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The Bulgarian Center Right - Victories, Defeats, Transformations

■ There has been no Bulgarian tradition of any long-standing resistance to the communist regime. There was neither any political opposition, nor any other kind of an influential dissident movement. Bulgaria never went through the purgatory of the Hungarian uprising of 1956, or the “Prague spring” of 1968. It is indeed difficult to find any counter arguments whatsoever against the cliché that Bulgaria was the closest satellite of the Soviet Union.

■ The fundamental contradictions within the Union of Democratic Forces (SDS) coalition were present from the very first day of its inception. There were Marxists who were longing for “socialism with a human face”, intellectuals with liberal ideas, social democrats and Christian democrats, conservatives and radical democrats, monarchists and republicans. The members of the center-right coalition did not delude themselves about their differences; they rather shared the clear understanding that only a painful compromise could stand some chances against the Goliath of the totalitarian Bulgarian Communist Party (BKP). It was this unanimous opposition to the communist regime and its legacy that made the coalition possible. But only for a limited period of time.

■ The United Democratic Forces (ODS) government under Prime Minister Ivan Kostov (1997-2001) completed the reformist agenda of anti-communism. At the end of the ODS term of office, Bulgaria was a country with a functioning market economy, stable democracy, and a clearly outlined foreign policy course towards the country's accession to the European Union and NATO, which was accepted by all significant political formations, the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) included. Since that time, no successive government has ever questioned these achievements. But anti-communism was doomed to fall prey to its own success. It is not its enemies, but rather its achievements that depleted its strength. Paradoxically, it is the implementation of its programme that made it dispensable.

■ And just when the Bulgarian Right Wing was in the position to point at the indisputable achievements of its governance, it had to face the cumbersome task of renewing itself, this renewal being of an ideological, organizational, personal, and behavioural nature. Without denying the achievements, the right-wing voters came to pose new requirements. The emergence of a new party, Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) seems to meet their expectations and offers the possibility for finding a new formula for the development of the center-right political environment, namely the “peaceful and competitive” co-existence of the “new” and “old” Right Wing.

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1. The Birth of the SDS and the First Democratic General Election (1989-1990)

The Bulgarian center-right parties in their essence are new political forces. They were called to life by the political disintegration of the totalitarian regime at the end of 1989. At that time, Bulgarian society had no channels for communication with the West and was kept in ignorance about values, procedures, and the institutions of democracy. The decades of severe censorship, which were consistently imposing spiritual and ideological uniformity, isolated the citizenry from the cultural and political traditions of the free world; as all the outlets for free expression of thought and ideas were altogether blocked.

For a certain period of time, even the very combination of the words “political”, “center” and “right” was incomprehensible for the Bulgarian public; some came to argue that self-identification with any version of the “political right” is destructive and should be avoided. Those belonging to the right part of the political spectrum preferred the designations of “democrats”, “reformers” or “anti-communists” which seemed more respectable and acceptable in the beginning of the transition. This is just a tiny illustration of the inevitable localization of both western models and vocabulary. Both the typical features and peculiarities of the Bulgarian center-right parties are shaped by the politics of post-communist transition and the post-Cold War geopolitical realignment. These provided the Center Right with its first but inevitably transient identity.

Searching for the beginnings, it is safest to start with the 10th of November 1989 that is widely considered to be the first date of the new chronology in Bulgarian political life. On that day the Politburo of the Bulgarian Communist Party (BKP)¹ forced the long-standing communist Head of State, Todor Zhivkov, to resign.

¹ All abbreviations standing for political parties and coalitions follow their Bulgarian spelling (in Latin letters).

This sudden change, later called “a peaceful coup d’état”, opened a new chapter in Bulgarian history and was followed by an outburst of political activity. Taking advantage of the altered political climate, Bulgarian citizens quickly organized themselves into parties, civil movements, committees, and even trade unions. After more than 40 years of totalitarian communist rule, political freedom was quickly recovered.

1.1. The Communist Legacy

The burden of the past was far too heavy to be properly assessed in these first days of unbridled enthusiasm. In comparison with the other Eastern European countries, Bulgaria’s communist regime was strikingly more stable. It never faced any real challenge from within. The extent to which the totalitarian regime of a Soviet type was imposed on Bulgaria was much greater than on any other East European country. Any opposition was physically eliminated and ever since 1948, when the country was quickly pushed into the tight iron strait-jacket of Stalinism, the BKP operated as a fully subordinated branch of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Bulgaria was isolated from the Western world and there was no counter-balancing influence against the Soviet power. This was combined with severe and systematic repressions against the former elite of the nation in all spheres of social and political life. Terror was unleashed by the murders of thousands of Bulgarian citizens in the first months and years after the 9th of September 1944, and continued with sending or deporting people for political reasons to labour camps and prisons, whereby some of these reprisals and restrictions lingered in milder forms until the 1980s.

There has been no tradition of any long-standing resistance to the regime. There was neither any political opposition, nor any other kind of an influential dissident movement. Bulgaria never went through the purgatory of the Hungarian uprising in 1956, or the “Prague spring” of 1968. It is indeed difficult to find any counter arguments against the

cliché that Bulgaria was the closest satellite of the Soviet Union. It is a real wonder that less than a month after the ousting of Todor Zhivkov the political opposition in Bulgaria was actually established. There is no wonder, however, that all this happened under the vigilant eye and with the helpful hand of the communist “State Security” services.

1.2. The “Founding Fathers” of the SDS

For almost 20 years, the history of the Bulgarian Center Right coincides with the history of the Union of Democratic Forces (SDS). The Union was established on December 7th 1989 by 10 organizations, the representatives of which met at the *Institute of Sociology* with the *Bulgarian Academy of Sciences*. This is the list of the SDS founding organizations and their respective leaders at the time of the first democratic general election in June 1990:

1. *Club for Glasnost and Democracy* (CGD, Petko Simeonov). Founded in Sofia on December 2nd 1989 on the basis of the informal *Independent Discussion Club for Support of Glasnost and Perestroika* that had existed since 1988 on the territory of the Sofia University mainly. The founders were well known Bulgarian intellectuals who had announced their goals to be the holding of free discussions on questions concerning the national economy, culture, environmental issues, human rights, etc. At a later date the Club grew into a federation of all such clubs throughout the country (*FCGD*).

2. *“Ecoglasnost” Independent Association* (Peter Slabakov). Although founded in Sofia, it was initiated by activists of the *Public Committee for the Defence of the Town of Rousse*, established on the 8th of March 1988 (but never registered by the communist authorities) as an act of protest against the high level of poisonous chlorine gas emissions from the industrial facilities across the Danube River in the town of Giurgiu, Romania. *Ecoglasnost* demanded “freedom of information” and new legislation on environmental issues.

3. *Independent Association for the Defence of Human Rights* (NAZChP, Rumen Vodenicharov). It was founded in Sofia on the 16th of January 1988 with the object of defending human rights and collecting data on their violation in Bulgaria.

4. *“Podkrepa” Independent Labour Confederation* (Konstantin Trenchev). It was founded in Plovdiv in February 1989 as a trade union organization of intellectuals and artists. Gradually it broadened its perspective and branched out to incorporate other trades and professions.

5. *Committee for the Defence of Religious Rights, Freedom of Conscience, and Spiritual Values* (CZRS, Christofor Subev). It was founded in Veliko Turnovo on the 19th of October 1988 and called for the removal of the state from Church affairs, the restitution of nationalized Church property, the reinstatement of national religious holidays, etc.

6. *Club of the Repressed after 1945* (CR, Dimitar Batalov). Founded in Sofia on the 26th of October 1989; it demanded legal rehabilitation of the repressed under the communist regime and compensations for the survivors and their heirs.

7. *Federation of the Independent Student Societies* (FNSD, Emil Koshloukov). It was founded on the 13th of November 1989 by politically active students at the Sofia University.

8. *Civic Initiative* (GI, Lyubomir Sobadjiev). It was founded in Rousse in 1988 its object being to “foster democracy through public debate.”

9. *Bulgarian Social Democratic Party* (BSDP, Peter Dertliev). Founded originally back in 1891, it was dissolved along with all other political parties during the first years of the communist regime, and was re-established in Sofia on the 26th of November 1989. In May 1990, the BSDP regained its membership in the Socialist International.

10. *Bulgarian Agrarian People’s Union – “Nikola Petkov”* (BZNS-NP, Milan Drenchev). Founded in Sofia on the 27th of November 1989; it claimed to be the inheritor of the

ideas of the best known Bulgarian agrarian reformers, such as Alexander Stamboliyski and Nikola Petkov who was the last leader of the pre-communist BZNS and was executed by the communist authorities in 1947.

