

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

POLIT-BAROMETER

Year 23 Issue 10
November 6th – December 8th

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The local elections did not produce an advantage to any party and did not question the government formula.



Constitutional changes all in all increase political uncertainty.



There is an ambition to monopolise the economic process within the triangle of GERB – PP-DB – MRF.

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1

THE DYNAMICS OF FOREIGN POLICY

The Europe-Russia tension. The main geopolitical axis of Bulgarian foreign policy is being preserved. This axis is of key importance because it represents one of the legitimating factors of the government and the majority. Together with this, the geopolitical divide also frames positions in the national political debate. It is not supporters of Russia who stand against staunch defenders of “Euro-Atlanticism”, but political players who capitalise on the suggestion of “Bulgarian national interest” regarding the conflict in Ukraine.

The “Euro-Atlantic” vector was symbolically confirmed in the speech of the Bulgarian Prime Minister Nikolay Denkov before the European Parliament. Denkov pointed out that Russia’s war against Ukraine is actually a war against Europe, and this requires unity and mobilisation. The message is not new. It is shared among European elites, although less and less reported. Three points deserve further attention. First, the Bulgarian Prime Minister has hardly won much support with his overly simplistic version of Europe’s peaceful and military heritage, transferring Julius Caesar, Charlemagne and Napoleon Bonaparte to the latter with a negative sign. Second, Denkov presented Russophilism as an artificial product of Russian hybrid interventions. According to him, it seems that pro-Russian sentiments would not exist if they were not actively encouraged by the Russian state. And thirdly, despite the grandiloquent moment, the Prime Minister’s speech was sharply criticised by Bulgarian MEPs, expressing doubts about the authentic Euro-Atlanticism of the Prime Minister and the cabinet.

The Russia-West divide has ultimately served as a pretext for a cross-party competition in Euro-Atlanticism. The majority parties proposed, with the leading role of GERB and the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF), the provision of Bulgarian armoured personnel carriers to Ukraine, and just two weeks later - also Bulgarian missile complexes. In the first case, President Rumen Radev’s veto was expected; the decision of the parliamentary majority not to comply with it was also expected. What is more interesting is the lack of fierce controversy over these

military-political issues. In his speech, Radev also called Kiev’s counteroffensive in the war a “mistake”, but received criticism mainly from the Ukrainian ambassador in Sofia. Probably, the current stage of the war in Ukraine does not give Bulgarian politicians grounds for rhetorical enthusiasm. However, it should be noted that the difference in viewpoints is not limited to the relationship between the majority and the President, but is also characteristic of the participants in the majority themselves. GERB and MRF as a whole have the ambition to prove a more categorical Euro-Atlantic commitment than that of “We Continue the Change (Produzhavame Promianata) - Democratic Bulgaria” (PP-DB). This is also evident in the case of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe forum held in Skopje. None other than GERB’s representative in the government, Foreign Minister Maria Gabriel, tried to make it as difficult as possible for the Russian delegation to appear in Skopje by imposing a ban on members of the delegation flying over Bulgaria. Subsequently, already within the framework of the forum, Gabriel demonstratively left the meeting during the speech of her Russian colleague Sergey Lavrov, and even made a special statement.

The case of “Lukoil”. The story of the Burgas oil refinery, owned by Lukoil, went through dramatic twists and turns to return to the original position. It seemed as if GERB and MRF wanted the derogation for imports of Russian petroleum products to end immediately, while PP-DB insisted that it remain as long as possible. The agreement between the three formations provided for the compromise option that from January 1, 2024, the quotas for the export of Russian oil would be abolished, and from March 1 - the derogation in general. Later, GERB and MRF suddenly returned to their claim of immediate cancellation of the derogation and began a kind of mutual blackmail. Then they agreed again on the specified dates in January and March. In the end, the only more significant news from this dynamic is that the probability of Lukoil selling the refinery has increased and was practically acknowledged by the company. This is hardly surprising, considering the

Bulgarian state's national and international attack on this site. The issue of the future of the refinery remains open. The rumours are diverse and target companies close to the parties in power. What is important for the final outcome of the situation is the persistently maintained version that the problem is geopolitical and it is about fighting Russian influence in Bulgaria.

2

INSTITUTIONS AND THE PUBLIC AGENDA

The government and the parliamentary majority.

