

Bulgaria elections offer no way out of the political crisis

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The Bulgarian elections took place on October 2, the fourth round of elections held in the Eastern European country this year. The previous government, led by the liberal We Continue the Change party (PP) of Prime minister Kiril Petkov, ruled the country for about eight months, in a coalition that included the “post-Stalinist” Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP). The ruling coalition collapsed in a no-confidence vote held in June.

On an official voter turnout of just 39 percent, the strongest party was the Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB), led by former PM Boyko Borisov, with 25 percent of the vote. The PP lost 5 percent compared to the previous November elections, with 20 percent of the vote. The party will lose 24 seats in Parliament and will have 53 seats to GERB’s 67.

The third party was the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS), which generally draws votes from Bulgaria’s Turkish minority, with 13 percent. The fascist VAZ party took 10 percent and will have 27 seats in parliament, the largest far-right presence since Ataka won 6 seats in 2017. At the time, the fascists were invited into the Government by Borisov. The Socialist Party continues to lose votes and became Bulgaria’s fifth-largest party with 9 percent of the vote.

The other parties have announced their reluctance to form a coalition with the widely despised Borisov, who was ousted from power by months-long protests in 2020 and 2021, and the parliamentary set-up is dominated by a deep crisis.

Immense pressures are being brought upon Bulgarian society. Bulgaria is the poorest country in the EU, with over 20 percent of the population living below the official poverty line and a further 32% of the population at risk of poverty and social exclusion according to Eurostat data. The global prices hikes and spiraling inflation as well as the resurgence of workers’ struggles internationally, are radicalizing workers in Bulgaria.

Borisov, the winner of Sunday’s poll, was ousted from power twice in the last decade by mass protests over energy prices.

Bulgaria was also brutally hit by the ongoing Covid pandemic. Having renounced public health measures and seen their health care systems collapse, Eastern European countries had one of the highest per capita death rates in the world. Bulgaria registered an official death toll of 37,718, for a population of around 7 million people.

An article in *Nature* in April by Antoni Rangachev, Georgi K. Marinov and Mladen Mladenov underlined the excess deaths in the country, particularly in the working age population. In total, they calculate the excess deaths in the 40-64 population group at 11,986, on top of the official Covid deaths.

Above all, Bulgaria is caught up in the geopolitical maelstrom triggered by the NATO war against Russia in Ukraine. Borisov’s government worked with the EU to block the South Stream pipeline linking Russia with the Balkans and Central Europe via the Black Sea, bypassing Ukraine.

The Greece-Bulgarian pipeline was unveiled with much fanfare on October 1 and will bring gas from Azerbaijan to Bulgaria. The pipeline will shore up gas imports in Bulgaria, which was almost entirely dependent on Russian gas. Present at the opening in Sofia was Azeri president Ilham Aliyev, who recently was emboldened to break a cease fire with Armenia and restart a war in the Caucasus.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the restoration of capitalism and mounting NATO-Russian conflicts in recent decades have driven a resurgence of wars across the region.

The Bulgarian bourgeoisie is increasingly hostile and provocative against neighboring North Macedonia. North Macedonia’s territory has historically been a target of Bulgarian expansionism and regional ambitions. On this,

the Bulgarian ruling elites are united, regardless of formal political association. It was Borisov's government that first blocked EU-North Macedonia negotiations, in order to force concessions from the Macedonians over language and "national identity".

President Radev, close to the BSP and considered an enemy of Borisov, maintained pressure on Macedonia, with the support of the PP government.

In April, Bulgarian Premier Peskov and Vice President Iliana Iotova unveiled a "Bulgarian cultural club" in the North Macedonian town of Bitola, named after the infamous fascist collaborator Vancho Mihailov.

In the 1920s and 1930s, Mihailov led the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (IMRO), a terrorist organization in the service of the Bulgarian state. A determined anti-communist, Mihailov became an ally of Mussolini and the fascist Ustase movement. The IMRO participated in the Bulgarian occupation of Macedonia and parts of Greece, as well as the Holocaust in these regions. Mihailov would flee to Italy and become a collaborator of the CIA against Yugoslavia.

After the restoration of capitalism and similar to the fate of fascist leaders in other countries, the Bulgarian bourgeoisie would rehabilitate Mihailov and the IMRO, as it sought to resume its predatory interests in the region.

Bulgaria's irredentist ambitions are not only tolerated but encouraged by the EU, giving the lie to the imperialist fantasy that the EU is a harmonious association of nations. To sever Bulgaria's links to Russia, it has allowed the Bulgarian elites to continue blackmailing North Macedonia.

Germany is also intent to bring North Macedonia firmly into its economic sphere by completing its EU accession, in order to counter Russian and Chinese investment and influence in the country.

The so-called "French proposal" pushed by the EU powers this summer enshrined Bulgarian ambitions on the future course of the North Macedonian accession to the EU. The document provoked an intense crisis in both countries. It led directly to the downfall of the PP government in Bulgaria, when the right-wing There is Such a People party left the coalition because the document offered what they viewed as insufficient concessions. The "French proposal" was passed through the Bulgarian parliament with broad support from all political factions.

In North Macedonia, the plan was passed through parliament by the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia government. There were widespread, often violent street

protests throughout the summer. These protests were organized and led by the far right and ultranationalist forces, led by the VMRO-DPMNE party. The VMRO was founded in 1990, in explicit opposition to the country's founding by the mass Yugoslav partisan armies in December 1945. Initially cultivating ties to Bulgaria, the party later distanced itself from Sofia.

These forces represent a faction of the bourgeoisie that opposes Bulgarians ambitions in order to maintain the stranglehold over "their own" working class and carve their own deals with the imperialist powers. The participation of the Levica party in these protests only underscores the bankruptcy of this "left populist" party hailed by pseudo-left groups in the region.

A political confrontation is being prepared between the Bulgarian workers and this corrupt political establishment. The main political responsibility for this lies with the BSP and the pseudo left groups that gravitate around it.

The legacy of Stalinism has been a tragic one in Bulgaria as in the rest of Eastern Europe. The BSP, having participated in capitalist restoration in Bulgaria, has seen its vote collapse since the 2017 elections, when it took 26 percent of votes. It opposed Covid measures, and later it joined forces with the PP to cut ties with Russia and back the NATO war drive.

In August, the "Progress" platform was initiated in order to put some organizational distance between the pseudo-left milieu and the BSP. Calling Bulgaria a "critical, constructive and full partner in European and Euro Atlantic structures", Progress' stated aim was to "push the BSP and other political forces to take a course towards a real modern left," in the words of publicist Stanislav Dodov.

As they enter into struggle, workers must break with these servants of imperialism, and unite with their class brothers and sisters in the Balkans and internationally in a movement against war and capitalist reaction, and for socialism.



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