

Georgi Karasimeonov (Ed.)

BAROMETER

Political Parties Development in Bulgaria

Vol.8 Issue 4
Oktober – December 2008

■ The political situation in the country has exacerbated after the European Commission imposed a serious financial sanction on the country by suspending the disbursement of EUR 220 million from its pre-accession PHARE program. The reaction of the Bulgarian political circles from the governing tri-partite coalition ranged from an extreme disappointment to attempts to accuse the European Commission of a biased attitude with respect to Bulgaria. Subsequently, the government adjusted its stance and sought for new forms of dialog with Brussels. The opposition used the occasion to attack the government poignantly and even to demand its resignation.

■ The opposition parties inhabiting the right-centrist spectrum of the political environment have been enhancing their activity with a view to the approaching general election next year. Among them, the leading right-centrist party is GERB, which is likely to return the largest parliamentary faction to the next National Assembly, has been categorically refusing to set up pre-election coalitions, probably with the hope of possibly winning an absolute parliamentary majority, something which from today's point of view seems highly unrealistic. At the same time, the small and older right-wing parties are looking increasingly more actively for options to start a process of rapprochement and set up a possible coalition agreement. This qualification concerns mostly parties such as DSB and the UDF.

■ The major party in the governing tri-partite coalition – the BSP – has managed to consolidate its positions after its last Congress and for the time being has subdued internal conflicts. This fact was expressed at the highest party forum as well by the almost unanimous election of Sergei Stanishev to the post of party leader. According to the opinion poll surveys, the BSP is expected to get about 15 percent of the electoral vote at the general election next year, but this percentage may increase in result of the party's enhanced activity in the course of the election run-up.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Table of Contents.....	1
1. The Political Situation.....	2
2. State and Development of the Party System in Bulgaria.....	3
2.1. The Parties of the Governing Coalition.....	3
2.1.1. Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP).....	3
2.1.2. National Movement for Stability and Progress (NMSP).....	6
2.1.3. Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF).....	8
2.2. The Opposition Parties within the Right-wing Political Environment.....	9
2.2.1. Union of Democratic Forces (UDF).....	9
2.2.2. Democrats for Strong Bulgaria (DSB).....	11
2.2.3. Bulgarian New Democracy (BND).....	11
2.2.4. Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (The GERB Party).....	12
2.2.5. The "Ataka" Party.....	12
2.2.6. The "Forward" Movement.....	14
3. Public Opinion.....	15
4. Trends and Prospects.....	17

1. The Political Situation

The political processes over the past quarter have been driven by two major factors mainly: the growing antagonism between the governing tri-partite coalition and the opposition, which brought about the exacerbation of political discourse, and the consequences of the global economic crisis, the presence of which Bulgarians have already started to perceive.

One of the reasons underlying the tension between the governing coalition and the opposition is the issue connected with the appropriation of European funds and the reforms within the system of internal order and justice. Over the last three months no visible progress has been marked in terms of undertaking specific and effective measures to counter the existing problems connected with the appropriation of EU funds.

As a result, the European Commission refused to restore the accreditation of two agencies: at the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Regional Development respectively, which were entrusted with the management of funds disbursed by the EC PHARE Program. In this way the country lost funds to the amount of EUR 220 million for good. According to the Commissioner for EU Enlargement, Olli Rehn, not only has Bulgaria marked no progress at all, but it has also managed to amass new deficiencies. The latest inspection of the Commission indicated that even new improprieties were found, although details about them were not publicly disclosed. It is obvious, however, that these improprieties have something to do with corruption practices, because Olli Rehn declared that corruption continues to be a major problem in Bulgaria and this is what was observed in connection with the management of European funds.

The Cabinet of Prime Minister Sergei Stanishev expressed their disappointment with the decision announced by the European Commission and even claimed it to be unjust. Prime Minister Stanishev said that a huge amount of work had been done to overcome the weaknesses in the problem-ridden areas over the

past few months, but to his regret the European Commission failed to recognize that.

From an objective point of view, however, the Commission's decision is a yet another proof that the government lacks a lucid strategy about the ways and means of coping with the existing problems. Even though a special Cabinet Minister with the rank of Deputy Prime Minister – Meglena Plugchieva – was appointed and entrusted with the task of coordinating and controlling the appropriation of European funds, only a partial progress has been actually achieved in this area to date.

The extreme reaction on the part of the opposition after the decision of the European Commission to completely discontinue disbursing funds from the PHARE Program was an expected one altogether. The joint opinion of the opposition parties was expressed by the usual demand for an immediate resignation of the government, followed by an early general election. For a yet another time the opposition expressed its negative assessment with respect to the governing coalition but failed to propose specific measures for finding solutions in the problem-ridden areas. This raises doubts as to the readiness of the opposition parties to genuinely solve these problems, should they eventually take the governance of the country in their own hands.

Under the impact of the Global Economic Crisis, the economic situation in Bulgaria affected the political debate in the country as well. The first sector of the economy, which manifests crisis phenomena, is the construction business. For years this sector has been marked by the most dynamic development rates and to a large extent it is construction that contributed to the high growth rates in the country. What is currently observed, however, is a strongly shrinking market for construction products. The underlying reasons are complex, but the most important one is perhaps the rise of loan servicing costs, as banks increased their interest rates, coupled with the more stringent requirements of the banks with respect to their borrowers.

As a consequence, a number of construction companies discontinued work on their projects and suspended their business activity. According to experts on this particular branch of the economy, construction company failures can be an expected phenomenon. What is also being observed is an outflow of foreign investors who used to invest mainly in the purchase of residential space and buildings in the mountain and sea resorts of the country.

The expectations are that the current crisis will affect this country most tangibly next year. This will bring about the slowdown of economic growth, the rise of the unemployment rate and shrinking consumption rates. The most serious problem the country is likely to face, however, is the growing current account deficit of the national balance of payments, which will result in serious financial difficulties.

The consequences of the economic crisis also affected the debate on the government budget for the coming fiscal year and this was the reason why its initial draft was subjected twice to a closer review. According to Prime Minister Stanishev, one of the major tasks facing the Bulgarian state in the course of the coming year will be to guarantee the revenue side of the budget. The available data about the fulfillment of the 2008 government budget indicate that a certain slowdown of revenues has occurred during the last quarter of the fiscal year. The 2009 government budget envisages a 4.7 percent economic growth rate. Should there be a threat for the emergence of a budget deficit, the Council of Ministers will be entitled to further tighten the expenditures of the various ministers above the 10 percent lower subsidy, which was announced earlier. These 10 percent will be spent only in case the budget revenues permit such expenditures.

The opposition pointed out that the macro-economic framework of the country's 2009 government budget does not comply with the actual economic situation. The 4.7 percent growth rate, which the budget envisages, is rather optimistic and the amount of budget revenues has been set above the realistic level. In the opinion of the DSB

leader, Ivan Kostov, it is necessary to lower the taxation and social security burden of the population and plan for a deficit budget rather than a surplus one, scaling down public expenditures at the same time.

The consequences from the economic crisis will continue to impact the political situation in the country in the months ahead as well. The forthcoming general election next year is likely to be strongly affected by the economic crisis, should the forecasts of the pessimists for serious tremors in the Bulgarian economy actually come true.

2. State and Development of the Party System in Bulgaria

2.1. The Parties of the Governing Coalition

The past three months displayed an abundance of events for the parties of the governing tri-partite coalition. Two of these parties – the BSP and NMSP – held their party congresses, which outlined the trends and directions of their future development. For the MRF, the last quarter of 2008 was ridden with rows, which have had an adverse impact on the public image of the party.

On the other hand, the criticism launched by the opposition to the governing parties is getting increasingly stronger and the major culprit for this escalation is the failure of the tri-partite coalition to cope with the appropriation of the European funds designated for this country.

