

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

POLIT-BAROMETER

Year 25 Issue 3
May-June

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Bulgaria received the green light for membership in the euro-zone from January 1, 2026.



President Rumen Radev's initiative for a referendum on the topic, although rejected, became a central factor in the political debate.



A corruption scandal in the party "We Continue the Change" has cast doubt on the prospects of the liberal political community in the country.

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1

THE DYNAMICS OF FOREIGN POLICY

On the threshold of the eurozone. Bulgaria received positive convergence reports from the European Central Bank (ECB) and the European Commission (EC) on the readiness of the country for eurozone membership. This was followed by an affirmative opinion from the Eurogroup members and an informal positive position from EU leaders. A resolution from the European Parliament (EP) and a final decision from the EU Council are due at the beginning of July. This will finalise the administrative procedure. The path to adopting the euro from January 1st 2026 is open. Despite the rumours, a last-minute surprise (for example, in the form of a veto by Slovakia) is unlikely.

The government and the parliamentary majority categorically support this development and use it as their main asset. However, there are also moments of discussion. There is significant resistance in Bulgarian public opinion against the upcoming entry into the eurozone. This resistance has both party voices (“Vazrazhdane” {“Revival”}, MECh, “Velichie” {“Greatness”}) and institutional support (President Rumen Radev, who even proposed a national referendum on the topic). A key foreign policy priority of Bulgaria is about to be realised in the conditions of dominant public skepticism. Also, doubts that the country is ready are circulated not only in Bulgaria, but also in authoritative foreign media (for example, “Politico”), challenging the reliability of official statistical data on the level of inflation. The orientation towards membership in the eurozone is openly and widely perceived as a political decision by Brussels and Frankfurt, which has no connection with the work of the Bulgarian government, nor with its effectiveness.

Russia-West tension. Bulgaria continues actively to support the cause of Ukraine in the conflict with Russia. This was clearly expressed by Prime Minister Rosen Zhelyazkov to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky at the Ukraine-Southeast Europe summit in Odessa and at the European Political Community summit in Tirana. The concerns of the Bulgarian government about having to take sides in a possible disagreement between the United States and Western Europe on the issue of Ukraine seem to have disap-

peared. Such concerns undoubtedly existed in March and April. That is why the Bulgarian side readily welcomes Washington’s firm commitment to NATO, demonstrated by President Donald Trump at the Pact summit in The Hague. The central news of this event was the decision to increase the share of defence and security funds of member states to at least 5% of GDP. The tension caused by Spain’s opposition brought to light concerns in member states that this measure is difficult to achieve. Bulgaria accepted it without objection, despite the many uncertainties about how it would happen in practice.

The problems with Skopje. The crisis in relations between Bulgaria and North Macedonia shows no signs of being overcome over time after VMRO-DPMNE returned to power. North Macedonia’s refusal to “sacrifice their national interest” for Bulgaria runs in parallel with Bulgaria’s refusal to allow North Macedonia to start EU membership negotiations. Former Macedonian Prime Minister Ljubcho Georgievski, convicted by a court in his country for pro-Bulgarian political and cultural statements, became a striking personal illustration of such a crisis. Georgievski was received at a high level in Sofia, and the sentence against him was officially criticised.

A worrying indication of Bulgaria’s European authority in the dispute with North Macedonia was given by the debates in the EP on the Skopje progress report. Bulgarian MEPs unanimously and regardless of their party affiliation insisted on corrections to the report related to “Macedonian identity and language”. However, these corrections were rejected by the majority in the EP’s Foreign Policy Committee. It is noteworthy that the Bulgarian representatives in the EP have not managed to convince any of the European parties to support Sofia. The diplomatic failure for Bulgaria is clear to see. It can hardly be mitigated by the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which has begun to comfortably issue reminders that the EP has no say in these matters, and in the European Council Bulgaria will ultimately still impose its veto. Nor is President Radev’s initiative to write to all heads of state and government in the EU to explain the meaning of the

Bulgarian position likely to help. Two trends are apparent. First, the EU's initial reluctance to work with Skopje after the Mickoski cabinet came to power has ended. The suspended pressure on Bulgaria may soon resume. And second, Bulgaria's ambition to present the Skopje problem as a problem between Skopje and

Brussels, part of the European integration process, is visibly losing supporters. In official statements, leading figures in European politics are once again starting to talk about a bilateral problem between Sofia and Skopje. This makes the Bulgarian position even more vulnerable.

