



“European” and “Extreme” Populists in the Same Row – the New Government of the Republic of Bulgaria

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ISAC Fund

Professional paper

UDK: 323(497.2)

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***Abstract:** The current (minority) government consists of the representatives of the political parties Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) led by the former Mayor of Sofia, Boyko Borisov. What makes this right-centre government especially interesting is that it is supported in the Parliament by the extremist party of a symbolic name - Ataka. This party, since its appearance in 2005, has done everything to present itself as an uncompromising opponent to all major tendencies in the European and Euro-Atlantic area. Moreover, its sole creation has led to the quakes on the European political level, since it enabled the creation of the extremist group in the European parliament (EP), along with the parties of the similar provenience from other Member States. In the following text the author will try to explain how this paradox came about, that an extremist party, officially very sceptical of the European Union (EU), openly supported a centre-right party which bases its own identity on this supranational creation. For that purpose, we will explain the phenomenon of the rise of populism in Bulgaria in the last decade, which is a key factor for understanding the ways of cooperation and closeness of GERB and Ataka. We will also examine their programmatic and ideological differences and similarities, as well as the basic motives for their cooperation. Finally, we will try to answer the question that logically follows: what is the reason for this seemingly unnatural coalition and what is its scope.*

***Keywords:** Bulgaria, Ataka, GERB, the European Union, populism, coalition.*

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2009 Parliamentary Elections

Parliamentary elections in July 2009, as it was expected earlier, radically changed the political scene of Bulgaria. The main favourite, the party of, at the time, Mayor of Sofia, Boyko Borisov – GERB won 39.72% of the votes, which enabled them to obtain 117 out of 240 seats in the Parliament¹. Since this success at the elections was not enough to form a government by themselves, they were forced to search for support among the smaller right-wing parties that managed to enter the Parliament². The parties from the previous government – Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) and the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS) – had no chance to form another cabinet. Hence, the possible partners were both the *Blue Coalition* (formed by the *Alliance of Democratic Forces* (SDS) and *Democrats for Strong Bulgaria* (DSB) of the former Prime Minister Ivan Kostov) with 15 seats, the new party *Order, Law and Justice* (RZS) with 10 seats, as well as the extremist party *Ataka* with 21 seats. Viewed from aside, as a coalition of “sister” right-centered parties from the *European People Party* (EPP), only the *Blue Coalition* should have been an acceptable partner for GERB, since the other two potential candidates showed clear tendencies towards political extremism. This possibility was mentioned several times during the pre-election campaign, especially from the *Blue Coalition* side³. Nevertheless, Boyko Borisov openly rejected any possibility of creating pre-election coalitions, presuming that GERB would obtain enough seats to form the government alone. Since it did not happen, he pledged for the creation of the minority government which would be supported by one of the three parties/coalitions. Right after the results of the elections were made public, both *Ataka* and RZS gave their unconditional support, while the representatives of the *Blue Coalition* wanted a deal on the economic programme to fight recession, still assuming they were the only relevant partner for GERB⁴.

Borisov offered to his potential partners some sort of a contract to establish the principles for support of the minority government: a quick revision of the work of the previous cabinet of Sergey Stanishev, revision of the work of the previous governments and issuing indictments against those who broke the law, the implementation of urgent anti-crisis measures, adop-

¹ Bulgaria has a combined electoral system, under majority rule GERB won 26 seats, which completed the number of 117 seats in the Parliament

² Since Borisov opted out in advance from any kind of coalition with the parties forming the previous government, Bulgarian Socialist Party and Movement for Rights and Freedoms <http://www.dnes.bg/izbori2009/2009/07/05/pyrvoto-obeshtanie-na-GERB-nov-izbiratelen-kodeks.73813>

³ GERB http://www.sofiaecho.com/2009/07/03/748476_boriso-v-rejects-expert-cabinet, Blue Coalition – Kostov and Dimitrov on the right-center government http://www.sofiaecho.com/2009/07/05/750188_kostov-and-dimitrov-centre-right-coalition-is-best-solution

