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BAROMETER

Political Parties Development in Bulgaria

Vol.9 Issue 1
January – March 2009

■ The parties of the tri-partite governing coalition are embarking upon the forthcoming election campaign with different strategies and goals. What is important for the BSP and the MRF is to score results, which will make it possible for them to come to office again, irrespective of the composition of the future governing coalition.

■ What the opinion poll surveys indicate thus far is that the GERB Party will be the number one political party at the upcoming general election, which means that it will be the entity entrusted with the mandate to form the new government. Borissov's constant repetition that under no conditions would he set up a coalition with the BSP and the MRF can now really come true in practice, given the fact that the UDF and DSB have already signed their unification.

■ The decision of the two major right-wing parties DSB and SDS to run the elections on joint party slates has changed the electoral situation in the country. This makes the picture much clearer both in terms of the possible configurations at the next Bulgarian Parliament and the possible coalitions after the general election. The coalition between the UDF and DSB has all the chances of scoring a very good result, surpassing the sum of the results, which each of the two parties could score if it ran the election on its own

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1. The Political Situation

The political situation over the first three months of 2009 clearly showed that the country is under the impact of the upcoming general elections, which are due to be held this summer in a dual capacity: for the European Parliament and for the Bulgarian National Assembly. The political parties have assiduously begun to prepare for the elections, which enhances even further the tension between the governing majority and the opposition. Especially bitter are the relations between the two leading parties and major competitors at the upcoming elections – the GERB Party and the BSP, whereby the mutual accusations they have been hurling at each other in the media environment sometimes goes beyond the well-bred and acceptable political tone. This trend is certain to continue to the date of the elections and the tension between the two parties is bound to escalate even further.

At the beginning of January, Bulgaria was severely affected by the gas-supplies crises raging between Russia and the Ukraine, which brought about the total discontinuation of the contract supplies. The country faced a grave crisis, which hit both the ordinary households and the Bulgarian industry, which sustained serious financial losses.

The gas-supplies crises put on the agenda yet again the issue about the need to diversify the energy supplies entering the country. At this stage, however, this major issue remains unresolved, because the alternative options for Bulgaria, such as the “South Stream” and the “Nabucco” gas pipelines, are hardly likely to become operational in the foreseeable future.

President Pravanov said that the European Commission should be addressed with the issue about re-opening Blocks 3 and 4 of the “Kozloduy” Nuclear Power Plant, making it possible for the country to cope with the crisis. In his opinion, this would also prevent the country from another similar situation happening in the future. The stance of the European Commission, however, was that the NPP issue

had nothing to do with the situation surrounding the gas-supplies crisis, because the case in point were two problems of a different nature.

The Bulgarian government insisted that Russia should compensate the losses sustained due to the discontinued gas supplies. Such compensations were agreed after the Moscow meeting between President Parvanov and his Russian counterpart, Dmitry Medvedev. Apart from that, the Bulgarian government raised a demand for the elimination of the gas intermediary Overgas from the gas-supplies business with Bulgaria, insisting that gas-supplies should take place directly between the two national gas companies: Gazprom and Bulgargas.

For the first time in years, the interim monitoring report of the European Commission on the situation of the judiciary and internal law and order in Bulgaria recorded some progress. Especially positive – according to the report – were the actions taken by the Inspectorate with the Supreme Judicial Council in connection with its control over court proceedings in Bulgaria, and criminal proceedings in particular. In the opinion of the European Commission, however, steps should be taken in the direction of a broader parliamentary control on the activities of the State National Security Agency. The report points out that the major weakness of the Bulgarian justice dispensation system, namely the lack of sentences in the area of corruption and organized crime, continues to hamper combating these phenomena, which are extremely harmful both for society and the state at large.

The positive assessments are partially due to the arrests of individuals connected with organized crime, such as the so-called “Gallevs brothers” – Plamen Gallev and Anguel Christov – who have been bossing over the town of Sandansky for a long time, and the detention of another notorious boss – Zlatimir Ivanov, nicknamed Zlatko the Barret.

Remand measures were taken with respect to the “Gallevs bothers” and they were detained on remand in pre-trial incarceration, with the main charges against them being organizing

a criminal gang and extortion. Zlatomir Ivanov was also charged with organizing and participation in a criminal gang.

The future will show whether the prosecutor's office will prove capable of bringing to court solid accusations in its indictment, on the basis of which respective sentencing verdicts could be pronounced.

A serious political row was provoked by the pre-trial proceedings initiated by the Sofia City Prosecutor's Office against an unknown perpetrator for abuse of office and official capacity at the National Revenue Agency (NRA). According to the leader of the "Order, Rule of Law, and Justice" Party, Yane Yanev, what was behind the proceedings was a case of massive draining-off of value added tax (VAT). In fact, it was Yanev precisely who voiced the information about the pre-trial proceedings. According to the prosecutor from the Supreme Cassation Prosecutor's Office, Valeri Parvanov, one of the lines on which the investigation is working is that companies belonging to Vladislav Christov, intimate partner of the NRA Director, Maria Murgina, with whom she lives in unofficial marital relations, tax-wise have been "treated in a particular way". These companies were included on the preferential list of the Medium-size Taxpayers Directorate, but whether infringements of these companies have been covered up, or they have nothing to hide, is yet to be established.

As soon as these facts were made public, Maria Murgina handed in her resignation. According to the prosecutor's office, there is no direct information of her being involved in corruption, but nevertheless, she will be one of the people subject to the ongoing investigation. The opposition demanded the immediate resignation of the Minister of Finance, Plamen Oresharsky, as he was directly responsible for the current state of affairs at the National Revenue Agency subordinated to him. Oresharsky himself defended Murgina by saying that he was extremely content with her work. In his turn, Prime Minister Stanishev declared that he was firmly standing behind the NRA and

would in no way allow for the functioning of the Agency to be discredited. In his opinion, these were targeted attempts of certain circles aiming to "endanger national security" by acting against such a key state institution.

