



**Spoilt for Choice, Yet Hard to Get: Voters and  
Parties at the Bulgarian 2005 Parliamentary  
Election**

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## **Abstract**

The June 2005 parliamentary election in Bulgaria produced the most fragmented and variegated political configuration since the beginning of the transition period, as seven parties and coalitions managed to carve out parliamentary presence in the 40<sup>th</sup> National Assembly. The election result may lead to a restructuring of the Bulgarian political system and has once again called into question its stability at a critical time when the country was preparing for EU membership. The Bulgarian Socialist Party as part of Coalition for Bulgaria was returned to office after eight years in opposition but its lacklustre performance at the polls left it looking for coalition partners from the centre of the party system. The parties on the right were soundly defeated while the centrist formation of the Bulgarian ex-king, National Movement Simeon II, came a respectable second. One surprise from the election was the breakthrough of the first anti-establishment formation in Bulgaria, Coalition Union Attack, which leapfrogged to fourth place in the running parliament. A second surprise was the doubling of the votes for the Turkish minority party in Bulgaria, Movement for Rights and Freedoms, which achieved its best election result since the party was formed.

## **Spoilt for Choice, Yet Hard to Get: Voters and Parties at the Bulgarian 2005 Parliamentary Election**

Lyubka Savkova

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The June 2005 parliamentary election in Bulgaria produced a splintered result, which is difficult to interpret as a victory for any party. Moreover, the sheer number of parties and coalitions ushered into the next parliament raises the possibility of a reshuffling of the party system which may upset the delicate balance of party politics in Bulgaria and jeopardise the country's bid for EU membership in 2007. As anticipated prior to the election, it was the Bulgarian Socialist Party (Bulgarska Sotsialisticheska Partia: BSP), as part of Coalition for Bulgaria (Koalitsia Za Bulgaria: KB), which won the most votes and was returned to office after eight years in opposition, though lacking a clear majority to form a government on its own. The centrist formation of the Bulgarian ex-monarch Simeon Sakskoburggotski National Movement Simeon II (Natsionalno Dvizenie Simeon Vtori: NDSV) finished second, while the three parties on the right – Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria (Demokrati Za Silna Bulgaria: DSB), United Democratic Forces (Obedineni Demokraticхни Sili: ODS) and Coalition Bulgarian People's Union (Kolalitsia Bulgarski Narodен Sauz: KBNS) were soundly defeated. In addition, there were two surprises in the election result that few commentators had foreseen. The first surprise was the emergence of the first antiestablishment party in Bulgaria, Coalition Union Attack (Koalitsia Ataka : KOA) which resurfaced at a very late stage in the campaign but nevertheless mobilized over 8 percent of the vote (21 seats). The second surprise was the formidable performance of the Turkish Minority party in Bulgaria, Movement for Rights and Freedoms (Dvizenie za Prava i Svobodi: DPS), which doubled its predicted share of the vote and achieved its best election result since the party's formation in 1990. This extraordinary result followed what was an intense and innovative campaign for most parties which however failed to spur the public interest due to opinion polls predicting a comfortable win for the Socialists prior to the election. This had a negative effect upon voter turnout.

The aim of this article is to account for and analyse the election result of the 2005 Bulgarian election. It begins by mapping out the development of the party system in Bulgaria since the last parliamentary election in 2001. Within this time frame a multi-party system was established around three main groupings which replaced the bi-polar model of party politics synonymous with the transition period in Bulgaria. There was further fragmentation of the political right which resulted in three right parties competing at the 2005 election in contrast to the consolidation on the left and strengthening of the credentials of the Bulgarian Socialist Party following the 2001 presidential election. The article examines the campaigns of all seven parties that crossed the 4% threshold and entered parliament and accounts for their result. Finally, it reaches some preliminary conclusions about the development of the party system in Bulgaria in the foreseeable future.

### **The 2001–2005 Parliament: The Right Disintegrates, the Left Consolidates, the Centre Crumbles and Recovers**

Political scientists define the 2001 parliamentary election in Bulgaria as ‘critical’ for the development of the party system as it presented an opportunity for its transformation from a bi-polar to a multi-party system.<sup>1</sup> Prior to 2001 the Bulgarian political system was dominated for a decade by two conglomerates, the Bulgarian Socialist Party on the left and United Democratic Forces on the right, which had divergent ideological leanings on the axis communism vs. de-communization and policy approaches to the transition.<sup>2</sup> Electoral support bounced regularly back and forth between the two alternatives, rotating the power card between the same political rivals, which limited the progress of reforms, as both parties habitually reversed the policies of their opponent when elected to power. This political set up distinguished Bulgaria from other countries in Central and Eastern Europe such as Hungary and the

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<sup>1</sup> See R. Kolarova, ‘Transformatsiite na bulgarskata partiina sistema (1991-2001)’, *Razum*, Issue 2, (2002), p. 55.

<sup>2</sup> For a description of the bi-polar model of politics in Bulgaria see G. Karasimeonov, ‘Bulgaria’s New Party System’ in G. Pridham and P. Lewis (eds), *Stabilizing Fragile Democracies*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), pp.254-66. Other useful sources on the dynamics of the Bulgarian political system include J. Bell, ‘Democratization and political participation in “post-communist” Bulgaria’ in K. Dawisha and B. Parrott (eds), *Politics, power, and the struggle for democracy in South-East Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp.353-403; and G. Karasimeonov, ‘Past and New Cleavages in Post-Communist Bulgaria’ in Kay Lawson, Andrea Rommele and Georgi Karasimeonov (eds) *Cleavages, Parties, and Voters: Studies from Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Romania* (Westport: Praeger, 1999), pp.109-23.

Czech Republic, where the beginning of the post-communist transition saw an inflated number of parties entering parliaments as a by-product of the social euphoria, only to consolidate in the late 1990s to a few stable groupings.<sup>3</sup>

It was therefore significant, though not completely unexpected, that after the 2001 election a centrist formation organized around the Bulgarian ex-king Simeon Saksoburggotski, National Movement Simeon II, took a central stage in the 2001-2005 parliament as the main governing party in a coalition government with the Turkish minority party, Movement for Rights and Freedoms. The secret of its electoral success was twofold. On one hand it resulted from the disenchantment of the Bulgarian public with the established left/right political class as well as being based on the charismatic persona of Simeon who won the vote on a series of populist promises to improve the life standard of the electorate in 800 days, new moral and honesty in politics and consensus and political dialogue on issues of national significance.<sup>4</sup> As a result National Movement Simeon II drew its support base from all social and economic strata on a programme that combined confidence in the market economy and the rule of law with carefully selected Christian Democratic ideals such as ‘freedom and responsibility’, ‘fairness and tolerance’, ‘equality of opportunities’, ‘solidarity and subsidiary’.<sup>5</sup> Following the initial high level of support in the polls the party experienced a sustained slide in confidence visible from Figure 1 due to fractional rivalries within the party and public disappointment over the slow pace of reforms.

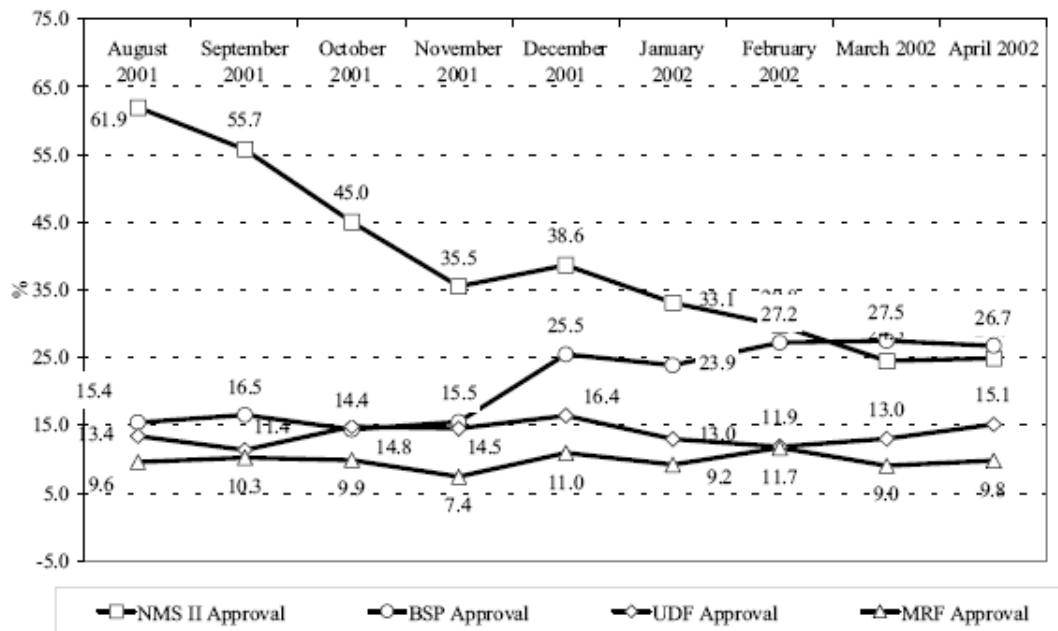
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<sup>3</sup> For a comparative account of the number of parties in CEE see F. Millard, *Elections, parties and representation in post-communist Europe*, (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> For an excellent account of the reasons which led to the success of NDSV at the polls in 2001 see A. Zdrebev, ‘Simeon Saksoburggotski I bulgarskata politicheska sistema’, *Razum*, Issue 2 (2004), pp.126-44. Also, for a brief review of Simeon’s strategy after the 2001 election see M. Koinova, ‘Saxcoburggotsly and His Catch-All Attitude: Cooperation or Cooptation?’, *Southeast European Politics*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (2001), pp.135-40. On NDSV’s performance at the polls see Z. Barany, ‘Bulgaria’s Royal Elections’, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (2002), pp.141-55; and R. Peeva, ‘Electing a Czar: The 2001 Elections and Bulgarian Democracy’, *East European Constitutional Review*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (2001), at < <http://www.law.nyu.edu/eecr/vol10num4/focus/peeva.html>>, accessed on 5 September 2006.

<sup>5</sup> See ‘Deklaratsia na tsennostite’, at <[www.nmss.bg](http://www.nmss.bg)> accessed on 23 April 2006.

FIGURE 1  
APPROVAL RATING OF THE PARTIES REPRESENTED IN PARLIAMENT\*



Source: *Early Warning Report: January – April 2002*, BBSS Gallup International.

\*Approval rating bases on the confidence in main political parties; exact research question not disclosed in the report.

