

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

POLIT-BAROMETER

Year 20 Issue 3
April 2020

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The crisis with the coronavirus has radically changed the political debate in the country.



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POLITICAL SITUATION

The political situation in April was overshadowed by the state of emergency and measures related to the fight against coronavirus. On April 3, the National Assembly voted in favour of the government's motion to extend the state of emergency until May 13th. BSP was the only parliamentary party that did not support the extension of the state of emergency. The socialists demanded an analysis of the effect of the restrictive measures at present, supporting their decision with a lack of objective information about the economic and social consequences. IMRO agreed with some of the arguments of the left wing and suggested that the state of emergency be extended only until the end of April. However, in the end they also voted in favour of the proposal for the extension until May 13th. In early April an update of the state budget was voted. Among the reasons for the requested update were expectations of a decline in domestic consumption in the country, decreased exports and imports, and projections for lower employment. The services sector, especially tourism and transport, is expected to decline by almost 26%. Exports of goods and services are generally expected to fall by more than 16%. Weaker exports and domestic demand will also limit the amount of imports of goods and services by 12.9%.

The budget update stipulates that the state will pay 60% of the wages to workers who are threatened with redundancy, while the respective company will pay the remaining 40%. It is also envisaged that the maximum amount of new government debt which can be taken out during the year will be increased from BGN 2.2 to BGN 10 billion.

BSP did not support the budget update because, according to the socialists, it does not solve the problems, but deepens them. The reasons for this, according to BSP, are the lack of a clear plan and estimates. All the other parliamentary parties supported the update proposed by the government.

The government and MPs decided not to receive salaries during the state of emergency. This was arrived at after mutual attacks and accusations between political forces that accused each other of populism. In addition, state subsidies to parties during the state of emergency have been suspended.

As expected, the state of emergency and quarantine measures have led to an increase in unemployment in the country, which before that was at record low levels. Ac-

ording to the Employment Agency - in the period March 13th - April 13th, there were 82,409 people newly registered as unemployed in the Labour Offices. A dramatic increase on one day was reported on April 13, when almost 5,000 newly unemployed were registered. Expectations are that this trend will intensify. The largest share is that of people employed in tourism, hotels and restaurants - 39% of the total number of newly registered unemployed. The trade sector follows with 18.9%, the manufacturing industry with 14.9% and transport with 4.9%.

There are several centres with an outbreak of contagion, Sofia being with the greatest number infected, as well as Blagoevgrad, Vidin, Kyustendil, Pleven, Stara Zagora and Sliven. A major problem that the National Operations Headquarters has addressed is infections in hospitals and the contamination of medical personnel, as has been the case in some hospitals in the country. At the end of April, there was no serious pressure on the health system and there was no shortage of beds, equipment or medical care in any of the regional cities of the country. An exception is the hospital in Vidin, where there are several infected doctors. As of April 29th, the number of infected persons had reached 1,437, with 287 hospitalised. The total number of deaths stood at 59.

At the end of April, Prime Minister Borisov announced that early termination of the state of emergency was also being considered, which did not mean that quarantine measures would be abolished. He stated that this change would be introduced in phases, but the provision for mandatory wearing of masks in public would remain.

Tensions between President Rumen Radev and the government continued through this month as well. The president continued to criticise the government for not having a long-term plan to terminate the crisis and deal with the economic consequences. This led to an exchange between the two of them. Prime Minister Borisov said Radev was the only president in Europe who constantly criticises his government. Borisov stated he would not attend the National Security Advisory Council under the president, if one was convened, but would send a deputy. The relationship between the two has long since exceeded the normal institutional tone and turned into a personal war. And this has a negative impact not only on interaction and political

dialogue in the conditions of crisis, but has also diminished the trust of citizens in institutions.

