

HOW TO EXPLAIN PARTY ENDURANCE IN FLUID PARTY SYSTEMS?

A CASE STUDY OF THE BULGARIAN POLITICAL PARTY GERB

by

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Abstract

This thesis seeks to explain the exceptional and ongoing endurance of the Bulgarian political party GERB (Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria) over the past two decades. The doctoral research is based on more than one year's fieldwork (from 1 September 2021 to 31 August 2022, and from 23 March 2023 to 13 April 2023) in Bulgaria during which time over a hundred interviews were conducted with relevant political figures across the country, following visits to party offices and attendance at party events. The study aims to address the wider issue of party politics in Central and Eastern Europe and why some parties are short lived while others endure. It is argued that the endurance of a new party is not only determined by the critical juncture of parliamentary breakthrough but is reinforced through key decision-making over its fate. Specifically, the continuous decision-making of building and maintaining subnational linkages through formal structures and informal activism tends to lead to political party endurance. Crucially, the national appeals and subnational problem-solving parties engage in are the glue that keeps subnational branches continuously aligned with national headquarters. The driving force for endurance, the subnational problem-solving, is characterized by the distribution of patronage resources from national to subnational structures. Clientelism, in terms of non-programmatic problem-solving networks and interpersonal trust building networks, helps a new party maintain subnational branches and secure electoral support for endurance. In conclusion, the thesis contributes to party endurance studies through incorporating the subnational dimension into the existing national dimension of party politics.

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A Note on Transliteration

All names of Bulgarian individuals, political parties, and places mentioned in this thesis have been transliterated from the Cyrillic alphabet to the Latin alphabet in accordance with the Bulgarian Law on Transliteration. This law, originally promulgated in the State Gazette (*Държавен вестник*), issue 19 of 13 March 2009, and subsequently amended in issues 77 of 1 October 2010, 77 of 9 October 2012, 68 of 2 August 2013, and 98 of 13 December 2019, provides the official standards and guidelines for the transliteration of Bulgarian text into the Latin script.

The transliteration of names in this thesis follows these legal standards to ensure consistency and accuracy.

Terms of Administrative Divisions and Elections in Bulgaria

regional	<i>регионален/regionalen</i> , 6 regions in Bulgaria: northwestern, north central, northeastern, southwestern, south central, southeastern
provincial	<i>областен/oblasten</i> , 28 provinces in Bulgaria (see Law on the Administrative-territorial Structure of the Republic of Bulgaria)
municipal	<i>общински/obshitinski</i> , 265 municipalities in Bulgaria
local elections	<i>местни избори/mestni izbori</i> , elections at municipal/city/village levels in Bulgaria

Terms of Political Parties and Party Organizations in Bulgaria

Political Parties (oldest to newst)	
SDS	Union of Democratic Forces/ <i>Съюз на демократичните сили/Sayuz na demokratichnite sili</i>
BSP	Bulgarian Socialist Party/ <i>Българска социалистическа партия/Balgarska sotsialisticheska partia</i>
VMRO (VMRO-BND)	Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization-Bulgarian National Movement/ <i>Вътрешна македонска революционна организация – Българско национално движение/Vatreshna makedonska revolyutsionna organizatsia-Balgarsko natsionalno dvizhenie</i>
DPS	Movement for Rights and Freedoms/ <i>Движение за права и свободи/Dvizhenie za prava i svobodi</i>
NDSV	National Movement Simeon II/ <i>Национално движение Симеон Втори/Natsionalno dvizhenie Simeon II</i>
DSB	Democrats for Strong Bulgaria/ <i>Демократи за силна България/Demokrati za silna Bulgaria</i>
PA	Party Ataka/ <i>Партия Атака/Partia Ataka</i>
RZS	Order, law and justice/ <i>Ред, законност и справедливост/Red, zakonnost i spravedlivost</i>
GERB	Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria/ <i>Граждани за европейско развитие на България/Grazhdani za evropeysko razvitie na Bulgaria</i>
NFSB	National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria/ <i>Национален фронт за спасение на България/Natsionalen front za spasenie na Bulgaria</i>
DBG	Bulgaria for Citizens Movement/ <i>Движение България на гражданите/Dvizhenie Bulgaria na Grazhdanite</i>
ABV	Alternative for Bulgarian Revival/ <i>Алтернатива за българско възраждане/Alternativa za balgarsko vazrazhdane</i>
BBT	Bulgaria without Censorship/ <i>България без цензура/Bulgaria bez tsenzura</i>
Volya	Will/ <i>Воля/Volya</i>
V	Revival/ <i>Възраждане/Vazrazhdane</i>
DB	Democratic Bulgaria/ <i>Демократична България/Demokratichna Bulgaria</i>

ITN	There is Such a People/ <i>Има такъв народ/Ima takav narod</i>
ISMV	Stand up, Mafia Out!/ <i>Изправи се, мутри въвн/Izpravi se, mutri van!</i>
PP	Change Continues/ <i>Продължаваме промяната/Prodalzhavame promyanata</i>
BV	Bulgarian Rise/ <i>Български възход/Bulgarski vazhod</i>
Party Organizations	
MGERB	Youth organization of GERB/ <i>Младежки ГЕРБ/Mladejki GERB</i>
ZhGERB	Women organization of GERB/ <i>Жени ГЕРБ/Zheni GERB</i>
SGERB	Senior organization of GERB/ <i>Старейшини ГЕРБ/Stareyshini GERB</i>
PGERB	Entrepreneur organization of GERB/ <i>Предприемачи ГЕРБ/Predpriemechi GERB</i>
NIS of MGERB	National Executive Commission/ <i>Национална изпълнителна комисия/Natsionalna izpalnitelna komisia</i> of MGERB, the national level decision-making organ
MNDSV	Youth organization of NDSV/ <i>Младежки НДСВ/Mladejki NDSV</i>

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Chapter 1 Introduction

The Puzzle

How do newly emerging political parties endure in fluid party systems? Central and Eastern Europe developed fluid party systems after experiencing the fall of state socialism and the end of one-party rule in 1989 (Zielinski et al, 2005: 365-366; Slomczynski et al, 2008: 92). By fluid party systems, I mean party systems with less stability and more electoral change, which are permissive to new party entry (Mainwaring and Torcal, 2006: 205-207; Tavits, 2006: 99). Central and Eastern Europe acceded to accession to the EU (European Union), went through market reform and democratisation, and experienced the financial crisis in 2008, and the pandemic crisis in 2020. These changes have also been reflected in the region's fluid party systems. New party breakthroughs can often be observed. The typical path of these new parties is that they live fast and die young, with the Slovak political party Smer-SD (Direction-Social Democracy) and the Czech political party ANO (Action of Dissatisfied Citizens) as a couple of striking exceptions for their continued electoral success (Haughton and Deegan-Krause, 2020; Cirhan, 2023). Given this trend the Bulgarian political party GERB (*Граждани за европейско развитие на България/Gradjdani za evropeisko razvitie na Balgaria/Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria*) is puzzling, because since its establishment by Boyko Borissov (*Бойко Борисов*) as a new centre-right pro-European party, it has won a plurality of the vote in five consecutive parliamentary elections, from 2009 to April 2021. It has gradually developed into a fixture of the Bulgarian party landscape.

This doctoral thesis aims to answer the research question: *how can we explain the endurance of the Bulgarian political party GERB in the fluid Bulgarian party system?* As will be further discussed in detail, this thesis defines party endurance as *maintaining constant presence in the national parliament* (Chandra, 2005; Stanley et al., 2021; Ishiyama and Stewart, 2021). GERB maintained its parliamentary presence throughout the nine consecutive parliamentary elections, held from 2009 to 2023. The broader topic the doctoral research addresses from the case of GERB is to understand why some parties endure but other parties are short-lived. Given the fate of many other new parties created in Bulgaria and across Central and Eastern Europe that have often had an ephemeral existence and limited success (Sikk, 2012, Engler, 2016; Hanley and Sikk, 2016), it is puzzling that GERB has endured.

The focus of this doctoral thesis on Central and Eastern Europe provides insights into the global challenges of new parties. For example, in Western Europe, the so-called 'frozen party system'

came to an end in the late 1960s and early 1970s with the emergence of a series of new parties (Bartolini and Mair, 2007: 302). The number of new parties and the level of their electoral support have been observed to reach an unusually high level in the 2010s (Emanuele and Sikk, 2020). The emergence of new parties, however, has not been a phenomenon exclusive to party systems in Western Europe. Political party competition has been permitted following the change of political regime over the past three decades in Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, and South-East Asia. These regions have developed fluid party systems and witnessed the emergence of new parties (Cho and Kruszewska, 2018; Bekenova, 2022; Lupu, 2016; Cyr, 2017; Bleck and Van de Walle, 2013).

In what follows, I will unpack the puzzle of GERB by locating its endurance in the fluid Bulgarian party system, contrasting it with other political parties, and illustrating how it has survived periods of electoral downturn. I will then nest the puzzle of GERB in the literature of party endurance and introduce this thesis's theoretical and methodological parameters. After that, I will briefly overview GERB's pre-breakthrough success, post-breakthrough organizational development and gradual subnational problem solving, which is expected to account for GERB's endurance. I will finally end Chapter 1 with a roadmap of how the remaining chapters of this thesis will proceed.

The Puzzling Endurance of GERB

The endurance of GERB has been particularly puzzling compared to a series of newly emerging parties in Bulgaria (Gherghina and Soare, 2021; Zankina, 2015). One of them was NDSV (the National Movement Simeon II/*Natsionalno dvizhenie Simeon II*/Национално движение Симеон Втори). NDSV, named after its founder the once exiled Tsar Simeon II (*цар Симеон Втори*), won a plurality of votes in the 2001 parliamentary elections, based on its key appeals of anti-corruption and increased welfare for the poor (Koinova, 2001: 135-136). NDSV suffered from a dramatic vote loss in its second parliamentary elections in 2005 and has not been able to gain over 4% of votes in order to remain in parliament since 2009 onwards. GERB is puzzling, because its gradually stabilising fate is starkly different from the ephemeral fate of newly emerging parties in the 21st century.

The Temporal Dimension of GERB's Endurance

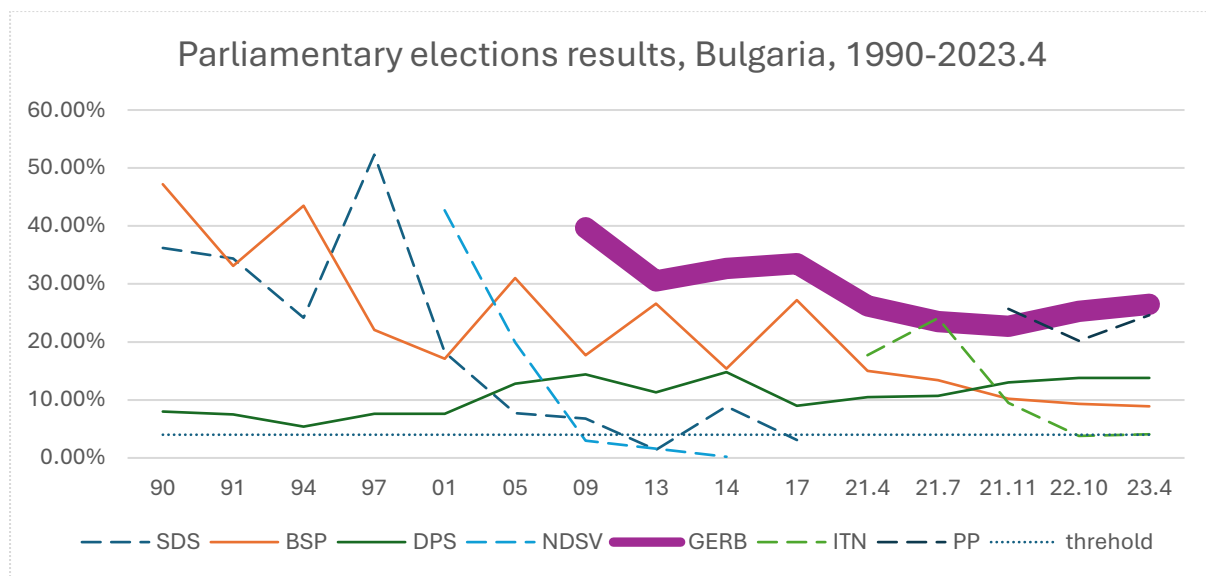


Figure 1.1 Parliamentary election results in Bulgaria, 1990-2023. Source: Bulgarian electoral commission

It should be noted that GERB's endurance has not been stable but has varied significantly over time (Open parliament website, 2024). Particularly, GERB experienced challenges in the streets and at elections that were quite substantial in 2013-4 and 2020. Endurance is therefore considered as the capacity to bounce back and the capacity to minimize losses in periods of crisis.

As demonstrated in Figure 1.1, GERB surprisingly survived the two downturn electoral moments in the 2013 and 2021 parliamentary elections. Both elections did not allow GERB to form a government. Strikingly though, both downturns were followed by early elections, as a result of which, GERB returned to power in 2014 and in 2023 respectively. Surviving electoral downturn moments is particularly challenging for a new political party and can be used a powerful indicator of GERB's endurance (Cyr, 2017). It is highly unusual for a new political party like GERB to hold up well after its first parliamentary mandate, surviving its first electoral downturn moment (Pop-Eleches, 2010; Sikk, 2012). Newly established parties tend to experience a sharp decline in votes in their parliamentary elections after the accumulated unpopularity of their first mandate. For example, NDSV experienced a sharp decline in its 2005 parliamentary elections after its first mandate, as illustrated in Figure 1.1. Therefore, it is puzzling from Figure 1 that GERB's decline in the 2013 parliamentary elections was much less dramatic than NDSV's.

Surviving the 2013 electoral downturn demonstrated that although GERB lost the novelty appeal after being in office, it had already developed itself into a relatively stabilising party to compete with the perennial party BSP. Back then, the first Borissov government, created after GERB won the 2009 parliamentary elections, ended up with its resignation in February 2013 due to the nationwide protests against monopolies in the energy sector (Krastev, 2013; Drezov, 2013). The early parliamentary elections in May 2013 resulted in a minority parliament where GERB dominated a relative majority of seats but did not form the government (Kanev, 2013; Stoyanova, 2018). The then formed BSP-led government was forced to resign in July 2014 due to another series of nationwide protests against the appointment of the media mogul Delyan Peevski (Делян Пеевски) as head of DANS (*the State Agency for National Security/Darzhavna agentsia 'natsionalna sigurnost'*/Държавна агенция 'национална сигурност'). The subsequent early parliamentary elections in October 2014 resulted in a highly fragmented parliament of eight parties (Petrov, 2014). GERB survived the 2013-14 electoral storm and returned to power after the 2014 parliamentary elections, forming the second Borissov government (Kanev, 2014; Mavrodieva, 2015).

Unexpectedly, GERB managed to bounce back when challenged by new parties in the post-2021 electoral turbulence, surviving its second electoral downturn moment. In 2020, protests started again, urging for the resignation of General Prosecutor Ivan Geshev (Иван Гешев, see Damyanova, 2023). The 2020 protests also called for the resignation of the third Borissov government, which was formed after GERB won a plurality of votes in the 2017 parliamentary elections. In the post-2021 electoral turmoil, five parliamentary elections were held over a two-year period from April 2021 to April 2023. During this period, GERB faced major challenges mainly from two new parties. The first was ITN (*Има такъв народ/Има Takav Narod/There is Such a People*) founded by a TV show host Stanislav Trifonov (Станислав Трифонов). The second was PP (*Продължаваме промяната/Prodaldzhavame Promyanata/Change Continues*) founded by the two Harvard graduates and former caretaker government ministers, Kiril Petkov (Кирил Петков) and Asen Vasilev (Асен Василев). GERB won the second place in the 2021 July parliamentary elections, as it was beaten by the new party ITN that won 24.08% (Neudorfer et al, 2024). In the November 2021 parliamentary elections, the newer party PP won a plurality of votes at 25.67%, leaving GERB in second place again (Bankov, 2023). Unexpectedly, GERB then managed to return to first place by winning a plurality of votes in both the October 2022 and the April 2023 parliamentary elections (Zankina, 2023). After the latter, GERB was invited by its opponent PP to form a cabinet. It is therefore particularly

noteworthy that the newly established political parties in Bulgaria, although seemingly popular, have not been able to form a cabinet without GERB.

The Subnational Dimension of GERB's Endurance

The subnational dimension of party endurance means that political parties win varied levels of support in various parts of the country. Figure 1.2, 1.3 and 1.4 below illustrate the geographical spread of support by GERB in the 2021 April, July and November elections respectively. The three figures show party support both at the capital city and beyond the capital city. The capital city is defined as 'a seat of power and a place of decision-making processes that affect the lives and future of the nation ruled' (Gottmann, 1983: 88). The three figures show that GERB did not seem to receive particular strong level of support from the capital city compared to the provinces outside the capital city. There are in total 28 provinces (*oblasti*) in Bulgaria, and the figures show that GERB has obtained consistently strong support from the province Kyustendil and the province Pernik in the southwestern part of the country. The relatively weak electoral support is obtained consistently from the Kardjali province densely populated with the ethnic minority population (Turkish). Therefore, it should be noted that although the endurance of GERB is uneven across space, the party managed to hold up well in even ethnic Turkish regions.

Figure 1.2. Density of GERB support in the 2021 April elections in Bulgaria

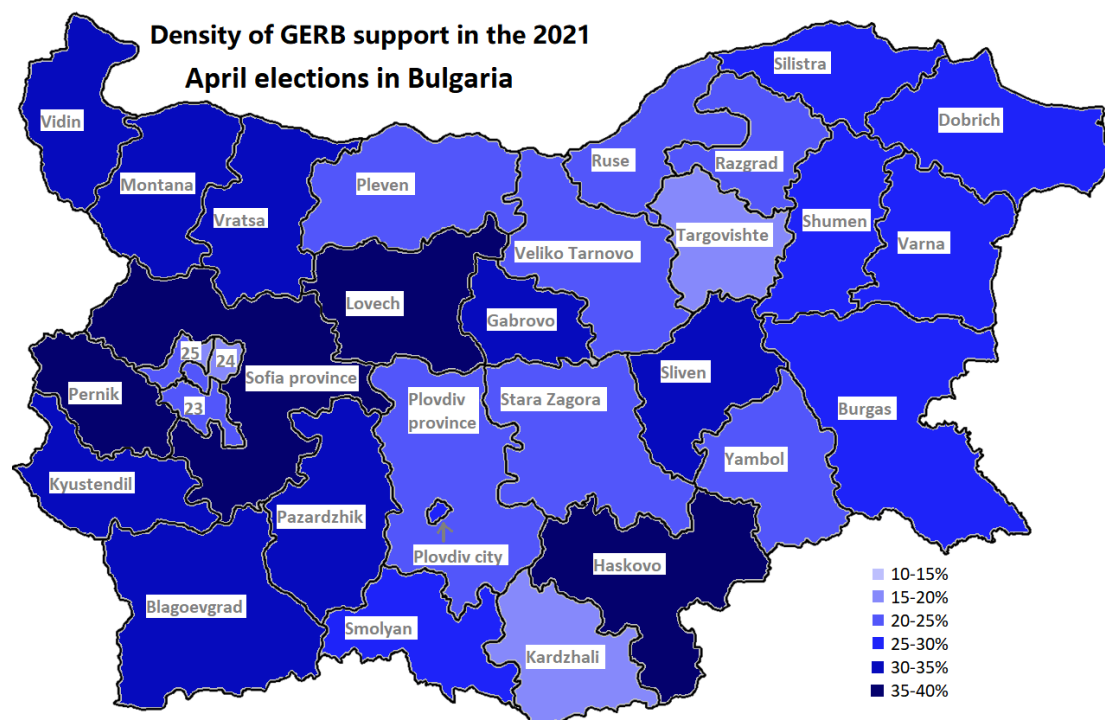


Figure 1.3. Density of GERB support in the 2021 July elections in Bulgaria

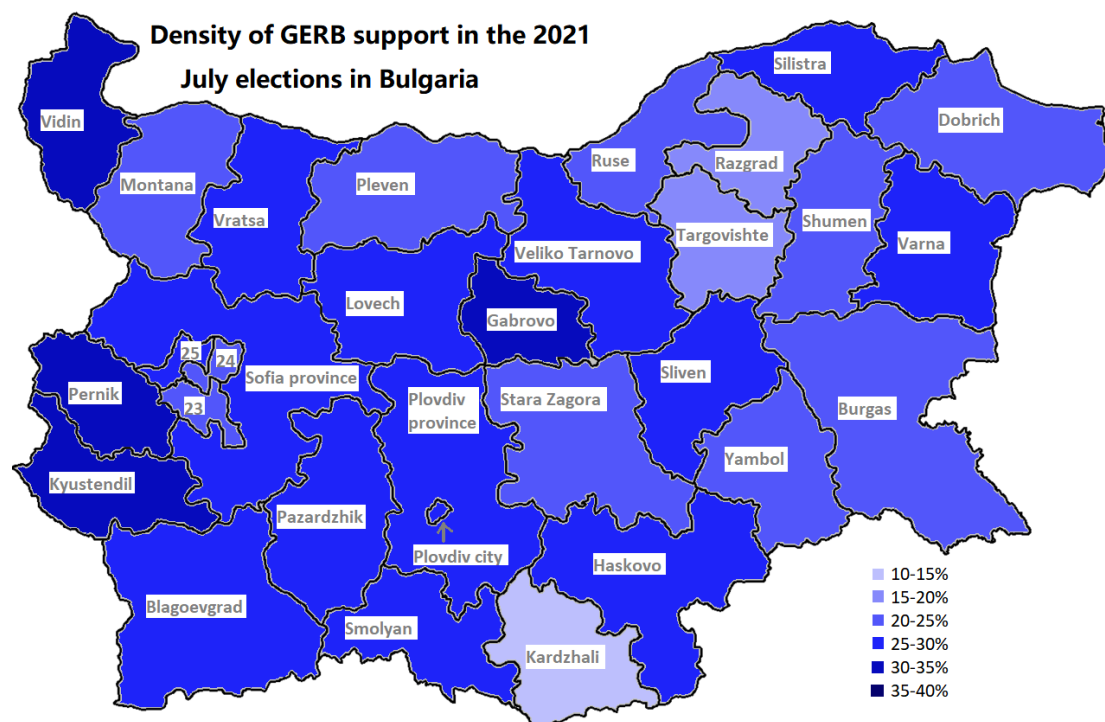
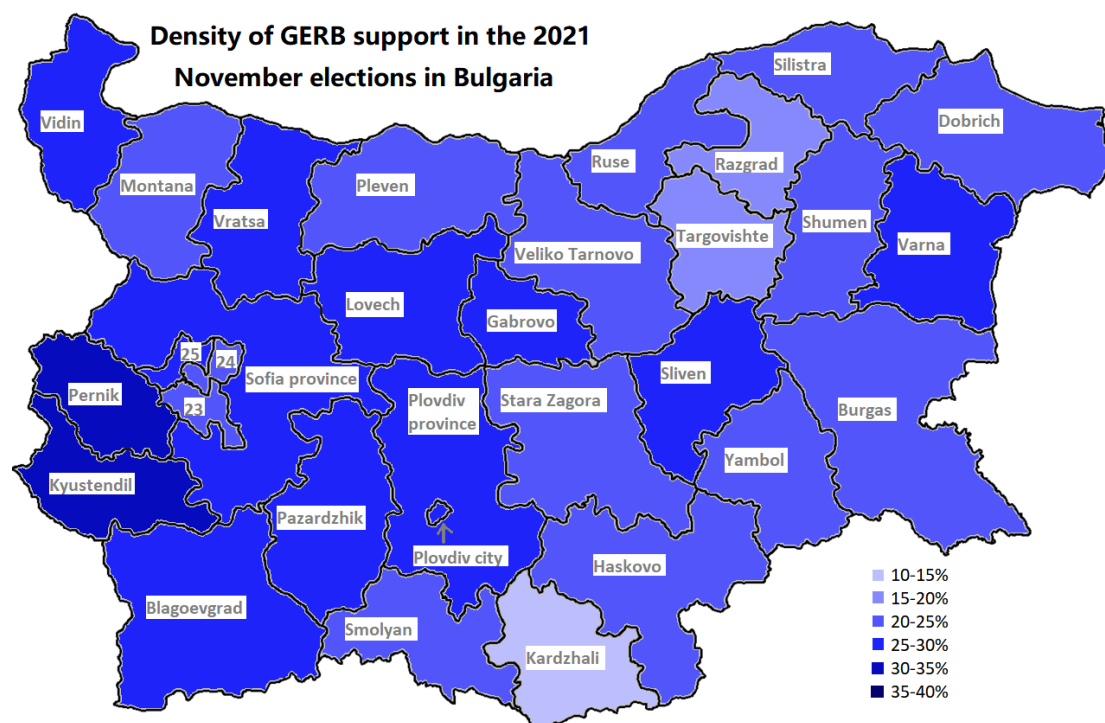


Figure 1.4. Density of GERB support in the 2021 November elections in Bulgaria



GERB's Endurance in Bulgaria's Fluid Party System

GERB's endurance is exceptional within the right-wing party family in Bulgaria. As the first-cohort party formed by the dissent groups of the 1980s, the right-wing party SDS (the Union of Democratic Forces/*Sayuz na demokratichnite sili/Съюз на демократичните сили*) was powerful in the 1990s, but split nine times (Spirova, 2005: 618). While SDS contributed to the fragmentation of the Bulgarian party system in the 1990s, GERB gradually provided a strong stabilising force to the Bulgarian party system. SDS then largely weakened in the 21st century and has been absorbed into the national electoral coalition, GERB-SDS, since the April 2021 parliamentary elections.

GERB has unusually become a constant actor alongside the first-cohort parties BSP (the Bulgarian Socialist Party/*Balgarska sotsialisticheska partia/Българска социалистическа партия*) and DPS (the Movement for Rights and Freedoms/*Dvizhenie za prava i svobodi/Движение за права и свободи*) in the Bulgarian party system. Since the fall of communism, the communist-successor party, BSP, and the ethnic Turkish party, DPS, have remained in parliament. As illustrated in Figure 1.1, BSP and DPS have been the two perennial parties since Bulgaria's shift to the multi-party system in 1990, different from new parties that lived fast and died young in the 21st century (Haughton and Deegan-Krause, 2020). BSP and DPS have been benchmark for longevity in Bulgarian party politics. GERB is puzzling, because it is the first newly emerging political party in Bulgaria that has developed into a fixture comparable to the benchmark parties for longevity in Bulgaria.

GERB's endurance is more of a puzzle than that of BSP and DPS, because GERB belongs to the new party category. Bolleyer and Bytcek (2017: 775) posit that new parties do not necessarily represent new issues; rather, their organizational development is distinguished from that of established parties. GERB was an organizationally new political party in 2006 compared to BSP and DPS that already developed extensive organizational structure. Barnea and Rahat (2011: 311) propose a threshold for a new party as 'a party that has a new label and that no more than half of its top candidates (top of candidate list or safe districts) originate from a single former party'. In more specific terms, Sikk (2005: 399) conceptualises the GNP (genuinely new parties) as political parties that 'are not successors to any previous parliamentary parties, have a novel name and structure, and do not have any important figures from past democratic politics among their major members.' Finally, Haughton and Deegan-Krause (2020) propose a four-level typology of newness: inception, transformation, alteration,

and continuation. This typology is characterised by a decreasing trend in newness, with each subsequent category representing a less novel form of newness. Houghton and Deegan-Krause (2020) posit that GERB can be classified as an inception typology in the new party category, making it a highly novel new party. Party endurance studies tend to focus on established parties (Stegmaier and Vlachová, 2009; Ellinas and Katsourides, 2013), and the endurance of new parties like GERB, while puzzling, is under-researched.

New parties have kept emerging and disappearing in Bulgaria, but none of them have been as enduring as GERB. For instance, founded by the former SDS MP Yane Yanev (*Яне Янев*), the political party RZS (Order, Law and Justice/*Red, zakon i spravedlivost/Ред, закон и справедливост*) with the slogan ‘stop corruption’ achieved parliamentary breakthrough in 2009 (Karasimeonov, 2009: 202-3; Kanev, 2010: 45), but survived for only one mandate. Established by Nikolay Barekov (*Николай Бареков*), a long-term ‘radio and TV presenter’ who exposed scandals of the alleged corruption of GERB, the political party BBT (Bulgaria without censorship/*Bulgaria bez tsenzura/България без цензура*) entered parliament in 2013, but remained there only until 2017 (Gherghina and Soare, 2021). Not to mention that there are some new parties that have never achieved parliamentary breakthrough. Lyutvi Mestan, the former chairman of the ethnic Turkish party DPS from 2013 to 2015, was dismissed from DPS and subsequently established a new party, DOST (Democrats for Responsibility, Solidarity and Tolerance/*Demokrati za otgovornost, svoboda, i tolerantnost/Демократи за отговорност, свобода и толерантност*) (novinite website, 2015). The Turkish minority was represented by the new party, which was positioned against the alleged corruption of DPS (Mediapool website, 2020), and it has not managed to achieve parliamentary breakthrough. Considering the many new parties in Bulgaria that were ephemeral, it is puzzling how GERB managed to endure.

After unravelling the puzzling endurance of GERB, it is then necessary to contextualise the puzzle of GERB within the existing literature on party politics. Indeed, the endurance of GERB speaks to the broader question of *how do new parties endure in fluid party systems?*

Explaining the Endurance of New Parties

In order to address the endurance puzzle of GERB, it is necessary to undertake a detailed examination of the manner in which the concept of party endurance is understood within the study of party politics. The context of the discussion below is set in party systems where political parties compete to obtain votes, with the intention of forming the national parliament and subsequently the central government. As mentioned above, the context of this doctoral

study is set in fluid party systems with less stability and more electoral change, which are permissive to new party entry (Mainwaring and Torcal, 2006: 205-207; Tavits, 2006: 99). The conceptualisation of party endurance as electoral success (Chandra, 2005) implies the importance of electoral snapshots for the enduring fates of political parties. A consistent avoidance of electoral failures results in a constant presence in parliament (Stanley et al., 2021). In addition to winning seats in the legislature, party endurance is also operationalised in terms of entering government (Ishiyama and Stewart, 2021). Nevertheless, for a political party to enter government, it must either win a sufficient number of votes to form a cabinet on its own or successfully negotiate with other parties to share power. Consequently, the likelihood of a political party remaining in government is considerably less predictable than its chances of remaining in parliament. In order for a political party to fulfil its representation function, it must remain in parliament. Therefore, as mentioned above, this thesis defines party endurance as *maintaining constant presence in the national parliament*.

The success of a political party in elections is important, but it is not the only reflection of its endurance. While voting does impact a political party's longevity (Osborn et al., 2010), focusing solely on electoral snapshots is insufficient to explain party endurance. Understanding the internal dynamics of the party is crucial. Intra-party unity (Clark, 2013) and internal cohesion (Van Dyck, 2018) play pivotal roles in a party's endurance. Additionally, a party's reputation, particularly for competence (Bufacchi, 2001: 714; de Mesquita, 1974), is expected to be a significant factor in determining its long-term endurance. Centring around party endurance, the doctoral thesis acknowledges the role of the electorate during official electoral campaigns (party success), but its focus is on the political party's side of the endurance story, including long-term linkage-building with voters (party survival).

Insufficiencies of Existing Explanations and This Thesis's Subnational Explanatory Framework

The existing literature on party politics does not go far enough in offering an explanatory framework for understanding the endurance of new parties. This is due to a number of reasons, which are presented below. Firstly, existing scholars of party politics (e.g. Bolleyer and Bytcek, 2013, 2017) consider the origin of new parties to be a critical juncture that will influence their subsequent fates. This temporal trade-off is partial. This thesis posits that the manner in which new party leaders utilise the period prior to the end of their first parliamentary term to establish subnational linkages is of consequence to their subsequent endurance. The initiation of

subnational linkages is of consequence, but more important is the manner in which these linkages are subsequently developed.

Secondly, the organizational strength of political parties is regarded as a fundamental indicator of their endurance (eg. Cyr, 2016; Tavits, 2013; Hanley, 2008). Nevertheless, the conceptualisation of party organizations remains incomplete. Building on this, the doctoral thesis goes on to reveal crucial organizational features that are essential to the strengthening of political parties and, subsequently, to their endurance. For instance, the combination of formal structures and informal activism. It is important to note that party organizations do not provide a comprehensive causal mechanism for party endurance. Parties do not endure solely on the basis of their organization. An equally important factor is the role of party appeals in this context, which must be considered.

Thirdly, it is important to note that political party appeals, particularly their temporal change after parliamentary breakthroughs, are necessary for the continued support of party members and voters (eg. Engler 2023). However, the existing understanding of party appeals is limited by its exclusive focus on national-level factors. National-level factors are distant from the everyday survival concerns of townspeople and villagers. This doctoral thesis incorporates the subnational dimension of everyday problem solving into the analysis of party appeals, given that the subnational dimension is significant but under-researched by party politics scholars in explaining political party endurance (Frendrei et al, 1990; Lipset and Rokkan, 1967: 53). It should be noted that the positioning and appeal of political parties in Central and Eastern Europe are not always programmatic and ideological (Mainwaring and Torcal, 2006: 205-207). Consequently, an explanation for party endurance in the region is incomplete without a focus on patronage and clientelism.

Fourthly, patronage- and clientelism-based politics represent a powerful theoretical tool for explaining political party endurance (Arslantaş et al, 2020; Aspinall and As'ad, 2015; Muñoz and Dargent, 2016; Warner, 1998). However, the existing understanding of patronage/clientelism is problematic in that it is narrowly focused on the temporal scope of official electoral campaigns. To address this limitation, this thesis emphasises the everyday subnational problem-solving as a core function of patronage resource distribution and clientelistic linkage building. This, in turn, enables party organizations to survive and appeal to communities, thereby contributing to their endurance.

This doctoral thesis intends to construct an explanatory framework for political party endurance by overcoming the insufficiencies of the aforementioned literature on party politics. In light of the four main criticisms outlined above, the subnational explanatory framework of this thesis will prove instrumental in explaining the phenomenon of new party endurance in fluid party systems. A fundamental prerequisite for the endurance of new parties is the presence of a charismatic party leader with previous domestic political experience. The endurance of new parties is not a spontaneous phenomenon, but rather the result of a strategic approach by their leaders. A good start is the basis for success. An earlier start to building an endurance strategy allows a longer period of time to lay a strong foundation for endurance. The core of an endurance strategy, the subnational dimension including subnational linkage building and subnational problems solving, requires a long period of time to address, which is beyond the scope of an electoral mandate. Consequently, a late start could prove fatal in the context of the fluidity of party systems.

However, it is not sufficient to just have an early start. It is then important to maintain subnational linkages that do not depend on official electoral campaigns. The maintenance of subnational linkages is based on the sustained efforts of everyday activists, rather than the sporadic efforts of pre-election campaigns. The crucial function of maintaining subnational linkages is to solve subnational problems, which is the core appeal of a political party. In sum, a new party's endurance strategy involves an early start in building and maintaining subnational linkages, which are then used to deliver subnational services. This, in turn, enhances the new party's subnational level appeal, and ultimately leads to its endurance.

This thesis's explanatory framework is not only informed by the existing literature, but also developed from an in-depth single case study with long-term fieldwork (also see Chapter 3). It is then worth noting that 'subnational' is the key to this thesis, which has both theoretical and methodological relevance in explaining political party endurance. The following will therefore introduce the methodological considerations of the thesis: case study, long-term fieldwork, and fieldwork at subnational levels.

Case Study and Long-Term Fieldwork at Subnational Levels

Single case studies are conducive to the generation of in-depth, nuanced knowledge (Gustafsson, 2017; Kennedy, 1979). Single case studies are less susceptible to the pitfalls of multiple case studies, such as the potential for overlooking crucial underlying dynamics. Despite the relative breadth of research afforded by multiple case studies, single case studies

offer a more focused and nuanced approach. This thesis's in-depth case study of a single political party is likely to shed light on the endurance of political parties in general, particularly of new political parties in their overall short-lived trend in Central and Eastern Europe. The fact that GERB is both exceptional and under-researched provides a rationale for its selection as a single case study for this thesis.

Despite the highly significant and exceptional fate of GERB, it has remained surprisingly under-researched. The relatively comprehensive studies of Bell (1998), Melone (1998), Giatzidis (2002), and Ganev (2007) span from 1989 to 1997 or 1999, the first stage of polarisation between the two old parties: the successor to the Bulgarian Communist Party, the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), and the new democratic party formed by dissident groups of the 1980s, the Union of Democratic Forces (SDS). Subsequent studies conducted after 2001 have sought to examine the phenomenon of populism in the context of the rise of three influential parties: the political party formed by the exiled Tsar Simeon II, National Movement Simeon II (NDSV); the nationalist party founded by the TV show host, the Attack (Ataka); and GERB (Smilov, 2008; Ghodsee, 2008; Vassilev, 2010). Furthermore, even the comprehensive party policy networks in Bulgaria and the study of the survival of Borissov-led government do not provide an analysis of the organization, ideology, and leadership of the single party GERB (Petkov, 2019; Spirova and Sharenkova-Toshkova, 2021).

In order to achieve a comprehensive understanding of GERB, it is fundamental to conduct long-term fieldwork at the national and the subnational levels in Bulgaria. Long-term fieldwork confers substantial benefits when compared to purely desk-based research such as document analysis or statistical analysis in the field of political science (Millar, 2018). This thesis acknowledges the value of document analysis and statistical analysis in theory development and theory building. However, the generation of documents and numbers, as well as their measurement, may be hindered by a lack of appreciation for context. One advantage of data derived from long-term fieldwork is that the researcher gains an in-depth familiarity with the community inhabitants (Mariampolski, 1999). This thesis is positioned within area studies. It utilises the area study approach in conjunction with long-term fieldwork to produce knowledge that is embedded in the local language, geography and history (Stenning, 2005; Bates, 1997; Szanton, 2004; Basedau and Köllner, 2007).

Based on long-term fieldwork, the thesis does not merely investigate the national level of Bulgaria, it also examines its subnational levels. Subnational levels are of great importance but

remain under-researched in political science (O'Neill and Hymel, 1994; Trounstone, 2009; Giraudy et al., 2019; Jakli and Stenberg, 2021). In order to collect data on the subnational level, it is essential to select fieldwork sites that are located beyond the capital city (Dawson, 2016). Studying the subnational levels allows the researcher to document the perspectives of local communities, which can contribute to the development of explanatory frameworks in political science. Therefore, the thesis is based on over one-year fieldwork in Bulgaria's subnational levels including over a hundred interviews with party politicians and party activists.

Political scientists should be very careful when researching 'subnational'. Subnational research is heavily contextualised on the geographical-administrative divisions of the case country. As illustrated in Figure 1.5, there are six regions (*reginoni/региони*), including twenty-eight provinces (*oblasti/области*) in Bulgaria. Below the provincial level, there are 265 municipalities (*obshitini/общини*) in Bulgaria. The subnational dimension in the case of Bulgaria therefore comprises four levels: regional level, provincial level, municipal level, and town/village level. It is essential to specify how parties organise across the subnational levels. Yovcheva (2022: 82) insightfully suggested 'local' when comparing why NDSV did not survive but GERB did. However, in Yovcheva's (2022:82) accounts, terms such as 'local coordinators', 'local branches' and 'local structures' did not make it clear which subnational level was being referred to.



Figure 1.5. An Administrative Map of Bulgaria, Source: Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works

Bulgaria's subnational levels are under-researched in political science. Regarding Bulgarian political parties in the late 20th and the early 21st centuries, Spirova (2005: 615) commented on 'a higher level of organization development' indicating 'higher membership figures, more extensive structures' in a comparative perspective in Central and Eastern Europe. Spirova (2005) did not specify 'extensive structures' in terms of the subnational administrative levels. Focusing on the period from 2010 to 2021, Bankov et al (2021: 307) examined the organizational stability of the Bulgarian nationalist party VMRO-BND (*BMPO – Българско национално движение/VMRO-Balgarsko Natsionalno Dvizhenie/IMRO-Bulgarian National Movement*). Bankov et al (2021: 307) sharply pointed out the importance of 'grassroots efforts' and 'local activities' but did not unpack the meaning of 'local'.

So far, I have introduced the puzzle of GERB, and this thesis's theoretical and methodological approaches centring around subnational levels. I will then introduce empirical accounts that are anticipated to explain the endurance of GERB.

Expected Factors that Impact GERB's Endurance

While the success of an anti-corruption appeal explains GERB's parliamentary breakthrough, it does not explain its subsequent endurance. When GERB was created, Borissov criticised the alleged corruption of the then existing three-party coalition (*troinata koalitsiya/тройна коалиция*) made up of NDSV, BSP, and DPS in the government mandate from 2005 to 2009 (DW, 2006a, 2007a). At the time of GERB's emergence, 'a new and modern party' was what distinguished GERB from NDSV (DW, 2007c). Borissov highlighted his competence to fight against corruption through his one year and a half experience as the capital's mayor, and in this way, used the issue of anti-corruption to persuade citizens to vote (DW, 2007a). This is in line with the widespread phenomenon of the emergence and success of new parties in Central and Eastern Europe. Citizens are disappointed with the alleged corruption of established parties and so turn to the clean-up promises made by new parties (Haughton and Deegan-Krause, 2015, 2020; Sikk, 2012, Engler, 2016; Hanley and Sikk, 2016).

The endurance of GERB is expected to be explained from a series of decision making during its pre-breakthrough and post-breakthrough periods. The crafting of GERB's pre-breakthrough success in secondary elections including local elections and European parliamentary elections, as well as the making of the party's pre-history, may lay the foundation of an enduring fate. Its post-breakthrough organizational development and its construction of political record in office, particularly related to subnational problem solving, may provide consistent fuel for its endurance. Before delving into GERB's pre-breakthrough and post-breakthrough development, however, I orient readers on what kind of party GERB was at its parliamentary breakthrough by illustrating its centre-right pro-European position, and the centrality of the party's charismatic leader Boyko Borissov.

The Centre-Right Pro-European Position and Borissov's Role in GERB's Breakthrough

GERB's centre-right positioning on its own is not the main reason for its breakthrough. GERB claimed to be a centre-right, conservative and Christian party, but these features were not its main appeals to voters at its inception (DW, 2008a; see also Chapter 6). The initial party program of GERB was thought to have drawn on that of the German conservative party Christian Social Union, known as CSU (DW, 2009a). Interpersonal connections were made with CSU's chairman Edmund Stoiber when Borissov worked as the head of the police in the Ministry of Interior Affairs, and Stoiber saw Borissov as one of important partners in Bulgaria and helped with the creation of GERB (DW, 2006b, 2009a). The centre-right positioning has

been helpful in guiding some citizens to locate GERB in the universe of political parties. However, the positioning on its own might not have been persuasive enough to motivate a considerable number of citizens to support GERB, for it to achieve a parliamentary breakthrough.

The centre-right position on its own does not play a dominant role in Bulgarian party politics, because to some extent, the divide between the left wing and the right wing has been ‘imported’ to Bulgaria and then localised there. The understanding of right-wing there can only be unpacked based on the historical context of the country. In the bipolar party system in 1990s, Bulgaria’s party competition was centred around ‘past-oriented conflict between the communist successor party BSP and the anti-communists SDS’ (Cholova et al, 2011: 112-113). From the end of the 1990s to the 2000s, however, convergence was observed in party programmes of BSP and SDS, as Bulgarian political parties at the time tended to prioritise fulfilling requirements to access the EU (European Union, see Krastev 2007; Andreev 2009a).

The pro-European positioning has been strategically used by Borissov as an important issue to enhance the appeal of GERB, just as the name of the party suggested: *Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria*. GERB’s novelty appeal was particularly suited to a significant historical event in 2007 – the official accession of Bulgaria into the EU. The Bulgaria’s accession to the EU was associated with the public hopes for new accelerated development based on utilising the European funds. Thus, the public expected to see changes in the society, including new faces in politics who could bring about the expected changes (DW, 2007e). Therefore, the EU issue was frequently used by Borissov to sell GERB to the electorate (DW, 2007a). The EU fund had been suspended due to corruption allegations in early 2008 (Andreev, 2009b: 380). Borissov stressed that GERB planned to improve the absorption of EU funds (DW, 2007b). Borissov then fulfilled his promise and restored EU’s fund during the first GERB-led government after the parliamentary breakthrough (Spendzharova and Vachudova, 2012: 50).

It was Borissov’s choices that created GERB and crafted GERB’s initial electoral success. Borissov’s connections with Germany were likely to demonstrate how the then new party leader could make Bulgaria well-respected abroad (DW, 2005a; DW, 2005b). This shaped GERB’s appeal at the time of its formation. When GERB was officially established as a political party in December 2006, Borissov attended the founding conference as its informal leader (Omda, 2012). At that time, Borissov had been elected as the mayor of Sofia as an independent in the early local elections (Hanns-Seidel-Stiftung, 2021) and he became the

celebrity mayor of Sofia. Before becoming the capital city's mayor, Borissov acted as Secretary General (*главен секретар/glaven sekretar*) of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (*МВР/Министерство на вътрешни работи/Ministerstvo na vartreshni raboti*). 'Benefiting from his huge popularity as a Secretary General (fighting against organized crime and corruption), Borissov became the most popular politician in the country' (Cholova et al, 2011:111). Through strategic choices in building his political career, Borissov accumulated the governing competence and then used it as a resource to brand his political project, the new party, in a timely manner for a parliamentary breakthrough.

Regarding the importance of the political experience of party leaders, Claessen (2024: 719) posits that 'career capital does contribute to party leaders' survival in office,' and that 'political experience acquired shortly before entering party leader office is more important for political survival.' It is anticipated that Claessen's (2024) argument based on Western Europe and North America will be applicable to Central and Eastern Europe. Before GERB was created, Borissov had already established many links abroad during his political career. In 2005, when Borissov was Secretary General of the Ministry of Interior Affairs, he was invited to the US Federal Bureau of Investigation to talk about cooperation in tackling organised crime. This was the first time that a Bulgarian politician had a meeting with the director of the FBI (DW, 2005a). The creation of GERB was closely related to the links that Borissov was able to establish with Germany. The German non-profit political education organization Hanns Seidel Foundation in Bulgaria provided 'active support' to the establishment of GERB as an association (Hanns-Seidel-Stiftung, 2021, Chapter 4). The links between Hanns Seidel Foundation and Borissov were based on the common goal of fighting against cross-border organised crime (DW, 2005b). It is anticipated that Borissov's extensive previous political experience prior to the establishment of GERB will have an impact on the long-term endurance of GERB.

GERB's endurance cannot be explained fully by its centre-right pro-European positioning and Borissov's role, even though these characteristics at first sight distinguish the party from other Bulgarian parties. A closer look at the timeline of GERB's formation reveals hidden dynamics that might contribute to its endurance: its pre-history as an NGO and its pre-breakthrough success in the European and local elections.

Strategic Crafting of Pre-breakthrough Success and Pre-history

Half of success is getting a good start. GERB's origin as an NGO was particularly striking. Before becoming a political party, GERB was registered as an NGO, or civil society association

(*sdruzhenie/sdruzheniye*), in March 2006. Borissov referred to GERB as a movement at the time of its creation, in order to distance GERB from other players on the Bulgarian political scene (DW, 2007b). Reflecting on GERB's timeline before its birth as a political party, the origin of GERB as an NGO is fundamental to its endurance (Chapter 4), although the importance of party origin in party endurance should not be overestimated (Rybář and Spáč, 2020).

GERB's pre-breakthrough success in secondary elections is expected to increase its chances of post-breakthrough endurance. I discuss this further in Chapter 4. Less than a year after its creation, GERB won the European Parliament elections in May 2007. The party obtained 21.7% of the vote, ahead of the then ruling Socialist Party (DW, 2007b). GERB then broke the record by winning 360 municipalities in the October 2007 local elections (DW, 2007b). GERB continued to perform well in the European parliamentary elections in the same year, ahead of the 2009 parliamentary elections. These successes in three secondary elections already demonstrated the popularity of Borissov and the competence of GERB to mobilise voters for electoral support. Through these elections, it was considered that GERB mobilised a new layer of voters who had not usually voted before (Zankina, 2015: 11).

On a separate note, GERB's political record in office should not be underestimated in order to provide a compelling account for its endurance. GERB's start was strong, but the party still needed constant fuel in order to sustain itself. Given that Borissov was the prime minister in the three GERB-led government mandates (2009-13, 2014-17, 2017-21), Borissov's political record could potentially be the source of GERB's endurance. While political record at the national level is important, it is also important to consider the record at subnational levels. Before taking a closer look at the political record of Borissov and his role in subnational problem solving, I introduce GERB's leadership continuity and organizational development, the two components that have so far facilitated the party to construct its political record.

Post-breakthrough Leadership Continuity and Organizational Development

Borissov as GERB's leader has remained unchanged since its inception, that may have an impact on its endurance (Chapter 6). GERB underwent reforms in 2013-14 to increase the number of deputy chairmen to three and to introduce new people to the Executive Committee (Maritsa, 2013). The party has not experienced any changes in its top leadership for the past fifteen years since its creation. In 2013, Borissov claimed that there would be a new leader of GERB in the following 2-3 years (Maritsa, 2013). This has not yet happened. In an online

survey (Pik website, 2019), Borissov was voted the most popular politician in post-socialism Bulgarian history, and was more popular than Todor Zhivkov who had been in power for 35 years before the fall of state socialism in Bulgaria. As a charismatic politician, Borissov has remained close to the Bulgarian public through his way of communicating: people have queued up to take a photo with him (DW, 2007c). According to a sociological survey conducted in June 2019, the citizens' rating of Borissov was higher than that of GERB, while the rating of the BSP leader Korneliya Ninova (*Корнелия Нинова*) was lower than that of BSP (Webcafe, 2019). This showed that citizens had a relatively higher level of trust in Borissov than in his party GERB. Borissov increased GERB's rating. However, it is oversimplified to state that leader's brand was the most important factor for citizens to vote for GERB after more than a decade of its existence.

It should be acknowledged that Borissov's appeal over time has not been as strong as when he founded GERB. Scholars have observed that the problem of Borissov's power concentration may 'have a noticeable negative impact on the electoral support, internal party cohesion and activity' (Bankov, 2020: 43).

It was also noticeable that although Borissov's right-hand man Tsvetan Tsvetanov (*Цветан Цветанов*) left GERB, the party did not collapse. In 2020, GERB's deputy chairman Tsvetanov resigned and formed his own party *Republicans for Bulgaria* (*Републиканци за България/Republikantsi za Bulgaria*). Tsvetanov was the formal leader of GERB at its birth, when he was sent by the real leader Borissov to create the structure of GERB (Benatova, 2019). Over time, he became part of Borissov's central power network. The role of Tsvetanov in the endurance of GERB was complicated, as will be illustrated in detail in Chapter 4, Chapter 5 and Chapter 7. The resignation of Tsvetanov, however, did not lead to the collapse of GERB. This seemed to suggest that GERB would not collapse simply because of the exit of important elites.

While Borissov has been important to GERB's endurance, it is now doubtful that the 18-year-old party would completely collapse without Borissov. As will be discussed in the next section, GERB's subnational problem-solving appeal is the glue keeping the party together. Separately, GERB's organizational development, in terms of its steady membership growth for almost two decades since its creation, has been exceptionally strong for a new party. The party has gradually grown as an organization. In 2018, BSP had about 100,000 members, while GERB had more than 94,000 members (24chasa, 2018). In addition, more than 5.5 million Bulgarians

lived in municipalities governed by GERB (the total population of Bulgaria was around 7 million, see 24chasa, 2018). Moreover, GERB has developed stable organizations in the ethnic minority municipalities traditionally governed by the ethnic Turkish party DPS, Targovishte (*Търговище*), Silistra (*Силистра*), Razgrad (*Разград*), Blagoevgrad (*Благоевград*), Kardzhali (*Кърджали*, see 24chasa, 2018). It was also reported (24chasa, 2018, Chapter 4) that GERB covered extensive populated places with its four horizontal organizational structures: MGERB (*Младежки ГЕРБ/Mladejki GERB/the youth organization of GERB*), ZhGERB (*Жени ГЕРБ/Zheni GERB/the women organization of GERB*), SGERB (*Старейшини ГЕРБ/Stareshni GERB/the senior organization of GERB*), and PGERB (*Предприемачи ГЕРБ/Predpriemach GERB/the entrepreneur organization of GERB*).

Gradual Subnational Problem Solving

Building a problem-solving political record is one of the necessary ingredients for political party endurance in Bulgaria. Borissov has shown a clear vision of Bulgaria's development priorities, which is in line with what the mass public has been expecting since the fall of state socialism. Infrastructure has been a fundamental issue to attract voters by party elites (Park, 2011). EU funds were promised to be prioritised for infrastructure construction, according to Borissov (DW, 2007b). Borissov gave an example that the construction of the Sofia metro would be completed with the help of the EU funds (DW, 2007d, Chapter 6). Borissov's unusual activism in getting things done as Bulgaria's prime minister for three terms in office may be one of the main reasons for GERB's endurance. The thesis therefore stresses the idea of delivery of economic goods and services at national and subnational levels, which is important for the endurance of new parties.

