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## **The Party System in Bulgaria** **2001 – 2009:** Transformation and Evolution of the Political Parties

■ The 2001 general election marked the beginning of a deep transformation of Bulgaria's new party system, which was set up after the onset of the country's transition back in 1989. From a party system of a country in transition it came to grow into a party system of consolidating democracy. The second post-communist party system, which began to emerge after 2001, acquired the contours of a multi-party system, but at the same time it was subject to dynamic changes, which became more apparent after the 2005 and 2009 general elections in the country.

■ Following the failure of the liberal center, the party system once again provided room for the "in-building" or imposition of a new two-block party system, established under novel conditions now, between a left-centrist block of parties and a right-centrist block of parties, respectively. After the 2009 general election, the left-centrist block consists of the MRF and the BSP, both of which continue their joint actions in the capacity of parliamentary opposition, despite the difficulties they are experiencing, whereas the right-centrist block is made up by GERB, DSB, and the UDF, all of which are member parties of the European People's Party. The nationalist right wing party Ataka is also supporting the government.

■ At the same time, a process of ongoing transformation of the party system well into the future cannot be ruled out because of multiple unknown factors concerning the results of the performance of a young party such as GERB because it only has minimal experience in the institutions of central governance and its elite in the executive and legislative branches of power is both unfamiliar and unpredictable. In other words, the new two-block party configuration is in a temporary state for the time being, waiting for yet another transition towards a greater stability of the party system to take place in the foreseeable future.

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### **1. Attempts at consolidating the centrist-liberal spectrum of parties in the aftermath of the 2001 general election**

The 2001 general election marked the beginning of a profound transformation in the new Bulgarian party system, established in the aftermath of the 1989 changes, which spurred the democratic reforms in the country. From a party system of the post-communist transition, now it gradually came to grow into a party system of a consolidating democracy.

The first post-communist party system, which was functioning throughout the 1989 – 2001 period of time, was characterized mainly by the imposition of the strongly polarized model of a bipolar party system, dominated by the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) on the one hand, and the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) on the other.

The second post-communist party system, which emerged after 2001, acquired the contours of a multi-party system, but in its turn it was also subject to dynamic changes, the manifestations of which became markedly apparent after the two successive general elections held in 2005 and 2009 respectively.

The establishment of National Movement Simeon II (NMSII) as an electoral formation, which identified itself solely with the personality of the former Bulgarian King Simeon II, raised a number of questions concerning its evolution and fate as a party formation. Unlike the rest of the ma-

ajor political parties, making up the backbone of the new post-communist party system, namely the BSP, the UDF, and the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF), NMSII was set up in quite a speedy fashion and started its public “life” directly as a parliamentary formation made up of 120 Members of Parliament. In other words, its emergence resembles the establishment of the first classical party formations in the United Kingdom, the USA, and other democratic countries, which at that time were embarking on the road of their development from the institutions of representative democracy. Only later did they grow from “parliamentary represented parties” into “parties of the civil society”.

At the same time, being returned to Parliament in the capacity of the largest parliamentary faction, NMSII penetrated into the structures of the executive power as a major governing party, which – since the very beginning of its existence – turned it into a “party of state governance”, exerting strong impact on the public administration, where its principal human resource reserves were starting to take shape. In other words, NMSII was formed entirely “from the top down” at the sole discretion of its leader, Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, and completely outside civil society, if we disregard the brief 2001 general election campaign of the new formation, which was made up almost exclusively of people who were newcomers to politics.

The way in which NMSII emerged raised numerous doubts as to its capacity

to consolidate itself as a viable party formation. Besides, NMSII proclaimed itself to be a movement and its rhetoric sounded with a certain anti-party overtone, which corresponded to the initial understanding and outlook of its founder and leader – Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha.

Given this situation, the major factors which played the role of a tool legitimizing NMSII were first and foremost the performance capacities of the government, also coupled with the ability to preserve its entirety, internal stability, and proper interaction with its junior coalition partner – the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF). Indeed, it was actually the relationship with the MRF that the parliamentary majority depended on.

The managerial capacity of NMSII in the government of the country gave rise to reasonable question marks because of the totally unfamiliar team which came to top the new government. All of them were people lacking experience in public administration at the level they were summoned to work. Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha himself was reluctant to take on his responsibilities as Prime Minister of the country, as he also lacked any relevant experience for this post. This is the reason why his initial intention in fact was to set up a coalition government with active and experienced UDF and BSP cadres, thus securing the continuity in the country's governance, on the one hand, and sharing the ensuing responsibilities with them, on the other. Only the BSP, however, responded positively to Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha's endeavors and two

activists from its ranks agreed to shoulder the responsibilities of their respective ministerial posts.<sup>1</sup> In this way, the government of Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha secured the tacit support of the parliamentary faction dominated by the BSP, apart from the open parliamentary support of its coalition partner – the MRF.

The government was also "favored" by the fact that the MRF and its leader, Ahmed Dogan, had accumulated significant experience in the political events taking place in the country in the wake of the 1989 changes and were thus able to compensate to a certain extent for the fact that Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha and some of his ministers had been isolated from Bulgarian politics for quite some time.

Another positive point for the government was the fact that it started functioning in conditions of a relative economic stabilization of the country at the end of 2001 and in a favorable international environment, connected with Bulgaria's prospects to move forward on the road of its accession to NATO and the European Union.

The excessive expectations, which the majority of Bulgarian citizens entertained at that time, however, were an adverse point for the government. These expectations had been prompted by the election campaign promises for significant changes in the living stan-

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<sup>1</sup> They were: Kostadin Paskalev, who was appointed Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Regional Development and Public Works, and Dimitar Kalchev, who was appointed Minister of State Administration. The former resigned from his post in 2003 because of his disagreement with the policy pursued by the government, while the latter held his ministerial post till the end of the government's term of office.

dard and life of Bulgarians, the majority of whom had come to rank among the “losers” from the country’s transition to a market economy, due to the grave economic shocks and meltdown during the 1990s. From the very first months of the NMSII government, people came to realize how unrealistic some of the populist promises made by NMSII and personally by the new Prime Minister, Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, were. Although the NMSII government continued to pursue the line of macro-economic and financial stabilization, it failed to deliver its exaggerated election promises for a significant improvement of the living standard of the Bulgarian population. It was this failure namely that brought about the drop of popularity and the loss of public confidence in the NMSII Cabinet as early as the first few months of its actual governance.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, however, the diminishing confidence was not accompanied by serious economic disturbances and crises. Moreover, during the last two years of the NMSII government’s term of office, the country saw a definite improvement in the living standard of certain strata of the population, which manifested itself in the growing number of people belonging to the so-called “middle class”. The unemployment rate declined and this was coupled with a

relative increase of incomes, mainly the incomes of civil servants in the state administration. The amount of foreign investments also marked a rise.<sup>3</sup>

The principal achievements of Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha’s government, however, were made on the international political arena, and were mainly manifested by the fact of the successful completion of the country’s negotiations for accession to the NATO block and the European Union. Bulgaria became a full-fledged NATO member country in April 2004, and the negotiations with the EU were completed on April 25<sup>th</sup> 2005, when the country officially signed the EU Accession Treaty and the date of January 1<sup>st</sup> 2007 was scheduled as the date of its actual accession.

These facts served as a guarantee for the government’s relative stability, despite the declining confidence rating over the first years of its functioning. This electoral confidence was partially restored with the approaching end of the government’s term of office.<sup>4</sup> This factor, alongside several other, such as the preserved parliamentary majority and the lack of sufficient popularity by any of the alternative opposition parties, played the role of a guarantee ensuring the completion of the government’s full four-year term of office as provided by the country’s Constitution. This circumstance was extremely important for NMSII as it provided the party’s legitimacy as a political

<sup>2</sup> A year after the new government had come to office, the electoral impact of NMSII had dropped to 13 percent of the entire Bulgarian electorate. See: Barometer, *The Political Parties in Bulgaria*, July-September, 2002, FES and Institute for Political and Legal Studies.

<sup>3</sup> See the data in the 2004 Yearbook of the National Statistical Institute.

<sup>4</sup> See Barometer, *The Political Parties in Bulgaria*, January-March, 2005, FES and Institute for Political and Legal Studies.

formation capable of offering its own alternative in the capacity of a liberal party, different from the alternatives suggested by its major rivals from the left-wing and right-wing political environment respectively. It is this circumstance that made it possible for NMSII to shape up its own specific profile of a centrist party, claiming to take its rightful place in the second Bulgarian post-1989 party system.

Besides, the four-year term of office made it possible for NMSII to “nurture” human resources of its own both in the central administration and local government. In this way the party also expanded its societal base, mainly among the class of civil servants, many of whom got their assignments precisely owing to the governing party. This period, as well, was conducive for NMSII to consolidate its own party elite, which grew around the figure of Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha himself. But now the party enjoyed legitimacy not only because of its leader, but through a number of its ministers who had managed to gain a respectably high level of public support in the meantime.<sup>5</sup> With time, these NMSII functionaries came to occupy leading positions both in the newly established NMSII party and in its parliamentary faction.

