

## EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION BRIEFING NO. 23

### THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS IN BULGARIA MAY 20<sup>th</sup> 2007

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#### Key points:

- The May 2007 European parliament election served as an electoral barometer at the time of the mid-term of the governing coalition. The results showed that the three coalition partners (Coalition for Bulgaria-National Movement Simeon II-Movement for Rights and Freedoms) were moving in opposite directions in terms of public support: National Movement Simeon II suffered a catastrophic election defeat with only 6.7% of the vote and gained only 1 MEP in the European Parliament; Coalition for Bulgaria finished second after GERB by a small margin while Movement for Rights and Freedoms maintained its upwards tendency first noted at the parliamentary election in June 2005.
- The most spectacular feature of the election was the success of new opposition party Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) which took the highest percentage of the vote (21.68%) and gained the same number of five MEPs as the Bulgarian Socialists.
- During the election month the Socialist Party was shaken by a massive corruption scandal which contributed to its electoral performance. The swift and timely interference of the Prime Minister limited the impact of the crisis and succeeded in mobilizing the party's core electorate.
- For a first time in the post-communist period the right was not represented as none of the three right parties - United Democratic Forces, Union of Democratic Forces and Democrats for Strong Bulgaria, managed to accumulate enough support. Their weak performance indicated the culmination of the disintegration of the political right in Bulgaria that began ten years ago.
- Nationalism and populism were reoccurring themes in the election campaigns of many parties. Ataka and GERB both gained seats on the card of nationalism. Moreover, single issue populist parties such as the Green party were competing too for a share of the vote.
- Turnout was low at 28.6% but not uncharacteristically so compared to the European parliament elections in other new EU member states. Lack of debate on European issues and general unfamiliarity with Europe contributed to the widespread public abstention from voting.

## **THE CONTEXT**

European Parliament elections were held in May 2007. These were the first elections of this type for Bulgaria and took place after Bulgaria acceded to the European Union in January 2007. The context in which the European parliamentary elections took place in Bulgaria was one of decreasing popularity of the governing coalition at a national level. The coalition was formed following the general election in 2005 and therefore the European Parliament elections occurred at a time that was effectively mid-term prior to the run up to the next general election. (which must take place before June 2009). The year had been, however, a difficult one for the coalition due to the concentration of efforts necessary to achieve the target date for EU membership of 1<sup>st</sup> January 2007. Although, the date was eventually achieved, it was at the cost of ignoring domestic issues such as health care, public sector pay and pensions, on which usually voters form their opinions at election time. This shifting of objectives affected mostly the Bulgarian Socialists which in their manifesto from the last general election in June 2005 drew heavily on pledges with a social agenda. Many of the hard-core supporters of the Socialist party were disappointed when the party prioritised fulfilling the demands of the European Commission for EU membership (which they perceived as having little impact on their day-to-day living) over more bread and butter issues that traditionally feature in the election campaigns of the party. Those voters were left with the impression that the government was being too willing to give into European demands to secure EU membership at any price, without safeguarding the national interests. Poll ratings from the last quarter of 2006 show that the popularity of the Socialist party laid below that of the governing coalition with one agency reporting in October 2006 that 63 percent of the socialist supporters were dissatisfied with the party leadership while only 27 percent were satisfied.

The other two parties in the coalition, National Movement Simeon II and the Turkish minority party Movement for Rights and Freedoms were affected differently to one another by the goal of timely membership. Similarly to the Socialists, National Movement Simeon II suffered loss of electoral support as a result of the accession. The reason for their loss of votes, however, was mainly due to their supporters' perception that the coalition was ineffective and slow in the fulfilment of the criteria for membership. This view emerged following two harsh evaluation reports by the European Commission, published in May and October 2006, which criticised the government for its inability to overcome problems in six policy areas, the most problematic of which was that of judiciary and home affairs. The reports were part of the Commission's strategy for this wave of enlargement which was one of carrot-and-stick: the actual date of membership was not confirmed until just three months prior to January 2007, while the government was constantly reminded that Bulgaria's accession might be postponed by a year if all criteria were not met on time. As public opinion data shows the majority of the supporters of National Movement Simeon II are people with professional occupations, young, well educated and on middle to high incomes, who were most likely to lose out if Bulgaria's date of membership was postponed to 2008.

