

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

POLIT-BAROMETER

Year 24 Issue 2
February 1st – March 6th

Boris Popivanov



Government rotation is turning out to be a complex process that will probably defy expectations of ease and speed.



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1

THE DYNAMICS OF FOREIGN POLICY

The international activity of those in power. The Bulgarian government held perhaps the most intensive month of diplomatic contacts since it was established 9 months ago.

Something of key importance, traditionally, is the **American vector**. The results so far are contradictory. Undoubtedly, the agreement signed with the USA on the construction of new reactors at the Kozloduy nuclear power plant is of great importance. However, questions about the price and the contractors are causing tension in parliamentary and expert circles. The parties that support the government have for many years opposed the construction of a nuclear power plant in Belene on the premise that the cost would be unprofitably high. The financial sums that are now being discussed in connection with the new blocks in Kozloduy appear to be even higher. This has already created a discussion in the National Assembly, but continuations can also be predicted. Along with this, the case with the fate of spent nuclear fuel seems unresolved. The problem is serious enough, and it is quite possible that it will be exploited politically by the opposition as early as during the coming months. Bilateral contacts between Bulgaria and the USA are indeed a priority and go beyond the economic sphere. For Prime Minister Nikolay Denkov, it is important to legitimise his own political role precisely on the path of cooperation with Washington. In this regard, Denkov's failed visit to the USA is an indicator of failure. Widely advertised since the beginning of January, it was fiercely attacked by participants in the majority GERB-UDF and the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) as superfluous.

After it became clear that summits were not foreseen, Denkov was forced to decline the trip with the unconvincing pretext that there are protests of farmers in Bulgaria and he should not be absent from the country. It is known that GERB-UDF and MRF share the foreign policy priorities of Denkov and his formation "We Continue the Change (Produlzhavame Proimianata) – Democratic Bulgaria" (PP-DB). Therefore, one cannot speak of a discrepancy in politics, but of actions towards a personal discreditation of the Prime Minister, and this on the eve of the expected rotation

in power, when Denkov is to give up his post to Foreign Minister Mariya Gabriel. However, on the American line Denkov was able to receive some compensation two weeks later, in Munich, at the traditional security conference, when he and Gabriel met with U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken.

The **Ukrainian direction** is related to that of America, but also produces contradictory results. At first glance, the dynamics are in an upward direction. In just one month, three Bulgarian official delegations visited Ukraine – that of the National Assembly, led by its President Rosen Zhelyazkov, that of Prime Minister Denkov and that of Deputy Speaker of Parliament Rositsa Kirova. Ukraine was the subject of the meetings of Denkov and Gabriel in Munich, Brussels and Paris. In Kiev Denkov even announced that the signing of a bilateral security agreement with Ukraine was being discussed. Later, however, the Prime Minister had to deny to the Bulgarian Parliament that the agreement entailed sending Bulgarian armed forces to Ukraine. Denkov had to repeat his excuses after French President Emmanuel Macron's announcement that NATO might become embroiled in the Ukrainian conflict. Some tension was also triggered by the scandal over the supply of Bulgarian armoured carriers to Ukraine – a commitment Sofia has not been able to fulfill in more than four months, despite the bombastic declarations. This was also a cause for another clash within the ruling majority. GERB-UDF and MRF directly demanded the replacement of Defence Minister Todor Tagarev, considered the strongest guarantor of Bulgaria's Euro-Atlantic policy in the government. The Ukrainian development has turned the perspective of the Bulgarian political process. At the beginning of this term, it was suggested that PP-DB were the leading force of Euro-Atlanticism, and that GERB-UDF and MRF followed them under coercion. Today, PP-DB must defend themselves daily against accusations of ineffective or insufficient Euro-Atlanticism.

In line with these trends, Foreign Minister Mariya Gabriel has emerged as **the central figure of Bulgarian foreign policy**. While Prime Minister Denkov wants to capitalise for the needs of his public

image personal meetings with foreign leaders, Gabriel creates the impression of a performer of more strategically oriented political behaviour. It should be emphasised that the highest-ranking political visit to Bulgaria of the past month, that of British Foreign Minister David Cameron, came about at the invitation of Gabriel. In recent weeks, she has been trying, primarily, to consolidate Bulgaria's new energy policy. Gabriel's meetings in February with leading representatives of Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Azerbaijan, dedicated to energy, are indicative. Secondly, Gabriel is extremely active in the Balkan direction. It is difficult to point out a period in recent Bulgarian histo-

ry in which bilateral contacts and visits with Croatia, Romania, Greece, Montenegro, Slovenia and Albania were organised in such a short time. The officially announced topics have been varied, but security always figures among them. Hence, thirdly, assumptions can be made for Gabriel's purposes requiring the preservation of this majority. A series of discussions were held in Sofia with the intention of supporting a future new foreign policy strategy of Bulgaria. And in April, again in Sofia, a major international conference on security in the Black Sea region is being prepared. Bulgaria's place in the new phase of global policy tensions is likely to start to be clarified there.

2

INSTITUTIONS AND THE PUBLIC AGENDA

The **majority in a clash over the rotation**. The acute contradictions between the participants in the majority GERB-UDF, PP-DB and MRF have occupied the major part of the agenda of Bulgarian politics. Expectations were exactly that. It is common practice for an agreement to be preceded by an emotional escalation that creates a sense of insolubility and decay. Accordingly, all three partners announced that they were not worried about early elections, but in the name of Bulgaria it was better to avoid them. There were allegations of serious political disagreements from the three places, but even the most scrupulous observers did not understand exactly what these disagreements were. In contrast to this, the confrontation for personal positions in government and public regulators became visible to all. At no time did anyone question the leading consensus of the majority: a Euro-Atlantic political line combined with a "continuation of constitutional changes" for reforms in security services and the judiciary. No strategic economic vision was formulated by anyone; in fact, economic disputes between partners always boiled down to questions about the efficiency or potential for corruption of a given project (nuclear reactors, oil refinery, motorways, etc.), but not about the perspective of the country.

In the end, the rotation in power expected by everyone turned out to be the centre of the following problems: (1) the political initiative in the majority; (2) the role of MRF in the same majority; and (3) the personal balance between the partners. Gradually, these problems seem to have found (at least temporary) solutions.

PP-DB made another attempt to keep the political initiative for themselves by issuing a memorandum to the partners from GERB, where it was proposed that they unite around common priorities and divide the positions of power fifty-fifty. The retreat of PP-DB is obvious: even now they formally control almost the entire government, and they are already ready to split it. Along with this, the memorandum pursues two more goals: to keep alive the compromised thesis that the power in Bulgaria is led jointly and equally by Nikolay Denkov and Maria Gabriel; and to leave MRF

out of the picture. The fierce criticism of GERB and MRF against the memorandum showed that PP-DB no longer had the resources to determine the agenda and direction of the administration.

Just two days after the memorandum, Lena Borislavova, considered very close to the co-chairman of PP Kiril Petkov, specified in an interview that the memorandum was only a proposal for a conversation, that it could be replaced by another document and that everything was subject to further discussions. This de facto admission of failure left the ball in GERB's court. After a short but intense media campaign portraying the PP-DB offer as an unprincipled attempt to share posts, GERB came up with a draft coalition agreement, essentially also an attempt to share posts. The differences are that it is no longer about another 9 months of government before a possible second rotation, but about a government with a Prime Minister from GERB for a much longer period. Moreover, in an almost authoritarian manner GERB reserve the right to veto the choice of PP-DB as ministers. From this point on, PP-DB were left to protest that it was too early for a coalition agreement and that some pressing issues first had to be resolved. GERB quite unequivocally have the initiative.

The memorandum of PP-DB awkwardly and quietly tried to keep MRF out of talks about government. After all that had happened in the last 9 months, in which MRF and personally lawmaker Delyan Peevski took the role of mentor and spokesperson of the cabinet, this was already impossible. MRF are a fully-fledged participant in the policies of the majority without being held accountable by agreements or quotas.

