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# BAR METER

Bulgaria's Political Parties

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- In the coming months, the political situation will be determined mainly by the forthcoming elections for local authorities. This might delay the efforts related to reforms which the government is trying to carry out and they may be postponed till after the elections.
- GERB maintains its position as a leading political force, with an almost twofold advantage ahead of the second party BSP. At this stage, GERB has no real government alternative, which gives it confidence in the forthcoming local elections. Most probably GERB will strengthen their presence in the local authorities, which may be a prerequisite for a re-structuring of the political arena in this country.
- The local elections will be a big challenge for the Reformists Bloc. It looks like they will be a cornerstone not only for the unity of the Bloc, but also for its future. At this stage some contradictions arise regarding the principles on which the joint candidates of RB will be nominated.
- The crisis processes in BSP are still going on. In inner-party terms, some tension exists between the different camps in the party. At this stage, Mihail Mikov seems to manage to balance between them, but he cannot find ways out of the crisis and strengthen the opposition role of BSP. The cadre deficit in the party, as well as the lack of ideal renewal, do not allow the electoral support for it to grow.

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## 1. Political Situation

The past quarter was particularly dynamic in inner-political terms. The parties have started the preparation for the local elections in October, which inevitably increases the competition between them. The government made some efforts to implement the promised reforms in a number of public sectors.

The reform of the judiciary became the topic of a lively debate. Minister of Justice Hristo Ivanov submitted a draft for amendments to the Constitution. The proposals of the Minister enjoy the support of GERB and the Reformist Bloc, as well as ABV and the Patriotic Front – though with some reservations. The most arguable items are related to the Constitutional amendments, regarding splitting the Supreme Judicial Council into two colleges – judges and prosecutors/investigators, reducing the term of office of the SJC members to 4 or 3 years, as well as the proposal for the SJC to have an open procedure for voting the appointments of the judges. In the draft for the Judiciary Act there are provisions that would enable a more transparent career development of the judges and a mechanism for checking their property status.

In this respect, the idea is to establish a new entity – the National Bureau for Prevention of Corruption to check the property status and the conflict of interest at the higher levels of power. This is a provision in the draft the Government submitted for preventing corruption among the people who are in high state positions. The National Bureau will unite and further develop the functions of already existing entities like: the Conflict of Interest Commission, the Centre for Prevention and Countering Corruption and Organized Crime, and the Directorate

of the National Audit Office, which collects and checks the property declarations. The proposal is for the Director of the Bureau to be nominated by the Council of Ministers and to be appointed with a Presidential decree. Every year the entity will report its activities to the National Assembly. One of the most disputed parts of the draft is that the Bureau will be able to make audits based on anonymous whistleblowing and media publications.

The reform of the judiciary became a target of acute criticism on the part of SJC members and the judges' community. Serious reserves were voiced by the Chief Prosecutor Sotir Tsatsarov, and the tension between him and the Minister of Justice Hristo Ivanov becomes more and more apparent. The criticism against Hristo Ivanov's reform by former Prime Minister of the caretaker government Georgi Bliznashki came as a surprise. Bliznashki attacked Ivanov, who was Minister of Justice in his cabinet too, calling him an "incompetent" man who "has not even one day's working experience". According to Bliznashki, reducing the term of office of SJC members will only result in their greater dependence on the "powerful of the hour". He also strongly criticized the idea of having an open vote on personnel matters, which, according to him will increase the dependencies of the members of the Council. Bliznashki stated that the purpose of the judiciary reform is to politically harness the judiciary and not have real reforms to improve the quality of jurisprudence.

Another priority reform of the government is that of healthcare. The division of the health packages into basic and additional was approved by the parliament by means of amending the Health Insurance Act. The reforms intend to have socially

significant diseases Bulgarians most often suffer from included in the so called "basic package". Within this package free access to treatment will be provided, which will be covered by the National Health Insurance Fund. In the additional package there will be diseases that do not threaten the life of the patients and their treatment can wait. In order to have the NHIF pay for this treatment, the patient will have to be put on a waiting list. If the patient does not want this, he/she will have to pay or rely on private medical insurance.

The government presented their vision about the pension reform to the Tripartite Cooperation Council. The reform envisages that the pension contribution will go up by 1% in 2017 and 2018. There is also a gradual increase in pensionable age for men and women to 65 years for both sexes in 2037 for Labor Category III. The required years of service will also increase by 2 months every year to 40 for men and 37 for women by 2027. The pensionable age for the people from labor category I and II will be increased gradually to 55 for Category I and 60 for category II. A minimum pensionable age is introduced for the law enforcement authorities – 52 and 10 months which will be increased gradually to 56 years.

