



Georgi Karasimeonov (Ed.)

BAROMETER

Political Parties Development in Bulgaria

Vol.9 Issue 3
July-September 2009

■ In the foreseeable future, the political situation in the country will be developing mostly under the impact of the activities launched by the new Bulgarian government. This will predetermine the relations both between the governing party and the opposition, on the one hand, and among the right-wing parties, which so far have pledged their support to the governing GERB Party, on the other.

■ Over the coming months, Boiko Borissov will strive to consolidate around himself the legislative and executive branches of power, and this will make it possible for him to implement those political reforms, which the GERB Party announced to be the priorities of its political programme. What is also important for GERB is to score success at the local by-elections for Mayor of Sofia Municipality, which will be yet another proof of the superiority of the party over all the other political formations in the country.

Having sustained a heavy loss at the July general elections, the BSP is currently torn apart by deepening conflicts. The various groups of influence in the party are waging a battle for the political leadership. The official reason for this in-fighting is the future of the party, including its new political image and ideological vision.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Table of Contents.....	1
1. The Political Situation.....	2
2. Situation Of The Political Parties And Development Of The Party System In Bulgaria.....	5
2.1. The Right-Wing Political Environment.....	5
2.1.1. The GERB Party (GERB).....	5
2.1.2. The Order, Legality and Justice Party (OLJ)	7
2.1.3. The Blue Coalition (UDF and DSB)	8
2.1.4. The "Ataka" Party (Attack)	9
2.2. The Parliamentary Opposition	10
2.2.1. Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP).....	11
2.2.2. Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF).....	12
3. Public Opinion	13
4. Major Conclusions And Forecasts	14
5. Results From the General Elections Held on July 5 th 2009 In Bulgaria	16

1. The Political Situation

The first steps of the new GERB government were the major factor determining the political situation in the country over the third quarter of 2009. To a large extent, it is these first steps that predetermined the public agenda and had strong impact on the political debate in the country.

Having held unsuccessful talks with the rest of the political parties from the right-wing political scope, GERB set up an independent government of its own headed by Prime Minister Boiko Borissov. The government received broad parliamentary support from the other right-wing parties, namely: the Blue Coalition, the Order, Legality and Justice (OLJ) Party, and the "Ataka Party. They all publically declared their support for GERB in the course of their talks with the party, which won the majority of parliamentary seats at the July general elections. Although no specific details from these talks emerged in the public environment, it became clear that the smaller right-wing parties, such as the Blue Coalition and the OLJ, insisted on setting up a coalition with the GERB Party and on receiving respective ministerial seats in the new Bulgarian Government.

Borissov's decision to set up an independent one-party government places the entire political responsibility for the country's governance upon the shoulders of the young GERB Party. This is the reason why the new Prime Minister, Boiko Borissov, has put his stakes upon a Cabinet formed by both professionals and experts, on the one hand, and by personalities politically committed to the GERB Party, on the other. Borissov fulfilled his intention, declared long before the general elections were held, to close down the Ministry of State Administration and Administrative Reform, and the Ministry of Emergency Situations and removed from his Cabinet the post of a Minister of European Issues at the same time.

The new Cabinet has two Deputy Prime Ministers. They are Simeon Dyankov, who has been entrusted with the post of Minister of Finance, and the formal Party Chairman, Tzvetan

Tzvetanov, who – as expected – now heads the Ministry of Interior. Dyankov has substantial experience as financial expert working for the World Bank, and his particular expertise lies in the area of anti-crisis measures and programmes, which makes him especially suitable to head this important ministry at a time of a severe economic crisis. The formal GERB Party Chairman, Tzvetan Tzvetanov, has long standing experience at the Ministry of Interior and is currently facing the challenge of reforming the crucial ministry under his control.

Nickolay Mladenov, former UDF MP and former GERB MEP, was elected to the post of Minister of Defense. Mladenov is one of the politically committed personalities in the Cabinet. At the same time, he has serious foreign political experience and is well known in the international political circles.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been entrusted to the former MEP Roumyana Zheleva, who topped the GERB party list for the MEP elections earlier this year. It is highly likely that it will be Roumyana Zheleva who will be nominated for the post of European Commissioner from the Bulgarian quota in the European Commission.

Boiko Borissov entrusted two of the ministries, which were most severely criticized by the EU institutions in connection with the appropriation of the European funds, namely the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works, and the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Supplies, to professionals and experts.

Thus, the new Minister of Regional Development is Rossen Plevneliev. He is a man of long-standing experience in the property development and construction business, who for years has held managerial posts in companies investing in the property development and construction business both in Bulgaria and abroad.

Miroslav Naidenov is the new Minister of Agriculture and Food Supplies. He is a specialist in the area of veterinary medicine and before his election to the ministerial post was head of the expert group on the issues of agriculture at the GERB Party.

Traicho Traikov was elected Minister of Economy, Energy and Tourism. His educational background is in the area of international economic relations and he has previously worked as a consultant to international energy companies, but thus far has been little known in the public environment in the country.

The extremely important Ministry of Justice was entrusted to a proven professional such as Margarita Popova, Prosecutor at the Supreme Prosecutor's Office of Cassation before her election to the ministerial post. At her previous position, she headed the special unit for combating fraud with funds coming from the European Union and her work was given high evaluation by the European institutions. Her new assignment in the capacity of Minister of Justice is a significant signal given by the new government to the European Union that Bulgaria will strengthen its efforts to combat fraud and corruption.

The new Minister of Labour and Social Policy is Totyo Mladenov, who has been Mayor of the town of Vratza. He has been member of the GERB Party since 2007 and has amassed long standing experience in the capacity of trade union expert working for the "Podkrepa" Confederation of Labour, and later on in the capacity of head of the Chief Labour Inspectorate at the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy.

