

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

POLIT-BAROMETER

Year 22 Issue 1
January 2022

Boris Popivanov



Bulgaria is moving closer to North Macedonia, but is still a long way from resolving the dispute.



The government is stabilising with the ambition of the presidential institution for a key role.



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1

THE DYNAMICS OF FOREIGN POLICY

The Macedonian nodus. Bulgaria's relations with its neighbour, North Macedonia, have been firmly on the political agenda. The reasons are due to expectations raised last year that the end of the political crisis in Bulgaria will rescind the country's "veto" on the commencement of the negotiation process of North Macedonia for EU membership. An important role was played by the statement of the new Bulgarian Prime Minister Kiril Petkov that a solution to the issue could be reached within 6 months. There has been talk in the Bulgarian public space of increasing pressure from Bulgaria's Western partners - primarily the United States and Germany – to bring this about.

There have been two key events. One was the meeting of the National Security Advisory Council under President Rumen Radev, at which representatives of state institutions and parliamentary political forces reached a consensus that Bulgaria's position remains unchanged, and the search for solutions will not be tied to deadlines. The second event was the visits exchanged between the Bulgarian Prime Minister Petkov and his North Macedonian counterpart Dimitar Kovachevski, from which came the message of "dynamisation" of bilateral relations, the formation of working groups by sectors and the focus on common economic projects.

The Bulgarian political elite are not yet ready to change their approach to North Macedonia. This is partly due to fears of an acute negative reaction from public opinion, which for the most part supports the current firm position. There are also purely conjunctural concerns that the political initiative could lead to nationalist parties that accuse the "status quo" of betraying the national interest. The impression is created, however, that two lines coexist in the official Bulgarian politics – one which is more categorical, represented by President Radev, and one which is more compromising, manifested by Prime Minister Petkov. In Skopje, they share this understanding and rely on contacts with Petkov, even outlining the possible terrain of a concession to Bulgaria - constitutional changes that would give Bulgarians in the republic the status of a minority. Expectations of change, as well as the deadlines discussed, focus on the planned

conference on the Western Balkans in Paris in June, which is part of the initiatives of the French Presidency of the Council of the EU. At this stage, however, there are still not enough preconditions for this conference to give rise to a "breakthrough" in the deadlock. What is more, the attitude is that France itself and its President Emmanuel Macron are not among the most ardent supporters of the idea of the European integration of North Macedonia and Albania.

Tension surrounding Ukraine. In recent weeks, there has been a noticeable increase in the confrontation between Russia and the West over Ukraine. There is growing talk in public spheres about an impending military conflict. This hypothesis is considered realistic by both sides - the West warns of a possible Russian invasion of Ukraine, and Russia - of military provocation of Ukraine in Donbas. In this context the Russian demand was made to withdraw NATO from the former socialist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, including from Bulgaria and Romania. Bulgaria's reaction was predictable and relatively quickly formulated through all official channels - namely that NATO is a conscious choice of the country and that ultimatums are not accepted. However, the question of the role and behaviour of Sofia in the field of confrontation remained open. It should be emphasised that at this stage there is no clear unified position in NATO itself. There are countries that are in favour of a more extreme approach to Russia, and there are those like Germany, which are more cautious. Bulgarian institutions recognise this, but they also take into account the polarised attitudes in society. The traditional Russia-West rift in the Bulgarian mass consciousness has come to the fore again. It has also received political projections that were largely predictable. President Radev and Defence Minister Stefan Yanev are seen as being more positive about Russia, while expectations were generated that Prime Minister Kiril Petkov would take a more decisive stance against the alleged Russian aggression. The central events in this context were the sitting of the Security Council with the Prime Minister and the subsequent extraordinary sitting of the National Assembly. Those who hoped for some unequivocal message remained disappointed. The government has declared its loyalty to NATO and its fears

of Russia's actions, but at the same time has effectively refused to join the "hawks" in the conflict. Bulgaria assumed a stance in favour of de-escalation, i.e. for the peaceful resolution of the problems in Ukraine, stressed that military units could be deployed in the country only under Bulgarian command, and voiced fears about the deficits of the Bulgarian army itself

and the energy risks in the event of a potential conflict. Taken together, these allegations express a reluctance to engage in any serious involvement, which shows only disadvantages. Of course, the situation is dynamic and changes in the Bulgarian position should not be ruled out. The first step, however, embodies moderation and a lack of enthusiasm.

