

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

POLIT-BAROMETER

Year 23 Issue 3
March 1st – April 5th

Boris Popivanov



The early elections do not point to a clear way out of the political crisis in Bulgaria.



The current dilemma remains: “an expert government with broad support” or new early elections.



The nationalist “breakthrough” in parliament is serious and has every chance of growing.

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1

THE DYNAMICS OF FOREIGN POLICY

The war in Ukraine and its consequences. Military aid to Ukraine was once again part of the agenda of the European Council, in which the Bulgarian President Rumen Radev took part. Ever increasingly we are hearing warnings that Europe is running out of available weapons and it is becoming more and more difficult to send new military aid to Kiev. Against this background, the Council proposed an order for the supply of 1 million projectiles with the voluntary participation of the Member States. Bulgaria refused to take part in the procurement, although it supported the general framework of military aid. President Radev declared, apart from this, that Bulgaria will not send its heavy weapons (tanks, missile complexes and fighter jets) to Ukraine. In an even more acute form, his thesis was heard that the priority for Sofia should be the arming of the Bulgarian army, not that of Ukraine. These positions continue to fuel criticism of Radev inside the country that he is effectively expressing Russia's point of view in the war.

The matter of military aid is more complicated and can be viewed in more nuanced ways. Along with the reluctance to include Bulgaria in new arms delivery initiatives, Bulgaria continues to categorically condemn the Russian invasion. This was also understood in the general statements of Radev and his Romanian colleague Klaus Iohannis during their meeting in Sofia. At the same time, statistical data (about the tripling of Bulgarian imports into Ukraine in 2022) and journalistic investigations (by the Brussels publication Politico) systematically support the belief that the Bulgarian military industry is actively providing armaments to Ukraine, even if this is done in indirect ways. An interesting point in this context is the visit of the European Commissioner for Internal Market Affairs, Thierry Breton, to Bulgaria, who decided to inspect precisely weapons factories.

The problem of military aid is the most visible, but not the only aspect of the attitude of Bulgaria to the Ukrainian conflict. Two other aspects should be mentioned: the economic and the psychological ones. Economically, EU member states are becoming more concerned that the increased import of agricultural

products from Ukraine is destabilising their domestic markets and their agricultural production in general. Bulgaria and four other countries have sent a special letter to the European Commission with a demand for compensation. This type of "economisation" of conflict, if left unchecked, can have serious repercussions on public attitudes towards the conflict itself. Psychologically, we are observing an expected – and politically exploited – consequence of the excessive duration of the war. In the absence of a clear road map for peace, intimations that Europe, and Bulgaria in particular, will become actively involved in military action sound more and more convincing. Such were the fears about military aid. But now the nationalist party "Vazrazhdane" ("Revival") and a number of public speakers openly claim that armed contingents are about to be sent to Ukraine, behind the backs of Bulgarian and European societies. In Sofia and larger Bulgarian cities, anti-war marches were held under the title "Bulgaria - a zone of peace". Entirely in the spirit of Russian propaganda, World War II reminiscences about the "Eastern Front" are being updated. A socio-psychological atmosphere is forming, which not only intensifies the confrontation between supporters and opponents of Russia, but also provides additional electoral chances to Eurosceptical political forces.

The tension with North Macedonia. The continued escalation of mutual accusations between Bulgaria and North Macedonia occurred on the occasion of an act of vandalism of the Bulgarian cultural and information centre in Skopje. The Bulgarian institutions accused their North Macedonian partners of intensifying the "language of hate" and of blocking their own European perspective. The situation is further complicated by the decision of the authorities in North Macedonia not to register the Bulgarian clubs - "Tsar Boris III" in Ohrid and "Ivan Mihailov" in Bitola - with these names. In fact, the problem is that the Bulgarian-Macedonian dispute is shifting from the field of human and civil rights (the right of self-determination of the Bulgarians), where Bulgaria has a strong and European legitimate position, to the field of history, where the impasse is obvious. Moreover, precisely in the field of history, Skopje has a chance to gain a "Eu-

