

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

# POLIT-BAROMETER

Year 19, Issue 3  
July – September, 2019

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The upcoming campaign for the local elections will be extremely intense, and full of compromising statements and smutty PR.



GERB controls practically all of the local government in the country after its major election success four years ago.



The divisions in BSP after the European elections seem to have temporarily died down and the party is emerging relatively consolidated for the local votes.

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## 1

## THE POLITICAL SITUATION

### 1.1 INTERNAL POLICY

On the domestic scene, the past quarter was mainly determined by the imminent campaign for the upcoming local elections, with political tensions remaining high despite the summer break of the Bulgarian Parliament. One of the points of great intrigue in this election will be the mayoral race in the capital since Ombudsman Maya Manolova will be standing for mayor of Sofia. For several months now, one of the topics that has seized public attention has been whether Maya Manolova would participate in the elections in the capital. In the last year, Manolova has established herself as the political figure with the highest public approval, even ahead of President Radev. GERB has been in power in the capital for almost 14 years, during which time there has been a tremendous change in the city, but in the last year fatigue and dissatisfaction with the government of Sofia has been perceptible.

Manolova resigned as Ombudsman, with Parliament electing her deputy, Diana Kovacheva, to finish the remaining one year in office. Manolova was put forward by an initiative committee and was supported by BSP, ABV, Movement 21, Bulgaria for Citizens Movement, the Agrarian People's Union, the National Movement for Stability and Progress (NDSV), "the Way to the Young" and others. She said that she would not necessarily seek party support, but would count on all Sofia residents regardless of their party sympathies. In fact, this is also Manolova's most difficult task - building the image of a non-party candidate, which will be difficult, given the fact that she was one of the faces at the forefront of BSP only 4 years ago, and her entire political career is connected with the socialist party. Over the 30 years since the changes, Sofia has always had a right-wing mayor, so Manolova also seeks broader support, including from right-wing political parties such as the Bulgaria for Citizens Movement, which is a member of the European People's Party.

Current Mayor of Sofia Yordanka Fandakova has announced that she will run for a new term. It seems that the main clash in the capital will be between Fandakova and Manolova, with the most likely outcome being a runoff between the two. This seems particularly worrying for GERB, because until now Fandakova has had no real competition and has always won on the first round. A pos-

sible run-off in the upcoming elections could lead to an anti-GERB vote, especially since the Liberal Right voters are highly critical of GERB and may abstain from voting in a ballot, which would make it unpredictable. The elections in Sofia will also be with the highest symbolic stakes. Defeat for GERB in the capital would be a severe political coup with inevitable consequences. Therefore, the expectations are for an intense tone, and a polarised campaign, saturated with compromising statements and smutty PR.

The first such smutty issue was circulated by the tabloid PIK, which has links to the ruling party, when it published pornographic pictures of the girlfriend of Democratic Bulgaria candidate for mayor of Sofia Architect Borislav Ignatov. PIK called on Ignatov to withdraw from the race. The publication of the PIK led to acute condemnation from politicians, journalists and public figures. Ignatov described the attack as discrediting his candidacy and said that he was continuing the race with even greater ambition and desire. In fact, this scandal has shown that the election campaign will be with particularly high stakes and we will witness an extremely negative and ugly campaign.

The local elections will be held on October 27, and the second round of mayoral elections in places where this is necessary will be a week later. 59 parties and 7 coalitions have registered with the CEC to participate in the upcoming elections.

Vociferous public outcry set in motion the procedure for selecting a new chief prosecutor - an event that was highly anticipated due to the unreformed prosecutor's office and the lack of results in the fight against corruption. This is the main reason why the monitoring under the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM) of the European Commission to Bulgaria continues. In general, the mandate of the current Attorney General Sotir Tsatsarov will be remembered for contradictions and the lack of results in the fight against corruption, which was one of his main promises when he was elected 7 years ago. This is why at this time expectations for the election of a new Attorney General are great. The unpleasant surprise came when all 11 members of the Supreme Judicial Council (SJC) Prosecutor's College submitted a single application - to Deputy Prosecutor General Ivan Geshev, who until recently was the head of the specialised prosecutor's office. This shows,

in practice, that there will be no competition for the post; there will be no clash of concepts and visions for reform and development of prosecution.

Immediately after the nomination, there was a civil protest in front of the SJC building, in which thousands of people gathered. Protests against Geshev's candidacy have entered their second month, and it appears that they will intensify as the election scheduled for October 24 - three days before the local elections - approaches. The sentiment against Geshev can be grouped into several main categories. First, he is part of the team of Sotir Tsatsarov, whose mandate will be remembered for the lack of results in the fight against corruption at high levels of power. Besides this, in the last few years Geshev has demonstrated a forceful style of behaviour in his work, but also a crude approach in his communication with the media. Many explain this manner of work by saying that Geshev graduated from law school at the Ministry of the Interior in the early 1990s. One of the biggest cases on which Ivan Geshev has been working - the bankruptcy of the Corporate Commercial Bank, has continued to stall in court for the fifth year. And one of the persons who worked most closely with the banker Tsvetan Vasilev - the oligarch and MRF MP Delyan Peevski - remains untouchable.

Criticism of Geshev intensified after an interview he gave, in which he expressed reservations about the principle of separation of powers. He stated that he "does not share the view of right-wing extremists that the legislative, executive and judicial branches should be separated." According to him, in order for there to be results, there must be unity in the work of the institutions. In this way, Geshev demonstrated disrespect for a basic constitutional principle, but also expressed political antipathy towards right-wing voters, whom he called "right-wing extremists", referring above all to "Democratic Bulgaria". Geshev saw in the protests against him an attempt by defendants, in his words related to "Democratic Bulgaria" to prevent him from being elected prosecutor general of the country.

At this stage, with the exception of "Democratic Bulgaria", which supported the protests, other political parties have refrained from commenting on the election of the prosecutor general. Prime Minister Borisov stated that the Minister for Justice had not nominated a candidate for Prosecutor General, which the law allows him to do, in order to avoid political interference. According to the Prime Minister, the election should be left to the Supreme Judicial Council, as the constitution demands.

