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1.

The dynamics of foreign policy

The processes in the first two months of the year have been largely determined by the development of the political crisis in the country, which have led to changes in the heads of the three main institutions involved in foreign policy – the President, the Council of Ministers and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The context of the election campaign, which is now beginning, further increases the tension in foreign policy statements and the atmosphere of political criticism towards them.

The anniversary of the war in Ukraine. Four years after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, leading Bulgarian politicians have made statements that have symbolic significance for their geopolitical positioning. The new caretaker Prime Minister Andrey Gyurov reaffirmed Bulgarian support for Ukraine, stressed that Ukraine is currently fighting not for itself, but for the freedom of Europe and Bulgaria, and pointed out that the one who is losing the war is Russian President Vladimir Putin. The new Foreign Minister Nadezhda Neynsky announced her intention to visit Ukraine in March. The new President, Iliana Yotova, has labelled Russia an aggressor and insisted on finding a peaceful solution to the conflict. In practice, these statements reproduce the previous visions of the executive branch and the presidential institution. Gyurov and Neynsky echo the strong pro-Ukrainian rhetoric of former Prime Minister Rosen Zhelyazkov and former Foreign Minister Georgy Georgiev, while Yotova follows the interpretation of former President Rumen Radev, which is more nuanced than that of the government and more focused on the prospects for peace.

The Munich Security Conference. The traditional February Munich Forum this year was expected to send signals about the future of transatlantic relations. Political changes in Bulgaria provoked an unconventional formula for the participation of the country, in which both President Iliana Yotova and the outgoing Prime Minister Rosen Zhelyazkov decided simultaneously and separately to join. The messages of the two, although not contradictory, embodied two different approaches. Yotova explicitly supported the efforts of Europe to become a strong subject in global politics and defended the concept of “strategic independence”, launched by many European leaders, but most vividly and consistently by French President Emmanuel Macron. Zhelyazkov, for his part, declared himself in favour of strengthening Europe’s partnership with the United States, through an ever-increasing European contribution to the overall balance.

The (semi)participation of Bulgaria in Donald Trump’s Peace Council. US President Donald Trump’s initiative for a Peace Council began as a peace plan for the Gaza conflict, but quickly expanded to an idea for an “alternative UN” committed to peace around the world. Most leading European countries refused to participate, due to the unclear status of the new structure, personally subordinate to Trump. Within the EU, only Hungary and Bulgaria declared a desire for membership. In light of the existing tension between Europe and the US, Bulgaria seemed to have taken on a “dissident” role in the Union. However, Bulgarian participation has begun to look uncertain, half-hearted and conditional – neither fully aligned with Washington (as is the case, for example, with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán) nor fully aligned with Brussels (as is the case, for example, with French President Emmanuel Macron). This geopolitical ambiguity, at least at first glance, is explained by the political turmoil in Bulgaria. The invitation to join the Peace Council was extended to President Rumen Radev, but he declined it on the grounds that he was resigning and would not be President. Later, Prime Minister Rosen Zhelyazkov, also resigning, stated that Bulgaria accepted the invitation, but would not join the mandatory fund of \$1 billion per member state of the Council, and ratification of membership would be postponed to the next National Assembly. The inaugural meeting of the Peace Council in Washington on February 19 scheduled by Trump was pushed aside by President Yotova (because she had to be in Bulgaria to issue a decree on the caretaker government), by Zhelyazkov (because he had to hand over power to his successor Gyurov), and by Gyurov (because he had to take over from his predecessor Zhelyazkov). The composition of the Bulgarian delegation in Washington, approved by the Zhelyazkov government, was of the lowest possible level, compared to all the founding countries: secondary officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the acting head of the embassy in the United States. For now, the issue of ratification and entry into force of the treaty has been postponed. The impression is that the hesitant Bulgarian position is both an expression of the state leadership’s desire to be with Europe and the United States at the same time, and of another underestimated circumstance: the Director General of the Peace Council, Nikolay Mladenov, envisaged by the Trump team, is a Bulgarian diplomat. It would be extremely illogical for an international organisation to be led by a citizen of a country that does not participate in this organisation at all.

2.

The development of the political situation

Rumen Radev – from president to party leader. President Radev's entry into party politics is the big political news of the period under review. Radev finished handing out exploratory mandates for forming a government after the resignation of the "Zhelyazkov" cabinet and chose this moment, exactly one year before the end of his own presidential term, to resign from office and announce his intention to establish his own political party.

