

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

POLIT-BAROMETER

Year 24 Issue 7
July - August

Boris Popivanov



The pre-election situation in Bulgaria brings to the fore the problem with the registration of parties and coalitions.



There are clear symptoms of a crisis of the party system, most clearly represented by the unprecedentedly violent internal conflict in MRF.



The unification of the left wing has a chance only if it quickly overcomes the post-Ninova phase and the agenda of the right wing.

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

POLIT-BAROMETER

Year 24 Issue 7
July - August

Contents

1.	THE DYNAMICS OF FOREIGN POLICY	2
2.	INSTITUTIONS AND THE AGENDA OF SOCIETY	3
3.	THE STATE OF THE PARTY SYSTEM	6
4.	MAIN CONCLUSIONS AND FORECASTS	11

1

THE DYNAMICS OF FOREIGN POLICY

International tension and the war in Ukraine.

The Bulgarian position regarding the Russia-West conflict remains unchanged, albeit on the periphery of the discussion on future scenarios. No significant news from Sofia was produced. A Bulgarian delegation, led by Prime Minister Dimitar Glavchev, took part in the NATO Summit in Washington and supported the general course towards strengthening the Alliance. The only more specific information that came from there was Bulgaria's decision to contribute a monetary sum to the armament fund of Ukraine. Against this background, Glavchev's effort to shroud his visit in secrecy, bypassing the topic of possible Bulgarian commitments to the National Assembly (NA), as well as the desire to break the tradition of the President attending these forums, do not seem completely understandable. A possible explanation is related rather to attempts to monopolise foreign policy in the hands of the executive branch.

At almost the same time, President Rumen Radev took part in the summit of the European Political Community, held in Great Britain. The warning of the head of state that a continuation of the war would lead to a deficit of human potential had a traditional ring to it. The event gained popularity in Bulgaria, due to a photograph of Radev with the skeptics of the anti-Russian policy - Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic, his Azerbaijani counterpart Ilham Aliyev and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban. Probably devoted to ongoing energy projects, the dialogue of the four is somewhat incapable of calling into question the behaviour of official Sofia.

The case with the Bulgarian European Commissioner. The elections for the European Parliament im-

mediately put the national nominations for members of the European Commission on the agenda. Although she did not have the power to demand it, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen called on member states to nominate one man and one woman each so that the final composition of the body is fully gender-balanced. The recommendation was not observed by most countries, with the exception of Bulgaria, which did nominate a man and a woman - former Minister of Foreign Affairs Ekaterina Zaharieva and former Minister of Environment and Water Julian Popov. The procedure itself does not show a particularly high level of responsibility towards the country's European presence. First, there was no evidence that Bulgarian diplomacy had held talks about the possible portfolio in the Commission, nor had it sought agreement with other countries. Various portfolios were discussed in the media as rumours, but not as actual offers. Second, Glavchev's government initially refused to make the nominations, justifying its temporary status, but then went ahead with it alone, ignoring parliament, the argument being the lack of time. Although parliament was ignored, it was the parliamentary parties that were invited to make their proposals. Third, the selection of Zaharieva and Popov was made without any publicly announced criteria. It could be assumed that the motive for the decision was the orientation towards the two largest parliamentary groups, GERB-UDF (for Zaharieva) and PP-DB (for Popov), but everything remains in the realm of conjecture. In political terms, it is good to take into account that GERB and their leader Boyko Borisov have always maintained a close relationship with the European Commission, and Borisov has prioritised his personal contacts with the presidents of the Commission. The nomination of Ekaterina Zaharieva gains new light in this context.