ropean" advantage over Bulgaria. The 80th anniversary of the tragic events of March 1943, which led to the deportation of practically all the Jews of Vardar Macedonia to the Nazi death camps, served as an occasion for North Macedonian President Stevo Pendarovski to demand an apology from Bulgaria, under whose temporary administration this area was at that time. Bulgaria, which traditionally refuses to acknowledge its responsibility for the deportation, this time decided to present the regime of Tsar Boris III almost entirely in a positive light. In this way, the country risks seriously reinforcing the isolation of its position in the EU. Sofia allowed the problem with the Bulgarian clubs not to look like an attack by Skopje against the people with Bulgarian national self-determination, but to look like

a glorification of Boris III and Ivan Mihailov, widely perceived in Europe if not as Nazis, then at least as close allies of the Third Reich. Bulgarian foreign policy is making a mistake that could undermine the two-year efforts of President Radev and his diplomats to present the dispute with North Macedonia in a favourable interpretation for Bulgaria. The focus on the inclusion of Bulgarians in the Constitution of North Macedonia remains in the background, despite the commitment of Brussels (expressed again by the High Representative for Foreign Policy Josep Borel) to this Bulgarian demand. Thus, in turn, the authorities in Skopje find reasons to postpone the constitutional changes and justify their delay with the political situation and the election cycle in the country.

2

THE INSTITUTIONS AND THE AGENDA OF SOCIETY

The President. Undoubtedly, the foreign policy messages of the head of state determine his image in domestic politics. His behaviour with regard to the Ukrainian conflict has caused increasingly polarised assessments, which he has evidently encouraged by radicalising his rhetoric. The most clearly expressed tension is that between him and the so-called “forces of change”, the coalition between “We Continue the Change” (“Produlzhavame Promianata”) and “Democratic Bulgaria” (PP-DB) and media speakers close to it, who quite openly denounce Radev as an agent of Russian influence in Bulgaria. This has led to direct accusations that Radev has been betraying the Bulgarian national interest, half-disguised threats that constitutional changes limiting his powers were possible, and open protests in front of the presidential administration building. It seems that Radev does not mind being perceived completely negatively in these circles. His balanced foreign policy messages enjoy the support of significant groups of Bulgarian society, but the parties advocating similar positions are also negatively disposed towards the figure of Radev - with the exception of the underrepresented coalition “The Left!”.

In fact, the President finds himself at a sort of political crossroads. Until recently, his tongue-in-cheek remarks against his parties have paid dividends. He denounced the inability of the Bulgarian parties to reach agreements and take responsibility for power sufficiently effectively and appropriately. There comes a time, however, when the argument can be turned against him. The perspective and direction given by the presidential institution in the conditions of a permanent political crisis do not become clear. On many topics (North Macedonia, education and history), Radev increasingly gravitates towards national-conservative points of view, making it difficult to formulate a positive agenda for the future.

The government. The long-standing government of Galab Donev’s cabinets (more than the previous regular cabinet of Kiril Petkov) is beginning to bring tangible negatives. Business, the media and society increasingly perceive the caretaker government not as a temporary solution, but as a permanent body, and

raise their expectations. On the whole, the government did a good job of organising the elections, but in the course of the campaign it allowed itself, for the first time since August, to adopt an entirely defensive role. Topics such as Schengen, the Eurozone and energy, on which it had the political initiative, seem to remain in the background. The difficulties of exercising power in the absence of a parliament, of one’s own majority and of a legitimate strategy of government stand out. It could be said that Donev’s cabinet is not faced with the consequences of incompetence, behind the scenes or revanchism, of which the parties accuse him, but with the Constitution and the restrictions arising from it. The lack of a new budget is becoming an increasingly serious problem for the social situation in Bulgaria. The government has limited resources, which objectively contributes to the trend towards impoverishment. And last but not least, inconsistent and uninhibited statements (such as that of Finance Minister Rositsa Velkova about the dire state of finances) are the focus of well-founded criticism from the media. The most unconvincing policy remains that on prices and incomes. It could hardly be met with comprehension in society for much longer.