It is easy to promise, but hard to deliver. Exceptionally, as a new political party, GERB has gradually built up a political record of delivering on campaign promises. After initially promising on the infrastructure development in GERB's electoral campaign, Borissov became the prime minister and demonstrated super activism in inspecting and supporting the delivery of road and church infrastructure across Bulgaria (Borissov, 2021c; Borissov, 2021b; GERB Plovdiv webpage, 2013). The way in which Borissov distributed state subsidies was by travelling around different municipalities in a jeep, meeting people and broadcasting live on Facebook (Btvnovinite website, 2021). This distribution of resources was not constrained by party competition and polarisation, as some of the mayors of these municipalities were nominated by other parties like BSP and DPS. Opponents criticised this non-programmatic way

as contrary to norms (Btvnovinite website, 2021), but the mayors received state subsidies on time through this interpersonal way of distributing resources (Chapter 7). Borissov demonstrated that he was close to the people by getting things done for them (Borissov, 2021a).

Borissov's investment in subnational problem solving has facilitated the gradual development of linkages between GERB and subnational elites. It is therefore worthwhile exploring whether Borissov's efforts in cultivating subnational support have a bearing on GERB's endurance. To illustrate, the village Dabnitsa (*Дъбница*) in Gurman (*Гърмен*) municipality within Blagoevgrad province was one of the localities that received substantial financial resources for disaster prevention from the third cabinet of Borissov (Borissov, 2021a). Consequently, Sinem Bekirova (*Синем Бекирова*), the mayor of Dabnitsa village, on behalf of Gurman municipality, presented a hand-painted canvas as a gift to Borissov. According to Bekirova, the painting expressed a high level of joy in the village (Borissov, 2021a, also see Figure 1.6). This expression of profound gratitude indicated that the party leader held the village in a special regard, suggesting that GERB's approach to problem-solving was closely aligned with the village's needs.



Figure 1.6: A painting gift to Borissov from the village Dabnitsa. Left 1: Vladimir Donkov (*Владимир Донков*), Deputy mayor of the municipality Gurmen. Right 1: Sinem Bekirova, Mayor of the village Dabnitsa. Middle: Boyko Borissov. (source: Borissov, 2021a)

It is a simplistic assertion to suggest that Borissov is solely responsible for GERB's longevity, despite his continuous investment in the party since 2006. Borissov's problem-solving activism plays a role. Nevertheless, it is debatable whether Borissov's activism is the sole explanation

for the continued support of GERB by a significant number of citizens despite the circulation of media reports about alleged scandals involving Borissov. Consequently, it can be postulated that the subnational leadership of GERB may be expected to play a role in the endurance of GERB. It is therefore worthwhile to examine how subnational elites have chosen to join GERB and become GERB's subnational leadership, as well as how they have connected with the national leadership and grassroots voters (Chapter 7). While it is important to note that Borissov frequently travelled to the provinces and demonstrated his ability to deliver results in Facebook live broadcasts, this does not fully account for GERB's endurance. It was not possible for Borissov to construct problem-solving political records specific to every urban and rural area of Bulgaria on his own. Consequently, a more pragmatic approach to endurance would be to engage with subnational elites at a multitude of locations, thereby enabling GERB to facilitate the everyday problem solving of grassroots communities. Indeed, explanations for the endurance of political parties are anticipated to be found at subnational levels.

The interactions between the national and subnational dimensions of party leadership, party appeals, and party organizations are expected to provide a crucial explanation for the endurance of GERB (Chapter 6). The subnational dimension of leadership, organizations and appeals proved instrumental in enabling GERB to withstand the challenging national electoral downturn. It should be recalled that GERB experienced its first electoral downturn in 2013, when the first Borissov cabinet was forced to step down, to be succeeded by the BSP-led government led by Oresharski (*Орешарски*, 2013-14). This, according to Viktor Yanev (*Виктор Янев*), one of the founders of GERB's subnational organization in the southwest Bulgarian province of Kyustendil (*Кюстендил*), was not as beneficial for subnational development compared to the first Borissov cabinet. During the period from 2013 to 2014, the local administrations of Kyustendil municipality and Dabnitsa municipality pledged EU funds for the protection of the environment and water resources. However, only a small proportion, 15 million, was allocated, while the majority, 120 million, was suspended (GERB website, 2014). Therefore, the strong appeal of GERB in a given locality seemed to be the benefits the political party could bring to the development of the area. It can be reasonably assumed that GERB's political record of addressing subnational issues will serve to reinforce the party unity and electoral support in the face of electoral challenges.

Without the exceptionally strong alignment of GERB's subnational party branches with its national party headquarters, the party would have been an empty shell in terms of political record building. For instance, Yanev asserted that Kyustendil province benefited from GERB's

national development priority, namely the energy efficiency programme and the renovation of residential buildings. GERB's politicians in Kyustendil have attempted to implement this national strategy with the objective of providing residents with warmer and more comfortable homes and reducing energy costs (GERB website, 2014). In fact, in 2020, GERB continued to prepare the second round of free renovation of another 1,951 buildings (Offnews website, 2020). Similarly, Georgi Stoyanov (*Георги Стоянов*), GERB subnational leader in Southeast Bulgarian province Sliven (*Сливен*, see gerb-sliven.org, 2014), and Marin Zahariev (*Марин Захариев*), GERB subnational leader in Southern Bulgarian province Smolyan (*Смолян*, GERB Smolyan website), both expressed their alignment with GERB's national development priority of implementing the energy-efficient programme in both provinces. It is therefore of interest to examine the manner in which interactions between the national and subnational dimension influence the construction of political records, given that the latter is expected to be one of the principal mechanisms of political party endurance in Bulgaria.

Political party endurance is never the result of a single factor. The abovementioned empirical evidence provides expected factors that impact GERB's endurance: pre-breakthrough strategic choices, post-breakthrough organizational development and subnational problem-solving. It is these expected factors that the whole thesis will centre around in order to explain political party endurance. I will therefore end Chapter 1 by presenting the structure of the whole thesis.

Structure of The Thesis

The thesis is comprised of eight chapters, which are structured as follows. Chapter 2 reviews the existing explanations for political party endurance, upon which the explanatory framework of this thesis is constructed. It commences with an examination of the strengths and weaknesses of the system-level explanations of endurance, including historical legacy, sociological cleavages, and institutional frameworks. Chapter 2 then critically engages with party-level explanations, including party linkages, party organizations, party appeals, and electoral clientelism. Finally, the chapter concludes the literature review section by suggesting that existing studies are incomplete in specifying the temporal dimension of subnational linkage building and are disproportionately focused on official electoral campaign periods, thereby overlooking everyday subnational linkage maintenance. Chapter 2 highlights another takeaway from reviewing the literature, namely the significant role of subnational problem-solving that is under-researched in the party politics discipline. It then addresses the limitations of the existing literature and presents the intended subnational explanatory framework of this thesis. Regarding this thesis's subnational explanatory framework for political party endurance,

Chapter 2 emphasises the importance of establishing subnational linkages at an early stage and then maintaining them on a regular basis, regardless of elections. This approach highlights the everyday subnational problem-solving that is essential for a party to consistently survive and secure votes.

Chapter 3 presents the existing methods used in political science to explain political party endurance, which subsequently provide reasons for this thesis's choice of methodological approaches. It commences with an examination of the limitations of large-n and small-n methodological approaches, which are deemed insufficiently nuanced. This has led to the decision to adopt the single case study approach. In order to develop and construct an explanatory framework based on thick description, Chapter 3 then borrows insights from ethnographic research to demonstrate the advantage of conducting long-term fieldwork in political science research. It goes on to discuss the limitations of statistical analysis, document analysis, and structured surveys on their own, which therefore needs to be triangulated with in-depth interview data. Regarding the principal methodological instrument employed in this thesis, Chapter 3 illustrates the fundamental importance of conducting over a hundred in-depth interviews at subnational levels to underpin the conclusions of the thesis. The final section of the chapter considers the ethical implications of conducting long-term fieldwork and the potential impact of the researcher's positionality on the research process.

In order to provide an explanation of political party endurance, the empirical chapters commence with an analysis of the significance of an early start, or a pre-breakthrough start, in the construction of subnational linkages. Regarding the advantage of a pre-breakthrough start, Chapter 4 posits that it compensates for the lack of time and incentive for subnational linkage building once a new party has entered parliament and assumed power. With regard to the core of pre-breakthrough subnational linkage building, the chapter continues to advocate the necessity of cultivating subnational autonomy. In order to enhance subnational autonomy, this chapter then emphasises the national party authority's strategy of incorporating interpersonal connections into subnational linkage building, as opposed to the pure institutional connections. In order for subnational linkages to continue to reach grassroots communities, Chapter 4 emphasises the importance of incorporating non-partisan activism into the organizational strategy for building linkages. This is in contrast to the pure partisan activism based on criticising opponent parties, which is detached from everyday life. Furthermore, the chapter delineates the necessity of organising non-partisan activism in Bulgaria, including the

establishment of affiliated youth organization and women organization, among others. Subsequently, Chapter 4 emphasises the significance of youth organization in ensuring the long-term viability of political parties.

Chapter 5 of the thesis focuses on the regularity and long-term horizon, namely the necessity of continuous maintenance of subnational linkages over a long period of time. This follows on from Chapter 4's main message of an early start. In the first instance, Chapter 5 posits that in order to secure the longevity of political parties, subnational party branches must engage in sustained activism throughout the year, rather than solely during official electoral campaign periods. Chapter 5 then explores nonpartisan activism, as mentioned in Chapter 4, which refers to activities that are not directly related to criticising opponent parties. Rather, it concerns more broadly the political participation of citizens (political activities), or even activities that are not directly linked to formal politics (nonpolitical activities). In Chapter 5, I further stress the importance of nonpolitical activities in facilitating the direct and indirect participation of citizens in subnational party branches, fostering citizens' party identification and enabling subnational party organizations to grow. Essentially, the chapter demonstrates that the informal activism is likely to increase chances of the mass party model route of political party endurance (Katz and Mair, 1995, 2009).

Chapter 6 elucidates another equally pivotal aspect of the subnational dimension for political party endurance, subnational-based political party appeal, following Chapter 4 and Chapter 5's discussion on subnational linkages. The opening of Chapter 6 acknowledges the role of national-based party appeals including ideological positioning, national leadership and national political record. It then incorporates the significant area of subnational service delivery, which has not been extensively researched, into the components of a party's appeal. The chapter continues to demonstrate that a significant challenge associated with subnational service delivery by national party authorities is the lack of in-depth knowledge regarding the specificity of local contexts. Chapter 6 then demonstrates that this challenge can be mitigated by robust subnational party autonomy that aligns with national development priorities established by the national party authority. This chapter therefore emphasises the significance of subnational service delivery for both the strengthening of the party from within and the mobilisation of voters from outside. Regarding political party endurance, Chapter 6 further suggests that getting things done at the subnational dimension tends to mobilise voters to cast ballots, as

opposed to the appeal to popular sentiment espoused by populist rhetoric (Norris, 2020; Leininger and Meijers, 2021).

Chapter 7 turns to the additional feature of clientelism in continuation of the preceding discussion on subnational problem-solving. In order to provide a more detailed illustration of the concept of clientelism in the context of subnational problem-solving, the chapter proceeds to delineate the three principal components of this phenomenon. Chapter 7 initially posits that clientelistic problem-solving networks contribute to the endurance of political parties by fostering and sustaining interpersonal trust with voters. With regard to subnational problem-solving, this chapter subsequently considers the role of informal interpersonal connections between the national party authority and subnational party branches. In the chapter, I continue to demonstrate that this increases the probability of subnational party branches delivering subnational services through securing patronage resources from the national party authority. It is acknowledged that subnational service delivery does not always fall within the remit of programmatic delivery based on official government funding. This chapter therefore emphasises non-programmatic delivery, or clientelistic delivery, based on unofficial subnational funding. By emphasising subnational problem-solving in the clientelistic linkages that subnational party elites have with businesses, Chapter 7 challenges the prevailing understanding of the clientelistic model, which is primarily focused on vote-buying (eg Mares et al., 2017).

The conclusion of the thesis is presented in Chapter 8. In this chapter, the endurance of GERB is first restated in the context of the ephemerality of new political parties in Central and Eastern Europe. It is then argued that the subnational dimension of party organizations, party appeals and party leadership holds the key to answering the puzzle. In the chapter I then demonstrate that this thesis develops Bolleyer's (2013) new party endurance explanation, which focuses on party origin. This thesis argues that the period before fulfilling the first parliamentary mandate is crucial to a strong start of subnational linkage building. Furthermore, Chapter 8 demonstrates how this thesis builds upon Tavits' (2013) argument regarding party organization by incorporating the informal dimension. This chapter further presents that this thesis builds on Engler's (2023) argument regarding party appeals and proposes the crucial subnational dimension, surprisingly under-researched in political party appeals. Chapter 8 continues to demonstrate that this thesis employs the empirical data from Central and Eastern Europe to corroborate the findings of Szwarcberg (2012) regarding clientelistic problem-solving

networks, which were originally observed in Latin America. Subsequently, the chapter considers the broader implications of this doctoral research for the fate of new parties. It concludes that while it is relatively easy to establish new parties, it is much more challenging to sustain them over time. However, a long-term strategy involving subnational branches can help new parties to endure. Chapter 8 then reflects this thesis's wider lesson regarding Bulgarian politics, namely that it is characterised by subnational service delivery and informal activism. The methodology through which I arrived at the conclusions, in adopting an approach that involved extensive first-hand fieldwork and a close understanding of the Bulgarian context, also points towards a novel approach to studying party politics and party endurance. The conclusions drawn from the case of Bulgaria offer a number of key insights which shed new light on new party emergence.

Chapter 2 Explanations for Party Endurance

Introduction

In the previous chapter, the puzzling endurance of GERB was examined within the context of Bulgaria's fluid party system. Several interesting factors emerged that may explain this endurance: party origin, pre-breakthrough success, leadership continuity, organizational development, and political record in office. The following chapter reviews existing academic literature that might provide an answer to this thesis's research question: *how can we explain the endurance of the Bulgarian political party GERB in the fluid Bulgarian party system?*

Although recognizing the importance of structural factors and broader context in explaining party endurance, this chapter emphasizes the need to incorporate the subnational levels into our understanding of party politics and party endurance. While existing frameworks offer valuable insights, this chapter argues that agency—particularly the role of a charismatic leader in making strategic decisions—plays a crucial role in a new party's survival. The endurance of a new political party is shaped by the choices made by its national leader as well as subnational leaders, highlighting the significance of subnational dynamics in the broader explanatory framework.

Before finally illustrating the thesis's explanatory framework, the chapter reviews the existing explanations for political party endurance. The chapter begins with reviewing system-level factors including historical legacy, sociological cleavages, and institutional frameworks. The chapter agrees that while the system-level factors can provide raw material for the party's national leader to craft party endurance, the system-level factors on their own cannot explain the varied party fates. Following this, the chapter acknowledges the strength of the agential approach, because the approach stresses the role of the party leader in crafting party endurance. This chapter then criticises the existing literature on the agential approach for a lack of a specific endurance strategy. The existing three strategies for new party endurance provide inspiration for this thesis's subnational explanatory framework, so are reviewed in the chapter. The three strategies are: party appeal strategy, party organization strategy and patronage/clientelism strategy.

Firstly, I acknowledge the strength of party appeal strategy (Engler, 2023) for stressing the role of ideological and programmatic positioning in new party endurance. I then criticise it for its two shortcomings: it downplays the role of party organization and non-programmatic positioning. The two shortcomings are overcome respectively by the second and the third bodies of literature as follows.

Secondly, regarding the highly debatable role of party organizations in party endurance, I review the existing literature that stresses the importance of party organizations (Bolleyer, 2013; Tavits, 2013; Cyr, 2017; Cirhan, 2023). I then reflect the advantage of the party organization argument for its emphasis on signalling accountability to voters and connecting to voters for their potential electoral support (Tavits, 2013: 33). However, I highlight two main disadvantages of the existing party organization argument, both related to its incomplete conceptualization of party organizations. On the one hand, I focus on the temporal dimension and reveal the overemphasising of party origin as a critical juncture (Bolleyer, 2013), therefore ignoring the golden time for party building, the period before the end of first parliamentary mandate. On the other hand, I concentrate on the formal and informal dimensions and unpack that the existing party organization accounts narrowly centre around the formal structure (Tavits, 2013), hence ignoring the informal activism. Moreover, I acknowledge that party organization is not the only component of an endurance strategy, and that a political party needs to be appealing. In addition to the ideological and programmatic appeal of political parties, the non-programmatic appeal is less known but plays a role as well.

Thirdly, I discuss the existing literature that reflects the role of patronage and clientelism strategy (Munoz and Dargent, 2016; Szwarcberg, 2012). I acknowledge the following two strengths of the existing approach. One important strength is its focus on party unity enhanced by the patronage resource distribution, such as funding and jobs, from the national party authority to the subnational party autonomy (Munoz and Dargent, 2016). Another equally important strength is the reconceptualization of clientelism as problem-solving networks that address the everyday life concern of grassroots voters (Szwarcberg, 2012). I then note that such a compelling approach of clientelism is based on the empirical evidence from Latin America (Munoz and Dargent, 2016; Szwarcberg, 2012), and so I intend to apply it in Central and Eastern Europe. In doing this, the chapter lays out the conceptual foundations to construct its theoretical framework of the thesis that the empirical chapters will build their analysis.

From Party-System Factors to an Agential Approach

The explanations for political party endurance start from party-system factors: sociological cleavages, historical legacy and institutional frameworks. These party-system factors are important to set up the context for the endurance of political parties but cannot fully explain the varied fates of political parties in the same party system. Therefore, there is the need to emphasize the agential approach in the understanding of party fates and party endurance. Indeed, the choices that party leaders make regarding the opportunities and constraints of the

existing sociological cleavages, historical legacy and institutional frameworks to a large extent craft political party endurance.

Sociological Cleavages

A sociological cleavage, defined as ‘the political division among citizens rooted in the social structure and affecting electoral preferences’ (Jurkynas, 2004: 281), is emphasized by Stoll (2008) as being exogenous to the political system. In this context, political parties play a crucial role as agents that translate these societal conflicts into political disagreements (Jurkynas, 2004).

Political sociologists employ cleavages to explain the birth of the modern party system in Western Europe, arguing that it originates from structural social divisions, which can be traced back to national and industrial revolutions (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967). Lipset and Rokkan’s (1967) sociological cleavages have been applied in party system studies in Western Europe. The class-based cleavage has been observed to play an important role in the North European party system development since 1950, although in its more recent development, other socio-economic cleavages, such as gender cleavage and urban-rural cleavage, have played an increasingly strong role (Martínez-Toledano and Sodano, 2021). A decline in the class cleavage has also been observed in Italy and Spain with the emergence of anti-system parties and anti-immigration parties after the 2008 financial crisis (Bauluz et al, 2021). In contrast, the class divide has widened in Ireland and in Portugal after the 2008 financial crisis, as it has been observed emergence of a ‘workers’ party in Ireland, and an increased class division in ideological polarisation between the two mainstream parties in Portugal (Bauluz et al, 2021).

The explanation based on sociological cleavages is powerful, because it contextualizes the party system in the broader society and links parties to the society. It also highlights that social structural patterns classified by religion, education, and income can influence the voting choice of various demographic groups (Bornschier, 2007). Regarding the impact of the sociological cleavages in party success, the social structural force may fundamentally decide the size of the party’s vote base to achieve success. For instance, there is an ethnic Turkish minority in Bulgaria, which has been represented by the political party DPS since the establishment of the multi-party system in Bulgaria in 1990. It is therefore not surprising that DPS has been a long-term surviving party in the Bulgarian party system.

There is considerable debate on the appropriateness of using the cleavage-based approach to conduct academic research on parties in CEE. After 1989, CEE began the process of

democratization where political parties are expected to provide a link between civil society and the state. Most scholars hold that frameworks from Western Europe such as the party system approach and the party family approach can be applied directly (Spirova, 2007; Hlousek and Kopecek, 2010). Others disagree, arguing from a historical perspective that a deep social cleavage differentiates Western Europe from CEE. First, the rise of democracy in Western Europe stems from the Reformation in the 16th century (Lewis, 2000: 143), and the national and economic changes in the 19th century (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967). Second, post-socialism is accompanied with insecurities and income inequality, which does not provide enough economic and social prerequisites for building Western-democratic institutionalized parties (Bieber, 2017: 36). Third, the cleavage requires long-term institutionalisation of social conflicts (Jurkynas, 2004). The historical cleavage itself manifests a certain level of stability (Bornschieer, 2007). Hence, it is challenging to use this explanatory tool alone to fully explain the Central and Eastern European party systems where the volatility is high and new parties constantly emerge.

The cleavage-based approach itself implies the ‘bottom-up’ understanding. It assumes that the social structure itself automatically translates itself into political competition. Challenging the ‘bottom-up’ understanding of sociological cleavages, the ‘top-down’ approach stresses the role of party officials in shaping the social division (Evans and Whitefield, 2000). Take the class cleavage as an example, Sartori (1969) argued that the class position is not translated to politics mechanically, but it is the working-class political party that raises the awareness of working-class people for the common political goal. Cleavages help shape the raw materials of politics, but it is up to political actors to use (or not) those raw materials (Enyedi, 2005). Therefore, the cleavage-based approach can be refined as agency-centered approach that focuses on the certain political actors (Enyedi, 2005). Such move from the macro structure to the micro agency can yield more fruitful explanatory results, when studying the behaviour, attitude and networks of individual agencies in party system development.

Historical Legacy

In the study of party success in Central and Eastern Europe, scholars have highlighted that historical legacy has an impact on the development of party systems (Kitschelt et al, 1999; Grzymała-Busse, 2006). Grzymała-Busse (2006) stresses the influence on multi-party system building caused by communist parties exiting from power. Bulgarian communist party successor party, the Bulgarian Socialist Party, was one of the two major political parties in

Bulgaria in 1990s after the exit from the communist regime. The Bulgarian Socialist Party set the party building mode. This, according to Spirova (2005), was the reason why there was a higher level of organizational development of Bulgarian parties compared to other CEE countries in 1990s. However, the other major political party, SDS, has split nine times since 1989 (Spirova, 2005: 618). This frequent fragmentation of Bulgaria's party system resulted in the observation that there was higher absolute number of competing parties in Bulgaria than the Central and Eastern European counterparts in 1990s (Spirova, 2005).

Kitschelt et al (1999) used different types of communist regimes to explain the subsequent development of party systems. Bulgaria as a close Soviet satellite country has not witnessed strong social movements against the communist regime as in Central Europe before 1990s. This may have made it challenging for Bulgaria to institutionalise its subsequently established multi-party system in 1990s. It was suggested that the 'reason for the weak results of SDS in these first elections was that they could not rely on a pre-existing organization or movement, nor could they count on the support of any strong external sponsor. Contrary to other countries in Central and Eastern Europe, there were no strong (and hardly any) opposition movements in Bulgaria before 1989.' (Cholova et al, 2011: 102)

The impact of the history on voting behaviour is also discussed in the literature. Tworzecki (2003) explored how the nature of communist rule and socioeconomic structure shaped the electoral choices of voters. Moreover, Kostecký (2002) believed that the historical legacy of regional identities and industrialization have shaped voters' preferences in Central and Eastern Europe.

The communist legacy is acknowledged to explain the initial onset of building multi-party system, but not so powerful to elucidate the subsequent party system development (Hanley et al, 2008). Moreover, communism is not the only source of legacy for Bulgarian politics development. In fact, prior to the four decades of communism, Bulgaria had experienced five-century under the rule of Ottoman Empire. Even though Bulgaria managed to achieve independence during 1878, the Ottoman empire legacy has left Bulgaria with ethnic Turkish populations of around 9% (CSD, 2000). Hence, the Ottoman legacy could explain the long-lasting appeal of the Turkish ethnic party DPS.

Historical analysis suffers from weaknesses, as it tended to treat the party system development as 'statically fixed by long-term historical legacies' (Kreuzer and Pettai, 2004: 619). Indeed, historical legacy contextualises the party system development, but the role of history should be

taken in a more dynamic way. Elster et al (1998) have provided convincing arguments regarding the dynamic role of history, showing that actors' resources are determined by communist and pre-communist legacies, and these legacies in turn put constraints on actors' choices.

As will be discussed in Chapter 6, GERB's centre-right appeal is partly illustrated through its critique of the communist regime, in contrast to the left-wing appeal of the BSP, which draws on nostalgia for the perceived benefits of that era. While the communist regime undeniably shaped the Bulgarian party system to some extent, its influence has gradually diminished in explaining the endurance of newly formed political parties. Arguing that the fate of a party formed in 2009 is determined or greatly shaped by the pre-1989 experience of Bulgaria stretches the power of legacies considerably. The post-communist experience is now approaching the same duration as the communist period, further reducing the explanatory power of the communist legacy in understanding contemporary political dynamics (Haughton, 2021).

Institutional Frameworks

The proportional representative (PR) system tends to make a multiparty system which is likely to permit new party entry. The proportional representative system has greater minority representation, while the single-member plurality system has greater accountability. The single-member plurality system sets bigger barriers for new party breakthroughs than the PR system (Harmel, 1985). This is because if a new party aims to win votes under a single-member plurality system, it has to get a substantially high number of votes in a district, otherwise, the small votes for a new party will be wasted. The geographically dispersed electoral support will put new parties in a disadvantaged position (Lijphart 1994).

The electoral system in Bulgaria in 1990 was mixed system of both majoritarian seats and proportional representative seats (Birch et al., 2002: 115). The single member system elected 200 MPs (Members of Parliament), while the proportional representative system elected 200 MPs with 4% as a barrier to enter the parliament. The parliamentary electoral law of 1991 then decided on the proportional representative system of in total 240 MPs (Birch et al., 2002: 120). Bulgaria's electoral system remained stable from 1991 (Birch et al., 2002: 123). The 2009 parliamentary elections used the mixed system of 120 MPs (Karasimeonov, 2010: 176-240). On the one hand, 31 mandates of MPs were elected from the party that won most votes in each of the 31 constituencies (the so-called single member system). On the other hand, the rest, 89

mandates of MPs, were assigned to all parties based on proportions of won votes. The Bulgarian electoral system was changed to the PR system since 2011 (NSD). There are overall 240 constituency seats and parties which need to gain more than 4% of votes in order to enter the parliament (NSD). Since Bulgaria relies on the PR system, new parties have a greater chance of gaining parliamentary representation. After achieving breakthrough, new parties face serious challenges such as maintaining their position in parliament, because the PR system makes it relatively easy for new parties to be replaced by even newer parties.

The strength of the electoral system approach is that it points out the structural force as a 'facilitator or inhibitor' that might influence the experience of party formation and success (Hauss and Rayside, 1978: 37). Nevertheless, as is also the case with historical legacy and sociological cleavage factors, the electoral system also suffers from the weakness of not offering explanations for the variations that occur in individual parties within the same party system (Hanley et al, 2008).

The argument that institutional design influences party politics has been criticised for not being able to explain the variations of parties (Haughton, 2014: 220). Also, the institutional design represents the top-down approach to understand how political parties are functioning, and it might be not very strong to explain the relationships between parties and voters. Mungiu-Pippidi (2005) argues that in Southeast Europe people have low levels of trust in the state and are more likely to be reliant on informal networks.

The EU's influence on Bulgarian party politics is significant, evolving from the era of communism to EU integration. Vachudova and Hooghe (2009) argue that the EU has had a profound impact on party politics in this transition. Haughton (2014: 221) refines this view, describing the EU's role as an 'external validator' and a 'referencing point'. EU membership has provided Bulgaria with resources and an open market, which has affected party politics. Under communist rule, the Bulgarian Communist Party used both top-down and bottom-up governance, with societal networks playing a crucial role in community management (Noutcheva and Bechev, 2008: 127-128).

In the early 1990s, state assets were distributed to the communist nomenklatura, leading to what Ganev (2013: 31) describes as stable competitive rent-seeking. This system shifted to dysfunctional clientelism with the influx of foreign direct investment as Bulgaria began its EU negotiations in the early 2000s. Noutcheva and Bechev (2008: 128-129) explain that Europeanization created reform gaps that fostered clientelism, posing challenges even greater

than those faced during the initial democratization. Despite EU pre-accession conditions encouraging elites to adopt rule-based governance (Noutcheva and Bechev, 2008: 116) and the EU's Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM) driving political party reforms (Spendzharova and Vachudova, 2012: 39), the early 2000s saw persistent clientelism, exacerbated by the entry of multinational companies into Bulgaria's bribery market (Ganev, 2012: 31) and the mismanagement of EU funds (Spendzharova and Vachudova, 2012: 48).

Therefore, in order to clarify the casual mechanism of the electoral system and the EU, it is crucial to look into the experiences and choices of individual party leaders (Haughton, 2014). It is important how party leaders use sociological cleavages to design and implement new party projects. It is also important how they cope with the opportunities and constraints emerging from historical legacies and institutional frameworks. Indeed, in party politics scholarship, focus tends to be given to structural factors, such as party system changes, particularly how that are reflected through electoral snapshots. For instance, although Sikk and Köker (2024) focuses on individual parties, their argument and data collection are largely based on the party system level. To explain the puzzle about the endurance of new parties, however, the party system analysis does not provide sufficient nuanced mechanism about individual parties. The insufficiency of the party system level explanations alone can be overcome by an agential approach.

An Agential Approach

An agential approach is important for us to understand both the breakthrough and the endurance of new parties. New party breakthrough and subsequent endurance are not only associated with traits and previous experiences of leaders (Eatwell, 2005; Van Dyck, 2018, Wieringa and Meijers, 2020) but are crafted by a series of their decisions and choices. Leaders' traits, previous experiences and decision-making matter to both obtaining electoral support outwardly and strengthening party organizations inwardly.

The reputation of leaders is likely to influence the reputation of parties among voters. Voters are likely to be attracted to the reliable personality of leaders, especially of charismatic leaders, which subsequently make voters support parties (Eatwell, 2005). For voters, a change of leaders is more recognizable than a change of party program or policy (Litton, 2015).

Wieringa and Meijers (2020) demonstrate that the 'previous political experience' of leaders is positively related to the new party breakthrough. Previous political experience is likely to enhance the skills of leaders to unite the party. It is also stressed that leaders should remain

unchanged for relatively enough time, so that their authority can be consolidated, leading to a relatively smooth process of party building (Brichta and Pedahzur, 2002; Gherghina, 2014).

Moreover, leadership continuity is argued to be important for new parties to persist after a breakthrough (Bolleyer and Bytze, 2017). As discussed in Chapter 1, Borissov played an important role in founding the party. GERB has its leader Boyko Borissov unchanged since its establishment in 2006. Borissov has reputation for being close to people through communicating with the public directly on Facebook (see for instance, Borissov, 2021a; 2021b, see Chapter 6).

In order for parties to consistently retain their internal cohesion, leadership is important as well. Internal cohesion of parties is likely to prevent party split and vote loss, which is an important manifestation of political party endurance. Van Dyck constructs a leadership-centred model that focuses on the ‘moral authority, cross-factional ties, and ideological representativeness’ of party leaders; such characteristics are more likely to prevent schisms or party collapse leading to party cohesion in Peru (Van Dyck, 2018: 891). Van Dyck’s agential approach derived from Latin American therefore can be further applied in Central and Eastern Europe.

The appeal of the continuous leadership plays a positive role as long as the leader is able to remain his reliable reputation among voters. Nevertheless, there is also the necessity of leadership change when the leaders are exposed to corruption scandals and losing reputation among voters and party supporters (Deegan-Krause and Haughton, 2018).

The understanding of the agential approach merely as the focus on the national leadership is not complete. A new party needs to have a charismatic leader that makes a series of decisions to enforce its endurance, but a charismatic national leader is not enough. The charisma of the national leader cannot explain subnational variations in obtained votes by branches. Choices and decisions made by subnational leaders play an important role in political party endurance as well.

Towards an Explanatory Framework

Centring around the agential approach and the importance of political party leadership, there are concrete elements of party appeals, party organizations and clientelism that need to be taken into consideration to enable a new political party to endure. Choices that party leaders make regarding party’s programmatic positioning, on-the-ground party organization building and non-programmatic politics, also known as clientelistic politics, are important to craft party endurance.

From Partisanship to Party Appeals

Existing studies on party appeals start with the focus on partisanship. Partisans can be understood as either politicians who ‘seek office and hold office’, or citizens who ‘belong to or identify with a party’ (Herman and Muirhead, 2021: 364). Herman and Muirhead (2021: 373) point out that the heart of partisanship is that ‘the ideas and policies of one’s own party are superior to those of opposing parties.’ On the other hand, partisan identity is conceptualised as either ‘affective attachments to political parties’ or ‘running tally’ changing with how voters evaluate party performances (Fossati, 2020: 350). By strong partisan affect, Ward and Tavits (2019: 1) mean that voters ‘strongly like some parties and dislike others.’ Moreover, the negative partisanship, or ‘hostility hypothesis,’ according to Mayer (2017: 1), can increase voter turnout and have an effect on voting choice. As such, partisanship is an important tool to understand why citizens vote or not vote for a particular political party, and therefore can explain the endurance of long-term established political parties.

Nevertheless, the existing studies on partisanship tend to focus on established parties in the US and Western Europe over a long-term scale (Ward and Tavits, 2019; Mayer, 2017; de Benedictis-Kessner, 2021). It is doubtful if partisanship can be used to explain the fast emergence and success of new parties. In an attempt to study partisanship in Central and Eastern Europe, Matuszewski and Szabó (2019: 10) found out for both Poland and Hungary the group division of political views is not solely based on partisan lines, and ‘cross-ideological’ integration exists. This demonstrates that the attachment to political parties in Central and Eastern Europe is not as deep as the partisanship in the US and Western Europe. In Central and Eastern Europe, new parties seem to disappear before being able to cultivate a voter base with strong party identity. Citizens tend to vote for new parties mainly due to their anti-corruption promise in the electoral campaigns, but the anti-corruption message alone is not sufficient to cultivate long lasting partisanship and constant electoral support.

Given that partisanship takes a long time to cultivate, new parties tend to invest in developing appeals. Regarding the importance of party appeals to political party endurance, Engler (2023) stresses that ideological and programmatic positioning after parliamentary breakthroughs decides if new parties can endure in Central and Eastern Europe. The strength of Engler’s (2023) argument is the focus on the temporal trade-off between parliamentary breakthrough and post-breakthrough consolidation. Engler (2023) insightfully points out the importance of ideological and programmatic appeals which many new political parties do not have and therefore struggle

to endure. Given that the anti-corruption appeal explains parliamentary breakthroughs of new parties, new parties then need to develop their appeals in order to endurance after breakthroughs. Cultivating durable appeals is a necessary ingredient for new parties to strengthen themselves and secure electoral support, which leads to political party endurance.

Although Engler's (2023) argument makes a valuable contribution to the literature through flagging up the importance of party appeals to party endurance, it is not complete in the following two ways. Firstly, while the ideological and programmatic positioning is important, it has shortcoming as long-term time scale is needed for materialising concrete results. The non-programmatic politics are not perfect, but sometimes they help to get things done quickly and reduce the waiting time, contrasting the pure programmatic politics. After all, politics is not all ideological or programmatic; developing the clientelistic appeal can sometimes be a resilient and effective strategy for political party endurance. Secondly, while Engler (2023) is correct in stating that new parties cannot suddenly develop extensive organizational structure after their breakthroughs, the role of party organizations in party endurance is underestimated in Engler's (2023) argument. Party endurance on the one hand is the consequence of cultivating party appeals, but on the other hand is the result of developing party organizations. This is not just because that new parties need to get organised in order to persuade more citizens to know and support their appeals. As such, it is important to turn to the discussion of party organizations in the following section.

The Importance of On-the-Ground Party Organizations

Recent studies focus on the role of party organizations in new party successes (Ishiyama and Stewart, 2021; Wieringa and Meijers, 2020; Bolleyer and Bytze, 2017). As stressed earlier in this chapter, some of the more persuasive accounts of party survival in Central and Eastern Europe have stressed the importance of organizations (Tavits, 2012). The causal mechanism between on-the-ground party organizations and party endurance, according to Tavits (2013: 9), is that party organizations can shape voters due to the following two reasons: firstly, party organizations can make 'immediate, frequent and organized contacts with the electorate'. The second reason that Tavits (2013: 9) proposes to explain electoral success is that party organizations signify 'competence, reliability and accountability'.

Party organizations can refer to an internal hierarchic structure and 'an organized youth and/or women's wing' (Ishiyama and Stewart, 2021: 75). In relation to geographical expansion, party organizations can be measured as 'the extent to which the party's organization extends beyond

the capital city' (Werkmann and Gherghina, 2016). Party organizations also mean that parties use active websites as well as other tools to communicate messages effectively to voters (Ishiyama and Stewart, 2021).

A more comprehensive approach to understand party organizations is the Extended Party Networks. The EPN (Extended Party Networks) theory believes that parties are embedded in extended party networks that are made up of interest groups, media, think tanks, and other advocacy organizations (Koger et al 2009; Albert, 2020). The theory of EPN challenges the traditional understanding of parties in three ways: their roles in government, in parliament, and in the electorate (Katz and Mair, 1993). According to the EPN study of Desmarais et al (2015) in the US, the more integrated a candidate is in the extended party network, the more likely he/she will achieve electoral success. This is because 'support by a partisan community of interests signals the ideological credibility and appeal of a candidate' (Desmarais et al, 2015). The EPN approach is challenging to be operationalised in researching Bulgaria due to its different system in party financing from the US.

In terms of the mode of party organizations, scholarly debates exist in the usefulness of lightweight organizations of a political party. Vitak et al (2011: 6) pointed out the advantage of lightweight participations online as 'minimum commitment of time and effort' when studying students' lightweight participation with political parties via Facebook prior to the 2008 presidential election in the US. The limitations of Vitak et al's argument are: firstly, while this may work for the student group, there are other demographic groups who may have different attitudes towards lightweight organizations; secondly, while at face value lightweight participation seems convenient, it can be questioned if lightweight participation alone can lead to durable party identification. The importance of combining online participation with on-the-ground participation of citizens in party branches cannot be ignored for long-term endurance. Overcoming the shortcoming of Vitak et al's (2011) argument, Haughton and Deegan-Krause (2020) argue that web pages help initial breakthroughs of new parties, but extensive physical organizations such as subnational branches are important sources of party endurance.

On-the-ground party organizations are argued to have three components (Tavits, 2013; Cyr, 2017). The first of the three components are territorial branches, which can provide 'space for activities' (Cyr, 2017: 22-23). The disadvantage, though, is the financial cost of maintaining territorial branches, that may 'put the party in a financial strain' (Scarow, 1994, cited in Tavits, 2013: 36). However, a political party in parliament tends to receive state subsidy to cover rent

of territorial branches. Crucially, having presence of territorial branches provides stable space for regular political socialization within the local party team. Having territorial branches also signifies accountability to communities for their electoral support. Having territorial branches is a defining feature of on-the-ground party organizations, but it is not enough to have a branch with no staff inside.

This leads to the second component of party organizations: professional staff, which is a ‘full-time job’ (Tavits, 2013: 33). Professional staff can ‘resolve conflict and communicate within the party’ (Grzymala-Busse, 2002, cited in Tavits, 2013: 34) and ‘organize activities’ (Cyr, 2017: 22-23). An emphasis on ‘full-time job’ makes sense, because otherwise it is hard for people to devote a large amount of their time into the difficult task of party building. A ‘full-time job’ sometimes entails staff who is an administrator or an accountant within a party branch. Of course, the interest and enthusiasm to the community welfare and public affairs is also important, which motivates professionals to work for a party branch. These professional staff can serve as party representatives and be sources of accountability and credibility within communities. This will be discussed in Chapter 6. Not necessarily a full-time job to a party but simply group affiliation, is membership.

The third component of party organizations, party membership, can ‘make more attractive appeals to its potential electorate’ (Tavits, 2013: 26-27). The observed trend of party membership declines in Europe demonstrated that it is not easy to expand membership, let alone for a new party (Van Biezen and Poguntke, 2014). Since the public has a relatively high level of expectation and enthusiasm towards a new party at the beginning, it is therefore important for the new party to set up the procedure to absorb them into membership base in a timely manner. After all, party members are argued to be ‘unlikely to withdraw their support even in the face of major party failures’ (Tavits, 2013: 26-27). The positive correlation between party membership and obtained vote shares will be explored in Chapter 5. To summarise, the three components - territorial branches, professional staff, and membership - are powerful to illustrate party organizations that contribute to party endurance.

The on-the-ground element can make party organizations more visible to the public. However, the existing accounts of party organizations suffer from the following three insufficiencies. Firstly, the temporal dimension of party organization development (eg Bolleyer and Bytcek, 2017) focuses on party origin as critical juncture that decides the following party fate. This can be revised, as the party leader needs to make a series of decisions to reinforce its endurance.

Secondly, although the existing argument of party organizations mentions local branches (eg Yovcheva, 2020), the meaning of ‘local’ is not precise and the power of the subnational dimension in political party endurance is not fully illustrated. Thirdly, the existing conceptualisation of party organizations concerns mainly the formal structures (eg Tavits, 2013; Cyr, 2017), leaving the informal dimension not sufficiently researched.

Rethinking the Temporal Dimension

It takes a long time to build party organizations, and so it is important to discuss the temporal dimension. By temporal dimension, I mean the various party development stages, particularly the importance of time and timing in party organization building. Emanuele and Sikk (2020: 884) identify five distinct patterns of new party performance in their analysis of the first five parliamentary elections in Western Europe. These are labelled ‘explosive’, ‘meteoric’, ‘contender’, ‘flat’ and ‘flop’. The degree of success is found to decline. The term ‘explosive’ denotes a party that leaves a lasting impact on the political landscape, while ‘meteoric’ refers to a brief but intense period of success that ultimately fades. ‘Contender’ and ‘flat’ describe a gradual and cautious approach to entering government. The final category, flop, is defined as a party that is initially weak and subsequently dissipates (Emanuele and Sikk, 2020: 891). This category is observed as the most common in Western Europe. Emanuele and Sikk’s (2020) analysis are strong for its incorporation of the temporal dimension and its implication that participation in five parliamentary elections can provide an early indication of the long-term endurance of a new political party. Consequently, GERB has retained its presence in parliament for a period of fifteen years, spanning from 2009 to the present day in 2024. This has involved surviving ten parliamentary elections, including early elections. This suggests that GERB may be classified as an ‘explosive’ political actor, as defined by Emanuele and Sikk (2020: 884), which is a category that is close to a permanent political actor.

Nevertheless, Emanuele and Sikk’s (2020) analysis does not sufficiently address the pre-breakthrough dynamics, including factors such as the party’s origin, its creation, and its pre-breakthrough success. Furthermore, the analysis does not provide sufficient nuances regarding post-breakthrough electoral downturns. It is understandable because it is difficult to quantify and compare the pre-breakthrough dynamics and post-breakthrough electoral downturns in large datasets. By focusing on a single case study, this thesis will provide further details to develop Emanuele and Sikk’s (2020) analysis regarding the temporal dimension of new party

endurance. Indeed, a theoretical framework for party endurance cannot be developed without incorporating the temporal trade-off.

The temporal dimension is important, because it is challenging for new parties to build organizations from zero. Wieringa and Meijers (2020) demonstrate with evidence from the Netherlands that new parties originating from existing parties are more likely to gain parliamentary entry. Wieringa and Meijers (2020) are insightful to reveal that the organizational capacity of new parties is related to their origin and creation point. Focusing on new party success after breakthrough in Western Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, it is argued that parties created with strong support from ‘promoter organizations’ (Bolleyer and Bytcek, 2017: 775) such as ‘environmental groups, women’s organizations, religious groups, unions/employer organizations...’ (Bolleyer and Bytcek, 2013: 776) are more likely to endure in parliament. The mechanism is that such linkages make it easy for personnel from external organizations to be recruited in new parties, raising levels of competence and loyalty to organizations in new party members (Art, 2011).

Bolleyer and Bytcek’s (2013) argument is insightful because it points out the niche variations in the timing of formation and breakthrough in the life cycle of new parties. New parties without roots in social groups, also called entrepreneur new parties, are less likely to endure than rooted new parties, which refer to parties with links to extensive groups (Bolleyer and Bytcek, 2013). The endurance of GERB is then particularly puzzling, as although GERB was not completely without rootedness when created, it is mostly considered as an entrepreneur party and its organizational development has happened over the years rather than at the point of its origin. So, not to dismiss the importance of party origin, but there may be stronger explanatory power if taking a slightly broader approach, and considering the choices made by new party leadership from party pre-history to its parliamentary breakthrough, and then to its fulfilment of its first parliamentary mandate.

The temporal trade-off between the pre-breakthrough and post-breakthrough period is studied regarding political party’s ideological and programmatic positions (see for instance Engler, 2023). Party endurance does not only concern the division between the pre-breakthrough and post-breakthrough period. A series of choices made by new party leaders continuously after breakthrough play a role in reinforcing party endurance.

Lack of the Informal Dimension in Existing Conceptualisation of Party Organizations

In the existing party organization accounts for political party endurance, focus is given to formal structures on paper (Tavits, 2013; Cyr, 2017). Formal structures mean the design of organizational structures and hierarchies on paper in official party documents. When discussing how party organizations contribute to party endurance, the two mechanism that party organizations can firstly contact voters and secondly signal competence (Tavits, 2013: 9), in fact are not the result of merely formal structures. Formal structures cannot tell how active party organizations are in reality. Being active in reality helps both contact voters and signalling competence. Therefore, it is necessary to bring in the informal dimension of party organizations into the discussion of political party endurance. Along the informal dimension, activism can tell how active party organizations are in reality.

When mentioning the importance of ‘active party members’ to political party endurance (eg. Cyr, 2017: 35), existing scholars did not specify the meaning of ‘active’ and nuances of informal activities that party organizations may carry out relevant to political party endurance. As will be discussed in Chapter 5, the underlying reason for varied subnational electoral performances is the activism of ‘activists rather than the number of branches’ (Cirhan, 2021: 52). Indeed, a deeper examination is needed in political party endurance studies to unpack informal activism carried out by subnational party branches both during and beyond official electoral campaign periods. Engaging with informal activism does not have to be necessarily linked to the formal procedure of becoming party members.

Another disadvantage of mentioning ‘active party members’ (eg. Cyr, 2017: 35) is that it is membership-restricted and does not consider the role of non-party members - informal activists - in party growth. Indeed, it seems that the existing conceptualisation of ‘organizational resources’ based on Latin America (see eg Cyr. 2017: 35) is mainly as representation of ‘a party’s formal structure’. The existing approach of organizations is mainly about formal organizations, governed by ‘rules and procedures that are created, communicated, and enforced through channels widely accepted as official’ (Helmke and Levitsky, 2004: 727). An important missing dimension in the existing party organization literature is informal activism.

The informal organization is neither disciplined nor related to party bureaucracy. It serves as problem-solving networks in local neighbourhoods based on research in Latin America (Levitsky, 2001). Informal organization tends to be personalised, and examples include meetings held in activists’ homes (Levitsky, 2001). In addition to the informal relations between the national level and subnational levels of a political party, informal organization can

also refer to informal relations between parties and voters (Osei, 2016). The informal internal organization may help build up internal cohesion, while the party-voter informal relations might be helpful for voter mobilisation. The informal organization of local party activists with NGOs, clubs, and unions is resilient and effective to distribute resources, also termed patronage resource distribution (Levitsky, 2001, Munoz and Dargent's, 2016), which in turn increases loyalty towards the party, leading to political party endurance. The existing understanding of the informal dimension is derived from Latin America (Levitsky, 2001, Munoz and Dargent's, 2016). The informal dimension in Central and Eastern Europe is not sufficiently researched.

The Lacunae of Subnational Politics in Party Endurance Studies

In the discussion of party appeals and party organizations, subnational politics are close to everyday concerns and problem-solving of voters, and therefore are important to obtaining votes consistently and to political party endurance. However, in the existing studies of political party endurance (Engler, 2023; Tavits, 2013; Cyr, 2017), there is not enough attention paid to subnational levels. The ideological and programmatic positioning, put forward by Engler (2023), almost implicitly focuses on the national level. In the party organization accounts of Tavits (2013) and Cyr (2017), local organizations are mentioned, but not given enough details. In the comparison studies of party survival between GERB and NDSV, Yovcheva (2020: 82) points out the importance of an organization strategy that is composed of establishing '[l]ocal branches' and 'local coordinators.' As mentioned in Chapter 1, Yovcheva's (2022) account touches upon subnational levels but do not specify the meaning of 'local' in the case of Bulgaria. The importance of subnational levels is not fully demonstrated. Firstly, Yovcheva (2022: 83) argues for the significance of winning local elections, because it may provide more resources. It does not become clear from Yovcheva's accounts the content of these resources and their role in political party endurance. Secondly, Yovcheva (2022) considers the local election performance as an indicator of the party's organizational strategy of building local structures. Winning local elections does not only have relevance to party organizations. It remains under-researched in Yovcheva's (2012) accounts as to how winning local elections provides opportunities for party nominated elites to deliver subnational service, which matters to political party endurance.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, different countries have different subnational levels. For example, in the US, the state level is an important subnational level. Regarding the US, 'many studies find partisan control of the state legislature influences a number of salient policies' (eg. Dennis

et al, 2024: 2). However, subnational levels in Central and Eastern Europe remain under-researched.

Incorporating Patronage and Clientelism to Party Endurance Explanatory Framework

Given the importance of subnational politics in party endurance, it should be noted that subnational politics do not only concern programmatic politics, but also concern non-programmatic politics, or patronage/clientelistic politics. The control of patronage resource is argued to increase the chance of incumbent parties to win elections in the US (Folke et al, 2011). It has also been argued that the lack of patronage resource, such as jobs and fund, is likely to lead to failure and the collapse of parties (Muñoz and Dargent, 2016). Various forms of patronage exist such as ‘personal rewards and gifts, allocation of public service projects, contracts or licences, pork-barrel legislation’ (Kopecky and Spirova, 2011: 905). Patronage is seen as ‘a dimension of party-state relationships’ that can be explored through ‘the civil service appointment process’ as well as ‘the state control of the appointment in media during election cycles’ (Roper, 2006: 362-363, 369-370). Patronage is defined as the distribution of favours to individuals in exchange for political advantages accruing – or being expected to accrue – to those who give the favours’ (Blondel, 2002: 241). The term patronage is used by Muñoz and Dargent (2016) to discuss the internal organizations of political parties between the national arena and the subnational arena, such as resource distribution and decision making. Patronage as organizational resource is important to internal party cohesion.

The arguments of Munoz and Dargent (2016) are powerful, because they highlight patronage as an internal organizational resource. Patronage as organizational resource helps subnational party structures to stick with national party authority, and therefore is likely to explain party success. Patronage describes the kind of state resource access and distribution that can build and sustain the linkages between the national and subnational levels of political parties (Muñoz and Dargent, 2016). Essentially, patronage resource functions as preventing a political party’s subnational branches from falling apart from its national headquarters, therefore important to political party endurance (Muñoz and Dargent, 2016).

Nonetheless, the patronage resource and subnational linkage theory of Muñoz and Dargent (2016) was developed from the empirical cases from Latin America, making Central and Eastern Europe an under-researched region in testing the role of patronage resource in political party endurance. Focusing on old political parties that have gone through certain reforms, the subnational linkage theory of Muñoz and Dargent (2016) are not directed at newly emerging

political parties, therefore unable to illustrate new parties' temporal trade-off between pre-breakthrough building and post-breakthrough endurance. Also, what is missing in the accounts of Munoz and Dargent (2016) is that they do not stress how parties use patronage resources to interact with voters, which might have more direct effect on the electoral success.

To avoid such shortcomings, clientelism may serve as an appeal to voters and may enhance voter mobilization, which therefore explains party success. Clientelism is defined as 'direct and contingent exchange between votes and targeted goods delivered only to party supporters' (Wang, 2020: 402). A similar definition of clientelism is 'a particular mode of exchange between electoral constituencies as principals and politicians as agents in democratic systems' (Kitschelt and Wilkinson, 2007: 7). The term clientelism is used to analyse the interactions between party branches and grassroots communities. Clientelism as an appeal to voters in voter mobilization strategy has been observed around the world, such as: France, Italy, Turkey, Indonesia and Argentina (Warner, 1998; Sayarı, 2011; Aspinall and As'ad, 2015; Szwarcberg, 2012). According to these studies clientelism can explain political party endurance because it may provide voters with specific material benefits. According to Warner's study of French and Italian politics from 1946 and 1958, such material benefits can immediately help voters 'mitigate uncertainty and hardship' (Warner, 1998: 557). In contrast, 'the universalistic policies take too long to yield benefits' for new parties (Warner, 1998: 557). While patronage and clientelism are a useful tool to explain clientelism, the existing accounts suffer from weaknesses which will be discussed below.

Clientelistic Problem Solving Networks

Subnational party branches maintain subnational problem-solving networks, that are useful to cultivate subnational problem solving appeals of political parties, giving reasons for communities for consistently vote for political parties. The subnational problem-solving networks, understood as clientelism (Szwarcberg, 2015), are therefore important to political party endurance. Some of existing studies on clientelism, however, neglect problem-solving element (Gherghina and Volintiru, 2017). Gherghina and Volintiru (2017) propose a new model of clientelism in the study of Romanian politics. Gherghina and Volintiru (2017) argue that the vertical material flow from parties to voters may be funded by the horizontal clientelistic linkages between parties and private contributors. The financial donations that parties receive from the networks with the private sector can be useful to voter mobilisation, and therefore is likely to enable parties to obtain electoral success. Nevertheless, what is missing in Gherghina

and Volintiru's (2017) accounts of the clientelistic linkages is the subnational problem solving as the purpose for party financing.