The decision of the government to increase the pensionable age resulted in a protest of the Police Officer Unions. The fire service and Border Police also participated. More than 1,000 people working in the structures of the Ministry of Interior submitted their demands to the government. They urged Minister of Interior Rumiana Bachvarova, Deputy Minister Krasimir Tsipov and the Director of the Fire Safety Service to resign. The reason, according to them, were lack of dialogue with the Ministry on the structural changes implemented without

the knowledge of the Unions. The Border Police officials complained about the poor working conditions at the Bulgarian-Turkish border. Minister Bachvarova disagreed with the accusations of lack of dialogue and said that the debate had been going on for several months.

Over the past quarter, the tension regarding the Roma community in the country has grown stronger. At the end of May, there were some mass protests in the municipality of Gurmen provoked by a street fight between Bulgarians and the Roma community. The reason for the conflict was a dispute between neighbors. People from Gurmen said that it was not an isolated incident. Their complaint is about a sudden increase of the inhabitants of the Roma quarters over the past years and about robberies and violence 24/7. The conflict and the protests resulted in an increased police presence in the municipality, so the conflict did not escalate a great deal. The population of Gurmen demand that the illegal houses in the Roma quarters be demolished and the people who live there be relocated.

In the middle of June a similar conflict arose in Orlandovtsi, a suburb of Sofia where one of the Roma quarters is. The reason for the tension was Roma people beating up Bulgarians, which resulted in an organized protest. The protest settled after the law enforcement intervened. 25 people were arrested as a result of the clashes.

The events in Gurmen and Orlandovtsi are indicative of latent processes of tension in Bulgarian society, induced by poverty, social exclusion and low level of integration of Roma in the country. As a consequence, petty crime is increasing in many regions of the country, which can lead to a new escalation of violence. The need for urgent and systematic measures by the state is obvious

in the direction of Roma integration.

Politicians in this country assessed the events differently. Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Labor and Social Policy Ivailo Kalfin stated that the tension might be “based on ethnicity, but its roots are in poverty – both of the Roma, and the protesters”. According to DSB leader Radan Kunev it was all about a shared social problem that threatens the security of each and every citizen. He called for everyone to obey the law, regardless of whether they are Bulgarian, Turks or Roma. Radan Kunev said that there should be a non-stop presence of the police in places of mixed population.

MRF leader Liutvi Mestan announced that he is not for a policy of force but for a strong state policy in the Roma quarters. According to him the tension was a result of the absence of the state and exclusion of the Roma community for many years now. The only thing he could hear the ultra-nationalists and DSB suggest with regard to tackling the issue is that the state increases the presence of the police and “enforce fear”. MRF MP Ilia Iliev on his part, accused certain politicians and media of inducing tension in Roma quarters in the country. According to him, the “society mirrors the political elite – as long as there are politicians in parliament who incite discrimination and xenophobia, we can’t expect anything else to happen”. BSP leader Mihail Mikov accused the government of failing to understand the nature of the problem that provoked tension in Gurmen and Orlando-vtsi. According to Mikov the reasons for the conflict are socio-economic and they should not be ethnicized.

Since the beginning of the year there has been a steady increase in the refugee flow to Bulgaria. The number of the people who have crossed the border with Turkey

has increased significantly compared to last year. The Agency for Refugees stated that the capacity to accept asylum seekers is exhausted and that, if the trend continues, the country will be faced with greater challenges. It is expected that the refugee influx will peak in summer. Bulgaria expressed some reservation regarding the possibility of receiving refugees from Italy and Greece to be distributed according to a quota principle. According to such formula, the country has to accept about 500 people from both countries. Bulgaria insists that the migrant quotas offered by the European Commission should recognize the capacity and the geographic location of the countries and be significantly lower for countries like Bulgaria, which are external borders of EU and are subjected to a strong migration pressure. The position of the country was officially presented in the meeting of the Justice and Home Affairs Council in Luxembourg.

At the beginning of June President Rosen Plevneliev submitted to the National Assembly a motion for holding a referendum on the election rules again. The questions of the referendum are the same as the ones he proposed last year - to introduce compulsory voting for all types of elections, for a majority vote for some MPs and for electronic and absentee voting. The motives of the President are that in this way corporate voting and vote buying will be overcome, and the change in the election rules will strengthen the legitimacy of the political system and restore confidence in politicians. The idea of the President is for the referendum to be held together with the local elections this autumn.

