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Bulgaria

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Introduction

2016 proved to be more turbulent than 2015 in Bulgaria, with presidential elections, a cabinet resignation and a lot of speculation about the foreign policy orientation of the country. The Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) re-asserted itself on the political stage, the nationalist bloc consolidated, while the traditional right disintegrated.

Election report

Presidential elections

Presidential elections took place on 6 and 13 November 2016. Twenty-two candidate pairs (president and vice-president) registered for the first round of the elections and ran in a relatively short but dramatic campaign. What caused much speculation during the campaign was the delayed announcement of the candidacy of GERB. For several months before the nomination polling results consistently indicated that a GERB nominee would almost certainly become the next president, capitalising on GERB's dominance and popularity. GERB's main opponent, the Socialists (BSP), chose to tap into the anti-establishment attitudes of the electorate by fielding a candidate with virtually no experience in politics. General Rumen Radev (officially nominated by an initiative committee) ran together with Iliana Iotova, an acting socialist MEP, former deputy, BSP spokesperson and popular television journalist.

Finally, in early October, Tsetska Tsacheva, the Chairwoman of Parliament since 2009, a lawyer and a leading GERB politician, was put forward by Prime Minister Borissov as the antipode to the BSP candidate. As the campaign unfolded, Tsacheva, herself not a popular political figure in the country, faced tough competition from three dominant male candidates: Radev; the candidate of the nationalist platform Krasimir Karakachanov; and the Bulgarian 'Trump', businessman Veselin Mareshki. As a result, the GERB campaign lost momentum, and ultimately reached a parity with the BSP in the weeks running up to the elections. The main issues in the campaign were relations with Russia, the refugee/migrant crisis and the protection of national interests.

At the first round, with voter turnout at 58 per cent Radev came first, winning 25 per cent of the popular vote, while Tsacheva finished second, 130,000 votes behind. At the second round, at which almost 52 per cent of eligible voters turned out, a majority supported the opposition candidate and General Radev was elected President of the Republic, with 59 per cent of the vote.

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Table 1. Elections for President in Bulgaria in 2016

Round	Round 1	Round 2
Date	6 October 2016	13 October 2016
Electorate	6,839,380	6,848,311
Total votes cast	3,943,004	3,540,829
Turnout	57.7%[a]	51.7%
Total valid vote	3,823,646	3,474,876
Share of valid vote	97.0%	98.1%

Candidate	Formal endorsement	Votes[b] N	%	Formal endorsement	Votes[b] N	%
Rumen Radev (1963 male)	BSP	973,754	25.4%	BSP	2,063,032	59.4%
Tsetska Tsacheva (1958 female)	GERB	840,635	22.0%	GERB	1,256,485	36.2%
Krasimir Karakachanov (1965 male)	OP	573,016	15.0%			
Veselin Mareshki (1967 male)		427,660	11.2%			
Plamen Oresharski (1960 male)	DPS	253,726	6.6%			
Traicho Traikov (1970 male)	RB	224,734	5.9%			

Notes: [a]Our calculations differ slightly from the turnout rates announced officially by the Central Election Commission.
[b]There is an option in the ballot 'I don't support any of the nominated', which got 214,094 votes (5.6%) in the first round and 155,411 (4.5%) in the second round.
Source: Central Election Commission website, 2016 Presidential Elections, 1st round https://results.cik.bg/pvrnr2016/tur1/president/index.html

Referendum

A national referendum on changes in the electoral law and party financing was held parallel to the presidential vote. The referendum was initiated by Slavi Trifonov, a popular host of a late night television show. Having followed the procedures for a popularly initiated referendum, the proposal asked the Bulgarian people to vote on three questions, including changing the electoral system to a 'majoritarian system with absolute majority in two rounds'; the introduction of mandatory voting in national elections and referenda; and a decrease in the amounts of state subsidies allocated to parties by the national budget.

The national referendum barely missed the threshold needed to make its decision binding. It fell short of about 13,000 votes to reach the necessary threshold – the number of votes cast in the previous national parliamentary elections. In spite of this, the consequences of the referendum are likely to be substantial as 72 per cent voted in favour of the introduction of a majoritarian system. The National Assembly is legally bound to consider the propositions and given the public predisposition is likely to move the electoral legislative framework in this direction.

