

The European Parliament elections in Bulgaria are likely to reinforce the country's political stalemate between left and right

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The Bulgarian government currently lacks a majority in the country's national parliament, with the governing coalition counting on support from 120 out of 240 MPs. [Kyрил Drezov](#) writes that the upcoming European elections will likely be fought on the basis of this domestic situation, with European issues playing only a minor role, and the majority of seats being distributed between the two largest parties: the Bulgarian Socialist Party and the Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB).



European Parliament Elections are still fairly new for Bulgaria – the 2014 elections will be only the third since accession. Like previous EP elections in 2007 and 2009, their function is purely as a test for changes in national politics. The present election campaign is overwhelmingly dominated by domestic concerns and is notable for the absence of EU-related issues. As a leftover from the accession days, the European Union is still considered 'a good thing' in Bulgaria and does not generate much passion.

There is consensus amongst Bulgarians that key European policies are shaped somewhere else, and that Sofia's role is to adapt to these policies whatever shape they may take. The big traditional players in Bulgarian politics gravitate towards particular European party families – Socialist, Christian Democratic and Liberal – and in their election manifestoes mostly parrot whatever line these party families take on the big European issues. With the European level conceded, the only level left for real passion is the domestic one.

One important innovation for these elections is the introduction of preferential voting (Bulgaria is a single constituency electing 17 MEPs). A new Election Law adopted last February stipulates that any candidate with more than 5 per cent support could be moved up in the party list. This measure is likely to increase interest in the EP elections, as many voters would be keen to use this chance to punish or reward particular politicians. In this respect, the European elections again are seen as a dry run for early national elections. The present coalition government, incorporating the [Coalition for Bulgaria](#) (led by the [Bulgarian Socialist Party](#) – BSP) and the [Movement for Rights and Freedoms](#) (DPS) does not have a parliamentary majority (it is firmly supported by 120 out of 240 MPs) and relies on the ultranationalist [Ataka](#) (Attack) for parliamentary quorum.



Bulgarian Parliament building, Credit: Todor Bozhinov (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

BSP and the Left in the European Elections

On the left, the EP elections will be a crucial test for Sergey Stanishev, the leader of the Bulgarian Socialist Party, who is also leader of the [Party of European Socialists](#). After early parliamentary elections last May, Stanishev hitched BSP's fortunes to a coalition government formed together with the mostly Turkish [Movement for Rights and](#)

Freedoms. This government, led by uncharismatic technocrat Plamen Oresharski, is widely seen as dominated by oligarchic interests.

There were intermittent mass protests against the government for much of 2013, plus increasing dissatisfaction within BSP with both the government and Stanishev. In January 2014, former President Georgi Parvanov, along with a number of influential BSP opponents of Stanishev, relaunched a long-standing project for an internal BSP opposition forum labelled ABC (Alternative for Bulgarian Renaissance – the abbreviation in Bulgarian is ABV, standing for the first three letters in the Cyrillic alphabet). Without formally leaving BSP, ABC has announced a separate list for the EP elections in May, headed by current Socialist MEP Ivaylo Kalfin.

Kalfin is a former diplomat and was Bulgaria's foreign minister between 2005 and 2009, when he presided over the country's accession negotiations with the EU. Kalfin is an experienced and well-respected MEP, but his problem is that BSP's rank-and-file now view him as traitor and repeat offender. Kalfin had left BSP for an alternative leftist group in 1997, and never formally rejoined, even though he was elected as an MEP on a BSP ticket in 2009, and ran as a BSP candidate for president in 2011, coming second with 47 per cent of the vote.

Stanishev officially heads the BSP candidate list for the EP elections, although it is not clear whether he would become an MEP if elected. Even though Stanishev is not much liked by the BSP membership, the latter are traditionally averse to splitters. Moreover, many BSP supporters view Parvanov's ABC as a project favourable to the right-of-centre Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB), BSP's most influential enemy. Thus the latest opinion polls in March give BSP (part of the Coalition for Bulgaria) about 20 per cent of the vote, compared with less than six per cent for ABC. Still, Stanishev's political enemies within BSP are emboldened by the preference option, hoping to relegate him down the list, thus forcing him to resign.

