

Parliamentary Elections in Bulgaria 2009 Specifics and Results

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The 7th parliamentary elections in Bulgaria since the beginning of the transition were held on 5 July 2009. Nearly 7 million officially registered voters had the opportunity to give their preferences to 18 parties and coalitions.

Specifics of the Elections

These elections were characterized by several specifics which distinguished from other national elections held so far.

First of all, the elections were held in accordance with a new voting system. After an initial experiment of 1990 with a mixed voting system ("Grabensystem"), according to which half of the members of parliament (MPs) were elected through proportional voting system with a 4% election barrier and the other half through majority voting system in two rounds in one-mandate constituencies, a fully proportional voting system has been consistently applied since 1991. Voting legislation underwent only minor and technical amendments and alternations. Meanwhile, the percentage of participation at elections gradually decreased, reaching 55% in 2005 from above 90% in 1990, which presented a sufficient ground for changes in the voting system to be pursued. In the beginning of 2007, in his speech about broad reforms in the political system president Georgi Parvanov appealed to MPs for changes aimed at introducing majority element in the existing voting system. Initially this proposal was accepted by political parties but in Parliament it encountered silent resistance. With the elections in 2009 approaching, the Bulgarian Socialist Party, BSP broke the silence and proposed that 58 MPs be elected

through the majority system. Only in April 2009, after continuous and heated debates, a proposal to elect 31 out of 240 MPs through majority system, supported by the Movement for Rights and Freedoms, DPS was accepted. Alongside with this, however, in the last moment the barrier for coalitions to enter the parliament was changed from 4% to 8%. These changes were criticized by the opposition and president Parvanov vetoed the bill in its part regarding the change of the barrier. After the veto by the president was overridden, 70 MPs predominantly from the opposition appealed the case to the Constitutional Court which cancelled the change of the election barrier but could not form the necessary majority regarding the majority element and thus this decision taken by Parliament stayed in force.

The main problem with the 31 MPs elected through majority system is that they are elected in the existing elections constituencies predetermined for the proportional system, which differ significantly in terms of population and number of MPs that they elect. In this way, a single MP is elected by a significantly differing number of voters in different constituencies. However, half of the Constitutional judges concluded, that if elections are viewed as a whole and not separately in their two components, there is no violation of equal voting right.

Other important changes in the law were connected with the funding of pre-election campaigns, as parts of the previously amended Law on Political Parties were repeated. Donations from legal entities are prohibited. Donators are obliged to provide declarations on the origin of funds and

all donations exceeding 5.000 BGN (2.500) can only be done via bank transfer. Parties have a public register of their donators.

The revised voting system, i.e. 209 MPs elected through proportional voting system in 31 polymandate constituencies with a barrier of 4% and 31 MPs elected through majority system in one round ("first pass the pole") in the same constituencies, created a difficult environment for participants not only because of the insufficiently thought over introduction of partial majority vote but mostly due to the last-minute amendment of voting legislation. These amendments have virtually played a decisive role for the end results of the elections as they significantly increased the number of MPs of the biggest party.

The second specific in the 2009 elections was the close temporal link with the elections for European Parliament. This was the first time in the past 20 years that two elections on national level were held within a month (7 June and 5 July). To a large extent they were treated by both participants and audience as the two parts of one and the same election and led to an untypically long pre-election campaign as well as a reflection of the results of European elections on national ones, which would not have occurred providing the elections had different timing.

The European elections were seen as a competition for winning starting positions for the national elections and as an opportunity to test and legitimize new participants with a view to national elections.

It was exactly at the elections for European Parliament that the main participants in parliamentary elections were outlined, and the new ratio of powers became evident. This refers in particular to the newly created party of the mayor of the Bulgarian capital, Sofia Boiko Borissov, the "Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria", GERB, which participated in parliamentary elections for the first time after two successful participations in two European elections (2007 and 2009) and one local election (2007). It showed best performance during the first elections

as it won most of the votes and gained most members of European Parliament, MEPs. This reconfirmed its aspirations as the biggest political party and main participant in the future government of the country.

