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Bulgaria's Political Parties

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- The political situation in the country is still tense. Despite the fact that the protests are gradually losing intensity, political dialogue between the government and the opposition remains very confrontational. The President confronted the National Assembly and the government, which adds to the tension in the complicated political and social environment.
- GERB continue their inconsequent behavior as parliamentary opposition. The party cannot yet fit into this new role. Loss of electoral support that was registered by leading opinion poll agencies is most likely to grow as a result of this behavior.
- The protests have consolidated BSP and they are political force number one at the moment according to the electoral attitude polls. At the same time, there is a lot of internal tension within BSP. It is due to the leadership, on the one hand, and to the political course and cadre decisions. Many BSP members accuse the leadership of making decisions in a small circle and not asking the opinion of the legitimate party bodies, such as the National Council.

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1. The Political Situation

The political situation of the past quarter was dominated by the ongoing anti-government protests and counter-protests in support of the Oresharski Cabinet. The main features of the protests are their duration, non-partisan character, active participation of young people and the important role of the social media in the process of their organization. These initial features of the protests underwent changes during the past quarter when certain political parties of the right wing spectrum, including GERB, tried to use the protests for their party-political interest.

The peaceful character of the protests was disturbed in late July. On the night of 23 to 24 July, the demonstrators gathered in front of Parliament and stopped MPs, Ministers, experts and journalists from leaving the National Assembly building. The demonstrators clashed with the anti-riot units of the police. After hours of blockade the protesters were dispersed and the politicians could leave the Parliament building.

The events of that night resulted in rapid reaction of the opposition. GERB, the right wing parties and the Trade Unions demanded the resignation of the government. Boyko Borisov's party demanded The Consultative Council of the National Security to be convened immediately, to determine a date for pre-term parliamentary elections before the end of this year.

In August the protests quieted down for a while. Their new phase started on August 16th, when dozens of buses brought cabinet supporters from the country for an extraordinary session of the National Assembly. In September, the

protests against the government went on, although with far fewer participants.

In parallel with the protests requesting the resignation of the Oresharski Cabinet, there are counter-protests in his support organized on a daily basis. In addition to their support for the Prime Minister, the protesters demand the resignation of President Rossen Plevneliev. The government and their supporters accused the President showing bias in support of the protesters and "parting with his role of unifier of the nation". This was the reason for a petition for his impeachment.

In September Prime Minister Oresharski reported the first 100 days of his government in a paper entitled "100 measures in 100 days". He said that the major success of his government was that the country was relieved from the fear imposed by the previous government. The main tasks of the government during the first 100 days were stabilization measures: correcting policies with an unfavorable effect on economic and social development; starting reforms in various areas; establishing teams and public boards in order to have dialog with the civil society.

BSP and MRF supported the government. MRF announced that the government will enjoy their support as long as it is socially effective. Ataka's leader Volen Siderov pointed out that the lack of analysis and review of the previous government were a shortcoming of report but gave a positive assessment of the actions of the government for suspending some concession contracts and undertaking various social measures.

The opposition party GERB expressed sharp criticism of the government and called the report "100 measures – 100 lies".

During the current quarter President Plevneliev imposed a veto on the budget update. However, the presidential veto was overruled by 130 votes at an extraordinary session of the Parliament. The MPs from BSP, MRF and Ataka were against the veto, whereas the 93 MPs from GERB backed the President.

Imposing a veto on the budget of the country was a precedent in this country and it resulted in tension between the institutions. So far, it was only President Zhelev, who had vetoed the budget, but then the reason was anti-constitutional texts in the latter. The government parties accused the President of interfering in the work of the executive power, as the drafting of the budget and its submission to the Parliament is an exclusive prerogative of the government.

BSP leader Sergei Stanishev stated that Rossen Plevneliev's veto was part of the attempts to obstruct the recovery of parliamentarism and normal democratic statehood.