The election campaign. The campaign for the 49th National Assembly was not distinguished by non-standard or bright decisions, capable of changing the initial trends in the attitudes of the voters. As expected, the parties preferred to stir up their potential hard-line voters and distance themselves from the other contestants all the time. The official ideological profile did not really matter. Political actors, close in platform and values, assumed the role of fiercest competitors (GERB-UDF against PP-DB, as well as BSP against “The Left!”) and even as alternatives to each other. Preliminary coalition intentions were not announced, which constantly deprived voters of an opportunity to assess the stakes of the election.

From the point of view of the inter-party clash, the campaign was oriented as a race between GERB-UDF and PP-DB for the first place. The parity between them in the polls added to the intrigue. In this way, the campaign itself once again reproduced the already tradi-

tional dilemma of “status quo” vs “change”. The difference: the status quo did not now sound completely unacceptable, and change was not associated solely with good things. The other parties found themselves with something of a supporting role, with the exception of “Vazrazhdane” and Slavi Trifonov’s party “There is Such a People” (“Ima Takuv Narod” – ITN), which unequivocally rejected the importance of the political intrigue between GERB-UDF and PP-DB. Thematically, the campaign focused on four main storylines. Of course, the geopolitical motive was the leading one, and provoked fierce debates on the most diverse topics (Should March 3rd remain a national holiday? Should the Monument to the Soviet Army be dismantled? Should the Oscar-winning film about the Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny be aired? Will Russian gas secretly be sought through Alexandroupolis? Will the President cut us off from Europe?) The President turned out to be the second most important topic, primarily because of accusations of him accumulating too much power and serving the mafia behind the scenes. The issue of control over the Chief Prosecutor was again bandied as a key condition for the rule of law, including as a litmus

test for the willingness of the “status quo” to “reform.” Prices and incomes were also on the agenda, but in a far more limited and sporadic way.

As a whole, in the course of the campaign, no long-term solutions were proposed to any of the leading problems of the Bulgarian society, especially those which are of a socio-economic nature. It has become something of a vicious circle. Parties do not believe that elections can lead to long and stable governance, so they limit themselves to fragmented, short-term promises. The lack of direction and strategy repels voters, and contributes to the fact that elections do not lead to long and stable governance. The elections this time did not feature a new significant political actor who would concentrate the hopes of broader public groups. The existing political actors did not resort to risks that would leave them outside the “electoral comfort zone”. There was no way all this could motivate higher activity compared to October 2nd. The actual turnout was only slightly higher than on the previous occasion, but it did not show a way out of the crisis of legitimacy of the party system.

3

THE STATE OF THE PARTY SYSTEM

GERB-UDF. The formation is once again first in the pre-term elections and has shown the ability to retain and even slightly increase its electorate with a campaign entirely oriented towards the past. The emphasis on the former “accomplishments” of GERB as opposed to the current “chaos” actually allows for great flexibility in the political strategies in the post-election period. However, two of the messages in the campaign are important for the future: budgetary discipline (to calm business against the background of the social temptations of other parties) and the priority of municipalities (to keep their clientele in place). With his decision to accept a parliamentary seat and personally lead the negotiations for a possible government, leader Boyko Borisov has also achieved his own goal - to re-legitimise himself as a leading and irreplaceable figure in the political process after all the calls to withdraw or be withdrawn.

After the elections, GERB advocated the political thesis that national responsibility is necessary and therefore the formation of a government is a condition for any other decisions and policies. The subtext is obvious. In GERB, they are worried that their opponents PP-DB may ask for support for numerous reforms in the 49th National Assembly, motivated by Euro-Atlantic loyalty, and finally refuse to cooperate in forming a government. In this way, PP-DB might be able to force GERB to fulfill their agenda and finally accuse them of having let parliament down, and because of them new elections should be held. In response, Borisov wants to contrast “responsibility” with “reforms”.

