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Bulgaria's Political Parties

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- The political situation in the country is still tense. Dialogue between those in power and the opposition is still as sharp and confrontational as it used to be. However, the government managed to hold against the protest wave and strengthen its positions, at this stage. The protests quieting down led to gradual normalization of the situation in this country.
- GERB continues to lose public support. The inconsequent actions of the party being in opposition led to voters withdrawing from it. It will be a challenge whether the party will manage to keep its parliamentary group intact after one MP left it.
- The protests have led to consolidation of the BSP electorate. According to the polls, currently the party is the first political force, albeit with a very small advantage over GERB. Despite the intra-party criticism towards Stanishev coming from various groups in the party, who have lost their positions in recent years, BSP leadership and its parliamentary group stand firmly behind their leader.

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1. Political Situation

The political situation in the last months of 2013 remained tense. At the end of October the protests that had quieted down escalated anew. The reason was the decision of the Constitutional court that Delyan Peevski continued to be a Member of Parliament. Some students occupied the largest auditorium of St. Clement of Ochrid University in Sofia in order to request an answer about the decision of the Constitutional court and its Chairman Prof. Dimiter Tokushev, who was delivering a lecture there. Later on, the group that called themselves "The Early Rising Students" occupied Sofia University's Rectory with one major demand: resignation of the government and pre-term elections. The Rectory of the largest university in Bulgaria remained occupied for three weeks. Many members of the faculty supported the students. Similar actions of occupation started in other universities in this country, which took the form of episodic sit-ins and interruption of the lectures there.

Council of University Rectors condemned the actions of the students and made a statement that they respected the right of everyone to protest, but did not respect the methods of occupation that disturbed the teaching process. The public Declaration of the Academic Council of Sofia University also had a similar tone.

The peak of the new protest wave was on November 11-12th, when the Parliament was blocked yet again. A group of protesters made an unsuccessful attempt to break the fencing in front of the Parliament. The opposition accused the parties in power of police violence against the protesters,

which was categorically denied by the Minister of Interior. Tsvetlin Yovchev stated further that there was information at the Mol about preparations to invade the Parliament building, which was not allowed by the law-enforcement authorities.

After these events, GERB announced that they would convene a protest rally in Plovdiv on 16 November and urged their members and supporters from the entire country to join in the event. At the same time, BSP and MRF organized a counter-rally in support of the government in Sofia, where tens of thousands of supporters took part.

One of the most-serious topics, determining the development of the political situation in the country in the last quarter of this year was the increased migration flow towards Bulgaria. By the end of November, more than 11,000 refugees and illegal immigrants had entered this country. The refugee wave increased the fears of the public and led to growing nationalist and xenophobic moods. Some incidents, related to a robbery and attempted murder, as well as attacks against Bulgarian citizens by foreigners in the Sofia city center provoked response reactions by nationalist groups, who started to chase and beat immigrants. Parties like Ataka and VMRO of Krassimir Karakachanov organized rallies and demonstrations in the streets of the capital city, calling for closing the border with Turkey and extradition of all the illegal immigrants.

The Syrian refugee wave is a new challenge for this country. It made it necessary for the government to take urgent measures aimed at restricting the immigration flow. Bulgaria started negotiations with Turkey with the goal of improving security on the common border between the two

countries. The question was also raised about the re-admission agreement between Turkey and the EU, which is expected to be concluded in December 2013. Bulgaria received financial aid from a number of European states, as well as from the European Refugee Fund.

The attempts of the government to provide additional buildings for refugees' and illegal immigrants' accommodation turned out to be a very serious problem. Abandoned military bases of the Bulgarian Armed Forces are used for that purpose in various places throughout the country. However, this met the opposition of local communities. For instance, the decision of the government to place nearly 1,000 refugees in Telish, Plevan Region, led to protests amongst the locals, who blocked some roads in the area adjacent to the former military base there. There were protests like this in other places too, and this made the efforts of the government to provide additional premises for refugees' accommodation more difficult in practical terms.