The apparent instability of the majority is striking. The past few weeks have been characterised by continuous mutual accusations between the three participating formations, GERB-UDF, PP-DB and MRF, with requests for resignations of various ministers and ultimatums for withdrawal of support and removal of the cabinet. It is obvious that the results of the local elections did not give any tangible dominance to anyone. The claims for more national power by no political force can be convincingly justified by a newly established local hegemony. This is why traditional tensions and clashes are back in full force. The high dose of excitement and nervousness is also evident from the vocabulary used in the communication between parties – “games”, “circles”, “boys” and “persons”. The complex interactions between these parties at different levels of government and in different portfolios make it very difficult for any observer to orientate themselves on which topics there is agreement and on which there is not. The example mentioned of the derogation of Russian oil is indicative of repeated changes and revisions of the same decision. Another example of the same type is the decision of the Health Minister Hristo Hinkov to dismiss the director of the Pirogov Emergency Hospital – a decision that was also subjected to immediate revisions in one direction or another. All this has a direct impact on the general political situation. It is enough to point out that due to the derogation scandal GERB and MRF refused to support the cabinet in the vote of no confidence, but then supported it, and because of the scandal with the hospital the same parties refused to support the draft of the state budget, but then withdrew the refusal.

The government is a collective body, but the processes in it do not allow for any clear hierarchy to be identified. There is an impression of the “separatism of ministers” and the open confrontation of some of them with the majority parties. Minister of e-Government Aleksandar Yolovski asked for personal security guards because of a threat of physical retaliation by the co-chairman of the coalition (!) Kiril Petkov. As regards Interior Minister Kalin Stoyanov, Prime Minister Denkov has come to ask for his resignation and threaten his own resigna-

tion if he does not receive it. Some of the parties also demanded the resignation of Health Minister Hristo Hinkov. However, there is no change in government (for now). The explanations are clear. Ministers do not feel undisputed authority within the cabinet and allow themselves to manifest behaviour and send messages that under other conditions would lead to immediate removal. Moreover, these ministers are likely to realise that with more serious tensions in their portfolios there is no one to protect them, and therefore also seek support for themselves outside the government. And the parties supporting the government fear that the resignation of a minister could provoke a political crisis and lead to an uncontrollable process of ambition for ministerial reshuffles, and at this stage they firmly prefer to keep the status quo.

The majority brings to the fore several different centres of power – or at least try to legitimise some. PP-DB as a coalition insists that power is in the government and presents it through the “Denkov-Gabriel” formula to indicate GERB’s responsibility to the cabinet itself. We will often hear claims that all important decisions are taken jointly by Prime Minister Denkov and Foreign Minister Gabriel. In parallel, Denkov has engaged in permanent disputes with the Chairman of the Parliamentary Group of MRF Delyan Peevski on the objectives, priorities and limitations of the government. The exchange of phrases between them, which happens every 2-3 days, can be summarised as an effort by Peevski to promote the parliament (and himself as its informal “speaker”) as assigning tasks to the government, and as a counter-effort for Denkov to challenge his subordinate function. At the same time, key political initiatives (the latter being the proposal to provide missiles to Ukraine) are not announced by the government or the parliament, but by a special “trio” in the composition of the co-chair of PP Kiril Petkov, the leader of GERB Boyko Borisov and Delyan Peevski, who perpetuate their ideas in written documents bearing their signatures. And in order to make things even more complicated, the other co-chairman of PP, Finance Minister Assen Vassilev, seems to be securing “his” political space of influence, in which MRF has a generous place.

The Denkov cabinet formally emerged as a government with the leading role of PP-DB and supporting GERB. Geopolitical and constitutional considerations extended the majority to the participation of the MRF. Initially, GERB did not mind encouraging the inclusion of MRF in order to be able to balance the power appetites of PP-DB. However, MRF quickly emancipated itself from the scheme of GERB and entered into an independent role, which is far from always limited to support for GERB, and started an increasingly complicated game with both. This construction of the assembly determines both the constant scandals and the avoidance of real responsibility. It can be traced back to the development of important issues of power in recent weeks.

