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- The protests in the country have shown that the citizens' discontent is not related only to high electricity prices – they are the cause of social tension, but not the reason for it. The problems are more complex and have to do with the overall poverty, unemployment, and the diminished trust of citizens in politicians and institutions.
- GERB is now in a new and unexpected situation, connected to the pre-election environment. High levels of unemployment, low incomes, the bankruptcy of hundreds of small and medium-sized enterprises, the existence of monopolies in a number of sectors of the economy, the poor results of the fight against corruption and organized crime are topics that will be addressed by the opposition during the campaign and answers will be required from GERB.
- The main challenge for BSP is whether it will manage to ride the wave of protests in the country. The demands of voters can be determined as left-wing, but what weighs on BSP at the moment is that many people determine it as a party of the status quo. Stanishev is making efforts to renew the party ranks, relying on new and young faces, while politicians of the transition remain in the background.
- From today's point of view, it is hard to make a clear prediction on the outcome of the election. The protests in the country introduced a new element to the political situation. No one knows if and to what extent the protest vote of the citizens will go to some of the new formations, established by leaders of the protests, but there is potential for this. For now it is certain that there will be five parties in Parliament: GERB, BSP, MRF, Bulgaria of the Citizens' Movement and the Attack Political Party (Attaka).

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1. The political situation

During the first quarter of 2013 Bulgaria went into a political and social crisis. It started with the first civil protests in Blagoevgrad and Sandanski on January 28th, demanding lower electricity prices. Over the next two weeks, the scale of the protests grew and on February 10th the first mass demonstrations were held. The discontent was caused by high electricity bills.

The first national protest against monopolies and the political system was held on February 17th. Citizens blocked roads and key crossroads, burned electricity bills, threw stones at the buildings of electricity distribution companies, chanting "Mafia!" and "Out with monopolies!" 33 cities in total joined the demonstrations, the largest being in Varna, Sofia, Blagoevgrad and Plovdiv. From that day on, protests in the country were held on a daily basis.

A young man of the protesters in Varna, Plamen Goranov, set himself on fire as sign of protest against the city's mayor, Kiril Yordanov. This was a precedent that has no analogue in Bulgarian history and triggered more self-immolation in the country. People took their lives to show their despair at the poverty and misery they lived in, and this increased even more the political tension in the country.

Under pressure from the protesters, The Council of Ministers elected a new chairperson of the State Energy and Water Regulatory Commission (SERC) on February 13th – Yuliana Ivanova, who took the position of Angel Semerdzhiev, who had resigned two weeks earlier. She was also dismissed later on because it was disclosed that she was part of a company involved in illegal trade activity. The Prosecutor's Office opened pre-trial proceedings against Angel Semerdzhiev on the basis of misuse of power.

Boyko Borisov made changes to the government. On February 18th the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance

Simeon Dyankov resigned. The Prime Minister Boyko Borisov announced that his position as Deputy Prime Minister would be taken by the Minister of Regional Development and Public Works Lilyana Pavlova, and the current Minister of EU Funds Management Tomislav Donchev would take up the responsibilities of Minister of Finance.

President Rossen Plevneliev made an emergency statement on the escalating social pressure in the country. He said that he supported the people and guaranteed that their voices would be heard. He also insisted that checks be carried out not only in the energy distribution enterprises, but also in SERC, The Bulgarian Energy Holding and the National Electric Company.

On February 19th the Prime Minister Boyko Borisov stated explicitly that he was not going to resign. But after a series of demonstrations with severe clashes between protesters and police, Borisov submitted his cabinet's resignation.

In view of the situation in the country, BSP insisted on early elections because, in their opinion, the current Parliament was exhausted and could not set up a new government. The MRF for its part summoned all parliamentary groups to declare before the President that the National Assembly had exhausted its capacity and the path to a caretaker government and early elections should be followed.

The Attack Political Party declared that Boyko Borisov had saved himself and GERB by this maneuver. The party summoned all organizers of protests and parliamentary parties to make an action plan for a caretaker government.

The co-chairman of the Blue Coalition Ivan Kostov commented that Boyko Borisov was running away from people's anger and that with this move he gave the power to BSP and MRF.

On February 21st the resignation of the Borisov cabinet was voted on, with 209 MPs voting "for", 5 "against" and 1 abstention.

Following the resignation of the government, President Rossen Plevneliev held consultations with parliamentary groups except for the Attack Political Party, which boycotted the meeting. After the end of the consultations the President declared that the country was heading for a caretaker government.

