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## Foreign Policy Effects of the New Coalition Government in Bulgaria

Jakub Pieńkowski

*Bulgaria's new coalition government—for the third time under Boyko Borisov—has received a vote of confidence. Its programme calls for strengthening European integration, but the coalition formed by the Borisov's centre-right party Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria and the nationalist alliance of the United Patriots might be threatened by instability and may complicate Bulgaria's relations with Turkey.*

On 4 May, Bulgaria's parliament convened for the first time after the March early elections and voted on the third cabinet of Prime Minister Boyko Borisov (2009–2013; 2014–2017). His centre-right party Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB), in coalition with the nationalist alliance of the United Patriots (OP), was backed by 134 of the 240 deputies, with 100 MPs against. The ruling coalition's majority is slim. Of its 122 MPs, GERB has 95 and the United Patriots has 27. Therefore, GERB reached agreement on parliamentary cooperation with another party, Volya, which has 12 MPs and is run by an eccentric politician and businessman named Veselin Mareshki. This party wants rapprochement with Russia and remains against European integration, but on the other hand it wants Bulgaria to join the eurozone and Schengen Area. The opposition consists of 80 MPs of the post-communist Bulgarian Socialist Party (BPS) and 26 MPs of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS), elected mostly by Bulgarian Turks, who comprise 9% of Bulgaria's citizenry.

**In Search of a Coalition Partner.** In November 2016, after the GERB candidate for president, Tsetska Tsacheva, lost the election, Borisov dissolved his second cabinet. He forced a political crisis that led to early parliamentary elections. At the same time, he proved that he treats his election promises seriously, and therefore he is still the most trusted politician among Bulgarians (with 32% support). This has helped Borisov create an image as the only guarantor of political and economic stability, and that he fights corruption and will strengthen Bulgaria's relations with the EU and NATO while maintaining good relations with Russia and Turkey.

Although GERB's result in the early elections was very good (11 MPs more than in the previous term), it was not enough for it to govern alone. Due to ideological differences, its coalition partner could not be the DPS. A coalition with the Turkish minority party would preclude cooperation with the nationalists, who supported some of the previous GERB government's proposals. Borisov ruled out a grand coalition with BPS because it would undermine his image as a politician who fights corruption. Bulgarian citizens who remember the BPS rule of 2005–2009 identify this party primarily with corruption. The scandals of that time even caused the EU to suspend a structural funds payment to Bulgaria in 2008.

So, GERB proposed a coalition to United Patriots. Negotiations on the common programme were not long, despite serious ideological differences and the fact that UP itself is a layered coalition. It comprises the National Front of Salvation of Bulgaria (NFSB) and the IMRO-Bulgarian National Movement (VMRO-BND), which as the conservative-nationalist coalition of Patriotic Front supported Borisov's minority government during its last term—and the xenophobic, anti-Western party Attack, known for its regular anti-Turkish and anti-Roma rhetoric.

**The Coalition Agreement.** Nationalists have never been in government in democratic Bulgaria. Now, despite open animosity, declared many times, to the EU and NATO, they are ready to make many concessions, especially in GERB's key Euro-Atlantic policy. This compromise is evident in the coalition government's position on the need to preserve unity in the EU, strengthen European integration, and base EU reforms on the values of solidarity and equality between the Member States. The coalition also has confirmed Bulgaria's willingness to join the eurozone.

In its security policy, the coalition government declares that Bulgaria will be an active and reliable member of the EU and NATO. This is a serious concession especially by Attack, which has demanded a referendum on Bulgaria's exit from NATO many times. The coalition programme appreciates the importance of NATO against the growing influence of third countries in the Balkans and the Black Sea region. In addition, the Bulgarian government seeks closer cooperation between NATO and the EU and declares it wants to be involved in the development of a new defence policy for the Union. It also plans to spend 2% of GDP annually on the Bulgarian military by the end of the government's mandate in 2021.

Including the nationalists' demands on foreign and security policy is not controversial to GERB voters. The government's programme responds to the current mood of Bulgarians and their immediate concerns about safety. Under the agreement, the government will work to better protect state borders and to expel illegal immigrants from Bulgaria. In addition, it is expected to try to revise the Dublin Regulation, which puts the main burden of dealing with refugees and migrants on EU border states along key immigration routes. The government has pledged to fight extremism and interference in Bulgaria's internal affairs by other states. The nationalists are particularly concerned about radicalisation of Bulgaria's Muslims (12% of the population) and accuse Turkey of interference in the Bulgarian elections. The nationalists charge Turkey with agitation and even offering free bus rides to Bulgarian citizens who are permanent residents in Turkey to polling stations in Bulgaria.

The nationalists' impact on Borisov's so far pro-European foreign policy will not be significant. This is also because key offices in this sphere will continue to be occupied by GERB politicians. Tomislav Donchev, who was responsible in the first Borisov cabinet for European funds, is now deputy prime minister without portfolio. The minister of foreign affairs and deputy PM in charge of judicial reform is Ekaterina Zakhariyeva. She was minister of justice in the second Borisov government. Earlier, she was a minister in the chancellery of former President Rosen Plevneliev, who was pro-European and criticised Russia for its aggression against Ukraine. Zakhariyeva favours extending the EU sanctions against Russia. The minister in charge of the Bulgarian presidency of the Council of the European Union (in the first half of 2018) is Lilyana Pavlova, the highly appreciated minister of regional development in the second Borisov government.

Two of the leaders of United Patriots were nominated to deputy PM offices. Valeri Simeonov (NFSB) is in charge of economy and demographic policy while Krasimir Karakachanov (IMRO-BND) is both defence minister and deputy PM in charge of public order and national security. The third leader of United Patriots, Volen Siderov (Attack), was not be given any office in the new government, but the ministers of economy and environment were nominated by the nationalists.

**Conclusions.** GERB's victory in the early elections and reappointment of Borisov as prime minister as predicted mean that the most important directions of Bulgarian foreign policy will be maintained. Despite including nationalist parties in the coalition, the new Bulgarian government seeks to strengthen elements of European policy, such as the need for closer integration, common defence policy, reform of EU migration policy, and joining the eurozone. These points, along with its recent support for a European Public Prosecutor's Office, indicates that Bulgaria in the debate on EU developments will favour closer integration.

The involvement of the nationalist parties in the government coalition probably will not change the threat perception regarding the Black Sea region but could petrify the traditional Bulgarian sympathies with Russia out of fear of a strengthened Turkey. As a result, convincing Bulgaria to take up new NATO initiatives in the region—such as a joint fleet—is likely to be even more difficult for countries wishing to strengthen the Alliance's presence in the Black Sea.<sup>1</sup>

The stability of the GERB and United Patriots coalition could be threatened by any new massive influx of refugees and migrants from Turkey. The lack of prompt and effective support from the EU could be exploited by the nationalists to question the bloc's credibility. On the other hand, the possibility of a recurrence of anti-Turkish or anti-immigrant actions by the nationalists, especially Attack, now a coalition partner, could expose Bulgaria to criticism from the European Commission and European Parliament and could cause tension in its relations with Turkey.

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<sup>1</sup> W. Lorenz, "Strengthening Deterrence in the Black Sea Region," *PISM Bulletin*, No. 22 (1464), 3 March 2017, [www.pism.pl/publications/bulletin/no-22-962](http://www.pism.pl/publications/bulletin/no-22-962).