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BAR METER

Bulgaria's Political Parties

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- The political situation in the country is becoming more and more dynamic. The main reasons for this are the upcoming presidential elections and the preparation of the main political parties to participate in them. Although the presidential nominations of the leading political forces have still not been announced, it is already clear that the elections will be extremely intense.
- GERB continues to be the electoral leader. The forecasts that the party will be the sure winner in the forthcoming presidential elections at this point seem realistic but this would depend foremost on the candidates and the alliances that would be forged in support of one candidate or another. Regardless of the withdrawn support from ABV for the government, there are no indications for early elections at this time.
- This quarter, too, the Reformist Bloc can be characterized by an incessant series of contradictions and scandals. The inconsistent policy of Radan Kanev and DSB, being on one hand part of the RB and, on the other, in opposition, continues to provoke conflicts within the bloc. At this time, it is difficult to say whether the parties within the RB will come out with a joint presidential nomination.
- With the election of Kornelia Ninova as leader of BSP, the party faces a new stage in its development. The new leader can become a factor for revival but this will depend on the overall policy and behaviour of the party. BSP has to resolve a number of organizational issues and personnel matters accumulated over the years but, foremost, it has to streamline its ideals, political programme and vision.

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1. Political Situation

1.1 Domestic Policy

During the past three months the political situation in the country has been rather dynamic and tense, both internally and externally. At the start of May ABV withdrew its support for the government and went into opposition. Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Labour and Social Policy Ivailo Kalfin offered his resignation, stating that he was leaving government in order to satisfy a party decision. He voiced his satisfaction with what he had achieved during the past year and a half, and stressed the efforts he had made during this time so that Bulgaria could boast of “higher income, more work opportunities and more justice and predictability within the social systems.” Kalfin expressed his gratitude towards the Prime Minister Boyko Borisov for all the support he had received. Borisov stated that he regretted Kalfin’s decision, but would comply with his decision and that of ABV. According to him, Kalfin was one of the best ministers, and he had always been correct in his relations with him and the other members of the Council of Ministers.

ABV claimed that the reasons for them withdrawing their support are complex. Their dissatisfaction arose from the way decisions were made within the government. They were not consulted on important legislation, such as the amendments to the Election Code, for example. ABV declared that their decision was thought through, was not spontaneous and was in no way connected to the BSP congress results.

After Kalfin’s resignation Zornitza Rusinova was chosen as his successor. Her nomination was made by Prime Minister Boyko Borisov, who justified his choice with the fact that she had been working in the Min-

istry of Labour and Social Policy for over 15 years and thus a continuation between Kalfin and the new minister was assured. This time the portfolio of the social ministry is from GERB’s quota.

The amendments to the election legislation, submitted by the Patriotic Front and supported by GERB at the end of April, contributed to the growing political tension in the country. The changes restrict the establishing of polling sections abroad. Opening sections in countries from the EU could happen by using the current regime – apart from embassies and consulates, sections can be opened in places where at least 100 Bulgarian citizens have submitted an application. In counties outside the EU, the opening of sections outside the diplomatic missions could only happen in cities with over one million inhabitants, if there are 100 people willing to vote, with the proviso that there could be only one section.

The submitters from the Patriotic Front did not hide that the changes were made so that the manipulations in the organization of the elections in neighbouring Turkey could be limited. The Chairman of PF’s parliamentary group Valeri Simeonov stated that, with the proposed changes, one of the party’s pre-election promises, included in PF’s election campaign, would be fulfilled. GERB explained that they supported the suggestion, so that the unity of the majority could be preserved and to avoid the fall of the government and early parliamentary elections. Reactions from MRF and the newly founded DOST, with leader Liutvi Mestan, were strong. They declared that basic rights of Bulgarian citizens were being restricted.

The controversial amendments to the Election Code brought about a wave of displeasure from Bulgarians living abroad.

Campaigns on social media were organized in different parts of the world, urging the President of the Republic to veto the bill. Protests were also organized in the country, which further exacerbated the political environment.

President Rosen Plevneliev vetoed the changes with the justification that they were unconstitutional, because they restricted basic rights of Bulgarian citizens. It was pointed out in the justifications that all Bulgarian citizens are equal before the law and have equal rights, and since different voting regimes are established for EU Member States and countries outside the union, this basic constitutional principle is violated. The Patriotic Front reacted strongly to the veto, threatening to withdraw their support for the government if it was approved. After a series of discussions between the parliamentary groups who support the government, and GERB a decision was reached – new changes would be submitted, which would widen the opportunities for opening polling sections in countries outside the EU, but the president's veto would be rejected. The new amendments foresee that in every country up to 35 sections can be opened if at least 60 applications from residents who want to vote are submitted. GERB voted together with the PF, rejecting the president's veto, stating that their aim is to preserve the political stability in the country.

Political disputes were also caused by the upcoming referendum, for which nearly 700,000 signatures were collected by the showman Slavi Trifonov. The questions included in the referendum are as follows: should a two-round majority voting system be implemented; reduction of the number of MPs to 120; introduction of mandatory voting; introduction of e-voting on the internet; reduction of the state subsidy for

political parties to one BGN per vote; election of chiefs of district and regional police directorates of the Ministry of Interior by the public.

According to the law for referendums, if more than 400,000 signatures are collected the National Assembly is required to support the execution of the referendum. Some of the questions caused disputes among the political parties and constitutionalists on whether or not they are acceptable and compatible with the Constitution. Finally, the National Assembly decided to allow all six points of the referendum, even though the biggest parliamentary represented party GERB voiced its concern that some of the questions fall in the competence of the Grand National Assembly, and cannot be voted on in a referendum.

