

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

POLIT-BAROMETER

Year 22 Issue 10
November 1st – December 10th

Boris Popivanov



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1

FOREIGN POLICY DYNAMICS

The Schengen Case. As soon as it came to power, the current caretaker government created expectations that a breakthrough was possible in Bulgaria's long-frozen application for membership in the Schengen agreement. Diplomatic activity grew, letters were sent to European leaders, inspections were requested, encouraging signals were circulated from European institutions and leading member states of the European Union. The current Czech presidency of the Council of the European Union has reacted completely favourably to the Bulgarian candidacy. Germany's support has been serious and openly expressed.

When it came down to it, the Netherlands and Austria enforced a veto on Bulgaria's membership in Schengen. To some extent, it looks like a repeat of the situation 12 years ago. Then, as now, Bulgaria and Romania were rejected as a package. However, the situation today is different. First, the Bulgarian institutions managed to mobilise much more serious and open European support (including the once sceptical Germany and France), to such an extent that the Netherlands and Austria seemed isolated and forced to justify their decision. This also found expression in the half-hearted consolations that the matter could be reconsidered very soon. The efforts of President Radev and the acting Minister of Justice - Krum Zarkov, the Minister of

Internal Affairs - Ivan Demerdzhiev, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs - Nikolay Milkov were serious and persistent. Bulgarian MEPs also made an important contribution to placing the problem on the agenda. Second, Bulgaria managed to shift the burden of the problem from the benefits for itself to the benefits of the EU itself from this Schengen expansion. On the whole, any attempt to replace technical criteria post factum with political and other considerations was appropriately rejected. The EU itself faces the debate of how it defends its own rules and how it strengthens its unity in a confrontational geopolitical environment. The problem of Euroscepticism also requires attention. Third, the Schengen failure has polarised Bulgarian politics and become a warped mirror in the debate about the culprits of the political crisis. According to GERB, the chaos of the last two years provoked this result. According to the new parties, the ten years of GERB rule predetermined the same result. The President was also attacked for using a harsh tone towards Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte. Despite the final "no", however, the Schengen initiative should hardly be thought of as a failure. It showed that on the international stage, Bulgaria can be not only a passive observer, but also an active participant with its skills at winning support. And this, to a certain extent, is precisely down to the President and his cabinet.

2

THE INSTITUTIONS AND THE AGENDA OF SOCIETY

The President. The head of state undertook the longest political consultations in Bulgarian history. If until recently consultations took two days or even one, this time they were extended to two months. There were two official reasons, both relatively convincing to the public. The first: that the parties should be given enough time to overcome their emotions and red lines in order to agree on a government. The second: that if this still did not happen, it would be good that the parliament should not be dissolved until January, so that the elections could be held in March, and not in winter.

On the way to realising this plan, embodied in the incredibly slow pace of the political process, the President has made a conscious effort to distance himself from most parties, especially, and most of all, from those who supported him for his second term of office. Radev's sharp criticism provoked legitimately dissatisfied reactions, but not an alternative agenda. The President's ratings are likely to suffer, but his reluctance to associate himself with the ambitions of a single party relieves him of responsibility for the fate of parliament. The two months of consultations do not seem to have improved the chances of a regular cabinet being formed. There are no real negotiations. For this reason Radev can claim a benevolence to which others have been unable to respond.

The tension between the President and the parties still poses significant risks. There is the possibility that Radev's behaviour will be permanently perceived as an expression of rapprochement with GERB and MRF at the expense of the "forces of change", in other words, as a reversal in his overall political image. This could also have negative international repercussions. The partnership between the presidential and legislative institutions can introduce uncertainty into the political system in the long run.

