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Republic of Bulgaria

Jeffrey K. Hass

University of Richmond, jhass@richmond.edu

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REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA

(Republika Balgariya)

By Jeffrey K. Hass, Ph.D.



One of the more orthodox Communist countries in the Warsaw Pact, Bulgaria has slowly but surely made its way out of Socialist authoritarianism and is developing democracy and a market economy. Despite a sizable non-Bulgarian ethnic minority (especially Turks), the country has avoided the ethnic tensions that led to war in Russia (Chechnya) or the former Yugoslavia. The possibility of joining NATO and the European Union promises to bring Bulgaria closer to the West than ever in its history. Bulgaria's party politics were among the more stable in East Europe until the arrival of a new mass movement, but Bulgaria is not on the verge of civil chaos.

HISTORY

After the overthrow of Communist dictator Todor Zhivkov on November 10, 1989, Bulgaria began the precarious transition to parliamentary democracy. In 1990 the Grand National Assembly was called to draft a constitution (passed July 12, 1991). In December 1990 Dimitar Popov was named prime minister. Popov's government, associated with the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), maintained a degree of political calm in 1991 and introduced economic reforms (price liberalization, land reform) that led to popular hardships. In 1991 only three parties cleared the 4 percent electoral barrier—the Union of Democratic Forces (SDS), the Bulgarian Socialist Party, and the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS). Because the SDS had barely more votes than the BSP, the DPS became

the kingmaker and established an uneasy coalition with SDS in 1991 to put Filip Dimitrov in the position of prime minister.

By November 1992 this coalition broke apart; Dimitrov and the SDS supported de-Communization of politics and society, attempting to punish those who had worked with the Communist Party by denying them access to politics and high positions. In July 1992 several large strikes resounded, as trade unions objected to the SDS's monetarism. Under pressure from the parliamentary opposition (the BSP), Dimitrov asked for a vote of confidence; the DPS threw its weight with the BSP and both voted against the government. After the 120-111 vote, Dimitrov had to resign, and Lyuben Berov became the next prime minister.

Berov was more sympathetic to BSP programs—populist policies, support for the social safety net, gradualism in regard to restructuring the economy. Initially both the BSP and President Zhelyu Zhelev (SDS)—consistently at odds with each other—supported Berov. As a result of policy weakness, Bulgaria's economy went into decline in 1994, spurring a cabinet reshuffle and a motion for a vote of confidence (May 1994), which Berov narrowly won. After the May showdown Berov conceded that with upcoming parliamentary elections in December 1994, his cabinet would most likely resign. Thus Berov turned to more modest policy projects.

The December 1994 parliamentary elections were a shock to the SDS: they dropped from 100 seats to 69, while the BSP went from 106 seats to a parlia-

mentary majority of 125. The harsh, uncompromising anti-Communist rhetoric of the SDS plus economic decline hurt their cause; voters in small towns and rural areas and those who cared more about their pocketbooks than Communist cleansing turned to the Socialists and their populist slogans. Zhan Videnov, BSP party leader, became the new prime minister and promised economic recovery without economic pain. Unfortunately, in 1995 banks hovered near crisis and the currency fell, draining reserves; meeting payments on Bulgaria's external debt further hurt government pockets. Crime and corruption continued to climb and became serious issues for the voting public.

In 1996 world grain prices rose; Bulgarian grain, kept at an artificially low price domestically, was exported for profit, and Bulgarians found themselves standing in breadlines for the first time since the collapse of Communism. The grain crisis—which prompted the resignation of several agriculture ministers in succession—led to a vote of no confidence, which Videnov survived, in January 1996. To add to Videnov's headaches, a fault line began to appear within the BSP, between an old guard supporting populism and minimal reform and another group supporting more effective reforms and opposing Videnov on the grounds that he was ineffective as prime minister.

