

BAROMETER

Political parties in Bulgaria

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- Recent months will be remembered for the foreign political activity of the government. The good neighbour treaty signed with Macedonia stands out as a particularly big success. It had been postponed for years by the Macedonian side. The treaty improves the perspectives for Macedonia's integration into NATO and the EU, and Bulgaria demonstrated that it can be an important political factor in the region.
- BSP started the new political season actively. It started putting forward alternative legislation motions, which leads to focusing the political debate on issues that are important to this country. In this way BSP shows that it can be not only a strong opposition with a large parliamentary group in terms of numbers, but that it is trying to establish itself as a possible alternative to the government in the future.
- GERB was rocked by several scandals during the summer months, which had a negative impact on the public image of the party. At the same time, the foreign political pro-activeness of the government and of PM Boyko Borisov compensated for the internal political negatives which GERB had to face over the past months. At this stage, GERB manages to maintain a relatively good dialogue with its coalition partners, despite the fact that the Deputy Prime Minister and NFSB leader Valery Simeonov mentioned that there had been problems in communication.

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1. Political Situation

1.1 Domestic Policy

In terms of internal politics, the summer months were calm, with no significant events and political tension. In early September, at the start of the new parliamentary session, all political parties presented their priorities for the forthcoming political season. The declarations delivered from the parliamentary podium, which traditionally open each session of the National Assembly, indicated that the main priority of all parliamentary groups will be the forthcoming presidency of the EU Council in the first semester of next year. The opposition, represented by BSP and MRF pledged their support for the efforts of the government in the imminent presidency. At the same time, some key topics were outlined on which there will be discord and political clashes. The main political debate where the parties in power and the opposition will differ is the voting on the budget for next year. Also, passing the new anti-corruption act will be subject to serious political contradictions.

A highlight of the new parliamentary session will be the promulgation of a new Anti-Corruption Act as per recommendation of one of the recent EC reports under the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism. This issue clashed two drafts for an act – that of the government, supported by the majority in the National Assembly, and that of the BSP. The two drafts are based on a different way of thinking. The draft tabled by the government provides for the creation of a conglomerated body on the basis of commissions and bodies that have already existed thus far, in order to have better coordination of the inspections of the property of persons in senior positions in the government and the leadership. The draft provides for the Chairman of that new body to

be elected by Parliament.

The draft of the BSP provides for the establishment of an Anti-Corruption Agency with investigation functions and for the Director thereof to be appointed by the President of the country. BSP had a series of meetings with the President, the Prosecutor General and the Presidents of the Supreme Court of Cassation and the Supreme Administrative Court. President Radev expressed his readiness to appoint the Head of the anti-corruption body. Prosecutor General Tsatsarov dubbed the draft contradictory as far as the investigation functions are concerned, as they are the task of the Office of the Prosecutor and the Ministry of Interior. The President of the Supreme Court of Cassation Lozan Panov stated that both drafts – that of the government and that of BSP – do not provide an answer to the major issue: why one needs a new body when there are already institutions tasked with countering corruption.

Sources from GERB stated that the President may not appoint the head of the new anti-corruption body, because it is only the National Assembly that can have an efficient oversight on the operation of that body.

After having elected the professional quota of the new Supreme Judicial Council in the summer, as soon as the new parliamentary session opened, the National Assembly elected the members in the parliamentary quota. Although the parties in power said that the procedure was public and transparent, a number of NGOs and experts expressed their suspicions of preliminary agreements between parties and quota distribution. In fact, the initial expectations that there would be 4 nominees elected from GERB, 3 from BSP and two each from MRF and the United Patriots were confirmed. The European Commission followed closely the election of the new SJC in view of the next CVM progress report. In

this respect, the election of the new President of the Supreme Administrative Court Georgi Cholakov was equally important. So far, he has been a judge at the Supreme Administrative Court and is regarded as close to the outgoing President Georgi Kolev. As per the Constitution, in order for the newly elected President of the Supreme Administrative Court to take the office officially, a Presidential Decree is needed. The President may refuse to approve the nomination, but only once. President Radev announced that it would be more appropriate for the newly elected Supreme Judicial Council to elect the SAC President so that, as President Radev put it, the new President has a lot more respect. The decision of the President of the Republic is still pending.

This year too, there is a positive trend in the development of this country's economy. Gross Domestic Product has grown by 3.6% in the second quarter of 2017. The increase compared to the first quarter was 0.9%. Expert evaluations of the National Institute of Statistics (NSI) GDP in the second quarter reached BGN 24.309 billion in nominal terms. The foreign trade balance is in the positive. Employment is growing; unemployment has shrunk in the second quarter of 2017. The Unemployment rate is 6.3%, 1.7 % less than that reported in the second quarter of 2016. 213,900 unemployed remain registered in the Employment offices.

According to data of the Ministry of Finance, at the end of June there was a budgetary surplus of BGN 1.78 billion. The revenue in the first six months was BGN 17.48 billion, whereas BGN 14.54 billion was from taxes, which is 51.9% of the plan for the year in total. The revenue from social security and health insurance contributions was BGN 4 billion in total. Non-taxation proceeds amounted to BGN 2.27 billion. And the spending totalled

BGN 15.74 billion for the first six months of this year.

The improvement of the economic state of this country and the promises of the people in power for income increases (which they made in the election campaign) enhance the expectations of citizens and of a number of entities in the public sector for an increase of their income. This is why protests of several labour organisations and sectors are not unlikely, demanding higher income on the eve of promulgating the government budget for next year. They will influence the debate for passing it. The protests of police officers and the staff of the Ministry of Interior, which we had several months ago, were renewed. Police Unions demand a back-dated pay rise, as well as an allowance for clothes.

At the end of September, the government passed a report on the state of national security in 2016 stating that Russia is one of the main foreign political threats. The document says that the actions of Russia are a source for regional instability and that the security challenges in the regions of the Baltic and Black Sea are growing, where Russia is enhancing its military capabilities and increasing its military operations. The deterioration of the relations between the Russian Federation and NATO and EU is also determined as a problem. This creates serious trials for the existing European security infrastructure.

