

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

# POLIT-BAROMETER

Year 25 Issue 1  
January-February

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Bulgaria finds itself in a complex foreign policy situation between the American “rock” and the European “hard place”.



The new Bulgarian government temporarily ends the political crisis in the country, but unites disparate partners without a clear common strategy.



The political and social dimensions of eurozone membership are becoming a key test for the cabinet’s political perspective.

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## 1

## THE DYNAMICS OF FOREIGN POLICY

***The change in the White House and the war in Ukraine.*** For several months, the Bulgarian media have been creating the impression that Donald Trump's second term as US President will fundamentally change the political situation in Europe and Bulgaria. The inauguration of Trump and his administration in January has indeed reformulated the global agenda. This does not so much apply to Bulgarian domestic politics for the time being. The previous US ambassador to Sofia, Kenneth Merten, was recalled, and Susan Falatko, temporarily carrying out the functions, took his place. Just that, despite expectations, Falatko is not publicly interfering in the Bulgarian political process for the time being. Bulgaria's attitude towards the war in Ukraine, however, is what is undergoing changes as a result of Washington's new policy. There are two central events – the speech of Vice President J.D. Vance at the Munich Security Conference and the meeting of US President Donald Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy at the White House. These events have created a sharp divide between America's position in favour of an immediate peaceful resolution of the conflict in Ukraine and Europe's position in support of Ukrainian resistance against Russian aggression. A series of extraordinary meetings of European leaders, initiated first by French President Emmanuel Macron and then by British Prime Minister Keir Starmer, have raised the issue of more decisive European military involvement on the side of Kiev. America and Europe have also been divided on the issue of diplomacy. The United States sees negotiations in the trilateral format of the United States – Russia – Ukraine as the first priority, while leading European countries insist on the active involvement of the European Union (EU).

Bulgaria seems largely isolated from the turbulent processes. At the first meeting, organised by Macron, the country was not invited. At the second meeting, Bulgarian Prime Minister Rosen Zhelyazkov was given the opportunity to join via video link. Starmer's meeting again took place without a Bulgarian presence. It is striking that, with the exception of France and Germany, the main participants are leaders of countries with the most pronounced anti-Russian attitudes.

This is how the term "coalition of the willing" arose, which suggests that military assistance for Ukraine will most likely be sought outside the institutional channels of the EU. Bulgaria, through statements by its Prime Minister Zhelyazkov and the Foreign Minister of the country Georg Georgiev, resolutely supported the Ukrainian cause.

No less decisively, however, the National Assembly (NA) issued a declaration opposing any sending of Bulgarian troops to Ukraine. The declaration was preceded by a fervent statement by President Rumen Radev in the same direction. In parliament, it received the votes of as many as 204 out of 240 members of parliament, and none of the parliamentary groups contested it on substance. There was a kind of national political consensus, which for now keeps Bulgaria apart from the "hawks" in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

The divisions in foreign policy orientation were evident in connection with the Trump-Zelenskyy meeting. Three publicly articulated points of view emerged. The first was advocated by the government, which immediately demonstrated support for Ukraine, and broadly followed the Starmer-Macron line. The second was expressed initially by President Radev, and later categorically confirmed by the leader of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms – New Beginning (MRF-NB) party, Delyan Peevski, and welcomed Trump's approach, along with the belief that the Ukrainian conflict has no military solution, but that security and defence spending must increase. The third point of view, formulated by GERB leader Boyko Borisov, professes the hope that the US and Europe will come to an understanding. This is the line of the Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, whose statements Borisov borrows even with the same words. There is also a third intermediate opinion, shared by the co-chairman of "We Continue the Change" ("Prodlzhavame Promianata" - PP) Kiril Petkov. Like the government, Petkov fully sides with Ukraine, and like Borisov, he relies on transatlantic understanding. Petkov himself adds that Bulgaria should more clearly stand closer to Great Britain.

However, the geopolitical disagreements at this stage have not culminated in any more overt domestic political conflict. It is obvious that the Bulgarian political elite are worried about international dynamics and are in no hurry to draw unambiguous conclusions.

**The Eurozone Perspective.** The formation of the new Bulgarian government has once again put the topic of joining the Eurozone on the agenda. The date of January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2026 does not seem unrealistic and is not actually disputed by the European institutions. The impression is that there is no open political resistance to Sofia among the member states of the monetary union. At the same time, the procedures are such that a possible failure of the Bulgarian candidacy would now postpone the issue for at least two years.

