

Bulgaria: Presidential elections reveal drop in support for former Tsar Simeon II

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Recent presidential elections in Bulgaria resulted in a debacle for the government of the former Bulgarian Tsar Simeon II, with a surprise victory for Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) leader, Georgi Parvanov. Simeon's government was first voted into office in June with a huge majority.

"The people have given the politicians a slap in the face", was the headline of the Bulgarian daily paper *Standart*.

In the second round of voting last weekend, Parvanov is estimated to have won around 55 percent of the vote with 44 percent going to the Petar Stojanov, the existing president and the candidate favoured by prime minister Simeon and his National Movement.

In the initial round of voting a week ago, just 41.6 percent of those eligible to vote actually did so. Young voters and workers in the larger towns stayed away in droves, with a larger percentage of voters amongst more elderly layers based in the rural areas.

Stojanov took part in the elections as an independent candidate, although he was originally a member of the conservative UDS (United Democratic Forces) and assumed the post of president as UDS candidate in 1996. It was predicted he would win the current election with a huge majority. Instead, his vote dropped by over a million votes and in the first round of voting he gained just 34.9 percent of the ballot.

BSP candidate Parvanov received 36.4 percent, well in front of the poorly placed third man-former Interior Minister Bogomil Bonev, the official candidate of the UDS, which had governed the country up until the last general elections in June.

The presidential elections came just 100 days after the election of the Simeon government. During this period Simeon threw to the winds all of the promises he originally made regarding an improvement in social conditions, including an immediate increase in pensions,

which average less than the country's minimum wage of \$47 per month. Promises to increase wages in the public sector also remained on paper. Instead mass redundancies have been declared. Drastic increases in the prices of heating, electricity and telephones have been implemented and increases in water rates are planned. The cost of living in October rose by 1.7 percent, the biggest monthly increase since October 1997.

Increased heating costs alone are quickly expected to negate the tiny increase in the minimum wage and many Bulgarian families have already had their heating capped because of their inability to pay the bills. Nevertheless the country's energy ministry has intensified penalties for non-payers. Those with two months arrears are to have their heating capped and will be threatened with severe financial penalties should they fail to purchase and install their own heating meter.

In October a speaker for the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, Lydia Schuleva, made an urgent appeal to international aid organisations and member countries of the European Economic Union for clothing, food and medicine to help the population and, in particular, elderly citizens survive the winter. Subsequently government offices reacted nervously and criticised the official, claiming that she was prejudicing the image of the country at a time when it was seeking membership of the EU. Strikes by teachers complaining of unpaid wages spread throughout the country. A trade union organisation has announced plans for strikes and protests against rising heating and electricity costs.

In the same month, the government struck a new deal with the International Monetary Fund pledging to limit the country's budget deficit to just 0.75 percent. The arrangement makes new cuts in social welfare inevitable. At the same time the government promised tax cuts for the rich and investors. Profits that are re-invested in the economy are to be freed from tax altogether.

Opinion pollsters had already spoken of a dramatic decline in support for the cabinet prior to the elections and some have referred to the possibility of severe social turbulence in the coming year. The head of the Institute for Liberal Studies in Sofia, Ivan Krastev, criticised the prime minister, claiming he ruled “like a pope”, lacked leadership qualities and spoke at length over morality while saying little about politics. Finance experts trained in the west dominate the country’s economic policy.

The Sofia pollster Petar Schivkov spoke of a “dramatic loss of confidence” in the government. In June 56 percent of the Bulgarian population anticipated an improvement in their living standards, whereas today the figure is just 23 percent.

The high level of abstention and the success of the BSP candidate (successor organisation of the former Communist Party of Bulgaria) show that the euphoria for the ex-monarch last summer was short-lived and that the political mood in the country could rapidly shift in another direction. The fact that the BSP was able to profit from the situation does not represent any confidence in the representatives of the former Stalinist regime, but reflects the general lack of a progressive alternative.

The BSP, which constituted the government between 1995 and 1997, carried out policies entirely along the lines of the conservative UDS—aimed at enriching a narrow layer of society at the expense of the majority of the population. Its economic and social policies were virtually identical to those of the UDS or the National Movement of Simeon and, as a result, the BSP suffered its own election debacle in 1997. The lack of differences between the various parties is also demonstrated by the fact that two BSP ministers are part of the government of Simeon.

None of the Bulgarian parties has any firm social basis and this lies behind the wild swings in parliamentary majorities. At the last general elections in June, the total of UDS seats plummeted from 137 to 51 while Simeon’s movement, first formed in Spring this year, won at its first attempt 120 from a total of 240 seats. The BSP has a total of 48 deputies, but can now probably fill the post of president.

During the election the various candidates tried to trump one another with mutual accusations of corruption. UDS candidate Bonev, who was sacked from the post of interior minister in 1999 due to allegations of corruption, accused Stojanov of participating as an independent candidate to further his own interests and charged him with corruption. For his part Stojanov countered with a

secret report by the security services accusing his rivals of allowing improper control of key areas of the economy by the police.

The presidential election brought another aspect of the situation in Bulgaria to light. Not only did many workers ignore the elections, but the government also made a demonstrable display of its disinterest in the entire proceedings. Five government ministers, including Finance Minister Milen Veltshev, Deputy Prime Minister and Economics Minister Nikolai Wassilev, the Environment Minister Dolores Arsenova, Transport Minister Plamen Petrov, as well as the Minister for State Administration Dimitar Kaltshev did not even bother to vote.

Prime Minister Simeon, who remained in Budapest during the election, cast his vote but when asked in an interview whether he would follow the election results on television replied, “The elections? I have more important things to do.” In response to requests that he appear before the press to comment on the result of the election he retorted, “I am too busy.”

His comments make clear the contempt of ruling layers in Bulgaria for the population at large. Ten years after the reintroduction of capitalism in this poverty stricken Balkan state, the new ruling elite no longer bother to make the least effort to cloak their policies, aimed at the enrichment of a tiny minority, in democratic garb.

As is the case in other east European countries, the newly emerged bourgeoisie in Bulgaria lacks any internal strength. It acts in the most servile manner as an agency of the International Monetary Fund, the European Union and NATO in the hope of gleaning a few crumbs from the tables of the imperialist powers. To this end they are prepared to go to any lengths in attacking their own people. They have nothing to offer in the way of democracy or social improvement for workers, having much in common with Simeon’s father, Tsar Simeon I, who was toppled from his throne in 1945 after collaborating with the Nazis and brutalising his own people and those of fascist occupied Yugoslavia and Greece.



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