2

INSTITUTIONS AND THE AGENDA OF SOCIETY

Parliament. The 50th National Assembly was unable to produce a government and will end its work in two months, with the election of the next parliament scheduled for October 27th. The work of the current legislature can be summarised with several main trends. First, it is the parliament with the greatest speed and scale of dissolution of parliamentary groups. In a relatively short time, the second group, that of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF), lost more than half of its MPs, and the smallest group, that of “Velichie” (“Greatness”), was officially disbanded. In less than two months, there are already 39 independent people’s representatives in the National Assembly, but their number may continue to grow. This is an alarming indicator of the stability of the party system and of the severe crisis processes in individual parties. Second, the 50th National Assembly adopted the tradition of using the parliamentary rostrum for campaign messages and not so much for legislative and administrative decisions. As in previous cases, the most sensitive part of parliamentary time is occupied by listening to ministers, with the resulting opportunity for MPs to make assessments, formulate criticisms and launch promises. The statements of the leaders on the sidelines had far more serious political significance than the debates and votes in the hall. The large number of declarations and positions of the parliamentary groups pursuing the same goals is also impressive. Rather, the bills entering the plenary hall served the task of asserting a political identity and appealing to public support. Such examples are the law to introduce the euro and the law to stop LGBT propaganda in school, but also the unvoted bill on the registration of foreign agents. Strategic problems of the economy and the budget hardly reached the attention of the legislative body. Third, the traditional confrontational tone and taste for scandals persisted, but could not disguise the growing propensity for cooperation among the leading formations. Unlike previous parliaments, readiness for talks and consultations with other parliamentary groups has become a practice. The mandates to form a government were the brightest occasion, but not the only one. Everyone’s striving to disprove suspicions of isolation is visible. Also missing is the usual rhetoric about “red lines”

in inter-party contacts, popular after 2021. The general awareness of a crisis of the party system is clearly also producing a higher sense of uncertainty.

The government. The failure of the third mandate to form a regular government put the question of a new cabinet on the agenda. There were expectations that the Constitutional Court would overturn 2023 changes to the basic law narrowing the choice of caretaker prime minister to a few officials and giving those officials the power to choose their own ministers. However, the court were split in the vote (6 against 6) and maintained the current position.

Subsequent events seemed to confirm the inadequacy of constitutional reform. The circle of potential candidate prime ministers, as before, has been reduced to a minimum, because some of the figures described in the Constitution have legal obstacles to their taking office, others have resigned, and yet others refuse to participate. The example of the Chairperson of the National Assembly, Raya Nazaryan, is symptomatic. The constitutional text implies that persons occupying institutional positions must act on the presumption that at some point they may have to head a caretaker government. In April, when Dimitar Glavchev’s first caretaker cabinet was announced, all the persons mentioned had intervened before the changes in the Constitution, and in this sense their refusal to head the government would be understandable. But Nazaryan was elected to head the National Assembly after the constitutional changes. In other words, she should know that by agreeing to become chairperson she would automatically enter a list of potential prime ministers. That is why her refusal to be nominated for Prime Minister does not show much respect for the spirit of the Constitution.

We also witnessed the first-ever failure of a candidate for caretaker Prime Minister. Gorica Grancharova-Kozhareva, nominated by the President, did not comply with Radev’s warning about the composition of a caretaker cabinet, and ended her mandate without results. She was not trusted either by the head of state or elsewhere, and proved with her own case

the institutional unconvincingness of the new type of cabinet. There is one more example of a mismatch between constitutional assumptions and political behaviour. Both Grancharova-Kozhareva and Glavchev, who was nominated for the second time after her, took it for granted that the election of caretaker ministers should almost exclusively concentrate on the previous caretaker ministers. Over the course of nearly two weeks, the public watched as candidates for caretaker Prime Minister paid visits to all the current caretaker ministers and asked them if they would agree to stay on. In such a way, a practice has been created to reduce not only the circle of potential Prime Ministers, but also the circle of potential ministers to a minimum.

The lack of clear political accountability for the caretaker government could easily turn it into an arena for the clash of political influences that disregard institutional hierarchy. This is not just a theory. It has been seen how individual ministers (Minister of the Interior Kalin Stoyanov, but also others) conduct their own independent policy and participate in political clashes practically without the sanction of the Prime Minister. The assessment can be made that Glavchev's first cabinet did not emerge from the shadow of suspicions of heavy political dependencies. Staff appointments in the executive branch, including the replacement of deputy ministers and regional governors, can easily be interpreted as convenient for certain political forces. The start of Glavchev's second cabinet does not promise anything different.

The President. The head of state was once again faced with the double task of demonstrating political strength in parallel with distancing himself from the entire political elite. So far, he has coped with this task rather successfully. Two examples can be cited. First, he has positioned himself as the main opponent of MRF co-chair Delyan Peevski outside his party. It is true that Peevski, with his daily statements against Radev, helps to a great degree to construct such an image, but in any case it remains clear for all to see. Moreover, Peevski's attacks effectively ascribe more political weight to Radev than he actually has, but also neutralise the usual accusations against the President of pro-Russian or pro-conservative behaviour from liberal circles. In short, a complete rejection of Radev is not possible, because that would mean agreement with Peevski. Secondly, the President's refusal to accept Gorica Grancharova-Kozhareva's cabinet project marked Radev's second institutional victory on the new terrain of his limited powers. After Dimitar Glavchev was forced 4 months ago to withdraw the nomination of Daniel Mitov for Foreign Minister, now Kalin Stoyanov's nomination for Interior Minister has also been withdrawn.

