

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

POLIT-BAROMETER

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The issue of whether to provide military assistance to Ukraine in the conflict with Russia has become a dividing line in Bulgarian politics.



The social and economic policy of the Bulgarian government has been compromised as a result of the war and the crisis and requires new solutions.



Trust in institutions and parties is diminishing without a clear alternative.

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1

FOREIGN POLICY DYNAMICS

The war in Ukraine. This is a central topic on the agenda of Bulgarian politics. It is developing in several directions.

First is the issue of strengthening the eastern flank of NATO. At the Alliance Summit, it was decided to deploy a battalion battle group in Bulgaria (as well as in Romania, Slovakia and Hungary). This news has been the only major announcement since US Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin's subsequent visit to Sofia. The issue raised by President Rumen Radev about the protection of the Bulgarian air space in the situation of serious problems of the Bulgarian fighter aircraft remained open. Two additional topics testify to Bulgaria's difficulties regarding defending itself and its citizens in the face of a raging military conflict. The first is the information about sea mines in the Black Sea, which have not reached Bulgarian territorial waters, but which now raise concerns about the capacity for disarming them. The other is the issue of Bulgarian sailors on a ship in Mariupol, near the site of hostilities. Their safe return turned out to be insoluble by the end of the month with the funds of the Bulgarian state.

Second is the possible provision of military assistance to Ukraine. Calls for such assistance in the form of fighter jets and anti-missile systems have come from various political and social backgrounds. It has been pointed out that only Bulgaria and Hungary are not involved in supporting the Ukrainian armed forces against Russian aggression. There has been speculation that the real reason for Lloyd Austin's visit to Sofia was this. In this regard, an unfavourable social environment is being formed. A poll by the organisation Trend shows that while only 16% of Bulgarians support the Russian invasion of Ukraine, as many as 77% oppose NATO military intervention (which means directly or indirectly Bulgaria) in the conflict. Fears of becoming involved in the war are established as a considerable barrier to any government initiative. Two "camps" have emerged. One camp insisted on military aid and claimed that the "for / against Putin's war" dilemma was tantamount to a "for / against" military aid to Ukraine dilemma. This camp includes the right-wing parties and even the leading formation in the government of "We Continue the Change". Minister

of Finance Asen Vassilev, for example, supported such a decision, and Prime Minister Petkov, who clearly displays a similar penchant, presented his justification with the disagreement of Bulgarian society, but left a back door open with the explanation that a decision on military aid could be taken by the National Assembly. The other camp believes that Bulgaria's participation in the conflict in any form is unacceptable and poses not only a risk to the country's security, but also a way to create a distance with peace. A clear expression of this opinion is that of President Rumen Radev, who at one point even hinted that Bulgaria could host peace talks between Russia and Ukraine. BSP also opposed the provision of weapons, and the party "Vazrazhdane" ("Revival") took a step forward and suggested that Bulgaria should not accept NATO contingents on its territory.

Third is the energy problem in the context of the war. The point is that Bulgaria (like many other European countries) is highly dependent on Russian gas and oil supplies. It is clear that these supplies can be used - and are being used - as political pressure from Russia. However, overcoming the dependence in question is a process that, if it were realistic to do so at an affordable price, would take many years. The efforts of the Bulgarian government are primarily focused in two directions. The first is interconnection. Accelerated work on completing the interconnector with Greece and connecting it to the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline have been events this month. Prime Minister Petkov's visit to Turkey to meet with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan was dedicated to energy diversification, and in particular to opportunities for more significant supplies of Azerbaijani gas through Turkey. Diversification was also at the centre of a special meeting in Sofia of Petkov with the prime ministers of Romania - Nicolae Chuka, Montenegro - Zdravko Krivokapic and Northern Macedonia - Dimitar Kovachevski, who, in the name of "Coordinated Balkans", also talked about accelerating North Macedonia's integration into the EU. Later, Petkov tried to link liberation from Russian energy dependence to the fight against corruption, a central theme for his government. The Balkan route of the Turkish Stream, which carries Russian gas, was cited as an example of corruption. It should

be noted that the Prime Minister and the President took similar positions on the issue of energy connectivity and diversification. President Radev called for a NATO-backed pipeline system in Southeast Europe and developed his idea in talks with Romanian President Klaus Johannes and Polish counterpart Andrzej Duda. The second area of activity concerns relations with Gazprom. Something that caused shockwaves was the statement of the Minister of Finance Asen Vassilev (subsequently reiterated by the Minister of Energy Alexander Nikolov) that Bulgaria has no intention of negotiating with Gazprom for a new gas supply contract after the current one expires at the end of 2022. In the absence of a clear alternative, such a point of view was received with with exceptionally acute negative reactions not only from employers' organisations in Bulgaria, but even abroad. Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic has warned Bulgaria to be careful with the prospect of gas transit through its territory to Serbia. It was later clarified that the Bulgarian government was relying on a joint decision of the European Union to buy gas from Russia, so that Bulgaria would not have to negotiate separately with the Russian gas giant Gazprom. Such a joint decision was part of the agenda of the Brussels European Council at the end of March. However, the barriers to its implementation remain enormous, also because of the insistence of Russian partners for payment for the raw material to be made in rubles.

Fourth, the attitude towards the Russian ambassador. From the very beginning of the war, the behaviour of the Russian ambassador to Bulgaria Eleonora Mitrofanova gave the impression of going beyond her diplomatic status. Mitrofanova refused to appear at the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to receive a note regarding the use of rude language; she stated that the majority of Bulgarians support Russia, unlike their own government; she pointed out that without the help of the Soviet Union, Bulgaria would have remained only within the borders of Sofia Province. Each of these statements sparked a storm of criticism and outrage in certain political and media circles. It is also necessary to point out the context in which Russia included Bulgaria in the list of "enemy states" (along with all other EU members) and Bulgaria expelled 10 Russian diplomats on charges of illegal activity. In the end, the Bulgarian government responded by demanding consultations with Ambassador to Moscow Atanas Krastin. Prime Minister Petkov has even publicly stated that he expects Russia to act reciprocally and recall Mitrofanova (temporarily). There is no such thing as an imperative requirement of this kind. The Russian ambassador has taken on the function of a major irritant to the Bulgarian government. In doing so, her statements have not only become more popular, but also mobilised supporters of the Russian version of the Ukrainian conflict with the aggression and determination in them.

2

INSTITUTIONS AND THE AGENDA OF SOCIETY

The government. The 100 days of Petkov's cabinet, which transpired in late March, sparked polar reactions. The leading party in the government - "We Continue the Change" - and personally the Prime Minister Kiril Petkov referred to the successes achieved; while the opposition, represented by GERB and MRF, described the cabinet as "unrescuable" and "devoid of a plan". The many crises in which Bulgaria finds itself (economic, social, energy, geopolitical) are, according to some estimates, a justification for the shortcomings, but, according to others, a clear sign of the incompetence of the government.

There are several fields of increased activity. First, with regard to the judiciary. The intentions to complete the process of closing down the specialised courts and the prosecutor's office are quite clear. The co-operation with the European Public Prosecutor's Office and the visit of the European Chief Prosecutor Laura Coveschi to Sofia are a signal that a special focus will be the misuse of European funds. Second, in terms of e-government. The development of mobile electronic identification as well as e-health plans is progressing. March is rich in news in this direction, already tied to clearer deadlines. Third, with regard to ecology. The thesis of the Minister of Environment and Water Borislav Sandov that the Green Deal is not a problem but a solution in the context of the war in Ukraine deserves attention. For the first time in Bulgarian conditions there is a counterargument to the statement that the energy crisis implies the postponement and transformation of the Green Deal. There are indications that the reassessment of the country's energy profile is proceeding at a rapid pace with the priority of green policies. The standstill of previous years seems to have been overcome, although too many questions remain. There is still no strategic concept, and the risks of a premature "green turn" in the economy are significant. Fourth, on energy connectivity. The decision to complete and rapidly build ties with other Balkan countries is a new stage in the country's energy policy. Fifth, on the Recovery and Sustainability Plan. The fact that this has been returned yet again from the European Commission for corrections is a minus for the cabinet. Criticisms of the nature of the projects outlined in the Plan also raise questions about the

real goals of the Bulgarian side. Doubts about the interference of both personal and geopolitical interests have been voiced. Sixth, in the light of the refugee issue. The actions of the cabinet are limited to the ambition to register refugees and rely too much on the temporary European directive. It is also unclear how Bulgaria sees the potential of the future Refugee Fund, discussed at the Versailles European Council. Seventh, but not least in importance, behaviour in relation to the economic crisis. Politics here seems chaotic, inconsistent, and without strategy. The legitimate concerns of the population and business do not seem to be adequately taken into account. Reassuring statements that things will settle down in a few months are hardly enough.

Politically, the government continues to look stable. According to forecasts, the war in Ukraine has become a kind of guarantee against the fall of the Cabinet and early elections. This is acknowledged by both the opposition and analysts. At the same time, the four parties in the ruling majority have managed to achieve unity in their parliamentary behaviour, despite differences. Only in some cases (although important ones such as the rules for electing a governor of BNB) do discrepancies occur. The problem, as in previous months, is rooted mainly in the independent management policies of the individual parties, which are rarely fused by a common idea.

The President. President Rumen Radev maintains his position as a moderate critic of the government in both domestic and foreign policy. The line of the head of state is outlined in several directions - calls for more responsibility in taking decisions; protection of the results (and personnel) of the caretaker governments from last year; and assessments of thoughtlessness and incompleteness of management initiatives. Information about a new political project, which will be headed by former caretaker Prime Minister Stefan Yanev, inevitably reflects on Radev. Rumours that the President is encouraging the formation of new parties cannot be refuted, even with the best of intentions. It seems that Radev prefers to take advantage of them to exert influence and to continue to concentrate the idea of change around himself. In the context of

this behaviour, however, the head of state is gradually losing the support of right-wing circles in society, which increasingly see him as an opponent of a clear Euro-Atlantic policy. The balance between the various factors of "change" that Radev has been trying to embody over the past two years has been shaken.

The Chief Prosecutor. The prosecutor's office is in an already obvious and daily conflict with the executive branch. March began with a repeated request by the Minister of Justice for the removal of Ivan Geshev. The culmination was the statements of Prime Minister Petkov about "absolute sabotage" by the prosecutor's office and Interior Minister Boyko Rashkov for the "umbrella over the accused", held up by Geshev. The tendency to close the specialised courts and prosecutor's office is also an institutional blow to Geshev. Against this background, the investigation into Finance Minister Asen Vassilev is easily presented by the government as a political counterattack.

Public opinion. The series of crises that have befallen Bulgaria logically increase the anxiety in the Bulgarian society. A nationally representative survey conducted by the agency "Trend" in mid-March showed a rise of 7% to 47% in pessimism about the future of the country in just one month. A collapse of trust in the institutions can also be determined: 24% trust in the National Assembly (5% less than in February); 29% in government (10% less than in February); 49% in the President (6% less than in February). The lack of a clear perspective and guarantees for security distances people from both the ruling party and the opposition. Everyday fears of inflation culminate in clashes over the purchase of cheaper cooking oil in stores and in queues at petrol stations. These events have been explained by those in power with deliberate panic and the machinations of speculators, but are indicative of the moods of the masses. There is a clear belief that the political elite is not giving the right answers to the concerns.

3

THE STATE OF THE PARTY SYSTEM

“We Continue the Change” still identify politically with their key representatives in government and parliament. Increased criticism of them in recent weeks has naturally led to a decrease in confidence. The ostentatious optimism of the leader Kiril Petkov in any situation emerges as the most important political capital of “We Continue the Change”.

GERB-UDF are going through a period of very serious ordeal. Both partners in the coalition held their own forums, at which they re-elected the current chairmen - Boyko Borisov in GERB and Rumen Hristov in UDF. The signals from these events do not indicate any intention for any significant change in ideology and behaviour. The focus is on events surrounding the crisis. Three messages came out of the GERB National Assembly: unanimity (there are no different opinions or different votes in the party), Borisov’s lack of alternatives (his edifying, even rude, speech reaffirmed his image as party owner rather than “first among equals”); reluctance to take risks (the Executive Committee was re-elected with one exception); the announced course towards early elections aims to unite and mobilise supporters of the party, and not so much to establish a real new situation in the country. It is significant that GERB executives stressed very soon afterwards that the time was not right for elections.

The GERB National Assembly was completely overshadowed by the arrest of Borisov, his PR Sevdalina Arnaudova and former Finance Minister Vladislav Goranov on suspicion of abuse. This has become a scandal with a strong international response. For the first time since the arrest of Andrei Lukanov in 1992 has a former Bulgarian Prime Minister been detained. With regard to Borisov, Arnaudova and Goranov, the impression was created that there was a lack of sufficient evidence, which made the action of the Ministry of Interior extremely risky and with unpredictable consequences. The three detainees were released after 24 hours and were given the opportunity to claim that it was repression of the government against a political opponent. There has been criticism that this arrest actually achieves the opposite result. According to these critics, instead of publicly exposing Borisov’s corruption, he has fallen victim to an authoritarian approach. Howev-

er, those in power have not lost their chances of winning the battle for interpretations. First, political will was demonstrated personally by Prime Minister Petkov. Second, the suggestion was mooted that the actions against Borisov are not a national issue, but are in some way related to the European Prosecutor’s Office and do not depend on the resources and capabilities of Borisov himself to prevent them. Third, the responsibility for the lack of charges was shifted to the prosecutor’s office, thus striking yet again at Chief Prosecutor Geshev. And fourth, despite Borisov’s release, he begins to look like a person who could be under arrest again at any moment. The political perspective of such figures would be perceived by many as dubious.

The Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) is currently the most predictable participant in the political process. The party attacks individual ministers to erode cabinet unity; it seeks to maintain its position in the judiciary as far as possible; it defends its MP Delyan Peevski against all charges and systematically points to businessman Ivo Prokopiev as the main culprit for oligarchic dependencies in Bulgaria. The goal of MRF again seems relatively clear - to reach a parliamentary situation in which they will be able to sway the balance in one direction or another.

The main challenge for the **Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP)** is to clarify convincingly its place in the ruling coalition and in the political process as a whole. The first aspect of the problem is with regard to the war in Ukraine. The Socialists insist on a moderate stance against Russia, opposing the idea of new sanctions, the election of “hawk” Todor Tagarev as Minister of Defence and the provision of military aid to Kyiv. At the same time, they are not looking for allies and are trying to distance themselves from President Radev, who is in some respects close to their line. At the same time, they are trying not to compromise the perspective of the government of which they are part, against the background of escalating calls from various circles in Bulgaria to leave the ruling majority precisely because of incompatible views on the war in Ukraine.

The second aspect is related to the role of the “social vector” in the government, which the BSP attribut-

ed to itself at the beginning of its mandate. This role was consistently consolidated with the theses on the “most social budget” that Bulgaria has ever had. However, against the background of soaring energy prices and high inflation, such claims can no longer be justified. The crisis has literally “eaten up” the social vector, and the alibi of BSP is focused on the future, and on updating the state budget.

A third aspect is provided by the personal initiatives of the leader Korneliya Ninova, who in her capacity as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Economy and Industry tried to establish herself as a personal guarantor of social justice in Bulgarian society. The results of most initiatives, however, are discouraging. As a reminder: for the prices of mobile operators not to be increased (in the end they were increased); for the pressure of collection companies on debtors to be stopped (the submitted bill was branded as lobbyist and was never voted on); for speculation with cooking oil and basic foodstuffs to cease (no serious consequences have occurred); and finally to introduce force majeure, which allows non-fulfillment of agreements in the crisis (the idea was rejected by the coalition partners). However these intentions are assessed as regards their content, the lack of ability to turn them into governmental decisions undermines the importance of Ninova herself as a factor in the cabinet.

