

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

# POLIT-BAROMETER

Year 24 Issue 8  
September

**Boris Popivanov**



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## 1

## THE DYNAMICS OF FOREIGN POLICY

**The tension with North Macedonia.** The unofficial visit of the President of North Macedonia Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova to Sofia unexpectedly raised the degree of tension between the two countries. Siljanovska-Davkova was received by Bulgarian President Rumen Radev, but not by representatives of other Bulgarian institutions. After the end of the visit, the leading figures of the ruling VMRO-DPMNE in Skopje started a massive campaign against Bulgaria, focused on the absurd accusation that the flag of North Macedonia was missing from the Radev-Siljanovska meeting. Prime Minister Christian Mickoski personally joined the campaign, but Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Nikoloski was particularly rude and with insulting qualifications for Bulgaria and the Bulgarians. The negative sentiments of VMRO-DPMNE towards Sofia are not news. The current campaign practically coincided in time with the decision of the European Union (EU) to separate the accession procedures of Albania and North Macedonia and initiate a negotiation process only with Albania. The political effect was multi-layered. The government in Skopje received an excuse for the failure of the negotiations in its unwillingness to “give up their sovereignty”, yielding to Bulgarian claims. President Siljanovska-Davkova tried to demonstrate that, after all, an effort for dialogue was made, and this was at the initiative of North Macedonia. Political forces in North Macedonia and Bulgaria, opposed to Skopje’s European perspective, mutually strengthened their positions. The Bulgarian National Assembly even adopted a consensus declaration on the subject. It was apparently based on the tacit assumption that Brussels prefers to freeze negotiations with the North Macedonian government, which is considered to be exposed to too much Serbian influence, and therefore to the impact of Russian interests.

**The Bulgarian nomination for European Commissioner.** For the first time since Bulgaria became a member of the EU, the country’s nomination for a member of the European Commission (EC) was directly named by Brussels. GERB representative Ekaterina Zaharieva, former Minister of Justice and Foreign Affairs, received an invitation to join the Commission. In the project on the distribution of portfolios, an-

nounced by the President of the EC, Ursula von der Leyen, Zaharieva was offered the “startups, research and innovation” portfolio. According to commentators, the offer is not the best, firstly, because the department mentioned is poorly developed as a regulatory framework and financial resource, secondly, because it sets before the incumbent the difficult task of turning the EU into an effective competitor of the USA, China and India in the field of the new technologies, and thirdly, because it corresponds neither to the achievements of Bulgaria nor to the professional experience of the Bulgarian candidate.

Zaharieva was attacked in the European media with an old report of abuses that had been going on for ten years. The initiators of the signal were easily recognised as circles close to the coalition “We Continue the Change (“Produlzhavame Promianata”) - Democratic Bulgaria” (PP-DB), clearly dissatisfied with the preference of Sofia and Brussels for their political rival GERB. There is no doubt that Zaharieva’s hearing in the European Parliament will be overshadowed by these suspicions of abuse. Whatever the final result on the European stage, it is certain that the mutual mistrust between GERB and PP-DB on the Bulgarian political terrain will deepen.

**The Schengen perspective.** The topic of complete accession of Romania and Bulgaria to the Schengen area came up again on the agenda because of the European institutional calendar. After the Schengen restrictions on Romanian and Bulgarian citizens by air and water were lifted in March, a decision is now pending on land restrictions. Hopes have arisen, which so far are not based on serious facts. The partial return of border control by Germany and the victory of the radical right in the elections in Austria create a context in which the Romanian and Bulgarian cause seems difficult to defend. As is tradition, attempts at internal political uses of the Schengen issue are escalating, including mutual accusations between political forces and accusations against President Radev.

**The case of the kidnapped sailors.** After more than half a year of lull, the subject of the kidnapped Bul-

garian sailors on the ship "Galaxy Leader" has been reactivated and raised expectations that a resolution is possible soon. Negotiations were announced for the release of the Bulgarian captain and co-captain of the ship. President Radev raised this issue in his meetings in New York with leading political representatives of Iran, Oman and Saudi Arabia. Prime Minister Dimitar Glavchev confirmed that actions are being taken. MEP

from the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) Elena Yoncheva even managed to organise a meeting with the kidnapped Bulgarians. After the meeting, MRF co-chairman Delyan Peevski criticised the President for obstructing efforts to free the hostages. Again, there is an international situation, whose real parameters are awfully vague, but which is actively used for internal political clashes.