President Rosen Plevneliev brought to the Constitutional Court two points; the reduction of the number of MPs to 120 and the election of police chiefs by the public, with the justification that they were unconstitutional. The President informed the Constitutional Court that the question about e-voting was already subject to a referendum held last year and that the National Assembly decided to introduce it experimentally at first.

The presidential elections scheduled for the end of October exert a growing influence on the political situation in the country. The candidates of the main political parties are still not decided and apparently the nominations will be made on the eve of the campaign. Surprisingly, at the start of May DSB Leader Radan Kanev called on GERB for right-wing party joint support for the candidature of current president Rosen Plevneliev. The President reacted strongly, stating that Kanev did not consult him. GERB replied to Kanev's proposal by stating

that they will take a decision on their presidential nominee alone.

At the end of May President Plevneliev announced that he will not run for a second mandate as president this fall, citing personal reasons. He said he will not leave politics, but neither will he participate in political parties. He pointed out that this announcement is made five months prior to the elections so that there could be no speculations on the subject. The President said he had already informed Prime Minister Boyko Borisov about his decision, adding that he will finish his term responsibly and at full capacity. The President went on to say that he has worked well with GERB and Prime Minister Borisov and the good relations were constant during his entire presidential mandate.

1.2 Foreign Policy and European policy

A summit meeting of the South-East European Cooperation Process was held at the beginning of June in Bulgaria. Heads of states, parliamentary leaders and ministers of foreign affairs from the 13 South-Eastern European states which are part of the process took part in the meeting. The summit was honoured by the presidents of Albania, Montenegro, Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Moldova, as well as the Prime Minister of Romania.

The host of the summit, President Rosen Plevneliev, stated that South-East Europe could become part of the top ten global economies in the next five years. According to him the region's GDP will reach EUR 1600 billion. He pointed out that 20 years ago the GDP of all the countries in South-East Europe was EUR 440 billion. The President said that in the past the countries from the region were divided, but now they are moving forward together. According to

him, only together can we guarantee our energy independence and only together do we represent a market which is big enough to be of interest to strategic investors. Plevneliev reminded participants that ten years ago the region was torn apart by distrust, tension and conflict. In his opinion the countries in the region have never before been so well-connected with the rest of the countries in Europe.

The countries from the SEECP adopted a declaration which confirmed that the policy of enlargement in South-East Europe must remain a priority on the EU's agenda. The document urges the EU to progress with the negotiations, on the condition that every candidate-country fulfils the necessary requirements and conditions. In conclusion, the document expresses strong support for the continuation of NATO's "open doors" policy for the countries from South-East Europe which can take on the responsibilities and obligations of membership and fulfil the necessary requirements. The declaration focuses on the security of the region and the cooperation in the fight against organized crime and corruption, as well as counter-terrorism.

The meeting in Sofia marked the end of Bulgaria's chairmanship in the period from July 2015 to June 2016. Croatia will take on the chairmanship of the regional forum for the next year.

President Plevneliev's speech at the European Parliament on June 8th enjoyed a strong social and international resonance. In his 30-minute speech he outlined the challenges that the EU faces and emphasized the values which must be upheld in order to preserve its unity and strength.

In his speech the President spoke about the upcoming UK referendum about the country's membership in the EU. He ex-

pressed certainty that Britain would make the right choice and remain a member of the union. Plevneliev explained that “the richness of Europe is in its diversity. Diversity should not be a cause for changing the nature of the European Project by initiating a ‘two-speed’ or ‘multi-speed Europe’.” He said that “Today, more than ever, we need to bring back confidence in the vitality, in the lack of alternative of our European project. We need to dispel the doubts of Europeans and reassure them we know where we are heading.”

The President commented on the subject of terrorism and extremism in Europe. According to him, “Terrorism starts where education fails. Many of the terrorists and foreign terrorist fighters are Europeans.” He said further that “we do not forget our moral obligation to be a land of freedom, human rights for the oppressed and for the endangered. But we also represent rules and values that outline rights, but also responsibilities. Integration and education is a commitment for both host societies and migrants,” he said further. “Populists and nationalists are forcing us to make a choice – between the values we inherited from the founding fathers and the imperatives of security for our citizens. We choose both! We choose values and security. We see no contradiction between keeping our borders safe and sticking to human rights and freedoms,” the President concluded.

Also Plevneliev said that “Russia does not support the principles of international order and is trying to destabilise the EU, by bringing about mistrust in our main democratic values.” According to him, “Moscow has initiated a vast propaganda operation in Europe, which spreads messages of mistrust. The goal is to undermine the trust of people in the EU.” Plevneliev stated that for

him “Crimea is Ukraine and Ukraine is Europe,” a stance which he has been upholding constantly before the media.

During the visit of Romanian President Klaus Iohannis to Bulgaria the Romanian side offered joint activities for the Bulgarian, Romanian and Turkish navies in the Black Sea. Iohannis pointed out that this initiative should be deployed under the NATO umbrella in the Black Sea region. According to him, the initiative is defensive in nature and it is “natural that in this initiative coastal Black Sea countries take part.” He said that he expects Turkey to join the initiative. The initial cooperation would be under the umbrella of NATO. Plevneliev also pointed out that NATO is entirely a defensive union between democratic states. According to him there is no doubt that NATO’s actions are in support of the objective of East flank countries’ and justified concerns about Russia’s actions.

