

# Polit-Barometer

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- The European elections confirmed the political status quo and showed that there is no alternative in which voters are wont to place their trust. The campaign of compromising others led to an ebbing of voters and has confirmed the tendency of lack of confidence in the political elite and political parties as a whole. Scandals related to apartments and guest houses once again raised the issue of corruption in power.
- BSP lost the next elections, even though they had a favourable political situation brought about by the scandals related to GERB. Instead of standing more consolidated at these elections, BSP sank into serious internal struggles to sort out the party list, which, as expected, had a negative impact in the course of the campaign. The party went to the elections disunited and tried to achieve an effect with a negative campaign. This, on the one hand, repelled voters who were hesitating, and on the other hand consolidated GERB.
- The conflicts between the leaders of the United Patriots and the insults they exchanged during the campaign have burned the last bridges between them. Despite this, it is unlikely that the ruling majority will break down, because what still brings together the three formations is power and staying there at all costs. The European elections changed the distribution of forces between the three parties. The nationalist vote consolidates itself in IMRO and the party will have two MEPs in elections where candidates stand independently, which is undoubtedly a success for it.
- „Democratic Bulgaria“ achieved the minimum stated in their programme of at least one MEP. Although the electoral barrier was passed due to lower activity and with the help of the votes from abroad, the European elections again returned the liberal urban right to the political scene. The formation continues to demonstrate a highly regional character - nearly 40% of the votes were received in Sofia.

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## 1. The Political Situation

### 1.1 Internal policy

The last quarter passed in the context of the European elections. Relations between the major parties were extremely tense, following the scandals that shook the party in power. This also predetermined the character of the campaign. It was dominated by issues related to the domestic political situation in Bulgaria, and the European agenda remained in the background. The opposition, in the face of BSP, relied on leading a negative campaign and turned the elections for European Parliament into a vote of confidence in the government.

Scandals about apartments acquired in a dubious manner by people in power and subsequent resignations, including ministers, shook the credibility of the ruling party. Throughout April, GERB was in a defensive position and the theme of apartments, the so-called "Apartmentgate", continued to be on the agenda. In mid-April, a new scandal shook the government when it became clear that staff from the State Fund for Agriculture had benefited from the programme for rural development and that certain persons close to these people had received funds for the construction of guest houses, which consequently had been used for their own needs. Just such a house turned out to have been acquired by the Deputy Minister of Economy from GERB Alexander Manolev. The revelations led to Manolev's resignation, and the prosecutor's office began investigating the case. The Deputy Executive Director of the State Fund "Agriculture" Ivanka Bagdatova-Mizova was also dismissed after her phone number was found to be a contact number for the site of a guest house in the village of Yundola, near Velingrad. These scandals have shown a lack of control on the part of the State Fund "Agriculture" in the way the funds under the Rural Development Programme are spent.

The scandal with the guest houses has put even more pressure on the party in power. In order to minimise the damage to GERB during the election campaign, Prime Minister Borisov asked for the resignation of Minister of Agriculture Rumens Porozhanov. In the place of Porozhanov, Desislava

va Taneva was elected, who had already occupied this position in the second government of Borisov.

The last two weeks of the election campaign passed with the active participation of Prime Minister Borisov. BSP filed a complaint with the Central Electoral Commission (CIK) that Borisov was participating in the election campaign using state funds and insisted that he should take leave. CIK did not uphold the Socialists' complaint. For their part, GERB filed a counter-complaint to CIK for the participation of President Radev in the campaign on the side of BSP. The reason for this was Radev's visit to Asenovgrad, which coincided with a BSP election campaign event, which included the participation of Kornelia Ninova. In this case too, CIK rejected the complaint as unfounded.

Despite the forecasts of some sociological parity agencies between the two leading parties, GERB won the elections, defeating BSP by a significant margin. The party that came first received 31.07% of the actual votes and BSP got 24.26%. MRF took third place with 16.55%. Two more parties will have representatives in the European Parliament – IMRO (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation) with 7.36% and Democratic Bulgaria with 6.06%. This means GERB will have 6 MEPs - Maria Gabriel, Andrey Kovatchev, Andrey Novakov, Eva Maydell, Asim Ademov and Alexander Yordanov from UDF. Maria Gabriel stated that she would remain as European Commissioner. Thus, her place will probably be occupied by the eighth in the list Emil Radev, as Lilyana Pavlova, who was ahead of him, was nominated by the government as Vice-President of the European Investment Bank.

BSP will send five representatives to the European Parliament - Elena Yoncheva, Sergey Stanishev, Petar Vitanov, Tsvetelina Penkova and Ivo Hristov. President of PES Sergei Stanishev, who was fifth in the list, was second in preferences and so took second place.

MRF will have three MEPs. After the first two in the list, Mustafa Karadayi, the chairman of the party, and the oligarch-MP Delyan Peevski, declined the offer to go to Brussels, Ilhan Kyuchyuk, Iskra Mihaylova and Atijez Aleyeva will be there.

IMRO will have two representatives in the European Parliament - Angel Dzhambazki and film director Andrei Slabakov. Democratic Bulgaria will have one MEP - the former DSB leader Radan Kanev.

