

Georgi Karasimeonov (Ed.)

BAROMETER

Bulgaria's Political Parties

Year 15, Issue 4, October-December 2015

- The local elections consolidated GERB's dominating position and showed the stability of the government. The opposition, mainly MRF, failed to fulfil their expectations that the elections will disclose the need for a change of the formula of governance. Despite this, the main challenge that the government faces remains unchanged - whether it will be able to conduct the reforms which it promised to its voters.
- GERB is the big winner in the elections. The party reinstated its leading role not only at a national level, but at a regional level, too. The strengthening of GERB's presence in the local authority led to the further internal consolidation of the party. The next elections which would be a priority for GERB are the presidential elections next year.
- The Patriotic Front was divided at these local elections. The two main parties in the coalition – the NSFB of Valeri Simeonov and VMRO of Krasimir Karakachanov took part in the elections separately in most parts of the country. This is one of the reasons for the less convincing results, compared to the elections held last year.
- BSP suffered a great loss at these elections, as it had done previously. The party is faced with numerous internal challenges and still there are no signs of any real steps and ideas for overcoming this deep crisis which the socialists are experiencing. It is more than evident that the party congress, which will be held next year, will be of key importance for its future development.

**FRIEDRICH
EBERT
STIFTUNG**

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung
Office Bulgaria
Analyses



CONTENTS

1. Political Situation2

2. State and development of the main political parties4

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 Front6

2.1.4. ABV7

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. Main Conclusions and forecasts.....11

1. Political Situation

The local elections held on October 25th and the national referendum on electronic remote voting marked the political situation in the past quarter. GERB unequivocally won the local elections. The results show that there is no significant change in the power balance between the main political parties. As a whole, after the local elections the parliamentary represented political parties in the country retained their electoral positions gained at the parliamentary elections held last year. As a result the political system in the country preserved its current characteristics. Alpha Research exit poll figures show the following picture: GERB – 34%, BSP – 17.2%, MRF – 14.6%, RB – 9%, ABV – 4.3%, 'Ataka' – 3.1%, NFSB – 2.7%, VMRO – 2.5%.

Local elections were accompanied by grave election mishaps during the submission of the protocols from the district election commissions to the Municipal Election Commission in Sofia. This process was organised in Arena Armeec hall, but was made extremely difficult by the fact that only 19 members of the MEC –Sofia received the protocols as per the regulations in the election code. The members of the commissions were barricaded in the hall for 48 hours, which led to political tension, criticism of the work of the Central Election Committee and attacks on various institutions in charge of the election process.

This escalated in the resignation of the chairperson of MEC – Sofia. GERB blamed the election code and the amendments passed by the previous parliament, in which BSP and MRF had the majority, for the problems. Maya Manolova, who was the mastermind behind the drafting of this new election code, was specifically attacked. BSP

refuted the accusations and said that the incumbents could have amended the code.

In fact the problems were connected with the fact that there were four different bulletins in the capital – for mayor of the municipality, for municipal councillors, for district mayors and for the referendum. Apart from this, the lists of municipal councillors had the option of preferential vote. This created difficulties while counting the bulletins and resulted in many incorrect protocols – not only in Sofia, but all over the country.

There was a record number of non-valid bulletins in the lists of municipal councillors – more than 400,000, which is approximately 14% of the total number of submitted bulletins. Many parties and candidates reported that the preferences had not been counted and there were mistakes in 80% of the protocols. This led to the accusations made by different formations and participants in the elections for the existence of manipulations conducted by the incumbents from GERB. This resulted in a record number of claims for annulment of concrete election results in different places in the county, including Sofia and Plovdiv.