On one hand, this is one of the most long-awaited events in Bulgaria. There has been a lot of talk about a party of the President since the time of the major protests against the oligarchic model in the summer of 2020. The question as to whether there would be such a party has been on the agenda in media discussions before each of the numerous early parliamentary elections to date. Radev's request today comes at a time of serious instability in the party system: failure in the governance of the so-called status quo parties, GERB and the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF), as well as their junior partners from the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) and "There is Such a People" ("Ima Takuv Narod" - ITN); uncertain internal relations in the coalition "We Continue the Change ("Produlzhavame Promianata") - Democratic Bulgaria (PPDB); serious contradictions and mutual attacks in the so-called nationalist camp, represented by "Vazrazhdane" ("Revival"), "Morality, Unity, Honour" (MECh) and "Velichie" ("Greatness"). Against this background, Radev stands out with a remarkably high rating, the highest among Bulgarian politicians; with the claim that he is the only one of them who has been consistent and principled throughout the long years of his presidential mandates; and with the concentrated expectations of many Bulgarians that he will put an end to a tired status quo, widely suspected not only of corruption and lawlessness, but also of political, legislative and budgetary impotence.

It is not easy to determine the programmatic parameters of Radev's future political project. We only know the name, "Progressive Bulgaria", and the fact that for now it unites two small social democratic formations and one other movement. It looks like Radev's conscious strategy is not to give information until the last possible moment, in order to keep his competitors in the election race in suspense, but probably also in order not to repel potential voters. This enigma is also hardly surprising. Various groups of Bulgarian citizens look to Radev with hope, each of which has its own expectations and its own reasons for believing that the former President is their representative. A thoroughly developed platform could dissuade at least some of these groups from their conviction. A month and a half before the elections, it was still unknown who the main figures in the future party would be, nor what its name would be. The media

could only suspect that former presidential advisors Ivo Hristov and Dimitar Stoyanov, former spokesman for a caretaker cabinet Anton Kutev, or media commentator Slavi Vassilev were expressing the President's point of view in their interviews. Radev's only public appearance after his resignation has been in an interview on national television, where he largely stuck to his theses, which were known from earlier. And yet this statement hints at a certain, albeit very general political profile. Messages were conveyed in three main directions: first, a call for "true integration" into the European Union, without oligarchy; second, an orientation towards a sovereign foreign policy that respects national dignity; and third, a negation of the social inequalities that tear Bulgarian society apart. With certain caveats, these are messages to voters of the urban right, nationalists and socialists. The name of the presidential formation, "Progressive Bulgaria," indicates a special emphasis on the last political space, the left, without implying neglect of the first two, which, at least at this stage, are also broader. It is no coincidence that circles sympathetic to the former President are talking about possible future partnerships with PPDB, "Vazrazhdane", BSP, and even GERB. It looks like the fan is being deliberately kept as wide open as possible.

Sociological surveys even before the registration of parties and lists and before the start of the actual campaign indicate electoral support for Radev between a quarter and a third of voters, with the number one million being mentioned more and more often, with extrapolations to just over three million voters. Critics of the former President warn that without any information about names, faces and ideas, it is difficult to make predictions. This is, of course, true. In percentage terms, these will probably be among the most unpredictable elections. The subject of the great dispute among analysts is indicative – whether Radev will be able to raise a "wave" or not manage to do so. The term "wave" in this case refers to the ability to inspire and motivate a huge number of voters dissatisfied with the existing social, economic and political situation in Bulgaria; while the alternative to the "wave" would be a shift between the electorates of the previously functioning parties.

President Yotova's first steps. Radev's resignation led to the accession of the hitherto Vice President Iliana Yotova to the position of Head of State. From the very beginning, Yotova was faced with the task of nominating an acting Prime Minister. According to the amendments to the Constitution adopted in 2023, the President can choose from ten individuals holding senior state positions. Yotova aptly warned that she would not bear political responsibility for this acting government, since she has no say either in the personage of the Prime Minister, as

he would be according to her understanding, or in the ministers, appointed solely by the candidate for Prime Minister.