These rows were the informal reason for the opposition to table a yet another non-confidence vote against the Stanishev Cabinet, but the vote was turned down yet again. This time the official motive for the non-confidence vote was the incapacity of the tri-partite governing coalition to cope with the overall policy it was pursuing in the country. This non-confidence vote failed to produce any substantial parliamentary debate. The unsubstantiated expectations of one part of the opposition that this time NMSP could turn against the Cabinet did not come true. The NMSP leadership declared that what a country needed at a time of crisis was political stability and qualified the demand for the government's resignation as short-sighted from a statesmanship point of view.

Actually, what the opposition targeted at was to attract public attention by reminding the public that it existed and was properly functioning rather than oust Stanishev's Cabinet. But even this did not happen: the opposition failed to attract both the public interest and the interest of the media. The reason why the interest in this non-confidence vote was close to zero both in society and in the media was mainly because the outcome of the vote was crystal clear in advance.

Over past quarter, various protest demonstrations and rallies were organized. Along with the habitual protests of milk producers, this time students' demonstrations were held, on the one hand, and organized protests of policemen and employees from the system of the Ministry of Interior, on the other. And if the students' protests were rather feeble and had unclear messages, the protests of the policemen provoked louder reverberations. Their major demands were connected with improved labor conditions and material resources, as well as with the insistence for a 50 percent rise of their salaries.

These protest actions legitimately brought about political reactions. The Minister of Interior, Mikhail Mickov, qualified the demands for a pay rise by 50 percent as unrealistic and impossible to fulfill. What is necessary, in his opinion, is an optimization and job cuts within the system of the ministry and the implementation of a structural reform. The governing coalition voiced complaints that this protest is being politicized and expressed misgivings that it was GERB and Boiko Borissov that stood behind this police protest. Borissov dismissed these accusations and qualified them as an attempt on the part of the BSP to discredit him in public. In Borissov's opinion, however, the problems within the system of the Ministry of Interior are serious and it was necessary for a number of reforms connected with improvements of both labor conditions and the quality of police performance to be undertaken. According to him, however, over the last four years, the government had committed numerous mistakes with the reforms implemented at the ministry.

The most extreme assessments about the police protests were voiced by the "Ataka" Party. In the opinion of the party leader, Volen Siderov, these protest meant the "disintegration of statehood" in the country. Siderov also thinks that "the Ministry of Interior needs a purge", in order to "eject from the system corrupt employees", who are too many in number, on the one hand, and work jointly with organized crime, on the other. This necessitates – in Siderov's opinion – drastic cuts in the police forces and this is something his party will insist upon at the future Parliament of the country.

The concerns related to the economic crisis in the country have been gaining momentum. This subject matter is especially sensitive for the public opinion in the country, owing to the grave economic problems Bulgaria already went through in the 1990s. What people fear most is the rise of the unemployment rate (see the chapter on "Public Opinion"). At the time being, a number of the industrial sectors are experiencing difficulties, and the crisis is strongly affecting the small- and medium-size enterpris-

es, which – in order to survive – are forced to cut jobs in order to optimize their costs.

The Minister of Finance, Plamen Orsharsky, expressed concerns that the crisis could bring about a drop in budget revenues, which the revenue side of the government budget is expected to collect. For the first quarter of 2009, however, such problems have not been observed, but they might emerge in the future. The exports rates have dropped by 27 percent, and the imports rates – by 33 percent, and this is taking place much faster than expected. This namely is one of the reasons for economic experts to feel pessimistic in their forecasts for the future development of the economic crisis in Bulgaria.

According to Eurostat, the highest year on year inflation rate for the European Union over the last 12 months until February, has been recorded in Latvia (14.1 percent), followed by Bulgaria and Lithuania with 10.8 percent. All these facts indicate that the Global Economic Crisis is beginning to affect Bulgaria increasingly more tangibly. This will definitely have an impact on the election campaign in the country and could substantially modify the existing electoral attitudes.

The question whether the elections for the national and the European parliament should take place on the same day provoked a loud political and public debate. The idea about merging the dates of the elections received the support of the opposition parties, and was also supported by President Parvanov. Most insistent in this respect were the representatives of NMSP, and the party even organized a civil subscription in favor of the idea for the two elections to be held on the same date.

The major motives for such a decision were cost savings of financial resources, which is an important condition to observe at a time of financial crises. The adherents of this idea also hope that this will boost the electoral activity in the country. The BSP and the MRF opposed the idea on the grounds that this required an amendment to the Constitution, for which the necessary time was lacking, and also because

that the issue concerns two completely different types of elections. Nonetheless, NMSP and the opposition tabled a motion at Parliament for the amendment of the Constitution, which would allow for two different types of elections to be held on the same day, but it failed for the lack of sufficient parliamentary support.

One of the most important issues, which still remains unresolved, is the way and mechanisms in which the elections will be held. For more than a year now, there have been discussions on possible amendments to the electoral legislation and the implementation of a majority element in the elections. Not only is the governing coalition divided in its visions on this issue, but there also are strongly different stances on the subject matter within the individual parties themselves. The largest parliamentary represented party, the BSP, is also disunited on this issue. From a technological point of view, now it is almost impossible for any substantial amendments to be made to the electoral law.

One of the options for amendments, which is currently drafted by the governing coalition, is the increase of the electoral threshold from 4 to 6 percent for the coalitions, whereby a rise to 8 percent is also being discussed as a possible option. Such a move would drastically change the electoral picture. Should this step be taken, it means that it is directly targeted at the right-wing opposition parties and the new UDF – DSB coalition. This is bound to escalate and exacerbate the political tension and the pre-election situation in the country even further.

2. Situation Of The Political Parties And Development Of The Party System In Bulgaria

The party system in Bulgaria is in a process of restructuring. The principal factor, which will have a decisive impact on this restructuring, is the forthcoming election for the National Assembly of the country. To a large extent, this election will outline the ways in which both the political parties and the country's political system at large will be developing within a long-term period of time.

