

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

POLIT-BAROMETER

Year 21 Issue 1
January – February 2021

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The holding of elections in the circumstances of an epidemic is a major challenge facing the country.



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1

THE POLITICAL SITUATION

In the first months of the year, the political situation has been determined by two main processes - the measures against the coronavirus and the preparations for the upcoming electoral campaign. One of the main challenges facing the country is holding elections in a pandemic.

In January, the President, whose duties include setting the date for the parliamentary elections, began consultations with health authorities and political parties to identify measures to hold fair and safe elections in the circumstances of a pandemic. One of the main topics of the consultations was the request for the government to quickly draw up a health protocol for the voting, in order for citizens to feel safe and for the individuals who are quarantined not to be deprived of their right to vote. There is already a solution to these issues. Those who are sick and those in quarantine will vote with mobile ballot boxes, as provided for by the Electoral Code in other similar cases. Furthermore, it was decided that the members of the election commissions should be vaccinated as a matter of priority. During the consultations, opposition political parties raised the issue of the fairness of the vote and fears of possible manipulation by the ruling party. GERB retorted that such statements further erode the credibility of the election process, which would discourage a large number of Bulgarian citizens from going to the polls. Opposition groups called for a postal vote, at least for Bulgarians abroad, saying that this would be the best solution in the current epidemic situation. The government rejected the proposal, saying such fundamental changes could not be made immediately before the elections.

In the end, the President issued a decree that the elections should be held on April 4th. He called on the government to take all the necessary measures to ensure safety in the vote and to conduct an information campaign in order to avoid a low voter turnout, which would call into question the legitimacy of the next parliament. GERB accused Radev of choosing an unsuitable date, as April 4th is Catholic and Armenian Easter, which demonstrates disrespect to this part of Bulgarian society. Furthermore, this date would hinder voting abroad, as holidays usually impose additional restrictions on travel to a number of European countries.

On February 1st, during his report for the fourth year of his term of office, President Rumen Radev announced that he and Vice President Iliana Iotova would be standing for a second term. Radev said he would be counting on the support of all Bulgarian citizens and that he had not negotiated with political parties for his candidacy. Radev said he was relying on the support of hundreds of thousands of socialists, whom he considered as his family. Radev outlined the main priorities in the country. Amongst these were strengthening the state, the rule of law and restoring parliamentary democracy in the country. Radev mentioned that Bulgarian citizens want a change and an end to the viciously corrupt model of government, as evidenced by the protests in the country last year. According to the President, the parliamentary elections this year are key to removing the current political status quo, and he expressed the opinion that trying to maintain the current model of governing in the form of an expert government or a government of national salvation is not a solution but behind-the-scenes political machinations. Radev stated that the country needs a clear democratic reformist majority to restore statehood, reform the prosecution and wage a vigorous battle against corruption. The President reaffirmed his readiness to submit a draft amendment to the constitution, and said that this would be one of his first steps in the next parliament.

In early January, the Group for Monitoring Democracy, the Rule of Law and Fundamental Rights of the European Parliament's Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE) conducted a new hearing on Bulgaria, noting previous weaknesses in the legal order in the country, media freedom and the powers of the Prosecutor General. MEPs were dissatisfied with the hearing and asked new clarifying questions in writing. Information was requested on how many times the Chief Prosecutor had overturned decisions of lower-level prosecutors, whether he had suspended them against their will, and how often he had issued written instructions to them in separate cases. MEPs posed the question to the prosecutor's office as to how far the *Barcelonagate* investigation had gone - an investigation, also under way in Spain, into Prime Minister Borisov's alleged involvement in money laundering. The

LIBE commission also asked what is the stage of the investigation of the photos from the Prime Minister's house, which show huge sums of money, as well as whether technical expert study of the recordings with the alleged voice of Borisov had been made, accusing him of insulting allegations against political opponents. These questions are completely justified, since at the end of last year the prosecutor's office refused to initiate pre-trial proceedings, declaring that it could not be concluded from the recordings that a crime had been committed. However, the prosecutor's office did not want to say whether the expertise had established whether this was the voice of the Prime Minister. With regard to the photos with the wads of euros and gold bars, the prosecutor's office concluded that their authenticity could not be established. The identity of the woman who made the recordings is not clear, even though from several interviews with the Prime Minister it can be concluded that he knows who she is. The question is whether the prosecutor's office questioned the woman and whether she has been charged. These areas of vagueness show that certain facts about this case have deliberately been concealed.

