

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

# POLIT-BAROMETER

Year 20 Issue 9  
November 2020

**Georgi Karasimeonov (Ed.)**



Bulgaria has entered a difficult phase of the pandemic.



The situation in the country in the winter will be complicated by the concurrence of three crises - health, economic and political.



The political elite as a whole show more an opportunistic pre-election state of mind than a state approach and unity in seeking solutions to the crisis.

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

# POLIT-BAROMETER

Year 20 Issue 9  
November 2020

# Contents

<b>1.</b>	<b>THE POLITICAL SITUATION</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>2.</b>	<b>CONDITION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE PARTY SYSTEM</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>3.</b>	<b>PUBLIC OPINION</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>4.</b>	<b>MAIN CONCLUSIONS AND FORECASTS</b>	<b>7</b>

## 1

## THE POLITICAL SITUATION

In November, Bulgaria registered a record number of people infected with the coronavirus, and in one seven-day period the country ranked first in the world in terms of mortality per 1 million of the population. The reasons for this result are the delayed measures of the government and the chaos in health care caused by the lack of an adequate plan to fight the pandemic. The government wasted the summer months. Instead of starting a reorganisation of the health care system, action is now being taken *ad hoc*. As early as in October, Deputy Prime Minister Tomislav Donchev acknowledged that the cabinet did not decide on tougher measures because protests would break out. The low level of trust in the government is increasing the tension among society, as people react with dissatisfaction to the contradictory and inconsistent measures of the cabinet and this situation causes demotivation among people regarding adherence to the measures.

The chaos in the health care system has led to inadequate treatment of those who are seriously ill - shunted from hospital to hospital due to poorly written regulations. Shocking images of dying people lying on the steps in front of hospitals for hours, before being admitted as an emergency, graphically showed the chaos in the system. Although health care spending is increasing every year, deficits in the system remain acute - especially in the countryside, where there is a shortage of doctors and medical professionals. The increase in the number of infected doctors and medics has exacerbated the shortage of health workers in the system.

It was not until November 27<sup>th</sup> that the government decided to impose a lockdown, with all schools, kindergartens, bars, restaurants and malls being closed. These measures will be in force at least until December 21<sup>st</sup>. Prime Minister Borisov said he would not impose stricter measures because it would be disastrous for business. Many teachers in the country have announced that if they do not switch to distance learning, they will quit their jobs. Teachers are among the cohort that, along with doctors, has registered the greatest number of cases of infection and deaths. By the end of November, 1,300 teachers had tested positive for coronavirus, as well as more than 1,500 doctors.

The tighter measures are likely to have an effect within a month, according to experts, but this is hardly likely to lead to the pandemic being under control. The opposition and the president have blamed the government for the pandemic spreading, as well as chaos in the system. Businesses constantly come up with positions on the need for support from the state because, according to general assessment, the measures in terms of financial resources are insufficient. This is leading to the bankruptcy of a number of small and medium-sized businesses.

The government has adopted the budget for next year. The opposition voted against it. The president called the budget devastating and without clear measures for getting out of the crisis. However, he said he would not veto it because the budget is within the exclusive competences of the government and it is responsible for its decisions. A number of economists and experts have also strongly criticized the macro framework of the budget. Former Minister of Finance in Borisov's first government, Simeon Djankov, said the higher deficit of BGN 5 billion is not a problem in itself, as it is normal for spending to be higher in a crisis. According to Djankov, however, at least another BGN 3 billion is needed in compensation for business, and the current budget lacks buffers to respond adequately if the economic crisis deepens and a long period of lockdown is required in the third wave of the pandemic. Former Minister of Labour and Social Policy Ivan Neykov pointed out that next year's budget does not have the character of a programme. According to him, the money is simply spent without clear goals. According to him, it may transpire that the deficit for 2021 will be much larger, which will necessitate new debt and a subsequent update of the budget.

