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Polit-Barometer

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1.

The Dynamics of Foreign Policy

Right from the first days of the new cabinet of “Progressive Bulgaria”, a foreign policy devoid of clarity and one-dimensionality has been pursued. Those in power invented the concept of “multi-vector foreign policy” to denote their claim to defend the “national interest” on the international stage. The opposition, on the other hand, spoke of “schizophrenia in foreign policy” to criticise what it calls chaos and unpredictability.

The Russo-Ukrainian conflict. The development of the war in Ukraine in the summer led to the activation of that international format, which was called the “coalition of the willing” and was mainly aimed at providing military assistance to Kiev. The initiative to deploy missile defence in defence of Europe and Ukraine gave Bulgarian Prime Minister Rumen Radev an occasion to deflect Bulgarian participation, during his visit to Paris. This was in line with his previous statements. At the same time, however, Foreign Minister Velislava Petrova-Chamova participated in the Ukraine-Southeast Europe summit in Kiev, which ended with a joint declaration in defence of the country, including with weapons. This caused controversy as to what the Bulgarian position actually was. And although both Radev and Petrova-Chamova emphasised that the Kiev Declaration is not binding, and there is no Bulgarian signature under it, the question remained as to why the Bulgarian representative did not at least formulate Sofia’s disagreements at the forum. An impression of ambiguity was created, which also caught the attention of the global media. Sofia’s subsequent official actions and messages did not distract him. For example, Bulgaria did not send a high-ranking envoy to Ukraine’s Independence Day celebrations, fueling opposition accusations of self-isolation from Europe. Critics of the Ukrainian cause, in turn, saw cause for dissatisfaction in the fact that President Iliana Yotova did send a congratulatory address to her Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Zelensky, but did not do the same to Russian President Vladimir Putin in June in connection with Russia’s national holiday. Weeks after Prime Minister Radev resolutely announced that Bulgaria did not have enough resources to financially support Ukraine this year, he met with Zelensky at the NATO Summit in Ankara and announced that financial support would be provided as long as it did not affect social spending. To all this, we should add the inauguration of the new Bulgarian ambassador to Kiev, Zlatin Krastev, who spoke to Zelensky about “a sovereign and territorially whole Ukraine, which has taken its path to the EU.” It is true that this has been the unchanging Bulgarian point of view throughout the years of the war, but it is also true that after the elections of April 19th, the new Bulgarian ruling party had not recalled it.

Another example of the politics of nuance is the Bulgarian positions on the war in Ukraine within the common European frame-

work. Bulgaria supported the 21st package of EU sanctions against Russia, but back in June it had expressed reservations about the inclusion of three individuals in this package – the Russian Patriarch Kirill, the co-owner of Lukoil Vagit Alekperov and the businessman Iskandar Makhmudov. Ultimately, the EU institutions satisfied all three Bulgarian objections, with the one about the patriarch in particular also meeting with the preliminary support of Italy. Thus, the impression was again given that Sofia was not sabotaging the common European policy, but did not automatically approve of it.

Another example is possible. There was an incident with a drone that exploded in the Bulgarian part of Dobrudja near the Romanian border and near critical infrastructure. The investigation showed that the drone was Ukrainian. The Ukrainian ambassador, Olesya Ilashchuk, was also summoned to the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs for explanations. On one hand, the institutions, including Prime Minister Radev and Defence Minister Dimitar Stoyanov, have repeatedly stressed that the incident was not intentional and that it will not affect bilateral relations. On the other hand, the very fact of Ilashchuk’s summons is indicative of a more distant behaviour, unprecedented so far, and corresponds with Stoyanov’s later statements that an inquiry was made to Kiev about this drone, but they have never given satisfactory explanations.

Iranian-American tensions. The conflict between the US and Iran, which has been developing in ebb and flow since February of this year, affects Bulgaria mainly due to the use of Bulgarian military infrastructure by the US Air Force, potentially operating against Iran.

