

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

POLIT-BAROMETER

Year 20 Issue 8
October 2020

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1

POLITICAL SITUATION

The protests in the country are continuing, but the number of protesters fell significantly in October. In spite of this, the protests achieved one of their goals - Bulgaria became the subject of a debate in the European Parliament, which voted on a resolution on the state of the rule of law in the country.

During the hearing in the European Parliament, statements of harsh criticism about the situation in Bulgaria and the state of the rule of law and the fight against corruption were made by groups of socialists and democrats, greens, European liberals and the far left. The European People's Party defended the government, saying it respected the protests of Bulgarian citizens, but it would be the regular elections that would decide who would rule Bulgaria. A bad impression, which was widely discussed in Bulgaria, was made by the decision of the EPP not to allow Radan Kanev from Democratic Bulgaria to speak during the debate. This forced Kanev to send a written position. The statement of the leader of the EPP group Manfred Weber, who said that the government has made progress on many issues that bring Bulgaria closer to Schengen and eurozone membership and that the country is on the right track, was met with dissatisfaction and indignation by protesters in Bulgaria. This position showed a deep lack of understanding of the essence of the problems in Bulgaria related to high-level corruption and the lack of effective counteraction by the prosecution. Hundreds of comments followed on Manfred Weber's Facebook and Twitter pages, which showed the indignation of Bulgarian citizens. The EPP attempted to make a number of changes to the draft resolution tabled by the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs - LIBE. During the debate, EU Commissioner Vera Jourova said Bulgaria remains under double scrutiny - under the Co-operation and Verification Mechanism and the new rule of law mechanism for all member states.

The resolution was voted on a few days after the debate in the European Parliament. None of the proposals for changes by the EPP and the Bulgarian MEPs from GERB were accepted. The resolution was adopted with 358 votes in favour, 277 against and 56 abstentions. It expresses "their unequivocal support for the people of Bulgaria in their legitimate demands and aspirations for jus-

tice, transparency, accountability and democracy." The resolution condemned the violent and disproportionate intervention of the police, as well as allegations of the use of force against women, children and journalists, as well as "the illegal and excessive audits" of private companies which expressed their support for the protests. In the text there is mention of "a significant deterioration in respect for the principles of the rule of law, democracy and fundamental rights, including the independence of the judiciary, the separation of powers, the fight against corruption and freedom of the media". The systematic problems in the activity of the Prosecutor General and the lack of a legislative framework with which to hold him accountable by the Supreme Judicial Council are also highlighted.

The resolution expresses deep concern at the deterioration of freedom of media, transparency in media ownership, as well as allegations of European funding for pro-government media. Attention is also drawn to the need for tighter control over the way European funds are spent and for an immediate response to fears that taxpayers' money is being used to feather the nests of people close to the ruling party. The resolution expressed regret that Bulgaria had not adopted the Istanbul Convention due to a decision of the Constitutional Court.

23 MEPs from the EPP abstained, and 7 supported the resolution, thus failing to comply with party discipline. This showed that the EPP is not united in its support for GERB.

On the occasion of the resolution, the ruling party in Bulgaria castigated the Bulgarian MEPs from the opposition, accusing them of "national betrayal". Prime Minister Borisov pointed out that the resolution included dangerous topics such as that of the Macedonian minority, which, however, is not in the text. It only mentions that Bulgaria has been convicted by the European Court of Human Rights in connection with the refusal to register the pro-Macedonian party OMO Ilinden. Radan Kanev rejected the accusations of the ruling party, saying that this problem arose because the state had failed to defend itself with arguments in Strasbourg. According to Kanev, the Bulgarian court was justified in not registering OMO Ilinden more than 15 years ago, as the organisation contradicts the constitution because it calls for separatism.

GERB MEP Andrey Kovachev described the resolution as “a party text and abuse of the European Parliament for election purposes”. The Speaker of the National Assembly Tsveta Karayancheva also saw in the resolution the transfer of the election campaign in Bulgaria to European institutions, pointing out that the document has no legal value, but serves only as a recommendation.

