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■ A serious crisis evolved in the Ministry of Interior due to accusations of connections with organized crime that led to the resignation of Minister Roumen Petkov and other senior personnel. The new minister, Mikhail Mikov consequently proposed some significant reforms.

■ The enhanced criticism from various circles within the European Union with respect to insufficient progress in the combat against crime and corruption resulted in the nomination of the then Ambassador to Germany, Meglena Plugtschieva as new Deputy Prime Minister entrusted with the coordination and control over the appropriation of European Funds.

■ The parties of the governing coalition have started their preparations for the general election next year. Confirming their commitment to continue the coalition for the full term, each one is striving to improve its image. Coalition leader BSP is preparing for a Congress that shall introduce new statutes as well as a new programme. The party of Car Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, NMSP is struggling for survival; more and more members are defecting to other parties or forming their own ones.

■ Opposition parties continue their efforts to topple the government. The biggest opposition party, GERB is looking for potential coalition partners. On the right wing UDF, DSB and some smaller parties are trying to form a united block that might have the chance to enter Parliament and be a partner for GERB. The nationalist Ataka party is softening its tone in order to become an ally of GERB as well.

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1. The Political Situation

The political situation over the past quarter was dominated by the massive corruption row, which shook the country and made public the ties existing between some high ranking civil servants from the Ministry of Interior with organized crime. This row was widely covered by the mass media and reverberated not only in this country but in the international public opinion as well, enhancing Bulgaria's unfavorable foreign political image.

All this brought to the fore the need for urgent reforms, which can help find adequate mechanisms aimed at solving the massive problems this country faces in its endeavors to combat organized crime and corruption. Such urgency is also prompted by the fact that the row has taken place in a period of strict monitoring by the European Commission concerning the measures the country has to implement for the solution of the adverse consequences, which the highly sensitive subject matter of organized crime and corruption has made imperative both in the country and the EU on the whole.

The row at the Ministry of Interior burst out when the DSB MP, Reserve General Atanas Atanassov, who was Chief of Intelligence at the time of Ivan Kostov's government (1997 – 2001), submitted to the Prosecutor's Office a compact disk with material recorded by means of special intelligence devices, which he claims to have been sent to him by an anonymous person. The recordings make it clear that high-ranking officials of the Chief Directorate for Combating Organized Crime protect representatives of such organized crime. As a result, the Deputy Chief of the Directorate for Combating Organized Crime was arrested, because his telephone conversations implicate him in demanding and receiving bribes. Following an inspection made by the Prosecutor's Office, the former Chief Secretary of the Ministry of Interior, General Illia Illiev, was also arrested for illegitimate use of special intelligence devices.

The row reached its climax with the revelations made by the former Director of the Chief Directorate for Combating Organized Crime, Gen-

eral Vanyo Tanov, when he was summoned to a hearing before the Parliamentary Committee for Internal Order and Security. In his conversation with the members of this committee Tanov disclosed the fact that the Minister of Interior, Roumen Petkov, had held unauthorized appointments with representatives of organized crime. This fact emerged during a surveillance operation carried out by the task force for combating organized crime in connection with two men belonging to the criminal circles.

The Minister of Interior, Roumen Petkov, confirmed that he took part in such an organized encounter, but added that it was part of a special task, which his Ministry had to accomplish, and that an officer from the secret services was present at this pre-arranged encounter. The specialists in this area, however, categorically claim that the Minister is not entitled to deal with matters of such nature and - according to the legislation - such engagements can be arranged only by representatives of the professional leadership of the Ministry of Interior.

Despite these disclosures, Prime Minister Stanishev defended Roumen Petkov and even gave him the assignment to carry out a thorough inspection of the functioning of the Ministry of Interior. President Parvanov also gave his support to the Minister of Interior by expressing the opinion that it was Roumen Petkov who could carry out the needed reforms at the Ministry of Interior. This statement brought about a tempestuous reaction on the part of the opposition, which declared that this was inadmissible and that Petkov should hand in his resignation right away.

Petkov did not resign: he started instead extensive inspections at the Ministry he headed, and in response the opposition tabled a yet another non-confidence vote to the Cabinet on account of the activity of the Ministry of Interior and its failure to combat organized crime and corruption. Unlike the previous non-confidence votes, however, this one was truly dramatic and showed the existence of serious differences within the governing tri-partite coalition. This became particularly obvious during the debates and the voting procedure

itself, when the NMSP MPs abstained from voting and the Cabinet survived only thanks to the votes of the BSP and MRF.

The parliamentary faction of NMSP expressed particularly strong criticism with respect to the Minister of Interior, Roumen Petkov. In the opinion of the NMSP MPs, he already had to have handed in his resignation. In this way the NMSP stance was a clear signal to Prime Minister Stanishev indicating the urgent need for replacing his Minister of the Interior. For his part, Stanishev expressed his own criticism for the behavior of his coalition partner, NMSP, and the MRF also hastened to do the same.

The Prime Minister also said that the row revealed the existence of serious problems in the functioning of and interaction between the individual units and sectors of the Ministry of Interior, but the Cabinet and the governing tri-partite majority had the political will to start reforming this system. In his opinion, the row was prompted mainly by the circles which aim at the political destabilization of the country, thus intending to provoke an early general election and facilitate GERB's and Boiko Borissov's ascent to power and the governance of the country.

The right wing opposition accused the government of close relations with organized crime in Bulgaria, adding that corruption had become a customary practice of political behavior on the part of the governing tri-partite coalition. This was a categorical proof for the existence of a statehood crisis in the country. The opposition was also unanimous that the only way out of this crisis was the Cabinet's immediate stepping down from power and the summoning of an early general election.

Almost 40 days after the onset of the row and a result of the extensive media, public, and political pressure, Roumen Petkov was forced to hand in his resignation and the political and public circles qualified this as a much belated move. Although Petkov denied to have resigned in result of any pressure, claiming that this was his personal decision, which he had made long time ago, society remained with the lasting impression that the truth about the resignation ran contrary to Petkov's claims.