The third coalition partner, Movement for Rights and Freedoms, was the only party in the coalition that was unaffected by the accession. This was because although the movement was supportive of early membership, it concentrated on fulfilling its election pledges from 2005 regarding the living standards of the Turkish electorate. Moreover, since its electorate was of Turkish origin and with basic level of education concerns regarding national interests and the speed of the accession did not influence the level of support. As an additional factor the emergence of the anti-Turkish, nationalist party Ataka at the last general election raised the level of mobilisation among the Turkish electorate, both at the presidential elections in October 2006 and especially at the European Parliament elections in May 2007.

The decision of the European Commission to accept Bulgaria into the EU as planned on the 01 January 2007 was a triumph for the coalition. At the time of that announcement in October 2006, 84

percent of Bulgarians were in favour of the accession, and 5 percent were against it as reported by Eurobarometer. According to the same source traditionally Bulgarians (and Romanians) have been one of the most supportive nations in Central and Eastern Europe of European integration. Remarkably in the Bulgarian case the certainty of the accession led to an increased level of public support (from 75 percent in 2003 to 84 percent in 2006). This contrasted the experiences of other new member states like Poland where there was a drop of support just prior to membership.

This surge of public enthusiasm for integration however did not translate into increased support for the governing parties. In the five months from the date of membership to the European Parliament elections in May 2007 the public was swayed into believing that Bulgaria was given “a second class” membership and let in through the “back door of Europe”. This opinion was popularised by the nationalist party Ataka (currently in opposition) and it was justified with some of the implications proceeding from membership.

For a start, the majority of the old and some of the new EU member states imposed restrictions on the right of Bulgarian citizens to work freely on their territories for a minimum of two and up to seven years. Prior to the accession it was expected that the EU15 would follow the same approach in relation to immigration adopted in 2004 but some countries reversed their immigration policies based on their experiences of the first Eastern enlargement. For instance, the UK and Ireland revised their open door policy and imposed restrictions while Finland and Denmark at the other extreme opened fully their labour markets. The rest of the countries did something in between by opening some sectors of the economy but keeping others closed.

The biggest disappointment in Bulgaria caused the decision of the UK to treat Bulgarians (and Romanians) differently to the countries that joined in 2004, announced on the same day as the Irish decision. The reasons for that are well known: the UK had been a firm supporter of Bulgaria’s accession throughout three Labour governments; there was no overwhelming evidence to suggest that mass scale immigration to the UK was likely to occur following the accession and there was a general sense of double standards to the two waves of enlargement which created the impression that the EU2 were unfairly penalised for the massive influx of Polish workers since 2004.

Besides the work restrictions, there were also public concerns about national interests in relation to the energy sector and the right of EU citizens to purchase land in Bulgaria following the accession. The land issue was relevant to the rural areas, small towns and villages, where the citizens were most affected by it. The main EU investor in land and property in Bulgaria were British firms and nationals and considering the work restrictions which their country imposed on Bulgarians there was public pressure to see counter measures that would cause them equal inconvenience.<sup>1</sup> One such (unworkable) measure proposed by Ataka was a ban on their right to freely acquire property and land in Bulgaria for as long as the work restrictions remained in place.

