

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

POLIT-BAROMETER

Year 25 Issue 6
November-December

Boris Popivanov



The resignation of the Zhelyazkov cabinet has put the country on the verge of more pre-term elections.



Mass civil protests have reaffirmed the illegitimacy of the governance model embodied by Boyko Borisov and Delyan Peevski.



Bulgaria enters the euro-zone amid conditions of political crisis and social fears.

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

POLIT-BAROMETER

Year 25 Issue 6
November-December

Contents

1.	THE DYNAMICS OF FOREIGN POLICY	2
2.	DEVELOPMENT OF THE POLITICAL SITUATION	3
3.	STATE OF THE PARTY SYSTEM	6
4.	THE PROGRESSIVE POLITICAL AND SOCIAL AGENDA	10
5.	MAIN CONCLUSIONS, FORECASTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	11

1

THE DYNAMICS OF FOREIGN POLICY

Bulgaria in the new development of the Ukrainian conflict. Military action in Ukraine continues against the background of intensified and extremely contradictory diplomatic dynamics, characterised by constant reversals and unclear results. Countries like Bulgaria see two trends – one of them, personified by US President Donald Trump, and expressed in the claim to develop a peace plan in a parallel dialogue with Moscow and Kiev; and the other, represented by the major Western European countries, firmly supporting the territorial integrity of Ukraine and insisting on the participation of the European Union (EU) in the negotiation process. Sofia chooses to follow both trends. At the regular monthly EU summits, Prime Minister Rosen Zhelyazkov and Foreign Minister Georg Georgiev have clearly advocated European participation at the negotiating table and have pleaded for guarantees for the integrity of Ukraine. In practical terms, Bulgaria has joined, along with 23 other member states, in the agreement to provide a €90 billion loan to Ukraine, secured by these states and not by frozen Russian assets. The decision of Sofia to place the assets of the Russian company Lukoil under state control was publicly motivated by the desire “not to finance the war in Ukraine.” And at the same time, leading Bulgarian politicians, including President Rumen Radev, the leader of the ruling party GERB, Boyko Borisov, and even Prime Minister Zhelyazkov himself, have spoken out in favour of Trump’s efforts for peace. If this is consistent behaviour for Radev, and typical manoeuvring for Zhelyazkov, Borisov’s position is the most interesting. After nearly four years of unconditional pro-Ukrainian rhetoric, Borisov unexpectedly went so far as to remove the Ukrainian flag from his party headquarters, under the pretext that this was a requirement of a visiting Chinese delegation, and to declare that “Russia cannot lose this war”, contrary to his previous assessments.

The Eurozone. Bulgaria’s membership in the euro-zone, which will come into effect on January 1st 2026, was seen by the Zhelyazkov government as their

main achievement. A special international conference, “Bulgaria on the Threshold of the Eurozone”, was convened in Sofia, which brought together the President of the European Central Bank Christine Lagarde, the European Commissioner for Economics Valdis Dombrovskis and the Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund Kristalina Georgieva. Both at this forum and afterwards, Bulgaria received very positive signals of support. However, relations between Sofia and Brussels are not all idyllic. It is true that the European Commission allocated the country the new tranche of the Recovery and Resilience Plan to the amount of 1.47 billion euros, but a substantial amount of money was blocked due to Sofia’s *de facto* refusal to reform its anti-corruption commission.

The American vector. The visit of US Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Smith was the key event demonstrating the growing American interest in Bulgaria. Traditionally, there are two themes around which Washington’s approach to Sofia is focused: energy diversification and military cooperation. The first theme is developing in the preparation for the construction of the 7th and 8th units of the Kozloduy nuclear power plant by American companies, as well as in the accelerated work on the Vertical Gas Corridor, designed to replace Russian gas sources in Eastern Europe with American resources. The second theme entered a new phase after the delivery of the last F-16 fighters ordered by Bulgaria. Additional rearmament of the Bulgarian army with American equipment is forthcoming. The deepening partnership on these issues between the countries of Eastern Europe, which received organisational expression in the NATO Eastern Flank Summit in Helsinki with the participation of Bulgarian Prime Minister Rosen Zhelyazkov, should also be taken into account. Regardless of the dynamics in bilateral relations between Bulgaria and the United States, however, a central problem for Bulgarian leaders, such as the sanctions under the Magnitsky Act, are not being reviewed.