A number of human rights protection organizations in this country criticized the government for the poor conditions in which refugees are accommodated. There are several reasons for this, among which the force majeure circumstances related to the large influx of immigrants, weak preparation and lack of administrative capacity of the State Agency for Refugees. Despite its numbers of staff being increased by nearly 50% the difficulties the Agency is facing are still high on the agenda.

In order to restrict the immigration flow that enters the country through the so called "green border", the government decided to start the construction of a protective barrier of wire net, similar to that of

Greece. It is for a 30 km long cross country strip along the border with Turkey, difficult to guard due to its mountainous nature. Virtually the entire immigrant influx passes through that part of the border, directed by organized groups of traffickers. The barrier should be ready within two months. The government took yet another measure – it seconded additional police officers for securing the border along this strip.

The crisis caused by the refugee influx increased the calls to the President by the parties from the entire political spectrum to convene the Consultative Council on National Security (CCNS), in order to discuss the issue at the highest political level. President Plevneliev took a long time to take the decision, which was the reason for growing criticism against him. In spite of that, the CCNS was convened on 20th November and the measures were discussed related to the refugee wave. According to the law, the CCNS is attended by the Prime Minister, Members of the Cabinet, the Speaker of the National Assembly, representatives of the parliamentary groups as well as those of the security services.

Unlike the previous meeting of the Council, which ended with a scandal due to the way the leader of Ataka Volen Siderov behaved, this one took the form of a constructive dialogue. The political situation in the country as a result of the ongoing protests was also discussed in the session. The result from the CCNS was a common stance that was supported by all Council members.

The stance condemned the attempts to incite hatred towards the refugees and manifestations of xenophobia. It was also declared that the citizens have a constitutional right to protest, which should be within the frame of the law. It was stated

that the pluralistic multi-party system is at the basis of democracy and that it should not be doubted by anyone. As to the refugees, CCNS made it compulsory for the government to work on the plan it outlined and to update it periodically on the basis of reports.

The CCNS session was the first attempt for months to reinstate the dialogue between the major political forces in this country. Achieving consensus showed that when national interest is at stake and common solutions are sought, such dialogue is possible. Proof of this was also the joint declaration by President Plevneliev and Prime Minister Oresharski, condemning the frequent manifestations of xenophobia in this country. Despite these examples of dialogue and uniformity of thinking, the sharp political confrontation between the parties and institutions has not passed yet and will continue to be the main challenge for this country in the coming months.

At the beginning of October GERB submitted the second vote of no confidence in the government. The motive was the newly established Ministry of Investment Planning, which allegedly did not function and delayed many infrastructural projects. As expected, the vote of no confidence did not succeed. Initially GERB announced that they would table a series of similar votes but gave up the idea later on.

This quarter too, energy was at the focus of public attention. PM Oresharski announced yet again that the NPP 'Belene' Project might be renewed if it is proved that it would be economically beneficial for the country.

Minister of Economy and Energy Dragomir Stoynev visited the USA and had talks with Westinghouse about the construction of Unit 7 of NPP 'Kozloduy'. Stoynev said

that the technology the US company offered was the most modern from the point of view of security.

Another major energy project 'South Stream', however, is questioned after the European Commission published a position in early December that the bilateral inter-governmental agreements of a number of EU member states with Russia contradict EU Law. This is why these countries, including Bulgaria, should request re-negotiation of the agreements.

The National Assembly voted the state budget for next year at the beginning of December. The projected revenue growth of BGN 1.5 bn. more than in 2013. This should be the effect of increasing indirect taxes, whereby an additional BGN 600 million would come from VAT and BGN 250 million – from excise duties. The Ministry of Finance projects a 1.8% growth of GDP in 2014 and expected inflation is 1.8%. According to the majority of economists, the forecast of the government is far too optimistic. EC estimates, for instance are for 1.5% GDP growth next year. Unicredit Bulbank expects 1.3%.

Innovation in next year's budget is the establishment of a project financing fund of BGN 500 million. It is called Public Investment Program 'Growth and Sustainable Development of the Regions'.

