

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

# POLIT-BAROMETER

Year 22 Issue 8  
September 1 – October 2

**Boris Popivanov**



Bulgaria has taken an important step towards energy diversification.



The results of the parliamentary elections do not bring a lasting solution to the political crisis.



At this stage, an expert cabinet, supported by GERB and other parties, seems to be the main alternative to more pre-term elections.

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# Contents

<b>1.</b>	<b>FOREIGN POLICY DYNAMICS</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>2.</b>	<b>INSTITUTIONS AND THE AGENDA OF SOCIETY</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>3.</b>	<b>THE STATE OF THE PARTY SYSTEM</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>4.</b>	<b>MAIN CONCLUSIONS AND FORECASTS</b>	<b>8</b>

## 1

## FOREIGN POLICY DYNAMICS

**The war in Ukraine.** The increased tension along the West-Russia axis has caused Bulgaria to take a more active position in sync with its partners from the EU and NATO. Sofia refused to recognise the so-called referendums on the accession of occupied Ukrainian territories to Russia. President Rumen Radev harked back to his statement of February 24, the first day of the war, condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Defence Minister Dimitar Stoyanov described Russian President Vladimir Putin as an “aggressor” and emphasised that he hoped for an “about turn” in military actions in favour of Kyiv. Foreign Minister Nikolay Milkov from the rostrum of the UN General Assembly used the term “illegal military aggression” with regard to Russia’s actions. There is also an already traditional nuance in the behaviour of the President. Radev is known for his efforts to pursue a more balanced foreign policy. Often this brings him accusations that, in the conditions of the conflict, a balanced policy means de facto support for Russia. Radev refused to join the declaration of the nine heads of state from Central and Eastern Europe, which called for accelerated acceptance of Ukraine into NATO. His motives build on his previous warnings against involving Bulgaria (in this case as a NATO member) in the war. But they also express an already noticeable distinction. Since the beginning of the Russian invasion, Radev has consistently supported all the common positions of the EU and NATO regarding Russia (including sanctions), but he usually distances himself from the positions of individual countries or groups of countries that are not established at the level of the European and the Euro-Atlantic institutions (the provision of arms to Ukraine; Ukraine’s membership in NATO).

**The energy issue.** Overcoming the “chaos” and “crisis” in the energy sector was imputed by President Rumen Radev as a priority of his office. It was the energy issue that was at the centre of Bulgaria’s foreign policy activity in September. It can be said that practically all the diplomatic moves of Bulgaria were oriented towards the search for gas supplies and energy connectivity. To this end, the President held negotiations with the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Azerbaijan, as well as numerous consultations in the Balkans. The culmination of this policy was the official opening of the gas interconnector between Bulgaria and Greece in Sofia in the presence not only of the heads of state and government of Balkan countries, but also the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, and the European Commissioner for Energy, Kadri Simson. In doing so, Radev achieved two things. First, it demonstrates that the thesis of energy diversification is not just a rhetorical but a practical exercise that also enjoys European support. And secondly, the very fact that the ceremony took place exactly one day before the parliamentary elections in Bulgaria formed the impression that it is the President, not political parties, who knows how to solve the country’s problems. And in this situation, however, just as with regard to the war in Ukraine, the “Radev nuance” was visible. In recent weeks, the head of state has deliberately nurtured the belief that he has been negotiating the resumption of gas supplies from the Russian giant Gazprom. It is difficult to judge whether the refusal of the Russian side was predicted and whether, in this sense, the whole effort has not just been a gesture towards the Russophile public.