Like last year, his motion was assessed in contradictory ways. The government majority is inclined to support the proposal for a referendum, but the individual parties

differ on the three questions. GERB agrees with them the way the President has submitted them and is against changing the wording. The Reformist Bloc is for holding the referendum but has some reservations as regards compulsory voting and the introduction of the mixed election system, as this measure will affect the smaller parties. The Patriotic Front is in favor of compulsory voting, but against the majority election and e-voting. ABV insists on editing the question about the majority vote and suggests that half of the MPs should be elected in majority elections.

Most extreme in their assessment was the MRF. The Movement declared that they would not support the idea of holding a referendum with those questions and accused the President of being a populist. Party leader Liutvi Mestan even said that they would suggest that all 240 MPs be elected the majority way in order to test the real intent of the right wing parties in Parliament who support majority elections in words, but do not want it in practice.

BSP said that in principle, being a left party, they are in favor of direct democracy and holding more referenda, but they believe that this referendum should not be held together with the local elections, because it will not only make the job of the Central Elections Commission even more difficult, but will dilute the local election campaign too. BSP states that it supports compulsory voting but is against a mixed election system and Internet voting.

The Reformist Bloc and ABV submitted drafts for laws on bringing down the validity thresholds for referenda. RB proposes that the referendum be regarded valid if more than half of the people who have the right to vote have cast their ballot. ABV suggest that the threshold be lower – 40%.

According to current legislation, in order for the outcome of the referendum to have a binding force, the voter turnout has to be exactly the same as in the last parliamentary elections. The motion about the threshold was revoked in the first reading with the votes of GERB and MRF. In general, tradition is that voter turnout in local elections is lower than in parliamentary elections and is around 50%. This would make the validity of the referendum the President wants problematic.

## **2. State and development of the main political parties**

### **2.1. Trends in the parliamentary represented parties supporting the government**

#### **2.1.1. GERB**

During the past quarter, the parliamentary group of GERB focused their efforts on securing political and parliamentary support for the reform that the government was thinking of implementing. GERB continues to set store by infrastructure projects the government is working on. It is not by chance that the Minister of Regional Development Liliyana Pavlova has the highest rating among ministers. The second best approved minister from GERB in the cabinet is Deputy Prime Minister Tomislav Donchev, who is in charge of EU funds. The renewal of the EU funds allocations for Bulgaria is an undoubted success for the government and results in positive assessments for GERB, as well as for Deputy Prime Minister Tomislav Donchev.

In the parliamentary group of GERB the core group that is most pro-active in the parliamentary debate comprises the head of the Legal Committee Danail Kirilov, of

the Budget and Finance Committee – Menda Stoyanova and Dessislava Atanasova. Along with the Chairman of GERB parliamentary group Tsvetan Tsvetanov, this core bears the main burden of the parliamentary debate and is responsible for the discipline in the parliamentary group in the legislative process.

GERB started active preparation for the local elections. The current mayors of Sofia – Yordanka Fandakova, Burgas – Dimitar Nikolov, Varna – Ivan Portnih, Plovdiv – Ivan Totev, Veliko Turnovo – Daniel Panov, Stara Zagora – Zhivko Todorov, Blagoevgrad – Atanas Kambitov, Russe – Plamen Stoilov, Smolyan – Nikolai Melemov and Pleven – Dr. Dimitar Stoykov still enjoy the party's confidence for another term of office.

Deputy Regional Governor of Vidin Ognyan Tsenkov, who is also Municipal Chairman of GERB, will most probably be GERB's mayoral candidate in the city on the Danube. In Montana there are two options – the current Mayor of Georgi Damyanovo Dilyan Dimitrov, who was elected as regional coordinator in October, or the current Regional Governor Ivailo Petrov. It is expected that two other party coordinators will be nominated for Mayors – Nayden Shopov in Pazardzhik, and Kornelia Marinova in Lovech.

MPs Darin Dimitrov and Liubomir Hristov are the most likely mayoral candidates of the party in Turgovishte and Shumen respectively. For the time being there are no nominations for Kurdzhali, Kyustendil, Haskovo, Yambol and Sliven.

By the end of July the Executive Commission of GERB will endorse the mayoral candidates for all municipalities after having received the nominations from all local structures by 26 June. The Deputy Chairman of the party announced this in a meet-

ing with the local coordinators from the entire country. The mayoral candidates for the large regional cities will be officially presented on 13 September at a nationwide convention in the Arena Armeec in Sofia.

Over the past quarter there have been some changes in the regional leaderships of GERB. GERB's regional coordinator in Plovdiv Zdravko Dimitrov resigned. The MP sent a letter to Boyko Borisov and the Executive Commission of the Party. No motives were stated in the resignation.