At the same time, efforts to disavow the President in the system of state institutions continue from all

sides. Caretaker governments are increasingly actively looking for ways to circumvent the requirements for shared powers with the President by focusing on "temporary" appointments. Radev rejected the proposal that the prominent anti-Russian politician of the past Nikolay Nenchev should become ambassador to Kiev, but Nenchev was not withdrawn, still being sent to Kiev as "temporary manager" of the Bulgarian diplomatic mission. The same is happening with the candidates for the chief secretary of the Ministry of the Interior, who again take this position "temporarily", without a presidential decree.

Public opinion. The summer season led to a strengthening of both conservative and conspiratorial attitudes in Bulgarian society. Some of them have gained visible dominance in forums and social networks.

The adopted changes to the Preschool and School Education Act, popularised as the Anti-LGBT Propaganda Act, created conditions for severe social division, concentrated in the poles of support and rejection. The law itself, proposed by the party "Vazrazhdane" ("Revival"), claims to fight against homosexual propaganda in schools, for which there is no particular data. Apart from attacking a fictional and non-existent problem, the law flagrantly contradicts all world and European regulations in this direction, as well as the spirit and principles of the Bulgarian Constitution. Prohibitions are being introduced to discuss scientific matter in the educational process and openly discriminatory divisions are pushed through. What is more, a mechanism is created - and indeed already working! - for presenting opponents of discrimination as supporters of LGBT propaganda. The law has undoubted support, not only among the main political parties and their media spokespeople, but also in broad sections of Bulgarian society, armed with the argument that it represents resistance against outside interests, determined to ruin the Bulgarian nation by attacking its children. Perhaps some of the reasons can be sought deeper, in the dissatisfaction with the transition and scepticism towards foreign innovations, and also in the anxiety of the demographic crisis, which has escalated into fears for the future of national traditions and identity. The political use of these attitudes is in itself very troubling. In addition to support, the law also encountered massive opposition at different levels: initially, in the positions of non-governmental organisations and individual citizens, then in protest activity demanding a veto by the president, and then in a widely shared critical petition by teachers and the 900 plus academic researchers who subscribe to it. The petition of the teachers was brutally used by the proponents of the law as an occasion for a "witch hunt" and threats against specific teachers. The President's decision to sign the law served to confirm the conservative point of view of the political elite and did not contribute to a decrease in tensions.

The law mentioned can be placed next to other manifestations, especially impressive as an expression of social trends. For example, the Olympic Games in Paris provoked serious tension on many occasions, of which the case of the gender of female boxers stands out. Complaints about the crisis of civilisation allowing "men" to beat "women" in the ring have circulated. Findings about the "Satanism" of the West (specifically with this term) are part of the arsenal of the Russian propaganda machine and are far from dominant, but they are already taking root in Bulgaria, and not only in circles suspected of pro-Russian sympathies.

We do not at present have the tools to verify the exact dimensions of these trends. It is quite possible that they are not universal to society, but they are by no means isolated, and fit into a longer process. A suitable example is the situation with the medals of the Bulgarian Olympians in Paris. Some of these contestants turned out not to be "ethnic Bulgarians", but people of other origins. The question was that of which will prevail in the mass consciousness - the Bulgarian flag or ethnicity. It could be argued that the flag and pride in Bulgaria's achievements prevailed, but the presence of hitherto unknown disputes and

discussions before is indicative of the dynamics in people's sentiment.

Against this background, the current nationally representative survey of the sociological agency "Alpha Research", published in the media with optimistic headlines, should be mentioned. It shows that 64% of Bulgarians want to live in a liberal democracy, only 25% support the cause of Russian President Vladimir Putin in Ukraine, and supporters of Bulgarian membership in NATO outnumber its opponents. The data are certainly accurate, but interpretations could vary. Pro-Russian attitudes do not coincide with pro-conservative ones, but the former undoubtedly feed the latter. It is necessary to take into account not only the support of Bulgarian citizens for the EU and NATO, but also the existence of a perceived value distance towards these unions.

