



DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

# POLIT-BAROMETER

Year 23 Issue 6  
6<sup>th</sup> – 30<sup>th</sup> June

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The trends of the political crisis in Bulgaria are continuing, despite the formation of a regular cabinet.



Those in power are trying to legitimise themselves with a constitutional reform without clear content.



The campaign for the local elections has actually already started.

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## 1

## THE DYNAMICS OF FOREIGN POLICY

**A new way of looking at Ukraine?** Expectations for a new Bulgarian position towards the war in Ukraine, more uncompromising than hitherto, were mainly related to the election of a new Bulgarian government. Even on June 6th, when the regular cabinet with Prime Minister Nikolay Denkov took office, clear messages were sounded that the country's commitment to military aid to Kyiv would be expanded. The first steps of the cabinet generally confirm this line in at least three ways. On one hand, Bulgaria expressed a desire to join the European initiative to provide 1 million shells and ammunition to Ukraine. Previously, participation in the initiative was not foreseen. And the ruling parties have rejected the proposal of the previous caretaker cabinet that any new decision on military aid in the future should be approved by parliament. Instead, this prerogative is given entirely to the government. This is an additional institutional facilitation of a more active policy of Bulgaria being involved in the rearming of Ukraine. Next, an overwhelming majority of political parties submitted a draft declaration to the National Assembly in support of the membership of Ukraine in NATO. This includes both the ruling party GERB-UDF and "We Continue the Change" ("Produlzhavame Promianata") - Democratic Bulgaria" (PP-DB), as well as the opposition Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) and "There is Such a People" ("Ima Takuv Narod") (ITN). The declaration was conceived as a preliminary expression of the Bulgarian position on the eve of the NATO summit in Vilnius, and the Bulgarian position itself is not merely formal due to the existing divisions in NATO circles on the subject of Ukrainian membership. Then thirdly, the more determined Bulgarian commitment to Ukraine is beginning to be presented not only as an ally and moral solidarity, but also as a source of financial benefits. In her statement, the new Foreign Minister of Bulgaria, Maria Gabriel, emphasised that Sofia's active support for Kyiv is a condition for future participation in the reconstruction of Ukraine. Such a perspective has been met with certain reservations in the Bulgarian media, which recall how in 2003 the then Foreign Minister Solomon Passy promised participation in the post-war reconstruction of Iraq, but this remained without consequences.

Bulgaria's new position regarding Ukraine is expected to fuel tension between the government and President Rumen Radev. The head of state again emphasised his concerns about involving the country in the conflict. The dialogue between Radev and the cabinet has gradually grown into a dispute over the constitutional role of the President, and more specifically, over his powers in foreign policy and over the meaning of the concept of "Commander-in-Chief". The practical result of the dispute so far is the government's decision to end the tradition of the President representing Bulgaria at NATO summits over the past decade. Prime Minister Denkov will attend the event in Vilnius instead of Radev.

**Schengen and the Eurozone.** One of the first appearances after assuming office of Prime Minister Denkov and Foreign Minister Gabriel was a meeting with the ambassadors of the EU and the USA. At this meeting, they indicated Bulgaria's membership in the Schengen Area and the Eurozone as their main priorities in foreign policy.

The parallel efforts of President Radev and Prime Minister Denkov to convince skeptics of the candidacy of the country for Schengen have been of interest. Radev visited Austria and discussed the matter with Chancellor Karl Nehammer. Almost at the same time, Denkov took part in a meeting of the European Council in Brussels, where he suggested that Germany, the Netherlands and Austria should send their representatives to see for themselves how Bulgaria guards its borders. This initiative has questionable added value because it is known that the objections of The Hague and Vienna are not technical and logistical. Notwithstanding, Denkov has been quick to justify a possible failure with the claim that it is the fault of the caretaker government that Bulgaria has not prepared the necessary laws under the Recovery and Resilience Plan, which are considered important by the Netherlands and Austria.