The government of National Movement Simeon II was supported by Movement for Rights and Freedoms which acted as a junior partner in the governing coalition and together they identified with the political centre in the 39th parliament. The movement has always played a balancing role in Bulgarian politics, siding with both the Socialists and the Democrats in previous parliaments. Its profile is ethnic as a whole, upholding the rights and freedoms of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria and its electorate is in the farming communities, with limited income and education.<sup>6</sup> Figure 1 shows that throughout this term in office the public support for Movement for Rights and Freedoms remained constant at around 9-10%, largely due to its strategic distancing from National Movement Simeon II on privatization deals such as that of the Bulgarian tobacco company Bulgartabak in 2003 and its support for better social provisions of the Turkish minority in general.

On the right flank of the party system United Democratic Forces, the anticommunist opposition party in Bulgaria that had two spells in office in 1991-1992 and 1997-2001, experienced further fragmentation and struggled to recover following the

<sup>6</sup> For an overview of DPS's electorate see B. Dimitrova, 'DPS – granitsi na postoianstvoto' in *Bulgarski izbori 1990-1996, Rezultati, analizi, tendentsii*, (Sofia: Demetra, 1997), pp.44-46.

limited support of 18% (51 seats) which they received at the 2001 parliamentary election. Key figures within the party were expelled or left on their own terms only to resurface as leaders of new right parties taking some of the democratic electorate with them and contributing to the disappointing result of 20% at the local elections.<sup>7</sup> Three such parties were formed in time for the 2005 parliamentary election. Union of the Free Democrats (Sauz na Svobodnite Demokrati: SSD) is the party of the well-liked and three times elected Sofia mayor Stefan Sofiyanski, formed after United Democratic Forces withdrew its support from him in the 2001 party reshuffle. Ivan Kostov, the Bulgarian prime-minister of United Democratic Forces in the period 1997-2001, established a new party, Democrats for Strong Bulgaria in 2004 of which he became a leader after quitting from his post as UDF's leader in 2001. Similarly, Evgenii Bakurdzhiev, a deputy prime-minister in the government of Kostov and popularly known among the public as 'a democrat at heart', formed Bulgarian Democratic Union: Radicals (Bulgarski Demokratichen Sauz-Radikali: BDS-R) when he was expelled from government during the party's last term in office. All of this led to shrinking of the Democratic Forces' electorate to its core supporters and weakening of their strong image as an alternative to the Socialist party which United Democratic Forces had maintained up to this point, throughout the period of transition.

The crumbling of the political right in Bulgaria was in stark contrast to the consolidation on the left which was orchestrated by Coalition for Bulgaria, a formation of left-leaning parties dominated by the Socialists. The party started with a low level of support of only 17% (48 seats) at the 2001 election which accounted for its core electorate of disadvantaged groups such as pensioners, the unemployed and rural dwellers who were attracted to the party by its social agenda which was less generous but more predictable than what Simeon had on offer.<sup>8</sup> What followed was a series of well considered steps by the party organization the cumulative effect of which was a steady increase in the level of support which as table 1 shows peaked at 33 % at the time of the local elections. First and foremost the appeal of the Socialists was enhanced by allowing young and charismatic party cadres to establish themselves at the top of the party hierarchy which attracted young mainstream voters

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<sup>7</sup> For a good description of ODS's fragmentation after 2001 see G. Karasimeonov, *Novata Partiina Sistema v Bulgaria* (Sofia: Gorekspress, 2003), p.113.

<sup>8</sup> For a description of BSP's key electoral supporters see G. Karasimeonov, *Novata Partiina Sistema v Bulgaria* (Sofia: Gorekspress, 2003), pp.159-62.



disillusioned with National Movement Simeon II in the short and medium term after the election. As part of this strategy the Socialists supported the candidacy for president of Georgi Parvanov who was elected at the second round of the presidential elections in November 2001. He was replaced as party leader by Sergei Stanishev, an even younger bureaucrat with limited experience in high office. In addition, the party completely discarded its strong ideological rhetoric and reinvented itself as a forward looking liberal formation which was legitimized in the eyes of many voters by securing membership of the Socialist International in the autumn of 2003.

TABLE 1  
PRELIMINARY LOCAL ELECTION RESULTS, OCTOBER 2003

<b>Party Name</b>	<b>% of Vote</b>
Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP)	33%
United Democratic Force (ODS)	20%
National Movement Simeon II (NDSV)	10%
Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS)	10%
others	27%

*Source:* National Democratic Institute, *Local Elections 2003*,  
<[http://www.ndi-bg.org/docs/Ti\\_izbirash\\_2003en4.pdf](http://www.ndi-bg.org/docs/Ti_izbirash_2003en4.pdf)> accessed on 05-September 2006

The party system began to unravel almost immediately after the 2001 election. Both National Movement Simeon II and United Democratic Forces experienced internal splits and disintegration in the first two years in parliament which contributed to their disastrous performance at the local elections. Several major fractions within National Movement Simeon II struggled to gain influence and control during the first year in power, which did not result in official splits but nevertheless damaged greatly the reputation of the party and undermined its moralistic rhetoric. The tussles, albeit not always explicit were over several issues – the arrangement of the MP lists for the general election; the future organizational structure of National Movement Simeon II as a political party; the appointments of regional governors; and the nomination of the presidential candidate for the movement. There were three groups within National Movement Simeon II that were competing for domination: the circle around the movement’s heavyweight Plamen Panayotov, known popularly as the ‘jurist lobby’, another circle around Stoyan Ganev, former Foreign Minister and the Prime

Minister's *Chef de cabinet* and the young and Western educated cabinet and deputy ministers such as Nikolai Vassilev, Milen Vechev and Lyubka Kachakova.<sup>9</sup>

The rifts within National Movement Simeon II deepened when in March 2002 five MPs were expelled from the parliamentary group and became independent because of disagreements over the social and economic policy of the cabinet and because of the authoritarian style of management of Simeon.<sup>10</sup> Apart from damaging the party's reputation this event was significant as it raised suspicions of the degree to which Simeon could exert control over his own deputies after two of the five MPs refused to leave on his request and had to be removed. It also had an effect on the power balance within the ruling coalition, with National Movement Simeon II becoming more reliant on the support of Movement for Rights and Freedoms for passing legislation and overall governance of the country after losing its full majority of 120 seats.

A similar pattern of factional rivalries was experienced by United Democratic Forces. There were three main issues which caused serious cracks between the party's leadership and the internal fractions at the beginning. These were the possible election alliance with Movement for Rights and Freedoms prior to the election, the possibility of a coalition with National Movement Simeon II after the election and the management style of the former leader Ivan Kostov. From the three issues on which different opinions existed within the party, perhaps the most explosive was that of the leadership style of Kostov, over which both the Sofia mayor Stefan Sofiyanski and the deputy prime minister Evgenii Bakurdziev left or were expelled from United Democratic Forces.<sup>11</sup>

To make matters worse in 2003 there was a corruption scandal in the party concerning the funding of the Democracy (Demokratsia) foundation which was alleged to have been funded by mid-2001 through the activities of the controversial Russian businessman Michael Chorny. The publication of this fact sealed the rift between the

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<sup>9</sup> See Open Society Foundation, *Annual Early Warning Report – 2001*, (Sofia: BBSS Gallup International, 2001), pp.28-9.

<sup>10</sup> See E. Kavalski, 'Bulgaria: State of Chaos', *Southeast European Politics*, Vol.4, No.1, p.78.

<sup>11</sup> See Open Society Foundation, *Annual Early Warning Report – 2001* (Sofia: BBSS Gallup International, 2001), p.29.

moderate and fundamentalist right fractions within United Democratic Forces.<sup>12</sup> The new UDF leader Nadezda Mihailova, a moderate within United Democratic Forces, left the management board of the foundation shifting the responsibility in this way onto the former leader from the fundamentalist wing, Ivan Kostov. As if this wasn't enough around the same time bitter conflicts arose among the right-wing parties in Sofia (United Democratic Forces, Bulgarian Agrarian People's Union – People's Union, the Democratic Party, the Union of Free Democrats and the Gergiovdan Movement) which together tried to form a coalition to govern the capital that subsequently failed, damaging further UDF's integrity.

Both National Movement Simeon II and United Democratic Forces attempted to isolate the impact of splits and scuffles prior to the local elections and in retrospect National Movement Simeon II appears to have been more successful than United Democratic Forces in devising a strategy in the long run. For a start Simeon succeeded in registering the party in April 2002, less than a year after he came to power, and settled his relationship with the two political parties, Movement for National Revival, Oborishte, and the Party of Bulgarian Women, which originally carried the mandate of the parliamentary coalition National Movement Simeon II. This reduced the risk of further splits and the movement's image was improved when Simeon announced that he was to become a leader of the new party. In July 2003 there was a government reshuffle as well as changes in the leadership of National Movement Simeon II, the most important of which was the promotion of Plamen Panayotov from the post of former leader of National Movement Simeon II to a Deputy Prime minister. Other factors that signalled cohesion from within were the negotiation of a long-awaited offer for NATO membership that Bulgaria was given at the Prague Summit in 2002 and the recognition of National Movement Simeon II as an associate member by the Liberal International in September 2003 that gave the party international in addition to domestic legitimacy.

For its part United Democratic Forces agreed upon a series of organizational and structural changes at the 13<sup>th</sup> National Convention in March 2002 which were enacted after this date. The key decision taken at the occasion was the election of Nadezda

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<sup>12</sup> On the Chorny affair see Sofia Echo, 'The Sum of All Smears', *Sofia Echo*, 23 October 2003 at <[www.sofiaecho.com/article/the-sum-of-all-smears/id\\_8273/catid\\_5](http://www.sofiaecho.com/article/the-sum-of-all-smears/id_8273/catid_5)> accessed on 30 April 2006.

Mihailova, a former foreign minister during 1997-2001, to the position of party leader after Ivan Kostov resigned. This was seen as a victory for the reformist camp and had the potential to revitalize the party particularly as it led to an almost entire change of the central leadership and replacements in the regional and local structures which were strategic for performing well at the local elections. As it turned out the changes that were initiated were little more than cosmetic and had minimal effect on United Democratic Forces's policies and performance because within the party remained representatives of the fundamentalist wing such as the pro-Kostovite Ekaterina Mihailova and the anticommunist hardliner Edvin Sugarev, whose opinions differed from these of the moderate majority and left voters unconvinced of the party's coherence. Moreover, the spectrum of opinions that remained within United Democratic Forces prevented the party from exploiting its opposition advantage of criticizing the governing coalition as on many issues the anticommunist MPs refused to coordinate their actions with these of the Socialist party, also in opposition, which cast doubts of the reformed nature of the Democratic party and highlighted the inter-party splits to the electorate.