Finally, one of the most serious topics on the public agenda in July and August, the drought that occurred in many regions and settlements of Bulgaria, met with a partial reaction from the state institutions, but almost no political mobilisation. This is part of the real social agenda of Bulgarians, almost ignored by the political parties or noted only with a perfunctory statement.

3

THE STATE OF THE PARTY SYSTEM

GERB-UDF. The largest political force in the 50th Parliament did not want to form a government and did everything possible to prevent one from being formed. The possible explanation has been commented on many times: the worries of the leader Boyko Borisov that he would turn out to be a hostage of foreign interests in power. However, what is the guarantee that there would be no such danger in the next National Assembly on one hand, or, on the other hand, that GERB would have equally favourable chances? Borisov's intention to postpone the issue of power until the period after October 27th, and perhaps further into the future, is risky. This intent does not harm him for now. First, unlike usual, public attention is not concentrated on GERB as the culprit of yet more pre-term elections, and secondly, GERB turn out to be one of the few political forces without internal divisions and upheavals.

It is noteworthy that Borisov has monopolised the appearances of the entire party. Quite a few figures from GERB, who over the years have established themselves as their public spokespeople, hardly appear in the media. What the leader practices is called "condescension" and is somewhat reminiscent of former communist president Todor Zhivkov's behaviour in response to pressure from Gorbachev's Soviet Union. Borisov has been accused more than once of supporting and realising the interests of the co-chairman of MRF Delyan Peevski, and he has always denied it, although not convincingly. It is not possible to give a correct assessment of whether and to what extent there is truth in the allegations of dependence on Peevski, but the fact is that Borisov does what is necessary not to anger Peevski during the internal conflict in MRF. Also, it is Borisov's practice to wait for two camps to finish their clash in order to side with the winners. In this case, this is a really important task, especially against the background of the information that in a number of places around the country, the clientele of GERB are quite closely connected with the clientele of MRF. Here is an illustration of the tactic of waiting and condescension: in one of Borisov's very few political statements in August concerned the case with Interior Minister Kalin Stoyanov, considered

close to Peevski. Borisov surprisingly demanded that Stoyanov step down and that another Interior Minister be found – "to calm the tension". At first glance, this is a gesture towards Peevski's opponents. At the same time, however, this is also a sign to Peevski himself that he will not gain anything from persistent support for Stoyanov, and he could achieve his goals with another Interior Minister.

It would appear that Borisov's line is based on several pillars. First, a return to the role of Bulgarian partner of the West, lost in recent years. But the scandals and failures of the new contender for the role, "We Continue the Change ("Produlzhavame Promianata") - Democratic Bulgaria" (PP-DB), also give a new chance for a turnaround. GERB were at the heart of both the newly accepted law to adopt the euro and the new deal for the purchase of ammunition. Borisov hopes that it is he who will put forward the future Bulgarian European Commissioner. Second, a stronger negotiating position vis-à-vis GERB's preferred partners - MRF and PP-DB. This could happen if the crises in both formations (public and spectacular in MRF, discreet but serious in PP-DB) further weaken them in the coming months. And thirdly, arising from the first two, a new exploitation of "pro-European" legitimacy for a future government through a "red line" with the party "Vazrazhdane" ("Revival"). It is not by chance that Borisov at one moment calls the leader of "Vazrazhdane" Kostadin Kostadinov "the new Peevski", as an architect of parliamentary combinations, and then repeats that he will not enter into conversations with him, or will withdraw from conversations in which he participates. The optimal option for Borisov would be a strong performance of "Vazrazhdane" in the elections, which would give reasons for a "sanitary cordon" against Kostadinov and facilitate a more comfortable majority for Borisov.

"We Continue the Change ("Produlzhavame Promianata") - Democratic Bulgaria" (PP-DB). For the coalition, the summer season turned out to be a time of unrealised opportunities. The failure of GERB's first mandate to form a government and the crisis in MRF seemed to open a field for PP-DB to claim

