

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

POLIT-BAROMETER

Year 25 Issue 2
March-April

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The partial annulment of the elections is a serious blow to confidence in the democratic process in Bulgaria.



The main stake of the political process is the prospect of membership in the eurozone.



The government is increasingly under the influence of Deljan Peevski.

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THE DYNAMICS OF FOREIGN POLICY

Europe-Russia tension. Bulgarian foreign policy falls within the context of the new stage of transatlantic relations, dominated by the re-entry of Donald Trump into the White House. The separate initiatives of France and Great Britain to mobilise European support for Ukraine are gradually moving towards attempts at a common position of the European Union (EU), specified in a rearmament plan (ReArm Europe) and an approach to the Ukrainian conflict called “Peace through Strength”. The international environment has been transformed, but the Bulgarian reaction generally adheres to the previous parameters. The government of Rosen Zhelyazkov consistently supports all European actions. This was expressed by Prime Minister Zhelyazkov both at the videoconference leadership meeting organised by British Prime Minister Keir Starmer and at the summit in Paris initiated by French President Emmanuel Macron. The Bulgarian proposal for participation is also not new: hosting a multinational security coordination centre in the western part of the Black Sea. Ambitions for the development of the Bulgarian arms industry in connection with the new phase of the conflict were also voiced again. The potentially large role of Bulgaria as a supplier of military equipment and ammunition was highlighted by Zhelyazkov during the visit of the President of the European Council Antonio Costa to the country. Also, in accordance with previous practice, reservations were expressed regarding the rearmament plans by President Rumen Radev, according to whom the modernisation of the Bulgarian army should be a priority of the government regardless of the stakes of the Ukrainian crisis.

The war in Ukraine has been used by political forces in Bulgaria for three years to legitimise their own positions. The delivery of the first American F-16 fighter jet ordered by Bulgaria became an occasion for another flare-up of the clash between Russophiles and Russophobes. Pro-Western political circles welcomed the event as a decisive step towards freeing Bulgaria from dependence on Russian weapons. Information about a minor technical malfunction in the plane in turn provoked the enthusiasm of pro-Russian circles.

Political projections were not long in coming. Leading figures in the parliamentary majority implicated President Radev in the incident, and the chairman of the Security Services Control Committee, Atanas Atanasov, convened a special meeting to discuss the hypothesis of Russian sabotage.

The “Trump” factor is also exerting its influence on the foreign policy visions of Bulgarian politicians. Since the beginning of the year, the leaders of two of the main parties, Boyko Borisov of GERB and Delyan Peevski of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms – New Beginning (MRF-NB), have stopped actively speaking about support for Ukraine. Despite the decision made long ago to provide Ukraine with the unused Russian reactors for the Belene nuclear power plant, Borisov and Peevski suddenly adopted the idea of keeping the reactors in Bulgaria and using them to create data centres. Apparently, this corresponds to some business strategies of the new American administration. An interesting detail in the same direction is the visit to Bulgaria of Donald Trump Jr., the son of the American President. He arrived for a forum of the large technology company Nexa, previously suspected of close ties to liberal pro-European circles, and now apparently inclined to change his behaviour. Trump Jr.’s meeting with GERB leader Borisov did not lead to publicly announced results, but it fuelled rumours that the Bulgarian authorities are making great efforts to review the Magnitsky list of individuals sanctioned by the US for corruption. An additional reason for these rumours was the decision of the American side to remove from this list a politician close to Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. The hypothesis that this could also happen in Bulgaria with regard to Delyan Peevski and Vladislav Goranov has not been proven, but it has not been refuted in any way.

The Kocani tragedy. A fire in a discotheque in the North Macedonian town of Kocani claimed the lives of over 60 people, for the most part, young people. Bulgaria was one of the first to offer and provide emergency treatment to many of the injured, and declared national mourning in honour of the victims

of the incident. Sofia's behaviour received almost consensual public and political support. Indeed, in recent years there has hardly been a Bulgarian action in relations with North Macedonia that has been so strong, adequate, and at the same time humane and

good-neighbourly. Against this background, the disputes between Sofia and Skopje over the construction of Corridor No. 8 and the firmness of Bulgaria's position on North Macedonia's European negotiations no longer seem like a simple "freezing" of relations.

