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B A R O M E T E R

Political Parties Development in Bulgaria

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■ The upcoming elections due to take place next year have exacerbated the political discourse among the major political parties in the country. The topical political rhetoric has increasingly shifted from actual politics to personal attacks, accusations, and allegations, aimed at tainting the reputation of the political opponent and rival. This situation will be observed over the coming year as well, right through the local and presidential election campaigns.

■ Despite the hesitant policies the GERB Party has been pursuing in a number of political areas, the rating of the party remains high and at the time being there is no other plausible political alternative, which could possibly bring about the electoral defeat of the governing party. The rows surrounding the GERB Party over the past few months, however, have resulted in the decline of its confidence rating. This is a notable shift, as a large majority of the Bulgarians gave their 2009 electoral support to GERB precisely on account of its anti-corruption program and the promise for effective combat against organized crime.

■ The Blue Coalition is turning into one of the staunchest critics of the GERB Party. There is a possibility for it to become GERB's opposition. Such a tactical move seems justified from an internal party point of view. Opinion polls indicate that a large part of the right-wing voters who gave their support to the GERB Party at the last general election have been disappointed with the policies, which the incumbent governing majority has been pursuing since it came into office.

■ The emergence of the new presidential project has begun to alter the situation in the left-wing political space. The project became popular with its abbreviation signifying the first three letters of the Bulgarian alphabet (ABV), which actually encode words meaning an "Alternative for Bulgarian Revival". For the time being, it is far from clear what the political objectives of the ABV Movement are going to be and whether it will eventually become a yet another political party. Participants in the Movement declared themselves to be an alternative to the incumbent GERB governance.

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1. The Political Situation

What is being observed with the increasingly closer approach of the 2011 local and presidential elections in Bulgaria is the perceptible exacerbation of relationships among the political parties in the country.

Both the deliberations and the voting procedure provoked by the first non-confidence vote against the incumbent government, which the BSP and the MRF jointly tabled in Parliament on account of the crisis in the healthcare sector, were held in the absence of Prime Minister Boiko Borissov. For the first time ever over the past twenty years of democratic governance in the country, a Bulgarian Prime Minister was deliberately absent from a non-confidence vote against the Cabinet. This elicited the strong criticism of the opposition, which accused Prime Minister Borissov of disregarding the National Assembly. As expected, only the opposition personified by the BSP and the MRF voted in favor of the non-confidence vote, which they themselves had tabled.

The political project announced by President Parvanov provoked strong political reverberations, despite the fact that it had been subject to public discussions long before its official launch. The first initiative of the Movement entitled "An Alternative for Bulgarian Revival" (the Bulgarian abbreviation of which is ABV) was a discussion held in the middle of November under the heading of "Bulgaria – on the Next Day". To prevent possible attacks of infringing the Constitution, Parvanov was not the organizer of the forum but its guest instead, invited to attend it by an Initiative Committee headed by the Mayor of the town of Blagoevgrad, Kostadin Paskalev. According to the Bulgarian Constitution, the President shall not be part of the leadership of any political entity. Regardless of the fact that the ABV was not established as a proper political party, GERB and the Attack Party accused the President of actually having infringed the country's Constitution.

Although President Parvanov had declared months ago that Bulgarian politics needed new faces, the faces of the newly established Movement are those of well-known politicians and public figures. Members of the Initiative Committee also are: Borislav Kittov, former MP from the Bulgarian Agrarian People's Union – People's Union, Prof. Vassil Prodanov from the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Emil Kalo, Chairman of the Shalom Association of Jews in Bulgaria, the Reserve General Mikho Mikhov, the former Chief Secretary of the Ministry of Interior, Krassimir Petrov, sport stars Yordan Yovchev and Valentin Yordanov, and the incumbent Member of the European Parliament and former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ivailo Kalfin.

The address of President Parvanov to the ABV Forum contained sharp criticism of the GERB governance. In his opinion, the revival of the Bulgarian nation goes through reconciliation and the refusal to wage battles with the country's past. In Parvanov's opinion, the ABV Movement will strive to achieve a historical compromise between the Left Wing and the Right Wing, nurturing a new type of political culture, whereby decisions are made by a broader circle of parties and civic structures.

President Parvanov declared that the ABV Movement intended neither to grow into a party nor to run at next year's local elections, meaning that the Movement would not be drafting slates of municipal councilors of its own and would not nominate candidates for mayors of its own. In his opinion, however, the ABV Movement could lend support to certain candidates – either independent candidates for mayors or the candidates of other parties. One of the founders of the ABV Movement, Kostadin Paskalev, also said that the ABV Movement was not going to become a party, but should that nonetheless happen, he himself would instantly leave the Movement altogether.

At the beginning of December, the Bulgarian Parliament finally passed the 2011 Government Budget of the country. The GERB and Attack

parties voted in favor of the budget tabled by the Cabinet, the BSP and the MRF voted against, while the Blue Coalition abstained. The decision of the traditional Right Wing to refrain from voting for the Budget is a symbolic move and is a yet another confirmation of the tendency for its increasingly more decisive differentiation from the policies pursued by the GERB Party.

The 2011 Government Budget envisages an economic growth rate to the tune of 3.6 percent. The budget deficit amounts to BGN 2.16 billion, which is by 3 percent lower than the overall amount of the country's GDP and thus does not exceed the EU permitted mark. The revenue side of the budget amounts to BGN 25 844 billion, which exceeds the 2010 budget revenue target by BGN 1.3 billion. The excise tax on fuels and tobacco products goes up, whereby the expectations are for this increase to bring BGN 65 million in budget revenues. The flat 10 percent tax rate on corporate and personal incomes has been preserved. The forecast 2011 inflation rate is 3.7 percent.

The expenditure side of the budget amounts to BGN 27 807 billion. The maximum amount of incomes for the purpose of deducting social security contributions remains at the level of BGN 2000. The 2011 government budget envisages no increase of minimum wages and pensions whatsoever. The largest expenditures laid down in the government budget are allocated for appropriation by two ministries, namely the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Defense.