According to MRF leader Liutvi Mestan the veto of the President was a political act aiming at political gain – to stress the dependence of the Oresharski Cabinet on the votes of Ataka. In this way the President was attempting to energize the protests and take on the role of an ethical arbiter in Bulgarian politics.

Ataka Leader Volen Siderov stated that this act of the President was “nit-picking” and executing a party political task for GERB.

As a result of the deteriorating situation in Syria, the refugee wave that Bulgaria is facing grew much bigger. The Minister of the Interior Tsvetlin Yonchev presented information estimating that between 6,000 and 10,000 refugees

from the Middle East will enter this country by the end of the year. The forecast of the Agency for Operational Cooperation among the Countries along the External EU Borders FRONTEX is far more pessimistic and gives 40,000 as the number of refugees. At the end of September the number of refugees who had entered Bulgaria was about 4,200 and that only 800 were left until the critical maximum intake capacity was reached.

Due to the lack of more places of accommodation and the restricted experience this country has with dealing with refugee situations, Bulgaria asked the EU for assistance. Moreover, a National Operation Center was established, headed by Minister Yovchev in person. It is working for establishing new places for accommodation for refugees, particularly in view of the coming cold months of the year.

The events in Syria made it necessary to convene the Security Council with the Council of Ministers. Terrorist threats, as well as the economic risks for Bulgaria were discussed. Although it was reported that there were no reasons for concern from terrorist attacks, actions will be taken to evaluate and update the National Plan to Counter Terrorism in relation with the changed situation in the Middle East. Refugee influx and the possibility of increasing the number of instances of generation of crimes and social unrest at the places where refugees are given shelter were reported as a major problem. The National Investigation Service defined the situation as dangerous for national security.

Defense Minister Angel Naidenov dismissed the possibility of Bulgaria taking part in a military campaign in Syria. Moreover, the country has no capacity for direct military action. Both Minister Naidenov and Foreign

Minister Christian Vigenin spoke in favor of the political solution to the problem.

President Rossen Plevneliev and PM Plamen Oresharski issued a common position condemning the chemical attack against civilians on the outskirts of Damascus on 21 August. Both of them urged for a political solution to the crisis under the auspices of the UN.

2. The State and Development of the Party System

2.1. Trends in the Parliamentary Represented Political Parties

2.1.1. GERB

In the past quarter, GERB fell into political isolation and started losing electoral support. The position of boycotting the parliament did not bring about the expected results. The party did not manage to 'unite' with the protesters, who regarded it as part of the status-quo parties.

The entire period of July-September was difficult for GERB from the point of view of the attempts to find allies. Several times people from the party attempted to reach out a hand for common action to the newly established right wing Reformer Block, to no avail. The Leader of DSB, one of the founding parties in the Reformer Block Radan Kanev stated that the two formations have political differences and unification between GERB and the Reformer Block would be impossible and no one would be interested in that. According to him, the only common task the two parties shared was overthrowing the current government.

During the past period some of the members who left GERB, among whom were Emil Dimitrov, Ivan Petrov, Pavel Dim-

itrov, and former Minister of Agriculture Miroslav Naidenov, founded a new party – "Bulgaria for an Alternative to Fear, Terrorism, and Apathy" (BASTA). Miroslav Naidenov announced that the party would not have a leader and stated that the main reason for them leaving GERB had been the style and the ways of management of the Deputy Chairman of the party Tsvetan Tsvetanov. Miroslav Naidenov announced that BASTA would not be GERB2 and that not only people who left GERB would be members thereof. He stated that there might be negotiations for joint actions with some movements like Modern Bulgaria and some patriotic parties like VMRO.

Boyko Borisov made an appeal to the citizens to protest on the day of the opening of the new political season. GERB organized the transfer of citizens from the countryside to participate in the protest. However, this discredited additionally the spontaneous protests of the citizens and gave reason to the government to accuse GERB of backing the organization of the protests. The protest remained limited.

At the beginning of the new political season GERB announced their return to parliamentary commissions. However, the party did not nominate any MPs for chairs or deputy chairs of commissions with the explanation that in doing so they would legitimize the Parliament.

