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BAR METER

Political Parties in Bulgaria

Year 15, Issue 1, January-March 2015

- The government went through the first crisis situation related to the resignation of the Minister of Interior Veselin Vuchkov successfully. With the quick nomination of Rumiana Bachvarova and the change of Lazarov and Pisanchev, Prime Minister Borisov succeeded in promptly preventing more serious negative consequences for the government. With the changes in the Security Sector on one hand the demands of the Reformists have been satisfied, and on the other hand – Borisov managed to inculcate some figures close to him thus having close control over this important area of government.
- Despite the categorical support for the cabinet on the part of the Reformist Bloc at this stage, the relations between the parties in the Bloc remain tense and the competition between the various parties constituting it is still evident. At this stage, tension comes from political appointments. RB gives the impression that the parties are competing with each other as to who will get more positions in government, which damages its image of a formation fighting for new morals and transparency in politics.
- The Patriotic Front continues to shape up more and more like a formation with extreme language which was typical for Ataka in the past. The xenophobic speeches of their leaders from the podium of the National Assembly sharpen the political discourse in this country, which might result in radicalization of the campaign in the local elections - particularly in the regions of mixed population.
- BSP continues to lose electoral positions. Several opinion polls have demonstrated this. The party is still looking for a successful formula of an opposition formation but has difficulty in articulating its ideas publicly, at this stage.

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CONTENTS

1. The Political Situation.....2

2. State and Development of the main political parties.....4

2.1. Trends in the parliamentary represented parties supporting the government4

2.1.1. GERB4

2.1.2. Reformist Bloc.....5

2.1.3. Patriotic Front5

2.1.4. ABV6

2.2. Trends in the parliamentary opposition7

2.2.1. BSP - Left Bulgaria.....7

2.2.2. MRF.....8

2.2.3. BDC.....9

2.2.4. "Ataka"10

3. Public Opinion11

4. Main Conclusions and Forecasts.....12

1. The Political Situation

The political situation during the first quarter of 2015 was determined mainly by the first steps of the new government. Despite the fact that the relations between the parties supporting the government remain complicated, the government as a whole manages to project stability and enjoys wider parliamentary support on certain issues. On several occasions MRF and the parliamentary group of the Bulgarian democratic Centre BDC supported the majority in passing some key resolutions.

In early March the first more serious government crisis occurred. Unexpectedly, the Minister of Interior Veselin Vuchkov handed in his resignation and it was accepted by Prime Minister Borisov. The reason for the resignation was differences of views of the Minister and the Prime Minister on the Chairman of the State Agency for National Security SANS Vladimir Pisanchev and the Secretary General of MOI Svetlozar Lazarov. According to Vuchkov, the amendments to the Law on SANS and the Law on MOI enacted by the majority required the replacing of these two figures. On several occasions Borisov stated that he was not in a hurry to make these changes, as both of them were doing their best and were doing their job well. Vuchkov said that changes were a must because Lazarov and Pisanchev embodied the model which GERB was fighting against in the time of Oresharski's government.

The Reformist Bloc also insisted on the change. GERB's parliamentary group Chairman and former Minister of Interior Tsvetan Tsvetanov also spoke critically of the two and insisted they be replaced. The latter gave grounds to many to see divergence

between Borisov and Tsvetanov as regards the personnel decisions in the Security sector.

Borisov nominated Deputy Prime Minister Rumiana Bachvarova as the new Minister of Interior. Despite the fact that Bachvarova is a sociologist and has no experience in the system of MOI her nomination was accepted well even by the opposition. Borisov said that he relies on a civil nominee who is not from the MOI system and hoped that all speculations and concerns about back-stage dealings and illicit machinations would be dropped. After the nomination of Rumiana Bachvarova was voted by the National Assembly, the Prime Minister announced that SANS Chairman and the Secretary General of MOI will be replaced. Following a nomination by Rumiana Bachvarova Georgi Kostov, Deputy Secretary General until then, was appointed MOI Secretary General. He has long standing experience in the system of MOI, having gone through all levels of the hierarchy. Dimitar Georgiev was appointed Head of SANS. He was Deputy Minister of Interior in the previous GERB government. Up until then he was national security advisor to the Deputy Prime Minister Meglena Kouneva. Prime Minister Borisov said that Georgiev was an experienced professional and well accepted by the partner services.