The European elections were also a test for the new formula of participation of the traditional right parties, as the "Union of Democratic forces", SDS and the "Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria", DSB – which parted after deep discrepancies and continuous scandals – unified for both elections as the so called "Blue Coalition", which could be considered as an "old-new" participant in the elections. This coalition showed comparatively low result at the European elections, but the mere fact of unification and the one mandate it won gave reasons for higher confidence for the "real elections".

At the European elections two other parties received their legitimization. The first one is the "Order, Law, Justice" (RZS) party, created to the model of the Polish PIS party with a strong populist notion and nationalistic orientation. It is true that it could not send any MEP, but it achieved the respectable result of 4.67% and thus stated their ambitions to enter the National Parliament. The other one – LIDER – is a party of corporate type, representing a tendency shown very clearly at the national elections in 2007, i.e. the involvement of business interests in politics through utilizing the influence that an employer has over their employees. With the 5.7% it gained, it remained just below the voting barrier but also showed potential for parliamentary participation.

The emergence of new political actors which were absent in the last parliamentary elections and partially legitimized just before the 2009 elections meant a continuation of the process of particularization of the party system and heralded serious changes in the future parliament.

Still, the more important effect of the European elections appeared to be their influence on the attitudes and behaviour of voters, especially those who usually do not participate in elections.

Extrapolated to the future parliament, these results predicted a power “tie” in the parliament, enormous difficulties in creating a working coalition government and most likely new elections in a few months’ time. This perspective obviously scared voters, especially in a state of economic crisis which was already becoming tangible in Bulgaria as well. The fear of a continuous political deadlock was also the main reason for the significant activation of new segments of voters for the sake of determining a clear subject of governance and a widespread search for a sustainable alternative. This state of public consciousness proved extremely profitable for GERB who won because it was a factor of change, on the one hand, and a factor of stability, on the other. The convincing victory of GERB seemed as the only option to protect the country from political crisis and inability to constitute a government.

The third specific was that unlike in other occasions, the electoral campaigns and what happened during them played a significant role for the outcome of the elections. Indicative in this respect is the fact that in the dawn of the elections none of the researchers was able to predict what would happen. Obviously in the last 10 days preceding the elections unexpected events took place and they increased the activity of voters which led to unexpected results.

As a whole, the pre-election campaign passed in a comparatively unusual manner. The leading party in the governing opposition BSP was predictably trying to emphasize the successfulness of its government, to outline concrete positive results, to persuade in its experience and qualities to apply the appropriate anti-crisis programme and to guarantee financial stability and social protection in the difficult economic situation. Alongside this, however, untypically of the governing party and its traditions – BSP put more energy into a negative campaign targeted against GERB and their possible cooperation with the Blue Coalition, personalized by the leader of DSB, Ivan Kostov. At the same time, it chose to lead its entire campaign on the basis of a “clash of leaders” – “Stanishev vs. Borissov” – which was also untypical, as well as unprofitable

for BSP. The negative campaign might have consolidated the solid core of BSP but was generally not received well by its potential voters. Another consequence was much less beneficial for BSP, i.e. that this campaign politicised and activated many more opponents of BSP.

The case with the DPS campaign was a similar one – it mobilized its own supporters to the utmost but this became the reason for the activation of those social segments which treat it with mistrust and animosity.

Actually the trigger that led to strong polarization was a statement of the leader of DPS, Ahmed Dogan which was interpreted by the media as if he singlehandedly would distribute the financial resources of the state. In this way an ethnic bias which is rooted in the past and which had been avoided since the beginning of the transition, became a more dominant feature of the campaign.

Until recently, this was typical especially for the nationalist “Ataka” party but at these elections, even before the statement of Dogan, major actors such as GERB, the Blue Coalition and RZS relied on an anti-DPS message. RZS even changed their slogan during the campaign – from “Stop corruption” to “Stop Doganization”. The next step was “tying” BSP to DPS and ascribing the negatives to the two parties as participants in the Triple governing coalition (Boiko Borissov: “BSP and DPS are one and the same party”).

