

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

POLIT-BAROMETER

Year 21 Issue 4
May 2021

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The caretaker government has set about its work actively.



The main challenge facing the caretaker government is the implementation of fair elections.



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1

THE POLITICAL SITUATION

After the political parties in the 45th National Assembly failed to reach an agreement on forming a government, new parliamentary elections are to be held, which will be on July 11, 2021. The National Assembly ended its work with fervid clashes due to the revelations made at the sitting of the parliamentary commission for inspection of the GERB government. One of Bulgaria's richest agricultural producers, Svetoslav Ilchovski, testified before the commission, accusing former Prime Minister Borisov and his cronies of crimes. Ilchovski stated that he had been coerced into selling products at discounted prices and that he was involved in manipulating the stock exchange in favour of the company Gradus, belonging to Ivan Angelov, who is close to Prime Minister Borisov. Ilchovski said he knew where the gold bars in the photos in Borisov's bedroom had come from, citing the names of specific businessmen who had given the bars as gifts on the GERB leader's birthday. Ilchovski said that during a party attended by then-Prime Minister Borisov, he was shown a video clip showing how a famous businessman was sexually abused in custody, the video having been made by a warden. According to Ilchovski, this video was shown in order to ensure the necessary respect for the businessmen who participated in the party, showing what could happen to them if they did not follow the orders of the authorities. GERB MPs tried to prevent Ilchovski from speaking by interrupting the session of the commission with shouts and screams. At the next meeting, GERB MPs brought Ivan Angelov from the company Gradus to refute the allegations. He confirmed that he knew Boyko Borisov and that they often played cards together. He stated that Borisov had often helped him in his business, even defending him before the Turkish authorities during a veterinary inspection of his goods at the border. Angelov also shed light on a strange deal from last year, when tons of dates were donated to the country from the United Arab Emirates, which the government had previously announced were consumables for the pandemic. Angelov said he had benefited from the deal. A week later, when summoned for questioning by the prosecutor's office, he took back his statements, saying he had been mistaken.

The revelations dealt a serious blow to the prestige of GERB. Based on all the reported data, the prosecutor's

office carried out an inspection, and the caretaker Minister of Justice appointed an inspection in the Directorate for Serving Sentences.

Before parliament was dissolved, a new composition of the Central Election Commission was appointed on the proposal of the political parties represented in parliament. Kamelia Neykova, nominated by "There is such a people", was elected CEC chairwoman after GERB withdrew its proposal for chair. The elections on July 11 will be held with full machine voting in all sections with more than 300 voters, ballot voting being provided in the case of machine damage on election day. The reason for this change is the desire to reduce the number of invalid ballots, which in the last election was over 80,000. GERB stated that the introduction of full machine voting is a hidden educational qualification and appealed to the Constitutional Court to declare it unconstitutional.

Fulfilling his constitutional duties, President Rumen Radev has appointed a caretaker government. He said he was looking for a balance between experts and representatives of both the left and right, as well as the political centre. Stefan Yanev, a reserve general and the president's secretary for matters of security and defence, has been appointed Caretaker Prime Minister. Yanev was Defence Minister in the previous caretaker government appointed by Rumen Radev at the beginning of his term of office. He has held a number of diplomatic positions in the United States and NATO. Boyko Rashkov, a former director of the National Investigation Service and also former head of the Bureau for Control over Special Intelligence, has been appointed Interior Minister. Rashkov is one of the biggest critics of GERB and Chief Prosecutor Ivan Geshev. He was dismissed by previous rulers as head of the Special Intelligence Bureau after announcing allegations of misuse of special intelligence by SANS and the prosecution. A prominent BSP representative, Yanaki Stoilov, has been appointed Minister of Justice. Until recently, Stoilov was a member of the Executive Bureau of the BSP National Council. A member of BSP is also the Caretaker Minister of Agriculture and Food Hristo Bozukov, who also held this position in the Caretaker Government of Ognyan