## 2

## THE INSTITUTIONS AND THE AGENDA OF SOCIETY

**Parliament.** The 50<sup>th</sup> National Assembly, after its failure to form a regular government, logically became the pre-election tribune of the political parties. From the point of view of the general configuration, the considerable number of decisions taken by majority is impressive. Parties are often willing to cooperate, as long as it does not involve building formal coalitions. From the point of view of the political initiative, GERB and the MPs loyal to the co-chairman of MRF Delyan Peevski dominate. Until the last moment before the pre-election vacation of parliament, GERB and MRF were the main drivers of the legislative process. Two examples are illustrative. GERB and MRF did not allow the other formations to remove the temporary chairman of the commissions for combating corruption and confiscation of illegal property, Anton Slavchev, thus preserving the status quo in the apparently ineffective fight against corruption. At the same time, GERB and MRF failed to pass laws on coal plants, which would have opened up the possibility of absorbing new funds under the European Recovery and Sustainability Plan. In these and in other cases, it can be seen that the National Assembly is ending its short mandate without any strategic priorities and without clear responsibility.

**The government.** Dimitar Glavchev's caretaker cabinet distanced itself as much as possible from the centre of the political debate. Unlike in the previous months, there are no lines of tension. The organisation of early elections is loaded with messages to appease political passions without engendering trust in the parties or the public.

**The President.** There are no changes in the political positioning of the head of state Rumen Radev. The President already by virtue of established practice (1) uses international forums to send messages for peace without questioning Bulgaria's geopolitical and military strategic commitments; (2) criticises political parties for their inability to meet citizens' expectations; and (3) draws credibility from his importance as a primary opponent of MRF co-chairman Delyan Peevski. Radev's role in the system of institutions is gradually growing due to his personal appointments - in the

Management Board of the Bulgarian National Bank, in the Electronic Media Council, and soon in the Constitutional Court. In contrast to previous years, when he was rather isolated from the party system, today the President seems to be able to count on the partnership of at least two more significant parties - the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) and "There Is Such a People" ("Ima Takuv Narod" - ITN ). An open question, however, is how these increasing assets will be exploited in the political process. So far, there are no clear indications of Radev's intentions after the next pre-term elections.

**The official start of the election campaign.** 19 parties and 9 coalitions are registered to participate in the parliamentary elections on October 27<sup>th</sup>. At the start of the official campaign, the following observations can be made. First, there are no significant new participants in the political race, nor are there new coalitions between previously more prominent participants. The only serious exception is the two wings of the split MRF. Second, never before has the procedure for registering parties and coalitions been loaded with so much in the way of political drama and scandals. Due to the disputes in MRF and BSP, registrations were made and canceled several times, and until the final deadline it was not known whether, under what name, and under what leadership leading parliamentary subjects would take part. Third, for the first time, not just the Central Election Commission, but also the Supreme Administrative Court were brought in as arbitrators in the registration disputes. The involvement of the institutions temporarily solved the problems, but did not create an impression of fairness and impartiality. Fourth, popular parties are gradually accumulating that refuse to take part in the electoral process - such as VMRO, the National Movement for Stability and Rise, "Centre". Perhaps the reason lies in the increasingly frequent early elections, which give the feeling that non-participation now can be compensated by a new participation very soon. The unusual fact that new political parties are announced on the eve of elections, but not to compete in them, speaks in the same direction.

Several polling agencies published surveys at the start of the campaign that generally painted the prospect of a highly fragmented parliament that 7, 8 or even 9 parties could enter. Undoubtedly, the biggest political intrigue of the campaign is the clash of the two wings in MRF and the highly unpredictable electoral projections of this clash. However, there are two other factors worth noting. It is unclear how many parties will pass the 4% barrier to enter the 51st Na-

tional Assembly, making any speculation about future governing coalitions not just premature, but largely unfounded. In the analyses, the opinion prevails that there is a danger that not two or even three, but as many as four parties will be needed for a future majority. The second conclusion leads to analysts' fears of an even lower voter turnout, gravitating towards around 2 million voters, which will further erode the fragile legitimacy of the political system.