⁴ http://www.sofiaecho.com/2009/07/12/7573775_borisov-pledges-to-cut-down-on-parliament-committees



tion of the new law on political parties and a new law on referendum, enforcing new measures that would help unfreezing of the EU structural funds⁵, reform of the parliamentary services and the rules of functioning of the parliament in order to regain the citizens' trust in this institution, reform of the government administration and the number of the members of the government, in order to adjust it to the financial crisis, the implementation of the cabinet's programme for cooperation with political parties and citizens' associations. In return for the support, GERB offered a political partnership that would include a joint legislative initiative, through the parliamentary bodies, cooperation in the committees, leading positions in most of the committees for the opposition, etc.⁶

The Blue Coalition and RZS refused to sign this document, pointing out different reasons for their decision. The *Blue Coalition* called this memorandum “purposeless” and unnecessary, maybe because of the official reaction of the sister parties from the EPP to the possibility of signing such a document jointly with *Ataka*⁷. Still, they announced they would provide the cabinet with its support even without signing the memorandum. On the other hand, the RZS leader Jane Janev refused to sign it with a pretty banal explanation that he did not like Borisov's “royal” approach to him⁸. Most probably, the members of the *Blue Coalition* did not want to diminish their own significance by becoming just one of the signatories of the memorandum, while the RZS was probably making its own political calculations.

The only party that did sign this memorandum and continued to give (officially) an unconditional support was *Ataka*. Since that moment, an essential partner relationship between GERB and *Ataka* has been confirmed, while the *Blue Coalition* and RZS (whose parliamentary group fell apart soon after) gave government their support only occasionally, when it was in line with their own interests. Later developments confirmed that *Ataka* was really the only unconditional support for Borisov's cabinet, regardless of the fact that this coalition was ideologically incompatible. Borisov's party, a member of the EPP, which includes in its very name and programme a “European” definition, forms an unofficial coalition with a party that bases its discourse on the attack on the fundamentals of the European Union itself. We will therefore analyse the

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⁵ Since the conditions to lower the level of corruption and organized crime in Bulgaria were not met, the help of EU structural funds is temporarily frozen.

⁶ http://sofiaecho.com/2009/07/15/755933_GERBs-memorandum-to-right-wing-parties

⁷ http://www.sofiaecho.com/2009/07/19/757819_yanevs-order-law-and-justice-party-will-not-sign-gerbs-memorandum

⁸ *Ibid.*

complementarities of the two parties on the programmatic level and then move onto the practical level by examining their essential similarities and interests.

(Non)Consent on the Conceptual Level – Political Programmes of GERB and *Ataka*

Political party *Ataka* has very few programme documents. Up to now, it has offered two documents to the public – the *20 Points* and a *Programme Scheme*⁹ which could be considered more as drafts on *Ataka*'s main goals, than as a coherent and meaningful programme. Both documents can be summarised into the following objectives of the party:

- Preventing all “traitors of the nation” from threatening the existence of the Bulgarian state (which chiefly includes the Bulgarian Turks and their political representatives, as well as various political parties which are not pro-nationalistic oriented – BSP, SDS, DSB, etc.) So, despite the formally advocated maximum respect for the *Bulgarian ethnic model*¹⁰, in reality it is orientated towards ethnic Bulgarians.
- Social care – the strengthening of the state social and health care funds, which would eliminate negative effects of the transition, caused by foreign factors (IMF and others) and the “domestic traitors”.
- Anti-corruption measures – reducing the administration and improvement of its functioning. They also advocate a revision of privatisation that was conducted before and bringing to trial the politicians and the so-called “friendly circles” that allegedly got rich during the privatisation process.
- Fight against crime by strengthening the informational capabilities of the army and strengthening the judicial system.
- Economic measures – they advocate the so-called “Social Capitalism”, meaning: the protection of Bulgarian economy (increase of trade barriers) and a growing involvement of the state in it, aid to domestic business, re-nationalisation of the private companies that went into bankruptcy after privatisation.