The process concerning the internal party stability and the homogeneity of the NMSII Party, however, turned out to be much more complicated. Having

emerged as a political formation “inside Parliament” and without any support and social roots in civil society whatsoever, it retained its wholeness mainly because of its loyalty to and identification with the personality of the leader Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha. In terms of its construction, the party was a combination of several friendly circles (representatives of the legal profession, technocrats, yuppies from London and other western cities, the Koshlukov – Sevlievsky circle, and some others), connected with extra-parliamentary and other economic circles, which actually makes it possible to define NMSII as a “clan” party. Some of the NMSII MPs were typical “political hitch-hikers”, who had already changed one or more parties (the UDF and the BSP included) and now availed of the opportunity to land into the band-wagon of a new one. Their presence in NMSII was prompted much more by personal and career-oriented interests and very little (if at all) by any ideological and/or value-oriented considerations.

Therefore, NMSII was a typical clientele organization, serving the interests of various economic lobbies and the personal ambitions and needs of a sizeable part of its Members of Parliament. This background and actual situation of NMSII predetermined the series of conflicts and repeated succession of splits within its parliamentary faction. They were instigated by the contradictions among the main “friendly” circles and the domination of two of them – those of the lawyers and the technocrats, who were

<sup>5</sup> Among them were the Minister of Finance, Milen Velchev, the Minister of Economy, Lidya Shuleva, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Solomon Passi, the Minister of European Integration, Meglena Kuneva, etc.

highly favored by Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha and had taken prominent positions in the government and the NMSII parliamentary faction.

It is these two principal groups that obtained the major power resources in the institutions of state and it is this fact that provoked the dissatisfaction of the other internal party groups and individual MPs. The onset of the series of conflicts and the subsequent outflow from the NMSII parliamentary faction began as early as the first few months of the government's term of office and continued right to its end, when only 97 MPs had remained in the NMSII parliamentary faction out of the 120 MPs who initially made it up. The most significant conflict occurred in 2004, when 11 NMSII MPs left the parliamentary faction and set up a parliamentary faction of their own – the so-called New Time, headed by Miroslav Sevlievsky and Emil Koshlukov. Subsequently, on the 10<sup>th</sup> of June 2004, these MPs established a political party of their own, which was of a pronounced right-centrist orientation.

Following the 2005 parliamentary crisis, the New Time “traded” its refusal to lend support to the non-confidence vote tabled against the government and demanded that their party be included in the government and be given a ministerial post. It is thus that the New Time got included in the so-called Liberal Alliance together with NMSII and the MRF, which existed only for a brief period of time and disintegrated shortly before

the 2005 general election. Each of the constituent parties ran the general election independently, and eventually the New Time did not make it to the new Parliament, remaining outside with unclear prospects as to the possibility to remain a viable part in the right-centrist political space.

An important step in the transition of NMSII from a non-homogenous movement to a political party was its registration as a political party in June 2002. In the declaration on the major values that NMSII upholds, it proclaimed to be a liberal formation, which aspires to situate itself in the right-centrist political environment.

In terms of its organizational essence, NMSII qualified itself as an electoral party, lacking the organizational structure typical of the other Bulgarian parties with central, regional, and local bodies. The primary function of NMSII in this sense was to organize the election process of the party at the time of the various elections. Initially NMSII made the decision to join the European People's Party, where the member parties are mainly of a conservative and Christian-democratic orientation, but its EPP membership was hampered by the opposition of the UDF, which is an older member party of this European supranational party. Subsequently, NMSII re-oriented itself to the Liberal International and the Liberal European Formation (European Liberal and Reformist Party) and became its regular member party in 2003. The MRF had already acceded to this trans-national party

in the capacity of a regular member and thus was able to give its valid support to the membership of NMSII.

In other words, it was mainly due to foreign political considerations and external influence that NMSII accepted liberalism as its ideological orientation and together with the MRF acceded to the liberal party formations. Because historically the liberal parties in Europe are rather non-homogenous, having right-wing, left-wing, and centrist factions of their own, some of which even exist as independent parties, NMSII found it easy to adapt successfully to this model. On the one hand, it corresponded to the internal lack of homogeneity within NMSII itself, where different factions of more left-wing or right-wing orientation also revealed their viability. On the other hand, it corresponded to the fact that the centrist space within the Bulgarian party system was relatively very sparsely “inhabited” and this made it possible for NMSII to perform a balancing act between the right-wing and the left-wing parties and find coalition partners, if need be, in the two directions in compliance with its specific interests.

NMSII identified the MRF as its major partner, as the latter had also self-determined itself as a liberal formation and had acquired the status of an integral part of the governing coalition. It is in this way – typical of the Bulgarian political process – that NMSII self-determined its ideological image and thus made an important step towards its party identification from a populist to liberal formation. At that spe-

cific historical point in time, the meaning of this step had first and foremost a pragmatic and foreign political aspect, as the liberal tradition in Bulgaria was discontinued after 1947, and after the post-1989 changes was represented only for a brief period of time by insignificant formations within the UDF.

In other words, the liberal political values were yet to acquire their specific Bulgarian coloring in order for them to become a conscious orientation of the NMSII elite and its entire membership.

After the 2001 general election, the first test indicative of the NMSII social roots and its connections with civil society were the local elections in October 2003. Despite the specificity of this vote – a majority vote system for mayors and proportional vote system for municipal councilors – NMSII only managed to score some humble results, which, however, testified to the fact that in its capacity of the youngest Bulgarian party it still availed of a certain circle of supportive voters of its own. NMSII won six of the mayors’ seats, of which two were in larger towns, and a total of 344 municipal councilors, with the support of 6.51 percent of the total number of voters.<sup>6</sup> This percentage reflected both the NMSII rating at that time, which ranged between eight and ten percent, thus marking a substantial decline in comparison with the 2001 general election outcome. At the same time, however, this result

<sup>6</sup> See the issue of the “Sega” daily from Nov. 4th 2003, p. 3.



showed that NMSII had begun to consolidate itself as a political formation on the local level and had partially started to emerge in the open, outside the shadow of its leader, Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha. It is at these local elections that NMSII received its first legitimacy in the capacity of a party formation. It is these 2003 local elections precisely that opened vistas for the parliamentary representation of NMSII at the next general election, despite the lingering question marks concerning the issue of its further political fate.

Another factor which put to the test the capacity of NMSII to govern the country was the interaction of the young party with its coalition partner – the MRF. It was the MRF that was the major factor guaranteeing the reliable parliamentary majority. It was the MRF that was the supporting pillar of the new government and was at the same time an active participant in the executive branch of power. This coalition formula for governing the country was tested for the first time ever in Bulgaria after the 1989 democratic changes. The two constituent parties of the new coalition formula made the respective efforts to ensure their durable interaction. In this way they proved that a new center of power was now established – outside the BSP and the UDF, which thus far had dominated the party system in the country, and NMSII and the MRF preserved their coalition formula intact, despite the recurring internal coalition disagreements and conflicts.

This new form of coalition cooperation also created prerequisites for the emergence of a new alternative for the governance of the country around the two liberal-centrist parties. This was a novel factor, which at the level of governance helped to break up the bipolar party system. This helped to make the two parties legitimate in the capacity of actual and potential participants in the country's governance in the future as well, well beyond the 2005 general election.

Although the MRF had been a factor in the Bulgarian political process ever since the changes in 1989, this direct involvement in the executive branch of power in the capacity of an active participant completed the process of its integration within the political system of the country. The MRF obtained new opportunities for expanding its presence in the administrative apparatus on the central level alongside the possibility to avail of new resources of power in order to materialize the interests of its political elite and its electoral base. The MRF also used its participation in the executive power to expand its impact within the structures of the local authorities after the 2003 local elections, where it marked an impressive result, capturing 13.6 percent of all ballots cast. The MRF electoral outcome at these local elections can be illustrated with the 695 municipal councilors returned to the municipal authorities and the numerous mayor seats in the ethnically mixed regions of the country, the town of Kurdjali included.

Throughout this entire period of time, the MRF was making efforts to expand its electoral impact outside the ethnic Turkish population and to attract to its ranks more Bulgarians both in the party leadership and in the structures of the country's governance by employing the levers of its presence in the Cabinet. The MRF also made significant endeavors to consolidate the liberal-centrist bloc as a major factor in the new party system. It was on the initiative of the MRF that a Liberal Alliance was set up by NMSII, the MRF and the New Time. The MRF leader, however, failed to convince the NMSII leadership that the governing coalition formed by the three parties should grow into a pre-election coalition to the purpose of running the 2005 general election. This failure, however, brought to the fore both certain tensions and substantial differences concerning the tactic that was yet to be employed by the three formations for the purposes of their election campaigns.

