

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

POLIT-BAROMETER

Year 22 Issue 4
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Boris Popivanov



Bulgarian foreign policy has become domestic. All topics of the political debate are broken up through prism of the country's foreign policy dilemmas.



The government is close to a state of blockage due to the rejection of a common strategy and a "policy of mutual blackmail" of the coalition partners.



The conflict between the President and the Prime Minister is becoming a central dimension of the political process.

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1

FOREIGN POLICY DYNAMICS

The war in Ukraine. The official Bulgarian position regarding the Russian invasion of Ukraine did not undergo any significant change until almost the end of April. In the spirit of the line adopted at the beginning of the conflict, Bulgaria joined all EU and UN initiatives to condemn and deter the aggressor. Among them are the country's participation in the EU Fifth Package of Sanctions against Russia (for ceasing coal imports and closing ports to Russian ships) and in the UN decision to suspend Russia's membership in the Human Rights Council. The only Bulgarian government decision of greater significance was to provide helmets and bullet-proof vests to the Ukrainian civilian population. This decision also expressed the consensus understanding of the main political forces and institutions.

Throughout the whole of the month, the Bulgarian debate on the war focused on the possibility of sending of military aid to Ukraine. Several dimensions of the problem can be traced. The first of these concerns the international context. Bulgaria's Euro-Atlantic partners have repeatedly underlined that this matter is a sovereign Bulgarian decision in which they do not interfere. This was the position of both the US Ambassador to Sofia Hero Mustafa and the Chairman of the NATO Military Committee Admiral Rob Bauer. The impression was created that the Bulgarian authorities preferred a decision to provide military assistance to appear to have been taken under external pressure. This is exactly the kind of impression that neither Washington nor Brussels wanted to make. The radicalisation of the debate, however, came from outside, as a result of Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba's visit to Sofia. He indicated the dilemma that any non-support for Ukraine means support for Russia, and called on Bulgaria to determine whose side it is on. It can be said that Kuleba's message was one of the catalysts for change in the hitherto more cautious Bulgarian position. A second dimension of the problem arose from the dynamics of relations in the ruling coalition. The initiative was taken by Democratic Bulgaria (DB), who were the first to submit a proposal to the National Assembly for military assistance. Later, the party "There is such a people" (ITN) supported the idea, and at the end of the month it was joined by the

mandate-bearing party "We Continue the Change". Only the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) continued to strongly oppose military aid. Even in the position of BSP, however, nuances have emerged. While at first it seemed that if military aid were decided upon, BSP would leave the government, later there was talk only of voting against it in parliament. A third dimension of the problem stems from the dynamics of relations between institutions. Prime Minister Kiril Petkov and President Rumen Radev gradually assumed opposing positions. Petkov, who advocated the need for unity and compromise, all of a sudden strongly advocated the provision of military aid. The President, on the other hand, consolidated his line and maintained the view that such a decision would involve Bulgaria in the conflict. The fourth dimension of the problem concerns the so-called gas issue. Russia has cut off natural gas supplies to Bulgaria, based on the grounds that the country has not complied with the request of Russia to pay for the supplies in rubles. This further polarises the "for" and "against" reactions of Russia in the political elite. The government have stated that they will not succumb to Russian pressure, and guarantee the availability of alternative sources of gas. The President and the opposition questioned the reality of these alternatives and pointed to the danger of a severe collapse of the Bulgarian economy and irreparable damage to household budgets. The nationalist party "Vazrazhdane" ("Revival") even saw the refusal to negotiate with Russia as a reason to demand the resignation of the cabinet and opt for early elections. There is also a fifth dimension of the problem, related to various initiatives to stimulate a clearer Bulgarian position against Russian aggression. This should include discussions on whether the Russian ambassador to Sofia, Eleonora Mitrofanova, should be declared persona non grata; Prime Minister Petkov called upon Bulgarians to donate one salary for military aid to Ukraine; Petkov and representatives of ITN (There is Such a People) and DB (Democratic Bulgaria) visited Kyiv; Sofia municipality took the decision to name an alley in front of the Russian embassy in Sofia "Heroes of Ukraine". All these actions, taken together, supported the daily intimation that Ukraine is the main topic on the agenda of Bulgarian politics and that the time has come to decide on military aid.