On the left the Bulgarian Socialist Party was following a different trajectory to National Movement Simeon II and United Democratic Forces of party consolidation, which increased its chances of returning to the forefront of Bulgarian politics, especially as this was skilfully combined with intense and vigorous criticism of many government initiatives. The first milestone was the election of Georgi Parvanov for president in November 2001. From the party's point of view this event was significant as it represented the defeat of United Democratic Forces, after their candidate, the former president Petur Stoyanov, lost by a small margin at the second round of the election.<sup>13</sup> This indisputably placed Coalition for Bulgaria as the main opposition party in the country particularly as Parvanov became quickly popular with the electorate for his ability to remain apolitical and identify with the nation's interests on issues such as sending Bulgarian military personnel to Iraq, EU and NATO memberships and the question of the Bulgarian medics in Libya.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> For an analysis of the Presidential election in Bulgaria see M.A.G. Harper, 'The 2001 parliamentary and presidential elections in Bulgaria', *Electoral Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (2003), pp.335-43.

<sup>14</sup> According to BBSS Gallup International the confidence rating of the President Parvanov has steadily increased over the years since his election. His rating in 2002 was 51%, in 2003 - 54%, in 2004 - 63% and in 2005 - 66%. See Open Society Foundation, *Annual Early Warning Report – 2005* (Sofia: BBSS

The rise of Parvanov to the presidency left vacant the position of Socialist Party leader which created a theoretical possibility for splits within the party structure, between the old and new cadres of the Socialist party. The splits, however, did not materialize as Parvanov sensibly threw his support behind Sergei Stanishev, a member of the reformist wing but also appealing to the old generation of activists with his Ukrainian (aka Soviet) ancestral roots and his father's career record at the top of the Communist Party prior to 1989.<sup>15</sup>

Stanishev was elected as party leader in December 2001 and since then has channelled his efforts into reforming the nature of the Socialist party both in terms of ideology and organizational structure, a transformation commenced by Parvanov, which paid off at the local elections. The prime change in terms of ideology was the complete abandoning of hostile rhetoric and carving an identity as a polar opposite of United Democratic Forces which was replaced by well articulated social-democratic policy proposals that resembled those of the Socialist parties in Europe.<sup>16</sup>

In addition, Stanishev pitched his electorate widely to appeal to voters from the political centre, dissatisfied with the performance of National Movement Simeon II as well as relying on its hard-core nest of left electorate at the local elections. This was a very perceptive move as National Movement Simeon II was more or less emerging as the new right, replacing the incumbent United Democratic Forces, obvious from its economic policies of privatization of national companies, price liberalization and foreign investment growth at the expense of social policies.<sup>17</sup>

The new image of the Bulgarian Socialist Party was strengthened by changes in the party organization such as creating opportunities for young and professional people to gain experience in party management in the form of work experience programmes run through local universities, the establishment of a public relation department within the

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Gallup International, 2005), Section 'Approval of Institutions' at <<http://www.earlywarning.bg/edition.php?issue=24>> accessed on 26 April 2006.

<sup>15</sup> Stanishev's mother is Ukrainian and he was born in Kherson, Ukraine in 1966. His father, Dimitur Stanishev, a Bulgarian, was a high ranking party functionary during the communist regime in Bulgaria.

<sup>16</sup> For an overview of the social emphasis see the election programme of BSP for the 2005 parliamentary election, BSP, *Za Sotsialno Otgovorno Upravlenie: Osnovni Parametri Na Programata na BSP za Upravlenie na Republika Bulgaria za Perioda 2005-2009* (Plovdiv: BSP, 9 April 2005).

<sup>17</sup> NDSV was often criticized in the national press for its harsh market-oriented economic reforms which did not result in significant improvements of the life standard of the vast majority of Bulgarians.

party that supplied information to PhDs and NGO researchers and the support at local level of highly skilled and young professionals to manage local party structures. In other words, the emphasis in the recruitment procedures within the Bulgarian Socialist Party shifted away from ideological loyalty and towards professionalism and business approach customer relations with voters.<sup>18</sup>

As a direct consequence of these efforts in October 2003 the Bulgarian Socialist Party achieved its aim to become a member of the Socialist International alongside their Romanian counterpart, the Romanian Social Democrats (RSD).<sup>19</sup> Like with all the other parliamentary parties in Bulgaria, membership in a political organization at a European level bestowed legitimacy upon its policy agenda and increased the party's lobbying potential at European level on issues of national consensus such as EU membership. It was a particular pride for the Socialists and one which they publicized prior to the local elections that the Bulgarian Socialist Party received directly the status of a full-righted member, a precedent in the workings of the Socialist International which usually accepts new parties as overseeing or consulting members before elevating them to full membership.

The positive developments within the Socialist party increased the public support for it and from Figure 1 it can be seen that as early as March 2002 the Bulgarian Socialist Party outperformed National Movement Simeon II in support ratings, a tendency which persisted until the June 2005 parliamentary election. This in turn gave the party the confidence to criticize energetically most of the economic initiatives of the governing coalition which boosted its popularity still further for many of these initiatives had a negative economic effect on certain groups of the population. For example the Socialist Party questioned the motivation behind the lump sum tax duty, known as patent tax, which affected small and medium sized businesses and the introduction of which in 2002 led to a wave of protests by taxi drivers in Bulgaria. Another unfavourable measure on which the Socialists capitalized was the imposition of VAT on drugs that fuelled shortages of pharmaceuticals and higher prices of stock

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<sup>18</sup> Interview with an official from BSP Headquarters, Sofia, 20 May 2005.

<sup>19</sup> On BSP's membership to the Socialist International see 'BSP stana chlen na Sotsinterna', *Duma*, 30 October 2003 and 'Priznanie za BSP', *Duma*, 31 October 2003. For a description of BSP's road to membership see K. Vigenin 'Putiat na BSP kum Sotsialisticheskia Internatsional' *Ponedelnik*, Vol.11-12, pp. 35-41.

in the sector. Then there were the social costs of economic restructuring attempted by National Movement Simeon II which led to job closures in the energy and mining industries, marked too in 2002–2003 by public protests across the country. The Bulgarian Socialist Party were particularly critical of the closure of reactors 1 and 2 of the nuclear power plant in Kozloduy in line with the EU requirements for accession and the discontinuation of four mines in the south of Bulgaria: St. Anne in Pernik, Trayanovo-1 and Trayanovo North in Tvurditza and Zdravetz in Dimitrovgrad.

The local election results were disappointing for all parties with a historically low voter turnout of 32% and in the case of National Movement Simeon II much worse-than-expected result. Nevertheless, in the remaining sixteen months prior to the parliamentary election National Movement Simeon II managed to regain some of its electorate from the Bulgarian Socialist Party, largely due to its successes in foreign policy which enhanced the party's popularity at home. In April 2004 Bulgaria acceded to the NATO alliance and one year later, in April 2005, it signed its Accession Treaty with the European Union. The governing coalition was also applauded for its cool stance against terrorism when in July 2004 it refused to cooperate with Islamic extremists that had kidnapped two Bulgarian lorry drivers, subsequently beheaded, in Iraq.

United Democratic Forces was pushed to the periphery of the party system, threatened not only by the opposition parties, National Movement Simeon II and the Bulgarian Socialist Party but also by newly formed right-wing parties, the most serious runner of which was that of the former United Democratic Forces leader Ivan Kostov Democrats for Strong Bulgaria. In an attempt to increase its coalition potential in November 2004 United Democratic Forces participated in the signing of a joint declaration for cooperation in the next parliament alongside 10 other right-wing parties, but excluding Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria and the Democratic Party. The declaration served the purpose to disperse some of the voter scepticism on voting for the right and indicate the willingness of the right parties to take part in a future coalition government from the centre-right.

In retrospect, the 2001–2005 parliament was always going to be a fluid one with some critics even suggesting at the beginning that it may not survive its full term. However,

National Movement Simeon II was very instrumental first in its selection of a coalition partner, preferring the minority Movement for Rights and Freedoms to the unstable United Democratic Forces and then in its strategy of limiting conflicts and strife among its fractions. Simeon remained its key asset, highly successful and unchallenged in regards to Bulgaria's foreign policy of NATO and EU membership which guaranteed the party support prior to the forthcoming election. The Bulgarian Socialist Party and United Democratic Forces on the other hand followed completely different paths of consolidation and disintegration respectively that were to seal their faith on Election Day. United Democratic Forces failed to reform regardless of its efforts at changing the party leadership and was facing competition from other right parties as well as from the left and centre. The Bulgarian Socialist Party was the predicted election winner which after eight years in the back benches and many futile attempts at transformation convincingly reformed its outlook and structure to regain power.

### **The 2005 Election: Enterprising Campaign, Diverse Result**

Regardless of the certainty of the voting outcome according to which Coalition for Bulgaria was trumpeted as the undisputed election winner by all sociological agencies across the country<sup>20</sup>, the other parties worked hard on the election trail which ensured an exiting, highly contested and intense election campaign. Judging from the public opinion reports of nine research institutes in Bulgaria summarized on Table 2 days prior to the parliamentary election at least six small parties, Coalition Union Attack, Coalition Bulgarian People's Union, Coalition of the Rose, Democrats for Strong Bulgaria, Evroroma and the New Time, were buzzing around the 4% threshold mark for parliamentary representation, all of whom fought to secure high voter turnout which was critical for their chances to enter parliament.

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<sup>20</sup>On the certainty of the election outcome see Bulgarian National Radio, *Elections 2005, No Surprise Expected*, <[http://www.bnr.bg/radiobulgari/emission\\_english/theme\\_politics/material/elections0606.htm](http://www.bnr.bg/radiobulgari/emission_english/theme_politics/material/elections0606.htm)>, accessed on 21 July 2005.