Mass protests in the country continued on February 23rd. President Plevneliev went to meet the protesters, who submitted their demands to him. In the area of energy they included demands for immediate termination of all lawsuits against clients of the energy distribution enterprises, district heating companies and water and sewerage companies until the legitimacy of utility bills was established; using 100% of the cheap electricity generated by the Kozloduy power plant to meet the needs of the domestic market; state management of the energy distribution enterprises; declassifying all contracts of the producers of electricity for the domestic market; terminating the contracts robbing the state and Bulgarian citizens; and seeking judicial and criminal liability from the people who signed the contracts for the damages caused to the state.

The protesters had other various demands, too – for the National Assembly not to be dissolved; establishment of a public council of experts with a civil quota, which should develop a program for the fulfillment of citizens' demands; establishment of a program cabinet; amendments to the election law with a transition to a majority election system; entitlement of citizens to recall MPs; provision of civil quota of 50% in all state regulatory bodies; the summoning of a Constituent Assembly, which should draft a new constitution.

Another big national protest was held on March 3rd. It coincided with Bulgaria's national day. More than 130 thousand Bulgarians took to the streets in different cities of the country. The largest protests were in Varna. The main demands there were aimed not only at monopolies, but also at the city's

mayor Kiril Yordanov and the organized crime group TIM. Following a few weeks of protests and the death of Plamen Goranov, who set himself on fire in front of the municipal building, Kiril Yordanov resigned.

Within a week, President Plevneliev consecutively handed the mandate for forming a government to GERB, BSP and MFR. They returned the mandate, which resulted in the appointment of a caretaker government. One of the President's commitments regarding the caretaker government was that it should be made up of experts and professionals with proven experience, who were not committed to any political party. The main political parties in the country and the protesters insisted on this.

On March 13th the President appointed a caretaker cabinet, dissolved the National Assembly and scheduled a date for early parliamentary elections on May 12th.

Bulgaria's former Ambassador to France, Marin Raykov, was appointed caretaker Prime Minister. He will also serve as Bulgarian Foreign Minister. Marin Raykov is a career diplomat who was a Deputy Foreign Minister in the UDF government (1997-2001) and a Deputy Foreign Minister in the GERB government over the period of 2009-2010.

There are three Deputy Prime Ministers in the caretaker government. These are Ekaterina Zaharieva, who is also Regional Development Minister, Deyana Kostadinova – Labor and Social Policy Minister, and Iliyana Tsanova – EU Funds Management Minister.

To this point Ekaterina Zaharieva was Secretary General of President Plevneliev. Previously, she used to be Plevneliev's Deputy while he was Minister of Regional Development and Public Works. Deyana Kostadinova is also a member of the President's team – until now she was Secretary for Social Policies. She was Deputy Minister of Labor and Social Policy in the GERB government for a while.

The new government includes also the Minister of Agriculture and Food Professor

Ivan Stankov, the Minister of Health Professor Nikolay Petrov and the Minister of Education, Youth and Science – Professor Nikolay Miloshev. Petya Parvanova was appointed Minister of the Interior – until now she was head of the “International Cooperation” Directorate at the Ministry of the Interior. The other ministers are: Dragomir Yordanov, Justice Minister; Kalin Hristov, Finance Minister; Christian Krastev, Minister of Transport, Information Technology and Communications; Petar Stoychev, Minister of Physical Education and Sports; Todor Tagarev, Defence Minister; Vladimir Penev, Minister of Culture; Yulian Popov, Minister of Environment and Water; Asen Vasilev, Minister of Economy, Energy and Tourism; and Roman Vasilev, Minister of Electronic Government.

The President set three main tasks to the caretaker government – to guarantee financial stability; to meet the expectations of the protesters by carrying out audits in the whole energy sector; and to prepare the holding of fair and democratic elections.

The composition of the caretaker government was regarded differently by the political powers in the country. Lutfi Mestan from MFR and Sergei Stanishev from BSP voiced doubts about the party neutrality of the new government, stating that there are people in it close to GERB.

DSB expressed its approval of the new cabinet and especially of the Prime Minister, Raykov. The former leader of UDF, Martin Dimitrov, also spoke positively of the new cabinet and rated the economic team highly.

The political situation over the first quarter was marked by other important events as well, which later on remained in the background of public attention, due to the violent political crisis in the country. At the end of January the first referendum was held after the democratic changes in Bulgaria. Bulgarian voters were asked: “Should Bulgaria develop nuclear energy through the construction of a new nuclear power plant?” Voting activity was

low – only 20.22% of Bulgarians with the right to vote took part in the referendum. 60.6% of them answered “yes”, and 37.96% – “no”. Due to this result (over 20%), the issue was referred back for reconsideration in Parliament.

