

**ELECTION BRIEFING No.21
EUROPE AND THE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION IN BULGARIA,
25TH JUNE 2005**

Lyubka Savkova
University of Sussex, Sussex European Institute
E-mail: ls23@sussex.ac.uk

Key points:

- The election ended eight years of opposition for the Bulgarian Socialist Party which as part of Coalition for Bulgaria received 34.17% of the vote (82 seats), but failed to ensure an overall majority.
- Seven parties and coalitions – managed to carve out parliamentary presence resulting in the most fragmented and variegated configuration since the beginning of the transition period with no obvious model for a stable coalition government.
- One surprise from the election was the breakthrough of an anti-establishment formation in the face of Coalition Attack which gained a high level of support and effectively positioned itself as the fourth largest parliamentary group in the 40th National Assembly.
- A second surprise was the doubling of the number of votes for the Movement for Rights and Freedoms which achieved the best election result since the party was formed.
- Overall, the election result worked in favour of small parties which gained votes at the expense of Coalition for Bulgaria and National Movement Simeon II.
- The turnout of 55.7% was the lowest in parliamentary elections since 1990 irrespective of measures that aimed to enhance the degree of participation such as the introduction of an election draw; increasing the number of voting sections abroad and staging expensive media orchestrated election campaigns.
- The highlight of the campaign was a shift in the energies of the parties with frequent, professionally designed commercials on national TV stations which accentuated the parties' major strengths and election pledges.
- Europe was not a salient issue in the election campaign of any party including those with marginal chances for parliamentary presence and more populist appeals such as New Time, Democrats for Strong Bulgaria, Coalition People's Union and National Union Attack.

Background

Since the 2001 parliamentary elections Bulgarian party politics has been enlivened by the unexpected return of the Bulgarian king in exile – Simeon Sakskoburggothski in

the role of a prime minister after his party (National Movement Simeon the Second - NMSS) won the battle for hearts and minds, one seat short of an absolute majority. Even prior to Simeon's victory at the polls in 2001, political commentators in Bulgaria were sceptical of his ambitious programme which was long on promises and short on details of how to fulfil them. Nevertheless, the Bulgarian public was won over by the regal charisma and optimistically cast an exotic vote for National Movement Simeon the Second believing that this time round their hopes for better life were finally in safe hands.

The following four years in office was testing time for Simeon who struggled to meet his pre-election pledges in full and saw the popularity of National Movement Simeon the Second shrunk by a third at the end of the first year in power. This trend persisted in the remaining three years and days prior to the June 2005 general elections the party was capable of mobilizing just 20.6% of the vote¹.

This substantial drop in support can be explained with the inability of Simeon to live up to three of his major pledges. Firstly, he came to power promising a robust economic reform which to transform the lives of ordinary people for the better in only 800 days. Although, an economic programme was indeed implemented which had a positive effect on the level of trade, foreign investment and unemployment, the benefits failed to filter down to the older and less educated stratus of the population, particularly pensioners and those on minimum wage. In addition, there were alarming gaps in the implementation of the health reform both from an administration point of view of setting the criteria of which groups should and should not pay health insurance and how it is to be collected on behalf of the Health Authority as well as in terms of actual medical care and drugs that the patients were entitled to. This was coupled with the lack of action in modernizing the educational system and failing to address the issue of the low remuneration that teachers and lecturers continued to receive.

The second failing of Simeon was his failure to uproot corruption and sleaze at the higher echelons of power which neutralized his original claim to pursue high morality in politics. He was the first to receive criticisms for the restitution of vast plots of woodland and properties that presumably formed part of his inheritance but which many believed were returned by the courts to him because of his high position and ability to influence the institutional and legal structures.² His ministers were also not immune to scandal. Many of the privatization packages that the government approved, such as the deals for the Bulgarian tobacco company "Bulgartabak", the Bulgarian Telephone Company (BTK) and most recently the "Trakia" highway concession scheme, were suspected of enriching the pockets of the political elite and were often criticized for that by the opposition circles which attempted six no-

