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The Continuing Political Crisis in Bulgaria

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May 21, 2013 marked the opening of the first session of the 42nd National Assembly (Parliament) of Bulgaria. Two days later, President Plevneliev gave the mandate for the formation of government to ex-Prime Minister Boyko Borisov, leader of the biggest party in the Parliament. It proved only a formality; the mandate was immediately returned to the President since Borisov's party, 'Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria,' (GERB) had neither enough seats to form a government nor sufficient support from other parties. The prospects for Borisov's party were extremely limited due to a 'hand-tying' distribution of seats among those parties that managed to pass the 4% barrier and enter the Parliament. A few days later, on May 29, 2013, the new Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) government led by Plamen Oresharski was sworn in. It was voted by a simple majority of only 120 out of 217 present Members of Parliament (MPs).

The May 2013 elections

How was Bulgaria led to this new government? In February 2013 Prime Minister Boyko Borisov announced the resignation of his government, dissolved the Parliament and announced new elections a full two months earlier than expected. This political maneuver was an attempt to calm spirits after mass urban protests. The protests were sparked by high electricity bills, but came to also focus on complaints about growing poverty, low standards of living, growing income inequality and widespread corruption and other problems within Bulgarian democracy.

Despite this loud cry for social and political change, no party managed to secure an absolute majority of 121 seats in the parliament in the May 12 snap elections. GERB received the most votes: 30.5% of the vote and 97 seats in the 240-member Parliament. The Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) came second with 26.6% (84 seats) followed by the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS), traditionally representing the Turkish minority, which got 11.3% (36 seats). The extreme, nationalist ATAKA came fourth with 7.3% (23 seats). No other parties managed to meet the 4% threshold required to secure a seat.

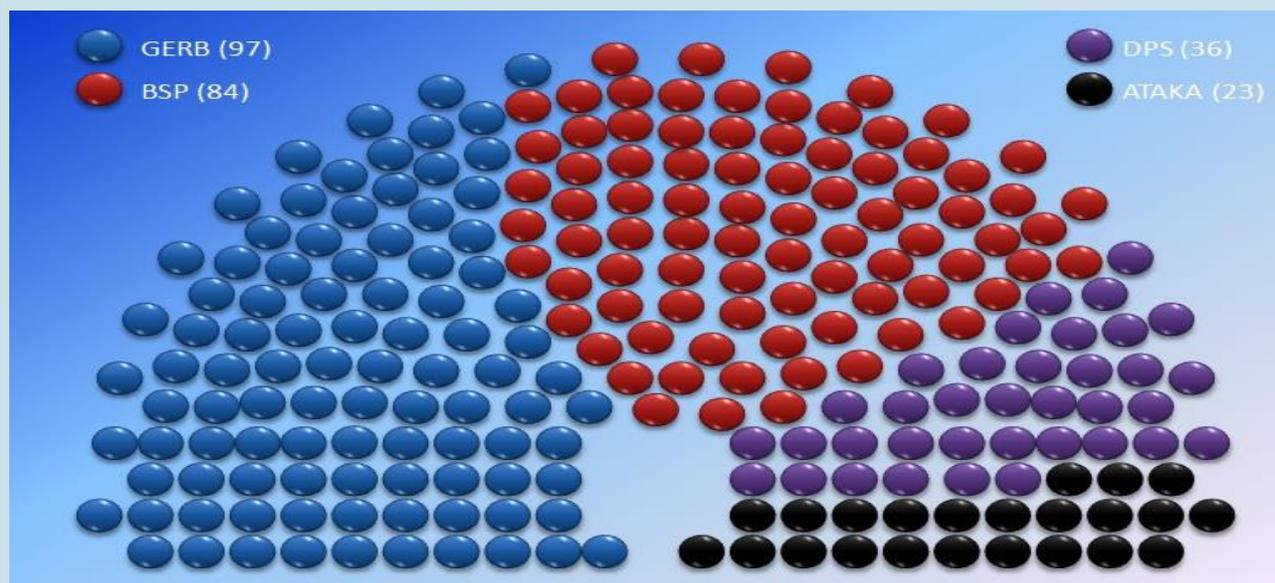
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Table: The electoral strength of the four main parties

Party	Leader	% of votes 2013	Seats in Parliament	% of votes 2009	Seats in Parliament
Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria (GERB)	Boyko Borisov	30.54	97	39.72	116
Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP)	Sergey Stanishev	26.61	84	17.7	40
Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS)	Liutvi Mestan *	11.31	36	14.45	38
ATAKA	Volen Siderov	7.3	23	9.36	21

* as of Jan 2013 (from establishment in 1990 - Ahmet Dogan)

Graph: The four parties' strength in Parliament



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A noticeable aspect of the recent elections is that the traditional right-wing parties (the so-called Democratic Forces) did not make it into the Parliament. Thus, there is a new cleavage in Bulgarian politics between the parties which are represented in the Parliament and the ones that are not. The parties failed to garner enough votes, a motley collection of 30 parties, collectively make up 24.24% of total votes. These include the National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria (3.7%), Movement 'Bulgaria for the Citizens'(3,25%), Democrats for Strong Bulgaria (2.93%), IMRO - Bulgarian National Movement (1.89%), Leader (1.74%), Order, Law and Justice (1.67%), Center – Freedom and Dignity (1.63%), Union of Democratic Forces (1.38%), and the People's Voice (1.34%). The leaders of three right-wing parties (Democrats for Strong Bulgaria, Union of Democratic Forces and Movement 'Bulgaria for the Citizens') resigned assuming political responsibility for their parties' electoral failure.

