

Elections in Bulgaria take place amidst political and economic crisis

By Markus Salzmann
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Bulgaria elects a new parliament on Sunday. The last election took place only 18 months ago and led to a change of government. Since then, there have been three heads of government. It is already clear that the new election will not bring the politically and economically crisis-ridden country any stability.

The latest opinion polls show the "Citizens for a European Development of Bulgaria" (Gerb) at about 36 percent, in front of the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), lagging behind at 20 percent. The Ethnic Turkish Party (DPS) are predicted to receive 12 percent. Four other parties may also clear the 4 percent hurdle needed to win seats in parliament, including the far-right Ataka, the Reform Bloc, and the newly founded right-wing populist "Bulgaria without Censorship" of former journalist Nikolai Barekov. The media mogul Deljan Peewski is suspected of being the financier behind this group.

The leader of Gerb, Bojko Borisov, who started his career in the state security apparatus, headed the government between 2009 and 2013. In February 2013 he was forced to resign because of mass protests against electricity price increases. In the subsequent election, Gerb suffered heavy losses, but with 30 percent remained the strongest party, closely followed by the BSP with 27 percent.

Borisov, however, was unable to find a coalition partner. Eventually a minority cabinet under the non-party financial expert Plamen Oresharski took over the government, supported by the BSP, the DPS and Ataka. Oresharski had to resign in August 2014 because the BSP and DPS withdrew their support. Since then, there has been a government of technocrats under Georgi Blinaschki.

If Gerb wins the election, Borisov would once again have to rely on a coalition partner. The most probable

candidate is the right-wing Reform Bloc. This combination of right-wing parties could push through austerity measures demanded by the ruling class, above all in the health system and pensions. But cooperation with the ultra-right Ataka is also not excluded.

The end of the Oresharski government in August was a direct consequence of the banking crisis unleashed by the run on the Fibank and KTB banks. Although the exact causes of the banking panic are still unclear, it was apparently connected to the Ukraine conflict and tensions between the EU and Russia. This has provoked fierce clashes in Bulgaria between rival political camps and oligarchs.

Traditionally, Bulgaria and Russia have enjoyed close economic and political relations. The Oresharski government and the BSP, the successor organization to the Bulgarian Communist Party, have firm connections with Moscow and, in part, reject the EU's rigid confrontational course with Russia.

The most contentious issue in relation to the EU and Russia is the construction of the South Stream pipeline, which will transport Russian gas via the Black Sea directly to Bulgaria, bypassing Ukraine, and from there to Austria and Italy. Under massive pressure from the EU and the US, Oresharski officially ordered a halt to the construction project, but he has been repeatedly accused of expediting construction just the same.

The technocrat government of Georgi Blinaschki, which replaced Oresharski in August, consists of individuals who maintain close links with the EU or US.

Many of the ministers have been educated in the EU and the US, or have worked there. They are pursuing a distinctly harsher course against Russia and have intensified austerity measures. Borisov too has announced that he would only build the South Stream

pipeline with the approval of the EU, which has flatly refused to do so.

In the interests of the international financial institutions, the temporary head of government, Blisnaschki, is insisting that a stable government be formed within two weeks of the election, in order to push through the "long postponed" cuts. He is demanding that the next government undertake radical reforms designed to bring the country out of the "post-Communist morass."

The law professor Blisnaschki had originally belonged to the BSP, and at that time was one of the leaders of the protests against the Oresharski government. He advocates harsher sanctions against Russia and does not exclude the use of military means. A Borisov government would continue this course, intensifying the political crisis and social tensions in the EU's poorest member state.

The price of electricity rose by nearly 10 percent again in September, after falling slightly under Oresharski. As of October 1, private households must pay 9.8 percent more for electricity on average, the state-owned DKEWR decided.

Even before the increase, large sections of the population were unable to pay their electricity bills, especially in winter. Against the background of the Ukraine conflict, many Bulgarians fear an icy winter, as Bulgaria is almost completely dependent on gas from Russia. For this reason, some media sources predict new protests.

Under these conditions, desperation and anger with the political elite prevail in the population. A resident of Misia, a town in northern Bulgaria, told the Berlin *Tagesspiegel*: "No one will go to the polls! What for? So that they can live and we suffer?"

Misia is one of the towns that suffered serious flooding in the summer. Thousands lost their homes as a result of the floods, most of whom still lack adequate accommodation. The state support provided following the floods was literally just a drop in the ocean.

Another inhabitant of Misia complained about the catastrophic social situation: "People are hungry. Everyone knows that. Twenty percent live well, but what about the rest?"

Polls show that 70 percent of Bulgarians are pessimistic about a new government, and over half do not expect any positive change.

The precarious conditions have also led to growing corruption throughout the country. According to judicial expert Tihomir Bezlov, bribes given to civil servants have risen to their highest level since 2000. His colleague Todor Yalamov claims that corruption rates in the public sector have doubled since 2009, *Deutsche Welle* reports. Official approvals for health care and other services are almost exclusively obtainable on payment of bribes, which very few people can afford.

The deep social tensions were visible in recent weeks. Miners at the Cherno More mine in Burgas launched a strike lasting several days after receiving no wages for months. In other mines, protests and other actions were announced following plans by the Ministry of the Environment to partially close the pit at Bobov Dol in the southwest and reduce production and the workforce by 50 percent.

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