




Weekly Briefing

Bulgaria political briefing:
OVERVIEW OF THE POLITICAL 2019 YEAR FOR BULGARIA
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OVERVIEW OF THE POLITICAL 2019 YEAR FOR BULGARIA

The political 2019 for Bulgaria was quite dynamic. During the year Bulgarian ruling party GERB has undergone serious problems and scandals that have undermined its political rating. Corruption scandals, clashes among the ruling coalition, criticism from Bulgarian President Rumen Radev and sharp attacks from the main opposition political force – BSP, represent only some of the problems faced by GERB and its Government.

Despite some speculations at the beginning of the year that the government may not be able to complete its term due to a number of political scandals as well as a result of the possible lost in the elections that took place during the year, the situation at the end of the year shows relatively stable political position of the ruling governmental coalition. Bulgaria continues to be governed by the Third Government of the Prime Minister Boyko Borisov (also called the Government of Boyko Borisov III or Cabinet "Borisov III"). This is the ninety-sixth government of the Republic of Bulgaria, elected by the 44th National Assembly on May 4, 2017. The cabinet, headed by Boyko Borisov is a coalition formed by the Borisov's right-wing party GERB and the so called United Patriots which is a nationalist electoral alliance formed by three political parties: IMRO – Bulgarian National Movement (IMRO), the National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria (NFSB) and Attack. The coalition between the three parties has been created by an agreement. The ministerial distribution among the government coalition is 16 (GERB): 4 (United Patriots).

During the year, there were several major political upheavals affecting Borisov's cabinet. One of these shocks was related to the relations in the so-called small coalition (the United Patriots) which is GERB's partner in governance. The United Patriots coalition had a serious internal crisis which led to speculations that the government will collapse as well. This crisis was due to the fact that two of the parties in the alliance, have voted to expel the third, Volen Siderov's Ataka party. The move is seen as effectively spelling the end of the United Patriots coalition. This emerged on July 25, a day after a United Patriots coalition council meeting – the first in many months – lasted a mere two minutes before breaking up in the acrimony that long since has come to characterize the fractious grouping. A meeting of the United Patriots, held without Ataka, voted to expel Siderov, as well as Ataka MPs Dessislav Chukulov and Pavel Shopov, from the group. The decision came 15 days after the two parties – Valeri Simeonov's National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria (NFSB) and Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister Krassimir Karakachanov's VMRO – voted to oust Siderov as parliamentary leader of

the United Patriots. The leader of VMRO Krasimir Karakachanov explained that the decision did not end the majority in the National Assembly and nor did it put the government's term in office in risk. Since then, the United Patriots group was rent asunder by infighting. Karakachanov remained a Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister, while Siderov was ousted as leader of the United Patriots parliamentary group and following his recent election as a Sofia city councilor, resigned from Parliament. Valeri Simeonov was on November 20 elected one of the National Assembly's Deputy Speakers. Simeonov was elected to replace Yavor Notev, who had held the post allocated to the United Patriots group, but who stepped down after the Ataka party of which he is a member was excluded from the United Patriots.

Another sign of some instability in government were the ministerial changes that have been made during the year, which are mainly caused by serious socio-political scandals in the areas of dismissed ministerial posts.

First, Justice Minister Tsetska Tsacheva resigned over a scandal with bought apartment by her much more below the market price. This was part of the political scandal known as the "Apartment Gate". On April 5, 2019, MPs voted for the release of Tsacheva from the post of Minister of Justice. Prime Minister Borisov designated Danail Kirilov (former chairman of the Parliament's Legal Committee) for the post so he was elected next minister.

Later in the year, on May 15, 2019, MPs voted to dismiss Rumen Porozhanov from the post of Minister of Agriculture, Food and Forestry, following his resignation because of an investigation into abuse of European funds by the State Fund for Agriculture, when the institution was run by Porozhanov. Borisov designated Desislava Taneva (former chairman of the Parliament's Committee on Agriculture and Food and former Minister of Agriculture and Food in Boyko Borisov's second government) for being the next minister elected on this post.

At the end of the year, on December 3, 2019, MPs voted to dismiss Bisser Petkov from the post of Minister of Labor and Social Policy following his resignation (and demanded by the Prime Minister) in connection with "time- gathered reasons". The latest scandal surrounding his name arose from the government's desire to pass a law that deprives workers of the right to a fully guaranteed and paid hospital sick leave. The government's proposal was the first day of the hospital sick leave to be at the employee's expense. This provoked a huge wave of discontent and ultimately the proposal was withdrawn. Boyko-Borisov-nominated Denitsa Sacheva (former Deputy Minister of Education and Science and former Deputy Minister of Labor and Social Policy in Borisov's second government) so she was elected Minister on the place of Biser Petkov.