Gerdjikov. The new Caretaker Minister of Health, Dr. Stoycho Katsarov, is a person whose political biography is connected with the right wing. He was Deputy Minister of Health in the government of Ivan Kostov, founder and MP from the Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria in 2005-2009. The economic team appointed by the president, which is composed of young and highly educated professionals, is also very impressive. Asen Vassilev, who was also a minister in Marin Raykov's caretaker government, was appointed Minister of Finance. Vassilev graduated from Harvard. Another graduate of Harvard University is the Secretary of the Economy Kiril Petkov, who has so far been involved in business in the field of innovation.

30-year-old Atanas Pekanov, a lecturer at the Vienna Institute of Economics, is the Deputy Prime Minister for EU funds, and will also be responsible for the Reconstruction and Development Plan. He is a member of President Radev's Strategic Council. Career diplomat, Ambassador Svetlan Stoev, who was director of state protocol a few years ago, was appointed Caretaker Foreign Minister. Minister of Education is Prof. Nikolay Denkov, who held this position 4 years ago in the first caretaker government appointed by Rumen Radev. The Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs and Minister of Labour and Social Policy Galab Donev is also from the president's team. He was also a minister in Prof. Gerdjikov's cabinet. Other ministries also saw the appointment predominantly of experts who have worked over the years in these departments as deputy ministers or directors of directorates.

The President said the main task of the government is to hold fair elections and stop iniquitous vote-buying practices. According to Rumen Radev, the caretaker government must reveal the truth about the condition of the state left by GERB and start the process of strengthening statehood and the institutions. The President stated that the caretaker government will work under the motto - Transparency, integrity, professionalism. In general, the assessment of a number of analysts is that with this cabinet the President wants to show the possible model of the next government elected by the National Assembly, which will be a combination of experts and figures from both the left and right political spectrum.

The caretaker Prime Minister Stefan Yanev said that he had come across chaos in the state and the administration and that, in the brief time of the caretaker cabinet, he would try to restore the professionalism and the normal rhythm of work. The caretaker government has made a number of changes in personnel. The Secretary General of the Ministry of the Interior, the Director of the Sofia Police, as well as the Director of the Inspectorate at the Ministry of the Interior and the Director of the Internal Security of the Interior Ministry have been replaced. The Caretaker Interior Minister Boyko Rashkov stated that there were reports

of police officers involved in schemes of vote-buying. Rashkov promised to be uncompromising towards ministry officials who have been involved in criminal acts. He stated that his main task was to stop vote buying and controlled voting, and called on prosecutors to reveal which parties had bought votes in the latest elections. Rashkov threatened that, if the prosecution did not do so, he would do so. Rashkov expressed outrage at the decision by the heads of the State Agency for National Security (SANS) and the State Agency for Intelligence (SAI) to go on a long period of unpaid leave – both of them from May 5th to September 6th. Rashkov said that, as a result of this, national security was left without leadership during such an important period for the country. President Radev stated that with this act the heads of the two services had demonstrated that they were loyal to Boyko Borisov, but not to the country. After a proposal from the government, the President issued a decree dismissing the head of SANS because he was politically dependent. Plamen Tonchev is the new director of SANS.

Minister of Finance Asen Vassilev dismissed the heads of the National Revenue Agency and the Customs Agency, saying that this should have happened a long time ago, and gave a reminder of the leakage of personal data of 5 million Bulgarians and the fact that BGN 700 million in fees from gambling have not entered the state budget. All district governors were also replaced. Asen Vassilev presented worrying data about the work of the NRA. He pointed out that over the last 4 years the NRA has written off BGN 10 billion in debts of companies to the revenue agency.

