

Bulgaria: To support or not to support the government in power, this is the dilemma

Sorina Soare

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Bulgaria, which formerly belonged to the Communist bloc, entered the European Union (EU) in 2007. Nevertheless, compared with the other countries of the former Warsaw Pact, the Bulgarian process of European integration was carried out with three years of delay; as emphasised by Noucheva and Bechev (2008), the reasons Bulgaria as well as Romania lagged behind in meeting the EU accession criteria had to do with a set of domestic factors, a tortuous democratisation process, with relevant veto players and institutional structures that obstructed democratic and market reforms for almost a decade. Despite the acceleration of political and economic reforms beginning in the 2000s, the 2005 Accession Treaty signed with Bulgaria contained a number of safeguard clauses as well as specific post-accession benchmarks and the monitoring system under the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM) for Bulgaria and Romania with biannual progress reports upon accession to the EU (Gateva, 2010, Trauner, 2009, Spendzharova and Vachudova, 2012, Bechev, 2013). Seven years after obtaining the status of a member state, Bulgaria held its third European elections with 15 political parties, 6 coalitions, and 6 independent candidates competing for the 17 seats available. The competition involves two main actors (Rashkova, 2013): on the one hand, the heir of the former communist party, the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), and on the other hand, the representative of the centre-right, the Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) party.

The results

As in all postcommunist countries, the specter of a high level of abstention was hovering over the Bulgarian European elections; the adoption of a proportional system through preferential voting for national lists was sup-

posed to give voters more power over which party candidates win office and increase voter turnout. Significantly, since the beginning of the campaign, the outcome of 2014 has been predicted in reference to GERB's ability to mobilise voters, where the BSP electoral results seemed to be favoured in the case of low participation. In the end, with a higher level than the initial estimate, the electoral participation was 36.15%, slightly lower than that in 2009 (-1.34%) and definitely inferior to the EU average. The preference was expressed by approximately 25% of the voters, not without some confusion, as in the case of the BSP: the socialists' voters ticked not only the 15th list corresponding to the party, but also the candidate with the 15th position in the list, the young Momchil Nekov, who eventually displaced the party leader Sergei Stanishev from the top position on the ballot.¹ In the case of the Reformist Coalition, the preferential vote sends to the European Parliament (EP) the second name on the list, Svetoslav Malinov, replacing the list's leader, former commissioner Meglena Kuneva, for the only EP seat the coalition won.

All in all, the centre-right party, GERB, got six seats in the EP, thereby defeating the current ruling BSP who only obtained four seats (-11.46% votes in comparison with the GERB). The remaining seven seats were divided as such: four seats for the BSP coalition partners from the Turkish-ethnic Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS), two seats for the recently created party led by the journalist-turned-politician Nikolai Barekov—Bulgaria Without Censure (BBT)—and one seat for the centre-right coalition of the Reformist Bloc (RB).² The biggest Bulgarian delegation joins the European People's Party (EPP) (six GERB Members of the European Parliament [MEPs]), the four BSP MEPs join the S&D alliance, and the DPS mandates reinforce the ALDE group. The recently created BBT still has to define the EP affiliation. Most probably, the RB will affiliate with the EPP.

Election campaign and the main political parties

A simple glance at the election campaign allows us to see that beyond the billboards with EU logos and images, the election debate was mainly framed by domestic issues—in particular, the performance of the 2013 born rainbow coalition government, formed by the socialist BSP (within the Coalition for Bulgaria

¹ "25% of Bulgarian Voters Cast Preferential Ballot in the EU Elections", Sofia News Agency, May 27, 2014.

² Central Election Commission: Final results of Bulgaria's May 2014 European Parliament elections", May 28, 2014.

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Table 1. Results of the 2014 EP elections – Bulgaria

Party	EP Group	Votes (%)	Seats	Votes (change from 2009)	Seats (change from 2009)
Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB)	EPP	30.4	6	+6.04	1
Coalition for Bulgaria (KB)	S&D	18.9	4	+0.4	0
Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DSP)	ALDE	17.3	4	+3.1	1
Coalition Bulgaria without Censorship (BBT)	NI	10.7	2		
Reformist Block (RB)	EPP	6.5	1		
Alternative for Bulgarian Renaissance (ABV)		4.0	0		
National Union Attack (Ataka)	NI	3.0	0	-9.0	-2
Others		9.2			
Total		100	17		
Turnout (%)		36.15		-1.34	
Legal threshold for obtaining MEPs (%)	Implicit threshold – the national quota				
Additional notes on the electoral system	Proportional system through preferential voting for national lists in a single multimember constituency				

Source: Central Electoral Commission Source: Idea Voter Turnout Data, Central Electoral Commission

EP group abbreviations: EPP, European People's Party; S&D, Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats; ALDE, Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe; G-EFA, The Greens–European Free Alliance; ECR, European Conservatives and Reformists; GUE-NGL, European United Left–Nordic Green Left; EFD, Europe of Freedom and Democracy; NI, Non-Inscrits.