2

DEVELOPMENT OF THE POLITICAL SITUATION

Parliament. The 51st National Assembly (NA) started in the conditions of a complex 8-party configuration, which, however, turned out to be inconclusive. The instability of the parliamentary relations has already become apparent on two occasions. In response to a lawsuit filed against the legality of the elections, the Constitutional Court made a decision declaring the election of 16 MPs illegal and ruling that there were enough votes cast for parliamentary participation of a ninth party in "Velichie" ("Greatness"). The decision is unprecedented, not only because of its scope. For the first time, the structure of parliamentary representation is changing as a result of complaints. Moreover, for the first time, the numerous allegations and evidence of electoral machinations have received official confirmation from the highest institution.

The Constitutional Court produced the first "shock-wave" in the parliamentary process. A second "shock-wave" immediately followed, which occurred in the course of the implementation of this decision. The parliamentary group of "Morality, Unity, Honour" (MECh) for a short period of time found itself with nine MPs, one less than the minimum for the existence of a separate group. The reason seemed to be purely technical – MPs from MECh had to leave the National Assembly, and others had to take the oath in their place. However, the Speaker of the National Assembly Natalia Kiselova applied a literal reading of the normative acts and announced the dissolution of the MECh group. Thus, the 51st parliament, which had grown by one group, again decreased by one. A consensus opinion was created that Kiselova's decision was wrong and should be revised, which ultimately happened. This is how the current legislature can boast that it is the most fragmented of all in the history of Bulgarian parliamentarism.

The deepening fragmentation has also complicated the problem of the traditional division between the ruling and opposition parties. The Constitutional Court's decision left the parliamentary majority with 121 MPs, which is almost on the verge of being able to impose decisions. In parallel, the support of the MRF-NB for the majority's initiatives has become pub-

lic and – at this stage – unreserved. The inclusion of the MRF-NB cannot be called a step towards "floating majorities", because the latter imply thematic votes and variable behaviour of the parties that are not in the government, while the MRF-NB has declared an unchanging behaviour. In turn, the exit of "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] from the majority has further blurred the demarcation line. The majority in the National Assembly is now an informal majority. The government agreement was signed by four parties, one of which has withdrawn, but in its place has been replaced by another that has not signed anything.

The National Assembly adopted the state budget for 2025 with a three-month delay, generally within the parameters announced back in February. The assumptions that the budget vote would turn into a populist bidding war between parties did not come true. On the contrary, the majority vote was largely disciplined. The most important message related to the budget was to maintain the deficit ceiling of 3%, which is a requirement for membership in the eurozone. Outside of the budget, however, this parliament continues to fail to demonstrate a clear legislative programme. Three trends coexist in parallel. The first concerns the impressive number of initiatives that remain unfinished. The many bills that reach first reading in the plenary hall are impressive, but are never brought to a final vote. Secondly, it is a reproduction of the practice from the time of caretaker governments, where parliamentary control is replaced by constant requests to hear various ministers on various current issues. This exacerbates political tension, but does not produce any bright results other than chances for mutual accusations. And thirdly, the hope instilled by the majority that this National Assembly will make a breakthrough in the absorption of funds under the European Recovery and Resilience Plan. Until recently, the majority parties claimed that the funds in question were irre-

trievably lost due to the inefficiency of caretaker governments. Now it is claimed that the necessary laws can be adopted on time and the funds can still be provided. Real legislative actions are not evident, which raises suspicions rather of a PR strategy.

The government. The cabinet of Rosen Zhelyazkov marked its first 100 days practically without serious political or media discussions. The government legitimised itself mainly in two directions – as a stabilisation government (offering a way out of the 4-year political crisis) and as a euro government (creating conditions for even more complete European integration of the country). The messages correspond to the intentions. There was talk of a full 4-year mandate, and at the same time real initiatives were launched to facilitate the transition from lev to euro. The report that would give Bulgaria the green light to join the eurozone is due in early June.