In such a situation the opposing parties and most of all GERB skilfully used resentments on ethnic basis as a pre-election instrument to attract voters and predominantly for the activation of passive voters.

In comparison with the incorrectly constructed elections campaign of their main opponent, GERB took advantage of every chance and focused their efforts on appeals for voting, concentration of the vote and against the coalitional form of governance.

Even though all the parties had prepared comparatively serious election platforms, the actual discussion on the real problems of the country was scarce during the campaign. Comparison and choice between different strategies to overcome the economic crisis were lacking. To a large extent, programmes remained an artificial appendage to the campaign as they were not referred to even when the opponent presented them in an unduly manner.

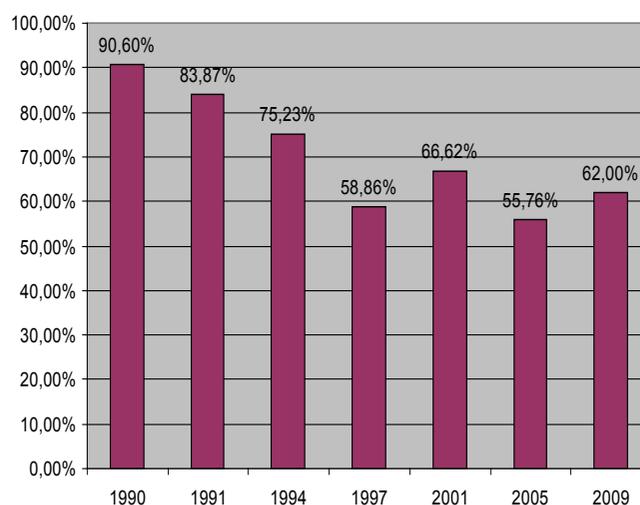
The slogans of the parties – even though in most cases they were used in both campaigns and were repeated over two months in the public space, left no definite trace in the consciousness of citizens. According to a research of the National Centre for Study of the Public Opinion, NZIOM between 72% and 88% of the persons interviewed during the campaign could not distinguish the slogans of different parties in the campaign.

Eventually ethnization and politization of the campaign gave credits predominantly to GERB as the strongest opposition party which had not participated in central governance and which attracted the biggest part of the activated protest vote.

The fourth specific of the parliamentary elections in 2009 – and the decisive one – thus can be seen in the unexpectedly high voting activity. None of the observers predicted higher participation than that of 2005 – around 3.5 – 3.7 million voters or around 55%. The reasons for this were connected with the global tendency of decreasing participation as well as the fatigue after two consequent elections, the summer season etc. Reality proved different. The specifics of the campaign listed above as well as the highlighting of problems such as the buying of votes, the so called corporate vote, the release of arrested individuals due to their registration as candidates for elections, the expectations for massive voting of citizens with dual citizenship in Turkey and for “voting tourism” inside the country, the feeling that the last minute changes in the voting legisla-

tion meant to work in favour for the governing parties, the fear of the inability to form a government – all this turned into a complex impulse to activate voters. Ultimately over 4.3 million citizens voted, or 62% of all voters.

Table 1: Participation in parliamentary elections in Bulgaria 1990 – 2009



Bearing in mind that voting lists, which are the basis for calculating participation, are imprecise, we could say that around 70% of actually eligible voters voted. In this way the election excitement, caused by former Zar Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha in 2001 was to a large extent repeated and the trend for relatively low participation in elections after 2001 has been turned.

Table 2: Participation in elections in Bulgaria 2005 – 2009

| Elections | No. of votes | % |
|-------------------------------------|--------------|-------|
| Parliamentary elections 2005 | 3.747.822 | 55,76 |
| Presidential elections 2006 - round | 2.856.731 | 44.10 |
| Presidential elections 2006 - round | 2.757.441 | 42,62 |
| European Parliament 2007 | 1.955.451 | 29.22 |
| Municipal elections 2007 | 3.440.312 | 49.71 |
| European Parliament 2009 | 2.601.677 | 38,91 |
| Parliamentary elections 2009 | 4.323.581 | 62.00 |

The additional participation of 600.000 to 1 million voters has significantly changed the picture of the projected election results as well as the expectations of most participants in the elections.