As expected, electoral turnout was low - 32.64%, and this was close to the previous European elections in 2014 when it was slightly more than 35%. Vesselin Mareshki's party "Volya" remained below the electoral barrier, with a score of 3.6%. The outcome of two independent candidates prompted interest. Former Mayor of Mladost Desislava Ivancheva, who was sentenced at first instance to 20 years in prison for alleged bribery, paradoxically received 1.55% of the actual votes. This is a paradox, which can be seen as a reaction to the humiliating treatment of Ivancheva in her arrest as well as doubts that have arisen about her guilt and low trust in the prosecution and law enforcement agencies in the country. Another independent candidate, Mincho Hristov, a former MP from "Ataka" and host of the television programme about the behind the scenes working of Bulgarian politics at the Evrocom TV channel, received 1.18% of the actual votes. The results for Ivancheva and Mincho Hristov also provoked interest because of the fact that they exceeded the votes of two of the parties in the ruling coalition "United Patriots" - "Ataka" (1.07) and NFSB (1.15%), which suffered a collapse in these elections.

After the European elections, the issue about the size of party subsidy became a heated debate. The reason for this was the information revealed that, instead of 11 leva per vote, as the law stipulates, parties received 13.25 leva. It became clear that this practice has existed for 15 years, but not one political party has reacted up to now. The Prosecutor's Office initiated a criminal investigation of persons from the Ministry of Finance, and BSP demanded the resignation of Minister Vladislav Goranov. GERB accused BSP of populism, as they had also received an increased subsidy but had not reacted. Therefore, Prime Minister Borisov proposed that the Council of Ministers make decisions for the budget update for 2019, with which the state subsidy for the parties would be reduced to 1 lev. MRF called this populism because this would doom parties to bankruptcy. For this reason MRF

went even further, by proposing a total abolition of the subsidy and a change in the Political Parties Act that would remove the ceiling for financing parties by individuals and give the opportunity for companies and legal entities to finance parties in full transparency and control. BSP reacted acutely to the changes, saying it was an attack on democracy in the country and was directed entirely against the opposition in view of the forthcoming local elections. Democratic Bulgaria also objected to the proposed changes. The United Patriots expressed dissatisfaction that this issue had not been discussed with them for their agreement at the Coalition Council. NFSB leader Valeri Simeonov called the offer a blow to the multi-party system in the country. Temporarily, GERB withdrew its proposal, pending a new negotiation with its coalition partners. The decision to reimburse the difference between the amount due and the subsidy paid after 2016 is considered a heavy blow to the opposition and, above all, to BSP.

## 1.2 Foreign and European policies

At the beginning of May, Pope Francis visited Bulgaria. This was the second Papal visit to Bulgaria after the visit of Pope John Paul II in 2002. During his visit, the Pope sent a message of peace, including representatives of other religious communities in the country, apart from the Orthodox Church. He called for a human attitude to refugees and the needy. According to him, Bulgaria is a country that has always been a bridge between the East and the West, where representatives of different religions and cultures coexist in peace and harmony. The Pope also appreciated the role of Bulgaria in spreading the work of the holy brothers Cyril and Methodius.

On account of canonical considerations, the invitation of the Pope to take part in the prayer for peace did not meet the understanding of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. Pope Francis met with the Bulgarian patriarch Neophyte in the building of the Holy Synod, and both of them expressed satisfaction with the meeting and the conversation. The Pope held a solemn liturgy in Sofia, and in the town of Rakovski, the place with largest Catholic

community in Bulgaria, gave first communion to hundreds of children.

Despite the efforts of the Bulgarian government for the country to join Schengen, it will be difficult to reach a positive decision at this stage. This is evident from the words of Dutch Foreign Minister Stef Blok during his visit to Sofia. He said that there is still no majority in the EU Council for Bulgaria, since not only the Netherlands, but also other countries are still critical of the situation in the country. Blok stated that he understood Bulgaria's desire and welcomed the efforts that the country is making. At the same time, however, he stressed that strong and uncompromising control of external borders is a necessity. According to him, there remains the problem of border control and how the government is dealing with corruption and trafficking in human beings. The Dutch Foreign Minister pointed out that it is important for reforms not only to remain on paper, but also that results should be seen. In his words, the Netherlands closely follows the reports of the European Commission on Bulgaria's progress in the area of justice and home affairs, and these still show a number of shortcomings in the judicial system and the fight against corruption.

At the beginning of June there was tension between Sofia and Skopje related to the work of the Bulgarian-Macedonian Mixed Commission, which reviews the events and personalities of their common history. The reason for the tension was the proposal by Macedonian historians for the general celebrations of the Bulgarian revolutionary Gotse Delchev not on the date when he was born or died, but on October 7th. This was the date when the Communist authorities in Bulgaria passed the bones of Gotse Delchev to Skopje at the injunction of the Comintern. The Vice-premier and IMRO leader Krassimir Karakachanov reacted most acutely, announcing that this offer was provocation and "blatant mockery". Karakachanov said that it was on the acceptance of historical facts and truth as it is that Bulgaria's support of for the membership of Northern Macedonia in the EU would depend. During her meeting with Macedonian Foreign Minister Nikola Dimitrov, Bulgarian Foreign Minister Ekaterina Zaharieva said Bulgaria would never ac-

cept that date. Zaharieva specified that historical truth clearly indicates what Gotse Delchev was - he did indeed call himself a Bulgarian. Zaharieva shared that Bulgaria would not turn its back on its history before 1944. Up until then, Bulgarians had lived in these lands and this is the position that historians in the Joint Commission stand by. After this year, Bulgaria has no claims, because after that the building of the Macedonian nation and identity began with the active participation of Belgrade, which led to a change in the historical truth. Zaharieva reiterated that Bulgaria was the first country to recognise Macedonia as an independent state after the breakup of Yugoslavia. In her words, it is very important for the two countries to live in understanding and dialogue, but this can only happen by accepting history as it is.

