

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

# POLIT-BAROMETER

Year 21 Issue 7  
September 2021

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Bulgaria is entering a period of political turbulence.



President Radev is favourite to win a second term.



The next parliament is also expected to be highly fragmented, which will make negotiations for a stable parliamentary majority difficult.

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## 1

## THE POLITICAL SITUATION

After two months of fruitless work, the 46th National Assembly was dissolved, and for the third time this year Bulgarians will vote for parliament. In two months, parliament passed only two laws - updated the budget at the suggestion of the caretaker government and removed the Witness Protection Bureau from the chief prosecutor, transferring it to the Ministry of Justice. The 46th National Assembly will be remembered for its chaotic work, scandals between the parliamentary groups and its inability to form a regular government. Early parliamentary elections will be held on November 14th, along with the first round of the election of the President.

After Parliament was dissolved President Radev appointed a caretaker government with almost the same composition as Stefan Yanev's first cabinet, but with three exceptions. Ministers Kiril Petkov and Asen Vassilev have announced that they will stand in the upcoming parliamentary elections with their political project. Their places were taken by Daniela Vizieva as Minister of Economy and Valeri Belchev as Minister of Finance. Due to tension in the sphere of transport, the Minister of Transport, Information Technology and Communications has also been replaced in recent months. The new minister is Hristo Alexiev, who also held this position in the caretaker government of Ognyan Gerdjikov at the beginning of 2017. The caretaker government will continue the policy as a style of governance that it has followed up to now. It faces two main challenges - the health crisis and inflation. These are the biggest risks in the country in the short and medium term. These two topics will also be the foundation of the election campaign.

The situation regarding the pandemic is deteriorating, with the peak of the fourth wave expected to be at the end of October. Schools have started face-to-face education, and for this reason there are fears that the number of those infected will soon increase significantly. So far, about 1,500 to 2,000 people are infected per day, which equates to 8-9% of the tests performed. However, the mortality rate is too high and Bulgaria continues to be in first place regarding mortality from Covid in Europe. The reasons for this are the low proportion of the population who are vaccinated, which at

the end of September was about 20%. The government is afraid to take decisive action with the introduction of compulsory vaccination - at least for some areas and groups of people due to pressure from representatives of the restaurant and hotel industry, who threaten protests, strikes and roadblocks. A Gallup poll conducted in mid-September showed that 45% of Bulgarians were categorical that they would not be vaccinated. This is very unusual for a country like Bulgaria, where compulsory vaccinations were introduced in the 1950s.

The second main challenge is rising prices due to the increasing price of electricity for businesses. This has almost doubled in the last three months. The increase in the price of gas also affects the final prices of household goods. Inflation is a global trend, but several internal factors also influence the rise in prices. Borisov's government took the decision to liberalise the electricity market and this came into force in July this year. According to specialists, there is a number of speculators on the market, who buy cheap electricity, which they then sell expensively because they have preliminary information about what is offered on the energy exchange. For this reason the Ministry of Interior and the State Agency for National Security started an inspection in the Energy and Water Regulatory Commission, the Bulgarian Energy Holding, the Energy System Operator and the Energy Exchange. Although inflation is a global phenomenon and is to a great extent imported from abroad, GERB has accused the President and the caretaker government of raising prices. The blame for the increase in electricity prices for industry and the price of gas, however, must also be sought in the previous government. GERB never carried out a qualitative reform in the energy sector, and the difficulties in building the interconnector with Greece, which has been in the process of construction for more than 10 years, do not now enable Bulgaria to buy cheaper gas from Azerbaijan.

The election of President appears to be a foregone conclusion, with Rumen Radev and Iliana Yotova expected to be elected for a second term as President and Vice President. Radev's main opponents from GERB and MRF are expected to be announced at the last possible moment - just before registration. Radev and Yotova

were nominated by an Initiative Committee composed of celebrities, and supported by BSP, ITN (“There is such a People”), ISBGNI (“Rise Up BG, Here We Come”) and the new formation of Kiril Petkov and Asen Vassilev.

