

Bulgaria: Right-wing makes gains in local elections

By Markus Salzman
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Local elections in Bulgaria held October 28 have produced further political disarray, intensifying the political crisis in this recent and poorest member of the European Union. The overall winner of the election was the GERB (Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria), headed by right-wing populist Boiko Borisov.

In Bulgaria's cities and municipalities, elections were held for mayors and local councils. The Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), led by Sergey Stanishev, who is also prime minister, retained the majority of local councils. However, his party's main support came from the countryside and it was unable to secure a victory in any of the country's important cities. Altogether the GERB received approximately 80,000 votes more than the BSP.

Borisov was elected mayor in the capital, Sofia, with over 50 percent of the vote; Martin Zaimov, the joint candidate of the conservative parties reached second place. With a sharply reduced vote, the BSP candidate Brigo Asparuchov received only 15 percent of the vote. Also in Plovdiv, Bulgaria's second largest city, the GERB candidate Slavcho Atanasov won more than 55 percent of the vote. In the Black Sea city of Burgas, there was a run-off between Dimitar Nikolov (GERB) and Valeri Simeonov, the candidate of the ultra-nationalist Ataka Party.

In a further step towards political insignificance, the BSP's coalition partner, Movement for Simeon II, the party of the former tsar Simeon Saksoburggotski, will in the future not be represented by a mayor of a single large city. The party of the Turkish minority (DPS) suffered only minor losses, receiving its best vote, as expected, in districts with a high proportion of Bulgarians of Turkish origin.

The conservative parties, which in the 1990s were to be found in government coalitions or even leading governments, continued their political decline. After much debate, they finally agreed on joint candidates in most districts, but without the desired effect, with their candidates coming far behind in the polls.

The relative popularity of Borisov and GERB is connected directly with the crisis of the establishment parties. These parties introduced radical free market reforms at the beginning of the 1990s after the collapse of the Stalinist regime, with

catastrophic economic and social results. Then in 2001, Simeon Saksoburggotski entered the political arena, was able to exploit the discontent of the population and won the parliamentary elections at his first attempt. Four years later, after he had continued to implement the anti-social policies dictated by the European Union in Brussels, Saksoburggotski lost the elections and now sits as junior partner in the BSP-led government.

Borisov has had a similar experience. In the European elections at the beginning of the year, the GERB was able to garner most of the votes of disappointed Saksoburggotski supporters. Borisov presented himself as an honest, energetic politician and was able to lift himself above the usual political swamp in the eyes of many Bulgarians. Borisov has been conducting an incessant populist campaign against the pervasive corruption and desperate social inequality that blight Bulgaria.

The party of this former policeman is, however, anything but an alternative to the existing parties. Until the collapse of Stalinist rule in 1989, Borisov was a major in the interior ministry and was considered a faithful supporter of the regime. Subsequently, he used his contacts to establish a private security company, working for the former Communist Party leader Todor Zhivkov, among others. The majority of the GERB's active membership consists of former police and secret service officers.

The GERB's list of candidates included about 400 members of the former Stalinist secret service. However, it is not the only party that has its base of support in this milieu. Many are active in the BSP and the neo-fascist Ataka. GERB and Ataka having so many points in common has led to speculation about a possible coalition between the two organisations, which could replace the Socialist Party government in the next elections.

Election turnout was approximately 40 percent, the same low level as in the European elections, where two-thirds of voters stayed away from the polls. This continuously low turnout is an indication of the growing disgust felt by Bulgarians for the entire political establishment.

The present condition of "democracy" in the Balkan state is revealed in reports of the massive buying of votes. This reached such proportions that there were several arrests. The

parties shamelessly exploited the precarious social situation of broad layers of the population. The value of a vote reportedly lies between “two meat balls and a beer” in a Roma settlement and some 200 leva (€100) in better off suburbs. Those arrested were found with long lists of data about the votes they had bought as well as several thousand leva.

There was virtually no difference between the different political camps in these elections. In most municipalities the question of whether one voted right or left did not arise at all. In many places there were a whole number of independent candidates who were completely apolitical. The daily paper *Dnevnik* noted: “Strange regional party conglomerates have formed around indistinct private interests. The involvement in the election campaign of celebrities from the worlds of media, sport and music, who are light-years away from the business of practical politics, as well as the participation of the business parties, shows that our political system is in a crisis.”

In the 1990s, rich businessmen increased their influence by buying up politicians. Now they are increasingly entering politics themselves to directly pursue their interests.

Dr. Emil Tsenkov from the Centre for the Study of Democracy told *Deutschlandfunk*: “It is a new phenomenon. New parties are created that have neither an ideology nor a broad base of support. Behind them stand business groups and sometimes even financially powerful individuals.” Their goal, according to Tsenkov, is to penetrate the local councils where they can develop a system of corruption. While these small parties are growing like mushrooms throughout the land, the traditional parties, which developed in the transitional period following the collapse of Stalinism, are dying.

One reason for this development is the flow of European Union funds pouring into Bulgaria since it joined the EU at the beginning of the year. Bulgaria is set to receive seven billion euros from European Union structural and cohesion funds by 2013, which mandatory national co-financing then increases to eleven billion euros.

Only a few large enterprises actually profit from these funds from Brussels. According to a recent poll carried out by Vitosha Research, only 3.8 percent of Bulgarian enterprises have received EU money. Inside the country’s political and economic elite a bitter dispute rages over this cash. Interest in the local elections was especially great because the subsidies from Brussels are no longer centrally distributed and the municipalities have a more independent role in financial questions since Bulgaria joined the EU.

The depth of the gulf between official politics and the general population is shown by the national teacher’s strike, which has lasted over five weeks, and which dominated the entire election campaign. Since the end of September, at least 80 percent of the teaching staff at schools and kindergartens has participated in demonstrations nationwide against their low pay and the ailing education system.

In the election campaign, the parties either disparaged or kept

silent about the strikers; however, the teachers enjoy much support not just from other public sector workers but throughout the entire population. Although the strike has closed down schools, presenting many families with big problems, the teachers have received the support of up to 70 percent of those surveyed in opinion polls.

The teachers’ strike has revealed conditions that are symptomatic for Bulgarian society as a whole. A narrow layer of the super-rich, whose interests are served by the leading parties, have enormously enriched themselves at the expense of the broad mass of the population. While the former live in unimagined luxury, a teacher, for example must manage on €150 a month.

Two days before the local elections, the government tabled an offer of a 22 percent salary increase, with a further increase next year. Although the union leaders support this proposal and have recommended it be accepted, approximately 55 percent of teachers rejected the offer.

The offer is pure hypocrisy. Food prices alone rose by 25 percent this year, to say nothing of exploding energy prices. Moreover, the government offer only applies to teachers; the pay of other staff working at schools and kindergartens would stay the same.

Following the rejection of the government’s offer, the minister of education Daniel Valchev said there would be no further concessions to the strikers. He categorically excluded a doubling of salaries or the increase of the education budget as a whole by five percent, as the teachers had demanded.

The government is hoping it can exert pressure on the trade unions and impose a rotten contract on the teachers. The Bulgarian unions stand far to the right politically and in the past 16 years have accepted privatisation and welfare cuts. Today, if they posture militantly in public and demand higher wages, this is mainly out of fear that the teachers’ strike could spread and draw in other social layers.

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