For his part, Nikola Dimitrov said that Gotse Delchev was a great historical figure, who should be a bridge between Bulgaria and Macedonia, to unite the two countries, not to divide them. He pointed out, however, that friendship is not based on ultimatums and threats. Dimitrov said the process of building understanding and friendship between Bulgaria and Macedonia would be completed by finding closure on all controversial issues.

At the beginning of June, President Rumen Radev took part in the International Economic Forum in St. Petersburg. Before the forum he met with the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin and they discussed the general economic projects between Bulgaria and Russia. Radev stressed the significance of "Turkish Stream" passing through Bulgaria as part of the energy connectivity of Central and Southeast Europe. Radev stated that the Bulgarian government should be more active in achieving a lower price of Russian gas for Bulgaria. He shared with his Russian counterpart that Bulgaria will soon be receiving the first supply of US liquefied gas, which is at a lower price than that of Russia. President Putin, in turn, said that the price of Russian gas to Bulgaria is fair and that this is the real market price. However, the facts show something different - for years, the price of Russian gas for Bulgaria is higher than that for Germany or countries of Central Europe. During his meeting with Putin Rumen Radev said Russia has

a place in the realisation of the Belene NPP project, regardless of who the main investor in it will be.

The Russian and Chinese presidents and UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres took part in the forum in St Petersburg. Rumen Radev and Slovakia's Prime Minister, Peter Pellegrini, were the only head-of-state level representatives from EU member states. In his address to the forum, the Bulgarian President focused on tackling the challenges of sustainable development in the world, which in his words requires an across-the-board approach, combining a wide range of instruments - from political to cultural. According to Radev, the potential of the UN should be exploited by strengthening the tools and mechanisms through which the organisation can participate more effectively in this process. In his address, Radev highlighted corruption as a major challenge, the range of which now extends across borders. He stressed the need for a global consensus in the fight against corruption, money laundering and income and tax evasion, as well as the restriction of offshore zones.

During the presidential panel of the forum, Vladimir Putin stated that Bulgaria had not acted sovereignly when refusing to build the South Stream, which the Bulgarian President objected to. Radev stated that he could not agree with such a thesis, because the South Stream was a European project and the decision regarding it was taken by the EU in general. Regarding a question about the sanctions on Russia that the moderator of the forum posed the Bulgarian President, Radev pointed out that sanctions had two sides - on the one hand, they were aimed at de-stressing the tensions, but on the other they were not fair for business. According to Radev, sanctions can continue, but the Bulgarian experience during the embargo on former Yugoslavia showed that they lead to a black market, organised crime and other negative consequences.

At the end of June, the purchase of eight US F-16 Block 70 military jets had reached the stage of finalisation. After several months of negotiations between the Bulgarian government and the American side, the United States sent the official offer. Previously, the US Congress had approved the fi-

nancial framework of the deal, which should not exceed \$1.6 billion. The package includes the value of the eight aeroplanes with the full set of air-to-air and air-to-ground weaponry, the long-term operation and maintenance systems associated with them, as well as comprehensive training for pilots and support staff. The value of the offer has not yet been announced publicly, but Prime Minister Borisov mentioned that it will probably be about 2.2 billion levs. In order to pay for the planes, Bulgaria will take money from the reserve and launch a bond issue. A decision of the Council of Ministers is due, as is the submission to the National Assembly of the ratification agreement.

### 1.3 Refugee crisis

At the beginning of April the refugee pressure on the border between Bulgaria and Greece intensified. Thousands of migrants set up a camp near Thessaloniki in preparation for crossing in a northerly direction towards Bulgaria or Macedonia. This led to preventive action by the Bulgarian authorities. Additional patrols with thermal cameras and equipment were sent to the border, the readiness was expressed to include the army in the case of a larger refugee wave.

Interior Minister Mladen Marinov stated there were many migrants detained not only at the Bulgarian-Greek border but also at that between Bulgaria and Serbia. Usually, during the summer months, migratory pressure increases, and this summer will not be an exception. Prime Minister Borisov said the deal with Turkey is working and no problems are expected from this direction. However, the border with Greece remains problematic. At this stage, the crisis in Greece seems to be under control, and the pressure on the Bulgarian border remains at the usual levels for this time of the year.



## 2. State and development of the major political parties

### 2.1 Social Democratic and other centre-left parties

#### 2.1.1 BSP

BSP took part in the elections in the form of the BSP for Bulgaria coalition with several smaller parties. As a whole, BSP set out on a negative campaign, focused entirely on the problems of domestic politics, and the themes on the European agenda were virtually absent. The strategy of the party was to turn the elections for European Parliament into a vote of confidence in the government. It was stated repeatedly that a BSP victory in the elections even by one vote would mean that citizens have lost their confidence in GERB. This, according to the Socialists, would open the door for calling for early parliamentary elections.