2

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE POLITICAL SITUATION

Parliament. The parliamentary configuration at this stage remains completely stable. The parties participating in the government, GERB, the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) and “There is Such a People” (“Ima Takuv Narod” - ITN), act unitedly and without internal disagreements on the main topics of the agenda, including those that only half a year ago would have provoked tension - such as membership in the eurozone and support for Ukraine. The Movement for Rights and Freedoms - New Beginning (MRF-NB) categorically supports the government and even hints at a possible full 4-year mandate. The cabinet does not rely on “floating majorities”. However, the votes in the National Assembly (NA) confirm the presence of a “floating minority”. The second political force, “We Continue the Change - Democratic Bulgaria” (“Produlzhavame Promianata” – “Democratichna Bulgaria” - PPDB), supports the cabinet on some issues and opposes others. This is not able to change the overall situation. It can be argued that in the current context, and barring any unforeseen future events, the survival of the parliament and the government depends almost solely on the will of GERB leaders Boyko Borisov and MRF-NB Delyan Peevski.

There is a lack of any strategically oriented legislative policy of the majority. Two successive months have passed in which the National Assembly has adopted only one new law, that on personal bankruptcy, and the remaining approved acts are ratifications and amendments to existing laws. The majority mainly makes personnel appointments in various public bodies. The latest examples in this area are the final election of Rosen Karadimov as Chairman of the Commission for Protection of Competition and the election of a completely new composition of the Commission on the dossiers of candidates of the ruling parties. And the work of the parliament can be characterised by assessments such as “stabilization” and “stagnation”, the figure of the Speaker of the National Assembly Natalia Kiselova generates the greatest political tension. Her actions have consistently drawn acute opposition criticism, culminating in demands for her resignation from both

the liberal camp (PPDB) and the nationalist parties. Among these recent actions are Kiselova’s statement that she “does not attach much importance” to the protests; her controversial decision to not allow the president’s proposal for a referendum to be voted on in the National Assembly; allegations that she did not allow Bulgarian citizens to be evacuated from Iran on her plane. This is a political storyline that is marked not only by opposition activism, but most often by government silence. Although they do not give in to the opposition’s demands for resignation, the government do not publicly defend Kiselova and to some extent leaves her politically vulnerable.

The government. The Zhelyazkov cabinet seems entirely dedicated to Bulgaria’s upcoming membership in the eurozone. This is the asset with which it wants to legitimise itself in the face of the Bulgarian citizens. At the same time, this reflects the dividing line adopted from the very beginning by the current majority: pro-European versus anti-European forces. This dividing line does not allow for a unified action by the opposition, on one hand, and removes the topics of the status quo, the rule of law and corruption from the top of the agenda, on the other.

Preparations for the adoption of the euro were all but non-existent before President Radev’s call for a referendum. Then the government, apparently under pressure from the President and public opinion, launched a series of initiatives designed to reassure citizens about the possible negative consequences, most notably inflation. So far, the government has not convincingly coped with its task. Inflationary processes have gained new momentum in recent weeks. Even the director of the Revenue Agency, Rumen Spetsov, reported a sharp increase in prices, although the next day he was forced to explain that this was “raw data”. In fact, the government’s policy boils down to threats to traders that they will be sanctioned for “speculation” and “unjustified increases” in prices. However, there is no regulatory framework that would allow such state intervention in pricing. Therefore, the measures of the authorities cannot be anything other than propaganda.

The dominance of the dividing line between pro-European and anti-European can also explain the reactions in the scandal with the Ministry of Interior ("Ministerstvo na Vutreshni Raboti" - MVR). The case of a citizen in Varna who died in a police raid provoked serious dissatisfaction and demands for the resignation of Minister Daniel Mitov from both PPDB and the nationalist parties. The criticism also covered a whole range of additional problems of the Ministry of Interior, from dismissals to public procurement. And although GERB initially acknowledged the reasonableness of some of the criticism, MRF-NB firmly stood behind Mitov. Gradually, the scandal subsided. The European legitimacy of the government, of which the Euro-Atlantic Mitov is an important element, prevailed over the plot with the rule of law.

