

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

POLIT-BAROMETER

Year 21 Issue 2
March 2021

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1

THE POLITICAL SITUATION

The election campaign was held in the shadow of the Covid pandemic. Measures related to the health crisis in the country and the economic consequences have naturally been the main topic of debate. Other important issues remained in the background, such as the fight against corruption and the issues related to rule of law in the country – all of which were increasingly inconvenient for the government, and which they tried to remove from the campaign agenda. The debates on television were in a format only between parliamentary or non-parliamentary parties, and so the ruling party GERB escaped the awkward attacks of its strongest critics from the extra-parliamentary opposition. Prime Minister Borisov did not appear in a single debate, preferring to make his usual tours of the country and broadcast live on his Facebook page. The opposition accused Borisov of “hiding” for half a year and avoiding embarrassing questions about some of his discrediting audio recordings and photographs of his bedroom, which provoked huge interest but remained unclarified, due to a lack of objective investigation by prosecutors.

The campaign unfolded more along the line of personal attacks between politicians than in debates on specific policies. The growing number of cases of Covid-19 in the country and the conflicting measures taken by the government provoked the most discussion. In mid-March, Bulgaria topped the number of infected per 100,000 people and was second in mortality in Europe. This led to a new lockdown, but in early March the government decided to open restaurants and bars in a situation of growing morbidity. The number of infected people continued to grow, but the cabinet decided to slacken the measures again on April 1, with establishments only being able to work outdoors. This chaos showed once again that the government did not have a clear strategy, but was guided by the pre-election situation and was trying to please everyone.

Bulgaria has fallen behind seriously in the vaccination process. The reason is the government’s decision last year to give up its stake in the EU order for Pfizer and Moderna vaccines at the expense of AstraZeneca. The Bulgarian government has opted for the Oxford vaccine because of its lower cost and easier storage.

Borisov participated in a meeting in Vienna of EU countries lagging behind in vaccination. The meeting, initiated by Sebastian Kurz, called for a renewed distribution of vaccines. The European Commission announced that these countries had made their choice in giving up their share in favour of other vaccines. The opposition sharply criticised the Bulgarian government for the strategy chosen. However, Borisov did not accept the guilt and tried to shift responsibility to the European Commission.

In the middle of March, the prosecutor’s office and the State Agency for National Security detained six people, amongst whom were former and current Bulgarian military intelligence officers, on charges of spying for Russia. In a style typical of Prosecutor General Geshev, the case was vociferously announced at a special press conference, as data from instruments of special intelligence was announced - videos, photos and recorded conversations between members of the group. Geshev declared the operation unparalleled in the annals of the most recent history of Bulgaria. The feeling remained, however, that the time of the arrests was not selected by chance to be during the election campaign and it was to serve political purposes. These were for the most part the reactions from opposition parties, including Democratic Bulgaria, which has always been highly critical of the regime in Russia. A number of analysts described the action as an attempt by the government to show that it is a predictable and loyal ally of NATO - especially after the scathing declaration of two leading US senators from the Foreign Policy Committee, also published on a page of the US Embassy in Sofia, which states that the scale of corruption in Bulgaria may have a negative impact on bilateral relations. Five of the detainees remained in custody, and one was released on bail after confessing and deciding to co-operate in the investigation. As a result of the spy scandal, Bulgaria “expelled” two more Russian diplomats. Thus, in the course of a year, the total number of Russian diplomats declared *persona non grata* increased to eight.

Again this month, relations between Bulgaria and the Republic of North Macedonia remained extremely strained. The Bulgarian side criticizes the “ongo-

ing hate speech in the Macedonian media towards Bulgaria". Provocative statements of Bulgarian politicians from the ruling party IMRO further escalated the tension. The reaction on the part of Bulgaria provoked the attempt of several members of the European Parliament from the Socialist and Green groups to make an amendment to the resolution on the integration of the Republic of North Macedonia into the EU, directed against politicians in Bulgaria on account of their statements. This text was not accepted. However, the activities of the International Institute for Middle East and Balkan Studies Foundation, registered in Ljubljana, became a topic. According to the Bulgarian government, the institution is involved in lobbying for the Macedonian cause in Europe and in spreading a campaign of defamation against Bulgaria. For that reason, the Bulgarian Foreign Ministry called the acting ambassador of the Republic of North Macedonia in Sofia, expressing outrage at the defamation campaign involving the Ljubljana-based institute. The government in Skopje confirmed that it has a contract with the institute, but expressed incomprehension as to why the Bulgarian Foreign Ministry summoned the North Macedonian ambassador on account of a non-governmental organisation operating in a third country.