Approximately 40% of the voters took part in the referendum and in favour of electronic remote voting were nearly 70% of the votes cast, with 25% against. The condition for the validity of the referendum and making it statutory - the number of votes to equal the number of votes in the last parliamentary elections, proved to be as expected a very high threshold to overcome. Thus, the final decision on whether online voting should be introduced will be made by Parliament within three months of holding the referendum,

as required by law. President Plevneliev, who initiated the referendum, expressed satisfaction with the results and called upon the parties in the National Assembly to act responsibly and to listen to the voice of citizens.

Employees of the Ministry of Interior held unprecedented protests all over the country for several days in November. They commenced when the trade union of the employees in the structures of the Ministry of Interior opposed the legislative amendments proposed by the Finance Minister Vladislav Goranov, eliminating the privileges of policemen, the military and the employees in the Security Sector. The amendments were part of the transitional and final provisions in the State Budget Law for 2016. Policemen were supposed to receive 10 instead of the current 20 wages upon retirement. Apart from this, their vacation was reduced to 20 instead of 30 days. The non-uniformed employees would no longer have received 2% bonus on their wages for time served and no free of charge public transport.

The protests of the employees from the sectors of the Ministry of Interior took the form of blocking key roads and junctions in Sofia and other towns in the country. Prime Minister Borisov reacted strongly to the police protests by saying that the compromise decision, proposed by the government, is for the amendments to be valid only for the recently appointed employees. However, the police trade unions did not agree to this proposal and the protests continued. This led to the complete withdrawal of all the drafted amendments prepared by the government and the protests stopped.

These events brought about heated discussions in the public. Some analysts

were extreme in their evaluations of the events and described the actions of the police as an attempt at a coup d'état. Others stated that tension in the sector has been accumulating for years and the problems are much deeper and connected to the lack of an overall vision for reforms. The opposition parties, BSP and MRF, described the police protests as just and logical. The Patriotic Front, which supports the government, expressed the same opinion.

The budget for 2016 envisages taking on a new debt amounting to BGN 5.3 billion, of which BGN 3.9 billion could be drawn under the dealership contract with four banks, concluded last year. The Finance Ministry noted that the money is needed for refinancing old debt and financing the budget deficit. However, the threshold of the state debt is set at BGN 26.6 billion, or 30.1% of the estimated GDP for 2016.

According to the draft law and the 3-year prognosis of the Finance Ministry, Bulgaria's economy will grow by 2.1% next year and the gross domestic product will reach BGN 88.28 billion. Next year the budget envisages a deficit of BGN 1.8 billion. It stipulates that the minimum wage next year will be BGN 420 and the second year maternity leave compensation will be BGN 320.

After the elections the government disclosed its intention to update the budget for 2015, despite the statement made by the Prime Minister Borisov that there is record high collection of excise duties and customs duties during the entire calendar year and that budget revenues exceed expenditures. This resulted in criticisms on the part of the opposition.

During the discussion in the plenary

hall of the National Assembly, Finance Minister Vladislav Goranov described the budget with three words – stability, realism and results and added that the government is doing everything possible for the return to normalcy of the country. He noted that there is delay in conducting some of the urgent reforms, thus explaining the need to update this year's budget with BGN 387.8 million. The updating is inevitable because of the completion of the operational programmes for the period 2007 – 2013, as well as because it is impossible to reduce the employees drastically in certain sectors and because of the need for extraordinary expenditures for compensations, the minister explained.

Goranov outlined the main goal as the reduction of the budget deficit and dispelled the apprehensions that the state debt is growing disproportionately. He further noted that the main investment priorities in next year's budget are education and infrastructure, as well as defence and security, where the state has made international commitments.

BSP accused the government that there are no priorities in the budget but only a fall into a spiral debt. The position expressed by MRF was similar.

The budget law was passed on first reading on November 19th with the support of GERB, the Reformist Bloc, the Patriotic Front, ABV and the BDC. MPs from BSP, MRF and "Ataka" voted against.

