

Polit-Barometer

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- Bulgaria has *de facto* entered the election campaign with a noisy scandal around luxury apartments bought by people in power at low prices. This has led to a strong public response and has become the number one theme in the public domain. These events show that there will be an intensified election campaign with a focus on compromising situations and black PR, and European topics will probably fade into the background.
- The apartment scandal seriously hit the reputation of GERB. Turning this case into the topic of the day put the party's election campaign at risk. With demanding resignations, especially that of Tsvetan Tsvetanov, Boyko Borisov took the only possible step to minimise the damage. From now on, GERB will count on full mobilisation of its structures to win the election. There is a lot of stake for GERB – as early parliamentary elections may be on in case of a weak result.
- The fact that BSP left the National Assembly has turned the party into a radical opposition. This move, however, ruins Bulgarian parliamentarism and erodes even the low trust in the institution. BSP does not profit from this step, not even on an internal party basis. Their walking out of parliament has played its part in GERB's decision to return the old version of the preference to the Electoral Code, but the boycott has continued to play a counterproductive role.

Content

1. The Political Situation	2
1.1 Internal policy	2
1.2 Foreign and European policies	4
1.3 Refugee crisis	5
2. State and development of the major political parties	5
2.1 Social Democratic and other centre-left parties	5
2.1.1 BSP	5
2.1.2 Other centre-left parties	7
2.2 Centre-right parties	7
2.2.1 GERB	7
2.2.2 Other centre-right parties	9
2.3 Centrist parties	10
2.3.1 MRF	10
2.3.2 "Volya" ("Will" in Bulgarian)	10
2.4 Nationalist parties	11
2.4.1 United Patriots	11
2.5 Positions of Political Parties on Foreign and European Policies	11
3. Public opinion	12
4. Main Conclusions and Forecasts	12

1. The Political Situation

1.1 Internal policy

The political situation in the first months of 2019 was filled with scandals, and the relations between those in power and the opposition entered a phase of extreme opposition. At the end of January, BSP MP Elena Yoncheva brought to light documents and recordings she had been given which, according to her, prove how in 2016, the former Deputy Minister of Culture and now Minister, Boil Banov, just wrote off the amount of 700,000 levs' penalty for the construction company of the Largo project in Sofia. Boil Banov reacted sharply to the data presented, saying the recordings were made by a former minister of culture, who now works at the Ministry of Education. Banov claimed that he has been blackmailed by certain individuals and threatened with being discredited for a long time. He said the recordings were manipulated and that he had not deprived the state of anything. In this case, the prosecutor's office started a check. BSP urged Boil Banov to resign. This scandal, according to BSP, is not just one specific case, but is indicative of how the GERB governance model functions in practice.

The Russian site for investigative journalism, Bellingcat, reported that the Russian agent, going by the pseudonym of Fedotov and suspected in the Skripal case had, entered Bulgaria three times in 2015, with one of his visits coinciding with the poisoning of the arms dealer Emilian Gebrev, as well as his son and Managing Director of Dunarit Valentin Tachchiev. Gebrev's companies have been exporting ammunition to Ukraine since the beginning of the conflict there.

After several days with no official information on the case by the Bulgarian authorities, the Chief Prosecutor confirmed the poisoning and that one of the suspects in the Skripal case was in Bulgaria during the days of the poisoning. Bulgarian investigative bodies said they would seek cooperation with the British services in the case.

A strong public-political response triggered the changes in the Electoral Code made in mid-Feb-

ruary by GERB and MPs from the NFSB with the support of the MRF. The changes were made after a midday meeting of the Committee on Legal Affairs without any public discussion and debate on the subject. With the changes, the threshold of preference has been raised so that to rise on the list a candidate would have to collect a considerably higher amount of personal votes. The most drastic changes affected the upcoming European elections - about 130,000 preferences would be necessary to put a candidate on the list. Thus, in practice, preference became meaningless. In protest, BSP took the decision for the parliamentary group to leave parliament until the disputed changes were removed and the old regime was re-introduced. The Socialists insisted that a full machine vote be put in place for the upcoming elections.

BSP pointed out that the country was ruled by a new coalition between GERB and MRF, after Tsvetan Tsvetanov admitted that they had accepted the increase of the preference threshold under pressure from MRF.

BSP also reacted sharply to the changes that removed the qualified two-thirds majority in decision-making in election commissions. Decisions can now be taken by a simple majority. The removal of the cassation complaint before the Supreme Administrative Court was assessed by BSP as a deprivation of rights.

The party stated that with all these changes, GERB aims to secure a walkover victory in the elections and to manipulate them. BSP has stated that they will appeal to the Constitutional Court and turn to the Venice Commission. They also insisted on the election of a new Central Electoral Commission (CEC), since the mandate of this House expires. GERB indicated that choosing a new CEC post before the elections could affect the preparation of the election process, so it would be better to do so after them. BSP countered that this was not an argument and the law had to be respected as it is.

Strong public dissatisfaction and the reaction of BSP led to a retreat in the position of GERB and they decided to return the state of preferences to what it was before the changes and introduced a

new bill. GERB also agreed to the request to elect a new CEC to avoid speculation on the part of BSP regarding the legitimacy of the election process.