Opposition parties in Bulgaria were unanimous that the resolution was an assessment of Prime Minister Borisov’s rule over the past 10 years, which had led to “subjugation” of the country by oligarchic circles.

In mid-October, BSP and MRF submitted a request for the dismissal of Tsveta Karayancheva, Speaker of the National Assembly. The motives for the request were based on her systematic violation of the Rules of Procedure of the National Assembly and it being impossible for the National Assembly to exercise effective parliamentary control over the Prime Minister. The accusations of the opposition against Karayancheva are that she deflects questions and queries to the departmental ministers, instead of directing them to the Prime Minister for answers in cases that affect the general policy of the government. Another reason for the requested resignation is the new internal regulations of the National Assembly, which restrict the access of journalists to the corridors of parliament. In the end Tsveta Karayancheva was not removed from her post - GERB, the United Patriots and Volya voted against the decision.

The majority in the National Assembly set up a temporary parliamentary commission to consider and discuss the draft new Constitution submitted by the ruling party and Volya. BSP and MRF refused to participate in it, as both parties have clearly stated that they are against this project and will vote against convening a Grand National Assembly. Although it is clear to the ruling party that they will not be able to gather the 160 MPs necessary to convene a Grand National Assembly, they are continuing with the procedure, which, according to analysts, is a scheme to win time until the regular parliamentary elections in March next year. GERB appealed to experts in constitutional law with an invitation to join the work of the commission, but at this stage no one has responded to their call. All authoritative constitutionalists in the country have described this project as very weak. President Radev appealed to the Constitutional Court with a request to declare this parliamentary commission unconstitutional since only the Grand National Assembly can discuss and amend the draft that has already been submitted. The Constitutional Court declared the request admissible and indicated that it would issue a decision by the end of December.

In mid-October, Chief Prosecutor Ivan Geshev was heard in the National Assembly, but he did not manage to provide convincing answers as to why the investigation was delayed with recordings and photos of Prime Minister Borisov which raise conjectures of suspicious behaviour

against him. Geshev was subjected to severe criticism by BSP, who confirmed that they were continuing to demand his resignation. Geshev’s report was voted on by GERB, United Patriots and MRF.

The Union of Judges, the largest judicial organisation in the country, has lodged a petition with the Supreme Judicial Council to remove the chief prosecutor. As expected, however, this request did not meet with the support of the majority in the SJC, which did not respond to the systematic violations that Ivan Geshev has committed since the beginning of his term of office. The magistrate community in the country is becoming increasingly disunited, which has a negative impact on the work of the system of justice. A number of associations of lawyers in the country have joined the demand for the removal of Ivan Geshev and said they are ready to take strike action and stop appearing in court.

Another topic that was widely discussed in the public sphere was the construction of the Turkish Stream or, as the government calls it, the Balkan Stream, through the territory of Bulgaria. The United States has said it is preparing sanctions against the companies that are involved in the Turkish Stream, giving them a month to suspend operations. In October, it became a public fact that Russian subcontractors were behind the Saudi company Arkad. From the annex to the contract between Arkad and Bulgartransgaz it became clear that the Saudi company is now being represented by a Russian citizen. This is something that the government had carefully been keeping under wraps.

Democratic Bulgaria announced that this is a project that entirely serves Russian interests and our country will not gain any profit from transit fees, and this will cost the budget BGN 3 billion, which de facto will be paid to Russia. The government claims that this is not a continuation of a Turkish stream, but a Bulgarian project which is based on European rules.

