

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

# POLIT-BAROMETER

Year 22 Issue 5  
May 2022

**Boris Popivanov**



In the Bulgarian political debate, for the first time in the 21st century, the need to choose between Europe and Russia is presented as being of paramount importance.



The government is failing to formulate a useful way out of its own trap with North Macedonia.



The gas crisis is becoming established as a systemic challenge for Bulgaria, requiring political consensus and an adequate strategy.

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## 1

## THE DYNAMICS OF FOREIGN POLICY

**The war in Ukraine.** The greatest tension in Bulgaria's foreign policy over the past month - the issue of providing military assistance to Ukraine - ended in parliamentary compromise. Bulgaria stood by the countries providing military assistance, but with the important clarification that this assistance implies only the repair of Ukrainian military equipment. The meaning of the compromise is clear. Both those who insist on military aid and those who refuse to send weapons have a reason to declare success. In fact, as is often the case, everyone was dissatisfied - some because no weapons were given and others because military aid was still given. The important thing is that the decision of the National Assembly brought the heated debate to an end (temporarily?) The reason for this is that the real political stake in the decision was not Ukraine, but the survival of the government. The will of the four ruling parties to maintain the cabinet predetermined the compromise itself.

The focus of the case of Ukraine has shifted from domestic policy to public debate and foreign policy.

In the field of public discussions, there is a bright colouring of the topics with the litmus test of the division for/against Russia. Almost every contentious issue is judged on whether its decisions express a pro-Russian or anti-Russian stance. Here are a few examples. What the national holiday of Bulgaria will be depends on the attitude to the „Russian“ March 3. What niches the new political projects are looking for and what coalitions will emerge are analysed only according to the supposed attitudes of the party leaders towards Russia and the West. Which sources of gas supplies Bulgaria should focus on is debated according to willingness or lack of willingness to finance the Putin regime. The dilemma for/against Russia seems to be beginning to frame, reduce and model the liberal-conservative dividing lines in Bulgarian society.

In the area of foreign policy, the dual approach of Prime Minister Kiril Petkov is making an impression. His messages to foreign audiences in Bulgaria sound more and more different. While in Bulgaria Petkov greatly reduced his anti-Russian rhetoric, in statements to foreign media and on visits abroad, it was

quite the contrary, he acutely strengthened it. In a series of interviews (with the *New York Times* on May 13th, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* on May 20th, and *Die Welt* on May 22nd), the Bulgarian Prime Minister directly linked the legitimacy, priorities and problems of his government to the danger from Russia. If we summarise his narrative, three aspects stand out. First, the identification of corruption with Russian influence – „the corrupt ones are those who do business with Moscow.“ Second, defining the political risk with Russia – „The Kremlin wants to fail us by inciting unrest.“ Third, self-identification as an example of Europe through anti-Russian behaviour: „If the country in the EU that is most dependent on Russia can stand up to Putin, anyone can.“ In this way, the Bulgarian Prime Minister is trying to play the anti-Russian card, which turned out to be insufficiently convincing in his hands on Bulgarian soil, in another, larger, European game. In other words, this ought to have a consolidating effect on the European position.

**North Macedonia.** The problem of Bulgaria's veto on North Macedonia's EU membership talks has emerged as a second stumbling block for the ruling majority after Ukraine. The delicate nature of the situation stems from two contextual factors: the presence of undoubted external pressure against the veto itself (openly or not recognised by most state institutions) and the lack of cooperative behaviour on the part of Skopje (where they do not suggest willingness to make concessions supporting the Bulgarian decision). Unlike with the Ukrainian issue, however, it is a matter of a far more unpopular solution, both for public opinion and the political elite. In fact, the paradox is that a possible change in the Bulgarian position is constantly being discussed, which is otherwise not formally disputed by any of the ruling parties. That is why the debate is constantly focused on the battle for interpretations, not on real facts.

People were led to believe the conviction that Prime Minister Petkov was intending to take a surprising move to lift the Bulgarian veto. By analogy with Ukraine, it was expected that a formula would be found that would allow the government to remain without the parties in it breaking their commitments. Whether or

not Petkov had such plans, in the end he chose to shift political responsibility beyond the majority. His first attempt was to cede the topic to the President after calling on Rumen Radev to convene a National Security Advisory Council with a „Macedonian“ agenda. When Radev refused to do so, Petkov turned to parliament and declared that the National Assembly should decide. In principle, it is possible in parliament to calculate a

configuration in which the veto might fall. However, such a configuration would be extremely uncertain and dangerous for the legitimacy of the cabinet itself. For this reason, it was not clear whether the Prime Minister was vigorously looking for options to push through his publicly unannounced anti-veto position, or whether he was looking for an alibi for his European partners that he could not push this position through.