Toward the end of 1996 presidential elections were held; governmental and parliamentary ineffectiveness helped propel democrat Petar Stoyanov to victory. Videnov and his government resigned, and Stoyanov gave the mandate to the Socialists (still the majority in parliament) to form a new government. However, with calls for new parliamentary elections and massive street demonstrations in the background, Socialist prime minister candidate Nikolay Dobrev eventually gave Stoyanov the option of forming a non-Socialist caretaker government until April 1997, when early parliamentary elections were to be held. Stefan Sofiyanski became the new prime minister, and April 1997 elections gave the parliamentary majority to a non-Communist coalition headed by the SDS.

As party competition settled, a surprise emerged in 2001: the return to active politics of King Simeon II (Simeon Saksoburggotski). (Simeon II became king at six years old in 1943 and went into exile in 1946. Until his return he worked as a business consultant in Spain.) Simeon II formed the National Movement of Simeon II two months before the 2001 parliamentary election. A moderate right-wing party reflecting the king's vague ideology, the National Movement created a platform that emphasized the need for quicker integration with Europe, improved economic reform,

and the fight against corruption. Simeon's National Movement rode a wave of public support for the returned king and popular displeasure with the status quo. The fresh but inexperienced party won half of the seats in the election, throwing aside the traditional competition between Socialists and the pro-market Right. To form a parliamentary majority, the National Movement brought the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (an ethnic-based party; DPS) into a ruling coalition. Simeon became prime minister in the new government but found the task of implementing his promises difficult. This hurt his and the party's prestige—Simeon's approval rating fell from 80 percent to 50 percent a few months after entering office—as well as that of Bulgaria's political Right. Further, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms jolted the right-leaning National Movement by publicly supporting a left-wing candidate for the presidency in 2001. Incumbent and right-leaning Petar Stoyanov, an independent earlier aligned with pro-reform democratic forces, lost in the second round to Socialist candidate Georgi Parvanov.

In the parliamentary elections of June 2005 the Coalition for Bulgaria, led by the Socialist Party, won the largest number of seats but not enough to form a government on its own. The coalition eventually decided to enter into a government with the National Movement and the DPS, and Socialist Party leader Sergei Stanishev became prime minister.

The System of Government

The Republic of Bulgaria is a parliamentary democracy based on a constitution adopted July 12, 1991.

EXECUTIVE

The executive branch is run by the president and the prime minister. The president has a vice president elected on the same ticket, but his duties are unclear.

The presidency is essentially a ceremonial position; real power lies in the legislature. The powers and responsibilities of the president include scheduling elections for the National Assembly; concluding international treaties; implementing laws; appointing and dismissing diplomatic personnel (upon motion from the Council of Ministers); granting or withdrawing Bulgarian citizenship; issuing pardons, granting asylum, and waiving debts to the state; and a few other

minor duties. The president enjoys a weak veto: If he disagrees with legislation, he may send it back to the National Assembly with his reasons for disagreement. If the bill receives an absolute majority, it becomes law over the president's objections. When the National Assembly is not in session, the president may issue decrees with the force of law; these decrees must be countersigned by the prime minister.

The president also performs a ceremonial function in the naming of the prime minister and the Council of Ministers: he must give the mandate to form a government to the largest parliamentary party, which then presents a candidate to the National Assembly. Should the parliament fail to approve a government within seven days, then under the constitution the president must give the mandate to the second-largest party. If the National Assembly cannot agree on a prime minister and government, the president can appoint a caretaker government and call for early parliamentary elections to break the deadlock; this is what happened in early 1997, when Dobrev feared he could not garner the parliamentary support—and the president created a caretaker government and called for early elections.

In essence, the president is a weak figure. This is due to the historical legacy of the Stalinist system, where one figure, the general secretary of the Communist Party, was a virtual dictator. Real executive power lies with the prime minister and Council of Ministers, who are approved by the National Assembly and require continued parliamentary support: the prime minister is under threat of a vote of confidence, which he or parliament can bring to motion. Finally, the Council of Ministers must resign before a newly elected National Assembly holds its first convocation.