The efforts of the New Time to form a coalition on its own with the MRF for the 2005 general election also proved unsuccessful. Thus, the three liberal-centrist parties ran the 2005 election on their own with the prospects for continuing their cooperation in the post-election situation, should the possibility for such cooperation actually arise. The outcome from the general election did confirm that there is room for a centrist-liberal bloc in Bulgarian politics, and that it can become a major component of the sec-

ond post-communist party system, despite the deteriorating relationships between the MRF and NMSII.

## **2. Fragmentation and restructuring of the right-wing political space**

Right after the 2001 general election, the UDF – claiming to encompass the entire right-wing political spectrum and thus far being the major opponent of the BSP – fell into the grips of a prolonged internal party crisis. It was provoked by a series of different factors, among which the following seem to stand apart most conspicuously:

Firstly, while the UDF was still in power before the 2001 general election, it gradually started severing its connections both with its societal base and civil society altogether, as a consequence of the deepening adverse trends of the party's isolation within the limits of the elite at its top. Thus it was increasingly "closing" itself within the "friendly circle" of its leader and then Prime Minister, Ivan Kostov. He manifested himself as an authoritarian leader and it was not by chance that his comrades from his own party came to dub him increasingly more often "the Commander". After 2001 Kostov began to eliminate his major opponents within the UDF, concentrated substantial power resources within his own personality and hands, and isolated the party leadership from the rank-and-file members of the party.

Secondly, the UDF was affected by the deepening and aggravating adverse processes prompted by the clientele-prone

bias of the party. The fact that the UDF became “a party in office” without any strong roots in society and proper internal party democracy turned it into a party, which to a large extent was serving the self-interests of its ruling top and it is this self-promotion precisely that far too soon provoked internal party clashes. Corruption as a typical phenomenon of immature party formations and accidental party leaders who have reached the top of the party pyramid in a post-communist environment, actually corroded the UDF internally and turned it into an arena where lobbyist interests began to clash.

The analysis covering the 2000 – 2001 period of time elaborated by the Head of the UDF Strategies and Analyses Department, Svetoslav Malinov, correctly points out the symptoms of this process of “clientelization”<sup>7</sup> of the UDF. In Malinov’s opinion, “certain clientele-oriented groups within the UDF began to follow their own agendas” and thus the party “reached a new distorted phase of encapsulation and privatization of clientelism itself”.

Thirdly, having governed the country for a complete four-year term of office with a stable parliamentary majority, having laid the foundations of certain re-

forms, and having set the geopolitical orientation of the country towards the Euro-Atlantic structures, the UDF depleted the reasons for maintaining the initial anti-communist ideological course, which first and foremost had provided its legitimacy as a party and had mobilized its substantial electoral potential. The UDF, however, failed to launch on time the indispensable process of declaring its new ideology and program renewal in conformity with the new realities in the country, and what is especially important – failed to accept the post-1989 democratic achievements as an irreversible factor in Bulgarian politics.

By maintaining the ideological slogans of aggressive anti-communism, characteristic of the onset of the country’s transition, the UDF was hampering its own adaptation to the new realities and the new generations of voters, who grew up in the period after 1989. On the other hand, the attempt to bring Christian-democratic ideology from “outside” and impose it on the Bulgarian realities failed last but not least because the UDF lacked the potential of ideas and the respective ideologists capable of substantiating the Christian-democratic values in the specific Bulgarian conditions. This is also the reason why the Charter of UDF Values remained without any genuine effect whatsoever on the evolution of the party itself.

What was added to these three major factors for the crisis in the UDF after 2001 were the ongoing and increasingly exacerbated relations among the leaders and the different factions existing within

<sup>7</sup> The notion of “clientelism” has been introduced in political studies to denote the way in which political parties turn into organizations serving the interests of a narrow circle of interested people for whom the party organization is mainly a tool meant to satisfy their personal interests and those of a strictly closed group of insiders, which are of a predominantly economic nature. Creating a loyal clientele of their own, the parties themselves thus depend on it to pursue the interests of the party. It is in this way that a specific unity is created between the party functionaries and their clientele in the state bureaucracy and the various economic structures.

the party itself. The immediate catalyst for the deteriorating relations was the poor performance of the UDF at the 2001 general election, followed by the loss of the presidential candidate backed up by the UDF, namely Peter Stoyanov, who was the country's Head of State throughout the 1997-2001 presidential term of office. This is how within a short period of time in 2001 the UDF lost two crucial political battles, which brought about painful processes both inside the party and outside it – among its major proponents. This marked the beginning of a period of disintegration of the UDF, which went through various phases after 2001 and continued until and beyond the 2005 general election. This process could not be reversed even when Nadezhda Mikhailova won the leadership party post at the UDF National Conference in 2002 in a poignant contest with her predecessor Ekaterina Mikhailova, who has always been Ivan Kostov's close and loyal associate.<sup>8</sup> This disintegration within the UDF manifested itself in two directions: first, exacerbation of the simmering internal conflicts, and second, party splits, which resulted in the formation of new right-wing parties from the splinters remaining after the UDF fell apart.

The first more significant conflict, which brought about the first split in the party, was connected with Stephan Sofiansky, the then popular Sofia City Mayor, who

left the UDF right after the 2001 general election. He established a new party formation and headed it himself. It was registered under the name of Union of Free Democrats (UFD), the orientation of which was the right-centrist political space. This is the reason why the new party sought contacts with the governing party – NMSII. The social base of the UFD encompassed mainly representatives of the new middle class in the larger towns in the country.

During its short-lived existence in the capacity of a political party, the UFD was entirely dependent on the fate and popularity of its Chairman, Stephan Sofiansky, who won a third term of office in the contest for the mayor's seat at the 2003 local elections. At the same time, the growing problems of the mayor as well as the lack of a majority in the municipal council, on the one hand, and on the other, the lawsuits filed against some of his acts in the capacity of a mayor, considerably narrowed the scope of the UFD impact on the eve of 2005 general election. The UFD failed to grow beyond the standing of a small party, the capacity of which to overcome the 4 percent electoral threshold was quite dubious. This prompted the UFD to enter a rather unstable and disparate coalition in terms of its ideological point of view, namely the Bulgarian National Union, the other participants in which were an agrarian formation and a nationalist one.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> According to the opinion polls held in the summer of 2002, the UDF electoral impact had dropped to 10.4 percent. The source of the data is a national representative poll held by the BBSS Gallup International, published in the "Sega" Daily on August 20th, 2002.

<sup>9</sup> According to the various opinion polls, Sofiansky's UFD confidence rating ranged between 1 and 3 percent, and its membership in 2003 amounted to about 15 thousand people. The summarized data were published in the "Trud" Daily on May 23d 2003.

The conflict ranking second in terms of its scope and ensuing split was between the supporters of ex-Prime Minister Ivan Kostov and the new UDF leadership headed by Nadezhda Mikhailova. The contradictions escalated after the loss in the contest for the mayor's seat at the 2003 local elections, where Nadezhda Mikhailova was running on behalf of the UDF. Ivan Kostov's supporters used this fact to start a campaign for her ousting from the leadership post and the return of Ivan Kostov to the leading positions in the UDF. After the failure of this campaign, Kostov's proponents re-oriented their efforts towards leaving the UDF altogether and setting up a parliamentary faction of their own, which subsequently became the backbone of a new political party – Democrats for Strong Bulgaria (DSB), actually founded in May 2004.

Ivan Kostov, former UDF Chairman and 1997-2001 Prime Minister of the country, was elected leader of the new party. DSB self-determined itself as a right-wing conservative party, the ambition of which was to create the image of the "New Right Wing" emerging from the shadow of the UDF. The program and election documents of the party revealed its aspirations to present itself as a party, defending the Bulgarian national interests with a grain of Euro-sceptic bias. The principal element in its program, however, was the combat for order and legality, combined with traditional anti-communist slogans. From its very inception, DSB was set up as a leader's party around the figure of Ivan Kos-

tov, through whom it wanted to gain its legitimacy and to assert itself.

