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Polit-Barometer

Year 26 Issue 2

March 1st – May 8th

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1.

The dynamics of foreign policy

The Agreement with Ukraine. The signing of a 10-year security agreement between Bulgaria and Ukraine came as a political surprise, polarising attitudes in Bulgaria. The idea for this agreement had been floated a year and a half earlier, but the acting Prime Minister at that moment, Dimitar Glavchev, had postponed it, arguing that a regular parliament was needed. However, the 51st National Assembly did not take any action on the issue after that. This was the context of the unexpected and unannounced visit of the acting Prime Minister Andrey Gyurov and his delegation to Kiev, which led to the signing of the act in question. The ongoing election campaign provoked and intensified opposing political reactions. While the coalition between “We Continue the Change” (“Produzhavaame Promianata”) and “Democratic Bulgaria” (PPDB) welcomed the document, which they said affirmed the Bulgarian contribution to the common European support for the Ukrainian cause, President Iliana Yotova, the leader of the most influential party “Progressive Bulgaria” (PB) Rumen Radev and the leader of the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) Krum Zarkov avidly contested it. The critics’ reasons were more procedural than substantive – that it was unacceptable for a caretaker cabinet with a very short horizon to bind the country internationally, without political and expert debate and without consulting any of the other institutions. Prime Minister Gyurov justified himself by saying that the Agreement was not an international treaty, but a memorandum of intent that did not oblige Bulgaria to anything specific and therefore did not require parliamentary ratification. In this way, the Bulgarian position once again became ambiguous, and the same uncertainty was transferred to the idea of a common European loan in favour of Ukraine, guaranteed by the member states of the European Union (EU).

The Peace Council. The caretaker government refused to give a go to Bulgarian membership in the so-called Peace Council –

the initiative of US President Donald Trump, which received the support (and signature) of the former Bulgarian Prime Minister Rosen Zhelyazkov. On this occasion, in the last weeks of the outgoing 51st National Assembly, an inter-institutional clash occurred. In an effort to legitimise their pro-American vision, GERB-UDF, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) and “There is Such a People” (“Ima Takuv Narod” - ITN) voted on a resolution obliging the government to submit Bulgarian membership in the Peace Council to parliament for ratification. Gyurov, at that time on a visit to Brussels, stated that he would not comply with the decision because of its unconstitutionality. According to Gyurov, it is for the Council of Ministers to consider whether to submit international treaties for ratification to the National Assembly, and not for the National Assembly to decide instead of it. The case has not yet been continued. The only result was that Gyurov practically publicly joined the thesis of a divergence between the EU and the US on issues in the Middle East.

Continuity. Disagreements between the caretaker cabinet, the presidential institution and political parties on foreign policy did not prevent a striking manifestation of continuity from emerging, affecting energy connectivity in Eastern Europe in the context of geopolitical crises and deficits of raw material supplies. We are talking about the Vertical Gas Corridor project, which is approaching the final phase of implementation, and in which Bulgaria not only participates, but has also carried out the vast majority of the work on its territory. This project, which at least visibly meets the agreement of both Washington and Brussels, was defended by both caretaker Prime Minister Gyurov in his conversation with US Secretary of State Marco Rubio, and by President Yotova at the summit of the European Political Community in Yerevan.

2. Development of the political situation

The election campaign. The campaign for the eighth parliamentary elections since April 2021 was highly unusual – with a clear winner in advance, but also with a high degree of uncertainty in society, the media and parties as to what should be expected from this victory. Contrary to preliminary predictions, the campaign was not dirty and underhand, and was not remembered for a single serious compromising scandal. The hypotheses that the so-called “ethnic card” would be used, i.e. inciting tension on an ethnic basis, such attempts as existed, for example, during the winter protests, did not come to pass. The assumption that the key topic of the previous month, the mass suicide in the “Petrokhan” hut and its alleged political connections, was also refuted.