⁹ http://www.ataka.bg/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=14&Itemid=, http://www.ataka.bg/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=13&Itemid=5

¹⁰ *Bulgarian ethnic model* was formally established with the 1990 Constitution and its Article 11.4 which forbids any political work based on ethnic, cultural and similar differences. Therefore, Bulgarian nation is defined as primarily civil, while at the same time guaranteeing individual right to manifestation of ethnic and cultural peculiarities. More on this Yantsislav Yanakiev, *The Bulgarian ethnic model – a factor of stability in the Balkans*, https://intra.css.ethz.ch/milsoc/ev_prague_02_vlachova_yanakiev.pdf



- Foreign policy – *Ataka* is severely opposed to Bulgaria’s participation in NATO and the IMF. It also criticises the EU as it is now, advocating the creation of a more equal Europe of nations, without any space for Turkey in it. They strongly disagree with the foreign policies of the USA, Israel, as well as with strengthening Turkey’s influence especially vis-à-vis Bulgaria.
- Change of the democratic system in the state towards some form of “direct democracy”- something close to the presidential system with frequent referenda, with a clear aim to mitigate the influence of political parties. Finally, they also advocate the clearly defined role of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church in the country’s politics, by forming some sort of advisory body that would assist the government.

On the other hand, GERB has offered much more coherent, meaningful and precise basic document – the *Programme for European Development of Bulgaria*¹¹. The document offers a set of concrete aims that should be achieved, or at least started, during the next government that was assumed to be a GERB-led one. The programme is clearly divided into several parts:

- Ensuring the respect for the law and the state system – fight against corruption and organised crime, overall security improvement, reform of the judicial system directed at faster and more efficient verdicts, smaller and more efficient administration.
- Increasing the quality of life – a quick way out from the financial crisis through appropriate measures (a dialogue between the trade unions, the government and businessmen with additional fiscal and stimulation measures), quick unfreezing of the access to the EU Structural Funds, better energy management, improvement of the conditions of rural economy, tourism, transport and infrastructure policies.¹²
- Improvement of life conditions – better social and health policies, better and more efficient decentralisation and an increase of the importance of the regions, greater environmental protection.
- Human resources development – improvement of education and science, intensified promotion of Bulgarian culture, giving priority to the development of information and telecommunication technologies.¹³

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¹¹ This programme is basically an upgrade of their first programme from 2007 – *New Right Agreement for Bulgaria* http://www.GERB.bg/uf/documents/Programma_za_evropeisko_razvitie_na_Bulgaria.pdf

¹² This is the weakest formulated part of the program, without any concrete measures – relatively short compared to the previous chapter.

¹³ The document envisages the Bulgarian culture not in ethnic/traditional sense but in civil one – the emphasis is very much on the citizens.

- Foreign policy and defence – mainly a full support for the EU and NATO with an accent on the field where Bulgaria could have an influence: the Balkans and the Black Sea region. The document especially emphasises the idea that the EU and NATO are not alternatives for each other.¹⁴

What is particularly indicative here is that the whole document, in each point, relies on the programme and practical policies of the EU, thus declaring in practice that the main policy which will be conducted will be in line with the EU standards and proclaimed goals.

Here is also evident the main difference between these two parties which should be essential and practically insurmountable. *Ataka* presented a xenophobic, catch-all document, designed for all kinds of extremists¹⁵ that should attract by proclaiming a set of alternately extreme right and extreme left policies (to a much lesser extent). However, these principles are not clearly and precisely defined, which makes it much easier for the party to change its attitudes or even to neglect them if necessary. In terms of its programme, *Ataka* is a party which, according to the definition of Neven Cvetičanin, is positioned between the margin and the post-civil political field (Cvetičanin, 2008:600). Therefore, this party does not cause a completely new order, but strongly opposes its typical policies: European and Euro-Atlantic integration, guaranteed human rights and liberties, open market and so on. The strongest criticism is directly targeted at the West, mainly at the USA and its foreign policy, and at Turkey as an open and direct enemy of Bulgaria.

On the contrary, GERB declares its commitment to the EU and NATO, and to the civil concept of the state. For GERB, ethnic issues are not of crucial importance (at least according to their programme), and the elaboration of a topic which refers more to the 19th century is within the area of competence of the historians and not the politicians. Besides, GERB opens a whole series of questions which do not have any significance for *Ataka*'s political concept: sustainable development, ecology, better communication with the EU, etc.