## 2

## INSTITUTIONS AND THE AGENDA OF SOCIETY

**The government.** Foreign policy issues indirectly demonstrate the will of the ruling parties to preserve the government. Both Ukraine and North Macedonia are examples of the majority looking for a reason to compromise rather than resign. Mutual contradictions and accusations do not abate, but they turn out to be a strange style of working together, rather than a prelude to a breakup of the coalition. In May the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) announced that it could still leave the government; „There is such a people“ (ITN) declared the compromises to be exhausted; and Democratic Bulgaria (DB) raised a „red flag“ to the cabinet. Despite the harsh rhetoric, what seems most prevalent is the general belief that resignation at this point would lead to more damage and fewer positives for every one of the parties. This does not mean that a sudden government crisis is not possible, but that for the first time since the beginning of the mandate, the majority openly show a desire to continue together.

One big problem of this continuation is organisational. The government still does not have a program of governance, and society does not know in the name of what it wants to retain power. The division in the coalition is visible. The left-wing BSP and the right-wing DB are pushing for such a program, while „We Continue the Change“ („*Prodalzhavame Promianata*“ – PP) and ITN apparently do not see any sense in having one. And this division is natural. Older and more experienced formations such as BSP and the DB can hardly operate without a clear framework in which to enter their intentions, manoeuvres and even intrigues. Contrary to this, the newly created PP and ITN exploit the possibilities of an *ad hoc* policy, in which nothing is a given and everything can be agreed without preconditions at the last moment.

The second big problem is a social one. Inflation stimulates trends for crisis that cannot be controlled with limited financial injections. The practice of temporarily supporting certain sectors or groups of the population was inherited from the cabinets of GERB, but even then it did not work well, and in much more difficult economic conditions it was doomed to failure. A vivid illustration is the state of energy. The var-

ious and contradictory statements of the government about agreed gas supplies from various producers do not assuage worries in the whole of the Bulgarian economy, which would be on the verge of survival in the case of a new drastic increase in gas prices. It is not so much a matter of political abuse of the situation, but of the accumulation of preconditions for a crisis that the government simply does not have the capacity to deal with.

**The President.** The head of state is choosing a political course that is at the same time equidistant from political forces, the ruling party and the opposition, and which corresponds to the prevailing attitudes in public opinion. This is especially evident on foreign policy issues such as Ukraine and North Macedonia. Rumen Radev's ability to construct his messages is impressive. In any attempt to identify himself with a particular political camp (pro-Russian or opposition), Radev turns the argument round and attacks the weaknesses of his critics. This allows him to remain the most influential authority in Bulgarian politics, but also raises expectations for an even more active political role, with all the unknowns coming from there.

**The Chief Prosecutor.** The prosecution continues to assume a defensive position against the relentless attacks of the majority. Ivan Geshev made an initially doomed attempt to postpone the closure of the specialised courts and prosecutor's offices, decided by the National Assembly. The aim of the Chief Prosecutor is rather to establish himself as a defender of the staff in these institutions. On two occasions the procedure initiated for Geshev's removal from office did not develop in the Supreme Judicial Council due to formal reasons. The Council apparently does not want to take responsibility for one decision or another on the case. This can probably be explained by the lack of clarity on whether legislative and personnel changes will take place in the judiciary in the autumn and what they might be. The question of Geshev's post is part of a more general question about the distribution of power throughout the system.

**Public opinion.** The impact of the conflict in Ukraine and its political uses palpably distances Bulgarian so-

ciety from taking a clear position. The Eurobarometer survey received a wide range of responses, showing that against the background of European respondents, Bulgarians are least sympathetic to Ukrainians (39%) and least inclined to blame Russia for the war (27%). The data can be supplemented by a survey by the sociological agency ESTAT, from which it can be seen that 68% of Bulgarian society prefer neutrality in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, and supporters of support for Ukraine or Russia are a minority. It is true that support for the Ukrainian cause exceeds that for Russia by 2 to 3 times, but abstinence certainly dominates. The foreign policy aspect of public attitudes is also valid for the case of North Macedonia. According to a Gallup International study, the ratio between people urging Skopje to meet Bulgaria's terms before EU membership talks begin and those who believe negotiations should begin without meeting those conditions is 10:1. (61% and 6%, respectively). The common denominator of the data in the „Ukrainian“ and „Macedonian“ issues is probably the disagreement of the respondents with the alleged external pressure on Bulgaria. It could also be argued that the perception of what is „one's own“ and what is „foreign“ plays a part. The war in Ukraine is perceived as a „foreign“ war, in which Bulgaria has no reason to intervene in any form; while the veto on the negotiation process in North Macedonia is rather thought of as „Bulgaria's own“ problem, regarding which no one should interfere with Bulgaria.

There are ever-clearer indications that concerns in public opinion are shifting from the military to the socio-economic risks of the Ukrainian conflict. A survey by the sociological agency Trend shows that an impressive 91% of respondents consider the problem of income to be the most serious for Bulgaria. The erosion of confidence in the institutions being able to cope with current and new challenges is continuing for the third month in a row. 19% express trust in parliament (against 24% in April) and 22% show trust in the government (against 27% in April). The only institution that maintains stable levels of support remains that of the President. This in itself creates a certain horizon of expectation for the President in the event of a political crisis.

Half a year after the elections, for the first time, symptoms of a reconfiguration of party preferences can be discerned. The figures of the various sociological agencies vary, but the general trend reveals three things: an indubitable decline in support for all four ruling parties; maintaining, albeit without an increase, support for the opposition in the face of GERB and the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF); and a clear increase in support for those who reject the status quo in the face of „Vazrazhdane“ („Revival“) and the new party of former Prime Minister Stefan Yanev, Bulgarian Rise. All this is happening against the background of little desire for early elections. The situation at this stage can be described as stalemate.

## 3

## THE CONDITION OF THE PARTY SYSTEM

“We Continue the Change” (PP). The incumbent party are increasingly realising that their weight and importance in the political process depend to a great extent on the impression of a serious and long-term political entity, rather than a short-term project. The formal procedure of establishment in April was the first step. Now they are proceeding to the second - the achievement of international legitimacy through affiliation to a European party family. The choice of the liberal Renew Europe is not by chance, because the profile, positions and messages of PP can indeed find liberal parallels.

At the same time, PP are still changing their line of conduct. After the peak of the confrontation in April, they were more conciliatory in May. The tension with President Radev has not been overcome, but the degree has been lowered and the rhetoric has been eased. PP again show a desire to find a balance between their coalition partners. It seems that the ambitions in the economy and the unfavourable public attitudes are stimulating PP to be more cautious. Keeping the coalition in its current form, with minimal turmoil, is a top priority. This can be judged by the systematic attacks against the opposition GERB and MRF. After the arrest of Boyko Borisov in February, a coalition with GERB in this parliament is difficult to achieve. The comprehensive inspection announced by Prime Minister Petkov for violations in the construction of the Turkish Stream gas pipeline is an indirect blow against both GERB and MRF. The scandal in which Petkov was accused of threatening an MRF MP fits into the same tendency to differentiate himself from MRF. PP seem to be doing their best to demonstrate that the only possible coalition in the current parliamentary term is the ruling quadruple coalition. The other options are systematically crossed out. With declining public confidence in the coalition parties, this means that they have to choose between permanent compromises with each other and with PP and early elections with unpredictable results. Such a dilemma strongly privileges the leading party.

**GERB-UDF.** Those who were formerly in power seem to be encouraged by favourable sociological research. However, the serious erosion of the PP does not au-

tomatically spill over into support of GERB. After 12 years of rule, negative attitudes remain critically high. That is why the course of the party avoids radicalisation. Two facts make an impression. First of all, GERB did not mobilise their supporters on a large scale for a series of transport and other protests against the government in Sofia.

The resources of the party would be enough to create visibility for much stronger public pressure - but these resources have not been used. And secondly, GERB constantly explains how the most incompetent government in history is governing, but almost half a year after the beginning of its term, the opposition is only „considering“ a vote of no confidence. Instead of the resignation of the cabinet, the resignation of the deputy speaker of parliament has been demanded. This could be seen as a test of the consolidation of the majority. As it has turned out, the ruling parties, despite their differences, are not ready to make concessions to GERB. That is why the party clearly prefers to avoid more decisive action and relies on its own decline of the ruling party.

