

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

POLIT-BAROMETER

Year 19 Issue 4
October – November, 2019

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The victory of GERB in the elections enables the party to complete its governing mandate.



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1

THE POLITICAL SITUATION

The election campaign for the local elections took place in a tense domestic political environment. Despite this, with few exceptions, a normal tone between political parties and candidates for positions in local government was maintained. The election campaign was generally somewhat low-key in terms of election events and political advertising. The reasons for this could be found in the drastic cut in party subsidy, with only GERB being able to afford a more expensive campaign. A campaign which was particularly active was that of GERB in Sofia, where Yordanka Fandakova relied on a diverse campaign with a strong presence on Facebook, where dozens of advertising videos could be seen. This activity was fully justified in view of the high political stakes in the capital, where for the first time in 14 years there was real competition and expectations that there would be a run-off turned out to be well-founded.

Protests against the election of Ivan Geshev as the new attorney general of the country continued throughout the election campaign. The election took place 3 days before the local elections, with Geshev supported as expected by 20 members of the SJC - the whole of the public prosecutor's office, plus the members of the parliamentary quota in the panel. There were four judges against Geshev's election, selected by the professional quota, including the President of the Supreme Court of Cassation Lozan Panov. According to a number of observers, Geshev's hearing was not convincing. He purportedly once again allowed himself to give assessments of certain media, non-governmental organisations and political forces, showing bias and prejudice. According to Lozan Panov, Geshev does not have the necessary professional skills and that this could be seen from his workload as a prosecutor over the last 10 years. Panov pointed out that Geshev had not dealt with cases of practical legal complexity, and excluded the case of the Corporate Commercial Bank, as it was still in the judicial phase and could not be taken into account when considering the results of the candidate. Attorney General Sotir Tsatsarov attacked Lozan Panov by allowing himself personal attacks and expressed doubts about transparency and his choice.

Protesting citizens and a number of non-governmental organisations urged the president not to issue a decree appointing Geshev, and to refer to the Constitutional Court to clarify whether, if the candidature was returned, which

the president has the right to do, it would mean a new procedure, or a procedure with other candidates.

The first time President Radev commented on Geshev's election was on the day of the first round of local elections, when he answered questions from journalists after exercising his right to vote. He said he would make a decision only after carefully examining all the documents and would not submit to pressure from any side. Radev attacked Prime Minister Borisov for having an enormous influence over the SJC through the parliamentary quota, as he was obliged to make sure there was a contest with the nomination of a second candidate by the Minister of Justice. According to Radev, Borisov cannot pretend that he has nothing to do with the election of the attorney general. Borisov dismissed these allegations, saying that Radev was involved in the election campaign, indeed on the very day of the vote with a speech against the leader of the largest party. Borisov said BSP also has three representatives in the SJC, elected after having been proposed by the party.

With the exception of Democratic Bulgaria, political parties refrained from evaluating Geshev's election. GERB said they were not interfering in the procedure and that this was the job of the SJC. Before the first round of local elections, BSP leader Korneliya Ninova nevertheless declared that "a one-horse race is not a race." She said BSP had warned of the dangers posed by the adopted judicial reform in 2015, when the SJC was split into two colleges.

Before the run-off in the mayoral elections in the capital, Maya Manolova announced that she stood on the side of protesters against Ivan Geshev and urged President Radev not to issue a decree for appointment. In this move many saw an attempt by Manolova to win right-wing votes before the run-off.

The results of the local elections showed that at the national level, GERB is the first political force in a large number of municipal councils which have always been considered as an indicator of party vote. As for the mayoral elections - the political map of the country will be much more colourful, thanks to the large number of run-offs, including in a number of regional cities, which in itself was a prerequisite for a protest anti-GERB vote that united politically diverse voters.

Turnout for the first round of local elections was about 48% nationwide, slightly lower than 4 years ago. Among the regional cities of the country the lower turnout in Varna was striking - 39%.

The election for mayor of Sofia was with the highest stake and intrigue after the candidacy of former Ombudsman Maya Manolova. As expected, Yordanka Fandakova and Maya Manolova made it to the run-off, with the difference between the two being nearly 10% in favour of the incumbent mayor of the capital. At the elections in Sofia, the big surprise in the first round was the result of the independent candidate Boris Bonev from the civic association "Save Sofia". Bonev received nearly 11% of the actual mayoral vote and almost as much as an independent candidate for municipal councillor. "Save Sofia" has been particularly active over the last year, showing shoddy repairs to Sofia residents that have boosted public sentiment towards city governance. Boris Bonev appealed to younger and educated voters, with both left and right-wing voters opting for him, as well as many people who do not normally vote in elections. Boris Bonev conducted an active campaign on social media, and stood out in the election debate in BTV, which had all the main contenders for the post of mayor.

Yordanka Fandakova won 49.9% of the run-off vote in Sofia against 45.1% for Manolova, with 4.9% of voters saying they did not support anyone. Manolova's headquarters said the difference between the two was below 20,000 votes and that there had been abuse of the electoral process and vote-buying, so they would request a cancellation of the elections in the capital. Manolova said that supporting her were citizens who wanted change, and so she will decide how to retain this public energy. This message could be seen as an appeal for a new political project.

Also, in these elections, the main challenge remains vote-buying and controlled voting. A week before the first round of

local elections, the mayor of the Black Sea municipality of Nessebar and four candidates for municipal councillors were arrested on suspicion of vote-buying. What was paradoxical about the case was that the citizens of Nessebar protested in support of the mayor and, although he remained in custody, he won in the first-round election, receiving in excess of 60% of the vote. The mayor-elect and the four municipal councillors elected were subject to the most severe pre-trial measures of "detention in custody".