The sculptor of international renown, Vezhdi Rashidov, was elected Minister of Culture. He was the majority vote candidate of the GERB Party in the town of Kurdjali – the mainstay of Ahmed Dogan's MRF party, where he won a landslide victory. Rashidov is an ethnic Turk who over the last few years has been one of the most severe critics of the policy pursued by the MRF and its leader, Ahmed Dogan.

Yordanka Fandakova, Deputy Mayor of Sofia City since 2005, has been appointed Minister of Education, Science and Youth. She is one of the founders of the GERB Party and close associate of the informal party leader and former Sofia City Mayor, Boiko Borissov. Not long ago, Fandakova was nominated as the GERB Party candidate at the by-elections

for a new Sofia City Mayor, which are due to take place at the beginning of November. In all likelihood, she will win this elections and a new Minister of Education, Science and Youth will have to be appointed.

Alexander Tzvetkov is the new Minister of Transport and Communications. Before being elected to this post, Tzvetkov was Deputy Mayor of Sofia City in charge of transport, after his predecessor, Velizar Stoilov, resigned following a row with non-transparent public procurement tender practices. Tzvetkov's previous post at Sofia Municipality was in the same area, namely Director of Transport Infrastructure.

The Ministry of Environment and Waters was headed by Nonna Karadjova, who is a proven expert in the sphere of environmental protection and has valuable experience working on EU programs.

Dr. Bozhidar Danev was elected Minister of Health Care. This appointment comes only months after he won the highly contested election for Chairman of the Bulgarian Union of Physicians.

A new Ministry of Sport was created by the new government, thus transforming the former State Agency for Youth and Sport into a full-fledged ministry, whereby work with youth was transferred to the Ministry of Education. Svilen Neikov, coach and husband of Olympic rowing champion Roumyana Neikova, was appointed Minister of Sport.

The most contested ministerial nomination was that of Bozhidar Dimitrov, who was appointed Minister without a Portfolio in charge of Bulgarians abroad or the entire Bulgarian diaspora. Until recently, Dimitrov was a member of the BSP. His past of a collaborator of the former State Security Secret Service met the disapproval of the Blue Coalition, but nevertheless its MPs gave their undivided support to the new government as a whole at the voting procedure in Parliament.

The first steps of the new Cabinet were connected with a thorough review of the work and accounts of the former government. Infringements and dubious deals were discovered at a number of ministries and state agen-

cies. The Prosecutor's Office brought criminal charges against the former Minister of Agriculture, Valeri Tzvetanov, and the former Head of the Forestry Agency, Stephan Yurukov, on multiple occasions of exchange deals with state property – lands and forests – which have been assessed to have incurred damages to the state of more than BGN 4.5 million.

Other infringements were found at the Ministry of Health Care, the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, etc., and some of the former ministers of these institutions were invited to interrogations at the Prosecutor's Office in their capacity of witnesses to criminal proceedings filed against unknown perpetrators. Representatives of the Prosecutor's Office said that if facts about infringements committed by former ministers were found, they would not hesitate to bring charges against them.

Because of the numerous infringements made by the former government, the National Assembly set up an ad-hoc parliamentary committee entrusted with the task of carrying out an inquiry, checking up the legitimacy of the expenditures, transactions, appointments, etc., made by Stanishev's government over the last year of its term in office. This ad-hoc committee is made up by 12 MPs and is due to complete its inquiry within a two months' period of time.

The parliamentary opposition strongly reacted to the decision tabled by the parliamentary majority by virtue of which the MPs who have collaborated with or have worked for the former State Security Secret Services cannot sit on the National Security parliamentary committee, the Foreign Policy and Defense parliamentary committee, the parliamentary committee controlling the state Agency for National Security, and the parliamentary committee on European Issues and Control over European Funds. The BSP and the MRF turned this text of the By-laws on the functioning of the National Assembly over to the Constitutional Court of the country, demanding an interpretation of its compliance with the Bulgarian Constitution.

Apart from the above mentioned review of activities and accounts inherited by the former government, the new Cabinet began work on curbing the effects of the economic crisis in the country. One of the ideas of the new government is to lower the social security burden of the working population by 2 per cent next year, and to continue lowering it by 1 per cent every next year, thus lowering it by 5 per cent altogether by the end of its term in office. In this way the government hopes that more money will remain in business and jobs will be preserved at a time of a palpable economic crisis.

A particularly hot debate was provoked by the hesitation on the part of the government and the announcement of a possible review with respect to the energy projects concerning the "Belene" Nuclear Power Plant and the Bourgas – Alexandroupolis oil pipeline. Borissov's government said that the Belene NPP would cost far too much to the country, as the overall estimate of the expenditures to be made in connection with its construction amount to over EUR 10 billion. On the other hand, the Bourgas – Alexandroupolis oil pipeline, which will cross the Black Sea, could bring about serious adverse consequences for Bulgarian tourism. These issues were subject to discussion at a meeting between Prime Ministers Borissov and Putin. What Borissov said at this meeting was that his government had to get acquainted with the contracts concluded by the former government and it was only then that a final decision on the feasibility of the projects could be made.

The energy subject provoked a row between Prime Minister Borissov and President Parvanov. The reason was that Parvanov expressed doubts as to Borissov's competence on issues connected with energy and declared that work on these projects should be accelerated. Borissov replied that this subject fell within the competencies of the executive branch of power and it, by far, had nothing to do with the competencies of the President. Despite these clashes between the two, both the dialogue and civil tone between them

were restored after the meeting of the National Security Consultative Council with the President, at which a common line concerning the appropriation of the European funds was adopted with consensus.