Further threats are listed, like the ongoing military actions in Syria, the pressure of refugees and migration, as well as the risk of establishing terrorist cells. According to the report the trends of the development of the international environment outline a predominantly hybrid nature of the future risks and threats. Attempts of foreign states to form public opinion by way of disinformation, propaganda campaigns, using social media for

spreading misleading information, financing parties and populist organizations are a cause for concern.

Prime Minister Borisov stated that the report is not aimed against Russia; it is rather in conformity with the fact that Bulgaria is a NATO member and since all the papers of the Alliance read that, after the annexation of Crimea and the war in Eastern Ukraine, Russia is a threat to the NATO member states, so Bulgaria may be a possible target in a potential war. Borisov pointed out that Bulgaria maintains friendly and pragmatic relations with Russia and even during his meeting with Alexis Tsipras in Greece one of the topics they discussed was to work for lifting the sanctions against Russia and for normalizing the relations between the EU and the Russian Federation.

At the end of September there was some tension between the government and President Rumen Radev regarding the results of the work of the Parliamentary Committee, which had to carry out an inquiry on the decision of the caretaker government to select the Gripen fighter planes for the public procurement of new fighter planes for the Bulgarian Air Force. As soon as it was established it was dubbed by many the "Anti-Radev" Committee. At the end of the day, the Committee decided that the procedure had to be restarted with review of the bids of Gripen, Eurofighter and Portugal, who offer second-hand F16 planes. President Radev reacted sharply and said that the lobbyists had benefitted most from this decision. In fact, it will take more than a year submit new bids, in order to start the procedure anew. President Radev said that Prime Minister Boyko Borisov had been misled by his advisors and that his MPs had not read the documents they had passed themselves in the previous National Assembly. Borisov, on his part,

said that Radev should name the lobbyists and not just throw around unfounded allegations. According to him, money is needed not only for the Air Force, but also for the Army, as well as for the police, for pensioners, for new trains, for, railroads etc. Actually, the decision to procure new fighter planes was taken by the majority and the previous government of Boyko Borisov. This is why his current stance seems strange and it gave the President a reason to say that Borisov changes his position all the time. GERB MPs, on their part, accused Radev of lobbyism in favor of Gripen. This conflict may make the tension between the President and the government stronger - even more so, given the fact that various media close to the government started a campaign against the President.

In late September the TV showman Slavi Trifonov stated that he would work on a new political project and would look for people to replace the current political elite, which, in his words, was exhausted. Trifonov has had ambitions to enter politics for a long time and one of his steps towards that was a referendum to amend the election rules, which he initiated, but he did not get sufficient votes in order to make its outcome mandatory. The lack of confidence in politicians on the part of many citizens and Slavi Trifonov's popularity – particularly among young people – make interest in his future intentions even stronger. For the time being, however, they are just intentions and it is difficult to assess his chances of succeeding.

1.1 Foreign and European Policy

A day prior to the date of significance for Bulgaria and Macedonia – 2 August, marking the Ilinden-Preobrazhenie (Transfiguration) Uprising and celebrated as the National Day of the Republic of Macedonia, in Skopje the

Prime Ministers of the Republic of Macedonia and the Republic of Bulgaria signed the long-awaited treaty of friendship, good neighbourhood and cooperation between the two countries.

The treaty provides for the two countries not to make territorial claims against each other and not allow adversary actions against the other country on their territory. A joint expert committee will be established to deal with historical and educational matters, which should contribute to the objective interpretation of the historic events of impact on both countries.

Bulgaria and Macedonia will organize joint celebration of historic events and pay homage to historic personalities, aiming at strengthening good neighbourly relations in the spirit of European values. The Republic of Macedonia confirmed that its Constitution may not and must not, either now or in the future, be interpreted of being the grounds for intervention in the home affairs of the Republic of Bulgaria. Within three months from the treaty entering into force, Bulgaria and Macedonia will establish a Joint Intergovernmental Committee co-chaired by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of both countries. The Committee will meet once a year and will monitor the efficient enforcement of the treaty.

Prime Minister Borisov said that Bulgaria and the Republic of Macedonia have arrived at the conclusion without any go between that peace and good neighbourly relations are more important than anything else. Borisov emphasized that the term “common history” brings people closer together and provides prospects, rather than divisions. In his words, signing the document sets the “tone for political stability and maturity and carries the message of peace, prosperity, and investment climate, as well as prospects for young people to travel but stay to live in the Balkans.” Borisov

expressed his expectation of a positive reaction on behalf of the EU and wished that the Republic of Macedonia become part of the European family.

Prime Minister Zoran Zaev on his part stated that the two countries have taken a historic step “forward together to the future”. In his words, signing the treaty demonstrates that where there is political will and desire to progress, issues are resolved. Zaev said that the signed document is a common success for both countries and contributes to the political stabilization of the countries in the region providing prospects for the whole of Eastern Europe.

During the visit, two memoranda were also signed – for the development of the railway links between Sofia and Skopje, and for cooperation in the area of natural gas.

On 25 and 26 August the President of France Emanuel Macron visited Bulgaria upon the invitation of President Radev and Prime Minister Boyko Borisov. The visit was agreed during the visit of the Bulgarian Prime Minister in Paris several months ago. The perspectives for the development of the bilateral relations between Bulgaria and France, bilateral economic, investment and cultural cooperation, the security of external EU borders, as well as ideas for the future of Europe were some of the points of emphasis in the talks between the French President and President Radev and Prime Minister Borisov. The priorities of the forthcoming Bulgarian presidency of the EU Council, the European prospects for the Western Balkans and Bulgaria becoming part of the Schengen area and a member of the Eurozone were discussed.

