

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

POLIT-BAROMETER

Year 23 Issue 1
January

Boris Popivanov



The failure of the 48th National Assembly has deepened the political crisis in Bulgaria.



The political process is constructed as a clash between the “experienced” and the “good”, ignoring the social agenda.



Conditions are being created for a Eurosceptic wave via the tools of direct democracy.

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1

THE DYNAMICS OF FOREIGN POLICY

International processes exert a substantial influence on the topics of Bulgarian politics. The ongoing war in Ukraine, of course, plays a leading role. Bulgaria's place and importance in regional and European terms have also become part of the national political clash. It is worth noting that topics related to foreign policy are used by the institutions and political forces in Bulgaria mainly with the aim of reaffirming positions in the tension between Russia and the West. Here are three examples.

The Nexo - Die Welt axis. The Bulgarian Prosecutor's Office has launched an investigation against the international crypto exchange Nexo on suspicion of tax crimes and money laundering. The structure was created by Bulgarians, one of whom is former right-wing MP Antoni Trenchev. Leading figures from "We Continue the Change" (Asen Vasilev and Nastimir Ananiev) have been identified as being related to Nexo's activities. Data has also been presented that Nexo employees financed election campaigns of "Democratic Bulgaria" with large donations. The two political forces involved in the scandal responded that there was nothing illegal about the way the company operated, and that it was a matter of a political order carried out by the prosecutor's office. Trenchev himself threatened to sue the Bulgarian prosecutor's office with a demand for compensation of 1 billion dollars. The geopolitical aspect of the case turned out to be interesting. The prosecutor's office insisted that the investigation had been started on a signal from the US, where parallel actions of the competent authorities were taking place. Moreover, GERB-UDF actively joined the accusations against "We continue the change" and "Democratic Bulgaria", spreading the information that Nexo actually operated with sanctioned Russian companies and with the declared terrorist organisation "Hamass". The general subtext of the campaign is clear. The impression had to be created that the prosecutor's office and GERB-UDF sided with the Bulgarian partners from the USA against fraudsters, in one way or another involved with Putin's Russia.

Shortly after the *Nexo* scandal, the authoritative German publication *Die Welt* published a detailed article

portraying the leaders of "We Continue the Change" as the "saviours of Ukraine" in the first and worst weeks of the Russian invasion. According to claims made by *Die Welt*, Kiril Petkov, as Prime Minister, secretly organised vital supplies of Bulgarian arms to Kyiv from his coalition partners, at a time when the Western partners had not yet taken any action. A series of statements by Petkov and Vassilev followed, emphasising how Bulgaria should be proud of its Euro-Atlantic initiative. In this case, the implication was that no one contributed more to the country's Euro-Atlantic behaviour in the Ukrainian conflict than "We Continue the Change". The counter-accusations by GERB-UDF that the covert operation was carried out in violation of the laws and that Petkov and Vassilev actually benefited from commissions failed to undermine the effect of the campaign, just as the acquittals for *Nexo* were unable to clear the conviction that major irregularities had been committed. This geopolitical filtering of the conflict between the previous rulers and their predecessors ended with a score of 0:0.

Schengen and the Eurozone. The two topics which were supposed to lead to the final European integration of Bulgaria reached an intermediate stage of assessment. Bulgaria did not get a "yes" for its Schengen membership, but President Rumen Radev and the government managed to reach a conditional deadline in the current year of 2023. Radev's meetings with the sceptical Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer show that the Bulgarian pressure is continuing. At the same time, the unclear perspective of some of the laws envisaged under the Recovery and Resilience Plan creates convenient justifications for maintaining the current situation. The problem with the normative regulation of the rule of law in Bulgaria is becoming an element of the eternal dispute about the country's "western" affiliation and the identification of its opponents. The efforts of the Minister of Justice Krum Zarkov and Minister of Internal Affairs Ivan Dermendzhiev are currently facing the passive resistance of parties such as GERB and MRF.

The case of the Eurozone is more dramatic, firstly, because regarding it there is not even an apparent

political consensus, and secondly, because in the international context at this stage there are no influential opponents of Bulgarian membership. Despite difficulties arising from inflation and budget deficits, Deputy Prime Minister Atanas Pekanov expresses confidence that effective membership from January 1, 2024 is realistic. He even suggests that from August of this year it might be possible for prices in Bulgaria to be denominated in euros as well as in leva, and appeals for legislative measures against possible speculation. Against this background, the various assessments that Bulgaria is not ready for such a step and that it could lead to a new inflation boom are increasing. The party "Vazrazhdane" ("Revival") has already launched a petition for a national referendum to delay membership of the eurozone for 20 years. The plot again acquires geopolitical nuances. Pro-Eurozone parties accuse its opponents of a hidden pro-Russian influence that aims to distance the country from its Western partners. In such a way, however, the adoption of the euro seems burdened with the negative images of the parties and experts who propagate it.

North Macedonia. Half a year after the lifting of the Bulgarian veto on the integration process of North Macedonia into the EU, the most serious crisis in relations between Sofia and Skopje occurred. The beating

of Hristiyan Pendikov, secretary of the Bulgarian club in Ohrid, brought the issue of the rights of Bulgarians in North Macedonia back onto the agenda. The authorities in Skopje warned against the "politicisation" of the case, but also admitted inappropriate statements that they would not allow the presence of some Bulgarian officials at the upcoming celebrations of Gotse Delchev. Bulgaria temporarily recalled its ambassador for consultations. The development of events seems to retroactively prove how right were those who, like President Radev, insisted that North Macedonia has not provided sufficient evidence for the protection of people with a Bulgarian ethnic self-consciousness. The Bulgarian parties have taken positions, again stimulating geopolitical division. "Vazrazhdane" proposed that Bulgaria halt the European integration of Skopje. Parties such as GERB and MRF, however, witnessed behind-the-scenes attempts to bring North Macedonia into the Russian orbit of influence. On one side of the debate is the argument that not too much attention should be paid to the incident because it would serve an anti-European cause. On the other side, they recall the double standards of "pro-European" politicians who have called on Bulgaria to protect the Bulgarian journalist Hristo Grozev against alleged Russian encroachments, but do not do the same for an abused Bulgarian without an anti-Russian dimension.

2

THE INSTITUTIONS AND THE AGENDA OF SOCIETY

The President. The head of state is about to appoint a fifth caretaker government since taking office. Since the beginning of his second term alone, it turns out that executive power has been in his hands longer than in those of a regular government. This fact, as well as the consciously sought distance from the parties, compound the accusations against Rumen Radev that he is striving for unilateral power. The national referendum on a presidential republic launched by the showman Slavi Trifonov did not receive support from Radev, but it has given rise to new discussions on the role of the President.

Radev's actions seem to play second fiddle to his ambition for a "breakthrough" in the energy sector, so as to redraw Bulgaria's place on the energy map of the region and record this as his "contribution" to energy diversification and the creation of guarantees against energy deficits. The President took the liberty of announcing a new energy strategy for Bulgaria for a 30-year period, until 2053, which, in the absence of a regular government, actually appears to be a bold political move. Radev seems to have had a lot to report in the last month - procedures for the supply of liquefied gas from Alexandroupolis, a contract with Turkey for supplies through the Turkish gas transmission network, a procedure for the purchase of nuclear fuel from Westinghouse for the Kozloduy Nuclear Power Plant and even the intention to restart the Belene project. All of this is far from being unequivocally appreciated in Bulgaria; it is very often the focus of criticism.