Geshev's candidature was supported by a number of regional and district prosecutors in the whole country, the Association of Prosecutors and Investigators, the SANS, various police departments, and even some universities.

In order to be elected prosecutor general, the nomination must amass 17 votes from the 25-member Supreme Judicial Council. At this point, Geshev's choice seems premature. The final decision lies with President Radev, who may

once return an SJC nomination. When asked by the media, Radev signalled that he would return the nomination for a new vote without going into specific details. Prompted by this, prosecutor general Sotir Tsatsarov said that he would vote for Geshev a second time, if necessary, because he categorically supports this candidature.

BNR also became embroiled in the subject of election of the prosecutor general after it became clear that long-standing journalist Sylvia Velikova, who had been reflecting on the judicial system for years, had been taken off the air. According to Velikova, she was led to believe that the reasons for this were the manner in which she presented Ivan Geshev's candidature for prosecutor general. Velikova is a journalist with a clear position on the subject, and she has never concealed her criticism of this nomination. What ensued was a response of solidarity from all journalists on National Radio who announced that they would not accept Velikova's broadcast the next day as a sign of protest. The next day, the management of the radio stopped broadcasting for several hours. After a reaction by Prime Minister Borisov, Velikova was immediately returned as presenter of the show. The Prime Minister said that what happened was a disgrace and that he insisted that Velikova return to being on air, otherwise GERB MPs would demand the resignation of the director general of the radio.

President Radev also commented on the topic of the removal of Sylvia Velikova, stating that BNR did not stop even during the war, and this case brings to the fore the question of who governs the public media and how. According to Radev, it is obvious that "the state is governed by someone's phone, not through the institutions, as is normal European practice." Borisov reacted acutely to this statement by Radev, stating that the suspension of Horizont was "sabotage" against the government and that he never, in any way, restricted freedom of expression, because the media criticised the government every day and wrote what they wanted.

The Velikova case once again raised the issue of freedom of media in the country and the quality of the media environment. Bulgaria continues to be at the bottom regarding freedom of media in Europe in all authoritative charts. The control of media in the hands of oligarchic circles of those close to power continues after only a few months ago, Nova Televisia became the property of the Domuschiev brothers.

In early August, Plamen Georgiev, the head of the Commission for Counteracting Corruption and for Seizure of Illegally Acquired Property (KPKONPI), resigned after his name was associated with apartment scandals among those in authority. Georgiev said he had been targeted by certain groups whose interests had been affected by his work. Initially, Plamen Georgiev was reinstated as a prosecutor in the specialised prosecutor's office - a position he had held before becoming Deputy Minister of Justice in the first government of Borisov, and later as head of the Commission for the Seizure of Illegally Acquired Proper-

ty (KONPI). Surprisingly, after being reinstated as a prosecutor, Plamen Georgiev was appointed Consul General of Bulgaria in Valencia and the Balearic Islands, causing a wave of discontent in the public sphere. The reasons for this are the scandals surrounding Georgiev and the lack of any kind of diplomatic experience. By dint of this, the government became involved in another scandal that caused new reputational damage.

In the middle of July, a new scandal rocked the government, after it became clear that the personal data of more than 5 million Bulgarians had leaked from the National Revenue Agency following a hacking attack. The data leaked was from the filed tax returns of individuals and companies over the last several years. After the collapse of the Trade Register last year, this is the second case that shows serious deficits in the country's electronic infrastructure, despite the billions spent on establishing an e-government. Experts in the field said the NRA system is technologically outdated, making it clear that no system tests and checks have been made in recent years, which are mandatory. This led to a record NRA fine being imposed by the Commission for Personal Data Protection, but high-level resignations have never been submitted. Finance Minister Vladislav Goranov attempted to dismiss the incident, saying that the leakage of all this information would not cause any significant damage to citizens with regard to their future abuse.

Three people from the cyber security firm "TAD Group" have been detained for the hacking attack and they face serious charges of terrorism. At this stage, the case is distinguished with several aspects - the extremely grave allegations, and the prosecution's leakage of information in the case, including questioning witnesses, interviews and chats. This has been highlighted by a number of lawyers as initially perverting the course of justice and declaring the accused guilty in advance, which is a violation of their rights and the subject of future cases in Strasbourg.

Strong domestic political and international response was provoked by the accusation of espionage in favour of Russian organisations, levied by Nikolai Malinov. He is chairman of the "Russophiles" Association and a former member of the Coalition for Bulgaria, and has been on the lists of the "United Patriots" in recent parliamentary elections. On 9 September, which is a significant date in Bulgarian history, it became clear that arrests or interrogations of individuals associated with the "Russophiles" Association had been carried out. The prosecutor's office announced that eight people had been detained, including Nikolai Malinov, who was charged under Article 105 of the Criminal Code for having acted in favour of two organisations - the "Double-headed Eagle", affiliated with Russian oligarch Konstantin Malofeev and The Russian Institute for Strategic Studies, headed several years ago by Gen. Leonid Reshetnikov. The accusations against Malinov are also of large-scale money laundering that should have been used to carry out media projects and create a party. According to the chief of the State Agency for Nation-

al Security Dimitar Georgiev, these actions are part of the Russian hybrid war against Bulgaria. Malofeev and Reshetnikov received a 10-year ban on entering Bulgaria. Former editor-in-chief of the Duma Party newspaper - Yuri Borisov, Prof. Vanya Dobрева, former BSP MP, now a member of the National Council of the Party, and sociologist Zhivko Georgiev, currently a member of the Strategic Council to the president, are among the witnesses called for the investigation. There was vociferous reaction to the action taken against Yuri Borisov, who, although called for questioning as a witness, was taken into custody in handcuffs, which he himself stated. Sociologist Zhivko Georgiev, on the other hand, was questioned about the sociological studies he had carried out - who commissioned them and who had financed them and whether he knew General Reshetnikov. This matter is probably related to a study that media publications in 2016 linked to the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies regarding the presidential election in Bulgaria. Then it became public knowledge that there was a secret meeting between General Reshetnikov and BSP leader Korneliya Ninova, who, according to President Radev's opponents, discussed his nomination as president.