The observation that a stable regular cabinet would not be possible without the participation of GERB is largely true. As in the last parliament, GERB could come to an agreement with the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF), probably with the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), and now also with “There is Such a People” (ITN), but this is an option that would be difficult for them. Borisov continues to fear a “Euro-Atlantic” front against him in such a configuration, especially since their main competitor PP-DB seems strong enough to present itself as an alternative. A coalition like the one outlined above would be perceived more

favourably if PP-DB declined, and that has not yet happened. The other option for a government majority, a “grand coalition” between GERB and PP-DB, is clearly preferred. It would be more profitable for GERB, because it would nullify the whole pathos of “change”, it would give greater advantages to the first party due to greater political and behind-the-scenes experience, and it would guarantee the international legitimacy of the government. However, PP-DB are aware of the trap and at this stage have not given indications of readiness. Yet more pre-term elections are the obvious third option, but it carries serious risks due to a loss of confidence - both electorally and also in the party’s ability to follow through on its commitments.

The local elections are increasingly on the agenda of GERB. It is a prime necessity for a clientelist part to find a political formula which enables them to preserve, as far as possible, the extremely strong positions in local government. As the parliamentary vote showed, the danger of defeat in Sofia, Plovdiv and Varna is significant. But if the pill of this danger is swallowed, it could be the basis for an understanding with their great rival PP-DB. Borisov could end up giving up something he is likely to lose anyway in order to get something in return. The strategy of GERB does not seem to be completely clear, but doors are open in more directions than in the last three years.

“We Continue the Change” (“Produlzhavame Pro-mianata”) - Democratic Bulgaria (PP-DB). In the course of the campaign, great expectations were purposefully formed that PP-DB would not only be first, but might even come close to an absolute majority. There was a strategy clearly built on the advantages of victory. The new union did little to hide their intentions – to pressure GERB for support from their position as a winner without allowing GERB to have a say either on the agenda of the future administration or on their staffing decisions. The failure was largely due to a misguided campaign idea that overlapped too much with the elitist, right-wing, and anti-communist priorities of DB.

PP-DB are entering the new parliament with an internal dynamic that is undoubtedly exaggerated by the

media and opponents, but is hardly something that is fully made up. The election results indicate that PP will have slightly more MPs than DB, which means that within the coalition the leading party is severely limiting its parliamentary presence. Former Transport Minister Nikolay Sabev called for resignations, and former MP Ivan Hristanov warned of an internal coup in PP. The impression was created of a clash between the joint chairs Kiril Petkov and Asen Vasilev and of a serious disagreement between camps in the party. The two co-chairs deliberately made a joint statement in which they refused support for a government with the mandate or participation of GERB. Besides having to show unity, the leaders, contrary to the rules of the coalition culture, rushed to announce their decision without consulting their partner DB. This, in turn, shows concerns about the loyalty of DB and a desire to place the "small" partner in a situation where they face a *fait accompli*. In PP, there is no way they would not have considered the message of Hristo Ivanov, one of the leaders of DB, from the end of the campaign, that cooperation with GERB and MRF is possible on the basis of broad constitutional majorities. It appears that the internal monolithic nature of PP-DB is being called into question.

The dilemma facing PP-DB is whether to enter into a "grand coalition" with GERB in some form, or go for new pre-term elections. The former seems to be all but ruled out after initial statements, but it is still too early for definitive generalisations. The option of a "minority government" composed only of PP-DB sounds utterly unrealistic after the defeat in the elections. Such a structure would have no legitimacy from the position of second place, nor reliable partners to carry it out. Unlike the previous parliament, PP-DB do not have a backup option in the case of a possible third mandate to form a cabinet, because this mandate cannot go to a party recognised as a "force of change". However, the course towards new elections carries serious risks of electoral collapse. And yet it seems that at this stage PP are oriented precisely towards this last option. It is not yet possible to assess whether the same applies to DB. Internal coalition processes may revise the first reassessments.

