Bulgaria political briefing:
Outlook of the Political Challenges for Bulgaria in 2022

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Summary

In political terms, Bulgaria ended 2021 with the final outcome of more than half a year political crisis and the lack of a regular government. At the end of the last year, a new regular government was finally elected, headed by Prime Minister Kiril Petkov, leader of the newly established political party called “We Continue the Change”. From this point of view, the beginning of 2022 is filled with hopes and expectations for the new political government of the country. At the same time a lot of challenges are expecting to be overcome. The expectations of the people are for stable governance, functioning parliament and properly working institutions. The hopes are mostly related to the fact that the new government will be able to cope with all the challenges of the crisis situation in which Bulgaria finds itself in every aspect of the political, socio-economic and cultural development of the country.

After more than half a year of no regular government in Bulgaria and after three consecutive parliamentary elections in 2021 that led to a severe political crisis, at the end of the year finally a regular government was elected. It was headed by the young and well educated businessmen Kiril Petkov who was a minister of the economy in the caretaker cabinet of the former prime minister.

Preserving the stability of the new Bulgarian coalition government in 2022

The structure of the new government is a coalition between four parties, the largest of which is the first political force in the parliament called "We Continue to Change". This newly established political force won the support of a large part of Bulgarian society, with promises for changing the status quo, which has so far been dominated by traditional political parties, which influence and authority has seriously degraded in recent years. The reason for the socio-political crisis in Bulgaria was related to the powerful public protests against the rule of former Prime Minister Boyko Borissov and his party GERB, which were accused by great part of Bulgarian society of corruption and violation of basic democratic principles of governance.

The protests began in 2020 and lasted for more than a year and a half. Thus, at the end of last year, the end of the government of Boyko Borissov and the GERB party, which ruled Bulgaria for more than ten years, was marked.
From this point of view, the beginning of 2022 is filled with great expectations and hopes for the new political governance of the country. With regard to Parliament, the hope is that the hard-won parliamentary majority, which includes the four parties that make up the government, will be able to remain stable. These four party parliamentary majority include the largest political force, “We Continue Change”, the Bulgarian Socialist Party, the political party of showman Slavi Trifonov - "There is such a people" and the centrist-right political coalition Democratic Bulgaria formed by three political parties – “Yes, Bulgaria!”, “Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria” and “The Greens”. A political coalition made up of so many different political parties carries also the risk that it can become unstable or disintegrate at any moment.

This is one of the reasons why many analysts do not expect the government to serve its full four year term. At the same time, however, the hopes of the society are focused on the fact that the coalition will show enough responsibility and will overcome all possible contradictions in the name of Bulgaria overcoming all the challenges that lie ahead in 2022.

At the same time, the new Prime Minister Kiril Petkov seems highly motivated to fulfill the commitments and promises he has made, namely the new government to overcome most of the deficits of the old government, as well as to deal with problems that the previous government failed.

The ruling coalition will need extreme virtuosity and strong will to guarantee governmental and social stability. However, there is a chance.

Main challenges and key priorities and actions of the new government in 2022

The most important challenges for the country's government will be related to two key areas: managing the energy and health (Covid) crisis and the distribution of funds in the Budget 2022 and under the Recovery and Sustainability Plan.

The first urgent task for the ruling majority is to overcome the energy crisis by finding a sustainable solution to lower electricity and heating prices, while balancing the interests of all stakeholders - producers, distributors, businesses and household consumers.

The second urgent task is to control inflation. Although it is largely related to energy prices on the international market the government is expected to take some urgent measures. Whether this will be the chosen direction will be seen in the budget for 2022, which must be adopted by the end of January 2022.

The new cabinet must also immediately resolve differences between Bulgaria and the European Commission over the details of the Resilience and Recovery Plan for the country. At the end of last year, the EC returned to Bulgaria the Recovery and Sustainability Plan, under
which the country expects to receive over 6 billion euros. Most of the remarks are related to reforms and projects in the energy and rule of law sectors. In order for the funds to be allocated, Sofia will have to revise these parts of the document.

The next task for the new political government is to manage the Covid crisis. The government has decided to increase the low rate of vaccination, relying on monetary incentives. At the same time, public resistance to some strict measures is growing and the cabinet is unlikely to resort to lockdown, even in a new strong Covid 19 wave.

Another quick task for the new government is to achieve breakthroughs in the field of corruption. Anti-corruption rhetoric and promises has brought the new government to power, and achieving real results is a mandatory follow-up to it. The society is expecting to see convincing evidence in the coming months. For the 2022, the government coalition has set immediate legislative changes. One of the most significant challenges confronting the new cabinet and Parliament is reforming the Bulgarian judiciary, and especially the State Prosecution. The success of this task may make or break the legacy of the new cabinet. A majority in parliament is expected to pass changes to a number of laws in the field of justice and the fight against corruption.

Several tasks in the social sphere are also of high priority for 2022 government. From January, the abolition of fees for kindergartens will be sought. By mid-2022, maternity leave for the second year will be tied to an increase in the minimum wage.

In terms of foreign policy, the immediate task for the new government will be to find a way out of the crisis with Northern Macedonia, which keeps Bulgaria in international isolation.

The expectations are that in 2022 the new Bulgarian government will do everything possible to cope with these tasks and to overcome the emerging challenges. This will be a test for the cabinet and its ability to hold on to power for a longer period of time and earn the trust of the people.

**Challenges for other political forces in Bulgaria in 2022**

Another key point that largely ensures the stability of the new government is the united coalition's efforts to prevent the return of GERB and Boyko Borissov into power. The former ruling party now remains in opposition but uses every opportunity to sharply criticize the new cabinet. Sociological polls show that GERB is losing more and more electoral support. Last year, the party lost not only parliamentary elections but also the presidential once.

It is expected that 2022 will give an answer what will be the fate of the other "parties of the status quo". According to many analysts, this is probably the year in which the political
weight of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (the centrist political party in Bulgaria, enjoying the support mainly of ethnic Turks and other Muslims in Bulgaria) will significantly decrease.

Bulgarian Socialist Party is also facing great political challenge. In the last two years the party is in a serious internal political crisis. From January 2017 to November 2021, the BSP lost all elections held in the country - for parliament, for MEPs and local authorities - with declining support. From 955,450 votes and 80 MPs from the elections on March 26, 2017 for the 44th National Assembly, the support and representation of the party on November 14, 2021 fell to 267,817 votes and 26 deputies in the 47th Parliament.

According to a number of political experts in the country the collapse of trust in the BSP is directly related to the transformation of the party from a democratic organization with collective leadership into so called "leadership" party, led in an authoritarian style by the current leader Cornelia Ninova.

After the last parliamentary elections, Cornelia Ninova announced her resignation, which means that a new election of the party's chairman will take place this year.

It depends on this election of a new leadership of the Bulgarian Socialist Party whether the largest and most traditional left-wing political force in the country will retain its influence and weight in the political life of Bulgaria.

**Conclusion**

The year is expected to be extremely difficult and full of challenges, both domestic and foreign. 2022 will pose the first big test to the strength of the new ruling coalition - will it be able to manage all the problems facing it (rising energy prices, a new Covid variant, low vaccination rates, stagnating investment, attacks from the opposition) or it will disintegrate under all these pressures? The answer to this question will likely determine whether any chance of lasting, meaningful reform in Bulgaria would even have a chance of succeeding.