2

DEVELOPMENT OF THE POLITICAL SITUATION

The budget procedure. The previous issue of this Political Barometer, analysing the political processes in September and October, noted a stabilisation of the government under the leading role of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms – New Beginning (MRF-NB) party and their leader Delyan Peevski, but warned of the risks for the government arising from the critically important budget procedure. Indeed, it seemed that the parliamentary majority was politically impenetrable, and the civil protest activity was insufficient for change. However, the budget procedure overturned the initial ideas and provoked a political crisis that surprised almost all observers.

The reason for the political upheaval was undoubtedly the arrogant approach of the ruling party to the budget. The draft budget was criticised by most financial experts as unrealistic (with an overestimated component of revenue), dangerous (with the assumption of new burdens of debts), or damaging (with increased tax pressure on business). It is noteworthy that, with the exception of Finance Minister Temenuzhka Petkova, none of the leaders of the ruling parties defended the draft in its entirety, and GERB leader Boyko Borisov even distanced himself from it. On the other hand, everyone described it as "the only one possible." A paradoxical situation arose in which the government blamed the opposition for the budget, and rather the legacy of "wasteful" budgets left by "We Continue the Change (Produlzhavame Promianata) – Democratic Bulgaria" (PPDB).

The lack of clear political responsibility was compensated by a unique determination to have the budget adopted in the form in which it was submitted, without any adjustments. Bulgarian parliamentary history knows no such case. The budget procedure has always reflected the demands of opposition forces or interested professional communities. This time, the government clearly stated that they would not accept any proposal. To this lack of dialogue, we should add the intention to violate usual parliamentary practices and deadlines. The time for submitting additional proposals was reduced to a minimum, and the parliamentary committees tried to finish their work without

debates. The suggestion of the authorities that "we will do whatever we want" was starkly obvious and undisguised. The mandatory condition for consideration of the budget by the Tripartite Committee was circumvented. Employers and unions, who had been in a serious conflict weeks earlier, were arrogantly rejected by the majority and forced to stand together in their negative assessment. All this happened in the context of the mass belief that the leaders of the majority were about to appropriate huge assets through major deals, most notably the oil refinery in Burgas and the Bulgarian Sports "Totalizator" (Lottery). The law - adopted with astonishing speed - which places Lukoil's assets in Bulgaria under the control of a "special manager" in the person of the previous director of the National Revenue Agency, Rumen Specsov, and the plans announced for a concession of the "Totalizator" seemed to confirm the suspicions that favouring companies close to the government was being prepared. The natural result of this type of behaviour, much more reminiscent of Delyan Peevski's aggressive style than Boyko Borisov's manoeuvring practices, was a mobilisation for protest, initiated by the unions, and later taken up by others. It can be said that in exactly three weeks in November, the majority managed to unite everyone against themselves - opposition parties from across the spectrum, trade union and employers' organisations, and civic structures.

The resignation of the government. The wave of protests prompted GERB leader Boyko Borisov to announce that the government was withdrawing the draft budget and would submit another one, which would remove key ideas such as the increased dividend tax on companies, increased social security contributions, and the system for direct transfers to the revenue agency. The opposition, represented by PPDB, accused Borisov of insincerity because he had not actually initiated the withdrawal of the budget, but had launched three different budget options – preserving the current draft, a new draft with the three changes mentioned, and an extended budget, preserving the parameters of the previous year. In response, Borisov asked that the government be given a chance to stay, in order to avoid the chaos and uncertainty of

entering the eurozone. Another protest, even more numerous than the previous ones, led to the resignation of the cabinet.