## 2

## INSTITUTIONS AND THE AGENDA OF SOCIETY

**The government.** The caretaker cabinet was visibly trying to build its public image around the topic announced as a priority from the very beginning - energy diversification. Undisputed achievements in this vein seem to remain in the shadow of the President. This is the first caretaker cabinet appointed by Rumen Radev which shows no ambitions of imposing itself and the ministers participating in it before the media and public opinion. Prime Minister Galab Donev himself (unlike Ognyan Gerdzhikov in 2017 and Stefan Yanev in 2021) has shown no intention of establishing himself as an independent political figure. The most important news was produced by the presidential administration, not by that of the government. Even key subjects such as the escalation of the war in Ukraine were discussed not in the institutional format of the Security Council at the Council of Ministers, but at ad hoc meetings with the head of state. The government did not stand in the spotlight, but in this way it did not allow a number of controversial topics, regarding personnel and policy, to grow into scandals. The effectiveness of some of the ministers (Krum Zarkov and Atanas Pekanov) on topics such as the legislation on the Recovery and Sustainability Plan or accession to Schengen and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development did not go unnoticed. Of course, the attacks against Energy Minister Rosen Hristov were numerous and sometimes put him in a difficult position. On the whole, however, the formula for a working expert cabinet, two months after its formation, can be assessed as more successful than not.

**The President.** In the course of the election campaign, President Rumen Radev drastically limited his public appearances on domestic political topics and devoted himself entirely to foreign policy. Expectations that some of the parties would bet on anti-presidential rhetoric in the campaign did, to some extent, come true. Efforts were made to compromise Radev in both his foreign and domestic politics. The main thesis of some right-wing parties was, as in the previous two months, that Radev's attempts at international balancing were actually covering up a pro-Russian course. Another thesis that arose in another part of the political spectrum was the idea of a presidential republic. It fuelled the accusations that Radev wants to usurp

all the power in Bulgaria by using parties supposedly close to him such as "There is Such a People" (ITN) and "Bulgarian Rise". In left-wing circles, the accusation that Radev has converged his positions with Boyko Borisov's GERB party gained strength. The common denominator of all the criticisms is clear. This is the implication that Rumen Radev is the opposite of what he presents himself to be – he is not a balancer either externally or internally, but on the contrary, strongly oriented towards Russia externally and towards hypertrophy of presidential powers domestically.

On Radev's part, there are almost no answers to the accusations. It seems that the head of state is deliberately distancing himself from the political debate so that he can get involved much more actively after the elections.

**The Chief Prosecutor.** The behaviour of the chief prosecutor continues to give rise to negative reactions. On the initiative of the Minister of Justice Krum Zarkov, the Council of Ministers submitted to the Constitutional Court a request to specify the powers of the prosecutor's office. This is a signal that not only the personality of Ivan Geshev, but the excessive concentration of power on the part of the institution represents a serious problem for the democratic balance in Bulgaria. Geshev seeks to respond to the institutional blows by rehabilitating the closed specialised justice. A series of car accidents caused by drivers under the influence of alcohol and drugs has motivated the chief prosecutor to complain that without specialised justice there will be no real justice. His efforts will clearly be devoted towards exploiting the theme of injustice and lawlessness, popular enough in Bulgarian society, as a shield against accusations of legal arbitrariness. Geshev's comment "Where do you see a country?!" points to an unequivocal populist turn of one of the leading state institutions.

**Public opinion.** The election campaign was dominated by public opinion polls directly focused on the outcome of the political struggle. Topics related to people's attitudes towards the most important problems of Bulgarian society received less attention. The general picture, as the winter season approaches, is markedly pessimistic. Research by the sociological agency

“Market Links” found that only 15% of respondents gave a positive assessment of the development of the country. A study by Gallup International concretises public concerns. It is startlingly impressive how many people see a serious and immediate danger in inflation (90%), the potential shortage of gas (78%), and the potential shortage of electricity (69%). The idea of long-term political instability as a danger for the country is shared by as many as 78%. The impression is created that Bulgarian citizens, when called upon to vote, do not see protection against the reasons for their worries in the political system. Social themes prevail over geopolitical ones. For 56% of Bulgarians, the deepening of the war in Ukraine is a great danger, but for many more (72%) a possible wave of migration to Bulgaria as a result of the war is perceived as a danger. Concerns are focused on the national level. The risk of Bulgaria breaking away from the Western world (the EU and NATO) is seen as a great danger by only 35%. It turns out that, regardless of the geopolitical coordinates of the party debate, public opinion is more inward-looking than outward-looking.

