ANALYSE

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1.
The Dynamics of Foreign Policy

A situation of heightened uncertainty. The period was marked by events that intensified concerns regarding Bulgaria's national security. Explosions occurred at ammunition depots at a military plant near Dryanovo. Antennas belonging to the global satellite internet system "Starlink" were set on fire near Plana. It is worth recalling that, as early as late August, a powerful navigation signal jammer was discovered in Dragalevtsi, located dangerously close to Sofia Airport. While there are suspects in some of these cases, credible and verified information regarding those who ordered the acts remains unavailable. However, the truly major news involved three consecutive drone attacks on vessels passing through Bulgaria's exclusive economic zone in the Black Sea - occurring on October 6th, 13th, and 28th, respectively. Five ships have been severely hit - three of which have sunk - and over 20 sailors are missing and presumed dead. These incidents have sparked fears of a total collapse of shipping in the Black Sea, while also leading to a near-consensus in Bulgarian political circles that the Russo-Ukrainian war is drawing closer to the borders of the country. The source of these attacks has not yet been definitively established, though the prevailing assumption is that they originate from Russia.

The issue of the Black Sea: drone attacks have sparked a political debate regarding Bulgaria's stance. Two main positions have emerged. The first - articulated by the government and President Iliana Iotova, with the overt support of the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) and the de facto, albeit tacit, concurrence of the nationalist party "Vazrazhdane" - maintains that the ultimate solution to the problem lies solely in a lasting peace between Russia and Ukraine; consequently, all efforts of Bulgarian foreign policy should be directed toward this goal. The second position - advocated primarily by the opposition parties "We Continue the Change" ("Produlzhavame Promianata" - PP) and "Democratic Bulgaria" (DB), and to a somewhat more moderate extent by GERB and the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) - calls for explicitly identifying Putin's regime in Russia as the culprit, while seeking closer alignment with Bulgaria's European and Euro-Atlantic partners to ensure better protection. The former group views the latter as "warmongers", while the latter accuses the former of "servility towards the Kremlin." The concurrent presidential election campaign further intensifies the political confrontation surrounding this issue.

No domestic political consensus was reached. President Yotova convened the Consultative Council on National Security - which includes leaders of the opposition parties - in an effort to formulate a unified Bulgarian position. The Council adopted a document outlining a series of concrete measures, but identified a ceasefire in Ukraine as the surest way to eliminate risks - a stance with which the opposition leaders disagreed. The opposition viewed the decision by Prime Minister Rumen Radev to summon the Russian Ambassador to Sofia, Eleonora Mitrofanova - in order to explain the reasoning behind why Russia stands to gain the most from the drone attacks - as a half-hearted and even humiliating move. The political conclusion put forward by the opposition was unequivocal: the refusal to name Russia as the culprit serves Moscow's interests and undermines Bulgaria's European future.

The drone attacks, apart from being a problem in their own right, also served as a catalyst for two approaches to foreign policy already advocated by the authorities. The first is regional and concerns security in the Black Sea. As early as on September 23rd - two weeks before the first attack - President Yotova, in a speech before the UN General Assembly in New York, expressed a vision for the Black Sea as a zone of safe navigation, to be guaranteed by the international community. Following the attacks, Yotova and the government undertook a series of diplomatic initiatives aimed at establishing a moratorium on military operations in the Black Sea. Several urgent consultations and meetings were dedicated to this, involving heads of state and government, as well as the foreign and defence ministers of Bulgaria, Romania, and Turkey. The Bulgarian initiative was presented by Prime Minister Radev at the European Council in Brussels, and by Foreign Minister Velislava Petrova-Chamova to her French counterpart, Jean-Noël Barrot. A second foreign policy track has a far more ambitious scope, concerning the outlook for the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. Bulgaria is advocating - more actively than ever before - for the involvement of the EU in the peace process. In various forums, Prime Minister Radev and President Yotova argued that a "war of attrition" cannot yield a positive outcome for Europe; they therefore advocated replacing the current formula of "peace through strength" with a new one: "peace through negotiations." The initiative by Finnish President Alexander Stubb and Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre to hold talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin was widely interpreted as a sign that Europe's stance on the war in Ukraine is beginning to shift. Similarly, Radev's meeting with Kyrylo Budanov - an advisor to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy - which took place on the eve of (ultimately unsuccessful) Russian-Ukrainian-American talks in the U.S., reinforced the same message: that Bulgaria is attuned to emerging global trends and is well-positioned to contribute to the development of an effective European peace plan.