The main Bulgarian parties accuse each other of their behaviour as an obstacle to eurozone membership. GERB claim that the financial policy "We Continue the Change - Democratic Bulgaria" (PP-DB) have created huge budget deficits, which make it extremely difficult to meet the criteria. PP-DB respond that GERB and their government are deliberately delaying the procedure in order to doom the entire initiative. At the end of February, the nationalist party "Vazrazhdane" ("Revival") organised a large-scale protest against the introduction of the euro, which escalated into clashes with the police and acts of vandalism against the House of Europe in Sofia. The tension related to the topic of the Eurozone has two explanations in the public space. The first is that a large-scale Bulgarian business has capital, the origin of which cannot be

proven. For this reason the so-called transformation of "dark money" for business into euro would be very difficult. At the same time, it is believed that the representatives of the same business would not be very happy with the strengthening of the control of the European Central Bank over the banks in Bulgaria, which also followed the introduction of the euro. The second explanation concerns public opinion, which seems to be dominated by reluctance to join the Eurozone. A survey conducted by the sociological agency "Miara" from the end of January showed that 57% of respondents are "against" the euro in principle, and 39% are "for". According to this study, the numbers in favour diminish even more when it comes to introducing the euro on January 1, 2026. Only 26% approve of this variant. Mass fears in Bulgarian society about galloping inflation and additional impoverishment as a result of the introduction of a new currency is not news. Bulgarian politicians, who enjoy a relatively low level of trust, cannot help but be aware of the rating and electoral effects of such processes.

Whatever the situation may be, the new government is officially on course for immediate membership of the eurozone. The project for the new state budget keeps the limit of 3% on the planned budget deficit. According to statistics, this threshold was not crossed last year. It has also become known that Bulgaria almost covers the inflation criterion for membership. The country has formally requested a convergent report on readiness for joining the eurozone, the conclusions of which may open the path to January 1<sup>st</sup> - or close it.

## 2

## DEVELOPMENT OF THE POLITICAL SITUATION

**Parliament.** The 50th National Assembly probably holds the record for the slowest constitution and most cumbersome functioning. After a one-month period for electing the speaker of the parliament, and after relatively long negotiations for the composition of the cabinet, the National Assembly managed to form its standing commissions only at the end of January. The new majority from GERB, the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), ITN (“Ima Takuv Narod” – “There is Such a People” and “MRF” “Democracy, Rights and Freedoms” – “DRF” (DPS-DPS) [Translator’s note: In Bulgarian: “Movement for Rights and Freedoms” is translated as “Dvizhenie za Prava I Svobodi” - DPS, while “Democracy, Rights and Freedoms” is translated as “Democratsia, Prava I Svobodi” – DPS, hence DPS is repeated] did not immediately begin legislative activity, postponing their proposals until after the adoption of the new budget. For this reason parliament has largely turned into an arena for political clashes between parties, aimed at formalising the points of view of the party’s theses on current topics of the day.

The two most striking examples of the parliamentary debate so far were two (unsuccessful) polls for the temporary commissions with investigative functions. The first commission, proposed by MRF-NB, was supposed to investigate the activities of George and Alexander Soros and their foundations in Bulgaria. This was a continuation of the traditional party line of the party, which claims Euro-Atlantic legitimacy, but insists that the money of Soros creates a false image abroad of real Euro-Atlanticists in the country. The second commission, initiated by PP-DB, was intended to investigate the leader of the MRF-NB Delyan Peevski. Apart from the fact that it looked like a mirrored act, this initiative also fitted into the traditional PP-DB propaganda against Peevski as an embodiment of all the fiendish practices in Bulgarian politics. Both cases served to expose supposedly hidden dependencies, to focus public attention on the behind-the-scenes role in Bulgarian politics. We should probably add to them the unfolding “saga with immunity”, during which the parliament is constantly kept in tension by the prosecutor’s office with a request to revoke the parliamentary immu-

nities of one or other representatives of the people from almost all parliamentary groups.

The situation with Chairperson of the National Assembly Nataliya Kiselova is specific. Elected with great difficulty and as a result of serious compromises, she is also a target for constant political attacks from various directions. On one hand, she is accused of investing her time in various initiatives for the party that put her forward, BSP, and not trying to demonstrate dispassion. On the other hand, there are allegations that the official Bulgarian position for Ukraine is being undermined by refusing to allow the building of the National Assembly to be painted in the colours of the Ukrainian flag and by speaking for the “coalition of those who want peace” in contrast to the rhetoric of European leaders. These attacks are hardly random. However, one should not forget that complex decisions with complex majorities lie ahead of parliament. There is a risk that the post of chairman may be turned into a bargaining chip in the process of inter-party negotiations.

**The government.** The 105th government of Bulgaria with Prime Minister Rosen Zhelyazkov (GERB) was elected on January 16th with the support of 125 people MPs from GERB-UDF, BSP, ITN and DPS-DPS, with 114 MPs from PP-DB, “Vazrazhdane” (“Revival”), MRF-NB and MECh voting against. Initially, GERB negotiated with Democratic Bulgaria. The sudden collapse of the negotiations triggered predictions that the country was once again facing early elections, but in a relatively short time GERB agreed with BSP and ITN to form a cabinet officially supported by the party, the former chairman of MRF, Ahmed Dogan. The 3+1 coalition formula is actually a formula for four parties, since, in addition to their political proposals, DPS-DPS also received the right to nominate figures from the “second echelon” to power. It can be said that this is the beginning of the political crisis in 2021. This is the most easily realised management agreement, without a “red line” on the participants and without mutual public reservations between them. The composition of the cabinet is distributed by party as follows: 12 figures from GERB (including the Prime Minister), 5

from BSP (including one deputy Prime Minister without portfolio) and 4 from ITN. The impression is given that the mandate-bearing party GERB is concentrated on foreign policy, order and security, and finance, as well as key sectors for the country such as agriculture and energy. From the department with greater resource security, regional development is determined for BSP, and transport and communications for ITN.