Two other factors are likely to have a negative impact on attitudes in Bulgaria in the coming months and years. The results of the population census were announced, from which it is clear that the population of the country has decreased by 800,000 people in a decade. What is more, for the first time none of the six largest cities saw growth. The thesis that we are observing a normal internal migration from small settlements to large ones has been disproved. The nation is melting away, and this fact will have deep public resonance, just as it will have diverse political uses. In addition, the UN also announced its Human Development Index for 2021. Bulgaria moved to 68th place and is the only one in the EU to fall from the group of highly developed countries. The economic situation has nothing to do with this trend. The problem is social. According to the UN, Bulgaria is going downhill because of a falling average life expectancy and a declining educational level. A shrinking population with shrinking social indicators - this speaks of the need for a social agenda of Bulgarian politics, which the election campaign practically did not propose.

## 3

## THE STATE OF THE PARTY SYSTEM

**The election campaign.** The “hot phase” of the election campaign took place against the background of several dominant plots. First, the geopolitical context, and more specifically the Russia-West confrontation. This opposition was used to activate two types of worldview tensions in Bulgarian society – the traditional tension between Russophobes and Russophiles and the more modern tension between modern (European, progressive, liberal) and retrograde (patriarchal, nostalgic, conservative). Second, the party axis of division.

In the end the campaign began to look like a clash between the two main forces GERB and “We Continue the Change” (“Produzhavame Promianata” – PP), whilst most of the remaining parties were seen as potential future partners of one or the other. The lack of substantial differences in programme between GERB and “We Continue the Change” in turn turned corruption into a dividing line. Third, the debate during the campaign. It came down almost exclusively to mutual accusations between the parties about the state of the country and the crises in which it was engulfed. The fact that, with the exception of “Vazrazhdane” (“Revival”), all the main candidates for parliament were until recently represented in executive power, or were very close to it, added further fuel to the accusatory rhetoric. And fourth, the campaign was isolated almost entirely in the hard cores of the parties. Concerns that abrupt and unconventional moves could jeopardise electoral performance motivated limited, closed campaigns, without major scandals and compromising information, but also without opening up to new voters. The result: voter turnout was lower than even the hitherto all-time record of November 14th, 2021. Whatever the truth about the reliability of electoral rolls, there is no doubt that recently less than 50% of people have participated as voters in the political process.

The final data from the vote shows slight shifts in electoral preferences compared to November 2021. The changes are not so apparent, due to over-expectations created during the campaign: “We Continue the Change” lost 165,000 votes, although there were forecasts that they would suffer an even greater collapse; GERB appear to be the undisputed winners,

but they have added fewer than 40,000 votes, and in that sense they have failed to reach their own levels from April and July 2021; “Vazrazhdane” have doubled their share, but there were repeated fears that they could turn out to be the second political force, and now the two-fold growth almost looks like a failure; the Movement for Rights and Freedoms and “Democratic Bulgaria” have stabilised with a minimal increase; “Bulgarian Rise” have made it into the National Assembly with doubts about corporate added value; The Bulgarian Socialist Party show a permanent downward trend (with another 30,000 votes lost and an unprecedented fifth position).

**GERB-UDF.** As the winners of the elections, and with a clear lead over the party in second place, GERB-UDF have the political initiative. Unlike the three parliamentary elections in 2021, there are now no definite public attitudes that the participation of GERB in power is unacceptable, therefore they are obliged either to make efforts to form a government or to make it look like they are trying to do so. This is the expectation of both businesses and their clientele.