After the introduction of partial lockdown, the incidence of infection in the country decreased. However, the government continues to demonstrate contradictory and chaotic measures. The delay in vaccination is particularly worrying, with the country ranking last

in Europe with regard to the number of people vaccinated. As of February 20th, 26,000 people had been vaccinated with two doses. One of the reasons is the insufficient supply of vaccines and the government's decision to refuse a larger share of the vaccines of Pfizer-Biontech and Moderna, at the expense of Astra Zeneca, which is designated for mass vaccination. The reason for choosing this vaccine is its easier storage. The reason for choosing this vaccine is that it is easier to store. Only at the end of February did the government decide to start mass vaccination, and the so-called green corridors were provided for everyone. Although the government has launched a massive media campaign about the benefits of the vaccine, many people are still afraid to receive it, with 43% not planning to be vaccinated yet. In the last days of February, the number of positive cases of coronavirus increased significantly and reached nearly 2,000 on a daily basis.

Relations between Bulgaria and the Republic of North Macedonia continue to be extremely tense. Accusations against Bulgaria intensified in Skopje after the blocking of the start of the negotiations of the Republic of North Macedonia for EU membership. The Bulgarian position remained unchanged, which provoked acute reactions from the Macedonian side. A new attempt at normalising the dialogue and smoothing out the conflicts may come about only after the parliamentary elections in Bulgaria.

2

CONDITION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE PARTY SYSTEM

For the first time GERB will stand in a coalition in the upcoming parliamentary elections. The partner of the ruling party will be the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF). Despite the protests last summer and the low confidence in the government and Prime Minister Borisov, GERB continues to be the leading political force in all opinion polls. The ruling party relies on a well-established client network and the state administration, which are the main electoral core of the party. GERB relies on a low turnout and less protest mobilisation due to the pandemic. In such a scenario, the “hard cores” of the big parties, such as GERB and BSP, will be decisive with regard to the election results. Opposition parties have accused GERB and the government of deliberately instilling fear in people and not embarking on an election campaign to get fewer people to go to the polls.

The main challenges facing GERB remain the continuing scandals with Prime Minister Borisov and the possibility of new compromising statements discrediting the government coming to light during the campaign. The businessman Vasil Bozhkov, who is in hiding in Dubai, said that he would reveal new data substantiating corruption by the government and Prime Minister Borisov. In an interview with the national radio, Bozhkov reaffirmed that he had given over BGN 60 million in bribes to Finance Minister Vladislav Goranov, also intended for Borisov.

Borisov himself travels around the country almost every day leading a *de facto* election campaign ostensibly on his official commitments.

Yet another source of tension has emerged in BSP. The reason for this was the ordering of the lists for the parliament. The opposition in the party accused Korneliya Ninova and the leadership of ignoring the wishes of local party organisations in a number of districts of the country, such as Plovdiv, Sofia, Veliko Tarnovo and Pernik. This discord is likely to have an adverse effect on the mobilisation of the party during the electoral campaign. The conflict between the party leadership and the local BSP leader in Plovdiv, Georgi Gergov, culminated in the expulsion of the latter from the party. This led to a sharp reaction from the leadership of the Plovdiv organisation. The mayor of Pernik, Stanislav Vladimirov, also distanced himself from BSP, announcing his intention to stand for

President in the next presidential elections. Vladimirov accused the BSP leader of an authoritarian leadership style, which is destroying the party and leading to a decline in the number of votes. He said Ninova is living in a world of her own, with the party showing ideological aimlessness and organisational chaos.

Regarding governing in the future, Ninova said she would conduct an internal party consultation about which formations the party should form a coalition with after the elections. She rejected the possibility of a grand coalition with GERB in an attempt to dispel speculation that secret talks are in progress with the ruling party.

The decision of President Rumen Radev and Vice President Iliana Iotova to stand for a second term of office led to mixed reactions from BSP. It took several days before position the party was heard. At the end of last year, Korneliya Ninova several times answered evasively as to whether the party would support Radev for a second term, which has led to a great deal of speculation. A sense of tension remained between Ninova and the President. After the President announced his candidacy, Ninova announced that the decision on Radev would be made according to the statutes of the party after the parliamentary elections, when the process of nominations by party structures would begin. A vague position such as this on the part of the party causes confusion among ordinary socialists, and this could have a negative impact on the upcoming parliamentary elections. Moreover, a number of BSP organisations in the country have issued declarations in support of Radev.

