

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

POLIT-BAROMETER

Year 20 Issue 4
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The end of the state of emergency has led to a normalisation of political and public life in the country.



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1

THE POLITICAL SITUATION

After the expiry of the term of the state of emergency in the middle of May, Bulgaria began to restore normality in life. The anti-epidemic measures will continue with the amendments to the Health Act, which stipulate that the Council of Ministers may declare an “emergency epidemic situation”. These changes led to a debate over whether this is in line with the constitution, bearing in mind that only the National Assembly may declare a state of emergency. President Rumen Radev referred this matter to the Constitutional Court.

Bulgaria has dealt relatively well with the epidemic, being among the three countries in Europe with the fewest deaths per 1 million population and the lowest number of people infected. Some experts, however, reckon that the good figures are also due to the small number of tests conducted. After the end of the state of emergency, restaurants and open-air establishments for consumption were opened, and also the work of large trading centres and malls was restored. Hotels began to return to a normal rhythm of operation. At the end of the month, kindergartens were opened, and only schools and universities will complete the academic year remotely.

Overcoming the economic consequences of the crisis has been a major topic of political discussion. A number of branches and industries have increased pressure on the government for measures to stimulate their faster recovery. The decision of Prime Minister Borisov to reduce VAT in the restaurant industry to 9% at the insistence of this branch provoked particularly heated debates. The Minister of Finance Vladislav Goranov and the Chairperson of the Budget Committee in the Parliament Menda Stoyanova of GERB expressed their disagreement with this proposal. Prime Minister Borisov said he was ready to take this risk politically. Vladislav Goranov said it was time to start a debate on a complete rethinking of the tax policy of the country. BSP welcomed such a debate, stating that it was time to move towards progressive taxation of income. BSP also demanded a 9% reduction in VAT on food and medicine, but this proposal was rejected. In addition to the business of restaurants, there will be lower VAT on books. These decisions have sparked lively discussions among experts, who have expressed concerns that these were conflicting measures that would be more likely to have negative consequences.

It also came as something of a surprise when the government expressed its intention to set up a state oil company and build state petrol stations in the country. The reason is that this will create competition in the industry and will lead to falling prices for the end user. According to experts, this decision de facto recognises that the state cannot cope with the market situation and the existing cartel, which is mentioned by those in the know.

The political and criminal plots that determined the development of the socio-political situation before the pandemic returned in full force after the end of the state of emergency. The businessman Vasil Bozhkov, who fled to Dubai because of the charges against him, gave a telephone interview on one of the leading national television channels - BTV, which generated a strong socio-political resonance. Bozhkov himself is one of the wealthiest oligarchs, connected with the criminal structures from the very beginning of the transition; he is believed to be very well informed about the behind-the-scenes actions of those in power.

Bozhkov levied serious accusations against Prime Minister Borisov and Minister of Finance Vladislav Goranov. He said that he had personally contacted Minister Goranov about his gambling business and could prove it. According to him, if he paid a lower fee, as the prosecution claims, and, so doing, deprived the budget of BGN 700 million, this means that Minister Goranov must resign “due to incompetence” and especially so, if he knew that something wrong had been done. Bozhkov said that the difference between the 1990s in the country, when criminal structures extorted business, and now is that today the new “swatters” are the prosecutor’s office, the State Agency for National Security (SANS) and the National Revenue Agency (NRA). Bozhkov also raised the rhetorical question: what do the bandits (“fat necks”) of the time of the transition and today’s “fat necks” have in common, and answered that what they have in common is - Boyko Borisov, who was on the stage then and today, and what is different is Delyan Peevski, who then did not exist, and today “sits like a spider in the shadows and pulls the strings.” Bozhkov also said it was a public secret that Peevski had “appointed” Ivan Geshev as chief prosecutor. During the interview, comments were also made about the topic of the shares of the football team Levski, which found itself in a severe financial crisis. The majority stake is held by Georgi Popov,

a person close to Bozhkov, who is also with him in Dubai and has also been charged. This question was raised because Prime Minister Borisov personally promised that the state would help the team, but first the ownership must be changed. Bozhkov said that Boyko Borisov was to blame for the condition of Levski and that he was considering what to do with the shares, one of the options being “to put them back where he took them from.” A few days later, the shares were transferred with Prime Minister Borisov’s endorsement and taken to the building of the Council of Ministers by the well-known journalist Sasho Dikov. In a Facebook post, Bozhkov said he was giving the Prime Minister an opportunity to publicly take responsibility for Levski, showing endorsements of the team’s transfer of ownership in recent years. According to him, they show that “Borisov has been transferring the team’s shares secretly and behind the scenes for 10 years”, which seems to be a reference to 2015 when the team was transferred to Alexander Angelov, a lawyer close to Delyan Peevski, and the executive director of Levski Ivo Tonev, who is close to Prime Minister Borisov, became a shareholder.