BSP turned the topic of corruption into a leading one. The main spokesperson in the campaign was the leader of the list Elena Yoncheva, who did not let up with her taunting of the government, mainly because of the scandals with the apartments purchased at low prices. In the last week of the campaign, Yoncheva attacked Prime Minister Borisov, again focusing on the old topic with the house in Barcelona, which in journalistic publications is claimed to have been bought by Borisov's cronies. In addition, Yoncheva attacked Borisov for swapping stamping grounds with his cousin in the capital, at the time when he was Mayor of Sofia. This created the impression of a campaign of compromises. It led to the mobilisation of the GERB electorate and the drifting away of voters who were hesitating about who to vote for.

Elena Yoncheva participated in a TV debate with the leader of the GERB list, Maria Gabriel, in which her ignorance of the European agenda and the functioning of the European institutions was brought to light. Sergey Stanishev participated in the only debate dedicated to Europe, together with GERB MEP Andrey Kovachev, where there was indeed a full discussion of the challenges facing the EU and the solutions to overcome them. This meant that Stanishev's potential was never fully

used, with almost no media coverage of the TV reports, paid for by the party, of his participation in tours around the country.

BSP also placed too much trust in the sociological surveys, which at the beginning of the campaign showed equal results with GERB and even a slight preponderance for the Socialists. In the middle of the campaign, however, the trend tipped the other way and BSP never found the right way to compensate for having fallen behind. Thus, the socialists lost the next elections too by failing to take advantage of the turmoil in the ruling party. This shows not only an erroneous strategy but also a systematic problem that deserves deeper internal analysis within the party.

The internal party opposition in BSP attacked Ninova for the loss of the election and demanded her resignation. Ninova's reaction was not delayed, saying she was resigning as chair of the BSP National Council. She added that she would participate in internal party elections, which would have to determine the leader of the party according to the changes in the constitution. Ninova stated that this issue would be discussed at a meeting of the party congress.

The BSP National Council refused to accept the report on the party's performance in the elections and, in practice, blames the party leadership. Initially, the report was drafted by the party's think-tank committee, but the Executive Bureau did not like it and reworked it. The think-tank committee's report was highly critical. Putting an emphasis on domestic political issues during the elections and ignoring the themes of the European agenda was regarded as a mistake. Moreover, overexposure of the goal - calling for early parliamentary elections - led to peripheral voters being repelled. The think-tank committee also rejected Ninova's concept of "left-wing conservatism," which does not fit into BSP's "Vision for Bulgaria" programme and the European Vision for Europe platform. This concept led to confusion among sympathisers and party members. Instead of these assessments, however, the Executive Bureau revised the report, focusing on low turnout as a reason for the party's inability to win the election. In addition, the

results were assessed rather in a positive light, as BSP has five MEPs - one more than in the previous European elections. Positive performance was assessed in certain regions of the country.

The National Council decided that the report needed to be finalised, and the proposal that Ninova be the head of the commission was rejected. In addition, the composition of the committee was extended with three new members - Velislava Dareva, Anton Kutev and Anna Pirinska. The decision was taken that the report of the congress should not be read by the leader, but by Valery Zhablyanov.

During the plenum, the sociologist Yuri Aslanov resigned as a member of the National Election Commission. Aslanov made a cutting statement, saying that BSP had waged a campaign of negativity that had repelled the party's periphery and simultaneously added to the mobilisation of the hesitant GERB voters.

The President of PES Sergei Stanishev levied harsh criticism at Kornelia Ninova. He is of the opinion that the reasons for the loss of the elections are complex - from a misguided focus, inaccurate messages and poor organisation of the campaign, to the division in the party brought about by Ninova. According to him, for the past two years, Ninova has been trying to turn BSP into a Eurosceptical and populist party. This, according to Stanishev, is the main issue the party has to sort out. According to him, there can be no retreat from the socialist ideology and the pro-European character of BSP.

Stanishev stated that the internal dialogue in BSP is severely impaired. According to him, one can observe a style of sole decision-making by the party leader, a policy of stubbornness, and denial of the collective character in the party's work. Stanishev is of the opinion that the Party Plenum is used to rubber-stamp decisions taken in advance. As an example, Stanishev gave the decision of BSP to walk out of the National Assembly, which, in his words, was a serious political mistake. Stanishev pointed out that until BSP solved its internal problems, and until the party started a policy of listening to different opinions, it was impossible for citizens to trust the party.

Rumen Ovcharov was among the people who stood firmly behind Ninova. He said her resignation was a mistake and there was no need for such an act. According to Ovcharov, Ninova had managed to change the party and take it out of the backstage area Stanishev had put it in during Oresharski's time in charge. He said that BSP headed by people like Georgi Gergov, Sergey Stanishev, Mikhail Mikov, Dimitar Dabov and Georgi Pirinski had no future.

Before the congress, a number of local BSP structures called for Kornelia Ninova to withdraw its resignation. Representatives of the Party's Executive Bureau also described the resignation as hasty and unnecessary, and urged her to withdraw it. Ninova's opponents, on the other hand, defended the position that, after the resignation had been filed, she was no longer the leader of BSP. In fact, according to the party's constitution, when the leader hands in a resignation, it is only recorded by congress, not voted on.

The meeting of the 49th Party Congress began with appeals to Ninova to withdraw her resignation. The internal opposition made an attempt to put a point on the congressional agenda for changes to the constitution, which was, however, rejected. In her speech at the congress, Ninova said that in the previous week people and structures outside the party had been trying to take control of it and appoint a leadership that would be convenient for them. She pointed out that the party was facing chaos that its future was in jeopardy. For this reason she stated that she would overcome her ego and not resign. Ninova thanked the congress and not the party structures for the support. In fact, what made an impression was that the vast majority of members of Congress supported Ninova.

