

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

POLIT-BAROMETER

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Bulgaria entered an unprecedented political crisis following the antisystemic, antiparliamentary and destructive behaviour of There Is Such a People (Ima Takuv Narod - ITN).



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POLITICAL SITUATION

Bulgaria entered a period of permanent political crisis after it proved incapable of forming a government following the second consecutive elections in a year, although further efforts are being made with the third mandate given to BSP. This effort will also most probably be unsuccessful and in about two months new elections will be held. The main reason for this unprecedented situation is the antysystemic and destructive behaviour of the winning party – There Is Such a People (Ima Takuv Narod - ITN). This came after retracting the first project of a cabinet with Nikolay Vassilev as Prime Minister, proclaimed even before the official election results were announced. ITN began talks with the other parties except GERB in search of agreement on certain policies. In contradiction with all rules of Parliamentary democracy, the party led by showman Slavi Trifonov stated it will present a cabinet itself and will not negotiate with other parties on specific ministers. Despite numerous comments on the part of analysts and politicians that this approach is illogical and will lead to a deepening of the crisis, rather than find a working solution for forming a government, ITN remained unrelenting and handed back the mandate.

The tone between potential partners was strained after the co-chair of Democratic Bulgaria Hristo Ivanov offered from the Parliamentary tribune to find a spot for the most successful ministers of the caretaker government in the future cabinet: Kiril Petkov (Minister of Economy), Assen Vassilev (Minister of Finance) and Prof. Nikolay Denkov (Minister of Education and Science). ITN reacted sharply and declared that Hristo Ivanov has no right to offer ministers. The chairman of the Parliamentary Group of ITN Toshko Yordanov harshly attacked Kiril Petkov and Assen Vassilev. This attack on the part of ITN coincided with the harsh media attack on behalf of MRF against the two ministers, in which Democratic Bulgaria perceived coordinated actions between the two formations. ITN revealed data that Kiril Petkov has dual citizenship – Bulgarian and Canadian – and therefore does not cover the requirements of being a minister. GERB brought the case to the Constitutional Court. Kiril Petkov stated that he had given up his Canadian citizenship with a declaration certified by a notary public before becoming a minister. He believes that the attack against

him is due to affected business interests, related to the former government and the MRF, following the revelations regarding the Development Bank and the actions of the government regarding companies that benefited from the former government.

ITN offered a government with Plamen Nikolov – currently a member of Parliament from the party – for Prime Minister. Nikolov is not known by the broader public, he has a PhD in philosophy and has worked in business as a representative of an American company for swimming accessories. Most of the ministers in the proposed government were not famous, with no administrative or managerial experience. The most controversial name turned out to be that of Sofia University lecturer and attorney-at-law Peter Iliev, who was nominated for deputy Prime Minister on Security and Minister of Interior. Peter Iliev is an honorary consul of Barbados, a country that until recently was on the EU blacklist, due to its tax legislation. Furthermore, Iliev was accused of plagiarism by a colleague of his from the Sofia University, where he is senior law lecturer. This led to serious reactions on behalf of the so-called protest parties, the potential ITN partners, who declared they will not support a government of people they do not know and for whom there is suspicion as to whether they would be capable of competently executing their duties. BSP also declared that they will not support a government with the participation of Peter Iliev. Despite these attitudes, Trifonov stated that he will not remove Peter Iliev from the government and, expectedly, Democratic Bulgaria and “Rise Up, BG! Here We Come!” announced the position that they will vote against the ITN project for a cabinet presented to the National Assembly. ITN declared that it will not introduce the cabinet for a vote in Parliament and thus the state faced a constitutional crisis. For the first time in Bulgarian history a Prime Minister who had offered a government and had a decree and suggestion to the National Assembly for a vote rejected his mandate. In the end the situation was resolved when, following scandals and arguments between parties, the decision was made to hold a vote, whereby the Parliament found that the mandate to form a government was unsuccessful. Thus, the second mandate was given to the second largest parliamentary group – that

of GERB-UDF, with their candidate for Prime Minister Daniel Mitov returning the mandate on the same day.

