

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

POLIT-BAROMETER

Year 25 Issue 4
July-August

Boris Popivanov



The Bulgarian political elite has reached the consensus that the transition period to the euro-zone will be accompanied by difficulties.



European rearmament is a new legitimising theme for the Bulgarian government.



Radicalisation of the nationalist and liberal political oppositions is being observed.

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1

THE DYNAMICS OF FOREIGN POLICY

The Ukrainian intersection in international relations. The summer, usually uneventful, registered an extremely dynamic development of the conflict in Ukraine. The mediation initiatives of US President Donald Trump and the firm commitment to Ukraine by the so-called Coalition of the Willing in Europe took on leading importance in the global plan. Even before the start of the season, Bulgaria seemed to have already defined its position, trying to combine support for Trump's actions with participation in the Coalition of the Willing. The main exponent of this line, as before, is Prime Minister Rosen Zhelyazkov. He participated in an online meeting of the Coalition; met live with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in Rome; reaffirmed the Bulgarian point of view before the heads of state and government of the European Union (EU); and held a video call with Ukrainian Prime Minister Yulia Sviridenko to promote the European integration of Ukraine, and the start of the negotiation process. "Consistently" and "unhesitatingly" are the words of the Bulgarian Prime Minister, characterising his country's advocacy for the Ukrainian cause. In this regard, Sofia faces an issue that provokes discussions and even resistance in EU member states – the prospect of opening the first negotiation cluster with Ukraine. At this stage, it seems that Bulgaria supports the simultaneous start of the process with Ukraine and Moldova – with Ukraine for obvious reasons, and with Moldova in the context of internal pre-election tensions and the rise of pro-Russian sentiments in the former Soviet republic. Zhelyazkov's visit to Chisinau is indicative. The other aspect of the Ukrainian direction in Bulgarian foreign policy is related to the broader context of European rearmament. Bulgaria has declared its course towards increasing defence spending to 5% of GDP, in line with Trump's calls and the updated position of the European Commission. Sofia will join the application procedure for the new European instrument SAFE (the European Commission's Security Action for Europe). An agreement has also been reached with the German concern Rheinmetall

for the construction of gunpowder and artillery shell factories in Bulgaria. Unlike the topic of military aid to Ukraine, the topic of rearmament unites the President and the government. Head of State Rumen Radev and Prime Minister Zhelyazkov are united on the need to strengthen the country's defence capacity.

Tensions with North Macedonia. The traditional contradictions between Sofia and Skopje escalated over the finalisation of the report on the progress of the Republic of North Macedonia on its path to the EU. At the end of June, Bulgaria was practically reprimanded in the European Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee, after its aspirations to remove the terms "Macedonian language" and "Macedonian identity" from the report were rejected by the main party families in the EU. Somewhat surprisingly, however, in the final text of the report, which was approved by Parliament, the controversial terms were removed. This is hardly effective crisis diplomacy on the part of the Bulgarian institutions. Bulgaria has already demonstrated that it is unable to convince representatives of the European political mainstream of its position. Rather, Strasbourg has realised that directly disavowing a member state is an unpleasant precedent that can also serve to the detriment of others.

The acute reaction of Skopje, unlike the about-turn in Strasbourg, was not surprising. Prime Minister Hristian Mickoski spoke of a plan for the destruction of the Macedonian nation, being carried out by Bulgaria. He also used offensive qualifications towards the Bulgarian Foreign Minister. We witnessed another example in which the Bulgarian institutions were united. Prime Minister Zhelyazkov, President Radev, and Foreign Minister Georg Georgiev all formulated the thesis that no one is hindering the European integration of North Macedonia more than North Macedonia itself. The explanation that Mickoski is resorting to a scandal to justify the failure of his European policy is, in all likelihood, valid.

2

DEVELOPMENT OF THE POLITICAL SITUATION

The double European challenge. Literally on the same day, July 8th, two European events that affect Bulgaria took place. The European Council finally approved the country's accession to the eurozone from January 1st, 2026, and the European Commission published its regular report on the rule of law in the Member States, including Bulgaria.