The new party adopted a firm opposition stance both against the left-wing parties and the NMSII governance. It took a sharply critical stance against the rest of the right-wing parties, the UDF and UFD in particular, and did not conceal its aim to replace them from the right-wing environment altogether. The major accent in the activities of DSB was its poignant opposition against the MRF and especially against its leader, Ahmed Dogan, who was accused of monopolizing the ethnic vote of the Bulgarian Turkish population. Despite the ambitions of the new party to replace the UDF from the right-wing party environment, the societal base of DSB remained rather narrow – until the 2005 general election it encompassed hard-line anti-communists and elderly citizens in the larger cities of the country. According to the opinion polls, the DSB ranked only second – behind the BSP – in terms of its share of zealots and supporters exceeding 61 years of age.<sup>10</sup>

Within the UDF itself, the crisis processes provoked by the series of splits did not subside. Secondary power struggles for gaining influence over the party continued until the 2005 general election and were generated by a number of ill-conceived decisions made by the party leadership and the leader Nadezhda Mikhailova in person. One of these

<sup>10</sup> "Dnevnik" Daily from June 10th 2005.

principal decisions was subject to a particularly strong criticism, namely the one for the party to enter a broad pre-election coalition with non-traditional parties, some of which were the parties from the Alliance of Democratic Forces (ADF), totally discredited in the eyes of the staunch UDF supporters. This decision gave rise to new tensions and conflicts, including resignations of leading UDF members from leadership posts and grave post-election consequences for the party itself. Established at the very beginning of 1990 as an anti-communist formation, the UDF had exhausted its potential and shrank to the size of a small party with dim prospects for its future existence, with a diminishing societal base, and tortured by a grave organizational crisis. The consequence of this crisis was the election for a new UDF leader at an ad-hoc Congress of the party, held on November 1<sup>st</sup> 2005. The delegates to the Congress elected the ex-President of the country, Peter Stoyanov, new Chairman of the UDF and he was entrusted with the difficult task of finding ways and means to take the party out of its profound crisis.

Apart from the UDF, the UFD, and DSB, several other parties managed to retain some influence in the right-wing political environment. They were: the right-wing nationalist party IMRO (led by Krassimir Karakachanov), "Gergyovden" (led by Lyuben Dilov), the Democratic Party (led by Alexander Pramatarsky), and the "Radicals" Union (led by Evgenii

Bakardjiev). All of them were small-size or marginal parties, among which only the IMRO and "Gergyovden" enjoyed a relatively larger number of supporters. In the capacity of independent parties functioning on their own, they had no prospect of success whatsoever, and this was the reason why on the eve of the 2005 general election they started looking for the shelter of pre-election coalitions with larger right-wing parties.

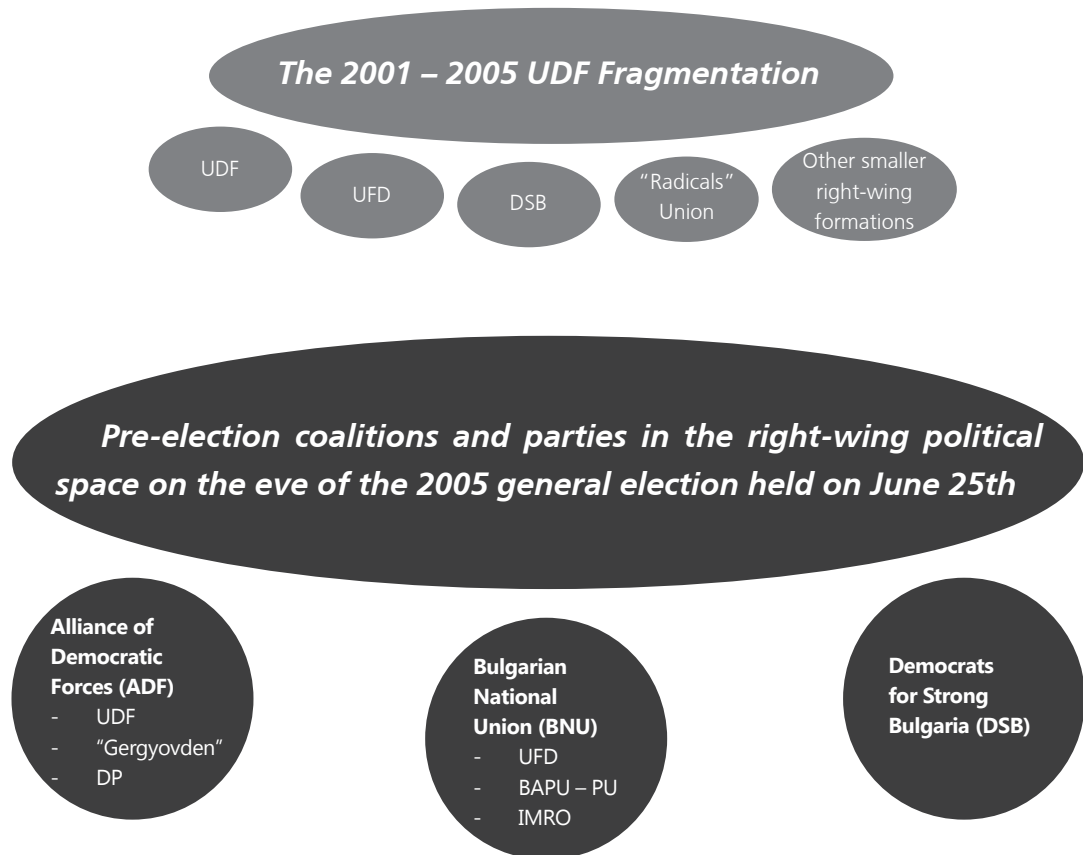
The processes of disintegration of the UDF and the splintering of the right-wing political space brought about the process of uniting right-wing parties in pre-election coalitions on the eve of the 2005 general election.

The UDF set up a coalition with the Bulgarian Agrarian People's Union - People's Union (BAPU-PU) – the largest agrarian formation and traditional UDF ally. They were joined by the nationalist-oriented IMRO. The name given to this coalition was Bulgarian National Union (BNU).

The UDF set up the Alliance of Democratic Forces (ADF) coalition together with "Gergyovden", the Democratic Party (DP), and several smaller parties – agrarian formations and parties from the Roma ethnic spectrum.

After unsuccessful attempts to set up a coalition with the Bulgarian Agrarian People's Union - People's Union (BAPU-PU) and the Democratic Party, DSB chose the road of running this general election independently.

## Situation in the right-wing political space on the eve of the 2005 general election



### 3. The consolidation of the BSP in the left-wing political space and its participation in the government of the country

After the 2001 general election, parallel to the process of dwindling public confidence in NMSII and its government, and as a consequence of the crisis tearing apart the UDF, a gradual process of consolidation of the BSP began, accompanied by an expansion of its positions both in society and politics. This process was stimulated by the victory of the BSP leader, Georgi Parvanov, at the presiden-

tial election in November 2001, which brought a representative of this party to the prestigious post of Bulgarian Head of State. Parvanov himself supported Sergei Stanishev to succeed him at the post of BSP Chairman. Thus far young Stanishev had been international relations secretary of the party and had amassed only modest experience and tenure in the BSP structures. This appointment was meant to serve as a sign for the BSP and especially for the public circles outside the BSP that the party would continue its course on the road of its social-democratization and acknowledgement of the political line

of integrating the country with NATO and the European Union.

Stanishev's appointment to the post of BSP party leader and his subsequent endorsement at this post at the 45<sup>th</sup> Congress of the BSP held in 2002, as well as the decisions which the Congress then took, were all proof to the fact that Parvanov's line in the party was being and would be continued. This development, followed by the integration of the BSP in the Socialist International in 2004, and in the Party of European Socialists (PES) in 2005, made the BSP internationally legitimate as a social-democratic formation, connected with the European tradition in this family of parties. In the party itself, this line irrevocably gained the upper hand, despite the attempts of the narrow circle around former BSP leader, Alexander Lillov, to maintain the idea about "a new left-wing party". In Parliament, the BSP gave its support to Bulgaria's accession to NATO and lent its assistance for the successful completion of the country's negotiations for accession into the European Union. All this increased the standing of the BSP as a party connected with the European social-democratic Left Wing, which – for its part – resulted in the substantial improvement of the party's image on the domestic political scene. In fact, this was the farewell, which the BSP bid to the totalitarian past of this party, and completed its transition to a modern and democratic party formation.

This development of the BSP exerted a consolidating impact on the party system

at large by accelerating its transition from the first to the second post-1989 Bulgarian party system. No doubt, this accelerated the UDF disintegration as well, because the latter was a formation born by the country's transition and was developing mainly on the platform of anti-communism. The social-democratization of the BSP brought the relationships among the parties back to normal and put them on the track of the developed European democracies, whereby the left-wing political space gradually came to be dominated almost exclusively by the BSP, following the collapse of the Bulgarian Euro-Left party at the 2001 general election.

To the purpose of its election campaign, the BSP retained the presence of the so-called New Left in Coalition for Bulgaria – a union previously set up among the BSP, the New Left, and other three very small social-democratic formations, the only prospects of which were either to merge with the BSP or remain without any positions in the party life of the country whatsoever. The neo-communist left relapsed into a marginal position outside the BSP, but one of its parties preserved its alliance with the BSP within the framework of Coalition for Bulgaria.

As far as the internal party situation of the BSP is concerned, after the 2001 general election it was also characterized by a process of internal party clashes, especially on the level of local structures, which exacerbated even further around the time of the 2003 local elections. With time, the party leadership came on top of these



whirlpool trends for the party to disperse, and on the eve of the 2005 general election the BSP was consolidated and ready to run the general election for a new Bulgarian Parliament.