Szwarcberg's definition of clientelism is powerful, because it points out the reasons why voters might accept clientelism – because clientelism can solve their problems. The abovementioned definitions stress clientelism as 'exchange' and point out how parties are likely to benefit from clientelism. A more nuanced definition of clientelism is 'a strategy of political mobilization in which politicians solve or promise to solve voters' problems in exchange for their political support' (Szwarcberg, 2015: 2). According to Szwarcberg's research in Argentinian politics, political parties are argued to rely on problem-solving networks to build and sustain interactions with voters, helping voter with 'money lending, childcare, and counselling' (Szwarcberg, 2012: 230). Problem-solving networks can be beneficial to voters and therefore influence their voting choice. For voters, clientelism is a problem-solving strategy to obtain food and medicine in the context of extreme material deprivation (Auyero, 2000). Indeed, clientelism provides more direct linkages between voters and party workers (Kitschelt, 2000).

Recent studies based on long-term fieldwork tend to stress the defining feature of clientelism as problem-solving networks mainly in Latin America, and also in Asia and Africa, making Central and Eastern Europe a neglected region in party politics discipline (Szwarcberg, 2012; Daby, 2021; Auyero, 2000; Hagene, 2015; Hagene and González-Fuente, 2016; Hilgers, 2012; Auyero, 2014; Grindle, 2016; Berenschot and Aspinall, 2020). Research is needed to explore if clientelistic problem-solving is carried out by political party organizations and form an important part of political party appeals in Central and Eastern Europe.

Clientelism as Long-Term Strategy

As mentioned earlier, in electoral politics clientelism is studied as a direct exchange strategy to win votes (Wantchekon, 2003; Weitz-Shapiro, 2012; Wang, 2020), which ignores the existence of clientelism beyond the pre-electoral campaign period. Notably, existing scholars study vote-buying as the tool of clientelism (Wang and Kurzman, 2007). As Hilgers (2011) accurately points out, the problem of this understanding of clientelism is that vote-buying is a one-time transaction between votes and money, while clientelism is long-term relationship.

The informal activism carried out by subnational party branches is anticipated to provide channels of political and social participation of citizens from the grassroots communities. Indeed, such citizen participation has not been paid much attention to in the existing party politics literature with a regional focus on Central and Eastern Europe. There, a lot has been

written about the existence of electoral clientelism, pressure and coercion in influencing voting behaviour in Bulgaria and Romania (Mares et al, 2017), and trading votes in exchange for favourable policies in Hungary and Romania (Mares and Young, 2019). The existing accounts about (clientelistic) subnational linkages between party branches and grassroots communities (Mares et al, 2017; Mares and Young, 2019; Wang, 2020) tend to be directed at the official electoral campaigns – this temporal shortcoming made their arguments partial, oversimplifying the relationships between voters and brokers as direct one-time exchange. Tavits’ (2013) and Cyr’ (2017) party organization argument is not complete if not considering the openness of party branches to indirect citizen participation.

The long-term relationships are likely to generate voters’ trust in subnational party branches. Studies that focus on clientelism and trust in Southern Asia and Central Asia illustrate trust as a characteristic of clientelism but does not discuss its relevance to political party endurance (Berenschot, 2015; Hierman, 2010). This thesis brings clientelistic trust into the discussion of political party endurance. Existing literature discusses the impact of institutional trust in clientelism, but does not take interpersonal trust into consideration (Bustikova and Corduneanu-Huci, 2017; Benstead et al, 2019). This thesis stresses the role of clientelism in developing long-term interpersonal trust that facilitates casting ballots consistently. As such, this thesis brings clientelism and trust (Torsello, 2012) to explain political party endurance: interpersonal trust generated from clientelistic networks may be as significant as abstract institutional trust in making grassroot communities stick with subnational party branches.

The (Sub)national Explanatory Framework of This Thesis

Building upon the previously discussed literature on party organizations (Tavits, 2013; Cyr, 2017; Bolleyer and Bytze, 2013), party appeals (Engler, 2023, Haughton and Deegan-Krause, 2020), party leadership (Van Dyck, 2018; Wieringa and Meijers, 2020), and patronage/clientelism (Muñoz and Dargent, 2016; Szwarcberg, 2012), the chapter then moves to construct this thesis’s (sub)national explanatory framework. This thesis’s (sub)national explanatory framework aims to put together elements of party organizations, party appeals and party leadership, incorporating the significant under-researched element of subnational politics into the studies of party endurance. As such, party endurance is the result of both national and subnational levels of party leadership, party appeals and party organizations.

Table 2.1 Subnational Explanatory Framework

elements	subnational linkages: -the linkages between the national party authority and the subnational party autonomy; -the linkages between party representatives and grassroots voters
	subnational problem-solving appeal
dimensions	temporal dimension: -earliness; -regularity, and -long-term horizon
	informal dimension: -interpersonal trust (personalised interactions between the national party leader and the subnational party representatives, face-to-face communication between party representatives and grassroots voters); -non-partisan activism; -indirect participation, and -encapsulation avoidance

As demonstrated in Table 2.1, the subnational explanatory framework includes two elements: *subnational linkages*, *subnational problem-solving appeal*. Subnational linkages include two distinct but equally important levels. The first level is the linkages between the national party authority and the subnational party autonomy. The second level is the linkages between party representatives and grassroots voters. Both levels of subnational linkages need to be built as early as the pre-breakthrough period and maintained regularly for party strengthening and electoral success. More importantly, subnational linkages are the prerequisite for subnational service delivery. The centre of the subnational approach to an endurance strategy is to deliver subnational economic goods and services given the funding crisis in local government. Both the hope and the result regarding the subnational service delivery cultivate the subnational-based appeal. Cultivating the long-lasting subnational-based appeal through everyday subnational service delivery is the fundamental mechanism of the subnational approach to an endurance strategy that enables a new political party to survive any storm and secure stable electoral support.

The subnational explanatory framework has two dimensions: *the temporal dimension, and the informal dimension*, as shown in Table 2.1. The temporal dimension is important to be incorporated into the subnational explanatory framework. The temporal trade-off of subnational linkages, subnational service delivery and subnational-based appeal is the core of the subnational approach to an endurance strategy. The temporal dimension has three components: earliness, regularity, and long-term horizon. The three components can be unpacked as follows. A new political party needs to build subnational linkages early on when voters have hopes, as opposed to the post-breakthrough stage when the party has to deal with the difficult task of governing the whole country and when voters get disappointed with the party's governing results. Regarding regularity, the new political party then needs to regularly invest all-year-round in the maintenance of its subnational linkages. On a long-term scale, based on the pre-requisite of regular subnational linkage maintenance, the new political party only in its relatively later stage after several electoral mandate is likely to get ideas from its extensive party branches where and how to provide subnational service delivery. The everyday subnational service delivery in turn cultivates subnational-based appeal, over decades, in contrary to just during the official pre-electoral campaign, over months.

The informal dimension is less known but increasingly powerful in the subnational explanatory framework. The informal instrument in crafting subnational linkages and subnational service delivery is the catalyst of the endurance strategy. The informal dimension has four components: interpersonal trust, non-partisan activism, indirect participation, and encapsulation avoidance. Interpersonal trust is the key to the informal dimension and has two levels. The first level of interpersonal trust is based on the personalised interactions between the national party leader and the subnational party representatives. This can enhance subnational party autonomy, compared to the pure institutional trust that the national party leader has in subnational party branches. The second level of interpersonal trust is developed through face-to-face communication between party representatives and grassroots voters. This can reduce vote loss in electoral downturns, compared to the pure institutional trust that voters have in political parties.

The second level of interpersonal trust, although difficult, can be achieved through the tool of non-partisan activism, the channel of indirect participation, and the close-up status avoidance of party branches. Non-partisan activism has the potential electoral benefit of building interpersonal trust with voters who are not interested in pure partisan competition and formal politics, but care about the development of the society and individuals. As opposed to the direct

participation in formal party politics through formalised registered membership, non-partisan activism facilitates indirect participation not restricted by membership status. This enables party branches to develop interpersonal trust with even apolitical voters for their long-term electoral support. Facilitating indirect participation of citizens in non-partisan activism is a necessary informal instrument to build and maintain interpersonal trust with voters, in the context of an increasingly individualised and apolitical society. This is because it plays a pivotal role in the dissolution of distrust that citizens have towards party representatives; it subsequently reduces potential vote loss in electoral downturns. Finally, allowing indirect participation through arranging non-partisan activism opens up diverse channels for citizen participation. Opening diverse participatory channels makes subnational party branches more accessible to the wider public, and subsequently avoid entering the close-up status. Avoiding close-up status is crucial for the growth of branches and the connection with voters. The close-up status avoidance through the non-partisan activism tool and indirect participation channel characterises the subnational approach more as the mass party route to an endurance strategy.

Although this thesis highlights its explanatory framework, alternative explanations are acknowledged. The aforementioned process can be described as creating a system of enforced dependence and lack of choice that makes people gravitate towards GERB as the party controls many local governments instead of interpersonal trust. Trust, or in Bulgarian language *doverie*, is the term used by GERB party politicians and party activists as a strategy to achieve endurance in the interviews conducted. Although the thesis acknowledges the alternative existence and framing for interactions between party branches and voters, the thesis's framework emphasises the role of interpersonal trust, as opposed to institutional trust. The thesis highlights trust as source of electoral support, while does not deny that threatening, coercion, and forced dependence can also be source of electoral support. As will be discussed in Chapter 3, based on the interviews conducted with party politicians and party activists, the interpersonal trust building is essentially GERB's endurance strategy. As will be discussed in Chapter 8, future studies can focus on the voter side studies of party endurance, which will reveal further nuances and mechanism regarding how voters interact with the party's endurance strategy.

The chapter therefore ends with a brief presentation of this thesis's (sub)national explanatory framework for political party endurance. The following chapter will explore methodological approaches and tools which are most suitable for confirming this framework. Guided by the focus on the national and subnational arenas in this thesis's explanatory framework, the next chapter will therefore highlight the incorporation of the subnational dimension regarding the

data collection process into the existing political science focus on the national dimension. Additionally, given the informal dimension of this thesis's theoretical framework, the following chapter subsequently seeks methodological operationalisation which can reveal subnational, informal and hidden dynamics in everyday party politics life. The next chapter does this by drawing inspiration from ethnographic methods.

Chapter 3 Methodology

Introduction

Chapter 1 introduced the entire thesis by setting up the research question and defining the key concept that this thesis aims to explain: party endurance. Chapter 2 reviewed the existing explanations for party endurance, pointing out the insufficiencies of system level explanations alone such as historical legacy, sociological cleavages and institutional frameworks. Analytical focus was then given to party-specific factors: party leadership, party appeals, party organizations and patronage/clientelism. Chapter 2 concluded that the significant missing element in party endurance studies is the subnational politics.

Focusing on subnational politics, Chapter 3 provides a rationale for the basket of methodological approaches adopted in this thesis to explain party endurance. Since this thesis's data is mainly based on observations and interviews during the one-year fieldwork, its methodological discussion starts with a summary of the fieldwork: the twelve-month fieldwork in Bulgaria from 1 September 2021 and to 31 August 2022, plus the follow-up three weeks from 23 March 2023 to 13 April 2023. The initial five-month stay from 1 September 2021 was based in the capital city which facilitated data collection process at the national level, and then the subsequent seven-month interviewing in all 28 provinces in the country enabled the researcher to gain insights at subnational levels. Follow-up interviews were then conducted during the three weeks in 2023.

As shown in Table 3.1, in total 179 semi-structured and in-depth interviews were conducted with party officials and members, which can be grouped by administrative level and by party level. By administrative level, 35 in the capital, 128 in provincial centre towns, 13 in municipal centre towns, 3 in villages and towns below municipal centre towns. Then by party, 65 with the GERB (Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria), 17 with NDSV (National Movement Simeon II), 14 with ITN (There are Such a People), 9 with PP (Change Continues), 27 with BSP (Bulgarian Socialist Party), 11 with DPS (Movement for Rights and Freedoms), 22 with other parties, and 14 with non-party election observers. In addition, in total 25 party-themed activities were observed, including party gatherings and lunch breaks in party offices, a cadre training course in a hotel, and a festival celebration in a restaurant.

Table 3.1. Numbers of interviews by administrative level and party level in Bulgaria

Administrative level	Capital	Provincial centres	Municipal centres	Towns& villages				
	35	128	13	3				
Party level	GERB	NDSV	ITN	PP	BSP	DPS	Other parties	Election observers
	65	17	14	9	27	11	22	14

The timing for conducting interviews is based on both political seasonality and non-political seasonality. Political seasonality refers to periods where there are political events such as electoral campaigns, rallies, party training events and reception days of municipal government, etc. Political seasonality is important, because it creates the atmosphere in the society for people to talk about politics and it creates events that researchers can go to participate and network in order to schedule interviews with other event participants. Non-political seasonality refers to periods where all the other non-explicit political events happen, such as historical commemorations and traditional festivals. Interview routes can be strategically planned by considering the timing of political events and other cyclical events that are not directly related to politics.

Choice of informants is based on the following two principles. Firstly, informants need to cover various administrative levels, including the national level, the provincial level, the municipal level, and the town/village level. This is important in order to balance data sources from both the national and the subnational levels, as well as to avoid the pitfall that data sources are only centred around the national level. Secondly, informants need to cover people not strongly affiliated with political parties (experts from NGOs, election observants), and people who are strongly affiliated with various political parties, including GERB, BSP, DPS, NDSV, ITN, PP and other small parties. This can potentially reduce bias in data sources and offer endurance explanations from various perspectives.

The methodological choice of doing long-term fieldwork and conducting interviews fits the research aim of finding the underlying reasons that explain political party endurance. It is a valid research strategy to use large dataset and run regression, but at the heart of political parties are individuals, communities and relationships. Therefore, in order to explain those long

enduring political parties, there is the need to go to observe them on the ground, to see how party branches function in everyday life, and to identify how party organizations look inside. Hence, this thesis has not just taken statistics from a big dataset and to conclude the organizational patterns of political parties, particularly regarding their hierarchy, which is what a lot of big data sets tend to suggest. The thesis highlights the importance of conducting long-term fieldwork and looking at the party in-depth from the ground, which provides a valuable perspective. The thesis does not claim that other perspectives are wrong but suggests that the methodological perspective based on interviewing local people brings some valuable insights, although relatively neglected in political science research.

While highlighting the benefits of conducting interviews with local people in political science research, it is acknowledged that conducting interviews as a method is also criticised in the following three points. The first criticism is that when the researcher interviews people from GERB for their assessment of party endurance, it could be difficult to be sure that GERB respondents' self-assessment is correct. In order to address this criticism, the researcher has also interviewed people who were affiliated with NDSV – a party that has not endured. Therefore, through putting GERB in a comparative perspective with NDSV, stronger evidence could be provided for the mechanism that leads to party endurance. The second criticism is the tendency that respondents from GERB are likely to give positive (trust-building) rather than negative (transactional, dependence-creating clientelism) readings of their own actions. To address this concern, the researcher has interviewed people both from GERB and from other parties, as well as offering anonymity when conducting interviews. The one-year fieldwork also allowed relatively long time for the researcher to build trust with respondents to construct safe psychological space for respondents to reveal their views. The third criticism is that when the researcher interviews people who have themselves endured in the party, it creates an impression of an overdetermination of the explanation, i.e. people who have done certain things and are in the party confirm that these things were important for the party. To address this criticism, the respondent has also interviewed people who exited GERB during the party's different development stages, as well as people who are currently (2021-23) in different positions within GERB from national level politicians to village mayors, from party branches in northern Bulgaria to branches in southern Bulgaria, from party branch administrators to youth organization activists. The diversity of respondents in terms of geographical regions, administrative levels and demographics could therefore largely reduce the bias in the data collected. The thesis is not contingent on one answer from one respondent.

This subnational-fieldwork-based thesis positions itself in the academic field of party politics and comparative politics in the wider political science discipline. Looking through a political science lens can offer significant insights, but it is complemented by an area studies approach to gain deeper insights related to the area of Central and Eastern Europe. This thesis adopts an area studies approach, understood as ‘a set of culture and geographic-specific objects of study’ (Clowes and Bromberg, 2019: 7), underscoring the study of the given area contributed to the discipline (Bates, 1997). An area studies approach requires ‘in-depth field research in local languages and close attention to local histories, viewpoints...’ (Szanton, 2004: 5). Having a better understanding of the history, the language, the culture and the geography of the country under study can enhance what can be seen through a political science lens. An area studies approach leads this thesis to gain insights from ethnography and use qualitative methods. Given that the research question addresses a national-level puzzle, fieldwork was conducted not only in the capital city or a few selected localities but across a wide range of locations. Adopting an area studies approach, this thesis therefore adapts the ethnographic methods from anthropology to answer the party politics puzzle about party endurance.

Centring around national and subnational levels of politics, this thesis’s party endurance explanatory framework focuses both on the national level and all administrative levels below the national level. Where analytical accuracy is needed, the following terms will be chosen and used carefully: ‘regional’ (6 regions in Bulgaria: northwestern, north central, northeastern, southwestern, south central, southeastern), ‘provincial’ (28 provinces or *oblasti* in Bulgaria), ‘municipal’ (265 municipalities or *obshitini*), and ‘city/town/village’. Usage of these terms has the advantage of contextualising party organizations in the country’s geographic-administrative divisions. Given that a political party is a hierarchic organization, this thesis uses terms like ‘grassroots level’, ‘middle-level elites’ and ‘top-leaders’: ‘grassroots level’ refers to party activists, passive members, and loose party supporters across constituencies (Scarrow, 2014: 14), as well as party volunteers (Whiteley, 2009: 144). ‘Top-leaders’ (van Haute and Gauja 2015: 7-8) refer to party leaders at the national level, who are usually parliamentarians and cabinet ministers and make strategies for the entire party. ‘Middle-level elites’ are party activists (Mair, 2001), overlapping with grassroots level, but who tend to have influence over outcomes of policies making in municipal government. The methodological implications are therefore to collect data both across geographical-administrative levels and from respondents at various hierarchic positionings in a party.

The chapter proceeds as follows. It first briefly presents this thesis's methodological approach as an ethnographically informed single case study. To be specific, the chapter reflects the case study approach and positions the Bulgarian political party GERB as a deviant case, while stressing the benefits of adapting ethnographic methods of gaining hidden and deep insights in party politics research. Centring around the ethnographically informed single case study, this chapter then argues semi-structured and in-depth interviewing as an appropriate methodological tool triangulated with other tools such as documents and election results. In addition to the ethnographically informed case study, another equally important methodological approach of this thesis centres around '(sub)national'. The chapter therefore then highlights the value of multiple sites across national and subnational administrative levels of politics. Specifically, the chapter stresses the strategy of going to multiple sites where GERB had high and low electoral support. As an ethnographically informed single case study in multiple sites across national and subnational levels, the chapter then moves to discussing the research ethics and the researcher positionality. Finally, this chapter's concluding remarks stress the methodological contribution of this thesis to party politics: the focusing on the subnational politics of one country in depth and conducting over one hundred interviews over a year in multiple sites across administrative levels with language skills.

An Ethnographically Informed Single Case Study

In the debates among political scientists regarding the use of quantitative versus qualitative methods, the focus often centres on how each approach can effectively capture and analyse different types of data (Frericks, 2022: 319). Quantitative methods are based on 'large-N' cases, incorporating statistics to map relationships between sets of numbers representing concepts (McNabb, 2015). Quantitative methods have the advantage of systemic measurement and comparison (Frericks, 2022: 317). For a cross-national analysis within a large number of countries, quantitative data may be lower cost and less time intensive.

However, Tarrow criticised the idea of King, Keohane and Verba that 'quantification is the answer to all the problems of social science research' (King et al, 1994, cited in Tarrow, 1995: 474). It is important to emphasize the distinction between meaningful and measurable aspects, noting that not everything can be easily expressed in quantitative terms (Copsey, 2015). Focusing solely on what can be quantified may overlook valuable insights that fall outside the scope of numerical measurement. The challenge of quantitative methods is the ability of the researcher to interpret the decontextualised statistics in order to make sense of the real

happenings in politics and society.

Different from ‘large-N’ cases, qualitative approaches are argued to use ‘small-N’ cases: two cases, three cases, or a few cases (Hague et al, 2019). Not all qualitative data can be called ethnographic data, because ethnographic data is strictly defined, and at least long-term relationships between the researcher and the researched need to be built (Millar, 2018: 669). Tarrow (1995: 473) suggested ‘the triangulation of different methods on the same problem’ as a ‘strategy of combining quantitative and qualitative research methods.’

To make use of the advantages of each of the methods, this thesis employs quantitative data (vote shares of parties) and adapts ethnography when gaining interviewing and observing data. As discussed in Chapter 2, studying the subnational dimension of politics is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of party politics dynamics. Quantitative tools, such as vote shares, party membership figures, and branch statistics, provide valuable insights into the subnational levels but cannot capture the entire subnational context. Therefore, qualitative on-the-ground research is necessary to complement these quantitative methods and offers a more nuanced understanding of the subnational political landscape.

As an ethnographically informed single case study, this thesis uses the single case study approach, instead of large-N or small-N study approaches. As discussed in Chapter 1, the power of the case study approach will be further illustrated as follows.

The Power of the Case Study Approach

Methodologically analysing a single country diachronically offers an insightful solution to research questions in political science (Lijphart, 1971). The case study method is defined as ‘the intensive study of a single case for the purpose of understanding a larger class of cases (a population)’ (Gerring, 2007: 95). The scope of the case study is that it looks at a case within its actual context (Yin, 2018). The case study method allows the thesis to study the political party, GERB, without ignoring its context, the Bulgarian party politics. Given the focus on understanding how new parties survive and adapt, an in-depth study of GERB is expected to provide valuable lessons that could be applicable to similar cases in other contexts.

Case studies use techniques including observations and interviews, leading to thick description. Lund (2014: 226-227) argues that the ‘general relevance’ of the case study is generated through

‘iteration and triangulation until a certain degree of saturation is reached’, giving an example of ‘iterative interviews’ as a form of data collection. Indeed, the advantage of the case study method is to use ‘an in-depth and real-world understanding’ of an example to illuminate a wider phenomenon (McCormick et al, 2019: 36).

The effort to go against seeing a case just a case is illustrated by Lund (2014: 230): ‘It is not the actual phenomena, which are a case; it is our efforts at generalizing, abstracting and theorizing that make a case of the phenomena.’ If generalization is not included as part of effort to conduct case studies, then ‘resonance with events and processes...in different temporal or special contexts’ will be ignored (Lund, 2014: 229). To address the critique that the case study cannot generate generalizations, it is argued to reconsider generalizations as ‘indeterminate, relative and time and context bound’ (Lincoln and Guba, 2002, cited in VanWynsberghe and Khan, 2007: 85). In other words, generalizations ‘have half-lives and require continuous updating as the context changes’ (Cronbach, 1975, cited in VanWynsberghe and Khan, 2007: 85). Each case is embedded in context which requires in-depth examination. In this way, case studies can provide arguments that are to be tested in another case in further research. This thesis adopts the case study approach because an in-depth study of an exceptional case, GERB, can shed light on the broader trend of new party challenges in Central and Eastern Europe.

The GERB’s sustained electoral success as discussed in previous chapters has shown places it in the category of a deviant case study. Hague et al (2019: 38) present types of cases. The representative case is the ‘typical of the category’, while the deviant case is the ‘exception to the rule’. The enduring fate of the GERB has made it an exceptional case in the universe of ephemeral new parties in Central and Eastern Europe. Researching this deviant case is likely to confirm the subnational explanatory framework as discussed in the previous chapter and illuminate wider lessons in party endurance in Central and Eastern Europe. There are two levels of understanding of the ‘case’ here: the case of GERB, and the case of Bulgaria.

The single case study of Bulgaria’s GERB can shed light on the understanding of new parties in Central and Eastern Europe. As discussed in Chapter 1, Haughton and Deegan-Krause (2020) reveal the cycle of short-lived new parties in Central and Eastern Europe, while pointing out several exceptions: Slovakia’s Smer (Direction), Czech Republic’s ANO (Action of Dissatisfied Citizens), and Bulgaria’s GERB. Notably, GERB entered the national government after the first elections it contested, whereas Smer did not. Haughton and Deegan-Krause (2020) argue that Smer’s period in parliament immediately after its breakthrough outside government

was arguably crucial for its development. It is particularly puzzling that GERB, despite not experiencing this period outside government immediately after its breakthrough, has still managed to endure as Smer has. Therefore, while insights gained from GERB may be applied to the cases of Smer and ANO, it is important to consider the different contexts and unique experiences of each party.

The case of Bulgaria is significant, but under-researched in comparative politics. The Bulgarian party system has demonstrated in its historical trajectory development of the past three decades a strikingly polarising pattern for studying party change and stability (Spirova, 2007). Such a pattern deserves attention for a detailed single case study (Haughton, 2014). Pepinsky (2019) carefully examined non area study journal articles in comparative politics, and concluded that excluding US, single country studies largely focused on countries from Western Europe, Canada, and Australia and New Zealand, and since 2000, also countries from Latin America. Bulgaria, like most countries outside Western Europe and the US, remains under researched in the discipline of politics.

The Inspiration from Ethnography

As an ethnographically informed single case study, this thesis borrows insights from ethnography in its data collection. Ethnography is understood as involving ‘immersion in the place and lives of people under study’ (Wedeen, 2010: 257). Long-term immersion in the place and lives of people under study has the strength of challenging existing theories in political science that have been generated through large-N research methods (Wedeen, 2010: 268). Existing theories generated through large-N research methods may suffer from the pitfall of ignoring undocumented happenings in the political life, but an ethnographic approach allows ‘human observations’ to validate statistical data ‘because the data quality might not be perfect or may measure something unintended’ (Bjerre-Nielsen and Glavind, 2022: 2). Kubit (2009: 36) flagged up the importance of ‘meaning’ that individuals perceived about a given object in politics and society. Long-term fieldwork is useful for the researcher to understand the meanings that are attached to various events. It might be challenging for the researcher to capture the meaning-making logic of respondents without being informed by the ethnographic approach.

Given that the explanatory framework of the thesis is centred around the subnational dimension, and the subnational dimension is complicated and made up of several administrative levels which are different from the local dynamics that the pure ethnographic approach is centred

around, it becomes increasingly challenging for this thesis to adopt the pure ethnographic approach. As the thesis is to address the party politics puzzle about the national endurance of the new party, it is then not enough to only focus on the local dynamics. To fully address the puzzle of the thesis, it is therefore required to tackle both the national and the subnational arena of party politics. Although this thesis does not directly adopt the pure ethnographic approach, I am informed by the ethnographic approach when spending one year across the multiple administrative levels including both the national and subnational levels of the fieldwork country.

There are challenges that need to be overcome when conducting long-term fieldwork. Kapiszewski et al (2015: 197) criticised that respondents may sometimes ‘offer self-serving and distorted accounts.’ The key strategy is to have interviews with respondents from as many different perspectives as possible. In fact, distortion may also exist in quantitative methods like survey research, because the categories set in advance by the research may be distorted, and respondents may also experience distortion when filling out the survey. Another challenge that may come up in fieldwork include that people may be reluctant to provide information, namely the difficulty in gathering information (Heimer, 2006). In the clientelism study of Mares and Young (2019), the locality selection is based on ‘the accessibility of the research team’ (Mares and Young, 2019: 61). The practicality consideration matters, as previous contacts with certain localities can ‘facilitate community entry and respondent recruitment’ (Mares and Young, 2019: 62). Accepting the long-term fieldwork as dynamic, flexible and iterative process is an important strategy. Mares and Young (2019) practise the flexibility principle and decide some of its localities at later stage of their research after documenting levels of clientelism through surveys. Indeed, it is important to ‘stay open to unforeseen ideas that we come across in fieldwork and to integrate what we discover into our research design’ (Heimer, 2006: 58).

Therefore, I conducted 12 months of fieldwork to build long-term trust with the community, which allowed me sufficient time to manage respondent resistance. To avoid this resistance, I refrained from having a fixed list of national party elites to interview, as scheduling them strictly could make the research process seem deliberate and disconnected from everyday life in the field. By approaching subnational party branches during significant local events and festive times, I found that while respondent resistance did not disappear entirely, it became less disruptive. Before starting fieldwork, I had established contacts with Bulgarian journalists, having accompanied Bulgarian media delegations to China during my undergraduate studies

in Beijing. Although these contacts helped with initial interview scheduling, they did not play a decisive role throughout the entire fieldwork period. The 12-month duration allowed me to develop new connections on-site, though my initial contacts did help reduce respondent resistance (Petkov and Kaoullas, 2016).

Methodological Tools

So far, this chapter discussed the methodological choice among the large-N, the small-N and the single case study and defended the position that the single case study is powerful for gaining in-depth insights. The chapter also illustrated the benefits of borrowing insights from ethnography in party politics research. Therefore, a further step is to reflect strengths and weaknesses of methodological tools used in party politics.

While the survey research can approach more respondents at over a thousand with the attempt to represent the whole population (Brady, 2000: 47), it is challenging in the first place to make sure that accurate concepts are put into the survey questions. Concept construction based on in-depth interviews overcomes the shortcoming of oversimplicity in measuring concepts with numbers (Dawson, 2016). Combining the survey data and semi-structured interview data is argued to have the advantage of ‘expansion of the range of evidence’ (Schatz, 2012: 183), but it is then challenging to operationalise given the time and financial limitations. This thesis therefore relies on interviewing as a main methodological tool, and reasons are given below.

Towards Semi-structured and In-depth Interviews

This thesis utilises semi-structured and in-depth interviews as an attempt to overcome the shortcomings of relying solely on statistical tests, purely structured survey research, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews have the advantage of creating ‘openings for a narrative to unfold, while also including questions informed by theory’ (Galletta, 2013: 2). Semi-structured interviews are recommended to use where ‘little is known about the topic of interest’ or ‘the topic of interest may be particularly sensitive’ (Adams, 2010: 18). Indeed, semi-structured interviews allow space for pursuing new themes or cases that come from interviewees. Given that this thesis seeks to find underlying reasons for GERB’s endurance, interviewing is an appropriate methodological tool, compared to relying solely on statistical tests, structured survey research, and document analysis.

Statistical tests have strengths and weaknesses. They enable researchers to estimate if there is

correlation between sets of numbers representing the varied real-world characteristics of concepts. Moreover, as reported by Erceg-Hurn and Mirosevich (2008: 591), statistical tests allow the researcher to falsify the alternative hypothesis. For instance, if there are no relationships between the numbers, it indicates that there are no relations between the concepts that the numbers represent. Statistical tools also test if the relationship exists, to illustrate ‘the degree of confidence that the true relationship is close to the estimated relationship’ – the so-called ‘statistical significance’ (Sykes, 1993: 1).

Lacking thick description, the pure statistical tests suffer from the shortcoming of processing data out of the political and economic context in which the data is collected. Context as a key concept in anthropology ‘refers to the fact that every phenomenon must be understood with a view to its dynamic relationship with other phenomena’ (Eriksen, 2004: 40). For instance, measuring party organization as numbers of local branches ignores the context. There was no statistical significance when Cirhan (2021: 51) analysed the relationships between electoral success and local organizational density, measured by the vote share of Czech’s party ANO (Action of Dissatisfied Citizens) per region in the 2016 regional elections, and ‘ANO’s local branches per 100,000 eligible voters’, respectively. As the author continued to analyse based on interview data, the underlying reason for varied electoral performance is the activism of ‘activists rather than the number of branches’ (Cirhan, 2021: 52). The Cirhan’s research (2021: 51-52) illustrates that only measuring organization as party branch quantity ignores significant qualitative contextualized elements of party organizations.

Statistical tests alone do not seem productive in constructing a concept grounded in thick description, as one is likely to find out in interviews with the research community after trust building. An example is the study of Marschall et al (2016) aiming to prove that clientelism as a strong source of the durability of AKP (the Turkey’s Justice and Development Party). Marschall et al (2016: 202)’s statistical model revealed that ‘[i]n districts where AKP constructs more housing units, the likelihood of winning all of the last three local elections [in 2004, 2009 and 2014] is significantly higher’. Illustrating the clientelism mechanism as that the housing funds moved to pro-government construction firms which provided the party supporters with jobs, campaign funds and local economy boost (2016: 206), Marschall et al concluded that ‘clientelistic-linkage mechanisms help explain party voting and the durability of the AKP’ (2016: 211). Marschall et al (2016)’s research showcased the weakness of using a proxy variable in a statistical model, that the housing funds statistics do not necessarily represent the

whole picture of clientelism. If Marschall et al (2016) had utilised evidence from interviews to show that a job represents the dominant reason for party supporters from various geographical regions and professional biographies to stick with the given party, then their conclusion may seem more convincing. Indeed, statistical tests for validity do not guarantee that the input numbers represent the whole picture of the concept of interest.

To collect data for statistical tests, political scientists tend to conduct survey research, which can be divided into mass surveys (or general voter surveys, Berenschot, 2018: 1574), elite surveys and expert surveys (Mair, 2001). One advantage of the survey research is that questionnaires ‘can be custom designed to meet the objectives of almost any type of research project’ (McNabb, 2015: 109). However, self-administered surveys suffer from the weakness that ‘the absence of the researcher and the randomly assigned respondents may lead to mismeasurement since the intention of a question cannot be personally explained’ (Bailer, 2014: 168). To overcome this weakness, it has been demonstrated that the validity of the answers could be enhanced when an interviewer is available to clarify the survey questions (Schober and Conrad, 1997, cited in Krosnick, 1999: 542-543).

Looking into survey types, Mair (2001) argued for the strengths of the mass survey approach and the elite survey approach, reporting that the former has ‘proved to be one of the principal and most robust means of charting party and/or voter positions’ (Knutsen, 1998, cited in Mair, 2001: 14). The mass surveys can be powerful to get an estimation of the voting pattern across the country. Pre-election surveys, however, cannot reflect those voters who changed their voting preference until the last moment of cast their votes (Best and Krueger, 2012: 3). Therefore, the use of exit poll surveys is a better methodological choice in capturing wider voting pattern. Elites are defined as ‘those having power...or being more likely to have more influence on political outcomes than members of the general public’ (Richonds, 1996, cited in Bailer, 2014: 171). The attitudes of party activists as middle-level elites are argued to be ‘the best overall indicator of a party’s policy position in the long run’ (de Swaan, 1973: 136, cited in Mair, 2001: 15). Indeed, elite surveys have their uses. The final type, the expert survey approach, is praised for its reliance on ‘the substantive knowledge of country specialists’ (Benoit and Laver, 2006: 74). Meanwhile it is criticised that expert surveys may produce estimation errors in ‘rather fluid or unstable objects of investigation – such as new parties’ (Marks et al, 2007, cited in Bailer, 2014). The theoretical focus on new parties therefore should not rely solely on expert surveys.

The strengths and weaknesses of expert surveys and general voter surveys are also discussed in clientelism studies. Berenschot (2018: 1575) pointed out the weakness of expert surveys, which are widely used in mapping clientelism, such as the DALP (the Democratic Accountability and Linkage Project) in eighty party systems worldwide (Wang and Kolev, 2019), and the GPS, the Global Party Survey (Norris, 2020). The tendency for group thinks among experts is likely to disallow researchers to gain new insights about a concept under research. On the other hand, general voter surveys allow researchers to obtain data from a wide range of voters across time periods, which can be particularly useful to map the national level voting pattern and to compare historically. Berenschot (2018: 1574) criticised that the general voter survey has tended to operationalise clientelism as ‘vote buying’. Long-term fieldwork generates new understanding of clientelism as understood as problem-solving networks based on observations and interviews (Hagene, 2018; Szwarcberg, 2015). The insights gained by sending out questionnaires are not likely to be as deep and comprehensive as by conducting fieldwork interviews with country experts, elites and voters.

Separate to survey research, document analysis (or documentary analysis, qualitative document analysis, also known as QDA, see Wesley, 2010) can provide a rich description of a single case under study (Bowen, 2009: 27), although it has been criticised for lacking ‘statistical tests of validity’ (Manheim et al, 2002: 317). Documents refer to a wide range of materials depending on the research purpose, such as ‘secondary sources on memoirs, novels, and articles by officials, diplomats and researchers’ (Ledeneva, 2013: 17-18), showcasing ‘the richness of complex realities’ (Manheim et al, 2002: 317). The use of document analysis in clientelism studies and in party politics studies are discussed as follows. Previous studies on clientelism and patronage examine documents in one party or several parties (Muñoz and Dargent, 2016; Warner, 1998; Sayarı, 2011; Giugă and Costinescu, 2020). For instance, in the clientelism study of Gherghina and Volintiru (2017: 127), the authors collected ‘581 articles referring to 136 cases’ from ‘media reports and the official number of criminal case files registered’ in Romania during the 2008-12 period. The purely ‘qualitative content analyses’ based on documents enabled the authors to map clientelism as vote-buying criminal cases. The problem of using document analysis to map a concept without interviewing the research community is the potential danger of omitting alternative understandings.

Previous studies of political parties stress the importance of using ‘party documents’ (Gauja, 2015: 94), such as ‘programs, statutes, and policy papers’ (Bankov et al, 2021: 307).

Particularly, ‘party statutes are a rare source of comparable data on the rules that govern party life and they constitute the framework of action’ (Fabre, 2011: 350-351). The party manifesto, ‘the official statement of party policy’ (Benoit and Laver, 2006: 64), is a commonly chosen methodological tool in the studies of party politics. The advantage of interpreting party manifestos is to obtain some insights as to what the party stands for and what its main priorities are on paper. It is for this advantage of party statutes being official and authoritative that this thesis also employs party statutes as an important documentary source.

In the case of Bulgaria, party manifestos also give some indication of the organizational strategy of a party. Yovcheva (2022) compared the party manifesto of the two Bulgarian parties, the NDSV and the GERB, and underscored the importance of the local structure in explaining their fates. Although the party manifesto approach has its uses to in assessing a party’s official attitude towards its organizations, ideological and policy positioning, the party manifesto as a kind of ‘organizational documents’ tends to be ‘institutional driven’ and ‘follow early versions’ (Keman, 2007: 77). This leads to its drawback that perhaps ‘very few voters read any party manifesto at all’ (Benoit and Laver, 2006: 64). Indeed, the existence of party manifestos does not guarantee its persuasiveness to voters who they should vote for.

Party documents in the 21st century are likely to be uploaded in ‘party websites’ (Gauja, 2015: 94) - party websites tend to publish news capturing developing dynamics of political parties. What can also capture the developing dynamics of political parties are ‘media reports’ (Gauja, 2015: 94; Bankov et al, 2021: 307). Even though media reports, party websites and party documents, particularly party statutes, offer valuable sources of information to portrait a political party, they do not necessarily touch the strategic choice and real-life dilemma of political parties. Interviews can overcome the shortcoming (Fabre, 2011: 350-351; Yovcheva, 2020: 76) and help to reveal hidden and ignored dynamics in a political party. This thesis therefore supplements the party document approach with on-the-ground observations and interviews.

Given that the thesis seeks to confirm the power of (sub)national explanatory framework in answering the puzzle of new party endurance, the methodological operationalisation requires a focus on the hidden informal everyday dynamics outside the official document. Therefore, any of these methodological tools alone cannot have a full play. This thesis challenges existing conceptualisations and values the complexity of the native’s viewpoints, and so cannot be restricted to statistical proxies and the structured survey. The thesis examines to what extent

the real-life picture is as same as described in the official document of the party manifesto, therefore cannot only rely on document analysis. Even though the importance of party documents cannot be underestimated, they are not sufficient to answer the question *how to explain the endurance of GERB*. In order to understand the choices made by GERB's (sub)national leaders that crafted the party endurance, it is essential to mainly rely on conducting semi-structured and in-depth interviews.

Semi-structured and In-depth Interviews

Defined as a 'purposeful conversation' (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982, cited in Carruthers, 1990: 64), interviews are divided into structured, semi-structured and unstructured. Semi-structured interviews and in-depth interviews have the advantage of collecting in-depth data compared to structured interviews in the following three ways. Firstly, interviewees 'may use words or ideas in a particular way, and the opportunity to probe these meanings will add significance and depth to the data' (Saunders et al, 2009: 378). If interviewees are surprised at the questions asked by the researcher, semi-structured and in-depth interviews give 'each interviewee an opportunity to hear themselves 'thinking aloud' about things they may not have previously thought about' (Saunders et al, 2009: 378). This may encourage the generation of particularly hidden and subtle data to map disputable phenomena.

Secondly, semi-structured and in-depth interviews are likely to lower down the certain respondent resistance compared to distributing questionnaires where respondents 'may feel that it is not appropriate to provide sensitive and confidential information to someone they have never met' or 'may be reluctant to spend time providing written explanatory answers, where these are requested, especially if the meaning of any question is not entirely clear' (Saunders et al, 2009: 378-379). A contradicting view illustrates that respondents may prefer 'anonymity of the computer, rather than disclosing face to face' (DiLillo et al, 2006, cited in McIntosh and Morse, 2015: 7), therefore it is key to remain flexible with respondents by offering an alternative to face-to-face interview modes such as online or over telephone. Thirdly, semi-structured and in-depth interviews can overcome the shortcoming of group interviews when 'respondents might not be candid about if sitting with peers in a focus group' (Adams, 2015: 494). Indeed, by making efforts to conduct one-to-one in-depth personal interviews, the researcher demonstrates a higher level of seriousness, commitment and respect to the researched community. This is likely to be appreciated by respondents who in return may provide data they would otherwise be hard to come up with in answering questionnaires.

The challenge of conducting semi-structured interviews is to gain access. Such a challenge can be overcome using the following three techniques. Firstly, it might be relatively easy to approach ‘old-timers’ category of respondents, those who were once insiders but have exited; and ‘frustrated’ category of respondents; those who are dissatisfied (Adler and Adler, 2002). The disadvantage of approaching these two groups, though, is that they may be reluctant to recall the past, if they have weakening identification with the given organization. Secondly, the use of an intermediary can introduce the researcher and increasing the legitimacy of the researcher (Petkov and Kaoullas, 2016). Indeed, the networks that exist between the researcher and the field before the researcher to enter the field, can enable the researcher to ‘find gatekeepers even before physically arriving at a site’ (Horst, 2009: 126). This may be particularly valuable in locating intermediaries and therefore gaining access to potential respondents. Thirdly, Mares and Young (2019) suggested a strategy of building up trust throughout the interview process. What is missing in Mares and Young (2019)’s accounts, however, is to build up trust before scheduling interviews. In-depth interviewing seeks deeper information and knowledge built on interpersonal interactions between the interviewer and the interviewee (Gubrium et al., 2012). And this is why being on the ground for a long period of time helps. Fieldwork primarily based on observation enables researchers to collect data in a natural setting (Kawulich, 2005) and to understand day-to-day interactions between voters and political actors (Gutmann, 2002). Overall, conducting semi-structuring interviews tends to be a dynamic and iterative process where various techniques are used to constantly negotiate access embedded in the specific context of the field.

To explain a national level political phenomenon, it is crucial not to limit potential interview respondents to the national level parliamentarians and ministers. Aspinall and As’ad (2015: 172) in their study of patronage networks in Indonesia approached ‘village officials...religious leaders, midwives and other health workers, teachers, and other informal community leaders’. The advantage of approaching party supporters from a range of professional backgrounds is to embed extended party networks within a wider society. When researching clientelism in Romania and Hungary, Mares and Young (2019: 62) had a respondent list including ‘welfare recipients, opponents and supporters of the mayor, local administrators of social assistance programs, and potential electoral brokers’ (Mares and Young, 2019: 62). The disadvantage of approaching mayors to discuss party politics, however, is the potential resistance. This is because mayors in order to enhance public trust in institutions and to show they work for all the inhabitants in the locality instead of working for a party, may be reluctant to talk about

party specific issues. A coping strategy is to design questions starting from policy and development. Even though it is beneficial to conduct interviews with the national level parliamentarians, the insights from sub national level mayors are also important. In order to confirm this thesis's (sub)national explanatory framework for party endurance, I conducted interviews with both national level and subnational level politicians.

Gaining access can be achieved by using snowball sampling method 'to reach the parts other methods cannot reach' (Platzer and James 1997, cited in Streeton et al, 2004: 39). Snowballing tends to recruit respondents within a network (Bowling 1997, cited in Streeton et al, 2004: 41), which is beneficial to the study of informal networks. Social Network Analysis can explain the significance of social relations across various academic disciplines (Knoke & Yang, 2008). Interviewing and snowball sampling can be powerful to study networks compared to other techniques in network analysis. For instance, the approach of EPN (Extended party networks, see Desmarais et al 2015 and Koger et al 2009) has a drawback of putting significant emphasis on campaign finance flow, but ignores other networks where donation is not particularly dominant. Other network analyses include focusing on the biographies of senior ministerial and local officials (Kopecký et al, 2012: 18), legislator networks by party switching and voting in parliament (Fierăscu et al, 2018), networks between interest groups and parties by policy prescription language (Albert, 2020). They restrict party networks to official networks made up of formal politicians. In contrast, interviewing and snowball sampling based on party event observations can access much wider respondents locating within informal networks of political parties. Snowballing helped me build up trust and schedule interviews when I moved between administrative levels in both the national and subnational arena, in order to explain the national endurance of the party.

Triangulation, or 'collecting data from a variety of perspectives, using a variety of methods' (Guba, 1981, cited in Carruthers, 1990: 65), is likely to overcome the shortcoming of relying on a single method. The use of semi-structured interviews in light of triangulation, in turn, is likely to provide in-depth dynamic nested in party documents. Methodology triangulation mainly centring around semi-structured and in-depth interviews is beneficial to gain deep insights into how the strategic choices of (sub)national party leaders led to the political party endurance. In other words, methodological triangulation centring around interviews suits well the agential approach taken by this thesis to answer the endurance puzzle.

Researching the Subnational Dimension of Party Politics

The existing explanations on party success tend to focus on the national level dynamics (Oshri et al, 2022; Wagner, 2022; Zue, 2019), but there is an important neglected element that of the subnational level. Tavits (2012) argues the importance of having extensive local branches in the electoral success through the aggregate organizational strength data such as the total number of local branches at the national level. The neglected element is the varied performances of local branches that contribute to the national-level electoral success. Cyr (2017) conceptually puts forward the division between the nationalized and localized survival, and measures organizational resource as ‘party members, local committees, and party locales’ (2017: 3), which oversimplifies the subnational dimension of party organizations. Building on the work of Tavits (2012) and Cyr (2017) about organizational structures, this thesis develops the theoretical significance of the subnational dimension of party organizations, which informs the methodological choice of this thesis.

To investigate the significance of the subnational dimension of party organizations, conducting interviews in multiple localities allows the researcher to gain a broader understanding of the variation at the subnational dimension. In the study of clientelism in Bulgaria, Mares et al (2017) compared two localities Karlovi and Karnobat, because they are similar on a variety of observable demographic and economic variables, but which differ in the length of the local government’s political incumbency’ (Mares et al, 2017: 945). The choice of two localities suffers from the weakness of not having sufficient extensiveness, and therefore might be challenging to represent the whole country. Similarly, in the study of the endurance of the Turkish party AKP (Justice and Development Party), Arslantaş and Arslantaş (2020) chose the site, Bağcılar, because the AKP in that site ‘received more votes than in any other district in Istanbul’. The choice of single site where party success is most obvious is likely to ignore the potential comparative insights from the sites where there is a low level of party success. To overcome this shortcoming, Aspinall and As’ad (2015) chose fieldwork sites on the basis that they include villages where the winning candidates have won high as well as low percentages of vote in the study of voting behaviour in Indonesia. Focusing on multiple localities is likely to increase the representativeness of the data in the whole country and to capture the diversity of the subnational dimension.

The focus on multiple localities is informed by the anthropological debate on single-sited fieldwork and multi-sited fieldwork. It has been suggested the significance of ‘strategically

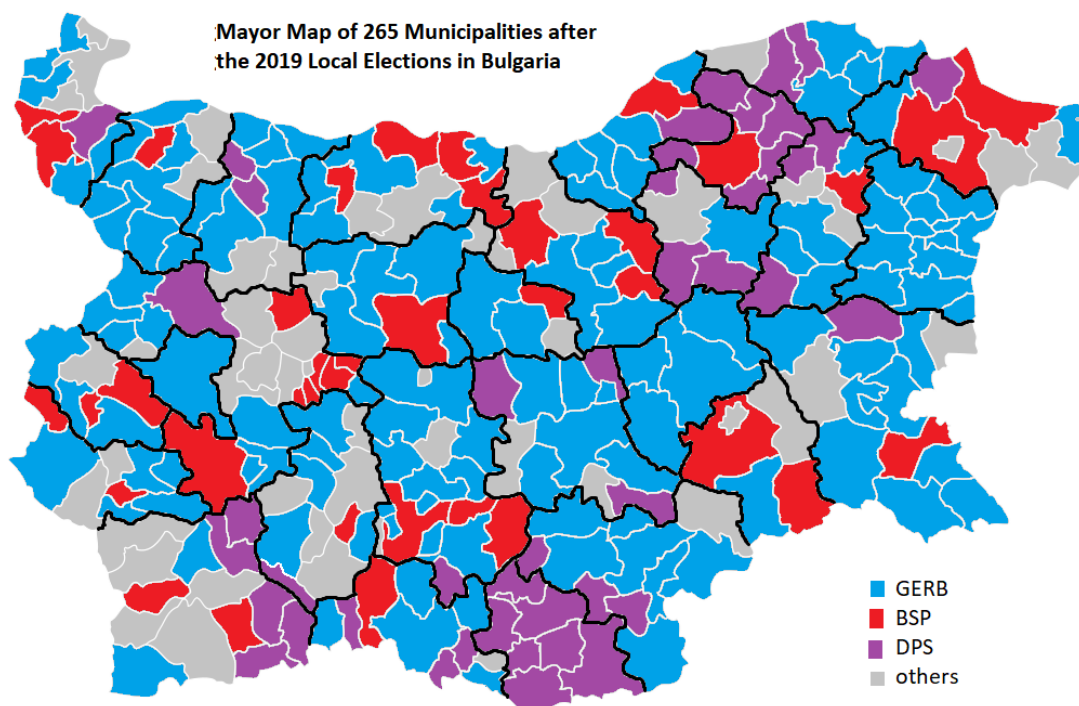
situated (single-site) ethnography’, in order to ‘understand something broadly about the system in ethnographic terms as much as it does its local subjects’ (Marcus, 1995: 111). Gielis (2011) argues for the value of the single-site ethnography through the example of choosing the migrant house as a site to study transnational experience for the locale’s relational and emotional meanings. Even though depth is a huge advantage of fieldwork in a single site, the ‘multiple causalities’ for the puzzle (Horst, 2009: 120) and ‘multiple agents in varying contexts’ (Horst, 2009: 121) make it highly challenging to rely solely on single-sited fieldwork to collect data. In fact, ‘the multiplicity of multi-sitedness makes up for its inadequacies in any single site’ (Falzon, 2009: 7) and leads to ‘spacial depth’ (Falzon, 2009: 10). Borrowing the insights from this debate, this thesis attempts to access a wide range of localities through building up familiarity with the organization’s national level networks.

The subnational dimension has its horizontal complexity that political parties win varied levels of support in various parts of the country. Therefore, it is worthwhile for the researcher to go conduct interviews in multiple localities where the party has had both high and low vote shares (Aspinall and As’ad, 2015). Building trust and familiarity, as argued by Kapiszewski et al (2015: 253-254), does not seem to require ‘a scholar’s uninterrupted presence in the field site’. In fact, it may also be productive to give the respondents time off from the researcher. Kapiszewski et al (2015: 255-256) suggest that seasonality such as election cycles may matter for research in political science. Contextualized on the given fieldwork country under research, the political seasonality may have subnational variation. It is likely that for given countries, apart from the purely political seasonality, other timings denoting significant cultural and social meanings can also have relevance for research on politics. Research in anthropology also emphasizes to ‘follow people, connections...across space (because they are substantially continuous but spatially non-contiguous)’ (Falzon, 2009: 1-2). Therefore, this thesis underscores the importance of seasonality when deciding the timing for conducting interviews.

The subnational dimension also has its vertical complexity of administrations from provinces to cities. Under each of the 28 provinces in Bulgaria (with the exception of the capital city Sofia), there are municipalities (*obshitini*), making in total 265 municipalities. As illustrated in Figure 3.1, each of the municipalities have their mayors elected in local elections every four years. The administration divisions between provinces, municipalities, and cities (*grad*) and villages (*selo*, see Loc website) require the researcher to ‘move between administrative levels’ (Heimer, 2006: 60). Meanwhile the municipal level should be prioritized because it is a self-

governed unit with mayors owning municipal budgets. This is in consistency with Szwarcberg (2015)'s focus also on the municipal level in Argentina, as both in Bulgaria and Argentina, the municipal level mayors are closer to electorate compared to the national and provincial level. Therefore, the municipal level is likely to play a determining role in mobilizing voters for elections. Given the vertical complexity of the subnational dimension, and there is the methodological need to gain interview access to the multiple administrative levels.

Figure 3.1. Mayor map after the 2019 local elections in Bulgaria



Research Ethics and Research Positionality

Addressing the issue of anonymity is likely to be central to the research ethics. This thesis obtained ethical approval from the UoB (University of Birmingham) and conformed with the university's ethical procedures. Interview information, stored on paper, in the researcher's password-protected mobile phone, laptop and in the cloud provided by the UoB, is used following anonymity principle. Ellersgaard et al (2022) suggest the disadvantage of anonymity is that 'elites are often embedded in complex power relations, meaning that masking elites could lead to decontextualizing their statements to an extent in which the reader cannot access the validity of the interview material' (Ellersgaard et al, 2022: 681). The issue of anonymity shows there is trade-off between methodology transparency and research ethics (Mares and Young, 2019). To prioritize the protection of the respondents, this thesis offers a mixture of on-

the-record quotes and off-the-record quotes, and the latter means that anonymity about respondent names and cities is given when referring to interview data. This is in line with Szwarcberg (2015)'s standpoint and rationale that the names of the respondents and the cities do not necessarily link to the abstraction and theory construction process.