The concerns in regards to energy were more widespread and related to the closure of reactors 3 and 4 of the nuclear power plant in Kozloduy from the date of accession. Since the closure of the two reactors (as well as reactors 1 and 2, which were closed down in 2001) were a non-negotiable condition for EU membership, many people interpreted the projected financial losses for Bulgaria as the price the country had to pay to secure its place in the EU. This impression emerged among other things as a result of the bad political handling of the case by all transitional governments in Bulgaria which upon assuming office routinely pledged to save the reactors from closing, turning it in this way into a national cause. This left no space for a real public debate on other possible options as they would have been perceived by voters as betraying the national interests. It also ignored the fact

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<sup>1</sup> There was one reported case where in 2006 a British citizen was permitted to buy out a whole village in Bulgaria!

that other new member states like Lithuania and Slovakia have similarly had to close reactors in the process of negotiations and Bulgaria was not treated differently in that respect.

Thirdly, the overwhelming public enthusiasm for EU membership was closely linked to an expectation that that it would quickly raise the standard of living which did not materialise. On the contrary, the membership brought many additional regulations on producers and businesses which increased the risk of them closing down. It was also followed but a slight but persistent rise in prices in the months before the European Parliament elections. All of this coincided with a system of strict monitoring by the European Commission from the date of accession in areas where there was a realistic prospect that safeguard clauses may be necessary.

In the months before the European Parliament elections the main parties of opposition in Bulgaria were Ataka and Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) which were both with strong nationalistic profiles. Ataka had already been on the political scene since the general election in 2005 while for GERB the EP elections were the first since the party was formed. Effectively, both parties were competing for the same sections of the electorate, mostly voters who were dissatisfied with the performance of the governing coalition. Another similarity between the two was their strong anti-Turkish position which became obvious in the course of the campaign. Nevertheless, there was a general sense that GERB aimed to represent voters on the right where there was a political vacuum due to the fragmentation and irreversible disintegration of the democratic parties following the presidential election in October 2006.

The two issues that featured as part of the context for the European Parliament elections were the European Constitution and the prospect for Turkish membership. On both there was a clear-cut distinction between the position of the governing parties and those from the opposition. The European constitution was seen by the three coalition partners as a mechanism for strengthening the role and workings of the European institutions which was beneficial to Bulgaria. By contrast, Ataka perceived the Constitution as a document that facilitated the transfer of power from national to supranational level and was in conflict with Bulgaria's national interests. Similarly, while the mainstream parties viewed Turkish membership in the EU as an opportunity to assert Bulgaria's role in the region, the opposition emphasised the threat from the influx of cheap labour and immigration.

Finally, two technical aspects of the European Parliament election need to be considered. The first is that, in Bulgaria, seats are distributed in proportion to the national vote and this is in contrast to the simple member plurality system used at national elections. The main implication of this system is that it gives an advantage to the Turkish minority party, Movement for Rights and Freedoms. This is because their electorate is well mobilized and proportionately they achieve a higher result when turnout in the ethnically Bulgarian regions is low. The other consideration, which went some way to counter the effects of the quota distribution, was the recently introduced 'principle of settlement', whereas voters were only allowed to register their vote at the EP election if they had resided in Bulgaria in the last three months prior to voting. The principle of settlement affected mainly the Turkish electorate who in large numbers used to arrive from Turkey on the day of an election and have an impact of the election result without having lived in Bulgaria. According to newspaper sources 85 000 Bulgarian citizens from Turkish origin have been denied the right to vote at the EP election and for a first time in Turkey there were only two voting sections opened in Ankara and Istanbul compared to forty-two at the presidential election in October 2006.

## **THE POLITICAL PARTIES AND THEIR ELECTION CAMPAIGN**

The European Parliament election campaign was remarkably detached from the issue of Europe and the topics discussed by the main parties were the same as those debated prior to national elections. For instance the subject of lustration resurfaced once again when it was announced that six candidates for MEPs had worked as agents for the Bulgarian Secret Service before regime change. The parties then had to decide whether to replace those candidates from their electoral lists or disregard the information about their past and let them compete for seats. The Bulgarian Socialist party which appeared at the EP election as the Party of European Socialists and Movement for Rights and Freedoms were against replacements while National Movement Simeon II and GERB were more image-conscious and decided to take the opposite course of action. GERB in particular used lustration as a focus of its election campaign and its leader Boyko Borissov pledged to open the secret files as soon as the election was over.