2.1.1. Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP)

The most important event for the BSP from an internal party point of view was its regular Party Congress held at the end of November. The principal outcome from the work of the Congress was the adoption of a new statute and program of the party. The Congress decisions showed that the party is united and consolidated, and the internal party differences among key party figures have been left behind – at least for the time being – with a view to the upcoming general election due to take place in the summer of next year.

It was expected that Sergei Stanishev would be re-elected leader of party, as his candi-

ature for party leader was the only nomination, and the delegates to the Congress returned him to his post with a convincing result: 97 percent of the votes. This result gives Stanishev both a huge amount of legitimacy and the confidence of the party. This is the necessary condition for the party to successfully complete the term of office of the tri-partite coalition and a factor, at the same time, for the consolidation of the BSP around its leader within the context of the forthcoming general election.

In front of the Congress Assembly, Stanishev outlined the major priorities facing the BSP within the context of the challenges the Bulgarian society will have to confront and the solution to which must be found urgently within the near future time span. Stanishev also made an assessment of the performance of the government he heads. In his opinion, throughout all the years of the country's transition, Bulgaria has not been governed by a Cabinet of a more left-wing and socially committed orientation than the incumbent government is, and it is the BSP that has the main merit for this state of affairs.

Stanishev also stressed upon the major priority facing the party, which is to elaborate a clear and comprehensible party program focusing on the actual problems people experience. The purpose and intent of this program is to create prerequisites for the sustainable improvement of people's welfare. According to Stanishev, what the party needs in order to achieve this goal is to win the next general election.

In his speech before the Congress Stanishev voiced his own assessment of the global economic crisis and its impact on the country as a whole. In his opinion, apart from the huge downsides the crisis has brought about, it has also reinstated the socialist project on a global scale and this is a situation of which the Bulgarian socialists should avail by proposing a lucid alternative plan concerning the economic development of the country.

Substantial amendments were made to the party statute at the November BSP Congress. The most hotly debated amendments were those which put a ban on the possibility for a single person to hold a party office

and perform a public office at the same time. An exception to the ban has only been made for the party leader, who can hold the office of the country's Prime Minister as well. These amendments aim at a greater autonomy and differentiation between the party itself and its representatives appointed to various public offices. Although the amendments were passed unanimously by the votes of 517 delegates to the Congress altogether, no vote against, and only three abstentions, critical remarks were voiced with respect to the possible consequences, which these amendments to the BSP statute could have for the party in the long run.

Some of the key leading figures in the party were among the major critics of the amendments passed. Thus for instance, according to Roumen Ovcharov, this division could bring about contradictions in the functioning of the BSP in future, because the amendments create the possibility for the party leadership to dominate over the executive branch of power whenever the party comes to power and actually starts to perform the country's governance. The comment of the Minister of the Economy and Energy, Peter Dimitrov, was even more extreme, as he qualified the amendments as a "political absurd". Even the Prime Minister and BSP leader, Sergei Stanishev, showed certain reservations to this effect by voicing the opinion that such amendments were not that significant for the development of the party, because they were hardly likely to improve the coordination between the various levels of governance.

Actually, these amendments should not be considered unilaterally. On the one hand, they make it possible for a more substantial degree of autonomy to be given to the leading party bodies, because they differentiate the narrow-party functions, which the leading bodies are currently performing, from the functions the party performs in the executive branch of power, which is a prerequisite for a higher extent of control and democratic orientation. On the other hand, however, these amendments could bring about differences and contradictions between the party leadership and the executive,

should the party come to public office. This could create conditions for political inefficiency whenever decisions concerning the governance of the country have to be made.

Another significant amendment is the introduction of limited terms of office for the party leaders of all levels of the party hierarchy. A party leader will be able to hold a leadership post for two consecutive terms of office, which makes 8 years of party office altogether.

The new party statute introduces the official status of a like-minded supporter and an enthusiastic advocate of the party. Such supporters and advocates will have the right to participate in the elaboration of the party's political stance and take active part in various events connected with the party. The supporters will also be entitled to a consultative vote and will be able to participate in direct internal party primaries and referenda.

A yet another amendment concerns the renaming of the Supreme Party Council, which from now on will be called National Council of the BSP. The Congress also elected the members of the new National Council. The greatest majority of votes were cast for Sergei Stanishev, the Mayor of Smolyan – Dora Yankova, the Speaker of the National Assembly – Georgi Pirinsky, The Minister of Culture – Stefan Danailov, the Minister of Transport – Peter Moutafchiev, the leader of the left-wing faction within the BSP – Yanaki Stoilov, the Chairperson of the parliamentary faction of “Coalition for Bulgaria” – Anguel Naidenov, the Chairperson of the State Agency for Youth and Sports – Vessela Lecheva, the Minister of the Interior – Mikhail Mickov, and the municipal councilor at the Sofia City Municipal Council – Georgi Kadiev.

Two of the most influential figures in the BSP – Roumen Petkov and Roumen Ovcharov – also made it to the National Council, having been rehabilitated after the political rows they were involved in over the past two years. The law-court declared Roumen Petkov not-guilty in the course of the law-suit, whereby he was charged with disclosure of classified information, which revealed the name of an officer from the secret services. For his part, Roumen Obcharov retained his po-

sitions within the party, having been re-elected leader of the largest BSP organization, namely the Sofia City BSP organization, a few days before the party Congress.

An emblematic businessman – Georgi Gergov – also made it to the National Council, having been recently elected deputy chairperson of the local BSP organization in the town of Plovdiv.

Some of the most controversial figures in the BSP failed to be elected members of the National Council. Some of these popular names are: Illia Bozhinov, member of the BSP left-wing faction and one of the most vociferous critics of the tri-partite government and the party policy, which the BSP has been pursuing in the governance of the country, the MPs Nadka Baleva and Plamen Ranchev, former chairperson of the parliamentary committee in charge of reviewing the restitution of the former Kings' real state, Parvan Dangov, former mayor of the town of Doupnitza and one of the major critics of Roumen Petkov, etc.

The BSP Congress passed a new party program as well and it is on the basis of this new party program that the future election program of the party will be elaborated. The BSP program indicates the aspirations of the party to formulate in a clearer way the left-wing identity and social orientation, which underlie its ideology. The program and the messages it contains are directed at the hard-core BSP electorate and the narrower periphery of the party. This is especially important for the party now, when the critical remarks alleging that it has lost its “left-wing image” and identity during the term of office of the incumbent government headed by the party precisely continue to materialize in a genuine outflow of voters. This phenomenon has been observed for almost two years now: ever since the last local elections campaign in the country, which took place in 2007.

The problems with the country's governance, both those that have been mainly connected with the criticism on the part of the European Commission and were expressed by suspending resources from the EU pre-accession funds allocated for the country, and those connected with the looming economic problems

stemming from the global economic crisis, are a serious test and ordeal for the BSP. The fact that the BSP is the largest among the parties in the tri-partite coalition and that it is the BSP which heads the government predictably means that the responsibility for the country's governance and the downsides connected with it do affect the Socialist Party to the largest possible extent. The slow-down of the economic growth rates in the coming year and the rise of the unemployment rate as a direct consequence of the economic crisis will inevitably impact the party strategy for the upcoming general and EMP elections, because the crisis will enhance the negative attitudes with respect to the party due to the fact that it is the BSP that is currently holding the helm of the country's governance.

This is the reason why the remaining months till the end of this government's term of office will be the decisive factor underlying the performance of the BSP at the general election in the summer of next year.

2.1.2. National Movement for Stability and Progress (NMSP)

Much like its coalition partner, the BSP, NMSP also held its party Congress. The major task of the Congress was to confirm and consolidate the amendments passed at the previous party Congress, mainly because its decisions were not registered in the law-court as they were appealed by the MPs who split from the party and later set up a party of their own under the name of Bulgarian New Democracy (BND).