At the end of March, the foreign ministry of the Republic of North Macedonia sent a note of protest to the Bulgarian Foreign Ministry regarding a video released by IMRO MEP Angel Djambazki with footage from the Macedonian cities of Skopje and Ohrid and Djambazki's statement that "Macedonia is Bulgarian". The government in Skopje says it will inform the EU of what has happened.

In mid-March, it became clear that the Central Election Commission was behind schedule in preparing for the elections. There was no widespread information campaign regarding the health protocol of the voting, so that voters could go to the polls calmly and without fear. The training of the members of sectional election commissions in connection with the filling in of the complicated election protocols began very late in view of the fact that for the first time voting would be carried out both with machines and with ballots. A

fortnight before the elections, the state-owned company that submits the election results electronically, Information Services, announced that the official results of the elections could be delayed by several days due to the complicated protocol. According to them, this could lead to a large number of mistakes in filling in the data in the sectional election commissions. GERB levelled the accusation at BSP that their representative in the CEC was guilty of working on the protocol for the sectional commissions. BSP described this accusation as absurd and stressed that GERB has a majority in the CEC and this protocol was approved by their votes. According to the opposition, GERB alone is to blame for the complicated vote with the changes in the electoral code, with which it was decided that, in addition to machine voting, there would be voting with ballots at the discretion of voters. Furthermore, the opposition gave a reminder that the government accepted that the results of the machine vote should be entered by hand in the protocols, which in practice makes machine voting meaningless and creates additional opportunities for errors.

At the end of March, the United States Department of State published its annual report on the state of human rights in the world. The part about Bulgaria was highly critical. The report highlights the serious problems of corruption, media censorship, the rule of law, the independence of the judiciary, and the numerous cases of police arbitrariness and violence that have not been sanctioned by the judiciary. For the first time, the former MP of MRF, oligarch Delyan Peevski, is mentioned by name, pointing out that his newspapers and media provide targeted positive coverage of politicians connected to him and the activities of Prosecutor General Ivan Geshev. This year, Peevski sold his media group to United Group, which also bought Nova TV.

The report also states that in the country there are no guarantees for the rights of minorities, including LGBT communities. There are also examples of inhumane treatment of refugees, as well as several cases in which the Bulgarian authorities handed over to the Turkish state people who are being persecuted for political reasons by the regime of Erdogan.

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CONDITION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE PARTY SYSTEM

Over the duration of the electoral campaign, GERB gradually increased their lead over BSP. This was not so much due to a growth in the electoral support for GERB, as to the erosion of the peripheral electorate among the Socialists. The conflicts in BSP had a negative impact on the campaign and some of the votes of the Socialists spilled over to other parties – “There is such a people” of Slavi Trifonov and “Stand up! Thugs out!”

The campaign of GERB was conducted under the slogan of “Work, work, work”. The party focused on what was done during the mandate - increasing incomes and improvement of the infrastructure. The topic of corruption and reform of the system of justice and the judiciary was carefully avoided. GERB used the strategy of not participating in a direct debate with the extra-parliamentary opposition. GERB did not envisage an increase in direct taxes if they won a new term in office, but they did envisage raising local taxes and increasing insurance payments. The party promised that by the end of 2025 the minimum wage in the country would reach BGN 1,000 and GDP would be BGN 200 billion.