At the above mentioned meeting on December 7th 1989, Zhelyu Zhelev from the CGD was elected Chairman of the SDS, while the *Ecoglasnost* activist Peter Beron became the Secretary of the organization. Before the end of December, the SDS was joined by two other parties: the first one being the *Radical Democratic Party* (RDP, Elka Konstatntinova and Alexander Yordanov), re-established in November 1989, having been originally founded in 1902, and the second one - the *Democratic Party* (DP, Stefan Savov), established in 1896, dissolved in 1948 and re-established in December 1989. The process continued in January 1990 when the Christian Democratic Front (HDF), considered as the most conservative group of the coalition, signed up with the SDS. The Green Party (ZP, Alexander Karakachanov), formed by *Ecoglasnost* members also joined in January. The political movement United Democratic Center (ODC, Stefan Sofiansky, Ekaterina Mihailova,) whose members were chiefly lawyers and economists sharing Christian democratic values joined the SDS in February.

In the meantime, the communist National Assembly passed legislation granting amnesty to all political prisoners. As a result, Turkish minority movement activists were released from prison and established the *Movement for Rights and Freedoms* party (DPS, Ahmed Dogan). After a lengthy and poignant discussion, the leaders of the SDS rejected the request of the DPS to join the coalition - a decision with serious long-term consequences.

Thus, less than four months after the 10th of November 1989, the SDS had grown into a 15-member coalition and was undoubtedly the largest of the opposition political forces in Bulgaria. It consisted of historically revived parties, newly established ones, political "movements",

academic organizations, "human rights" organizations and a trade union.

All of these organizations represented different orientations and various political outlooks. Nevertheless, they all had a common cause underlying their strong quest for political and economic reforms, for democracy and a market economy. Moreover, the members of the SDS had a common enemy – the BKP and its all-embracing influence. This is what they declared to be their immediate tasks in the Constituent Charter of the newly established Union:

1. Democratic election for a new National Assembly; summoned to draft and pass a new democratic Constitution of the country.

2. Harmonization of the national laws with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; freedom of speech, press and association; legal and financial independence of the mass media and the publishing houses.

3. Equal treatment of atheists and believers; a new approach to ethnic and religious minorities; freedom of confession and religious activity; rehabilitation of the repressed under the communist regime.

4. De-politization of the army and the police; elimination of the ideological monopoly in education; full autonomy for universities and research institutes; student participation in the management of universities.

5. Equal legal treatment of all kinds of property, i.e. personal, cooperative and state-owned property; new labour and social laws; guarantees for the existence of independent trade unions and for the right to go on strike; new economic policy consistent with the protection of the environment.

It is easy to deduce that the Charter of the SDS included pieces from the platform of every member of the new political union. At the same time, to date it also represents a realistic picture of the predicaments faced by a post-totalitarian society and of the enormous difficulties, which its transformation had to undergo. There were still no local SDS structures,

no concrete policies, no long-term platform for the government of the country to pursue; but the principles underlying the Charter were quite enough to keep the loose coalition together and to prepare it for its first battles.

1.3. The Round Table Talks

The first free democratic election in Bulgaria ever since World War II was held in June 1990. It was preceded by the peculiar institution of the "Round Table", which was expected to arrive at a consensus concerning "the new rules" of the political game and to prepare the ground for democratic elections. The initiative came from the BKP, which during the negotiations managed to outmanoeuvre their inexperienced opponents. One of the few achievements of the opposition was that the talks were broadcast live. This was of great importance for the leaders of the opposition, most of whom were unknown to the Bulgarian public. They appeared for the first time on national television, sitting face to face with the representatives of the BKP and the state institutions, making political declarations, speaking publicly and criticizing the communists in a way that was inconceivable only three months ago. For the first time they were allowed to take part in a public forum and they obviously made much of it. Every opposition political formation was weighed against the SDS. All of them felt that they were being dwarfed by the coalition and they certainly were. The only exception to this rule was the DPS.

The national Round Table was in session from January until May 1990. The agreements of the Round Table were accorded supreme legislative status; the National Assembly was expected to vote and adopt automatically its decisions without additional amendments. The decisions made were crucial for the subsequent political changes in Bulgaria. One of the changes was the creation of a presidential institution with very limited powers. The most urgent political problem prompted the following agreement to be reached: the general election for a Grand National Assembly was

to be held in June 1990; whereby the members of parliament had to be elected on the basis of a mixed majority-proportional system, and the number of the members sitting on this extraordinary body had to be 400 the task of whom would be to draft and subsequently pass the new country's Constitution. After the accomplishment of this task, the Grand National Assembly would be dissolved and replaced by a new "ordinary" National Assembly (comprising 240 members of parliament only).

1.4. The General Election for a Grand National Assembly (June 1990)

The voter turn-out at the first general election was exceptionally high – 90.79% of those eligible to vote went to the polls in the first leg of the election, and 84.14% went to the run-offs. Forty political parties, coalitions, and groups ran this election but only four of them went over the 4% threshold. These were the BKP (under its new name of *Bulgarian Socialist Party* (BSP) – 47.2%, the SDS – 36.2%, the DPS – 8% and the BZNS (the coalition partner of the totalitarian BKP) – 6%. The ruling BSP won the largest number of parliamentary seats: 211 out of 400; next came SDS with 144 seats; DPS with 23, BZNS with 16, and 6 seats were won by independent.

Why the SDS did not win the first post-totalitarian free election? In short: the BSP had a formidable advantage over the opposition. No changes had taken place in the infrastructure of the party, and its primary party organizations were well positioned in every town, village, and enterprise. The party treasury was well prepared for the expenditures. SDS had no experience in running an election campaign and its financial resources were limited. The rural areas were completely dominated by the BSP, which also enjoyed a serious media advantage and launched truly efficient anti-SDS propaganda. Owing to the lengthy Round Table discussions, the opposition was deprived of the only resource that could have tipped the

balance in its own favour – *time*. It is ironic that the most popular slogan of the SDS was “Time is ours!” It was exactly the lack of time that actually predetermined the election outcome.

The immediate reaction of the SDS leaders and supporters in connection with the election results were spontaneous demonstrations. According to the SDS official announcement “the election was nominally free but unfair, because it was arranged and conducted by the BSP with the help of the state apparatus it still controls to date. The election was rigged, involving fraud, slander, and manipulation.” Many opposition leaders took the stance of not accepting the election outcome and made the decision to boycott Parliament. Tears were shed, some suffered psychological breakdowns, but finally a compromise was reached and the SDS leaders decided to enter Parliament and influence the process of decision-making from within. This was the beginning of a long-term conflict within the SDS between its “moderate” and “radical”, i.e. non-collaborative, wings.

According to the Round Table agreements, the newly elected Grand National Assembly had been given a mandate to draft the new Constitution of Bulgaria and to enact legislation that would take the country out of the economic crisis. According to the parliamentary rules and procedures, the important decisions required a qualified majority of two-thirds of the votes, including the ratification of the Constitution. Therefore, although parliamentary initiative and the majority vote decisions were both in the hands of the BSP, the final say belonged to the deputies of the SDS. But the key question was: was the SDS capable of preserving its unity?

2. The First Seven Years (1990-1997)

2.1. The SDS at the Grand National Assembly

SDS entered the Grand National Assembly as the only legitimate anti-communist political formation possessing the virtual monopoly

over public protests. The anger provoked by the election outcome created specific attitudes among the younger, professional, and urban voters. These active social groups turned to massive street actions and exerted pressure upon Parliament. Most notable was the students’ sit-in strike, by virtue of which they occupied *Sofia University* with the demand for the resignation of President (an office introduced by the Round Table) Petar Mladenov. Frustrated by demonstrators in front of the building of the National Assembly, he had uttered to the Minister of National Defence: “It’s better to let the tanks come!” His words were captured on a video tape and he had to resign.

The new President had to be elected by a 2/3 majority vote by the Grand National Assembly. On the 1st of August 1990, after six unproductive votes, the Chairman of the SDS, Zhelyu Zhelev, was elected President. The mass street protests were crowned by their first important result: the BSP was forced to sacrifice the presidential power.

In the wake of the general election for Grand National Assembly, the interim Cabinet of Prime Minister Andrei Lukanov resigned, opening the way for the formation of a new government. The winner at the elections – the BSP - preferred to set up a broader coalition or even a “grand coalition” government. The leaders of the SDS rejected the proposal and stuck rigidly to their strategy of confrontation. Unable to block any decision that required a simple majority vote, the SDS regularly boycotted the parliamentary sessions and called for mass protests.

Meanwhile the confidence the BSP government enjoyed was dramatically falling and it had to resign on November 29th. The main cause for the resignation of the Cabinet was the strong parliamentary and particularly non-parliamentary pressure exerted on it. The SDS perceived that the situation was offering a good opportunity for a radical change in the constellation of power. The tactic of the “radicals” was

effective but their success in overthrowing the BSP government involved the SDS in a serious compromise. The BSP asked for a new agreement that included the formation of a coalition government, which had to set the dates for an early general election in May 1991.