The Congress outlined several major trends in the internal development of the party. First, Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha was re-elected leader of the party, which ruled out all the misgivings circulating before the Congress that he may step down and appoint a successor of his to the post. This indicates that there will be no changes in the leadership post before the general election next year. Remaining at the helm of the party, Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha will be the major factor for the preservation of the party's unity and for its further consolidation. Otherwise splits and internal party clashes may

occur, which remain latent for the time being only due to the role played by the incumbent party leader, Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha.

Second, NMSP indicated that it would remain a loyal member and partner to the tri-partite coalition and would by no means bring about an early general election by withdrawing from the country's government. At the same time, however, the party will continue to demonstrate its own image of a political formation and will criticize the motions tabled by its coalition partners whenever it deems it necessary or when such motions run contrary to its political beliefs and convictions. A number of actions undertaken by NMSP over the last quarter of 2008 unequivocally demonstrate that the party actually adheres to this stance formulated at its Congress.

Third, from an internal party point of view, the group around the Deputy Chairman of the party, Milen Velchev, is coming to dominate the leadership of the party increasingly more tangibly and this view is additionally corroborated by the names of the individuals elected to the NMSP Political Council.

On the other hand, the figure of the Chairperson of the parliamentary committee on internal order and security, Mincho Spassov, has been coming to the fore increasingly more prominently and is currently getting increasingly more popular with the manner of conduct he has been demonstrating at the hearings of the committee he heads. Over the last few months Mincho Spassov has become one of the most popular faces of the party and is likely to become a major factor in the formation of the public image of the party during the election campaign next year. It is in this sense that the election of Mincho Spassov to the post of Deputy Chairperson of the party should be regarded and interpreted. Apart from Spassov, the former Speaker of the National Assembly, Ognyan Gerdjikov, was elected Deputy Chairperson of the party as well. Thus far NMSP had three deputy chairpersons, namely Marina Dickova, Milen Velchev, and Illia Lingorsky, who also retained their posts.

The election of the members of the Political Council of the party formed the principal

core around which NMSP will grow and develop in the future. Major role in the formation of the Political Council is played by the leader of the party. According to the party statute, the leader personally nominates 11 members of the Political Council. The personal nominations of Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha for members of the Political Council were: the Mayor of the town of Simitly, Apostol Apostolov, the Deputy Mayor of the town of Strazhitza, Verka Bozhkova, the Regional Governor of the town of Vratza, Antonio Georgiev, the MPs Milen Velchev, Ognyan Gerdjikov, Marina Dickova, Denitza Dimitrova, Olimpi Kuttev, Nina Chillova, Christina Christova, and the incumbent Deputy Chairperson of the party, Illia Lingorsky.

The members of the Political Council elected by the NMSP Congress were: the MPs Antonia Parvanova, Stanimir Ilchev, Mincho Spassov, Solomon Passi, and also the economist Vladimir Karolev and Vladimir Daskalov. By right, members of the Political Council are the party leader, Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, and the Chairperson of the NMSP parliamentary faction, Plamen Mollov, as well.

The Congress also elected the members of the NMSP Control Council, namely: Andrei Batashov, Maria Anguelieva, Vesselin Bliznakov, Borislav Vladimirov, Snezhana Grozdilova, Ivan Ivanov, and Mariana Kostadinova.

The Congress confirmed the decision of the previous party forum, whereby the name of the party was modified to National Movement for Stability and Progress (NMSP). Several amendments to the party statute were introduced as well. The new party statute separates the functions of people at leadership posts in the party from those appointed to public office in the executive branch of power. This is the reason why the NMSP ministers will not be eligible for nomination and election to the Political Council of the party.

The speech of the NMSP leader, Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, with which he addressed the Congress, was subject to special interest, as it contained a number of important political messages. From an internal party point of

view, the party leader sharply criticized the way in which NMSP functions. In his opinion, many NMSP MPs and coordinators fail to perform their obligations properly with respect to coordination and communication among the various levels in the party. One of the major internal party problems, in the opinion of Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, is the ongoing wrangling and rivalry for posts among the politicians of the party, which brings about contradictions and intrigues. This also creates prerequisites for the declining people's confidence in NMSP, hampering in turn the process of consolidation, which the party badly needs for its election campaign next year.

In the same speech addressed to the Congress, Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha also made an assessment of the performance of NMSP in its capacity of an equitable partner to the country's governance in the tri-partite governing coalition. In his opinion, the major reason for "the blows and the libel, slander and smear campaigns" against the party are due to the fact that it is this party that managed to change the political status-quo in the country. The NMSP leader said that the party's participation in the incumbent government was a political necessity undertaken to the purpose of guaranteeing the stability of the country, especially in a situation when major threats are hovering over democracy, such as nationalism and populism. Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha categorically denied the misgivings that NMSP is a depleted party bound shortly to step down from the political stage. According to the party leader, it is precisely to the purpose of disproving this allegation that the party needed consolidation and intensive work.

The party Congress voted for and passed a political manifest and several resolutions. The Manifest outlines the major liberal values professed by the party, as well as the political goals and objectives it will be pursuing in the future. The major emphasis is laid on the economic stability of the country, the sustainable economic growth, the modernization of the pension system, the healthcare reform, the

liberalization of the energy sector, the combat against monopolies and cartels, etc.

One of the resolutions defends the need for an amendment to be introduced in the country's electoral system alongside the introduction of mandatory going to the polls, which could discontinue the vile practice of vote purchasing, which was observed at the previous local elections.

2.1.3. Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF)

Over the past three months, the MRF was one of the most hotly debated parties in the public environment. The trigger of the heated debate was the suicide of the Secretary of the MRF Political Cabinet, Ahmed Emin, which took place in the personal residence of the party leader, Ahmed Dogan. According to insiders, Ahmed Emin was the person responsible for the funding of the MRF, although this fact was later denied by the party leader.

This suicide was the reason for the emergence of numerous speculations and opinions, voiced by politicians from the opposition parties. They also launched various versions, including the alleged suspicion that Ahmed Emin did not commit suicide but was actually murdered. During the inquest, however, having found a letter addressed to Dogan and written briefly before Emin killed himself, the investigating bodies confirmed the version about Ahmed Emin's suicide.

Despite these proven facts, the suicide of Ahmed Emin set forth a wave of repercussions, attacks and critical remarks directed personally at Ahmed Dogan. A number of old times party fellows of Dogan's, subsequently ousted from the party, made their media appearances by taking part in lengthy interviews, thus becoming Dogan's bitter political enemies. It is thus that the subject matter about the MRF corruption practices and the party's "black slush fund" came to top the public agenda. As a result of these interviews, the Prosecutor's Office took the initiative and started an inquiry on account of the information disclosed in the electronic media.

The MRF was involved in another row as well. The opposition demanded that the parliamentary committee on internal order and security make an inquiry of the results of an investigation held by the secret services under the code name of "Liana", which subsequently was unjustifiably suspended according to the leaders of the opposition parties. In the opinion of the opposition, the investigation concerned corruption and the illegitimate funding of political parties, in which people from the MRF were also involved. This case is currently subject to an inquest pending possible investigation.

The MRF leadership denied the accusations. Ahmed Dogan declared that a targeted scenario was under way to discredit the party and that part and parcel of this plan was Ahmed Emin himself who subsequently committed suicide. Dogan said that he was incapable of explaining Emin's motives. According to the MRF leader, this occurrence had an extremely adverse effect on the party and it seemed to him that this was exactly what this act aimed at.

Whatever the doubts are with respect to the reasons underlying Ahmed Emin's suicide, it is a fact that nearly a month later it is this event precisely that was one of the major subject matters, which the media were focusing on. And beyond any doubt, this had a highly damaging effect on the image of the MRF.