The whip of the GERB Parliamentary Group Boyko Borisov used the start of the new parliamentary season to stress yet again that formally GERB won the elections and that he regarded the current Parliament as not legitimate. The leader of GERB stated that the most important issue was the immediate resignation of the Cabinet and pre-term elections.

According to Boyko Borisov the state was in a political and institutional crisis. He stated that GERB rejected the proposal by Sergei Stanishev to reach an agreement on the national priorities as outlined by the majority.

In September GERB initiated a vote of no confidence in the government. The reason was the establishment of a Ministry of Investment Planning. According to Boyko Borisov serious funds were spent on its establishment and it hadn't actually started working. The party claimed that there is no investment policy in place regardless of the declarations by the government that investment and construction were a high priority. At the same time, GERB failed in the debate on the vote of no confidence and the actual voting thereof. This was due to GERB boycotting the parliamentary sessions devoted to the vote. According to the GERB leader the parliamentary group did that in order to discredit MRF and BSP who could not gather sufficient quorum for holding the session, with Ataka not attending.

As a consequence of the scandal with a diary of the Chairman of the Committee on Conflict of Interest Filip Zlatanov, found by the Prosecutors' Office, Boyko Borisov requested that the deputy chairwoman of the parliamentary group of GERB Iskra Fidosova leave the parliament and the leadership of GERB. She was accused of secret intervention in the cadre policy of GERB when the party was in power.

2.1.2. BSP

To a great extent, the summer protests led to internal consolidation – both within the BSP leadership and among their voters.

Sergei Stanishev reiterated yet again BSP's support for Oresharski's Cabinet, which, according to him, continued to work for the change of the status-quo. The leader of BSP also noted that the government will not allow itself to be turned into a caretaker cabinet under external pressure for pre-term elections.

The Parliamentary Group Coalition for Bulgaria also presented a declaration of main priorities. The following are among them: termination of the vicious dependencies between business and politics and defending national interests; protecting Bulgarian producers from unfair competition, as well as Bulgarian consumers from the abuse of monopoly positions; creating prerequisites for reducing poverty; increasing the level of education, support for science, technological innovation and Bulgarian culture; harnessing the demographic collapse by assisting in improving health care; increasing employment; increasing the options for civil participation in the government and widening civil oversight over the latter; and passing a new Election Code in line with all democratic standards prior to the European Parliamentary elections.

At the beginning of the political season, the disagreement within BSP grew as well. Former President Georgi Parvanov (2002 – 2012) requested a change in the BSP leadership. He stated that the managerial decisions in the party had been taken in a very small circle and that some of the first actions at the beginning of the work of the cabinet had projected the influence of certain economic circles. According to Parvanov, BSP had to follow the example of the European left and turn to new social layers. He stressed that a very tangible problem of the party

was that for decades active people had not recognized BSP and that the party could not rely only on pensioners. Parvanov's intention to set up discussion clubs to discuss topical political issues and put forward strategic solutions created additional tensions within the party.

Prior to the opening of the new political season, not only Georgi Parvanov, but also the Chairwoman of Movement D21 Tatyana Doncheva proclaimed the need for a new left. She stressed the necessity of a new political project on the left, which should not be related to the BSP of the recent past and today, nor with the oligarchic circles around the party.

More evidence of the discrepancies within BSP was the position of the left wing MP Georgi Kadiev, who insisted that the party took responsibility for the nomination of Delyan Peevski for President of the State Agency for National Security DANS. Kadiev announced that he would work for changes within BSP that could start as early as October with the elections for several regional chairpersons of the party, including of the metropolitan organization in Sofia. According to him, BSP was developing in the direction of a "leader's party", which could in no way be good for the left. Kadiev also stated that the imposed cooperation with Ataka might bring about a negative attitude towards BSP.

2.1.3. MRF

During the third quarter, MRF followed closely the line of support for the government of Prime Minister Plamen Oresharski.