Borisov refused to accept the shares, saying it was a provocation. However, a legal case was formed after a number of authoritative lawyers stated that the endorsement is a one-time act, for which the consent of the recipient is not required. Thus, they defended the thesis that Borisov has ownership of the shares, but in order for there to be a formal transfer, it must be entered in the book of shareholders. When asked about the subject by a reporter, Boyko Borisov attacked BTV, calling it “Bozhkov TV”. This led to a reaction from the television channel. BTV published an official position, stating that they found it somewhat alarming that such a reaction could be given by the Prime Minister to a TV station with a proven high reputation, which works to the highest journalistic standards, covering news and events in an objective and impartial manner. The Levski case seems to have found a solution after Bozhkov said that Georgi Popov would transfer the shares to veteran footballer Nasko Sirakov.

Bozhkov continued his attacks by posting screenshots claiming that they were from telephone correspondence with Vladislav Goranov. This correspondence was about his gambling business and organising meetings between the two of them. In one of the conversations, the accused businessman wrote that “there is no connection with the girl (according to Bozhkov, this refers to Maria Filipova - former head of the Gambling Commission), to which his interlocutor (Goranov - according to Bozhkov) replies that they have seen each other and she has “received valuable guidance.” He also published a photo of a “memorandum” from a meeting in the office of businessman Kiril Domuschiev, owner of Nova TV, which took place on July 10th, 2019. Bozhkov claims that this meeting was held under pressure from Prime Minister Borisov and Minister of Finance Goranov. In the memorandum, signed by Bozhkov and Domuschiev, there is reference to a contract for advertising gambling on Nova TV for 10 years, and one of the points signed by the two of them is – “full support in

the SCG (State Commission on Gambling) with the aim of regulating business.” Domuschiev rejected Bozhkov’s accusations, pointing out that there were advertising contracts with Nova TV before he became its owner.

Prime Minister Borisov stated that he would not comment on the defensive reaction of an accused person and that he took any qualification from Bozhkov as a compliment. Borisov stated that he had nothing to do with Levski and that it was normal for Vladislav Goranov and himself to meet with businessmen. Goranov also said that this was a defensive strategy by Vasil Bozhkov but declined to say categorically whether he had had such chat correspondence, saying he “does not remember”. The chief prosecutor was asked by journalists if he would make a referral of himself regarding the matter of Bozhkov’s conversations, and he said he had not read them, but his colleagues said there was no information in them that would require any criminal proceedings or an investigation. However, the “Anti-Corruption Fund” NGO filed a complaint with the prosecutor’s office.

BSP commented on the topic with the data presented by Bozhkov in a political declaration from the parliamentary rostrum. In this declaration it was stated that the case was “an example of how backstage activity had enveloped the state in a cocoon”. BSP leader Korneliya Ninova, who read the declaration, said it was time for the Prime Minister to respond. In her words, if he did not know what was happening in the country, he wasn’t fit for this post. And if he did know and did not take action, then he is an accomplice and must answer personally.

The Bulgarian Foreign Minister Ekaterina Zaharieva added her name to a circulated declaration marking the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II, signed by the foreign ministers of the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and the United States. The declaration states that after the war, the Soviet Union seized Eastern and Central Europe “in an iron grip through incredible military force, repression and ideological control” and that the citizens of these countries were deprived of their rights and freedoms, and subjected to violence and torture. The declaration became an occasion for BSP to demand the resignation of Minister Zaharieva. BSP hold the opinion that such declarations belittle the millions of victims who put an end to “the most misanthropic regime in the history of the world.” According to BSP, the allegations in the declaration were made without substantive arguments and did not contribute to the establishment of the historical truth both about the events that led to the Second World War, as well as its course and outcome. UDF reacted most sharply against this position of the BSP, calling on BSP and Korneliya Ninova to stop their attempts to pull Bulgaria out of the European Union. GERB stated that they would not comment on this position of the BSP, which was not a surprise for them.