Minister of Finance Peter Chobanov explained that the fund will allocate up to BGN 15 million for municipal projects and up to BGN 30 million for projects of the ministries. The projects will be ranked by an interagency board where ministers and representatives of the municipalities will be participating. A minimum non-taxable income is also foreseen for income from labor relations up to the minimum monthly salary. Some economists and em-

ployer organizations defined such a decision as harmful, as it would increase the grey economy and is the first step towards amending the flat tax.

2. The State and Development of the Party System

2.1. Trends in the Parliamentary Represented Political Parties

2.1.1. GERB

In recent months GERB has continued its tactics of ruining some of the sessions of the National Assembly by not registering. The Party kept claiming that it is an obligation for the majority to ensure a quorum in a plenary session. Despite these cases, GERB have gradually begun to accept their role as the parliamentary opposition by counteracting the majority with political arguments and participation in debates.

In Parliament a temporary Commission of Inquiry was created to once again handle the case of leaked conversations in the so called case of "Misho the Beer". The scandal broke in the beginning of 2011 when conversations emerged into the public space, taped with special investigative techniques between Boyko Borisov and the then director of the Customs Agency Vanyo Tanov, in which the termination of customs inspection in Mihail Mihov's brewery is discussed.

This case will again be investigated by prosecutors, even though in 2011 it terminated investigations and did not succeed in submitting an indictment against officials. Prosecutor General Sotir Tsatsarov announced that once again all the people involved in the conversations will be interrogated as the preliminary proceedings have been renewed. GERB qualified this as a po-

litical order of the opposition since, according to them, this case has been solved and it has been proven that the conversations were manipulated.

The Prosecution has pressed a third charge for Tsvetan Tsvetanov – this time for misappropriation in large amounts. According to the prosecution, the Former Minister of Interior fraudulently acquired BGN 50 thousand from the Ministry of Interior budget. The money was unlawfully paid as a ransom for freeing the former chief of CD-COC in Veliko Turnovo Orlin Todorov.

At the end of November judicial proceedings began against Tsvetanov for refusing to sign an implementation of special investigative techniques against the abovementioned Orlin Todorov. The third charge, for which a pre-trial proceeding has already begun against the Deputy Chairman of GERB, according to the Prosecutor General, will soon go to court. It is about unexercised control as a result of which illegal wiretapping has been executed. Sotir Tsatsarov announced that over 800 telephone numbers have been illegally tapped. Tsvetanov denies the accusations and assigns them to political repression.

At the beginning of December GERB member Georgi Markov left the parliamentary group of the party and became an independent MP. This is the first case of anyone leaving from GERB. Markov announced he had come to this decision as a sign of disagreement with the authoritarian style of parliamentary group management and turning MPs of the party into static executors of party assignments. Markov's opinion is that if GERB were to continue this management style it could lose other MPs. He also said that in future he will vote by conscience and it is not ex-

cluded that he would support legislative initiatives and decisions of the government when they are reasonable. GERB management announced that they were not informed of his leaving in advance. Markov was summoned to leave the parliament by his fellow party members and not remain as an independent MP. Asked by journalists whether GERB expected Markov to be followed by other party members, Deputy Chairman of the Parliamentary Group Krassimir Velchev stated "that would not be such a surprise".

2.1.2. BSP

In an internal political plan the main efforts by BSP were to keep the authority and the parliamentary support for the government. Despite the protests and the attempts of the opposition, represented by GERB, to block the work of Parliament, the Parliamentary Group Coalition for Bulgaria remained unified.

As a whole, protests against the government have united BSP's electorate and for three months now the party is still the leading political force according to all opinion polls. This result is not so much due to an increase in BSP support, as it is to a decrease in the potential electorate for GERB.

The relations between BSP and MRF remain stable, although we have observed tense situations in BSP structures regarding MRF recruitments. We have even heard talk about the need for elaborating a coalition agreement between the two parties. This for now remains only an idea about which Yanaki Stoilov hinted in an interview. Yordan Tsonev from MRF announced that such an idea has not been officially discussed between the two parties.