President Radev vetoed the changes in the Electoral Code, which was rejected by the ruling majority. Only then, they put their new bill to a vote.

BSP, however, said they would not return to parliament because not all their demands were met - the cassation complaint, the majority of the committees, and the introduction of a machine vote in general, not just in some of the sections. The fact that BSP walked out of parliament has led to difficulties in its work but, despite that, GERB at this stage has managed to secure a quorum to avoid collapsed sessions. However, this is at the expense of many compromises and vague arrangements with the parliamentary groups of MRF and "Volya", which are not part of the ruling coalition.

The changes in the Religious Law, that were introduced by GERB and MRF, were adopted by the BSP precisely as a result of such an agreement. In addition to the introduction of a state subsidy for the main religious denominations in the country for which there is a political consensus, their old debts to the state are written off, with the highest sums being owed by the Muftiate - over 8 million BGN. BSP described this as an agreement in the interest of MRF, which showed that there is a new triple coalition in the country between GERB, the "United Patriots" and MRF. A number of experts have identified this idea as a dangerous precedent, as the state is giving a bad example by writing off debts of legal entities. Later, GERB once again retreated - it was decided for debts to be postponed for a longer period of time, but not for them to be written off.

The rupture in relations between the president and the government seems to be insurmountable. The sharp attacks between them go beyond the normal institutional tone. During his report of the second year of his term of office, President Rumen Radev once again criticised the government for violating the principles of democracy, transparency in public procurement and corruption. Radev yet again pointed out that confidence in parlia-

ment is at critically low levels. In his words, more and more laws are changing cardinally without public discussion and impact assessment, which leads to unpredictability in the legislative process. Radev stated that there was an ever-increasing tendency to adopt lobbying legislation in violation of public interest.

According to the president, the ruling elite must address the issue of the accelerated economic and social development of the country. And that, according to him, can be done with highly educated, competent and respectable people, and when the parties are "cleared of corrupt and incompetent personnel with ambitions to gain power."

Radev appealed to the Commission for Countering Corruption and for Seizure of Illegally Acquired Property (KPKONPI), the Prosecutor's Office, the Ministry of the Interior and services to "enter into a carefully circumvented perimeter of power, potential dependencies between politicians, owners of companies that earn large public orders, and potential outsiders." If this does not happen, according to the president, the decay will continue, and "the search for justice may go beyond the limits and mechanisms of the law."

For the first time, the president pointed out directly that he would support a new political project, provided it defended democratic values and worked for the modernisation of the country. According to him, if "the next parliament also turned out to be a coalition that was compromised or blocked in an embryo, or it formed an unprincipled coalition in the name of power, it would be the last deal of the cards in the current political system."

The President's speech provoked a sharp reaction by GERB, who once again announced that Radev was party president of the BSP and that he was working for the disintegration of the nation. National Assembly President, Tsveta Karayancheva, said that with his words Radev was violating the image of the Bulgarian parliament and damaging statehood. BSP, for their part, supported the president in his assessment by pointing out that he was calling the problems in the country how they were, and that the solution to these problems

started with early parliamentary elections and removing GERB from power.

1.2 Foreign and European policies

The Venezuelan crisis has led to diverging positions between the government and the president. The government officially backed opposition leader Juan Guaydo as Venezuelan interim head of state and urged him to schedule free, fair and democratic elections. President Rumen Radev said that Bulgaria should not interfere with domestic affairs in Venezuela and accused the Bulgarian government of not having its own position but of presenting a “transposed position”. According to the president, “Europe is strong because it is the cradle of democracy and freedom of thought.” That is why he thinks that the European position cannot issue ultimatums. In his words, “right and sovereignty must be respected, and the principle of non-interference is a fundamental principle”.

On the occasion of the controversy between the president and the government, Foreign Minister Ekaterina Zaharieva stated that it is good for Bulgaria to speak with one voice on the international stage. Zaharieva stressed that everyone has the right to a different opinion but, according to the Constitution, “the foreign policy is implemented by the Council of Ministers”.

Bulgaria became the focus of attention after it became clear that money had been transferred to a Bulgarian bank from the Venezuelan oil company. This became clear after a meeting of the US Ambassador with the Bulgarian Prime Minister. This fact was first reported by opposition sources in Venezuela and it was initially denied by Foreign Minister Zaharieva. Prime Minister Borisov thanked the information provided by the US authorities, stating the Bulgarian authorities would carry out a full investigation of the case.

In early March, Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev made a visit to Bulgaria. The main purpose of the visit was to discuss energy projects with Russian participation. The efforts of the Bulgarian government are aimed at being involved

in the Turkish Stream project so that in this way Bulgaria would ensure the transit of Russian gas to Europe. Prime Minister Borisov said the intentions of the Bulgarian government have been agreed with the European Commission. Russian Prime Minister Medvedev said that Russian gas could flow through Bulgaria from the Turkish Stream, but for this purpose categorical guarantees from the European Commission were needed so that it would avoid the fate of the “South Stream.” Prime Minister Borisov said, Bulgaria has the understanding of the European Commission. He pointed out that Bulgaria does not want new gas quantities but to ensure the necessary supplies if Russia was about to stop the transit of gas through Ukraine.

