

The Bulgarian European Parliament Elections of 2019 – Domestic Battles As Usual

Several months before the start of the European Parliament elections campaign in 2019 leading Bulgarian politicians both from the governing parties and opposition characterized the coming EP elections as a precursor of the upcoming local elections. The local elections will be held in October 2019, and they are considered by the governing parties and opposition to be much more important than the elections for EP. The expectations were that the EP 2019 elections would confirm the conclusion of many scholars, that EP elections are ‘second order elections’. Thus, the general mood, at the end of 2018, was that EP elections 2019 would be won by the governing party GERB (Citizens for European development of Bulgaria) without much difficulty. The situation dramatically changed two months before the start of the campaign, when the well-known Radio Free Europe, which was one of the media arch-enemies of the Bulgarian Communist Party (BKP) during the communist regime, published information about cases concerning the purchase of apartments by key figures of GERB at suspiciously low prices. This publication being initially ignored by the governing party, developed into a serious crisis for GERB and the government.

The Campaign

The “Apartmentgate” scandal significantly shaped the electoral campaign, transforming it into a purely domestic battle and a vote to either support or reject the prime-minister and the governing coalition. As a result, GERB, seriously hurt by the scandal, and loosing voters’ support, tried to motivate its supporters by emphasizing the successes (according to the party) governing of the prime-minister Boyko Borissov, and focusing on topics such as the development of infrastructure, and the use of EU funds for improving the life of the citizens. Relying on massive media support, meeting the voters personally and promising more money for their villages and cities, Boyko Borissov succeeded in stabilizing his position and the positions of the party. This meant that the party won the elections and it sent 6 MEPs to Brussels. Although the governing party GERB won these elections with 31.07, the voters who decided to support the party list were a little bit more than 600 000 and this represents one of the lowest results since the establishment of the party.

Under the slogan “Justice- now”, the main parliamentary presented opposition party, the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) tried to profit from the corruption scandal. The BSP accused GERB of corrupt practices, incompetence and mismanagement of EU funds, and significant failures of government’s social policies. The BSP leader, Kornelia Ninova, tried to capitalize on this, calling for national parliamentary elections if GERB were to lose the EP elections. Thus, she made an effort to transform the EP campaign into a referendum on the governing coalition. For this purpose, the Eurosceptic rhetoric of the party from the last three years was sidelined and the main focus was on the domestic policies failures of the government. Once again, the BSP did not succeed in terms of winning the EP elections but it improved its 2014 EP Elections results (see table 1) and sent 5 MEPs to the EP.

If we turn our focus to the nationalistic and Eurosceptic block “United Patriots” we can see a different campaign. The three parties (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Bulgarian National Movement (VMRO-BND), the National Front for Salvation of Bulgaria (NFSB), and Ataka), which are all part of the governing coalition with GERB, decided to participate separately in the election. This decision was as a result of continuing personal and political scandals among the three parties. Although all three parties share a nationalist rhetoric, they adopt very different political strategies. Ataka, the party with the lowest level of support (according to electoral polls held before the elections) among the three nationalist parties, decided to organize a TV reality show casting for candidates for its electoral list elections. The results of this casting the party created an electoral list not based on party affiliation but still closely responding to the Eurosceptic, nationalist and pro-Russian positions of the party. Despite the campaign efforts of the leader of the party list to mobilize Ataka voters with strong Eurosceptic and nationalist rhetoric, Ataka results were very poor (see table 1). With a little bit more than 20 000 votes. This leaves the party in a difficult situation, struggling for its political survival.

NFSB preferred another type of campaign. The electoral campaign of this nationalist party was completely leader-centred. Even the coalition that party formed was named “Patriots for Valeri Simeonov” after of the leader of the party. During the whole campaign the party focused on the role of NFSB as a party that is putting first the interest of Bulgaria, and it is ready to defend this interest under all conditions. As in the case with Ataka, the results of the party were disappointing for its supporters (see table 1). These results put in serious question the political survival of the party.

The most successful campaign, in the nationalist camp, was conducted by VMRO-BND. The leader of the party list was Angel Dzhambazki, a vice-chair of the party and an outspoken nationalist and Eurosceptic politician. Under the slogan “Defending Bulgaria” he fiercely attacked Brussels’ bureaucrats, the Bulgarian Roma minority, the LGBT community and liberals in the country. His highly personalized electoral campaign was one of the most visible and successful campaigns during the campaign period. The party received 7.36 percent (see table 1) and was supported by more than 140 000 voters. These electoral results situated VMRO-BND as the most influential nationalist party in the country, making it an attractive coalition partner both for GERB and BSP.

If we pay attention to the electoral performance of the ethnic party of Bulgarian-Turks DPS (Movement for Rights and Freedom), we could conclude that the party succeeded in stabilizing after the party split in 2016. Although the party didn’t reach the levels of its 2014 results, the party mobilized a significant number of voters that secured the party 16.55 percent and election of 3 MEPs.

From the extra parliamentary opposition, one small surprise on these elections was the coalition Democratic Bulgaria. With a pro-European campaign (“Bulgaria can do much more in a Strong Europe”) and strong criticisms towards the government regarding corruption and the rule of law violations in the country, this party succeeded in attracting enough voters to send one MEP to the EP (see table 1).

Turnout

If we pay attention to the turnout level, we can confirm that Bulgarian EP elections are second order elections. Usually the EP elections are not very popular in the country with turnout low (see table 2). In the first two EP elections (2007 and 2009), after the accession of the country to the EU in 2007, the explanation for the low level of participation was that EP elections concerns are seen as very distant from Bulgarian citizens and electors often do not understand the role of the EP elections. More than ten years after accession, it seems that this distance and sense of disconnect are still there. As a result the registered turnout was the lowest turnout result in the recent history of the country. To the reasons for that participation rate, already discussed, I will add one more: the political apathy spreading over the society as a consequence of unsuccessful attempts of politically engaged citizens to provoke some

significant change in Bulgarian politics. Under the Slogan “Stability” the political establishment blocked any attempts for reforms in key sectors as health care, education, security and the judiciary. Thus, this reluctance of the governing parties to address these demands and the controversial policy ideas of BSP may be contributing to the political apathy of the society.

Conclusion

The Bulgarian EP 2019 elections were elections that confirmed that GERB has no electorally significant alternative. Thus after one of the biggest corruption scandals in the last several years the governing party succeeded in winning the elections one more time. On the other side BSP demonstrated a lack of policy ideas which might have helped the party to broaden its electoral support. A battle among the nationalist the coalition partners “United Patriots” showed stable electoral support for Eurosceptic and nationalist politics but this support is still not increasing significantly. The extra parliamentary opposition in the face of Coalition Democratic Bulgaria succeeded in mobilizing some support and managed to send an MEP to the EP but this is not enough to put into question the dominance of GERB and BSP in the Bulgarian party system. With a low turnout rate, a purely domestic character of the campaign and the political apathy of the voters supporting the position of many politicians the EP elections look set to be replicated in the local elections to be held in October 2019.