The government. Galab Donev's cabinet is in a special situation as an institution. Unlike the practice where caretaker governments have only two or three weeks of coexistence with parliament, in the

current case the coexistence has turned out to be a long one and necessitated the establishment of certain relationships between the two institutions. These relationships are not simple. For various reasons, the parties in the National Assembly are critical or downright negative about the cabinet. Nevertheless, the proposals of the cabinet have gathered a majority. Galab Donev's line is based on a careful assessment of what is desired and what is possible. Two things follow from this. First, at no time is it forgotten that this is an interim government, under the auspices of the President, and not an independent political player. Hence the decision not to submit a new budget, but only a law to extend the old one. A new budget presupposes the presence of a majority, of whose will to govern the budget is an expression. The absence of such a majority will have severe consequences for the governability of the country, because the parties will edit the budget as they see fit, but the responsibility will lie with the proposer, and the proposer will no longer be in power because they are temporary. Accusations against the cabinet of being anti-social do not receive mass support, including because the impression is created that right now, for the first time since the beginning of the year, the rate of inflation has been brought under control. And secondly, the cabinet's proposals are mostly concentrated in the area of the Recovery and Resilience Plan. These are both European requirements and conditions for granting funds. That is why in most cases the parties are forced to adapt to the legislative programme of the Council of Ministers, despite their desire to cover it up with noisy declarations and accusations.

The Chief Prosecutor. The media activity of the Chief Prosecutor Ivan Geshev, which continues at an unabated pace, is already into its third month. Geshev is increasingly beginning to look like a political player, who imposes an agenda on the parties and the parliament. The niche he has chosen is the one for which he is most attacked - the rule of law. The dilemma formulated by Geshev is simple: "rule of law or totalitarianism". According to this scheme, various centres

in Bulgaria are seeking to establish unlimited power by trampling on the institutions, and only the institution of the Chief Prosecutor is able to stop them. This should also explain the demands for his resignation, defined, for no apparent reason, as “Trotskyism”.

Accepting the function of “the main defender of the Constitution”, Ivan Geshev insists on increased penalties for various types of crimes (recently with an emphasis on traffic violations) and warns against any shifts in the balance between powers (for example,

with criticisms against the idea of transferring the security services from the President to the government). In the conditions of political and institutional crisis, such behaviour, although not typical of the judiciary, could accumulate public support. The question is how Geshev might subsequently use this support. It should be recalled that the last two years have brought to light numerous media and political accusations of abuses against representatives of various parties and institutions. The role of the Chief Prosecutor in such a situation basically becomes more important.

3

THE STATE OF THE PARTY SYSTEM

GERB-UDF. The largest party has also had a leading role in the entire post-election process so far, however much this role is not recognised by others or is belittled. GERB proposed a candidate for prime expert, the neurosurgeon Prof. Nikolay Gabrovski. This is the second nomination of a professor for a high state post after the support for the presidential candidacy of Sofia University rector Prof. Anastas Gerdzhikov a year ago. The message is clear: "We are open to society and the intellectual elite, we are not slaves to narrow party accounts." Dialogicity is perceived both as the "new face of GERB" (as opposed to the persistent authoritarian image) and as a justification in case of a possible failure for a cabinet (that everything possible has been done for the sake of understanding).

The positioning of GERB is based on two pillars. The first is the legitimisation of an enemy in the face of "We Continue the Change" (*Produlzhavame Promianata* - PP). The accusations against PP for the coal-fired power stations and for the Bulgarian Development Bank are a main element of the rhetoric of GERB. The meeting organised with PP had the aim of demonstrating precisely that these are the two parties that are important for the political perspective of the country. In GERB's version, of course, one party brings a good perspective, and the other a bad one. The second pillar is the ambition for "Euro-Atlantic legitimacy" through constant attempts to attract "Democratic Bulgaria" (DB) into a coalition. It even seems increasingly likely that if such an alliance were not created, GERB would prefer new elections. From a tactical point of view, the breaking of the PP-DB axis fits into the traditional practices of GERB. In the past, in the same way, centrifugal processes were encouraged in previous partners of Borisov, such as "Ataka", "the Reformist Bloc", and "the United Patriots". In addition, in the present case it is important for GERB to transfer the weight of the political conflict in Bulgaria from the "status quo versus change" variant, which is awkward for them, to the more profitable geopolitical option "East versus West". With all their actions, GERB are trying to show that they are ready to go further than DB in both Russo-

phobia and anti-communism. Here are two examples. DB organised a protest against the visit of Russian bishops to Sofia - GERB called with a declaration for the Bulgarian Orthodox Church to be related to the Ukrainian Church. DB once again raised the issue of dismantling the Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia - GERB came up with a whole draft law for the dismantling of all such monuments.