During the talks with the potential candidates from the constitutional list, five expressed their agreement to form a government: the deputy governor of the Central Bank, Andrey Gyurov, the deputy ombudsman, Maria Filipova, the chairman of the Chamber of Accounts, Dimitar Glavchev, and his two deputies, Margarita Nikolova and Silvia Kadreva. Yotova also initiated consultations with the parliamentary parties, and after they ended, on February 19th, she appointed Gyurov as Prime Minister. The President's behaviour was criticised on three fronts: first, that by nominating Gyurov, a man with a bright party biography as the parliamentary leader of "We Continue the Change", she gave power to the PPDB; second, that she unnecessarily delayed the talks and consultations in order to give Radev time to prepare his own party; and third, that she did not show any political initiative.

Yotova has a convincing response to each of the criticisms. First of all, Gyurov, a controversial figure in himself, was the candidate named by the largest number of the parliamentary parties consulted, namely PPDB, "Vazrazhdane", the Alliance for Rights and Freedoms (ARF), MECh, and "Velichie". Moreover, after the winter protests led to the overthrow of the Zhelyazkov cabinet, it makes political sense for the head of the caretaker government not to belong to the parties supporting that cabinet – and of the five potential candidates, only Gyurov meets this condition. Secondly, the impression of a deliberate delay in the procedure is completely erroneous. The parties making such accusations should know this very well. According to the Constitution and the Electoral Code, the caretaker government is appointed exactly two months before the election date. Yotova took office on January 23rd, and was supposed, again in accordance with the constitutional order, to hold talks with ten potential candidates for Prime Minister, consult with nine parliamentary groups, nominate a caretaker Prime Minister, wait for him to form a government and issue a decree. It was absolutely impossible for this to happen within six days, by January 29th. For this reason the March 29th election date was called off. April 5th is the Orthodox Palm Sunday, which also coincides with the school holidays, and April 12th is Orthodox Easter. Therefore, the first realistic date for the elections was April 19th, as it happened, from which in turn it follows that the procedure had to be concluded precisely on February 19th. And thirdly, Yotova's active role as a corrective to the government cannot be underestimated. Literally a day after the formation of the caretaker government, she actually demanded, from the television screen, the resignation of the newly appointed caretaker Deputy Prime Minister for the Organisation of Fair Elections, Stoil Tzitzelkov, due to problems with his judicial past. The resignation came to pass a few hours later. The attack on Tzitzelkov from many other places was strong, but it was the President who demonstrated power and influence in this case.

The challenges facing Yotova are yet to come. For now, most political parties, with the exception of MECh, have publicly refrained from harsh criticism or attacks against her. The reasons for such a lull seem twofold: some of the parties hope for the

favour of the presidential institution in the upcoming months of political turmoil; while others are counting on splitting the Radev-Yotova tandem and turning the President against her predecessor.

The new caretaker government. The composition of the "Gyurov" cabinet reveals different selection mechanisms. The foreign and military ministries have been given to well-known figures who, with their very biographies, must attest to Sofia's Euro-Atlantic loyalty. Others are representatives of the "second echelon" of PPDB, who served as deputy ministers or senior administrators in the cabinets of Kiril Petkov or Nikolay Denkov. Two of the ministers are biographically connected to the old MRF of Ahmed Dogan. Perhaps the largest group are activists of non-governmental organisations specialising in the rule of law or in the fight against corruption, and publicly popular with their initiatives against the current model of governance in Bulgaria. In general, the overall composition speaks of the closeness of the cabinet to urban liberal circles, whose most influential political representative is indeed perceived as PPDB.

Opponents of the cabinet, both from the circles around GERB and MRF, and in the nationalist camp, tirelessly try to attribute this government to PPDB and to shift all potential negatives onto the coalition – various scandals with the biographies of one minister or another or his advisors, suspicions of conflict of interest, even suspicions of corruption. The most powerful focus of the attack falls on the so-called. "Petrohan" case. This is a tragic incident near a hut in the Balkan Mountains, in which six people, including a minor, were found shot. The investigations, carried out by state authorities and disputed by a number of commentators, point to something like a sect that was engaged in informal education of students and around which it is assumed that there were cases of paedophilia. Moreover, it is known that there were prominent figures in PPDB, including former Minister Borislav Sandov and Sofia Mayor Vasil Terziev, as well as people from the media and business, considered to be sympathetic to this coalition, who were in contact with the deceased and visited them, and permits for actions and possession of weapons were given to them as a priority by the institutions during the Petkov and Denkov cabinets. Society still does not have enough complete information on the subject, but the propaganda campaign linking the Petrohan incident with PPDB is massive and seems to be successful.