2. Situation Of The Political Parties And Development Of The Party System In Bulgaria

The outcome of the July general elections for the 41st National Assembly brought about a new transformation of the Bulgarian party system. The elections were won by the GERB Party, a newly established political formation, which was taking part in general elections for the first time ever. Following this victory, it is for the first time in nearly ten years now that the right-centrist forces have come to dominate the Bulgarian Parliament, whereas the Left Wing embodied by the BSP scored one of its poorest results ever, which turned the party into a weak opposition, torn by contradictions and lack of ideas.

2.1. The Right-Wing Political Environment

After the July general elections, a broad right-wing majority was established in the country, which supports the newly elected government of the GERB Party. At the same time, however, the right wing continues to be torn by internal differences, which have been somewhat suppressed for the time being, but can erupt again in the coming months. The past quarter indicated that the smaller right-wing parties harbour both contradictions and rivalries mainly with respect to their partnership with the GERB Party. On the other hand, the relations between the smaller right-wing parties and GERB remain within the framework of a temporary strategic partnership rather than a permanent alliance, and are currently failing to develop along the lines of a certain stable and long-term process of collaboration.

2.1.1. The GERB Party (GERB)

The past quarter was especially important for the GERB Party. Having convincingly won the

July general elections, the party set up an independent government of its own headed by its informal leader, Boiko Borissov. In practice, Borissov's new Cabinet is a government of the parliamentary minority, as the party failed to provide the 121 MPs it needs to secure a majority parliamentary support of its own, falling short of only 5 MP seats. For the time being, however, Borissov's government has been given serious support at the National Assembly, following the commitment pledged to this effect by the rest of the right-wing parliamentary formations, namely the Blue Coalition, the OLI, and the "Ataka" Party.

Immediately after the general elections, GERB publicly manifested that the party would put its stakes on the strong internal party discipline under the direct control of the informal party leader, Boiko Borissov. A proof of this is the rule book containing the prescriptions for the functioning of the GERB parliamentary fraction. It says that upon any prolonged and unsubstantiated absence from Parliament, upon failure to take into consideration the opinion of the parliamentary fraction, and upon voicing alternative opinions, the MPs shall hand in their resignations and shall be ousted from Parliament. In practice, however, this decision has no legal consequences, because Bulgarian MPs enjoy the principle of the free mandate, which releases them from dependence on the political formation they have been elected from, as they are considered to be representatives of the entire nation, and the Constitution does not envisage such a form of ousting or "impeachment" of MPs. This is the reason why this internal party rule is considered to be rather a tool for tightening the party discipline of the GERB MPs.

The authoritarian internal party style practised by Boiko Borissov was manifested in the "ousting" of a freshly elected GERB MP – Todor Yosifov, who is a rap singer and is better known under his nick-name – the Maniac. Before taking the oath as a People's representative, Yosifov filed a declaration in the Central Elections Commission containing his refusal to be Member of Parliament. The

most likely reason for this declaration is the pressure exerted on him by Boiko Borissov, according to whom Yosifov was undermining the image of the GERB Party with his "gangster songs" recorded in the past.

The GERB Party undertook another move, the purpose of which was to avoid the fragmentation of Parliament, as it happened with the previous National Assembly. On the initiative of the party, the new parliamentary by-laws, governing the functioning of the 41st National Assembly, contain the provision that MPs who leave the parliamentary fractions they have been returned to shall become independent MPs and shall be deprived of the right to set up new parliamentary fractions.

The above examples indicate that GERB and Boiko Borissov are putting their stakes on party discipline, which is of crucial significance for each and every minority government. A proof to this effect is the way in which the 41st National Assembly has been functioning during the first two months of its parliamentary mandate, where the GERB MPs – at least for the time being – manifested extremely serious discipline as far as their presence in the parliamentary hall is concerned.

At the same time, however, Borissov clearly showed that he would rely on the opposition in order to attain the desired transparency of his own governance. It is not by chance that GERB refused to chair key parliamentary committees such as those on combating corruption, the control over the appropriation of European funds, and control over the National Agency for National Security, which are currently presided over by the opposition and the right-wing parties, whereby the chairpersons of these committees will preside over them on the principle of rotation.

From now on, GERB will focus its efforts and activities mainly on the governance of the country. The first steps of the government, described above, were connected with reviews at the individual ministries to the purpose of establishing the actual situation inherited from the previous government of Sergei Stanishev. Several times Boiko Bo-

rissov voiced a declaration to the effect that the reviews brought about the following discoveries, namely: Stanishev's government has committed a number of infringements and abuses, whereby funds have been spent from the government budget without due justification, owing to which the country was left in a poor financial situation in a period of expanding economic crisis.

The Prosecutor's Office was addressed with a number of such infringements and abuses committed by the previous government of the country, and what is expected shortly is the announcement that criminal charges have been brought up against top civil servants and ministers. The actions undertaken by the new Cabinet with respect to the review of the activities of the previous government increased its outstandingly high rating even further.

At the same time, however, the opposition launched accusations against the Cabinet and the GERB majority at Parliament to the effect that for a third month in a row since the new National Assembly was convened, not a single important draft bill has been tabled in Parliament and in practice the supreme legislative body of the country is staying idle. The BSP and MRF accused GERB of being unprepared for office and totally inexperienced. The Blue Coalition for its part expressed its apprehension that GERB is delaying the introduction of anti-crisis measures in the economy way too much, which could have an extremely negative impact on the country in the coming months.

The Minister of Finance, Simeon Dyankov, dismissed the accusations concerning the allegation that the government had no clear strategy for coming out of the crisis. He said that the budget deficit was lowered to BGN 105 million in August in comparison with the BGN 565 million deficit in July as a result of the measures taken by the new government. The major merit for the lower deficit can be attributed to the cut of government expenditures as soon as GERB took over the reins of the country's governance. The Cabinet froze 15 per cent of the expenditures of all minis-

tries, which equals to BGN 1.2 billion. Apart from this, a number of capital expenditures were frozen as well, such as 41 constructions sites in the system of the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works, the total cost of which amounts to BGN 180 million. Besides, what is observed is a slight increase of budget revenues, particularly revenues from the excise duties levied on alcohol beverages and tobacco products, mainly cigarettes.