The draft of a new constitution by GERB and the convening of a Grand National Assembly did not receive support from even one of the country's leading constitutionalists. The president appealed to the Constitutional Court to declare the parliamentary commission that was formed to consider the draft constitution unconstitutional. The reasons for this were that only the Grand National Assembly can discuss or propose changes to the Constitution. In all the opinions of the experts who were invited by the Constitutional Court, the position was stated that the commission was unconstitutional. This was another

heavy blow to the government. The preliminary standpoint of the Venice Commission was also highly critical. The standpoint stated that the project had been submitted without debate and prior discussion, either among the public or at the expert level. Critical remarks were also made about the lack of control mechanisms for the Prosecutor General. Apart from this, the Venice Commission considers that the reduction in the number of Members of Parliament from 240 to 120 was done arbitrarily and without justification, which could undermine the representativeness of the legislative body. A day after the opinion of the Venice Commission, and a few days before the decision of the Constitutional Court, the ruling party hurried to submit to the parliament a bill for convening a Grand National Assembly, which did not receive the necessary votes. What is more, only 111 MPs voted in favour of the proposal, which was even below the required 120 signatures with which the proposal was submitted. MPs of "Volya", who backed the project with their signatures and thus made it possible for it to be considered in the National Assembly, this time voted against it. This simply confirmed the impressions of a number of observers that GERB had never taken the draft of a new constitution seriously, but only aimed at gaining time in order to remain in power.

At the end of November, the Minister of Environment and Water Emil Dimitrov (from the quota of United Patriots in the government) made a scandalous confession in the National Assembly during the parliamentary control. According to Dimitrov, the country is in an extremely severe water crisis due to "criminal inaction in repairing agricultural reservoirs and criminal acts of destroying the national irrigation system." He cited the example of the Plovdiv region, where all pumping stations and pipelines were cut off ten years ago. BSP leader Korneliya Ninova said this was the picture of the entire government - chaos and carelessness. She demanded the resignation of the government. MRF leader Mustafa Karadayi demanded that Prime Minister Boyko Borisov either come to parliament to refute what has been said, or resign.

Prime Minister Borisov convened an emergency meeting of ministers, stating that they had a plan to rehabilitate the reservoirs and funds for this. However, it is not clear why nothing has been done on this important issue over the almost 10 years of GERB being in power.

Bulgaria vetoed the commencement talks with the Republic of North Macedonia regarding EU membership.

Despite intensified negotiations mediated by Germany, no compromise was reached. Prime Minister Zoran Zaev visited Sofia, but the positions of the two countries did not converge. The assessment of historical events and facts and the lack of progress in the implementation of the Neighbourhood Agreement proved to be the main stumbling blocks. The Bulgarian government stated that Bulgaria accepted the current realities and the right of Macedonians to self-determination, but called for an end to "hate speech" regarding Bulgaria and acceptance by North Macedonia of a number of issues that Bulgaria and North Macedonia both consider part of their history.

Relations between Macedonia and Bulgaria have been complicated for nearly 20 years. A particularly severe deterioration of relations happened during the term of Nikola Gruevski's government. Zoran Zaev is Macedonia's first prime minister since Lyubcho Georgievski to actually make efforts to improve relations between the two countries, despite the risk of angering his opponents.

In an interview with the Bulgarian agency BGNES, Zoran Zaev made a number of concessions, allowing himself to say that the prominent revolutionary Gotse Delchev is a common national hero - a Macedonian and a Bulgarian who fought for the freedom of Macedonia and Edirne Thrace. Zaev stated that Bulgarians and Macedonians are two brotherly peoples who have a common history, and that which still divides them is the legacy of Yugoslavia, and it was time for this "Iron Curtain" to finally fall. This position of Zaev should be appreciated, as his words met with a sharp reaction among the opposition and Macedonian public opinion.

A compromise between the two countries is still possible if an annex to the Neighbourhood Agreement can be agreed upon, or if there is a joint declaration between the two governments. Bulgaria's position remains poorly understood in the EU. This is also due to the fact that Bulgaria was particularly active on the topic of the membership in the EU of Albania and North Macedonia, as the country made great efforts during the Bulgarian presidency of the EU Council in 2018.