the rightness of their messages. After the collapse of the "Denkov" cabinet, they began constantly to say that GERB could not form a cabinet, and MRF are a mafia. It seems that everything said was confirmed in practice in a very short period of time. GERB really did not find an alternative to the rule of the 49th Parliament, and the honorary chairman of MRF Ahmed Dogan himself publicly admitted to the mafia actions of his own party. A new situation came about, which PP-DB did not understand. Their decision to be a staunch opposition in the 50th Parliament was initially appropriate. Although not very original, their point that the third mandate to form a government should be thought of as national, without a dominant party, and lead to a "technical government", modelled on turn-of-the-century Italy, was also acceptable. Just that the collapse of the MRF parliamentary group suddenly made PP-DB the second parliamentary force. The second cabinet mandate went to them. However, they showed that they did not know what to do with it. The new situation demanded more responsibility. Opposition-type behaviour was no longer operational. However, PP-DB asked President Radev to give them two months (!) to decide whether they would propose a government, during which Parliament was expected to vote on the proposals in their legislative programme. Such an offer, unaccompanied by an offer of joint participation in power, and even without a promise of a later assumption of responsibility in power, would not be accepted by anyone. The President did not accept it either. Then PP-DB returned the mandate unfulfilled, which demonstrated that they were not ready to govern against the background of the governmental failure of GERB and MRF, which they loudly propagated.

PP-DB, when their turn came, did not present any ideas for overcoming the political crisis. Their refusal to take responsibility for the inadequate constitutional changes could be somewhat understood. It is more difficult to understand their effort to present the new constitutional machinery of caretaker government as working. For this purpose, three complex conspiracies were born, one after the other, in the circles of the PP-DB, which were later half-recognised by the leaders of the coalition. The idea in all three cases was similar – to gather a majority, if necessary, and with certain legislative changes, to elect a new holder of one of the institutions that are on the list for potential caretaker Prime Ministers. Respectively, this was about the National Assembly (to remove Raya Nazaryan), the ombudsman (to elect a new one) and the vice-chairperson's post in the Audit Office (also to elect a new one). All this set the conditions for cooperation from the other parliamentary parties, but also the President's agreement to immediately nominate the newly elected opponent of GERB and MRF for the post of Prime Minister. Neither made sense. The other parliamentary parties had no reason to serve the staffing ambi-

tions of PP-DB, and the last thing the President was going to do was to join a conspiracy with some parties against other parties, and thus blow up his own legitimacy as an alternative to the whole political elite.

To these and other topics (e.g. LGBT propaganda), PP-DB were late in reacting, under pressure from the media or their activists, and did not broadcast clear and unequivocal messages. In short, they failed to impose their agenda in Bulgarian politics. It follows that the crisis processes in the coalition itself should also be taken into account. Dissatisfaction against the media improvisations of former Prime Minister Kiril Petkov has been brewing for a long time. The party "Yes, Bulgaria" and "We Continue the Change" did not find a common language for preliminary elections in the coalition for the lists of MPs. The warnings of "Yes, Bulgaria" that they would not accept party quotas, but would insist on an assessment of the real social and political weight of the candidates, were interpreted in some media as a signal of the disintegration of PP-DB. This is not very likely at this stage, without being completely out of the question. However, the internal tension in PP-DB will also be a factor in the election campaign from now on - and especially after the day of the elections.

"Vazrazhdane" ("Revival"). In the behaviour of the party, one can see an attempt to break free from political isolation. In recent years, "Vazrazhdane" have insisted that they are the only party that will not compromise with their programme and will participate in government only if it is their own. In five consecutive parliamentary elections, they increased their results and created the impression that such an ambition is ultimately realistic. On June 9th, however, the number of votes was lower for the first time. Probably in order not to alienate his supporters, the leader Kostadin Kostadinov set out to show that he was capable of cooperation, of course, in the name of his goals. "Vazrazhdane" launched the idea of negotiations between the parliamentary parties for a cabinet "without GERB and MRF". In PP-DB circles, the hypothesis was announced that, contrary to their rhetoric, "Vazrazhdane" are preparing for future government with GERB and MRF. All this indicates that Kostadinov's party are increasingly integrated into the "parliamentary game" and there is no longer a "sanitary cordon" against them.

The most vivid illustration of the new situation is the law against LGBT propaganda in school. Remarkably, "Vazrazhdane" gathered unprecedented support and a majority for their bill. This would not have been possible without the votes of GERB and MRF, who have otherwise officially always refrained from supporting anti-liberal and somewhat anti-European legislation. The conservative consensus formed is important news, the development of which will have to be monitored in the next parliament as well. Its reproduction in the

51st National Assembly may already lead to a drastic reassessment of Bulgaria's entire European path.