The constitutional changes came to their end, but in a way that heightened uncertainty rather than dispelling it. The majority parties never clarified what would finally be adopted by the original constitutional draft, what would be dropped and whether there would be anything unexpected to enter at the last minute. Regardless of the assurances, the basic law has been redesigned without consensus on the exact parameters, in a situation of agreements, in which each of the three formations of PP-DB, GERB and MRF wants to deploy the constitutional changes as "theirs", but at the same time promotes them as a result of the joint efforts with others.

Paradoxically, the plot with the second vote of no-confidence against the Denkov cabinet tabled by "Vazrazhdane" ("Revival"), the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) and "There is such a people" ("Ima Takuv Narod" - ITN), was on the grounds of the defence and national security sector. The vote, as expected, was unsuccessful. Unprecedented in recent Bulgarian history, however, it took two weeks and three votes to have it rejected. The majority parties themselves refused to participate in the votes not because they shared the distrust of the government, but because they gave each other ultimatums about the derogation of Russian oil. But it was not only strange that there was no one to defend the cabinet in the Parliament. The long period of the procedure was accompanied by the calls of Prime Minister Denkov to President Radev to dismiss the Chairman of the State Agency for National Security Plamen Tonchev and for the Interior Minister Kalin Stoyanov to resign. The reasons for that tension were different, but the majority in practice confirmed the opposition's assessment of a security failure. When a prime minister believes that the leading figures in the sector, such as the interior minister and the chief of the most important counter-intelligence service, have failed, it indirectly means a confession of the failure of politics in that sector.

The battle in the majority for appointments and divisions of quotas between "our" and "your" guys were rude on many occasions, including the nomi-

nation for Deputy Governor of the National Health Insurance Fund, which provoked mutual threats with boycotts, including the vote on the state budget. The protest of thousands of football fans in Sofia against the leadership of the Bulgarian Football Union, culminating in bloody clashes with the police and serious material damage, turned into an "apple of discord". The government and PP-DB wanted to use the case to remove the Interior Minister nominated by PP-DB, but suspected a long-standing secret collaboration with GERB. GERB and MRF defended Stoyanov and insisted on the resignation of the Minister of Youth and Sport. The Minister in question has no bearing on the protection of sports and protest events. Interestingly, PP-DB, after the failure to remove Stoyanov, were content to fire his deputy Stoyan Temelakiev because he was responsible for the operational activities of the Ministry. However, the real operational leader, Secretary-General Zhivko Kotsev, was not named, although he bears the greatest institutional responsibility for the dramatic development of the riots in the centre of the capital. However, Kotsev received his post two months ago after a severe clash between the government and the President, which led to the resignation of the former Secretary General Petar Todorov and his replacement with Kotsev, who is close to the mandate-holder. Therefore, Kotsev – instead of being fired – was tasked with investigating the whole story.

The end of local elections, in turn, widened the internal contradictions between the parties in the majority to the reorganisation of government in the municipalities. There were dozens of cases where the president of the municipal council could not be elected from the first time, and the usual complex arrangements escalated to ultimatums and sabotage. Perhaps the brightest example was Sofia, which remained more than a month after the vote without a chairman of the Municipal Council. Several consecutive votes did not provide the candidate of PP-DB Boris Bonev with the necessary majority. Determinedly against GERB, Bonev could not get their support and, for various reasons, it was unacceptable for the other party groups in the local parliament. Thus, despite the victory of PP-DB in the capital, no new political situation emerged. The newly elected mayor Vasil Terziev was not only checked because of the election results, but was also unable to find his own majority and, in a matter of weeks, he faced problems that demonstrated the helplessness of the municipal institutions – the protests of football fans, the snow storm and the chaos of waste removal. GERB lost the local vote in Sofia with a humiliating third place, but weeks later they instilled the self-confidence that they offered solutions to the problems and controlled the local infrastructure.

The President. Like the election month, and after the elections, Head of State Rumen Radev preferred a more distant behaviour that does not put him in

a constant verbal clash with those in power, but strengthens his function as an alternative. Radev reaffirmed his negative attitude to providing arms to Ukraine (with the veto on the decision of parliament) and ensured that the government understood that he would not succumb to pressure for any personal appointments (in connection with the fate of the Chairman of the State Agency for National Security).

