Towards Confrontation
(October 1946–September 1947)

The period from the autumn of 1946 to the autumn of 1947 saw a transition from a tense but not clearly defined standoff to an open confrontation between East and West. On the international level, the Western powers began to withdraw from Eastern Europe and to focus their attention on preventing further Soviet expansion through a policy of ‘containment’. This meant that in spite of the desperate appeals from their representatives in Bulgaria, they could only support the opposition by dramatic but ineffective public declarations. That was particularly unfortunate, as the elections of October 1946 had demonstrated the strength of the Bulgarian opposition and had given its leaders courage and confidence. Stalin, for his part, began to reassess his policy of accommodation with the West, which was causing increasing problems, without delivering noticeable results, and to move towards a policy of retrenchment. The internal political development of Bulgaria interacted intensively with the great powers’ shift towards conflict. The emergence of an open, if not entirely free, electoral competition between the communists and the opposition left two alternatives open. First, it could potentially lead to the development of parliamentary democracy, either in the form of the communist party exercising its democratic mandate to set up a government, which would then be held accountable by the opposition, or in the form of a grand coalition between the two main parties, the BWP and the BANU-NP, which clearly represented the majority of the electorate. It could also lead, however, to an all-out confrontation, which could result in the destruction of the opposition. In the course of October 1946–June 1947, both options were explored before confrontation finally prevailed.

The disgruntled non-communist Fatherland Front parties proved to be an important element of instability in the competition between the
communists and the opposition. Shocked by their dismal performance in the elections, widely attributed to their failure to offer a clear alternative to the voters, these parties were forced to redefine their position, either by negotiating more equal coalition arrangements with the communists or by joining the opposition. Majority opinion within the parties favoured the latter option, increasing the confidence of the opposition and forcing the communists into further ruthless intervention into these parties’ internal affairs.

The opposition was elated by its performance in the elections. As reported by Soviet intelligence, immediately after the announcement of the results, Petkov called a meeting of his closest followers to discuss his party’s future strategy. A decision was reached to begin negotiations with the BWP on the joint formation of a new government, on the basis that the elections had demonstrated that there were only two parties that mattered in Bulgaria and the interests of the nation dictated that the two should recognize each other’s strength and work together. Petkov hoped to persuade the Western powers to make proposals to the Soviet Union on promoting talks between the communists and the opposition. His demands were seconded by Barnes, who argued that the elections had demonstrated that the opposition was more than a bunch of traitors and reactionaries, and its sizeable parliamentary contingent could influence the policy of the government or even provide a basis for a grand coalition. He suggested that an American approach to Moscow could facilitate this process.

The Western governments, moving towards the view that recognition was inevitable, failed to exploit the opportunities presented by the elections. The British, not surprisingly, took the initiative in damping down what remained of American willingness to intervene in Bulgaria. A British diplomat wrote to the Foreign Office from Sofia on 7 November, reporting Barnes’s enthusiasm about making an approach at the highest level in Moscow and his own doubts about the wisdom of such a move. His doubts were shared in London, and on 14 November, the Foreign Office wrote to Washington, rejecting an official approach, although noting the need to be seen to be doing something, primarily in order to ward off questions in parliament. Interestingly enough, Stalin probably expected an approach from the Western powers. He was impressed by the performance of the opposition and the relative failure of the non-communist FF parties (a Soviet diplomat in Sofia spoke of the ‘consolidation of the opposition’s position in the country’), and deemed it necessary to send a personal telegram to the BWP leaders, evidently not trusting their ability to act with the right degree of restraint in a