On the eve of the European Council meeting at the beginning of November, at which the decision is to be taken as to whether to start EU membership talks with Albania and the Republic of North Macedonia, relations between Sofia and Skopje are becoming ever more strained. The Bulgarian government has threatened to impose a veto against it. In the Macedonian press, anti-Bulgarian propaganda has intensified in the last month. The Macedonian government has stated that it will not back down from the issue of language and the recognition that the revolutionary Gotse Delchev was a Bulgarian. Gotse Delchev (1872-1903) was a national hero for both countries, but he was especially important for the Macedonian national ethnicity. Bulgarian historians from the joint expert commission, which examines historical issues of common history between the two countries, insist that only historical facts should be observed, which categorically show that Gotse Delchev identified himself as a Bulgarian in a number of docu-

ments and letters. IMRO leader and Minister of Defence Krassimir Karakachanov said that if Bulgaria backed down and compromised, he would leave the government. According to him, the historical facts are clear and irrefutable. Karakachanov pointed out that Bulgaria is currently under pressure from Europe and, most of all, from Germany. He said the government could not allow itself to make concessions and compromises with Bulgarian history because that would be a national betrayal. Thus, if no compromise is reached, Bulgaria will most probably impose a veto. Meanwhile, the Macedonian government has proposed a compromise text as an annex to the Bulgarian-Macedonian treaty of friendship, good neighbourliness and co-operation, which would calm passions and restore a good tone between the two countries. Macedonia will state that it has no territorial claims on its neighbours.

The government has been severely criticised for the draft state budget, which dramatically increases the deficit for next year. The Cabinet shows no let-up in spending money for election purposes – an increase of 30% in salaries in state administration, increasing the salaries of teachers, university lecturers, top-ups to all pensions of BGN 50 to the end of the term of the government; and increasing social payments as child allowances for all children for next year. Opposition both on the left and the right have described this as pre-election money spending, the consequences of which will be dealt with by the next government.

The draft budget envisages the budget deficit for this year to reach BGN 5.2 billion, and to be BGN 4.9 billion or 3.9% of GDP for 2021. Thus, the deficit for the two crisis years will rise to BGN 10 billion. The government has already taken out a loan of BGN 5 billion, which, however, will not be enough for the huge amount in expenses that the cabinet is running up before the election, and a new debt will have to be issued next year. At the end of 2020, the country's debt is BGN 28 billion or 23.5% of GDP. However, it is expected to reach 28% next year.

In October, the situation with the coronavirus in the country grew more complicated, as the number of people with positive tests increased, exceeding 2,500 people a day at the end of October. However, the government

continues with chaotic and contradictory measures. For a long time, the cabinet did not decide on stricter measures, because this would increase discontent and lead to a new wave of protests. Only in late October did the government decide to introduce stricter measures similar to those in other European countries.

At the end of October, Prime Minister Borisov also tested positive for coronavirus. He announced that he was feeling unwell in general, would be on home treatment, but would be continuing to work. Other ministers with whom the Prime Minister was in contact were also quarantined.

The confrontation between the president and the government continued this month because of Rumen Radev's visit to Estonia. The President supported the "Three Seas" initiative, which Bulgaria has joined and which includes 12 countries from the regions of the Baltic, Adriatic and Black Seas. The "Three Seas" aims to strengthen transport and energy connectivity between the states which are members of the initiative. The initiative was created under the auspices of United States Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, with the United States contributing USD 1 billion to the total fund of the initiative. President Radev went to Estonia and agreed for Bulgaria to be the host of the initiative next year. Until now, the government has always shown reservations about the "Three Seas" and Bulgaria's participation. According to some analysts, the reason is fears that Russia will be irritated by dint of this. The Foreign Ministry demanded that Bulgaria's presidency at next year's summit meeting should be postponed, on account of 2021 being an election year for the country and that it will not be able to prepare well for the position of host. On the second day of Rumen Radev's visit to Estonia, his visit was suspended due to contact with a person infected with coronavirus. The person in question is the commander of the Air Force of Bulgaria, with whom Radev had contact a few days earlier during the celebrations of the Day of the Bulgarian Aviation. The president accused the government of being behind the failure of his visit. Radev said he had tested negative on arrival in Estonia. A day later, Radev took a second test, which was also negative. Borisov denied Radev's allegations and said he had always supported the "Three Seas" initiative.