The Macedonian Nodus. Bulgaria's veto on starting negotiations for North Macedonia's accession to the EU remains in force. The new dynamics in the relations between Sofia and Skopje, announced by Prime Minister Petkov in December last year, gradually faded away. At the same time, political tensions over the case of North Macedonia are rising again.

The first reason is an international one. There are clear enough indications of external pressure on Bulgaria to remove the veto on the negotiation process. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen visited Sofia to give the green light to Bulgaria's Recovery and Sustainability Plan, but used the occasion to give a reminder that the EU has a commitment to the candidate countries Albania and North Macedonia that needs to be implemented. Von der Leyen's statement made it sound as if to her the two things (the approval of the Bulgarian Plan and the lifting of the Bulgarian veto) were interrelated. It seems that Bulgaria has even been given a deadline - until June - this time by EU Enlargement Commissioner Oliver Varhej. German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock referred in the same vein to her conversation with Bulgarian Foreign Minister Teodora Gencheva, although Sofia later denied that any such promises had been made. Notwithstanding, the calendar shows expectations for a possible solution to the dispute between Sofia and Skopje within the current French presidency of the Council of the EU. Indeed, Bulgaria gave assurances that there is no official change of position. Interestingly, the behaviour of North Macedonia does not encourage such a change. On the contrary, President Stevo Pendarovski expressed doubts as to whether Bulgaria's demands should be met, because there are no guarantees against the emergence of new demands in the future. In Skopje they once again raised the topic of Bulgarian sympathy for fascism during the Second World War.

The reason for this was the opening of a Bulgarian cultural club in Bitola, named after the IMRO activist Ivan Mihailov. In response, a campaign was launched in North Macedonia against the initiative, citing Mihailov's collaboration with the Nazis.

The political tension on the Macedonian issue was transferred to the Bulgarian political debate. First of all, a conflict arose within the Bulgarian government itself. Foreign Minister Gencheva accused Prime Minister Petkov of pursuing "two foreign policies" towards North Macedonia, one for our international partners and one for Bulgarian public opinion. Although the conflict was later settled, the impression remained that Petkov had made commitments to North Macedonia that he hid from the Bulgarian public. Secondly, disagreements between the Prime Minister and the President have intensified. The topic of "North Macedonia" has been a cause of distance between Petkov and Radev for a long time, but now the focus of the controversy has become clearer. Radev insists that the inclusion of Bulgarians in the constitution of North Macedonia be accepted as an imperative condition for lifting the veto. Petkov, who is not against the condition itself, at the same time believes that this could be postponed and it could happen during the negotiations themselves, rather than preceding them. Thirdly, the parliamentary division on the subject further complicates the decision-making process. At the moment, in the ruling coalition BSP and ITN are against a change in the Bulgarian position, while "We Continue the Change" and DB do not have a definite position, but are still more inclined towards a change. In the opposition, GERB and "Vazrazhdane" are against it, and only the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) strongly support the commencement of negotiations. There is still no majority for lifting the veto.

2

THE INSTITUTIONS AND THE AGENDA OF SOCIETY

The government. It is widely shared that one can see a serious crisis of the cabinet in at least two areas - severe internal conflicts between the coalition partners and the lack of a strategy to overcome the negative economic trends. There is more and more talk of early elections in the short term.