Radev's geopolitical orientation continues to be the subject of both conjecture and fierce disagreement. The head of state seems to have been permanently stigmatised by those affiliated with "We Continue the Change" and "Democratic Bulgaria" as a politician diverting Bulgaria from its "western path". The main reason is Radev's publicly expressed disagreement with sending weapons to Ukraine. This has now been reaffirmed in a special interview, where he warns of an "intensification of the war" when it comes to running out not of weapons but of "people". At the same time, Radev quite strictly adheres to the decision of the Na-

tional Assembly to send weapons and does not question it. The deal launched by Radev for new F-16 planes also leaves no reason to suspect "pro-Russian" sentiments. For now, it can be said that with his public positions for both Ukraine and North Macedonia, he takes the side of the prevailing public opinion in Bulgaria, without coming into direct conflict with partners from the EU and NATO. It is a separate question to what extent this nuance allows for a truly effective foreign policy.

The government. Galab Donev's cabinet turned out to be the longest-running (exactly half a year) caretaker cabinet in the recent history of Bulgaria. It has already become common knowledge that Donev will also head the next cabinet, which will make him a Prime Minister certainly with longer experience than that of the last regular Prime Minister, Kiril Petkov. Until that moment, in no way has Donev allowed himself to stand out as an independent political figure, preferring to stay completely in the shadow of the President. The messages he expresses are purely expert. His vision is one of a cabinet of ministers who must do a definite, non-delayable current job, and nothing more. In his report, the Prime Minister indicated that he had found "the country on hold". With this discreet criticism of the previous rulers, political evaluations are also made redundant.

The Chief Prosecutor. Ivan Geshev again found himself under political siege, despite all his efforts in recent months to take the political initiative and dictate the agenda. The Chief Prosecutor's investigation mechanism, developed by the Minister of Justice Krum Zarkov, became a turning point in the attitude towards the prosecutor's office. Geshev's criticism that it was an unconstitutional act directed against a certain person did not sound convincing. The bill introduced, apart from everything else, also has these qualities that it enjoys the approval of the Venice Commission and is necessary in connection with the Recovery and Resilience Plan. For this reason, it cannot be challenged by "Euro-Atlantic positions". Geshev is very keen to present himself as an advocate of precisely these "Euro-Atlantic positions",

even launching a special advertising campaign for his visit to the USA to participate in a prayer breakfast for President Joe Biden. But in fact, just such a line of defence is ineffective. The Chief Prosecutor found himself under double fire - open, from the Council of Ministers and the right-wing parties in the parliament, and indirect, from the American ambassador, Hero Mustafa, whose statement about the impunity of the oligarchs and the urgency of judicial reform actually casts doubt on the effectiveness of the prosecutor's office. Moreover, Geshev allowed an even more direct connection with the so-called "powers of the status quo" from GERB and MRF. With the Nexo affair, the impression was created that the prosecution attacked "We Continue the Change" and DB with a determination that it did not show in relation to GERB and MRF. And the confused and inept defence that GERB and MRF offered to Geshev in the National Assembly against the investigation mechanism, based mostly on procedural clutches, further supported the thesis of his belonging to this camp in Bulgarian politics. From a political point of view, a problem for Ivan Geshev is that he stepped too actively into a quasi-political role, and this made it easier for his opponents to identify him with a specific political camp.

Public opinion. Bulgarian citizens are facing more early elections, which is of great importance for the perspective of the entire political system and the legitimacy of the existing constitutional framework. Systematically declining voter turnout continues to constitute a key risk for Bulgarian politics. That is why messages that motivate and mobilise people are expected from the election campaign. A nationally representative survey conducted by the agency Trend indicates that the agenda of society is definitely social. When asked about the main priorities of the government, of the first five answers, only one, which ranked third with 34%, is not purely social - the fight against corruption. The others are as follows: 74% indicate the fight against inflation, 45% limiting poverty and social inequalities, 26% better health care and again 26% fighting unemployment. Respondents were also asked to state which is the most serious crisis facing Bulgaria. A resounding 79% chose namely the "social crisis". Without getting too fixated on percentages, it can be argued that the upcoming campaign opens up greater opportunities for those political forces that bring their platforms closer to the social agenda of the voters, rather than trying to impose some other one on it.