At the end of February MPs took a decision for the final shut-down of the Belene NPP project. 154 MPs took part in the voting, of whom 114 voted in favor and 40 against.

At the beginning of February, the Consultative Council on National Security with the Presidency was summoned. It discussed matters related to the bombing attack at Sarafovo Airport, as well as the threats to Bulgaria arising from the civil war in Syria. After the meeting Rossen Plevneliev stated that Bulgaria supports international efforts for stabilization in the Middle East, and especially for overcoming the crisis in Syria, which resulted in increased migration flow to Bulgaria. As to the bombing attack at Sarafovo, the President summarized that the investigation had made great progress.

Interior Minister Tsvetan Tsvetanov, however, announced that there is data for a well-founded assumption that the militant wing of Hezbollah stands behind the attack in Sarafovo. This provoked the USA and Israel to plead with the EU to blacklist Hezbollah as a terrorist organization.

Bulgaria’s opposition parties saw a threat to national security in the statement of Interior Minister Tsvetanov. The leader of BSP Sergei Stanishev remarked that the statement was made under external pressure. The statements of the Attack Political Party and the Blue Coalition were along the same lines.

The Prosecutor’s Office also distanced itself from categorically pinpointing Hezbollah as the perpetrator, since the investigation was still underway. The Chief Prosecutor Sotir Tsatsarov announced that the lawsuit had not yet reached court and the lodging of an indictment by the Prosecutor’s Office, because this required hard evidence.

2. State and development of the party system

2.1. Trends in the right-wing political space

2.1.1. GERB

The government's resignation under the pressure of street protests had a negative impact on GERB. The latest sociological research shows that 70% of voters deem the government's resignation an escape from responsibility. This is the first government in the country since 1997 that has failed to complete its 4-year mandate. The surprising move of Prime Minister Borisov placed the party in a new political situation. GERB's strategy up to now was connected with the subtle use of power resources as a ruling party. GERB relied on building their pre-election campaign on the undoubted success of the government – the development of infrastructure. Now the situation is different. Being out of government, GERB will have to rely on another type of campaign. The broad social discontent towards the whole political élite in the country puts the priority to renew the party and to change the emphasis of its propaganda activity on GERB's agenda. Some ministers criticized Simeon Dyankov's financial policy.

The party defined the criteria which must be met by all its candidate MPs. According to its decision, those members and supporters of GERB who are loyal to the party and have proven that they are working "both for the authority and for solving the problems of Bulgarian citizens" can be nominated at the elections. Candidates who are not members of GERB, but have indisputable public authority and an active civil position can be nominated for MPs.

GERB announced that they will include in their electoral lists proven public personalities, professionals and famous people. Famous Bulgarian sportspeople have been nominated for MPs – the world champion in

wrestling Stanka Zlateva, the Olympic boxing champion Ivaylo Marinov and the Olympic rowing champion Romyana Neikova.

The Vice Chairman of GERB Tsvetan Tsvetanov who will be head of the party's pre-election headquarters stated that the former Finance Minister Simeon Dyankov will not be a candidate for MP at the early parliamentary elections. None of the local structures of GERB has nominated Dyankov. Tsvetanov said also that more than half of GERB's ministers will not be nominated for candidate MPs.

One of the most controversial figures in GERB – Emil Dimitrov, who has been blamed many times by the opposition for passing lobbyist laws, will not stand for election either.

It also became clear that the leader of the party Boyko Borisov will be top of two electoral lists, one of which is in Sofia.

After the government's resignation, GERB admitted to having made mistakes in the government. According to Boyko Borisov, the biggest mistake was the freezing of incomes. The former Finance Minister was blamed directly, because in Borisov's opinion his priority was financial stability at the expense of raising incomes.

Due to this reason, GERB will count on policies for increasing incomes and employment in their program for the upcoming elections. Other priorities in the program are the development of policies to encourage small and medium-sized business, reform in the energy sector, support for export-oriented companies and the attraction of foreign investments – areas in which the government could not achieve success.

GERB stated explicitly that they are going to keep the 10% flat tax. The party will consider the options for raising the minimum monthly wage to 350 BGN, on which trade unions insist.

The European People's Party (ENP) stated that they trust GERB and will support the party at the upcoming elections. However, ENP set three conditions to GERB for its

support – to carry out reforms in the energy sector towards its liberalization, as well as policies for employment and fighting youth unemployment, and measures to encourage small and medium-sized enterprises.

GERB was the first party to register at the Central Electoral Commission for participation in the elections.