GERB relies on increasing revenues from customs duties and excise taxes, which can take place in result of curbing goods trafficking and illegal imports. It is in this respect that the government relies on the new leadership of the Customs Agency and its Director, General Vanyo Tannov, who is a former Head of the Chief Directorate for Combating Organized Crime with the Ministry of Interior.

The majour challenge facing GERB is the difficult task of coping with the economic crisis, which will be the first genuine political test for the party, which is willing to prove to the sceptics that it is capable of effectively governing the country and its ailing economy. Another majour challenge facing GERB is the ability of the party to restore the confidence of the European Union institutions to the country as a whole. At the time being, there are encouraging signals in this respect. It is not by chance that the European commission officially announced that the funds due for reimbursement in connection with the SAPARD Programme, which were blocked during the term in office of the previous government, have now been unfrozen and respectively released for actual payments.

The principal factor for Bulgaria to restore the lost confidence of the EU institutions will be the way in which it will pursue its policy of combating corruption. Thus far, GERB has declared its determination to cope with this majour issue hampering the development of the country, and the very first steps made by the new GERB government have been precisely in this direction.

The GERB Party announced its nomination for the post of Sofia City Mayor at the up-

coming local by-elections. GERB's candidate is Yordanka Fandakova, the current Minister of Education, Science and Youth. She has amassed almost 4 years of managerial experience during her work at the Sofia Municipality in the capacity of a Deputy Mayor in charge of education. Borissov's party said that it would run this by-election independently, which, however, does not preclude the possibility for the rest of the main right-wing parties to give their support to the candidate of the GERB Party.

Prime Minister Borissov announced his intention to nominate a member of the GERB Party to fill Bulgaria's quota for European Commissioner to represent the country in the next EC. The most probable candidate for the post will be the current Foreign Minister and former MEP, Roumyana Zheleva. However, this is an issue, which brought about a loud debate both in the political and public environment in the country, mainly because of the high approval rating enjoyed by the current Bulgarian European Commissioner – Meglena Kuneva. Borissov substantiated this decision and his refusal to give support to Kuneva with the argument that in practice she was part and parcel of the "tri-partite coalition" of the BSP, NMSP, and the MRF. This decision of Borissov's, however, can open Kuneva's road to the presidential election in two years' time, where she can be a highly likely candidate running against the GERB Party.

2.1.2. The Order, Legality and Justice Party (OLJ)

The July general election was an undoubted success for the Order, Legality, and Justice Party. Making it to Parliament, the OLJ managed to attain the major goal it had set to its members and supporters to accomplish, namely – getting returned to the 41st National Assembly. The consolidation of this achievement, however, is yet to be seen. To a large extent the success of the party came as a result of the well conducted populist election campaign and the wide popularity of its leader, Yane Yanev. However, the party is now

facing the challenge to live up to the image of a conservative formation as its leadership has been claiming thus far.

The first major challenge the OLI had to go through was connected with the stance, which the party had to take with respect to the formation of the country's government after the July general elections. The OLI was one of the parties, which used to be among the most severe critics of the tri-partite coalition of the BSP, NMSP, and the MRF. This is the reason why OLI's decision to grant its support to Boiko Borissov's government did not hold any surprise whatsoever.

Yane Yanev declared that his party was giving its unconditional support to GERB and the new country's government for the first six months of its coming into office. The OLI leader said that his party would back up all efforts of the government directed at combating corruption and organized crime. It is precisely combating corruption that is the major priority of OLI, which was broadly proclaimed at the time when the party was waging its pre-elections campaign. And it is as a consequence of this commitment that Yane Yanev will be presiding the parliamentary committee for combating corruption over the first six months of the functioning of the 41st National Assembly.

One of the principal ideas, launched by the OLI during the first days after the new Parliament was convened, concerns the summoning of a Grand National Assembly. This means that the incumbent legislative body will have to function for only a limited term in office and will have to announce an early general election for a Grand National Assembly, which will be entrusted with the task of passing the country's new constitution. In the opinion of the OLI, only a new constitution is capable of solving the institutional problems of the judicial system and justice dispensation in Bulgaria. This subject, however, is highly contentious with a view to the need for a well-functioning Parliament in the country over the next few years, capable of meeting the challenges of the global economic crisis.

Initially, the OLI even tabled a draft bill for the amendment of the Grand National Assembly Act, which, however, was subsequently withdrawn. The party Chairman, Yane Yanev, motivated the decision of his party with the fact that GERB intended to set up a working group entrusted with the task of launching consultations concerning constitutional amendments with respect to the entire electoral legislation. In Yanev's opinion, however, the subject about convening a Grand National Assembly remains topical, because the country needs the adoption of a new constitution, which will mark a new beginning for the development of the Bulgarian party system.

2.1.3. The Blue Coalition (UDF and DSB)

What the Blue Coalition insisted on right after the July general elections were negotiations with the GERB Party to the purpose of drafting a common programme for the governance of the country. According to the leaders of the two constituent parties making up the coalition, Martin Dimitrov and Ivan Kostov, this was the way to guarantee a stable right-centrist government of the country. Boiko Borissov's decision to opt for an independent GERB government modified the strategies of the two coalition parties. They granted support to Borissov's Cabinet with the motive that this was the will expressed by Bulgarian voters and – being member parties of the European People's Party – they had to give their support to the right-centrist Cabinet.

At the same time, however, the Blue Coalition addressed critical remarks to Borissov's government. For instance, one of these critical remarks was that the government had delayed the announcement and launch of its governance program, which – in the opinion of the Blue Coalition – would have an adverse effect on the economic crisis in the country. The DSB leader, Ivan Kostov, said that GERB was obliged to announce its governance program for its entire four-year term of office not later than the end of September 2009.

