

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

POLIT-BAROMETER

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Boris Popivanov



The war in Ukraine is a challenge for the ruling majority in Bulgaria, but also an additional opportunity for them to become stabilised.



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1

FOREIGN POLICY DYNAMICS

The war in Ukraine. Russia's invasion of Ukraine inevitably rearranged the agenda of Bulgarian politics. Prior to that, Bulgaria refrained from taking a clear position on escalating tensions in Ukraine. The conflict there was one of the topics of the National Security Advisory Council held under the leadership of President Rumen Radev, but the joint declaration after the Council spoke only about the state of Bulgaria's defence capabilities. Russia's decision to recognise the independence of the so-called The Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics divided the political forces, which came out in the National Assembly with different declarations and did not want them to be united in a common document. However, the beginning of the invasion changed the atmosphere. Bulgarian institutions reacted relatively quickly and by consensus. The invasion was condemned jointly by President Radev and Prime Minister Petkov at an extraordinary meeting, and later the National Assembly issued a declaration against Russia's actions. It is true that this act was preceded by a 6-hour discussion with various points of view, but in the end an almost complete consensus was reached (with the exception of "Vazrazhdane" ("Revival") and the objection of BSP on one of the points related to the imposition of sanctions).

Internationally, Bulgaria has unreservedly supported the positions of the international formats in which it participates. Full co-operation was shown with the EU on sanctions (expressed by Prime Minister Kiril Petkov at the extraordinary summit), with NATO to strengthen the eastern flank of the Alliance, with the Council of Europe to freeze Russia's membership, and with the OSCE, condemning Russia's invasion. Bulgaria also closed its airspace to Russian flights in line with the majority of Central and Eastern European countries. As a NATO member, Bulgaria was even among the active participants in the search for solutions, and was among the 8 countries that requested consultations under Article 4 of the North Atlantic Treaty due to threats to the security of member states. Separately, President Radev attended the meeting of the so-called Bucharest Nine (NATO Eastern flank countries) in Warsaw and supported the position agreed on there. It should be pointed out that Bulgaria does not use other diplomatic means of influence, since, unlike

in a number of European countries, the Russian ambassador has not been called to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (at least for now). In short, the Bulgarian position on the Ukrainian conflict is clear and shows solidarity with the Western partners, without standing out with extremes.

The big issue with potential Ukrainian refugees and the Bulgarian diaspora in Ukraine remains unclear. There was a general willingness to receive refugees, including in hotels along the Black Sea coast, and "corridors" for the withdrawal of Bulgarians to the country have been announced. However, there is no overall plan. In fact, only the non-parliamentary IMRO are calling for a strategy towards Bulgarians in Ukraine at this stage.

The unity achieved in the Bulgarian position concentrates on the behaviour of institutions. In public announcements, however, a discrepancy has become apparent, outlined by the more assertive and decisive presence of Prime Minister Petkov and the thesis of the Minister of Defence Yanev, which is much more moderate and based on negotiations. Yanev even initially refused to call the events in Ukraine "war", and then expressed doubts that the Bulgarian national interest would be effectively defended. Petkov eventually asked for Yanev's resignation. On one hand, in the context of recent trends in the EU, this is a logical move. Otherwise, there would be — and quickly there would have spread around the world — allegations that Bulgaria is trying to keep open a back door in the assessment of the conflict. On the other hand, just the very resignation of a military minister in the situation of a war in the vicinity could encourage undesirable geopolitical interpretations for Bulgaria. Another thing that will also be important in this case is the point of view of President Radev, who is not only close to Yanev, but also partly shared his view on the primary role of diplomacy in the post-war settlement of the conflict.

There have been attempts to make use of the war in Ukraine internally, but they seem to be dominated by concerns about the development of the conflict and they do not go against the general political situation.