IMRO decided to stand in the parliamentary elections on its own, and the United Patriots coalition disintegrated. Party leader, Krassimir Karakachanov, said that this was the wish of the party structures. In his words, IMRO has already proved that it can successfully participate in elections on its own. Proof of this is seen in the local elections and those for the European Parliament. Karakachanov pointed out that in the government the formation has fulfilled its pre-election promises – an increase in incomes and pensions, and the modernisation of the armed forces. The decision of IMRO to participate independently in the elections is a risky move, because at this stage the party is on

the verge of surpassing the electoral barrier. Whether it will manage to enter parliament will depend primarily on its ability to consolidate the nationalist vote around it. But other patriotic formations – “Ataka”, “Volya” and NFSB will also be counting on this surmise.

After the decision of IMRO not to participate in the elections in a coalition with NFSB, Valeri Simeonov's party formed a coalition with the party “Volya” of Vesselin Mareshki. This new coalition has been the subject of intense public reactions, due to the fact that its two leaders have been embroiled in heated arguments and even personal insults over recent years. Mareshki and Simeonov said these conflicts have been forgotten, and that which unites them is a common programme based on patriotic and conservative values. At this stage, however, their chances of entering parliament remain low.

“Ataka” will also stand independently in the elections. Volen Siderov said that these elections will be manipulated, but nevertheless “Ataka” will do everything possible to perform well in them.

Vigorous electoral mobilisation can be observed in MRF on the eve of the elections. The party is close to the third position, which at this stage is occupied by the party “There is such a people” of the showman Slavi Trifonov. MRF has once again defended the position that the country needs a catch-up development programme, which requires broad political agreement. Although he was nominated by a number of the party's primary organisations, the honorary chairman of the movement, Ahmed Dogan, said he would not stand for parliament. Businessman Delyan Peevski has received nominations for MP from almost all structures in the party. Party leader Mustafa Karadayi said this showed people's assessment of Peevski's actions at the start of the epidemic. Peevski remains synonymous with corruption in the country, and the decision of MRF for him to be on its lists again shows his strong influence in the party. His presence on the MRF lists is a fundamental obstacle to the party being accepted as a coalition partner by other parties.

Opinion polls show that Democratic Bulgaria will be a certain participant in the next parliament. A slight decline in the number of voters has been observed after the peak values that the right-wing party registered during the protests last summer. Democratic Bulgaria presented a programme for the accelerated modernisation of the country with two main pillars: e-government, with the introduction of administrative reform, and restoration of the rule of law in the country through reform in the prosecution. Regarding possible coalitions after the elections, Democratic Bulgaria stated that they would not participate in governments with a mandate of GERB or BSP, but did not rule out the possibility of cooperation with the Socialists in a government in which they are a mandate holder. This hypothesis, however, narrows the range of alternatives, because Democratic Bulgaria could receive a mandate to form a government only if the first

two attempts are unsuccessful. The leader of “Yes, Bulgaria” Hristo Ivanov stated that they would cooperate with any formations that agree to make a radical reform of the prosecution with changes in the constitution. This opens up space for so-called thematic majorities in the next National Assembly without being related to a given coalition format. Hristo Ivanov pointed out that there are three big issues to be resolved facing the country: restarting the rule of law, rehabilitation of political institutions, and development of human capital in the country.

The party of showman Slavi Trifonov “There is such a people” continues to be the third political force according to sociological polls. The formation has been registered as an independent participant in the elections. The party said it would not form a coalition with any of the current parliamentary political forces because they are all part of the status quo. The main priorities of the formation, about which they will not give way are - introduction of electronic remote voting, a majority electoral system in two rounds, the introduction of a subsidy of 1 lev for parties, and election of the Prosecutor General through direct elections by citizens. These demands will make it difficult to hold talks after the elections to form a ruling majority, as the other parties will find it difficult to accept some of these proposals.

