

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

# POLIT-BAROMETER

Year 20 Issue 2  
March 2020

**Georgi Karasimeonov (Ed.)**



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## 1

## THE POLITICAL SITUATION

The political situation in March was primarily determined by the efforts taken by the authorities against the global spread of coronavirus infection, which has also affected Bulgaria. As early as the end of February, the government took action to address the growing number of incidents in Italy, creating crisis headquarters for doctors and experts. The headquarters were headed by Director General of the Military Medical Academy, General Prof. Ventsislav Mutafchiiski. Initial measures taken by the government resulted in increased medical checks at airports and border crossing points. These included measuring the temperature of those entering the country, and those arriving from areas at-risk were advised to remain in two-week home self-isolation. The situation in the country in early March was complicated by a new wave of influenza, which led to decisions to announce school holidays across the country - a step that was followed by a number of higher education institutions. The first two cases of people with coronavirus infections in the country were announced on March 8 - in Pleven and Gabrovo.

At first Prime Minister Borisov assumed a cautious position on the measures the state should take, expressing concern that the economy and budget of the country could be put at risk if restrictions were tightened. The headquarters of the staff dealing with the fight against Coronavirus called on citizens to restrict their social contacts, wash their hands more often and take other measures. The dynamic situation in the whole of Europe, and especially the difficult situation in Italy, where there is also a large Bulgarian community, led to a quick and timely reassessment, and the government asked the National Assembly to declare a state of emergency in the country. The motion was tabled on March 13 and was unanimously voted on by all 201 MPs present at the meeting. Thus, Bulgaria became one of the first European countries to introduce a state of emergency and impose quarantine. The initial draft of the Council of Ministers did not provide a time-limit for the state of emergency, but at the insistence of the BSP, a period of 1 month was specified - until the 13<sup>th</sup> of April. This period may be extended by a new vote by the National Assembly as the epidemic grows. BSP leader Korneliya Ninova said that the BSP parliamentary group had strongly insisted that the text explicitly mentions that the state of emergency is announced on the grounds of art. 57, para. 3 of the Constitution, which states that even in a state of emergency or martial law, the fundamental rights of citizens are guaranteed. The BSP argued that this

clarification provided additional guarantees that the government would not abuse its powers.

Measures that the government implemented immediately after the announcement of the state of emergency included the closure of all schools and kindergartens, closing all retail outlets - bars, restaurants and malls - except grocery stores, banks, insurance companies and pharmacies. Employers were urged to introduce a remote working mode wherever possible. At the end of March, more stringent measures were taken, allowing traffic between the district cities of the country only when needed or for work purposes and prohibiting walking in parks and public gardens. After establishing that one of the outbreaks of contagion is the ski resort of Bansko, the town was blocked and quarantined. On the 29<sup>th</sup> of March, the measures were extended to April 12<sup>th</sup>, which does not preclude the introduction of more stringent measures if the situation becomes more complicated.

Prime Minister Borisov called for unity and the consolidation of political forces and of society as a whole. He said the country had taken timely measures, which some countries had begun to take later. He said he was very concerned about the economic downturn, which would inevitably occur. According to him, if it continues for several months towards the end of the year, the country will have a deficit of at least BGN 3 billion.

The judiciary in the country has stopped holding court hearings to avoid numerous people gathering, except in urgent cases. Prosecutors also went onto a system of duty, which will include rotation to avoid more people in one place. Some lawyers have criticised the measure, which, in a state of emergency, creates prerequisites for possible arbitrariness and renunciation of justice by the state towards citizens.

The National Assembly passed a law of state of emergency, which amended a number of other laws. Some of the measures have sparked lively debate. The swift adoption of the law has led to ambiguities and contradictions. At the suggestion of GERB, the National Assembly allowed the armed forces to participate in the implementation of anti-epidemic measures in towns - to stop vehicles and persons until the arrival of the police, to use physical force and auxiliary means when needed. In addition, the location data of mobile operators will be stored and used for

the detection and isolation of quarantined persons. Police officers have the right to request this information. Mandatory quarantine was proposed for everyone arriving from abroad in Bulgaria. In case of refusal, the fine will be BGN 5,000. Following the reaction of BSP, as well as of medical organisations, sanctions for medics in cases of refusal to treat coronavirus infected persons were dropped by law. Non-compliance with quarantine and the spread of false news about the disease have been criminalised - imprisonment of up to three years and a fine of 1,000 to 10,000 leva, as well as more severe fines after a second violation. The deadlines for paying income tax and submitting tax returns to the National Revenue Agency (NRA) for businesses have been put back until June 30.