2.1.2. The Blue Coalition (UDF and DSB)

The traditional right wing represented by UDF and DSB will be disunited at the next elections. After the collapse of the Blue Coalition, DSB and the MPs who left UDF formed a National Union "Unity" and will stand together for election. The Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) gravitating around GERB and led by Emil Kabaivanov, looked for new allies. In the middle of March it became clear that UDF will unite a few smaller right-wing parties with which it will stand for the early parliamentary elections. The new coalition will include the "United Agrarians", The George's Day Movement, the Radical Democratic Party and Civil Association "Patriot" whose members are three dissenters from the Attack Party who supported GERB for a while as independent MPs. In all probability this coalition will be joined by IMRO-BAA, led by Krasimir Karakachanov, which in the last months acted together with the Attack Party. However, the increased support for the Attack Party during last month made Volen Siderov reconsider his relations with IMRO and terminate the discussions for joint participation of the two parties in the elections.

DSB and the National Union "Unity" will stand together for election. Nadezhda Neynsky and Ivan Kostov signed a United Platform on January 20th, which marked the beginning of a future common political union. The two of them stated that they were aware of the need for a strong reformist right wing, which should lead Bulgaria out of the severe political and social crisis. The final goal of this

union is to establish a unified right-wing party based on the two formations. This process must be completed by autumn. The two formations are committed to protecting right-wing voters by ensuring sustainable economic development, which should create real conditions for increasing citizens' incomes. The priorities of the new formation include carrying out reforms in healthcare and the judicial system, as well as opposition to the unilateral energy commitment with Russia.

As the leader of DSB Ivan Kostov put it, the new formation is open to all opponents of GERB's government.

Since the National Union "Unity" is not registered as a political party, the registration of DSB will be used at the elections.

2.1.3. The Attack Political Party (Attaka)

Attack is the party which at this point is gaining most political dividends from the crisis in the country. The latest sociological research, held immediately after the protests in the country, shows that the electoral support for the party is on the rise. Populism and radical talking at a time of political and social crises always wins supporters, something which is proved by the events in a number of other European countries. This explains the increased support for the Attack Party.

During the protests the Attack Party increased its radical, populist and nationalist rhetoric. Siderov has been talking for years about the need to nationalize the energy distribution companies in Bulgaria which, as he puts it, "take national wealth abroad" and make profits "at the expense of the common Bulgarian". Siderov's repeatedly stated thesis that during all the years of democracy the Bulgarian political elite has been carrying out "a colonial policy of dependence" sounds convincing to many Bulgarian citizens, albeit unsubstantiated.

Only a month ago the chances of the Attack Party entering the next National Assembly were meager. Now, a great part

of its demands resonate with those of the protesters although most of them are actually unattainable. With the aim of gaining narrow party dividends, Volen Siderov left the Consultative Council on National Security with the President that was summoned at the end of February. Siderov refused to take part in the consultations with parliamentary groups summoned by the President to explore the possibility of forming a government within the 41st National Assembly.

The first extraordinary National Congregation of the Attack Party was held on Bulgaria's national day, March 3rd. Volen Siderov was unanimously re-elected Chair of the party. He pointed out a number of immediate measures to be taken by the party in a future government of The Attack. Among them were increasing the incomes of Bulgarians; immediate cancellations of the contracts of CEZ, EVN and Energo-Pro; re-opening of units 3 and 4 of the Kozloduy NPP and construction of a new nuclear power plant as soon as possible. At the forum of the party Volen Siderov again declared himself against Turkey's membership in the EU and stated the need for Bulgaria to reorientate itself economically towards new markets and countries like China, Russia, India and Brazil.

In his speech before the national forum of the party Volen Siderov again brought to the foreground extremely left-wing populist proposals for a sharp increase in citizens' incomes. He stated that it was "completely realistic" for the minimum wage to be 1000 BGN, and the minimum pension – 500 BGN. He insisted that Bulgaria claim back the economic resources and productions granted on a concession basis to foreign companies in the area of ore-mining, gold mining, etc.

The party forum gave a mandate to Volen Siderov to hold negotiations and sign prospective agreements for coalitions for the upcoming election. Delegates from different cities said that they would support these

authorities of the Chair, but did not see a party worthy of standing next to the Attack Party.

2.1.4. Order, Law and Justice (RZS)

At the heat of the protests, the coalition between RZS and the Liberal Alliance of businessman Veselin Mareshki fell apart. Mareshki was one of the people who were severely stigmatized by the protesters in Varna. That was the formal reason for which Yane Yanev canceled the agreement signed with the Liberal Alliance. Mareshki stated that not Yane Yanev, but he himself had cancelled the agreement after the leader of RZS insisted that their union should pay sociologists, politologists and journalists in connection with the pre-election campaign, which he refused to do. Yanev also insisted that the party of businessman Kovachki "Leader" be included in their coalition since it had a "network of votes" in Kyustendil and Pernik where Kovachki has companies and enterprises.

