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# BAR METER

Bulgaria's Political Parties

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- The political situation at the beginning of the year was dynamic and tense. The relations between the main political parties in the country remained extremely acute and this trend will most likely become deeper on the eve of the elections for European Parliament. Despite the fact that the anti-government protests were brought to a halt, the public confidence in the Oresharski Cabinet stays low. Parliamentary support for him stays stable at this stage in spite of the occasional squabbles between BSP and MRF.
- The resolutions of the National conference of GERB and the elections of two new Deputy Chairpersons – Yordanka Fandukova and Dimitar Nikolov – marked an attempt to restrict Tsvetan Tsvetanov's influence in the party. On the other hand, with this move, Boyko Borisov tried to change the image of GERB, which is seen as that of an authoritarian party.
- BSP is facing serious inner-party challenges on the eve of the forthcoming elections. The decision of Georgi Parvanov to run an alternative electoral list led by Ivaylo Kalfin resulted in the withdrawal of supporters of BSP. For the time being, this withdrawal is not significant, although it might be decisive in who will come first in the elections.

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## 1. Political Situation

In the past quarter, the political situation in the country was very acute. The anti-government protests stopped, but the tension between the parties in power and the opposition remained high. The relations of the President with the government and the National Assembly remain tense and complicated. One of the reasons is the President becoming pro-active. At the beginning of the year Rossen Plevneliev initiated a referendum on the election regulations in the country and suggested they be held together with the elections for the European Parliament. The President suggests that the referendum should provide an answer to three questions: introducing compulsory voting, introducing electronic remote voting on the internet and providing an opportunity for some MPs to be elected on the first past the post (FPTP) basis. According to Plevneliev introducing compulsory voting would eliminate the burden of the controlled voting in the country, and e-voting would allow Bulgarian expats to exercise their right to vote more easily. Introducing an FPTP element in the election system, according to the President, would provide an opportunity for the citizens to vote for personalities. The President believes that the referendum should take place together with the European Parliament elections, because in this way the turnout would be increased.

According to the country's Constitution, the President has the right to initiate a referendum, but the final decision is that of the National Assembly. The majority in power – BSP and MRF – accused the president of trying in this way to become an active protagonist in the forthcoming elec-

tion campaign, helping the opposition. On the other hand, according to the parties in power, the topics of compulsory and e-voting are anti-constitutional. According to the Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly, Maya Manolova (BSP) there is a Ruling of Constitutional Court that Internet voting cannot guarantee the secrecy of the vote. The President of the Legal Commission of the National Assembly Chetin Kazak (MRF) supported Manolova and added that introducing compulsory voting would require an Amendment of the Constitution as the right to vote is one of the fundamental rights of the citizens and is not a duty.

No deadline can be imposed on the National Assembly to vote on the President's proposal and this is why the parties in power delayed its hearing. The Direct Participation of the Citizens Act provides for a referendum to take place if 500,000 signatures requesting it are collected. To this end an Initiative Committee was established to organize a petition for the topics raised by the President. Professor Georgi Bliznashki became Head of the Initiative Committee, many intellectuals who supported the anti-government protests also joined in. The opposition, represented by GERB and the Reformist Block, also supported the petition. Mainly with the help of GERB, more than 570,000 signatures were collected in a very short time. They were submitted to the National Assembly. A validity check will be made, which can take up to three months. In practical terms the idea to hold the referendum together with the European Parliament Elections will not happen, due to the timeline for its organization.

After 9 months of work the new Election Code was passed in February. It pro-

vides for a permanent Central Election Commission (CEC) of 19 members with a 5-year term of office. The leadership of the Commission, comprising a Chairman, two Deputies and a Secretary shall be elected by the National Assembly, and the remaining 15 people shall be appointed by the President upon proposals by parliamentary parties. Parties represented in the European Parliament but not in the National Assembly shall also have the right to one CEC member. The new Election Code provides for preferential voting, whereby the voters can rearrange the electoral list. Until now there has been such a possibility only at the last elections for European Parliament, but the preference was quite high – 15%. In the new Code this threshold was brought down to 5%. For the first time preferential vote was introduced for elections for National Assembly and for municipal councilors with a threshold of 7%. BSP sources stated that these changes introduced a FPTP element in practical terms, as the President insisted too, and urged him not to veto it. The opposition arraigned the parties in power that the new Code was almost completely identical with the previous one, passed by GERB.

The President vetoed some of the texts of the Election Code. According to Plevneliev despite the undoubtedly positive steps, the Code does not provide a sustainable regulation which reflects the expectations of the public. The parties in power accused the President that his veto was purely political and without any argument. It was overruled with the votes of BSP, MRF, 'Ataka' and the independent MPs who left GERB.