However, the flip side of the coin should not be overlooked. Radicalism remains a trademark of "Vazrazhdane" and is capable of alienating, at least at this stage, the party's conservative-thinking partners in parliament and society. The lists of teachers who are opposed to the law, published by local structures of "Vazrazhdane" in the form of lists of supporters of LGBT propaganda, are not very popular so far. An interesting test will be the reaction of other parties and public opinion to the proposed but still not passed "Vazrazhdane" bill against foreign agents. It is advertised as a tool for exposure, although in fact it stipulates very clear severe sanctions against anyone who has received the equivalent of at least BGN 1,000 in income "from abroad" in the course of a year. Whether this "hidden" side of the bill will gain widespread approval is an open question.

Something that also deserves to be mentioned is the international activity of the party. "Vazrazhdane" noisily advertise their contacts with partners from Russia and China. A delegation led by Kostadinov himself even went to a forum of the BRICS organisation held in Moscow, and a visit to China is also in the process of preparation. The suggestion to the electorate of real support from the "Eastern powers" is unmistakable, despite the apparently weak interest of Moscow and Beijing in these requests. On a more pragmatic level, one should note the active participation of "Vazrazhdane" in the process of forming a new radical right-wing group in the European Parliament called "Europe of Sovereign Nations". The inclusion of "Alternative for Germany" in this group after the scandal with the neo-Nazi messages of this formation effectively divides the European radical right space into two - parties that tend to accept positive references to the Nazi past and those that do not. "Vazrazhdane" turn out to belong to the former.

Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF). The party, which have always considered themselves the most stable and monolithic player in Bulgarian politics, are experiencing the worst internal division in their entire history, but also the worst internal conflict for a major party in general. Many times there have been splits in different parties, but for the first time the founder of the party and the most powerful person in it stand against each other, each of them with the support of about half of the MPs from the same party. The division in the local structures of MRF cannot be precisely calculated, but even there we are talking about a powerful and scarcely surmountable influence of each of the two camps.

After the honorary chairman of MRF Ahmed Dogan called on the MPs of the movement to vote against

the decision of the co-chairman Delyan Peevski to support a GERB cabinet with the first mandate, some of the MPs who agreed with Dogan were excluded from the group, and others left of their own accord. In a new address, Dogan demanded the resignation of Peevski and his entourage. Peevski refused to obey. Hardly coincidentally, investigations by authorised bodies against business and political figures close to Dogan were launched, leading to confiscation of property and arrests. Dogan himself was almost openly accused by Peevski of misusing an impressive bank loan. Then Dogan summoned some of the members of the party's highest governing body, the Central Operational Bureau, and declared Peevski and his entourage expelled from MRF. Peevski retorted that this was not a legitimate decision. Almost immediately, Dogan was deprived of his shares in a key enterprise, and the owner of the enterprise demanded that the honorary chairman of MRF immediately leave the residences he occupied in Boyana and Rosenets. Supporters of both camps clashed in Boyana.

The two lines of propaganda that aim to monopolise the minds of voters look like this. Peevski relies on social populism. He exploits the voters' dissatisfaction with the so-called "derebeyi", those wealthy from power under the benevolent gaze of Dogan, local MRF leaders, and focused the attention of the public on the luxury of residences in Boyana and Rosenets, so that ordinary MRF sympathisers could compare it with their own lifestyles. For his part, Dogan tries to reactivate his authority as the creator of MRF, whose word is always last, with the vision that the guarantor of the integrity of the empire is only the "sultan" or "autocrat, and the rebellions of "viziers" or "bol-yars" , however influential they may be, cannot have a future. Of course, both propaganda lines, which we metaphorically label as "anti-derebeyi" and "pro-sultan", have significant flaws. Peevski is probably the last one who can present himself as a moral bulwark against the rich "derebeyi", and Dogan, with his central credit for the rise of Peevski, hardly has the right to show moral outrage.

The normative framework further complicates and intensifies the conflict. The MRF statute provides that the two co-chairmen (Peevski and Dogan loyalist Jevdet Chakarov) represent the party "together and separately". The question remains as to how this will affect the registration of the party for the elections, and later on the registration of the lists. The speed and brutality of the local activists will probably make a big difference. The idea that, in the end, not one MRF party, but two, could participate in the elections is quite seriously argued.