BSP presented a strong social programme, including proposals for the introduction of family income taxation for working parents - a non-taxable minimum of BGN 500 per month for each child under 18. According to BSP estimates, this measure would cover 750,000 families. The programme of the party included free kindergartens for nearly 220,000 children. An increase in the maternity allowance was envisaged, so that in the second year it would become BGN 650 per month, which is the amount of the minimum wage. BSP proposed that free textbooks be guaranteed for all pupils from the 1st to 12th year at school. The Socialists gave a proposal for a VAT reduction on medicines from 20% to 9% and free medicines for children under 14 years of age.

BSP stated that they would work for the introduction of progressive income taxation, but corporate tax would remain at 10%. The model proposed by the party envisaged that nearly 3.5 million people would remain at the current level of taxation, and only 120,000 who have incomes over BGN 3,500 per month would

be taxed at a higher rate. Regarding the health crisis, BSP stated that if they came to power, they would start negotiations on the purchase of the Russian and Chinese vaccines. They also expressed the intention of establishing hospitals only for coronavirus treatment, so that citizens would be able to be treated in the other hospitals which were “clean from Covid”.

In the campaign, IMRO reported as a success its participation in the management the modernisation of the army and the increase of the minimum pension to BGN 300. The leader of IMRO and Deputy Prime Minister Krassimir Karakachanov used a harsh tone towards the Republic of North Macedonia in an attempt to win political dividends and consolidate his share of the vote of divided nationalist factions. This, however, has served to intensify the confrontation between Sofia and Skopje.

Although Delyan Peevski received the most nominations from MRF party organisations, he was not included in their lists. The party announced that the decision regarding this was made by Peevski himself. In a sense, this move by Peevski and MRF was not entirely unexpected. The problems that Peevski’s personality creates for the image of MRF are far-reaching. This step can be seen as an attempt by MRF to clear its reputation so that it can participate directly in governing the country. The MRF campaign was conducted under the slogan of “Restarting statehood”. MRF severely attacked the GERB model of governance, stating that the country needed to restore parliamentarism and political dialogue both between parties and between institutions. The most pressing priority for MRF is the creation of an expert government to implement a programme for the accelerated catching-up of economic development. According to MRF, the successful implementation of this programme would depend to a great extent on the opportunities provided by the green deal in the EU.

Democratic Bulgaria conducted an active election campaign, the main priorities in the programme being the economic modernisation of the country and reform of the prosecution. The union expressed the aim of working on the restarting of the legal demo-

cratic order through changes to the constitution that would “free institutions from the grasp of the mafia” and put the prosecutor’s office within democratic accountability. Democratic Bulgaria envisaged realisation of technological and energy transition by investing the funds from the European funds in projects with high added value with a view to increasing the competitiveness of the economy.

The party “There is such a people” of showman Slavi Trifonov was conspicuously absent from the electoral campaign. The party chose a strategy of not participating in any of the media debates. On the other hand, Trifonov relied on a campaign on social networks and his television channel 7/8. The most memorable events were the online discussion, with citizens who could ask questions in real time, and the live concert on the last day of the election campaign, which was broadcast on Facebook and on his TV channel. The discussion with the citizens was watched by over 300,000 people in just one day - proof of the serious interest in Trifonov and his formation. Among the experts that Trifonov included in his lists are several well-known figures in the public sphere, such as Prof. Andrey Chorbanov from the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, the economist Mika Zaykova, the power engineer Ivan Hinovski, and the national security specialist Nikolay Radulov. Trifonov’s main priorities, set out in the party’s election programme, remain the introduction of a majority electoral system and re-

mote electronic voting, reducing the state subsidy for parties to BGN 1, introducing e-government and administrative reform, as well as direct election of police chiefs and the chief prosecutor.

“Stand up! Thugs out!” was among the formations that most vehemently attacked GERB and Borisov’s government. The main speakers in the election campaign were the leader of “Stand Up!” Maya Manolova, Arman Babikyan from the “Poisonous Trio” and Tatiana Doncheva from “Movement 21”, who headed one of the lists of the coalition. The main priority for the formation was to change the corrupt model of government, a real fight against crime and corruption, and reform of the prosecution and the Supreme Judicial Council. Tatiana Doncheva stated that immediately after the elections “Stand up! Thugs out!” would introduce a bill that would make it possible for the mandate of the Supreme Judicial Council to be terminated, after which a new one would be elected. One of the first tasks of this new SJC would be to dismiss Chief Prosecutor Ivan Geshev. Only in this way, according to Doncheva, would the dependence of the prosecution on the ruling party and the oligarchy be terminated.