The appointment of the CEC members provided grounds for new contradictions between the President and the people in

power. NMSP and the Blue Coalition, being parties with members of the European Parliament, will have one representative each in the CEC. BSP and MRF insisted that the other 13 representatives nominated by the parties in the National Assembly be appointed by the President in the following proportion: five for GERB, five for BSP, two for MRF and one for 'Ataka'.

However, President Plevneliev divided the proportion on the entire 19-member composition of CEC. So GERB got 6 representatives from the quota of the President, and MRF – just one, the same as 'Ataka'. MRF and BSP reacted sharply and accused the President of violating the Election Code. Maya Manolova even said that with this the President had 'declared war on the National Assembly'. MRF Leader Lyutvi Mestan accused the President that he had 'given one seat as a gift to GERB, which he had taken from MRF'. Mestan said that in no way can MRF have the same number of CEC members as 'Ataka', given the fact that his party has 13 MPs more.

As counter-reaction to the decision of the President, the majority in the National Assembly did not vote the GERB nominee for Deputy Chairman of CEC. So in the interim CEC was left with 18 instead of 19 members. The ruling parties declared that CEC can work with this incomplete composition as its resolutions require a qualified majority of 2/3 of its members. The case was resolved after MRF agreed to support GERB's nomination for Deputy Chairman of CEC and it was put to the vote again. BSP and MRF declared that they will challenge the Presidential Decree before the Constitutional Court.

At the beginning of February GERB submitted a third vote of no confidence in the government due to the government policy

in the security sector. Three major arguments were given by GERB as reasons for the vote of no confidence: lack of success of the government in fighting smuggling, unsatisfactory results regarding the problems with the refugees and an overall failure of the reform in the sector.

The vote was rejected with 116 votes of the MPs from BSP and MRF. The MPs from 'Ataka' abstained. During the debate PM Plamen Oresharski declared that his cabinet will go on implementing policies for improvement of the systems for security and the government will continue the reforms in the sector. He defined the motives of the vote as unsubstantiated and rather 'self-criticism of previous terms of office', meaning the government of GERB.

BSP Leader Sergey Stanishev said that GERB did not have the moral right to submit a vote of no confidence on this subject, because it was precisely the area of security that he proved to be GERB's biggest failure. Stanishev gave a good assessment of what the current government had achieved in the sector this far, putting the emphasis on the radical reduction of the use of special investigation means and discontinuation of the methods of repression on the part of the police.

MRF Chairman Lyutvi Mestan rated the vote of no confidence as lacking any grounds. According to him, however, it was useful, because the Bulgarian public was given a chance to compare two concepts, differing in principle, about the role of the MOI and the law enforcement structures – the one of the previous Minister of Interior Tsvetan Tsvetanov, and the current one of Tsvetlin Yovchev.

GERB leader Boyko Borisov stated that the vote was successful because it demonstrated yet again that the government was

dependent on 'Ataka'. He announced that GERB would initiate a new vote of no confidence very soon, since the government was not doing a good job in any sphere at all.

At the beginning of February President Plevneliev called a session of the Consultative Council on National Security (CCNS), which discussed the forthcoming signing of the Partnership Agreement with the EC for the next programming period. The leaders of the parliamentary parties agreed on the need to absorb to the maximum extent the Euro-funds in the period 2014 - 2020. CCNS members accepted that the implementation of the Partnership Agreement with European Commission in the next programming period to the maximum extent is of great importance for the development of the country. The following are some of the main priorities in the next programming period: improving access to education, reducing poverty, achieving sustainable development, developing the agricultural sector, supporting innovations, strengthening the institutional environment, energy security and improving transportation. CCNS passed a resolution recommending that the Council of Ministers organize and implement an information program for public awareness of the parameters of the next programming period.

The events in Ukraine and the Crimean crisis that followed were among the main topics which had an impact on the political situation in Bulgaria. Being a Black Sea region country, dependent on gas supplies from Russia, a possible escalation of the crisis would result in serious consequences for Bulgaria. On the other hand, there are more than 300,000 Bulgarians residing in the southern regions of Ukraine, which

increases the responsibilities of the Bulgarian state additionally. The visit of Bulgarian Minister of Foreign Affairs Christian Vigenin to Kiev was in relation to that – he sought guarantees for the safety and the rights of the Bulgarian minority from the new Ukrainian government. Vigenin met with the interim Ukrainian President Alexander Turchinov. In the talks, the Bulgarian foreign minister stated that Bulgaria supports the sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence of Ukraine and expects the new government, together with the international community, to create the necessary conditions for reducing tension and achieving sustainable stabilization of the country. Vigenin expressed his satisfaction with the refusal of Turchinov to sign the resolution of the Supreme Rada of the Ukraine to revoke the law depriving Russian and other languages of the status of regional languages. During his stay in Kiev Vigenin met representatives of the Bulgarian community in that country.