The legislators envisage that the 2011 budget deficit can be made up for by an issue of government debt to the tune of BGN 2.35 billion and by raising revenues from privatization deals to the tune of BGN 450 million.

One of the controversial points in the process of passing the 2011 government budget was the decision of the governing majority to transfer the reserve of the National Health Insurance Fund to the budget of the Ministry of Health. The BSP qualified this decision as nationalization of funds. The Blue Coalition also

voiced their stance against this decision and declared that they would address the Constitutional Court to this effect.

The Blue Coalition warned that there was a genuine danger for the country to incur an excessive budget deficit next year, because the expectations for a 3.6 percent growth rate were unrealistic. Furthermore, the Right Wing accused the governing majority of practising "leftist populism" and accomplishing no reforms whatsoever, thus preventing the country from entering the phase of economic recovery.

Similar criticism was launched by the MRF as well. They said that by passing such a government budget, the ruling majority had missed the opportunity to implement genuine reformist policies.

The opposition expressed its dissatisfaction with the fact that Prime Minister Boiko Borissov was absent from the Plenary Hall of the National Assembly throughout the entire parliamentary procedure of passing the 2011 government budget. According to a number of political analysts, Borissov's neglect of Parliament is increasingly turning into a characteristic style of his conduct, which exacerbates the relations with the parliamentary opposition and adversely impacts the functioning of the institutions.

At the beginning of October, the Prime Minister of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, paid an official visit to Bulgaria. During his bilateral talks with Prime Minister Borissov, Erdoğan declared that Turkey was looking forward to Bulgaria's support for his country's pending accession to the European Union. The Prime Minister of Turkey also noted that Brussels was putting far too many obstacles on Ankara's path to EU membership, which were missing from the pre-accession practices of the European Commission with respect to other countries. In reply Boiko Borissov said that Bulgaria supported Turkey's European prospects. However he rejected the possibility for the Bulgarian stance concerning Turkey's EU accession to be decided at a referendum and declared that this issue would be

considered only when Turkey had closed down all the required negotiation chapters.

In November, the Russian Prime Minister, Vladimir Putin, arrived in Bulgaria to sign the agreement for the construction of the "South Stream" gas pipeline. Another Russian-Bulgarian project, namely the construction of the "Belene" Nuclear Power Plant, is about to be finalized as well. The two countries signed a memorandum for the establishment of the project company, which will be responsible for the construction of the NPP. The memorandum lays down the percentage stakes of the parties involved in the project company. It envisages that the Bulgarian state-owned National Electricity Company (NEC) will have a 51 percentage stake, and Russia – 47 percent. The project also includes European investors, such as the French "Altran" Technological Company and the Finnish "Fortum" Company, the shares of which will be 1 percent each.

The major differences between Bulgaria and Russia over the past two years concerned the cost of the "Belene" NPP, which – according to the latest calculations done by "Rosatom" – cannot go below EUR 6.4 billion. The Bulgarian government insists that the overall cost should not exceed EUR 5 billion. The cost issue has remained unsolved thus far, and clarity is expected to emerge only at the time of signing the final contract for the construction of the "Belene" NPP project.

The GERB governing majority together with the Attack Party MPs passed the new Electoral Code, which was subject to deliberations for almost a year now. It unites into a single Act of Parliament all the rules governing the various kinds of elections held on the territory of this country. The most hotly debated were the texts concerning local elections. One of the amendments envisages that the mayors of the boroughs in the larger cities such as Sofia, Plovdiv, and Varna from now on will be appointed rather than being directly elected by the citizens as the law provided for thus far. The major motive

of the governing majority is that such borough mayors are not vested with sufficient powers, which could justify their direct election by the local voters.

It is the Blue Coalition that reacted most strongly to this amendment. The new situation has a direct bearing on the interests of the UDF and DSB, as these two parties have borough mayors of their own in the biggest cities of the country. In the capital city the Blue Coalition has traditionally strong positions in some of the borough municipalities and this is the reason why the direct elections for borough mayors are important for its constituent parties from a strategic point of view. For its part, the BSP also voiced its stance against this particular amendment.

A similar provision of the new Electoral Code envisages that the mayors of small settlements – mainly villages populated by less than 500 inhabitants – shall also be appointed instead of elected. The opposition was equally critical of this idea as well.

Another controversial amendment to the Electoral Code is the provision requiring permanent residence for local election voters within the limits of a year on the territory of a given municipality. Subsequently, the length of permanent residence was diminished to 10 months. This amendment aims at avoiding the so-called "electoral tourism", which has been practised for years now, mainly by the MRF, by organizing the Bulgarian immigrants to Turkey and bringing them to Bulgaria for a day or two in order to secure a substantial number of votes in target municipalities. The staunchest supporters of this amendment are the nationalists from the Attack Party. The idea gained the support of the GERB Party and the Blue Coalition as well. The MRF said that this amendment was depriving Bulgarian citizens from vested rights and that they felt obliged to address the Constitutional Court on this account.

The Electoral Code opens up the possibility for casting e-votes via the Internet, which initially will only be experimental. In the meantime,

the governing majority made a decision for next year's local and presidential elections to be held on the same day – on one of the Sundays in October 2011.

Despite the continuing extensive media coverage of police actions and operations, genuine results in the combat against organized crime and corruption have not been achieved over this last quarter of the year as well. One of the indicative law-court cases – the one against the so-called "Galev brothers" – ended up with a not-guilty verdict. Another case against the alleged motorway robbers nicknamed 'the Crocodiles' also ended up with their exoneration. The case against the gang of the kidnappers nicknamed "the Impertinent" was given a continuance for a yet another time. The law-court modified the remand measure of the former agent of the State National Security Agency, Alexei Petrov, into home arrest. A number of the charges brought up against him were lifted because of the lack of sufficient proof and only those for extortion are still in force. These cases show that Bulgaria is still incapable of finding an appropriate way of combating organized crime. The accusations circulated by the governing majority that the problems are wholly due to the judiciary seem increasingly more unsubstantiated. According to insiders, there are serious shortcomings in the process of investigation and the performance of the police as well.