The integrity of the elections became a central issue. This was not surprising, considering the fact that the previous vote in October 2024 had a sad record of manipulation and was partially annulled by the Constitutional Court, and public opinion polls clearly registered citizens’ distrust in the electoral process. The integrity of the elections as a topic developed in two directions. First, in suspicions of bought and controlled voting by GERB and MRF and efforts to stop it, on one hand, and in accusations of voter intimidation, on the other. And second, in assumptions of external, understandably Russian, intervention in favour of PB, coming to rekindle the geopolitical division in Bulgarian society.

The next important topic was the role of the caretaker cabinet, criticised from many directions for representing a participant in the election race with actions and statements in support of PPDB. It reached the point of allegations about the illegitimacy of the caretaker Prime Minister Andrey Gyurov, unprecedented in their nature, in calls for his resignation, and in generalisations that the acts of the executive branch are null and void. The basis for this motive came from an officially published opinion of one of the advocates general of the Court of Justice of the EU, which concluded that Gyurov did not meet the conditions for being a deputy governor of the Bulgarian National Bank, and hence for being prime minister. Although the opinion had no legally binding force, it was widely circulated as evidence of the insolvency of Gyurov’s choice.

The third leading topic in the campaign, understandably, concerned the attitude towards the new political formation of Rumen Radev. Across the political spectrum, as well as in the media, uncertainty towards the leader of PB was evident. There were constant appeals for him to speak more and explain his plans and programme. However, the parties’ concerns that they would have to comply with Radev’s project from now on made them cautious in their criticism and denial. It was said with

many conditions that a partnership with PB was in principle possible, and most often the potential coalitions of PB were discussed - whether with GERB or with PPDB.

The campaign got off to a boring and uninteresting start. The Easter holidays, which fell in the middle of the election month, slowed down the slow pace even more, and it was only in the final week that radicalisation occurred, marked mostly by the geopolitical confrontation “for” or “against” Russia.

The results of the elections. On April 19th, 3.36 million voters voted, which, according to official data, is 51.11%, but in reality this is probably over 60% of those eligible to vote due to the very outdated electoral lists, which include far more people than the entire current population of Bulgaria. This is the highest turnout since the beginning of the political crisis. An obvious reason for this fact is the emergence of a new major political player in the person of the Bulgarian People’s Party. It can be said that Rumen Radev is the last great hope of those dissatisfied with Boyko Borisov’s model of government. All political figures or parties that have gained popularity as an alternative to this model over the past 10 years have, to one degree or another, been disappointed with their parliamentary or governmental participation. After Radev, there is no other figure left. It is from this perspective that he is the last, and most prominent, face of the battle of “change” against the “status quo.”

The PB result was truly impressive and managed to exceed all expectations. We have the first absolute majority in Bulgaria in 29 years, and in a polarised and fragmented political environment that, according to almost all analysts, was “doomed to coalitions”. In comparative terms, the votes for PB, although over 200,000 less than those of GERB in its crushing victory in 2009, are comparable because they fall into a situation with a reduced electorate and higher levels of depoliticisation.

April 19th did not end, but rather forced the processes of transformation of the party system in Bulgaria. The voters “punished” all four parties that made up the majority in the previous parliament, with GERB and MRF shrinking to remarkably low numbers, while BSP and ITN were unable to enter the National Assembly at all. From an ideological point of view, the vote against the “status quo” confronts the country with the categorical dominance of a party without clear ideological coordinates with a fragmented opposition of right-wing liberals, right-wing conservatives and right-wing nationalists.

The caretaker government. Andrey Gyurov’s cabinet devoted its efforts to three main areas.