The Zhelyazkov government is a political government. The model widely discussed over the entire previous year of an expert cabinet with equidistant Prime Minister was rejected. The current government includes top officials from the three parties, and the Prime Minister belongs to the closest leadership of GERB.

A special body for coordination, the so-called Council for Joint Government, which includes representatives of the four parties supporting the cabinet, has been established. The task of the Council is to create guidelines for legislative activity and smooth out contradictions between the partners. At the same time it is still unclear what authority this Council has and what responsibility it bears. Unlike, for example, the time of the Triple Coalition (2005-2009), when the leaders of the three parties Sergei Stanishev, Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, and Ahmed Dogan personally sat in a similar body, neither GERB leader Boiko Borisov nor Slavi Trifonov of ITN participate in the current Council, while DPS-DPS are represented by their formal leader Jevdet Chakarov, but not by their actual leader Dogan. Up until this moment, the Council for Joint Government has determined only one important rule, namely that the deputy ministers in each separate department should not be nominated by the party which has put forward the minister, but it has already caused one scandal, and more precisely, the demand for the resignation of the rotating chairman of the Council Kostadin Angelov (GERB) by DPS-DPS because of alleged concessions for Delyan Peevski.

In the work of the government, a deliberate slow deployment regarding the "second echelon" of power can be observed. Most deputy ministers, heads of agencies in the executive power system, regional governors and their deputies have not yet been appointed. Appointments are made for a small number of people at a time in periods of one week. This expresses extreme prudence and the desire to postpone any possible reasons for tension internally between the partners or externally between the majority and the opposition.

Since its first day the government of Zhelyazkov has been facing the big question regarding the influence of Delyan Peevski in the government. The very format of the coalition sounded somewhat paradoxical to many. It was believed that Peevski would not allow a government without the direct participation

of his party, and if this could not happen now, he would strongly appeal for early elections. However, a government without Peevski's party was formed, and the support of DPS-DPS for this government, in the context of the severe conflict between Peevski and Dogan, even looked like a challenge to MRF-NB. At the same time, a number of messages to the cabinet and his first appointments arouse assumptions about the continued strong influence of Peevski on the government.

Disputes over "Peevski's Shadow" have had a public political character since the first weeks. Two scandals spread - first, the appointment of the former Deputy Prime Minister Lyudmila Petkova as the director of the State Financial Inspection Agency, and then the nomination of the former Minister of Innovation, Rosen Karadimov, as the chairman of the Commission for the Protection of Competition. Even though Petkova is formally close to circles of GERB, and Karadimov is connected to BSP, both are accused by PP-DB and various media and public organisations of being subservient to Peevski. The suspicion that Peevski continues to "pull the strings" on the government from behind the scenes comes to the fore, as they claim he had been doing during the previous governments of GERB.

Despite the slow pace with which the work is beginning, the Zhelyazkov government has to deal with various and in no way easy challenges, some of which are of a conjunctural nature, others with a long-term perspective. First, the legitimacy of the elections. After numerous violations in voting were found, the Constitutional Court ordered the elected administration to recount the votes. There is a risk of realignment of the parliamentary mandates, and hence the risk of the stability of the majority. Second, the draft budget for 2025 contains a very high growth in both income and expenditure, without any change in the tax burden. The realism of budget expectations is contested by various politicians and economists. The state of public finances may turn out to be a complex problem for a group of parties with quite divergent views on the role of the state. Thirdly, the case with the euro zone can lead to both dividends and losses for each of the parties in the coalition, regardless of whatever development might occur over the next four months. Postponing Bulgarian membership could be perceived as a failure in foreign policy, whilst success would reveal inflationary and other threats to the stability of the cabinet. Fourth, over the coming months decisions will be made on parliamentary quotas in dozens of regulatory agencies, as well as in the Supreme Judicial Council and the Constitutional Court. For this purpose, a qualified majority is often necessary, which can both rattle the unity of the coalition and open the doors wide for political extortion. Moreover, Bulgaria is on the verge of the consummation of its failure in the absorption of funds under the

Recovery and Stability Plan. This is a matter of a serious reserve for the budget, which will most likely be lost. There is a danger that commitments made in advance to the European Commission will be fulfilled without receiving any funding in return. And last but not least, the increase in prices is becoming a leading concern for Bulgarian society and is creating the conditions for growing social tension. The government seems to have no answer to these processes, as well as to the risks associated with the liberalisation of the electricity market. Posing as a bystander can cause unpredictable negative consequences today.

It is too early to analyse the administrative intentions of Zhelyazkov's cabinet - simply because there isn't one yet. The programme for the government has yet to be announced.