In the meeting, the efforts of Bulgaria and France were stressed for managing the migration influx to Europe, whereby President Macron underscored the necessity of reforming

the European Asylum Policy. President Macron confirmed France's support for Bulgaria's accession to Schengen as well as for Bulgaria becoming part of the discussion on Schengen reforms.

The assessment was shared that the EU needs a new impetus in the process of European integration. The multiple crises in the regions neighboring the EU require a common response, as both presidents stated and singled out the importance of developing common European defense. The Bulgarian President noted the excellent cooperation between the armed forces of Bulgaria and France and thanked for France's support in the process of transformation and modernization of the Bulgarian armed forces. On his part, President Macron confirmed France's readiness to continue supporting the development of the defense capabilities of Bulgaria as a factor of stability in a region close to a number of crises.

The French President sought Bulgaria's support for the reform of the European Directive regulating secondment of employees to the EU and the so-called "social dumping". President Radev stressed that it falls within the competence of the government, but it is important that it becomes part of the big debate on building a social Europe. Radev added that Bulgaria is against the workers' social security fraud. However, he linked the change in the current regulation with the more general economic discrepancies in the EU. In his words, "there are other problems like tax dumping too, but there is also pay of the workers in the new member states that is only a fraction of that of the pay of their colleagues in the old member states for the same work." The Bulgarian President underscored the necessity to maintain the cohesion policy that leads "to real convergence".

Borisov also established a similar link; he said that one needs a quicker increase in the income and improvement of the standard of living in the new member states from Eastern Europe, in order to restrict the migration towards Western Europe.

On 5 September, Prime Minister Borisov visited Greece and met with his colleague Alexis Tsipras. They discussed the refugee crisis and the pressure on the borders of Bulgaria and Greece. The Ministers of Transport of both countries signed a memorandum for the construction of a high-speed railway corridor connecting with a high-speed railway line the ports of Thessaloniki, Kavala and Alexandroupolis on the Mediterranean with the Bulgarian ports of Burgas and Varna on the Black Sea and Russe on the river Danube. The estimates show that Bulgaria has to invest more than 1 billion Euro in the project and that the overall cost will be as high as 4 billion Euro. From this project Bulgaria wins future development of the ports of Burgas and Varna, a link to Alexandroupolis, and the construction of a modern line from Varna to Rousse.

Bulgaria had a strong reaction to the law passed by the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, which reads that after the 5th grade students will not be able to learn their mother tongue. The Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that a letter co-signed also by the Ministers of the Foreign Affairs of Hungary, Romania and Greece had been sent to the Minister of the foreign Affairs of Ukraine demanding that the education law not affect the rights of the minorities to learn their mother tongue.

PES leader Sergey Stanishev said that the issue would be brought up officially by the European Parliament delegation, which would be on a mission to Kiev at the end of September.

In a special letter, MEPs from Bulgaria, Po-

land, Romania, Slovakia, Hungary and Croatia expressed their concern that the new law contradicts the international commitments Ukraine had made as part of the partnership agreement with the EU; it violates the rights of the minorities and builds up ethnic tensions. During the visit of President Radev to the session of the UN General Assembly, he talked on this topic with his Ukrainian colleague Petro Poroshenko, who assured the Bulgarian President that the law would in no way affect the rights of the Bulgarian minority.

1.3. Refugee crisis

The government and Prime Minister Borisov have seen the reduction of refugee pressure on Bulgaria as a success. According to Borisov, this is due to the diplomatic efforts the country has made in recent years in its relations with Turkey. The construction of the fence along the border has also played its part.

Interior Minister Valentin Radev pointed out that in recent months the pressure on the Bulgarian border has decreased by 70 percent as a result of the efforts made by the Bulgarian authorities, the EU financial assistance and the temporary engineering facility on the Bulgarian-Turkish border. Radev stressed that the agreement between Turkey and the EU is working very well, including on a bilateral basis.

In mid-September, Romanian coastguards rescued 153 migrants from a Black Sea vessel after receiving a signal for help. The ship was towed to Constantza. According to initial data among the migrants there were 53 children. Migrants are increasingly using this route and trying to cross the Black Sea from Turkey in an attempt to reach Romanian territory. Several days later, a tragic incident occurred when 15 people drowned and 20 were missing after a boat with migrants capsized in the Black Sea

off the coast of Turkey. Turkish coast guards managed to save 38 people. All this shows that the refugee traffic already has a new route along the Balkan route and in future it could also be directed towards Bulgarian territorial waters in the Black Sea, after the wall along the border with Turkey turns out to be a serious barrier.

2. State and development of major political parties

2.1. Social Democratic and other center-left parties

2.1.1. BSP

2.1.1.1. Condition

During this quarter BSP intensified its opposition activity. If, until recently, the party's opposition activity was primarily a verbal attack on its opponents from GERB, there is now a change in behavior. The BSP has directed its efforts in developing alternatives to government policies and legislative initiatives, which leads to a substantive policy debate - concrete policies and a clash of ideas. In this regard, the BSP anti-corruption bill, as an alternative to that of GERB, which has already been mentioned, was particularly reflected in the public space. In this way, BSP is positioning itself on one of the most important issues for society - the fight against corruption, and what makes an impression is that the Socialist project is more radical than that of GERB. While the GERB project envisages that the new anti-corruption body will rather monitor and report to the competent authorities in cases of suspicion of corruption, the BSP draft provides for it to have investigative functions. The debate on the adoption of the new anti-corruption law is yet to come, and it appears that this will be the main clash between the ruling party and BSP during this political season.

The BSP has demanded that they also pro-

pose an alternative budget for the next year, which shows that the debate on its vote in parliament will be exacerbated. And during this quarter BSP recalled GERB's pre-election promises to raise incomes, but this has not happened, exemplifying protests by the Ministry of Interior employees or the insignificant increase in pensions, which was one of the main political promises during the pre-election campaign by the coalition partners of the GERB "United Patriots".