At the beginning of March, RZS launched a populist campaign which, as Yane Yanev put it, gave the chance to each Bulgarian citizen, non-government, inter-branch, professional and other organizations to propose their candidate MPs. Yanev stated that his party is wide-open to all Bulgarian citizens.

According to the leader of RZS, more than 70% of the citizens who have already filed documents for participation in the electoral lists have higher education, among which there are lawyers, economists, IT specialists and accountants. Among the candidates there are Bulgarians who live in the USA, Canada and Germany, but would like to come back to their homeland and help with its development. Yanev pointed out that the average age of the candidates is 35 years, and most of them share the party's idea for summoning a Constituent Assembly with the aim of adopting a new constitution, and they declare that this is their main motive for entering into politics through the electoral lists of RZS.

RZS supported the protesters' demands for summoning a Constituent Assembly which should amend the Constitution towards reducing the number of MPs, as well as introducing the possibility for a recall of MPs. Yanev also proposes an amendment to the Constitution through which the President can be recalled by referendum. According to Yanev, the referendum for summoning a Constituent Assembly may be held in parallel with the early parliamentary elections.

The leader of RZS still supports GERB and would like a coalition between the two parties after the elections.

2.2. Trends in the parliamentary opposition: the center-left spectrum

2.2.1. BSP

In the middle of February a meeting was held at the congress of BSP. The forum's motto was "For a New Social Bulgaria". There BSP stood for a new left-wing policy against neoliberalism and the absolutization of the role of the market. According to BSP, the new left-wing policy will be characterized with "regulation and control of the market, including financial markets, with state investments in the economy, education and science, healthcare, and in innovations and culture. Its radicalism consists in its ambitious goals – overall modernization of economy and society, eradication of poverty and abolishment of extreme inequality, overcoming the demographic crisis and the return of a significant number of young people to Bulgaria; in the outright opposition to social inequity, the destruction of nature and the violation of human dignity and rights; and in the active and resolute implementation of state measures". The political framework of the congress states also that BSP supports the protesters and will strive as best it can to represent their interests.

BSP declared a left turn in 16 steps.

They involve a tax reform for the annulment of the flat-rate tax and reestablishment of the progressive taxation by determining a threshold for the lowest incomes. Socialists propose a model for the financing of healthcare – state financing for state institutions guaranteeing free medical care for all, in parallel with the insurance model for the other institutions and objects of the system. The project also envisages "emergency measures in healthcare – the prices of medicines must return to their tolerable limits" and the reestablishment of state control and the pricing system from the period of the tripartite coalition. BSP commits itself to creating 250,000 new jobs, a return to previous norms of retirement age and restoration of the annual indexation of pensions, as well as an increase in maternity allowance for the second year of raising a child to the level of the minimum wage which by the end of next mandate should be 450 BGN. Another promise is "resolute legal and government activities" for the restriction and regulation of monopolies and abolition of cartels, and for encouragement and resource support for small and medium-sized businesses.

The party sets itself the goal of a convincing victory at the parliamentary elections. Socialists accept as their partners patriotic and other left-wing organizations. The party declared that it would also work with civil organizations. At the congress of BSP it was stated that the party would not go into coalition with GERB after the elections.

In the middle of March BSP held a party plenum. It took the decision that the party would appear in its usual format of "Coalition for Bulgaria" at the upcoming elections.

The plenum drafted a 100-day emergency plan that BSP will follow, should it win the elections. The main points it includes are a change in the work of the National Assembly and the introduction of a schedule for parliamentary control, which should allow for the regular account of authority; intensive support for the

most deprived municipalities; improvement of the business environment in Bulgaria and support for state-owned companies; fighting against youth unemployment; introducing anti-monopoly legislation and declassification of privatization contracts, which are of great public interest, as well as the introduction of progressive income taxation.

On the eve of the pre-election campaign, BSP started a process of renewal of its party. Long-time MPs from the party decided to step down from active politics and not to stand for the upcoming elections. Among them are: Georgi Pirinski, Lyuben Kornezov, Petar Dimitrov, Emilia Maslarova, Boyko Velikov and Asen Gagauzov.

The party leader Sergei Stanishev is trying to introduce younger politicians who are close to him, thus "opening" the party to new groups of voters.

BSP also stated that they will attract authoritative public figures and experts to their civil quota.