The perception of an impending cabinet blockage is based on several factors. First, the so-called coalition council does not really work or, at best, works poorly. None of the meetings held in the format of party chairs led to the development of a common position and the overcoming of disagreements. Secondly, there is no coalition dialogue on the forthcoming budget update and its priorities. The principle of last-minute unilateral actions, which are inevitably associated with great tension and potential for conflict, is being affirmed. The lack of a government programme uniting the common understandings of the four coalition partners is becoming increasingly apparent. Third, inter-party relations in the coalition express a kind of "celebration of the red lines", the principles about which the parties declare that they will not back down. Such are the clashes between the BSP and the DB over military aid to Ukraine or between the "We Continue the Change" and ITN over the election of a governor of the Bulgarian National Bank (BNB). In the end, this stimulates an orientation towards "floating majorities", where the survival of the government requires important decisions to be made in parliament with the votes of the opposition. An example of this is the situation with payments for road construction contracts. In this case, ITN (from the government) and GERB and MRF (from the opposition) stood together. Fourth, the refusal to have a full-fledged dialogue with business in conditions of economic uncertainty and galloping inflation encourages an environment of protest. Employers' organisations have already announced their intention to protest, demanding the resignation of the cabinet.

The only area where a positive effect of the government's work can be felt is judicial reform. Amendments to the Judiciary Act have finally been adopted, closing down the specialised court and the specialised prosecutor's office, institutions that had long been

known to be a tool for repression by the authorities. Of course, this act is only part of the imperatives of judicial reform, but it is an important part, a step in the right direction.

The President. The conflict between the President and the Prime Minister, predicted at the beginning of his term, is beginning to become ever more clearly outlined. So far, tensions between the two institutions have not been very public. Radev's criticism of certain actions of the cabinet was moderate and nuanced, and the cabinet itself accepted or avoided them without acute reactions. Events escalated with the resignation of the head of the National Security Service (NSS) General Emil Tonev. President Radev, who is in charge of this resignation, flatly refused to confirm it. Disagreements came to a head over the issue of military aid to Ukraine. Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Asen Vassilev described the President's reserved position as "disgraceful". Some commentators saw in this reaction an official rejection of Radev's "guardianship" of the cabinet. According to other estimates, the cabinet is entering a dangerous spiral of creating more and more new enemies.

The Chief Prosecutor. The closure of the specialised courts and prosecutors office is a severe blow to Chief Prosecutor Ivan Geshev, who resolutely and until the very last moment defended the need for them. The procedure for Geshev's removal, launched in the Supreme Judicial Council, is unlikely to yield any result, but shows the chief prosecutor's growing inability to get out of the defensive position in which he finds himself.

Public opinion. There was a series of opinion polls that called the tune in April, which recorded a drastic drop in confidence in the leading political force, "We Continue the Change". From the point of view of the dynamics of party attitudes, there are three items of news. First, the return of GERB to the forefront, albeit not because support for GERB is growing, but because support for "We Continue the Change" and other parties is declining. Second, a dramatic increase in confidence in "Vazrazhdane" ("Revival"), which shows the prospects of the political role of "opposition to everyone". Third, minimal demand for new

political projects, suggesting voter fatigue and a depletion of political offers.

Public opinion at first glance is characterised by paradox. There is very serious disappointment with the government and the parties represented in parliament, but not a desire for early elections. The reason is the lack of a clear alternative. According to the Gallup International polling agency, only 22.2% of respondents want new elections. It follows that there is no expectation that voting anew will radically change the current configuration. An indirect indicator of

the distrust in the government to bring about such a positive change is the impressive share of 84.9% who believe that inflation will continue to rise. The sociological agency Alpha Research, in turn, noted an unprecedented twofold increase in negative assessments of the government in just two months (from 23% in February to 48% in April). Public opinion obviously gives it judgement based on merit. According to Alpha Research, the highest share of positive expectations of the government (28%) is aimed at curbing corruption - the area where the efforts and messages of the current government are most to be seen.