2.1. The Parties of the Governing Tri-Partite Coalition

Despite the serious differences observed at times among the parties of the governing tri-partite coalition on significant political issues, they will nonetheless complete their term of office more or less successfully. To a large extent this happened on the basis of numerous, sometimes even complicated or painful, political trade-offs. The coalition itself and these concessions, however, are one of the reasons why some of the parties have lost the public confidence they enjoyed before entering into the incumbent coalition. A typical case in point to this effect is NMSP. Now that the three parties – the BSP, NMSO, and the MRF – are in a pre-election situation, this will prompt them to look for different strategies in order to secure their electoral success.

2.1.1. The Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP)

The past three months served to indicate that the BSP has already launched its active election campaign. A number of representatives of the party leadership are already touring the country and are organizing meetings and talks with BSP supporters. The Prime Minister and BSP leader, Sergei Stanishev, made personal visits to various regions in the country. A portion of this campaign is the so-called "Stanishev" plan, meant to help cope with the consequences of the global economic crisis and consolidate the prospects for the long-range economic development of Bulgaria.

The BSP was given strong support by the Party of European Socialists (PES) during the visit made by the Chairman of PES at the European Parliament, Martin Schultz, to this country. Schultz declared that the BSP is a serious partner to the European Left and that it has proven its genuine capacity to govern the country. According to Schultz, Bulgaria should continue in the direction, in which the BSP is now leading it, and this is the reason why what the socialists need now is to win the upcoming elections. Such a support is completely comprehensible with a view to the upcoming elections for mem-

bers of the European Parliament (MEPs), when PES (member of which the BSP also is) will seek to score a good election outcome.

The BSP began to discuss its MEP party slates. It is likely for Christian Vigenin and Iliana Yotova to preserve their current MEP seats by occupying the front positions on the party slate, which guarantees their electability.

The discussions about the party slates for the national general election have also started. At its party forum, the party made the decision that 20 percent of the party slate seats will be allocated to representatives of business, who are proven experts and professionals in the management of the real economy. The same quota has been allocated to experts from the area of social policy. Quotas of 15 percent each have been envisaged for lawyers, economists, "leaders and public figures", and foreign policy experts.

At its plenum, the BSP also endorsed the agreement it will sign with its coalition partners for joint running the upcoming general election. These partners include the following formations: the Movement for Social Humanism, Bulgarian Social Democrats, the "Alexander Stamboliisky" Agrarian Union, and the Communist Party of Bulgaria.

In order to serve the purposes of its election campaign, the BSP started publishing a free of charge weekly newspaper, which will be delivered to and distributed among the members of the Sofia City party organization.

After the BSP Congress, held at the end of 2008, the newly elected Executive Bureau of the party has also started to function properly. Dimitar Dabov was elected Chief Secretary of the BSP, and Anton Kutev, Evgenii Uzunov, Katya Nickolova, Kiril Dobrev, and Christian Vigenin were elected party Secretaries. The new spokesperson of the party is Cornelia Ninnova. The other BSP members who entered the Executive Bureau are: the Chairman of the parliamentary faction of Coalition for Bulgaria, Anguel Naidenov, the Minister of the Interior, Mikhail Mickov, and the Minister of Culture, Stefan Danailov, deputy ministers Vanya Dobрева and Svetla Bachvarova, the Chairman of

the Veteran Movement in the BSP, Vladimir Topencharov, the Speaker of the National Assembly, Georgi Pirinsky, the Mayor of the town of Smolyan, Dora Yankova, Maya Manolova, Boiko Velikov, Roumen Petkov, Roumen Ovcharov, and Semra Izetova. The new faces in the party leadership are those of Cornelia Ninnova, Vanya Dobрева, and Vladimir Topencharov.

After some of the representatives of the "Left Wing" faction within the BSP lost their positions at the Supreme Council of the party at its latest congress, extreme reactions on their part surged to the surface. Thus for instance, Illia Bozhinov, one of the ideologists of the left-wing faction, left the BSP and together with several of his like-minded colleagues decided to set up a new party under the name of "Bulgarian Left". He declared that he was leaving the BSP because the current BSP had nothing to do with the authentic Left, it "was not even a social democratic party, but rather a liberal formation". At the same time, Bozhinov denied any intention of setting up a communist party. The new formation, in his words, would be more like Oskar Lafonten's party in Germany.

The founder of the "Bulgarian Left" said that his attempts to provoke a debate about the need to reform the BSP in the direction of the proper left-wing had failed at the party's last congress, and this was precisely what prompted the idea about setting up this new formation. In Bozhinov's opinion, his new party will not compete with the BSP for its electorate. Rather than that, it will compete for the votes of the huge number of people who do not think they are properly politically represented at the time being. Their convictions are left-wing oriented and the BSP is incapable – in Bozhinov's opinion – of meeting the expectations and cater for the interests of these voters because of the right-wing policy it has been pursuing consistently.

The program intentions of the new formation include: the elimination of the flat tax rate, the complete return of healthcare into the domain of the state-owned sectors, the nationalization of the monopolies, such as the electric-

ity distribution utilities, for instance. Besides, the “Bulgarian Left” declares to stand against the deployment of foreign military bases and installations on Bulgarian territory, and against the participation of Bulgarian military contingents abroad.

In its capacity of a governing party, the BSP will undoubtedly be the party most affected by the negative consequences it has borne by participating in the tri-partite coalition during its term of office. The problem the BSP is experiencing is an internal one, with a part of its own electorate, which has been severely hit by the economic reforms implemented during the transition. The reasons why are rooted in the fact that the party is in office now. For a long time before this governance mandate, the party was in opposition, therefore its voters had high expectations for the time when it would come to power. These expectations were mainly connected with social populism, which the BSP failed to live up to, because over the past four years it was pursuing a pragmatic economic policy, which brought about economic stability to the country, and which is especially important now – at the time of the Global Economic Crisis.