The problems that the cabinet went through should not be underestimated. Official support for it, with the departure of MRF-DPS, fell from 4 parties to 3 parties. The declaration of the three formations, GERB-UDF, the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) and “There is Such a People” (ITN) was of interest. In response to the decision of MRF-DPS, they expressed satisfaction with the departure of an “unreliable” partner and declared their determination to continue governing in full mutual coordination. Moreover, the “Zhelyazkov” cabinet turned out to be the first to face as many as two votes of no confidence in the course of its first 100 days. Initiated by the nationalist opposition, the votes of no-confidence actually only contributed to the consolidation of the ruling coalition. They were dedicated to topics such as foreign policy and corruption. Considering that foreign policy is the government’s leading legitimisation, and a few weeks in power are definitely not enough to establish a failure in the fight against corruption, the three ruling parties drew positives from the attack against them.

The only sphere in which the government’s larger-scale reform intentions are felt is education. The Ministry of Education and Science launched a public discussion on the introduction of mandatory education in the subject “Religion and Virtues”. The topic caused sharp political and media polarisation. Activists of leading parliamentary parties, the Orthodox Church, and popular intellectuals firmly defend the idea that the crisis of the values of the younger generation can be overcome by educating in Christian virtues. The idea of these conservative circles is approaching classical religious doctrine, with the presence of a separate programme for students of other faiths. Liberal circles, which also have parliamentary support, reject the idea, admitting insidious ambitions to push Russian influence, and are preparing protests under the slogan “School is not a church”.

The government itself has not clarified whether the reform aims at introducing religious doctrine, or at a critical reading of all major religions. In any case, the situation creates the prerequisites for a long-term conflict with political and geopolitical dimensions. It is still too early to assess to what extent the rulers see in the educational reform a path to their future conservative legitimisation, complementing and building on their European and anti-crisis legitimisation.

The consequences of the change of the government format undoubtedly have internal political repercussions. In January, the inclusion of the MRF-DPS in the majority seemed to be an inevitable guarantee against suspicions of backstage involvement of MRF-NB in power. In the absence of MRF-DPS and following the strong declaration of support by MRF-NB, the government increasingly risks being perceived as Peevski’s ‘cabinet’. Such accusations are spread by the opposition, but the executive staff appointments in the first 100 days seem to give them some grounds.

The President. The stabilisation of the government puts President Rumen Radev in a specific situation. For a long time, the impression was created that Radev was the major alternative and critic of the two informal leading figures of the current majority, Boyko Borisov and Delyan Peevski. At the same time, the public tension between them seemed to have subsided. Surprisingly, however, Radev became the subject of a massive negative campaign, almost openly promoted by Borisov and spread in the media, considered close to Peevski. The reason is not new – the gas contract signed by Radev’s caretaker cabinet with the Turkish company Botas. What is new is the obsessively repeated message that, thanks to Radev, Bulgaria loses one million every day, which is going into the pocket of the Turks. The President’s reasons for concluding this contract are well known and undoubtedly find justification in the complex situation of refusing Russian gas supplies. Now, however, the “one million” is becoming an effective propaganda weapon, far stronger than Radev’s regular accusations of authoritarianism, pro-Russian attitude or closeness to supposedly corrupt advisers. The indictment brought against former caretaker Interior Minister Ivan Demerdzhiev, appointed by Radev, should be added to all that. There were suspicions in the media that the indictment came immediately after Demerdzhiev’s allegations of smuggling through the Plovdiv customs office; and attempts for a parliamentary inquiry into the case were blocked by the majority. There is the suggestion that efforts to attack Radev and his legacy in government will not be limited to mere media rhetoric.

The question of the time and reasons for this attack remains open. There is no political event in the coming months that could justify such action. Presidential elections are too far away, and the President’s

political project is not on the horizon (yet). For now, it can only be concluded that tensions between the President and the parliamentary majority are growing. Radev and Borisov clashed in absentia over the technical malfunction of the F-16 fighter jet recently acquired by the Bulgarian Airforce. The parties in power spoke about replacing the chairman of the State Agency for National Security Plamen Tonchev, previously defended decisively by Radev. These and other circumstances point to a condition for a deepening confrontation between the President and the parliamentary majority.