The President. The head of state made his most striking political statement in more than a year. In a special address to the nation and parliament, he proposed a referendum on whether the euro should be adopted from 2026. The government majority and PPDB reacted extremely sharply and immediately against the President's idea. The Speaker of the National Assembly, Natalia Kiselova, refused to allow the President's request to be voted on in parliament, arguing that the Constitutional Court had already ruled against the possibility of such a referendum in the case of the petition by "Vazrazhdane" two years ago. Radev appealed to the Constitutional Court, which challenged the possibility of a referendum, but agreed to file a case on Kiselova's legal grounds for making a decision alone. It became clear that a referendum would not be held. The President further developed his idea in several statements, denying that it was directed against the eurozone or the EU, but on the contrary, aimed to give the government the legitimacy of the popular vote in carrying out a complex and risky transformation. In a special interview with CNN, Radev outlined three approaches to policymaking: technocratic, economic, and democratic. The first approach transfers decision-making to experts, with the presumption that they alone can judge what is right, and not people who do not have the necessary competencies. The second approach is based on faith in the driving force of the economy, which alone must overcome all the difficulties of one change or another. And the third approach, whose supporter Radev declared himself to be, is based on the belief in the democratic legitimacy of every important decision. The hidden message is obvious, namely that the President defends democracy, while the ruling party and a significant number of the political forces are shirking it. Radev uses the fact that the data from the sociological surveys unequivocally support his thesis, and not that of the ruling party. The political elite's self-admission that they are unable to convince people of the correctness of its decisions is noteworthy. The very first reactions to the

presidential address rejected the referendum as an instrument because it was populist and would scupper the European integration of the country.

The topic of the presidential initiative has two aspects: legal and political. In legal terms, Radev is indeed going beyond the framework of constitutional admissibility. This became clear on the day of the address, when his legal advisor Krum Zarkov resigned. In political terms, Radev undoubtedly positions himself as a leader of public opinion. It should be borne in mind that over the past year, the President and leading parties have been engaged in various disputes on peripheral issues that were unable to engage public attention. However, entering the eurozone is a key issue.

An agreement by the President with the government that the country is prepared when there are sufficiently numerous doubts to the contrary would be inappropriate. Neither would a few perfunctory criticisms do the trick. In this sense, a referendum proposal really concentrates the political debate around the President. But the disadvantages of such a position should not be underestimated. First, if the President really proposes something that he knows is unconstitutional, this does not speak of respect for the rule of law, whose protection Radev has claimed to provide for so many years against the lawlessness of various governing configurations. Secondly, despite the clear explanations that it was about a specific date for entering the eurozone, the President's proposal was widely perceived as directed against the euro in general. Internationally, this could become a new step towards isolating Radev, who is already often accused of pro-Russian sympathies. It should be recalled that after the stories in the European constitution and Brexit, for the European elite the word "referendum" really has an anti-European sound. If Radev has so far managed to balance between pro-European and nationalist camps in Bulgaria, the risk of gradually closing in only on the nationalist spectrum is significant. It is true that Radev consciously speaks only about the social and economic risks of the euro, unlike the nationalists, who treat it in the context of national sovereignty and independence. The interpretations do not coincide, but the propaganda for a hypothetical coincidence is strong. Third, the idea of the referendum further united the government majority, which was already left without Ahmed Dogan's party. The fear of Radev, crowned with significant public support, reduces the chance of future pre-term elections, respectively, political change. Fourth, the initiative can easily be exploited in favour of the thesis of Boyko Borisov and Delyan Peevski that the division in Bulgaria is between pro-Europeans and anti-Europeans, and not between the status quo and change or between corruption and anti-corruption, and thus can contribute to further rendering PPDB meaningless as an opposi-

tion. The further concentration of power in the hands of Borisov-Peevski receives another incentive.