¹ Survey data on the question: "Who would you vote for at the parliamentary elections on the 25th June?" collected between 8-14th June by the National Centre for Research of the Public Opinion. Source: 24 Chasa (24 Hours), 21 June 2005, pp.5

² Particularly Simeon's decision to apply for the restitution of the highest mountain peak in Bulgaria - Mousala provoked anger and suspicion in many citizens who insisted the peak was part of the national heritage. On his part Simeon has always maintained that the legal statutes on the basis of which his assets are being returned to him have been passed through parliament before and not after he came to power and the same laws apply equally to all other Bulgarian citizens, rejecting claims of special treatment.

confidence votes against the Sakskoburggotski government in the four years that it remained in power.

Most obviously, Simeon's government did not succeed in transforming the legal system to secure convictions of career criminals involved in international drug trade who were regularly shooting each other on the streets of Sofia and other major cities in broad daylight, creating concerns for the European Commission in regards to the forthcoming EU membership of Bulgaria.³

Last but not least, the ex-monarch's authoritarian style of leadership is, in part, responsible for the erosion of trust that the party suffered in the public domain. It became Simeon's trademark to restrain from commenting on the events of the day in front of the cameras as any prime minister is expected to do, opting instead for the folklore phrase that comments on the subject would be made: "*When the right time comes!*" In many people's eyes that sort of behaviour was seen as arrogant, dismissive and alienating and usually understood through the prism of his privileged upbringing. It did not help that Simeon does not speak Bulgarian fluently, although his aides were emphasizing his ability to speak six other languages, and on the rare occasions that he attempted to make a statement the king appeared stiff, unnatural and struggling in front of the electorate.

To his credit Simeon II was extremely successful outside Bulgaria in advancing Bulgarian foreign policy in the promised direction towards NATO and EU membership. Bulgaria became a member of NATO in 2004 and in April 2005 signed the accession treaty with the European Union on the basis of the expectation of full membership in 2007. On that note, according to a survey published in the Information Bulletin of National Movement Simeon the Second in 2005⁴, 27% of the people were of the opinion that the government has managed to improve the international image of the country and ultimately nowadays Bulgaria is more popular among investors and desired as a partner on the European scene.

In the last four years National Movement Simeon II governed in coalition with Movement for Rights and Freedoms, the Turkish minority party present in Bulgarian politics since 1990. When the coalition government was originally announced after the 2001 elections the majority of Bulgarians were disappointed that the "king" appointed Movement for Rights and Freedoms instead of the United Democratic Forces as its coalition partner for there was a widespread mistrust towards Movement for Rights and Freedoms due to its record of previously rocking the boat of both Socialist and Democratic governments. At best the analysts predicted an unstable coalition in which the "politically inexperienced" Simeon would be forced into making concessions for the benefits of the Turks. At worst the same analysts envisaged an early election in a few years time.

As it happened the NMSS-MRF coalition was not such a bad deal after all with few dirty tricks and disloyalties. From the very beginning the leader of Movement for Rights and Freedoms – Ahmed Dogan made the usual request for his party to receive

³ According to a recent report produced by an NGO and circulated in the Bulgarian media, about 50 people with mafia links were shot in Sofia in the past year.

⁴ Survey commissioned by the National Centre for the Research of Public Opinion in March 2005. Source: NDSV Informatsionen Buletin (NMSS Information Bulletin), No.4, 2005, pp.5

the ministerial chair of the agricultural ministry which is most closely linked to the livelihood of its electorate. He was particularly supportive of social programmes on the list of National Movement Simeon the Second that were expected to benefit primarily the Bulgarian Turks such as the recent increase of the minimum wage to 150 lv. (£50) and the introduction of a scheme for temporary employment. In relation to foreign policy Dogan remained firm on European membership and did not give in to the Socialist proposition to pull out the Bulgarian military personnel from Iraq in due course.