TABLE 2  
ELECTION FORCASTS FOR THE 2005 GENERAL ELECTION IN BULGARIA

Main Political Parties	Public Opinion Agency Election Forecasts								
	MBMD*	"Skala"	"AFIS"*	"Sova-Haris"	"Evrrika"	"Alpha Research"	"Mediana"	"Estat"*	Gallup International*
Coalition for Bulgaria (KB)	34.1	37.0	41.5	38.0	36.5	37.6	35.0	36.0	40.0
Nation Movement Simeon II (NDSV)	21.3	19.0	20.0	23.0	18.5	19.8	22.0	24.0	20.0
United Democratic Forces (ODS)	6.6	9.0	8.6	12.0	16.0	10.5	10.0	8.5	8.5
Bulgarian People's Union (BNS)	6.8	5.0	5.0	6.0	6.2	5.0	4.5	3.5	3.5
Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS)	8.6	10.0	6.7	10.0	7.4	7.9	9.0	9.5	9.0
Democrats for Strong Bulgaria (DSB)	6.8	6.0	5.0	5.0	7.5	4.4	7.0	4.5	6.0
Coalition Union Attack (KOA)	7.0	-	6.4	6.0	-	4.3	4.5	3.5	4.0
New Time (NV)	-	-	3.2	-	3.8	2.7	4.5	2.5	3.0
Coalition of the Rose (KR)	-	-	1.0	-	-	2.6	-	-	-
Evrroma (E)	-	-	1.1	-	-	1.5	-	-	-

Source: 24 Chasa, 23 June 2005, p.2

\*Average result based on minimum and maximum predicted outcomes; adjustment made by author.

The enthusiasm and resilience of the small parties was remarkable given the historical preferences of Bulgarian voters for main parties but it was also to some extent understandable as the same voters had at times flirted with more exotic options that gave victory at the 2001 election to the ex-king's party National Movement Simeon II and prior to that in 1994 and 1997 installed in parliament the opportunistic formation of George Ganchev Bulgarian Business Bloc.<sup>21</sup>

The voter turnout of 55.7% was the lowest turnout in parliamentary elections in Bulgaria since the beginning of democracy which was disappointing given the

<sup>21</sup> The Bulgarian Business Bloc (BBB) was founded in 1990 as a party in favour of liberalism, economic freedom and technical progress. It was a regular participant in the early post-communist life of Bulgaria and at the 1994 and 1997 elections gathered enough votes to enter parliament with 13 and 12 seats (total number of seats 240) respectively. The face of the Bulgarian Business Bloc was its colourful chair George Ganchev who used to amuse voters with his songs, poems and Western wisdom, having lived in the UK and the US after marrying (and later divorcing) the daughter of a British ambassador. Ganchev's starring moments came at the 1992 and 1996 presidential elections when he was a serious contender for the post. In 1997 the Bulgarian Business Bloc dissolved but Ganchev registered for all presidential elections until 2006 without making an impact.

professional nature of the campaign.<sup>22</sup> The only similar turnout result of 58.9% was at the 1997 election when following the resignation of the Socialist government of Videnov, United Democratic Forces were similarly certain to win the elections with an absolute majority. Besides the obvious lead for the Socialists the low turnout rate was also a consequence of the timing of the general election on a Saturday as well as the recent changes to the electoral law passed in April 2004 that led to a significant reduction of the number of registered parties and coalitions<sup>23</sup>. On this occasion 22 parties and coalitions were on the electoral roll compared to 42 at the 2001 election and 39 in 1997.

The election result was almost as exciting and unpredictable as the campaign itself. Seven parties and coalitions entered parliament which was by far the most diverse mix since the beginning of the transition period. As Table 3 shows, Coalition for Bulgaria secured a tentative victory of 34.17% (82 seats) but fell short of an absolute majority (120 seats) and could only form government in a coalition. National Movement Simeon II came second with 22.08% (53 seats), slightly more than what the opinion polls had predicted which increased its bargaining power in the coalition negotiations. On the right three parties managed to cross the required threshold with similar outcomes: United Democratic Forces, Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria and Coalition Bulgarian People's Union had 20, 17 and 13 seats respectively. There were two surprises in the result that enlivened the structuring of the new parliament. Movement for Rights and Freedoms, the Turkish minority party in Bulgaria doubled its usual share of the vote which guaranteed it a high-profile presence in the political life of the country. Finally, the biggest surprise in the result was the unexpected breakthrough with 21 seats (8.75%) of Coalition Union Attack, the first openly nationalistic and anti-establishment party in Bulgaria to secure parliamentary representation.

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<sup>22</sup> Turnout Percentages for Parliamentary Elections in Bulgaria for the Period 1991-2005 were as follows: 1991 – 83.9%, 1994 – 75.2%, 1997 – 58.9%, 2001 – 66.6%, 2005 – 55.7%. Source: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, <[http://www.idea.int/vt/country\\_view.cfm?CountryCode=BG](http://www.idea.int/vt/country_view.cfm?CountryCode=BG)>, accessed on 5 September 2006.

<sup>23</sup> On the new electoral law see Bulgarian Nation Radio, *Election 2005: New Voting Rules and Political Chances and Ambitions*, <[http://www.bnr.bg/radiobulgaria/emission\\_english/theme\\_politics/material/newelecrules.htm](http://www.bnr.bg/radiobulgaria/emission_english/theme_politics/material/newelecrules.htm)> accessed on 29 June 2005. Parliamentary elections are always held on Sundays in Bulgaria and the 2005 election on a Saturday was expected to act as a deterrent to voter turnout as it interfered with the work of farm workers from family farms that travel on Saturdays to attend to their land.

TABLE 3  
RESULTS OF THE JUNE 2005 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION IN BULGARIA

Party Name*	2005 Percentage of Votes cast %	2005 Number of MPs	2001 Percentage of Votes cast %	2001 Number of MPs
Coalition for Bulgaria (KB)	34.17	82	17.15	48
National Movement Simeon II (NDSV)	22.08	53	42.74	120
Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS)	14.17	34	7.45	21
Coalition Union Attack (KOA)	8.75	21	-	-
Union of Democratic Forces (ODS)	8.33	20	18.18	51
Democrats for Strong Bulgaria (DSB)	7.08	17	-	-
Bulgarian People's Union (BNS)	5.43	13	-	-
Total	100	240	-	240

Source: <[www.novinite.com/elections2005/2005.php](http://www.novinite.com/elections2005/2005.php)> accessed on 3 July 2005

\*For the 2005 election, **Coalition for Bulgaria** incorporates Bulgarian Socialist Party, Party of Bulgarian Social Democrats, Political Movement Social Democrats, Bulgarian Agrarian People's Union "Aleksander Stamboliiski", Civil Union "Roma", Movement for Social Humanism, Green Party of Bulgaria, Bulgarian Communist Party. **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. **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. **Bulgarian People's Union** is a coalition of Bulgarian Agrarian People's Union – People's Union, Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization, Union of Free Democrats

### **Coalition for Bulgaria's Apprehensive Political Comeback: Narrow Victory, No Landslide**

The election result of 34.17% (82 seats) was lower than what Coalition for Bulgaria was predicted to achieve even though its election campaign was extremely popular with some social groups which in previous elections it had repetitively failed to impress such as the city dwellers and the highly educated. Table 4 details the profile of the Socialist voter and is useful in evaluating the effectiveness of the party's campaign. There was a clear shift towards better educated voters supporting the Socialist party: 33.7% of them had higher education and 47 % came from a secondary background. Another positive change was Coalition for Bulgaria's orientation towards the county towns and the capital which throughout the period of transition have remained democratic strongholds. The public support in Sofia where the party won the election made up 12.7% of the Coalition's total electorate, while a third of its supporters were from major towns.

TABLE 4  
VOTER PROFILE OF THE 2005 ELECTION:  
PERCENTAGE OF VOTES CAST FOR EACH PARTY GROUPED BY  
DEMOGRAPHIC CATEGORIES

	KB	NDSV	DPS	KOA	ODS	DSB	BNS
<b>Age Groups</b>							
18-29	10.1	23.8	26.8	18.4	22.1	18	16.7
30-39	9.8	20.4	23.3	19.5	21	20.1	21.4
40-49	15.6	19.2	16.2	19.2	18.8	17.1	20.1
50-59	22.3	16.9	17	21.5	19.6	19.2	17.9
60+	42.1	19.8	16.7	21.6	18.4	25.6	23.9
<b>Education</b>							
Higher	33.7	37.2	10.6	38.8	44.4	51.9	37.7
Secondary	47	52.3	40.8	54.2	47.1	41.6	48.2
Basic or Less	19.3	10.5	48.6	7.1	8.5	6.5	14.1
<b>Ethnic Group</b>							
Bulgarian	95.9	95.3	13.6	99.2	94.2	97.4	97.3
Turk	1.2	2.1	80	0.1	4.3	0.9	0.6
Roma	2.4	1.9	5.9	0.4	0.6	0.9	1
Other	0.5	0.7	0.5	0.4	0.8	0.9	1.1
<b>Social Group</b>							
Employers	5.2	10.8	3.2	9.3	11.4	11	11.7
Middle Management	4	6.1	1.6	5.4	7.4	10.2	6.1
Clerks	17.4	19.7	5.9	19.9	21.7	23.9	20.8
Worker	17.9	24.6	32	24.7	22.5	15.7	22.4
Student	2.6	7.3	2.8	7.8	6.9	6.5	5.4
Unemployed	8.8	8.8	31.7	6.8	8.1	5.2	8.8
Housewife	1.6	1.8	5.1	1.7	2.3	1.7	2.1
Pensioner	42.6	20.8	17.8	24.4	19.5	25.7	22.8
<b>Vote 2001</b>							
NDSV	14.2	71.2	5.9	34.9	11.6	11.9	24.7
ODS	3.8	7.2	3.5	11.3	72.5	63.1	27.7
KB	70.8	3.7	3.2	13.1	3.3	3.1	5.8
DPS - LS - "EVROROMA"	0.6	0.7	69.1	0.5	0.4	0.4	0
"Gergiovdn" - VMRO	0.8	1.1	0.7	3.1	2.3	1.6	11.4
Other	1.3	1.8	6.2	16.7	1	9.9	14.2
Not Voted	8.4	14.3	11.5	20.3	8.9	9.9	16.1
<b>Type of Residency</b>							
Capital	12.7	14.6	0.8	18.3	17.9	34.8	20.2
County Town	32.3	41.9	12.9	40.5	43.3	32.7	31.7
Other Town	22.5	22.6	12.9	28.6	23.8	19.1	23.6
Village	32.4	20.9	73.4	12.7	14.9	13.4	24.4

Source: 24 Chasa, 28th June 2005; Results based on an Exit-Poll by the Institute for Marketing and Social Research (MBMD).

Question: "Who did you vote for at the election?"

