



DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

POLIT-BAROMETER

Year 23 Issue 8
September

Boris Popivanov



The policy of the Bulgarian government increasingly falls under the control of GERB and MRF.



The campaign for the local elections has begun with a clear dominance of GERB, but with limited public interest.



So far, no one has questioned the current configuration of government.

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1

THE DYNAMICS OF FOREIGN POLICY

The Ukrainian context of Bulgarian politics. The war in Ukraine continues to reflect on the Bulgarian political agenda in various aspects. Here are just a few examples directly or indirectly related to the raging conflict. Priests from the Russian Church in Sofia were expelled from the country on suspicion of espionage, the place of worship was temporarily closed, and leading representatives of the majority sent a signal to the prosecutor's office to check on the ownership of the property itself. In a closed session, the National Assembly decided to increase military aid to Ukraine with missiles and ammunition previously declared by the Ministry of Defence to be defective and unusable. The government, following the recommendation of the European Commission, lifted the ban on the import of Ukrainian grain, which caused mass protests by farmers and an attempt to blockade Sofia, which ended after a compromise between the authorities and protesters. Parliament considered a bill that would have waived the exemption for importing Russian oil into the country, but in the end, the waiver was postponed for a whole year. The regional administration in Sofia built scaffolding around the Monument to the Soviet Army as a first step towards subsequently dismantling it and provoked another series of protests by defenders of the monument itself. Senior government officials have discussed additional anti-Russian sanctions, including a ban on Russian-registered cars and the possible nationalisation of the Russian resort complex "Kamchia" on the Black Sea coast, with no clear plans or timetable for the moment.

Some things are noteworthy. First of all, there is the unchanging pro-Ukrainian position of the Bulgarian government, which on certain topics - economic and military - is beginning to look even tougher than that of other countries in Central and Eastern Europe, such as Poland and Slovakia. This confirms the geopolitical profile of the administration. Secondly, perhaps paradoxically, this same pro-Ukrainian position is defended and implemented by the those in power with hesitation and compromise. Ambitions to give up Russian oil and dismantle the Soviet monument remain, but have been postponed. The ban on Ukrainian grain has been lifted, but with the assurance that the ban

on Ukrainian sunflower products remains. New military equipment is being sent to Kiev, but with the explanation that it is hopelessly damaged and it does not matter whether it is scrapped or exported. It seems that the government are worried about negative reactions of public opinion and prefers to cover up, delay and downplay their actions in defence of Ukraine. Thirdly, those in power are increasingly trying to justify their foreign policy not with partner commitments and civilisational causes, but with supposed national interest. Until recently, invoking the national interest was the entitlement of critics of this policy. And fourthly, critics of the pro-Ukrainian position received a new argument, characteristic of Russian official propaganda, but relatively unknown in Bulgaria. It is about the defence of Orthodoxy. The case of the extradited Russian priests was presented by some political and expert circles as part of the attack of the West on the Orthodox Church in general, similar to incidents with Orthodox churches and monasteries in Ukraine during the war. At the same time, this case was used to suggest that Russian Orthodoxy supports Bulgarian interests. Critics of the extradition insisted that the Russian priests had previously been expelled from North Macedonia because the Macedonian Church was under the influence of the Serbian Church, and the Serbian Church had always been unfavourably disposed towards the Bulgarian Church and towards Bulgaria in general. In short, with each subsequent month, the field of opposition between "pro-Western" and "pro-Russian" camps in Bulgarian society has been expanding more and more, without always having a connection with the development of military actions.

Schengen and the Eurozone. The cabinet's two main foreign policy priorities appear to be deadlocked. The deadlines – December 31, 2023 for Schengen membership and a year later for membership of the Eurozone – are questionable. The government have made efforts to exploit the official withdrawal of the monitoring mechanism for Bulgaria and the call of the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, for the Schengen integration of Bulgaria and Romania. These efforts have not en-

joyed great success. It became known that the decision to drop the mechanism was made on the basis of a report completed in June. Therefore, the last government that can claim credit is the caretaker government. As for von der Leyen's appeal, the Netherlands and Austria immediately confirmed their opposition. The Cabinet declares that chances are not lost and

the "veto" can be lifted as early as December. These statements correspond with the cabinet's announcement that it is preparing a bill to enter the Eurozone from January 1, 2025, which sounds rather like wishful thinking. It is difficult at this stage to identify the real reasons for the government to harbour hopes that the dates previously set will be met.