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Table 2. Results of the referendum on changes in the electoral law and party financing in Bulgaria in 2016

Date of referendum	6 October 2016		
Electorate	6,865,086		
Total votes cast	3,488,558	Votes cast as share of electorate	50.8%
Total valid votes	3,400,890	Valid votes as share of votes cast	97.5%

Referendum question	Valid answers	N	%	Outcome
Do you support the election of national representatives using the majoritarian elections system with absolute majority in two rounds?/*Подкрепяте ли народните представители да се избират с мажоритарна избирателна система с абсолютно мнозинство в два тура?*	Yes	2,509,864	72.0%	Valid but not binding (turnout above 20% but below 3,500,585 threshold)
	No	560,024	16.1%	
	No definitive answer	330,928	9.5%	
Do you support the introduction of mandatory voting at elections and referenda/*Подкрепяте ли въвеждането на задължително гласуване на изборите и референдумите?*	Yes	2,158,929	61.9%	Valid but not binding (turnout above 20% but below 3,500,585 threshold)
	No	905,691	26.0%	
	No definitive answer	336,180	9.6%	
Do you support the proposition that the annual state subsidy given to political parties and coalitions should be one Bulgarian lev (*c.* 50 euro cents) for every vote received at the previous parliamentary elections?/*Подкрепяте ли годишната държавна субсидия, отпускана за финансиране на политическите партии и коалициите, да бъде един лев за един получен действителен глас на последните парламентарни избори?*	Yes	2,516,791	72.2%	Valid but not binding (turnout above 20% but below 3,500,585 threshold)
	No	523,759	15.0%	
	No definitive answer	359,778	10.3%	

Source: Central Election Commission website, 2016 Referendum Results https://results.cik.bg/pvrnr2016/tur1/referendum/index.html

Cabinet report

Tensions in the three-party minority coalition[1] of Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB), Reformists Bloc (RB) and Alternative for Bulgarian Revival (ABV) – already noted in 2015 – increased in the first half of 2016. Early on in the year, personnel changes in the composition in the cabinet indicated tensions within the Reformists Bloc. Its Minister of Education Tanev resigned on 3 February and was replaced by Vice Prime Minister Meglena Kuneva, party leader of Movement Bulgaria of the Citizens (DBG), a constituent part of RB. In March, Democrats for Strong Bulgaria (DSB), another constituent party of RB, openly joined the opposition. In May 2016, in clear anticipation of the presidential elections in November 2016, the left-wing coalition partner ABV left the governing coalition, and its minister Ivaylo Kalfin (Minister of Labour and Social Policy) resigned and was replaced by Zornitsa Russinova (independent). This was seen as the first definite sign that the coalition formula of the cabinet needed to change and

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it resulted in negotiations to incorporate cabinet ministers of the support party Patriotic Front. Cabinet reshuffling was planned for after the presidential elections, and expectations were that the share of RB ministerial portfolios would be decreased in accordance with its decreasing parliamentary support for the cabinet and the anticipated poor performance at the presidential elections.

A decline in the popularity of Borissov's cabinet was noted in June 2016: satisfaction with the cabinet was down 4 percentage points from February to June, but in contrast dissatisfaction with Prime Minister Borissov was up 5 percentage points, reaching over 40 per cent for the first time since Borissov took office in 2014 (Alpha Research 2016). This was attributed not so much to dissatisfaction with the work of the cabinet, but more so with the intra-coalition problems, tensions and scandals that have accompanied the cabinet since 2015.

During the campaign for presidential elections and especially in the period between the two rounds, Prime Minister Borissov made a clear commitment that he would resign if the GERB candidate failed to win. The landslide victory of the candidate backed by the Socialists at the second round indicated that a considerable proportion of supporters of the coalition parties voted for the opposition candidate. This led to the resignation of Borissov on 14 November, even though the cabinet could *de facto* still rely on the support of more than 140 MPs, with 121 needed for majority decisions (GERB, RB, Patriotic Front, Bulgarian Democratic Centre and even ATAKA). With 38 MPs the Socialists were practically unable to form a coalition and they declined to attempt to do so. As Reformist Bloc, Patriotic Front, Bulgarian Democratic Centre and ATAKA declared their willingness to work out a new coalition, the president gave the Reformists two weeks to make a last attempt to form a cabinet. This did not prove successful because GERB and Borissov were determined to push for early elections. On 21 December, with only a few weeks remaining of his tenure, President Plevneliev decided to leave it to the new president to dismiss the parliament and appoint a caretaker government in January 2017.

Parliament report

Parliamentary life reflected the gradual change in the format of the coalition. In February 2016, a vote of no confidence was introduced by BSP, DPS and two unaffiliated MPs because of the cabinet's alleged failure in the area of healthcare reform. Not having enough support from other parliamentary factions, the vote failed with only 80 votes in support of the no-confidence motion. While further votes were discussed and planned, the resignation of Borissov pre-empted further parliamentary actions of control. Parliamentary party groups remained somewhat stable with the major exception of DPS, which lost quite a few members following the expulsion of Mestan.

