

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

POLIT-BAROMETER

Year 21 Issue 3
April 2021

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Contents

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

1

THE POLITICAL SITUATION

The political situation in April was mainly determined by the first steps of the newly elected National Assembly and the process of forming a new government. After the elections, GERB fell into political isolation, while the contours emerged of a new anti-GERB majority in the National Assembly, which, however, was short-lived. The reasons for this were its heterogeneous character and the fact that it was driven solely by the desire to remove GERB from the government of the country. There are complex and contradictory relations between the parties in the parliamentary anti-GERB majority. Each of them follows its own strategy and suspects the others of clandestine goals and intentions. Particularly indicative of this are the relations between "There is such a people", "Democratic Bulgaria", "Stand up! Mutri out!" and the old parties - BSP and MRF, which are defined as "status quo" by the three new formations.

President Radev convened the first sitting of the National Assembly only a day after the Central Election Commission published the results of the election in the State Gazette. Although, according to the constitution, the President must convene the National Assembly within a month, he accelerated the procedure on the grounds that the country needed a functioning parliament and a new government as soon as possible.

6 parliamentary groups were registered in the National Assembly: GERB-UDF - 75 MPs; There is such a people (Ima Takuv Narod - ITN) - 51 MPs; "BSP for Bulgaria" - 43 MPs; Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) - 30 MPs; Democratic Bulgaria (DB) - 27 MPs; "Stand up! Mutri out!" (Stand up Thugs out - ISMV) - 14 MPs.

At the very first sitting of the National Assembly, the isolation of GERB and the anti-GERB majority formed by the other five parties was apparent. The new anti-GERB majority supported the candidacy of MP Iva Miteva from "There is such a people" for Speaker of the National Assembly. She was nominated for the post by the parliamentary group of Slavi Trifonov's party, ITN. GERB-UDF nominated former Speaker of Parliament Tsveta Karayancheva. Iva Miteva was elected with 163 votes as Speaker of the National Assembly, and all MPs voted for her, with the exception of those of GERB-UDF.

Iva Miteva is a lawyer by education; she has been working in the National Assembly as a state expert since 2000, and her last position was Director of the Legislative Activity and EU Law Directorate in the National Assembly. The majority of her fellow MPs said Miteva was a good lawyer who knew the parliamentary work and the legislative process in detail, giving her high evaluation of her work in her previous role. From the other parliamentary groups those elected as Miteva's deputies were: Tsveta Karayancheva (GERB-UDF), Victoria Vasileva (ITN) Kristian Vigenin (BSP), Mukaddes Nalbant (DPS), Atanas Atanasov (DB), Tatiana Doncheva (ISMV).

The parliamentary isolation of GERB was also evident in the election of the chairpersons of parliamentary committees.

MPs from the anti-GERB majority invited the resigned Prime Minister Boyko Borisov to present in the National Assembly the recovery plan prepared by the government, which Bulgaria had to send to the European Commission by the end of April. However, Borisov took a leave of absence and did not respond to the invitation of the MPs. The parties in opposition to GERB described it as "outrageous" and pointed out that Borisov had not been in parliament for a year. They then voted on a decision with which they obliged Borisov to appear at a parliamentary hearing. Two days before the parliamentary session at which Borisov was supposed to appear, he went to hospital for surgery on his meniscus, which turned out to have been torn during a football match.

No sooner had the elections passed than Borisov resigned as an MP, saying he would retire from the party and nominate a new face as a candidate for the post of Prime Minister. This move was expected. In the last year, the scandals related to Borisov have dealt a serious blow to his reputation - not just in the country, but also on the international scene. Borisov described himself as "the most prepared politician in the country", but "so as not to irritate" he decided to retire and work only as the party leader.