The fact that there are misgivings concerning the adequate performance of the law-enforcement bodies and the judiciary in this country on the part of Bulgaria's EU partners was the letter of the French and German Presidents sent in the last decade of December to the European Commission, whereby they demand for the postponement of Bulgaria's and Romania's accession to the Schengen zone on account of doubts about their preparedness for the task of being reliable external borders of the Union. Their letter insists that such a decision be made only after the so-called EC Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM) Report has been published, through

which Brussels monitors the progress made by the two countries in the sectors of justice and home affairs. The EC Report is due in February and, according to the French-German letter, it has to be properly assessed by the EU member countries, especially with respect to the issue concerning the capacity of these two countries to cope with organized crime and corruption, which contain the potential of endangering the integrity of the Union. Despite the joint French-German stance on the issue, the country's top officials hope to join the EU border-free zone by the end of 2011 as scheduled.

On the other hand, in order to secure a more sophisticated judiciary mechanism, which will be better prepared to hear criminal cases involving organized crime, the government has been considering for almost a year now the institution of special criminal courts. Eventually, after consultations with the Venetian Commission, at the end of December Parliament passed an amendment to the Judiciary Act providing for the establishment of such a specialized criminal law-court. The governing majority hopes that such a specialization will yield the results, on which both Bulgarian society and the EU community have insisted for quite some time now.

The month of December witnessed a new wave of rows, which received international reverberations as well and continued to undermine the confidence rating of the government (for further detail see the Opinion Poll Section). The first one came with the revelation that the Head of Bulgaria's Agriculture Fund, Kalina Ilieva, turned out to have forged her university degree diploma. The second one erupted with the revelations of the special Commission responsible for the opening of the former communist State Security files. On its website the Commission published a list of incumbent Bulgarian diplomats at the level of ambassadors and heads of consular offices who had been former State Security officers, agents, and collaborators. Most of the 218 names now revealed used to work for the communist Intelligence and Counter-

intelligence units. What is even more striking is the fact that over the past twenty years the number of former State Security agents at top positions in the Diplomatic Service has been growing instead of diminishing, to reach as high as close to 50 percent.

In connection with this latest row, the comments of the foreign press focused on the fact that 21 years after the fall of communism, the successive Bulgarian governments have proved incapable of coping with the legacy of the former State Security Services.

In order to prevent any further damages to the authority, reliability, and credibility of the country abroad, on the eve of Christmas Night the Cabinet made the decision to recall all diplomats exposed for belonging to the former State Security Services in one or another capacity. To this end, the President will have to sign a decree for their recall. At a special press conference, Prime Minister Borissov said that after their recall these people will continue to work at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs until their retirement, as Bulgarian law does not provide for any lustration mechanisms or other forms of disqualifying from office.

2. Situation and Development of the Party System in Bulgaria

2.1. Trends in the Right-Wing Political Environment

The Blue Coalition is about to go into opposition to the GERB Party. Most likely, an official announcement to this effect will be made at the beginning of next year with a view to the upcoming local and presidential elections due to take place in the fall of 2011. In this way, from then on, GERB would be able to rely only on the parliamentary support of the nationalists from the Attack Party. The OLI party has launched a campaign aimed at discrediting members of the incumbent government, which has further exacerbated the poignant political discourse between the governing majority and the opposition.

2.1.1. The GERB Party

The last three months of 2010 will be remembered with the series of rows, in which the GERB Party was involved. The release of Alexei Petrov from his remand measure of custodial detention and his transfer to home arrest unleashed a succession of public attacks directed at the governing majority. The OLI – the party, which is seemingly quite close to Petrov and receives information from his sources – accused Tzvetan Tzvetanov, the Minister of Interior, of concealing facts concerning the real estate he owns. The information disseminated by the OLI is related to several apartments bought by Tzvetanov, the value of which – in the opinion of the OLI leader, Yane Yanev, – exceeded the amount of income received by Tzvetanov over the last few years.

In response to this information, the BSP even accused the Minister of Interior of abuse of office and conflict of interests and threatened to address the Prosecutor's Office to this effect. According to the socialists, at the time when Tzvetanov served as Deputy Sofia City Mayor, Sofia Municipality concluded dozens of deals with a company, which subsequently sold an apartment to Tzvetanov at an extremely low cost. The implicating factor here, in the opinion of the BSP, is that the manager of this company is a close friend of Tzvetanov's.

Tzvetanov denied the allegations by saying that they were circulated by figures connected with organized crime, their main intention being to destabilize the country's governance. He declared that he had bought the apartments by a combination of a bank loan and personal savings from salaries and the royalty for an analysis commissioned to him on the crime-related situation in the country. However, Tzvetanov refused to name the entity, which ordered this analysis. The Minister of Interior confirmed that one of the apartments was bought from a friend of his at a cost lower than the market value, but he saw nothing extraordinary and improper in this fact.

The National Revenue Agency (NRA) made an audit of Tzvetanov's personal estate and

came up with the opinion that no infringements of the taxation law were found. The BSP remained dissatisfied with Tzvetanov's explanations and the NRA position and even tabled a demand that a parliamentary inquiry committee be set at Parliament in order to review the case. This demand of theirs, as expected, was promptly rejected by the parliamentary majority.

The accusations against Tzvetan Tzvetanov have adversely affected his personal political rating. Several opinion poll agencies have recorded a decline of his confidence rating by as much as 10 percent.