"Vazrazhdane" ("Revival"). For the fifth consecutive elections, Vazrazhdane have increased their support, with the increase this time being the most drastic, by over 100,000 votes. "Vazrazhdane" have already surpassed the former joint achievements of "United Patriots" and won third place, thus becoming a truly serious participant in the political process. This shows the mobilisation potential of the referendum campaign against eurozone membership launched by the party. It is this campaign that allows "Vazrazhdane" to demonstrate their own agenda, different from that of other parties. The same role is played by the anti-elitist messages, which aim to present the

division in Bulgarian politics as a clash between the supporters of Bulgarian sovereignty and the executors of external orders. Discreet Euroscepticism and open anti-Americanism make up the current profile of the party, to a greater extent even than pro-Russian understandings.

The submission of the petition for the referendum is approaching and "Vazrazhdane" will get the chance to rearrange the priorities of the new parliament, focused inevitably on the formation of a cabinet. The position of "Vazrazhdane" is clear - an independent government, without coalitions. And if earlier this seemed illusory, after winning the third place, it is no longer so. The hopes of "Vazrazhdane" are focused on a possible decline of the PP-DB, which would allow them to strive for second place in new early elections even without a significant electoral surge. Second place is by definition a bid for first place, and the other parties have to come to terms with the new situation.

Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF). The party maintained their previous positions and even lost a certain number of votes in Bulgaria at the expense of a stronger vote of Bulgarian citizens in Turkey. However, expectations of strong support from Turkey, spurred by President Recep Erdogan in light of his new warmer ties with the MRF, did not come to fruition. MRF even relinquished the third place that they had in previous elections. This calls into question the ambition of political balancing, which would only be possible with broader parliamentary representation. For this reason, at this stage, it seems that, as before, the chances of MRF participating in power are mainly related to GERB.

Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP). The party suffered yet another electoral defeat and registered the fifth consecutive lowest result in its history. In the 49th National Assembly, the BSP will have the lowest number of MPs in history, only 23. Two statements were circulated in the campaign - that the socialists would increase their result due to the introduction of voting with a paper ballot and due to the initiative for a referendum against the so-called gender education. Neither came to pass. Although by a few thousand, the result is lower even than that of the previous elections. Surveys by sociological agencies using the exit-poll method on election day reveal the danger of permanent marginalisation of BSP in Bulgarian society - an increasingly large proportion of their voters are in the upper age and lower educational groups, and fewer and fewer live in the capital. In these elections, the BSP had a competitor for the left parliamentary representation in the face of the newly formed coalition "the Left!". The participation of prominent figures from BSP in this coalition fuelled the belief that "the Left!" would attract a significant number of socialist voters. However, the modest result of "the Left!" did

not confirm this hypothesis. Those 56,000 who voted for them can easily be explained by the electorates of the parties participating in the coalition - ABV, "Stand Up, Bulgaria", and "Movement 21". So, to a large extent, the electoral collapse of BSP was due to internal reasons brought about by the politics of the leadership rather than external factors.

After the elections, the party leader Korneliya Ninova in fact refused to take responsibility for another heavy defeat and accused both "the Left!" and the President of an "attempted murder" of BSP, which proved unsuccessful. It did not become clear why, in the presence of so many stronger and rising political forces, a conspiracy was necessary against the fifth party, which could easily be bypassed both in parliamentary decisions and in government configurations. It can be summarised that conspiratorial-sectarian messages increasingly dominate the socialist party.

The leadership of BSP announced that it will hold an internal party poll for joining possible coalitions. The move puts the media focus not on the party's social agenda, but on its coalition intentions. And the increasingly escalating criticisms against the President give rise to expectations among observers that the main thing that BSP can offer in the Bulgarian parliament is participation in an anti-presidential campaign. In fact, the failure of "the Left!", paradoxically, is bad news for Korneliya Ninova. If "the Left!" had managed to surpass the barrier, Ninova would have both a permanent excuse for their own failures and new reasons for complacency in possible shake-ups in this unstable coalition. Now, the representation of

left-wing people remains a commitment of BSP alone, which has not shown the capacity to fulfill this role.

"There is Such a people" ("Ima Takuv Narod") (ITN).

