

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

POLIT-BAROMETER

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Bulgaria faces a serious crisis as a consequence of the fourth wave of the pandemic.



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1

THE POLITICAL SITUATION

The political situation in October was determined mainly by the intensification of the pandemic, which changed the focus of the election campaign. The incumbent head of state Rumen Radev is the favourite in the upcoming presidential elections. He has the support of four of the main parties and coalitions in the country - BSP, "We Continue the Change", "There is Such a People" (ITN) and "Rise up BG! Here We Come." Rumen Radev's main competitor in the presidential elections is the candidate supported by GERB, prof. Anastas Gerdjikov. He is rector of Sofia University and was deputy Minister of Education in the Government of Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha. Gerdjikov was put forward by an initiative committee, with which GERB hopes to attract a wider periphery of voters, which at this stage is not justified. Gerdjikov tries to distance himself from GERB, announcing that he is not their candidate, but relies on the support of all Bulgarian citizens. He has stated that he will be the unifier of the nation and this is the slogan with which he is leading his election campaign. At the same time, he faces difficulties related to the fact that he avoids responding to questions, related to the evaluation of the previous administration regarding corruption, the reform of the judicial system and the dismissal of the chief prosecutor. Another problem for Gerdjikov is that he is not recognised among the broader public, which cannot easily be compensated for in such a short space of time before the elections.

"Democratic Bulgaria" support the President of the Supreme Court of Cassation, Lozan Panov, whose mandate expires at the beginning of next year. He was raised by an initiative committee and has also waged a scathing campaign against the current head of state. According to Panov, Radev did not assume a position against the oligarchic model of government and the chief prosecutor until the prosecution levelled accusations against the presidency. At this stage, Panov's campaign is not convincing and, for the time being, he is gathering support from a limited circle of voters.

MRF have put forward the leader of the party, Mustafa Karadayi, as a candidate for president with a view to mobilising maximum party support in the parliamentary elections. MRF are among Radev's most avid

critics, accusing him of undermining democracy and the dividing the nation. The reasons for this hostility is the position that President Radev took during the protests last year and his strong role in the struggle against the oligarchic model of government, of which is GERB and MRF are a symbol. MRF announced that they would support Gerdjikov in the second round.

The situation regarding the pandemic in the country became more complicated in October. The number of those infected is growing with every passing day, with Bulgaria leading the lamentable statistics for first place in mortality in the world per 100,000 people. At the end of October, the government took the decision to introduce a "green certificate" for entry into restaurants, bars, malls, schools and universities. Universities have switched to distance learning, as have schools in municipalities in the "dark red zone" for the rate of those infected. These measures taken by the government are overdue, and a full lockdown may be imposed in the coming days and weeks, as hospital capacity has been exhausted, even in the capital. The pre-election situation further exacerbates the situation. All parties, without exception, are focused on their election performance, so together they attacked the decision of the caretaker government, and some of them even openly flirt with widespread anti-vaccination sentiment, believing that this will bring them additional votes. The "Vazrazhdane" ("Revival") party and nationalist parties organised protests in front of the presidency, which led to clashes with law enforcement officers. Maya Manolova announced that "Rise up BG! Here We Come" will attack the order of the Minister of Health before the Supreme Administrative Court claiming that it is illegal and discriminatory. GERB-backed presidential candidate Anastas Gerdjikov called on the Minister of Health to revoke the order, as, according to him, it would lead to many businesses in the country going bankrupt. BSP demanded the resignation of the Minister of Health, Stoycho Katsarov, on the grounds that this measure was imposed without giving the people the opportunity to prepare and giving some period of grace. GERB also demanded the resignation of the Minister of Health, stating that the introduction of a "green certificate" is anticonstitutional. "Democratic Bulgaria" called on President Radev to convene the

National Security Advisory Council (KSNS) so that the parties could reach a consensus on the measures. This proposal is not possible because parliament is dissolved and a large number of the members of the NSAC are chairmen of the parliamentary groups.

The Minister of Health Stoycho Katsarov stated that the introduction of a "green certificate" is an alternative to

a full lockdown. He announced that the government's adopted plan would be followed, which stipulates that a full lockdown will be imposed if there are 1,000 infected people per 100,000 and if there are 9,000 people with Covid in medical institutions. These levels will probably be reached in early November and the government will have no choice but to take this measure.

2

CONDITION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE PARTY SYSTEM

Opinion polls show that the imminent elections will produce the same parliamentary fragmentation as in the previous two short parliaments this year. The dividing lines between the old and new parties remain, and this will lead to complex and difficult negotiations to form a regular government.