For the political parties, the more important campaign is that of the parliamentary elections. The presiden-

tial elections, however, can also affect the outcome of party lists – especially those of some of the parties that have backed the president. Thus, their support for Radev can increase their results. It would appear that GERB and MRF will build their pre-election campaign on anti-Radev rhetoric, and this will make the political discourse in the country considerably more acute.

## 2

## CONDITION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE PARTY SYSTEM

“There is Such a People” (ITN) suffered a collapse electorally in the last month. The reasons for this are the disappointment of the voters with the behaviour of the party and it being impossible for them to form a government. Over 40% of Bulgarians believe that ITN are mainly to blame for this. If only two months ago ITN was at the centre of political attention, today the party is less and less talked about in public. ITN has remained in isolation, which will be difficult to overcome during the election campaign, and the downward trend is set to continue.

The collapse of ITN has returned GERB to first place in the election preferences. There is no growth in the approval of the former ruling party, but a preservation of the positions from the previous elections on July 11th. The party will announce its candidates for President and Vice President at the last minute, due to the lack of suitable figures who could oppose Rumen Radev. In September, for the first time since the establishment of GERB, trust in Boyko Borisov is lower than that of the party. A Gallup poll shows that only 15% of voters express trust in Borisov, and 22% would vote for GERB. This shows that Borisov is no longer even accepted unequivocally in his own party. However, the question of his resignation as leader is not being discussed, and this has been stated by a number of representatives of the party leadership.

After sanctions were imposed against Delyan Peevski under the Magnitsky law, MRF became radicalised. The party stood firmly behind the oligarch, who has become a symbol of corruption in the country. MRF accused circles in Bulgaria related to the publisher Ivo Prokopiev, owner of the Capital and Dnevnik websites, of being behind the sanctions and misleading the US authorities. This thesis was expounded by MRF MEP Ilhan Kyuchuk from the rostrum of the European Parliament during the discussion of the actions under the Magnitsky law. For the first time in its history, MRF will lead a negative and radical campaign. This is due to nervousness and a pressing concern among the MRF elite that a future investigation into oligarch Peevski could lead to the unravelling of deep-rooted schemes of corruption, in which other members of the top-level leadership the party are likely to be embroiled. MRF

does not cease its attacks on the caretaker government and President Radev. The party leader, Mustafa Karadayi, called Radev a divider of the nation and harmful to Bulgarian democracy. This is a thesis that is also expressed by representatives of GERB. MRF threatened to do everything possible to prevent Radev from being re-elected and announced that they would nominate their own candidate for the presidential election.

For weeks now, the main interest of the media has focused on whether the most approved ministers in the caretaker government, Kiril Petkov and Asen Vassilev, will stand in the parliamentary elections with their political formation. The answer to this question became apparent on the day of the presentation of the new cabinet, amongst which the names of Petkov and Vassilev did not figure. The two announced that they will be standing in the elections. Because of the lack of time to create their own party, the two announced that they would use the registration of small existing parties, with which they would form a coalition with a brand of their choosing – “We Continue the Change.” The parties that gave substance to the new political project were the pan-European party Volt and the Middle European Class party. Petkov and Vassilev will be co-chairs of the association. Politically, the formation is situated in the centre. Among the main figures in the coalition are young professionals who have graduated abroad, with professional experience in the field of economics, innovation and entrepreneurship, who were part of the ministerial teams of Vassilev and Petkov. They announced that the main goal is to continue the change that the caretaker government has put in motion - namely: stopping corruption,; reforms in the public sector and the judiciary; stopping the inefficient spending of public resources; and conducting transparent public procurement, control over large companies and greater collection of the budget. The two called for a new style of government, opening the door wide to dialogue with all political parties - even GERB and MRF. A condition for talks with these two formations is that they differentiate themselves from the corrupt practices of the previous government and distance themselves from the corrupt people in them. “We Continue the Change” stated that their natural partners are “Democratic Bulgaria” and “Rise up BG!”

Here We Come!" The two protest parties appealed to the new party to unite and appear with joint lists in the elections. Kiril Petkov and Asen Vassilev rejected this proposal, but expressed readiness for talks and the signing of an agreement on a programme and priorities for future governance.