Prime Minister Borisov stated that Bulgaria will not take part in such an initiative for a joint fleet. Borisov said that the country could take part in joint NATO exercises, but wants to avoid creating conditions for unwanted confrontations. In a joint statement the President, the Prime Minister and the Minister of Defence denied that there were ever talks about a joint fleet. The officials clarified that the country, as part of the Alliance, can take part in joint exercises, as it has done in the past.

Finally, the Romanian President told reporters that he was misunderstood and he never had in mind a joint fleet but a joint initiative under the NATO umbrella.

During the visit of the Romanian President, President Plevneliev declared that Bulgaria will support the setting up of a NATO headquarters structure and a multi-national brigade in Romania. The President Plevne-

liev expressed his categorical position that our country will support every effort for the improvement of the security in the region, not only in words, but with actions. "We expect such a decision to be taken during the NATO summit meeting in Warsaw and together we are working to this goal," said the President. He recapped Bulgaria's position expressed by the Minister of Defence that up to 400 military personnel will take part in exercises and training on a rotation principle.

At the end of June, the ICC Arbitration Court in Geneva ruled in favour of Atomstroyexport (ASE) in the lawsuit with the National Electric Company (NEK) of Bulgaria on the cancellation of the Belene NPP project. The court ordered ASE to be compensated for damages amounting to EUR 620 million. The Minister of Energy Temenuzhka Petkova said the decision of the Arbitration Court on Belene NPP can be described as objective because it is only logical "to pay for something that has been ordered". The total amount of ASE's claim was EUR 1.2 billion. Petkova explained that the court's decision now has to be received officially by the NEK in accordance with procedure. According to her, the arbitration has judged that the NEK is obligated to pay and to acquire the assets, namely equipment for a nuclear power plant amounting to approximately EUR 550 million. The minister said that the NEK intends to get acquainted with all the circumstances in great detail before meeting with ASE's representatives in order to clarify the positions of both companies and to reach a mutually beneficial solution.

On June 22nd to 24th the President of the Federal Republic of Germany, Joachim Gauck, was on a state visit to Bulgaria at the invitation of President Rosen Plevneliev. The increase in German investments in Bul-

garia and strengthening bilateral trade relations, the development of cultural ties as well as partnership between the two states in the EU and NATO were some of the focal points during the talks between the two presidents. President Rosen Plevneliev was awarded with the Cross of the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany and President Joachim Gauck received the Order of Stara Planina with a Ribbon.

1.3. Migrant Crisis

The migrant crisis was one of the main topics of the World Humanitarian Summit, held in the middle of May in Istanbul. During this first-ever forum, Prime Minister Borisov reiterated Bulgaria's commitment to the global and regional efforts directed towards the prevention and resolution of the ongoing conflicts. He pointed out that Bulgaria, as the current chair of the South-East European Cooperation Process, had suggested specific initiatives to strengthen the security and stability of the region.

During the meeting Boyko Borisov discussed the migrant situation with a number of European leaders. In a conversation with German Chancellor Angela Merkel and deputy EU Commissioner Kristalina Georgieva the Prime Minister reminded them that Bulgaria is among the few countries that registers every single migrant who passes our state border, thus the country has proven that it protects the EU's external border well. Borisov stated that he has familiarized his Dutch colleague Mark Rutte with the purpose of the fence at the Bulgarian-Turkish border. Borisov pointed out that the fence could be regarded as "expensive, unneeded, if everything in the world was normal, but we have to invest in the safety of the public, and together in cooperation with Tur-

key we have to stop the flow of migrants along the Balkan route.”

Two years since the start of the construction of the fence at the border with Turkey, which is expected to limit the influx of migrants entering the country, the total cost amounts to BGN 102.3 million. This, however, is not the final amount, because more kilometres are to be constructed, and the price will be known after the completion of the entire project. The length of the fence on the border with Turkey is over 132 km. Expectations are that this autumn another 119 km. will be completed.

During the current three months the situation on the Bulgarian border has been calm; no rise in the influx of migrants has been observed. At the end of May nearly 90 migrants were apprehended on Bulgarian territory shortly after crossing the border with Greece. In accordance with a previously worked out plan for cooperation, military personnel joined the Ministry of Internal Affairs in order to help protect the state border with Greece.

At the end of June, it became clear that Turkey had not adhered to the signed agreement for readmission. Prime Minister Borisov expressed concern that out of the 200 migrants who were returned, there have been 200 denials from the Turkish side. So far there has not been an official statement by the Turkish side. However, if Turkey continues to denounce the agreement, the challenges with the migrant wave that face Bulgaria will increase significantly.

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 continues to be the leading political party in the electoral attitudes of the Bulgarian people. As the main party in the ruling coalition it is very appropriate that during the quarter under consideration it was at the focus of public attention once again. The approaching presidential elections accelerate increasingly the public-political expectations regarding the following - who would be the party's presidential nominee. After the decision of the Head of State Rosen Plevneliev not to run for a second mandate as president it became clear that GERB will have to propose a new candidate for president at the forthcoming elections.

Prime Minister Boyko Borisov stated that he respects the decision of the President not to run for a new mandate. He gave a high assessment of Plevneliev by saying that both of them have been in excellent working relations over the past years and will remain friends in the future. Borisov noted that Plevneliev's mandate was a difficult one and filled with political crises, which twice imposed the need to appoint caretaker governments. Therefore, he expressed gratitude towards the President that in such hard times he adhered to preserving the political stability and the democratic foundations of the country.

So far it is still not clear who will be GERB's candidate for president. The party stated that they will announce their decision at the end of August or the beginning of September. This in fact means that GERB's candidate will be announced just before the start of the presidential campaign scheduled for the end of September.

During the past quarter various choices for possible candidates of GERB have been discussed. Among them are the Mayor of

Sofia, Yordanka Fandakova, and the Mayor of Burgas, Dimitar Nikolov, both of them being also deputy chairmen of the party. They are both successful mayors and enjoy high public rating. The name of Tsvetan Tsvetanov, who is chairman of GERB's parliamentary group and former Minister of Interior in the first Borisov's cabinet, was also mentioned by the media. This information was hastily denied by Borisov himself, who said that Tsvetanov will not be the party's presidential nominee because "he is not an electable figure." After the Prime Minister's statement Tsvetanov also shared the view that he will not run for president. The sharp tone of the Prime Minister's words, however, only confirmed the rumours of tension between the two leading figures of GERB, which has been speculated over for years.

Among the possible GERB presidential nominees is the EU Commissioner Kristalina Georgieva, who continues to be the politician with the highest approval rate in the country. At this stage Georgieva declines to comment on this topic, but continues to be one of the strong potential candidates.

Many do not exclude the possibility of Borisov himself deciding to run for president. So far he has denied this possibility several times, by saying that he feels that he is more useful in executive power and that he does not want to abandon the commitments he has as Prime Minister.

It seems that GERB's candidate will be announced at the last possible moment, just before the very start of the presidential campaign. As the largest political party in the country it can afford to conduct such a wait-and-see approach. GERB specified that there is nothing to impose the need to announce their presidential nomination now, since none of the other main local parties have done so.

2.1.2 Reformist Bloc

The tension in the Reformist Bloc continues to be high and the relations between DSB, on one hand and BCM and UDF, on the other, continue to be extremely strained. The non-coordinated appeal made by Radan Kanev to GERB and the other parties in the RB to back up the nomination of the current President Rosen Plevneliev for a second mandate met with the strong reproaches from the representatives of BCM. Meglena Kouneva's party declared that this was a reckless move because it was not deliberated over even with the president himself.

After the declining of Plevneliev, DSB proposed the idea for a joint candidate of all the democratic and pro-European parties. According to Radan Kanev such a candidate could win even during the first round of elections. Otherwise, according to him, "the risk of the candidate of the pro-Russian and anti-European forces becoming president is real." Kanev believes that if this happened GERB would be most to blame, because they openly opposed the idea for a joint right-wing parties' presidential nomination.

Radan Kanev launched another idea, too – of raising one joint presidential nomination of the Reformist Bloc that would be approved at a general congress with the participation of all the formations included in the bloc. Many saw in this idea proposed by Kanev yet another attempt to hold a unification congress, which has been discussed for nearly two years now, but still is impossible to be organized. The reason for this is that the parties comprising the bloc hold different views concerning its structure. DSB insists that there should be a move towards a one party structure, while UDF and CBM uphold the opinion that the confederative

character of the bloc should be preserved. UDF made the proposal for the leadership of the bloc to be on a rotation principle.

The National Council of the Bulgaria for its Citizens Movement (BCM) refuted the official petition of the DSB for holding a unification congress of the Reformist Bloc before the presidential elections and, at the time, approving the joint presidential nomination of the bloc. In the past several weeks the parties from the right-wing coalition have been holding talks on a joint presidential nomination and recently they have come up with the proposal to have a joint nomination at the forthcoming elections in the autumn. Later, however, DSB clarified that they have an explicit condition: before that the Reformist Bloc should hold a unification congress that would approve the nomination for president and vice president. In reply, BCM saw in this an attempt on behalf of DSB's leader Radan Kanev to 'trade' the joint nomination for Head of State in return for heading the bloc and declared that they would not participate in such collusions.

According to BCM's Leader Meglena Kouneva, the parties from the bloc have an agreement that "there will be a move towards a new political body after the full cycle of elections" which means that this could be on the agenda only after the presidential elections. According to Kouneva it is unacceptable for DSB to insist on a unification congress and to use this as an excuse for not raising a joint nomination for president from the RB.

CBM are convinced that the Reformist Bloc should take part in the presidential elections with a joint candidate. Meglena Kouneva stated that the bloc's presidential nominee should be a figure recog-

nized in Europe. According to her, they have to find "a stable candidate who can go beyond the bigot party cores." Meglena Kouneva stated that she will not run for president because she does not want to leave her work in the Ministry of Education.

2.1.3 Patriotic Front

In mid-April VMRO – one of the two main parties in the Patriotic Front, held its regular congress. As expected, the long-standing leader of the party, Krasimir Karakachanov, was unanimously re-elected as chairman of the party. The MEP Angel Dzhambazki and the MPs Iskren Veselinov, Milen Mihov and Atanas Stoyanov were elected as deputy chairmen. The other members of the national leadership are Sultanka Petkova, Krasimir Bogdanov, Boris Vangelov, Vasil Hristov, Georgi Drakaliev, Anton Andonov and Alexander Sidi.

It became clear during the congress that VMRO has prepared a signal to be submitted to the Chief Prosecutor, Sotir Tsatsarov, insisting that the prosecution should object to the registration of the new party of Liutvi Mestan - DOST. According to Angel Dzhambazki, DOST contradicts the Bulgarian legislation and the Constitution of the country because it is an 'ethnic' and 'religious' party. He believes that "more than 80 percent of its founders are clergymen and officials of a foreign state, and during its founding declarations were made that threaten national security."

