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BAR METER

Bulgaria's Political Parties

Year 16, Issue 1, January-March 2016

- The migrant crisis was one of the main topics that shaped the political situation in the country. This will be one of the greatest challenges the government will face in the following days and months. The shutting down of the so called Balkan route might lead to redirecting the migrant flow towards Bulgaria. The government is undertaking preventive measures to guard our southern border and, if needed, reinforcements from the Bulgarian Army will be sent.
- GERB's government stands stable. The internal party's mobilisation is at its highest and shows support for the government. Despite the criticism from the opposition, neither BSP and MRF, nor DSB can be viewed as a serious alternative to GERB at this point of time. Prime Minister Borisov confirmed his foreign policy positions, acknowledging the significance of the state with regard to the migrant crisis and the protection of the external border of the EU.
- The Reformist Bloc continues to exist more in theory than in practice. The processes of division within it are now more and more visible after the decision of the DSB to become an opposition party. Currently the struggle of the parties in the bloc is for the trademark Reformist Bloc and which one of them will keep it. This is one of the reasons why DSB's stance is so indeterminate – on one hand to be in opposition and, on the other, to remain in the parliamentary group. Probably the RB will dissolve ultimately with the nearing of the presidential elections.
- An internal party priority of the BSP is the forthcoming congress at the beginning of May. It seems that the main battle will be between the present leader Mihail Mikov and Kornelia Ninova. The congress will be of great importance for BSP, and will show whether the party can manage to emerge from political stalemate which it has been experiencing for the second consecutive year.

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1. Political situation

1.1 Domestic policy

The first quarter of 2016 was especially dynamic both from a foreign political aspect and from domestic policy plan. A major influence on the political situation in the country was played by the more complex relations in the ruling coalition, which led to DSB with leader Radan Kunev becoming opposition. The continuing migrant flow and the crisis situation close to the Bulgarian state borders heightened the fears of the public and raised the risks to national security.

The fact of DSB becoming an opposition party was provoked by the resignation of the Minister of Justice Hristo Ivanov at the end of last year. Ivanov resigned after the vote in parliament on the amendments to the Constitution which reflected on the legal system reform. Hristo Ivanov insisted that the majority of the members of the college of judges should come from the judge's circle, so that the true independence of the court can be guaranteed, and such were the recommendations made by the Venice Commission. However, this did not happen and the MPs gave their support to ABV's draft. Hristo Ivanov accused the incumbents of lack of political will for real reform of judicial power.

The new Minister of Justice Ekaterina Zaharieva said that she is determined to continue the judiciary reform with a faster pace and to see it through. Before taking this post Zaharieva was chief of cabinet of the President Rosen Plevneliev and Deputy Prime Minister in the two caretaker cabinets appointed by the president. Zaharieva announced that it would be a priority for her to pass the Law on the Judiciary System, the procedure codes – Penal Procedure Code

and the Civil Procedure Code, leading to fast and efficient litigation.

Another government shuffle was conducted at the beginning of February. The Minister of Education Prof. Todor Tanev resigned upon the request of the Prime Minister Borisov. The cause for the resignation was the new educational school plans announced by the ministry, which triggered a scandal related to the interpretation of historical events – more particularly the period of the Ottoman rule of the country. The Prime Minister Borisov said that he would allow the Reformist Bloc to propose the candidacy of the new minister of education.

DSB refused to take part in the negotiations on the appointment of the new minister of education. The other parties in the Reformist Bloc (RB) united around the candidacy of the Deputy Prime Minister Meglena Kouneva. She was approved by parliament with only five ballots difference between those in favour and those against her candidacy. Kouneva's candidacy received firm support only from GERB and half of the votes of her own political group - the Reformist Bloc. The opposition parties BSP, MRF and "Ataka" and some MPs from the Patriotic Front, which is part of the ruling majority, declared in advance that they would not give their support for her. The voting on Kouneva's candidacy showed that the government relies on a fragile balance of the support of flexible majorities at the expense of various compromises, most of which, however, remain hidden to the general public.

In the middle of February BSP and MRF tabled the first motion for a vote of no confidence on the government's healthcare policy. The opposition accused the Health Minister Peter Moskov that his inconsistent actions and authoritarian work style have

resulted in creating chaos in the sector. As expected the vote of no confidence was not passed. Only BSP, MRF and "Ataka" were in favour, while 135 MPs from the ruling majority expressed their support for the government. The group of the Bulgarian Democratic Centre (BDC) abstained. Nonetheless, the problems in the sector remain unsolved. The professional organisations refused to sign the annual framework agreement, which goes to show that the contradictions within the profession are serious, and there is a lack of dialogue. The decision of the Constitutional Court to repeal an important part of the reform – the separation of the health package into main and secondary - was a strike at the policy of Minister Peter Moskov. In its motives the Constitutional Court stipulates that medical care is covered by the Law on Healthcare Insurance, but totally indiscernibly, and this is inadmissible as it pertains to basic human rights. This violates the principle of the rule of law and Article 52 of the Constitution, according to which the people have the right to healthcare which guarantees accessible medical care.

