

Polit-Barometer

The political parties in Bulgaria

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Year 18, Issue 2 – April-June 2018

- The Presidency of Bulgaria of the EU Council can be judged as a successful political, logistical and communication plan. The theme of the “Western Balkans”, which had long been absent from the highest European forums, was back on the agenda again. Despite the difficulties and challenges faced by countries in the region, the prospects for integration open new horizons related to solving a long-standing controversy. The solution to the dispute over the name of Macedonia that Skopje and Athens reached shows that dialogue is possible in the name of a common European future.
- With the BSP vote of no confidence in the government, the Socialists are again making an attempt at taking the initiative as an opposition, thus dictating the political agenda in the context of the finishing presidency. Security issues, especially the fight against crime, are an area where the government is demonstrating serious shortfalls and this is a good topic to be attacked. It seems that, with the end of the presidency, the BSP will step up the pressure on the government on a number of socially sensitive issues.
- Over the past few months, GERB as a party has focused its efforts above all on providing support and domestic political comfort to the government in its work on the presidency. GERB quickly managed to quash the controversy with their coalition partners from the United Patriots. They remained in the background, displaced by the main foreign policy events that were the focus of public attention. With the end of the presidency, unresolved domestic problems will once again appear on the agenda, and GERB will face the difficult task of seeking ways to solve them.

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1. The political situation

1.1 Domestic policy

In the course of Bulgaria's presidency of the EU Council, domestic issues that dictated the political situation and public attention in the previous quarter, such as the Istanbul Convention and the CEZ deal, are no longer the focus of attention. At the beginning of May, the temporary parliamentary committee of inquiry, which had to examine the deal with CEZ, ended its work without clarifying the main issues - who is behind Inercom and Ginka Varbakova and what the origin of the funds for buying the company's assets is. The term in which Inercom has to pay CEZ to finalize the deal continues to run and it is not clear whether Inercom will be able to pay the amount. During this quarter, Inercom abstained from media appearances, and the pressure on the government and Prime Minister Borisov to respond was muted as the focus was shifted by other events mostly related to Bulgaria's rotating presidency of the Council of the EU.

Despite the ongoing tensions between those in power and the opposition, a broad parliamentary consensus was reached regarding the government's modernization project for the Bulgarian army. The National Assembly supported the project amounting to BGN 3.3 billion for the purchase of combat aircraft and new armored vehicles. The plan envisages the purchase of 150 armored vehicles amounting to BGN 1.5 billion for three battalions of the Land Forces to be acquired within 12 years and BGN 1.8 billion for the acquisition of at least 8 military jets. Defense Minister Krasimir Karakachanov said that bids would be sent for the acquisition of new military aircraft to the United States for the F16 and F18, and to Israel and Portugal for used F16 aircraft, as well as offers for new Gripen, Eurofighter and Rafale planes. The project of the government was supported almost unanimously, with only "Volya" MPs voting against.

Despite the consensus reached, the topic of the modernization of the Bulgarian army led to new political potshots between President Rumen Radev and the government. The reason for this was an incident near Plovdiv airport, where a mili-

tary helicopter Mi-17 fell in training, killing the two pilots. President Radev said the reasons for this were the delayed modernization and purchase of new equipment, for which he blamed the government. Radev reiterated that he had previously expressed concern that tragic incidents would happen due to the aging technology and the training of the pilots that had been reduced to critical levels regarding hours spent in the air. The president said the reasons for the failed deal to buy a new combat aircraft were due to lobbying interests, referring to people in the ruling party without naming names. The ruling majority immediately responded to the criticisms, accusing Radev of politicizing the problem and acting as party president of the BSP. This stance is increasingly used by the government, because of the president's criticism of various spheres of government.

In mid-June the Minister of Labor and Social Policy, Biser Petkov, resigned in connection with the protests of the parents of children with disabilities. Parents insist on a change in legislation that is adequate for the needs and requirements of their children. This resignation also surprised the protesters themselves, who stated that the dialogue with the minister had been with a view to finding solutions and that, one day before his resignation, he had promised to propose legislative changes. Protesters said that if the resignation of the minister was approved, they would step up their protests and demand the resignation of the entire government. They issued a statement in which they accused Prime Minister Borisov of putting pressure on Minister Petkov to resign to preserve his image in the eyes of his European counterparts with regard to the presidency of the EU Council. According to protesters, Minister Petkov is one of the few working ministers with whom dialogue can take place. The unions also backed the Minister, saying they would address Prime Minister Borisov, insisting that the resignation be withdrawn. After this reaction, just one day after Borisov had accepted his resignation, the Prime Minister said that Minister Petkov would remain in office. This is the second case this year in which the Prime Minister has changed his decision. Only a few months ago, Borisov accepted the resignation of Minister of Energy Temenujka Petkova af-

ter it became clear that Inercom had bought CEZ. Subsequently, the resignation was withdrawn.

At the beginning of June, the National Assembly adopted a decision repealing the imposed moratorium on the construction of Belene Nuclear Power Plant. Only MRF voted against, on the grounds that this project is unnecessary from an economic point of view. Those in power have long sought solutions for the reactors purchased for the plant and the realization of the project on a market principle with the finding of a strategic investor. It has become clear that a Chinese company is interested in the project. The main problem in reaching a decision, which necessitates that some solution be found is that if the project is not implemented, it means the National Electric Company (NEK) has to write off the BGN 3 billion invested in the project, which is currently calculated as an asset, and when this becomes a liability, the state-owned company will in fact go bankrupt because of accumulated debts. By 2023, NEK has to return to the state budget the loan with which it paid to equip Rosatom after the state lost the arbitration case for BGN 1.17 billion. The government said that at this stage there is no resumption of the project, but that solutions are only sought as to how it can be realized and also how it can be cost-effective. This topic has polarized the political parties in the country for years. Putting the topic back on the agenda will heighten the political tensions in the country in the coming months.