As far as the concessions were concerned, some were inevitably made. One of the most noticeable wins for the last Movement for Rights and Freedoms administration was the continuation of direct translations of the daily news bulletins in Turkish on Bulgarian national television initiated at the time of the United Democratic Forces-led government of Kostov. The party also defended the interests of its electorate in relation to the privatization deal of “Bulgartabak” which they feared would leave many Turks without employment. As a result of their interference on the basis of the national interest the sale of the Bulgarian tobacco company to British and American Tobacco did not materialize and put on the cards the ability of National Movement Simeon the Second government to complete its time in office after the issue prompted another no-confidence vote in parliament.

At the 2005 general elections Movement for Rights and Freedoms was predicted to take its traditional 7.6% of the vote although from the party’s point of view the decision of the other minority party “Evrroma” to appear independently in this election, as well as the introduction of an integrated ballot paper for a first time were issues that could mar its prospective electoral performance. Evrroma in particular had a powerful potential to divert the young minority supporters away from Movement for Rights and Freedoms, as it appealed to this age group with its gypsy supporter – Azis who is a well liked eccentric pop-folk singer with a penchant for female clothing. The ballot paper issue on the other hand was close to Movement for Rights and Freedoms’ interests because the integrated electoral ticket which effectively was a list of all registered parties and coalitions, was expected to create difficulties for the illiterate part of the electorate, the majority of who were from the Turkish minority.

Apart from National Movement Simeon the Second and Movement for Rights and Freedoms , the titans of the bi-polar model in Bulgaria – Coalition for Bulgaria and United Democratic Forces – were also certain of entering the 40th National Assembly. Coalition for Bulgaria is dominated by the Bulgarian Socialist party, which is a successor party of the Bulgarian Communists. The party won the first democratic elections in Bulgaria in 1990 and returned briefly to power in 1994 with the Videnov administration, which lasted two years and plunged the country into a deep economic crisis. Since then Bulgarian Socialist Party (later Coalition for Bulgaria) has remained in opposition firstly to a United Democratic Forces government in 1997 and then to a NMSS-MFR-led coalition in 2001. At the last election CB mobilized just 17% of the vote which amounted to its hard core electoral base.⁵

⁵ Source: www.novinite/elections_2005/2005.php, accessed on 03/07/2005

In the subsequent four years Coalition for Bulgaria successfully climbed its way up to a confident 36% support rate in the days before the general election in 2005 and was tipped by many all sociological agencies to emerge as the winner in the forthcoming contest (although by most expectations short of an absolute majority).⁶

The formula of its success depended primarily on its ability to persuade voters of the reformed nature of the Socialist party which was helped by the successful presidency of the Bulgarian Socialist Party candidate Georgi Parvanov after the 2001 presidential elections in Bulgaria. The new, all-inclusive image was further emphasized with the young face of Sergei Stanishev, a 38 year-old bureaucrat, who was appointed as a Bulgarian Socialist Party leader after Parvanov vacated the post. For those who were still not convinced Bulgarian Socialist Party took the necessary steps to ensure it satisfied the criteria for becoming a full member of the Socialist International in the late part of 2003, which in a way legitimized its claims for being a contemporary liberal formation.

In contrast to socialists, the political right in the face of United Democratic Forces (UDF), Democrats for Strong Bulgaria, National People's Union, Union of Free Democrats and party Radicals, remained unconsolidated. This can be seen in the reduction of support for the UDF from 18% in 2001 to an expected 9.9% in the 2005 elections.⁷ United Democratic Forces is the only party on the right before 2005 that was represented in parliament and all the other parties of the right have subsequently emerged from it. Originally UDF was formed as the democratic, market-orientated opposition in Bulgaria to the communist system. It was in government twice: for a first time between 1991 and 1992 with the Dimitrov administration and again between 1997 and 2001 with the Kostov cabinet, which was the first Bulgarian government in modern times to complete a full term in office. After the fall of Kostov, the UDF leadership could not agree on the line of politics and the party split into many fractions, each formed around a different leader.

In the last four years UDF (main) has stayed almost invisible although broadly it supported the political line of the centrist National Movement Simeon the Second particularly in relation to foreign policy – NATO and EU membership. It objected to the proposal of Coalition for Bulgaria to pull out the military troops of Iraq prematurely as well as to renegotiate with the European Commission concerning the closing down of the nuclear plants in Kozluduy, which they feared could postpone Bulgaria's EU accession.

