ANALYSE

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

THE PARTY SYSTEM IN BULGARIA

2009-2019

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The second party system after 1989 (2001-2009) turns out to have been subjected to new turmoil after the National Assembly elections in 2009.

In 2009, GERB took over the government of the country on their own, and their leader Borisov was elected prime minister.

Political parties are a key factor in the consolidation of the democratic political system.

FRIEDRICH EBERT STIFTUNG

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Contents

1

INTRODUCTION

The second party system after 1989 (2001-2009) was subject to new changes after the elections for the National Assembly in 2009. Its lability and ongoing transformation, and a growing crisis of trust among the citizens regarding the parties, was evident. Apart from objective reasons connected with the legacy of the transition from the totalitarian socialist system to democracy and a market economy, key causes of the crisis of trust in political parties were clientelism and corruption, which severely hit the political system, including the party system. These phenomena led to the emergence of new political parties which set the fight against corruption as the basis of their platform. It was also triggered by the harsh criticism of the European Union, a member of which Bulgaria became in 2007.

Bulgaria's membership of the European Union has become an important external factor with a strong impact on the domestic policies and activities of political parties, most of which have become part of European party families. In a series of reports of the European Union, following the accession of Bulgaria, harsh criticism has been levied, mainly against unsubjugated corruption and the ineffective judiciary, which undermines not only the confidence of citizens in political institutions, but also hinders the effective use of EU funds in the interest of the socio-economic development of the country.

According to a survey conducted by the agency Market Links at the beginning of 2009, Bulgarian citizens identified as the most significant problems facing Bulgaria: corruption - 42%, unemployment - 33.6%, and crime - 22%. (Barometer, Friedrich Ebert Foundation 2009, April-June.)

In this sense, corruption has replaced a number of other topics as fundamental to the political agenda, from which new political parties have benefited.

2

THE ASSERTION OF GERB AS A PARTY OF POWER AND THE COLLAPSE OF THE BSP AND MRF COALITION

Some of the new parties rapidly gained a great deal of political success. The main formation among them was the "Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria" (GERB) party, established in 2006 and headed by the then popular Mayor of Sofia, Boyko Borisov. It was born as a populist formation, but it quickly moved towards the European People's Party, of which it became a member in 2008, claiming to occupy the centre-right space in the party system.

As early as in the local elections in 2007 GERB managed to win good positions in local government institutions and created prerequisites for good performance in the parliamentary elections in July 2009. Its actual leader Boyko Borisov (Tsvetan Tsvetanov was formally elected as President of the party because Borisov, being mayor, could not assume the post) was again elected as Mayor of Sofia, thus confirming his strong political influence in the country.

In the parliamentary elections in 2009, GERB achieved great success by receiving about 40% of the votes cast and 116 seats in the National Assembly, 5 short of an absolute majority. In doing so, GERB established itself as the dominant party in the centre-right political area, replacing the "old" right-wing parties - the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) and Democrats for Strong Bulgaria (DSB), which, united in the Blue Coalition, gained about 7 percent and remained a small parliamentary formation with limited public influence. In other words, the 2009 election marginalised once and for all the "old" right-wing parties that came from the disintegration of the UDF. Some of them, like the Union of Free Democrats and those seeking a seat in the right-wing political space, Gergyovden and VMRO, remained outside parliament with minimal chances of independent existence. They managed to survive on the whole as part of political coalitions. Another formation that originated from the old parties, the Bulgarian Agrarian National Union (BZNS) - the People's Union, suffered a political collapse, even though it was part of the Blue Coalition. In general, the so-called agrarian formations, left and right, continued to lose positions and remained as practically insignificant formations in the party system.

Table 1

The elections for the 41st National Assembly
June 5th 2009
Parties with more than 1% of the votes
Number of the population who voted: 60.20%

Party	Actual number of votes	%	Selected by majority list	Number of seats
GERB	1,677, 870	39.71	26	116
Coalition for Bulgaria	747,849	17.70	0	40
MRF	610,831	14.46	5	38
Ataka	395,656	9.36	0	21
Blue Coalition RZS (Order, Legality and Justice)	285,418 174,582	6.76 4.13	0 0	15 10
NDSV (National Movement for Stability and Progress)	127,340	3.01	0	0
LIDER (Liberal Initiative for Democratic European Development)	137,684	3.26	0	0

Source: CIK (Central Electoral Commission)

GERB took over independent government of the country, with its leader Borisov being elected as prime minister. Borisov himself was at that moment a unique phenomenon on the political horizon after 1989, as a figure who was able to fit perfectly into the national-psychological notion of a determined politician of action and a man of the "people", who was very differ-

ent from the prime ministers who had held this post before his term . This gave him a great deal of popularity at the beginning of the term, but it also led to great expectations among voters that he would meet the promises made during the election campaign, especially regarding the fight against corruption.

Following the failure of the liberal centre (the Simeon II National Movement and the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF)), once again the space opened for "establishing" new conditions for a "two-block" configuration between a centre-left block of parties and a party block that was aligned centre-right. The left-centred block was formed after the ethnic Turkish Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) and the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), which, albeit with difficulty, continued to act as the opposition, and the centre-right bloc composed of GERB, DSB and UDF, all members of the United People's Party.

In other words, the second party system was seriously undermined, creating conditions for the transition to a new, third party system with significantly different characteristics from the second party system.

Its most typical feature was the hegemony of the centre-right bloc, which continued until the next pre-term parliamentary elections in 2013.

Without experience of being in power, the GERB government entered a "new" territory with many underwater stones and mines. The fate of previous governments supported by a large majority in parliament (BSP-1994-1996, UDF - 1997-2001, NMSS and MRF - 2001-2005 and the Triple Coalition - 2005-2009) bore witness to the amplitude of public mood - from extreme trust to extreme disappointment.

Borisov, as prime minister, received a great deal of real power, although GERB was in the minority in parliament. But his support from the other three right-wing and nationalist parliamentary groups (the Blue Coalition, Order, Legality and Justice (RZS), and Ataka) guaranteed the government for a certain period of calm and stable governance. The relationships between these three parties were such that they did not imply their unified action, which meant that the GERB government could rely on the support of at least one of them so that it could govern "calmly" without threats of a successful vote of no-confidence.

