

Georgi Karasimeonov (Ed.)

BAROMETER

Bulgaria's Political Parties

Year 15, Issue 3, July-September 2015

- The European Migrant Crisis has a significant impact on the political situation in the country. At this stage we do not observe an intense migrant flow towards Bulgaria, but the expectations, expressed also by Prime Minister Borisov, are that in the following months the situation could change completely and there might be an influx of tens of thousands of refugees to the country. This might enhance society's apprehensions and could escalate the political debate on the issue.
- Until now GERB's government stands firm and, despite the contradictions with its coalition partners, the party and above all, Prime Minister Borisov, manages to find consensus on controversial issues such as the constitutional reform, for example. It seems that the party will win the local elections and, by doing so, will consolidate its leading political role in the country.
- The internal conflicts within the Reformist Bloc continue and this proves to be a systematic weakness of the coalition. For the time being, however, the bloc is rallied together only by its involvement in executive power. Regardless of their differences, the reformists managed to agree on a joint registration for the local elections and, for the time being at least, it seems that the disputes have been settled, bearing in mind the bigger goal at hand - to perform well at the elections.
- BSP is still unable to overcome the heavy loss from last year's parliamentary elections. The party proves to be weak in opposition and finds it difficult to articulate the issues on which it can attack the government convincingly. Very often BSP is left in isolation on important topics such as the judicial reform and the constitutional changes, and the party's arguments remain misunderstood and unclear.

**FRIEDRICH
EBERT
STIFTUNG**

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung
Office Bulgaria
Analyses



CONTENTS

1. Political Situation	2
2. State and development of the main political parties	5
2.1. Trends in the parliamentary represented parties supporting the government	5
2.1.1. GERB	5
2.1.2. Reformist Bloc.....	6
2.1.3. Patriotic Front	7
2.1.4. ABV	7
2.2. Trends in the parliamentary opposition	8
2.2.1. BSP-Left Bulgaria.....	8
2.2.2. MRF.....	9
2.2.3. BDC.....	10
2.2.4. "Ataka"	10
3. Main Conclusions and forecasts.....	11

1. Political Situation

The judicial reform and the related changes to the Constitution were the main issues which had a significant impact on the political situation in the country. At the end of July the debate on these issues almost led to a political crisis in the ruling majority as the Co-Chairman of the parliamentary group of the Reformists Radan Kunev threatened that his party would leave the coalition. The necessary support of a minimum of 160 votes in favor of the draft law on the amendments to the Constitution, sponsored by the Minister of Justice Hristo Ivanov, was not there just two days before the scheduled voting in parliament.

The MRF categorically opposed most of the changes, while BSP and "Ataka" said in advance that they would not support the proposal. The political party supporting the government ABV also expressed some reservations regarding the intended changes. The controversial texts in the draft law sponsored by minister Ivanov were related to the distribution of the percentages among the quotas of parliament and the court in the composition of the Supreme Judicial Council.

Minister Hristo Ivanov viewed the division of the Supreme Judicial Council into two college of members - the court and the prosecution, as key for the judicial reform. According to his draft, the quota of the court would comprise 13 members and would include the presidents of the Supreme Court of Cassation and the Supreme Administrative Court, six members appointed by the general assembly of the judges and five from the National Assembly.

The distribution of seats in the college of prosecutors proved to be the bone of contention. The opposition and ABV stated that this distribution gives advantage to the

political quota and thus will infringe on the independence of the state prosecution. The MRF insisted that this proportion violates the principles of the separation of powers and that solely the Grand National Assembly is authorized to conduct such changes. ABV expressed a similar position.

Another controversial change in Hristo Ivanov's draft envisaged the voting at the Supreme Judicial Council to be by open ballot. According to proponents of the idea, this would make the voting transparent and the responsibility for taking decisions by each member of the council would be evident. Opponents of this text in turn believe that an open ballot vote would reinforce the pressure exerted on the members of the colleges of the council.

The presumption that the draft law, sponsored by Hristo Ivanov would be overturned in the plenary hall meant that a new draft could not be submitted in the following six months, in accordance with the Constitution of the country. Such a probability led to an urgent round of consultations between Prime Minister Boyko Borisov and parliamentary groups in the National Assembly. Borisov criticized the Minister of Justice and the Reformist Bloc for directing unnecessarily strong remarks towards the opposition, while at the same time seeking its support.