2

CONDITION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE PARTY SYSTEM

The position of GERB is becoming increasingly weak, not only in the country, but also among the EPP. Despite the support of Manfred Weber and much of the EPP group, critical voices are increasingly being heard about the governance of Borisov. Proof of this is the 30 MEPs from the EPP who either abstained from voting or supported the resolution of European Parliament. At first sight, GERB seems consolidated, but the broad electoral periphery of the party is constantly becoming thinner. At this stage, the new party of the former deputy chairman of GERB Tsvetan Tsvetanov "Republicans for Bulgaria" boasts less than 1% of electoral support. However, GERB members are continuing to jump ship to join Tsvetanov's party.

Controversy in BSP remains, despite Ninova's victory in the direct election of party leader. She is consolidating her position, but the dissatisfaction felt by the opposition in the party continues. The six MPs who left the parliamentary group were followed by two more. They stated that their motives were the same as those of their other colleagues - insurmountable differences in values with party politics, leadership and style of work in the parliamentary group.

Relations have become very strained between Ninova and MEP Elena Yoncheva, who is working most actively for the rule of law in Bulgaria to become a topic of debate in the European Parliament. Yoncheva accused Ninova of making behind-the-scenes deals with Boyko Borisov, which led to the government remaining in power. According to Yoncheva, the BSP should have left parliament and become actively involved in the protests. It reached the point where the BSP organisation in Sliven withdrew its trust in Yoncheva. All these contradictions lead to divisions in the party, which could have a negative impact on the performance of BSP in the forthcoming parliamentary elections.

The BSP National Council accepted the composition of the new Executive Bureau of the party proposed by Korneliya Ninova. The following were elected as her deputies: MP Kristian Vigenin, who will be responsible for international affairs; the mayor of Gotse Delchev - Vladimir Moskov, with the department of "local self-government"; Irena Anastasova - public policies; MP Atanas Zafirov - coalition policy; and Yanaki Stoilov - ideolog-

ical issues. The party secretaries will be Vyara Emilova and Hristo Prodanov. Members of the Executive Bureau are - Asen Gagauzov, Brigo Asparuhov, Borislav Gutsanov, Boyan Ivanov, Georgi Svilenski, Ivan Ivanov, Katya Georgieva, Krum Zarkov, Manol Genov, Prof. Radoslav Gaydarski, Stefan Burdzhev, Stoyan Mirchev, Stoyko Tankov and Trifon Panchev. They were elected with 136 votes to zero, with 9 people abstaining.

The BSP National Council elected the chairpersons of the 17 Sector Policy Councils to draft the election programme of the party. The governing council, which includes all councils, is headed by party leader Korneliya Ninova. The councils will carry out a review of the implementation of the strategic documents adopted and conducted in the ministries; they will develop opinions and recommendations; their role will deal with the development of alternative sectoral policies; they will prepare projects for political positions of the party, etc. In the public sphere and the media, a number of analysts have described these councils as a BSP shadow government.

Yanaki Stoilov became head of the Commission for Ideological and Programme Development, and Anna Yaneva respectively of the Party Activities Committee. Georgi Svilenski was elected head of the election headquarters.

The United Patriots and in particular IMRO raised the topic of Bulgarian-Macedonian disputes over history and language. This is an attempt to consolidate nationalist-oriented voters on the eve of the parliamentary elections. IMRO leader and Deputy Prime Minister Krasimir Karakachanov has threatened to leave the government if there is a compromise and the Republic of North Macedonia begins talks with the EU without resolving disputes over historical issues.

The MRF has resumed its reporting and election conferences in preparation for the party congress, which has to elect a new party leader. This was supposed to happen in April, but due to the coronavirus, the congress was postponed. For now, it is scheduled to take place at the end of November or the beginning of December. At this stage, it is unclear whether there will be contenders for the post currently held by Mustafa Karadayi. Information has come to light that rivals of the current chairman will be

MEP and youth organisation leader Ilhan Kyuchuk and former MEP Filiz Hyusmenova. MRF MP Halil Letifov stated Mustafa Karadayi would be re-elected MRF chairman.