The position of the Bulgarian government was supported with certain nuances by all parliamentary parties except MRF, which called Bulgaria's veto a mistake. BSP supported the cabinet's decision, but said this body had made no effort to explain any better Bulgaria's position in Europe and thus risked isolating the country.

## 2

## CONDITION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE PARTY SYSTEM

GERB suffered a serious blow with its draft constitution, managing to gain only 111 votes in the attempt to convene a Grand National Assembly. The party's parliamentary group demonstrates chaotic and inconsistent legislative decisions, which often face a presidential veto. The National Assembly finds it increasingly difficult to reach a quorum, following a boycott by BSP and MRF and the growing number of cases of MPs infected with the coronavirus. This brought about a change in the rules of procedure of parliament, which allows MPs to participate remotely in sittings. The left-wing opposition said it was unconstitutional and would refer the matter to the Constitutional Court. BSP pointed out that parliament works in practice without a quorum, and this will lead to the illegitimacy of the acts it adopts. GERB described the behaviour of BSP and MRF as irresponsible in a situation of complicated conditions in the country and rejected the accusations of lack of a clear plan for dealing with the crisis.

BSP sharply criticised the state budget for next year, declaring that it has no clear goals for overcoming the crisis. The Socialists proposed an alternative budget, again calling for a change in the tax model and a shift to progressive income taxation. BSP called the budget a pre-election one, which throws the country into a debt spiral. The main criticism was directed at the lack of adequate measures to compensate business and the most hit sectors of the economy - restaurants, hotels, tourism, transport, and small and family businesses.

BSP accused the government of using chaotic measures to deal with the pandemic, stating that the summer months had been wasted by the cabinet, when the system could have been prepared to withstand the anticipated second wave in the autumn and winter. BSP leader Korneliya Ninova said Prime Minister Borisov was personally responsible for this. BSP said that it was necessary to move towards mass testing of the population. The party called for a legislative change to be discussed, which would keep young doctors in the country. Those whose training is covered by the state during their studies should sign contracts that they will work at least 5 years in the country or, if they decide to work abroad, that they should pay for the entire course of their training. MPs from BSP who are doctors agreed to work as

volunteers in some hospitals in the provinces, where there is a shortage of staff.

IMRO became actively involved in the disputes with the Republic of North Macedonia, which further aggravated the already strained relations between the two countries. The pre-election situation in Bulgaria makes the nationalists even more unyielding, which makes it difficult to find a workable compromise that satisfies both sides. The vice-president of IMRO and MEP Angel Djambazki became involved in a scandal that reached the European Parliament. During a protest in front of the party headquarters, from one of the windows of the building Djambazki began spraying protesters with water from a fire hose and hurling burning bombs and firecrackers at them, which could have caused an accident. The leader of ABV, Rumen Petkov, contacted the prosecutor's office about Djambazki's actions with a request to start criminal prosecution against him and deprive him of his immunity as a representative in the European Parliament. Djambazki described his actions as self-defence.

MRF has sharply criticized the ruling party's budget, saying there was a lack of buffers in response to the crisis. In addition, the movement is of the opinion that there are not any adequate measures to stimulate and compensate business.

The MRF youth organisation held an online reporting and election conference, which elected a new chairperson. The hitherto chairman of the youth organisation, MEP Ilhan Kyuchuk, was not entitled to a new term after holding the post for two consecutive terms. Kyuchuk said that Youth MRF is the largest youth organisation in Europe which has proven its significant role in the development and renewal of the party. A national party conference is expected to be scheduled soon to elect a new leader of the party. The incumbent party chairman Mustafa Karadayi is likely to be re-elected.

