



**European Parties Elections  
and Referendums Network**

**EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION BRIEFING NO 32  
THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION IN BULGARIA,  
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**Key points:**

- There was a rise in the number and levels of support for centre-right parties: Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) and the 'Blue Coalition' together accumulated one third of the vote.
- A major change compared to the previous European Parliament (EP) election in May 2007 was the consolidation of the right-wing parties into the Blue Coalition, which secured one mandate.
- Protest, anti-system and nationalist parties (Attack, Order, the Law and Justice Party, Forward, LIDER) became more prominent in the election campaign, but only Attack won a share of the vote.
- Domestic issues dominated the campaign with no attention paid to Europe. Changes to the electoral system, the global economic crisis, and energy security were the leading themes in the campaigns of the main parties.
- The turnout (37.49%) was higher than at the last EP election due to the proximity between the EP and the parliamentary elections. Many voters and parties perceived the EP election as a rehearsal before the parliamentary election on the 5 July 2009.
- The issue of vote buying was more prominent than in other campaigns and there were some high profile cases reported in the media. The parties nevertheless stuck to their time honoured practices and vote buying among the Turkish and Roma minorities and villages throughout the country was widespread.

EP elections were held in Bulgaria in June 2009. They were the second elections of this type, taking place two years after the European Parliament elections in May 2007 when

Bulgaria became an EU member state.<sup>1</sup> The context in which the election was held and the result confirm the observations from 2007 regarding the positions of political parties and the Bulgarian party system. Given the fact that the election took place one month before the regular parliamentary election in July 2009, voters and parties treated the EP election as a first round of the parliamentary election, which was expected to repeat the result. This was the main reason why the EP election achieved a relatively high turnout of 37.49%.

The context in which the EP election was held was one of complete disassociation from European issues. The election campaigns of the governing parties overlooked European debates on the Lisbon Treaty, the question of further EU enlargement towards Croatia and the Balkan countries, Turkey's application for membership, and the EU budget. Instead the parties accentuated changes to the electoral system, the effects and duration of the global economic crisis on the domestic economy, energy security, increases in pensions and incomes, and the need to ensure low unemployment.

The parties of the governing coalition (the [Socialist Party-based] Coalition for Bulgaria, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms, and the National Movement Simeon II) suffered a drop in support compared to the last EP election. This is characteristic with the end of a parliamentary mandate when voters wish to punish the incumbent government. The coalition spent the first two years (2005-2007) concentrating on timely accession to the EU which was followed by two years (2007-2009) of addressing harsh criticisms from the European institutions regarding corruption and efforts to (un)freeze EU. The second stage coincided with the global economic crisis and the energy disputes between Ukraine and Russia, both of which made it difficult to fulfill key pledges from the Socialist Party election programme that related to social welfare and an independent foreign policy. As the main party in the governing coalition, Coalition for Bulgaria lost the highest percentage of the vote compared the other two parties: the Movement for Rights and Freedoms and the National Movement Simeon II. Many of its hardcore supporters were disappointed that the party prioritised the demands of the European institutions compared to the more bread and butter issues that traditionally feature in their campaigns and manifestos.

The National Movement Simeon II also lost electoral support compared to the last parliamentary election but sustained the same popularity as at the 2007 EP election. Most of the supporters who left the party voted for Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria, which is a centre-right party that shares similarities with the National Movement Simeon II such as a charismatic leader and a centre-right election programme. The latter's supporters were dissatisfied with the pace of reforms, the splits within the National Movement, the authoritarian leadership style of Simeon II and his ambition to reconstitute, on dubious grounds, a vast number of estates and land that belonged to the royal family before his abdication from the Bulgarian throne.

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<sup>1</sup> See: Lyubka Savkova, 'The European Parliament Elections in Bulgaria, May 20 2007,' *European Parties Elections and Referendums Network European Parliament Elections Briefing No 23* at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/epern-ep-bulgaria07.pdf>.

The third coalition partner, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms, was the least affected and lost only 3% of the vote compared with the 2005 parliamentary<sup>2</sup> and 2007 European Parliament elections. This was because it relied on the Turkish and Roma electorates that had a basic level of education and were fairly unconcerned with national issues. Some reports suggested that the drop in support is due to the less aggressive campaign of 'incentives' (usually money, but also clothes, shoes, coal, flour, meat, mobile phones and other essentials) that are traditionally given in exchange for votes. This year all the mainstream parties made an effort to demonstrate their allegiance to unbiased elections and transparency resulting from pressure by the European institutions. An additional factor that mobilised the minority electorate since 2005 was the prominence of the Attack party, which targeted the Bulgarian Turks and Roma in its election campaigns.

The Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria won the highest percentage of the vote, as in 2007. Its electorate was mainly that of the National Movement Simeon II and United Democratic Forces parties: urban, young, well educated and professional. For the majority of those voters joining the EU on time was a key aim but they also wanted to see more opportunities arising from membership in Bulgaria. In the course of the election campaign, Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria was not able to present a strong team and its leading position at the EP elections in both 2007 and 2009 was due to the popularity and charisma of its informal leader, the Sofia mayor Boyko Borisov. It is notable that the party did much worse outside of the capital, in rural and minority areas of the country.

Attack received the same result as in 2007. The main theme of its election campaign was opposition to Turkey's membership in the EU. The party emphasized the threat of an influx of cheap labor, immigration, the resurgence of Islam and the terrorist threat alongside its usual criticism of the governing coalition. There is no doubt, however, that anti-system rhetoric has become more popular in Bulgaria and the election suggested that Attack would soon have to compete for the same electorate with other new anti-system parties such as: Order-Law and Justice, Coalition Forward, and New Dawn. From the three new parties only Order-Law and Justice appeared to have a realistic chance of winning seats at the next parliamentary election, especially as the electoral threshold is lower than for the EP election. The main theme of the party was the fight against corruption and greater transparency and, unlike Attack, it did not raise the question of national minorities.

The biggest surprise of the election was the result of the Blue Coalition, which secured one seat in the EP. In the 2007 election, the United Democratic Forces and Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria run independently and neither managed to secure enough votes. In 2009, the two parties joined forces although the union was marred by a leadership dispute within the ranks of the United Democratic Forces over whether the party should join the Blue Coalition. The case was eventually resolved in court in favor of the Coalition.

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<sup>2</sup> See: Lyubka Savkova, 'Europe and the Parliamentary Election in Bulgaria, 25 June 2005', *European Parties Elections and Referendums Network Election Briefing No 21* at [http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/epern-eb-bulgaria\\_2005.pdf](http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/epern-eb-bulgaria_2005.pdf).

Regardless of the Blue Coalition's success in passing the electoral threshold, the fragmentation of the political right in Bulgaria is not over and there were, at the time of writing, four parties competing for the right electorate in the run up to the parliamentary elections: Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria, the National Movement Simeon II, LIDER and the Blue Coalition.

Finally, two technical aspects of the EP 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 in the past. The main implication of this system is that it gives an advantage to the Turkish minority party, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms, because their electorate is well mobilised and they achieve a high result proportionally when turnout is low. The other consideration is the 'principle of settlement', which was introduced prior to the 2007 EP election, whereby voters were only allowed to register their vote 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 the past used, to arrive for the election on the same day without having lived in Bulgaria. According to one newspaper report, 94,000 Bulgarian citizens of Turkish origin were denied the right to vote in the EP election and there were only two polling stations in Turkey (the same as in the 2007 election), compared to forty two at the October 2006 Presidential election.<sup>3</sup>

## **The political parties and their election campaigns**

The EP election was remarkably detached from the European debate and the topics discussed by the main parties concerned the forthcoming parliamentary election in July 2009. The election campaign was relatively short, three weeks compared to the usual four, and virtually all the parties - with the exceptions of the National Movement Simeon II and Attack - fought the campaign on domestic grounds.

The question of lustration resurfaced again, just like at the 2007 election, when it was announced that seven MEP candidates had been associated with the communist-era secret services. The announcement was less dramatic than at the last election as their names were already in the public domain. The topic prompted Boyko Borisov, in his capacity as an informal leader of Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria to renew his pledge to open the security service files as soon as the election period was over. MPs from all parties joined in the debate and opinions were polarised from that of Yane Yanev, a leader of the Order-Law and Justice party, Ivan Kostov from the Blue Coalition and Volen Siderov from Attack who supported a purge of former agents from prominent positions and party ranks, to that of Kristian Vigenin and Iliyana Yotova from the Coalition for Bulgaria who saw no merit in such measures.

