

# Polit-Barometer

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- The political situation in the first months of 2018 was determined to a great extent by the political tension created around the ratification of the Istanbul Convention and the deal with CEZ. These two events moved the focus of public attention away from the start of the rotational Presidency of Bulgaria of the Council of the EU. Despite the political controversies, the Presidency has been running successfully so far. The government has focused its efforts on two main priorities - integration of the Western Balkans into the EU and bringing the relations between the EU and Turkey back to normal.
- BSP tried to use the scandals and to harden the tone against the government. The cases with the Istanbul Convention and CEZ were used by the socialists to attack the government. This showed that BSP has the resources and the capability to set the political agenda in its capacity of opposition. At the same time, however, the party risks taking a populist turn if it uses any topic popular for the people in order to create clashes with the government and misses the main problems of this country.
- GERB was engaged on two fronts: on one hand it had to mitigate the conflicts with its coalition partners, and on the other – to respond to the attacks from the opposition, mainly BSP. The tension between the President of the country and the government becomes more and more apparent. Most likely, it will become even stronger and this will have a negative impact on inter-institutional relations. At this stage, the government coalition remains stable and no split is expected to happen imminently.

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## 1. Political Situation

### 1.1 Internal Policy

At the beginning of January, Bulgaria took over the Presidency of the Council of the EU – an event charged with a lot of expectations, which nevertheless was left in the background of public attention, due to the series of scandals that shook the governing majority.

At the end of January the first vote of no confidence in the government was held upon the initiative of BSP, who stated the following motive: lack of results in combatting corruption. Obviously, the vote was unsuccessful; it was supported only with the votes of BSP and MRF. The debate on the vote was not a convincing one – it turned into mutual accusations between the majority and the opposition. BSP reminded people of cases already known to the public, like the scandal in Haskovo concerning Delyan Dobrev; the one in Dobrich where a GERB MP – Zhivko Martinov - resigned, and the corruption along the state border in connection with the construction of the fence. The vote of no confidence did not have the effect the Left had expected, even in terms of public response and attention.

In an internal political plan, the past quarter was dominated by two scandals – the attempt to ratify the so-called Istanbul Convention and the transaction with the largest power distribution company in Bulgaria owned by the Czech company CEZ.

As early as at the first meeting of the government in 2018, the Ministry of Justice submitted a draft for ratification of the Istanbul Convention that resulted in a sharp reaction by political parties and the public. The convention was signed in the time of the previous government of Borisov by Ekaterina Zaharieva, the then Minister of Justice. The motion was made without any public discussions and came as a surprise even for the coalition partners of GERB in the government – the United Patriots. They categorically stated that they would not back the ratification of the Convention at the National Assembly because they believed it introduced the notion of “gender” which they regard as a “third sex”. The

United Patriots expressed their concern that that Convention would open the door for making gay marriages legal in this country and that would be absolutely unacceptable for them. The point was reached where even GERB ministers voted against the proposal for ratification during the government meeting. Regardless of that, the Cabinet submitted the draft law for ratification in the Parliament, and Prime Minister Borisov said the Convention must be ratified. BSP also stood against the ratification. The party said that they would not support it in the vote in the Plenary Hall. A strong public reaction followed, the point was reached where protests were organized. Dozens of prominent intellectuals and public figures stood against the Convention. President Rumen Radev said that one should not rush to ratify the Convention because there were quite a number of unclarities in it that need to become clear after a serious public debate. BSP even proposed having a referendum on the topic – an idea that was later rejected by the National Assembly. The government decided to organize a public debate on the topic, which demonstrated that the votes against the Convention significantly outnumber those in its favor.

Despite the statements of the supporters of the Convention that it is only against violence against women, the introduction of the concept of “gender” and the requirement that schoolchildren start learning about the existing stereotypes regarding the social roles of the sexes resulted in insurmountable public contradictions where even people of opposing political positions actually shared the same opinion. The representatives of all faiths in this country opposed to the Convention – starting from the Orthodox church, the Mufti’s office, and the representatives of the Catholic church. In the end, two months later, the strong public sentiments made the government withdraw their decision to ratify the Convention by sending it to the Constitutional Court for interpretation.

At the beginning of March a new scandal burst out that has taken on more and more international dimensions, because it regards the sale of the assets of the Czech state company CEZ in Bulgaria to a previously unknown company – Inercom, owned by Ginka Varbakova. After the announcement of

the deal, the government's initial reaction was one of complete surprise. The Chairman of the Energy Committee of the Parliament and GERB MP Deljan Dobrev, said that this was 'fake news'. A day later Minister of Energy Temenuzhka Petkova submitted her resignation after the media published the news that she had known Ginka Varbakova for years. The resignation was strange and unexpected, provided that the government had claimed from the very beginning that they had nothing to do with that deal, that they had not known about it and that it was a deal between two companies that had been concluded in the Czech Republic according to the legislation there. Petkova motivated her resignation with her intention to save her image after the scandal and to not harm the government in any way. The opposition represented by BSP deemed Petkova's resignation an attempt on the part of Boyko Borisov and the government to mitigate the growing scandal from the word go. It did not work – moreover, the resignation pinned the attention of the public to the deal and to Ginka Varbakova, who had not been in the public eye until then. Publications appeared about the businesses of Ginka Varbakova claiming that her husband had had businesses in the past in partnership with people close to 'groups of violent force'.

The first interview Ginka Varbakova gave to one of the nationwide TV channels made the suspicions even greater that there was something irregular about the deal and about the possibility that there might have been other people who were actually behind it. Varbakova stated that she deals with photovoltaic businesses and would rely on bank financing in order to close the deal. She denied the claims that offshore companies had provided the financing. It became clear that she would provide slightly more than 10% of the value of deal from her own funds which in itself is quite strange.