In the course of the row, the name of an undercover agent of the secret services was revealed and this is the reason why an investigation is being currently held as to who has made this unauthorized disclosure. The misgivings are that the guilty person was the Minister of Interior, Roumen Petkov himself, and that he had done so before handing in his resignation. The Prosecutor's Office demanded that the ex-Minister be stripped of his parliamentary immunity so that an investigation to this effect could properly be carried out. Petkov waived his immunity himself and said that he did not commit the alleged crime he was charged with. The results from the prosecutor's investigation are expected to be announced shortly.

The resignation of the Minister of Interior, Roumen Petkov, and the situation of a growing public negativism with respect to the government gave sufficient reasons to Prime Minister Stanishev to carry out personal re-shuffles in the Cabinet, which had been long due and expected for more than a couple of months. Petkov's replacement at the post of a new Minister of Interior was Mikhail Mickov, Chairman of the parliamentary faction of Coalition for Bulgaria. Re-shuffles took place at the Ministry of Health, where Minister Radoslav Gaidarsky was replaced by the former mayor of the town of Stara Zagora, Evgenii Zhelev; at the Ministry of Defense, where Nickolay Tzonev replaced Vesselin Bliznakov from NMSP, and at the Ministry of Agriculture, where Valeri Tzvetanov replaced Nihat Kabil from the MRF. A new Deputy Prime Minister was also appointed: Meglena Plugchieva, former Bulgarian Ambassador to Germany, who was put in charge for the appropriation and control of EU funds.

The Prime Minister also announced that the major objective facing the newly-composed government was the successful completion of the term of office of the tri-partite coalition. The priorities, which the overhauled Cabinet will pursue are: combating corruption and organized crime, reform of the internal security system and increased control over the specialized units entrusted with combating organized crime, reform of the healthcare system, and raising the standard of living of the population.

At the time when the changes in the personal composition of the Cabinet were put to the vote at the Bulgarian Parliament, the opposition voiced its categorical assessment that the ministerial replacements were hardly capable of altering anything in the functioning of the government and that the only outcome out of the situation was the resignation of the entire Cabinet and holding an early general election.

Apart from the ministerial replacements, the number of deputy ministers in the government was decreased: out of the previous 72 deputy ministers only 59 remained. In the overall re-shuffle of the government several regional governors were also replaced.

The crisis within the Ministry of Interior brought about a number of dismissals in the ranks of the professional leadership of this institution. The Chief Secretary of the Ministry of Interior, Valentin Petrov, whose name was also involved with the row, was discharged, and his post was taken by Commissioner Pavlin Dimitrov, who until then was Director of the Regional Police Directorate of the town of Bourgas. Replacements were made in the professional staff of the Chief Directorate for Combating Organized Crime, where its then leader, Kiril Georgiev, was demoted to Deputy Director, and Peter Vladimirov was appointed Director of the Chief Directorate, who previously headed one of the departments at the same directorate.

Apart from the personal replacements within the leadership of the Ministry of Interior, the tri-partite governing coalition launched initiatives aimed at carrying out a number of structural reforms within the system of the Ministry, mainly as far as control over the special intelligence devices and the wire-tapping and eavesdropping systems are concerned.

In the middle of June, by-elections for municipal councilors were held in the towns of Sandansky and Kazanluk, where vote-buying practices at a large scale were observed at the end of last year. This time the situation with the vote-buying practices was repeated more or less yet again, but this time the signals for such practices were subject to rapid inquiries, in result of which a person

was arrested in the town of Sandansky for participating in such illegal activities. The man in question admitted to having committed the offence and summary court proceedings were held. The election outcome in the town of Sandansky is now subject to a court appeal and the election returns will most probably be declared null and void. The by-elections in the town of Kazanluk also gave rise to doubts for possible vote-buying and this election outcome will also be subject to court-appeal proceedings.

This exceedingly undemocratic practice made the political elite in the country launch an intense debate concerning the introduction of amendments to the election legislation. Unfortunately, this debate has not truly taken place to date, despite the appeals, which President Parvanov has been making to this effect for more than a year now. However, this debate is likely to be genuinely held in the next months and it will hopefully bring about positive results, on the basis of which a new Election Law and other changes will be elaborated and voted for, uniting the proposals for amendments tabled by the various parliamentary represented parties.

President Parvanov once again voiced his stance for undertaking a number of reforms in the political system of the country intended to result in positive political changes. In Parvanov's opinion, the country needs not only urgent reforms in the election system itself, but also amendments to the Political Parties Act, whereby a more stringent control over their funding will be introduced.

The rest of the political parties indicated that they will respond favorably to Parvanov's ideas for amendments to the system of holding elections. The BSP tabled a proposal for the introduction of a mixed election system combining the proportional system with the majority vote system, much in tune with the thesis of President Parvanov. NMSP accept the enhancement of the majority element, but in their opinion voters should be given the opportunity to re-order the places of the candidates on the party slates by means of a preferential vote. Another proposal tabled by the NMSP MPs concerns the vote-buying practices.

According to them, a party which is proven have been buying votes, should be deleted from the register of political parties by decision of the respective court.

The UDF expressed the opinion that an amendment to the election laws alone would be insufficient. This is the reason why the parliamentary faction of the party tabled a text for amendments to the Penal Code, whereby vote-buying should be qualified as a grave criminal offense punishable by 2 to 8 years of imprisonment and a penal fine amounting from BGN 50,000 to 200,000 (EUR 1 = BGN 1.96). This idea was given support by NMSP as well.

Another important point in the development of the political life during the quarter under review was connected with the criticism, which President Parvanov addressed to Prime Minister Sergei Stanishev. These critical remarks made it possible for many politicians and analysts to start talking about a conflict between the two of them. What prompted Parvanov's criticism was the fact that advisors to the Prime Minister were members of the Boards of Directors of various companies, in which the government has a majority stake. Stanishev replied that he could not accept such criticism because the task his advisors were entrusted with was to provide direct information about the activities of these companies, as the government was bearing its own share of responsibility for the way state-owned property was run. Despite this dialog between Prime Minister and President, the two of them denied the existence of any conflict – either personal or institutional – between them. After the meeting held between Parvanov and Stanishev, they jointly declared that their relationships were very good indeed and dispelled the speculations about the existence of any differences between them.