Outbreaks of social tension. The findings of an end to the political crisis do not correspond to the visible signs of high social tension, taking the form of mass clashes. Three cases are indicative of the accumulated negative public energy. 12-year-old girl Siyana was run over in the road near Telish by a truck driver. 18-year-old

Magdalena was killed by a classmate in Haskovo. 6-year-old Angel died in Plovdiv from complications after anaesthesia. In all three cases, mass protests followed. In Haskovo, there was an attack on the police station and in Plovdiv there were attempts by members of the public to break into a hospital. In all three cases, there were no party or political motives behind the discontent of the people, but on the contrary, they displayed anger at the repeatedly demonstrated helplessness of the state. In the eyes of many Bulgarian citizens, the state cannot or does not want to bring order to the roads and limit the constant tragic incidents, to create conditions for discipline and security in schools, or to guarantee the quality of health care. Roads, schools, hospitals – these are all topics that affect hundreds of thousands and perhaps millions of people. The potential for a social explosion is undoubtedly present and could be unlocked by just one spark, like what happened after a similar unforeseen incident in Katunitsa in 2012.

3

STATE OF THE PARTY SYSTEM

GERB-UDF. The largest formation in parliament and in government looks as if it had two faces. In the government and from the parliamentary benches, the figures from GERB strive to show as neutral an expert profile as possible, avoiding any more acute political statements. Conversely, party leader Boyko Borisov commented daily on the political process and cross-party relations. It has been repeatedly pointed out by commentators that it is unusual for Borisov that his party is in power and he himself is not Prime Minister. If in the first weeks of the current cabinet Borisov overcame this contradiction, publicly distancing himself from Zhelyazkov and his ministers, then later he assumed the opposite role, of a man who gives them instructions. In January and February, we could hear from Borisov that he had nothing to do with the Prime Minister and did not know what he was doing. In April, Borisov openly stated that he could 'order' the defence minister to fire the chief of the Airforce.

Borisov has always maintained his authority through the image of a strong leader who knows where he is leading his party. Over the past four years, this authority seems to have been somewhat shaken by the strange coalition manoeuvres that have raised doubts among many that Borisov is afraid of PPDB and the liberal circles. The formation of a cabinet with the leading participation of GERB, but without Borisov, creates a risk of further undermining this authority, especially if the party and society accept that the important decisions in the country are not taken by the leader. Borisov is undoubtedly aware of all this.

Borisov's public attitude towards the leader of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF-NB) Delyan Peevski is changing too. For more than 10 years, he has sought to refute any accusations that he has partnered with Peevski. Even in January this year, the invitation to the MRF-DPS to join the government majority was aimed at convincing the public that Peevski's influence would be contained. This claim seems to have come to an end. Borisov spoke positively about Peevski for the first time and even explained that the inclusion of Peevski in the sanctions list for

corruption under the US Magnitsky Act is the result of malicious reports and will soon be reviewed. Obviously, the leader of GERB has resigned himself to the fact that at this stage it is better to appear that he and Peevski rule Bulgaria than that only Peevski has taken charge. In support of the latter hypothesis, one can point to Borisov's foreign policy activity. He relies on his foreign policy credentials to do what neither Peevski nor Zhelyazkov can: he seems to be an equal partner of figures from abroad. The past weeks have seen Borisov as Bulgaria's unofficial foreign minister – meetings with the executive director of Hyundai, the head of Reinmetal, the deputy director of the European Defence Agency, even a brief and mysterious meeting with Donald Trump's son. However, the continuation of this series has not been so successful. At the meeting of the European People's Party (EPP) in Valencia, where Borisov was present, his candidate for vice-president of the European formation Mariya Gabriel was not re-elected. This is not about the attitude towards Gabriel herself, whom Borisov was rather willing to sacrifice politically in the Denkov cabinet, but about Borisov's own authority among his European partners. It can be assumed that Gabriel's loss is linked to the growing anti-American line of the EPP, opposing Borisov's ambitions to balance Western Europe with Trump. So far, this cannot be proven, but it is an interesting plot for the future.