The terrorist's attacks in Paris brought the issues related to migrants and the war in Syria back onto the agenda. Foreign Minister Daniel Mitov stated that the country could not take on more refugees, even if the EU insisted on it. Prime Minister Borisov said that Bulgaria joins France

and the efforts of the international community to resolve the conflict in Syria and categorically underlined that our country will not take part in a land operation but, if necessary, we could provide logistic support and gather intelligence.

2. State and Development of the main political parties

2.1. Trends in the parliamentary represented parties supporting the government

2.1.1. GERB

GERB scored a convincing victory in the local elections and reconfirmed its position as the dominant political party in the country. In many district towns in the country GERB won in the first round and in many of them the victory was unequivocal. For example, the current mayor of Burgas, Dimitar Nikolov, who is also deputy chairman of the party, won with 84%; in Stara Zagora the current mayor Zhivko Todorov won with a convincing 79%; in Varna Mayor Ivan Portnih won with 62%; in Blagoevgrad Atanas Kambitov was elected for a second mandate with 58% of the votes. As expected, the Mayor Yordanka Fandukova won the elections in Sofia in the first round with 60% of the votes cast. GERB won in the first round of the elections in Ruse, Smolyan, Veliko Tarnovo, Gabrovo and Yambol.

Among the largest cities in the country, there was a second round of elections in Plovdiv and the current mayor from GERB Ivan Totev won with a small margin. GERB won the rest of the second round of elections in the district towns in the country, with the exception of Pleven and Dobrich, where the party lost to the candidates of the Reformist Bloc.

GERB received the most votes in the municipal councils in the district towns, thus consolidating its position in the local authority. GERB's election campaign head Tsvetan Tsvetanov reported that out of the total 5,181 municipal councillors in the country, GERB has 1,727, or one third. He mentioned that GERB's pre-election goal was to have at least 100 mayors, but in reality there are many more - 129 - and added that GERB has increased its presence in 22 district centres.

At the press conference after the elections Prime Minister Boyko Borisov said that the results at the local elections have shown that 'no one can measure up to GERB'. According to him this success is due to the enormous amount of work done by GERB's representatives in the past years – the construction of highways, roads, sports halls, kindergartens, etc.

At the press conference after the elections Borisov was asked about the participation of his party in next year's presidential elections. He did not mention a concrete name but stated that GERB's candidate has the biggest chance to win. Borisov said that it is still too early to talk about this.

Borisov denied BSP's accusations that the elections were unfair and manipulated. According to him there were several places in the country in which the party won so convincingly, that there could be no doubts of an unfair vote. Concerning the mishaps in Arena Armeec, Borisov said that a change of the election code is needed in order to prevent such events from happening in the future.

GERB's victory at the local elections consolidated the stability of the government and showed that there is no alternative at the moment. Henceforth, a priority for the party should be conducting the reforms in a

number of sectors, despite opposition from various social groups, proven by the backtracking of the government after the police protests.

GERB's internal party efforts will be focused on winning the presidential elections to be held next autumn.

2.1.2. Reformist Bloc

The Reformist Bloc won the second round of elections in Pleven and Dobrich. This fact places the party on a par with GERB and MRF, which are the other two parties with elected mayors in the district cities in the country. The current mayor of Montana, Zlatko Zhivkov, supported by the RB, won in the first round of elections. Peter Paunov will be mayor of Kyustendil for a third mandate. He was supported by both the Reformists and GERB.

Vili Lilkov came second after the winner Yordanka Fandukova in Sofia, as expected, but the expectations of the RB for a second round of elections did not transpire. However, the Reformists won several district mayors' seats in the capital, where DSB and UDF are traditionally strong.

As a whole RB's results at the local elections proved that the Bloc has strengthened its position among voters, despite its internal-coalition contradictions.

The leaders of the main parties in the RB evaluated highly the election results. UDF leader Bozhidar Lukarski, who is also Minister of Economy in the present government, said that his party achieved excellent results at the elections. Henceforth, Lukarski says that the RB should focus its efforts on next year's presidential elections, as it is necessary for the Bloc to agree on a common nomination of a candidate. UDF proposes their common nominee to be elected at primary elections with the participation of supporters of the RB.