With his words and actions, it was Borisov who predetermined the fall of his own government. First, he showed that the government are an irrelevant factor, because the leader of one of the parties in the majority decides whether and what budget will be voted on. Second, with his readiness for concessions, he revealed that the government are far from as unwavering as it seemed, and can be pressured even harder. Third, with his three budget options, he denounced the government's propaganda about "the only budget possible." And fourth, with his appeals for stability upon entering the eurozone, he refuted his and his government's genial claims that no chaos and uncertainty with the introduction of the euro were possible.

The resignation of the cabinet caught the coalition partners visibly unprepared. Some of them, for example from the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) and "There Is Such a People" ("Ima Takuv Narod" – ITN), explained literally until the day of the resignation that this was not "on the agenda" and that the government was successfully implementing its programme. The most important factor in the government, Delyan Peevski's MRF-NB, also insisted until the last moment that they would not allow the "street" to determine the fate of the cabinet. The government were not even given the chance to defend their results. Prime Minister Rosen Zhelyazkov announced his resignation minutes before the vote of no confidence on economic policy submitted by the opposition. Thus, the majority failed to express their confidence in their own executive branch. The inconsistency in political communication deepened. Initially, the ruling party explained that the reasons for public discontent were "economic" and related to certain budget clauses. Then Zhelyazkov himself insisted that the reasons were "value-based" and rooted in arrogant behaviour. And finally, threats were made that the reasons would turn out to be "social" and would escalate after the introduction of the euro.

The President. The Head of State, Rumen Radev, took advantage of his long-established image as a major critic of the ruling majority and was the first among the more important political figures to demand the resignation of the government on the night of the second major protest. The importance of his call was emphasised, by way of denial, by Delyan Peevski, perceived as a major factor in the government, who blamed the President for the instability that had arisen and warned PPDB that with their protests they were working not for themselves, but for someone else. In fact, Radev's position was more delicate than it seemed at first sight. The initiators and main speakers of the protests in no way wanted to recognise the Head of State as a political alternative

to the falling government. Accordingly, he, unlike in 2020, could not go "to the people". For this reason he preferred the path of institutional leadership (shown in the consultations with parliamentary parties before the handing over of an exploratory mandate for a new government).

The protests revealed both the ability of the divided oppositions to act together in extreme conditions and the insurmountability of their differences. And since Rumen Radev cannot claim to be a spokesman for either the protesting supporters of PPDB or those of "Vazrazhdane", he strives to take a unifying position without committing to extreme statements. For example, Radev did not use the decision of the Constitutional Court as a weapon, which declared unconstitutional the act of the Speaker of the Parliament Natalia Kiselova to prevent the initiative for a referendum on the eurozone from reaching the plenary hall. Radev also did not fail to show solidarity with PPDB's wishes for totally machine voting in the next elections. The President's point of view was most succinctly synthesised in his New Year's address to the nation: there is a "popular consensus against the mafia" that cannot be privatised by any political force. The thesis of the "popular consensus" sounds tempting because it opens doors to various electoral niches. However, here arises the biggest mystery, naturally focusing public attention on the President - whether he plans to personally use these electoral niches. Once again, in recent years, the topic of a potential presidential party has been on the agenda of parties and the media.

The protest. The large-scale protest wave that broke out in Bulgaria surprised observers and politicians. By the end of November, there was a widespread belief that the government was stabilised, and if any upheavals were possible, they would arise as a consequence of the introduction of the euro, but not before. The connection between mobilisation of the protests and membership in the eurozone was so widely exploited that it misled even major European media outlets, which in their reports from Sofia claimed that Bulgarians took to the streets as a sign of dissatisfaction with the European currency.