The „minimum program“ that party leader Boyko Borisov has focused on at this stage has two elements. Firstly, to strengthen the suggestion of a strong Euro-Atlantic and anti-Russian identity. This is very important because GERB's image in the eyes of Euro-Atlanticists has been severely damaged by cooperation with Russia and participation in the project of the „Turkish Stream“. For this reason, both Bulgaria's international partners and the Euro-Atlantic liberal circles in the country should be convinced that they have a completely loyal partner in the form of GERB. The official proposal to make May 24th a national holiday in place of the „Russian“ March 3rd fits well into the aforementioned logic. And secondly, GERB must maintain the strength of its local structures and exploit as much as possible its dominance in local government. Borisov's numerous tours in different cities play the role of team building, of „uniting the team“. The leading message is that the government does not give the municipalities the resources they should receive. Given that most municipalities are controlled by GERB, this is a call to resist the temptation of partner-



ship with the government and wait for the party to return to power at a national level. It remains unclear how GERB envisage a return to power. There is evidence that, according to some circles in the party, this would imply the withdrawal of Borisov himself. However, it is difficult to accept that he would take such a step and tolerate advocates of this kind of action.

***The Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF).***

The party seems to be in more acute conflict with the ruling party than even the leading opposition GERB. The government's attacks on MRF combine two elements - corruption and geopolitics. MRF have been identified with businessman Delyan Peevski (on the basis of persistent suspicion of corruption) and anti-American policy (under the Magnitsky Act and the intentions for its Bulgarian equivalent). The criticisms themselves are not sufficiently substantiated but, paradoxically, this exacerbates their effect. MRF are not able to convincingly refute them - because they receive few facts to refute. The party's defence strategy is increasingly pushing it towards the Euro-Atlantic mainstream. For example, the initiatives of the MEP and co-chair of the European Liberal Party ALDE Ilhan Küçük for immediate lifting of the Bulgarian veto on the negotiation process of North Macedonia with the EU are indicative of MRF's desire to „overtake“ PP on the Macedonian „track“ and thus testify to them being loyal to European partners of Bulgaria.

Leader of MRF Mustafa Karadayi has repeatedly called on his constituents to prepare for the upcoming pre-term elections. Apart from everything else, the aim of this is to increase political tensions. Confrontational rhetoric is growing. If until recently the MRF claimed that PP resembled the early GERB in terms of incompetence and arbitrariness, there are often claims that they are currently running the weakest government since the beginning of the transition. In their analysis of the situation, MRF formulated a new national goal – „energy and food security of Bulgaria“ - thus suggesting its understanding that it expects major shocks for the country to come in the fields of energy and food supply.

***The Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP).*** The agenda of the government in Bulgaria seems to be gradually approaching the agenda of BSP. Social issues are the focus of power. Anti-crisis measures and budget updates are coming to the fore. The merits of the left in this regard are unquestionable. For the first time, it seems that social policy is not just a task of the „social vector“ in government, but of the government as a whole. On some foreign policy issues (such as military aid to Ukraine or the position on North Macedonia), Prime Minister Petkov's behaviour can easily be described as a retreat from the „red lines“ of BSP. Some right-wing commentators have even warned that BSP chair Korneliya Ninova is actually pulling the strings of the cabinet, a thesis that is doing her the greatest possible favour.

The idea outlined has some grounds, but is generally superficial. Judging by opinion polls, it is not recognised by public opinion, where the weight of BSP is steadily declining. The reason is probably rooted in the deepening discrepancy between words and deeds.

The decision of parliament decision to provide military aid to Ukraine, but only in the form of repairing military equipment, was loudly propagandised as Ninova's „victory“. However, numerous reports have become public that weapons are actually being provided to Ukraine, and in significant quantities, albeit through intermediaries. Allegations that all this is happening without the knowledge and consent of the Deputy Prime Minister have not won conviction either in society as a whole or among red supporters. Thus, the pro-Russian image has been seriously undermined without the pro-Western one having a chance to establish itself. An analogical ambiguity arose in connection with the Plan for the Adoption of the Euro, when the ministers nominated by BSP voted against the Plan in the Council of Ministers, but the party itself did nothing to prevent the eventual positive decision. The tactic of sitting on two stools at the same time leads to quite contradictory results.

The opinion that in this form BSP does not find anything to represent the left-wing voter has been widely shared for a long time. It is indirectly illustrated in the ambitions to create new parties exactly in the left political space. Stefan Yanev's new project „Bulgarian Rise“ officially declares a national-conservative, and not a left-wing ideology, but it is reckoned that its task is to attract disappointed supporters of the socialists. Former ombudsman Maya Manolova, who unambiguously distinguished herself from left-wing identification in her 2021 political initiatives, is now setting up a party with a much clearer left-wing phraseology. Her „Stand Up, Bulgaria“ was announced on May 1st, Labour Day, under the motto that Bulgaria needs a „social party“, which it is currently lacking. All this is a clear sign that in many circles there is a vision of a continuing decline of BSP, and hence of the beginning of the „struggle for the red heritage“.