Nikolay Malinov was released on bail for BGN 50,000. He said he had nothing to worry about, because he could not be persecuted for his ideas and what he believed in. Malinov stated that he was considering implementing media projects in Bulgaria, pointing out that taxes had been paid on all the funds he had received. According to him, it was for the prosecution to prove its accusations in court.

Prime Minister Borisov made a strange attempt to distance himself from the accusations of Nikolai Malinov, saying this was a "spy scandal" in quotes. Borisov stated that this would in no way affect relations between Bulgaria and Russia, and that it had happened before that Russian businessmen had been expelled from the country when there were reports that they threatened national security. Prosecutor General Sotir Tsatsarov was heard in parliament, explicitly emphasising that the charges were not of espionage in favour of Russia, but in favour of two organisations. In fact, this further undermines the credibility of the accusations, because foreign NGOs in many countries operate on the territory of the country and finance a wide range of activities, including the commissioning of case studies and works of analysis. According to the Prosecutor General, Malinov worked for the geopolitical reorientation of the country, which is by no means a crime under the Penal Code. Moreover, "Russophiles" have never concealed their programs and intentions of exiting NATO and strengthening ties and co-operation with Russia. In fact, it is also part of the programme of several parties in Bulgaria, including the party "Ataka", which backs Borisov's government. All of this has led to the conclusion, which has been made by many analysts and experts in the field, that the spy scandal was sparked by election manoeuvring.

As expected, BSP strongly condemned the actions of the prosecution against party members such as Yuri Borisov and Vanya Dobрева. The party said the accusation of es-

pionage was one of the gravest in the Criminal Code and must be proven. Korneliya Ninova said that she saw the investigation as provocation against the right to freedom of association. According to her, this was carried out as a pre-election stunt and also to mask other scandals caused by the government.

DSB leader and former chief of Bulgarian counterintelligence Atanas Atanasov stated that the spy scandal was part of the election campaign of two people - Boyko Borisov and Ivan Geshev. According to Atanasov, the fact that the action was held a day before the protest against the election of Ivan Geshev as prosecutor general was hardly a coincidence. On the other hand, he felt that Borisov was afraid that he might lose the local elections, even in Sofia, so this action also aimed to attract the votes of right-wing voters, who are traditionally associated with anti-Russian attitudes.

In connection with the espionage case, the NGO "the Atlantic Council", called for an investigation into the role of the institute led by General Reshetnikov in proposing Rumen Radev for the position of President in 2016. Former Minister of Defence Nikolay Nenchev supported this request, and did not rule out the possibility of impeaching the President if Russian interference in the 2016 Bulgarian presidential elections was proven. It would appear that the mentioning of the President's name at the height of the election campaign is not by chance. Radev has become one of the biggest critics of the government and the ruling majority, so it is no coincidence that the president's "Russian connection" has been circulated in the pro-government media. Apart from this, Rumen Radev will play a key role in the appointment of the new Prosecutor General, with his powers including the ability once to return the nominee for the Supreme Judicial Council proposed after the vote.

The president commented on the spy scandal, saying it was a very serious accusation and he would expect law enforcement and prosecution to have sound evidence. Otherwise, he said, the feeling would be that "Bulgarian institutions have been used in a directed domestic political scenario." As for the demands of the Atlantic Club and the involvement of his name, Radev indicated that he was elected by 2 million Bulgarian citizens and "such allegations and insinuations are mostly an affront to these people". According to the president, the inability of the government to deal with important issues such as the country's membership of Schengen and the eurozone, the elimination of the monitoring mechanism on the topic of justice as well as other issues leads to the search for enemies in order to divert attention.

President Rumen Radev's critical tone towards those in power has become a common line of behaviour. This was also evident during his address to the people and the National Assembly at the beginning of the new parliamentary session. It was also the first address of the President in the Bulgarian Parliament for more than two years. The president said power was concentrated among a narrow circle of people, transforming into economic benefits and media

comfort. According to him, with this formula there is no development, prosperity and security, but poverty and corruption. Radev called on MPs to exercise full parliamentary control over executive power, because only in this way can effective government be maintained in the state. According to him, a provision is needed that obliges the Prime Minister to appear at least once a month in a parliamentary chamber to answer general questions on government policy. Radev urged lawmakers to focus on important and urgent decisions for the future of the country. If that does not happen, in his words, the apathy will continue, and Bulgarians will leave the country, or the street will sweep away the status quo.

GERB reacted strongly to Radev's speech, stating that once again he was putting down dividing lines in Bulgarian society. GERB parliamentary group chairwoman Daniela Daritkova said Radev will remain in history as the most negative president, and the one who has posed the most threats to public peace, though by constitution he must express the unity of the nation.

It would appear that tensions between the president and those in power will continue, and they may even escalate in the months ahead in the context of the local election campaign and the development of the so-called spy scandal.

Despite the spy scandal, energy projects with Russian involvement continue. In mid-September, the Supreme Administrative Court dismissed the appeal of one of the companies in connection with the construction of the continuation of "Turkish Stream" through Bulgaria. This happened after the company itself withdrew its claim. Following a meeting between Bulgarian Energy Minister Temenuzhka Petkova and the Russian Industry Minister, the two announced that from January 1, 2020, Russian gas would flow through the Turkish Stream from Bulgaria to Serbia. Petkova said that the Bulgarian part of the pipeline would be called the "Balkan Stream". It became clear that Bulgaria had agreed with Rosatom to participate in the renovation of Kozloduy Nuclear Power Plant Unit Six.

Late August saw the announcement of tenders for the construction of Belene Nuclear Power Plant, a project the government has decided to renew. The seven companies which submitted bids are: IPK and UP EOOD Bulgaria, Rosatom through a subsidiary, Bektron Karlsruhe, Belene Power Plant Consortium, CNNC Chinese Company, the Korean Hydro Atomic Corporation and Belene Nuclear Power Plant Consortium. The other two bids are for the supply of equipment - from Fram Atom and General Electric.