BSP's municipal structure in the Kardzhali municipality of Kirkovo does

not agree with the personnel policy of the Government in regions with mixed population. For this reason the Municipal Deputy Chairman Dimitar Manchev has handed in his resignation from all party posts, but it has not yet been accepted. According to Manchev the personnel policy, led by the Government, "seriously empowers MRF" and the national BSP leadership "is in a severe commitment to the movement". Manchev stated that the balance in personnel policy is drastically disturbed in Kardzhali region and in the regional offices. He blamed Sergey Stanishev for the "reverence" toward MRF.

During this quarter the Former President Georgi Parvanov continued his tour in the country, organizing discussion clubs involving a wide range of citizens. BSP management regards this initiative as an attempt to create a new left party or as a desire on his behalf for the leader's post in the party, which at present the Former President denies.

Parvanov stated once again that new management in BSP is needed, which should "gather support from all different positions and consolidate left-thinkers". However he expressed skepticism for that to happen if BSP is headed by Sergey Stanishev. The Former President stressed that if the Party's management does not realize the need of inevitable change it will go "into the corner of the political scene". According to him BSP is taking after Ivan Kostov and the UDF. If the Party does not rethink its policy "the left will certainly search for other solutions and they will be beyond the monopoly of one Party".

Parvanov stated that BSP have lost the last parliamentary elections and criticized the Party for its "unprincipled compromise" with Ataka in the name of power.

Ataka's support for the Government continues to negatively affect the international image of BSP and its leader. As the leader of the Party of European Socialists, Stanishev is still criticized for his relations with Ataka, not only in the country, but also in Europe. BSP continues to insist that Ataka does not participate in the Government and does not support it.

2.1.3. MRF

At the beginning of November MRF was shaken by a scandal with the Deputy Chairman of MRF and Deputy Chairman of the National Assembly Hristo Bisserov, against whom the prosecutor's office pressed charges for money laundering.

The "Bisserov" case began after it was announced to media that he had resigned as MP and as Deputy Chairman of the Party and was also leaving politics. The initial information, spread by the MRF leader Liutvy Mestan, was that Bisserov had made this decision for personal reasons. Asked by journalists for more information, MRF MPs showed surprise and claimed that they did not know the reasons for the resignation.

A few days later the Prosecutor's Office released the information that a signal was received from the State Agency for National Security for remittances from Bisserov's Swiss bank accounts to his son-in-law Ivaylo Glavnikov's accounts. These sums were not declared to the Bulgarian National Audit Office.

In mid-November the Prosecutor's Office pressed charges on Bisserov for money laundering and declaring false data before the Audit Office. A remand subject to bail of BGN 25,000 has been implemented as well as a prohibition to leave the country. Bisserov was accused of concealing

his Swiss accounts in his 2012 declaration to the Audit Office. The money laundering charge is due to carrying out financial transactions of about 315,000 dollars and 117,000 euro which, according to the Prosecutor's Office, Bisserov knew had been obtained by criminal means. Charges of participating in laundering these sums were pressed Ivaylo Glavnikov.

For now Bisserov refuses to comment on the charges pressed before the media. MRF management also abstains from explanations on this case. Liutvy Mestan tried to distance himself from Hristo Bisserov, stating that it is "not about a policy concerning MRF" but about the actions of "a person" and a case currently in "the field of judicial power".

In public space the thesis that Bisserov resigned in advance due to a leak of information from the services to Ahmed Dogan was intensively commented on. To minimize the scandal for the Party Dogan forced Bisserov to resign. This thesis was also developed by the opposition represented by GERB. Liutvy Mestan emphatically denied that, together with Dogan, they knew in advance about the accusations towards Bisserov.

At the insistence of GERB a Temporary Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry for the "Bisserov" case was created. The proposal was supported by MRF from where it was announced that they have nothing to worry about as a Party in this case and that they insist on its clarification.

Aliosman Imamov from MRF was appointed in Bisserov's position of Deputy Chairman of the National Assembly and Chetin Kazak was appointed in his position of chairperson of the Parliamentary Legal Affairs Committee.

Pressing charges on one of the most influential figures in MRF and in Bulgarian

politics as a whole does not at this stage affect the Party. MRF's management succeeded in mitigating the scandal and guided the conversation on the topic toward a basis of principle. A thesis was developed that the current authority has proven it does not hold out a "political umbrella" for anybody, and politicians, part of the governing majority, are not an exception. Furthermore, Liutvy Mestan raised the question of the necessity of publicly announcing all politicians' accounts by the disclosure of bank secrecy as, according to him, this problem has to be solved on a European level inside the EU.