Researcher positionality, composed mainly of gender, age and ethnicity (Erdemli, 2019: 76-81) matters. This is because the information that a researcher in social science is likely to obtain through interactions and conversations with respondents tends to be influenced by the demographic characteristics of the researcher. A contrasting view in anthropology presents that observations are 'considered to be an objective act that in no way influenced the object's true significance, a significance that existed prior to the act of observing it' (Dwyer, 1982: 257, cited in Kulick, 1995: 12). Reflexive anthropology, however, pays attention to 'bringing the anthropologist into the text and highlighting the interaction between the anthropologist and subject' (Blackwood, 1995: 37-38). Informed by the debate in anthropology, this thesis captures the researcher positionality as 'fluid' in research process (Kapinga et al, 2022: 108), which tends to influence the research outcome (Fort, 2022: 349).

The respondents' perception of the researcher from a gender perspective may have influenced their responses. The researcher status of being unmarried female may not fit the normative culture in the fieldwork country and may be a slight barrier to get integrated into life in the fieldwork sites in the accounts of Cassidy (2011: 60) focusing on Romania and Ukraine. In this thesis, the gender perspective does not have a particularly strong influence in the sources of data collected. Erdemli (2019: 78) reflected that in fieldwork in Muslim societies, the researcher is more likely to access informants of the same gender. In the fieldwork in Bulgaria, no significant challenge has been posed to access informants from the opposite gender, and it seemed likely for the researcher to build up trust with respondents both from the same gender and the opposite gender.

The age of the researcher tends to shape the research outcome. The age difference is generational, as sometimes the elderly people are argued to experience 'perceived social and cultural differences from younger populations' (Zubair and Victor, 2015: 962). For instance, in the party organization in Bulgaria, it has been observed that the party's senior organization may gather to play chess, while the party's youth organization may gather at social events such as discos. The young age of the researcher might make relatively easy integration with the life of the party's youth organization compared to the party's senior organization. It should be noted

that it might be the relative inactive nature of the party's senior organization compared to the youth organization which has made the researcher less productively capture the activities of the party's senior organization. This thesis's fieldwork shows that the young age of the researcher facilitates the data collection process, because the respondents appreciated the needs of the researcher to explore and learn as youth, which is in line with the researcher positionality reflection of Erdemli (2019: 78) in his study of Georgian associations in Turkey that 'being young affected the data collection process in a positive way'.

In addition, ethnicity and race are likely to matter in the way the researcher is perceived by the respondents and subsequently might influence the quality of the data that the researcher can get from the respondents. The researcher from a foreign ethnic and racial background is likely to be perceived as an outsider, which is likely to cause challenges in data collection. Kapiszewski et al (2015: 260) suggest that it is important for the fieldwork researcher to gain cultural knowledge of the fieldwork country. When the researcher is from a different race or ethnicity, a demonstrated level of cultural knowledge can make smooth communication. Also, this thesis's fieldwork suggests that when the respondent from a foreign ethnicity/race has made the efforts to learn to speak the language of the respondents, the respondents are likely to be impressed and to treat the researcher as an insider. As a result, the respondents may be more open to the researcher, which benefits the data collection process of gaining deep insights.

Overall, age, gender, ethnicity and other demographic features of the researcher produce both strengths and weaknesses in the data collection process. In this research, being a young female Chinese student facilitates the data collection process about the party's youth organization most productively, compared to the party's senior, women and entrepreneur organizations. The positionality as a foreign researcher but a fluent speaker of the respondents' native language is a positive force in shaping the data collection. Indeed, social scientists relying on interview methods tend not to be scientific in the natural science sense, because the data is always influenced by the ongoing dialogues from person to person in interviews. In order to be most scientific, it is important to enhance methodology transparency by underscoring the traits of the researcher that might influence the data obtained. This resonates with Kulick (1995: 12)'s view that acknowledges the existence of 'the biography and position of the researcher' in the interaction process between the researcher and the researched.

Conclusion

A basket of approaches used in this thesis shows the advantages of addressing a research

question through disciplinary lenses such as area studies, politics, and anthropology. Conducting research in social science, either relying solely on statistical testing and document analysis, or using the pure ethnographic approach, have their distinctive merits. But in order to address the new party endurance in national parliament, it is not sufficient only relying on running regressions as it oversimplifies the complicated narratives from various groups in the society. Ethnography has the advantage of gaining deep insights, but it is time and resource intense to conduct the research in a pure ethnographic way. Conducting fieldwork only in the capital city for the national level picture suffers from the shortcoming of ignoring the subnational politics in understanding party endurance. Also, it ignores the fact that the electoral success of any party is about winning votes in different parts of the country. In order to get a cross-sectional view from the village level, the municipal, the provincial and the national level, it is essential for the researcher to access a wide range of localities. Therefore, this thesis's package of research tools modifies the pure ethnographic approach. It is methodologically powerful to visit every single province in the country to reach a spatially deep understanding of the case country. The combinatorial approach applied by this thesis is an appropriate basket of methodological tools of the semi-structured and in-depth interviews, the election results and exit polls to address the topic of new party endurance.

In summary, this chapter emphasises the benefits of borrowing insights from ethnography in tackling a puzzle in party politics. This is in consistency with the methodological choice of Dawson (2016), Cyr (2017) and Szwarcberg (2015), that the inspiration from ethnographic methods is likely to provide in-depth hidden dynamic which is particularly helpful to the construction of concepts and theories in political science. The chapter also highlights the advantages of using semi-structured interviews and in-depth interviews, which is consistent with Szwarcberg (2015)'s approach. This chapter contributes to the methodological literature by arguing triangulating interviews with documentary data. The chapter further contributes to the literature by highlighting the important neglected element of the subnational dimension in mapping organizational structures of political parties. To explain the exceptionally long-term endurance of GERB, the following four chapters provide four elements in the (sub)national explanatory framework.

In Chapter 4, it will be demonstrated that for political party endurance it is important to build subnational linkages with an earlier start, involved with bottom-up elements, and interpersonal socialization. Chapter 4 illustrates that GERB's national leader, Boyko Borissov, began

building interpersonal links to the subnational arena in the period before the parliamentary breakthrough (2006-9). From its birth, GERB's process of interpersonal linkage building was characterised by the activism of GERB's youth organization under its first national leader Monika Panayotova (2006-14). The early interpersonal linkage building, the pre-2014 period, therefore made it unsurprising that when the national GERB lost power to the Bulgarian Socialist Party in 2013, GERB's subnational support bases held up well; in fact, the national GERB returned to power in 2014.

In Chapter 5, it will be noted that GERB's continued post-2014 activism has maintained subnational linkages beyond the time horizon of a single electoral mandate. Maintaining subnational linkages was achieved through sustaining party branches through regular leisure, learning and voluntary activities, which adds the element of informal agency to the formal organizational structure. A wide range of branch activities recruited and retained members, and GERB's membership exceeded that of the BSP in 2020, as will be demonstrated in Chapter 5. GERB's subnational linkage building practices thus illustrated the importance of the interactions between formal organizations and informal networks for the endurance of political parties.

In Chapter 6, it will be argued that building and maintaining subnational linkages has been a prerequisite for GERB to deliver subnational services and goods, especially during its second and third mandates (2014-17, 2017-21). The broader significance of the existence of party branches was to provide solutions to problems specific to administrative centre towns and nearby human settlements; problem solving in turn motivated town dwellers and villagers to vote for or remain with GERB in the context of the state's absence from the everyday survival strategy in the subnational arena. National and subnational service delivery, especially in the much-needed area of public infrastructure, gradually became GERB's appeal. When the national GERB was severely challenged by the newly established parties since 2021, the appeal based on its political record brought GERB back to power in 2023.

In Chapter 7, the discussion will centre around the role of subnational service delivery in political party endurance. GERB's endurance depended on its informal central-local patronage resource distribution, its subnational clientelistic problem solving, and its clientelistic interpersonal trust building. Thus, the party's delivery was a combination of programmatic and non-programmatic delivery. The latter, based on patronage resource distribution, meant, for example, that Borissov distributed some of the government funds in his jeep car as he drove

around Bulgaria. Subnational clientelistic problem-solving referred to unofficial donations from municipal politicians' salaries and the private sector, in municipality or town, to maintain party branches and provide subnational services. Thus, GERB's clientelistic networks, centred on party representatives, functioned to solve problems and build interpersonal trust at the grassroots, both of which were transferred to sources of electoral support that subsequently contributed to party endurance.

Chapter 4 Early Strategies for Building Subnational Linkages and GERB's Initial Return to Power (2014)

*'[e]nthusiasm was high, but the structure wasn't created in a lot of places because it took physical time, we walked, we created.'*¹

Introduction

Having established the puzzle in Chapter 1 and selected the most appropriate tools from existing explanations and methods to address it in Chapters 2 and 3, the following four chapters will present empirical accounts to answer the puzzle. In summary, these chapters will focus on confirming how the continuous choices of both national and subnational party leaders contributed to party endurance. Their adopted endurance strategy includes two elements: party organization and party appeal. Chapters 4 and 5 will be dedicated to the (in)formal party organization element, while Chapters 6 and 7 will focus on the (in)formal party appeal element.

The temporal dimension will also be integrated into the discussion of the chapters. Regarding party organization, Chapter 4 will discuss the start of building subnational linkages, while Chapter 5 will concentrate on their ongoing maintenance. On the party appeal side, Chapter 6 will first present national-level appeals at the party's creation and breakthrough, and Chapters 6 and 7 will then unpack the subnational-level appeal based on problem-solving, which the party cultivated in its later development stages. Thus, Chapters 6 and 7 will detail how party appeal has shifted over time and its contribution to party endurance. Overall, these four chapters aim to provide detailed empirical support for this thesis's (sub)national explanatory framework established in Chapter 2: the secret to new party endurance lies within the (sub)national dimension, combining formal and informal sets of party organizations and party appeals, which are reinforced through a series of continuous strategic choices made by (sub)national party leaders.

This chapter serves as the introduction to the following four empirical chapters and emphasizes the importance of the timing in building subnational linkages—where earlier is better—as this directly benefits the development of both formal and informal organizations, ultimately contributing to party endurance. Focusing on this early stage, defined as the pre-breakthrough period, enhances the explanatory power of the party organization argument for party endurance, given the series of challenges a new party faces after achieving a parliamentary breakthrough and entering power (Levitsky et al., 2016, p. 29; Bolleyer and Bytze, 2017, p. 773; Haughton

¹ Interview conducted on 13 September 2021, capital city, NGO GERB founder Dushana Zdravkova

and Deegan-Krause, 2020). It is not only necessary to build party organizations for party endurance; it is equally important for a new party to start building them early. This temporal dimension is a key contribution of the chapter to the existing party organization argument (Tavits, 2013; Cyr, 2017).

Nevertheless, this chapter is careful not to fall into the trap of overstating the decisive role of the early stage, or the pre-breakthrough stage. It is important to note that an early start in building subnational linkages is a necessary condition but by no means a sufficient one for the party organization aspect of new party endurance. As will be detailed in Chapter 5, it is the ongoing efforts to maintain subnational linkages that make the initial decision to build these connections meaningful for the aim of new party endurance. Therefore, the ultimate takeaway of this chapter is that the organization-building process for new party endurance is not a critical juncture, as existing scholars argue (see, e.g., Bolleyer and Bytcek, 2017), but rather a continuous process reinforced by a series of choices that begin early.

The chapter provides an empirical account of the early-stage choices made by GERB's leader, Borissov, that were beneficial to the party's subsequent endurance. As discussed in Chapter 1, one of the challenges for new party endurance is maintaining strength after completing the first parliamentary mandate; by that time, the new party has lost its novelty appeal and is likely to suffer significant vote loss. To illustrate this point, the chapter contrasts the short-lived NDSV with GERB's endurance. Although GERB went into opposition after completing its first parliamentary and governmental mandate in the 2013 parliamentary elections, it returned to power in the subsequent early parliamentary elections in 2014. This chapter, therefore, focuses on the pre-breakthrough organizational choices that not only contributed to GERB's first comeback to power in 2014 but also established a solid foundation for the party's potential future endurance. Of course, GERB's long-term endurance was not solely determined by these pre-breakthrough organizational choices; it was also shaped by a series of post-breakthrough decisions regarding party organizations and party appeals, as will be detailed in Chapters 5, 6, and 7.

The chapter focuses on the importance of the pre-breakthrough choices to post-breakthrough endurance, noting that pre-breakthrough choices are shaped by circumstances and opportunities. The earlier that party elites choose to make and implement subnational linkage strategies, the better it is to the subsequent party endurance. Political events such as European parliamentary elections, local elections, and referendums, are opportunities for subnational

linkage building. In the case of GERB, the political party participated in the 2007 European parliamentary elections, 2007 local elections, and 2009 European parliamentary elections, before it achieved parliamentary breakthrough in 2009. On the one hand, the opportunities of participating in secondary elections are important structural forces beneficial to GERB's subsequent endurance. On the other hand, the choice of GERB elites to participate in secondary elections during the pre-breakthrough stage helped to craft GERB's post-breakthrough endurance. Therefore, acknowledging the importance of circumstances and contexts, the thesis highlights the choices of party elites under structural opportunities and constraints to craft party endurance.

Additionally, the comparative value between GERB and NDSV needs to be discussed. It is important to take the goals of parties into consideration, because parties might have different goals and choose strategies that fit these goals. NDSV was founded by Simeon II and won the parliamentary elections in 2001, but after the 2005 parliamentary election when it lost almost two thirds of its vote, Simeon II stepped down as party leader. Under the new leadership, NDSV did not enter the parliament in 2009. Therefore, NDSV's goal did not seem to confine to only bring Simeon II back to the contemporary political life in Bulgaria; instead, after Simeon II decided to exit the party, NDSV kept competing for legislative and executive power. Although NDSV and GERB were established during different historical periods, and contexts under which they were established may matter, there is still comparative value the two parties. Through putting GERB in a comparative perspective with NDSV, the thesis seeks to provide empirical evidence to explain why some parties endure and others do not.

The chapter proceeds as follows. First, I will demonstrate that the endurance of GERB can be explained by the fact that it began building subnational linkages years before achieving its parliamentary breakthrough. To reinforce this point, I will discuss the short-lived NDSV, which had only a few months to connect with voters during its official electoral campaigning prior to its parliamentary breakthrough. To illustrate this further, I will focus on the pre-history of GERB, highlighting how it established linkages with voters as an NGO from March to December 2006.

I will then reveal that GERB endured because, from its early start in building subnational linkages, the party utilized both formal and informal tools to connect with subnational levels. Here, I will focus on the role of the informal tool, understood as interpersonal socialization, in developing relations between the national and subnational structures, which subsequently

benefit the subnational structures in supporting the national headquarters during electoral downturns. I will provide details of GERB's pre-breakthrough experiences campaigning in the 2007 local elections and the 2007 and 2009 parliamentary elections as additional incentives for building interpersonal connections between national and subnational structures. Furthermore, I will highlight how the national party leader builds interpersonal connections with subnational leaders who possess facial recognizability; this is important for developing party organizations that connect with communities and grassroots voters in Bulgaria. In this context, I will present the stories of GERB's provincial organization-building in several provinces, where the provincial leaders have strong facial recognizability within their localities. I will again use the experiences of NDSV to contrast with GERB, emphasizing the importance of interpersonal socialization before achieving a parliamentary breakthrough.

I will next highlight another important choice made by GERB's leaders during the pre-breakthrough stage that contributed to its subsequent endurance: the establishment of youth, women's, senior, and entrepreneur organizations. I will introduce this choice by noting that it was inspired by the party model of the European People's Party. Among these four organizations, I will focus on the youth organization, as it developed exceptionally well during the pre-breakthrough stage and throughout GERB's first electoral mandate. I will explain that the super activism of GERB's youth organization played a crucial role in the party's first comeback to power in 2013 and in its continued endurance. Additionally, I will emphasize that the vision and choices of the chair of GERB's youth organization were significant in driving the organization's activism nationwide. Similarly, I will contrast GERB's youth organization with that of NDSV to reinforce the importance of an early start in building robust organizations, particularly through the inclusion of a youth organization.

An Early Start in Building Subnational Linkages

It is important to start building subnational linkages between a new party and citizens early on because the popularity of a new party is likely to decline after achieving a parliamentary breakthrough and taking responsibility for controversial lawmaking. Once a party enters parliament and government, the social environment may become less favourable for party building.

Linkage Building Challenge: Lack of Time and Incentive after a Parliamentary Breakthrough

The decline in popularity of a new party after entering power can pose a challenge for party

building. According to a former party official of NDSV, the popularity of NDSV in government declined rapidly; therefore, it is important for party organizations to be established before popularity wanes:

‘In the beginning, our party’s rating was very high. If we had created a party then, we would have had not 20 thousand but 100 thousand members... It is golden time for party building during the first months, weeks after being in power... In the beginning we were very popular, then when we created a government, the popularity level fell....’²

The political party building process is closely associated with the wider social environment. The degree to which the social environment is accommodating to party organization building is influenced by the enthusiasm and hope that voters have for the new political party to foster better development. After a new political party comes to power, delivering on electoral promises as quickly as voters expect can be challenging, often resulting in declining public approval ratings. Such declines in public ratings may lead to a certain level of resistance in expanding the party network. Consequently, before taking power, a new party generally finds it easier to expand its networks with supporters and the wider society without the pressures of governance. This does not mean that a new party cannot develop organizations after stepping into power; rather, the social environment appears to be more accommodating for a new party to build organizations before assuming power and perhaps during the very initial stage of governance. During this early stage, the social environment typically exhibits a relatively high level of enthusiasm and hope regarding the new party. The three important elements in an early start to subnational linkage building—time, incentive, and socialization—will be discussed as follows.

Stepping into power tends to result in a lack of both time and incentive for party building due to the demanding tasks faced in the cabinet (see, e.g., Haughton and Deegan-Krause, 2020). Timing is a crucial ingredient in establishing long-term relationships between national leadership and provincial structures; thus, early-stage socialization between MPs and provincial coordinators in a new party can be beneficial for subsequent linkage building with citizens. The significance of the temporal dimension is well illustrated by contrasting the short-lived NDSV with GERB.

² Interview conducted on 4 May 2023, capital city, NDSV, former party official Nikolay Vasilev

According to a former NDSV party official, it was a mistake that the party-building process of NDSV was slow in its early stages:

‘Things happened very quickly. The king gave a speech on April 6, 2001, where he said he would participate in the elections. The elections were on the 17th of June. So there were 2 months and 11 days. He could not make a party for that period, he tried with his lawyers, however, the court did not register the party... And then he used two other parties, so called mandate-bearers to register for the elections and participate. And won 50% of the seats in parliament... And the party was not formed until the next year on the 6th of April 2002. During this period there was no party, there was only a parliamentary group, a government, and supporters on the ground, but there was no official party. That, I think, is a mistake. Politics is done by the party. Whoever does not create a strong party will not exist after a while... In my opinion, it has been delayed by a year. We should have created a party immediately...’³

Reflecting on the early-stage development of NDSV, another former party official⁴ pointed out that it is a ‘paradox’ to first win the election and later establish the party. It is perceived as a paradox that while established parties often come to power by leveraging their well-developed organizational structures, new parties that win their first national election may not have the same advantage. Once in power, established parties can focus on governance with the support of their existing structures. In contrast, new parties, preoccupied with the immediate demands of governing, may struggle to build their organizational infrastructure. This paradox highlights the challenge of balancing governance with party development.

Governing a country is complex, but building a party from scratch presents its own set of difficulties. As the former NDSV official⁵ continued to comment, the new government led by NDSV was very busy working to make Bulgaria enter the European Union, which included formulating financial policies to meet numerous requirements from the International Monetary Fund regarding the deficit. Therefore, the period before assuming law- and policy-making responsibilities was a ‘golden period’ for GERB—a prolonged time during which most of the party’s resources and efforts could be devoted to building its organizational structure. Registered in 2006, GERB had three years to develop its party infrastructure before coming to

³ Interview conducted on 4 May 2023, capital city, NDSV, former party official Nikolay Vasilev

⁴ Interview conducted on 23 May 2022, capital city, NDSV, previous party official Hristina Hristova

⁵ Interview conducted on 23 May 2022, capital city, NDSV, previous party official Hristina Hristova

power in 2009. In contrast, NDSV was formed shortly before the 2001 election, after which it entered office, and thus did not have this golden period for engaging in party organization building outside the capital.

Another challenge for a new party in building organizational structures is the lack of incentive after coming to power. Winning first place in a parliamentary election and forming a cabinet without any territorial organizational structures may lead some central-level party elites to perceive that such structures are unnecessary for electoral success or for gaining power. In fact, some voices at the central level of NDSV, while in power, suggested that the political party should function as a pure *електорална организация/elektoralna organizatsiya* (electoral organization), only becoming active during election periods⁶. Being in power does not seem to incentivize new party leadership to build territorial organizations. However, if a new party begins establishing territorial organizations before coming to power, it could gain an additional advantage by expanding and deepening its contacts with existing or potential supporters, thereby enhancing the initial organization-building process.

A third challenge for a new party in building organizational structures is the lack of early-stage socialization between national and subnational leadership before coming to power. Early interactions between MPs and provincial coordinators can influence the problem-solving capacity of provincial party organizations. Socialization during this early stage, before MPs are elected, is crucial to ensure that MPs are nominated by provincial party organizations rather than solely by national leadership. This early-stage socialization fosters accountability among MPs to the provincial organizations that nominate them. Conversely, if MPs are elected without prior socialization with provincial coordinators, their accountability to provincial organizations may be compromised, as they might become accountable only to the national leadership rather than to the provincial organizations below.

The lack of adequate socialization poses a challenge for party-building at an early stage. Establishing party organizations before participating in parliamentary elections allows for valuable interactions between MP candidates and provincial party organizations. A reversed sequence leads to insufficient socialization between national elites (MPs) and subnational structures (provincial coordinators, etc.) at a critical stage. This lack of early interaction can

⁶ Interview conducted on 1 June 2022, capital city, NDSV, previous party official Daniel Valchev

negatively impact the level of support that MPs offer to provincial organizations.

As one former NDSV provincial coordinator⁷ noted, MP candidates were initially selected directly by the national leadership. After winning the election, provincial coordinators were appointed to build party structures. Since MPs were not nominated by the provincial organizations, they were more accountable to the national leader than to provincial organizations, reducing their support for local problem-solving tasks. However, many of the issues provincial organizations dealt with required MPs' networks in the capital. Without adequate MP support, provincial organizations struggled to resolve citizens' problems, leading to disappointment and a decline in their popularity.

In short, a lack of early-stage socialization between national and subnational structures tends to hinder party-building, subnational problem-solving, and ultimately, party endurance.

Party Origin: Choosing to Exist as an NGO in Pre-Political-Party Stage

As mentioned in the previous section, it is important to initiate subnational linkage building early, as it becomes increasingly difficult for a new party to establish these connections after a parliamentary breakthrough. At that point, the party may lack sufficient time and incentives to build subnational linkages. Additionally, the pre-political-party stage is crucial for starting to establish these connections.

Being a political party involves additional responsibilities, such as participating in elections and competing for power, which can expose political elites to greater scrutiny and public criticism. In contrast, NGOs generally focus on societal improvement and are less burdened by the immediate pressures of electoral and governance results. This makes the pre-political-party stage of an NGO particularly valuable for building subnational linkages and fostering citizen enthusiasm, both of which can be crucial for the long-term endurance of a political party. For GERB, its prior existence as an NGO provided both activism and organizational experience, which were key in establishing a strong foundation. This early phase significantly contributed to GERB's endurance as a political party, helping it maintain its organizational strength and public support after its transition to a political role.

From the perspective of political elites, it is essential for the national level to build linkages

⁷ Interview conducted on 28 July 2022, provincial centre town Dobrich, GERB, office worker Ginka

with the provincial level during the pre-political-party stage to encourage the provincial level to establish connections further down. This preliminary stage is understood as the period before becoming a political party. The process of building subnational linkages is a two-way dialectical process, requiring not only the vision of political elites but also the support of citizens. Given the apolitical atmosphere in society, an NGO may serve as a more effective tool for winning the support of apolitical citizens compared to a political party. The subnational linkage-building process of GERB can be traced back to its NGO stage, prior to the formation of the party. GERB initially followed the NGO-to-political-party path, with the NGO playing a crucial role in its early development. The NGO provided a solid organizational foundation that contributed to the political party's endurance once it was established. During this pre-political-party phase, the alternative organizational structure effectively mobilized social enthusiasm and built subnational connections.

From the perspective of citizens, their attitude toward political elites and the nature of the organizations led by these elites can significantly facilitate the party linkage-building process. *Entusiasam* (ентузиа́зм), or enthusiasm, describes the supportive attitude that citizens held toward GERB during its pre-political-party stage. According to one of GERB's founders⁸, during this period, GERB organizations did not need to actively approach citizens; rather, citizens actively sought them out. However, once the pre-political-party stage concluded and the organization transitioned from an NGO to a political party, apolitical citizens—those who are socially active but prefer to remain distanced from politics and power—may exhibit reduced enthusiasm for engagement in the party formation.

The potential alternative existence as a non-electoral organization, such as a *sdruzhenie* (сдру́жение) or NGO, presents distinct advantages, especially considering the negative perceptions that apolitical audiences in society may have toward political parties. One of GERB's founders⁹ noted, “The NGO and the political party are two different things. The party is simply very frightening.” This sense of fear, stemming from the generally negative associations that apolitical citizens hold toward political parties, can act as a barrier, preventing them from engaging with an organization labelled as a political party.

As further elucidated, another advantage of an NGO compared to a political party is that,

⁸ Interview conducted on 13 September 2021, capital city, NGO GERB founder Dushana Zdravkova

⁹ Interview conducted on 13 September 2021, capital city, NGO GERB founder Dushana Zdravkova

‘with the party, you can get into power, and become a lawmaker, legislator, to make laws, to implement policies, while in an NGO you cannot participate in political processes, and cannot participate in elections... They [a political party and an NGO] are different in content; this is the most important, because NGOs harness strong civic energy, while parties become encapsulated prisons.’¹⁰

This pursuit of power-oriented electoral organization, such as a political party, may struggle due to a lack of linkages with grassroots levels. In this context, the alternative existence of a non-electoral organization, like an NGO, plays a crucial role in mobilizing social enthusiasm and connecting with citizens, ultimately contributing to party endurance.

The interview data revealed that GERB founders strategically opted to register as an NGO first:

‘Our idea with Krasi was to have a broad civil platform and a small party to be an instrument... The party should be an instrument, a mechanism through which the policies that NGOs create are enacted... Only then can the voices of the citizens be heard. This was an idea with Krasi, a very broad NGO network, clubs, and of course, small party structures.’¹¹

This insight underscores that during the pre-political-party stage, an NGO was viewed as a more effective organizational form for engaging a wide range of citizens, including those who are apolitical. Consequently, the choice of an NGO in the pre-political-party stage was instrumental for GERB’s subsequent endurance, facilitating enhanced subnational linkage building. The two key elements of subnational linkage building during this stage—activism and the legacy of organizational structure—will be discussed next.

It is worth noting that, in discussing the NGO-turned-political-party trajectory, there were differing perspectives among those involved in the foundation of GERB. For individuals like Dushana Zdravkova (*Душана Здравкова*), there was a desire for GERB to remain primarily or solely an NGO to sidestep the challenges associated with formal party politics. In contrast, others consistently aimed to develop GERB into a formal political party. This division underscores the contingent nature of GERB’s development.

¹⁰ Interview conducted on 13 September 2021, capital city, NGO GERB founder Dushana Zdravkova

¹¹ Interview conducted on 13 September 2021, capital city, NGO GERB founder Dushana Zdravkova

GERB began building subnational linkages and expanding its networks actively before it officially became a political party, having been registered as a *sdrudjenie* (NGO) in March 2006. One of the founders of the NGO GERB¹² reflected on this period, stating, ‘Enthusiasm was high then. People were constantly looking for us, asking for meetings, volunteering... The energy of people was great. We didn’t have to look for them.’ During its time as an NGO, GERB harnessed a significant amount of civil society enthusiasm, which was not limited to merely establishing static organizational structures. As the founder continued to state:

‘Our task was to outline the policies...Then we started to hold roundtables... In Sofia, we gathered individuals interested in various topics, such as anti-corruption, regional policies, social policies, and education. These roundtables brought together professionals from specific fields to discuss what needed to happen and what actions should be taken, thereby mapping out a possible future for the party based on the community’s needs.’¹³

The advantage of operating as an NGO lies in its greater openness to society compared to a political party, which facilitated the organization’s activism. GERB’s earlier existence as an NGO allowed it to actively engage citizens in the policymaking process, encouraging their input and suggestions.

In addition to demonstrating activism, GERB began to establish structures during its existence as an NGO, which provided an organizational legacy for its later transformation into a political party. One significant aspect of this legacy was the formation of local territorial clubs and their chairs. According to one of GERB’s founders¹⁴, ‘[s]o when we made the NGO, we operated under the law governing non-profit legal entities, which allows for the establishment of local structures called clubs. We started creating these clubs, with a chair for each city, even before the party was officially formed.’

The organizational structure during GERB’s NGO phase was also supported by dedicated activists. One founder¹⁵ recounted, ‘[t]here were small offices, often maintained by volunteers, such as local businesspeople...These so-called local clubs of NGO GERB were established

¹² Interview conducted on 13 September 2021, capital city, NGO GERB founder Dushana Zdravkova

¹³ Interview conducted on 13 September 2021, capital city, NGO GERB founder Dushana Zdravkova

¹⁴ Interview conducted on 13 September 2021, capital city, NGO GERB founder Dushana Zdravkova

¹⁵ Interview conducted on 13 September 2021, capital city, NGO GERB founder Dushana Zdravkova

across provincial centres in Bulgaria in 2006, including locations in Sliven in August and Kardzhali, a province with a significant ethnic Turkish population, in September.’

Media reports corroborate these accounts; for instance, Dariknews documented that the then-informal leader of GERB and mayor of Sofia, Boyko Borissov, opened a GERB office in Plovdiv, the second-largest city in Bulgaria, on June 2, 2006 (Dariknews website, 2006). This office aimed to extend local clubs to other municipalities within the Plovdiv province to realize GERB’s ideas.

However, there were limitations due to the lack of time for building structures during GERB’s brief NGO existence. As one respondent noted, ‘[e]nthusiasm was high, but the structure wasn’t created in many places because it took physical time; we walked around to establish it.’¹⁶

Despite its limited nine-month timeframe as a pure NGO before evolving into a political party, the organizational legacy of NGO GERB contributed to the subsequent organization-building efforts of the political party GERB.

Interview information further illustrated how the existing structures of NGO GERB were inherited by the political party GERB. One respondent emphasized, ‘I strongly insisted that NGO club chairs remain as club chairs and that party coordinators be appointed separately. You cannot mix functions; parties serve one purpose, while NGOs have fundamentally different roles. However, they appointed club chairs as provincial coordinators everywhere, effectively conflating party functionaries with the roles of a civic organization. I couldn’t contest this, and I was astonished that such a situation could arise. I observed that things were heading in the wrong direction, and eventually, only party members participated in the round tables.’¹⁷

This account highlights that during the period from 2007 to 2009, there was a significant transition in which the organizational structure of NGO GERB evolved into that of the political party GERB.

Perhaps the most significant challenge of being labelled an ‘electoral organization’ is the tendency to limit the organization’s focus to essential steps related solely to participating in elections. In contrast, a non-electoral approach can open many more avenues for connecting

¹⁶ Interview conducted on 13 September 2021, capital city, NGO GERB founder Dushana Zdravkova

¹⁷ Interview conducted on 13 September 2021, capital city, NGO GERB founder Dushana Zdravkova

with diverse citizens, keeping them engaged through campaigns, seminars, and various activities. The significance of maintaining a non-electoral stance cannot be underestimated in explaining electoral outcomes, a topic that will be explored in detail in Chapter 5.

The continuous non-electoral efforts made by GERB's organizational structures, both during its pre-political-party stage and throughout its development, have kept the party connected to its existing and potential supporters, thereby securing consistent electoral backing. As I have demonstrated, the long-term success of a political party in Bulgaria hinges on its communication channels with citizens. One of GERB's founders articulated this sentiment, stating,

‘If a party wants to be successful in the future, it should understand that the party, and the party model, is merely a mechanism for legislative activities, not for policymaking. Policies should be shaped by the people. They must articulate their needs beforehand, not after the fact. Before drafting a budget, for instance, it's crucial to engage with teachers, transportation workers, and others to ensure that the budget reflects their input.’¹⁸

Thus, the non-electoral elements, or NGO characteristics, play a vital role in linking GERB organizations to the broader society prior to their parliamentary breakthrough. The pre-political-party existence of GERB as an NGO was instrumental in building the organization and facilitating its long-term endurance.

An Early Start in Building Relations between National and Subnational Structures through Interpersonal Socialization

For the aim of political party endurance, a new party needs to begin connecting with citizens and building subnational linkages early. Subnational linkage-building strategies in the pre-breakthrough stage involve not only functioning as an NGO during the pre-political-party phase but also fostering interpersonal socialization between national and subnational elites. An early start of this relationship-building process is beneficial for the party's endurance. The electoral campaigns for local and European elections before the party achieves a parliamentary breakthrough provides good timing for the start of this relationship-building process.

Personalised Campaigning: Choosing to Build Interpersonal Linkages from the Pre-

¹⁸ Interview conducted on 13 September 2021, capital city, NGO GERB founder Dushana Zdravkova

Breakthrough Stage

Charismatic leadership plays a significant role in the success of new political parties (Yovcheva, 2020; Haughton and Deegan-Krause, 2020). However, it is important to note that the linkages a party leader creates with voters through media platforms may not be sufficient to cultivate a stable support base. Nor are social media connections likely to be enough by themselves to motivate geographically dispersed elites to establish new party support bases in the provinces for a charismatic leader. While social media can help reach a wide audience, the strength of these linkages can be questioned.

In contrast, interpersonal linkages—connections the party leader forms with provincial elites through face-to-face interactions—offer a more substantial means of building support. These personal interactions may serve as an influential tool for the party leader to foster deeper connections with provincial elites. Ultimately, it may be the combination of the leader's projected image on social media, together with direct interpersonal contacts in the provinces, that proves most effective in motivating provincial elites to build strong support bases for the new party.

Before GERB became the party in power, its leader, Boyko Borissov, and deputy leader, Tsvetan Tsvetanov, actively built linkages to the provinces through interpersonal contacts during electoral campaigns. Prior to the party's parliamentary breakthrough in the July 2009 election, GERB participated in three elections: the May 2007 European parliamentary election, the October 2007 local election, and the June 2009 European parliamentary election. Notably, other new parties have also first emerged through European parliamentary elections (Farrer, 2015). These electoral campaigns provided timely opportunities for GERB's leaders to engage with provincial elites and supporters, facilitating early-stage linkage building between the national and provincial levels.

The timing of European and local elections provided a strong incentive for the physical presence of new party leaders in localities, both near and far from the capital city. Electoral campaigns, in this context, served as a fast-track mechanism for new party leaders to establish networks with provincial elites, who at an early stage were often filled with high hopes for the new party. Therefore, the interpersonal connections forged during these campaigns were particularly valuable for linkage building, as provincial elites were more likely to be enthusiastic and open to the new party's vision. It is emphasized that European and local

elections are crucial moments for initiating the development of interpersonal linkages and understanding the nature of those connections.

The significance of participating in European elections became apparent during the 2007 European parliamentary campaign. According to a former candidate for European Parliament from GERB¹⁹, the campaign was instrumental in the party-building process. By May 2007, GERB was relatively well established in four major cities: Sofia, Plovdiv, Burgas, and Varna. However, there appeared to be a gap in communication between the party leadership and provincial elites in more distant regions, particularly concerning party organization and expansion.

The electoral campaign provided an important opportunity for bridging this gap. The former candidate²⁰ noted that she, along with party leader Boyko Borissov and deputy leader Tsvetan Tsvetanov, travelled extensively across Bulgaria during the campaign. These visits facilitated face-to-face contact with provincial elites who could potentially take on the responsibility of building party structures in their regions. This direct interaction was critical for engaging provincial elites in GERB's organizational efforts.

The former candidate²¹ emphasized that running a nationwide campaign for the European elections was especially beneficial for a new party like GERB, which was less than a year old at the time. The experience of traveling and engaging with elites during the campaign helped lay the groundwork for the party's future success and solidified the early stages of its national network.

Compared to European elections, participating in local elections (*mestni izbori*) in Bulgaria can be particularly advantageous for party building. Local elections are held to elect municipal mayors, municipal councillors, and, at the lower administrative level, town and village mayors. The wide-reaching nature of local elections provides new party leaders with the opportunity to recruit and support mayoral and councillor candidates nationwide.

For GERB, participating in the 2007 local elections allowed its leadership to engage not only

¹⁹ Interview conducted on 4 July 2022, Sofia, former chair of the capital city women organization of GERB Irina Yordanova

²⁰ Interview conducted on 4 July 2022, Sofia, former chair of the capital city women organization of GERB Irina Yordanova

²¹ Interview conducted on 4 July 2022, Sofia, former chair of the capital city women organization of GERB Irina Yordanova

with candidates in major regional centres but also in less frequently visited provincial towns. This extensive recruitment and support process created valuable opportunities for GERB's leaders to interact with elites across the country. These interpersonal contacts were instrumental in forming strong linkages between the party's national leadership and provincial elites. This process ultimately proved beneficial to GERB's efforts in building a robust, nationwide organizational network.

The nature of interpersonal contacts between party leaders and provincial elites plays a crucial role in early-stage party linkage building. Face-to-face conversations, physical gestures such as handshakes, and personalized touches like giving signed postcards can leave lasting impressions. For instance, when I inquired about GERB leader Borissov's visit to the provincial town of Yambol in 2006, respondents²² involved in early organizational structure-building recounted meeting him with high hopes for GERB. They believed GERB was the best tool to bring prosperity to both Bulgaria and Yambol. When asked about their impression of the encounter, they recalled that Borissov wrote good wishes on a postcard for their children, which he then gave as a family gift.

Similarly, in Blagoevgrad, another provincial town where I interviewed early party structure founders, respondents²³ showed me a postcard featuring Borissov's photo and his handwritten message of best wishes, along with his signature. These examples illustrate how personal, face-to-face interactions between Borissov and provincial elites helped establish a personal connection, which later facilitated the building of party structures in these provincial centres and across the provinces. Such interpersonal contacts were pivotal in the early-stage party linkage building for GERB.

Participation in early electoral campaigns provides valuable opportunities for new party leaders to establish interpersonal linkages with provincial elites. These elites often hold strong hopes for the new party before it steps into power. Unlike media appearances, the physical presence of party leaders outside the capital city, coupled with direct interpersonal contacts, plays a key role in forging these linkages between the national and provincial levels. Through these personal interactions, a new party can strengthen its connections to localities across the country, effectively building a nationwide support base. Such linkages can be crucial in ensuring the

²² Interview conducted on 23 August 2022, in provincial centre town Yambol, party structure founders

²³ Interview conducted on 12 January 2022, in provincial centre town Blagoevgrad, party structure founders

party's resilience, even if it faces periods of unpopularity after gaining power.

Choosing to Build Linkages to Provinces before Parliamentary Breakthrough

A key factor in establishing a new party's extensive nationwide organizational structure is the interpersonal contacts made by party leaders in various localities. These initial linkages between party leaders and provincial elites serve as a critical first step, laying the foundation for the development of provincial organizational structures.

Razpoznavamo litse (*разпознаваемо лице*), or 'recognizable face', has not been used by Bulgarian political scientists but emerged from my fieldwork²⁴. This term describes the preexisting networks associated with a provincial party chair who is about to start building the provincial party structure. Provincial recognizability implies that the provincial party chair is widely known within the province, as opposed to someone who is only known within a tight circle or who comes from outside the province.

The provincial level is crucial because it is closest to the national level and represents the starting point for building the subnational organizational structure of a new party. While this chapter does not suggest that the municipal and town/village levels are unimportant, it emphasizes the provincial level as an essential first step for new party leaders in establishing top-down organizations.

While social media allows the voice of the national party leader to reach the provincial level, it is not sufficient for a new party to be genuinely recognized or rooted in a province. Interpersonal contacts between party representatives and citizens can be a more significant source of recognizability than social media postings. The recognizability of the provincial chair is likely to enhance the recognition of the new party within the province. Establishing recognizability, especially for a new party in a specific province, is crucial for the national party to be effectively rooted at the provincial level.

Provincial recognizability is vital for the endurance of a political party for two additional reasons. Firstly, the preexisting networks of the provincial party chair can serve as valuable resources for establishing the new party organization. This can reduce the difficulty of building provincial party structures from scratch, facilitating the expansion of the new party from the

²⁴ Interview conducted on 13 September 2021, capital city, NGO GERB founder Dushana Zdravkova

capital city to the provinces. Secondly, as a new political party becomes better recognized in a province, the connection between the party and provincial residents is strengthened. Increased familiarity with the new party may lead residents to trust its provincial organizations more, thus raising the likelihood of them casting their ballots for the party. While this concept applies to new parties, it can also benefit established parties such as the Bulgarian Socialist Party and the Movement for Rights and Freedoms. Given the challenges associated with building a new party, provincial recognizability is particularly crucial.

The sources of provincial recognizability, specifically the preexisting networks associated with GERB, will be discussed below. These include Borissov's police networks, prior party networks, and networks from the broader society.

GERB's early-stage recognizability in some provinces is rooted in the preexisting police networks of the party leader, Borissov, from his former role as secretary in the Ministry of Interior Affairs. The authority and influence held by a police officer within the province contribute to the recognizability of the newly established provincial organization. In an interview with the provincial chair of GERB's youth organization²⁵, he emphasized that the authority of the provincial police officer, who served as the first party provincial coordinator, was crucial for building recognition of the new party's provincial organization. Similarly, in another interview with a worker from GERB's provincial office²⁶, she noted that the first party provincial coordinator was a police officer who already possessed established recognition and networks in the province, which were vital for the development of the provincial party organization. Thus, the police networks associated with Borissov played a significant role in the early-stage organization building in some provinces.

The centre-right, anti-communist positioning of the new party GERB may also explain its appeal to some provincial organizations of the right-wing old party SDS (Forces of Democratic Alliance). In an interview with a member of GERB's youth organization²⁷, she noted that building the provincial organization of the new party was not challenging because GERB largely inherited the well-established personnel and organizational structures of the SDS. The first provincial coordinator of GERB had previously served as the provincial head of SDS. Indeed, establishing a new party structure from scratch in a province can be difficult; thus, the

²⁵ Interview conducted on 7 March 2022, in a provincial centre town, with GERB's youth organization activist

²⁶ Interview conducted on 15 March 2022 in a provincial centre town, with GERB's party office worker

²⁷ Interview conducted on 30 March 2022 in a provincial centre town, with GERB's youth organization activist

preexisting networks of the SDS may have played a significant role in building GERB's provincial recognizability during its early stages.

While in some provinces GERB's early-stage recognizability was built upon the existing structures of the SDS, in others, it drew from sources within the wider society. In an interview with a member of GERB's provincial leadership and founder of the women's organization²⁸, my respondent recounted the origins of GERB's provincial organization in Targovishte. She explained that in 2006, a group of widely recognized individuals, including teachers and doctors, sought better development for the town and the region, which is predominantly populated by ethnic Turks. They viewed GERB as a potential alternative platform for progress, as they were dissatisfied with the old parties and saw hope in the face of GERB's leader, Borissov. Consequently, they decided to join GERB and establish the provincial organizational structures.

My respondent²⁹, a teacher who was well-known in the town, demonstrated her local connections during our conversation. As she showed me around, many townspeople waved and greeted her. She had a deep understanding of the town and was well-connected to its residents, particularly the parents of her students. The preexisting networks she possessed contributed to the new party's recognizability in the provincial centre.

Unlike Sofia, a large city, Targovishte is a small town where residents are more likely to be closely connected, facilitating the formation of networks at the local level. In an interview with an activist from GERB's youth organization in Targovishte³⁰, she mentioned that during her visits to a local restaurant, she recognized half of the customers. In such a tightly-knit community, the preexisting networks of the local party leadership contribute significantly to the new party's recognition, thereby facilitating organization building.

While it is possible for a new political party to build extensive organizational structures from scratch, preexisting networks serve as a valuable resource, as they can be integrated into the new party organizations across the country. The sources of GERB's preexisting networks include police networks, prior party networks, and networks from the wider society. In fact,

²⁸ Interview conducted on 20 October 2021 in a provincial centre town, with GERB's provincial leadership and founder of women organization

²⁹ Interview conducted on 20 October 2021 in a provincial centre town, with GERB's provincial leadership and founder of women organization

³⁰ Interview conducted on 31 March 2023 in a provincial centre town, with GERB's youth organization activist

different localities have varying accounts of how the party organization was initially established, and these preexisting networks are a central theme in many provincial or municipal party organizations. Therefore, the networks held by the new party's provincial leadership significantly facilitate early-stage party building as the new party begins to establish connections at the subnational levels.

The Importance of Party's Provincial Coordinators to Build Linkages to Municipals

The preexisting networks held by provincial coordinators significantly impact the ongoing expansion of new party organizations into more municipalities. While the national charismatic party leadership serves as a crucial driving force for this expansion, the national leader cannot be available every day to forge connections with local residents. The role of the provincial coordinator can greatly enhance the advantages provided by the national leadership and facilitate the establishment of party organizations from the provincial centre throughout the province. It should be emphasized that provincial leadership is essential for developing sub-provincial organizations, particularly at the municipal level and in towns and villages.

An important arena for building party linkages is at below-provincial levels, including municipal level and town/village level. I use examples from the regions inhabited by large ethnic Turkish populations, specifically Kardjali and Razgrad, to illustrate the role of provincial leadership in establishing below-provincial organizations.

In the province of Kardjali, GERB's founder, Tsveta Karayancheva, has a background in engineering and management. In an interview, she stated:

'The party GERB in Kardjali was established in February 2007. I am one of the founders of the party. We first started in Kardjali, then in Kirkovo, followed by Krumovgrad, and later established structures in the remaining four municipalities. Since the 2011 local elections, GERB has had municipal councilors in all seven municipalities in the province, and we continue to have representatives in all seven municipalities to this day. I have been the provincial coordinator of the party in Kardjali since 2007. Initially, we attempted to establish structures here in October 2006. Borissov contacted me at that time; I was the leader of a factory in town, a mechanical engineer by profession, and I managed the factory very successfully. They reached out to me, and I agreed to give it a try, despite having never been involved in politics before.

Perhaps some sympathizers may not favour the party leader but appreciate me as the provincial coordinator.’³¹

In Kardjali, where the dominant population is ethnic Turkish, the founder of GERB’s provincial organization was an engineer who managed a large factory. The activism of the provincial coordinator was crucial in building the provincial organization. The provincial coordinator was responsible for establishing party organizations in municipalities during the early stages and later ensured that these municipal organizations remained cohesive. Therefore, it is essential for the provincial coordinator to leverage their networks and recognizability to foster strong party linkages at below-provincial levels.

In an interview with one of the founders of the GERB organization in Razgrad, another province heavily populated by ethnic Turks, the interviewee³² shared that he came from a military background. He mentioned that the provincial organization was established in 2007. At that time, GERB was not represented in parliament and therefore did not receive state subsidies; the salary of the organizational secretary in the province was funded by donations from the provincial leadership. My respondent indicated that, in the early stages, the provincial organization had a strategy to expand beyond the provincial centre and into various municipalities. He noted that after GERB gained power, from 2010 to 2011, there was a rapid increase in the membership base. However, prior to that, between 2007 and 2009, there had already been a steady increase in membership.

The experience of building the party organization in Razgrad illustrates that GERB began its organization-building process earlier, even before its parliamentary breakthrough, laying a solid foundation for its subsequent endurance. The provincial coordinator plays a crucial role in devising strategies for expanding party organizations into municipalities. Without the activism of the provincial coordinator, cohesive party linkages across the province could not have been developed in the early stages.

The provincial and municipal levels of party organizations can be enhanced by incorporating additional thematic elements. These thematic elements were integrated during the initial

³¹ Interview conducted on 10 August 2022 in a provincial centre town, with GERB’s provincial organization founder

³² Interview conducted on 25 March 2022 in a provincial centre town, with GERB’s provincial organizational founder

establishment of GERB's provincial and municipal organizations. As will be discussed in detail in Chapter 5, GERB branch in Burgas has developed Mother-GERB organization and sailor-GERB organization, because there are many young mothers in the prospering on-coast town Burgas³³. In addition, as will be further illustrated in Chapter 5, GERB organization in Ruse has also developed the club of education, doctors, culture, sports, and medicine etc, in order to better connect to the wider community³⁴.

While establishing party organizations divided by professions can be challenging at the national level, provincial organizations have the autonomy to create more nuanced sub-organizations. Professions, along with factors such as age and gender, serve as important themes for the division of party organizations, contributing to more targeted citizen participation, as will be discussed in Chapter 5. This is particularly valuable given that parliamentarians and ministers often do not have sufficient time to engage frequently and extensively with citizens.

The interpersonal contacts between national and provincial party leadership, along with the previously existing networks of provincial party leaders, play a crucial role in establishing and maintaining new party linkages at and below the provincial level. Existing literature, while focusing on organizational strength in terms of membership, branches, and staff (e.g., Tavits, 2013), often overlooks the role of provincial leadership in developing cohesive party linkages. Consequently, this literature tends to overemphasize the importance of national party leadership (e.g., Van Dyck, 2018) without adequately recognizing the contributions of subnational party leaders, particularly those at the provincial level. Building a political party organization from scratch is never an easy task, yet it is essential for establishing connections with citizens. Therefore, the early-stage efforts in new party building, centred around interpersonal interactions and preexisting networks, are significant for subsequent endurance.

An Early Start in Building Party-Citizen Linkages through Heavyweight Organizations

Another important decision in building subnational linkages during the pre-breakthrough stage is to establish heavyweight organizations. These organizations are defined as on-the-ground

³³ Interview conducted on 5 July 2022, provincial centre city Burgas, GERB's youth organization former activist Galya

³⁴ Observed a gathering in party office, GERB, provincial centre city Ruse, 15 Aug 2022

entities with vertical hierarchical structures based on administrative levels, as well as horizontal structures, such as youth organizations, women's organizations, and others.

Making Horizontal Structures: A Strategic Pre-Breakthrough Choice Contributing to Endurance

Given that parliamentarians are often busy with legislative tasks after a new party achieves parliamentary breakthrough, and ministers face similar demands if the party is in power, it is unrealistic to rely solely on teams of parliamentarians and ministers—who are professional national-level politicians—to develop substantial linkages with citizens on a broad scale. Although parliamentarians and ministers should also prioritize connecting with citizens, an additional set of party organizations, such as youth organizations, which possess more social elements, is necessary to bridge the gap between 'top' party politicians and 'ordinary' citizens across the nation.

Tematichni strukturi (тематични структури), or thematic structures, are used to describe party organizational frameworks divided by themes such as age, gender, and profession. Thematic structures that establish horizontal linkages with citizens are significant because citizens from diverse backgrounds may engage more effectively with political party organizations compared to purely hierarchical party structures.

GERB drew inspiration from Western Europe in its approach to building horizontal linkages based on thematic structures. Unlike NDSV, GERB developed its horizontal linkages with citizens through its youth organization, women's organization, senior organization, and entrepreneurs' organization. In contrast to the relatively less active youth organization of NDSV, GERB's youth organization exhibited stronger activism, particularly during its early-stage development. Specifically, the cadre training activism of GERB's youth organization in its early stages was more frequent than that of NDSV's youth organization.

The structure-making of GERB is inspired by the party model of the European People's Party (EPP). According to my respondent who is one of GERB's founders:

'they [GERB] started to build these things in the likeness of EPP...First the youth were the only ones, then we did women...then the old ones did... entrepreneur, EPP - small and medium enterprises. They are NGOs. They are not a circle around the party. They are NGOs and they are free to make policies. They are not a part of EPP. That is the

difference. GERB's youth organization, is GERB, to a political party, in the EPP it is different.'³⁵

My respondent provided an example of the EPP's youth organization: 'the youth organization of European People's Party organized a campaign - you vote, or youth vote, for the 2009 European elections. I was with them in Scotland and in Vienna. I saw this model in EPP. GERB followed their model.'³⁶ This interview illustrates that the organizational setup of GERB, comprising the youth organization, women's organization, senior organization, and entrepreneurs' organization, is inspired by a similar model from the European People's Party.

Another point regarding European influence is that the German political foundation Hanns Seidel provided financial support for the establishment of GERB. My respondent noted,

'Now I remember that Hanns Seidel did a couple of sort of training seminars to explain election technology, to train people how to do campaigns...but something like that...it was for us, actually, for candidates who participated in the elections, but it was kind of help because there was no funding...'³⁷

In addition to financial support, European influence on GERB's establishment can also be illustrated through ideas and values. As indicated by the party's name, *Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB)*, the new party positions itself as a pro-European political entity from its inception. According to the interpretation of one of GERB's early-stage youth organization activists³⁸, "Bulgaria entered the European Union in 2007. GERB was established one month before Bulgaria joined the EU. Western Europe was then looking for a new party in Bulgaria because the old parties were associated with negative perceptions from the previous government; a new party was sought to embody the so-called European values." Thus, European inspiration plays a crucial role in the establishment of GERB.