In turn Meglena Kouneva also gave

a positive evaluation of the RB's results at the elections and pointed out that the new mayors in Pleven, Georg Spartanski, and in Dobrich, Yordan Yordanov, are representatives of her party: Bulgaria for the Citizens Movement (BCM).

DSs Leader Radan Kunev said that local elections have established the RB as one of the leading political formations in the country. According to him the elections have confirmed the stability of the governing majority, since they won the elections convincingly together with GERB. Regarding the presidential elections, Radan Kunev presented a slightly different position from that expressed by his colleague Lukarski. Kunev holds the opinion that primary elections should be held among the right-wing political parties, including GERB. Thus, the right-wing parties will win next year's presidential election in the first round – even without the support of MRF, the DSB Leader believes.

In mid November the Reformist Bloc's group in Sofia Municipal Council declared that it will be in opposition and will only support the proposals that are good for the city. The Bloc's councillors refused all 10 deputy chairmanship posts in the committees, after expressing their disagreement with GERB's decision to head all 13 committees, as in 6 of them the party has an absolute majority. The reason for this disagreement of the 11 councillors of the Bloc is that GERB's group does not have an absolute majority in the Municipal Council.

As before, this quarter again a priority for the Reformists will continue to be the reform in the judicial system, as the amendments to the Constitution are expected to be approved at the second reading very soon.

2.1.3. Patriotic Front

The two main parties in the Patriotic Front – NFSB and VMRO, were not united in the local elections. This predetermined the Patriotic Front's lower results, compared to the results which the formation attained jointly during last year's parliamentary elections.

What should be noted is that if the NFSB was the leading party in the Patriotic Front a year ago, at these elections VMRO achieved better results than its partners. VMRO won the elections and appointed mayors in the smaller municipalities in the country, such as Elin Pelin for example. VMRO has 3 municipal councillors in Sofia, 2 in Veliko Tarnovo, and 6 in Ruse. VMRO's mayor nominee for Ruse came second in the elections and was a few votes short of a runoff.

The "Patriots" candidate for Plovdiv Mayor Slavcho Atanasov reached the runoff, but lost to the town's current mayor Ivan Totev from GERB by 1400 votes. Atanasov said that he would ask for the annulment of the elections because of the numerous corrected protocols.

VMRO leader Krasimir Karakachanov called upon the NFSB not to be divided any longer during the forthcoming elections. Karakachanov noted that the election results of VMRO are good in many places in the country and that the slogan on the building of Parliament – "Unity Is Strength", should be understood correctly by the patriotic parties in Bulgaria. In his opinion, if the two formations had appeared together at the elections in Sofia, Vratsa, Veliko Tarnovo and Ruse, most probably the mayor nominees of the Patriotic Front would have reached runoffs against GERB's representatives.

Valeri Simeonov acknowledged that the party has registered a drop in their results compared to the last parliamentary elec-

tions. He reported that NFSB has 46 separately elected municipal councillors and 16 municipal councillors elected as part of a coalition.

2.1.4. ABV

At the press conference after the local elections ABV Leader Georgi Parvanov said that ABV has become an indispensable factor in Bulgarian politics. He defined the local elections as an important test for ABV. The reason for this is that ABV is a young formation which needs to build its local structures and has to affirm its position in a state of flux.

Concerning the dialogue among the left-wing political parties, Parvanov said that ABV has always been open to holding talks for cooperation with other left formations. According to Parvanov the reason for the split in the left is internal and is caused by a lack of deep and forward-looking change. He expressed the opinion that it is inevitable for the left to change, otherwise it is doomed to defeat.

Parvanov congratulated GERB on winning the elections and added that GERB's domination in local authority is "obvious and is not only a result of a well-conducted campaign but of good management of the municipalities".