An important event from a foreign political point of view was Sergey Stanishev's visit to Washington in the month of June. At the meeting between the Bulgarian Prime Minister and the US President, George Bush expressed his support for Bulgaria in the combat with corruption and organized crime and congratulated Stanishev on

his efforts to push on the reforms he has been pursuing in this area. Another subject to discussions was the possibility for implementing several energy projects in Bulgaria, in which US investors expressed willingness to participate.

The future development of the political situation in the country will become increasingly dependent on the forthcoming general election in the summer of next year. It is this election that will determine the processes underlying the development of the political agenda in the country, alongside the dynamic turns that will be taking place within the party system itself.

2. State and Development of the Party System in Bulgaria

2.1. Processes within the Governing Coalition

As already mentioned above, the rows which burst out at the Ministry of Interior affected the relationships between the parties from the tri-partite governing coalition. Nevertheless, all indications at the time being are that the government will complete its full term of office and no early general election will have to take place. Possible problems for the coalition could arise after the publication of the monitoring report of the European Commission on Bulgaria's progress in the combat against corruption and organized crime, which is expected to be extremely critical and strongly negative. In all likelihood, this will be a suitable occasion for the opposition to enhance its attacks against Sergei Stanishev's Cabinet.

2.1.1. Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP)

The BSP was the party, which had to bear the strongest and most adverse effect from the row connected with Roumen Petkov, having in mind as well that Petkov is the person considered to be one of the strongest and most powerful figures in the party. The expectations of many experts and analysts were that the row will affect particularly adversely the confidence, which voters have in this party. And yet, at the time being these expectations prove to be partially wrong as far as the extent of confidence loss is concerned (for greater detail see Chapter 3

– “Public Opinion”). To top it all, at the local by-elections for municipal councilors in the town of Kazanluk, it was the BSP that got the majority of electoral votes.

Nonetheless, the row with Roumen Petkov has enhanced the negative attitudes with respect to the BSP. Certain circles within the party, for whom Petkov is an internal party opponent, will most probably avail of this situation. The BSP MP Tatyana Doncheva used to be particularly critical of the former Minister of Interior and as early as the onset of the row she demanded Petkov’s immediate resignation. She even addressed critical remarks to Prime Minister Stanishev for his failure to interfere more decisively in this situation and even for his failure to demand his minister’s resignation himself. Doncheva’s opinion is shared by other representatives of the party as well, who – according to insiders – will capitalize on the difficulties Petkov is experiencing at present in order to bring down his influence within the BSP to a bare minimum.

In actual fact, the level of political and party confidence, which Petkov used to enjoy, is currently at a very low point, indeed. After he resigned from the ministerial post, he returned to his MP seat and now is a member of the Parliamentary Committee on Internal Order and Security. Petkov, who thus far has almost always headed the BSP pre-election headquarters and has taken care of the party finances, may not be entrusted to handle this line of activities at the next general election, although the leader of the party, Sergei Stanishev, said that he would be relying on Petkov in the future, too.

The personal re-shuffles in the Cabinet brought about predictable shifts within the party leadership and the parliamentary faction of the party. Thus for instance, as soon as the Chairman of the Coalition for Bulgaria parliamentary faction, Mikhail Mickov, was appointed Minister of the Interior, his leadership post in the parliamentary faction was taken by the BSP spokesperson, Anguel Naidenov.

One of the initiatives, which the BSP leadership raised during the period under review, was for a discussion to be held among the coalition partners, devoted to outlining measures capable of raising the standard of living of the population and permitting to pursue a more active social policy, especially in the healthcare sector. One of the proposals tabled at the discussion was for the health security contribution to be raised from 6 to 8 percent at the expense, however, of the surplus in the government budget and not at the expense of increasing the burden of social security contributions, which the individual citizens pay. But this proposal was met with serious criticism on the part of NMSP, whose representatives announced their categorical opposition to any such move.

The BSP continues to work on the draft of a new party statute and a new party program, which are expected to be adopted at the forthcoming party congress. It has already been announced that the BSP will run the next general election in the well known coalition format with other left-wing parties, which people have been familiar with for several years now under the name of “Coalition for Bulgaria”. The BSP leadership announced that the new program will be socially-oriented and its priority areas will be: education, healthcare, growing public welfare and incomes of the population.

2.1.2. NMSP (National Movement for Stability and Progress)

The most significant event for NMSP, which merits special attention, is connected with the stance taken by the party during the raging row at the Ministry of Interior. The fact that NMSP categorically declared to stand for Roumen Petkov’s resignation and abstained during the non-confidence vote against the government, of which they are an inseparable part and parcel, indicates the willingness of the party to attain a higher degree of political emancipation with a view to the forthcoming general election next year.

At the time when the Cabinet re-shuffles were carried out, NMSP categorically defended the quota principle of allocating ministerial posts,

as laid down in the coalition agreement among the parties. In a statement of his, Prime Minister Stanishev declared that he did not intend to take into account the quota principle of allocating government posts, and in response NMSP announced that should that happen, this would indicate that the coalition agreement had been breached and that would actually mean the end of the coalition itself.

This unwavering stance on the part of NMSP brought about a compromise and as a consequence only one minister from the NMSP quota was replaced – the Minister of Defense, Veselin Bliznakov. And although during the past few months there were rumors about the desire of the NMSP party leader, Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, to replace not only Bliznakov, but two other ministers as well – Nikolay Vassilev, Minister of State Administration and Administrative Reform, and Daniel Vulchev, Minister of Education and Science, they both retained their posts.