The power of the prime minister and Council of Ministers lies in their control over the state bureaucracy—the police, the tax authorities, customs authorities, privatization committees, education, foreign policy, agriculture, and so forth. The prime minister and Council of Ministers may introduce legislation for consideration in the National Assembly. Ministers are responsible for day-to-day affairs and must answer for corruption and mistakes within their given ministries; serious mistakes are grounds for no confidence.

LEGISLATURE

The legislature, known as the National Assembly (Narodno Sabranie), is the most powerful political

body in Bulgaria. Made up of 240 members elected according to proportional balloting and party lists, this unicameral body is entrusted with the fate of the nation; Article 67 of the constitution states that "Members of the National Assembly shall represent not only their constituencies but the entire nation." The powers of the National Assembly include passing, amending, or rescinding laws; passing the state budget; setting tax rates; scheduling the presidential elections; deciding on holding a nationwide referendum; approving and dismissing the prime minister and members of the Council of Ministers; approving and dismissing the head of the Central Bank; approving declarations of war and peace and approving the use of troops; declaring, on request from the president, a state of martial law; and other responsibilities.

The National Assembly has final control over the government by means of a vote of no confidence. Such a vote can be called in two ways. The prime minister can request it, or such a motion can be seconded by one-fifth of the National Assembly. Once the motion is before the parliament, an absolute majority—121 votes—is required for it to pass. From 1992 to 1995 no-confidence votes were precarious weapons, since the National Assembly was split almost evenly between the Union of Democratic Forces and the Bulgarian Socialist Party; the ruling coalition was whomever the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (the Turkish party) sided with, as became the case in 1992.

The major duty of the National Assembly is legislation: passing bills that are brought up by members of parliament or policies brought up by the Council of Ministers. Such bills must be deliberated (read and voted on) twice before they can pass and must receive a simple majority; in exceptional cases (not defined in the constitution), both votes may occur in a single session. Other acts of parliament that do not become laws—statements, for example—need be voted on only once.

JUDICIARY

After the collapse of Communism, the judicial branch emerged less than gloriously: under Communism the courts served as a cloak of legitimacy and as an extension of the power of the Communist regime. Upon coming to power after the 1991 parliamentary elections, the SDS party set out to build an independent, competent, Western-style judicial system. While the dearth of qualified, professionally trained jurists,

lawyers, and judges will make the functioning of the judicial branch problematic for some time to come, the institutional foundation has been set already.

The judicial branch is composed of three parts: the court system, the Constitutional Court, and the Supreme Judicial Council. The first, the court system, consists of the various courts from the local level up to the Supreme Courts, which engage in dispute resolution, decisions of justice in criminal cases, and dispensing of administrative justice. These courts follow the continental model of jurisprudence. Basically, laws passed by the legislature or issued by the government are considered to be the basis for judicial decisions. The courts do not add their own interpretations; further, past court decisions have no direct bearing on decisions for different cases, as is the case in Anglo-American common law. Each case for dispute or criminal justice is decided on its own grounds with application of relevant laws and rules. Disputes and appeals may be carried up the hierarchy: municipal courts at the bottom, then district and military courts, then courts of appeal, and finally to the top two courts, the Supreme Court of Cassation and the Supreme Administrative Court.