What impresses in some of the latest statements made by Stanishev is that the BSP has now come to avail of the voters’ fears of the danger mainly connected with losing their jobs. It is likely for this fear to underlie the party’s election campaign. The party representatives will be trying to convince their electorate of the dangers imbedded in “GERB’s obscure project”, as the BSP leaders themselves have come to call it, and of the need for the citizens’ social protection at a time crisis, and that it is only the BSP that is capable of providing such protection – again according to the socialists themselves.

2.1.2. National Movement for Stability and Progress (NMSP)

Over the past quarter, the public opinion surveys showed again that at this point in time NMSP is proving unable of overcoming the 4 percent electoral threshold on its own. All the indications are that the party is likely to run

the elections independently, which makes its return to the next parliament even more problematic. Although in one of his interviews the party leader, Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, said that he did not rule out the possibility for a liberal coalition between NMSP and the MRF to be set up, a categorical confirmation came subsequently from the party leadership that the party has made an official decision to run the elections on its own.

Such a liberal alliance between NMSP and the MRF is quite problematic, because of the rather tense relations between the two parties over the last few years. This is one of the reasons why the NMSP strategy to run the elections independently is risky, but – on the other hand – the formation will try to put its stakes on the vision of a modern pragmatic liberal party, which stands for professionalism in politics and the involvement of experts in it. Such, at least, are the intentions of the party leadership, and they have declared this in the media over and over again.

The willingness and desire of NMSP to merge the dates of the MEP and the national general elections can be assessed as an element of its election strategy. The categorical stance in defense of merging the election dates is due to the fact that a possible failure of the party at the MEP election would negatively affect the motivation of NMSP supporters to vote for the party at the national general election again.

It will be difficult for NMSP to overcome the higher 5 percent electoral threshold to get its candidates returned to the European Parliament. Now that it is clear that the elections will take place on two different dates, the MEP election becomes much more important for the party, because *de facto*, they will be the cornerstone on the way to attain the key objective, namely to get back to the next National Assembly. This is the reason why NMSP will invest all its available resources in the election campaign for the MEP election.

The party has made up a list of the possible criteria, which their MEP candidates must meet. Among the criteria are: mandatory fluency in at

least two West European languages, no involvement with the structures of the former State Security Secret Services, whereby the availability of international internships and diplomas would be an advantage for the candidates. Unlike the previous MEP elections, this time the party has decided that nominees for EMP candidates can be not only party members, but people outside the party. This opens and widens the circle of possible candidates. One of the reasons for this move is that NMSP can thus put its stakes on popular faces and professionals.

One of the most likely candidates to top the NMSP party slate is Meglena Kuneva. It is around Kuneva precisely that the image of the party will be built in the course of the election campaign. Being one of the most popular faces in Europe, Kuneva enjoys a high confidence rating in the Bulgarian public opinion as well. There is no doubt that Kuneva's participation in the campaign will give NMSP a serious advantage.

The rest of the names on the party slate are still subject to discussions. Most likely, the second name on the party slate after Kuneva will be the incumbent MEP and NMSP member, Billiana Raeva. Front-ranking positions on the slate will be given to Solomon Passi and Antonia Parvanova, too. It was Parvanova precisely who won the highest number of voters' preferences out of all the MEP candidates of all the parties running the 2007 MEP elections.

Over the past quarter, NMSP raised Solomon Passi's nomination for the post of NATO General Secretary. This nomination was supported by the other two partners of NMSP in the tri-partite governing coalition. Such a move can only bring advantages and positive scores for NMSP, irrespective of the fact whether Passi will be elected to lead the Alliance or not.

2.1.3. Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF)

Over the past quarter, the MRF was in the periphery of media attention. There were no serious internal party events, either, which could provoke a strong public interest. After the serious rows, which afflicted the party last year,

the MRF leaders are now getting ready for the upcoming elections – both the MEP and the national general elections – without attracting much of a media attention to themselves.

As already mentioned above, one of the question marks surrounding the elections is whether the MRF will set up a coalition with NMSP. One of the possible options is to run these elections on a common slate only for members of the European Parliament, which means that the two parties will run the general election on their own. This, however, is still in the sphere of hypotheses, and the greater likelihood is for such a scenario to fail altogether because of the little time left to the election date.

Much like the rest of the parties, the MRF have started work on drafting the party slates both for their MEP candidates and for national members of parliament. To a large extent, this is rather a centralized process, because the major role in the candidate nominations is played by the political leadership of the party. This is the reason why no special surprises can be expected with respect to party slates, and the leading figures in the party are almost certain to retain their seats.

Almost certain are the MRF candidates for MEP nominations. Leader of the party slate will be the incumbent MEP, Filiz Hyusmenova. Metin Kazak and Prof. Vladko Panayotov are also likely to remain on the MRF party slate. MP Fatme Iliyaz is also one of the likely candidates for an MEP nomination. The leader of the Youth MRF, Korman Ismailov, also has fair chances to be given an electable position on the slate.

Among the major criteria for making it on the party MEP slate is the fluency in at least two international languages, alongside experience with European projects, as well as managerial or political experience.

2.2. The Opposition Parties of the Right-Wing Political Environment

The first quarter of the new 2009 was especially dynamic and full of events, connected with the right-wing parties in Bulgaria. The long-awaited unification between the UDF and DSB

is now a fact, although it is regarded ambivalently in both of the parties. On the other hand, talks with other right-wing parties are going on with a view to enlarging this right-wing coalition. This was the principal objective of the meeting held in Cadenabbia, Italy, organized by the European People's Party (EPP).