At the beginning of March PM Plamen Oresharski convened the Security Council with the Council of Ministers to discuss the situation in Crimea and the risks for Bulgaria. It was decided to establish a crisis HQ in Bulgaria to follow the developments. The danger of discontinuation of gas supplies was defined as the most serious immediate economic threat for Bulgaria. Oresharski stated that Bulgaria supports the sovereignty and the territorial integrity of Ukraine.

The events in Crimea were one of the topics in the speech of President Rossen Plevneliev before the National Assembly at the beginning of March. The President stated that military intervention in a sovereign state is unacceptable. In his speech he expressed his fears of the possibility of

Russia annexing Crimea based on an unconstitutional referendum. Plevneliev declared that one should give way to diplomacy otherwise the world was at risk of entering into a new Cold War.

The events in Crimea led to a strong politicizing of the topic inner-politically and to polarizing positions of the main parties. The nationalists from 'Ataka' stated that a group of fascists has performed a coup d'état in Ukraine, by overthrowing a legitimately elected president. Siderov saw in these events the 'long arm of the US' which, to put it in his words, wants to force Ukraine into their vassalage. There were also different assessments of the situation within BSP. Nikolai Malinov MP – publisher of the party newspaper 'Duma' and President of the Russophiles Movement congratulated all Orthodox Slavs on the 'victory in the Third Crimean War' and stated that this was a personal position which did not commit the party. BSP MP Georgi Kadiev on his part declared that Bulgaria must have a 'balanced position' led by the principle 'Never against the EU, never against Russia'.

These statements induced sharp reactions on the part of the right wing parties. The Reformist Block was most extreme and said that BSP proved yet again that it is a 'pro-Russian' party and 'a servant to the Kremlin'. The Reformist Block announced that they were in favour of a strong reaction on the part of the EU, including economic sanctions against Russia. GERB took a more balanced position regarding the sanctions as they might affect Bulgaria in a negative way. GERB leader Boyko Borisov stated that the results of the referendum were not legitimate and that ways must be found to reduce tension.

MRF declared that the situation in the Ukraine will normalize only when the rights of all the minorities in the country are respected. According to Lyutvi Mestan Bulgaria must strictly adhere to the common position of the EU.

At the end of March President Plevneliev convened the Consultative Council on National Security (CCNS) to discuss the development of the crisis in Ukraine and the risks for Bulgaria resulting therefrom. 'Ataka' leader Volen Siderov left the session to demonstrate his disagreement with the discussed stance and stated that Bulgaria must recognize the results from the referendum, which, in his words, was legitimate.

The other participants in the CCNS agreed on a unanimous position. It says that Bulgaria supports the sovereignty, the unity and territorial integrity of Ukraine. The referendum held on 16 March 2014 in Crimea is an infringement of international law and Bulgaria does not regard it as legitimate. CCNS members urge all parties which are involved in the crisis to stop the provocations. Sending an OCSE mission to Ukraine is an important step towards guaranteeing the peaceful resolution of the conflict. Bulgaria supports the signing of the political part of the Association Agreement of Ukraine with the EU. CCNS is of the opinion that gas supply diversification, speeding up the inter-connector links with the neighbouring countries and the gas deposits on the Black Sea shelf are a national priority that admits of no alternative. CCNS recommended that the Security Council with the Council of Ministers follows the processes and risks for the country and Bulgarian institutions maintain active dialogue with the Bulgarian communities in Ukraine.

## **2. State and Development of the Party System**

### **2.1. Trends in the Political Parties Represented in Parliament**

#### **2.1.1. GERB**

The Third National Conference of GERB took place in February. As expected, the delegates reelected Boyko Borisov unanimously with 1,102 votes 'in favour' and no votes 'against' or abstentions. Organizationally, some significant changes were undertaken. The party will have not only one but three Deputy Chairpersons. Following a proposal by the leader Borisov, the Mayor of Sofia Yordanka Fandukova and the Mayor of Burgas Dimitar Nikolov were elected Deputy Chairpersons. Both of them are among the most successful mayors in the country and enjoy widespread public support in the cities they are in charge of. With their election Borisov is trying to open up the party towards a greater electorate and change its image of a leader party so far.

The Deputy Chairman until now Tsvetan Tsvetanov saved his position. It was actually one of the main features of the National Conference. Tsvetanov continues to be one of the most negatively accepted figures in GERB – not only by the general public, but also by the members and supporters of the party. Regardless of that, the expectations that Borisov would part with Tsvetanov did not prove correct. Tsvetanov is still important to GERB in organizational terms. He was the person who was most active in developing the party structures locally. It is believed that the majority of the leaders of the local party organizations are personally loyal to him because they

got their positions thanks to him. This is why his possible sacking would have inevitably had a negative impact on GERB on the eve of the elections for European Parliament. This is why Borisov did not take such a risky step despite the great number of appeals in the public space to do so.