Another major topic that led to increasing political tension was the proposal of the Minister of Finance Vladislav Goranov for voting a new external debt to the amount of BGN 16 billion. This decision came as a surprise even for the parties supporting the government. The Reformist Bloc supported the Minister's proposal from the very beginning. Unlike them, the Patriotic Front and ABV were extremely surprised and said that this was not part of the Program Declara-

tion of the government, and they had not been informed about such a decision in advance. BSP and MRF announced that they were categorically against the debt and said that they would inform the Constitutional Court if the President did not veto it. This resulted in a series of consultations between the Minister of Finance and the parties supporting the government. Minister Goranov claimed that the money was for covering the deficit in the coming three years and for repaying old debt.

Prime Minister Borisov threatened that if the voting of the debt failed, it would mean resignation of the government. At the beginning of the debate prior to the vote of the resolution for the debt, in addition to BSP and MRF, ABV and BDC said that they would not support it. A new series of talks followed. Finally, surprisingly the debt was approved by a majority of 161 votes, supported by GERB and RB as well as by MRF, BDC and ABV. This change of position was explained with the promise of Goranov that BGN 2 billion would not be spent except in the case of extreme need. Still, doubts were raised that there had been back-stage deals and people started talking again about a covert coalition between GERB and MRF, which both parties categorically deny.

The topic of the Corporate Commercial Bank remained in the focus of public attention. Over the past months, doubts were voiced about draining the bank's assets by changing their ownership. In this way legislative amendments were enacted at the end of March that allow temporary trustees to be appointed without an official bankruptcy being announced by the court. The case is still pending at the Supreme Administrative Court. The Court of Appeal of Belgrade refused the extradition of the majority owner of CCB Tsvetan Vasilev and the case has

been returned to the first instance court.

In January the European commission published its new report on Bulgaria under the Mechanism for Cooperation and Verification regarding the progress in the area of Justice and home Affairs. The report found old shortcomings and issues like a lack of progress in fighting corruption and organized crime, and a lack of sentences at the higher levels of power. The report gave a good assessment of the Strategy for Judicial Reform passed by the National Assembly at the end of last year. It is noted that there is political will for reform, which the people in the government interpreted as confidence given to the cabinet.

At the end of January the Supreme Judicial Council (SJC) elected Lozan Panov chairman of the Supreme Court of Cassation (SCC). Pavlina Panova, Judge from the SCC, was competing with Panov for the position. She participated in the competition at the end of last year when none of the candidates managed to get the necessary 17 votes. So a new election procedure was opened. The newly elected Chairman Lozan Panov was judge at the Supreme Administrative Court until then. The election procedure was criticized yet again. Despite the exhortations of the Minister of Justice Hristo Ivanov and of some of the Members of the Council to vote with ballots rather than with the electronic system, the majority of the SJC refused to allow such a vote. People started talking again about lobbies in the SJC that impede the judicial reform despite the declarations of its members that they want real reform in view of the recommendations of the report of the European Commission.

During this quarter, the conflict in the Ukraine was yet again one of the topics that impacted the political situation in the

country. BSP, "Ataka" and ABV are for the lifting of sanctions against Russia. The government and the President stick closely to the common political position of the NATO allies and the EU member states for continuation of the sanctions.

At the end of March the Ministry of Defense published a report on the state of the armed forces in Bulgaria, which states that a hybrid war is wedged in this country from Russia. According to the report a propaganda campaign is carried out in Bulgarian media, disseminating disinformation about the conflict in the Ukraine as well as attempts of populist party leaders to manipulate the electorate.

2. State and Development of the main political parties

2.1. Trends in the parliamentary represented parties supporting the government

2.1.1. GERB

Over the last quarter, GERB focused their efforts on securing parliamentary support for the government. Opinion polls show that the party remains the first political force and the distance from BSP of the elections last year remains the same. The parliamentary group of GERB stays united and very cohesive, which is a sound foundation for the preparation of the party for the local elections this autumn.