Medvedev also indicated that Russia is ready to participate in the construction of the Belene nuclear power plant. The Belene project was suspended by the first government of Boyko Borisov in early 2013 as an economically unprofitable project that generated corruption. Bulgaria subsequently had to pay over BGN 1 billion to Atomstroyexport as compensation for the termination of the project. During the talks with Medvedev, the Bulgarian prime minister confirmed that the country is interested in using the two reactors that are already paid, instead of abandoning the project. According to Borisov, Bulgaria will experience the need for more power in ten years or so, otherwise it will have to import electricity. Borisov said that Russian participation in the project will depend on the auction that will be held. What Bulgaria will set as a condition is not to provide state guarantees to the foreign investor and not to conclude long-term contracts with them for the purchase of electricity. Many experts believe, however, that it would be impossible to find an investor to build the project on such terms.

During Medvedev’s visit, Bulgaria and Russia signed a Programme for joint actions in the field of tourism between the Ministry of Tourism and the Ministry of Economic Development of the Russian Federation for 2019-2021. A Protocol was also signed amending and supplementing the Social Security Treaty between the two countries.

1.3 Refugee Crisis

Also, during this quarter, there was no change observed in the migrant picture of the country and refugee pressure was virtually absent. At the end of March in a pre-election situation, BSP opposed the construction of new centres for migrants in Lyubimets, Elhovo and Malko Tarnovo. BSP insisted that the public works contract should be halted and threatened to support the protests made by the residents of Yambol. The Socialists asked the government whether there is an agreement with Germany on relocation of refugees. Deputy Interior Minister Krassimir Tsipov said that refugee camps will not be built, but temporary centres will be closed and migrants will not be able to leave them. According to him, temporary sites are to be prepared, which will only be used in the event of increased migratory pressure, which is not currently the case at our borders. Tsipov pointed out that the BSP has used this issue pre-election and has called for the speculation that instils fears in people to stop.

2. State and Development of the Major Political Parties

2.1 Social-democratic and other centre-left parties

2.1.1 BSP

At the end of January, Elena Yoncheva, an MP from BSP who was one of the main 'blades' of the party in the attacks against the government, was indicted by the Public Prosecutors' Office for money laundering 'of particularly large sums'. According to the prosecution, Yoncheva has become a partner in an offshore company through her *Avtorska Televisia* company in 2012. The offshore company had an account with CCB, to which more than BGN 650,000 had been transferred. According to the prosecution, this money belonged to CCB and was "embezzled by three officials" of the bank and was transferred in favour of five companies *de facto* controlled by Tsvetan Vasilev, including the one in which Yoncheva was a partner. The prosecution insisted that Yoncheva was aware that she was laundering money, embezzled from the bank, which

later went bankrupt. Yoncheva stated that she was not concerned about the investigation because she was of the opinion that she had done nothing wrong. BSP stood firmly by Yoncheva and defined the indictment as a political attack with the participation of the prosecution in response to Yoncheva exposing the actions of the people in government.

At the end of January, BSP held its 49th Party Congress with the main item on the agenda being the final approval of the Vision for Bulgaria Programme, which was subject of discussions months prior to that, as well as adoption of the election platform for the forthcoming European Parliament elections, called Vision for Europe. Before the delegates of the Congress, BSP leader Kornelia Ninova stated that the major goal of BSP was to win the EP elections, which would open the way to pre-term parliamentary election and the removal of GERB from government. Ninova hurled some serious accusations at the government, saying that the "authoritarian government had been established in the country, the state had been taken over by a few and the people had been enslaved and kept in fear". According to her, corruption in this country had become state policy and lawlessness had been "guaranteed by law", which could not go on any further.

PES leader Sergei Stanishev stated that BSP stood a real chance of winning against GERB in the forthcoming elections. In his words, what could stop the party from doing so was the split inside it. Stanishev pointed out that without BSP PES could not attain its goals because PES was a family of shared values. Stanishev also pointed out that BSP should not follow a policy of contravening the group of the Bulgarian MEPs and the PES.

The motto of the platform for the European elections Vision for Europe was "For a social Europe of the citizens and peoples, against inequality and poverty". The document stated that the European Union was in crisis and was far from the ideas and values that had inspired European citizens for decades. The policy carried out in the European Union now was far from the problems and concerns of the ordinary people. The right-wing leadership in Europe and neo-liberalism had brought about the dismantling of

the social state, deep inequalities, and benefits for the rich. The 2009 crisis had not led to the expected increase of confidence in the left wing in Europe. The major goal for the socialists would be development of a new social state in Europe and solidary societies, which put in the centre the needs and strivings of each and every citizen. According to the document, in order for this to happen, a decisive refusal of the neo-liberal model would be needed and restoration of the positions of the state in the economy and the social area. Some of the highlights of the programme are: establishment of a European Social Union, supported by a new economic model of development and growth; a united and democratic European Union that respects the sovereignty of the Member States; a multi-annual financial framework in favour of cohesion, citizens and real economy; a strong and effective Cohesion Policy beyond 2020; a European Union for the young – a better life and active democratic involvement of the future generations; a sustainable migration policy based on solidarity and respect for national priorities; the European Union – an independent factor in global politics.