In spite of the presidency, the political contradictions and the harsh exchanges between the ruling and the opposition parties, especially between GERB and BSP, continued over this quarter. At the end of June, BSP tabled a vote of no confidence in the government related to the security sector, mainly because of the Ministry of Interior's inability to cope with the growing crime in the country in recent months. The debate on the vote of no-confidence was dealt with in record time. GERB MPs did not express opinions in the debate. The same was true of the Minister of Interior Valentin Radev. Rather than in the plenary hall after the closing of the voting debates, GERB gave a press conference, claiming that they had not taken part in the debate because BSP had not presented any argu-

ments. The vote was not passed because it was supported only by the BSP and MRF parliamentary groups. Everyone else voted against.

1.2 External and European policies

May 17 saw the culmination of the Bulgarian Presidency in Sofia - the EU-Western Balkans summit. It was attended by the Heads of Government of the Member States and six Western Balkan countries - Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo and Macedonia. Only Spain's Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy was absent from the forum because of the presence of the President of Kosovo and the problems with Catalonia.

President Donald Tusk said the meeting reaffirmed the commitment to the European perspective of the entire region. According to him there is no alternative to the Western Balkans, other than EU membership; there is no plan B. Unlike Tusk, French President Emmanuel Macron was more reserved. He said there should not be such a hurry with EU enlargement to the Western Balkans. In his words, the Western Balkans should have a strategy to follow, for which they would be encouraged. France supports the accession of the countries of the region to the EU, but more caution is needed in the enlargement process.

Prime Minister Boyko Borisov expressed his satisfaction at the summit, stressing that the Western Balkans have again come to the fore on the European agenda, and from now on the countries could expect a lot of work. Borisov said the issue will also be among the priorities of the Austrian Presidency, which confirms the EU's long-term commitment to the region.

As a result of the forum, the leaders of the EU Member States and those of the Western Balkan countries issued a joint declaration. This states that the EU welcomes the shared commitment of the Western Balkan partners to European values and principles and is ready to step up its commitment to the countries of the region at all levels by supporting their political, economic and social transformation and reconfirming their perspective for integration.

Amongst other topics at the meeting in Sofia was that of improving relations between the countries of the Western Balkans in the framework of the whole region. The EU has committed itself to further strengthening connectivity in all its dimensions, such as transport links, energy security, digitalization, the business climate, and opportunities for young people by extending the Erasmus + program and its funding. Participants in the forum also discussed challenges in the areas of security, terrorism and migration.

At the end of May in the space of a week President Radev and Prime Minister Borisov visited Russia for meetings with President Vladimir Putin. These meetings resumed the dialogue with Russia at the highest level, which for several years had been broken. The first visit was of President Radev, who met with his Russian counterpart in Sochi. They highlighted the close spiritual and cultural ties between the two nations, and the need for closer economic cooperation in the fields of energy, trade, and tourism. At the meeting, President Putin announced that Prime Minister Borisov was soon to visit him, which was not known until that time. The news led to a series of comments, the main question being why Bulgarian society found out about this meeting from Russia, and not the Bulgarian government, and whether it had been organized in an emergency. The Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs said the meeting had been planned for a long time and there was nothing unusual or extraordinary about it.

President Radev arrived in Russia without representatives of the Bulgarian government, even at the level of deputy ministers, because of a flagrant boycott by the government - more proof that relations between the president and the government have reached their nadir.

A week after the visit of President Radev, a government delegation headed by Prime Minister Boyko Borisov headed a visit to Moscow. The delegation included ministers for energy - Temenujka Petkova, tourism - Nikolina Angelkova, Minister for Culture Boil Banov and Deputy Prime Minister Tomislav Donchev, as well as the director of Bulgaria's transgas Vladimir Malinov. Borisov and Putin

talked about strengthening economic co-operation between the two countries as well as energy projects. Prime Minister Borisov regretted that the South Stream project has not been realized, saying that the non-transparent practices of the Oresharski government had contributed to this. After talks with Putin, Boyko Borisov said it was agreed that the gas from the "Turkish Stream" would come to Bulgaria, against which he said neither Russia nor Turkey had any objections. This information was later proved to be false by Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov, who said talks were being held and the Bulgarian side had expressed such a desire, but an agreement had not been reached. Peskov pointed out that this could not happen at the moment, because guarantees from the European Commission are necessary.

The right-wing extraparliamentary opposition has demanded the resignation of Prime Minister Borisov for Borisov's apology to Putin on the South Stream, which they deemed humiliating for Bulgaria. The left-wing opposition in the face of BSP in parliamentary control asked Boyko Borisov a question about the results of the visit. The BSP asked why Borisov's position on Russian energy projects had changed in a positive direction. Borisov said he had had a three-hour meeting with President Putin, and the conversation had passed constructively and in a positive tone. Borisov stated that the country has a gas contract with Russia till 2030. With regard to the Turkish flow, it is about a supplementary volume of gas entering Bulgaria and the third liberalization package to find options for how it should be transported through our gas transmission system to Serbia, Hungary, Macedonia and Greece. Borisov pointed out that this is a matter that concerns the European Commission and Russia. He informed the National Assembly that on 13 June a ministerial meeting, between representatives of the European Commission and Gazprom, would be held in Belgrade about how gas on the territory of Bulgaria should be traded, and another part of it will be through direct contracts with Serbia and Hungary.