3

THE CONDITION OF THE PARTY SYSTEM

“We Continue the Change” With a great delay they proceeded with their official establishment as a political party. Despite their initial scepticism about traditional forms of political participation, “We Continue the Change” have obviously realised that without a structured presence in the country, they cannot stabilise support for themselves. It is also noteworthy that the Parliamentary Group of the party is increasingly appearing in the National Assembly and in front of the media with its own declarations and statements - not just as an expression of support for the Prime Minister and the government, but as a political position of its own (anti-corruption, against the efforts at sabotage by the opposition, and in support of Ukraine). This tactic leads in the same direction - to the establishment of a separate party profile. The effect would have been greater if this had happened at an earlier stage, and not now, at a time when confidence is ebbing away, when such otherwise normal actions are perceived as crisis PR.

The pursuit of their own organisational and political profile by “We Continue the Change” is due to the requirements of the next, third successive, transformation of political behaviour, which “We Continue the Change” has experienced in a period of only a few months. Until the formation of the cabinet in December, “We Continue the Change” tried to embody the change and be the engine of the political process, to be the initiator of the rejection of the GERB model. “We Continue the Change” then took on the role of a balancer in their own government, manoeuvring between the often irreconcilable views of coalition partners. Now today we are seeing a third transformation, towards a political force that is trying to lead the cabinet unilaterally and present their partners a fait accompli.

GERB-UDF. GERB’s strategy in the new crisis situation was publicly announced personally by leader Boyko Borisov. He called for the situation not to escalate, but just to let the government disintegrate under the weight of its contradictions and problems. Borisov is convinced that time is working in his favour. Sociological research seems to give the basis for such a hypothesis. It can also explain the fact that GERB did not want to make the most of the scandal with

the illegal arrest of Borisov. On the contrary, with the exception of some perfunctory statements, the topic is overlooked. Borisov prefers to keep the focus away from himself. Far more important for him from a political point of view is the fact that the removal of GERB staff from the administration has ceased. The preservation of electoral and administrative resources against the background of the decline of confidence in other parties is quite a logical “minimum program”. However, GERB face the risk of being misled by the conviction that Bulgarian society is willing to accept them again as legitimate candidates for government after 12 years of them being in power, and such international factors as the acceptance of the builder of the “Turkish Stream” as a loyal Euro-Atlantic partner.

The Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) has most categorically advocated defining the political situation in the country as a governmental and parliamentary crisis. The leader of the movement, Mustafa Karadayi, called on his supporters to prepare for early elections in May. It is significant that he chose to express this message during a visit to Turkey. In this way, the support he hoped for was indirectly suggested. It should not be forgotten that the third place of the MRF in the elections in November last year was mainly due to the serious mobilisation of immigrants from Turkey, not seen for at least 15 years. In the public presentation of the MRF something that also made an impression was the European dominant in the person of the MEP and co-chairman of the European Liberal Party ALDE Ilhan Küçük. His appearances and interviews, on international and domestic topics, are a priority for the MRF press centre, even with a frequency and volume that rivals that of Karadayi.

The Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) faces the difficult issue of surviving in power. The deepening of the Ukrainian conflict is increasingly polarising the Bulgarian political debate. In the context of the growing anti-Russian rhetoric of other parties in government, BSP is beginning to look like a fully and unreservedly pro-Russian party. Voices are growing in pro-government circles and in the media that it has no place in the cabinet. The “red line” of BSP - that of not providing military assistance to Ukraine - is increasingly

leading to an unfavourable situation for the party. If there were a successful parliamentary vote on the subject - and there is a majority for it - BSP would have to either leave the ruling coalition and take responsibility for the ensuing political crisis, or be left silently bypassed in a decision that would demonstrate a lack of real political weight. The only useful solution would be to postpone or nuance the decision, but this is rather unlikely. The principled position of the party leadership has been undermined by two additional factors. The first concerns the information in the Bulgarian and world media that Bulgarian weapons are indeed exported to Ukraine, albeit through intermediaries. And the second factor is the increasingly visible confrontation with President Radev, who could otherwise be the most authoritative ally of the left wing on Ukrainian issues.