Both programmes have some similarities though, mainly in the field of the fight against systematic corruption and organised crime which is defined by both parties as the biggest problem in the country. This common goal transferred to the politics in practice will be observed in detail later in the text.

¹⁴ http://www.GERB.bg/uf/documents/Programa_za_evropejsko_razvitie_na_Bulgaria.pdf p. 71

¹⁵ In the beginning such an electoral body reflected on the *Ataka*'s structure itself – however, over time through various divisions in the period 2005-2009 the party was reduced exclusively to the circle around Siderov.



What Unites and What Divides. Self-Identification at European Level

From a practical point of view, there are many things that unite Boyko Borisov and Volen Siderov than we could conclude at first glance. First of all, they have both gathered their parties around their own charisma and access to the electronic media: the one through its own TV show¹⁶, and the other – on the basis of TV shootings of police actions in which he himself participated. Besides, both parties and both leaders are connected by a populist logic. The phenomenon of populism has been one of the features of the Bulgarian political scene since 2001 when the party/coalition of Simeon II Saxe-Coburg-Gotha won the parliamentary elections. The populist parties form their position mainly on the basis of the opposition “us” vs. “them” which stands in the foreground, where “us” stands for the whole (underprivileged) nation “represented” by the leader and the party, whilst “them” is usually understood as a “target” that can be embodied in some adversary (even enemy) leader, political elite, ethnic group, etc.¹⁷ Another characteristic are the unreal promises about the results which will be achieved once they come to power. Simeon shifted his populist platform around the promises of a fast improvement after the 800 days of his government, and around the critics of the former “corrupted” Bulgarian government led by Ivan Kostov and the SDS.

Siderov and Borisov have similar approaches to politics but the contents with which they manipulate in public are different, that is, how they manage to mobilise the electorate of diverse background. The “enemy” is here as well: For GERB, these are, first of all, the corrupted political elites personalized by BSP, and problems with crime and corruption. In addition, a significant part of the GERB’s rhetoric was connected with the opposition to the BSP’s participation in the DPS in the government. This part of the GERB’s public discourse was formally without any allusions of ethnical hatred: what was emphasised was the role of DPS in corruption affairs mainly associated with the EU funds.¹⁸ For *Ataka* and Siderov, the spectrum of potential enemies is always apparent – in this sense, efforts are focused in three directions: ethnical distance vis-à-vis the Bulgarian Turks; fight against corruption and crime; and revision of the former period, respectively investigative procedure against the repre-

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¹⁶ The TV programme *Ataka* on the SKAT cable television through which Siderov has reached wide popularity. In these presentations he has formed the core of his future party’s identity. This television was the main “spokesperson” and promoter of *Ataka* until the breakup with Siderov in November 2009. More at http://www.novinite.com/view_news.php?id=109830

¹⁷ More on the phenomenon of populism in E. Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, Verso, London, 2006

¹⁸ Borisov about DPS and the role of its leader Ahmed Dogan : <http://news.bpost.bg/story-read-14523.php>; Borisov about the MRF and the Muslims in Bulgaria right after the elections: <http://news.bpost.bg/story-read-14523.php>

sentative of the BSP. Other “enemies” were left aside for the time being.

So, in public discourse, Borisov and Siderov found the “lowest common denominator”: fight against the DPS¹⁹, fight against corruption and crime, as well as bringing to trial the preceding governing political constellation. Putting the emphasis exclusively on these issues and at the same time by-passing and concealing the subjects where they have different views, set the ground on which the two parties could form an alliance.

GERB is a party member of the EPP and as such it supports policies which it jointly adopts with its sister-parties. It is a centre-right party, moderately conservative, that respects the civil compromise reached after WW2. Therefore, according to its self-identification at European level, it would be most natural for that party to form a coalition, as far as it can, with a sister party and to carry out coherent and ideologically close policies. By the way, Borisov and GERB made an actual alliance with an extreme right party, which is strongly opposing the majority of the policies that they represent. Moreover, this party had not only achieved an impact of its discourse on the domestic level, but in 2007 it influenced the European political scene as well. Then, the parliamentary group *Identity, Sovereignty, Tradition* was formed in the European parliament. It gathered the majority of the extremists in the European parliament: Le Pen’s National Front (FN), the Austrian Freedom Party (FP?), the Flemish Interest party (VB) from Belgium, Greater Romania Party, Alessandra Mussolini’s Social Alliance and others.