In an internal political plan MRF expressed its strong and firm support for the Oresharski Cabinet a few times, while Liutvy Mestan even described the current Government as the "strongest Government" from the beginning of the democratic changes up to now.

2.1.4 Ataka

The refugee wave in the past two months has turned into the main topic articulated by Ataka. Siderov's Party saw that this is a good opportunity for extracting specific political dividends and increasing their popularity. If only until two months ago opinion polls showed a sustained drop in support for Ataka, at the end of November almost all main agencies submitted results in which we can see that even though minimal at this stage, trust in the Party is growing.

Volen Siderov began a tour in numerous towns in Southeastern Bulgaria, where protest demonstrations were organized against refugees and illegal immigrants. Siderov appealed to the Government to close the border and to expel all the illegal immigrants. According to him

the refugee wave is a threat for the country's national security, mostly because of the danger of radical Islamists entering Bulgaria's territory.

The Party's TV channel "Alfa TV" even began a systematic campaign against refugees through organizing dozens of talk shows propagandizing "the threat of the refugees".

Siderov proclaimed a recall for Kristalina Georgieva as EU Commissioner because, according to him, she has so far done nothing to provide financial help from the EU for refugees in Bulgaria.

During these months Ataka has supported the government in voting on several laws. The Party did not support the votes of no confidence, initiated by GERB, as the Ataka MPs abstained. Meanwhile Siderov on some occasions criticized the Minister of Interior Tsvetlin Yovchev for the police not acting hard enough regarding the protests. The opinion of the leader of Ataka is that the protests are illegal and paid for by oligarchs close to GERB and the Reformist Block and that Mol should reach the organizers, sending ultras and provocateurs to cause unrest and violence.

2.2 Non-parliamentary Parties

2.2.1 Reformist Block

Opinion polls show that, at least for the time being, if pre-term parliamentary elections were held, 'Reformists' would make it to the National Assembly. At the same time, however, there is a certain drop in the support for the parties from the Block. The reasons are the vast ideological differences of the parties on the one hand, and the inability to send distinctive political messages, on the other. Inner-party lead-

ership contradictions, a permanent weakness of the right wing parties over the past 10 years, constitute the major challenge for their consolidation.

It is not by chance that the 'Greens' left the 'Reformist Block' - the reasons being the ideological differences between the parties. The 'Greens' declared themselves against signing the coalition agreement for joint participation in the elections for European Parliament and stated that they would run on their own. Another reason for leaving the Block that was left out of the public eye were the more and more energetic attempts for domination on the part of Meglena Kouneva's 'Bulgaria of the Citizens' and pushing the smaller parties into the background.

At a meeting in Veliko Turnovo in early November a decision was passed for the Reformist Block to run for the elections in coalition with the newly created Citizens' Boards within the organization. According to the DSB Leader Radan Kunev, the new political union will be long term. He explained that the conditions of the coalition agreement are yet to be determined, as well as the principle of drafting the joint ballot for the elections.

In early December the Reformist Block published a declaration indicating their vision as to how to go out of the crisis in this country. It states that the political system is in need of a profound change and the first step towards it would be the resignation of the government. The reformers suggest urgent amendment of the Electoral Code, dissolution of the National Assembly and pre-term elections - no later than the EP elections in May 2014. They are of the opinion that a reformist government should be formed with a limited mandate to work on the urgent decisions

for improving the life of the citizens, the operation of state institutions and implementing effective measures for fighting corruption. According to the Reformist Block, "the future government must establish fair relations between the banks and the receivers of loans, a normal business climate, limitations of the monopolies, favorable conditions for recovery of small and medium-size businesses, the creation of new jobs and increase in incomes". The last step Reformists suggest is a wide public and political debate on constitutional changes that would result in a decision to convene a Grand National Assembly to pass a new Constitution.