MRF used its position to suggest people to be nominated for various posts in public administration. Some of these nominations provoked negative reactions of the public.

MRF Chairman Liutvi Mestan emphasized several key points when opening the new political season. According to him the life span of the Oresharski Cabinet does not depend on who protests more strongly, but on how committed it is in the social area. Mestan stated categorically that MRF has a clear commitment to follow an anti-monopoly policy and said that monopolies are a burdensome legacy for the Oresharski cabinet. This position of the party will be reflected in the new Public Procurement Act. MRF will work pro-actively for amendments to the Budget Act and the Election Code. Liutvi Mestan also indicated the willingness on the part of MRF to hold wide parliamentary and public debates on the content of Bulgaria's agreement with the EU for the next 7-year program period.

The MRF leader voiced his opinion that it would be a very big misapprehension to believe that the conflict in the country was between the protesters and the Cabinet. He said that it was a much deeper conflict – between the protesters and the political class as a whole. Mestan stated that it was a question of political responsibility to stop the process of delegitimizing the political system in Bulgaria and it was necessary to take the debate from the street into parliament.

During the period reviewed we have quite often witnessed sharp exchanges between the MRF leader Liutvi Mestan and GERB MPs. In the plenary hall they accused each other of lack of professional qualities of recently appointed people and people who were appointed by the previous government. The issue of who had nominated Delian Peevski for Chairman of DANS was also discussed. Both MRF and BSP keep refusing to give a

specific answer to this day. Liutvi Mes-tan stated that it was a “shared political” decision, hence the responsibility was “shared political” too.

Another cross fire inducing issue between MRF and GERB were the mayoral elections in Gurmen municipality, which were held after the current mayor Ahmed Bashev was elected a Member of Parliament. Only two candidates ran for mayor – one from MRF and one from GERB. Boiko Borisov chose personal contact and made a big tour of the region, stating that the population there lived in fear of MRF. Moreover, he announced that GERB people who refused to become part of MRF structures or vote MRF were dismissed en masse. MRF won the elections.

The main dividing line between MRF and BSP is the topic of the Nuclear Power Plant Belene, MRF being against its construction. However, MRF does not take sides on the topic pro-actively in order not to create a conflict with their allies.

There is no decision of the Constitutional Court yet on the Peevski case after GERB MPs submitted a claim for incompatibility and impeachment of the MRF MP last June. This case came into being after Peevski was elected Chairman of DANS on June 14th and a couple of days later Parliament revoked its decision. Even at that time MRF announced that Peevski would not attend the sessions of the National Assembly and would not receive any salary as an MP until the Constitutional Court pronounced their resolution.

2.1.4. Ataka

The last quarter was a period of slight withdrawal of the Ataka party and its leader Volen Siderov from active partici-

pation in political life. Siderov undertook this move after the discontent of the supporters grew from the behavior of the party which *de facto* supported the Ore-sharski government. That resulted in the decline of its influence on the account of another nationalistic party, NFSB, led by Valeri Simeonov.

At the opening of the new parliamentary session, the leader of Ataka pointed out that Parliament should actively discuss topics related to the poverty, unemployment and standard of living of Bulgarians, as well as the challenges Bulgaria is facing in relation to the events in Syria.

Siderov said also that he and his party will be appreciated by history for stopping GERB returning to power. According to him, there were no arguments in favor of pre-term elections for the time being. Siderov criticized the protests, which he believed were organized by GERB and the parties who were left outside parliament.

In the third quarter we observed a growing conflict between Ataka and NFSB. At the beginning of July there were some clashes between supporters of the two formations.

In August the GORD formation of Slavi Binev MEP joined NFSB and together they founded a party which will follow the political program of the Front. The two parties stressed that their union is based on common principles and positions. They are opponents of Ataka.

The dependence of the government on Ataka meets the disapproval of EPP and PES. PES sent a note expressing wishes for the termination of this informal coalition in Parliament, stressing on the different values of Ataka and the socialists. For their part EPP, represented by Doris Pack (Board Member) expressed

their concern about the government relying on the support of Ataka, which she regards as an anti-European party.