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INSTITUTIONS AND THE AGENDA OF SOCIETY

The government. During the first half of its first “100 days”, the new Bulgarian government, composed of “We Continue the Change”, BSP, “There is Such a People” and “Democratic Bulgaria”, gave the impression that it is engaged in preparatory work to start the matter of governing itself. The main news from the executive branch was related to appointments at different levels (deputy ministers, district governors, political cabinets, executive agencies), as well as independent initiatives of individual ministers (and more specifically the parties that nominated them). It is clear that the cabinet is still experiencing serious difficulties in working as a team that demonstrates a united political will.

All the same, two main directions of government activity emerged.

The first direction concerns the draft budget for 2022 that has been submitted for consideration. The draft shows that the cabinet as a whole does not question the pre-existing revenue structure. No intentions to change the tax system or the redistribution mechanisms are apparent. Criticisms that this type of budget reproduces social inequalities and concentrates public wealth in a relatively small stratum have not been examined in depth. At the same time, the project is characterised by greatly increased social spending, which predetermines an impressive deficit of 4.1% and the intention of compensating for it through loans. There is a clear desire to achieve an effect of the type “you can have your cake and eat it too”: ongoing business assistance combined with measures for alleviating the effects of the social crisis. However, the high inflation, as well as the drastic increase in energy prices, create preconditions that may lead to the measures being insufficient. There is another interesting point. Despite calls for priority adoption of the budget, it has been postponed palpably. What is more, there has even been talk of a possible update over the summer. All of this shows that either the government still does not have clear long-term intentions for reforms, or they prefer not to announce them, in order to wait for legislative changes in certain spheres. It is significant that the government does not even discuss its programme of governance and still today refers to the various

messages from the coalition agreement. What can be confirmed at the end of January is that the first political force “We Continue the Change” dictates the pace of work of the cabinet.

The second direction of activity is focused on the idea of judicial reform. It is one of the most popular issues, uniting, at least in words, the parties in the governing majority. Concrete legislative initiatives have not yet been taken, either for changes in the constitution or in the Judiciary Act, but personal intentions are there to see. Apparently, the priority is the actions that are expected to lead to the resignation of Chief Prosecutor Ivan Geshev. The resignation of former chief prosecutor and chairman of the Commission for Combating Corruption and Confiscation of Illegally Acquired Property Sotir Tsatsarov is seen as a step towards the removal of Geshev. There were indications that the majority planned to reform the Commission for Combating Corruption and Confiscation of Illegally Acquired Property by splitting it up and separating part of this body as an investigatory one, thus turning it into a second, “parallel” prosecutor’s office. Probably this was Tsatsarov’s incentive to withdraw preventively so that he would not be released during the reform. But Tsatsarov’s resignation was accompanied by a statement by Prime Minister Kiril Petkov himself that the head of the anti-corruption body had been denied access to classified information, and a declaration by the National Assembly, calling for Geshev’s resignation. Thus, the authorities publicly linked the two cases and presented Tsatsarov’s departure as a transition to that of Geshev. It seems that the ruling majority is undertaking a long “siege” of the “fortress” of the prosecutor’s office. The forthcoming changes in personnel by the end of the year in the Inspectorate of the Supreme Judicial Council and in the Supreme Judicial Council itself are likely to be considered the final “frontier”, after which the removal of Geshev will be a matter of time.

The President. Rumen Radev and Iliana Yotova took office for a second term as President and Vice President of the Republic. The second term is traditionally a time for greater political ambition, which is not limited to hopes of re-election. In his speech to the Na-

tional Assembly, Radev announced programme-based intentions in all areas of government, which almost resembled a government programme. The President is obviously reluctant to make do with the ceremonial functions of a head of state in a parliamentary republic. He is reckoning on playing an active role, above all as a corrective to the current government. In this regard, the hypotheses that sooner or later this will lead to a confrontation with Prime Minister Petkov are of interest. Rumours of tension between Radev and Petkov accompany both the staffing of the new cabinet and the development of the plot with North Macedonia and that of Ukraine. The opposition accuse Radev of trying to "dictate" to the Prime Minister and even of being a "fifth party" in a coalition with his ministers. There are also rumours that Radev is ready to encourage the establishment of new parties. Nevertheless, a open conflict between the President and the executive power is unlikely in the foreseeable future. Both sides would lose out, and they are well aware of that. Expectations are that Radev will soon have to announce his ideas for changes in the Constitution, which he has

been hinting at for a considerable amount of time. This move, if indeed it transpired, would be indicative of both the direction of the intentions and the degree of influence of the President.

