

Stalemate after elections in Bulgaria

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20 May 2013

The Bulgarian parliamentary elections of May 12 have exposed the deep divide between the population and the country's political elite. The elections were brought forward four months after a broad wave of protests in February forced the right-wing minority government of the Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) under Prime Minister Boyko Borisov to resign.

The protests of the impoverished population were directed against dramatic increases in electricity prices and threatened to lead to an open revolt against the EU's policies of privatization and austerity. But this protest found no expression in the elections.

Although Borisov's GERB suffered heavy losses, it was again the largest party, with 30.5 percent of the votes cast, followed by the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) with 26.6 percent.

Only four parties exceeded the four-percent threshold required to enter parliament. The remaining two were the Turkish minority party DPS with 11.2 percent, and the far-right Ataka (Attack) with 7.3 percent.

The four parties now represented in parliament were supported by only 39 percent of the electorate. Turnout was approximately 50 percent, while one quarter of those voting cast their ballot for parties that failed to reach the four-percent threshold. In 2009, only 8 percent voted for such parties.

There is now a stalemate in the new parliament, which makes it extremely difficult to form a government. The most likely coalition partners, the conservative GERB and the nationalist Ataka, only control 120 of the 240 seats in parliament, as do the BSP and the Turkish minority party.

GERB has therefore announced the formation of a minority government, while the BSP wants to form a "programme government" with the party of the Turkish minority, supported by the far-right Ataka. The obstacle to such a combination is the enmity between the ultra-

nationalist Ataka and the representatives of the Turkish minority.

In principle, all four parties represented in parliament are agreed on the need to continue the austerity measures dictated by the EU and IMF, which have turned the country into a poorhouse. They represent different wings of the ruling elite, who are arguing amongst themselves about the division of the booty, and who work closely with the European Union.

The BSP emerged from the former Stalinist party of state. Its leader, Sergei Stanishev, was prime minister from 2005 to 2009. He took Bulgaria into the European Union in 2007 and initiated massive social cuts to attract foreign investors. In its election manifesto, the BSP promised more spending to stimulate the economy and to create jobs, but essentially based its election appeals on the scandals involving the GERB.

The conservative GERB was founded in 2006, and has been in government since 2009. During the campaign, it argued for the continuation of the austerity measures, and for the retention of the 10 percent "flat tax". Before the fall of the Stalinists in 1989, its leader Boyko Borisov was a karate trainer, and a bodyguard for the Stalinist ruler Todor Zhivkov. In the violent early years of the reintroduction of capitalism in Bulgaria, he owned a personal protection and debt collection company. Later, he became the country's chief of police.

The Turkish minority party DPS, run by Ahmed Dogan, a former employee of the Stalinist secret service, is considered highly corrupt.

The right-wing extremist and xenophobic Ataka officially aims to unite Bulgarian nationalists against integration into the European Union and NATO. But that did not prevent it unconditionally supporting the pro-EU government of Borisov during the last parliament.

The groups that head the protest movement are

responsible for the fact that opposition to the ruling elite found no expression in the elections. They do not represent the interests of the working class, but of middle-class layers who are fighting for their own social advancement, and who look towards the European Union. They push the burning social questions into the background, and instead stress issues such as public participation and control of monopolies. (See also: “The political issues confronting the Bulgarian protests”)

When President Rosen Plevneliev (GERB) called for increased oversight by the EU on developments in Bulgaria, the organizers of the protests called for a week-long suspension of the demonstrations. Their readiness for dialogue with the establishment is responsible for the stalling of the protests.

These groups then hardly played a role in the elections. For example, the Bulgarian Left (BL), which works closely with and is supported by Germany’s Left Party, barely managed 6,000 votes, less than 0.2 percent. In their campaign statements, the Bulgarian Left had offered themselves as a vehicle for the protest organizations and promoted their policy of public participation and orientation to EU guidelines.

BSP president Stanishhev has announced that as well as the DPS and Ataka, he also wants to win parties and civil movements who failed to gain entry into parliament to support a “broad government programme to save the country.” A “broad consensus” should be established among all political factions, out of which a government of technocrats should be formed, he said.

In fact, the BSP’s plan confirms the rule that faced with growing tensions between the classes, all the bourgeois factions move closer together. This is especially true for the petty-bourgeois protest movements, who will quickly accept the invitation to sit at the table of the EU masters.

However, poverty and misery are growing rapidly in the country. During the campaign, there were repeated reports of a wave of suicides by people who cannot feed themselves and their families. Eight people have set themselves alight in protest against the disastrous social conditions. Hunger is the order of the day; more and more Bulgarians no longer know how to make ends meet.

The implementation of the austerity dictates of the international financial institutions since 1997 has meant

that one in five Bulgarian is now considered poor and must live on less than €120 a month. Unemployment has climbed to over 19 percent, and 40 percent of young Bulgarians are without an apprenticeship or employment. With an official average monthly income of €350, Bulgaria is at the bottom of the EU; however, it takes a top spot when it comes to social inequality.

The global economic and financial crisis has hit the country particularly hard. Consumption, exports, industrial production and foreign investment have all dropped sharply. The GERB government has been unable to halt the decline through drastic austerity measures in the social sector and by supporting business with fiscal reserves and loans of over 8 billion leva (€4 billion). The increase in the price of electricity by the multinationals was the straw that broke the camel’s back.

Bulgarian society is “a ticking time bomb that needs to be urgently defused,” *Deutsche Welle* quoted a foreign diplomat saying. And *EU Infothek* writes: “The next uprising is inevitable. Conforming to EU policies has led the nation to the brink of the abyss; austerity is bringing misery to the poorest country in the EU.”

The Bulgarian “left” sees things very differently. It is trying to save the reputation of the EU, and advocates greater subordination to its control. It calls on the European Commission not to recognize the election results, and is demanding new elections under international supervision.

No matter what government constellation emerges, or whether the election is repeated, Bulgaria faces a new round of fierce class struggles. These can only be successful if they are directed by a socialist perspective. Working people must organise themselves independently of all bourgeois and petty-bourgeois parties to defend their own interests. Their struggle will gain in force when it is directed against the EU and its agencies in the country, and is linked to the European working class, which faces the same enemy everywhere—the insatiable European financial oligarchy.



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