The other critical remark, which Kostov addressed to the Cabinet, was that it had not yet revealed a clear strategy for the further development of the country.

The Blue Coalition took a staunch stance with respect to the construction of the "Belenne" Nuclear Power Plant. According to the UDF leader, Martin Dimitrov, the project for the construction of the new nuclear power facility must be suspended, unless private capital could be raised for its construction. The demand of the Blue Coalition is for the share of private investments to be 80 per cent of total costs, whereas the share of state investments should not exceed 20 per cent of the overall construction costs. Dimitrov said that according to estimates made by the Blue Coalition this project was designed to serve the purposes of electricity exports only and therefore it was an unsubstantiated and poor decision for the country to pay USD 10 billion for such an initiative in the conditions of an economic crisis.

This categorical stance taken by the Blue Coalition could possibly become an occasion for differences to emerge with the GERB Party in case that Borissov decided to continue work on the Belene NPP project in the way it was agreed by the previous government.

At the beginning of September, the MP Ventsislav Varbanov left the Blue Coalition. Varbanov was returned to Parliament from the quota of the "United Agrarians" party, and in this capacity he became an independent Member of Parliament. The reason for Varbanov's leaving the coalition was a decision taken by the UDF and DSB to address the Constitutional Court on account of the decision made by the Central Elections Commission that there is a mistaken electoral protocol in the Rousse constituency, whereby the Blue Coalition was deprived of 24 votes cast for it. This finding was confirmed by the Supreme Administrative Court as well. It means that the Blue Coalition has to return an MP to Parliament from Rousse instead of from Dobrich, and it is from the Dobrich constituency precisely that Ventsislav Varbanov has been returned to Parliament.

The United Agrarians declared that the petition tabled before the Constitutional Court to review the mandates of the Blue Coalition in the Rousse and Dobrich constituencies is a flagrant infringement of the pre-election agreement concluded between the two political formations, and this was the reason why the United Agrarians could reconsider their further stay with the Blue Coalition.

2.1.4. The "Ataka" Party (Attack)

Much like the rest of the right-wing parties, the nationalists from the "Ataka" Party granted their support to the government set up by Boiko Borissov. The "Ataka" party leader, Volen Siderov, declared that the country needed a strong government enjoying a strong parliamentary support and that was the reason why "Ataka" would give its support to the GERB Cabinet. In Siderov's opinion, however, this does not mean that his party will have an uncritical stance with respect to the actions and decisions of the new government.

In this way, for the first time in its existence the "Ataka" Party has come into a role, which is far from habitual for the party, namely: to support the governing party and refrain from being an extreme and radical opposition. This raises the question: to what extent could "Ataka" prove capable of preserving its image and in what way would the party adapt to the current political situation having granted support to the GERB Party, which is currently dominating the political and economic life of the country? Thus far, the electoral success of "Ataka" was based on the criticism, characteristic of every radical populist party, which launches its poignant criticism at the political elite and the existing political status quo.

The support given to GERB and its government, however, does not mean that "Ataka" will modify its ideological profile or give up its reliance on the nationalist rhetoric, which has become the traditional hallmark of the party. This was made clear as early as the first session of the 41st National Assembly, where Volen Siderov declared that his party would table a draft decision by virtue of which the

Bulgarian Parliament has to recognize the genocide committed by the Ottoman Empire with respect to the Armenian population inhabiting its territories. The party will table another draft decision concerning the repayment of the debt Turkey owes to the Bulgarian refugees who emigrated to Bulgaria by fleeing and leaving their property and possessions on the territory of Eastern Thrace during the Balkan wars after 1912. Siderov also declared his stance in favour of setting up an ad-hoc parliamentary committee entrusted with the task of making an inquiry into the voting procedures both in Turkey and the mixed ethnic regions of the country at the time of the July general elections. The reason underlying the draft decision is the opinion shared by Siderov and his party that enormous manipulation and infringements have been committed during this year's general elections.

The authoritarian internal party style, which is so characteristic of Volen Siderov, brought about a heightening tension around "Ataka" in the third quarter of the current year as well. Even before the actual July general election campaign, there was discontent among the ranks of the "Ataka" Party concerning the way in which the party lists were drafted. After the election, at the end of July, the former "Ataka" MP, Mitko Dimitrov, made an attempt at convening an ad-hoc National Gathering of the party to the purpose of amending the party statute. The gathering was attended by a few party activists who were discontented with the policy Siderov was pursuing. They launched accusations against the party leader for having single-handedly ranked the candidates on the party lists to the total disregard of the opinions voiced by various local party organizations.

The "Ataka" leadership declared that none of the attendants at the ad-hoc event was a member of the party and this was the reason why the decisions made at their gathering were of no legal consequence.

The problems with the drafting and ordering of the party lists before the July general election brought about another serious con-

flict, namely the clash between Volen Siderov and Valeri Simeonov, Chief Executive Officer of the SKAT TV broadcasting station. The SKAT TV, where for years Siderov had his own daily personal broadcast, played a huge role for Siderov's personal popularity and that of his party as a whole. The conflict between Siderov and Simeonov, however, seems irreversible, having in mind the determination of the CEO of SKAT TV to set up a new party with the participation of politicians who have left or resigned from the "Ataka" Party.

The establishment of such a party is hardly likely to affect or undermine in any conceivable way the trust in and support for "Ataka". The loss of publicity through the channel of the SKAT TV is also hardly likely to affect the party, because by now Volen Siderov has gained the rostrum and publicity, which the national media have made available to him. The graver problem for the party lies elsewhere, namely: how will the party cope with its new role of a supporter to the governing party?