The conduct of NMSP in the direction of exacerbating the relationships with their coalition partners are a clear indication that till the end of the government's term of office Saxe-Coburg-Gotha's party will try to build and uphold a political image of its own. This is the reason why NMSP is likely to stay its stance within the coalition more staunchly by mainly opposing the proposals raised by the BSP in the sector of social policy, thus emphasizing the liberal nature of the party. The increase of the health security contribution level, which was already mentioned before, will be one of the proposals that is likely to become subject to a most heated debate.

Another BSP proposal likely to be heatedly debated among the tri-partite coalition partners namely because of the NMSP stance concerns the amendments to the Election Law. NMSP is skeptical with respect to the introduction of a mixed election system and the establishment of "first past the post" or majority vote constituencies. NMSP representatives have already shared their opinion that the best system according to their party is the introduction of an option for preferential vote on the part of the electorate.

Thus far there have been no clear indications about the way in which NMSP will run the forthcoming general election next year. Opinion polls currently show that should the party run the general election on its own, it would hardly be likely to overcome the required four percent electoral threshold (for greater detail see Chapter 3 – "Public Opinion"). Therefore the question of finding an appropriate coalition formula is still open for the party. This should be a formula giving NMSP the opportunity to get returned to parliament once again. The winning options are few, one of them being the possibility for setting up a joint Liberal Alliance with the MRF, and this idea has informally been considered for several years now. It was discussed before the last general election as well, but it failed mainly because of the unwillingness to pursue this option on the part of the then NMSII. Things are different now and this time it is the stance and willingness on the part of the MRF that will count most.

2.1.3. Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF)

Over the quarter under review, the MRF continued to be one of the most strongly attacked and criticized parties in the governing tri-partite coalition. Most numerous were the attacks launched by DSB and the GERB Party. DSB addressed the Prosecutor's office, the new National Security Agency, and the Parliamentary Committee for Combat against Corruption with the request to establish the source of the funds, with which the massive and luxurious residence of the MRF leader, Ahmed Dogan, has been acquired in one of the elite neighborhoods of Sofia. Ivan Kostov's party also addressed the National Revenue Agency with the same request, namely for an inspection to be held on the amount of incomes Dogan has declared on his tax return over the years.

For his part the Sofia City Mayor, Boiko Borissov, also filed a complaint with the Prosecutor's Office concerning the case with Dogan's residence, because – according to the municipal authorities – it was built illegally, i.e. without a building permit. Should the competent authorities find the building to be illegally constructed, Borissov threatened that he would issue an order for the residence to be pulled down.

Ahmed Dogan replied to these attacks by saying that they were absolutely groundless. He said he was not afraid of any inspections because everything he was doing was legitimate. In his opinion the attacks against him were actually attacks against his party because it had become a leading factor in Bulgarian politics. For a yet another time Dogan warned that such allegations and attacks aimed at creating adverse attitudes against the MRF, which – according to him – was a dangerous and destructive act.

Accusations to the MRF was launched by DSB MP, General Atanas Atanasov, who claimed that the police had investigated the MRF for connections of its representatives with organized crime gangs, but this investigation was put on hold by order of the ex Minister of Interior, Roumen Petkov. For the time being these accusations remain mere allegations, but the National Security Agency is investigating this case.

One of the Cabinet replacements was connected with one of the key MRF figures – the Minister of Agriculture and Food Supplies, Nihat Kabil. The reason for his replacement lies in the fact that the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Supplies was one of the institutions subject to the most severe criticism on account of European funds appropriation. Despite Kabil's replacement, the MRF leader Ahmed Dogan maintained that Kabil was one of the ministers who carried out a serious reform in the agrarian sector, which made it possible for the country to meet the criteria of the European Union in this particular sphere.

Regardless of his replacement, Kabil continues to be one of the most influential figures in the MRF and he is the man on whom Dogan will continue to rely in the future as well.

MRF's conduct during the crisis at the Ministry of Interior showed that the party is willing to do its utmost so that the government of the tripartite could complete its full term of office. The fact that the MRF lent its strong support to the BSP during the row, which affected one of its key representatives, is a clear signal about the intentions of Dogan's party to continue its cooperation with the BSP after the general election next year,

too. For its part, the BSP has declared many a time that the MRF is a serious partner and that the cooperation with them yields serious results in the governance of the country.

2.2. Processes within the Opposition

The right-wing opposition parties manifested intense political activity at the time of the row at the Ministry of Interior, but this brought about political dividends much below the level of their expectations. Although the right-wing parliamentary opposition joined forces and acted together during the non-confidence vote against the government, the relationships among them remain unchanged and the differences have not disappeared, which hampers the unification in the right-wing political environment.

2.2.1. Union of Democratic Forces (UDF)

Over the past three months, the UDF leadership tabled a demand for the launch of an impeachment procedure against President Georgi Parvanov because of the fact that for more than a year he had failed to convene the National Security Consultative Council. According to the UDF leader, Plamen Yurukov, this was a grave infringement of the Constitution and this substantiated the grounds for the impeachment of the President. In the opinion of a number of leading constitutional law experts, however, the UDF demand was based on no legal grounds.

This UDF initiative was prompted by the fact that the opposition addressed numerous appeals to the President to convene the National Security Consultative Council on account of the crisis in the country connected with the rows at the Ministry of Interior, but Parvanov failed to respond. The motive of the Head of State was that such a move was unnecessary and would by no means contribute to overcoming the crisis.

The UDF initiative for the impeachment of the President did not muster the needed parliamentary support and thus the party had to give up its demand and withdraw the tabled proposal.

The UDF continued to pursue its initiative of bringing former leading figures of the party

back to its ranks, the objective being to enhance in this way the process of unification of the right-wing in Bulgaria. Among those who made it back to the fold is the former Deputy Prime Minister in Ivan Kostov's Cabinet, Evgenii Bakardjiev, and his party called Bulgarian Democratic Union ("Radicals"), the members of which will shortly reunite with the UDF ranks.