During the past quarter the MP from the PF Polina Karastoyanova was ousted from all the parliamentary committees of which she was a member. According to Valeri Simeonov, Karastoyanova pro-

tected lobbyist interests, citing as an example the Law on Excise Duties and Tax Warehouses, also she participated in companies managing copyrights. Polina Karastoyanova denied the accusations made by Simeonov, left the parliamentary group and became an independent MP. Karastoyanova was replaced by Slavcho Atanasov as chairman of the parliamentary Culture and Media Committee.

2.2 Trends in the Parliamentary Opposition

2.2.1 BSP

The elapsed three months were marked for BSP by the recently held congress and the election of Kornelia Ninova as the new party's leader. There were two rounds of election. During the first round Mihail Mikov won 329 votes in favour and Kornelia Ninova – 280. The other three candidates received, respectively – 77 votes for Krasimir Yankov, 55 – for Georgi Gergov and 10 delegates supported Valeri Zhablyanov. At the run-off Ninova received 395 votes in favour, against 349 votes for the current leader Mihail Mikov.

Thus Ninova became the first female leader of the party in its 125-year-long history. It was not clear till the very last minute whom the three candidates that dropped out after the first round of the elections would support. During the last few hours before the final vote Georgi Gergov told reporters that he would call upon his supporters to vote for Kornelia Ninova. The former longstanding leader of BSP's Sofia organization – Roumen Ovcharov, in turn summoned the delegates "to vote for change." According to him, the change in BSP is a matter of politics and not "a matter of personal emotions, as for two years the current leadership did not overturn the tendencies

for the diminishing support for the party, and did not express conduct characteristic for an opposition party." The MP Kiril Dobrev withdrew from the race before the vote in favour of Kornelia Ninova.

After the congress Mihail Mikov deposited his resignation as Chairman of the parliamentary group of the party and wished success to the new chair.

After winning the leadership, Ninova stated that her objective was to transform the BSP into a strong opposition party and a real alternative to the incumbents. According to her, the country needs early elections that would put an end to the bad management of the state. Ninova believes that the political instability and the constant bargaining amongst the ruling parties results in the loss of valuable time and delay in conducting real reforms.

The members in the top party leadership were also changed after the congress. BSP's National Council approved all the proposals made by the leader Kornelia Ninova for new members of the Executive Bureau. The new bureau consists of: Alexander Zhablyanov, Vesela Lecheva, Georgi Gergov, Denitsa Zlateva, Dragomir Stoynev, Iliana Iotova, Kaloyan Pargov, Kiril Dobrev, Konstantin Paskalev, Krasimir Yankov, Krum Zarkov, Radoslav Gaydarski and Yurii Aslanov.

The actor Stefan Danailov was elected Deputy Leader of BSP, having been the presidential nominee of BSP during the previous presidential elections in 2011.

Ninova stated that she has "attempted to utilize the party's assets in the new Executive Bureau" and that she "intentionally looked for people that can act as a counterbalance, who had criticized [her] over the years" and expressed hope that "they will continue to speak frankly in the future."

The first challenge facing the new BSP

leadership will be the party's performance during the presidential elections. BSP's strategy for its participation in these elections is not clear. ABV's appeal for a joint left candidate does not have the unambiguous support of BSP at this time. Still there is no nucleus of potential candidates. A step towards finding a solution to BSP's participation in the presidential elections will be an internal-party consultation on the issue which will be held between June 27th and July 3rd, Leader Kornelia Ninova announced. It will become clear from the party referendum whether the socialists will take part in the elections on their own or will form a coalition with other political parties such as ABV, "Ataka", VMRO, Movement 21, MRF and other centrist formations.

2.2.2 MRF

The MRF National Conference was held at the end of April and the new party leader was elected, after the ousting of Liutvi Mestan. There was only one candidature proposed to the congress – that of Mustafa Karadayi, and as expected, he was elected as the new leader. His compatriots voted unanimously in his favour. The Honorary Leader of the party Ahmed Dogan was present at the National Conference. This was his first public appearance after the attempt on his life. Dogan was not at the podium but in the distinguished guests' gallery. His address to the assembly was read by the MEP Filiz Hyusmenova. The honorary chairman described the MRF as a strategic investment in the stability and peace of Bulgaria. According to him, the Bulgarian ethnic model is a unique liberal project, which is still not truly assessed by Europe and the rest of the world. In his address he called upon his compatriots to be strong and well-intentioned and not to succumb to hate speech.

During its meeting MRF's Central Council elected the party's Central Operative Bureau (COB). The party's chairman Mustafa Karadayi will have five deputies – the Mayor of Kardzhali - Hasan Azis, the Deputy Chairman of the National Assembly - Aliosman Imamov, the MEP - Filiz Hyusmenova and the MPs – Yanko Yankov and Ahmed Ahmedov. The remaining members of the COB are Djevdet Chakarov, Durhan Mustafa, Emel Etem, Erdinch Hayrula, Ilhan Kyuchyuk, Yordan Tsonev, Kamen Kostadinov, Nigyar Djafer, Ramadan Atalay, Rushen Riza, Stanislav Anastasov, Tuncher Kardzhaliev, Chetin Kazak and Yunal Lyutfi.