At the opening of the autumn parliamentary session at the beginning of September, BSP leader Cornelia Ninova read out a declaration on behalf of the parliamentary group outlining the priorities in the legislative work that was to be followed by socialists. Ninova mentioned that in the new session the National Assembly would have two priorities - the Presidency of the Council of the EU and the adoption of the next year's budget.

Ninova said that the main strategic goal for the party was raising income and reducing poverty. According to her, "there are also working poor - one in every ten" in the country. She pointed out that the efforts of the government should focus on education, the economy and the fight against corruption in order to fight poverty. Cornelia Ninova said that BSP will propose amendments to the Pre-school and School Education Act, with an emphasis on school drop-outs.

The contradictions in BSP, after Georgi Gergov's resignation from the Party's Executive Bureau, have disappeared, although Gergov last month again attacked Ninova and the leadership, saying that they were leading the party in the wrong direction that they were deprived of proven experts and parliamentarians like Mikhail Mikov, Atanas Merjanov and Yanaki Stoilov, and this could be seen in the work of the parliamentary group. Gergov accused

Ninova that instead of using the proven lawyers in BSP, the party paid a law firm to write the anti-corruption bill. That, according to Gergov, is incomprehensible and inexplicable. The BSP leadership acknowledged that they were using the services of a law firm, but said it had been done before.

Former BSP leader Mikhail Mikov criticized the leadership of the party and the work of the parliamentary group. The reason for this was the election of members of the Supreme Judiciary Council from the parliamentary quota. In Mikov's words, the BSP has shown that it is not a clear opposition. He believes that there are many problems in the BSP that are not solved in the direction of opening the party to voters. According to him, the BSP cannot reach people and prove it is the authentic left party.

2.1.1.2. Recommendations

BSP should continue to offer alternative policies, subjecting them to public discussion, not only in party structures, but also among a wider range of citizens. It would be a good idea for the party to begin preparations for the local elections in 2019 at an earlier stage by stepping up its local structures. It is important to allow local party structures to actually have the final say in nominees for mayors of municipalities and settlements, not just formal, as it has been over the years, and this has led to demotivation of local assets. As the main left party, BSP approves of it as the initiator of a dialogue with other left and centrist formations in the direction of finding allies and building coalitions at local level.

2.1.2. ABV - Movement 21

2.1.2.1. Condition

After the elections, ABV and Movement 21 do not show any closer relations between themselves, nor common positions or initia-

tives. The coalition between them was pre-election and now it seems that each of the parties goes their own way. With the approach of local elections in 2019, it is not impossible for the two formations to relaunch their cooperation again.

The relations between ABV and Movement 21 with the leading left party - BSP are also stagnant. Moreover, the BSP received heavy criticism from the two formations. And this only reinforces the tendency that dialogue is missing and the prospects for closer cooperation or reunification of the left are receding over time. Especially since the BSP established itself as the main opposition party with a large-scale parliamentary group.

In the past quarter a few particularly critical statements of the leader of Movement 21 Tatyana Doncheva, addressing both the government and the BSP, will be remembered. Doncheva said that the state is governed by the Mafia and that at the highest state level, decisions are dictated by how to “steal” more. She even said that the country is heading towards fascism, because anyone can be charged with anything, if it is so decided, for example, to ruin a business after pressure from the state. According to her, this is being done at the moment with the private arms companies Emko and Dunarit, because the businessman and MP from MRF Delyan Peevsky wants to take them and the state cooperates with him through the Minister of Economy Karanikolov, who, according to Doncheva, is a protégé of Peevsky.

Doncheva also supported the protest of workers in Dunarit and Emko, who protested to the National Assembly because of the revoked licenses for trading companies. The topic “Dunarit” was also commented on by the ABV leader Konstantin Prodanov, who said that certain circles are currently empowered use their

position to “hit” several private enterprises. In his words, however, they do so in a way that will also ruin state-owned enterprises in the industry. According to Prodanov, “Dunarit” is part of the struggle to overcome the legacy of the bankrupt Corporate Commercial Bank.

Tatyana Doncheva criticized the BSP and its leader, Kornelia Ninova, for having participated in the election of the parliamentary quota of the Supreme Judicial Council and the six candidates nominated by the socialists have chosen the three who, according to her, are the most inappropriate and convenient for GERB. According to Doncheva, the Bulgarian Socialist Party does not show willingness and desire for genuine judicial reform because they are part of the status quo and cannot get away from certain dependencies that guide much of the party’s processes. Doncheva also criticized the anti-corruption bill of the BSP, which, according to her, does not clearly state what this body will do and what its structure will be. Everything else, according to Doncheva, for example who will appoint the body, or whether there will be investigative functions, is irrelevant.

2.1.2.2. Recommendations

ABV and Movement 21 can enhance internal party work, and if they want to continue their cooperation with each other, it is a good idea to start with common political positions on the topics of the day. Unlike up to now for them just to be left with the episodic participation of their leaders in television shows where they discuss the situation in the country as political analysts. The work of politicians is to point out the problems and to offer solutions, not to be political commentators, which is the lasting impression that the leaders of both formations give people. Political positions in the form of declarations and political documents

will ensure more political weight.

2.1.3. “Bulgarian Social Democrats” Party

2.1.3.1. Condition

Also during this quarter there was no change in the status of the “Bulgarian Social Democrats” party. There is no inner-party life; the party is unrecognizable in the public space, even among the broader left-wing electorate; there are no media appearances.

2.1.3.2. Recommendations

The recommendations remain the same as in the previous quarter: the party must re-establish its internal party activity; it must strengthen its media presence; it has to express positions on major political issues and the country’s agenda; to seek dialogue with other left-wing and social-democratic formations in order to implement meaningful and meaningful initiatives.

2.2. Center-right parties

2.2.1. GERB

In the past quarter, GERB focused its efforts on governance. The party highlighted above all the foreign-political activity of the government, which was reported as successful and proof of the strengthening of the role of the country at European and international level. The agreement of good neighborliness between Bulgaria and Macedonia and the growing influence of Bulgaria in the region, as a result of the diplomatic efforts of the government and Prime Minister Boyko Borisov, was particularly highly rated.