2.2.1. Union of Democratic Forces (UDF)

At a meeting of the UDF National Council at the end of January, subject to election were the leading figures who will be responsible for the various sectoral policies within the party. Thus for instance, the ex director of the Bulgarian intelligence, Dimo Gyaurov, was elected Secretary for National Security and Foreign policy, MP Vanyo Sharkov will be responsible for healthcare, and the ex minister of social policy in Ivan Kostov's government, now municipal councilor at the Sofia City Municipality, Ivan Neikov, will lead the party's policy in the sector of social policy. Besides, a leader of the permanent election headquarters was elected too, and the choice fell on the incumbent Mayor of the town of Pleven, Naiden Zelenogorsky. The new Chief Secretary of the party will be MP Ivan Sotirov.

Martin Dimitrov headed the UDF, having convincingly won the internal party elections, and with his victory, the party has now come to be dominated by that wing, which stands for unification with DSB and joint running the upcoming elections. Despite this fact, an influential group continues to exist within the UDF, which opposes the formation of such a coalition. A case in point is the largest party organization of the UDF – the Sofia City organization, headed by Ivan Sotirov, who was one of the candidates for the leadership post in the UDF at the last party elections.

At one of its meetings, the capital city organization voted against the unification with DSB, which potentially threatens the unity of the party. The decision made by the Sofia City organization contains a condition: they will put up with the new situation as long as Ivan Kostov's name is not included in the joint party slates. The mo-

tive behind the decision is that people bearing the responsibility for the split of the UDF, must not be present on the party slates.

Despite this decision of the Sofia City organization, the UDF National Council approved the coalition with DSB and gave its leader the mandate to sign the coalition agreement. The former UDF leader, Plamen Yurukov, also stands firmly behind the opponents of this agreement, should Ivan Kostov be included in the party slates.

Martin Dimitrov and Ivan Kostov signed an agreement for jointly running the EMP and national general elections in the middle of March. Dimitrov qualified this act as "something significant", which the two parties were performing in the name of their joint future right-wing governance of Bulgaria. According to Ivan Kostov, another step has to follow this one: the enlargement of the coalition, so that it can encompass other right-wing parties, too.

Despite the Cadenabbia meeting, the other participating parties in which also were: GERB, the Democratic Party of Alexander Pramatarsky, Anastassia Mozer's "United Agrarians", Bulgarian New Democracy (BND), Maria Kapon's United People's Party, and the "Forward" Movement, no specific agreement was arrived at for a possible enlargement of the right-wing coalition.

The UDF stands categorically against the participation of the "Order, Rule of Law, and Justice" Party, and BND in the new coalition, whereas DSB wants these parties to join the coalition. For the time being, the greatest chances for entering the coalition are those of the "United Agrarians" of Anastassia Mozer. Talks were also held with Emil Koshlukov's party, "The New Time", which also has chances of joining the coalition.

The major problem facing the coalition will be the task of selecting the leaders of the joint party slates. Thus for instance, the Varna organization of the UDF decided to table a motion at the UDF National Council with the demand that the party leadership should take the decision of making a UDF representative leader of the Varna joint party slate, rather than a DSB representative. With respect to the agreement

signed with DSB, the leader of the Varna UDF organization, Dimitar Dimitrov, said that the new UDF leader, Martin Dimitrov, was employing the methods of the BSP and has made this important decision without a respective discussion. These arguments are likely to continue and this could negatively affect the voters' motivation to support the newly established right-wing coalition.

Despite all these differences, the unification of the UDF and DSB is changing the electoral situation in the country. Should a good level of mobilization be achieved and an effective election campaign be held, the coalition between the UDF and DSB has all the chances of attaining a very good election outcome, exceeding the result, which the two parties could get added together, should they run the elections on their own.

2.2.2. Democrats for Strong Bulgaria (DSB)

At the end of January, the simmering internal party differences, which had been gaining momentum over the last few months, finally reached their culmination. Nickolai Mikhailov, Neno Dimov, and Antonella Poneva left the DSB parliamentary faction and became independent Members of Parliament.

Their conflict with the DSB leadership and mostly with the leader Ivan Kostov himself had been going on for more than a year, and their act came as no surprise to anyone. According to Doctor Mikhailov, "DSB has seriously betrayed its principles", which made any further stay of the three of them in the party impossible. Antonella Poneva, who several months ago declared her stance against any joint actions of DSB with GERB, now focused her criticism on the ideas about a coalition with the MPs who split from NMSP and set up their own Bulgarian New Democracy (BND) party. In Poneva's opinion, a coalition with people who until recently have had a key role in the incumbent governing coalition is inconceivable. The three now independent MPs were especially critical with respect to the principle suggested by the DSB leader Ivan Kostov, according to which the MP

seats in the future right-wing coalition should depend on the capacity of the parties to invest more resources in the campaign. Neno Dimov was particularly extreme in his assessment in this respect. He thinks that DSB has now become a party, which is harmful for democracy in Bulgaria and which has dealt a stronger blow on the democratically minded Bulgarians than Ahmed Dogan's "hoops of businesses".

Despite the protest gesture on the part of the three MPs, expressed by their leaving DSB, their act failed to bring about any detrimental effect on the party from an electoral point of view.

DSB has launched the process of nominating its candidates for MEPs and national MPs. Only after its completion there will be some clarity about the final version of the party slates, because they have to be coordinated with the coalition partners from the UDF and the possible other participants in the new right-wing coalition.

Now that the coalition with the UDF has been established, a change in the DSB leader's style and rhetoric can be observed. In the opinion of Kostov, the severe confrontation among the individual parties in the country should be discontinued, having in mind that a mechanism, capable of restraining political corruption, should be built in this country with the participation of the entire opposition. Kostov is of the opinion that what the country needs at the time being is as broad as possible national consent to the purpose of implementing effective reforms. According to the DSB leader, it will take not only strong right-wing governance, but also a strong opposition for such reforms to genuinely come true.

The major emphasis in the election campaign of DSB and the UDF will be combating corruption and organized crime, and the need for an institutional judicial reform, which will guarantee a truly effective and timely justice dispensation. On the other hand, the need for the optimization of the country's administrative capacity and the effective appropriation of the EU structural funds will also be highlighted.

