DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

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Boris Popivanov

Bulgaria went through a "small political crisis", which led to the strengthening of the power positions of MRF (Movement for Rights and Freedoms) - New Beginning and their leader Delyan Peevski.

Boyko Borisov's leadership role in the government majority seems seriously undermined.

A critically important budget procedure is looming, in which the problems of energy and social security seem to be systematically underestimated.

FRIEDRICH EBERT STIFTUNG

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THE DYNAMICS OF FOREIGN POLICY

The repercussions of the war in Ukraine. The new stage of the Ukrainian conflict, marked by an escalation of international tension and uncertainty in relations in the US-European Union-Russia triangle, has fuelled new fears of a large-scale war. The Bulgarian position still seems firmly on the side of the categorical pro-Ukrainian point of view of the EU. At the annual session of the UN General Assembly in New York, Bulgarian Prime Minister Rosen Zhelyazkov declared that the so-called "coalition of the willing" (to help Kiev) is "unshakable", and then stated Bulgaria's intention to end the transit of Russian gas in 2026. All these messages did not become the subject of a wider public discussion, nor did they have a clear mandate from the National Assembly. The "unshakability" of the Zhelyazkov government's course of foreign policy is questionable, especially given the fact that his own Foreign Minister Georg Georgiev offered, without being asked, an air corridor to Russian President Vladimir Putin for the failed meeting between him and his American counterpart Donald Trump in Budapest.

The Lukoil case. The US decision to impose sanctions on the Russian companies Lukoil and Rosneft, together with rumours that the EU is about to follow suit, has led to increased attention focused on the fate of the Lukoil refinery in Burgas, which is one of the largest and most strategically important enterprises in the Bulgarian economy. Since the time of the Petkov cabinet, rumours that the Bulgarian government is trying to force Lukoil to sell its assets in the country have not subsided. Specific investors have also been mentioned more than once, and in the most recent case in December 2024, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán personally visited Bulgaria to launch the company MOL. The international aspects of the Lukoil case have come to the fore again with the start of this autumn season. A publication by the Wall Street Journal accused the leader of the party GERB, Boyko Borisov, of lobbying the son of US President Donald Trump Jr. to lift the sanctions under the Magnitsky Act against the leader of the party Movement for Rights and Freedoms – New Beginning (MRF-NB), Delyan Peevski, and in return offered American investors the acquisition of the Lukoil refinery and the Bulgarian route of the Turkish Stream gas pipeline. Borisov's denial was rather weak. Shortly afterwards, at the initiative of the ruling party, the National Assembly passed a law that would require the approval of the State Agency for National Security (SANS) for any deal for national security facilities, including the Burgas refinery. There were suspicions that the ruling party, and in particular Borisov and Peevski, had an idea for a buyer and intended to give them an advantage over other candidates through the filtering assessment of the security services. The announcement of the US sanctions hardly came as a complete surprise to the government in Sofia. The light-hearted statements that Bulgaria would have no problem with fuel supplies were met with interpretations in European media such as *Politico* that negotiations were secretly underway for a Bulgarian derogation from the sanctions on Lukoil, similar to that which Germany won for Rosneft. Lukoil's announcement that it intends to sell the refinery to the Gunvor company, considered close to Russian ruling circles, revealed a stalemate situation, in which Bulgaria risks both eventually entering an oil deficit and allowing an arbitrary restructuring of Russian ownership on its territory.

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DEVELOPMENT OF THE POLITICAL SITUATION

The "small crisis" in the ruling majority. The Bulgarian political autumn started with a relatively complete stabilization of the ruling majority, which had distributed the government portfolios and was functioning without serious internal tensions. The opening speeches of the parliamentary groups at the opening of the autumn session of the National Assembly reinforced this impression. On a number of legislative decisions (especially in the field of security services) and on personnel appointments (for example, a new deputy ombudsman), the majority acted in an entirely united fashion.

The partial local elections in Pazardzhik, held on October 12th, seemed to overturn this perception. GERB leader Boyko Borisov demanded a "reformatting" of the government, and parliament stopped meeting, due to lack of a quorum. Serious political tension was created at a very accelerated pace. Various scenarios were discussed, which could be briefly reduced to five: new parliamentary elections; a new ruling majority; a new coalition agreement; new government staff at the prime ministerial and/or ministerial level; preservation of the status quo. Within ten days, the final result was reached, according to which MRF-NB would become an official partner in the government without official participation, and the only change in personnel would concern the post of Speaker of the National Assembly, which would be subject to rotation between the partners in power. The previous Speaker of the National Assembly Natalia Kiselova resigned and was replaced by the representative of GERB Raya Nazaryan. As can be seen, the fifth scenario was closest to the development of events, namely that hardly anything would happen. The political crisis turned out to be a "small crisis", and its political effect is rather symbolic. Despite the Kiselova-Nazaryan rotation, it is expressed in the increased authority of MRF-NB and the weakened positions of GERB.