Relations with North Macedonia. Bulgaria's position regarding North Macedonia remains unchanged. It is based on the premise that North Macedonia must include Bulgarians in its

constitution and cease the use of hate speech against Bulgaria. Furthermore, the issue concerning the country's European integration is not a bilateral matter between Sofia and Skopje, but rather one between Skopje and Brussels - a framework established by the so-called "European consensus," or the "French proposal" of 2022. For its part, North Macedonia increasingly asserts that the obstacles to its European integration stem from Bulgaria's nationalist aspirations, arguing that the European Union (EU) must be convinced that - despite all good intentions - it is impossible to work with Bulgaria. It can certainly be argued that North Macedonia has no desire to improve bilateral relations.

The visit of European Commission (EC) President Ursula von der Leyen to Skopje was used by the North Macedonian authorities to push for more active European mediation to unblock the negotiations. Von der Leyen recommended direct dialogue with Sofia. To demonstrate its good will, the government sent its Foreign Minister, Timcho Mutsunski, to the Bulgarian capital - fully aware that no breakthrough could be achieved in the absence of any concrete message. Another initiative from Prime Minister Hristijan Mickoski emerged in late October, centring on the demand that the constitutional amendments be preceded by an action plan regarding minority rights between Bulgaria and North Macedonia. Skopje's persistent introduction of new conditions is intended to suggest the opposite - that it is Sofia that is setting new conditions and is not prepared for cooperation.

There is an increasing amount of evidence that the Mickoski government treats relations with Bulgaria as a matter of national identity and prefers to keep them unresolved. First, the agreement between Greece and Bulgaria regarding the return of Tsar Samuel's remains to Bulgaria sparked angry reactions in North Macedonia - a country that considers Samuel a Macedonian tsar and maintains a monument to him in the central square of Skopje. Mickoski spoke of a new "Bled Agreement," this time directed against North Macedonia. Reference was made to the Bulgarian occupation during the Second World War, with the Bulgarian state of that era explicitly characterised as "fascist." Second, the individuals who, three years earlier, had beaten Hristiyan Pendikov - secretary of the Bulgarian club in Ohrid - were acquitted by the court. Third, the case of the Bulgarian national Iva Mihaylova, who is facing trial for a serious crime, has taken an unexpected turn. Following the persistent refusals by the North Macedonian authorities to allow Bulgarian medical assistance for Mihaylova, she suddenly appeared in Bulgaria, claiming to have crossed the border legally. In response, North Macedonia summoned the Bulgarian ambassador and demanded Mihaylova's extradition, threatening to refer the matter to all relevant international institutions on the grounds of obstruction of justice.

2.
The Development of the political situation

The Challenges of Governance. The formula "de-oligarchisation + rule of law + a new economic model" formed the basis of the government's programme. At the start of the autumn political season, the "Progressive Bulgaria" (PB) majority sought to give concrete substance to these principles.

Minister of the Interior Ivan Demerdzhiev took a leading role in the process of "de-oligarchisation." An audit of public procurement contracts for road guardrails was presented, revealing that the companies receiving funds under these contracts had transferred a portion of the money to an entity that financed travel for Delyan Peevski, a leader within the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF). Peevski categorically denied this. This was followed by the arrests of two MRF mayors - Dimitar Gazazov in Sungurlare and Radoslav Revanski in Belitsa - who, along with Hristo Shirokov, the party's regional leader in Burgas, were accused of trading in influence. The staunch defence of these individuals by MRF sparked a public debate over whether this represents the gradual dismantling of the oligarchic model or, conversely, political repression against the opposition.

In media discourse, the issue of the rule of law is linked to the election of a new Supreme Judicial Council (SJC). The professional quota within the Council is nearing completion - four representatives of the prosecutors have already been elected, while the selection process for judges and investigators has still to be done. What is more delicate is the matter of the parliamentary quota, which for years has been viewed as a stumbling block to resolving the crisis within the judiciary. Even before the elections, it was understood that the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) would need to reach an understanding with "We Continue the Change" (PP) and "Democratic Bulgaria" (DB) to secure the necessary majority of 160 MPs. No such understanding has been reached; instead, relations between BSP and the other two parties have steadily deteriorated. It is the aim of both the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) and the PP-DB coalition to convey that their nominees enjoy broad support within professional circles and the civil sector, thereby making their selection appear "above politics." GERB and MRF have not put forward their own candidates. However, it is clear that they aspire to act as arbiters of the selection process itself. The hearings and the vote are scheduled for November. For the time being, at least, commentators remain skeptical that the procedure will conclude quickly and without political conflict.

The budget for 2027 has moved to the forefront of the economic agenda. In October, the draft budget plan was submitted to the European Commission for review. The key parameters announced by the government include curbing expenditures and debt, narrowing the deficit to 3.5% (on a cash basis), and implementing increases of 8% for pensions, 5% for public sector wages, and 7.5% for teaching staff. An increase in the minimum wage is also planned.

From the very beginning, the government's budgetary plans have faced fierce criticism from the opposition. The government has been accused of delaying the submission of the official draft to the National Assembly due to the presidential elections - presumably because the proposal is so bad that it would alienate supporters of the government's candidate. Meanwhile, trade unions have stated that the cabinet's approach to the minimum wage would result in a smaller increase than what would have been achieved under the now scrapped formula used by previous administrations. The Constitutional Court's decision to cancel two provisions of the current 2026 budget has sparked heated debate. The opposition's claim - that the Radev cabinet's very first budget is so poorly drafted that it violates the Constitution - is, in fact, quite an exaggeration, given that the ruling concerns only two specific clauses. Something of more significance, however, is the criticism regarding the lack of an underlying philosophy in the new budget. For some time, the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) has maintained that the 2026 budget is a product of the legacy left by previous administrations and contains no substantial reforms, arguing that the party's true policy agenda will only become apparent in the next budget. Accusations that no such policy exists - having been replaced by a collection of piecemeal measures - predate the submission of the bill itself. The Radev administration has faced criticism for a lack of vision and for incompetence, as it has combined hopes for fiscal consolidation with generous social compensation measures. There are numerous social measures in response to the crisis; amongst these there is an "inflationary voucher" for fuel, a decision to cap electricity and heating prices until the summer of next year, and fines imposed on large retail chains for unfair commercial practices. Questioned by the opposition and trade unions regarding their effectiveness, these measures will once again be subjected to parliamentary scrutiny during the budget debate.

The election campaign and its outcome. These elections featured the highest number of registered presidential and vice-presidential tickets in the history of Bulgarian democracy (27) and - perhaps paradoxically - also the lowest voter turnout in history: 23% in the first round and 28.6% in the second. Several other factors define the specific context of this electoral race. First, there has been a decline in the number of tickets nominated by political parties or coalitions, with a corresponding rise in "independent" candidates nominated by initiative committees.

In this election, only 7 out of the 27 tickets were nominated by parties or coalitions, compared to 14 out of 23 in the previous election in 2021, and 11 out of 21 in the 2016 vote.

The trend of viewing a party nomination as a hindrance - rather than a boost - to electoral support is becoming more pronounced. Secondly, the first-round results reveal that a significant number of presidential tickets attracted fewer votes than the number of signatures they had submitted for registration. Of the 20 independent candidates in the current election, as many as 9 – in real terms, almost half! – had the support of over 2,500 valid signatures of citizens, yet ultimately received fewer than 2,500 valid votes at the ballot box. It is evident that the criteria for entry do not function effectively and can easily be circumvented by participants. Thirdly, despite the impressive number of candidates, few managed to achieve broad recognition of their name or leverage their electoral performance into significant political weight. The data from the first round is unequivocal: if we set aside the top three presidential tickets, the remaining 24 received a combined total of only 16% of all votes. Furthermore, if we exclude the top six, the bottom 21 accounted for a mere 5% of the total vote. This indicates that the fragmentation of the political process in Bulgaria does not translate into a fragmentation of the vote itself; voters tend to gravitate towards a few main contenders. Fourthly, for the first time in history, the second-largest political force - GERB - have not backed a presidential ticket, while another parliamentary party, MRF, has neither nominated nor officially endorsed any candidate for either the first or the second round.

The initial orientations of the participants in the electoral race can, to some extent, be traced through the profiles of the candidates. Among them, the most prominent groups are those with explicitly nationalist convictions and messages, as well as those with a Russophile-traditionalist orientation. Their participation in the elections is, in a sense, indicative of the perception that Bulgarian society is primarily seeking protection against globalism and liberalism. The awareness that people are weary of political deadlock and anxious about rising international tensions also shaped the choice of slogans. The candidates who reached the second round - Iliyana Yotova and Andrey Gyurov - opted for remarkably similar campaign themes, despite their otherwise significant differences: “For a Bulgaria in Safe Hands” (Yotova) and “For a Stable and Secure Bulgaria” (Gyurov). Most of the key contenders had their own “doubles” - that is, presidential tickets that presented their messages within the same ideological and political register as the higher-polling pairs - probably in the hope of attracting some of their voters. Examples of this include presidential candidates Ivan Hristanov and Nikolay Nenchev in relation to Andrey Gyurov, as well as Georgi Dimov and Boyan Rasate in relation to Kostadin Kostadinov. Of course, purely pragmatic and non-political motivations should not be overlooked either. Many works of analysis point to the significance of the media packages allocated to presidential tickets as an incentive, as well as the opportunity to leverage the presidential vote to gain personal popularity for a career outside of politics - for instance, on the pop-folk scene.

Right from the start of the campaign, polls identified three leading tickets: incumbent President Iliyana Yotova with Kiril Valchev - director of the Bulgarian News Agency - as her running mate; and former caretaker Prime Minister Andrey Gyurov with Georgi Kandev - former Chief Secretary of the Ministry of the Interior - as his running mate; and the leader of the “Vazrazhdane” (“Revival”) party, Kostadin Kostadinov, with the popular journalist and the party’s Member of the European Parliament, Petar Volgin, as his running mate. Yotova and Valchev received the support of the ruling “Progressive Bulgaria” and the left-wing BSP, while Gyurov and Kandev secured the backing of the opposition parties PP and DB. Poll-based projections pointed to a significant lead for Yotova over Gyurov in the first round - with Kostadinov in third place - and a clear victory for Yotova in the second round. However, the first round concluded with only a narrow margin between Yotova and Gyurov - in Yotova’s favour (2.5%, or 42,000 votes) - leading to widespread speculation that an upset was possible.

There are varied reasons for this dynamic. From a factual standpoint, the claim that Gyurov achieved a major breakthrough is inaccurate. His 32% - amidst an unprecedentedly low turnout - actually amounts to fewer than 500,000 voters; this can be explained by the total mobilisation of the core base of the parties supporting him, PP and DB. The more significant development here is the actual collapse in support for Yotova, who managed to garner far less backing than had been projected. Arguments citing voter fatigue from frequent elections and abstention due to the belief that the outcome is a foregone conclusion have some merit, but they do not capture the full picture. Let us consider three additional factors. First, the campaign unfolded entirely according to the agenda set by Andrey Gyurov’s campaign team. The other candidates - Yotova in particular - allowed the media to portray him, from the very outset, as Yotova’s “main opponent” and a guaranteed contender in the second round. Consequently, the month leading up to the first round was dominated by persistent media, public, and political discourse centred on three themes - themes devised and aggressively pushed by Gyurov’s team. One such theme was Yotova’s alleged culpability, in her capacity as Vice President, for the pardoning of drug traffickers (specifically the 2022 case involving the so-called “Escobar of Petrich,” Ognyan Atanasov); Yotova’s inability to safeguard national security in the context of drone attacks (allegations that she serves Russia and the Putin regime, in opposition to European stances); and the anti-democratic nature of her candidacy (accusations that she is a puppet of Prime Minister Radev and is covering up the concentration of power in his hands; as well as suggestions that she condones infringements on freedom of speech, as seen in the case of journalist Sonya Koltuklieva). Throughout the campaign, Yotova’s own messages were completely drowned out by this rhetoric, which forced the candidate into a defensive, explanatory position. Secondly, Gyurov’s campaign was organised in a multi-layered and marketing-savvy manner - in stark contrast to Yotova’s rather formulaic strategy, which relied primarily on meetings and interviews. Gyurov was situated within a kind of “virtual bubble,” where he cultivated the image of a competent technocrat who was, at the same time, close to the people - engaging in the everyday activities typical of ordinary citizens. The campaign’s messaging and actions were entirely dominated by PP and DB; they framed the

presidential election as a dress rehearsal for the parliamentary elections, presenting the vote not merely as the selection of a head of state in a parliamentary republic, but as a dramatic - and perhaps final - choice between Europe and Russia, democracy and dictatorship, the future and the past, truth and lies. On a third level, an extensive social media network effectively caricatured Yotova, attributing to her every conceivable political, moral, and aesthetic flaw, thereby rendering a vote for her - especially in the eyes of younger generations - seemingly unrespectable. The overall effect was twofold: it mobilised her own electoral base while demotivating the opposition's voters. Unlike the typical scenario, where incumbent presidents benefit from low voter turnout, the situation in Bulgaria was the reverse: an increase in turnout worked to Yotova's advantage, while a decline favoured her opponent. Third, PB's support for Yotova gave rise to a far more complex problem than anyone had anticipated. PB backed her candidacy, but in the weeks leading up to the first round, they effectively distanced themselves. Certain unpopular moves by the government were attributed to the incumbent president, while others - including the arrests of mayors from MRF - could be interpreted as an implicit signal to the party's supporters not to vote for Yotova. It should not be forgotten that the massive electoral wave that secured an absolute majority for Rumen Radev's party in April has since receded. Concerns regarding inflation and an uncertain outlook may, in fact, cause some voters to channel their disappointment with Radev into votes for the opponents of his chosen candidate. Another factor points in the same direction: in the mere 5 - 6 months since its establishment as a party, PB still lacks genuine local structures. Consequently, it has no way to mobilise voters other than through statements by the Prime Minister - statements which, in this instance, were notably absent.

Taken together, these factors produced a first-round result that greatly encouraged the so-called "urban right" - represented by PP and DB - and prompted suggestions that Yotova embodies the impending collapse of PB. The week between the two rounds generated genuine suspense regarding the final outcome and heightened public interest in the presidential election. A sharp shift occurred in the course of the campaign, marked primarily by a mobilisation around Yotova.

The second round of the elections and what is politically at stake. The results of the first round led to a restructuring of the political confrontation. In the case of Yotova, a dilemma was framed: normality and peace on one side, versus confrontation and warmongering on the other. In the case of Gyurov, the narrative presented was that of a civilisational choice between the future and the past. Party support for the two candidates ahead of the second round took shape along these lines. Among the more prominent candidates from the first round, Ivelin Mihaylov of the party "Velichie" ("Greatness") offered direct support to Yotova, while Kostadin Kostadinov of "Vazrazhdane" ("Revival") provided indirect support by urging voters to cast their ballots against Gyurov. Analogically, Radostin Vasilev of the "Morality, Unity, Honour" (MECh) party offered indirect support to Gyurov by calling for votes against Yotova. The citizens' initiative "Forum for Democratic Action" - which has spent the past year attempting to organise support for a joint "democratic" presidential candidate - issued a statement in favour of Gyurov. The statement bears the signatures of prominent political figures from the past and present of the right-wing spectrum, including GERB leader Boyko Borissov, who clarified that he was signing in his personal capacity rather than on behalf of GERB. Information has also come to light that Delyan Peevski, leader of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF), mobilised his supporters to back Gyurov. This account is all but confirmed by the unexpected surge in votes for Gyurov in Kurdzhali and among Bulgarian expatriates in Turkey, which occurred within the span of just one week.

It was exactly this consolidation around Gyurov that laid the groundwork for a successful counterstrike by the caretaker government and Radev. In a dedicated statement, the Prime Minister declared that what we are witnessing is an attempt at a comeback by the "sglobka" ("juncture") - the joint governance arrangement between PP-DB, GERB, and Peevski that existed from 2023 - 2024 and has become synonymous with political lack of principle. He further stated that their objective is to trigger snap parliamentary elections, bringing with them a fresh political crisis. Both the "sglobka" ("juncture") and the prospect of a new election cycle are deeply unpopular among Bulgarian citizens; many perceived them as a threat, one embodied by Gyurov's candidacy. A second effective tool in Yotova's strategy was the successful "packaging" of Gyurov as a party-aligned product of Asen Vasilev, PP, and DB - rather than as an independent candidate - a characterisation for which there was, in fact, some basis. The distrust felt by a large segment of the electorate toward PP and DB - and toward Vasilev in particular - played a significant role. A third factor was Yotova's categorical dominance during the televised debate with Gyurov on national television.

The result of all this became apparent during the runoff on November 1st: an increase in turnout by nearly 400,000 voters - despite the elimination of most candidates from the first round - along with more than a doubling of support for Yotova, bringing her total close to 1.1 million votes. Meanwhile, Gyurov was limited to 750 thousand votes - essentially the combined core support of PP and DB, supplemented by small and quantitatively insufficient, yet highly compromising additions from GERB and MRF.

3.
State of the party system

"Progressive Bulgaria" (PB). The accelerated institutionalisation of the ruling party is a stated priority. In September, over 6,000 new members were registered across 251 municipal and district organisations - a move viewed as a step toward the local elections taking place a year later. In any case, the party organisation of PB remains in a very early stage of development. The presidential elections demonstrated to observers that PB is unable to mobilise voters and has a weak local presence. Moreover, the highest level of mobilisation is found in areas where PB has succeeded in attracting the active core of BSP.

This is why the functioning of PB this stage, continues to be viewed through the lens of political balances within Rumen Radev's administration. Various assumptions are made regarding different camps and factions represented by specific ministers, while analysts interpret the power hierarchy through the prism of the level of access individual figures have to the Prime Minister. Hard facts on these matters are scarce.

GERB-UDF. Boyko Borissov's party attempts to fulfill the role of a "systemic alternative" to the government - criticising it for "spending too much, over-taxing, and governing unpredictably" - yet it confines its criticism to parliamentary forums, and primarily uses it to counter the allegations of the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) regarding a "bad legacy."

Public attention regarding GERB centred on the party's decision not to propose or support a candidate for the presidential election. The prevailing theory behind this unprecedented move was that leader Boyko Borissov feared a poor performance - one that could leave the party's nominee in third place or lower, much like what occurred during the 2023 local elections in Sofia. This also raised the logical question of whether Borissov might ultimately end up backing another candidate, thereby underscoring his own indispensable role in determining the outcome of the electoral race. Some believed that GERB would provide covert support to its mayor of Elin Pelin, Ivaylo Simeonov - who ran as an independent presidential candidate - but the first-round results did not bear this out. Other commentaries suggested that Borisov was discreetly "trading" some of his support. During the main electoral contest between Yotova and Gyurov, it was evident that certain GERB figures - such as Stara Zagora Mayor Zhivko Todorov and MEP Emil Radev – gave their support to Yotova, while others spoke less publicly in favour of the "right-wing candidate," Gyurov.

Two days before the second round, Borissov - along with dozens of other politicians - signed a declaration in support of Gyurov, citing a commitment to a pro-European policy and the protection of national security. The declaration appeared literally at the last minute; it did not gain wide circulation within party circles and was followed by a clarification from Borissov himself, stating that it did not commit GERB, but rather only him "as a citizen". Data from the second round does not indicate that GERB voters played a significant role in the distribution of votes between Yotova and Gyurov. It is difficult to determine whether this amounts to a "double game" - a formal declaration of alignment with the "democratic camp" (despite the initial reluctance of PP and DB to admit Borissov into it), coupled with an apparent unwillingness to hinder Yotova's campaign. In any case, GERB failed to derive any notable advantage from this situation.

"We Continue the Change" ("Produlzhavame Promianata" - PP) and "Democratic Bulgaria" (DB) - two political entities that continue to act in political sync despite being formally divided into two separate parliamentary groups - threw their entire political and media resources into Andrey Gyurov's campaign, effectively turning it into a partisan campaign directed against the government and the Prime Minister. It was precisely PP and DB that set the tone for the attacks against Yotova and the administration, while challenging the cabinet's resolve and expertise in the realm of national security. The outcome appears positive. Thanks to Gyurov's advancement to the second round - and the sentiment that emerged between the two rounds suggesting he might even pull off an upset and win - PP and DB have clearly established themselves as the primary opposition to the PB.

Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF). The party transitioned from being a "loyal opposition" to openly confronting the government. Revelations regarding contracts for highway guardrails and the flights taken by leader Delyan Peevski - followed by the arrests of several MRF mayors - put an end to the movement's ambiguous political stance. The party turned decisively against the cabinet, alleging a "Radev-Koprinkov" model and invoking long-standing insinuations about the Prime Minister's economic dependencies; meanwhile, MRF Members of the European Parliament Elena Yoncheva and Taner Kabilov alerted European institutions to alleged political repression.

It has been suggested that, until recently, Peevski had hoped for some sort of understanding with Radev, but by October, he gradually realised that the pressure exerted on him by the new governing authorities would not cease. This shift also took on a specific dimension in the context of the presidential elections. Public reports emerged indicating that, during the first round, MRF structures attempted to prevent voters from casting ballots for Yotova, while in the second round, there was a mobilisa-

tion - both in ethnically mixed regions and among Bulgarian emigrants in Turkey - in support of Gyurov. While this yielded no tangible electoral outcome, the political impact was decidedly negative. Without providing any significant boost to Gyurov, MRF cast a shadow over his claims to political integrity. It created the impression that Gyurov had struck backroom deals with the very party against which his own political community had most vehemently protested.

"Vazrazhdane". ("Revival") The party delayed its presidential nomination until the very last moment, aiming to project a sense of political initiative that would shift the stakes of the campaign. This move was not particularly successful. There was valid speculation that MEP Petar Volgin would have been a strong presidential candidate, as he stood a good chance of attracting not only the party's core (and currently diminished) electorate but also many disaffected left-wing voters, Russophiles, and unaffiliated nationalists. Instead, Kostadinov once again chose to nominate himself for head of state - with Volgin as his running mate - thereby risking the confinement of his potential voter base strictly to the party's own supporters. Whether this stems from Kostadinov's reluctance to allow anyone else within "Vazrazhdane" to gain greater electoral weight than himself remains a matter of conjecture. In any case, at no point did the party's presidential ticket manage to emerge from the shadow of the "major" clash between Yotova and Gyurov. The third place, won with 190,000 votes is actually a good achievement, and it indicates that "Vazrazhdane" still managed to regain some part of its old supporters, who in April reoriented themselves to PB, but later became disillusioned with the hesitant policy of Radev's government. Presidential and parliamentary elections, in principle, should not automatically be compared, but in the case of Kostadinov, a "party man", this is a permissible comparison. Kostadinov's later call to vote against Gyurov, which actually meant for Yotova, also demonstrates a responsible (and in some sense supra-party) attitude towards his great anti-liberal cause.

4.
The progressive political and social agenda

The Left in a state of mobilisation. Although they remain on the outside of parliament, the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) have mobilised to the fullest in support of the Yotova-Valchev duo in the presidential election. It is fair to say that a significant portion of the local campaign organisation - as well as a substantial share of the final result - can be attributed to the Socialists, who view Yotova with reason as their own candidate.

The hope of BSP that they will make a comeback in mainstream politics is taking shape along two main lines. First, there is a shift towards the left in terms of ideology. The "20 Theses for Socialism in Our Century", published by leader Krum Zarkov, encapsulate the party's new direction. They address issues such as the labour-capital conflict; criticism of of privatisation, deregulation, austerity, and the flat rate tax; affordable housing; prioritising healthcare over profit; the recognition of care work; worker participation in management; climate justice; and opposition to excessive military spending - all while advocating for a "different Europe" built on labour, peace and equality.

Taken as a whole, this vision signifies a distancing both from left-centrism at the global and European levels, and from the shortcomings of Radev's "de-oligarchisation" at the national level. Secondly, it reflects an effort to integrate BSP into civic protest initiatives that express opposition to the dominant neoliberal agenda and its inherent flaws. A case in point is the campaign "Don't Gamble Away Our Old Age", which advocates a fundamental overhaul of the second pension pillar and has reached the stage of submitting signatures to the National Assembly.

Trade union activity. Discussions surrounding the upcoming state budget for 2027 have triggered a new wave of mobilisation among trade unions. Alongside sectoral protests - such as those involving young doctors and medical professionals - the CITUB and Podkrepa ("Support") trade unions organised a series of actions across many cities, culminating in a national protest and a motorcade demonstration in Sofia. Their demands are clear: a pay increase of at least 10% in the public sector (rather than the 5% proposed by the cabinet), an increase in the minimum wage to 690 euros (instead of the 660 euros under discussion), and a rejection of indiscriminate budget cuts that would degrade public services. A significant takeaway from these events is the potential to undermine the government's claim to a "progressive" identity - a government that still faces high social expectations.

5.
Main findings, forecasts, and recommendations

The escalation of Russia's war against Ukraine is a reality that raises well-founded concerns regarding the security of the entire Black Sea region. The increasing frequency of drone attacks calls into question the viability of civilian shipping in the Black Sea as a whole, with all the negative consequences for neighbouring states. Consequently, the Bulgarian government's efforts to bolster the defensive capabilities of Black Sea nations - specifically those that are members of the EU and/or NATO - should be viewed positively, as should its initiatives to foster regional and European coordination aimed at preventing the Black Sea from becoming a theatre of military operations. The proposal put forward by Bulgarian President Iliana Iotova for a moratorium on hostilities in the Black Sea warrants very careful consideration.

The major development from Bulgaria's seventh presidential election is the election of the first female president in the history of the country, Iliana Yotova. At the start of the period under review, this outcome seemed almost a foregone conclusion; however, the campaign and the inconclusive results of the first round raised the political stakes of the race. An impression emerged - one also echoed in global and European media - that we were witnessing a clash between a pro-European candidate, Andrey Gyurov, and a pro-Russian candidate, Yotova. This is a superficial conclusion. Yotova possesses a clear European political profile and has demonstrated loyalty to Bulgaria's European and Euro-Atlantic partners. However, albeit to a more moderate degree than President Rumen Radev, she advocates for far more serious EU engagement to accelerate a peace process in Ukraine, including the development of a common European platform for negotiations with Russia. It is worth noting that such views are not unique to Bulgaria; they also find resonance in a number of other European countries.

In a sense, the election of Iliyana Yotova also confirms the shift in Bulgarian politics that began with the victory of PB in the parliamentary elections this past April. It would be a mistake, however, to view the outcome of November 1st merely as yet another victory for Prime Minister Rumen Radev. Disappointment with the policies of the incumbent government is undeniable. The very entity of PB have yet to establish themselves as a fully-fledged party with stable local structures, and their future perspectives remain unclear. The upcoming discussions regarding the 2027 budget should reveal whether the cabinet possesses a clear vision for reform, or whether its actions are driven by inertia and a reactive, ad-hoc approach.

The election of Iliyana Yotova also presents an opportunity for the revival of the Bulgarian Socialist Party. Although Yotova ran as an independent candidate, her background - along with the participation of prominent BSP figures in her initiative committee - confirms her commitment to the political left. While it would be inaccurate to equate Yotova entirely with the Left, one should not overlook the new possibilities for the European Left in Bulgaria that have emerged from the national vote.

The emergence of PP and DB as the focal point of the opposition to the Radev cabinet received clear validation in the presidential elections. Other opposition parties, such as GERB and MRF, are visibly aligning their actions with this leading role. The outcome of the second round makes Andrey Gyurov the politician within this centre-right/liberal spectrum with the highest level of electoral support. The question of Gyurov's political future is gradually coming to the fore - whether as a key player within the PP-DB alliance or as the founder of a new political party.

Bulgaria has a difficult winter in store that will test the authority of the government, but will also stimulate the future rearrangement of the party system.

Victory of Y chance for BSP

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

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Iliyana Yotova and Kiril Valchev, supported by the ruling Progressive Bulgaria party and the Socialist Party, won the presidential and vice-presidential elections by a convincing margin.

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The liberal right has established itself as the primary opponent of the government.

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A series of incidents related to national security highlights Bulgaria's serious vulnerability in the context of the expanding war between Russia and Ukraine.

Further information on the topic can be found here:
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