At the end of June the Supreme Court of Cassation sent back the case against Tsvetan Tsvetanov to the Sofia Court of Appeal for a further hearing. Tsvetan Tsvetanov was sentenced in two instances to 4 years' imprisonment. The case is being heard because the former Minister of Interior has denied 6 times a prosecutor request for special means of investigation against an Mol officer in Veliko Turnovo in 2009. The prosecutor request was also endorsed by a judge. The motives of the majority of the panel of judges at the Supreme Court of Cassation were that the judgment was made in a biased court. The judgment of the SCC was signed with reservations by one of the members of the panel, who disagreed with the other two members thereof.

### 2.1.2 Reformists Bloc

In the past quarter the RB has focused on providing political and parliamentary support for the reforms their ministers are trying to enact in the relevant ministries. RB sets the main emphasis on the judicial reform, whose main advocate is DSB leader Radan Kunev. He gave his unconditional support to the Minister of Justice Hristo Ivanov. Reform in healthcare and in the education are two further important reforms initiated by RB ministers – Peter Moskov

and Todor Tanev respectively. At this stage though, both reforms are moving slowly and are target of a great deal of criticism – not only by the opposition, but inside the governing majority too.

In terms of the internal matters of the coalition RB are facing a serious dilemma related to the issue of how to nominate candidates for the local elections in the regions where no agreement can be reached on one candidate. The Minister of Economy and UDF leader Bozhidar Loukarski proposed to his partners in RB that they hold internal party pre-elections in the regions where there is disagreement and, in doing so, determine who the Bloc's candidate will be. Loukarski provided the argument that this would be the most democratic option.

The Bulgaria for Citizens Movement (DBG) set a deadline for their partners in RB to sign a coalition agreement for joint participation in the local elections no later than 31 July 2015. Meglena Kouneva's party insists on united registration of RB for the local elections as this would increase their influence in the local authorities. Kouneva stated that the aim is to keep balance – and that the mayoral candidate, his staff, as well as the order of the names in the list should be discussed en block. She expressed her belief that there will be a consensus for joint nominations.

DBG have nominated mayoral and municipal councilor candidates in 12 regional centers and about 100 municipalities in the country. RB Parliamentary Group co-chairman Nayden Zelenogorski said that DBG hope for many of their candidates to be joint Bloc's candidates. Yordan Yordanov is their party nomination for Mayor of Dobrich. He is the regional coordinator of the party in this city. Some of the other DSP nominations are: Georg Spartanski – may-

oral candidate in Pleven, Zhivko Tabakov – in Bourgas, Angel Yanchev – in Veliko Turnovo, and Lyudmil Vesselinov – mayoral candidate in Pernik.

With their nomination DBG ran ahead of the other partners in the RB. Many interpreted this as an attempt to impose these nominations and this contributed to an increasing tension in the Bloc. There was some sharp reaction on behalf of DSB to Meglena Kouneva's proposal that former Foreign Minister in the Saxe Cobourg-Gotha government Solomon Passy should be nominated candidate for Mayor of Sofia. The party believes that they have to endorse the nomination for Sofia, as traditionally, they have the highest electoral support in the capital compared to the other RB parties. DSB will probably nominate MP Villi Lilkov for Mayor of Sofia. He has been a municipal councilor in the capital for many years. Currently he is DSP chairman in Sofia.

In all likelihood, the coming months will be particularly busy for the parties from the Reformist Bloc. It is quite possible to witness some disagreement on certain nominations for mayors judging from the overall situation in the coalition over the past year. The municipal councilors' ballots are also a prerequisite for dispute. It is very likely that they will not agree on joint nominations in some places of this country.

### 2.1.3 Patriotic Front

At the end of May the Patriotic Front set seven conditions to GERB to be met before 1 July. Otherwise the Patriots threatened that they would withdraw their support for the cabinet. One of their demands is to immediately demolish the illegal houses in Gurmen and intensify the fight against petty crime. In addition the PF insists on enacting amendments to the Election Code and in-



roducing compulsory voting or voting registration. Another of the seven conditions is to build a safety fence along the border with Turkey and repair the damaged parts of it. In the social realm PF insists on not allowing the price of electricity to increase, and that there be some administrative measures by the power distribution companies and the Ministry of Energy for stopping the massive misappropriation and theft in the sector.

PF Co-Chairman Valeri Simeonov criticized the government that “on a number of priorities, important to PF, nothing has been done 7 months after the government took office”. He stated further that “PF’s support for the current government is not unconditional and is directly related to the implementation of the priorities in the Stable Government Program.”

Regardless of the fact that PF’s conditions were not met by 1 July, their support for the government remains. After talks with the Chairman of the parliamentary group of GERB Tsvetan Tsvetanov the Patriots stated that they are happy with the pledge of the government to make more decisive steps in combating petty crime.