## 3

## THE STATE OF THE PARTY SYSTEM

**GERB-UDF.** The situation of the leading party in the country looks complicated, without being in the lime-light. Against the background of the centrifugal processes in MRF, BSP and to some extent in PP-DB, GERB certainly look stable. Their main messages legitimately exploit this apparent state. However, the problems are not to be underestimated. First, on several occasions GERB have won elections, but have not formed a government. Moreover, there are widespread suspicions that they do not want to have a government. This certainly alienates party-affiliated businesses and client networks that rely on the predictability of a regular cabinet. Second, there are rumours that a certain faction of the structures and activists of GERB are loyal not only to the party and the leader Boyko Borisov, but also to other political and business factors, including the co-chairman of MRF Delyan Peevski. The reliability of the information cannot be verified, but it is unlikely to be completely made up. This narrows Borisov's perimeter for political manoeuvres and undermines any attempt to distance himself from Peevski. Third, the complex balances in the anti-corruption bodies and in the judiciary, but above all the starting procedure for the election of a new chief prosecutor, probably create additional worries in GERB that the political struggle escalated to the extreme may hit the party themselves after the elections.

In such cases, Boyko Borisov usually prefers not to show too much activity. It seems as if his party does not have a clear strategy for what they will do after the elections and are waiting for developments in MRF. For now, Borisov is probing with various lines to assess the prospects of one line of behaviour or another. Here are some examples. Borisov talked about a "gentlemen's agreement" between the parties to check to what extent the PP-DB, or at least certain circles in the PP-DB, are willing to cooperate with him. Then, Borisov more and more persistently launched ideas for changes in the electoral rules, intended to show a way out of the deadlock - the introduction of a partial majority system or a bonus for the first political power. This is already a message to all parties, which are expected to think about whether this is not a more painless decision for them than joining unpopular coa-

litions. By the way, Borisov also tossed an option about for a "natural coalition", which actually includes everyone apart from "Vazrazhdane" ("Revival"). This option, which would somewhat nullify Peevski's immediate influence, relies mainly on a potential second place of "Vazrazhdane" in the elections, making the "Euro-Atlantic" union against the "radical right wing" seem like an inevitable compromise. For now, however, we are only talking about vague scenarios.

If anything is actually changing, it is Borisov's political approach to the campaign. The bright figures from his previous cabinets and parliamentary groups come to the fore less and less. They hardly get any media coverage either. In contrast with this, GERB make leaders of lists of their successful mayors, striving to engage the local government and local interests more closely with the stake of the parliamentary vote. This is the case with Burgas, Smolyan, Stara Zagora, even partially in Sofia, where the mayor until recently Yordanka Fandakova has stood for election as an MP. Beyond this unconventional approach of "tightening ranks", it is possible that the mayoral scenario has other dimensions. Another rumour can be cited that the authoritative mayor of Burgas Dimitar Nikolov has a chance of being nominated for Prime Minister in some configuration excluding national politicians. In short, GERB are trying to leave as many loopholes open as possible and not to occupy a specific political niche.

**"We Continue the Change ("Produlzhavame Pro-mianata) - Democratic Bulgaria" (PP-DB).** It is an achievement of the coalition in itself that it did not allow the centrifugal tendencies to gain momentum and lead to a collapse on the eve of the elections. The dissatisfaction of "Yes, Bulgaria" with the approach of PP to the election nominations was temporarily concealed. The ratio of 2:1 in the distribution of leading positions between PP and DB is preserved. The political request for the return of 100,000 voters to the coalition electorate was also made. However, the DB did not put forward their leaders and brightest names for leading roles, and this is probably not only because they rely on a preferential vote, but also so as not to be responsible for the results.



PP-DB really do not seem to be able to take the political initiative and change the agenda. Their party lists show an affinity for almost the same names that are associated with the downward movement of the coalition. Internal contradictions have not been ironed out. Their attitude towards GERB remains unclear - as a potential partner, albeit a competitor, or as a categorical opponent. Nor is the international support that PP-DB always referred to. While GERB and Borisov constantly maintain contacts with the European People's Party and with Ursula von der Leyen, and their candidate is preferred for European Commissioner, PP-DB have almost no external appearances, not counting one meeting of PP co-chairman Kiril Petkov with the former state US Secretary Mike Pompeo. The thesis of the need for a "technical government" and a "neutral Prime Minister" continues to be repeated, but the lack of specifics gradually deprives it of its attractiveness. At this stage, PP-DB do not offer a convincing electoral strategy that goes beyond the traditional voters of the old urban right wing.