3. Public Opinion

A poll of electoral attitudes in November carried out by Gallup shows that BSP is ahead of GERB. 21.4% of the voters would vote BSP, and 18.1% would vote for the former party in power. Third came the Reformist Block - 6.7%, followed by MRF - 5.9%. Following the initial drop in the support for Ataka - a trend observed after the elections, in November the nationalists got an average of 2.4%.

Confidence in the institutions in the country continues to be on the decline. The government and the National Assembly have reached the critical thresholds in terms of confidence. As few as 26% of voters have confidence in the government, whilst 65% do not. There is a trend of growing distrust towards the President. President Rossen Plevneliev got 30% approval and 53% disapproval. Confidence in PM Orsharski continues to fall - 27% of the citizens support him, 57% do not.

The leaders of the major parties enjoy extremely low confidence too, supported

only by their most loyal followers. Sergei Stanishev enjoys the support of 24% of voters, Boyko Borissov - 21%, Liutvi Mes-tan - 9%, Volen Siderov – 4%, and Megle-na Kouneva – 10%. Unlike them, former President Georgi Parvanov still enjoys high confidence - 31% of voters like him as a politician.

A poll by the Mediana Sociological Agency indicates increasing fears and concerns of the public related to the wave of refugees. 33% of the respondents believe that no refugees and illegal immigrants should be allowed into this country, and 20% are of the opinion that they should be made to leave the country. According to 78% of the respondents Bulgaria is far too poor a country to be able to afford support for the refugees. 42% are of the opinion that the refugees should stay in closed refugee centers.

An increase of xenophobic attitudes in this country is also detected by the outcome of the poll. It shows that 15% of the citizens approve of the attacks against immigrants. At the same time, the large majority of people show compassion and solidarity towards the refugees. 65% of Bulgarian believe that they are people in need of support and protection, as well as normal living conditions..

4 Main conclusions and forecasts

1. The political situation in this country remains tense. Dialogue between those in power and the opposition remains sharp and confrontational. However, the government managed to hold against the protest wave and strengthen its positions at this stage. The protests quieting down led to a gradual normalization of the situation in this country.

The relations between the president and the government are still complex and this trend is likely to continue in short and mid-term. The main challenge for the cabinet is still the fragile parliamentary support and the low public confidence in it.

The crisis with the wave of refugees creates yet another challenge to this country, mainly due to the risk of increased xenophobia and growing social tension.

2. GERB continues to lose public support. The inconsequent actions of the party being in opposition led to voters withdrawing from it. It will be a challenge whether the party will manage to keep its parliamentary group intact. MP Georgi Markov leaving the group can be followed by other MPs, which will further deteriorate the unity of the party.

At this stage, the 'BASTA' organization around Miroslav Naydenov and Emil Dimitrov does not present any threat for shredding voters from GERB. Right-wing voters are discouraged in their support for GERB and will go on looking for other political actors to give their support to.

3. The protests led to consolidation of the BSP electorate. According to the polls, currently the party is the first political force, albeit with very small advantage over GERB. Despite the intra-party criticism towards Stanishev from various groups in the party, who have lost their positions in recent years, BSP leadership and its parliamentary group stand firmly behind their leader.

Georgi Parvanov is still one of the most trusted politicians in this country. His activity lately demonstrates that it is not out of the question for him to try to become a leading political factor in the left wing yet again.

4. The scandal with the indictment of Hristo Bissarov by the Prosecutors Office,

as well as his leaving politics, did not cause any significant shake-ups in MRF. The party managed to mitigate the scandal and left this case to the judiciary.

The stability of the government remained top priority for MRF. The party has focused all its efforts on further strengthening its position in power.

5. The refugee wave towards Bulgaria strengthened the positions of Ataka. The party increased its populist rhetoric seeing the crisis with refugees and illegal immigrants as an opportunity to receive narrow-party dividend. Siderov launched a mass anti-refugee campaign abusing the fears of the public. Ataka declared itself in favour of closing the border with Turkey and making the illegal immigrants leave this country. If the refugee influx into Bul-

garia continues, support for Ataka is likely to grow.

6. The relations within the Reformist Block are still complex. The 'Green Party' leaving showed that the parties in the Block have not fully clarified their future coalition activities yet. What unites them is the wish for a pre-term general election soon.