The ABV election campaign head Rumén Petkov reported that more than 150 municipal councillors have been elected from ABV lists or with the support of the party. ABV has more than 65 mayors elected in various locations in the country.

Georgi Kadiev, Sofia mayor nominee supported by ABV, came fourth in the elections with almost 6% of the votes, and ABV won 3 municipal councillors' seats in the Sofia Municipal Council.

2.2. Trends in the parliamentary opposition

2.2.1. BSP - Left Bulgaria

The local elections proved that the crisis within the BSP continues unabated. The party did not win a single mayor's seat in any of the district towns for the first time since the reforms conducted in 1989. The party lost in those towns which in the past were considered to be its bastions, such as Vidin, Vratsa, Shumen and Lovech. In the large cities in the country – Sofia, Plovdiv and Varna, the party's candidates were not even among the main contestants to win. Mihail Mirchev came third in Sofia with 8.4% of the votes. In Plovdiv the businessman Georgi Gergov only came in fifth place. And in Varna Anelia Klisarova, former education minister in Plamen Oresharski's cabinet and supported by BSP, came in third place with slightly more than 7%.

BSP lost a number of the smaller municipalities too, in which in the past it dominated. The party's consolation is that it managed to preserve its position as the second political force in the country and the expectations of some of the analysts expressed before the local elections that MRF would overtake it, were not realised. Nevertheless, BSP is very close to the third party – MRF. Once again this shows that the party is experiencing a serious crisis – organisational, communication, personnel and ideological.

There were demands for holding an extraordinary congress at the beginning of 2016 and the local structures in Plovdiv and Varna seconded the proposal. According to BSP's statute, a new congress for the appointment of a new party chairman should be held in May 2016.

At the press conference after the second round of elections BSP Leader Mikov

described the loss as a “bitter” one, but however it “does not correspond to the insinuations for the deletion of BSP from the political map”. Mikov enumerated various reasons for this loss – starting with internal-organisational ones and ending by accusing GERB of putting political pre-election pressure on the voters; “extortion and the use of the entire state machine” in their favour.

BSP held a party plenum after the elections at which strong and critical statements were made towards the party’s leadership. The former minister of defence in the Oresharski cabinet, Angel Naydenov, outlined some of the reasons for the party’s crisis. According to him BSP continues to preserve its “inefficient and outmoded structure” and is in a situation of ideological impasse. Angelov believes that the leadership’s attempt to make a left turn has led to a “total regression” and even “return to communism” and the “blatant pro-Kremlin policy” has placed BSP on the same plane as “Ataka”. The former minister accused the leadership of not proposing attractive policies that would draw the young and active citizens, and this leaves the party seriously understaffed.

Most of the members of the party’s National Council criticised the leadership. Rumen Ovcharov also criticised the party for the “left turn” which, according to him, has mutated into left-sectarianism, accompanied by punishments and expulsion of those that hold a different opinion. Kiril Dobrev said that the party’s leader does not have enough potential to lead the party effectively.

The following members of the Executive Bureau submitted their resignations during the plenum – the BSP’s deputy leader Dragomir Stoynev, the head of the party’s

Sofia organisation Kaloyan Pargov and the MEP Iliyana Yotova. At the beginning of the meeting Mikov refused to put to the vote the resignation proposal made by the members of the Executive Bureau and explained that he does not accept the resignations because there is another way to bear the responsibility at this point and reminded that the forthcoming congress is scheduled for spring. Despite this, the vote was cast, which came only three votes short of the resignation of the BSP Executive Bureau. Some 42 members of the National Council voted in favour of the resignation of BSP’s leadership as a body and 44 were against.

After the plenum Mihail Mikov said that resigning is a personal act and that the attempt for the destabilisation of the party’s leadership has failed. The BSP leader did not agree with the attacks and expressed the opinion that he received the trust of the party’s congress two years ago and only the congress can decide to replace him.