A careful analysis of the three protests, held on November 26th, December 2nd and December 10th respectively, reveals that both opponents of the euro and, to a much greater extent, its supporters were present. The budget procedure, which gave PPDB reason to call for a protest, is only the occasion for an outburst of deep-seated dissatisfaction with the general lack of change and path for development, which has characterised Bulgarian politics for years. The first protest united the ununitable – left and right, employers and unions, urban liberal strata and outraged nationalists. They did not stand under common banners, but they

did not boycott the protest either. Although PPDB were the undisputed initiators of the mobilization and although their supporters gave the appearance of the events, the protest was far more diverse and heterogeneous. In the first days, there were attempts by the opposition to present it as a "middle class revolt" that disagreed with the budget burdens on business. Later, a second attempt at categorisation was formed – a "generation Z protest", suggesting youthful energy against a tired and unpromising status quo. Both definitions are somewhat exaggerated,

but not completely fabricated. The presence of young people with average well-being was visible. The crisis PR of the authorities, ridiculing the protesters for not knowing what they want, not having produced leaders and not having a clear programme, turned out to be as unsuccessful as it was inadequate. In quantitative terms, the three protests showed an escalation and definitely surpassed the previous protest wave of 2020, allowing for comparisons with that of the the distant year of 2013. This is a force that every government must reckon with.

3

STATE OF THE PARTY SYSTEM

GERB-UDF. Boyko Borisov's party ended the government in which he was the mandate holder. On one hand, this is traditional behaviour of Borisov, who, faced with organised dissatisfaction from different directions, prefers to take a step back. On the other hand, it deepens the uncertainty of the backbone of the party that the leader knows what he is doing and is able to guarantee a long-term presence in power.

The situation after the partial local elections in Pazardzhik in October, when Borisov tried to take the political initiative and initiate a "reformatting" of the government in favour of GERB, but was brutally interrupted by Delyan Peevski, created the impression of a majority in which GERB is increasingly becoming an affiliated party of the New Beginning, personified by Peevski. From the point of view of Borisov's ambitions for power, such a situation is difficult to accept. It became clear that in this configuration Borisov would not be able to get out of Peevski's shadow. The first protest, directed mainly against Peevski's dominance in the government, ended with provocations, during which a GERB office was attacked. The provocateurs, whoever they served, showed Bulgarian society that Borisov and Peevski are together.

The decision to provoke the resignation of the cabinet was entirely in line with Borisov's personal political interest. The GERB leader did not like a governance formula in which he bears the main responsibility, but someone else leads the processes; which stimulates all opposition forces and social factors to unite against the cabinet; and which will be forced to endure criticism in the first months of the introduction of the euro. The most profitable thing for Borisov is early elections, which will relieve him of responsibility, will stop, at least temporarily, the trend of GERB personnel leaving for MRF-NB, and will open up new fields for him to manoeuvre. Some observers believed that Borisov would not dare to take such a move for fear of punitive action from Peevski. Such punitive action, however, is not very likely at this stage. Peevski is aware that he cannot do without GERB and Borisov, both now and after possible new elections. In this sense, Borisov is playing a safe game, or at least that is

what he thinks. His public role can easily be that of a well-intentioned patriarch, deterring all other parties from excessive and unreasonable actions, and taking care of the stability of the country.

"We Continue the Change - Democratic Bulgaria" (PPDB). The coalition, which until recently could not find a suitable political position to attack the majority, and which suffered from internal fragmentation, received an unexpected chance for ascendancy from the arrogant behaviour of the majority. PPDB gave the political start to the protests. However, it was evident that the scale of the mobilisation of the protests surprised them. The very first protest unanimously demanded the resignation of the cabinet, and PPDB continued to insist for some time afterwards that their main demand was the withdrawal of the budget. Only when it became obvious that they risked losing the support of the protesters were they forced to issue a call for resignation, and after President Radev and all the other opposition parties had already done so. The reason for their hesitation was rooted in concerns, which have not yet been refuted, that a political crisis and early elections could be capitalised on much more effectively by the President than by them. It would have been in the interest of PPDB for the government to remain, but completely delegitimised, like a new edition of the "Oresharski" cabinet of 2013-14, and under constant pressure from protests to be accommodating and willing to make concessions. However, the escalation of political tensions quickly ruled out this option.

