



Weekly Briefing

Bulgaria social briefing:

The Bulgarian Civil Anti-War Initiative named for "Peace and Sovereignty"

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The Bulgarian Civil Anti-War Initiative named for "Peace and Sovereignty"

Summary

In the last several months since the beginning of the year, eight consecutive civil processions were organized in numerous cities of Bulgaria under the slogan "March for Peace and Sovereignty". It is anti-war initiative organized by civil society organizations that argue and underline they have no party affiliation. The purpose of these processions is to protest against the actions of the Bulgarian political parties in the parliament and the government, which, according to the protesting citizens, create a danger of involving Bulgaria in the war in Ukraine. In April, the organizers of the protest movement also initiated a collection of signatures in support of holding a national referendum, in which the Bulgarian citizens could decide for themselves whether they want Bulgaria to be more actively involved in the war by sending military equipment and ammunition, or, on the contrary, they want Bulgaria to maintain neutrality, which would guarantee the preservation of peace for the country. The last such procession was held on July 9 and tens of thousands of Bulgarian citizens took part in it in Sofia and in many other cities around the country. Although the official position of the government, which is dominant in the media, is completely opposite, it makes an impression that more and more Bulgarians are joining the processions and are ready to support the signature for holding a referendum on the issue of Bulgarian neutrality.

The beginning of the war in Ukraine led to a strong polarization of society in Bulgaria. The already existing division between "Russophiles" and "Russophobes" has intensified many times. In general, Bulgarian citizens believe that the Russian invasion of Ukraine is a threat to the security of the EU and Bulgaria. What separates them, however, is the question of whether Bulgaria should participate even more actively in all EU and NATO initiatives regarding the war, including sending military equipment and ammunition to Ukraine. The government's position, which is also dominant in the media, is clear that the best way for Bulgaria to protect its national security is by participating even more actively in the collective military aid provided to Ukraine. However, another part of the Bulgarian society is of the opposite opinion. It turns out that quite many Bulgarians are afraid that, through their political actions, the government and the parties in the parliament can lead to the involvement of Bulgaria in the war.

This is the reason why, in the last several months since the beginning of the year, a considerable anti-war movement has been emerged in Bulgaria. An expression of its activity is the organization, already eight times, of anti-war processions in Sofia and in many other cities around the country under the title "March for Peace and Sovereignty". Organizers of these protest movement are various civil organizations that explicitly emphasize that they are not connected to any political parties and party interests. Some of these organizations are: "Bulgarian National Council for Peace", "Civil Initiative", "Public Initiative Council "Wars for Peace", "Left Look Movement", "Women for Peace Against War", "Fair Bulgaria", "Anti-Fascist Forum - Bulgaria" and others.¹

According to the organizers of the processions, nearly 10-12 thousand people usually go out every time on the streets in Sofia, supporting the demands of the protesters. At the same time, the residents of dozens of smaller cities throughout Bulgaria also go on protest processions.

One of the main slogans of the citizens is for Bulgaria to become a "Zone of Peace". The beginning of more active actions of this anti-war civil movement was laid with the "Protest declaration-appeal against the involvement of Bulgaria in the military conflict in Ukraine", which was issued back in February this year. In it, it was stated that the citizens of Bulgaria have concerns that a legal basis is being prepared for sending Bulgarian military personnel to participate in the armed conflict in Ukraine.

That is why the declaration states that the Bulgarians should not simply declare neutrality. Bulgaria should declare itself a "Zone of Peace". This means no foreign bases, troops and facilities, no Bulgarian military personnel outside Bulgaria's border in the execution of any armed missions and participation in military conflicts. Bulgaria to become the initiator of the European and even global Movement for Peace, to hold events on Bulgarian soil - international meetings, conferences and any other actions to bring peace and tranquility to the European East.²

In the meantime, an Initiative Committee of prominent public figures and representatives of civil organizations has been formed, which announced that it will begin collecting signatures of citizens for the holding of a National Referendum, in which the Bulgarian citizens will decide on the following six questions:

1. Do you support the establishment of a national policy of military neutrality for Bulgaria in relation to all conflicts external to its territory?

¹ <https://www.brodbg.com/news-1.html>

² <https://pogled.info/bulgarski/protestna-deklaratsiya-priziv-protiv-vklyuchvane-na-balgariya-vav-voenniya-konflikt-v-ukraina.152823>

2. Do you support the sending and use of Bulgarian armed forces outside the country in connection with an armed conflict to be decided only by a national referendum?

3. Do you support the residence of foreign military formations on the territory of the country on the occasion of an armed conflict external to Bulgaria to be resolved only with a national referendum?