Changes occurred in the parliamentary group of the MRF as well. The new chairman of the parliamentary group is Mustafa Karadayi and his deputies are Yordan Tsonev, Rushen Riza, Stanislav Anastasov, Tuncher Kardzhaliev and Chetin Kazak. The secretary of the group is Ferihan Ahmedova.

The new chairman Mustafa Karadayi declared that the party's leadership is comprised of "exceptionally knowledgeable and serious individuals" and MRF will continue to act as an efficient and well-organized structure. According to him, the party's strength will be manifested at the presidential elections and during these elections MRF will prove that it is an unavoidable factor in domestic politics. The new MRF leader believes that the incumbents are unstable and generate instability constantly. Further, the presidential elections should bring to society security and stability in the policy conducted by the state. Karadayi shared that MRF will analyse the situation and will take the best decision – whether to raise its own presidential nomination or to support another nomination and to decide on the nomination it would support.

Regarding the newly elected leader of BSP, Kornelia Ninova, Mustafa Karadayi stated that MRF will communicate with all systematic parties including BSP in order to restore the politics of normality. "We would be able to work together with any one of the systematic parties, regardless of whether we are in power or in opposition, in the name of the stability and security of the country," he announced.

Concerning the unity of the party, the Mayor of Kardzhali Hasan Azis said that he is not fearful of a break-up. He expressed the opinion that the party structure in his town is consolidated and shows absolute synergy. According to him, the new project of Liutvi Mestan is a trial for MRF, but Azis recalled the existence of another similar project – The Party for Democratic Change, which ended in a fiasco.

2.2.3 Bulgarian Democratic Centre

During the past quarter the parliamentary group of the BDC passed through various obstacles. At the beginning of June, the MPs from the People's Union, Rumen Yonchev, Yavor Haytov, Borislav Iglev, Georgi Kovachev and Svetlin Tanchev declared that they were leaving the parliamentary group due to disagreement on the vote to replace members in the parliamentary committees. The five MPs left the group as a result of the proposal of BDC and Krasimira Kovachka to redistribute the representation of the MPs in the parliamentary committees. This happened with the votes of GERB. Rumen Yonchev was replaced as chairman of the Committee on the Policies towards Bulgarians who Live Abroad.

Consequently, however, the MPs in question withdrew their applications to leave the group. Indeed, if five of the MPs had left, then the entire group would have

ceased to exist because the minimum number of MPs for a parliamentary group according to parliamentary regulations is 10 members.

During the meeting of BDC's parliamentary group it was decided to rename the group to BDC - People's Union. These are the names of the two parties that comprise it. It was also decided that Rumen Yonchev would replace Kancho Filipov in the parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee and Georgi Kovachev would return as a member of the parliamentary anti-corruption committee.

According to an internal party arrangement, the decisions of the parliamentary group will be taken with two thirds majority – or at least 10 MPs, which BDC does not have. Rosen Petrov (BDC) and Yavor Haytov (PU) stated that the preservation of the group does not mean that the two parties will lose their individuality. Hence, the 9 MPs from BDC will continue to support the ruling majority and the five MPs from the PU will preserve the parliamentary union with ABV which was recently declared, and its goal is to join efforts in common legislative initiatives. This concerns political and parliamentary alliances between ABV, the People's Union and Gergyovden, which will prepare common legislative initiatives and will exert control over executive power.

The main spheres of interaction between the three formations will be the fight against corruption, reform of the legal system, social policy, demographic development, foreign policy and national security.

2.2.4 "Ataka"

During the past three months, Leader of "Ataka" Volen Siderov stretched out a hand in offering unification with the PF and, if not, at least presenting a joint pres-

idential nomination. According to Siderov, the country needs unification of the patriotic forces in the name of the state's wellbeing. The PF declared that even at the time of the parliamentary elections campaign they expressed a readiness to work together with all political parties with the exception of MRF at the time, and now with the exception of DOST. The co-chairman of the PF and Leader of NFSB Valeri Simeonov said that "there is no reason why they shouldn't hold talks with Siderov, although there are a number of unpleasant memories from his attacks against him personally, as well as his family." But, according to him, this is something that can be overcome. Simeonov clarified that the division between NFSB and "Ataka" occurred as a result of the transformation of the principles upheld by "Ataka" in 2009, when the party supported the GERB government during the first mandate of Boyko Borisov.

A similar position was expressed by Simeonov's coalition partner, VMRO Leader Krasimir Karakachanov. He reminded people that back in 2013 he had beckoned for unification of the patriotic formations against the division in society and the political elite into leftist and rightist, Russophiles and Russophobes, conservatives and liberals. Karakachanov believes that if there is a dialogue with "Ataka", in this way the patriotic organizations will prove that they have indeed read and understood the inscription on the façade of the National Assembly – "Strength comes from Unity".

"Ataka" Leader Volen Siderov said that he would consider running for president if bestowed with such trust, but there are other better options. He underlined that together with NFSB and VMRO they have to embark on discussions on future candidates in order to find the best possible solution

for raising a joint presidential nomination of all the patriotic forces in the country. Siderov shared that he met with Valeri Simeonov for the first time in 7 years – during this period there was no communication whatsoever between them. During the meeting it became clear that both politicians could overcome their differences and personal affairs in the name of shared goals and policies which could be discussed and coordinated.