During the past quarter the Prime Minister Borisov ordered the cancellation of a number of public procurements, due to the fact that, according to him, there is a certain perception in society regarding the transparency of their procedures. Borisov noted that if any irregularities in any one of the cancelled public procurements should be ascertained, then there will be sanctions for the officials. The opposition accused Borisov of populism and explained that if there are irregularities in the public procurement tenders, executive power is to blame for this. The cancellation of public procurements is only possible if there is sound legal ground for this, and it should not be done unilaterally

ally by the Prime Minister, based on unclear motivation. Many of the representatives of the opposition pointed out that by doing so the Prime Minister is trying to clear his image in the eyes of the European partners of Bulgaria. The cancellation of the public procurements commenced after Borisov was asked the question during a meeting with the Bulgarian community in London as to "whether he sees Delyan Peevski when he looks into the mirror." The issue of the connections between Borisov and Peevski is strongly articulated publicly by DSB's leader Radan Kanev and representatives of the Protest Network. It is not by chance that the first cancelled public procurement by Borisov, worth nearly one billion BGN, was for the construction of Hemus highway, which it is rumoured, was won by companies close to the MP from MRF, Delyan Peevski, and the CEO of Lukoil, Valentin Zlatev.

1.2. Foreign and European policy

The European Commission's report on the Mechanism for Cooperation and Verification came out at the end of January. This was yet another report that established one and the same shortcoming – the main criticisms and recommendations to Bulgaria remain unchanged – lack of results in the fight against corruption, and lack of transparency in the decisions taken by the Supreme Judicial Council. The need of reform of the prosecution and the penal procedure has been observed, as well as amendment of the Law on the Judiciary System, which would be instrumental for implementing the constitutional amendments endorsed at the end of 2015. The First Vice-Chairman of the European Commission Frans Timmermans said that 2016 is the year in which serious progress and real results in the fight against high level corruption and the court

cases against organised crime should be seen. According to him, this continues to be the most-pressing challenge facing Bulgaria and, therefore, it has to be addressed as a foremost priority.

Once again the European Commission's report generated contradictory reactions. The proponents of radical judiciary reform saw the report as severely critical. It was seen as a step towards the separation of Bulgaria and Romania, even leading to the dropping of the monitoring of Romania, which would be considered as a serious blow to Bulgaria's reputation and a clear sign of the low level of trust in the country as a whole. DSB, the Protest Network and the Judges Union in Bulgaria uphold this stance. The chairman of the Supreme Cassation Court Lozan Panov – one of the spokesmen in favour of conducting a sweeping legal reform, has become even more critical towards the incumbents, the work of the Supreme Judicial Council, whose member he is by right and towards the prosecution. His conflict with the Chief Prosecutor has become more evident in the past few months. Sotir Tsatsarov accused Lozan Panov of having political ambitions and of making political statements, which is unacceptable for a judge. This conflict is transferred onto the work of the entire legal system and has an even more negative effect on the already extremely low level of trust in the courts and the law enforcement authorities.

On the other hand, the advocates in favour of lifting the monitoring of Bulgaria on criminal law and civil matters are becoming stronger. During a conference in Brussels under the aegis of Bulgarian MEPs the question of the need to lift the verification mechanism of Bulgaria was raised since, according to them, it is discriminatory and dysfunctional, and has fulfilled its role.

1.3. Migrant crisis

The migrant crisis has been one of the leading topics in the public domain over the past quarter. The increase in the flow of refugees since the beginning of the year and the gathering of thousands of people close to the Bulgarian-Greek and the Bulgarian-Turkish borders has led to the taking of urgent measures on the part of the government. Parliament has passed amendments to the Law on Defence and the Armed Forces allowing the Bulgarian army to participate in the guarding of the state border. So far this has been the responsibility of the border police, part of the structure of the interior ministry. The MPs unanimously supported this decision. Training exercises with the participation of the army, border police and other structures were held in the vicinity of the border with Greece with a view to preparing for a possible flow of refugees on the southern borders of the country, especially after the shutting down of the so called Balkan route.

Several times in recent months Prime Minister Boyko Borisov has called upon the closing of the external borders of the EU and prevention of the admission of more migrants. He underlined that a distinction between refugees and economic migrants should be made. Borisov expressed this position during his visit to the country of his Hungarian colleague Viktor Orban. Orban invited Borisov to take part in the meeting of the Visegrad Four, dedicated to the migrant crisis.

The deal reached between the EU and Turkey is of exceptional importance for Bulgaria in its role of an external border of the union. Prime Minister Boyko Borisov asked the EU to include Bulgaria explicitly in the draft-agreement with Turkey for stopping the migrant flow, which only mentions

Greece. Otherwise, he warned, Bulgaria will veto it. In a letter addressed to the President of the European Council Donald Tusk and the Member States Borisov insists also that the EU should not change the rules of the visa liberalisation dialogue with Turkey only because it relies on Turkey's ability and motivation to stop the refugee flow towards Europe. In turn, the Foreign Minister added that each country that wants visa liberalisation should fulfil 72 requirements. He said that exceptions shall not be made for anyone under any circumstances. This issue was also commented on by President Rosen Plevneliev. According to him the EU's attention should not be focussed only on the measures for restricting the migrant flow from Turkey to the Greek islands. The talks on the deal with Ankara need to include also the land border of Turkey with Greece and Bulgaria, as well as the Black Sea border between the EU and Turkey. Otherwise prerequisites for opening alternative routes of the migrant flows would appear.

