

Bulgaria: Protests continue after government's resignation

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Protests and demonstrations are continuing in Bulgaria despite the resignation of the right-wing government of Boyko Borisov (Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria, GERB). Last weekend, tens of thousands took to the streets in cities across the poorest country of the European Union to protest against poverty, the rising cost of living and corruption. In the largest mass protests since 1997, demonstrators demanded the resignation of President Rosen Plevneliev and other leading politicians.

One protest took place in front of the headquarters of the Central Bank in the country's capital, Sofia. Those taking part criticized the role of the country's banks, which are mainly in foreign hands. Many major roads were blocked. Students and members of the country's Roma minority took part in a rally of around 20,000 in the center of Sofia. Demonstrators chanted slogans such as "Mafia" and "We are hungry". Under the eyes of a large contingent of police, protesters burned a puppet wearing a police uniform to protest against the brutality of the security forces. Dozens of people have been injured, some seriously, due to police brutality at previous protests.

The biggest demonstration took place in the Black Sea city of Varna, where the protests began two weeks ago. Around 40,000 people marched through the city and blocked major roads. They demanded the resignation of Mayor Kiril Yordanov. In Varna, popular anger is directed against the regional power company Energo-Pro from the Czech Republic. Banners called for the nationalization of all of the country's power companies. Additional protests took place in Bulgaria's second largest city, Plovdiv, and in Burgas on the Black Sea.

Prior to Borisov's resignation a week ago, protests against the government and its policies had taken place

in over 30 cities across the country, with tens of thousands demonstrating. One man set himself on fire in protest outside the town hall in Sofia last week. He was taken to hospital with severe burns. One day earlier, a 26-year-old died as a result of his self-immolation.

The ongoing protests clearly show that the social situation in the Balkan state has reached the breaking point. *Euronews* reported on the mood amongst demonstrators: "They should take care of us instead of leaving us to fend for ourselves", one young woman said indignantly. Another protester said: "We are now the poorest country in Europe—why? Because we have been exploited over the years and people have no money. The little money we did receive was then taken away."

One elderly woman on the fringe of a protest told journalists: "My pension is 160 leva (€80), my electric bill 114 leva," Her situation is typical for most of the country's pensioners, who belong to the poorest segments of society.

The social situation has deteriorated dramatically for the majority of the Bulgarian population since the country joined the EU in 2007 and following the economic crisis one year later. According to the National Statistics Office, unemployment rose in 2012 to 12.4 percent. Independent economists estimate that the real rate of unemployment is likely to be double that. Many families subsist only due to illegal forms of work.

Under these conditions, the Borisov government introduced policies to slash wages for those still working. Finance Minister Djankov has insured that wages and salaries in the public sector have not increased since 2009, despite substantial increases in living costs. According to the unions, one in five

Bulgarians are living under the poverty line on less than the equivalent of €110 (US\$145) per month. One third of the population have an income of less than €260 (US\$340) a month.

The austerity policies introduced in recent years following pressure from the European Union and the International Monetary Fund are responsible for a decline in the birth rate, which in 2012 reached its lowest level since the Second World War.

The economic situation has further deteriorated in recent months. The debt crisis in neighboring Greece has hit Bulgarian exports. Greece is the main buyer of Bulgarian exports in the EU, and Greek banks play a significant role in Bulgarian financial affairs.

The resignation of the GERB government was aimed at opening the way for the Socialist Party (BSP) to take power with the task of stabilizing the situation in the interests of country's ruling elite. This calculation has not paid off as popular anger is also directed at the totally discredited BSP. This is why President Plevneliev is now trying to permit the unions to play a bigger role.

Interrupted by loud boos at a rally on Sunday in Sofia, Plevneliev promised "to discuss with the unions what is important for our country." The two leading unions, KNSB and Podkrepa, which have sabotaged a series of strikes and protests in recent years against plant closures, layoffs and wage cuts, have deliberately kept their distance from the current protests.

In a press release, the Podkrepa trade union confederation has called for the establishment of a transitional government to calm the situation and end the protests. This government should maintain the "economic and social stability" of the country, the statement declares. Podkrepa categorically rejects the demand for the nationalization of the country's energy supply. The replacement of a private monopoly by a government one will not solve the problems, the union says.

The bankruptcy of the BSP and the unions as well as the absence of any progressive political formation is being exploited by right-wing forces to promote their reactionary positions and direct the popular movement into nationalist channels.

In front of the regional headquarters of the Austrian energy provider EVN in Plovdiv, members of the neo-fascist Ataka party called upon Plevneliev to withdraw

licenses for foreign energy companies operating in the country. In previous protests, representatives of the Ataka party had been excluded, but reportedly in Sofia the ultra-nationalist VMRO party joined the protests for the first time.



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