One of the big intrigues in BSP was related to the nominations for the party list for the European Parliament elections and the place of the PES President Sergei Stanishev in it. The controversy between BSP leader Kornelia Ninova and Sergei Stanishev became stronger around the debate on the adoption of the Istanbul Convention one year ago, whose ratification BSP was categorically against. On several occasions, Ninova openly demonstrated her negative attitude towards Stanishev. She did not attend the PES Congress in person when he was re-elected as President, nor the Congress when the nomination of Frans Timmermans was announced for President of the European Commission and when the PES Manifesto for the forthcoming elections was approved. There were voices heard in BSP that Stanishev had no place on the party list. This was the position taken by Alexander Simov MP, who is close to the leadership of the party. However, Stanishev got the categorical support of many circles in the BSP, including that of the inner-party opposition. He got the most votes in the nominations, together with the other main contestant for leader of the list – Elena Yoncheva, the favourite of the party leadership.

The leader of the list was decided at a meeting of the BSP National Council in mid-March. As expected, the Executive Bureau of the party nominated Elena Yoncheva as leader of the list. At the forum, Sergei Stanishev stated that the European elections were important for BSP because the potential victory would open the way to pre-term parliamentary elections and for changing the model of government in the country. To this end, however, the party should stay united and not additionally split. Stanishev and Yoncheva proposed that the National Council members put the first two places on the list to the vote. The leadership of the party was against that motion and it was rejected. In her speech at the forum, Kornelia Ninova said that it was not a must for the PES President to be a MEP. Ninova directly proposed that Sergei Stanishev has to be removed from the party list, suggesting that “he would be spared the inconvenience of bringing together the opinion of PES and BSP”. Thus, a secret vote was taken for determining the leader on the party list. Elena Yoncheva won with 95 votes against 75 for Sergei Stanishev. Stanishev accepted the outcome and congratulated Yoncheva. He said that to a certain extent the outcome was predestined as 20 of the National Council members were employees of the party and it was expected that they would back the leadership. Stanishev stated that he would not give up his fight for the party list for the EP elections because of the support he had received from the party structures, as well as because he did not want to cause additional divisions in the party. Stanishev expressed his concern that the party was sending a bad message to its members and supporters and that the leadership was instigating divisions and digging trenches between BSP and PES. He also said that he was concerned that there is no dialogue within the party and that this could discourage many of its members from supporting the list. Stanishev said that he had not talked with Kornelia Ninova for months and that he would not be surprised if he was not placed on the list at all.

Former BSP leader Mihail Mikov said that the BSP leadership would like to remove Stanishev from the list despite of the wish of the vast majority of the party structures. Mikov said that there is an ongoing bolshevisation process in BSP. The big-

gest problem according to Mikov was that there was no discussion on policies in the party, and that the major issue for the past two months was “Stanishev or Elena Yoncheva”.

On his part, Cristian Vigenin defended Yoncheva’s nomination as leader of the list with the argument that she might “motivate better not only the socialists and their supporters but a wider circle of people who see her as a symbol of the fight against corruption and freedom of the media.”

The BSP list will be finally announced on 6 April. Among the candidates with most nominations and the biggest chances to take electable places on the list are the Deputy Chairman of BSP Denitsa Zlateva, Momchil Nekov MEP and Peter Korbumbashev MEP, as well as Prof. Rumen Gechev MP, and Prof. Ivo Hristov MP.

2.1.2 Other centre-left parties

In the middle of February, ABV sent a proposal in writing to Kornelia Ninova for establishing a wide left-wing coalition for the purpose of winning the elections for European Parliament and removing GERB from power. According to ABV leader Rumen Petkov, such a coalition would create the feeling of real perspective in society and ability to govern the country in a different way. At a BSP plenum this option was rejected. The BSP leadership stated that ABV had participated in the third Boyko Borisov government of GERB, and therefore would hardly be recognised as the alternative to the current government.

In mid-March ABV announced that they would start a petition for convening a national referendum for answering the question whether Bulgarians would want nuclear weapons to be located on the territory of this country; and whether they would want additional offensive military installations to be built in Bulgaria.

ABV leader Rumen Petkov stated that the initiative was prompted in the context of the US decision to withdraw from the Treaty for decommissioning small and medium range missiles. It looks like ABV

will use the topic in its European elections campaign. The initiative followed an idea launched by Solomon Passy – leader of the Atlantic Club of Bulgaria, who said that nuclear weapons should be located on the territory of the country as a deterrent vis-à-vis Russia.

The ABV initiative was backed by a number of smaller left-wing formations like the Alexander Stamboliyski Agrarian Union, the Communist Party of Bulgaria, the Bulgarian Party Liberals, The United Labour Block, the Movement for Social Humanism and the Social-Democrats Movement.