Tzvetanov's name was involved in another row as well. According to a statement of his, the ex-Prosecutor-in-Chief, Nickola Filchev, was suspected for ordering the murder of prosecutor Nikolai Kolev in 2002. The Prosecutor's Office denied having received any such information thus far and no pre-trial investigation was ever held to this effect. Filchev was interrogated only in the capacity of a witness. The DSB qualified Tzvetanov's conduct as inadmissible and non-professional and even made a demand for his resignation.

Despite Tzvetanov's conduct and the attacks addressed to him, Prime Minister Boiko Borissov lent him his full and unconditional support and declared that he was satisfied with the work Tzvetanov was doing. Nonetheless, over the past few months, the criticism Tzvetanov has been subjected to is on the rise. Critical to him are not only opposition parties, but also a number of civic organizations and professional associations. Cases, in which the police have been accused of arbitrary acts and abuse of civil rights, are becoming increasingly more frequent. For the time being, however, Tzvetanov continues to enjoy the support of the European countries and the USA for the efforts he has been making in the combat against organized crime.

The OLI Party launched accusations addressed at another key representative of the GERB Party, namely the Chairman of the Sofia City Municipal Council, Andrei Ivanov. Accord-

ing to the OLI, Ivanov owns more than 40 real state pieces of property amounting to a total market value of more than BGN 10 million, which runs counter to his declaration concerning his personal estate. Andrei Ivanov denied the attacks and qualified them as political allegations against the governance of the country.

The ruling party was involved in a yet another serious row, which once again puts the issue about GERB's cadre policy and potential to the fore. At the end of November it became clear that the diploma of the recent director of the National Agricultural Fund, Kalina Ilieva, testifying that she had acquired a Master's Degree in Germany, is totally forged. Ilieva was appointed Head of the Fund last year when she was only 29 years old. Previously she had been a junior expert at the same institution. Doubts about her competence were reverberating in the public environment for quite a long time, and as early as a year ago the opposition expressed its misgivings about the genuine quality and authenticity of Ilieva's diploma. This case moves once again to the top of the agenda the policy GERB has been pursuing with respect to its expert potential.

The attacks against the GERB Party will continue in the future as well – especially within the context of the local and presidential elections next year. All signs indicate that certain circles in the country will attempt to destabilize the government by means of compromising materials and information. Whether this will affect the government depends on the capacity of GERB to cope with the actual political problems.

2.1.2. The Attack Party

The Attack Party reacted very harshly to Prime Minister Borissov's statement expressing the country's support for the EU accession of Turkey during Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's official visit to Sofia. To show their indignation, the Attack Party MPs entered the Plenary Hall of Parliament clad in black T-shirts with the inscription "No to Turkey in the EU". From the parliamentary ros-

trum, the party leader, Volen Siderov, expressed his gross dissatisfaction with Borissov's words and insisted that GERB should "rectify the error it has committed".

The Attack Party organized a rally in the city of Plovdiv against the possible accession of Turkey to the European Union. At the rally, Siderov announced the end of his unconditional support for the GERB Party and went on to enumerate his conditions to the parliamentary majority. One of them was for the government to seek official compensation from the Turkish government to the tune of USD 10 billion for the heirs of the Bulgarian refugees from the Eastern Thracian lands around the town of Odrin (also known as Edrine). The Attack Party also insisted that the deals signed with the electricity distribution companies should be revoked. Siderov appealed for a review of all privatization deals to be held, followed by taking certain sectors of the economy back to the patrimony of the state.

The Attack Party parliamentary faction tabled a draft decision in Parliament with the demand for summoning a national referendum on the issue of Turkey's membership in the European Union.

Despite Siderov's critical remarks, over this last quarter of the year as well, the relationships between GERB and the Attack Party did not sustain any significant change. The Attack has continued to be the party most loyal to the governing majority, which was made quite obvious by the staunch support, which the Attack MPs lent for the numerous legislative initiatives launched by the GERB Party, such as the passing of the 2011 government budget and the voting for the Electoral Code. The Attack Party stood firmly behind GERB during the non-confidence vote tabled against the government, although it was held only days after Erdoğan's official visit to Bulgaria.

The internal problems of the Attack Party have further exacerbated over the past three months. The municipal chairpersons of the party in the Shoumen district handed in their resigna-

tions because of their disagreement with the actions of the national party leadership, which in their opinion was blocking the functioning of the local organizations and was replacing the votes cast by the supporters of the party. The local leaders demanded the resignation of Volen Siderov and the entire national leadership. The Chairman of the Attack municipal organization in the town of Shoumen, Roumen Roussev, expressed his dissatisfaction with the authoritarian style practised by his leader. In his opinion, Siderov failed to take into consideration the opinions of the local structures and was one-handedly appointing people to leadership posts. Moreover, the local organizations received no funding from the central leadership whatsoever and had to pay all costs connected with their activities on their own. Dissatisfaction was also expressed on account of the fact that the Attack Party was losing its own identity because of the unswerving support it was giving to the GERB Party.

The representatives of the Attack Party in the town of Shoumen also expressed their strong disagreement with the appointment of the new district coordinator of the party, Veselin Panayotov, because the appointment was made without consulting the municipal structures of the Attack Party.

Apart from Shoumen, dissatisfaction with the central party leadership and the policy pursued by Volen Siderov has been expressed by the local structures of the party in the towns of Rousse, Gabrovo, and Yambol.

The centrifugal processes taking place within the Attack Party brought about the resignation of the People's Deputy Kamen Petkov who left the parliamentary faction of the party. Petkov was the only MP from the Attack parliamentary faction who refused to give his support to the government at the non-confidence vote against the governing majority earlier this fall. With the resignation of Kamen Petkov, the Attack parliamentary faction will continue to function with 20 MPs. Petkov will stay at Parliament in the capacity of an independent MP. The

motive he pointed out for his resignation was his disagreement with the policy pursued by the party, which – in his opinion – contradicted the promises the Attack had made to its voters during the general election campaign.