**The President.** The head of state will assume a very constructive role in the process of forming a government. Rumen Radev fully complied with the wishes of the party for the need for more time for negotiations. What is more, he did not allow himself to divert attention from the thesis of the negotiations with his bright initiatives or statements. The same moderate position is noticeable in relation to the first weeks of the functioning of the government - abstinence from harsh criticism.

The President is actively exploiting his foreign policy line, formulated years ago in connection with the

war in Ukraine. This line presupposes support for the Ukrainian people and a general commitment to NATO and the EU, but in the direction of finding a peaceful solution to the problem as quickly as possible. Radev used his military education to conclude several times that the Ukrainian counteroffensive against Russia in 2023 was adventurous by nature, which caused the country's defence capacity to collapse, and the lack of manpower made it impossible to maintain long-term combat operations. This position, somewhat close to that of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his Slovak colleague Robert Fico, although softer than those, corresponds to and is focused on significant layers of Bulgarian society. Current geopolitical upheavals accompanying the second mandate for Trump seem to further legitimise the thesis on the President.

The second line, which Radev follows unwaveringly, is patriotic. The naming of the airport of the capital after the national hero Vasil Levski is an illustration of the approach mentioned. Support for the Bulgarian Orthodox Church against the poll for registration for an alternative old-style church, suspected, probably unfounded, of ties to the Ecumenical Patriarchate, also fits the trend. However, Radev's decision to convene the Consultative Council on National Security not about some other topic, but about the problem of the addiction of children and youth to intoxicating substances, has a far-reaching strategic nature. This reflects the oppression of many Bulgarians, and is keeping the eye of the media on the future of the country.



## 3

## THE STATE OF THE PARTY SYSTEM

**GERB-UDF.** The new government is an indisputable success for GERB and personally for its leader Boiko Borisov. For the first time since the beginning of the political crisis in 2021 GERB has realised the implementation of a cabinet with its mandate. The coalition format is not unusual at all - the Borisov 2 and Borisov 3 cabinets were also the product of complex coalitions, even with non-traditional partners.

Something that is remarkable is the crossing of inter-party borders that was unthinkable until recently. GERB have formed a government with the party against which they stood as the main opponent for 15 years and with which they claimed that they would never come to an agreement (BSP); the party created and won the elections in the name of the ambition "let's thwart" GERB (ITN); and with support for a party whose predecessor never openly stood by GERB (DPS-DPS of Ahmed Dogan). In such a context, today it is absurd to repeat the legend of the "isolation" of Borisov. On the contrary, apart from being the leader of the largest party, he actually turns out to be the most sought-after partner in the whole political space. The cabinet, in addition to the opportunity of exercising power, for GERB, to some extent, also appeared to be a necessity. The parliamentary elections in October 2024 not only confirmed the leading position of the party, but also increased the electoral result. It would be difficult, when in such a dominant position, for GERB to seek yet more pre-term elections and hope for similar or even greater support. In the next place, the GERB cabinet has betrayed its unfaltering tactics over the years of the political crisis and is looking for an agreement with PP-DB, or at least a part of it, at any cost. The reason for this is the international situation. Trump's victory in the USA and other events in Europe probably confirm Borisov's belief in a "conservative" wave, which would lead to diminishing external support for "liberals" from PP-DB, and in this sense - to diminishing external pressure on his own party.

There is one more factor that Borisov is undoubtedly aware of, and it is related to the influence of Delyan Peevski in Bulgarian politics. Borisov is not ready either for an official partnership with Peevski, which

could easily turn into a "death hug", or for a confrontation with him. That is why we are observing the traditional postponement of the problem - the administration opening the door for non-public interference with Peevski, but leaving Peevski himself outside.

It could be argued that under Borisov, the current cabinet is a temporary solution, which, given good circumstances, could develop into a permanent one. There are too many unknowns that weigh on the fate of this administration - starting with the dynamics of global processes and the role of Europe, and ending with the case of the Eurozone and with inflated budgets atypical for GERB. The approach to Borisov is expressed in the distancing between himself and his own government. Unlike earlier, he does not give a statement in which he explains how he ordered the members of parliament to vote one way or another. On the contrary, he began to claim that one or another solution is for the government to make, not him. It is not by chance that Borisov does not even participate in the Council for Joint Management. He emphasises this in front of the media, and also points out that he is an "ordinary MP" and that he is "not even the head of the commission". There is also a lack of clear support for the activities of GERB MPs. Motives for such behaviour can be unravelled. Borisov knows that no other person is associated with the GERB party more than he is. A relatively successful stint of government, whatever the criteria, of GERB would be attributed to him as a personal political asset. But in the face of difficulties and the need for change, Borisov could take advantage of his distance and legitimately look for a second policy or even a different formula for government.