“Stand up! BG” of former ombudsman Maya Manolova has registered for participation in the elections together with the so-called “Poisonous Trio”, the Movement Bulgaria of the Citizens, Movement 21 of the former BSP MP Tatiana Doncheva and the United People's Party of Maria Capone. The coalition also included the slogan from the protests “Thugs out!” along with the name of Manolova's civil association “Stand up!” All sociological polls predict that “Stand up! Thugs out!” will surpass the electoral barrier. Maya Manolova was among the first politicians to announce that they back Rumen Radev's nomination for a second term of office and will support him in the upcoming presidential elections at the end of the year.

Manolova announced that the main goal of the formation is to overthrow GERB and dismantle the corruption-oligarchic model in the country. She pointed out that in the next parliament their union will seek supporters to reform the prosecution, replace the Supreme Judicial Council and remove Ivan Geshev as chief prosecutor.

The inclusion of the “Poisonous Trio” in the union has increased support for Manolova's formation, although Prof. Velislav Minekov expressed disagreement with the decision of his partners - Arman Babikyan and lawyer Nikolay Hadjigenov regarding their participation in the electoral campaign as politicians. Minekov also gave as a motive his disappointment with the non-parliamentary opposition, which has not managed to sort out its own party interests, in order to make the only right decision in his opinion – a common stand in the elections. According to Minekov, this is a strategic mistake that could lead to victory for GERB and a new government of Boyko Borisov.

3

PUBLIC OPINION

A Gallup poll conducted between February 7th and 15th shows voters' attitudes at the start of the electoral campaign. GERB continues to be leader in the electoral rankings. 25.8% would vote for the party. BSP remains second with 21.9%. Slavi Trifonov's party "There is such a people" can rely on the support of 13.1% of Bulgarian citizens at this stage. Mobilisation can be observed in MRF and 12.4% of voters would cast their vote for this movement. The Gallup poll shows that at present three more parties would be in parliament - Democratic Bulgaria with 6.8%, "Stand up! Thugs out!" with 4.7%, and IMRO, which remain on the brink of crossing the electoral barrier with 4.2%. "Volya"-NFSB

is supported by 2.7% of voters, which at least for the time being does not give them a great chance of entering parliament.

The end of the government's term of office shows it with only 19% approval and 69% distrust, which is comparable with Oresharski's government in 2014. The National Assembly has the trust of 14% of Bulgarians, and 73% do not approve of its work.

The survey shows that a low voter turnout is expected - 43% of voters said they would definitely go to the polls. In real terms, this equates to 2.9 million voters.

4

MAIN CONCLUSIONS AND FORECASTS

Holding elections in circumstances of an epidemic is a major challenge facing the country. The increase in the number of positive tests in the last days of February heightened fears of a third wave during the electoral campaign. The government's decision to open restaurants and bars on March 1st is a cause for concern.

If the peak of the third wave is during the elections, this will lead to a low voter turnout, which will call into question the representativeness and legitimacy of the next National Assembly.

The circumstances of the epidemic will affect the electoral campaign, with the parties primarily using the media and the Internet to present their programmes and positions. Expectations are for a campaign based on confrontation and compromising material. At this stage, GERB is the leading political force, but the government has exceptionally low levels of confidence, and this may bring about surprises.

At present, BSP is lagging behind GERB. Internal conflicts between the various wings of the party continue, and the order of the lists has become a cause of tension.

The biggest questions relate to "There is such a people." Slavi Trifonov has chosen to play a waiting game. This excessive passivity, however, has led to a decline in the number of potential voters. Trifonov keeps the names of the people who will head his lists in complete secrecy, and it is possible that surprises in this respect will include popular people.

At this stage, the mobilisation of a protest vote remains low, due to fatigue of citizens as a result of the pandemic and the restrictive measures. This is in the interest of the ruling party GERB, which hopes for a lower voter turnout and, hence, that the vote will be resolved by the "hard cores" of the parties. Even if it is the leading political force, GERB may fall into isolation and not find partners to govern, especially if the "patriotic" formations do not surpass the electoral barrier. BSP, "There is such a people", and Democratic Bulgaria have stated categorically that they will not form a coalition with GERB.

With a greatly fragmented parliament, forming a ruling coalition will require at least three parties. Expectations are of complex and lengthy negotiations to form a government, in which the President may well end up playing a key role, especially if the first two attempts to form a government come to naught.

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FES Bulgaria has been publishing the „Polit-Barometer“ since 2000, analyzing current and long-term political processes and identifying trends in Bulgarian politics with a special focus on the political parties as democratic actors. In a situation where

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