Fourth, suspicions of corruption and nepotism should be highlighted. A scandal erupted over the allegations of the MP from “We Continue the Change” Alexander Dunchev that BSP indiscriminately fired proven specialists in the forestry sector in order to appoint their own staff. The scandal was suppressed rather rudely, and Dunchev was even suspected of having mental problems. Wherever the truth lies, the conviction which formed after the elections that BSP will use its participation in the government for staff appointments of those loyal to the leadership remains valid. This further risks repelling party supporters. The party headquarters openly downplay the new political projects of Maya Manolova and Stefan Yanev. But the danger of them attracting disgruntled socialist supporters should not be underestimated.

Logically, a fifth aspect of the problem with the political role of the BSP is contained in the strategy for recovery after the severe electoral defeats last year. Past events so far do not confirm Ninova’s thesis from the 50th Congress that participation in the government will revive the party. The principle of “the staff decide everything” can mobilise a small party elite, but not offer a vision for the future. Therefore it is not Ninova’s initiatives that attract attention, but the country tour of MP Krum Zarkov, together with MEP Petar Vitanov, Pernik Mayor Stanislav Vladimirov, former Social Deputy Minister Nadya Klisurska and other representatives of the younger generation on the left. These meetings

are dedicated to both the organisational strengthening of BSP and the ideological renewal. The so-called “march of the awake” of Zarkov and his colleagues is an example that a more youthful, dynamic, more progressive and ultimately more European profile of the party is not only possible, but nor does it contradict the attitudes and expectations of voters.

“There is such a people” (ITN) entered the agenda of the month with the candidacy of their MP Lubomir Karimanski for BNB Governor. Karimanski’s past as an expert in the banks of famous oligarchs has been the subject of fierce criticism. “We Continue the Change”, in their role of leading partner in the coalition, have nominated their candidate against Karimanski, Andrei Gyurov. Analyses have emerged that this clash could cost the coalition its survival. Such conclusions are exaggerated, but something else is important. Without hesitation ITN accepted the support of GERB and MRF for a change in the rules for electing the governor of the bank. This is the first important precedent in this parliament, in which a situational majority has been formed between parts of those in power and the opposition. This fact itself confirms the older paradoxical observation that the most surprises for the government can be expected from the partner who is most “docile” and with the least public appearances.

“Democratic Bulgaria” (DB), as in last month, has failed to take the lead on either of its two main topics - judicial reform and opposition to Russia. To some extent, this can be explained by internal problems. In “Yes, Bulgaria” for the first time a faction called the Club “December 9th” has been created, which has declared itself against the authoritarianism of the leader Hristo Ivanov and challenged the role of the alleged “grey cardinal” Ivaylo Mirchev. The erosion of Ivanov’s image is indeed happening. If in recent months there were warnings that the entire DB coalition has become “Hristo Ivanov’s party”, this is no longer the case. Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria (DSB) are pursuing their own policy of acute criticism of the security services suspected of links with Russia. The same suspicion is indirectly directed at President Radev. The Green Movement seems to be the most stable. It held its own national forum, at which one of the co-chairs, Borislav Sandov, left his post painlessly and without scandals, and was replaced by Plovdiv activist Dobromira Kostova. Kostova’s election and the messages of the forum show the priority of decentralisation and local policies, which brings the Bulgarian Greens even closer to their partners in Western Europe and seeks to expand their base. The Green Movement’s proposal for Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to be heard in the National Assembly may be the subject of criticism and even ironic evaluations, but still it betrays the party’s ambition to dictate the agenda instead of engaging the attention of society with their internal contradictions.

“Vazrazhdane” (“Revival”) has undergone an interesting transformation. From a party that for months had been fully focused on combating restrictive measures in the Covid-19 pandemic, it has found itself in a new situation. The pandemic is off the agenda. “Vazrazhdane”, regularly accused of having pro-Russian positions, actually took one in the debate on Ukraine. At the same time, the emphasis is not on justifying Putin’s policies, but on anti-American messages. Prime Minister Petkov was booed and almost physically attacked by “Vazrazhdane” supporters during the celebrations of the March 3rd national holiday at the top of Mount Shipka; the government has been accused from the

parliamentary rostrum of “national treason” for covert intentions to send weapons to Ukraine; an impressive rally was held against the NATO presence in Bulgaria. The thesis that the government is trying to involve Bulgaria in a war under the dictates of the United States stands out. Sociological polls, which for another month show a growth in support for “Vazrazhdane”, are evidence that this is an electoral niche that is expected to be filled. The flexibility of the party should be pointed out, which allows it to take advantage in short periods of completely different situations to exploit its traditional motive of “conspiracy of the elites” against the freedom and interests of the Bulgarian nation.