The coalition remained true to its established campaigning style and run an active, well organized and non-aggressive campaign with emphasis on voter contact, touring, speeches, local party celebrations and vast quantities of promotional material. A central piece of the campaign was a stylish TV commercial, beamed on national television a dozen times a day during the election month, which displayed ordinary people from different age groups explaining why they would be supporting the Socialist alternative on the background of the famous Bulgarian song ‘My country, my Bulgaria’, popular with Bulgarians during the Communist era for its nationalistic lyrical contents. The slogan of the campaign ‘One for All – All for One!’ was also part and parcel of the campaign’s positively nationalistic theme. The aim was to project an image of competence and pragmatism which run in contrast to the dysfunctional and chaotic behaviour of the three parties from the right.<sup>24</sup> In line with this strategy throughout the campaign the Socialist leader Sergei Stanishev emphasized the party’s political strengths that ‘BSP learns from its mistakes’, ‘BSP is not promising wonders’ and ‘BSP’s best feature is its approachability, openness and dialogue’.<sup>25</sup>

Regardless of the model campaign on the day of the election Coalition for Bulgaria failed to realize its full potential and the predictions for a landslide gave way to a modest victory. This disappointing election performance remained undetected until the actual results came out and outstripped even the gloomiest election prognosis according to which the party would need the support of Movement for Rights and Freedoms in order to form the next government. After the election results were announced it quickly became clear that the votes of Movement for Rights and Freedoms alone were insufficient and a vision of a grand coalition with National Movement Simeon II as a third partner started to take shape.<sup>26</sup> In retrospect this last minute slipping of support can be attributed to three main factors that jointly contributed to this worst-than-expected result.

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<sup>24</sup> For an example of the contradictive behaviour on the right refer to ‘Nadezda: Purvi sme v Diasno; Kostov: ne, nie sme’, *24 Chasa*, 26 June 2005.

<sup>25</sup> See ‘Predizborni Avtografi’, *Tema*, 27 June-3 July 2005.

<sup>26</sup> See ‘BSP + DPS bez mnozinstvo’, *24 Chasa*, 21 June 2005; and ‘Levitsata i DPS niamat mnozinstvo’, *Trud*, 26 June 2005.

First and foremost the certainty with which the Socialists were tipped as election winners gave impetus to key players from the political right and centre to begin a personal smear campaign during the election month against the leader of the Socialist Coalition which dissuaded part of the left electorate to vote for Coalition for Bulgaria.<sup>27</sup> A common charge against Stanishev that struck a cord with the Socialists' traditionally old sympathizers was that at 38 he was still not married and had no children with his long-term partner, the war journalist Elena Yoncheva, although living with her for the past 10 years. His lifestyle was portrayed by the leader of the New Time Emil Koshlukov in one of the key television debates as 'immoral', 'wasteful' and 'irresponsible', all characteristics that were meant to erode Stanishev's credibility as a Prime minister in waiting.<sup>28</sup> The leader of Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria Ivan Kostov made his own contribution criticizing Stanishev for avoiding military service due to his dual Bulgarian-Ukrainian nationality. This little known fact put Stanishev at odds with thousands of young Bulgarian men and their families who had no such choice. Once in the public domain the military service issue was capitalized too by Lyuben Dilov Junior, a coalition partner of United Democratic Forces, who organized a mock military training exercise for the benefit of Stanishev in the seaside city of Burgas. Even National Movement Simeon II did not remain impartial to the offensive and the then foreign minister Solomon Pasi publicly expressed doubt that Stanishev had sufficient influence and support inside his own party to carry out reforms which meant that at the election Bulgarians were choosing between two alternatives 'either EC, or BSP'.<sup>29</sup>

Besides the verbal pre-election crusade against the leader of Coalition for Bulgaria another factor that deprived the coalition of more votes was the last minute emergence of the anti-systemic party Ataka that succeeded to enter parliament by attracting votes from the left periphery which otherwise would have gone to the Socialist party.<sup>30</sup> A large share of the Ataka electorate constituted of the losers of post-communist transition who the Bulgarian political scientist Andrei Raichev accurately defined as

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<sup>27</sup> See 'Predizborni Avtografi', *Tema*, 27 June-3 July 2005; and 'Nai Gorchiva e Pobedata na BSP', *24 Chasa*, 28 June 2005.

<sup>28</sup> Leadership Debate on the topic 'What do you intend to do with the country if you assume power?', on *bTV*, 22 June 2005.

<sup>29</sup> See 'Golemiyat Vupros e EC ili BSP', *24 Chasa*, 11 June 2005

<sup>30</sup> See 'Novata Situatsia' *Kapital*, June 2005; and 'Parlamentut ste e sharen i nestabilen' *Standart*, 26 June 2005.

“unsatisfied consumers”<sup>31</sup>: people without jobs, on a low pay or pensioners that in previous elections gravitated towards the Bulgarian Socialist Party. Their support for Ataka represented a punitive vote against the whole political class in Bulgaria over its systematic failing in the last fifteen years to improve the general standard of living and implement successful economic reforms.

A third factor that may have reduced the support for the Socialists was the introduction of an integrated ballot ticket which required the voters to indicate their party from a list of all registered political parties and coalitions for the general election. Before then all democratic elections in Bulgaria followed the principle of the single bulletin where each party had a separate electoral ticket with a different colour. Overall, the new system was more efficient but there were cases where old or illiterate voters got confused on how to cast their votes. For example, one newspaper reported that in a village in the region of Stara Zagora where about sixty percent of the population were Roma, the majority of people were asking for help on how to vote.<sup>32</sup> In another instance an old man from Sofia tried to vote by cutting off his party’s name from the integrated bulletin which invalidated his vote.<sup>33</sup> Since Coalition for Bulgaria’s electorate is traditionally old and/or less educated the integrated system of voting prevented some from registering their support for the party.

### **Mobilizing Well the Centre Electorate: National Movement Simeon II’s Dignified Election Defeat**

With 22.08% of the vote (53 seats) National Movement Simeon II’s performance was a dignified defeat compared to its impressive result in 2001 when it won the election with 42.74% (120 seats), the equivalent of one vote short of a full majority. This massive slump in support of a governing party is typical for Bulgaria. Historically the other two major parties the Bulgarian Socialist Party and United Democratic Forces have suffered similar defeats after their terms in office at the 1997 and 2001 elections respectively. The difference this time was that the fall out was easy to predict well in advance of the election and the modest support that the party received was as a result

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<sup>31</sup> See ‘The New Situation’ *Kapital*, June 2005; and also ‘“Ataka” shte broi nedovolnitate’, *24 Chasa*, 23 June 2005; and ‘Otchaianite Bulgari izbraha “Ataka”’, *24 Chasa*, 26 June 2005.

<sup>32</sup> See ‘Negramotni Romi’, *Monitor*, 26 June 2005.

<sup>33</sup> See ‘Dyado napuva da Glasuva s Parche ot Buletina’, *Standart*, 26 June 2005.

of mobilizing well its core electorate. From Table 4 one can see that National Movement Simeon II remained popular with the more affluent social strata: voters between the ages of 18 and 39, students and people in private occupations as well as those with higher education and living in the capital or major towns.

At the heart of National Movement Simeon II's electoral strategy was presenting itself as the main alternative to the Socialist party. The distancing from Coalition for Bulgaria was made explicit half-way through the campaign when the leader of National Movement Simeon II Simeon Saksoburggotski publicly announced in an interview with the influential newspaper *24 Chasa* that his party would not support a government with the mandate of the Bulgarian Socialist Party after the election.<sup>34</sup> His statement was intended to end weeks of speculation of a secret deal between the exiting and the Socialists according to which National Movement Simeon II would lend its support to the Socialist Party after the election if the Socialist Party agreed to break its pledge of investigating the legitimacy of Simeon's royal inheritance. Moreover, in the light of the certainty with which Coalition for Bulgaria was tipped to win the election, National Movement Simeon II wanted to reassure its core supporters that their votes would not subsequently go to the left as part of a coalition arrangement since otherwise the party risked a massive desertion leading to a catastrophic defeat. Thirdly, in the role of a main opponent to Coalition for Bulgaria the centrists could compete for votes from the right electorate who was disheartened by the constant quarrels between the myriad of right parties prior and during the active campaigning period and where National Movement Simeon II had good chances for success due to the relative proximity of its election pledges to those of United Democratic Forces and Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria. As table 4 shows 7.2% of National Movement Simeon II's supporters had at the previous election voted for United Democratic Forces.

A distinguishing feature of the party's election campaign was the initiation of an election draw open to everyone who voted in the general election. Officially the draw was justified as a method of boosting turnout rates and paid for by the government but in reality it was expected to motivate primarily supporters of National Movement

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<sup>34</sup> See 'Ne bihme podkrepili pravitelstvo na BSP', *24 Chasa*, 06 June 2005.



Simeon II to go to the polls since they were young, pragmatic, well educated as well as being the most hesitant.<sup>35</sup> None of the other parties embraced the idea of the draw because it was a threat to their own electoral performance. Coalition for Bulgaria, United Democratic Forces and Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria all opposed it on the grounds of degrading the electoral process, while the leader of Movement for Rights and Freedoms Ahmed Dogan (at the time still a coalition partner to National Movement Simeon II) called it a ‘misunderstanding’. Even the EU was puzzled by what position to take when the opposition parties in Bulgaria threatened to challenge the initiative in court but eventually different European commissioners gave a half-hearted approval for it providing it was based on public and political consensus. One day after the election the national press reported that 250 000 Bulgarians had registered with the draw and a day later the number of candidates for prizes had doubled to more than 500 000.<sup>36</sup> Post election data showed that a substantial share of those registered had voted as anticipated for the royal party.<sup>37</sup>

Other aspects of National Movement Simeon II’s campaign were less successful and worked against the party’s popularity. Most obviously during the election month Simeon turned down all offers for debates and disputes on national television and radio programmes which left the impression that he was incapable of taking responsibility for his time in power. The other parties capitalized on his silence by drawing attention to it such as at the last television debate on bTV three days prior to the election when the left leader Stanishev and the Movement for Rights and Freedoms leader Ahmed Dogan both abstained from participation in protest to Sakskoburgotski’s systematic absences.<sup>38</sup> The individuality of Simeon’s campaigning style was no doubt designed to revive his past enigma that led him to success at the last election. The culmination of this approach came four hours prior to the end of the period for campaigning when seeking maximum impact he finally appeared on national television to address the nation in his capacity of a Prime minister but not party leader. Nevertheless, his speech was an evaluation of the work of his coalition government and stressed upon its successes in the areas of foreign

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<sup>35</sup> See ‘Simeon – smokinoviat list na sotsialistite’, *Novinar*, 26 June 2005.