In terms of contents as well as in terms of style the election campaigns of the main parties resembled each other. The messages about Europe were simplistic or absent altogether. The campaign of the Socialist party was marked by a major corruption scandal that took place during the election month involving the minister of the economy and energy Rumen Ovcharov and the Director of the National Investigative Agency Angel Aleksandrov, who accused the minister of corruption on a large scale through deals involving 'friendly circles'. The scandal had the potential to make the Socialist voters abstain from voting at the election but its impact on the level of support was limited through the interference of the Prime minister who took a decision unprecedented for the morals and functioning of Bulgarian politics to transfer the case in the hands of the legal system. At the same time, Stanishev sent his minister on a paid leave and sacked two junior ministers, one from the quota of the Turkish party.

In fairness, all Bulgarian governments during the transition have experienced some sort of corruption scandal in the second year in their term in power and every past government is identified in public not only by the name of its Prime minister but also by the name of the friendly circles around it: the government of Videnov with 'Oreon', Kostov with 'Olimp', Sakscoburgotski with the 'yacht company'. The difference this time was in Stanishev's approach to the crisis which was confident and transparent. This contrasted with previous experiences when no concrete actions were taken and the usual reaction from governments had been one of apathy: everything was being left on its own current until it was forgotten. Therefore, in a way the scandal reassured and mobilised the hard core of the Socialist electorate which explains the party's satisfactory election result.

Throughout the campaign the Socialists remained true to their established style of door-to-door visits by party activists who were touring the country in red mini buses to clarify the contents of the election manifesto. The manifesto itself was positive, stressing the benefits of having Bulgarian representatives in Europe. What was particularly original about the manifesto was its shape: it was in the form of a circular red ball with the slogan 'Europe for you!'. On the ball one could count the names of all 5304 towns, villages and cities in Bulgaria, the idea being that the future of all those Bulgarians depends on who is sent to the European parliament.

The Party of the European Socialists gained the same number of seats at the EP election as GERB, which is a new party in Bulgaria, established by the Sofia mayor Boyko Borissov. The party is of a leadership type and similarly to other such parties like National Movement Simeon II or Ataka its campaign was defined by the presence and rhetoric of its leader. GERB was the only party that did not use bill-boards or TV clips to popularise its identity during the election campaign but Borissov took advantage of every media opportunity to assert his party's position in politics.

Some background information about GERB's leader is therefore useful to understand his behaviour at the campaign. Borissov has a colourful political past: he began his political career as a bodyguard to the former communist dictator Todor Zhivkov, then a bodyguard to the ex-king Simeon who later gave him a high profile position as a head of the Agency for Internal Security and he is currently serving as a mayor of Sofia. Sociologists and political scientists in Bulgaria noted before the election that GERB's chances of gaining the highest number of seats in the European parliament were high due to its unique positioning on the party system - formally on the right but also with strong appeal to voters from the left, centre as well as the growing number of nationalists from the far left and right.

The key to GERB's success at this election was in the different electoral strategies towards its varied electorate during the campaign. A substantial number of left voters supported GERB as Borissov presented himself for a true communist and former member of the party who was concerned with the future of the left in Bulgaria. His criticisms of the Bulgarian Socialist Party were usually in three directions: against the political "millionaires" from the circles around the Bulgarian Socialist Party; against the participation of the Bulgarian Socialist Party in the grand coalition which was "wasting the country" and finally against the political leadership of the Bulgarian Socialist Party which was "staining the name of the party" with its incompetence and corruption.

In the last week of the run up to the EP election Borissov raised the timbre of his rhetoric against the Socialist party in an attempt to allure the right electorate to the polling stations. For instance he speculated that if GERB won the most seats at the election, the Bulgarian Socialist Party would fall apart. This last minute change of tactic may have generated some losses for GERB in terms of support from the left but the risk of the strategy was worth taking as it drew the attention of the right voters to the new party and presented it as the only alternative to the current government and political status quo. In many of his campaign gatherings Borissov repeatedly identified himself with the political right referring to the cliché that "United Democratic Forces is a trade mark, which he would like to preserve".