The party that won the last elections – “There is Such a People” (ITN) shows a drastic collapse in support, confirmed by all the opinion polls conducted this month. Media interest in Slavi Trifonov’s formation has decreased significantly, reflecting the general trend of the loss of public trust and disappointment among the voters who supported the party. ITN is trying to normalise relations with other parties, taking the position that a government must be formed at all costs after the elections. Deputy Chairman of ITN, Toshko Yordanov, said the party was ready to negotiate and sign a coalition agreement with parties apart from GERB and MRF. Yordanov stressed that the main goal of the new government was to eliminate the influence of GERB and MRF in the political and public life of the country. ITN said that a mandatory condition for the signing of a coalition agreement with other parties is the adoption of amendments to the Electoral Code for the introduction of electronic remote voting and the introduction of a majority electoral system. These proposals are not unequivocally accepted by other formations - especially that of a majority vote, which might block negotiations to form a government. Despite ITN’s requests to sign a coalition agreement, the formation remains extremely unpredictable and expectations that dialogue with them this time will proceed normally and according to the rules are rather optimistic.

The collapse of ITN has returned GERB to the top of the electoral charts. In September, a slight increase of 1-2% in the support of GERB was observed, which shows maximum mobilisation of the party for the elections. The highest result given to them by some polls is 24%, which is about 700,000 votes, a result approaching that of the elections on July 11th. There is a gap of about 7-8% between them and BSP and “We Continue the Change”, who are vying for second place. At least at this stage, GERB emerge as the winners of the elections. However, this is by far insufficient to be able to form

a government, even with MRF. GERB continues to be an undesirable party for a partner. And in the course of this campaign, there are no signs that those who were previously in power have reconsidered the reasons why they fell into isolation. There is a lack of self-criticism or reporting of governmental mistakes, nor is there any hint of reform in the prosecution or that Ivan Geshev will be dismissed as chief prosecutor. Geshev is blocking investigations into corruption among the former ruling party - proof that none of the revelations of abuse asserted by the caretaker government, at least for the moment, have led to charges.

GERB have embarked on an aggressive campaign, mobilising all the resources at their disposal - including among a number of branch organisations, such as those in the construction of roads, which have started protests. Many observers saw the influence of GERB in these protests, because over the years of their time in power a network of companies was set up, which won all the public procurements in the sector. GERB ardently criticise President Radev and the caretaker government, with accusations that they are mainly to blame for the increase in electricity and gas prices.

At this stage the nomination of Prof. Anastas Gerdjikov for President brings no additional votes for the party. Quite the contrary, in fact - a number of opinion polls show that Gerdjikov has a 2-3% lower score than the party’s lists for the parliamentary elections. GERB categorically rejected the opinions that appeared in the public space, including by former President Rosen Plevneliev, that Borisov ought to step down from the leadership position in the party in order for it to be recognised as a potential partner for government by other parties. Desislava Atanasova, who chaired the parliamentary group of GERB in the previous parliament, said the issue was not subject to comment, because Borisov is the founder of the party and will continue to be its leader. Tomislav Donchev even admitted that this time Borisov will not give up his seat in the National Assembly.

BSP are vying for second place with the new formation “We Continue the Change”. Different opinion polls put the party either in second or third place, and the dif-

ference between them and “We continue to change” is within the bounds of statistical error. Some polls show a 2% increase in support for BSP, predicting that they will receive 17-18% of those who have definitely decided to vote in the upcoming elections. Probably this is due to additional mobilisation as a result of the presidential election and Rumen Radev. The main challenge for BSP is whether these intentions will materialise as a real vote, due to the pandemic and machine voting, which demotivates some of their older supporters from going to the polling stations.

BSP postulate that they are a predictable party, capable of dialogue with other parties apart from GERB and MRF, in order to find a formula for forming a regular government. Representatives of BSP have repeatedly pointed out that they were the only party in the last National Assembly that did not set out pre-conditions, but relied on a pragmatic and reasonable approach to finding agreement on the formation of a parliamentary majority. BSP promise that in the next parliament they will show responsibility in an open dialogue with the new parties for the adoption of a programme of governance with clear priorities, which will lead the country out of the crisis, but will also make the necessary reforms in the judiciary, in health and also in the social sphere.