The President as an Alternative. In recent months, President Rumen Radev has clearly positioned himself as a leading critic of the government, with much greater authority and categoricalness than the opposition parties. The government majority's undisguised dissatisfaction with him actually did him a favour, further legitimising him as an alternative through the political pressure exerted.

This pressure from the majority on the President took three forms. First, the four ruling parties decided to revoke the presidential administration's authority to use special cars from the National Security Service (NSS). The belief that the case would provoke public discontent against the head of state, who, despite his claims to speak on behalf of the people, spends taxpayers' money on the luxuries of his officials, however, turned out to be wrong. Radev responded by getting out of the NSS state car himself and getting into his personal car, whilst welcoming Hungarian President Tamas Sujok. The public reaction was more focused on the problem of how Bulgaria presents itself to foreigners. Of no less importance, of course, was the obvious comparison between the presidential cars and the impressive motorcades of the initiators of the restriction, Borisov and Peevski. The rulers backed down on the proposal that the state purchase other cars for Radev's administration - an idea rejected by Radev with the understandable reason that it was a much more expensive solution than the previous one, which was cancelled precisely because it was expensive.

Secondly, the legislative changes also took away the President's authority to appoint heads of security services by decree. In the case of the National Security Agency, Radev had long refused to accept the majority's candidate for chairman, Denyo Denev, due to his alleged closeness to Peevski. The President's reluctance to cooperate was overcome in the most effective way. Now the majority will be able to choose their nominations without any problems. However, the unpleasant precedent remains that laws are being rewritten because of one person, not because of principle.

And third, the pressure from the ruling party and the media close to them to provoke Radev to announce his own party project and thus lose the pedestal on the presidential podium has intensified. Both Borisov and Peevski have repeatedly declared that they no longer

consider Radev as President, but as a party leader. Rumours have been spread that the party had already been initiated at a secret meeting in a mountain hut, and the President's advisors were accused of negotiating with professional military personnel for support. The issue of the presidential party is undoubtedly a concern for the ruling party, due to the risks of restructuring the political space. But the discussion on this topic aims to compromise the idea of such a party in advance, and also to suggest that Radev's mandate is ending and that he is being discarded to history. The latter suggestion is exploited by the ruling media, and by circulating rumours about future successors to the post that Radev was preparing. It began with the rumour that Radev would nominate Sofia Mayor Vasil Terziev and thus betray the socialists who nominated him at the time, and continued with the next rumour that Radev would give his backing to the chairwoman of the Olympic Committee, Vessela Lecheva, and thus betray his vice president, Iliyana Yotova.

Rumen Radev's political strategy cannot be fully deciphered at this stage. It is clear that next year will be key for his political perspective – both because of the entry into the eurozone and because of the upcoming presidential elections. What is visible is a desire to expand the political space that Radev will claim. Since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, he has gradually distanced himself from liberal and pro-European circles and parties in Bulgaria, taking positions often suspected of pro-Russian or pro-nationalist sympathies. The culmination of this course was his call on May 9th for a referendum on the introduction of the euro, after which many analysts announced that Radev had closed himself off to the nationalist spectrum. With the political rise of Delyan Peevski in recent months, however, Radev has taken a different direction. He has become the most prominent spokesman for the pro-European liberals' theses against Peevski, corruption, and the "conquered state." Radev's words that the Borisov-Peevski tandem is a "Magnitsky coalition" were remembered more clearly than the more complex interpretations in "We Continue the Change ("Produlzhavame Promianata") – Democratic Bulgaria" (PPDB) camp. Radev's statement about the need for a "wall against corruption", personified by Peevski, is in practice an appeal for a new "cordon sanitaire" against the leader of MRF-NB after the final failure of the first "cordon sanitaire" from the winter of 2024-2025. And although accusations of Russophilia against the President are still heard from within PPDB, more leading figures in the coalition have begun to spare their anti-Radev rhetoric, apparently realising that Radev's future support, at least in some respects, could be very useful to them.