Borisov described the deal between the EU and Turkey as plausible for Bulgaria and underlined that Bulgaria will not accept any more migrants from Turkey outside the commitment for relocation of 1200 people. According to Borisov the gravest danger comes from the migrant wave towards Bulgaria flowing from Greece and not from Turkey, at whose border the pressure is low at present. According to him there is information that large groups of thousands of refugees are getting organised in camps in Greece and are moving towards the Bulgarian border. This is the reason why the training exercises at the border should continue so that the actions of the army, the interior ministry, the Red Cross, etc. can be coordinated.

In general the main political parties in Bulgaria expressed overall concern about the migrant crisis situation. But of course, there are some differences in their positions. As a whole the incumbents from GERB and the Reformist Bloc uphold a more balanced position and express solidarity with the people seeking asylum and appeal towards finding a pan-European solution. "Ataka" is at the opposite pole and believes that all migrants that have entered the territory of the country illegally should be extradited. Krasimir Karakachanov from the Patriotic Front believes that the main problem with the refugees is the instability in the Near East and Turkey's attempts "to blackmail the EU with the enormous mass of refugees on its territory." Rumen Petkov from ABV expressed his party's dissatisfaction from the results of the summit meeting in Brussels due to the fact that the conditions posed by the Turkish President Erdogan were accepted with the assistance of the German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and underlined that this marks a deep political and institutional crisis in the community.

2. State and Development of the Main Political Parties

2.1. Trends in the Parliamentary Represented Parties Supporting the Government

2.1.1. GERB

During the past quarter GERB faced the challenge of inter-coalition contradiction. Tsvetan Tsvetanov was elected chairman of the parliamentary committee on internal security and public order, since the former chairman Atanas Atanasov from DSB resigned because his party became opposition.

Really strained relations between GERB and

part of the Reformist Bloc, close to DSB and Radan Kanev, were witnessed during the past quarter. The Reformist Bloc proposed the re-signing of the coalition agreement with GERB on the reforms that should be implemented and to define clear terms. GERB reluctantly accepted this idea, but commenced negotiations at an expert level with a view to signing the final document.

However, the repartee and accusations between Radan Kanev and representatives of GERB in the media have become a daily occurrence. Kanev accused GERB of connections with MRF and Delyan Peevski. According to him the two parties have not ceased to govern covertly. He believes that Borisov, Peevski and the chief prosecutor Sotir Tsatsarov form a Triumvirate that actually rules the state. This thesis repeated numerous times led to discontent in the GERB parliamentary group. At the end of March the deputy chair of the GERB parliamentary group Tsveta Karayancheva urged the Prime Minister Boyko Borisov to come to the National Assembly and to explain how long Radan Kanev and DSB will be part of the incumbents, since they are in opposition. In her opinion the GERB parliamentary group insists that the Prime Minister should take measures to dismiss the representatives of DSB from leading state appointments. GERB came out with a list of DSB supporters that continue to hold high-ranking state positions – in ministries, agencies and boards of state-owned companies. GERB accused Radan Kanev and DSB of behaving schizophrenically. The party expressed its astonishment and discontent with DSB's behaviour – according to the representatives of GERB, it is not possible to be in opposition and at the same time to have cabinet ministers, deputy ministers, regional governors, and advisers in political cabinets.

Boyko Borisov was the first to sign the annex to the coalition agreement, as was the wish of the Reformist Bloc. According to him this is unnecessary, as two years ago all the parties from the RB signed the coalition agreement with clearly set parameters and policies. Borisov stated that the constitutional reform, because of which DSB became the opposition, was never part of the coalition agreement and two years ago no one even believed that this very National Assembly was capable of gathering a quorum and reaching a consensus to amend the Constitution – bearing in mind the difficulties at the time of forming the government.

Regarding the presidential elections GERB said that the party will announce its candidates in June. According to Tsvetan Tsvetanov the party has several possible candidates who he believes will be winning ones. The presidential candidates of the party will be comprised of people with authority, well-known, with a wide public and non-partisan support, said Tsvetanov. Tsvetanov refused to reply to the question as to whether the party plans to raise the candidacy of the current president Rosen Plevneliev for a second mandate. Tsvetanov highly appreciates the mandate of Plevneliev, but said that in the future GERB will rely on renewal of the presidential couple, which led to various speculations on the exact meaning behind his words.

2.2.2. Reformist Bloc

The contradictions in the RB reached their culmination in the first quarter of the year. As mentioned before, DSB announced that it will be in opposition. Despite this the party Leader Radan Kanev continues to be the co-chairman of the RB parliamentary group, which placed the party in a situation which

is strange at first glance – to be both in opposition and part of the incumbents simultaneously. The healthcare minister did not resign after all, although sources within DSB claim that he was asked to do so. Moskov continues to be member of the party and Radan Kanev stated on numerous occasions that the party will support the reform started by him.

At this point MPs from the civil quota of the bloc such as Grozdan Karadzhov, Martin Dimitrov and Peter Slavov, gravitate towards Radan Kunev's and DSB's position. Thus almost half of RB's MPs have declared that they are in opposition. BZNS, with Defence Minister Nikolay Nenchev as leader, are believed to be closer to DSB and Radan Kanev than to BCM of Meglena Kouneva.