According to Borisov, in order for the reform to succeed, the votes of the opposition are needed and this is why there should be dialogue and compromise.

During the negotiations MRF stated that they would support the changes to the Constitution only if the draft of Hristo Ivanov was withdrawn and a new draft was submitted, in which the controversial texts should be omitted. After two days of intense consultations between the MRF and the RB a compromise was reached and the

new draft for amendment of the Constitution was submitted, carrying the signatures of 180 MPs from GERB, the Reformist Bloc, the Patriotic Front, BDC, MRF, independent MPs and part of ABV, while the latter stated that their support was symbolic and that they stood by their reservations.

The controversial texts related to the quota distribution remained but, upon the proposal of the MRF, the Constitutional Court was approached with the request to pass judgement whether the division of the Supreme Judicial Council into two colleges constitutes a change of the form of state governance. The open ballot vote was dropped in the new draft. The changes concerning the functions of the two colleges remained and it was decided that they would convene separately on personnel and organizational issues, as part of their competence. Concerning common issues and such related to the entire judicial power, the decisions will be taken by the full plenary composition of the two members of colleges of the Supreme Judicial Council. The sessions of the plenary composition will be chaired by the Minister of Justice, as a non-voting member. Upon the absence of the Minister of Justice, the sessions of the plenary composition will be chaired by the President of the Supreme Court of Cassation. The college of judges will be presided over by the President of the Supreme Court of Cassation, and that of the college of prosecutors by the Chief Prosecutor.

The new draft repeals the right of the Minister of Justice to manage the property of the judicial power and envisages the full plenary composition of the Supreme Judicial Council to administer the real estate of the judicial power.

The rights of the Inspectorate of the Supreme Judicial Council are also enhanced, allowing it to conduct checks for conflict of interest of judges, prosecutors and investi-

gators, to verify the comprehensiveness and truthfulness of the property ownership declarations, to conduct checks on cases that degrade the prestige of judicial power, as well as such which infringe on the independence of judges, prosecutors and investigators.

The amendments also give the Supreme Bar Council the right to approach the Constitutional Court when the rights and freedoms of the citizens are being violated by law.

In the middle of September the Constitutional Court declined to pass judgement on the request submitted by the MPs, as expected - whether the division of the Supreme Judicial Council and the distribution of the members into the two colleges constitutes a change in the form of state governance. The main motive was that the request is inadmissible, as the Constitutional Court only rules on approved legislation which is already in force, and not on drafts.

Despite all this, at the end of September the amendments to the Constitution were passed on first reading in parliament with 184 votes 'for'. They were supported by GERB, RB, MRF, PF, BDC, 4 independent MPs, and one MP from ABV. The draft law unexpectedly received the support of 9 MPs from "Ataka", which proved to be of key importance for attaining 180 votes in favor of the amendments as a qualified majority. This means that the other two remaining readings will be passed in a shorter period of time. If the first reading had received the support of only 160 MPs, the next reading could have been held not earlier than two and not later than five months after it. "Ataka" stated that they still had reservations but justifiably the public had doubts about covert dealings. MRF also stated that its reservations remained. Liutvi Mestan said that if the ratio in the college of prosecutors was not changed, his party would not vote in favor of the draft during the

second and third readings. This provides for surprises during the forthcoming readings, despite the compromise which has been reached at this point.

The contradictions and tension within the ruling majority were evident during the voting of the so called anti-corruption law sponsored by the Deputy Prime Minister Meglena Kouneva, which was not able to be approved before parliament's summer break. At the start of the new parliamentary season the draft law was rejected with the votes of ABV and the Patriotic Front and the opposition. Meglena Kouneva expressed her disappointment and even hinted that the Reformist Bloc could reconsider its participation in the coalition. Kouneva and the RB received the assurances of Prime Minister Borisov that the government will submit a new draft law after three months, hoping that it will be passed this time.