Historically, Rumen Radev has been strongest when he has been alone against everyone. For this reason

the situation that has arisen largely corresponds to his internal political attitude. The majority of commentators concluded that a decisive step has been taken towards the creation of a presidential party. However, there are no practical indications of this.

3

STATE OF THE PARTY SYSTEM

GERB-UDF. The largest party are present in the political space primarily through the statements of their leader Boyko Borisov. There is no programme, nor any vision for the future. Borisov's messages are generally structured in two directions. The first is related to the distance from his own government. Borisov invariably points out that the issues of power concern not him, but Prime Minister Rosen Zhelyazkov. He emphasises that this is a major compromise, apparently made almost exclusively in the name of the eurozone. He calls the cabinet itself a "caretaker mandate". He constantly emphasises that a real GERB government could only exist, were he Prime Minister. The topic of Borisov's prime ministerial ambitions does not seem to be on the agenda. Sometimes he threatens that he will become Prime Minister "whenever he wants". Other times he explains that Bulgaria's foreign policy disgrace would not be allowed "if he were Prime Minister". All this not only undermines Zhelyazkov's authority, but also fuels rumours that Borisov is planning to take the prime minister's post in the future. Two arguments can be put forward, both of which to some extent touch on the problem of Borisov's personal rehabilitation.

On one hand, after the 2020 protests, a long journey has been traversed towards "normalising" the contested role of GERB. In 2021, there was talk of "expelling" GERB from the political system altogether. In 2023, GERB were seen as an acceptable participant in power with only one minister. In 2024, GERB's right to govern as the leading party was recognised, but not with Borisov as Prime Minister. It was the latter that would complete the rehabilitation cycle. On the other hand, Borisov has been the longest-serving Prime Minister in Bulgaria's recent history, claiming to represent the country's "European development." However, all the more important milestones on this path – from EU membership itself to Schengen entry to the upcoming accession to the eurozone – have occurred under other prime ministers. Borisov does not seem particularly keen to recognise all this.

The other direction concerns Borisov's increasingly wide-open doors to MRF-NB and DB. For years, Bor-

isov has been suspected of close collaboration with Peevski. But for the first time in recent weeks, he has begun to openly acknowledge his partnership with Peevski and claim that he works best with him, especially when it comes to the prospect of governance. Similarly, Borisov has long been trying to apply the "divide and rule" tactic to PPDB, relentlessly attacking PP, but making political offers to DB, including participation in the government. The current corruption scandal engulfing the PP is a good reason for Borisov to increase his pressure. A specific reason for him is the discussions about a common presidential candidate of the democratic community in Bulgaria. Borisov directly suggested that he join the common nomination. It is difficult to say for sure whether the "open door policy" aims to balance Peevski and liberal circles, but it would completely correspond to Borisov's political style.

"We Continue the Change ("Produlzhavame Pro-mianata") - Democratic Bulgaria" (PPDB). For six months now, the second political force has been placed in the unpleasant position of staying out of power, but being forced to support a significant number of the government's initiatives for pro-European reasons. This uncertainty compromises the opposition image of PPDB. Efforts to get out of the "pro-European" trap focused in two directions. First, by reformulating the political stake and actively talking about the presidential elections in 2026. The first of a series of discussions was held under the auspices of "Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria", with two messages: that the unity of the Democrats around a common candidate is the only chance to defeat a "pro-Russian" competitor in the presidential vote; and that the example of Petar Stoyanov from 1996 is the appropriate starting point to think about such a union. Quite logically, although not predetermined, the political instrument of that time, pre-term elections according to the American model, was also commented on. For now, however, the initiative faces two unresolved problems. The first is traditional for the liberal right and concerns the uncertain attitude towards Boyko Borisov. It is still unclear what the attitude towards the future presidential candidate of GERB will be, as

“pro-Russian” or as “pro-European”. The first closes the doors, but also increases fears of renewed self-isolation of these parties. The second, however, raises the question of why discussions of this nature are being held at all, since there would be a “pro-European” candidate with a chance of success both with and without the right. The second problem refers precisely to the historical experience of 1996. Many commentators recalled that the pre-term elections were the means by which the then-incumbent head of state, Zhelyu Zhelev, was removed from the race. In this sense, concerns are being raised that parties with more mobilised activists (such as DSB and DB) could technologically prevail over parties with perhaps more supporters but undeveloped local structures (such as PP). The existence of such assumptions already casts a shadow of doubt on the noble intentions of the very idea of launching a “presidential bet” in the political process today.