Just as in previous parliaments, Borisov openly tolerated the "dissident" behaviour of Delyan Dobrev, who was left to criticise PP-DB on a daily basis, despite the joint government of GERB and PP-DB, so now Borisov himself is taking on the role of Dobrev. Something that does make an impression is Borisov's constant political game with "Vazrazhdane", alternating measured political praise for the leader Kostadin Kostadinov with furious accusations and disagreements. It

is not excluded that Borisov wants to keep as a reserve a possible future partnership with “Vazrazhdane”, which could replace the current coalition format. Such a scenario is not certain and depends on the future. But according to some analyses, it is based on international analogies. Under Borisov, Germany was always a political model. There are some who hope that sooner or later the conservative coalition in Germany will overcome internal barriers and reach an open alliance with Alternative for Germany. This would automatically legitimise the rapprochement between GERB and “Vazrazhdane”, which is not possible now. And indeed, Borisov has always drawn public support from a combination of pro-European and national orientation. The best option for him would be if such a combination were to gain status as a European practice. For now, however, the Zhelyazkov coalition is the only one that guarantees access to power and political survival.

**“We Continue the Change - Democratic Bulgaria” (PP-DB).** This is the largest opposition force in the 50<sup>th</sup> National Assembly. In fact, for the first time since their creation in 2021 PP are in opposition. The unity of the coalition was maintained after the separatist negotiations of DB for the government with GERB. PP-DB get the opportunity to criticise the new majority on two topics that seem to be their trademark - pro-European policy and the fight against corruption. However, the situation in PP-DB is far from politically stable.

First, PP-DB should share the opposition bench with three other parties, each of which has a clear and simple political strategy – “Vazrazhdane” with the fight against foreign influence in Bulgaria; MRF-NB with the pretense that they protect people and will soon be in power; MECh with their rhetoric are against the entire political status quo. Unlike them, PP-DB are more nuanced. Their starting discussion on the budget demonstrates this. They approve some measures and dispute others, but their voice is lost among those of much noisier political actors. Also, with their 37 MPs, PP-DB are not in a position to independently initiate a vote of no-confidence, and the damage to their image of a joint vote with whoever else of the other three opposition formations would be extensive.

Second, PP-DB lost the initiative in the political debate. With the ambition of representing the “change” in Bulgarian politics, they allowed themselves to be associated with the “political crisis” and the “endless cycle of elections”. Their opponents, together with the media close to them, have bandied clichés that from 2021 on the whole time there has been a PP-DB government, and they bear full responsibility for this period, and the legacy they have left behind is measured in terms of monstrous budget deficits (a “hole of 18 billion leva”). This will put PP-DB in a defensive position, in which those in power attack the

opposition, and the opposition defend themselves from the attacks. What is more, in the past year, PP-DB have raised the battle against the election of Borislav Sarafov as the chief prosecutor as their main banner. However, the parties suspected of being behind Sarafov - GERB and MRF-NB - blocked his election through a parliamentary decision at the exact moment of formation of the “Zhelyazkov” cabinet. Thus PP-DB lost this weapon of theirs as well.

Thirdly, the internal stability of PP-DB seems much more uncertain than that of any other parliamentary formation. Despite often being a part of the parliamentary group, MPs such as Daniel Lorer and Yavor Bozhankov actually represent the intra-party opposition. PP actually distance themselves from them. But Bozhankov at a later stage launched an attack against the co-chairman of PP Asen Vasilev with the accusation that he was leading the country towards disaster. Negotiations of DB with GERB for the government which PP did not participate in were not explained to the public. The first poll for the creation of a temporary parliamentary commission to investigate Delyan Peevski, conducted by PP-DB, failed, as the electronic screen in the plenary hall showed the absence of 10 MPs, namely from PP-DB. The impression was created that dependence on Peevski flourishes even in circles in PP-DB. The situation in Sofia, a traditional fortress amongst those who currently support PP-DB, is particularly difficult. There, several other district mayors from the PP-DB coalition with “Spasi Sofia” (“Save Sofia”) have already been removed from court due to legal muddles - the last of them, the mayor of Slatina, Georgi Iliev, in February - and the district mayor of Vitosha, Zarko Klinkov, left “Spasi Sofia”. The tension between the leader of the organisation, Boris Bonev, and PP-DB is growing, having reached the point of a warning about the possible imminent disintegration of the coalition.

At this stage, it would appear that PP-DB are making efforts to break out of the political stalemate through actions and messages in two interrelated directions - international activity and rallying the electorate. Co-chairman of PP Kiril Petkov developed a veritable foreign policy offensive, visiting the inauguration of Donald Trump in the USA, the Munich Security Conference and London during the meeting with Starmer for Ukraine. Petkov obviously aimed to show that, despite the “conservative wave”, support for PP-DB abroad was not on the decline. At the same time, the anti-Russian line was brought into play again. Proposals were launched for renaming the cathedral “St. Alexander Nevski” and the central street of the capital “Graf Ignatiev” with Bulgarian names. Observations show that the tension between America and Europe leads to the mobilisation of traditional supporters of PP-DB on a pro-European and anti-Trumpist basis. These are, however, temporary measures that cannot compensate for the lack of a long-term political vision.