Outside the above four parties the pre-election prognosis speculated on the possibility of four additional parties and coalitions joining the main players in the next parliament, making it the most kaleidoscopic to date. All of them buzzed around the 4% threshold mark so there was no guarantee that any of them would pass the trustworthiness check on Election Day.

With the highest percentage in the polls (5.8%) from the hopefuls were Democrats for Strong Bulgaria⁸, the right wing party of the ex-prime minister Ivan Kostov. Its main difference to United Democratic Forces (main) was its ideological leaning towards

⁶ 24 Chasa (24 Hours), 21 June 2005, pp.5

⁷ 24 Chasa (24 Hours), 21 June 2005, pp.5

⁸ 24 Chasa (24 Hours), 21 June 2005, pp.5

anti-communism which was reflected in its aggressive rhetoric against the socialist party.

Second on the list was New Time with 5.5% of the vote⁹, which is a splinter party from National Movement Simeon the Second, organized around that part of the party machine which was unhappy about Simeon's authoritarian style of leadership and presented itself as a new leadership alternative to otherwise identical policy choices.

Thirdly, Bulgarian People's Union with 4.2%¹⁰, is a complicated venture of three smaller formations: the Agrarians with Anastacia Mozer, the right wing party of the Sofia mayor Stefan Sofiyanski – "Union of Free Democrats" and the nationalist party – "Revolutionary Internal Macedonian Organization" with Krassimir Karakachanov.

Finally, no one really expected with modest 3.9% the first anti-establishment party in Bulgaria¹¹, Coalition Union Attack to gain a big enough slice of the vote to make it to parliament, although this possibility could not be completely discarded. Coalition Attack appeared on the Bulgarian scene two months before the general election presenting a programme which was in opposition to every political consensus that has been agreed over the years: participation in the Iraq war, EU accession agreements, the sale of land to foreigners to name but a few.

⁹ 24 Chasa (24 Hours), 21 June 2005, pp.5

¹⁰ 24 Chasa (24 Hours), 21 June 2005, pp.5

¹¹ 24 Chasa (24 Hours), 21 June 2005, pp.5

Results

Table 1: Results of the June 2005 Parliamentary Elections in Bulgaria

Party Name	Percentage of Votes %	Number of MPs
Coalition for Bulgaria ¹²	34.17	82
National Movement Simeon II	22.08	53
Movement for Rights and Freedoms	14.17	34
Coalition Union Attack ¹³	8.75	21
Union of Democratic Forces ¹⁴	8.33	20
Democrats for Strong Bulgaria	7.08	17
Bulgarian People's Union ¹⁵	5.43	13
Total	100	240

Source: www.novinite.com/elections2005/2005.php , accessed on 03.07.2005

At the 2005 general elections in Bulgaria 22 parties and coalitions competed for the 240 seats in the National Assembly. This is a substantially reduced number of registered candidates in comparison to previous elections, a fact that can be attributed to the modifications to the electoral law approved by the National Assembly in April 2004¹⁶. According to the new rules the political parties had to present a list of support of minimum 5000 voters and a financial deposit of 20 000 lev (£7000) for a party, 40 000 lev for a coalition and 5000 lev for an independent candidate. The deposit is reimbursed if the political formations win at least 1% of the votes.

As Table 1 illustrates, 7 parties overcame the threshold of 4% required to participate in parliament and 3 more (New Time, Coalition of the Rose and Evroroma) received above the set 1% to reclaim their deposits.