To develop networks with local citizens, establishing a range of organizations within a political party can be an effective strategy (Bankov, 2021). GERB founded four types of organizations in 2008, prior to its parliamentary breakthrough in 2009: the official national-level founding

³⁵ Interview conducted on 13 September 2021, capital city, NGO GERB founder Dushana Zdravkova

³⁶ Interview conducted on 15 September 2021, capital city, NGO GERB founder Dushana Zdravkova

³⁷ Interview conducted on 13 September 2021, capital city, NGO GERB founder Dushana Zdravkova

³⁸ Interview conducted on 15 September 2021, capital city, former GERB's youth organization activist Mitiya Atanasov

assembly for youth-GERB took place in February, senior-GERB was established in May, and entrepreneur-GERB was founded in October. Although women-GERB did not appear to have held a formal national-level founding assembly, it began operating in 2008 (GERB website).

In contrast, NDSV did not have a range of active organizations; it only had a youth organization that was formally established (with elected national leadership organs) in 2003, after the party's formal establishment in 2002. Having a diverse range of organizations enabled GERB to engage with more citizens who might support the party during parliamentary elections. NDSV's relatively limited organizational structure hindered its ability to gather social support, making it difficult to consistently secure votes based solely on the work of the NDSV-led central government and parliament.

Following the national-level founding assembly of GERB's horizontal organizations in 2008, these organizations continued to be established in various cities and towns throughout 2009 (GERB website). Given that the biggest challenge for a new party to expand its local network after entering government is the lack of time, the best solution is to have a parent organization composed of a political-administrative community, including members of parliament and ministers, along with a range of organizations. This structure allows the various organizations to focus on party-building tasks while enabling the parent organization to concentrate on governing the country and enacting laws. In this sense, having a diverse set of horizontal organizations can help a new party balance its responsibilities for governance with its party-building efforts.

Within Horizontal Structures: Choosing to Build Youth Organizations for Long-Term Endurance

Although long-term benefits can be derived from an early decision to build thematic structures that include various active organizations, such as a pensioners' group or a women's group, the youth organization is particularly crucial for a party's endurance. Political party capacity building is closely linked to an active youth organization, as highlighted by one activist from GERB's youth organization:

'If we're talking about endurance, right, over a large period of time, surely, a youth organization should be there. Yes. Even in the short term, youth can be, you know, the people who transmit the energy, the motor, the engine of the party itself even in the

short term. And of course, right for the future, always the youth are the people who can be counted on in a party. A party that has no youth organization has no future.’³⁹

While both GERB and NDSV had youth organizations, GERB’s youth organization was established earlier and demonstrated significant early-stage activism. The youth organization of GERB was formed in April 2006 to support the activities of the civil organization GERB, before being formally established in Sofia in April 2008 with 600 delegates from across the country, one year prior to achieving parliamentary breakthrough in 2009.

NDSV achieved its parliamentary breakthrough in 2001, and that same year, a group of youth was formed to support the party’s campaigns. According to one of the early members of NDSV’s youth organization⁴⁰, although the organization was registered as an NGO in 2001, the process of recruiting members at the provincial level began only after NDSV had achieved its breakthrough. This recruitment involved asking MPs in all constituencies to recommend youth who had assisted with the pre-election campaigns. This indicates that the establishment of NDSV’s youth organization occurred after the party’s parliamentary breakthrough.

In addition to the importance of recruiting individuals at the national level to form the youth organization early on, the activity of the youth organization itself is also crucial. As the first national chair of MGERB (*Mladejki GERB*/GERB’s youth organization)⁴¹ pointed out, ‘For a youth organization to function optimally, there must be coordination at the national level, which was the case for the development of MGERB during the period from 2008 to 2014. Every three months, there was a large-scale national event, such as ‘Save Education’ or ‘Save the Library,’ and at the provincial level, the youth organization responded actively, such as by donating books to provincial libraries.’

NDSV’s youth organization (*MNDSV-Mladejki NDSV*) also had an annual calendar of events, including distributing the traditional Bulgarian talisman *Martenitsa* on March 1 to celebrate the arrival of spring and giving flowers to women on International Women’s Day, March 8. According to the chair of NDSV’s youth organization⁴², a key contribution of MNDSV to the

³⁹ Interview conducted on 4 April 2023, provincial centre city Ruse, GERB, youth organization activist Evgeni Chavdarov

⁴⁰ Interview conducted on 2 June 2022, capital city, chair of NDSV’s youth organization Borislav Vardev

⁴¹ Interview conducted on 13 May 2022, capital city Sofia, GERB’s youth organization former chair Monika Panayotova

⁴² Interview conducted on 2 Jun 2022, capital city, chair of NDSV’s youth organization Borislav Vardev

country's development was the establishment of information offices for youth policy related to the European Union in 2001, prior to the state administration setting up similar offices in each municipality in 2003. Thus, before formal government policy-making occurred, MNDSV had already established information offices in Shumen and Pernik, allowing young citizens to learn about the EU's youth policies.

While MNDSV had been active, MGERB demonstrated greater activity in terms of the scale and frequency of its events. One of the important features of GERB's youth organization in its early-stage activism is its cadre training activities. According to one of the activists in GERB's youth organization⁴³, 'GERB's youth organization organized three types of political education training. The first type consists of national-level large-scale training events held twice a year: one in winter, known as *zimniya universitet* (зимняя университет/winter university), and one in summer, called *letniya universitet* (летняя университет/summer university). These events are not only open to formal members of GERB but also to citizens within GERB's broader networks.'

The second type of training is on a relatively smaller scale: the *regionalna akademija* (регионална академия/regional academy), which can focus on either Bulgaria's northern or southern regions. For instance, during the 2014 election campaign, the regional academy titled *Predstoyashtiyat izbor – desni idei za edna po-dobra Evropa* (The Upcoming Election - Right-Wing Ideas for a Better Europe) was held in Pleven for the first time, attracting around 150 participants from northern Bulgaria and approximately 50 participants from Pleven in March 2014. A week later, the southern regional academy took place in the province of Kardjali. The training activities that took place before parliamentary elections offered opportunities to boost the morale of youth organizations.

The third type of training is the relatively small-scale *politicheska akademiya* (политическа академия/political academy), which includes activities such as visits to the European Parliament in Brussels. The respondent⁴⁴ illustrated the cadre training activism of GERB's youth organization by stating, "*Palna s initsiativi, palna s kampanii*" (full of activities, full of campaigns) in the month leading up to the 2014 parliamentary election. This indicates that

⁴³ Interview conducted on 2 Jun 2022, about provincial centre city Pleven, GERB's youth organization activist Zornitsa Petrova

⁴⁴ Interview conducted on 2 Jun 2022, about provincial centre city Pleven, GERB's youth organization activist Zornitsa Petrova

political education training is actively pursued within GERB.

In contrast, the national chair of the youth organization of NDSV⁴⁵ noted that MNDSV regularly organized seminars 3-4 times a year during the period from 2003 to 2010, with each seminar gathering around 80 participants. While MNDSV was also active in organizing training seminars nationwide, the scale of training events organized by MGERB was significantly larger, reaching more young people.

Furthermore, MGERB has grown to be a much larger organization compared to MNDSV. At its peak, MNDSV had around 6,000 members, according to its chair⁴⁶, while MGERB has developed a membership base of 15,000 as of 2022 (Trud website, 2022). In other words, MGERB is three times larger than MNDSV, while the entire membership base of GERB reached 98,000 in 2020 (24chasa, 2020), which is five times larger than NDSV's peak membership of 20,000, as stated by an official of NDSV⁴⁷. In this context, MNDSV performed relatively well compared to the larger organization of NDSV.

Conclusion

Unpacking how the story of GERB's party organization building illustrates the role of early action in new party endurance reveals three main points. The first point is a sequential argument: *a sufficiently early start in building subnational linkages during the pre-breakthrough period is associated with greater chances of subsequent endurance*. Regarding the incentive challenges for organization building after gaining power, Levitsky et al. (2016: 29) suggest that 'access to the state weakens politicians' incentive to construct the kind of grassroots organization that facilitates long-term party survival.'

There tends to be a lack of time as well; the time available for subnational linkage building is an organizational feature of political parties, measured by the years between party creation and party breakthrough (Bolleyer and Bytcek, 2017). Bolleyer and Bytcek (2017) demonstrate that shorter time frames for party building correlate with greater vote loss for new parties after their breakthrough. This occurs because the tensions new parties face in parliament often leave them with little time to expand their organization. A parliamentary breakthrough elevates a new party's status, imposing the responsibility of representing voters in parliament and crafting

⁴⁵ Interview conducted on 2 Jun 2022, capital city, chair of NDSV's youth organization Borislav Vardev

⁴⁶ Interview conducted on 2 Jun 2022, capital city, chair of NDSV's youth organization Borislav Vardev

⁴⁷ Interview conducted on 4 May 2022, provincial centre town, former NDSV official Nikolay Vasilev

legislation. Consequently, this new responsibility can consume valuable time for a new party (Bolleyer and Bytcek, 2017: 773). Additionally, governing the country is likely to divert attention from organizational building (Bolleyer and Bytcek, 2017: 773). However, it is important to note that the endurance outcome must be reinforced through a series of choices that strengthen party organizations after parliamentary breakthroughs (Haughton and Deegan-Krause, 2020), as will be discussed in Chapter 5.

The second point further illustrates the sequential argument: *a sufficiently early start in building (in)formal relations between the national and subnational structures during the pre-breakthrough period is a prerequisite for subsequent endurance*. Recall that the centre of this thesis's (sub)national explanatory framework emphasizes the role of the subnational dimension, including subnational structures, in supporting party endurance, particularly during electoral downturns (Tavits, 2013; Cyr, 2017). In this context, the relationships between national and subnational structures (Laffin et al., 2007) must be integrated into studies of party endurance because the initiation of subnational structures depends on national leadership.

When it comes to establishing these relations, it is essential to recognize both formal and informal tools. The former pertains to institutional design, while the latter is based on interpersonal socialization; both tools are necessary. Recalling the sequential argument of this chapter, I emphasize that a pre-breakthrough initiation of relationships between national and subnational structures, utilizing both formal and informal tools, is vital for party endurance. This sequence tends to create a bottom-up element in the decision-making process of candidate nominations for the parliamentary breakthrough, likely holding selected MPs accountable to the subnational structures that nominated them.

In contrast, a dominant top-down approach to MP candidate nominations—decided solely by national leadership—can hinder the development of relations between national and subnational structures. This can adversely affect the growth of subnational structures, which are crucial for promoting party endurance. To ensure party endurance, the relations between national and subnational structures must be continually maintained. Such sustained relations are important for subnational problem-solving, illustrating the appeal side of party endurance, as will be discussed in Chapters 6 and 7.

The third point further illustrates the sequential argument: *an early start in building heavyweight organizations during the pre-breakthrough period enhances the likelihood of*

subsequent endurance. The organizational design debate regarding heavyweight versus lightweight organizations, as discussed in Chapter 2 (Vitak et al., 2011: 6; Haughton and Deegan-Krause, 2020), reflects a choice between robust territorial organizations and more superficial, online-oriented entities. This chapter introduces a new requirement to the conceptualization of heavyweight organizations: the establishment of various organized wings based on demographic features such as age and gender, in addition to the existing parent organization.

The chapter's use of 'organized wing' aligns with the terminology employed by Ishiyama and Stewart (2021: 75) in their discussion of 'youth and/or women's wings,' as well as with terms like 'affiliated organizations' used by scholars studying party organizations in various contexts (Van Biezen, 2003: 66; Svasand, 1994: 310; Koole, 1994: 286; Muller, 1994: 59), or 'ancillary organizations' (Poguntke, 2002: 10). In these contexts, the affiliated or ancillary organization where young people participate is often referred to as a 'youth wing' (Paalo, 2017; de Roon, 2020; Malafaia, 2018).

Ultimately, an early focus on building heavyweight organizations that comprise both on-the-ground hierarchical structures and horizontally organized wings is crucial for party endurance. This is because these organized wings have the time and capacity to engage in the party-citizen linkage-building tasks, especially when the parent organization is preoccupied with legislative or governance responsibilities following a parliamentary breakthrough (Levitsky et al., 2016: 29; Bolleyer and Bytzek, 2017: 773). It is not only necessary to establish these hierarchical organizational structures with engaged organized wings early on, but also to ensure that these structures are substantive rather than superficial. Thus, the ongoing activities of organized wings that contribute to political party endurance will be explored further in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Continuous Strategies for Maintaining Subnational Linkages: Interactions Between Formal Structures and Informal Activism

‘In 2011, when I was 19 years old, there were local elections, and my teacher was a mayoral candidate. I helped with the campaigning. After the elections, another member of GERB’s youth organization invited me to participate in various activities, such as painting benches and planting trees. It was through these environmentally focused activities that I gradually became a member of GERB. Eventually, I became the municipal chair of GERB’s youth organization, and since 2021, I have been a member of the National Executive Board of GERB’s youth organization.’⁴⁸

*‘Just using program leaflets to get young people interested in the party may not always work. Instead, a good way to start is by inviting folks to join in on some fun, relaxing activities that don’t have any political vibes.’*⁴⁹

Introduction

It is not only the early-stage decisions to build subnational linkages, as emphasized in the previous chapter, that contribute to endurance, but also the ongoing decisions to maintain these linkages. This chapter will therefore discuss, from the perspective of party organization, how these continuous choices reinforce party endurance. As will be elaborated, maintaining subnational linkages depends on both formal structures (Tavits, 2013; Cyr, 2017) and informal activism. Party endurance is thus not merely the result of establishing formal organizations, including organized wings, as mentioned in the previous chapter. Informal activism is crucial for sustaining existing supporters and recruiting new ones, helping to maintain subnational support bases and enabling the party to remain resilient in the face of electoral downturns. However, while informal activism is important, it is insufficient to fully explain party endurance. Therefore, the power of subnational problem-solving will be discussed in Chapter 6. The mechanism of patronage and clientelism, which funds both informal activism and subnational problem-solving, will be detailed in Chapter 7.

As discussed in Chapter 2, existing arguments about party organization and endurance focus primarily on formal structures (Tavits, 2013; Cyr, 2017), leaving the informal dimension under-researched. This chapter argues that while formal structures are important, they alone are unlikely to ensure party endurance. The focus is therefore on whether formal structures are

⁴⁸ Interview conducted on 24 June 2022, provincial centre city Kyustendil, GERB’s youth organization activist Desi

⁴⁹ Pleven, Zornitsa Petrova on 2 Jun 2022, about provincial centre city Pleven, GERB’s youth organization activist

supported by informal relations and activism in practice. On one hand, informal relations between national and subnational structures, as discussed in Chapter 4, are crucial for the establishment, maintenance, and problem-solving capacity of subnational organizations. On the other hand, informal activism carried out by these formal structures is essential for fostering long-term engagement, trust, and party identification with grassroots communities, which is vital for electoral support. Additionally, the informal set of appeals that subnational branches can construct through problem-solving, as discussed in Chapter 6, is often more effective at securing electoral support than formal appeals based on party ideology. These examples form the foundation for this thesis's conceptualization of the informal dimension, which is an intriguing but under-researched mechanism that contributes to party endurance.

This chapter makes three key points about the importance of the (in)formal dimension in contributing to party endurance, complementing the temporal dimension of subnational linkages discussed in Chapter 4. First, *the interaction between formal structures and informal activism increases the likelihood of party endurance*. As discussed in Chapter 2, formal structures—comprising territorial branches, membership, and professional staff (Tavits, 2013)—are important but incomplete on their own. Formal structures on paper may not reflect reality: territorial branches may close due to unpaid rent, and registered party members may be inactive. A crucial factor for party endurance is whether these formal structures generate informal activism (Cirhan, 2021). Party endurance depends not only on the number of territorial branches or registered members but also on whether these branches are properly maintained, and members actively engage with grassroots communities. The true power of extensive party organizations in fostering endurance emerges when formal structures consistently drive informal activism. On one hand, activism fosters team building, creating solidarity among party members, encouraging socialization, and strengthening their identification with territorial branches. On the other hand, activism enhances the visibility of these branches by demonstrating care to grassroots communities, giving them a tangible reason to support the party. The importance of this interaction between formal structures and informal activism will be further explored through the next two main points.

Secondly, *continuous investment by national headquarters in developing party organizations—not only during electoral periods but also during non-electoral periods—contributes to party endurance*. While official electoral campaigns are crucial for subnational branches to mobilize, persuade, and convert voters, demonstrating activism solely during these periods is insufficient.

Non-electoral periods, defined in this thesis as times outside official electoral campaigns, are crucial for maintaining party strength. Since regular parliamentary elections occur every few years, the official campaign period—lasting only a few months—is much shorter than the non-electoral periods. The term ‘non-electoral’ emphasizes the need for ongoing maintenance of subnational linkages through both formal and informal organizations. For sustained political party endurance, national party elites must not neglect subnational linkages even outside urgent voting periods. As discussed in Chapter 7, interactions between subnational branches and voters during non-electoral periods cannot be simply reduced to vote-buying during official campaigns, challenging the existing clientelism framework (Gherghina and Volintiru, 2017). Continuous investment by national party authorities in subnational branches helps maintain these structures and facilitates regular informal activism, fostering long-term familiarity, engagement, and trust with grassroots communities, thereby ensuring consistent electoral support. Thus, the effectiveness of informal activism depends on its continuous presence across both electoral and non-electoral periods.

Thirdly, *subnational branches that maintain regular non-partisan activism are more likely to secure consistent electoral support, contributing to the endurance of the national headquarters.* Political polarization, particularly partisan polarization, challenges democracy by fostering a lack of mutual tolerance (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2019). Excessive focus on partisan competition can be detrimental not only to democratic health but also to appealing to apolitical audiences, which is crucial for long-term party endurance. This thesis underscores the importance of nonpartisan activism—activities that do not merely criticize opposition parties or foster negative sentiments toward them. Nonpartisan activism has broader implications for democratic health and party endurance because it engages apolitical audiences who may not be interested in partisan conflicts or power struggles. By conducting both partisan and nonpartisan activism, subnational branches are better positioned to survive and grow, as they sustain existing members and attract new ones, ultimately supporting the overall endurance of the party.

Formal Structures

As mentioned earlier, the interaction between the formal and informal dimensions of party organizations is crucial for political party endurance. The formal dimension of GERB’s organizations has been well-developed, encompassing both vertical structures across administrative levels and horizontal wings organized by demographic features. Equally important is the informal dimension, which shows that GERB’s territorial branches and

organized wings have not only existed on paper but have also been actively engaged in various activities.

Formal Vertical Hierarchical Structures and Extensive Branch Networks

Formal vertical hierarchical structures and extensive branch networks are crucial for political party endurance. Territorial organizational structures focus on improving local living conditions, so that residents are not compelled to move to the capital or abroad. In Bulgaria, it is common for people from smaller cities to relocate to Sofia or foreign countries for work. As one party office worker⁵⁰ remarked, ‘If it weren’t for the goal of making our hometown a better place to live, we wouldn’t be here at all.’ This underscores the importance of territorial branches in shaping territorial identities (Jeffery and Hough, 2009) and linking these identities to the party. As will be discussed in Chapter 6, subnational problem-solving drives party organizations and contributes to their longevity. Therefore, establishing territorial party branches is a critical factor in addressing subnational issues.

GERB has made a strategy for establishing formal vertical hierarchical structures across different administrative levels in Bulgaria, as shown in Table 5.1. This table highlights that GERB’s statute specified a structure that extends from the provincial level to the municipal and local levels. In contrast, the NDSV statute only designated a provincial coordinator. While NDSV may have updated its statute since, the version under review indicated that its organizational vision was primarily limited to the provincial level. Similarly, newly established parties, such as PP and ITN, have outlined strategies for building their own territorial structures.

Table 5.1 Territorial organizations of NDSV, GERB, ITN and PP in their statutes

Party	Description about territorial organizations in statutes
NDSV	<i>oblastni koordinatori i stolichen koordinator</i> / provincial coordinator and capital coordinator (Article 6 of the Statute n.d.)
GERB	<i>teritorialna organizatsiona struktura</i> / territorial organizational structure: <i>oblastni organizatsii</i> / provincial organizations <i>obshtinski (rayonni) organizatsii</i> / municipal (district) organizations <i>mestni klubove</i> / local clubs (Article 15 of the Statute 2014 Feb 16)

⁵⁰ Interview conducted on 25 May 2022, with the office worker in Change Continues’ branch

ITN	<i>-oblastniyat koordinator/</i> provincial coordinator <i>-obshtinskoto subranie/</i> municipal assembly <i>-obshtinskiyat koordinator/</i> municipal coordinator (Article 22-24 of the Statute 2020 Feb 16)
PP	<i>-oblastni koordinatori/</i> provincial coordinators <i>-obshtinski organizatsii ili v gradove s rayonni delenie - rayonni organizatsii/</i> municipal organizations or in cities with district division - district organizations (Article 9 of the Statute 2022 Apr 15) <i>-oblastna organizatsia/</i> provincial organization <i>-obshtinska (rayonna) organizatsia/</i> municipal (district) organization <i>-regionalni klubove na krartalen ili gradski (selishten) nrintsip/</i> regional clubs on neighbour or city (village) principle (Article 20-27 of the Statute 2022 Dec 17)

Table 5.1 demonstrates that GERB has developed a nationally coordinated strategy for establishing hierarchical party organizations across subnational levels in Bulgaria. However, the statute alone does not provide details on the actual implementation of this strategy. Further insights from party websites, as presented in Table 5.2, suggest that after three terms in government, GERB has largely implemented its plan to build territorial organizations across Bulgaria. Whether recently established parties like PP and ITN, which have begun building territorial branches, will develop their organizations to a similar extent remains to be seen.

Table 5.2 Numbers of branches of GERB, ITN and PP in all the provinces in Bulgaria, counted by the author on 29 May 2023 from their official websites

Province	GERB	ITN	PP
Blagoevgrad	12	4	5
Burgas	13	4	1
Varna	17	3	1
Veliko Tarnovo	10	4	1
Vidin	1	1	1

Vratsa	1	1	1
Gabrovo	4	3	1
Dobrich	6	0	1
Kardzhali	8	1	1
Kyustendil	8	3	1
Lovech	8	1	1
Montana	8	2	1
Pazardzhik	10	1	1
Pernik	5	1	1
Pleven	10	1	1
Plovdiv - grad	5	1	1
Plovdiv - oblast	16	4	1
Razgrad	3	1	1
Ruse	9	1	2
Silistra	5	3	1
Sliven	4	1	1
Smolyan	10	10	1
Sofia – grad	27	5	3
Sofia - oblast	14	6	0
Stara Zagora	8	2	1
Targovishte	5	1	1
Haskovo	10	2	1
Shumen	8	2	1

Yambol	4	1	1
Total	249	70	35

While GERB appears to have established a robust network of territorial branches nationwide, merely counting these branches is insufficient. First, the number of branches does not reveal their internal organization, leaving the party's formal structure incomplete. Second, as discussed in Chapter 2, the number of branches does not necessarily reflect their actual activity levels. These issues will be explored further below.

Horizontal Organized Wings

Although important, vertical organizational structures alone are not enough to activate party members. Thematic organizational structures, which form horizontally organized wings, provide additional incentives for party members to be active. For instance, one respondent shared insights about the role of thematic organizational structures, explaining how they contribute to organizational engagement:

“It’s a complementary, additional activity to party structures that creates engagement of people, that people are actively involved in the political life of the party...so I think it’s a good option to have it because that way, it gives people who are members...who are not particularly active, an opportunity to participate in party life in other ways. Another chance to participate in party life.”⁵¹

In addition to vertical organizational structures, GERB developed horizontally organized wings, which have helped enhance activism and support political party endurance. Similarly, the 2022 Dec 17 Statute of PP mentions ‘thematic organizational structures.’ According to Article 29.1, ‘the party may establish thematic organizational structures, including clubs, unions, youth, and other organizations, based on professional or civic interests, other characteristics, or to advocate specific policies or goals.’ Thus, the concept of ‘thematic organizational structures’ is equivalent to ‘affiliated organizations’ and ‘organized wings’. A review of party statutes reveals that PP’s leadership has considered thematic organizational structures as part of its organizational strategy, whereas they remain unmentioned in ITN’s party statute, according to Table 5.3. In contrast, GERB established regulations for four thematic structures (youth,

⁵¹ Interview conducted on 7 April 2023, provincial centre city, BSP, provincial party chair

women, senior, and entrepreneur organizations) as early as 2008 and updated the regulations for the youth and women's organizations in 2014 and 2015, respectively.

Table 5.3 Thematic organizational structure of NDSV, GERB, ITN and PP in statutes

Party	Thematic organizational structure
NDSV	<i>Mladezhka organizatsia na NDSV - MNDSV/ NDSV Youth Organization - MNDSV</i>
GERB	<i>Pravilnik za organizatsiyata i deynostta na mladezhkata organizatsia na PP GERB - MGERB/ Regulations for the organization and activities of the youth organization of PP GERB - MGERB, the 2014 June 27 version, changed after the initial 2008 Feb 24 version</i> <i>Pravilnik za ustroystvoto i deynostta na organizatsiyata na zhenite kam PP GERB - Zheni GERB/ Regulations for the structure and activities of the women's organization to PP GERB - Women GERB, the 2015 January 18 version, changed after the initial 2008 July 13 version</i> <i>Pravilnik za ustroystvoto i deynostta na organizatsiyata na stareyshinite kam PP GERB - SGERB/ Regulations for the structure and activities of the organization of the elders to the PP GERB - SGERB, the 2008 May 18 version</i> <i>Pravilnik za ustroystvoto i deynostta na organizatsiyata na malkia i sreden biznes kam PP GERB - Predpriemachi GERB/ Regulations for the structure and activities of the organization of small and medium business to PP GERB - Entrepreneurs GERB, the 2008 October 5 version</i>
ITN	NA
PP	<i>tematichni strukturi/ thematic structures (Article 28 of the Statute 2022 Dec 17)</i>

Emphasizing the importance of thematic organizational structures does not diminish the value of territorial structures; rather, the thematic builds upon the territorial. A political party's overall activities are centred at the national level, with the goal of gaining power to implement laws and policies that improve various regions and localities across the country⁵². Territorial

⁵² Interview conducted on 18 May 2022, provincial centre city, DB, municipal councilor

structures, therefore, provide essential information to the national party headquarters regarding community problems and potential solutions. This is why the territorial branches of party organizations are likely to gain support from community and locality-specific activists and voters who share the same territorial identity as subnational party branches. However, beyond territorial identity, activists and voters from diverse backgrounds also possess identities related to gender, age, and profession. By tapping into these demographic identities, a political party can more effectively organize activities for existing members and attract potential voters, thereby contributing to the party's long-term endurance.

A provincial party office worker⁵³ noted that during the initial stage from 2008 to 2013, GERB's youth organization was particularly active, but its level of engagement slightly decreased thereafter with the change in national leadership of the youth organization. This trend suggests that national leadership plays a crucial role in the development of youth organizations and other thematic structures. The national-level vision and coordination of thematic organizations appear to have a more significant impact than separate subnational efforts.

For national party endurance, it is insufficient to establish thematic organizational structures in just one or two towns. Party organizations that integrate both territorial branches and thematic structures into their national vision and coordination, as well as their subnational implementation, are more likely to achieve enduring success. It is not merely about setting up a branch in a city; it involves crafting targeted and accessible communication that resonates with potential voters from diverse backgrounds. Thus, thematic structures provide added value in building robust party organizations for long-term sustainability.

Informal Activism

As discussed in Chapter 2, Cyr (2017: 35) conceptualizes 'organizational resources' primarily as a representation of 'a party's formal structure,' which may underestimate the actual organizational strength of a political party. The party organizations of GERB represent a combination of formal structures and informal activism. According to Levitsky (2001: 66), '[a]nalyses of political parties must go beyond formal structures and examine how parties work in practice.' Levitsky (2001: 29) notes that informal organizations of political parties serve a problem-solving function in Argentina, and this concept can also be applied to the context of Bulgaria, as will be discussed in Chapter 6.

⁵³ Interview conducted on 7 April 2022, provincial centre city Gabrovo, GERB, office worker Greta

I argue that relying on a combination of formal organizations and informal activism is more effective than depending solely on formal structures. Informal activism is crucial for political party endurance because, internally, it fosters cohesion among existing members and, externally, it aids in the recruitment of new members.

Formal Membership Organization and Informal Activism

Informal activism can help retain existing party members within the organization, contributing to political party endurance. As a membership organization, GERB has seen significant growth, reaching 94,000 members in 2018, nearly matching the traditional membership levels of the Bulgarian Socialist Party (24chasa, 2018). By 2020, GERB's membership increased to 98,000, surpassing that of the Bulgarian Socialist Party (24chasa, 2020).

Recruiting new members has become a key strategy for GERB's subnational party organizations. One provincial chair of the youth organization⁵⁴ shared that it was part of his daily routine to persuade people in his vicinity to join the political party. He also distributed party membership application forms to activists during regular gatherings of the youth organization. Thus, through the active efforts of these subnational organizations, it is not surprising that GERB has evolved into a relatively large membership organization.

An activist from GERB's youth organization⁵⁵ emphasized the advantage of party membership, stating that having more members generally leads to better electoral results, as party members are more inclined to vote for their party. Indeed, party members tend to remain loyal and vote for the political party even in the face of national-level challenges.

Sometimes party supporters are also cautious about officially being party members if they do not have political career aspirations. As commented by an activist of GERB's youth organization, if one has become a party member, but when the party is not in power, it is not good to find a job. Being a party member is good to the organization, but not always good to the individual.⁵⁶ Career considerations form part of reasons that some of the party supporters do not become party members. Therefore, not all activists in GERB are its official members.

⁵⁴ Interview conducted on 4 Aug 2022 Pleven Borislav Shterev, Provincial chair of GERB's youth organization

⁵⁵ Interview conducted on 15 April 2022 in provincial centre city Dobrich, Polina Marashlieva and Maria Momchilova, GERB's youth organization activists

⁵⁶ Interview conducted on 26 July 2022 in provincial centre city Pazardjik, GERB's youth organization activist Katerina Stefanova

Nevertheless, becoming a party member can help supporters maintain their commitment to a political party. One provincial chair of GERB's youth organization⁵⁷ noted that he actively encourages supporters to take the next step and become formal members, as membership status enhances their engagement with party activities. Membership often signifies a higher level of loyalty compared to non-members. Therefore, party membership plays a crucial role in strengthening loyalty and contributing to the endurance of the political party.

Recruiting party members is essential for the growth and endurance of a political party, but the real challenge lies in retaining existing members. Leisure activities play a vital role in sustaining engagement among members of the youth organization. According to the municipal mayor of GERB⁵⁸, sports and team-building activities are effective for consolidating the youth organization during regular periods. This strong foundation enables the youth organization to perform well in electoral campaigning when election season arrives.

Similarly, an activist from GERB's youth organization⁵⁹ emphasized that an army must keep exercising even in peacetime. This analogy highlights the necessity for party organizations to remain active even when elections are not on the horizon. Regular activities are essential for maintaining the vitality and morale of subnational party organizations. Indeed, merely registering individuals as party members is insufficient; ongoing activities must be organized to ensure that members remain engaged with the party.

Informal Activism and Beyond Formal Membership Organization

While developing formal party membership organizations is essential, it is not a sufficient condition for achieving party endurance. This limitation arises not only from the inherent disadvantages of relying solely on formal membership structures but also from the need for active engagement and connection with the broader electorate. A political party must cultivate relationships, foster informal networks, and maintain vibrant grassroots activism to ensure longevity and resilience. Without these elements, formal membership alone may not translate into enduring support or electoral success.

One significant disadvantage of party membership is the time commitment it entails, as

⁵⁷ Interview conducted on 11 Aug 2022, Haskovo Vasil Mitev, Provincial chair of GERB's youth organization

⁵⁸ Interview conducted on 25 August 2022, municipal centre city Nova Zagora, GERB, mayor Galia Zaharieva

⁵⁹ Interview conducted on 25 March 2023, capital city, GERB's youth organization activist, Dragomir Mladenov

members are expected to assist with electoral campaigning and engage in non-electoral activities. An activist from GERB's youth organization⁶⁰ remarked that many people prefer to be passive members, reluctant to participate in tasks such as making phone calls or organizing events. This observation aligns with Scarrow's (2013) assertion that traditional party membership models, which typically required a clear and stable commitment to a party, are increasingly yielding to more flexible and dynamic forms of involvement.

There are additional reasons why party supporters may be unwilling to become formal members. Activists from GERB's youth organization⁶¹ revealed, 'We have registered our NGO, which is non-partisan, so we do not want to be members of any political party.' Some activists may prioritize policy outcomes over a strong affiliation with a political party, leading to their reluctance to formalize their membership.

Given the limitations of formal party membership, it is evident that membership organizations, while important, should not be the sole avenue for party growth. In fact, many party activists may prefer informal associations with the political party, highlighting the significance of non-members as a vital pathway for party development.

As an activist from the youth organization⁶² illustrated, there is a distinction between the formal and informal dimensions of political party organization. Meetings that are strictly open only to formally registered party members who pay a membership fee represent the activism of formal organizations. In contrast, when meetings are open to citizens who have not registered as party members or paid membership fees, these gatherings can be considered informal activism. It is crucial to conceptually differentiate between the formal and informal dimensions of party organizations in the context of GERB. The endurance of GERB may largely be attributed to the effective combination of both dimensions within its organizational structure.

As a GERB MP⁶³ noted, 'We don't want to encapsulate; we can do without formality.' The absence of formality allows for activities that are accessible to non-party members. While party organizations certainly hold meetings exclusive to their members, it is equally important to

⁶⁰ Interview conducted on 15 April 2022 Dobrich, Polina Marashlieva and Maria Momchilova, GERB's youth organization activists

⁶¹ Interview conducted on 12 April 2022 in provincial centre city Varna, GERB's youth organization activist Viktor Stoyanov

⁶² Interview conducted on 8 July 2022, provincial centre city Plovdiv, GERB's youth organization activist Iosiv

⁶³ Interview conducted on 5 July 2022, provincial centre city Burgas, GERB's youth organization former activist Galya

arrange activities open to non-members. Maintaining both formal and informal dimensions within party organizations fosters a healthy and inclusive environment.

The pathway for a political party to grow lies in effectively engaging with those who are not formal members. Informal activism serves as a crucial tool for a political party to expand its reach beyond its official membership. For instance, during my participant observation of GERB's training and leisure activities, I encountered individuals⁶⁴ who did not self-identify as part of the party's formal organization. Despite their lack of formal affiliation, these participants can still be considered part of the party's networks due to their involvement in party activities. Thus, such activities become a defining feature of party networks, distinguishing them from party organizations that rely on bureaucratic registrations of formal membership.

Informal Activism and Party Endurance

Informal activism plays a crucial role in cultivating informal networks that can be more effective than formal organizations in reaching a diverse audience, thereby fostering the growth and endurance of a political party. As a secretary in the municipal government⁶⁵ noted, building a party organization involves placing people in key positions to create supporter networks. These networks should aim to reach as many individuals as possible, rather than being limited to expert circles. Effective networks are established through actively engaging with people and listening to their concerns. One effective approach is to organize activities that are accessible to a wide audience. Consequently, such activities serve as a powerful tool for building informal party networks, which, in turn, enable the political party to connect with more people and expand its reach.

An example comes from a GERB activist⁶⁶ who shared their journey into the party:

‘In 2011, when I was 19 years old, there were local elections, and my teacher was a mayoral candidate. I helped with the campaigning. After the elections, another member of GERB's youth organization invited me to participate in various activities, such as painting benches and planting trees. It was through these environmentally focused

⁶⁴ Observation in GERB's events on 25-27 Feb 2022 and on 25 June 2022

⁶⁵ Interview with a municipal government secretary Angelina Topchieva, provincial centre city Plovdiv, 28 April 2022

⁶⁶ Interview conducted on 24 June 2022, provincial centre city Kyustendil, GERB's youth organization activist Desi

activities that I gradually became a member of GERB. Eventually, I became the municipal chair of GERB's youth organization, and since 2021, I have been a member of the National Executive Board of GERB's youth organization.'

This example illustrates the effectiveness of activities in recruiting new members to the political party. Rather than directly persuading citizens to join as formal members, inviting them to engage in informal activities can be a more effective approach.

Through organizing activities, GERB's youth and women organizations play a crucial role in connecting formal party structures to the wider society. An activist from GERB's youth organization⁶⁷ highlighted that these organizations are instrumental in bridging the gap between the party and citizens who are not officially members. Therefore, it is essential for a political party to establish youth and women organizations, as they can organize regular activities that effectively engage non-members. Through establishing youth and women organizations and carrying out regular activities, a political party can better fulfil its linkage and representation function and ultimately achieve party endurance.

Informal activism organized by GERB's youth and women's organizations significantly contributes to the party's endurance. An activist from GERB's youth organization⁶⁸ shared that meetings are held at the provincial level at the beginning of each month, regardless of the election cycle. Maintaining an active youth organization involves arranging regular activities, which can strengthen the party's presence in society and attract more citizens to collaborate with the political party. This engagement not only leads to growth in formal party membership—comprising those who register as party members—but also nurtures informal party organizations made up of supporters who have not formally registered. Consequently, this dual growth aids provincial party organizations in garnering votes in parliamentary elections, thereby ensuring the party's continued presence and influence at the national level.

GERB's women and youth organizations have actively sought to organize activities that are open to non-members, aiming to project an image of the party as one that serves the broader community, not just its members. As the chair of GERB's women organization⁶⁹ in Sofia noted,

⁶⁷ Interview with the former women organization leadership Irina Yordanova, GERB, Sofia, 4 July 2022

⁶⁸ Interview conducted on 8 July 2022, provincial centre city Plovdiv, GERB, member of National Executive Commission of GERB's youth organization, activist

⁶⁹ Interview conducted on 4 July 2022, Sofia, GERB's women organization leadership

citizens who participate in these events can observe that the party is committed to societal welfare, rather than solely focusing on its internal affairs. Similarly, an activist from GERB's youth organization⁷⁰ mentioned that non-members are welcome at regular meetings, emphasizing that the presence of party sympathizers indicates GERB's engagement with the wider community. These examples highlight the efforts made by GERB's youth and women organizations to organize inclusive activities that invite participation from outside the party.

Inviting non-members to participate in activities can also serve as a strategy aimed at improving electoral results. As the chair of GERB's women's organization⁷¹ in Sofia explained,

‘We did not only aim to organize events that were exclusively open to GERB's members. Instead, we arranged public events to regularly invite influential figures. For example, we organized an event in collaboration with an NGO, the Club of Businesswomen and Manager Women. We never expected these participants to become our party members. However, when elections come, they are familiar with us and are more likely to vote for us.’

Organizing non-electoral activities is crucial for a political party's electoral success, as participants in these events become acquainted with the party's representatives, fostering familiarity that can translate into electoral support.

Electoral and Non-Electoral Activism

The relevance of informal activism to political party endurance is illustrated through party capacity building. This encompasses both short-term electoral mobilization and non-electoral aspects, such as long-term governance and delivery capacity. As discussed in Chapter 7, non-electoral activities facilitate regular communication with citizens, fostering long-term trust that is essential for securing their electoral support.

In terms of electoral mobilization, a former provincial chair of GERB's youth organization⁷² highlighted that during elections, the youth organization took on the primary responsibility for logistical and organizational tasks, such as arranging meetings for candidate MPs in various towns across the province. The message conveyed by this former provincial chair underscores

⁷⁰ Interview conducted on 8 July 2022, provincial centre city Plovdiv, GERB's youth organization activist Iosiv

⁷¹ Interview with the former women organization leadership Irina Yordanova, GERB, capital city, 4 July 2022

⁷² Interview conducted on 23 June 2022, provincial centre city Shumen, GERB, former youth organization activist Evgeni

that youth organization activists often dedicate a significant amount of their free time and effort to volunteer in mobilizing citizens to vote.

A former activist from GERB's youth organization⁷³ shared that during the pre-election campaign, he used his actions, words, and enthusiasm to influence 50 people around him to vote for him. This example underscores the importance of youth organizations in conducting electoral campaigns.

Given the importance of youth organizations in conducting electoral campaigns, it is crucial to maintain these organizations even when elections are not taking place. A former provincial chair of GERB's youth organization⁷⁴ noted that during non-election periods, he made efforts to keep the youth organization cohesive. One of his strategies involved helping members develop their careers across various fields. He collaborated with the national chair of the youth organization to invite IT experts from Sofia to speak in the provincial capital. These non-electoral activities, conducted during off-election times, are likely to encourage young people to remain engaged with the party's youth organization, thereby enabling the political party to sustain and enhance its capacity to mobilize citizens when elections arise.

Furthermore, to fulfil the promises made during electoral campaigns, a political party's governing and delivery capacity is crucial, particularly in relation to the training activities of its youth organization. These training initiatives can facilitate the transfer of knowledge and skills from the capital city to provincial regions. As mentioned above, the provincial chair of GERB's youth organization⁷⁵ not only invited IT experts from Sofia to speak in the provincial capital, but also organized discussions on other vital topics, such as agriculture and husbandry, which are essential for regional development. Youth organization activists who receive training in these various sectors are likely to apply their knowledge to contribute to the growth of their hometown and region.

Similarly, the first national chair of GERB's youth organization⁷⁶ highlighted that a variety of training initiatives have been undertaken to strengthen party capacity. This chair emphasized

⁷³ Interview conducted on 15 September 2021, capital city, GERB, former youth organization activist

⁷⁴ Interview conducted on 23 June 2022, provincial centre city Shumen, GERB, former youth organization activist Evgeni

⁷⁵ Interview conducted on 23 June 2022, provincial centre city Shumen, GERB, former youth organization activist Evgeni

⁷⁶ Interview conducted on 13 May 2022, capital city Sofia, GERB's youth organization former chair Monika Panayotova

the vital role of the youth organization in building the political party's capacity, ultimately contributing to its endurance. It is crucial for a political party's youth organization to implement training activities that can enhance the party's delivery capacity. Political party endurance necessitates effective subnational delivery, as discussed in Chapter 6.

A political party can leverage training activities to cultivate its own cadre of future politicians. As noted by a former provincial chair of GERB's youth organization⁷⁷, the party organized training courses that encompass not only theoretical knowledge but also practical skills essential for becoming effective politicians. It is, therefore, unsurprising that GERB's youth organization has produced numerous politicians, including MPs and mayors. An activist from the youth organization⁷⁸ highlighted, 'At the moment, I do not know if you have looked at the results; however, from Ruse, we have a deputy who is young, Georg... And in Vratsa, Varna, Sofia, Kyustendil, and other provinces, there are young people who are being given opportunities.'

This activist's examples illustrate that many members of the youth organization have successfully transitioned into elected positions. These non-electoral training activities play a crucial role in cultivating talent, thereby enhancing the governing and delivery capacity of the political party.

It can be challenging for the youth organization to thrive independently; therefore, it is crucial for the political party's incumbent politicians to invest in its training and development. Such investment is vital. As one of GERB's municipal mayors⁷⁹ stated, engaging in pure political activities, like street protests, is relatively easy. The real challenge arises when a party assumes governmental responsibilities. Those who advocate loudly on the streets may not possess the necessary competencies to govern effectively. Cadre training activities serve as a source of essential skills and knowledge. The mayor mentioned his efforts to cultivate a talent pool within the municipality, targeting around 4-5 individuals in their 30s who, through five years of development, could be prepared for significant political roles. This highlights the important role municipal mayors play in training the party's youth organization within their

⁷⁷ Interview conducted on 7 April 2022, provincial centre city Gabrovo, GERB, office worker Greta

⁷⁸ Interview conducted on 4 April 2023, provincial centre city Ruse, GERB, youth organization activist Evgeni Chavdarov

⁷⁹ Interview with a municipal mayor Zhivko Todorov, GERB, provincial centre city Stara Zagora, 29 July 2022

municipalities, ultimately fostering the development of future municipal politicians.

A provincial party office worker⁸⁰ highlighted the generational effect, noting that those active in the 1980s pass on their experiences to individuals in the 1990s, who in turn share their knowledge with those from the 2000s. Each generation is better able to connect with the next, rather than with those from two generations prior. This underscores the importance of continually developing an active youth organization to prevent any generational gaps in cadre development.

Members of the European Parliament also play a significant role in supporting the youth organization. An activist from GERB's youth organization⁸¹ recalled that in 2015, European Parliament Deputy Andrei Novakov invited four members from the province of Kyustendil, along with more than ten members from Blagoevgrad, to visit the European Parliament in Brussels. Such training activities provide GERB's youth organization activists with valuable insights into legislation and policies at the European level. Indeed, both European and municipal politicians of GERB have a responsibility to invest their knowledge and time in training the party's youth organization. Consequently, these training activities are crucial for building GERB's capacity to govern and deliver, which is an essential aspect of the political party's endurance.

Partisan, Non-Partisan Activism and Enhancing Citizen Participation

It is essential to emphasize the importance of nonpartisan activities for political party endurance. The distinction between purely partisan activities and nonpartisan activities is illustrated by the chair of GERB's youth organization⁸². According to her, youth organizations can engage in activities that criticize opposing parties, promote the party's program, and expand the membership base—these are considered activities with a strong party label. Conversely, there are activities organized by party representatives that lack a party label but contribute to the overall development of society. The former type of activities is referred to as *partiini initsiativi* (partisan activities), while the latter is termed *nepartiini initsiativi* (nonpartisan activities). Given the observed decline in partisan representation at the subnational level (Vampa, 2016:

⁸⁰ Interview conducted on 7 April 2022, provincial centre city Gabrovo, GERB, office worker Greta

⁸¹ Interview conducted on 24 June 2022, provincial centre city Kyustendil, GERB's youth organization activist Desi

⁸² Interview conducted on 13 May 2022, capital city Sofia, GERB's youth organization former chair Monika Panayotova

579), it may be more advantageous to prioritize nonpartisan activities.

The approach of the chair of GERB's youth organization⁸³ emphasizes the importance of conducting more nonpartisan activities. For instance, while youth organization members engage with citizens to encourage voting, they do not necessarily persuade them to vote exclusively for their own party. Nonpartisan activities hold greater significance for the development of society as a whole, in contrast to purely partisan activities that primarily focus on the interests of a specific political party. While pure partisan activities aim to foster the growth of a political party and intensify party loyalty, they can be limiting in their appeal to citizens who are disinterested in political affiliations. In contrast, nonpartisan activities engage individuals who may not be inclined to support any political party, thereby demonstrating the political party's benefit to society, which, in turn, can contribute to the endurance of the political party itself.

Given the disadvantages of purely partisan activities, it is essential to prioritize nonpartisan initiatives, particularly those aimed at encouraging citizen participation in politics. One challenge to citizen engagement is that governments at all administrative levels may have limited capacity to communicate directly with and listen to their constituents. Political party organizations can help bridge this gap by clarifying new policies to citizens and gathering their suggestions to relay to the government. This process can be categorized as policy clarification and policy-making, which will be discussed in detail in the following sections.

Enhancing Citizen Participation: Policy Clarification and Policy Making

GERB's youth and women's organizations have actively worked to clarify policies enacted at both national and European levels to citizens. Engaging in policy clarification activities not only strengthens the commitment of activists to party organizations but also enables party branches to demonstrate accountability to the public by providing essential policy information.

At the national level, as noted by a provincial chair of the women's organization⁸⁴, GERB's women organization has contributed to information campaigns in the municipality to clarify national-level policies. These party organizations serve as valuable channels for citizens to

⁸³ Interview conducted on 13 May 2022, capital city Sofia, GERB's youth organization former chair Monika Panayotova

⁸⁴ Interview conducted on 20 October 2022, provincial centre city Targovishte, GERB's women organization activist Darina Kostova

better understand policies.

Citizens often seek to understand national policies through party branches. As noted by a municipal councillor of GERB⁸⁵, ‘people came to ask us about what is happening in ministries and parliament in Sofia, and what new laws and policies have been enacted.’ This process of policy clarification underscores the accountability function of party organizations. Grassroots voters may turn to branches of parties they voted for guidance when they find themselves confused about policies at either the subnational or national levels.

Given that policies at the European level may seem distant to townspeople, party organizations play a crucial role in linking citizens to Europe. As noted by a former chair of GERB’s youth organization⁸⁶, the organization is actively involved in European activities. This bridging function is further illustrated by a former provincial chair of GERB’s youth organization⁸⁷, who stated,

‘My aim in leading the youth organization is to arrange for members from my province to travel to Brussels with the support of GERB’s European Parliament member, Andrey Kovachev. This initiative is vital, as young people in the province typically have limited understanding of Europe. It also allows citizens to recognize that the European Parliament has programs related to agriculture and other sectors.’

Thus, GERB’s youth organization has worked to familiarize Bulgarian citizens with European policy information. Policy clarification and policy projection activities play a crucial role in the activism of GERB’s women and youth organizations, both at the national and European levels.

In addition, engaging citizens in the policymaking process is a key strategy of GERB’s organizations, particularly the youth organization. As one activist⁸⁸ stated, ‘Personally, the most important cause for me is animal protection. I contributed my ideas, and the MPs of my party turned them into a concrete law.’ The opportunity to influence policy and legislative processes not only enhances the sense of purpose for party activists but also fosters a stronger

⁸⁵ Interview conducted on 7 April 2022, provincial centre city Gabrovo, GERB, office worker Greta

⁸⁶ Interview conducted on 13 May 2022, capital city Sofia, GERB’s youth organization former chair Monika Panayotova

⁸⁷ Interview conducted on 23 June 2022, provincial centre city Shumen, GERB, former youth organization activist Evgeni

⁸⁸ Interview with a youth organization activist Mihaela Metodieva, GERB, capital city, 25 March 2023

commitment to the political party.

Furthermore, GERB's organizations have actively sought ideas and suggestions from the wider society to inform policymaking. As noted by the previous chair of GERB's youth organization⁸⁹, the youth organization organized public roundtables focused on educational development. Members across all provinces gathered input on how to improve education, compiled their findings into a report, and submitted it to the Ministry of Education. This initiative, called SOS (*Spasi obrazovanie sega*, Save Education Now), represents a significant effort to engage citizens in national policymaking. By allowing citizens to contribute, the political party enhances its perceived accountability and fosters stronger loyalty among party activists. Consequently, such policymaking activities can bolster party cohesion and positively impact electoral outcomes.

Enhancing Citizen Participation through Gender-, Age-, Profession-Specific Organizations

Organizing activities that promote citizen participation not only strengthens party cohesion but also signals accountability to voters. Party organizations, by leveraging their networks, can effectively supplement the limited capacity of government institutions to engage with citizens. To enhance citizen participation effectively, the structure of party organizations is crucial. Specifically, organizations should focus on gender-specific and age-specific policymaking, necessitating outreach to diverse groups of citizens. By dividing party organizations along age, gender, and professional lines, they can engage citizens more effectively in targeted policymaking. Ultimately, activities designed to encourage citizen participation can reinforce party cohesion and enhance the perceived accountability of the party, thereby contributing to its endurance.

GERB's organizations are structured along gender lines, with the women's organization specifically focused on expanding networks with female citizens and engaging them in policymaking related to women's issues. In addition to this national-level gender division, provincial party organizations have the autonomy to establish their own structures. A former activist of GERB's youth organization⁹⁰ noted that the first provincial coordinator in Burgas

⁸⁹ Interview conducted on 13 May 2022, capital city Sofia, GERB's youth organization former chair Monika Panayotova

⁹⁰ Interview conducted on 5 July 2022, provincial centre city Burgas, GERB's youth organization former activist Galya

had the innovative idea to create various divisions within the party, including a club known as Mother-GERB/*Maika-GERB*. This initiative was particularly relevant in Burgas, a city with many young mothers and infants. Through Mother-GERB, the GERB mayor's team can better understand the needs of young mothers, such as the demand for playgrounds and child-friendly pavements. Establishing the Mother-GERB organization enables the party to focus on gathering ideas and developing policies that cater specifically to mothers and children.

An essential function of party organizations is to communicate effectively with voters. Given that voters have diverse needs and areas of expertise, party organizations must adapt their strategies to target specific groups rather than treating voters as a monolithic entity. Enhancing citizen participation along gender lines is particularly crucial, especially regarding policymaking related to gender issues. Members of GERB's Mother Organization not only work toward the overarching goals of the political party but also embody the specific and nuanced role of mothers. By contributing ideas to specific policymaking at the municipal level, GERB's Mother Organization can foster unity among its members, strengthen their ties to the party, and attract new members who are eager to participate in policymaking in this domain. Dividing the organization into more focused subgroups based on gender, rather than relying solely on the broader party structure, may prove more effective in engaging with targeted citizen groups.

Another effective approach to engaging citizens in policymaking is through age-based divisions within party organizations. A more nuanced categorization can better address the specific needs of citizens who wish to contribute ideas relevant to their age group. For instance, an activist from GERB's youth organization⁹¹ expressed, 'The reason I am interested in the youth organization of GERB is that I want to develop youth policies, and I believe GERB is the party that can help me realize my ideas for policies aimed at young people.' This example illustrates how a young individual seeking to influence the development of policies for their demographic turns to GERB's youth organization for support and collaboration.

Conversely, it is more effective for a political party's youth organization to gather ideas specifically related to policymaking for young people. Citizens eager to engage in policymaking within their area of expertise are likely to seek out more specialized sub-

⁹¹ Interview conducted on 12 April 2022 in provincial centre city Varna, GERB's youth organization activist Viktor Stoyanov

organizations within the party. Therefore, dividing party organizations based on age, gender, and other nuanced categories can serve as a beneficial strategy to enhance citizen participation. This approach not only strengthens party cohesion but also demonstrates the party's accountability to its constituents, ultimately contributing to the endurance of the political party.