In mid-February in Sofia ABV and United Russia Party signed a joint protocol for deepening their interparty relations.

2.2 Centre-right parties

2.2.1 GERB

At the end of January, GERB held its National Pre-election Convention, attended by MPs, ministers, mayors and representatives of the local party structures. GERB leader and Prime Minister of Bulgaria Boyko Borisov called the participants in the forum to unite the party because BSP was coming closer to GERB in terms of electoral support. He criticised the party for the lack of power to stand against the numerous attacks coming from the opposition. Borisov urged the MPs and ministers to be pro-active against the fake news about the party and representatives thereof. In his words, GERB should clear its ranks and wherever there are mistakes - correct them. Borisov reminded that people wanted fairness and that he would not tolerate any corruption in the party. He urged that people should immediately speak out loud if there is information about such cases. Borisov warned the participants in the forum that if there were no red flags raised, he would “show them what the blue flag is all about”.

Tsvetan Tsvetanov explained that the words of Borisov meant total mobilisation for the vote. In his words, the leadership was happy with the activities of the party, but it is very important to beware of

scandals. According to Tsvetanov, GERB has proven throughout the years that it can bear responsibility and even when there were doubts about irregularities, the people involved had been removed.

European Commissioner Marija Gabriel received the most nominations from the party structures – more than 10 thousand from 232 municipalities – and will lead the GERB party list.

At the end of March, there was a scandal in GERB related to the purchase of luxury real estate. An investigation of *Radio Free Europe* and the *Anti-Corruption Fund* NGO demonstrated that the Chairman of the parliamentary group of GERB Tsvetan Tsvetanov, the Minister of Justice Tsetska Tsacheva and Vezhdi Rashidov MP had purchased real estate in one of the most expensive districts of Sofia for three to four times less than the going market price in the area. Deputy Minister for Youth and Sports Vanya Koleva, at whose wedding Tsvetan Tsvetanov was a witness, also had acquired a flat at a preferential price. All three of them stated that there was nothing irregular about the deals, that everything was legal and paid per bank transfer, as well as the fact that they could prove the origin of the funds. *Boets* Association alerted the prosecution and the Anti-corruption Commission, which opened an enquiry on the case.

Radio Free Europe announced that at the end of 2017, before the Parliament dissolved, Tsvetan Tsvetanov and GERB MPs had submitted a bill for amendment and addenda to the Spatial Development Act extending the validity of construction permits from 5 to 10 years for buildings of category 1 and 2, including high-rise buildings. The company which sold the real estate to GERB politicians has a project for constructing a skyscraper. After the extension of the validity of the permits, it renewed the construction works on it. A strange coincidence was also a published document, according to which 4 days prior to buying his apartment, Tsvetan Tsvetanov referred a file to Sofia Metropolitan Municipality regarding an inspection of the construction company in question. BSP stated that those facts were not a coincidence and that it was all about lobbyism and trading influence.

The 'Apartmentgate' had a strong echo in the social media and the press and became one of the most commented topics at the end of March. BSP leader Kornelia Ninova said that the case was sufficiently indicative of the system of power, which favours certain companies and receives gifts in return. Ninova urged Borisov to follow his promise that he would not tolerate even the doubt of corruption in the party. President Radev also commented on the topic of the apartments. In his words, this case went far beyond the scope of a simple real estate deal because it reflected directly on the confidence in the political class and the statehood. Radev reiterated that in his annual report he had urged the Commission for Counteracting Corruption and for Seizure of Illegally Acquired Property to enter the carefully avoided perimeter of power. However, he expressed his pessimism that such a thing could happen because – to use his words – there is no way that the Anti-Corruption Commission "appointed and controlled by Tsvetan Tsvetanov could investigate him in particular according to the toothless Act imposed by Tsvetanov himself".

Prime Minister Borisov expressed his disappointment that the topic came out just in this moment on the eve of the elections. According to him, it was not by chance. He stated that GERB has always been uncompromising, even when there were just doubts of some irregularities. And this time Borisov promised to have a close look into all these transactions to see whether there was anything morally reprehensible in them and then possibly have to make some very difficult decisions. Borisov announced that he would convene the Executive Committee of the party to review the case. However, he categorically refused to accept BSP giving moral judgements because it was precisely the one party whose establishment had resided in good apartments in prestigious districts of Sofia before 1989.

Tsvetan Tsvetanov stated that this was a fake scandal and it was not by chance that it came on the eve of the election campaign from people who were not happy with the fact that GERB was in an excellent state. Tsvetanov accused President Radev of being the flagship of the negative

campaign against him and GERB despite the facts indicating a different thing – the investigation of the apartments was that of the US media *Radio Free Europe*.

The scandal resulted in resignations. The first to resign was the Minister of Justice Tsetska Tsacheva. After a meeting with the Prime Minister she announced that this was an act of personal ethics that she undertook in order to avoid a shadow being thrown on the party and the government. After Tsacheva, Deputy Minister Vanya Koleva also resigned. Tsvetan Tsvetanov resigned from Parliament and the positions he held there – Chairman of the Parliamentary Group of GERB and Chairman of the Committee on Home Security and Public Order. He will remain Deputy Chairman of the party and President of the Election Staff. The resignations of Tsvetanov reduced significantly his influence in the party and in politics.