At the opening of the new parliamentary session in early September, Tsvetan Tsvetanov read a statement on behalf of the GERB Parliamentary Group, which outlined their priorities. Tsvetanov said he was confident that the program of the government expresses

their firm readiness for a full 4-year ruling mandate. He mentioned that the government will work for stronger integration processes in Europe, and the GERB parliamentary group will do its utmost to that end. Tsvetanov has given assurances that the country’s accession to Schengen and the eurozone are fundamental priorities for GERB. In his words, Bulgaria should make the most of the forthcoming presidency to improve its authority in the Union. According to Tsvetanov, the opposition must understand that gaining sympathy does not stem from fake news and oppression of the opponent, but from the ability to evaluate good political ideas and to offer working decisions. In his words, the rhetoric of hatred does not give rise to political trust. Tsvetanov pointed out that during the new political season the parliamentary group of GERB will work for consensus and agreement on the nationally significant topics, both with its partners and with the opposition. According to him, the public have expectations of more justice and the fight against corruption, and for this reason the main priority for GERB this season will be the adoption of the anti-corruption law, which will create a new anti-corruption body. In Tsvetanov’s words, this must be adopted by the end of the year. The statement also highlighted GERB’s intentions for reforms in the judiciary. Tsvetanov stated that it was a matter of heading for fast and efficient justice, with the recommendations in the European Commission’s reports on new legislative changes being followed.

In the summer months two unpleasant scandals related to political figures from their ranks hit the headlines. In mid-July, Chief Prosecutor Sotir Tzatsarov announced data from an investigation against GERB MP Zhivko Martinov regarding the extortion of a merchant in Dobrich for a total of 4 tons of flat salami sau-

sage, as well as 60kg. of cured beef and “Elena” fillet, amounting to 45,000 leva. According to the victims, Mr Martinov had repeatedly stated that the delicacies were for Prime Minister Boyko Borisov. The Chief Public Prosecutor said that the check carried out proved that no such sausage had reached the Prime Minister. This scandal caused jollity about GERB in social networks, and brought about mockery and oppugnancy from the opposition. BSP said it was GERB’s style of governance, and such racketeering exists in many places in the province. GERB went into explanatory mode, but they did at least react quickly, excluding Zhivko Martinov from their ranks. After talks with him, he decided to leave parliament. GERB said that this case was closed for them and that they had proven over the years that when one of their representatives was found to be culpable, they would immediately leave the party.

A month later a new scandal rocked GERB, which was widely reflected in the public domain. In the municipality of Septemvri, during a child’s birthday party, the owner of the restaurant which was the venue for the party was shot with the gun of the chairman of the Municipal Council in Septemvri from GERB, Lazar Vlaykov, the gun having been shot many times. The process of ascertaining who shot the man - Lazar Vlaykov, as is claimed by the relatives of the victim of the shooting, or the child, as Lazar Vlaykov claims - is in progress. GERB immediately excluded Vlaykov from their ranks but could not answer the question of why their member occupied such an important post at the local level after it became clear that other cases were being brought against this person – including battery and hooliganism in recent last years, for which he has never been convicted. Victims have talked about these events and said that all this has been known for years,

but Vlaykov had immunity and was therefore untouchable.

In the middle of September, during a meeting with the municipal leadership of GERB-Targovishte, the chairman of the GERB parliamentary group and deputy chairman of the party Tsvetan Tsvetanov said that the preparations for the local elections in 2019 should begin. According to him, GERB manages 130 municipalities in the country with a population of 5.5 million people. For this reason it is important to maximize all of the structures of GERB. Tsvetanov mentioned that in the small settlements the personality is the leading factor, and for this reason we should think of undisputed candidates for mayors and municipal councilors.

In the context of the local elections in 2019 there is tension between the Mayor of Haskovo Dobri Belivanov, elected with the support of GERB and the local structure of the party. The leadership of the local organization sent a letter to the GERB headquarters in Sofia which expressed their disappointment with the mayor’s work. The document says that for months there has been tension between the structure and the mayor Dobri Belivanov. This was brought about by the failure of the Mayor’s management.

2.2.2. Reformist block

In the past quarter the Reformist Party parties were not in the public eye. There has still been no congress at the Movement Bulgaria of the Citizens to elect a new party leader after Meglena Kuneva’s resignation. The UDF was also very passive in its appearances. Only one contribution of UDF leader Bozhidar Lukarski will be remembered on a TV show in which he commented on the situation surrounding the scandal with the companies Dunarit and Emko.

2.2.3. DSB

During this quarter DSB will be remembered for several media appearances of the new chairman of the party Atanas Atanasov, in which he criticized the work of the government. A particular focus in Atanasov's statements was Prime Minister Boyko Borisov, whom the DSB leader blamed for all the major problems in the state. Atanasov made direct accusations of corruption against Prime Minister Borisov. According to him, Borisov is "the Lord of public procurement", which he "distributes so that it goes to his friends."

Atanasov is of the opinion that the right political space can be united only on the basis of a general assessment of how power will be exercised in the state. Those who believe that "this is a vicious, oligarchic model of government that is detrimental to the economy and statehood can find an easy way to unite." Atanasov made a firm statement that, while he is chairman of the DSB, he will not fight for them to govern one day with Borisov, but that his desire is to create a real political alternative.

2.2.4. "Yes, Bulgaria"

In July and August, "Yes, Bulgaria" vanished from public attention. One explanation for this is that the leadership has embarked on building party structures across the country. It was not until mid-September that the party headed by former Justice Minister Hristo Ivanov showed political activity related to the priority issue of reforming the judiciary.

The party sent a letter to President Rumen Radev not to sign the decree appointing Georgi Cholakov as chairman of the the Supreme Administrative Court because his candidacy was not convincing, but it had been negotiated in advance by the status quo in the judiciary. "Yes, Bulgaria" criticized the election of

members of the Supreme Judicial Council by the National Assembly, and they believe that behind-the-scenes dealing in the country has triumphed again and in the future there will be no real change in the work of the main personnel body of the judiciary.