In the period until the next elections in 2013, the minority government, which was a novelty in Bulgaria, had to manage in a complex economic and political environment. The consequences of the global financial crisis were also evident in Bulgaria with rising unemployment, budget deficits and increasing social inequality. This provoked social unrest and protests, the likes of which had not been seen in the country for a long time, and which reached their culmination during the second half of the government's term.

The GERB government managed to stay in power by using the disagreements and internal squabbles in the parties that initially supported it until the next parliamentary elections, albeit without the necessary parliamentary majority. This was mostly true for Ataka, which was for some time the most consistent supporter of the government. This, however, in turn provoked harsh criticism of its members and activists, as well as internal dissent. One of the leading factors in the party, Valeri Simeonov, left and in the course of time created a new nationalist formation - the National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria (NFSB). Some of the MPs of Ataka left the party and supported the government when the former withdrew into opposition in July 2011. All this resulted in a serious decline in the electoral influence of Ataka.

RZS also suffered internal cataclysms and lost some of its electoral support, and, over time, turned against GERB. RZS lost public influence because of links with organised crime in the face of one of its representatives, Alexei Petrov, which seriously damaged the image of the party.

The other important supporter of the government, the Blue Coalition, has increasingly distanced itself from the government because of the failure to implement the stated reforms in a number of areas. In DSB and also UDF, there have been a growing number of calls for distancing from GERB and a search for ways to form a "broad-based centre-right unification" without GERB, according to the new UDF leader, Martin Dimitrov. This call also received support from DSB. At the same time, the relations between the main parties in the Blue Coalition, the DSB and UDF, deteriorated and came to an end in 2012 when UDF refused to continue the cooperation with DSB.

The opposition for their part, in the face of BSP, accused Prime Minister Borisov of increasing concentration of power in his hands, claiming that "the country was going to sole government" in the words of its leader Sergey Stanishev. (Barometer, Friedrich Ebert Foundation 2009, October-December) In BSP there were internal processes of differentiation, with Stanishev's leadership receiving serious criticism of its ineffectiveness as opposition.

President Parvanov, the former leader of BSP, took steps to form a new party, initiating the creation of the Alternative for Bulgarian Revival (ABV) as a civil movement in 2010. Similar initiatives were made by one of the leaders of the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), Tatyana Doncheva, in creating Movement 21. These formations were a successive attempt at a breakthrough in the hegemony of BSP in the left-wing space.

After the second year of government, a decline in confidence began. In a sociological survey in 2011 67% of respondents did not see results from the fight against corruption, and 63% believed that groups close to power were being patronised. (Alpha Research, Barometer, Friedrich Ebert Foundation 2011, January-March) At the same time, in a report by the European Commission the Bulgarian ruling circles were criticised for not doing enough to restrict corruption in the country.

In the other opposition party, MRF, leader Ahmed Dogan took a course of "Bulgarisation" of the party, involving more Bulgarians in party leadership, including political figures who were members of other parties, such as Hristo

Bisserov, who moved from UDF to MRF as deputy chairman. At the same time, another wave of internal conflicts and controversy over Dogan's authoritarian leadership happened in the party. In March 2011 one of the executives, Kasim Dal and the leader of the youth organisation, Korman Ismailov, were excluded. According to Dal, MRF had become a place of "personal causes for rapid accruement of wealth". (Barometer, Friedrich Ebert Foundation 2011, January-March)

The relationship between the ruling party and President Parvanov seriously deteriorated, leading as far as the initiation of an unsuccessful procedure for impeachment of the head of state. This further destabilised the political situation in the country.

The political situation in 2011 was intertwined with the next presidential election, which took place in October. They were won in the second round by Rosen Plevneliev, proposed by GERB, against the BSP presidential candidate, Ivailo Kalfin, who also received the support of the MRF.

Table 2
Elections for President and Vice President
October 2011
Candidates who received over 1%

Candidate	Actual number of votes	%
Rossen Plevneliev and Margarita Popova Political Party GERB	1,349,380	40.11
Ivailo Kalfin and Stefan Danailov BSP	974,300	28.96
Meglena Kuneva and Lubomir Hristov Initiative Committee	470,808	14.00
Volen Siderov and Pavel Shopov Political Party Ataka	122,466	3.64

Second Round

Candidate	Actual number of votes	%
Rossen Plevneliev and Margarita Popova Political Party GERB	1,698,136	52.58%
Ivailo Kalfin and Stefan Danailov BSP	1,531,193	47.42%

Source: CIK (Central Electoral Commission)

The new centrist candidacy in the face of Meglena Kuneva received an indicative score of 14% and opened the way to the subsequent formation of a new political party.

The presidential elections highlighted the failure the candidacy of the UDF.

With the victory of Plevneliev, GERB strengthened its positions of power by winning the presidential institution, and thus significantly expanded its ability to influence the political system.

In the parallel local elections, GERB also expanded its influence in the main district centres. In Sofia, its candidate, Yordanka Fandakova, received 53.3% of the votes, with which GERB confirmed its domination in the capital city.

In the year after the presidential election, and with the next parliamentary elections approaching, **two new parties** were formed - one in the centre-right spectrum and the other in the nationalist camp.

Bulgaria for Citizens Movement, with leader Meglena Kuneva, appeared on the political scene with the claim to be "the Right Beyond the Transition". (Barometer, Friedrich Ebert Foundation 2012, April-June)

The new nationalist party, the National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria, with its leader Valeri Simeonov, stands out with typical anti-MRF positions and nationalist rhetoric, competing with Ataka.

Ataka has assumed an increasingly pro-Russian stance, combined with criticism of the European Union as "a threat to democracy and national sovereignty." (Barometer, Friedrich Ebert Foundation 2012, October - December)

2013 began with social protests, the likes of which had not been seen for a long time, provoked initially by rising electricity prices, but gaining an ever-broader character and directed against the government of Borisov. The national protest on February 17 was held in 33 cities in the country, with the largest-scale events in Sofia, Varna, Blagoevgrad and Plovdiv. After yet more protests on February 19, Borisov and his cabinet resigned, paving the way for early elections on May 12th. The considerations of Borisov and GERB for this surprising move were the reluctance of the government to confront the ongoing protests and to build up negatives in the year of the parliamentary elections.