The issue with the Eurozone is faced with Bulgaria's difficulties in meeting the Maastricht criteria in the conditions of crisis and inflation. The new Finance

Minister Asen Vasilev, supported by the majority parties, cites this as the leading reason for insisting on a 3% deficit ceiling in the draft state budget, regardless of the cost of such a decision in a social and economic sense. Moreover, in an effort to present the path as irreversible, Vassilev proposes a parallel introduction of the euro as a payment currency in Bulgaria togeth-

er with the lev even before entering the eurozone. Employers and banks have warned that this would be extremely difficult to implement. From a political point of view, the idea is clearly aimed at presenting the party "Vazrazhdane", which have submitted their petition for a referendum against the membership of the eurozone, with a *fait accompli*.

## 2

## THE INSTITUTIONS AND THE AGENDA OF SOCIETY

### ***The government and the parliamentary majority.***

The new regular cabinet is the product of a strange formula. It is not unknown around the world, but it is full of Bulgarian paradoxes. The government majority consists of the two leading forces, GERB-UDF and PP-DB. In the first nine months, PP-DB candidate Nikolay Denkov is to be Prime Minister, and GERB candidate Maria Gabriel Vice Prime Minister and Foreign Minister. Then the government is to resign and a new one be formed with the same composition, only with Gabriel as Prime Minister and Denkov as her deputy. After those 18 months, the majority is expected to review the results of the rotation and assess whether it continues to support it. It is noteworthy that the cabinet in its current form is almost entirely dominated by PP-DB.

Apart from Denkov, there is also another prominent party figure from PP (Finance Minister Asen Vassilev), as well as a figure of Democratic Bulgaria (Minister of Justice, Atanas Slavov). Most other ministers are experts, but clearly selected from circles close to those of PP-DB. The curious exception is Interior Minister Kalin Stoyanov, who is believed to be no stranger to GERB, and this is hardly accidental. In any case, the asymmetry is also evident in favour of the smaller governing partner, PP-DB. From there, the problem of GERB-UDF responsibility for the government becomes inevitable and insurmountable.

The government was formed without a coalition agreement. Both formations insist that they are not in a coalition, apparently in an attempt to avoid the image negatives of uniting such diametrically opposed opponents. It seems as if GERB are proposing a coalition agreement, and PP-DB do not want it, but the issue has not been brought up so far. Driven by the same image considerations, the two ruling formations give reminders every day of the “huge mistrust” they feel towards each other, and even systematically express their suspicions that they can be used by each other. The language of management was enriched with new terms. The cabinet has gained popularity as an “assemblage”. PP co-chairman Kiril Petkov warned that he did not want his coalition to end up in the role of “naive antelopes”. GERB leader Boyko

Borisov countered that he does not accept his party serving as “sacrificial lambs”. Political zoology was supplemented with botany: for Kiril Petkov, there was a risk that the cabinet would be a “fig leaf” for GERB. DB co-chairman Hristo Ivanov preferred a milder expression: “screen”. This is a government that, even in its first days, freely discussed how it would fall from power. Prime Minister Denkov has twice hinted that he is ready to resign. PP-DB came up with seven conditions for GERB, which, if not met, would lead to the withdrawal of their support for their own cabinet. Borisov, in his turn, mentioned as a matter of course that there would be no rotation - i.e. the cabinet would not last more than nine months. In short, the destabilising potential of the cabinet is embedded in its very foundation.

It would certainly appear that efforts to legitimise the government are founded on the promise of constitutional reform. At least in the statements of the PP-DB, the changes in the Constitution are described as a triple necessity - to have a parliament and a government, to have a dialogue with all parties, and to have a view to a greater cause than the relations between the governing partners. However, the commission on constitutional issues created for the purpose is running idle. Not only are those in power unable to agree on members of the commission (in particular, Delyan Peevski from MRF), but they still have not introduced a constitutional project, in the name of which they are looking for a broad majority. The decision to “restart” the commission, with only “experts” and not “political figures” being involved in it, is unusual. The constitution is, after all, the highest possible expression of political will. For this reason the statement that politicians should not be involved in the development and adoption of constitutional changes is extremely unconvincing. Moreover, the reform discussion brought to the fore specific ideas such as the abolition of the institution of the Chief Prosecutor and even the abolition of caretaker governments. The categorical assessments of lawyers that these are changes within the competence of the Grand National Assembly only, reinforces the feeling of chaos and improvisations regarding the basic law.