A scandal prompted the decision of the state-owned Bulgarian Development Bank (BDB), whose main role is to encourage small and medium-sized businesses, to grant a loan of BGN 75 million to a debt collection company. The aim is that with this loan the company should buy bad loans from two banks. Democratic Bulgaria has demanded the resignation of BDB chief Stoyan Mavrodiiev. Prime Minister Borisov reacted immediately and ordered the Minister of Economy, the bank's principal, to immediately dismiss the entire board of directors. The Development Bank has been repeatedly criticised by the right-wing non-parliamentary opposition, as well as by a number of experts and observers who claim that, instead of promoting small and medium-sized businesses, it finances projects of companies with certain political connections and big businesses in the country. BDB chief Mavrodiiev stated that it was a good deal that had been prepared before the crisis had begun and that he had fallen victim to attacks by political circles linked to oligarchs close to the non-parliamentary opposition.

After the government surprisingly announced in late February that it would not rush to apply for Bulgaria's entry into

the ERM II mechanism, Prime Minister Borisov stated in mid-April that he had rethought this decision of his. He said that he would work on the topic expeditiously and by the end of April the government would apply to join the mechanism. He indicated that Bulgaria's application for ERM II would be in parallel with that of Croatia. At the end of April, it was revealed that the Bulgarian National Bank (BNB) had concluded a swap line agreement with the European Central Bank (ECB) for EUR 2 billion. Borisov said this was very good news, with confidence in the Bulgarian banking system being shown by the ECB. Borisov said that it was precisely the current crisis that showed how important it is for our country to be in the euro area so that we can benefit from the mechanisms provided by the ECB and the help that the eurozone countries will receive. According to Borisov, the pandemic has disproved the arguments of all critics in the country about the negatives of eurozone membership.

At the end of April, the Fitch International Agency lowered its forecast for the growth of the Bulgarian economy for 2020 by 8 points. Instead of the expected growth of 3.2% of GDP, GDP is projected to decline by 5.1%. The rating is maintained at BBB level, but the perspective has been changed from 'positive' to 'stable'. In 2021 a growth of 4.2% is expected, which means that the economy will not recover from 2019 levels.

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CONDITION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE PARTY SYSTEM

The state of emergency and measures to tackle the epidemic have been a major focus of political debate in the country, which has confronted government and opposition. New groupings have been formed between the parties in terms of measures. On one hand - GERB, the United Patriots, MRF and "Volya", who stood firmly behind the government and the proposed measures, and on the other - BSP and the non-parliamentary opposition in the form of Democratic Bulgaria. The criticisms of BSP relate to accusations against the government of chaotic measures and the lack of a clear plan for overcoming the economic consequences of the crisis and protecting the most vulnerable social groups, the poor, and small and medium-sized businesses. Another line of attack by BSP, as well as by Democratic Bulgaria, is related to the rights and freedoms of citizens and the protection of parliamentary democracy, which, according to the two political forces, are being suppressed.

The Coronavirus also affected MPs. The chairman of the GERB parliamentary group Daniela Daritkova and MPs Daniela Maleshkova from GERB and Hasan Ademov from MRF all tested positive. All MPs, as well as a large number of parliamentarians, were tested and no other carriers of the virus were found.

The danger of contagion has become a major argument for the governing parties to convene extraordinary parliamentary sessions only when measures and decisions on the crisis have to be voted on, and parliamentary scrutiny should be in writing only. BSP gathered votes to convene an emergency meeting for Prime Minister Borisov to be heard reporting on what the government did during the state of emergency. However, GERB and the United Patriots refused to register, and the meeting did not achieve a quorum. GERB blamed the BSP and leader Korneliya Ninova for attempting to improve her personal PR, which is highly inappropriate in an epidemic because of the risk of MPs becoming infected. GERB pointed out that the government was giving daily briefings - the prime minister personally or ministers, whom journalists could ask questions. They stated that this was being done transparently and in the eyes of the whole society. Korneliya Ninova objected to this argument, which she said was frivolous and belittled parliamentary democracy in the country, turning politics into "television democracy."