President Radev called for dialogue and responsibility on the part of the parties several times. The Head of State expressed the opinion that the state needs a regular government with a clear parliamentary majority. According to him, Bulgaria is facing several challenges and crises that require solutions. He put a lot of effort into achieving dialogue by calling consultations with the chairs of parliamentary groups before presenting the second mandate. The President also called the National Security Consultative Council in an effort for it to become another platform giving the opportunity to parties to gather around a table and communicate. The President called parliamentary parties to urgently update the budget so that the caretaker government could carry out payments related to the measures for combatting the consequences of the pandemic. The caretaker government presented a budget update and some of the proposed calculations were not approved by the parties. Each of the groups introduced its own suggestions. In the end, it is expected that the budget will be updated.

Predictably, President Radev gave the third mandate to form a government to BSP, which came in third at the elections. The Socialist leader Korneliya Ninova stated that they will seek an extra-party person widely renowned by society, around whom it would be easier for parties to unite. She declared that BSP will do everything possible to recover the dialogue with the protest parties but emphasised that GERB and MRF will not be invited to the negotiations. This practically makes forming a government impossible, since There Is Such a People categorically refused to participate in any government with the third mandate.

Thus, the parliamentary elections will most probably be held along with the presidential elections. For the moment two dates are being discussed – November 7th and November 14th. So far President Rumen Radev has no competitor. The other parties have not announced candidates yet, as they were busy in negotiating forming a government. Other than BSP, Radev will rely on the support of There Is Such a People, which was announced by the party leader Slavi Trifonov. Maya Manolova's formation declared its support for the President long ago, and thus Radev will rely on three of the parliamentary parties. Democratic Bulgaria announced that they will have their own candidate. This will probably also be the case for the MRF, which are in open conflict with Radev. GERB are also still waiting before announcing a candidate. Radev has a great chance of winning in the first round, but

this will depend on the voter turnout and whether it will surpass 50%, which is highly unlikely considering people's disappointment with political parties.

The Taliban's seizing power in Afghanistan means Europe will face a new wave of refugees, which will affect Bulgaria as an EU external border. The caretaker government identifies this as an imminent threat to the national security of the state and has enacted a plan to increase forces along the southern border. The partitioning facility along the border with Turkey has been destroyed at multiple spots, which makes crossing the border much easier. Prime Minister Stefan Yanev stated that in some places the wall needs urgent work. The caretaker Minister of Interior Boyko Rashkov confirmed an increase in migration pressure. He said that an increase in persons illegally crossing the state border has been noted since June and that at the end of August this number has reached 100-200 per day. Refugees are caught inside the country as well, trafficked in trucks towards the Serbian border. Boyko Rashkov noted that refugee centres in the country are 80% full, which means that an increase in resources is necessary, as well as opening new centres if need be. The Bulgarian government announced that Bulgaria will welcome up to 70 people from Afghanistan who have worked for the Bulgarian embassy in Kabul or who supported the Bulgarian military contingent to the composition of Allied forces alongside their families. At the end of August, the Minister of Defence stated that up to 700 soldiers from the army will be sent to support the activities of the border police along the borders with Turkey and Greece.

In August Bulgaria entered a fourth COVID wave. At the end of the month cases skyrocketed up to 2000 new cases per day. The reasons for this are people not abiding by the measures in place and the active tourist season at the Black Sea coast, where the fourth wave initially started. Expectations are for the highest levels to be reached following the beginning of the school year at the end of September. The state is seriously lagging behind in terms of vaccination and is last in the EU with only 16% of the population vaccinated with both doses. The caretaker government is being criticised for not finding an effective solution to stimulate vaccination. Although popular persons were tasked with propagating the benefits of vaccination, no ad campaign was made in the media. The death rate remains high, which could be explained with the low percentage of vaccinated people and the high share of persons with chronic diseases in the state. The government is hesitant about adopting stricter measures, due to the opposition of the hotel and restaurant industry, who threatened to protest.