In fact, due to these personal changes in the Government there was a feeling in the society that the purpose of the already third government of Boyko Borisov is not to solve problems, but

to survive in power. The problem is that recently entire social systems such as health care, education, the social sphere began to collapse. All this indicates clearly that radical reforms are needed, but since they would be unpopular and thus can overthrow the cabinet, Boyko Borisov is using ministerial resignations to vent the accumulated social tension.

The main test for the government and central political issue for Bulgaria in 2019 were the two election campaigns that the Bulgarian population had to go through. First, the elections for Members of the European Parliament and on the second place the local elections in the country.

A number of political analysts have predicted that the ruling coalition will consistently lose both types of elections, leading to the fall of the government and early parliamentary elections as well. The events, however, unfolded completely differently, and in the end the leading political party in the government, GERB, not only did not lose the elections, but further strengthened its political positions in the country's government. Boyko Borissov's GERB party (EPP-affiliated) won the European elections on Sunday (26 May), despite a number of scandals in which it was involved in months before the elections. Up until the last ten days before the election date, Borissov, looked set to lose to his arch-rivals, the socialists (BSP), according to opinion polls.

In particular, the so-called apartment scandal, which revealed that several high-ranking GERB politicians had bought real estate at suspiciously low prices, hurt support for the party, and in early May, a series of polls put BSP ahead. But during the elections GERB obtained 30.77%, against 25% for BSP. As expected, third was the mostly ethnic Turkish DPS, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (ALDE-affiliated), with 13.7%.

The nationalist VMRO party of Krassimir Karakachanov got 7.7%, and the centre-right Democratic Bulgaria 6.9%. This translates into seven MEPs from the EPP, five for PES, three for ALDE and two for a Eurosceptic group.

Turnout was around 30%, lower than the previous European elections. The election threshold for EU elections in Bulgaria is 5.88%. Pundits say Borissov made a big impact, as he campaigned very actively during the days before the vote. BSP on the other hand made a series of mistakes in their campaign, and appeared divided in front of their electorate. Party leader Kornelia Ninova, who has ideological differences with Sergei Stanishev, leader of the Party of European Socialists (PES), did not even want to have him on the election list.

The good result of VMRO shows that this force from the so-called "United Patriots", the junior coalition partner of Borissov, has completely overtaken the nationalist electorate, at the expense of Volen Siderov's Ataka party and the National Front for Salvation of Bulgaria. Each of the two parties got around 1% from the votes.

Winning elections for the European Parliament stabilized the positions of the ruling GERB party, and the result for the main opposition BSP party led to serious internal political conflicts and clashes, further weakening the party as an opposition force. This largely determined the results of the next elections held in the country this year.

During the local elections the Socialists launched a campaign opposite to the character of that of the Eurovote - significantly more positive, entirely local, extremely cheap. If during the campaign for the EU elections BSP have lost the European dimension of its performance, within the campaign for the local elections BSP lost the national dimension as well. The biggest stumbling block for the party internally was undoubtedly the campaign of Maya Manolova, an independent and backed candidate for Sofia mayor. Manolova has repeatedly distanced herself from the BSP and its past, and this has created serious difficulties for the Sofia campaign of the Socialists. The BSP leader Kornelia Ninova showed a new image - not only remained in the shadows on the national media airwaves, for the first time since her election to the post, but also for the first time did not allow herself to express an opinion on a figure like Manolova, who provoked her political behavior. This ostentatious omission has positive effects as well - it led to better results. There were also negative consequences - it didn't properly exploit the power of the BSP precisely as a national party. The BSP broke out in big cities and 4 district mayors (against none so far), but lost small towns and lagged dramatically behind the GERB winner around most of the country.

Bulgaria's ruling GERB party have won in most regional centres in the country – as well as in the capital, Sofia. In the vote for municipal councilors, GERB took about 30%, BSP - 18%, MRF - 12.5%. In the vote for mayors GERB won 140 municipalities (including 17 regional centers, including Sofia, Plovdiv and Varna), BSP - 61 municipalities (including 4 regional centers), MRF - 47 municipalities (incl. 1 district center). For the first time since 2005 there was a run-off in Sofia, where incumbent Mayor Yordanka Fandakova defeated BSP-backed independent candidate, Maya Manolova (50 to 45%), with strong result from independent candidate Boris Bonev in the first round (11%). Democratic Bulgaria has nominated 8 of the 24 district mayors in Sofia (13 for GERB, 2 for BSP, 1 independent). The invalid ballots in the mayoral elections were about 4%, and for municipal councilors - 15.09%.

The results show that GERB is the undisputed winner in the local vote - both in the number of district mayors and in the number of municipal mayors, in the number of municipal councilors, and in the absolute number of votes cast.

In political term we can conclude that the local elections in Bulgaria set new trends, but not a major change. The government is gaining a new horizon of legitimacy. The formats of "explicit" and "hidden" majorities are still preserved. The search for an alternative goes beyond

supply. The fears and disappointment of part of the society from the government goes beyond their initiative. At the end of the year the social-political attention was diverted to the 2020 budget and the hopes of social and professional communities that it will be linked to better opportunities for the next year.