

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

POLIT-BAROMETER

Year 23 Issue 9
October – November 5th

Boris Popivanov



The upheavals and scandals in the parliamentary majority arise mainly from the clash of partners over the future of the Bulgarian energy industry.



The results of the local elections show that all the leading parties are suffering political damage from the current administration.



The candidate for mayor of Sofia, Vanya Grigorova, has become a leading figure in the left political space.

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1

THE DYNAMICS OF FOREIGN POLICY

The war in the Middle East and Bulgaria. The terrorist attack by Hamas against Israel and the subsequent bloody conflict in Gaza has focused the attention of people around the world. Bulgaria has categorically condemned the aggression of Hamas at various institutional levels – the President, the Prime Minister, the foreign minister and the National Assembly (NA). Sofia also showed extremely fast and adequate behaviour, becoming one of the first countries that succeeded in deporting its citizens who wanted to be evacuated from Israel. The Metropolitan Municipality also demonstrated a clear and unwavering stance by banning marches in defence of Palestine. Prime Minister Nikolay Denkov and Foreign Minister Maria Gabriel visited Israel to hold meetings with their counterparts there and to testify to Bulgaria's commitment to the cause of the country under attack.

The nuances in these processes should not be underestimated. They have both geopolitical and domestic dimensions. Firstly, it is important to mention that Bulgaria is one of the very few European countries that almost openly blames Russia for the Hamas attack. Prime Minister Denkov personally stated that the conflict in Israel is related to that in Ukraine. The motive, according to Denkov, is that the tragic events in Israel shift the focus of the international community away from Putin's aggression and are likely to limit arms supplies to Kiev. It must be said that the European Union (EU) does not entertain such hypotheses at all. From a national perspective, the Hamas attack has once again pitted different institutions and political players against each other. President Rumen Radev and Prime Minister Denkov, professing similar views on the situation in Israel and Gaza, organised various forums to discuss the implications of this situation on Bulgarian security. On two successive days, Radev convened a meeting of the heads of services and line ministers, and Denkov met with the Security Council of the Council of Ministers. Denkov was present at both meetings, but clearly wanted to show that the President was not the authority on the subject. The disagreements also affected parliament. The National Assembly condemned the terrorist attack by Hamas with a declaration. It is true that

this declaration did not meet any objections, but nor did it gain consensus. The parties from the majority - GERB-UDF, "We Continue the Change (Produzhavame Promianata) - Democratic Bulgaria" (PP-DB) and the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) announced their support, while the other three parliamentary groups, "Vazrazhdane" ("Revival"), the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) and "There is such a people" ("Ima Takuv Narod" - ITN) simply did not participate in the vote. The war in the Middle East is turning out to be another occasion for confrontation between Bulgarian institutions and parties in search of a political advantage.

The war in Ukraine. It is the first month that the Ukrainian conflict has not been at the centre of Bulgarian foreign policy, although it is at the centre of the domestic political debate. Sofia's anti-Russian line is not doubted. It was officially confirmed in a video conference call between Bulgarian Prime Minister Denkov and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. It was demonstrated once again in a series of cases, among which the extradition of the correspondent of the Russian publication "Rossiyskaya Gazeta" from Bulgaria occupies a prominent place. The decision of the Bulgarian authorities was not justified by any explanation and received a reciprocal response from the Russian side. There have been indications that the tension between the EU (and Bulgaria in particular) and Russia will focus increasingly on the terrain of the war of information, in which the media play an essential role. Apart from events such as that mentioned above, however, in general, the tension with Russia has mainly been exploited domestically, in the course of the ongoing local election campaign in Bulgaria, and mainly by PP-DB. Two directions of development of the topic were outlined, both of which used the forgotten concept of "civilisational choice", which indicates the country as belonging to the Western world. First of all, the ruling majority was presented as the guarantor of Bulgaria's "civilisational choice". In this sense, any political crisis would appear to serve Russia, even and especially if it were provoked by one of the partners and not by the opposition. And secondly, the candidacy of the united left for mayor of

Sofia, Vanya Grigorova, was interpreted as a “pro-Putin project”, the ultimate goal of which was the return of Bulgaria to Russia’s orbit.