The perspective of local elections creates a context that further sheds light on the behaviour of GERB. It is important for GERB to have an opponent like PP, who do not have serious local structures. At the same time, GERB would not want the "forces of change" to unite for the local vote and challenge GERB's monopoly in large regional centres. The weariness and disappointment with the mayors of GERB is a fact that the party headquarters itself recognise, after declaring that their leading mayors (Sofia, Plovdiv and Burgas) will not stand for re-election. And if GERB were to form a national coalition without the right and PP, it would inevitably push them towards a local coalition with all the dangerous consequences that might bring.

The changes to the Electoral Code, which bring back voting by paper ballot, were strongly supported by GERB, MRF and BSP. Thus, the impression was created that a coalition between these three parties would be possible. That is why, most likely, the task of GERB will be to extricate themselves from this image of a partner of MRF and BSP, which could give them conjunctural power today, but deprive them of power in the long term of tomorrow. The return of the paper ballot has created the widespread belief that GERB and MRF are about to manipulate the next elections, and that these elections will be soon. As well as other considerations of GERB, however, the target is probably more distant and affects the future local elections, when the paper vote will be even more important and necessary.

"We Continue the Change" ("Produlzhavame Promianata" - PP). The PP strategy seems to have been clear since the election and has not changed

since then. PP do not want a government in this parliament, because they think that in new elections they will perform better and regain first place. Moreover, in such a case, apparently, according to PP, GERB would be compromised as unable to form a government in the parliament in which they were first. The alternative variant, again positive for PP, would be for GERB to be able to form a cabinet, but unstable and short-lived, and accordingly Borisov's party would be compromised as being incapable of governing. The line according to which PP want to be recognised as not just the leading one, but practically the only alternative to GERB, remains in force.

This implies the political radicalisation of PP. The party aims to control the space of both the traditional right wing and the traditional left wing. Regarding the right, it is about the complex dilemma that PP wants to push DB into. If DB for some reason were to agree to enter into a coalition with GERB, this would mean an ebbing of DB voters to PP, which takes an extreme position against GERB. If DB remained packaged together with PP, meaning fully adopting the messages and "red lines" of PP, it would increasingly fall into the shadow of the larger partner, from where the same electoral effect of ebbing away could be expected, albeit at a slower pace. The claim of PP that they can propose a "minority cabinet" with DB is more a form of pressure on DB than a political conviction, because such a cabinet, if approved by parliament, could not be controlled by its constituent parties and it could have catastrophic consequences for them. Regarding the left, it is more than clear that PP seeks to settle in the space of BSP, claiming to be the new "social party", which does not necessarily mean on the left wing. The social proposals of PP are substantially at odds with those of BSP. The split vote of MPs from PP on the purchase of new F-16 jets should also tell red voters that PP is not "the American party". And last but not least, PP has publicly announced dozens of times that BSP is now part of a coalition with GERB (due to the re-introduction of the "paper ballot"), so as to take advantage of anti-GERB sentiments in socialist circles.

It seems that the biggest stumbling block for PP is their relationship with President Radev. The confrontation between them reached a certain peak with Radev's statement that PP were "charlatans" and with the response from PP that Radev had "returned the thugs" to power. This confrontation has a long history, but the current escalation somewhat serves the PP thesis that they are the only alternative to GERB. If this is true, it means that Radev is not an alternative, which in turn means that Radev is in the same political camp as GERB. However, the risks for PP should not be underestimated, and not just because executive power is currently in the hands of the President. It has been known since the presidential elections in 2021 that the

vast majority of PP voters also support the President. Of course, this must have changed over the past year, but there is still the danger that in the event of an acute conflict between Radev and PP, the PP electorate will to a certain extent be swayed in their choice.

Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF). The party continue to give the impression that they are extremely keen on a government in this parliament, and apparently at almost any cost. However, MRF are aware that their participation in power can be achieved at this stage only in cooperation with GERB. For this reason they support the initiatives of GERB and criticise PP and DB more sharply than anyone. The fact that MRF alone do not object to the name "paper coalition" for the parties supporting the paper ballot shows that an alliance between GERB, MRF and BSP seems promising enough to them. The media close to MRF mostly emphasise the authority of the "system parties" against the improvisations of the new political actors.

The reasons why MRF so blatantly want a government are not entirely clear. Obviously, they are not electoral, because in a new election the party would probably even increase its number of voters. Two hypotheses have been launched in the public space. One is related to the interests of MRF in the funds under the Recovery and Sustainability Plan and under the Green Deal. Without a parliament and a regular government, the utilisation of these funds could be compromised, delayed or even blocked. The second hypothesis concerns the personal authority of the leader Mustafa Karadayi. He is the third chairman of this party and so far the only one who has not managed to bring it to power.

"Vazrazhdane" ("Revival"). Kostadin Kostadinov's party have clarified their political role in the current parliamentary configuration. This role is a combination of radicalism in messages and moderation in tone. "Revival" sound muted, without extremes, and it seems as if they dedicated to the effort to minimise one of their main downsides – that of scaring some voters. At the same time, the party's position is in opposition to everything and everyone. "Vazrazhdane" are preparing a protest against Bulgaria's membership in the Eurozone and continue to talk about a referendum. They have asked for a complete revision of the Recovery and Sustainability Plan with the thesis that it threatens the country's energy independence. They opposed the paper ballot, which was the basis of one of the few alliances between parties in parliament. They are doing what they can to take over the functions of the IMRO by organising provocative visits to North Macedonia. They have declared themselves against a GERB government with the argument of Borisov's supposed failure over the last 12 years. They have criticised the President for delaying

too much the constitutional procedure for awarding mandates. They have floated their idea of a law on foreign agents with the intention of compromising the right wing and its media and think tank partners.

Of course, the role of “opposition to everything and everyone” comes at a price, and that is complete political isolation. “Vazrazhdane” are trying to limit this damage by demonstrating confidence in its chance of governing (the much-used phrase “after we win the elections”) and in its capacity for government (Kostadinov’s statement to Radev that the party has a “cabinet at the ready”). Against the backdrop of people’s weariness and disillusionment with coalitions, and even more so with the impossibility of forming coalitions, the prospect of one-party rule sounds attractive. The question is whether “Vazrazhdane” seem to be the most convincing candidate for this.

Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP). The focus of all political activity on the left wing is on criticism of the President. BSP claim that Radev is trying to prevent the formation of a regular cabinet because of his ambitions for a presidential republic, and is therefore at “war” with the parties. Radev’s caretaker government is accused of being anti-social and convinced that with its decision not to submit a draft for a new budget, it is condemning people to a tough winter. Radev himself has been attacked for sacrificing Bulgaria’s social policy for the sake of deals for new planes. BSP chairwoman Korneliya Ninova presents herself as a victim of the President and his cabinet, claiming that court security is pursuing her with subpoenas. Ninova goes so far as to claim that the authorities are participating together with her party opponents in an “intra-party coup” in BSP. And although Ninova with no second thoughts is now confronting the President that she nominated, this does not win her any partners.