The Minister of Economy Kiril Petkov highlighted the iniquitous practices in the state Development Bank, which should promote small and medium-sized businesses. According to the minister, almost BGN 1 billion in loans from the bank's portfolio have been distributed to 8 companies related to the names of former MRF MP Delyan Peevski, oligarch Kiril Domuschiev, who is close to the ruling party, and Rumen Gaitanski, who is close to MRF business circles. Minister Petkov said that he would appoint an inspection in the bank and would look for an explanation as to why loans were given as priority to people close to the ruling big businessmen. At his suggestion, two members of the bank's Supervisory Board were dismissed and replaced with new people.

The heads of the Road Infrastructure Agency were fired for oversights in their work.

At the end of May, the joint-leader of Democratic Bulgaria, Atanas Atanasov, reported that 32 opposition politicians had been wiretapped before and during the elections. The Caretaker Interior Minister Boyko Rashkov confirmed the news, saying that Caretaker Prime Minister Stefan Yanev, then the President's secretary of defence and security, had also been wire-

tapped. Boyko Rashkov said that the wiretapping had been confirmed by officials in the services, who were adamant that it was a case of wiretapping of opposition politicians by the two structures using special intelligence means - the State Agency for National Security and the State Agency for Technical Operations. Rashkov declined to name other names, saying he expected the National Bureau for Control over the Use of Special Intelligence Means to conduct an inspection and announce the results. The Interior Minister stressed that there is information that documents are being destroyed in the special services, which clearly shows that an attempt is being made to cover up information. GERB said that there had been no illegal wiretapping and that this information was used by opponents of the party and the President.

Despite the change of government in the country, Bulgaria's position regarding the start of negotiations for the accession of the Republic of North Macedonia to the EU has remained unchanged. This was stated by the Caretaker Prime Minister Stefan Yanev and the new Foreign Minister Svetlan Stoev. Stefan Yanev

said that the caretaker government does not have a mandate for a new position, because this is bound by a declaration adopted by the National Assembly, but they will make efforts to restore dialogue and hold working meetings in various formats. At the end of May there was a visit to Sofia by the EU Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Oliver Varcheli and Portuguese Foreign Minister Augusto Santos Silva, as this country holds the rotating presidency of the EU Council. The Bulgarian Foreign Minister said that Sofia is ready for a responsible, open and full-fledged dialogue with the Republic of North Macedonia, but "there is full continuity on this topic and no change in Bulgaria's national position regarding the Republic of North Macedonia can be expected."

A positive step towards understanding and dialogue was the decision of Bulgarian President Rumen Radev and his counterpart from the Republic of North Macedonia Stevo Pendarovski to travel together to Rome to visit the Pope on the occasion of May 24th to honour the work of the holy brothers Cyril and Methodius declared by the Vatican as co-patrons of Europe.

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CONDITION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE PARTY SYSTEM

The serious blows suffered by GERB and the political isolation in which they found themselves led to changes in the party's leadership. Borisov's leadership post was not challenged by anyone, was criticism of him heard during the party's National Assembly. At the suggestion of Borisov, Sofia Mayor Yordanka Fandakova and Burgas Mayor Dimitar Nikolov were released as party deputy chairpersons. Tomislav Donchev and Daniel Mitov were elected as new deputy chairmen. Upon Borisov's suggestion, the National Assembly released Menda Stoyanova, Plamen Nunev and Krassimir Velchev from the party's Executive Committee. There were amendments to the statute of the party and the composition of the Executive Committee was increased from 11 to 15 members. Former members of the Executive Committee were elected - the former mayor of Plovdiv Ivan Totev, the regional coordinator of the party in Sofia Todor Krastev, Vezhdi Rashidov and former ministers Denitsa Sacheva and Kostadin Angelov. The National Assembly also made changes in the party's Control Commission, with the dismissal of Desislava Taneva, Alexander Nenkov, Emil Radev, Irena Sokolova, Daniela Seveklieva and Andrey Novakov. "There is such a people" (Ima Takuv Narod - ITN) continues to be an enigma with its behaviour. After a long silence and posts only on Facebook, Slavi Trifonov finally respected Bulgarian journalists by giving an interview to the Bulgarian National Radio. Trifonov justified his silence by explaining that Bulgaria ranks 112th in terms of media freedom and therefore he saw no point in speaking to the media, because his words would either be distorted or presented completely out of context. He pointed out that the main goal of his party had been to oust GERB from power and change the iniquitous model imposed by Borisov over the past 12 years. Trifonov said Bulgaria must be a loyal member of NATO and the EU, declaring itself in favour of a more united and cohesive European Union. Thus, for the first time, Trifonov has shown something new - that his party sees the future of the EU as a federation. Trifonov fended off the question of whether he would become Prime Minister if his party won the elections, saying he could only answer that question after the elections.