The lawyer Dimitar Popov who was not formally affiliated with any political party became the new Prime Minister of the country. On December 20th 1990, he formed a Cabinet where the key economic posts were entrusted to SDS representatives. Thus the Ministry of Finance was headed by Ivan Kostov. In spite of the delays, the fears, and the obvious resistance, the economic reform was launched in February 1991 and that was perhaps the bravest start in the whole of Eastern Europe. It included the almost complete liberalization of prices, considerable liberalization of the trade and foreign currency regimes, a sharp increase in interest rates, and the enforcement of floating exchange rates. The influence of the Center Right over all this was evident.

In the meantime the SDS sustained a heavy blow. At the beginning of December 1990, the leadership fell into disarray as allegations surfaced that the successor of President Zhelev at the post of SDS leader - Peter Beron - had served as an informer of the State Security services. He resigned from the post less than a week after the resignation of Lukanov. This humiliating event was only the prelude to the perturbations that the SDS had to go through over the next six months.

2.2. The New Constitution and the First Split within the SDS

In February 1991, while the opinion polls forecasts were indicating an overwhelming support for the SDS; the BSP parliamentary majority went back on its word to schedule a general election. The constitution-making process was slowing down, as it was being blocked by at least ten draft constitutions. All deadlines had been missed and the date for

the new general election was receding further into the future. The agreement signed before the formation of the coalition government was flagrantly broken. The desire of the BSP leaders to postpone the second democratic general election was as strong as was their desire to hold the first one as soon as possible in June 1990.

In late March and early April, a radical disagreement was publicly articulated for the first time within the SDS. Two wings had been formed within the SDS and they were splitting almost every member party. The first group, headed by the leaders of BSDP and BZNS-NP, considered the new Constitution to be a priority; while the second one called for mass protests, the boycott of Parliament, scheduling an immediate general election, and an overall rejection of the "new communist Constitution".

The organizational structure of the SDS was only making matters worse. The SDS was governed by a National Coordinating Council composed of three representatives from each member organization. The decisions on key issues were made by a 2/3 majority, the others needed a simple majority only. The Chairman and the Secretary of the SDS were managing the current affairs of the coalition and there were two spokespersons, expressing the official stances of the coalition. On entering the Grand National Assembly, the coalition governing authority was divided between the National Coordinating Council, headed by the new SDS Chairman, Philip Dimitrov, and the SDS parliamentary faction, led by the leader of the BSDP, Peter Dertliev. By June 1991, it was clear that there were two centres of power within the SDS.

The turning point occurred in May when a group of radical members of parliament from the SDS raised a demand for the Grand National Assembly to be unconditionally dissolved and for a new general election to be held before the adoption of a new Constitution. On May 15th, 39 deputies, who later became popular as "the group of the 39", left

the parliamentary sessions in direct confrontation not only with the BSP majority, but also with the majority of the SDS parliamentary faction. Despite their desperate resistance and the new wave of mass protests, the new Constitution was passed on the 12th of July 1991. The organizational split within the coalition was inevitable.

The members of parliament who signed the Constitution remained unsupported by their parties, whereas the party activists supported strongly “the group of the 39” and the National Coordinating Council was dominated by the radical wing. The latter passed a decision to the effect that no deputy who had signed the new Constitution could be nominated as a SDS candidate at the forthcoming general election. Thus, virtually on the eve of the new election finally scheduled to be held in October, the SDS anti-communist coalition disintegrated into four major formations, each of which chose to run the election on its own.

1. *The SDS (Movement)* that emerged as the legitimate heir of the coalition established on the 7th of December 1989. Its leader was Philip Dimitrov, the last Chairman of the National Coordinating Council of the “old” undivided organization.

2. *The SDS (Center)* comprised the BSDP, part of *Ecoglasnost*, and two smaller parties from the countryside.

3. *The SDS (Liberals)* included the Green Party (ZP), the FNSD and a splinter group from the DP.

4. *BZNS-NP* decided to run the election on its own as an independent political entity.

2.3. The first SDS Government

Unlike the 1990 general election, held to the purpose of forming a 400-member Grand National Assembly, the second free general election in Bulgaria, held on the 13th of October 1991, were electing an ordinary National Assembly of only 240 members. The SDS (Movement) won the election by 34.36% of

the votes, thus returning 110 MPs; the BSP came second with 33.14% and 106 MPs respectively; the DPS came third with 7.55% and 24 MPs respectively. Although the socialists lost their majority, the victory of the SDS was not categorical by far, as the winners did not enjoy a sufficient majority to form an independent government and had to look for the support of the DPS.

The biggest surprise was that all the formations that split from the SDS won less than 4% together and fell below the electoral threshold. The failure may largely be attributed to their inability to form a coalition prior to the elections. They also had to operate in a situation that amounted to a total polarization of political life. Mass consciousness was dominated by the opposing notions of communism versus anti-communism. The radical wing of the SDS, i.e. the SDS (Movement), was obviously the formation that the majority of those dissatisfied with the “old regime” voted for. The very labels – SDS (Center) and SDS (Liberals) – suggested a milder attitude towards the political opponent. All of the SDS splinter formation failed in the attempt to express some semblance of a moderate identity in a political context of high intensity and confrontation. The efforts to establish a new political block of moderate centrist ex-SDS formations were also turned down by the voters themselves. The “radicals” were the indisputable winners among the center-right voters. But yet again the key question remained: was the SDS capable of preserving its unity?

The SDS government of Philip Dimitrov was the first non-communist government ever after the Second World War. It initiated legislation, which led to the adoption of the Law on the Restitution of Nationalized Property and Agricultural Land to private owners. The restitution of some part of the nationalized real estate in the cities resulted in the stimulation of private business activities. The SDS government also passed respective legislation in the area of privatization and this was the first step towards implement-

ing the structural reform in the economy. As far as foreign policy is concerned, the government made a sharp turn toward rapprochement with the USA and Western Europe. Thus the process aimed at the country's European integration was successfully launched.

However, the forces who staunchly opposed the first non-communist government were gradually gathering momentum. A major challenge, which the SDS Cabinet proved incapable of meeting, was the restructuring of the secret services and the Ministry of Interior. The directors of these services used every opportunity to discredit the government and to accuse it of endangering the country's national security. Many of the new appointees were ill prepared for their new obligations. In general, the SDS government lacked professional expertise and well-trained and qualified loyal civil servants. It had a limited reserve of qualified people to replace the old "red" cadres and the communist *nomenclature* at large.

Personal disagreements within the Cabinet could also be regularly observed. In spite of the splits, the SDS was still a coalition of too many political formations with heterogeneous and divergent interests, leading to different priorities in policy-making. Finance minister Ivan Kostov pursued a monetary policy line based on a stable national currency and protection against inflation. With the advancement of the economic reform, there was a steady growth of the unemployment rate.

The non-parliamentary formations, especially the former SDS members, such as the BSDP and the BZNS-NP, were critical of the Cabinet. President Zhelev joined their attacks despite the fact that he had won the first presidential election in January 1992 owing to the support of the SDS and DPS. The leaders of the SDS and the DPS could not reach agreement on how to continue the economic reform and dramatically broke up their relations.

Prime Minister Philip Dimitrov took the risk of tabling a confidence vote at the Bul-

garian Parliament in October 1992. He expected that all his non-BSP critics – at least in Parliament – would be silenced and vote respectively "for". The outcome of the secret ballot made it clear however, that not only the BSP and DPS deputies, but also some part of the SDS deputies had voted "against". The presidential advisor Lyuben Berov was nominated to the post of Prime Minister; the new Cabinet received the support of all the DPS and BSP deputies, and was also supported by approximately 20 of the SDS MPs – a combination that ran absolutely counter to the will of the voters expressed just a year before.

2.4. The SDS in Opposition (1993-1996)

From a political point of view, the government was under pressure from every possible direction. None of its officially announced policies was properly pursued. The restitution of land to its rightful owners was blocked by a majority formed around the BSP; the initiative for "mass privatization" was blocked by a majority formed around the SDS, etc. A stable majority was available only when the SDS tabled a demand for a non-confidence vote. The Cabinet seemed to be a hostage in a tactical game for domination among the political parties. It became clear that elections would be held whenever it was convenient for the socialists. In the meantime, the weakness of the state institutions triggered numerous negative tendencies – the legislative activity was dominated by corporate interests, the country was suffering from economic chaos, illegal exports and organized crime became uncontrollable.