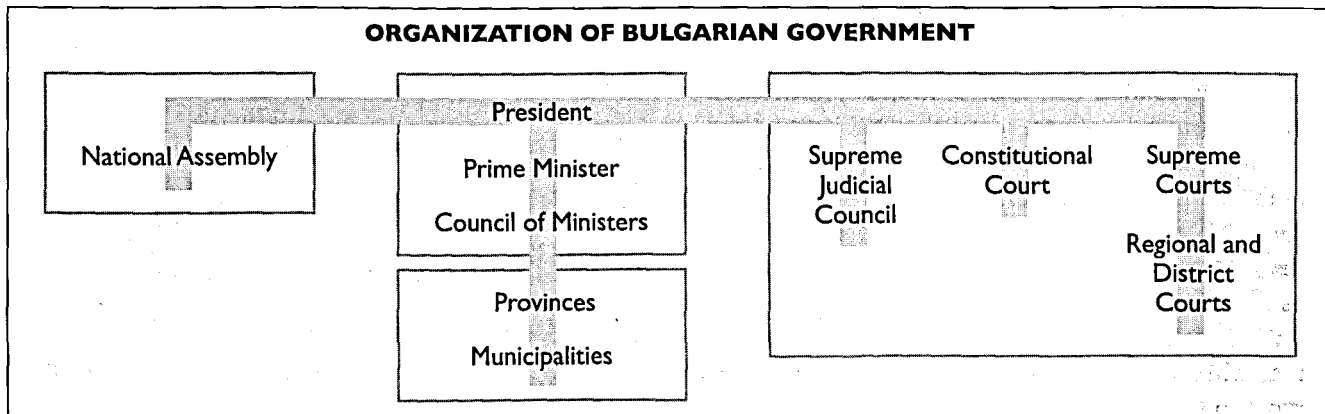
The Supreme Administrative Court has two roles. First, it oversees the administration of the law for administrative justice (e.g., criminal cases); and second, it rules on challenges to the legality of decisions of the Council of Ministers brought by outside parties. The Supreme Court of Cassation oversees the application of laws to disputes by all lower courts, in essence serving as the ultimate authority for disputes and appeals.

The Constitutional Court stands beyond the normal court system. Only this court has powers of legislative review (the power to declare legislation unconstitutional). Further, the Constitutional

Court is empowered to decide on disputes concerning elections and division of powers between the various branches of government; the decision of this court is binding on all branches. The Constitutional Court is composed of 12 justices; four are appointed by the president, four are appointed by the National Assembly, and four are appointed by the Supreme Court of Cassation and the Supreme Administrative Court.

The Supreme Judicial Council, created in the 1991 constitution, is a body of 25 professional jurists: three members are the chairmen of the Supreme Administrative Court and Supreme Court of Cassation and the chief prosecutor; of the remaining 22 (all of whom must have at least 15 years' judicial experience), 11 are elected by the National Assembly and 11 are selected by judicial bodies. These 22 elected members serve a five-year term and may not be reelected to the council. The mission of this council is to handle appointments, transfers, and replacements of judges, prosecutors, and investigating magistrates. The council also appoints the chairmen of the Supreme Court of Cassation and Supreme Administrative Court, after conducting lengthy investigations. To this end the council has independence from other governmental bodies; its recommendations of chairmen of the two Supreme Courts may be returned by the president for reconsideration only once, and if sent to the president a second time, they must be accepted. The Supreme Judicial Council was set up in August 1991, but after the council was enlarged in the constitution, more members were added and the council began work in March 1992. Its first steps were bold and rapid: in March and April the council replaced 43 judges and prosecutors, reorganized central judicial bodies, and appointed new senior personnel.

ORGANIZATION OF BULGARIAN GOVERNMENT



REGIONAL AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Bulgaria is divided into nine provinces (*oblasti*), which are run by local councils. Cities are run by municipal legislatures and by mayors.

The Electoral System

The National Assembly's 240 seats are assigned to parties based on proportional balloting. All Bulgarians age 18 and older can vote. In an election, a voter casts a ballot for a party. Parties must receive at least 4 percent of all votes cast to receive the right to representation in the parliament; those that receive less than 4 percent do not qualify for positions. (An individual may run for parliament but must receive more than 4 percent.) The number of seats a party receives depends on two numbers: the number of votes received, and the number of votes cast for parties that overcome the 4 percent barrier. (Essentially, if a party does not gain 4 percent of votes cast, then all votes it receives are wasted.) The actual delegates for the National Assembly are then drawn from official party lists assembled before the elections; if Party A has 30 seats, then the first 30 people on the party list become parliamentary delegates.