The reluctance of PPDB to come up with clear and concise messages was overcome by the PP chairman, Asen Vassilev, who stepped into the role of informal leader of the entire coalition. In a television broadcast, he stated two important things – that the protest is not theirs, but of all Bulgarians, but they can represent it politically; and that the change in the governance model can only occur with an absolute majority of 121 MPs from PPDB in the future parliament. Ironic comments from politicians and the media immediately followed. But Vassilev's move was politically correct. Since PPDB is the factor that has been most involved

in the protests and which bears political responsibility for the fall of the government, they have the right to ask to govern, and the request for an absolute majority frees them from the unpleasant obligation of constantly explaining with whom they will form a coalition and with whom they will not.

The question from now on is whether PPDB will be able to maintain a moderate and responsible tone towards the election process, or will slide into their usual practice of self-aggrandisement and self-enclosure in a small urban liberal community, which would repel the majority of hesitant voters. The protest against the removal from the air of the popular journalist Maria Tsantsarova, the promotion in the media of dubiously prepared individuals from Generation Z with the aura of Komsomol activists, the claims that are suddenly arising that they represent Bulgarian Turks are examples of actions that can have the opposite effect.

"Vazrazhdane" ("Revival"). The stagnant ratings of the party were rightly a concern for their leadership, and the prospect of imminent elections made the task of overcoming this stagnation even more urgent. "Vazrazhdane" must convince voters, first, that they lead the nationalist space, despite the efforts of "Morality, Unity, Honour" (MECh) and "Velichie" ("Greatness") to challenge this role, and second, that they have a real chance not only of expanding their parliamentary representation, but also of governing the country. The party leader Kostadin Kostadinov actively participated in the protests to present himself as a visible part of the energy for change, and encouraged resistance to the euro despite its obvious futility. Kostadinov's narrative in the pre-election situation has already been publicly outlined, even before the other parties. In this narrative, the political space is divided into three camps: sovereignists, mafiosi and janissaries. The first are nationalists, represented by "Vazrazhdane", in which case the label "nationalists", too contested and devalued recently, has been replaced with a more general European concept, expressing the defence of national sovereignty against any interference from outside. "Mafiosi" is a collective expression for the previous rulers of the "Borisov-Peevski" model, while the term "janissaries", known from the history of the Ottoman Empire, in which children of Christian families were raised in the greatest hatred against their own compatriots, is used to designate the "false alternative" to the "mafiosi" personified by the pro-European PPDB. In Kostadinov's explanation, the country's political future will be decided by the clash of these three camps. Kostadinov offers a favourable scenario in which "Vazrazhdane" receive an absolute majority and govern according to their sovereignist understandings, and unfavourable ones, in which the crisis continues and the right decision is postponed, but not cancelled. The only uncertain element in this narrative is the place of President Radev. And although Kosta-

dinov attacks him with the accusation that he did not do enough to stop Bulgaria's membership in the eurozone, at the same time he hints that "Vazrazhdane" could govern in coalition with him. It is clear that the attitude towards Radev will be determined by the development of the political process.

Movement for Rights and Freedoms – New Beginning (MRF-NB). Within a year of the last parliamentary elections, MRF-NB achieved remarkable success, followed by facing a monumental failure. From the fourth political force with only 29 MPs, threatened with a "cordon sanitaire" by almost all the others, MRF-NB turned out to be the main factor in governance, controlling the government, parliamentary process, judiciary, local government and security services. The ruthlessness with which this happened had its price, and leader Delyan Peevski had to pay it. Just as in 2013, when his unyielding ambition to head the State Agency for National Security united the whole of Bulgarian society against him, so in 2025 he managed to achieve the same. The budget procedure was only the icing on the cake of a political pressure that – at least according to the public effects – frightened the political elites and shook society out of a state of apathy. At a time when only flexibility can be a political quality, Peevski is demonstrating a lack of any sense of political balance and public opinion. He organised counter-protests across the country in defence of the government and further angered the majority of people, who were given another reason to take to the square. And at the same time, he declared that the attack on him was an attack on Bulgarian Turks and Roma, thereby attempting in a completely unacceptable way to generate ethnic tension and identify with ethnic minorities in a party where this identification has always required the respective ethnic origin. The tactic did not work. Peevski was forced to accept both the resignation of the government and the new political situation that had arisen. MRF-NB probably have a significantly larger electoral scale than in October 2024, but they also bear significantly greater resistance from all directions. This complicates the party's task of being, if not a more important, then at least as important a factor in a future post-election government.