Table 3
Elections for the 42nd National Assembly
May 12th 2013
Number of the population who voted: 51.63%
(Political parties which received over 1% of the votes)

Party	Actual number of votes	%	Number of seats
GERB	1,081,605	30.5	97
Coalition for Bulgaria	942,541	26.6	84
MRF	400,466	11.3	36
Ataka	258,481	7.3	23
Bulgaria for Citizens Movement	115,190	3.3	
National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria	131,169	3.7	
VMRO – Bulgarian National Movement	66,803	1.9	
Union of Democratic Forces	48,681	1.4	
RZS (Order, Legality and Justice)	59,145	1.7	
LIDER	61,482	1.7	
Centre – Freedom and Dignity (NPSD)	57,611	1.67	
Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria and Bulgarian Democratic Forum (DSB, BDF)	103,638	2.9	

Source: CIK (Central Electoral Commission)

The pre-term parliamentary elections held on May 12th highlighted the following main trends:

First of all, for the second time GERB won the parliamentary elections convincingly, confirming its position as a dominant party in the right-centre of the political spectrum. At the same time, it was left without its allies and supporters to form another government.

Second, the traditional right-wing in the form of Democrats for Strong Bulgaria and the Bulgarian Democratic Forum (DSB, BDF) and the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) remained divided and separately received less than 3% of the vote. For the first time since the beginning of the transition to democracy after 1989, the traditional right wing remained without any representation in parliament, which was a significant political defeat. Among the main reasons for this was the fact that the main binding ideological element of the right, namely anti-communism, had lost its attractive force as a leading factor stimulating the union of the traditional right. In addition, the main foreign policy aims of the right had been realised, namely membership of Bulgaria in the EU and NATO. The basic principles of the market economy were also established, albeit distorted by the specifics of the transition, especially by corruption. At the same time, GERB manged to attract a significant part of the right-wing social base and to establish itself as the main opponent of the BSP, depriving the former UDF of this calling.

The new centre-right party, the Bulgaria for Citizens Movement (DBG), also failed to surpass the 4% barrier and *de facto* demonstrated its limited presence in Bulgarian political life.

Third, BSP, as a major player in the Coalition for Bulgaria, achieved second place and improved its position in comparison with the previous elections, but failed to topple its main opponent, GERB, from first place. The so-called left turn for the party was not a big enough factor to bring about a more substantial breakthrough among voters. BSP was not recognised as an alternative to right-wing rule during the protests. It remained a party chosen predominantly by the older population and by people in the smaller settlements and "without significant opportunities to mobilise the periphery" beyond its electorate of about a million voters. (Political Process and Public Opinion in Bulgaria in 2013, Annual Review Gallup International 2014, Sofia, Ciella) Meanwhile, in 2011 Sergei Stanishev was elected chairman of the Party of European Socialists, which was recognition of his international authority.

Fourth, the Movement of Rights and Freedoms reaffirmed its good results as the third political force and remained an important factor in shaping the next government as a coalition partner of the Socialists. MRF achieved categorical dominance in its segment and "strengthened its position as the main and even sole representative of the Turkish ethnic minority in Bulgaria." (The Political Process and Public Opinion in Bulgaria in 2013, Annual Overview Gallup International 2014). The attempts of "troublemakers" in its ranks to tear off a significant part of its electorate failed.

Fifth, the nationalist camp was again represented in parliament again with Ataka, which received a relatively good result with the possibility of influencing the future

government, as neither GERB nor DPS-BSP had enough votes in parliament to form their own government.

The new nationalist party, the National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria, performed comparatively successfully, despite the fact that it did not enter Parliament. It retained positions for future possible negotiations to form a coalition of nationalist parties. This group of parties also included VMRO, which received less than 2%. On the whole, all the nationalist parties received about 13%, with which nationalism became a viable political current in the country.

The elections also demonstrated the failure of RZS (1.7%), which was marginalised without any prospects of participating with real influence in the political life of the country.

In this post-election situation, although it had the largest parliamentary group, GERB could not form a government because it did not have an ally that was necessary to reach a parliamentary majority. The second largest parliamentary group, that of the BSP, which found an ally for the formation of a government in the form of MRF, set about this task. Together, the two parties had 120 seats in parliament, receiving tacit support from Ataka.

Indubitably, this was a risky situation, fraught with many unknowns because the new government, headed by Plamen Oresharski, did not have the necessary parliamentary majority, and it depended on the will of Ataka, whose opportunism and swaying political affinities placed the cabinet in constant uncertainty. In parallel with this, an extremely erroneous political decision by the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) and the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) to propose the controversial politician, Delyan Peevski at the beginning of the term in office, as chairman of the State Agency for National Security, provoked mass public outrage and protests, which permanently undermined confidence in the government and hampered its subsequent activity. Although Peevsky withdrew his candidacy, the protests against it culminated in protests against the government, with demands for new elections.

On top of all that, one had to add the tactic of GERB to boycott parliamentary activity, refusing to assume its positions in the leadership of parliament and parliamentary committees, as well as various forms of non-participation in the National Assembly and demands for new elections. In addition, President Plevneliev withdrew his confidence in the government, which further exacerbated the political environment in which it had to function. In this environment, it was difficult to implement its programme and perform the necessary reforms, which caused a constant crisis of its legitimacy. The political tensions in the country also reflected on the growing clashes in BSP and the criticism of its leadership with Sergey Stanishev at the helm. Critics included former President Parvanov, who called for a change in the leadership of BSP. ABV, the formation backed by him, took a course of distancing itself from the BSP and registered as a party.

In the right-wing political area, more restructuring took place, with the formation of the Reformist Bloc, which included DSB, UDF, Blue Unity, BDG - the Bulgaria for Citizens Movement (Kuneva), the Agrarian Union, the Greens, and Freedom and Dignity (a splinter group from MRF headed by Korman Ismailov). In fact, almost the entire traditional right-wing UDF and new centre-right parties have joined the new formation. It is oriented towards a possible future alliance with GERB.

The political situation was further complicated by the conflict in Ukraine, which led to the collapse of the pro-Russian government as a result of the mass protests, called Maidan, and subsequently led to Russia's annexation of Crimea following a hastily carried out "referendum", condemned by the West. This development of the international situation once again provokes the becalmed conundrum in Bulgarian politics - in support Russian politics or against it. Ataka was the most prominent supporter of Russian politics. Also, BSP militants supported Russia, although the leadership adopted the EU line of sanctions against Russia. EU policy was backed by GERB and the Reformist Bloc.