The majority officially accept as their priorities the judicial reform and the budget for 2023. It has already become clear that the first of these still has no clear outlines. However, the budget situation is also complicated. It was initially announced that the budget was committed to be tabled almost immediately after the cabinet took office. It was then postponed until the end of July. However, Minister of Finance Vasilev shared the key parameters of his project – 3% deficit, 1.8% GDP growth, 7.8% inflation. Criticism immediately followed about the realism of the revenue in question. More specifically, the media, parties and experts accused Vassilev of trying to artificially inflate revenues through accounting manipulations with the dividends of state-owned companies and accounting for the funds under the Recovery and Sustainability Plan, for which there are no guarantees that they will be received. “Vazrazhdane” (“Revival”), BSP and “There is Such a People” (“Ima Takuv Narod” – ITN) dismissed the budget as, respectively, “rose-tinted” (i.e. impractically optimistic), “anti-social” (i.e. freezing incomes) and “papery” (i.e. offering solutions only on paper). GERB refrained from preliminary assessments and called on Vassilev to personally present the project to them. In the absence of a unified majority, the most diverse requests for budgetary corrections can be expected.

Tensions and scandals have surrounded the work of the majority since its first day. The focus of the controversy is primarily staffing issues. The lack of agreement between GERB-UDF and PP-DB leads to the strange situation that three months after the parliamentary elections, most committees in the National Assembly still do not have permanent chairpersons. GERB-UDF constantly accuse PP-DB of intending to appoint their own people “without exception” and “everywhere”. Such an open clash occurred on the subject of the heads of the so-called regulators – the Bulgarian National Bank, the Audit Chamber and the National Health Insurance Fund. No sustainable solutions have been found, and in response to the criticism by GERB, PP-DB raise the counter-accusation that GERB are violating the government contract and are looking for “hidden” and “floating” majorities with MRF and “Vazrazhdane”. A few additional more striking examples can also be given. The first job of Finance Minister Vasilev was to appoint as chief of the National Revenue Agency his close friend Rumen Spetsov, who headed this agency in Vasilev’s previous term as well and received a great deal of criticism for his work. The appointment of Spetsov still happened, but Vassilev’s proposal to send Violeta Laurer, wife of PP-DB MP and former minister Daniel Laurer, to the Board of Directors of the European Investment Bank, was withdrawn after a scandal, and not without the participation of GERB.

An unconventional case was also created around the Bulgarian nomination for European Commissioner

after the resignation of Maria Gabriel. Signals from Brussels pointed to a preference for a woman, so avoiding upsetting the cross-party balance in the Commission, which requires the candidate to belong to the family of the European People’s Party. Of the ruling majority, only GERB-UDF belong to this family. Nevertheless, PP-DB hastened to raise the candidacy of the above-mentioned Daniel Laurer. Then it became clear that GERB also had their own nominee, Iliana Ivanova, who is a former MEP and member of the European Court of Auditors. To avoid confrontation, the government submitted both applications. This put Bulgaria in the uncomfortable position of having the European Commission determine the final Bulgarian proposal, rather than the country itself. As could be expected, Brussels ruled in favour of Ivanova, who has not yet had hearings in the European Parliament.

The topic of the first steps of the government and the majority will not be fully covered unless we also broach the subject of the “image of the enemy”. And here there is a certain ambiguity. The cabinet took power with the clear intention of openly distancing itself from President Radev and presenting itself as an alternative to him. In this direction came the accusations against Radev that he had sabotaged the government by suggesting to the deputy ministers in the caretaker cabinet and to the regional governors that they submit their resignations. One can hardly speak of sabotage, because these positions are political, not administrative, and are vacated after the end of each cabinet. Nothing would prevent the Prime Minister from re-appointing those Deputy Ministers and Regional Governors who would agree to stay. But the message that without “Radev cadres” there is destabilisation of the state, does not correspond with the main message of an alternative to the caretaker cabinet.