For months, the focus of this plot was the American tanker aircraft that were based at Sofia Airport. In June, the government decided that in the future they would be relocated to the Bezmer military airport near Yambol, despite the dissatisfaction and protests of the local population about the security risks. In the end, Radev’s cabinet sought the highest legitimacy in a parliamentary republic for this decision, namely an act of the National Assembly. However, the problem of national security and the ability of the government to guarantee it remained on the agenda. Iran sent a note to the Bulgarian Foreign Ministry warning about the planes, and a little later the influential British newspaper The Financial Times published an article in which Bulgaria was explicitly named as a possible target of subsequent Iranian strikes against American positions in Europe. A political scandal erupted in Bulgaria, which cast doubt on the government’s capacity to withstand tensions imported from outside. Sofia officially stated that there was no direct

threat from Iran, Foreign Minister Petrova-Chamova announced that she had had a telephone conversation with her Iranian counterpart to convince him of Bulgaria's peaceful nature, and Radev himself issued a statement according to which Iran understood very well that the planes were not intended for combat operations. At the same time, even NATO indicated that they were ready to react to a threat to Bulgaria. The domestic political exploitation of the topic was serious. The leader of the opposition party GERB, Boyko Borisov, tried to refute the cabinet by saying that the "Austrian services" had information about a real threat to the country, and the leader of another opposition party, "We Continue the Change" ("Produlz-

havame Promianata" - PP), Assen Vassilev, made an unprecedented declaration that Radev was taking Bulgaria to war. The truth is that no matter how dramatic the political demarches were, they were half-hearted, because both GERB and PP did not dare to vote in parliament against the relocation of American planes to Bezmer, evidently in order to avoid confrontation with the United States. In any case, both the subsequent reassuring announcement by Minister Stoyanov that the planes had left Bezmer, and the rumours that such planes were still arriving at other Bulgarian airports, testify that Bulgarian foreign policy is highly vulnerable precisely along the lines of the belief that it protects national security.

2.

Development of the political situation

The half-yearly budget. The National Assembly finally adopted the state budget for 2026, which will in fact function for less than six months. Despite heated discussions on the initial draft submitted by the Council of Ministers, the main parameters remained unchanged, including the deficit of 5.7% and the maximum amount of new public debt by the end of the year of 10.1 billion euros. By the admission of those submitting it themselves, the budget “has no social package”, something that is motivated by the current state of public finances and the heavy legacy of previous administrations.

Some decisions and trends are worrying. Here are three examples. Education spending in the new budget falls from 4.8% to 4.5% of GDP, while the plan for 2028 is for it to drop to 3.8%. The so-called freezing of the minimum wage, on which the increase in a number of other payments of an important social nature depends, means fixing it as a value in the budget for each subsequent year. And in the field of labour rights, the change in the calculation of length of service in contracts that are not full-time is worrying because it creates real problems for many people before retirement.

At first reading, the budget was supported by the ruling “Progressive Bulgaria” (PB) and the opposition Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF), which, however, withdrew their support during the second reading of the texts after the majority refused to accept its proposals. The symptomatic example of MRF does not change the fact that PB, despite their absolute majority, do not and clearly do not plan to seek permanent partnerships in parliament.

The cabinet’s programme for government. Rumen Radev’s government marked the 100 days since taking office by publishing their long-awaited 4-year programme for management. As a formula, the programme looks like this: deoligarchisation + rule of law + new economic model. Deoligarchisation is a new term, unknown in the Bulgarian political vocabulary, and naturally caused the most discussion and criticism. And if the majority insisted that its intentions mark the entry into a “new era” (in the words of MP Slavi Vassilev), then opposition parties concentrated their objections on the claims that the programme has too many slogans and generalisations and too few clear goals and deadlines for achieving them. Special attention has been drawn to the requests for changes to the Constitution. The plans are to restore the President’s powers to form caretaker governments, taken away with the latest constitutional changes of 2023, and to enshrine the right to pay in cash in the basic law, on one hand, and to completely transform the role of the Supreme Judicial Council, on the other. What is of interest to

both political parties and media analysts is how PB will manage to secure qualified majorities for such changes given its weak, at least so far, desire for dialogue with other parliamentary forces.

