Political crisis in Bulgaria continues

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The Bulgarian interim government headed by Marin Raykov is in deep political crisis, as anti-government protests continue. Government leaders are currently trying to form an alliance with the trade unions and petty-bourgeois forces to control the situation.

One tragic indication of the anger and desperation gripping broad layers of the population are the self-immolations in recent weeks, which have now claimed a fourth victim. A 40-year-old unemployed man set himself on fire in Sitowo in the northeast of the country, in a protest against abject poverty. He died of his injuries last weekend.

On February 19 a man set fire to himself on a main street in the central Bulgarian town of Veliko Tarnovo. In another case, an unemployed blacksmith sought to burn himself to death in front of the presidential office in the capital, Sofia.

Meanwhile, protests and demonstrations continue in a number of cities across the country. Dozens of protesters have erected a tent city in the capital and in the northern Bulgarian town of Rousse to protest high electricity prices and social decline. Protesters blocked trains in the coastal cities of Varna and Shoumen, leading to delays and cancellations.

Protests also took place in Varna outside the office of the local electricity provider. Several main roads were blocked for several hours, and protesters clashed with police. A demonstration also took place in the second largest city in the country, Plovdiv, on March 17, where several hundred protesters confronted a huge police detachment.

Several hundred people also held protests in Sliven and Kyustendil, demanding the newly elected government meet their demands for lower prices for water and electricity.

Both the government and the European Union are alarmed. The European Commission recently published a report summarizing the situation in the country since the start of the year: “Mass protests, which turned violent, burst out at the end of January 2013 and are still continuing, one month after, in over 30 cities. The protests were spurred by abnormally high electricity bills, on average two times higher than the previous month. After the tension escalated, the center-right government of Boyko Borisov resigned on 20 February 2013.”

The report notes that the harsh austerity measures introduced in recent years are responsible for increasing social unrest. Bulgaria's budget deficit has been reduced from 4 percent in 2010 to 1 percent in 2012.

It is estimated that many Bulgarian households now pay around 85 percent of their income for electricity and heating. Forty-nine percent of the population live in poverty or are threatened with poverty. For the over-65s this figure rises to 61 percent. A fifth of Bulgarians in the poorest EU country live under the poverty line—estimated to be equivalent to 120 euros a month.

The government in Sofia and representatives of the European Union are determined to continue austerity measures despite the protests.

Interim Prime Minister Marin Raykov and two ministers conducted talks last week with EU representatives on the situation. The main topics were the use of EU funds and the complete privatization of the energy market, which would undoubtedly lead to further increases in electricity prices. The European Commission has already criticized Bulgaria over its failure to completely liberalize its energy market.

At a meeting with EU Commission chief Herman van Rompuy, political and economic measures were discussed to ensure the stability of the country up to elections planned on May 12.

To this end, the government has already met for talks with employers and trade unions. The right-wing trade unions in Bulgaria have consistently supported the

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government's program of cuts in the past few years. As was the case in other Eastern European countries, the unions were instrumental in the destruction of state-run companies in the 1990s.

While protesters are motivated by their opposition to the enormous social inequality prevailing in the country, the protests' leaders are seeking to channel popular anger into a campaign to pressure the government to improve their own status.

With protests mounting since February these political tendencies have tried to push the social question into the background and instead call for more citizen participation and changes in government regulation of business monopolies.

A look at the leaders of the protest movement reveals the social and political interests they represent. Leading representatives of the movement Yanko Petrov, Doncho Dudev and Angel Slavchev have founded the "Movement for Civil Control". In a March 25 interview with Bulgarian National Television, Slavchev declared that small and medium enterprises were particularly affected by the crisis and that their problems were most pressing.

He then called for more competition in the electricity and gas supply industries and urged closer cooperation between the civil rights movement and the established parties to address the issue.

Slavchev is a former member of the Bulgarian Left Party, a split off from the Socialist Party (BSP), which headed the government for many years. He was a longtime member of a nationalistic, anti-Russian movement, which he claims he joined to defend the interests of the Bulgarian nation.

Another leader of the protest movement, Doncho Dudev, is a former member of Nova Sila, a small party, led by former Ataka member Anton Sirakov. Ataka is an ultra-right organization notorious for its racist and anti-Semitic policies. Nova Sila is said to have ties to the state intelligence agency and organised crimes. Other middle-class representatives are closely linked to the GERB party of deposed Prime Minister Boyko Borisov or the BSP. Others call for the formation of a "government of experts" after May 12 composed of representatives from business, trade unions and "civil right organisations".

While there are differing proposals put forward by the various groupings, their joint goal is to stabilize the situation and suppress the protests against social decline in order to press ahead with implementing policies in the interest of the EU and international finance.

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