In the initial vision of PP-DB the configuration of power regarding personnel should be divided in a ratio of 50:50. GERB spoke about sharing according to the electoral weight of the parties, which means a higher share for them. Moreover, GERB are making efforts to keep for themselves key positions along with the Prime Minister's chair. This shifts the political balance drastically towards the so-called "powers of the status quo".

The President. The Head of State successfully weathered the powerful attack of MRF MP Delyan Peevski without, for the present, allowing his public image as a principled opponent of the status quo to be damaged. It is difficult to predict whether Peevski's offensive will start again at a suitable moment. However, for this to happen, new and serious revelations of corruption in the presidential apparatus would be needed. Otherwise, Peevski would hardly be able to turn public opinion against Rumen Radev.

Rumours and speculation about the start of a presidential party planned to make its premiere in the European elections are at this stage refuted. Radev, however, was able to establish himself as an informal leader of the undeclared party "March 3rd". His speech at the celebrations for the national holiday, delivered at Shipka Peak, sealed the claim for embodiment of the folk and state historical tradition. Radev increasingly looks like a unifier of conservative and somewhat Russophilic attitudes in Bulgarian society. The GERB competition on Euro-Atlanticism within the ruling majority, as well as the internal conflicts in the opposition Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) and "Vazrazhdane" ("Revival"), almost turn him into a figure without alternative in this area.

The judiciary. Yet another gangland-type murder in Bulgaria has created one of the most spectacular scan-

dals in the judiciary. The victim was Martin Bozhanov, nicknamed the Notary, who was believed to be one of the brokers in the judiciary and a mediator between magistrates and politicians. A series of revelations and mutual accusations after the murder made it extremely difficult to understand the scale of the trade with influence. There are reports of close ties with the Notary to both the former Prosecutor General Ivan Geshev and his current successor Borislav Sarafov. Prominent figures with dubious reputations such as Petyo Petrov - the Euro and Alexey Petrov, killed nearly a year ago, are embroiled. The intervention of political parties is being discussed.

The political aspect of the problem at present can be summarised as follows. First, any claims of a return to the rule of law and of "casting off of the corrupt bottom" with which the current government advertises itself are extremely exaggerated. Secondly, the abundance of directions in which the media interpretation of the murder unfolds is rather confusing and leads nowhere. The likelihood of any more serious penalties for other figures involved is decreasing. Thirdly, a special committee drawn up by parliament to study the circumstances of the Notary is likely to point to an intention to trivialise the case. It seems like the political forces have no interest in a full investigation, despite the inevitable efforts to draw political dividends from PP-DB against GERB and MRF.

3

THE STATE OF THE PARTY SYSTEM

GERB-UDF. The leading political party is gradually becoming the leading party in the political process as well. After 9 months of government of Denkov GERB are the ones who dictate the agenda of the government. GERB strive to be a counterpoint to PP-DB in almost all respects, mainly pursuing two tactics: accusing their partners of their own sins in governing in the past and depriving the partners of their alleged advantages regarding image. A number of completely new examples can be given. Now GERB are launching the idea of a coalition agreement, given that for a long time they were the main opponents of this type of documents and PP-DB have accused them of political insincerity. Now GERB have long been discussing how many unprincipled and corrupt office bearers are in PP-DB (Customs Agency, the State Financial Inspection Agency, the companies for the toll system, etc.), given that for a long time they were the main defendants on these topics and generated protests against themselves. Now GERB insist on the failure of the government in Sofia, given that the capital was ruled for 18 years by GERB, and the current mayor, without a majority of his own, has only been in power for 3 months.

The way in which GERB, with the help of representatives of the BSP and other parties, took over the key positions in the Sofia Municipal Council and left the winner PP-DB with the leadership of only two committees, is indicative of the party's new approach to power. GERB's ambition is no longer to eliminate PP-DB, but only to marginalise and burden them with responsibility for all government decisions both nationally and locally. GERB deliberately waited for the crisis with the election of the President of the Sofia Municipal Council to take months to instill a sense of helplessness of PP-DB. In order to maintain the presidency in the Council, PP-DB sacrificed – perhaps not too reluctantly – their original candidate Boris Bonev. However, when it came to the election of the second candidate of PP-DB, Tsvetomir Petrov, the allocation of the government seats in committees was quickly decided in favour of GERB and BSP. Thus, PP-DB formally have both a mayor and a chairperson of the Municipal Council, but not the capacity to conduct their own policy in the capital. This is reminiscent of