The second attempt to escape the “pro-European” trap is aimed at updating the anti-corruption direction traditional for PPDB. This is, in principle, an opportunity to maintain a healthy distance from the ruling majority. PPDB presented various data on corruption addictions. The most prominent publicity was gained by the discussions on the revelations of the Anti-Corruption Fund against businessman Hristo Kovachki. However, PPDB were unable to take advantage of this trend, due to a powerful and unprecedented corruption scandal in their own ranks. The PPDB district mayors in the Lyulin and Mladost districts of the capital publicly complained about the pressure exerted on them for the deduction of funds from public procurements to the PP party treasury. Sofia Deputy Mayor Nikola Barbutov was arrested after a recording incriminating him in similar agreements. PP co-chairman and former Prime Minister Kiril Petkov took political responsibility for “wrong personnel decisions” and resigned from the party and parliament. According to media comments, Petkov’s surprising move (in Bulgarian democratic history there are almost no examples of party leaders leaving office after public accusations of irregularities) was intended to limit the scale of the scandal. However, this is unlikely to happen. There are suspicions that the revelations about Barbutov are just the tip of the iceberg of illegal schemes of the merger between politics and business. It is also well known that PP was created as a party in the name of fighting corruption. In this sense, revelations of corruption here carry a risk of much more serious reputational damage than would happen in other parties.

The Barbutov affair fits into the general background of the crisis processes that have engulfed PPDB in their electoral stronghold of Sofia. Mayor Vasil Terziev has been significantly compromised due to a series of inappropriate actions in power, especially in the field of

urban planning. The public transport strike in Sofia has reinforced the mass impressions of Terziev’s political helplessness. Terziev’s claims that there is no money were refuted by the government, who found the money. The main message is aimed at pragmatic business in the city, so that it can orient itself where the strong factors of power are concentrated. After a long period of blockage, Sofia’s budget for 2025 was adopted literally in the middle of the year, and in a form that does not correspond to the initial intentions of the mayoral team. The political positions of PPDB in Sofia are shrinking drastically. PPDB lost the mayoral election in a key district such as Iskar. The departure of the mayors of Lyulin and Mladost, as well as municipal councillors from the coalition, just weeks after the split with the “Save Sofia” faction, effectively revised the results of the local elections 2 years ago. GERB officially became the first political force in Sofia. Terziev is without a majority and without trust. Of course, Sofia is the strongest, but not the only example of “tightening the noose” around PP. Municipal councillors from the coalition in Dobrich collectively joined GERB, and a mayor from the same coalition, albeit in a village, significantly switched to Delyan Peevski’s MRF-NB. MEP and former Speaker of the National Assembly Nikola Minchev entered the epicentre of a scandal over hidden advertising for a Chinese telecommunications giant, although his personal guilt in this case is more than doubtful.

The situation outlined also fits into another context, the increasingly cold relations between the partners PP and DB. This was clearly evident in the dispute over the introduction of a vote of no confidence against the government. While PP insisted on an immediate vote after the final decision on the introduction of the euro, DB said that a vote was possible at the earliest in September, if it was necessary at all. In the course of the scandal in Sofia, DB also openly warned PP that they must take more serious responsibility. Of course, a rift between the partners is hardly likely, mainly because both PP and DB are aware that at such a moment this would be fatal for both formations. But it seems that the moment of battle for the legacy of the once great PP is coming.

Petkov’s resignation led to an interim leadership of PP headed by Asen Vassilev. At the end of September, a national forum of the party is due, which has the job of choosing new leadership. From Vassilev’s actions, it will soon be understood whether he plans to take sole control of the party, or whether he considers himself a truly temporary leader. The rumours that Vassilev is in serious conflict with the circle of Kiril Petkov - Lena Borislavova are not new, but they are not refuted either. Vassilev himself is suspected of being more inclined to cooperate with the Borisov-Peevski line, due to his economic dependencies, than Petkov has been so far. In this analysis, we cannot answer the ques-

tions that arise, but the summer will certainly clarify many of the unknown factors about the fate of PP.

