

Bulgarian elections: support for former king collapses

Markus Salzmann
13 July 2005

On June 25, Bulgarian President Simeon II and his National Movement (NM), which were elected four years ago with a large majority, were voted out of office. They received just 20 percent of the vote, a loss of over 50 percent compared to the last election.

The party with the largest share of the vote (over 31 percent) was the “Coalition for Bulgaria.” The coalition is made up of the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) and seven smaller parties. The BSP originates from the Stalinist Bulgarian Communist Party. It is led by Sergei Stanishev, who is seen as a possible leader of the next government.

Trailing in third place, with 12.1 percent, was the DPS, the party which represents the Turkish minority and was formerly a junior partner in Simeon II’s National Movement. Next, with just 6.45 percent, came the Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria (DSB), led by former government head Ivan Kostov. Finally, the electoral alliance of the Bulgarian People’s Union (BNS) and the United Democratic Forces (ODS) received 5.2 percent and 7.7 percent respectively, only just enough to enter the Bulgarian parliament—the Sabranie.

The newly-formed fascist “National Attack Movement” benefited from the collapse of the right-wing bourgeois parties. It was able to gather some 400,000 votes, which represent over 8 percent of the electorate.

The party’s leader, Wolen Siderov, is no newcomer to politics. He comes from the camp of Kostov and combines rabble-rousing racial attacks on Turkish, Romanian and Jewish communities with a campaign against Bulgaria’s entry into the European Union (EU). He is the only member of the political establishment who speaks openly against the planned entry of Bulgaria into the EU in 2007. The majority of Bulgarians have suffered enormously from the preparatory measures imposed as conditions for EU entry.

The major parties standing for parliament have played a reactionary role since the collapse of the Stalinist regime.

It is therefore no wonder that, despite an intensive campaign, an increase in the number of polling places, and the addition of a lottery for cars, TVs and similar prizes, only 53 percent of the electorate turned out to vote. This shows the deep mistrust that Bulgarians have towards the representatives of the established parties. It was the lowest electoral turnout since 1990.

The promises made by the Bulgarian Socialist Party during the campaign were very similar to those of the NM. Over 200,000 jobs would be provided nationally. Civil servants would get significant pay rises, poor farmers more state subsidies, and health provision and pensions would be protected.

As for foreign policy, the Socialists pledged to withdraw all 450 Bulgarian soldiers from Iraq, and EU-entry, they said, would improve living standards for everyone. In fact, there is little likelihood that social improvements will be made under a BSP government. Since its formation, the BSP has shown itself to be the willing tool of international financial institutions.

The former Communist Party played a major role in the destruction of Bulgarian industry. By the end of 1990, half of all factories in Bulgaria had been closed down, and not just those which were unprofitable. Major state concerns were systematically plundered, and their assets siphoned off to private enterprises, often owned by CP functionaries.

In 1995, the same party was again in power—this time under its new name, the Bulgarian Socialist Party. The BSP-led government initiated a radical restructuring of the social and economic system inherited from their right-wing predecessors.

The new “red millionaires” were exempted from taxes, while the economic and social crisis reached its peak. The growing numbers of unemployed, a 1000 percent hyperinflation rate, and shortages of food and necessities led to hunger protests in the winter of 1996-97, which

forced Minister-President Zhan Widenov to back down, causing a split in the BSP.

Under his successor, Kostov, inflation was brought down by means of drastic cuts in social provisions. In July 1997, the lev (the Bulgarian currency) was fixed to the German mark by means of a currency board, thus subordinating the social and economic policies of Bulgaria to the dictates of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, causing further misery for the people.

By 2001, the Kostov regime was deeply hated and the BSP discredited in the eyes of Bulgarians. This paved the way for the aristocrat, Simeon Saksoburggotski (who formed his party a few months before the election), to win a significant victory, in which he only narrowly missed gaining an absolute majority. In his populist election campaign, the former monarch promised that within 800 days every Bulgarian would be better off.

But as soon as he was elected, he too launched massive attacks on the people. While taxes were slashed for business, oil prices were raised in 2002, under pressure from the IMF, to world market levels, making gasoline about 30 percent more expensive. By contrast, average wage levels today are 30-40 percent lower than in 1989. The minimum state pension remains at about 50 euros. Even basic foodstuffs have become prohibitively expensive for many people, so that nearly half of the population is dependent on food they grow themselves.

Stanishev, the 38-year-old son of a high-level CP bureaucrat, is regarded as a colourless pragmatist. He has made it clear that his priorities are maintaining existing currency policy and gaining entry into the EU in 2007. However, even with its desired partner, the DPS, the Socialist Party cannot achieve the required number of parliamentary seats to form a government.

It appears likely that the BSP, DSP and NM will form a grand coalition government. The Internet magazine "tol" sums up the absence of serious policy differences between the Socialist Party and the National Movement: "The old formula—communists against democrats—no longer applies, and the party programmes read as if they were written by the same person." Already under Saksoburggotski, Socialist Party ministers were brought into the government or nominated for high office in the civil service.

This means the pro-American stance of the Saksoburggotski regime will almost certainly be maintained. The US ambassador, James Pardew, has made it clear that, despite the announced withdrawal of

Bulgarian soldiers stationed in Iraq, three more US military bases will be set up in Bulgaria this year as planned.

Before the election, the Socialists repeatedly rejected the prospect of a coalition with Saksoburggotski, but now they have started talks with representatives of the BSP and NM. Saksoburggotski declared: "The bigger the coalition, the better it is for Bulgaria." The deputy head of the BSP, Rumen Owcharov, spelled out what was at stake: "Our priority is the creation of a stable government because difficult tasks remain before us."

These tasks are bound up with fulfilling the demands for EU membership made by the European Commission in Brussels, which has put pressure on the parties to quickly form a stable government. "It is clear that the clock is ticking," was the comment of one Brussels bureaucrat.

In light of the crisis of the European Union precipitated by failed EU constitution referendums in France and Holland, scepticism towards EU membership for Bulgaria and Rumania is growing. Austria's chancellor, Wolfgang Schüssel, who is due to take over the chairmanship of the EU Council next year, declared that he was convinced membership for the two Eastern European countries would be put back a year.

Brussels has made clear it will not tolerate any concessions to the electorate, and will not retreat from its demands for tough reforms. This will inevitably serve to intensify political and social tensions in Bulgaria, where no government has been able to secure a second term of office over the past fifteen years.

In last month's election just over half of the electorate placed their hopes for social change on a number of diverse opposition parties. By forming a so-called "grand coalition" against the population, the political establishment is, in fact, providing sustenance to the most right-wing political forces. The dangers involved in this development are already clear in the rapid rise to prominence of the neo-fascist "Attack."



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact