

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

POLIT-BAROMETER

Year 24 Issue 1
January

Boris Popivanov



Preparations for a government rotation began with complex negotiations for a “package deal” between the ruling parties.



The political debate is subordinated to the powerful political attack by MRF politician Delyan Peevski against President Rumen Radev.



Suggestions for the non-alternativeness of the government majority fuelled expectations for new political projects.

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1

FOREIGN POLICY DYNAMICS

The War in Ukraine and the Government in Bulgaria. The ruling majority in Bulgaria, which defines itself as “Euro-Atlantic”, invariably legitimises itself with the military assistance it provides to Ukraine. There has probably been no change in this since the commencement of the Cabinet. While other European countries raise a variety of additional topics, from emerging economic imbalances to arms shortages, Bulgaria is unambiguous. Foreign Minister Mariya Gabriel’s statement that Bulgaria “will support Ukraine as long as necessary” contains neither a strategy nor even a desire to discuss options of support. At the World Economic Forum in Davos, Prime Minister Nikolay Denkov gave an interview with CNN, stressing that Ukraine is fighting not for its territory, but for the whole of Europe. This statement is a direct quote from Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Denkov ranks among those who are asking for an accelerated decision of the European Union (EU) on an arms package for Kiev.

The “Kiev Legitimation” of the Bulgarian government seems to be running parallel to the domestic political developments in Bulgaria. If in the summer of 2023 President Zelensky hosted in Bulgaria the forces of “We Continue the Change (Produzhavame Promianata) – Democratic Bulgaria” (PP-DB), while the other participants in the majority GERB-UDF and the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) seemed forced to join in the second line, then in January 2024 Zelensky already recognised the equal contribution of each of the partners. This was evident from the video conference conversation of the Ukrainian President with the leaders of the PP-DB Kiril Petkov, GERB-UDF Boyko Borisov and MRF Delyan Peevski, when gratitude was expressed to each of them separately. It would appear that PP-DB have lost their leading role in the “Ukrainian relationship”.

The American Vector. Something interesting in this sense is the relations of the Bulgarian rulers with the leading state in the Euro-Atlantic family, the United States of America (USA). Against the backdrop of US hesitations on how and by what means to continue to provide assistance to Ukraine, this topic is gaining

new significance for Bulgaria. However, the news related to the US, unlike the Ukrainian news, seems to relate almost predominantly to PP-DB and their representatives in power. The start of the new year came with the news that PP were recruiting American lobbyists to ensure a more favourable representation of their political party in American political and business circles. The role and specific tasks of these lobbyists remained unclear. There was also intrigue regarding the occasion of Prime Minister Denkov’s upcoming visit to the United States – whether this visit will include a meeting with President Joe Biden or not. Observers may remain with the impression that for Denkov and PP-DB such a meeting is especially important, even if it is just in a symbolic sense. It should not be forgotten that the discussion about Denkov’s potential meeting with Biden took place in parallel with the visit of Defence Minister Todor Tagarev to the United States. The information that Tagarev discussed the possibilities for the deployment of allied anti-aircraft and anti-ship missile systems in Bulgaria seemed to instill the independent weight of the Minister of Defence in the bilateral relations of Sofia-Washington. The fact that not the Council of Ministers, but the Ministry of Defence was the key speaker on such serious national security issues could not fail to be noticed.

“Semi-Schengen”? The decision of the Netherlands and Austria to withdraw their objections to Bulgaria’s membership of the Schengen area at the air and sea borders provoked heated debates in the country. The majority evaluated the fact as a major foreign policy success of Bulgaria, which had previously been impossible in the office of President Rumen Radev, but now it has happened thanks to the presence of a pro-European government and real legislative actions to guarantee the rule of law. Among other things, Schengen membership as of 1 January 2024 was the first of the five initial promises of the Denkov cabinet when it started its term of office. President Radev took the opposite position and described the result as “semi-Schengen”. It was appropriate to observe that Bulgaria’s great interest is land borders, because the huge costs of business come from there and not from airports, and also because maintaining Schengen

borders with Romania and Greece also keeps state spending high. Is the glass half full or half empty? The breakthrough in the "Schengen Wall" of the country should not be denied. But it should be borne in mind that fully-fledged Schengen membership is a Bulgarian right, a product of long met requirements, not a pledge for negotiations in search of "compromise". From this point of view, the partial realisation of Schengen membership can indeed become an indefinite postponement of its final realisation. A warning about exactly such a negative development was given

by the MEP Ilhan Kyuchyuk. Apart from everything, there are forecasts that Bulgaria's latest steps towards Schengen could give rise to a series of new conditions and requirements that were never included in the normative documents. The rumour that in exchange for "air" and "water" Schengen, the Bulgarian government had agreed to accept a considerable number of immigrants from Syria and Afghanistan was vigorously refuted by the institutions, but is indicative of the existing distrust in the firmness and principle of the Bulgarian foreign policy line.

2

THE INSTITUTIONS AND THE PUBLIC AGENDA

The majority in preparation for rotation. The new year is a turning point in the dynamics of the current government in Bulgaria. During the first seven months of the government's mandate, the issue of its sustainability remained pending. The maximum horizon discussed openly was 18 months. Two factors – the local elections, which did not give a dramatic lead to any one party, and the constitutional changes that demonstrated a very good level of cooperation between the rulings – suddenly calmed the three formations in the majority (GERB-UDF, PP-DB and MRF) and gave them confidence that they could manage together in the long term; none of them at this stage had a better option than this. Prime Minister Denkov, and after him other leading figures in the government, talked about a full mandate and the need for a programme for this. The decision of the leader of GERB Borisov and the co-chair of the PP Kiril Petkov to put a stop to the legal cases brought against each other became a symbol of consolidation. In addition, the Chairman of the Parliamentary Group (PG) of the MRF Delyan Peevski stopped his daily attacks against Prime Minister Denkov. In December and January there were almost no draft parliamentary decisions that would not simultaneously bear the signatures of the “three big guys” – Borisov, Petkov and Peevski.

The consolidated government configuration went through another important test – the election of constitutional judges from the parliamentary quota. Despite the statements of the PP-DB that they did not consider acting politicians to be suitable for such a position, and despite the expectations that MRF would stand by their nomination, the decision for a general nomination of the Chairman of the GERB Parliamentary Group Desislava Atanasova (on behalf of GERB) and the judge of the Supreme Court of Cassation Borislav Belazelkov (on behalf of PP-DB) was taken extremely quickly and implemented just as quickly. In direct confrontation with the ruling of the Constitutional Court itself that the new judges only complete a nine-year term and in this sense would be elected in less than seven years, the parliamentary majority voted Atanasova and Belazelkov for nine years. President Radev challenged the election before the Con-

stitutional Court and refused to attend the swearing in of the two newly elected people. The legal side of the situation is not the subject of this analysis. The President claims that the Court's rulings bind the other authorities immediately, while the parliamentary majority insisted that it had made the election one day before the court's ruling came into force. Whatever the outcome of the case may be, from a political point of view, it does not demonstrate seriousness for the legislative institution to play a game of one-upmanship with the dates.

The biggest challenge facing the majority, of course, is the rotation foreseen for the beginning of March, in which Nikolay Denkov must give up his post to Mariya Gabriel. Since the beginning of the year this has been the number one theme. It concerns not only the chair of the Prime Minister, for which there is generally a consensus, despite rumours probably deliberately circulated by GERB that it is possible that Borisov personally wants to replace Denkov. It concerns all ministerial positions because the rotation requires the resignation of the Council of Ministers and the election of a new one for the leadership of the National Assembly, which must move from GERB to PP-DB, and the dozens of leading positions in the public regulators and the judiciary, which were supposed to come onto the agenda in January, but which were purposefully postponed for the period immediately after the rotation. It is clear enough that there are weeks of political bargaining in store in which the government is part of a package deal involving all other levels of government. It is difficult to predict exactly how these negotiations will end, at the very least because the participants in them can hardly know now how they will come to agree on matters, but the prospect of an agreement is practically certain. This proves the daily desire of the three parties in the majority to continue together.