The migrant crisis was another main issue which marked the political situation in the country. At this stage we do not observe an intense migrant flow towards Bulgaria, as witnessed at the borders of Macedonia, Serbia and Hungary, but as a country bordering with Turkey and Greece, Bulgaria still remains one of the countries most threatened by an influx of refugees. This undoubtedly enhances society's apprehensions, evident from the public and media debate and concern felt in social networks.

Prime Minister Borisov called for sympathy and solidarity towards the refugees. He pleaded with the Bulgarians to show more understanding, because the situation is dire and the government is doing everything possible to protect the state's borders and, at the same time, to fulfil its humanitarian commitments. Borisov launched the idea of holding an international conference with the participation of the EU, the USA and Russia, at which a political decision should

be taken and the crisis in Syria be resolved. The Prime Minister pointed out several times that the key to the solution of the problem can be found in two states - the USA and Russia.

During the meeting of the heads of state of the Arraiolos Group held in Germany at the end of September President Rosen Plevneliev called upon tolerance towards and sympathy with the refugees. Addressing the forum he pointed out that the policy of sealing the borders is not a solution, but a more systematic approach of the EU Member States is needed.

During the EU Justice and Home Affairs meeting in Brussels Bulgaria expressed support for the proposal of the European Commission for a mandatory relocation plan for 120,000 refugees. The Minister of Interior Rumiana Bachvarova stated that Bulgaria consents to accept 850 refugees as a one-off measure and pointed out that this is only a temporary solution and other principle-based approaches and solutions should be sought in order to resolve the crisis situation.

Bachvarova described as fair and balanced the proposed mechanism for relocation of refugees and declared that there are no objections against Bulgaria's quota. According to her other talks should be help in parallel - for the security of the external borders of the EU, for example.

During the extraordinary European Council meeting in Brussels convened at the end of September the Prime Minister Boyko Borisov launched the idea, also shared by the Turkish Prime Minister Davutoglu, of setting up a safety zone in Syria where the refugees can be close to their birthplaces and can receive humanitarian aid. This idea was rejected by the European Council. Donald Tusk noted that the EC has to deal with much more urgent problems than the one of setting up a safety zone on the territory of Syria. According to

the President of the European Council, such an idea would mean creating a territorial area of 80 by 40 km jointly with the efforts of the European Union and the UN, which would need military control, would be a no-fly zone and banned for ground forces. Ankara's idea is contradictory and would infringe upon the sovereignty of a foreign state, believes Tusk.

In the past quarter the tension in the relations between Bulgaria and Russia escalated once again. The cause was the refusal of the Bulgarian government to grant access to Russian military-transport planes to fly over our airspace because of suspicion that there might be transportation of weapons and munitions intended for the Assad Regime. BSP, ABV and "Ataka" expressed a similar position, describing the decision as being taken under external pressure, and gave Greece as an example for refusing to fulfil the demand of the United States for prohibiting the flight of Russian planes over the airspace of the country. The Foreign Minister Daniel Mitov proposed to the Russian side for the planes to halt on Bulgarian territory for a check and after that to continue on their route to Syria.

The local election campaign was opened on September 25th and it will predetermine the development of the political situation in the country in the following month.

2. State and Development of the Main Political Parties

2.1. Trends in the parliamentary represented parties supporting the government

2.1.1. GERB

In the past quarter GERB concentrated its efforts on two things - ensuring parliamentary support for the legislative initiatives of the government and the preparation for the local elections. The chairman

of the party's parliamentary group Tsvetan Tsvetanov indulged into extraordinary parliamentary activity by holding consultations with other parliamentary groups on a good deal of draft legislation and reforms.

At the end of July GERB expelled from its parliamentary group the MP Zdravko Dimitrov, the reason being Dimitrov's decision to run for mayor of Plovdiv, although the party had already officially designated Ivan Totev as candidate mayor. The GERB parliamentary group described Dimitrov's action as contradictory to the party's values and ethics. Dimitrov was asked to leave the National Assembly and not to remain in parliament as an independent MP because he was elected as part of GERB's ballot paper. Dimitrov's nomination for mayor of Plovdiv was made by an initiative committee and later received the support of the Reformist Bloc. A month before declaring his intention to take part in the local elections Zdravko Dimitrov resigned as GERB coordinator for Plovdiv Region because of disapproval with the personnel policy in the regional party structures. Zdravko Dimitrov was mayor of West Plovdiv Region and later he was appointed Regional Governor of Plovdiv.