At the same time, however, representatives of "There is such a people" admitted that Slavi Trifonov may not

stand for election as an MP this time. This gave rise to new speculations related to Trifonov's health, which have been circulating for years.

Although the behaviour of "There is such a people" has met with a great deal of criticism among a number of analysts, the party is continuing to gain popularity and recent opinion polls show that it is catching up with GERB and may overtake them in the elections. ITN is registering to participate in the upcoming mayoral elections in Blagoevgrad, which will take place a week before the parliamentary vote. This shows a serious political step by the new party, which will be a test of its electoral strength on the eve of the early parliamentary elections on July 11th.

The serious defeat in the last elections shocked BSP and the party has been trying to reorganise its work. A new campaign headquarters was elected, headed by Christian Vigenin. The biggest news came at the end of May, when on the initiative of Korneliya Ninova, BSP began negotiations with other left-wing formations for a joint turnout in the elections. The left-wing coalition was joined by ABV and Georgi Kadiev's civic association, "Normal State". This attempt to unite the left-wing formations more broadly aims to show unity on the left, to mobilise the left-wing voters, and on the other hand to fend off competition from alternative projects. Just such a project is the new coalition "Left Union for a Clean and Holy Republic" - a formation whose organisational secretary is the former leader of BSP and prime minister in the mid-90s Jean Videnov. Videnov announced that he would create a new political party after the elections - Left Alternative, and will now run in the elections in a coalition with four parties, including the Russophile party "Revival of the Fatherland". The leader of the new union is Ivan Atanasov, who said the new coalition was formed because "the left has been trounced and the left-wing space is free" after the collapse of BSP in the last elections. The new union also includes the party of Krassimir Yankov, who left BSP last year - the "Bulgarian Progressive Line".

In May, BSP created a new ideological trend called "Socialism of the 21st Century". Its founders are out-

spoken critics of Ninova such as Georgi Pirinski, Valeri Zhablyanov, Georgi Bozhinov, Yuri Aslanov, Velislava Dareva and others. The main goal of the new faction in BSP is the restoration of the authentic ideological line of the party, which will fit into contemporary political realities.

MRF assumed an extreme anti-GERB stance during the work of the 45th National Assembly, as the formation made an attempt at dialogue with the democratic opposition. MRF stated that they would participate in the upcoming elections using the same lists with which they approached the previous ones. The movement is of the opinion that the country needs a restarting of statehood and political dialogue in the name of a common national catch-up development programme. MRF were adamant that they would not support a government composed of party coalitions in the next parliament, but would only support an expert cabinet with a clear programme and goals. MRF denied the data announced that the companies of the former MRF MP Delyan Peevski were financed with hundreds of millions of leva by the Bulgarian Development Bank. The acute reaction of deputy party chairman Yordan Tsonev has shown that this is a topic that is of concern to the movement. The results of the inspection in the Development Bank will be announced soon and this may become a cause for tension between MRF and the office of Stefan Yanev.

“Democratic Bulgaria” has maintained the results it achieved in the previous elections, with opinion polls even showing a slight increase. The reasons for this are the active work during the short period of work

of the 45th National Assembly and the good team of professionals - some of them new people who made a good impression. The parliamentary group of “Democratic Bulgaria” was one of the few that maintained a good parliamentary tone during the heated debates in the National Assembly.