Membership in the eurozone had long been heralded as a major success for the government and the ruling majority. Solemn speeches and assessments of a "historic" achievement were not long in coming. However, the political debate had already turned to the problems of price increases and inflation. The referendum on the eurozone launched by President Rumen Radev in May further catalysed the already widespread concerns about the new wave of inflation in the middle of the year. For this reason the work of the ruling party is mainly focused on the propaganda of their anti-inflationary policy. The Council of Ministers has created a special mechanism for the coordination of monitoring and control in connection with the introduction of the euro. The National Assembly voted on amendments to the Euro Adoption Act, which allow only "justified" price increases during the transition period, hefty fines for violations, and a green light for "temporary measures" by the government, without specifying what they would be. Critics of these decisions saw an open door for state arbitrariness and pressure on inconvenient businesses. It was pointed out that the definitions of "justified" and "temporary" are unclear, allow for different interpretations, and would be easily attacked in court. In general, the government itself, with its actions, acknowledges the validity of the President's concerns. In May, they claimed that no financial turmoil would accompany entry into the eurozone, because the example of other countries such as Croatia has proved it statistically. In the previous issue of Political Barometer, we warned about the trap the government fell into by allowing the eurozone to be associated in the mass consciousness with rising prices. Socio-psychologically, it is now not difficult to explain every inflationary movement with the euro, although it is known that basic prices are currently rising in the eurozone as well as outside it.

Public tension also received an unexpected "sociological" response. A survey by the Alfa Research agency, commissioned by the Ministry of Finance, found that nearly half of Bulgarian citizens (49.2%) support joining the euro. This is a remarkable increase in support within just 2-3 months, and in conditions in which, for the first time, the public debate on the topic was dominated by negative attitudes and concerns. Other sociological agencies reported data from their own surveys that bypass the topic of support and focus on fears of rising costs of living. The surveys gave the government the opportunity to formulate two messaging strategies. The first separates support for the euro, which is perceived as high, from concerns about its introduction. The second frames the fears as short-term, which, whether justified or not, represent a small episode in the context of the larger event.

The Commission's report on the Rule of Law is far from bringing the same optimism as the invitation to the eurozone. "Serious concern" has been expressed about certain processes and practices in Bulgaria, and "limited progress" has been stated. Some new regulatory and institutional solutions are recognised as steps in the right direction, but it is difficult to speak of results. For this reason, the report was met by the ruling parties and the media close to them with complete silence, without a single comment. The only exception can be considered the Facebook status of the Minister of Justice Georgi Georgiev, who makes a tendentious positive reading of the conclusions of the report. It is understandable that the report itself remains in the shadow of the latest news about the eurozone. At the same time, in addition to saving themselves the inconvenience of responding to the criticisms and recommendations in the report, those in power also want to avoid the damage to their positive image, exploited on the occasion of the eurozone. In the parliamentary arena, only the opposition coalition "We Continue the Change" - Democratic Bulgaria (PPDB) referred to the report with an acute declaration against the corrupt and authoritarian tendencies in power, but this declaration was neither taken up in the media, nor did it become a topic for political discussion.

The parliamentary configuration. The summer session of the National Assembly has come to an end. As early as in the spring, it was noticeable that the parliamentary configuration was stabilising. Regardless of the formal presence of a “minority government”, the ruling majority firmly and unshakably consists of GERB, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms – New Beginning (MRF-NB), the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) and “There is Such a People” (“Ima Takuv Nariod” - ITN). Compared to the previous period, not only the ruling camp but also the opposition space has stabilised. This was a smooth process, which was completed in July, after the final decision on the eurozone. Previously, the Alliance for Rights and Freedoms (ARF) of Ahmed Dogan and PPDB, although advertising themselves as opposition, did not participate in the votes of no confidence against the government, thus undermining one of the main indicators for opposition parties.

Both parties justified this with their determination not to hinder the process of eurozone accession. In the end, however, with the exception of the DB MPs, they clearly aligned themselves against the government. Votes of no confidence turned out to be the main dividing line in the political process. Until now, they had been initiated, in varying proportions and not without tensions, by the nationalist parties. Such were the third vote in July, dedicated to fiscal policy, and the fourth, dealing with the environment and water. Now not only the nationalists, but also the PPDB are discussing initiating a fifth vote in September, related to the government's failure in the rule of law. The opposition space is not, of course, united, but it is beginning to show common opposition reflexes.