**“Vazrazhdane” (“Revival”).** The election of the new government provoked a sudden radicalisation of “Vazrazhdane”. There has been a change in political tactics. Last year “Vazrazhdane” tried to break the impression of political isolation by demonstrating institutional behaviour. The refusal of parliament to schedule the initiation of a referendum initiated by the party against the eurozone seems to have been accepted with perfunctory declarations of dissatisfaction. “Vazrazhdane” even managed to impose themselves as an effective factor in the parliamentary process, especially with the introduction of anti-LGBT propaganda law in schools. Now, on the contrary, “Vazrazhdane” exploit the opposition to the introduction of the euro as their main instrument to present themselves as the only opposition to the foreign-backed status quo. The protest for the preservation of the Bulgarian lev on February 22nd turned into a central political event. The clashes with the police and the attack on the House of Europe in Sofia made the news around the world. What happened had been prepared well and a long time in advance. Party leader Kostadin Kostadinov’s threat “We will set them on fire” was announced in January. In fact, this was one of the few protests in Bulgaria that had been advertised several weeks in advance. With its realisation, Kostadinov helped both himself and his opponents. On one hand, the prevailing scepticism in Bulgarian public opinion regarding the euro was channelled politically as a position precisely on “Vazrazhdane”. Also, the protest coincided with the traditional annual nationalist “Lukov March” in Sofia, organised by circles alien to “Vazrazhdane”, and left the “Lukov March” completely in its shadow. In this way, Kostadinov indirectly claimed to represent the entire nationalist spectrum in the media. On the other hand, the lev-euro tension also seems to serve the complex game of Boiko Borisov. Last but not least, the “Vazrazhdane” protest also serves a unifying function for the majority behind the “Zhelyazkov” cabinet. The parties participating in it are given an alibi to put aside their contradictions in the name of “restraining” the party “Vazrazhdane”.

“Vazrazhdane” is also the party with the most turbulent political activity since the beginning of the year. The acute criticisms against Borisov and Peevski - and the exposure of the PP-DB and MECh, showing hypocrisy on this topic - happen daily. The pro-crisis pressure of “Vazrazhdane” is also evident in their decision, unique in Bulgarian political practice, to attack the authority of the two perhaps most stable institutions in the country, the Bulgarian National Bank and the National Statistical Institute. However, this radical drive is nowhere reminiscent of improvisation. “Vazrazhdane” are very careful not to push away potential supporters with thoughtlessly categorical messages on various topics. Kostadinov showed the media an invitation from Donald Trump’s team for the inaugu-

ration in Washington, but did not commit to further endorsement for the American President. Gratitude was expressed to Russia for the revival of Bulgarian statehood, but without advertising the ties with the Russian ambassador in Sofia or with Russian initiatives. February 1, the Day of Remembrance and Respect to Victims of the Communist Regime, was marked with a call for national reconciliation due to the presence of innocent victims on both sides.

As in other cases, the international activity of “Vazrazhdane” stands out. Kostadinov is particularly keen on ties with the “Alternative for Germany” party. He gave a speech at the party’s final election rally before the Bundestag vote, where he mentioned the need for “strong leadership” in Germany in order for it “to become great again.” Kostadinov also appeared at a rally in Bucharest in support of the arrested Romanian presidential candidate Calin Georgescu. No less important a fact is that the representative of “Vazrazhdane”, Stanislav Stoyanov was elected chairman of the European party Europe of Sovereign Nations, which is essentially an attempt by the Alternative for Germany to organise an international nationalist group around itself. In this way, Kostadinov aims to achieve the impression that he is part of a much larger international process of change that works in his favour and makes his bid for power realistic.

**Movement for Rights and Freedoms – New Beginning (MRF-NB).** At first glance, it seems that Delyan Peevski’s party lost the political game at the beginning of the 50<sup>th</sup> National Assembly. Peevski constantly repeated that he would come to power or there would be pre-term elections. He did not come to power, there have been no early elections, and the party of his biggest opponent Ahmed Dogan is in power. In fact, however, this is more of a strategic retreat. Peevski became convinced that in the current party configuration he could not become an official partner of any party. In the event of immediate early elections, this would hardly change. For this reason Peevski is oriented towards waiting, so as to simultaneously maintain his influence in the institutions and further weaken his potential partners.

The public behaviour of MRF-NB is reduced to Peevski’s personal rhetoric. He focuses on socially significant problems and comments on them with authoritative calls for their immediate resolution – the water shortage, electricity prices, and inflation of food prices. There is an obvious consistency with which Peevski creates the impression that the collapse of all other parties is imminent at the expense of his future rise to total power. Peevski declared Zhelyazkov’s cabinet the “end of the transition” and marked almost every topic discussed with the clarification “when I become Prime Minister”. His intention may be to prepare not so much public opinion as the other parties for a fu-

ture entry into power, from far better positions compared to what is currently the case.

