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Who will challenge Bulgaria's strongman?

Last year's protests showed that Bulgarians want change. Yet the former prime minister, Boyko Borisov, could end up being in power once again

Boyko Borisov is known for being a sore loser. The man who ruled Bulgaria for the better part of the last decade has resigned twice during this period. His legendary frustration over losing a charity match to former tennis star Boris Becker in 2010 is still widely discussed in Sofia.

When it comes to Bulgarian politics, however, it is not clear whether the former prime minister Borisov lost the match or just the first set. In any case, a new player has stepped onto the court in the meantime: Slavi Trifonov — singer, producer, presenter and one of the most popular figures on the Bulgarian media scene. His party, 'There Is Such a People', founded only last year, became Bulgaria's second strongest force right off the bat in April's parliamentary elections.

Borisov's conservative GERB remained the overall strongest party, butsuddenly found itself isolated: its former coalition partner failed to re-enter parliament and all other parties that would have been suitable partners demonstratively turned away.

The desire for political change

Trifonov, too, returned his mandate to form a government. His dissociation from the entire 'system' and its political parties not only made it impossible to join forces with Borisov's GERB, but also made almost any other coalition inconceivable. This radical opposition to all established actors resonates well with many Bulgarian voters who seek political change.

Distrust of obscure backroom deals between parties is high in Bulgaria. For far too long, there has been a general, somewhat justified feeling that party elites shared power and influence among themselves — to the

detriment of the citizens and the country. No one believes any longer in a gradual change to a different political system, there is only 'business as usual' or radical change.

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To mobilise his voters, Trifonov therefore has little choice but to isolate himself completely. In doing so, he could even succeed in becoming the strongest force in the new elections on 11 July. However, a majority for 'There Is Such a People' is unlikely, not even in a potential alliance with the two other parties that, riding on the wave of last summer's massive anti-government protests, have newly entered parliament.

A lack of strong leadership

Another weakness of 'There Is Such a People' is Trifonov himself. While being the central figure of the movement, he is not participating in the election. Even after the April election, he seemed unprepared for his resounding success and disinclined to take up a political post. Trifonov wants to return to his career in the show business. Many of the other prominent figures campaigning for his party are also not available for political office.

In principle, Bulgarians are used to not really knowing *what* they will get after the election because political programmes rarely get enough attention. But the fact that they now don't even know *who* they'll be getting takes the logic of the protest vote to the extreme: everything and everyone is better than what has been in the past.

And what does Borisov do? After a period of insulting sideswipes at his new political opponent, and challenging him to show that he could govern better, the former prime minister is now concentrating primarily on keeping his core electorate. Borisov repeats the line that GERB is the party against crisis and instability, Trifonov a political coward and President Rumen Radev a dictator and friend of the Kremlin. In this way, Borisov targets the fears of Bulgarians, most of whom are pro-European, about Russia's increasing political influence.

The presidential challenge

Apart from Trinofov, Rumen Radev presents another challenge for Borisov and, in the long run, perhaps even the bigger one. After the failed

government formation, it was up to Radev to appoint a non-partisan cabinet of experts responsible for organising new elections. Like Radev, Prime Minister Stefan Yanev — whom Radev appointed — has a background in the military. Although Yanev leads the government, it's Radev who is currently considered the strongest political force in the country.

Radev has never understood his role as president to be merely ceremonial. Since winning the presidency against his GERB rival in 2016, he has become a harsh critic of Borisov's government and was one of the leading figures of the protests in the summer of 2020. However, his interpretation of the presidency has also provoked criticism. Bulgaria, similar to Germany for instance, sees the role of the president as non-partisan and representative. Radev, however, may have overstepped the bounds of his office. But unlike in Germany, the president in Bulgaria is elected directly by the people and thus has the highest democratic legitimacy.

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Likewise it must be considered a weakness of the parliamentary opposition that both Trifonov and Radev have moved to the political centre: None of the parties were able to absorb the mood of change that has gripped the country. While Trifonov is unfamiliar with his role, Radev's expert government makes no secret of its desire for change. Already in the first few weeks, dozens of stories of mismanagement, corruption and nepotism have been exposed, GERB confidants have been replaced at various neural points in the administrative apparatus, and different projects of the previous government have been stopped and reviewed.

Serious accusations have also been made against Borisov personally in a parliamentary investigative committee. Radev has received tailwind from an unexpected source. Under the so-called Magnitsky Act, the US has somewhat surprisingly issued sanctions against three Bulgarians on the grounds of corruption. All three are well known and associated with the Borisov government.

Nevertheless, the question of who will govern Bulgaria in the future remains open. Trifonov will not, Radev may not. This is Borisov's strongest asset. Should the formation of a government fail again in July, the longing for stability, even if at the price of Borisov's return, could outstrip the desire for change after all. A victory in the tie-breaker, so to



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