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CONDITION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE PARTY SYSTEM

ITN showed not only antisystemic behaviour, but behaviour aimed against basic principles of parliamentary democracy. ITN showed they have no plan, nor ideas of how to develop the state, nor the expert capacity to govern the state. ITN offered a single-party minority government with only a quarter of the seats in Parliament. Slavi Trifonov announced he will be making no coalitions because it is a “dirty word”. According to his understanding, a coalition is an agreement on positions, not on policies. Trifonov did not appear publicly – neither at the consultations with the President, nor during the discussions with the other Parliamentary parties. His only public appearances were Facebook posts and one interview each over the phone for the Bulgarian National Radio and live for Bulgarian National Television. Many link the lack of publicity to deteriorated health, rumours of which have been spreading for years.

Two main theses were presented as an explanation of ITN’s behaviour. The first is that the initial idea of Slavi Trifonov was to destroy the political system through destructive behaviour in order to give way to a radical change of the model of constitution. The other one is that it is a project of the oligarchy in the state and circles around MRF. The second thesis became especially topical following the parallel attacks from ITN and MRF against the caretaker ministers Kiril Petkov and Assen Vassilev, who damaged the interests of Deljan Peevski and persons related to him. It is difficult to explain how, after ITN invited Kiril Petkov and Assen Vassilev to be ministers in the first suggested government of Nikolay Vassilev, just a week later they were fiercely attacked with discrediting claims, following the course of MRF.

Slavi Trifonov announced that ITN will support President Rumen Radev for a second term. Trifonov motivated this decision with the argument that Radev has made the presidential institution meaningful. Several analysts stated that this support could have the opposite effect and harm the President. Others believe that with this move Trifonov will try to use the reputation of the President to minimise the damage he suffered after turning down the opportunity to form a government with the protest parties and BSP.

Democratic Bulgaria and “Rise Up, BG! Here We Come!” also made mistakes regarding their attitude towards ITN. Following the first election on the 4 of April, they declared their unconditional support for ITN to form a government – without any expectations regarding ministers and positions. This perhaps further boosted Slavi Trifonov’s confidence, and he decided that he could single-handedly suggest a cabinet. After the other two protest parties expressed their suspicion that some of the persons proposed for ministers are not appropriate for the fields they were chosen for, a natural conflict arose. Harsh words were exchanged from the parliamentary rostrum, which blocked the opportunity for having a normal dialogue. Democratic Bulgaria and “Rise Up, BG! Here We Come!” attacked ITN for working behind the scenes with MRF. The two protest formations clearly stated that they will in no way support a government with figures backed by MRF or GERB.

Those who voted for the protest parties are very disappointed, especially with ITN. They achieved good results at the elections, which made it possible to form a solid majority of 138 members of Parliament with the support of BSP and, therefore, a stable government.

Socialists were constructive during the discussions with ITN and put all their efforts into finding the formula for forming a government. Although initially ITN considered BSP among the status quo parties, at the end of the talks between them an agreement was achieved on key priorities for BSP in the social field. The situation drastically changed after ITN refused to remove the controversial Peter Iliev from the proposed government. BSP announced its position that it will not support a government with his participation.

The attacks against GERB and the isolation in which it ended up solidified the party. Recent opinion polls show it is the leading political power following the collapse of ITN. GERB strengthened its criticism against the protest parties, blaming them for pushing the state to chaos. The main person responsible for the chaos according to GERB representatives is President Radev. This will probably also be the party’s

main message at the upcoming elections – especially if they are two in one – both presidential and early parliamentary. GERB have not yet announced their presidential candidate and will most probably do so at the last possible moment, considering the development of the political situation.