The state announced that it will pay 60% of employees' salaries to companies that do not lay off workers but who, due to quarantine, have stopped working, and to companies whose revenues have fallen by more than 20%. The Bulgarian Development Bank, which is state-owned and aims to encourage small and medium-sized enterprises, announced a special liquidity support line, receiving from the state BGN 700 million to help needy businesses and citizens. The measures have provoked a mixed reaction. Many small and medium-sized enterprises believe that these measures are not sufficient.

The project to update the government budget for 2020, which envisages raising the limit for taking on new government debt to BGN 10 billion and a deficit of BGN 3.5 billion at the end of the year, was adopted by the government instead of a balanced budget. It is to be submitted to the National Assembly, which is not currently in session unless convened because of legislative measures related to the state of emergency, which has been introduced due to the risk of the coronavirus spreading.

From the outset, the strategy of the Headquarters of the Operation and the government was to delay the spread of the virus to the maximum extent possible, in order to avoid a collapse of the health system and a crisis similar to that in Italy. This strategy is yielding results at this stage. Thus, by March 30, after the announcement of the first contaminated total, it had reached over 359 people with 8 people having died and 17 having recovered, which is one of the lowest levels in Europe and the Balkans. Only moderately or severely ill patients with complications are hospitalised. According to some experts, the number of those infected is highly misleading due to the small number of tests being carried out in the country. The fact is, however, that pressure on hospital care has slowed down, which allows for better preparation and reorganisation in times of crisis.

Relations between the President and the government that had escalated in recent weeks remain complex. The crisis has led to some renewed dialogue between them. President Radev organised two meetings with the Prime Minister and members of the government and the operational headquarters. The President said he supported the efforts of the op-

erational headquarters and the government, but also called for the formulation of a plan with economic measures to compensate business, the population and the most vulnerable groups by rescheduling some payments. Prime Minister Borisov said that in times of crisis, institutions should be united, and at least temporarily, forget their differences. He issued a statement of assurance that everything is being done so that the economy suffers less damage, but without the country being pushed towards economic populism, which would lead to very severe long-term consequences from which it would take years to recover.

The President vetoed two texts of the Emergency Act because of ambiguity - the widespread use of the term "false information" in relation to measures against fake news, and price measures with regard to potential speculation. In his justification, the president stated that the law "attacks the last vestiges of free speech." Radev is of the opinion that this norm can be interpreted freely and any freethinking is being attacked, the most worrying thing being that this restriction would remain after the state of emergency is over. Radev pointed out that all countries have taken action targeting the most vulnerable groups, as well as measures to support the small and medium-sized businesses that will be most affected. Such actions, he said, however, had not been taken by the Bulgarian government. According to Radev, the government's actions will exacerbate the economic crisis that is looming, and it could turn into a social one. The President also stated that he did not accept the texts, which provide for state regulation of prices, as an option to combat speculation. Radev also criticised the involvement of the armed forces in actions such as police functions for detaining and inspecting citizens provided for in the Emergency Act. The President also stated that restricting traffic between cities is not a proportionate measure for the crisis, but will lead to chaos and even greater economic and social damage. According to Radev, the credit for the trust that the government has received should be used rationally, not a prelude to the uncontrolled exercise of power.

Prime Minister Borisov responded instantly and sharply criticised Radev's behaviour. He described the president's statements as political PR, which is unacceptable in such a crisis. Borisov said he had been in constant dialogue with the President over recent days and was astonished by this attack. Borisov again called for unity and dialogue but said he would not succumb to populist proposals that would hinder economic recovery in the future. The National Assembly respected the President's veto and the texts were deleted from the law.