It is not just the authority of BSP in the left space that has been put to the test, but also the previously unconditional leadership authority of Korneliya Ninova in BSP itself. The scandals surrounding the attempts of her relatives to take over the Plovdiv organisation of the party show an open refusal to obey the instructions of the party headquarters. The decision of Ninova to remove the Secretary General of the Ministry of Economy and Industry Yordan Tatarski, who subsequently came out with public accusations of statutory and legal violations against Ninova herself and her chief of staff Kaloyan Metodiev, caused a great shock. Ninova's commitment to consolidating and strengthening the party through participation in power, announced at the congress in January, faces

its unfeasibility in reality. The right of an alternative point of view is sought, for the search for unity and development through clearer ideological identification and change of the style of functioning of the party, expressed at the same congress by the candidate for president Krum Zarkov. This view gained international legitimacy during the visit of Zarkov, MEP Petar Vitanov and former Deputy Social Minister Nadia Klisurska to Berlin. At their meetings with leading representatives of the German government, the ruling Social Democratic Party and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation the imperative of a political course that overcomes the BSP's self-isolation and puts the left agenda at the centre of politics and messages was outlined. The signal from Berlin is supplemented by a signal from Sofia. The election of Gabriel Valkov as chairman of the party's Youth Union in competition with a candidate actively supported by headquarters reveals the deep cracks in the principle of sole imposition of party power practised by Ninova and her entourage. This vote can also be seen as a disagreement with the current youth policy of BSP. The self-closure of the left is turning into a stage of self-closure of its narrow leadership.

**“There is such a people” (ITN).** Slavi Trifonov's party is taking on an unusual role of „internal government opposition“. Not just individual government decisions are criticised, but almost all of them. The lack of adequate communication with PP has been emphasised, even in coalition councils. The government has been accused of acting unilaterally, without consulting the majority parties. Deputy Prime Minister Asen Vassilev has been accused of concentrating the state's financial resources in his hands. What results is an interesting situation of a kind of „self-opposition“. Unlike other coalition partners, who criticise the cabinet but praise their ministers, ITN are doing their best for it not to be understood that there are their ministers in the cabinet at all. From the party's public messages, one would never guess that the Ministries of Foreign Affairs or Energy, for example, are in the hands of their staff members.

There are already open warnings in the media that ITN may be the first party to break up the coalition. Of course, it is difficult to predict. However, the hypothesis is that ITN got everything they could from this government configuration and they are not being allowed to get more. Critics of the party most often maintain this point: „others took more.“ At the same time, leaving the cabinet without a good reason could have catastrophic electoral consequences. No one knows it better than ITN after their ill-fated experience in 2021.

**Democratic Bulgaria (DB).** The main goal of DB continues to be to keep the liberal city voters, some of whom tend to see their understandings embodied in the actions of PP and personally of Prime Minis-

ter Petkov. For this reason DB issued a parliamentary declaration calling for the „deputinisation“ of Bulgaria and describing its action as a „red flag“ for the cabinet. „Deputinisation“ in this case is a term that describes a complete process of emancipation of the country from all kinds of dependencies, from oligarchic to Russian. Putin's influence is perceived not just geopolitically, as pressure from one country on another, but as a holistic model of the functioning of politics, economics and the judiciary based on behind-the-scenes practices. With their declaration, DB are clearly striving to achieve several goals. Firstly, to extricate themselves from the case with military aid to Ukraine and send a signal that their anti-Russian cause is not exhausted. Secondly, to reveal a clear anti-Russian profile, in contrast to PP, where fluctuations and nuances are undoubtedly greater. Thirdly, to take the initiative in the debate for/against Russia, and not just to react to events and processes independent of them. And fourthly, to outline a potential platform for political partnership, including with regard to perspective. Without being ready for alliances with GERB or MRF, DB are aware that the categorical imperative against GERB and MRF deprives them of choice and concentrates their chances only within the current majority. In addition, a Euro-Atlantic platform could, under more favourable circumstances, turn geopolitical identity into new political opportunities.

Within the frame of the coalition DB „Yes, Bulgaria“ and DSB are increasingly converging as regards positions and messages. The Green Movement stands out, following a different agenda. Legislative facilitation of renewable energy sources and changes to the Environmental Protection Act are two examples of initiatives that find multi-party support in parliament and consolidate the profile of the Greens.