In first place, of course, was the organisation of the election process. The fight against bought and controlled votes turned out to be a real priority, and it was implemented relatively successfully. We can judge this by the extremely powerful attack regarding staff against any potential dependencies in the institutions. All regional governors were immediately replaced, a huge number of the directors of regional directorates of the Ministry of the Interior, and the heads of the three most important structures of the Ministry. Even afterwards, the observers' analyses established undoubted progress in the election sections, traditionally considered "problematic". And if these activities of the cabinet provoked allegations that they were directed against GERB and MRF, other activities seemed to be organised against PB. This includes the creation of a special unit at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to combat disinformation and hybrid threats, to which the famous journalist Hristo Grozev, known for exposing pro-Russian conspiracies, was brought in as an advisor; publications in authoritative European publications such as *Politico* that Gyurov had requested EU help against Russian interference in the Bulgarian elections; investigations by Bulgarian right-wing websites that suspicious groups on social networks were generating support for Radev in his image as a fighter against the West. The impression was almost created that a "Georgescu" scenario was possible in Bulgaria, similar to Romania, where the winner in the first round of the presidential elections in 2025 was disqualified due to accusations of a Russian conspiracy to elect him. Nothing of the kind happened in Bulgaria, but the belief in the bias of the caretaker cabinet towards pro-European liberal forces in the form of PPDB remained.

In second place was the issue of state finances. Gyurov's cabinet used various occasions, including in its final report, to point out that it had managed to "save" €400 million from the second and third tranches of the EU Recovery and Resilience Plan; that it had sent the official request for a fourth tranche; and that it had transferred €1.4 billion from the Bulgarian Development Bank, which had so far remained unused there, to the state budget. The overall idea was to suggest that the will to fight corruption, rather than loans or tax changes, could be the main driver of a balanced budget and economic development.

A third field of activity of the acting cabinet turned out to be the intensified production of images. The creation of Andrey Gyurov's personal image was fuelled by all means of modern PR. The predictable result was the widespread circulation of Gyurov as a possible presidential candidate in the autumn elections – a plot that unfolded in the media and even gave rise to discussions about the potential nomination of the vice president. The organisation of the elections, in turn, became an occasion for accumulating a high personal rating for the acting Minister of the Interior Emil Dechev and the Secretary General of the Ministry Georgi Kandev. Their frequent appearances in the media, as well as the information that Kandev was threatened by mafia circles, made them almost "heroes" for the democratic community. And the subsequent visit of Dechev and Kandev to the USA was already supposed to inspire international support for their future presence in Bulgarian politics.

The new cabinet. The 52nd National Assembly was convened for its first session unusually quickly for current practice, on the twelfth day of the elections, and the new regular government with Prime Minister Rumen Radev was also elected in a very short time, on the nineteenth day of April. This pace came in sharp contrast to the torturous agony of previous legislatures, which were unable to even elect a speaker for several weeks, and created the widespread impression of paralysis of the institutions.

It was clear that after the decisive victory, the PB would form a single-party government. What is more interesting is that this government seemed to want to present the results of its governance even before it took office. Such was the example of the acting Prosecutor General Borislav Sarafov, who resigned after a media ultimatum from one of Rumen Radev's close associates. It became clear that the country is truly entering a new stage after all the drifting from 2020 up to the present.

The personal composition of the new cabinet did not bring too many surprises. Radev's regular government was reminiscent of Radev's caretaker governments in the past. For the most part, the ministerial chairs were occupied by his former ministers or deputy ministers. Viewed negatively, not a single figure considered part of Radev's close entourage was left out of the distribution of positions in the National Assembly, the government or the Prime Minister's political office. The criticism that the prime minister has co-opted cadres of ITN, GERB or PPDB, because some of the ministers have functions from the time of the cabinets of these parties in their biographies, is not entirely appropriate. We are talking mainly about short-term presences of the figures in question in the executive branch, without a party career in the relevant formations. It is striking that there are no ministers with a biography in government before 2021, from the era of the disputed "Borisov" model. At the same time, the engagement of BSP cadres, especially in the second echelon of power, like deputy ministers is far more visible. And there is no surprise here, because Radev was not only nominated for president by the left, but also maintained relations mainly with its experts over the years. And let us add that few of the ministers have their own independent political or civil authority. In particular, this applies to the ministers of finance, Galab Donev, considered a "shadow" of Radev; of justice, Nikolay Naydenov, without a bright presence even in the legal team; and of foreign affairs, Velislava Petrova-Chamova, who, due to her age, does not yet have serious media weight. It can be assumed that the Prime Minister personally intends to supervise the areas declared by him as priorities in the work of the government – budget and prices; judicial reform; and foreign policy.

