

Mass abstention in Bulgarian elections

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The July 11 parliamentary elections in Bulgaria highlighted the deep political crisis in the eastern European Union state. Slavi Trifonov's protest party ITN ("There Is Such a People"), which emerged victorious, is supported by fewer than one in 10 eligible voters.

This result exemplifies the political situation in Eastern Europe, where the majority of the population harbors deep mistrust of the entire political elite.

Overall voter turnout was only 42 percent. Even in the capital Sofia, not even half of those eligible to vote went to the polls.

In the Kardzhali region turnout was only 28 percent. With 24.1 percent of the ballots, the ITN achieved a razor-thin lead over the right-wing conservative GERB of former Prime Minister Boyko Borisov, which received 23.5 percent of the vote.

The Coalition for Bulgaria, an amalgamation of several "left-wing" parties around the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) and the Bulgarian Communist Party (BKP), lost votes once again, garnering only about 13 percent. Also represented in parliament are the Democratic Party (DB), the Turkish minority Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DSP), and the anti-corruption party ISMV.

This was the second parliamentary election this year. Already in April, voter turnout reached a historic low of 47.5 percent. At that time, Borisov's GERB came in first by a narrow margin. However, the deeply discredited party was unable to find a coalition partner. The former coalition partner of GERB failed to retain representation in parliament, and other potential partner parties refused to cooperate.

Despite this, Trifonov turned down the mandate to form a government after the April elections. Observers assume he was speculating that his party would emerge strongest from new elections. As a result, President Rumen Radev installed Stefan Yanev as interim prime

minister.

The results of the new elections are a slap in the face for Bulgaria's entire political establishment. Borisov, who had ruled almost continuously for nine years, is hated by a large part of the population, as had already become apparent after the 2017 election.

To achieve a tiny parliamentary majority, GERB entered into a coalition with the fascist United Patriots (OP) party alliance. The alliance included the National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria (NFSB), the Bulgarian National Movement (IMRO), and the far-right party Attack.

For two months last year, thousands of people demonstrated almost daily against the prime minister and the government. They demanded their resignation, new elections and fundamental reforms in the state apparatus.

Borisov, who began his career in the Stalinist BCP, is seen as the embodiment of a system marked by corruption and the intertwining of oligarchy, politics and the state. Although the protests were organized by equally discredited figures, they expressed widespread opposition to the political and social conditions in the country. According to Transparency International, the country has the highest level of bribery in the EU.

In the EU, Borisov was valued as a reliable partner despite his numerous scandals. His party, which openly formed coalitions with fascist forces, remains a member of the European People's Party (EPP). In European capitals, Borisov was praised primarily for his pro-European orientation and distance from the Kremlin.

The recklessness of his government's policy was particularly evident in the COVID-19 pandemic. The virus has claimed over 18,100 lives in Bulgaria since the pandemic began. In addition, there have been mass layoffs and a dramatic reduction in wages in many industries.

But like the other parties, Trifonov's ITN is in no

way an alternative to GERB. The 54-year-old Trifonov has been known in Bulgaria for decades as a singer and entertainer. He only recently founded the ITN, in February 2020.

Similar to a number of other prominent and wealthy individuals in other countries, Trifonov has been able to capitalize on anger toward the established parties. Despite touting his hostility toward the “elite,” he is well connected with the country’s political and economic bigwigs.

His understanding of democracy was expressed in a Facebook post he made immediately after the election. Despite a record abstention, he spoke of a “good day for Bulgarian democracy.”

ITN’s election program consists of little more than vague statements against corruption and for greater prosperity. In foreign policy, Trifonov stands for a continuation of the pro-European course and strives for rapid entry into the euro zone, a policy attended by massive social attacks against the population in recent years.

After the election, the ITN initially announced that it would establish a minority government and name a cabinet. This was expressly intended to exclude coalition negotiations with other parties. The planned cabinet of mostly unknown economic and financial experts was to be headed by Nikolay Vassilev. Vassilev was a minister several times between 2001 and 2009 and belonged to the right-wing National Movement for Stability and Progress (NDSV).

In the face of fierce opposition on social media to the announcement that such a discredited politician without any democratic legitimacy would become prime minister, Trifonov withdrew his announcement three days later.

Now ITN wants to enter coalition talks with two unspecified parties, according to an announcement by Vice-Chairman Toshko Yordanov. Negotiations are likely with the DB and the ISMV, which likewise focused its election campaign solely on corruption. ITN representatives have announced that new proposals for a cabinet will be made soon.

Political experts in Sofia assume that attempts to form a government could again fail. “Just like after the April election, I expect a highly fragmented parliament with no single party able to form a cabinet,” said Genoveva Petrova of Alpha Research.

Ruzha Smilova, who teaches political science at Sofia University, expressed a similar view. “Even if ITN were to join forces with the protest parties, they would not have a majority in parliament,” Smilova said. “Trifonov would have to seek support for certain policies from the traditional parties, with which he has so far refused to cooperate.”

To prevent the ruling class from once again cobbling together a right-wing, anti-working class government, workers in Bulgaria and throughout Eastern Europe must draw the lessons from the experience since the restoration of capitalism 30 years ago. It was not socialism that failed then, but Stalinism.

Old and new capitalist cliques can continue determining policy only because the working class lacks an independent perspective and leadership. Such a perspective must now be developed. The basis for this lies in the history of the Trotskyist movement, which defended the Marxist program of socialist internationalism against Stalinism and social democracy.



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