Beyond the controversy over the minister of war, the degree of confrontation among the political elite is not high. No parliamentary force, not even the Russo-phile "Vazrazhdane", explicitly supported the Russian invasion. Only the leadership of the non-parliamentary "Revival of the Fatherland" went to the Russian Embassy to express empathy. GERB, currently a party in opposition, stood practically without reservations behind the cabinet. Apart from rhetoric, however, there have been no serious attempts to escalate anti-Russian politics. Only when discussing the state budget, the Vice-President of GERB Daniel Mitov proposed that Bulgarian military equipment should not be repaired in Russia, but the proposal was rejected by the majority and the GERB did not make any efforts to derive any dividends from this.

The Macedonian nodus. The dynamics in relations between Bulgaria and North Macedonia have been understandably overshadowed by the events in Ukraine. Before that, however, we witnessed efforts by the Bulgarian government to continue the unusually intensive dialogue, albeit without clear results. For example, Bulgarian Foreign Minister Teodora Genchovska visited Skopje, the first flight between Sofia and Skopje was made with the participation of the transport ministers of the two countries, and agreements on academic exchange programmes were reached. At the same time, North Macedonia's position towards Bulgaria remained

largely ambiguous. President Stevo Pendarovski almost simultaneously flattered Bulgarian Prime Minister Petkov that he was acting like the great fighter for rights and freedoms, Nelson Mandela, and organised meetings with the organisation OMO "Ilinden"-Pirin, which claims rights of the Macedonian minority in Bulgaria. The celebrations of the 150th anniversary of the birth of the revolutionary Gotse Delchev proved to be "half joint" – the joint ceremony in Skopje was held only at a ministerial level, while the heads of state and prime ministers of the two countries preferred to commemorate the date separately. Furthermore, we should also add the criticism of convergence on both sides. In Bulgaria, President Radev warned Prime Minister Petkov that his visit in January to Skopje was "hurried", while in North Macedonia the main opposition party VM-RO-DPMNE insisted on Bulgaria apologising for the deportation of local Jews during World War II and giving guarantees that it would not block Skopje on its way to EU membership.

Left to follow their moves up to now, bilateral relations do not hint that there will be a "breakthrough" and the cancelling of the Bulgarian veto over the negotiation process of North Macedonia with the EU. However, the war in Ukraine sets a new context for regional stability. Smoothing the controversy in the Balkans could be seen as an anticipation of Western partners in the face of acute tensions with Russia.

2

INSTITUTIONS AND THE AGENDA OF SOCIETY

The government. The month turned out to be critical for the new Bulgarian government. Many upheavals and scandals accompanied their actions. There were suspicions of lobbying and illegal appointments in institutions. A series of blunders by Prime Minister Petkov necessitated long explanations and excuses. Predictions of an impending fall of the cabinet and early elections in the autumn began to circulate in the media.

Reasons for such analyses are the understanding that the ruling coalition is severely fragmented, that in practice there is no coalition decision, but separate initiatives of each of the four participating parties, and that there is no joint responsibility. This style of delegating responsibility for certain policies to one party or another has already been commented on as a defect since the coalition agreement. It could also be argued that only in connection with Bulgaria's position on the Ukraine war has Prime Minister Petkov tried to seriously unite and coordinate the majority parties. Nevertheless, the government still has significant resources to stay in power for a long time. First, because of the anti-GERB bond that holds the four parties together, especially in the face of growing opposition activity. Second, because of the convincing self-promotion, which allows them to overcome scandals without major damage to their rating. Third, because of the available budgetary opportunities, which give them the confidence that they have sufficient means to control the situation. Fourth, because of their remarkable energy, which in the eyes of public opinion contrasts sharply with the apparent fatigue of opposition leader Boyko Borisov. And fifth, which might be the most important factor, because of the tensions between the West and Russia, which are emerging as a long-term factor on the horizon and stimulating political predictability and stability.