President Yotova. In the highest post in the state, Iliana Yotova demonstrates Rumen Radev's firmness, but also greater dialogicity. Overall, she fully exercises her constitutional powers and strives to instill the indispensable role of the presidential institution for overall political stability in the country. Yotova has shown that she is a corrective to the cabinet she serves (for example, by calling Gyurov's decision to agree with Ukraine

“inadequate”; or by sharply challenging Gyurov’s comments in Brussels about the influence of “one oligarch” on the Peace Council case), but also that she can provide it with the necessary support (for example, for the organisation of the electoral process and for financial stabilisation). In relations with political parties, Yotova opted for a completely non-confrontational approach, demonstrated in the search for consensus in the

consultations for the new cabinet. It is in this area that the president is credited with the relative agreement of all parliamentary forces except Vazrazhdane on the immediate agenda of the government: prices + budget + judicial reform. It can be said that since February, Yotova has been raising the topic of price increases with increasing insistence, so that it eventually becomes central to Bulgarian politics in general.

3.

State of the party system

Note 2: This section tracks, first, the political formations that entered the 52nd National Assembly, and then, the remaining political forces that participated in the previous parliament or exceeded 1% in the April 19th elections.

Progressive Bulgaria (PB). The new political force, which had just filed for registration as a party, entered the campaign as a foregone conclusion and eventually took first place with 1.444 million votes, or 44.59%. PB's main asset, of course, was the high personal rating of the former president Rumen Radev and his main messages, aimed at four different segments of society – to those on the left (with the engagement of left-wing politicians), to liberal circles (with promises of judicial reform and the fight against corruption), to the nationalists (with the claim for national dignity and an end to “yes-politics”) and to the non-voters (with the hope of eliminating a political status quo that many hate).

The lists of the new party were interpreted in different ways, but they did not become a scandal, primarily because they did not include either prominent representatives of big business or people with biographies from the discredited “status quo parties”, with the exception of BSP cadres. The election platform, oriented towards promoting business and financial stabilisation without tax changes, did not meet with objections anywhere apart from BSP. The PB campaign proceeded unusually. For a long time it was distinguished by its intransigence, with general statements about innovations, digitalisation and generally elitist topics, and with the public silence of the leader Radev. Doubts arose that PB could not gain strength and that it even risked losing some of the electoral support registered in advance. In fact, however, this was precisely what prepared the ground for the final assault, whose aim was – and which finally succeeded in – convincing those who were wavering and causing an electoral wave. The statements of PPDB and GERB against the “pro-Russian parties”, the initiatives of the caretaker cabinet against the hypothetical “Russian intervention”, the discussions in the media about the inevitability of future coalitions, and the criticism of analysts that PB do not provide any specifics about what they call an “oligarchic model”, allowed for several very strong final moves. Radev gave a special interview in which he warned that they were about to “steal the elections” according to the “Georgescu” scenario; then he explicitly emphasised that he would not form coalitions with anyone, and that the only chance for a way out of the political crisis was an absolute majority for his party; then he projected a photo of himself with Russian President Vladimir Putin at the campaign closing; and when voting on election day, he insisted that the goal was to remove (by name!) Borisov and Peevski

from power. To a large extent, this predetermined the unexpectedly strong election result.

The vote for PB, judging by the exit polls of the sociological agencies, is rather conservative, evenly distributed throughout the country, with dominance everywhere except in the ethnically compact Turkish regions, and stable in all socio-demographic groups, with a slight preponderance towards smaller cities, the slightly less educated, and the older population. This is a vote of dissatisfaction that shapes the expectations of Bulgarian society towards PB. From their first steps in the new National Assembly, PB have clearly shown that they have no intention of acquiescing to other parties and that they will determine their own direction and pace of work. The decision to reject the opposition's proposals for temporary inquiry committees is indicative of this. The uncertainty that the other political players are experiencing will persist.