At the beginning of June, President Rumen Radev took part in the summit of the so-called Bucharest group hosted by Warsaw and Polish President

Andrzej Duda. This regional initiative originated in 2015 in Bucharest and includes nine countries from Eastern Europe which are NATO member states. The aim of the meeting is to achieve a united and stronger position for the countries of Eastern Europe before the summit of the Alliance members in Brussels. The presidents of these countries issued a joint declaration calling for a stronger NATO presence in Eastern Europe. President Radev said at the forum that Bulgaria supports the efforts of NATO to build modern defense capabilities, and the modernization of the Bulgarian army is part of this process. According to the president, enlargement policy should be maintained, and Bulgaria will continue to support countries aspiring to full membership in NATO. Rumen Radev highlighted the strengthening of stability, the continuation of reforms, and the building of good neighborly relations and the promotion of the Euro-Atlantic perspective for the Western Balkans as a key priority for Bulgaria. Alliance relations with Russia must be driven by realism and pragmatism, in line with the NATO approach to developing defense capabilities and conducting dialogue.

The Bulgarian government welcomes the resolution to the name dispute between Macedonia and Greece. However, the agreed arrangement has led to contradictory responses in Bulgaria. The name "Republic of Northern Macedonia" has rekindled some old fears in Bulgaria that in this way Macedonia might express territorial claims to this country in the future, since Southwestern Bulgaria is part of Pirin Macedonia, i.e. to the north of the Greek administrative area of Macedonia. Up until now Bulgaria has not expressed any claims with regard to the name of its southwest neighbor, since in 1992 the country first recognized Macedonia as an independent state with the name "Republic of Macedonia". The impression given, that Bulgaria has claims regarding the name in the dispute between Greece and Macedonia was born out of controversial statements by Bulgarian Foreign Minister Ekaterina Zaharieva, who last year addressed Macedonian media, saying Bulgaria would definitely not support a name that contains geographical indications, especially Northern Macedonia. This position was extremely surprising, especially since it was expressed after

the signing of the Neighborhood Agreement between Bulgaria and Macedonia, and during the negotiations on its signing, Bulgaria did not utter a word on this issue. At the end of May, when it was mentioned that Ilinden Macedonia was a possible compromise, Minister Zaharieva said that Bulgaria would support this name because it proves our common history and only a few days later, when it was rejected by the Greek side, she said this idea hadn't been so good. After announcing that there is an agreement on the name "Republic of Northern Macedonia", Zaharieva welcomed this decision by forgetting about her comments of last year. The situation took on scandalous proportions after Prime Minister Boyko Borisov surprisingly refused to meet with Macedonian President Gjorge Ivanov during his visit to Sofia at the invitation of Bulgarian President Radev. Borisov declined the planned meeting with Ivanov, which was withdrawn at the last minute, as the Macedonian President had said he would not sign the treaty with Greece the previous evening. The Bulgarian government justified its refusal by stating that they did not want to interfere in Macedonia's domestic affairs, although with his refusal, Borisov accomplished just the opposite. Macedonian President Gjorge Ivanov expressed his surprise at Borisov's reaction. He pointed out that Borisov, as well as being Bulgaria's Prime Minister, was also the President of the EU Council, that he had always been in favor of finding consensus and how important it was for the integration of the Western Balkans, which he had set as a priority during the presidency. And now with this action, in Ivanov's words, the Bulgarian Prime Minister had taken one side. President Radev also commented on the unfavorable diplomatic situation for Bulgaria. He said it was Borisov's decision, but it sounded illogical that the one who called for dialogue should run away from it. Later, Prime Minister Borisov justified his decision on the grounds that Gjorge Ivanov knew very well that Bulgaria sincerely wishes Macedonia's membership in the EU and NATO. In his words, the Macedonian president has hindered the efforts of not only the two governments - the Macedonian and the Greek ones - engaged in the resolution of the name dispute but also of the EU countries. Borisov said it would be a betrayal of those efforts if he accepted Ivanov at this moment. At a press

conference after meeting with the Macedonian president, Rumen Radev said they had a serious conversation. Radev welcomed the name agreement between Macedonia and Greece, saying it was a step towards the integration of Macedonia into the EU and NATO.

With the approach of the end of the presidency, the assessments and the balance of the government's work began. Minister for the European Council Presidency Liljana Pavlova praised the work done, saying it was an assessment that was unambiguously given by all. According to her, Bulgaria has proved to be prepared not only at a professional and expert level, but also organizationally and logistically. Despite the intensified relations between the president and the government, Rumen Radev gave a positive assessment of the Bulgarian presidency. In his words, the government has shown courage by choosing as a top priority a difficult topic like the integration of the Western Balkans. According to Radev, the stability in the region is fragile, but it is important that the responsibility of pointing out the problems has been taken and that the Western Balkans are again the focus of attention. According to Radev, the government has succeeded in managing Europe's agenda by creating an atmosphere of honest and frank dialogue in search of progress in various areas - security, the digital market, and cohesion. The opposition has not yet given its assessment of the presidency. Kornelia Ninova said that the BSP would only do so when the presidency had ended, and after thorough analysis.