trends in national institutions. Some key locations are provided to PP-BB to be held accountable, but at the same time GERB are effectively vetoing which figures of PP-BD are able to occupy these places and which ones are not. For various reasons, the big battle is for two ministries, where GERB does not want to allow compromises with the partners – that of finance (due to the allocation of resources) and that of foreign affairs (because of international legitimacy). The outcome of this battle and the additional arrangements around it will also depend on the profile of the possible future configuration of government.

“We Continue the change (Produlzhavame Promianata) – Democratic Bulgaria” (PP-DB). The trend towards the collapse of the coalition has continued steadily for another month. The failure of the memorandum with which PP-DB tried to impose their will on GERB and MRF clearly shows how their political weight is judged. Obviously, GERB and MRF are convinced that PP-DB are afraid of early elections and are ready to do anything to avoid them. The decision of PP-DB Prime Minister Nikolay Denkov to hand in the resignation of the cabinet to be voted on on March 6th reveals the hope that they can exert pressure on their partners to negotiate quickly. If this is true, it is a political mistake. GERB and MRF are able to leave the Denkov cabinet in a state of indefinite resignation. Thus, they will only strengthen the public perception of the helplessness of PP-DB and gain even greater concessions. Thus, they will only strengthen the public perception of the helplessness of PP-DB and gain even greater concessions. The failure in the Sofia Municipal Council, when PP-DB lost control of the municipality in the hands of the more experienced parties, is a warning of what may happen to them in longer government negotiations. PP-DB is turning out to be a type of formation that can only get their way under powerful electoral domination and with unambiguous external support. When the last two conditions are missing, there are obvious organisational and political weaknesses.

It is not inconsequential that GERB announced their draft coalition agreement at a national meeting of the entire party. This way of doing things had the task

of instilling monolithicity. PP-DB, on the other hand, are not able to instill such unity. Their memorandum was presented by the co-chair of PP Kiril Petkov to journalists after a meeting of the parliamentary group. This approach alone, along with the absence of Prime Minister Denkov, did not reveal excessive seriousness. The tensions in PD-DB coalition have not been overcome. The Green Movement in DB has practically distanced itself from the general structure, and part of it, headed by MP and former co-chair Vladislav Panev, is actively lobbying for its new club "Acceleration", combining the beginnings of another party with aggressive neoliberal rhetoric. The leader of "Da Bulgaria" ("Yes, Bulgaria") Hristo Ivanov suffered a heavy blow with the statement of MRF MP Delyan Peevski that the former was "sitting on his lap". Ivanov's verbose explanations failed to dispel the impression that this phase of his political career, which began with the "heroic" disembarkation in the maritime residence of MRF near Rosenets in 2020, ends in the embrace of MRF as their novice. Separately, and in light of the approaching European elections, competition between PP and DB is growing. A leaked sociological study, carried out on the needs of the coalition, brings to light the unsubstantiated disputes between them as to whether they should appear together or separately, and what would be more advantageous in an electoral sense. The PP-DB partners in the majority report these disagreements and exploit them as much as they can. The difference is that MRF rather welcome PP and concentrate their fierce criticism against DB, while GERB praise DB and constantly accuse PP of amateurism and incompetence. But the pressure does not just come from the outside. In PP itself, confrontational plots are periodically ignited, killing also on the political surface. For example, Kiril Petkov has twice publicly set about thwarting the ambition of his partner Denkov to become foreign minister – the first time with the statement that Denkov "loved traveling" and therefore wanted to take over this ministry, and later with the clarification that the post of Foreign Minister for Denkov is not a "red line" in the negotiations for the future cabinet.

PP-DB face the real danger of losing, along with the post of Prime Minister post, actual control of the government.