Another hotly contested topic was the proposed changes to the current electoral system in a number of areas: the threshold for coalitions to be raised from 4 to 8%, a mixed

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<sup>3</sup> See: 'Voting Abroad Report', in *24 Chasa*, June 9 2009, p.14.

electoral system to be introduced in time for the next parliamentary election, as well as whether it should be held in the format '2 in 1' i.e. the EP national elections being held at the same time. In general, the opposition parties supported the changes while the government parties were against them. The parties voted against the '2 in 1' format in order not to overshadow the European election with domestic topics, which happened anyway. The mixed electoral system was approved but the threshold for electoral representation was not raised as the High Court ruled that this was un-constitutional and restricted the expression of democracy.

In the course of the campaign, parties referred to: the impact of the global economic crisis for Bulgaria and strategies to limit its consequences, energy security in light of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, nuclear safety and the building of the nuclear power plant in Belene, rubbish collection in the capital, and corruption. In terms of content as well as style, the main parties' election campaigns resembled each other. Opinions on Europe were simplistic or completely absent altogether. One exception was Attack whose main electoral slogan was 'No Turkey in Europe!' The other parties discussed, to a certain degree, the question of the (un)freezing of EU funds and, depending whether they were in government or opposition, either praised the efforts made to (un)freeze the funds or criticised why the measure was necessary in the first place. From a comparative perspective, the National Movement Simeon II led the most positive European campaign with the slogan 'Europe Can Hear Us', which complemented the fact that Meglena Kuneva, the Bulgarian EU Commissioner, occupied the leading place at the top of their party list.

Throughout the campaign, the Socialists remained true to their established style of door-to-door campaigning by party activists who were touring the country to clarify the contents of the election manifesto. The manifesto itself was positive and highlighted the benefits of having Bulgarian representatives at the European level. The party wanted to project an image of success by stressing its achievements during the last electoral term. Two of its most frequent election slogans in their campaign were: 'We doubled the minimum pension; this is not enough; we will continue to increase it' and 'We increased the minimum salary by 60%; but this is not enough; we will continue to raise it'. New methods of campaigning were also introduced such as an Internet profile in Facebook of prime minister and party leader Sergei Stanishev and their MEP candidates, where they could respond to questions from voters directly. The party's list of candidates was more diverse with two candidates of Roma origin. There were plenty of election materials, TV clips, billboards, speeches and the campaign left a feeling of determination to perform well at the election.

Comparing the election campaign of Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria with that of the Socialists, the former lacked vision. The most exciting element was a daily verbal exchange between Borisov and Stanishev concerning the topic of rubbish collection in Sofia where they accused each other of incompetence over the issue. As a leader-based party, just like Attack and the National Movement Simeon II, the Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria election was defined by the appearances and

messages of its leader. The key message of the campaign was: ‘To prove that Bulgaria can!’ and the election programme highlighted right-wing pledges.

The Turkish minority party, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms, led a very active, positive and well-organized campaign. It allocated many resources and efforts in explaining to the electorate the benefits of EU membership and the purpose of the EP elections. This was always done in a relevant context, for instance in relation to farming subsidies from the EU, Turkish membership, or immigration. As usual, the Movement stood out with its time honored mobilisation tactics seen at the last EP elections of offering ‘inducements’ in exchange for votes. For instance, it was reported that in the region of Lom the party had arranged with pawnbrokers to pay out a percentage of the debts of potential Roma supporters. Another refreshing method was to offer free marriage blessing rituals to Muslim couples who agreed to vote for the party. There was the usual distribution of coal, rice, flour which had become a trademark of the party since the beginning of the post-communist period.<sup>4</sup>

The other parties had lukewarm campaigns. The Blue Coalition returned to the electoral slogans from the early 1990s seeking to distinguish itself from the Socialist Party. The motto of their election campaign was: ‘It is time for the Good Ones to Come Out!’ Order-Law and Justice Party emphasised primarily the issues of corruption and lustration. Attack, on the other hand, talked only about Turkish membership while LIDER dealt with the effects of the economic crisis.

Populist parties such as the Greens did extremely well in the capital and major cities. The Greens secured 2.2% of the vote in Sofia compared with 0.79% at national level. The Bulgarian Green party emerged in 1989 and since then it has participated independently only at local elections. Its main election pledges involved the preservation of national parks and better management of public waste and recycling. They made occasional references to Europe in regards to available ecological programmes such as Nature 2000, without elaborating on them.

## **Results and Analysis**

The election turnout was 37.49%, which was higher than the turnout at the last EP election in 2007 (29.22%). The higher turnout was attributed to the proximity between the national and EP elections, which was only one month. For the majority of voters and parties, the EP election was perceived as a first round of the national election. Otherwise, unfamiliarity with Europe and the lack of a debate on European issues might have dissuaded more voters from voting.