2.1.3. The Blue Coalition

(made up by Democrats for Strong Bulgaria, DSB, and the Union of Democratic Forces, UDF)

The past quarter saw the expected turnabout in the attitude of the Blue Coalition towards the GERB Party governance. The traditional Bulgarian Right Wing is about to go into opposition. Although this has not been officially announced yet, there are unmistakable signs that DSB and the UDF have begun to strongly differentiate themselves from the policies pursued by the GERB Party. A clear indication of this change is the abstention of the Blue Coalition throughout the entire parliamentary procedure of passing the 2011 Government Budget.

In one of his parliamentary speeches, Martin Dimitrov went as far as to speculate about the possibility for holding an early general election next year because of the crisis in the governance of the country. In his opinion, the Blue Coalition is getting ready for elections and it will become increasingly more recognizable by the electorate as the right-wing alternative to the incumbent government.

Thus far the criticism of the Blue Coalition addressed to the country's governance concerned mainly the area of the economy, the anti-crisis measures, and the slow-down of the reforms in the public sector. Apart from that, however, a critical attitude has emerged now concerning the effective performance of the Ministry of Interior as well. The UDF leader, Martin Dimitrov, accused Tzvetanov of arbitrary police acts and abuse of civil rights. At the same time, according to the UDF leader, the combat against organized crime and corruption is waged in an ineffective manner, because the lack of guilty verdicts connected with the judicial cases of key

significance is due to omissions and defects in the process of investigation.

The DSB leader, Ivan Kostov, demanded that Tzvetan Tzvetanov hand in his resignation. Apart from the resignation of the Minister of Interior, Kostov said that another four ministers had to be replaced as well, namely the Ministers of Transport, Health, Culture, and Agriculture respectively. In Kostov's opinion, the Cabinet badly needed a radical re-shuffle, both in terms of its human resources potential and the policies it has been pursuing thus far.

Another major subject matter, on account of which there has traditionally been a deep division of opinions between the GERB Party and the Blue Coalition, concerns the energy projects based on agreements with Russian partners. Before the arrival of Prime Minister Putin in Bulgaria, the Blue Coalition appealed to the government to refrain from signing the "South Stream" agreement and making any other commitments whatsoever without public clarification of the economic consequences they entail. According to Martin Dimitrov, otherwise this would be an unsecured and non-transparent contract signed without a clear idea of the benefits it could bring to the country. In the opinion of the UDF, the "South Stream" project will bring about no genuine diversification, as it would rather be a yet another confirmation of the energy dependence of Bulgaria on Russia.

DSB came up with a political resolution, which states that the party would continue to fight against "any going back on the Euro-Atlantic modernization of Bulgaria, against any attempt to sacrifice the Bulgarian national interests in favor of Russia". The Blue Coalition also voiced its criticism of the memorandum signed between Bulgaria and Russia for the construction of the "Belene" Nuclear Power Plant.

In November, DSB summoned the National Assembly of the party. The Assembly made a decision concerning the strategy of the party at the local and presidential elections due to be held next year. According to the DSB leadership,

the Blue Coalition should run these elections in its current format, attracting to its ranks other right-centrist political formations at the same time. The decision also envisages that the Coalition should run these elections independently with candidates of its own in every possible constituency and should not support the nominations of other political entities at the first leg of the upcoming local and presidential elections. In the opinion of Ivan Kostov, the Blue Coalition must make a clear public announcement of its claim that it will run the elections on its own, because this is the way in which it could enlarge its electoral support.

The statement of Boiko Borissov expressing his positive assessment of the activity of the former communist leader, Todor Zhivkov, provoked a pointed reaction on the part of the Blue Coalition. According to Borissov, any government would be considered to have made a huge achievement, should it manage to attain the economic growth rate of the state ruled by Todor Zhivkov. The Blue Coalition accused Borissov of attempting to exonerate the former communist regime and introduce changes to the current system of values. The Blue Coalition sent a special declaration to the European People's Party (EPP), whereby they demanded that the Bulgarian Prime Minister be reprimanded for the assessments voiced by him.

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

The first people to visit Alexei Petrov after his remand measure for charges connecting him with organized crime was modified from custodial arrest to home arrest were representatives of the OLJ party headed by the party leader, Yane Yanev. As soon as the encounter with Alexei Petrov was over, Yane Yanev said that the former agent of the National State Security Agency (NSSA) was inclined to head an expert council within the OLJ on issues related to national security.

For a yet another time Yane Yanev denied the allegations that his party was set up with

the moral and financial support of Alexei Petrov. Nonetheless, the latest events around the OLJ party and Alexei Petrov rather seem to confirm the proximity between the former NSSA agent and Yanev's party. The impression formed by the public opinion in this country about the connections of the OLJ with one of the most controversial figures of the Bulgarian transition has had rather an adverse effect on the image of the party. The opinion poll surveys held over the past three months have given a clear indication yet again about the continuing decline of the confidence and support for Yane Yanev's party, the chances of which to get returned to Parliament for a second time are practically negligible at the time being.

The OLJ party tabled a demand at Parliament for holding a Referendum on the issue of summoning a Grand National Assembly and terminating the powers of the incumbent Parliament, which was supported by a subscription containing almost 600 thousand signatures of rank-and-file citizens from the whole country. Yane Yanev said that this subscription was in practice an unequivocal and direct non-confidence vote against the incumbent GERB governance.

The Speaker of the National Assembly, Tzetzka Tzacheva, declared that this was not the appropriate moment in time for dissolving the incumbent Parliament, because at a time of an economic crisis and implementation of important reforms the country needed a properly functioning legislative body.

The OLJ party marked the fifth anniversary of its establishment by holding its National Conference. One of the announcements made at the forum was that the party would run the local and presidential elections next year independently. Yane Yanev declared that his party was the genuine right-wing alternative to the incumbent government and that the major objective of the OLJ was to pass a new Bulgarian Constitution and establish a stable two-party model.