MRF continues to be in a political isolation despite the effort of ITN to attract it for the negotiations for forming a government. The leadership and the parliamentary group of the MRF were mainly busy defending the oligarch Delyan Peevski. MRF claims that Democratic Bulgaria and the caretaker government work in the interest of oligarch Ivo Prokopiev.

The leader of MRF Mustafa Karadayi caused a scandal at the meeting of the National Security Consultative Council to the President, called regarding the pandemic and the upcoming migration crisis. Karadayi left the meeting after the Minister of Economy Kiril Petkov was invited to participate. The MRF leader declared he could not be present at a secret meeting with the presence of a “foreign citizen”. A few days later, this was the reason for an exchange of remarks between Karadayi and President Radev during the consultations at the Presidency before presenting the second mandate. This situation shows one thing – an extremely aggravated and tense political situation in the state – a process that will only deepen in the autumn during the election campaign.

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PUBLIC OPINION

At the end of August, the research agency Market Links presented a survey which showed a change in the electoral attitudes compared to the July 11th elections. The most significant drop is observed for "There Is Such a People". Slavi Trifonov's party is currently third with 15.7% of voters. This equals BSP's result, which also gets 15.7%. GERB is the leading political power with 21.6% of voters, the same as in the elections. Democratic Bulgaria comes in second with a result of 16.5%. MRF are fifth with 11%, almost as much as in the elections on the 11 of July. "Rise Up, BG! Here We Come!" get 4.5%

of the voters. The nationalists from Vazrazhdane continue increasing their support and now cross the electoral threshold with 4.3% of voters.

The survey shows an increase of approval regarding the caretaker government, which now reaches 54%. A growth in support is also observed for President Radev – 58%. Trust in the National Assembly is at a record low – 13%, as it was at the end of the term of GERB's government. Trust in the judicial system remains traditionally low – 17%.

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MAIN CONCLUSIONS AND FORECASTS

Bulgaria has entered an unprecedented political crisis. There have indeed been political and parliamentary crises before in the democratic history of the country. However, for the first time, the state is on the verge of a constitutional crisis, following the antisystemic, antiparliamentary and destructive behaviour of "There Is Such a People". Political polarisation in the country has built a wall between the main political parties, which restricts opportunities for dialogue and finding solutions to form a parliamentary majority.

Third Parliamentary elections in slightly over six months push the state to a stalemate and to deepening the political crisis. New elections can reproduce the same picture or make the situation even more fragmented and complicated. People's disappointment will lead to an even lower voter turnout, which could bring surprises at the elections, especially in the environment of an upcoming healthcare crisis and strengthening measures against the pandemic.

ITN will probably end up in the most losing position. Their antisystemic behaviour will probably drive back centrist-oriented and moderate voters, who supported them in the hope that they would carry out what they promised – a change of the previous government model in cooperation with the protest parties.

BSP was among the few parties that tried to be constructive during government formation talks.

Democratic Bulgaria was also consistent in its efforts at finding a working government formula. The formation, however, cannot yet overcome certain ideological taboos with the position that they will not support a government with BSP's mandate. Opinion polls show that Democratic Bulgaria is in an electoral surge and can expect to achieve even greater results at potential early parliamentary elections.

At new elections, GERB will try to restore the periphery of voters that they lost. They will claim that there was foreseeability and stability during their governance.

A potential wave of refugees would be used by nationalists to accumulate party dividends on the fear of people. Vazrazhdane ("Revival") Party was one of the few that improved their results on July 11th. This time it will probably surpass the electoral threshold. The topic of refugees will also be a main tool for political mobilisation for other patriotic formations – IMRO, NFSB, "Volya" and "Ataka".

The situation could radically change with the creation of a new political project related to the widely popular Minister of Economy Kiril Petkov. This will fundamentally change the electoral picture in the state and could be the biggest surprise at the elections.

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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

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