* Probably ECR (Mudde 2014)

with other smaller parties) and Turkish-ethnic minority representatives (DPS), a coalition without a parliamentary majority and hence forced to rely on the radical nationalist party Ataka's support. The lack of a clear parliamentary majority and the highly criticised alliance with Ataka were somehow overshadowed by the protesters storming the streets after the appointment of the shady Delyan Peevski (DPS) as the head of the State Agency for National Security. Protesters called for the resignation of Peevski and the government. Antigovernment protesters complained about poverty, corruption and organised crime. In this context, the European elections appeared to be a test for the government from

the very beginning. Moreover, the president of the socialists declared that if the coalition government had received fewer votes than the opposition, then the government would resign and new elections would be held by the end of 2014. In light of the May 2014 results, a weakened BSP seems to open the gate for a new period of political instability, although according to the latest statements of the socialists' leader Sergey Stanishev, there is no intention to hold early elections.³

In brief, as in 2007 and 2009, national issues shaped the themes covered by the electoral campaign (Bechev, 2013), recalling Reif and Schmitt's (1980) observations concerning simultaneous national elections held in each of the EU member nations without institutionally binding consequences on government or opposition policies. More specifically, for Reif and Schmitt, EU elections have appeared to be second-order elections from the very beginning where voters tend to cast their votes on the basis of the main political arena dynamics instead of in relation to the specific context of these elections (EU-related topics). The Bulgarian 2014 European election shares striking features with this assumption that are congruent with their lower level of participation, the brighter prospects for new political parties and alliances, as well as the penalisation of the government parties. Through the lenses of this assumption, the outcome of the May 25 elections was mainly crafted by a socioeconomic cleavage concerning the pace of the economic management opposing the centre-right (represented primarily by the former prime minister Boyko Borisov's party—GERB) to the centre-left (represented by the leading governmental party, the BSP). For the BSP, the May 2014 electoral competition was also a personal challenge for its leader—Sergey Stanishev—elected in 2012 for president of the PES. The BSP's position in the head-to-head race with the GERB was weakened not only by its position in government but also by the challenge of a separate alternative left-wing ballot launched by the former socialist president Georgi Parvanov, Alternative for Bulgarian Renaissance Movement (ABV), whose lists were led by MEP Ivaylo Kalfin, Bulgaria's Former Minister of Foreign Affairs (2005–2009) and leader of the Bulgarian socialist delegation in the EP in 2009–2014. Note that Kalfin was known to be strongly critical of the BSP alliance with the radical nationalists of Ataka. Last but not least, circumstantial elements have to be taken into account such as the vote-buying scandal in the Bobov Dol mine (votes in exchange for investments and better working conditions).⁴ In the end, the BSP was a distant second to the GERB opposition party, whereas the ABV

³ A. Bivol, "European elections 2014: Bulgarian socialists refuse to admit failure", *Sofia Globe*, May 26, 2014.

⁴ "Bulgaria's Prosecution Launches Probe into Bobov Dol Vote Affair", Sofia News Agency, May 21, 2014.

failed to pass the implicit electoral threshold. As such, the undisputed winner of the May 25 election was the GERB, who already came in first in the European elections of 2007 and was the ruling party from 2009 to 2013. In line with these results, in the statement issued after the publication of the first official results, Borisov saluted the victory and boasted about the outcome of a ‘heroic party’ that not only had severely defeated its main domestic competitor, the BSP, but also its European counterpart, the PSE. Ironically, Borisov invoked God in order to maintain Stanishev as BSP’s leader for many more years in order to easily win in the next round of elections.⁵

Although initially estimated as making up 8% of the vote, the Reformist Block (RB) registered a rather fragile success, weakened not only by the head-to-head race between the BPS and the GERB but also by the choice to let Meglena Kuneva to top the coalition’s lists.⁶ This constellation of five small conservative political factions is supposed to join the EPP delegation as well (one seat). Note that due to the electoral system, voters’ preferences replaced list leader Meglena Kuneva with the runner-up Svetoslav Malinov. Considering the electoral results, the project of a centre-right alternative seems to have an unpromising future.

Confirming the permeability of the Bulgarian party system to newly created parties (Spirova and Rashkova, 2012), there are several new faces promoted by these European elections, including Bulgaria Without Censorship (BBT)—a party created by the television journalist, Nikolai Barekov, whose main political tribune was settled by the protests against the government’s policies after June 2013. He uses a populist rhetoric that combines a critique of the establishment and the fight against corruption in the name of a vaguely defined ‘capitalism and a market economy with a human face.’⁷ The BBT took part in elections in alliance with other smaller parties. Under these conditions, the electoral market of the nationalist parties became particularly competitive and the biggest loser of the elections seems to be Volen Siderov’s Ataka with a Russophile and Europhobic discourse.

The Bulgarian delegation in the EP also includes the four representatives of the Turkish minority, whose success lies primarily in the characteristics of its constituencies, linked to the ethnoreligious minority in Turkey.

⁵ “Bulgaria’s GERB to Request EPP Deputy Chair Seat—Boyko Borisov May 26, 2014”.

⁶ Kuneva entered Bulgarian politics in 2001 and was appointed as Minister of European Affairs in two consecutive governments – first under the National Movement for Stability and Progress (NDSV) with Prime Minister Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha from 2002 to 2005 and then under the BSP that eventually nominated her to be the EU Commissioner in the end of October 2006.

⁷ “A controversial newcomer could be kingmaker”, *The Economist*, March 4, 2014.

Concluding remarks

After all that has been said, in an electoral campaign monopolised by the head-to-head race between the BSP and the GERB and, in particular, the clash between their leaders, the main conclusion stresses that the interest of the Bulgarian voters for EU elections remains relatively low. The domestic issues prevail over the EU ones. Plagued with political instability, polarisation and incertitude (Rashkova, 2013_b), Bulgarian politics seem to be a perfect breeding ground for new parties and sparkling political entrepreneurs such as Nikolai Barekov, who succeeded in assembling a party and sending it to Strasbourg in less than a year.

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Internet Resources

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