2.2.5 ABV

ABV's leaving the ruling majority and becoming opposition was the main event for the party during the past quarter. After resigning as minister Ivaylo Kalfin decided not to return to parliament as an MP. He said that he will direct his efforts towards internal party work. ABV stated that their main goal is to win the presidential elections based on a joint left-centrist candidate, who can be expected to attract wider support from the patriotic formations as well. Not by accident during VMRO's congress ABV Leader Georgi Parvanov called for finding a solution for a joint presidential nomination with the participation of a wide range of political formations.

After BSP's congress, ABV made a plea to the socialists for finding ways to raise a joint nomination during the presidential elections. Regardless, at this point in time BSP remains somewhat reluctant regarding such a proposal. The new BSP Leader Kornelia Ninova described ABV as part of the political status quo. According to her, BSP wants to change this status quo because they are in opposition to the government in which ABV participated. Ninova believes that they are ready to hold talks with all those positioned in the left wing "but categorically we will not accept a patronizing

tone, and left-wing leadership, where BSP has to be the follower." According to her, the mechanical collection of small parties will not make BSP stronger.

Over the past three months several times in the media Georgi Parvanov stated that the Constitution does not prevent him from running for a new presidential term. According to him, the Constitution does allow a third term as president since the clause saying that "the president can be re-elected only for one more mandate" means that after the elapsing of two consecutive terms, he can run again. This interpretation made by Parvanov, however, is disputed by most of the constitutional experts in the country, who categorically uphold the opinion that a president has the right only to two terms and this can be clearly discerned from the verbatim records of the proceedings of the Grand National Assembly during the adoption of this Constitution.

2.3. Positions of the Parties on Domestic and European Policy

At the end of April Mihail Mikov – still in the capacity of BSP Leader, visited Moscow and signed an agreement between BSP and Just Russia political party. As he said, this has created a more stable foundation for the development of long-term relations between BSP and the social-democratic party, which is also a member of the Socialist International. After the visit Mikov declared that "Russia considers Bulgaria as friendly and is greatly pained when certain Bulgarian politicians act like super-hawks", specifically targeting the president, the foreign minister and the defence minister. He added that amongst the main issues discussed with representatives from Just Russia and United Russia were the great opportunities opened for Bulgarian tourism, as well as

issues related to the bilateral relations between Bulgaria and Russia.

At the beginning of June BSP submitted to parliament a draft resolution for the repealing of the sanctions imposed on Russia. It was overruled by the ruling majority. BSP's draft resolution received the support of ABV and "Ataka".

During the plenary hall discussions, Mihail Mikov expressed the opinion that the imposing of sanctions against MPs from Russia is "a stupid decision by Europe." His compatriot Kristian Vigenin stated that the sanctions harm both Russia and the EU and do not achieve the political objective on the account of which they were introduced. According to Vigenin one of the possible compromises that could be reached at the end of July is to "start gradual lifting of the sanctions." The BSP MP Valeri Zhablianov believes that the Bulgarian public did not show support for the sanctions against Russia from the very moment of their introduction.

Desislav Chukalov from "Ataka" called upon for normalization of the relations with Russia. According to him, "the Bulgarian people have a traditionally good attitude towards Russia, but at the moment the attitude of Russia towards Bulgaria is negative."

Georgi Kyuchukov from ABV pointed out that his party supports the draft resolution submitted by the BSP for lifting the sanctions against Russia. According to him, the sanctions serve only to "point out the culprit" and not to resolve the conflict.

The chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee and GERB MP Dzhema Grozdanova said in turn that her party follows a consistent position regarding the sanctions. According to her, none of the other European Member States, regardless of the positions

they have expressed, have imposed a veto on the sanctions and the reason for this is the common EU policy in the sphere of foreign affairs and security.

ABV Leader Georgi Parvanov described Turkey's and Romania's position for a joint Black Sea fleet as 'sabre-rattling' which consequently will legitimize the deployment of Turkey in the Black Sea and operations against Russia. He summoned the National Assembly to adopt a declaration for non-interference of Bulgaria in military operations and the prevention of the use of our territory for operations against our neighbours, including Russia. The ABV MP General Miho Mihov emphasized that the idea of Bulgaria participating in the South-East brigade was not discussed by the parliamentary Defence Committee, and expressed doubt that this will be only a training exercise, as was explained.

The joint statement by the President, the Prime Minister Boyko Borisov, and the Defence Minister Nikolay Nenchev was characterised by Parvanov as 'mimicry' and "rehearsed a good cop/bad cop routine, by which one tries to preserve the relations with the East, and the other – with the West, but in the end whoever stands between two stools falls on the ground."

ABV stated that they will propose a joint declaration of the National Assembly that clearly and most strongly asserts that "Bulgaria shall not consent to its territory being used as a cause for hostile policy and actions against its neighbours." As ABV deputy chairman Ivaylo Kalfin put it, Bulgaria should not take the role of "the hawk in the region," and should not interfere and "take sides between Turkey and Russia and between Russia and Ukraine." The MEP from BSP Iliana Iotova declared that her party will support the appeal made by ABV.

On the issue of the initiative for forming the Black Sea fleet, DSB Leader Radan Kanev accused the PM Boyko Borisov of taking a non-statesmanship stand and acting in favour of populism.

In turn the deputy chairperson of GERB's parliamentary group Tsveta Karayancheva defended the PM Boyko Borisov for his reaction and said that "he acted in an extremely responsible manner, protecting national interests."

3. Public Opinion

A survey by Exacta, conducted at the end of May, shows that if parliamentary elections were held now, GERB would win 26.5% of the votes, followed by BSP with 15.4%, the RB in third place with 5.6%, MRF – 5.4%, and PF would receive the support of 4.5% of the voters. ABV is on the border line for entering the next National Assembly. This time "Ataka" has a slight chance of passing the 4 percent barrier.