In the report on the election results, read by Valery Zhablyanov, it is stated that BSP failed to achieve its main goal - to win the EP elections and trigger early parliamentary elections. Varying messages from different party candidates have been reported, which has led to confusion among voters. The report states that BSP missed the opportunity to offer its ideas to Bulgarian society, but has remained in the daily debate about abuses and de-



formations in government. This emphasis, however, has led to the consolidation of the party core of GERB and demotivation for participation in the elections of the so-called peripheral electorate. According to the authors of the report, a key factor in the campaign was the “mass abuse of administrative resources and budget funds” on the part of GERB. It is reported that the capabilities of PES President Sergey Stanishev were not fully exploited. A positive feature that was reported was the better result with the five seats won compared to the 2014 elections, the first places achieved in Montana and Yambol and on the regional level in Pleven and Dobrich. According to the report, these results show good potential for successful performance in the local elections this autumn.

### 2.1.2 Other centre-left parties

Smaller left-wing parties received extremely low results. ABV stood in the elections as “Coalition for Bulgaria” - a name under which the BSP has been in elections for more than two decades. BSP saw this as an attempt to “steal” the votes of the party. For this reason, they began an active explanatory campaign in their structures so as to avoid confusion among voters. In fact, this danger turned out to be overestimated and ABV with the Coalition for Bulgaria received 0.86% of the actual votes or 16,759 votes. “Movement 21” of Tatiana Doncheva achieved an even more modest result – 0.21% of the actual votes or 4,141 votes. These results showed that the two formations do not have any electoral clout and there are no prospects for their development.

## 2.2 Centre-right parties

### 2.2.1 GERB

GERB entered the pre-election campaign with a tainted image. The reverberations in the party after the apartment scandal led to an unprecedented wave of resignations. After Tsvetan Tsvetanov resigned as a Member of Parliament, his place was taken by Daniela Daritkova, chair of the parliamentary group. She is head of the Parliamen-

tary Health Commission and a long-standing MP. However, Tsvetanov remained deputy chairman of the party and chairman of the pre-election headquarters. He stated that he had not done anything untoward and described the attack on himself as part of the election campaign.

Tsvetanov continued to be active in the media on the eve of the election campaign, which, however, had more of a negative impact on GERB. According to data of Alfa Research, every second voter of GERB believes that the case of the apartments is abuse of influence. Thus, at the beginning of the election campaign at the end of April parity was reached between the forces of GERB and BSP. As has already been mentioned, the data of some sociological agencies even showed a slight advantage for BSP. This necessitated a drastic change in the tactics of GERB. Tsvetan Tsvetanov was “hidden” from public attention and the media, and Prime Minister Borisov became the centre of the election campaign.

Borisov started touring the country every day, being involved in a number of events - opening factories, inspecting infrastructure and highways, turning the first sod of the gas interconnector with Greece, together with his colleague Tsipras and others. For the first time in many years Borisov had so actively joined the campaign. And all his appearances were reported in the leading national television channels. The assessment of political analysts is that it was precisely the personal participation of Borisov in the campaign that led to a reversal of attitudes.

During the campaign Borisov mentioned several times that the future of Tsvetan Tsvetanov will depend on the results of the elections. He pointed out that Tsvetanov had caused serious damage to the image of the party.

After the victory in the elections, Borisov announced the news that Tsvetan Tsvetanov was withdrawing from all leading positions in GERB and remaining only a full member. Borisov stated that the results showed that Tsvetanov’s role in the party was overestimated. He pointed out that trust between the two of them was missing on many topics.

Tsvetanov did not disguise his bitterness. He shared that he had suggested two options to Borisov - to remain in the party for the local elections or to leave all the posts he occupied. Borisov had offered a third option - to remain in the party at the headquarters without public and media appearances. That is why Tsvetanov preferred to leave all the positions in the party. Tsvetanov stated that he would not say a bad word about the Prime Minister, because all these years they had worked together and achieved many successes. Tsvetanov did not say what he was going to do in the future, but said he had temporarily "stuck the spikes on the wall", leaving open the question regarding future participation in politics. One thing is certain, at least at this stage - the withdrawal of Tsvetanov will not lead to a split in GERB. Tsvetanov himself is hardly likely to make such a move and this was highlighted by a number of his colleagues in the party.

For many years Tsvetanov had been Borisov's right hand man, since he was the chief secretary of the Interior Ministry. Tsvetanov was also his deputy mayor in the capital. He was also the first president of GERB in 2007-2009 when there was a legal obstacle for mayors to be party leaders. Many saw Tsvetanov as the engine of GERB. With his organisational qualities and energy, Tsvetanov played a leading role in the organisational structuring of GERB and the transformation of the party into a "machine" for winning elections. In actual fact, they both shared out the roles - Borisov in executive power, Tsvetanov in the party, and thereafter in the parliamentary group. Therefore, with Tsvetanov leaving the scene, fundamental changes in GERB will be afoot, which in one way or another will affect the organisational aspect of the party.