However, we are hardly talking about just a pendulum swinging from one pole to the other. Entry into the eurozone is imminent on January 1st, and there are widespread concerns about price chaos and fuel shortages. Radev's "return" to these positions skeptical of the euro and the government's anti-inflation policy should not be ruled out. In short, the head of state seems to be trying to play in parallel with two mutually hostile political camps. If both, for different reasons, see in him their chance for rise, Radev's own rise is almost a foregone conclusion. But the task is not at all an easy one.

The judiciary and the rule of law. The problem of the rule of law in Bulgaria is being raised more and more often both in the country and abroad, especially in connection with the practices of the current government. This problem has both constitutional and legal dimensions. After the interim Prosecutor General Borislav Sarafov refused to leave his post, despite the expired statutory six-month term, the situation in the judicial system began to deviate from any normal standards. The Supreme Court of Cassation confirmed Sarafov's illegitimacy, but the Supreme Judicial Council, also with an expired mandate, recognised Sarafov, and finally the leader of GERB Boyko Borisov announced that he "recognises" Sarafov as Prosecutor General. This is only the tip of the iceberg of crisis trends that find diverse manifestations. The promises of the ruling party that Bulgaria will finally receive a new tranche of 650 million euros from the European Commission under the Recovery and Resilience Plan, which has so far been refused due to the lack of adequate legislation in the area of the rule of law, have not yet come to pass. Bulgaria's unenviable place on the so-called "grey list" for a country with money laundering was also confirmed, and in response, the representatives of GERB in the government were content to blame the "Denkov" cabinet, which they themselves supported and in which they played a part. The case of a prosecutor beaten with a hammer did not receive wide media coverage, but it raises question marks over the state of the system. And last but not least, Bulgaria became infamous in world media with the story of Bulgarian officials who demanded a bribe from the team of the singer Robbie Williams, who was visiting the country. All of this, taken as a whole, reveals a clear Achilles' heel of the political system, which not only cannot be concealed, but also has clear international repercussions.

3

THE STATE OF THE PARTY SYSTEM

GERB-UDF. GERB's place as the main political force in the country and in government is not formally disputed by anyone, although in recent months the impression has been created that GERB are losing ground to Delyan Peevski's ambitious MRF-NB and at the same time lack a clear vision in which direction they want to lead the government majority.

With the beginning of the autumn political season, comments multiplied that GERB intend to play a more active political role, and their leader Boyko Borisov will restore his authority as national leader. It is in this context that suspicions have intensified that Borisov is planning a cabinet reshuffle, in which he would take over the post of Prime Minister and possibly welcome entry into the eurozone in this capacity. There is no categorical evidence to support this thesis, but there is no lack of arguments for it. First, for a long time now Borisov has been repeating that GERB does not gain by coming to power, but that he, as leader, will show patience until the adoption of the new budget and the euro – events that were gradually approaching. Secondly, Borisov did not openly object to the claims that Rosen Zhelyazkov was unable to impose himself authoritatively on the coalition partners, and even at one point he stated that there were "five prime ministers" in Bulgaria (Zhelyazkov, Borisov himself, Delyan Peevski, Atanas Zafirov and Slavi Trifonov) with the explicit clarification: "There could only be one in my person". Thirdly, by virtue of coincidence, Zhelyazkov's authority was further damaged by unexpected revelations about a hotel in Sofia owned by his wife and financed with funds that can hardly be explained by savings from public sector salaries. Fourthly, in an unprecedented act for the leader of a majority party, Borisov did not vote against the fifth vote of no confidence against the Zhelyazkov cabinet, with which he seemed to send a signal to PPDB, and at the same time, for the first time, he issued a pointed warning to Peevski not to overdo things with his political self-confidence.