Frustrated by these unexpected developments, the SDS sank deep into its internal conflicts and parliamentary inefficiency. The structural conflict between the SDS big and small formations, which was further enhanced by the two centres of power – Parliament and the National Coordinating Council, produced another painful split. The Union was left by the influential Democratic Party (headed by Stefan Savov),

which subsequently formed the People's Union coalition (NS) together with Anastasia Moser's anti-communist formation BZNS-united.

Prime Minister Lyuben Berov was helplessly observing the situation until he was finally voted out of power in the autumn of 1994. The socialists had correctly calculated the right time for holding an early general election. The Center Right was losing strength and popularity and no one was surprised by the fact that the BSP won an absolute majority of 125 MPs at the election; the SDS came second with 68 MPs, the newly formed NS came third (18), and the DPS - fourth (15). After the resignation of Philip Dimitrov, the SDS leadership was taken over by Ivan Kostov.

The new leader was aware of all the weaknesses of the Union and was determined to put an end to the negative tendencies that had been haunting the Center Right since its very inception. Having accumulated experience by working successively in both the executive and legislative branches of power, he understood that the major obstacle, which prevented the SDS from being equally efficient in power and in opposition, was its very structure. It produced not only inefficiency, but also a constant succession of conflicts, witnessed by the public eye. Elementary lack of discipline, chaotic meetings of the national and local National Coordinating Councils, contradictory statements of leaders, the tortuous decision-making process, the inability to implement decisions once they were taken – all this made the trade mark of the "romantic" period of the "SDS movement". All this had to be ended. Ivan Kostov personally committed himself to implementing a painstaking gradual reform in order to transform the amorphous anti-communist coalition into a unified party. His ambitions to strengthen the Center Right were put to the test far too soon.

At the end of 1995, President Zhelev announced that he would run for another five

years' term of office in 1996. NS declared its support, whereas the SDS declared its intention to nominate a candidate of its own. All attempts at mediation failed. Opinion polls clearly indicated that should the democratic community nominate two candidates, a socialist nominee would become Bulgaria's next President, leaving the country entirely in the hands of the ex-communists. The worst scenario for the opposition was about to materialize in practice.

The primary elections emerged as the only mechanism for running the presidential election with a single candidate. A general agreement was reached to "nominate a joint candidate for the presidential election in Bulgaria through the process of primary elections". It was signed on the 29th of March 1996 by the leaders of SDS, NS and the DPS. Finally, the agreement was also signed by the two nominees, President Zhelyu Zhelev and the SDS candidate Petar Stoyanov. An enormous risk was taken; the unsuccessful primaries would expose the opposition to ridicule and would moreover sow the seeds of its total collapse.

The first and last presidential primaries in Bulgaria for the time being took place on the 1st of June 1996. A total number of 858 560 voters took part in them, the turn-out being much larger than expected. President Zhelev recognized the outcome of the primaries and the heavy loss by a 1 to 2 ratio in favour of the younger nominee. The winner Petar Stoyanov became the official candidate of the opposition for the coming presidential election scheduled for October. He went on to convincingly win the "real" election against the candidate of the BSP. This newly formed coalition, called United Democratic Forces (ODS), demonstrated its readiness to govern the country. But while the center-right parties were overcoming the crisis within their own ranks, the BSP government was plunging the whole country into the worst economic crises after the liberation of Bulgaria from the Ottoman Empire in 1878.

2.5. The collapse of the BSP government (1995-1996)

The general election held at the end of 1994 was convincingly won by the BSP. Exhausted by the changes and disappointed by the inability of the Center Right to hold the power and govern effectively, the majority of the Bulgarian citizens were seduced by the messages of the Left about security, new jobs, and higher salaries. In 1994, the nostalgia for communism was revived. Having won the absolute majority at Parliament, the BSP easily formed the new Cabinet with its leader Zhan Videnov as Prime Minister.

As early as the middle of 1995, experts were warning that the methods applied to economic matters were in effect an attempt to go back to the centrally planned economy and as such – doomed to result in a catastrophe. Nevertheless, the collapse, when it actually came, took almost everybody by surprise.

The government had deliberately created an investment-hostile economic climate. Foreign entities were banned from owning Bulgarian land and - what was worse - the BSP leaders openly expressed their hostility towards selling “our precious land to greedy foreigners”. Amendments were made to the investment legislation, which specifically singled out expatriate Bulgarians and prevented them from investing in the country. Several multinational companies had to pull out and relocate their production facilities. From a developing economy and a promising market Bulgaria was rapidly becoming an investment wasteland.

The prices for traditional everyday food products were steadily rising. The prices of milk products increased five times; bread beat all records by increasing sevenfold; fuel and heating also went up fivefold. The living standard fell by 75 percent as a result of the government’s attempt to go back to the “good old days”. But the worst was yet to come.

By the spring of 1996 everyone felt that the banking system was tottering. The only

way to prevent the system from collapsing was the flow of unlimited refinancing secured by the Bulgarian National Bank. The government failed to gather enough nerve to close down the biggest loss-makers in the economy or isolate them from the chain of refinancing. At the same time no serious privatization deals were negotiated or properly finalized.

Fifteen banks were declared to suffer from liquidity problems and were consequently put under special supervision. Millions of depositors and hundreds of enterprises lost the right to operate with their own assets. Banks went down one after another as the population engaged in several mass runs on the Bulgarian domestic currency – the Lev, which collapsed against the dollar losing 9/10 of its former value. Bulgarians went through the bitter experience of hyperinflation – a phenomenon that was known only from movies and fiction. The overwhelming majority of the population shared the blind faith that sooner or later “the government will come to fix things”. The panic and shock that followed were unprecedented in Bulgarian history.

Following months of public tension, the nation took to the streets demanding an early general election and a rapid economic reform. On the 3^d of January 1997, the first massive gathering and rally took place in the capital city, but this time the protests spread all over the country. The message was simple – no more Socialist governments, an early election as soon as possible. On the 4th of February, in front of the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral in Sofia, at a huge rally, the leader of the opposition and future Prime Minister, Ivan Kostov, announced that the BSP had agreed to an early general election in April 1997. The results confirmed the decisive change of attitude in the nation. The ODS won the absolute parliamentary majority, returning 135 MPs of its own to the National Assembly, which still remains the highest result ever scored at a general election held since 1989.

2.6. Conclusions

The first seven years of the Bulgarian Center Right in politics were marked by notorious instability. Hope, disappointment, despair – these were the feelings that almost each and every center-right voter went through and it is in this order precisely that people experienced them throughout that period. The fundamental contradictions within the SDS coalition were present from the very day it was established. Anti-communism and the defence of democracy were at its foundations, but these gave just a minimal common ground for people of different and even irreconcilable ideological positions in a normal democratic environment. There were Marxists who were longing for “socialism with a human face”, intellectuals with liberal ideas, social democrats and Christian democrats, conservatives and radical democrats, monarchists and republicans. The members of the center-right coalition did not delude themselves about their differences; they rather shared the clear understanding that only a painful compromise could stand some chances against the Goliath of the totalitarian BKP. It was this unanimous opposition to the communist regime and its legacy that made the coalition possible – but only for a limited period of time.

Some of the leaders were too old, while others were too young to achieve the desired mutual understanding. A tension developed between the style of the informal groups, many of which showed little inclination to build structures in society and observe any political discipline and, on the other hand, the style of the more structured and more popular formations. There were constant fears that some of the stronger parties and personalities would dominate the organization at the expense of all the rest. There were also implanted agents and informers of the communist State Security who did their best to flare up the existing contradictions, create new antagonisms or simply switch to the BSP when they were ordered to do so.

The Union never established a proper organizational structure. The loose confederate principle and the rule “one party, one vote” in the decision making process were ineffective. It is this principle that made inevitable the conflicts between the National Coordinating Council and the SDS parliamentary faction. As time went on, it became increasingly more evident that this rule favoured the smaller formations. At the same time, it frustrated the bigger formations on a daily basis and tempted their leaders to go independent and see what they could do outside the coalition. In the end, they crossed swords not only with the ex-communists, but with their yesterday’s friends and political allies as well.

These were the years when the BSP opposed all the major reforms on every level it possibly could. It seemed that the ex-communists really believed that the return to the security of “the good old days” was possible. Exploiting the nostalgia and the fears of the Bulgarians, they won general elections twice and the second time they even tried to carry out a “restoration” on a grand scale. The failure was so spectacular that it cleared the way for the alternative Center Right vision for the future of Bulgaria – a transformation that could have been achieved after years of public debates. For the first time since 1989, an overwhelming majority of Bulgarians voted in support for the forthcoming exceedingly painful reforms, as they could see no other viable alternative, abandoning at the same time all their illusions about the return to socialism.

Shortly before the early general election took place in April 1997, the SDS leaders decided that the Union should become a single party. The new political entity was quickly acceded to the European People’s Party. The transformation from an amorphous anti-communist coalition into a party was the main guarantee for a successful full term in office – especially after the bitter experience from the previous years. Thus, the key question whether the SDS was capable of preserving its unity was finally given a positive reply.

