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THE POLISH INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

# BULLETIN

No. 8 (1079), 18 January 2018 © PISM

Editors: Sławomir Dębski ● Bartosz Wiśniewski ● Rafał Tarnogórski

Karolina Borońska-Hryniewiecka ● Anna Maria Dynier ● Aleksandra Gawlikowska-Fyk  
Sebastian Płóciennik ● Patrycja Sasnal ● Justyna Szczudlik ● Marcin Terlikowski ● Tomasz Żornaczuk

## “United We Stand Strong:” Bulgaria’s EU Council Presidency

Jakub Pieńkowski

*On 1 January 2018, Bulgaria took up the presidency of the EU for the first time. Over the next six months, it will try to build up its image as a stable and responsible EU partner and the leader of the Balkan states. The effectiveness of the Bulgarian presidency will depend on its ability to achieve compromise on such issues as mass-migration, Brexit, and the new budgetary framework. Bulgaria avoided involvement in Article 7 actions against Poland, but in this situation, its emphasis on the mediating role of the presidency may be particularly important.*

**Internal Determinants.** In both the political and public perception, the Bulgarian presidency of the EU is an important event. Prime Minister Boyko Borisov, also the leader of the party Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB), in 2017 set up the post of minister in charge of the presidency of Bulgaria in the EU Council and nominated Lilyana Pavlova, the former long-serving Minister of Regional Development. Among her tasks is probably also to strengthen the government during the next EU budget (multiannual financial framework, or MFF) debate and to win funds through cohesion policy, important for Bulgaria, the poorest and most corrupt Member State. In addition, according to a new poll released by Trend this month, 76% of Bulgarians consider the EU presidency to be important.

In December 2017, to improve the state’s image in the EU, Bulgaria’s parliament adopted a new anti-corruption law prepared by GERB. It needed to implement European Commission recommendations included in evaluations of the mechanism for cooperation and verification (CVM). Given the lack of an independent judiciary and the ineffective fight against corruption, Bulgaria has been under CVM supervision since 2007 and has not yet joined the Schengen area. On 2 January, however, President Rumen Radev vetoed the bill, describing it as a facade, and the parliamentary opposition announced it would make a motion of no confidence. Although the government has a parliamentary majority, which may reject both the veto and vote of no confidence, the episode could negatively affect the image of the Bulgarian presidency. Beyond that, the participation in the ruling coalition of the United Patriots (UP)—an alliance of xenophobic and Eurosceptic parties—may be even more harmful to the EU’s perception of Bulgaria. This is why during Bulgaria’s EU presidency the UP’s leaders, Valeri Simeonov, who is also the deputy prime minister for Economic Affairs, and Krasimir Karakachanov, a deputy PM and defence minister, will not participate in the Council meetings. Since joining the government, though, the UP has eased its rhetoric and has not stoked tensions over European policy issues.

**Maintaining EU Unity.** The Borisov government recognises the priority of the presidency is to maintain EU unity. The motto of this presidency comes from the Bulgarian coat of arms: “United we stand strong.” Bulgaria will try to avoid issues that could result in criticism from EU institutions or deepen the differences of opinion between Member States. A phone call on 5 January between Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki and Borisov on the Article 7 issue may be viewed as proof of Bulgaria’s intention to keep the

presidency a neutral mediator in the matter. On the other hand, in Borisov's speech on the inauguration of the presidency on 11 January, it appeared that Bulgaria will likely avoid bringing the issue to the attention of the Council at all.

Borisov promised instead to conduct hard negotiations on Brexit until the details are fixed. This is intended to preserve the unity of the EU by preventing bilateral talks between the UK and Member States. Bulgaria, despite its pro-Russia sympathies, also will not push for abolition of the EU sanctions on Russia, which was confirmed by the Minister of Foreign Affairs Ekaterina Zakharieva. These sanctions are in effect until the end of July, which is why Bulgaria can hold off during its presidency and pass on this sensitive issue to Austria, which is also considered pro-Russia but also stronger in the EU.