**“Vazrazhdane” (“Revival”).** The dynamics of public opinion are opening up serious chances for the smallest parliamentary party. „Vazrazhdane“ is now even considered a competitor for the first three places in possible early elections. The categorical pro-Russian position (the only one in the National Assembly!) and the anti-elite rhetoric (especially on the occasion of inflation or the adoption of the euro) are bearing fruit. In this sense „Vazrazhdane“ have to deal with three tasks. The first is related to the establishment of a monopoly on the Russophile niche. It is not by chance that such strong criticism is directed at two parties with a real or potential pro-Russian electorate - BSP (accused of being hypocritically pro-Russian while actually sabotaging international forums in Russia and secretly supplying weapons to Ukraine) and „Bulgarian Rise“ accused of hiding an American project designed to divert Russophile voters from their authentic representatives). The second task for „Vazrazhdane“ is to suggest that they are able to come to power. It is known that parties of this type are behind the „sanitary cordon“ and coalitions with

them cannot possibly get any electoral results. That is why the leader Kostadin Kostadinov has recently reiterated that „Vazrazhdane“ will rule „in a few months“. Their supporters must be convinced that their vote is not marginal and doomed to remain in opposition, but quite the contrary, it is a vote for a future participant in power. It is in this context that it is crucial for „Vazrazhdane“ to show that they are not limited to rhetoric, but are ready to move immediately. The organisation of protests in the centre of Sofia and the removal of the Ukrainian flag from the Sofia Municipality building are examples of such proactive behaviour. The third task is the most delicate and con-

cerns the assessment of the political moment. On the one hand, it is possible that time is working in favour of „Vazrazhdane“ and support for them will continue to grow. In this sense, it is in the interest of the party to preserve the current parliament. On the other hand, however, right now, in the context of specific domestic and foreign policy factors, „Vazrazhdane“ is in an obvious positive trend and there are no guarantees that this bubble will not burst. So the course for early elections may be justified. It is difficult to say where the party's preferences are heading and what their real resources are regarding influencing the course of events.

## 4

## MAIN CONCLUSIONS AND FORECASTS

100 days after the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the political confrontation on the subject in Bulgaria has become a positional one. It is not so much calls for action that dominate now, but self-determination. In the media debate, there are not so much expectations of the government, the president or the parties to do something about Ukraine, as the wish for them to take a declaratively clear side on the axis for/against Russia. This division, although traditional in its genesis, overlaps with the other contradictions in Bulgarian society in a new way. It is beginning to look like a chance for political actors to win better positions and change the existing configuration to their advantage after the apparent end of the leading confrontation between the status quo and change. The rise of „Vazrazhdane“ and the party of former Prime Minister Stefan Yanev further legitimises the thesis of a battle between Europe and Russia. But ambitions for political rearrangement are a more important factor than the reality of this battle, because, despite the strength of Putin’s propaganda, it is clear that Russia does not have the resources and opportunities to offer Bulgaria an alternative to the EU.

The topic of the Bulgarian veto on North Macedonia reveals mostly an avoidance of political responsibility and a refusal to hold a public debate on alternative positions. A widespread feeling has formed that decisions and agreements have been made behind the backs of Bulgarian voters. It is absurd that on such a key and strategic issue as the European integration of a neighbouring country there is no clarity at any time what will be done the next day. This in no way helps

Bulgarian authority in the eyes of the international partners of the country. For now, it seems that the problem will be postponed for several months, but any other development is possible. It can almost certainly be said, however, that even if there is an unexpected change in Bulgaria’s position, it will not in itself lead to the disintegration of the ruling coalition.

The government is successfully overcoming its internal contradictions and showing an astonishing propensity for compromises. GERB and MRF are not able to launch a socially convincing alternative approach to government in any form; new political projects and „Vazrazhdane“ find public support, but not a public wave on whose crest to surf. In the ruling coalition itself, it seems that only ITN is a risk player from whom surprises can come. But the degree of unpredictability is high for the entire party system, and not just for a single segment of it. This reduces the chances of a political gambling game. It is becoming increasingly likely that the government will rule at least until the end of the year.

The President is the stabilising element in the political process, which does not permit a widening of the gap between the political agenda and mass attitudes. In society as well as in business, concerns are growing about the looming social and economic crisis, which continues to be out of focus. The gas situation will become critical in the next few months. Efforts to strengthen internal party power are a major problem for coalition parties, including, and especially for the left-wing BSP. But strengthening social stability can no longer be bypassed as a priority.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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