The other parties registered in the elections (30 in total) participated in the election campaign on the whole without very noticeable television appearances and posters, but only a small number of them had a real chance of surpassing the 1% barrier.

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PUBLIC OPINION

A Market Links survey conducted in mid-March shows that a large number of Bulgarian citizens (38%) support the establishment of a programme / expert government after the elections. Only 20% are of the opinion that forming a one-party cabinet is the best solution for the country. 17% of respondents support a two-party coalition, and a broad multiparty coalition of three or more parties has the backing of 25%.

The survey by Market Links shows that at the end of its term, the already dissolved parliament had the approval of only 10% of Bulgarians, and was distrusted by nearly 70%. Borisov's government can also claim only critically low levels of trust - 19% approval and 64% disapproval. Traditionally, the judiciary enjoys a low threshold of public trust - 20% of respondents approve of its work, and 53% do not.

A study by Exacta Research Group, conducted in mid-March, shows a positive change in attitudes to vaccination by society in Bulgaria. 62.8% of the respondents see an opportunity to return to normal life as a result of vaccination. 6.7% answered that they have already been vaccinated, and 15.5% that they have an appointment for immunisation. 40.6% believe that vaccination is inevitable. 37.2% have stated that they will not be vaccinated under any circumstances. The Exacta Research Group study shows that the largest proportion regarding vaccination is in the capital city, with these mainly being educated people between 40 and 50 years of age. Residents of Sofia who have higher education and are about 30 years old predominate among those who wish to be immunised.

The results of the parliamentary elections on April 4th resulted, as expected, in a fragmented parliament. Six parties will be represented in parliament. GERB won the election, but this is their worst result in parliamentary elections and they will probably remain in opposition. The biggest surprise was the high level of support for "There is such a people", which achieved second place. Democratic Bulgaria also won more votes than expected. BSP suffered a failure, which could lead to new internal battles within the party.

Party or coalition	Result as a percentage
GERB	25.80
"There is such a people"	17.40
BSP for Bulgaria	14.79
MRF	10.36
Democratic Bulgaria	9.31
"Stand up! Thugs out!"	4.65
IMRO	3.59
Bulgarian National Unification (Vasil Bozhkov)	2.91
"Vazrazhdane" (Revival)	2.41
"Volya"-NFSB	2.34
Republicans for Bulgaria (Tsvetan Tsvetanov)	1.30

Note: The results are based on 100% of the protocols processed in the CEC

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MAIN CONCLUSIONS AND FORECASTS

GERB won the elections, but it could be a Pyrrhic victory and the party is likely to remain in opposition. The reasons for this are that the party has fallen into isolation after the corruption scandals that have shaken the government in the last year. The surprise was "There is such a people", which achieved second place. BSP achieved one of their lowest results and the main culprit for this was the leader Korneliya Ninova, who with the purges in the party repelled and disappointed many members and supporters of the party.

The election results show that citizens want significant change. Summative, the extra-parliamentary opposition in the face of "There is such a people", "Demo-

cratic Bulgaria" and "Stand up! Thugs out!" will have most seats in the next National Assembly. These are the formations with the greatest chance of forming a government. However, this requires the support of BSP, and this will lead to difficult talks, because "There is such a people" and "Democratic Bulgaria" said before the elections that they would not participate in a government together with BSP. Therefore, the other option is an expert minority government of the non-parliamentary opposition, but this carries with it many risks regarding political stability. Difficult negotiations lie ahead and one should not rule out the option that it will not be possible to form a government, which would thus mean new elections.

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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

the quality and neutrality of Bulgarian media is under question, we aim to provide a scientific basis for a political discussion for Bulgarian and international readers.

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Further information on the topic can be found here:

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