3

THE CONDITION OF THE PARTY SYSTEM

GERB-UDF. The leading political force in the outgoing parliament went to great lengths to create an alibi to voters that it was not to blame for the failure to form a government. GERB were the only ones who proposed a composition of staff to the Council of Ministers; they discussed a cabinet of experts without a party career; they attributed the formulation of a government programme to the potential future government, not to the party; and the leader Boyko Borisov broke his tradition of not stepping into the National Assembly by participating in a “leadership meeting” in connection with the chances of the third mandate granted by the President. Even after it became clear that the third mandate would be unsuccessful, Borisov gave hope that success, perhaps in the same format, would be possible in the next parliament. Among other things, Borisov eventually achieved his exit from political isolation, especially clear in the past 2 years. From a politician with whom no one wishes to negotiate, he has become an acceptable participant in leadership meetings, and what is more, he has taken on the role of the figure who determines whether these meetings are effective.

The second task of GERB before the dissolution of the Assembly was to prove their Euro-Atlantic affiliation, and in a way that leaves them no competitors in the Bulgarian party space. The party insisted that “We Continue the Change” were right to provide arms to Ukraine, but that this should have been done openly and in this sense was not convincing enough; they organised a campaign against the Lukoil refinery as the “only one in Europe” processing Russian oil; they pointed to a “Russian connection” in the tension with North Macedonia. Borisov himself did not miss the opportunity to meet Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer during his visit to Bulgaria, in order to suggest that high-ranking European guests continue to turn to him at critical moments. The propaganda against GERB as “insincere Euro-Atlanticists”, however, was too powerful to allow the transformation of the image already imposed. Therefore, it can be assumed that in the future GERB would need additional evidence that they are truly a loyal partner of

the international factors in possible government of the country.

The confrontation with “We Continue the Change” remains the leading tactic of “pointing out the enemy”. The almost daily accusations against the former rulers, the constantly manufactured scandals against them in the whole range from Gemcorp to Nexo, together with the court cases do not create expectations that an understanding between the two (up to now) main parties is achievable. The behaviour of GERB mirrors that of “We Continue the Change” – the aspiration of Borisov’s party is to demonstrate the lobbyist-corrupt nature of Petkov’s party combined with its false Euro-Atlanticism, exactly what Petkov’s party is trying to do to GERB. Within the framework of the 48th parliament, until its end, Borisov’s ambition was to split the “camp of change” and attract “Democratic Bulgaria” to his side. This was connected with successive ostentatious gestures of goodwill towards “Democratic Bulgaria”. On the eve of the third mandate, Borisov went so far as to launch the idea of “Yes, Bulgaria” leader Hristo Ivanov as Prime Minister, whom he would support. This undoubtedly makes sense from an international point of view, and in the context of future local elections, it serves a preventive function against a potential common front against GERB candidates. The decision of “Democratic Bulgaria” to start negotiations for an alliance with “We Continue the Change”, however, rather outlines a failure of this course of action.

“We Continue the Change” (“Produzhavame Pro-mianata” – PP). The second political force failed to implement the second mandate to form a government and returned it unfulfilled. The tactics of PP, like GERB, were to show that it was not in political isolation. For this reason, they did not dare to propose a composition of the cabinet to be voted on in the plenary hall, but insured themselves by launching a programme declaration. The failure of the declaration would spare them the failure of the cabinet project, as it did. Academician Nikolay Denkov’s candidacy for Prime Minister was not discussed or voted on at all. Instead,

the members of PP have been busy refuting the numerous compromising allegations that have flooded the media about them throughout January. The publication of the German edition *Die Welt* gave them a modicum of breathing space and PP immediately tried to construct their image of people who secretly, and regardless of legal and political obstacles, work for Bulgaria and its worthy place in Europe.