In an attempt to mitigate the scandal, Prime Minister Borisov met with Ginka Varbakova at the Council of Ministers. After the meeting it became clear that the Prime Minister insisted that the government participate in the deal with a minimum of 34% control share. Varbakova was heard at the Energy Committee of the National Assembly. Also present were representatives of the security ser-

vices and the Director of the state-owned Bulgarian Development Bank which was mentioned in media reports as one of the banks (along with two other Bulgarian banks) intending to finance the deal. The boss of the Development Bank Mavrodiev informed that they had received a letter from Inercom with a question as to whether they would be interested in financing that deal. As in other similar cases their response was that they provide loans for such deals in principle, but no specific commitment was made. The other two Bulgarian banks denied that they would finance that deal. The security services stated that they have no competence for scrutinizing such deals and could check the origin of funds only after the deal is concluded and a money transaction has been made. What the boss of the Bulgarian Agency for National Security said made an impression – that the selling price for CEZ was increased. Given the evaluation of 220 million Euro, the initial information was that Ginka Varbakova was buying at 320 million Euro. At the end of March CEZ CEO Daniel Benes said in an interview for a Czech media outlet that the price was actually "a lot more than 320 million Euro", which fuelled even more the suspicion that something untoward was happening. Varbakova told the parliamentary Committee that it was not Bulgarian but foreign banks who would provide the financing and that negotiations were underway for that. Inercom would offer the shares of the company they buy as collateral for the loans.

Varbakova went to Prague to present the request of the Bulgarian government to become part of the deal. CEZ responded that they would think about this proposal, but stated that they had some reservations because there is an arbitration procedure currently open between CEZ and the state of Bulgaria for a sum that might reach 500 million Euro. The arbitration procedure was initiated by the Czech company.

The government continued sending out different and contradictory messages. Only a couple of days after stating their willingness to take part in the deal, which in all likelihood seems impossible, Minister of Finance Goranov stated that it would not be a good idea for the government to participate. In his words, the deal with CEZ would not

result in energy price increase as the Regulator has all the tools and mechanisms available to scrutinize that process. The government decided not to accept Minister of Energy Temenuzhka Petkova's resignation with the support of all coalition partners.

The scandal was also fueled in Czech media outlets. The Czech office of Transparency International stated that the deal should be stopped and that CEZ should open a new procedure due to suspicions of unclear funding and of an opportunity for money laundering from offshore bank accounts.

In an interview for Czech media the CEZ CEO stated that they pulled out of Bulgaria because Prime Minister Boyko Borisov disliked them and they had problems with the state. This claim shed doubts yet again about the business climate in this country and the reasons why many foreign investors have sold their businesses over recent years. Recently, the mobile operator Telecom has done the same. Such was also the case with the owners of Nova TV. The statement of the CEZ CEO made the opposition attack the government yet again, claiming that the government chase out investors and arbitration cases are opened against the state.

Upon a BSP initiative a temporary parliamentary inquiry committee was formed to clarify the circumstances around the sale of the assets of CEZ in Bulgaria. GERB MPs supported the proposal but insisted that the period was covered when the power distribution companies were privatized during the term of office of Simeon Saxe Coburg of Gotha's government. The committee is headed by Zhelyu Boychev from BSP. Boychev said that the committee will hear Ginka Varbakova once again and that it will invite Prime Minister Boyko Borisov to a hearing too.

Internal-political scandals moved the focus away from the EU Council Presidency. After the eruption of the scandal with the CEZ deal, BSP leader Kornelia Ninova even stated that "the Presidency is over and done with". According to her, after this deal, the Prime Minister has embarrassed the country and, instead of talking about the pri-

orities of the Presidency, everyone is focused on this scandal.

The tension between the President and the governing majority also continued to be present in the first months of 2018. In his report on his first year in office President Rumen Radev criticized the functioning of parliamentarism in this country. According to his words, "Parliament has become a Notary Public's office for legalizing the decisions of the government" and this results in "the parliamentary republic's dystrophy". Radev addressed some criticism to the government regarding the lack of results in fighting corruption. He deemed the new anti-corruption act ineffective, which was the reason for his veto. According to Radev, corruption remains a huge problem and the government have fulfilled their commitment to the European commission only formally, but in practice the result is completely different. In his words, the fight against corruption is still done only by the public and the media because there is no will on the part of the government do so. Radev criticized the state of democracy in Bulgaria, saying that freedom of expression is questioned. The President declared that his efforts next year will be focused on safeguarding the democratic rights of Bulgarians, on guaranteeing national sovereignty and on enforcing the rule of law.

After President Radev's statement, a reaction followed by the Speaker of the National Assembly Tsveta Karayancheva. She stated that the President should be a unifier of the nation and not a promoter of degrading qualifications. According to Karayancheva the President introduces 'catastrophic language' as a style which does not correspond to reality, moreover, the current EU Council Presidency shows the respect of the partners to Bulgaria.

The relations between the President and the Prime Minister remained tense during this last quarter too. Some harsh rhetoric was exchanged between the two. It all started after an interview of PM Borisov where he mentioned that Ivo Hristov, Chief of the Cabinet of the President, was Director of the BBT TV station owned by MRF MP Delyan Peevski. The statement that Peevski was owner of the TV station was not true and was

refuted immediately by Ivo Hristov, and also by Delyan Peevski, who wrote a letter to the media. Rumen Radev said that the mention of the name of Delyan Peevski and members of his administration is a harsh manipulation and, in turn, asked the Prime Minister three questions: Has he been meeting and is he still meeting Peevski? Has he ever had and does he still have joint business interests with Peevski? Has he ever awarded and is he still awarding public procurement contracts in the interest of Delyan Peevski?

For years, the opinion has existed among some members of the public that there are connections between Prime Minister Borisov and Delyan Peevski. The topic has been subject of comments and analysis on many occasions. At this moment, however, questions are asked at the highest level of state about those relations, which indicates that the President will not remain a passive on-looker and is ready to take a stand on topics that the government feels extremely uncomfortable about. Prime Minister Borisov gave immediately an extraordinary media briefing and denied any relations whatsoever with the media oligarch. Borisov stated that his conscience is clean and urged Radev, if he had any information whatsoever of the alleged wrongdoings of him and Peevski, to submit it to the Prosecutor's office without any delay. According to Borisov the President is jealous of his foreign political success and the attention he is receiving from European leaders during the EU Council Presidency.