<sup>36</sup> See ‘250,000 dushi napirat za nagradi v tombolata’, *Trud*, 26 June 2005; and ‘Nad 500,000 dushi v lotariata’, *Trud*, 27 June 2005.

<sup>37</sup> See ‘Koi specheli ot lotariata?’, *Standart*, 16 September 2005.

<sup>38</sup> See ‘Simeon, Stanishev i Dogan otkazaha posleden sblusuk’, *24 Chasa*, 23 June 2005.

policy and economic growth. In the second part of the speech the ex-monarch declared his appetite for a second term in office with the pledge to follow the same policy framework for the future as before.<sup>39</sup>

The two buzz words that echoed from Simeon's statement were *continuation* and *capability* and it is precisely on these concepts that the overall campaign of National Movement Simeon II was being modelled: constantly comparing the achievements of the party in the last four years with the plans for the next term. For example, in its 2005 election leaflets National Movement Simeon II compared its successful signing of the Accession treaty with the EU in 2004 with the prospect of EU membership in 2007. The slogan of the campaign 'To continue forward, in order to be proud of Bulgaria!' was also illustrative of the same principle of encouraging support through a positive evaluation of National Movement Simeon II's first term in office.<sup>40</sup>

Regardless of the efforts invested during the election campaign to present National Movement Simeon II as a successful party, its second place at the election reflects Simeon's failure to live up to one of his major pledges of improving the standard of living of Bulgarians in 800 days, which massively eroded his charisma and public trust. This explanation was circulated widely by different news agencies in Bulgaria and abroad when the election results came out. Reuters for example contextualized their report on the movement's performance with the observation that in 2004 when National Movement Simeon II were in power Bulgaria was the second poorest EU candidate state in terms of GDP per head followed only by Turkey.<sup>41</sup> In addition to the economic prosperity of the nation National Movement Simeon II failed to tackle organized crime, street assassinations, corruption at the high and middle echelons of power and treatment of the Roma, for all of which it was being harshly criticized by the European Commission as part of the accession process. The EU's close monitoring of Bulgaria's progress made the government failings in these areas more obvious and intolerable to the general public and so indirectly contributed too to the party's inevitable fall from grace.

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<sup>39</sup> See 'Tsariat se obrushta kum natsiata', 24 *Chasa*, 23 June 2005.

<sup>40</sup> See *Election Leaflets*, NDSV 2005

<sup>41</sup> Reuters News Bulletin, 26 June 2005

## **Movement for Rights and Freedoms's Unexpected Electoral Success: Is Ataka to Blame?**

The doubling of the votes of the Turkish minority party (Movement for Rights and Freedoms) was one of the two major surprises from the 2005 election and an impressive milestone for the party itself for achieving its best election result of 14.17% (34 seats) since it first appeared on the Bulgarian political scene in 1990. Prior to 2005 Movement for Rights and Freedoms had secured between 5.5 to 7.5% of the vote at general elections and as Table 2 shows the most optimistic scenario for the last election was that it may reach between 9 and 10%. Judging from the profile of its supporters described on Table 4 Movement for Rights and Freedoms remained true to its ethnic minority appeal: 80% of its electorate was Turkish and 5.9% was from Roma origin. For the party voted people with basic education, 90% of them had secondary education or less and 86% of its total electorate was living in villages or very small towns.

On the face of it the election campaign of Movement for Rights and Freedoms followed the stereotype of previous campaigns which involved high profile appearances of its leaders in the regions with Muslim representation that culminated in grand celebrations aimed at impressing the villagers with political wealth and generosity. At the 2005 election this practice exceeded all proportions and the leader of Movement for Rights and Freedoms Ahmed Dogan and his entourage spared no expense visiting their strongholds in helicopters and donating lavishly to churches and mosques around the country in an attempt to convince their impoverished electorate that their own prosperity could rub off on them too simply by voting for the minority party.<sup>42</sup>

The campaign was well organized and targeted three specific electoral groupings: the Bulgarian Muslims living in the south of the country, those permanently resident in Turkey and the group of other minorities the most prominent of which were the Muslim Roma. The three groups are geographically dispersed and a variety of strategies was applied in order to mobilize them. To enhance the electoral

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<sup>42</sup> See 'Sokola poletia naliavo', *Tema*, 27 June-3 July 2005.

participation from Turkey Movement for Rights and Freedoms relied on the support of Turkish politicians and expatriate organization of Bulgarian Muslims (including religious ones) which promoted the party on local TV channels and door-to-door visits from party activists that continued even on the day of national reflection, one day prior to the election, when all forms of political propaganda were strictly forbidden.<sup>43</sup> The vote of the Bulgarians living in Turkey was crucial for Movement for Rights and Freedoms since many of their supporters in Bulgaria had migrated for the summer to Western Europe and were expected to miss the June election. Their number was to be balanced out with increased support from Turkey which explains the high profiled campaign in favour of Movement for Rights and Freedoms in Bulgaria's southern neighbour. The only influential Turkish figure that spoke against Dogan's party was the dissident Avni Veli but the impact of his opinion was successfully isolated with the overwhelming support and publicity that the movement received from everywhere else. The efforts invested in the campaign in Turkey paid off handsomely at the election and Movement for Rights and Freedoms managed to double its Turkey based electorate to 44 000 that constituted about 10% of the party's overall support.<sup>44</sup>

The Roma vote was mobilized differently through alleged financial bribery and arranged transportation to voting sections in the form of excursions usually from villages to nearby county towns or the capital.<sup>45</sup> Quite a few incidents of this nature were reported in the media where Roma voters were being given notes of 10 lev in order to vote for Movement for Rights and Freedoms or they were issued with forged voting permits and transported to vote more than once in different sections across the country. The additional challenge that this election presented for the illiterate Roma was how to use the integrated electoral ticket, a problem that Movement for Rights and Freedoms recognized and provided training for at local level in the areas with Roma population. This naturally guaranteed that the Roma votes would not be invalidated and would go to the Turkish party as planned. The methods of training were also of some interest since they were designed to minimize the risk of votes

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<sup>43</sup> See 'Turski televizii propagandirat za DPS', *Monitor*, 26 June 2005.

<sup>44</sup> See 'V Turtsia glasuvaha dvoino poveche', *24 Chasa*, 25 June 2006.

<sup>45</sup> See 'Kupuvat turski glasove vuv Varna', *Monitor*, 26 June 2005; 'Iskat kasirane na izborite', *24 Chasa*, 26 June 2005; 'Tsigani v Ataka', *Novinar*, 26 June 2005; and 'Haskovo e stolitsata na izbornia torizum', *24 Chasa* 2005.

dispersing to other parties. For example, one wide spread technique (also used by the minority party at the local elections in 2003) was to issue the Roma with wooden sticks with the exact length of the distance between the top of the electoral ticket and the position of Movement for Rights and Freedoms on it, to guide them to the spot where to indicate their support for the party!<sup>46</sup> Analysis of invalidated votes done by the Central Electoral Commission after the election concluded that there was no evidence to suggest that supporters of Movement for Rights and Freedoms found the integrated bulletin any more difficult than the rest of the population, which was largely due to the party's excellent preparation of its electorate.<sup>47</sup>

The iron organization of Movement for Rights and Freedoms prior to the election contributed to its outstanding performance but was not the sole reason for it. There were at least two other factors, both circumstantial, that worked in favour of the Turkish party. Most importantly, a major force behind the unexpected mobilization of the minority electorate was the sudden resurfacing of the first nationalistic party Coalition Union Attack (Ataka) which was openly hostile to the Turkish, Jewish and Roma minorities living in Bulgaria. As early as 2003 the leader of Ataka Volen Siderov published a book with the title Bulgarophobia (Bulgarofobia) which aimed to discredit the Bulgarian minorities in the spirit of nationalism. The three main problems that the book outlined were that the high birth rates of all minorities were diluting the Bulgarian population; the Gypsies were responsible for the rise in crime; and Dogan's party was ethnic and unconstitutional and had to be banned. It was the last proposition, also asserted during Ataka's brief election campaign, alongside a scandalous election pledge to impose a suffix to all Muslim surnames to make them sound Bulgarian that motivated the minority electorate to go to the polling stations.<sup>48</sup> The non-Muslim Roma rallied too to the Turkish party for protection shocked by a series of extreme racist pledges, the most memorable of which were to open concentration camps for offending gypsies and sterilize Roma women as a method of birth control.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> See 'Desetnik pazel vota za DPS', *24 Chasa*, 27 June 2005.

See 'Integralnata buletina ne se okaza prechka na izborite', *Trud*, 29 June 2005.

<sup>48</sup> See 'Ataka shte preimenuva nanovo turtsite', *Trud*, 27 June 2005.

<sup>49</sup> See 'Ataka predvizda lageri za Romi', *24 Chasa*, 28 June 2005.

Moreover, the Roma population supported Movement for Rights and Freedoms in large numbers not least because of the flippancy with which *Evrroma*, the only Roma party to register for the election, dealt with the threats of Ataka. *Evrroma*'s most famous face, the gay pop star Azis simply dismissed Ataka's leadership as 'lunatics' and 'past timers' which contrasted with Dogan's inclusive approach of claiming to be a centre party representing 'all Bulgarians' and as such opposing any form of discrimination or threats to the Roma issued by Ataka.

A second reason that explains the high support for Movement for Rights and Freedoms was the first ever attempt of opposition parties, namely Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria and Coalition of the Rose to attract a share of the Turkish vote during the election campaign. The presence of competitors in its strongholds mobilized additionally Movement for Rights and Freedoms for which it was subsequently rewarded. Neither Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria nor Coalition of the Rose managed to achieve any breakthroughs with the minorities mainly because they lacked organizational structures at local level. Their campaigns in the areas with Turkish population were aggressive but sporadic and boiled down to street rallies in the case of Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria, which as the party found out had long outlived their winsomeness. Coalition of the Rose, on the other hand played the sympathy card to no avail through staged dramas that made several newspaper headlines. The most original from their repertoire of headline grabbing stories was about its leader from Turkish origin Guner Tahir days before the election that he had been poisoned with rat poison by his political opponents in an attempt to eliminate him.<sup>50</sup>

### **Massive Attack: Ataka's Startling Success with Despairing Electorate**

Coalition Union Attack (Ataka) emerged as a serious runner a fortnight before the election when various public opinion agencies began to register accumulating support for it. At the beginning nobody really expected Ataka, the first nationalistic and anti-systemic party in Bulgaria, to overcome the 4% threshold and enter parliament but it did so spectacularly with nearly 9% of the vote giving it 21 of the total 240 seats. As

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<sup>50</sup> See 'Otrova za mishki prashta vodach v Pravitelstvena', *24 Chasa*, 21 June 2005.

table 2 illustrates during the election week the possibility that Ataka may become a factor in the political life of Bulgaria increased and at this point all comparative surveys estimated its potential of 4 to 6 % to exceed that of other first timers such as The New Time, Coalition of the Rose and Evroroma.