One of the prestigious achievements of DSB over the past quarter was the election of

the DSB MP, Assen Agov, to the post of Vice President of NATO's Parliamentary Assembly. It is for the first time that a Bulgarian occupies such a high post in one of NATO's institutions. The term of office at this post is of a two years' duration, with the right to reelection for another term of office.

2.2.3. The GERB Party (GERB)

During the past three months, GERB continues to lead the electoral support ratings held by the opinion poll agencies (see the chapter on Public Opinion). This brings about a strong tension between GERB and the BSP, because the two parties will be the major contenders at the forthcoming elections. Especially indicative in this respect is the increasingly harsher dialog between the two leaders, Borissov and Stanishev, in the public and media environment, where the sharp exchanges between the two have become an almost daily occurrence by now.

The conduct of the GERB informal leader, Boiko Borissov, also contributes to this state of affairs, as on various occasions it provokes some sort of response on the part of the governing coalition and mainly on the part of the BSP. Thus for instance, one of Borissov's phrases turned into a broad public row. It was pronounced at the time of Borissov's visit to Chicago where he addressed representatives of the Bulgarian community residing there. He launched an appeal concerning the need for the Bulgarian emigrants to come back to the motherland, where too few active citizens have now remained. With a view to the demographic situation, he said that the prevailing part of the population was made up now by retirees and representatives of the minorities, manipulated by traditional parties such as the BSP and the MRF. It is with respect to these people that the GERB leader used the word "material", and this precisely is the word, which provoked a wave of angry accusations and reproaches. This phrase was so deeply over-exposed in the media that it became notorious, and to top it all, the BSP qualified Borissov's statement as "racist and fascist".

Another of the problem-ridden areas, in connection with which the governing majority has often been criticizing Borissov, is the painful issue concerning the waste collection and waste dumping in the capital city. Sofia was littered with waste when the "Novera" company, entrusted with the garbage collection business, stopped collecting it because of some overdue and outstanding sums of money, owed to it by the Sofia Municipality. The government accused the Sofia City Mayor, Boiko Borissov, by saying that it was him that was the main culprit for the problem. The problem was solved only after the Sofia Municipality canceled its contract with "Novera".

At the end of February, by-elections were held for mayor of the town of Rakovsky, which were won by the GERB candidate, Ivan Antonov. He won the election with a total of 3,900 votes, and his opponent, the BSP supported Peter Antonov, remained behind with a total of 2,384 votes. The electoral turn-out was 40.5 percent, out of all the 23,000 voters in the town.

Over the last two years, the GERB Party has developed an adequate network of local structures, and it also enjoys a solid representation in the institutions of the local authorities. It is on this basis that the party will attempt to maximize the number of votes in its favor both at the forthcoming MEP and the national general elections.

For a yet another time, Borissov declared that his objective was to win an absolute majority and thus the governance of the country independent from coalitions at the upcoming general election. Should that prove impossible, he would consider setting up a coalition with the right-wing parties.

The EPP Chairman, Wilfrid Martens, gave his staunch support to the GERB Party during his recent visit to Bulgaria. Martens qualified Borissov as the leader of the right-wing in Bulgaria and added that this leadership should be acknowledged by the rest of the right-wing parties, members of the European People's Party.

2.2.4. Bulgarian New Democracy (BND)

Over the first quarter of 2009, BND for a yet another time gave its support to the parliamentary opposition during the non-confidence vote procedure tabled against the incumbent government. Despite its attempts to convince the electorate that with its actions it truly belongs to the opposition, this political party continues to encounter difficulties in building its own political profile and distinct image, which can be both recognizable by and acceptable for the voters.

The reasons why are rooted in the fact that only a year ago the representatives of BND were part and parcel of the governing coalition, and even played a key role in it as part of NMSP (under its former name of NMSII). This is the justification of certain right-wing political parties, such as the UDF, for instance, to refuse accepting BND in the right-wing election coalition.

BND received an invitation for the meeting in Cadenabbia, Italy, held under the auspices of the European People's Party and the Conrad Adenauer Foundations, in which various Bulgarian right-wing parties also took part. The leader of the party, Nickolai Svinarov, said that the BND objective is for a right-centrist unification to materialize, making it possible for the country to be governed by such a coalition within the next ten years, because this was of a crucial importance for the development of Bulgaria.

The BND leadership announced that the party was ready with a concrete political project entitled "Principles of right-centrist governance" and that they were ready to put this document to discussion with the other parties from the right-wing political environment in its capacity of a founding document.

Despite this effort, however, it is unlikely for BND to join the coalition set up between the UDF and DSB because of the categorical negative stance of the UDF in this respect. This brings to the fore the need for the party to start looking for other coalition formulae and options, which could facilitate its running the upcoming elections this summer. The short time, which BND has at its disposal, however, seems to narrow to a bare minimum the coalition op-

tions that could prove successful for it. And this again puts a questions mark both to its successful performance at the elections, making it possible for its leaders to get returned to the next Bulgarian Parliament, and its own future as a political party.

2.2.5. The "Forward" Movement

Some of the opinion poll surveys indicate that at the time being the recently established "Forward" Movements has definite chances of making it to the next Parliament this summer. The charges, which the prosecutor's office brought up against the informal leader of the Movement, Christo Kovachky, currently do not seem to affect the supporters of the Movement and no outflow of its potential voters has been observed thus far. The pre-trial proceedings initiated by the prosecution against Kovachki have yielded no result so far, but the investigating authorities said they were working on filing the indictment for further criminal proceedings at the law-court. According to insiders, this is likely to happen over the next few months.

In the past quarter, the "Forward" Movement carried out a single memorable initiative: namely, the one they undertook in favor of re-opening Blocks 3 and 4 of the "Kozloduy" Nuclear Power Plant. The Movement organized a rally in the center of Sofia, the major demand of which was to re-open the NPP decommissioned units. The principal motive of the Movement is that given the current situation of a Global Economic Crisis, this will be something that could help Bulgaria cope with the crisis a little easier.