GERB presented the mayor candidates for the local elections in Arena Armeec Sofia. GERB's leader Boyko Borisov declared that the party is united and stronger after coming back to power. Borisov mentioned the accomplishments of his administration - the infrastructure projects, the highways, and Sofia underground, and focused on the achievements of GERB's mayors in a number of towns in the country.

The party's deputy chairman Tsvetan Tsvetanov stated that the party will celebrate its tenth victory at the local elections. According to him this is because the voters can appreciate the real work done by all the party structures.

GERB will rely on its successful mayors for the local elections, who will run for a new mandate. The Sofia Mayor Yordanka Fundukova is the all-round favorite, the main question being whether she will manage a first-round win. Dimitar Nikolov won the 2011 elections in Burgas with a record 70% and now the expectations are that he will have a first-round win once again. Mayor Ivan Portnih is running for a second mandate in Varna. There is a clear favorite in Dobrich, as well - Detelina Nikolova, who has already received the confidence of the people of the town four times.

GERB also relies on a new mandate for the mayors in Blagoevgrad - Atanas Kambitov, in Stara Zagora - Zhivko Todorov, in Plovdiv - Ivan Totev, and in Smolyan - Nikolai Melemov.

The only district town in the country where GERB does not have its own candidate and ballot list is Kyustendil, as the party has decided to support the present mayor Petar Paunov.

At the start of the campaign, GERB's election campaign head Tsvetan Tsvetanov said that the party will hold a tolerant and positive campaign. According to him GERB will rely on direct campaigning in order to present to the voters in the best possible way its achievements, to give them reports and also to put forward the new challenges for local administration.

GERB's slogan for the local elections will be "Visible Results".

2.1.2 Reformist Bloc

Tension in the Reformist Bloc remains high this quarter as well. The relations among the leaders of UDF Bozhidar Lukarski and of Bulgaria for the Citizens Movement (BCM) Meglena Kouneva, on one side and DSB leader Radan Kunev, on the other, continue to be tense. The contradictions oc-

curred during the joint registration of the coalition at the Central Election Commission. Initially DSB, Freedom and Honor People's Party of Korman Ismailov and Bulgarian Agrarian National Union (BZNS) of Defense Minister Nikolai Nenchev signed an agreement for joint participation in the elections. Meglena Kouneva and Bozhidar Lukarski felt disregarded and reacted strongly. Kouneva said that she could not apprehend why the three formations did not invite UDF and BCM, provided that she had stated a number of times her support for a joint registration. Lukarski in turn expressed disappointment for the separative actions of his colleagues and expressed the view that this was more of a misunderstanding. A few days later a meeting of the leaders of the five formations from the Reformist Bloc was held, at which the differences were settled and a joint registration at the Central Election Commission was made. However, symbolically, Radan Kunev was absent from the meeting, which is yet more clear proof of the strained relations within the RB.

These contradictions were also evident during the nomination of the candidates for municipal councilors and mayors in a number of towns in the country, but there were no sharp conflicts, at least not openly. BCM and UDF agreed to support the nomination of Vili Lilkov for Sofia Mayor. DSB's intention to nominate as leader on the municipal councilors' list in the capital the former Economy and Energy Minister in the first Borisov cabinet - Traicho Traikov, created tension. Kouneva's party insisted that the leader be Proshko Proshkov. At the end the ballot list was headed by Traikov but this at first glance minor disagreement once again disclosed the competitive relations between DSB and BCM.

The Reformist Bloc nominated the businessman and former municipal councilor

Chavdar Trifonov for Varna Mayor. The local UDF structure in the town supported GERB's nomination of Ivan Portnih. In Montana the RB expressed support for the current mayor Zlatko Zhivkov, who has a chance of winning a new mandate. As already mentioned, in Plovdiv the RB supported the nomination of Zlatko Dimitrov, who had been ousted from GERB. The RB will support the current Burgas Mayor from GERB - Dimitar Nikolov. In another district town - Kyustendil, the reformists will support the current mayor Petar Paunov, who has GERB's support as well. In Haskovo the RB will support the town's mayor Georgi Ivanov, who is running for a fifth mandate, despite the scandals surrounding his property and the investigation by the prosecution.

2.1.3 Patriotic Front

The Co-Chairman of the Patriotic Front (PF) and leader of the National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria (NFSB) Valery Simeonov outlined the main priorities of the formation during new parliamentary season. The most important task of the PF is to oust the MRF from all positions of power because, according to Valery Simeonov, the division and confrontation in the Bulgarian society on ethnic and religious principles is the greatest danger for the country. The NFSB leader described the Migrant Crisis as a direct threat to national security. Therefore, according to him it is necessary to speed up the construction of the fence at the border with Turkey as an effective measure against the migrants. Valery Simeonov stated that the PF is in favor of strengthening the punishments for human trafficking. Once again he reiterated the PF's support for the reform in the judicial system, healthcare and education.

The VMRO nominated the MEP Angel

Dzhambazki for Sofia Mayor. The Co-Chairman of the Patriotic Front (PF) and leader of the National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria (NFSB) Valery Simeonov expressed his disagreement with this nomination. In turn the National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria raised the nomination for deputy Sofia Mayor the reporter from SKAT TV - Silvia Trendafilova. This once again proved that there is tension between the two main coalition partners.

The VMRO and the NFSB will take part in the elections in another large town - Burgas, not as a coalition again. VMRO said that they will support the nomination of the current mayor Dimitar Nikolov, elected from GERB. Thus the split within the Patriotic Front becomes more visible because in fact VMRO will run against its parliamentary partner NFSB, which has its own nomination - Boyko Mirazchiiski. At the last local elections Krasimir Karakachanov's party was not able to win a single councillor's seat in the district town.

Most of the mayor nominees of NFSB are leaders of the party's local structures, for example Nikolay Marinov, mayor nominee for Pleven, Dimitar Dimitrov in Razgrad, Yordan Kovachev in Silistra, Dobrislav Ivanov in Sliven, Atanas Kodzhabashev in Smolyan, Gergana Mikova in Stara Zagora, Krusty Krustev in Haskovo, and Natalia Stefanova in Shumen.

Valery Simeonov stated that NFSB's nominees are worthy patriots and proven professionals.

2.1.4. ABV

At the inauguration of the new parliamentary season the chairman of the ABV parliamentary group Borislav Borisov criticised the way in which the ruling majority takes decisions. According to Borisov serious and careful discussion is necessary

for the successful implementation of the reforms during the present parliamentary session, otherwise ABV would not give its support. Borisov called for dialogue, constructiveness and respect among all the political formations. According to him this would contribute to the successful implementation of the intended reforms in the spheres of healthcare, judicial power and national security.

The forthcoming local elections are of great importance for ABV and not only because they will be the first elections for the party. As a new party ABV is still in the process of building its local structures and the elections will be an important prerequisite for the consolidation of the party in the political arena. It should be noted that the party relies on individuals who were close to BSP in the past, but this is understandable, as ABV emerged as a result of a split in the socialist party.

ABV's nominations are Vladimir Elezov in Blagoevgrad, the university professor Kamen Seimenliiski in Burgas, the businessman Angel Angelov in Kyustednil, the Regional Governor Trendafil Velichkov in Pazardzhik, and in Pleven - Tsvetan Antonov, who is a close compatriot of Roumen Petkov.

ABV has a chance to win the elections in the small municipalities and town councils, but its main objective is to win seats in the municipal councils in the district towns.

2.2. Trends in the Parliamentary Opposition

2.2.1. BSP – Left Bulgaria

At the inauguration of the new parliamentary session BSP's leader Mihail Mikov outlined the priorities of the left during the forthcoming political season. He criticized the reforms conducted by the government

and the ruling majority - in the healthcare sphere, education, and judicial power and described them as counterproductive and not fully thought out. Mikov declared that BSP will oppose the proposal for hospital privatization launched by the Health Minister Petar Moskov. The BSP leader criticized the government's education sector reform which envisages the allocation of public resources to private schools. According to him this will enhance inequality and will further restrict access to education, which will lead to the social exclusion of certain groups. Once again Mikov placed an emphasis on the ongoing work on the judicial reform and expressed the opinion that the incumbents' goal is only to replace the Supreme Judicial Council's members. This, in his opinion, cannot be called reform because it will not lead to fairer and more expedient administration of justice.