From an internal party point of view, the BSP accomplished a gradual change in its leadership – a transition towards the younger generation of party activists and emancipation from the remnants of the activists of the ex-communist party connected with Andrei Lukanov and Alexander Lillov. At the same time, the societal base and especially the membership of the BSP continued to be dominated by the elderly party members, including those over 60 years of age. The delayed rejuvenation of the BSP affected both the cadre potential of the party and its positions in the major political spheres where it was operating, and this fact emerged on the surface in the pre-election platform of the party.

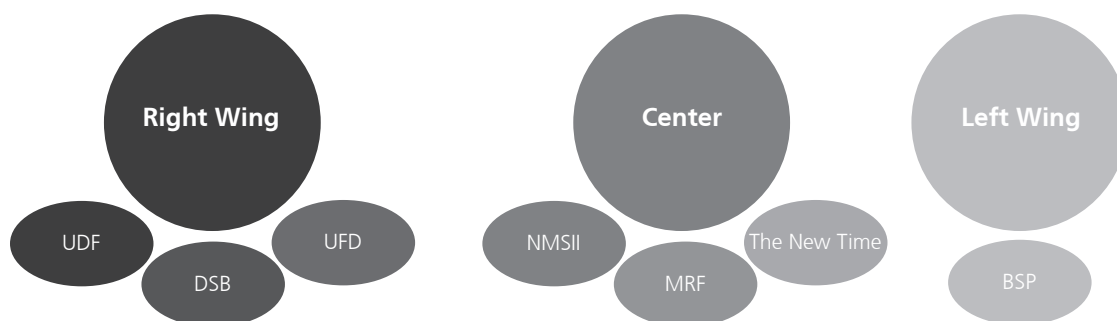
In the wake of 2001 and with the approaching 2005 general election, the BSP gradually came out of the crisis it had been going through after the collapse of

Zhan Videnov's government back in 1997 and began to expand its public impact. The opinion polls recorded a gradual improvement of the electoral positions of the party and an increase in its public confidence rating. This process of restored confidence of the BSP turned it into a dominant force in the left-wing political space and the major political party therein. Unlike the right-wing political space, a consolidated Left Wing managed to assert itself and to raise claims for taking the reins of the country's government having spent eight long years in opposition.

On the eve of the 2005 general election, the party system had gone through a significant transformation, thus acquiring new traits of quite a different quality in comparison with the first post-1989 Bulgarian party system.

In this way, on the eve of the 2005 general election, the bi-polar party model was replaced by the emergence of a more pluralistic type of party system from the point of view of the participating party players and from the standpoint of ideology and values.

### The Second Party System on the Eve of the 2005 General Election



#### 4. The 2005 general election and the establishment of the tri-partite governing coalition

The 2005 general election produced a categorical proof to the fact that durable changes had been taking place in the Bulgarian party system, and these changes were outlining the contours of the second post-1989 party system.

*The first major feature of the second party system was its plurality and fragmentation.*

At this election, the voters “rejected” the model of a party system with dominant parties in a position of hegemony, such as the BSP and the UDF used to be up to 2001, which were replaced between 2001 and 2005 by their populist alternative – NMSII, structured later on as a liberal party.

#### General Election for the 40<sup>th</sup> National Assembly Held on June 25<sup>th</sup> 2005 Overall Voter Turnout 55.76%

Parties and Coalitions	Ballots Cast	Percentage Rate	Parliamentary Seats
Coalition for Bulgaria, the major party being the BSP	1 129 196	30.95	82
NMSII	725 314	19.88	53
MRF	467 400	12.81	34
The “Attack” Coalition	296 848	8.14	21
ADF (the major party being the UDF plus smaller partners)	280 323	7.68	20
DSB	234 788	6.44	17
Bulgarian National Union (UFD, IMRO and BAPU-PU)	189 268	5.19	13

The New Time	107 758	2.95
Coalition of the Rose	47 410	1.30
“Euroroma” Political Movement	45 637	1.25

Source: Central Electoral Commission

Seven major political coalitions and parties made it to the 40<sup>th</sup> National Assembly. It is only NMSII and DSB that ran

the election on their own – in the capacity of independent parties. The BSP was the dominant party in Coalition for Bulgaria, whereas such a dominant party in the ADF was the UDF. In the Bulgarian National Union (BNU) there was a relative equitability among the UFD, IMRO, and BAPU – PU, the number of the UFD MPs being the smallest. Out of this coalition,

the UFD had no realistic chances for any parliamentary representation whatsoever.

The “Attack” Coalition, in its capacity of a new political phenomenon, was a union of predominantly nationalist formations, including the “Attack” party, led by Volen Siderov. This coalition was a new political factor in the party system, although it had inherited other parties of a more moderate nationalist bias, such as the Bulgarian Business Bloc of George Ganchev, for instance.

The right-centrist liberal formation the New Time was not returned to Parliament, nor was the “Coalition of the Rose” – a formation of a social-democratic orientation, and the most important political formation of the Roma population in the country – the “Euroroma” Political Movement.

The largest political formation among the seven parties and coalitions, which made it to the new 40<sup>th</sup> National Assembly, was the BSP. It was returned to Parliament with about 30 percent of the overall electoral support, followed by NMSII – enjoying about 20 percent electoral support.

Among the smaller formations, which made it to the new Parliament, the MRF was the “largest” one, followed by the UDF (within the framework of the ADF), DSB, and the parties making up the Bulgarian National Union. This new parliamentary set-up mirrored the trend of differentiated electoral vote and the voters’ re-orientation, i.e. they had departed from the value-based and ideological motives underlying their support for certain

parties and their motivation had shifted towards social, economic, and other motives, based increasingly on personal or group assessment concerning the role of a certain party, especially when that party had already spent some time in the governance of the country.

*The second major feature in the evolution of the second party system, outlined in the general election outcome, was the continuing and deepening crisis of legitimacy of all political parties.*

The trend manifested at the 2003 local elections of voter abstention from established parties continued at the 2005 general election as well. The voter turnout shrank substantially in comparison with previous elections. The refusal of 45 percent of the electorate to vote was symptomatic. It revealed the fact that a large part of those who refused to go to the polls were actually expressing their dissatisfaction with the party elite and the role of the parties at large, and were thus manifesting their lack of confidence in them. In other words, voters refused to identify themselves with any of the parties running the general election. At the same time, what was observed was a relocation of votes – over 8 percent altogether – in favor of formations openly voicing an anti-party rhetoric. These formations were both distancing themselves from the established parties and opposing them at the same time. This was the typical anti-establishment vote, which reflected not only the lack of voter confidence, but also the negation of the

parties in their capacity of a major component of the democratic system.

What can be added to these two figures (45% + 8% = 53%) is also the number of dissipated votes for parties failing to overcome the 4 percent electoral threshold, which rounds up a figure of about 60 percent of the electorate, who in various forms refused to give their voter confidence to the major parliamentary represented parties (with the exception of the new "Attack" party). This phenomenon marked the significant shrinkage of the base these parties enjoyed in society, and this was especially important as far as it concerned the formation of a new government.

Besides, in the conditions of the non-consolidated Bulgarian democracy, this opened a niche of prerequisites and electoral reserve for spontaneously emerging political formations and parties, including formations and parties of an anti-democratic and anti-systemic nature, which could potentially destabilize the party system. In other words, all these phenomena had prepared a fertile soil for the emergence of parties such as the GERB Party and the Order, Legality, and Justice (OLJ) party at the next general election.

In this way, the legitimacy crisis of the party system placed the second post-1989 party system at the very beginning of its formation on shaky grounds, which opened possibilities for it to be provoked, destabilized and compromised by new party formations. In turn, this placed the parties themselves in a permanent

confidence crisis, created conditions for internal conflicts and splits, and in the final account had an adverse effect on the entire democratic political system, and this effect subsequently manifested itself as early as the next 2009 general election in the country.

*The third major feature in the evolution of the second party system was the fact that for the first time ever a radical nationalist populist formation made its way to the Bulgarian Parliament. This was the "Attack" Coalition, part of which later transformed into a party under the leadership of Volen Siderov.*

The "Attack" phenomenon had captured a variety of attitudes, moods and public reactions, characterized mainly with the protest against the political failures and the hardships people suffered during the country's transition after 1989. It is these failures and hardships that had produced a sizeable group of "losers" and marginalized social strata. Their discontent was additionally fueled by the dissatisfaction with the clientele nature of the majority of Bulgarian parties, involved with corruption, as well as the lack of principles rampant among the political elite, which had detached itself from the daily problems people were constantly encountering in their routine.