The new union has started with a high level of support: 11%, which shows the potential for a strong performance in the upcoming elections. One thing is for sure – "We Continue the Change" has had an impact on the electoral picture and could become an unavoidable factor in the forming of a regular government.

BSP showed a constructive approach in the 46th National Assembly and this stabilised the position of the party. Opinion polls once again put it in second place, with about 15% of the vote, although the differences between it and other parties are very close. For BSP, holding the parliamentary elections together with the presidential elections is an opportunity to expand the periphery of voters, in view of the support for Rumen Radev.

At the same time, however, BSP continues to send contradictory signals regarding the team of Radev-Yotova. BSP asked the President whether he was participating in and supporting the project of the caretaker ministers. Although the President denied having anything to do with the political intentions of Petkov and Vassilev - the stamp of "Presidential Party" is accepted by some people in the general public. This could lead to an overflow

of support from the President for "We Continue the Change", but it could also mean that BSP loses voters.

Democratic Bulgaria have experienced a halt in their electoral ascent. The coalition reached second position at the end of August. The main challenge for the party is whether some of their broad periphery will not become reoriented to "We Continue the Change" – even more so since Kiril Petkov is a co-founder and former member of "Yes, Bulgaria". Democratic Bulgaria is discussing various options regarding taking part in the presidential election, but in the end they will announce their candidates at the last minute. Many of the supporters of Democratic Bulgaria back Rumen Radev and are expected to support him in the first round. Therefore, it is very likely that the presidential candidate couple of Democratic Bulgaria will get a lower result than that of the party list in the parliamentary elections.

Despite internal contradictions, "Rise up BG! Here We Come" will appear in the same format in the elections. The party came to the forefront of a scandal involving one of its leaders, Tatiana Doncheva, who was accused by "There Is Such a People" of trying to split their parliamentary group by hinting at bribery. Doncheva denied the allegations. "Rise up BG! Here We Come!", as the smallest coalition in the 46th National Assembly, is also at greatest risk of not crossing the 4% electoral barrier this time. Some of their supporters might also be reoriented to the new project of Kiril Petkov and Asen Vassilev.

## 3

## PUBLIC OPINION

On the eve of the third parliamentary elections this year, a serious shift in the strata of the electorate can be observed. A Market Links survey conducted in the second half of September showed significant dynamics in support for some political formations. The winners of the July 11th elections "There is Such a People" have had the largest electoral collapse of over 10%. Thus, Slavi Trifonov's party ranks third with 13% support. This collapse returns first place to GERB, which now ranks as the first political force with a result of 22.6%. This result is practically equal to the vote that GERB received on July 11th. This equates to 600,000 – 650,000 votes. This is the limit of GERB and it is very difficult for the party to mobilise more voters. BSP comes in second, but has results that are very close to those of "There is Such a People" and Democratic Bulgaria. 14.5% of the electorate would vote for the Socialists, a result close to that of July 11th. BSP has the opportunity to mobilise an additional periphery, which, however, will be more difficult due to competition from the new formation of former caretaker ministers Petkov and Vassilev. Democratic Bulgaria received 11.9%, which shows a halt in its electoral ascent, which was observed in the summer, when it reached second place. The main reason for this is the new political project – "We Continue the Change".

The Market Links poll was conducted before Kiril Petkov and Asen Vassilev announced their entry into politics and their participation in the upcoming parliamentary elections. Therefore, the result of 10.9%, which the formation received in the study is extremely high and it has the potential to increase. "We Continue the Change" receives support from voters with different social profiles, who have voted for "There is Such a People", Democratic Bulgaria, as well as for GERB and BSP in the past. "We Continue the Change" also received support from those who did not vote in the previous elections. All this shows that the potential is high. MRF ranks sixth with 9.8% of the vote. The protest group "Rise up BG! Here We Come" remain below the electoral barrier with a score of 3.3% and they are unlikely to find a place in the next parliament. It is expected that many of the supporters of the formation will reorient themselves to "We Continue the Change". The nationalists from "Vazrazhdane" ("Revival") have a result of 3.2% and at this stage they also fail to pass the 4% electoral barrier.