Ataka's supporters constituted of the less prosperous segments of society as described on table 4: 43.1% of its electorate were over 50 years old, 61.3 were with secondary education or less and 56.8 % were workers on modest incomes, unemployed or pensioners. Most telling, however, was the relatively high number of voters (59.3%) who had switched to Ataka from supporting one of the three main parties (National Movement Simeon II, United Democratic Forces and Coalition for Bulgaria) at the previous election. They were the group of *despairing* electorate, people who had been negatively affected at some point during the transition to democracy and who blamed the established political class for their individual misfortune.<sup>51</sup> A closer look at Table 4 shows that the highest share of the despairing voters (34.9 %) were those that defected to Ataka from supporting National Movement Simeon II at the previous election which can be attributed to the failure of the king's party to keep up to his main election pledge from the 2001 election of improving the life standard of Bulgarians in 800 days during the party's first term in power. In the face of Ataka the transitional losers recognized an advocate of their own interests since the coalition pledged to hold to account the whole political class in a gesture of retribution. Finally, given the nationalistic profile of Ataka and its calls for a mono-ethnic (Bulgarian) state it came as no surprise that 99.2 % of its electorate was ethnically Bulgarian.

The coalition appeared from obscurity less than two months before the general election uniting a number of patriotic organizations the most prominent of which were Political Party Attack (Ataka), Political Circle Dawn (Zora), Union of Military and Patriotic Forces Defence (Zashtita), National Movement for Salvation of the Motherland and Bulgarian National Patriotic Party. Its election campaign was very ad-hoc and conducted mainly by the leader of the coalition Volen Siderov (also a leader of Political Party Ataka) from an evening television show with the identical

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<sup>51</sup> See 'Ataka shte broi nedovolnite', 24 *Chasa*, 23 June 2005; and 'Otchaianite bulgari izbraha Ataka', 24 *Chasa*, 26 June 2005.

name 'Ataka' which stood out with its ultra nationalistic contents. Many of the topics debated on the show in the run up to the election elaborated on Ataka's election pledges: the withdrawal of Bulgarian military personnel from Iraq, renegotiation with the EU of the agreement to close Kozloduy's nuclear reactors, investigation into the legitimacy of Simeon's royal inheritance and all privatization and concession deals agreed by his cabinet as well as a series of ethnic-centred pledges like a ban on the Turkish minority party Movement for Rights and Freedoms, restricting the rights of all minorities, the abolishment of the news in Turkish on national television and prosecution of offending Roma.

A key element of the campaign was a controversial TV commercial that appeared on national television before being banned by the Central Electoral Commission on the grounds of inciting racial hatred. The commercial displayed pictures of Bulgarian mosques followed by a brief emission of the regular news bulletin in Turkish on BNT and finished with the slogan of Ataka 'Attack to save Bulgaria!' Regardless of the ban the advertisement was shown regularly on the cable TV channel Skat, especially before and after Ataka's show, while the slogan became popular with the coalition's growing number of supporters at election rallies.

Ataka owes its electoral success to a punitive vote against the established political class in Bulgaria resulting from its inability to bring an actual change to the life standard of the less well-off electorate over many years. This explanation coincides with the opinion of the majority of political commentators in Bulgaria who after observing the Ataka phenomenon concluded that the popularity of the coalition reflected not a problem of society such as extremism or radicalization as it was at first suspected but was rather rooted in a growing gap between elite performance and public expectations that alienated voters by making them feel 'unrepresented' by the mainstream political parties in the party system.<sup>52</sup> The timing of Ataka's surge is supportive of this theory as it occurred after Simeon's bombastic election pledges in 2001 and their inevitable lapses. One should remember that Simeon's initial success in politics was based purely on his carefully devised image of a returning saviour that exploited the public trust only to crush it by failing to deliver on his promises four

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<sup>52</sup> See 'Vurvim po stsenaria na Latinska Amerika', *Standart*, 26 June 2005; 'Komentatorite: LatinoBulgaria', *Novinar*, 26 June 2005.



years later. As table 4 shows the highest share of Ataka's despairing electorate (34.9%) supported National Movement Simeon II in 2001. Compare this with the much smaller groups of voters that defected to Ataka from backing United Democratic Forces and Coalition for Bulgaria at the previous election.

A facilitating factor to Ataka's breakthrough was the complex relationship that developed between National Movement Simeon II and Movement for Rights and Freedoms during their time as coalition partners that led to heated racial tensions between Bulgarian and Roma communities preparing the soil for Ataka. From the beginning National Movement Simeon II was dependent on the Turkish party for support which it willingly traded off in exchange for positive discrimination of the Turkish and Roma minorities through various social initiatives. Initially this coalition arrangement was kept discreet but even when leaks of it appeared in the media they had little impact on the Bulgarian population who was used to the idea of giving privileges to minorities for the sake of ethnic peace which many Bulgarians believed was part of the *uniqueness* of Bulgaria's successful model of ethnic relations. The tide began to turn towards the end of the coalition's mandate when National Movement Simeon II's dependence on Movement for Rights and Freedoms increased as a result of a sequence of no-confidence votes compelling it to overstep the mark of public tolerance by supporting a culture of lenience in the public sector towards the Roma minority. The Bulgarians were getting increasingly concerned with a rising wave of Roma criminality of which they were often targets but that was rarely investigated by the authorities. An extreme but by far not unique example of this situation was the case of a Bulgarian professor from Sofia University who was killed one month before the election in an unprovoked attack by gypsies that were never tracked down.<sup>53</sup> Another more trivial issue was the payment of heating bills for which Roma families were being subsidised while Bulgarian pensioners had to cover single-handedly. Ataka exploited both of these problems and others of similar nature in order to raise its profile and popularity before the election. Unsurprisingly a survey compiled by Alpha Research discovered that the two main reasons for which voters

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<sup>53</sup> See 'Prebitiat professor pochina v Pirogov', *24 Chasa*, 2 June 2005.

had supported Ataka was because of ‘their stance against the gypsies’ (44%) and ‘their defence of Bulgarian interests’ (31%).<sup>54</sup>

### **Competing for the Right Electorate: United Democratic Forces, Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria and Coalition Bulgarian People’s Union’s Lukewarm Results**

As Table 3 shows the same number of voters (20.83%) supported the three right parties (United Democratic Forces, Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria, Coalition Bulgarian People’s Union) that entered parliament as those who voted for United Democratic Forces at the last election. Although the political right managed to retain its electorate it emerged as a loser from the election since the support it received was fragmented and virtually impossible to consolidate as well as being limited to its very core nest of loyal allies. On positive note all right parties came out with something to be proud about and in the election night celebrated their results rather than acknowledged defeat. United Democratic Forces were pleased for being the main party from the right with a better result than Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria. Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria and Bulgarian People’s Union on the other hand were relieved to have passed the electoral threshold in the face of uncertainty. As Table 2 indicates United Democratic Forces did worse than anticipated prior to the election as more votes slipped through to the democrats of Kostov and the People’s Union due to their extra mobilization in the final days of the campaign.

The philosophy behind the campaigns of all three parties was the same: to appear as the most credible alternative to Coalition for Bulgaria on the right. In the case of United Democratic Forces and Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria the list of opponents also included National Movement Simeon II while Movement for Rights and Freedoms was targeted specifically by Kostov. All three parties were very active on the election trail and their leaders used every media opportunity to promote themselves at the expense of other parties. The leader of United Democratic Forces Nadezda Mihailova answered about 60% of all questions in the campaign with the phrase that ‘the parliamentary elections were a referendum for or against the European future of Bulgaria’, effectively inferring that the Socialists, who had a lead

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<sup>54</sup> Bulgarian National Radio Horizon, 29 June 2005. In addition for an analysis of similar public opinion results see ‘Elitut mulchi, Ataka gurmi’, *24 Chasa*, 05 May 2006.

in the election forecasts, were incapable of guaranteeing the country's timely membership into the Union.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, the original television clip of United Democratic Forces, which was replaced half-way through the campaign, showed a metamorphose of Simeon's face turning into Stanishev's, clearly identifying in this way United Democratic Forces's main rivals.

Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria were equally explicit in marking their adversaries. Ivan Kostov tirelessly explained at election rallies that his party was against a second term of Sakskoburggotski as well as a government formed or led by the Socialists. The election clip of the party displayed a group of people waiting for Kostov to enter to put an end to the 'monarchic-communist oligarchy' meaning National Movement Simeon II, Movement for Rights and Freedoms and the Bulgarian Socialist Party.

In contrast to the other right parties, Bulgarian People's Union were open to everyone apart from the Socialists and before the election even entertained the idea of a wide right coalition with Movement for Rights and Freedoms which to emit a government. The anti-Socialist orientation of the coalition was understandable given the type of parties that it glued together. The Union of Free Democrats of Sofiyanski as well as the Agrarians of Mozer had a track record of being on the fundamentalist right in terms of ideology but probably more to the centre in respect of the actual policies that they favoured. Moreover, the Union of Free Democrats in particular were a party that existed on the basis of mainly business interests which lent itself well to the prospect of working in a coalition with other parties alongside the spectrum centre-right<sup>56</sup>.

Having a common adversary in the face of Coalition for Bulgaria worked against the interests of all three parties since they ended up competing among themselves for the same voters. For example, Nadezda Mihailova often tried to win the supporters of Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria and Coalition Bulgarian People's Union with the life motive that 'ODS is the only guarantor that their votes would not go to BSP' capitalizing on the possibility that the other right parties may fail to pass the electoral threshold and hence were risky to support.<sup>57</sup> Ivan Kostov resorted to a different

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<sup>55</sup> See 'Hubavata sapiorka', *Tema*, 27 June-3 July 2005.

<sup>56</sup> See 'Sofiyanski pak usmihnat', *24 Chasa*, 27 June 2005.