The political line of the majority. The ruling majority of four parties continue to engage in extremely limited and inconsistent legislative activity. The leading trend in their policy is the policy of specific personnel. First, the ruling party began filling the so-called “house book”. This expression in the Bulgarian political dictionary after the constitutional changes of 2023 refers to the list of incumbents of institutions from whom the President could choose as acting Prime Minister in a situation of early elections. Most such incumbents are controlled by GERB or MRF-NB, and the Speaker of the National Assembly, Natalia Kiselova, nominated by BSP, has opposed the President on key issues several times, thus becoming part of the circle against him. The positions of ombudsman and deputy ombudsman remained vacant.

Velislava Delcheva and Maria Filipova, who were respectively nominated and approved by the media, were considered loyal to the majority. In this situation, even if early elections were to be held in the next year and a half, Rumen Radev cannot settle on a candidate for Prime Minister who is distanced from the ruling party. The election of the ombudsman and

deputy ombudsman came after the Constitutional Court failed to gather a majority to reject the aforementioned constitutional changes. In all likelihood, those in power decided to guarantee for themselves that even in the event of a political crisis, which is not yet in sight, the President would hardly have a chance for a political breakthrough.

Second, the filling of vacancies in the so-called public regulators continued. The most prominent topic of discussion and conflict has become the procedure for selecting members of the Anti-Corruption Commission, where figures loyal to the majority are likely to be elected again.

Third, the majority decided to remain completely silent on the issue of electing a new parliamentary quota for the Supreme Judicial Council and a new Prosecutor General. On July 21st, the 6-month period that the Law on the Judiciary gave to those temporarily performing these functions to continue performing them expired. Just that the majority, which probably cannot gather the necessary qualified support for new members of the Supreme Judicial Council or is afraid of an international scandal, preferred to accept the tortured legal interpretation according to which the 6-month period applies to future temporary performers of these positions, and not to the current ones in the established position. The situation stretched out in time is on the edge of the Constitution and the law. The rulers, and GERB in particular, tried to shift the responsibility onto the President. The thesis goes like this: just as the President delays the appointments of ambassadors and heads of the State Agency for National Security and the Ministry of Interior, so too there is a delay here.

In short, the entire personnel line of the majority is not based on any clear principle, but on conjuncture. The claims of opposition media and politicians that in all cases we are observing an expansion of the influence of the leader of the MRF-NB, Delyan Peevski, are perhaps partially exaggerated, but in no way fabricated.

The government. The Zhelyazkov cabinet has been building its legitimacy on the prospect of eurozone membership for months. This has now been achieved, but the warning also applies that the cabinet has burdened itself with expectations that it will find difficult to meet.

The summer period brought to the fore alarming trends in the economy and finance. A decline in industrial production, a new wave of loans, and a frighteningly growing budget deficit were registered as early as the middle of the year. In addition to the criticism of the opposition, the concerns of experts and business are also being voiced. The head of the Association of Industrial Capital, Vasil Velev, spoke publicly about the “danger of a debt spiral” and a “Greek scenario” in Bulgaria. The

government reacted to these warnings in two ways. The first of them essentially represents a classic avoidance of the topic, with attention being directed to various measures to combat speculation. The second way includes strange budget manoeuvres, related, for example, to the capitalisation of the state-owned Bulgarian Development Bank and the Bulgarian Energy Holding, which, according to experts, are aimed at reducing the deficit purely for accounting reasons.

The government is gradually moving towards two new strategies of behaviour. One of them is based on the thesis that it is solving “inherited problems” for which it bears no blame. This was also the defence line of the ministers during the debates on the votes of no-confidence – not that the opposition’s data is incorrect, but it refers to past governments, not to this one, and therefore any criticism should be directed at past governments, not to the current one. The same strategy took on the dimensions of crisis PR during the fight against the summer fires that swept the entire country and revealed the lack of adequate firefighting equipment, and the water shortage that led to water shortages for over 260,000 people in dozens of settlements, but especially clearly expressed in Pleven.