GERB-UDF. With 433,000 voters, or 13.38%, GERB registered the lowest result in its parliamentary history and was not far from losing second place. The figures are comparable only to those of GERB from the European elections. It is namely the European elections that provide the key to the explanation – the weak mobilisation of local authorities and local clientelistic networks. GERB relied on a completely traditional and predictable campaign, based on the messages of stability and growth, contrasting with the chaos and unpredictability of the other parties. No other approach could be expected, because ultimately it is the stability of the political process and the protection of local businesses that are the basis of the usual support for the party. Even before the official campaign began, suspicions were circulating that some of GERB's party clientele might shift to the future new big player in the form of PB. Leader Boyko Borisov tried to minimise the damage by attracting his most popular mayors, Dimitar Nikolov of Burgas and Zhivko Todorov of Stara Zagora, as organisational secretaries of the party. However, this move proved fruitless. The rumour that another prominent figure in GERB, Delyan Dobrev, was considering leaving, was denied, but it reinforced suspicions of an ongoing quiet internal disintegration.

In purely political terms, Borisov decided not to attack the PB head-on, but to create expectations for a future partnership that could contain the centrifugal forces. Apart from a short-lived attack on the alleged Russian interference in the elections, when Borisov associated PB with the “Tik-Tok-crazy” and the “digital mafia”, the GERB leader's comments towards Radev were mostly positive. This tactic carried over into the 52nd National Assembly, where GERB symbolically did not vote

“against” Radev’s cabinet, but only “abstained”, and advised the majority on “unpopular measures with a right-wing profile”, for which it would receive their support. It is likely that Borisov hopes that with his constructive behaviour he will protect himself from PB attacks and will be able to redirect PB’s attention to the other prominent representative of the “status quo”, Delyan Peevski.

“We Continue the Change” (“Produlzhavame Promianata” - PP) and “Democratic Bulgaria” (DB). The coalition managed to attract 408,000 voters, corresponding to 12.61%, and thus increased their result compared to October 2024. The first reason for this relative success is related to the fact that PPDB were the initiators of the protests that led to the overthrow of the previous government, and naturally capitalised on some of the public attitudes for change.

The coalition actually ran a rather diverse and decentralised campaign, focusing at one moment on support for the actions of the caretaker government, at another on the imperative of entering Generation Z into politics, at another on the defence of Europe and European values from hybrid threats, and at yet another on the euphoria of the elections in Hungary, which offered an example to follow with their 80% voter turnout and the overthrow of a pro-Kremlin politician. Economic and social issues were the subject of contradictory messages, broadcast by PP and DB separately and without mutual coordination. The tension between the partners was clear and visible even before the official campaign. The arrangement of the lists led to public criticism of the leader of PP, Asen Vassilev, because he single-handedly did not allow the candidacies of popular figures such as Daniel Lorer and Yavor Bozhankov. The thesis of Vassilev’s excessive leadership ambition seemed to be confirmed by the change in the political tone of the campaign compared to Rumen Radev’s project. If at first Radev was the subject of mostly moderate comments, at worst of some skepticism, then at one point Vassilev called him a “cowardly hypocrite” and launched accusations against the former president of pro-Russian intentions and an insincere desire to dismantle the “Borisov” model. In all likelihood, this approach was effective because it did not allow PB to attract a large share of PPDB sympathisers, simply because Radev failed to seriously enter the pro-European niche.

Tensions between PP and DB erupted immediately after the elections. The reason for this was the preferential vote, which allowed a number of DB candidates to displace their PP partners for seats in parliament. DB unexpectedly proposed to PP that they unite in a “single entity”, something that Asen Vassilev logically refused, simply because there were obviously no prerequisites for this, and in the end the two formations decided to register as separate parliamentary groups with a request to form a “parliamentary union” and to partner in the upcoming partial local vote in the Sredets district of the capital and in the presidential elections.

The split in PPDB soon received ideological justification. DB declared themselves to be a right-wing party, supporting business and families, while PP defined themselves as a centrist

party, pursuing both left- and right-wing policies, and seeking to expand support outside the centre of large cities.

Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF). The party shrank to 230,000 voters, equal to 7.12%. The outflow also has a symbolic meaning. Let us recall that the partial local elections in Pazardzhik in October last year gave MRF first place and started the crisis processes in the government of Zhelyazkov, and now in Pazardzhik MRF is third, with a result similar to the national one.