The political clash between the president and the party in power continued this month. Rumen Radev continued criticising the government regarding economic measures to

overcome the crisis as a result of the pandemic. Thus, the exchange of remarks between the two leading men in the country continued. Prime Minister Borisov said Bulgarians were lucky that he himself was heading the government, because if it had been people like Rumen Radev, Vladimir Putin or Boris Johnson, many people would be dying. In response to this, Radev replied that he had long since lost the trust of the government. He added a reminder that for years he had called for corruption schemes to be stopped and that if he ruled the country “there would be no stealing.” Radev said it was undignified of the Prime Minister to arrogate the achievements of Bulgarian medics as his own.

The decision of the ruling party in Ukraine to carry out administrative-territorial reform, which affects the Odessa region and Bolgrad, where ethnic Bulgarians live, also caused a political upheaval. Upon the insistence of the nationalists, the Bulgarian parliament adopted a declaration stating Bulgaria’s concern about this reform and fears that it would affect the rights of the Bulgarian minority. The Ukrainian Foreign Ministry expressed their protest against the adopted declaration, stating that it was interference in the country’s internal affairs.

Relations between Bulgaria and Northern Macedonia were also strained following media coverage of the Macedonian language. In Northern Macedonia, which is in a period of pre-electoral campaigning, relations with Sofia and the historical past are among the main topics of debate that the nationalist opposition, VMRO-DPMNE, is trying to take advantage of. Prime Minister Borisov stressed that he did not accept the provocations in the Macedonian media towards Bulgaria, some of which he described as outright lies. Borisov stated that Bulgaria supports Northern Macedonia, but also that it wants everything written in the neighbourhood agreement to be fulfilled.

Tensions in the judiciary continued this month, with an intensification of attacks on Supreme Court of Cassation President Lozan Panov, one of the advocates for reform of the prosecution service and a reduction in political influence over the judiciary. The reason for the attacks on Panov was the publication of a music video in the Courthouse where a gangster plot takes place, while the song is about drugs and violence. This was the reason for the majority in the Supreme Judicial Council to accuse Panov of giving permission for the video by concluding a contract without knowing the content of the video that would be shot. Panov was accused of undermining the prestige of the judiciary. Lozan Panov said that this was an active event and a scenario for discrediting him. As a result of all this, the SJC took the management of the building of the Judicial Chamber away from Panov, and this obligation was given to the chairman of the Sofia Court of Appeal. The attacks on Panov continued after former SJC members signed a call for his resignation. All this highlights the state of the judicial system in the country. The most worrying thing is that in this way Bulgaria is moving towards a “Polish scenario”, where political attempts to control the judiciary have led to sharp reactions from the EU and the possibility of sanctions being imposed.

In this context, the conclusions of the report of the European Commission in the so-called European Semester confirms Bulgaria’s problems with the rule of law and corruption at the highest levels of government, stating that there are no real results. Although some of the Commission’s statements seemed to indicate the end of the monitoring for Bulgaria under the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism, there is still no official decision on this matter. Bulgaria continues to experience serious deficits in the rule of law, which will inevitably be reflected in the new mechanism, set to apply to all member states.

2

CONDITION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE PARTY SYSTEM

GERB maintains stable electoral support, as shown by data from opinion polls conducted at the end of the state of emergency. At the same time, however, the challenges of overcoming the economic problems posed by the crisis will intensify. The main challenge for the party in the coming months is whether it will be able to maintain its unity because signals are growing that the former “number two” in GERB, Tsvetan Tsvetanov, will set up his own political project. At the end of May, it became clear that 48 people from the municipal party structure of GERB in Vidin, including the former mayor of the city Ognyan Tsenkov and the former regional governor Albena Georgieva, were leaving the party. Ognyan Tsenkov said the reason for this decision was agreement with party policy at a local level. According to the regional coordinator of GERB in the regional city and MP Vladimir Toshev, there were rumours that those who left would join a new political project, without commenting on what this project would be and who stood behind it. There is information that other structures in the country, such as those in Ruse and Yambol, are facing a split, where reorganisation was carried out after Tsvetanov's departure. Tsvetanov had strong positions in both Blagoevgrad and Veliko Tarnovo, so a split can be expected in these structures of GERB as well.