2.2. Non-parliamentary Parties

2.2.1. Reformist Block

A new party association was established in the protests, which claimed the votes of the right wing voters. Seven parties joined it – DSB, UDF, BAPU, Bulgaria of the Citizens Movement, the Greens, Freedom and Dignity, and Blue Unity. According to DSB Chairman Radan Kanev, the Reformist Block is a political union that has several important goals: to show voters that BSP and GERB are not the only alternatives; to unite the right wing supporters after twelve years of erosion of the right political wing; to respond to the needs of a whole new generation of citizens, enter into a dialogue with them in order to show that it makes sense to be both electorate and politicians; to represent the urban middle class; to set the foundations of a sustainable coalition in the center-right, which represents the interests of various social and ethnic groups and defends the rightful place of Bulgaria in an ever more united European Union.

A Citizen's Board with expert commissions was established with the Reformist Block. The Citizen's Board will draft the topical political positions of the Reformist Block, it will decide whether the Block should expand and which parties it should interact with in the future. It will have the task of drafting the leadership policies of the Block and creating a platform for interaction with the civil society in this country. The operation of the Council will be divided into groups

devoted to various topics, which will discuss the proposals for specific policies. Decision-making will be on the basis of unanimity and will be binding to all parties in the association. The following will be among the priorities of the Block: reform of the judiciary and the public administration; greater economic freedom and law enforcement; raising the standard of living; pension reform; and consumer protection.

A major issue for the new Reformist Block is their relations with GERB. GERB and their leader Borisov in person repeatedly demonstrated their willingness for joint action with the RB. According to one of the RB leaders Meglena Kuneva the Block does not negotiate with GERB. She believes that real competition in the right wing would have a healing effect. According to her one should not contemplate a coalition with GERB, but focus all the efforts on the development of RB and the policies it puts forward. DSB leader Radan Kanev noted on his behalf that unification between GERB and RB is impossible and no one was interested in that.

3. Public Opinion

Public opinion during the reported period was presented in the poll of Alfa Research on the first 100 days of Oresharski's government. Data indicates that it enjoys low public support. Despite the fact that the numbers of protesters were significantly lower during the summer months, the poll indicates that it did not change the growing negative attitudes among the silent majority of citizens. 23% are satisfied with the performance of the government, and 21% are of the opposite opinion – extremely dissatisfied

with the people in power. The biggest share is that of those who are disappointed (55%).

The support for the government and the Prime Minister stayed the same over the past quarter – it remained at 23% and 29% respectively. However, the negative assessments of their performance almost doubled. If in early June nearly half of the adult Bulgarians did not have any definite opinion on their work, and the critical remarks were about one quarter, in late August the share of the people with a negative attitude towards the cabinet grew from 28% to 47%, and towards the Prime Minister from 25% to 44%. One quarter of the respondents maintained neutrality. There is also a decline in the share of the supporters of the statement that the work of the Cabinet is in favor of the society (from 39% to 26%), whereas in parallel with that the share of the people who are positive that the Cabinet operates in favor of economic circles close to it grows by almost 20% (from 53% to 70%). 84% of the respondents do not believe that „the most competent people with integrity are appointed to high public positions“.

Public attitudes towards protests are as follows: 51% of the adult population of the country support the requests for resignation of the government, 33% support the counter-protests in support of the government, and 16% do not support either of them.

The protest wave in this country led to changes in the support for parties and political formations. At the beginning of the new political season BSP enjoys 18.4% support and is in the lead before GERB (15.6%), with the newly established Reformist Block coming third (7.6%).

The fourth political force is MRF, maintaining its traditional position with 5.8% electoral support.

Ataka Party loses its position among the nationalistic voters, with 1.5% of the total votes. Ataka's supporters change their preferences in favor of the National Front for Salvation of Bulgaria (NFSB), which enjoys 3.1% support.

