EUROPE 03.12.2018 | Helene Kortländer

A Faustian pact

Bulgaria's example shows just how toxic a political alliance with the far-right can be

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It was remarkably quiet in Europe when Bulgaria's Prime Minister Boyko Borisov led his conservative 'Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria' (GERB) into a coalition with the far-right party alliance 'United Patriots' in March 2017. 'The voters have made their decision,' commented Borisov at the time. His colleagues from the European People's Party (EPP) kept silent.

In other European countries too, the question arises as to whether a pact with right-wing parties will soon be necessary to stabilise conservative governments. Bulgaria, a relatively small country at the edge of Europe, seems to be just right as a laboratory for this kind of alliance. However, the Borisov's hopes for stability are now waning: his coalition partner's unrestrained demeanour have sparked a wave of protests, putting the government in dire straits.

The Patriots are under control, Borisov is quoted saying after his government was formed. But most likely, the Prime Minister did not believe it himself, and specifically included his intention to serving out the full four-year term in the coalition agreement.

In fact, the 'United Patriots' already seemed to have shot their bolt shortly after the election: they demanded a border fence for the defence against refugees – and it was built. And with the 'EU-Turkey deal', the number of refugees in Bulgaria declined to such an extent that even the staunchest right-wing extremists could no longer talk of their country being flooded by refugees. Only about 1500 refugees are estimated to still be in the country.

Without any coherent program beyond their xenophobia, the 'Patriots' merely resorted to occasional verbal attacks against the Bulgarian Roma minority and faced their own internal quarrels. In Parliament, they rubber-stamped the GERB initiatives. While Borisov's plan of

domesticating the 'Patriots' seemed to work out, his junior partner's approval ratings also declined. Of the 9 per cent of the election result, barely five remained. Even Borisov could have anticipated that an alliance kept alive by provocation cannot be contained in everyday political life.

Early warning signs

There had been plenty of warnings in advance. In particular, Valeri Simeonov, chairman of one of the parties in the 'United Patriots' alliance, was convicted of hate speech after calling Roma 'humanoid beings' in 2014. His election program also called for the creation of Roma reservations that could serve as 'tourist attractions'. When asked about party members who showed the Hitler salute in social media pictures, Simeonov commented that he himself could not guarantee that he did not make 'joke photos' during a visit to Buchenwald in the 1970s. Simeonov's reputation does have tangible consequences: his appointment as chairman of the Council for the Integration of Minorities in 2017 effectively paralysed the body – associations and organisations do not want to work with him.

There were also other explosive statements from the Patriots. In 2008, Krasimir Karakachanov declared a Bulgarian territorial claim to Macedonia in Parliament. Today Karakachanov is Minister of Defence and is considered the leading moderate politician of the Patriots. In 2007 Volen Siderov, also a Patriot leader, along with 50 members of his party, forced his way into the editorial offices of the newspaper '168 Chasa', which had published an article about Siderov's possible involvement in a political donations scandal. Siderov has also repeatedly made headlines with his racist and anti-Semitic vulgarities. In the run-up to the elections, the Patriots organised border blockades to prevent voting by Bulgarian Muslims living in Turkey.

We have to understand Bulgaria as a warning sign: don't make a pact with the far-right.

But nearly a year after the election, the Patriots achieved their first political coup – against their own government. Surprisingly, in December 2017, they announced that they would not support the 'Istanbul Convention' on domestic violence which was submitted for ratification. Subsequently, they led an unprecedented homophobic and misogynistic campaign against the convention which, supposedly, aimed at instilling decadent Western European concepts such as 'marriage for all' and 'third gender' in Bulgaria. The fact that the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) jumped on the bandwagon also

fuelled the debate and sealed the fate of the convention.

Borisov escaped direct confrontation by submitting the convention to the Supreme Court for consideration, which ruled that it was incompatible with Bulgaria's Constitution. The social damage is great – not just in the fight against domestic violence. Gender issues are now such a tricky subject that no party wants to talk about them anymore. In Bulgaria, the term 'gender' is synonymous with 'pervert'.

Moreover, Borisov has also embarrassed himself vis-à-vis his European partners: Bulgaria's refusal also jeopardises the ratification of the Convention at the EU level. In the case of the UN migration pact as well, the Prime Minister had done nothing to oppose the nationalist tones. Although the negotiations on the pact were largely conducted under Borisov's aegis during the Bulgarian EU Presidency, he distanced himself after resistance from the coalition partner (and the opposition) – also to the frustration of his own ministers.

Borisov's miscalculation

And now this: since the beginning of October, the mothers of disabled children in Sofia are demonstrating for state support. Responding to the protests, Valeri Simeonov described the protesting mothers as 'screaming women' who, instead of showing real maternal emotions, used their 'pseudo-ill children' exclusively as an instrument for financial goals.

Even for protest-averse Bulgarians this was going too far. There were national demonstrations, in which not only the mothers demanded Simeonov's immediate resignation. The socialist opposition party also joined in and announced that it would boycott parliamentary sessions until Simeonov resigned. 81 per cent of the Bulgarians supported the resignation, including Simeonov's alliance colleague Volen Siderov. On top of that, 64 per cent gave Prime Minister Borisov joint responsibility for the offences of his deputy and coalition partner.

Borisov, however, made hardly any secret of the fact that he lacks room for manoeuvre: although he distanced himself from Simeonov's comment, he could not force his resignation because it would mean the end of the coalition. 'What do you want? Should I throw the country into chaos? I'm gritting my teeth and doing my job.'

After a month of national protests, Simeonov has now resigned with a sarcastic reference to the media campaign against him. Too late – calm has not returned to Bulgaria. In the meantime, the Patriots internally

resort to criticism and demands for resignation, along with thousands protesting nationwide: for the resignation of the government, against high gasoline prices, and for better governance and a higher standard of living.

Borisov will have to clench his teeth for a while longer. The Prime Minister looks battered, and even worse, helpless. In the past, Borisov has already twice lost his office – now the betting on his third resignation has already closed. The stability he sought in the coalition was a chimera right from the start, and not only because the Bulgarian right-wing is undisciplined and divided. The rationale behind their provocation lies in their institutional logic, because without them, the 'Patriots' disappear from the public eye. Participating in the government acts as an amplifier, determines and threatens the tone of public debate, destroys the already low level of trust in state institutions, and allows them to play the role of political saboteurs. Borisov gained an opposition within the government and is now being driven by it.

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Helene Kortländer
Sofia

Dr Helene Kortländer heads up the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Bureau in Bulgaria. She previously worked for the FES in Israel and Berlin.