There was a visible consolidation between the two nationalistic parties – Patriotic Front and ATAKA, with the latter moving from a radical opposition to a support party. After the presidential elections PF and ATAKA tried to build on the good performance of its candidates – Karakachanov (PF) and Notev (ATAKA) had finished third at the elections – and set out to become a 'kingmaker' in parliament. After Borissov's resignation they actively promoted the option to form a new GERB cabinet (led by Borissov or another candidate). RB stood firmly behind Borissov and were only willing to support a new cabinet with him

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Table 3. Cabinet composition of Borissov II in Bulgaria in 2016

Duration of cabinet	Inception	7 November 2014	Dissolution	27 January 2017 (resigned on 14 November 2016)
Period covered by table	From	1 January 2016	Until	31 December 2016
Type of cabinet	Minority Coalition (MC)			

A. Party/gender composition on 1 January 2016	Seats in cabinet		Seats held by women		Seats in parliament	
	N	%	N	% of party	N	%
Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria/*Grazhdani za Evropeysko Razvitie na Bulgaria* (GERB)	11	57.9%	6	54.5%	84	35.0%
Reformers Bloc /*Reformatorski Block* (RB)	6	31.6%	1	16.7%	23	9.6%
Alternative for Bulgarian revival/ *Alternativa za bylgarsko vuzrazhdane* (ABV)	1	5.3%	0	0.0%	11	4.6%
Unaffiliated	1	5.3%	1	100.0%	–	–
Totals	19	100.0%	8	42.1%	118	49.2%

B. Composition of Borissov II cabinet on 1 January 2016

See previous editions of the *Political Data Yearbook* for Bulgaria or http://politicaldatayearbook.com

C. Changes in composition of Borisov II cabinet during 2016

Ministerial title	Outgoing minister	Outgoing date	Incoming minister	Comments
Minister of Education and Science	Todor Tanev (1957 male, RB)	3 February 2016	Meglena Kuneva (1957 female, RB)	Tanev submitted his resignation on 1 February after a request by PM Borissov as Tanev was appointed personal adviser to the PM on 1 March.
Minister of Labour and Social Policy	Ivailo Kalfin (1964 male, ABV)	18 March 2016	Zornitsa Rusinova (1971 female, GERB)	After a decision by ABV to leave the coalition Kalfin submitted his resignation.

D. Party/gender composition on 31 December 2016	Seats in cabinet		Seats held by women		Seats in parliament	
	N	%	N	% of party	N	%
Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB)	12	66.7%	7	58.3%	84	35.0%
Reformers Block (RB)	5	27.8%	1	20.0%	22	9.2%
Unaffiliated	1	5.6%	1	100.0%	–	–
Totals	18	100.0%	9	50.0%	106	44.2%

Source: Council of Ministers website: http://www.government.bg/ (2016).

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Table 4. Party and gender composition of parliament (*Narodno Subranie)* in Bulgaria in 2016

	1 January 2016				31 December 2016			
	All		Women		All		Women	
Party	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB)	84	39.6%	30	35.7%	84	35.0%	30	35.7%
Coalition for Bulgaria/*Koalicia za Bulgaria* (KB)	38	15.8%	4	10.5%	38	15.8%	4	10.5%
Movement for Rights and Freedoms/ *Dvizhenie za Prava I svobodi* (DPS)	30	12.5%	3	10.0%	24	10.0%	3	12.5%
Reformist Bloc (RB)	23	9.6%	1	4.3%	22	9.2%	1	4.5%
Patriotic Front/*Patriotichen Front* (PF)	18	7.5%	2	11.1%	17	7.1%	1	5.9%
Bulgarian Democratic Center/*Bulgarski Demokratichen Centur* (BDC)	14	5.8%	1	7.7%	14	5.8%	1	7.1%
Party ATAKA/*Partia Ataka* (PA)	11	4.6%	3	27.3%	11	4.6%	3	27.3%
Alternative for Bulgarian Revival (ABV)	11	4.6%	1	9.1%	11	4.6%	1	9.1%
Unaffiliated	11	4.6%	2	18.2%	19	7.9%	3	15.8%
Totals	240	100.0%	47	19.5%	240	100.0%	47	19.6%

Source: National Assembly Archive: http://www.parliament.bg/bg/archive/51/2/

as prime minister. Both options were unacceptable for GERB as they did not guarantee cabinet stability and the party opted for pre-term elections aiming to preserve its dominant position in the parliament – be it in the government or in opposition.

Political party report

Three substantial changes happened in Bulgaria's party landscape in 2016. First, after a leadership reshuffle in the DPS, a contender for the votes of the Turkish minority emerged in early 2016. Lutvi Mestan, the former DPS leader who had been expelled from the party in late 2015 established Democrats for Responsibility, Freedom and Tolerance (DOST). While at the beginning the courts refused to register the party, arguing that the use of the abbreviation DOST (friend in Turkish) violated the constitutional ban on ethnic parties, ultimately the registration was allowed by the Supreme Court of Cassation. The party officially backed a different presidential candidate in the October elections than the DPS, and using that vote as an indicator, it appeared able to attract a substantial amount of the DPS votes in the country and particularly its supporters among the Bulgarian Turkish diaspora in Turkey. The role of DPS is visibly diminishing as the main party objective for 2016 was to retain its monopoly on the ethnic Turkish and Muslim vote.