Public opinion. Bulgarian society is going through a difficult winter period, marked by a combination of a series of crises - economic, social, and health-related. A nationally representative survey conducted by the "Trend" Research Centre on January 12th-19th shows that the biggest problem for respondents for Bulgaria is the shock of prices. 44% of respondents gave this answer, almost four times as many as those who indicated the second most frequent response, the Covid-19 pandemic (12%). An important fact is that among the 10 most frequently given answers, 6 are openly social in nature (the shock of prices, the standard of living, impoverishment, healthcare, unemployment, and pensions). The expectations of Bulgarian citizens are that the government should solve social problems as a priority. This emerges as the main indicator of the effectiveness of the new government.

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THE STATE OF THE PARTY SYSTEM

“We Continue the Change” as the leading political force in the country not only has the greatest responsibility for governance, but also concentrates public expectations for change. In fact, the trust in the cabinet, as measured by sociologists, is mainly due to the public image and representatives of “We Continue the Change” in the government, and not so much to the other three formations BSP, “There is Such a People” and “Democratic Bulgaria”. After their victory in the November elections, “We Continue the Change” were clearly faced with the question of how they would function as a party. An unequivocal answer has yet to be given. The party is present practically only through its people in the legislative and executive authorities. There are no indications that local structures are being built, nor is there any generation of purely party news or events. According to one possible interpretation, this hints at a short-term project that will be abandoned at some point in the near future. However, there is a more probable hypothesis that we are witnessing a different approach to party activity, based not on hierarchy and organisation, but on networks. This approach would be implemented in two directions. The first is the application of the principle of personal proximity, following the example of the government (appointments are directly motivated by friendly and collegial contacts and even family relationships). And the second - the co-opting of “external” personnel, according to the widely advertised principle of “knowledge” and “integrity”. However, this would entail a certain number of risks to the stability of “We Continue the Change” and their ability to maintain the same political line.

GERB-UDF (Union of Democratic Forces) decisively entered into their role of firm and uncompromising opposition against the government. So far, this role of opposition has no programmatic or ideological dimensions, but concentrates on general criticism of the behaviour of the current government and defence of the achievements of previous GERB governments. GERB’s main efforts are aimed at suggesting that the draft budget for 2022 is wasteful and doomed to destroy macroeconomic stability, whilst the policy towards NATO and Russia throws Bulgaria into “complete international isolation”. The image of “evil” is manifest-

ed in the persona of President Rumen Radev, whose guilt, according to GERB, exceeds the alleged abuse of presidential power and is expressed in “destructive leadership”, bringing about serious, lasting and hardly reversible divisions in society. This is the background against which, according to GERB, their own alternative should stand out. It would appear that the party is still hoping for mass public discontent against the crisis tendencies and failures of the government, which would lead to preconditions for a relatively quick return to power. The probability of this happening is not great. The regular press conferences of the party leader Boyko Borisov are full of criticism, proposals and self-apologies, but they do not attract the attention of the public and are not capable of imposing Borisov’s interpretation of the ongoing processes. It is Borisov’s style to promote opposing tendencies, the balance of which guarantees his role as supreme arbiter. In this case we are talking about the decisive liberal Euro-Atlantic course, expressed by Daniel Mitov, and the conservative trend towards more tradition and moderation, which is set by Toma Bikov and Petar Nikolov. However, this maintains the illusion of a party in power seeking to cover the entire political spectrum, rather than an opposition party that needs to find its identity.

The Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) have consistently developed their active offensive line in the political process, making the most of the parliamentary podium. The first aspect of this line is related to criticism of the new first political force “We Continue the Change”, who are both accused of inexperience and of repeating GERB’s populist slogans of the past. MRF want to emphasise the similarities between “We Continue the Change” and GERB in order to demonstrate equal distance. Next, the party is pursuing an aggressive campaign of strengthening the image of the big businessman and their MP Deljan Peevski (from apologies, to his donations during the pandemic, to denying crimes connected with him). The campaign has a flipside - constant attacks on the businessman Ivo Prokopiev, who is accused of being at the bottom of all behind-the-scenes political action in Bulgaria. Prokopiev’s transformation into the personification of “evil” in Bulgarian business seems to be an important element of MRF’s ambition to dictate,