Holding 2-in-1 elections for President and parliament increases turnout. According to a survey by Market Links - 57% of respondents stated categorically that they will vote, and 20% said "most likely - yes."



## 4

## MAIN CONCLUSIONS AND FORECASTS

Bulgaria is entering a period of political turbulence. For the first time in the democratic history of the country, the elections for the President and the National Assembly will be held on the same day. This will exacerbate political polarisation during the elections, with expectations of a campaign of deprecation full of scandals and mutual accusations. President Radev is favourite to win a second term. He continues to be the most approved politician in the country, apparently without a rival. Four of the main parties are backing him – BSP, “There is Such a People”, “Rise up, BG! Here We Come!” and “We Continue the Change”. The other major political parties are tardy in nominating candidates for the post, which will hamper their election campaigns.

The biggest risks facing the President and the caretaker government are the complication of the health crisis and rising prices. The government is still unable to find an effective way to increase the proportion of people vaccinated in that they have refrained from imposing stricter measures and introducing compulsory vaccination for certain groups. The pre-election situation further complicates the adoption of unpopular decisions in connection with the health crisis. The country is deeply divided into people who support vaccination and so-called anti-vaccinators, due to contradictory speeches by health experts and manipulative social media campaigns, including by political parties such as ABV (“Alternative for Bulgarian Revival”) and “Vazrazhdane” (“Revival”).

GERB are currently the first political force electorally, due to the collapse of “There is Such a People”. There is no increase in the level of backing for the former ruling party, as they maintain the levels of support from the elections of July 11th. This seems to be an electoral limit for GERB. The party remains isolated and even if it were to be the first political force in the elections, it would be unlikely to be able to carry out its first term. Its leader, Boyko Borisov, enjoys very little public support.

Most probably, President Radev will have a big lead in the first round of the presidential elections. Whether he will be able to win on November 14th will depend primarily on the turnout and whether it will exceed 50%. It is expected that holding 2-in-1 elections will increase voter turnout. However, Bulgarians are extremely disappointed with the inability of political

parties to form a regular government twice in succession, so the turnout will have difficulty exceeding 50%.

It is also expected for the next parliament to be highly fragmented, which will make it difficult to negotiate a stable parliamentary majority. The new formation of Kiril Petkov and Asen Vassilev – “We Continue the Change” (“Produzhavame Promianata” - PP) will probably cause a serious shift the electoral picture. The formation started with considerable support of 11% and in the course of the campaign will probably increase its result. This will depend primarily on the people on the lists and whether the right messages will be found to attract widespread support. Assuming a position in the centre, politically, PP can take votes from everywhere - both from the left and from the right. A crucial factor will be the popularity of the two former caretaker ministers, who are currently among the most popular politicians in the country. Their proposal to have a post-election dialogue with all political forces to form a government that shows maturity and common sense should be praised. At the same time, they have very serious requirements for GERB and MRF related to their corrupt practices in order for negotiations to be carried out with them.

Many of those who voted for “There is Such a People” are beginning to reorient to the new formation. In the course of the campaign, this formation will continue their electoral decline and it is very likely that they will get a result below 10%. They are mainly to blame for it being impossible to form a government in the 46th National Assembly, which is borne out by the attitudes of citizens in a number of opinion polls.

“Democratic Bulgaria” are concerned about the possibility of “We Continue the Change” attracting their voters. Nevertheless, the two formations, which claim to be the basis of the next governing coalition, have demonstrated a constructive dialogue.

BSP have currently maintained their electoral positions of July 11th. The party will endeavour to take advantage of the 2-in-1 elections and mobilise an additional left-wing vote of people who sympathise with President Radev. The hesitant stance of BSP regarding the President in recent weeks and attacks by party officials on Radev may repel some undecided voters to the left and redirect their vote to “We Continue the Change.”

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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

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The next parliament is also expected to be highly fragmented, which will make negotiations for a stable parliamentary majority difficult.

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