In parallel with this, requests were made for an “audit” of the activities of the caretaker cabinets. This is a process that requires some time, but at least at this stage it does not provoke dramatic revelations. The cabinet, in its third week, reoriented itself towards another “image of the enemy” in the face of the party “Vazrazhdane”. A scandalous and inadmissible statement by the leader of the party Kostadin Kostadinov gave rise to a special press conference of Prime Minister Denkov, at which he, in the presence of the ministers of internal affairs and justice, practically directly accused “Vazrazhdane” of neo-fascism. An investigation by the prosecutor’s office has also been launched. The delicate nature of the situation is that the charge of neo-fascism uttered from such a high rostrum is unprecedented and would only make sense if followed by specific institutional action.

**The President.** The head of state does not need to advertise his critical or outright oppositional attitude

towards the new government. The media and public opinion by definition perceive him as the main opponent of the majority if only by virtue of his statement before the formation of the cabinet that Denkov's mandate was "discredited". This is probably the reason why Rumen Radev limited his statements on the subject. These statements could also be to his detriment, because they encourage consolidation of the highly fragmented majority on an anti-presidential basis.

The issue of Radev's political behaviour remains open. The intention of those in power, but especially of PP-DB, is clearly to limit his actions as much as they can. The decision not to allow him to attend the meeting in Vilnius fits into the ambition to demonstrate his international isolation, but also to impose barriers for his influence in foreign policy and affairs of security. In his interview with the Brussels publication "Politico", Kiril Petkov from PP-DB confirmed the plan to reform the security services, which would remove them from the control of the President, and that in the name of limiting Russian influence in Bulgaria. Rumours have emerged that in the new budget, transfers to the presidential institution will be drastically cut, so as to make the initiatives and trips of the head of state almost financially impossible. Against this background, Radev is subject to constant criticism in two directions - the traditional one, that he serves Russian interests in Bulgaria, and the newly emerging one, that he is in cahoots with hitherto chief prosecutor, Ivan Geshev.

The powers of the president have indeed been limited, despite all warnings of an imaginary "presidential republic." These powers inevitably put Radev at a disadvantage in the tension with the executive branch. That is why the plot with the hypothesis of a future "network of mayors", which, according to rumours, Radev is trying to organise as a basis for his party is curious. At this stage, the proximity of possible mayoral candidates to Radev cannot be confirmed. But one should not rule out that some of the potential contenders for local government might look to the President for support in their competition with the representatives of the active parties.

**The prosecutor's office.** For the first time in the country's democratic history, a chief prosecutor was removed during his term. The expectations of some commentators for a long battle with an unknown outcome between the incumbent Ivan Geshev and the parliamentary parties did not come to fruition. Geshev lost the vote in the Supreme Judicial Council (SJC) and left the judiciary. His threats of dramatic

revelations, which rang out almost every day in the last few weeks, first in Bulgaria, and then even in the building of the European Parliament, did not materialise either. The SJC released Geshev for "discrediting the judiciary". The occasion was the qualification "political garbage" used by Geshev in addressing the people's representatives. The SJC dropped the other charge – that Geshev had manipulated the investigation into the alleged assassination attempt against himself – to ease the proceedings. In fact, intentionally or unintentionally, this gives a political chance to Geshev, who will now be able to claim that he was removed not because of violations of the law, but because he "told the truth" about politicians. There is a great deal of speculation that the former Chief Prosecutor will establish his own political party. He himself quite obviously hinted at it in his last public statement. The political profile of such a party, if it is created, is also logical - conservative, moderately nationalist, and fiercely anti-elitist. Another issue is the potential of the party, which, at least for now, does not seem too great.

The SJC very quickly elected an acting chief prosecutor. This is Geshev's previous deputy, Borislav Sarafov, who was the first in the prosecution to turn against his superior after the assassination attempt. A procedure for selecting the holder of the post has also been launched, which should be completed in the autumn. However, the actions of the SJC met with the disapproval of the main parliamentary forces, among them PP-DB. PP-DB are the initiators of the declaration of the National Assembly, in which, together with GERB-UDF and MRF, they call to halt the procedure for the new election of the chief prosecutor. PP-DB asked Sarafov to resign, and Justice Minister Atanas Slavov, also from PP-DB, challenged his election as acting chief prosecutor in court. The publicly disclosed reasons for the attack on the prosecutor's office can be reduced to two: first, the thesis that the SJC has an expired mandate and does not have the legitimacy to elect a new chief prosecutor; and secondly, the accusation that Sarafov is the "new Geshev" and actually maintains the status quo in the state prosecution. The political parties mentioned emphasise that a new chief prosecutor should be elected either after changes to the Constitution or after the election of a new composition of the Supreme Judicial Council. Both options, however, are likely to promise Sarafov a long stay in charge of the prosecution. Constitutional changes are unlikely to happen in the next few months, and the fragmentation in the National Assembly will probably make it quite difficult to elect SJC members from the parliamentary quota.