The early elections and citizens' discontent towards the political elite give additional arguments to Stanishev for implementing his plans to isolate politicians who have faced distrust and negative attitude in society, such as Rumen Ovcharov and Rumen Petkov. Rumen Petkov reacted sharply to the attempts of certain circles in BSP to raise the issue of the stepping down of politicians from the older generation in the party. Stanishev rejected the accusations that he is carrying out a purge in BSP by stating that what is happening is a natural process of renewal of the party.

Stanishev's statement that even if his party won the elections, he would not be Prime Minister, strikes the same note. He announced that after the elections the country would need a program government of national consent, which should be supported by a broader circle of democratic parties excluding GERB.

2.2.2. MRF

The past quarter was particularly turbulent and dramatic for MRF. On January 18th, the 8th National Conference of the Movement took place, where an assassination attempt was made against the leader Ahmed Dogan. While he was giving a speech before the conference delegates, a gunman approached him and tried to shoot him. The pistol misfired and the attacker was disarmed in the scuffle that followed. This happened in the presence of the leader of the European Liberals Graham Watson and the President of the Liberal International Hans van Baalen. The attacker turned out to be a young man, a student of Turkish origin. Later on it was found out that the weapon was a gas pistol.

Politicians severely condemned the attack against Dogan. GERB announced that such actions are unacceptable. According to the party, an assault against any leader is a threat to democracy in the country.

UDF stated in a declaration that violence, regardless of the reasons and in any form is unacceptable, inadmissible and unjustified. BSP also firmly condemned this act. According to the left-wing party, the assault is a result of "hatred that has been long-fanned, aggression against a political opponent and hostility".

According to the leader of DSB Ivan Kostov, there have to be severe sanctions for the personnel of the National Security Service who let the accident happen. However, DSB announced that this was not attempted murder because a gas pistol could not cause death.

RZS defined the attempt as a "theatre performance" aiming to boost cohesion in the ranks of MRF's voters. The party defines what happened as a "risky PR-campaign".

MRF reacted sharply to the incident. The party blamed the government that under their pressure the Prosecutor's Office had changed the qualification of the deed from "attempted murder" to "murder threat".

This happened after it was found out that the weapon was a gas pistol. MRF condemned the attempts that followed in social networks to make the deed a heroic act. According to Lütfi Mestan, these actions may bring about lasting and irreparable consequences for democratic values in Bulgarian society, and for ethnic peace and tolerance in the country.

To this point it has been found out that the assailant acted by himself. Nevertheless, the Prosecutor's Office stated that they couldn't rule out completely the version of helpers and accomplices. The attacker pointed out the motive that in his opinion Dogan was harmful for the development of democracy in the country, which is why he wanted to threaten him. The investigation and legal proceedings on the attack are going on.

Despite the temporary break due to the assault, the conference continued. Dogan's speech, which was interrupted by the assailant, was read three hours later in his presence. It confirmed the information that Dogan would step down from the leader's position. He appointed as his successor Lütfi Mestan. A special decision proclaimed Dogan an honorary Chair of MFR. As per the adopted amendments to the party statutes, as an honorary chair he would be able to participate in all fora and meetings of the Movement.

Lütfi Mestan was elected unanimously. In the last few years he has been the face of the party before society. Lütfi Mestan is set as an example of a moderate politician and one who is open to dialogue, and a skilful speaker and parliamentarian.

The conference also elected the composition of the Central Council and Central Control Commission. In addition, a political declaration of the 8th National Conference was adopted. It states that "following three and a half years of GERB's government, today the fundamental problem of Bulgarian society and the country as a whole is the need for a firm restoration of democracy".

At the beginning of February, 4 new vice-chairpersons of MFR were elected. They are Filiz Hyusmenova, Aliosman Imamov, Rushen Riza and Hristo Biserov. Yunal Lyutfi will also continue to be a vice-chair of the party.

3. Public Opinion

The political and social crisis in the country makes the upcoming early parliamentary elections unpredictable. The strong anti-party and anti-systemic attitudes among citizens render forecasts of sociologists difficult to make. What is more, around 70% of voters are hesitant as to which political force they will support. That is why a number of sociological agencies in the country present their research with conditionalities.

According to some research of BBSS "Gallup International", since the beginning of March BSP and GERB have had almost equal positions at this point – nearly 20% of voters say that they will vote for one of the two parties. 5.2% of voters would vote for MFR. According to the research of "Gallup", the Attack Party has marked a significant increase – 5% of voters say that they will vote for the party, as opposed to 1.2% in February. Other nationalist formations also mark a growth in electoral support – The National Front for Salvation of Bulgaria (1.5% as opposed to 0.9% a month earlier) and IMRO (0.9% as opposed to 0.4% in February). Meglena Kuneva's Bulgaria for Citizens Movement has lost its position over the last quarter, and at the time of the research is below the threshold of entering Parliament – 3% in March, whereas in February it received 4.8%. At the bottom of the rating are RZS (0.5%), DSB (1.2%) and UDF (0.8%).