Democratic Bulgaria has requested that a broad coalition of extra-parliamentary political forces be formed as an alternative to governance. The leader of DSB Gen. Atanas Atanasov pointed out that talks are underway for a coalition between Democratic Bulgaria, Slavi Trifonov's party "There is such a people" and Maya Manolova's

Stand Up.bg. The organisers of the protests from the so-called Poisonous trio, who have already started touring the country to create structures, will also participate in this initiative. Atanasov pointed out that such a unification is possible, similar to the UDF at the beginning of

the transition, which was a coalition of ideologically diverse parties. What can unite these forces, according to Atanasov, is a change in the model of government and a return of the country to true parliamentarism, which, in his words, does not exist at present.

# 3

## PUBLIC OPINION

In November, the Centre for the Study of Democracy presented a study of public attitudes towards democracy in the country. The main conclusion of the study is that democratic norms and principles still do not find widespread support in society, as most Bulgarians would prefer a model of governance with a strong leader (a firm hand), who is not hindered by elections and parliament, than a liberal democratic system. This is particularly true of the elderly population. Supporters of liberal democracy are mostly among younger people between the ages of 18 and 45 and more educated citizens.

These attitudes are also on the increase because of the pandemic. A study by Trend Research Centre in November showed an increase in the proportion of people who believe that the coronavirus was created artificially - 52% believe so, while in June - 43% thought so. The proportion of people who believe in conspiracy theories about the spread of the coronavirus is growing. 33% are of the opinion that a vaccine already exists, but is being kept under wraps in order to increase its price in the interest of pharmaceutical companies. 17% share the opinion that the virus does not exist.

# 4

## MAIN CONCLUSIONS AND FORECASTS

Bulgaria has entered a difficult phase of the pandemic. Contradictory and belated government measures are the main reason for the high levels of infection and mortality in the country. Long-standing deficits in the health system, mainly related to the shortage of doctors and low salaries in the healthcare sector, are becoming increasingly visible. The reasons for the collapse of the system are the lack of adequate reforms in the last 10 years, which should have led to a qualitative change in the sphere of health care. Although the health insurance budget increases every year, much of the money goes to costly clinical pathways, while pre-hospital and emergency care remain in the background.

The situation in the country in the winter will be complicated by the concurrence of three crises - health, economic and political. New waves of social protests are not discounted, which will further exacerbate the political situation in the country on the eve of the elections. Polarisation in society and among political parties is growing stronger. The opposition continues to boycott parliamentary sessions, which could block their activities in a longer term and lead to a severe parliamentary crisis. The political elite as a whole shows more opportunistic pre-election thinking than a state approach and unity in finding solutions to the crisis.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Professor, Doctor of Philosophy, **Georgi Karasimeonov** is a lecturer at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", Director of the Institute for Political and Legal Studies. From 1991 to 1998 he was Chairman of the Bulgarian Political Science Association.

[karasimeonov@gmail.com](mailto:karasimeonov@gmail.com)

## IMPRINT

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung | Office Bulgaria  
97, Knjaz Boris I St. | 1000 Sofia | Bulgaria

Responsible:

Helene Kortländer | Director, FES Bulgaria  
Tel.: +359 2 980 8747 | Fax: +359 2 980 2438

<http://www.fes-bulgaria.org>

Contact:

[office@fes.bg](mailto:office@fes.bg)

Commercial use of all media, published by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), is not permitted without the written consent of the FES.

## 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.

<http://www.fes-bulgaria.org>

## POLIT-BAROMETER

Year 20 Issue 9  
November 2020



Bulgaria has entered a difficult phase of the pandemic. Contradictory and belated government measures are the main reason for the high levels of infection and mortality in the country.



The situation in the country in the winter will be complicated by the concurrence of three crises - health, economic and political. New waves of social protests are not discounted, which will further exacerbate the political situation in the country on the eve of the elections.



The political elite as a whole show more an opportunistic pre-election state of mind than a state approach and unity in seeking solutions to the crisis.

Further information on the topic can be found here:  
<http://www.fes-bulgaria.org>