## 3

## THE CONDITION OF THE PARTY SYSTEM

**GERB-UDF** Boyko Borisov's party became part of the government majority in the specific role of "ruling opposition". It is an indisputable fact that Borisov made every effort to reach such a configuration, including at the cost of concessions to PP-DB, which many of his supporters deemed excessive. It is this concession that now becomes part of Borisov's obvious strategy to regain positions by weakening and discrediting their partner in PP-DB. GERB constantly emphasise that they practically do not participate in the government, except for the ministerial post of Maria Gabriel, and complain about the staffing ambitions of PP-DB. There is a continuous campaign against the coalition partner with the motto "They only have 63 MPs, but they want everything". Thus, the false impression is created that GERBs have no influence on the policies of the cabinet, although in many cases it is evident at the level of the "second echelon of power". The fight for the standing committees in the National Assembly and for the regulators is only now starting to unfurl, as the image account for the scandals and tensions seems to favour PP-DB. Borisov deliberately allowed his close deputy and former minister Delyan Dobrev to vote "against" the election of the government, thereby opening up space for him to criticise and expose the actions of PP-DB on a daily basis. At the same time, GERB effectively adopted the technology of "floating majorities", voting together with MRF and "Vazrazhdane" and against PP-DB on a number of topics. All the prerequisites are present for avoidance of political responsibility in combination with the actual consumption of power.

There was an opinion that Borisov would be a silent letter in the majority due to fear of the prosecution. However, this was quickly proved to be erroneous. Not only was the chief prosecutor Ivan Geshev, the main initiator of the attack against Borisov, removed, but also the immunity of Borisov himself as a representative of the people was reliably protected. GERB's serious experience in the parliamentary game allows the co-rulers to outplay PP-DB with ease. Regardless of everything, the fundamental question of GERB actually ruling as a leading force has not yet been resolved. It also has a very specific dimension due to

the sentiments of the party clientele, which are concerned not only about their role in national power, but also about their presence in local government in light of the forthcoming elections. Thus we arrive at the dilemma facing Borisov: to focus on the final discrediting of his own government, respectively in order to overthrow it, or to encourage the atmosphere of scandals until the gradual erosion of the partner in power. In any case, it can be argued that GERB are in the strong position, and PP-DB really look isolated and set in a downward trend.

**"We Continue the Change (Produlzhavame Pro-mianata) - Democratic Bulgaria" (PP-DB).** The entry of PP-DB into a general government majority with GERB was inevitably felt as a blow to the legitimacy of the coalition, which had founded all its messages on the negation of GERB. Sociological surveys predictably register a drop in electoral support for PP-DB. The decline is not great, but it may be a harbinger of future processes of decay. It is not at all accidental that DB initially refused any personal participation in the cabinet, and then, due to tactical considerations related to the priority importance of judicial reform, took only the Ministry of Justice for themselves. It is as if the coalition has two faces: PP, directly and ambitiously involved in governance, and DB, dedicated to the "grand" constitutional problems. The internal contradictions in PP are also not to be underestimated. For the second time after the time of the "Kiril Petkov" cabinet, the impression is given of a separate circle around Assen Vasilev and Daniel Lorer, who strives to monopolise the economic and staffing policy, and of the active role of Lena Borislavova, who speaks and negotiates without a public institutional quality on behalf of the government and practises the behaviour of a "shadow prime minister".

PP-DB promote the judicial reform as their cause, but they never managed to achieve hegemony in the public discourse on the subject. Their vague ideas about the Constitution leave them in the shadow of the far more categorical MRF. And the practice of resorting to ultimatums on most topics betrays political helplessness rather than self-confidence in power. We can

judge for ourselves - in three weeks there have been calls for the MRF MP Delyan Peevski to leave the constitutional commission, a call for GERB to fulfill seven conditions for keeping the cabinet and a call for the acting chief prosecutor Borislav Sarafov to resign. The results are not encouraging. The knowledge that electoral support is in decline reduces the credibility of threats that they may quit the cabinet.