In their preliminary statements upon taking office, Prime Minister Gyurov and his colleagues outlined a relatively broad agenda for the caretaker executive. After that, the main excuses heard were, for example, the increase in water and electricity prices, which could be explained by a conspiracy against the government. However, in the first two weeks of its operation, one trend has been clearly visible - large-scale changes in personnel, concentrated in the bodies related to the election process. In just a few days, all 28 regional governors, the Secretary General of the Ministry of Internal Affairs Miroslav Rashkov, and almost all directors of regional departments of the Ministry of Internal Affairs have been replaced. Efforts have been made, unsuccessful so far, to remove the acting Prosecutor General Borislav Sarafov and also the interim chairman of the State

Agency for National Security Denyo Denev. The impression is that the cabinet wants to completely replace the people who, in one institutional capacity or another, were responsible for the conduct of the elections before. The general accusation against these people, which, let us emphasise, is not personalised anywhere, is that they have patronised the schemes for controlled

and bought votes and have favoured the relatively high election results of GERB and MRF. The two parties that have taken the brunt define the changes as a “purge” that is supposed to give an artificial electoral bonus to PPDB. The mutual accusations between the two camps are an important aspect of the rhetoric of the starting election campaign.

3.

The state of the party system

GERB-UDF. The largest political force are heading towards early elections with their traditional rhetoric, opposing stability to chaos. GERB have been organising similar campaigns for the past 5 years. This time the situation is different. The participation of former President Radev in the elections creates the real possibility that GERB will not only fail to be the first party, but will also have much less electoral support than the party that do come first. This has never happened to the party since their establishment 20 years ago. Their leader Boyko Borisov has so far been cautious in his appearances and has not yet developed his personal strategy for the elections, but the GERB National Assembly scheduled for March 22nd, which is to elect a new party leadership, hints at intentions to “tighten the ranks” through changes in personnel.

In the eyes of public opinion, GERB not only embody the status quo, but they are beginning to resemble a political party in decline. The allegations that some of GERB’s local structures and local clientele may change their party loyalties have been widely discussed in the media. The case of former Energy Minister Delyan Dobrev is curious. The perception has been created that he was considering leaving GERB, something that would have been the first such event in many years, but he backed out at the last minute after a personal conversation with Borisov. Publicly available information does neither allows this hypothesis to be confirmed nor rejected, but it fits into the general downward trend.

“We Continue the Change (“Produzhavame Promianata”) - Democratic Bulgaria” (PPDB). The coalition lost much of the initial political momentum it had gained as the main initiator of the large-scale protests of December last year. Radev’s project undermined their claim to be the main carrier of change, and their proximity to Gyurov’s cabinet exposed them to all attacks against the current executive branch. Paradoxically, it turns out that the election campaign is beginning with a focus on criticism of the opposition of the previous government, and not on the ruling party and their actions. The Petrohan coalition is a negative label that can hardly be completely erased by April 19th.

PPDB are being preserved for the elections as a political format, although some contradictions between PP and DB have not been completely ironed out. PP are trying to capitalise on their image from the protests as much as possible by launching some of the most active protesting youth on the lists, as well as other prominent protest figures such as the head of the civil organisation “Justice for All” Velislav Velichkov. However, all this is happening against the backdrop of comments that the leader of PP, Assen Vassilev, instead of de-escalating, is introducing new

divisions by removing popular names from the same lists - former co-chair of the party Kiril Petkov, Lena Borislavova, Daniel Lorer and Yavor Bozhankov. Regardless, the big problem facing PPDB is the unclear attitude towards Radev. While some circles in the coalition remain silent, others attack Radev for his alleged pro-Russian views, and still others see hopes for future partnerships. This uncertainty is also creating problems for adequate pre-election positioning.

“Vazrazhdane” (“Revival”). The party seem to be one of the most threatened by the electoral rise of Rumen Radev’s political project. With his positions in favour of a referendum on the euro and against military aid to Ukraine, combined with calls for national dignity and sovereign politics, the former President impresses the understandings of many “Vazrazhdane” supporters. Probably worried about an impending electoral collapse (already registered in the sociological surveys), the leader of “Vazrazhdane” Kostadin Kostadinov began a fierce campaign to “expose” Radev. The former Head of State was accused of hypocritically proposing a referendum and distancing himself from Kiev, while in fact serving the American position in Bulgaria - namely the position of the Democratic Party and billionaire George Soros, - while his future party was characterised as an “engineering project” that should return power to the liberals from PPDB. “Vazrazhdane” actively used the case of American military aircraft stationed at Sofia Airport to provoke fears that Bulgaria would be drawn into a war with Iran under the benevolent silence of Radev and President Yotova.