In addition to the topic of Ukraine, the increase in the refugee flow to Europe and, in part, to Bulgaria, following the war in Syria, contributed to the emergence of the policy towards new immigrants, which provoked disunity in the EU. Some EU members and liberal political circles supported the admission of immigrants, especially Germany and Sweden, while other countries, especially in Eastern Europe and conservative and right-populist political forces, opposed this process. This divisive conundrum has also affected Bulgaria, provoking anti-immigrant and xenophobic attitudes among some of the population and among the nationalist formations Ataka, VMRO and NFSB, amongst others.

Against this background, there emerged a new populist party, Bulgaria without Censorship (BBC), led by journalist Nikolay Barekov. Its main theme was the call for a change in the political class and combatting corruption. According to its acquaintances, its main financial benefactor and sponsor was the owner of one of the major banks, Corporate Commercial Bank, Tsvetan Vassilev, who was subsequently charged and tried for gross abuse committed through the bank. He left the country, refusing to appear before a Bulgarian court.

In May 2014, elections for the European Parliament were held, which were a test of the political influence of the political parties, but especially of support for the government.

The results showed a loss of the positions of BSP, which received 18.93% of the votes. GERB received most votes - 30.4%. BBC received 10.6%, with which the new formation led by Barekov received the support of a significant number of voters. The Reformist Bloc did worse, with 6.4%. As is traditional, MRF was well-represented with 17.27%. The nationalist parties Ataka and NFSB failed to get seats in the European Parliament.

The poor performance of BSP gave MRF cause to announce that the government had lost the confidence of the voters and they called for new early elections despite the attempts of BSP to preserve the government coalition.

The collapse of the coalition between BSP and MRF led to yet more pre-term elections on October 5th, 2014. These have led to a new ratio of political forces and a new configuration of parties in parliament.

Table 4
Elections for the 43rd National Assembly
October 5th 2014
Number of the population who voted: 48.66%
(Political parties which received over 1% of the votes)

Party	Actual number of votes	%	Number of seats
GERB	1,072,491	3.67	84
BSP Left Bulgaria	505,530	15.4	39
MRF	487,130	14.84	38
Reformist Bloc - Bulgarian Agrarian National Union, Bulgaria for Citizens Movement, Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria, NPSD, UDF	291,811	8.89	23
Patriotic Front – NFSB and VMRO	239,112	7.28	19
Bulgaria without Censorship	186,940	5.69	15
Ataka	148,261	4.52	11
Coalition ABV - (Alternative for Bulgarian Revival)	136,223	4.15	11
Movement 21	39,221	1.19	
People's Voice	37,341	1.14	

Source: CIK (Central Electoral Commission)

GERB again took the first place by doing significantly better than its main opponent BSP. GERB proved its vitality and defended its dominant position in the centre-right political spectrum. The party won the battle for the right to form another government, as this time it turned out to have a coalition partner in the form of the Reformist Bloc. GERB lost about half a million votes compared to its peak in the 2009 elections but repeated its 2013 result in terms of absolute votes. "This was the first case of its kind in the country's recent political history." (The Political Process and Public Opinion in Bulgaria in 2014, Annual Overview Gallup International 2015, p. 67) GERB established itself among all groups of voters - stronger in large settlements and weaker among elderly people and in villages (there once again).

BSP with its coalition partners received its worst result since the beginning of the transition and the first free elections in 1990. This was mainly a consequence of the failure of the government together with the MRF and the deep crisis of confidence in the party. An additional factor was the emergence of ABV, which "stole" votes from BSP. In fact, its electorate shrank to its hard core. It turned out that 'the loss of BSP in the autumn of 2014 seemed significant not only because of the continuing weakness among the younger groups and the difficulty of reaching those of "middle" age, but also because of the electoral retreat that was outlined among the older layers that were usually stronger for the party'. (The Political Process and Public Opinion in Bulgaria in 2014, Annual Overview Gallup International 2015, p.63)

MRF once again showed a good performance and the real opportunity to be a second political force, especially if the BSP continued to lose influence.

The Reformist Bloc succeeded in uniting the traditional right wing (UDF and DSB) and the new centre-right parties like the Bulgaria for Citizens Movement. The question remained as to whether such a variform coalition would maintain its unity in the future.

Bulgaria without Censorship appeared as a new formation and, after its success in the European elections, lost some of its electoral support but maintained positions among some of the newly voting, young members of the electorate and those disappointed by the other parties. Its populism and character of leadership made it a too "fragile" a political formation faced with the challenge of establishing itself as a homogeneous formation with a clear conceptual platform.

ABV did not achieve the result desired by its leaders, especially former President Parvanov, and it failed to attract the expected votes from BSP. But at the same time, it formed its own niche, "more centrist and more urban than that of BSP". (Political Process and Public Opinion in Bulgaria in 2014, Annual Overview Gallup International 2015, p.70) ABV managed to enter parliament with opportunities to demonstrate its political stance, especially against the backdrop of the declining influence of BSP.

The new formation in the nationalist spectrum, the Patriotic Front, has won good positions. Bearing in mind the result of Ataka, as a whole, nationalist parties, albeit different as an ideological platform, and especially international positions, have emerged with good prospects of playing a more significant role in the political life of the country.

As a whole, there was **a new fragmentation in the party system and the undermining of the "two-block" model after 2009**, when GERB and BSP were the main opposing forces. In fact, only the centre-right spectrum remained dominated by GERB, but together with the emergence of a new political force - the Reformist Bloc. As competition of GERB, Bulgaria without Censorship also appeared.

New positions have been won by the nationalist sector in the form of the new Patriotic Front and Ataka coalition.

In the centre-left spectrum, a new party that claims to be competing with BSP, namely ABV, appeared. Movement 21 led by former BSP activist Tatyana Doncheva received just over 1% of the vote.

MRF retained its traditional place in the centrist sphere and again showed that it is de facto the only representative of Bulgarian Turks.

For the first time it turned out that parliament was divided between so many (eight) parties and coalitions, which would make it difficult to form a viable government coalition.

3

THE GOVERNMENT OF THE "BROAD SPECTRUM COALITION" AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PARTY SYSTEM (2014-2017)

After the elections, GERB, as the leading political force, took on the task of forming the next government. This turned out to be a complex task because it had to negotiate with new political formations, formed on a coalition principle and with different conceptual positions. At the end of the negotiations the upshot was a governmental formula that was unique for the years after 1989, based on the GERB coalition agreement with the Reformist Bloc on one hand and ABV on the other hand. These formations also received respective ministerial posts. The Patriotic Front provided programme support to the government without taking part in its composition.