## 1.2 FOREIGN AND EUROPEAN POLICIES

Negotiations on the formation of the new European Commission were among the main topics that were the focus of intense media attention in the country. The Bulgarian government was firm in its support for the leading candidate for President of the European Commission, raised by the European People's Party - Manfred Weber. After it became

clear that this option would not come to pass, Bulgaria supported the agreement reached by the European Council for Ursula von der Leyen to be proposed for the post. In the course of the talks on the four leading positions in the EU, it became clear that Bulgaria was offered the post of High Representative for Foreign Policy, which was announced by Prime Minister Borisov. Among the names discussed was that of Kristalina Georgieva, who later became an established candidate for the post of director of the International Monetary Fund - an EU nomination. In the end, Bulgaria's EU Commissioner-designate Maria Gabriel received the portfolio "Innovation and Youth". Prime Minister Borisov evaluated the portfolio highly, saying it was modern and innovative, while the opposition described this position as one of the most insignificant. In fact, the portfolios are also allocated according to the qualities of the commissioners proposed by the Member States. Although she has been the EU commissioner for almost three years, Gabriel remains a stranger and without much experience in European politics. The only position she has previously held is that of an MEP. Therefore, this portfolio for Bulgaria with this candidate is not surprising. By way of comparison, five years ago Kristalina Georgieva was responsible for the EU budget and was Vice-President of the European Commission. This is why Gabriel's position should be regarded as a step down for Bulgaria.

At the end of July, the National Assembly ratified the contract for the purchase of new F-16 fighter jets, with the decision supported by the MPs of GERB, MRF and IMRO. However, BSP, "Volya", "Ataka" and NFSB voted against. The deal is worth \$1.256 billion for 8 planes to be paid at once. To pay the amount, Bulgaria has issued a debt of BGN 700 million. The main criticism is that the country does not receive a full package of weapons, which it will have to buy additionally. This was also President Radev's main criticism.

In early September, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced a position on an exhibition dedicated to September 9, 1944, organised by the Russian Embassy in the country where the Soviet army determined itself as Bulgaria's liberator. The position states, "The bayonets of the Soviet army have brought to the peoples of Central and Eastern Europe half a century of repression, the suppression of civilian conscience, deformed economic development and detachment from the dynamics of the processes in developed European countries." The foreign ministry advised the Russian embassy "not to take a stand in support of a dubious historical thesis ("liberation"), which favours only some political circles in Bulgaria, as it is an interference with the domestic political debate in our country." The position also states that "the long-term consequences for Bulgaria have been the same as for other countries in Eastern Europe, falling within the Soviet sphere of influence - 45 years of rule of a totalitarian regime based on the Bolshevik-Leninist version of communist ideology."

Responding to Bulgaria's position, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova replied that Bulgaria was

"dangerously and criminally" rewriting history. This view of the Russian Foreign Ministry fits in with their argument that criticisms of the Soviet army during the war are tantamount to rejecting the role of the USSR in the defeat of Nazi Germany.

Many have identified this unprecedented stance of the Bulgarian foreign ministry as a prelude to the spy scandal. This is a statement that Foreign Minister Ekaterina Zaharieva denied. She stated that the allegations of espionage were specific to the individual and had nothing to do with the Bulgarian-Russian relations.

During his visit to Germany at the invitation of the Bavarian Christian Social Union, Prime Minister Borisov took a surprising position with regard to the country's entry into Schengen. For 10 years this has been one of the foreign policy goals of the country, and Borisov has always insisted that the country become part of Schengen, always claiming that we have long fulfilled the technical criteria for membership. The main obstacle to acceptance remains the problem of corruption and judicial reform in the country, due to which a monitoring mechanism operates. The surprise came from Borisov's words that he did not support the idea of Bulgaria joining Schengen as a land border, because he said the country would be filled with migrants coming from Greece. According to the Prime Minister, border police send more than 150 migrants back to Greece every day.

GERB MEP Emil Radev justified the position of the Prime Minister, saying that this is how the country responds to challenges to national security. According to him, the large number of migrants in Greece is such a challenge. He gave the example of Schengen countries that are closing their borders to better control migration.

The opposition reacted sharply to Borisov's words, saying that this was not a change of position on Schengen, but simply that the Borisov government had failed in its attempts to become part of it. Following these criticisms, the Prime Minister said he had been misunderstood. In his words, Schengen remains one of Bulgaria's priorities, but he had simply pointed out that this would not be a prize for the country, because we would not gain from it in view of the challenge of migration.

### 1.3 MIGRATION

The situation of illegal migration in Bulgaria is relatively calm. Over recent months, an increase in attempts to illegally cross the border from Greece to Bulgaria has been reported by the authorities. The Interior Ministry states that currently 100 persons per day attempt to enter Bulgaria illegally from Greece, which, according to the Ministry is linked to a complication of the situation in the Middle East and Turkey. The latest statistics published by the Interior Ministry do not reflect increased pressure. According to them total of 331 third-country nationals were detained in August, compared to 298 in July. 46 of



them were attempting to cross the state border (July: 27), 82 attempting to leave the country (July: 60) and 203 who were found to be illegally resident in the country (July: 211). The relatively high number of persons staying illegally in the country or firstly detected while leaving the country shows that illegal migrants continue to cross the border without the border services being in a position to respond. This is despite increased security measures and the deployment of additional resources along the Bulgarian-Greek border.

Most of the migrants captured are from Afghanistan and Iraq, with a significant reduction in the number of those from Syria.

In mid-September, the Bulgarian government demonstrated concern regarding the words of Turkish President Er-

dogan, who once again threatened Europe that if he did not receive additional support, he would open the border to migrants. Defence Minister Krasimir Karakachanov said the country was ready to respond to such a challenge. He said he had ordered that groups of troops who had been trained over the past two years to assist the border police should be on stand-by. Karakachanov said that up to 2,200 people could be sent to the border with Turkey within 24 hours, and with a larger influx this number could be increased to 10,000.

It is difficult to evaluate how real this danger is, as Erdogan has periodically made similar threats over the last few years. However, in the exacerbated geopolitical situation in which Turkey is located, it is hardly likely to resort to such a move that would lead to a break with EU relations.

## 2

## STATE AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE MAJOR POLITICAL PARTIES

### 2.1 SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC AND OTHER CENTRE-LEFT PARTIES

#### 2.1.1 BSP

At the beginning of the new parliamentary session, Korneliya Ninova read a declaration on behalf of the party's parliamentary group outlining the priorities of the socialists for the new political season. Ninova stated that the party would push for a more active role for the state in helping small family companies and business by providing tax incentives. She warned that indications of an imminent new economic crisis were evident, and the state was not prepared for it. According to Ninova, in order to overcome this crisis, it is necessary to stimulate consumption.