Thirdly, one of the biggest challenges for GERB was how to gain a share of the patriotic electorate which gravitated towards Ataka. The attitude here was similar to that in relation to the right parties, basically taking the view that Ataka's election pledges were theoretically sound but there was little point in voting for the party because Europe would not invest any trust in them. At the same time Borissov portrayed himself as being well accepted in the European capitals regardless of his regular criticisms of the Bulgarian ethnic model. The main difference between GERB and Ataka in this respect was that Ataka criticised the Turkish population whereas GERB were against the position of power given to the Turkish party at present. Both parties were against Turkish membership in the EU in near the future which was justified through the potential risk of immigration and influx of cheap labour.

The only electorate that GERB did not make any efforts to attract was that of National Movement Simeon II as it was expected that their voters would vote for GERB anyway given the weak position of the yellow party.

The Turkish minority party, Movement for Rights and Freedoms led a very active, positive and successful campaign. The slogan of the party was futuristic: 'The reason wins, 1 January 2007 – new horizons!' This was the party that allocated the most resources and time in explaining to voters the importance of the EP election and how their electoral choices may change their daily lives. At election rallies there was a lot of emphasis on the availability of European subsidies in various sectors of the economy and especially agriculture. The movement also made it clear that it

supported the European Constitution and were in favour of Turkish membership if and when Turkey fulfils the criteria for accession.

A memorable aspect of Movement for Rights and Freedom's campaign was their mobilisation strategies which stood out from those of other parties. The party relied on a large number of local level activists in the regions with Turkish population, each of whom was responsible for 1000 voters. The activists had the task to convince *all* voters in their charge to support Movement for Rights and Freedom at the election and in order to do that they had permission from the party's central office to use any methods required. The party activists appeared to resort to their time-honoured tactic seen at the last general and presidential elections of offering 'inducements' in exchange for votes. For instance it was reported that, in the region of Shumen, local activists were visiting the homes of supporters the day before the election with bags of rice, cooking oil and sugar. One of the more enterprising and refreshing methods was to give out pairs of trainers to potential voters. In order to ensure that they cast their votes for the minority party the agitators would only hand out one trainer before the election and the second one after the election when the bulletins were counted.

The nationalistic party Ataka was the most Eurosceptic party from all major contestants at this election. Virtually all of its election pledges were against European integration and the EU in general. Above all the party opposed Turkish membership in the EU which was the main theme of its election campaign. Ataka's election manifesto made it clear that the party was against the European Constitution, the formation of a European super-state and the erosion of sovereignty of national governments and parliaments as a result of European integration. It was in favour of the defence of national interests, the recognition of national sovereignty and Christian values, equal rights and responsibilities of everyone and respect for the rule of the law. All of its the election literature contained the slogan 'We need Bulgarians in EU who are able to say No!' followed by the words of Ataka's leader Volen Siderov 'I chose those people (candidate MEPs) to defend Bulgaria, you must choose them too!'

In the television clip of Ataka there were references to the historical fact that Bulgaria had saved Europe from the invasion of the Turks in the past century. The animation featured the symbols of the European capitals – Big Ben in London, the St. Marko Cathedral in Venice, the Eiffel tower in Paris and the Vatican in Rome and showed how these symbols of European civilisation simultaneously turn into mosques. The clip concluded with the writings that 'All of this was going to be a fact, if we had not stopped the Turks! Enough of Ottoman York! We are European, not from Anadola! or 'This was going to be Europe today, had it not been for us – the Bulgarians!'