1.3 Refugee crisis

One of the topics of the Bulgarian Presidency was related to migration and the refugee crisis. Initially, the Bulgarian government made attempts to bring the issue of the quota allocation of refugees again to the agenda. This is, however, a matter that meets with strong resistance from the countries of the Visegrad group. On a number of occasions, the prime ministers of Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia said they would not support the Bulgarian proposal. The changed situation in Europe after the elections in Italy, the

problems in the coalition in Germany, and the differences between Chancellor Merkel and Interior Minister Seehofer on the subject of migrants led to a new Bulgarian proposal. Prime Minister Borisov announced that at the summit in Brussels at the end of June he would propose the closure of the EU's external borders and the passage of migrants only through checkpoints. In addition, economic migrants and those who did not meet the refugee criteria should be returned to their countries. According to the prime minister, Europe has turned into a broken yard and it is a gross mistake for member states to raise borders between each other, which in fact torpedoes the idea of freedom of movement. It is therefore very important that the external borders be closed and well-guarded. Regarding the refugee situation in Bulgaria, Boyko Borisov said that for one and a half years refugee pressure on Bulgaria has been reduced to zero. In his words, the country has proven "that it guards the EU external border strictly." In fact, migratory pressure on the country is insignificant. The data from the Ministry of Interior show that from the beginning of the year to May 610 illegally entering citizens were seized on the Bulgarian border. The refugee centers are empty – with a capacity of 5,190 places, 691 people are sheltered there.

BSP leader Kornelia Ninova said she would insist that Boyko Borisov should appear in parliament and inform the National Assembly what position he was going to take at the Brussels summit on the subject of migration and refugees. According to Ninova, 44,282 people are registered in Bulgaria as the first country of entry into the Union, people who have gone to other EU countries. She is of the opinion that if the proposals of German Interior Minister Seehofer are accepted, these people will be returned to Bulgaria. The position of BSP is to return refugees to the countries they came from.

2. State and development of the major political parties

2.1 Social Democratic and other center-left parties

2.1.1 BSP

Also during this quarter BSP continued with its active opposition. The party tried to be as involved as possible with the agenda, not only regarding internal political issues but also foreign policy issues, including those related to the EU presidency.

BSP leader Kornelia Ninova stepped up her activity regarding foreign policy. She visited Bratislava, at the invitation of former Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico, where she attended a meeting with similar parties in the Visegrad Four countries. The meeting ended with the adoption of a joint declaration on future cooperation, in which the parties would develop common positions on different issues in Europe. After the meeting, Ninova said that this format would become permanent, the idea being that the party leaders would meet every six months. The next meeting will be in Sofia, with the topic proposed by the BSP leader and accepted by her colleagues of EU-Russia relations being the chief focus.

The pressure of PES on the BSP to change the party's position with regard to the Istanbul Convention continued throughout this quarter. This was the reason why Kornelia Ninova again raised this issue in a plenum of the party held in June, with the party's position being reaffirmed against the adoption of the convention as it stands.

After the BSP plenum it became clear that the party will allocate BGN 2 million from the party subsidy for the launch of party television. The party's goal is to start broadcasting in early October. The idea is not for purely party TV to be the theme, but for it to be polythematic, so that a wider audience can be attracted, not just party sympathizers. The BSP press center announced that it is about to submit the documents to the Council of Electronic Media (CEM) to obtain a license for the television, and then the name of the future media will become clear.

With regards to the current topic of addressing disabled people's issues and mothers' protests for children with disabilities, Kornelia Ninova said that until parliamentary amendments have been passed, MEPs should not go on summer vacation. According to Ninova, a new model for caring for people with disabilities is needed. She has expressed concern that the contradictions between the various organizations that represent disabled people and the government are deteriorating.

In mid-June, BSP announced that it was introducing a vote of no confidence in the government on the subject of "Security". The party said they would file the request alone. The motives for the vote are related to the government's alleged inability to guarantee the security of citizens. The BSP said the events of recent months have shown that the government and the Ministry of the Interior have failed to fulfill one of their core functions. The party recalled the cases of the two escaped prisoners and the subsequent murder of one of them, after they had been hiding for nearly two months. This case is part of a series of incidents since the beginning of the year that show systemic weaknesses in police work. The murders of a tax officer and a businessman from Veliko Tarnovo, who were close to GERB, remain undisclosed. The Socialists demanded the resignation of Interior Minister Valentin Radev.

At the end of June the leader of the Agricultural Union "Alexander Stamboliiski" Spas Panchev was excluded from the parliamentary group of BSP for Bulgaria. Farmers are among the coalition partners of the BSP. The reason for Panchev's exclusion was the decision of the farmers to participate on their own in the local elections next year and not in a coalition with BSP. Panchev's exclusion is based on Article 22 of the Coalition Treaty, which reads: "a party, a member of the coalition, which has decided to stand alone in elections for MPs, and for president and vice president, as well as for municipal councilors, mayors and MEPs is expelled from the coalition." The second MP from the agricultural party - Dimitar Georgiev - decided to freeze his party membership, and therefore remained in the parliamentary group. BSP called on Spas Panchev to leave parliament as a moral gesture to voters who had voted for BSP for Bulgaria.

Panchev said he would remain in parliament and be an independent MP.