Table 2: Turnout Percentages for Parliamentary Elections in Bulgaria 1991-2005

Year	1991	1994	1997	2001	2005
%	83.9	75.2	58.9	66.6	55.7

Source: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance

In addition, Table 2 shows that the 2005 election was characterized by the lowest voter turnout since the first democratic election in the country in 1990. This is hardly surprising considering that in the last two years all public opinion polls have indicated that Coalition for Bulgaria is the indisputable leader in the forthcoming election which is normally expected to have a drop-out effect on public attendance. The low turnout rate should also be judged in the context of the public passivity that had dominated the period before the election, firstly at the presidential elections in

¹² Coalition for Bulgaria incorporates Bulgarian Socialist Party, Party of Bulgarian Social Democrats, Political Movement Social Democrats, Bulgarian Agrarian People's Union "Aleksander Stambolijski", Civil Union "Roma", Movement for Social Humanism, Green Party of Bulgaria, Bulgarian Communist Party

¹³ Coalition Union Attack consists of National Movement for the Salvation of the Fatherland, Bulgarian National Patriotic Party, Union of Patriotic Forces and Militaries of the Defence Reserve

¹⁴ Union of Democratic Forces includes Union of Democratic Forces, Democratic party, Bulgarian Agrarian People's Union, National Democratic Party, George's Day Movement, BZNS National Union, Movement for an equal public model

¹⁵ Bulgarian People's Union is a coalition of Bulgarian Agrarian People's Union – People's Union, Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization, Union of Free Democrats

¹⁶ 39 parties and coalitions in 1997 and 42 in 2001 were approved for participation in the general elections by the Central Electoral Commission

2001 when the turnout was 54.9% (second round) and then at the local elections in October 2003, when 38.7% voted (second round).

Coalition for Bulgaria is the party that attracted most votes at the 2005 election and secured 82 seats. However, this tentative victory failed to match the inflated pre-election prognosis for anywhere between 89 and 118 seats, depending on which polling agency one preferred to believe in the last minute warm up prior to the election results. The fact that the coalition did not manage to win an absolute majority was not a setback in itself because the party was prepared to form the next government in a coalition with Movement for Rights and Freedoms . These original plans were complicated after the election, when the worse-than-expected performance of Coalition for Bulgaria effectively placed the party in a position to require the cooperation of two rather than one coalition partner, most probably from the political centre, as the joint votes of Coalition for Bulgaria and Movement for Rights and Freedoms were short of reaching the 120 seat majority.

Second, in terms of voter preference came National Movement Simeon II with 53 seats, which, at first sight, appears to be a dishearteningly bad result for a governing party to score. One should remember, however, that in the 16 years of democratic history the Bulgarian public has never re-elected a government in office so coming second at this election was not such a bad news for National Movement Simeon the Second after all. In fact the party did marginally better than the polls suggested in the election week, some giving it as few as 49 seats in the next parliament. More importantly, National Movement Simeon the Second emerged from the election with a lot of bargaining power from at least two perspectives: it is just about the only party (apart from Movement for Rights and Freedoms) that Coalition for Bulgaria could invite as a partner in the next government; and in the case that National Movement Simeon the Second does not wish to participate in a Socialist-led coalition by turning down the offer, as second political power it secures its own try to form a government when the efforts of Coalition for Bulgaria to find suitable partners on the right fail.

Thirdly, the impressive performance of Movement for Rights and Freedoms which gained 34 seats and moved in rank to third political power in the next parliament did not match the polling forecasts which, at their most optimistic, interpreted the potential of the movement to be around 25 seats. With the ability of hindsight it seems that the sudden appearance of Union Attack on the political landscape has acted as a mobilizing factor for the Movement for Rights and Freedoms electorate who were afraid that anti-ethnic forces might outdo their representation in parliament. Moreover, the breakthrough of Attack made Movement for Rights and Freedoms even more valuable as a coalition partner for any attempts to oust the movement from government participation would be interpreted in the Turkish circles as taking the side of the nationalists, and in the long run this could be detrimental to the harmony of the Bulgarian ethnic model of relations.

Down the pecking order it was of course the unexpected victory of Union Attack to secure 21 seats that laced the newspaper headlines in the morning after the election. It is too early to judge the full extent of the rationale that motivated the electorate to support Attack in the first place but by all means Attack's breakthrough is a result of a punitive vote against the established political class in the face of the Bulgarian Socialists and the centrist National Movement Simeon the Second. Here is the place

to say that by most probabilities Attack would be shunned in the next parliament as all political parties have so far rejected future cooperation with the Union.