In the campaign, the party successfully pursued a “submarine strategy”, without major public appearances and without any participation in the national media. It was evident that the calculation was made that all the aggressive statements of leader Delyan Peevski towards Radev only increased trust in him and isolated MRF. The non-confrontational line continued after the elections, without contesting the results and without accusations of illegal pressure, apart from before the European Parliament. In a special statement, MRF even welcomed Sarafov’s resignation, given that in previous years he had been the most ardent defender of the acting Prosecutor General. Moreover, the media affiliated with MRF completely ceased subjecting Radev to critical fire and replaced it with sympathetic comments. Considering Peevski’s business style, there is most likely hope for a “deal” with the new big player in Bulgarian politics.

“Vazrazhdane” (“Revival”). The party finished with 137,000 votes, equal to 4.25%. This is a real electoral collapse, which deprives “Vazrazhdane” of over 60% of its previous voters and returns them to the levels of their first parliamentary participation in 2021. The defeat is serious, not only because of the size of the parliamentary group, but because it undermines the party’s previous claim that, although slowly, it was increasing its electoral share and thus taking small steps towards the top positions in Bulgarian politics.

Sociological surveys show that the majority of Vazrazhdane voters preferred PB because of Radev’s more convincing claim to be defending the national interest. The leader of Vazrazhdane, Kostadin Kostadinov, who was aware of this risk from the very beginning, chose a course of acute radicalisation, tasked with exposing Radev as a “false hero” serving the same external forces as the other parties. Fears of Radev’s rise were evident everywhere. When arranging the lists for April 19th, Vazrazhdane retained 29 of its 31 leaders on lists from October 2024. It was clear that there was no reluctance to take risks and seek breakthroughs into new political spaces. Kostadinov sought to prevent the outflow of disappointed party activists to PB, and, as in football, to “keep the score level”. The only more innovative solution, aimed at other nationalist niches in the country, was the “Bulgaria 1400” programme, which was called upon to prepare the country for the celebration of the anniversary of the creation of Old Great Bulgaria by Khan Kubrat – “the first Bulgarian state on the European continent”, and to shift the beginning of Bulgarian history back half a century. Outside of this initiative, “Vazrazhdane” mainly exploited their usual themes, related to the request for the return of the lev as the national currency and the lifting of sanctions against Russia, but now also mediation with Iran to stop the conflict in the Middle East.

Overall, the radicalising strategy gave Vazrazhdane a chance to stay in parliament, but nothing more than this. A key concept of the campaign, which was “national treason”, was devalued by overuse and lost both its media and public effect. Kostadinov accused Gyurov’s cabinet of national treason and demanded an investigation successively of Gyurov’s cabinet (because of the agreement with Ukraine), of President Yotova (because of her veto on the Electoral Code restricting voting outside the EU), of Yotova again and of former Parliament Speaker Natalia Kiselova (because they admitted that there was Bulgarian complicity in the deportation of Jews from White Sea Thrace and Vardar Macedonia during World War II), of Boyko Borisov and Rosen Zhelyazkov (because of their various actions), and finally of Rumen Radev (because in his speech he had supported the federalisation of Europe, which meant the liquidation of the Bulgarian state).

After the elections, Kostadinov maintained consistency in his behaviour and began to explain how the voters of PB had been deceived. A new and different nuance in his statements was the claim that after the failure of the Bulgarian Socialist Party, left-wing sympathisers could now find their political representation in Vazrazhdane.

Bulgarian Socialist Party – United Left (BSP-UL). With 3% of the vote, equal to nearly 98,000 votes, or 85,000 fewer than in October 2024, for the first time since World War II the left failed to cross the threshold for entering parliament.