The success of showman Slavi Trifonov's party in entering the new parliament is one of the surprises of the elections. Two factors are of importance. First, it was the party-initiated petition for a referendum on a presidential republic, which partly brought the attention of the public back to Trifonov. And secondly, the campaign of ITN against PP-DB aroused interest if only because of the angry reactions from the opposite side. PP-DB legitimised ITN again, so to speak, and in a field where Trifonov is strong - the show. Regardless, the persistent intimation that after their failure in the 47th National Assembly, ITN had no way of getting back into politics, led to all sorts of conspiratorial explanations as to how it happened. The ridiculous thesis that MRF "spilled" votes to ITN in the late afternoon of election day ranks among them. The explanation is probably much simpler. In the 48th National Assembly, ITN remained below the barrier with 96,000 votes. They are now over the barrier with less than 104,000. A value added of only 7 thousand votes is not a remarkable achievement, especially for a showman with a large contingent of fans.

A leading message of ITN after the elections is the ambition to exercise "control" over those in power. No coalitions are ruled out. Along these lines, ITN is reminiscent of Stefan Yanev's "Bulgarian Rise" party from the previous parliament. But the constructiveness of Trifonov is far less than that of Yanev. It is difficult to see ITN as a source of political stability, but for the needs of their political renaissance they might perhaps be ready for such a role.

4

MAIN CONCLUSIONS AND FORECASTS

The development of the Ukrainian crisis presents Bulgarian foreign policy with major challenges. The tension between Europe and Russia continues to grow although not at a great pace. Bulgaria's desire to stand not with the "hawks" but with the "doves" among EU member states is understandable. The effectiveness of such a strategy requires a flexibility of messages. Instead of this, however, we seem to be observing a toughening of the tone. This increasingly raises the danger of Bulgarian politics being perceived as pro-Russian, something of which there is practically no evidence.

The pre-term parliamentary elections held on April 2nd did not cut the knot of the political crisis in Bulgaria. The results largely coincided with preliminary predictions and did not point to a clear predominance of any camp on the political spectrum. It seems that there is a reproduction of the situation from the 48th National Assembly, which could have formed a regular cabinet, but had no desire to do so. At this stage, the prospects are not clear, but the responsibility of the parties is growing ever higher - not only because each subsequent parliamentary failure increases disillusionment with the parliamentary system and can electorally harm all participants in the process... but also because in the conditions of social and economic crisis, the need for urgent parliamentary and governmental decisions is growing. Even with the best intentions, a caretaker cabinet cannot offer a long-term perspective and enforce legislation that will support the people. If the parties once again abdicate their responsibility and shift it to the President, the problem with incomes may prove too severe.

Despite some initial post-election statements, the coalition option between the two leading political forces,

GERB-UDF and PP-DB, remains the most stable under the current initial conditions. The formation of such a government, no matter under what formula (most likely an expert one), could exert a stabilising effect on the economy. However, the social sphere would again be problematic. However the two leading formations are defined ideologically, they demonstrate a rather right-wing, pro-business oriented economic profile. It is precisely in such crisis conditions that the negatives of the lack of a strong left-wing party in the country become apparent. The BSP crisis is a crisis of the Bulgarian social agenda. There are no indications that the impasse in the left political space can be reformulated before the local elections.

There are five storylines that are likely to unfold in the coming weeks and months. The first is the approach of GERB to possibly forming a regular government - whether it will be sincere or not. Second, these are the beginnings of internal tensions in the PP-DB coalition and their potential implications in the political debate - whether open conflicts will result or not. Third, President Radev's approach to the constitutional procedure for forming a cabinet - active or distant, accelerated or smooth. Fourth, the growing rumours that initiatives to change the Constitution are possible - regarding judicial reform, caretaker cabinets or something else. Fifth, the fate of the "Vazrazhdane" petition for a referendum on Eurozone membership and the chances of this initiative rearranging the agenda.

Everything that has been mentioned so far has the potential to either stimulate temporary solutions to the political crisis or deepen it further.

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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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Further information on the topic can be found here:
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