The electoral threshold for representation at the EP election in Bulgaria was 5.56% and, as Table 1 shows, seven parties and coalitions crossed that threshold and participated in the distribution of seats. There was no clear winner since Citizens for the European

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<sup>4</sup> See: ‘Church Leaders Interfere with Election’, *Trud*, June 3 2009, p.12 and ‘Vote Buying in Lom: the MRF mafia Strikes’, in *Lomski Vestnik*, June 4 2009, p.3.

Development of Bulgaria and the Bulgarian Socialist Party reached very close results. The outcome was almost identical to that of 2007, with the exception of the performance of the Blue Coalition which made a breakthrough by winning one seat.

**Table 1: Results of the June 2009 Bulgarian Election to the European Parliament**

Party	Vote Share %	MEPs	Expected MEPs*
Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria	24.48	5	5 -6
Bulgarian Socialist Party	18.59	4	4
Movement for Rights and Freedoms	14.21	3	3-4
ATAKA	12.01	2	2
National Movement Simeon II	8.00	2	0-1
The Blue Coalition	7.99	1	1
Order-Law, Justice Party	4.72	-	0-1

Source: Central Electoral Commission reported in *24 Chasa*, 4 June 2009, p.14.

\*Based on the MBMD election survey, *24 Chasa*, 4 June 2009 p.14

Comparing the actual number of MEPs with the number projected before the election, the Bulgarian Socialist Party, Attack, the Blue Coalition and National Movement Simeon II achieved their maximum potential, while Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria, Movement for Rights and Freedoms and the Order-Law and Justice party did worse than anticipated.

Although Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria gained only five seats compared to the six expected before the election their performance was nevertheless satisfactory. It gained the highest percentage of the vote in all age groups from 18-50 as well as in the capital and other major cities. More importantly, it came first in places where in the past there were a high number of supporters of United Democratic Forces such as Varna, Burgass, Russe, Nova Zagora. If we disaggregate the party's electorate by their past electoral preferences, it is made up of one-eighth supporters of Attack, one-fifth supporters of the Socialist Party, one-third supporters of the right, and one-third supporters of National Movement Simeon II.

The Bulgarian Socialist Party came out with one seat less than Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria and slightly worse than their performance in 2007. The Socialists were ahead in the villages and small towns as well as among the elderly electorate over 50 years old, the working class, groups with limited incomes, and the less well educated.

The Movement for Rights and Freedoms managed to retain 91.3% of those who voted for them in the parliamentary election in 2005. Their voters were mainly from the Turkish or Roma minorities and living in villages and small towns. Their ability to retain their electorate could be explained by mobilization strategies and the presence of Attack as well as a degree of self-interest to ensure support for Turkey's membership in the EU.

Attack lost some of its appeal and gained two instead of the possible three seats. The main reason for their less effective performance was the appearance of parties such as Order-Law and Justice and the Union of the Patriotic Forces 'Defense' which traded on similar images of being strong and nationalistic. The profile of Attack's voters is extremely difficult to define as they come from all segments of society but there is a tendency for them to be ethnically Bulgarian and with basic education and limited income.

The rest of the parties owe their results to their weak election campaigns, leadership disputes in the case of United Democratic Forces, and lack of debate on Europe. The National Movement Simeon II gained one seat due to the popularity of Meglena Kuneva while the Blue Coalition managed to attract the hard core erstwhile supporters of the United Democratic Forces.

## **Conclusions/Future Prospects**

The EP election in Bulgaria confirmed what was already known about Bulgarian party politics. Although the election left Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria well placed to win the July 2009 parliamentary election, the party also showed a lack of human potential, structure and organization necessary to form a stable government. The Bulgarian Socialist Party lost support and looked set to move into opposition. For the Movement for Rights and Freedoms the result indicated that they could always count on the support of the minority electorate. Attack was left having to reconsider its strategy for the future as some of its supporters looked like they might back the new party Order-Law and Justice in the forthcoming election. For National Movement Simeon II the results indicated that the party would disappear from political life in Bulgaria since it had no core electorate. The Blue Coalition made it into the EP and looked quite likely to participate in the next government, which looked like it would be a centre-right one.

On the topic of Europe, the EP elections confirmed that European integration remains an abstract issue for Bulgarian voters and one on which they rarely make their electoral choices. Instead, it was domestic politics that determines the electoral outcome of how Bulgaria is represented at European level.

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*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 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*



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