Borisov said that from now on the GERB Executive Committee will have more say in the work of the party because its activity has been pro forma so far. He also said that the secretary of state, Tsvetomir Paunov, will take on more tasks in the future. Borisov said that he would no longer have a figure upon whom to concentrate so much power in an organisational plan. He does not envisage the election of a new deputy chair of the party to replace Tsvetanov. So there will be two of them: the mayors of Sofia - Yordanka Fandakova, and Burgas - Dimitar Nikolov.

Tsvetanov's resignation as deputy chairman of GERB will be voted on by the GERB Congress on 7 July, as stipulated in the statute of the party.

What made an impression was the refusal of most of the prominent figures in GERB to comment on Tsvetanov's resignation. The comments were to repeat the words of Prime Minister Borisov, or were formulated along the lines of "the leader knows best the condition of the party and how best to move on". All this showed the authoritarian character of GERB and the leading role of Borisov. This was despite the thesis in recent years that Tsvetanov's role in organisational terms was indispensable and that the power of GERB was rooted in the "Borisov-Tsvetanov tandem". During the campaign, Borisov mentioned in an interview that his goal was to carry out his mandate and after that to give way to the youth in the party.

### 2.2.2 Other centre-right parties

"Democratic Bulgaria" managed to exceed the electoral barrier and will be represented by one MEP, Radan Kanev. He had almost twice as many preferences as the second candidate in the list of "Yes, Bulgaria" - Stefan Tafrov. During the election campaign, most sociological agencies rated the chances of this formation getting into the European Parliament as very low. Actually, the lower-than-expected electoral turnout helped them to do so, and Democratic Bulgaria exceeded the electoral threshold with just 3,500 votes more than the required minimum. Just over 118,000 people voted for the right coalition. By comparison, in the 2017 parliamentary elections, 101,000 people voted only for "Yes, Bulgaria", and 86,000 for DSB. However, entry into the European Parliament should be considered a success and an important step for the new union to establish itself in the party system of the country.

Democratic Bulgaria received the largest share of the votes among Bulgarian voters living abroad - over 6,000 votes. The results show that the two main formations in it "Yes, Bulgaria" and the DSB differ according to region, with nearly 40% of the votes being in Sofia, where they ranked as the third

political force after GERB and BSP. Democratic Bulgaria was voted for mostly by young, highly educated and high-income citizens, who are liberally oriented and live in the big cities of the country.

The UDF participated in the GERB list, which led to the winning of a seat in the European Parliament - that of Alexander Yordanov. This decision, however, turned the "blue party" into an annex of GERB. The preferential votes showed real support for the UDF in practice - Alexander Yordanov received just over 13,000 preferences. The UDF, however, reported the election results as a success. According to UDF chair Rumen Hristov, in the upcoming local elections, cooperation with GERB is likely to be maintained because such were the attitudes of party structures on the ground. Rumen Hristov did not rule out cooperation with "Democratic Bulgaria" in some regions of the country.

## 2.3 Centrist parties

### 2.3.1 MRF

MRF regained its place as the third political power, after having conceded it to the "United Patriots" in the 2017 parliamentary elections. The results of the elections for European Parliament give the party more self-confidence and strengthen its claims for power in the central political space. In these elections, the most important thing for the Movement for Rights and Freedoms was to prove that the party was consolidated and that they had recovered from the damage that DOST, the electoral party of Lyutvi Mestian, had done to them in the 2017 parliamentary elections. Just over 320,000 people voted for MRF, which was viewed by the leadership as a very good result. DOST received only 7,000 votes, indicating that there is no political future for this project.

Also, at these elections, MRF concentrated its efforts on a local campaign, close to its grass roots, in the regions inhabited by its traditional electorate. Two weeks before the elections, an address by honorary chairman of MRF Ahmed Dogan was published to members and sympathisers of the party. In it Dogan appealed to angry and disappointed supporters, asking for forgiveness for mis-

takes in the recent past. In his words, MRF stands for a great cause, so it cannot be allowed to be divided and pursue internal squabbles. Dogan called for unity and consolidation in the name of young people who want a European path of development.

Something that provoked interest was that Oligarch Delyan Peevski appeared at the end of the election campaign. After the election, he also appeared in the National Assembly, which led to a strong journalistic interest stemming from the fact that he had not attended a parliamentary session for almost two years. Peevsky stated that MRF would come up with a proposal to reduce VAT on the price of bread, books and medicines. Later Yordan Tsonov explained that there was nothing populist about this, but that it was the fruit of thorough analysis. According to him, Bulgaria is in a regional market where neighbours - Romania and Greece have similar differentiated VAT rates, and in order to compete with them Bulgaria has to take the same step.

After the elections, MRF continued to assert the thesis of the need for a change in the coalition's governing formula, without this necessarily implying early parliamentary elections. MRF insists on drawing up a long-term programme of catching up process for the development of Bulgaria, around which all major parties should unite, regardless of who is in power. Fundamental to this programme, according to MRF, there must be three main pillars: overcoming the demographic crisis, accelerating development and education. These should also be the leading priorities in the governance of the country, on which a full consensus must be reached. According to MRF, Bulgaria has achieved its national goals only when parties have been united. The MRF gave the country's integration into NATO and the EU as examples - objectives that were realised with the efforts of all the leading parties. In their opinion, such a consensus is possible now too, as long as parties turn their backs on egoism and their narrow party interests.