as far as possible, the changing economic environment in the country since the end of the rule of GERB. Thirdly, MRF continue to treat President Radev as their main political opponent. Disagreements with Radev are widely circulated in the public space. They also manifest themselves indirectly. For example, MRF announced their intentions to amend the Constitution. Specific parameters of these changes have not been presented, but there are suggestions that they affect the judiciary. Against the background of Radev's own intentions to propose constitutional changes, this seems like a preventive action with the aim of seizing the initiative from the head of state. In the legislative sphere, in parallel with this, MRF plead for the abolition of the so-called "investment citizenship" and in-house procurement, as well as parliamentary scrutiny of government spending. It is evidently an attempt to impose an alternative anti-corruption agenda that diverts attention from the figure of the chief prosecutor, who is considered to be close to MRF. In recent years, MRF have allowed themselves to be seen as an informal partner of GERB. This contradicts ambitions of being a "balancing player" in Bulgarian politics, which is able to create parliamentary majorities in one direction or another. And since Rumen Radev's behaviour shows just such ambitions and opportunities (with doors open on both the left and the right), it is important for MRF to limit Radev's influence and play a balancing role between GERB and "We Continue the Change" without simultaneously making the prosecution and big business hostile towards them.

The Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) held a meeting at its 50th congress, which was to "make note of" the resignation of President Korneliya Ninova in November and launch a procedure for the direct election of a new leader. This did not happen because the Congress voted against the resignation and so Ninova's term of office continued. Ninova's actual refusal to stand again may have two explanations. According to one of these, she is worried that she might lose because of the seething discontent with her among party members, as well as due to the authority of her rival Krum Zarkov. According to the second explanation, we see behaviour from a position of strength that no longer needs a democratic alibi. Ninova's move received almost consensual negative comments in the media, which even spoke of a "final end" to BSP. Immediately after the congress, prominent names of the left (such as the former chairman Mikhail Mikov) and entire party organisations terminated their membership in BSP, which underlined the depth of sentiment against the present leader. What is more, signals have emerged that the growing crisis in the party will lead to the imminent creation of new left-wing projects, which will include socialists disappointed with Ninova and representatives of the failed centre-left movement "Stand Up BG" of former ombudsman Maya Manolova. In any case, BSP face very rigorous tests. In her report to Congress, Ninova outlined a way out of the crisis

through effective participation in government, which would restore people's confidence. However, there are also serious risks that the demise will continue. BSP have chosen not to defend key left-wing reforms such as taxation, labour protection, and a return to solidarity in education and healthcare. The party is in no hurry to submit its bills to the National Assembly. Efforts are concentrated on specific topics, expressed personally by Ninova in her capacity as minister - such as restricting mobile operators and collection companies. At best, these are small causes, and not a grand strategy. Even the "social budget" for 2022, which BSP single out as their achievement, does not bring unconditional positives for the left wing, especially in the context of the social crisis and increased public expectations. The fact that not BSP, but the Minister of Finance of "We Continue the Change" Asen Vassilev spoke out strongly against the low salaries in the country, shows how easily social issues can be seized from the left and used by other political actors.

"There is Such a People" of all the parties represented in parliament makes the least effort to build its specific political profile. The messages from Slavi Trifonov's party are diverse and generally subject to a populist approach (the renewed topic of reduced state subsidies for political parties; a hesitant attitude to the "green certificate"; the extravagant proposal for a "deal" with the United States on the European integration of North Macedonia) and to political pragmatism (cooperation on most coalition issues combined with increased participation of party members at various levels of government). "There is Such a People" do not seem to be willing to put a stop to the decline in public confidence, which has been plummeting in one direction for months. In this sense, the prospect of the party's survival is extremely unclear. Of the four parties in the government majority, "There is Such a People" seem to be the least associated with a particular cause and the most suspected of covert business influences. For this reason, paradoxically, the behaviour of this party heightens fears that it is the most unstable element in the coalition.

"Democratic Bulgaria" (DB) continues to act as a coalition in crisis. Poor election results led to the acceptance of responsibility in the form of the resignation of all three participants in the coalition - "Yes, Bulgaria", DSB ("Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria") and the Green Movement. From the very beginning, an attitude was created for the re-election of the current leaders in "Yes, Bulgaria" Hristo Ivanov and DSB Atanas Atanasov. The lack of alternative candidates (and alternative programmes) does not conceal the existence of internal party contradictions. During the procedure, the ardent critic of Hristo Ivanov and former chairman of the DB group in the Sofia Municipal Council Metodi Lalov was expelled from "Yes, Bulgaria". Positions against Atanasov were publicly expressed by the leaders of entire Sofia-based structures

of DSB. There was also information about informal leadership competition in DSB by the former party leader and current MEP Radan Kanev with his increasingly active media appearances. The case of the Green Movement is even more complicated, because in this formation there are also influential voices that are in favour of leaving the coalition and joining “We Continue the Change”. The fact that in the last presidential election the Green Movement supported a different candidate for president from that of “Yes, Bulgaria” and DSB is indicative of this. At the same time, the general problem of DB is related to political positioning. A key theme in the messages of the coalition – that of judicial reform - is more strongly defended today by the President and “We Continue the Change”. The digitalisation of governance and public services is a slow process that would not easily bring immediate electoral dividends and, apart from that, DB is not the only political player committed to this issue. The firm stance on NATO and Russia risks alienating DB from their own government and bringing them dangerously closer to their GERB opponents. No useful way out of this situation has yet emerged.