All the outlined plots ended simultaneously with the partial local elections in Pazardzhik, in which MRF-NB won first place, and GERB ranked only sixth (with 6.2% of the vote). Pazardzhik turned out to be a turning point in a purely symbolic sense. After Pazardzhik, the various comments that GERB and Borisov would fall victim to Peevski in the same way that recently happened to Ahmed Dogan stopped being speculation and received a convincing illustration. Borisov's reaction was to turn the defect into an effect by going on a counteroffensive. At a special briefing, he announced his support for the "reformatting" of the government. His messages developed in several directions: the ministries have been given to concessions to "parties, and circles, both large and small"; certain ministers such as the social Borislav Gutsanov or the interior Daniel Mitov are not doing particularly well; Zhelyazkov must do his job if he wants to be Prime Minister; MRF-NB must take responsibility and officially enter the government; and it is logical for the Speaker of the National Assembly to be from the largest party. Despite the radical announcement and the orchestrated campaign within GERB in support of Borisov's theses, the final result fell far short of confirming the leader's ability to hold the political initiative. No changes were made to the organisation of the executive branch; nor did a single minister lose their post; Zhelyazkov received full and uncritical confidence from the majority as Prime Minister; MRF-NB did not take responsibility for governance; and the Speaker of the Parliament was indeed replaced with a GERB candidate, though not because GERB are the largest party, but as an expression of equal rotation between the parties and the majority. Borisov's rhetoric also lost its initial radicalism. If at first he spoke of "reformatting", a week later he limited himself to insisting on "leading" the process, and three days later he himself described his function as "bridging" between the individual parties. From grand intentions in domestic politics, the GERB leader returned to fears about foreign policy, summarised in his declaration that he feels an "animal-like fear" of a large-scale war.

The "small crisis" provoked by Borisov ended with a meeting with Peevski. If we refer to symbolism again, Borisov resembled those mayors of small towns and villages who go to have their picture taken with Peevski to prove their loyalty. In short, October end-

ed with an almost universal conviction that Boyko Borisov had suffered a serious setback in his political plans and had gone on a political downward spiral.

"We Continue the Change (Produlzhavame Promianata) - Democratic Bulgaria" (PPDB). The coalition had the opportunity to establish itself as the main alternative to the current government, but it seems that it failed to take full advantage of the available opportunity. The fifth vote of no confidence against the Zhelyazkov cabinet was the first initiated by PPDB (and the first in which PPDB participated as a coalition), was dedicated to "their" topic (internal security and justice) and gathered the greatest parliamentary support against the background of all previous votes (101 "for" versus 133 "against"). However, the momentum set by the vote was not effectively capitalized on. PPDB did not show a unified strategy and often scattered their attention on other topics and in responses to attacks from the ruling party, especially on the occasion of alleged corruption practices in PP and the garbage collection crisis in some districts in the capital city.

There was also a lack of coalition unity in the most general sense of the term. It can be said that the classic divisive syndrome of the "urban right" in Bulgaria came into effect, determined by the contradictory attitude towards the leader of GERB Borisov. The crisis with the "reformatting" of the government successfully directed PPDB to the tactic of driving a wedge between Borisov and Peevski, developed in the campaign for the "devouring" of GERB by MRF-NB. However, in a number of public appearances, concern for Borisov and a desire to help him were more likely to be heard. This was especially true for the DB, which invariably demonstrated distancing themselves from the sharp opposition policy, did not accept the idea of a vote of no confidence on the topic of water shortages and reacted hesitantly to the issue of the resignation of the Speaker of Parliament Kiselova. Specific political figures from the DB even seemed to suggest to Borisov that he could get out of the "trap" with Peevski by redirecting attention to foreign policy and the Euro-Atlantic orientation. The leader of the "Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria" Atanas Atanasov repeatedly warned that the most important danger was the Russian one, embodied in the threat of Russia attacking Bulgaria from its property on the shores of the Iskar Reservoir, and the co-chairman of "Yes, Bulgaria" Ivaylo Mirchev was quick to define Borisov's behaviour in relation to Lukoil as geopolitically correct.

For their part, PP had long been focused on their national forum, which was supposed to give the party a new direction after the resignation of co-chair Kiril Petkov. The PP general assembly, held on September 27th and 28th, made a far stronger claim to an opposition role than DB. The political process in Bulgaria was characterised as "a war, not a battle." The party declared themselves against both the "oligarchic model" embodied by Borisov-Peevski and the "eastern statism" professed by socialists and nationalists. Assen Vassilev was unanimously elected as the sole chairman. However, commentators on the forum saw Vassilev's decision to retain only three of the current Executive Council and remove ten others as a political showdown with the wing of Kiril Petkov and Lena Borislavova. Relations with DB remained unclear and fraught with tension. Politicians from DB had previously spoken of these relations as a kind of "confederation" in which the scope for joint decisions is relatively modest. In principle, it was believed that within the coalition, DB would always have an advantage due to their better organisation. Under the leadership of Vassilev, PP, however, rejected the previous model of a "cloud party" and began to rapidly build structures. A similar competition is also evident in the field of presidential nominations. The initiative initially belonged to DB, who began to hold round tables on the image of the future presidential candidate. PP focused on what was much more interesting for the media, and more precisely, specific names - such as the mayor of Sofia, Vasil Terziev, or the arrested mayor of Varna, Blagomir Kotsev, promoted by the former Prime Minister from PP, Nikolay Denkov. The collapse of the PPDB coalition is indeed unlikely for now, but political unity is increasingly becoming a chimera.

