



EP 2014 elections in Bulgaria: A hint at normality?

Expert comment

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Bulgaria's Central Election Commission is yet to announce the official final results of the European Parliament (EP) election held on 25 May, 2014, but it has processed all protocols from the precincts with counted 100% of the ballots. This was the third EP campaign in Bulgaria after the one following EU entry in 2007 and then the regular one in 2009. Turnout was traditionally low (some 35%) and somewhere on the average in Europe.

The results show a clear win for the centre-right GERB party, from the EPP family, with 30.4% of the vote and 6 of the 17 Bulgarian MEP mandates; a collapse of the co-ruling Bulgarian Socialist Party, from the PES family, with 18.9% and 4 seats; and a powerful performance of the ethnic Turkish-dominated DPS, of the ALDE family, with 17.3% and 4 mandates. The election also affirmed the place of two new formations on the nationally significant political scene, which do not have yet representation in the Assembly: the populist (and backed by specific business interests) coalition led by the Bulgaria without Censorship party (10.7%, 2 seats) and the Reformist Bloc – a centre-right pro-reform political union of small parties which failed to pass the 4% threshold at the last national poll a year ago (also members of the EPP family) – 6.4%, 1 seat.

In technical terms, the election was controversial and marred by violations: allegations were made and proofs made available before and on election day about instances of 'controlled vote' – a phenomenon gaining formidable pace in Bulgaria ever since the local elections in 2007 – including vote-buying and coercion to vote in a certain way by power-brokers (corporate bosses, community leaders in ethnic Turkish-controlled regions and in compact Roma neighbourhoods, loan sharks, etc.). The most notorious case was a video footage taken secretly some days before the poll at a company meeting of privately-held Bobov Dol Mines in Southwest Bulgaria, where miners were ordered by the company mid-management to vote for the Bulgarian Socialist Party. A study carried out by the Institute for Regional and International Studies in Sofia showed such practices were common in private and state-



owned firms alike, especially in poorer regions. The absolute, feudal control of DPS in Turkish- and Muslim-dominated regions was evident again but has been known for decades, with mavericks deprived of career prospects and put to outright isolation by the community. And the massive vote-buying carried out by the new Bulgaria without Censorship party, in the form of paying for tens of thousands of formal party observers across the country, plus its extremely intruding and obviously expensive media campaign, contribute to the idea that this European election was not as free and fair as a vote in a EU country is supposed to be.

One reason for this may be the perceived high national significance of the election as viewed by political parties ahead of the poll. The controlled vote mentioned above has been most pervasive at national and especially local elections, not European. But this Sunday's vote was regarded by most players as an event with domestic implications rather than European. The political situation in Bulgaria after the May 2013 early election has been very unstable, with trust in the BSP-DPS government, supported by the populist/xenophobic Ataka in parliament, unprecedentedly low. Many parties did not pass the national assembly threshold last year, leaving a million active citizens unrepresented in parliament and openly discontent. Mass protests marked the entire 2013. Political parties saw in Sunday's EP vote an opportunity to re-position themselves in this volatile situation: the co-ruling parties to reaffirm they are still strong, and the opposition parties to demonstrate a new strength and capability to challenge. And indeed, the huge majority of the political messages were nationally oriented, targeting domestic issues and trying to strike a local chord with the populace.

But why then, given all that, the European Parliament election in Bulgaria was a hint at normality and, in fact, inspired some optimism among certain observers? Firstly, the anti-EU, xenophobic, far-right, neo-fascist and populist elements of the political spectrum, so worryingly present in Western Europe, were totally ousted in Bulgaria. The two largest parties representing these sentiments in society – parliamentary Ataka and regional NFSB – won around 3% of the vote each, with the threshold for winning an MEP mandate being 5.9%. This shows that the xenophobic and extremist attitudes in Bulgarian society are not organic – they are rather an expression of a protest vote or a reaction to some perceived failure of the powers that be, with support fluctuating according to the circumstances. Another interesting aspect of this development, closely linked with Ataka specifically, is that the anti-Western and pro-Russian component of the 'nationalist' vote obtained no support. Many Western media reported in the months before the EP vote that Bulgaria was split between a European/Western commitment and a nostalgic infatuation with Russia, newly resurgent under Putin and land-grabbing in its neighbourhood. Ataka, a self-defined 'nationalist' party, was the loudest promoter of Russia and 'Orthodox' values in the campaign, apparently bolstered financially by Putin and his propaganda apparatus. The Sunday election results and Ataka's performance thus also show that Bulgarians were not fooled by the nostalgic pro-



Russian rants and have never questioned their belonging to Europe and the Western system of values.