At the end of June, Zhelyu Boychev resigned as deputy chairman of the BSP parliamentary group. He announced that he would soon leave parliament and withdraw from politics. The reasons for this decision are personal. BSP leader Kornelia Ninova said she regretted Boichev's decision and that there was no conflict or problem within the party that led to this decision. Boychev is one of the young, active and dedicated politicians in BSP, who in recent years has given a new face to the party, so his withdrawal would be a loss for the BSP. He headed the temporary committee of inquiry examining the CEZ deal with Inercom. Despite the stated positions of Ninova and Boychev, there remains the feeling that behind this decision there are other motives, which for now remain hidden.

2.1.2 Other center-left parties

At the end of May, at its regular congress, ABV chose Rumen Petkov as their new leader. Before the parliamentary elections last year, ABV paved the way for the young chairman of the party in the face of Konstantin Prodanov, but now there seems to have been a change in the strategy of the party. Petkov received the trust of 579 of the 591 delegates in the forum. Prior to the vote, Konstantin Prodanov announced that he was in favor of the change of the course and the leadership of the party, which, in his opinion, should be radicalized. The founder of the party and former President Georgi Parvanov called for radical change and action. In his opinion, ABV should have a clear and robust conception of the many social conflicts. According to him, ABV should be able to lead real political battles, not to be an academic club. This requires a change of tactics - greater activity, and clear positions on every social problem. Parvanov urged the ABV Congress to give a mandate to party leadership to negotiate with similar political formations and form a new center-left coalition.

ABV supported the parliament's decision to put an end to the moratorium on the construction of the Belene NPP, again defending their position that

the project would be profitable and would create 30,000 jobs. Rumen Petkov said that many years have been lost in the realization of the project, but the final result is now more important – for the plant to be built. Regarding the state of the sector of "Security", Rumen Petkov, who was Interior Minister in Sergey Stanishev's cabinet, said the Ministry of Interior had demoralized the team, which had grown in recent years due to the lack of adequate reform and permanent restructuring in the sector. He pointed out that there had been bad staffing decisions, many of which were purely political, with professionals leaving the system and destroying the agency. Rumen Petkov predicts that the resignation of Interior Minister Valentin Radev is inevitable.

The leader of Movement 21 Tatiana Doncheva also criticized the work of the Ministry of the Interior and the Interior Minister, describing his behavior and statements in the last months as "inadequate". Doncheva also said that the government is generally lacking in capacity, so people cannot expect positive results and reforms. Doncheva was especially critical of Foreign Minister Ekaterina Zaharieva, who in her words has no competence to lead Bulgarian diplomacy, bearing in mind her inconsistent and contradictory statements regarding the new name of Macedonia.

2.2 Center-right parties

2.2.1 GERB

At the end of May GERB won the partial elections for mayor of the village of Galiche after defeating the candidate of the BSP in the runoff. For nearly 20 years Galiche was run by the scandalous Tsenko Chokov, who is currently serving a prison sentence. BSP has questioned the outcome of the election, saying it was won by GERB with manipulations because the voting list includes people who do not live in the village.

Apart from in Galiche, GERB won the mayoral elections in the villages of Lyaskovo in the district of Dobrich and Beden in the district of Smolyan. These results encouraged GERB on the eve of

local elections next year, with Tsvetan Tsvetanov saying that success even in such small settlements indicates that voters recognize GERB as the party that is capable of managing and responding to people's needs.

With regard to the motion of no confidence initiated by the BSP for the security sector, Tsvetan Tsvetanov said that BSP is seeking to reap party dividends at the end of the EU presidency. According to Tsvetanov, BSP is not behaving as a nationally responsible opposition, but acts in a partisan manner, because it cannot accept the successful presidency, which the government has implemented. According to Tsvetanov, the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) has no moral right to vote for mistrust in this sphere and has gone far back in time - to before 2009, when BSP was in power. Tsvetanov reiterated that at that time there was a record number of kidnappings and killings of organized criminal groups in the country, which, with GERB coming into power, were revealed so that convictions were made. Tsvetanov said the vote of no confidence is absolutely inappropriate. In his view, the society expects a full term of office. Tsvetanov pointed out that the Interior Ministry is doing its best to remedy the weaknesses in its work and mentioned that high-ranking officials had been dismissed. He is of the opinion that, after each crime committed, the Minister's resignation cannot be immediately demanded. According to Tsvetanov there is no alternative to the current government. The stability of the state has made it possible to carry out reforms in different sectors and to allocate additional funds as a result of economic growth. Tsvetanov pointed to the increase in teachers' salaries from next year, with the starting salary for a teacher amounting to BGN 900. With this, GERB has proved that they are fulfilling their pre-election promises.

During his tour of the GERB structures in Southwest Bulgaria, Tsvetan Tsvetanov said that the candidates of the party for the local elections for the next year are already very clear. Some of the candidates, in the words of Tsvetanov, will surprise the BSP, as mayors elected with the support of the Socialists are ready to be proposed by GERB because they are disappointed with the policy that

the Socialists are leading. Tsvetan Tsvetanov said that certain incumbent mayors will be nominated for a new mayoral mandate: those of Sofia - Yordanka Fandakova, Bourgas - Dimitar Nikolov, Varna - Ivan Portnich, Plovdiv - Ivan Totev, Stara Zagora - Zhivko Todorov, Veliko Tarnovo - Daniel Panov, and Blagoevgrad - Atanas Kambitov.

2.2.2 Other center-right parties

In the middle of April, DSB, "Yes, Bulgaria" and the "Greens" united in the "Democratic Bulgaria" coalition, and the idea is for the new coalition to join other opposition parties.