This month, too, a media appearance by Tsvetanov made an impression, where he levied criticisms against GERB and the government for their actions in tackling the crisis during the epidemic. According to Tsvetanov, the state of emergency is ending in a severe political confrontation and institutional crisis. According to him, the government should have talked to the president about holding a National Security Advisory Council (KSNS), and instead approached Rumen Radev in a confrontational manner. To the question as to whether Tsvetanov will form a political party, he answered that new subjects will be sought in the upcoming parliamentary elections, and as to whether he will make a new project - time will tell. According to him, everything will depend on the mood in the country, but the disapproval of the policy pursued by all parliamentary groups today is obvious.

BSP suffered an electoral collapse in the months of the state of emergency. The contradictory signals sent by the party regarding the measures against the pandemic, as well as the ever-intensifying internal battles in the context

of the election of a new president, were among the main reasons for this result. It is still unclear when the internal party elections will take place, but this will probably be in September. It is expected that a strong and hotly-contested battle is ahead, the result of which may weaken the party further. Former BSP chairman Mihail Mikov said the party was in an extremely serious condition, which he said was reflected in opinion polls. He said the party had been torn apart by serious scandals, with many people at the headquarters being laid off this month. The reason for this, he said, was that Korneliya Ninova feared that these people were working for those competing against her for the leadership position. According to Mikov, BSP is in practical bankruptcy, and the party has never been in such a difficult situation in the last 30 years. Precisely contrary to this as a position was Rumen Ovcharov, who defended the policy led by Ninova. According to him, in the last three months GERB has adopted many of the ideas of BSP, which makes the attacks against Korneliya Ninova, both from within the party and outside it, inexplicable. Ovcharov said that, if Ninova was such a weak leader, GERB would not be making such efforts to overthrow her with their incessant attacks against her. According to Ovcharov, the internal opposition against Ninova aims to weaken the party, thus only helping GERB to win the elections again.

The problems in BSP pave the way for the restructuring of the left-wing political space, especially after the intention of the former ombudsman and mayoral candidate of Sofia Maya Manolova to lead a new political project. Manolova announced this decision at an organised protest in front of the Council of Ministers by her “Stand Up BG” movement. She stated that the ambition of this project is to become the first political force in the upcoming elections, following the model for the elections in Sofia - seeking broad support from citizens. Also seen at the protest were former members of the Reformist Bloc – Bulgaria for Citizens Movement and Nestimir Ananiev, leader of Volt Europa, as well as figures close to some social democratic formations, such as those associated with Alexander Tomov. In fact, these parties also supported Manolova in the mayoral elections in Sofia.

MRF also postponed its national conference, at which a new chairman was supposed to be elected. It is not yet clear when it will take place and whether there is another

contender besides the incumbent chairman, Mustafa Karadayi. MRF stood firmly behind GERB in all the initiatives and measures proposed by the party in power. This rapprochement makes a strong impression and can be seen as a way of officialising the partnership in a formal coalition after next year's elections. Yordan Tsonev from MRF did not rule out such an option. This month, too, the donation of MRF MP Delyan Peevski, who donated millions of leva to hospitals, made an impression. The donation was loudly propagandised in the media close to the government, as a number of analysts described this gesture of Peevski as an attempt to clear his negative public image. In the middle of the month, the honorary chairman of MRF, Ahmed Dogan, "hit the news" after a fire broke out in his residence in Rosenets, near Burgas. This quickly turned into a news item. The same day, however, it was announced that it was a short circuit in the residence where Ahmed Dogan was at the time of the fire.

IMRO and NFSB have continually been losing face in government. The relations between them and GERB remain

complicated, without threatening the government. The two nationalist formations came up with various proposals this month to alleviate the plight of people in difficulty, as well as that of the tourism industry, most of which, however, were not supported by GERB. Among them are state-guaranteed sea vouchers to the amount of BGN 210 for a 7-day vacation for socially insured workers and employees; opportunities for reduction or cancellation of the tourist tax by the Municipal Councils of the resort municipalities, etc.

Again in this month, the extra-parliamentary opposition in the face of Democratic Bulgaria continued its criticism of corruption and the rule of law in the country. They demanded the resignation of Finance Minister Vladislav Goranov in the context of scandals surrounding Vasil Bozhkov. The formation stated that if Goranov was not replaced, it would only prove the dependence of Prime Minister Borissov on Delyan Peevski and whose minister is actually Goranov. This is in the context of the long-standing thesis in the public and media space that the Minister of Finance is very close to the circle of Delyan Peevski.