The union tried to find a dialogue with the parties opposing GERB, which turned out to be a difficult task. The co-chairman of “Democratic Bulgaria” Hristo Ivanov said that active talks with the democratic formations outside GERB and MRF should start from now to seek a formula for nominating a government within the next parliament.

“Stand up! Mutri out!” (Stand up Thugs out - ISMV) will stand in the elections in the same format. Despite tension among some of the union’s leaders, the prevailing viewpoint is that this format is successful and has every chance of finding a seat in parliament. The leader of “Movement 21” Tatiana Doncheva participated in the negotiations with BSP for the unification of the left forces, but the talks did not lead to any results. Therefore, “Movement 21” and Tatiana Doncheva will again be part of the coalition “Stand up! Mutri out!”

After not managing to gain a seat in the 45th National Assembly, the patriotic formations decided to unite to increase their chances of entering parliament. IMRO, “Volya” and NFSB signed a coalition agreement for joint participation in the elections as a coalition of the “Bulgarian Patriots”. The other two nationalist parties, “Ataka” and “Vazrazhdane” (“Revival”), refused to join the new union.

3

PUBLIC OPINION

A Gallup poll conducted in the middle of May shows the following electoral picture: "There is such a people" are drawing close to GERB and it is quite possible for the former to overtake the latter in the forthcoming elections. 22.8% would vote for GERB-UDF, and 20.1% for Slavi Trifonov's party. BSP remain third with the support of 16.1% of voters, followed by "Democratic Bulgaria" with 11.6%, MRF with 11.2% and "Stand up! Mutri, out!" with 5.6%. Those that remain below the four percent threshold for entering the parliament are: IMRO - 3.1%; Vasil Bozhkov's party with 2.8%; the nationalists from "Vazrazhdane" - 2.6%; and "Volya" - 1.4%.

57.9% of all respondents said they will certainly vote in the July 11th elections. 16.7% stated that they are likely to vote, 8.3% say they are unlikely to vote. 13.7% gave the answer that they will certainly not vote.

The Gallup poll researches attitudes towards current political issues and scandals. Regarding the allegations being made that business was coerced to pay the government, 54.3% of the respondents believe that GERB and Boyko Borisov extorted business, 23.2% answered negatively and 22.5% hesitated to answer.

The Gallup poll sought to gain insight into attitudes towards the decision of "There is such a people" to immediately return the mandate to form a government. 69.9% of voters do not approve of Slavi Trifonov's behaviour after the April 4th elections, 18.6% approve of his behaviour, and the remainder cannot give an answer. However, 34.8% of respondents believe that "There is such a people" will increase their results in the upcoming elections.

Respondents are divided on the issue of whether to fully introduce machine voting in sections with more than 300 voters. 47.3% approve of this, whilst 48.9% do not.

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MAIN CONCLUSIONS AND FORECASTS

The caretaker government has made an active start to its work. Promised checks for abuses under the previous government may shed light on many of the scandals and cases that have arisen in recent years. Such revelations would have a negative impact on the election results of GERB in the forthcoming elections. The main challenge facing the caretaker government is the holding of fair elections. Even now, politicians from GERB are imagining what possible manipulations there might be, due to machine voting.

We are in for a strained and intense election campaign, which will be saturated with many revelations of abuses, which the caretaker government has begun to shed light on. At least at this stage the main losers are GERB. Electoral polls show that Slavi Trifonov's party is catching up with GERB and it is highly likely that for the first time since 2009, Boyko Borisov's party will lose the parliamentary 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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The caretaker government has set about its work actively. The checks that have been promised for occasions of abuse under the previous government may shed light on many of the scandals and cases that have arisen in recent years.



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Electoral polls show that Slavi Trifonov's party is gaining ground on GERB and there is a definite possibility that for the first time since 2009 the party led by Boyko Borisov will lose the parliamentary elections.

Further information on the topic can be found here:
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