The tension between the two formations should be regarded as an attempt of PF to maintain their identity and image in the complex and varied coalition formula from after the elections. Their tactics of seeking a balance between support and criticism makes them successful, at this stage. Opinion polls suggest that PF enjoys stable electoral support.

PF also started their preparation for the local elections. These will be their first local elections in this format. The two main parties in PF - VMRO and the National Front for Salvation of Bulgaria (NFSB) will have to find consensus when nominating their joint local candidates. This might result in some

disagreement, but is hardly likely to become a risk for the unity of the coalition.

#### **2.1.4. ABV**

In mid June ABV re-elected Georgi Parvanov as their Chairman with 93.53% of the members and supporters who participated in their inner-party poll. The inner-party elections came about as a result of Parvanov’s resignation in disagreement with the parliamentary group of ABV when voting on the 16 billion foreign debt. The other two candidates – the chairman of the municipal organization of ABV in Rousse Stel-lyan Stefanov and the regional governor of Pazardzhik and member of the Executive Board of the party Trendafil Velichkov received the support of about 3% of the members and supporters of the party.

Parvanov believes that ABV should go back to their initial mission – an alternative for Bulgaria’s revival. He is of the opinion that the party should formulate and defend new, good quality policies. In front of the delegates of the National conference of the party, the former President assessed highly the involvement of ABV in the government. He thinks that for six months of their participation in the government “the party has demonstrated that it can attain results and work for reforms in sectors that have been waiting to be reformed for decades.” Parvanov stated that ABV will set a number of clear priorities before the partners in government. Some of them will be: implementation of the proposals for social and pension reform; analyzing the state and the measures to be implemented to revive the energy sector. And last but not least, ABV will monitor the way the money is spent from the new external debt on items the state really needs.

ABV also started their preparation for

the local elections in October. Rumen Petkov will be Chairman of the Election staff. This quarter too ABV invited BSP to look for opportunities to have joint nominations in the left, but the socialists' attitude to the proposal is rather reserved, at least for the time being. Georgi Parvanov invited BSP leader Mihail Mikov to a meeting where a wide range of topics would be discussed, including local elections. At this stage Mikov has not responded to the invitation with the excuse that his schedule is very busy. Approximately 4 months are left and it is still possible that the two left formations agree to cooperate in some places.

The tension in Orlandovtsi and Gurmen was a topic which ABV also took a stance on. Georgi Parvanov urged to convene the Consultancy Council on National Security with the President due to the conflicts and protests in these two places. According to Parvanov such conflicts have a direct effect on national security. He expressed the opinion that the government's stability is not in any danger. It is the civil and social peace that is at risk. Former President Parvanov believes that Roma problems are economic and social. He warned against ethnicizing the problem prior to the elections.

## **2.2. Trends in the Parliamentary Opposition**

### **2.2.1. BSP- Left Bulgaria**

Over the past quarter, internal party tension in BSP has remained high. On a TV show former intelligence chief General Brigo Asparouhov - currently member of BSP's National Council - said that the now Chairman of BSP was offered a bribe from a competitor for the position. This happened on the eve of BSP's congress one year ago, when a new leader was elected. According to Asparouhov, Mikov himself shared this

information with former Chairman Stanishev and several members of the party leadership. General Asparouhov expressed his surprise as to why, given the situation, Mikov did not go public about the bribe offered. Several people from BSP said later on that they were aware of this, but refused to give the name of the person who had offered the bribe. BSP leader Mihail Mikov refused to make any comment whatsoever.

There is the impression that what Brigo Asparouhov said stirs up an intrigue inside the BSP rather. It remains unclear why he said this one year later, although he said that he knew it at the congress. Many people in BSP regard this as an attempt to induce more tension in the party and discredit its leader prior to the local elections.

Yet another inner party conflict deserves to be mentioned in this quarter. One of the most pronounced oppositionists inside the BSP - Georgi Kadiev - submitted a draft for amendment of the Elections Code to allow campaigning in people's mother tongue during election campaigns. This is a goal that MRF has been fighting for several years now. The party leadership reacted extremely negatively to Kadiev's proposal and, above all, to him not having discussed and coordinated it with his colleagues from the parliamentary group in advance. There was even a vote on his dismissal from the group but it was two votes short for that to happen. 24 of the left MPs were "in favor" of expelling Kadiev, and 14 against. In order for him to be expelled, a 2/3 majority was needed of the votes of the 39 left MPs, which amounts to 26.

However, immediately after the voting Kadiev hinted that he would consider the possibility of withdrawing his motion as a gesture to his colleagues who had supported him. He defined the decision of

the group in his favor as “the only positive thing for BSP” over the past weeks and as a “stress-test” for the party.