The attacks and accusations, which the opposition has been launching at the MRF for several months now, reached their culmination after one particular statement made by the GERB leader, Boiko Borissov. On one of the most popular TV programs, Borissov made a comment on the Revival Process in Bulgaria carried out by the communist regime against Bulgarian citizens professing the Muslim religious denomination, the essence of which was to rename these people and forcefully make them accept Bulgarian names. Borissov's comment provoked a serious row, because what he said was that it was not the objectives of the Revival Process that were wrong, what was wrong were the methods employed to achieve these objectives. In Borissov's opinion, the replacement of the

Turkish by Bulgarian names during the communist regime did not take place in the right way. What would have been correct, according to Borissov, was for Bulgarian names to be given only to the newly born ethnic Turks. The statement was crowned by the populist conclusion that those, who have the self-consciousness of Turks, should leave for Turkey.

This statement made by Boiko Borissov brought about a serious and critical reaction on the part of the entire political elite, the general assessment being that such a statement is inadmissible and is a precedent in the new history of democratic Bulgaria. The MRF leadership immediately came up with a sharp reaction and declared that they would address the European People's Party, a member of which GERB currently is, and would request the official stance and opinion of the EPP to this effect.

Subsequently Borissov justified his statement by declaring that he categorically condemned the Revival Process in Bulgaria, that he had made an error and a slip of tongue, and that the public failed to understand him properly.

Despite the apology, Borissov continued in the same vein with a yet another statement launching another extreme thesis in connection with the MRF. In his opinion, the MRF is capable of anything just to stay in power, "even to make recourse to terrorist activities" to the purpose of provoking ethnic clashes.

The consequence of all these events and statements, connected directly or indirectly with the MRF, undoubtedly have an impact on Dogan's party and on the political and public discourse in society at large. Such attacks hurled at the MRF result in the consolidation of the party, which – in cases like these – brings to the fore the subject matter of ethnic peace in the country and the possibility for the escalation of ethnic tension as a consequence of such attacks on the part of its political opponents. There certainly are no reasons to talk about ethnic tension in the country whatsoever, and when the MRF employs such an approach, it rather targets the internal party consolidation of its own electorate.

What can be expected with respect to the MRF in the months up to the general election next year is an escalation of the criticism and attacks at the party on the part of the opposition parties and first and foremost – on the part of GERB and the "Ataka" Party.

2.2. The Opposition Parties within the Center – Right wing Political Environment

Over the past quarter of 2008, the processes in the center-right wing political environment can be qualified as especially dynamic. The tendency of rapprochement among the major right-wing political parties began to acquire visible dimensions. The right-wing parliamentary opposition started to deliberate the idea about setting up a joint parliamentary faction, which would encompass the representatives of all EPP member parties plus the recently established parliamentary faction of Bulgarian New Democracy (BND).

On the other hand, the criticism voiced by the right-wing opposition with respect to the incumbent government continued to escalate. The upcoming general election next year, which will be held within the context of the global economic crisis, the consequences of which are already becoming tangible in Bulgaria as well, is an additional factor enhancing the tension between the governing tri-partite coalition and the opposition parties.

2.2.1. Union of Democratic Forces (UDF)

For the UDF the past quarter was especially dynamic and dense with events, which will determine the processes of development of this political party on the eve of next year's general election.

The most important event for the UDF was the election of a new party leader. The amendments to the UDF party statute passed at the last National Conference provide for the possibility of electing the party leader at internal party primaries by the entire membership of the UDF.

To the surprise of many observers, the incumbent UDF leader, Plamen Yurukov, refused to run at these primaries. It is Yurukov that has contributed to the greatest extent for the adoption of these amendments to the party statute, and the

amendments themselves have created not only on paper but in practice, too, the prerequisites for enhanced internal party democracy and wider political dialog within the party.

The major motive of Yurukov for such a decision was that he failed to find sufficient support among the members of the party and that he personally witnessed this fact during his tour of the local party organizations. Yurukov declared that he would certainly win the primaries as early as the first leg of the election but this was an insufficient condition for success to him, as he would not be able to consolidate the party before the forthcoming general election next year.

Actually, there are other factors, which underlie the decision made by Yurukov. What has undoubtedly influenced this decision are also the allegations about Yurukov's collaboration with the secret services, which were widely circulated in the public space and later denied by the State Agency for National Security (SANS). This fact played a definite role for the growing lack of confidence in Yurukov himself and, in turn, negatively impacted the party as a whole.

On the other hand, Yurukov became UDF leader having come from the outside without any serious biography of connections with the UDF. This again had a definite impact on the attitudes and confidence of the UDF members with respect to Yurukov, and this is equally valid both for the various groups within the party and the broader UDF membership.

Six nominations were made of candidates chosen to run for the leadership post: the MPs Martin Dimitrov and Ivan Sotirov, the former Secretary at the administration of President Peter Stoyanov, Roumen Christov, the Mayor of the town of Kyustendil, Peter Paunov, the ex Speaker of the National Assembly and an emblematic UDF figure at the beginning of the country's transition, Alexander Yordanov, and Tzonyo Botev.

There were no substantial differences in the election platforms of the candidates for the leadership post. They all declared that are ready to work for the unification of the right-wing in Bulgaria and that the major objective, which the UDF

is currently facing, is to restore the confidence of the voters to the party at large.

There were certain differences among the candidates as to the right-wing parties they would cooperate with in the future. According to Martin Dimitrov, the UDF should stop looking back to the past and engage in a senseless debate about the blame for the split of the right-wing. He declared to stand for joint actions with the other right-wing parties, but added that such interaction should be based on clearly formulated ideas and values.

Radically different was the opinion voiced by Ivan Sotirov. He declared that he would work for a right-wing coalition only after the politicians who brought about the split openly admit their political responsibility. This statement was an indication that Sotirov had reserves concerning the establishment of a coalition between the UDF and DSB.

Seventy percent of the UDF members eligible to vote took part in the primaries held on December 14th, which indicates that the amendment to the UDF statute aiming at the greater involvement of the party membership has attained an excellent result. None of the contestants, however, managed to raise more than 50 percent of the votes and this was the reason why run-offs of the primaries were held on the 21st of December.

The contestants at the run-offs were the front-runner Martin Dimitrov of the younger UDF generation, who won the largest number of votes on December 14th, and the second ranking Roumen Christov. According to data about the run-offs of the primaries, the UDF voter turn-out was close to 80 percent, and the counting of the ballots indicated that Martin Dimitrov was ahead of Christov by more than 1700 votes.

Thus the primaries were convincingly won by Martin Dimitrov. The 31 year old economist and MP from the parliamentary faction of the ADF is the new leader of the UDF. He promised to transform the UDF into a modern right-wing party pursuing a pragmatic policy, which could help get the party returned to next Bulgarian government. He also said that his intention was to introduce new elements to the party's policy,

including the broad involvement of the middle class, as it was small business, teachers, doctors, journalists, and the free-lance professions that were under-represented in the country's government and this was the reason why they consistently refused to go the polls. Martin Dimitrov also added that he stood for the UDF running the next general election on its own.

The new UDF leader faces the complicated task of consolidating the party and creating conditions conducive to regaining the confidence of the people. At the time being, opinion poll surveys indicate that should the UDF run the general election on its own, it would prove incapable of overcoming the 5 percent electoral threshold. This is the reason why the issue about finding rapport and starting a dialog with other right-wing parties remains open for the time being.