Secondly, the election corroborated what has been obvious over the last year of political volatility but given a blind eye by those in power: Bulgarian citizens do not have trust in the government and gave a clear sign the current governing configuration must be ended. The parties officially backing the cabinet, BSP and DPS, jointly got fewer votes than the parties calling for an early election, GERB and the Reformist Bloc. If we add to the latter the votes for the populist Bulgaria without Censorship party, which, despite being a hidden 'status quo' power, has explicitly and loudly held it is for an early vote (and thus collected anti-'status quo' votes), the equation becomes too tilted in favour of change. This is important because ahead of the vote the Bulgarian public was bombarded with extremely tilted public opinion surveys, conducted by unprofessional sociological agencies (allegedly connected with the ruling establishment), which claimed that BSP was definitely in the lead, and that in the span of a whole month before the poll. Only a couple of agencies published polls which were close to the real picture; respect due to Alpha Research and Exacta Research Group. Now that the official election results are out, there should be no doubt about what the public sentiments in Bulgaria are and that the need for early election and political stabilisation and normalisation is imminent.

Thirdly, the first actual use of preferential voting in a Bulgarian election took place and should be applauded. Bulgaria had preferential voting in its first EP election back in 2007, but then the usage of the option did not make much sense (the percentage threshold for votes for a preferred candidate to move up the list was high) and logically not used widely. With the last electoral code adopted by parliament earlier this year, the threshold was dropped to 5% of the votes for a certain candidate. As a result, shifts in the party lists took place in two of the formations which won MEP mandates: the Reformist Bloc's leader Meglena Kuneva, former (and the first) European Commissioner for Bulgaria, was replaced by the second in the list Svetoslav Malinov (an MEP in the outgoing parliament); and, more strikingly, the BSP and PES leader, Sergei Stanishev, lost in the preferential vote to the 15th in the list Momchil Nekov, a young and famously unknown party activist with otherwise minimal chances of success. While the BSP development may be attributed to technicalities and uninformed voters (Nekov's number was 15, just as the number for BSP in the party list was 15, thus opening the way for voters to cross out both numbers 'just in case'), a true majoritarian competition took place in the Reformist Bloc list. This is definitely healthy for the political system in Bulgaria, where voter disaffection has been growing and a bigger say for the citizens, via a majoritarian element, could be a great incentive for participation. And preferential voting may be the better option than a first-past-the-post system, as political parties should remain strong in an immature Eastern European democracy as Bulgaria. Also,



an experiment with 31 constituencies was introduced for the 2009 general election but it created such a mess in parliamentary procedure afterwards that all parties, winners and opposition alike, regretted it afterwards.

And fourthly, a new 'island of normality' in terms of political discourse could be recognised in this campaign in one of the new political actors already mentioned – the Reformist Bloc. Bulgaria has been the stage of several populist waves since true reform and European integration processes began in earnest in 1997. In 2001, the former king Simeon Saxe-Coburg Gotha came back from Spain, formed a party, won a landslide victory, ousting the relatively successful right-centre government of the UDF, and became a prime minister; he promised a miracle for the economy in 800 days, and people believed him. Then in 2005 Ataka emerged, offering a far-right and xenophobic version of the 'saviour' model; thankfully, it did not become so powerful as to win a majority, but nevertheless remained a factor in parliament. And in 2007 and 2009 the GERB party, the current winner and most popular formation, won the EP and general elections, mostly because of its leader and not on any ideology: the charismatic macho man and former fireman and karate champion Boyko Borissov. These populist waves were the result of common dissatisfaction of the people with politics and search for something new or exotic that would miraculously raise living standards and create jobs and prosperity. They also pushed true political discourse, based on ideas and beliefs, to the margins. The Reformist Bloc brought back some of this genuine discourse in its EP 2014 campaign. It was maybe the only party that had Europe-centred messages and did not fall victim entirely to the national debate: those included consistent positions on EU enlargement, common policy towards Ukraine and Russia, a European energy union, etc. And the won mandate of the party and the 150,000 votes behind it certainly can be regarded as a hint at normality. What they have to do now is build on it and expand this breathing space until the early parliamentary election, bound to happen sooner or later.