The heavy defeat occurred against the backdrop of the enormous efforts of the newly elected party chairman Krum Zarkov, who tried to achieve electoral mobilisation by focusing on the “new path” of returning to left-wing values and on the leader as the bearer of change. BSP’s goal in the campaign was to retain the traditional “red” electorate from the previous elections. There was clear support from the Party of European Socialists (PES) for the Bulgarian socialists. A clear cause was also formulated in defence of peace and social justice, expressed in a project for a new tax system. The party lists granted much greater freedom to local structures, at the expense of political figures associated with the alliance with Borisov and Peevski. Apart from the chairman, the practice of representatives of the party elite leading two lists at the same time was discontinued. In order to avoid the capital’s hegemony in the leadership, the popular socialist mayor of Troyan, Donka Mihaylova, took a prominent part in the key events of the left, alongside the chairman. For the first time, three former leaders of the party – Georgi Parvanov, Sergey Stanishev and Mihail Mikov – actively participated in the agitation. Popular figures of the left, such as Tatyana Doncheva and Maya Manolova, were involved, both through the lists and through public support. An active dialogue was underway with new left-wing groups and with civil organisations, ignored by the party elites until recently. And last but not least, BSP for the first time enjoyed the positive attitude of a number of the brightest commentators on social media.

The failure, of course, can be explained mainly by an outflow of sympathisers to the new party of former President Rumen Radev. At the same time, this reveals a deep and severe crisis of confidence in the party in general, reaching in places a political paralysis. Zarkov’s two months as leader proved insufficient to create a new image. After the electoral defeat, Zarkov demanded and received a vote of confidence for a complete renewal of BSP, oriented towards a new broad left movement and open to trade unions, civil structures and prominent left-wing figures. The BSP march in the capital on May 1st, Labour Day, was indeed honoured by both trade union leaders and many people outside the party. The question of the future of the only significant left-wing party in Bulgaria remains open. This question is also made more difficult by the intention of the new ruling party, PB, to attract more and more BSP cadres to the executive branch, further bleeding the left.

The other “small” parties. Below the 4% barrier for entering the National Assembly, quite a few parties remained, both previously represented in parliament and new ones. Among them, Radostin Vassilev’s “Morality, Unity, Honour” (MECh) and Ivelin Mihaylov’s “Velichie” (“Greatness”) deserve special attention, because their voters resisted the pull of PB and retained their voters. “Velichie” even increased their result by 3,000 votes, so that both they and MECh, with the lower activity of October 2024, would have entered parliament. It can be assumed that both parties have found electoral niches to which no one else has any claims – for MECh, these are people who want to hear denunciations of everyone; and for “Velichie” these are those carried away by contemplative historical romanticism. On the other hand, ITN and Ahmed Dogan’s Alliance for Rights and Freedoms (ARF) suffered a heavy and natural defeat. ITN suffered the damage from the arrogance of their participation in the “Zhelyazkov” cabinet and from its inadequate campaign, focused on criticism and insults towards PPDB, and ARF were never able to explain what the meaning of its existence was and what exactly it represented for the Bulgarian Turks. The window for change, left wide open by PB, was also used by another new formation, “Siyanie” (“Radiance”), created by Nikolay Popov – the father of the little girl Siyana who died in a road accident. This party managed to accumulate the people’s anger at impunity on the roads and achieve a good result, which immediately encouraged Popov to start building local structures in the name of participation in future elections.

The ultimate failure of these five political formations to enter the National Assembly is to some extent also a failure of the “hero” and “victim” strategies they adopted in their campaigns. MECh and ITN presented themselves as heroes, determined to defeat all enemies – and capable of doing so. Conversely, “Siyanie”, “Velichie” and ARF preferred the image of the “victim” – in the first case victims of blackmail by the major parties, in the second victims of the political elite, in the third victims of Delyan Peevski.

4.

The Progressive Political and Public Agenda

The election campaign took place in a national and international environment marked by inflation, impoverishment and various risks to social security. Apart from BSP, only the trade unions tried to draw the attention of political forces to the need for urgent measures to protect people's incomes. Thus, the Confederation of Independent Trade Unions in Bulgaria (CITUB) came up with 12 measures to support Bulgarian households and businesses, which it presented to political parties, to the caretaker cabinet, and finally to the new ruling party from PB.

The response was not enthusiastic, but the topic has by no means fallen off the agenda.