The other camp, comprising parties that are adamantly in support of the government are Bulgaria for its Citizens Movement (BCM) and UDF. Megelena Kouneva strongly criticized Radan Kanev and declared that the only true co-chairman of the RB group is Ivaylo Zelenogorski. Kouneva said that politics is for mature people and not for those who are unclear about their own behaviour. The leader of UDF and Minister of Economy Bozhidar Lukarski was even more extreme and described DSB's position as schizophrenic behaviour.

DSB stated that their main goal continues to be the profound and radical judiciary reform. Radan Kanev declared that the state is in the hands of the mafia and there is a deep political crisis. At the beginning of January Kanev announced that he will work for the setting up of a new right-wing political project uniting people and parties who are not part of the status quo, and who desire real change. However, to date this project has been more or less frozen, which is evident from the recently held national

meeting of DSB.

The DSB National Meeting came out with the decision for the party to stay within the Reformist Bloc for the time being and gave Radan Kanev and the MPs a mandate to work towards "bringing back the bloc to the commitments pledged to the voters during the 2014 elections". Part of the structures headed by DSB-Varna and DSB-Sofia region insisted that the party should leave the coalition immediately. The delegates approved a resolution with a great majority confirming that the party is in opposition, and assigning to the national leadership the task of cooperating with other parties from the bloc for "organisational consolidation and its opening to new voters and civil organisations".

The meeting approved amendments to the statute regulations. It was decided that in the future the ousting of a member of DSB should be possible only with the sanction of the regional organisation of which he is a member and not by a decision of a 7-member panel of the National Arbitrage, as is the case now. The delegates attempted to postpone the passing of the amendments to the statute regulations by six months, but they were finally approved.

Radan Kanev stated that he is considering the option to run for president at the presidential elections in the autumn. However, he did not rule out also the possibility of a joint right-wing candidacy. This would depend both on GERB's actions and on the decisions to be taken by the other parties from the RB.

2.2.3. Patriotic Front

The position of the PF coalition was consolidated after the crisis within the RB. Although the coalition does not have an actual representation in executive power, but

has only declared its support for the incumbents, its influence will mark an increase. Once again during the current quarter the PF proved that it stands firmly behind the incumbents and on important key votes in parliament gave its support to the government. As a whole the two main parties that constitute the Patriotic Front coalition – NFSB and VMRO continue to have certain disagreements, but in the name of the coalition's integrity they manage to overcome them for the time being. VMRO's leader Krasimir Karakachanov holds more moderate right-centre positions, while the chairman of the NFSB Valeri Simeonov is quite extreme in his nationalistic manner of speaking.

This quarter the PF focused on some important topics related to the long-term perspective for the development of the country. Something of significance for the PF is the overcoming the demographic crisis in the country. According to Krasimir Karakachanov this is a matter of national security, because if the tendencies from the past few years persist, the country will experience serious difficulties in its overall development – a lack of labour force, an aging population, and burdened social and pension systems. This tendency, combined with marginalisation and social exclusion of the minority communities in the country, will lead to catastrophic consequences for Bulgaria, which will be felt in the next 10 years.

Once again the PF placed emphasis on the fight against crime. According to the VMRO leader the marginalisation of the Roma community is amongst the core reasons for the higher crime rate in the small towns and villages. According to Karakachanov additional measures for improving the safety in the small settlements are needed as well as amendments of the social

insurance model. The PF urged that a national debate on the introduction of military training of the Bulgarian citizens and even reinstating conscription should be held.

2.2.4. ABV

At the beginning of the year ABV presented the idea for amendment of the Constitution pertaining to the president's rights and the eligibility requirements for the presidential candidates. ABV believes that it must not be mandatory for the president to be born in Bulgaria, to have Bulgarian citizenship and to have lived in the country in the past five years. Another proposal concerning the functions of the president is for the president to have the right of direct initiation of a referendum without the need to receive approval by parliament. The party insists that new more complex mechanisms for overthrowing the president's veto should be found.

ABV was the first party to start the debate on the presidential elections in the country and on the character of the future president. At this stage the party has not announced its candidacy, although Georgi Parvanov stated that the Deputy Prime Minister Ivaylo Kalfin would be a good a president. Parvanov himself noted that, according to him, there are no barriers for him to run for president because according to him the Constitution poses restrictions only for two consecutive mandates. However, this is an interpretation which is not popular among the majority of constitutional law specialists, who are categorical that a president can be elected for two mandates only, regardless whether they are consecutive or not.

This quarter too ABV supported the government, but at the same time did not spare its criticism on a number of topics.

For example, the party believes that there is no dialogue among the parties that support the government, the decisions are taken unilaterally and at the last second and the partners are just informed of the fact of their passing without actually participating in the discussions. ABV expressed the position that the Development Council, which plays the role of a coalition council which has to discuss important strategic issues and take decisions, does not function and is rarely summoned. According to ABV, without dialogue the majority will be faced with the impossible task of taking competent decisions and this will also hold back the work of the legislative power.