Bulgaria also intends to ease tensions related to the unsuccessful mandatory programme to relocate asylum-seekers across the bloc. It says it recognises the creation of an effective repatriation programme and the joint division of responsibility for refugees as a crucial issue. In addition, as a state situated on the external border of the Union, Bulgaria's preferred method for solving the mass-migration crisis is the EU's fulfilment of its obligations towards Turkey, which should halt the movement of refugees and migrants from its territory in return. The talks and meetings between Borisov and Turkish President Recep Erdoğan demonstrates Bulgaria's efforts to improve EU-Turkish relations. At the beginning of 2018, Zakharieva proposed an EU-Turkey summit, but it is not yet on the presidency schedule.

**Integration of the Western Balkans.** For Bulgaria, the most important goal of its presidency is to make European integration of the Western Balkans—the only region with the prospect of EU membership—more dynamic. This is set against the background of various crises that have affected the EU and weakened its interest in enlargement. Bulgaria will try to persuade the Member States that a successful Balkans integration would be proof of the continued attractiveness of the European model. President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker's 2017 State of the Union speech spoke to the need to present a credible membership perspective to the Balkan states. In this regard, Bulgaria plans to organise an EU-Western Balkans summit on 17 May. It would aim to set concrete integration plans for each state and the possibility to include some of them already in EU programmes involving transport, telecommunications, energy, education and digitalisation, such as cancelling mobile roaming charges, even before accession. This objective coincides with Bulgaria's strategic interest to play the role of the leader of the Balkan states and to represent their common interests on the EU forum. This would strengthen Bulgaria's political position in the Union, and may lead to the achievement of key economic projects, such as the "Balkan" gas hub and an effective land connection with Western and Southern Europe. On Borisov's initiative, the prime ministers of Bulgaria, Greece, and Romania, and the president of Serbia launched a new cooperation format called the "Balkan Four." Bulgaria has normalised relations with Macedonia since signing a good neighbour agreement in August. That was followed by joint plans to build a road and rail connection as part of the VIII Pan-European transport corridor, connecting Varna on the Black Sea coast—via Sofia and Skopje—to the Albanian port of Durrës on the Adriatic coast. In December, a meeting of the heads of state and government of the Balkan countries with representatives of the EC and World Bank took place in Sofia. Its aim was to discuss financing the VIII corridor, but also corridor X, connecting Austria, via the Western Balkans, to Greece.

**Development, Cohesion, Digitalisation.** The Bulgarian presidency wants to focus on economic growth and social cohesion simultaneously. The Bulgarian economy and public investments are dependent on structural funds. Meanwhile, the expected UK exit from the EU will significantly reduce the common European budget. That is why Bulgaria has announced a debate on the 2021–2027 MFF, promoting the current cohesion policy and Common Agricultural Policy.

Another priority of the Bulgarian presidency is to strengthen the competitiveness of the EU economy by creating a unified digital market. This goal was taken up after the Estonian presidency, which, unlike Bulgaria, commonly uses modern technology in its economy and administration. Meanwhile, the Sofia government has delayed introducing existing EU legislation. The EC, in turn, has pushed to punish Bulgaria for not implementing its directive on enforcing copyrights in online music. However, the Bulgarian presidency can count on the support of Mariya Gabriel, the current EU Commissioner for Digital Economy and Society, and GERB member, to push forward the EU legislative process on digitalisation.

**Conclusions.** Faced with the limited powers of the presidency and little experience in managing the EU agenda, Bulgaria intends to use the presidency mainly to improve its image. It also has high hopes of accelerating the integration of the Balkan states with the EU. The May summit is expected to strengthen Bulgaria as the regional leader. At the same time, the failure of this initiative raises the risk of increasing scepticism within the EU of ambitious projects for the Western Balkans. Bulgaria is opting for a presidency that will ease the divisions between EU members. This meets Juncker's appeals for Bulgaria to be actively involved in the search for compromise in the dispute between the EC and Poland over the launch of Article 7 procedure. As the state managing the agenda of EU Council summits, Bulgaria therefore has an opportunity to play an important role in the resolution of the dispute.