4

MAIN CONCLUSIONS AND FORECASTS

Bulgaria acts as a loyal ally of the EU and NATO in the war in Ukraine. However, there is a serious division among the Bulgarian government over the level of Bulgarian participation. Fears of Bulgaria's involvement in the war are widespread in society, and their political use could put the legitimacy of the government to the test. It would be extremely unfavourable for Petkov's cabinet if the interpretation that military aid to Ukraine means war and non-aid means peace were confirmed. From the events so far it can be concluded that a potential common position of the EU would exert the greatest sway over the Bulgarian position in this case. Bulgaria should strive for such a common position in order to act within its framework. Adherence to the point of view of the United States, NATO or the principle of "each country should decide for itself how to help" would rather not have the same social effect. Successful peace talks between Ukraine and Russia, which everyone hopes for, would reformulate the issue of attitude and participation, but it would not undo it.

Bulgarian-Russian relations are close to freezing point. However, the criticisms and accusations against Ambassador Mitrofanova are hardly the most appropriate course of action. In fact, they make Mitrofanova a key factor in the Bulgarian political process. State institutions should address the government that the ambassador represents, rather than addressing the ambassador herself. Moreover, the existing calls for Mitrofanova to be declared *persona non grata* would be quite dangerous, because it would essentially mean the end of diplomatic relations, something that no other EU member state or NATO is doing.

The war in Ukraine is undoubtedly increasing fears in Bulgarian society. These also have a socio-economic dimension. Unfortunately, however, the inflationary processes that citizens are suffering from are not yet due to the conflict itself, but to earlier causes. For this reason the escalation of anxieties has yet to be observed.

The problem of the Bulgarian veto on the negotiation process of North Macedonia with the EU has returned to the agenda with the active assistance of

Prime Minister Petkov. The renewed discussion could bring new divisions and tensions to society and the political elite.

The "Petkov" cabinet is not convincing in its overall policy, but it has the potential to last - first, because of the war, and second, because of the lack of a more convincing alternative. The intentions for new political projects, as well as the electoral rise of "Vazrazhdane", are important facts, but they have not changed the political situation so far. Political apathy and social anxiety will predetermine the atmosphere in society to a much greater extent. There are no early elections on the horizon. The coalition is likely to experience major upheavals in the weeks and months to come, and changes of ministers should not be ruled out, but even a change in the ruling majority within the current parliament still does not seem like a viable option.

Against the background of the government's often chaotic and inconsistent actions, President Radev has a chance to establish himself as a kind of "centre of stability" in the political system, a factor that, whether it be with hope or reluctance, many will see in the long run.

The battle for the prosecution is entering an increasingly decisive phase, in which surprises and news come almost on a daily basis. It seems increasingly likely that the executive branch will take the necessary steps and remove Prosecutor General Geshev, perhaps as early as this year.

The arrest of the leader of the opposition Borisov sent the most reverberations around the Bulgarian political space. This action puts an end to the speculations that some joint government of GERB and "We Continue the Change" is possible in the near future. The strongest indicator in this direction is the fact that Boyko Rashkov stays as Minister of Interior. The party GERB itself is aware that they are likely to face a longer period of opposition. It is possible that Borisov's moderate behaviour after his release from custody indicates a desire for understanding with the government over his own situation. GERB's rhetoric that the

cabinet is completely exhausted is reminiscent of their tactics during Oresharski's cabinet in 2013-2014: the ambition being to present the government as an agency that will sooner or later end. Radicalisation at this stage is unlikely.

The main factor that might shake the government is embedded within it. This is the risk of uncontrollable processes, both in the economic sphere and in the context of externally induced crises. The issue of updating the state budget is increasingly on the agenda.

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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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