These events demonstrate that the relations between the President and the Prime Minister will remain tense. On one hand, President Radev is the politician with the highest rating in this country, twice as high as that of Prime Minister Borisov. On the other hand, GERB are not used to having a serious corrective of this caliber, and the attacks against Radev, which started last year are hardly likely to stop. The President, on his part, pledged to be a corrective of the status quo as early as his pre-election campaign and it looks like this style of behavior will continue in the future too.

At the end of February the new Anti-corruption Act became effective after the National Assembly

had rejected the Presidential veto. The doubts regarding its efficiency still remain, as well as the doubts regarding the independence of the new body established by that law from the government in power. As expected, Plamen Georgiev, the then Chairman of the Commission for Forfeiture of Illegal Assets, was elected Head of the new anti-corruption unit. The opposition did not vote in favor of that election, pointing out that Georgiev was the prosecutor who had requested the wire-tapping on the Customs boss Vanio Tanov, when there was a leak in the media about his telephone conversation with PM Borisov ordering him to terminate a customs' investigation of a brewery which had its license for operation withdrawn.

## 1.2 Foreign and European Policy

Bulgaria became a rotational President of the EU Council in the beginning of January. Despite the delay in the preparations last year, the Presidency started normally. At the official opening in Sofia, the President of the European Council Donald Tusk gave a high evaluation of Bulgaria, defining the country as an important part of the Union with its centuries-old history and culture. Tusk delivered his speech in Bulgarian language as a sign of respect to this country - a gesture that was widely discussed in public and highly appreciated by Bulgarian citizens.

In the context of the Presidency, an important highlight was the visit of the German Chancellor Angela Merkel. She backed Bulgaria's priorities during the Presidency and announced to the media that Bulgaria would host a Summit between EU and Turkey in a press-conference. The main topic would be bringing the relations to normal and extending the agreement on the refugees - a priority that Prime Minister Borisov promised to work on during the Presidency.

The summit was scheduled for 26 March and it was not clear until the last moment whether it would take place, due to the tension between Turkey, Greece and Cyprus. The Summit as such was a success for the Bulgarian Presidency and Prime Minister Borisov. As one of the goals during the

Presidency he set the normalization of the EU-Turkey relations and took on the role of a go-between in this quite awkward task. Prime Minister Borisov stated his expectations that the Summit would be difficult and tense, but, in his words, dialogue was the only way to resolve problems and reach some normalization of relations. Yet again, Borisov stated that Turkey is playing a very important role in deterring the refugee influx into Europe and despite the difficult situation in that country, these efforts of Turkey should be appreciated. After the meeting the participants stressed that it was in the spirit of constructiveness and was a step toward improving EU-Turkey relations.

At the European Council session in Brussels at the end of March, one of the topics for discussion was the poisoning of Sergei Skripal and his daughter in Britain. The European leaders express unanimous solidarity with the UK and backed the position that Russia probably was behind the attempt on their lives. Prime Minister Borisov said that he requested more evidence on Russia's involvement beyond Theresa May's phrase "high level of probability". Borisov mentioned the war on Iraq, where the main motive was Saddam Hussein's regime being in possession of chemical weapons and "everyone had believed Britain then, but Tony Blair apologized later". In his words, the decision of the European leaders to call in the EU Ambassador to the Russian Federation for consultation demonstrates that, in spite of Brexit, the UK and the EU share the same positions, they are inseparably connected, and support each other. Borisov expressed his concern that the EU-Russia relations will continue to deteriorate and this calls for more reason and responsibility in our actions. As a token of solidarity with Britain, Bulgaria called in its ambassador to Moscow, Kotsev, for consultations in Sofia. After a meeting of the Security Council with the Council of Ministers, where Ambassador Kotsev was heard, the government decided not to recall Bulgarian diplomats from Moscow, like other countries both within and outside the EU did. Prime Minister Borisov stressed that there was not enough evidence on the Skripal case for the time being, therefore the reaction of Bulgaria would be calling in the ambassador for consultations.

Another major topic on which the government is working during the Presidency is implementing the EU integration of the Western Balkans. In this respect, an enhanced pro-activeness can be observed on the part of the Bulgarian government. Bulgaria set an example of how the relations in the region can be normalized after signing the good neighborly relations treaty with Macedonia. It was also ratified by the Macedonian parliament at the beginning of January. An important event in the spirit of the new relations between Sofia and Skopje was the participation of Prime Minister Borisov in the memorial service for the victims of the Holocaust in Macedonia to mark the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the deportation of Macedonian Jews to the death camps. For the first time Bulgarian Prime Minister attended this service. Borisov said that history should not be forgotten and expressed his sympathy for all Holocaust victims.

At the beginning of March Sofia hosted a working lunch attended by the heads of state of the Western Balkan countries and Jean-Claude Juncker. This was the final stop of the tour of the region that the President of the European Commission made. The main topics of discussion were related to the development of the region, investment in infrastructure projects, and dispute resolution in the relations between the Balkan states. This lunch was also preparation for the Summit between the EU and the leaders from the Western Balkans to be held in Sofia on 17 May this year.

The visit of Russia's Patriarch Kiril to Bulgaria for the celebrations of the National Day 3 March, the day of Bulgaria's Liberation, caused a great deal of public discourse. Patriarch Kiril said that he was leaving this country saddened by the fact that the President of Bulgaria had paid homage to all the soldiers of various nationalities who had fought under the flags of the Russian emperor in his official speeches. After his departure, the website of the office of the Patriarch of Russia published a video from the meeting of the Russian Patriarch with the President of Bulgaria Rumen Radev, where Kiril assertively explained that it was the Russian emperor and the state of Russia that announced the war on Turkey, and not the nations that were then part of the Russian Empire, and that that is a historical

fact. This caused some harsh reaction in the public space and indicated yet again how polarized the public of Bulgaria is vis-à-vis Russia, particularly at political and party level. The Office of the President made a statement that the President's response was as follows: "Like the church fights for the soul of every person, so are we grateful and honor the memory of every soldier who fought in the Russian army under the flags of Emperor Alexander II and lost his life for the freedom of Bulgaria, regardless of his nationality." President Radev said that the Russian Patriarch came to this country as a spiritual leader but decided to leave as a politician; however, this could in no way influence the relations between our two nations, who cherish deep historical and cultural connections.