At this stage, it seems that the advantage is on the side of Peevski's camp. He has more resources, not only financial, but also media, and also probably in

the state institutions. On the other hand, Peevski's public image is such that few would vote for his political project out of conviction. The fight for the ethnic Turkish voter is not over. It seems that Peevski believes that the only way to win this fight is to completely discredit Dogan and his camp, so that they lose all authority in the eyes of the people, and business moves away from them, with them being seen as unpromising. The pressure through checks, arrests and evictions from housing points in this direction. There may yet be other revelations related to the people loyal to Dogan, and indeed, why not to himself. The task is difficult because it is about traditions and habits established for many decades, but Dogan will not be able to rely on them alone.

The initial impression that other influential political players are more on Dogan's side out of fear of the rise of Peevski is perhaps premature. It is as if the prevailing view in Bulgarian society is that both antagonists, Dogan and Peevski, are equally harmful and should be left to eliminate each other politically. However, it is considered that no matter how the events develop in the next two months until the elections, it seems out of the question that Peevski will get a similar electoral strength to that of June 9th, and a weaker result will inevitably weaken his potential for pressure to seize power in the state. However, when we are talking about a party with an ethnic base and impressive economic networks, the consequences of the clash can be unpredictable and dangerous for the political system and social peace.

Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP). The key message of BSP after the resignation of Korneliya Ninova is related to a promise to create a truly large left-wing coalition and overcome the downward movement. This line has its own explanation. The differences between the new leadership and Ninova in a number of areas are not so significant. There seems to be continuity in the party's conservative course (as can be seen from the position on the LGBT propaganda bill and other events over the summer). There are attempts to break out of the international isolation of the previous team, as yet somewhat timid (as shown by the rejection of the nomination of the former party leader and president of the European Socialists Sergey Stanishev for European Commissioner, which omitted the only option that the candidacy of BSP could not simply be ignored by the government). However, Atanas Zafirov's team strongly finds Ninova's style of intra-party opposition to be counterproductive.

There is no doubt about the success of the negotiations for a coalition. Almost all parties with a left self-identification are engaged, with the exception of Vanya Grigorova and her "Solidarna Bulgaria", who are probably saving their strength for future political endeavours. Moreover, some of the leaders of these

left parties made concessions not to stand for parliament. This is intended to neutralise criticism that the point of the unification is to guarantee parliamentary seats for a few failed leaders. The leadership of BSP has yet to show whether it can neutralise a far more significant criticism, namely that it forces the party's voters to vote for candidates of formations that have worked on the ground against BSP in recent years, and that can simply make them refuse to vote.

The behaviour of their former leader Korneliya Ninova is emerging as a leading problem for the socialists. The upcoming election campaign requires submission of documents and registration of lists by the legitimate representatives of the parties. Ninova involved the new leadership in a legal dispute as to who currently represents BSP and the coalition - she as the current chairperson or Atanas Zafirov as the temporary incumbent. Ninova's criticism of the leadership for betraying ordinary socialists also escalated. We can imagine the damage to image from the parallel ongoing dispute over who has the right to claim and distribute the party subsidy. It is known that 15 years ago the once mighty Union of Democratic Forces collapsed ingloriously over legal disputes over who was the legitimate president and who was spending the money with what powers. The situation facing BSP is startlingly similar. Experts have even warned that the very participation of the party in the elections is in question. Ninova, who is doing her best to maintain this issue, publicly confirmed the danger and blamed it on the current leadership. It is not easy to state categorically what the interests of the former chairwoman are in this clash. There are speculations that she hopes to regain control of BSP by participating in direct elections, or that she has given up and is helping to destroy the party which can no longer provide her with a political springboard. It seemed more plausible that Ninova exerted pressure in order to be able to guarantee for herself and some of her cronies a presence in the next parliament, and already in a new political situation to clarify her plans. The new leadership sought a solution to this conflict by excluding Ninova and her close associates from BSP. On one hand, this could ease the tension that inevitably arises over the question regarding on whose behalf Ninova speaks. On the other hand, there is also the danger that the exclusion will make Ninova a victim, release her from responsibility for the state of the party and give her a path to other parties where she could claim to represent the "real BSP". The symptoms of a new division are clearly discernible.

The activity of Korneliya Ninova practically preserves the unity of the party leadership, in which the interests of the individual figures hardly coincide. The idea of left-wing unification, strong in itself, could crash with the media image of a left-wing disunity provoked by Ninova. BSP still has no political and ideo-

logical strategy for the future that goes beyond the conflict of different party factions.

