

The decline in support for Bulgaria's Socialist Party could be the first step in a rebalancing of the country's party system

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One of the key stories to emerge from Bulgaria's election on 5 October was the disappointing result for the Bulgarian Socialist Party, the successor to the Bulgarian Communist Party which ruled the country from 1946 until 1989. **Ekaterina Rashkova** writes that while Bulgaria faces substantial political problems, the result of the 2014 election may nevertheless indicate a long-term shift in the country's balance of power which might generate some optimism for the future.



The most often encountered word characterising the early parliamentary election in Bulgaria which took place on Sunday 5 October is *fragmentation*. Most media outlets reported polling agency predictions of six to eight political parties entering parliament. After the final results were posted by the Central Electoral Commission, it is certain that not six but eight political formations will enter the legislature. These include the formerly most represented centre-right party GERB, the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), the Turkish minority party, Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS), the newly formed right-wing coalition, the Reformist Bloc (Reformatorski Blok), Ataka, and three new formations – Patriotic Front, a coalition between several political parties campaigning for national values, Bulgaria without Censorship, a newly formed nationalistic party, and ABC (ABV), a newly formed break-away socialist political party led by former president Georgi Purvanov.

The aftermath of the election portrays several winners and several losers. The biggest loser, sadly, remains the population, which will once again be governed by what seems like a hard-to-get three-party coalition and no real political stability in sight. The hopes that former Prime Minister Boyko Borisov had in forming a stable majority right-coalition with the newly coalesced Reformist Bloc have not come to fruition due to the fact that even together the two formations do not have enough votes to secure 121 deputies (necessary for a majority) – GERB received just under 32.7 per cent of the popular vote, and the Reformers have just under 8.9 per cent.

Furthermore, the latter have made statements in front of the media that they will not support a cabinet headed by Boyko Borisov. Thus, despite the willingness of thousands to oust the former communists and bring about change, despite the hundreds of nights of demonstrations, and deprivation from what one may term 'a normal life', once again, the people of Bulgaria are subject to two faiths which seems difficult to escape – on the one hand, the petty calculations of political players, where inter-party battles and ego-driven conflicts take precedence over the goodwill for bettering the situation of the people; on the other, the disinterest and disillusionment of half the population, who did not go to the voting stations this past weekend to cast their vote. With this scenario, the only hope for a working parliament is that some of the smaller formations, which are new to the table, will either support or at least not obstruct a potential minority right government.

Long-term shifts in the balance of power in Bulgaria

Despite the rather grim political situation at the moment, what we can conclude from the election and especially the changes we observe in the party system, are extremely interesting and could point to some long-term shifts in the balance of power in Bulgaria in the years to come. One of the most prominent outcomes of the election is the failure of the Bulgarian Socialist Party.

The BSP has not only been marginalised to barely a second political force with 15.4 per cent of the vote (while the third largest party, DPS, has just over 14.8 per cent), but it has also lost in every single electoral district in the country. The party, which led the recently ousted government of Plamen Oresharski, has suffered primarily due to

internal splits and political moves, which led some of its known politicians to form their own alternative party, while others to make strong statements in the media opposing particular decisions of the governing body of the party.

Another noticeable defeat is that of Ataka – the, until recently, popular nationalist party of Volen Siderov. Ataka, the key veto player in Plamen Oresharski's government, lost nearly half of its electoral support. The party's disappointing result, somewhat similar to BSP, is likely due to a break-away new party formation (Bulgaria without censorship, the party of Nikolai Barekov), as well as to losing the interest of some of its previous supporters.

The winners of the election are the several newly formed parties and coalitions which made the 4 per cent electoral barrier, as well as the leading party GERB, which has increased its vote share by more than 2 per cent of the popular vote, in addition to widening the margin between it and its largest competitor, the BSP. While the prospects for creating a workable majority, or even a supported minority government, seem slim at the moment, one thing is for sure – the coherence and strength of the socialist party is slowly but surely fading away. And while parliamentary fragmentation is not ideal for any state's scenario, there is room for optimism in that more than two decades after the fall of the communist regime, we are finally starting to see kernels of the breaking of what seemed to be an unbreakable structure in the post-communist reality in Bulgaria.

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