In comparison with the previous attempts to attract protest and nationalist votes (e.g. the George Ganchev phenomenon), the "Attack" coalition was the most serious challenge thus far against the major democratic values, including

the constitutional provisions concerning ethnic peace and the principal foreign policy priorities of the country. The political program of the “Attack” coalition and the statements made by its leading figure, Volen Siderov, in particular, openly reeked of racist and xenophobic appeals, which undermined the ethnic model in the country and the tolerant cohabitation of its population. At the same time, they awoke dormant and latent attitudes among a portion of the Bulgarian population against the minority ethnic groups, such as the Roma people and the Turks, as well as against the geo-political orientation of the country in its accession to the structures of NATO and the European Union. For the first time ever, such a movement won a parliamentary representation and a high national rostrum for its public manifestations.

At the same time, as a movement set up in a hasty manner, the “Attack” was far too disparate, made up of people sharing dissimilar value orientations. Thus it hosted popular politicians from the right and left wing who co-existed there on the grounds of their moderate nationalist attitudes. Extreme nationalists in the capacity of novice politicians, such as Volen Siderov, were present in the movement as well, and they were yet to make their debuts in the political system.

With the emergence of the “Attack” movement, the rest of the democratic parties faced a new opponent, which was about to provoke their democratic values and commitments to the notion

of civil society. Therefore, a new cleavage emerged in the party system, this time along the axis of nationalism versus Europeism, as a reaction against the geopolitical orientation of the country, against the consequences of its accession to the international structures, and in perspective – against the effects of globalization. This was a cleavage, which was expected to emerge and develop in the way similar to all post-communist and European countries.

*The fourth feature in the evolution of the second party system was the fact that the dynamic processes in the major party and political camps were equally well and clearly outlined, namely in the right-wing, the centrist, and left-wing political environments.*

The parties from the right-wing political environment sustained a serious defeat. On the one hand, such a defeat was the fact that the general election mapped out the further disintegration of the UDF, which not long ago was the major political opposition and anti-communist force of the country’s transition. On the other hand, a defeat was also the splintering of the right-wing political space into several smaller parties – the UDF, the UFD, and DSB. Individually and some of them in coalitions, they managed to capture the vote of between 5 and 8 percent of the electoral vote. The most stable formation among them was DSB, because superficially it was a new formation, but in fact it was rooted mainly in a portion of the UDF elector-

ate, which is made up of the supporters of the former UDF leader, Ivan Kostov.

The UDF, being the major part of the ADF Coalition, suffered the most serious defeat and from a medium-size party it was brought down to a small party of a declining electoral impact. The 2005 general election categorically confirmed once again that the UDF in its capacity of a major force, representing anti-communism during the country's transition, is experiencing a process of ongoing disintegration, which also manifested itself in the internal party conflicts between the supporters of the party leader, Nadezhda Mikhailova, and her opponents, mainly grouped around the ex-Bulgarian President, Peter Stoyanov, and the ex-Prime Minister of the country, Philip Dimitrov. This festering situation within the UDF brought about the further decline of its electoral impact and portended the risk for the marginalization of the party at the next general election.

The Union of Free Democrats (UFD) led by Stephan Sofiansky "hid" itself in the Bulgarian National Union coalition together with the BAPU-PU and IMRO. There is a possibility for this party to continue to exist as a small right-centrist formation, but it will always be closely linked to the fate of its leader Stephan Sofiansky. Its prospects at that time, however, did not rule out its disintegration over the years to come, because of its strongly narrowed societal base and political impact accordingly, which could deprive it of all its chances for independent existence altogether.

The crisis within the right-wing political space opened a niche for the emergence of a new political entity, capable of availing itself of the new political realities, characteristic the emergence of the second Bulgarian post-1989 party system. It is this niche precisely that the GERB Party discovered. At that time GERB was still non-existent, but its founders were clever enough to avail of this window of opportunity.

NMSII managed to score a satisfactory general election outcome and to consolidate itself in the centrist political space in the capacity of a medium-size party. The factors conducive for this development were the disintegration of the UDF and the clashes in the right-wing parties, as well as certain achievements made by the government, which resulted in the general economic stabilization of the country and brought about successful moves in the area of foreign policy. The election outcome made it possible for NMSII to be included in the governing coalition and continue its participation in the structures of the country's government, although at a smaller scale now. At the same time, the fate of this party was hard to predict, because the major factor underlying its presence in the political life of the nation and its relative cohesion, namely the intentions of the NMSII leader, Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, remained unpredictable. The crucial question about the extent to which he would remain involved with NMSII, having released the post of the Prime Minister, was still open. His possible

withdrawal from politics posed the danger of leaving a palpable vacuum within NMSII, which would create conditions for internal party in-fighting for Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha's legacy.

Being still quite a young party, NMSII preserved its relative unity mainly because of the administrative resources it obtained as a party in office, on the basis of which it later on created its societal base – namely the extensive apparatus of civil servants. This raised the issue whether it would not go through internal splits, should it remain either without its power resources or with just a limited such resource, because NMSII continued to be a “clan” party made up of various factions. In other words, NMSII had retained its essence of a clientele party with very feeble roots in civil society. Moreover, as an electoral party according to its statute, it lacked any stable organizational structure throughout the country. All this was leaving open the issue about the future evolution of the party, which – should it manage to stabilize itself in the nearer future without its patron Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha – would make it possible for it to consolidate in the centrist political environment, given that it was headed now by the most popular party personalities it had at its disposal. Eventually, NMSII remained squeezed in the government between the MRF and BSP, which resulted in numerous adverse effects for it as a consequence.

At the 2005 general election, the MRF achieved its best election outcome ever after 1989. By and large, this was due

to three principal factors. The first factor was the massive mobilization of the MRF electorate, the immigrants in Turkey with double citizenship included. The second factor was the inclusion of ethnic Bulgarians at leading positions in the MRF party slates in constituencies, where these candidates for members of parliament had a certain impact. This is the explanation concerning the parliamentary seats won in the towns of Varna and Haskovo, where the MRF candidates were former UDF activists and ethnic Bulgarians, but their victory was greatly facilitated by the personalities of the other candidates, whom the MRF included in its general election party slates. Although the Bulgarians had played no decisive role in the political representation of the MRF over the last several years, Ahmed Dogan got them more actively involved in the activity of his party as a result of his policy of “opening up” to the Bulgarian ethnos. The third factor lies in the fact that the MRF capitalized on the low voter turnout, which is beneficial for all parties with a rock-bottom mobilized electorate, such as the electorate of the ethnic Turks.

At the same time, certain expectations that other Turkish ethnic parties and functionaries (some of whom were on the slates of other parties running the election) would take away MRF votes were totally disproved. Not less significant for the heightened activity of the MRF electorate was the aggressive rhetoric against Ahmed Dogan, launched by DSB and its leader Ivan Kostov in person and by IMRO

as a constituent part of the BNU coalition. The strongest factor for the mobilization of the MRF electorate, however, was the anti-Turkish rhetoric of the new radical "Attack" formation. It is the statements of its activists that created a conflict potential, which some other new parties, such as GERB and OJ, for instance, conveniently used to their advantage.

The participation of the MRF in yet another Bulgarian government made it incumbent on the MRF leadership to undertake a balancing act between its growing political ambitions and the restricted possibilities for accomplishing them within the tri-partite governing coalition. At the same time, the specific nature of the MRF as a predominantly ethnically-based party places it in the peculiar situation of a party summoned to guarantee the ethnic peace in the country. After the 2005 general election, however, the MRF had to play its role of a guarantor in new conditions, whereby Bulgaria was now a full-fledged NATO member country and a prospective member country of the European Union and – what is especially important – in a situation, whereby Turkey had already started its EU membership negotiations.

The election outcome attained by the BSP indicated that after eight years in opposition and after the most severe crisis it went through in the stormy 1996-1997 period of time, the party had managed to consolidate itself and to preserve its leading positions in the left-wing political environment, where the BSP is without a single worthy rival. The 2005 gen-

eral election process undoubtedly proved that the "Parvanov" line leading towards the modernization and social-democratization of the party was perfectly legitimate and highly assessed. It is by virtue of the 2005 general election process and outcome that the new party leadership headed by Sergei Stanishev obtained its legitimacy as well.

At the same time, the 2005 general election outcome invalidated the expectations of certain BSP leaders that the party would manage to assert once again its nation-wide hegemony in the left-wing party space and in its capacity of a large party would possibly win the election with an absolute majority or a result close to it.

Therefore, in the wake of the 2005 general election the party was put to the test for its capacity to pursue a coalition policy, especially after the new country's government was set up. The result of this test would prove to be of a paramount significance for the further legitimacy of the party in the capacity of a democratic left-wing formation and for its further consolidation and development, including the expansion of its societal base. In the event of any failure or collapse of the tri-partite coalition, it was the BSP that would bear the major blame and suffer the gravest adverse consequences respectively.

The formation of the new government in the shape of a tri-partite coalition was another "novelty" for the second post-1989 Bulgarian party system. The need to find coalition forms of government was brought about by the fragmentation



of the party system and the unwillingness of voters to cast their ballots for a party in a position of hegemony. This was also the consequence of the normalization of party life and the removal of leading mega-themes of a predominantly ideological nature. The election campaign itself predetermined new subject matters for party rivalry – topics of an economic nature mainly. This resulted in the stratification and dispersion of votes in the direction of a larger number of parties, which – for the first time after 1989 – imposed a new type of dialog and compromises. What is important is that such a dialog was held among parties which had opposed one another at the time of the election campaign.

This is the reason why the process of setting up the new government proved to be cumbersome, lengthy, and accompanied by moments of crisis. It was only with the third mandate to form a government, handed by the Bulgarian President to the MRF – the third ranking party in terms of parliamentary seats, that an agreement was reached to set up a tri-partite coalition by the three largest parties at the National Assembly – the BSP, NMSII, and the MRF. The principal factor which finally “brought them together”, was Bulgaria’s forthcoming accession to the European Union, as well as the need to prevent a possible political crisis that could have been provoked had they failed to form a government. On the basis of this tri-partite coalition, the new Bulgarian government also gained the exceedingly massive

parliamentary support of the three largest parliamentary factions.

### **5. A new transformation of the party system following the July 2009 general election in Bulgaria**

The second party system, established in this country after 1989, found itself subject to a brand new shock following the July 5<sup>th</sup> 2009 general election. What was brought up to surface as a result of this election is the apparent second party system instability and ongoing transformation.

Over the last twenty years, ever since the country began its transition to democracy and market economy, the major political parties, with the exception of the MRF, which managed to mobilize the ethnic vote of the Turkish population to the maximum possible extent, failed to establish stable relationships with civil society. The major reason for the ongoing crisis of legitimacy, which they have been suffering from over the last two decades, lies mostly in their inefficiency to perform well in the capacity of governing parties, especially as far as the principal interests of Bulgarian citizens are concerned. Apart from the objective reasons, connected with the heritage they have been burdened with during the transition from a totalitarian state-owned socialist system to a modern democracy and market economy, the other substantial reasons underlying the crisis of confidence, generating the discontent of Bulgarian people with

the activity of political parties, are the clientele attitude and corruption, which have gravely affected the entire political system, the party system included.

These phenomena precisely, which surfaced in public consciousness as a factor undermining the country's democratic development and economic progress, became the underlying reason for the emergence of new political parties, whose political platforms were based on combating corruption. The prevalence of the corruption subject matter was also prompted by the severe criticism on the part of the European Union, after Bulgaria became its full-fledged member on January 1<sup>st</sup> 2007. Bulgaria's accession to the European Union became a new external factor of a significant impact on both domestic politics and the activity of political parties, most of which are part and parcel of the European political party families. A number of the European Commission reports on the progress of Bulgaria after its EU accession launched poignant criticism mainly against the notorious corruption, which the country has failed to overcome, and against the inefficiency of its judicial system, as these two phenomena undermine not only the confidence of Bulgarian citizens in their own political institutions, but also hamper the effective appropriation of European funds for the benefit of the country's social and economic development.

According to an opinion poll survey held by the Market Links Agency at the beginning of 2009, Bulgarian citi-

zens rank the most significant problems which the country is facing, in the following way: corruption – 42 percent, unemployment – 33.6 percent, and crime rate – 22 percent.

The results from this survey indicate that corruption has replaced a number of other themes, which have dominated the political agenda over the preceding years, and new political parties have availed of this reshaped situation to reap an astounding political success within a very short period of time. The major formation among these is the Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria Party (or as its Bulgarian abbreviation goes – the GERB Party, or simply GERB). It was set up in 2007 and was headed by the popular former Chief Secretary of the Ministry of Interior and then Mayor of Sofia Municipality, Boiko Borissov. The party was born as a populist formation, but it was quick to redirect itself to the European People's Party and became its member in 2008 with the claims to come to dominate the center-right within the party system in Bulgaria.

As early as the 2007 local elections, the GERB Party succeeded in winning good positions in local governments, and thus created its prerequisites for good electoral performance at the July 2009 general election. Its actual, though informal, leader Boiko Borissov (the law does not permit a mayor to be a party leader at the same time) won the elections for Mayor of Sofia Municipality for the second time in a row, thus stabiliz-

ing his public clout and impact. At the 2009 general election, GERB marked a huge success by receiving about 40 percent of the overall number of votes cast and 116 seats at the National Assembly, only 5 seats short of the absolute parliamentary majority. Thus GERB consolidated itself as the dominating party in the right-centrist political space and replaced the “old” right-wing parties, such as the UDF and DSB, which – united in the Blue Coalition – managed to receive only about 7 percent of the votes and remained a minor parliamentary formation of limited public impact.

In other words, the 2009 general election saw the ultimate marginalization of the “old” right-wing parties, which proliferated after the disintegration of the UDF. Some of them, such as the Union

of Free Democrats, along others, which were seeking their place in the right-wing political environment, namely the “Gergyovden” Movement and IMRO, remained outside Parliament and are facing meager chances for independent existence and consequently – no significant political role whatsoever. They can only survive as parts of some new formations, i.e. as parts of political coalitions, for instance. Another formation belonging to the “old” parties – the Bulgarian Agrarian People’s Union - People’s Union (BAPU-PU) – suffered a total political collapse, although it was part of the Blue Coalition. On the whole, the so-called agrarian formations continued losing positions and in practice have currently remained in existence just as marginal formations within the overall make-up of the Bulgarian party system.

**Outcome of the general election held on July 5<sup>th</sup> 2009 in Bulgaria**  
**Total number of voter turnout: 60.20%**

<b>Parties and Coalitions</b>	<b>Valid Ballots Cast</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Majority Vote MPs</b>	<b>Number of parliamentary seats</b>
The GERB Party	1 677 870	39,71	26	116
Coalition for Bulgaria	747 849	17,70	0	40
MRF	610 831	14,46	5	38
The “Attack” Party	395 656	9,36	0	21
The Blue Coalition	285 418	6,76	0	15
OJL	174 582	4,13	0	10
NMSP	127 340	3,01	0	0
The “LIDER” Party	137 684	3,26	0	0

The GERB Party took the rudder of the country's government on its own, and its leader, Boiko Borissov, was elected Prime Minister of the Republic of Bulgaria on 5 July 2009. In comparison with previous prime ministers of the country ever since 1989, Borissov enjoys the greatest actual power, despite the fact that GERB's parliamentary faction – though the largest one at the National Assembly – is in the situation of a minority government party at Parliament. But the support given to him by the other two parliamentary factions – those of the Blue Coalition and the "Attack" Party – is a guarantee that for a certain period of time at least Boiko Borissov will be able to enjoy the opportunity of a relatively problem-free and stable governance. At the beginning he had also the support of the Order, Legality, and Justice Party, but later it became a staunch critic of the government.

Boiko Borissov himself is a unique phenomenon on the political horizon in the post-1989 era. He is a figure who has successfully embodied the popular psychological idea of a decisive politician, a man of action, and – at the same time – a man close to the ordinary people, quite different from all the prime ministers who inhabited the corridors of power before his own term of office. This is what has secured the great popularity he enjoys at the beginning of his coming to power, but this popularity has also generated great expectations among the voters, who are now looking forward to his fulfilling the promises he was so gen-

erously making at the time of his election campaign, especially as far as combating corruption is concerned.

At the same time, the new country's government is facing numerous tests and challenges in a complicated economic environment, connected with the consequences of the global economic crisis. This curbs the available resources and the options for maneuvering on the part of the government which would enable it to implement new projects and reforms. Without any experience in government whatsoever, the Cabinet of GERB has embarked upon a completely "new" territory laden with numerous submerged rocks and mine fields in disguise. The fate of the previous governments, which enjoyed large parliamentary majorities, such as those of the BSP (1994 – 1996), the UDF (1997 – 2001), NMSII (2001 – 2005), and the latest term of office of the tri-partite coalition of the BSP, the MRF, and NMSII (2005 – 2009), illustrates the broad fluctuations of public attitudes and moods – from extreme confidence to extreme disillusionment.

Even if the GERB government could succeed in meeting some of the huge expectations of the voters, a question remains open: whether the party would manage to reverse the trend of the country's development observed thus far in a durable and sustainable way, and become at the same time the instrument conducive to the introduction of new tendencies in the Bulgarian political process. The instability of public moods and

attitudes, and the instability of the political elite, which to a large extent has been brought about by these fluctuations precisely, hamper the development of the party system and both its stabilization and consolidation. It is these fluctuations and instability over the last few years that resulted in the emergence of political formations such as the “Attack” Party, the Order, Legality, and Justice Party, and in the emergence of GERB itself. But they likewise contributed to the disintegration of the liberal political center, which had already been formed around NMSII and the MRF.