The reforms of the new government. The first 100 days of the Radev cabinet are insufficient for a review of its requests and actions, but they already provide certain guidelines for analysis. Without claiming to be exhaustive, here are the results in some areas.

The procedure for issuing a parliamentary quota for the Supreme Judicial Council has been launched in the judiciary, with the possibility for non-governmental structures to nominate names that can then be recognised by the parliamentary forces. It is not yet clear how this hidden “citizens quota” will work, but at this stage it has parried the opposition’s objections. The new Commission for Combating Corruption, which has been effectively blocked for the past two years, is also being established.

The changes in electoral legislation lifted restrictions on the establishment of polling stations outside the EU, which were generally considered to have been designed to reduce the vote from Turkey, and closed the ill-conceived constituency of “Abroad”. More significantly, machine voting was fully restored in polling stations with over 300 voters, a fact that was argued with the desire to avoid electoral manipulation and attacked by some opposition parties as a source of even greater potential manipulation. Even the leader of GERB Boyko Borisov has committed to the claim that machine voting makes the presidential election “predetermined.”

The development of the investment climate has also generated extremely contradictory assessments. Negotiations on frozen and deferred payments under the Recovery and Resilience Plan have entered a decisive phase after the fourth payment of EUR 896 million was received, and Deputy Prime Minister Atanas Pekanov announced the ambition for almost complete absorption of the fifth and final payment. A rare parliamentary consensus has been achieved on this topic, including in terms of approving legislative changes at extraordinary sessions of the National Assembly. The fate of the fifth payment is still not entirely clear. Analogically, Bulgaria received the first tranche of the European defence mechanism SAFE for nearly 500 million euros, no longer as a grant, but as a loan, and distributed over nine projects in the field of defence. Radev’s ambitions are very much aimed at that. Against this background, however, the problems with the long-planned investment of the German concern Rheinmetall for a munitions plant in Bulgaria are evi-

dent, which was frozen after the Bulgarian government disagreed with the initial conditions and with the argument of lack of funding. The plant is indeed not secured with funds from the state budget, nor with funds under SAFE. And although the Bulgarian side insists that the agreement is a priority, no progress has been seen on it since the second half of July. A special case, also important for Prime Minister Radev, but for a different reason, is the gas supply contract with the Turkish company Botas. This contract, and especially the penalties under it, had become the most serious target for criticism against Radev in recent years, and accordingly the Prime Minister's understandable desire was to solve the problem. Radev's visit to Turkey brought the news of a revision of the contract, according to which it is "frozen" for 15 months ahead, until a suitable form for its continuation is found, and during this period Bulgaria will not pay fees to its Turkish partner. What exactly was decided in Turkey has not been made public. It is only known that the Turkish side is not talking about adjustments to a poorly functioning agreement, but about a step towards a much broader energy and infrastructure cooperation. For such reasons, rumours have arisen in the Bulgarian public space that Turkey's concession to Radev has its price, and that news such as potential concessions for Turkish companies to drill for gas in the Black Sea instead of Shell and to build the Black Sea motorway between Varna and Burgas are part of the price.

The decision to suspend the implementation of a number of public procurement contracts is motivated by risks of corruption, but it also creates legitimate concerns about the future of multiple large infrastructure projects. At the same time, the government and Prime Minister Radev personally have repeatedly referred to the introduction of a new electronic system called SIGMA, which is supposed to filter out "risky" from "risk-free" procurement contracts.

A large-scale administrative reform was announced in the health system, apparently oriented towards centralisation, especially of powers to the executive branch. This applies to the regional health inspectorates, but also to a number of councils and structures that should be consolidated. The controversies on these topics, as well as in relation to the functioning of the National Health Fund, escalated into public scandals and the resignation, as a sign of disagreement with the reform, of the long-time popular national health inspector Angel Kunchev. And in the sphere of education, in addition to the ongoing debate about the benefits and harm of the proposed new school subject "Religion and Virtues", strongly supported by the current Minister, Prof. Georgi Valchev, an ambitious programme was reached to abolish the two-decade-old model of education financing, which gained notoriety with the formula "money follows the student", and to replace it with a still unestablished model of financing based on quality. All this could not fail to arouse controversy and polar points of view.

The commencement of the presidential race. The National Assembly set October 25th as the date of the (first round of

the) presidential elections, which implies September 22nd as the deadline for registration of candidates for President and Vice President. According to the Constitution, the vote should be held between two and three months before the end of the term. It is no coincidence that those in power chose the first possible date. It is advantageous for them for a number of reasons - the cold season, associated with higher utility bills and greater dissatisfaction, has not yet set in; opposition candidates have less time to accumulate recognition and support; this leaves more time for other actions of the majority, such as submitting the 2027 budget or electing a new Supreme Judicial Council, which can be postponed after November 1st and, accordingly, not fall under the sign of the election campaign.

Incumbent President Iliana Yotova was the first to announce her candidacy for a new term. From a political point of view, this was the right move, because as President she has no reason to delay her decision, and besides, all other candidates are forced to align their participation with her. Despite some predictions, Yotova almost immediately received the categorical political support of the ruling PB, as well as the extra-parliamentary Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP). That is why Yotova, in addition to being the first, also becomes the leading candidate in the race. For now, she is following the traditional practice of incumbent presidents – to consolidate her official public image not of a candidate, but of a ruler, and at the same time demonstrate gestures of loyalty to the majority, for example, by refusing to veto the state budget for 2026.

It is Yotova's leading position that postpones the decisions of other political forces and creates, even at the very end of August, the impression of excessive waiting. The feeling arises that the other parties are busy with a formula that is very difficult to implement, to build a united front against Yotova and the Prime Minister who supports her, but this front should be headed by their representative. For this reason, by the end of August, none of the parliamentary forces outside PB had nominated or supported a presidential candidate.

The candidacy of former caretaker Prime Minister Andrei Gyurov, widely circulated as the choice of the democratic community, was not officially confirmed until the last day of August. The mutual uncertainty of the opposition formations is working in Yotova's favour for now, but it is also encouraging attempts to use this waiting by smaller political entities. For example, without being registered, the candidacies of the former Minister of Defence Nikolay Nenchev and the former Minister of Agriculture Ivan Hristanov, clearly aimed at liberal-democratic voters, as well as the leader of the "Morality, Unity, Honour" (MECh) party, Radostin Vassilev, oriented towards those dissatisfied with the weak anti-corruption results of the Radev cabinet, and the representative of "Narodna Sila ("People's Force") Georgi Dimov, who claimed to attract those dissatisfied with the insufficiently Russophile line of the same cabinet.

3.

State of the party system

“Progressive Bulgaria” (PB). The ruling party is still in the early stages of its formation, which is why, understandably, the main signals about its intentions come from Prime Minister Rumen Radev and the ministers. There is also a lack of sufficient public information to identify the real internal hierarchies in PB. The indications we have are mainly from the party’s most prominent spokespeople in its parliamentary group. From them, we can judge that PB treat their presence in Bulgarian politics not simply as a government, but as a new period, representing a negation of the entire status quo so far. This period, characterised as a “new era” (Slavi Vassilev) or a “new model” (Petar Vitanov) with its corresponding “new moral standards” (Anton Koutev), does not yet have fully clarified parameters, except that it will imply a long-term process, the first visible step of which is the new type of parliament, more orderly and disciplined than previous legislatures.

The energy of PB is invested not only in governance, but also in the accelerated formation of a party with strong local structures, similar to GERB or BSP in the past, and unlike Simeon II’s party or PP. In an extremely short period of time, local bodies of PB have been established in dozens of municipalities, and regional coordinators have also been elected. It is clear that the long-term goal is not the presidential elections, but the local vote in the autumn of 2027.

GERB-UDF. With the start of the new political season, GERB announced that they were moving from a “constructive” to a “critical” opposition to the majority. In their public appearances, the party adhered to a tactic familiar from the times of the political crisis after 2020 – to emphasise their predictability and consistency as a counterpoint to the alleged incompetence of the current government. This was particularly evident in the budget debates. Leader Boyko Borisov even described the government as “primitive.”

In practice, GERB have focused on accelerated internal reorganisation, associated with a mass replacement of regional coordinators in places advertised to the media as the creation of a “shadow government”. The party’s National Assembly crowned these processes with changes in the Executive Committee, which included some of the new coordinators. Consolidation is an important issue for GERB in light of the new political situation, in which a number of mayors are tempted to offer their loyalty to the new government. The most serious challenge for GERB is the presidential elections. Due to the specific nature of the party itself, their activists find it most difficult to mobilise for this type of vote, unlike supporters of PP and DB, who see the presidential institution as the most key moral and geopolitical stake for

them. A third position for GERB in the presidential elections, similar to the local vote in Sofia in 2023, would create the impression of a lasting decline. Borisov has made enormous efforts to avoid this trap. His offer for a common candidate of the right against the “left”, represented by Yotova, was consistently rejected by PP and DB. Even Borisov’s attempts to “divide and rule”, expressed in the explanations that he gets on well with PP, but not with DB, did not yield results. Meanwhile, popular names were also mentioned unofficially that GERB could seek in order for their presidential nomination to be truly supra-party - the lawyer Prof. Daniel Valchev, the former president Petar Stoyanov, and the governor of the Central Bank Dimitar Radev. So far, there has been no result, and Borisov’s latest message that he does not participate in “pre-determined” elections and only “on an Olympic principle”, is an indication that for the first time the idea of non-participation in a presidential vote is being discussed, without, of course, being finally decided.

“We Continue the Change” (“Produlzhavame Promianata” - PP) and “Democratic Bulgaria” (DB). We examine the two formations together because they most often express similar positions on the main political issues and act together on the political terrain. PP and DB have been the most active opposition to the government since the very beginning of their mandate, with a daily frequency of criticism, and with a clear desire to suggest that the country is in a political crisis. An additional, although not central, impetus for their radicalisation comes from the election of MEP Radan Kanev as chairman of “Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria” (DSB), a component of DB, and accordingly from his ambitions to assert his political weight among the other leaders of the coalition.

Generally speaking, PP and DB are developing their criticism of PB in a number of directions: that there is no change, but a continuation of the “status quo” and a return to the “old model”, and with their personnel; that the government is incompetent; that they have a tendency to make secret deals and that they can even be suspected of corruption; and that they actually serve Russian interests in Europe.

The topic of a return to the old model is not new. It is fuelled by the hypotheses that Radev wants to take control of the oligarchic pyramid of Borisov and Peevski and subordinate it to himself in the construction of an authoritarian non-European power. There are two recent examples in this direction. The decision to hold the new edition of the Eurovision music festival in Burgas, and not in Sofia, was denounced as a behind-the-scenes move, dictated by the desire to remove the inconvenient mayor of the capital from PP and DB from the race in favour of the

Burgas mayor from GERB. And the incident in Strumyani, where a local activist was detained during Radev's visit, was presented as pressure from the new government on the free media. The topic of corruption still remains abstract, without specifics, more often as an assessment of failure to deal with the model of corruption and vague doubts about the government coalescing to it. As for the topic of incompetence, it was forced during the budget debates and actually highlighted fundamental differences between PP and DB. While DB insisted on right-wing politics and claimed that they did not see any restriction and control of expenses in the budget, as well as promotion of business, PP, represented by their leader Asen Vassilev, devoted themselves to social-liberal criticism, targeting the PB project as a "philosophy of cheap labour", in which the purchasing power of the population is on the decrease, many pensioners fall below the poverty line and problems arise with maternity and social payments, in order to reach the political conclusion that low incomes do not make a country rich. Perhaps the most publicised ambition was the ambition of PP (less) and DB (more), with the active participation of civil activists and non-governmental organisations, to highlight Putin's Russia as a key frontier for criticism and to interpret most events during the summer season as signs of Russian influence. For example, the public space heard these claims that the incident with the Ukrainian drone on the Bulgarian-Romanian border was actually Russian sabotage; that the Russian firefighting plane that passed over Bulgarian territory for Serbia was actually a reconnaissance plane, sent to investigate the base in Bezmer; that the brutal murder of a man by teenagers in Plovdiv is a manifestation of implanted Russian neo-Nazism; that the fire in a warehouse at the Emko arms factory of businessman Emilian Gebrev is another Russian punitive action; that the probes of the Bulgarian Ministry of Defence for the purchase of second-hand MiG-29 fighter jets from Poland are pro-Russian sabotage of the Euro-Atlantic rearmament of the Bulgarian army; that the revelation of a GPS jammer in the Dragalevtsi district of the capital, aimed at Sofia airport, conceals an attack on national security with a dubious but presumed geopolitical beneficiary; etc. Here we are not commenting on the substantive side of such assumptions, but on the constant search for Russian sponsors, respectively, their use as an argument against Radev's "multi-vector foreign policy".

The issue of the presidential nomination of PP and DB is becoming more acute. All the above-mentioned anti-government radicalisation is obviously designed to demonstrate in the autumn that the new majority have lost their credit of public trust. The presidential vote is a suitable occasion for this, and the minimum programme of PP and DB is second place, which would establish them as the leading opposition. The candidacies of Andrey Gyurov for President and of the former chief secretary of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Georgi Kandev, for Vice President gradually stood out during the summer as "hanging", without the two declaring their intentions until the very end of August, but with a campaign apparently gathering strength. PP and DB announced their support for them in advance, and the Forum for Democratic Action, a civic body tasked with airing the best nominations, effectively abandoned its plans and called on the parties to nominate "the most electable candidate". The

delayed nomination of Gyurov and Kandev was probably intended to heighten the tension surrounding their inclusion in the race, but risked wasting valuable political time.

Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF). The party has been fully continuing its line since May 8th, and this is a line of "loyal opposition". It is expressed in two directions – moderate criticism of the government and activation only during attacks against leader Delyan Peevski. In the first direction, it should be noted that MRF is the only parliamentary force that regularly votes together with the PB majority on key decisions, for example, on the redeployment of American aircraft in Bezmer or on the first reading of the state budget for this year. Other acts of the cabinet, such as the freezing of the contract with Botas, were publicly welcomed. The objections of MRF to PB policy are mainly expressed in expert analyses and proposals, without political conclusions and without attacks. This is also the reason why these objections are almost never mentioned in the media. MRF officially argue their positions with a commitment to statehood and firm Euro-Atlanticism. One of the elements of this approach can also be seen on the European political scene, where the party's MEPs have joined the conservative political family. On the second line, MRF are the subject of various attacks – from the investigations into the individuals who travelled with Peevski to Dubai over the years and the inspections of the services against Peevski for influence peddling and money laundering to the dismissals and even arrests of party activists in Burgas, Shumen and other places, as well as the symbolic decision to seize the building of their party headquarters in Sofia from MRF. On this front, MRF always react sharply, including by referring to international and European institutions, but here too they do not reach any extreme radicalisation, do not address Prime Minister Radev, but focus criticism on the Minister of Interior Ivan Demerdzhiev. The hypothesis remains that all the aforementioned attacks are accepted by Peevski in the hope that they will not develop into something bigger and that in the end Radev and PB will rely on their support, which requires political patience and signals of readiness for a "deal".

"Vazrazhdane" ("Revival"). This party have also maintained a predictable line since the elections and the formation of the new government. They have brought forward fierce criticism of all political initiatives of the majority and the cabinet. "Vazrazhdane" are trying to undermine the trust of the PB voters in their leader, constantly talking about unfulfilled promises and defining the new executive branch as "another Euro-Atlantic cabinet". A key concept in the rhetoric of the party is "sovereignty". The thesis that PB is liquidating Bulgarian sovereignty is developed throughout, from foreign policy and security to budget calculations. It is difficult to assess the effectiveness of this political behaviour, except with the hope that, if not now, then in the long term it will erode support for PB. Still, it is worth noting the exploitation of anti-migrant sentiments. Although not with the same intensity as other topics, this one is important because it refers to a new phenomenon for Bulgarian society – people from distant countries who arrive in Bulgaria to work. Society has neither traditions nor reaction mechanisms developed for such processes, and this opens up a large field for populist manipulations.

4.

The progressive political and social agenda

The Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP). The main left-wing party, which remained outside the parliament, is making constant efforts to restore its positions and attract back its disappointed voters. The renewal at this stage seems to be thought of through ideological, but not political radicalisation. The traditional annual gathering of the “left” on Mount Buzludzha in the Balkan Mountains, the published new manifesto “Socialism of Our Century” and the public appearances of the leader Krum Zarkov provide grounds for such a conclusion. The BSP leadership declare themselves to be about overcoming capitalism – a proposition that has been considered evolutionary and historical in the party’s previous programmes. The task is to combat inequalities related to the devaluation of labour and leading to the triumph of the “one percent super-rich” and the power of the “privileged” in contrast to “true democracy.” The political assessment of the Reds indicates that “social democracy is visibly retreating, while democratic socialism is gaining supporters” as an alternative to the neoliberal capitalist status quo. Hence Zarkov also formulates an ideological identity: “anti-capitalist like Mélenchon, anti-imperialist like Sánchez, anti-fascist like Dimitrov”. The ideological debate in BSP is not over. The tendency towards assimilation of the positions of the American and European radical left is probably not surprising in the context of the global processes of recent years; at the same time, it raises questions about the political image and goals of the party, which still have no answers. It is important to note that this ideological radicalisation does not correspond to radicalisation in national politics. BSP treats Radev’s government with muted criticism, more with warnings than with severely stated disagreements. The presidential elections are an obvious motive. A possible victory of Iliyana Yotova, who has a long biography with BSP, could play a positive role in the revival of the party, if of course it is properly understood and used appropriately. And overly harsh criticism of the leading party supporting Yotova could harm the presidential candidacy itself.

Labour and the welfare state. The budget procedure, but also the overall state of the public sector in Bulgaria, provoked a number of protest actions, in which the Confederation of Indepen-

dent Trade Unions in Bulgaria (CITUB) and Podkrepa (“Support”) took a central place. The focus of the disagreement of trade unions with the government was the decision to freeze the minimum wage, and when it was adopted, subsequent efforts were made to negotiate its future formula. In parallel, protests took place in a number of hospitals, referring to the low incentives for medical specialists. Along with the union activity, national protests “Maternity is not charity” were also organised with demands for changes in benefits during the second year of maternity leave. The initiative of the popular Sofia municipal councillor Vanya Grigorova, “Don’t gamble with our old age”, which began earlier and continued with the collection of signatures, was directed against mandatory participation in the second private pension pillar and against the risky investments of pension funds.

The problem of neo-Nazism. The fight against Nazism and its contemporary manifestations has always been on the agenda of progressive movements. During the summer season, it received new opportunities with homophobia and anti-minority rhetoric in Bulgaria, and especially with cases such as the one in Bansko, where young people chanted Nazi slogans against Italian youths of Jewish origin, and the one in Plovdiv, where a man was killed by teenagers with motives close to Nazi ideology. A debate flared up about redefining today’s fascism, in which progressive movements, including LevFem, formed a certain common line, although not a common front. Their thesis was that fascism is not a deviation from the social norm, but a product of this society; not a generational disease, but an expression of continuity with previous manifestations, made possible by phenomena that had long been normalised in Bulgarian society. In this sense, fascism was presented as a result of social atomisation, inequalities and the destruction of social systems. The position thus outlined ran counter to both the perspective of the institutions and that of the urban liberal community, to Radev’s national moralism, praising the Bulgarian tradition of tolerance, moral education and historical memory, and to liberal geopolitical reductionism, for which the Putin regime is the sole root cause of the neo-Nazi renaissance, and anti-liberal rhetoric – the driving force behind neo-Nazi raving.

5.

Main conclusions, forecasts and recommendations

Bulgarian foreign policy is trying to perform balancing functions by adhering to its European commitments, without showing solidarity with all EU initiatives, and to a privileged partnership with the US, without formalising it in any public principle. It is an exaggeration to talk about a “new Orbanism” in relation to Bulgaria, but the criticisms that in the conditions of heightened global tension such an approach is unrealistic and unproductive cannot be completely ignored.

The great danger to the national legitimacy of the new government is peace. Incidents such as the one with the Ukrainian drone or the American planes and the Iranian warnings are indicative of the fragility of the Bulgarian position, highly vulnerable to outside influences. It can be assumed that the great expectation of many of the PB voters was for peace, and any act that would bring even briefly some conflict to Bulgarian territory would be assessed extremely severely.

The first 100 days of the Radev cabinet received contradictory political and media assessments. The summary that the PB claims to embody a “course towards normalisation” was proposed by the prominent socialist politician Georgi Pirinski, albeit in a highly critical manner, but the government, and in particular Prime Minister Radev himself, took it as a call to arms in a completely positive context – as a slow movement towards stabilisation and restoration of statehood after years of chaos and uncertainty, and as an alternative to the ongoing radicalisation of political opponents. Normalisation essentially represents a centralisation of power, in the various branches of government and even within the parliamentary process. The mass

public perceptions of anarchy and irresponsibility undoubtedly had to be addressed by PB. However, it is not yet entirely clear to what extent internal institutional consolidation will reach.

In the political process, PB strive to play the role of a centrist factor that pushes PP and DB, on one hand, and “Vazrazhdane”, on the other, towards the radical poles of the political space. They are helped by the fierce criticism, especially of PP and DB, which for now is producing a “storm in a teacup”, because they insist on convincing people that there is a political crisis, which in practice does not exist. A favourable circumstance for PB is that the various opposition forces are still unable to construct a common “anti-Radev” narrative. It should also not be forgotten that these are the first and most convenient months for the government, which will still have to face the challenges of winter and their unclear social policy.

The new parliamentary season, at least in its first two months, will be marked by the presidential election. Iliana Yotova enters the race as the undisputed favourite. Of course, the results of the election are not predetermined. Being the acting head of state and having the support of the acting government is a double-edged political sword. Either way, Yotova’s candidacy expresses that possible combination between (classically thought) statehood and (progressively perceived) sociality, which would be extremely important for the political process.

The absence of a stabilising social factor in the Bulgarian parliament will be felt more and more perceptibly.

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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Polit-Barometer



The first 100 days of the Radev cabinet indicate a trend towards institutional centralisation, presented as a “course towards normalisation”.



Incumbent President Iliana Yotova is the favourite for the upcoming presidential elections.



Social policy is still the least developed field of governance.

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