3. The Center Right in Power (1997-2001)

3.1. The Achievements of the ODS

Government

Although the government inherited the ravages of an economic collapse, its clear vision, prompt actions, and political discipline instilled confidence in the Bulgarians. The new government launched macroeconomic stabilization measures and structural reforms that resulted in a reduced budget deficit, lower inflation, and the growth of foreign investment. After stabilizing the economy through a currency board mechanism, which imposed strict monetary policies and financial transparency, the government accelerated the sluggish privatization of state-owned assets. To encourage the economy to grow, the SDS committed itself to implementing simultaneous land, tax, financial, and judicial reforms, which created a privatization environment that was wide open to foreign investments. Ambitious improvements to the energy and transportation infrastructure were also initiated. The government succeeded to squeeze organized crime out of illicit oil, gas and arms trafficking. Bulgaria became one of the great success stories of the world's emerging markets.

From its very first day in office, the government actively pursued membership in Western institutions including NATO and the European Union. The SDS maintained close contacts and an active dialogue with NATO and the EU officials on all relevant political, financial, military, and other issues related to the country's future full-fledged membership. In many ways, the Bulgarian government attempted to cooperate as though it were already acceded as a NATO member country, a testimony to which was the Bulgarian contribution to the handling of the Kosovo crisis. The government believed that active engagement to fulfil the required membership criteria would encourage foreign investment and promote greater confidence in

Bulgaria's political and economic institutions. In 1999, Bulgaria received an invitation to join the European Union and in the beginning of 2001 the painful visa regime for free travel within the EU was removed – a fact of enormous symbolic significance.

The ODS government was the most successful government since the start of the transition in 1989. Bulgaria overcame the severe crisis it was going through and achieved financial stabilization and a low inflation rate. In the context of this stable macro-economic frame, the government simultaneously launched a structural reform and extensive privatization, as a result of which the private sector became dominant in the Bulgarian economy. Foreign investments grew to a record high level in the year 2000. Bulgaria had outlined clear priorities in its foreign policy, which were supported by the majority of the Bulgarian public. The desire and consistent work for integration with the European Union and NATO produced specific results and dispelled all doubts about the specific nature of the road Bulgaria had to follow for a generation to come. Ivan Kostov's government became the first ever to complete its term in office in the post-communist era in Bulgaria. It weathered several external economic storms and received international praise for the example it set as a zone of stability in the volatile region of South-East Europe.

Objectively speaking, the government's economic and political achievements were more than enough for the re-election of the SDS or, at least, for a minimal loss. However, at the June 2001 general election the ruling coalition was overwhelmed by the newly formed National Movement Simeon the Second (NDSV). Its leader was the exiled successor to the Bulgarian throne, Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, who became Bulgaria's next Prime Minister. There was no consolation in the fact that the old enemy – the BSP – was in an even worse situation, its election outcome ranking third for the first time since 1989.

3.2. The Reasons for the Defeat in June 2001

Any explanation of the “landslide” victory in June 2001 should start with the peculiar characteristics of the NDSV and its leader. The rise of NDSV as a major political force was so meteoric that the political leaders of Bulgaria’s traditional parties, as well as political experts and observers, were all caught by surprise. Although NDSV was immediately identified as a populist movement, making use of the disappointment with the traditional parties, there was no time to neutralize the effect of the messages of Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha who announced his intentions only 10 weeks before Election Day.

It would be quite unjustified to include NDSV in the Bulgarian Center Right. On the whole, the NDSV representatives - probably, *inter alia*, under the influence of their leader - were not inclined to identify themselves ideologically in any clear left-wing or right-wing terms. The emphasis in their self-identification was invariably on “pragmatism, expertise, and positive outlook.” Subsequently, NDSV became member of the Liberal faction at the European Parliament.

Focusing not on the winner, but rather on the big loser – the SDS, we can divide the reasons underlying the loss of confidence into two main groups. The first one includes all those associated with the governance of the country, and the second, those associated with the internal situation of the SDS party. Even though this division is artificial because of the fact that the SDS was the ruling party, it is nevertheless most expedient in an analysis of an election defeat suffered by the government, which even today is widely considered to be the most successful Cabinet ever throughout the entire Bulgarian transition.

3.2.1. Reasons for the Defeat: the Government

The ODS took Bulgarian society back on the road to the abandoned reformist agenda, but the lost first seven years made everything much

more painful. The government was forced to launch severely delayed reforms in several spheres - public administration, healthcare, education, the army, etc. While these reforms were gradually gathering momentum, they inevitably triggered acute social discontent. The economic reforms led to rising unemployment, which eventually stabilized at 20%. In the context of a functioning currency board mechanism, the income policy was bound to observe a strict fiscal discipline. Wages and salaries in the public sector were steadily rising, but their low starting point from 1997 onwards and their slow increase could hardly satisfy people. Reforms took their toll on particular social groups or professional communities before their positive results were felt by all alike. The ODS government had to work on such an extensive front that an increasingly higher number of citizens fell within the scope of the so-called “unpopular measures.”

It is not accidental that there was an obvious tendency in Eastern Europe, by virtue of which almost all center-right governments failed to win a second term in office. If the Center Right in the ex-communist countries follows its reformist programme unswervingly, it must inevitably pursue unpopular policies, which alienate people and they start looking for alternatives. In most cases, they will turn to the renewed Left of a social democratic profile, although the electorate might also choose to give support to nationalist formations. Hence the logical conclusion is that in the conditions of a process of transition, centre-right governments are likely to “fall prey to the success of their own policies” because, burdened with the weight of their daily concerns, people cannot see things in their long-term perspective and thus they prove incapable of comprehending the reforms, which take long time to yield tangible positive results. It is small wonder that this explanation is quite popular among the politicians of the Center Right. However it contains only some part of the truth.

In its overwhelming majority, the Bulgarian public had accepted the need for reforms and, as numerous opinion poll surveys indicated, people did realize that their severity was directly proportional to their delay. The ODS government failed to do something very important, which people expected and which was not articulated clearly in the enthusiasm of the civil unrest, which swept the country in the winter of 1996-1997. Perhaps the way in which the ODS won their term in office failed to be appreciated in its entire depth, and the politicians failed to recognize the unprecedented intimacy established between the general public and the then political opposition, which had started to emerge during the 1996 presidential election and which set new moral standards for the future holders of power. The involvement in civic protests and the intensity of the support provided by the protestors exceeded by far the routine duties of the democratic citizen who occasionally goes to the ballot box to cast his or her vote. This created excessive expectations about the style of the new government. The Bulgarians expected the closest possible relationship between leaders and voters, a direct and frank dialogue between the authorities and the public, and these are mechanisms and practices, which were entirely alien to the communist regime and its successors, as attested by their conspicuous absence under the BSP government. After the excessive effort that people invested in provoking the early general election, the majority of Bulgarians expected that at a long last this would truly be "their" government - transparent, dialog-prone, and sincere. The ODS government, however, failed to meet all these expectations.

3.2.2 Reasons for the Defeat: the Party

Corruption, clientelism, and encapsulation - those are the most frequent descriptions of the processes, which evolved while the SDS was in power. The "self-enclosure" of the par-

ty was caused by the fusion of administrative and political power. The overwhelming majority of SDS local leaders were MPs and their communication was almost exclusively within the limits of the party structures. All kinds of information passed through a specific "blue" filter, from which only the problems concerning SDS activists actually emerged. And when deputies visibly concentrated on solving the problems of the party members alone, it was very difficult for external observers to accept such self-centered practices.

The SDS came to power with the promise to accelerate privatization to the possible maximum. Thus far privatization had been blocked by the socialist government and unfortunately the new governing party became involved in this process to an extent that was inadmissible for a political formation. The SDS should have tried to include broader sections of the public in the privatization process, which was brought down to the level of an internal party reallocation of public property. Before the eyes of Bulgarian society and with the collaboration of the newly appointed civil servants, the members of the SDS local structures and the central governing authorities took part in joint business ventures. This symbiosis of political and economic activity was operating within the limits of the permitted legal framework. But it is small surprise that it fuelled a burning feeling of injustice and painted the ugly image of large-scale corruption.

Very few were aware of the hidden challenges that the ODS government had to face. Its task was not only to pursue specific policies and implement its election programme, but also to build and maintain a sense of solidarity between the elite and the citizenry based on the common belief that the implementation of the painful reforms was just and even-handed. Solidarity was interpreted in the narrow partisan sense of the word as something applicable only to relations between the supporters of the SDS. In this context, the government itself began to

look unjust, and the reformers - immoral. The value-oriented policy required by the Christian democratic identity disappeared from the domestic political image of the SDS and was manifested only in the field of foreign policy.

