

GOVERNING WITHOUT AN OPPOSITION: THE AFTERMATH OF THE EARLY PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION IN BULGARIA

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A LONG-STANDING VIEW among political scientists is that less fractionalized party systems produce more stable democracy and deliver socially better results. Putting theory and practice together, the question that remains is, 'is that always the case?'. Theoretically speaking, policy is more easily passed and policy choices can be expected to be more stable in the long run when supported by a united majority, yet, there can be situations in which the range of policy options is compromised due to the fact that the political elite governing a state is just not diverse enough. The results from the lack of a true political opposition are political instability and directional confusion both within and outside the state. Similar situation is revealing itself currently in Bulgaria, where after the parliamentary election held in May this year, the country's government and its likely political choices, have taken a 180° degree turn.

Political crisis, radical change of direction (perhaps more for the outside world than for those currently leading the country), and once again a three-legged coalition – these are the characteristics of the current political situation in the country. The reason for calling early elections, which were originally due at the end of the summer, was the resignation of the Borisov Cabinet earlier the same year. Ex-prime minister Boyko Borisov announced his cabinet resignation after nearly two weeks of spiraling social protests¹ in which thousands of people demonstrated against the level of corruption, the lack of law and order, and the persistent poverty. Claiming that 'he will not govern a state where the police beats the citizens' and with the belief that his party, GERB, has a strong potential of winning the



elections which were to follow, Borisov, surprising both national and international politicians, stepped down. In the subsequent weeks, all three parties (GERB, the left-wing socialist party, BSP, and the Turkish minority party, DPS), which were given the opportunity to form an interim government had returned it to the President, who after consultations proceeded to the formation of a care-taker government.

In the election of May 12, four political parties entered the parliament – Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB), the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), the Movement for Rights and Freedom (DPS), and ATAKA (a party with nationalist ideology). Former Prime Minister Borisov’s party, GERB, admittedly won the election with 30.54 per cent of the popular vote. However, the low voter turnout² of just 53 per cent, and GERB’s slim victory over the BSP (less than 4 per cent), has prompted the question whether these results are not a symptom of a growing mistrust towards, rather than a true victory for GERB. An even more striking fact is that about a quarter of the popular vote was cast for parties that did not make the 4 per cent parliamentary threshold, thus leaving a significant portion of the citizens’ voices

unheard. Among these parties are Citizens’ Bulgaria (DBG) of former EU commissioner Meglena Kuneva, Democrats for Strong Bulgaria (DSB) of former Prime Minister Kostov, as well as the United Democratic Forces (SDS), Order, Law and Justice (RZS), Lider, and VMRO, several of whom were part of the previous parliament.

One of the conclusions in the aftermath of Bulgaria’s parliamentary election is that perhaps the results have affected most Bulgaria’s political *Right*. For the first time in the democratic history of the country, parties, which were part of the initial democratic political opposition after the changes in 1989 (the United Democratic Forces and its multiple fractions) were now all left outside of the parliamentary doors. A devastating fact not only for many of the *Right* political leaders and the future direction of their parties, but also for the current political situation in Bulgaria - one resulting in a left-wing coalition which has not won the majority of the popular vote to govern, yet is doing so in full swing with the official support of the Turkish minority party (DPS) and in practice without any viable opposition. The lack of a viable opposition is a result of the perfect division within the parliament, which allocated the ruling BSP and DPS with 120 seats in a 240-seat parliament, and GERB and ATAKA with the remaining 120, divided 97 to 23, respectively. This division of the electoral choice forced GERB to return the mandate it was granted as a leading political force because the only potential partner it could have had was the nationalist political party ATAKA. As a result, the mandate for forming a government was given to BSP, who in coalition with the Turkish party (DPS) proposed cabinet. After a new cabinet headed by Plamen Oresharski, was voted in on May 29, 2013, GERB remained the only and somewhat weak opposition to the ruling coalition. For the passing of the proposed cabinet, BSP and DPS’s 120 parliamentarians were supported by the leader of the nationalist party, who despite proclaiming himself against the ruling of these parties, registered for the vote on May 29 thus ensuring



Boyko Borisov



the necessary quorum of minimum 121 MPs for the vote to take place. Regardless of ATAKA's relatively small size, the perfectly divided parliament and the party's ideological incompatibility with GERB, give it the strongest veto power in the current parliament. The extremist party is enjoying a privileged position in which one side does not want anything to do with it, but without it, its opposition to the ruling coalition becomes merely symbolical, and the other while stating that they will not cooperate with a party with extreme nationalist views, welcomes its backing in crucial times like the passing of the cabinet.

The situation in Bulgaria is rather critical. Policies for which center and center-right parties have worked on for years after the democratization process started are being turned around. Steps towards the decentralization of prosecuting power are being reversed. Rules which ensured that political change happens only after it has passed through the majority of parliamentarians are being changed. One of the national priorities of the Oresharski Plan is to restart the project for the Nuclear Power Plant Belene, in which Russia has exclusive interests and which were terminated by the Borisov cabinet. Another major point of contention are the changes envisioned, and passed as of June 7, within the Law on National Security and the jurisdiction of the State Agency for National Security (DANS) which is to engulf the General Directorate for Combating Organized Crime (GDBOB) – the latter was the strongest pillar in former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Interior Tzvetan Tzvetanov's work, who's fight against corruption was appraised by many, especially abroad, but was severely criticized by the BSP and DPS who were at the time in opposition. An additional change to the law about the national security is that the director of DANS will be chosen in parliament, and not appointed by the President on the recommendation of the parliament, as it has been until now. In this way, the ruling coalition ensured that no-GERB-related

figures will have any say in the running of national security. Among other important rules which are undergoing changes are the 'house rules' of the parliament. Two points of contention there are whether break-away MPs are to be allowed to form new parliamentary groups (this was forbidden by the previous cabinet, but the rules have been changed by the current majority) and what should be the necessary minimum MPs present for parliamentary committees to be able to do their work (this used to be 50 per cent plus one, and the proposed change is to lower it to a third).

With these being only the most important changes and the ones that have been proposed and voted on already in the first week after the passing of the new cabinet, one is left to wonder 'what is next?'. What else can be reversed or changed in its direction and whose interests will it serve – those of the people or those of some parties? On the threshold of the unknown, and on the verge of many voices being left unrepresented, perhaps as some have argued³ we should not be worried about stability, but about change.

NOTES:

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1. Rashkova, Ekaterina R. (2013). In the midst of political crisis, Bulgarians are searching for accountability and justice from their government. LSE EUROPP Blog. 28 February 2013. <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2013/02/28/bulgaria-government-crisis/>. (Accessed 08/06/2013).
2. Dimitrova, Antoaneta (2013). Bulgaria's low election turnout is a symptom of the growing mistrust for the ruling GERB party and the country's political system. LSE EUROPP Blog. 16 May 2013. <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2013/05/16/bulgaria-elections/>. (Accessed 08/06/2013).
3. Ibid.