The Prime Minister's session in the National Assembly did, however, take place a week later. On April 28, he was heard at the request of BSP. Borisov pointed out that it was very difficult in such a dynamic situation to make forecasts and talk about an action plan in the future. According to him, no country has a clear plan of action, because the situation is constantly changing. According to the Prime Minister, a real assessment of the economic impact of the crisis can be made only after the period of quarantine has ended. Only then could a long-term economic recovery plan be worked out.

The United Patriots proposed measures to encourage Bulgarian farmers in the circumstances of crisis. IMRO leader and Deputy Prime Minister Krasimir Karakachanov proposed that there should be a ban on the import of foreign products in the season until Bulgarian products were used up. He said it was a fair measure in the face of a crisis and that it would cease after the situation came to an end. According to him, however, it is very important to preserve Bulgarian vegetable production and agriculture right now, since it is the most active season for this branch.

At the beginning of April, BSP presented an alternative plan for action on the coronavirus crisis and its economic impact. Among the measures is for the state to give without reimbursement to people on unpaid leave and self-insured persons a sum equal to one minimum wage plus insurance. According to BSP estimates, this amounts to BGN 725 per person - for the period of emergency. The Socialists also propose a grant of BGN 30 million for small and medium-sized farmers who are about to plant a crop. An important measure, according to BSP, is the exemption from pavement law for restaurants and small establishments, as well as refuse tax and VAT on food that has been purchased but not used. According to estimates by the left wing, these measures will cost a total of about 1.5 billion leva. BSP also proposed the freezing of deals for the purchase of armoured vehicles, vessels and weapons for the fleet.

BSP appeals to the Constitutional Court on legislative changes that give the Ministry of the Interior access to the telephones of citizens who are subject to restrictive orders and who have been quarantined. The concern of BSP is that these texts open the door to abuse and mass surveillance of people. This abuse, according to BSP, is possible because

this new measure does not require a court order, as the law explicitly dictates, in a normal situation. These changes were made in the version between the first and second reading of the bill. Therefore, BSP wants the Constitutional Court to rule on whether it was unconstitutional to vote on a text only at the second reading, without having voted on it before that at a first reading. According to BSP, this is a practice that has been used too often by governing bodies to vote on various lobbying texts in recent years.

The state of emergency delayed the direct elections for a new leader of BSP, but tensions in the party remain. Party Deputy Chairman Kiril Dobrev is emerging as Ninova's main opponent in the upcoming leadership clash. In a TV broadcast in early April, Dobrev refused to announce his decision on whether to run, but said the party needed a change.

In his words, "new times need new leaders to gather, not sow separation." According to him, "when you want to rule this country but divide your own party, there is no way you can unite around yourself those who do not like BSP for the sake of change in the country." Although he did not give a name, this statement could be interpreted as a direct attack on Korneliya Ninova.

Korneliya Ninova's term as leader of BSP expires on May 8th. However, she will continue to lead the party until a new president is elected, as the charter of the party dictates. The BSP Executive Office is expected to propose a direct election for a leader in the autumn. The First National Emergency Council must address all these issues, and it is possible that the internal opposition will call for an emergency congress to change its constitution so that president of BSP can be re-elected from Congress. It would appear that this will be the basis of the tactical battle between the separate wings that have formed in the party.

A new escalation of tensions in BSP gave rise to an interview with the leader of the BSP Plovdiv organisation - businessman Georgi Gergov on one of the national television channels. Gergov attacked Ninova, saying that she was running the party as she pleased and constantly got into conflicts with the ruling party over the coronavirus crisis. According to Gergov, the good work of the government and the measures taken have to be taken into account. A number of local party organisations in the country have reacted sharply and issued declarations demanding his resignation as a party member. Korneliya Ninova also urged Gergov to

leave the party. The Plovdiv organisation defended Gergov with a letter, asking questions of the leadership - how long it would rely on demagoguery and populism and why BSP is constantly involved in "scandals". All this indicates that the situation surrounding the election of a new BSP president will provoke even greater internal tensions.