There are two important topics that will determine the role of the President next year. One relates to constitutional changes and, in particular, to the way office cabinets are formed. Deprived of the freedom to choose a staff member of the Council of Ministers, Radev would be automatically excluded as a factor in the struggles

for the supremacy of the parties by the majority. Quite the contrary, with reserved powers in a political crisis, it would be a deterrent to any sharper movements of parties in the executive branch. The second topic is the petition for a referendum on the national holiday, the deadline for which is expiring. The President is not formally involved in the petition, but it will inevitably be seen as his success or failure. In this sense, the verification by the competent authorities of the validity of the signatures may lead to a situation where Radev dictates the political agenda. Rumours that the initiative committee for the referendum will grow into a party under the auspices of Radev, circulated by advisers to the President, hardly rest on any immediate plans, but maintain tensions among the political elite.

3

THE STATE OF THE PARTY SYSTEM

GERB-UDF. The success of the local elections confirms the dominance of GERB, but the outflow of votes in the major regional centres does not legitimise the claim of victory. At the end of the election campaign, the focus of the attack was directed directly against PP-DB, and the stakes of the vote were raised to the fate of the government. Indeed, GERB leader Boyko Borisov, in parallel with the second round of the elections, called a “national meeting” of his party in Veliko Tarnovo with the warning that they would discuss whether to stay in the majority or leave. The move clearly aimed to block the possible euphoria of PP-DB from victory in leading cities in the country. However, the target has not been achieved. The event in Veliko Tarnovo can safely be described as a failure, and was remembered only by the tortured and confused speech of Borisov about his great responsibility. We can accept that Borisov failed to play his game completely because of the brutal intervention of MRF, who through their main spokesperson Delyan Peevski declared, a day before Veliko Tarnovo, that the government was preserved and there was no danger for it. In fact, GERB became hostage to the political plans of MRF after GERB was the dominant party in their relations for a long time. Borisov’s problem with MRF comes from the fact that he was very keen to integrate them into the majority because of the belief that they would have no choice but to support GERB against PP-DB, but MRF, once accepted as a “full” participant in this configuration, have been oriented towards their own political line with their own deadlines other than those of GERB. The view that MRF was too much politically demonised and isolated to show autonomy was a major political mistake of Boyko Borisov.

Therefore, at this stage GERB does not have a useful move to make. Borisov is aware that neither the government’s agenda, nor its terms of operation, nor even constitutional changes depend on him. Traditionally, at such moments Borisov begins to wait in order for the situation itself to change, and to find in the new conditions a new political chance for a breakthrough.

“We Continue the Change (Produlzhavame Promianata) – Democratic Bulgaria” (PP-DB). The vic-

tories of the coalition of the local vote in municipalities such as Sofia, Varna or Blagoevgrad are not an unimaginable success, but they are a sure testament to being rooted in Bulgarian society. The central issue facing PP-DB from this point of view is to get out of the trap of GERB and MRF and to maintain maximum control over government policy, without taking full responsibility for decisions imposed by the partners. With the geopolitical activity of GERB and MRF, especially in the Lukoil affair, it has become very difficult for PP-DB to maintain a monopoly on Bulgaria’s Euro-Atlantic orientation. The government’s drive to postpone the end of the derogation began to be perceived as inconsistent Russophobia. PP-DB are trying to compensate for this impression by bringing back the topic of corruption in politics – a topic on which traditionally GERB and MRF are in a defensive position. The International Anti-Corruption Day served as an occasion, but the speech of Prime Minister Nikolay Denkov before the European Parliament should also be mentioned. In Strasbourg, Denkov explicitly emphasised that there are two dividing lines in Bulgarian society, not only between Europe and Russia, but also between corruption and anti-corruption. In all likelihood, this fits into the efforts to renovate an “old” advantage over partners after the noticeable backlog on Euro-Atlantic issues.

After the local elections, PP-DB actually seems stronger, but it is not clear whether this also means more unified. The internal differentiation in PP between Kiril Petkov and Assen Vasilev this time points to a growing predisposition of Vasilev and his entourage (including former Innovation Minister Daniel Lorer) towards convergence with MRF on budgetary policy, contrasting with the increasingly active dialogue between Kiril Petkov and GERB. The relationship between PP and DB should not be underestimated in this equation. Unexpectedly, the statement of the co-chair of DB Hristo Ivanov that the formation were launching an “internal party ideological debate” was unexpected for many. The purpose of this debate, according to Ivanov, is the choice of a political family in the EU and orientation towards the centre-right space in order to represent the “right-wing people”