The reasons for this general outcome can be explained by public disenchantment with politics, the consequences of what many see as a failed post-communist transition, and also the lower voter turnout. Going hand-in-hand with these is the way in which the election campaigns were conducted: scandals and mutual accusations dominated over ideas and policy solutions for the pressing economic and social issues. Examples include the alleged wire-tapping of senior party officials a few weeks before the elections, the 350,000 'additional' ballot-papers found in the printing house of a GERB-supported municipal councilor on the eve of election-day. Other issues that raised concerns were the state funding to political parties, the composition of the regional voting commissions, and the support provided by the Bulgarian media to certain political parties, including free campaign spots.

The turnout was the lowest it's been since 1989, with only 51.3% of the population voting, and this is a clear indication of citizens' low expectations for politics and their lack of trust in the political system. The leader of the biggest party, Boyko Borisov, announced his intention to appeal to the Constitutional Court for annulment of the results because of electoral fraud. Nevertheless, despite allegations of fraud and voting irregularities, international election observers declared that the elections were free and fair, effectively backing the Central Voting Commission. Suspicions, however, remain, as does a high level of anger and frustration amongst the electorate.

The formation of the new government

It was clear from the beginning that the composition of the new parliament would make it difficult to form a government, and could potentially lead to deadlock. With only four parties in the parliament, some with entirely conflicting politics and agenda, and an expressed determination of the three (BSP, DPS, ATAKA) to 'send' GERB to the opposition, coalition formation was anything but easy. One possible way around this was the principle of "all against GERB." That, however, would require that two polar opposites, DPS and ATAKA, reduce tensions and improve their relations. ATAKA's participation would also be necessary because BSP and DPS were short of a viable majority in parliament by 1 MP. However, even with the inclusion of ATAKA the new government would be hardly stable given the incompatibility of the coalition partners' programmes and political visions.

Another possible scenario was a governing coalition of the two major parties, GERB and BSP, which would together comprise a strong block of 181 MPs, well above the 121 needed to form government. Such a strong grand coalition would be welcomed by the European Commission, which urges Bulgaria to implement much-needed reforms and tackle problems that taint the country's politics and economy. Observers held that the two major parties have much more in common than they admit and share many of the same political objectives (increasing citizens' standard of living, fight against unemployment, lower taxes, higher absorption rates of EU funding, anti-monopoly policies and e-government). This grand coalition scheme could have offered opportunities for the reform agenda. However, the scenario soon proved unfeasible as anti-GERB sentiments proved stronger.

In the end, BSP formed a government together with the DPS, albeit with the tacit support of ATAKA; while the 23 MPs of ATAKA abstained, the necessary quorum was secured by the presence of Volen Siderov, the leader of ATAKA. The new government got 120 votes (84 BSP plus 36 DPS), while the 97 GERB MPs voted against. GERB now takes on the role of the main opposition party. Former PM Boyko Borisov pledged that his party will conduct 'constructive opposition' and expressed his willingness to support even "unpopular economic measures" of the new government if his party deems them necessary for the country's reform efforts.

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Post-election blues

Few had illusions that the new government would be stable and long-lived. However, the first governmental crisis came even earlier than observers expected. Among the first moves of the new government was the controversial appointment of DPS MP Delian Peevski, a media magnate with alleged connections to the mafia, for director of the State Agency for National Security (SANS). Within a few hours of the appointment, social media flooded with calls for mass protests. Initially asking for the withdrawal of Peevski, the protests subsequently developed into a massive outcry against all manifestations of non-transparent governance, demanding the resignation of the new government. Peaceful protests have continued for more than thirty days. Protesters demanded a genuine and functioning democratic state and deplored all allegations that their demonstrations were staged and paid for by those who want to undermine the new government.

The government has remained generally unresponsive. While this new crisis is still in its early stages, a new round of elections is a possible outcome. It would be hard to argue that a new round of elections will actually solve many problems. It would mean pre-election campaigns, antagonistic political positioning, and the likely outcome would be another shaky government. Wasteful public spending would increase, Bulgaria's foreign currency reserves would shrink, reforms in education, health care, and the security sector would be further delayed, and the continuation of political turmoil would further frustrate efforts to attract foreign investors. But, at the same time, many believe that only elections can bring to the forefront new and untainted politicians and it is the only solution for getting the process of real change going. The Bulgarian public feels that more than two decades of transition has been wasted and that informal, insider political structures are still the effective ruler. Few expect that the recent change of guard in government will significantly improve the political and economic situation in the country. Bulgaria seems caught between a rock and a hard place. As a result, social unrest, which Bulgaria is experiencing for the first time in more than fifteen years, is likely to continue as a central feature of public life.

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