2.2. The Parliamentary Opposition

For the time being, the only apparently visible opposition to Borissov's government will be that of the former coalition partners from the BSP and MRF. The relations between these two parties, however, are considerably more different now than they used to be before the July general elections. A large majority within the BSP has been criticizing the policy, which their own party was pursuing with respect to its relations with the MRF. This is yet another source of conflict within the BSP, at a time when the party is being torn apart by differences and contradictions. Currently, the BSP is manifesting the image of weak opposition and things are likely to remain like that until it manages to solve the internal discrepancies within the party and radically reconsiders its political philosophy and relationships with its rank-and-file members and supporters.

The MRF is also expected to make an assessment of its eight years' participation in the governance of the country for two successive terms in office. This is of particular sig-

nificance for the future development of the party. Over the past quarter, the party limited its media appearances – most probably with the intention to stay away from public attention. The negative attitudes it has amassed thus far are the major reason for the isolation, in which the MRF found itself after the July general elections.

2.2.1. Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP)

Over the past quarter, the crisis processes within the BSP have been deepening. The information, which has been constantly revealed to the media by Borissov's government concerning abuses, misuses, and infringements, committed during the term in office of the previous government, has been producing an increasingly more negative effect on the BSP. A number of opinion polls indicate that the confidence rating of the party among its electorate has shrunk to encompass only the rock bottom core of its supporters. Even the hard-line voters of the party show hesitation when making their assessments as to the confidence they have in this party.

A strong blow on the image of the BSP as a left-wing and socially-oriented party was struck by the information announced by Borissov's government concerning the huge salaries paid at the "Information Services" state-owned company. The members of the corporate management were receiving salaries between BGN 7 thousand and 11 thousand. Until the end of July, Chairman of the Board of Directors of the "Information Services" Company was Sergei Stanishev's adviser – Azer Mellikov.

Despite the numerous appeals addressed to Sergei Stanishev by his party comrades to hand in his resignation on account of the election defeat at the July general elections, he refused to do so. He received the confidence vote of the National Council of the party and thus preserved his leadership post. The number of the National Council members who voted in his support was 122, while another 29 voted against his remaining at the leadership position in the party. The National Council also made the decision to convene a regular congress of

the party (which – according to the party statute – is a session of the current Party Congress) on the 18th of October.

Stanishev and his inner circle refuted the idea of convening an ad-hoc congress of the party, to the purpose of which new delegates should be elected to take part in it, with the motive that in this way the congress proceedings would be delayed way too much. In this way, in fact, Stanishev aims at preserving the status quo, as it is precisely the same delegates to the current Congress that voted for him with more than 90 percent of the votes at the previous session of the Congress.

At the meeting of the National Council Stanishev said that he was not handing in his resignation, because such an act would be interpreted as an escape from accountability. Stanishev defended the party leadership by adding that members of the Executive Bureau had handed in their written resignations, but this act was largely unnecessary at the time being, according to the BSP leader.

The former MP, Georgi Bliznashky, declared that after such an election defeat, the party leader was obliged to hand in his resignation. Bliznashky pointed out that what was lacking in the BSP was a debate on "the grand subject of corruption". In his opinion this was one of the "Achilles's heels of the government and this was the reason why it was left undiscussed". According to Bliznashky, the party failed to muster the necessary strength to expose those people, who during their term in office resorted to practising abuse of power.

Another former MP, Dobromir Gushterov, handed in his resignation as a member of the National Council. He said that with his conduct Stanishev was leading the party to its total demise and – in Gushterov's opinion – the situation with the UDF as a party could get repeated, as – having collapsed from an electoral point of view – the UDF gradually became a marginal political formation.

The processes of internal conflicts within the BSP do not result from the defeat at the July general elections only. These con-

flicts have been ravaging the BSP members throughout the entire term in office the party spent at the helm of the country's governance, but thus far – despite the conflicts – always a compromise was made in the name of this same country's governance.

The game of gaining the upper hand within the BSP is played among several major groups in the party. On the one hand, the leader Stanishev is trying to preserve his control over the party, and so far he managed to do it successfully owing to his position of Prime Minister of the country. This is the reason why Stanishev surrounded himself with a loyal National Council and a loyal Executive Bureau, by means of which he continues to exert his control over the party. At the same time, a number of local party organizations feel dissatisfied with the policy pursued by the central BSP leadership and make demands for a change to be effected.

There are other groups within the party attempting to avail of this situation. The wings around Roumen Petkov and Roumen Ovcharov, which Stanishev was trying to isolate during his term in office from the executive branch of power, are now insisting on changes and reforms. These two groups of influence within the BSP are the major threats for Stanishev's leadership, despite the fact that they formally gave the current leader their support.

Yet another group has taken shape within the BSP – that of the "discontented former MPs", such as Tatyana Doncheva, Dobromir Gushterov, Mladen Chervenjakov, etc., who insist on the immediate resignation of the party leader Stanishev.

The left wing within the BSP around Yanaky Stoilov has also been insisting on changes to take place. According to Stoilov, the major reason for the failure of the BSP is the fact that the party has become a clientele organization of lobbyist interests and has abandoned both "the left-wing idea and its own electorate".

It is these major groupings precisely that will determine the future processes of developing conflicts within the party with a view to its forthcoming Congress.

The BSP began its preparation for the local by-elections in Sofia City and the town of Vratza, which are scheduled to take place on November 15th. These elections will be extremely difficult for the party, taking into account the situation in which it currently finds itself.

The Sofia City party organization tabled the nomination of Georgi Kadiev for the race at which a new mayor will be elected. The party leader Sergei Stanishev, however, opposed this nomination and expressed the opinion that the BSP should not raise a candidate for the post who is narrowly party-oriented. In fact, Stanishev opposes this nomination, because Kadiev is one of the main internal party critics of the ex-prime minister. For his part, however, Kadiev is a figure, which enjoys the strong approval of the BSP ranks. With his current nomination and despite the actual outcome of the upcoming by-elections, Kadiev is making a serious claim for his future political development in the BSP.