“We Continue the Change” set off with a flying start in the campaign, as sociological surveys rated it with a result of about 15-16%. The two former caretaker ministers Kiril Petkov and Asen Vassilev, who are co-chairs of the union, have a high rating. The lists of the formation included mostly young professionals with an education abroad in the field of economics and innovation, some of whom have worked in large international companies. The programme of the party prioritises zero corruption, putting a stop to misappropriation and misuse of public resources, higher budget collection without a change in tax legislation, judicial reform, removal of the chief prosecutor, and introduction of control and accountability for his future activities.

The leaders of “We Continue the Change” started touring the country with serious interest from citizens. Due to the worsening of the epidemic situation, however, “We Continue the Change” decided to suspend meetings in the cities of the country. An important case for the representation of the party is the verdict of the Constitutional Court on whether Kiril Petkov was a dual citizen at the date of his appointment as caretaker minister. Petkov also had Canadian citizenship, and before becoming a minister he signed a notarised declaration that he was renouncing it, which he sent to the Canadian authorities before being appointed as minister. According to some lawyers, his statement of intent is sufficient, whilst others believe that what is important is the date on which the Canadian authorities terminated his citizenship. On October 27, the

Constitutional Court ruled that the decree appointing the Minister of Economy was unconstitutional, as Petkov was a dual citizen on the date of his appointment. This ruling could negatively affect the campaign of the formation. Attacks on Petkov and President Radev, who has been accused of violating the constitution by appointing a dual citizen as minister, have not stopped for more than a month now. The specialised prosecutor's office has launched an investigation into whether Kiril Petkov signed a declaration with false content that he was only a Bulgarian citizen when he took office. Petkov claimed there was bias on the part of the prosecution and an attempt to intimidate.

The expectations of some analysts that the founding of “We Continue to Change” would split the vote for “Democratic Bulgaria” have so far not been justified. DB achieves a result of about 10-12%, close to that which it had in the last elections. In September, there was some degree of tension in DB over the ordering of the party lists. Members of DSB, part of the coalition, accused the party leader, Atanas Atanasov, of taking decisions on his own regarding last-minute reshuffles and even demanded his resignation. Former chairman of the Sofia District Court Metodi Lalov, who was chairman of the “Democratic Bulgaria” group in the Sofia Municipal Council, left the group and ardently criticised the leadership of “Yes Bulgaria”, accusing Hristo Ivanov of taking decisions on his own and non-compliance with the statute of the party with regard to the nomination of candidates to be Members of Parliament. Lalov demanded that Ivanov and the entire leadership resign. Hristo Ivanov stated that these attacks only weakened the party before the elections and that he was ready to be checked by the Control Council. These attacks have shown that there is tension within the “Democratic Bulgaria” coalition between the two main parties, DSB and “Yes, Bulgaria”. DSB representatives also resent that the fact that their other main partner, the Green Movement, is over-represented in the polls, despite their modest electoral contribution. At this stage, the contradictions seem to have been ironed out, but after the elections, especially if a government is formed without the participation of “Democratic Bulgaria”, they may erupt in full force.

For the first time in its history, MRF has nominated an ethnic Turk as its party candidate for President. With the nomination of Mustafa Karadayi as a presidential candidate, MRF will try to mobilise itself as much as possible for the elections, because it has achieved disappointing results over the last year. However, the party has not made any internal changes to clear its image of a formation backed by behind-the-scenes oligarchic interests. Furthermore, MRF returned the oligarch Delyan Peevski, who was sanctioned under the Global Magnitsky Law, to its lists. He will head the parliamentary lists of the party in Veliko Tarnovo and Blagoevgrad. This act can be assessed as provocation for Bulgarian voters, but also for the United States. It also

shows that MRF is completely dependent on Peevski, and it is very likely that he will machinate the entire party leadership with compromising information. In an interview on TV, such a thesis was developed by the former “Number 2” in MRF and founder of the party, Kassim Dahl. According to him, the party is entirely in the hands of Peevski, and honorary chairman Ahmed Dogan no longer controls MRF. Kassim Dahl is of the opinion that Peevski “has lots of flash drives” with compromising information about all kinds of people. Peevski’s nomination came just days after his name appeared in the Pandora Papers, which revealed that he had three offshore accounts that were not declared to the Bulgarian authorities while he was an MP. Peevski was summoned for questioning regarding this by the State Agency for National Security (SANS).

At this stage “Rise up BG! Here We Come” remains below the electoral barrier. In previous elections, the party has always been on the brink, with even the most insignificant erosion in support meaning it could remain outside parliament. One of the reasons for the electoral decline is the appearance of “We Continue the Change”, which takes part of the vote for “Rise up BG! Here We Come”.