“Vazrazhdane” (“Revival”). The party is in a complicated situation. Its main political cause for the past two years has been the preservation of the lev as the national currency. This cause gained new relevance with the accelerated process of Bulgaria’s accession to the eurozone in the first months of this year. However, President Radev’s statement about a referendum created the prerequisites for “Vazrazhdane” to remain in the shadows on the most important political issue for them. Radev is still a far more popular politician than Kostadin Kostadinov, and also more influential in far wider public circles. The political resource that Kostadinov has, unlike Radev - parliamentary representation - is also not unambiguous due to the competition from parties such as MECh and “Velichie”, challenging the monopoly of “Vazrazhdane” in the field of parliamentary nationalism. The three motions of no confidence against the “Zhelyazkov” cabinet so far have been supported by all three nationalist parties and accompanied by a media competition as to who has the leading role in the fight against the government.

It has been commented that Vazrazhdane will suffer a heavy electoral blow from Rumen Radev if and when the President decides to create his own political party. For this reason there were expectations that Kostadinov would attack Radev with calls for more radicalism in defending the national currency and, accordingly, expose Radev that the lack of sufficient radicalism proves his political insincerity. Just that Kostadinov consciously went in a different direction from Radev. While the President is focused on the social and economic effects of the euro and does not use a single nationalist argument, Kostadinov emphasises almost exclusively the threat to Bulgaria’s national sovereignty and independence. In all likelihood, this is the product of a tactic that for now avoids drawing dividing lines in order to preserve as much as possible the chance for future mastery of the entire anti-euro space. Kostadinov is wary not only of Radev, but also of the so-called civil activism against the eurozone. The large rallies in defence of the Bulgarian lev, organised by “Vazrazhdane”, are dominated by dissatisfied citizens who are not supporters of any party. The main speakers of these protests are figures such as Strahil Angelov, Nedyalko Nedyalkov and Romyana Chenalova, who are also not party-affiliated. However, “Vazrazhdane” clearly believe that over time they will be able to come forward as a political representative of precisely those broad social groups that do not recognise the party as their own, but at least do not refuse to protest alongside them.

Movement for Rights and Freedoms – New Beginning (MRF-NB). Delyan Peevski’s party are es-

tablishing themselves not only as a key factor in the country’s governance, without formally participating in it, but also as the winner in the intra-sector battle for the legacy of the old MRF. The process of the outflow of former sympathisers of Ahmed Dogan’s alternative MRF in local government to Peevski’s structures is increasingly obvious. At the same time, for the first time, sociological surveys are starting to be published that assign to MRF-NB the second position in national politics. Even if we assume that these results are debatable, the trend is leading in this direction. It is hardly a coincidence that old statements by Delyan Peevski, in which he declared aspirations to a prime ministerial role, are becoming relevant in the media and provoking serious, albeit negative, comments.

Bulgarian Socialist Party – United Left (BSP-UL).

BSP is undoubtedly one of the parties experiencing turmoil after the presidential initiative for a referendum. Traditionally, a significant number of the socialists are skeptical about changing the national currency, and the war in Ukraine has also increased their skepticism about EU policies in general. Without creating big news, the decision of a figure as iconic for the older generation such as Rumen Gechev to leave the party for reasons related to disagreement with the eurozone is indicative. Alarming signals about BSP are also coming from the local authorities. Vanya Grigorova, who almost won the mayoral elections in Sofia on behalf of BSP, left the party’s group of municipal councillors. Her motive is the collaboration of BSP in the Municipal Council with the ruling parties. And last but not least, the fact that the BSP candidate received fewer votes than the list of the local socialist structure in the partial vote for mayor of the Slatina metropolitan area, gained popularity.