### 1.3 Refugee Crisis

At the beginning of the year, no migration pressure was observed from Turkey towards this country. This is due to the commitments that the Turkish side has been fulfilling so far. This is why it is of particular importance to the Bulgarian government to assist in normalizing the EU-Turkey dialogue and to extend the term of the agreement on the refugees.

At the session of the EU Council on Justice and Home Affairs in Sofia at the end of January, it became clear that it will be hard to reach consensus on receiving refugees based on quotas, which the countries from the Visegrad Group strongly oppose. The negotiations on this matter will continue in June.

## 2. State and Development of the Main Political Parties

### 2.1 Social-Democratic and Other Center-Left Parties

#### 2.1.1 BSP

##### Current State

BSP took advantage of the scandals related to the ruling party and strengthened its opposition rhetoric. This brings some success to the Socialists,

with the latest sociological studies showing that the gap in electoral support of the two leading parties is decreasing. Two main themes were the reason for critical reactions from the BSP - the Istanbul Convention and the CEZ deal.

BSP has expressed a strong stance against the Istanbul Convention and, in particular, with regard to the unclear opinion of many texts, introducing the term "gender". The party leadership said another approach in this case is needed – in order to make changes at the legislative level, which are related to violence against women.

According to the Socialists there are passages in the convention that divide Bulgarian society and are open to different interpretations. BSP introduced legislative amendments to the Penal Code to incriminate domestic violence. The party stated that they have always defended women's rights and denounced all forms of violence. According to the BSP, the changes introduced will fill the void in the legislation and this will lead to greater effectiveness in the fight against domestic violence and violence against women.

The resistance to the adoption of the Istanbul Convention, however, led to tensions between BSP and PES, which is chaired by former party leader Sergey Stanishev. Stanishev expressed his bewilderment about the position of BSP. In his words, the policy of protecting women has always been a priority for the Socialists. Stanishev expressed concern that BSP is demonstrating solidarity with positions that are backed by nationalist formations.

A severe letter to BSP leader Kornelia Ninova was sent by the PES women's chairwoman, Zita Gurmai, urging BSP to back the ratification of the convention. The letter says that BSP risks becoming the only party in the PES that is against the convention.

Another topic to which BSP reacted extremely gravely was the deal between CEZ and Inercom, which has already been mentioned. BSP saw a threat to the national security of the country in that an unknown company was buying a strategic company that affects the rights of 3 million consumers. BSP insisted that the deal between



Inercom and CEZ be terminated and under the new procedure, the state would join on a market principle together with other candidates to buy the whole company. BSP strongly opposed GERB's idea of buying a minority stake in the company. According to BSP, this would only legitimize the deal, and the state would become a partner of a company with an obscure owner, behind which there probably was offshore capital.

BSP initiated a national petition for the termination of the deal, which, the party suggested, although it could not have any direct legal consequences, would be a moral act to show that citizens do not approve of such non-transparent transactions.

At the end of March, BSP leader Kornelia Ninova, with a delegation of her party leadership, led by her, met in Skopje with Macedonian Prime Minister Zoran Zaev. The leaders of the two socialist parties - BSP and SDSM (The Social Democratic Union of Macedonia) - signed a partnership agreement. Ninova and Zaev discussed bilateral relations between the two countries, as well as Macedonia's prospects for Euro-Atlantic integration. They also discussed the meeting in Sofia on May 16<sup>th</sup> with the prime ministers, commissioners and party leaders in Europe, which BSP and PES will host. BSP will host a meeting of the mayors of the two parties, who will discuss the regional partnership between the local authorities in both countries.

The leaders of the party announced that they will hold a large national conference in May to present their country's vision for development. This became apparent after a meeting of the National Council of the Party in late March. The event will be attended by the municipal and district presidents of the party, mayors, municipal councilors, MPs and members of the National Council of BSP.

#### Recommendations

At the level of opposition, BSP shows that it is capable of imposing an agenda, pressing the government on controversial issues, and opposing unpopular decisions of the government. On the other hand, however, the party must strike a balance between being extreme opposition, taking a stance

on popular topics, such as the Istanbul Convention, and the necessity of offering alternative management decisions and policies. By only relying on the first variant, BSP risks taking a populist course that could bring short-term dividends, but in the long run could damage the party's values.

#### 2.1.2 ABV and Movement 21

##### Current State

Like the other opposition parties, ABV and Movement 21 also severely condemned the CEZ deal. ABV issued a political statement on a scandal that broke out with the sale of the energy company owned by CEZ. In it there is a call for all responsible state institutions and regulatory bodies to intervene adequately and effectively, "including using diplomatic channels and top-level talks with the Czech state, and for the annulment of the CEZ deal". After that, the State should set about reversing the acquisition of this sector, either alone or in partnership with strategic investors, while ensuring the maximum possible control and protection of the public interest. According to the ABV, the main blame for "the chaos being created lies entirely with the government and personally with Prime Minister Borisov, who is directly responsible for everything that concerns the national security of the country." The party urges that, regardless of how the CEZ scandal ends, Borisov should take political responsibility and resign.

The leader of Movement 21, Tatyana Doncheva, also commented on the deal with CEZ. In her words, it is "a great outrage committed by people who have taken control of the state to a much greater extent than ordinary people want to imagine." In Doncheva's words, this transaction was "concluded with the agreement of Boyko Borisov".

Rumen Petkov, a member of the ABV Executive Bureau, said that besides the scandal over the CEZ deal, the development of the arbitration process that CEZ is leading against the state is particularly important. Rumen Petkov also commented on the decision of the Chief Prosecutor and the President to send to the Constitutional Court the bill

on private security guards, which stipulates that they guard the smaller settlements and villages in the country. Petkov reiterated that ABV had first raised the issue of what he said was an “absurd decision” of the ruling. According to him, this decision is the abdication of the state from its main function of guaranteeing security and order in the country and protecting the property of its citizens. In his words, the reasons for this decision are the unfulfilled pre-election promise of GERB that there should be one policeman in each village.