Energy is becoming confirmed as a key area of governance. The changes in the management teams of the energy regulator - the State Agency of Energy Regulation - and the state company Bulgargaz demonstrate the desire of the government to seek a new pricing policy and organisation of the energy market. The visit of the Minister of Finance Asen Vassilev and the Minister of Energy Alexander Nikolov to the Unit-

ed States was dedicated to the issue of diversification of energy supplies. This is a topic on which the government has worked extremely actively, and within its framework both the accelerated construction of the interconnector with Greece and the talks of Prime Minister Petkov in Serbia should be analysed. Bulgaria also requested and received from the European Commission an additional postponement of a revision of the Recovery and Sustainability Plan aimed at limiting heat and gas capacity and their displacement from batteries. All this shows an ambition to drastically transform the structure of the Bulgarian energy sector in a relatively short period of time.

The President. The head of state Rumen Radev stood out in the public space with his critical assessments regarding the work of the government - on appointments, tax policy, fuel prices and the Macedonian issue. The culmination was Radev's conclusion "The time for analysis is over; what we need now is action." This gave the impression of deepening tension between the institution and the executive branch, which, *apropos*, was predicted at the time of the elections in November. At the same time, however, the extremely moderate reactions of the Prime Minister and the Minister of Finance should be pointed out. It is difficult to talk about a conflict, and even less so a "war between the institutions", but the distance is apparent. Radev is trying to find a political place that is simultaneously close enough to the cabinet that it does not look in tune with the opposition, and yet far enough away that it does not remain in its shadow and does not share responsibility for its actions. His high rating and the crisis of the political parties are helping Radev to consolidate his corrective position. An immediate challenge to this position will be the president's attitude towards the dismissal of the minister of war.

The prosecutor's office. The systematic attack on Chief Prosecutor Ivan Geshev continues. Both sides in the institutional conflict - the prosecutor's office and the government - have brought things to the attention of European institutions. The Prime Minister submitted to Geshev a list of 19 names of people suspected of corruption and, in exchange, GERB's youth structure and

journalist Nikolai Barekov made their own lists with allegations against the cabinet. With the scandals over the “Golden Passports” and “Barcelonagate”, the government wants to make it clear that the prosecution is clearly not doing its job. The decision of the Constitutional Court that the Minister of Justice has the right to demand the resignation of the Prosecutor General puts the Supreme Judicial Council in a difficult position. Still, despite the counter-actions he is taking, Geshev appears to be in “survival” mode.

Public opinion. The war in Ukraine and high inflation are the focus of Bulgarian society, and electricity prices are specifically provoking serious business concerns. A nationally representative survey conducted by Alpha Research between February 6th and 14th provides an interesting perspective on the political aspects of mass attitudes. President Radev enjoys an impressive rating of 51%, which gives him the opportunity to send

authoritative messages and even be an arbiter in the political debate. The new government enjoys a strong positive attitude (35% confidence versus 23% distrust), more than any other cabinet since 2009. It is clear that expectations for change are still focused on the leading political force “We Continue the Change” which is the undisputed leader in the rank-list (24%), at an increasing distance from the main opposition GERB-UDF (18%). It is significant, however, that supporters of “We Continue the Change” see President Radev as a greater authority than their own leader Kiril Petkov (in a situation of tension between the two, 38% of this electorate would support Radev against 26% for Petkov). In this sense, it is still difficult to talk about outstanding leadership in the executive branch. It is as if public attitudes are encouraging Radev and Petkov to interact – Petkov should, because Radev is more authoritative than him, and Radev should, because people do not want early elections.

3

THE STATE OF THE PARTY SYSTEM

“We Continue the Change”, as a leading political force, continue to concentrate the highest level of public approval and, at the same time, to determine the greatest agenda of governance. The budgetary procedure and the fate of the Recovery and Sustainability Plan are examples in this sphere. At the same time, “We Continue the Change” still function as a political network of like-minded people, and not as a party. It is noteworthy that it is approaching the 100th day of its government with no apparent intention of even establishing itself as a party by law, let alone building local structures. Efforts are focused mainly on promoting the activities of individual ministers and MPs on specific cases. It is worthy of note that longer-term political strategies seem to be set by two figures – Minister of Finance Assen Vassilev and Minister of Innovation and Growth Daniel Lorer.