2.2.2. Democrats for Strong Bulgaria (DSB)

Over the past quarter, the DSB continued to pursue its course of criticizing the governing tripartite coalition and making public new information about corruption in the high corridors of power. The party was an active participant in the inquiry concerning the previously mentioned "Liana" investigation held by the secret services in connection with the MRF. This manner of conduct on the part of DSB aims, on the one hand, to instigate conflicts among the governing parties. This goal has been successfully achieved, as indications of such conflicts have been observed for quite some time now. On the other hand, with their active opposition behavior the top DSB representatives aim to focus the attention of the public on themselves, with a view to the forthcoming general election next year.

Opinion poll data show that the electoral support for the party has not increased and this raises the issue about the party's political future. What comes to the fore is the need to find ways and means of cooperation with other right-wing parties, predominantly with the UDF, in order to overcome the electoral threshold at next year's election. Such cooperation would certainly turn these two parties into a factor for the formation of a possible future right-wing coalition –

something the parties members of the European People's Party, GERB included, have been talking about for a long time now.

Ivan Kostov himself declared that his party was ready to engage in joint opposition actions against the governing majority with all opposition parties, including even the "Ataka" Party. Volen Siderov, however, categorically refuted Kostov's idea and accused him of dishonesty, because – in Siderov's opinion – it was "Ataka" that two years ago, during the presidential election, declared its stance for organizing a common front against the governing coalition, but he failed to find any support whatsoever for this idea at that time.

There is no doubt that it is on the willingness and readiness for dialog on the part of the DSB leadership that the formation of a right-wing coalition with the UDF and other smaller right-wing parties actually depends. For the time being, a number of questions remain open, as there are adversaries to this idea both within DSB and the UDF. The most problematic issue concerning a possible future unification is the way in which the party slates will be drafted. This issue may turn into the major obstacle blocking the joint right-wing running at the next general election, because the individual parties are hardly likely to arrive at an acceptable consensual solution on this matter any time soon.

2.2.3. Bulgarian New Democracy (BND)

The Bulgarian New Democracy party (BND), which was set up shortly after the split of NM-SII, is still struggling to find its proper party image. The attempts of the party to assert itself as one of the entities in the right-wing political environment have failed to produce any tangible result. The major reason underlying this failure is the excessive fragmentation of the Right Wing in this country, which thus far has proved incapable of consolidating itself around clear-cut political principles and stances.

The opinion poll surveys indicate that at the time being BND stands no chances whatsoever of getting returned to the next Bulgarian Parliament. This is the reason why BND is making attempts to set up a coalition with other parties of the Right

Wing and such talks have been held for more than a month now. A first step in this direction is the effort to materialize the idea about the formation of a joint parliamentary faction of the entire opposition, excluding the radically right-wing "Ataka" Party. This idea was tabled more than six months ago by the Chairperson of the ADF parliamentary faction, Yordan Bakalov, but at that time it failed to raise sufficient support. The same idea now has been launched by BND.

Even if this initiative succeeds, it by no means solves the issues stemming from the upcoming next year's general election. And this is the reason why over the next few months BND will be focusing all their efforts and resources on setting up a pre-election coalition, which could help the party gain the desired parliamentary representation.

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

Over the past three months, the opinion poll agencies registered a decline in the confidence rating of the GERB Party for the first time since its inception. At a first glance, this result may seem a little surprising with a view to the visible failures of the tri-partite governing coalition and the low confidence the citizens of this country demonstrate with respect to its government. In its capacity of the biggest opposition party, GERB should have availed of this situation and should accordingly have mustered higher popularity and support. Contrary to logic, this expectation failed to materialize and the underlying reasons can be sought for in several main directions. First and foremost, the declining confidence in GERB is likely to stem from the negative assessment people give to the extremely critical statements regularly made by the party leader, Boiko Borissov, which sometimes even border on the abnormal political discourse. His notorious statement on account of the so called Revival Process in communist Bulgaria was mentioned in the section devoted to the MRF, where a mention was also made that this statement provoked both a political and public row.

There is no doubt that it is Borissov's extreme rhetoric, his constant attacks, populism, and accusations hurled against the governing majority, which are deprived of any clearly expressed program-oriented alternative whatsoever, that underlie the declining confidence rating of the GERB Party. Certainly, it is the future that will show whether this declining confidence rating of GERB is becoming a trend or is merely a temporary phenomenon. The attitudes of the Bulgarian electorate are intensely volatile and voters are easily affected by situational factors. And this is precisely what generates both the sudden electoral collapses with respect to a certain party and the soaring electoral ascents.

Another factor, which is likely to have affected the outflow of GERB electorate, is connected with the corruption row at the Sofia City Municipality, in which Velizar Stoilov, Deputy Mayor in charge of transportation and one of the officials from the innermost circle of Mayor Boiko Borissov, was deeply involved. Stoilov was charged with accusations that he had lobbied in favor of certain companies during the competitions for the distribution of the bus lines of the Sofia City public transport. Borissov dismissed Stoilov right away and declared that even the doubt of corruption practices made it incumbent upon him to undertake such a move, because such doubts were detrimental to the image of his party.

At the beginning of December, the National Assembly made a legislative amendment, which indirectly affects Boiko Borissov and his GERB Party. The amendments to the Local Government and Local Administration Act were passed at their first reading, whereby the ban for mayors to be party leaders at the same time has been revoked. This is the reason why there no longer are any legal obstacles for Borissov to officially take the leadership of the GERB Party, the official leader of which is currently Tzvetan Tzvetanov.

2.2.5. The "Ataka" Party

During the past three months, the "Ataka" Party launched several initiatives, whereby it reminded the public that the party does profess radically nationalists beliefs. The party declared its stance

against the construction of an Islam Center in Sofia. The idea to erect such a center together with a mosque belongs to the General Mufti's Office in Bulgaria, which has bought to the purpose the respective plot of land at the outskirts of the capital city. One of the major investors in this project is the Islam Conference Organization. The "Ataka" Party leader, Volen Siderov, declared that his party would decisively oppose this intention of the General Mufti's Office and would even start radical actions and organized protests to this effect. In Siderov's opinion, this center will be a threat for the national security of the country, as its premises are highly likely to turn into a hub of Islam fundamentalism.

Another initiative announced by "Ataka" was a rally summoned by the party leadership on account of the anniversary of the Peace Treaty of Neuilly, signed on November 27th 1919 between Bulgaria and the Allied Powers after the end of World War I, by virtue of which Bulgaria lost a number of its territories. In connection with the anniversary, the political "Ataka" Party came up with a special declaration, which says that the possession of the territories inhabited by people with Bulgarian self-consciousness, currently located on the territories of Serbia and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, should be returned to the jurisdiction and authority of the Republic of Bulgaria. What the declaration actually means is the territory around the town of Strumitza in Macedonia and the so-called Western territories in Serbia, predominantly populated by ethnic Bulgarians.

According to the leadership of the "Ataka" Party, in order to start negotiations for EU accession, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Serbia must give back the above mentioned territories to the Republic of Bulgaria. Otherwise, Bulgaria will have to veto the accession of these countries, should their accession be put on the agenda in the nearer or more distant future.

The "Ataka" Member of the European Parliament, Dimitar Stoyanov, personally handed in the declaration of the party to the Representative Office of the European Commission in Bulgaria, in front of the building of which the rally commemorating the Treaty of Neuilly was held. The

declaration was also handed to the Embassies of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Serbia respectively.

Having been mitigating its radical rhetoric and political style of conduct for months, with these actions "Ataka" once again revealed its true essence. On the one hand, this behavior is typical for "Ataka", as it is a radical right-wing populist formation. On the other hand, however, these actions can be seen as a political strategy the party has chosen to employ. The underlying reason for this choice can be found in the fact that at the time being "Ataka" is facing a competitor on the electoral field embodied by Boiko Borissov and his GERB Party. As previously indicated, Borissov makes use of a rhetoric typical for nationalist formation. This is the reason why "Ataka" sees in GERB a political competitor from the point of view that the likelihood for the typical "Ataka" electorate to vote for Borissov's party actually exists. Owing to this fact, "Ataka" can be expected to continue putting its stakes on such political radicalism, whenever its party leaders need this out of purely strategic considerations.