A common denominator of all these trends is the belief of many socialists that the party have lost their face in the shadow of their long-standing opponents from GERB and MRF, and that in the joint government with them they have failed to outline their own “red lines” and impose their own policies. BSP are indeed going through a difficult period. However, it is important to note two things here. The first is related to the party’s return to the European socialist space, from which the course of former chairwoman Korneliya Ninova had long separated it. The participation of the current chairman Atanas Zafirov and the youth leader Gabriel Valkov at the congress of the German Social Democrats in Berlin is of key importance. A second important event is the declaration of the party’s youth structure, entitled “If we don’t change, we will perish. Restart here and now” and calling for radical efforts to renew and revive left-wing and progressive policies in Bulgaria. With this declaration, the young socialists initiated discussions about the future of the socialist idea, which took into account the worrying state of the party, but also looked forwards.

Alliance for Rights and Freedoms (ARF). Ahmed Dogan's party are on the verge of their final collapse. They have lost both the right to use the old building of their party headquarters and the right to use the abbreviation MRF in their name. A heavy political blow to the ARF was the decision of none other than their chairman, Dzhevdet Chakarov, to leave them and openly declare his loyalty to Delyan Peevski and his MRF-NB, with Chakarov being followed by two more MPs and a significant number of mayors and municipal councillors. Leading figures in the ARF announced the intention of establishing a new party for Dogan, based on the energy of the youth structure, but a month after this announcement, no real action is visible.

It is an enormous disappointment for many of Dogan's supporters that their leader has not taken any initiative for a whole year and has not taken any action to be a worthy opponent to Peevski, who is aggressively expanding his influence. Dogan's silence is the context of internal party tension in the ARF, marked by clashes between the group of Yucel Attila and Ilhan Kūçük, on one hand, and the older and popular politicians around Ceyhan Ibryamov, on the other. Rumours are widespread that it is the older politicians, worried about their own corruption addictions, who prefer to do nothing so as not to provoke persecution by the respective state authorities. The case of Chakarov, whose son is accused of corruption, is indicative. Those who still hope to use Dogan as their banner to survive further in politics are standing against the "stagnation". However, the most dangerous rumour should not be ignored, namely that Dogan himself is ready to seek a deal with Peevski, admitting defeat and retiring from politics without being prosecuted in any way. The rumour cannot be confirmed or denied for now, but it dominates the atmosphere of disbelief and crisis that has gripped ARF circles.

"There is such a people" ("Ima Takuv Narod" - ITN). The party formally re-elected their leader Slavi Trifonov for a new term, without discussion and without outlining political goals. Unlike their participation

in the "Petkov" cabinet, ITN now shows complete loyalty to the government. A suitable illustration of this is their reaction to the presidential initiative for a referendum. In recent years, ITN have regularly demonstrated agreement with Radev and his policies. In this case, however, they limited themselves to saying that they support the idea of holding referendums in principle, although they are otherwise in favour of immediate entry into the eurozone.

"Morality, Unity, Honour" (MECh). The party behave as an opposition that invariably fixate the Borisov-Peevski couple as the main enemy of Bulgarian development. Once again, MECh is among the co-sponsors of a vote of no confidence. In his rhetoric, the leader Radostin Vassilev tries to distinguish himself from the other opposition nationalist forces by presenting himself as a potential unifier of the opposition, a balancer between "Vazrazhdane" and "Velichye", but also as a politician who can "talk to everyone". In political practice, this is poorly supported by facts.

"Velichie" ("Greatness"). The party continue their line hitherto of being extremely active on the Internet and in social media, mobilising their supporters for certain specific causes: protection of linden forests, fight against landfills, etc. The leader Ivelin Mihaylov is building an image of a kind of "mailbox" for people's problems in the face of the institutions. The slogan "We are your voice" corresponds to this understanding. In political terms, "Velichie" are making efforts to compete with "Vazrazhdane" as a leading role in the nationalist opposition. If in their resistance to the introduction of the euro, "Vazrazhdane" rely on rallies and mass events in Sofia and other cities, "Velichie" chose an unconventional way to attract attention by organising a motorcade of dozens of cars to Brussels, so as to express their protest against the abolition of the Bulgarian national currency in the capital of the EU. A natural consequence of this activation is the visible manifestation of jealousy from "Vazrazhdane" towards "Velichie", even expressed in parliamentary skirmishes.

