



BULGARIA ELECTION UPDATE

Parliamentary Elections in Bulgaria
June 8, 2001

On June 17, 2001, Bulgarians will go to the polls to vote in regularly scheduled parliamentary elections for the first time since the fall of the communist regime in 1989. Prior to Ivan Kostov's recent tenure as UDF prime minister, no Bulgarian cabinet had completed a full mandate; previously, the early dissolution of governments or nationwide street protests triggered snap elections.

In addition to determining the composition of the next government however, these elections serve as a turning point in Bulgaria's political history. Tsar Simeon's sudden arrival as an electoral force introduces a strong third party into Bulgaria's bi-polar political system, in which the Union of Democratic Forces and the Bulgarian Socialist Party have alternated political power.

In this series of Election Updates, NDI's resident representatives in Sofia take to the road in the final days of the pre-election period to provide insight on the elections. By maintaining contact with candidates and activists trained in NDI's Parties in Parliament Program, and by following NDI's civic partners as they conduct their non-partisan voter education and GOTV campaigns, NDI is in a unique position to provide a snapshot of Bulgarian political parties and civic organizations on the eve of the election. Over the next week, 3 election updates will follow.

THE ELECTORAL SYSTEM

The Republic of Bulgaria has a unicameral 240-person National Assembly, with Members elected to four-year terms from party lists. There are 31 parliamentary districts, each of which elects from four to thirteen deputies, depending on population figures. Parliamentary seats are allocated based on each district's party

vote totals, but only among parties who garner more than four percent nationwide. Remaining seats are allocated using the mathematical formula.

On Election Day, voters will select from regional lists of candidates submitted by the national parties. Citizens must vote for an entire list, as there is no mechanism to express dissatisfaction or approval of individual candidates. Although there are 60 plus parties or electoral coalitions registered by the Central Election Commission, only a handful are likely to cross the four percent threshold and gain parliamentary seats.

POLITICAL ACTORS

The Union of Democratic Forces

Originally a broad group of anti-communist reformers, the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) garnered a 52 percent parliamentary majority in the 1997 parliamentary elections. Under its governance for the last four years, Bulgaria has instituted a series of painful but necessary economic reforms and launched an aggressive European integration campaign. In an election coalition with the People's Union (called the Alliance of Democratic Forces) the UDF's campaign focuses on the need for continuity in government to ensure further economic improvement and rapid accession to the European Union. Current polls show the UDF with roughly 15% support.

The Coalition for Bulgaria

Following the Eastern European revolutions of 1989, the Bulgarian Communist Party reconstituted itself as the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP). The party maintained control of the national government until 1997, when endemic

corruption and hyperinflation prompted citizens to take to the streets to demand the resignation of the BSP government and early parliamentary elections. A vocal opposition since then, the BSP led “Coalition for Bulgaria” is now campaigning as Bulgaria’s alternative choice for economic improvement and European integration. The coalition polls at approximately 11%.

National Movement for Tsar Simeon II

Registered just hours before the electoral deadline, the National Movement for Tsar Simeon II (NMS) now leads projected election results with a ten to fifteen numerical point margin. Tsar Simeon II, exiled as a child in 1946 through a rigged communist referendum, returned to a Bulgaria this spring with a promise that, if elected, his coalition would “improve living standards in 800 days.” Capitalizing on an electorate weary of political corruption and extreme levels of unemployment, the NMS bills itself as the “New Bulgarian Morality” and is running on a platform of improved social policies. Although Simeon Saxe-Coburgoski is not on NMS candidate lists – the Tsar enjoys wide popular support and many speculate that he may be in a position to become Bulgaria’s next Prime Minister.

The Alliance for National Salvation

Led by the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF), Bulgaria’s ethnic Turkish party, the Alliance for National Salvation has maintained a minor but consistent presence in the National Assembly since 1990, acting as the coalition partner for BSP and UDF governments by turn. Despite the coalition’s previously consistent showing, recent polls indicate that the Tsar has drawn a substantial number of MRF supporters. In conjunction with increased Turkish emigration over the last four years, this

alignment may prevent MRF from crossing the four percent parliamentary threshold. Polls show the Alliance hovering between 2 and 3.8 percent.

NDI IN BULGARIA

Since 1990, NDI has conducted programs in Bulgaria, working with civic actors and the Bulgarian Parliament.

In the last year, NDI’s parliamentary program focused on working with parliamentary parties to improve outreach and communication practices through single party training seminars with all groups represented in parliament. To date, NDI has trained more than 325 MPs and political leaders representing the five party groups in the National Assembly. Through this program, NDI has also provided comparative legislation to inform the content of draft laws on political party finance and lobbying regulations.

The Institute’s civic program centered on preparing a coalition of seven Bulgarian NGOs (*Ti Izbirash*) to carry out a nation wide Voter-Education and get-out-the-vote campaign targeting previously under represented demographics: women, youth, and minorities. To encourage voter participation and further direct communication between political leaders and citizens, NDI launched a voter education and get-out-the-vote program, engaging The Bulgarian Association for Fair Elections, the Women’s Alliance for Development, the Association for Building Partnerships, the Center for Intercultural Relations and Minority Studies, the Media Development Center and two of Bulgaria’s trade Unions - to mobilize their own networks to conduct voter education and get-out-the-vote activities such as voter canvassing, public debates, rock the vote, and phone banking.

National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) is a nonprofit organization working to strengthen and expand democracy worldwide. Calling on a global network of volunteer experts, NDI provides practical assistance to civic and political leaders advancing democratic values, practices and institutions. NDI works with democrats in every region of the world to build political and civic organizations, safeguard elections, and to promote citizen participation, openness, and accountability in government. In Central and Eastern Europe, NDI conducts programs in Albania, Bosnia, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, and Slovakia. For more information on NDI’s Bulgaria programs, please contact Alicia Phillips in Washington, D.C. at 202-328-3136 or NDI in Sofia (Rick Asplund 359-2-989-7238 or Ann Liston at 359-2-980-7753).