The legislative initiative of “Vazrazhdane” to drastically limit the vote of Bulgarians abroad, however, encourages accusations against Kostadinov himself - that he serves the interests of MRF and Delyan Peevski. Such criticisms are regularly voiced by his opponents in the nationalist camp by those such as MECh and “Velichie”. The political perspective of “Vazrazhdane” at this stage is unclear, although entry into the next parliament seems certain.

Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF). Delyan Peevski’s party has decisively changed its previous strategy, in which the leader boldly gave instructions to ministers and handed out verdicts from the screen, while state institutions seemed to try to carry out his instructions more quickly. After Radev’s resignation from the presidential post, Peevski left the media spotlight. This is rather a successful decision, because a significant part of the dissatisfaction with the previous governance model was due to the impression of the arrogant omnipotence of the MRF leader. It can be considered that the behaviour of the caretaker cabinet deals heavy blows to the networks of influence of the

MRF – the prosecutor’s office, the interior ministry, the regional governors, the non-functioning anti-corruption commission and the director general of the national television. For now, MRF have reacted with silence, but they are unlikely to passively accept their deepening isolation in the political process. The changes to the Electoral Code seem to be one of Peevski’s last victories – limiting the vote outside the EU will also reduce the voting of Bulgarian citizens in Turkey, and in their majority they have until now supported the MRF’s competitors from Ahmed Dogan’s party.

Bulgarian Socialist Party – United Left (BSP-UL). The party enters the election campaign with new leadership and a new clearly defined left platform. The fall of the previous chairman Atanas Zafirov seemed to be predetermined. After the resignation of the Zhelyazkov cabinet, the Executive Bureau of the party, apart from Zafirov, collectively resigned as a sign of taking responsibility. After this act, the question of responsibility could not bypass the highest-ranking socialist. Later, the National Council of BSP twice and with a large majority announced the convening of a party congress with the election of a chairman in February. The first time Zafirov tried to postpone the congress until after the elections, and the second time to remove the election of a chairman from the agenda, but both times he was found to blame. Zafirov’s statement that he would not run for MP seemed like a retreat, not a compromise. In the end, he realised that the situation was unsalvageable, and rightly chose not to nominate his candidacy at the congress. Zafirov’s political activity over the past year did not actually provide grounds for the positive assessment of the majority of his party members. BSP entered into a joint government with Boyko Borisov’s GERB despite the strong reservations of many rank-and-file socialists. And if the coalition could find some justification in the need for political stability in the country, then the depersonalisation of BSP in the shadow of Delyan Peevski during this government was difficult to understand. Zafirov won his chairmanship a year and a half ago with two promises: that he would return the collective leadership to BSP after the sole power of Korneliya Ninova; and that he would restore the frozen relations with President Radev. Neither promise was kept. Zafirov, as Zhelyazkov’s deputy prime minister, determined the party line at his own discretion, and according to popular belief – in constant coordination with Peevski. And instead of warming relations with Radev, BSP began to vote together with MRF on all proposals directed against Radev and to reject any of his vetoes. Zafirov’s constant argument that he was always ready to sacrifice the party’s interest for that of the state, sounded politically absurd. Anyone could ask themselves what the point is of the existence of a party whose interest is always in conflict with the state’s interest.

The preparations for the congress were marked by the spontaneous nomination of former Justice Minister Krum Zarkov by the local party organisations. Zarkov eventually won the election for the new chairman in the first round with 416 votes as opposed to 302 for his competitor, the former Social Minister Borislav Gutsanov. Zarkov’s victory was due to several factors. Although he does not belong to any faction in the party, he is well known for his energy, consistency and authentic socialist views.

He undoubtedly raised hopes among the congress delegates that he could pull BSP out of their unenviable electoral situation, in which their chances of entering the new National Assembly are by no means guaranteed. Zarkov embodies the need for a new image for the party, alien to suspicions of dependences. At the same time, he worked closely with Rumen Radev and left him, thus creating the impression that in the future he could partner with Radev’s party, as is the desire of many socialists, but he would not turn the party into a state-backed structure in cahoots with Radev’s.