Regarding the reform, prosecutors from the BSP stated that they would submit a legislative proposal to control the actions of the Prosecutor General. Ninova said that a new debate should be held on the election of the chief of the Commission for Counteracting Corruption and for Seizure of Illegally Acquired Property, because recent events have shown the complete failure of the commission. Ninova insisted on a change in the way the new chairman of the commission is elected.

With regard to the mayoral elections, which are majoritarian, BSP will try to expand its support by standing behind non-party candidates in order to gain support beyond what is traditional for the party. This effect can be achieved especially in those constituencies where there will be run-offs. In this way, BSP will attempt to replicate the effect of Rumen Radev's candidacy in the 2016 presidential election.

As expected, BSP endorsed Maya Manolova's bid to become mayor of Sofia, which is set to be one of the most curious battles in this local election. The leader of the BSP metropolitan organisation Kaloyan Pargov said that Manolova was the only candidate who could win the elections in Sofia, so there was no way BSP could not stand behind her. Pargov admitted that BSP could not win elections with a purely party-based nomination, because the 30 years since the changes have proved that Sofia is a city where right-wing voters are predominant. For this reason, Manolova, who became the politician with the highest rating as the Ombudsman, could attract an additional protest

vote beyond the traditional BSP voters. Pargov reached out to "Democratic Bulgaria" voters to form a majority in the future municipal council, to see a change in city governance that can only be brought about with a joint effort. Otherwise, in his words, the model for running the capital imposed by GERB will continue. Pargov's words indicate that BSP will count on disappointed right-wing GERB voters for a possible run-off with Manolova.

The BSP National Council approved the candidates for mayors of regional cities in the country. The most controversial one was the nomination for Varna after the local party organisation was raised by the leader of the "Revival" party Kostadin Kostadinov, known for his extremely nationalistic positions. The BSP plenum rejected this nomination and put forward former Minister of Education in the office of Plamen Oresharski, Professor Anelia Klisarova. The BSP leadership withdrew its political confidence from BSP-Varna leader Borislav Gutsanov, who was removed from the list of municipal councillors in the city. Gutsanov said he would appeal in court against this decision of the party plenum.

As mayor candidate in Plovdiv BSP nominated Nikolay Radev, who is a municipal councillor and director of the English high school in the city. In Vidin, BSP also relies on the director of the language high school in the city - Lyubomir Georgiev. The editor-in-chief of Duma daily newspaper Ivelin Nikolov will compete for the mayoral seat in Gabrovo. Former MP Milko Bagdasarov is the mayoral candidate for Kardzhali. Nikolay Tishev will be the candidate for mayor of Burgas, general Kolyo Milev for Sliven, Pencho Milkov for Ruse, Stanislav Vladimirov for Pernik and Todor Baychev for Karnobat. BSP MP Yavor Bozhankov will be a candidate for mayor of Gorna Oryahovitsa. BSP candidate for mayor of Kyustendil is Zdravko Milev, for Lovech it is Radina Bankova, and for Pleven it is Ilian Yonchev. In Pazardzhik BSP will not put forward a candidate but will support businessman and municipal councillor Blago Solov. In Blagoevgrad, the party will also not nominate a candidate but will stand in support of businessman Rumen Tomov.

Korneliya Ninova said the goal of BSP in these local elections is to double the number of mayors elected with the support of the party. In the last local elections, the BSP received one of its worst results, so now they will certain-

ly be improved. The question is how many of the district cities of the country will be won by the party, where the dominance of GERB is currently overwhelming. Such a breakthrough opens the possibility, moreover, that anti-GERB sentiment in a number of regions of the country is on the rise because of increasing clientelism and corruption. The big question is whether BSP will be able to consolidate the protest vote - something it failed to achieve in the last elections – both parliamentary and European. At least at this point, it would seem that BSP has learned from previous campaigns with an approach of aggression and negativism, which repelled voters from the wider periphery. An attempt is now being made to focus on specific policies and alternative solutions, rather than relying solely on self-criticism.

### 2.1.2 Other centre-left parties

ABV and Movement 21 continue to have a negligible electoral presence. In many places in the country, they will participate in various local coalitions. In Sofia, however, both parties categorically backed Maya Manolova's nomination for mayor, saying this was the only chance of defeating GERB in the capital.

## 2.2 CENTRE-RIGHT PARTIES

### 2.2.1 GERB

At the beginning of July, GERB held an extraordinary National Conference, at which the resignation of Tsvetan Tsvetanov as deputy chairman of the party was to be voted on and changes to the Executive Committee had to be made. The decision to release Tsvetanov was taken with the votes of 1046 MPs, with 10 against and 11 abstaining. Thus, GERB was left with only two deputy chairpersons - Yordanka Fandakova and Dimitar Nikolov. In the place of Tsvetanov and Romyana Bachvarova, who became ambassador to Israel, the chairman of the National Assembly, Tsveta Karayancheva and Todor Todorov, regional coordinator of the party in Silistra, were elected to the 11-member Executive Committee, on Borisov's proposal.

The local elections will be the first to really see to what extent Tsvetanov's withdrawal from active politics will adversely affect its organisational image and election status. Tsvetanov was a major driving force in party work, and his role in GERB's election campaigns was enormous. This is something that was acknowledged years ago by party leader Borisov, who stated that "the party is Tsvetanov's." In mid-September, Tsvetanov announced that he was creating a non-governmental organisation, the Euro-Atlantic Security Centre. The purpose of the organisation is to provide works of analysis in the fields of hybrid war, fake news, cybersecurity, and the communist past.

It appears that interest in the elections in Sofia will be greatest now that Maya Manolova has joined the race. Sofia is a symbolic city for GERB because it is where the party was set up after Borisov won the mayoral election

for the first time in 2005. For the upcoming elections, Yordanka Fandakova said she would renew her team in the municipality. The negatives accumulated in recent years have led to growing dissatisfaction with the way in which the city is governed. Problems such as the polluted air, reconstruction, poor infrastructure and holes in the streets in the suburbs of the city are just a few of the topics that will be addressed by Fandakova's opponents in the upcoming elections. On the other hand, a main focus will be on transparency in public procurement and on how the money of the citizens of Sofia is spent. This is why Fandakova demanded a change in the team of the municipality. Big names such as Andrey Ivanov, Orlin Alexiev and Orlin Ivanov have been dropped from the lists of municipal councilors, behind which there have been claims over the years that there are powerful lobbies.