GERB-UDF, as the main opposition party, demonstrate an ebbing of support. On one hand, this is due to their gradual removal from power. On the other hand, GERB do not seem to be able to impose their own topics in Bulgarian politics and only react to the actions of the government. The party’s tactics remain defensive. The priority task is to protect the leader Boyko Borisov from attacks and allegations, and to a lesser extent - the achievements of the previous GERB administrations. This line is most evident in the discussions on the development of the “Barcelona-gate” scandal, regarding the investigation of money laundering schemes with the alleged, but unproven, involvement of Borisov. In this case, GERB were not only the most active in the media and parliament, but also gave the impression that they were ready for a deal - to display more cooperative behaviour towards the government in exchange for the government refraining from interfering in such scandals. In any case, there are no public and political preconditions for GERB to return to power any time soon. Therefore, there is greater importance attached to the forthcoming National Assembly of the party in mid-March, at which personnel changes in the leadership and probably a reassessment of the political course are expected.

The Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) keeps on with extremely aggressive political be-

haviour and in this sense is established as a more serious opposition than GERB. The main lines of criticism of the government are in two directions known from the past - firstly, accusations that the cabinet is in fact made up of representatives of businessman Ivo Prokopiev, and secondly, allegations of human rights violations. The first direction is represented in a series of acute statements and initiatives. Among these are the threats that the investigations of the so-called “Golden passports” (obtaining Bulgarian citizenship in exchange for investment in the country) will expose the Prime Minister’s cronies; the insistence on announcing which private media outlets receive state funding; theses that there is a “risk of corruption” in the budget. All this is intended to suggest that the current government is serving Prokopiev, and thus protecting the image of businessman Delyan Peevski, an MRF MP, as a fighter against the oligarchy and a victim of its attacks. This line is partly illustrated in the second direction of criticism. The MRF has contacted the prosecutor’s office about Finance Minister Asen Vassilev for “illegal inspections” of Peevski, as well as the European Commission and the European Parliament for alleged violations of civil rights during the 2021 elections. On the whole, the party is trying to build an image of “We Continue the Change” as a “second GERB” with the same characteristics as the original one - corruption and repression. What is more, MRF managed to take the political initiative on a key issue for the government, constitutional reform. Despite the many comments and promises of changes in the judiciary, so far only MRF has announced ideas for changes to the Constitution. This makes them unavoidable participants in the future discussion on the issue.

The Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) are making efforts to establish themselves as an independent player in the government, different from the other three formations. The propaganda of the party focuses on a topic that has become mandatory for all speakers - that the country has received the most social budget for the last quarter of a century and that this is the merit of BSP alone. The figures do not convincingly prove this statement, but it is imposed daily in the media. Along with the budget, there is a campaign to

create a personal image of leader Korneliya Ninova as a defender of the poor and disadvantaged. In January, Ninova's main issues as deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Economy were the prices of mobile operators and the actions of collection companies, whilst in February the state's ambition to buy wood and sell it to people at preferential prices was stated. Despite all this, however, the party leadership cannot overcome the impression of an outflow of support and a continuing downward movement. Sociological polls, registering alarmingly low electoral levels for BSP, in fact express the results of an objective trend of self-closure of the party and repulsion of supporters. First, the National Council took the decision to remove Kaloyan Pargov as chairman of the Sofia organisation. The way in which this happened (anonymous petition against Pargov, immediate convening of the National Council and voting by mail) left no doubt that this was yet another clearing of accounts of the leadership with internal party opponents. The question of "who is next" in this sense is completely logical and flies in the face of all claims of consolidation and unification of left-wing forces. Second, the party itself launched the so-called March of the awake, during which the candidate for leader Krum Zarkov, the MEP Petar Vitanov and the mayor of Pernik Stanislav Vladimirov started a series of meetings with local structures to hold talks on the future of BSP. The rhetoric of this trio, who began to be joined by other recognisable people, emphasising cohesion and renewal, contrasts with the behaviour of the leadership and clearly shows how another way is possible for BSP. Third, the unconvincing reaction of BSP to the war in Ukraine (when the parliamentary group refused to support a declaration of sanctions against Russia and subsequently backed the declaration with minimal editing) failed to appease either supporters of the Russian standpoint or those against it. The party faction "Socialism of the 21st Century" came up with a pro-Russian position, which further stressed the reluctance of the leadership to make clear decisions and be responsible for them. And fourth, rumours are spreading that a new left-wing project is being prepared that would include the movement of former ombudsman Maya Manolova and other left-wing formal and informal organisations. This demonstrates that circles outside BSP consider the party exhausted and the left-wing political niche free.