Bulgarian Socialist Party – United Left (BSP-UL). The Socialists are leaving the government with serious damage to their image. Their participation in the government can probably be justified by the need to get out of the endless cycle of early elections, and their role can be defended with examples of real achievements in the social sphere, but the image of a formation dependent on the MRF-NB and Delyan Peevski has permanently overshadowed all the potential positives. The belief was widely shared, including among red sympathisers, that all the important decisions of the party are made outside it.

The resignation of the government caused a strange political result. BSP openly assessed their government mandate as successful, but despite this, the entire Executive Bureau of the party, apart from the chairman, resigned. This is probably the first case in which the supposed success is punished with resignation. The decision of the Bureau led to criticism that we are observing a game of machinations – the resignations were submitted in order to attribute all the responsibility to the chairman Atanas Zafirov and, if necessary, to politically sacrifice him. Voices were heard, including those of former Minister of Justice Krum Zarkov and MP Ivan Petkov, that a more serious example of responsibility is needed, and that the main fault lies not in some administrative error or another, but in the depersonalisation of the party. It remains to be seen whether the forces of the status quo, which have distributed their influence at the top of the party elite, will retain their power and present some cosmetic changes such as a complete rebranding. But the problem of the political, and in particular the parliamentary, future of BSP is definitely on the agenda. In this sense, the position of the youth structure of the party, entitled "If we do not change, we will perish. Restart - here and now", adopted 6 months ago, deserves to be urgently considered by the outgoing leadership.

"There Is Such A People" ("Ima Takuv Narod – ITN"). The party greeted the resignation of the government with an overly emotional reaction. The leader of the Parliamentary Group Toshko Yordanov, in a special statement, threatened Bulgarian citizens that without this government they would experience chaos. The nearly one-year stay of ITN in power seemed to have created in them the belief that it would last forever. In recent months, the arrogant behaviour of politicians from the party has been impressive, directed not against the elite, as is the tradition in ITN circles, but against ordinary people. At the same time, ITN have never found an adequate response to the accusations that they promised to govern without Delyan Peevski, but in practice work together with him every day.

The fall of the cabinet has left ITN facing a complex situation. There is already internal turmoil, related, for example, to the departure of the popular MP Andrey Chorbanov and local coordinators in the provinces. Party leader Slavi Trifonov organised a video discussion with his deputies, in which, however, he failed to come up with a single initiative or piece of news, and repeated his usual criticisms of PPDB. The only effort to fix a political niche on the eve of the elections is the attempt to formulate the dilemma of "chalga vs. yellow cobblestones" {Editor's note: the yellow cobblestones are an area of approx. 60,000 sq. metres in the cultural centre of Sofia, paved with these stones, which were a gift from the Austro-Hungarian Empire}, in which ITN proudly identify themselves with the chalga and with the mass folk way of life and

taste against the ostentatious, snobbish elitism of the urban right.