2.2. Trends in the Parliamentary Opposition

2.2.1. Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP)

The declaration 125 Years BSP was drafted during the BSP National Council meeting held at the end of March. The declaration establishes the main features of the party as the party of the people of labour. In their declaration the socialists affirm that BSP is a party which has survived many transitions but is not a transitory party. BSP's present calling, as a left-wing national party, is "to guarantee a dignified life for everyone, without humiliating poverty and fear of tomorrow, to modernize the economy of the country and to uphold the interests of Bulgaria."

Already in BSP there is intense preparation for the forthcoming congress which will elect the party's chairman. At the end of March Kornelia Ninova announced that she will run for the chairmanship. Ninova was nominated by a number of BSP structures and stated that she will transform BSP into a real alternative to the right-wing parties in the country, and will improve on

the achievements over the years. Her main goal will be to lead the party towards governance of the country and to revive its self-confidence again.

The MP from BSP Krasimir Yankov also stated that he will run for the chairmanship of the party. According to him, now the left is faced with one main issue - whether the status quo will be preserved, or BSP will change. He expressed certainty that BSP will change after the congress, because the socialists are the only alternative to current right-wing governance. According to him, BSP has lost public support, and this is mainly due to the negativisms accumulated from the time when Plamen Oresharski headed the government. Yankov has minimal chances of winning the party's leadership post. It seems that the main battle for the leadership will be between the present chairman Mihail Mikov and Kornelia Ninova.

The congress will be held on May 7th and 8th and by the end of March the local organisations have to nominate their candidates for chairman.

During the past quarter BSP assumed some important legislative initiatives. For example, the parliamentary group submitted a proposal for repealing flat tax and introduction of progressive income tax. The idea is implemented in the draft law on amendment of the Personal Income Tax Law. The amendment envisages as of January 1st, 2017 labour income, after the compulsory social insurance deduction, to be non-taxable up to the limit of the minimum working wage. The monthly labour income up to BGN 1000 should be taxed at 10% for the difference above the minimum monthly wage. BSP proposes that the tax for incomes between BGN 1000 and 2000, should be 15% for the difference above BGN 1000. Those who receive an income

between BGN 2000 and 5000 would pay 20% tax on their incomes above BGN 2000.

In the motives to the draft law BSP states that the proposed amendment makes a more just distribution of the weight of the personal income tax for people with different professions. The existing flat tax is a factor leading to deepening of the social-economic inequality, which creates social instability.

The demographic crisis is another issue which BSP considers to be a priority and needs to be solved. The Party Leader Mihail Mikov proposed to the president to summon a meeting of the Consultative Council on National Security in connection to the demographic crisis in Bulgaria. In reply the president underlined that already the topics to be discussed by the council have been planned for 2016 and one of them will be specifically on demographic issues. The negative demographic trends create a risk for the economic and social environment in the country and BSP urges that concrete measures must be taken.

During this quarter BSP expressed concern about the financial debt of the country, as well as the lack of real reforms in health-care, education and the pension system.

2.2.2 Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF)

The ousting of Liutvi Mestan from the post chairman of the MRF at the end of last year was the event which determined the development of the political situation in the party during the past quarter. Mestan was ousted from the leader's post and expelled from the party after criticisms made by the honorary chairman of the movement Ahmed Dogan at the traditional New Year's gathering of MRF. The formal cause for Dogan's criticism was the declaration read by Liutvi Mestan

from the podium of the National Assembly after the shooting down of the Russian military jet by the Turkish air force. In the same declaration Mestan justified the incident at the Turkish-Syrian border and judged Russia's actions in connection with the violation of the Turkish air space. Dogan described Mestan's position as hasty and leading to possible negative consequences for Bulgaria, which is geographically located in a region with a history of geopolitical conflicts between Russia and Turkey.

After the information about the criticisms made by Ahmed Dogan became public knowledge, Liutvi Mestan decided to go to the Turkish Embassy and this gave cause for rumours of an alleged spy affair in the public. Mestan justified his visit to the embassy with the motive that he wanted to guarantee his personal safety and that of his family, as he felt threatened after finding out that he was no longer guarded by the national service for protection. During this scandal it became known that the Prime Minister of Turkey Ahmet Davutoglu had called the Bulgarian Prime Minister Borisov regarding the scandal within the MRF in order to protect Mestan. Borisov said that he categorically refused to take any sides whatsoever in an inter-party conflict.

However, these events raised the question of the influence of Turkey and the Turkish representatives in the internal affairs of the country. The media stated that MRF representatives received telephone calls from the diplomatic mission of Turkey in Bulgaria telling them that if they did not back up Mestan, Turkey would forever be closed for them.

Subsequently the Turkish media reported that Ahmed Dogan and Delyan Peevski are banned from entering Turkey. This information was neither confirmed, nor de-

nied by the Turkish Embassy in Sofia. A list of persons connected to MRF was published too, who are also allegedly banned from entering Turkey. A number of representatives of MRF, however, said that the list is a fabrication as they have entered Turkey unimpeded after its publication.

Regarding the ousting of Mestan, Ahmed Dogan made a statement via his press attaché saying that “everyone who is against the national interests of Bulgaria will share the same fate.” In turn Mestan declared that he has fallen victim to the conflict between Turkey and Russia. According to him as Leader of MRF he tried to prevent the party from becoming the image of a “pro-Russian oligarchic party”.