Within the government, only BSP focuses on the social problems of the population. But galloping inflation and the dangers of a collapse in gas supply are in fact detracting from the influence of so-called "social vector" in governance. Without a common strategy of the government, BSP has no solutions to offer in the social sphere and can only accumulate the negatives of people's social expectations. The failure of the thesis of the leader Korneliya Ninova from the congress in January that participation in the executive power will strengthen the party is evident. This makes the rectitude of the "alternative" in BSP more and more clear, expressed by the "Trio" Krum Zarkov, Petar Vitinov and Stanislav Vladimirov, whose meetings in the country continue to enjoy great interest. But BSP is threatened not only by its incompetent policy, but also by new political projects, which are already being officially established - former ombudsman Maya Manolova and former Prime Minister Stefan Yanev. Their electoral capacity is probably not great, but it is able to further erode support for the Socialist Party.

"There is Such a People" (ITN) have taken on the role of an internal coalition opposition. The most powerful reverberations in the government so far were related to the ambitions of ITN to impose their candidate Lubomir Karimanski as Governor of BNB at any cost. The predicted failure radicalised the party of the showman Slavi Trifonov, which started a kind of political game of "all in" - to launch proposals and threaten problems if they were rejected. Such are, for example: the demand for the resignation of the leader of "Yes, Bulgaria" Hristo Ivanov as chairman of the Commission for Constitutional Changes and closure of the commission itself; the claim that the the composi-

tion of parliamentary committees should be reviewed to include more ITN representatives; warnings against concentrating the financial resources of the state in representatives of "We Continue the Change"; even renewed initiatives to change the electoral system. It seems by all accounts that ITN remains the weakest link in the coalition. Unlike the other three parties in power, ITN finds it most difficult to say what price they are willing to pay in the event of a break-up of the parliamentary majority.

"Democratic Bulgaria" (DB) cannot manage to get out of the political shadow of "We Continue the Change". At first it seemed as if namely DB were expressing pro-European and anti-Russian sentiments about the war in Ukraine. However, the decision of "We Continue the Change" to support the provision of military assistance has made "We Continue the Change" a leading political force in these public circles. Neither the chairman of "Yes, Bulgaria" Hristo Ivanov, nor the chairman of the Democrats for Strong Bulgaria (DSB) Atanas Atanasov stand out with their proposals and ideas in the political debate. The brightest media presence was won by an "external factor" in the face of the MEP from the coalition Radan Kanev. Against the background of the unconvincing manifestations of "Yes, Bulgaria" and DSB, the most constructive element in DB is the Green Movement, which ostentatiously does not deal with coalition intrigues and disagreements, but actively seeks environmental solutions to existing energy efficiency problems.

"Vazrazhdane" are experiencing an expected surge of public confidence. This is the only parliamentary party whose electoral growth is impressive and beyond doubt. It has won support not only for its pro-Russian messages and calls for neutrality in the Ukrainian conflict, but also for suggestions that all other parties are working out compromises behind the backs of Bulgarian society. "Vazrazhdane" leader Kostadin Kostadinov exploited fears of war while presenting his decisions in the field of a plebiscite democracy. Governing by using referendums (the first of them refer to the Bulgarian position on the negotiations for the EU membership of North Macedonia) is exposed as a formula for overcoming the "conspiracy of the elite" against the "Bulgarian national interest". This is a classic populist thesis, but generally it works. It could be said that "Vazrazhdane" are already achieving an effect that has not been registered since the time of the early Volen Siderov 15 years ago - the unification of the nationalist space and marginalisation of competitors who had been influential until recently.

4

MAIN CONCLUSIONS AND FORECASTS

The decision to provide military aid to Ukraine is emerging as the first serious test of the resilience of the ruling coalition. The nature of the decision itself and its consequences will determine the short-term prospects of governance in Bulgaria - in the full range of possible scenarios from government crisis through political instability of "floating majorities" to stabilisation at the expense of "red lines". Although it is not necessarily in the most literal sense, the Bulgarian government is turning out to be the first government in the EU whose future is hostage to the development of the Ukrainian conflict.