What the rally impressed with was the strong organizational capacity underlying it, which indicates that the organizers are capable of exerting a substantial impact on the workers from the enterprises owned by Kovachky, and the bulk of the participants in the rally were precisely his employees.

The "Forward" Movement announced that one of their political goals, should they make it to the next Parliament, is to lower the VAT rate to 18 percent, alongside with a complete

VAT exemption for medication and books. The economic program of the Movement outlines as its special priority the development of power generation in the country. The emphasis is laid on electricity generation from nuclear power, which should reach a 35 percent share of the energy sector, whereas another 20 percent of the energy generated in the country should come from alternative energy sources.

2.2.6. The "Ataka" Party

On the eve of the MEP and national general elections, the "Ataka" Party unfailingly demonstrates stable electoral positions. All opinion poll surveys give the party between 7 and 10 percent of the electoral vote, and in some of the surveys it even surpasses the result of the MRF, which makes it the third ranking political force. It should not be forgotten that during such surveys some of the supporters of parties such as "Ataka" are embarrassed to declare their genuine support. This means that "Ataka" could be supported by some "hidden vote", which the pollsters are incapable of "catching" by their survey questionnaires.

After the party congress held at the end of last year, Volen Siderov and his close circle consolidated their positions in the party. The removal of his deputy Anton Sirakov who during the congress proceedings opposed the cadre policy of the party pursued by Volen Siderov, failed to bring about any shock or turmoil within the party. On the contrary, it only clearly revealed the domination of Siderov and his closest circle.

At the beginning of this year, "Ataka" symbolically left Parliament with the main motive that the incumbent National Assembly has depleted its political resources and consequently has lost its legitimacy, too, because new parliamentary factions are sitting in Parliament now, for which no one has actually voted. This is a strategic pre-election move on the part of "Ataka", aimed at attracting a greater number of protest votes. In practice, "Ataka" has already launched its election campaign with the tours of its political leadership around the country.

The traditional right-wing parties sent several signals to "Ataka" for possible post-election coalition cooperation. In one of his statements, Ivan Kostov said that no obstacles should be placed barring the possible participation of "Ataka" in a broad right-wing coalition. It will take a serious parliamentary representation for the next Parliament to be able to initiate the institutional reforms, which the right-wing parties and GERB would like to see in place. That is the reason why "Ataka" could be part of such a broader parliamentary majority. Besides, parties of a similar political orientation have been part of broad right-wing coalitions in a number of European states, and a right-wing coalition with the participation of "Ataka" will not be any unusual precedent.

There are supporters of this idea in the UDF as well. At the beginning of February, the Deputy Chairman of the party, Plamen Radonov, tabled a motion at a meeting of the UDF National Council for considering the idea about an even broader pre-election coalition, including "Ataka" as well. This idea, however, was dismissed by the UDF executive body.

An obstacle for the establishment of such a post-election right-wing coalition, including "Ataka", could be the principled stance voiced by the European People's Party. "Ataka" has its own parliamentary representation at the European Parliament, it will be represented there after this year's MEP elections as well, and will probably sit again in the group of the rest of the nationalist formations. In this way, the question marks around coalitions with "Ataka" remain unanswered. Everything will be hanging upon the actual make up of the next National Assembly.

In one of his television interviews, the leader of the "Ataka" Party was asked by a journalist whether he would support a future government without ministers from "Ataka" sitting in it. Volen Siderov replied that this contradicted normal logic, because such a step would only bring downsides for his party, depriving "Ataka" at the same time from the possibility to implement its own party program and political ideas.

3. Public Opinion

During the past three months, the surveys of electoral attitudes indicate that the trend registered over the previous few months has been preserved. This is the conclusion made in result of the national representative survey held by the National Center for Public Opinion Surveys (NCPOS) between the 19th and 27th of February 2009, the representative sample of which covers a total of 1000 respondents.

This survey shows that Bulgarian voters qualify their own general election for National Assembly as more important (57 percent) than the MEP election (37 percent), which is quite a legitimate reaction and would hardly surprise anyone.

GERB continues to rank first as far as electoral attitudes are concerned and 26.8 percent of the respondents say that they intend to vote for Boiko Borissov. The share of respondents willing to vote for the BSP is 17.7 percent, which makes it the second-ranking political party in the country. The radically right-wing nationalists from "Ataka" get 9.1 percent, and their major political adversary – the MRF – gets 7.5 percent of the respondents' votes.

The parties of the traditional Right Wing have registered the following electoral support: the UDF – 3.1 percent and DSB – 2.2 percent. These data were registered, however, before the unification between them took place and their coalition agreement was signed, which means that at the time being the picture might be different. The "Forward" Movement gets 2 percent electoral support, which gives the party chances of overcoming the electoral threshold, should the electoral turn-out prove to be below expectations. The survey shows that at this point of time NMSP has no chances of overcoming the 4 percent general election electoral threshold, because the support it gets is only 1.4 percent of the electoral vote.

A categorical stance that they would not go to the polls has declared 23.2 percent of the respondents in the survey held by the National Center for Public Opinion Surveys.

The attitudes of Bulgarian citizens with respect to the expectations for the future have painted a pessimistic picture. The survey shows that the share of the pessimists – 45.5 percent, exceeds the share of the optimists – 41 percent, as far as the tendencies in the development of the country are concerned. The current situation of a global economic crisis probably has a lot to do with the pessimistic expectations of Bulgarians.

One of the major reasons contributing to the heightened pessimism is the fears revealed by the respondents that the crisis might affect directly their economic and social situation. Thus for instance, 47 percent of the respondents are concerned that they can be made redundant. Over the coming months, these pessimistic attitudes are likely to be preserved, and are even likely to enhance, on the condition that the forecasts for an aggravation of the economic situation in the country come true, and the economic growth rate – typical for the last several years – begins to decelerate.