We Continue the Change – Democratic Bulgaria (PPDB). Once again, the formation is locked in a situation with no useful outcome. There are two political traps: 'the euro' and 'Peevski'. As a coalition claiming the highest level of defence for Bulgaria's European path, PPDB cannot but support the Zhelyazkov cabinet's course towards the eurozone, especially when this course is announced as a central priority. And if PPDB shares common political views with the government, of which it is not a part, it strongly opposes the views of the opposition, of which it is a part. PPDB did not support the nationalist-initiated votes of no confidence, although this risked casting doubt on its opposition status. The justification of PPDB that it does not want to interfere with the Bulgarian bid for the eurozone, and immediately after the Euro-

pean decision on the issue their coalition will ask for a vote of no confidence, is absurd. If the decision is positive, it will turn out that PPDB considers a failure precisely the cause to which it swears. If the decision is negative, it will turn out that the failed strategy of a hostile government has been defended. The Peevski trap, in turn, refers to the coalition's ambiguous attitude towards the leader of MRF-NB. They chose the fight against Peevski's influence as their goal in the current parliament but never found a convincing justification for their de facto joint government with the same Peevski just a year ago. PPDB's initiatives in the attack on Peevski systematically do not bear fruit. PPDB tried to impose as a central topic the case of the Bulgarian representative in the European Prosecutor's Office Teodora Georgieva, who exposed abuses allegedly related to state and private entities close to Peevski, but the subsequent revelations against Georgieva seriously undermined the campaign. Later, PPDB joined a protest of the NGO network Justice for Everyone against Peevski. Protest escalation did not occur, and the presence of businessman Vasil Bozhkov at the said protest significantly discredited them. In general, any attempt of PPDB to present itself as a principled alternative to Peevski hits a wall. On several occasions already Peevski personally published his SMS-correspondence with leading figures in PPDB who had been telling the media how they had always opposed him.

An alarming symptom of PPDB is the ongoing erosion of their social and political base in local government. Scandals have scarred the term of office of their mayor in Varna Blagomir Kotsev from the very beginning. The recent resignation of his deputy, Dian Ivanov, was motivated by health reasons, but left plenty of room for doubt. Sofia, which was their biggest victory in the local vote, creates the greatest tension. Tensions were created by Mayor Vassil Terziev, firstly with his urban policy, which was widely criticised, especially by the residents themselves, and secondly with the persistence to appoint Bogdana Panayotova the city's chief architect, who won the competition but was called by 'We Continue the Change' to step down. Tensions were created by PPDB's small coalition partner, 'Save Sofia', who, after repeated warnings, left the local coalition, accusing it of violating the coalition agreement. Tensions are also created by the district mayors of PPDB – for example, the newly re-elected mayor of Oborishte district Georgi Kuzmov, who first appointed the popular activist of Democratic Bulgaria Stoyan Mihalev as his deputy, but, after a public scandal in the coalition, was forced to part with him. The processes mentioned coincided with the decision of the Municipal Council to dismiss the director of the Sofia metro Stoyan Braetov, despite the officially declared support for him by Mayor Terziev. The impression is that PPDB are completely helpless in the metropolitan city's government, where everyone starts doing whatever they want.

The national forum of Yes, Bulgaria, which is part of the coalition, elected Ivaylo Mirchev and Bozhidar Bozhanov as co-chairs, a year after the resignation of former chairman Hristo Ivanov. The new tandem aims to instil a balanced attitude to organisational life (Mirchev) and technological perspective (Bozhanov), and it remains to be seen how much it will be able to show synergies. Hristo Ivanov's programme speech at the forum indicated ambitions of a 'New Dogan', a strategist who points to the future of the party. In combination with the calls of the leader of "Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria" Atanas Atanasov for internal elections for president in the coalition, Ivanov's behaviour is an indicator that "Democratic Bulgaria" is yet to cause clashes in the coalition, where PP was considered the weak link until recently.