Alliance for Rights and Freedoms (ARF). A founding meeting of the new ARF party, created by supporters of former MRF leader Ahmed Dogan, was held. The meeting elected Dogan as "honorary chairman with operational functions" and appointed a 17-member leadership with four co-chairs: Taner Ali, Dimitar Nikolov, Sevim Ali and Hayri Sadakov. A declaration was also adopted that emphasises Euro-Atlantic values, brings to the fore the rights and freedoms of the people and warns against the oligarchy and the conquered state. Instead of becoming a rating stimulus, however, the act of creating the party went almost unnoticed. The messages were abstract and boring, the leading figures unpopular, and Dogan himself only announced that "it is not good." The promises that authoritative figures such as MEP İlhan Küçük or former mayor of Kardzhali Hasan Azis, or representatives of the youth structure would join the leadership of the formation were not realised. The event was not capitalised on by the media. The ARF did not manage to use a single occasion to publicly launch the alternative they proposed, including the consultations with the president. The opinion, also registered by sociological surveys, that the "Dogan project" has neither energy, nor ideas, nor any particular chances for electoral rise, at least not in its initial format, is confirmed.

"Morality, Unity, Honour" (MECh). The party supports the most radical rhetoric in the Bulgarian parliament. "Revolution" is a standard word in its vocabulary. In parallel with the radical speech, radical behaviour is also observed, expressed in physical clashes in the plenary hall. It seems that the party leader Radostin Vassilev relies primarily on his sensational statements and actions to gain electoral support, especially with the toolkit of social networks. Until recently, he sought to balance between the liberal and nationalist oppositions, presenting himself as the only bridge between them. PPDB do cooperate with MECh in submitting votes of no confidence, but they clearly show that they do not consider MECh as a normal partner. The only thing that makes MECh acceptable to PPDB is the lack of clear pro-Russian attitudes. In every other respect, MECh are treated as part of the "reactionary" and "populist" nationalist camp.

In the looming pre-election situation, MECh are oriented precisely towards an unambiguous nationalist strategy. A systematic attack is underway, including revelations and recordings, against "Velichie", who are accused of not being a party, but a criminal group. "Vazrazhdane" are accused of being false nationalists in the interest of GERB and MRF-NB. Vassilev drastically increased his criticism of the European currency and defined himself as an "Orban-type Eurosceptic."

"Velichie". ("Greatness"). The party are yet another who have suffered heavy blows to their image. The other two nationalist formations, "Vazrazhdane" and MECh, are making joint efforts to marginalize "Velichie" and present them as a criminal business venture. The Anti-Corruption Commission and the prosecutor's office surprisingly seemed to confirm these allegations after a show-off action against the business project of "Velichie" leader Ivelin Mihaylov, the so-called Historical Park. During the action, seven people were arrested for money laundering and information was announced about a crime committed by a "per-

son with parliamentary immunity", namely Mihaylov. The investigation into the matter has been ongoing for years. To many observers, it seemed strange that action had been taken just on the eve of an election campaign. Mihaylov's defensive strategy is logical. He claims to be the biggest enemy of the ruling Borisov-Peevski tandem, because he is the only one of the party leaders who has criminal proceedings underway. But Mihaylov is also the only one of the party leaders to have unequivocally expressed support for President Radev and even announced that he intends to govern together with him after some future elections.

4

THE PROGRESSIVE POLITICAL AND SOCIAL AGENDA

The end of the year was marked by another wave of union activism. The two main trade unions in the country, the Confederation of Independent Trade Unions in Bulgaria (CITUB) and the Confederation of Labour "Podkrepa" ("Support"), were the first to launch protest actions against the draft state budget for 2026 and were quicker than the initiatives of the political parties. Two facts were indicative of the determination of the CITUB and "Podkrepa": that for the first time in years, the budget in its entirety, as well as the procedure for its adoption, was the subject of disagreement; and that the government's propaganda for the "most social" budget possible was categorically challenged. What is more, the unions also took

a principled protest position on a number of sectoral issues, including the costs for medical specialists and for those working in the social security system and in national statistics. Clear messages were formed that resonated strongly in the public sphere – namely, that the "social" nature of a budget is determined not only by the spending policy, but also by that of the revenues, and most of all, the tax and social security policy; and that the policy of income growth loses its effectiveness when it is unbalanced and creates disparities between professional groups. It can be said that the Bulgarian unions defended the working people to the highest degree, concentrating on the budget revisions instead of on the resignation of the government.