2.2.2. Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF)

Immediately after the July general elections, the MRF started making an assessment of its participation in the country's governance. One of the major conclusions made by the party leadership is that the MRF has achieved its best election result ever since it has been running elections, because it has proved to its electorate that it is a responsible political entity enjoying considerable public clout. According to the leadership assessment, however, numerous accusations were simultaneously launched against the party, by means of which other parties gained enviable public legitimacy. Nonetheless, according to the MRF, this situation is only a temporary phenomenon and will hardly bring future political dividends to those parties and politicians that have put their stakes on unnecessary confrontation.

As expected, the MRF went into opposition by voting against the GERB government. Lyutvi Mestan declared that the MRF would be a constructive opposition. Mestan qualified as a dangerous precedent the fact the GERB gov-

ernment was given support by the "Ataka" Party. According to Mestan, this was one of the reasons why the MRF gave its categorical vote against the Cabinet of Boiko Borissov.

The party leader, Ahmed Dogan, expressed his opinion that the Cabinet would come to dominate Parliament, which would be a distasteful and poor practice, and the MRF would categorically oppose it. On the other hand, according to Dogan, GERB lacks the necessary experience for the governance of the country. The GERB MPs were a proof to this effect, as none of them had any serious political biography. The lack of proven professionals in the GERB parliamentary fraction – in the opinion of Ahmed Dogan – would substantially encumber the legislative work of the newly elected Bulgarian Parliament.

The MRF expressed its disagreement with the decision made by the right-wing parliamentary majority to set up an ad-hoc parliamentary committee entrusted with the task of checking up the legitimacy and way of conducting the electoral procedures in the polling stations opened for the July general elections in the Republic of Turkey. According to the governing party, a number of infringements and abuses were committed there, which throws doubt on the number of parliamentary seats with which the MRF was returned to the National Assembly. The MRF said that they would address the Constitutional Court and the Prosecutor's Office on account of these actions of the parliamentary majority, which – according to the party leadership – were both unlawful and unsubstantiated.

3. Public Opinion

A high level of public confidence accompanied the first steps in office of both the GERB government and Prime Minister Boiko Borissov. Opinion poll surveys indicate that Bulgarian citizens have high expectations from the new government. Most hopes are connected with the efforts of the new government to combat corruption and organized crime. This is largely due to Boiko Borissov's personality and the po-

litical will he has been demonstrating all the time he was in opposition.

What provoked interest among pollsters were the attitudes of Bulgarian voters with respect to political institutions both in Bulgaria and in the European Union. Bulgarians continue to distrust their national institutions and remain one of the greatest Euro-optimists at the same time. This is what the data compiled by the Euro-Barometer opinion poll survey, held in July 2009, indicates.

Only 14 per cent of Bulgarian voters trust their country's judicial system. Bulgaria also ranks almost at the bottom of the rating scale among the EU member countries in terms of the degree of confidence its citizens have in their own national government – merely 17 per cent of Bulgarians said they trusted their government in June 2009. Most likely, this result is connected with the strong disapproval of the government led by Sergei Stanishev, which was ruling the country then. At the same time, more than 50 per cent of the Bulgarians participating in this survey have indicated that they trust the European Commission.

Only 10 per cent of Bulgarian respondents have confidence in their National Parliament, given the fact that the average confidence rating of these institutions in the European Union is 32 per cent. However, the confidence of Bulgarians in the European Parliament is 61 per cent, which is by 14 per cent higher than the average for the European Union at large.

Only 13 per cent of Bulgarian respondents have indicated confidence in the political parties in Bulgaria, whereas the average confidence rating percentage of the political parties in the European Union is 19 per cent.

At the same time, Bulgaria is one of the countries where it is traditional for the population to have the highest level of confidence in the European Union and its institutions. Currently, the confidence rating of the EU and its institutions has reached 60 per cent, which is the highest level attained since Bulgaria acceded to the European Union, whereas the average confidence rating indicator for the EU as a whole is 45 per cent.

Only 3 per cent of Bulgarians are in the opinion that the national social system could serve as an example to other EU member countries, unlike the opinion of 46 per cent of the citizens of the EU as a whole, who would recommend their national systems to be taken as such an example. Nearly half of Bulgarians think that the system of social and welfare services is far too expensive for the society at large, whereas only 8 per cent believe that it secures a sufficiently wide variety of care-giving services.

At the time being, it is the economic situation that is of the gravest concern for the people, according to the attitudes revealed by Bulgarian voters. The Bulgarian respondents have indicated that the most serious problems the country is currently facing are: the economic situation (51 per cent), unemployment (38 per cent), the inflation rate (30 per cent), and rampant crime (29 per cent). In this respect, the data compiled in this opinion poll survey gets close to the EU average, the only difference being that in the average EU situation unemployment ranks first, before the economic situation.

In the majority of cases, Bulgarian citizens make a negative assessment of their personal labour status and only slightly more than a third of them qualify it as good. Job security is extremely important for Bulgarian citizens as well, but they lay a much stronger emphasis on good remuneration. This is a subject which has specific dimensions in Bulgaria, as the latter is one of the countries notorious for the lowest standard of living in the entire European Union.

4. Major Conclusions And Forecasts

1. The future development of the political situation in the country will continue to unfold mostly under the impact of the activities undertaken by the new Bulgarian government. This will determine the relations both between the governing party and the opposition, on the one hand, and, on the other, among the right-wing parties themselves, which have thus far been supporting the GERB Party.

Despite the fact that the parliamentary represented right-wing parties have given their support to the government, contradictions may emerge between them and the GERB Party over the next few months. These differences could be connected both with the economic measures undertaken by the new government and the energy projects, regarding which the Blue Coalition has a stance of its own.