4

THE PROGRESSIVE POLITICAL AND SOCIAL AGENDA

The Bulgarian capital became the scene of one of the largest strikes in the entire democratic history of Bulgaria. For six days, public transport employees, with the exception of those in the metro, went on strike, demanding higher pay and better working conditions. The union organisation of the protesters was strong, and the effect of the event itself was undoubtedly great. The mayor and the municipality stubbornly refused to compromise, until finally, upon the recommendation of GERB leader Boyko Borisov, the government allocated the necessary amount for an increase in pay.

As in every similar initiative, here too there was an attempt at large-scale propaganda against the strike,

linking it to political tensions in the municipality. According to this propaganda, the trade union structures, led by former and current activists of GERB and BSP, were mobilised in an attack on the administration of Mayor Vasil Terziev and the PPDB he represented. Regardless of everything, there was an effective and successful labour protest that did not put forward any political demands and ended with the satisfaction of the goals initially set. If strikes of this type are normal in Western Europe, for Sofia everything looks like a breakthrough that has the potential for future expansion.

5

MAIN CONCLUSIONS, FORECASTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Bulgaria's upcoming membership in the eurozone is undoubtedly a key stage in the development of the country. There is still little awareness that this includes integration into the decision-making process at the fiscal and monetary policy level. There is practically no discussion of Bulgaria's interests in such a process. Such a discussion indeed sounds distant in relation to the challenges of the day, but even if indirectly it is necessary in order to fully benefit from the advantages of the monetary union.

The preparations for membership do not seem to correspond to a real analysis of the risks and dangers. For a long time, the government did almost nothing, and after the President's initiative for a referendum, it quickly embarked on an information campaign that does not cover most of the problems, and on anti-inflation rhetoric that is not based on an adequate regulatory basis. There is a considerable probability that the weeks and months after January 1, 2026, will be accompanied by shocks that are not currently being discussed. The big mistake that the government made was to allow the process of introducing the euro to be equated with the process of inflation in the mass consciousness. From now on, any increase in prices will be attributed to the effects of the eurozone.

With his proposal for a referendum, the President outlined the political stakes not for the present moment, but for the upcoming 2026. It is now clear that possible rating dividends for Rumen Radev and/or for the nationalist parties, if there are such dividends, will occur in the spring of next year at the earliest, in the conditions of the introduced euro, and will inevitably affect the general socio-psychological atmosphere be-

fore the presidential elections in the autumn. Public statements and mass demonstrations now aim not so much at a turnaround in the political process as at consolidating the respective political profiles in the eyes of citizens on the eve of future events.

The government seems stabilised and consolidated from the Euro perspective. Early elections do not seem to be on the cards. However, for the sake of fairness, several possible motives should be pointed out for Boyko Borisov and Delyan Peevski, the only political figures with the potential to provoke such elections, to do so. First, this will give new legitimacy to the government on the eve of entering the Eurozone. Second, potential turmoil around the adoption of the Euro could be justified with a possible caretaker government at the end of the year. Third, President Radev would probably not have time to create a new party if he had such intentions, which is why the elections, once again, would pass without his actual participation. However, the disadvantages of an early vote outweigh the advantages. The current governing configuration operates in conditions of very good synchronisation and there are no guarantees that new elections would produce a better option for all participants. Also, European legitimacy is particularly important for those in power, and it would probably suffer in an artificially organised political crisis just before an important transformation in Bulgaria for the EU.

The party system is increasingly dominated by the expansion of MRF-NB. Crisis tendencies of fragmentation are observed in a number of other parties – from PPDB to BSP to ARF. Political stability indeed turns out to be a function of the lack of a political alternative.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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IMPRINT

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

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POLIT-BAROMETER

Year 25 Issue 3
May-June



Bulgaria received the green light for membership in the eurozone from January 1, 2026.



President Rumen Radev's initiative for a referendum on the topic, although rejected, became a central factor in the political debate.



A corruption scandal in the party "We Continue the Change" has cast doubt on the prospects of the liberal political community in the country.

Further information on the topic can be found here:
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