in Bulgaria. In fact, the elections for the European Parliament are not so far away (only in 5 months), and it is becoming increasingly certain that no others will be held in the country before the European elections. The problem with PP-DB is the ideological heterogeneity of the formation. Designed to embody the unity of the “powers of change” in national contexts, internationally the same formation tends towards at least three European party families – Christian Democratic, liberal the greens. Appearing jointly in the European elections, as a coalition, would be charged with a number of questions. But vice versa, the collapse of the coalition for the European elections would be difficult for voters to understand. It seems that Hristo Ivanov's signal is in the direction of separation between the formations. Logically, speculation arises as to whether DB is taking the first steps to get detached from the orbit of PP and leave the overly burdensome governing coalition. The conceptual debate called for by Ivanov should take place after the constitutional changes, when one of the key motives of DB for participation in the coalition would be dropped. However, the conceptual debate, whatever its meaning, carries risks not only for the alliance with PP, but also for the internal stability of DB. The National Assembly of the Green Movement, part of the DB coalition, led to the dominance of the “authentic” ecologists over the “party”, or in other words, the entourage of Borislav Sandov over that of Vladislav Panev. Thus, the Green Movement has increasingly shifted to its old roots and its origins in social movements and the non-governmental sector since the beginning of the century, and also to less flexibility in coalition relations. On the other front are the positions of “Democrats for Strong Bulgaria”, also part of DB. The party, which has lost an impressive number of its members and supporters, has increasingly established itself as a machine of pressure and appointments in the sphere of regulators and security. And this already limits the space for purely political manoeuvres. Finally, the coalition with “Save Sofia” for the local elections in the capital was considered one of the great successes of PP-DB. The deal for this coalition envisaged the refusal of Boris Bonev, leader of Save Sofia, to run for mayor in exchange for his election as chairman of the Municipal Council. After the elections, however, it appeared that PP-DB loyally fulfilled their commitment to nominate Bonev, but did absolutely nothing to find him a majority. For this reason Bonev was forced to withdraw his nomination, and PP-DB were visibly pleased to leave a future contender for power in the capital outside the big game in Sofia Municipality. The political effect is, however, that it cannot be measured by a crack in the relations between Save Sofia and PP-DB.

Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF). The resignation of MRF Chairman Mustafa Karadayi has long been predicted. It has been talked about since

the political crisis in 2021-23 and the “short” parliaments. Then it was also commented that MRF would not allow such a change at the top to take place in the course of political instability or during an election campaign – figuratively speaking, to change the horse when the carriage is in the river. What was somewhat surprising, however, was the moment of resignation, immediately after the local elections, in which MRF performed very well. No official motives were made public. “Semi-official” comments were circulated that Karadayi had forgotten and isolated himself, which necessitated the intervention of honorary chairman Ahmed Dogan. There were also rumours that Karadayi was in closer ties with Turkey than was correct, thus threatening the party's political independence. The analogy with former President Lyutvi Mestan, who hid in the Turkish embassy after his removal, is obvious, as are the associations wakened by this – too. To some extent, Karadayi encouraged this analogy by choosing the first public event after the resignation to be in front of a monument to Atatürk in Turkey. Without more in-depth information, the available data suggest that these hypotheses are rather exaggerated. Karadayi failed to either expand the party's influence or bring it out of the secondary role in Bulgarian politics.

The question regarding Karadayi's successor has a clear answer – Delyan Peevski. Initially, Peevski became co-chair of the Parliamentary Group of MRF, then President after Karadayi, and finally put forward his candidacy for the highest post at the party forum scheduled for February. Ahmed Dogan, in turn, called Peevski a “phenomenon” and did everything possible to suggest that he was his choice for leader. Many commentators doubted that this would be the case. However, it should be borne in mind that Peevski is the most satanised man in the most satanised party. In addition, MRF is the political force that cannot exist peacefully in conditions of enmity with Ankara, but at the same time has the ambition to be the primary guarantor of Bulgaria's Euro-Atlantic orientation. Two of the first things that can be said about Peevski are that he has been banned from Turkey for years and has been sanctioned under the global Magnitsky law. Is he really the favourite? In such situations, the behaviour of MRF is predictable. The election of a new leader should be paved with confidence, not with sudden twists. Ahmed Dogan likes to repeat that his party would only play a leading role in the country if it was led by an ethnic Bulgarian. At the time of the removal of Mestan Dogan, he had backed three co-chairs before Karadayi's official election. Today Dogan personally takes over the operational leadership of the party. In itself, this is a clear sign that he just as personally wants to convince the elite and the party's asset that he stands behind Peevski, and Peevski is his, Dogan's, continuation, but “by other means”.