GERB did not propose the mayors of Plovdiv, Ruse, Yambol and Haskovo for a new term of office. In Plovdiv district governor Zdravko Dimitrov was put forward in the place of Ivan Totev, whose name has been associated with numerous scandals. In Ruse, teacher Diana Ivanova will fight for the post of mayor, although the local structure has demanded that current mayor Plamen Stoilov be supported. In Haskovo, GERB withdrew confidence from current mayor Dobri Belivanov during the "Kumgate" affair and now the governor-general Stanislav Dechev will be the mayoral candidate. Belivanov will run in the election as an independent candidate nominated by an initiative committee.

GERB has proposed the following mayors for a new term of office: Varna - Ivan Portnih; Burgas - Dimitar Nikolov; Blagoevgrad - Atanas Kambitov; Veliko Turnovo - Danail Panov; Vratsa - Kalin Kamenov; Gabrovo - Tanya Hristova; Stara Zagora - Zhivko Todorov; Smolyan - Nikolay Melemov; Lovech - Korneliya Marinova, Pernik - Vera Tserovska; Vidin - Ognian Tsenkov; Silistra - Julian Naydenov; Razgrad - Valentin Vasilev; Targovishte - Darin Dimitrov; Smolyan - Nikolay Melemov; and Sliven - Stefan Radev. GERB supported the mayors of the UDF coalition partner - Peter Paunov, Mayor of Kyustendil and of Montana - Zlatko Zhivkov.

Just as in the elections for the European Parliament and the local vote, GERB signed an agreement on common actions with right-wing formations such as the UDF, United Agrarians and the Bulgarian Democratic Forum.

### 2.2.2 Other centre-right parties

After the elections for European Parliament, "Democratic Bulgaria" remained the only major formation among the smaller right-wing parties. Electorally, the party has a more significant presence in the capital and in some of the major cities of the country. This is why the elections in Sofia are of particular importance for "Democratic Bulgaria". The formation proposed for mayor architect Borislav Ignatov with the idea of presenting a new modern vision for the development of the city of an architect who is young but already established in the profession. Ignatov was the subject of the first compromising situation in this campaign,

which has already been discussed. Most of all, however, it would appear that this situation will have the opposite effect - support for Ignatov has increased, and outrage among citizens, media and politicians against the gutter press, which has published the photos, has become another occasion for discussion about the poor state of the media environment in the country - and this is a topic that has long been a priority of "Democratic Bulgaria".

"Democratic Bulgaria" supported the protest against the election of Ivan Geshev as prosecutor general. The topic of reform in the Prosecutor's Office was the first significant matter around which the party Justice, Hristo Ivanov, created "Yes, Bulgaria", so the support of the protest hardly surprised anyone.

After the Bulgaria for Citizens Movement decided to support Maya Manolova as mayor of Sofia, several politicians in the party, headed by Naiden Zelenogorsky, said they were leaving the ranks. Zelenogorsky said it was unacceptable for the right-wing party to support Maya Manolova, who is one of the faces at the forefront on the left. Even more, according to Zelenogorsky, Manolova will be remembered for a number of scandals, such as the Kostinbrod election affair. Zelenogorsky announced that he would work on the creation of a new party project aimed at uniting the right-wing space, seeking co-operation with "Democratic Bulgaria". He strongly emphasised that he would support the candidacy of Borislav Ignatov for mayor of Sofia. "Democratic Bulgaria" responded promptly to Zelenogorsky's request, saying they accept this support – and what is more, they are willing to provide seats for municipal councillors in their list for people put forward by the group of Zelenogorsky.

## 2.3 CENTRIST PARTIES

### 2.3.1 MRF

The split in the group of the "United Patriots" has strengthened the position of MRF in parliament. Thus, MRF has become a key player, on which the fate of the government depends. Although MRF formally joins the parliamentary opposition, the party all too often provides decisive support for one or another GERB legislative initiative. This support, however, is linked to vague, behind-the-scenes deals, behind which particular corporate interests are seen. For example, at the end of July, it became clear that the Varna Thermal Power Plant, which is owned by MRF Honorary Leader Ahmed Dogan, will receive money from the state this winter for the so-called "Cold Reserve". These are capacities that do not work but receive money to be on standby when needed. Varna TPP has been ranked among the leading places in auctions of the state Electricity System Operator (ESO) and will receive 26.5 million levs. However, the topic of Dogan's power plant has been diligently avoided by the ruling party. Despite calls by a number of organisations and the right-wing opposition to investigate the Dogan deal, prosecutors and the KPKONPI have refused to take any action whatsoever.

Speaking at the opening of the new parliamentary session, MRF Chairman Mustafa Karadayi said that a dialogue was needed between the parties as well as a national programme for the catch-up development of the country. This is a thesis that MRF has been advocating for more than a year. According to Karadayi, the crisis in statehood and inter-institutional wars is exacerbating the problems facing the country and this must stop. In his opinion, in Bulgaria there is a tendency for "hatred of all for all", and this heralds a new crisis.

MRF leader Mustafa Karadayi stated that the party's primary goal in the upcoming local elections is to expand its position in local government. In his words, MRF candidates have the capacity and the will to create the conditions for economic growth and development of the municipalities. According to Karadayi, local government is closest to the people, which is why the MRF is always extremely serious about preparing for these types of elections. Karadayi called on other parties to stop xenophobia, aggression and hate speech during the campaign. According to him, the upcoming elections should be a clash of programmes and decisions for the development of the municipalities, not scandals and negative PR.