Thus, any talk about the effectiveness and competence of the government with respect to what had already been achieved and what was achievable in future – where the Center Right was supposed to have an overwhelming advantage over the Left - was entirely annihilated. The Bulgarians did not want to hear about any future or past achievements, because the moral profile of the power-holders became more important than anything else. The pragmatic debate on expertise, means and ends in politics etc., was displaced by the debate on morals and ethics in politics. On this battlefield, not only the SDS, but also their major opponent the BSP, was extremely vulnerable. This is the reason why the majority of the Bulgarian people ventured to put their trust in something completely unknown that gave them the hope for a new beginning – NDSV and its leader.

4. The Center Right in Opposition (2001-2008)

4.1. What Should Have Been Done

On the whole, what the SDS should have done was to radically open up to the public. In designing its policy, the Union should have opened up to independent experts and opinion-makers who had always cared about the SDS problems and could have suggested new ideas. The time the party spent in opposition was invaluable for establishing permanent contacts with influential and active representatives of the civil society in Bulgaria. The professional and entrepreneurial communities understood the essence of the reforms and were the natural civic allies of the “Blue Party.”

The SDS had to make an effort to develop its Christian democratic identity in order to take a principled and consistent stance in the pub-

lic debate, especially in its capacity of an opposition party to the “liberal” government of NDSV and the DPS. Thus, its moves and initiatives would not have been the consequence of some *ad hoc* circumstances or manifestations of the personal spontaneity of one or another of the SDS leaders, but would have logically ensued from clearly articulated principles. The latter would have generated the value-oriented policy, which was so deficient during the term of office of the ODS government.

The internal opening up to its own members by democratizing the internal party life, the external opening up to all Bulgarian citizens by means of new mechanisms and practices, the Christian democratization of the SDS policies, the large-scale cleansing of the governing bodies at the local and national level - only these moves could have restored the public image of the SDS. The processes which the SDS had to undergo seem quite radical, and perhaps it would be no overstatement to define them as a re-establishment or re-invention of the party. Something that should have never been forgotten was the fact that the SDS was the political force of change. Irrespective of the failures and mistakes, the Union remained *the* reformist force in Bulgaria and it had to put its stakes on this deepest and most unshakeable layer of its identity.

The party should have stayed firm in its decision to remain in opposition and to expose the lies of NDSV and its leader. It should have always supported and defended the achievements of the “blue” government and its Prime Minister, Ivan Kostov. All temptations within the SDS to “help” the inexperienced NDSV at the expense of preserving certain positions in the country’s government should have been resisted. The “blue party” should have played the role of a constructive opposition in defending the Euro-Atlantic integration policies of the new Cabinet. The re-election of President Petar

Stoyanov, the symbol of the new beginning of 1997, should have been considered as a crucial first step in the recovery of the SDS. The local elections in the autumn of 2003 were supposed to be the “dress-rehearsal” for the next general election. At these local elections, the Union was expected to restore its reputation and strength by showing both a new style and new faces to the public. The good results could have overturned the negative tendency that had reached its culmination in June 2001 and would have given the SDS the chance to reclaim in 2005 the right to govern the country once again for a second term of office until 2009.

4.2. What Actually Happened

The first step after the 2001 general election was the immediate resignation of the SDS leader, Ivan Kostov, who was replaced by Ekaterina Mihailova – the leader of the “blue majority” at the previous Parliament. She was supposed to lead the party to its 13th National Conference in March 2002 where elections for all governing bodies of the SDS were expected to be carried out. The eight months of her leadership were full of events.

Under Ekaterina Mihailova’s leadership, the SDS decided not to go into forming a coalition with NDSV and to stay in opposition. Instead of uniting the party, this move caused a deep division of opinions among both party members and leaders. The “radicals” were represented by Ekaterina Mihailova and Ivan Kostov, the alternative “moderate” vision was expressed by Phillip Dimitrov (ex-Prime Minister and leader of SDS) and Stefan Sofiansky (the SDS Mayor of Sofia since 1995). Even before the 2001 general election, the two of them openly defended the idea of collaboration with Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha and NDSV. The attitude towards NDSV and its leader created a new dividing line within the SDS. This was the reason for Stefan Sofiansky to leave the SDS in the autumn of the same

year and for his decision to launch the establishment of his new party, called Union of Free Democrats (SSD), of which he was elected leader. These controversies made impossible the fruition of the project for fundamental reforms that the new leader of the SDS proposed and thus everything was left for the National Conference to decide in March 2002. Unfortunately, before the end of 2001, the SDS suffered yet another heavy blow.

The incumbent President Petar Stoyanov was the obvious favourite at the presidential election in November 2001. His re-election seemed predetermined and it is then that the BSP nominated as its presidential candidate the party leader, Georgi Parvanov, the popularity of whom was quickly going down after the recent defeat of his party at the general election. Many observers saw this nomination as a dignified way for the leader of BSP to step down from office.

Petar Stoyanov decided to run as an independent candidate. He believed that the active campaigning for him on the part of the SDS leadership and the rank-and-file members might do him more harm than good. He was perhaps the strongest supporter of the idea about the collaboration between the SDS and NDSV. Distancing himself from the SDS, the President demonstrated his sympathy for NDSV, thus asking officially for its tacit or open support. On the eve of the elections, such support was articulated personally by the new Prime Minister, Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, who called upon the NDSV voters to vote for President Stoyanov. In the minds of many of the traditional SDS voters these actions were considered unacceptable. Thus negative attitudes and judgments were combined with a highly confused campaign, burdened by a very late start and personal blunders. The result was a real shock – after the first leg of the presidential election, Stoyanov came second after Parvanov and was unable to change anything whatsoever during the two weeks preceding

the run-offs. The socialists received such a boost that for the first time since 1996 their party took the lead in the public opinion polls.

The National Conference of the SDS took place in a very depressing atmosphere. Only a year ago, the President, the Prime Minister, and the Mayor of the capital city were members of the SDS – in March 2002 all this was gone. Ekaterina Mihailova in her capacity of SDS leader was replaced by the ex-foreign minister Nadezhda Mihailova. Enjoying the highest degree of popularity in comparison with all leading SDS politicians, Nadezhda Mihailova was considered to be a figure of compromise within the party. Many people believed that being the symbol of the biggest and indisputable achievements of “the blue government” in the area of foreign policy, the new leader would be able to transfer her personal rating onto the party itself.

What became clear all too soon after the National Conference was the fact that the radical changes in the SDS would be postponed for an indefinite future period of time. The top leadership of the party was indeed renewed, but all governing bodies of the structures beneath it remained untouched. The desire to balance between the different groups within the party and the unwillingness (or may be the inability) to confront the government on a day-to-day basis gradually deprived the SDS of its clear identity as an opposition force. Without doing anything blatantly wrong, the new leadership lapsed into passivity and inertness. A year after the election of Nadezhda Mihailova to the leadership post, there was a widespread feeling that the SDS was fading away. The fears that instead of becoming a step-stone for success at the next general election, the local elections in the autumn of 2003 would turn into a debacle for the SDS were slowly trickling into the minds of SDS activists. Nadezhda Mihailova was well aware of all this and made the courageous move to run against Stefan Sofiansky at the mayoral elections in Sofia. During

the campaign, the leader of the SDS declared that she would either win the race or resign from the leadership post altogether.

The results were disastrous both for the SDS and its leader in person who came to rank third after Stefan Sofiansky and the candidate of the BSP. The dissatisfaction with the state of the Union was articulated openly by many local and national leaders. The situation deteriorated rapidly when the SDS leadership announced that the results were not that poor and Nadezhda Mihailova herself refused to resign in spite of her earlier declarations. The tensions within the party rapidly grew and the two clearly opposing factions now openly emerged in front of the public eye.

Unconditional defence of the “blue government”, relentless opposition activity against the NDSV-DPS government, rejection of any future coalition prospects with NDSV – that is what the “radicals” within the SDS demanded. They accused NDSV of a demonstrative return to communist recruitment practices within the state administration, of rehabilitating figures belonging to the repressive institutions of the totalitarian past, of incompetence and open collaboration with the BSP. They insisted on setting up coalitions only with organizations that were in strong opposition to the government and under no conditions sided with NDSV. The “moderates” were far more critical of the “blue government” – Nadezhda Mihailova even apologized to the Bulgarian public for the mistakes of her party. At the same time, the “moderates” were far more tolerant as far as NDSV was concerned, planning a future collaboration or even a coalition with this newly established party. It became obvious that the SDS was harbouring two entities that shared different perceptions of the past, the present, and the future of the Union. These differences were far too deep to allow for any further peaceful coexistence.