"Vazrazhdane" ("Revival"). The party are increasingly losing the political momentum gained with the protests to preserve the Bulgarian lev as the national currency. At the beginning of the autumn season, "Vazrazhdane" organised two more national protests and participated in a vote of no confidence, but they never managed to enter the centre of political and media attention. Radicalisation seems to come as a reaction to these failures. An ambitious attempt to regain the initiative was undertaken by temporarily leaving the National Assembly. Leader Kostadin Kostadinov announced that "Vazrazhdane" have no intention of participating in the sham of the political status quo, and their MPs will go to meetings with their voters within the framework of the campaign "Parliament goes to the people". A similar practice has been tried in the past by much larger parties, for example in 2013 by GERB and in 2018 by the Bulgarian Socialist Party. In both cases, as well as in the one with "Vazrazhdane" now, there was no significant political effect, and the respective parties quietly returned to the parliamentary institution. A second attempt to regain the initiative was connected with Kostadinov's call for a change in the entire political system - a new social contract, a new Constitution and the introduction of a semi-presidential republic on the French model. And again, the large-scale political announcement did not meet with a reciprocal public resonance. The efforts of the party MECh, which

launched a series of attacks on "Vazrazhdane", that this was actually copying their program, also contributed to their degradation.

Movement for Rights and Freedoms – New Beginning (MRF-NB). The party won a huge symbolic victory with undoubtedly positive political consequences. There were two real electoral successes – first place in the partial local elections for municipal council in Pazardzhik and for mayor of the Dimitrovgrad village of Chernogorovo. In themselves, neither case is representative of the national political situation. However, the belief arose that after the defeat of Ahmed Dogan's MRF, Delyan Peevski's party are on the way to attracting the structures of GERB to themselves. This is a new stage in the consolidation of Peevski's public authority. If in the summer, for the first time, there was general recognition that he and Boyko Borisov were a political tandem, then in the fall there was already a consensus that Peevski was the leading figure in the tandem. The victory in Chernogorovo, despite its insignificant factual value, seemed to come as a message that the victory in Pazardzhik was not accidental, but part of an increasingly obstructed path to all power. From the point of view of the national picture, sociological surveys (for example, by the agencies "Trend" and "Myara") found that MRF-NB are close to claiming to be the second political force. Peevski's message that he intends to build a State with a capital "D" {'State' in Bulgarian is 'Durzhava'} [Editor's note] ("D" as in Delyan) consolidated the claim on a propaganda level, immediately taken up and spread by the media.

Delyan Peevski actually made serious efforts to demonstrate his superiority over Borisov in the "tandem" thus outlined. In practice, not one of Borisov's demands was met. Right at the beginning of the "small crisis", the MRF-NB explicitly declared that they would negotiate the "reformatting" with Prime Minister Zhelyazkov, and not with his party chief. Moreover, Peevski hardened his tone towards Borisov, starting to accuse him of artificially supporting PPDB in Bulgarian politics. Ultimately, the new stage that MRF-NB reached as a result of the "small crisis" is expressed in the strange role of a partner in the government without a special agreement and without changes in personnel. It seems almost the same as before, but it is not. In fact, he was publicly legitimised as a normal participant in power, with a strengthened impression of strength, but at the same time without any real responsibility. However, Peevski's Achilles' heel remains the same - international isolation, which he fails to break through, despite all the official and behind-the-scenes initiatives, and which leaves his MEPs outside the life of political groups in European politics.

Bulgarian Socialist Party – United Left (BSP-UL). The party emerged from the "small crisis" with a damaged image. The leadership showed readiness for any concessions in the name of remaining in power – although interpreted as concern for the stability of the state. The Speaker of the National Assembly, Natalia Kiselova, who was expelled by BSP and forced to leave her post, was not protected in the optimal way. A political assessment of her work in the post was not requested by the majority. The impression that the party too easily accepted the collaboration with the MRF-NB and Delyan Peevski provoked internal turmoil, expressed in critical statements by members of the National Council, declarations by party structures and the decision of the Political Movement "Social Democrats" to leave the BSP-UL coalition.