The tendency for re-establishing the strong UDF figures of the past, which proved to be a major policy line of the new UDF leader, Plamen Yurukov, can be seen in the possibility for the former party leader and former Minister of Foreign Affairs in Ivan Kostov's Cabinet, Nadezhda Mikhailova, to be elected new Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly. She is expected to fill in the parliamentary seat vacated by the UDF MP and ex Prime Minister, Philip Dimitrov, who announced that before the end of this parliamentary session he was going to leave Parliament, as he was giving up politics and his political pursuits. In this way Nadezhda Mikhailova, who opposed the previous UDF leadership headed by Peter Stoyanov, will regain her former positions of a leading figure in the party.

For several months now the UDF leadership has been working hard on the elaboration of a new party statute. Some of the proposals tabled by the working group elaborating the draft statute, which is headed by the leader Plamen Yurukov, have been met with disapproval by a number of party representatives who belong to the intermediate echelon of the party leadership. The idea, which provokes the strongest opposition, is for the party leader to make the nominations for members of the National Executive Council that will be voted for by the National Council instead of by the National Party Conference, as the procedure was practiced thus far. Opponents to this amendment are the representatives of the largest local organizations in the cities of Sofia, Plovdiv, Varna, and Veliko Tarnovo.

The rest of the amendments to the party statute include the possibility for the party leader to be elected at primaries by the entire membership of the UDF, unlike the current practice – by the party

conference only. The party leadership said that the purpose and intent of this measure was to open the party to its members and to strengthen the internal party democracy, which would enhance the overall confidence in the party. However, the way in which these amendments have been planned would rather centralize the party than democratize it, because they will increase the power of the party leader exceedingly much.

2.2.2. Democrats for Strong Bulgaria (DSB)

Over the past quarter, DSB has remained in the collective public memory with several anti-corruption initiatives, which were in the focus of public attention. DSB was the party which played the leading part in the raging political row. As already mentioned, it was DSB MP, General Atanas Atanassov, who revealed the recordings, which brought about the resignation of the Minister of Interior, Roumen Petkov, and the investigation started by the Prosecutor's Office with respect to the people involved with the row.

The past quarter of the year did not see any change in the attitude of DSB in connection with the unification of the right-wing political environment. In a number of statements, the DSB leader, Ivan Kostov, reproached the UDF because he could see circles within the UDF, which were in close relationships with the MRF. In Kostov's opinion, this was the only reason that made any common action between DSB and the UDF problematic. Kostov appealed to the UDF leader, Plamen Yurukov, to express his clear stance on the issue and decisively differentiate his party from the MRF, thus enabling the future common actions of the two right-wing parties.

The attitude of DSB as regards the GERB Party remains unchanged at this stage as well. Despite the letter sent by the Chairman of the GERB Party, Tzvetan Tzvetanov, to DSB, in which he expresses the willingness of his party for common actions in the name of the success, which the united right-wing could score at the next general election, DSB has retained its previous position in relation to Boiko Borissov's party. For a yet another time Kostov declared the categorical stance of his

party that the condition *sine-qua-non*, on which DSB could cooperate with Boiko Borissov, was for GERB to unequivocally differentiate itself from President Parvanov. According to Ivan Kostov, as long as GERB have qualified the governing tripartite coalition as their major political opponent, they must do the same with respect to the President, who is the actual creator of this tripartite governing coalition.

The prospects for improving relations between DSB and the GERB Party seem little likely at this stage in time at least, and the principal reason why are the personal attitudes and differences between the two leaders, Ivan Kostov and Boiko Borissov.

Irrespective of the initiatives undertaken by DSB with respect to combating corruption and organized crime and aimed at improving the opposition image of the party, in reality this has not brought about any positive impact on the rating of the party, which cannot boast of any tangible improvement. Current opinion polls indicate that at this stage DSB seems unlikely to make it to the next Parliament after the general election due to take place in the summer of next year (for more detail see Chapter 3 – “Public Opinion”). The reasons why are mainly due to the negative attitudes to the party leader, Ivan Kostov, which the electorate has amassed in the past. In short, it is the party leader who is one of the major factors underlying the situation in which DSB currently is.

Kostov's unwillingness to engage in a dialog and his predominantly confrontational style of conduct hamper not only the processes of unification in the right-wing political environment, but also create prerequisites for lack of public confidence in the right-wing at large.

2.2.3. Bulgarian New Democracy (BND)

In the middle of May, the group of MPs who split up from NMSD, became the founders of a new political party carrying the name of the parliamentary faction they had set up in Parliament last fall, namely: Bulgarian New Democracy (BND). The ex Minister of Defense in the Cabinet of Sime-

on Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, Nickolay Svinarov, was elected leader of the new party, and his deputies became MPs Lydia Shuleva, Borislav Velikov, and Christo Savchev.

Among the major priorities of the party declared at its Constituent Congress are: establishment of a broad right-wing coalition with the participation of BND, as well as the lasting consolidation of the party as one of the leading formations in the right-wing political environment. The party leadership said that they would cooperate only with opposition forces from the right-wing political environment, and that the parties from the tripartite governing coalition would be their ideological opponents. They also added that one of their medium-range political objectives would be the new party's membership in the European People's Party.

The supreme executive body of the BND will be called Council of the Regions. By right its members will be: the party leadership, the MPs of the party's parliamentary faction, the leaders of the local organizations, and the mayors elected on the BND party slate. The rest of the Council of Regions members will be elected by the party Congress.

The party Statute passed by the Constituent Assembly says that officers and collaborators of the former secret services of the former communist regime shall not be elected to leadership posts in the party.

2.2.4. Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (The GERB Party)

During the last several months, the unofficial leader of the GERB Party, Boiko Borissov, was forced to openly declare his stance on various issues in order to prove for a yet another time that he was truly a right-wing politician. Thus for instance, on the occasion of establishing the GERB's Party Council of the Elders in the month of May, Borissov declared that he had no intention of becoming a prime minister in a government set up with the participation of the MRF. He expressed the same stance with respect to a possible coalition with the BSP and even put his signature under this statement in public in order to testify to the

fact that he would not go back on the declaration he had just made. This was Borissov's indirect admission that a possible post-general-election coalition between the GERB Party and the BSP or the MRF is highly unlikely.