It is interesting to note that two out of five voters would like a new important party of the protesters to emerge, and one in five declare their willingness to vote for it.

The research shows that 92% of the

participants in the poll support the protests in the country.

Regarding one of the hottest issues over the last quarter – electricity distribution enterprises and monopolies – there is almost unanimous consensus. 73% are “in favor” of their nationalization and only 10% are “against”. As for the attitude towards the elections – 42% think that “nothing will change essentially”.

58% of the participants in the poll approve of the resignation of the Borisov cabinet and 62% think that protest should go on.

EU Commissioner Kristalina Georgieva remains top of the politicians’ rating with 50% of approval, followed by President Rossen Plevneliev with 44% and the mayor of the capital Yordanka Fandakova with 39%.

4. Main conclusions and forecasts

1. The protests in the country have shown that civil discontent is not only due to the high electricity bills – they have been a factor in the social tension, but are not the reason for it. The problems are much more complex and have to do with overall poverty, unemployment, and the diminished trust of citizens in politicians and institutions. This endangers the democratic process in the country. At this stage there are a few formations that will be headed by the protesters. Their chances of entering parliament are yet unclear and to a great extent will depend on the pre-election campaign of the political juncture.

Protests are subsiding and the situation is returning to normal. Yet it will depend on the work of the caretaker government as to whether this is to be a permanent trend. Parties will also have an important part to play. Obviously, they will rely on a sharp and confrontational pre-election campaign, which could further increase the political and social tension in the country.

2. GERB is in a new and unexpected

situation. The political and media comfort the party had been enjoying over the last three and a half years is being put to the test. The main challenge for the party will be the pre-election campaign itself. All main opposition parties, be they left or right-wing, will blame GERB for the harsh economic and social situation in the country. The high levels of unemployment, low incomes, the bankruptcy of hundreds of small and medium-sized enterprises, the existence of monopolies in a number of sectors of the economy, and the poor results of the fight against corruption and organized crime are issues the opposition will raise during the campaign, and for which they will seek answers from GERB.

3. The traditional right wing in Bulgaria is faced with a fateful trial. According to expectations, UDF and DSB will stand for election disunited. At this point DSB and their partners from the National Union “Unity”, led by Nadezhda Neynski and Martin Dimitrov have greater chances of entering parliament. The UDF of Kabaivanov has smaller chances because a large portion of the party’s supporters sided with “Unity”, while others entered the ranks of the Bulgaria for Citizens Movement, led by Meglena Kuneva.

4. The Attack party has gained most from the protests. The party has every chance of repeating its result from 2005 and maybe even going beyond it. The practice in other European countries shows that in such situations of crisis the winners are anti-systemic parties of radical political discourse. We can expect that the votes for such parties will increase. The Attack Party will rely on strong populism reflecting the voice of the street, and Siderov’s party will make the most of the situation.

5. Sociological research shows less than 1% support for RZS. Yane Yanev’s opportunism, the depersonalization of his party and its turning into a creature of GERB reduce to a minimum the chances of

RZS entering the next Parliament. Yanev's unprincipled agreements with Mareshki and the following collapse in the relations between them put off voters from RZS even more.

6. The main challenge for BSP is whether it will manage to ride the left-wing wave of protests in the country. The demands of voters can be determined as left-wing, but what weighs on BSP at the moment is that many people determine it as a party of the status quo. Stanishev is making efforts to renew the party ranks, relying on new and young faces, while politicians of the transition remain in the background. BSP is relying on typical left-wing populism in its program. This, however, may be an obstacle for finding partners after the elections to form a coalition with the participation of the party.

7. MRF is the only well-prepared party for the elections. The change at the top consolidated its ranks on the one hand, while on the other it has "opened" it up to other parties. Over recent years MRF went into isolation caused by the personality of Ahmed Dogan. Dogan's stepping down before the elections is not accidental. This is a move with which the party is making an attempt to come out of political isolation and thus go back to the government. The new leader Lütifi Mestan is a person open to dialogue and consensus, which definitely makes MRF a more acceptable partner for other parties. It is not by chance that Lütifi Mestan stated that after the elections Bulgaria will need a program and supra-party government, supported by pro-European democratic parties.