An important event for Volen Siderov himself and for the party at large was the closure of the law-suit, in which both the "Ataka" leader and his wife, Kapka Siderova, were defendants. The court decision found them not guilty of the perjury charges in connection with the accident on the "Thracia" motorway. Siderov expressed his satisfaction with the decision of the Bulgarian court and underlined once again that this entire law-suit was initiated and fabricated by the former Minister of the Interior, Roumen Petkov.

On December 21st, the "Ataka" Party held its Fourth National Assembly – the highest forum governing the party, at which the "Ataka" Party leader, Volen Siderov, was re-elected to his post. The only person who voted against Siderov's re-election to the leadership post was the Deputy Chairman of the party, Anton Sirakov. The substantiation Sirakov gave for his vote was that Siderov had supplanted the policy of the party. Sirakov was not elected to the new party leadership and he announced that he would appeal

the decisions made at the forum. According to Sirakov, the election of a new party leadership is inadmissible before the previous leadership has accounted for its work by presenting a report to the party congress. Anton Sirakov also disagrees with the congress proceedings whereby reports are presented and amendments to the party statute are made only after a new party leadership has been elected. He disagrees with an amendment to the statute as well, providing for party congresses to be held once every three years instead of holding a congress annually, as the party practice was thus far.

Before the 552 delegates to the Assembly, Volen Siderov declared: "We are going to the polls next year ready to govern Bulgaria". He also added that "Ataka" would be among the first three political forces in the Bulgarian Parliament after the general election next year and would become an insurmountable factor in the formation of the country's government. However, he failed to give a clear answer to the question whether "Ataka" would share the power with GERB, mentioning that Boiko Borissov had yet to answer numerous questions.

Siderov launched another attack at Borissov by saying: "If GERB wants Bulgaria to be an Oriental country with new mosques in every town, this means that we cannot go it along with GERB. If GERB wants Bulgaria to be a Latin American country with 5 percent super-rich and 90 percent poor, this means that we cannot go it along with GERB. If GERB wants us to be a colonial country with hotel capitalism, we also say "No"! The time has come to put an end to the neo-liberal experiments." Then Siderov added that "Ataka" would not agree to become a coalition partner of any party, if the latter fails to recognize Ataka's major standpoints and views about the governance of the country.

"Ataka" will adopt a targeted party program for the general election next year. Should the representatives of "Ataka" come to power, they envisage a special operation to cope with organized crime. According to Siderov, this operation should encompass the Bulgarian politicians, too. In his opinion they should be fol-

lowed and wire-tapped as a precaution against possible illegitimate contacts.

The newly elected National Assembly of the party includes: the Deputy Chairman of the party, Dimitar Stoyanov, the second Deputy Chairman, Dessislav Chukolov, the Treasurer, Denitza Gadjeva, the Organizational Secretary, Illian Illiev, the MPs Pavel Shopov and Stanislav Stanilov. The only person who voted against the newly elected leadership was again Anton Sirakov.

Opinion poll surveys indicate that "Ataka" continues to enjoy rather a good electoral support (for greater detail see the "Opinion Poll" Chapter). This shows that the party will be a important factor at next year's general election. However, whether the right-wing parties, esp. GERB will invite "Ataka" to join a post-election coalition, will depend mostly on the political situation and the arrangement of forces at the next National Assembly.

2.2.6. The "Forward" Movement

The motive to include this new political entity in this analysis has been prompted by the electoral potential of this movement, since its support rating measured by the opinion poll surveys makes it possible for it even to overcome the current 5 percent electoral threshold.

This movement was set up after the unification of three quite different formations in terms of their ideological profiles and traditions, namely: the Agrarian People's Union (APU) of Stefan Lichev, the IMRO of Krassimir Karakachanov, and the "Leader" Party, the informal leader of which is the large-scale businessman Christo Kovachky. The "Leader" Party became especially popular after last year's local elections, when it managed to return a number of its representatives to the local authorities in many regions of the country. Doubts remained that the success of this party is mainly due to the vote purchasing practice, which – being an alarming phenomenon – brought about serious political and public repercussions both in Bulgaria and abroad.

The fact that the IMRO set up a coalition with the "Leader" Party prompted Stefan Sofiansky's Union of Free Democrats (UFD) to leave the parliamentary faction of Bulgarian National

Union (BNU). That would have resulted in the disintegration of the BNU parliamentary faction, but it eventually it was joined by the "Georgyovden" Movement, which in turn left the ADF parliamentary faction. The name, which the new parliamentary faction chose for itself, is the "Forward" Movement and it is currently headed by the IMRO leader, Krassimir Karakachanov. The "Georgyovden" Movement, headed by Lyuben Dillov, is shortly expected to join the "Forward" Movement coalition as well.

Businessman Christo Kovachky is rather a contradictory and debatable figure and this fact was confirmed by the latest developments connected with his personality. The Prosecutor's Office pressed charges against Kovachky for financial fraud and tax evasion in especially large amounts and the bail money he had to pay for his freedom, pending the investigation, stands at BGN 200 thousand. Kovachky immediately defended himself by declaring that this legal action was actually a political attack against him. On the whole, it is the future that will show whether the charges currently pressed could be sustained in the law-court.

The ongoing prosecution inquest is certain to affect the new movement. Should the judiciary confirm the charges pressed, the existence of the "Forward" Movement will hang in the balance, because the coalition relies for its funding on Kovachky's financial resources only.

Stafan Lichev's APU is a party torn by contradictions and conflicts, a testimony to which was the last congress of the party as well. On the other hand, over the last several years, the IMRO has often manifested a strong brand of political opportunism, which shrank the electoral confidence in this party to the number of its own political clientele, in the name of which the IMRO leadership is ready to enter any coalition. The situation with the "Georgyovden" Movement is much the same. It is a small clientele-oriented party and owing to this fact precisely it does not enjoy any special popularity. This is the reason why the success of the "Forward" Movement is inconceivable without the "Leader" Party and Christo Kovachky behind it.

3. Public Opinion

What had an undoubted impact on the public opinion during the last quarter of 2008 was the Global financial crisis, the presence of which has now become perceptible in Bulgaria as well. On the other hand, what impacts the attitudes of Bulgarian citizens to an even larger extent is the exacerbated conflict between the governing tri-partite majority and the opposition with a view to the upcoming general election next year and the failures of the government concerning the suspended pre-accession EU funds.

A representative public opinion survey held by the "Alpha Research" Agency at the end of November reveals the trends in the development of electoral attitudes, which take into account the major problems facing the country. Thus for instance, the survey shows that approximately 40 percent of the eligible voters consider that the global economic crisis is the principal challenge the country is currently facing. It is in this connection that the concerns of nearly 52 percent of the respondents have been growing. People's concerns are justifiably focused on the overall economic development, as – in their opinion – it is problematic. The issue about the material welfare of the citizens from personal and household point of view is subject to primary concern for more than 51 percent of the respondents.

The issues related to the development of the economy in the context of the challenges and consequences stemming from the global economic crisis to a large extent affect the confidence people have in the political parties and the governance of the country as a whole. In principle, the public opinion is skeptical as far as the ability of the government to cope with the crisis is concerned, which is another confirmation of the trend indicating that the government enjoys a low confidence rating. It is only 8 percent of the respondents that have given a positive assessment to the performance of the incumbent government. In this connection, the approval rating concerning the performance of Prime Minister Sergei Stanishev has marked a slight drop from 19 to 17 percent in comparison with the end of September.

