



Country Issue: Bulgaria



The Relaunch of Europe

Mapping Member States' Reform Interests

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Institut für Europäische Politik (Institute for European Politics, IEP) is one of the leading foreign and European policy research centres in the Federal Republic of Germany dedicated to the study of European integration.

Further information on the project can be found here:

www.relaunch-europe.eu

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THE RELAUNCH OF EUROPE

MAPPING MEMBER STATES' REFORM INTERESTS

The Relaunch of Europe. Mapping Member States' Reform Interests (RelaunchEU) is a project conducted by the Institut für Europäische Politik (IEP) on behalf of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) that surveys the implementation prospects for twelve concrete reform proposals. It covers the policy areas of Social Union, Economic and Monetary Union and Defence Union as well as asylum and migration policy and the EU's institutional set-up. Furthermore, it analyses the support for flexible integration and the positioning towards the five scenarios presented in the European Commission's »White Paper on the Future of Europe« of spring 2017. It covers the positions of national governments and of relevant progressive political parties, which received a minimum share of 5 % of the votes in the previous European or national elections.¹

The study follows two main objectives: (1) It demonstrates the scope of action for prompt reforms of the EU in the selected policy areas while also taking into account which member states would, under certain conditions, be willing to implement the specific proposals. (2) It empirically determines which member states could belong to an avant-garde group willing to deepen integration.

Researchers from think tanks and research institutions in the member states of the EU-27 compiled information to determine the position of governments and progressive political parties towards the twelve reform proposals. This qualitative analysis reflects the country experts' views and is based on documents such as coalition agreements, government or party programmes, position papers, press releases, interviews, op-ed pieces, and official documents. It presents a snapshot of the discussions within the governments and parties. In order to keep the country issues short, internal debates and deviating opinions cannot be covered in detail. Positions are subject to change, especially following elections and the formation of new governments. The snapshot was taken at the end of September 2017. More recent developments could not be included. Notable exceptions are the country issues of Austria and Germany, which were updated following the latest coalition negotiations.

The study's results are published in English on the website www.relaunch-europe.eu. It presents maps for every actor and reform proposal, 27 country issues and an analytical paper. The paper compares the positions of all actors in all member states of the EU-27 on the twelve concrete reform proposals and presents five flagship-projects, which bear the chance for a relaunch of Europe.