The first sittings of the parliament were reduced to scathing dialogue and attacks between GERB and the

other parties. MRF Deputy Chairman Yordan Tsonev called GERB a toxic party because it had destroyed every party with which it had ruled. The leader of "There is such a people" Slavi Trifonov said in a Facebook post that his party was created to expel GERB from the political life of the country. The tension evoked the initiative of "Stand up! Mutri out!" to set up a parliamentary commission which should audit GERB's government. GERB insisted that the inspection include not only the last government, but the last 10 years. This was determined as a move aimed at complicating the work of the commission. However, the proposal was accepted in a vote. Maya Manolova (ISMV) was elected chair of the commission.

There was also controversy because of the decision of the anti-GERB majority to impose a moratorium on appointments to positions in executive structures and decisions on concessions of the resigned government. From a number of places there were signals of numerous reassignments in state administration, such as people from the political cabinets and deputy ministers being appointed as directors of directorates or as state experts. For this reason, BSP proposed imposing a moratorium even at the first sitting of the National Assembly. At that time, however, this point was not accepted, which led to a sharp attack by BSP leader Korneliya Ninova on the new parties and the MRF, accusing them of helping GERB. The other parties rejected the accusation, saying Ninova had not made the proposal legally sound enough and that they would support it at the next meeting. The moratorium was accepted with the support of all parties except GERB. GERB stated that this decision was anti-constitutional and would refer it to the Constitutional Court with a request for an interpretative decision.

After the National Assembly began work, the President convened consultations with the leaders of the parliamentary groups before he handed over a mandate to form a government. The President called on the parties for dialogue and agreement on a programme and priorities that would be the basis for finding consensus and nominating a government elected by parliament. The President denied speculation that he was rushing with the consultations because he wanted to appoint a caretaker government in the event of party talks failing. Rumen Radev stressed that the country needs an operational regular government to deal with the consequences of the pandemic, both with regard to the health crisis and in terms of economic recovery.

As per the Constitution, President Radev handed over a mandate to form a government to the GERB-UDF parliamentary group, which forwarded Daniel

Mitov as a candidate for Prime Minister. Mitov was foreign minister in Borisov's second cabinet (2014-2017), when he was a member of the Bulgaria of the Citizens party, part of the Reformist bloc. Shortly before the elections, Mitov announced that he had become a member of GERB. His political and party career began in 2004, when Mitov became a member and founder of the Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria (DSB). For many years, Mitov worked for the American Foundation - the National Democratic Institute. Last year, he was nominated as Bulgaria's ambassador to Romania, but President Radev refused to approve his appointment. Although it was clear that the GERB-UDF cabinet would not be supported, Mitov accepted the mandate and invited two parties to talks - DB and ITN. They refused to take part in any talks with GERB, however. The leader of GERB and resigned Prime Minister Boyko Borisov also pointed out the composition of their possible government, which included most of the current ministers of GERB. Borisov indicated that this was a cabinet with a pro-European and Euro-Atlantic orientation. In fact, the proposal of Mitov to be a candidate for Prime Minister was a tactical attempt to improve GERB's image among Bulgaria's partners in the EU, NATO and the United States. This image has been severely damaged as a result of numerous scandals involving Borisov and his government.

Three days after receiving an exploratory mandate to form a government, Mitov returned the mandate to the President, stating that he had not received support for the forming of a government. According to the Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria, the President must hand over a mandate to the second largest parliamentary group – "There is such a people." If they also fail to form a government and return the mandate, on the third and final attempt, the President assigns a mandate to one of the other groups of his choice.

President Radev handed over the mandate to "There is such a people" on April 28. This was immediately returned by the party's prime ministerial candidate, Antoaneta Stefanova. The President will make a proposal to a third parliamentary group to form a government.

Radev called upon the government to submit an update of the budget to be voted on by the National Assembly in view of the aggravated economic situation.

At the end of April, the annual Reporters Without Borders ranking for media freedom was released. Bulgaria dropped another place in the ranking and is now in 112th place - the worst in the EU and far worse than the position of neighbouring countries such as the Republic of North Macedonia and the Republic of Serbia.