The MPs Hussein Hafuzov, Shabani Durmush, Mariana Georgieva, Ventsislav Kaymakanov and Aydogan Ali stood by Liutvi Mestan. They were expelled from the parliamentary group of the MRF and are currently independent MPs. Mestan also received the support of the regional leader of MRF in Kardzhali and mayor of Dzhebel Bahri Omer, who is one of the most influential politicians in the party.

After the ousting of Liutvi Mestan from the party, the leadership of the MRF was given to three co-chairmen – Chetin Kazak, Rushen Riza, Mustafa Karadayi – all three of them are MPs. They will be leaders of the party until the holding of the national conference, which has to elect a new leader.

It became known in March that most of the structures of the party implore Ahmed Dogan once again to take the leadership. According to the MP from the MRF Hassan Ademov, Dogan is not willing to head the operative organ of the party once again and will continue to be an honorary leader of MRF. At this point it is not clear who will be the leader – apart from the

names of the three co-chairmen, another name mentioned as a possible new leader of MRF is that of the MEP Filiz Hyusmenova.

At the end of February Liutvi Mestan commenced the process of founding a new party by summoning a constituent assembly. The new party will be called Democrats for Responsibility, Freedom and Tolerance (Bulgarian abbreviation DOST). The meaning of DOST in Turkish is “friend”. In his address to the constituent assembly Mestan expressed his expectations that the founding of DOST will meet with severe resistance. He even expects that the registration of the new party will be blocked and in his words, it would be the result of the circulation of “the myth of the national traitor who is founding a new pro-Turkish party”. Mestan discarded this myth. He avowed that on November 25th he read, on behalf of the parliamentary group of the MRF, a declaration which expressed NATO and Euro-Atlantic values, in connection with the shooting down of the Russian military plane by the Turkish air force. According to Mestan, Dogan put an equal sign between the pro-NATO position expressed in the declaration and the pro-Turkish one, and in fact by doing so he obliged the pro-Russian sentiments in society. Mestan described Ahmed Dogan’s address as “a watershed of values which divided the movement’s set of values”. According to him, MRF’s model is exhausted and the final countdown has started. Mestan’s aim is for DOST to become the “true, authentic, liberal party” of Bulgaria in the name of the cherished national, democratic and patriotic cause. According to him, this will be a party that will unite and will not lead to dissension among the Bulgarian citizens. In Mestan’s opinion “DOST will be a party introducing radical change, a NATO and Euro-Atlantic oriented

party. It will be friends with all NATO Member States and its EU allies”.

Unlike the new party of Liutvi Mestan, which will evidently have the support of the incumbents in Turkey, traditionally the MRF will rely on closer friendly relations with the Turkish opposition republican parties. It is not by chance that at the end of March the co-chairmen of MRF Rushen Riza and Chetin Kazak met with the Leader of the Republic People’s Party in Turkey Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu in Ankara. He asserted the importance of keeping the unity of the party, which is of great significance for the minorities it stands for. The main emphasis in the talks was the speculations in the past few months regarding MRF and the furthering of the amicable relations between Bulgaria and Turkey. The representatives of MRF invited Kılıçdaroğlu to attend the forthcoming national party conference to be held on April 24th, 2016.

The MRF leadership represented by its co-chairmen began touring the party’s local structures in order to prevent a divide within the party. In their opinion MRF will remain united and there will be no outflow of supporters towards Mestan’s new party.

2.2.3. Bulgarian Democratic Centre (BDC)

During this quarter as before, BDC continued to observe the behaviour of constructive opposition to the incumbents. The parliamentary group remained united, despite the existence of two political entities in it – Bulgarian Democratic Centre (renamed to Leader Party) and the People’s Union, connected to the MPs Svetlin Tanchev and Rumen Yonchev. BDC expressed a number of concerns regarding the reforms conducted by the government and the ruling majority. The most criticised sphere by them is the healthcare reform. According to the

co-chairperson of the parliamentary group Dr Krasimira Kovachka, the healthcare reform is conducted in piece and there is a lack of systematic approach. In her opinion the refusal of the professional organisations to sign the framework agreement only goes to show that the dialogue between the health ministry and the doctors’ union is not at the desired level. According to Kovachka the most problematic area is the status of the municipal healthcare, where there is an even greater deficit of doctors and nurses and qualified staff, as well as lack of equipment, which leads to access to high quality healthcare only in municipal centres. She believes that it is necessary to set up a mechanism for co-financing of the municipal hospitals from the municipal budgets.

BDC is categorically in favour of and supports the reform in the legal system. According to Rumen Yonchev, fast and decisive action must be taken with regard to the endorsement of the Law on the Judiciary System. In his opinion it is necessary to bring down the tension in the legal system, because the magistrates themselves are tired of the debate on the reform. According to Yonchev, some of the political parties in the country abuse the debate on the legal system and by doing so raise the degree of tension, and this is not in favour of bringing composure to the system. Regarding the anti-corruption law sponsored by Meglena Kouneva BDC expressed grave reluctance. The parliamentary group is worried by the fact that the new anti-corruption authority might prove to be an instrument to be used for purely political goals.

BDC declared that it will propose amendments to the Election Code in the part for extension of the election campaign. According to them, the proposal for the time of the campaign to be reduced to 21

days makes it immaterial and insufficient.