The leadership tried to overcome the internal tension with a new initiative, launching 11 measures in the budget and social security spheres. In essence, they represent a transition to a phased abolition of the flat tax. This is in principle a strong move, designed to objectify long-adopted programmatic statements. However, it is not clear to what extent the upper echelon of the party is united on the topic. For example, Social Minister Borislav Gutsanov disputed the need for changes in the tax system. It is also not clear to what extent there is political will to defend the package of measures to partners. There is a risk that the initiative will be reduced to a mere political declaration in the budget debates and will not even become a topic in the majority negotiations.

In political terms, BSP constantly allow themselves to be branded as the culprit in the biggest scandals and the problems of governance which are most difficult to solve. This was the case back in May-June in the debate on inflation, when it was BSP that committed themselves to limiting speculation and inflationary pressure. This was the case in the summer during the water crisis, when party leader Atanas Zafirov headed the National Water Board and faced a situation in which there were no solutions. This is what has happened now, when BSP ministers came to the forefront as directly involved in the floods on the Black Sea coast. The disloyalty of GERB and MRF-NB to BSP is unquestionable. BSP themselves, in turn, reacted with disloyalty to President Rumen Radev, willingly joining in all the legislative actions of Borisov and Peevski against the powers of the head of state.

Like other political forces, BSP are gradually moving towards the topic of future presidential nominations. Two of the influential party figures have already made statements. While Kiril Dobrev mentioned Iliyana Yotova, Yanaki Stoilov and Krum Zarkov as possible candidates, Kaloyan Pargov focuses only on a possible candidacy of Yotova, but creating the impression that he is distinguishing her from Radev. In fact, a strong and convincing presidential candidate would be the only chance for the socialists to get out of the unen-

viable position in which the elections in recent years and participation in power have placed them.

Foreign policy is the other area in which BSP seem to be trying to show a more serious presence. After the visit of Zafirov and the delegation he led to China and their meetings with President Xi Jinping, there followed a visit by the General Secretary of the Vietnamese Communist Party, Tho Lam, to Sofia, with Zafirov as the official host. BSP's place in the government does indeed create conditions for the intensification of Bulgaria's contacts with strong and economically developing socialist countries. However, it is not certain that the political elites are fully aware of these opportunities. Zafirov also led a BSP delegation to the congress of the Party of European Socialists in Amsterdam. For the first time since Sergey Stanishev, the leader of the Bulgarian socialists had the opportunity to give a special speech before the Congress. In this way, a sign was given of an exit from the European isolation into which the former leader Korneliya Ninova had thrown BSP. As in the cases with China and Vietnam, there is potential that can be realised, or it may remain only in theory.

"There is Such a People ("Ima Takuv Narod") (ITN). Slavi Trifonov's party suffered a series of political and moral blows. Their participation in the government led to a second difficult compromise. If in January ITN had to defend themselves against the accusations that they had promised never to form a coalition with Boyko Borisov, in October they had to go through the same problem, this time because of Delyan Peevski. It is true that MRF-NB is not formally represented with ministers in the government, but their presence has been officialised in a sufficiently open manner that it can be downplayed.

Five additional blows to the image of the should be mentioned. First, the attack on the protests of young doctors, cynically launched by the leader of the group Toshko Yordanov and inappropriately continued by the Health Minister put forward by the party Silvi Kirilov, was met with massive public discontent. Second, the so-called censorship bill, sanctioning individuals who disseminate personal information, was withdrawn, but not before it sparked criticism that it aimed at silencing journalism in Bulgaria. Third, the scandal that erupted with the party's Minister of Culture Marian Bachev, an actor from whose school was accused of sexual assault, grew into unpleasant revelations about the school itself and culminated in a public attack by the Union of Artists against Toshko Yordanov's interference in staffing in the aforementioned ministry. Fourth, numerous comments gave rise to the case of the popular host of "Slavi's Show" Ivo Siromakhov, who was removed from Slavi Trifonov's television and in response openly distanced himself from Trifonov and Yordanov. Fifth, the newly registered party "It Makes Sense" ("Ima Smisul"), founded by former Trifonov MPs, do not have great electoral chances for now, but they are creating impressions of smouldering divisions and a fight for the legacy of ITN.