The problems related to the European Union funds also affect the confidence rating of the ministers involved to the highest degree with their appropriation. The “Alpha Research” opinion poll survey indicates a decline in the confidence rating of Deputy Prime Minister Meglena Plugchieva, who has been entrusted with the EU funds coordination and control, and the Minister of Regional Development and Public Works, Assen Gagauzov. The population as a whole continues to manifest a highly critical attitude to the performance of the ministers involved with the sectors of finance and the economy as well. The performance index of the Minister of the Economy and Energy, Peter Dimitrov, is on a negative territory with minus 10.2 percent (-10.2). Similar attitudes are revealed with respect to the performance of the Minister of Finance, Plamen Oresharsky, the performance rating of whom stands at minus 6.4 percent (-6.4). These figures indicate that the two ministers enjoy the lowest approval of the population among all the other members of the incumbent Cabinet.

The negative attitude concerning the performance of the government, however, does not spill over in the direction of enhancing the confidence rating of the opposition. Indicative to this effect are the replies of the respondents to the question about who could cope better with the consequences of the economic crisis – the governing majority or the opposition. The respondents who believe that the opposition could cope better are 43 percent, which is even a lower figure than the number of those who trust the governing majority on this issue – 48 percent.

Both, the exacerbation of the political debate in the country and the enhancing tension between the governing tri-partite majority and the opposition have not brought about any radical change in the electoral attitudes of the population. The “Alpha Research” survey indicates that the majority of parties have a limited core of hard-line adherents each, which makes the support for them unstable and makes it dependent on a number of temporary situational factors.

Thus for instance, the behavior of GERB’s leader, Boiko Borissov, resulted in a strong disap-

pointment with him over the past quarter, and this disappointment affected even his own supporters. The share of respondents who condemn his statement in connection with the Revival Process is 40 percent. This seems to be affecting both GERB and Boiko Borissov, as the party and its informal leader have started to lose the public confidence they previously enjoyed, which inevitably impacts their electoral support.

The survey held by “Alpha Research” indicates that at the time being 20.1 percent of the voters would cast their ballot for GERB, which is a more than 4 percent decline in comparison with the previous representative opinion poll survey held by the Agency. It is mainly voters of lower incomes who live in the regional centers and the smaller settlements that have withdrawn their support for the GERB Party. For the time being, these respondents are in the group of hesitant voters as their position is still indecisive. Depending on the conditions and the situation, these voters can re-orient their vote to another party or restore their confidence and support for GERB.

The BSP continues to be the second ranking party in terms of electoral support. About 15 percent of the voters would currently cast their ballots for it, but here, too, a certain decline in the confidence rating of the party can be observed, which undoubtedly has been prompted by the party’s poor achievements in the governance of the country. The spill-over of the economic crisis could also have an adverse impact on the electoral support for the party.

From the parties of the tri-partite governing coalition it is not only the BSP that enjoys a stable electoral support. Such support has consistently been measured with respect to the MRF as well. The survey held by “Alpha Research” currently indicates that around 6 percent of the voters would cast their ballots for Dogan’s party, which is actually the size of the hard-core MRF electorate. The events connected with the party over the past few months, coupled with the attacks and accusations of corruption and abuse of power, do not seem to have any serious impact on the party’s own supporters, because the MRF continues to rely mainly on its hard-core ethnically-based electorate.

To overcome the four percent electoral threshold continues to be a problem for NMSP. What the party can currently rely on is only 2.2 percent of the overall number of voters.

Out of the rest of the parties, it is "Ataka" that has a genuine chance of making it to the next National Assembly. The survey shows that more than 6 percent of the voters would cast their ballots for it, which is an indication that the party has a stable support base, hence – a comfortable share of the electorate.

The right-centrist political environment remains in a strongly fragmented state, and the support for the individual parties belonging thereto has shrunk to a bare minimum. Four parties enjoy a relatively equal support rates within the range between 1 and 2 percent, which makes their chances for parliamentary representation virtually unpredictable. DSB would enjoy the support of 1.8 percent of the voters if the general election were held today. The newly established coalition under the name of "Forward" Movement among the IMRO, the "Leader" Party, and the Agrarian People's Union has attracted the support of 1.7 percent of the respondents. The accusations and charges pressed against the informal leader of the movement, businessman Christo Kovachky, are likely to impact adversely the electoral potential of this party, which even without the possible legal proceeding has been rather unstable.

Despite the fact that the rows surrounding the UDF are not very topical at the time being, they have contributed to the virtual collapse of the image, which this party has enjoyed thus far. Only in the course of a month, its overall confidence rating has declined from 13 to 6 percent, and its electoral potential has shrunk to 1.5 percent. This is the reason why the way ahead and the policy of the party, which its new leader will map out, are of such a huge significance. The search for coalition partners is one of the possible options for the party's development in the future.

The lack of a stable motivation amidst the electorates of the individual parties is the underlying reason for the unstable support they all enjoy. This fact makes the forecasts for the structuring of the party system after next year's general election

truly problematic. The factor enhancing the lack of clarity even further is the economic crisis, which is threateningly looming over the country. This crisis can give rise to significant shifts in the political layers, thus making the outcome of next year's general election difficult to forecast.

4. Trends and Prospects

1. The political situation in the country has exacerbated after the European Commission imposed a serious financial sanction on the country by suspending the disbursement of EUR 220 million from its pre-accession PHARE program. This act, which finally deprives a EU country from obtaining EC funding, is the first ever such an act on the part of the European Commission. The reaction of the Bulgarian political circles from the governing tri-partite coalition ranged from an extreme disappointment to an attempt to accuse the European Commission of a biased attitude with respect to Bulgaria. Subsequently, the government adjusted its stance and sought for new forms of dialog with Brussels. As a result, the General Director of the EC General Directorate on Enlargement, Michael Leigh, came on a visit to Bulgaria and an agreement was reached for closer cooperation, stricter control, and better interaction in the course of the implementation of the rest of the EC programs envisaged for this country.

The major substantiation given by the European Commission on account of the suspended Euro-funds was connected with accusations of corruption and the failure of the judicial system to cope with a number of law-suits concerning the PHARE program, in connection with which charges have been pressed for infringements, abuses, and corruption practices. Another reason is the poor coordination and communication with Brussels, as well as the insufficient effectiveness of the Bulgarian administration in the area of elaborating projects. In the final account, the Bulgarian side used this occasion to enhance the measures implemented in the areas of monitoring and control, particularly those concerning corruption practices, and to review and revise a number of programs, so that this sorry precedent could be prevented from

re-occurring especially in the areas connected with the appropriation of funds connected with structural and operating programs, the necessary funds for which were allocated for Bulgaria to appropriate after its EU accession.

Regardless of the improved tone of discourse between Sofia and Brussels, the opposition used the occasion to attack the government poignantly and even to demand its resignation. In their turn, the parties from the tri-partite governing coalition responded to the challenge with the categorical statement that there would be no early general election, despite the perception for a rising tension between the individual parties of the coalition. This can be seen especially clearly in the attempts made by NMSP to manifest its growing independence by raising certain claims concerning some of the government's actions. Thus for instance, a sharp difference of opinions can be predicted with respect to the time at which the EMP elections and the national general election will be held next year, whereby NMSP insists on holding the two elections on the same date, while the other two parties disagree, because such an election merger will necessitate an amendment to the Constitution. For the time being, the BSP and the MRF still hesitate on account of this specific subject matter, but very soon it is due to surface to the fore. At the same time, sharp criticism was addressed by some of the BSP ministers to individual ministers from NMSP, and the response of NMSP was equally sharp.

And yet, despite all these differences, NMSP is hardly likely to leave the tri-partite coalition before the regular general election due to take place in the summer of next year. Therefore, barring any emergencies, the tri-partite governing coalition will complete its term of office and will see in the forthcoming general election.

