

Mass protests bring down Bulgarian government

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On Wednesday, Bulgarian Prime Minister Boiko Borisov announced his government's resignation. He was responding to ongoing protests that began at the beginning of the month over skyrocketing electricity costs.

On Thursday, parliament accepted the resignation by 209 votes to 5. Borisov led a minority government of the Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) party. Since all the major parties opposed the formation of a new government, fresh elections are expected in April. Until then, the country will probably be led by a technocratic government. The election had been scheduled for July.

In the days before the government resigned, protests against its brutal social policies were escalating. What began at the start of the month with a few hundred protesters opposing high electricity prices developed into a mass social movement supported by hundreds of thousands of workers in over 30 cities. There were repeated attacks on the offices of the energy companies.

The protests are no longer limited to high electricity prices. Demonstrators demanded the resignation of the government and the nationalization of the energy companies, and some called for citizens' control over agencies and corporations as well as the election of a constituent assembly. Protesters in Plovdiv carried a banner with pictures of the leaders of all the political parties and the slogan, "You must pay the bill."

The GERB government responded to the protests with extreme brutality. Protesters were bludgeoned and water cannons were used. On Tuesday alone, at least 14 protesters were injured; 11 of them had to be hospitalized.

The protests were a fundamental social rebellion. Bulgaria is the poorest country in the EU, with an official monthly average wage of €350. Unemployment

has risen to over 12 percent. According to the charity Caritas, 40 percent of the country's children do not have enough to eat.

Bulgarian governments of various parties have implemented austerity programmes over the last 10 years. Almost all state enterprises have been privatized, labor rights attacked and wages cut. All this has taken place under the aegis of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the European Union, transforming Bulgaria into a haven for foreign investors.

The government resignation is an attempt by the Bulgarian ruling elite and the European Union to bring the situation under control and bring the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), the largest opposition party, into government. This is why Borisov—who claims he wanted to fight "to the bitter end"—was forced to resign.

Numerous previous attempts by the government to bring the protests under control failed. Last week, the prime minister replaced the head of the energy control authority Angel Semerdchiew with Juliana Ivanova, who announced the setting up of a commission to monitor the energy companies and reduce electricity prices. She was forced to resign after only four days when it was revealed that she had traded illegally in tobacco.

Last Monday, Borisov dismissed his unpopular finance minister, Simon Djankov. Djankov, a former manager of the World Bank, was largely responsible for the austerity measures. He was the cabinet member with the lowest approval rating, 11 percent.

Immediately after Djankov's dismissal, Borisov promised to distribute a multi-million-dollar subsidy to Bulgarian grain producers, which the finance minister had withheld. He also promised an 8 percent reduction in electricity prices and the withdrawal of the license for Czech power company CEZ.

Bulgaria's trade unions also tried to suppress the protests and rescue the government. The chair of the successor organization to the Stalinist KNSB union, Plamen Dimitrov, jumped to the aid of the regime even as protesters on the streets demanded the resignation of the government. He proposed the formation of a joint committee of trade unions, regulatory authorities and business representatives, headed by Prime Minister Borisov, to resolve the social conflict.

After these attempts failed and the mass protests continued, the opposition tried to present fresh elections as a solution and thus place themselves in the running. Last Sunday, the BSP, which had hitherto played no role in the protests, published a statement by party leader Sergei Stanishev in which he blamed the "inadequacies and incapacity of the government" for the situation.

His party colleague Georgi Parvanov, who was Bulgarian president from 2002 to 2012, said that he had expected Borisov's resignation, as this was the only possible step to end the protests. He pleaded for the convening of a National Security Council chaired by President Rossen Plevneliev (GERB), with representation from all ministers responsible for security matters.

The BSP is the author of the cuts and privatization policies. From 2004 to 2009, when it was involved in government, it led the country into the EU and implemented corresponding social attacks. As a result, it obtained its historically lowest vote (18 percent) in the 2009 elections and gave way to the GERB government. The party is still deeply discredited.

For this reason, workers' protests have been increasingly directed against the entire political establishment. The next mass demonstration has been announced for Sunday.



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