2

THE INSTITUTIONS AND THE AGENDA OF SOCIETY

The government and the parliamentary majority.

The first 100 days of the government in Bulgaria have passed. Certain evaluations are now possible. However, they include too many unknowns. The governing formula was called by the participants themselves “assemblage” and “non-coalition”, but it is still not clear who are included in the formula itself - whether only the leading parties GERB-UDF and “We Continue the Change” (“Produlzhavame Promianata”) - Democratic Bulgaria - PP-DB, or the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) are also together with them. The reason for the hesitation is the fact that, firstly, MRF are a co-initiator of practically all major decisions and bills of the administration, and secondly, MRF support the decisions of the ruling majority in almost all cases. GERB leader, Boyko Borisov, has twice openly stated that MRF participate in the government. The objections of PP-DB that this is not true are not entirely convincing. In the beginning PP-DB themselves attracted MRF to the so-called a constitutional majority, necessary for the adoption of the changes in the Constitution that they felt were important. However, once MRF were legitimised as a participant in the constitutional majority, it became difficult to prevent them from participating in that of the government as well. It should be recalled that for the Bulgarian right-wing parties MRF have long been “satanicised”, and a particularly “satanic” representative of MRF is the businessman and MP Delyan Peevski. Just that 100 days after the inauguration of the cabinet, none other than the most satanicised person from the most satanicised party has become a kind of spokesman for the majority. Peevski regularly reports to the media what decisions are being taken, what will not be taken and what needs to be done. Peevski’s name even stands together with those of Boyko Borisov and PP leader Kiril Petkov under a number of official proposals: to drop the ban on Ukrainian grain, to clarify the ownership of the Russian Church in Sofia, etc. The result is an obvious asymmetry in the construction of the “assemblage”. Formally speaking, this is a cabinet with the mandate and participation of the PP-DB, elected to carry out their programme. In parallel, the influence of GERB is disproportionately strong in parliamentary committees, public regulators and

economic projects. And finally, MRF represent a filter, determining the fate of certain decisions.

The nature of this indefinite parliamentary majority, lacking formal partnership rules, creates inevitable clashes with the authority of the government. It has happened more than once that Prime Minister Nikolay Denkov or his ministers announce some decision, and then Borisov or Peevski revise it. Denkov, for example, used a scandalous comparison of the protesting farmers with “terrorists”, with whom there is no negotiation, but then he was forced by the majority to enter into negotiations and make concessions. Denkov personally defended the change of the national holiday as an expression of the general will of the majority, but Borisov subsequently stated that this was not on the agenda, and the Prime Minister had to clarify that the topic was still not over and would be discussed in the future. Borisov and Peevski also gave negative evaluations of current ministers (e.g. the Minister of Agriculture), but this did not lead to changes in the staff of the cabinet. The impression was created that the real centre of power lay outside the government.

A key commitment of the majority, such as the draft changes to the Constitution, also has no clear fate. Always up to the present, when the current Constitution of 1991 was adopted and in the five subsequent amendments, it was known exactly what proposal was being debated and what would be adopted. Such clarity does not exist in the present case. It is not known exactly which texts from the submitted project will be discussed in the National Assembly. It is not known whether others will be added. Nor is it known whether or when there will be an opinion from the Venice Commission. Even the distribution of this process over time is not known. Initially, PP leader Kiril Petkov spoke of December 6th as the final date for adopting the changes. Later, Delyan Peevski launched December 15th. When all this is taken into consideration, it does not contribute to the authority and stability of the Bulgarian institutions.