The Party System

The party system in Bulgaria has been relatively stable. Under the constitution, citizens have the right to form political parties, which may then compete in elections and political life. The one major restriction on parties is that they cannot be organized along racial, ethnic, or religious lines, nor may they seek "violent usurpation of state power" (constitution, Article 11.4). This has not been particularly troublesome except for a brief moment in 1991. The Bulgarian Socialist Party protested that the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS), a primarily Turkish-based group claiming to represent the Turkish minority, violated this constitutional prohibition. However, courts did not agree, and the DPS became the founder and largest member of a new 1996 coalition centered on ethnic and minority rights.

Bulgarian parties, with the exception of the BSP, have few grassroots connections to the masses. Instead, parties are essentially groups of elites who try to woo voters with their slogans and programs rather than trying to mobilize direct support, and who try to link their programs to the masses through feedback loops.

PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION, 11/11/01 AND 11/18/01

Candidate	% votes, first round	% votes, second round
Georgi Parvanov	36.4%	54.1%
Petar Stefanov Stojanov	34.9%	45.9%
Boromil Bonev	19.3%	
Pereta Indžova	4.9%	
Žorž Gan ev	3.4%	
Petar Beron	1.1%	

Source: www.electionworld.org

PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION, 6/25/05

Party	% from party vote	seats
National Movement of Simeon II	21.9%	52
United Democratic Forces	8.4%	20
Coalition for Bulgaria	34.2%	82
Movement for Rights and Freedom	13.7%	33
Union Attack	9.0%	22
Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria	7.0%	17
Bulgarian People's Union	5.7%	14

Source: www.electionworld.org

Major Political Parties

COALITION FOR BULGARIA

(Koalitsia za Bulgariia)

This coalition is led by the Bulgarian Socialist Party, the revamped Communist Party in social democratic

trappings. The Socialists held power from 1994 to 1997, when a sufficient number of voters felt disparaged by market reforms. However, their supervision of Bulgaria's economy was hurt when the Yugoslav civil war disrupted trade relations and income and when Socialist policies slowed reforms and hurt the fiscal discipline that had temporarily reined in inflation. Their Democratic Left coalition took second place in 1997, and in 2001 their Coalition for Bulgaria movement came in third (but with only three fewer seats than ODS). Despite these losses, the Socialist candidate Georgi Parvanov defeated incumbent Petar Stoyanov in the 2001 presidential race. In 2005 the Socialist-led Coalition for Bulgaria benefitted from dissatisfaction with the ruling coalition of the National Movement and DPS and won the largest number of seats in the parliamentary elections held in June. Lacking a majority, however, the Coalition for Bulgaria agreed to form a coalition government with both the National Movement and the DPS.

While the Socialists earlier were weary of privatization and price liberalization, they have embraced market reform and now champion social services and welfare, much as Socialist (usually former Communist) parties elsewhere in Eastern Europe.

MOVEMENT FOR RIGHTS AND FREEDOM

(Dvizhenie za Pravata i Svobodie; DPS)

Originally founded in 1990 to oppose forced Bulgarianization of Bulgarian Turks, the DPS became a wider umbrella organization representing the claims and voices of various ethnic minorities, although Bulgarian Turks still dominate the party. In the 1990s DPS joined with monarchist and centrist parties to form the Union for National Salvation. In 1997 DPS supported the United Democratic Forces' government, but at the end of that year tensions between the two emerged over ODS populism and a problematic record of reforms and publication of secret police files on DPS members. Its electoral support has grown steadily, from 15 in 1994 to 21 in 2001 and then to 33 in 2005. It joined coalition governments in both 2001 and 2005.

NATIONAL MOVEMENT OF SIMEON II

(Natsionalno Dvizhenie Simeon Vtori)

Upon returning to Bulgaria, Simeon II hastily set up a broad-based party as a vehicle to propel himself

and his vision for Bulgaria to power. The party's basic platform called for improvement of tax laws, more forceful measures against corruption, and low-interest loans for entrepreneurs. National Movement's appeal in 2001 was its relative political inexperience; it was not tainted by political corruption or the compromise of previous governments. This attracted the protest vote of pensioners, civil servants, teachers, and the like who had lived on meager wages and had despaired of the growing corruption endemic in Bulgarian society. At the apex of the party are a hodge-podge of younger professionals and businessmen; political inexperience, which attracted voters, made governance difficult after 2001, and the party lost the 2005 elections to the Socialist-led Coalition for Bulgaria. It agreed to form a new government along with the Coalition for Bulgaria and the DPS

Like many post-Communist parties, National Movement is weak at the grass-roots level and has only a vague organizational structure; it is more accurate to describe the party as a loose social movement of people either in support of the monarch or opposed to other established parties and elites.