The imminent local elections are another case that puts the coalition to the test. Until recently, it seemed that fatigue and disillusionment with GERB made electoral successes for PP-DB in leading cities, including the capital, almost inevitable. This confidence has been shaken. The message of PP-DB that they want to end the "GERB model" in the municipalities does not sound convincing from the position of GERB's partner in power. In order to shift the focus from the difficulties of today to the chances of tomorrow, PP-DB have in fact launched the campaign for the local elections, officially nominating a candidate for mayor of Sofia in the person of businessman Vasil Terziev. The positive signal from the nomination is that all other contenders, and especially the leader of "Save Sofia" Boris Bonev, agreed to support Terziev. There are at least three negative signs. First, the elitist orientation of Terziev, who speaks for and on behalf of "successful" people. It is true that a significant part of the PP-DB electorate has a similar self-awareness, but this could close the paths to the much-needed electoral peripheries. Second, the pedigree of Terziev, where influential figures from the communist State Security appear and thus undermine the lustrational pathos of the coalition. Of course, no one bears responsibility for their relatives, but in this case it is more about the political hypocrisy of DB, who only six months ago refused to support Nikolay Gabrovski, nominated by GERB for Prime Minister, precisely because of his "red" pedigree. And thirdly, there is the decision to nominate for a second term the mayor of the "Izgreve" region in the capital, the former member of BSP, Delyan Georgiev. Probably dictated by a desire to cast a "wink to the left", this move generated great dissatisfaction in the circles of the coalition. Not so long ago, they were forced to accept BSP MP Yavor Bozhankov as their representative due to his anti-Russian statements. Now they are forced to accept as their representative a mayor from BSP, popular for his pro-Russian speeches and his meetings with the Russian ambassador Eleonora Mitrofanova. The complex picture of compromises in the Sofia campaign is a symptom of future problems.

One should not rule out the possibility that the analysis of mutually reinforcing negative trends will push PP-DB to more radical actions to control the power resources of the government. The media, have begun to recall Assen Vassilev's statement from the leaked recording of a meeting of the leadership of the PP that

control over the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the security services should be taken within a short time, so as to facilitate the chances of electoral success. It is still difficult to predict in which direction PP-DB will look for a way out of the growing political impasse.

**"Vazrazhdane" ("Revival").** The radicalisation of the party in recent weeks is alarming. The rhetoric of "Vazrazhdane" unreservedly promotes the division of the people (represented only by them and by no one else!) - the American embassy (controlling all other parties, the media and civil society, without exception). Calls for violence are escalating, laced with transparent hints of extermination and concentration camps for opponents. Rhetoric in some cases almost came close to practice - as, for example, in the attempts of supporters of "Vazrazhdane" to use physical force to stop the screenings in Sofia and Varna of a film they defined as paedophilic. The leader Kostadinov's expression "ugly scum" proved to be emblematic, provoking enormous indignation. This expression also has a geopolitical context, as it is used to address those who rejoice in a failed riot against Russian President Vladimir Putin. The clear location along the Russia-USA axis shapes the clash of "Vazrazhdane" most of all with the so-called "democratic community" of PP-DB. But apart from being geopolitical, the clash is quite deliberately also geographical - "Vazrazhdane" are the first party in decades to challenge the monopoly of the "urban right wing" on the protests and processions in the centre of Sofia. A logical consequence of all this is the growing media discussion about the need to ban "Vazrazhdane" as a "fascist party".

It is clear that "Vazrazhdane" are very reliant on their anti-euro referendum, which all parties prefer to keep silent, circumvent, and in some cases try to postpone institutionally. Radicalisation is a tool with which "Vazrazhdane" want to force others to come to terms with their presence.