The agenda of the majority in the new autumn political season has been saturated with ambitious announce-

ments - constitutional changes, anti-corruption legislation, reform of the security services, and laws under the Recovery and Resilience Plan. One of the pillars of governance legitimacy is ultimately a commitment to the reform of justice. If the constitutional changes can be called the "big" reforming of justice, then the legislative proposals form the "small" one. However, the tension between the two, between the "big" and the "small", is apparent. In the name of the "big" reform, a number of earlier intentions for changes in the judiciary have been postponed, as a result of which the prosecutor's office has remained in the same form as at the time of Ivan Geshev, the Supreme Judicial Council has continued to function in its previous composition when the mandate expired and in circumstances of high distrust, and Borislav Sarafov has been given every chance to keep his temporary position at the head of the prosecutor's office for an indefinite period. At the moment, it is impossible to say how or if at all this would change with constitutional changes, because it is not known what they would be and when they would happen. The "small" reform, in turn, is also not in a very optimistic situation. What has been done so far - at the beginning of the mandate, the so-called "law of Krum Zarkov" for the investigation mechanism of the chief prosecutor has been revised, so that the mechanism has been practically blocked, and in September the so-called an anti-corruption law was passed, which reformed the anti-corruption body so as to make it fully subordinate to the parliament, in that sense preserving suspicions of inefficiency and subservience to political conjuncture.

It should also be added that the much-hyped reformist plans of the majority collided with the decision of the majority to have the National Assembly go on an unprecedented one-month vacation in connection with the local elections. The official argument that the parliamentary tribune could be used for pre-election rhetoric cannot be taken seriously. Both during elections and at other times, parliament has always been a place to deliver political messages. With this parliamentary recess, the claim that the legislative programme of the majority is a priority loses weight.

The President. The head of state maintains his public image of the main opponent of the majority. Rumen Radev's critical statements are clearly aimed at undermining, and it can be said, with considerable success, the pillars of the legitimacy of the government: the claims of transparency (with the thesis that the behind-the-scenes activity in the circumstances of the recently murdered businessman Aleksey Petrov is a key factor in the formation of the majority); for honesty (with the thesis that the policy of the cabinet is oriented towards the distribution of public resources to companies close to the government); for leadership (with the thesis that the Prime Minister Denkov does not have independence, but on the contrary, obeys his

mentors); for competence (with the thesis that the extradition of the Russian priests is an example of an ignorant attitude to national security); and even for Euro-Atlanticism (with the thesis that the practice of the rulers to spread secret information distances us from the European Union and NATO with their standards).

Quite logically, the political front against Radev is consolidated and quite active. This alone shows that the blows the President has struck have hit the mark. However, at the same time, it is clear that the opponents of the President in the government and parliament have the upper hand in the institutional tension and are gradually realising this upper hand in their favour. When those in power demanded the resignation of the Chief Secretary of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Petar Todorov, and Radev defended him publicly, Todorov was eventually forced to resign himself. Radev had no choice but to accept this, thus indirectly admitting his defeat. The gathering strength of the parliamentary discussion on the reform of the security services is increasingly condensing the expectations that soon the President may indeed be deprived of tools to influence them. The fate of the constitutional changes, as has been indicated, is shrouded in uncertainty, but the intention to curtail presidential prerogatives in relation to caretaker governments continues to unite the majority. There is an obvious reluctance of those in power to allow Radev to form a caretaker cabinet next time. Without being able to accurately predict the development of the political process in the coming months, there is a serious possibility that we will end up with a President with significantly limited powers.