The government explained that both the lack of equipment and the lack of water pipes and water were the fault of those in power before them. Apart from the idea of creating another institutional structure, the so-called National Water Board, no workable solutions have been reached so far. The second strategy, which is legitimising and intended to generate hope for the future, is based on the rearmament process within NATO, which will also include Bulgaria. The agreement to build large military plants with Rheinmetall and the re-equipment of the VAZ machine-building plants in Sopot, accompanied by a special visit by the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen, were supposed to suggest to public opinion that new major opportunities were opening up for the Bulgarian economy.

An analysis of the government’s work highlights the unpleasant conclusion that at decisive moments the Bulgarian Council of Ministers prefers not to bear responsibility and to transfer it in other directions. For every decision that meets with resistance or dissatisfaction, the cabinet seeks parliament as an ally. Such a practice was established by the last caretaker Prime Minister Dimitar Glavchev, who, despite his clear powers, asked the National Assembly who should lead the country’s delegation to a NATO summit. Now Prime Minister Rosen Zhelyazkov, after announcing a large-scale programme for the privatisation of state property and being attacked from many directions, has also turned to the National Assembly to consider what to do with the original intention.

The President. The topic of the referendum on entering the eurozone in 2026, which launched President Rumen Radev into the centre of the political process in May and June, naturally remained in the background with the final decision of the European institutions. However, Radev continued with his warnings about the potentially negative socio-economic effects of this decision, updated by inflationary processes. The government’s plan to privatise over 4,000 state-owned properties gave rise to a new and strong plot for the President in the view of public opinion. In his statements, Radev outlined the following logic - the lack of sufficient budget funds, which makes us unprepared for entering the euro on January 1st, prompts the authorities to sell off state property, thereby preparing the ground for a huge and unprecedented robbery. The veto over the cabinet’s amendments to the State Property Law further strengthened the position of the head of state.

The attacks against Radev by those in power and their media have not subsided, although they do not seem to be reaching completion, but rather have the appearance of warnings. The famous scandal with the gas transmission contract with the Turkish company Botas, which gave rise to criticism of Radev for daily damage to the treasury, developed into the summons of the former acting Minister of Energy Rosen Hristov and the former head of Bulgargaz Denitsa Zlateva, considered close to Radev, to the prosecutor’s office for questioning. However, nothing has come of this questioning (so far). The media also tried to create a scandal through videos with the President’s excessively large security guard during a visit to Varna. After Radev was heavily criticised for his armoured cars, even more crude hints came from those in power that since Radev likes a royal cortege so much, he will be given the position of head of the National Security Service. The director of the Service, General Emil Tonev was indeed reappointed and the issue of the President’s practices has (for now) been abandoned. The impression was created that more serious attacks were to come at a more opportune time.

The end of Rumen Radev’s second presidential term, which is coming up in a year and a half, is increasingly drawing attention to the figure of his future successor in the institution. The traditional assumptions for years have been that this would be the current Vice President Iliyana Yotova. During the summer period, Yotova almost openly entered the field of view of observers as a possible future candidate. She pardoned the former mayor of the Mladost district of the capital, Desislava Ivancheva, who was convicted of corruption and was serving her sentence in prison, despite calls from various organisations and parties for her pardon. Comments that this act by the Vice President is the beginning of a pre-election campaign were not long in coming, and in a subsequent interview, Yotova replied that she was considering whether to enter the race.

3

THE STATE OF THE PARTY SYSTEM

GERB-UDF. The largest party in the country and in government are also the most passive in media and political terms. Their presence in the political debate is measured almost only by the regular appearances of the leader Boyko Borisov. If in the previous months the interesting thing about him was that he stopped distancing himself from Delyan Peevski and denying his close collaboration with him, then in July and August that which was interesting was that Borisov stopped distancing himself from the government and now almost openly self-identifies with it in terms of behaviour and results. There are two central directions in Borisov's rhetoric: his personal role as the saviour of the huge European funds under the Recovery and Resilience Plan, on the one hand, and his position as the sole and lonely defender of the right wing against the backdrop of the spreading left-wing populism among all other parties.