In the 2001-2009 period of time, right up to the 2009 general election, what could be observed were the outlines of the formation of a particular center within the party system, mainly based on the electoral and parliamentary positions of NMSII (now renamed to National Movement for Stability and Prosperity) and the MRF. Both parties governed the country in a coalition in the first post-2001 government and were coalition partners again in the tripartite 2005 – 2009 government headed by the BSP. At the same time, both parties are members of the European family of liberal parties. After 1989, a number of attempts have been made to establish such a political party center, capable of playing the balancing role in the political process and serving at the same time as a bridge for the establishment of smaller and bigger coalitions, either in the right-wing political environment,

or in the left-wing environment. NMSII accepted the role of a right-centrist party, while the role of the MRF was left-centrist. Furthermore, the two formations have repeatedly discussed the establishment of a Liberal Alliance in the capacity of an electoral coalition, which could secure a more durable interaction between the two of them.

This idea, however, and the successive attempt for the formation of a “centrist party field” collapsed altogether after the two terms of office of NMSII (NMSP) and the MRF. But the MRF managed to retain its electoral positions on the basis of the ethnic vote cast by the Turkish ethnic population, whereas NMSP gradually lost its electoral positions and collapsed below the 4 percent electoral threshold at the July 2009 general election. On the one hand, this outcome came as a result of the loss of voter confidence in NMSII (NMSP) after two successive terms in office and its domination over the executive branch of power, and on the other, it is especially due to these two parties’ participation in the tripartite governing coalition, which effaced the individual image of NMSII (NMSP) on the background of the other two parties dominating the coalition, namely the BSP and the MRF.

Another reason for the collapse of the “centrist party” idea were the divisions within NMSII, which brought about the split of a substantial number of MPs and party activists, who subsequently left the party altogether. They

set up a new party – Bulgarian New Democracy, which, however, was completely marginalized after the July 2009 general election. The highly contested real estate and property acquisitions of the NMSII leader, Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, additionally created an adverse public attitude towards the party, which was widely seen as a project conceived and implemented by the former Bulgarian King. To top it all, tensions arose between NMSII and the MRF, which undermined for good the possible interaction and more durable presence of the two parties in the political life of the country in the capacity of actual liberal allies. The MRF visibly distanced itself from NMSII and went on to look for closer cooperation and interaction with the BSP.

The situation in the left-centrist political space is also quite problematic. The major party in there – the BSP – suffered a grave election defeat at the June 2009 general election, and scored its poorest result ever since the onset of democracy in 1989. This provoked a profound crisis within the party and brought about internal party clashes. The position of the party leader, Sergei Stanishev, has been seriously undermined and despite the fact that he withstood the pressure exerted by his opponents in the party leadership, over the next few years he will find it quite difficult to lead his party effectively. For the first time after 1989, the BSP is facing the prospect of losing its electoral impact, clout, and positions, especially after the new party in office,

namely the GERB Party, started revealing to the public a number of weaknesses, infringements, and most importantly – corruption practices, committed by the government of the tri-partite coalition. And because it is corruption that has replaced all other issues as the problem focusing the current public concerns, the BSP in its capacity of a leading party in the former tri-partite coalition is taking the brunt of public discontent to the highest possible extent.

The ideological identity of the BSP is turning into another serious problem for the party, which – during its term of office put its stakes on a number of measures, which are typical of neo-liberal and right-centrist parties, namely: the introduction of the 10 percent flat tax rate, the implementation of monetarist approaches for the strengthening of the country's financial stability, etc. A number of these measures were introduced under the impact of BSP's coalition partners, especially on the part of NMSII. This damaged the image of the BSP as a left-wing and socially-oriented party, which – despite all the efforts it had made in the area of improving the social status of the population – provoked the discontent of a sizeable portion of its societal base at the end of its term of office. This was the reason why a new left-wing formation was established by BSP activists who left the party before the general election. Although the clout of this formation is insignificant at the time being, we cannot rule out a possible development

when either this new formation or another new left-wing party, opposing the “right-wing line” pursued by the BSP, could gather momentum and respective electoral impact, thus undermining the electorate of the BSP.

After the failure of the liberal center, the new conditions opened room for the “building in” of a “two-block” set-up or arrangement in the party system between a left-centrist block of parties and a right-wing block of parties. After the July 2009 general election, the left-centrist block of parties is made up by the MRF and the BSP. Although they find it difficult, these two parties continue their joint actions as a parliamentary opposition. The right-centrist block of parties is made up by the GERB Party, DSB, and the UDF, all of which are member parties of the European People’s Party (EPP). Depending on the specific situation, other two parties can join this block, namely: the right-populist party “Order, Legality, and Justice” (OLJ), and the nationalist “Attack” Party. They both lent their support to Borissov’s Cabinet at the beginning of its term of office and although the “Attack” is still the most loyal supporter of GERB, the OLJ has turned into a staunch opposition of the governing party.

Only time will show what type of relationships will develop between these two blocks of parties – either polemical on the level of dialog, or confrontational, and this is what will determine the outline, image, and nature of the second

party system in this country in its newest form of development.

What lies in store in the coming years is the domination of the right-centrist parties and especially the domination of the GERB Party, around which in certain periods of time and for quite different motives rather disparate formations will be gravitating, including “Attack”, on the one hand, and the remnants of the old right wing – DSB and the UDF, on the other. The “old right wingers” will be making attempts to expand their own political environment, even by increasingly distancing themselves from GERB, particularly when the governing party begins to lose some of the initial confidence the voters have invested in it.

The right-centrist block of parties currently enjoys a considerable prevalence in the political environment. This domination is also particularly due to the crisis, which can currently be observed within the left-centrist block, mainly within the BSP and the MRF. This significantly weakens the opposition capacity of the left-centrist block and makes it possible for the right-wing parties to reinforce and endorse their priorities both in the field of the legislative and executive branches of power.

At the same time, an ongoing transformation of the party system cannot be ruled out on account of the numerous unknown factors concerning the future results from the governance of GERB we are yet to see, as it is a completely “young” party with practically little expe-

rience of governing the central authorities and institutions of power and with an unknown and unpredictable elite in the areas of governance and legislature. Whether the transformation we have been witnessing will be more significant or of a more limited nature after GERB's term of office comes to an end is early to predict, but it is apparent that changes are inevitable because of the fact that Bulgaria has a young and consolidating democratic party system, the foundations of which are still in the process of falling into their proper place. In other words, the new two-block party system is in a temporary state at the time being and is looking forward to an effective transition to a party system of greater stability.

The stability of the second party system in the post-1989 period, the foundations of which can provisionally be said to have been laid in 2001, and the possible transformations it well may undergo in the future depend on two major factors. Firstly, they depend on the effective performance of the governing GERB party and its ability to preserve the public support it enjoys after its first year in office in a difficult economic situation. Secondly, they depend on the consequences of the crisis processes taking place within the BSP and the left-centrist political environment as a whole.

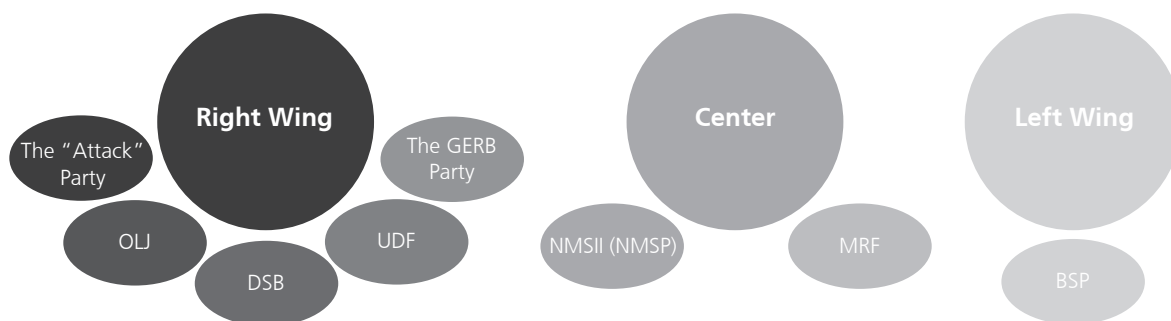
It is these processes that will determine whether the hegemony of the right-centrist block will turn out to be the more durable factor, or a certain balance will be restored between the left-centrist

and the right-centrist party environment, thus consolidating the two-block party system with relatively equitable partners within each of the blocks, namely: the left centrist BSP plus the MRF and other left-wing formations, on the one hand, and the right-centrist GERB Party plus DSB and the UDF and other right-wing formations, on the other.

Therefore, until the next general election due to take place in 2013, and after the 2011 presidential elections in the country, dynamic processes will be observed within the Bulgarian party system, which is far from consolidated as yet. At the same time, this will be accompanied by frequent changes in the correlations among the political forces. A number of factors, such as economic instability, social structures in development, lack of a well established elite, etc., coupled with human factors, such as poor administrative capacity, the lack of quality politicians, and the poor democratic political culture of the population, will continue to affect the evolution of the party system over the coming years as well.



### The Party System following the July 2009 General Election in Bulgaria



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