"Yes, Bulgaria" expressed dissatisfaction with the visit of the Russian Chief Prosecutor Yuri Chayka to Bulgaria, who visited the country at the invitation of Chief Prosecutor Sotir Tsatsarov.

2.3. Centrist parties

2.3.1. MRF

Over the past quarter, the MRF has continued to criticize the involvement of nationalists in government. In almost all their public appearances, the representatives of the movement regarded this as an extremely negative and paradoxical phenomenon in the context of the upcoming Bulgarian presidency of the Council of the European Union.

At the beginning of the new political season in early September, MRF chairman Mustafa Karadayi read from the floor of the National Assembly a declaration on behalf of the parliamentary group outlining party priorities. He stated that "instead of managing the country through working institutions and administration, we have become witnesses of activities that are characteristic of an amateur club, and that is not how to govern a country." Karadayi pointed out that the Government program demonstrates essentially a lack of a clear vision for the future development of the country, and is a "set of declarations and measures that do not only guarantee the achievement of well-established goals but reveal the inability of the government to achieve economic growth, social responsibility and a European quality of life." According to him, Bulgaria has no right to

move away from European values, even more so in a year in which the country will preside over the EU Council for the first time. Karadayi pointed out that successful resolution of important issues requires the country's governance to be grounded on a common Euro-Atlantic-oriented basis of values, rather than on nationalists and populists in government.

Also in this quarter, the name of the MP from the Movement for Rights and Freedoms, Delyan Peevski, has given rise to debate in the public domain. Peevsky, who has not attended sessions of the National Assembly for a considerable time, and who many claim to be abroad where he takes care of his deals, continues to be the man responsible for the very negative image of MRF in the eyes of the public.

In August in some media in the country, publications were issued about the imminent arrest of Ahmed Dogan and a conflict between him and Peevsky. This forced a response from Dogan, who rarely speaks in public. He said he has not been in real politics for 5 years and does not see any reason why he should be arrested. Dogan said people should not "be bothering with him, but looking at the state.» He denied the publications that he and Peevsky had disagreements.

Meanwhile, members of GERB appealed to the Prosecutor's Office regarding an old case from the time of the tripartite coalition – the Tsankov Kamak dam, as its wall is cracked and a major overhaul is needed. This was subsequently denied by the company that runs the dam, from where it was announced that maintenance was planned. Dogan had received a million-dollar fee as a project consultant, for which a case was filed with the SAC, and he was acquitted some years ago.

Peevsky's name was also involved in the ongoing saga of the bankruptcy of the Corpo-

rate Commercial Bank and the legacy of its assets. In August, it became clear that the owner of the bankrupt Corporate Commercial Bank, Tsvetan Vassilev, through an American office and a former US governor, had filed a lawsuit in the United States under the Magnitsky act that he had been the subject of political repression and violation of his rights by Chief Prosecutor Sotir Tsatsarov and Delyan Peevski. In the claim it is stated that the bank was subject to raiding by Peevsky with the assistance of the Chief Prosecutor and state structures, and this fact actually caused the bankruptcy of the bank. Vassilev argues that the struggle is now for the control of its assets, which was, in fact, Peevsky's main goal. Vassilev gave as an example what is happening in the military-industrial complex with the company owned by him – "Dunarit", that Peevsky's main goal now is to acquire it, for which he is aided by the Minister of Economy Karanikolov, who is close to him.

Peevsky sent a letter to the media denying articles published about his interest in the arms business, calling this fake news.

In mid-September it became clear that in the spring of next year the MRF will host the ALDE Leaders' Leaders Meeting at their regular annual meeting. The decision for Sofia to host this was taken at the last meeting of the ALDE leadership, a member of which is the Movement for Rights and Freedoms MP Ilhan Küçük. The forum will focus on the priorities of the Bulgarian presidency, the future of the EU, and Brexit, but it will also launch the candidacies of the Liberals for the next President of the European Commission who has to be elected after the European elections in 2019. MRF leader Mustafa Karadayi described the choice for host venue as appreciation of the active work of MRF in ALDE, the European institutions and Bulgaria. According to him, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms will use

the high rating and their positions in ALDE to contribute to the Bulgaria's successful first presidency of the EU Council. Karadayi also pointed out that among the main issues the MRF will highlight during the forum will be "more a Europe of the union, the place and the future of the Balkans along the lines of the model of the Bulgarian ethnic model and the transformation of Europe and the Balkans into an area free from nationalists and radicals."

2.3.2. DOST

During this quarter, the party of former MRF chairman Lyutvi Mestan disappeared from the political scene. Mestan, who was particularly active during the election campaign, during these months had no media coverage, nor comments on topical issues on the political agenda. This shows that at this stage the activity of the DOST party is, to all intents and purposes, frozen. The coming months will give more clarity to its future in the context of the upcoming local elections in 2019.

2.3.3. "Volya"

In the middle of July, "Volya" leader Veselin Mareshki and two of his MPs Plamen Hristov and Krastina Taslakova were indicted for extortion by the prosecution. Over the period from April 3, 2013 to the end of 2015 Hristov is accused of having threatened three pharmacy owners, in the cities of Sofia and Vidin, in co-operation with Mareshki and in one case with Krastina Taslakova. The threats aimed at getting pharmacists to stop working or to transfer shareholdings to Mareshki. In some cases, the owners of pharmacies were forced to buy medication from a warehouse for medical products under unfavorable conditions. The pressure on rebellious pharmacists also came via the Executive Agency for Drugs and by means of unfair commercial practices for

them to be brought to bankruptcy. Krastina Taslakova has been charged with a crime committed by her from the end of 2013 until the end of 2015 in Vidin and Sofia in partnership with Mareshki and Hristov. The two MPs have a "custody" measure.