"We Continue the Change (Produzhavame Pro-mianata - PP) - Democratic Bulgaria" (PPDB). The coalition entered the summer period in a relatively difficult state. It is characterised, first of all, by a crisis in one of the two parties, PP. The resignation of co-chair Kiril Petkov led to an interregnum, in which everyone expects the decisive party forum on September 27th and 28th, intended to elect a new chairman. Then, there were publicly tense relations between the two parties. Even during the corruption scandal in the Sofia Municipality, DB called on PP to figure out their problems, and in the fourth vote of no confidence against the Zhelyazkov cabinet, the two parties openly decided not to vote together. PP supported the vote, while DB did not participate in the vote. To all this the ongoing destructuring of the main political and electoral base of the coalition in Sofia should be added. Mayor Vasil Terziev's intention to change the Municipality's servicing bank caused another upheaval, during which another deputy mayor, Ivan Vassilev, resigned.

A surprising reversal in the downward trend of PPDB occurred with the arrest of the mayor of Varna, Blagomir Kotsev. The ongoing investigation does not yet allow us to assess the credibility of the accusations. But in light of the revelations in Sofia, the Varna arrest be-

gan to seem to both the PPDB and their supporters as repression on behalf of the authorities, aimed at eliminating their positions in the local government. Another striking thing is the date of the arrest, July 8th, the day of the final decision on Bulgaria's entry into the euro-zone. All this reinforces the belief in anti-opposition pressure by the ruling party, certain that immediately after the positive assessment of Bulgaria by the European institutions, there was no way there could be no acute reactions against the country. Kotsev's arrest consolidated the PPDB coalition, which stood united behind the mayor and condemned the alleged repression. The coalition's previously hesitant anti-government position also hardened, including in terms of rhetoric. Expressions like "soft dictatorship" and "political prisoners" entered the vocabulary of party leaders. They were taken up in the media with unusual sharpness by analysts considered close to the party.

The mass protests of PPDB and the liberal circles in the capital in general have been revived. A number of authoritative foreign media outlets, including the German Die Welt, published extensive materials on the Kotsev case, presented exactly in the way PPDB presents it - as an expression of an authoritarian tendency. The German ambassador Irene Plank was also present at one of the protests in Sofia. This caused a reaction unnecessarily steeped in stress from the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the form of a special declaration, recalling without mentioning names what is permitted and what is not permitted in diplomatic practices. The feeling was created that, just like in June 2013, with the election of the chairman of the National Security Agency, a "hoe has been stepped on", and by the same person as then. Of course, the effect so far seems incomparably smaller, but it is certainly there.

The activation of PPDB, which until recently was in decline, was natural. In parliament they tried to directly attack Delyan Peevski, proposing that the Central Bank should oversee the financial transactions of individuals sanctioned under the Magnitsky Act. They also took advantage of the situation with the privatisation project of state-owned assets by launching a campaign called "The State is Not for Sale." Despite

all the positive news about PPDB, however, the coalition's view of their future moves is far from unified. The votes of no-confidence are a telling example. DB, and especially the "Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria", who belong to them, do not want to burn all the bridges to GERB and Boyko Borisov, so as not to remain permanently in opposition. The desire of DSB to impose anti-Russian priority over anti-corruption is evident – in connection with Russian properties on the Iskar Reservoir or the Russian consulate in Varna. The anti-Russian line undoubtedly provides more opportunities for partnership with Borisov than that of anti-corruption. On the other hand, for the first time in three years, PP seem to have abandoned their hostile tone towards President Radev. The campaign "The State is Not for Sale" illustrated this statement.

"Vazrazhdane" ("Revival"). Kostadin Kostadinov's party is waging its main battle for relegitimation as the leading representative of Bulgarian nationalists in competition with MECh and "Velichie" ("Greatness"). The stakes of this battle are increasing for many reasons, including in connection with the problem of a nationalist candidacy in next year's presidential elections. It is known that the great rise of Bulgarian nationalism occurred a decade ago as a result of the agreed joint candidacy of Krasimir Karakachanov for President. For now, mass public events seem to be Kostadinov's primary tool for demonstrating his power to others. The advertised "National Protest of Free Bulgarians" for September 13th should be understood in such a context, which is unlikely to overthrow the "regime" but has a chance of keeping the "troops" on combat alert. Kostadinov probably knows that an open attack against the other two formations will not bring him any positives, so he pursues a strange hesitant policy, in which he alternates negotiations with MECh and "Velichie" for votes of no confidence with qualifications for the same parties as "parasitic".