UNITED DEMOCRATIC FORCES (Obedineni Demokratichni Sili; ODS)

ODS is a coalition of anti-Communist, pro-market, and pro-reform parties led by its largest member, the Union of Democratic Forces (Sayuz Demokratichni Sili, SDS). SDS was formed in December 1989 after the collapse of Communism. Early policies barred former Communists from political office. For most of the 1990s the SDS reform agenda was in the forefront. ODS through SDS's domination has promoted privatization, fiscal discipline and the control of inflation, and land reform. Benefiting from the collapse of Communism, SDS and the Movement for Rights and Freedoms formed a coalition and majority in parliament and formed a government in 1991 that pushed economic reform. When reforms created economic and social dislocation, voters returned the Socialists to power. When their policies and the war in Yugoslavia (traditional purchaser of Bulgarian agricultural produce) hurt Bulgaria's economy even more, SDS returned to power in 1997. It was the second-largest parliamentary group after the 2001 elections but was swamped by the National Movement's landslide victory. Soon after, two top leaders of the SDS left to form their own parties (which remain minor), threatening fragmentation and further weakening of the main party and overall coalition that had led Bulgaria out

of Socialism and into democracy, a market economy, and the possibility of entering NATO and the European Union. The coalition won 20 seats in the parliamentary elections of 2005.

Minor Political Parties

Several other small parties generally manage to win a handful of seats in the parliament. Two that won seats in 2005 were the Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria (Demokrati za Silna Balgarija) and the Bulgarian People's Union (Balgarskij Naroden Sajuz). Most other small parties survive only as members of larger coalitions such as ODS or Coalition for Bulgaria.

Other Political Forces

Those nonaligned domestic forces that may exert political pressure are generally subsumed into party and coalition structures in Bulgaria. Internationally, the country was not among those invited to join the European Union in 2004. However, Bulgaria signed an accession treaty with the EU in April 2005 and was expected to progress to full membership in 2007. Upon taking the post of prime minister in August 2005, Sergei Stanishev pledged to make EU membership his top priority. In 2004 the country did join the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO).

National Prospects

Bulgaria's transition out of Socialism was not smooth initially, although Bulgarians have been spared the horrors of internal conflict and authoritarian emergence that plagued Yugoslavia, Belarus, Russia, and others to the east. The party system, while young and in need of grass-roots structure and depth, has been fairly stable, with the same three major players now joined by a fourth. Politics was defined by the Communist past and by the pain of economic transformation. On the one hand, the SDS and DPS have defined themselves and their programs around the Communist past: the

SDS is primarily an anti-Communist party that does not want Socialists in power; and the DPS exists in part as a reaction against Bulgarianization policies of Todor Zhivkov and the Bulgarian Communist Party before 1989. The Socialists, on the other hand, until 1996 had taken a populist stance against painful economic reform.

However, Bulgaria appears to be well on the way to democracy: parties and presidents have given up power when they were supposed to (e.g., election losses, votes of no confidence). There are other positive signs for the future. Bulgaria was invited to join NATO in 2004 and is in line to join the European Union, which will aid the process of market transition by expanding markets for its goods and labor and aiding investment from the West.

Bulgaria's primary problem is economic reform; until such reforms take hold and bring development, the population will remain discontented and will provide excellent fodder for the pitched political battles between parties. Bulgarian politicians and political parties have been playing by rules of the game, which appear to have become institutionalized in the country. While Bulgaria's economy may not be the envy of Eastern Europe, Bulgaria's democratic roots may be taking hold much deeper than elsewhere in the region.

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