During the past quarter too, the relations BSP-ABV remained complex. Despite that, ABV supported BSP when collecting signatures to plead to the Constitutional Court to scrutinize the Act for ratification of the foreign debt of BGN 16 billion. Deputy speaker of the National Assembly Yanaki Stoilov gave a positive assessment of that and said that cooperation between the two parties is possible on matters of importance. Stoilov also said that it is possible for BSP to interact with ABV in certain regions for the local elections, but additional talks will be required for that.

The re-election of Sergei Stanishev for another term of office as PES president played an important role for BSP. This event in itself improves the international legitimacy of the party at a European level. Mihail Mikov assessed the election of Stanishev as important, “because a Bulgarian will lead Social-Democratic Europe in times of great challenges for the left.” According to Mikov this creates new opportunity and charges BSP with new energy.

After he was elected, Stanishev repeated his main causes as PES leader – fighting youth unemployment, democracy standards, as well as good results of the sister parties in the forthcoming elections in Denmark, Portugal and Spain. He pledged continuous support for BSP, particularly in the forthcoming local elections.

### 2.2.2. MRF

Liutvi Mestan announced that the inner-party democracy will be strengthened and the nominations for mayors will start from the lowest levels – the village conventions. 43 people will work at the Central election HQ

of MRF – the MPs of the movement, the members of the Central Operations Bureau of the party.

Liutvi Mestan stated that freedom has been given to the municipal structures to propose the best strategies for political interaction in municipalities where MRF has no resources for electing a mayor with their own list but has a decisive influence on who will be elected. He said also that there is a change in the strategy of the party for political interaction and that MRF are open to dialogue with other liberal formations in this country, including NDSV.

Mestan promised to register his mayoral candidates in the majority of municipalities, regardless of whether their party stands a chance of winning with their candidate. The motive of this decision is that “the reason of political competition is to provide different ideas and concepts to be aired, and not to win the position of the mayor at any cost”. The MRF leader does not give an answer at this stage as to whether the party will nominate a candidate for mayor in Sofia. Mestan explained that they will wait and see what the nomination of MRF’s Sofia regional organization will be.

Deputy Chairman of MRF Rushen Riza announced that the deadline for mayoral nominations is until 30 August and the leadership will make the final decisions in September.

At the beginning of June, immediately prior to the parliamentary elections in Turkey, Liutvi Mestan visited Ankara, following an invitation of the Turkish PM Ahmet Davutoglu. MRF defined this meeting as a regular one and denied any connection between that meeting and the elections in the country. According to Mestan, he and the Turkish PM share the opinion that EU integration and democratization of the region

are the only possible chance for prosperity and creation of zones of economic, social and cultural partnership.

MRF Chairman Liutvi Mestan took part in the meeting of European Liberal Parties held in Brussels at the end of June. Belgian PM Charles Michel and EU Parliament ALDE Group's President Guy Verhofstad invited Mestan to this event. The liberals organized a forum like this for the first time. It was attended by the leaders of all liberal parties in Europe – Prime Ministers, liberal ministers and members of ALDE Presidium. The liberal perspective for the future of EU was discussed at the forum.

### 2.2.3. BDC

After the Leader Party renamed itself to Bulgarian Democratic Center, the parliamentary group practically fell apart. Former allies of Nikolai Barekov – Svetlin Tanchev and Rumen Yonchev said that the name of the parliamentary group should be changed to parliamentary group "Center" in order not to be associated with the renamed party of Hristo Kovachki. This was not done and a conflict arose that finally split the BDC into two camps – close to businessman Hristo Kovachki and a group around Svetlin Tanchev and Rumen Yonchev.

Moreover, at the beginning of June it became apparent that the group around Tanchev will set up a new formation that will run alone in the local elections. The Union of Free Democrats, the Agrarian People's Union of Rumen Yonchev, St. George's Day Movement and the Radicals Movement will be part of the new formation. The new political union will be registered centrally and will participate in the local elections, then become the core of a new party. Most probably the new party will be called Future and Development for Bulgaria.

Bulgaria Without Censorship leader Nikolai Barekov MEP expressed his disappointment in his former colleagues, who he claims have changed the political project he created.

At the beginning of June Nikolai Barekov announced that Bulgaria Without Censorship will nominate his wife, Maria Kalenderska for Mayor of Sofia.

### 2.2.4. "Ataka"

In this quarter, "Ataka" went on with their pro-Russian rhetoric. The party organized several, albeit small anti-NATO and anti-American protests in places like Varna, Dobrich and Plovdiv. "Ataka" opposed the idea of having US tanks and other heavy military equipment based in Bulgaria. According to Volen Siderov in this way our country would be "finally colonized" and will become an "arena for combat in a war with Russia".