<sup>57</sup> See 'Hubavata sapiorka', *Tema*, 27 June-3 July 2005.

strategy of giving negative evaluations of people that were still close to United Democratic Forces such as the former president Petur Stoyanov which was damaging to the election chances of the party.<sup>58</sup> Considering that Stanishev, Dogan and Sakskoburggotski all abstained from participation at the last leadership debate on bTV it turned into a major platform for competition between the right parties where their different electoral tactics against each other peaked.<sup>59</sup> This had a boomerang effect on voters that were outside the democratic nucleus but who may have considered voting for right parties have they appeared willing to work together in the election aftermath. The absence of such desire for coordination vocalized explicitly by Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria at the evening debate convinced the majority of hesitant voters to look for alternatives beyond the political right. It did not help too that both United Democratic Forces and Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria dismissed the possibility of working in a coalition with National Movement Simeon II as well as each other which marginalized them still further in the election race.

### **Future Prospects: A Complex Party System Takes Shape**

The 2005 election in Bulgaria left vital clues as to how the party system in the country is likely to develop in the near future. Above all the political consensus on the issue of EU membership that has been present in Bulgaria since the dawn of democracy was now strengthened via the formation of a grand governing coalition between Coalition for Bulgaria, National Movement Simeon II and Movement for Rights and Freedoms that called itself symbolically *Coalition 2007*, after the target date for EU membership of Bulgaria. The establishment of the coalition was not a straightforward matter and took almost two months to resolve with each party forsaking something from its list of election pledges in the name of their shared objective of timely membership into the Union. For example, National Movement Simeon II went back on its promise to reject a government of the Bulgarian Socialist Party while Coalition for Bulgaria is unlikely to investigate in any great depths the legitimacy of Simeon's inheritance as intended.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> See 'Zavrushtaneto na Komandira', *Tema*, 27 June-3 July 2005.

<sup>59</sup> See 'Leadership Debate on the topic "What do you intend to do with the country if you assume power"', *bTV*, 22 June 2005.

<sup>60</sup> See 'Golemiyat pazarluk', *Trud*, 28 June 2005.

A measure of the governing parties' commitment to EU membership was their decision to invite in the coalition the Turkish party Movement for Rights and Freedoms that was a strategic choice and not strictly necessary in terms of numbers since Coalition for Bulgaria and National Movement Simeon II together had 135 seats, more than the required 120. The intension behind this act of cooperation was to wipe out any doubt that the Socialists were capable and committed to the European future of Bulgaria every bit as much as the old coalition partners Movement for Rights and Freedoms and National Movement Simeon II. In fact had the main political parties not agreed upon a joint framework for Europe the date of Bulgaria's membership would have been postponed at least by a year if not indefinitely.<sup>61</sup>

Therefore by most probabilities the governing coalition KB-NDSV-DPS would survive in its current form until 2007 but its existence in the longer term is dependent upon a recalculation of the power balance between the three coalition partners. So far National Movement Simeon II has made the most sacrifices but its veto in the coalition, which is worked out by the formula 8:5:3, does not reflect its input, a fact that National Movement Simeon II will seek to change in the near future. Another unsettling issue that has the potential to rock the boat of consensus between the parties resurfaced with the presidential election in October 2006 when National Movement Simeon II refused to back up the candidature of the incumbent Socialist president Georgi Parvanov and instead withdrew from the election, a gesture that was met with frustration in the Socialist circles. With the local elections looming just around the corner, the possibility for tensions in the governing coalition is as real as ever.

At a party level one expects that the processes of consolidation, modernization and political pragmatism within the Bulgarian Socialist Party commenced by Parvanov will continue in the future and the party will finally be able to shake its sclerotic image by attracting younger and well educated voters. This is likely given the strategic role of the Bulgarian Socialist Party in the final months prior to EU membership and especially the impressive landslide with which Parvanov won a historic second term at the presidential election.

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<sup>61</sup> See 'Burzo s'globete kabinet!', *Trud*, 30 June 2005.

Similarly to the Socialists, Movement for Rights and Freedoms is on the course of gaining an increased electoral support due to its participation in two successive governments that has begun to alter its early image of a purely minority formation. Movement for Rights and Freedoms has already declared its intention to invest in reaching beyond the minority electorate particularly to liberal voters from the centre of the party system that currently fall within the remit of National Movement Simeon II. The first indicator of the extent to which it has succeeded in this mission is the results from the local elections that should reflect any permanent breakthroughs outside its minority strongholds. Moreover, the success of Ataka to enter parliament as well as to reach the second round of the presidential election would have had a consolidating effect on the minority vote in general that could lead to a boost of support for the minority party with new votes from the Jewish, Protestant Roma and Armenian communities in Bulgaria.

The rest of the political parties in the party system face an uncertain future and their political survival rests with a variety of factors that are unique for every party. National Movement Simeon II remains a leadership party and as such is highly dependent on Simeon and the individual life choices that he decides to make. If for example he returns to Madrid as rumours have it, after or throughout this parliamentary term, the party will fade into obscurity as quickly as it resurfaced in 2001. Nevertheless one expects that National Movement Simeon II would take a turn to the right where currently there is a political vacuum and given the fairly successful economic policies of its first term, it will be well placed. Furthermore, unlike the right parties National Movement Simeon II is unlikely to experience internal splits as those MPs with radical views who objected Simeon's leadership such as Emil Koshlukov or Stella Bankova had already left the party structures. This too could be a pull factor to right voters who after 1997 have become disillusioned and frustrated with the right's inability to resolve its past and move forward.

Ataka, which basked in the limelight following its election result, was actually lucky twice in this election: firstly by making it to parliament in record time and secondly by being shunned by virtually all political parties in the coalition negotiations which enhanced the credibility of its populist and anti-systemic rhetoric. This is because Ataka unlike the rest of the political parties lacks a clear policy platform that would

have exposed its shallowness to voters if it landed in government but from the safety of the back benches it remained free to criticize any and every alternative without risking its popularity. In the first year after the election there was indication that this status quo would not last for long as the party followed a path of disintegration by losing 10 of its 21 MPs through a string of scandals and expulsions due to perceived disloyalty to the party leadership. The most telling of the destructive nature of the intra-party dynamics was the well documented incident on the Trakia Motorway in April 2006 when after a minor vehicle collusion between the car of the party leader Siderov and that of a fellow motorist, Siderov's travel companion and an MP from Ataka Pavel Chernev beaten the young driver before reporting the incident to the authorities as an assassination attempt. When the other party sued, Chernev blamed their driver for the beating but then changed his story again claiming Siderov influenced his original admission and was immediately expelled from Ataka.<sup>62</sup> At the time of the incident Ataka's usually high public support ratings went down to a record low, a drop from which the party has taken a long time to recover.<sup>63</sup>

However, all of this changed with the result of the 2006 presidential election which resurrected the spirit of Ataka since the party managed to reach the second round of the election. Moreover, the permanent criticisms of the EU towards the governing elite in Bulgaria, the pressure to implement reforms and the threat of safeguard clauses gave a new impulse to the Ataka's rhetoric. This was coupled with announcements from most of the old EU member states at the end of 2006 that they intended to restrict the labour mobility of Bulgarians upon membership. Ataka took an issue particularly with the UK, which was one of the three member states (alongside Sweden and Ireland) to have opened its labour markets when the EU-10 joined in 2004. In the midst of a widespread public disappointment at the news Ataka proposed a simple solution: to ban British citizens from purchasing cheap housing and land in Bulgaria until all restrictions are lifted! No doubt this won them some votes.

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<sup>62</sup> On the Trakia motorway incident read: 'V petuk Chernev ne bil sprial pri atentatora, v ponedelnik – spial', *24 Chasa*, 12 April 2006; 'Treta versia kraik Chernev', *24 Chasa*, 16 April 2006; 'Siderov nakaral Chernev da prikrie biyach', *Standart*, 14 April 2006.

<sup>63</sup> See 'Tuzna prolet za Siderov', *Trud*, 18 May 2006; and 'Obratno teleportirane', *Tema* 15-21 May 2006.

Finally, the political right remains in a state of crisis and the signals from this junction are not encouraging. Immediately after the election it became apparent that United Democratic Forces has learnt nothing from the election defeat nor for this matter from its past attempts at transformation. Rather than throwing its weight in the coalition negotiations which might have given it a route back to power, the party was engulfed in a leadership dispute between the former president Petur Stoyanov and the then leader Nadezda Mihailova, whom he wanted to replace.<sup>64</sup> This more or less repeated the situation before the March 2003 party Convention when the split between Mihailova and Kostov cost United Democratic Forces a massive loss of electorate.

Another recent setback that has cast a shadow over the right's ability to recover was the catastrophic result from the presidential election that again lined up the right parties after Ataka for a second time in less than two years. In the foreseeable future it seems the right in Bulgaria will remain fluid with new right parties penetrating the party system while the established ones will attempt to regroup in search of a permanent framework in which to exist alongside each other. At least two new right parties are expected to resurface during this parliament: Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) headed by the National Movement Simeon II's offspring and current Sofia mayor Boyko Borissov and Bulgarian Democratic Union – Radicals of the United Democratic Forces ex-deputy leader Evgenii Bakurdzhiev.<sup>65</sup> At the other extreme the three parties in the Coalition Bulgarian People's Union coalition may go their own ways, dissolving the coalition, which would not be surprising given the lack of common aims or electorates.

The 2005 election in Bulgaria confirmed the observation made after the 2001 election result that the break away from the bi-polar system which relied on the use of ideology to differentiate between two competing alternatives was irreversibly replaced by a new multi-party model encompassing a greater number of parties at any one time. On the face of it this is a welcoming development as it means more choice for voters but as the 2005 Bulgarian election also shows it must be approached with a caveat. In other words a delicate balance needs to be struck on the number of parties

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<sup>64</sup> See 'Stoyanov i F.Dimitrov: Ostavka na Nadezda', *24 Chasa*, 27 June 2005; 'SDS e v klinichna smurt', *24 Chasa*, 27 June 2005; 'Petur Stoyanov poiska ostavka na Nadezda', *Trud*, 27 June 2005.

<sup>65</sup> On the possibility that GERB will resurface as a party in the near future see 'Vlastelinut na tsialoto politichsko prostranstvo', *Tema*, 27 March-2 April 2006.



that make up the party system since as the Bulgarian case illustrates, voters spoiled for choice, sometimes prove hard to get. Moreover, too many parties in the party system increase the potential for restructuring and make it less stable and balanced in the long run.

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