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

"Volya" led one of the most expensive and aggressive election campaigns. Party leader Veselin

Mareshki, who was also the leader of the coalition “Volya-Bulgarian patriots”, staged populist rhetoric, strongly advocating the party’s rapprochement with nationalist formations in Europe. Marine Le Pen and Matteo Salvini’s wish to build a strong group in the European Parliament has made “Volya” a sought-after partner. This was due not to some ideological reasons, but rather to the rule that it was necessary to have parties from seven member states to form a group in the European Parliament. Veselin Mareshki took part in the big pre-election rally, organised by Matteo Salvini in Italy, an event that was loudly reflected in the pre-election reports of “Volya”. Marine Le Pen, who visited Bulgaria on the eve of the election campaign, found a place in one of the party’s election videos.

The main target of attacks during the election campaign of “Volya” was “United Patriots”. Mareshki’s goal was to draw some of their voters, but as the campaign progressed, they headed for IMRO. So, despite the efforts and the means put in by Veselin Mareshki, his formation received only 3.6% of the actual votes and failed to exceed the electoral barrier.

## 2.4 Nationalist parties

### 2.4.1 “United Patriots”

The United Patriots Coalition emerged disunited in the elections for European Parliament. IMRO was the first to launch its election campaign, based mainly on the image of the leader in the list Angel Dzhambazki. In this way, IMRO managed to consolidate the nationalist vote around it and win two MEPs, while “Ataka” and NFSB received the lowest results in their history. For each of the two parties, just over 20,000 people voted.

Valeri Simeonov refused to give an assessment of the performance of his party. Instead, he focused on the practice of buying votes, which, in his words, all the major parties did. According to Simeonov, it is incomprehensible why there is no reaction against the massive purchase of Roma votes by the Movement for Rights and Freedoms in the region of Northwest Bulgaria, which has already become a favourite practice. In his words,

the police does not do its job well enough or demonstrate a deliberate lack of action.

Volen Siderov continued his attacks on IMRO after the elections as well. In his words, IMRO had received a vote that was totally from a clientele and purchased. According to Siderov, IMRO has so far had no more than 1% in any elections, so they have never had an independent parliamentary group, unlike “Ataka”. Siderov also made a conspiratorial hypothesis by involving the United States in the election process in Bulgaria, drawing a connection between the result of IMRO and the role of Minister of Defence Karakachanov in the purchase of American fighter jets. Julian Angelov of IMRO described this thesis as insane or simply out of envy on the part of Siderov. Krasimir Karakachanov said that Siderov had crossed the line with vilification, lies and defamation directed at him, so he does not see how they will ever be able to look each other in the eye again. In his words, this behaviour is unacceptable between partners and one cannot go on like this. Karakachanov called for a Coalition Council of the United Patriots to decide once and for all the question of how the three formations would continue in the future. Karakachanov, however, pointed out that even if it came to separation, this would not affect support for the government, as the three nationalist parties have separate coalition agreements with GERB. NFSB and “Ataka” have repeatedly pointed out that relations between them will not affect the stability of the majority and the support for the government, which has to see out its mandate in order for commitments to voters to be fulfilled.

Deputy Chairman of IMRO and Deputy Speaker of the United Patriot’s Parliamentary Group Iskren Veselinov said the upheavals in the coalition were so strong that it would be very difficult for it to survive. In his words, the coalition has not been working for half a year and the parliamentary group has not been called by its president Siderov for several months. According to Veselinov, there are two options - for the group to break up or for IMRO and NFSB to continue together.

Valeri Simeonov at this stage distanced himself from the disputes between “Ataka” and IMRO.

He stated that this situation of accusations was not pleasant, recommending that his colleagues find a normal way of holding dialogue. According to Simeonov, there is no room for personal relations in politics, because what has gathered them is common ideas and principles and fulfilling the government programme they have signed.

After the elections, IMRO insisted that the coalition agreement between the partners in the ruling majority be considered. Deputy Prime Minister and leader of IMRO Krasimir Karakachanov said it was quite normal in the middle of the government's mandate to review the achievements and to identify measures that should be implemented by the end of the term of office. IMRO said they would insist that their Roma integration programme be put on the agenda of the National Assembly.

## 2.5 Positions of Political Parties on Foreign and European Policies

Despite the European elections, there were very few issues related to the European agenda in the election campaign.

GERB focused on the successes during the presidency last year, the topic of the Western Balkans, and the work done by Bulgarian commissioner Maria Gabriel. The party avoided the topics raised by the opposition about corruption, delayed membership in Schengen, and the continued monitoring of Bulgaria in relation to the judiciary and corruption.

The opposition in the face of BSP and Democratic Bulgaria accused GERB of the fact that corruption is the main reason why Bulgaria has not yet become a member of Schengen, and these criticisms intensified after the visit of the Dutch Foreign Minister to the country, which has previously been mentioned.

The disputes between Bulgaria and northern Macedonia over the historical past led to reactions from political parties. GERB MEP Andrey Kovachev reacted sharply to the provocation of Macedonian historians regarding Gotse Delchev's personality. According to him, the attempts in

Northern Macedonia to lay hands on Bulgarian history must stop in order to reach genuine good neighbourliness and understanding between the two nations. According to Kovachev, Macedonian identity has been built for years after the Second World War on the basis of anti-Bulgarianism. As an example he cited Macedonian history textbooks, in which Bulgaria was portrayed as Macedonia's biggest enemy. This, according to Kovachev, has led to severe distortions and moods against Bulgaria, so time is necessary to overcome these attitudes. The IMRO also reacted acutely to the anti-Bulgarian campaign launched in Northern Macedonia. "Ataka" said they would ask the National Assembly to draw up an annex to the treaty of understanding and good neighbourliness between the two countries in which the historical issues would be clarified. If the Macedonian side refused to sign the annex, the leader of "Ataka", Volen Siderov, suggested that Bulgaria withdraw unilaterally from the treaty.