The Case of Schengen. Bulgaria’s membership in the Schengen area is a foreign policy priority of the current administration, tied to a specific deadline - December 31 of this year. Diplomatic efforts to overcome obstacles continued intensively throughout the whole of October. Both Prime Minister Denkov and Minister Gabriel held various international meetings. Denkov’s visit to Berlin was particularly important, where German Chancellor Olaf Scholz unequivocally supported Bulgaria. Despite everything, Austria and the Netherlands confirmed their veto on the Bulgarian candidacy.

The government faced the prospect of its first apparent failure in power. Sofia’s strategy of communication in this regard remained unchanged. Denkov, as before, insists on some new hypothetical chances for a reversal in the positions of Vienna and The Hague, even if this is in December. But at the same time, the Prime Minister is endeavouring to turn Schengen membership into a hostage to the stability of the cabinet he leads. According to Denkov in a special interview, the chances of the Austrian and Dutch objections being dropped are directly dependent on the stability of the current Bulgarian government and its geopolitical priorities. In other words, there is a warning to the GERB-UDF and MRF partners that any separatist act of theirs would come at a serious geopolitical price.

2

THE INSTITUTIONS AND THE AGENDA OF SOCIETY

The government and the parliamentary majority. The format of the government is subject to the trends fixed in recent months. One party in the majority (PP-DB) is constantly looking for ways to make GERB and MRF take their responsibility for the fate of the government, whilst the other two (GERB and MRF) prefer to distance themselves. The campaign for the local elections increased the tension, because the three parties had to appear as competitors for local government. Mutual threats to leave the majority escalated. In fact, two centres of power gradually established themselves. One is concentrated in the government and undoubtedly has an institutional advantage. Just that the low authority of Prime Minister Denkov does not allow this advantage to be realised. The second centre of power is publicly represented by GERB leader Boyko Borisov and the new co-chairman of the MRF parliamentary group Delyan Peevski, who claim to speak on behalf of the legislative body, the National Assembly. Borisov and Peevski undermine the trust in the cabinet and its head in every possible way - with periodic requests that they report in writing for the work done (e.g. on the topic with Schengen), with the formulation of tasks to be performed (e.g. to file a case against the Russian Church in Sofia, to buy emergency insulin for hospitals, etc.) and by challenging any attempts at independence (eg against the calls of the Minister of Defence for parliament to approve a new arms deal). The Prime Minister is evidently unable to regain the lost control over the activities of his cabinet. Denkov's public reactions betray a growing nervousness bordering on helplessness. His statements such as that a report by the State Agency for National Security (SANS) is "manipulative", or remarks such as the one with which he calls the representatives elected by the people "disrespectful", are clearly an expression of political uncertainty, but also of institutional irresponsibility.

Energy has become the central theme in the politics of the majority. It also led to the first vote of no confidence against the Denkov cabinet, initiated by BSP and "Vazrazhdane", which received the support of these two parties and ITN (71 votes "for") and was rejected with the votes of GERB, PP-DB and MRF (143

votes against). October began with continued mass protests by miners and energy workers. These protests eventually ended, despite the government's lack of assurances about the fate of the coal plants. Even on the contrary, Denkov's office explicitly emphasised that the territorial plans under the Recovery and Sustainability Plan, which provide for the phased closure of the power plants in the Maritsa basin, are not subject to revision and are coming into force. The impression was created that the cabinet was deliberately raising hopes in one energy sector to compensate for their refusal to compromise in another. Most probably, this is the way to interpret Denkov's surprising and, at this stage, expertly completely unsubstantiated, statement that construction of units 7 and 8 of the nuclear power plant in Kozloduy will begin at an accelerated pace (in just 2 years!). This statement is clearly intended to reassure the public that regardless of the fate of the Maritsa-Iztok mines, Bulgaria will have sufficient energy production capacity.