2

CONDITION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE PARTY SYSTEM

Despite formally winning the elections, GERB have fallen into serious political isolation. Prime Minister Borisov gave a sign of renewal in the party by relinquishing his seat and nominating a new candidate for prime minister in the person of Daniel Mitov. Despite these moves, the other parliamentary parties refused to hold any talks with GERB with regard to forming a new government. Although they remain in political isolation, GERB continue to control a large administrative resource, both at central level and in local government. It would appear that the party is about to undergo change and renewal after the long rule of Boyko Borisov as Prime Minister. From now on, Borisov will retire from the party as its leader. Borisov has stated that he has no intention of running for President in the upcoming elections.

Chair of the GERB-UDF parliamentary group will be lawyer Desislava Atanasova, who was minister of health in Boyko Borisov's first government.

GERB "threw down the gauntlet" to "There is such a people" by offering to them that they should vote together for the adoption of a majority electoral system - one of the issues of the referendum which Trifonov organised. "There is such a people" rejected this proposal of GERB, saying that majority elections could be voted on in another parliament and would only take effect at the next regular elections.

GERB called the behaviour of the new parties politically irresponsible because they were delaying the process of forming a new government after, together with BSP and MRF, they had a majority of 165 votes. Borisov even called Slavi Trifonov "a political coward". GERB said that it was important for the country to have a new regular government that would meet the growing challenges facing the country and would even give a few votes to get it elected if necessary.

"There is such a people" turned out to be the big surprise of the election with the second place that they achieved. The leader of the party Slavi Trifonov took his oath of office remotely due to a coronavirus infection. Over the past month, all eyes have been on "There is such a people" because the parties in the

emerging anti-GERB majority have said they would support a government with a party mandate. That which remains, however, extremely incomprehensible and counterproductive is the silence of the party leadership on what they intend to undertake. The new party declined to comment on any journalistic questions. Even at the reception of the National Assembly, the chairman of the parliamentary group Toshko Yordanov stated that this National Assembly would have a short horizon. Despite the expectations that a government of the minority of the three protest parties could be formed with the mandate of "There is such a people", Slavi Trifonov's party returned the exploratory mandate of the president. The world chess champion and MP Antoaneta Stefanova was formally nominated for the post of Prime Minister. In a Facebook post, Slavi Trifonov stated that the party would return the mandate because it did not have the required number of MPs or partners to form a government. According to Trifonov, the proposed support was from political entities that are "harmful, greedy and proven compromised, and this was not support, but dependence."

BSP suffered a serious electoral defeat. The party received its lowest result in the parliamentary elections, losing half a million voters compared to the last parliamentary elections in 2017. Previous failures for the party had always been after it had been in power and never when it had been in opposition. BSP described the loss as heavy. Korneliya Ninova stated that, although they had been GERB's only parliamentary opposition for four years, voters did not recognise them as an alternative. After the loss, the whole Executive Bureau of the party resigned. During the meeting of the Executive Bureau, Ninova's resignation was also demanded, with Yanaki Stoilov and Krum Zarkov insisting on it. Ninova said she would not resign because it would be devastating for the party if it were left without a legitimately elected chairman in the upcoming new elections. The BSP leadership deemed as a mistake the fact that they had not supported President Radev for a second term of office, but left this topic for after the elections. For this reason, at the first meeting of the National Council of the party decisions were made in support of Rumen Radev and Iliana Yotova for a new term as President and Vice President.

Although MRF had been considered GERB's hidden partner in government, after the election the party assumed a sharp anti-GERB position. MRF said they viewed the verdict of the voters as a desire for change. That is why MRF stated that they would support the government of the three new parties in the National Assembly without participating in it. MRF is of the opinion that the country needs a new energetic government composed of experts and technocrats to implement a development programme for catching up, using the opportunities provided by the EU recovery plan and green deal. MRF leader Mustafa Karadayi said that the most important thing for the country was the restarting of statehood and the resumption of normal political dialogue between parties and institutions. MRF stated that they would not support a government with a mandate of the parties that had lost the elections - GERB and BSP. According to MRF, both parties had lost because they had decreased their results from the previous elections - GERB by 300,000 votes and BSP by half a million.