Immediately after their congress the socialists regained the highest electoral values in the past three years, which means that there is a process of mobilization of the core that forms the party. The RB retains its electoral share in the last year without any significant change. The same is valid for the PF - 4.5% of the Bulgarians of age are ready to vote for the party.

After the founding of DOST a slight shrinking of MRF's electorate was registered. A secondary perusal of the figures shows that most of the parties preserve to a great extent their voters from the time of the 2014 parliamentary elections. BSP, GERB and MRF have preserved most of their former voters – more than 80%. PF, ABV and the RB have preserved approximately two thirds of their voters.

The May political calendar was filled

with events, amongst which was the BSP congress and the withdrawal of ABV into opposition. Some 31% of the respondents say that they have been following the work of the 49th BSP congress, while 69% did not express any interest in it. Some 34% of the interviewed approve of the election of Kornelia Ninova as BSP Leader. Twice as low is the share of those who disapprove of this choice. Out of the BSP supporters, 79% approve of the election of Kornelia Ninova for leader of their party.

There is significant public attention towards the ABV's going into opposition and Ivaylo Kalfin's leaving the position of Deputy PM and Minister of Labour and Social Policy. Some 54% of Bulgarians state that they have been following these events with interest. The approval rate for ABV's going into opposition is higher than that for disapproval (35% and 27%, respectively).

With respect to the presidential elections, 69% of the respondents express the opinion that they will vote for a president who can be a constructive counterbalance to the incumbents. Some 51% of them state that a decisive factor in their choice for president would be the qualities of the president. For 31% of the voters it is important for the presidential nominee to be a party-supported candidate, while 19% prefer an independent candidate.

4. Main Conclusions and Forecasts

1. The political situation in the country is becoming more dynamic and intense. The reasons for this are the forthcoming presidential elections and the preparation of the main political parties to take part in them. Although the nominees of the leading political forces are not yet announced, the elections are expected to be extremely intense. One of the issues that the presidential

nominees will focus on is the foreign policy of the country and more specifically – the sanctions against Russia, the migrant crisis, Turkey – EU relations and the role and input of Bulgaria in these processes.

2. GERB continues to be the electoral leader. The forecasts that the party will be the certain winner in the forthcoming presidential elections at this point in time seem realistic, but this will depend above all on the nominees and on the type of alliances that will be forged for the support of one candidate or another. Despite the withdrawal of ABV's support for the government, currently there are no indications for early elections. GERB's parliamentary group manages to mobilize situational majorities in times of decisive voting with the help of other formations, outside the parties supporting the government, such as BDC and independent MPs.

3. Once again, this quarter was for the Reformist Bloc an incessant series of contradictions and scandals. The inconsistent policy of Radan Kanev and DSB, as part of the RB on one hand, and in opposition, on the other, continues to incite conflicts within the bloc. At this point of time it is difficult to say whether the parties from the RB will have a joint presidential nominee. The proclamations that their candidate is able to take part in the run-off against GERB's nominee are illusory.

4. The Patriotic Front strengthens its influence on the government after the shift of ABV towards the opposition. Although it does not participate in the executive power with its own representatives, its role is growing. It is not by accident that the Deputy PM Rumiana Bachvarova from GERB called the PF a predictable and loyal ally. The PF's strategy for parliamentary conduct yields results. Proof of this is the public opinion

polls, which show that the PF preserves its electoral positions.

5. With the election of Kornelia Ninova as BSP Leader, the party faces a new stage in its development. The new leader can become the factor of revival but this will depend on the overall policy and conduct of the party. BSP has to resolve a number of organizational matters and personnel-related issues accumulated over the years but, foremost, it has to streamline its ideals, political programme and vision. The nearing presidential elections provide ample opportunities for this. The main question is whether the BSP will be able to find a way towards the other left formations for mutual political activities and solutions in the future.

6. The MRF elected a new leadership. The presence of Ahmed Dogan at the party's National Conference aimed at showing that, in fact, he remains the real leader of the party - something that is publicly admitted by his compatriots. At the same time Liutvi Mestan's new party DOST, which has still not been registered by the court, continues to be a challenge for MRF and its unity. At this time the public opinion polls show something of an outflow of voters from the MRF. Evidently this can be attributed to the events of the ousting of Mestan from the MRF leadership position.

7. The BDC is more clearly than ever divided into two cores. The first one gravitates around the businessman Hristo Kovachki and supports the ruling majority, while the second one – including the MPs from the People's Union Rumen Yonchev and Svetlin Tanchev, has closer positions with ABV and makes attempts at conducting an independent opposition policy.

8. "Ataka" embarked on a path for joint political actions with the PF with respect to the forthcoming presidential elections. This came as a surprise amid the scandals between Valeri Simeonov and Volen Siderov over the years, but it seems that, in the name of common political goals and interests, they can overcome the personal aspect of their relationship. Clearly, this has to do with the presidential elections and the strategy of the nationalist formations for participation in them.

9. ABV went into opposition immediately after BSP's congress. It seems that this course of action was planned in view of the presidential elections and ABV's attempts, and those of its Leader Parvanov, to intensify its influence over the left. Presently the calls of the former president for joint actions with BSP at the presidential elections do not meet with the necessary support. However, this is subject to change if the personal animosities which seem to hinder such a development are buried.

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