Unlike BSP, ABV took a different stance on the Istanbul Convention. Party leader Konstantin Prodanov said that this issue has been the subject of speculation, as various opposition parties have benefited from people’s fears. According to him, the patriots are using the situation to increase their diminished rating. The same was true of BSP, taking advantage of a subject that is subject to manipulative interpretations. Prodanov is categorical that the Istanbul Convention addresses the issue of violence against women and all forms of discrimination on the basis of gender. According to him, Bulgaria’s big problem is not the “third sex”, but the socio-economic inequality in the country.

At the beginning of March, an ABV Expert Discussion Forum again announced that they were in favor of the dropping of the Belene Nuclear Power Plant moratorium to allow investors to complete the project. ABV leader Konstantin Prodanov said to the participants in the forum that the project is economically beneficial, because there is no nuclear power station in the world that works at a loss. According to him, there is currently evidence of investment interest in the project; the only obstacle is the parliamentary decision of 2013, which needs to be reviewed. According to Prodanov, the project should go ahead with strategic state participation because nowhere is there an entirely private NPP.

#### Recommendations

For smaller parties such as ABV and Movement 21, the development of local party structures is exceptionally important. The upcoming local elections next year are a good opportunity for both parties to step up their grass roots work. Demand

for dialogue with the other left-wing parties should continue, despite tensions over the years.

#### 2.1.3 Party “Bulgarian Social Democrats”

##### Current state

At the beginning of 2018 there was certain activity on the side of the Bulgarian Social Democrats. The party declared that they opposed the transfer of labor from abroad. According to the general secretary of the party, Georgi Anastasov, such a move would lead to an increase in unemployment among Bulgarians, which would force many of them to leave the country. Anastasov mentioned that the big problem in Bulgaria is low income and poverty, so efforts should be directed towards raising salaries and pensions. According to Anastasov, Bulgaria’s presidency of the Council of the EU should also be used to attract investment in the field of production, because it is one of the ways to increase incomes and the retention of Bulgarians in the country. Anastasov said the issue of income would be discussed in all party structures in the country, after which a common position would be formulated, which would be sent to employers’ and trade union organizations in the country. The party intends to organize a round table on the topic, to which stakeholders and organizations should be invited. Anastasov said the party is preparing to participate independently in the upcoming elections for the European Parliament and local government in the coming year.

The Bulgarian Social Democrats party declared its support for the ratification of the Istanbul Convention. Georgi Anastasov said that social democracy has taken gender equality as a fundamental value for a long time. For him, the position of the BSP on the Istanbul Convention remains incomprehensible, and this places the party along with nationalist formations, which is unacceptable for a left party member of the PES and the Socialist International.

According to Anastasov, with this leadership of BSP, the Socialist Party is covered by demagoguery and populism and is moving away from leftist values. Anastasov commented that, despite the

differences with the Socialists on certain issues when they were part of the Coalition for Bulgaria, there has always been a dialogue with previous BSP leaders. In his words, with the new leadership of BSP in the face of Kornelia Ninova such a dialogue is very difficult, indeed almost impossible.

### Recommendations

The Bulgarian Social Democrats party should show a presence in the political life of the country. During this quarter there has been some recovery, but not enough. The site of the party continues to fail to function, which does not make a good impression for a party with traditions in the country and a member of the Socialist International.

## 2.2 Center-right parties

### 2.2.1 GERB

In the first quarter of the year, GERB was busy fighting the emerging tensions in the Coalition with the United Patriots, and also government-related scandals. Several times after talks with the patriot leaders, chairman of the GERB parliamentary group Tsvetan Tsvetanov managed to ease tensions through dialogue and a pragmatic approach. At this stage, GERB is managing to maintain stability in the coalition. Tsvetanov defined the differences with the United Patriots as completely natural and unrelated to the management program. According to Tsvetanov, it is far easier to work with the United Patriots than with the Reform Party in the previous government because they adhere to the commitments made in the coalition agreement. In his words, GERB has learned lessons from the weaknesses in the coalition with the reformers, and now things are working much more smoothly, despite the momentary differences. Because of this, he does not expect a split in the coalition, speculation about which is being spread in the public domain.

In GERB, they were not indifferent to the evident tensions between the President and the Prime Minister, which have already been mentioned. Tsvetan Tsvetanov has repeatedly attacked Pres-

ident Rumen Radev, which has confirmed the exacerbation of relations between the President and the government. Tsvetanov has stated that Rumen Radev behaves not like a head of state and a unifier of the nation, but like a person behind a political project. In connection with the attacks of Russian Patriarch Kiril, Tsvetanov expressed doubts that President Radev had defended the national interest and called for the shorthand scripts of conversations to be declassified. According to Tsvetanov, the presidential administration's assertions that a shorthand record is not kept are frivolous. Tsvetanov pointed out that Radev was defending positions on the sanctions against Russia and that, along with the BSP, they are acting to divert the country from its European path.

GERB has taken a defensive strategy on the deal between CEZ and Inercom, seeing that it negatively affects the credibility of the cabin and the party as a whole. The transparency of the deal is not commented on by GERB, but instead the idea is out forward that there will be no increase in the price of electricity, as this is in the powers of the state energy regulator - KEVR. In this way, GERB aims to reassure the public on a sensitive issue - the price of electricity, which is understandable.

At the end of March, Tsvetan Tsvetanov discussed the current political situation in the country with the representatives of GERB-Sofia as part of the preparations for the local elections next year. He emphasized the efforts of GERB aimed at implementing successful local government policies. At the meeting questions were raised related to the problems and development of the district. In the framework of the working meeting, Tsvetanov mentioned that GERB does not tolerate the division of municipalities into "ours and yours", or the political attempts to divide the people in the small settlements. In his words, GERB has always tried to help people in the regions of the country and an example of this is the work of central authorities and the government. Tsvetanov said the party is always in contact with citizens in all regions of the country, not just during elections. As examples he cited the regular receptions for citizens who become MPs, mayors and municipal councilors from GERB.

### 2.2.2 The Reformist Block

During this quarter, the Reformist Block has practically fallen apart. The two main parties in it, the UDF and the Bulgarian Democratic Union (BDG) are likely to take different paths very soon. The upcoming European Parliamentary elections and local elections next year are one reason for right-wing parties to seek new coalition formulas in an attempt to regain their lost positions in the political life of the country amidst the collapse in the early parliamentary elections in 2017.