The political basis on which Rumen Radev is stepping in his strategy is subject to conjecture. It is true that in many cases he is an exponent of mass sentiment, as opposed to the majority, but this is not able to guarantee his political influence. Rumours that the local elections will become a springboard for building a future presidential party have not yet been confirmed. Practically no one from Radev's close circle is a candidate for mayor, despite the expectations created for former interior minister Ivan Demerdzhiev and others. It is true that in places in the country the candidacies of figures belonging to the "second echelon" of power from the time of the caretaker governments have been put forward (e.g. Trendafil Velichkov in Pazardzhik, Mincho Afuzov in Sliven, Stefan Sabrutev in Smolyan), but there is a lack of convincing arguments that momentum from the presidency was a major driving force of the nominations. All the same, it should be borne in mind that sometimes Radev's support or doubts that he has such support turn individual events into key ones for the political agenda. Such is the example of the initiative committee for a referendum to preserve March 3rd as a national holiday, established under the leadership of MEP Pe-

tar Vitanov in response to Radev's call for a "people's movement in defence of March 3rd". The idea of such a referendum obviously greatly worried those in power, because even before the collection of signatures for the petition began, the leader of GERB Borisov gave up the project of the majority for May 24th. Another such example is the harsh position of the State Agency for National Security (SANS), which in fact accused former Prime Minister Kiril Petkov of incompetence in his television interview. Suspicions immediately arose that Radev was behind this position, aimed at protecting the Agency's current leadership from the reform plans. A third example is the energy cooperation memorandum signed in Budapest between the heads of the gas operators of Bulgaria and Hungary in the presence of Radev, which was surprising for many. Rumours spread, which were not publicly denied by the government, that the Bulgarian state company Bulgargaz was acting at Radev's behest, rather than being authorised by the cabinet. Whatever the truth, hypotheses about the President's impressive influence in many sectors tend to work in favour of his image as an alternative centre of power.

Public opinion before the local elections. On September 29th, the official campaign for the local vote started. Traditionally, public attention is focused on pre-election intrigue. We will probably observe this in October, but September was definitely dominated by topics and concerns other than the pre-election issues. A number of events, some of them unfortunately tragic, once again put on the agenda the helplessness

of institutions to impose rules. We are talking, for example, about the consequences of the floods along the Bulgarian Southern Black Sea coast or the killing of a boy by a drunk driver in the centre of Sofia. Of course, the current cabinet cannot bear the blame, but nevertheless, a discussion of the extent to which ordinary problems of the people intersect with the priorities of the cabinet becomes inevitable.

Two large protests – by agricultural producers and by miners and energy workers – provoked a feeling of inability to manage the processes. It shows not only the weak communication of those in power, but also the lack of judgment about the effects of certain decisions. Explanations by politicians and analysts close to people in power that the protests are actually political, as well as doubts about the right to protest, betray an arrogance that can have a boomerang effect. The principle of "divide and rule" was also applied in these cases. The people in power have tried to do what they can to convince the public that farmers are millionaires driving luxury cars, and miners, who have been offered 36 salaries to leave, throw a spanner in the works of the absorption of huge European funds. It is remarkable how right-wing, business-oriented political forces fuel discontent with real or fictitious wealth.

Bulgarian society has entered the pre-election month without enthusiasm and with no great expectations for the elections. Again, rising inflation and the absence of a compensatory policy increase the distance of the people from the political elite.

3

THE CONDITION OF THE PARTY SYSTEM

GERB-UDF. The leading political force managed to gather in its hands many of the levers of government that were not initially thought to belong to GERB. The decisions of the leader Boyko Borisov have already become indispensable for the work of the majority. With his criticism and praise of the Prime Minister and ministers, and with the change of priorities and cancellation of agreements, Borisov can claim to be “honorary prime minister”. In this regard, the effective return of GERB to power after a two-year hiatus is incontrovertible, albeit through the back door, with the motto of “non-coalition”.