Again in these elections, the main nationalist parties will appear separately. Each of them has nominated a presidential candidate. Closest to the electoral barrier is “Vazrazhdane” (“Revival”), which has launched protests against the introduction of a “green certificate” in an attempt to attract “anti-vacs” (those against vaccination) votes.

3

PUBLIC OPINION

A Gallup poll conducted between October 10th and 17th shows the following picture of electoral attitudes for the presidential and parliamentary elections. Rumen Radev is the undisputed leader in the presidential race with 51.2%. These figures show that he can be elected in the first round if the turnout exceeds 50%. Second is the candidate supported by GERB, Anastas Gerdjikov, who received the support of 22.5%, which coincides exactly with the electorate that would vote for GERB. This shows that Gerdjikov can hardly expand his support for himself beyond the firm supporters of GERB, at least in the first round. MRF leader Mustafa Karadayi comes third in the Gallup poll, as 7.9% of voters would vote for him. The presidential candidate Lozan Panov, supported by "Democratic Bulgaria", has a score of 6.2%, which is almost half as much as that for the party list. The reasons for this are that a large number of the supporters of "Democratic Bulgaria" would support Rumen Radev in the first round. 3.1% would vote for Kostadin Kostadinov from "Vazrazhdane".

The Gallup poll shows that six parties will be represented in the next parliament again. 22.5% of the respondents would vote for GERB-UDF. BSP are in second position with 15.1%. Third is the new formation "We Continue the Change" with 13.4% support. They are followed by "There is Such a People" (ITN) with 12.2%, "Democratic Bulgaria" - 11.2%, and MRF - 10.8%. Those who remain outside parliament at this stage are "Rise up BG! Here We Come" with 3.7% and "Vazrazhdane" with 2.9%.

The poll by Gallup shows that there is more interest in the presidential elections, with nearly 56.4% saying they will definitely vote for President, while the estimated turnout for the parliamentary elections is 54.2%. Turnout is the most difficult thing to predict and is likely to be lower than these levels. The main reason for this is the increase in the number of people infected with Covid-19.

4

MAIN CONCLUSIONS AND FORECASTS

Bulgaria faces a severe crisis as a consequence of the fourth wave of the pandemic. There is a lack of political leadership to meet the challenges of taking the unpopular measures of vaccination. Instead of demonstrating unity on the issue and supporting the efforts of the caretaker government, political parties are sending mixed signals, driven solely by the thought of the upcoming elections. The government procrastinated over the introduction of a "green certificate" and the conducting of a massive information campaign to increase the proportion of people vaccinated. The next two to three weeks until the elections will be critical. This could lead to a risk for the electoral process and significantly reduce turnout. It is possible for a lockdown to be introduced, which would further complicate situation regarding the elections. To a great extent, the protests against the government's measures are politically inspired, with representatives of the nationalist parties being the most active.

The fourth wave has shifted the focus of the election campaign. There is practically no debate on other important political issues, either between parties or between presidential candidates. The remainder of the campaign will be waged under the sign of Covid. Growing accusations are observed between the caretaker government and those from the former ruling party of GERB over who is mainly to blame for the low vaccination rates, which remain about 20-25%.

President Radev is favourite to win a second term of office. This will probably be decided in the second round, because turnout will not exceed 50%. The GERB-backed candidate Anastas Gerdjikov will face Radev in the runoff elections. So far, Radev leads convincingly - by about 30% over Gerdjikov. This equates to a difference of nearly one million votes, which will be very difficult to melt in the runoff. In the second round, Gerdjikov will rely on the support of GERB and MRF, while a large contingent of the voters of "Democratic Bulgaria" will support Radev. The decision of the Constitutional Court to declare the decree for appointment of a caretaker government partially unconstitutional, due to the dual citizenship of Kiril Petkov, will intensify the attacks by GERB and MRF against Radev, which will talk about impeachment. However, the situation can hardly get as far as impeachment, as this requires a parliamentary majority of two-thirds, which Radev's opponents from GERB and MRF cannot achieve.

The imposition of a partial or full lockdown will make the outcome of the parliamentary elections unpredictable. The dividing lines between the parties remain. On one hand there are GERB and MRF, and on the other - the new parties and BSP. Even if GERB win the election, it will be difficult to form a government. Therefore, it is more probable that the new parties and BSP will enter the next government.

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