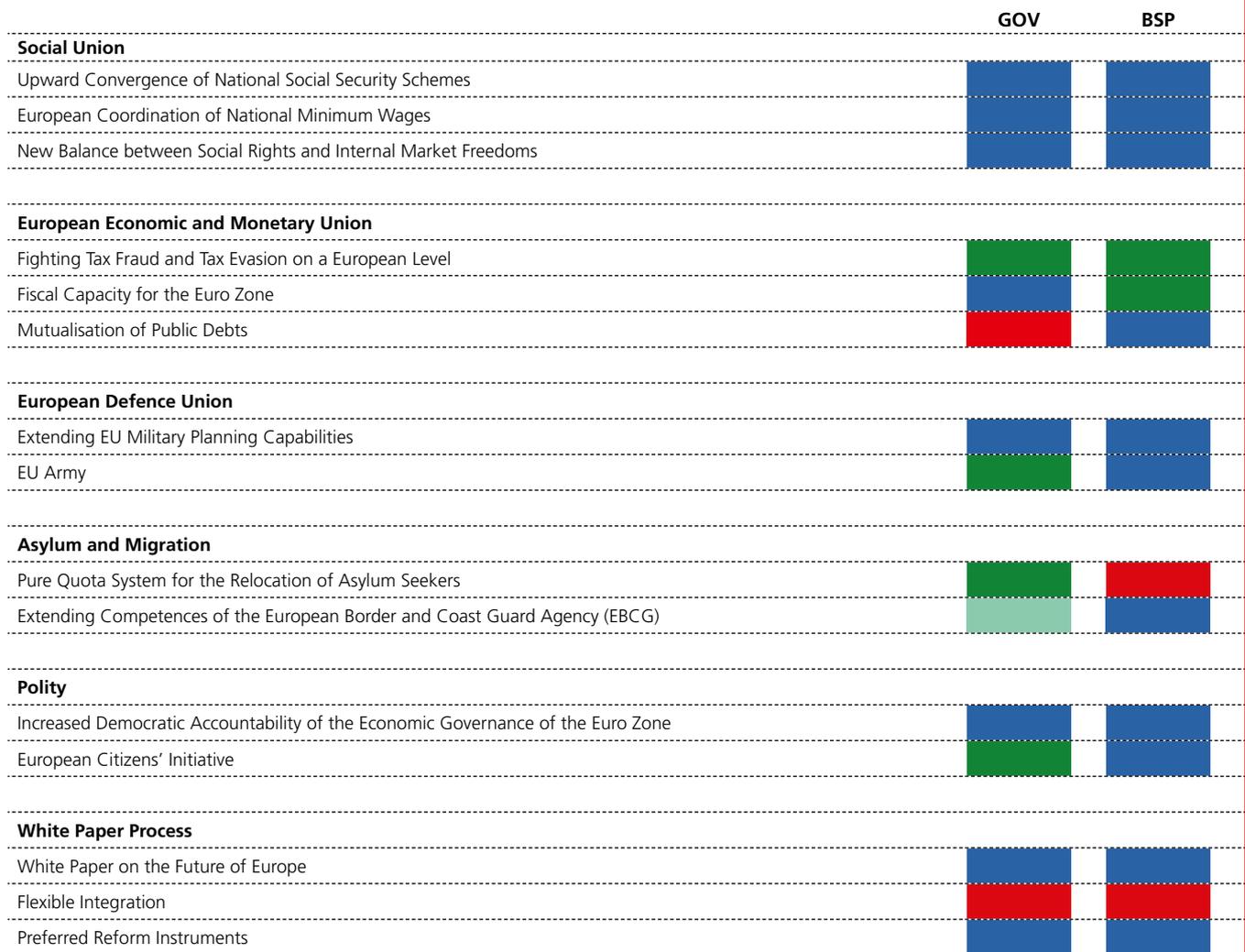
¹ If a party fulfills this criterion, but is not a relevant actor in the national public debate anymore, it was deleted from the sample based on the judgement of the projects' country expert.

BULGARIA

Since the parliamentary elections in March 2017, Bulgaria is governed by a coalition between the centre-right *Grazhdani za Evropeisko Razvitiye Balgariya* (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria, GERB) party and the United Patriots. The

latter are an alliance of three nationalist parties who campaigned on strong anti-migration and anti-Turkish rhetoric. The progressive *Bălgarska Socialističeska Partija* (BSP) is currently the second largest party in the Bulgarian parliament.

Support of the Bulgarian Government and the BSP for Deepening EU Integration



Legend

- support for
- support under conditions
- against
- neutral

- GOV** National Government
- BSP** Bălgarska Socialističeska Partija

- 1 – Scenario 1: »Carrying on«
- 2 – Scenario 2: »Nothing but the single market«
- 3 – Scenario 3: »Those who want more do more«
- 4 – Scenario 4: »Doing less more efficiently«
- 5 – Scenario 5: »Doing much more together«

SOCIAL UNION

Bulgaria ranks first among the EU member states regarding the percentage of its population that is at risk of poverty or social exclusion (41 % in 2015). Thus, the political debate is generally focused on lifting the national living standard, which is considerably below the EU average. There are hardly any discussions concerning reform proposals on the social dimension of the EU. Thus, neither the government nor the BSP have a specific stance regarding the **upward convergence of national social security schemes**. While the government plans to increase the employment rate by improving »human capital« and labour productivity, e.g. through better education and improved skills of employees, the BSP addresses international standards of payment and the definition of minimum wages in its manifesto. The BSP is struggling to reduce the growing poverty and inequality, to seek support for the most affected social groups, and to achieve a level of income that provides a decent standard of living. Therefore, the general aim is to increase the national level of real wages, investments in the qualification of employees, and the minimum wage. The latter one has to be linked with the increase of the country's average salary. However, there is no further discussion concerning the **European coordination of national minimum wages**. Instead, the focus is on the level of the national minimum wage, which the current government increased to 460 lev, equivalent to about 235 euro. Nevertheless, the minimum wage in Bulgaria remains the lowest in the EU. Therefore, the government aims to raise it up to 650 lev by 2021 in order to promote higher living standards in the country. Both actors support the participation of social partners in the process of setting the national minimum wage. The BSP states that it must be based on living conditions. Once more, the idea of **a new balance between social rights and internal market freedoms** has not yet appeared on the national political agenda. Thus, none of the actors has adopted a clear position on this reform proposal. The government stresses the importance of social cohesion in the EU and believes that social and tax dumping needs to be tackled. However, social policy has to remain national competence.

EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND MONETARY UNION

The current Bulgarian corporate tax rate of just 10 % is a competitive advantage for the country. Therefore, the Bulgarian government is against a Europe-wide minimum corporate tax rate. However, the government is in favour of more cooperation with other EU member states **in fighting tax fraud and tax evasion**. A stable regulatory framework in this area will facilitate the work of the responsible authorities. In September 2016, the Bulgarian Ministry of Finance took steps to implement the Council Directive (EU) 2016/881 of 25 May 2016 regarding »mandatory automatic exchange of information in the field of taxation« and new rules with regard to country-by-country reporting have come into force as well. In cooperation with the

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the country has introduced anti-hybrid provisions aimed at curbing the possibilities for double non-taxation. It appears that the government is open for closer cooperation on corporate taxation within the EU but it is afraid that its administrative capacity might not be sufficiently developed. As Bulgaria is not yet part of the euro zone, the current discussion is rather focused on the question of when Bulgaria might adopt the euro. The BSP is supporting the creation of a new **fiscal capacity for the euro zone**, while Bulgaria's government is rather hesitant and indecisive. Such a budget could create false incentives for member states to rely on rescue mechanisms. The government also fears that the European Commission would gain too much power due to further financial commitments of euro zone countries and rights to intervene with national budgets. However, Bulgaria is willing to join the Banking Union once it has become a full member of the euro zone. Thus, the current government recently announced that it seeks to join the Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM II) also known as the euro waiting room. Generally, the question of the **mutualisation of public debts** is not a pressing matter in Bulgaria, as the country has the third lowest debt to gross domestic product ratio in the EU. Although both national actors have no specific position on this topic, the government has expressed some general concerns. However, there is clear opposition to issuing common bonds. Such bonds are considered another incentive for moral hazard. Highly indebted states would be encouraged to carry on taking on new loans.

EUROPEAN DEFENCE UNION

Under the condition that NATO structures are not duplicated, both actors are in favour of stronger common European defence policy. NATO and EU are seen as necessary means to guarantee Bulgaria's security and common defence as a way to save money. However, neither the government nor the BSP have adopted a clear position on the **extension of EU military planning capabilities**. While the BSP is indecisive towards the creation of an **EU army**, the Prime Minister considers that its establishment is the next logical step towards a common defence policy among the EU member states. In this regard, the government supports the creation of the European Defence Fund financed by member states' contributions and other EU funding. Similarly, the government is in favour of reinforcing and further developing EU battle groups and the extension of its common funding in order to achieve fair burden-sharing among the EU member states. Either way, EU-NATO cooperation is of national priority and needs to be enhanced.

ASYLUM AND MIGRATION

Bulgaria has not joined the Schengen area yet, but it is one of the main entry countries for asylum seekers from Turkey heading to other EU member states. Thus, migration has been a key issue in the national political debate. Both, the

Bulgarian government and the BSP, consider the current Dublin system unfair as it burdens countries with external EU borders. Furthermore, the government asks for the introduction of a fair **pure quota system for the relocation of asylum seekers** based on burden sharing, which ensures an equal distribution of refugees within the EU. However, it would not support any correction mechanism that would allow Schengen area members to buy their way out of the obligation to take in refugees with financial contributions for countries outside the Schengen area. This, the Bulgarian government argues, would not be compatible with the idea of a fair and solid Common European Asylum System (CEAS). The BSP is less interested in EU reform options and more concerned about the completion of the Turkish border fence to stop migration flows. In contrast to the government, the party opposes any further deepening of the CEAS. **Increased competences for the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (EBCG)** are conditionally supported by the government since the EBCG plays an important role in the management of the EU's external borders. The government prioritizes the agency's function in returning irregular migrants effectively. Therefore, all member states should provide timely expertise and equipment for the EBCG's full deployment in order to ensure its rapid response capacity in times of crisis. However, the government opposes any competences of the agency that intervene in national sovereignty over border security and demands that states have a greater say in the decision to deploy the EBCG at their borders.