According to the leader of "Volya", the attacks against him are political in nature. Mr Mareshki said he had received suggestions that he abandon his fuel business and petrol stations. He said he would not name names because he feared for his life.

Mr Mareshki is of the opinion that "corruption, a dysfunctional judiciary and the crushing of business scare off foreign investors." He stressed that in 2016 foreign investment decreased by BGN 1 billion compared to 2015 whilst at the same time in Romania it increased threefold.

The leader of "Volya" said that they would support or initiate a vote of no-confidence in the cabinet regarding their governance as a whole if nothing good happened. He mentioned that for several months in the National Assembly his parliamentary group refuted "all the false news about the group, including the claims that it would be a crutch for somebody."

2.4. Nationalist parties

2.4.1. United Patriots

Also during this quarter, the United Patriots have shown moderation in their positions and utterances due to their involvement in the government. Something that will be remembered is the participation of the Deputy Prime Minister Valeri Simeonov in several night-time checks on restaurants in the Black Sea resort of Sunny Beach on account of excessively loud music in several discotheques that have troubled the tourists for years. Simeonov said the state should intervene and enforce order

in the resorts. His participation in these actions was controversial. On one hand, many have criticized this behavior, since it could lead to a reduction in the number of tourists, and things should be regulated after the end of the season; others have supported Simeonov because there has been a noise problem for years, but there has been no solution due to the lack of action of the authorities. Prime Minister Boyko Borisov supported Simeonov and said that these issues should be settled at a legislative level - it should be clear what status each resort would have and so in the future any such misunderstandings would be avoided.

Another major topic which the United Patriots claimed as their success was the construction of the fence along the border with Turkey and the reduction of the flow of refugees. "Ataka" leader Volen Siderov said he had been pushing for the construction of this fence for years and had supported this idea even with Plamen Oresharski's government when the fence was built.

At the opening of the new parliamentary session, the chairman of the parliamentary group of the United Patriots Volen Siderov read a statement on behalf of the group. In it, he pointed out that "the political class has obviously grown wiser in recent years." In his words, the United Patriots Group have shown in their work up to now that they are correct, loyal and responsible political partners. In his words, reality has made clear and disproved those who "frightened people that something terrible was happening." According to Siderov - on the contrary, the opposite happened. In the past three months of the coalition government with GERB, "good things have happened for Bulgaria." In his words, "they may not be too large, but enough to sense, feel, see from people, and understand that the state can be re-

sponsible." According to him, GERB listens to the ideas of its smaller coalition partner, and the opposition at times has been very responsible. This shows, according to Siderov, that "it is obvious that the time of constructive action in politics has come, and that things that lead to a real result are being done."

In the middle of September Deputy Prime Minister Valeriy Simeonov said problems in the relations in the ruling coalition were apparent. In his words, some disagreements are related to staff appointments in ministries and local authorities. According to him, party leaders of GERB are placed in leadership seats on purely "partizan" motives. Simeonov does not agree on appointing incompetent people just because they are party loyal to GERB. He said that GERB urged Neno Dimov, Minister of Environment and Water, to appoint their people to the ministry managed by him. He admitted there was a very large disproportion in the allocation of posts that were not in line with the coalition agreement. Simeonov mentioned there was no dialogue in the coalition, with no meeting of the Coalition Council being held for two months.

The chairman of the GERB parliamentary group, Tsvetan Tsvetanov, admitted that the coalition council had not met for a long, but put it down to the summer months and the absence of some ministers who were involved in other events. However, Tsvetanov explained that there was rather a tension on staff appointments between the three parties of the United Patriots - VMRO, "Ataka" and NFSB, rather than between them and GERB.

The initiative of the new regional governor of Sofia from "Ataka" for renaming Mount Musala did not prevail. President Radev, whose prerogatives are the naming of sites of national importance, refused to rename the highest peak on the Balkan Peninsula. This is the sec-

ond attempt of “Ataka” to rename the peak because of the Turkish-Arabic origin of the name. During the term of the previous President Rosen Plevneliev this claim was also rejected.

2.5. Positions of the parties on foreign and European politics

The report by the government, which described Russia as one of the main threats to the national security of the country, has given rise to mixed comments from the parliamentary-represented parties in the country. Krasimir Velchev of GERB, who is also co-chair of the Friendship Group with Russia, said that politicians too often interfere with the friendship and relations between Bulgarians and Russians. “The less they get involved, the better it is for the love between the two nations,” Velchev said. GERB MP Anton Todorov said the report on the state of national security would not harm relations between Bulgaria and Russia. He described it as “a wonderful report, which reveals the hybrid war against the government.”

The coalition partner of GERB, United Patriots, also commented on the subject. MP Milen Mihov said that Russia’s increased military presence in the Black Sea Basin and the increase in Russian military forces pose a threat to Bulgarian national security. In his words, the intensified relations between the EU, NATO and Russia cannot lead to any result other than increasing the threat to national security. However, he also defended friendship and good relations with Russia. In his words, “Russia is an extremely important factor in Bulgaria, historically and politically significant.” His colleague from “Ataka” determined the thesis that Russia is a threat to the country’s national security as “NATO nonsense”. “Ataka” leader and chairman of the parliamentary group of the United Patriots, Volen Siderov, known for

his pro-Russian positions, recommended to Boyko Borisov that the report be edited in the part about Russia, saying the Prime Minister was misled by his advisers. In his words, Russia is not a threat to the country, and the content of the report is a compilation of secret service reports.

BSP said they would not support the document in a planning room as it stands. Cornelia Ninova said Russia is not a threat but a strategic opportunity for Bulgaria. Deputy Chairman of BSP Parliamentary Group Anton Kutev commented that this is “another inadequacy of the government.” According to him, “the last few governments have shown a propensity for a definite anti-Russian mood. Bulgarian politicians should speak both Russian and English equally well.” Kutev said the fact that the country could maintain good relations with Moscow “does not mean that we are giving up the Euro-Atlantic direction of Bulgaria.” In his words, Bulgaria can be a bridge in the relationship between the EU and Russia.