2.2.2. MRF

MRF’s expectations to expand its geographical electoral influence during these local elections were not fulfilled. The elections were important for MRF because the party’s main goal was to prove that it has a significantly larger political and electoral influence compared to other formations, such as the Reformist Bloc and the Patriotic Front. According to MRF’s positions declared before the elections, this would be proof that the current form of governance does not have the necessary electoral legitimacy. The results of the election refuted this.

MRF was not able to make a breakthrough in the large cities of the country. Its hopes for a municipal councillor in Sofia did not come true.

The MRF lost the mayoral elections in

Kubrat and Isperih – two municipalities considered bastions of the party. MRF's loss in Isperih was mainly due to the fact that MP Gunai Husmen – a big businessman from the region, who was ousted from the party, gave his support to the former deputy mayor of Isperih – Beisim Rufat, nominated by the little-known United Bulgaria Party.

The election results showed that MRF lost the support in 9 municipalities in Northeast Bulgaria such as Dulovo, Isperih, Omurtag, Kubrat, Razgrad, Tutrakan, Silistra, Nikola Kozlevo and Samuil. Ahmed Bashev from MRF lost to the current mayor Minka Kapitanova in Gurmen, where a few months ago there were riots against the Roma population.

MRF won the local elections in Kardzhali in the first round and this is the only district centre where the party has a mayor.

At the press conference after the local elections Lutfi Mestan said the vote has set new political realities. Mestan reiterated the thesis from the last months that the existing "power formula is vicious and does not correspond to our European and Euro-Atlantic orientation, and has been gravely distorted." According to him the country "needs a new power formula which should be European in its essence." The MRF Leader underlined that there is "a discrepancy between the power status and the vote received at the local elections."

Mestan discarded the suspicions that his criticism towards the ruling majority come from the wish of MRF to be part of the executive power and added that the dialogue between his party and GERB will be placed in the future on the plane of incumbents – opposition, as is the case now.

Mestan characterised MRF's election results as "good news for Bulgarian politics". According to him the "model in which MRF

is included by combining ethno-religious differences is valuable for the country because it protects Bulgaria from the outbreak of radicalism. It stands above our political differences and if we have enough political maturity and culture, we will comprehend it."

The results from the referendum show that in the regions where MRF has the majority of votes, electoral activity is a fraction of that at national level – between 10-15%. In Turkey, where Bulgarian expatriates traditionally vote all together for MRF, this time they did not go the ballot-boxes. This shows that in fact for the MRF the introduction of electronic remote voting is not a priority, although many Bulgarian citizens with Turkish ethnic origin live abroad.

2.2.3. BDC

The Bulgarian Democratic Centre (BDC) retained its parliamentary group but is no longer a unified entity. At least three formations took part in the local elections, each with its own personal agenda. The group of MPs close to Svetlin Tanchev and Rumen Yonchev, which also includes the deputy chairman of the National Assembly, Yavor Haitov, took part in the elections for the first time as the People's Union Coalition. Svetlin Tanchev said that the People's Union Coalition received approximately 100,000 votes, which came as a "surprise at the local elections". According to him the new formation does not have state subsidies but its results at the local elections are "similar to and even higher than those of the other small parliamentary parties." According to Tanchev the result of the People's Union is close to 3%, which in absolute value is 80,000 votes only from individual participation and another 20,000 votes from the participation in the elections with other for-

mations. These figures bring the coalition close to initial anticipations and the strategic goal for the elections. According to Tanchev the People's Union will have close to 150 municipal councillors in the country.