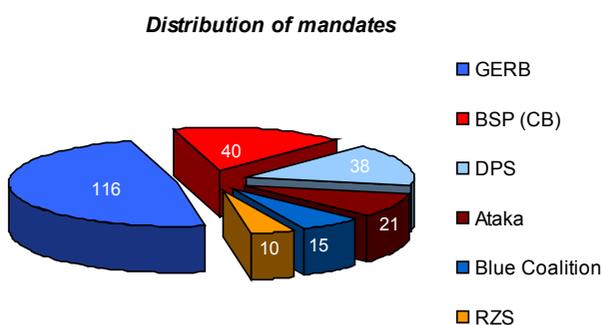
The Results

Even though the expected rearrangement of parties took place, the ratio of powers proved entirely different. These results underline the fact that there will be significant changes in the new parliament and government of the country.

The unquestionable winner in these elections is the party GERB, created and led by Boiko Borissov. As shown, it benefitted to the highest degree from increased participation. This is evident in two respects. On the one hand, GERB achieved a big difference in comparison with the second party BSP in the proportional vote with its nearly 1.7 voters and 90 mandates. On the other hand, its victory would not have been so convincing if high participation rates had not led to winning most of the majority candidates (26 out of 31). Thus having 116 seats in parliament, GERB is only 5 mandates away from absolute majority.

Table 3: Elections for 41st National Assembly (5 July 2009)

| Parties and Coalitions | NJo. of Votes | Votes, % |
|------------------------|---------------|----------|
| GERB | 1.678.641 | 39.70 |
| BSP (CB) | 748.147 | 17.70 |
| DPS | 610.521 | 14.50 |
| Ataka | 395.733 | 9.36 |
| Blue Coalition | 285.662 | 6.76 |
| RZS | 174.582 | 4.13 |
| LIDER | 137.795 | 3.26 |
| NDSV | 127.470 | 3.02 |
| Greens | 21.841 | 0.52 |



GERB including 26 by the majority system
 DPS including 5 by the majority system

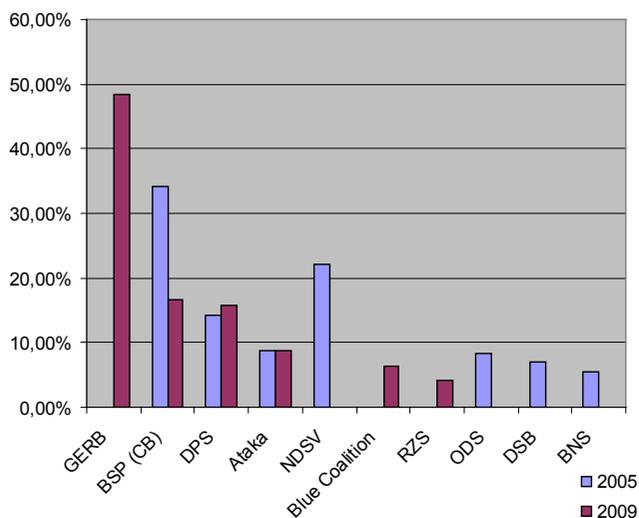
The big loser in these elections turned out to be the leading party in the government, BSP. Its result of approximately 750.000 votes was to a large extent decent and expected but in light of the high voting activity only a rather meagre performance in terms of percentage of votes and seats in parliament (40). In addition to this, the party could not win a single majority election. In the end the presently strongest party in parliament, BSP is now not only the second in place, significantly behind the first one, GERB but will also have its smallest group in parliament ever since the first democratic elections after the change in 1990.