**"Vazrazhdane" ("Revival").** In the last weeks of the 50th National Assembly, "Vazrazhdane" realised a sequence of successes. On their initiative, laws were voted and decisions approved. Their positions in the parliamentary chamber influenced the general tone and direction of the political debate. For "Vazrazhdane", the great success lies in leaving the sphere of political marginality. More and more, the party is seen as a mainstream Bulgarian party, whose messages are heard by the conventional media and can be read on expensive billboards. The decline of the party "Velichie" ("Greatness"), who were their competitor, gives new electoral chances. For the first time, sociological studies also allow the hypothesis of a second place for "Vazrazhdane", which would mark a fundamentally new situation.

**Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF).** The rift in MRF is undoubtedly the most striking political event of recent months. In the course of the preparations for the parliamentary elections, the two wings in the party separated and personalised themselves completely. Honorary Chairman Ahmed Dogan publicly and openly headed one wing for the first time, and the other wing, headed by Delyan Peevski, publicly and openly distanced itself from Dogan for the first time. The geographical picture of the division is extremely complex and one cannot speak of categorical regional supremacy; the two wings show resources and figures throughout the country, including in the mixed areas.

Delyan Peevski's wing show political dominance for now. They won the important battle of party registration. After the two co-chairmen Peevski and Jevdet Chakarov had the power to register the party, according to the MRF statute, such registrations were made

several times by one and withdrawn by the other. In the end, the Supreme Administrative Court sided with Peevski and gave him the MRF "brand". This not only has a symbolic meaning, but also a psychological and operational one. If traditional voters want to vote precisely for MRF, this means voting for Peevski's wing. Also, it is Peevski's wing that will have control over appointments in the district and section election commissions, because they, not Dogan's wing, represent a parliamentary party. Dogan's wing were forced to register under the name Alliance for Rights and Freedoms (ARF). The second victory of Peevski's wing was regarding statutory ambiguity. Ahmed Dogan and Jevdet Chakarov stood for parliament on behalf of the ARF, thereby losing their right to membership in MRF. In this way, Chakarov no longer has the tools to prevent one or other normative actions of Peevski, who has already become the sole chairman of the party. It is too early to talk about a third victory, but there is currently a battle going on over the fear of reprisals. A number of leading figures of Dogan's wing were attacked and investigated by the judicial authorities or the revenue agency, and the mayor of Mineralni Bani, Myumyun Iskender, was flatly arrested. The "cost" of loyalty to Dogan for many turns out to be quite high.

The campaigns on both wings predictably sought to monopolise the image of the "real" MRF. Ahmed Dogan identifies the party with his personal initiative and insists that people see it as his creation, temporarily usurped by another. Delyan Peevski attacks publicly on two lines. One is economic - with exposures of the "derebeyi" around Dogan and of his personal unprecedented luxury in the palaces he inhabits, contrasting with the relative poverty of the party's traditional voters. The second is political and aims to undermine Dogan's authority as a defender of Bulgarian Turks and Muslims. It is no coincidence that the campaign motto of Peevski's wing is "MRF without State Security" [Translator's note: "DPS without DS". MRF in Bulgarian is "DPS" - "Dvizhenie za Prava I Svobodi"; State Security, (in Bulgarian "Durzhavna Sigurnost"; abbreviated DS) was the name of the Bulgarian secret service under the People's Republic of Bulgaria during the Cold War, until 1989] and evidently refers indirectly to Dogan, known for his cooperation with the communist State Security. When Peevski talks about the need for "retribution" for the Revival process, i.e. about the repression against the Bulgarian Turks at the end of the communist regime, he aims to suggest that people like Dogan were not simply on the side of the repressed, but quite the contrary, they assisted the repressors.

The electoral effect of these processes cannot be predicted. The toolkit of sociological surveys is insufficient to account for the different levels of mobilization of interest, of electoral alienation from the conflict, of controlled support, of ethnic loyalties, of fears, and of

a vote from neighbouring Turkey. It seems that both wings of MRF are likely to have the capacity to enter the next National Assembly, but in what proportion and by how much, it will not be possible to predict until the night of the elections.

**Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP).** The formation of the “BSP - United Left” coalition is the great achievement of the new leadership of the Socialist Party. The coalition agreement was signed. BSP also avoided suspicions that the purpose of the coalition was to secure parliamentary seats for the leaders of the small left-wing parties. In fact, these leaders (Maya Manolova, Tatyana Doncheva and Rumens Petkov) themselves refused personal nominations. The legal obstacle was also overcome, expressed in the attempts of the former leader Korneliya Ninova to stop the registration of BSP by registering it in her own name on the basis of the old current status of the party. However, the processes on the left are not unequivocally positive. The new coalition offers almost no message other than the failure of the formulas of Ninova. The only exceptions are the positive attitude towards President Radev and the more balanced position towards the European socialists. “BSP - United Left” do not yet have an answer as to how and with whom they will implement their ambitious platform of 100 points, which resembles a government programme for self-governance with a 4-year mandate. Relations in BSP are far from a stage of stabilisation. There are three strong figures - the chairman of the parliamentary group, Borislav Gutsanov, who has a certain weight among the party structures, but hardly succeeds in imposing his views on staffing in the National Council of the party; Christian Vigenin, who by virtue of his MEP position is not suspected of an immediate appetite for power and pushes a number of the most important decisions in the party; and the

interim chairman Atanas Zafirov, whose political presence is apparently the most hesitant, but is strengthened because of his ability to rally around him those who are dissatisfied with other party figures. The aspiration of the former deputy chairman of BSP Kiril Dobrev to regain the leading role in party life is clear. On the other hand, former President Sergey Stanishev was prevented from achieving his ambitions to head the electoral list. Although solemnly announced as a union of the left, the new coalition is by no means so comprehensive and monolithic. Some of the partners (MIR party – “MIR” in Bulgarian is “Moral, Initiative, Patriotism”) left it at the last moment; others (ABV – in “Bulgarian Alternativa za Bulgarsko Vazrazhdane” – “Alternative for Bulgarian Revival”), though remaining within, sharply distanced themselves from the arrangement of the lists in certain regions. Figures like Vanya Grigороva and Georgi Kadiev remain outside. The claims that Korneliya Ninova’s entourage spreads that, as a sign of disagreement with the coalition, party members are leaving it en masse throughout the country, are exaggerated, but include an element of reality. Ninova, who was believed to be seeking another party list to enter parliament after her expulsion from BSP, has so far not done so, possibly because she expects an unconvincing performance of the coalition in the elections. Realistically, an optimal performance for BSP under these circumstances would be to maintain current levels of support.

**“There Is Such a People” (“Ima Takuv Narod” - ITN).** Slavi Trifonov’s party are preparing for the elections with the self-confidence of an already important participant in the political process, who have proven in many cases that they know how to fit into the political agenda. The chances of growth for this formation outlined in the previous months remain in force.

## 4

## MAIN CONCLUSIONS AND FORECASTS

Bulgarian foreign policy remains extremely passive, waiting, without its own initiatives, only saturated with actions along previously stated lines. The pre-election situation seems to lead to caution for political actors, where it is more important to blame the opponent for foreign policy failure than to seek consolidation for some success. In this way, Bulgaria rather remains on the sidelines of the formation processes of the new European Commission and the debates on the future of the Schengen area.

This same caution dictates national political behaviour. Worried about their declining results, parties are largely turning to their own electorates. In the political debate, calls to stop the opponent from coming to power sound more distinctly and more convincingly than real aspiration for one's own coming to power. The predicted low voter turnout will once again update attempts at solutions by changing the rules - regarding the electoral system or the political model. The expected even more serious fragmentation of the future National Assembly has already normalised discussions about new elections in the spring. The innovation of bringing mayors into the parliamentary race has understandable electoral motives, but could be dangerous for national political representation, risking disintegration into feudal networks of local business and political influence.

The division in MRF has a structure-determining character for the campaign, but also for the prospects after the elections on October 27<sup>th</sup>. The supremacy of one or another wing of the party is capable of rearranging the chances of a regular government. However, it is clear that neither will Delyan Peevski be able, at least in the short term, to preserve the effectiveness of his political influence, nor can Ahmed Dogan remain an undisputed leader.

The next elections are coming up, after which a regular government without GERB will practically be impossible to form. This will once again focus attention on the leader Boyko Borisov and his political intentions. It is as if Borisov is striving to achieve the political comfort of a coalition that is convenient for him, in which he balances various irreconcilable partners, but there are no guarantees that this comfort will be realised.

In general, the campaign agenda dominated by conjunctural procedural issues (legitimacy of the decisions of the electoral administration, legitimacy of the participating parties, the effective organisation of the electoral process, biases of the executive power, etc.) and by chaotic populist themes (rights of the LGBT community, foreign influences, disputes about the communist or more distant past, etc.), diverges drastically from the current problems of Bulgarian society.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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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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Further information on the topic can be found here:  
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