An interesting thing is the claim of the still acting Prime Minister Denkov that the ministerial shuffling will be carried out only and solely on the basis of his and Mariya Gabriel's judgment. It refutes the way in which the leaders of the majority discuss possible ministerial changes as entirely dependent on them;

and also Denkov's helplessness to receive resignations of ministers he has publicly asked for. In this regard, a strong resonance prompted Vice President Iliana Yotova's comment that the government is the B-team of the majority. The indignant reaction of the Prime Minister cannot conceal the obvious fact that too few things in the sphere of power are under the control of Denkov or Gabriel, that some ministers surprise their Prime Minister with their moves and statements, and that the government itself still does not implement any clear policy, but follows the dynamics of relations in the majority in parliament.

The President. The constitutional changes have severely limited the powers of the Head of State, especially in the very frequent situations of crisis. After the amendments were adopted by the National Assembly, and after the President referred a number of them to the Constitutional Court, almost immediately in the public sphere the allegations were updated that Rumen Radev intends to establish a political party and attack his opponents in this field. Radev himself feeds the rumours to a great extent, and has hinted in a series of statements at such a scenario, but nowhere does it explicitly confirm it. Even in his New Year's address to the nation, the President declared that "we need unity and leadership", a phrase followed by a series of clarifications on what the leadership would set. A month later, Radev stated that "the alternative is inevitable". There are many assumptions about who the party's faces will be and whether the President will resign to head it personally. It is noteworthy that the main leaders of the majority directly called on Radev to come out with such a party and criticise on the party ground instead of taking advantage of the comfort of the "non-partisan" institution. The intense talk itself about a presidential party, without any real fact in this direction, could speak of fear among the those in power of the consolidation of public discontent under the banner of the head of state. But it could also be a provocation that aims to push Radev into the muddy terrain of cross-party battles, where he will be one of many.

In fact, the most important event related to the presidential institution is the powerful and unprecedented attack of the Chairman of the Parliamentary Group of MRF Delyan Peevski against Radev. It started with a very significant statement before the Christmas holidays that the head of state should look around when talking about corruption; this attack escalated into a daily onslaught and accusations at the end of January. Peevski insists that the presidency is a "dark institution full of cash", that Radev advisers such as Nikolay Koprinkov are associated with numerous financial abuses, that prosecutors and services should be activated, and that Radev himself should resign. For the first time in his political career, Radev has been accused of corruption. The traditional criticism of him

for having dictatorial ambitions or serving Russian interests did not lead to his public discredit. However, Radev's claim to be the main moral judge of the current majority is put to the test in light of exactly this type of "blitzkrieg". Peevski's serious intentions are also evident from the fact that the media considered close to him suddenly began publishing a series of material exposing the alleged financial irregularities in the presidency. The topic of Radev's moral image, anyway, comes to the agenda. Of course, Peevski with his political and business biography is probably the last person to take the position of a moral defender. However, it should not be forgotten that Peevski's previous aggressive moves have provided him with almost the full support of GERB and PP-DB partners. The question is whether this will happen again with regard to the President. So far, it is clear that the other parties in the majority, as well as the other MRF politicians, are striving to deflect the comments on the subject as much as possible. Whether and how they will be involved, and whether it will eventually lead to an attempt to remove the head of state, it is too early to foresee. The development of this most significant test in his political life will depend on the behaviour of GERB and PP-DB, as well, of course, as Radev, who is extremely experienced in crisis situations.

Society and Cultural Wars. The beginning of the year is characterised by low protest activity, but hardly by increased levels of public satisfaction. Social and economic themes, traditionally central in the winter season, seem to have been left to one side by the media and sociological agencies. The focus of tension is in the so-called cultural wars, dedicated to the "eternal" issues of Bulgarian identity, culture, attitude towards the past and Russia. For example, a nationally representative Gallup International survey found that Bulgarian society was divided on the issue of the Soviet Army Monument in Sofia (35.7 % supporting the idea of dismantling it against 40.3 % disagreeing with it), but almost consensually opposed to changing the national holiday from Russia-related 3 March (10.3 % for versus 77.9 % against). Regardless of the mass attitudes, there is a feeling that confrontation in this sphere is consciously promoted politically. The final stage of the dispute over the dismantling of the Soviet Army Monument in Sofia, which ended with the removal of some of the bronze figures, took half a year. The pedestal of the monument continues to stand, and thus to incite once again disputes between supporters and opponents. Almost immediately after the Sofia case arose that of Plovdiv. There was an initiative and a petition for dismantling of the Soviet Army Monument there, known as Alyosha. Rallies and protests followed, and the institutions were clearly in no hurry to take sides. Everything suggests that the topic of Alyosha will also continue to engage society's attention for months before a final decision is reached. Apart from Sofia and Plovdiv,