In the past months, the leader of the GERB Party faced other problems as well, which are far from typical for a strong leader's party. Thus for instance, the Mayor of the village of Vetrino, Georgi Andreev, who was elected mayor on the GERB Party slate, received a BSP membership card. The Prime Minister and BSP leader, Sergei Stanishev, availed of the situation and personally handed this membership card to the mayor who had left the GERB Party. Boiko Borissov said that what he was hoping for was for Andreev to resign his post immediately. He went on to explain that the Mayor of Vetrino had signed a declaration in accordance with which should he infringe the ethical norms and principles that made him join the GERB Party, he was bound to resign the post he was elected to.

During the last week of June, local by-elections were held in the town Kazanluk. For the first time ever since its inception the GERB Party suffered a defeat at these elections and came to rank second after the BSP. A totally unknown patriotic organization under the name of "Zashtita" (i.e. "Protection") won the same number of municipal councilor seats as the GERB Party did. GERB representatives said that this was certainly due to the vote-buying practice because – in their opinion – what was indicative here was that a party nobody had ever heard about came to win so many votes all of a sudden.

2.2.5. The Ataka Party

A careful look at the activity of the political Ataka Party over the last three months reveals the typical features of the so-called non-program parties combined with certain extremist elements.

On the one hand, the party and its leader, Volen Siderov, in particular continued the course pursued for some time now towards changing the party profile and adopting a more moderate political image. Several months ago Siderov showed

his willingness for dialog with the rest of the political forces and now, in April, the party made an even stronger move in the direction of changing its political course. In an interview for the Maltese "Times of Malta" newspaper, the Ataka Party leader said that the profile of his formation was more of the right-centrist type and much closer to the ideology of the European People's Party. The Ataka Party has three MEPs at the European Parliament, who at the time being are independent MEPs but previously belonged to the right extremist parliamentary faction of "Identity, tradition, sovereignty". In Siderov's opinion, the Ataka Party needs assistance from the European Union in order to cleanse its name. In this interview he promised to clarify before the EU member countries what the Ataka Party actually is and only then would he make attempts to file for membership in the European People's Party (EPP).

Parallel to all this, for the first time Volen Siderov publicly admitted the positive traits of Ataka's major opponent – the leader of the MRF, Ahmed Dogan. At a conference held in April on the occasion of the third anniversary from the establishment of his party, Volen Siderov invited Dogan to a debate devoted to the future of the country. The Ataka Party leader declared that he did not want to wage wars any more. He also added that he intended to put an end to his bickering with the media, too.

At the background of this moderate tone, however, the Ataka Party showed its other face as well. After numerous postponements, at the beginning of May the Sofia City Court finally started proceedings on the case for instigation to perjury against the Ataka Party leader, Volen Siderov, and his wife, Kapka Siderova. The Siderovs were accused of having instigated the former Ataka MP, Pavel Chernev, to give false evidence in connection with a traffic accident on the "Thracia" motorway, which took place in April 2006. The motorcar in which Siderov was riding then collided with the motorcar driven by Yavor Dockov. Immediately after the accident the leader of the nationalists, Volen Siderov said that the collision was planned by Roumen Petkov, who until recently was Min-

ister of the Interior of the country. Passengers in Yavor Dockov's car were his father and grandfather. At the inquiry after the accident Siderov said that the car they were riding in was driven by Pavel Chernev. In the course of the investigation Chernev first confirmed this fact but later on withdrew his testimony and confessed that he did not drive this car, proving that he was in another car miles away from accident.

Back in the court room, as soon as the court proceeding were opened, the shouts and thumping of the Ataka Party proponents were so loud that the judge was forced to postpone the hearings. The slogans shouted by the Ataka's supporters were: "No to the double standards in the system of justice." According to Siderov, the entire investigation and court proceedings were a trap and he was simply framed in for being inconvenient for the governing majority. Before the people who had gather outside the court he announced that he could not accept a judicial system where the court applies double standards and lets go unpunished traffickers, gang leaders and mobsters. The Minister of Justice, Meglena Tacheva, qualified the protests and the slight clashes that followed between participants and the police as an attempt to exert pressure on the judicial institution and the court proceedings themselves.

The change in the position and behavior of Volen Siderov in the direction of a more moderate rhetoric and political stance are due to the forthcoming general election in the summer of next year. Many analysts consider it quite plausible that a future right-wing coalition could be set up, in which the GERB Party will be the major political force but may well include the Ataka Party, too. Siderov is well aware of his chances and this is the reason why he will continue to mellow and soften his rhetoric, acting within the limits of the moderate political discourse.

The leader of the GERB Party has expressed his sympathies for the Ataka Party and some of its political positions many times, which makes such a future coalition possible, especially having mind that Borissov has categorically declared that he would not enter any coalitions with the participation of the BSP and the MRF.

3. Public Opinion

During the second quarter of 2008, the public attitudes were influenced to a large extent by the price rise and the corruption rows, which shook the country. This naturally had an impact on the public opinion, too, and the results of the opinion poll surveys held by several leading opinion poll agencies in the country are indicative to this effect.

The National Statistical Institute reported a 15 percent inflation rate in comparison with the same period of the previous year, and according to this indicator Bulgaria ranks third after Latvia and Estonia as countries with the highest inflation rate in the European Union.

The survey held by the MBMD Agency reveals the escalation of Euro-skepticism in Bulgarian society, the most likely reason for which is the high inflations rate precisely. In comparison with April, the number of people who have expressed a pessimistic outlook concerning the future development of the country has risen by 10 percent at the end of June, and the share of pessimists now stands at 54 percent. The low incomes of the population at large enhance the pessimism in people's attitudes.

The MBMD survey shows that it is the problems with low incomes, high prices, and inflation that occupy the first two places among the gravest concerns of Bulgarians. Corruption and poor governance rank third in this scale of concerns.

A similar trend can be observed in the survey held by the National Center for the Study of Public Opinion (NCSPPO), where the respondents indicate that the major problem of society is the low standard of living and low incomes of the population. According to nearly 90 percent of the respondents, the most important task, which the country must cope with, is the increase of the living standard of the common people.