The unions also systematically highlighted the problems with uneven wage indexations in the public sector, which are a product of chaotic and ill-conceived budget policy for years. This led to protest actions at "Bulgarian Post Offices" and public transport in several cities, and ultimately to the realisation of the demands.

5.

Main conclusions, forecasts and recommendations

The election results of April 19th indicate an unprecedented victory for a political force in recent decades. This is the first absolute majority in Bulgaria since 1997, a fact that simultaneously opens up great horizons, but also concentrates the political responsibility for the future of the country on PB and in particular on Prime Minister Rumen Radev. PB won the elections because of widespread hopes that this would finally bring an end to a vicious corrupt model of governance and political deadlock. Radev's calls for an absolute majority were heard by Bulgarian citizens, who, for the most part, realised that there was simply no other option for getting out of this spiral of endless pre-term elections, and that the alternative to Radev's victory was new elections in the autumn or temporary coalitions of mutual blackmail.

In the assessments of politicians and analysts, it has been heard that the end of the political crisis in Bulgaria has come. This is indeed the case. Major political upheavals can hardly be expected at least until the end of the year, and perhaps even beyond. The reason is not only that the PB have an absolute majority, but also because there are no political actors around or emerging who are not isolated or compromised and could convincingly claim to be subjects of better governance.

The country's foreign policy has become the subject of numerous disputes, caused by the ambiguity of the political messages of Radev and PB. A "turn" or "swerve" is very unlikely to happen. Perhaps the new government will distance itself from some pro-Ukrainian initiatives of Brussels, but without blocking the common policy, without a "veto" and without ambitions for a "new Orban". Radev personally, from the point of view of his own authority, is faced with the task of achieving progress in the case of "Botas", which has brought him many accusations of short-sighted and even disastrous decisions in the energy sector. Also, the prospect of Bulgarian membership in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which will lead to some type of foreign policy mobilisation, is gradually emerging. The biography of the Foreign Minister in the new cabinet implies this orientation.

The huge challenges lie rather in domestic politics. The picture of public opinion presented in sociological surveys reveals a sense of injustice, an impression of massive and accelerated impoverishment, and fears for peace and stability in the region and the world. It seems that the agenda of the new government has not only been outlined, but has also been confirmed by its leading representatives and recognised to one degree or another by the opposition: anti-inflation strategy + budget + judicial reform. Concrete actions can be predicted in the very near future, in a matter of weeks.

It is now, after the elections, that the majority have the greatest freedom of behaviour and can realise their most radical ideas, without being burdened by people's fatigue and dissatisfaction with mistakes. Preliminary requests rather highlight a freeze on the tax system, preserved social payments, focusing on the most vulnerable groups, and maintaining the deficit ceiling. In other words, we are most likely facing attempts to impose control and discipline, motivated by the looming danger of spiralling debt.

The election results have another clear consequence: a flaring "war for the left-wing legacy". Most political forces have hardly commented on BSP's exit from parliament, but have drawn their own conclusions about the existence of a vacuum in the left-wing space. PB not only included the classic triad of social democracy "freedom, justice, solidarity" in their platform, but after the elections they talked about positioning themselves "left of centre" in view of the "stray voters on the left". "Vazrazhdane" announced that left-wing voters could find representation with them. After the split with DB, PP emphasised that they are not right-wing like their previous partners, but emphasise income, social security, and the poorer classes. BSP themselves have reached a very difficult crossroads, which leads either to marginalisation (and an outflow of cadres and activists to PB), or to a new electoral base (gathering young people, the working poor, and intellectuals). The coming months will provide an opportunity to understand what content the party leadership puts into the idea of a "broad left movement", and how realistic, under the current conditions, this concept is.

About the author

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About this study

FES Bulgaria has been publishing the „Polit-Barometer“ since 2000, analyzing current and long-term political processes and identifying trends in Bulgarian politics with a special focus on the political parties as democratic actors. In a situation where the quality and neutrality of Bulgarian media is under question, we aim to provide a scientific basis for a political discussion for Bulgarian and international readers.

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