Zarkov’s election is indeed a chance for BSP to survive politically. But this chance is not to be taken for granted. There are circles within BSP that seem publicly determined to sabotage the new chairman. Despite Zarkov’s call, eight BSP MPs, including Zafirov, rejected President Yotova’s veto on the changes to the Electoral Code. The solid support for Gutsanov at the congress, which expresses not so much individual preference for the candidate as disagreement with Zarkov, is indicative that some of the socialist elites are not gripped by an instinct for political self-preservation and do not wish to consolidate around the platform of their new chairman, even at the cost of electoral failure. In the short period before the elections, Zarkov can only try to convince the disappointed, tired and hesitant socialists that Rumen Radev’s party is not a new edition of the leftist idea in Bulgaria, and that they must give trust to BSP again in order to have a greater opportunity to realise their goals and ideas in the parliamentary process.

“There is Such a People” (“Ima Takuv Narod” - ITN). The party suffered a lot of electoral damage due to its participation in the “Zhelyazkov” cabinet and now, according to data from sociological agencies, they are collecting support insufficient to enter the next parliament. ITN are entering the election campaign with the ambition of restoring their political weight by representing conservative attitudes in Bulgarian society. For the first time since they were founded, ITN have publicly defined their ideological profile: “a right-wing, traditional, conservative party”. As their priorities for the next parliament, they have listed stopping “paedophile sects”, preventing gay marriages, extradition of illegal immigrants, and a balanced budget.

In practice, however, the impression is created that ITN acts as an informal mouthpiece for Delyan Peevski’s politically isolated MRF. The relentless attack on PPDB and their actions, the criticism of the newly appointed caretaker cabinet and the demand for the resignations of its ministers, the accusations of producing chaos and backstage agreements with former President Radev were a traditional element of Peevski’s rhetoric until the beginning of the year, and since then - of the media associated with MRF. In the political space at the current stage, it is ITN that are broadcasting them.

Alliance for Rights and Freedoms (ARF). The party was officially registered under the name Alliance for Rights and Freedoms on the eve of the election campaign. However, the chronic lack of political activity and clear messages logically assigns ARF a place at the bottom of the rating tables.

The party received the third mandate to form a regular government from President Radev. Radev himself explained his decision with the thesis that ARF were to a large extent a “victim” of the previous oligarchic model, overthrown by the authorities with the large protests in December. Later, figures such as Hasan Ademov and Korman Ismailov, who were previously associated with Ahmed Dogan, were proposed for Gyurov’s caretaker cabinet. This act gave rise to accusations that Gyurov, probably in agreement with Radev, was trying to revive the declining Dogan formation. It is difficult to assess whether Radev really intends to open up new chances for ARF, or vice versa, with the help of ostentatious gestures to attract their voters to his future political project. In any case, if ARF have any perspective in politics, it would be realised not thanks to their own efforts, which are distinguished by complete helplessness, but only under the condition of a crisis in the new MRF of Delyan Peevski.

“Morality, Unity, Honour” (MECh). Radostin Vassilev’s party, which according to current sociological surveys is close to the 4% barrier for entering parliament, is moving towards radical behaviour. The MECh leader got into a physical confrontation with MRF MPs in the plenary hall of the National Assembly, and during the consultations for a caretaker cabinet he caused a

public scandal by calling President Yotova part of the oligarchic-totalitarian model, demanding her resignation and emphasising how important it is for Bulgaria to shake off its communist past. All these actions, along with a series of acute media statements, seem to indicate a pre-election strategy based on two pillars: first, the rudeness that should impress voters, dissatisfied with the slow pace of political processes after the major winter protests; and second, the anti-communism that is entering the terrain of “Blue Bulgaria” and seeking to either attract their sympathisers or themselves as a partner.

“Velichie”. Ivelin Mihaylov’s party for the third time in a row seem to have minimal chances of entering a future National Assembly. Judging from sociological surveys, there is a serious outflow, which is probably due to Rumen Radev’s entry into party politics. As in previous cases, we must be cautious in our final assessments. For now, “Velichie” have decided to present themselves as the only real opponent of the status quo, which is the reason why they have become a victim of this same status quo. The examples that Mihaylov invariably gives include a beaten local coordinator of the party, a broken Sofia office, and numerous anonymous threats. At the same time, “Velichie”’s activity on social networks is extremely high and suggests parliamentary ambition.