The growing economic crisis will also be one of the important factors determining the political debate in the country. Society is under the impact of increasing apprehensions connected with the rising unemployment rate, and this makes the way in which the governing party will respond to the challenge especially significant.

2. Thus far, GERB has been laying the emphasis on the issue concerning the review of the inheritance left by the previous government. The subject matter of corruption is one of the major issues pointed out by the public opinion as a paramount factor hampering the development of the country. This is the reason why it is essential both for GERB and Boiko Borissov's government to manifest their determination and political will to heal the sores of corruption. Besides, this determination was one of the most important claims made by the party and Borissov in person from the very first day, on which the party was established. Therefore, over the coming months Borissov will attempt to consolidate the executive and legislative branches of power around himself, which will make it possible for him to push through with those political reforms that GERB has already announced to be the priority issues in its political programme.

The success at the local by-elections for Sofia City mayor is also important for the GERB party, as it will be yet another proof of the supremacy of the party over all the rest of the political entities and formations in the country. And it is not by chance that Yordanka Fandakova was nominated as GERB's candidate for the post of Sofia City Mayor, because she is one of the faces, which are closely committed to the political cause of the GERB Party.

3. The Blue Coalition very much hoped to be one of the major factors in the formation of the new Bulgarian government. The coalition between the UDF and DSB was set up precisely in order to make it possible for the new political union to become the third political force in the country. This failed to materialize, however, and this is the reason why a debate has been launched to the purpose of clarifying the reason underlying the poor performance of the coalition at the July general election.

The relations between the two parties are undergoing a dynamic development and future conflicts and tensions cannot be ruled out. The situation within the UDF is much more unpredictable, as strong dissatisfaction with the leader, Martin Dimitrov, can be felt there, especially on the part of the Sofia City party organization of the UDF. This autumn, primaries will be held again for the election of a UDF leader, and it is not unlikely for Martin Dimitrov to lose the election this time.

Unlike the UDF, DSB is much more consolidated from the point of view of its party leadership. Nevertheless, the process of debating the issue connected with the replacement of the politicians burdened with the downsides of the country's transition is still on the agenda. This is the reason why the problem with Ivan Kostov's leadership remains open, although for the time being the party lacks a figure capable of replacing him.

4. For the time being, the Order, Legality and Justice Party (OLJ) remains outside the limelight and public attention. The party received support at the July general elections mainly owing to the strong populist conduct it manifested during the pre-election campaign. The situation is different now and the OLJ will try to adapt to it. It is likely for the OLJ to table once again its idea about the summoning of a Grand National Assembly to the purpose of passing a new Constitution of the country. The OLJ and its leader, Yane Yanev, will make use of their declared Grand National Assembly stance in the future, too, as an official reason for withdrawing their support for the GERB Party, should the governing party refuse to back up this idea.

5. The "Ataka" Party continues to be an unpredictable player. It gave its support to Boiko Borissov's Cabinet, which can bring about its loss of identity in the future. GERB and its leader Borissov profess a moderate type of nationalism, which competes with the brand of the "Ataka" Party nationalism on the territory of electoral support. This is the reason why "Ataka" faces the challenge of the way in which it will adapt to its new role of a party supporting the governing majority, especially having in mind that so far "Ataka" was strong because it was a radical opposition, refuting the existing status quo in the country.

6. After the disastrous defeat at the July general elections, the conflicts within the BSP have been deepening. The various groups of influence in the party are fighting for the political leadership. The official reason for this in-fighting is the future of the party and its new political and ideological vision. In fact, the party has to solve the grave issue about the reasons underlying the failure of its term in office at the helm of the country's governance. Actually, one of the reasons for this failure is the fact that the BSP turned into a securely self-enclosed clientele organization, defending and protecting individual groups and economic interests. For the time being, the BSP leadership and the leader Sergei Stanishev himself refuse to admit their failure in the governance of the country, which increasingly dooms the future of the party to total unpredictability.

7. The major challenge currently facing the MRF is the issue about searching and finding ways to overcome the strongly negative public image, which the party enjoys at the time being, according to the public opinion in the country. What the party has undertaken so far is to adopt a strategy of self-isolation from public attention, thus waiting for the time when the situation will become more favorable for them. Currently, the party has no genuine "allies", because the BSP is also manifesting a reserved attitude as far as open joint actions with the MRF are concerned, and – to top it all – the BSP is strongly preoccupied with its own internal party problems.

5. Results From the General Elections Held on July 5th 2009 In Bulgaria

Total percentage of voter turnout: 60.20%

Parties and Coalitions	Valid Ballots Cast	%	Majority Vote MPs	Number of parliamentary seats
The GERB Party	1 677 870	39.71	26	116
Coalition for Bulgaria	747 849	17.70	0	40
MRF	610 831	14.46	5	38
The "Ataka" Party	395 656	9.36	0	21
The Blue Coalition	285 418	6.76	0	15
OJL	174 582	4.13	0	10
NMSP	127 340	3.01	0	0
The "LIDER" Party	137 684	3.26	0	0

About the editor:

Georgi Karasimeonov, Professor, Doctor of Philosophical Sciences, is Head of the Department of Political Science at the "Kliment Ochridsky" Sofia University, Director of the Institute for Political and Legal Studies, and Editor-in-Chief of the "Political Studies" Journal. Between 1991 and 1998 he was Chairman of the Bulgarian Association for Political Sciences.

Contact point: ipls@dir.bg



Imprint

Friedrich Ebert Foundation
Office Bulgaria
P.O.Box 958
97, Knjaz Boris I St.
1000 Sofia, Bulgaria

Orders

Friedrich Ebert Foundation
Office Bulgaria
Att.: Emilia Bargaslieva

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.