4. Do you support changing the requirements for the number of signatures to produce a national referendum, so that with more than 100,000 signatures, the National Assembly must make a decision to produce it?

5. Do you support a decision in a national referendum when one of the answers - yes or no - is chosen by more than half of the actual votes and this majority is at least one third of those who participated in the last parliamentary elections?

6. Do you support a national referendum to be able to produce long-term contracts from the competence not only of the National Assembly, but also of the Council of Ministers, and they are ratified or concluded only if there is a positive decision in the referendum?³

According to the initiators of this referendum, Bulgaria is in an unprecedented period of its historical development - a series of elections, caretaker governments and a military conflict that is at a close distance from the country. The main issue of the proposed referendum is for the Bulgarian people, as sovereign, to say by voting whether Bulgaria should participate in one or another military conflict. Such an existential question should not be decided by a narrow group - government and parliament. The main argument for this is that in Bulgarian history, such decisions by narrow groups of people have always led the country to some national catastrophes.⁴

The Initiative Committee of the "Referendum for Peace and Sovereignty" includes prominent professors, scientists in various fields, athletes, journalists, lawyers and judges, as well as other reputable public figures. They put their names and reputation behind the anti-war cause of the established civil movement called "Peace and Sovereignty". This movement welcomes the support of various political figures, but their participation in the activities of the movement should be as citizens, not as representatives of political parties which are about to divide a nationwide civic initiative.⁵

³ <https://narodna.me/%d0%b2%d1%8a%d0%bf%d1%80%d0%be%d1%81%d0%b8/>;
<https://www.bta.bg/bg/news/bulgaria/443689-organizatsionniyat-komit-et-na-obshtobalgarski-pohod-za-mir-i-neutralitet-obyav>

⁴ <https://narodna.me/%d0%b2%d1%8a%d0%bf%d1%80%d0%be%d1%81%d0%b8/>

⁵ <https://novovreme.com/nay-novo/insinuacii-v-mediite-po-povod-pohoda-za-mir-i-suverinitet-otkrito-pismo-do-sem/>

The organizers of the movement and the processions underlined that they will protest not in front of foreign embassies and missions, but only in front of Bulgarian institutions, which must be responsible only to Bulgarian citizens.⁶

At the same time, they emphasize that this is a peaceful movement, adhering to the principles of non-violence and tolerance, in which Bulgarian citizens of different ages participate.⁷

As can be seen from the questions proposed for a national referendum, the main demands of the "Peace and Sovereignty" movement are for Bulgaria's neutrality in the war between Russia and Ukraine, for Bulgaria not to send weapons to Kiev, and against foreign military formations on Bulgarian territory in the event of a conflict.

The last, eighth in a row, "March for Peace and Sovereignty" was held on July 9, parallel in Sofia and in many cities around the country, as well as in several cities abroad, in which the Bulgarian diaspora took an active part. This time, the initiators of the processions also raise several other slogans - for energy sovereignty of Bulgaria, against the sale of the units for the "Belene" Nuclear Power Plant and against the immediate closure of the thermoelectric power plants in Bulgaria, as they account for 40% of Bulgarian electricity. The other slogan was against the so-called "Istanbul Convention" and the so-called gender ideology. Last but not least, the initiators of the protest procession supported the idea of holding a referendum on Bulgaria's entry into the Eurozone.

Many times in the past months, a number of political parties have tried to take advantage of the civil protests by claiming their causes and demands as their own. However, the initiators of the anti-war movement firmly oppose this, stating that this is not a politically organized protest, but a nationwide and national civil movement.

Last but not least the media in the Bulgaria hardly cover the anti-war movement. The major national televisions impose almost complete media blackout on the initiative.⁸

⁶ Ibidem.

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ <https://pogled.info/bulgarski/obrashtenie-po-balgarskata-zemya-vse-po-silno-se-chuvat-antibalgarskite-barabanchitsi-na-voinata.157844>

Conclusion

The civil movement "March for Peace and Sovereignty" is the largest anti-war initiative that has been held in Bulgaria for a long time. For the eighth time in a row since the beginning of the year, tens of thousands of Bulgarian citizens from all the cities of the country, as well as from cities abroad where Bulgarian communities live, are participating in it. At these protest processions, Bulgarians of various age state their position against any actions that could involve Bulgaria in Russia's war against Ukraine. The fear of these Bulgarians is that the parties in the parliament and the government itself may at some point vote to send Bulgarian soldiers to participate in the armed conflict in Ukraine. These processions are a clear expression of the increasingly distinct division in Bulgarian society, which is provoked also by fear and mistrust in political parties and governing state institutions.