**The Bulgarian Socialist Party – United Left (BSP-UL).** The Socialists entered the government in the context of two unfavourable public circumstances. The party's political line over the past 15 years has been entirely subordinated to the open confrontation with GERB, declared the main opponent and banned by a congressional decision as a coalition partner. Now BSP are participating in a political cabinet with GERB as an official coalition partner. And next, the suspicion was widely spread that BSP follow the dictates of the leader of the MRF-NB, Delyan Peevski, and even propose ministers who are close not only to the party leadership, but also to Peevski. This is a blow to the political authority of BSP, who present themselves as the only ideological party in Bulgaria. The motives for being included in the "Zhelyazkov" cabinet can easily be identified. The party elite not only do not want quick pre-term elections because they fear weaker results, but they also do not see a resource for political renaissance in the opposition. The big question here is not so much the coalition format as the degree of integration of the party platform into the government's policy. This question remains unanswered for now. The topic of "red lines" has been abandoned.

The central event for the Bulgarian Socialist Party was the 51<sup>st</sup> party congress. The battle for the chairmanship was not a foregone conclusion. The presence of 17 candidates should not lead to confusion. The majority of them accepted the nominations not in order to fight for the leadership position, but to strengthen their party positions and aim to hold sway and bring influence to bear in the future party leadership. In fact, there were four main candidates – the acting chairman Atanas Zafirov, the organisational secretary Borislav Gutsanov, the MEP Kristian Vigenin and the former leader of the Sofia socialists Kaloyan Pargov. They were also the only ones who carried out a real campaign across the country. It was known in advance that the congress would reject the election of direct leadership by all party members introduced by the former chairwoman Korneliya Ninova and would return the election to the delegates of the congress. And since practically none of the candidates essentially challenged the participation of BSP in the government, it was precisely the government's weight that greatly influenced the chances of the candidates. It is hardly a coincidence that Zafirov had agreed not to have his own portfolio in the Council of Ministers, but to be Deputy Prime Minister, so that he would be hierarchically higher than his competitor Gutsanov. Zafirov's victory with 422 votes in the second round against 365 votes for Gutsanov reflects both the realities of power and the effectiveness of Zafirov's message of "first among equals." Fears of Gutsanov's overly authoritarian approach played their part. Observers per-

ceive Zafirov as cooperative, willing to accommodate different camps and lobbies, further from the Russian line than Gutsanov, more of a man of the status quo, and more acceptable for Peevski. In fact, Zafirov will have far more personal leverage for influence than is currently believed, but expectations for a soft political style remain in force. These expectations are not related to hopes for political initiative or for re-ideologising the party. The BSP Ninova elite are consolidating their power, with openly advertised co-opting of some of Ninova's more prominent opponents, while Ninova herself is politically marginalised and is really of no interest to the party leadership with her attempt at a conservative project "Unruly Bulgaria".

**"Democracy, Rights and Freedoms – DPS" (DPS-DPS).** [Repeat of translator's note: In Bulgarian: "Movement for Rights and Freedoms" is translated as "Dvizhenie za Prava i Svobodi" - DPS, while "Democracy, Rights and Freedoms" is translated as "Democratsia, Prava i Svobodi" – DPS, hence DPS is repeated] Ahmed Dogan's party entered the ruling majority with the clear intention of maintaining their political decline and accumulating resources to fight their main opponent, MRF-NB. The party's inability to produce a single meaningful message and develop a single meaningful initiative logically increases the doubts of their voters as to whether Peevski does not embody the "vital" MRF after all. regional Dogan's party perceive their role in the majority as a guarantee against Peevski's influence, but it is clear to everyone that such a guarantee is impossible. For this reason, DPS-DPS are urgently calling on the Prime Minister and the cabinet to appoint their deputy ministers and directors. The path to ultimatums is open. Even if this path is taken, everyone realises that Dogan's party have no interest in leaving the majority.

**"There is such a people" ("Ima Takuv Narod" - ITN).** Slavi Trifonov's party entered the cabinet despite some tension caused by the recent line against GERB. Trifonov's solemn vows that he would never form a coalition with Borisov were widely circulated. The decision to participate in the majority was followed by a mysterious announcement by ITN that they were convening their own national forum. Speculation arose that the change in coalition policy would also lead to a change in leadership. However, the forum was cancelled. Ultimately, ITN demonstrated the most constructive and pragmatic attitude possible to the issue of power. Observers who remember how, in the case of need, ITN suddenly reversed their entire political behaviour – as they did during the "Petkov" cabinet – would hardly be fully calm.

**"Morality, Unity, Honour" ("Moral, Edinstvo, Chest" - MECh).** Radostin Vassilev's party remain in the shadow of political processes. The constant rhetoric against Borisov, Peevski and the introduction of

the euro cannot compete with the much brighter and noisier propaganda of "Vazrazhdane". MECh are making efforts to carve out their niche in political messages and consistently exploit it. We are talking about calls

for nationalisation, respectively cancellation of concessions, of energy distribution companies, gold deposits and the oil refinery in Burgas. So far, however, this does not yield a significant public and media effect.