The situation of the party is more special in light of the upcoming local elections. The bar for GERB has been raised too high. As is known, the last local elections in 2019 produced a landslide victory to GERB, who won most of the regional centres and a very large share of municipalities, unprecedented in the democratic history of the country. Of course, even then it was believed that after this achievement the electoral road could only lead downwards. It is doubtful, however, whether this will actually be the case. In too many places, incumbent mayors from GERB have established their clientele and sustainable networks with local businesses, greatly facilitating their potential re-election. Despite the calls for change, respectively, almost everywhere GERB are pushing their current representatives in local government. This is evident, for example, in Burgas, where until recently it was rumoured that Dimitar Nikolov was serving his last term of office, but today he is once again a candidate for GERB. Hypotheses that more important former mayors of GERB will prefer to appear as formally independent “with the support of GERB” in order to avoid the negatives of the public image of the party have also been refuted. Moreover, mayors of regional centres who years ago established themselves separately from GERB (in Montana, Kyustendil and Pazardzhik), although not without their support, now fully agree that their nominations for a new mandate should be announced “with the support of GERB”. Of the six largest municipalities in Bulgaria, GERB are on the way to reasserting their dominance in Burgas and Stara Zagora, but also even in Varna, where the mayor

Ivan Portnih, the subject of lawsuits and accusations of corruption, stands firm and enjoys the sympathies of local business. GERB have a chance of taking control of Ruse as well, where the mayor is from the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), but now against him there is a more attractive and respected competitor from GERB compared to the party’s flagrantly unsuccessful decision four years ago. It was figured that GERB would almost certainly lose Plovdiv after the recent scandal in the local party structure and the departure of the mayor Zdravko Dimitrov. However, there is no split in the Plovdiv organisation, Dimitrov is not a candidate, his opponent and former mayor Ivan Totev has been removed by Borisov, and the support for the new candidate, until now the mayor of the Trakia district in the city, is fully consolidated. Against the background of unpopular opponents, GERB are definitely entering the competition for Plovdiv as favourites.

The most interesting case, of course, is that of Sofia. The probability of GERB losing the capital is not negligible. Moreover, even with another crushing victory throughout the country, a loss in Sofia would have a serious symbolic meaning, and not just symbolic, taking into account how many of the GERB supporters and how much clientele are concentrated in this city. GERB announced their candidate for Sofia at the last moment, and it is the journalist Anton Hekimyan. Comments immediately appeared that this was a weak decision, because Hekimyan was not born in Sofia, he is not seriously familiar with the issues in Sofia and he is alien to the local activists of the party. Some analysts suspected that with this nomination Borisov wanted to “gift” the capital to his opponents from PP-DB in order to stop their electoral decline and keep their heads “above water” in order to balance with them the growing appetites of MRF and Delyan Peevski. Such a scheme seems too complicated and does not correspond to Borisov’s political and personal style. In pragmatic terms, the dissatisfaction with the party structures and businesses close to the party - that they are put in a doomed situation - would be too great to offset the hypothetical benefits of some balance between PP-DB and MRF. Last but not least, Hekimyan is not a definite losing

candidature. He would successfully fit into the image of the modern young technocrat, as is the field of his competitor from PP-DB Vasil Terziev, but with much better communication capabilities and a professional taste for the news. Without being burdened personally with the 18-year rule of GERB in Sofia, Hekimyan could, with a good campaign, fulfill the maximum of a realistic strategy for victory, namely to unite in a possible second round the smaller players against the candidate of PP-DB.

“We Continue the Change (Produzhavame Pro-mianata – PP) - Democratic Bulgaria” (PP-DB). The formation is in an unfavourable condition. It is also reported in sociological surveys, revealing a 7% gap behind GERB and practically the same amount of trust as “Vazrazhdane” (“Revival”). PP-DB hold the main departments in administration, but still fail to realise results that would justify the unexpected union with GERB. A number of their proposals - from increasing value-added tax for restaurateurs to merging the security services - were directly criticised by GERB and MRF and undermined the image of a real governing entity. PP-DB also suffered significant damage to their image after revelations, which, although not officially confirmed, further eroded the claim of a new moral force in Bulgarian politics. The recordings of a meeting of PP, leaked at the end of the spring, shed light on the plans of this party in the government. In September, two other suggestions were added to them: that the alliance with GERB was formed not on the basis of public negotiations, but on secret meetings with the mediation of the businessman Alexei Petrov, who was later murdered; and that the projects won under the Recovery and Sustainability Plan and the planned projects under the territorial plans benefited companies close to the government of PP and DB. As a consequence, the coalition has been placed in explanatory mode. The local elections are a big challenge for PP-DB because of the lack of strong structures in places. As far as there are such structures, they belong to the DB parties. This is where the tension over the general nominations came from. In many places across the country, the DB structures were unhappy that figures from PP, unknown to them, were running for mayor on their behalf. But it can be said that the tension has been overcome. There are two positive effects: first, almost everywhere PP and DB have managed to understand each other to appear together (Burgas is an emblematic exception); and secondly, PP and DB have resisted the temptation to have somewhere common nominations with GERB, as almost all the other main parties have done. In the local elections, PP-DB was opposed to GERB. However, their common governance at the national level inevitably undermines the claim that they are an “alternative” to GERB. This ambiguity of political position is a contributing factor to the generally shared expectation that PP-DB will underperform.