The parliamentary role of BSP remains undefined and deepens the feeling of political isolation. The party allowed its assets to be wasted on consistent opposition to GERB and their manipulations as it staunchly defended, in cooperation with GERB and MRF, the return of the paper ballot. Moreover, the proposal was that of BSP, and GERB and MRF edited it to their advantage and thus suggested that BSP had been used for their interests. The decision of BSP not to support a government with the mandate of GERB does not overcome the damage to their image. Quite the contrary, there were rumours that in the name of participation in power at any cost, Ninova’s team are ready for a coalition precisely with GERB with the third mandate, if it comes to one. At the same time, the shift away from the “forces of change” is clear. BSP are more and more aggressively attacking PP. The tension between them reached an open confrontation with the accusation that PP holds the “codes” to access the software of the voting machines. The fanatical defence of the

paper ballot means the stake will be the electoral performance of BSP, which, if it does not improve drastically in the next elections, will completely compromise the overall political behaviour of the party.

The processes in the left-wing space, in turn, are not encouraging for Ninova. A gathering of representatives of BSP and other left-wing parties was held, where the prospect of renewal and unification of the left was discussed. It was logical for this event to come to pass, because when the intra-party dialogue is destroyed, the dialogue overflows beyond the borders of the party. The meeting brought together figures whose authority stems more from the past than from the present, and it failed to come up with a “road map” for unification. But it would be hasty to reckon that Ninova has any gain from this. The initiative for left dialogue is no longer in her hands, and she could hardly return there. On the contrary, Ninova continues to progress with her self-isolation. An example of this was the harsh declaration against the Socialist International (whose Vice President was Ninova, although she was recently removed) and the new series of exclusions (of the mayor of the “Izgreve” district in the capital, Delyan Georgiev, from BSP, and the MP Yavor Bozhankov from the Parliamentary Group of BSP). We are talking about factors that lead not towards the expansion of influence, but exactly in the opposite direction. It is too early to judge whether there will be a regrouping of small parties in the left space and whether this would have any chances in elections. In any case, however, the pressure on the left-wing space, from PP on one hand, and from Ninova’s opponents on the other, bodes ill not only for the chairperson, but also for the party itself.

“Democratic Bulgaria” (DB). The formation is in an extremely delicate situation. They must manoeuvre between the Scylla of GERB and the Charybdis of PP. On one hand, DB, as is clear to everyone, is the most preferred partner of GERB. Categorically closing the door to GERB would reduce their political weight. This is even more complicated, bearing in mind the fact that within the coalition there have always been voices in favour of rapprochement with Borisov. It is hardly a coincidence that one of the parties in the coalition, “Yes, Bulgaria”, officially released information that at a meeting of its national leadership, 55 of its members were “against” support for a government with the mandate of GERB and only 5 were “in favour”. The intention, in all probability, was to show GERB that those supporters of a coalition with them are not hidden and are in fact very few in number. On the other hand, in the cooperation with PP, the party of Petkov and Vassilev has a leading role and sets the agenda. DB tried to break this framework by offering PP joint participation in the local elections. This, of course, is important for DB, because at this stage the potential of PP appears far greater. The hes-

itant response of PP betrays their desire to determine how and with whom they will work for the local vote. And this can create an impression on DB that they are being used politically. DB has, for the second time, proposed a pre-election coalition to the PP and, for the second time, it seems not to have been met with understanding.

The internal condition of DB also raises concerns. This is especially true in the case of DSB, where the symptoms of erosion are most severe. A key figure in the party and a former candidate for the post of chairman, such as Tsetska Bachkova, left the party. She was followed by the chairwoman of the already disbanded youth organisation, Hristina Dimitrova, and then others. Rumours of a petition against the chairman Atanas Atanasov are widespread. All this further narrows the room for manoeuvring of DB.

“Bulgarian Rise” (“Bulgarski Vuzhod” - BV). The smallest formation in parliament have been trying since the elections to present themselves as the party with the best chance of forming a government with a possible third mandate. Party leader Stefan Yanev exploits this impression in that he constantly emphasises several things. First, that he is ready for a dialogue with everyone, and that he does not exclude anyone as a participant in a future cabinet. Second, that he has no “leadership ego” and no “childhood dream of being Prime Minister”, thereby suggesting a

willingness to let someone else have the leading role. Thirdly, that the task of parliament is “simple” – that of overcoming the crisis - and therefore there is no need to dwell so much on inter-party contradictions, strategies and incompatibilities.