A total of 52 percent of the Bulgarians approve of the functioning of the European Parliament, while the share of the disapproving attitudes is 11 percent. Another 38 percent of the respondents say that feel insufficiently well informed about the European Parliament and cannot give an opinion about its functioning.

Quite similar to the approval for the European Parliament is the approval of the respondents for the European Commission. The highest number of disapproving respondents with respect to the European institutions has been registered among the supporters of the "Ataka" Party, according to the same survey of the National Center for Public Opinion Surveys. This result is fully in line with the profile of the party and its characteristic Euro-skepticism.

The latest report of the European Commission has been "better" than expected for 21 percent of the respondents in the same survey. For 18 percent it was worse than expected. Out of all the respondents, 60 percent say that they are not acquainted with the report of the EC and thus feel incompetent to express an opinion in connection with it.

Disappointed with the stance of the European institutions are mostly the people who have no political commitments. Despite this fact, the Bulgarian citizens accept that the European Union is a serious corrective mechanism for the governing majorities in Bulgaria.

4. Major Conclusions And Forecasts

1. The political situation in the country has been determined to a considerable extent by the upcoming elections for members of the European Parliament and members of the Bulgarian National Assembly. The political parties have started their assiduous preparation for these elections, which is heightening the antagonism between the incumbent governing majority and the opposition parties even further.

2. The parties of the tri-partite governing coalition are embarking upon the forthcoming election campaign with different strategies and goals. What is important for the BSP and the MRF is to score results, which will make it possible for them to come to office again, irrespective of the composition of the future governing coalition. It is hardly by chance that the BSP has implied the possibility for establishing a broad coalition with the GERB Party, in the name of the political and economic stability of the country, and in response to the serious challenges of the global economic crisis.

NMSP is faced with the issue of the very political survival of the party, and its major aspiration is to manage to overcome the electoral threshold. The only secure way for this to happen is a coalition with the MRF. But at least for the time being, such a coalition has not been put on the party's agenda.

3. What the opinion poll surveys indicate thus far is that the GERB Party will be the number one political party at the upcoming general election, which means that it will be the entity entrusted with the mandate to form the new government. Until recently, the speculations about whom GERB will enter into a coalition with were due to the lack of clarity about the fate of the smaller right-wing parties. Boriss-

ov's constant repetition that under no conditions would he set up a coalition with the BSP and the MRF can now really come true in practice, given the fact that the UDF and DSB have already signed their unification.

The decision of these two major right-wing parties to run the elections on joint party slates has changed the electoral situation in the country. This makes the picture much clearer both in terms of the possible configurations at the next Bulgarian Parliament and the possible coalitions after the general election. The coalition between the UDF and DSB has all the chances of scoring a very good result, surpassing the sum of the results, which each of the two parties could score if it ran the election on its own. This, of course, will depend to a large extent on the way in which the new right-wing coalition will run its election campaign and on the faces that will top the joint MP party slates.

The situation with the possible enlargement of the coalition by joining other parties to it remains unclear for the time being. Best are the chances for joining the coalition of "The New Time" party and the "United Agrarians" of Anastassia Mozer. An agreement in principle to this effect has already been struck with "The New Time", but it still has to be endorsed by the political leaderships of the UDF and DSB respectively.

The fact that the other right-wing parties, such as BND, the Democratic Party, "Order, Rule of Law, and Justice", Maria Kapon's "United People's Party", and other smaller formations will remain outside this coalition may result in the establishment of a second right-wing coalition, which will compete with the coalition of the UDF and DSB for the votes of the right-wing electorate.

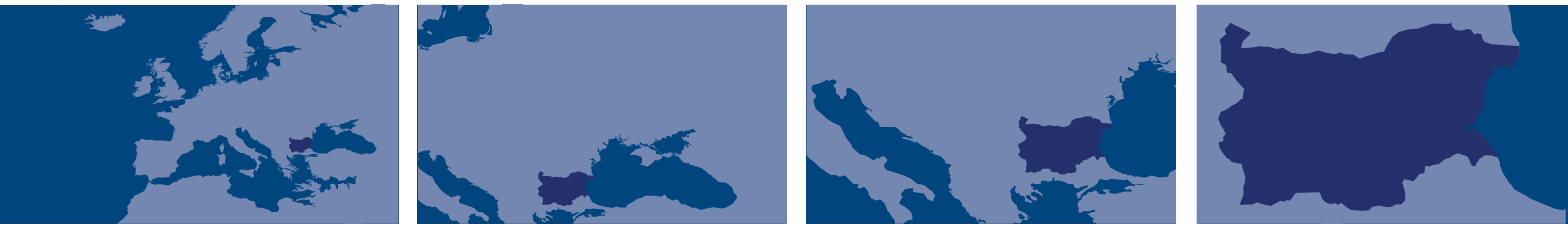
4. In the course of the past year, the "Ataka" Party has changed its political style. Although the radical manifestations of the party have not been discontinued, there has been some mitigation of the extreme rhetoric used by its leader. The underlying reason why is the amended strategy of the party with a view to the upcoming elections. Much like every other party, "Ataka" has been aiming at the governance of

the country, which for its leadership is quite a feasible task in the conditions of a fragmented parliament, and such a fragmentation is likely to occur at the next Bulgarian Parliament. This is precisely the reason why "Ataka" has been trying to present itself as a party inclined to and capable of holding a normal political dialog with the rest of the political parties.

5. After the upcoming general election the chances are for a two-block party system to be established in the country, which could be preserved in the future, too. To a large extent this will depend on the parties themselves and – first and foremost – on the electoral outcome. This two-block system may consist of GERB and the right-wing parties, on the one hand, and the BSP and the MRF, on the other, but such a division will become possible only in a situation where one of the two blocks prevails over the other in terms of the number of MP seats won at the election. Should this condition fail to be fulfilled, more complicated options for the establishment of a broad coalition, or even of a coalition of the parliamentary minority, could be explored and arrived at.

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