The second entity, part of the parliamentary group of the BDC, is the Leader Party renamed to Bulgarian Democratic Centre, which is close to the businessman Hristo Kovachki. After the local elections BDC's Chairperson Dr Krasimira Kovachka also boosted the good results, similar to her colleagues from the People's Union. She said that BDC has won 70,000 votes, counting the vote cast for the separate party lists. BDC won mayoral seats in two smaller municipalities: Bobov Dol and Galabovo. Traditionally, as it did in the past, Hristo Kovachki's formation received the majority of votes in Bobov Dol because the mines owned by him, are the main source of livelihood in the municipality. Krasimira Kovachka reported that the party has all together 47 mayors and 120 municipal councillors in the country as a result of the individual participation of the party at the elections.

Obviously the results of Bulgaria Without Censorship of the MEP Nikolay Barekov are exceptionally low. Barekov's spouse – Maria Kalenderska, mayor nominee for Sofia received only 0.5% of the votes, equal to 2000 votes. Only 500 votes were cast for the candidate mayor of Bulgaria Without Censorship in Barekov's hometown Plovdiv.

2.2.4. "Ataka"

This quarter "Ataka" will be mainly remembered for yet another scandal with its leader. During the election campaign Volen Siderov entered into altercation with the students from the Theatrical Academy in Sofia. The Leader of "Ataka" and his fellow party members barged into the building of

the academy twice and had a fracas with the students.

It all started when Siderov picked a fight in front of a liquor and cigar shop close to the Academy. He accused the shop owners of selling drugs and cigarettes without tax stamps. There were clashes between Siderov, Desislav Chukolov and passersby and the police had to intervene. The investigation conducted did not prove Siderov's accusations against the shop owners.

The culmination of these episodes was on the night of the elections. While the polling agencies were announcing the figures from the exit-polls at the end of the Election Day, once again Siderov barged into the Theatrical Academy. Citizens, policemen and gendarmerie gathered in front of the building of the Academy, headed by the chief secretary of the Ministry of Interior and the Minister of Interior Rumiana Bachvarova. Several TV channels made live broadcasts. The police escorted Siderov out of the building but once outside a man from the crowd that had gathered hit Siderov in the face. The man was apprehended by the police and Siderov was taken to the police station for questioning.

The chief prosecutor Sotir Tsatsarov asked Parliament to strip Volen Siderov and the MP Desislav Chukolov of their immunity and to allow their arrest, with the motive that both of them indulged in hooliganism with a high level of cynicism.

Volen Siderov declared that this is political repression against him on behalf of the chief prosecutor and the Prime Minister Boyko Borisov. According to Siderov their goal is to remove him from politics. The Leader of "Ataka" said that he is the only alternative to the status quo and this is why the incumbents have directed the entire state apparatus against him and his party.

He was bewildered by the fact that the person who hit him in the face is parading on national TV instead of being locked up for inflicting bodily harm. Actually Siderov's assailant was invited to take part in the morning talk show on one of the national channels in order to talk about the attack.

Parliament stripped Volen Siderov and Desislav Chukolov of their immunity. On November 17th they were both taken into custody at the behest of the prosecution under police escort and this was accompanied by protests organized by supporters of "Ataka". Volen Siderov declared a hunger strike and described the arrest as a political one. According to Siderov's attorney Yavor Notev, deputy chairman of the National Assembly, the arrest is illegal because the arraignment cites more acts than those included in the request for the stripping of immunity. Siderov and Chukolov spent only a few hours in custody and were later released by the court upon the appeal of their attorneys.

These events shifted the focus of attention from the results of "Ataka" at the local elections. In general, the party lost almost one third of its voters compared to last year's elections. Approximately 100,000 people voted for "Ataka", which shows that the party has lost part of its electoral potential. "Ataka" will have municipal councillors in several district towns in the country; two in Sofia, Yambol, Pazardzhik, Gabrovo and one each in Pernik, Stara Zagora and Pleven.