Very soon after the formation of the government, the first disagreements in it began. The earliest in this regard was by ABV, which froze its support for the government in early 2015. According to its leader Georgi Parvanov, Prime Minister Borisov "behaves in an authoritative manner, and solves the problems singlehandedly and chaotically" (Barometer, Friedrich Ebert Foundation, 2015, January - March)

The controversies in the Reformist Bloc, especially between the Bulgaria for Citizens Movement and DSB, which, over time, were going to intensify, also emerged. The main dividing factors were the speed and nature of the reforms and the attitude towards GERB.

There were also conflicts between the VMRO and the NFSB within the Patriotic Front, also related to the attitude towards the government.

In the opposition parties, processes of stratification also occurred. In BSP a union of left-wing Socialists was formed, demanding a correction of the party's left-wing course and the radicalisation of criticism of the government.

Bulgaria without Censorship and its parliamentary group, the Bulgarian Democratic Centre (BDC), split, with all the elected MPs, except one, leaving Bulgaria without Censorship and its leader Barekov. *De facto*, the group of MPs related to the "business" party LIDER, funded by oligarch Kovachki, took control of Bulgaria without Censorship via the Democratic Centre, which led to the collapse of the formation that had been created and led by Nikolay Barekov. At a later stage, the BDC split into two separate factions.

Ataka strengthened its pro-Russian line around the events in Ukraine and Crimea and demanded a referendum on the country's exit from NATO. At the same time, surveys showed that 42% of Bulgarians support Bulgaria's participation in NATO and only 14% are for leaving the pact. In addition, in the same survey, 54% of respondents expressed a positive attitude towards Russia, with 40% not sympathising with Russia. (Barometer, Friedrich Ebert Foundation, 2015, January-March)

Also intertwined into the political process were the local elections that were held in late 2015. In them GERB confirmed its leading positions, especially in the largest regional centres, where it won most of the mayoral positions. One third of the elected municipal councillors were GERB candidates.

The Reformist Bloc performed comparatively successfully, especially in Sofia. It won mayoral posts in Pleven, Dobrich and Montana.

The patriotic front lost positions because it appeared disunited. VMRO emerged as its moderate wing, while the NFSB was seen as extremely nationalist.

Bulgaria without Censorship registered a complete failure, which heralded its final marginalisation.

Ataka lost nearly a third of its voters.

BSP once again suffered a heavy loss, especially in the regional centres. In Sofia it received only 8.4% for its candidate. This deepened the crisis in BSP. According to Angel Naydenov, a member of the party's leadership, BSP had an "obsolete, ineffective structure" and was in an "ideological *cul de sac*" as it led a "blatant pro-Kremlin policy" in the same corridor as Ataka. According to him, this left the party "seriously understaffed", especially with regard to young people. (Barometer, Friedrich Ebert Foundation, 2015, October-December)

As a consequence of this state of the party came the election of Kornelia Ninova as new President of the BSP, only narrowly defeating the previous chairman Mikhail Mikov. There were major changes in the Party's Executive Bureau and substantial rejuvenation of its members. Ninova imposed changes in the statutes, which limited mandate in

parliament and led to a number of BSP veterans leaving the parliamentary group.

In the months after the local elections, new divisions broke out in the Reformist Bloc, which split into two factions - one headed by the DSB, which opposed the government, while the other - headed by the Bulgaria for Citizens Movement (BDG) and the UDF - remained to support and participate in the government.

ABV also chose to oppose Borisov's government and its representative left his ministerial post.

Serious divisions also happened in the MRF, with the chairman of the Party Lyutvi Mestan, under the pressure of honorary chairman Ahmed Dogan, removed from office and excluded from the leadership. The main accusation against him was that he had taken a position in support of Turkey against Russia following the rift in their relations after a Russian military fighter was shot down by the Turkish Air Force. Mestan left the party and set up a new party Democrats for Responsibility, Freedom and Tolerance (DOST). Its orientation was identified by the new leader as an authentic liberal and Euro-Atlantic party.

Mustafa Karadayi was elected as the new chairman of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms.

In the second half of 2016, the presidential elections were held, which were also to become a test for the stability of the government.

The main opponents in the elections were the representatives of GERB and BSP. GERB proposed Tsetska Tsacheva, President of the National Assembly, and BSP put forward General of the Air Force Rumen Radev. Other participants in the presidential race were the representatives of the Reformist Bloc Traicho Traikov, the Patriotic Front, which included Krassimir Karakachanov of Ataka, ABV Ivaylo Kalfin, MRF Plamen Oresharski as an independent candidate, Veselin Mareshki and others.

In the first round, the presidential candidate couple with most support was that headed by Rumen Radev (25.44%), followed by that headed by Tsetska Tsacheva (21.96%), then Krassimir Karakachanov (14.97%), Veselin Mareshki (11.17%), Plamen Oresharski (6.63%), Traycho Traykov (5.87%), Ivailo Kalfin (3.28%), Tatyana Doncheva (1.81%) and others.

In the second round, the pair headed by Rumen Radev convincingly beat that of Tsetska Tsacheva with 59% against 36%.

These results showed some changes in electoral preferences compared to previous presidential and parliamentary elections, despite the specifics of the presidential vote.

BSP managed to overcome the failures of the previous elections and to inflict defeat on its main opponent GERB for the first time since 2009. At the same time, although Radev was a BSP candidate, his election profile differed from that of the BSP in the previous elections. The vote for Radev was not the typical "left-wing" vote characteristic of higher age groups and smaller settlements. On the contrary, Radev was the winner in the capital and in the big cities with nearly 60% of the vote, as well as in the age group of 18-30 years - something that was not typical for the BSP vote. "It was clear to see that the vote for Radev could not be equated to a vote for BSP." (The Political Process and Public Opinion in Bulgaria in 2016, Annual Review 2017, Gallup International, p.69) This had its explanation in the fact of the unfortunate candidacy of GERB in the face of Tsacheva, who did not perform particularly well in the election campaign, but also in the desire for change expressed by a number of voters, dissatisfied with the long-standing government of GERB and Prime Minister Borisov. In Radev, they saw a new political figure who did not come from the political elite of the country, of whom there were great expectations of a change in the status quo in the country.

