

Mass abstention in Bulgaria's presidential election

Markus Salzmann**31 October 2006**

Low voter turnouts have characterised the two rounds of Bulgaria's presidential elections held in October. A low turnout held in mid-October meant no candidate received enough votes to win outright in the first round. In a second runoff ballot held on October 29, the incumbent Georgi Parvanov, supported by the Bulgarian Socialist Party, emerged victor against his main rival, the leader of the far-right *Ataka* (Attack), Volen Siderov.

In the first round, Parvanov won 64 percent of the votes cast, Siderov received 21.5 percent, and the candidate of the conservative parties, former constitutional judge Nedelcho Beronov, approximately 9 percent. In Sunday's ballot Parvanov received 73.5 percent of the vote, enough to assure his confirmation as president for a second term of office.

The election was characterized by a broad rejection of the entire political elite. Only some 42 percent of those entitled to vote went to the polls in the mid October ballot—the lowest turnout ever in a Bulgarian presidential election. Bulgarian election laws stipulate that there can be no winner if less than 50 percent of those eligible to vote cast a ballot; a simple majority of those voting is required in the runoff ballot. Following an appeal from all the candidates for more voters to turn out in the second round, the Bulgarian electorate reacted by staying at home in even larger numbers. Only 39 percent took part in the second ballot.

Voter turnout in the runoff was lowest in the capital city of Sofia, where only 35.1 percent of those eligible cast ballots; this was down from 38 percent in the initial round. CNN International cited an unenthusiastic comment from someone who did turn up to vote, in a downtown polling station in Sofia. "First I thought to stay home because Parvanov's victory is more than certain, but then I figured that if everyone did the same, we could end up with Siderov as president," said Violeta Pancheva, a 39-year old teacher.

Parvanov's victory will make him the first president since 1989 to secure a second term. However, this cannot hide the fact that a majority of Bulgarians clearly rejects his policies and those of his grand coalition.

Parvanov tried strenuously to ensure that the election campaign was as un-political as possible. He gave hardly any interviews and avoided public debate with his challengers. In a crude election campaign, he tried to supply a non-partisan image. The 49-year old historian presented himself as "president of all Bulgarians," and alluding to Siderov, said he was opposed to all those who wanted to encourage ethnic or religious conflict. He promised that Bulgaria's accession to the European Union would provide a better life for all in the Balkan state.

Like many of the current so-called "socialists" in Eastern Europe, Parvanov comes from the ranks of Stalinist bureaucrats who became the most eager advocates of capitalism following the collapse of the old regime. He played a major role in the transformation of the old Communist Party into the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), which did everything possible to privatise the country's ailing industry and smash up the welfare system.

In 1996, at the high point of the economic crisis in Bulgaria, Parvanov took over the BSP party presidency, after his predecessor Zhan Videnov had had to withdraw following substantial protests. Parvanov frequently played the racist card in an effort to raise his profile against the parties of the right wing government of that time. His insults directed against the Turkish minority and its political representatives at that time are now matched by the racist tirades of his adversary Siderov.

Parvanov, who has been president since 2001, signed treaties of accession to the European Union and NATO, and together with the BSP has been a driving force to ensure that Bulgaria fulfills the EU entry criteria.

Although Parvanov stood in the recent elections as an “independent,” he enjoyed the support of the grand coalition, which has formed the government since last year, and which he played a major role in bringing together.

In August 2005, following inconclusive parliamentary elections, weeks of negotiations finally saw the BSP and the National Movement of the former Bulgarian monarch Simeon II (Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha), establish a coalition government under Socialist Party leader Sergei Stanishev, which also included the Turkish minority party (DSP).

As head of state, Parvanov had pressured the party leaders Stanishev and Saxe-Coburg-Gotha (who in 1946, at the age of six, was deposed as the last Bulgarian Tsar) to form a stable government before the publication of a critical report by the EU Commission, which was considering postponing Bulgaria’s accession.

The fierce tensions between the BSP and the monarchists were put aside in their mutual interest, with their agreement to continue the political course of the last several years. Brussels’ calls for austerity measures and further deregulation and privatisation of the economy were promptly put into effect by the Stanishev government.

However, the present election reveals the instability of this government. The monarchists officially called for a vote for Parvanov, but their parliamentary deputies did not adhere to this line. According to media reports, about 25 percent voted for the conservative Beronov and 20 percent for the right-wing extremist Siderov.

The miserable result of Nedelcho Beronov in the first round is symptomatic of the crisis of the conservative opposition parties. In last year’s general election, the Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria, the Association of Democratic Forces and the People Union just scraped into parliament. They had emerged largely from the Union of Democratic Forces, which in the 1990s was Bulgaria’s largest party.

In 2001, the recently established monarchist party of Simeon II won a surprise victory. Since then, the rightwing conservative camp has unravelled. Such tensions prevailed between the parties that it seemed almost impossible to secure the nomination of a common presidential candidate. Eventually, former constitutional judge Beronov was chosen as their emergency candidate.

Beronov, who claims to be completely un-political, had no chance from the beginning. Since the legal system is corrupt from top to bottom, most ordinary Bulgarians feel

a deep distrust of all its representatives.

In their first-round campaigns, neither the incumbent Parvanov nor his conservative challenger Beronov addressed the burning problems of the country. Both simply ignored the catastrophic economic and social situation, the massive pauperization of wide sections of the population, the pervasive corruption in all areas of life and the constantly growing crime rate.

Their stance played into the hands of the extreme rightist Siderov. His neo-fascist *Ataka* has been represented in the Bulgarian parliament since last year’s elections. As in 2005, Siderov once again conducted a racist and xenophobic campaign, which he combined with social demands and a nationalist economic policy.

If he wins, he has promised to ban the BSP and to abolish all rights for the Turkish minority. Siderov has also promised to hold a referendum regarding American military bases in Bulgaria and has spoken out against the participation of Bulgarian troops in the occupation of Iraq.

The vast majority of the population opposes Bulgarian support for the US policy on Iraq, which was begun under Saxe-Coburg-Gotha and was then continued by Stanishev. This is a view that finds just as little reflection in the establishment parties as the popular distrust of the European Union. While the BSP, the monarchists and the conservatives all claim there is no alternative to joining the EU, and impose measures which result in constantly falling living standards in order to fulfil the entry conditions, Siderov rails against Brussels and global capital, demanding the re-nationalization of privatised enterprises and the extension of social provisions.

The runoff last Sunday can only be called a farce. The electorate was left to choose between a completely discredited “socialist,” who pursues a rightwing, neo-liberal policy in the interests of the European corporations, and a neo-fascist, who exploits the despair of broad social layers for his utterly reactionary programme.



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