The gas crisis, also linked to the war in Ukraine, is a large-scale test of power. Indications that the available gas reserves would last for about a month set a clear deadline for the government to prove, first, its ability to negotiate alternative supplies, and second, to provide prices that would be tolerable for Bulgarian households and businesses.

A clear deadline, the end of June, is beginning to emerge on the subject of Bulgaria's position on North Macedonia's EU membership talks. Negative attitudes towards a change in position are widespread both in society and in the political elite. A unilateral move by the government would be very difficult to defend politically. At the same time, no desire is observed in Skopje to "help" Bulgaria with any concessions. On the contrary, they seem to be relying entirely on European pressure, not on dialogue with Bulgaria. However, the Bulgarian side ought to bear in mind that the Bulgarian veto is not an instrument that can be used indefinitely. In the EU, the idea of revising the main treaties is gaining momentum, abolishing unanimity on certain decisions. If such a revision comes into force, not only would Bulgaria lose its role, but North Macedonia would also get all the grounds for a triumphant anti-Bulgarian policy.

In the international configuration that has been created, the Bulgarian government relies on the belief that none of the opposition parties (GERB, MRF or "Vazrazhdane") seems to be a sufficiently reliable and trusted partner in the EU and NATO. However, this is a superficial idea. Moreover, governing parties are in-

creasingly turning to a "policy of mutual blackmail". This unilaterally and without dialogue proposes solutions that others must adopt in order not to pay the price of the disintegration of the majority and early elections. There is no guarantee that such practices could be replicated in the long term. The blockage of the government is mostly shown in the inability to express a common political will.

The incentives for the survival of the cabinet seem above all external. Apart from the well-known concerns about early elections, the idea of a "common enemy" in the person of President Rumen Radev is now being added to them. This idea, first hinted at by BSP leader Korneliya Ninova, suggests a hypothetical interaction between the head of state and main opposition leader Boyko Borisov to overthrow the government. In this way of thinking, the majority parties should realise that the most serious contradictions are not between them, but with Radev and Borisov. The fall of the cabinet in such a context is seen as a threat from, firstly, Radev's caretaker cabinet and, secondly, Borisov regaining power in the future. Paradoxically, but with completely different, and geopolitical, motives, circles on the right tend to accept such a scheme. In the "right-wing" interpretation, Radev and Borisov embody the "Russian vector" in Bulgarian politics. The deterrence of the "Russian vector" in turn implies consolidation around the new anti-Russian line of Prime Minister Petkov and Deputy Prime Minister Vassilev.

President Radev continues to be the most approved Bulgarian politician. The obvious dangers of a political and economic crisis in the coming months give him the opportunity to become a "factor of stability" for the political system. However, there are two risks for Radev. The first is related to the temptation for the President to seek his own political project. Such an initiative, even discreet and indirect, would deprive Radev of the much-needed position of supra-party authority in a crisis. The second risk concerns the President's international messages. He is beginning to approach a point of view that would be perceived as pro-Russian in the West. The political damage suffered by President Georgi Parvanov in his second term due to European isolation is well known.

The Bulgarian party system is in a state of crisis, and this encompasses not only the political forces represented in parliament. Even intentions for new political projects are no source of inspiration and do not give hope from the very beginning that they can create a "wave". The parties, with the exception of "Vazrazhdane", are primarily seeking to minimise erosion in public support. This is especially true for GERB, who rely on their resources in local government to stabilise themselves as a political alternative. The most delicate situation is that of BSP, whose leadership does not

show the capacity to meet the challenges facing the left, and who are oriented towards the already traditional practice of searching for enemies. The rise of "Vazrazhdane" marks a dangerous trend that draws strength not so much from the party's messages as from the impressions of crisis, helplessness and irresponsibility of other parties.

Bulgaria is ever more clearly moving towards a social crisis that would require convincing left-wing solutions.

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