Radev's convincing victory was also a success for the new BSP president, Kornelia Ninova, who confirmed her position in the party and got an incentive to carry out reforms, replacing a number of old leaders with new players.

The loss of GERB resonated seriously in the party's leadership and had a particularly negative impact on leader Boyko Borisov, whose favourite for party presidential candidate was Tsetska Tsacheva. This led to Borisov's decision to resign and trigger new parliamentary elections. The main argument of the GERB leader was that the elections showed *de facto* the mistrust of the majority of voters in the government, which meant that new pre-term elections had to be called.

The achievement of third place by the "nationalists" led by Karakachanov was a new phenomenon, which for the first time showed such a union of the main nationalist formations (VMRO, NFSB and Ataka). Their comparatively high result also bore witness to the expansion of the national populist niche, similar to the same phenomena in most European countries, mainly as a consequence of the 2015 immigration wave, which has applied to a number of countries in Europe and partially affected Bulgaria. This unification of nationalists continued in the parliamentary elections in 2017 and contributed to their first participation in the third government of Borisov.

The good and surprising result of Veselin Mareshki brought to the fore in the national elections a relatively new political figure who was also aligned in the national-populist niche. His popularity was mainly due to the image of a businessman holding a chain of pharmacies and petrol stations where prices were lower than the rest of the chains in this sphere. His good performance gave him grounds to establish the party "Volya" (Will), which managed to enter parliament in the next parliamentary elections in 2017.

The poor performance of the candidate of the Reformist Bloc Traicho Traikov led to its final disintegration, with the DSB separating from it and taking a course to create a new formation. According to its leader Radan Kanev, what was necessary was "a new treaty for a new Bulgarian republic".

The elections were a serious disappointment for ABV, which had the ambition of becoming a competitor of BSP on the left. Yet another attempt to narrow the position of the party had failed and ABV faced the problem of its survival in the next parliamentary elections.

The presidential elections were characteristic of another peculiarity. In parallel with them, a national referendum was initiated by Slavi Trifonov, the showman and TV host. The voters broadly supported the three proposals put forward by the initiative committee on the introduction of a majority system, a reduction in the state subsidy for political parties and compulsory voting. With just a few more votes these proposals would have had to be adopted by the National Assembly.

Following the resignation of the Borissov government and the expiry of the term of the interim government appointed by new President Radev, on March 26th 2017 the next pre-term parliamentary elections were held. They highlighted some changes in the party configuration.

Table 5

Elections for the 44th National Assembly
March 26th 2017
Number of the population who voted: 54.07%
(Political parties which received over 1% of the votes)

Party	Actual number of votes	%	Number of seats
GERB	1,147,292	33.54	95
BSP for Bulgaria	955,490	27.93	80
MRF	315,976	9.24	26
United Patriots	318,513	9.31	27
"Volya"	145,637	4.26	12
Reformist Bloc – People's Voice	107,407	3.14	
Movement "Yes, Bulgaria" (The Greens, DEOS – Movement for European Unity and Solidarity)	101,177	2.96	
Union DOST – Democrats for Responsibility, Solidarity and Tolerance	100,479	2.94	
New Republic - DSB, Union for Plovdiv, Bulgarian Democratic Community	86,984	2.54	
Coalition ABV – Movement 21	54,412	1.59	
Revival	37,896	1.11	

Source: CIK (Central Electoral Commission)

GERB once again won the elections convincingly, and so overcame the negative trends that had emerged after the loss of presidential elections. The party had again, for the third time, the right to form the next government of the country.

The main opposition of GERB BSP managed to overcome the negative tendency of the previous parliamentary elections and to capitalise on the successful presidential elections. BSP doubled its parliamentary representation and created the prerequisites for its representation as a strong opposition.

Nationalist parties in the United Patriots coalition were well represented. For the first time since 1989, such a formation achieved third place in parliamentary elections. With this result, it got a real opportunity to take part in the governance of the country with GERB.

The Movement for Rights and Freedoms managed a traditionally good performance, being able to categorically "defeat" the newly formed party, DOST, led by the expelled ex-chairman of MRF, Lyutvi Mestan. Thereby failed another attempt to thwart the presence of MRF in the country.

For the first time, albeit with just over 4%, a new party entered parliament - "Volya" - headed by businessman Mareshki. This was a typical populist party, with a nationalist inclination, identified by its leader, who was yet to seek his place in the ideological-political space.

The elections highlighted another **right-wing failure** of three different electoral formations - New Republic, with a major factor, DSB, the newly formed party, "Yes, Bulgaria", and the remnants of the Reformist Bloc. Although they received about 300,000 votes in total, they were unable to pass the 4% barrier to enter parliament.

The moderate left wing in the form of the ABV - Movement 21 coalition also suffered a loss. With this result, it was *de facto* marginalised and its attempts to compete with BSP in the left-wing space failed.

With this configuration in parliament the negotiations to form the new government began. Its composition was also a novelty for the political life of the country. For the first time nationalist formations joined the government, headed for the third consecutive time by GERB leader Boyko Borisov. His programme for governing for the period 2017-2021 was founded on a coalition agreement that was based on the conviction of the different sides that Bulgaria would continue to develop as a modern European country. They emphasise that the government will respect the rule of law, with institutions working transparently and in the interests of citizens, creating the conditions for dignified living, development of every citizen, and freedom and prosperity. The agreement recognises the necessity for Bulgaria to be a full partner of the European institutions in decision-making, whilst maintaining its national interest.

If GERB was the stable component of the government, its coalition partners represented three parties quite diverse in their history and ideological and political development. Among them, especially between Ataka and the NFSB and their leaders, there have been complex, hostile relations that have also been reflected in the functioning of the government. On occasions there have been times of crisis that have put the government in danger of disintegration. This was shown in the conjunctural nature of the United Patriots and the unprincipled nature of their union, which was preserved mainly under pressure of GERB and the desire to participate in the government.

The party system was also influenced by the elections to the European Parliament, which took place on May 26th, 2019. Despite their specificity as "external" elections, the election campaign was mainly focused on domestic policy and especially on the clash between the two main parties - GERB and BSP. Meanwhile, BSP had walked out of parliament, as a protest against the actions of the ruling coalition to alter the election law and change the Central Electoral Commission. Along with this action, BSP also demanded pre-term elections, as its leadership claimed that parliament had exhausted itself, and the ruling majority has lost the trust of the citizens. This brought further tensions into the political situation, which affected the election results.