In March 2004, the SDS suffered the most painful split in its history. Ivan Kostov and the

majority of the former ministers of the ODS government left the Union for good. The SDS parliamentary faction was split in two. The ratio was 1 to 2 in favour of the “radicals”. In May 2005, a new party was founded – Democrats for Strong Bulgaria (DSB) and its elected leader was Ivan Kostov.

Thus the Bulgarian Center Right ran the 2005 general election split into three separate parts. The SDS preserved its previous ODS coalition formula. The leader of the SSD, Stefan Sofiansky, initiated the establishment of a new coalition – Bulgarian People’s Union (BNS) – together with Anastasia Mozer’s BZNS and the moderate nationalists from VMRO. The only independent runner at this election was Ivan Kostov’s DSB. Unlike the 1991 general election, this time the voters were equally favourably minded with respect to these three formations, and each of them scored a result over the 4% electoral threshold. However, individually each of these three formations returned less than 10% of the MPs to Parliament, and this low result was making pointless the renewed battle for the leadership in the right-wing political environment. The fact that for the first time an organization, which had split from the SDS was scoring a result equal to the result of the Union itself, and that the SDS was losing its traditional leadership position in the right-wing political environment was much less impressive than the fact that the extreme nationalists from the newly-established „Ataka“ party were running ahead of each one of the older center-right parties.

For the first time ever in Bulgarian history, the country came to be governed for a full term of office by a coalition including the parties ranking among the first three at the June 2005 general election. These three parties – the BSP, NDSV, and the DPS – had agreed to set up a so-called “triple coalition”. The BSP Chairman, Sergei Stanishev, was appointed Prime Minister of the country. In this way the three parties were able to enjoy an unprece-

dent parliamentary majority of two thirds of the MPs at the National Assembly. The “good news” for the Right Wing was that the differences voiced thus far by its three constituent parts were now markedly mitigated. The decision of NDSV to enter the “triple coalition”, the largest partner in which was the BSP, removed the most painful dividing line between the SDS and DSB. This made it evident, that the categorical opposition against the “triple coalition” had no other possible alternative.

One of the few indisputable achievements of the Right Wing throughout the 2005 – 2009 parliamentary term of office is rooted in its effective actions in the capacity of a parliamentary opposition. Deprived of the possibility to organize mass protest actions, the MPs of the right-wing parliamentary opposition focused their efforts on all other parliamentary methods and skills, by virtue of which they managed to considerably reduce the public confidence, which the governing majority initially enjoyed. The opposition was facilitated, of course, by the errors the majority was making and the criticism launched in this connection by the European Commission. And yet, this opposition failed to increase the confidence, which the public used to have in their parties before.

Throughout the 2005 – 2008 period of time, the center-right formations entered a grave cycle of election losses. After the defeat they sustained by the BSP and NDSV at the June 2005 general election, another loss followed shortly at the local by-elections for Sofia City Mayor in the fall of the same year. The mayor’s seat was won at the run-offs by the then independent Boiko Borissov, who defeated the candidate of the BSP. What is notable about this election is the fact that none of the right-wing candidates managed to make it to the run-offs in a city, which ever since the onset of the country’s transition, was considered to be the preserved territory of the Right Wing.

The loss at the 2006 presidential election followed. This election was won by President

Parvanov at the run-offs against the leader of the „Ataka“, Volen Siderov. The joint right-wing candidate, Nedelcho Beronov, also failed to make it to the run-offs. The right-wing formations scored their most humiliating results at the MEP by-elections in 2007. The various parts of the Right Wing ran these elections independently, whereby the party slates of two of them were topped by their party leaders – the ex-President, Petar Stoyanov, who in the meantime had been elected leader of the SDS, and the former Sofia City Mayor, Stefan Sofiansky, leader of the SSD. None of the right-wing candidates – the DSB included – managed to raise sufficient votes to return at least a single Member of the European Parliament. Within the limits of three years only, the question about the leadership in the right-wing political environment was replaced by the question about its very survival.

5. The Birth of GERB and the Latest General Elections (2007 - 2009)

5.1. The “Birth” of Boiko Borissov as a Political Figure

When back in 2001 Prime Minister Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha appointed Boiko Borissov Chief Secretary of the Ministry of Interior, no one was aware that this appointment was laying the foundations of a political development, which would bring about the complete restructuring of the Bulgarian Center Right. Disregarding traditions, the new Chief Secretary was consciously seeking public manifestations, the coverage of which was all too readily supported by the media, as for them such openness on the part of a high-ranking policeman was truly welcome. With his non-convincing behaviour, the NDSV faceless Minister of Interior only helped enhance the vivid and dynamic image of his immediate subordinate, who in the meantime was elevated to the rank of Lieutenant-General.

These constant media appearances quickly turned General Borissov into a nationally recognizable personality. He was closely connect-

ed with the country's governance, but at the same time was quite different from the politicians, to the behaviour of whom people had already been accustomed. This was the reason why his name got included in the opinion polls of the pollster agencies and all too soon Borissov acquired a rating, which was commensurate only with the approval ratings of the President and the Prime Minister. Despite his regular declarations that he did not intend to go into politics and would rather perform his job of a policeman, Borissov agreed to be nominated as an MP candidate at the 2005 general election and topped two of the NDSV party slates, thus involving himself in a genuine political race for the first time ever.

Although his election race was successful and he was returned to Parliament, Borissov refused to become Member of Parliament and remained at the Ministry of Interior throughout the long weeks of tense negotiations for the formation of the new government. Rumour has it that he hoped to remain within the system of the Ministry of Interior and probably be offered the ministerial seat, but in all likelihood neither the BSP nor NDSV was particularly enthusiastic about such a prospect. The only certain thing is that as soon as the BSP made its nomination for Minister of Interior, it was quite obvious that he could hardly work together with the popular Chief Secretary of his Ministry.

Almost simultaneously with his retirement from the Ministry of Interior, General Boiko Borissov had to face a new decision. The Sofia City Mayor, Stefan Sofiansky, who ran the 2005 general election as a SSD candidate and was subsequently returned to Parliament as an MP from the BNS parliamentary faction, declared his preference to remain at the National Assembly rather than retain his mayor's seat. This was the reason why local by-elections had to be held for the post of Sofia City Mayor. Boiko Borissov made up his mind to run this election as an independent candidate. After

the run-offs with the candidate of the BSP, Bo-
rissov won a convincing victory and took over
the mayor's seat for the next two years.

5.2. The Birth of GERB as a Political Party

The failure of the Right Wing at the 2006 pres-
idential election indicated that the positions
of its constituent parties had been weakened
even further. The lack of conviction in the joint
actions of the two most serious right-wing par-
ties – the SDS and DSB – brought about the
bitter disappointment of the right-wing voters.
Instead of setting up a new leadership or form-
ing a successful coalition with the other right-
wing parties, the SDS and DSB let the „Ataka“
Party overcome them and it was precisely the
„Ataka“ electorate that denied all the achieve-
ments, which the Right Wing had scored since
the beginning of the country's transition. The
tri-partite governing coalition, which was es-
tablished with the open advocacy of the re-
elected President Parvanov, seem invincible,
and the BSP had significantly improved its
chances of winning a second term of office at
the helm of the country's governance.

It was at this point in time precisely that
Sofia City Mayor, Boiko Borissov, announced
the establishment of a new party – Citizens for
European Development of Bulgaria (GERB). At
the party's Constituent Assembly in Decem-
ber 2006, because of the existing legal limita-
tions, which do not allow for a single person
to simultaneously hold the mayor's post and
the chairmanship of a party, Tzvetan Tzveta-
nov, the then Deputy Sofia City Mayor, was
elected leader of the GERB Party.

At the same time, the young party started
to build up its local structures in preparation for
its national political debut – the by-elections for
members of the European Parliament (MEPs) –
scheduled for May 2007. The GERB Party was
the overall winner at these elections and al-
though its lead was small, it managed to come
ahead of both the BSP and DPS. Well before the
elections, the new formation began to identify

itself as a center-right party and subsequently
its five MEPs joined the European People's Party
faction at the European Parliament. It was after
these elections that the notions of “new” and
“old” (or “traditional”) Right Wing took a last-
ing hold in the Bulgarian public environment.

Having received the boost of a flying elec-
tion start, the GERB Party made an even bet-
ter and more convincing performance at the
local elections in the fall of 2007. It registered
candidates of its own everywhere throughout
the country and won the elections in a num-
ber of regional centres, while in the capital
city “the informal leader” of the GERB Party,
Boiko Borissov, was the uncontested winner
as early as the first leg of the elections.