"Vazrazhdane" ("Revival"). Kostadin Kostadinov's party are in a difficult moment, which seems to put an end to its political rise so far. This is the first parliament in which three separate nationalist parties are represented – "Vazrazhdane", MECh and "Velichie" – and it is not easy for Revival to achieve hegemony in this space. For Kostadinov, the most significant risk is losing their previously comfortable uniqueness as a single 'alternative' to the 'status quo'. Besides their parliamentary uniqueness, "Vazrazhdane" are also about to lose their uniqueness as a main defender of pro-Russian politics. The signals from Borisov and Peevski for a more sceptical approach to Ukraine turn their eyes to the behaviour of these parties, not to the isolated "Vazrazhdane". Last but not least, "Vazrazhdane" overcame criticism for their isolation by explaining their unceasing electoral rise – that they are almost a hair away from the position of second political force that started from the smallest party in parliament. The analogy with the Alternative for Germany is understandable. However, recent developments pointing to the growth of MRF-NB do not necessarily promise a further expansion of the influence of "Vazrazhdane".

For the time being, the party has been trying to prove their key importance for Bulgarian politics with international appearances. It is no coincidence that the first vote of no confidence in the Zhelyazkov cabinet, proposed by "Vazrazhdane", was on foreign policy. The party's relationship with European nationalists is clear. However, three steps have recently been taken – the signing of a partnership agreement between "Vazrazhdane" and President Vladimir Putin's United Russia party in Moscow; a "Vazrazhdane" delegation meeting in Washington with US senators; and a meeting of "Vazrazhdane" representatives with senior officials of the regime in Iran. The message is clear. Kostadinov wants to show that he is the Bulgarian representative of the new supposed global axis between Trump and Putin and also that he is creating a new antiliberal road map of Bulgarian foreign policy regardless of the nature of the regimes involved in it. A separate ques-

tion is to what extent this could be effective. More and more “Vazrazhdane” actions are being blurred and used politically by other circles. For example, a fundamental theme for the party, such as resistance to the introduction of the euro, could become part of more general expert-intellectual discussions with no electoral added value.

Movement for Rights and Freedoms - New Beginning (MRF-NB). Delyan Peevski's formation has become the strongest defender of the government, in which it does not formally participate. It is clear that such a government is needed as an umbrella for the continued mastery of positions by MRF-NB. It unfolds in two directions – in central and in local government. The first of the two directions is not publicly advertised and even disputed by the party. These are various staff appointments in numerous state and public bodies – the Financial Supervision Commission, the Fiscal Council, the National Health Insurance Fund, the Constitutional Court, the Governing Council of the Bulgarian National Bank. Typically, these are individuals who in their background have nothing to do with MRF-NB, but are associated by the media with this party, and some of them even openly state a positive attitude towards Peevski. A process officially referred to as the ‘New Beginning Strategy’ is underway in local government. Numerous mayors from across the country declare their support for the goals and intentions of MRF-NB, usually in personal meetings with Peevski, albeit without formally joining the party. There are dozens of examples: Razgrad, Borino, Gurkovo, Hayredin, Glavinitsa, Sitovo, Boboshevo, Bobov Dol... It seems that the practice of the early GERB from the time of Tsvetan Tsvetanov for taking roots in local authorities and local businesses is being repeated.

On Bulgarian soil, Delyan Peevski seems to be transforming Trump's approach in the US: A great businessman to present himself as the leader of the poor and the underprivileged. A vivid illustration of the latter can be found in Peevski's condolence address in connection with the death of the head of the Catholic Church: “the world has lost the pope of the people”. Peevski relentlessly repeats that his main goal is for “people to do well”. It is a different matter how credible this is, but the scale of this endeavour deserves attention.

Bulgarian Socialist Party – United Left (BSP-UL). The Socialists are establishing themselves as an extremely reliable partner in the government coalition and did not provoke any tensions in relation to the policy pursued, both nationally and internationally. For BSP, the open course towards the eurozone is certainly problematic, but it is not disputed in any way. Support for Ukraine is also a delicate issue, but BSP manages to bypass it. Within the BSP government, they were allowed to come forward as the initiator of the refusal to provide nuclear reactors to Kiev, which

gave grounds for party propaganda to claim principle attitude and consistency.