Alliance for Rights and Freedoms (ARF). The ARF parliamentary group did not have a memorable presence. If we exclude their support for the fifth vote of no confidence against the Zhelyazkov cabinet, they did not participate in the political clashes and combinations of the autumn political season that had commenced. The only more striking appearance of APS was related to the press conference of the leading figure Ahmed Dogan, at which a founding declaration for the creation of a new party was announced. The press conference itself could not find a way to mobilise the leader's supporters. An initiative committee was announced, headed by MP Taner Ali, who was extremely devoted to Dogan. The declaration itself contained extremely general conclusions about corruption and the conquered state, combined with the old MRF theses about togetherness and Euro-Atlanticism. Instead of taking the initiative, Dogan defended himself from attacks and did not answer whether he would head the future formation. The main actors, including Taner Ali, were not particularly well-known to the general public. Earlier claims about a young recruit were not confirmed. Even the composition of the committee itself was not specified, so it was not possible to understand whether the most authoritative among Dogan's close associates, MEP Ilhan Küçük, was included in it. On the whole, the birth of the future political project does not create a sense of energy, cause and potential.

"Morality, Unity, Honour" (MECh). The party systematically tries to exploit the thesis that it can become a unifier of the opposition space in Bulgaria. Their leader Radostin Vassilev repeats that they can simultaneously cast bridges to both "Vazrazhdane" and PPDB. It is true that in the preparation of the fifth vote of no confidence, PPDB turned for support only to MECh among the three nationalist parties. This is a sign that PPDB treat MECh as the least radical. In order to strengthen this dialogue, Vassilev for the first time explicitly distanced himself from any "anti-European" and "anti-NATO" positions, referring primarily to "Vazrazhdane", but he failed to achieve much more than that.

"Velichie" ("Greatness"). On a rhetorical level, "Velichie " seem to be the most radically opposed to the "Borisov-Peevski mafia" compared with other nationalist formations. Borisov and Peevski are most often attacked and showered with all manner of accusations and epithets. At the same time, however, Ivelin Mihaylov's party emit the least degree of consolidation and unity. The remarkable incident in

which eight of the ten MPs of "Velichie" disobeyed their leader's instruction not to register for parliamentary sessions, and then apologised to him publicly, has rekindled suspicions that "Velichie" are the most susceptible to pressure and control from the ruling party. Despite the fierce anti-governmental propaganda, the party's coefficient of efficiency remains very low. Their initiatives for a new vote of no confidence and for complaints to the Constitutional Court not only did not meet with understanding among other opposition parties, but were not even commented on seriously.

4

THE PROGRESSIVE POLITICAL AND SOCIAL AGENDA

With the arrival of the autumn season and the upcoming discussion on the state budget, calls from various individuals and organisations aimed at changing the tax system in Bulgaria have become more frequent. The strongest position in this regard was expressed by the Confederation of Independent Trade Unions in Bulgaria (CITUB), which resolutely declared itself against the socially unjust flat tax. What resulted was an unprecedented reaction from employers. One of their leading organisations, the Confederation of Employers and Industrialists in Bulgaria (CEIB/KRIB), issued a public declaration against CITUB on the topic and threatened to boycott collective bargaining. The accusations of CEIB/KRIB against CITUB that it is not a union, but a "radical political organisation" were based on the incorrect claims that CITUB is demanding an increase in taxes. In fact, CITUB claims to restructure the tax burden so that the richer bear a greater tax burden in the conditions of growing socio-economic inequalities. The syndicate did not give in. Without officially supporting it, others also demanded a gradual abolition of the flat tax, including BSP. It is clear that no change can be expected for now. The essential thing, however, is that, thanks to CITUB, the topic has firmly entered the agenda.

The national protests of young doctors, nurses and medical specialists that started in May continued. United in the initiative "Future in Bulgaria" with a demand for better pay and transparent competitions for specialisation, they seemed to have managed to achieve a result. However, surprisingly, the government declared that the promised increase in salaries would not be regulated by law, but would be incorporated into the budget, which would in practice become a temporary measure. The development of this case is yet to unfurl. But the excessive and dismissive behaviour of those in power led to public outrage and a much broader discussion on the realisation of young people in Bulgaria than was expected until recently.

Protests against violence against children were held in a number of cities across the country, including Sofia, Plovdiv, Burgas, and Stara Zagora. The occasion – a case of bullying in a kindergarten – raised the important topic of child protection, which has gained sad popularity after a series of tragic incidents. The political position that this topic will be addressed with the tools of a new school subject, "Religion and Virtues," does not seem well thought out and does not provide answers to many of the questions. The need for a clearer progressive perspective, going beyond clerical upbringing and mechanical restrictions, is obvious.