Yane Yane also announced that in the coming months the OLJ would form a shadow gov-

ernment of its own. Its strategic objectives will focus on education, economic growth, and combating corruption. At this forum, the OLU officially established its youth organization called "The Young for Order, Legality, and Justice".

An address of greetings to the delegates to the Conference was read on behalf of Alexei Petrov, which is a yet another proof of his involvement with this party.

2.2. Trends in the Parliamentary Opposition

2.2.1. Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP)

The Third Session of the 47th Congress of the BSP was held in the middle of October. Unlike the previous two sessions of the Congress, which took place in an atmosphere of tension and confrontation, the third session conducted its business without the habitual attacks of the internal party opposition against the party leadership. This is an indication of the attempts the party has been making to achieve consolidation on the eve of the local and presidential elections next year, which does not mean that the internal opposition has acquiesced with the current status quo. In all likelihood, the internal party adversaries of Sergei Stanishev will wait to see the outcome of these elections and should they prove adverse for the party, they will once again raise the demand for his resignation.

The Congress mapped out the major objectives of the party focused on the mobilization of the party to win the presidential and local elections next year. A decision was also made that by March 2011 at the latest a coalition agreement with other left-wing parties for jointly running next year's elections should have been drafted and put into effect accordingly.

President Parvanov's initiative for the establishment of the ABV Movement was one of the principal topics, which governed the internal party debate within the BSP. The socialists discussed this issue at a party plenum where the participants expressed rather disparate stances and views.

The BSP party leader, Sergei Stanishev, expressed his skepticism as regards Parvanov's vision about a broad national unification of the left-wing and right-wing political entities in this country. In Stanishev's opinion, politics is a matter of values, which differentiate both the political parties and the policies they pursue. The BSP leader expressed his conviction that the ABV Movement would inevitably grow into a political party and reminded that both the National Movement Simeon the Second (NMSII) and Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) were conceived to emerge as civic movements but later on became political parties. Stanishev voiced his firm stance that should this happen, his party comrades were then obliged to categorically take sides. He also said that the BSP was the only genuine alternative to the GERB Party and the incumbent government of the country.

One of the representatives of the left-wing faction within the BSP, Krassimir Premyanov, also took the stance that the ABV Movement would grow into a party, because the establishment of an organizational network with local structures was an indubitable sign for this. He expressed his own concerns that Parvanov's ABV project held the potential of splitting the BSP electorate.

A different stance was expressed by Roumen Petkov, former Minister of Interior, who is known for his close contacts with the President. In his statement, Petkov defended the initiative of President Parvanov. In Roumen Petkov's opinion, with his entire activity during the past twenty years Parvanov has demonstrated his desire to unite the Left, not to disunite it. This was the reason why Petkov appealed to the BSP to declare its positive attitude to the ABV Movement in a sufficiently unambiguous way.

The MEP Christian Vigenin also addressed President Parvanov's initiative and said that this issue had not been subject to an official debate in the Party of European Socialists. Nevertheless, Vigenin shared his opinion that some concerns had been expressed by the European socialists

about the unity of the Bulgarian Left Wing. Vigenin thinks that should the ABV Movement grow into a party, then PES would unequivocally stand in support of the BSP.

On the whole, the Plenum was dominated by the conviction that the ABV Movement would eventually become a party. A large part of the socialists are ill at ease that this could split the votes in favor of the BSP. However, the motion tabled to vote for a written declaration expressing the stance of the Plenum concerning the presidential project was turned down by the leader of the party, Sergei Stanishev.

2.2.2. Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF)

Over the last quarter of 2010, the MRF enhanced its criticism directed at the governing majority. The party refused to vote for the 2011 Government Budget and sharply reacted to the provision requiring a ten months' permanent residence eligibility for local election voters laid down in the new Electoral Code. The MRF qualified this measure as an attempt to deprive potential voters from vested political rights, which by itself is a gross violation of the Bulgarian Constitution.

A pending law-suit, which directly involves the MRF, reached a resolution. A three-member panel of the Supreme Administrative Court ruled that the Chairman of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms, Ahmed Dogan, did not infringe the Conflict of Interests Act and the requirements governing the conduct of the Bulgarian members of parliament on account of the royalty of over EUR 1 million he had received for consultancy services in connection with the construction of the "Tzankov kamak" hydro-electric power plant. Two of the judges think that there has been no such infringement because his contracts with the Institute of Construction and Mining were signed in 2008, whereas the Conflict of Interests Act came in force in 2009.

The Chair of the three-member panel, Judge Marina Mikhailova, however, signed the court decision with a dissenting opinion. According to

her, it has been proven beyond any reasonable doubt that Ahmed Dogan lacks the competency to perform hydro-geological examinations and consequently the contracts signed with him have been concluded with a view to his capacity of Member of Parliament and leader of a party, which at that time was a constituent part of Sergei Stanishev's Cabinet and the tri-partite country's governance.

The motives of Judge Marina Mikhailova also state that one portion of Dogan's royalty – to the tune of BGN 453 thousand – was transferred to him before the Conflict of Interests Act came into force and this money the MRF leader could legitimately retain. The rest of the amount – to the tune of BGN 1.36 million – was paid after the Conflict of Interests Act was part of the country's legislation and this sum had to be duly declared before the taxation authorities. Dogan, however, failed to do so and therefore the quoted amount is legally subject to confiscation.

The final decision on this administrative law-suit will be made by a five-member panel of the Supreme Administrative Court. In the meantime, representatives of the MRF expressed their satisfaction with the ruling of the three-member panel and said that it was a just decision. Once again they repeated the thesis that the accusations against Ahmed Dogan were actually a political attack against the MRF party and its leader on the part of the incumbent government aimed at discrediting both the leader and the party in the public environment.