On the whole, United Democratic Forces suffered the biggest decline in support and did not live up to the pre-election scenario of 26 seats, settling instead at the 20 seat benchmark. From a positive perspective, they kept their position of being the biggest political power on the right but to make their voice heard at the next parliament they need to coordinate their efforts with the other two parties – Democrats for Strong Bulgaria and Bulgarian People’s Union.

Finally, Democrats for Strong Bulgaria and Bulgarian People’s Union succeeded in their determination to get into next parliament and both parties came out stronger than expected prior to the vote. However, as in the case with United Democratic Forces all parties on the right need to work in cooperation to repair some of the damage done to the political right by this very fragmented representation.

Europe and the Election Campaign

Once an election is over it is all too easy to ponder upon the election result forgetting that realistically the result represents the climax of what in most cases is a meticulously organized and intense election campaign. At the 2005 general elections in Bulgaria the campaign season was officially opened a month before the election date and was marked by many innovative campaigning styles, media hype and dubious PR experiments. Of course some of the more traditional practices such as addressing voters directly, introducing party manifestos and taking part in TV debates were also introduced into the schedules of all major parties.

The campaign started on a false note with the controversial announcement of the National Movement Simeon the Second government that it intended to boost turnout rates by spending four million lev on an election draw, open to everyone who voted at the general election. This initiative was cleverly adopted with the intention to lure the active proportion of voters to the polls as it is within this group that National Movement Simeon the Second’s electorate can be usually located. The idea was immediately denounced as *undemocratic* by all other parties and most strongly by Coalition for Bulgaria which saw it as a threat to their own electoral success. On the other hand, voters were also less than excited about the prospect of winning a car, mobile phones, computers and other gadgets as a reward for exercising what they felt was their constitutional right. Even the EU was puzzled by what position to take on the draw but eventually half-heartedly approved the idea, providing it was based on political consensus and public approval.

Another aspect of the campaign was the professionally designed TV commercials that emphasized the parties’ strong points and election pledges a dozen times a day. For a first time the battle for the public vote was being fought to such a great extent from the marketing departments of party offices and PR agencies across the country which outperformed each other with extravagant ideas, aimed at making their clients popular and liked. Consequently, the average Bulgarian was spoilt for choice: there were the personalized commercials such as that of National Movement Simeon II, Democrats for Strong Bulgaria and the Bulgarian People’s Union, which revolved around the faces and activities of their leaders or the more inclusive TV “clips” which displayed

the reasons for support of ordinary people, preferred by Coalition for Bulgaria, United Democratic Forces and New Time. Both approaches had their individuality and appeal but in all cases they were garnished with populist slogans borrowed from the manifestos of the parties such as: “Bulgaria – this is You!” (United Democratic Forces), “Bulgaria is not for sale!” (BPU), “You have no more time to waste, your life is only one. Now is the time to change it with the New Time!”(New Time).

Outside these glossy innovations the established parties remained true to their campaigning styles. Coalition for Bulgaria led a very tolerant, balanced and active campaign with emphasis on voter contact, touring, speeches and locally organized party celebrations with traditional dances and tons of promotion materials. At the other extreme National Movement Simeon II adopted a lacklustre approach to the election which well matched the silence of its leader throughout the active campaigning period. To everyone’s surprise Simeon declined all offers to participate in TV debates or even more shockingly, when he travelled the country to open infrastructural facilities he refused to speak to members of the public that had waited to see him for hours. Otherwise, National Movement Simeon the Second’s campaign had a varying standard depending on the region in which it was organized. Broadly, campaigns in regions that had National Movement Simeon the Second representatives at local level such as Montana and Rousse were better planned and enjoyed more door-to-door visits by party candidates, events and live music concerts than those in regions without local representation.

On the right, Democrats for Strong Bulgaria and United Democratic Forces were keen to rehearse their standard approach of mobilizing street rallies which inspired support in the post-communist days, but which have since outlived their winsomeness. The biggest rally with 20,000 people was organized by DSB one week before the election in Sofia while United Democratic Forces were visibly less successful with never more than a few hundred people in sight.