2.2.4. "Ataka"

During the past quarter "Ataka" did not show any noteworthy parliamentary presence and its leader Volen Siderov restrained his media appearances. The reasons for this are the legal actions against him for hooliganism. It became known at the end of March that Volen Siderov and his deputy Desislav Chukalov pleaded guilty on four cases and struck a plea bargain with the prosecution. Both of them have been released on probation and sentenced to public service. Siderov was sentenced to 100 days public service and deduction of part of his salary. After the court's ruling, the leader of "Ataka" leader commented that being sentenced to public service is not a problem for him, because his entire work in the past years can be qualified as public service. The leader of "Ataka" expressed his indignation that monuments and buildings in Sofia, part of our cultural heritage, are dilapidated and in need of more serious attention on behalf of the state. He added that he would make a proposal to his colleagues in parliament to partake in the cleaning of the monuments and said that he could even hold lectures dedicated to the historical figures depicted on them.

Siderov commented that the country needs a profound legal reform. In his opinion there should be greater accountability of the prosecution, but the incumbents lack clear vision on the real judicial reform that is needed at present. Siderov described the reforms in education, healthcare, administration as chaotic and without concrete analysis of both the state of the systems and the effect that is attempted to be achieved.

Public opinion polls conducted by different agencies in March show that, despite

the scandals surrounding the party and its leader, "Ataka" preserves its chances of passing the four percent barrier during possible early parliamentary elections.

2.3. Positions of the parties on foreign and European policy

During this quarter there has been tension in the diplomatic relations between Bulgaria and Turkey. The cause of this tension has arisen around the events in MFR, as well as concerns that the Turkish diplomatic mission is interfering in the domestic affairs of the country. Bulgaria declared Uur Emiroolu, an attaché in the Turkish Consulate General in Burgas a persona non grata. The cause for this decision was activities carried out which were incompatible with the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations. The Turkish diplomat Uur Emiroolu was accredited as an attaché on social affairs, while during most of his stay in Bulgaria he engaged in religious activities. The Turkish Ambassador to Sofia has also received a warning from Bulgaria's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

In an answer to a question during Parliamentary Control, asked by the MP from "Ataka" Professor Stanislavov concerning the behavior of the Turkish ambassador and other Turkish diplomats, Minister of Foreign Affairs Daniel Mitov replied: "I have left my Turkish colleague Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu to decide whether the presence of Ambassador Süleyman Gökçe is beneficial to our relations."

The tension in the relations between the two countries reached its culmination when the National Assembly decided to set up an ad hoc parliamentary committee of inquiry, tasked to check whether or not Turkey, as well as Russia, is interfering in the domestic affairs of Bulgaria. This committee was created after a proposal from the MRF, which

was supported by GERB, BSP, PF and BDC.

The creation of the committee led to a sharp reaction from Russia, which accused Bulgaria of "neo-McCarthyism".

Prime Minister Borisov stated that the committee harms the bilateral relations of Bulgaria with both Russia and Turkey and urged the MPs to dismiss it. Rumen Petkov from ABV said that "the committee won't produce anything constructive for our country, but it will raise unnecessary questions in our already tense relations with Turkey and unnecessary questions and problems in our relations with Russia." Following the Prime Minister's position, the MPs from GERB reconsidered their decision. At the end of March, following a vote in the National Assembly, the committee was dismissed.

During this quarter BSP upheld its position that the EU sanctions against Russia must be lifted, because they are unproductive and Bulgaria has suffered great economic losses. This view was also supported by ABV and "Ataka".

During this quarter "Ataka" continued with its now traditional positions in the field of foreign affairs and European politics. State Duma MP Nicolai Valuchev, from the "United Russia" party, awarded Volen Siderov an honorary medal on behalf of the Russian War Veterans Committee for his contribution to the relations between Bulgaria and Russia. This happened during the annual rally of "Ataka" in honor of the country's national holiday, marked on the 3rd of March. The rally's motto was "Bulgarian-Russian friendship from centuries for centuries." "Ataka" supporters took down the European Union flag from the pylons in front of the National Palace of Culture. In front of the participants in the rally Siderov stated that after 9 years in the EU "we clearly see that this union is a fraud". Accord-

ing to him Bulgaria has not become "a more wealthy and developed state". Today the country, continued the Leader of "Ataka", is threatened by thousands of migrants, situated close to our borders and the European Commission "can't do anything about it." Siderov stated that the country should "start preparations to first leave NATO, because our membership there threatens us more than it protects us". After that it is necessary to leave the EU, which "causes harm and destroys the sovereignty of Bulgaria." As an alternative to NATO and EU membership Siderov pointed to the Eurasian Union, in which Bulgaria will receive, according to him, protection from "the great state of Russia, which liberated us from Turkish rule."

GERB considers that the migrant crisis brings about great challenges for the EU. Unilateral actions for coping with the crisis do not work and the closing of the internal borders within the Union is not a solution. GERB's position is that a consensus must be reached between the Member States, and the solidarity of the Union must be upheld.