The tension in the energy sector has continued to develop in three main directions - the situation with the contracts for the import of gas from Turkey; the transit of Russian gas through Bulgaria; and the Lukoil crisis.

An important element of President Radev's energy strategy was concluded in January of this year. This was the contract with the Turkish state company "Botaş" for the import of gas from Turkey, with options for its transit to third countries. In October, the "Denkov" cabinet officially expressed doubts that the contract was beneficial for Bulgaria, and a little later came the statement of the European Commission that it would check this contract for compliance with EU anti-monopoly legislation. There is hardly any doubt that the signal to the Commission was submitted by Sofia. The geopolitical alibi is also there to see. The Bulgarian government is hinting that under the guise of "Turkish gas" it is possible for "Botaş" to import Russian gas into Bulgaria, thereby circumventing the sanctions.

An unexpected step was for the cabinet to make a decision to propose, and for parliament to approve, the introduction of an additional fee of BGN 20/MWh. on

the transit of Russian gas through the Bulgarian Turkish Stream route to the Western Balkans and Hungary. There were ardent objections from Belgrade and Budapest that this made gas supplies prohibitively expensive. Concerns were also raised about the legal basis for amending an international treaty by a unilateral act of the Bulgarian state. The cabinet again armed itself with the geopolitical alibi - with the clarification that the sharp increase in the transit fee would affect the profits of the Russian giant Gazprom, not the end users in Serbia or Hungary. Of course, it is not clear why Gazprom would continue to maintain a contract that is already running at a loss. In other words, gas security in the region is in doubt due to the evidently uncoordinated actions of the side of Bulgaria. Interpretations of what is happening have appeared in the media, namely that with the proceeds from the new fee, the Minister of Finance Asen Vasilev is frantically trying to reduce the unmanageable budget deficit. It sounds convincing, although it is hardly likely to contain the whole truth.

The fate of the "Lukoil" oil refinery near Burgas cropped up again, also in an unexpected way. Only a month after the National Assembly left in force the derogation for the import of Russian oil through Lukoil for another year, GERB and MRF demanded the immediate cancellation of this derogation. In parallel to the two parties, but seemingly independently of them, the PP-DB also launched an attack on Lukoil. Initially, Finance Minister Vasilev announced in an interview with the Financial Times that the refinery would soon be sold. A denial of this by the company ensued. This was followed by statements by the Bulgarian government that "Lukoil" had not paid due taxes in Bulgaria to the amount of BGN 600 million. Suspicions have arisen that we are witnessing classic pressure on a company to relinquish its ownership and leave the country to cede its assets to another. Again, as if without any connection with PP-DB and the cabinet, MRF raised their claims and declared that "Lukoil" had to contribute BGN 1.5 billion to the budget. At this stage, it is difficult to analyse the political consequences of this multi-layered game, in which, independently of each other, partners in the government are attacking a specific company. Once again, there is also a geopolitical alibi, referring to the disapproval of Russia making profits on the back of an EU member state.

The guarantees of Bulgaria's geopolitical affiliation are undoubtedly keeping the government in power. The same can probably be said for the second unifying motif of governance, constitutional change. The bill to amend the Constitution passed its first reading in the National Assembly and received 161 votes, enough to get the "green light" for another vote two months later. It is noteworthy that the "constitutional majority" is in political and expert isolation on the

subject. Not only are the other three parliamentary parties, "Vazrazhdane", BSP and ITN, opposed to the project, but it also has the categorical disapproval of the expert community and the judiciary. The Supreme Judicial Council, the Supreme Bar Council, the Union of Judges, the Union of Lawyers and many other structures contested the content of the proposed changes. The majority made an effort to legitimise themselves with the positive opinion received from the Venice Commission. Just that the opinion in question, as it turned out, is far from positive, but expresses bewilderment about the motives and goals of the project. From the point of view of the majority's ambition to consolidate, however, one would not expect any "backtracking" or withdrawal of the changes, at least for now.