5

MAIN CONCLUSIONS, FORECASTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Bulgarian political circles, with the evident exception of PPDB, seem increasingly attracted by the prospect of Trumpism in politics, understood as a field for deals, including in relation to the war in Ukraine, and as the affirmation of local conservative-oligarchic elites, regardless of value or international legal considerations. The obvious difficulties of the EU to be present as a factor in global politics contribute to these sentiments. The example of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán is inspiring for many, if on the other hand the concerns about the loss of European support, so key to the legitimisation of most Bulgarian parties, were not overcompensated by the other side of the scales.

The fall of the Zhelyazkov cabinet is a product of political overestimation. Those in power wrongly absolutised the dominant attitudes against unending early elections and the lack of economic and budgetary stability. An accurate commentary appeared in the media, summarising the situation - the majority imagined that they had elected it to do what they wanted, and not simply so that there would be no elections. For an 11-month rule, the longest in 5 years, the government failed to gain authority, and Prime Minister Rosen Zhelyazkov did not manage for a second to alter his image as a "straw man", guided by figures outside the government itself and often publicly reprimanded by them.

The mass protests have brought to light a mobilisation of civil society, which is undoubtedly a positive sign and inspires hopes for change. However, it is difficult to assess whether a period is coming in which citizens will actually be a corrective to the government, and especially to their self-forgetfulness, or whether the energy of the protests will die down with the resignation of the cabinet. It must be admitted that this resignation is also a kind of chance for GERB and MRF-NB.

There is a great probability that they will control the future caretaker government without being held accountable, and will fuel people's fears of chaos, speculation and uncertainty in order to re-launch themselves as the only bearers of stability. It can be predicted from this moment that the election campaign will be filled with dirty tricks and political pressure.

The issue of voter turnout in the last quarter of a century in Bulgaria has always depended more on the emergence of a new significant political player and less on public discontent or attitudes of protest. This, of course, is a lesson from the past and by no means predestination for the future. There are already comments that protesters are not voters, and that in the elections looming in the second half of March we will witness a familiar electoral picture.

The biggest mystery continues to be the behaviour of President Rumen Radev. All pre-election calculations would be wrong if he decided to participate in the elections with a political party of his own. At this stage, no forecast can be made. On one hand, this is his chance to lead the public discontent against the entire parliamentary status quo. On the other hand, Radev seems to be giving signals that he wants to fully fulfill his constitutional duties as President. The forecast becomes even more complicated if we take into account the already existing hypotheses that the elections in March will not be the last of the year and that we are facing a new cycle of elections. In any case, a party of the President - whether now, in six months or in a year - will face the problem of political partners. In this respect, the President benefits from the fact that more and more political and public actors do not see a place for themselves in the current formula of the status quo and, although "with repugnance", would line up alongside him.

Entry into the eurozone has renewed people's concerns about speculation and impoverishment, against which even the hypothetical authority of a regular government no longer stands. The ruling majority, despite having every opportunity to do so, refused to adopt a new budget for 2026, and thus condemned the people to frozen incomes amid rising inflation. Prime Minister Zhelyazkov's warnings about future "social protests" do not sound completely abstract. But protests against whom and for what? In the conditions of a nascent political crisis, social discontent can be far less controlled and manipulated in a suitable direction than those previously in power apparently believe.

Months of uncertainty lie ahead, in which various scenarios are possible.

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.

IMPRINT

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

Commercial use of all media, published by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), is not permitted without the written consent of the FES.

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.

bulgaria.fes.de

The views expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung or of the organization for which the author works.

POLIT-BAROMETER

Year 25 Issue 6
November-December



The resignation of the Zhelyazkov cabinet has put the country on the verge of more pre-term elections.



Mass civil protests have reaffirmed the illegitimacy of the governance model embodied by Boyko Borisov and Delyan Peevski.



Bulgaria enters the eurozone amid conditions of political crisis and social fears.

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