As expected, Hasan Azis, the present mayor of Kardzhali, has been nominated for a new term of office in this bastion of the MRF – he will fight for a fifth consecutive term. Former MP Chetin Kazak was nominated for mayor of the city of Shumen. In Targovishte the MRF will rely on Hamdi Iliazov. In Dzhebel, the mayoral candidate is former MEP Nedzhmi Ali, and in Ardino, it is the party's regional coordinator, Izet Shaban. In smaller municipalities in areas with Turkish populations such as Chernoochene and Kirkovo, long-time mayors will fight there - Aidan Osman and Shinasli Suleiman. Sebihan Mehmed has been proposed for a fifth term of office as mayor of Krumovgrad.

### 2.3.2 "Volya" ("Will" in Bulgarian)

After the European elections, into which plenty of resources were thrown with no return, it is as if "Volya" has slipped away from the public domain. At this stage, there is nothing particularly memorable about the party's activities. And in the run-up to the local elections, there is no dynamism. "Volya" leader Veselin Mareshki said only that there was no way he would support Maya Manolova as mayor of Sofia because she is part of the status quo that "created poverty and corruption in Bulgaria".

## 2.4. NATIONALIST PARTIES

### 2.4.1 "United Patriots"

At the end of July, clashes between parties in the "United Patriots" parliamentary group reached their climax. Following a decision by the group, MPs Volen Siderov, Pavel Shopov and Desislav Chukolov were expelled from it. Later, the remaining "Ataka" MPs left the group and became independent MPs. This means that they also have to leave the positions they

hold in the parliamentary committees, and Yavor Notev gave up the post of deputy chairman of the National Assembly. The reasons for the expulsion of Siderov and Chukolov were "insufficient involvement in parliamentary work", and Shopov was dismissed "for gross violation of ethical rules".

IMRO leader Krasimir Karakachanov said the coalition has been out of work for more than a year because of constant sabotage by "Ataka". In his words, Volen Siderov's personal attacks on him and Valeri Simeonov have transgressed all borders - political and human. Therefore, according to Karakachanov, there is no other solution but to split. According to him, the exclusion of "Ataka" from the parliamentary group is not a critical reflection on the majority and the government. IMRO and NFSB will not seek to re-sign the joint governing agreement with GERB.

At the end of August, however, NFSB and IMRO discussed a revision in their relations with GERB. Valeri Simeonov said that there would be very serious changes in relations with GERB, as the state is not going in the right direction. According to Simeonov, in recent months the state has suffered severe economic shocks - such as the state of energy and high electricity prices; swine fever and what he saw as the inadequate measures taken by the State, which have eradicated this industry; as well as the ruining of the tourism industry to meet the ambitions of certain lobbies.

In early September, Volen Siderov asked the Speaker of the National Assembly to delete the name of the "United Patriots" parliamentary group. The reason was that "Ataka" no longer participated in it. The party claimed that under the coalition agreement signed by "Ataka", the NFSB and the IMRO, before the parliamentary elections, the group was to be called "United Patriots - NFSB, 'Ataka' and IMRO".

The local elections will be a test for the nationalist parties after the European Parliament elections saw a severe electoral collapse of the "Ataka" and NFSB. Plovdiv will be

one of the cities where a good performance is expected for IMRO and NFSB after the candidacy of the MP and former mayor of Plovdiv Slavcho Atanasov. In the last local elections, Atanasov almost managed to defeat Ivan Totev of GERB. Slavcho Atanasov promised a complete revision of the doctrines of Ivan Totev, ensuring transparency of public procurement. Among the commitments made is the promise to cut down the administration in the municipality, as he said it has now become a GERB feeder. Atanasov's strong candidacy makes a GERB victory in the second largest city in the country problematic. The problems in the city administration caused GERB not to nominate Ivan Totev for a new term, but to propose as mayor the district governor of the city - Zdravko Dimitrov.

In Sofia at these local elections too, just like four years ago, MEP Angel Dzhambazki has been nominated by IMRO. He said that a run-off between Fandakova and Maya Manolova was not a foregone conclusion and that his candidature was an alternative for governing in the capital. Dzhambazki said that IMRO will count on success in Plovdiv, Ruse, Varna, Pleven and Sandanski, where the party candidates are well-recognised and popular figures. IMRO said 30% of the municipalities would be in coalition with the NFSB in different forms.

NPSF proposed MP Jordan Apostolov for mayor of Dobrich; the municipal councillor of Varna Dimitar Karbov for this city; and the Executive Director of UMBAL Burgas Dr. Boyko Mirazchiyski for this constituency.

At the beginning of September, Volen Siderov announced that "Ataka" would support Yordanka Fandakova as mayor of Sofia, support that was immediately rejected by the Mayor of Sofia and GERB chairman of the municipal council Elen Gerdjikov. A new decision by Siderov followed - that he himself would stand for mayor of the capital. Siderov said his programme would be a single point - a ban on what has already become a traditional gay parade.

## 3

## PUBLIC OPINION

A Market Links survey on attitudes of Sofia citizens towards city development in late July outlines major problems and challenges facing city government. The biggest problem, according to people who live in the capital, is cleanliness and polluted air, followed by traffic and reconstruction. The poll shows that party candidates have less potential to mobilise voters in Sofia. 40% would support an independent mayoral candidate, 28% would vote for a popular local non-political figure, 25% for a candidate with a real chance of winning, whilst 24% believe the future mayor should have good contact with central power. And 22% would show allegiance to the candidate of the party they sympathise with.

The survey shows that Maya Manolova enjoys the highest support among Sofia residents - 63% approval, 26% disapproval. She is followed by President Rumen Radev with 54% approval, 38% disapproval. In third place is the mayor Yordanka Fandakova - 48% approval, 49% disapproval. The leaders of the two biggest parties warrant a large percentage of disapproval among Sofia citizens. Boyko Borisov is disapproved of by 60% of the residents of the capital, and earns the approval of 35% of them. Korneliya Ninova is disapproved of by 76% of Sofia residents, and only 20% approve of her.

The ratio of the leading parties in Sofia is as follows: GERB has 30% approval, IMRO - 27%, Democratic Bulgaria - 26%, BSP - 23%, NFSB - 12%, "Volya" - 8%, "Ataka" - 7%, and MRF has 3% approval. However, the authors of

the research state that this approval is an indirect indicator of support. The electoral picture as a request for a vote is different. For example, in municipal council elections - 22% would vote for GERB, 12% for BSP, 12% for Democratic Bulgaria, 4% for IMRO, 3% for "Volya", and 34% state that they are undecided.