3. Public Opinion

A survey conducted by Alfa Research in February shows that electoral attitudes remain steady and there are no significant changes in the arrangement of the major political parties in the country. GERB has lost 3% of the voters' support compared to November of last year, but keeps first place (21.3%). With 10.4% BSP remains the second political power. MRF suffered a decline from 6.8%, as of last November, to 4.9% at present. This decline is most probably due to the shock the party's traditional electorate suffered after the events surrounding Liutvi Mestan's ousting from the party. A slight decline of support for the Reformist Bloc is also observed – around 5% would support the block in eventual early

parliamentary elections. PF, ABV and "Ataka" retain their chances of entry into the next National Assembly.

Alfa Research survey shows that 58.6% of the population, despite the progress made in various spheres, see corruption as growing, justice as absent, and that this situation benefits a small group to the disadvantage of society. Only 22.3% believe that, despite some few impediments, corruption does not harm the overall positive development of the country. 62.2% of Bulgarians think that the most serious problems in the justice system are hidden at the top levels, because there the high-level corruption is covered up successfully.

A survey by Exacta, conducted in early March, shows the attitudes of the Bulgarian citizens towards the European institutions and their expectations for the future. According to the survey, Bulgarian citizens remain some of the biggest euro optimists among the Member States. More than 70% of those surveyed approve the country's membership in the EU and believe that it brings more positives than negatives. Only one fifth of the population has a negative attitude towards the union. Most often the negative attitudes come from the left and nationalist voters. The survey shows that during last year approval for Bulgaria's membership in NATO has risen 11% - from 42 to 53%. Most probably, this is due to the ongoing military conflicts in proximity to the country and the global challenges connected to terrorism and the migrant crisis.

According to the survey, the optimists for the future of the county are 43%, while the pessimists are 46%.

4. Main Conclusions and Forecasts

1. The migrant crisis was one of the main topics that shaped the political situation in the country. This will be one of the greatest chal-

lenges the government will face in the following days and months. The shutting down of the so called Balkan route might lead to redirecting the migrant flux towards Bulgaria. The government is undertaking preventive measures to guard our southern border and, if needed, reinforcements from the Bulgarian army will be sent.

Despite the crisis in the ruling coalition after DSB's decision to become opposition, the majority seems stable. At this point none of the parties will benefit from early parliamentary elections. However, the situation is greatly dynamic and even one change in the environment with regard to the thousands of migrants gathered close to our southern border, could trigger a political crisis.

2. GERB's government stands stable. The internal party's mobilisation is at its maximum in support of the government. Despite the criticism from the opposition, neither BSP and MRF, nor DSB can be viewed as a serious alternative to GERB at this point of time. Prime Minister Borisov strengthened his foreign policy positions due to the significance of the state with regard to the migrant crisis and the protection of the external border of the EU. The priorities of GERB are continuing the reforms and preserving the political stability of the country. The party declared that its next big goal is the winning of the presidential elections in the autumn. The candidates of the party have not been made known at this point and most probably this will happen at the beginning of summer.

3. The Reformist Bloc continues to exist more in theory than in practice. The processes of division within it are now more and more visible after the decision of the DSB to be in opposition. Currently the struggle of the parties from the bloc are for who will keep the Reformist Bloc trademark. This is one of the reasons why DSB is taking such an undefined

position – on one hand to be in opposition and, on the other to remain in the parliamentary group. Most probably the RB will dissolve ultimately with the nearing of the presidential elections. It is not likely that the bloc will support a joint presidential candidacy.

4. The Patriotic Front preserved its electoral influence during this quarter too. The coalition will gain more and more influence in governance with a view to the split in the RB and despite the fact that the representatives of the PF do not participate directly in the government. We should not exclude the possibility that at a certain point in time the PF will demand to be included officially in the governance of the country.

5. In the same way as with the PF, ABV's position in the ruling majority will strengthen more and more as GERB will no longer be able to depend on the support of part of the RB. With this the claims and political demands of ABV towards GERB and the government will become greater. At this point there is a very slight chance for unification of the left and coming out with a joint presidential candidacy. The relations between ABV and BSP remain complex and at times even hostile.

6. An internal party priority of the BSP is the forthcoming congress at the beginning of May. It seems that the main battle will be between the present leader Mihail Mikov and Kornelia Ninova. The congress will be of great importance for BSP and will show whether the party can manage to emerge from the political stalemate which it has been experiencing for the second consecutive year.

7. The events which occurred in MRF were unexpected for nearly everyone and led to a crisis within the party. The forthcoming congress of MRF, which has to elect a new leader, will show to a great extent whether the party will be able to preserve its unity or the new party of Liutvi Mestan – DOST, will at-

tract the current supporters of the movement. It is difficult to estimate what the effect will be from an electoral point of view for MRF at this point. The public is left with the feeling that Mestan's new party has the support of the incumbents in Turkey, although the former chairman of MRF denies this.

8. BDC continues to play the role of constructive opposition. BDC gave its support to the government during votes of key importance. On other issues, however, such as the reform in healthcare, education and social policy, the formation continues to be exceptionally critical.

9. During the past quarter "Ataka" restrained its public appearances. Most probably the reasons for this are the legal actions against the Party Leader Volen Siderov, who was released on probation after striking a plea bargain with the prosecution. At this point it is not clear whether Siderov's sentence will have a negative effect on the party from an electoral point of view. The public opinion polls show that, for the time being, the party retains its chance of entering parliament during possible early elections.

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Imprint

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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-
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All texts are available online

www.fes.bg

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