***The Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF).***

The party did not achieve their goal stated before the elections, and repeated after them - official participation in power - but they seem determined to gain the necessary influence on the path of constitutional reform. MRF skilfully use their long-standing negative image in Bulgarian society to their advantage. In the vote of the Denkov cabinet, two prominent representatives of MRF - the leader Mustafa Karadayi and the businessman Delyan Peevski - supported the government. Even this alone was enough to sow the seed of the impression that there was some kind of agreement with MRF. Thereafter, the talks of PP-DB about changes in the Constitution had the effect of showing the irreplaceability of MRF. The greatest ambition of DB, to legitimise the cabinet through the constitutional cause, was purely and simply privatised by MRF, who, unlike DB and their coalition, have a ready proj-

ect for constitutional changes, and also demonstrate that without Delyan Peevski nothing could come to pass. For the co-chairman of DB Hristo Ivanov, a similar situation has befallen him for the second time after 2015, when he again raised the issue of changes to the Constitution, again MRF and Peevski took up the topic, and finally imposed a result that led to the resignation of Ivanov as Minister of Justice.

**Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP).** The party are developing their behaviour along the lines of their traditional already fierce criticism in all directions. However, the accents are curious. The most convincing is the criticism against the often helpless and hypocritical functioning of the government. BSP with good reason noted the “end of change” that occurred with the coalition between GERB and PP-DB, but also noted the existence of two governments - the official one, of Denkov, and the hidden one, of GERB, MRF and “Vazrazhdane”. It is no surprise that there is criticism against President Radev and the recent caretaker cabinet. Korneliya Ninova’s party use every occasion, and often do so without occasion, to accuse the caretaker cabinet of corruption, of dubious actions, of financial chaos, and even go so far as to denounce public regulators for not including negative evaluations of the caretaker cabinet in their reports. No other political power is so obsessed with their dissatisfaction with the head of state and his former Council of Ministers. But thirdly, an acute criticism of the party “Vazrazhdane” suddenly began to appear. Until very recently, Ninova had called on the socialists to participate in the “Vazrazhdane” referendum petition, and longer ago she held joint rallies with Kostadin Kostadinov. Suddenly, the chairperson of BSP accused “Vazrazhdane” of “severe, extremist and somewhat fascist manifestations” and began to herald a rapid loss of public trust in “Vazrazhdane” due to their alleged collaboration with GERB.

BSP is currently also the party with the most positive attitude towards the former chief prosecutor Ivan Geshev. In the past months, BSP alone refused to vote on the mechanism for investigating the chief prosecutor, and also refused to negotiate a government with GERB hours after Geshev publicly declared himself to be against Boyko Borisov. GERB ironically identified

Ninova as “Geshev’s assistant”. If we leave aside the political rhetoric, the main theses of Ninova and her party entourage on the subject can be summarised as follows: Geshev should have started investigating Borisov earlier; the Chief Prosecutor’s investigation mechanism, introduced by the Minister of Justice Krum Zarkov, has “laundered the mafia”; Geshev was illegally removed from office; the overthrow of Geshev has given Boyko Borisov a new political chance; the government should not allow itself to remove chief prosecutors; operation “Clean Hands” will go ahead “with or without Geshev”. As can be seen, Ninova even indirectly advises Geshev about what he should have done. In the conflict between Geshev and Borisov, she takes a clear side, and at the same time - strangely for a lawyer - insists that Borisov should “prove his innocence”. The detail with Operation Clean Hands, which often appears in BSP messages, deserves attention. It is possible that this hints at future intentions of Ninova’s team for active intervention in the field of fighting injustice and corruption, in the same spirit and with the same theses that characterised Geshev’s statements after his removal from office.

July saw the three-month deadline for signing a referendum of BSP against the so-called gender education in schools. It is unclear whether the legally required signatures will be gathered. A negative indication is the gradual dropping of the topic from the agenda of the party. However, the ambition to compete with “Vazrazhdane” with regard to nationalism and conservatism is clear. This alone explains the campaign against Kostadinov’s party. BSP do not seem to be in good condition for the local elections either, because the facts show a distancing and even a loss of trust from a considerable number of former socialist mayors. The way forward with the current leadership continues to be a downward path.

**“There is Such a People” (“Ima Takuv Narod” - ITN).** Slavi Trifonov’s party at this stage maintains the classic behaviour of a political broker. After failing to enter the government, ITN defined themselves as an opposition party, drawing public dividends from their critical comments on the actions of the majority, but at the same time they are ready to join various “floating majorities” according to their interest.