The internal political problems of the country have affected people's attitudes concerning Bulgaria's membership in the European Union. The survey of NCSPPO quoted above indicates the following: More than 20 percent of the respon-

dents think that the country has sustained a loss on account of its EU membership. This percentage mainly includes people in the age bracket over 60 and the unemployed. Another 34.2 percent of the respondents think that Bulgaria has neither lost nor gained anything from its EU membership. And yet, the share of those who think that the country has gained from its EU membership is sufficiently large – 32.5 percent – and this percentage includes mainly the youngest citizens of the country in the age bracket from 128 to 30, and the university educated diploma and degree holders.

The subject matter of corruption was very topical over the past quarter and this was reflected in the public opinion survey held by the NCSPPO. The results show that the attitude of society is one of extreme intolerance with respect to corruption and this affects and underlies the high degree of lack of confidence in the political elite and the political parties in the country. The results obtained indicate that only 4 percent of the Bulgarians are inclined to believe the messages sent by the political parties. As far as the level of corruption is concerned, 37.2 percent of the respondents think that the level of corruption has increased following the country's accession to the European Union. The major reason for this situation – according to the respondents – is the opening of novel possibilities for engaging in corruption practices, connected with the distribution of funds coming from the EU

The rows at the Ministry of Interior affected the rate of confidence in the police as well. According to data obtained by NCSPPO, 29.4 percent of the respondents approve the work of the police, while 54.2 percent express their disapproval.

The political rows in the country also affect the electoral attitudes. A survey held by the MNMD Agency shows that nearly 23 percent of the Bulgarians categorically say that they will not go the polls, and approximately 20 percent express hesitation whether they will go to the polls or not.

Over the past three months, it is the GERB Party again for which most of the voters are going to vote and the number of these respondents

stands at 26.1 percent. This result indicates that Boiko Borissov's party has increased the support it can muster in comparison with the previous quarter. Despite the row in which its minister, Roumen Petkov, was involved, the BSP has lost merely 2 percent of its electoral support – unlike the situation from a few months ago – and the current BSP support rating stands at 17.6 percent.

Apart from the GERB Party and the BSP, among the parties, which are certain to overcome the mandatory 4 percent electoral threshold are: the MRF, which would get 6.3 percent of the votes, the Ataka Party – 6 percent, and the UDF – 3.8 percent. The survey shows that NMSP and Ivan Kostov's DSB will almost certainly prove to be incapable of making it to the next parliament with their current 1.6 percent and 1.0 percent electoral support rating respectively.

Over the period under observation, the politicians enjoying the highest public confidence rating continue to be Georgi Parvanov (43 percent) and Boiko Borissov (41 percent). A relatively high confidence rating has been given to the new ministers Mikhail Mickov (19.5 percent) and Meglena Plugchieva (20 percent). As for the rest of the leading politicians, the lowest confidence rating has been given to Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha (8 percent) and to both the UDF leader, Pamen Yurukov, and the DSB leader, Ivan Kostov, - 5.4 percent each.

4. Trends and Prospects

1. The political situation over the past three months has exacerbated as a result of the serious crisis in one of the major institutions of state, namely the Ministry of Interior. It affected the top levels of the political and professional leadership of the ministry, the Minister of Interior, Roumen Petkov, included. The most serious accusations were connected with suspicions for connections between some of the leading top-brass figures in the Ministry of Interior with organized crime. The crisis at this ministry provoked wide appeals for serious reforms and the need for a "clean hands" policy, which were raised not by the public opinion, but also by the governing tri-partite coalition itself and

the opposition. A series of resignations followed in result of the crisis, the resignation of the Minister of Interior included on the one hand, and on the other, the crisis brought about proposals for radical reforms, which the new Minister of Interior, Mikhail Mickov, tabled in the National Assembly.

The crisis at the Ministry of Interior coincided with the enhanced criticism coming from various circles within the European Union, which indicates that Bulgaria is making insufficient efforts to combat corruption and organized crime. The critical remarks were combined with threats for discontinuation of financial and other EU programs. This made the government take measures by creating a new governmental post – that of a Deputy Prime Minister entrusted with the coordination and control over the appropriation of European funds.

The expected regular Monitoring Report by the European Commission became the major subject matter of the current public and political debate as never before, thus turning into an integral part of the internal policy of the country.

The first cracks in the tri-partite governing coalition have now emerged. This happened when NMSP came to differ from the BSP and the MRF with respect to the assessment of the Ministry of Interior crisis and the deliberations about what reforms should be undertaken there. However, for a yet another time the Cabinet managed to survive at the non-confidence vote in Parliament, despite the abstention of NMSP, and for the time being there is no risk for its eventual disintegration and/or an early general election any time soon.

The proposals made by the President for changes in the political system and especially for amendments to the election system, the Political Parties Act, etc., became an exceedingly important subject matter for debate in the public environment as well. His idea is to provoke legislative amendments on the eve of the next general election, in order to overcome the confidence crisis, which the parties and political institutions are currently going through, and to create conditions for a higher level of commitment to the political process on the part of the citizens of this country.

2. The parties of the governing tri-partite coalition have started to make calculations concerning the general election next year increasingly more often and are looking for ways and means of improving their image. This creates internal tensions, both within the individual parties themselves and among the parties of the coalition.

The most dynamic processes of this nature have been observed within the BSP. Following the row at the Ministry of Interior, the party leader, Sergei Stanishev, managed to eliminate in fact a powerful rival of his and also a possible opponent in the party, namely the former Minister of the Interior, Roumen Petkov. Having in mind that the other power figure in the party – Roumen Ovcharov – is also in a defensive situation, one can say that because of this turn of events and in a certain sense despite the circumstances, Stanishev has consolidated his position of a BSP leader.

