

ELIAMEP Briefing Notes

51/2017

April 2017

The Bulgarian parliamentary elections of 26th March 2017

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On Sunday, 26th of March 2017, Bulgaria held its early parliamentary elections. The snap election had been called following the resignation of the government of Boyko Borisov, which came as a result of the victory of the candidate supported by the opposition *Bulgarian Socialist Party* (BSP), Rumen Radev, in the presidential elections of November last year. Participation in the elections was again low, 3,682,000 (or 54.07%) of the voters, slightly higher however than in the previous elections of October 2014, when 3,283,192 Bulgarians exercised their voting rights. The party of the *Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria* (GERB) won the elections with 32.65% of the votes (95 seats), retaining the dominant position it has held in the Bulgarian political scene since 2009, since it has actually won every parliamentary election since then (July 2009, May 2013, October 2014, plus the last one). GERB has exercised power in Bulgaria since July 2009, with only a brief interval between May and October 2014, when Plamen Oresharski's government of technocrats was backed by the BSP and the *Movement for Rights and Freedoms* (DPS). There is no doubt the GERB is the most successful Bulgarian political party of the last decade, dominant in the centre-right; a success to a large extent owed to the financial stability enjoyed by Bulgaria and the charismatic personality of its leader Boyko Borisov.

BSP under its new leader, Kornelyia Ninova, did considerably well, although it failed to dislodge GERB, managing to increase its share of the vote from 15.4% in the 2014 elections to 27.20% (80 seats). The success of Radev in the presidential elections last year had generated high expectations among the Party faithful, that BSP could overcome the 30% mark and could even prevail over GERB. It was not however helped by Ninova's ambivalent pre-election statements on the EU that seemed to have pushed away potential voters, particularly among the young. Persuading young voters remained a "weak point" for BSP, which managed to attract only 15% of the voting group between 15 and 30 years old, compared with GERB that won almost one third of the votes in the same group. As in previous elections BSP's share of the vote was higher among older voters, a problem that the party must work on.

The *United Patriots* (PF) emerged as the third party in parliament, increasing their share of the vote to 9.07% (and 27 seats), compared with 7.3% in 2014. The PF, a coalition of two parties formed before the 2014 elections - by *IMRO-Bulgarian National Union* led by Krasimir Karakachanov and the *National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria* led by Valery Simeonov - also accepted the well-known xenophobic and anti-minority, *ATAKA* party of Volen Siderov before the elections, further strengthening its profile as the main representative of Bulgarian nationalism on the political scene. The PF made headlines in the pre-election campaign, with its decision to block the main border-crossing with Turkey in an attempt to stop Bulgarian Turks, living in Turkey, from voting in the elections.

DPS has been weakened, but emerged victorious in its struggle to retain its dominant position as the main representative of the "minority vote" in Bulgaria (not only among Bulgarian Turks, but also among the Pomaks and increasingly among the Muslim Roma). DPS was challenged by the new political formation established last year, the *Democrats of Responsibility, Freedom and Tolerance* (DOST), led by former-DPS leader, Lyutfi Mestan, as well as by Ankara's outright hostility, and support of DOST. DPS won 8.99% of the vote (26 seats), compared with 14.8% in 2014. Illustrative of the support given by Ankara to DOST, in a political intervention highly damaging for Bulgarian-Turkish relations, is the fact that DPS won 12.05% of the votes of Bulgarians abroad, compared with 17.59% of DOST, underlying the switch of support from DPS to DOST in the Bulgarian Turkish community abroad and in particular in Turkey. Still

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DPS managed to retain the “hegemonic position” it has established over the Bulgarian Turks, although the recent estrangement from Ankara is something that privately worries the Party leadership.

The newly-established *Volya* party of Veselin Mareshki is the fifth party that managed to cross the 4% barrier and to enter parliament with 4.15% of the vote (12 seats). Mareshki, a businessman from the city of Varna, became widely known to the Bulgarian public last year, when he came fourth in the presidential elections, winning 11.17% of the vote. He is widely regarded as a right-wing populist, portraying himself as the “Bulgarian Trump”, and criticized by many for his business activities (in energy and primarily in the pharmaceutical business).

The 2014 and 2017 parliamentary elections

Parties	2014	2017
GERB	32.7%	32.65% (95 seats)
BSP	15.4%	27.20% (80 seats)
United Patriots (PF)	11.8%	9.07% (27 seats)
DPS	14.8%	8.99% (26 seats)
Volya	-	4.15% (12 seats)
DOST	-	2.86%

Forming the next Bulgarian government: difficult negotiations ahead

There is general consensus in Bulgaria on the need to establish a new government and to avoid new elections, given the fact that the country assumes the EU Presidency from 1st January 2018 and has to prepare itself, while it also has to deal with “regional instability” (developments in neighboring Turkey, refugee crisis, etc.) As the Bulgarian Constitution stipulates, GERB will receive the mandate from the President in order to begin negotiations for the formation of the new government. It appears that GERB has two main alternatives ahead of it:

a. Working with the PF, as the numbers add up, with the two parties having the necessary majority to establish a government (122 seats from 240 seats in total). However, such a government presents a number of challenges. Although the PF supported the previous Borisov government, this time it wants participation and ministerial posts. And the participation of PF in the government might put Sofia into a difficult position vis-à-vis its EU partners (not mentioning Ankara), given the fact that many in the EU regard the PF coalition as a nationalist one with “unacceptable positions” (such as advocating discriminatory practices) towards minorities. Secondly, the PF coalition itself is not solid enough and has a reputation of internal infighting that might threaten the stability of a future government given its fragile parliamentary majority (of just one seat). And lastly, the PF has set a number of demands (such as raising the minimum pension to 300 Euro monthly, allowing only 6 polling stations for Bulgarian voters in Turkey, not reforming the electoral system) that GERB might find difficult to accept.

b. Forming a coalition government with PF and Volya. Such an eventuality would make the new government more stable (144 seats) and put Borisov in a stronger position to withstand “unacceptable demands” on the part of PF. Mareshki himself has demanded participation in the government and has a couple of pre-election positions it regards as non-negotiable (such as dealing with the demographic crisis by, for example, subsidizing cheap housing for young families). A potential problem in the formation of such a coalition is the position of PF: Valery Simeonov has made it known that it will not consent to a coalition government that includes the politician-businessman from Varna.

In case GERB fails to form the new government, BSP would face an uphill struggle in its attempt to succeed, as it needs the support and consent of the other three parties (PF, Volya and DPS). In theory, BSP could establish a coalition

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government with PF and Volya (119 seats) that would enjoy the parliamentary support of DPS (145 seats). After all DPS has successfully played a “balancing role” in Bulgarian politics in the past, more than once, and might choose to do so again this time.

Given the regional challenges and the necessity of a stable government that could deal successfully with the requirements of the EU Presidency the best scenario for Bulgaria would be the formation of a “grand coalition” including GERB and BSP (175 seats). However, at the moment such a possibility seems distant, given the lack of support in both major parties for such a coalition government.

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