"There is such a people" (ITN) do not seem to be looking for a clear ideological or political face in government, but quite the contrary, preferring to function as a distributor of staff in power. On one hand, this carries a serious risk of political marginalisation, but on the other, it creates opportunities for political participation as a moderate and pragmatic party that does not engage in self-serving battles and does not draw dividing lines. The main way in which ITN achieve their goals regarding personnel is the full and unconditional support for the cabinet, considerably

more categorical than, for example, BSP or DB. In fact, ITN is the only partner in the government coalition that appreciates the current government and promises it a solid perspective. The party also stood firmly behind Prime Minister Kiril Petkov and "We Continue the Change" on the war with Ukraine and fully defended the budget in all its dimensions, even publicly confronting its former prime ministerial candidate, Nikolai Vassilev, on the latter issue. But precisely because it can be least associated with a political line of its own, ITN remains most dangerous for its partners in a crisis situation.

"Democratic Bulgaria" (DB) is not managing to overcome the trends of crisis. After the re-election of Hristo Ivanov as leader of "Yes, Bulgaria", it was time for the leader of "Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria" (DSB) Atanas Atanasov to be re-elected. In neither case did there seem to be any serious analysis of the reasons for the electoral defeat. No new perspective was proposed. In DSB, this took on an even more drastic appearance with Atanasov's promise that "it will not change." The party's national assembly had several results. First, Atanasov, who controls the party apparatus and some of the structures, won only with a ratio of 3:2 against his national rival Tsetska Bachkova. Second, Atanasov's proposed new party leadership included people who are not popular and who can hardly be expected to boost the position of DSB. Third, discussions that the party should strengthen its ideological image and emerge from the shadow of "Yes, Bulgaria" have only led to calls for lustration of former communists and references to some kind of conservatism that has never been clear. Fourth, the youth organisation's decision to dissolve itself in response to Atanasov's re-election was a heavy blow to the image of DSB regarding their ability to demonstrate a vision for the future. There is an imminent national party forum of the Green Movement coming up in March, for which there are no signals so far that it will announce any significant change. As a participant in the government, DB, for their part, cannot escape the shadow of the leading political force, "We Continue the Change". Hristo Ivanov was indeed elected chairman of the parliamentary committee on changes to the Constitution, but his role remains unclear amid a clash between "We Continue the Change" and MRF over the judiciary and the chief prosecutor. And the conflict in Ukraine, which at another moment in time would probably give priority to DB's traditional anti-Russian stance, focuses more on Prime Minister Petkov. Petkov's remark that Russia is a "petrol station with rockets" invalidates all the anti-Russian talk of the DB over the years.