While the women organization and the youth organization of GERB are structured at the national level, several provincial organizations have also been established along professional lines. For instance, according to the provincial chair of the education club⁹², this club comprises around 15 school directors, forming the core group from which ideas are disseminated throughout the broader educational sector. In addition to the education club, provincial party organizations include clubs focused on culture, sports, and medicine. When citizens unite around common interests in these clubs, they are more likely to form meaningful connections. Although creating professional divisions at the national level can be challenging, provincial organizations have the autonomy to establish thematic clubs. Dividing party organizations by profession, along with age and gender, serves as a vital strategy for fostering more targeted citizen participation.

Activities that enhance citizens' political participation are invaluable for demonstrating the accountability of party organizations, thereby earning electoral support. Engaging in the policy process can also incentivize party activists to remain loyal to their political party. It is crucial to organize activities that encourage citizen participation in political life rather than those that explicitly promote the party. Nonpartisan activism plays a significant role in enhancing citizen involvement in both policy clarification—where party organizations explain policies to citizens—and policy making—where they collect citizens' ideas and relay them to the government.

The structure of party organizations significantly influences the effectiveness of citizen participation. Specifically, organizations tailored along age and gender lines may be more adept at appealing to citizens interested in related policy issues. Indeed: party organizations that are structured to facilitate citizen participation are more likely to achieve political party endurance. This is because, from the party's perspective, increased citizen engagement fosters unity among activists, while from the voter's perspective, such participation signals the party's

⁹² Observed a gathering in party office, GERB, provincial centre city Ruse, 15 Aug 2022

accountability, thereby garnering electoral support.

Non-Explicit Political Activism

Non-electoral activism plays a vital role in contributing to political party endurance. Political parties engage in activities that are not directly linked to citizen political participation, often referred to as non-explicit political activities. These activities bolster party cohesion and foster growth, ultimately leading to greater political success and longevity.

Non-explicit political activities can be categorized into learning, leisure, volunteering, and festival celebration. These activities are crucial for demonstrating care towards various community groups, which can increase their likelihood of voting for the party. Additionally, non-explicit political activities facilitate immediate problem-solving, motivating party activists to engage more deeply with their organizations. Furthermore, these activities help retain apolitical activists within party networks, contributing to the overall growth and cohesion of the party.

Learning, Leisure, Volunteering and Festival Activism

Some non-explicit political activities focus on education and career development. In my interview with the organizational secretary of GERB's youth organization⁹³ in Stara Zagora in June 2022, she expressed her appreciation for various training events and party schools, such as the annual winter university. She shared that these experiences taught her how to behave like a politician, conduct electoral campaigns, and communicate effectively with voters. This learning opportunity significantly motivated her to remain committed to the party. By organizing training events, political parties can meet the educational needs of their supporters, thereby enhancing their engagement and loyalty.

The training activities of GERB extend beyond political training, aligning with the insights of Malafaia et al. (2018). They argue that providing education in political, legal, and economic domains is a key focus for youth wings (Malafaia et al., 2018: 68). The youth and women's organizations of GERB have organized various learning activities. In my interview with the former chair of the women's organization⁹⁴, she noted that they had conducted business forums,

⁹³ Interview conducted on 30 July 2022, provincial centre town Stara Zagora, GERB, organizational secretary of the youth organization

⁹⁴ Interview with the former women organization leadership Irina Yordanova, GERB, Sofia, 4 July 2022

which offered networking opportunities, business discussions, and leadership development for women. Importantly, she emphasized that participation in these forums is open to non-party members as well. This approach reflects the goal of expanding networks to include individuals who could potentially support the party, as highlighted earlier in this chapter. Training activities are essential; political training equips qualified cadres for future leadership roles, while broader training initiatives foster interactions that can deepen participants' connection to the party.

In addition to learning activities, Serrat et al. (2015: 241) highlight the significance of leisure activities, characterizing them by the motivation of personal enjoyment and the requirement of free time for participation. The youth and women's organizations of GERB engage in a variety of leisure activities. For instance, MGERB, the youth wing of GERB, has organized football matches among provincial organizations; during my visits to the GERB offices in Veliko Tarnovo and Haskovo in April and August 2022, I noted the presence of trophies from these matches. Additionally, a municipal representative from GERB's youth organization⁹⁵ mentioned organizing a major annual cultural and arts festival for the town, which has been well-received by the community. While these cultural and artistic activities do not convey any explicit political messages, their leisure and relaxing elements resonate with townspeople, who appreciate such opportunities for enjoyment.

The women's organization of GERB also engages in a variety of leisure activities. For example, a member of GERB's women's organization⁹⁶ highlighted that they organized numerous hiking trips in the mountains and herb-collecting excursions. These activities not only promote camaraderie among party members but also facilitate team bonding. In an interview with a municipal politician⁹⁷, my respondent noted that such sports and leisure activities contribute to team building, which can enhance the effectiveness of party organizations during electoral campaigns. Therefore, sports and leisure activities represent a significant category of non-political activities within the organization.

Unlike the previously mentioned types of activities, volunteering activities are 'oriented to other people and generally require a high investment of effort' (Serrat et al., 2015: 241). GERB's organizations actively participate in a diverse array of volunteering initiatives. For

⁹⁵ Interview conducted on 7 August 2022, municipal centre town Samokov, GERB, party representative

⁹⁶ Interview conducted on 22 August 2022, provincial centre town Yambol, previous activist of GERB's women organization

⁹⁷ Interview conducted on 25 August 2022, municipal centre town Nova Zagora, municipal mayor Galya Zaharieva

example, an activist from GERB's youth organization in Burgas province⁹⁸ shared that they organized events where citizens could collect rubbish in parks in exchange for books. In line with their commitment to environmental protection, another activist⁹⁹ noted that GERB's youth organization in the Petrich municipality of Blagoevgrad province has been dedicated to cleaning and planting trees in the garden near the Church of Saint Petka for several years.

Furthermore, GERB's branches actively volunteer to provide additional social care to those in need. For instance, an activist from GERB's women's organization in Montana province¹⁰⁰ shared that every Christmas from 2008 until 2021, when the homes were closed, they visited homes for abandoned children in the municipalities of Georgi Damyanovo and Berkovitsa to cook meals for them.

Another example of their social care efforts involved the senior organization and women's organization of GERB¹⁰¹, which received requests from a local club for the blind during Easter in 2022. They delivered 38 portions of the traditional Bulgarian Easter bread, *kozunak*. Similarly, an activist from GERB's youth organization in Kyustendil¹⁰² reported that they also delivered *kozunak* to individuals with disabilities. These examples illustrate that at the national level, GERB's organizations have consistently provided social care to those in need, particularly during festive occasions.

The last category of activity, festival celebrations, is also significant. When I asked a GERB MP¹⁰³ why they organize festival celebrations, she emphasized that traditional festivals deserve respect from everyone, and political parties should also pay attention to these occasions. An activist from GERB's youth organization¹⁰⁴ mentioned that party organizations aim to show kindness to the townspeople; for example, if they do not give flowers to women on International Women's Day (8th March), it would seem odd to do so on an ordinary day.

⁹⁸ Interview conducted on 5 July 2022, provincial centre city Burgas, GERB's youth organization former activist Galya

⁹⁹ Interview conducted on 24 June 2022, provincial centre town Kyustendil, GERB's youth organization activist Desi

¹⁰⁰ Interview conducted on 7 Jun 2022, provincial centre town Montana, GERB's women organization activist Plamenka

¹⁰¹ Interview conducted on 2 July 2022, provincial centre town Targovishte, GERB, office worker Sneji

¹⁰² Interview conducted on 24 June 2022, provincial centre town Kyustendil, GERB's youth organization activist Desi

¹⁰³ Interview conducted on 31 March 2023, provincial centre town Targovishte, GERB, MP Temenuzhka Petkova

¹⁰⁴ Interview conducted on 31 March 2023, provincial centre town Targovishte, GERB, youth organization activist Maria

Consequently, festival days provide a natural setting for party organizations to interact with citizens in a way that is easily appreciated and non-political.

One of the party office workers¹⁰⁵ illustrated part of the yearly calendar of GERB's organizations, which includes activities such as a Christmas dinner for 100-200 people in the provincial centre; a cuisine tasting event in celebration of the traditional festival honoring midwives, *Babin Day*, in January; a wine tasting and poetry reading for St. Valentine's Day; and a banquet with flowers for women on International Women's Day (8th March). This calendar demonstrates that, in the absence of elections, the political party operates more like a cultural organization.

The GERB branch calendar is also town-specific, as each town may have its own unique festival. For instance, during my observation of a cherry festival celebration in Kyustendil province¹⁰⁶, I noted that approximately 40 guests attended from neighboring provinces such as Sofia, Blagoevgrad, and Pernik. Such town festival activities provide an opportunity for members of GERB's youth organization from different provinces to connect and interact. This political socialization process during festival days could foster greater cohesion among GERB's youth organization across several provinces. Overall, GERB's organizations appear to be actively engaged in festival-related activities.

Demonstrating Care, Problem Solving and Party Growth

The four types of non-explicit political activities contribute significantly to political party endurance by enhancing party cohesion and facilitating party growth. Activities organized by party branches are crucial in demonstrating care for communities, which can increase the likelihood of receiving electoral support from those communities. Additionally, these activities play an essential role in addressing immediate issues, fostering motivation among members to maintain unity within cohesive organizations. Consequently, non-explicit political activities sustain the vitality of party organizations, enabling them to remain cohesive and expand over time.

The non-explicit political activities conducted by party organizations reflect a genuine care for communities, which can be advantageous in securing electoral support. For example, a GERB

¹⁰⁵ Interview conducted on 29 March 2023, provincial centre city Targovishte, party office worker Sneji

¹⁰⁶ Observation of cherry celebration event on 25 June 2022 in Kyustendil province

office worker¹⁰⁷ noted, ‘We prepared presents, visited pensioner clubs, and celebrated festivals with them throughout the year. One pensioner club’s chair particularly appreciated our efforts and became a supporter; the club is informally referred to as GERB’s club.’ Such demonstrations of care toward pensioners are likely to win their favour, ultimately translating into electoral support. Through these ongoing care initiatives, pensioners may gradually cultivate a sense of closeness to party organization activists. This continuity of care, especially during festival times, has the potential to evolve into long-term electoral loyalty.

Immediate problem-solving activities play a crucial role in enhancing the cohesion of party organizations, as many activists are motivated to remain with a political party to address issues and improve their communities. One of the key advantages of non-explicit political activities organized by parties is their ability to provide prompt solutions, which often have a shorter turnaround time compared to government processes. For instance, an activist from GERB’s youth organization¹⁰⁸ shared that their members engage in cleaning parks and painting benches. Although these activities are unpaid, they offer young people the opportunity to contribute positively to society and enact change in areas that require improvement. This activist’s perspective underscores the significance of problem-solving as a motivating factor for individuals to stay involved in GERB’s youth organization.

The activism of party organizations serves as a vital supplement to government functions. As one activist from the women’s organization¹⁰⁹ noted, ‘The state does not act adequately. We have to do it. A mayor is not likely to come and paint benches. If you see something wrong, you can fix it yourselves.’ This perspective highlights the significant supplementary value of party organization activism in enhancing the government’s delivery capacity by providing immediate solutions. The immediacy of their actions underscores the effectiveness of youth and women’s organizations, demonstrating the true strength of their non-political activities and fostering a unified commitment among party activists toward common goals. Consequently, this capacity for prompt problem-solving contributes to strengthening cohesion within the party organization.

Non-explicit political activities can effectively engage apolitical party activists, thereby

¹⁰⁷ Interview conducted on 2 July 2022, provincial centre city Targovishte, GERB, office worker Sneji

¹⁰⁸ Interview conducted on 28 March 2023, provincial centre city Shumen, GERB’s youth organization activist

¹⁰⁹ Interview conducted on 7 Jun 2022, provincial centre city Montana, GERB’s women organization activist Plamenka

enhancing party cohesion. For instance, during a participant observation of a training event in February 2022, one attendee expressed ambivalence toward the party slogans presented at the event but noted that the experience was valuable because it allowed him to visit a new town he had never explored before. This suggests that the leisure component of such activities can serve to mitigate any resistance felt toward activities that are strictly focused on promoting the political party's image.

Similarly, in my interview with an activist from GERB's youth organization¹¹⁰, the interviewee mentioned, 'Four of us from the province went to Brussels for a training activity. I'm not particularly interested in discussions about politics or the European Parliament, but for me, it was a good traveling experience.' This illustrates that not everyone within party networks is engaged in formal politics. Therefore, it is crucial to organize activities that appeal to both politically ambitious activists and those who are more apolitical. The significance of non-explicit political activities should not be underestimated, especially in retaining supporters who may not have a strong enthusiasm for politics.

Non-explicit political activities are essential tools that GERB's youth organizations leverage to foster growth within the party. As an activist from GERB's youth organization¹¹¹ noted, the first step in expanding party networks among young people is to establish friendships rather than immediately discussing politics. Engaging potential supporters is a daily practice. When I inquired about the motivation behind organizing these leisure activities, my respondent¹¹² expressed that relying solely on program leaflets to attract young people to the party is often ineffective. Instead, the initial approach should involve inviting citizens to participate in enjoyable leisure activities that are relaxing and fun, devoid of any political connotations. Thus, non-explicit political activities serve as a vital mechanism for the expansion of the party's youth organization.

Conclusion

This chapter addresses the question of what makes GERB's organizational patterns so resilient, allowing the party to endure. Three key lessons are uncovered regarding the features of GERB's organizational patterns that are crucial to its survival.

¹¹⁰ Interview conducted on 29 March 2023, provincial centre city Targovishte, party office worker Sisi

¹¹¹ Interview with a youth organization provincial level chair Borislav Shterev of Pleven, GERB, 17 May 2022

¹¹² Pleven, Zornitsa Petrova on 2 Jun 2022, about provincial centre city Pleven, GERB's youth organization activist

The first lesson is the reliance on a combination of formal and informal organizations. I build upon Levitsky's (2001) accounts of the power of informal organizations by suggesting that these informal networks are cultivated by formal structures. Therefore, it is the combination of both formal and informal organizations that provides a more complete understanding of GERB's organizational patterns. I propose that the defining feature of informal organizations, beyond their existence outside of territorial branches, is their openness to individuals who are not formal members of the party. The advantage of informal organizations for party survival is that they promote steady growth, as opposed to relying solely on a pure membership-based model.

The second lesson is the importance of maintaining long-term activities, as opposed to short-term vote transactions, which much of the existing clientelism literature focuses on (see, e.g., Mares et al., 2017). This long-term activism spans both official electoral campaigning periods and non-electoral periods. As will be discussed in Chapter 7, I will reconceptualize clientelism as expressed through clientelistic trust networks embedded in the long-term relationships between townspeople and party organizations. Additionally, in Chapter 7, I will argue that another feature of clientelistic trust networks is face-to-face interactions, which cultivate interpersonal trust as a supplement to institutional trust as sources of electoral support, thereby contributing to studies on clientelism.

The third lesson involves developing a variety of activities that do not always directly criticize opposing parties and are not explicitly political. Considering GERB's pre-breakthrough organizational choices (discussed in Chapter 4), the party began building its structures by incorporating thematic elements, which were further maintained and activated, contributing to its post-breakthrough survival. Organizational building not only involves registering territorial branches and recruiting party members but also requires ongoing activism within these branches and by their members. A broad range of activities, categorized as learning, leisure, volunteering, and festival celebrations, can sustain the vitality of party organizations even during non-election periods. This new conceptualization of party organizations includes activism alongside traditional indicators such as branches, members, and staff (Tavits, 2013; Cyr, 2017; Cirhan, 2021). Such a framework may enhance the explanatory power of party organizations in understanding party endurance.

The question of which types of party organizational modes are most useful for party survival concerns both practitioners and academics. While it is a commendable effort to innovate

organizational modes to adapt to the digital era, it may not be wise to completely abandon traditional on-the-ground organizational approaches. It makes sense for new party leaders to invest in long-term organization building (Haughton and Deegan-Krause, 2020) that expands networks to citizens, even when there are no elections. This investment in long-term organization building is often rewarded with increased trust and electoral support from voters. Additionally, it is important to note that party organizations do not only arrange regular activities to build trust with voters; they must also engage in everyday problem-solving within the community and deliver on the promises made during electoral campaigns, a topic that will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

Chapter 6 GERB's Second Comeback to Power (2023) – From National Level Appeals to Subnational Problem-Solving Appeal

*'While folks in the capital were out protesting for judicial reforms and calling for General Prosecutor Ivan Geshev to step down, people in the provinces usually aren't rallying around those national issues. For them, it's all about what affects their day-to-day lives, like fixing roads and getting better local services. Those big national reforms just don't hit home the same way.'*¹¹³

*During a speech at the winter university of GERB's youth organization in February 2022, I asked the activists why they believed their party had endured so long. They strongly attributed this to the concept of rezultati/rezultamam, or results—the tangible developmental outcomes achieved across Bulgaria during GERB's three mandates in government*¹¹⁴.

Introduction

Although the previous chapters argued that building and maintaining active party organizations are important, party activism also concerns solving problems. On the one hand, political scientists (eg Cyr, 2016) and party strategists stress the importance of organization building for party survival (see Chapter 5). On the other hand, for many of party activists and supporters, the main goal is political problem-solving. Questions of organization therefore do get addressed and party survival is advanced, but only as by-product of their efforts to solve problems. Organization and survival are not ends in themselves for these groups.

It is striking that the existing political party appeal frameworks give more focus to party ideology and party competence (Bernhardt et al, 2011; Johns and Kölln, 2020; Vegetti, 2014), and less focus to the outcomes of providing public services. This chapter explores how party endurance results from a strong political record in public service delivery, emphasizing that political parties' resilience is fuelled by the commitment of activists and supporters who prioritize delivery of public services.

A political party's ability to gain voter support largely depends on its commitment to addressing issues that matter to voters. Dynamics at the subnational levels are closest to voters' daily lives and the problems they face. Politicians who help solve problems in the subnational arena are

¹¹³ Interview conducted on 23 June 2022, provincial centre city Shumen, GERB, former youth organization activist Evgeni

¹¹⁴ Participant observation in the 3-day winter university of GERB's youth organization from 25 to 27 February 2022 in the town of Hisariya

more likely to gain voters' trust, making subnational problem solving crucial in shaping voter choices.

In addition to gaining electoral support, subnational problem solving is an important motivational source for activists to stick with subnational branches. Therefore, this chapter aims to integrate the importance of subnational problem-solving appeals into existing party appeal frameworks, which are predominantly focused on national-level politics.

Existing research on party politics has predominantly emphasized the salience of national-level politics (see Zur, 2019). However, there is growing attention to the subnational arena of politics (Tavits, 2012; Cyr, 2016; Deegan-Krause and Haughton, 2018). National politics may have limited influence on the daily lives of voters, especially those in geographically remote areas. Thus, when political scientists explain party endurance by focusing exclusively on the national level, especially by centering on national leaders and their media presence, the analysis risks being incomplete.

Scholarly debates exist in the importance of subnational politics. On the one hand, it is argued that subnational politics are not important and secondary to national politics (Campbell 1991; Gabriel 1989; Hainmueller and Kern 2005; Jeffrey and Hough 2002; Jérôme and Lewis-Beck 1999; Lohmann, Brady and Rivers 1997). On the other hand, Van Biezen and Hopkin (2006: 32-34) studied subnational autonomy of political parties but did not use subnational autonomy to explain party endurance.

Dinas and Foos (2017: 3) stated that '[o]utcomes of subnational elections influence national electoral dynamics because they determine whether parties enhance their organizational capacity by gaining access to financial and human resources at lower levels of government.' The account does not clearly demonstrate that obtaining resources in subnational politics serves the purpose of addressing subnational problems. This chapter will therefore build on that account to illustrate the significance of subnational problem-solving for political party endurance.

Subnational levels of politics in Central and Eastern Europe are under-researched, with existing studies focusing primarily on Western Europe, such as the UK, Spain, Germany, and Italy (Van Biezen and Hopkin, 2006; Dinas and Foos, 2017). This chapter aims to explore the significance of subnational politics for party endurance in Central and Eastern Europe.

Studying the subnational dimension of politics challenges the cartel party argument, which emphasizes the state resources that a party obtains at the national level while ignoring local party organizations (Katz and Mair, 1994; 1995; 1997). As Chapter 7 will demonstrate, clientelistic politics that focus on securing funding for subnational problem-solving do not necessarily align with the cartel party thesis.

The chapter proceeds as follows: After the introduction, I present GERB's national-level appeals, including its party ideology as a central-right conservative party and the influence of Borissov's leadership. Here, I emphasize that focusing solely on national appeals is insufficient. I then demonstrate how subnational appeals are crucial for fostering loyalty among party members. Next, I emphasize the importance of locality-specific delivery of infrastructure and social care to gain votes from various communities. This involves distinguishing between the different development needs of provincial centre towns and smaller localities. The conclusion of the chapter underscores the importance of combining national-level appeals with subnational problem-solving to achieve party endurance.

National Level Appeals: Centre-Right Positioning, Getting Things Done, and Borissov's Appeal

While emphasizing the importance of subnational problem-solving appeals, I do not overlook national-level appeals such as centre-right positioning, the emphasis on getting things done, and the influence of Borissov.

As discussed in Chapter 5, party organizations are crucial for the endurance of political parties. However, merely developing these organizations is not enough for a new party to sustain itself; crafting effective party appeals is equally essential. Yet, new parties often struggle to establish durable appeals over time. While party appeals are widely recognized as a key ingredient for electoral success, as evidenced in Western Europe (Somer-Topcu, 2015: 842) and Central and Eastern Europe (Engler, 2023), existing literature tends to overlook the importance of subnational problem-solving appeals. Although GERB's national-level appeals hold significance, they alone are insufficient for ensuring the party's longevity. Over the years, GERB has gradually cultivated durable appeals that have contributed to its endurance.

Ideational sources that contribute to GERB's endurance need to be discussed. Although the line between the left and the right has become increasingly blurred in guiding voters (Bale et al., 2020), it remains a central theme in party politics studies. When discussing GERB's ideological and programmatic appeal as a conservative centre-right political party, it is important to

recognize that party competition is not solely about left-right socioeconomic divisions. The GAL-TAN values dimension also plays a significant role (Stokes, 1963). Moreover, political competition involves more than just spatial placement; non-spatial appeals, often categorized under ‘valence’ issues, are also crucial in shaping party dynamics and voter behaviour (Green and Jennings, 2017).

National-Level Party Appeals: ‘Conservative Centre-Right’

GERB sees itself as a centre-right conservative political party with an implication in policy making and delivery of economic goods (GERB website). However, this delivery informed by the left-right divide is embedded in the context, i.e., the needs of Bulgaria’s domestic development. In an interview with an activist¹¹⁵ of the women’s organization of GERB in Yambol, she told me that she was very much in favour of the completion of the motorway Trakiya, linking the capital to the Black Sea city of Burgas, which passes through Yambol, during GERB’s term of office, and that a motorway passing through the capital was a good thing because it meant less driving time from Yambol to the capital. But, as a mother, a grandmother, she also acknowledged that during GERB’s three terms in power, there was no pension increase whatsoever, given that the focus of the money was spent on the motorway. It cannot be assumed that the political record of developing motorways is a strong right-wing attribute, because building roads is a basic necessity for Bulgaria at this stage of its development, regardless of ideological polarization of political parties.

Under this description, the term ‘centre’ is crucial in defining GERB as a centre-right political party. In a conversation with Vasko¹¹⁶, the chair of the youth organization in Haskovo province, he shared insights from his experience in the software services business and his startup. While he advocates for lower business taxes, he also emphasized the importance of finding a balance between left-wing and right-wing policies. Vasko noted that during GERB’s tenure, teachers’ salaries were raised, which motivated some of his friends to pursue careers in teacher training, positively impacting education development. Thus, while GERB maintains an official centre-right narrative, it blends this with Bulgaria’s specific national context and a balanced development strategy, yielding results that prioritize education and infrastructure growth.

¹¹⁵ Interview conducted on 25 August 2022, in a provincial centre town Yambol, with an activist of GERB’s women organization

¹¹⁶ Interview conducted on 11 August 2022, in a provincial centre town Haskovo, with a provincial chair of GERB’s youth organization

Existing research highlights that, beyond the economic left-right spectrum, voters also consider sociocultural dimensions, often referred to as GAL-TAN, where GAL stands for green, alternative, and libertarian values, while TAN represents traditionalism, authoritarianism, and nationalism (e.g., Dassonneville et al., 2024). Although the GAL-TAN framework may not fully apply to GERB, the party does possess certain ideational resources that help unify its members around sociocultural issues, extending beyond the economic left-right divide. I argue that it is the combination of modernity and traditionality reflected in grassroots activism that fosters loyalty among GERB supporters.

GERB's modernity is exemplified through its activism aimed at addressing contemporary issues, such as road safety, as well as its promotion of Bulgaria's European vocation. In response to the pressing problem of increased road accidents, GERB's youth organizations across the country have initiated various awareness-raising activities. For instance, the youth organization in Stara Zagora¹¹⁷ (*Mladejki GERB/MGERB*) conducts training courses for drivers to emphasize road safety. Meanwhile, MGERB in Pleven¹¹⁸ has painted zebra crossings and inscribed reminders on the ground to encourage pedestrians to exercise caution when crossing streets. Additionally, there has been a nationally coordinated campaign on Facebook, where MGERB members changed their profile pictures to support the initiative for safe driving¹¹⁹. This activism reflects GERB's commitment to promoting road safety, a crucial aspect of modernity.

It is important to recognize the significance of 'Europe' in the values of GERB, as mentioned in Chapter 1. According to Monika Panayotova¹²⁰, the first chair of MGERB, when GERB was established in 2006—just a year before Bulgaria's accession to the European Union—European culture and values began to take root in Bulgaria. She emphasized that promoting European values in Bulgaria is a historical task of the political party GERB, as reflected in its name: *Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria*.

On the other hand, GERB's organizations have engaged in activities that celebrate both Christian traditions and pre-Christian folklore. When I asked GERB's MP in Targovishte,

¹¹⁷ Interview conducted on 30 July 2022, with GERB's youth organization activist, in a provincial centre town Stara Zagora

¹¹⁸ Interview conducted on 17 May 2022, with the provincial chair of GERB's youth organization, in a provincial centre town Pleven

¹¹⁹ Interview conducted on 17 May 2022, with the provincial chair of GERB's youth organization, in a provincial centre town Pleven

¹²⁰ Interview conducted on 13 May 202, with the first national chair of GERB's youth organization Monika Panayotova, in Sofia

Temenuzhka Petkova¹²¹, why they commemorate all festivals related to these traditions, she explained that preserving traditional values is vital for the survival of the Bulgarian nation and takes precedence over purely political party interests. Indeed, both modernity and traditionality serve as sources of unity for GERB, as long as these abstract ideational resources translate into regular activities and networks, ultimately materializing through subnational problem-solving.

The importance of ideological and programmatic positions—both along the left-right scale and the GAL-TAN scale—for party endurance cannot be diminished (Deegan-Krause and Haughton, 2018). Ideological and programmatic positions should not be regarded as static; adapting appeals is crucial for the post-breakthrough survival of new parties (Engler, 2023). After GERB completed its first government mandate, a noticeable shift occurred towards appeals emphasizing ‘stability,’ ‘visible results,’ ‘solutions,’ ‘order,’ and ‘strength.’ This evolution is illustrated in Table 6.1, which showcases GERB’s electoral campaign slogans from its inaugural parliamentary elections to the 2023 elections. This shift in GERB’s campaign slogans is rooted in its early elections, where the focus was on making promises such as ‘to build’ and ‘a will’ before it had established a record of political delivery.

Strikingly, over the years, GERB’s electoral slogans have said little about its official ‘conservative centre-right’ ideology. This illustrates the stark contrast between the party’s proclaimed ideology and its actual messaging during electoral campaigns. While I acknowledge the importance of the left-right divide, I argue that this traditional dichotomy becomes less compelling compared to demonstrating a proven track record of problem-solving.

Table 6.1. GERB’s electoral campaign slogans from 2009 to 2023, source: from GERB’s territorial branch in Shumen

Election	GERB’s electoral campaign slogan
2009 parliamentary elections	<i>Da gokajem, che Bulgaria moje/</i> To demonstrate that Bulgaria can
2011 local and presidential elections	<i>Gradim Bulgaria/</i> To build Bulgaria
2013 parliamentary elections	<i>Imame volay/</i> We have a will
2014 European elections	<i>Bulgaria nyama vreme za gubene/</i> Bulgaria has no time to lose.

¹²¹ Interview conducted on 31 March 2023, with GERB’s MP candidate from Targovishte constituency Temenuzhka Petkova

2014 parliamentary elections	<i>Stabilna Bulgaria. Vreme e./</i> Stable Bulgaria. It is time.
2015 local elections	<i>Vidimi rezultati za Bulgaria/</i> Visible results for Bulgaria.
2016 presidential elections	<i>Rabotim v interes na grajdanite/</i> We work in the interest of citizens.
2017 parliamentary elections	<i>Realni resheniya za Bulgaria/</i> Real solutions for Bulgaria
2019 European elections	<i>Evropa ni chuva/Europe hears us.</i>
2019 local elections	<i>Rabota, rabota, rabota za [xx]/</i> Work, work and work for [xx] insert given place
2021 April parliamentary elections	Rabota, rabota, rabota/Work, work and work
2021 July parliamentary elections	<i>Red v Haosa/Order in chaos</i>
2021 November parliamentary elections	<i>Po-silni ot Haosa/Stronger than chaos</i>
2022 parliamentary elections	<i>Po-silni ot Haosa/Stronger than chaos</i>
2023 parliamentary elections	<i>Za stabilna Bulgaria otново/</i> For stable Bulgaria again
2023 local elections	<i>Rabotim za [xx]/</i> We work for [xx] insert given place

‘Rezultati’ and Getting Things Done

During a speech at the winter university of GERB’s youth organization in February 2022, I asked the activists why they believed their party had endured so long. They strongly attributed this to the concept of *rezultati/rezultatam*, or results—the tangible developmental outcomes achieved across Bulgaria during GERB’s three mandates in government¹²². They expressed difficulty in understanding why some citizens do not acknowledge the progress made under GERB. This suggests that members of GERB’s youth organization take pride in their party and remain loyal due to its political track record, which they believe justifies the consistent electoral support the party has received.

¹²² Participant observation in the 3-day winter university of GERB’s youth organization from 25 to 27 February 2022 in the town of Hisariya

While I acknowledge the significance of pure ideational resources, without a proven track record of addressing everyday problems rooted in those ideas, they risk being seen as empty promises and may fail to resonate with constituents. For example, Sasi¹²³, the administrator of GERB's office in Shumen, shared that the party funded the repair of an old church in the town due to insufficient state funding for religious infrastructure preservation. This initiative reflects GERB leadership's commitment to supporting people's beliefs through financial assistance.

The party's track record in problem-solving has significantly contributed to the electoral support it has consistently secured since its parliamentary breakthrough. This is exemplified by an interview with Anas¹²⁴, a businessman in the capital city. He expressed skepticism towards new parties emerging since 2021, believing they were likely to create chaos. Anas emphasized the importance of national stability and strong governance, qualities he feels GERB has consistently demonstrated.

Anas further illustrated that he did not concern himself with the finer details of GERB's governance; rather, he valued the party's ability to steer Bulgaria in the right direction—towards Europe. As a businessman in the property industry, operating both in the Bulgarian capital and Western Europe, he emphasized the importance of having access to the European market for his business. He expressed a clear desire to avoid a regression to the communist era, during which Bulgaria was not fully integrated into Europe. Anas's views may be somewhat exceptional in Sofia, given the strong anti-GERB protests and the heightened demand for prosperity and judicial reforms in the capital during 2020. He remains committed to gradual, stable progress, but is hesitant to rush into progressive judicial reforms.

This reflects that, despite the state's abandonment of communism over three decades ago, the legacy of that era continues to influence voting decisions today. Whether voters feel nostalgia for the past remains a significant factor in contemporary elections. Anas's example underscores key themes in GERB's electoral campaign, such as 'Europe' and 'strength,' as illustrated in Table 6.1. GERB's appeal is not solely rooted in right-wing ideology; instead, it combines a rejection of nostalgia for the pre-1991 regime with a focus on the European market and a domestic track record of problem-solving. This multifaceted approach likely resonates with some voters, encouraging consistent support for the party.

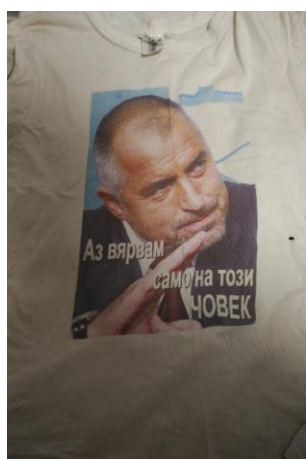
¹²³ Interview conducted on 18 June 2022, with GERB's provincial branch worker Sasi

¹²⁴ Interview conducted on 8 September 2021, businessman in property industry Anas, Sofia

Borissov and Getting Things Done

Borissov plays a crucial role in GERB's national appeal, contributing significantly to the party's endurance. The assertion that GERB is essentially Borissov's party holds some truth. As shown in Figure 6.1, T-shirts featuring Borissov's image with the phrase '*Az vyarvam samo na tozi chovek*/*Аз вярвам само на този човек*'/I only trust in this person' became popular campaign gifts distributed by GERB's territorial branches throughout Bulgaria. In my interviews across the country, I observed that there were people wearing these T-shirts in public. While the leader's appeal is a vital aspect of the party's attractiveness, there is a concern regarding an over-reliance on him.

Figure 6.1. T-shirt with the image of Borissov – *Az vyarvam samo na tozi chovek*/*Аз вярвам само на този човек*/I only trust in this person, source: picture taken by the author, T-shirt from GERB's branch in Targovishte



In an interview with NGO founder Dushana Zdravkova¹²⁵, she recounted a recent incident where she called Borissov to inform him that an activist from a movement critical of GERB was dying in his hometown of Vidin. In response, Borissov promptly contacted the Ministry of Health to arrange for a helicopter to transfer the patient to a hospital in Sofia for urgent surgery. Zdravkova emphasized that without Borissov's swift decision-making, the individual would likely have died. However, she also expressed concern about the lack of institutional mechanisms to address such emergencies, highlighting the risks of relying so heavily on Borissov for critical decisions.

Despite the concerns surrounding reliance on a single leader, it is evident that Borissov's leadership—particularly his proactive engagement with the public, attentiveness to their issues,

¹²⁵ Interview conducted on 13 September 2021, capital city, NGO GERB founder Dushana Zdravkova

and provision of solutions—has played a crucial role in GERB’s ongoing survival. Existing literature often approaches the impact of charismatic leadership on the endurance of new parties with caution (e.g., Deegan-Krause and Haughton, 2018; Yovcheva, 2020). However, over nearly two decades, the substantial benefits of Borissov’s leadership cannot be overlooked, underscoring the importance of leadership continuity for the post-breakthrough survival of new parties (Bolleyer and Bytze, 2017).

Criticized by opponents as informal, non-institutional, and lacking a programmatic approach, Borissov often drove his jeep around Bulgaria, distributing government funds based on immediate needs he observed. However, this seemingly ad-hoc method belied a political record marked by immediate subnational problem-solving. His hands-on style enabled him to respond quickly to local issues, demonstrating a pragmatic approach to governance that, while unconventional, yielded tangible benefits for various communities.

The Incorporation of the Subnational Problem Solving into Party Appeals

As discussed in Chapter 2, the subnational politics are a significant missing element in party endurance studies. The subnational arena plays a crucial role in gaining long-term voter support. While new parties may not showcase obvious subnational elements during their inaugural parliamentary election, the public often harbours expectations and hopes for both national and subnational development. Once a new party gains power, it becomes essential for the public to witness tangible delivery at national and subnational levels. If voters perceive a lack of local accomplishments—or if they only see national-level progress that feels distant and disconnected—they may become disillusioned with the party. This disappointment can erode support over time, highlighting the importance of effective subnational governance in sustaining a political party’s credibility and endurance.

In the discourse surrounding national and subnational politics, it is essential to consider the balance between remoteness and proximity—not only in terms of geographic distance but also in psychological and symbolic terms. This dynamic exists between the broader macro-environment of national politics and the localized micro-environment of subnational governance. Even when the national macro-environment is struggling, a strong subnational micro-environment can foster satisfaction among residents. Conversely, if there is national progress but persistent deficiencies in subnational public services, residents may grow disillusioned. While national achievements can evoke feelings of patriotism and pride, they may not compensate for the absence of essential services in daily life. This discrepancy can

lead to disappointment with the ruling party, underscoring the importance of addressing national and subnational levels to maintain public support.

Contextual factors need to be taken into consideration in order to understand the importance of subnational politics to motivating even apolitical people to join a new party in Bulgaria. After the collapse of the state socialism, particularly the then entry into the European Union, Bulgaria has opened itself to Europe and to the whole world, leading to the trend of Bulgarian people studying and working abroad. The abandonment of the state socialist regime has yet to deliver the anticipated development to many small towns in Bulgaria. This has exacerbated a trend where people increasingly relocate to the capital, Sofia, or to one of the five major cities—Plovdiv, Varna, Burgas, and Stara Zagora—which offer more opportunities and appeal, especially to younger generations. Additionally, many Bulgarians opt to move abroad in search of better economic prospects, further contributing to the decreasing population and stagnation of smaller towns.

Obezlyudeniya, or decreasing population, is the word that I heard frequently in Bulgarian remote empty municipalities, such as Silistra, which is on the River Danube near the border to Romania – the current desertedness of the municipal centre town was contrasted by the townspeople with the socialist period where there were a bigger population. The decline in population situation, particularly at the subnational arena, has its reflection in the incentives that motivate apolitical people to join new political parties in the wider Bulgarian party politics. For example, in Shumen I interviewed a party representative of the newly established party, *Izpravi se bg, mutri van*/Stand up Bulgaria, Mafia out, who was also the municipal councillor¹²⁶. He told me that he remembered a radio programme named the 10th city, which referred to local news in Shumen when it was the 10th biggest town in Bulgaria, in contrast with the current situation where the population of Shumen declined. For him it is important to revitalize Shumen which motivated him additionally to join the new political party and to campaign hard for it in 2021 parliamentary elections.

The desertedness is particularly obvious in northwestern Bulgaria. In a northwestern Bulgarian town Vratsa the office worker at Change Continues' territorial branch told me that even though originally from Vratsa, he, like many young people, had moved to Sofia and got a well-paid job¹²⁷. But he said he always had attachment to his hometown and so he agreed to quit his job

¹²⁶ Interview conducted on 10 February 2022, with the provincial head of IS.MV

¹²⁷ Interview conducted on 25 May 2022, with the office worker in Change Continues' branch

in Sofia and took up the job to be the provincial coordinator at the office of Change Continues in Vratsa. He said that they, Change continues' territorial branch, would not exist if not for the aim of developing the town that would appeal to young people in the town to stay instead of having to move to other cities or abroad. It is in this context of Bulgarian society that subnational development is an important appeal for political party endurance.

The Role of Subnational Problem-Solving Appeal in Motivating Party Members to Stick with GERB

In addition to studying how a political party appeals to voters, it is also important to study the survival of the political party itself, in order to explain political party endurance. As the Public Relations specialist of Shumen municipality Roza Encheva said, NDSV is a party with a lot of specialists, but the party did not stabilize in the end¹²⁸. Indeed, the fact that a lot of specialists went to join the party with good intentions of changing the nation does not mean that the party organization can be united and stable. Here, I emphasise that in order to stabilise political party organizations in different localities, there is a need to have policies corresponding subnational development, in order to cultivate subnational problem-solving appeal.

Given that stabilizing is a challenge for new parties, it is puzzling that GERB managed to sustain its members to stabilize in the end. It is therefore worth discussing ideational resources that motivate groups of activists and supporters to stick with GERB. This can be explained by the General Incentive Model proposed by Clark and Wilson's (1961). According to the model, there are incentives that keep supporters sticking with political parties; they are: purposive incentives (belief in the party's ideological positioning), material incentives (pursuing a political career), and solidary incentives (building friendships).

I focus on the importance of appeals based on subnational problem solving to maintaining stability and cohesion in party organizations. It is striking that Clark and Wilson's General Incentive Model does not explicitly mention the importance of subnational problem solving as to why party activists and party organizations stick together (Clark and Wilson, 1961). I argue that subnational service delivery is not only expected by voters, but also important for party members and is the glue that allows a party organization to continue to exist and grow smoothly. In the case of GERB, it is the subnational problem-solving appeal that plays an important role in motivating party people to consistently work for the party.

¹²⁸ Interview conducted on 4 February 2022, with the PR of municipal government in Shumen

Although national themes such as left-right ideological division play a role in motivating party people to stick with a party, these national themes may not be the only compelling reason, particularly in small localities. In small localities, focus needs to be given to subnational problem-solving. For instance, *publichna dela/публична дела*, or the support for public affairs, which has sustained Galya's steps towards being GERB's MP and later being GERB's municipal mayor¹²⁹. Galya also said that as a politician in a small place with a small population, she does not care who comes from which party when hiring people, as long as they are experts.

Galya's perspective as a politician in a small community underscores the importance of subnational problem solving: her emphasis on hiring experts regardless of their party affiliation suggests a move away from ideological polarization. In her view, practical competence and expertise for subnational problem solving are prioritized over party lines, indicating a preference for cooperation and effectiveness over ideological conflict. This reflects a broader trend where non-ideological politics—focused on practical skills and community needs—becomes more significant at the subnational levels. For individuals on the ground, the ability to effectively manage and address public affairs often takes precedence over strict adherence to ideological positions. Seyd et al. (1994), as cited in Bale et al. (2020: 76), support this notion by highlighting that engagement with political parties is increasingly motivated by tangible contributions to public welfare rather than ideological alignment. Thus, in smaller or more localized political contexts, expertise and pragmatic solutions for subnational problem solving tend to overshadow ideological divisions, fostering a more cooperative and less antagonistic political environment.

The importance of subnational problem solving in motivating activists to support subnational party branches cannot be underestimated. Subnational problem solving can also go a long way towards mitigating the global trend of ideological polarization along the national dimension which has become progressively more intense and less inclusive causing a threat to democracy (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2019).

Alongside the goal of subnational problem solving, friendships are formed among activists within subnational party branches. *Splotenost/сплотеност*, or being together, is the word used by Stefan, one of GERB's provincial youth organization activists, to describe why it is good to organise people within GERB's provincial organizations to get together often, such as

¹²⁹ Interview conducted on 25 August 2022 in a municipal centre town Nova Zagora, with the municipal mayor Galya Zaharieva

celebrating festivals together through eating and drinking¹³⁰. This is because a sense of community tends to form when everyone gathers in person. He explained that while politics is important, life itself also holds significance—making friends, meeting different people, and so on are all experiences worth cherishing. For him, it seems that beyond the collective political goals, joining a political party is a way to enrich life, which aligns with the idea of solidarity as a reason why supporters remain loyal to a political party (Bale et al., 2020: 99-101).

It is not just ideological motivations that keep people loyal to a political party; in fact, such motivations can sometimes result in low-intensity activism, like posting on Facebook (Bale et al., 2020: 99-101). However, sources of high-intensity activism stem from party members enjoying the process of organizing events and being together, as well as selective process benefits (Seyd et al., 1994, cited in Bale et al., 2020: 76). These selective process benefits are characterized by in-person network building (see Chapter 5). Much of the political party work involves socializing with fellow party members and reaching out to voters, suggesting that subnational problem-solving activism fosters the creation of interpersonal connections.

The power of subnational problem-solving is compelling enough to encourage activists across Bulgaria to remain loyal to GERB. During my participant observation at an informal gathering of GERB's youth organization activists in Smolyan¹³¹, I discovered that many of their concerns centred around how to apply for European funds to develop their hometown. These activists often expressed frustration over being misunderstood by the public; when they identified themselves as party members, the common response was the assumption that they received financial compensation for their involvement.

In reality, these activists reported that not only did they not receive any compensation, but they often covered their own petrol expenses while using personal vehicles to support party activities. Their commitment stemmed from a genuine desire to see development in their hometowns, fuelling both their strong affiliation with GERB and their high-intensity activism, often at the expense of their free time and personal finances. This grassroots engagement underscores the significance of subnational service delivery, illustrating how subnational problem-solving strengthens party cohesion and extend GERB's appeal beyond national-level politics.

¹³⁰ Interview conducted on 25 March 2022, with GERB's youth organization activist Stefan, in a provincial centre town Razgrad

¹³¹ Participant observation in a café gathering of GERB's municipal youth organization activists on 11 July 2022, in a provincial centre town

The subnational problem-solving appeal is nested within both the ideological appeal and the networking appeal. These factors work together to enhance party loyalty among members, ultimately contributing to political party endurance. Evgeni¹³², a student at the Law Faculty of the University of Ruse, explained that his reason for joining GERB's youth organization was twofold: an inner quest for right-wing ideology and the influence of his good classmate, Georgi, who was active in the organization. For Evgeni, it was not solely the pursuit of ideology, but also the desire to support a close friend and the hope of contributing to the development of Ruse.

To achieve the goal of subnational problem solving, party activists sometimes need opportunities to develop relevant careers. One of GERB's youth organization activists¹³³ shared that when the GERB candidate, a doctor, won the mayoral election in Pleven in 2011, he helped young party members secure jobs in the hospital and municipal administration. The respondent explained that this is not necessarily wrong, as those youth activists who had ambitions for political careers, had volunteered extensively for the party, and were qualified for the positions, should be given the chance to advance their careers.

For those who pursue political career for subnational problem solving, GERB's youth organization functions as a political career ladder, which is a material incentive in Clark and Wilson's terms (cited in Bale et al, 2020, 99-101). One of GERB's youth organization activists Evgenii told me that he thought the advantage of GERB's youth organization compared to that of other political parties in Bulgaria, eg. BSP and DPS, is *davane na shans/даване на шанс*, or the giving of opportunities to realize political career¹³⁴.

He¹³⁵ provided examples of mayors and MPs who were members of GERB's youth organization and were nominated by the party to participate in and win elections. One notable example is Georgi Krastev from Ruse, who became the youngest MP in the Bulgarian parliament at the age of 23, while still an undergraduate law student at Ruse University. GERB's leadership recognized Georgi Krastev's talent after his involvement in protests in Sofia. Additionally, his mother, a founding figure of GERB's organization in Ruse, served as

¹³² Interview conducted on 4 April 2023, provincial centre city Ruse, GERB, youth organization activist Evgeni Chavdarov

¹³³ Interview conducted on 2 Jun 2022, about provincial centre city Pleven, GERB's youth organization activist Zornitsa Petrova

¹³⁴ Interview conducted on 23 March 2022, with GERB's provincial youth organization activist Evgeni, in a provincial centre town Ruse

¹³⁵ Interview conducted on 23 March 2022, with GERB's provincial youth organization activist Evgeni, in a provincial centre town Ruse

the deputy mayor of Ruse when GERB won the local election. The underlying message is that young members like Georgi, whose talents were recognized through their involvement in the youth organization, and who went on to develop successful political careers, inspire other members of GERB's youth organization to stay loyal to the party. This offers material incentives for those pursuing political careers aimed at subnational problem solving.

Among the four factors identified by Rosenblatt (2018) that are key to explaining sustained vibrancy, one notable factor is 'channels of ambition,' which refers to the ability to satisfy politicians' individual career interests. This aligns with Kopecky et al.'s (2016) concept of patronage employment, which can effectively cultivate party loyalty, as evidenced by the experiences within GERB's youth organization. The development of political careers for youth organization members not only serves their personal ambitions but also enhances the party's capacity for subnational problem solving, creating a mutually beneficial dynamic.

It should be noted that political career is not only the driving force for apolitical people to join and stick with a party. In fact, when GERB was established as a political party in 2006, according to the party organization founders in Yambol, they decided to join GERB and devote time to working for the party in the town because they saw hope in the nationally popular GERB and in Borissov that could be a powerful alternative to develop their hometown Yambol¹³⁶. As such, the subnational problem-solving appeals are particularly salient in motivating people to join new parties in Bulgaria. There is strong hope that the new political party is a powerful instrument to bring development to the subnational that can further solve the decreasing depopulation problem which has gradually become a concerning issue since the collapse of the state socialism.

When people are not satisfied with established parties both in terms of national development and their hometown development, it is natural for them to give their hope to alternative to established parties: new parties. However, it is always easier to join a new party than to stick with a new party. The subnational based appeals can be powerful to motivating party people to continue to stick with a party with the incorporation of the achieved results in subnational service delivery.

Subnational sources are important to motivate people to stick with GERB in a wide range of localities. According to GERB's youth organization activist in Plovdiv Iosiv¹³⁷, GERB's

¹³⁶ Interview conducted on 23 August 2022, with one of GERB's provincial organization founders

¹³⁷ Interview conducted on 8 July 2022, provincial centre city Plovdiv, GERB's youth organization activist Iosiv

politicians, including MPs and municipal mayors, play an important role in bringing development to the town of the Plovdiv. Plovdiv is the second largest city in Bulgaria and the development for a better Plovdiv, according to Iosiv, is the important driving force for GERB's politicians to work for GERB. An example that Iosiv gave was that during the days when MPs needed to be in national parliament, the GERB's MP from Plovdiv Ivan Totev chose to commute back to Plovdiv, because he saw Plovdiv as a home, and he liked Plovdiv more than Sofia, so he preferred to spend time in Plovdiv. The example demonstrates that GERB's MPs from Plovdiv constituency tend to be in Sofia in order to solve the problems for Plovdiv and there is deep emotional attachment to Plovdiv.

The mechanism of the subnational belonging and attachment does not only work in Plovdiv. The GERB's MP in Yambol Mitko¹³⁸ told me that he used both his status as an MP and his personal networks to solve problems for people in Yambol, for instance, he helped a patient in Yambol to be hospitalized in the nearby big town Stara Zagora. Mitko said he knew Yambol very well, both the town and the nearby towns in the province. Mitko said that in contrast to MPs from the new parties who were not from the town and did not know the town well, he could walk around the town without using navigation. Mitko showed strong Yambol identity and as a MP spent a large amount of time in his constituency – his familiarity and commitment to Yambol cannot be ignored when discussing why he stuck with GERB for so long.

The subnational problem-solving appeal is also strong in northwestern Bulgaria. In a northwestern Bulgarian town Montana, the GERB's MP from the Montana constituency Irina¹³⁹ told me that for her, the *kauza*, or the cause to be a politician is to develop the northwestern part of Bulgaria. She also mentioned that she and her friend Rosi, who was elected as GERB's MP from another northwestern Bulgarian constituency Vidin, were both resilient people and did not want to give up the northwestern Bulgaria where they were born and grew up.

Irina gave examples of how she helped solve local problems in Montana, such as to find funding from the central government to improve road infrastructure, and to contact the ministry of education that a school in Montana did not have proper heating, etc. Irina's activism of problem-solving seems to be motivated by her commitment to the development of Montana and the northwestern Bulgaria. Indeed, in addition the national appeal, the subnational appeal

¹³⁸ Interview conducted on 24 Aug 2022, provincial centre city Yambol, GERB's MP Dimitar Ivanov

¹³⁹ Interview conducted on 7 Jun 2022, provincial centre city Montana, GERB's women organization activist Plamenka

is important to consistently motivate GERB's politicians to stick with the party, so that they can continue to deliver goods and services for their hometown regions. Continuously delivering subnational services is an important motivational source for supporters to stick with a party for its endurance.

The Role of Subnational Problem-Solving Appeals in Gaining Electoral Support

Gaining Electoral Support

Consistently gaining electoral support, although important for party endurance, is not an easy task, particularly for new political parties. According to the new party subsystem model, '[v]oters try a new party but opt immediately for a newer one and process repeats until change itself becomes institutionalized' (Haughton and Deegan-Krause 2020: 200).

Even though predicting well the rise and fall fate of the new party ITN in the shortened electoral cycle, the new party subsystem model does not predict the fate of GERB that has become firmly established. Table 6.2 shows the stabilized voter flow of GERB that from the 2014 to the 2022 elections, around 61%-88.9% of GERB's previous election voters have moved on to vote for the same party. This is comparable to perennial parties BSP and DPS at 68%-86.5% and 71.4%-92.8% respectively, as shown in Figure 6.2.