At the beginning of March, the “Movement of Bulgaria of the Citizens” (DBG) froze its membership in the Reformist Block, and it will not participate in its governing bodies. The reasons for this decision, in the words of the leadership, are the lack of an opposition stance in the policies of the Block. The BDG has set several conditions, which, if they are not fulfilled within a month, will lead to them leaving the Reformist Block for good. One of these is the development of a reformist platform with an emphasis on bold and decisive actions to improve the state of the sector of “security”, and measures to raise income, improve education and fight corruption effectively. The BDG insists on the immediate resignation of Prime Minister Boyko Borisov, whose rule they define as “corrupt”. The party has declared itself in favor of early elections, the creation of an “anti-GERB coalition” and for “anti-GERB communities” in localities to be the “basis for an alternative to GERB’s behind-the-scenes governance”. The BDG believes that there is a need for a strong democratic community in the country that is ready to oppose the “creeping dictatorship of GERB, transferred to the municipalities through the model of feudal governance”. In the statement of the National Council of the party it is expressed that there have been attempts by some of the members of the Reform Party to legitimize and defend erroneous decisions of the government, including by means of meetings between members of the Reformist Block and representatives of the government, which contradict all principles and decisions of the coalition.

Naiden Zelenogorski of the BDG said that the resignation of the government and early parliamen-

tary elections are the only way to go on the path of reforms. In his words, all the reforms that had begun on the insistence and with the efforts of the Reformist Block in the previous government have been halted. According to Zelenogorski, there is no effective democracy in the country, and the government is becoming increasingly national-populist.

UDF leader Bozhidar Lukarski admitted that the processes of breaking up in the Reformist Block are obvious and unstoppable. According to him, the UDF has not yet decided what alliance it will look for in the future and which parties it will partner. Lukarski said that the UDF has different opinions on this matter. Some politicians in the party believe that a partnership should be sought with the BDG, “Yes, Bulgaria” and liberal formations, while others share the view that the UDF should build an alliance of conservative and patriotic formations. The latter has further reinforced speculation about a possible coalition between UDF and NFSB of Valeri Simeonov.

At the end of March, in the UDF there was dissatisfaction with the leader of the party Lukarski, as a group around former party chairman Emil Kabaivanov, now deputy chairman, were to demand his resignation at a meeting of the UDF National Executive Council in mid-April. According to Kabaivanov, people in localities are not satisfied with the party’s isolation from the other right-wing formations or with the lack of clarity about the future of the UDF. Emil Kabaivanov said that he and his colleague Rumen Hristov are in a negotiating group that has to find a way round the party structures and study the attitudes of the UDF members about who their partners on the right should be.

### 2.2.3 DSB

At the end of March, the DSB held a meeting of the Executive Council of the party in Plovdiv, where the political situation in the country and the coalition policy of the party were discussed. The political situation in the country has been assessed as unpredictable and dangerous because of many of the government’s actions in recent months that undermine democracy and citizens’ rights and

freedoms. Constant scandals and tensions in various sectors, according to the DSB, lead to instability and risks for the country. The position of DSB is that with this behavior, the government is leading the country into a political crisis and early parliamentary elections.

The DSB accepted as a fundamental priority the building of a strong political union in the right-center space, with the main goal “of overthrowing Borisov’s authoritarian regime, restoring the parliamentary republic, counteracting corruption and improving the well-being of Bulgarian citizens.” The DSB Executive Council gave a mandate to the party’s chairman Atanas Atanasov to establish a lasting political union between the DSB and “Yes, Bulgaria”, which should be open to enlargement and to other democratic and oppositional formations.

#### 2.2.4 “Yes, Bulgaria”

Hristo Ivanov, the leader of “Yes, Bulgaria”, stated that the new right-wing grouping formed by the five formations - Yes, Bulgaria, DSB, the Greens, DEOS (The Movement for European Unification and Solidarity) and BZNS (The Bulgarian Agrarian National Union) of the former Defense Minister Nikolay Nenchev should be formed as a clear alternative to the ruling party. According to Ivanov, it should be opposed to cases and not just to words in the eyes of voters, and this should be clear to all the parties in the future coalition. Moreover, in the words of Hristo Ivanov, it is very important that the new entity should be clearly distinguished from the Reformist Block. He added that it is working not only at the level of party leaders but also at the expert level, giving as an example the launch of the “Bulgarian Manifesto” initiative for the establishment of a political program. An agreement is to be signed between the five parties to regulate relations in the future coalition, and the possibility of talks with other political parties is not excluded.

## 2.3 Centrist parties

### 2.3.1 MRF

At the end of February, the MRF held sessions in the so-called Boyana Sarai, where the Honorable President Ahmed Dogan lives. The political situation in the country in recent months, the tensions between the institutions and the ongoing presidency of Bulgaria of the Council of the EU were discussed. After the meeting, MRF leader Mustafa Karadayi said that MRF understood the need for stability during the presidency, and in that sense they as a party were making their contribution to this stability. On the other hand, however, he said, in recent months, the government has constantly been generating scandals and conflicts, including between institutions. And this in itself does not work for stability. The reasons for this, according to Karadayi are the way in which this coalition was created - with the participation of nationalists and populists, which from the very beginning was a sign that there were scandals and tensions. This is why it is important to regroup the coalition and for nationalists to leave it.

In the beginning of March the MRF held a seminar on the topic of “Open Government - a New Opportunity for Liberal Democracies. Attracting citizens into the decision-making process”. The purpose of the seminar was to launch a broad public discussion on the opportunities and challenges faced by democracies today. The long-standing ALDE (Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe) chairman, Graham Watson, was invited to take part in the forum. MRF leader Mustafa Karadayi said that this seminar should also be viewed as part of the preparations of the MRF for running the country. He also pointed out that the party is united and ready to take part in elections.

In his opening speech at the forum, Mustafa Karadayi developed the thesis of the crisis of liberal democracy and political processes in the country and in Europe. In his words, democracy is in retreat and is experiencing clashes with populism and nationalism. Populists and nationalists find their way into the ruling parties of some countries, and Bulgaria is no exception. At the seminar, Graham Watson described the role of the MRF as a “stabilizing factor in political life in Bulgaria”.