At the end of June "Ataka" demanded the freezing of electricity prices but the majority in Parliament revoked the proposal of the nationalists. Siderov's party demanded from the MPs to review their proposal for withdrawing the licenses of the power distribution companies, terminating the privatization contracts with them and returning their property to the state. Despite the demands of the MPs of "Ataka" the government coalition MPs voted against this motion becoming an item of the agenda of Parliament.

"Ataka" proposed amendments to the Act on disclosing the property of persons in leading state and other positions. The new text provides that owners of broadcasting and printed media, opinion poll agencies, PR agencies and producer companies shall declare to the National Audit Office their income and property.

The motives of the submitters of the draft say that this “will be an important step forward to more transparency and more successful fighting back stage dealings”. Volen Siderov is of the opinion that very famous journalists work there and it is not by chance that the public is interested in them, their income and property which, according to him, have been hidden and unclear for society.

This year too, “Ataka” announced they are against the Gay Pride in Sofia at the end of June. The party even submitted a draft for a law criminalizing the “public manifestation of homosexual orientation” providing fines from BGN 1,000 to BGN 5,000 and 1 to 5 years imprisonment.

### 3. Public opinion

A poll by Alfa Research from the middle of June indicates that the events from the past months like the planned increase in electricity prices, debated health care and pension system reforms, conflicts with the Roma and the debate on the judiciary reform raise the social tension and there is a growing disappointment with the executive. As a result, the overall assessment on the performance of the government registers a slight decline compared to April - 20% approval vs. 41% disapproval.

PM Boyko Borisov remains unaffected by the decline in confidence in the government. With a 33% personal rating he remains the second most liked politician in the country after Sofia Mayor Yordanka Fandakova.

A number of ministers from the cabinet are the target of dissatisfaction of larger groups and strata of the population. A new trend Alfa Research detected in June and, that occurs exceptionally rarely, is a simultaneous increase and decrease in

confidence in some key reformist thinking ministers. This phenomenon is most pronounced in the attitude towards health minister Peter Moskov and social minister Ivailo Kalfin. In a situation of polarization of the attitude towards Moskov and Kalfin, regional minister Liliana Pavlova breaks away in the leading position of the ranking of most successful ministers with 30.7% positive and only 3.8% negative assessments. The approval of the activity of Peter Moskov grows compared to April (from 24.3% to 27.8%), so does the criticism against him - by 3% compared to three months ago. The trend in the opinion of the performance of the social minister Ivailo Kalifin is analogical (growing positive assessment from 19.7% to 25% and of negative - from 9.1% to 11.7%). Minister on EU funds Tomislav Donchev has a performance index that is close to that of Peter Moskov. Albeit to a significantly lower extent, he stays among the popular names in the cabinet (15.6% positive and 4.9% negative assessments).

The most disapproved ministers in the government remain the minister of education Todor Tanev (3.9% approval and 20% disapproval) and the minister of economy Bozhidar Lukarski (3.2% approval and 17.2% disapproval). The concerns for the increase in the electricity price reduce the rating of the minister for energy Temenuzhka Popova (1.3% approval and 14.9% disapproval).

As for the political party leaders, ABV Chairman Georgi Parvanov has the approval of 22% of the respondents, followed by PF Co-Chairmen Krasimir Karakachanov (16.7%), Valeri Simeonov (15.9%), BSP leader Mihail Mikov (14%), Meglena Kouneva (14%), Radan Kunev (13%) and Volen Siderov (9.5%).

The trend of decline in the confidence of the major state institutions remains in this quarter too. The poll of Alfa Research indicates that the National Assembly stays the institution of the lowest rating - 10% confidence vs. 52% no confidence. Slightly higher, although predominantly negative is the attitude towards its speaker Tsetska Tsacheva (16% approval vs. 43% disapproval). President Rosen Plevneliev enjoys the approval of 24% vs. 37% disapproval.

The attitude towards the institutions of the judiciary remains unchanged and strongly negative - 8% of the respondents have positive attitude versus 60% negative assessment. The attitudes towards the Prosecutor's office are also similar - 6% approve of its performance, 60% do not. The Chief Prosecutor Sotir Tsatsarov has the approval of 13% of the people interviewed, whereas 40% have a negative attitude towards him.

Institutions like armed and police forces, which were among the few that enjoyed people's approval over the past years now are the target of more critical than positive assessments: armed forces - 19% confidence vs. 34% no confidence, police - 18% confidence vs. 44% no confidence.