Democratic Bulgaria consolidated and expanded its influence, and the party remains with an electoral share of about 6% of all voters. The formation continues to be an active participant in the protests, demanding a serious reform of the prosecution. The leader of Yes, Bulgaria rejected the possibility of a coalition with GERB and expressed the opinion that the next government should be formed with a clear mandate for judicial reform and the abolition of the oligarchic-mafia model of government.

The party of the showman Slavi Trifonov "There is such a people" continues to be the third political force according to the most recent sociological surveys. In this month,

again, Trifonov does not participate actively in the political debate, and it remains unclear what the party's political program will be and what expert team it will rely on. The main mouthpiece of the party is Slavi Trifonov's television channel – "7/8" and the eponymous evening show, which has become the main opposition tribune of "There is such a people".

The civil platform of former ombudsman Maya Manolova "Stand Up.BG" this month maintains its chances of entering the next parliament. Manolova said she would not form a political party, as "Stand up.BG" would be a civil union that would unite several parties - Social Democrats, Bulgaria of the Citizens, the European Party "VOLT" and "Movement 21" of Tatiana Doncheva. Manolova stated that she would count on a broad civil union, such as the one formed in her campaign for mayor of Sofia last year.

3

PUBLIC OPINION

A survey by Gallup conducted between October 1 and 9 shows current electoral attitudes. BSP has a slight lead over GERB. 13.5% of all voters would vote for the Socialists and 13% for GERB. These results show a contraction in both major parties. BSP is ahead of GERB not because support for it is growing, but because the ruling party is experiencing a significant electoral ebb of support. Slavi Trifonov's party "There is such a people" continues to be third with 8.6%. This is followed by MRF with 6.9% and Democratic Bulgaria with 6%. "Stand up.BG" of former ombudsman Maya Manolova with 2.5% and United Patriots with 2.3% also still have a chance of getting into the next parliament. Thus, 7 parties have the possibility of entering parliament. 1.8% of the voters would vote for Volya, and Tsvetan Tsvetanov's new party is below

1%, which shows that the chances of it surpassing the electoral barrier are extremely low.

The Gallup poll shows that confidence in the election process is very low - 19.2% expect the imminent elections to be fair, whilst 52.6% do not. Negative attitudes towards the election process are intensifying as a result of the frequent changes in the way of voting, related both to the hesitations of the ruling party about the introduction of machine voting and to the resignation of the head of the Central Election Commission. Doubts about GERB in a large part of the society regarding manipulating the elections and buying votes have existed in all previous elections. This has led to voter withdrawal in recent years and reduced voter turnout.

4

MAIN CONCLUSIONS AND FORECASTS

The situation with the pandemic in the country is deepening. The government continues with chaotic and inconsistent measures, which has been met negative reactions from citizens.

The economic crisis in the country is exacerbating, which could lead to a new wave of social protests in the winter. The cabinet is carrying out uncontrolled spending from the state budget, and the impression that remains is that this is being done for election purposes.

There are growing indications that in the forthcoming elections, all the major parties will base their campaign on anti-GERB rhetoric. This leads to the potential situation of creating a broader coalition of parties after the elections to run the country. That which can unite these

parties, despite their ideological differences, is the reform of the prosecution service and the start of a resolute battle against corruption.

The organisers of the protests from the "Poisonous Trio", the party of Slavi Trifonov and "Stand up.BG" united to build a common network of observers, which would be a guarantor for fair elections in the country. Democratic Bulgaria declared that they are for a parallel count of the votes.

The conflicts in the BSP have not let up and this could have a negative impact on the party in the forthcoming elections. Nevertheless, the socialists are in favour of dialogue with the other opposition parties to form a coalition on a broader basis to demote GERB to opposition.

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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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Further information on the topic can be found here:
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