GERB’s interest in the negotiations is connected to two prerequisites. First, to be able to “divide and conquer” in one administration, as was the practice in Boyko Borisov’s previous cabinets. That means bringing together partners to pit against each other during the mandate. The second prerequisite is that GERB find a way to attract “We Continue the Change” or “Democratic Bulgaria” or both formations into the government. This is necessary in view of the international tension. It is very important for GERB, given the experience of the protests in 2020, not to allow the staunchest supporters of the West to be in the opposition, so as not to block the cabinet, including by speaking on behalf of the EU and NATO. If these prerequisites are not evident, GERB would be able to accept early elections as a variant with fewer risks. In the public space, it is often commented that GERB would become an acceptable partner for others only if Borisov withdrew. In other words, the “red line” seems to be moving - it is no longer against GERB, but against Borisov. Borisov himself hints at such a possibility, but does not presuppose it. It is not to be ex-

cluded that he believes that with successive pre-term elections, this “red line” would be dropped for good.

**“We Continue the Change” (“*Produlzhavame Pro-mianata*” – PP).** PP overcame their serious electoral erosion literally in the “hot phase” of the campaign and performed quite well against the background of preliminary expectations. This is primarily due to the cleverly thought-out strategy of decisively exploiting two factors: the unabated anti-GERB sentiments in the country (with the position “no coalition with GERB after the elections” and “Borisov in prison”) and the “free” niche of socially sensitive liberals (with the position “all the social benefits are down to us”). A possible rejection of this strategy could seriously delegitimise them. There are grounds for the hypothesis that quite a few voters preferred PP not because they are a successful party, but because only they have the potential to neutralise GERB. The post-election configuration gives the PP a special, “intermediate” parliamentary presence. The party is large enough to effectively prevent a stable cabinet supported by GERB, but also small enough to construct a parliamentary majority without GERB. That is why the attitude of PP towards the victors is of key importance. Both main possibilities, which do not imply a complete abdication of previous statements (the possibilities “no support for GERB” and “no support for Borisov”), can be found in the media messages of PP. The more difficult question is which of the two will prevail. In one case, the risk is related to falling into political isolation and building an image of a destructive force that throws the country into a spiral of elections. Otherwise, the price of compromise may turn out to be too high for party supporters. GERB could find their way to PP in the hope of depersonalising them in their shadow at some future point. But in the circles of PP, among part of the business sphere, and especially in the non-governmental sector, overly strong anti-GERB attitudes exist, which would hinder as much as possible an understanding with Borisov’s party. It is possible, of course, that the country’s international partners will encourage an understanding between GERB and PP for the sake of the political stability of Bulgaria, but there are no guarantees that such sentiments would be sufficient for a compromise.

From the information available, one could conclude that PP leaders increasingly see their party as a long-term project of a progressive populist type, which has the ambition of occupying the ground of the traditional right wing (with its anti-corruption rhetoric) and the traditional left wing (with generous social promises). Such a long-term vision, in the absence of parliamentary experience, raises temptations for pre-term elections without predetermining them.

**The Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF).** MRF have a predictable and consistent line based on messages of dialogue with readiness for coalition and

with Euro-Atlantic priorities. Even before the elections, the bar was raised high with the request that it was time for them to participate directly in power. This is also a continuation of party chairman Mustafa Karadayi’s line on coming out of the “shadows”. MRF suggest that they are no longer content to be consumers of power “behind the scenes” and want to publicly and openly capitalise on their political weight. The task remains difficult. The other parties must find a way to justify an understanding with MRF, and MRF are waiting for them. It is known that in crisis parliamentary situations it is MRF that act most convincingly and decisively. It is possible that in the first weeks of the 48th National Assembly we will observe exactly such initiative. Nor is it unimportant, in addition, that MRF have the greatest experience in constructing acceptable government formulas. However, the issue of partnerships, although open, is limited by the appearances of party figures so far. Notwithstanding, it seems from them that the most preferred option for MRF is an alliance with GERB.

