

Right-wing opposition wins Bulgarian parliamentary election

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The right-wing “Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria” (GERB) won outright the parliamentary elections held in Bulgaria last Sunday. Its leading candidate, the mayor of Sofia, Boyko Borisov, won 41.5 percent of the vote and is expected to become the new prime minister of the Balkan state.

The former governing party, the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), lost nearly half its vote compared to the last election. Led by former Prime Minister Sergei Stanishev, the BSP—a successor to the Bulgarian Communist Party—obtained just 18.2 percent and failed to win a single direct mandate.

The former coalition partner of the BSP, the movement led by the ex-monarch Simeon Borisov Sakskoburggotski (NDSV), also lost a large portion of its support and failed to pass the newly introduced eight-percent hurdle for representation in parliament. Following the disastrous result for his party, Sakskoburggotski—an offspring of the country’s former Tsar—stepped down as party chairman. A breakup of the party is now very probable.

Other parties to obtain representation in parliament include the DPS (Movement for Rights and Freedom), which claims to represent the Turkish minority community in the countryside, and the ultra-conservative Blue Coalition—consisting of the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF), the Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria (DSB) and the equally right-wing “Order, Law and Justice” (RZS). The ultra-nationalist Ataka (National Union Attack) also enters the new parliament, and with 9.3 percent of the vote took the fourth spot in the election.

Since the GERB failed to win an absolute majority, Borisov will be compelled to seek a coalition partner, and he has already made it clear he is prepared to talk to any and all candidates—including Ataka.

The election result is blow to all those parties, i.e. both the “socialists” and conservatives, who oriented themselves exclusively to the demands laid down by European business circles. Hard hit by the economic crisis, Bulgaria has been denied 700 million euros of aid from the European Union,

because the government refused to undertake any measures to combat the rampant corruption in the country.

Now a number of political commentators have expressed their hopes for a “change” under the GERB and Borisov, because they have the temporary support of a large section of the population. However such assumptions are entirely misplaced.

Borisov’s landslide victory was only possible because of the weakness and rottenness of his political opponents, including the former Bulgarian Stalinists. In 2005, in response to the broad rejection of other right-wing parties and the Socialist Party, he was elected mayor of Sofia.

The main layers won over to the GERB in the recent election came from former supporters of Sakskoburggotski and other right-wing parties. Borisov presents himself as an honest, energetic politician and in the eyes of many Bulgarians was able to distinguish himself to a certain degree from the rest of the country’s political establishment. In the election campaign he promised to take effective action to deal with corrupt officials and leading figures from the criminal underworld.

The party led by the former policeman, however, is anything but an alternative to the existing parties. Prior to the collapse of Stalinism in Bulgaria in 1989, Borisov was a major in the interior ministry and regarded as a loyal adherent of the Stalinist regime. He subsequently used his good contacts inside the bureaucracy to set up a private security company whose services were taken up by—among others—the former head of the Communist Party, Todor Zhivkov.

When Simeon II assumed the post of prime minister in 2001 he appointed his long-time acquaintance, Borisov, as head of police in the interior ministry. Borisov calls himself a “right-wing centrist” and has been able to draw together a number of figures from the police, the former Stalinist security authority and the splintered spectrum of right-wing parties into his movement. In addition to his influence in Sofia, he has been able to win support for his ultra-conservative program in rural areas, where support for the

BSP slumped in some regions to well under 10 percent.

Politics and crime

The election campaign made clear that not only is there little to choose between the various parties, but that, twenty years after the collapse of the Stalinist bureaucracy, the borders between politics and crime in Bulgaria are completely fluid.

There are a number of indicators of corrupt electoral practices conducted by all of the main political parties. According to some reports, voters—especially in rural areas—were offered 50 euros, or in poorer areas, even just a hot meal, if they voted for a specific candidate. Just one day after the parliamentary election, deputy emergency situations minister Alexander Filipov was arrested on charges of buying votes on a large scale. Bulgarian state radio broadcast on Monday that Filipov is alleged to have offered or even awarded European Union-promoted projects to those prepared to give him their support.

At the same time, the power struggle between the various political candidates has become increasingly vicious. Recently a 42-year-old businessman was shot down in the center of the northeastern Bulgarian city of Shumen. Rumen Rachev, a well-known entrepreneur and supporter of the GERB, was executed in broad daylight in front of the city hospital in the presence of many passersby.

It is unclear whether he was mown down for political or criminal reasons, or both. Since 1989 there have been more than 150 so-called “public executions” in Bulgaria—primarily of businessmen with connections to the underworld and political circles. Following this latest murder, the regional head of BSP, Dimitar Dabov, was quick to declare that the victim had criminal links and that the assassination was a “mafia affair.”

Sunday’s election also saw the failure of an attempt by five alleged criminals who stood as candidates. They hoped that if elected to parliament they could gain immunity for their crimes. The Bulgarian judicial system provides temporary immunity to all candidates, who are then protected from prosecution should they enter parliament.

Plans for social attacks on the population

Borisov had already made clear before the election that he

would continue the policies of his predecessor Stanishev and pass on the costs of the economic crisis to the population. The economy of the country is suffering disastrously from liquidity problems and many investors have already quit Bulgaria this year.

Borisov has announced plans to revise the state budget as quickly as possible. At present the budget is suffering a six percent decline in income due to a decrease in tax revenues flowing from the economic crisis.

The new state budget is being drawn up to enable the country to qualify for a major loan from the International Monetary Fund. While the BSP did not officially seek an IMF credit, Borisov wants to conclude a deal with international backers immediately after his appointment as prime minister.

Such credits are invariably bound up with drastic budget cuts and will lead to substantial cuts in the country’s social network, coupled with steep tax increases. This has already been the consequence of IMF loans in Hungary and a number of other countries. The result will be increasing social misery in the already impoverished country.

The new Bulgarian government, irrespective of its composition, will have no compunction about implementing such cuts. The 38-year old economic specialist Simeon Djankov is being groomed as the new finance minister. He already has the backing of business groups who regard his nomination as a positive signal to investors and an opportunity to introduce fresh tax cuts for business interests.



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