In mid-February, at a conference in Bursa, the most influential organization of Bulgarian emigrants in Turkey, “Balgyoch”, called for the unification of the three parties MRF, DOST (Democrats for Responsibility, Freedom and Tolerance) and NPSD (National Party for Freedom and Dignity). In front of the participants, honorary chairman of the Confederation of Balkan Rumelian Turks, Turhan Gencoglu, said he had held talks with the leaders of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms and DOST and that “significant steps were taken towards reconciliation”. In his words, it is about reaching a consensus among sympathizers on the most critical issue - the need for unification and the elimination of political confrontation. MRF and DOST did not comment on the topic. The position of the MRF has always been that those who have left the party as sympathizers and members can always come back to it. This position, however, excludes party reunification, and it is not about the return of the prominent political figures, such as Lyutvi Mestan and Kasim Dal.

### 2.3.2 DOST

The Party DOST and its leader, Lyutvi Mestan, have been away from public attention in recent months. There was a dearth of media appearances that were particularly intense during the election campaign last year. All that was to be observed were episodic appearances and political statements by Lyutvi Mestan on events of the current agenda in the country. For example, on 21 February, the International Day of Mother Tongue, declared by UNESCO in 1999, DOST again declared themselves in favor of a change in the legal framework for the study and use of mother tongue in the country. The party insisted that mother tongue be taught as compulsory at school, and they called for the abolition of the prohibition in the Electoral Code of conducting agitation in a language other than Bulgarian.

Lyutvi Mestan took a position on the attacks of Russian Patriarch Kiril in Bulgaria. He described Kiril's behavior as “arrogant and imperial” and as part of the Russian hybrid war in Bulgaria. Mestan pointed out that the goal of Russia is to trigger a governmental crisis, early elections and the

establishment of a “Pro-Russian government in the country”, composed of BSP and nationalists: a government that would also benefit from the support of the MRF, again dropping hints about his long-standing thesis of the “pro-Russian line” in the MRF leadership. This is also the dividing line between MRF and DOST, according to Mestan, which makes their unification impossible.

### 2.3.3 “Volya”

Again during this quarter, “Volya” offers increasing support for GERB and the majority in important votes in parliament. “Volya” did not support the vote of no confidence in the government which was put to the vote in the National Assembly in late January, with MPs abstaining. According to Veselin Mareshki, there is still no alternative to the government, and the vote of no confidence is a BSP gambit that will not contribute to the fight against corruption. In his words, removing the government would hurl the country into a political crisis.

With the tensions between the three parties in the United Patriots, “Volya” may be a key factor in the balance of power in parliament. It was not by chance that GERB MP Delyan Dobrev said that if “Ataka” withdrew their support for the government, MPs from “Volya” would replace them.

Mareshki denied having negotiated with GERB to enter the government. According to Mareshki, more and more parties regard “Volya” as a natural partner, saying “it is consistent in its actions”, and this leads to greater trust from citizens. He pointed out that in this parliament the party will not enter the government, and that this could only happen after the next elections.

## 2.4 Nationalist parties

### 2.4.1 United Patriots

During this quarter, tensions between separate parties in the United Patriots increased. There is a growing divide between NFSB of Valeri Simeonov and the leaders of the other two parties, Volen Sid-

erov and Krassimir Karakachanov. The Istanbul Convention was the occasion for an exchange of rhetoric between Deputy Prime Ministers Karakachanov and Simeonov regarding the idea of the VMRO leader organizing a referendum in which citizens should express their opinions on the topic of legalizing gay marriages in the country and on other issues related to the topic of "gender". Valeri Simeonov described this idea as an attempt at PR of VMRO and nothing more. In his words, there is no sense in the proposal to hold a referendum on the subject, given that the categorical response of Bulgarian citizens will be clear.

Karakachanov said there was tension in the coalition, but it was caused by the lack of prior agreement of positions on certain issues. In his words, the reasons are rooted in Valeri Simeonov's approach - instead of discussing with his partners what he does not like or is concerned about, he goes directly to the media and makes accusations, and this only causes unnecessary tension between parties in the coalition.

The reproaches of the Russian Patriarch Kiril in his meeting with President Radev led to Valeri Simeonov's acute reaction in one of the national television channels. Simeonov called the Patriarch "a second-rate cop of the KGB", and a man "who has accumulated \$14 billion in the sale of excise-free cigarettes, which is why he is better known in Russia as 'the cigarette metropolitan'." At its meeting the Parliamentary Group of the United Patriots distanced itself from the words of Valeri Simeonov and urged him to apologize. The decision was taken with the votes of VMRO and "Ataka" MPs, and the representatives of NFSB left the meeting. Valeri Simeonov's words provoked a harsh reaction by "Ataka" leader Volen Siderov, who for years has been known for his pro-Russian positions. Siderov said it was unacceptable to insult a spiritual person and he as an Orthodox Christian would insist on a public apology from Valeri Simeonov. According to him, Simeonov's behavior was "equivalent to an Islamist and Jihadist act", and that these were insults that "the greatest enemy of Christianity did not allow himself to utter".

For his part Valeri Simeonov said that he would not apologize for his words and that it is unacceptable for a spiritual person to maintain an admonishing tone in the Bulgarian presidency, because Bulgarians pay tribute to all the warriors killed for the freedom of Bulgaria regardless of their faith or nationality.

Despite the harsh exchange of words, the tensions that have arisen have been suppressed in the name of unity and participation in government. Siderov said that the refusal to apologize "remains a sin" to Valeri Simeonov, but one should not expect the breakup of the United Patriots to follow. In his words, there are many greater and more important goals that the patriots have set for government. And they require stability and overcoming controversies that arise. For his part Krassimir Karakachanov said that there would not be resignations. In his words, "time heals everything". Valeri Simeonov has shown that he is an emotional person with spontaneous reactions, which does not in itself necessarily mean that this is a bad thing.

