



Weekly Briefing

Bulgaria political briefing:
The Conflict between the President and the
Government in Bulgaria Continues
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The Conflict between the President and the Government in Bulgaria Continues

Summary

Already three months after the formation of the new regular government in Bulgaria, the conflict between the President and the Council of Ministers continues. The tension between these institutions is expressed in a frequent exchange of highly critical remarks on both sides, mutual accusations and a complete lack of trust. This inter-institutional conflict began with the very formation of the government headed by Prime Minister Nikolay Denkov. President Rumen Radev accuses the government of serving some behind-the-scenes interests that are different from those of Bulgarian citizens. The prime minister and government ministers claim that the president defends pro-Russian positions and tries to exercise power beyond his constitutional authority. Only a few days ago, the negative tone between the president and the prime minister was slightly softened, giving analysts reason to suggest that perhaps relations between the most important governing institutions in the country are improving.

For three months now, the country has been governed by the regular government of Nikolay Denkov and Maria Gabriel, which was formed as a result of a coalition between the previously strong political opponents in the form of the "We continue the change"- "Democratic Bulgaria" and GERB- "Union of Democratic Forces" coalitions . This government ended the series of caretaker governments that had been at in charge of the executive power for the past two years, with one break of seven months, while Kiril Petkov's cabinet was in power. During the rest of the time, the president had the opportunity to appoint the two longest serving prime ministers - Stefan Yanev and Galab Donev.

During these two years, the relationship between the parties and the President became strained. The head of state distanced himself from the political party "We continue the change", which he created in 2021 and which supported him in his campaign for a second presidential term. Rumen Radev first called the co-founders of the party, Kiril Petkov and Asen Vassilev, "charlatans", and when handing over the mandate of Nikolay Denkov, with which the "Denkov-Gabriel" cabinet was created, Radev said that it was "inexpedient" to be fulfilled.

On the day of the election of the cabinet, in the National Assembly, the President left during the national anthem and did not stay for the swearing-in ceremony. Of course, this raised

many questions, but it was also a definite sign of what the attitude towards the cabinet would be.

In July, Rumen Radev accused the cabinet of exploiting the issue of military aid to Ukraine in an attempt to cover up its weak governance. The president accused the executive power of not caring about the people's problems. *"The issue of Ukraine is clearly being exploited by the rulers as a lifeline to divert people's attention from the lack of vision, program and real actions in response to the problems facing the country and the people,"* said President Rumen Radev.¹

In response, GERB-„Union of Democratic Forces“ coalition accused the head of state of radicalizing public opinion and speaking illogically.

Later, in August, President Rumen Radev delivered a speech at a ceremony commemorating the 146th anniversary of the Battle of Mount Shipka during the Russo-Turkish War of Bulgarian Liberation. He then answered questions from journalists. In these two brief appearances, the president expressed numerous accusations, qualifications or insults directed at the government or a group of people he described as "the rulers."²

Among the accusations there are some that are repeated in meaning. For example, the president says three times in different words that the cabinet wants to seize more power and three times accuses him of "creating a schism" in society. He says in 9 different ways that the rulers deny that they are Bulgarians.

Here are some of the other charges:

- the rulers have a "project to hijack the Constitution"
- the rulers are making attempts "to destroy the state"
- the rulers have "partners from the dark political shadows"
- the rulers carry out a "disgusting agreement"
- the rulers push "society towards chaos and violence"
- the rulers control "the Ministry of the Interior and the services for which they will discredit the elections"
- the rulers "demean the political debate"³

Another current cause of conflict between the executive power and the president is the intention of the governing coalition to change the date of the national holiday to May 24 instead of March 3.

¹ <https://btvnovinite.bg/bulgaria/nov-slovesen-sblasak-mezhdu-prezidenta-i-pravitelstvoto.html>

² <https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/32556923.html>

³ <https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/32556923.html>

Again, on the Shipka peak, Radev announced March 3 as *"the red line of our patience, which the people's movement will not allow to be erased."*⁴

In recent weeks, the tension between the cabinet and the president has worsened due to the requested resignation of the chief secretary of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Petar Todorov. Radev refused to sign a decree for his release, but in the end Todorov submitted it himself.

In early September, President Rumen Radev again attacked the government, saying that *"it is increasingly clear to everyone that the country is being run behind the scenes"* and that *"it doesn't matter at all what the Prime Minister says."*⁵

He commented on this after the GERB leader, Boyko Borisov admitted that the businessman with a dubious reputation, Alexey Petrov, who was killed a few weeks ago, helped form the cabinet. The next day, Borisov corrected himself that Petrov had only provided the logistics for a meeting with "We continue the change", but had not personally participated.