The Chairman of the parliamentary group and Vice Chairman of GERB Tsvetan Tsvetanov announced that the party will stand for the elections on its own. He stated that he hopes to be supported by the Reformist Bloc at the runoff elections for mayors where young candidates of the party are taking part. On their part, GERB

will support the Reformist candidates in the runoffs when this is of mutual interest. The goal of GERB according to Tsvetanov is to win the local election convincingly and to increase their presence in the municipalities throughout the country.

In mid March, mayors, MPs, ministers and members of the leadership of GERB gathered at a conference in Plovdiv, where they discussed the preparation for the local elections. Tsvetanov said that currently GERB have 94 mayors and 1601 municipal councilors. He expressed his confidence that after the elections this autumn these numbers will increase. Tsvetanov also said that instructions have already been sent to all party structures to start discussing the nominations.

Prime Minister Boyko Borisov participated in the forum in Plovdiv too. He said that he will suggest to the ministers not to participate in the election campaign in order to focus their efforts on the executive and not to have conflict between the partners in the government. According to him the elections will be a big test for the coalition but everyone has to show coalition culture.

Despite Tsvetanov being the second leading figure in GERB after Borisov, Rumiana Bachvarova, who heads the Ministry of Interior, is gradually being established as the person closest to Borisov.

At the same time, Tsvetanov is awaiting a decision of the Supreme Court after the Court of Appeal confirmed the sentence of 4 years imprisonment effectively, pronounced by the first instance court. The sentence is for the refusal of Tsvetanov to endorse the use of means of special investigation 6 times in an investigation against the anti-mafia boss in Veliko Turnovo Orlin Todorov. According

to the court, in the two instances so far, in doing so Tsvetanov has knowingly impeded justice.

2.1.2. Reformist Bloc

In the past quarter, the Reformist Bloc gave reasons for criticism of a number of appointments. The opposition accused the Reformists of having received too many positions in the state administration, which does not correspond to their electoral results in the elections of last year. MRF criticized the Reformist Bloc of political cleansing of professionals in the state administration in favor of party cadres from the Reformist Bloc. The partners in the government majority from ABV also criticized some appointments. ABV leader Georgi Parvanov defined the Reformist Bloc as a new MRF which “overeats with power”.

The reason for these reactions was the decision of the Minister of Economy Bozhidar Lukarski, UDF leader, to appoint a new Commission for Consumer Protection. Dimitar Yotov was appointed Chairman of the Commission. He is the husband of the Head of the political cabinet of Deputy Prime Minister Meglena Kouneva. Party figures from UDF were appointed members of the Commission. Martin Dimitrov from the Reformist Bloc criticized the appointments and said that they were all people with no experience whatsoever in this field. There was also some exchange of verbal fire in the public space between the Minister of Economy Lukarski and MPs from the Reformist Bloc.

This internal scandal reflected negatively on the Reformist Bloc in the public eye. In order to mitigate tension, the parties in the Bloc decided to start working on some rules for making public appointments.

Despite the claims for quick reforms,

which reformists insisted on in their pre-election campaign, these intensions remain rather declarative for the time being. The reform of the judiciary, which the Bloc really insists on, consists only of the strategy passed by the National Assembly so far. In spite the fact that Minister of Health Peter Moskov has the highest rating among the ministers, the health reform is not progressing significantly yet.

DSB leader Radan Kunev criticized the way Sofia Mayor Yordanka Fundukova controls the municipal budget. According to him the municipal budget of Sofia is one billion a year and it is necessary for it to be used in a better way. Kunev pointed out that the reformists will have their candidates for municipal councilors and mayors big cities of the country and did not exclude tension between the parties in the Reformist Bloc. This is why, according to him, it is important to approach this issue in a pragmatic way and not allow party ambitions to take over. He believes that otherwise the local elections might lead to insurmountable tension and a rift of the coalition.

The question about convening a congress and electing a chairman of the Reformist Bloc, which DSB was insisting on most, was not discussed in the last quarter. This remains a topic of conflict – mainly between DSB, who insist on electing a chairman, and UDF Bulgaria for the Citizens Movement, who think that this issue should be put off in the future. With local elections approaching, this issue will probably be put off yet again, as it might lead to some tension and disagreement in the Reformist Bloc.