3. Main Conclusions and Forecasts

1. The local elections consolidated GERB's dominant position and showed the stability of the government. The opposition, mainly MRF, failed to fulfil its expectations that the elections would expose the need for a change of the formula of governance. Despite this, the main challenge that the

government faces remains unchanged - whether it will be able to conduct the reforms which it has promised to its voters. The police protests and the government's backtracking from the planned reforms in the sector showed that the incumbents are easily amenable to social pressure and this might block the reforms in other sectors.

2. GERB is the big winner in the elections. The party reinstated its leading role, not only on national level, but at a regional level, too. The strengthening of GERB's presence in the local authority led to the further internal consolidation of the party. The next elections which will be a priority for GERB are the presidential elections next year. At the moment the party has not given a clear answer to the question as to who they would nominate as a candidate and what their participation approach would be.

3. The Reformist Bloc performed well at these elections, despite the contradictions between the different parties in the coalition. They won the mayoral elections in Pleven and Dobrich, which came as a surprise at the local elections. They supported the very popular current mayors in Montana and Kyustendil, and their success was anticipated. These results proved that the RB can be regarded as a stable union and GERB's partner in the government. At this point we cannot observe a more tangible expansion of the electoral influence of the Reformists, but one of the possible reasons for this is the strong dominant position of GERB in the right-wing space.

4. The Patriotic Front was divided at these local elections. The two main parties in the coalition - the NSFB of Valeri Simeonov and VMRO of Krasimir Karakachanov, run separately in many parts of the country. This is one of the reasons for the less convincing results compared to the elections

held last year. At present the future of the coalition and its unity in parliament is not on the agenda, but the tension between the two leaders is more than obvious.

5. ABV did not expand its presence in the left-wing political space as it was declared that it would be their goal at the elections. Relationships with BSP remain distant and it would be very difficult to change this – at least not at present and especially not with the current leaderships of both parties. BSP considers ABV as “separatists” who are part of the right-wing governance. It is very difficult to predict whether the forthcoming presidential elections will lead to a positive change in the relations between the two formations.

6. BSP suffered a great loss at these elections, as it had done previously. The party is faced with numerous internal challenges and still there are no signs of any real steps and ideas for overcoming this deep crisis in which the socialists find themselves. It is more than evident that the party congress to be held next year will be of key importance for its future development. Once again, most probably there will be a leadership clash, as the negative attitudes towards the current Leader Mihail Mikov are getting stronger.

7. MRF did not attain the goal which the party had set before the elections – to expand its presence in local authorities. Moreover, the party lost in certain municipalities in Northeast Bulgaria, seen as the party's bastions. MRF expected that these elections would lead to a change of the formula of governance, which meant that MRF should have been transformed into the second political force, ahead of BSP, and expecting that the Reformist Bloc would have disappointing results. Neither of these two expectations was fulfilled.

8. BDC only exists as a parliamentary group. The group close to Svetlin Tanchev, Yavor Haitov and Rumen Yonchev took part in the elections as a new political entity named The People's Union. In its turn, the renamed Leader Party, close to the businessman Hristo Kovachki took part in the elections under the new name Bulgarian Democratic Centre. However, the results of the two parties are too weak and they will hardly be successful in future parliamentary elections.

9. “Ataka” and Volen Siderov were once again embroiled in yet another scandal. This has become a kind of a habit for him and his party. The scandal at the Theatrical Academy and the subsequent arrest shifted the focus of attention from the party's results at the elections, which were much less convincing than those at last year's parliamentary elections.

Submitted on November 21st, 2015

About the editor:

Professor, Ph.D. Georgi Karasimeonov teaches at Sofia University “St. Clement of Ochrid”, Director of the Institute for Political and Legal Studies. From 1991 to 1998 he was President of the Bulgarian Association for Political Science.

Contact: ipls@dir.bg



Imprint

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

Orders

e-mail: office@fes.bg

Commercial use of all media
published by the Friedrich-
Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is
not permitted without the
written consent of the FES.

All texts are available online

www.fes.bg

The views expressed in this publication
are not necessarily those of the
Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung or of the
organization for which the author works.