Local elections are of great importance for BSP. They will show the direction in which the party will develop after the heavy loss during last year's parliamentary elections. Still the new party leadership cannot consolidate the party, despite the leader Mikov's assurances of the opposite. The events from last month are proof of this. The "eternal opponent" in BSP - Georgi Kadiev - announced that he will run for Sofia Mayor, despite the nomination of the Professor in Sociology Mihail Mirchev. Kadiev's nomination was raised by ABV and the Bulgarian Social Democrats with leader Georgi Anastasov, who at present is MP from BSP - Left Bulgaria parliamentary group. Kadiev was ousted unanimously from the parliamentary group and the party for violating the party statute.

BSP's leader Mihail Mikov deplored Kadiev's decision. In Mikov's words "the grief of the ordinary socialist as a result of this kind of behavior is tremendous". Accord-

ing to Mikov “to be career-oriented is not a sufficient motive to enter politics. Political nomads deceive those who have cast their votes for them”. Mikov said that he held a talk with Kadiev and explained to him that this move was a mistake. In turn Kadiev said that he did not feel like a traitor. His only motivation for taking this decision was to offer a real alternative to the candidacy of Yordanka Fundukova.

BSP faces problems in other towns in the country apart from Sofia. The party leadership met with resistance from its local structures in many places in the country concerning the mayor and municipal councilors’ nominations.

In more than two thirds of the municipalities BSP will run with independent candidates for mayors and municipal council lists. In 15 municipalities the party will support initiative committees and in 23 municipalities it will partake in coalitions together with other left formations. BSP Deputy Chairman Boiko Velikov announced that the party is in a process of regeneration and stated the fact that there are 41 female mayor nominees, or approximately 20% of all BSP’s nominations. According to him there is regeneration of the candidates with respect to education and age. Young and well-educated candidates are predominant.

Among the BSP candidate mayors are the names of the former Minister of Education in the Plamen Oresharski cabinet Anelia Klisarova in Varna and the businessman Georgi Gergov in Plovdiv. Nikolai Georgiev is nominated for deputy Varna Mayor, Maya Dimitrova is nominated in Dobrich, Georgi Kyuchukov in Kardzhali, Atanas Gerginov in Kyustendil, Anton Georgiev in Pleven, Dencho Boyadzhiev in Razgrad, Stanislav Stoykov in Silistra, and Deyan Donchev in Targovishte.

Mihail Mikov said that BSP strives to im-

prove its results compared to last year’s parliamentary elections, although the turnout at local elections is lower. In his opinion the most important thing for BSP is to be consolidated as a major opposition party and a real alternative to the incumbents. Mikov also disclosed that agreements with other representatives from the left spectrum will be concluded for support at the second round of elections and for actions in the municipal councils after the elections in different regions of the country.

At the end of July the National Assembly elected with a secret ballot one of the most emblematic figures of BSP, Maya Manolova, as ombudsman. This made her leave parliament and the party as per the legal requirements of her new appointment.

2.2.2 MRF

At the inauguration of the new parliamentary session at the beginning of September MRF Leader Liutvi Mestan outlined a number of important priorities for his party. In his address he placed emphasis on the relevant topic of the Roma minority in the country. According to Mestan the policy for the integration of the minorities, in particular of the Roma ethnic minority, is “weak because it is a policy of power”. He said that the county “does not need a power policy but a strong policy with democratic and humane solutions.” The MRF Leader holds the opinion that the Roma issue “will not be solved with fences and a heavy police presence but through educational integration at pre-school level.”

Mestan drew attention to the Europe Migrant Crisis. According to him this crisis cannot be resolved by erecting barbed wire to stop the refugee influx, because this would mean the demise of the European ideal - the ideal for humanism, freedom, solidarity and democracy.