## 3. Public Opinion

A study by the Trend Research Centre, conducted in mid-June, shows that GERB retains its leadership position in public opinion. If parliamentary elections were held at this moment, 23.8% of voters would vote for GERB. BSP remained second with 18.9%, and MRF third with 7.1%. Those who would vote for IMRO would account for 3.6% of the polled voters, for Democratic Bulgaria - 3.3%, for Volya - 1.2%, and for "Ataka" - 1.1%.

The survey also shows a decline in confidence in President Radev compared to May. In mid-June, 48% of voters had a positive attitude towards the President, 33% expressed a negative attitude. Parliament had the approval of 20% of Bulgarian citizens and 65% of the respondents were of the opposite opinion. 30% approved of the work of the government, and 54% did not approve of it.

The survey shows that more than half of voters did not feel that early parliamentary elections were needed, and 29% were of the opposite opinion.

#### 4. Main Conclusions and Forecasts

- The European elections confirmed the political status quo and showed that there is no alternative in which voters are wont to place their trust. The campaign of compromising others led to an ebbing of voters and has confirmed the tendency of lack of confidence in the political elite and political parties as a whole. Again in these elections Bulgarian politicians showed inability and lack of willingness to debate on the European agenda. Instead of this there was a focus on malicious domestic political issues, which further repelled the voter, who is weary of “inter-party battles”. Scandals related to apartments and guest houses once again raised the issue of corruption in power.
- In spite of the severe image damage GERB sustained as a result of the scandals and subsequent resignations, the party managed to mobilise itself and continue its winning streak in the next elections. Prime Minister Boyko Borisov played a key role in the campaign, which was broadly reflected in media outlets.

Tsvetanov's exit from the scene of active politics is the beginning of a new stage in the development of GERB. Up until now, Tsvetanov has been Borisov's right hand and the main figure in the party life, who, with his undeniable organisational qualities, played a leading role in the electoral mobilisation of GERB at the time of the elections. From this point on there will be reorganisation in the party, with the Executive Commission being entrusted with stronger functions. On the other hand, Borisov will have to engage more closely with party affairs - a role he had so far conceded to Tsvetanov. Despite the leadership character of GERB and the strong centralisation of the party, the possibility of intra-party changes should not be ruled out, which may affect the condition of the party at grass roots level, having a negative effect on its performance in the upcoming local elections.

- BSP lost these elections too, although there was a favourable political situation created

by the scandals surrounding GERB. Instead standing consolidated at these elections, BSP sank into serious internal struggles about sorting out their party list, which, as expected, had a negative impact on the course of their campaign. The party went to the elections disunited and ran a campaign of negativism. This, on one hand, repelled hesitating voters, and on the other hand consolidated GERB. Leader of the list Elena Yoncheva used the strategy of relying on the same theories and messages that she had been saying for almost a year. This showed inactivity and poor tactical judgment on behalf of the Party leadership regarding the campaign as a whole. Although Ninova confirmed her own position after the congress and showed that there was no alternative to the post of chairman of the National Council of the Party, her withdrawn resignation caused damage to her image, and in the future she will be constantly reminded of this both by her opponents in the party and by those in power. BSP needs dialogue and understanding, which is hardly possible at this stage. The conflicts will continue, and the party will be disunited in the local elections as well.

- The Movement for Rights and Freedoms regained its position as the third political force and overcame the crisis which befell it after the split and the emergence of DOST. The party came close to its usual electoral results, and this will reinforce its claims of being a political balancer again, without which it is not possible to form a stable majority.

The appearance of Delyan Peevski in the public space and his return to parliament is a fact that will now be the subject of observations and further analysis. On the whole, this must be seen as a demonstration of the role he has in the party, and in the political and economic life of the country. However, this does not in any way lead to an improvement in the image of the party; on the contrary it reinforces its reputation as a corporate-oligarchic group.

- The conflicts between the leaders of the United Patriots and the insults they hurled during



the campaign also burned the last bridges between them. Despite this, it is hardly likely that the ruling majority will collapse, because what still brings the three formations together is power and staying there at all costs. The European elections changed the distribution of forces between the three parties. The nationalist vote was consolidated in IMRO and the party will have two independent MEPs in the elections, which is undoubtedly a success for it. The other two parties – “Ataka” and NFSB - have virtually disappeared from the electoral map.

- The result for “Volya” showed that the party is on the brink of survival, politically speaking. This is a consequence of the opportunistic policy led by its leader, Mareshki. His attempt

to ride the nationalist and populist wave was not crowned with success. The local elections are likely to confirm the downward trend in electoral support for “Volya”.

- “Democratic Bulgaria” achieved their programme minimum of at least one MEP. Although the electoral barrier was passed because of the lower level of activity and with the help of votes from abroad, the European elections brought the liberal urban right-wing back to the political scene. The formation continues to have a highly regional character - nearly 40% of the votes were received in Sofia. Probably precisely the capital and the other bigger cities in the country will be the focus in the campaign of Democratic Bulgaria in the local elections in the autumn.

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