## 2.5 Positions of the foreign and European political parties

BSP leader Kornelia Ninova commented on the statement of Turkey's leader Erdogan that the Bulgarian city of Kardzhali is within the spiritual borders of Turkey. In her words, the statement of Erdogan is another provocation to Bulgaria which is absolutely unacceptable. Ninova insisted that the Bulgarian Prime Minister make a firm stand on this issue during the meeting in Varna, which will be attended by President Erdogan. Ninova has asked Prime Minister Borisov to put to Erdogan the question of the losses of the Thracian Bulgarians expelled after the Balkan Wars and the First World War. The government has repeatedly stated that this will be a meeting between the EU and Turkey, not a bilateral meeting where questions related to Bulgarian-Turkish relations can be raised.

Kristian Vigenin of the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), who is chairman of the parliamentary committee on European affairs, stated that there was every potential for this meeting in Varna to be

successful. In his words, it is necessary to reduce tensions and emotions and to reach pragmatic solutions. Vigenin also commented on the ongoing tension in the country over the visit of Russian Patriarch Kiril. In his words, the Russian side cannot find the correct tone for Bulgaria. According to Vigenin, there must be careful analysis of whether there is a targeted campaign against Bulgaria by Russia, or it is a matter of separate events that leave such an impression. In his words, some of Russia's moves do not appear to be well planned, as much as spontaneous reactions.

Regarding the Skripal case in London, Vigenin said there was no hard evidence to date that Russia was behind the poisoning of the former spy and his daughter, but rather it was a political campaign.

Chairman of the GERB parliamentary group Tsvetan Tsvetanov pointed out that Bulgaria has a clear stance on the poisoning of Skripal in the UK and is in solidarity with the EU's common position. Regarding whether Bulgaria will expel Russian diplomats, Tsvetanov said that this could only happen when the national security of the country is jeopardized. According to him there is no such data at present, so there is no need to take such action.

"Yes, Bulgaria" issued a political declaration condemning Prime Minister Borisov's position on the Skripal case. This states that the prime minister's behavior shows "a clear sign of the rejection of solidarity on the part of Bulgaria". Such an action undermines the trust of EU partners in the country. Regarding the visit of President Erdogan to Varna, the local organization of "Yes, Bulgaria" organized a protest against the regime in Turkey and the violation of human rights in the country.

### 3. Public opinion

Research by the Trend Research Center at the end of February shows that only 16% of Bulgarians support the Istanbul Convention, 46% do not support it, and 38% cannot judge it.

Regarding electoral attitudes, GERB retains its first position, since 20.7% of the respondents

would vote for the ruling party. BSP ranked second, 2.5% behind GERB. Socialists would be supported by 18.2% of voters. MRF came in with 6.4% and the United Patriots with 5.2%. The parties with no chance of entering parliament if parliamentary elections were held at the time of the survey were "Volya" with 1.5%, the Reformist block with 1.2%. Then 1.5% of respondents would vote for "Yes, Bulgaria", and only 1% would vote for DSB (Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria).

### 4. Basic conclusions and forecasts

1. The political situation in the first months of 2018 was largely determined by the political tensions surrounding the ratification of the Istanbul Convention and the CEZ deal. These two events shifted the focus of public attention from the rotating presidency of Bulgaria of the EU Council. Those in the ruling party GERB have made serious efforts to alleviate public tensions and to minimize the possible loss of support, which they have not managed to fully succeed in doing. It was the withdrawal of the Istanbul Convention from the agenda of the National Assembly which alleviated passions. However, the issue with CEZ remains on the agenda. The government has failed to clarify the case, and even with its incoherent and chaotic action, it has further reinforced the impression that there is something wrong that is hidden from society.

Despite the scandals, the Presidency of the Council of the EU is, at this stage, going successfully. The government has focused its efforts on two main priorities: the integration of the Western Balkans and the normalization of EU-Turkey relations.

2. The BSP tried to take advantage of the scandals and intensified its tone with regard to the government. The case studies with the Istanbul Convention and CEZ were used by the Socialists for attacks on the government. This has shown that BSP has the resources and the opportunity to impose the political agenda as an opposition. At the same time, however, the party risks heading in a populist direction if it uses every popular social issue to clash with the ruling party and misses the major problems of the country.



3. The smaller parties on the left at this stage cannot find the right moves to increase their popularity. Recent sociological studies show this clearly. A profound rethinking of their long-term participation strategies in politics is necessary, not only at ideological but most of all at an organizational level. Steps are needed to undertake new and interesting initiatives which would attract sympathizers.

4. GERB was engaged on two fronts - on the one hand suppressing conflicts with its coalition partners and, on the other hand, responding to the attacks of the opposition, and mostly BSP. The tension between the President and the government is growing ever more apparent, and this is likely to grow even further in the future, thus negatively affecting the relations between the institutions. At this stage, the government coalition remains stable, and is not expected to fall apart imminently.

5. The smaller right-wing parties at this stage have low electoral support. The reasons for this are political fragmentation, and complicated interpersonal interactions of the past, which hinder normal dialogue. The Reformist Block is on the verge of falling apart for good and the two main parties in it - the UDF and the DBG – embarking on different paths. In the other right-liberal block around DSB and “Yes, Bulgaria” there are processes of consolidation, and in the coming months they will take steps to unite with three other formations.

6. The MRF is regrouping internally. After DOST split from them, there is now a process of electoral consolidation of the party. MRF still faces unresolved challenges related to its image, particularly with regard to the impact of “oligarch” Delyan Peevski. This makes the party at least on a formal level unattractive as a coalition partner, both to the left and to the right, although on important topics both GERB and BSP rely on the MRF to support their parliamentary initiatives. This quarter also saw a joint action between GERB and MRF regarding the adopted Corporate Commercial Bank assets law and the concluded cessions, on which the President vetoed the voices of both parties and the “United Patriots”.

7. “Volya” is increasingly losing electoral support. The behavior of the parliamentary group is inconsistent and conjunctural. On one hand, “Volya” declares itself to be in opposition, on the other hand, in key votes, it helps the majority. This will probably continue to be the style of behavior of the formation of Vessein Mareshki, which, however, undermines its authors among the citizens.

8. The “united patriots” were at the center of political attention in the past quarter, mostly with internal conflicts between individual leaders. Despite the contradictions that we have witnessed, the three parties remain united in the name of power, so at least at this stage the ruling coalition retains its stability.

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