The President. The head of state Rumen Radev remained in the shadow of the political process. This is largely understandable during an election campaign in which Radev did not participate. A hypothetical attempt by him to intervene more directly in the race would hardly be approved by the public. Radev once again demonstrated his "alternative" position to the majority regarding the war in the Middle East. The refusal to convene a National Security Advisory Council (NSAC) was motivated by the reluctance to share classified information with party leaders (in other words, PP-DB). Instead, Radev convened a meeting on national security with representatives of the government and the secret services, something like an "alternative" NSAC, just as the Council convened by Prime Minister Denkov the next day was another "alternative" NSAC. The institutional clash continues to develop. The call by PP-DB, and then by Prime Minister Denkov personally, for the resignation of SANS chairman Plamen Tonchev, was a new blow against Radev, similar to the recent call for the resignation of the chief secretary of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) Petar Todorov. The dispute over the control of the security services does not leave the agenda of the relations between the President and the government.

The tension of the local elections. The election campaign got off to a dull and uninteresting start, overshadowed by national political controversies on other issues. In the first weeks, smear campaigns were severely limited. The impression was created that the parties and leading candidates preferred to have low interest among citizens, low voter turnout and, accordingly, the decisive role to be played by hard-core voters.

Towards the end of the campaign, this changed dramatically. Sociological studies have shown that the initial calculations do not reflect any given facts at all. Two days before the first round, an election "bomb" went off. A report by the National Security Agency caught a deputy minister from the PP-DB quota il-

legally photographing codes for the machine vote. Later, information came out that the minister in the same department was under increased security due to threats of mob law. Almost immediately, GERB and MRF suspected an attempted falsification of the machine vote. The Central Election Commission (CEC) agreed with these accusations and cancelled the machine voting for the first round. A series of actions began that would have seemed comical, were it not for them generally undermining confidence in the electoral process. The Municipal Electoral Commission in Sofia contested the decision of the CEC and stated that voting would still be done by machines in the capital. At the last moment, the CEC prevailed over its subordinate structure. The Supreme Administrative Court reinstated the machine voting for the second round, but without denying the legality of the decision to cancel this technology for the first round.

The data available is not sufficient to confirm or reject the accusation of PP-DB that there was a conspiracy by GERB and MRF to manipulate the local vote by pushing away voters and speculating on the paper ballot. In any case, the predicted collapse of voter turnout did not happen. These about a very low number of voters have become widespread, but such an assessment is not accurate. There were indeed fewer voters in the first round than 4 years earlier, and it is also true that turnout in local elections should be compared to other local elections. However, it is not insignificant that the number of voters this time round (2.713 million) exceeded the number of those who voted in the last parliamentary elections in April this year. (2.683 million), taking into account the fact that in Bulgaria, traditionally, fewer people vote in local elections than in general elections.