**“Vazrazhdane” (“*Revival*”).** The party is the only one that has doubled its result. In any other context, this would focus attention on it. At the same time, the expectations created for a major breakthrough, which did not come to fruition, neutralised interest in the new higher level of nationalist representation in parliament. It should not be underestimated that “Vazrazhdane” now has exactly as many MPs (27) as the union of nationalist parties had at their strongest moment in 2017. The chance of the leader Kostadin Kostadinov was that he announced himself as an alternative to the entire status quo. However, this chance itself is already limited. Public opinion expects a regular government and hopes for the constructiveness of the parties. This is far from being the case with Kostadinov, however, who, in his capacity as an “alternative”, seems to insist on an endless series of elections until his party is in a position to dictate the composition of an eventual cabinet. In this sense, it seems as though the role of “Vazrazhdane” in the political debate after October 2nd is exhausted until the next elections, whenever that may be. It would appear to be the case that party rhetoric will increasingly focus on anti-European and (especially) anti-Euro-Atlantic messages, in the hope that people’s disillusionment with the behaviour of the EU and NATO in the Ukrainian conflict will turn them towards the only available “dissidents” in parliament. Although reversals are not out of the question, the entire momentum of the party leads to a refusal to join any majority in any shape or form. If a regular cabinet is formed, along with that, pragmatism would make “Vazrazhdane” vote for individual legislative decisions according to their interest.

**The Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP).** The party suffered another defeat, which reduced it to less than a quarter of a million voters and gave it fifth place in



the National Assembly. The strategy of the chairwoman Korneliya Ninova, announced at the party congress in January, that participation in the executive power is the only way to strengthen the party, was clearly unsuccessful. It is true that this time the electoral damage is not great, but the starting position is still too low. Undoubtedly, the party's unconvincing positions on sanctions against Russia, the extradition of Russian diplomats and arms trade to Ukraine have an impact on the final result. The low authority of BSP in society also contributed to the fact that in the social sphere the merits of the "Kiril Petkov" cabinet, which were actually almost entirely an initiative of the socialists, were actually attributed to PP. The leaders of lists for the elections quite logically failed to mobilise the electoral periphery and even part of the core of the party. Ninova once again figured that a sharply confrontational style would be the best way, attacking the caretaker government throughout the campaign, and literally on the last day, came out with a rude attack on the president of the Party of European Socialists, Sergey Stanishev. Instead of using the good achievements of BSP members in the caretaker cabinet (especially the Minister of Justice Krum Zarkov and the Minister of Agriculture Yavor Gechev), the leadership sharply distanced itself from them and employed the thesis that the only successful socialists in power could be Ninova's cronies. There was no positive electoral effect. The unenviable state of the local structures of BSP gives rise to great concerns about the party's performance in the local elections in autumn 2023. The conviction is being created that the leadership is ready to abdicate the local vote (which mainly depends on these structures) and rely on media campaigns for national elections (where it is possible for the momentum of the past to send a certain number of persons close to Ninova to the National Assembly). The big question facing the party now is the conclusions of October 2nd - whether it will move towards a complete change in the personnel, and ideological and political profile of BSP, or whether it will continue along the previous path of single leadership and confrontation. Ninova's decision not to resign after yet another defeat suggests that she is most likely looking for some option for renewed participation in government. It is also the only way that an internal

party problem could be postponed because of a supposed commitment to national problems. But in any case, the ideological and political impasse facing BSP is deepening.

**"Democratic Bulgaria" (DB).** DB overcame its electoral stagnation in the course of the campaign and confirmed its previous presence, even with some growth. To a great extent, credit for this is shared with PP. If in the summer it seemed that PP could attract the traditional voters of the DB and marginalise it, the campaign showed a conscious "division of labour". The geopolitical theme was given entirely to DB (the West vs. Russia division), while the anti-corruption and social themes were taken over by PP. The good result of DB, in short, is mainly due to their anti-Russian positioning. This obliges DB to follow the same course already in a post-election situation and to legitimise itself mainly through this course. From the perspective of the legacy of the campaign, therefore, forming a governing majority with GERB and/or MRF becomes extremely difficult. Of course, there are potential justifications for entering such a majority (negotiation of judicial reform, some form of pro-Ukraine pact, obtaining the post of Prime Minister, etc.). There is another temptation arising from the complex composition of DB, which includes both party figures and civic activists. For the party figures (from "Yes, Bulgaria", "Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria" and, to a much lesser extent the Green Movement) participation in government is a way of taking the political initiative - in their capacity as politicians, and not as representatives of pressure groups. This is the only way to illustrate the dilemmas facing DB. Still, anti-GERB sentiment seems to have the upper hand at this point.