Movement for Rights and Freedoms – New Beginning (MRF-NB). The leading role of MRF-NB leader Delyan Peevski in the country's governance is no longer questioned by anyone. Peevski, as before, demonstrates his authority publicly by calling on the relevant institutions to do something, which they do straight away – as in connection with the convening of a parliamentary commission on the water crisis. Peevski also took an important step towards establishing himself as a "social leader" with the decision to open so-called "people's shops". In addition to the alleged electoral goals, the shops in question will probably also be used in the debate on the consequences of the euro after January 1st.

On several occasions, it has seemed that Peevski is ready to make concessions on key issues. Such are, for example, his proposals to stop the privatisation of state-owned facilities and to close the Commission for

Combating Corruption. In fact, this is not so much a "retreat", but a counterattack. As in the case of the judicial changes at the time, so now Peevski suddenly agrees with the criticisms and objections, which is unexpected for his opponents, but then he insists on more than what is currently available. This is what happened with the judicial changes, and this is likely to happen with the anti-corruption body.

The Bulgarian Socialist Party – United Left (BSP-UL). The Socialists held their traditional summer convention on Mount Buzludzha in the Balkan Mountains. The main message of Chairman Atanas Zafirov seemed to aim to justify the party's participation in the ruling coalition, motivated by political reason and a statesmanlike desire to overcome the political crisis. The need for justifications seems to be large, because BSP are more likely to follow the agenda of GERB and MRF-NB than any of their own. An example in this regard is the procedure for electing an ombudsman. Although formally supporting their candidate Maya Manolova, BSP also supported GERB's candidate Velislava Delcheva, thus making Delcheva's election possible in the first round. Comments that if it came to a second round, Manolova could turn the result in her favour were ignored. The bitter aftertaste of this parliamentary action suggests caution in assessing the party leadership's claims that Iliyana Yotova is their "possible candidate" for the presidential elections. In any case, BSP face the need to prove their political and ideological identity. The process of developing a new party programme that has begun is a step in this direction, but it is not yet sufficient. An important aspect of the ideological positioning is also the party's increased contacts with European social democracy. A key event was the participation of Chairman Zafirov in the congress of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) in Berlin. The meetings held with the new co-chairmen of the SPD and with the German Minister of Defence Boris Pistorius created conditions for rapprochement, which in practice means breaking away from the isolationist nationalist course of the former leader of the Socialists, Korneliya Ninova. It remains to be seen to what extent the programmatic conversation in BSP will reflect these trends.

"There is Such a People" ("Ima Takuv Narod" - ITN). Slavi Trifonov's party do not show much public activity, apparently satisfied with their place and role in the country's governance. It is worth mentioning that the same minister, broadcast by ITN – Grozdan Karadjov – is far more prominent in the media space now than in 2022. Topics such as the modernisation of railway transport and the practices of low-cost airlines arouse great public interest, which Karadjov generally exploits well.

Alliance for Rights and Freedoms (ARF). The collapse of the so-called Ahmed Dogan faction contin-

ues both literally and symbolically. On one hand, new Dogan MPs are leaving it, and on the other hand, the court has taken away Dogan's last chances to use the abbreviation MRF. Having entered the National Assembly as the sixth political force in October 2024, with an equal number of MPs with the fifth, ARF are now the seventh. One of their most important pillars, the Facebook group "I Support Ahmed Dogan", has effectively collapsed under the weight of the disappointment of its leading activists. Provoked by the deepening decline, Dogan issued an open letter in which he stated that his party had been "kidnapped" by Peevski and it was time to create a completely new party. A three-month period for discussion on this issue has also been set, which expires at the end of October. At the head of the newly appointed (personally, without any legal procedure!) Central Operations Bureau, Dogan has placed one of his most loyal people, Taner Ali. If this move is logical to some extent, it is doubtful that it will breathe new energy into the Dogan faction. The commitment of Dogan himself, who "calls" but does not promise to do anything himself, is unclear. It is un-

clear how the old rhetoric and the old faces of the ARF can lead to a better result than the current one. The impression that this is about the financial survival of a group of people has not been refuted.