Concerning the forthcoming local elections Mestan stated that they will show the need for reform of the coalition formula of the state. The MRF Leader expressed assuredness that his party will enhance its presence in the local administration and will show that it is an indispensable political factor in the country at national level. In his welcome address Mestan did not fail to mention once again that the present government, supported by anti-systematic nationalist formations, cannot succeed on the path of reforms.

MRF relies on its traditionally strong presence in the mixed areas of the country with a Muslim population. In recent years the party has turned towards the Roma minority and it has been criticized for doing so, because of suspicions about vote control and vote trading. As a whole MRF's goals have always been connected to the idea of expanding the electoral geography of the party. It is not accidental that at the local elections MRF has nominated Andrei Georgiev, Deputy Regional Governor of Sofia City in the cabinet of Plamen Oresharski, for Sofia Mayor. Andrei Georgiev was part of MRF ballot list during the European Elections 2014 and in the ballot list of 25th Sofia constituency in Sofia in last year's parliamentary elections.

MRF poses the ambitious goal to have two municipal councilors in Sofia, which has not occurred on previous occasions and would definitely be a breakthrough.

The party's nomination for Smoylan Mayor is Yulian Indzhov, in Shumen - Bunyamin Hasan, in Kardzhali - the present mayor Hasan Azis, and in Razgrad - Hami Hamiev.

2.2.3 BDC

The parliamentary group of the Bulgarian Democratic Centre (BDC) has not been

united for quite some time and is facing a split. At the end of July there was even rumor that 6 MPs, close to Svetlin Tanchev, would leave the group. If this happens BDC will be left with less than the required minimum of 10 MPs and will cease to exist as a parliamentary group. Tanchev, Borislav Iglev and Georgi Kovachev, as well as the leader of the Bulgarian Agrarian Union Rumen Yonchev and another MP from the same formation - the Deputy Chairman of the National Assembly Yavor Haitov intend to leave the group. The sixth MP, who is still officially connected to Bulgaria without Censorship of Nikolay Barekov, is Martin Ivanov.

Still this is not a fact, but the probability for this to happen after the local elections is high. BDC will be disunited at the local elections. The MEP Nikolay Barekov, leader of Bulgaria without Censorship, nominated his spouse - the reporter Maria Kalendaraska for Sofia Mayor.

2.2.4 "Ataka"

In the past quarter "Ataka" criticized the EU's policy towards the refugees. The party expressed disagreement with the decision for quota relocation of 120,000 refugees on the territory of the union. "Ataka" called upon the Bulgarian government to close our border with Turkey, the same way Hungary closed its border with Serbia. The Migrant Crisis is one of the main topics which Volen Siderov's party has been articulating for the third consecutive year. Such rhetoric does not surprise us when it comes to a nationalist populist formation like "Ataka". The party unites its hard-core electorate with such statements, which is evident in many public opinion polls conducted in the past year.

Addressing parliament, Volen Siderov set the political priorities which "Ataka"

will follow during the new political season. Once again Siderov expressed the opinion that Bulgaria is not a sovereign state and follows foreign interests. According to him this is the main deficiency, which can be overcome neither through judicial reform, nor through constitutional amendments. In his opinion Bulgaria should reconsider its membership in NATO and should proclaim neutrality because our NATO membership "only brings us into danger of being involved in war."

In his address Siderov placed emphasis on the continuous migration of Bulgarians abroad. According to him in the past one year between 60 and 100 thousand Bulgarians have left the country. Siderov believes that in order to overcome this trend it is necessary to create sustainable conditions for economic and social development for Bulgarian citizens in the country.

Like other parties "Ataka" is preparing actively for the local elections on October 25th. The party's goal is to strengthen its presence in many municipal councils in the country in which it is traditionally represented, such as Shumen, Targovishte, Yambol, Burgas, Stara Zagora, Ruse, etc.

The district towns are of importance for the party. "Ataka" nominated the Deputy Chairman of the National Assembly Yavor Notev for Sofia Mayor. The party does not have a chance of winning a mayor's seat in any of the district towns in the country and their realistic goal should be to win seats in the municipal councils.

"Ataka" is the only parliamentary represented party and coalition which will campaign against the forthcoming referendum for introducing electronic remote voting to be held on October 25th. The party's motive is that this will increase the share of vote control in the country.