Daniella Daritkova MP was elected Chairperson of the Parliamentary Group of GERB.

According to experts, the escalation of this scandal on the eve of the elections would have a negative impact on the pre-election campaign of GERB.

2.2.2 Other centre-right parties

“Yes, Bulgaria” held inner-party elections to nominate its candidates in the EP elections on a specially developed application for web-based voting based on block chain technology. 5,000 people cast their votes over a couple of days. Stefan Tafrov got the majority of the votes. He is a career diplomat, former resident Representative of Bulgaria to the UN, as well as ambassador to Italy, France and the UK. “Yes, Bulgaria” announced that the online elections had been a great success. It proved that there was nothing dangerous in remote voting on the web being introduced at national level. Tafrov announced that if elected MEP, he would not be part of the EPP Group. This caused strong polemics among the right-wing electorate because all other smaller right-wing parties like DSB, UDF and Bulgaria of the Citizens Movement are EPP members. Tafrov explained

his position with the fact that members of EPP are Victor Orban’s FIDESZ and Boyko Borisov’s GERB who have established non-democratic regimes in their countries.

Democratic Bulgaria’s list will be led by Radan Kanev, Deputy Chairman of DSB. Stefan Tafrov will be second.

In mid-March, EPP leader Joseph Dole sent a letter to the Bulgarian member parties asking them to participate in the elections with a single list in order to guarantee victory. DSB answered that they would not cooperate with GERB because, according to them, it is a party that drives Bulgaria away from Europe and takes positions that are incompatible with Europe’s values. Unlike DSB, UDF indicated that they would seek cooperation with GERB if the talks with the parties from Democratic Bulgaria for a joint ballot prove unsuccessful. UDF insisted that their candidate be ranked in the top three places on the list and the coalition to be called Democratic Bulgaria – UDF. Democratic Bulgaria disagreed. So, talks started between UDF and GERB and they resulted in one electable place for UDF on the GERB list. Boyko Borisov stated that UDF would have two places on the list in total. UDF leader Rumen Hristov said that the most logical thing for the EPP member parties was to run together. He said that GERB and UDF would strive to take 8 seats in the European Parliament. He pointed out that UDF has no differences with GERB regarding the development of Europe and the role of Bulgaria in that process. In an internal political plan, Hristov said that UDF would remain in constructive opposition to GERB. This decision was not accepted equally within the UDF. Former UDF leader Bozhidar Lukarski reacted abruptly saying that he had not seen any “greater shame and humiliation” in the entire history of UDF. He accused Rumen Hristov of taking the decision without the approval of the UDF National Council and demanded his resignation. Despite these calls, the UDF National Council gave the mandate to Rumen Hristov for running on the same list as GERB.

The other small EPP member party – Bulgaria of the Citizens Movement nominated their leader Dimitar Delchev for the EP elections. They termi-

nated the talks with Democratic Bulgaria. Party leader Dimitar Delchev said that there would be two options for BCM – either to run alone, or to seek cooperation with other right-wing parties.

2.3 Centrist parties

2.3.1 MRF

On the occasion of the 15th anniversary of Bulgaria's membership in NATO, MRF proclaimed a political declaration calling all political forces for open discussion on the priorities of this country. MRF reiterated that precisely in this way consensus was reached in the 1990s on the priorities of the country regarding its NATO and EU membership. The declaration stated that the country was facing challenges today which demand outlining new strategic priorities to be backed by all political forces. MRF believe that the country has no direction and priorities and is "trying to find its way between its European contemporary being and a nationalistic future".

The topic was further elaborated on in a media interview by Hasan Ademov. He said that the country was in need of clear strategic priorities and of a programme for an enhanced economic development. According to him one, two or three strategic priorities are needed which every following government should adhere to in order for the country to go forwards. Ademov added that pre-term parliamentary elections and coming to power are not a goal in itself for MRF. If MRF decided to walk out of the Parliament, pre-term parliamentary elections would be inevitable. More important, according to him, is what will be done after the elections.

2.3.2 "Volya"

At the end of January "Volya" announced the establishment of a new election coalition for the EP elections "Volya–Bulgarian patriots". Along with "Volya", members of that coalition is the Alexander Stamboliyski Agrarian Union led by Spas Panchev, who left the parliamentary group "BSP – Left Bulgaria" last year, United Social-Democracy Party

and People's Party "Freedom and Dignity" led by Orhan Ismailov. Veselin Mareshki said that the coalition would be a long-term one until the next presidential elections.

Veselin Mareshki announced that he would lead the list of the coalition and it is not impossible for him to give up his seat after being elected in favour of the candidate who follows him. He expressed his certainty that "Volya-Bulgarian Patriots" will win at least one certain seat in the European Parliament and their goal is to have two. This ambition is not confirmed by opinion polls, at least at this stage. Mareshki pointed out that the "Volya" representatives in the European Parliament would work with the group of nationalist formation and Marine Le Pen. Precisely this fact came as a surprise with the inclusion of the People's Party Freedom and Dignity (PPFD), which was in coalition with the DOST party of Lyutvi Mestan and prior to that was part of the Reformists' Bloc. The reaction of the People's Party Freedom and Dignity did not take long. The founder of the party Kasim Dal expressed disagreement with the participation in the coalition and said that Orhan Ismailov had taken this decision unilaterally without consulting the National Council of the party. Dal pointed out that it is unnatural for a party defending the rights and freedom of citizens and minorities to be in coalition with Le Pen. Orhan Ismailov was impeached and he said it was illegal. At the end of the day, PPFD terminated their membership in the coalition and started a legal dispute as to who their legitimate leader was.

After BSP walking out of Parliament, securing the quorum became the first priority for GERB. In this way, the influence of "Volya" and their 10 MPs grew stronger. The party saw an opportunity to raise their "parliamentary value". In mid-March Mareshki announced that "Volya" would also walk out of Parliament with the motif that the National Assembly does not work on the most important issues but deals in small talk. In spite of this statement, a day later the MPs from "Volya" provided the quorum for the plenary session in Parliament, which elected the new Chairman of the Commission for Financial Supervision. After an exchange with Tsvetan Tsvetanov and some representatives of the GERB

parliamentary group "Volya" decided to stay in Parliament. Veselin Mareshki said that they would back the good proposals from GERB that coincide with their ideas. According to the words of Mareshki, the country does not need any chaos and that is why the party has reconsidered their decision.

2.4 Nationalist parties

2.4.1 United Patriots

At the beginning of 2019, the relations between the three parties comprising the "United Patriots" remained tense. The controversies between their three leaders seemed to be difficult to overcome. The only thing they are in agreement on is their support for the government and remaining in power at any cost. Regardless of the conflict situations, which arise for one reason or another between the "United Patriots" parties or between them and GERB, in the end, the tension was always overcome and the government coalition stays intact.

For months, the talks about running in the EP elections together had not brought any result. The relations between the three parties became an endless story of parting and coming together. In February, VMRO practically started their election campaign with billboards and advertisements depicting the face of Angel Dzhambazki MEP. This became a reason for NFSB to protest – Valeri Simeonov said that that hasty action deprives any further talks of any sense whatsoever. In mid-February NFSB announced that they will run the elections alone and will nominate their party leader Valeri Simeonov to lead their party list. The idea is to achieve maximum electoral mobilisation for the EP elections in this way. Valeri Simeonov assured everyone that running solo would not shake up the coalition or the government as the three parties have different commitments to GERB, provided in the coalition agreement. This was confirmed by the other party leaders – Volen Siderov and Krasimir Karakachanov.

Volen Siderov did not participate in person in several meetings where participating together in the elections was discussed. NFSB defined that

as lack of willingness to partner the others within the United Patriots format. Siderov explained that there have been no talks about a possible coalition with the party of Nikolay Barekov for the EP elections, only about the candidature of "Ataka" for membership in the Alliance of the Conservatives and Reformists. The candidature, however, was not approved by the other members of the conservative family and the possibility for membership is not on the agenda any longer. Siderov accused his partners of not being able to find a compromise for running together. In his words, he had been insisting for months that his colleagues let him know how they will participate in the elections, but they had neglected the question. At the VMRO congress which he attended as a guest at the end of March, Volen Siderov stated that he would do his best for the three parties too run together in the EP elections. He said that Angel Dzhambazki was an excellent nomination, which "Ataka" would support to be top of the list. Later he went back on that proposal and said that "Ataka" will run alone in the EP elections.

At the end of March, VMRO held its 7th Congress, where Krasimir Karakachanov was re-elected Chairman of the party with 516 votes. The delegates also re-elected the members of the national executive board.

2.5 Positions of Political Parties on Foreign and European Policies

The crisis in Venezuela led to different positions of the main parties in this country. The government of GERB supported the government there and accused the President of undermining the authority of the country with his position. According to Toma Bikov from GERB Radev's position was a "political gaffe". BSP said that Bulgaria should not interfere in the internal affairs of a third country but obey international law and the rule of law. Kornelia Ninova pointed out that Italy, Slovakia, Slovenia and Romania had not taken sides in the conflict. Democratic Bulgaria said that with his position President Radev had demonstrated yet again his closeness to the Putin regime to the detriment of Bulgarian national interests.

The vote of EP on suspension of the negotiations for Turkey's EU membership caused disapproval on the part of MRF. Nedzhmi Ali MEP stated that suspending the negotiation process on Turkey's EU membership was unacceptable. According to him, the resolution of the EP does not contribute to the constructive dialogue between the Union and Turkey. Ali said that the one should consider the positive changes in Turkey as regards the negotiation process. He gave the example of Turkey's readiness to update the Action Plan for prevention of violations of the European Human Rights Charter. Moreover, in his words, Turkey had taken steps to reform its judiciary.