The election of the two new Deputy Chairpersons, however, speaks for itself and it sends the indicative message that the attitude towards Tsvetanov has changed. His powers in organizational terms will be narrowed in the future. The changes in the Statutes are related too – they provide for more serious responsibilities of the Executive Commission. Boyko Borisov stated that no one will speak of GERB as a leader's party any more, but as a democratic organization, where the leading role will be that of the Executive Commission.

The composition of the Executive Commission was increased from 9 to 11 members and people loyal to Borisov were elected in it. The sociologist Rumyana Buchvarova is one of them, who was Chef de Cabinet at the Council of Ministers during the term of office of GERB. In addition to the new Deputy Chairpersons Yordanka Fandukova and Dimitar Nikolov, the following people were elected members of the executive body of the party: the Mayor of Stara Zagora Zhivko Todorov, the Deputy Chairperson of the Parliamentary Group of the party Tsetska Tsacheva, the MPs Menda Stoyanova, Plamen Nounev, Krassimir Velchev and Tomislav Donchev – all of them from the circle closest to Borisov.

Plovdiv Mayor Ivan Totev and MP Rumen Dimitrov dropped out of the Commission. As early as last year former MPs Pavel Dimitrov

and Iskra Fidosova left the leadership of the party, as well as the former leader of the Blagoevgrad organization Kostadin Hadjigaev, who went to the new party BASTA together with Pavel Dimitrov.

The conference elected the Audit Board of GERB too. MPs Emil Radev, Desislava Taneva, Alexander Nenkov, Tsveta Karayancheva, Dimitar Glavchev, Daniela Saveklieva and Nikolai Melemov became its members.

The delegates of the National Conference proclaimed a resolution for pre-term parliamentary elections to be called and in support of the referendum on the election rules suggested by the President.

In February the MPs Svetlin Tanchev and Krasimir Stefanov (former Head of the National Revenue Agency) left the parliamentary group of GERB. Both of them announced that they will stay on in parliament as independent MPs as their colleague Georgi Markov did in December last year. Their motives for leaving were the authoritarian style of the work of the parliamentary group and the fact that their expert opinion was often ignored. Later on it became clear that both of them will provide expert support to the party of Nikolai Barekov 'Bulgaria Uncensored' and will represent its interests in the National Assembly.

The leadership of GERB deemed the actions of their former colleagues 'lacking integrity'. The Deputy Chairman of the parliamentary group Krasimir Velchev said that it would be appropriate for both of them to leave parliament and give their seats to the runners up on the party electoral list. Tsetska Tsacheva on her part defined the decision of Tanchev and Stefanov to leave as yet another act of 'back-stage dealings' in Bulgarian politics.



Unexpectedly, the parliamentary group of GERB parted with two more MPs – Dobroslav Dimitrov and Vladislav Goranov, who, unlike Tanchev and Stefanov, left the National Assembly. The former Deputy Minister of Finance in the government of GERB Vladislav Goranov announced the reason – his wish to stay an expert – which in his words was impossible if he stayed in politics. According to him one could not make real politics in the 42<sup>nd</sup> National Assembly and he was not capable of helping with his expert qualities. On his part Dobroslav Dimitrov stated that he left parliament due to personal reasons.

At the end of March GERB announced their top four candidates for the European Parliament elections. They are Tomislav Donchev, Andrei Kovachev, Mariya Gabriel and Vladimir Uruchev. The leader of the electoral list Tomislav Donchev was Minister for managing European funds in the GERB government. Donchev knows in detail the workings of the European institutions and the management of European funds. With his nomination one aims to attract a greater periphery in the right political wing.

Andrei Kovachev, Mariya Gabriel and Vladimir Uruchev have been GERB MEPs in the EPP Group until now. All three of them are extremely active and enjoy a good reputation in the European Parliament.

GERB's leader Boyko Borisov announced that the party's goal was to win the Euro-elections, which would be a step towards pre-term parliamentary elections. The entire electoral list of GERB will be made known by mid-April. Borisov also announced that the party's bet was on experts and professionals who will not only defend Bulgarian interests but will work actively for the development of the European Union.

### 2.1.2. BSP

The past quarter was extremely tense for BSP from an inner-party perspective. The main reason was the announced intent of former President Parvanov to renew the activity of the ABV Association, which will run with a separate electoral list for the Euro-elections led by Ivaylo Kalfin. Parvanov defined this decision as an important step for the development of the left wing in the future. The former President criticized yet again the leadership of BSP for the situation in which the party is now. According to Parvanov, BSP lost the elections in 2013 but this did not result in adequate analysis of the reasons for this outcome. Instead, BSP took on the risk of supporting a minority government, whereby it became hostage of unclear economic interest on the account of support of an anti-European populist party like 'Ataka'. Parvanov stated that ABV does not aim to split BSP, but to attract left voters that the left wing had lost with time. He said that in ABV BSP would have a natural partner on the left and would not have to stay hostage of parties like MRF and 'Ataka'. Parvanov criticized the unclear foundation of the relations between BSP and MRF. Both parties, so Parvanov said, govern without a coalition agreement, which dilutes the responsibilities and makes the coalition lack principle, with BSP being the biggest loser. According to Parvanov MRF 'is overeating with power' and this strengthens the anti-BSP attitudes. He said that one of the most important tasks of ABV would be to demonstrate that they are not just a temporary formation created for the sake of Euro-elections but a long-term project. Parvanov noted that ABV was pro-European and would work for a

new type of politics in Bulgaria based on consensus and national interest.

In addition to Ivaylo Kalfin, the project of Parvanov was supported by former Minister of Interior Rumen Petkov, Prof. Borislav Borisov from the University of National and World economy, Pernik Mayor Rositsa Yanakieva, and former Minister of Health Evgeniy Zhelev. A number of BSP members in the regions of Montana, Vratsa, Pleven and Stara Zagora moved to ABV.

The decision of Parvanov and Kalfin led to a sharp reaction of BSP. The leadership of the party accused Parvanov of being only after his personal ambition and with his actions aimed at splitting BSP. Parvanov and the people around him were accused of working against the interest of the party. Sergey Stanishev urged Parvanov and Kalfin to rethink their decision because the only thing they would achieve was to give the victory in the forthcoming Euro-elections as a 'gift' to GERB.

The tension in BSP grew further after opinion polls of a number of agencies were published showing a result for ABV of between 2% and 7%. As a result GERB surpassed BSP in terms of electoral attitudes and overturned the trend from the end of last year where the socialists had a certain advantage.

An internal discussion started within BSP as to what measures could be taken against ABV. The leadership spoke in favour of expelling the group around Parvanov from the party as the Statutes do not allow BSP members to work for other electoral lists. This decision was put off due to concerns that it might have a boomerang effect for BSP because Parvanov is still one of the most respected figures not only in BSP but in Bulgarian politics as

a whole, as indicated by his high rating in the opinion polls.

Only at the beginning of March the National Council of BSP proclaimed a resolution to expel Georgi Parvanov from the party. Pernik Mayor Rossitsa Yanakieva, Evgeniy Zhelev, Emil Konstantinov (former regional and municipal Chairman of BSP in Montana), Vladimir Kalchev (former municipal chairman of BSP in Dobrich) and Boyka Arabadzhieva (former municipal chairman of BSP in Kirkovo) were also expelled, together with the former President.

The 48<sup>th</sup> BSP Party Congress took place at the beginning of February. Party leader Sergey Stanishev defined winning the elections as the main task of the party and re-industrialization of the country as the main task of the government. He outlined the main priorities of the government: industrialization, modernization and the social welfare state.

As expected, one of the main topics of the congress was related to the ABV project. Yet again Stanishev accused Parvanov and Kalfin of working against the interest of the left wing. According to him, ever since its establishment ABV was conceived not like a discussion forum for governance ideas or an instrument to expand the political influence of the left wing, but rather like a clear-cut political project competing with BSP. The forthcoming European elections are of paramount importance, said Stanishev, the reason being the relative balance in the power of PES and EPP. This is why every vote counts and why, according to Stanishev, it is a 'great shame to disperse' left votes. He stated that everyone who votes for ABV will vote against the interest of the left and every vote taken from BSP is a vote for GERB.

In mid-March the National Council of BSP approved and presented the left electoral list for the European elections. It will be headed by the party leader Sergey Stanishev. The following positions are taken by the current MEP Iliyana Yotova, the deputy chairman of the party Georgi Pirinski, Petar Kurumbashev MP, and Dostena Lavern, nominated by left wing intellectuals.

Stanishev himself declared that he would not be an MEP. He is in the leading position due to two main reasons: on one hand, he believes that this will have a mobilizing effect for the members and supporters of the party and, on the other, this demonstrates his commitment as PES leader to the campaign of the European socialists.

### 2.1.3. MRF

The forthcoming European Parliament elections led to increasing criticism against MRF – an attempt of the opposition formations to attract protest votes. This criticism is shared by BSP politicians too, which induced tension between the coalition partners. Yordan Tsonev stated that he categorically does not accept the claims that the MRF is overeating with power and appealed for BSP to stop such speculations. According to him, such claims firmed the anti-MRF attitudes of the public. Tsonev stated that MRF and BSP had a clear objective of the government and have to follow it.

BSP's refusal to back MRF's motion for amendments to the Elections Act also created tension. The motion was to allow campaigning in a different language, other than Bulgarian. MRF Chairman Lyutvi Mestan declared that it was overt discrimination which not only does not protect the Bulgarian language but clearly endangers it. According

to him in this way the right is given that in other countries where there is a Bulgarian national minority it is subjected to discriminatory attitudes.