The rest of the parties led a very weak and subtle election campaign detached from any European issues. For instance, the most popularised election pledge of Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria (DSB) related to a substantial increase in pensions. Similarly, the election literature of United Democratic Forces (ODS) contained information about the weather on the election day, including that it would be '+ 18 degrees C' and 'the sky would be blue again' (in reference to the colour of the party). Irreverently, the election leaflet also called on voters to leave their umbrellas and bad mood at home. Neither of the two parties had any media presence, television clips or bill-boards due to lack of finances. National Movement Simeon II also made no impact on the election trail. Simeon remained true to his royal style of campaigning which involves avoiding all media opportunities at any price and on this occasion the bulk of the party's election campaign was carried out by the leader of the party list, Bilyana Raeva.

Finally, populism was a reoccurring theme during the active campaigning period and single-issue populist parties such as the Greens led very active election campaigns. The Green party in Bulgaria

emerged in 1989 and since then has participated independently only at local elections. Their main election pledges involved the preservation of national parks and better management of public waste. They made occasional references to Europe in regards to available ecological programmes such as Nature 2000 without elaborating on them.

Another party that resorted to populism was Order, Lawfulness and Justice, which first appeared as a nationalistic party at the presidential elections in October last year. The party linked the European Parliament elections with the issue of the Bulgarian medics in Libya by suggesting that the nurses might be released from prison if they were elected as MEPs. In line with this idea they included their names at the top of their electoral list but the Central Electoral Committee rejected their application upon registration. Nevertheless, the party gained some limited public interest and support as a result of its original approach.

## **RESULTS AND ANALYSIS**

The election turnout was 28.6% which is the lowest turnout for any election in Bulgaria since 1990. Given the public enthusiasm for EU membership perhaps a higher turnout was expected but as is true elsewhere in the region, lack of debate on European issues and general unfamiliarity with Europe contributed to this result. In addition on the day of the election Bulgaria experienced a heavy spell of rain which caused floods in certain areas that may have affected people's intentions to vote. From a comparative perspective the turnout in Bulgaria was consistent with the experiences of other new member states at their first European Parliament elections in 2004. For instance, in the Czech Republic the turnout was 25.3%, in Slovenia 28.3% and in Estonia 26%. There were also countries with much lower turnouts such as Slovakia with 17% or Poland with 20%.

The electoral threshold for representation at the European Parliament election in Bulgaria was 5.56% and as seen on table 1 five parties crossed that threshold and participated in the distribution of seats. There was no clear winner at the election since the first three parties (GERB, Platform of European Socialists and Movement for Rights and Freedoms) reached a very close result and there was even speculation on the election night that Movement for Rights and Freedoms had secured the most seats.

Comparing the actual number of MEPs with the projected number before the election Platform of European Socialist, Movement for Rights and Freedoms and Ataka fulfilled their maximum potential, while GERB, National Movement Simeon II and the right parties did worse than anticipated.

Looking at the results in terms of the parties' stance on Europe, we can differentiate between two groupings: the pro-European parties (Platform for European Socialists, Movement for Rights and Freedoms, National Movement Simeon II, United Democratic Forces, Coalition 'Bulgarian Social Democrats' and Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria) and those which are soft Eurosceptic (GERB and Ataka). Aggregating their vote can be used as an indicator of the electorate's stance on Europe although this may be an unreliable measure due to the fact that voting behaviour can be influenced by many other factors (e.g. protest voting) and indeed can have very little to do with the electorate's nature or stance on Europe. Nevertheless, we can still note that the soft Eurosceptic vote is 36% (GERB and Ataka) and therefore one in three voters were susceptible to concerns with Europe while the rest were pro-European.



**Table 1: Results of the May 2007 Bulgarian election to the European Parliament**

Party	Vote Share %	Number of MEPs	Number of Expected MEPs*
<b>GERB</b>	24	5	5-7
<b>Platform of European Socialists</b>	23	5	4-5
<b>Movement for Rights and Freedoms</b>	17	4	3-4
<b>Ataka</b>	12	3	2-3
<b>National Movement Simeon II</b>	7	1	1-2
<b>United Democratic Forces</b>	5	-	0-1
<b>Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria</b>	4	-	0-1
<b>Coalition 'Bulgarian Social Democrats'</b>	3	-	-
<b>Others</b>	5	-	-