Despite the extremely harsh campaign against GERB by BSP and the scandalous situations that arose for leading figures, amongst whom was the "Number Two" in the party Tsvetan Tsvetanov, and the allegations of corruption, this time too GERB succeeded in winning the elections by a significant margin over BSP. This caused a new strong tension in BSP and undermined the position of leader Kornelia Ninova, who handed in her resignation, but subsequently withdrew it. It turned out that, despite the defeat in the elections, she continued to enjoy the support of the majority of the party members.

The European elections provoked yet another split in the nationalist camp, with separate parties in them appearing on their own. The only party to benefit from this was VMRO, which managed to send two of its representatives to the European Parliament. Ataka and NFSB received extremely low results, with just above 1%.

4

POLITICAL PARTIES IN THE CONTEXT OF SEMI-CONSOLIDATED DEMOCRACY

The political parties reflect the specificities of their emergence and evolution in the conditions of transition from the totalitarian socialist system to democratic institutions and values. Upon them one can see the impact of the complexity of the consolidation of democracy as a process of approaching liberal democracy, which is confronted with the undeveloped democratic culture of civil society and the new political elite, with the influence of corruption and clientelism brought about largely by the process of the privatisation of the state economy.

In contemporary conditions, most post-communist democracies are **false or facade democracies**, since they do not build a liberal democracy based upon democratic political culture and active participation of citizens, but legitimise through the election process mostly authoritarian players and parties and new oligarchs who have accumulated wealth via criminal means and corrupt practices. Moreover, in a number of post-communist democracies, including Bulgaria, only after the initial period of establishment of democratic institutions and civil upsurge do the symptoms of political regression or de-democratisation appear.

Consequently, the political parties in Bulgaria bear the mark of semi-consolidated democracy. The party system, as part of the democratic political system, is characterised by great instability as a result of the rise and demise of numerous political parties. **This brought about the relatively rapid transition from the first party system 1989-2001 to the second party system (2001-2009) and to the third party system.** This instability of the party system as a whole is also a consequence of the instability of the political parties themselves, which rapidly climb the ladder of power, but also quickly fall off it. In this sense, political parties are predominantly parties of power, not parties of civil society. They mainly carry out those functions related to the conquest and exercise of political and state power at the expense of those functions related to the protection and conducting of the interests of civil society. This factor is a major cause of **the lack of trust on the part of the citizens in the parties and their low legitimacy in society.**

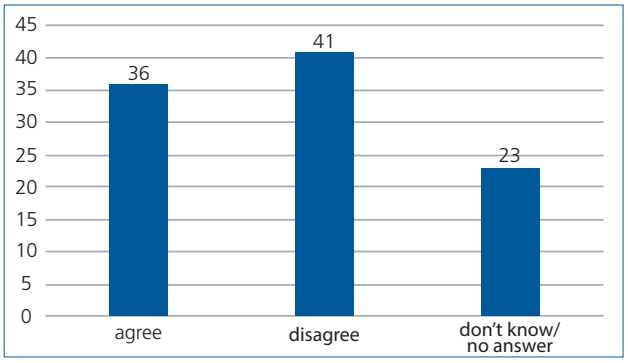
They are predominantly **parties of clientele**, a fact which is demonstrated in the specific symbiosis of state bureaucracy with economic groups close to power. In this sense, their legislative activity and the activity of executive power reflect, above all, the pressure of interested lobbies of oligarchic groups related to party leadership and activists.

Typical "teething problems" of Bulgarian democracy include **the presence of few professionals in the higher echelons of power.** When they take office as governing parties, they do not have sufficient reserves of personnel as regards professional politicians and government officials. For the most part, they are party functionaries, they quickly grew up in party politics and with limited experience in government. **This phenomenon often leads to a crisis in staff, to poor efficiency and bungling in government, and to failures.** There have been numerous examples in recent years when circumstances have forced the executive bodies too often to resort to reshuffling in governments. This undermines the effectiveness of their activities and their ability to cope with the complex issues associated with the governance of the country.

One of the most typical "problems" of parties in power is **corruption**. It is, in a way, also a product of the circumstance that **the government is over-partisan**, as a consequence of party activists with dubious ethical values and norms of behaviour happening to become part of political parties and state structures. The lack of democratic and ruling culture, as well as the temptations of power, have led to the transformation of corruption into a particularly grave problem, endangering the democratic institutions themselves. Parties in power are consciously or involuntarily embroiled in the process of corrupting and "infecting" in turn not only individual politicians but the whole political process with damaging behind-the-scenes actions and machinations that undermine the rule of law.

Figure 1

Do you agree or disagree that the establishment of a unified anti-corruption body will reduce the amount of corruption in the country?



Gallup International 2017

Most parties in Bulgaria come into being as populist parties without a solid party ideology or history. They legitimise themselves through charismatic leaders and aim for success with messages that respond to the momentary expectations

and demands of citizens, using their dissatisfaction with the difficulties of transition. Since many citizens are on the side of the "losers", they are willing to express their disappointment with social development through frequent swings of support between whatever parties happen to respond to their protest.

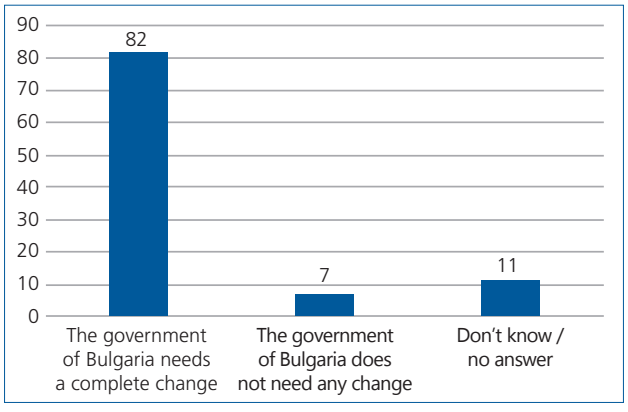
As an organisational structure, they are **primarily "leadership" parties**, where the leader and his circle of cronies have almost unlimited powers to decide the fate and political decisions of the party. This also leads to a critically low degree of intra-party democracy. And **the lack of intra-party democracy** and democratic habits in party activity is a risk factor for new democracies because the authoritarian tendencies evident in them are a direct reflection of the lack of democracy in political parties.