The reasons for this eminent election failure are numerous. They include the negative image generated during its governance. An important role played the failure to comply with the requirements regarding the administration of European funds and the subsequent cessation of a number of pre-accession funds for Bulgaria, as well as the suspicions that this is connected with corruption practices. Even despite the achieved economic growth and financial stability, problems in sensitive areas such as healthcare and education continued to be accumulated. Another reason should be looked for in the organizational state of the party which has gradually been losing its reputation of the most popular and best organized party in the country. For instance, at these elections BSP could not reach some of its voting corpses which used to be stable in the past, for instance people in villages and small towns. The third reason, which should not be underestimated, is the utterly inadequate pre-election campaign which to a certain extent managed to mobilize the party's own voters but also strengthened the unbeneficial processes of politization and personalization and contributed to the high results of its opponents. Presuming that the results from European elections were an estimation of the government and the role of BSP as a leading party in it, it was really second but significantly closer to the winner GERB. Obviously, the change occurred in the course of the second campaign and the results were negative for BSP.

DPS reached their highest result at these elections. This has been the first time that the party won over 610.000 votes. The increase in its votes in compari-

son with previous elections was significant. Its highest score was at the elections in 2005 – 467.400 voters. It more than accomplished the goals it had set and came close to be second in power. At the same time, DPS turned into the main target of its opponents during the campaign and now faces the possibility not only to become a part of weak parliamentary opposition but also to be partially isolated. It will be a serious blow for it to leave central governance after 8 years of participation in coalition governments.

Table 4: Distribution of mandates in the National Assembly after the elections in 2005 and 2009



Ataka proved again that it has taken a permanent place in Bulgarian politics. Defined as extreme right and nationalistic, it is going to participate with 21 MPs in the next parliament. However, it will hardly overcome the political isolation even though in the closing part of the campaign it managed to demonstrate moderateness and readiness for participation in a governing coalition.

Even though the leaders of the so called traditional right present their election results as big victory, objective data supports the opposite statement. The Blue Coalition, which unified SDS, DBS and a few smaller parties, managed to collect two to three times less votes in comparison with the separate results of its components in 2005. Even in its biggest fortress – Sofia – its performance was far from persuasive. The Blue Coalition had predefined

as its goal the winning of 400.000 votes and 12 – 15% of seats in parliament but eventually remained with only 285.000 votes and just above 6% of MPs. In 2009 it won only 15 seats in parliament in comparison with 20 for SDS in 2005 and 17 for DSB in 2005. Still, the fact that its MPs will be necessary for the formation of parliamentary majority will increase its role in politics over the next years.

Table 5: Elections in Bulgaria 2009

| Party/Coalition | European elections 2009 | | Parliamentary elections 2009 | |
|-----------------|-------------------------|-------|------------------------------|-------|
| | Votes | % | Votes | % |
| GERB | 627.693 | 24.36 | 1.678.641 | 39,70 |
| BSP (CB) | 476.618 | 18.50 | 748.147 | 17,70 |
| DPS | 364.197 | 14.14 | 610.521 | 14,50 |
| Ataka | 308.052 | 11.96 | 395.733 | 9,36 |
| NDSV | 205.146 | 7.96 | 127.470 | 3,02 |
| Blue Coalition | 204.817 | 7.95 | 285.662 | 6,76 |
| RZS | 120.280 | 4.67 | 174.582 | 4,13 |
| LIDER | 146.984 | 5.70 | 137.795 | 3,26 |

Among the smaller parties only the new, populist RZS managed to cross the 4% barrier. With its active and expensive campaign it focused on the fight against corruption and at the end against DPS. With slightly above 4% it could gain 10 MPs which are likely to participate in the game around the formation of the majority in the new parliament.

The “National Movement for Stability and Progress”, NDSV of former Zar and Prime Minister Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, the third party of the outgoing governing coalition, suffered the worst defeat as it could not collect 4% of votes and dropped out of parliament. After its unexpectedly successful performance at the European elections, where it managed to get two seats in European parliament, it became another “victim” of increased voting activity. Under other circumstances its 127.000 votes would probably have been enough to enter the parliament but now they represented only slightly above 3% of all votes.