## 4

## MAIN CONCLUSIONS AND FORECASTS

The new regular government in Bulgaria has created expectations for a revision of foreign policy in the direction of more active support for Ukraine. To some extent, these expectations have been confirmed. Official messages are more categorical than in the previous year. However, the actual results should not be overestimated. First, it turns out that Bulgaria has so far helped Ukraine quite considerably, and secondly, it turns out that the country does not have the resources and capacity to help much more. Sofia's attitude towards Skopje remains pending for now. The government has avoided making a more serious commitment yet, possibly because it believes that the standards established by President Radev and his cabinet enjoy public approval and that changing them would cause damage to their image. It is also possible that the attitude of those in power towards North Macedonia depends on their attitude towards the security services, which recently reported illegal transmission of classified information to Skopje.

The choosing of the Denkov cabinet did not put an end to the political instability. On the contrary, it continues not only in the form of daily scandals and contradictions between the partners in power, but also in the form of widespread hypotheses about an imminent resignation of the cabinet. At this stage, it seems unlikely that GERB-UDF or PP-DB will consider it in their interest to topple the government. Polls after the formation of the new executive branch do not give rise to incentives to seek a new majority or new elections. Mutual blackmail and discrediting are likely to remain a permanent feature of this partnership, with Boyko Borisov's party clearly predominating in the respective practices. Local elections in October will create a political picture that could already motivate reassessments. The planned rotation for March 2024, as noted in the previous edition of Political Barometer, could prove to be a suitable occasion for early elections at the same time as the European vote in May. For all this, however, before November of this year it is too early to speak of this.

The judicial reform is another political stumbling block laden with many unknowns, even if only because the

content of the concept is not specified. From a higher legitimacy of the current majority, this reform can become a triumph of the so-called status quo. The efforts of the caretaker cabinet, and in particular of the Minister of Justice Krum Zarkov, led to a clear dilemma for the situation in the judicial system - a first step towards change to guarantee the rule of law, or the risk of personal rearrangement to please just the same elites. With their unreasonably high ambitions for rearranging the constitutional model of separation of powers, however, those in power, and especially those from PP-DB, risk dooming the first option to failure and opening the door for the second.

The draft budget will understandably become the subject of a parliamentary clash. There is a danger that the second reading might result in a veritable sea of "floating majorities" that would rearrange beyond recognition the initial parameters of the draft. But the greater danger lies in the very philosophy of the budget, which is indeed very pro-business oriented and would effectively freeze the social sector. It is as if the political forces are paying no attention to the deteriorating social situation in the country. The floods in June demonstrated the helplessness of a number of social systems. July 1st marked the raising of electricity and heating prices across the country, along with toll taxes and a number of other services. Temporary tax relief and other concessions introduced in view of the Covid-19 pandemic and the inflationary crisis are gradually being phased out. A right-wing government with a broad right-wing majority is increasingly evident in Bulgaria. The alternative to this in the face of the Socialist Party is apparently helpless to stop or at least limit this trend. The lack of trust in BSP under the leadership of Korneliya Ninova is an opportunity for big business and a long-term problem for the more vulnerable and poor sections of Bulgarian society.

Instead of a left-wing alternative, a far-right alternative seems to be emerging. The radicalisation of "Vazrazhdane", while they are possibly pursuing opportunistic tactical goals, creates a false sense of an outlet for social tension. Thanks to "Vazrazhdane", social

tensions can be predicted to rise in the coming weeks and months. The referendum on the euro and the discussion on banning the party will mobilise the agen-

da. Precisely because it is weak, the government will seek enemies to consolidate itself, and those enemies will willingly exploit the opportunity given to them.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## ABOUT THIS STUDY

FES Bulgaria has been publishing the „Polit-Barometer“ since 2000, analyzing current and long-term political processes and identifying trends in Bulgarian politics with a special focus on the political parties as democratic actors. In a situation where

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The trends of the political crisis in Bulgaria are continuing, despite the formation of a regular cabinet.



Those in power are trying to legitimise themselves with a constitutional reform without clear content.



The campaign for the local elections has actually already started.

Further information on the topic can be found here:  
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