

Bulgaria: New government to include fascist parties

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The right-wing conservative party, GERB, which gained the most votes in the Bulgarian parliamentary elections last month, has agreed to form a coalition with an alliance of fascist parties known as United Patriots (UP). The new parliament is scheduled to meet for the first time on April 19.

The alliance of United Patriots includes the National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria, the Bulgarian National Movement (VMRO) and Attack (Ataka). The VMRO, the largest organisation in the UP, emerged out of a militant nationalist grouping that for decades used terrorist measures to further its aim of establishing a Greater Bulgaria, including neighbouring Macedonia. The National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria also propagates openly fascist and racist positions. In 2011, it split off from Attack, which also belongs to the UP.

GERB won the early election at the end of March with about 33 percent of the vote. The UP gained a little over 9 percent. The new coalition, with 122 seats in the 240-seat parliament, has a slim majority. Nevertheless, and despite forecasts to the contrary, the coalition negotiations were completed in a short time. Boyko Borissov, former GERB prime minister, refused to negotiate with other parties and decided to form a coalition with the ultra-nationalists.

He told the daily newspaper *Dnevnik* he was “happy” with the coalition because the UP parties were “very responsible”. His only condition was that the UP support him as a part of the government and not just in parliament, as the ultra-right parties had done in the past.

Another right-wing party, Volya (Will), headed by the businessman Veselin Mareshki, will also probably back the coalition. Mareshki’s role model is US President Donald Trump. The names of the members of the new cabinet will be announced in the next few days.

This means that Bulgaria, an EU member that is to hold the presidency of the EU Council from January 2018, will be led by an ultra-right government, members of which adhere to fascism and fascist traditions.

Attack is openly anti-Semitic and notorious for its violent provocations against Muslims, Roma and other minorities. The party was due to be banned in 2015 after forming a paramilitary unit. Its leader, Volen Siderov, is a professed Holocaust denier.

Shortly before the elections, the VMRO blocked a Bulgarian-Turkish border crossing to prevent Turks with a right to vote in Bulgaria from entering the country. Krassimir Karakachanov, the chairman of the VMRO, calls for the use of firearms against refugees at borders and for violence to be used against Roma living in the country. He regards Bulgaria as a front-line state in a campaign against Islamism.

All three parties have a strong presence in the media. Their management staff are often recruited from former intelligence officers, and many of its members are police officers or other state officials.

Only recently, Borissov stated that the Balkans was on the brink of war. Now he has formed a government with an openly fascist party. His party, GERB, whose initials stand for “Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria”, is a member of the European People’s Party (EPP), which includes the German conservative parties, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Christian Social Union (CSU), as well as the French Republicans. In 2014, the EPP warned against any alliance with the UP and characterised it as an “unacceptable partner”. Now, however, it has made no criticism of the new government.

The government programme bears the hallmarks of the far right and goes far beyond the reactionary

policies implemented by Borissov, who was prime minister from 2009 to 2013 and again from 2014 to 2017. He resigned both times, in 2013 after mass protests, and again this year, after his favoured candidate for the presidency failed to win the presidential elections.

The new government programme provides for a massive build-up of state forces in order to prevent any refugees entering the country. The borders are to be reinforced to repel all immigrants. Illegal immigrants are to be rapidly deported. Police presence is to be stepped up in all cities and villages, with some police duties transferred to private security companies and local authorities. In reality, this means that the existing fascist gangs, which are already intimidating immigrants, have been officially legitimised.

For some time, fascist militias have been hunting down refugees along the country's borders. There have already been fatalities as a result. The government has tacitly tolerated this policy.

In this context, the government anticipates "active cooperation" between the military and "patriotic organisations" to install "patriotic spirit into our young people". On the subject of education, the government paper states: "patriotism in the education system should be the basis for education and the uplifting of the Bulgarian spirit, a means for forming a sense of solidarity in society and devotion to the homeland."

Another component of the coalition agreement is the clampdown on democratic rights on the pretext of combating "terrorism, organised crime and corruption". It also provides for measures against radicalisation and extremism. In a government including members of paramilitary groups, this means the intimidation of political opponents.

After intense debate, the coalition agreed on a tiny increase to the minimum wage and minimum pension. The latter is to be increased from €80 to €100. The minimum wage is also expected to rise at a similar level within the next four years. This barely noticeable increase will be offset by cuts to social benefits.

All pensions approved by 2010 are to be re-examined and new criteria introduced to limit pensions. This was a central demand of the UP, which claimed that Roma were illegally benefitting from disability pensions. It is likely that pensions will now be massively reduced, especially for members of the Roma minority.

Military spending is also to be increased to 2 percent of GDP within the next four years. At the same time, a balanced budget is planned by 2020—a proposal that can only be realised through massive budget cuts in all other areas.

Officially, the coalition partners have agreed on a commitment to NATO and the EU. Bulgaria is an "active and reliable partner," the government said.

In fact, the country's relationships with the EU and Russia are highly controversial. The election of Rumen Radev to the post of president in November last year was interpreted as a turn toward Russia. Radev and the chairman of the Socialist Party, Korneliya Ninova, are advocates of ending EU sanctions against Russia and closer cooperation with Moscow. For his part, Borissov is a supporter of the EU.

The parties of the UP alliance had called for the lifting of sanctions against Russia in the election campaign, and Attack has called in the past for a referendum for a withdrawal from NATO. The coalition agreement tries to cover over these contradictory positions with its slogan for a "pragmatic foreign policy".



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