“Vazrazhdane” (“Revival”) have taken a radical course of rejection of the entire political status quo. This was largely expected. Their chance is to permanently occupy the nationalist space that has fallen into

crisis after the failures and compromises of the old patriotic parties, and to take advantage of distrust in institutions and the entire political elite. The flexible tactics of the party can be seen in the decision not to focus on typical nationalist issues (such as North Macedonia, minorities or migrants), but on dissatisfaction with restrictive measures during the pandemic. The protest against the “green certificate” for vaccination became the rowdiest event of the month. The attempt to invade the National Assembly, accompanied by threats of invasion and the Council of Ministers, was part of a populist strategy of pressure, based on the lack of competitors in this field. Among the other major political forces, there are no extreme opponents of vaccination, whilst there are significant sections of Bulgarian society with such sentiments. With an unstable majority and a compromised opposition, the radicalism of “Vazrazhdane” was given the opportunity to significantly enlarge its support. Something that makes an impression is the favour of the media close to the previously incumbent GERB towards the actions of “Vazrazhdane”. In all likelihood, GERB are relying on another party to take on the task of shaking and undermining the new government in order to pave the way for GERB to potentially return to power. However, there is a risk that this might be like playing with fire, and that it would not strengthen GERB, but a radical right wing that is hard-to-predict.

4

MAIN CONCLUSIONS AND FORECASTS

Bulgarian policy towards North Macedonia is characterised by expanding contacts, whilst maintaining the original positions in the bilateral dispute. The dynamics of the relationship are evident. However, the cultural and economic preconditions that could support it are weak. That is why these dynamics are doomed to fade away unless there is some significant political change, which does not yet appear to be imminently in the pipeline.

Bulgaria's attitude to tensions in Ukraine is marked by a reluctance to make "sudden movements." The confrontation between Russia and the West is being exploited by political forces depending on their orientation and in the name of their domestic political interests. But only the influence of external factors would lead Bulgaria to change its cautious and moderate position.

The Bulgarian government is stabilising. Or rather, public discontent during the winter months is unlikely to reach proportions that will bring about the fall of the cabinet. The centrifugal tendencies in the government majority are also negligible at this stage. The series of pre-term elections of 2021 would appear to have come to an end. Some forecasts which are pessimistic about the government are even discussing the option of parliamentary elections at the end of 2023 along with local elections. The cabinet itself is dealing with staffing issues, which, in a normal situation, would cause scandals and severe criticism. But after 12 years of GERB rule, remembered by many for its corrupt and nepotistic practices, public tolerance for anything new is quite high. It is difficult to predict how long it will last, but it is currently apparent.

The government's budget plans seem to embody the pre-election slogan of the leading party "We Continue the Change" to achieve "left-wing goals with right-wing tools" - keeping the principles of distribution and redistribution with the addition of generous social spending. This is probably the easiest way to

avoid controversies between the various parties in the ruling coalition. At the same time, high social expectations in society can generate problems for the legitimacy of the majority namely on this point.

The judiciary is turning out to be the sphere where the government's greatest ambitions for change in the coming months are concentrated. This change also appears to be presented in response to the existing expectations among Bulgarian citizens for justice and retribution.

From an institutional point of view, Bulgaria is entering an untraditional period of symbiosis between the President and executive authority, in which both institutions will claim to personify change and hold the political initiative. Tensions between the President and the Prime Minister will arise, but without the prospect, at least for the time being, of a more serious conflict.

After the turbulent upheavals of 2021, the Bulgarian party system is in a transformation framed by the functioning of the new parliament. We can observe polarisation without clear ideological dimensions. GERB and MRF find themselves in an opposition camp, standing against the government majority. Between the two camps, however, there are no deep differences of principle on the paths of development for the country. The conflict is related more with the government's past, along with its staff and practices. The left is noticeably losing social and political influence, after it has proved incapable of proposing a project for the future that is fundamentally an alternative to the essentially liberal economic visions of both the ruling party and the opposition. In contrast to the processes on the left, there is a tendency towards an increasing presence of the radical right wing, which has been able to show the ruling party and the opposition as two sides of the same liberal coin - in other words, the status quo - and to draw strength from this.

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