In the mayoral elections, the electoral attitudes in the first round are as follows: Maya Manolova - 28%, Yordanka Fandakova - 23%, Boris Bonev - 7%, Democratic Bulgaria candidate - 4% (this is stated so, because Borislav Ignatov was not yet nominated), 22% had not decided who to support.

A Market Links survey conducted towards the end of August shows public attitudes to choosing a new prosecutor general. 57% of the respondents believe that the procedure with only one candidate is flawed, with only 15% finding nothing wrong with it. 37% of citizens cannot judge. Nearly half of the citizens say the procedure needs to change and only 16% say it is good enough.

A survey by Alpha Research conducted in mid-September shows the following electoral picture for parties on a national level. To the question "Which party would you vote for if the elections were held today?" - 21.5% of the respondents would support GERB, 18.7% would back BSP, 8.6% would opt for MRF, 8.3% would vote for Slavi Trifonov's party, 4.8% for IMRO-NFSB, 4.1% for Democratic Bulgaria, 2% for "Volya", and 1.9% for "Ataka".

## 4

## MAIN CONCLUSIONS AND FORECASTS

1. The upcoming campaign for the local elections will be extremely intense, and full of compromising statements and smutty PR. The events of the last month confirm this. Images of pornographic content that have been distributed, the spy scandal, arrests of journalists, and the Bulgarian National Radio programme Horizont scandal with the removal of Silvia Velikova's broadcast are an avalanche of events which, in one way or another, may be related to the upcoming election campaign. This leads to political tension and can have unpredictable consequences for the result of the elections.

The local elections coincide with the election of a new prosecutor general, which aggravates public tensions even more. The sole nomination for prosecutor general has led to protests that have been continuing for a second month. The nomination of a single application initially distorted the selection procedure because it was expected that there would be competition between candidates and concepts, in view of the extremely low approval of the prosecution in recent years. Since the nomination of Ivan Geshev, there has been unprecedented support for his candidacy by media close to those in power and to the oligarch-MP Delyan Peevski, who are trying to discredit the protests in every way.

2. After winning the European elections, GERB is embarking on the election campaign with a good deal of confidence. The party controls virtually all of the local government in the country after its landslide election success four years ago. However, this is met with discontent in a number of cities in the country, where a clientele model of governance, lack of transparency and suspected corruption in public procurement is observed. Therefore, it is expected that GERB will encounter problems in the run-offs for the mayoral elections in many of the regional cities of the country, where there is also the greatest dissatisfaction with the government of the party.

Boyko Borisov is again actively involved in the campaign, touring the regions of the country daily for various events in order to seek a PR effect. The mayoral elections in the capital are particularly important for GERB, where they see a serious opponent in the face of Maya Manolova. Tensions in Sofia have intensified with protests over the elec-

tion of a new prosecutor general, which are supported mostly liberal-minded right-wing voters.

GERB also face another challenge - the former vice chairman Tsvetan Tsvetanov will not participate in the elections for the first time. This will be one of the tests which will show how important Tsvetanov was in the organisational work of the party and election campaigns.

3. The divisions in the BSP after the European elections appear to have temporarily died down and the party is emerging relatively consolidated for the local elections. Only in Varna is there a conflict with the local party structure, which may affect the results there. In many places in the country, the BSP has proposed non-partisan candidates for mayors, thus aiming to expand its periphery and gather the protest vote in possible run-offs there. This strategy brought success to the party in the presidential elections. The main goal of BSP will be to win in some of the regional centres in the country where breakthroughs may take place due to dissatisfaction with GERB mayors.
4. The scandals in the "United Patriots" led to a final outcome, with "Ataka" MPs excluded from the parliamentary group. At this stage, this does not lead to any major changes in government or a change in the government formula.

IMRO remains with the most significant electoral influence, and strong local structures in a number of cities in the country are a prerequisite for good results in some Bulgarian municipalities. The battle in Plovdiv will be particularly interesting, where IMRO and the NFSB put forward MP and former mayor of the city Slavcho Atanasov.

5. For MRF, local elections have always been important. In recent years, apart from in the mixed regions, MRF has been gaining good results in the northwest of Bulgaria, where in the polling stations with the Roma population, the party is widely voted for. This may be related to the underhand practices in Bulgarian politics that have been observed in recent years, such as controlled voting and vote buying. It is no coincidence that nationalist formations have called for particular vigilance in these constituen-

cies, urging the Ministry of the Interior to do its work to identify the groups involved in this activity. In recent months, it is notable that the role of the MRF in governance has increased, especially since the split in the group of the “United Patriots”. And the hidden coalition between GERB and MRF is becoming more visible to the public.

6. “Democratic Bulgaria” remains the only more significant formation among the so-called city-right parties. Following the success in the EP elections, further consolidation of the coalition is underway, with members of a splinter group of the Bulgaria for Citizens Movement, led by Naiden Zelenogorski, joining it. As a whole, “Democratic Bulgaria” relies on electoral support in Sofia and other major cities of the country and the most significant resources will be invested there. Local elections, on the other

hand, allow “Democrats” to strengthen their structures in the country.

The Bulgaria for Citizens Movement took another path in support of Maya Manolova’s candidacy for mayor of Sofia and decided to participate in a joint list for municipal councillors with the NDSV and the Agrarian People’s Union. The UDF, in conjunction with the United Agrarians and the Bulgarian Democratic Forum, also signed an agreement with GERB for joint participation in this election, as well as the European ones.

7. At this stage, “Volya” shows passivity in the campaign for local elections, with the party not having been able to build a sustainable public image. Playing with nationalist parties in Europe did not lead to the desired breakthrough in the European parliamentary elections. In this campaign Veselin Mareshki will probably focus his efforts on Varna, from where his political career began.



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The divisions in BSP after the European elections seem to have temporarily died down and the party is emerging relatively consolidated for the local votes. Only in Varna is there a conflict with the local party structure, which may affect the results there. In many places in the country, BSP has put forward non-partisan candidates for mayors, in this way aiming to expand its periphery and gather protest votes for possible run-offs there.

Further information on the topic can be found here:  
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