3. Public Opinion

According to an opinion poll survey held by the Alpha Research Agency at the beginning of October, the electoral support for the GERB Party has declined from 30.4 percent in June to 27.5 percent in October. The outflow of support for GERB is mainly due to right-wing voters and economically active inhabitants of larger towns and cities who feel dissatisfied with the postponement of reforms in key public sectors of

the economy. Despite their disillusionment, the right-wing voters who feel disappointed with the incumbent government are still incapable of seeing any other political alternative and this determines their tendency to refrain from voting for any party whatsoever. This is the reason why the number of respondents refusing to vote has risen to 41 percent.

The Blue Coalition has retained the rate of electoral support it enjoyed at the beginning of this summer of 4.1 percent but is still proving incapable of increasing its electoral capacity due to the hesitant right-wing voters who cast their ballots in favor of the GERB Party a year ago. The approval ratings of co-Chairs of the Blue Coalition, Ivan Kostov and Martin Dimitrov, stand at about 10 percent.

The approval, which Prime Minister Boiko Borissov enjoys, stands at 43 percent, while his disapproval rating has reached 23 percent. The Minister of Interior, Tzvetan Tzvetanov, enjoys the highest approval rating out of all other ministers in the Cabinet, but what is notable here is a trend of decline: from 45 percent in June to 37 percent in October. The rows, which Tzvetanov's name has been involved in, however, are likely to further decrease his approval rating.

The trend for an ongoing decline of President Parvanov's approval rating has continued. From 47 percent in September 2009, his rating stands at 32 percent at the beginning of October 2010. It is not quite clear yet in what a way his rating will be affected by the launch of his presidential ABV Movement political project.

The October data from the Alpha Research electoral attitude survey shows that 13.6 percent of the voters would cast their ballots for the BSP. This is an indication that the electoral decline, which the party was experiencing until recently, has already been overcome. Despite this fact, however, the majority of voters fail to recognize this party as an alternative to the incumbent government in anticipation of the local and presidential elections next year, due to take place in October 2011. The BSP leader, Sergei

Stanishev, has managed to stabilize his positions for the time being and the confidence rating he enjoyed in October was around 13 percent, whereas his rating four months earlier – in June 2010 – amounted to 10 percent.

If the general election were held in October 2010, 5 percent of the voters would cast their ballots for the MRF and this percentage roughly equals the size of the rock-bottom MRF electorate. The Attack Party continues to lose electoral support and only 2.7 percent of the electorate would vote for it. The OLI party has marked a yet another decline of its electoral support and for the time being its chances to make it to the Parliament are practically negligible, because only 0.9 percent of the electorate would vote for it.

The October opinion poll survey of the Alpha Research Agency indicates that the dominating overall perception in society is for a lack of any lasting improvement of the economic situation in the country. A proof to this effect is the opinion of 46 percent of the respondents who say that the economic recession has not come to an end yet.

Although the National Statistical Institute provided data about the stabilization of the Bulgarian economy, 32 percent of the employed consider that the situation in their companies has been worsening, while more than 70 percent of the respondents see no signs of overcoming the crisis in the short- and medium-term time span.

The end of December opinion poll survey held again by the same Alpha Research Agency has yielded some interesting results, which update the October data. The latest survey actually tests how the rows and the poor economic situation in the country have impacted the attitudes of the population in terms of the confidence ratings of the parties and the leading politicians.

As expected, the rating of the GERB Party was most adversely affected by the row around the MPs who left a session of the National Assembly with the expectation to receive as gifts expensive VERTU cell phones having attended

an event staged by journalists. The public opinion has been further negatively affected by the saga with the forged diploma of the former Head of the Bulgarian Agriculture Fund, Kalina Illieva, the rows with the real estate possessions of Tzvetan Tzvetanov and Andrei Ivanov, the outrageous paid trip to Venice made by the Minister of Culture, Vehdi Rashidov, as well as the transfer of the reserve of the national Health Insurance Fund to the government budget.

In numeric terms, the December Alpha Research opinion poll has produced the following results. The confidence rating of the Minister of Interior, Tzvetan Tzvetanov, has declined by 12 percent. Despite this poor result, however, the Prime Minister and leader of the party, Boiko Borissov, intends to nominate him as the party candidate for the presidential election next year. The confidence rating of the Minister of Agriculture, Miroslav Naidenov, has dropped by 5 percent. A predominant lack of electoral confidence has been measured in the ratings of Vezhdi Rashidov, Sergei Ignatov, and Simeon Dyankov as well.

The upsides for the image of the GERB Party over the past three months stem mainly from Christallina Georgieva's election for European of the year and the launch of the process of demolishing the illegal development of buildings in various parts of the country. This may be the reason why the confidence rating of the Minister of Regional Development and Public Works, Rossen Plevneliev, has marked an 11 percent rise, which ranks him first out of all other ministers in Boiko Borissov's Cabinet. Thus he toppled Tzvetan Tzvetanov from his traditional leading position and now the Minister of Interior ranks second. There has also been a rise in the confidence ratings of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Nickolai Mladenov, and the Minister of the Economy, Energy, and Tourism, Traicho Traikov.

The declining confidence rating of the larger part of the ministers, however, has brought about the overall decline of the support, which the incumbent government enjoys. In December

the negative opinion of the respondents (39 percent) significantly exceeds their positive opinion (24 percent). Nonetheless, Prime Minister Boiko Borissov has retained his traditional positive balance, whereby his approval rating stands at 42 percent against the 29 percent of disapproval accorded to him by the respondents.

On the whole, 46 percent of the respondents are satisfied with GERB's governance, while the number of the dissatisfied amounts to 51 percent. The support for the government is still at a sufficiently high level, but sociologists think that this is mainly due to the lack of a convincing moral alternative to the incumbent government.

If the general election were held in December 2010, the GERB Party would capture the votes of 27 percent of the electorate (thus marking a slight decrease in comparison with the October data), the BSP – 15.2 percent (which is a result higher by 1.6 percent than the October data), the MRF – 5 percent, the Blue Coalition – 4.4 percent (marking a slight increase in comparison with the October data), and the Attack Party – 3 percent (also marking a slight increase).