**"Bulgarian Rise" ("Bulgarski Vuzhod" - BV).** The impression is given that BV is ready for any coalition and can work with anyone. Whether this is the case is hard to say. In any case, support for the party in the elections received from corporate circles (e.g. in Kyustendil) rather testifies to an ambition for participation in power, and hence to governmental capitalisation on this participation, rather than anti-systemicism. BV seem to have no intention of imitating "Vazrazhdane" in a more muted and moderate form.

## 4

## MAIN CONCLUSIONS AND FORECASTS

The escalation of the war in Ukraine presents Bulgaria with new challenges, including the national security of the country. The political debate suggests that the dilemma facing Bulgaria is whether to take a pro-Russian or pro-European position. In fact, this dilemma is rather apparent. The real question is whether the Bulgarian position should be more radical, more “hawk-like”, along with that of the countries of Eastern Europe, or whether it should follow the pan-European line, which is more careful and cautious. It is clear to Bulgarian politicians that the annexation of Ukrainian territories by Russia does not give a chance for free manoeuvring between the “East” and the “West”. A border has been crossed that is more important and will unfortunately have more and more unpleasant consequences than the physical border crossed by Russia on February 24th.

The opening of the gas interconnector between Bulgaria and Greece is among the good news, creating hope that the looming energy crisis can be (at least temporarily) overcome. It is difficult to overlook the merit of the presidential institution.

The parliamentary elections of October 2nd did not solve the political crisis, but simply reformulated it. The current parliamentary configuration does not bode well for political stabilisation. It is still too early to predict whether a regular government will be formed, or whether yet more pre-term elections will be held at the beginning of next year, but in any case there is no majority for a stable cabinet.

It is highly unlikely that a regular government will be formed without the participation of the winning party GERB in some form, not only for arithmetic reasons, but also because such are the mass expectations, and the responsibility is focused on GERB. The parties are visibly worried about risky or gambling moves. For most of them, the biggest danger seems to be that they will be perceived as the main culprit for the failure to have a cabinet and more pre-term elections. Therefore, the tempo of the political process is likely to slacken.

If it comes to forming a cabinet, it would be unlikely to express clear party responsibility in the form of a for-

mal cross-party coalition or minority government. Such governance formats would focus responsibility on the participating parties not only for the processes during the tough winter period, but also for the possible termination of the mandate. An expert cabinet without party leaders would appear to be the formula that has the greatest chance of success. The lack of serious ideological differences and the hushing of internal party life in individual formations focuses the motivations for one or another important decision on the personal interests and concerns of the leaders. It is not without significance that for the first time there has been a parliamentary election after which no losing leader has resigned.

Together with this, the new National Assembly is faced with a double task: not just to produce a government, but also to pass legislation. The bills related to the Recovery and Resilience Plan cannot be postponed if Bulgaria wants to receive the next financial tranche, which is so necessary for an economy in crisis. It would not be good for the state to continue in 2023 with the budget for the previous year because of the drastically changed economic situation and especially because of the changed prices of energy carriers. A number of state institutions, such as the Supreme Judicial Council, the Inspectorate attached to it, and the Constitutional Court have expired mandates and need to fill the parliamentary quotas. All this will also be a test of the maturity of the new parliamentary configuration. But additionally, the attitude to the legislation prepared by the caretaker cabinet will be a test of parliament’s attitude to President Radev.

Failure to form a cabinet is a great likelihood. Apart from anything else, it would mean that the parties prefer to shift the responsibility for the winter period onto the President.

During the election campaign, one of the parties talked about a presidential republic. Immediately after the vote, another party insisted that only one-party rule could be effective. Of course, these are exotic statements. But political deadlock and social crisis, if allowed to continue too long, can radicalise both public attitudes and political abuse of them.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## ABOUT THIS STUDY

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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Further information on the topic can be found here:  
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