“There is Such a People” (“Ima Takuv Narod” - ITN). Slavi Trifonov’s party successfully builds the image of a moderate conservative formation that keeps the doors open to various partnerships and does not share either the over-ambitions of the major parties or their internal tensions. This is particularly evident in the situation with the third mandate to form a government handed over by the President to ITN. Expectations ap-

peared in the media, provoked by the show past of Slavi and his entourage, that “circus performances” were on the cards. On the contrary, ITN tried to hold negotiations with everyone without preconditions and without pompous declarations. The predicted failure of the venture did not harm ITN in any way. Moreover, they are the only ones in the parliament – with the inconsistent position of BSP – to defend the dialogue with the popular President as central to the development of the political process. ITN’s electoral outlook remains rather good.

4

MAIN CONCLUSIONS AND FORECASTS

The failure of the 50th National Assembly to produce a government reinforces the impression of the political crisis in Bulgaria as being permanent. The political debate constantly shifts from regular to caretaker governments, and respectively to the influences on them. Never before has there been such tension over the question of who the participants in a caretaker cabinet would be and whose interests they were protecting. Worryingly, it seems to be easier for political players to seek control of a caretaker cabinet than to take responsibility for a regular government.

The pressure for state institutions (the Constitutional Court, the courts, the Central Election Commission) to become arbiters of political disputes is also increasing. It is also clear that members of these bodies do not want to take responsibility for party conflicts and seek to postpone decisions or fend them off. Regardless of everything, in the election campaign that is now starting, the main problem will probably be the procedure for registering parties and coalitions, and later the registration of lists of MPs. The legitimacy of decisions in favour of one or another registration could provoke new disputes and divisions.

Not only is the crisis of the political system, related to the dysfunction of the regular executive power deepening, but so is the crisis of the party system. Erosion processes are taking place in MRF and BSP. Nor can the stability of the PP-DB coalition be taken for granted. New parties rise and fall at an astonishing speed. The spiral of pre-term parliamentary elections increases the tension in the individual formations and contrib-

utes to making everything seem temporary. The MRF crisis is likely to have the greatest public and political repercussions, because we observe a propensity for extra-political and extra-legal actions, radicalisation of participants and willingness to take risks with unpredictable consequences for the political, economic and ethnic situation. For now, this crisis is still being held outside the ethnic terrain. The favourable scenario would be for it to stay that way.

The summer gave no indication of the emergence of any new major political players who decided to participate in pre-term elections. Rumours that President Rumen Radev is preparing his own political project have been refuted once again. However, Radev's position as an alternative to the entire political elite can hardly have any other logical continuation than such a project in the future. In general, expectations for new political projects are aimed more at the conservative niche, but without the radicalism and anti-Europeanism of "Vazrazhdane".

The left wing in Bulgaria does not dominate the political agenda and remains on its periphery, busy with its internal problems and conflicts. The eight years of leadership of Korneliya Ninova in BSP have unblocked destructive processes that are very hard to overcome. The question is whether the left wing can now carry out the programme as a minimum - to overcome the post-Ninova crisis. Unfortunately, the observation remains that there is not only no social alternative in Bulgarian politics, but also that the hegemonic right-wing politics has almost degraded into conflicts between business networks and oligarchic lobbies.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Boris Popivanov, PhD., is an Associate Professor of Political Science at St. Kliment Ohridski University of Sofia. His research is concentrated in the areas of political ideologies, theory and history of the left, as well as the Bulgarian transition.

IMPRINT

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung | Office Bulgaria
97, Knjaz Boris I St. | 1000 Sofia | Bulgaria

Responsible:
Jacques Paparo | Director, FES Bulgaria
Tel.: +359 2 980 8747 | Fax: +359 2 980 2438
English translation: Keneward Hill
bulgaria.fes.de

Contact:
office@fes.bg

Commercial use of all media, published by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), is not permitted without the written consent of the FES.

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.
bulgaria.fes.de

POLIT-BAROMETER

Year 24 Issue 7
July - August



The pre-election situation in Bulgaria brings to the fore the problem with the registration of parties and coalitions.



There are clear symptoms of a crisis of the party system, most clearly represented by the unprecedentedly violent internal conflict in MRF.



The unification of the left wing has a chance only if it quickly overcomes the post-Ninova phase and the agenda of the right wing.

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