The scandals surrounding the second term had two interrelated consequences for PP. After seeing that in Bulgarian politics only one formation, "Democratic Bulgaria", is inclined to support them, this not being without reservations, they started talking about uniting the two formations in a common union. Such a proposal had existed even before the elections of last year, and it was made precisely by "Democratic Bulgaria". Just that PP rejected it, probably in the hope that they would be able to win the elections on their own. Now the concept seems similar. Together, PP and "Democratic Bulgaria" hope to be vying for first place in the new pre-term elections. This aspiration is backed by a massive campaign to present the possible unification as a flagship of democracy, Euro-Atlanticism and integrity against the mafia, the status quo and corruption. PP leader Kiril Petkov portrayed it in moral terms as: "gathering the good people". An advantage of the unification seems to be the claim that it is open, while its enemies from GERB, MRF and BSP, who operate covertly together, are ashamed to officially advertise their interaction. Moreover, an alliance between PP and "Democratic Bulgaria" creates the impression of the only more significant party news against the background of the preserved unchangeable participants in the pre-election race. However, the downsides of such an alliance should not be underestimated either. In politics, 1+1 does not always make 2, and internal tensions between partners still exist. And, among other things, an alliance with "Democratic Bulgaria" means for PP a de facto rejection of their widely proclaimed centrist position, of the message of "left-wing goals with right-wing tools." Alienating left-wing or socially oriented voters from PP would not be an impossible consequence of the new format. The question is to what extent the union will actually be brought to fruition, and to what extent it will once again be able to embody the hope of "change", without programmatic or ideological concretisation.

The Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF). The party was one of the few that seemed to sincerely seek a regular government within the framework of the 48th National Assembly, of course, with their participation. MRF insisted that a majority was possible, and after the failure of the three mandates, they called the upcoming pre-term elections "superfluous". As before, the problem of partnerships remains central to the party. Despite the repeatedly declared

readiness for dialogue, they seem to be oriented towards the concept of the "systemic parties" (which besides themselves include GERB and BSP) and increase their criticism of the political camp of PP and "Democratic Bulgaria". The Chief Prosecutor's defence fitted into this trend. However, the desire for coalitions on the part of the other parties is still noticeably lacking. That is why MRF have to rely on their quantitative weight. The goal set for the elections - 49 MPs in the 49th National Assembly - is extremely ambitious, but it is dictated by this very understanding that only "size does matter".

"Vazrazhdane ("Revival"). In "Vazrazhdane" they have realised that they know how to win supporters with their radicalism, but they fail to create the impression that they can actually take hold of the levers of power. And this could repel voters. Party leader Kostadin Kostadinov formulated the goal "first place in the elections". Even if such an incredible scenario were to materialise, however, their parliamentary isolation would remain unchanged. That is why the chance of "Vazrazhdane" can be sought rather in a radical reformulation of the political agenda. The petition launched by the party for a national referendum against eurozone membership is subject to such a judgment. Public concerns about unsustainable inflation when adopting the euro, combined with patriotic attachment to the lev as the national currency, have the potential to "change the game". The anti-euro campaign is, among other things, an expression of Euroscepticism which is hidden – and therefore acceptable to some of the population. This is actually the third big theme of "Vazrazhdane", which brings them to the centre of the political debate after the "green certificate" for vaccination and neutrality in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

If the signatures are gathered, and this is quite likely, the referendum could completely rearrange the priorities of the new National Assembly literally in the first weeks of it starting to function, and even overshadow the "eternal" problem of forming a cabinet. For this to happen, "Vazrazhdane" must be very careful not to allow their referendum to be "blurred" with that of Slavi Trifonov for a presidential republic and for "their" topic to sink into some complicated "clash of referendums". The attitude of the media, other parties and institutions to the issue will also be of key importance. ã

The Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP). For the fourth time the party received the third mandate to form a government from President Radev, and for the fourth time they returned it unfulfilled. The situation in the 48th National Assembly did not portend any other kind of development. However, the leadership of BSP approached the mandate with two prerequisites, which did not bring many political positives. First of all, their attitude towards the mandate itself

remained unclear. BSP declared that they wanted to receive it and were ready to look for options for forming a coalition, but at the same time they spoke of the President's "Danaë gift" and of his "complexes" towards the socialists and their leader. In the second place, all the energy of the leader Korneliya Ninova in relation to the mandate was focused on holding a "leadership meeting", evidently called to legitimise the leadership role of Ninova herself. The result was a legitimisation of the leadership of Boyko Borisov, who explained when and under what conditions he would form a government. One of the "supporting pillars" of Ninova's image was seriously undermined - as a politician dedicated to exposing and overcoming the "GERB model". Drawing dividing lines continued to be a constant practice of the party leadership. Criticism of President Radev deepened, who, according to Ninova, had "betrayed" the socialists, had a "rift" with them and sought to destroy parliamentarism. The caretaker government was also systematically attacked, being accused of causing "a great deal of damage to Bulgaria". Punishments were announced for the party structures in Harmanli and Simeonovgrad. The other parties in parliament were collectively convinced that they had "external patrons". As expected, the leadership of BSP took a negative position towards the so-called Left Alliance, which held its second meeting in Plovdiv. Ninova's claim that these were people who had left the party during the leadership of Sergey Stanishev was probably intended to sow division between the representatives of the Left Alliance and the distanced Stanishev, but it hardly achieved any particular effect. BSP is preparing for a congress in mid-February, which, by all accounts, should reaffirm the party's course and replace the leadership issue with a programmatic one. Intentions for a new programme statement and changes in the statute should perhaps separate the so-called "internal opposition" so that part of it enters into a discussion on ideology instead of politics. It can also be assumed that Ninova intends to keep the Left Alliance in the dark about her plans by refusing to respond to their proposal for joint lists until the last moment. The political strategy of the leadership is also becoming clear. Once again, BSP will try to capitalise on the belief that the Bulgarian political process is polarised between two camps, around GERB and around PP, neither of which has a majority, and in the presence of "Vazrazhdane", which is unacceptable as a partner, and only BSP will be able to make a government possible. These are post-election calculations. The asset with which the socialists enter the pre-election campaign is more modest than ever. If, before the elections last year BSP insisted that they had achieved "the most social budget in history", they now emphasise as their achievements the decisions on free textbooks, their opposition to the Law on protection from domestic violence and their aid to settlements in a state of plight in Karlovsko and Asenovgradsko. Ninova's hopes for a stable electoral

performance are largely tied to the following conjuncture - a possible outflow of left-wing voters from PP, a positive effect of the introduction of the paper ballot, and the failure of the Left Alliance to consolidate due to leadership contradictions. In general, the impression is that the line of the red party is concentrated around the political calendar and the political ambitions of Ninova - to pad out the remainder of the time until the end of her mandate in 2024 and to enter as a balancing factor in some government, regardless of its profile.

"Democratic Bulgaria" (DB). In the last weeks of the parliament the formation found itself under increasing pressure from GERB for interaction. When President Radev handed the third government mandate to BSP and not to DB, he actually saved DB from the inevitable step of seeking the votes of GERB. DB twice tried to get out of the political trap (if GERB is an unacceptable partner, the alternative is the "associate" party of PP) with palliative measures. From the beginning, DB formulated five priorities for future coalition interactions (Schengen, the Eurozone, the Recovery and Resilience Plan, modernisation of the army, and reform of the prosecutor's office), which, however, GERB did not oppose. Thereafter DB used the case with the support of GERB for the ownership of the "red businessman" Georgi Gergov on the Plovdiv fair. The intimation of GERB's collaboration with the "oligarchy", based on a local case, could not justify the national policy of DB. This national policy is increasingly overshadowed by the risks of local elections coming up in the autumn. Hopes for a strong performance in Sofia and regional centres may be seriously shaken by the competition of PP and also the new political project of Boris Bonev "Save Sofia". This is why the idea of a coalition with PP came as a way out of the situation. The dangers of depersonalising DB certainly exist, but it should be borne in mind that they are masters of effective political rebranding (United Democratic Forces, Blue Coalition, Reform Bloc, DB) and could try again without disappearing. Of course, there are too many unknowns facing the initiative to give an estimate of their chances.