3

THE CONDITION OF THE PARTY SYSTEM

GERB-UDF. The leading formation had the clear intention to turn the local elections into their triumph, with the help of which they would show the electoral helplessness of PP-DB and move towards stronger positions in the government. GERB started from the premise that their dominance in small settlements was unshakable, and in larger ones the main opponent would be precisely PP-DB. That is why the campaign was primarily oriented towards increasing separation from this majority partner. In his numerous pre-election meetings, GERB leader Boyko Borisov constantly talked about how the task facing the party was to overcome the “disaster” of “change”. Criticism against the government increased. Borisov even chose not to participate in the vote of no confidence against the cabinet, and the culmination of the tension between the two rounds of the elections was his assessment of the “disintegration” of the majority and the threat of reviewing GERB’s support for this majority in very short terms. GERB MP Delyan Dobrev openly launched the idea of future government of GERB, MRF and DB (without PP). Thus, among other things, the probability of the collapse of the PP-DB coalition itself was suggested. There is an assumption that the GERB actively participated in the machine voting crisis, driven by the belief that PP-DB were already sufficiently weakened and needed a little more pressure to be electorally marginalised for good. The election results are contradictory. Formally speaking, GERB are the undisputed winners - in terms of absolute number of votes, as elected municipal councillors, as elected municipal mayors, and as elected regional mayors. However, the picture is far from looking too optimistic. The performance of GERB is the weakest in the last 12 years. Against the background of the local elections of 2019, when GERB won 17 regional centres, now they have 13. After 18 years of being in power in Sofia, for the first time not only did the party not propose the new mayor of the capital, but they did not even manage to reach the second round. The loss in a city as significant for GERB as Varna cannot fail to make an impression. In purely comparative terms, the problem is not just the positions lost, but the fact that they are occupied in a number of cases by the main opponent PP-DB - for example in Sofia, Varna and Blagoevgrad.

In the week between the two rounds and immediately after the second round, Borisov was busy with clear crisis PR, called to minimise the damage to image from the tottering local hegemony. He issued signals of support first for the left-wing candidate for mayor of the capital, Vanya Grigorova, then for the right-wing candidate, Vasil Terziev. Borisov’s intention was to suggest that the election of the mayor in Sofia depended mostly on him, and that he remained the leading figure. If he decided that Grigorova should be mayor, he would support her, if he decided that it should be Terziev, his support would be for him. However, the split of GERB supporters detected by sociologists gives no indication that Borisov controls his electorate. His statement that a new “pro-Putin” majority has been created in the form of PP-DB, BSP and “Vazrazhdane” is rather an effort to reformulate the agenda and not allow the emphasis to fall on GERB’s electoral problems. If Borisov had planned after the local vote to negotiate with PP-DB from a position of strength, the results have doomed this plan. GERB have become the party of small and medium-sized settlements, with uncertain political influence in the larger ones, and the successes in the large regional centres were primarily due to popular mayors, and not to the popularity of the party and the leadership. This is an undoubted signal of the germination, albeit a slow one, of political decline.

“We Continue the Change (Produlzhavame Pro-mianata) - Democratic Bulgaria” (PP-DB). The ambition of the coalition was almost entirely focused on the local elections in Sofia. There was an implicit recognition that outside the capital, any achievements were unlikely. A number of government decisions, including the draft budget for 2024, were postponed so as not to interfere with the campaign itself. Indeed, PP-DB breakthroughs in the smaller settlements did not happen. The profile of the coalition began to resemble that of one of its participants, DB – urban and rather elitist. Despite retrospective statements, the success of PP-DB candidates in Varna, Blagoevgrad and Pazardzhik against their opponents from GERB was unexpected. It can be considered that it was a product not only of the strong nominations, which

the new mayors undoubtedly were, but also of the voters' weariness of the current status quo of GERB in these municipalities. The scandal with machine voting immediately before the first round, in all probability, had a consolidating effect on PP-DB supporters, who were told that GERB and MRF were trying to "steal" the elections from them.

The battle for Sofia went through different phases. Initially, the messages were highly technocratic, based on modern, European and digital solutions to the problems of Sofia, in contrast to the corrupt tradition of the supposed main opponent from GERB. The clash was packaged in the usual formula of "change" versus "status quo". Later, when the rise of the socialist candidate Vanya Grigorova began to catch the eye, PP-DB changed the concept and focused their efforts on the opposition between "left" and "right", with the implication that "Sofia has never been red" and therefore Grigorova had no chance. When the GERB candidate Anton Hekimyan was no longer in the running after the first round, another change occurred in the campaign. Growing anxiety over Grigorova's success led to the introduction of a stark geopolitical strategy, pitting the "pro-Western" Vasil Terziev against the "pro-Putin" Vanya Grigorova. The end result of all the rather hysterical rhetoric was a victory for Terziev over Grigorova by a narrow margin. Taking into account the electoral traditions and momentum in Sofia, the biases of the major media, the leading political role of PP-DB in the capital and the crisis state of the parties that support Grigorova, Terziev's victory is by no means a major achievement and speaks rather of an unconvincing candidate and badly-conceived campaign. In any case, however, for the first time in more than 20 years, Sofia is governed by a mayor from this sphere, and the data from the 24 metropolitan areas unconditionally testify to the supremacy of PP-DB.