\* The numbers are based on the election prognosis of seven public opinion agencies announced on 18.05.2007, Source: '24 Chasa', p.11

Although GERB gained only five seats compared to seven expected before the election their performance was nevertheless satisfactory. It gathered the highest percentage of the vote in all age groups from 18-50 as well as in the capital and major cities. More importantly, GERB came first in places that were once considered as democratic strongholds such as Burgass, Varna, Plovdiv, Russe, Stara Zagora and Haskovo. This indicates that in the future the party might establish itself as the new right in Bulgaria although the right voters were proportionately only a small percentage of their overall electorate. If we disaggregate GERB's electorate by their past electoral preferences it is made up of 1/10<sup>th</sup> supporters of Ataka, 1/5<sup>th</sup> supporters of the left and 1/3<sup>rd</sup> supporters of National Movement Simeon II in addition to those who had abstained from voting in previous elections and voters from the right.

Platform of European Socialists came out with the same number of seats as GERB. At the start of the election campaign they had the potential to achieve a better result but the corruption scandal at the heart of the Socialist party dissuaded a fifth of their electorate to go to the pooling sections. PES was ahead of GERB in the villages and small towns, in the North West of Bulgaria and among voters from the working classes with limited income and education as well as the elderly electorate over 50 years old.

Movement for Rights and Freedoms were a leader in the mobilisation of its electorate and they managed to retain at this election 95.4% of those who had voted for them at the parliamentary election in June 2005. This could be because of their instrumental mobilisation strategies, because of the strong anti-Turkish campaign of Ataka and GERB or as a result of the introduction of the 'principle of settlement' that acted as a catalyst for higher support among the Turkish electorate.

Ataka fulfilled the expectation for three seats in the European Parliament and retained 69.6% of their electorate from the parliamentary election in 2005. The main competitor of Ataka at this election was GERB due to similarities in their anti-Turkish campaigns. The profile of Ataka's voters is extremely difficult to define: they come from across all age groups and regions in Bulgaria although there is a tendency for voters to be uneducated and ethnically Bulgarian.

The rest of the parties owe their results to their weak election campaigns, leadership disputes before the election and scandals within the parties as well as lack of clarity on pledges in relation to Europe. Above all National Movement Simeon II and the two right parties failed to relate to voters the importance of the European Parliament election and their mediocre behaviour at the campaign was the main reason for their unsatisfactory election results.

## **FUTURE PROSPECTS AND CONCLUSION**

The European Parliament election in Bulgaria provided no new insights besides what was already known about Bulgarian politics in general. For the Bulgarian Socialists the election confirmed that the party was suffering from a mid-term crisis of support but this was mediated by the popularity of its leader who proved he could still command the respect of voters and remains an asset to the party. For National Movement Simeon II the election result indicated that the party was on its way to disappearing completely from political life and, in order to prevent this from happening, it had to restructure or consider a change of leadership. This however appears unlikely given the nature of the party which was formed on the credentials of the Bulgarian ex-monarch Simeon II. Movement for Rights and Freedoms confirmed that they were not solely reliant on the support of their electorate from Turkey and despite of the 'principle of settlement' the party mobilized well their electorate. The lesson for Ataka was in the realisation that in the future they had to compete for the nationalist vote with GERB and possibly with some other parties.

The most spectacular feature of the election was clearly the success of GERB. The party now faces two challenges: it needs to establish structures at local and regional levels in order to repeat its success at the local elections in October 2007. This is important because only then would GERB be taken seriously at by the political elite and public in Bulgaria. Secondly, the party needs to find ways and avoid the fate of other leadership parties such as National Movement Simeon II and to some extent Ataka that have become too dependent on their leaders popularity.

Finally, on the topic of Europe the EP elections confirmed that European integration remains an abstract issue for voters and one on which they rarely make their electoral choices. Instead Europe is used as an arena of punishing governing parties by registering a protest vote against the status quo.

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