"Morality, Unity, Honour" (MECh). The niche that the party leader Radostin Vassilev has chosen for himself is not new, although it exists mainly at the rhetorical level, not in terms of practical results. This is the niche of a "unifier" of the opposition. In his messages, Vassilev tirelessly presents the reminder that he intends to unite the "anti-government forces", because he has open doors to both PPDB and "Velichie".

"Velichie" (Greatness"). The party also has its own niche, expressed in publicly posting problems that are outside the agenda of Bulgarian politics. Illegal construction and sea pollution were the topics of leader Ivelin Mihaylov during the summer season, which found an institutional continuation in the debate on the vote of no confidence for the environment and waters.

4

THE PROGRESSIVE POLITICAL AND SOCIAL AGENDA

The activation of Bulgarian trade unions is undoubtedly an important trend that is constantly finding more and more new confirmations. Protests and strikes organised by trade unions compete in importance on the media agenda with politically motivated protests for the rule of law. Here we should mention at least three examples. The protests of young medics, which provoked the cynical remark of Toshko Yordanov from the Bulgarian National Institute of Health about the “import” of “cheap” doctors, directed public attention to the huge deficits of the health system and its prospects in the medium term. The protests of

employees in the forestry sector served as a reminder that the increase in income in the budget sphere is conjunctural, uneven and unfair. One of these protests resulted in the police arresting the vice president of the trade union CITUB (Confederation of Independent Trade Unions of Bulgaria) Todor Kapitanov. Thus, the event itself gained national and even international resonance. Another important thing was the protests of employees in fire safety, whose problems with equipment brought to light long-standing problems. And this case, like others, ultimately provoked an institutional response.

5

MAIN CONCLUSIONS, FORECASTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The summer political season left the big topic of Bulgaria's accession to the eurozone as a legacy for the autumn season. It is clear that the media and political debate in the coming months will be dominated by the preparation of institutions, businesses and citizens for this change and the increase in prices. The general impression is that Bulgarian parties do not have clear forecasts for themselves as to how this process will develop, and therefore they still avoid positioning themselves more categorically. This, of course, applies especially to the ruling majority.

The "Zhelyazkov" model of the current government has acquired relatively stable characteristics. The most important among them is the deinstitutionalisation of the legislative and executive branches. Formally, the opposition MRF-NB is not considered by anyone as an opposition, while other parties, using the instrument of no-confidence votes, are struggling with varying success to be recognised as opposition. The government itself, which at crucial moments hides "behind the back" of the National Assembly, has practically accepted that its main initiatives are dictated by factors outside its personal composition, such as Boyko

Borisov and Delyan Peevski. The Joint Management Council, which was supposed to coordinate coalition interactions, has almost stopped functioning, and it is very difficult to talk about the accountability of ministers to the parties that nominated them.

In July, two themes emerged, outlined by externally induced events – entry into the eurozone and the rule of law. In September, they will become the focus of the anti-government opposition, from nationalist and pro-European positions, respectively, with central mouthpieces being "Vazrazhdane" and PPDB. Large-scale protests are being prepared on both topics, and not just on one occasion. But they seem to be developing in parallel spaces, without any connection between one and the other. Some completely ignore the European reports and the problems of judicial reform, while others are not inclined to accept any comments about the negative consequences of the introduction of the euro. Even their terminology, although equally critical and radical, does not coincide. Some see the government as a "regime", and others as a "dictatorship". This creates all the prerequisites for political tension to grow in the autumn season.

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ABOUT THIS STUDY

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

the quality and neutrality of Bulgarian media is under question, we aim to provide a scientific basis for a political discussion for Bulgarian and international readers.

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Radicalisation of the nationalist and liberal political oppositions is being observed.

Further information on the topic can be found here:
bulgaria.fes.de