The intention of the Minister of Justice Danail Kirilov to request a temporary derogation from the European Convention on Human Rights due to the state of emergency also provoked critical reactions. A number of lawyers criticised the decision, denouncing it as unnecessary. According to experts, the Strasbourg court is that which takes into account the admissibility of the complaints, examines each case individually, taking into account the emergency situation.

The situation with the refugee crisis, which escalated in early March, has remained in the background. This has been particularly true after the Turkish government's decision to close its borders because of the country's coronavirus infection. However, the Bulgarian authorities continue to monitor the situation at the border between Bulgaria and Greece closely, with no illegal crossing being observed at this stage. There was no pressure whatsoever along the Bulgarian-Turkish border, even at the end of February, when the Turkish government sent migrants to its border with Greece. The cases of people crossing the Bulgarian-Turkish border were isolated and prevented by the border authorities.

In mid-March, the editor-in-chief of the 168 Hours newspaper and investigative journalist Slavi Angelov was brutally beaten. He was assaulted by masked persons while on his way home. This daring attack was condemned by

the journalistic community, but unfortunately it remained in the periphery of public and political attention because of the coronavirus panic. At this stage, the perpetrators have not been identified. The police are working on different versions related to the work of the journalist.

On March 26<sup>th</sup>, after a proposal of GERB, the National Assembly decided to suspend its regular sessions, meeting only extraordinarily, when legislative measures on the crisis were needed. The BSP reacted sharply to this proposal, saying this endangered statehood and parliamentary democracy. A majority voted in favour of the proposal, saying that such a step had been taken in a number of European countries and that parliament was still continuing to perform its functions, including with regard to parliamentary scrutiny, which is carried out in writing.

## 2

## CONDITION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE PARTY SYSTEM IN THE COUNTRY

The situation with the spread of the coronavirus has completely changed the agenda in the country, which also affects the activities and work of the parties. BSP and MRF postponed their reporting and election conferences, at which new leaderships of party structures on the ground had to be elected and candidates for leader had to be nominated. BSP decided to suspend the election campaign for party leader, which was due to take place on April 26<sup>th</sup>. The most likely choice is to delay this until autumn. Until then, it is assumed that Korneliya Ninova will remain at the head of the party, although her mandate has expired. This means that the May 9<sup>th</sup> congress of socialists will most probably be postponed.

The situation seems to be identical with MRF. So far, the MRF has not made a formal decision on whether to postpone their National Conference on April 26<sup>th</sup>. It will depend on the epidemiological situation in the country, but Congress is likely to be postponed.

BSP supported the government about the state of emergency, but insisted on more comprehensive social measures for the Bulgarian citizens most affected by the crisis. Some of the socialist proposals, such as price fixing, were controversial and were vetoed by the President. BSP put forward a proposal to introduce a temporary moratorium on domestic debt payments for the duration of the crisis. This provoked a sharp reaction from the government, who accused BSP of open populism.

GERB stood firmly behind the government's measures, calling for dialogue and unity. The party, however, reacted sharply to the presidential veto and criticism of the head of state. GERB parliamentary group chairwoman Daniela

Daritkova stated that the President should have respected parliament during the state of emergency vote instead of standing at a distance and levying criticism. GERB did not hold back in their criticism of Rumen Radev, recalling his remarks during the Shipka Peak celebrations on March 3<sup>rd</sup> over the national holiday, when he downplayed the coronavirus situation. GERB also criticised the President for not convening a National Security Advisory Board to demonstrate unity, and so giving further legitimacy to the measures taken by the state.

United Patriots have called for tougher and tougher measures in Roma neighbourhoods and ghettos and have even called for them to be closed. They also called on police to patrol these neighbourhoods to prevent the unreasonable exit of homes and the gathering of people in one place. In many Roma neighbourhoods in the country, local authorities have taken action and intensified the work of social mediators to explain the need for strict hygiene with the aim of reducing the spread of the disease.