Table 6.2 Percentages of voter flow arriving at a given election for a given party from the party's previous election voters, sources from Gallup, Trend and Alpha surveys

		2022Oct	2021Nov	2021 Jul	2021Apr	2017	2014
GERB	Ave	87.7	86.2	84.1	61	75.5	80
	Gallup	87.6	85	84	61	75.5	80
	Trend	87.8	87.3	82.9			
	Alpha			85.3			
BSP	Ave	78.4	77.6	86.4	68	86.5	68.2
	Gallup	79.7	75	83	68	86.5	68.2
	Trend	77.1	80.2	85.7			
	Alpha			90.4			

DPS	Ave	92.8	92.0	91.4	89	71.4	92.5
	Gallup	93.2	89	90	89	71.4	92.5
	Trend	92.4	94.9	89.9			
	Alpha			94.4			
ITN	Ave	50.7	39	84.6			
	Gallup	50.7	36	85			
	Trend		42	85.8			
	Alpha			83.1			
PP	Ave	57.5					
	Gallup	58.3					
	Trend	56.7					
	Alpha						

Figure 6.2 Voter flow for those continuing to vote for the same party, source: from Gallup, Trend and Alpha surveys

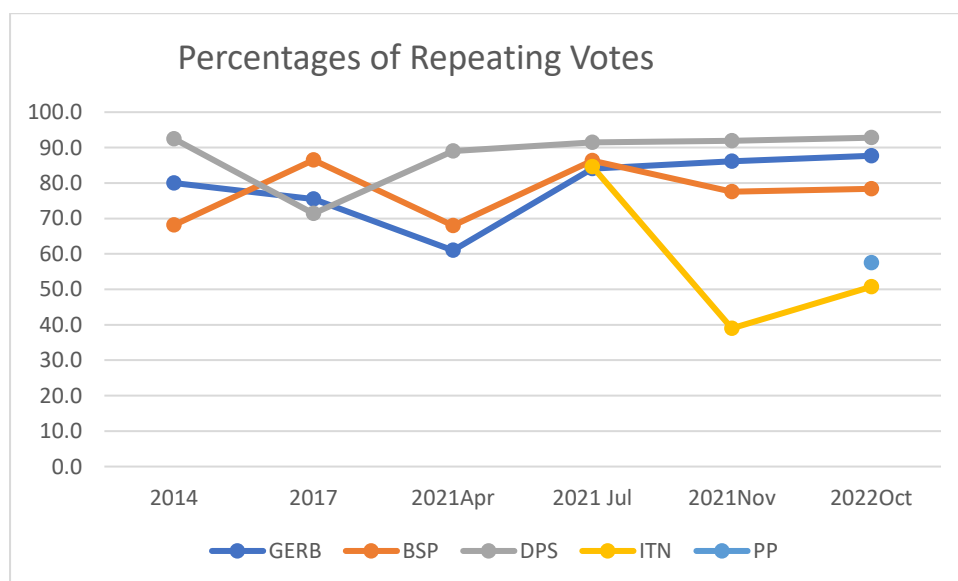


Table 6.3 further illustrates that a dominant force for GERB to hold up well is those who repeated votes for the party: around 80%-88.9% of GERB's votes in the elections from 2014

to 2022 have come from those voting for GERB during the previous election. The new party subsystem model overestimates the importance of change and newness illustrated by the fates of ITN and PP, but the endurance and stabilization of new parties as shown by GERB is underestimated in the new party subsystem model.

Table 6.3 Percentages of repeating votes in GERB's vote share composition, sources from Gallup, Trend and Alpha surveys

	2022Oct	2021Nov	2021 Jul	2021Apr	2017	2014
Ave	84.2	87.1	88.9	87	88	80
Gallup	85.4	87	90	86	88	80
Trend	82.9	87.2	87.7	88		

The pattern of those voted for GERB is in consistency with the stabilization pattern proposed by Haughton and Deegan-Krause (2020: 200) that '[v]oters try a new party and stay with it, until it becomes firmly established', which needs to be further explained.

Subnational Problem Solving

Delivering subnational services is a crucial source of political party endurance, as it consistently helps to secure electoral support by fulfilling the promises made during electoral campaigns. Some party politics scholars focus on the effectiveness of electoral campaigning when studying electoral success (see e.g. Cutts et al, 2012). Indeed, the electoral snapshot is a valuable window to study political party fates, as it is most intense for all party people, from elites to activists, to use all their resources possible to secure electoral support for political party survival. However, it is important to note that no matter how effective a political party is at conducting electoral campaigns, simply making promises without subsequent implementation is unlikely to sustain long-term electoral support.

Voters care about to what extent political parties have fulfilled their previous promises to them. Voters care not only about whether political parties have fulfilled their previous promises but also about the promises being made for the future. This dual focus highlights that there is both a retrospective and prospective element in campaigning and voting choice. Voters evaluate past performance to assess trustworthiness and are also influenced by future commitments when

making their decisions. Thus, effective campaigning involves addressing both past achievements and future plans in subnational service delivery.

It is not sufficient to look at the dynamics happened during the official period of the electoral campaigns. There are some elements hidden, such as personalism of subnational elites based on their regular political record outside electoral campaigning periods, that cannot be ignored in studying how a political party secures electoral support.

In the major and rapid political and economic change from state socialism to capitalism in Bulgaria, it was accompanied with public expectations of increased state capacity and development, which met with a huge discrepancy with the reality of what happened. Therefore, in order to understand why a new political party can endure in Bulgaria, especially one that has been in power, public service delivery is an inextricable topic.

Ludmila, a former press spokesperson for the NDSV¹⁴⁰, told me that at the time the NDSV-led government tried very hard to bring Bulgaria to the EU, because at that time it was felt that the EU road was a road that would bring development to Bulgaria, and the public had high expectations for Bulgaria's accession to the EU, thinking that Bulgaria would be able to reach a level of development like Switzerland's within a few years of joining the EU. But after joining the EU, development did not come that fast. So, to a large extent, people's high expectations of a new political party can be interpreted as the fact that the development they hoped for after the collapse of state socialism did not materialise immediately, and so they wanted to switch to a new political party in order to try to see if they could realise earlier the development that they had been looking forward to for a long time. Then, in examining why a new political party can endure, it is necessary to find out the reasons from the aspect of public service delivery.

Subnational Problem-Solving Appeal of Village and Municipal Mayors: Its Role in Electoral Mobilization

Delivery can affect people's motivation to vote. In the context of party politics in Bulgaria, there is a respect for those mayors, in municipalities, towns and villages, who can help to solve problems. This respect can be translated into vote support, for both old and new parties. The mayor of the village Nikolovo in Ruse province supported by BSP¹⁴¹ told me that he tried his best to make the village a nice place for villagers to live. He gave two examples.

¹⁴⁰ Interview conducted on 23 May 2022, capital city, NDSV, previous party official Hristina Hristova

¹⁴¹ Interview conducted on 6 April 2023, with the village mayor of Nikolovo in Ruse province

Firstly, he wanted to renovate the central square in the village, but could not secure funding from the municipal government, so he asked for help from construction companies – he did not ask for money, but he asked for donation of construction materials, and then he asked villagers to contribute their voluntary labour, and finally the central square of the village was renovated.

Secondly, the church in the village needed emergent renovations as it was in the danger of falling. Then the old people in the village were scared, as the church was related to how villagers practiced and worshiped their beliefs. The village mayor was still unable to secure funding from the municipal government, and he again asked for the help from the businesses that resolved the church repair crisis.

Indeed, the village mayor used all possible resources to solve daily life collective problems for the villagers. As such, it was not surprising that when parliamentary elections came, villagers who were genuinely confused as to which parties to vote chose to ask for advice of the village mayor¹⁴². The village mayor told villagers that it is like buying cheese in the shop – if you buy one brand of cheese and you find that it is spoiling, next time you would not buy the same brand of cheese again. This is because even though there is the danger that another brand of the cheese is also spoiling, at least you do not want to choose the already demonstrated spoiled cheese and so would choose for alternatives.

It should therefore be noted that village mayors with previous political records of delivery are important to the mobilization of villagers in parliamentary elections in the wider Bulgarian party politics. This also holds implications for the endurance of new political parties of making strategies of building up linkages to subnational elites who have the potential or record to deliver, which do not only include village mayors, but also municipal mayors.

The importance of personalism of mayors based on delivery in the village level and in the municipality level to obtaining electoral support is prominent. I visited Targovishte during the election campaign in April 2023, when the MP of GERB, the mayor of GERB, and several activists, including municipal councillors and youth organization members of GERB. Together they walked around Targovishte's town centre handing out leaflets with GERB's nominees for MP. During this walk, the GERB's municipal mayor has the highest level of recognizability, as many townspeople come to talk to the municipal mayor and shake hands.

¹⁴² Interview conducted on 6 April 2023, with the village mayor of Nikolovo in Ruse province

As such, it is the respect for the municipal mayor that is mobilised as sources for the electoral support for the political party at parliamentary elections. When I contacted GERB's office, the office workers¹⁴³ told me that the streets in the town centre have been renovated and the schools have been refurbished under the current mayor, Darin Dimitrov. The mayor has contributed to the development of Targovishte, and that is why people respect him. It is hard to imagine that GERB would have won these many votes in Targovishte without Darin Dimitrov. GERB likely would have still garnered votes due to its national-level appeal and active organization of social events in Targovishte (Chapter 5). However, the presence of Darin Dimitrov likely boosted GERB's support even further, driven by his role in delivering key infrastructure projects. This combination of national influence and tangible local development efforts, spearheaded by Dimitrov, likely contributed to GERB's stronger performance.

As discussed in Chapter 4, one of the important strategies for GERB's endurance is an early start of building linkages to subnational elites. This chapter will therefore further elaborate that this is because subnational elites form an important subnational problem-solving appeal through delivering subnational services. Indeed, to understand how a new party can endure, it is crucial to examine how it establishes linkages with subnational elites who are capable of delivering economic goods and services to townspeople and villagers, ultimately securing their electoral support. There are two primary trajectories for new parties to gain influence in the subnational arena. The first involves sending their own people to the subnational level, while the second focuses on building alliances with existing subnational elites. The first strategy, however, can be problematic due to the lack of recognizability of new faces, making it difficult to appeal to voters across diverse municipalities and villages (Chapter 4). Moreover, this approach may be impractical to implement uniformly across all municipalities.

One of my respondents¹⁴⁴ highlighted the significance of *razpoznavаемost/разпознаваемост*, or recognizability, for new political parties attempting to establish themselves at the subnational level. They emphasized the importance of leveraging existing networks, as this recognizability is crucial for building immediate support. Without it, a new party would first need to focus on making its provincial party chairs known within the region, and only then rely on these chairs to develop party organizations. This process is both time-consuming and resource intensive. By appealing to and forming connections with existing provincial, municipal, and village elites, the recognizability of these elites can transfer directly to support for the new party. This

¹⁴³ Interview conducted on 31 March 2024, with GERB's office worker in Targovishte

¹⁴⁴ Interview conducted on 13 September 2021, capital city, NGO GERB founder Dushana Zdravkova

approach is far more immediate and effective than sending experts from the national level, who lack local recognition and influence.

GERB has actively pursued a strategy of appealing to subnational elites, a topic that will be explored further in Chapter 7 through an examination of its central-local relations. Whether or not a new party chooses to proactively recruit subnational elites is a strategic decision, and GERB has clearly taken an active approach. This activism can be traced back to GERB's participation in the 2007 local elections, which preceded its parliamentary breakthrough in 2009, as discussed in Chapter 4. GERB's strong performance in the 2007 local elections, winning key municipalities such as Plovdiv, Stara Zagora, and Burgas, laid the groundwork for its future success. Although GERB would go on to win even more municipalities in subsequent elections, the development in Burgas and Stara Zagora is often held up as a model of good governance and municipal development, especially in contrast to the challenges faced by many smaller, declining municipalities.

Delivery of Subnational Infrastructure

Delivery of subnational infrastructure is not always considered as a priority by representatives of new political parties. For example, in 2020, protests erupted in the capital city driven by a sense of social injustice, leading to the formation of new parties like *Izpravi se/Изправи се/Stand up*. These parties, born out of civil unrest, often focus on broader social and political issues rather than on infrastructure. Similarly, *Da, Bulgaria/Да, България/Yes, Bulgaria*, founded in 2017 by former Justice Minister Hristo Ivanov, centres its platform on judicial reform, digitalization, and the green economy. While these issues are undoubtedly important, the emphasis on infrastructure—a critical component of public service delivery and community well-being—may sometimes be overlooked by newer parties, particularly those born out of protest movements.

The director of the municipal enterprise responsible for cleaning services in Shumen¹⁴⁵ mentioned that while there were protests in the capital demanding judicial reforms and the resignation of General Prosecutor Ivan Geshev, citizens in the provinces do not typically mobilize around such national issues. This is largely because national-level judicial reforms do not directly impact the daily lives of people in provincial municipalities, where priorities tend to focus more on tangible concerns like infrastructure and subnational service delivery. While

¹⁴⁵ Interview conducted on 23 June 2022, provincial centre city Shumen, GERB, former youth organization activist Evgeni

I do not claim that people in the provinces lack a sense of justice comparable to those in the capital, I emphasize the varied developmental priorities between the capital city and the provinces, which creates a space for infrastructure delivery.

Community infrastructure affects every resident, whether in towns or villages, and serves a wide range of activities carried out in both indoor and outdoor spaces. It encompasses various types of infrastructure that are essential prerequisites for community life, including educational facilities, road networks, cultural centres, industrial parks, and public service infrastructure. These forms of infrastructure are vital for the functioning of communities. Unlike other issues that individuals might address through personal effort, infrastructure development is led by the government and financed through public taxation. Infrastructure directly impacts the daily lives of ordinary citizens.

The challenge of infrastructure delivery lies in its non-universality; it is essential to consider the particular needs of each locality. What works in one community may not be applicable or beneficial in another. Therefore, effective infrastructure development requires a nuanced understanding of local contexts, priorities, and challenges to ensure that the projects undertaken genuinely address the needs of the residents.

New party representatives, especially those based in the capital city and detached from the realities of Bulgarian municipalities, may not always grasp the nuances of varied subnational infrastructure needs. In the southern Bulgarian mountainous province of Kardjali, journalists from the Bulgarian National Radio¹⁴⁶ told me that they organized debates for MP candidates during the 2021 electoral campaign. During these debates, the candidate from ITN (There is Such a People), a new party led by a popular talk show host, stated that his development priority for Kardjali was to build a large cinema theatre. The local journalists expressed concern about this priority, recognizing that there were far more pressing issues in the province—such as the poor condition of roads in the villages—that needed to be addressed before considering the construction of a new cinema. This example highlights that the types of infrastructure needed for a capital city differ from those required in remote municipal towns. Infrastructure development promises that do not align with the specific needs of a locality may fail to resonate with voters.

¹⁴⁶ Interview conducted on 10 Aug 2022, provincial centre city Kardjali, local journalists

To address the everyday concerns of townspeople, a political party needs deliver more than judicial reforms or similar priorities. A down-to-earth focus on infrastructure development is crucial, especially given the widespread perception in Bulgarian society that much of the existing infrastructure dates back to the state socialist era. Three decades after the collapse of the socialist regime, the basic components of daily life—such as roads, public utilities, and community infrastructure—are increasingly in need of renovation. A new party that fails to adequately deliver expected economic goods and services, particularly those informed by the specific needs of localities, risks undermining its legitimacy and losing voter trust.

Therefore, it is not surprising that infrastructure projects delivered by Borissov's central government, such as the construction of the *Trakiya* Highway linking the capital city to the southern Black Sea port of Burgas, resonated strongly with GERB supporters. These tangible improvements were key factors in securing electoral support for the party. The secret to GERB's endurance lies in its geographically extensive delivery of economic goods and services, which are tailored to meet the diverse needs of localities throughout Bulgaria, rather than being limited to the capital city. While I do not claim that all GERB mayors have the same reputation for effective delivery, I seek to document the results observed during my fieldwork. These findings contribute to a broader understanding of GERB's delivery outcomes at subnational levels.

At subnational levels, it is crucial to provide public services to localities with larger populations, as these areas tend to have greater demands. For this reason, I will examine Bulgaria's second-largest city, Plovdiv, and Burgas, a prominent city on the Black Sea coast that is widely considered a model of GERB's good local governance. Both cities share similarities: they have relatively developed industrial parks that attract migrants from across Bulgaria, offering appealing employment opportunities. In the context of many smaller localities experiencing decreasing population, these cities stand out as hubs of activity. Given their size, commuting across the city takes time, leading to a faster pace of life. Therefore, in their free time, city residents need access to cultural and recreational public spaces, such as cultural centres and museums. This makes the development of cultural infrastructure a key topic when considering the future growth of these cities.

In Plovdiv, a GERB youth activist, Iosiv¹⁴⁷, shared with me some of the key achievements delivered under the GERB mayor from 2011 to 2019, particularly through the use of European

¹⁴⁷ Interview conducted on 8 July 2022, provincial centre city Plovdiv, GERB, member of National Executive

funds. One example is the construction of the Regional Archaeological Museum Plovdiv. Upon visiting the museum, I observed that its funding came from multiple sources, including the municipality of Plovdiv, the America for Bulgaria Foundation, and the metal production companies of KCM Holding in the province. The modern facilities not only preserve the city's rich archaeological heritage but also provide space for schoolchildren to learn about local history, reinforcing local identity.

This achievement, which would not have been possible without political cooperation from GERB's leaders, underscores the importance of political delivery in building municipal pride. While I do not claim that all museum visitors directly associate the museum's success with GERB, for individuals like Iosiv, these results demonstrate the value of political engagement and GERB's role in municipal development. In the face of post-2021 electoral turbulence and corruption accusations, GERB's political record at the subnational level helped the party endure. Unlike new political parties that collapse under similar accusations, GERB's track record in local delivery sustained its legitimacy and continued to appeal to newcomers.

Burgas stands out as a model city of good governance and growing prosperity under the leadership of its long-serving mayor, Dimitar Nikolov. Since the 2007 local elections, Nikolov, consistently nominated by GERB, has held office for nearly two decades—spanning almost five mandates. While it is not guaranteed that residents satisfied with the mayor will necessarily support the political party he represents, Burgas is widely considered by GERB's supporters as the flagship of the party's successful local governance, with a reputation surpassing that of Plovdiv.

Galya Zhelyazkova¹⁴⁸, one of the founders of GERB's Burgas organization in 2006, and an early youth activist within GERB who later became an MP from the Burgas constituency, emphasized that under GERB's long-term municipal governance, Burgas has experienced the development its residents long anticipated. This development is not limited to the expansion of the industrial park but also extends to the construction of key cultural and recreational infrastructure, such as the *Tsentar za savremenno izkustvo i biblioteka Burgas*//Centre for Contemporary Art and Library Burgas, funded by European resources.

Commission of GERB's youth organization, activist Iosiv

¹⁴⁸ Interview conducted on 5 July 2022, provincial centre city Burgas, GERB's youth organization former activist Galya

It is particularly fitting to construct large cultural recreational buildings in cities like Burgas and Plovdiv, where relatively large populations, by Bulgarian standards, necessitate such facilities. Burgas, situated on the Black Sea coast, has long harbored a desire for closer public access to the seaside. According to Zhelyazkova, this dream was realized under Nikolov's leadership when the municipality developed a public access zone near the Burgas port, complete with hotels, restaurants, and parks open to pedestrians and cyclists. By fulfilling his promise to open the city to the sea, Nikolov met a deeply rooted local aspiration.

For a political party to endure, it needs to demonstrate not only how its national leader fulfils promises to the country but also how its subnational leaders deliver on commitments to their municipalities. In Burgas, GERB's ability to address both national and subnational needs underscores the importance of integrating national and local appeals into the party's strategy for long-term sustainability.

Delivery of Social Care and Interpersonal Interactions

Infrastructure delivery creates a material basis for public spaces, where interpersonal interactions between party politicians and local residents foster a sense of respect and care. While these interactions may not yield direct material benefits, they provide spiritual support, enhancing familiarity and trust in party politicians. The delivery of infrastructure and social care is found to go hand in hand when examining public service delivery in Bulgaria.

As mentioned, while Plovdiv and Burgas have large populations, they are exceptions and do not represent the entire landscape of Bulgarian localities. This highlights the need to include non-regional centre localities—specifically those outside the top five most populated cities—in discussions of subnational service delivery. Additionally, the fact that both Plovdiv and Burgas are located in southern Bulgaria underscores the economic divide between the north and south, with the southern region currently viewed as more economically developed, despite the northern region's significant historical role in Bulgaria. To illustrate geographically varied perspectives, I will provide examples from northern Bulgaria, where residents who choose to remain often exhibit a strong desire for development and revitalization to reflect the region's historical significance.

Another notable characteristic of Bulgaria is its multi-ethnicity, comprising ethnic Bulgarians alongside minority groups such as ethnic Turks and Roma. For this discussion, I have selected Ruse province, primarily populated by ethnic Bulgarians, and Shumen province, where a significant population of ethnic Turks coexists with ethnic Bulgarians.

According to 2022 data from Bulgaria's National Statistical Institute (National Statistical Institute, 2022a), the total population of Bulgaria was 6,447,710. In Ruse province, which has a population of 189,623, the Ruse municipality accounted for 139,226 residents, while the remaining population is distributed across seven municipalities: Borovo, Byala, Vetovo, Dve Mogili, Ivanovo, Slivo Pole, and Tsenovo. Notably, the population is disproportionately concentrated in the Ruse municipality, particularly in the city of Ruse, which has a population of 123,134 (National Statistical Institute, 2022b).

Ruse

The city of Ruse, situated on the banks of the Danube River, is often referred to as *Malka Viena* (Малка Виена), or Small Vienna. GERB's Ruse office accountant, Vesi¹⁴⁹, proudly shared the city's historical significance during the *Bulgarsko Vuzrazhdane* (Bulgarian Revival) leading up to Bulgaria's independence from the Ottoman Empire, as well as in the years following independence in 1878. Vesi explained that Ruse, due to its strategic location along the Danube, historically served as a port that welcomed modern European culture, which then spread throughout Bulgaria. This historical significance is still evident today in the city's architectural style and the presence of the University of Ruse, which offers higher education opportunities for young people. Therefore, it is not surprising that political party youth organizations, including GERB's, have a strong presence in Ruse, even though the municipality has been governed by the Bulgarian Socialist Party since the 2019 local elections.

In stark contrast to the 'special' Ruse municipality, the 'normal' municipality of Slivo Pole deserves attention as an example to illustrate the remaining seven non-regional-centre small localities. Slivo Pole has a population of 8,297 (National Statistical Institute, 2022a), which includes several villages and an administrative center, Slivo Pole town, with a population of 2,362 (National Statistical Institute, 2022b). In this context, the Bulgarian administrative term *grad* might be better translated as 'town,' given Slivo Pole's small population. The limited size of Slivo Pole has implications for how party activism is conducted. The municipal chair¹⁵⁰ of the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) in Slivo Pole, who also serves as a deputy director at a school in Ruse, shared that he gathers activists from Slivo Pole once or twice a year, treating them to food and drinks. He noted that residents are often busy with agricultural work, leaving them little free time for political party involvement.

¹⁴⁹ Interview conducted on 4 April 2023, provincial centre town Ruse, GERB office accountant

¹⁵⁰ Interview conducted in 24 March 2022, municipal centre city Slivo pole, BSP's municipal chair

In addition, Slivo Pole is a quiet and green place to live. For local residents who prefer not to engage in agricultural work, commuting to the provincial center, Ruse, offers more employment opportunities, with a bus journey of less than an hour on regularly scheduled routes. Since the 2015 local elections, Slivo Pole has been governed by a GERB-nominated mayor¹⁵¹. The chair of the municipal council, also nominated by GERB, shared that the mayor has demonstrated care to schoolchildren and pensioners, contributing to a positive perception of both him and the GERB party among the townspeople.

In contrast to larger cities like Plovdiv and Burgas, which have big populations and a subsequently more anonymous society, the proximity between politicians and townspeople in a small town like Slivo Pole is quite close. As a result, the needs of the community differ; party politicians do not need to deliver massive cultural and recreational infrastructure. Instead, the endurance of political parties in such areas relies on providing social care for children and elderly individuals, which is often facilitated through interpersonal interactions.

Shumen

Similar to Ruse, Shumen province has a population of 149,628 (National Statistical Institute, 2022a) and is comprised of ten municipalities: Shumen, Veliki Preslav, Venets, Varbitsa, Kaolinovo, Kaspichan, Nikola Kozlevo, Novi Pazar, Smyadovo, and Hitрино. Among these, Veliki Preslav and Smyadovo are small towns governed by mayors nominated by GERB.

Both Veliki Preslav and Smyadovo are within one hour's bus ride from the provincial center, Shumen, and townspeople in both municipalities often commute to Shumen for employment. Once the capital of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom, Veliki Preslav is now a small municipality with a population of 10,169, while the town itself has a population of 5,821 (National Statistical Institute, 2022a). The municipal mayor¹⁵² shared that he aligned with GERB because the party's development priorities in infrastructure and education matched his vision for Veliki Preslav. He aspires for the town to evolve into a green and quiet place where residents would choose to stay and raise families. He also noted that townspeople are more concerned with incomes, prices, and education than with national-level judicial reforms. The small size of Veliki Preslav influences how both voters and politicians perceive development and service delivery.

¹⁵¹ Interview conducted in 24 March 2022, municipal centre city Slivo pole, GERB's municipal chair

¹⁵² Interview conducted on 9 Feb 2022, municipal centre city Veliki Preslav, GERB, municipal mayor Yanko Yordanov

In the municipality of Smyadovo, which has a total population of 5,359, the municipal centre town also named Smyadovo has a population of 3,383 (National Statistical Institute, 2022a). The municipal mayor¹⁵³ expressed her determination to develop the town, stating her intention to continue participating in local elections until all the streets in Smyadovo have been renovated. With a background in accounting, she is confident in her ability to manage the municipality's limited budget effectively. She also acknowledged criticism regarding the 'in-house procedure'—awarding public contracts to insider companies instead of through public procurement, which allows outsider companies to bid. While this practice has faced severe criticism at the national level due to its association with corruption, she argued that at the municipal level, it serves as a practical means to achieve results within budgetary constraints.

She provided an example of a streetlight installation project in Smyadovo, where a company from Varna deemed the public procurement offer of one and a half million *leva* (Bulgarian currency) insufficient, instead requesting three and a half million *leva*. Ultimately, the municipal government opted for the in-house procedure and completed the project for approximately eighty thousand *leva*.

Another example she provided was related to snow removal. She explained that if this service were contracted to an external company, the municipality would incur maintenance fees even during periods without snow. By utilizing municipal resources instead, they could significantly reduce costs. Thus, prioritizing road infrastructure delivery within the constraints of a limited budget is crucial for a small municipality like Smyadovo, and this should be a consideration for any political party aiming to deliver economic goods for long-term endurance.

In addition to delivering infrastructural goods, the provision of social care is also evident in Smyadovo. The municipal mayor spent time with Roma children during a school celebration, even sleeping over to help them feel cared for and respected. She mentioned that her phone is always open to residents; for instance, during Christmas, an elderly woman called her seeking assistance because she had no firewood to heat her home. The mayor promptly helped her obtain some wood. Unlike larger municipalities such as Plovdiv or Burgas, the relatively close relationships between a small-town mayor and residents are notably similar to those found in Smyadovo.

¹⁵³ Interview conducted on 8 February 2022, municipal centre town Smyadovo, GERB, Ivanka Petrova

The Shumen province also includes the municipality of Kaspichan, which encompasses the town of Pliska, once the capital of the First Bulgarian Kingdom. Now, Pliska is a quiet locality with a population of 775 (National Statistical Institute, 2022b). The town mayor¹⁵⁴ mentioned that she assists residents with daily needs, such as buying bread for elderly citizens during snowy weather when travel becomes difficult. The close relationship between politicians and residents, largely due to the town's small size, underscores the importance of mayors as representative faces for their political parties, helping to mobilize votes in general elections.

When the mayor of Pliska took me on a tour of the town's public spaces, including the pensioners' club, kindergarten, and *chitalishte/чумануше* (community cultural center), the townspeople showed her respect and warmly welcomed her. She expressed particular pride in the kindergarten, noting that it provided a comfortable environment for children to grow. The mayor described her relationships with the townspeople as complex; they would praise her for a job well done at times, while at other times, they openly criticized her when dissatisfied. She mentioned that her workday began the moment she left her house, as she walked through the town greeting residents with a "good morning." This kind of interpersonal relationship-building, discussed in Chapter 5, is crucial in shaping the political and social landscape of small localities. Such localized service delivery not only helps party activists maintain their loyalty but also secures electoral support from voters.

Conclusion

In summary, the chapter emphasizes that a combination of national and subnational appeals is key to party endurance, rather than relying solely on national-level strategies. To address the question of what has allowed GERB to endure, Chapters 4 and 5 examine two crucial factors. Chapter 4 focuses on the temporal dimension, emphasizing the role of pre-breakthrough organization-building in post-breakthrough survival. Chapter 5 concentrates on party organization, highlighting the interplay of formal structures and informal networks that keep party branches active and appealing to grassroots citizens. However, the dimension of party delivery has remained largely unexplored. This chapter highlights the significance of GERB's delivery of public services, particularly infrastructure and education, during its three mandates in central government (2009–2021). These achievements are seen as a source of pride by the party's youth activists, who have continued to support the party despite its national decline since 2021. When GERB faced unpopularity at the national level, its record of subnational

¹⁵⁴ Interview conducted on 22 June 2022 in a small town Pliska, with the town mayor Tonka

service delivery helped convince both existing members to remain loyal and voters to continue supporting it—two crucial elements of political party endurance.

This chapter highlights the role of public service delivery in explaining political party endurance, emphasizing the broader issue of inadequate public services that have fallen short of townspeople and villagers' development expectations. Over three decades after the collapse of state socialism in Bulgaria, much of the public infrastructure, especially in rural and geographically remote areas, remains from the socialist period and is in need of renovation. However, it is uncertain when these renovations will occur more widely, given the political instability created by the post-2021 accelerated electoral cycle and the rise of new parties. Local residents and elites have prioritized securing funds from the central government to improve streets and public infrastructure, but this has been hindered by the unpredictability of rapid changes in central government leadership since 2021. Moreover, the new parties emerging from this electoral cycle have primarily focused on judicial reforms at the national level, overlooking other pressing priorities at the subnational levels. Given their preference for social media-driven campaigning and organization, it is unlikely these new parties will quickly recognize the importance of these local issues. Even if they were to shift towards building physical party branches, it would take time to materialize, and they might struggle to maintain electoral trust without delivering sufficient services in the interim.

The contribution of the chapter to the existing literature are summarized as the following two points. Firstly, the current chapter contributes to party politics literature by proposing a combination of the national and subnational arenas with a particular focus on subnational service delivery, which can be a valuable addition to the aforementioned explanations for political party endurance (see Chapter 4 and Chapter 5). Secondly, through flagging up the role of problem-solving in motivating political party activists and voters, the current chapter encourages public service delivery to be given more attention in future party politics literature. Problem-solving is not always programmatic, but non-programmatic problem-solving, or clientelistic problem-solving, also exists, which will be discussed in the following chapter.

Chapter 7 Developing into a Fixture of Political Landscape – Role of Patronage and Clientelism

‘This retirement home building rehabilitation project required a long negotiation process between the municipal mayor and the central government, and citizens in the municipality had waited 15 years before the reconstruction could be realized in 2020.’¹⁵⁵

‘It is not okay that they [MPs] look for us only when there are elections.’¹⁵⁶

Introduction

Although clientelism is not ideal to democracy, this chapter focuses on how clientelism can be used as an approach to explain party endurance. In line with literature that considers clientelism as phenomenon at long-term horizon and local level, the clientelism-based approach, put forward by this thesis, complements the short-term and national dimension of clientelism. As discussed in Chapter 2, existing literature has not used clientelism to explain party endurance, and therefore the innovative perspective of this thesis is the use of clientelism to explain party endurance. Important themes that come up in the previous chapters, informal activism and subnational service delivery, are incorporated into the understanding of clientelism in this chapter to explain party endurance. The interview data collected from this long-term fieldwork provided support to the existence of clientelism as problem-solving and trust-building networks. Based on the interview data, this thesis therefore highlights informal activism and subnational service delivery in the understanding of clientelism, although acknowledges that existing accounts considering clientelism as coercion-based and pressure-based interactions between voters and party representatives are not without foundations. Admittedly, a clientelism-based route to party endurance is not ideal to democracy, compared to the route of making programmatic and ideological politics. However, the thesis through long-term fieldwork reveals how clientelism is practiced in everyday party politics life and how clientelism is important to political party endurance.

In studying the longevity of a political party, it is essential that subnational organizations, which shape the party’s image, secure timely funding for subnational problem solving, as discussed in the previous chapter. One key method for obtaining this funding is through developing informal connections between subnational organizations and national elites in central government or parliament, potentially across various political parties. However, in the context

¹⁵⁵ Interview conducted on 4 Feb 2022, provincial centre town Shumen, PR of the municipal government led by GERB

¹⁵⁶ Youth organization member, GERB, provincial centre city Pleven, 4 Aug 2022

of multi-party competition and polarization, interactions between subnational organizations and national elites within the same party are less likely to attract criticism. While I do not assert that the absence of informal connections between national and subnational structures entirely undermines subnational service delivery, I propose that this absence may lead to localities facing prolonged waits for funding from the central government. The downside of such delays is that subnational voters' trust in politicians and parties is likely to diminish, potentially jeopardizing ongoing support for the party in parliamentary elections.

Informal central-local connections, need to be considered within studies on patronage resource distribution, such as funding and jobs from national to subnational structures (Munoz and Dargent, 2016). In a political system still largely defined by centralized power, subnational public services cannot rely on the limited tax revenues retained by local governments; instead, they depend on national tax reallocations. Consequently, the relationship between the national and subnational political arenas plays a critical role in shaping subnational service delivery. Given the financial constraints faced by subnational governments, effective coordination between central and local authorities—coupled with the strategic distribution of patronage resources (Munoz and Dargent, 2016)—becomes crucial for delivering public services at the subnational levels.

The effective interaction between central and local governments extends beyond official meetings and formal written communications. It also encompasses face-to-face interactions between central and local elites in informal settings, which facilitate patronage resource distribution for subnational problem solving. Informal central-local relations, as highlighted in anthropological studies of villages and towns in Central and Eastern Europe (e.g., Kaneff, 2004), play a key role in managing local issues. In the context of a centralized political system, this informal connection between the centre and the locality is present not only within governmental structures but also within political party frameworks. These dynamics offer valuable insights into party endurance, particularly by highlighting how informal interactions between national and subnational structures, characterized by the distribution of patronage resources, shape party survival.

Patronage resource distribution, as discussed in Chapter 2, is underestimated by existing political research on Central and Eastern Europe as a powerful tool for party endurance (see e.g., Kopecky and Spirova, 2011). This chapter examines party endurance in Central and Eastern Europe through the lens of findings from Latin American politics, which suggest that

party survival is a result of building and maintaining subnational linkages based on the distribution of patronage resources, such as funding and jobs (Munoz and Dargent, 2016). An important aspect missing from Munoz and Dargent's (2016) account of patronage resource distribution is their lack of emphasis on subnational problem-solving as a key factor in explaining party endurance. This chapter extends their argument by highlighting the critical role of patronage resource distribution in addressing subnational issues, which ultimately contributes to political party endurance.

While patronage resource distribution from national to subnational structures is important, it is often insufficient to address all subnational issues. An alternative financial source for problem-solving lies in party networks with subnational businesses. Existing literature on party politics highlights the critical role of party finance (Hopkin, 2004; Fisher and Eisenstadt, 2004) and reflects the contentious nature of this funding (Mietzner, 2007; Mwangi, 2008). It has been argued that 'political parties with minimal organizations reduced the spectrum of clientelistic exchanges to vote-buying and engaged in cooperation with external actors to secure the necessary resources' (Gherghina and Volintiru, 2017: 22). This perspective, while valuable for clientelism studies, focuses primarily on electoral campaigns and parties with limited organizational structures, neglecting the role of subnational service delivery where extensive party organizations are engaged in long-term community support.

The question of where the money comes from to provide subnational services is critical. It is difficult for the state to fund all projects in every locality simultaneously or in a timely manner. A significant issue with programmatic problem-solving reliant on official financing is the long waiting times, which often leave many projects stuck at the conceptual stage, awaiting state treasury funding. This challenge is compounded by crises or emergencies that require more immediate assistance. In contrast, clientelistic problem-solving based on unofficial financing—typically sourced from locally donated money rather than state subsidies—addresses this shortcoming and becomes a daily survival strategy. Such clientelistic delivery, relying on informal funding, usually occurs in subnational arenas, which compensates the role of the official state.

Thus, the theme of subnational clientelistic problem-solving highlights the relative weakness of state capacity, necessitating that the subnational arena relies on its own informal financing for a significant portion of public service provision and crisis response, often through socially responsible business networks in towns or villages. This underscores the need for political

scientists to pay attention to the dynamics of the subnational arena, as its significance directly impacts political outcomes in the national arena, including the question of who holds power—an aspect that cannot be ignored in discussions of party endurance.

As discussed in Chapter 2, existing research on clientelism in Central and Eastern Europe tends to downplay the role of problem-solving in clientelistic practices (see e.g., Gherghina and Volintiru, 2017; Mares et al., 2017). This chapter, therefore, examines Central and Eastern European politics by incorporating insights from Latin American politics, where clientelism is understood as a problem-solving network (Szwarcberg, 2012).

The existence of clientelistic networks is important, even in cases where problem-solving does not always occur. This is because the interpersonal and long-term nature of these networks fosters trust, which becomes a crucial source of electoral support. Thus, the functionality of clientelistic networks extends beyond problem-solving (Szwarcberg, 2012) to include trust-building (Torsello, 2012; Berenschot, 2015; Hierman, 2010).

The chapter proceeds as follows. First, I will review the role of patronage resource distribution in party endurance, emphasizing the interplay between the formal structure of the political system and informal central-local connections. I will argue that while the formal structure is crucial for distributing resources to address subnational problems, it suffers from long waiting times—a challenge that informal central-local connections help to overcome. Therefore, I suggest that it is the combination of formal and informal relations between national and subnational structures that facilitates subnational problem-solving and consistently sustains votes.

Next, I will highlight the significance of clientelistic problem-solving in party endurance alongside programmatic problem-solving. I will also demonstrate the limitations of programmatic problem-solving in the context of weak state capacity and local government funding crises. Consequently, I will illustrate that clientelistic problem-solving is not merely complementary but also innovative and essential for the everyday survival of grassroots communities. Finally, I will reveal that, in addition to problem-solving, clientelistic networks sustained through regular activism foster long-term interpersonal trust, which is another crucial source of electoral support.

From Formal Political Structure to Informal Central-Local Relationships: the Role of Patronage Resource Distribution in Party Delivery

As a source of political party endurance, party delivery in the subnational arena is financially dependent on the central government. Consequently, central-local connections significantly influence the amount of state funding localities can obtain within the context of Bulgaria's political system. To assess the importance of patronage resource distribution from national to subnational structures—an informal aspect of central-local relations—it is essential to clarify the formal relations and demonstrate how a purely formal political structure is insufficient to fund subnational service delivery.

Formal Political Structure

To contextualize the main point of this section, I will discuss the structure of Bulgaria's political system, where party politics are embedded. According to the Law on the Administrative-territorial Structure of the Republic of Bulgaria (*Zakon za administrativno-teritorialno ustroystvo na Republika Bulgaria*), the country consists of 28 provinces (*oblasti*) composed of municipalities (*obshchini*), with the constituent administrative units in municipalities being townships (*kmetstva*) or villages, and districts (*rayonite*) (Chl. 2./Art. 2.; Chl. 6./Art. 6.). The creation of districts in large cities requires a population of over 25,000 in one district (Art. 12), indicating that the three Bulgarian cities divided into districts—Sofia, Plovdiv, and Varna—have populations above this threshold. Consequently, party organizations are also structured at the district level in these larger cities.

In contrast, *kmetstva*, or townships, are localities with populations of more than 100 (Art. 14). Given their small size, it is often unrealistic for new parties to systematically establish branches at the *kmetstvo* level, although some active townships do have party organizations. To establish new municipalities, a total population of over 6,000 and a maximum road distance of 40 km from the municipality centre are required (Art. 8). This suggests that geographical distances within municipalities are not significant, allowing a party branch at the municipal level to potentially serve the entire municipality. Therefore, the municipal level is critical for understanding the Bulgarian political and party systems.

The importance of municipalities is further reinforced by Bulgaria's constitution, which states that the municipality is the basic administrative-territorial unit for local self-governance (Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria, Art. 136). At this level, both the municipal mayor (executive power) and municipal councillors (legislative power) are directly elected by citizens

in local elections held every four years. Their source of legitimacy differs from that of provincial politicians, such as the *oblasten upravitel* (provincial governor), who is appointed by the central government.

Thus, power is concentrated at the municipal level, while the provincial government of the 28 provinces primarily serves a coordinating and supervisory role over the 265 municipalities, acting as a bridge between the central government and municipal administrations. Although *kmetove* (mayors of *kmetstva*) are also directly elected and play a key role in grassroots problem-solving, they rely on municipal budgets. There are over 5,000 *kmetstva* in Bulgaria. Municipal mayors and councillors decide the distribution of budgets to *kmetstva*.

While the municipal level holds significant financial power within the subnational arena, large infrastructure projects still depend on central government funding, highlighting the crucial role of central-local connections in the development of municipalities.

Informal Central-Local Relationships and Subnational Branch Maintenance

The decision making for patronage resource distribution tends to take place through informal central-local connections. The connections between the central government or party headquarters and local governments or party branches are characterized by informality, meaning interactions occur in casual settings. The former provincial chair of GERB's youth organization and the current head of the municipal enterprise *Chistota/Чистота* (Cleanliness)¹⁵⁷ provided an example of this informal mechanism. When municipal politicians seek funding from the central government for specific projects, the actual decision-making by national political leaders often takes place in informal settings, such as during fishing trips together.

These informal central-local connections significantly shape Bulgarian politics. Indeed, they are crucial for subnational service delivery and for the endurance of political parties. Without strong central-local connections, a political party risks failing to deliver on promises at the subnational levels, which can weaken local organizations and reduce their appeal. This decline is detrimental to the overall endurance of the political party.

Beneficial for political party endurance, the informal central-local connections that facilitate patronage resource distribution—essential for maintaining GERB's subnational branches and ensuring service delivery—rely on the activism of national leadership. It is concerning when

¹⁵⁷ Interview conducted on 23 June 2022, provincial centre city, GERB, former youth organization activist

national political leadership loses regular face-to-face connections with extensive party branches. For instance, the chair of the NDSV youth organization¹⁵⁸ reported that during preparations for its second parliamentary election, he found some branches had closed due to unpaid rent, despite still being listed on paper. This was corroborated by another interview with NDSV's MP¹⁵⁹ in Burgas, who shared that during his inspections of the party's branches across Bulgaria, some provincial coordinators were unable to gather even four or five activists for meetings with national political elites, despite a registered membership base.

Maintaining party branches is a prerequisite for effective service delivery at the subnational level. It is essential to recognize that a party's subnational service delivery can only occur if its branches are well-maintained. This is crucial because when political party branches are employed as tools for development and prosperity, the effectiveness of those tools depends on their upkeep.

GERB's MP, Galya Zhelyazkova¹⁶⁰, noted that after Borissov became prime minister in 2009, he lacked the time to regularly inspect and support GERB's party organizations across the provinces. As a result, Borissov's right-hand man, Tsvetanov, was highly active in visiting and nurturing these party organizations throughout Bulgaria. According to GERB's municipal mayor in Smyadovo¹⁶¹, this care from national party leadership has been sorely missed since Tsvetanov left GERB in 2020. Similarly, the municipal mayor in Stara Zagora¹⁶² acknowledged Tsvetanov's critical role in maintaining extensive party branches, describing him as a relatable figure who, despite being the chair of the national parliament, carried the authority of national-level political leadership. Tsvetanov's words held weight and were influential in resolving internal conflicts within party branches, as both sides respected him and listened to his advice.

When national political leadership spends most of time in the capital city, established provincial party organizations can fall into a negative trend due to a lack of maintenance efforts from national party leaders. This underscores the importance of informal central-local connections and patronage resource distribution in maintaining extensive party branches, allowing provincial organizations to be salvaged before deterioration occurs.

¹⁵⁸ Interview conducted on 2 June 2022, capital city, chair of NDSV's youth organization Borislav Vardev

¹⁵⁹ Interview conducted on 5 July 2022, NDSV's MP in Burgas

¹⁶⁰ Interview conducted on 5 July 2022, provincial centre city Burgas, GERB's youth organization former activist Galya

¹⁶¹ Interview conducted on 8 February 2022, municipal centre town Smyadovo, GERB, Ivanka Petrova

¹⁶² Interview with a municipal mayor Zhivko Todorov, GERB, provincial centre city Stara Zagora, 29 July 2022

For instance, GERB's provincial chair of the youth organization in Pleven shared that the current provincial coordinator was performing well, unlike the previous one who had not fulfilled his duties properly. The respondent leveraged his networks in Sofia to arrange an in-person meeting with Borissov. When he informed Borissov about the misconduct of the former provincial coordinator, Borissov was shocked and unaware of the situation. As a result, he removed the problematic coordinator and appointed a new one, allowing the party branch in Pleven to function normally again.

This example illustrates how timely intervention by national leadership is crucial for the maintenance and survival of party branches, especially when issues arise that the branch cannot resolve on its own. Given the close familiarity of party branches with mobilizing provincial voters, maintaining these branches significantly enhances a political party's chances of enduring at the national level.

Informal Central-Local Relationships and Subnational Problem Solving

Delivering solutions to subnational problems in the subnational arena is a challenging task for new political parties. After achieving a parliamentary breakthrough, these parties have elected members of parliament (MPs) who are theoretically obligated to address issues within their constituencies. However, the degree of commitment an MP has to community problem-solving often depends on how they were nominated: either assigned by national leadership (top-down) or nominated by the constituency's party organization (bottom-up). The latter indicates a long-term familiarity with the constituency, increasing the likelihood of accountability for problem-solving.

The NDSV's provincial coordinator in Dobrich¹⁶³ pointed out that '*nyama nuzhda ot partiya ot dolu/няма нужда от партия от долу*' (there was no need for the party below) when explained why MPs focused more on the top party leadership than on grassroots organizations. Since they were appointed by party leadership, MPs perceived their legitimacy as deriving from the national arena rather than from subnational party organizations. As a result, they lacked strategies to form informal connections with provincial organizations. Thus, the trajectory of MP nominations significantly affects their subsequent ability—or inability—to deliver solutions through informal central-local connections and patronage resource distribution.

¹⁶³ Interview conducted on 28 July 2022, provincial centre town Dobrich, GERB, office worker Ginka

However, this bottom-up approach is often unrealistic for many new parties that lack established party organizations in their constituencies by the time they achieve parliamentary success. For instance, my respondent explained that when local residents sought help from the party's provincial organization, it was beyond their capacity and required support from the MPs' networks in Sofia. My respondent lamented that there was '*nyama normalna vrazka/няма нормална връзка*' (no normal connection) between the provincial organization and the party's MPs representing the province. This lack of connection can be empirically understood as MPs ignoring the needs of provincial party organizations. Consequently, the MPs' failure to engage in community problem-solving disappointed initial party voters, negatively impacting both party growth and voter loyalty.

Theoretically, 'no normal connection' signifies the existence of formal ties (de jure representation) but a lack of informal connections (de facto engagement with local issues). This discrepancy between formal and informal connections contributes to the party's inability to deliver community solutions. It is crucial to explore how to build informal central-local connections. My respondent emphasized the temporal aspect, noting that the lack of familiarity between MPs and provincial organizations ('*ne se poznavat ot преди/не се познават от преди*' – have not known each other since before) hindered the development of these connections, which ideally should start from the pre-breakthrough stage (see Chapter 4).

Role of National Party Leadership in Informal Central-Local Relationships for Subnational Problem Solving

In terms of delivering subnational services, GERB's national leadership actively built informal connections with party branches and local government officials. The chair of the municipal council in Slivo Pole¹⁶⁴ shared that he knew Tsvetanov from their time in the barracks. When GERB was established in Sofia in 2009, Tsvetanov approached him and asked if he would help establish GERB's organization in Slivo Pole. Tsvetanov continued to visit the locality regularly, checking if they needed any assistance.

For instance, when the town's school was not allocated a school bus—due to the central government's slow process—he contacted Tsvetanov for help. Tsvetanov then reached out to the Ministry of Education to arrange for school buses, ensuring that children in Slivo Pole did not have to wait. This example highlights the importance of informal connections over time,

¹⁶⁴ Interview conducted in 24 March 2022, municipal centre city Slivo pole, GERB's municipal chair

contrasting with the earlier NDSV example. In that case, party MPs did not know the local party branches before the parliamentary breakthrough and were therefore less motivated to address local issues. In contrast, GERB's national politicians had personal ties to local elites even before the party was formed, which resulted in their genuine commitment to solving problems for the municipality.

The comparison between GERB and NDSV underscores the necessity of long-term informal central-local connections for effective subnational service delivery. Tsvetanov's activism earned him a reputation across Bulgaria for problem-solving. For example, youth organization activists in the provincial centre of Smolyan¹⁶⁵ mentioned that Tsvetanov played a crucial role in securing funding for the long-anticipated construction of a swimming pool in the town. Smolyan, located in the mountainous *Rodopi/Podonu* (Rhodope) region, is known for its beautiful scenery but also requires significant infrastructure development. Patronage resource distribution through the informal central-local connections fostered by the activism of Tsvetanov have contributed to the development of many towns in Bulgaria, including Smolyan.

In the broader context of Bulgaria, resources have historically been concentrated in municipal center cities since the fall of state socialism (Kaneff, 2004). This focus has led to increasing depopulation in Bulgarian villages, a trend that village mayors often lack the capacity to change. For instance, the village mayor¹⁶⁶ of *Царево Брод/Tsarev Brod*, nominated by the BSP, explained that he needed to seek funds from the municipal government even to purchase something as simple as a pen. This financial constraint severely limited the ability of village mayors to independently develop their communities. While village development should be the responsibility of municipal councillors and mayors, my respondent noted that municipal politicians typically prioritize the development of towns with larger populations, as this strategy is likely to yield more votes.

This electoral-gains-driven policymaking is detrimental to villages. Residents in Tsarev Brod expressed their disappointment, recounting how young people once believed in campaign promises to build a football playground. They enjoyed their green, quiet, and peaceful village but needed space to exercise. Unfortunately, this promise has not yet been fulfilled, leading to a loss of trust in politicians and decreased motivation to vote in parliamentary elections.

¹⁶⁵ Interview conducted on 11 July 2022, provincial centre city Smolyan, GERB, member of National Executive Commission of GERB's youth organization, activist Ivan

¹⁶⁶ Interview conducted on 2 April 2023, with Stefan Zhivkov, the village mayor of Tsarev brod

Patronage resource distribution helps overcome the overconcentration of state resources in urban areas, thereby facilitating subnational service delivery in rural regions.

The record of infrastructure delivery through Tsvetanov's activism was highlighted by the office administrator¹⁶⁷ of GERB's branch in the northern Bulgarian province of Dobrich, an area located in the Danube Plain, where the local economy relies heavily on agriculture and also requires significant infrastructure development. One notable achievement was the construction of a wedding hall in the village of *Зърнево/Zarnevo* with the effort of Tsvetanov. Thanks to Tsvetanov's activism and funding secured from the Borissov government, the cultural infrastructure of a wedding hall was successfully delivered in 2022.¹⁶⁸ This example further illustrates the role of patronage resource distribution in delivering subnational infrastructure services.

Similar to the village of *Zarnevo*, the village of *Драгуново/Draginovo* also illustrates GERB's infrastructure delivery across small localities in Bulgaria, a point of pride for the party's youth organization activists. One activist in Plovdiv¹⁶⁹ shared that the first *Natsionalnia izpalnitelen savet/Националния изпълнителен съвет* (National Executive Council) meeting of GERB's youth organization was held in the village of *Draginovo*. Since then, with the construction of a kindergarten and school, *Draginovo* has rapidly transformed its image. It is therefore not surprising that GERB secured higher vote shares in both *Zarnevo* and *Draginovo* compared to the national average, as illustrated in Figure 7.1.

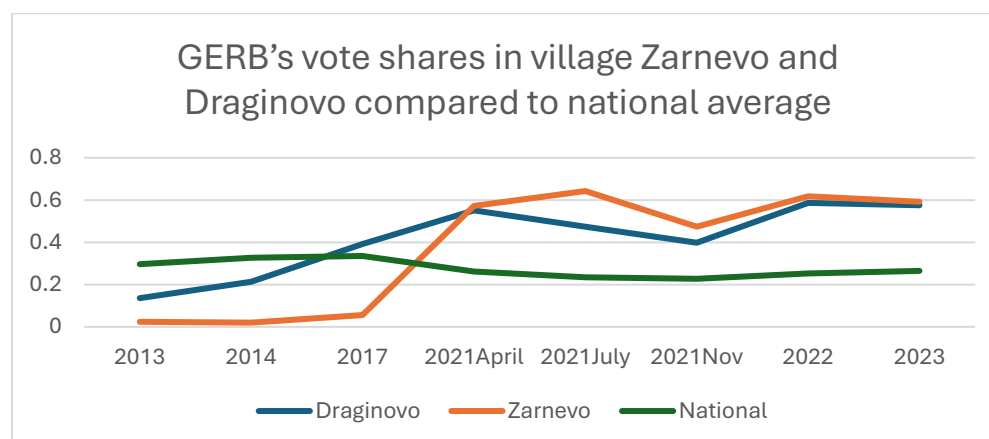
The significant increase in vote share in *Zarnevo* from 2017 to April 2021 can be attributed to Tsvetanov's intervention to negotiate funding from the central government, known as patronage resource distribution (Munoz and Dargent, 2016). In contrast, GERB's national-level involvement in *Draginovo* occurred much earlier, leading to a steadier increase in votes from 2017 to 2021. It is important to note that during this same period, there was a decline in vote share at the national level. This situation underscores how villages, as part of the subnational arena, contributed to GERB's endurance amidst national downturns. Thus, analyzing party endurance requires consideration of both national and subnational dynamics, particularly in relation to infrastructure delivery.