3

PUBLIC OPINION

An Alpha Research survey conducted in early May showed that the epidemic and the reaction of politicians to it have had a significant impact on electoral attitudes - especially towards the leading opposition party, BSP. GERB retains the position of the first political force, as 20.8% of voters would vote for the party. These are levels similar to the support for the party in December 2019, when this number was 21.7%. BSP has experienced a significant electoral decline - 12.2% of voters would vote for the party, compared to 18.2% at the end of last year. BSP leader Korneliya Ninova has lost 6 points of support, and her rating has dropped to 15%. Slavi Trifonov's party, which is still in the process of registration, continues to be the third with 9.1%. MRF ranks fourth with 6.4% (down 1.4% from December last year). An ebbing of support is also observed in IMRO-NFSB. The current survey shows that 3.9% of voters would vote for them, compared to 5.1% at the end of the year. However, this result would be enough for them to enter parliament. 3.7% of voters would vote for the non-parliamentary "Democratic Bulgaria", which also gives them a good chance of exceeding the electoral barrier. "Ataka" would be supported by 1.4%, and "Volya" by 1.5%.

The positions of President Rumen Radev with regard to the pandemic and the constant quarrels with the ruling

party have led to an erosion of the trust in him. Positive assessments of the president have decreased by 8% and he now has the trust of 40% of voters. There has been a 10% jump in negative assessments - from 15% at the end of last year to 25% now. For the first time since the inauguration of the head of state, the President and the Prime Minister have received equal ratings for trust (40% - for Radev, 40% - for Borisov). This intensifies the intrigue ahead of the upcoming presidential elections in the autumn of next year, for which Radev has so far been viewed as the strongest candidate.

The state of emergency and the reaction to the crisis on the part of the government are the main reason for the increase in the overall rating of Boyko Borisov. He has thus reached the second highest relative values since 2010, during his first term. Currently, the positive assessments of his activities are 40% - an increase of 10% compared to December 2019. 31% of the assessments are negative, but here too there is a decrease of 8%. These data are relative, because everywhere in Europe support for parties in power has increased, especially in countries that have done better with the epidemic. Whether these levels will be maintained will depend primarily on the forthcoming economic recovery.

4

CONCLUSIONS AND FORECASTS

The end of the state of emergency has led to a normalisation of political and social life in the country. Bulgaria has coped relatively well with the health aspects of the crisis, but the more difficult part lies ahead - economic recovery. At this stage, the government is giving contradictory signals as a systematic approach to measures for overcoming the economic consequences is lacking. Stumbling towards changes in the tax-insurance model involves risks, and the idea of establishing state-owned petrol stations raises many questions to which there are no answers.

The scandals surrounding the data released by Vasil Bozhkov are his defensive strategy, but at the same time they could rattle the government if it is proved that his business used a political umbrella at the highest level in GERB, which is becoming increasingly apparent. Bozhkov will probably continue with his revelations, which makes the situation unpredictable. All this data related to dependencies again raises the topic of corruption in Bulgaria, to which the EU will probably pay attention yet again in the forthcoming reports on the new mechanism on the rule of law in the

member states. Bulgaria has serious problems not only with the rule of law, but also with the freedom of the media, and it should not be ruled out that in the medium term there will be a harsher reaction of Brussels to Sofia.

The party system is facing new restructuring in the context of the upcoming parliamentary elections at the beginning of next year and applications from new political parties, such as that of Maya Manolova and possibly that of Tsvetan Tsvetanov. Slavi Trifonov's party, which is not yet officially registered, once again occupies third position in electoral attitudes. For this reason, its development and first steps should be monitored closely.

All these new parties will give rise to a significant shift in the electoral strata, and this will pave the way for new political alliances. The severe impending clashes between all participants in the political field - new and old, as well as the economic factors behind them in one way or another, are likely to lead to serious changes in the party system in the country.

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ABOUT THIS STUDY

FES Bulgaria has been publishing the „Polit-Barometer“ since 2000, analyzing current and long-term political processes and identifying trends in Bulgarian politics with a special focus on the political parties as democratic actors. In a situation where

the quality and neutrality of Bulgarian media is under question, we aim to provide a scientific basis for a political discussion for Bulgarian and international readers.

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Further information on the topic can be found here:
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