The “old” Right Wing continued to sustain
losses, being defeated both by its traditional op-
ponent – the BSP, and also by the GERB Party.
The “old” Right Wing came out of the local
elections with the undisputable proof that only
by forming coalitions involving its dispersed
parts, could it have some guarantee of remain-
ing on the political scene. It was also obvious
that the SDS and DSB were the only right-wing
parties that had preserved their national impact
and that a coalition set up between them was
the most acceptable outcome for the receding
number of voters loyal to the “traditional” Right
Wing. As far as the leadership issue in the right-
wing political environment was concerned, it
had already found its solution: the voters had
enthusiastically entrusted this leadership to the
“new” Right Wing embodied in the GERB Party.

5.3. The 2009 General Election:

The Center Right Comes to Power Yet Again

The largest right-wing party in the country – the
GERB Party – ran the regular 2009 general elec-
tion on its own. DSB and the SDS went to this
election together under the name of “Blue Coal-
ition”, having set up this coalition with BZNS-NS
and several smaller right-wing formations. Both
GERB and the Blue Coalition had reasons to be

content with the outcome of the “dress rehearsal”, held in May 2009, at the regular elections for the European Parliament (EP), because this was the role that these elections played for them at that point in time. At these EP elections, GERB came first once again and asserted itself as the first-ranking political force in the country, having returned 5 MPs to the European Parliament, while the “old” Right Wing, having successfully passed its “rectification exam”, this time won 2 EP mandates (the second one materialized only after the Lisbon Treaty entered into force).

During the election campaign for the regular general election in the fall of 2009, both right-wing formations – the “new” and the “old” – scored a significant increase of their forecast votes in comparison with the May EP elections. Another young party, called “Order, Legality, Justice” (RZS), also claimed to be of a right-wing identity and jostled for positions in the right-wing political environment. The leader of the RZS, Yane Yanev, is a former agrarian party leader who split from the ODS. His newly established party, however, failed at the EP May 2009 elections, but shortly afterwards made a good performance at the general election and was returned to Parliament. In the final account, the GERB Party won the 2009 general election and was only a fraction short of an absolute parliamentary majority. The number of the GERB Party candidates returned to Parliament is 116. The second ranking party – the BSP – returned 40 MPs, the DPS – 38, the „Ataka” Party – 21, the Blue Coalition – 15, and the RZS party – 10.

Prime Minister Boiko Borissov chose to form a minority government, composed by combining GERB party figures and non-affiliated experts. Although such a solution is quite unusual, it carries no risks, because the Blue Coalition, „Ataka”, and the RZS unanimously voted the new Cabinet in. Subsequently, however, the RZS parliamentary faction disintegrated and its MPs joined the ranks of the opposition, thus far represented by the BSP and the DPS. This put an end both to the RZS support

for the government and its short-lived claim for a right-wing political identity. Irrespective of these developments, for the first time after 1997, the centrist Right Wing personified by the GERB Party has a government of its own and a parliamentary majority including the Blue Coalition and „Ataka”. The failure of the first non-confidence vote against the government, tabled by the BSP in October 2010, is the ultimate confirmation of the actual composition of this parliamentary support.

6. The Next Seven Years (2010-2017)

It seems rather challenging to make such a long-term forecast. The instability and unpredictability of the Bulgarian political process are something that we have come to know in quite a painful manner. Over the last twenty years, Bulgarian voters have never chosen to return to power the political formation, which had come victorious at the previous general election. Twice – in 2001 and 2009 respectively – they entrusted the power a political party, which was virtually non-existent at the time of the previous general election. Things get even more complicated when the Bulgarian Center Right is subject to consideration. And yet, certain logic can be seen in the development of the Center Right in Bulgaria.

The first seven years (1990-1997) of Bulgaria’s transition to democracy and a market economy were marked by the sign of anti-communism: it is both a natural and mandatory component at the onset of such significant societal changes and does not require a broad public debate in order to define its major messages and principles. These had already gained sufficient momentum on the international scene with its focus on the former communist countries and the larger part of Bulgarians found it relatively easy to grasp and accept them.

Being a combination of moral maxims, political principles, and economic policies, anti-communism is a world outlook, the viability of

which is directly dependent on the political context. Its natural environment is the communist regime, where it is denied any publicity whatsoever and accordingly acquires the form of "dissident practices", and the post-communist transition to democracy, where it becomes the ideological programme and governing practices of the reformist forces. The launch and deepening of anti-communist reforms, conceived as the replacement of political and economic rules and the characteristic parameters of statehood, gradually bring to the fore the differences existing within the limits of the amorphous anti-communist coalitions, which had come to life in all former communist countries.

The Bulgarian Right Wing is a conspicuous case in point as far as this tendency is concerned. It was further accentuated by the excessive ideological variety of the different formations making up the SDS, which – combined with the ineffective organizational formula and the lack of political experience – used to generate constant conflicts and splits. This was a period in which radical attitudes dominated. These attitudes were additionally flared up by the leftist alternative of a non-reformed former communist party, which was trying to block any reform whatsoever, opposed the establishment of a market economy, and rejected the Euro-Atlantic re-orientation of the country. At a time when the political stakes for the development of the country had reached their upper limit, confrontation was inevitably intense, whereas the road on which Bulgaria was about to embark was subject to heated debates, but was still shrouded in obscurity. And this was the reason why the right-wing voters decided the battle for the leadership in the right-wing political environment in favour of those leaders whom they trusted to be capable of accomplishing the anti-communist reforms in both an unswerving and uncompromising way.

The ODS government under Prime Minister Ivan Kostov (1997-2001) completed the reformist agenda of anti-communism. At the

end of the ODS term of office, Bulgaria was a country with a functioning market economy, stable democracy, and a clearly outlined foreign policy course towards the country's accession to the European Union and NATO, which was accepted by all significant political formations, the BSP included. Ever since that time, no successive government has ever questioned these achievements.

This is precisely what exhausts the identity of the Bulgarian Center Right. Anti-communism was doomed to fall prey to its own success. It is not its enemies, but rather its achievements that depleted its strength. Paradoxically, it is the implementation of its programme that made it dispensable. And just when the Bulgarian Right Wing was in the position to point at the indisputable achievements of its governance, it had to face the cumbersome task of renewing itself, this renewal being of an ideological, organizational, personal, and behavioural nature. Without denying the achievements, the right-wing voters came to pose new requirements. The right-wing leaders, however, failed to cope with them and looking at the bitter experience of the Right Wing in almost all the countries of Eastern Europe, we can ask the question if coping with the new requirements was feasible at all.

The emergence of the GERB Party seems to meet the expectations of the voters. Recognized as a "new" Right Wing, it soon started to win the leadership game in the right-wing political environment in its battle with the "old" Right Wing. In order to preserve itself, however, the "old" Right Wing had to understand the reasons for its current situation and to make some difficult decisions at a time when the right-wing voters had no particular need for it. And this is an issue with respect to which the "old" Right Wing can be said to have coped well with.

Today it is becoming even more comprehensible why some of the voters preserved the "old" Right Wing. The economic crisis brought to the fore all the consequences of the incom-

plete reforms that were blocked after 2001. Even the very return to the notion of “reform” in the language of politicians is a remarkable phenomenon. The positive economic environment and the momentum inherited from the “blue” reformist governance made it possible for people to delude themselves for quite a long while that the abandonment of the reforms did not entail tangible consequences. And when it became evident that time was ripe for a “second generation” of reforms in the public sector, the value of expertise, competence, and determination went accordingly up. Today’s situation has produced numerous “fresh” proofs concerning the “utility value” of the “old” Right Wing, now personified by the Blue Coalition.

Despite the fact that the GERB Party leader, Boiko Borissov, was led by quite different considerations when he made up his mind to go for a minority government, it is this decision that made it possible for the development of the center-right political environment to embark upon a new formula. By far, this is not the formula of direct confrontation, so characteristic of “the first seven years”. The end result it then produced was such a mutual exhaustion that the winner turned out to be a loser all too soon, losing at that to “the eternal enemy” – the BSP. Fortunately, the Blue Coalition of the present day is sufficiently wise to avoid this road of destruction. The new formula is obviously far from the ODS formula, whereby the right-wing leader (the SDS) sets up a coalition with a smaller right-wing formation (NS), which voluntarily and completely abandons its own essence and image in this enticing embrace for the sake of power.

The outlines of a third likely option can also be seen. It includes: cooperation and partnership without setting up a coalition, criticism and competition without going into opposition, presentation of alternative policies, both more competent and less populist. Such an option also involves the independent

running of elections, which makes it possible for each constituent part of the new formula to nominate candidates of its own and launch programmes for a future governance of its own. The Blue Coalition can be useful for both its voters and the governance of the country without lending any helping hand to the Left Wing whatsoever. All this requires consistency, a clear vision, and political ingenuity. And most of all it requires the will power to stay and further build one’s own identity, regardless of all temptations involved with staying in opposition or being in office. Should this new model of “peaceful and competitive” co-existence find its real-life mode of implementation, 2017 could see the end of the second consecutive term of office of the Bulgarian Center Right.

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