8. Meglena Kuneva's Bulgaria for Citizens Movement has not yet managed to enforce its specific image. Sociological research shows that the party is losing its support. During the protests Kuneva could not come up with adequate messages with which to find a place on the agenda during the crisis. The party proposed a program document containing 31 items, which has rather a declarative

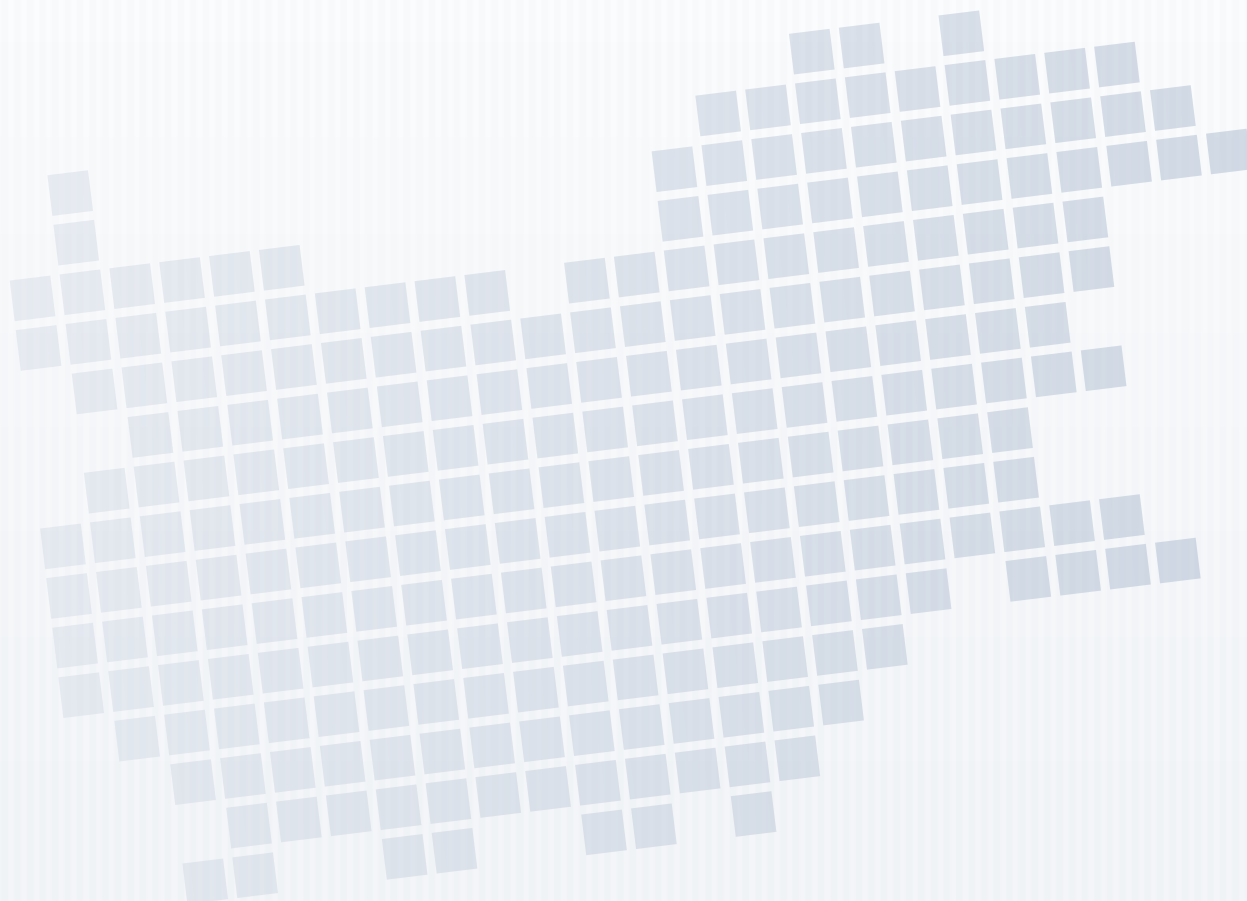
nature and does not offer enough actual and specific measures for overcoming the economic and social crisis in the country.

9. From today's point of view, it is hard to make a clear prediction on the outcome of the election. The protests in the country have introduced a new element to the political situation. No one knows if and to what extent the protest vote of the citizens will go to some of the new formations, established by leaders of the protests, but there is potential for this. For now it is certain that there will be five parties in Parliament: GERB, BSP, MRF, Bulgaria of the Citizens Movement and the Attack Political Party. In all probability none of them will have an absolute majority, which will make the establishment of a coalition government difficult. There is also a possibility for a "blocked Parliament" and new elections.

March 28

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