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BULGARIA: Looking to Free Elections in Six Months

Bulgarian party leaders, struggling to stay ahead of popular demands for reform, announced yesterday that free elections will be held in six months. [Redacted]

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At the party plenum that opened yesterday, the regime called for an extraordinary party congress in March, free elections for the National Assembly by May, and a new constitution to follow. General Secretary Mladenov also hinted the constitutional article guaranteeing the party's leading role will be rescinded soon. He had said only last week that free elections probably would not take place for several years. [Redacted]

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The regime also is easing its handling of dissidents. It legalized the leading unofficial environmental group yesterday, the first such approval of a dissident group. The Assembly is to pass a law on Thursday recognizing all dissident groups, according to a government spokesman. [Redacted]

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Comment: The party leaders are moving boldly in an effort to salvage their popular standing and give themselves time to implement their economic reform program, but they are likely to cost the Communist Party its majority in the Assembly. Blatant restrictions might create a backlash from an emboldened public, and the resurging Agrarian Party probably will present stiff competition for the first time in more than 40 years. Moreover, the regime may not be able to limit the participation of newly recognized opposition groups. [Redacted]

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Mladenov's apparently sudden reversal on the issue of free elections suggests he is not in full control of the party. More reform-minded members of the Politburo—like economic czar Lukanov, who promised last week that elections are forthcoming, and newly reinstated Politburo and Secretariat member Lilov—may be forcing a faster implementation of political reform. The speed with which the reformers are moving raises the possibility they may yet force Mladenov's ouster, opening the way for the type of revolutionary change occurring elsewhere in Eastern Europe. [Redacted]

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