Democratic Bulgaria achieved a strong election result, with more than 300,000 voters casting their votes for the party. Immediately after the National Assembly was convened, the parliamentary group of the coalition introduced bills to amend the Criminal Procedure Code with which specialised courts would be closed, as well as an amendment to the Anti-Corruption Commission Act, for its chairman, Sotir Tsatsarov to be removed. Democratic Bulgaria presented a draft amendment to the Constitution in the area of the judiciary and the powers of the Prosecutor General. Their draft envisages that the Prosecutor General

should be elected by the National Assembly, and his term should be reduced to 5 years. It is also envisaged that the number of members of the Supreme Judicial Council should be reduced to 15, with the composition of the two colleges being elected by the General Assemblies of the magistrate communities. At this stage, they have not collected the 60 signatures of MPs required to officially submit the projects. DB said it would support a cabinet with an ITN mandate. The chairman of a parliamentary group of Democratic Bulgaria will be the co-chair of the coalition and leader of the party "Yes Bulgaria" - Hristo Ivanov.

Chairperson of the parliamentary group of "Stand up! Mutri out!" will be the leader of "Stand Up" and former ombudsman - Maya Manolova. Even after the elections there were tensions between Maya Manolova and Nikolai Hadjigenov of the "Poisonous Trio". In a television interview, Hadjigenov stated that he was in talks with Slavi Trifonov's party to form a government, and that each of the opposition parties had to take some steps to reach a functioning government. Hadjigenov said that he was not worried about the request of GERB and MRF that they would vote for a cabinet with the mandate of "There is such a people". An extraordinary briefing followed for Maya Manolova, who said Hadjigenov might not be part of their parliamentary group and that he has no mandate to conduct any negotiations. Eventually, the conflict was resolved and Hadjigenov was elected deputy chairman of the parliamentary group. However, this episode showed that the group of "Stand up! Mutri out!" is not homogeneous and cohesive, and we may witness new conflicts in it in the future.

3

PUBLIC OPINION

A survey conducted by Market Links at the end of April shows that the majority of Bulgarians want a government elected by parliament, rather than new elections. Over 60% of respondents are of the opinion that it is necessary to have a regular government at least until the end of the year, and about 1/3 of the voters are in favour of early elections. To the question: "What should the next government be - a coalition around GERB or the opposition parties?", 61% want the new government to be anti-GERB based, 28% would prefer a coalition around GERB, and 12% cannot decide.

More than half of those who participated in the survey would prefer the next Prime Minister to be an ex-

pert rather than a politician, while 31% reckon that the Prime Minister should be a party leader.

The survey shows that Bulgarians are optimistic about the future of the country, with 62% of people giving such evaluations. Pessimistic attitudes are observed among 21% of respondents, and 18% - cannot decide.

Citizens cite employment (46%) and health care reform (45%) as the priorities in the work of the next government. 30% reckon that measures to support businesses and people affected by the pandemic should be a priority. 18% want an audit of the previous government, and 13% are in favour of changes in the election legislation.

4

MAIN CONCLUSIONS AND FORECASTS

Following the decision of “There is such a people” to return the mandate to form a government, the country is heading for new elections. New elections will hurl the country into political crisis, and the new parties will bear the responsibility. After the elections, there was an opportunity to create a majority of change, but the three new parties rejected the outstretched hand of BSP, who were ready to support the formation of a new government. The disappointment of thousands of Bulgarians who supported the protests

last year with the “protest parties” will intensify. In turn this disappointment could lead to lower turnout in early elections in July. The biggest winner in such a denouement would be GERB.

The risks for a possible caretaker government appointed by the President would be high in view of the economic crisis and budget problems. The combination of the economic and political crisis and the frustration of citizens means possible early elections would be unpredictable.

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ABOUT THIS STUDY

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

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