"Vazrazhdane" ("Revival"). The party has suffered three consecutive failures. First, the Constitutional Court rejected the appeal protesting against the decision of the National Assembly not to launch the referendum initiated by "Vazrazhdane" on membership of the euro area. Thus, their most ambitious initiative so far has failed without positive consequences. Second, for the first year "Vazrazhdane" failed to capitalise in their favour, as defenders of the Bulgarian tradition and history, the celebrations of the national holiday March 3rd on Shipka Peak. The main figure there was

President Radev. And thirdly, the election of chairman and commissions in the Sofia Municipal Council provoked a new split in the party. Not only were the municipal councillors who voted for the new configuration in the capital dismissed, but so were the MPs who supported them. One of them, Nikolay Drenchev, was considered a key figure in "Vazrazhdane". It is not impossible for him to seek his political future in another project. As a result of everything purely arithmetical "Vazrazhdane" relinquished their third position in the parliament to MRF.

Again, like after the local elections, analysts point to the setting of the sun for "Vazrazhdane", and again they are probably wrong. They were wrong then, because "Vazrazhdane" is a party that can only propose national policy and has no real approach to problems below the national level. Now they may be wrong because "Vazrazhdane" continue to associate almost entirely with their leader, and the other party representatives do not emit their own political light, so their secession will influence the image of the party in the mass consciousness.

Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF). MRF held a national conference at which, as expected, they elected as co-chairs Delyan Peevski and Dzhevdet Chakarov. The strategy is outlined in broad terms. MRF will not seek to join a coalition in the current parliament, but will strengthen their positions, including outside their traditional bastions, so that they can become an unsurpassed force in the future. This means, at least for now, that early parliamentary elections should be avoided.

The situation in MRF can be described as enigmatic not only for internal but also for external observers. In the address of the honorary leader of the party Ahmed Dogan to the conference, in particular, the call for Peevski and Chakarov to be voted for together, en bloc, for "unity" to be shown. It is plausible enough to suppose that Dogan was worried that Peevski might get fewer votes than Chakarov. The indications that Peevski is not unambiguously accepted by the traditional MRF voters to this day are numerous. With his long political biography and the peculiarities of his character, Chakarov obviously does not have the potential to be a future sole leader. Whether Peevski would establish himself over time as such, leaving Chakarov in his shadow, is a question whose answer we will begin to learn in the coming months. Then it will also be understood whether Peevski's confrontational style, creating enemies on all political meridians, is ultimately effective.

It is worth noting that the national conference of MRF was honored with a special welcome from Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Tensions between the authorities in Ankara and MRF have already been

overcome. It was not so long ago that Peevski was banned from entering Turkey. At the same time, Ankara will probably not give up looking for options for exercising a stronger and decisive influence on the policy of MRF. Indicative in this sense was the visit of Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan to Bulgaria. He preferred to meet first with former MRF Chairman Mustafa Karadayi and only after that with the couple Peevski-Chakarov. The desire for information about the processes in MRF directly “from the source” is undeniable, but it is hardly just a matter of information.

The **Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP)**. The party is one of the first to officially put on their agenda the preparations for the European elections. At the same time, precisely these are the elections which BSP approach with less conviction than anybody else – they do not dare to take a firm anti-European position, but systematically reject all pro-European figures and messages. What platform and what format will be selected remain unresolved issues. BSP hinted that they would look for a “wide left-centre-patriotic block” without specifying the participants. This is not a new idea. For the first time it was launched by party chair Korneliya Ninova after the local elections in November. Then Ninova even called for a partnership with IMRO and they received harsh criticism from the Party of European Socialists. The conservative-nationalist inclination of Ninova has long been known. It would not be surprising if it were sealed by the presence of conservatives and nationalists in the European list of BSP. The attention of the party is focused on yet another round of Ninova’s struggle against her internal party opponents. This round was pre-drawn after the remarkable success of the Sofia structure of the party, led by Ivan Takov, in the local elections. Ninova could not allow an alternative centre of influence in BSP. The reason for the new political purge was the

decision of the Sofia councillors from BSP to support the election of a new chairman and management of committees in the Municipal Council, including candidates from PP-DB and GERB. The national leadership of BSP publicly distanced itself from its advisers and launched a campaign to discredit them with calls for party punishments. The expression “party punishment” Ninova-style is usually synonymous with exclusion. However, after a significant number of the BSP regional structures in Sofia issued declarations in support of the municipal organisation, Ninova changed her approach. Her proposal for accounting and election meetings in Sofia and Burgas formally suits the style of the chairperson to resort to the “voice of the people” at decisive moments. However, this means a blockage of the activities of the organisation in the capital and the inability of its leaders to hold their current positions. Ivan Takov has no option but to turn against Ninova, although it is not yet clear what strategy of action he will choose – internal opposition or a new party.