4.

The Progressive Political and Public Agenda

The year began under the conditions of two circumstances, in themselves charged with tension: Bulgaria's entry into the euro-zone and the preservation of last year's state budget as "prolonged". Taken together, these two circumstances are associated with both inflationary pressure and the state's limited resources to protect vulnerable groups and regulate growing inequalities. It should be noted here that in her consultations with parliamentary parties, President Yotova invariably spoke of a "price shock", and what is even more interesting, none of the parties objected to the formulation.

The unions were the main players who sought to put these topics on the political agenda. They had the following arguments: that it was not wage growth that caused inflation; that public regulators were practically ineffective in the current situation; that increased prices were exacerbating regional disparities and inequalities; and that the prolonged budget was unable to create compensatory mechanisms for large groups of the population. It remains to be seen to what extent the caretaker government is sensitive to these problems, which are currently only being postponed.

5.

Main conclusions, forecasts and recommendations

Bulgaria's entry into the eurozone was preceded by numerous concerns and forecasts of social tension. It can be said that from an administrative point of view, the common currency was implemented rather smoothly, and within a month this process was channelled with the joint efforts of the institutions, especially the banks, and the citizens themselves. However, the social question mark has not been completely erased. Inflationary trends have not been broken, indeed, quite the contrary, and the beginning of the election campaign and the concentration of hopes in a new political player may rather postpone more mass manifestations of discontent.

The procedure for forming a caretaker government has once again exposed the genetic defects of the changes to the Constitution, which have deprived the President of the ability to influence the executive branch at times of political crisis. It is becoming increasingly obvious to all participants in the political process that the time is approaching for the return of the old constitutional texts.

Andrey Gyurov's cabinet is faced with the task of organising fair elections under the pressure of widely circulated accusations that it serves a specific political force in the form of PPDB. Without looking for any deep and complex motives in President Iliana Yotova's decision to stop at Gyurov, we can assume that the cabinet will turn out to be more of a burden than an advantage for the electoral strategies of PPDB. The first steps of this cabinet clearly speak of a definite intention to disrupt the vote manipulation schemes in place so far, but it is precisely such steps that provoke a massive campaign to compromise PPDB, so that in the end the winner of the clash between camps will be Rumen Radev's new project, which will simply take advantage of the cleared political terrain.

The elections on April 19th are shaping up to be a turning point for the entire Bulgarian party system. The effect of the

emergence of a new political force, headed by former President Rumen Radev, will certainly affect, albeit to varying degrees, all the previous participants in the inter-party competition. At this stage, specific forecasts cannot be formulated. It seems that the dominant view among commentators is that Radev's formation will undoubtedly win the elections, and with a large lead over the others, but this will not be enough for an absolute majority and independent one-party rule. Many factors remain in question, including the fate of the small parties gravitating around the barrier for entering parliament. The big challenge for Radev is not to accumulate support from voters who see in him a solution to the problems of Bulgaria's roadlessness of recent years, but to mobilise in his favour people who would like to use him to punish the entire political status quo, including people who systematically do not vote. A possible success on this second line would indeed form a huge electoral capacity. The interest in Radev's future partners in the next National Assembly is understandable. Here too, any calculations are preliminary, but it is already clear that there are no explicitly closed doors. Radev's style, at least for now, is more about building bridges to electorates than negotiating with their party representatives. The lack of clarity regarding the platform and policies of the new formation is unlikely to be completely dispelled in the election campaign, even if such documents are published. But it can be assumed that the basic parameters of the country's foreign policy orientation will not be challenged.

For the first time in the years of the new Bulgarian democracy, the country faces the danger of being left without representation of the left wing in parliament. The new leadership of the Socialist Party probably realises that its only chance is to convince as many left-wing people in Bulgaria as possible that Radev's project cannot realise the leftist agenda, but that this project is a future partner in a new political environment, freed from the stifling dependencies of recent years.

About the author

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About this study

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Polit-Barometer



The early parliamentary elections in Bulgaria scheduled for April 19th are a turning point for the development of the entire party system.



A clear electoral dominance of the newly created “Progressive Bulgaria” of former President Rumen Radev is emerging.



Bulgaria’s entry into the eurozone went smoothly from an administrative point of view, but the social consequences are not yet fully outlined.

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