2.1.3. Patriotic Front

This quarter showed that support for the government on the part of the Patriot-

ic Front is uncertain. The strategy the Front chose is not to be uncritical towards the government. Moreover, there were some situations of conflict on some motions proposed by the Council of Ministers. For example, the resolution on the sovereign debt was sharply criticized by the Co-Chairman of the PF Valery Simeonov. He said that the decision was made in a non-transparent way without prior information for the parties supporting the government. Simeonov announced that PF cannot vote in favor of sovereign debt when it is not clear what it is going to be used for. The explanations of Minister of Finance Goranov that it was intended for repayment of old liabilities did not sound convincing according to Simeonov. In the meeting of the Minister with representatives of the PF parliamentary group the MPs were not convinced by the arguments the Minister offered. At the end of the day the PF parliamentary group abstained from voting on the debt.

On the other hand, PF was remembered for sharp and extreme statements of its representatives from the parliamentary tribune. Valery Simeonov made several statements on the Roma ethnic group, which were qualified as xenophobic. On the whole, PF bets on populist, nationalist rhetoric similar to that of "Ataka". Unlike "Ataka", who demonstrate a pro-Russian orientation, PF are rather critical of Russia's behavior in the conflict in Ukraine. Moreover, PF insists on a special policy towards the Bulgarian community in Ukraine and for easing the visa regime and granting citizenship to Ukrainian citizens of Bulgarian descent. PF even called upon the President to convene the Consultative Council on National Security to review the situation in Ukraine and more specifically the circumstances of Bulgari-

ans there.

Last quarter was marked by a number of scandals between PF and "Ataka" in the National Assembly. They almost reached the point of physical clashes between MPs from both parties, which were prevented by interrupting the session of the Parliament and intervention on the part of the quaestors.

2.1.4. ABV

In the past quarter ABV tried to balance between their support for the government and upholding their image of a left formation. The party focused their efforts on the support for the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Social Affairs Ivaylo Kalfin but remained critical with respect to the performance of the cabinet in a number of other sectors. For instance the proposal for a new debt of BGN 16 billion caused a serious debate indeed.

In the discussion at the National Assembly Kalfin said that with the likely deficit he could not see how his performance in the government could be effective without drawing a loan, and implied resignation. This led to a change in the original position of ABV, and the parliamentary group voted in favor of the debt, which induced some tension within the party. After the vote it transpired that the leader of ABV Georgi Parvanov was not informed about the change in the position of the parliamentary group. Immediately after the vote Parvanov said that ABV's support for the ratification of the agreement for drawing a new debt was a serious mistake. He apologized to the voters for the change in the position of the parliamentary group and said that he would resign as leader of the party. The former President said that such serious decisions cannot be made at the last minute, without

any consultation with the partners in the government.

In its session the National Council of ABV accepted Parvanov's resignation. The new Chairman of the formation will be elected directly by the members and supporters of the party on April 25, and the former President will continue to chair it in resignation until then. The expectations are, however, that Parvanov will be re-elected Chairman of the party. He said himself that, if nominated, he would accept the nomination for leader. At the end of March it became clear that ABV members nominated Parvanov 35 times and there are no nominations whatsoever for anybody else.

The contradictions between ABV and GERB deepened in the past quarter. ABV do not disguise their dissatisfaction with the way decisions are taken by the people in power. Parvanov said that he regards the ABV support for the government as frozen and that very soon ABV may reconsider their attitude and leave the government. The reason for that according to Parvanov is the incorrect behavior of GERB, who do not communicate on important issues and decisions with the partners. Parvanov said that PM Borisov "behaves in an authoritative manner, and solves the problems singlehandedly and chaotically".

ABV declared that they are in favor of lifting the sanctions against Russia since, according to the party, they already have a detrimental impact on the Bulgarian economy and are counterproductive. ABV believes that these sanctions should be revised as there is already some progress made for a ceasefire after the Minsk agreement.

The relations between ABV and BSP remain complicated and competitive. Despite the fact that ABV made a proposal to BSP for seeking dialogue and participating in

the local elections with joint mayoral candidates and joint municipal councilor lists, this was not supported by the BSP. BSP saw some insincerity behind this proposal and said that they cannot see how they could cooperate with a party that supports a right wing government. Several times there has been some verbal cross-fire between politicians from both parties over the past quarter.

At the end of January ABV suffered a great loss – Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly Rositsa Yanakieva died. She was Mayor of Pernik and co-founder of ABV. Kiril Tsochev MP took her place as Deputy Speaker of Parliament.