"Democratic Bulgaria" reacted sharply to the decision of the National Assembly to do away with the moratorium on the construction of the Belene NPP, organizing a protest against the parliament on this occasion, but it was small-scale. The formation said they would demonstrate resistance against this decision in the European institutions, where support will be sought against the implementation of the project. The reasons for this have been repeatedly touched on by representatives of the parties in "Democratic Bulgaria", and these are: the project is not economically profitable, it is corrupt in its essence and commits Bulgaria to dependence on Russia. "Democratic Bulgaria" issued a statement condemning the visit of Boyko Borisov to Moscow, which was determined a betrayal of national interests.

In mid-April, the Movement of Bulgaria of the Citizens (DBG) finally left the Reformist Bloc after it had unfrozen its membership a month earlier. The reason for the decision, according to the DBG leader, Delchev, was the unwillingness of some of the parties in the Republic of Bulgaria to oppose the "pro-corruption", in his words, governance of GERB and the United Patriots. In this way the Reformist Bloc virtually ceased to exist, as only the UDF and the Bulgarian New Democracy of Borislav Velikov remained in it. Delchev said that DBG are ready to cooperate with other right parties, which share their goal - changing the model of government.

The UDF has fallen into a serious internal conflict, showing that the party is in a difficult situation, which it is very difficult to come out of. In mid-April at a meeting of the National Council of the Party, which had to decide on what path it would take in the future, there were clashes because of the attempts of one of the factions in the party to remove the leader of UDF Lukarsky. In mid-May at a meeting of the UDF National Council, a decision was made that on July 7 a party election-report conference should be held to choose a new leadership. Lukarsky said he would not run for the party leadership. According to him, the UDF needs to be upgraded to give the Party new powers, and this should be through a change of leadership. The National Council decided that in the local elections, the primary organizations of the UDF would have the freedom to form coalitions at a local level at their discretion. During this session, a UDF faction around the deputy presidents of the party Emil Kabaivanov and Rumen Hristov summoned an alternative National Council in Plovdiv, which voted for the resignation of Bozhidar Lukarsky. It seems that this case will lead to judicial battles for the legitimacy of the decisions taken and the dispute between the rival factions.

2.3 Centrist parties

2.3.1 MRF

At the end of April, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) hosted the meeting of the Party of European Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE). MRF leader Mustafa Karadayi said at the forum that the EU is at a crossroads and that the MRF will be an active participant in the debate on the future of the Union and will push for a reform that will lead to closer integration within it. He called for the EU to become a zone free from radicalism and was against a Multi-Speed-Europe. For MRF, a scenario in which the EU will develop at several speeds is not a solution to common problems; this will only deepen them. In his words, the EU needs a common defense policy within NATO to ensure the prosperity and security of European citizens in an environment of changing geopolitical security. At the forum, Karadayi called on the Eu-

ropean People's Party to answer whether it shares GERB's coalition policy and culture, including the nationalist orientation of its government partners, and whether there is a change in the Euro-Atlantic orientation of GERB. The reason for this was the pro-Russian statements made by Volen Siderov at a forum in the Crimea, as well as the IMRO declaration against Serbia's entry into the EU. This, according to Karadayi, is turning into a tendency that undermines not only the Euro-Atlantic orientation of Bulgaria but also divides the EU.

The MRF reacted strongly to the decision of the Stara Zagora municipal council to rename 838 sites bearing Turkish-Arab names. This came after a proposal by the nationalist parties - VMRO, "Ataka" and NFSB, which was also supported by the municipal councilors of GERB and BSP, only those from the MRF voting against. At the end of June a similar proposal is expected to be considered by the municipal council in Shumen. In a statement on behalf of the party on the decision of the municipal council in Stara Zagora, MRF leader Mustafa Karadayi accused GERB of failing to tame the nationalists and instead turning nationalism into a basic state policy. He called on the responsible institutions to condemn this act because it creates tension and insecurity, undermines confidence in society and is a provocation to national security.

Yordan Tsonev called on Prime Minister Borisov to order the regional governor of Stara Zagora to reverse the decision of the municipal council in the city to change the names of the 838 localities in the area that contain Turkish-Arab names. According to him, this is the only way Borisov will prove with actions that he is a guarantor of the ethnic peace in the country, as he has emphasized on more than one occasion. Tsonev also urged the Prime Minister to order the GERB structures and their municipal councilors not to take any further action that threatens the ethnic peace in the country and the calmness of the citizens.

Regarding the vote of no confidence of BSP, MRF expressed readiness to support it. The party reiterated that at the end of last year, when the first no-confidence vote against the cabinet was being discussed, they had proposed that the BSP vote

should be precisely in this area because it is one of the most problematic sectors, of which the events of the last few months are indicative.

2.3.2 "Volya"

During this quarter Vesselin Mareshki's "Volya" party underwent another metamorphosis. The party that claimed to be liberal in the election campaign last year joined the Movement for a Europe of Nations and Liberties. In early May, Mareshki participated in a meeting of the far right in the French city of Nice, where the host was National Front Leader Marine Le Pen. After the forum, Mareshki said the EU needs a radical change because "Europe is dying and being robbed by a handful of supranational elites." This is why a strong representation of the parties in their family is needed in order to have a large and strong group in the European Parliament to become the bearer of change. In Mareshki's words the EU resembles the Soviet Union "with a feudal lord, some dictator at the top, and obedient republics, obedient subjects below." The idea of their movement is exactly the opposite – for strong European nations to form a strong united Europe.