A day later, Prime Minister Nikolay Denkov replied that he did not know about *"behind-the-scenes talks"* and denied that the country was being run that way. He called the president's words *"empty talk."*⁶

However, the president also said that *"when the state is managed behind the scenes, it is weak, when the state is weak, the mafia is strong."*

According to him, *"Apparently the ruling coalition does not listen to the people. Prices are rising, scandals are multiplying, and they are preparing to hijack the Constitution, change the national holiday, politically subjugate the Ministry of Interior and the security services in order to entrench themselves in power."* The head of state pointed out that the actions of the current government divert Bulgaria from its democratic path of development, as they are in conflict with European principles and norms for making politics.⁷

Relations between the president and the other political forces in the government and parliament are not much better either. At the end of July, the head of state accused the co-chairman of "Democratic Bulgaria" Hristo Ivanov of supporting the "behind the scenes" politics and politicians, against which he initially fought.

⁴ <https://bntnews.bg/news/radev-ot-shipka-3-mart-e-chervenata-liniya-na-nasheto-tarpenie-1244870news.html>

⁵ <https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/rumen-radev-zadkulisie/32575425.html>

⁶ <https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/rumen-radev-zadkulisie/32575425.html>

⁷ <https://m.president.bg/bg/news7353/prezidentat-rumen-radev-darzhavata-se-upravlyava-zadkulisno-iyavno-nyama-znachenie-kakvo-govori-premierat.html>

Criticism of the head of state also comes from the Bulgarian Socialist Party, which was the one that nominated Rumen Radev for president in 2016. Kornelia Ninova said that Radev is a *"source of aggression"* and will try to sabotage the government.

The "Revival" party is against Radev. The leader of the party, Kostadin Kostadinov, called the president a "coward" because he has not set a date for a referendum to preserve the Bulgarian national currency leva.

On September 2, when asked if a rapprochement between him and the cabinet is possible, President Radev said: It depends on when the Prime Minister will distance himself from his mentors. Asked who they are, the head of state replied: Who are in the records, referring to a recording of a meeting of "We Continue the change" leaked a few months ago, in which Kiril Petkov and Asen Vassilev speak mainly.⁸

In response to this, the Prime Minister stated the following: *"I have no mentors, so maybe this is the president's problem, that he is not my mentor and has no other mentors, and I don't want to comment on other people's words anymore."*⁹

Earlier, Prime Minister Nikolay Denkov announced a reformulation of the powers of the head of state in order to restore the principle of separation of powers. *"The institutions must work according to what is laid down in the Constitution and the laws. The one who goes beyond the framework is the president,"* the prime minister also pointed out.¹⁰

Is it possible to overcome the tension between the president and the government?

On the day of the Bulgarian holiday, September 6, Nikolay Denkov and Rumen Radev talked face to face during a charity football match dedicated to collecting funds for cancer patients. *"Take the conversation yesterday as a hand out, including from my side, because I have said many times that the institutions should work together. I very much hope that the other side has understood this gesture and that these attacks, which are absolutely incorrect towards the government, will stop,"* commented the Prime Minister on Facebook.¹¹

Despite the serious differences, it is necessary for the government to work together with President Rumen Radev for "the common interests of Bulgarian citizens and the economy". This was said by Prime Minister Nikolay Denkov, who answered questions from citizens live on Facebook on September 7.

⁸ <https://www.24chasa.bg/bulgaria/article/15378391>

⁹ <https://bnr.bg/varna/post/101872812/nikolai-denkov-az-namam-mentori-i-prezidentat-ne-mi-e-mentor>

¹⁰ <https://bnr.bg/horizont/post/101872715>

<https://bnr.bg/varna/post/101872812/nikolai-denkov-az-namam-mentori-i-prezidentat-ne-mi-e-mentor>

¹¹ <https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/radev-denkov/32582394.html>

Conclusion

A large number of politicians and analysts believe that Radev feels isolated from determining the country's foreign policy course and from making internal political decisions.

At the same time, in the person of Rumen Radev, the government sees its reason to exist, since one of the main theses of the ruling coalition is that at any cost, no more caretaker governments should be allowed. One of the explanations for this position is the accusation that Rumen Radev and his offices protect rather pro-Russian interests.

This anti-presidential position is one of the strongest legitimations for the existence of this coalition government composed of internal political opponents.

At the same time, in this way, President Radev enters the role of the only opposition to what is happening in the country.¹²

One of the strong positions of the president is that he has practically not stepped down from his positions, neither during the previous government of GERB, nor now, when there is a coalition government. In this way the president consistently fulfills his role, which is that of a corrective to the power which is always important for all democracies.

¹² <https://frognews.bg/novini/prof-daniel-valchev-konfliktat-mejdu-pravitelstvo-prezident-ustroiva-dvete-strani.html>