"Bulgarian Rise" ("Bulgarski Vuzhod" - BV). The perspective of Stefan Yanev's party remains uncertain. Despite their numerous requests, they did not get the third mandate to form a government, which would have been a chance to promote their own political weight. On the contrary, BV is the only party in the current parliament whose risk of falling below the 4% barrier is openly commented on by numerous analysts. The decline of BV has two prerequisites. One is related to the loss of the "trademark" of the leader Yanev, namely the moderate and even critical position towards the "Western" version of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. The second premise concerns the "open door policy", of dialogue with all, which

had numerous critics but enjoyed the recognition that in a highly confrontational political environment it was not superfluous. However, the "openness" of BV to everyone in the last weeks of the previous parliament was mainly realised as "openness" to GERB, MRF and BSP. With many stipulations, BV supported the candidacy of Prof. Nikolay Gabrovski from GERB for Prime Minister and took part in the "leadership

meeting" of BSP for the third term, but refused to support the "programmatic declaration" of PP for the second term. In the plenary hall of the National Assembly and in the parliamentary committees, BV also far more often supported GERB and MRF than PP and DB. All this created risks of the party being perceived as a "crutch of the status quo", with all the consequences for public image and political chances.

4

MAIN CONCLUSIONS AND FORECASTS

The political process in Bulgaria is deepening the prerequisites for the spread of Euroscepticism. The failures surrounding Schengen, the gloomy rumours about the Eurozone, the escalating military support of Europe for Ukraine and the abundance of all sorts of fantastic claims about the decisions of the European institutions are increasing the distance of Bulgarian society from the EU. The referendum petition of "Vazrazhdane" has the potential to concentrate strong anti-European attitudes in the year ahead.

President Rumen Radev remains at the centre of Bulgarian politics. The idea of a referendum on a presidential republic legitimises in the public space the debate on changing the form of government. Radev himself does not engage with this topic, but it opens the doors to all possible and dangerous institutional experimentation in Bulgaria, drawing strength from the permanent political crisis. New plots capable of reformulating the normal agenda of future National Assemblies can still be expected.

Pre-term elections are an opportunity to "unclog" the political process. Whatever the results of the parties may be, and even if they move in values close to the previous ones, the "red lines" dividing the participants seem increasingly difficult to defend. This increases the chance of forming a government coalition, but also increases the dangers of unprincipled, feudalised and irresponsible governments.

There are difficulties with the organisation and conduct of future elections. Of course, it is hypothesised that they will be overcome in time. But the effects of the paper ballot, combined with the changed geography of constituencies, can fuel suspicions of irregularities and delegitimise the electoral process. The decision of some parties to challenge the Electoral Code in the Constitutional Court, and in the absence of a parliament that could address the problems, is a step in the same direction.

There has been a great deal of talk, indeed for a long while now, about a crisis in the party system. One of the manifestations of this consists in the lack of new mobilising political groups and the reluctance of the existing ones to transform. It turns out that even "new" candidates for political participation - hypothetically the Left Alliance and certainly NDSV ("Natsionalno Dvizhenie za Stabilnost i Vuzhod" – "National Movement for Stability and Progress") - can actually be safely called "old". In the upcoming campaign, the parties will rely on their hard-core voters; they will avoid making risky opening moves, and will identify themselves as a negation of the others. The decline of the left and the projected unification of the "forces of change" increasingly acutely concentrates the political clash between GERB and the so-called right wing, between those who define themselves as "experienced" and those who claim to be "good". The electoral stake, outlined in such a way, exceeds the bounds not only of the terrain of ideology, but also of politics.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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