According to his words, Europe has robbed the Bulgarian people, forbidding the construction of a new nuclear power plant, but making us shut down the Kozloduy nuclear reactors as a condition for entering the Union. Apart from that, the EU is responsible for the Bulgarian government's decision to abandon the South Stream project, but Germany is now building North Stream, which, according to him, is proof of its double standards for Europe.

Mareshki threw in another unexpected idea – that of organizing a referendum on Bulgaria's exit from NATO, with this being one of the main initiatives of the party in the campaign for the European Parliamentary elections next year. According to Mareshki, NATO "has given nothing to the country, but has robbed it", because it now required the country to spend several billion for a "pointless pile of iron", referring to the fighters that Bulgaria intends to buy. According to him, if NATO is indeed a partner, it can simply give Bulgaria a few planes. The idea

of leaving NATO was greeted with mockery by the other political parties in the country and state institutions, the overall assessment being that it was downright populism.

"Volya" was the only parliamentary party that did not support the project for the modernization of the Bulgarian army and the purchase of new weapons. Speaking at the parliamentary platform, "Volya" leader Vesselin Mareshki said this was unnecessary spending of funds that could be used to increase pensions, salaries and social payments.

Mareshki has requested the resignation of Minister of Defense Krasimir Karakachanov, accusing him of failing to cope with his obligations, but without giving specific reasons. The widespread attacks of "Volya" against the United Patriots show that this is due to tactical considerations. Mareshki directs his criticism towards the smaller partner in government, not towards GERB, in an attempt, on one hand, to demonstrate some opposition in view of the upcoming EP and local elections and, on the other, to raise his price in case of a possible repositioning of forces in parliament.

An interesting moment, which became clear from Mareshki's Facebook profile, was his presence at the Moscow parade on May 9 for the Day of Victory, where he welcomed the celebration of Europe. It was neither clear what the nature of the visit was, nor whether Mareshki had official or party meetings in Moscow.

2.4 Nationalist parties

2.4.1 United Patriots

In mid-April, "Ataka" leader Volen Siderov, along with MPs Desislav Chukolov and Yavor Notev, who is Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly, visited Crimea and participated in the Economic Forum "The Global Future. The Future of Russia." In Crimea Siderov said that Crimea was not annexed or occupied, and that anyone who visited the region would see what progress has been made there over the past two years. In his words, the EU must become emancipated from the US and warm up

its relations with Russia. Such a change, according to Siderov, will come soon after EP elections next year. Then in his opinion in the EP more patriotic formations such as "Ataka" will be included, which will hold national and conservative values, and this will affect Europe's policies towards Russia.

The coalition partners of "Ataka" in the government have distanced themselves from Siderov's words. The chairman of the GERB parliamentary group and deputy chairman of the party Tsvetan Tsvetanov said that the country has a clear position on the relations of Crimea and its annexation from Russia, and that Siderov's visit has no bearing on the position of the government.

NFSB leader Valeri Simeonov, part of the United Patriots, announced that he does not approve of this visit and has nothing to do with it. Despite the differences with "Ataka", Valeri Simeonov said that this in no way prevents them from being together in a coalition and defending Bulgarian national interests.

In the past quarter the tension between Deputy Prime Minister Valeri Simeonov and Minister of Tourism Nikolina Angelkova from GERB continued on the occasion of the actions of the NFSB leader on the Bulgarian Black Sea coast in which he tried to limit the noise in the restaurants as well as the issue of concessions on the beaches. It has reached the point where Valeri Simeonov sent a signal to the Prosecutor's Office against Angelkova and the Ministry of Tourism in connection with the development of the southern beach of Sunny Beach.

In the past quarter, Valeri Simeonov has also taken another initiative - for new regulations in the gambling business, which has triggered a wide public and political response. He has proposed changes to the Gambling Act, which provide for a ban on the mass distribution of tickets, chips and slips, the restriction of sales to places licensed by the State Gambling Commission, and a restriction on the advertising of gambling.

Also, during this quarter, there was an exchange of correspondence between the leaders of the three formations in the United Patriots for some reason or another, which became commonplace.

For example, Volen Siderov reacted harshly after the decision of his partners in the United Patriots Krasimir Karakachanov and Valeri Simeonov to hold talks with the BSP, without him being informed about it and without a decision of the Coalition Council. Karakachanov and Simeonov rejected the speculation that the talks showed any political reorientation and convergence with the opposition, saying that priority bills were discussed. Karakachanov sought support from BSP for the rearmament of the army, which affected the general national interest, and Valeri Simeonov with regard to the Gambling Act.

Despite the disagreement on certain issues among the individual leaders, the coalition remains stable because the parties have no interest in leaving the government or provoking early elections.

2.5 Positions of Political Parties on Foreign and European Policies

With regard to the signed agreement between Macedonia and Greece on the name of "Republic of Northern Macedonia", the main parties in Bulgaria came up with positions as expected. BSP said the country should stick to the position that has been held by Bulgarian presidents and prime ministers so far, which expresses reservations over adding the name to geographical epithets. Kristin Vigenin of BSP said that Macedonia should provide additional guarantees that the new name will not be a prerequisite for territorial claims upon Bulgaria. He explained that BSP wants Bulgaria's position on the beginning of talks on Macedonia's EU membership to be bound by such guarantees.

ABV took a similar stance. The party welcomed the resolution of the name dispute and expressed support for Macedonia's bid for EU and NATO membership, but that "this should not happen at the expense of Bulgaria." ABV recalled Boyko Borisov's statement in 2012, which stated then that "the option of Northern Macedonia is absolutely unacceptable." The newly-elected party leader Rumen Petkov said that a geographical part of Northern Macedonia is Pirin- Macedonia, and this could be the cause of a potential territorial claim to the country.