At the same time, the establishment of the National Security Agency enhanced Stanishev's positions as Prime Minister of the country, which is expressed in his new self-confidence and even in a certain friction, which appears to exist between him and his patron, the President. This is what has probably provoked the remote exchange of words between the two, which for the first time is of a more brusque nature. The President accused Stanishev of being insufficiently high principled in pursuing his recruitment policy expressed in placing "his men" for instance in the boards of directors of state-owned companies. As observers have pointed out, this is no serious occasion for criticism, but it has obviously been used by Parvanov to express his irritation on account of his diminishing influence over the Prime Minister. Stanishev himself responded to the "blow" with composure and having met the President in person, the two of them seemed to have ironed out the existing differences for the public eye at least, because these differences had become the focus and central topic of discussion in all the media, print and electronic alike.

Temporarily, the BSP postponed its Congress, at which it had to adopt a new program and to reform the statute of the party, leaving this sub-

ject matter to be considered at another congress at a later date. In the meantime, the BSP leadership gave partial support to the presidential ideas and for its part proposed certain amendments to the Political Parties Act. Proposals were also tabled for changes to the system, in which elections are held in the country.

NMSP continues its efforts to overcome its current situation of a marginal party without any prospect for making it to the next Parliament. They are trying to stabilize the internal party situation, which worsened after the split from several months ago and after some of the NMSP MPs left the party parliamentary faction. The former Minister of Finance, Milen Velchev, seems to have become the leading figure in the party, second in rank only to Simeon Sexe-Coburg-Gotha. In its attempt to consolidate its new image, NMSP has put the emphasis on outlining its differences with the BSP and the MRF, thus stressing upon its doubtless nature of a liberal party.

Although the MRF is in a stable situation from an internal party point of view, the party finds it increasingly harder to live with the attacks launched by its political opponents. This puts the party leader, Ahmed Dogan, in an uncomfortable political situation, which he has experienced never before, especially after the official competent institutions demanded that he give an account for the real estate and other property acquired by him personally and his party.

3. The opposition parties, sometimes together but most often independently, are looking for appropriate occasions to enhance their criticism and to undermine the unity of the tri-partite governing coalition. The biggest opposition party – GERB, especially after its accession to the European People's Party, is making efforts and exerting pressure to expand its contacts with the two major right-wing parties, the UDF and especially with DSB, with which its relationships are verging on the hostile. At the same time the party leader, Boiko Borissov, made a categorical declaration that if he were to head the next governance of the country, he would not enter any coalition, which might include the

BSP and the MRF. This necessitates that apart from GERB at least another right-wing party should make it to the next Parliament as well, which will make it possible for Borissov to set up a coalition, provided, of course, that such a party has returned a sufficient number of MPs of its own.

For the time being, the opinion poll surveys and sociological forecasts indicate that the only other right-wing party that might have a minimum chance of making to the next Parliament is the UDF. This is the reason why the processes of unification in the right-wing political environment are highly likely to accelerate, especially between the UDF and DSB, which might run the next general election together, thus securing the desired coalition partner for the GERB Party.

At the same time, however, GERB failed to perform well at the local by-elections in the town of Kazanluk, which – according to experts – indicates that the electoral support for the GERB Party is getting stabilized at around 26 – 27 percent nation-wide, including a certain drop of the electoral support rate. What is also being observed is the growing internal differences within the party itself, as well as clashes within a number of local party structures. Borissov himself gets criticized increasingly more often for his poor performance in the capacity of a Sofia City Mayor. Nevertheless, GERB remains the strongest party in the right-wing political environment and for the time being is holding the prospect for becoming the largest party in the Bulgarian Parliament after the next general election.

The other right-wing parties are in a feeble position and are doing their best to expand their electoral impact, which – for the time being – they have repeatedly failed to attain. Although DSB paints the image of a strongly critical opposition party, it has been incapable of showing any growing impact on the Bulgarian electorate, the major obstacle in this respect being the leadership of Ivan Kostov, on account of whom the party has sustained adverse publicity.

No progress has been made by the UDF, either, with its new leader, Plamen Yurukov, who is proving incapable of capturing public confidence.

Yurukov himself is a person of mediocre abilities. He has been making contradictory declarations and of late has entered into a sharp conflict with a partner from the ADF parliamentary faction, namely Yane Yanev, Chairman of a populist agrarian party, who has exerted a negative impact on the positions, which the UDF has managed to attain.

4. The extremely nationalist Ataka Party has preserved its electoral impact but the political discourse of its leader, Volen Siderov, seems definitely to be softening. It is obvious that Siderov is trying to expand the capacity and opportunities of his party. Such an opportunity would be to become GERB's ally after the next general election.

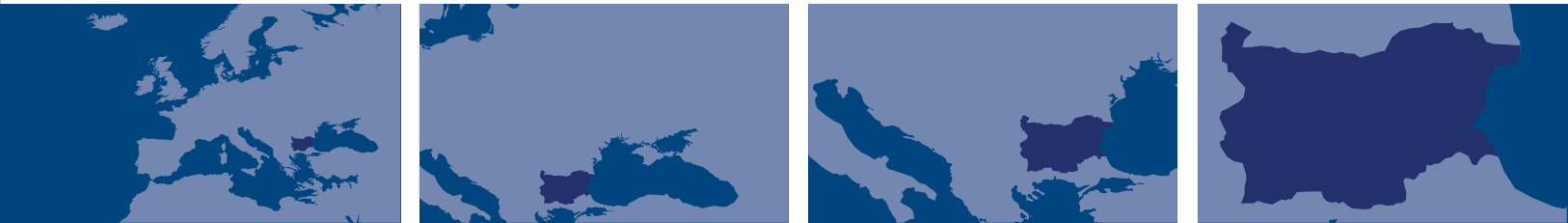
It is in the same sense that observers have interpreted Siderov's move to seek membership in the European People's Party, by proclaiming that the Ataka Party is situated in the center-right political environment. At the same time, Siderov himself is in a defensive situation in connection with the criminal court proceedings that are being held against him. He is charged with instigation to perjury committed more than a year and a half ago.

For the time being, the forecasts indicate that the Ataka Party will make it to the next Parliament, but its electoral impact remains limited at around 5 to 6 percent of the popular vote.

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