2.2. Trends in the Parliamentary Opposition

2.2.1. BSP – Left Bulgaria

BSP started its preparation for the local elections with a re-assessment of the events in the party over the past two years. The left wing in BSP – the Association of Left Socialists, organized a conference entitled *BSP – Acquiescence or Change*. The leader of the left wing – Yanaki Stoilov launched the idea that the BSP must change into a left party of the radical democratic socialism. According to him this will be the bridge for bringing closer the current Socialist and Social-Democratic parties to the new left parties and movements in Europe. Stoilov believes that "the radical, not the moderate left politics, is the effective barrier to the rising extremism – religious, ethnic, political".

According to Stoilov, the forthcoming elections will demonstrate whether the party is regaining the confidence of the voters or is continuing to lose supporters. In his words, if the trend of decline remains, BSP will lose the prospects for regaining its leadership positions for a long time and even its

existence as a top ranking political force will be questioned. The left wing leader is of the opinion that BSP needs authoritative central leadership and an active dialogue with the local structures. According to him the members and the local party organizations must be involved in solving the most pertinent issues for the party and the society.

BSP started its preparation for the local elections this autumn with a seminar in Varna under the motto *The Local Elections – an Important Battle for BSP*. PES Leader Sergei Stanishev attended the seminar too. According to him, BSP can do well in the local elections, whereby the leading criteria when nominating the left candidates should be electability, personal renown and shared values, and the formula for success is close integration between the local campaign and the campaign at national level. The PES leader is of the opinion that if BSP approaches the elections in a responsible and innovative manner, open to civil society, standing for explicit left ideas, the party stands a very good chance of doing well in the elections. Stanishev promised that in every municipality in which BSP wins a mayoral position, 50% of the kindergarten charges will be covered; that day care centers will be built for senior citizens; that there will be a pharmacy open 24/7 in each town; and that there will be internet connectivity in each municipal school.

Over the past quarter BSP organized several rallies in front of the Office of the President of the Republic, where the party openly declared that it is against the sanctions against Russia. This provoked some negative reactions in the public space and gave yet another reason for a media clash between the pro- and anti-Russian attitudes.

A delegation of the BSP Parliamentary

Group, led by the leader of the party Mihail Mikov, visited Moscow, where they had a meeting with the Speaker of the State Duma. In the talks Narishkin appreciated the fact that BSP is in favor of “cooperation with the Russian Federation and lifting the sanctions”.

Mihail Mikov confirmed that his meeting with Narishkin was a “very good signal for the development of the Russian-Bulgarian relations”. He reminded everyone that BSP has clearly expressed its position in favor of lifting the sanctions against Russia and that the Bulgarian Socialists in all European institutions are of the firm stance that these sanctions “do not help the further development”.

2.2.2.MRF

The local elections in Sarnitsa, held at the end of March, became the most important inner-political event for MRF. Sarnitsa was made an independent municipality on 1 January 2015 and this made it necessary to hold elections for municipal council and mayor to govern the municipality until the regular local elections this autumn. The elections in this small municipality had a symbolic meaning rather, due to GERB's claim to manage a breakthrough in a region where MRF traditionally has a strong presence.

The elections were held in tense circumstances, since the MRF candidate Nebi Bozov and GERB candidate Mustafa Alikanov both reached the run-off. In the first round Bozov won 1415 votes against 944 for Alikanov. The expectations were to have a very close second round because the reformist Bloc candidate had won 700 votes. Between the rounds there was some sharpening of the political opposition. GERB and the Reformist Bloc said that they would

unite their votes in favor of Alikanov and that they would win the run off. According to the DSB leader Radan Kunev in this way the right wing in Bulgaria would demonstrate that MRF has not got the monopoly in mixed population regions any longer. MRF leader Lyutvi Mestan accused the people in government of having exerted pressure on the voters and the electricity in part of the municipality would be turned off if the GERB candidate was not elected in the second round. GERB rejected the accusations and said that MRF had been exerting pressure on the voters from the mixed regions for years.

At the end of the day, MRF candidate Nebi Bozov won the run off with 60% of the votes. In this way MRF demonstrated their ability to mobilize the electorate in the regions where there are people of Islamic confession. This symbolic victory of MRF demonstrated that the party will be mobilized to the maximum extent in the local elections in the autumn.

Lyutvi Mestan defined the victory in Sarnitsa as "a citizens' warning that democracy always prevails over the attempts at political extinction". According to him, the elections in Sarnitsa confirmed "the power and the strategic role of MRF to be the national safeguard of democracy, freedom and Euro-Atlanticism".

In the past quarter MRF bet on their traditional rhetoric when the party is in opposition – calls for keeping the ethnic peace and claims that the party has always been its safeguard. The attacks on the part of the Reformist Bloc and the Patriotic Front gave reasons for this behavior. Minister of Health Peter Moskov (RB) named MRF a "tumor formation" and the Co-Chairman of the parliamentary group of the Reformists Radan Kunev said that MRF should be

"expelled from power". The Co-Chairman of the Patriotic Front Valery Simeonov said that MRF was the party which is a threat to the ethnic peace with their claim to have a monopoly over a certain portion of the voters.

The MRF leader defined this discourse as unacceptable for a democratic EU member state. According to him the politicians should refrain from using the "language of hatred" because that undermines the foundations of any society. Mestan said that the people in power are suffering from a severe form of revanchism and sack from the movement specialists and experts who are employed by a number of state departments.

MRF opposed the idea that had been launched again about holding a referendum for introducing compulsory voting. According to them the idea of "removing MRF from the political life of this country" is at the core of this initiative which, in his words, could not happen anyway because the movement had always received good results in the cases of high voter turnout.

Despite the deterioration of the relations between MRF and some of the parties in power, there is a tendency for MRF to back the majority when voting important resolutions at the National Assembly like the one on the vote on the new debt of BGN 16 billion. This gave reasons to start stating again that MRF supports GERB informally and that it is all part of a prior agreement between the two parties. GERB called this speculation. PM Borisov said that his party was not at fault for MRF backing important and sensible initiatives of the government.

2.2.3. BDC

During the last quarter the parliamentary group of the Bulgarian Democratic

Centre finally parted with Nikolai Barekov's party Bulgaria without Censorship. All MPs except Martin Ivanov left Bulgaria without Censorship. So in practice the composition of the parliamentary group was totally changed.

This happened after the LIDER party held a congress at the end of March where it was renamed to Bulgarian Democratic Centre, the name of the parliamentary group when the new parliament was constituted. Krasimira Kovachka MP (relative of the businessman Hristo Kovachki) and Stefan Kenov MP who left Bulgaria without Censorship were elected Co-Chairs of the new political formation. The former Chairman of LIDER Kuncho Filipov was elected Chairman of the Center for Analysis and Strategies, which will support the new leadership. Former TV anchor Rosen Petrov, Hristo Todorov, Georgi Nedev and Petar Petrov became Deputy-Chairmen.

Barekov qualified what happened with the parliamentary group of BDC as the "most impudent theft in Bulgarian politics". He accused the businessman Hristo Kovachki of "looting" the parliamentary group and said that MRF was behind all that was happening in BDC. He reminded people of the long standing relations of Kovachki with the movement ever since the period of the establishment of LIDER in 2007. Barekov said that he would inform ALDE leader Guy Verhofstadt about the attempts of MRF to make BDC part of the European liberals. According to Barekov this is unacceptable because when the party was established before the elections in 2014 his party Bulgaria without Censorship declared its appurtenance to the family of the European conservatives.

In the past quarter one can observe closer and closer cohesion of BDC with

the government parties. On several occasions, in important votes like the one on the new debt of BGN 16 billion BDC MPs supported the government. Most probably this trend will stay in the months to come. BDC's behavior, however, is difficult to predict because of the corporate nature of the formation where their shadow leader, businessman Hristo Kovachki finally took the upper hand. It is evident that the line that BDC will follow will be related mainly to the economic interest of its patron.

2.2.4. "Ataka"

Over the past quarter "Ataka" shaped up steadily as a party of pro-Russian orientation. A delegation of the party led by its leader Volen Siderov, visited Crimea at the beginning of February. During the visit Siderov said that he recognized Crimea as part of the Russian Federation. Yet again, he took the stance that the Referendum in Crimea was legitimate and that the peninsula had always been linked to Russia historically.