Democratic Bulgaria suggested that the state should take over 80% of the salaries of all employees of crisis-hit companies for the months of April, May and June. In addition, they propose that there be government guarantees for bank loans for companies affected by the crisis and deferral of credit contributions for one year. Democratic Bulgaria also insist on a change in the government's investment intentions for Belene NPP projects and the Balkan gas hub. Rescheduling of loans to disabled individuals is also proposed. Democratic Bulgaria is of the opinion that these measures can be financed with fiscal reserve funds, deferral of inappropriate investment costs, public procurement and restructuring of European programmes.

# 3

## PUBLIC OPINION

A Gallup agency survey conducted March 22<sup>nd</sup>-23<sup>rd</sup> shows that Bulgarians approve of government measures taken to combat the spread of the coronavirus. 66% of the respondents believe that the measures are sufficient, 17% claim that they are excessive, and 15% reckon that they are insufficient. Between 88% and 94% approve of the ban on all public gatherings, the closure of borders for foreigners and the ban on Bulgarians travelling abroad.

An increase in confidence in the institutions involved in the process can be observed - the government's actions regarding the crisis are approved of by 74% of citizens, with confidence in Prime Minister Borisov being 74% and confidence in the Head of the Operative Staff general

Mutafchiyski being 89%. A very high level of approval is expressed for the class of doctors - 91%, whilst that of teachers is 87%.

37% of citizens say they experience a great fear of the virus, while 2/3 of the population have more or less anxiety but are not panic-stricken. 64% of the respondents suspect that conspiracy theories may be true and believe that the coronavirus is laboratory-made. 66% believe that a cure for the virus will be formulated very soon.

The study shows that people are taking measures against the epidemic en masse. Almost everyone says they wash their hands more often; 80% use disinfectants; 90% limit their personal visits, and 5% use protective masks.



# 4

## MAIN CONCLUSIONS AND FORECASTS

The Bulgarian government has taken timely measures which, at this stage, curb the spread of the epidemic. Those in authority have demonstrated the ability to respond in a crisis and create the necessary organisation. The ongoing operational headquarters at this stage have created the right organisation but also the sense of calmness so that people can better understand the essence of the problem. At this stage, people are generally taking responsibility and showing trust in the measures put in place by the government.

One can observe increasing confidence in the institutions involved in resolving the crisis, including the government. In general, the political elite is acting responsibly and in a consolidated manner, although there are instances of populism and unnecessary exacerbation of tensions. BSP, whilst in support of the state of emergency, continue to be extremely critical of the government at times, without sufficiently taking into account the particular crisis, which demands that consensus be sought. This applies to the activities of certain members of GERB as well, who also provoke confrontation with BSP.

The major challenges in the country, as well as elsewhere in the world, do not only emerge during the pandemic crisis, but are yet to come during the inevitable recession that will follow. The focus now is on emergency measures that are currently in place to prevent the spread of the epidemic, so that the health system does not collapse, and hospital care can withstand the pressure. The Bulgarian government has proposed some urgent measures to protect business and industry, which have called for a budget update, which must be approved by parliament.

The Bulgarian economy is highly dependent on that of Europe, with small and medium-sized enterprises predominating, which will be most severely affected by the crisis. Tourism and transport - two of the most developed industries in Bulgaria - will be particularly hard hit. Bulgaria boasts a good fiscal reserve and is one of the European countries with the lowest government debt, which amounts to 20% of GDP. This provides additional buffers and financial options that, if used, will minimise the effects of the looming economic crisis.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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The Bulgarian government has taken timely measures to curb the spread of the coronavirus epidemic at this stage. The permanent operational headquarters at this stage provides the necessary organisation, but also peace of mind, so that people can better understand the essence of the problem. So far, people on the whole are demonstrating responsibility and trusting the measures put in place by the government.



As a whole, the political elite is acting responsibly and in a consolidated manner, although there are also some instances of unnecessary exacerbation of tensions.



The major challenges in the country, just like everywhere in the world, are not only related to the crisis triggered by the pandemic, but are yet to come during the inevitable recession that will follow. The Bulgarian government has proposed some urgent measures to protect business and industry that have required an update of the budget.

Further information on the topic can be found here:  
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