POLITY

As stated above, adopting the euro remains a priority for Bulgaria. However, reform proposals by national actors on how to **increase the democratic accountability of the economic governance in the euro zone** are lacking. Hence, proposals including parliamentary involvement, a European economic government or a European Finance Minister are neither an issue for the government nor the BSP. Nonetheless, the government agrees with further stabilisation and development of the EMU and also approves recent proposals for EMU reforms by the French government. Although Bulgaria figures among the few EU countries where referenda are enshrined in the constitution as instruments of direct democracy, the Bulgarian government and the BSP do not have a concrete opinion on the reform of the **European Citizens' Initiative (ECI)**. In general, the Bulgarian government supports reforms of the ECI in view of rendering the procedure more citizen-friendly and enhancing follow-up actions for successful initiatives.

WHITE PAPER PROCESS

The publication of the **»White Paper on the Future of Europe«** by the European Commission has been met with various concerns in Bulgaria. While the government remains indecisive which of the five presented scenarios it prefers, the progressive party BSP has as of yet also not found a clear

position. However, scenario 3, **»those who want more do more«**, is most likely not the preferred option, as both have expressed strong concerns about a possible multi-speed Europe. The reservations in Bulgaria concerning the idea of **flexible integration** generally stem from the fear of being left behind and thus being demoted to a second-class EU member state. This status has already broadly been experienced by Bulgaria as it is neither a member of the euro zone nor the Schengen area. Nonetheless, both actors regard differentiation as the most likely scenario for the future of the EU. This is due to the heterogeneity of its member states, which currently poses a great obstacle to advancing the EU integration process. Therefore, the actors stress the need for unity and solidarity in ensuring the EU's ability to deal with current and future challenges. However, both remain indecisive regarding the instruments for the implementation of reform proposals as discussed above.

Legend

Actors Covered by the Study in each EU Member State

- *National Government*: including its members from one or more political parties, the Head of State or Government, relevant executive ministers and administration.
 - *Progressive Parties*: They include all parties that are represented either in the Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament (S&D) or that are members of the Party of European Socialists (PES) and have gained a minimum share of 5 % of the votes in the last national or European elections. They also include La République en Marche (REM) in France.
-

Concrete Reform Options in Different Policy Areas

Social Union

1. *Upward Convergence of National Social Security Schemes* to provide Europe-wide protection against social risks and to ensure a decent standard of living for EU citizens.
 2. *European Coordination of National Minimum Wages* to ensure a decent income within the EU to prevent in-work poverty, to promote social convergence and to avoid social dumping across the EU.
 3. *New Balance of Social Rights and Internal Market Freedoms* to compensate the current precedence of internal market freedoms over national social rights.
-

European Economic and Monetary Union

4. *Fighting Tax Fraud and Tax Evasion on a European Level* for a fair allocation of tax burdens among natural and judicial persons.
 5. *Fiscal Capacity for the Euro Zone* to provide stabilisation against economic shocks through public expenditure in the euro zone.
 6. *Mutualisation of Public Debts* to tackle the problem of a sharp increase in public debts in some member states as a result of the euro zone crisis.
-

European Defence Union

7. *Extending EU Military Planning Capabilities* also for executive military missions and operations.
 8. *EU Army* establishing a permanent multinational military force under European command.
-

Asylum and Migration

9. *Pure Quota System for the Relocation of Asylum Seekers* which would replace the Dublin system.
 10. *More Competences for the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (EBCG)* expanding the current EBCG tasks in terms of »shared responsibility« between the EBCG and national authorities.
-

Polity

11. *Increase Democratic Accountability of the Economic Governance of the Euro Zone* to make its institutions more responsive to EU citizens.
 12. *European Citizens' Initiative (ECI)*: revision of the ECI regulation to make the instrument more citizen-friendly and effective in order to strengthen the participative democracy in the EU.
-

White Paper Process

13. *The White Paper on the Future of Europe* by the European Commission presents five possible scenarios for the future course of European integration.
14. *Flexible Integration*: limiting the application of certain rules to certain EU member states.
15. *Preferred Reform Instrument*: Treaty reform, reforms inside or outside the Treaties.

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