¹⁶⁷ Interview conducted on 28 July 2022, provincial centre town Dobrich, GERB, office worker Ginka

¹⁶⁸ Interview conducted on 28 July 2022, provincial centre town Dobrich, GERB, office worker Ginka

¹⁶⁹ Interview conducted on 8 July 2022, provincial centre city Plovdiv, GERB's youth organization activist Iosiv

Figure 7.1: GERB's vote shares in village Zarnevo and Draginovo compared to national average, source: Central Election Commission



Role of Subnational Elites in Informal Central-Local Relationships for Subnational Problem Solving

In addition to the activism of national-level politicians, informal central-local connections in GERB's party delivery are also developed through the efforts of subnational elites. The Public Relations specialist¹⁷⁰ of the municipal government in Shumen shared that the municipal mayor, Lyubomir Hristov (GERB's provincial coordinator since 2014 and mayor from 2015 to 2023), had a clear vision for the town's development, focusing on creating an industrial park. A former NDSV provincial coordinator¹⁷¹, who previously served as an elected municipal councillor, noted that she had worked on the groundwork for this industrial park during NDSV's active period.

Continuing the policies of NDSV, the GERB mayor frequently travelled to Sofia to engage with the Ministry of the Economy to attract more investors. His efforts paid off significantly: by 2022, the number of investors had increased to 25, up from just 5 in 2007, including 7 class A investors, each valued over ten million Euros. This industrial park created around 1,100 jobs.

In addition to the industrial park, the mayor collaborated with Borissov to secure funding for renovating a long-awaited retirement home, which opened in 2020 after extensive reconstruction. The project, costing 2 million Euros, could not have been financed by the

¹⁷⁰ Interview conducted on 4 Feb 2022, provincial centre town Shumen, municipal government Public Relation specialist

¹⁷¹ Interview conducted on 5 Feb 2022, provincial centre town Shumen, the former provincial coordinator of NDSV Daniela Ruseva

limited municipal budget alone and required 15 years of negotiations with the central government. The new retirement home accommodates around 110 elderly citizens.

Furthermore, in terms of sports infrastructure, the mayor worked with the Ministry of Sports to transform a former military base into the Arena Shumen Sport Complex, securing central government funding for the project. His long-term vision includes building business facilities and hotels around the complex, portraying a picture of economic prosperity that citizens aspire to. Thus, the delivery of services at the subnational level is a result of collaboration between national politicians and their counterparts at provincial, municipal, town, and village levels.

The Role of Unofficial Funding in Party Delivery and Clientelistic Problem Solving Networks

As mentioned in the previous section, informal central-local connections play a key role in securing government funds, which are essential for addressing local problems and delivering services in various regions. However, in Bulgaria, government funding alone often falls short of meeting the development needs of smaller localities. This is why subnational party branches need to develop clientelistic problem-solving networks to delivery subnational services.

For instance, in the small town of Pliska, the mayor¹⁷² explained that bus services to the nearby municipal centre, Kaspichan, were suspended during the COVID-19 outbreak and have not been restored by private companies. This is because Pliska's small population makes it unprofitable for private companies to run the service. The limited municipal budget also could not subsidize the bus routes to all towns and villages in the area.

During the socialist era, buses ran to every village in Bulgaria. However, following the regime change and in the current global neoliberal context, providing public transportation to smaller, unprofitable areas has become increasingly uncertain. While it may not make sense from a profit perspective, there are important social considerations. For example, many elderly residents, who often choose to remain in their hometowns or villages, cannot afford private cars or taxis to travel to nearby towns for essentials like medication, especially on their limited pensions. Although new party activists, especially those accustomed to living in larger cities or abroad, might suggest modern solutions like Uber, such technology is not viable in these deserted localities.

¹⁷² Interview conducted on 22 June 2022 in a small town Pliska, with the town mayor Tonka

Pliska, despite once being the capital of the First Bulgarian Kingdom in the 7th century, has struggled with transportation issues since the fall of state socialism in 1991. It represents many Bulgarian villages and small towns where public transportation services remain inadequate, even with government fund distribution.

The unresolved transportation issue has created opportunities for various sectors of society, including political party organizations, to step in and offer solutions. For example, the provincial chair of DPS's youth organization in Varna province¹⁷³ used the party's connections with local businesses to provide transportation services from a village to the city of Varna. This highlights how, in Bulgarian politics, unofficial funding sources from the private sector (clientelistic party delivery) play a key role in everyday survival strategies. This approach is vital for the endurance of both new and established political parties. Often, non-programmatic delivery becomes crucial when formal procedures for programmatic solutions haven't been fully established.

For instance, in a previous example of GERB's donation to renovate a church in Shumen, a party branch administrator¹⁷⁴ mentioned that government funding for church renovations in Bulgaria is still underdeveloped. It is worth noting that it is not always the national party headquarters providing funds for subnational services—politicians, particularly MPs who are expected to stay connected to their constituencies, also play a significant role in delivering these services, as discussed in the following sections.

As important as official funding is, unofficial funding—derived from three sources: donations from party MPs' salaries, contributions from party municipal councillors' salaries, and support from local businesses—plays a crucial role in the delivery of subnational services such as transportation and socio-cultural programs. This unofficial funding, which can be understood as a key aspect of non-programmatic (clientelistic) delivery, fosters satisfaction among townspeople, villagers, and municipal residents with both politics in general and the specific political party associated with the delivery actors - the party politicians. By combining official and unofficial funding, political parties can enhance their service delivery records, thereby increasing their chances of enduring in the political landscape.

MPs and Their Role in Unofficial Funding Strategies

¹⁷³ Interview conducted on 10 March 2022, with DPS's youth organization representative in Varna

¹⁷⁴ Interview conducted on 18 June 2022, with GERB's provincial branch worker Sasi

In Bulgarian politics, MPs often use both their professional and personal resources to support their constituents. Hristina Hristova, a former NDSV MP from Vratsa¹⁷⁵, explained that MPs are viewed as authoritative figures, and their words carry more weight than those of ordinary citizens. They also have connections to institutions in Sofia, which can help them solve local problems. For example, Hristova mentioned that she assisted unemployed individuals in her constituency by calling the Ministry of Social Affairs to help them access state benefits. While government programs create an institutional framework for eligible individuals, the actual delivery of social benefits often requires additional non-programmatic support—specifically, the personal influence and networks of MPs.

Hristova also shared that, as an MP, she personally visited the Roma neighbourhood in Vratsa, an economically disadvantaged ethnic minority group. She used her own income to provide food during these visits, which made the Roma community feel respected and cared for. They were so grateful that some even expressed a willingness to kiss her feet. This illustrates a tradition in Bulgarian politics where MPs are expected to leverage all available resources—both official and unofficial—to assist their constituents.

Galya Zhelyazkova¹⁷⁶, a GERB MP from Burgas, shared that she used her own salary to buy construction materials for villagers to build a football playground. She had promised this to the village long ago, but securing funds from the central government proved difficult, especially after the Borisov-led government stepped down following the April 2021 elections. During this period of political uncertainty, the chances of obtaining official funding were slim, making Zhelyazkova's personal contribution a form of non-programmatic delivery.

Additionally, when Zhelyazkova visited a local pensioners' club, she learned that the elderly members wanted traditional costumes for their singing and dancing practices but could not afford them on their limited pensions. In response, she used her salary to purchase these costumes. While traditional costumes were not part of any official programmatic delivery, they played an important role in the hobbies and leisure activities of this socially vulnerable group in Bulgaria.

¹⁷⁵ Interview conducted on 23 May 2022, capital city, NDSV, previous party official Hristina Hristova

¹⁷⁶ Interview conducted on 5 July 2022, provincial centre city Burgas, GERB's youth organization former activist Galya

Zhelyazkova's non-programmatic contributions, which included both significant sports infrastructure and smaller recreational items, helped build GERB's political reputation for fulfilling promises to the community.

Municipal councillors and Their Role in Unofficial Funding Strategies

Given that MPs split their time between the capital city and their constituencies, it can be physically demanding for them to address the needs of all municipalities within their province. In contrast, party municipal councillors have a more stable presence in their specific municipalities. In Bulgaria, being a municipal councillor is typically a part-time job, so many councillors hold additional employment to support themselves.

As a result, party-nominated municipal mayors and councillors often informally contribute part of their salaries to support their party branches and delivery efforts. This practice is common in well-functioning GERB branches, even though it is not formally mandated. For instance, I learned from GERB's Targovishte branch that professional staff, such as accountants and public relations specialists, are paid monthly by the party headquarters. However, the maintenance of the branch—including rent, utilities, and office supplies—often relies on donations from GERB's municipal councillors and mayors.

The contributions of party-nominated municipal politicians are crucial for the sustainability of GERB's branches and their overall effectiveness in delivering services.

According to the administrator¹⁷⁷ of GERB's Shumen branch, the salaries of municipal councillors are used to establish a charitable organization called GERSH (*Grazhdani za evropeisko razvitie na Shumen*/Citizens for the European Development of Shumen). This organization supports socially vulnerable individuals and enhances public spaces in the municipality. GERSH exemplifies how GERB has localized its appeal, adding strong elements that resonate specifically with the Shumen community while also maintaining a broader national appeal.

Both national and subnational appeals are essential for the endurance of a political party. According to my respondent, GERSH has provided scholarships for students unable to afford tuition at Shumen University. Additionally, financial assistance was given to a woman who faced delays in accessing public healthcare, enabling her to afford medication before she could

¹⁷⁷ Interview conducted on 4 February 2022, provincial centre town Shumen, GERB, office administrator

receive formal health services. GERSh has also donated TVs and washing machines to local social care institutions, including hospitals, orphanages, and homes for people with disabilities.

As a non-governmental initiative, GERSh represents a charitable fund that consistently delivers essential services at the local level. This demonstrates how non-programmatic delivery can effectively address gaps in programmatic services, particularly when immediate support is needed.

Unofficial Funding Sources: Engaging with the Private Sector

The final unofficial funding source for public service delivery comes from the private sector. I use the village of *Дибич/Dibich* in Shumen municipality as an example to illustrate villages across Bulgaria. The village mayor¹⁷⁸ shared that the municipal budget did not allocate sufficient funds for the village's biggest cultural event: the annual festival. Recognizing the festival's significance to the community, he sought sponsorship from a socially responsible businessman who owned a large alumina factory in the nearby industrial park.

With this non-programmatic funding, the mayor was able to set up a large outdoor stage and invite a professional folklore singing and dancing group in traditional costumes to perform for the villagers. He also arranged catering services, ensuring that all attendees enjoyed beer and *kebabche* (small kebabs) served with *lyutenitsa* (a traditional Bulgarian vegetable sauce). This annual celebration brought immense joy to the villagers, enhancing their satisfaction with the mayor, local politics, and democracy as a whole.

Since the village mayor is nominated by GERB, the respect garnered for him can translate into electoral support for the party. Similar funding mechanism was also observed in the nearby small town of Pliska. The mayor of Pliska¹⁷⁹ recounted a comparable story: the municipal funds were inadequate to organize the annual town festival, so she reached out to local agricultural businessmen for financial assistance. These businessmen, being residents themselves, understood the festival's importance to the town's identity and the happiness of its people, and they agreed to support the mayor financially to ensure a successful celebration. Thus, the reliance on local business funding for cultural service delivery further matters to obtain trust from voters for party endurance Bulgaria.

¹⁷⁸ Interview conducted on 21 June 2022, village Dibich, GERB, village mayor Yolian

¹⁷⁹ Interview conducted on 22 June 2022 in a small town Pliska, with the town mayor Tonka

Clientelistic Trust Networks

When I asked the provincial chair of the youth organization of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS) what makes voters support them, the answer was *doverie/dovepue*—trust¹⁸⁰. This trust can be seen in how a group of young people from the party socialize together—doing homework, playing cards, and so on. Of course, problem-solving further strengthens these bonds. Even without solving specific problems, just spending time together builds long-term trust between the party and the young people in its youth organization.

This example from DPS reflects a broader mechanism in Bulgarian party politics, one that is also present in GERB. Like DPS, GERB's organizations regularly engage in activism that involves a wide range of citizens. Over time, this makes GERB's presence in communities feel natural and helps build long-term trust with grassroots residents, forming what can be described as clientelistic trust networks (Torsello, 2012; Berenschot, 2015; Hierman, 2010).

I argue that this activism, which extends beyond social media, provides opportunities for repeated face-to-face interactions over time. These interactions build interpersonal trust between voters and party members, which in turn enhances institutional trust—the kind of trust that comes from reading a party's platform and ideology. This combination of personal and institutional trust helps maintain long-term electoral support for the party.

In addition to problem-solving, another key function of clientelistic networks is trust-building. As discussed in Chapter 5, party organizations actively generate and maintain engagement with citizens, which helps earn their trust and electoral support. This approach contrasts with the one-time transaction of vote-buying noted in some clientelism literature (see, e.g., Mares et al., 2017; Gherghina and Volintiru, 2017).

Studies on Extended Party Networks (EPN) often overlook the crucial element of trust, as discussed in Chapter 2 (Koger et al. 2009; Albert, 2020; Desmarais et al. 2015). These studies tend to focus on interest groups, media, think tanks, and other advocacy organizations, without delving into the grassroots networks that are closest to voters. While Szwarcberg's (2015) work provides valuable insights, especially regarding the informal networks at the grassroots level that party organizations develop for problem-solving—referred to as clientelistic problem-solving—it is important to recognize that these networks go beyond problem-solving. They

¹⁸⁰ Interview conducted in October 2021, provincial centre town Targovishte, with the provincial chair of DPS's youth organization

also involve building familiarity and relationships with voters, which play a significant role in generating trust and securing electoral support.

Activism that persists even when there are no elections is vital for building clientelistic trust networks, which subsequently contribute to electoral success. It is essential for a political party to maintain regular communication with citizens in order to foster long-term trust. For a party to endure, it not only needs to focus on its own survival but also actively interact with citizens to earn their trust. Regular communication makes the political party more visible and trustworthy in the eyes of the public. Establishing trust is a key strategy for securing consistent electoral support through ongoing activities, rather than solely during election periods, as it helps build robust clientelistic trust networks.

Regular communication is key to being seen and trusted, which is essential for gaining and maintaining electoral support. As noted by GERB MP Tsveta Karayancheva¹⁸¹ from Kardjali, a party that is not visible will be forgotten. To combat this, GERB's organizations in Kardjali organize various activities, such as excursions called 'To Walk Together,' where members hike in the mountains. Even if they cannot hold events every week, they aim for at least monthly gatherings of municipal leaders to stay visible across the province. This approach emphasizes not just establishing municipal structures before elections but also continuously maintaining them through regular activities that keep the party active. Karayancheva highlighted the importance of these non-electoral efforts in making the party visible to the public. Relying solely on visibility during election campaigns can be detrimental to sustaining clientelistic trust networks.

Informal central-local relationships play a crucial role in cultivating clientelistic trust networks for electoral support, as they establish regular communication channels between a national political party and citizens. As one GERB MP¹⁸² noted, citizens want to see their representatives to feel supported. When politicians make the effort to visit, it leaves a positive impression and earns respect. MPs typically spend their weekdays in parliament in the capital city and their weekends in their constituencies, creating ideal opportunities for weekly interactions with local citizens. The MP shared that she travels from village to village to engage with residents and understand their needs. This highlights the importance of political figures

¹⁸¹ Interview conducted on 10 Aug 2022, provincial centre city Kardjali, GERB, MP

¹⁸² Interview conducted on 5 July 2022, provincial centre city Burgas, GERB's youth organization former activist Galya

actively approaching citizens, meeting with them, and inquiring about their concerns. Ultimately, the interpersonal relationships built between party representatives and citizens are vital for securing consistent electoral support.

A political party may lose electoral support due to negative media coverage. In this context, face-to-face communication can help mitigate such unpopularity, particularly at the national level. Therefore, it is essential for municipal party organizations to regularly engage with citizens and listen to their criticisms; without this, the potential for vote loss could be significant. In Bulgaria, the distance between elites and citizens in a town is close. The direct face-to-face communication at the town level, or at neighbourhood level in the capital city, is a useful way for political parties to build trust. One GERB municipal councillor¹⁸³ emphasized the importance of direct contact with citizens, stating,

‘It’s crucial to have face-to-face interactions, even just to hear citizen complaints. This is different from people venting their frustrations alone on social media. Initially, I would try to counter every negative opinion about GERB, but over time, I found it more effective to simply listen.’

Clientelistic trust networks can often be cultivated by consistently listening to voters, even when it involves acknowledging criticism of the party’s performance.

To motivate subnational party branches to build clientelistic trust networks with citizens, it is important for national party elites to maintain subnational linkages with provincial party organizations through regular communication, as discussed in Chapter 4. A village mayor in Pleven province emphasized this point, stating, ‘it is not okay that they [MPs] look for us only when there are elections.’¹⁸⁴

The village mayor felt slightly disappointed with the party MP for not paying enough attention during non-election periods. This neglect could harm the cohesion between national elites and subnational organizational structures, potentially disrupting regular communication between grassroots activists and citizens. The interpersonal relationships between national party leadership and subnational structures are crucial not only for effective service delivery but also for developing clientelistic trust networks. Regular communication and interactions between

¹⁸³ Interview conducted on 7 April 2022, provincial centre city Gabrovo, GERB, office worker Greta

¹⁸⁴ Observed a gathering of youth organization, GERB, provincial centre city Pleven, 4 Aug 2022

national and subnational structures are vital for motivating subnational branch activists to engage with citizens, thereby fostering trust and grassroots electoral support.

Face-to-face interactions help reinforce trust between the municipal party organization and the broader community. Developing face-to-face trust is crucial for the endurance of a political party, especially considering that some members of the public may harbour distrust toward it. The significance of trust is underscored by one of GERB's municipal mayors¹⁸⁵, who noted that citizens find it difficult to trust a political party if they never encounter party activists in their daily lives. Trust increases when party representatives actively engage with citizens. Listening to their concerns is vital for fostering this trust. Ultimately, higher political trust serves as a valuable source of electoral support.

Clientelistic trust networks don't always require a problem-solving element; rather, increased trust itself can serve as the foundation for electoral support. As the GERB municipal mayor illustrated through an example of a typical conversation between party representatives and citizens: “‘How can I [the party representative] help you [the citizen]?’ - ‘No, you cannot help me, but I just want to talk to you.’” By sharing this example, the mayor emphasized that not all activities are aimed at solving specific problems; sometimes, the interaction itself is what matters.¹⁸⁶

Indeed, not all communication between party activists and citizens is focused on problem-solving. Even when it does not serve that purpose, such interactions are valuable for building trust.

Non-electoral activities establish a regular communication channel between the political party and citizens for developing clientelistic trust networks. In what follows I will give three examples to illustrate the importance of non-electoral activities to trust building: the first example is about sports activities and the second and the third examples are about festival activities.

As one of GERB's youth organization activists in the capital city pointed out, ‘citizens come to join our sports activities and talk to us (youth organization activists), so that they know we

¹⁸⁵ Interview with a municipal mayor Zhivko Todorov, GERB, provincial centre city Stara Zagora, 29 July 2022

¹⁸⁶ Interview with a municipal mayor Zhivko Todorov, GERB, provincial centre city Stara Zagora, 29 July 2022

are not bad people.’¹⁸⁷

Organizing sports activities alone may not persuade citizens to vote for the party, but the advantage of such non-electoral events is that they create a natural setting for communication between citizens and party activists, helping to ease distrust.

Another advantage of sports activities is that they are not bound by the electoral cycle and can occur more frequently. Relying solely on electoral campaigns for communication with citizens can be limiting due to their infrequency, making it harder to regularly address distrust or build lasting trust. Non-electoral activities offer a real advantage in maintaining clientelistic trust networks, which are a crucial source of electoral support.

In addition to nationally coordinated and provincially responsive activities, each provincial or municipal party organization has the autonomy to create its own calendar and carry out activities based on the specific needs of their community. According to the municipal chair of GERB’s youth organization,

‘in recent years, GERB’s youth organization activists organized the 1st June celebration in the town, because 1 June is international children’s day, and also because it is close to the end of the term. Parents took their kids to the celebration, their kids were happy, and parents showed gratitude to us. Our municipal councillors were there helping with the celebration, so parents could take this chance to talk to our municipal councillors if they needed to.’¹⁸⁸

As revealed by the organizer of the children’s festival, the significance of non-electoral activities lies in making children and parents in the community happy, thereby earning their gratitude. The festival also provided a natural setting for communication between the municipal party elites and citizens, fostering increased trust in the municipal party branch. Without such events, it would be difficult for the party to engage with townspeople face-to-face outside of election periods. It is likely the accumulation of these regular, engaging activities that has helped cultivate the long-term trust townspeople have in the party.

Festival activities are important because they show care to specific groups within the

¹⁸⁷ Interview with a youth organization activist Mihaela Metodieva, GERB, capital city, 25 March 2023

¹⁸⁸ Interview with a youth organization provincial level chair of Varna, DPS, 10 March 2022

community, helping to earn their trust, which can translate into electoral support. As an office worker from GERB illustrated, ‘we prepared presents, visited pensioner clubs and celebrated festivals with them all the year around. Particularly, one pensioner club’s chair liked us and supported us. The pensioner club informally is called GERB’s club.’¹⁸⁹ The care shown by subnational branches toward pensioners is likely to win their loyalty, leading to electoral backing. Through these ongoing demonstrations of care, especially during festival times, pensioners may gradually develop a sense of closeness and trust toward party activists. Over time, such activities contribute to building clientelistic trust networks, helping to sustain long-term electoral support.

Conclusion

As discussed in Chapter 6, subnational service delivery plays a crucial role in the endurance of political parties. In Bulgaria, the funding for a party’s subnational service delivery primarily comes from central government budget allocations. To reduce the delays in securing these funds, informal central-local connections (Kaneff, 2017) can facilitate the distribution of patronage resources such as jobs and funding (Muñoz and Dargent, 2016). This chapter expands on the subnational service delivery concept from Chapter 6, highlighting the role of patronage resource distribution in shaping service delivery, which ultimately supports political party endurance. Importantly, these informal connections are not used for private gain but as a quicker and more efficient way to implement community projects. This practice seems to be a key factor in GERB’s ability to maintain legitimacy and endure for nearly two decades.

Given the limited central government budget, which has long struggled to meet the service expectations of townspeople and villagers across Bulgaria, the mechanism of informal central-local connections through patronage resource distribution faces inherent limitations. A more immediate solution to subnational service delivery therefore has been donation from party politicians and party politician’s networks with subnational businesses. Unlike service delivery based on official government program funding, this non-programmatic approach represents a key aspect of clientelistic subnational service delivery. The concept of clientelistic problem-solving networks, originally developed in the context of Latin American politics (Szwarcberg, 2012), also applies to Bulgarian politics. These clientelistic problem-solving networks offer

¹⁸⁹ Interview conducted on 2 July 2022, provincial centre city Targovishte, GERB, office worker Sneji

another crucial mechanism that helps explain how GERB has successfully delivered subnational services, thus providing legitimacy for its political endurance.

Clientelistic networks developed by subnational party branches within communities are not solely focused on problem-solving; trust-building is also a crucial function of these networks. Trust, characterized by long-term interpersonal interactions, serves as a significant source of electoral support. This enduring interpersonal trust highlights the importance of the subnational dimension of politics for the endurance of political parties. Clientelistic trust networks help explain why grassroots voters from various communities have consistently supported GERB, contributing to the party's resilience even amid national unpopularity.

Chapter 8 Discussion and Conclusion

The longevity of the Bulgarian political party GERB is particularly puzzling amidst the trend of new party challenges in Central and Eastern Europe. This thesis seeks to explain this endurance by exploring three key arguments. First, it highlights the importance of the temporal, subnational, and informal dimensions of party organizations. Second, the thesis underscores the significance of national and subnational service delivery in party politics, an often-overlooked aspect. Third, it examines the role of patronage/clientelism in delivering subnational services and fostering voter trust, which helps maintaining internal party cohesion and securing electoral support. Through a single case study and in-depth interviews conducted during long-term fieldwork, this research establishes that GERB's endurance is rooted in its strategic formation of subnational and informal organizations prior to its parliamentary breakthrough, its subnational service delivery, and its trust-based clientelistic linkages.

The endurance of GERB has wider implication to Bulgarian politics. Newly emerging political parties in the recent post-2021 electoral turbulence in Bulgaria, challenged the dominance of GERB, although GERB still returned to the governing coalition formed in January of 2025. The building of clientelistic linkages and the selective provision of services to supporters has arguably helped GERB endure so far. However, the number of votes has fluctuated and declined since 2013, although GERB has never experienced as sharp decline as NDSV's losing two thirds of votes. Dissatisfaction with informality and corruption has contributed to voters' disaffection and lower voter turnout in the country. Both of these processes indicate that GERB is losing voters (to apathy in some cases, to other parties in others) so the process is not without negative implications for the endurance of the party and its position in the political system. GERB has been in a gradual decline, but it has stabilised. It can be particularly questionable to imagine the long-term future of GERB when its leader Boyko Borissov steps down. As this thesis has demonstrated, the extensive local networks that GERB has developed over the years meant that its appeal has not been entirely centring around Borissov, although the charismatic leadership and super activism of Borissov has mattered a lot. GERB by no means represents the democratic ideals in Bulgaria, but this thesis highlights that GERB politicians made efforts to solve problems for citizens in various localities across Bulgaria, like established political parties BSP and DPS. Just as the fluctuating vote that BSP and DPS have experienced over the years, GERB has developed into a fixture of Bulgarian politics, just like BSP and DPS. With the ongoing attempts of pro-democracy activists and new political parties to challenge GERB,

GERB by no means would come back to its popularity as it was established in 2006, but equally, it would be hard for GERB to disappear completely in the short term in Bulgarian politics.

In addition, the case study of GERB has wider implication to the studies of clientelism. This thesis demonstrated a clientelism-based approach in the understanding of party politics. Clientelism, broadly considered as an undermining factor to rule of law and democratic ideals, can have the function of problem solving in the daily life of citizens and party activists. Although this thesis does not endorse practices of clientelism, it tends to reveal how clientelism is practised party politics. Clientelism sometimes serves as non-programmatic networks of problem solving when programmatic politics are missing. Clientelism is therefore utilised as an approach to explain party endurance. This thesis demonstrates that it is not sufficient to study party endurance only through the lens of programmatic and ideological politics. Clientelistic politics and informal practices are resilient and to some extent powerful in the way that party politicians and activists carry out their work in practice.

Although this thesis builds its explanatory framework, as discussed in Chapter 2, based on the subnational approach by highlighting subnational problem-solving networks, it acknowledges alternative explanations for party endurance. Although not fully supported by the data that this thesis has collected, this thesis agrees that existing accounts accusing GERB of clientelism and corruption are not without foundation. Therefore, future research can work on an integrated approach to explain party endurance, which focuses on both problem-solving records and corruption scandals. Perhaps both the getting things done functionality and the corruption side of clientelism together contribute to party endurance, a statement that remains to be tested in future research design.

Furthermore, one should be careful not to draw too many lessons from a single case study. Nonetheless, in order to find the hidden dynamics to explain party endurance, a single case study has the advantage of gaining deep insights and building long-term trust with respondents for the quality of interview data. The results generated from this single case study remains to be tested in other cases. In Central and Eastern Europe, most parties are short-lived, but exceptions include the Bulgarian party GERB, the Czech party ANO, and the Slovak party Smer, that have endured. Therefore, the subnational approach, derived from the case of GERB, can be further tested in the cases of ANO and Smer in future research. By increasing cases, future research can increase the generalisability of the subnational approach for party endurance in Central and Eastern Europe.

This final chapter of the thesis seeks both to discuss the research results in light of bodies of existing literature, as well as conclude the whole the whole thesis. The chapter proceeds as follows: I will discuss the intended contribution of this thesis to party endurance, public service delivery and clientelism studies, then I will discuss the contribution of this thesis to Bulgarian studies. I will end this conclusion chapter with directions for future studies.

Contributions to Party Endurance Studies

This thesis makes several important contributions to the study of party endurance, each emphasizing previously underexplored dimensions of party organizations.

Temporal Dimension

Unlike the prevalent focus on the temporal dimension at the party system level (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967: 37-38; Ufen, 2012; Jonsson, 2016), this thesis integrates the temporal dimension into the analysis of individual party organizations. The research emphasizes the importance of starting to build subnational linkages early, well before a party's parliamentary breakthrough. Specifically, beginning to establish these linkages a few years in advance of the parliamentary breakthrough provides a significant temporal advantage. Bolleyer and Bytzek (2013, 2017) highlight the parliamentary breakthrough as a critical juncture in a new party's development. However, this thesis argues that the critical juncture should not be viewed as the sole determinant of party endurance. Instead, it is the series of reinforced decisions and choices made both before and after the parliamentary breakthrough that significantly impacts long-term persistence. The post-breakthrough phase, often a perilous period with a high risk of losing votes in subsequent elections immediately following the initial mandate, underscores the necessity of maximizing the time for party building until the end of the first parliamentary mandate. Early engagement in building subnational linkages helps mitigate these risks and enhances a party's ability to sustain itself over time. Thus, party endurance is less about the critical juncture of the parliamentary breakthrough and more about the continuous strategic efforts made before and after this pivotal moment.

Subnational Dimension

Existing studies on political parties have largely overlooked the role of the subnational dimension in party organizations (Wolinetz, 2002; Selle and Svåsand, 1983). While research on multilevel organizations of new parties (e.g., Bolleyer, 2012) has addressed various levels, it often neglects the critical importance of subnational organizations. This thesis makes a significant contribution to party organization studies by foregrounding the subnational

dimension as central to explaining political outcomes. While some studies have explored the salience of subnational organizations in Southern Europe and Latin America (Dinas et al., 2016; Ames, 1994), they have not adequately applied this focus to Central and Eastern Europe. Moreover, research addressing subnational organizations in this region (e.g., Szczerbiak, 1999) has not connected subnational dynamics to national-level political outcomes. This thesis bridges that gap by demonstrating how the subnational dimension is crucial for understanding the national endurance of political parties. By emphasizing the role of subnational organizations, this research provides a more comprehensive view of how party structures at the subnational levels contribute to sustained political success on a national scale.

Specifically, it demonstrates that the more subnational autonomy generated through an early start in building linkages to the subnational arena—by incorporating more decision-making power and distributing more resources—the more likely it is that the national party will secure support from the subnational arena to sustain itself (endurance). Subnational autonomy is understood as the incentive for national party elites to empower subnational branches in decision-making processes affecting both national and subnational politics, such as candidate nominations (Laffin et al., 2007). This autonomy encompasses both decision-making and crucially, resource distribution, a concept referred to as patronage resource distribution (Munoz and Dargent, 2016). Without adequate resources from the national authority, subnational autonomy struggles to survive.

The complete domination of decision-making by the national party negatively impacts party endurance, as it undermines the stability of subnational branches and disrupts the relations between national and subnational structures. A strong national authority with minimal resource distribution to subnational branches can lead to the near collapse of subnational autonomy. Conversely, when national party elites share decision-making power and allocate resources to subnational branches, it fosters stronger relations between national and subnational structures, motivating subnational elites to support the national party more robustly. Developing subnational autonomy from the outset of party building tends to reduce the subsequent loss of support from the subnational arena. This is particularly important as new parties, once elected, face the challenge of meeting electoral promises while managing expectations, which can impact their support in future parliamentary elections. This thesis thus bridges the gap identified in previous research by showing how the subnational dimension is crucial for understanding and sustaining national political success.

Informal Dimension

Furthermore, this thesis addresses a notable gap in existing party studies by emphasizing the informal dimension, specifically focusing on interpersonal interactions. Existing party studies have largely concentrated on formal dimensions (Katz and Mair, 1993; Gunther and Diamond, 2003) or informal institutions (Helmke and Levitsky, 2004), often neglecting the crucial role of interpersonal connections. Unlike previous research that tends to overlook the distinction between membership and non-membership within party organizations (e.g., Masket, 2004; Anria, 2009), this thesis underscores the importance of non-member components in party organizations, which are crucial for understanding the informal dimension. The thesis highlights the importance of interpersonal linkages—connections developed through face-to-face interactions and personal communication rather than through formal written or media-based channels.

The research demonstrates that cultivating subnational autonomy for political party endurance relies significantly on developing strong interpersonal channels of communication between national and subnational authorities. The initial organizational model on paper does not automatically create robust linkages between these arenas; instead, it is the interpersonal element that consolidates these connections. By fostering early interpersonal interactions, national and subnational elites can better support and empower subnational branches, enhancing their survival and, consequently, the endurance of the party.

Previous studies that considered informal party organizations as entities ‘not found in party statutes’ (Freidenberg and Levitsky, 2006: 3) have missed the vital role of youth and women’s organizations in forming informal, interpersonal relations. This thesis corrects that oversight by demonstrating how interpersonal linkages, produced by formal structures, strengthen the relationships between subnational branches and voters. These connections are essential for maintaining subnational support and cultivating long-term party success.

Moreover, while existing literature often focuses on electoral processes (Farrell and Webb, 2000), it tends to ignore non-electoral activities crucial to informal networks. This thesis addresses this gap by integrating non-electoral elements into the analysis of interpersonal interactions within party networks. By conceptualizing the informal dimension as encompassing interpersonal relationships, non-member component, and activism outside official electoral campaign periods, this research provides a more comprehensive view of how these interactions contribute to the functioning and endurance of political parties.

These contributions collectively advance our understanding of party organizations by incorporating under-researched temporal, subnational, and informal dimensions, thereby providing a comprehensive framework for analyzing the endurance of political parties. However, it is important to recognize that while this framework enriches our view of party organizations, party endurance is not solely about the formal and informal aspects of party organizations. More crucially, it also depends on the effective delivery of public goods and services that meet voter expectations, an element that extends beyond organizational factors alone.

The Incorporation of Public Service Delivery into the Explanatory Framework for Party Endurance

This research makes significant contributions to the study of subnational service delivery by addressing several under-explored aspects. Firstly, it emphasizes the importance of considering both national and subnational levels when analyzing service delivery. Existing studies often neglect the crucial role of subnational dimensions (Eggleston et al., 2008), and this thesis rectifies this by detailing the various levels of subnational service delivery in Bulgaria—provincial, municipal, and town/village levels. By doing so, it provides a clearer, context-specific understanding of how service delivery varies by locality.

Secondly, this thesis shifts focus from the common perspective of service delivery as a government function to examining how it impacts political parties. While existing literature often highlights the role of service delivery for voters and governments (Whitaker, 1980; Tummers et al., 2015; Pepinsky et al., 2017; Nelson, 1997; Pretorius and Schurink, 2007; Savas, 1977), this research explores its significance for political parties. It highlights that while some studies recognize the role of party control (Barbosa and Ferreira, 2019; Andrews et al., 2012) or party identification (Matebesi and Botes, 2017; Walsh and Gordon, 2010; West, 2004), they often overlook the internal dynamics of party organizations. This thesis demonstrates how subnational service delivery can influence party endurance and performance. By addressing gaps in the literature and integrating subnational autonomy and financing into the discussion, particularly in geographically remote areas where state capacity is limited (Munoz and Dargent, 2016), this approach challenges the state-centric view prevalent in existing studies and underscores the role of subnational actors in service provision. This thesis contributes by bridging public administration with political party literature, stressing that internal party

activists' engagement with subnational service delivery is crucial for party stability and party endurance.

Moreover, this thesis addresses the limitations of current studies that focus on party ideology and party delivery (Bel and Fageda, 2007; Connolly and Mason, 2016; Alonso and Andrews, 2020; Lindh and Johansson Sevä, 2018; Masuku and Jili, 2019). It argues that understanding local identity and service delivery offers a more nuanced perspective than purely ideological explanations. Based on a party's established subnational linkages, subnational service delivery contributes to political party endurance by appealing to existing party supporters to remain engaged with subnational branches. National-based appeals, such as national party leadership, ideology, and political records, often fall short due to their detachment from the everyday concerns of citizens outside the capital. In contrast, subnational service delivery directly addresses local needs, thereby fostering sustained support for subnational party branches (Chapter 6).

Subnational service delivery is actualized through collaboration between national party authority and subnational autonomy (Chapters 6 and Chapter 7). While national authorities set broad development priorities, these often fail to address the specificities of subnational issues due to a lack of local nuance. Subnational party autonomy, with its knowledge of local realities, fills this gap by tailoring service delivery to local needs, thus enhancing the legitimacy and appeal of subnational branches. For a political party to endure, it must forge robust subnational linkages that align with national priorities while also addressing locality-specific concerns. This approach not only strengthens the connection between national and subnational levels but also ensures that service delivery resonates with local populations, reinforcing party endurance.

Previous studies on public service delivery primarily focus on the mechanics of the delivery process (Graddy and Chen, 2006; Entwistle and Martin, 2005; De Ruyter et al., 1997). This thesis extends the literature by employing subnational service delivery as a framework to elucidate political outcomes within electoral and party systems. By incorporating subnational service delivery as an analytical tool, the thesis offers new insights into electoral and party systems in Central and Eastern Europe, filling a gap in the existing literature primarily focused on Western Europe, Asia, and Africa (Butler and Collins, 2001; Hasnain, 2008; Booyesen, 2007).

Overall, this research underscores that while party organizations play a critical role, their importance is fundamentally linked to their effectiveness in delivering public goods and

services that meet voter expectations. This broader perspective enriches the discourse on public service delivery and its implications for party endurance. While subnational service delivery is crucial for sustaining party support, it is essential to recognize that this delivery often involves a combination of programmatic and non-programmatic elements, the latter being characterized as clientelistic delivery. Consequently, incorporating clientelistic elements into this thesis's explanatory framework is vital for a comprehensive understanding of political party endurance.

Integrating Clientelistic Elements into the Party Endurance Explanatory Framework

The following discussion outlines the intended contributions of this thesis to the fields of clientelism and patronage studies. While studying the dynamics of clientelism is crucial, this thesis argues that it is equally important to employ clientelism as an analytical tool to explain outcomes in party systems. The impact of clientelism on party systems is illustrated through subnational service delivery. On one hand, clientelism can be understood as problem-solving networks, in line with Szwarberg's (2012) conceptualization. On the other hand, this thesis emphasizes an under-researched aspect of clientelistic networks: long-term, regularized activities. These activities are crucial for their trust-building function, fostering sustained relationships between voters and political parties, as opposed to one-time transactions like vote buying (Mares et al, 2017). Furthermore, the thesis underscores patronage resource distribution enhances subnational problem-solving, a key aspect often overlooked in existing patronage studies (Muñoz and Dargent, 2016). By exploring these dimensions, this thesis aims to broaden the understanding of clientelism's role in sustaining political party support bases and contributing to party endurance.

Temporality of Clientelism

This thesis has made significant contributions to the understanding of clientelism by addressing an important gap in the existing literature. While prior research has extensively explored various theoretical approaches to clientelism and its role as a strategy for winning votes (Hicken, 2011; Robinson and Verdier, 2013; Keefer and Vlaicu, 2008; Van de Walle, 2007; Wantchekon, 2003; Weitz-Shapiro, 2012; Cruz and Keefer, 2015), it has often focused primarily on its impact during pre-electoral periods.

By adopting a long-term perspective, this thesis reveals that clientelism influences not only immediate electoral outcomes but also the stability and evolution of political parties over time. Existing studies tend to neglect this extended impact, treating clientelism mainly as a short-

term electoral strategy (Schneider and Zúniga-Hamlin, 2005). This research addresses this oversight by providing a detailed case study that illustrates how clientelism affects party dynamics beyond the electoral cycle.

The findings show that while clientelism can offer short-term electoral gains, it also has complex implications for party durability and systemic role. The case study presented in this thesis highlights that clientelism can contribute to both the strengthening and weakening of political parties, depending on how it is managed and integrated into broader party strategies (Hopkin, 2006). This nuanced understanding challenges the prevailing view that clientelism's influence is limited to pre-electoral contexts and emphasizes the need to consider its long-term effects.

In summary, this thesis contributes to the literature by filling a critical gap regarding the long-term impacts of clientelism on political parties. It offers new insights into how clientelism interacts with party systems over time and suggests that future research should further explore these long-term effects and their implications for political institutions.

Clientelistic Problem-Solving Networks

This thesis has made notable contributions to the understanding of clientelism by addressing gaps identified in recent studies and proposing a new conceptual framework. Recent research, based on long-term fieldwork, has predominantly focused on clientelism as problem-solving networks, particularly in Latin America, Asia, and Africa, often neglecting Central and Eastern Europe (Szwarcberg, 2012; Daby, 2021; Auyero, 2000; Hagene, 2015; Hagene and González-Fuente, 2016; Hilgers, 2012; Auyero, 2014; Grindle, 2016; Berenschot and Aspinall, 2020). This thesis addresses this regional gap by applying this line of argumentation to Central and Eastern Europe, thereby enriching the empirical understanding of clientelism in this often-overlooked context.

Furthermore, while the problem-solving network concept provides valuable insights into micro-level interactions, it often overlooks the broader political context. The concept of policy networks (Van Waarden, 1992; Petkov, 2019) offers a wider perspective but lacks a specific focus on political party actors. Similarly, extended party networks (Desmarais et al., 2015; Yoon et al., 2022) emphasize party dynamics but do not fully account for voter concerns and expectations. This thesis contributes to addressing these gaps by integrating elements of these

existing concepts. It enhances our understanding of how clientelism functions not only as a problem-solving mechanism but also in relation to broader political and party contexts, and how it aligns with voter expectations and party competence.

Additionally, the relationship between subnational service delivery and clientelism has not been sufficiently explored (Kekez, 2018). Existing studies tend to view clientelism as a barrier to effective subnational service delivery (Bold et al., 2017), while those that see it as a tool for service delivery have primarily focused on Africa (Bénit-Gbaffou, 2011), leaving Central and Eastern Europe under-researched. Research focusing on the importance of future service delivery (Jöst and Lust, 2022) often emphasizes the voter perspective, neglecting the party's role. By utilising the concept of clientelism, this thesis illustrates how these problem-solving networks can supplement state and local government functions, providing voters with a tangible sense of progress in subnational service delivery.

Clientelistic Linkages and Activities

Existing studies on clientelism in Central and Eastern Europe (e.g., Camaj, 2016; Majcherkiewicz and Gadowska, 2005; Örnebring, 2012) have largely overlooked the intersection with party politics and electoral strategies. Previous research often fails to consider the role of various activities in clientelistic practices (Gherghina and Marian, 2023; Mares and Young, 2019; Gherghina and Nemčok, 2023; Gherghina and Volintiru, 2023; Westberg, 2022). This thesis addresses this gap by emphasizing the importance of activities—such as social, cultural, historical, and ecological events—that are organized throughout the year. Unlike the notion of vote buying, which typically involves a direct exchange of votes for money during elections, the organization of diverse activities fosters long-term relationships and trust between voters and party representatives.

Existing research (e.g., Tóth et al., 2022; Čakar and Čular, 2023) has not sufficiently used clientelism to explain the fates of individual parties in Central and Eastern Europe. This thesis extends the understanding of clientelistic linkages by demonstrating how activities, rooted in local history and geography, contribute to maintaining a party's vote base over time. This approach reveals that clientelistic practices involve a regular, year-round engagement with voters, rather than being confined to pre-electoral exchanges.

By highlighting the role of these activities, this thesis offers a more nuanced understanding of clientelistic linkages, challenging the oversimplified view of vote buying. It underscores the importance of local specificity and long-term engagement in sustaining clientelistic ties. Thus, this research contributes to the literature on clientelism by incorporating the role of activities into the analysis, offering new insights into how clientelistic linkages operate within the unique contexts of Central and Eastern Europe.

Clientelistic Trust Building Networks

Existing literature often conceptualizes clientelism as a simple exchange, a view that neglects the temporal dimension of these interactions (Bustikova and Corduneanu-Huci, 2017; Pellicer et al., 2022). This thesis addresses this limitation by emphasizing the importance of time, framing clientelism as a process of long-term relationship-building and trust-building, rather than a mere one-time transaction.

In terms of trust, existing studies have explored the impact of institutional trust on clientelism but have largely overlooked the influence of elections (Bustikova and Corduneanu-Huci, 2017; Benstead et al., 2019). This thesis contributes to the discourse on clientelism by highlighting how clientelism fosters trust among voters towards party activists. While research in Southern and Central Asia has identified trust as a feature of clientelistic systems (Berenschot, 2015; Hierman, 2010), this thesis goes further by illustrating how clientelism actively generates trust, which in turn facilitates electoral participation.

Additionally, this work advances the existing studies on clientelism and trust (Torsello, 2012) by suggesting that interpersonal trust cultivated through clientelistic networks may be more crucial than abstract institutional trust in the context of Central and Eastern Europe. Previous political studies addressing interpersonal trust (Carlin and Love, 2018; Kaase, 1999; Cox, 2003; Carlin et al., 2020) often neglect the role of clientelism. This thesis fills this gap by demonstrating how clientelism plays a vital role in generating interpersonal trust, thus contributing to the broader literature on politics and trust.

Through these insights, this thesis enhances our understanding of clientelism's nuanced role in fostering long-term trust relationships and underscores its significance in the political landscapes of Central and Eastern Europe.

Patronage Resource Distribution

While existing literature emphasizes the importance of ideology for party endurance (Epstein, 2009), this approach often overlooks the critical role of resource distribution. In Latin America, the distribution of clientelism and patronage resources has been argued to be significant for maintaining party cohesion (Munoz and Dargent, 2016). This thesis extends and complements the work of Munoz and Dargent in two ways.

First, it highlights the often-neglected aspect of party endurance in discussions of resource distribution. This thesis demonstrates how the distribution of patronage resources not only fosters party cohesion but also contributes to the long-term sustainability and endurance of political parties. Existing understandings of party cohesion often focus on ideological alignment (Kitschelt and Smyth, 2002) or the behavior of MPs (Borz, 2006), typically neglecting the complex, multilevel hierarchy within political parties, especially the potential for central-local conflicts. Grassroots dynamics are crucial, particularly for local delivery, which frequently encounters resource shortages. This is where patronage resource cohesion becomes essential. While existing research on patronage resource distribution and party cohesion (e.g., Munoz and Dargent, 2016) acknowledges the importance of resources, it often overlooks the ultimate objective of effective delivery, which is crucial for maintaining party cohesion.

This thesis contributes to the literature by emphasizing that the hope to deliver services and fulfill promises can significantly enhance party cohesion. Without strong party cohesion, parties may struggle to achieve effective local-level delivery, potentially leading to party disintegration or collapse. Thus, discussing party cohesion and patronage without considering the aspect of delivery presents an incomplete picture.

This thesis proposes a more comprehensive approach by contextualizing party cohesion within the framework of party delivery, highlighting the critical role of patronage resource distribution from the central to the local level. By integrating these elements, this research provides a deeper understanding of the mechanisms that sustain party cohesion and ensure the effective functioning of political parties, particularly in the context of Central and Eastern Europe.

Second, while Munoz and Dargent's work is primarily focused on Latin America, this thesis applies their argument to the context of Central and Eastern Europe, an area that has been

under-researched in this regard. By doing so, it broadens the understanding of how patronage and clientelism operate in different political environments, offering new insights into their role in party politics in Central and Eastern Europe.

Existing studies on Central and Eastern Europe typically view the use of patronage resource distribution as a mechanism for facilitating policy implementation (e.g., Kopecký and Spirova, 2011). However, this perspective often overlooks the critical aspect of internal party cohesion. This thesis addresses this gap by drawing on insights from Latin American studies (Munoz and Dargent, 2016) and highlighting the importance of patronage resource distribution for party endurance, specifically through the lens of internal party cohesion.

By focusing on Central and Eastern European politics, this thesis establishes that patronage resource distribution is not only a tool for policy implementation but also a crucial factor in maintaining party cohesion. This cohesion, in turn, plays a vital role in ensuring the stability and endurance of political parties in the region. Thus, this research extends the existing understanding of patronage and its implications by demonstrating its significance beyond policy implementation, emphasizing its impact on the internal dynamics and longevity of political parties.

Through these contributions, this thesis enriches the existing literature by integrating the concept of resource distribution with discussions of party endurance, and by expanding the geographic scope of these studies to include Central and Eastern Europe.

Wider Implications to Bulgarian Politics

Below are three key contributions of this thesis to the field of Bulgarian studies. Building on Ganev's (2007) exploration of Bulgarian politics, this research offers an updated examination and a detailed single-case study of a significant political party in Bulgaria from 2006 to 2023. The contributions span three central themes: subnational service delivery, party organizations, and clientelism.

The first theme is subnational service delivery, which remains a significant concern for practitioners but is underexplored in recent Bulgarian political literature. Earlier works predominantly focus on the role of local and municipal governments in service delivery (Snively & Desai, 2001), highlighting a gap in reflecting on public service delivery practices through the lens of political parties rather than solely through subnational government

structures. Based on fieldwork conducted in both rural and urban areas across Bulgaria, this thesis contributes to Bulgarian studies by demonstrating that, despite more than thirty years since the exit from a state socialist regime and over a decade and a half as a European Union member state, the waiting time for public services remains a significant issue for townspeople and villagers (Hann & Dunn, 1996). This prolonged wait suggests that a new party's ability to deliver subnational services is crucial for its endurance in Bulgaria, which is a central conclusion of this thesis. While the importance of subnational service delivery is significant, it has been largely overlooked in Bulgarian political literature (Stoyanov & Kostadinova, 2021; Rashkova & Zankina, 2017; Koinova, 2001; Ghodsee, 2008). This thesis highlights subnational service delivery as a critical mechanism for the endurance of new political parties in Bulgaria.

The second theme of this thesis explores party organizations, previously examined in Bulgarian party politics literature (Yovcheva, 2022; Spirova, 2005; Bankov et al., 2021). However, the existing literature often lacks a comprehensive conceptualization, particularly in terms of temporal, subnational, and informal dimensions. This thesis posits that an early start plays a crucial role in the pace of new party organization building in Bulgaria. Unlike a post-breakthrough start, a pre-breakthrough start accelerates organizational development, especially as new parties ascend to power—a dynamic insufficiently addressed in existing literature (Yovcheva, 2022).

Moreover, the research highlights the significance of subnational service delivery expectations over national-level concerns, such as EU accession, in motivating Bulgarian citizens to vote in parliamentary elections and engage with political parties. This emphasis on local issues is particularly salient given the 'brain drain' trend in Bulgaria, where young people often migrate to the capital city or abroad (Deegan, 2018). Those who remain in their hometowns value local and regional development, making this a critical yet underexplored mechanism in current studies (Stoyanov & Kostadinova, 2021).

Furthermore, the thesis addresses the apolitical nature of many Bulgarian citizens, who often distance themselves from politics and political parties, especially amidst prevalent discussions of corruption. To engage this audience, it is crucial for party representatives to establish informal organizations that intersect with demographic factors such as age, gender, and professions, fostering shared interests and broader participation. This informal aspect of party organizations has been documented in Bulgarian party politics (Bankov et al., 2021), and this

thesis extends the discussion by highlighting its role in enhancing participation and political party endurance.

The third theme addressed in this thesis is clientelism. Previous studies have largely conceptualized clientelism in Bulgaria in terms of vote buying, pressure, favoritism, and economic intimidation (Mares et al., 2017; Mares et al., 2018). However, this narrow focus on clientelism as a coercive or transactional mechanism, based primarily on survey results, overlooks its broader functionality within the Bulgarian context. Through long-term observation and interviews, this thesis offers a fresh perspective, rethinking clientelism in Bulgaria as a problem-solving and trust-building building.

In the absence of a strong state presence, local elites often rely on cohesive relationships with the central party apparatus, particularly in accessing patronage resources. This reliance underscores problem-solving as a core characteristic of clientelistic networks, which can significantly shorten the waiting time for public services—a vital issue for townspeople and villagers in Bulgaria. In doing so, this thesis adds this significant but inadequately explored aspects in the existing literature (Benovska-Sabkova, 2018; Nanov, 2021), which tends to focus more on the negative aspects of clientelism without acknowledging its potential role in public service delivery.

Furthermore, this thesis reveals that Bulgarian citizens often exhibit higher levels of interpersonal trust compared to abstract institutional trust. This interpersonal trust, fostered through face-to-face interactions between political party representatives and citizens, over long-term scales, plays a crucial role in motivating voter turnout. Such trust-based clientelistic linkages, which extend beyond the electoral cycle, may be a significant factor in the endurance of political parties in Bulgaria. By highlighting this under-researched role of trust in clientelistic networks, this thesis makes a significant contribution to the study of Bulgarian politics, offering a nuanced understanding of clientelism's role in party durability.

Avenues for Future Research

This thesis primarily adopts a party-centric perspective, suggesting several potential directions for future research. Firstly, a shift towards voter-centric studies could provide a complementary viewpoint. Future research might utilize exit poll data to trace vote flows and examine changes in voting behaviour, particularly in the context of new party emergence and rise. Voter surveys

could also be conducted to identify key motivations behind ballot casting in parliamentary elections. Themes such as subnational service delivery, subnational branch activities, and interpersonal trust, which emerged in this thesis, could be further explored and validated through these surveys.

Secondly, while this thesis is grounded in long-term fieldwork with the incorporation of document data and election results data, future studies could draw more on a wide range of sources, such as party statutes and local election results. Party statutes and campaign documents could offer insights into party ideology and formal organizational structures. Furthermore, analyzing local election results, especially the party affiliations of mayors and councillors over time, could provide valuable data on the development of party organization bases and their correlation with subsequent parliamentary election outcomes.

Lastly, as this thesis focuses on a single case study in Bulgaria, future research should investigate whether the findings can be generalized to other countries in Central and Eastern Europe or beyond. Comparative studies could reveal whether the dynamics observed in Bulgaria are unique or reflective of broader regional trends, thereby enhancing the applicability of the thesis's conclusions.

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