

New wave of protests in Bulgaria

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3 July 2013

Over the past several weeks, a broad protest movement has developed nationally demanding the resignation of the “government of experts”, which is led by the unaffiliated finance expert Plaman Orescharski and supported by the post-Stalinist Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP).

The protests were sparked by the selection of Deljan Peevski, a 32-year-old business oligarch, as leader of the domestic security service DANS, whose powers were significantly expanded. Peevski was given oversight, along with his internal security mandate, of the department that deals with organised crime, which was transferred from the Interior Ministry, removing any parliamentary oversight.

Peevski and his mother Irena Krasteva, the former head of the state-run lottery, control a large portion of the television and newspaper market in the country, although the origins of their wealth remain unclear. Despite his young age, Peevski held powerful positions in the government of “Tsar” Simeon (2001-05) and is implicated in several corruption scandals. He is a member of DPS, the party of the Turkish minority, which is the minor coalition partner in Orescharski’s government.

Peevski is backed by Zvetan Vassilev, one of Bulgaria’s richest men, and the Cooperative Trading Bank (KTB). Vassilev owns firms in almost every economic sector, including banking, insurance, electronics, newspapers, foodstuffs and tobacco.

Peevski relinquished his post after just one day, and the BSP expressed regret about public haggling over government appointments. Nevertheless, the demonstrations continued and expanded. Demands include the resignation of the government, new elections, and the democratisation of the election law. Last Wednesday, the protesters, who had until then been peaceful, sought to block a sitting of parliament by shouting down parliamentarians and pelting the building with objects.

In the second largest city, Plovdiv, and in Blagoevgrad, protesters prevented the assumption of power by the new chief of the regional administration, who had been named

by the party of the Turkish minority. At the Schipka pass in the Balkan Mountains, protesters from Gabrovo and Triavna blocked roads.

According to a poll from Alfa research, 85 percent of Bulgarians support the protests. Even the leadership of the police trade union released a statement backing them.

The current protests differ from those in February, which in a few days brought down the minority right-wing government of the Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria (GERB), led by Bojko Borisov. The protests in February were designated by sociologists as “hunger uprisings.” They were triggered by massive electricity price rises and directed against widespread poverty and the plundering of the country by European and international companies.

In the 24 years since the fall of Stalinism, nominally right- and left-wing governments have presided over a devastating social crisis bound up with their adherence to the demands of international financial institutions. Bulgaria’s population has declined from 9 million to 7.3 million due to emigration and a falling birth rate.

The consequences of the global economic crisis and the austerity measures of the European Union, of which Bulgaria has been a member since 2007, have degraded the country to the status of poor house of Europe. Bulgaria has the lowest wages in the EU and at the highest levels of social inequality.

With the help of the KNSB trade union (which has its origins in the Stalinist United Trade Union), and the Podkrepa union (which emerged from the opposition), as well as support from petty-bourgeois “left” forces, President Plaman Plevneliev was able to exclude social questions from last winter’s protest movement and orient it towards the call for new elections. However, only half of all registered voters took part in the vote.

Parliamentary elections on May 12 led to a tie, with the BSP and DPS controlling only 120 of the 240 seats. They govern with the indirect support of the ultra-right Ataka party (Attack). While the conservative GERB boycotted parliamentary sessions, Ataka allowed its representatives

to register, thereby securing the quorum necessary for decisions to be taken.

The protests against the new government emerged initially from better-off, educated middle class layers in the cities, who saw the pervasive corruption as a barrier to their own social advancement. There were also a significant number of young people participating in the demonstrations.

Apart from opposition to political corruption, the protests lack any clear perspective. The conservatives have tried to make use of them in order to return to power. Several right-wing organisations have pushed for influence. However, Ataka, the largest party of the far right, has sharply condemned the renewed protests. Party leader Volen Siderov described the protesters as “alcoholics and drug addicts.”

Within the protest movement, 60 judges, scientists, politicians and journalists have formed the group “Charta 2013”, which aims to reestablish “democracy and the rule of law.”

“Charta 2013” is seeking to orient the protests toward the EU, which they have presented as a guarantor of constitutionality and the struggle against corruption. In fact, the EU is the driving force behind the privatisations and social attacks that have created fertile ground for corruption to flourish and for the emergence of an oligarchy of millionaires.

Even the name of the new organisation, which refers to the Czech “Charta 77”, shows its right-wing character. “Charta 77”, whose founders included Vaclav Havel (who would later become Czech president) played a leading role in the restoration of capitalism in the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

However, “Charta 2013” does not appear to have significant influence among the protesters. In May’s parliamentary elections, the movement “Citizens for Bulgaria,” which was founded by former EU Commissioner Meglena Kuneva and includes some of “Charta 2013’s” leaders, failed to pass the 4 percent hurdle for parliamentary representation.

Although leading EU representatives have sought to display a certain sympathy for the current protests in Bulgaria, they are hoping that finance expert Orescharski can withstand the storm and bring the social crisis under control. Bulgaria’s EU commissioner and leading GERB member Christalina Georgieva in May urged that the formation of a new government be arranged quickly in spite of the unclear election result.

On June 21, Orescharski paid a visit to EU Commission

chief Jose Manuel Barroso and gave him a report on the situation. Barroso expressed concern about the tense conditions in the country. “The most important institutions and the most important principles should not be called into question,” he warned, and promised that the mechanisms for cooperation and verification in the EU would contribute to the implementation of constitutional relations in Bulgaria.

Sergei Stanishev, the chairman of the largest governing party, told Austria’s *Die Presse* that the situation in the country was “as explosive as a pressure cooker.” While the government was listening to “the people and their demands,” it would be “totally irresponsible,” he said, “to call early elections now and let those who caused the people to be provoked [meaning the GERB] back into power.”

When he assumed power as head of government, Orescharski began to pull back on his pre-election promise to alleviate the social crisis and provide aid to the population. In order to impose his right-wing, anti-working class measures and bring the protests under control, he is relying on the BSP, the trade unions and various petty-bourgeois organisations.

Bulgarska Leviza (BL), which is affiliated to the German Left Party, was critical of the formation of the Orescharski government with the support of the far-right Ataka. But since Hans Modrow of the Left Party expressed his support for the Orescharski government, the BL has remained silent on the issue. Instead, BL is promoting new elections early next year and the prospect of alterations to EU treaties.

Bulgarian workers and young people can find a way out of the social crisis only if they break from the influence of all of the bourgeois tendencies, from Ataka to Bulgarska Leviza. They must unite with the working class across Europe on the basis of a socialist perspective that opposes the European financial oligarchy and its institutions in Brussels.



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