On the other hand, the alliance with Siderov is very desirable for other reasons. Firstly, *Ataka* is not a party that has been in office, hence GERB can freely bring to trial the former governing parties. Secondly, Ivan Kostov and the *Blue coalition* lost power in 2001 in an extremely humiliating way which would bring Borisov to the position of making a pact with losers. Thirdly, the representatives of the *Blue coalition* are politicians that are backed up with a concrete and coherent set of political objectives, and specific compromises which are demanded by the Borisov’s ruling system would be much harder to achieve. Fourthly, the electorates of the GERB and *Ataka* almost overlap as Siderov gathers extreme protest vote while Borisov mainly pleads for moderate right electorate. And finally, by signing the Memorandum, Siderov proved to be a pragmatic politician whose goal is first of all to reach power and not

¹⁹ The prominent Bulgarian political analyst Ivan Krastev even considered that the essence of these elections was the elimination of DPS from the government as all the parties in opposition that had entered the parliament accepted this attitude.



to implement concrete policies. He has justified his unreserved support through the fight for the interests of Bulgaria, namely by eliminating the biggest “internal enemy” for the government: Ahmed Dogan and his party DPS. To what extent this transfer was painless is clearly illustrated by the fact that during the 2007 local elections in Sofia, *Ataka*’s main target was Borisov and his administration. In the next election *Ataka* did not have any problem to support GERB’s candidate for the mayor, Jordanka Fandukova, justifying its decision by the necessity to win convincingly against the socialist candidate.²⁰ And if we examine more attentively the Memorandum which GERB offered other parties about the post-election support for a minority government, we will see that by its signing *Ataka* actually agreed to the pro-European foreign policy, which is in conflict with its earlier aspirations.

The recent events revealed that there is a much higher degree of mutual consent between the partners, which goes beyond technical co-operation, that should reach the implementation of the above-mentioned objective. One of the principal initiatives of *Ataka* since its very foundation has been the removal of the short newscast in Turkish language which is broadcast on the National Television on working days as an unconstitutional right acquired thanks to the influence of Ahmed Dogan.²¹ Absolutely surprisingly,²² Boyko Borisov endorsed this proposal and wanted a referendum on the issue to be held, which resulted in the reaction of the official Ankara and the European parliament.²³

Common Practical Policies – Non-European for Europe

The parliamentary support which GERB gets from *Ataka* is extremely important for the implementation of the essential promise on the basis of which this party has received its mandate: tackling corruption and organised crime. And as *Ataka* very declaratively advocates a radical fight against crime, it was easy for Borisov to find support for introducing a series of restrictive procedures and laws which would empower the police and secret services, and make courts work more efficiently. The new Minister of the Interior in the Boyko Borisov’s cabinet, Tsvetan Tsvetanov, demonstrated decisiveness to launch

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²⁰ http://www.sofiaecho.com/2009/10/13/798858_right-wingers-to-back-GERBs-fandukova-to-be-mayor-of-sofia

²¹ According to *Ataka* the newscasts should be prohibited since the Constitution states that Bulgarian is the official language in the country, and that is why no foreign language should present in any public media. This news is broadcast once a day and has duration of 10 minutes.

²² See the news from December 2009 about this initiative of *Ataka* http://www.sofiaecho.com/2009/10/16/800810_is-siderovs-party-becoming-ataka-lite

²³ http://www.sofiaecho.com/2009/12/17/832018_european-parliament-to-debate-bulgarias-proposed-referendum-on-turkish-newscasts

the reforms as soon as possible, having in mind mainly the frozen EU Structural Funds. Their mandate started with the announcements of dealing with corrupt politicians from the preceding governments.²⁴ Therefore, the focus was put on the EU demands for a decrease in the corruption level, and the fight against organised crime. However, what turned out to be primary criticism was that the problem was not tackled from the standpoint of the creation of a systematic and democratic capacity for fighting corruption and crime, but was rather dealt with by means of using larger powers, which often leads to the violation of human rights and liberties. And here we face the final paradox of the present government: in its striving to promote a commitment to the pro-European principles, Borisov indirectly, every now and then, violates the fundamental tenets on which the EU itself is built.

The first important measure, which nonetheless caused worries among the public, was the amendment to the Electronic Communications Act. According to the proposal, the police would have unlimited access to information that is at disposal of the internet database and mobile telephone providers. After the pressure exerted by the opposition, mainly by the representatives of the *Blue coalition*²⁵, and by the NGOs as well, in January 2010, the most controversial provisions were rejected, and more precise definitions of the conditions in which such drastic measures could be applied were suggested.²⁶

Then, the reforms of the National Security Agency (DANS) started, in order to allow for smaller and mobile groups to gain more authorities. For the purpose of fighting organised crime and corruption at the high levels of the former cabinet, the police operations *Octopus* and *the Impudent* were launched and initially supported by the EU representatives.²⁷ The results of these actions were the arrests of several people closely connected to the cabinet of Sergej Stanishev.

A reform of the judiciary itself is envisaged in accordance with the long-standing EU requirements. The problem lies in the fact that justice is too slow and inefficient and lawsuit procedures often end up with the majority of the accused being set free. The reform itself, which is carried out through the amendments to the Penal Procedure Code, contains three controversial items that were criticised by the opposition: the introduction of the institution of a “reserve lawyer” in cases when the lawyer of the accused is absent at the hearings without a seri-

²⁴ This statement was presented even before the government was formed: http://www.sofiaecho.com/2009/09/03/778855_bulgaria-says-former-cabinet-ministers-to-be-indicted-in-next-few-days

²⁵ The only party that unreservedly supported GERB was *Ataka* http://www.sofiaecho.com/2009/12/22/834248_electronic-communication-act-amendments-for-first-reading-in-parliament

Martin Dimitrov, the President of SDS, said that instead of enjoying freedom and security, Bulgarians are forced to choose between the one or the other: http://www.sofiaecho.com/2009/12/22/834817_electronic-eavesdropping-amendments-passed-at-first-reading

²⁶ http://www.sofiaecho.com/2010/01/26/848150_GERB-proposals-on-electronic-eavesdropping-act

²⁷ <http://dnes.dir.bg/news.php?id=5887759>



ous reason (the opposition criticised this decision as a Stalinist one, as it deprives the accused of the right to choose his or her defender); then another introduction of an unlimited custody for persons suspected of being involved in criminal activities (the unlimited custody was abolished in 2006 because of the great number of rulings of the European Court for Human Rights against Bulgaria); introduction of the institution of a secret or anonymous witness (who can be someone from the police or the secret service), as well as the possibility of a conviction just on the basis of information collected by the police and secret service.²⁸

Furthermore, the greatest novelty, in the light of the previously discussed legal changes planned by the government and together with the amendments to the Law on the Judiciary, is the introduction of specialised courts that would deal exclusively with the cases of the high-level organised crime and corruption.²⁹

All these measures will most probably contribute to the achievement of certain positive changes, chiefly in relation to the criticism coming from the EU, but also in connection with the level and influence of organised crime and corruption. On the other hand, they should be time-framed and should have a clear goal. Moreover, the implementation of the measures has not given any specific results up to now, whilst the ruling circles constantly concentrate more and more instruments of power in their hands, without any guarantees that they would be used in case of a real need.

The implementation of the actions up to now has revealed that the authorities have not launched the essential fight against crime yet. The analysts criticise the government that the problem is still far from being dealt with, which stems from the fact that the indicted are mostly either members of the former regime or small criminals (with the presence of the media, of course).³⁰

Conclusion

The actions undertaken by GERB with *Ataka*'s support are the evidence of a consolidation of a strong alliance that must edge out all other rivals from the political scene. However, this alliance does not indicate a coherence of ideas

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²⁸ http://www.sofiaecho.com/2010/04/02/881907_radical-justice

²⁹ http://www.sofiaecho.com/2010/05/04/896444_bulgaria-will-have-special-courts-for-serious-crimes-interior-minister-says

³⁰ <http://waz.euobserver.com/887/30318>