"Vazrazhdane" ("Revival"). The strategy of "Vazrazhdane", clear long before the elections, was followed steadfastly until they were over. The party did not strive for victories at any cost and for coalitions to participate in power, but for the creation of local structures and local influence. It can be said that their ambition has basically been realised. The media circulated comments that "Vazrazhdane" was in decline and had not made a major breakthrough anywhere. However, for a party with a minimal local presence until recently, the growth is undoubted. "Vazrazhdane" has mayors, as well as a good result in Varna, and second place in the second round in Gabrovo. But more importantly, local self-government is not a cause of "Vazrazhdane" and could hardly mobilise their supporters. The causes of "Vazrazhdane", usually geopolitical and radical-transformative, are national. They are (possibly) achievable only with the tools of the state, not local government. Therefore, it can

be assumed that if there had been hypothetical parliamentary elections at the same time, the same party would have done significantly better.

The campaign of "Vazrazhdane" in Sofia is of interest, notwithstanding. It gradually developed into an acute opposition of the party candidate Deyan Nikolov, not against the leading parties, but against the left-wing contender Vanya Grigorova. Before the second round, the leader Kostadin Kostadinov refused to support either of the two candidates - Terziev or Grigorova. It is no surprise that BSP-Sofia accused Kostadinov first of working for GERB, doing everything possible with the campaign against Grigorova to give Hekimyan a chance to reach the second round, and then "gifted" the mayoral post to Terziev because of his refusal to support Grigorova, who lost by only a few thousand votes. The motives for this political mistake of Kostadinov are sufficiently transparent. Grigorova's rise casts a shadow over his own role as an "alternative to the status quo". In this sense, for Kostadinov, the failure of any other "alternative" is more important than the shaking of the "status quo" itself. In any case, this political behaviour of "Vazrazhdane" sticks in people's minds and will increase the mistrust of the other opposition formations towards the principles of the party.

Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF). After an active campaign, MRF are expanding their participation in local government, although without particularly large breakthroughs. The electoral geography of the party is interesting. As an independent player, they achieved mayors in 40 municipalities, of which 37 won in the first round and only 3 in the second round. This shows not so much a successful campaign, as a lack of real competition. There are even municipalities where the MRF candidate was the only contender for the post of mayor.

In the spirit of a practice that has already been established, MRF presented the elections as (yet another) step towards a future official return to state power. The month of campaigning left no doubt about the party's unofficial involvement in governance. A telling example is the vote of no confidence, in which MRF supported the cabinet. It is the practice of MRF to be against any government in which it is not publicly included, when voting on the budget and in votes of no confidence. For many, the new course is associated with the figure of MP Delyan Peevski, already widely commented on as an informal speaker and auditor of the government at the same time. This role of Peevski was further legitimised by his election as co-chairman of the MRF parliamentary group, together with Mustafa Karadayi. Rumours have been fuelled that the political end of Karadayi as a leader is approaching. The question is: what is the relationship between the sudden rise of Peevski and the leadership problem in MRF.

Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP). Korneliya Ninova's party appeared in the local elections with expectations of defeat. Immediately after the first and after the second round, however, the chairperson declared that "BSP are returning to local government", that they were increasing their result significantly and that they are the second political force after GERB. Analysis shows that these are exaggerations. A party with a solid tradition in local self-government, BSP now do not have elected mayors or councillors in dozens of municipalities, and, according to various estimates, the total number of municipal councillors has decreased by around 40%.

And yet one cannot talk of a collapse. Ninova talks of victories in 71 municipalities, although in fact it is about 40 or less. In the rest, BSP try to team up with winners whom they have supported, but whose success has no leading weight. This is still not insignificant either. Ninova spoke of victories in 4 regional centres, although one of them - Silistra - was definitely not won by the party. The elected mayor there has come up with a list of councillors different from that of BSP, and has preferred to keep the support of BSP for himself silent in his campaign. But she is right about Ruse, Razgrad and Shumen. The strongest and most symbolic achievement is still in Sofia. Vanya Grigorova did not win, but achieved an extremely strong result, finishing with the smallest second round margin compared to the winner (5,000 votes) compared to all other socialist contenders for the capital in the last 30 years. The vote for Grigorova even stimulated discussions in the media about the "end of blue Sofia".

Ninova goes into battle to appropriate all these results and record them as being down to her. The facts do not support such a claim at all. In many places in the country, BSP had the chance for a much stronger performance, if it had not been for the pressure of Ninova and her cronies Borislav Gutsanov and Atanas Zafirov for revision of the decisions of the local organisations and forceful imposition from above of unelectable candidates, whose main quality is loyalty to the party leadership. Thus, the socialists not only lost in important cities such as Smolyan and Sliven, but the candidates of the local structures of BSP, who appeared as independents, received much stronger support than the nominations of the party headquarters. Where BSP did better, it is almost entirely due to the authority of previous mayors from the left - such as in Troyan or Gotse Delchev.

And with regard to places where Ninova had high hopes and personally got involved in the campaign, in almost all cases the results were disappointing. On her campaign trail, she openly advertised her support for a number of her nominees, most of whom lost badly. Ninova never once stood by Pencho Milkov in Ruse, Dobrin Dobrev in Razgrad or Vanya Grigorova in Sofia,

but they did a lot in spite of that - or it is more accurate to say, precisely because of this. In the tense week between the two rounds, Ninova called on Grigorova to distance herself from Borisov's support, which was subsequently withdrawn, effectively turning against the candidate from her own party. The only exception to the endless series of wrong or counterproductive decisions of the leader of BSP was Shumen, where she nominated a candidate different from that of the local structure, Hristo Hristov, but he turned out to be a good choice and won the race hands down.

The dazzling presence of Vanya Grigorova has various explanations. She made a clear and outstanding campaign in which she brought to the fore left-wing goals and messages - against the omnipotence of the market in the municipality, against the marginalisation of entire neighbourhoods, and against the lack of adequate communal services. Grigorova had the chance to face two opponents with a technocratic profile such as Vasil Terziev and Anton Hekimyan, which made her a natural alternative to the dominant trend. The vote she received was largely one that expressed a protest. This can also be traced through the socio-demographic profiles of its voters, who are distributed in all age and education groups and in no way correspond to the traditional profile of the socialist voter. Grigorova was criticised for representing a facade behind which oligarchic interests, nationalist parties and Russophile circles lurk. There are such elements, but they are definitely not the leading ones. Grigorova's own biography as a trade unionist suggests the direction in which she wants to expand her political influence. The minimal electoral loss makes Grigorova an informal leader in the left-wing space, which for many years has been suppressed by Ninova's failures.

The ambition of the chairwoman of BSP to lay claims to all the achievements of the party is understandable. In fact, the local elections open a space for the independence of the local structures of the socialists, who are no longer dependent on Ninova. She has nothing more to offer them.

"There is Such a People" ("Ima Takuv Narod" - ITN). Slavi Trifonov's party, as expected, did not realise particular achievements in the local elections through their most impressive candidates and party lists. But the numerous local coalitions in which ITN participate have been fruitful - for example in Lovech, where the candidate of such a coalition won the post of mayor.

In political terms, ITN has so far been able to play a dual role, without any major upheavals: as a vociferous and determined opposition to the majority of the GERB, PP-DB and MRF, and at the same time as a media "blade" of GERB and MRF in their attacks against PP-DB, as evident from the machine voting scandal.

4

MAIN CONCLUSIONS AND FORECASTS

Bulgarian foreign policy has, as it has done in recent months, the main goal of legitimising the current administration. It is reminiscent of a game of mutual attrition. PP-DB strive with foreign policy declarations and appeals to limit the separatist intentions of GERB and MRF, while the latter two parties, having gained serious political self-confidence in this configuration, raise the foreign policy stake even higher (the merits of political actors for the orientation of Bulgaria), to instruct the government on what to do. It is noteworthy that the actively fuelled West-Russia tension is being used in that it is applied to the crisis in the Middle East. Those in power seem to want to suggest that we should see Israel as Ukraine and Hamas as Russia. Leaving aside how superficial this analogy is, it unfortunately creates additional prerequisites for anti-Semitism in Bulgarian society.

The resulting political situation is dominated by figures such as Boyko Borisov, Delyan Peevski and Asen Vasilev, while Prime Minister Nikolay Denkov appears weak, unconvincing and lacking in authority. The instability of government is visible, but the desire for change at this stage is rather limited. Battles that are difficult to understand for the outside observer, but extremely important from a financial and political point of view, are taking place in the field of energy. Apparently, the ambitions and appetites of the partners in power are concentrated there.

The local elections, unlike previous cases, did not set a clear political trend. Voters did not prefer a single political force to chart the future trajectory regarding the development of the country. All the main parties have something to be proud of, but they also have a lot of reasons to be disappointed. More than two

thirds of the municipal mayors were elected in just the first round. According to some estimates, this may mean increasing feudalisation of Bulgarian municipalities, but it is no less likely to mean hope for political stability. There is no “revolutionary situation”. But there is no re-legitimation of the previous model of local government. This construction rests on the authority of “old” mayors with many mandates, which indicates a certain exhaustion. The tendency for incumbent mayors often to lose the second round can be explained, in turn, again by problems of the personal authority of the respective figures. If the mayor has proven to be an effective mediator of local and national interests, he gathers support for the second round. Otherwise, he becomes a victim of inevitable public discontent.

Only in the largest municipalities did PP-DB create expectations for serious changes and protest voting. In Sofia, the coalition almost lost because of the dynamics it encouraged. From the behaviour of its leaders, it is clear that they definitely do not want the political debate in the capital and the country to shift to the left-right axis. The geopolitical stake “for/against Putin” seems more effective, including the reason that it would also help to reach an understanding with the opponents from GERB. With her impressive result in Sofia, Vanya Grigorova has brought the left back into the political agenda. It remains to be seen to what extent Grigorova will be able to maintain this theme and successfully impose her leadership in the left space. But the “gauntlet” has been “thrown down”. The left-wing people in Bulgaria have a focus of their hopes, and the political process in the Socialist Party is gradually shifting from the dilemma “for/against Ninova” to “away from Ninova”.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Boris Popivanov, PhD., is an Associate Professor of Political Science at St. Kliment Ohridski University of Sofia. His research is concentrated in the areas of political ideologies, theory and history of the left, as well as the Bulgarian transition.

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Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung | Office Bulgaria
97, Knjaz Boris I St. | 1000 Sofia | Bulgaria

Responsible:
Jacques Paparo | Director, FES Bulgaria
Tel.: +359 2 980 8747 | Fax: +359 2 980 2438
English translation: Keneward Hill
bulgaria.fes.de

Contact:
office@fes.bg

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The results of the local elections show that all the leading parties are suffering political damage from the current administration.



The candidate for mayor of Sofia, Vanya Grigorova, has become a leading figure in the left political space.

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