3. Main Conclusions and Forecasts

1. The European Migrant Crisis has a significant impact on the political situation in the country. At this stage we do not observe an intense migrant flow towards Bulgaria, but the expectations, expressed also by Prime Minister Borisov, are that in the following months the situation could change completely and there might be an influx of tens of thousands of refugees to the country. This might enhance society's apprehensions and could escalate the political debate on the issue.

The start of the local election campaign was peaceful. The results from the local elections will not bring any great surprises and the probability that they will lead to significant transformations in the party system are minimum.

2. GERB's government stands firm so far, and, despite the contradictions with its coalition partners, the party and above all, Prime Minister Borisov, manages to find consensus on controversial issues, such as the constitutional reform, for example. It seems that the party will win the local elections and, by doing so, will consolidate its leading political role in the country.

3. The internal conflicts within the Reformist Bloc continue and this proves to be a systematic weakness of the coalition. For the time being, however, the bloc is rallied together only by its involvement in executive power. Regardless of their differences, the reformists managed to agree on a joint registration for the local elections and for the time being at least, it seems that the disputes have been settled, bearing in mind the bigger goal at hand - to perform well at the elections. The RB continues to exert efforts to be the driving engine for the pledged reforms, although many of them provoked strong criticism by the opposition.

4. At this point the Patriotic Front strongly supports the government and we witness closer relations between the Front and GERB than with the Reformist Bloc. At the same time, however, the internal conflicts between the VMRO Leader Krasimir Karakachanov and the NFSB Leader Valery Simeonov are escalating, which will become even more evident after the local elections. The two main parties in the Patriotic Front will run against each other in many places in the country at the forthcoming elections - yet more proof of the existing tension in the coalition.

5. This local elections are of great importance for ABV as a new political party. The attempt of ABV to attract people from BSP continues, in order to strengthen its position in the left political arena. The nomination of Georgi Kadiev for Sofia Mayor by ABV only worsens the already tense relations between Parvanov's party and BSP. These local elections are yet more proof that any cooperation between the two formations is impossible at this stage.

6. BSP is still unable to overcome the heavy loss from last year's parliamentary elections. The party proves to be weak in opposition and finds it difficult to articulate the issues on which it can attack the government convincingly. Very often BSP is left in isolation on important topics such as the judicial reform and the constitutional changes, as the party's arguments remain misunderstood and unclear. Events from last month contradict the leader Mihail Mikov's claims that the outward processes within the party have been contained - this does not only concern the ousting of Kadiev. In many places in the country the local BSP structures expressed disapproval with some of the nominations for the local elections and this proves that the connections with the central leadership are weak.

7. More often MRF supports GERB and the government on key legislative decisions. In fact MRF deprived the RB of the initiative for the constitutional reforms, as part of the party's strategy to show its new face - that of a genuine pro-European party. This strategy aims to bring MRF out of the isolation it was placed into after last year's parliamentary elections. Most probably MRF will enlarge its presence in the local administration and this will heighten its claims to expand its role at national level.

8. BDC's existence is only a formality. Most probably the outward processes within the parliamentary group will lead to its disintegration, and it seems this will happen after the local elections.

9. Traditionally "Ataka" elevates its populist rhetoric at times of elections. The Migrant Crisis raised the electoral support for the party as a result of the stronger Euro-sceptical feelings in society, arising from the disagreements within the EU in the past few months.

About the editor:

Professor, Ph.D. Georgi Karasimeonov is teaching at SU "St. Clement of Ochrid", Director of the Institute for Political and Legal Studies. From 1991 to 1998 he was President of the Bulgarian Association for Political Science.

Contact: ipls@dir.bg



Imprint

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung
Office Bulgaria
97, Knjaz Boris I St.
1000 Sofia, Bulgaria
Responsible:
Regine Schubert, Director

Orders

e-mail: office@fes.bg

Commercial use of all media
published by the Friedrich-
Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is
not permitted without the
written consent of the FES.

All texts are available online

www.fes.bg

The views expressed in this publication
are not necessarily those of the
Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung or of the
organization for which the author works.