After the CCB crisis the long built confidence in the Bulgarian National Bank collapsed to 9% approval versus 52% disapproval.

Only the public media enjoy predominantly the confidence of society - BNT (52% confidence versus 12% no confidence), BNR (48% confidence versus 26% no confidence); as well as the Bulgarian Orthodox church (35% confidence vs. 20% no confidence).

Alfa Research's poll indicates that the

electoral support for the main political parties in the country maintains a steady trend - 21.9% would vote GERB. BSP remains second (11.5%). Then MRF (7.3%), RB (5.7%), PF (5.7%), ABV (3.5%) and "Ataka" (3.2%). These results show that if there were pre-term parliamentary elections in the country there would be 7 parties in the National Assembly. From the parliamentary represented parties only the former party members of Nikolay Barekov BDC would lose their chances of overcoming the 4% threshold.

#### 4. Main conclusions and forecasts

1. The clashes and the protests in two of the Roma quarters in the country brought to the forefront issues, for which there has been a lack of working solutions for years. The low level of integration of the Roma community results in many social problems that make the relations tense. The danger of politicizing the question is there and the nationalistic parties may try to derive dividends for themselves in the forthcoming local elections campaign. This may radicalize the situation in the country. For this reason the government and the ruling majority have to find mechanisms to put the development of similar processes to a halt.

In the coming months the political situation in the country will be determined mainly by the coming elections for local authorities. This may delay the efforts on the reforms which the government is trying to implement and they may be postponed until after the elections.

2. GERB remains the first political force with almost double headway in front of the second party - BSP. At this stage, GERB has no real government alternative, which gives them confidence

in the forthcoming local elections. Most probably GERB will increase their presence in the local authorities, which might be a prerequisite for restructuring the political arena in the country. At this stage, GERB take into consideration their coalition partners, but a strong result for them in the local elections might result in recalculating the government formula and reducing the influence and claims of the Reformist Bloc.

3. The local elections will be a big challenge for the Reformist Bloc. It seems that they will be a cornerstone not only for unity but for the future of the bloc too. At this stage there are some disagreements regarding the principles to make joint nominations of RB. The attempts of Meglena Kouneva to impose her candidates may result in a conflict and the parties within the Bloc might run with different candidates in some places in the country.

The reforms their ministers are implementing are also a challenge for the Reformist Bloc – in justice, healthcare and education. The political future of RB will depend to a great extent on the success or lack of success of these reforms.

4. The Patriotic Front continues to balance between support and criticism towards the government. Sometimes, at least in public, PF behaves like an opposition formation. However, this should be regarded rather as tactics PF applies in order to minimize the possible negatives from supporting the government.

5. Over the past months, ABV have stabilized themselves in electoral terms. The reasons are the good performance of Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Labor and Social Policy Ivailo Kalfin. He is one of the most approved ministers, which has a positive effect on ABV as a whole.

Like PF, ABV also manage to balance between their support for the government and their criticism in certain areas which bring negatives to the government as a whole. A typical example of that is the criticism of the Minister of Defense, and of the state of the energy and the judiciary reform.

6. The crisis processes in BSP are ongoing. In inner-party terms there is some tension between the different camps in the party. At this stage Mihail Mikov manages to balance between them but cannot find ways out of the crisis and strengthening the opposition role of BSP yet. The cadre deficit in the party and the lack of idea renewal do not provide an opportunity for their electoral support to grow. The local elections are a great challenge for BSP, because the party might lose in regions where they were traditionally well represented until now.

7. MRF continues its criticism towards the governing majority and more specifically to PF and RB, who in their opinion use the “language of hatred” and ethnicize the social conflicts in the country. On the other hand, in key moments for GERB, MRF support their initiatives. This is the reason that, during this quarter too, there is still talk in the media and the public about covert agreements between the two parties.

8. BDC finally split into two groups, albeit informally at this stage – in MPs who represent the party and are backed by businessman Hristo Kovachki and in MPs gravitating around Svetlin Tanchev and Rumen Nenchev. The latter announced that they will establish a new formation to run in the local elections alone. These two groups have a very sta-

tus-quo like behavior in the parliament which makes it very difficult to position them. On certain issues they support the government majority, on others they behave like an opposition. It is very likely to have a re-shuffle within the parliamentary group after the local elections and it might split or even cease to exist as a united entity.

9. Over the past quarter there is some electoral stabilization of "Ataka". The reasons being the pro-Russian and anti-NATO rhetoric which they employ. The speculations with the topic of NATO exercises in the country and the possibility of American weapons being based on Bulgarian territory increases the support for the party among the nationalistic electorate.

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