Lyutvi Mestan reacted sharply to a declaration, proclaimed by the National Council of BSP, condemning the language of hatred, where MRF was put along with GERB and 'Ataka' as parties using such rhetoric.

Despite episodic eruptions of tension, the relations between BSP and MRF remain stable.

In mid-February in Plovdiv, a rally was organized for the restitution of the Waqf real estate subject to litigation initiated by the Supreme Mufti in Bulgaria. Organized football hooligans smashed the windows of Dhumaya mosque in the city. MRF qualified this as vandalism and political provocation that endangers the ethno-religious peace in the country. MRF leadership is of the opinion that Plovdiv Mayor from GERB Ivan Totev was responsible for the events that infringed the law, as he refused to comply with the recommendation of the Ministry of Interior not to allow the event. MRF called upon the government and the law-enforcement authorities to take any measures necessary to discover the instigators and the organizers of the event.

MRF appealed to all the participants in the forthcoming European elections not to replace the European issues with internal political opposition. Party leader Lyutvi Mestan appealed for a positive campaign and stated that MRF will not engage in 'black PR' but will respond to provocations against them. According to him the insinuation that he and his party are 'holding the wheel of power' aims at unleashing anti-MRF attitudes similarly to 2009, when GERB won the elections.

Mestan stated that MRF is ready for the Euro-elections and that it will aim to win 4 MEP seats. The party is expected to announce the list of MEP candidates around 20 April. Most likely it will be led by Filiz Hysmenove MEP.

At the beginning of March, Oktai Enimehmedov, who attempted to shoot Ahmed Dogan, was released by the court under house arrest. This induced a sharp reaction on the part of MRF. In a declaration to before the National Assembly Lyutvi Mestan defined the ruling of the court as 'bias dressed in judicial robes'. He accused the judges of clientelist justice without naming the clients. Oktai Enimehmedov was sentenced to three and a half years imprisonment in the first instance court for threat of murder, after the Prosecutor's Office was unable to prove that he attempted murder.

The Union of Judges in Bulgaria (UJB) condemned Lyutvi Mestan's statement. The judges found it 'absolutely inappropriate to make comments from the parliamentary podium on the correctness of judicial acts such as not enacted first instance sentence and a final ruling deciding the detention measure against a defendant on a pending case'. The Union also pointed out that the principles of the rule of law in a country and the division of powers exclude the possibility for legislators and political figures to make statements on issues that are of the exclusive competence of the court.

The Supreme Judicial Council (SJC) also condemned the statement of Mestan and called upon the representatives of the legislative and executive powers, as well as all politicians in Bulgaria to refrain from unmeasured statements which question jurisprudence and induce mistrust in the courts.

#### 2.1.4 'Ataka'

At the beginning of the year Volen Siderov got himself involved in a scandal after confronting the French cultural attaché Stephanie Dumortie on a flight from Sofia to Varna. Siderov also engaged in verbal confrontation with one of the passengers who attempted to defend the French diplomat. The scandal between the two went on after the plane landed, whereby Siderov hit a police officer who was trying to calm the MP down.

In response to these acts the Prosecutors Office requested alienation of the MP immunity of Volen Siderov. The 'Ataka' leader will be investigated for inflicting light physical injury on a police officer on duty, as well as indecent acts and resistance against a law enforcement official.

In mid-February Volen Siderov imposed an ultimatum on the government by saying that 'Ataka's support will depend on ten main demands. Some of them are directly anti-MRF and have been raised many times by 'Ataka' over recent years: for instance – the demand to abolish the news in Turkish on the Bulgarian National TV; the Bulgarian government raising claims before the Turkish authorities for financial compensation for the lost Thracian real estate; revoking the Declaration of 2012 condemning the Revival Process; the National Assembly recognizing the Ottoman rule as genocide.

'Ataka' insists further not to tax medicines and text books with VAT; to abolish flat rate taxation; to make the contracts with the EDCs and those for gold concession null and void; to amend the Budget Act so that as of July 1<sup>st</sup> the minimum pension should become 500 NBG and the minimum salary should be equal to that of Central Europe.

'Ataka' proposed amendments to the Criminal Code criminalizing public demonstrations of people of homosexual orientation. The proposal envisages imprisonment and a fine for any person who 'publicly manifests their own homosexual orientation or appurtenance or that of other people by means of organizing or participating in rallies, marches or parades, or through the media and the Internet'. The motion was rejected by the National Assembly and evaluated unanimously as extremely xenophobic.

'Ataka' is the only one of the main parties in this country which was in favour of recognizing the outcome of the Crimean referendum. The party seconded five representatives of its parliamentary group as observers during the referendum. The party declared that they are categorically against any sanctions against Russia as they believe that it would bring about great economic losses for Bulgaria.