of course, there are other cities in Bulgaria. The fate of the Russian diplomat's Monument Count Ignatiev in Varna, demolished by a local resident and rebuilt afterwards, but which raised lively discussions about whether such a monument has any place at all, suggests that different readings of the memory of Russia and the Soviet Union will consolidate their opposing public camps and possibly mobilise them politically. The turbulent public reaction to the rumour that the authorities are planning the demo-

lition of the Shipka Mountain Monument, marking the victory in the Liberation War, is a clear indicator, first, that the battles of the past can easily displace the problems of the present, and secondly, that trust in the official positions of the political institutions has fallen to an extremely low amount. It would be enough for the authorities to declare that no one has ever had any intention of dismantling the Shipka Monument for a huge number of people to automatically believe that dismantling is beginning now.

3

THE STATE OF THE PARTY SYSTEM

GERB-UDF. Boyko Borisov's formation after the local elections prefer not to be at the centre of public attention. An active participant in government, in the media GERB have given way to the partners of PP-DB and MRF initiative to explain the policy of the government. Borisov himself obviously believes that his party is still not in a strong enough position to dictate the political agenda and, by virtue of an old political reflex, he is waiting for an appropriate moment in the future. Borisov (along with his main speakers) is limited to brief and boring comments on all key events (from the fate of constitutional changes to the election of new constitutional judges to the attack on the President). Even in terms of rotation, the general public learn of no intentions and suggestions, except the usual thesis that the time of Mariya Gabriel as Prime Minister is afoot.

An interesting illustration of this political course is Sofia. After the heavy loss in the local elections in October 2023, GERB are on the offensive and embody the critical front against the PP-DB mayor Vasil Terziev and his team. The inability to work the Municipal Council and adopt a local budget is blamed entirely on Terziev. The local disadvantages of PP-DB are being exploited to the maximum to suggest that the "change" in Sofia should mean rejecting Terziev's ideas, not the 18-year-old policy of GERB in the capital. The continued blockage of municipal institutions satisfies GERB completely. After the humiliating election loss just three months ago, GERB today seem in the position to pressure PP-DB to choose between only two options – either a coalition with GERB (and failure of the claim to being an alternative) or early local elections (and failure of the claim to victory).

"We Continue the Change (Produzhavame Pro-mianata) – Democratic Bulgaria" (PP-DB). The coalition faces a series of moral problems that erodes the fragile legitimacy of the demand for "change".

PP-DB are increasingly functioning in the shadow of their former opponents Boyko Borisov and Delyan Peevski. The argument that the number of MPs of PP-DB is insufficient to make the necessary changes themselves is becoming increasingly unconvincing.

PP-DB do not simply require the support of GERB and MRF for their reforms, but they vote for most GERB and MRF proposals almost unconditionally. It is not a matter of a partnership with disgust aimed at short-term implementation of the most important priorities, but of full-scale integration into a model that had to be denied and broken down.

Staff issues, as a rule, raise doubts about unprincipledness. PP-DB contributed with their decisive support for Desislava Atanasova's candidacy for constitutional judge, despite the widespread discontent of their supporters and experts close to them. It even led to the distancing of the Green Movement, part of DB, and also to the public disapproval of such a bright figure from the PP as the former Interior Minister Boyko Rashkov, who voted against Atanasova. The negative stance towards Atanasova of the Supreme Bar Council, considered friendly to PP-DB, also played its part in discrediting the coalition decision. Later, the National Council of the "Yes, Bulgaria" party, part of DB, issued a resolution in which it described the support for "bright political figures" for such positions as a mistake. This resolution resembles a helpless replica of the ultimatums against GERB and MRF that PP-DB issued in the first weeks of the mandate in June and July 2023. The forthcoming series of votes for public office holders will show the extent to which the resolution has any weight. However, it should not be forgotten that the principle should be applied not only against GERB and MRF, but also against their own coalition. After all, Finance Minister Asen Vassilev from the PP is precisely a "bright political figure".

Tremors in personnel are not limited to the examples given. In PP-DB there was intrigue about the nominations for a constitutional judge, president of the National Assembly and leader of the coalition list for the June elections to the European Parliament. Initially, the rumour spread that Atanas Atanasov, leader of the Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria party, which is also part of DB, although already with little political weight, would be nominated as a constitutional judge. There were sharp criticisms of this scenario, after which information leaked that Atanasov would

actually lead the National Assembly after the planned March rotation. Atanasov has said twice that he is “ready” to take over this function. The existing agreement with GERB from the summer was that the post would be taken by the former parliamentary chief Nikola Minchev from PP. That is why PP decided to propose Minchev as leader of the joint list with DB for the European elections. The option for the joint appearance of PP and DB of the European election is probably quite logical, but it has never been officially approved. At the same time, no talks between PP and DB on the top of the list were held. So it turned out that PP determine the ratio between the parties in the coalition, and without dialogue with the acting MEP Radan Kanev, who had apparently been hoping for a leading position, and now, according to the media revelations, should be satisfied with fifth place. It is true that in the circles of PP-DB candidates in the back seats are usually comforted that they will be able to overtake those in front of them with a preferential vote. Nevertheless, the whole briefly outlined picture, in which various figures, regardless of their political biography and qualification, are nominated for a variety of positions in different branches of power, cannot but increase moral discontent. The aforementioned Atanasov formulated a commentary which can be called emblematic of existing practice and hardly embodies the highest principles of political morality: “For everyone we shall find a place under the sun.”

Since its inception, the party PP has been subject to suspicions of corruption, but they have never been too specific. For the first time, a corruption scandal broke out in the party’s top echelon. The occasion was a journalistic investigation, which claimed that the co-chair of PP Asen Vasilev and the former Minister of Innovation Daniel Lorer acquired, under a complex scheme, apartments in the centre of Sofia at a price that was a fraction of the market price. Vassilev and Lorer denied the accusations, but the revelations nevertheless continued. It is hard to tell if there is any hidden intent behind the attack, and if there is, where it comes from, but it is interesting that the information first appeared on the BIRD investigative journalism site, and from there it went to “Capital” and BTV. These are media outlets that cannot be suspected of a deliberate negative attitude towards PP, on the contrary, and for this reason, a possible justification for “enemies” was impossible. The political effect is also undoubted. In early January the approaching rotation provoked the version that Vasilev insisted on being a deputy prime minister in Gabriel’s government. Prime Minister Denkov did not deny this; Vassilev said only that “this will be decided by parliament”, and GERB even expressed support in principle. Whether or not such a plan existed, after the property scandal it seemed implausible. Vassilev himself declared at the end of the month “I have never been Deputy Prime Minister, I have no intention of being such”. In the

public space, Vasilev and Lorer are increasingly seen as representatives of the same camp in PP, different from that of Kiril Petkov. However, Petkov’s image suffered almost at the same time after the media captured his conversation with businessman Spas Rusev, suspected of lobbying practices. Petkov denied that Rusev had lobbied him, but the scandal put him in an explanatory position regarding hypothetical behind-the-scenes actions.

The victory in the local elections in Sofia was the biggest political achievement of the PP-DB since the beginning of the term. At the same time, the coalition’s biggest political failures have been concentrated there. After seven unsuccessful attempts to elect the President of the Sofia Municipal Council, the option of early local elections is now being openly discussed. For understandable reasons, PD-DB did not want to create the impression that once again after the national parliamentary vote they were ready to join a coalition with GERB and mislead their voters. At the same time, only such a coalition in Sofia seems to be a realistic way out of the impasse. The main opponent of the alliance with GERB is the leader of “Spasi Sofia” (“Save Sofia”) Boris Bonev, who is a partner of the PP-DB in the Municipal Council and invariably repeats the election commitment to end the 18-year rule of GERB in the capital. PP-DB probably believed that the series of failures to elect a president of the Council would reconcile voters with the prospect of cooperation with GERB. So in January PP-DB withdrew Bonev’s nomination for chairman and proposed another candidate, Tsvetomir Petrov. Aware that they control the situation and that every subsequent day of a local political crisis negatively affects the Mayor Terziev, GERB do not want to be content with this victory and they are already calling Terziev “to stomp on the neck” of Bonev. It is as if it were an indirect appeal to PP-DB to part with Bonev, not just as a candidate for chairman, but in general. It turns out that both nationally and locally PP-DB are under strong pressure to make more and more new concessions to GERB.

“Vazrazhdane” (“Revival”). Kostadin Kostadinov’s party is on the periphery of the political process. Its aggressive offensive, typical until the summer of 2023, seems at least temporarily dulled. Then “Vazrazhdane” accepted with reconcilable objections the refusal of the National Assembly to schedule a referendum on the postponement of the euro as per their petition. Now, in January, the ruling majority with changes to the parliamentary rules deprived the MP of “Vazrazhdane” Nikolay Drenchev of the leadership of the Commission for Control of the Special Services. Again, the reaction was reduced to criticism that did not go beyond a good tone of parliamentary rhetoric.

“Vazrazhdane” has hardly been “domesticated”. Rather, the party deliberately avoids battles it has lit-

tle chance of winning, and prefers to bolster its public image as a defender of society and national memory. In fact, in a short time "Vazrazhdane" conducted several public campaigns with a rather wide resonance. The occasions were as follows: the version that the government has received approval for partial Schengen membership in exchange for Bulgaria's consent to accept 6,000 Syrian and Afghan immigrants; the sale of the private company Shkolo to a British company, which raised suspicions that the personal data of Bulgarian students would be appropriated by a foreign country; the repairing of the Monument to Freedom on Shipka Peak activated rumours that preceded dismantling; an article on the website "Free Europe", expressed the opinion that the poem "I am a Bulgarian" by Ivan Vazov is inappropriate for the children of migrants, and inspired the suspicion that the poem in question would be taken out of literature textbooks. In all the diversity of these cases, they have a common denominator in the propaganda that the institutions in Bulgaria secretly plan anti-Bulgarian actions.

Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF). The year started for the party with a letter from honorary Chairman Ahmed Dogan proposing to elect two co-chairs – leader of the Parliamentary Group Delyan Peevski and MP Dzhevdet Chakarov at the upcoming national conference of MRF. The event is surprising. After Mustafa Karadayi's resignation and Peevski's election as chairman of the movement's Parliamentary Group, it seemed clear that Peevski was the official candidate to be sole party leader. Unlike other parties, MRF are consistent in this respect and avoid sudden changes at the last minute. At least at first glance, Dogan's proposal can be considered a restriction on Peevski's power. Chakarov is an MP without a bright public presence and he can be expected to rather guarantee the positions of the Honorary President. Dogan's letter clarifies two considerations that are interesting – the risk of MRF becoming a "corporate paid party organisation" and the need for geopolitical balances in the global situation of transition to a "multipolar world". These two considerations seem to contain unspoken criticism of Peevski, who is known primarily for his business practices and for his ardent Euro-Atlantic speaking. In this sense, Peevski can really be "balanced". But at the same time, there is evidence that among the MRF voters there is strong resistance to Peevski and his sole leadership could provoke an internal party crisis. This is probably Dogan's motive for proposing that Chakarov be responsible for the traditional party regions, and Peevski – for opening up to new voters. So far, two questions remain unanswered. The first is whether the projected "dual power" in MRF will really come to pass, and whether it is not simply a transition to Peevski's "autocracy", but with more time for the party members to get used to it. The second question is more general and concerns the actual control of Ahmed Dogan over the processes in MRF.

It can be said that Delyan Peevski's behaviour in Bulgarian politics is taking on more and more brutal characteristics. At the beginning of the year, Peevski sparked a public scandal with criticism and accusations against Defence Minister Tagarev on the sole ground that the latter had not sent an invitation to Peevski for an ordinary ceremony. Later, when MP Boyko Rashkov challenged Desislava Atanasova's candidacy for constitutional judge, Peevski attacked him with threats and called on the prosecution to investigate him. Finally, Peevski launched a large-scale campaign against President Radev, filled with numerous accusations and all kinds of insults. MRF have often received negative assessments in Bulgarian society. But the party has always been hailed for its behaviour in parliament, characterised by a clear (at least on the surface) respect for the Constitution and political institutions. This new style, involuntarily reminiscent of the underworld, is completely new to MRF and it is far from certain that it will not return as a boomerang. It is not without importance that at least in the first week of Peevski's anti-presidential campaign none of the leading figures of the movement joined their parliamentary boss.

The Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP). The party is entering an accounting and election year, which should end with the election of a new chairperson and a new National Council. According to the statute, Korneliya Ninova is not entitled to a third term, but in her public appearances she does not reject such a hypothesis. The interpretations of the statutes in favour of the party leader have long become the trademark of this leadership. The other trademark – the exclusion of dissatisfaction with the party course – also remained in force after many bright figures from the Sliven and Shumen organisations were removed from the party at the National Council's Plenum. BSP started their preparations for the European elections with intrigue about the composition of the list. On the one hand, the dissident behaviour of MEPs Sergey Stanishev, Ivo Hristov, Elena Yoncheva and Petar Vitanov deprives them of potential participation. From the current delegation of Socialists in the European Parliament, only Tsvetelina Penkova is trying to demonstrate loyalty to Ninova, who does not stand aside from the common positions of her colleagues in the delegation by chance. On the other hand, there are rumours about Kristian Vigenin's ambitions to top the list. The principle of "divide and conquer" is likely to be applied in practice in this case as well.

The European elections, however, cannot conceal the upcoming new leadership choice. None other than Rumén Ovcharov, considered one of the last influential defenders of Ninova from the old party aristocracy, declared that better election results could not be achieved with this leadership and it is time for Ninova to gradually withdraw in favour of another chairperson. Ovcharov's initiative should not be overestimated.

He has repeatedly criticised Ninova without these criticisms highlighting a fault in the relationship between the two of them. Moreover, Ovcharov joined the current criticism with attacks on President Radev, suggesting that the decision of the leadership issue in BSP should remain strictly closed in the circle of Ninova.

BSP, at least initially, turned out to be the only parliamentary party that firmly supported Delyan Peevski's anti-presidential campaign. Ninova's war with the head of state is ongoing, and there is no prospect of it ending, despite the high political and electoral price that the party led by her is paying. The deadlock on the left wing is deepening.

“There is such a people” (“Ima Takuv Narod” - ITN). Slavi Trifonov's party follow their line of classical opposition behaviour combined with spectacular show messages. Two things deserve to be noted. The first: ITN became the first parliamentary party to effectively support the President in the context of Peevski's campaign. Secondly, ITN focus their opposition rhetoric almost entirely on PP-DB and hardly commented on the other partners in the majority of GERB and MRF. The leader Trifonov is committed to the claim that the entry of the PP-DB into power was “the biggest misfortune” for the country.

4

MAIN CONCLUSIONS AND FORECASTS

Euro-Atlantic loyalty remains a key legitimisation strategy of the ruling majority in Bulgaria. There seems to be a tendency to demand this legitimacy less and less in Kiev and more and more in Washington – probably because of the current stage of Russian aggression in Ukraine.

The government of PP-DB, GERB and MRF seems at first sight to be stabilised. The three participants managed to find partnership formulas more and more easily and reconciled that they might have a long-term joint stay in power. So far, neither PP-DB nor GERB nor MRF show any interest in early elections or reconfiguration of the political space. The March rotation, when parties will have to agree on a great many personal appointments, and the June European elections, when the three parties will have to compete for the votes of citizens, are undoubtedly challenges, but there is an attitude to overcoming them in the name of the comfort of general governance. The possible emergence of a serious political alternative, which currently does not exist, could further bring the majority together. It should be remembered that, following the European elections in June, the next regular elections will be the presidential elections in October 2026. This means that, unless there are early parliamentary elections, which is still dependent on the current parliament, Bulgaria will have two and a half years without electoral turmoil. This would probably be the longest such period in the country's democratic history and must be taken into account by all potential new actors in the political process.