President Georgi Parvanov, who has been very active of late, continues to lose public support. In December his approval rating stands at 32 percent (no change in comparison with October), but the disapproval, which the respondents have expressed of him, now amounts to 31 percent.

4. Major Conclusions and Forecasts

1. The approaching local and presidential elections due to take place next year have exacerbated the political discourse among the major parties in the country. The rhetoric, however, is being increasingly shifted from actual politics to personal attacks, accusations, and compromising materials, the aim of which is to taint the image of the political rivals or adversaries. This will continue over the coming year as well, both before and at the time of the election campaign. It is precisely with a view to the upcoming elections that the political parties are planning their tactical moves.

2. Despite the hesitant policies of the GERB Party in a number of political areas, its rating remains high. This is a sufficient proof to the fact that at the time being there is no other genuine electoral alternative capable of incurring an election defeat to the incumbent governing party. The rows around the party over the past several months have brought about the decline of the electoral support, which thus far it has been enjoying. Whenever even shreds of doubt about improprieties and corruption among the representatives of the governing party are launched into the public space, this affects the voter attitudes.

A large part of the Bulgarian voters gave their electoral support to the GERB Party because of its anti-corruption program and the promises that organized crime will be dealt with. It is coping with organized crime precisely that will put GERB to the hardest test. Despite the numerous police actions and operations, actual results and guilty verdicts are still lacking. There is a growing conviction among the population that the underlying problems can be found not only in the judicial practices, but also in the investigation authorities and the performance of the police itself.

The GERB Party is losing the support of the Blue Coalition and from now on the government will have to rely for its very survival increasingly more heavily on the parliamentary votes of the nationalists from the Attack Party.

From a medium-term point of view, next year's elections will be especially important for the GERB Party. The closer they approach, however, the more the likelihood for implementing genuine reforms will be receding. Traditionally, parties think first and foremost about elections and their electoral performance, whereas reforms may bring about the outflow of potential electorate, which on the whole dissuades political entities from pushing through painful reforms.

From a short-term point of view, what is very important for GERB is Bulgaria's accession

to the Schengen zone. Should this effort fail, the criticism addressed to the governing party will get increasingly stronger.

3. For the first time ever since the GERB Party came into office, the Attack Party announced that its support for the governing majority is not unconditional. The occasion on which this statement was made was the official visit of the Prime Minister of Turkey, Recep Erdoğan, to Bulgaria. At the talks with his Turkish counterpart Boiko Borissov declared that Bulgaria supported the efforts Turkey has been making to accede the EU as a full-fledged member country. The violent reaction of the Attack Party, however, was more of a show piece, as nothing has indicated ever since that its attitude to the GERB Party has been changed. All legislative initiatives tabled by the governing majority are unfailingly supported by the Attack.

The Attack Party has lost a number of its local structures and with the closer approach of next year's elections this trend may become endemic. Therefore, should no change in Attack's behavior occur, the party will sustain a heavy loss at the upcoming local elections.

4. The Blue Coalition is increasingly becoming one of the staunchest and most serious critics of the GERB Party. It is highly likely for it to go officially into opposition to the governing majority quite soon. Such a strategy seems justified from an internal party point of view. Opinion poll surveys indicate that a sizeable part of the right-wing voters who cast their ballots for the GERB Party at the last general election are disappointed with the policies pursued by the ruling party. Thus far, the Blue Coalition failed to be perceived as a credible right-wing alternative due to its unclear status and its ambivalent attitude to the governing majority. Should it dare take a clear stance on the issue, it could attract to it the vacillating right-wing voters. This is the reason why the Blue Coalition decided to run the first leg of next year's local and presidential elections independently, i.e. only with candidates of its own. Besides, the current format of

the Coalition may well expand with the involvement of other right-wing parties.

5. For some time now, the OJ is waging a war with compromising materials against the governing majority. In all likelihood, Yane Yanev's party will continue with these tactical moves into the coming year as well. The lack of other political arguments is one of the reasons why the OJ has put its stakes on developing such a strategy. It proved really successful for the party at the previous general election, but the situation is radically different now. The hypothesis about the connection between the OJ and Alexei Petrov is becoming increasingly more credible. But this connection has been adversely impacting the public image of the OJ party.

6. The emergence of the presidential ABV Movement project is altering the situation in the left-wing political environment. For the time being it is still unclear what the objectives of the ABV Movement are and whether it will eventually grow into a party. Representatives of the Movement declared themselves to be an alternative to the GERB Party governance.

The circle around the BSP party leader, Sergei Stanishev, seems to be rather critical with respect to the ABV Movement and fears that the latter could eventually split the Left Wing. There are other circles within the party, however, which have expressed their positive attitude to the presidential initiative. Although the internal party opposition to a large extent has moderated its attacks against Stanishev, which became pretty obvious at the Party Congress, this may only be a mere tactical move. It is highly unlikely for any changes to be made to the party leadership before next year's elections, but if the party should sustain an election defeat, the subject matter about the resignation of the party leader would inevitably top the BSP agenda once again.

7. The MRF is the party most badly affected by the requirement for a permanent residence status of the voters at the local elections. The party is likely to address the Constitutional

Court on the issue, making a final attempt for the requirement to be revoked. The MRF leader, Ahmed Dogan, continues to shun media attention. For several months now he has made no notable appearance in the public environment. The situation will most probably change with the approach of the upcoming elections and Dogan is sure to take an active part in the party's local election campaigns as he has always done so far.

The MRF is becoming an increasingly louder critic of the governing majority, although its representatives have managed to avoid excessive confrontation at the same time. The party rhetoric continues to be moderate and this style of public conduct will most probably remain unchanged. As far as the presidential election is concerned, for the time being the MRF position on this issue remains undisclosed.

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