## 2.2 Non-parliamentary parties

### 2.2.1 Reformist Block

Opinion polls indicate some decline in the confidence in the Reformist Block, which reduces their chances of seconding an MEP to the European Parliament. The reasons are of a complex nature. The Reformist Block relied on the anti-government protests but failed to formulate clear enough messages to the right wing voters. The usual anti-communist rhetoric was exhausted a long time ago in terms of potential and can hardly be a mobilizing factor. On the other hand, the latent controversy between the parties in the Block becomes more and more apparent. The attitude of a large number of the DSB supporters towards Meglena Kouneva is strongly negative due to the fact that she

was in the previous government of Stanishhev, who later on nominated her for Euro-Commissioner.

The attitude of the Reformist Block to GERB stays controversial. The unclear and contradictory messages – sometimes defining GERB as a potential partner and sometimes as a competitor and adversary – confuse the potential voters for the Block even more.

At the end of March, the Reformist Block also presented their list of MEP candidates. As expected, it is headed by the Chairperson of the Bulgaria for the Citizens Movement Meglena Kouneva. Second on the reformists' list is Svetoslav Malinov – Deputy Chairman of DSB and current MEP. Third is UDF Chairman Bozhidar Lukarski. Following the leaders of the other parties in the Block – Korman Ismailov (FDPP), Nikolai Nenchev (BAPU) and Radan Kunev (DSB).

DSB called upon their supporters to give a preferential vote – a clear sign they have reservations about Meglena Kouneva. Former DSB leader Ivan Kostov also said that he will use preference. The fears of the leadership of DSB that they might lose voters putting Meglena Kouneva first are well founded and hence the appeal for preferential voting was an attempt to keep these votes. This, however, will most likely increase the discrepancies between the Bulgaria of the Citizens Movement and DSB, which might have negative implications on the election campaign of the Block and their results.

### 2.2.2 Bulgaria Uncensored (BUC)

Opinion polls of leading agencies in this country indicate growing support for Bulgaria Uncensored (BUC) of former journalist, TV anchor and TV7 director Nikolay

Barekov. Surveys show that BUC stands a chance of winning seats in the European Parliament. Barekov became popular in the period 2005-2009 as an anchor of the morning show of bTV – one of the most popular TV shows. After leaving bTV he started working for TV7 – a channel that is connected to the names of Tsvetan Vassilev and Delyan Peevski. At the end of last year Barekov resigned as Director there and announced that he would enter politics.

Barekov defines his party as a centrist one, but populism is its main feature. Similar to other populist parties in Bulgaria, which have enjoyed success over recent years, BUC criticizes the entire political elite in the country and proclaims the idea of overall change of the political system. This change – according to BUC – will happen after a large scale campaign takes place for fighting corruption, which the new party calls operation 'Clean Hands' seeking an analogy with Italy at the beginning of the 1990s.

Financing BUC is one of the awkward questions for Barekov. He rejects the accusations that his party is entirely corporate and is financed by Peevski and Tsvetan Vassilev.

At the end of last year, BUC started talking intensively with VMRO of Krassimir Karakachanov and the leader of the Agrarian People's Union (APU) Rumen Yonchev for establishing a coalition. VMRO is a conservative patriotic formation with well-developed party structures. The party ran alone in the parliamentary elections in 2013 and won 1.9% of the votes. APU was a coalition partner in the Coalition for Bulgaria in the parliamentary elections in 2013 and Yonchev was an MP of the left parliamentary group up until recently. In February he left the group and became an independent MP.

At the end of March the three formations signed a coalition agreement for joint participation in the elections for European Parliament. St. George's Day Movement joined them later on.

Barekov has not announced the European Parliament candidate list but has mentioned several times that he will head it in person. He said that he will not become an MEP but will give his seat to the second on the list. The main goal of Barekov is to be part of the executive power in the future. He promised to call pre-term elections if Bulgaria Uncensored got sufficiently high support in the Euro-elections in May.

### 3. Public Opinion

The Gallup opinion poll on the electoral attitudes for the European Elections carried out in March indicates a levelling out of both largest parties in the country – GERB and BSP. 20.7% would vote for the former ruling party, and 19.5% for the socialists. Third comes MRF with 6% support. 5% of the voters would cast their vote for the new party of Nikolay Barekov, Bulgaria Uncensored. The Reformist Block received 3.1%, which is almost 2% less than the last poll of Gallup from the beginning of January. 2.5% would vote for the nationalists from 'Ataka', which for the time being excludes the possibility for the party to win seats in the European Parliament. 'Ataka's competitors for the nationalists' votes – NFSB of Valeri Simeonov got 1.9% support. 2% of the voters would vote for Parvanov's ABV.

The Gallup poll surveyed attitudes towards the amendments to the Election Code as proposed by the President. According to the results, half of those interviewed would vote in favour of the remote vote electronically, and 25% responded against it. FPTP

of some of the MPs received 2/3 affirmative answers and 9% are against. The question about compulsory voting is far more a matter for conjecture: 47% of the respondents would vote yes and 31% would not support it. 54% of the respondents supported the idea of holding national referenda simultaneously with all forthcoming elections.