President Rumen Radev in the eyes of public opinion, as well as in the assessments of parties and commentators, is the most prominent critic of the government, in this sense the most anticipated initiator of a political alternative. The efforts of the majority to limit Radev's political influence through accusations of Putinism and reduction of constitutional powers have been rather unsuccessful. That is why the powerful attack of Delyan Peevski against the Head of State is undoubtedly of interest. With his public image, Peevski is not the best example of a fighter against corruption. His clear ambition to prove that he has a leadership role in the majority by prevailing in an open clash

over the main critic of the same majority would be realised in two hypotheses – the start of a procedure for impeachment of Radev or the arrest of his key advisers. In one case, Peevski needs the co-operation of the other parties in the majority, in the other – the prosecutor's office. It remains to be seen whether this cooperation will be provided. If it were to happen, it would mean a consensus that Peevski would gain practically uncontrolled power in Bulgaria, with all the consequences arising from such a development. For the parties of the majority, it is probably tempting to observe the spectacular clash between "Mr. Magnitsky" (as Radev called Peevski) and "Mr. Cash" (as Peevski called Radev), but the stakes of the clash are much higher than the usual spectacle.

Discussions about a possible presidential party are also energetic. Radev probably realises that if he discreetly encourages a new political project without publicly engaging with it, the probability of failure of this project is quite high. A significant proportion of the persons associated in the media with the Head of State do not have enough public popularity to realise immediate successes. If Radev directly decided to lead the project and leaves the presidency, he would risk too much. There are upcoming European elections in which traditionally in Bulgaria activity is low and potential supporters of Radev might not come out to vote. Then Radev would lose his halo of a winner who has not conquered his opponents so far just because he has not gone against them. And the creation of a party with no immediate prospect of early parliamentary elections creates the risk that this party will stand "hanging" in the political space and be wasted politically even without going into battle. An additional argument in the same direction is the principle error of starting an undertaking in response to someone else's accusations, in other words, according to the rhythm and agenda of the opponents. At the same time, the topic of a new party can no longer be avoided, and public expectations are present. It is important to observe what strategy of behaviour Radev will be orientated towards.

The other relatively dramatic case in Bulgarian politics is related to the blockage of the local government in

Sofia. Lawyers openly discuss the option of early local elections, either because of the inability of the Municipal Council to function, or because of the cassation of the election results in response to the complaints submitted. At this stage, the probability of going to the polls early is low. The most solid scenario emerges with a coalition between PP-DB and GERB, by analogy with the national configuration. This implies not only isolation of "Spasi Sofia", but also a new chance for Boris Bonev to establish himself as an alternative to political unprincipledness in the capital. Whether Bonev will focus on creating a new party is too early to predict. It is clear that the prerequisites are present. The problem comes mainly from the liberal profile of "Spasi Sofia", which confines the potential voters of the formation in the niche of PP-DB. The potential for a modern Eu-

ropean left should be taken into account, but considerable efforts and overcoming many unknowns would be needed in order for this to be realised.

Political tensions in Bulgaria seem to pass by the central themes in people's lives and especially their socio-economic problems. The impression is that Bulgarian politicians rely on two institutions – the Constitutional Court and the Prosecutor's Office – to resolve all their contradictions, and this is exactly what should not be expected from these institutions. They are much more likely to "return" the cases to politicians. The government's agenda, as outlined in preliminary announcements – the fight against disinformation and corruption – promises nothing but political scandals and suspicions of arbitrariness of power.

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.

IMPRINT

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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FES Bulgaria has been publishing the „Polit-Barometer“ since 2000, analyzing current and long-term political processes and identifying trends in Bulgarian politics with a special focus on the political parties as democratic actors. In a situation where

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POLIT-BAROMETER

Year 24 Issue 1
January



Preparations for a government rotation began with complex negotiations for a “package deal” between the ruling parties.



The political debate is subordinated to the powerful political attack by MRF politician Delyan Peevski against President Rumen Radev.



Suggestions for the non-alternativeness of the government majority fuelled expectations for new political projects.

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