MRF also delayed the election of the party's president and party congress. The form of the new timetable for the reporting and election meetings will become clear after the end of the state of emergency. MRF stood firmly behind the measures proposed by the government, praising the cabinet and the National Operations Headquarters. Jordan Tsonev pointed out that each opposition party has two paths - criticising the government or supporting it in the current crisis and leaving criticism to one side. MRF has chosen the second path. In his words, "Prime Minister Borisov is capable of dealing with the acute phase of the crisis and is doing very well." Tsonev appealed to President Rumen Radev for understanding during this time of crisis and leaving aside the differences and disputes between him and those in power.

Democratic Bulgaria has made an appeal to the National Assembly with regard to the state of emergency. The Declaration calls for the work of parliament to be restored by switching to electronic and remote voting in order to avoid a situation where "executive power is left to act virtually alone, without any possibility for effective parliamentary scrutiny." In addition, it calls for a move to implement all the necessary anti-pandemic measures under the Health Act and the Disaster Protection Act, instead of under the Emergency Act, and so eliminate the need for its extension. The declaration also calls for the resumption of the work of local authorities and the judiciary through available electronic and remote technologies.

The leader of the party "Ataka", Volen Siderov, now a municipal councillor on Sofia City Council, became involved in a new scandal. After urging Bulgarians to go to church on Easter, stating that the head of the National Operational Headquarters "prof. Mutafchyski is not above God," he was charged with inciting a crime - failure to comply with anti-epidemiological measures. Siderov refused to report to the police department, so a nationwide search for him was declared. Following his voluntary appearance, he was detained for 24 hours and remanded on bail for BGN 100,000, which was subsequently overturned by a higher court.

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PUBLIC OPINION

A survey by Gallup conducted in mid-April shows that 68% of Bulgarians fear they or their families may become infected with the coronavirus, while 29% do not show this anxiety. However, 56% feel the threat is exaggerated and 39% are of the opposite opinion.

Regarding the work of the government, the institutions and the National Operational Headquarters (NOH), the following attitudes are observed: 75% agree or fully agree that the cabinet is doing well, and 24% rather disagree or completely disagree. Confidence in NOH is even higher - 80%. Approval for Prime Minister Boyko Borisov has doubled compared to pre-crisis times and now stands at 68%.

It is interesting to note respondents' answers to the question as to whether they: "are [...] ready to give up human rights in a state of emergency" - 73% are more likely to agree or fully agree to sacrifice their rights, whilst 24% disagree or strongly disagree.

57% believe that, after the pandemic, the world will change dramatically, and 57% believe that in the world of tomorrow, the world's major powers will show more cooperation instead of confrontation.

In terms of work and income, 22% say they have lost a significant portion of their income; 14% declared that they have suspended work; 8% state that the working day was reduced and 9% say that they have lost their jobs.

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CONCLUSIONS AND FORECASTS

The coronavirus crisis has dramatically changed the political debate in the country. Growing confrontation can be observed between political forces over measures to combat the epidemic and overcoming the economic consequences of the crisis. President Radev, BSP and Democratic Bulgaria are particularly critical. On the other hand, there are growing fears that there are violations of fundamental civil and human rights, not only related to the measures, but also some actions of the prosecution. This body has charged a number of citizens with causing panic or disseminating false information regarding the coronavirus, including the chairperson of the branch organisation of pharmacists Prof. Assena Stoimenova and the leader of the civic association "Voets" ("Fighter").

In May it is expected that the confrontation between BSP and those in power will intensify as the economic effects

of the crisis become more and more visible - rising unemployment and, above all, the severe crisis affecting tourism, hotels and restaurants in the country.

The internal political situation in the BSP continues to be exacerbated in the context of the imminent election of the party leader. The situation is especially dynamic and difficult to predict. The internal opposition will increase their attempts to remove Ninova from the leadership post and will probably unite behind the figure of Kiril Dobrev.

At this stage, confidence in the government and Prime Minister Borisov is high, but this effect is due to the crisis and the same is observed throughout Europe. The economic turmoil that will follow, however, is likely to have a negative impact on confidence in the medium and long term.

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