The United Patriots welcomed the news of the compromise reached between the governments of Macedonia and Greece. According to them, this solution to the problem will strengthen stability in the Balkans. The rights and interests of more than 100,000 Bulgarian citizens in Macedonia, as well as Macedonian citizens with Bulgarian self-awareness, should be protected and respected under the signed Neighborhood Agreement.

The MRF said that any understanding of the name of Macedonia in their dispute with Greece ought to be supported, as it would open up the country's path to membership of Euro-Atlantic structures.

Deputy Chairman of GERB and leader of the parliamentary group of the party Tsvetan Tsvetanov evaluated the signed name agreement between Macedonia and Greece as extremely important for the security in the region.

3. Public opinion

A study by the Trend Research Center conducted in early June shows the assessments of Bulgarian citizens about the EU Council presidency of Bulgaria. 56% of respondents declared that they do not track news related to the presidency as opposed to 40% who do. 41% of voters are of the opinion that Bulgaria has done well with the presidency, whereas 19% are of the opposite opinion.

The survey also examines the attitudes of citizens towards EU membership and NATO membership. 59% of Bulgarians would vote for Bulgaria to stay in the European Union in a referendum and one fifth for leaving. In an identical question about NATO, almost half (49%) would vote for Bulgaria to remain in the North Atlantic Alliance, against 24% who think our country should leave.

40% of Bulgarians believe that the EU needs a substantial change in its way of functioning and 29% think there should be a small change. Only 7% of all respondents are of the opinion that the EU needs no change.

The study shows that there is no significant change in electoral attitudes. GERB continues to be the leading political power, and 23.1% would vote for the party. The second political power is the main opposition party BSP with 19.8%. Then come MRF with 6.6% and the United Patriots with 5.5%. These are the four formations that surpass the four percent electoral barrier. 1.9% of respondents would vote for "Volya". The new unification "Democratic Bulgaria" receives 2.1% and the disintegrating Reformist Block gets 1.2%.

4. Main conclusions and forecasts

1. The Presidency of Bulgaria of the Council of the EU can be judged to have been a successful political, logistical and communication plan. The theme of the "Western Balkans", which was long absent from the highest European forums, was back on the agenda again. Despite the difficulties and challenges faced by the countries in the region, the prospects for integration open new horizons to solve long-standing controversies. The solution to the Macedonian name dispute reached by Skopje and Athens has shown that dialogue is possible in the name of a common European future. It should be noted that the Bulgarian government contributed to this result as well. The Neighborhood Agreement between Bulgaria and Macedonia, signed last year, began the process.

2. With the vote of no confidence in the government by the BSP, the Socialists are attempting again to take the initiative as an opposition, dictating the political agenda in the context of the finishing presidency. Problems in the sector of "Security", especially the fight against crime, are an area where the government is showing serious deficits and is a suitable subject to be attacked. It would seem that, with the end of the presidency, the BSP will step up the pressure on the government on a number of socially sensitive issues.

3. The imminent elections to local authorities and the European Parliament in the coming year have led to activation of smaller left-wing parties and will likely boost the search for new coalition formulas. An example of this is the change of leader-

ship in ABV. With an experienced and recognizable figure like Rumen Petkov, ABV is trying to step up its activity and political initiatives, which have been very limited in recent months. This move, however, has shown that the attempt to renew the party by paving the way for politicians of a young generation has failed.

4. Over the past few months, GERB as a party has focused their efforts above all on providing support and domestic political comfort to the government in the work of the presidency. GERB quickly managed to suppress the controversy with their coalition partners from the United Patriots. They remained in the background, displaced by the main foreign policy events that were in the focus of public attention. With the end of the presidency, unresolved domestic problems will once again come up on the agenda, and GERB will face the difficult task of seeking ways to solve them. Problems in some sectors show that, besides changing policies, government changes are also imperative, and it is very likely that very soon we will be witnessing ministerial shuffles.

5. Despite the momentary controversy between the leaders of the three parties in the United Patriots, the coalition remains unified and retains its electoral support. The three parties are aware that their chances of parliamentary representation will be minimal, and successful results in the elections next year require unity.

6. The MRF supported the vote of no confidence in the government submitted by BSP. The party

continues with its criticism of the government because of the involvement of nationalists in it. After the split last year, the party appears, at first sight at least, to be consolidated internally. This is in fact one of the main challenges in view of the forthcoming elections next year. As a strong regional party, local elections have always been of paramount importance for the MRF, but in recent years GERB has managed to break into a number of locations in mixed areas, to which the MRF is increasingly unable to respond.

7. "Volya" became an openly populist formation with marked anti-European rhetoric after joining the formation of European nationalists. The idea of organizing a referendum on the country's exit from NATO was met with irony because of this showing yet another metamorphosis of the party, but it actually shows a well-thought-out strategy for participation in the European Parliamentary elections in 2019.

8. The extra-parliamentary right made a further attempt at consolidation with the establishment of "Democratic Bulgaria". However, recent polls do not give it a chance at this stage of joining parliament. The formation was vehemently opposed to the decision to do away with the moratorium on the construction of Belene NPP, and this issue would appear to be one of the main issues in the run-up to the election campaign next year. The UDF, for its part, sank into heavy internal struggles, with the expectation of choosing a new leader, which will show the direction the party will take in the future.

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Imprint

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