Second, a new contender with a consumer-populist profile emerged when Vesselin Mareshki ran in the presidential elections and managed to win 11 per cent of the votes. Mareshki had been active in national and local politics since much earlier, capitalising on his major economic presence in the region of Varna. Gradually expanding his ownership of two business chains – pharmacies and gas stations – he appealed for political support by offering lower prices of both medicines and gasoline to the Bulgarian population. Aspiring to be the 'Bulgarian Donald Trump', Mareshki changed the name of his party to Will (*Volya*) in

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Table 5. Changes in political parties in Bulgaria in 2016

A. Party institutional changes in 2016
Democrats for Responsibility, Freedom and Tolerance/*Demokrati za Otgovornost, Svoboda I Tolerantnost* (DOST) became an officially registered political party on 10 April 2016 (registration challenged, allowed by the court on 29 July 2016) under the leadership of Lutvi Mestan (1960 male), as a result of the expulsion of Mestan from DPS.
Liberal Congress changed its name to Will/*Volya* in December 2016, under the leadership of Vesselin Mareshki (1967 male) who placed fourth in the 2016 presidential elections.
B. Party leadership changes in 2016
BSP party leader Michail Mikov (1960 male) lost the vote on the national party congress to Kornelia Ninova (1969 female) on 8 May 2016.

Sources: *24 Chassa*: https://www.24chasa.bg/novini/article/5901404; *Darik News*: https://dariknews.bg/novini/bylgariia/korneliq-ninova-e-noviqt-lider-na-bsp-1573586

December 2016 following his good performance at the presidential election. Volya is clearly a business party, based on the Mareshki company's reach into the economy of the country.

Third, 2016 witnessed the beginning of the disintegration of the Reformists Bloc, the coalition of traditional centre-right parties. Disagreements among its constituent parts were evident early on in the year, and while the Bloc ran a joint presidential candidate in October, by the end of 2016 it became clear that there were at least two irreconcilable camps, which were going to go their own ways come the early elections in 2017. Some of the RB parties explicitly defended the government and the strategy to maintain a coalition with GERB, while others joined the parliamentary opposition and strongly criticised the politics of Borissov II.

Institutional change report

The legal electoral framework was amended substantially in 2016 while groundwork for even more fundamental changes was laid as well. In April parliament approved several major changes: introduced mandatory voting, introduced the option 'vote against all candidates', and banned local coalitions among parties which are in different coalitions nationally. The legislature also tried to limit the number of voting sections in foreign countries, but after a strong civil society reaction from the Bulgarian diaspora, the limit was repealed. Despite disapproval from both the opposition and some of the coalition partners, mandatory voting was introduced in order to meet the strong demand of the Patriotic Front, a support party holding the key to government stability. The mandatory nature of the vote implied a punishment of being removed from the voting registry after two repeated failures to vote, and the need to re-register in order to vote again. Further changes might be anticipated following the national referendum described in the **Election report**.

Issues in national politics

Political life in Bulgaria became certainly less predictable in 2016. The instability of the coalition increased over the course of the year and presidential elections signaled the return

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of the Socialist party as a major challenger to GERB's dominance of the political process. Economically, the country continued to be the poorest in the EU, while macroeconomic indicators improved gradually.

Issues of national security became more relevant in the context of the refugee/migrant crisis, developments in Turkey and Russia's more prominent political role. Nationalist political parties Patriotic Front and ATAKA continued to be a stable presence in the country's political life and had a strong anti-minority and anti-migrant position, but as the other parties also adopted a strong patriotic stance the influence of the nationalistic bloc did not increase.

One of the hottest issues that framed the political debate and strongly influenced the presidential election outcome was the rivalry between two Bulgarian candidates for the position of UN Secretary General. The BSP-DPS government of Plamen Oresharski nominated Irina Bokova, Director-General of UNESCO (former BSP MP and Deputy Foreign Minister). In early September 2016 she proved to have limited chances of being elected. In the middle of the voting procedure on 28 September, as Bokova dropped to sixth (out of nine) position, Prime Minister Borissov withdrew the government's support for Bokova and put foreward a new Bulgarian candidate – European Commission Vice-President Kristalina Georgieva. It was a high-risk decision as the presidential elections were forthcoming and Georgieva had little chance of being elected. Ultimately, Antonio Gutieresh was elected Secretary General and the results were humiliating for Georgieva and, respectively, Borissov. During the parliamentary debates and presidential campaign in October the BSP played up their claim that GERB is unable to defend Bulgarian national interest in its foreign policy.

Note

1. The coalition had one support party – Patriotic Front (PF).

Sources and further information

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