With Peevski's candidacy, it is said that Turkey will have an equivalent partner, but not a subordinate structure, that Western allies must reconcile, that they will not determine who leads the country's Euro-Atlantic policy, and that Bulgarian public opinion must swallow the decisions of MRF as democratic, not its own moral frustrations. The fierce dialogue between Peevski and Prime Minister Nikolay Denkov, in which Peevski constantly attacks the Prime Minister, challenges his decisions, insists on their revision, asks for reports and even systematically insults him, acquires double meaning. First, the Bulgarian political elite must get used to the fact that Peevski is the new rising star of Bulgarian politics, why not a future Prime Minister, as he often suggests. And secondly, members and sympathisers of MRF must see with their eyes that the candidate for their leader is the key figure in the state, making him non-alternative for the party. Of course, the arrogance and brutality of this legitimisation procedure should not be underestimated. Sometimes they can have the opposite effect.

MRF at the present stage has no interest in a new government configuration or early elections, because there are no guarantees that they would perpetuate the new more important role of the party. Whatever happens, at least the European elections are on the agenda. They are important, firstly, because they correspond to the "Euro-Atlantic" flag of MRF, and secondly, because traditionally they are characterised by a low turnout and allow parties with a cohesive electorate such as MRF to stand out. This would be a fundamental test for MRF, not only for Peevski, but also for Ilhan Kyuchyuk, the "European face" of the party, long viewed as a contender for the leadership position.

The Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP). Immediately after the local elections, the leadership of BSP delivered impressive data on electoral success and announced its finding of a "return to local government". The data of Korneliya Ninova and her entourage, as has long been proven, are exaggerated. Strong "red" candidates are the only salvation of the party's local positions, but they have nothing more to rely on the national leadership for. It was also clear to the Bulgarian public that Vanya Grigorova's impressive result in the competition for Sofia Mayor happened not thanks to Ninova, but despite her.

BSP deserve admiration for their parliamentary rhetoric. This is the party that is most able to fill the understanding of opposition with content. The criticism of the Socialist MPs against the majority, its policies and, above all, its double standards are accurate and strong. However, they have almost no public effect because of the marginal importance BSP have acquired in the mass consciousness. Ninova's new ambition to overcome this unshakable marginalisation pushes her towards various initiatives, from which it

is especially worth mentioning the idea of a left-centre-patriotic bloc. Launched personally by Ninova in a television interview and subsequently distributed by her closest collaborators in various media, the idea in question boils down in general to an agreement between 16 leftist, centrist and nationalist parties for a "network" or "front", which have joint positions on the main problems of the country. Ninova's considerations for such an agreement are based on domestic and international motives. Internally, the fruitful electoral partnership between these formations in different municipalities is highlighted, as well as the fact that they are like-minded on the nation's most important topics. The international context, according to Ninova, is shaped by the example of the Slovak politician Robert Fico, who has shown how firmly conservative and national positions in dialogue and partnership with the relevant parties should be defended in the socialist camp. Ninova directly points to VMRO and the "Bulgarian Rise" party of former Prime Minister Stefan Yanev as participants in the future front, which will become operational in relation to the 2024 budget and constitutional changes. So far, the facts show that the conceived front is reaping complete failure even before it is created. VMRO and "Bulgarian Rise" publicly distanced themselves from Ninova and said that no one had talked to them about such initiatives at all. Joint declarations on the budget or constitution are missing. The party of European Socialists, which has already removed Fico and his party for ideological and politically unacceptable behaviour, has threatened BSP officially for the first time with a suspension of membership. Ninova, who likes to confront her European party family on all occasions, in this case refused to comment on what she called "rumours". She understands well that no matter how shaken the image of the Party of European Socialists in the Bulgarian left-wing space is, an exclusion of BSP will be understood as deepening the isolation and not as an emancipation from dependencies. Last but not least, whatever Ninova hopes can prevail over "Vazrazhdane" ("Revival") with a variety of networks and fronts in the nationalist space – which has been the President's obvious goal for several months – such initiatives represent a rather gross denial of all leftist and socialist principles. Ninova has long speculated that the left, defended by the European Socialists, does not necessarily and unequivocally coincide with the left, as Bulgarian Socialists see it. There are certain grounds for this judgment, but it is completely overwhelmed. Ninova no longer talks about any version of the left at all, but about coalitions, and this among "like-minded people", with parties of radical nationalism and anti-socialism.

The local elections gave rise to new hope for the left in Bulgaria with the strong election result of the joint left-wing candidate for mayor of Sofia Vanya Grigorova. The leadership of BSP have done everything

possible to suggest that they have nothing to do with Grigorova and that she has some alleged behind-the-scenes relationship with GERB. Nevertheless, the media and public interest in Grigorova's future political plans has been emphasised. On one hand, she made the political mistake for some time of focusing the debate on her personal emotions and tensions caused by the campaign. The excessive focus on messages in the first-person singular, also creates the danger of isolation, and of suggesting a lack of allies. The Sofia organisation of BSP, which still bears the primary

responsibility for Grigorova's nomination, contribute to this effect through their discreet distancing from it.

"There is such a people" ("Ima Takuv Narod" - ITN). The behaviour of Slavi Trifonov's party in the post-electoral period, however attractive, is in fact deeply logical and based on their already traditional practice – a noisy opposition tactic beyond the limits of good tone in the name of the show, combined with a far less noisy refusal to actually oppose those in power and their practices.

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MAIN CONCLUSIONS AND FORECASTS

Bulgarian politics after the local elections has returned to its already usual course. There is no new political situation. Therefore, the parties are trying to gain advantages with the already established practice of ultimatums, pressure and avoiding responsibility. And they are doing so more and more successfully. In November and December, it became clear that PP-DB did not control their own government. Each topic on the governance agenda is reduced to similar combinations at different levels. This, unfortunately, makes it increasingly unpredictable HOW governing will be carried out, but it does remain clear WHO will govern.

Foreign policy dynamics are subject to the same logic. Neither Ukraine nor Schengen are important in themselves to the parties in government, but only as reasons for constructing identity and legitimacy. The striking reluctance to discuss such topics in substance proves this sufficiently clearly. The focus is on decisions, no matter what the motivation for them is.

The finalisation of the constitutional changes and the imminent depletion of Bulgaria's weapons supplies shed new light on the problem of the survival of the government. The ambition that all this government has done to legitimise itself (to change the basic law, stop the President's influence and give arms to Ukraine) should be achieved before Christmas 2023 leaves open the question of what will legitimise the majority in the new year 2024. There are no answers. Of course, in less than two months there will be the "rotation" of Nikolay Denkov with Mariya Gabriel. It has long been suggested that this rotation may not take place and lead to the dissolution of parliament

and early elections along with the European elections in May. This is a perfectly acceptable hypothesis. But it should not be excluded that this model of governance, based on the "samples" and "mistakes", of ultimatums and bargains, would survive the crisis of rotation, simply because the parties involved in it do not see for themselves an alternative option that is both better and safer.

President Radev's behaviour and his political initiatives in January and February will undoubtedly exert influence on the final decision. It will also show to what extent the protest vote, raised with Vanya Grigorova's campaign, will find its own political representation.

So far, it seems that the government formula is rather stable. The same cannot be said of the public formula. The socio-economic problems of the people, growing in the winter season, are completely off the agenda of the political forces. Vigorous statements about higher incomes and pensions with the new budget replace any real economic policies. Two facts remain underestimated, although widely commented on. The first is related to the disturbingly low score of Bulgarian students in the European tests for functional literacy, and the second – to the mass trade union protests of road workers and cultural activists. One requires a conversation about the education and strategic goals of the state – something that the current government is absolutely incapable of accomplishing. Other participants in the dialogue are needed. The other speaks of increasing trade unionisation of Bulgarian society and gives hopes for new social activation in the future. Other participants in the social initiatives below are possible.

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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

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 local elections did not produce an advantage to any party and did not question the government formula.



Constitutional changes all in all increase political uncertainty.



There is an ambition to monopolise the economic process within the triangle of GERB – PP-DB – MRF.

Further information on the topic can be found here:
bulgaria.fes.de