The line of Atanas Zafirov as chairman, as expected, is distinguished by non-confrontationality. So far, there have been no efforts to discredit Zafirov's main opponent for the leadership post Borislav Gutsanov, who continues his role of social minister. The composition of the Executive Bureau proposed by Zafirov demonstrates a desire for internal party balance. The BSP leadership probably hopes that a longer government will mitigate the accusations of collaboration with the right and will ultimately bring some political dividends. BSP do not defend any specific political image, but they also do not face real competition. The officially established and announced as a left-wing new party of former President Korneliya Ninova cannot be seen as a serious electoral threat to the Socialists. It can be seen that Ninova has not been able to produce new ideas, nor to attract new faces. However, this should hardly be an occasion for political self-satisfaction.

Democracy, Rights and Freedoms – MRF (MRF-DPS). Ahmed Dogan's party are in a state of total political and organisational helplessness. They came out of the ruling majority without any political dividends. Their main objective – to deter the influence of Delyan Peevski – has not only not been achieved, but on the contrary. MRF-DPS created a big public scandal with an event of its youth structure held in Dogan's former palace in violation of the law, albeit in his presence. After long arguments and without violence, Dogan's supporters were shown out of the building. If Dogan had hoped, like at the end of the communist regime, to be arrested and become a victim and martyr, he was wrong. The big problem of his party is the lack of any ideas for political positions and for reversing the political agenda. The internal party division between the more radical wing, represented informally by MEP Ilhan Kyuchuk and the youth structure, and the more moderate one, headed by the formal party leader Dzhevdet Chakarov, is felt more and more. Both wings, however, do not show that they are able to overcome the ongoing erosion of the social base, marked by the incessant outflow of activists across the country to the MRF-NB.

There is such a people (ITN). Once in the ruling coalition, the party practically avoids making political statements and drawing attention to itself. At least at first glance, the tension points characteristic of ITN's participation in Kiril Petkov's coalition cabinet in 2021 are also absent. The messages are conservative but pro-European. A national conference of the party is scheduled for mid-May, which is expected to re-elect leader Slavi Trifonov, but not to draw up any change in political behaviour.

“Morality, Unity, Honour” (“Moral, Edinstvo, Chest” - MECh). Radostin Vassilev's party maintains

its image of a radical formation that attacks the political „status quo“ from the position of inside information. It is no coincidence that one of the first two votes of no confidence in the Zhelyazkov cabinet, on the topic of corruption, was initiated precisely by MECh, making efforts to monopolise the corruption issue. The audience became accustomed to Vassilev's practice of substantiating his claims with secret recordings of various politicians. Now he has moved onto a new phase, citing his conversations with businessman Vasil Bozhkov or the murdered Alexei Petrov. This suggests that no one else is better informed about what is happening in the circles 'behind the scenes'.

The decision of the President of the National Assembly Natalia Kiselova to announce the dissolution of the Parliamentary Group of MECh because of an essentially technical problem rendered a great service to Vassilev. MECh was in fact the only party subject to such a procedure, and this seems to support claims that it is the biggest threat to the 'status quo'. Vassilev made the most of the opportunity, organised protests and threatened with a 'Serbian scenario'.

"Velichie" ("Greatness"). For the second time, "Velichie" made it to the National Assembly, following an

unprecedented decision by the Constitutional Court. And for the second time, commentators find it difficult to determine the profile and the goals of the party. Unlike the 50th Parliament, the party has much clearer leadership in the figure of businessman Ivelin Mihaylov. Nationalism, Euroscepticism, Russophilia, but in non-radical forms, can be seen in his and his party's statements. Other parties from the nationalist spectrum have far more aggressive political behaviour. "Velichie" did not try to make political capital out of the miscount that left it out of the legislature for nearly five months. Once in the National Assembly, "Velichie" do not pretend to hold the political initiative but agree to support various proposals of "Vazrazhdane" or MECh and willingly accept standing in their shadow. It is noteworthy that "Velichie" are trying to cover practically all topics of the left, centre and right, starting from May 1st and the construction of the Belene Nuclear Power Plant all the way to freedom of business and the introduction of religion classes in schools. Instead of political and ideological generalisations, the party comments on specific cases across the country and allows people to recognise themselves in one problem or another. This creates the conditions for a political flexibility that "Vazrazhdane" and MECh have greater difficulties to demonstrate.