Their greatest hope, of course, is Sofia, where they have concentrated impressive financial and media resources. Indeed, the chances of a mayor there are the greatest. The psychological factor is also on their side, namely the self-confidence of foreknown winners. Especially after the nomination of Anton Hekimyan from GERB, the belief spread in the media that the PP-DB candidate Vasil Terziev is the favourite in the race. Rumours have been persistently circulated, probably from within the coalition itself, that Terziev has a national political career ahead of him in the future, perhaps as Prime Minister, and in this sense his victory in Sofia would be a step towards a national victory. The shortcomings should also be highlighted. Terziev’s communication style is too business-oriented at the expense of political speaking; it also focuses heavily on topics such as renaming Sofia streets that are hardly central to the agenda of the municipality. His behaviour creates the conditions to alienate voters from almost all other candidates, and this could prove to be a problem in a possible second round.

“Vazrazhdane” (“Revival”). The party, according to preliminary expectations, want to use the local elections as an opportunity to build local structures and assert influence throughout the country. The protest profile remains unchanged. “Vazrazhdane” support all social and economic protests that are organised and try to join them, even when the organisers do not agree with this. The party held their own protest in Sofia, calling for the resignation of the government. The event was ironised because of the relatively small number of participants, but its symbolic dimension is significant - for the first time in a long time, a party different from the camp of today’s PP and DB blocked the streets of Sofia.

It would appear that for the leader Kostadin Kostadinov, the long-term march to power, which does not rely on momentary breakthroughs, and is opportunistically focused on the topics of the day, is of leading importance. This probably explains the fact that “Vazrazhdane” practically do not talk about their unrealised referendum against the Eurozone, and do not seek to impose a plot from earlier months on today.

Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF). The party resides in a special relation to power. It is widely perceived as an unofficial partner of an unofficial union. This indeterminacy is actively used by the party leadership to assume the role of spokesperson for the majority without anyone recognising it as such. The impression is conveyed that everything in governance depends on MRF – from the schedule of constitutional changes to the behaviour towards Russia to the reactions to protests. In this sense, MRF have been rehabilitated as a legitimate political entity precisely by those right-wing circles, now represented by PP and DB, who had always denied their legitimacy in the past.

The situation with the politicians of MRF is interesting. For the first time in history, MP Delyan Peevski became a central media figure giving daily statements. This is a striking contrast with previous parliamentary mandates, in which Peevski not only did not give interviews, but also did not visit parliament at all. Sanctioned not so long ago under the US Magnitsky Act, Peevski seems to want to send the message to the US that the defence of "Euro-Atlanticism" will be carried out by those who decide for themselves, not by those whom the US would prefer to see. Another important thing is the public appearance of the honorary chairman of MRF Ahmed Dogan, who took on the role of examiner of candidate mayors. Dogan's decision not to allow the most popular mayor from the party, Hassan Aziz, to run for a sixth consecutive term in Kardzhali is indicative. In MRF, they must understand that there are no untouchables and there is nobody subscribed to positions of power "by right". The public absence of the leader of the party, Mustafa Karadayi, who seemed to disappear from the political scene and gave rise to rumours of his impending removal, should also be noted. These rumours are not arising for the first time, but now they are subtly encouraged by media close to MRF.

Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP). The announcement of candidates for mayors and municipal councillors from BSP has always been full of tension, but this time the public scandal has surpassed all previous cases. The party leadership quite rudely intervened in the work of the party structures in dozens of municipalities and rearranged the nominations. As a consequence, a number of figures initially promoted as mayoral candidates by local BSP organisations have

decided to run separately, in opposition to the candidates of the leadership. This is the case, for example, in Sliven and Shumen. But in many other places, leading socialists have rejected their nominations or left the party. It is not difficult to predict what the electoral effect of the behaviour of the tandem of Korneliya Ninova and Borislav Gutsanov, who took actual control of BSP will be.

It would seem that hopes for a good performance of the party are concentrated not elsewhere, but in Sofia, the city with traditionally low support for the left, thanks to the strong candidacy of trade unionist Vanya Grigorova for mayor. Grigorova's campaign got off to a promising start and this increases the chances of a strong result. If these chances become clearer in the coming weeks, however, it is possible that Grigorova will receive "friendly fire" from the party leadership. However, with the prospect of an electoral decline across the country, a potential upward movement in Sofia would automatically raise the question of the alternative to Ninova's course.

"There is such a people" ("Ima Takuv Narod" - ITN). Slavi Trifonov's party is making an impression with the impressive number of nominations for mayors throughout the country, something unconventional for a small and untraditional political force. At least the initial reading indicates that some of these nominations have real chances. In all probability, ITN have taken advantage of their parliamentary status to give the party logo more solidity to candidates without party affiliation. Even if so, it would allow ITN to report good results from the local elections and disprove the notion of a fading player.

4

MAIN CONCLUSIONS AND FORECASTS

The disparate events in Bulgaria, connected in some way with the Ukrainian conflict, give reasons to conclude that this conflict has finally become an element of the political and social tensions in the country. It is no longer just a matter of an attitude towards the Russian or Ukrainian causes, although such an attitude, of course, exists and matters. Different political camps, professional communities and ideological groups use the war in Ukraine in their propaganda arsenal to impose their interests and seek supremacy over their competitors. This confrontation is expected to have a long-term impact in a divided society like that in Bulgaria.

The 100 days of the Denkov cabinet show geopolitical activity but modest legislative and political results. Social and economic matters are left in the background. There are clear doubts as to whether the budget forecast is realistic. The protests that have broken out indicate the concerns in various sectors of society about unpredictable and thoughtless moves by those in power. Prime Minister Nikolay Denkov falls into the shadow of other leading representatives of the majority such as Boyko Borisov and Delyan Peevski. All of this feeds a sense of deficits in institutional accountability and strategic coherence.

The campaign for the local elections began with limited public interest. One of the reasons is the still unclear political stakes of the electoral contest. Many of the older parties are avoiding risks and nominating their previous candidates. The candidates of the new formations in many cases do not appear, at least

at first glance, to be a strong alternative to them. The analysis of the nominations in large municipalities nevertheless reveals the presence of a significant number of figures who have gained popularity during the political crisis of the last three years, but without established party affiliation. In the biographies of many one can see transitions from party to party for short periods. This new elite is trying to find a place for itself, this time on the field of local self-government, but apparently without an attractive and distinctive vision.

October will provide the answer as to whether the parties will raise the stakes of the contest, placing the fate of the government on the outcome of the election. There are such hypotheses. For now, however, they are unlikely. It would appear that none of the major parties is interested in an early fall of the government, even less so in pre-term elections. With a decisive victory, GERB could indeed demand a wider presence in the executive branch. In principle, however, this could be postponed until the time of the rotation in March. It is also uncertain whether GERB would wish to assume clearer responsibility for a relatively unpopular administration, instead of controlling its legislative agenda, financial instruments and lower administrative levels. In this regard, the discussion on the 2024 budget, including its initial non-public part, would be of interest.

On the whole, political stability in Bulgaria contrasts with heightened social tensions and a widespread impression of a lack of direction.

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