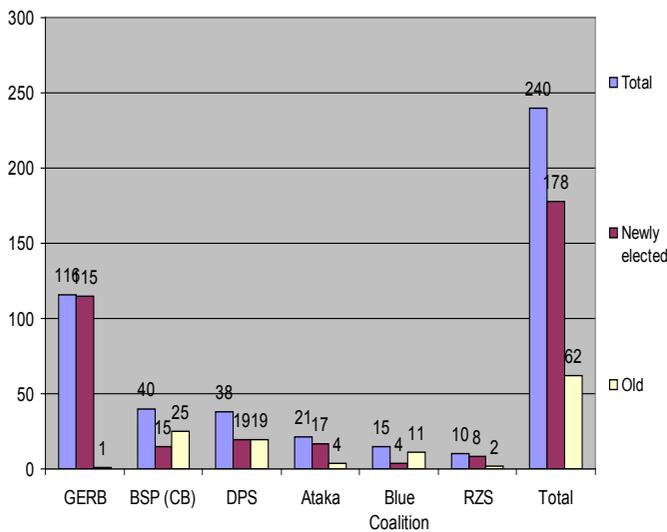
Despite their big ambitions, LIDER’s fate proved similar, as it could also not reach the barrier due to the participation of 4.3 million voters.

Notable however is the performance of the party "The Greens", which despite its short existence, lack of financial and organizational resources received the highest result among the "small parties", some of which had incomparably more resources. It managed to attract the votes of many young voters in Sofia (21.841 votes, 0.52%, see Table 3).

Looking at the large margin and unquestionable leadership of GERB, a relatively easy and quick formation of the new government is expected in the 41st National Assembly

At the same time, even now some problems connected with the election results can be pointed out. They will accompany the Bulgarian parliament and on a more global scale the political system as a whole.

Table 6: Succession of MPs in 41st National Assembly



The new National Assembly will predominantly consist of inexperienced MPs as was the case in 2001 but now this will be even stronger. Only 62 MPs from the previous parliament remain. The newly elected MPs are 178 or over 70% of the overall number. They do not have much time for adjustment bearing in mind the difficult situation of the country before the peak of the economic crisis which will probably have serious social consequences.

The parliamentary elections became a proof for the lack of stability of Bulgarian party system which is also indicative for the political system as a whole. The number of parties (not taking into consideration the fact there were coalitions) is six, i.e. one less in comparison with 2005. However, we still have two new parties in parliament which were not represented in the previous elections – GERB and RZS. They received over 44% of valid votes and for the first time after 1990 they could form an independent majority in the parliament. After the big breakthrough of NDSV in 2001, a repetition of similar size became possible but with different actors.

One cannot omit the fact that populism in the Bulgarian party and political system is gaining larger dimensions. GERB still has to show by its governance whether analysts are characterizing it rightfully as a populist party, based on the charisma of its leader. But after Ataka, also RZS entered the Bulgarian parliament which is in certain aspects of populism is even trying to overtake it, although it also likes to present itself as close to the British conservatives.

Table 7: Parliamentary elections in Bulgaria (1990 – 2009)

| | 1990 | 1991 | 1994 | 1997 | 2001 | 2005 | 2009 |
|---|------|------|-------|------|------|-------|-------|
| Number of registered parties and coalitions | 40 | 38 | 48 | 39 | 50 | 22 | 18 |
| Number of parliamentary parties | 4 | 3 | 5 | 5 | 4 | 7 | 6 |
| Number of "old" parties in parliament * | - | 3 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 4 |
| Number of "new" parties in parliament* | - | - | 2 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 2 |
| Percentage of valid votes for "old" parties | - | 75.0 | 73.2 | 86.8 | 42.8 | 71.3 | 48.28 |
| Percentage of valid votes for "new" parties | - | - | 11.2 | 5.0 | 42.7 | 19.4 | 44.04 |
| Percentage of mandates for "old" parties | | 100 | 83.09 | 94.2 | 50 | 79.75 | 47.5 |
| Percentage of mandates for "new" parties | | 0 | 12.91 | 5.8 | 50 | 21.25 | 52.5 |

Another risk arises from the increase in the use of ethnic arguments in Bulgarian politics. This can prove dangerous not only for the political stability in Bulgaria but would also have broader impact.

In conclusion, one can only state that truly significant changes are taking place in Bulgarian politics, as far as the leading actors and their announced intentions are concerned. And the months to come will show to what extent this refers to politics themselves.

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