Table: Predicted vote share and seats for Bulgarian European Parliament elections

| <i>Party</i> | <i>Parliamentary group</i> | <i>Predicted vote share (%)</i> | <i>Predicted seats</i> |
|--|----------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------|
| Coalition for Bulgaria (KB) | S&D | 30 | 6 |
| Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) | EPP | 29 | 5 |
| Bulgaria Without Censorship | NI | 10 | 2 |
| Movement for Rights and Freedoms | ALDE | 7.9 | 1 |
| Alternative for Bulgarian Renaissance | NI | 5.5 | 1 |
| Reformist Bloc | EPP | 5.2 | 1 |
| Ataka (Attack) | NI | 4.6 | 1 |

Note: The Coalition for Bulgaria is an alliance between several parties: the **Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP)**, **Party of Bulgarian Social Democrats**, **Agrarian Union “Aleksandar Stamboliyski”**, and **Movement for Social Humanism**. Predictions are from **Pollwatch2014** based on polls from 9-20 March and are provided for illustrative purposes, not as an attempt by the author to predict the result.

GERB and the Right in the European Elections

The traditional rightist electorate in Bulgaria is divided between GERB led by Boyko Borisov (Prime Minister 2009-2013) and the Reformist Bloc (RB), a coalition formed in mid-2013 by seven small right-wing and centrist parties. RB is seen as more civic-minded and less tainted with oligarchic connections than GERB, but also as too divided and more of a debating forum than an efficient party machine.

Opinion polls over the last six months have consistently given GERB 15-20 per cent electoral support (hovering

around 20 per cent in March, although recent Pollwatch predictions give them closer to 30 per cent), whilst RB's best scores were 8 per cent last November, 6 per cent last February, declining to around 3 per cent in March. The selection of Meglena Kuneva (former European minister in 2002-2006 and EU commissioner 2007-2010) to head the RB candidates' list further antagonised the traditional rightist electorate. This section of the electorate sees Kuneva as a turncoat and opportunist, as she had served previously in BSP-dominated governments. It is certain that many would use the preference option to move Kuneva down the list. Thus the EP elections are likely to test RB to the extreme, leading to further recriminations and squabbles amongst its constituent parts.

Taken together, the EP elections are likely to confirm GERB's far greater popularity and grass-root base on the right in comparison with RB, and perhaps fatally undermine the latter.

Self-declared 'centrist' parties

The Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) claims to be a centrist and liberal party (it is a member of the Liberal International), but in fact operates as a trade union for the Turkish and Muslim populations in Bulgaria. Its leadership consists mostly of secular Turks, but includes also a small number of ethnic Bulgarians in prominent positions. Its ethnically and religiously determined electorate has been the most stable of any party in Bulgaria since 1990.

Opinion polls in the last six months give MRF 4-7 per cent support, but this is likely an understatement, as it had won 11 per cent in last year's parliamentary elections and 14 per cent in the previous EP elections in 2009. Traditionally MRF has managed to mobilise its electorate with the greatest success of any party, not least by busing in thousands of dual citizens domiciled in Turkey. Unlike the BSP electorate, the MRF one tends to view its party's involvement in the present ruling coalition as a success, further motivating supporters to vote for their party's list.

Another party claiming the centrist ground is 'Bulgaria without censorship', created in January 2014 by popular TV anchor Nikolay Barekov. Although Barekov criticizes all established parties in Bulgaria for being controlled by business interests (attacking Bulgaria's GERB-nominated president Rosen Plevneliev with particular venom), many in Bulgaria view his newly-created party as an oligarchic project to tap popular discontent with the establishment.

They point at Barekov's 3-year executive stint at the Bulgarian TV channel TV7, which is allegedly owned by Delyan Peevski, an MRF MP and perhaps the most hated Bulgarian oligarch. Indeed, discontent with his meddling in the government triggered the prolonged anti-government protests of last year. Barekov is unashamedly populist in his critique of the establishment and has already attracted a fluctuating electorate of around 5-7 per cent. As a new and hitherto untested formation 'Bulgaria without censorship' is likely to further increase its share of the vote closer to the EP parliament elections – barring a major scandal involving its founder and leader.

European elections as an important test for Bulgaria's parties

The European elections are likely to confirm the existing political stalemate in Bulgaria, with the main parties of the left and the right balancing each other out. At the moment, both BSP and GERB have attracted the allegiance of around 20 per cent of the electorate, although as the opposition party, GERB is likely to improve its share nearer to election day, bringing it closer to the vote share predicted by Pollwatch. MRF has a stable and easy to mobilise electorate that could guarantee it at least 10 per cent of the vote. Of the smaller parties, only Barekov's 'Bulgaria without censorship' looks likely to win up to two MEPs, with the Reformist Bloc and ABC getting one each at best, or none.

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