## 4

## THE PROGRESSIVE POLITICAL AND PUBLIC AGENDA

The social problems remain almost beyond the attention of parliamentary parties and major state institutions. This is not the case with public opinion, whose concerns grow during the winter period. Inflation, especially visible in terms of food prices, is causing increasingly widespread discontent. It culminated in a boycott of large food chains, scheduled for February 13<sup>th</sup>, and organised by various consumer organisations. The boycott undoubtedly had an effect, not only because on the abovementioned day the turnover of the large chains marked a decrease of nearly 30%, but also because of two other facts – the fierce campaign of numerous media outlets against the senselessness of the boycott and the extraordinary meeting of the government with measures against inflation. Two more boycotts followed, with a far smaller quantitative effect. On the one hand, the reason is the lack of commitment of major parties or institutions to this cause. On the other hand – the ambitions of individual political figures from the past with low ratings to monopolise the topic and present it as their own probably repelled a considerable number of people. Nevertheless, the problem remains.

The disproportion between income increases and price increases has once again provoked acute reactions from the unions. In their assessment of the draft budget for 2025, they voiced their concern that the budget procedure would again be at the expense of

the people, and insisted that the envisaged 3% deficit ceiling be implemented through additional tax and social security revenues. In a special declaration, one of the two largest trade unions, the Confederation of Independent Trade Unions of Bulgaria (CITUB), asked the government for urgent action to protect the population from energy poverty. The upcoming closing of the regulated electricity market at the end of the year, so the text states, will leave consumers without adequate support. The activity of CITUB, which celebrated its 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary in February with a national conference, goes to confirm the fundamental discrepancy between the current government policy and the social concerns of households.

The topic of anti-fascism, although far more modestly established in Bulgaria than in many European countries, is also part of permanent campaigns in the progressive public space. A number of left-wing, progressive and anti-fascist organisations joined the traditional annual Anti-Lukov March. It was conceived as a counteraction to the marches of nationalists in memory of general Hristo Lukov, a famous nationalist leader from the Second World War and a supporter of Nazi Germany. The desire to offer a reminder of how dangerous the normalisation of extreme nationalism and historical revisionism can be was also present on this occasion. With the exception of individual representatives of the Bulgarian Socialist Party, however, political attention to the problem remains low.

## 5

## MAIN CONCLUSIONS, FORECASTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The geopolitical changes in the world are casting a new light on the stakes in the Bulgarian political process, without for now having an immediate impact on its course. The initial expectation that Donald Trump's victory in the US presidential elections would stimulate the "conservative wave" and reduce the influence of "liberal" forces has been justified to some extent, but has been offset by the sharp reaction of European institutions and leading European countries against trends on the other side of the ocean. Bulgaria is not a real participant in these processes, but it will probably soon be faced with the need to make new decisions regarding both European defence and the war in Ukraine.

The path of Bulgaria to the eurozone seems to have shortened significantly. The denouement will be very soon, in June, and will undoubtedly have an effect on the political and social situation in the country.

The formation of a regular government in Bulgaria has prompted comments that the political crisis, which lasted nearly four years, has ended. Of course, this is a premature conclusion, not least because of the uncertain context of foreign policy and the unstable state of the party system. Either way, it can be argued that the cabinet began work in conditions of serious political comfort. The endless cycle of early elections has minimised the expectations of society to simply have a government, let alone a successful or effective government. For various reasons, all four parties that support the cabinet have no interest in it falling for now. This will encourage various compromises, even of a principled nature. The extra-parliamentary opposition is weak, and the group in parliament is severely fragmented. Of the four opposition formations in the National Assembly, none could initiate long-term joint actions with another against the cabinet. This makes any alternative to the current format unrealistic.

Notwithstanding, non-public interactions and personnel appointments have the potential to cause political turmoil. The participants are aware of this and

therefore take their actions slowly, one by one, so that they can weigh up the effect. First on the agenda is the state budget, only thereafter everything else. In the first months of the year, the working parliament, which so many commentators relied on, is practically a non-working parliament, without a clear legislative programme. Regardless of everything, the lurking dangers facing the cabinet are already stimulating speculation that other majorities, respectively other governments, are possible within the same National Assembly. Suspicions of a "double game" are traditionally directed at GERB leader Boiko Borisov, who does not like to commit to a single option for his political future. Something that should not be forgotten is the behaviour of the leader of the MRF-NB, Delyan Peevski, who perceives his opposition role as temporary and is unlikely to tolerate this cabinet indefinitely. Nor should we forget the figure of Prime Minister Rosen Zhelyazkov, considered by many observers to be a "straw man" for Borisov, simply placed to carry out his orders. It is not clear whether and in the name of what Zhelyazkov might show a desire for political emancipation, as has happened in the past with other prime ministers who have been seen as puppets (e.g. Plamen Oresharski in 2013-2014).

Despite its generous spending, the draft budget does not touch on any of the main pillars of the right-wing model of governance in Bulgaria for the past 20 years. The participation of the Socialists does not change the fact that we have yet another centre-right government in Bulgaria, committed more to business than to hired labour. The challenge facing the left and progressive circles in the country is not so much a change in this governance as the imposition of a different agenda, closer to the concerns and hopes of the majority of Bulgarian citizens.

If this National Assembly overcomes the inevitable turmoil during the summer months and the autumn, then any new elections will most likely be postponed until at least the autumn of 2026, along with the regular presidential vote.

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