

## Bulgaria Human Security Chronicle 8 – May 2016

### *Voting rights*

## **New electoral code curbs the voting rights of Bulgarians abroad**

On 18 May 2016 the Bulgarian parliament rejected a veto by the president on a new electoral code that poses serious threats to the voting rights of Bulgarian nationals living abroad.<sup>1</sup> This means the code is now law (unless the constitutional court overturns it) and hundreds of thousands of voters around the world will be thwarted from casting a ballot due to a limited number of polling stations and eventually exclusion from the voting registry. The president's veto was a logical move after numerous spontaneous protests by Bulgarians home and abroad against the adopted code in April,<sup>2</sup> but to no avail: Bulgarian legislators chose to neglect these concerns about a direct threat to democracy and human rights, under the blackmailing of one of the governing coalition partners – the populist right-wing Patriotic Front.

The electoral code envisages voting abroad to take place mostly at Bulgarian diplomatic missions, with a limited number of additional sections allowed in big cities within the EU. This effectively eliminates a huge number of already existing polling stations which Bulgarian communities had established in their local areas across Turkey, Europe and America. Because queues in front of Bulgarian embassies and consulates have always been enormous and voting in New York or London for example could take hours, the new law will render the situation impossible. What is even worse is that it introduces some form of mandatory voting: a punishment by exclusion from the voting lists for those who fail to turn up at two successive elections of the same type (parliamentary, presidential or referenda). On a positive note, the code officially allows adoption of internet voting at some point in the future – a necessary measure given some two million Bulgarian citizens living abroad, much of whom would like to maintain their link with the Bulgarian polity.

The Patriotic Front's self-righteous motive in proposing the changes and threatening to leave the coalition if they are not endorsed (and thus bringing in a political crisis and probably early elections) is that there have been, in their words, numerous voting violations in Turkey, where a large number of Bulgarian citizens (ethnic Turks) live and vote, and that this is in fact a manipulation by the

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1 "President Plevneliev vetoes electoral law on Bulgarians voting abroad", *The Sofia Globe*, 7 May 2016. Available at <http://sofiaglobe.com/2016/05/07/president-plevneliev-vetoes-electoral-law-on-bulgarians-voting-abroad/>.

2 Mariya Cheresheva. "Bulgarians Protest over New Voting Rules," *BalkanInsight*, 26 April 2016. Available at <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/bulgarians-stand-up-against-new-voting-rules-04-25-2016>.

Turkish state – a meddling with Bulgarian affairs. Turks tend to vote for the Movements for Rights and Freedoms party, which has been a major factor in Bulgarian politics during the transition years after 1989. While there are some doubts of mass irregularities in polling stations in Turkey, the new code in no way addresses them: what it does is gross restriction of voting rights not only in Turkey but also across the globe.

This state of affairs is absurd in light of the mass emigration from Bulgaria and the huge aging problem.<sup>3</sup> If the country wanted in some way to retain its sense of nationhood in the process of globalisation, it should aim to achieve exactly the opposite: involve all those Bulgarian citizens who live abroad more actively in the public life back home, and not try to exclude them. It is the so-called 'patriots' who are supposed to be most sensitive to these trends. However, the motives behind the new legislation are entirely populist and xenophobic-nationalistic, and they use the vile instrument of blackmailing and threatening political destabilisation.

The complex four-party government (now three-party, see below), headed by prime minister Boyko Borisov, has often been a hostage to such extortions by the minor partners in the coalition. For example, the ABV party of ex-president Georgi Parvanov threatened<sup>4</sup> to leave unless Bulgaria officially proposed Irina Bokova, director of UNESCO, for a new UN Secretary General – a highly controversial figure linked to former state communist *nomenklatura* and to irregularities in UNESCO staff appointment procedures, but also a favourite of Bulgaria's 'reformed' ex-communists such as Parvanov and the Socialist Party.<sup>5</sup> Borisov backed down, and ABV got what it wanted; it left the coalition anyway in April 2016 ostensibly because of the electoral code situation, but more probably because of Parvanov's renewed presidential ambitions. But the infringement on voting rights exemplified by the new law is an unprecedented result of extortion and dwarves any petty domestic political bargaining that has been the cause of ruptures so far.

Human security is also about dignity and defence of basic civil rights such as the right to vote. Bulgarians abroad have been the largest investor in the Bulgarian economy over the last years via remittances, setting up companies and holiday spending, and their exclusion from the voting system is not only a threat to democracy but also an immoral and dangerous sidelining of a positive factor in Bulgaria's development in a globalised world.

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3 "Bulgarian Population Could Drop Below Five Million in 2070 – Forecast". *Novinite.com*, 17 August 2015. Available at <http://www.novinite.com/articles/170398/Bulgarian+Population+Could+Drop+Below+Five+Million+in+2070+-+Forecast>.

4 "Bulgarian minority party threatens to quit coalition government over election law changes". *The Sofia Globe*, 23 April 2016. Available at <http://sofiaglobe.com/2016/04/23/bulgarian-minority-party-threatens-to-quit-coalition-government-over-election-law-changes/>.

5 Iain Dey. "US anger as Putin's darling seeks to head UN". *The Sunday Times*, 14 February 2016. Available at [http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/news/world\\_news/Europe/article1667986.ece](http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/news/world_news/Europe/article1667986.ece).