In mid-February Volen Siderov said that there was military mobilization being prepared in this country because Bulgarian citizens had been called up for reserve in many Bulgarian cities. Extremely speculatively the "Ataka" leader said that the country was getting ready for a war. The Minister of Defense announced that Siderov's claims were not true. Minister Nenchev said that this was a routine that was repeated every year. Siderov criticized the President's decision not to take part in the parade in Moscow on May 9. According to him Europe is what it is today because of the Red Army. He also accused European leaders who refuse to attend the celebrations in Moscow of rehabilitating Nazism in this way.

“Ataka” announced it was in favor of a referendum for Bulgaria leaving NATO. Volen Siderov said that his party will start a petition among the citizens. His attempts to gain support for this initiative at the National Assembly proved unsuccessful.

3. Public Opinion

A poll by Exacta Agency, carried out at the beginning of March, indicates that GERB retains its leading position among the electorate attitudes. 27.4% of the voters would vote for the party. BSP continues to lose its electoral importance - the poll suggests that the socialists enjoy the support of 11.1% of eligible voters. MRF remains third with 8.2%. The Reformist Bloc comes fourth, whereby 5.5% of the voters would cast their vote for the RB. Exacta’s poll indicates that the Patriotic Front – 4.5%, ABV and “Ataka” with 3% each - would make it to the Parliament. This data shows that the parliamentary parties in the current parliament would make it again in forthcoming elections. The exception is the Bulgarian Democratic Centre, who does not stand a chance of overcoming the 4% barrier at this stage.

Exacta’s poll shows that 31% of Bulgarians approve of the work of the government. 55% are dissatisfied with the cabinet, where elderly people over 60 years of age, low-educated respondents and Bulgarians of low standard of living are prevalent.

As regards the performance of the government, 25% of Bulgarians say that nothing good has been done for the country since the beginning of this term of office. 16% say that they were left with a bad impression because of the draft of a BGN 16 billion loan as it was not clear what the money would be spent on. 7% criticize the

cabinet for a lack of reforms and 6% - for a lack of synchronization between the partners in government.

PM Boyko Borisov has the approval of 43% of the respondents, 45% do not approve of his performance. After the parliamentary elections he has increased the level of confidence by 4% after the parliamentary elections. The non-approval of him has gone down by 3% over the past four months. Minister of Health Petar Moskov is the most-liked minister with 49% approval. Three further members of the government have positive ratings – Minister of Regional Development Liliana Pavlova, Deputy PMs Ivaylo Kalfin and Tomislav Donchev.

The findings of yet another poll are also interesting. A nationally representative poll of Alpha Research Agency commissioned by the European Foreign Policy Council indicates the attitudes of the Bulgarians to Russia and the conflict in Ukraine. The poll shows that despite the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Ukraine Bulgarian citizens quite like Russia. 54% of the respondents show a positive attitude to the country. The actions of Russia in the conflict provoke a negative attitude in 40% of the respondents.

Albeit traditionally reserved towards participation in military unions, the majority of Bulgarians support the membership of our country in NATO. For 42% of the people our membership in the alliance is important for Bulgaria’s security and defense, and 22% are of the opposite opinion. 53% of the respondents are of the opinion that Bulgaria has to meet all its obligations as a loyal Alliance member. 32% believe that, depending on the situation, Bulgaria may not perform some of them. Only 14% are of the stance that the country should leave the Alliance.

The Bulgarian foreign policy regarding

the conflict in Ukraine is assessed mainly positively. 74% believe that Bulgaria has a moderate and well-balanced policy. 12% think that it is too aggressive, and 10% are of the opposite opinion – they think that Bulgaria is loyal to Russia and not a loyal member of EU and NATO.

4. Main Conclusions and Forecasts

The government went through the first crisis situation related to the resignation of the Minister of Interior Veselin Vuchkov successfully. With the quick nomination of Rumiana Bachvarova and the change of Lazarov and Pisanchev, Prime Minister Borisov succeeded in preventing in a timely manner more serious negative consequences for the government. With the changes in the Security Sector on the one hand the demands of the Reformists have been satisfied, and on the other – Borisov managed to inculcate some figures close to him thus having close control over this important area of government.

Despite the fact that the relations between the parties supporting the government, at this stage it is hardly likely that there will be a situation where the stability of the cabinet will be put at stake. The Rubicon for the government will be the local elections, where the outcome may cause re-grouping of the forces. Moreover, at this stage the cabinet enjoys even wider support in key votes. This brings about some negatives though, because GERB always has to make excuses that they have no covert agreements with MRF.

2. Despite the fact that at first glance there was some discrepancy between PM Borisov and the Chairman of the parliamentary group Tsvetan Tsvetanov on the change of Lazarov and Pisanchev, the parliamentary

group of GERB stands united and unconditionally supports the government and their leader. In inner-party plan the forthcoming local elections will be the most important ones, and it will invest some serious effort in them in order to not only confirm their leading role in the local authorities, but to legitimize the party as a leading political force too. The challenge for GERB will be how they will balance their relations with the reformist Bloc – relations that will become inevitably competitive during the campaign.

3. Despite the fact that the Reformist Bloc give their categorical support to the cabinet at this stage, relations between the parties in the Bloc remain tense and the competition between some parties within it remains obvious. At this stage, tension results from political appointments. RB gives the impression that the parties are competing over which one will get more government posts, which damages its image as a formation fighting for new morality and transparency in politics. If these processes are not regulated in some way in order not to have scandals – which the public have witnessed – RB risks losing the support of the core that supported them during the protests. The next big challenge for RB will be the ambitious reform that they promised to the voters. At this stage they are rather declarative, with no real dimensions.

4. The Patriotic Front continues to shape up more and more like a formation with extreme language which was typical for “Ataka” in the past. The xenophobic speeches of their leaders from the podium of the National Assembly sharpen the political discourse in this country, which might result in the radicalization of the campaign in the local elections - particularly in the regions of mixed population. PF demonstrates a

contradictory behavior towards the government. On one hand it supports certain aspects from the program of the government, and on the other it behaves in a more opposition-like manner.

5. ABV went through its first more serious challenge as a formation after the resignation of Georgi Parvanov. Despite the fact that this move was regarded by many as an attempt to unite the party ranks and the parliamentary group, the very act of resigning raised many questions about the future behavior of ABV. The statement of Georgi Parvanov that he “freezes” his support for the cabinet and that it can be withdrawn should be regarded in itself as an important indicator of a re-assessment of the positions of ABV.

6. BSP continues to lose electoral positions. Several opinion polls have demonstrated this. The party is still looking for a successful formula of an opposition formation but has difficulty in articulating its ideas publicly at this stage. Betting on the “Russian card” like “Ataka” is hardly working in favor of its image as a modern European formation. Looking for some middle way as regards conflict in the Ukraine and the sanctions against Russia does not contribute to increasing confidence in the party.

7. Unlike BSP, MRF has no problem with its image when in opposition. Keeping the ethnic peace and opposing to the language of hatred are means which MRF uses successfully every time they are not in government. Over the last quarter this rhetoric was clearly pronounced by the leader Lyutvi Mestan and by leading politicians from the formation. The victory in the elections in Sarnitsa shows that the party will be mobilized to the maximum extent for the local elections. At the same time, there is the tendency that when voting impor-

tant bills and resolutions, particularly when GERB have difficulties in gaining the votes of their partners, MRF gives their support. This shows that MRF is not necessarily trying to destabilize the cabinet. Moreover, it helps them out of difficult situations.

8. There was a total makeover of the BDC over the past quarter. From a formation linked to Nikolai Barekov, today it has turned into a function of the interests of the businessman Hristo Kovachki, particularly after the LIDER party renamed itself and took on the name of the parliamentary group – Bulgarian Democratic Center. With the exception of Marin Ivanov, the MPs from Bulgaria without Censorship left the party. It all demonstrates that the formation was created due to conjuncture considerations without clear ideological foundations and an electoral basis.

9. “Ataka” became a steady pro-Russian party. The majority of the public appearances of the leader of the party Volen Siderov are about supporting Russia and criticizing the politics of the Bulgarian government with respect to the conflict in Ukraine. More and more “Ataka” takes a stance against NATO and the EU.

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Imprint

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Office Bulgaria
97, Knjaz Boris I St.
1000 Sofia, Bulgaria
Responsible:
Regine Schubert, Director

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published by the Friedrich-
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www.fes.bg

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