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MAIN CONCLUSIONS, FORECASTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The international processes, once again intensifying the East-West tension, return the issue of the country's energy security to the agenda of Bulgarian politics and put it on a par with the inflationary trends, which are increasingly difficult to predict. The practice of reducing these cases in the political debate to geopolitical dilemmas and to ruling-opposition relations is highly risky. The government majority in Bulgaria must deal much more decisively with the fuel situation and price control.

The "small political crisis" in the country did not significantly change the political configuration. The main effect is propaganda and should not be underestimated. The legitimation of the MRF-NB as a "party in power" has been largely realised, and the findings of the political helplessness of GERB, at least for now, cannot be refuted. Delyan Peevski's request for future control of all power no longer sounds purely hypothetical, and the claims about the political decline of Boyko Borisov, perhaps hasty, for the first time do not sound like just a form of wishful thinking. In any case, the chances of seeing Borisov for a fourth time in the post of Prime Minister have drastically decreased. But the price of the "deal", which preserved the four-party majority, seems to be good only for the MRF-NB. The outflow of disappointed or unrealised GERB activists to MRF-NB will probably continue. For their part, BSP and ITN, as "junior" partners, demonstrated an over-compromise that was difficult to defend, both to their voters and in general, also creating concerns about future electoral erosion.

As before, the government draws strength from the fragmentation of the political oppositions. It is not only PPDB that are not particularly willing to engage in dialogue on any topic with the nationalists. Within PPDB themselves, relations between the partners are beginning to resemble a "cold peace," in which each party retains the right to independent political behaviour on the topics on the agenda. The term "confederation," coined by them, quite aptly describes the picture. The three nationalist parties have lost political momentum and in recent weeks have more or less fallen off the agenda of Bulgarian politics. There are two visible indicators that they are aware of this turn of events. On the one hand, instead of trying to dominate the nationalist spectrum with the aim of monopolising it, the three parties have entered into a daily intra-species struggle, with constant attacks and mutual accusations of betrayal and servility. And if earlier they had managed to consolidate for as many as four votes of no confidence, today this task is far more complicated. On the other hand, the awareness of crisis and reverse movement, as a rule, gives rise to radicalisation. The new theses of "Vazrazhdane", for example, on "reorganizing" the state, testify to dramatic efforts to re-attract declining public attention.

Against this background, the figure of President Rumen Radev is rather stable. Concerns about his future political plans, unknown to anyone, are evident in the incessant political and media campaigns to discredit or belittle the President. The decision to revoke some of his powers marks an important moment. In fact, Radev's authority stems mainly from his public positions, not from any very large political and institutional resources. If those in power continue to "tighten the noose" around him, revising his powers in other areas as well, a feeling of helplessness and hopelessness of Radev himself may arise, even among those who sympathise with him and have expectations of him.

The government regularly explains how it has only recently come to power and has to solve a multitude of inherited problems. In practice, however, this is not a new government with grounds for excuses. The Zhelyazkov cabinet is already the longest-serving cabinet in the last four and a half years, without a single ministerial change, and the upcoming state budget will be the second for this cabinet. Concerns are being heard from everywhere about both the financial realism and the social adequacy of this budget. The debates and decisions on the budget procedure in November will to a large extent also determine the horizon of the smooth stability of the government itself.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Boris Popivanov, PhD., is an Associate Professor of Political Science at St. Kliment Ohridski University of Sofia. His research is concentrated in the areas of political ideologies, theory and history of the left, as well as the Bulgarian transition.

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Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung | Office Bulgaria
97, Knjaz Boris I St. | 1000 Sofia | Bulgaria

Responsible:
Jacques Paparo | Director, FES Bulgaria
Tel.: +359 2 980 8747 | Fax: +359 2 980 2438
English translation: Keneward Hill
bulgaria.fes.de

Contact:
office.sofia@fes.de

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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Bulgaria went through a "small political crisis", which led to the strengthening of the power positions of MRF (Movement for Rights and Freedoms) - New Beginning and their leader Delyan Peevski.

Boyko Borisov's leadership role in the government majority seems seriously undermined.

A critically important budget procedure is looming, in which the problems of energy and social security seem to be systematically underestimated.

Further information on the topic can be found here:
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