3. Public opinion

According to a Gallup International express survey conducted in early September, public attitudes to corruption have been examined, as well as- how the new anti-corruption body should be structured. More than two-thirds of Bulgarian voters (70%) agree that the president must appoint the head of the new body, while 21% support the proposal for this to be done by the majority in the National Assembly.

With regard to the Corporate Commercial Bank bankruptcy case, a dominant interpretation has already emerged in the mass consciousness - for 70% of adult Bulgarians the bank was deliberately made bankrupt in order for its assets to be seized. One sixth (15%) think that the blame is entirely that of the banker Vasilev and 6% agree with both ideas.

Gallup's survey shows that Bulgarians generally perceive that the political elite as a whole is corrupt. Every second voter replied that GERB is a corrupt party, just the same number of respondents think the same for BSP. For both parties, the same share (37%) is of the opposite opinion. At the same time, however, the question of which of these two parties is more corrupt, the distribution of opinions is: GERB - 37%, BSP - 26%, and both - 17%.

An Alpha Research survey, conducted in early September, shows that President Rumen Radev retains high public confidence and is the country's most respected politician. Only 13% said they had a negative attitude. However, the positive ratings also decreased slightly - 54%. Prime Minister Borisov has 32% approval and 39% disapproval. Among the ministers, Deputy Prime Ministers Tomislav Donchev and Krasimir Karakachanov are most approved, and one of the least appreciated members of the government is the Minister of Justice Tsetska Tsacheva.

The Alpha Research survey shows that if elections were to be held today, 25.1 percent of voters would vote for GERB. BSP remains the second with 19.3%. The United Patriots ranked third with 5.9%. MRF remains fourth, and 4.9% would vote for them. In the party of Vesselin Mareshki "Volya", there is a drastic decline - 1.8%, which leaves it below the electoral barrier. The out-of-parliamentary right also remains with low results - Reformist Bloc - 2.2%, «Yes, Bulgaria» - 1.6%, DSB - 0.8%.

4. Main conclusions and forecasts

1. The last few months will be remembered for the government's foreign policy activity. A particularly great success is the Neighborhood and Cooperation Agreement which has been signed with Macedonia, after

having been postponed by the Macedonian side for many years. The treaty improves the prospects for Macedonia's integration into NATO and the EU, and Bulgaria has shown that it can be an important political factor in the region. The government is continuing the preparations for the presidency of the Council of the EU, with a consensus among the main political forces that it is a top priority that should be supported by all.

2. BSP is starting the new political season actively. The party began to come forward with alternative legislative proposals, which led to a focus on the political debate on the important issues for the country. In this way, BSP shows that it can be not only a strong opposition with a large-scale parliamentary group, but also that it seeks to prove itself as a possible alternative to governance in the future. Whether this will happen, however, will depend to a great extent on party preparation for next year's local elections, which will show whether the party's electoral rise will continue. On the other hand, as a leading political force on the left, BSP is called upon to initiate a conversation with other left and centrist formations about the forthcoming local elections in search of successful coalition formulas on a local basis.

3. Smaller left formations like ABV and Movement 21 were lost in the public space. The activity of the two parties is expressed in the occasional media participation of their leaders. After the elections, ABV and Movement 21 did not actively engage in dialogue with each other, but it is possible to form coalitions at the local elections in 2019. The critical tone, especially that of the leader of Movement 21 Tatiana Doncheva towards BSP, makes a striking impression, since it does more to create new barriers and obstacles in the left space.

4. GERB was rocked by several scandals in the summer months, which had a nega-

tive impact on the public image of the party. At the same time, the proactive foreign policy activity of the government and Prime Minister Borisov compensated for these internal political negatives, which GERB has suffered in recent months. At this stage, GERB managed to maintain a relatively good dialogue with its coalition partners, although Deputy Prime Minister and the NFSB leader Valeri Simeonov said there were communication problems. Until the end of the year, the efforts of the GERB parliamentary group will be focused on the adoption of the new anti-corruption law and next year's budget.

5. The extra-parliamentary right in the form of the Reformist Bloc, DSB, and "Yes, Bulgaria" still cannot find the right way to unite the right political space, which is racked by contradictions. The beginning of the new political season will be remembered for several protest declarations of DSB and "Yes, Bulgaria" for the election of a new Supreme Judicial Council, and a new chairman of the Supreme Administrative Court, as well as the visit of Russia's Chief Prosecutor Yuri Chayka. Probably in the coming months, as local elections approach in 2019, smaller right-wing parties will once again intensify dialogue between each other to find a new coalition formula.

6. The MRF continued its criticism of the government regarding the involvement of nationalists in it. This will be the main line of conduct on the part of the movement ahead of the European Presidency. And during this

quarter, MRF MP Delyan Peevski was the cause of scandals and accusations that continue to be detrimental to the image of MRF. The saga surrounding Dunarit and Emko, with which Peevski's name was involved in the public sphere, leads to reasonable suspicions of behind-the-scenes actions in which state representatives are also involved.

7. Vesselin Mareshki's party "Volya" started the parliamentary season with a motion for a vote of no-confidence in the government. With this move, Mareshki wanted to show once again that, in the fragile majority in numerical terms that GERB and the United Patriots have in the National Assembly, the votes of "Volya" may prove decisive at key moments. Earlier in July, Mareshki and two MPs from the parliamentary group of "Volya" were charged with blackmail. Mareshki dismissed the charges and said there was political pressure on him.

8. "The United Patriots" feel comfortable in the government. Proof of this is mitigation of radical talk, calls for consensus and dialogue that can be heard, even from Volen Siderov. A problem for the United Patriots could be created the management of two of their ministries, the ministry of defense, headed by Deputy Prime Minister and VMRO leader Krasimir Karakachanov, who has to recommence the procedure for the purchase of new fighters and the ministry of economy headed by Emil Karanikolov, around which there is growing tension with the case of Dunarit and Emko.

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