4

THE PROGRESSIVE POLITICAL AND PUBLIC AGENDA

The increasing trade union activity is one of the pieces of good news in the Bulgarian public space. The adoption of the state budget was a reason for decisive demands for a greater alignment between income growth and inflation growth. Trade unions have raised the issue of uneven income growth, which drags entire sectors down. Particular attention should be paid to the protests of workers in psychiatric hospitals against poor working conditions and low wages, as well as those of the workers of Sofia's public transport. These protests turned out to be the way for systematically underestimated problems in the social sphere to enter the political agenda.

The march "Feminism, not militarism", held on the occasion of Women's Day on March 8th in Sofia and Plovdiv, provided an example of good public mobilisation against domestic violence, gender inequality in the workplace, lack of access to quality social services.

The quest for a more humane society was also reflected in a series of protests against animal abuse provoked by scandalous videos. In dozens of cities across the country, there were spontaneous gatherings of people demanding heavier punishments for the torture of animals.

5

MAIN CONCLUSIONS, FORECASTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The usual reflex of the Bulgarian political elite is to seek to identify the lines of power in international politics and adapt to them. However, the current dynamics of transatlantic relations are so intense that this task is far from easy at this stage. This is why the Bulgarian government cautiously supports all EU initiatives regarding the rearmament of Ukraine, but also carefully monitors the behaviour of the United States. The fragmentary statements of GERB leader Boyko Borisov suggest that the prevailing image of Donald Trump is more like a businessman with whom a deal can be struck than a political strategist with whom principled rapprochements should be sought. The meeting with Trump Jr. and the decision on nuclear reactors are a potential basis for such a business approach vis-à-vis the new administration in the White House. Of course, if all this is true, it is not yet possible to conclude what the subject of the possible deal is, nor whether a deal will be struck at all.

The decision of the Constitutional Court on the legality of elections is of fundamental importance, which, unfortunately, relatively recently lost its place in media discussions. It has been institutionally proven that elections in Bulgaria are being manipulated. The problem of constitutional democracy is getting deeper. If earlier concerns were focused on bought and controlled votes, now we are talking about the correct counting of votes in general. There is a high risk that confidence in political institutions will decline even further.

For now, the Bulgarian political elite are guided by a sense of self-preservation. The entry of "Velichie" into

Parliament was not good news for most parties. The possibility of MECh disappearing from the parliamentary scene, on the contrary, would give new chances to many. However, almost all major parties defended MECh and "Velichie". Contrary to the situation in Romania, where a leading presidential candidate was removed from the race, in Bulgaria the fear of a precedent that could later affect others is strong.

The 100 days of the Zhelyazkov cabinet call for political reckoning. However, the cabinet and the majority did not distinguish themselves with any clear strategy for the development of the country. The focus of attention is entirely on the European report on Bulgarian membership in the eurozone, which is expected in early June. Indications that the report is more likely to be positive reveal, at least at first glance, a broad time horizon for the government itself, even if it does not do anything substantial. All three parties formally participating in the government coalition, GERB, BSP and ITN, have no interest in overthrowing the government. Politically, the behaviour of Borisov and President Radev is what could cause turmoil and reshuffles. The impression of political stabilisation is already opening the conversation about the presidential elections in the autumn of 2026.

The political configuration seems stable so far, but its main drawback is the discrepancy with the public agenda. The problems with road traffic, schools and health care remain like time bombs, for which it is not known when and whether they could go off. There is social tension, but not a specific political voice for it.

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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

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The partial annulment of the elections is a serious blow to confidence in the democratic process in Bulgaria.



The main stake of the political process is the prospect of membership in the eurozone.



The government is increasingly under the influence of Delyan Peevski.

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