2. The opposition parties inhabiting the right-centrist spectrum of the political environment have been enhancing their activity with a view to the approaching general election next year. Among them, the leading right-centrist party is GERB, which is likely to return the largest parliamentary faction to the next National Assembly. For the time being, the party leadership of GERB

has been categorically refusing to set up pre-election coalitions, probably with the hope of possibly winning an absolute parliamentary majority, something which from today's point of view seems highly unrealistic.

At the same time, GERB takes into account the fact that it will need allies at the next Parliament, and such possible allies both from a tactical point of view and with a view to its interests are likely to be DSB and the UDF. Although there has been some rapprochement between GERB and the extremely radical and nationalist "Ataka" Party, GERB is well aware that such a coalition union will provoke the dissatisfaction of the European People's Party and this is the reason why at this early stage GERB has declared that such a union has no chances of materializing whatsoever.

Nonetheless, should four parties make it to the next Parliament – and according to opinion poll surveys it is only the BSP, the MRF, GERB, and "Ataka" that are certain to do so, it cannot be ruled out for GERB to ask for the indirect support of "Ataka", i.e. without including it in the country's government. Such a situation would mean that "Ataka" will agree to give support to a government set up by GERB on its own.

At the same time, the small and older right-wing parties are looking increasingly more actively for options to start a process of rapprochement and set up a possible coalition agreement. This qualification concerns parties such as DSB and the UDF predominantly, which have been making efforts to achieve such a rapprochement, but some even smaller parties are trying to get closer to either of them or both of them as well. There are circles, however, both in the UDF and DSB who staunchly stand against such a union, because they have serious prejudices against the stances expressed by the other party and are particularly biased against their respective leaders. The UDF abounds of especially staunch opponents to the DSB leader, Ivan Kostov, who provoked the split within the UDF several years ago in order to set up his own DSB party. What course the newly elected UDF leader, Martin Dimitrov, will be pursuing, whether he will get support for a pre-election union with other parties, or he would rather be willing to impose

the line of the UDF running the general election on its own, will prove extremely important for this party's future. At the same time, running the election on their own is very risky both for the UDF and DSB, as – according to the opinion polls – they do not stand the chance of overcoming the four percent electoral threshold, which would make it possible for them to get returned to Parliament.

Consequently, over the next few months we shall be observing various moves, in which two tendencies will be intermingling: one tendency directed at finding formulae for interaction and joint activities between and among the smaller right-wing parties, and another tendency of an open opposition against the adoption of such coalition formulae within the parties themselves.

3. The major party in the governing tripartite coalition – the BSP – has managed to consolidate its positions after its last Congress. This fact was expressed at the highest party forum as well by the almost unanimous election of Sergei Stanishev to the post of party leader. And yet, contradictions on two levels can be observed within the party.

On the one hand, this is the ideological level, on which the now official left-wing faction, led by Yanaki Stoilov, accuses the party leadership and the government at large of pursuing a right-wing policy, which does not correspond, according to the left-wing faction, to the social image of the left-wing, in their opinion, Bulgarian Socialist Party. This left-wing faction managed to partially assert its views during the adoption of the new party program by including more radical anti-capitalist formulations therein. On the other hand, there is a different level – the one of clashes between individual groups linked by various economic and bureaucratic interests within the party. Two major wings play the leading part here: one around Roumen Ovcharov, who is closely connected with the Sofia City party organization in the capacity of its leader, and the other around Roumen Petkov, that – despite its lost positions during the last few months – is closely connected with a number of economic groupings through which Petkov has been materializing his interests within the BSP.

A specific independent group within the party is the group of younger party activists, which has been formed around the leader Sergei Stanishev. They were brought to the leadership of the party precisely by Stanishev himself and the group includes people such as: Anton Koutev, Ivelin Nickolov, who not long ago became editor-in-chief of the Duma Daily, Kiril Dobrev, etc. In one or another form these people will try to modernize the party, despite the fact that they are currently seriously opposed by the “old guard”, which for the time being has preserved its strong positions.

According to the opinion poll surveys, the BSP is expected to get about 15 percent of the electoral vote at the general election next year, but this percentage may increase in result of the party's enhanced activity in the course of the election run-up. Thus the party is likely to be the second ranking political force at the National Assembly after the GERB Party, and should it remain out of office, it will be the major opposition force to a possible right-centrist majority.

4. For the first time for quite a long while now, the MRF has found itself in an uncomfortable situation as a result of the number of rows involving the party, which brought about the weakening of the political positions of its leader, Ahmed Dogan. A certain amount of tension is observed within the party, too, and although it is still in a latent state for the time being, it nevertheless holds the potential for future conflicts in the event of a possible withdrawal of the leader Dogan, who has been ruling the party single-handedly and in an authoritarian way. At the same time, the MRF will continue to play an important role in the political life of the country due to the support it receives from the Turkish ethnic population in the country, which guarantees the party's presence at the next Parliament as well. For the time being, the principal ally of the MRF is the BSP, and given the possibility for different combinations in the future governance of the country, the two parties are likely to join in a coalition once again should the situation evolve in that direction.

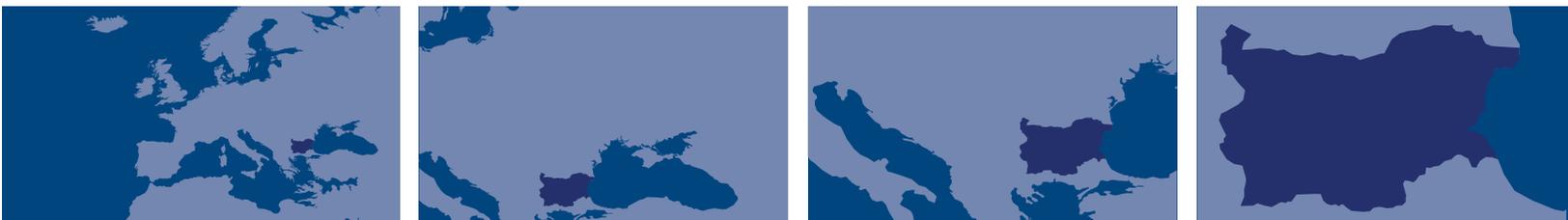
5. The “Ataka” Party has been trying to achieve a balancing act between the more extreme and the more moderate political discourse and po-

litical actions respectively. It needs the moderate line in order to leave the door ajar for a possible union with the GERB Party, should events develop in such a way that GERB find itself in the situation to need the support of "Ataka" in order to form its government. On the other hand, in order to retain its own voters, "Ataka" is compelled to demonstrate periodically its extremely radical and nationalist political line, thus preserving its image of a radical opposition. The balancing act between these two lines will become increasingly more difficult to manage for the leader Volen Siderov in the run-up to the forthcoming general election, and this can already be seen in certain reactions manifested by "Ataka" members and supporters who disapprove of the moderate political line. Such a moderate line leads to an outflow of "Ataka" voters to GERB. Therefore, in the coming weeks "Ataka" will have to clarify the political line it will pursue in order to preserve its current electoral positions, which guarantee that the party will be returned to the next Bulgarian Parliament.

About the editor:

Prof. Dr. Georgi Karasimeonov is Head of the Department of Political Science at Sofia University and Managing Director of the Institute for Political and Legal Studies. From 1991 to 1998 he was President of the Bulgarian Political Science Association. He is also Editor in Chief of the Political Studies Quarterly.

Contact: ipls@dir.bg



Imprint

Friedrich Ebert Foundation
Office Bulgaria
P.O.Box 859
97, Knjaz Boris I St. 2nd Floor
1000 Sofia, Bulgaria

Orders

Friedrich Ebert Foundation
Office Bulgaria
Att.: Emilia Burgaslieva
e-mail: office@fes.bg
Fax: +359 (2) 9802438

All texts are available online
www.fes.bg

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