The leadership ambitions of the chairmen of the separate parties are one of the challenges for the successful consolidation of the Reformist Block. Their attitude towards GERB remains unclear. The signals for future cooperation with the former party in power remain contradictory.

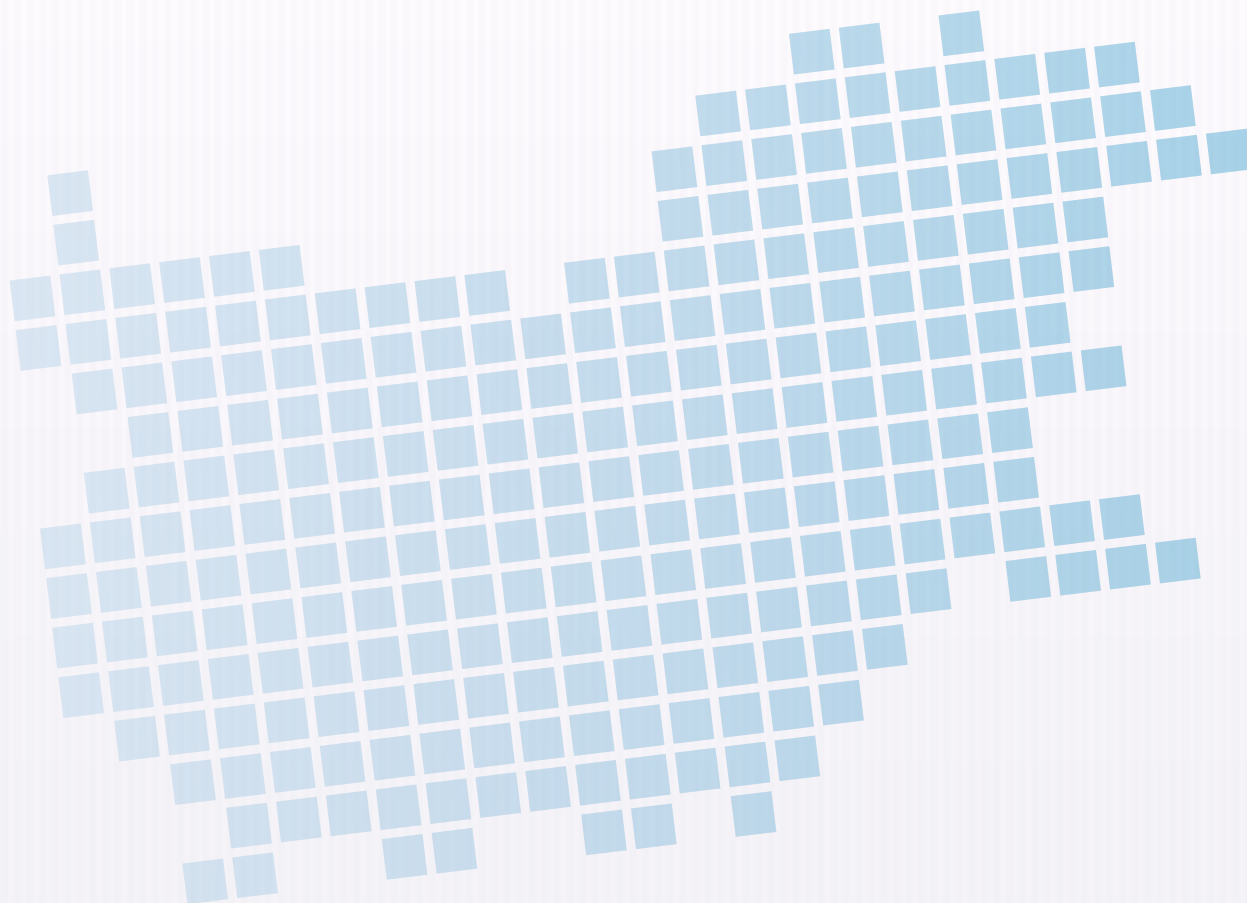
The first serious test for the Reformist Block will be the coalition agreement that is being drafted and the mechanisms for political decision-making within it.

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