The share of the supporters of the demand for resignation of the government a.s.a.p. and for new elections stays around 40%, whereby 38% support the idea of general elections together with the European parliamentary elections in May next year.

The share of the voters “still searching” is quite high – around 20%. They see no alternative to the current status-quo in the currently existing parties. To date it is difficult to forecast which political force(s) will manage to attract these undecided voters. It is possible that they opt for one of the existing and established parties, or go to an entirely new formation.

President Rossen Plevneliev manages to gather more approval (37%) than disapproval (25%), which makes him come third on the rating list. In comparison with the previous quarter, there is a decline in the approval of the President of nearly 7%.

Among the four politicians who enjoy more confidence than lack of it, first comes the EU Commissioner Kristalina Georgieva with 47% positive and 15% negative responses. Second is Sofia's Mayor Yordanka Fundukova with 43% positive and 22% negative responses.

The leaders of all parliamentary parties receive more negative than positive assessment on their work. Former Prime Minister Boiko Borisov has 26% confidence and 49% no confidence from all

respondents. BSP leader Sergei Stanishev has 23% confidence versus 56% no confidence. The attitude towards the leaders of the other two parliamentary parties remains negative. MRF Chairman Liutvi Mestan has the approval of 12% and disapproval of 67% of the voters in this country. The results of the leader of Ataka are even more negative – 4% positive versus 85% negative.

4. Main Conclusions and Forecasts

1. The political situation in this country remains tense. Despite the fact that the protests have quieted down gradually, the political dialogue between the government and the opposition is still dominated by confrontation. The President confronts the National Assembly and the government, which adds more tension to the complicated political and social environment.

The major challenge for the government in the coming months will be to restore and widen the scope of public confidence. Without it, it will be difficult for the government to implement important reforms in various sectors.

In the short term, pre-term parliamentary elections become less and less likely. A new wave of social unrest in the fall and winter is possible however. These could cause difficulties for the operation of the government yet again.

2. GERB continues its inconsistent behavior as parliamentary opposition. The party is unable to fit into this role that is new to it. The frequent walk-outs and attempts to undermine the quorum of the parliamentary sessions, including the refusal to register for the debates at the National Assembly on the vote of no confidence they initiated, make GERB an in-

creasingly unpredictable party, following the conjuncture of the decisions of their leader. The loss of electoral support, detected by major opinion poll agencies, will probably grow as a result of this behavior.

3. The protests consolidated BSP and it is currently political force number one according to opinion polls. At the same time, there are serious internal tensions within BSP. They have been induced by the leadership style, on the one hand, and by the political course and cadre decisions, on the other. Many BSP members are accusing the leadership that decisions are made in a narrow circle and without consultation of the legitimate bodies of the party, such as the National Council. With former President Parvanov entering the stage and his intent to establish a network of discussion clubs we have an indication that he will attempt a return to active politics. This will probably sharpen the leader's clash in the party yet again.

4. Despite the tension around the Peevski case, MRF continues to enjoy its traditional electoral support. At this stage, the Oresharski government relies on MRF support. Despite the existence of anti-MRF attitudes in BSP, the relations between the two parties remain stable and their parliamentary groups work in a consolidated, united manner.

5. Due to the informal support for the government, confidence in Ataka is on the decline. The major competitor of the party is still NFSB of Valeri Simeonov. Recent opinion polls show that there is a significant migration of voters from Ataka towards NFSB. Despite the fact that Ataka is losing electorate because of its support for the government, Volen Siderov's party continues to assist the parties in power when important votes are