Movement for Rights and Freedoms busied themselves with active campaigning, using their time-honoured tactic of offering ‘inducements’ to their electorate in the form of anything that is worth mentioning: sacks of coal, meat balls and other traditional delicacy, free trips from Turkey and 10 lev notes were some of the most well circulated incentives.

Finally, Attack’s campaign emanated from the platforms of hastily organized and racially incited, even fascistic, demonstrations and rallies as well as from the comfort of TV screens in the evening bulletin “Ataka” (Attack) on the satellite station - SKat.

There were three major opportunities for the parties to clarify their positions on national television. Channel 1 organized a debate on the 19th June, on the topic of “Difficulties and risks on the way to EU membership” which was followed by a leaders’ dispute on bTV three days later on the subject “ What do you intend to do with the country if you win the 2005 elections”. Those were supplemented with an open invitation to the leaders of the six main parties –National Movement Simeon the Second, Movement for Rights and Freedoms , CB, United Democratic Forces, DSB and BPU to be guests on “Slavi’s show” on bTV, where the format required that each leader would respond on the spot to a series of hot questions fired by Slavi’s five head-shaven, black-clad show producers.

It is surprising, in view of the prospect of Bulgarian EU membership in 2007, that the topic of Europe rarely came in the debates and when it was thrown at the party candidates, they often failed to exploit it to their benefit by differentiating their position from that of competitors. Overall, there was a sense of political consensus and urgency to finalize the necessary reforms and any doubts hovered around the ability to transform the legal system on time and raise the level of public awareness in relation to Europe.

Outside the trajectory of consensus remained only the question of renegotiating with the EU the closure of the nuclear reactors in Kozluduy. The variation of opinion was mainly between the mainstream political class and Union Attack with the latter proposing to review sections of the accession treaty that did not appear to uphold the national interest with direct reference to the above issue.

Otherwise, Europe was from time to time high-jacked in the process of the campaign as a populist front by National Movement Simeon II and Democrats for Strong Bulgaria to discredit the ability of the Socialist party to finalize the accession process. For example, in this spirit the Bulgarian foreign minister Solomon Passy (National Movement Simeon the Second) famously remarked that the public were at a crossroad to decide: “either BSP or EC”¹⁷.

Conclusions and Future Prospects

The 2005 elections in Bulgaria produced a very splintered result which is difficult to interpret as a victory for any party. Coalition for Bulgaria secured most seats but three weeks after the elections it is unclear whether it will succeed to find coalition partners and utilize the vote.

The onus is with the political class to put aside their differences as the ability of Bulgaria to realize the bid for EU membership in 2007 depends on ironing out the outstanding issues before September this year, when the European Commission will prepare the evaluation report on the country’s progress.

Negotiations between the three main parties – Coalition for Bulgaria, National Movement Simeon II and Movement for Rights and Freedoms , took weeks, although a coalition of the three seemed unlikely to emerge as the party leaders are uncompromising in regards to the prime ministerial position.

Another possibility is a wide coalition with five centre-right parties – National Movement Simeon the Second, Movement for Rights and Freedoms , United Democratic Forces, DSB and BPU but obviously this scenario will have to accommodate even more interests and its stability, in the long turn can be easily shaken.

This is the latest in a series of election and referendum briefings produced by the European Parties Elections and Referendums Network (EPERN). Based in the Sussex European

¹⁷ In “Tema”(Theme), 27June-3 July, issue 25(193), Year 5, pp.24

Institute, EPERN is an international network of scholars that was originally established as the Opposing Europe Research Network (OERN) in June 2000 to chart the divisions over Europe that exist within party systems. In August 2003 it was re-launched as EPERN to reflect a widening of its objectives to consider the broader impact of the European issue on the domestic politics of EU member and candidate states. The Network retains an independent stance on the issues under consideration. For more information and copies of all our publications visit our website at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/1-4-2.html>