The poll indicates an ongoing trend of decreasing confidence in the government – as little as 23% approve its work and 70% lack confidence.

Confidence in President Parvanov stays at the previous levels of about 30%. PM Oresharski has about the same. The leaders of the two largest parties – Boyko Borisov and Sergey Stanishev enjoy the approval of approximately 20% of the voters. A decline in the confidence of Georgi Parvanov is detected, compared to January, which is due to the change of opinion of many BSP supporters following his decision to run in the elections on a separate list. Parvanov, however, remains among the most approved political figures: 25%. The situation is similar when it comes to the other major figure in ABV – Ivaylo Kalfin, who enjoys the confidence of 22% of the voters.

#### 4. Main conclusions and forecasts

1. The political situation in the beginning of the year was dynamic and tense. The relations between the main political parties in the country remain extremely acute, and this trend will probably deepen on the eve of the European Parliament elections. Despite the fact that the anti-government protests have stopped, public confidence in the Oresharski government remains low. Parliamentary support for it at this stage remains stable, despite the occasional squabbles between BSP and MRF. The appearance of

new political players like ABV and Bulgaria Uncensored make the elections on May 25<sup>th</sup> even more unpredictable. The activation of President Plevneliev with his initiative for a referendum on the electoral rules became yet another reason for conflict with the ruling majority.

2. The resolutions of the National Conference of GERB, which elected two new Deputy Chairpersons – Yordanka Fandukova and Dimitar Nikolov, demonstrate an attempt to restrict Tsvetan Tsvetanov's influence in the party. Both of them are popular mayors who enjoy the approval of a large circle of voters and this can add to the respect for the party. On the other hand, with this move Boyko Borisov makes an attempt to change the image of GERB, which is seen as that of an authoritarian party. The fact that some MPs left GERB demonstrates that there are hidden controversies and internal squabbles which at this stage do not come up to the surface, possibly due to the forthcoming elections. In spite of that the party looks consolidated and ready for the pre-election battle. This is also due to the fact that there is no serious alternative on the right wing.

3. BSP faces serious inner-party challenges on the eve of the forthcoming elections. The decision of Georgi Parvanov to proclaim an alternative list headed by Ivaylo Kalfin resulted in withdrawal of supporters from BSP. This is not significant, for the time being, but might prove decisive for the first place in the elections. And they are of paramount importance for BSP because they can determine the fate of the government. An expressive victory of GERB might result in pre-term parliamentary elections. If BSP were to lose the elections this would be yet another blow for their leader Stanishev and would put the question about the pres-

idency of the party on the agenda again. In an attempt to achieve maximum consolidation, Stanshev decided to head the BSP list in person. In this way, however, he assumes personal responsibility, which would delegitimize him even more if he lost. For Parvanov and ABV it would be a success if he won a seat in the EP. If this is not the case, Parvanov risks staying forever outside the big political arena in the future.

4. The accusations that MRF is 'overeating with power' enhanced the anti-MRF attitudes among the members of the public. In addition to the opposition, this is actively shared by ABV and Bulgaria Uncensored. There are more and more voices in BSP that share this thesis too. This leads to tension between the coalition partners, which, however, does not impact the support for the government. As always, the movement uses the anti-MRF attitudes in order to unite its electorate on the eve of the elections.

5. With the date of the election drawing closer, 'Ataka' strengthened its populist rhetoric. Volen Siderov got involved in a scandal yet again, and the Prosecutor's Office indicted him. 'Ataka' was the only one of the main parties in this country to support the outcome of the referendum in the Crimea. This only confirms the years of doubts that the party is closely related to political circles in Russia. On the other hand,

with this move of his, Volen Siderov is hoping to attract voters who like Russia due to the historical links between the two peoples. Probably the 'Crimea' case will be one of the topics that 'Ataka' will accentuate on in the pre-election campaign, particularly if greater sanctions were imposed on Moscow by the EU.

6. The Reformist Block lost their impetus after the anti-government protests stopped. For several months now opinion polls have indicated that the Block is in decline. The weak media and PR policy marginalized the reformists even more and they are left aside from media attention. The fact that Meglena Kouneva is head of the list faces the disapproval of the members and supporters of DSB.

7. Unlike the Reformist Block, the new party of Nikolay Barekov Bulgaria Uncensored demonstrates greater chances of winning seats in the EP. Barekov relies on the strong support of the media, related to Tsvetan Vasilev and Delyan Peevski. Barekov's party, similar to other populist formations of the past, has focused its efforts on attracting the protest vote in this country. The rhetoric of the party resembles very much that of Yane Yanev and his party Order, Rule of Law and Justice, such as fighting corruption and sharp criticism against the politicians of the transition.

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