The result can easily be predicted – continued electoral collapse of BSP. The successive elimination of bright figures in the party has increasingly fuelled the hypotheses that Korneliya Ninova is aiming for a professional victory in the autumn in the election of a new party leader, especially since, according to the opinions of her critics, she does not have the statutory right to run, but is looking for options to circumvent the statute.

“There is such a people” (“Ima Takuv Narod” - ITN). The formation of Slavi Trifonov does not produce vivid news, but participates in the political process as the only party that has steered clear of internal scandals and contradictions. Perhaps this also explains their relatively stable, albeit low performance in the polls.

4

MAIN CONCLUSIONS AND FORECASTS

The world and Europe are facing a new escalation of tensions. The Russia-West conflict is perceived at many levels of Bulgarian politics, but at this stage it does not seem to be producing a preference of Bulgaria's Euro-Atlantic partners towards one party or another. It can be assumed that anticipation from the outside is rather a stable governance with clear international priorities and commitments. The analysis shows that the EU and the US are reluctant to support PP-DB unambiguously in their struggle for government positions with GERB and MRF. The allegations that GERB and MRF are very frightened because of Boyko Borisov's role in the Russian project "Turkish Stream" and because of the sanctions under the global Magnitsky act come from Bulgarian sources and cannot, at least at the moment, be recognised by an American or European addressee.

In parallel with the confrontation with Russia, the EU is already actively preparing for the June European elections. Bulgarian parties are lagging behind the schedule committed to the problem of government rotation. Paradoxically, GERB and MRF have received the clearest and most visible support from European partners over the last 3-4 years. The uncertainty with the rotation inevitably supports the 2 in 1 election scenario: early parliamentary elections together with those for the European parliament. Such a development is possible, although less likely. None of the three formations in the government, GERB, PP-DB and MRF, have any interest in or desire for embarking upon an election campaign at exactly such a moment. Of course, however, unexpected events cannot be excluded, which might tilt the scales in the direction of a collapse of the majority.

The resignation of the Denkov cabinet brings a nine-month period of decline of the PP-DB to an end. From being a political force that symbolised the hope of

change against the status quo and embodied Bulgaria's Euro-Atlantic path, PP-DB has gradually become an unstable subject with undermined moral and political identity and a shrinking field of political autonomy. If there are no early elections after this resignation, the fate of the future government will be in the hands of GERB and MRF. The role of the President, who should consult with the political forces and hand over an exploratory mandate to form a cabinet, should not be underestimated. In other words, the President is in a favourable position to determine the pace of the political process, just as GERB and MRF are likely to determine its content.

On the day of the resignation of the Denkov cabinet, it seems as if for a while, perhaps a few weeks, a new cabinet will not be chosen. Then the chances of a cabinet by agreement between GERB and PP-DB and support of MRF with Prime Minister Mariya Gabriel are most pronounced. But the figure of the premiere and the party configuration only highlight the tip of the government iceberg. What the quotas and what personalities in the future government will be, if such is elected, cannot yet be predicted.

The political situation in the capital is important, not only because Sofia is the largest city in Bulgaria. Sofia in this case also offers the terrain of the greatest political dynamics because since the first months of the term the Municipal Council has been filled with people who are excluded from their parties or do not have the trust of their national leadership. These are not only (former) advisers from "Vazrazhdane" or the BSP group, but even "Save Sofia" by Boris Bonev, distanced from the decision-making mechanisms of PP-DB. On the eve of the European elections, and also in principle, it is as if Sofia has the brightest chances of giving the basis of political rearrangement.

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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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