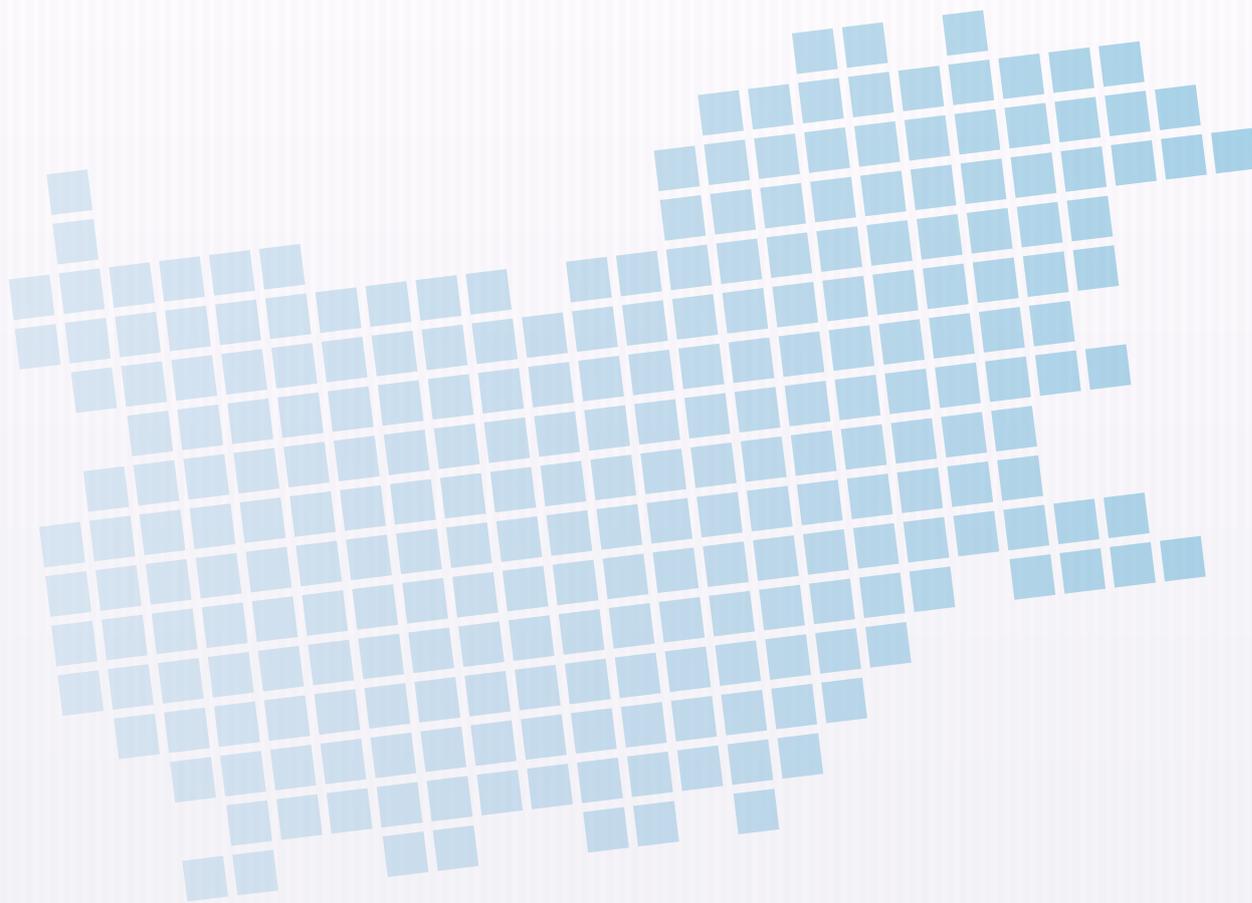
due in parliament. The existing expectations that Ataka parliamentary group will split as a result of the policy of the party so far have not been substantiated for the time being.

6. The Reformist Block stands the chance of attracting the right wing voters who are not happy with GERB's government. At this stage, the new right wing formation has a good electoral potential. However, there are many question marks

as to its future. A major challenge for the Reformist Block is how the constituent parties will overcome their narrow party political interests and personal ambitions of their leaders. There is still a large group of people in DSB – including members of the leadership, who have a negative attitude towards Meglena Kuneva. Some more conservative DSB voters have certain reserves towards the Freedom and Dignity Party of Korman Ismailov and Kasim Dal.

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