"Vazrazhdane" ("Revival") are increasing their electoral sway as the most radical opposition to "the whole status quo". The phrase of the party leader Kostadin Kostadinov that he wants to "break" the government has become emblematic. In fact, of all the

political forces represented in parliament, only “Vazrazhdane” declare that they want the government to fall and new elections to come. The others, including GERB and MRF, have not come up with such a thesis. This creates the advantage of open radicalism, without back doors. However, the advantage is conditional. The tactics of “Vazrazhdane” of exerting street pressure on the government (the “people” against the “elite”) prompted the party to hold a second rally after January on the same topic, that of revoking the “green certificate” as an anti-epidemic measure. And, while the first rally turned into an event, the second failed. Days before the rally, the cabinet announced

the intention of revoking the certificate, which shook potential participants. Then with his appearance at the rally, Prime Minister Kiril Petkov took the initiative from Kostadinov and made his own speech bigger news than the messages of the protesters. “Vazrazhdane” also failed to capitalise on their image as a staunch supporter of cooperation with Russia over the Ukrainian conflict. Despite his pro-Russian rhetoric in parliament, Kostadinov went so far as to agree that Russia had carried out aggression and that international law had been violated. Thus, the party did not stand out effectively as a political pole on any of the central topics on the agenda.

4

MAIN CONCLUSIONS AND FORECASTS

The war in Ukraine has put Bulgarian domestic and foreign policy in an entirely new context. The country faces important issues that have not yet been resolved and will depend on the development and duration of the conflict. Among these issues primary importance is taken by the place of Bulgaria in the so-called strengthening NATO's eastern flank, accepting refugees from Ukraine and the attitude of the country towards the Bulgarian diaspora in Ukraine. Indirect consequences of this new situation are also emerging. The radical transformation of the Bulgarian energy sector is already underway and is certain to continue. The conditions under which Bulgaria will negotiate a new gas supply contract from Gazprom in 2023 are becoming increasingly important. It can be predicted with a very high degree of probability that the Belene Nuclear Power Plant project has failed. It is difficult to imagine a new Russian project in an EU member state. Bulgarian tourism, for its part, is threatened by a crisis that will require solid state measures. The desire to consolidate the Western world against Russia will also affect relations in the Balkans. One must bear in mind that the territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina is also being severely tested. In this context, increased pressure on Bulgaria to lift its veto on the commencement of North Macedonia's EU membership talks is entirely possible. Domestically, the war in Ukraine will have a stabilising effect on the Bulgarian government. During the conflict, political destabilisation will not be desired by anyone, especially by Bulgaria's western partners. What is more, at this stage, the current majority has no other possible alternative but Borisov's GERB, who were the political architect of the "Balkan Stream" project for a Russian gas pipeline through Bulgaria.

The budget procedure has created an unequivocal division between the ruling party and the opposition. The ruling majority are united, while GERB, MRF and "Vazrazhdane" clearly declare themselves as opposed to it.

The social division between Russophiles and Russophobes, which is traditional for Bulgaria, has been re-activated with the beginning of the conflict, but so far it has not acquired a parliamentary dimension. Political parties avoid taking extreme positions. The crisis of the party system as a whole is deepening. Opinion polls show two winning parties: "We Continue the Change" and "Vazrazhdane", but they also have internal problems – a lack of organisation and a clear decision-making mechanism in "We Continue the Change" and the decline of a key topic of mobilisation in "Vazrazhdane", such as the fight against anti-epidemic measures. GERB are not managing to gather support from the social discontent of the people in the winter season. Both GERB and MRF seem to have a fixation on the protection of one specific person, in the first case Boyko Borisov, and in the second Delyan Peevski. This greatly narrows the field for political manoeuvring of both parties. The traditional left wing and the traditional right wing are becoming increasingly depersonalised. Both BSP and DB have suffered severe damage from the dilemma of the change in the status quo in Bulgarian politics. In their quest to break away from the status quo, both formations have so far failed to prove themselves as part of the change. Re-electing their leaders and maintaining the current course neither promises "change" nor better results.

Apart from anything else, the war in Ukraine increases the risks to the Bulgarian economy and compounds the effects of the social crisis. Citizens and small businesses would find it hard to believe that they have "the most social budget in history". Conditions are being created for the formation of new political parties. At the same time, the great danger lies in a populist exploitation of public fears. From an institutional point of view, the balance between the President and the government - both on Ukraine and beyond - is becoming the most important condition for the legitimacy of the political system in the coming months.

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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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Further information on the topic can be found here:
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