Despite this declarative openness, BV are encountering increasing difficulties and aim to neutralise them. It is true that Yanev talks about a cabinet of “all parties” (with “200 plus” MPs in the majority), but the media and analysts suspect him of intending to work mostly for GERB and MRF. This is also the reason why BV openly distance themselves from the firm support of GERB and MRF for the re-introduction of the paper ballot. An even more serious problem for BV is party identity. Yanev himself entered party politics after being dismissed as Minister of Defence for a balanced stance on the war in Ukraine.

It could be argued that most BV voters approved of the party’s abstinence from categorical association with Ukraine. With the BV’s decision to support the provision of military aid to Kyiv, precisely this *raison d’être* has been seriously eroded. The impression is given that this decision and Yanev’s subsequent visit to Washington are almost an attempt to obtain external consent for government with a mandate for BV. If such a government does not materialise, the prospect of BV remaining on the political stage does not look very optimistic.

4

MAIN CONCLUSIONS AND FORECASTS

The decision of the EU not to let Bulgaria and Romania become members of the Schengen area is part of a process, not an end point. Bulgaria has not lost its chances, because it relies on its right and because it has achieved quite broad support. Something crucial to these chances will be the continuation of political and diplomatic efforts. If this continuation is not active, and if it accepts the thesis that Bulgaria is really not ready and does not deserve it, the chances will be postponed for an indefinite future. Conversely, if the pressure does not ease, the option of an imminent revision is not out of the question. The question is - what will prevail in the Bulgarian political elite - the national inferiority complex or the optimistic vision? Not only will Schengen depend on this, but also two more important things – attitudes towards politicians and the political system, as well as the level of Euro-scepticism in public opinion.

President Rumen Radev continues to be the centre of power in Bulgarian politics. This interpretation also corresponds to the attitudes of the media, in which the caretaker cabinet is more and more often presented simply as “Radev’s government” and not as a presidential balance between different political and expert circles. Radev is distancing himself from the parties and risks becoming the focus of all criticism, especially if parliament is dissolved. This is especially true in connection with his choice of a party for the third mandate if it turns out that it is impossible to fulfill the first two. The risk is probably a calculated one, because, despite the efforts of BSP, an anti-presidential coalition in the current National Assembly shows no signs of forming.

Changes to the Electoral Code will have long-term negative consequences for the legitimacy of the po-

litical process. The scandals surrounding the re-introduction of the paper ballot have managed to spread the belief that machine voting led to manipulation and even fraud, despite the complete lack of evidence. Conversely, the persistence in returning to the paper ballot has revived suspicions that the purpose of this act is manipulation of the paper vote. From two different points of view, confidence in elections appears to have been seriously damaged. In fact, GERB and MRF are the parties that are more likely to benefit from this, because their political weight derives more from the suggestion of power than from strictly adhering to the rules.

Bulgarian political parties are experiencing a crisis that is not restricted only to low voter turnout. A shifting of the layers is happening, which may signal a restructuring of the political space. In the last year, not only have new party actors appeared, but also the aspiration of the new ones to take the “place” of the old ones is growing. This is clearly visible in the case of PP with regard to DB and BSP, but also in “Vazrazhdane” with regard to the old nationalist formations. The erosion of BSP is already openly threatening the monopoly of the party on the political left. This process has not acquired clearer forms, but it has already begun.

Two and a half months after the elections, it can be stated that the immediate political perspective has not changed dramatically. Either GERB will manage to form a temporary governing structure in some form and with some mandate (even if this is only to bring it down a little later), or they will decide that a new caretaker cabinet and early elections are in their interest. For now, the second option is more likely, as it was two months ago, without meaning that this is predetermined.

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ABOUT THIS STUDY

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

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Further information on the topic can be found here:
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