Another important challenge facing political parties is **the forming of their ideological, value standpoint.** The major political parties are still building their ideological platform to determine their identity. Up to now, among many of them, this is an artificial way of "grafting" the postulates of Western European parties. Therefore, seeking their place in the ideological-political space, they need to be able to give **the specific Bulgarian colouring** to their core values and to translate them into their real political practice.

Last but not least, the fundamental challenge for parties as a whole is the formation of **civilised inter-party relations.** This is the main criterion for "measuring" the maturity of democratic change. The main drawback of the party system, especially the first party system since 1989, is its acute confrontational nature, which excluded normal political dialogue between the main parliamentary forces.

Party partiality and the protection of party interest at all costs hinder the proper functioning of democratic institutions. The parties stimulate divisions and opposition in society, instead of encouraging its unification on nationally important issues, as was the case in striving for EU membership. It is precisely in this sense that one of the most complex issues of party politics and interparliamentary relations is achieving the necessary **balance between conflicts, the clash of interests and consensus in politics.** Finding this measure is one of the most complex but, at the same time, the most characteristic features of the maturity of democracy. The more political parties are able to focus on key public priorities as leading factors in their policies, the more successful the work of democratic institutions will be.

Figure 2
Which of the following statements is closer to your own opinion?

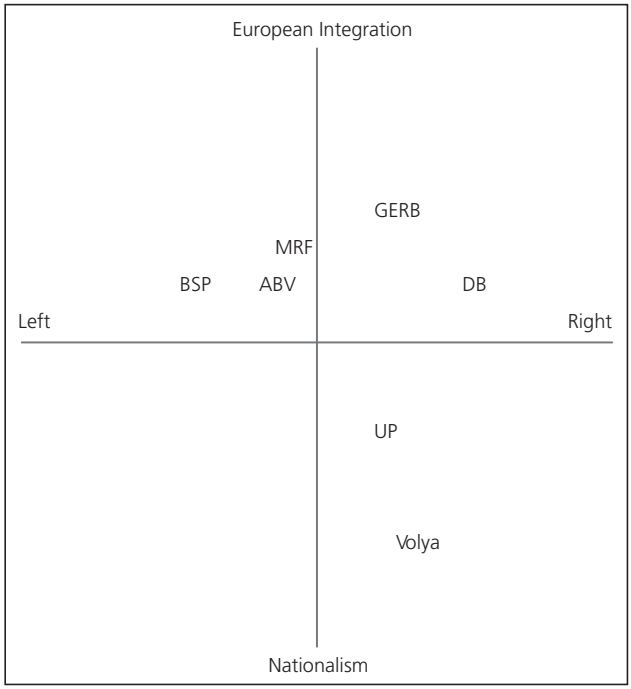


Gallup International 2017

In this sense, the imposition of **civilised dialogue among the main political parties**, especially among the largest ones, is one of the serious challenges facing Bulgarian democracy. Consequently, a particularly important challenge for political parties, particularly regarding inter-party relations, is **the promotion of the culture of political pluralism**, which is based on seeking a balance of interests and taking into account the wide range of values represented in society by different political parties. The more the culture of pluralism becomes the leading factor in party politics, the more stable the development of Bulgarian democracy will be and the risks of unnecessary confrontation undermining the legitimacy of the main political institutions will be avoided.

Finally, but by no means in the sense of importance, the main challenge for political parties is to overcome the crisis of their legitimacy, which has intensified in recent years. In all surveys of public opinion, there is a tendency of **growing distrust** towards them and dissatisfaction with their role, especially as ruling parties. The crisis of the legitimacy of political parties has led to a decline or even a collapse in the expectations that they will perform their basic functions, both in terms of a civil society and as factors playing an important role in governance. This leads to the phenomenon of "abstention" (unwillingness to vote) and to the intensification of the rift between political parties and civil society. The crisis of confidence also provokes more serious shifts in the party system and may destabilise it in the future, directing the protest vote of citizens towards other parties, including antidemocratic ones.

Figure 3
The party system in 2019



GERB - Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria
DB - Democratic Bulgaria
BSP - Bulgarian Socialist Party
MRF - Movement for Right and Freedoms
UP - United Patriots
АБВ- Alternative for Bulgarian Revival
Political Party "Volya" ("Will")

5

CONCLUSION

All of the above-mentioned problems and challenges put to the test the crucial role of political parties in the consolidation of Bulgarian democracy. To a great extent, the onus will be on them to help in speeding up this process and making democracy an irreplaceable component not only of the institutional infrastructure of society, but also of the political culture of the majority of Bulgarians. Consequently, the evolution of Bulgarian democracy is directly dependent on the work of political parties. They are a fundamental factor in the consolidation of the democratic political system. The assessment of their role in this process will depend on the extent to which in the decades to come they will become a factor in not only the stabilisation of political life and the civilised solution to the main problems of the state, but also the permanent legitimisation of liberal democracy in public consciousness.

LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

GERB	Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria
DB	Democratic Bulgaria
BSP	Bulgarian Socialist Party
MRF	Movement for Right and Freedoms
UP	United Patriots
АБV	Alternative for Bulgarian Revival
NFSB	National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria
UDF	Union of Democratic Forces
RZS	Order, Legality and Justice
DSB	Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria
DBG	Bulgaria for Citizens Movement
NPSD	National Party “Freedom and Dignity”

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ABOUT THIS STUDY

The series presents shifts and dynamics within Bulgarian political parties and the party system as a whole, thereby shedding light on the development of Bulgarian democracy as a whole and the challenges in the process of its consolidation.
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THE PARTY SYSTEM IN BULGARIA

2009-2019

The second party system after 1989 (2001-2009) turns out to have been subjected to new turmoil after the National Assembly elections in 2009. Its lability and ongoing transformation, and a growing crisis of trust among citizens regarding the parties, was evident.

In 2009, GERB took over the government of the country on their own, and their leader Borisov was elected prime minister. Borisov himself was at that moment a unique phenomenon of the political horizon after 1989, being seen as a figure who managed to fit well in both the national psychological notion of a determined politician of action and a man of the „people", significantly different from the prime ministers who had held this post before his mandate.

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