3. Public opinion

A poll by Trend Research Centre organised in the middle of March showed that three parties stand a chance of winning seats in the European Parliament – GERB, BSP and MRF. 19.1% of the respondents would vote for GERB, 17.3% for BSP and 6.9% for MRF. The situation for the smaller parties, which have no chance of a seat in the EP for the time being, is as follows: Democratic Bulgaria 2.5%, VMRO 2.5%, "Volya" 1.8%, "Ataka" 1.3%, NFSB 1%.

According to the Trend poll, 62% of Bulgarian citizens have a positive attitude towards the European Union, with only 18% expressing a negative one. The most positive attitude toward the EU is registered among the youngest (age 18-29), whereby 80% of them are positive and only 6% negative. Among the oldest population the percentages are 39% positive vs. 31% negative. To the question whether Bulgaria has won or lost from its EU membership 58% believe it has won, and 20% are of the opposite opinion.

20% of the respondents state that the role of the Bulgarian MEPs is "very important", and 38% "a rather important one", which demonstrates that the citizens recognise the importance of the European Parliament and its role in formulating the policies of the EU.

The Trend poll also demonstrates that the social narrative should be the priority of the next Europe-

an legislature – increasing the standard of living (11%), equality (5%), equalising income (5%), and more jobs (4%). The social area also dominates the answers to the question in which areas the EU should provide more funds for Bulgaria. 47% are of the opinion that it should be for employment, followed by the development of the regions lagging behind (38%), competitiveness of the economy (28%), agriculture (24%), infrastructure (20%) and education (19%).

42% of all respondents believe that the EU should strengthen the control over the policies of the individual Member States and 29% are of the opposing opinion. 52% believe that if processes of enhanced cohesion and integration started between the EU Member States, Bulgaria should participate. Only 16% share the opposite position.

4. Main conclusions and forecasts

1. Bulgaria entered *de facto* the pre-election campaign with the noisy scandal about the apartments purchased by some people in power at low prices. It induced a strong public response and became topic number one in the public sphere. These events demonstrate that we are in for some fierce pre-election campaigning full of scandal and black PR, and the European topic would probably remain in the background.

2. "Apartmentgate" was a serious blow to GERB's reputation. Becoming the topic of the day, it posed a risk to the pre-election campaign of the party. With the requested resignations, particularly that of Tsvetan Tsvetanov, Boyko Borisov made the only move he had left to mitigate the damage. From now on, GERB will have to rely on the full mobilisation of its structures in order to win the elections because the stakes are high – the fate of the government and the question as to whether there will be pre-term parliamentary elections. GERB will attempt to turn the defect into effect by maintaining that they are the only party in this country that removes everyone involved in scandals or in doubts of corrupt practices. It is difficult to say whether this strategy will work because GERB have been in government for almost 10

years now and there is some wear and tear apparent, as well as some fatigue accumulated within the party and among its voters.

3. BSP walking out of the Parliament makes it a radical opposition. That move, however, is destructive for Bulgarian parliamentarism and erodes the already low public confidence in the institution. BSP can hardly win from this act – even in an inner party plan. Walking out of parliament played its role in the decision of GERB to revisit the preference clause in the Election Code, but extending the boycott for an indefinite time is already counter-productive. The scandals around GERB give an advantage to BSP to use them during the campaign.

Anything else but victory in the elections will be viewed as failure - particularly by the inner-party opposition. Internal party conflicts in BSP, which escalated - yet again - around the ranking of the candidates on the party list for the EP elections may result in a split that will have a negative impact on the outcome of the elections.

4. The divided non-parliamentary right wing is facing the challenge of not winning a seat in the EP. UDF decided to run in coalition with GERB, which might mean one secure MEP seat. Over recent years, UDF marginalised itself in electoral terms and the coalition with GERB might lead to its total loss of identity. Democratic Bulgaria is the only formation which stands a real chance of one seat in the EP, but it will depend very much on how the campaign goes.

5. Unlike the other parties, MRF started their campaign late. The question about the lists was one of the least discussed topics in the party. Like in other elections, MRF worked pro-actively in the field, mobilising its structures without any loud media campaigns. Traditionally, MRF does well in European elections, because it is a party with a hardline electorate who are easily mobilised and given the lower turnout in such a type of elections, it always achieves good representation.

6. The endless conflicts in “United Patriots” resulted in a strong decline of their electorate, indicative of which are the opinion polls from the past months. The incapacity to find consensus to run together in the elections makes the task of seconding a representative of theirs to the EP difficult to achieve. The parliamentary group stays united at this stage because the three formations in it have no interest in leaving the government coalition and in pre-term parliamentary elections. Power is the only thing that continues to unite them, and this is why one cannot expect that they would be the ones who cause pre-term elections.

7. “Volya” looked for coalition partners among some smaller centrist formations. However, they do not stand a chance of getting a seat in the European Parliament. The party of Veselin Mareshki did not provide any surprises with its opportunism this quarter either. Their attempt to look like an opposition and at the same time support and provide the quorum when voting on important resolutions discourage the already few remaining supporters they have.

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