Another major distortion of the vote, especially in smaller settlements, is to add people with temporary residences to the electoral rolls, who have nothing to do with the settlement, in order to vote for a specific candidate. This is a phenomenon that has already been observed in several local elections.

Something that remains a significant weakness is the poor preparation of the members of the section election commissions, as evidenced by the huge number of wrong protocols. Even for the elections in Sofia over 90% of the protocols were wrong. In addition, these elections saw a record number of invalid ballots - over 15% in the first round. All this casts doubt on the fairness of the election process. In this connection there was an announcement by President Rumen Radev, who stated that he would convene a meeting of the Ministry of Interior, the Central Election Commission and the parties in order to identify measures for overcoming these defects in the election process. One possible step, according to the president, would be to introduce machine voting, which had been implemented, but was removed for these local elections by the GERB majority. Radev urged citizens to vote en masse in the second round, so that the weight of the purchased and controlled vote could be overcome. Prime Minister Borisov said that Radev only complains when BSP loses and that he will not attend such a meeting.

2

THE POLITICAL PARTIES AND THE RESULTS OF THE LOCAL ELECTIONS

2.1 GERB

The results of the local elections consolidated GERB's dominant role in the party system of the country, but at the same time there was also electoral erosion. GERB won the mayoral elections after the first round in 8 regional cities - Burgas, Stara Zagora, Vratsa, Gabrovo, Haskovo and Veliko Turnovo, and in a coalition with the UDF - in Kyustendil and Montana, where long-time UDF mayors were re-elected for a new term. After the run-offs, the GERB candidates won in 9 more regional cities - Sofia, Plovdiv, Varna, Shumen, Lovech, Targovishte, Silistra, Sliven and Smolyan.

Serious erosion is observed in the capital, where for the first time in 14 years there has been a run-off. Yordanka Fandakova lost nearly 90,000 votes compared to the 2015 elections, with just over 160,000 voters voting for her in the first round, or 36% of the actual vote. Even in the run-off, Fandakova remained far below her result in the previous mayoral elections in 2015. In the municipal council GERB will have a fragile majority together with IMRO. The electoral decline in the capital is also visible in the results for mayors. GERB will have 12 local mayors, as many as the number of mayors elected from other political forces.

In Rousse and Yambol, after the turmoil in GERB with local party structures one of the greatest collapses occurred. In Rousse in the first round the BSP candidate Pencho Milkov gained a 10% lead over his GERB opponent - Diana Ivanova. Milkov won the run-off with 60% of the votes cast.

In Yambol, GERB candidate Dimitar Ivanov, who is regional governor, was in third place.

In Blagoevgrad there is also serious erosion. GERB mayor Atanas Kambitov, who has held the post for two terms, went on to the run-off only 5% ahead of the BSP-backed candidate. At the previous local elections in 2015, Kambitov won in the first round. However, he lost the run-off, with his opponent Rumen Tomov winning by 12%.

In Varna, Ivan Portnih just failed to win on the first round, with one of the lowest turnouts among the regional cities of the country reported in the maritime capital of Bulgaria. Still, Portnih won the run-off convincingly, as he was

opposed by an unpopular candidate - nationalist Kostadin Kostadinov of the "Revivalist" Party.

GERB only managed second after BSP in the first round of the mayoral elections in Razgrad, and in Pernik the results of the GERB and BSP candidates were almost even, which led to hotly contested run-offs that GERB ultimately lost.

GERB lost the run-offs in Vidin, Dobrich and Pleven, where GERB candidates faced representatives of other right-wing parties. Tsvetan Tsenkov was elected mayor of Vidin, winning with 58% support. In Dobrich, the former mayor of the city, Yordan Yordanov, supported by the Bulgaria for Citizens Movement and other right-wing parties, won a new term with an impressive 66% of the actual vote. In Pleven, former Mayor Georg Spartanski, nominated by the initiative committee and right-wing parties, was re-elected for a new term.

The Prime Minister and GERB leader Boyko Borisov described the success after the first round of elections as unprecedented. Borisov said that for him as a party leader, the most important thing is the results for municipal councils, because it is where the strength of the parties can be measured most accurately. Borisov said that in most of the municipalities in the country GERB is the first political force. He cited Sofia as an example, where the GERB score on the lists of municipal councillors is twice as high as that of BSP.

After the run-offs, Borisov said the losses in certain regional cities were due to problems in the party structure and the party would make changes. He stated that he had repeatedly warned at party conferences over the past year that there were places where mayors had turned into local feudal lords, which met with serious public discontent. Borisov paid special attention to Blagoevgrad and to the former mayor Kambitov. Borisov said he was initiating changes to the regulations of the party so that a mayor could not be elected for more than three terms, in order to avoid people forgetting their roots. Borisov said the victories of other parties in a number of places in the country was a return to normality because the huge victory of GERB in 2015 was not normal. In this way, in his words, power will be shared among more entities, which is good for democracy. Borisov thanked the voters for giving their confidence to GERB for 10 years, despite the fatigue and the inevitable negatives

which any long period of rule brings with it. However, this has shown, according to Borisov, that citizens can see no alternative.

2.2 BSP

The strategy of BSP has been to use tactics of raising independent candidates in many places in the country in an attempt to attract a protest vote and expand the periphery of the party. On the whole, this move has brought a certain amount of success to the party. An example of this is Blagoevgrad, where independent candidate Rumen Tomov was supported, who also drew support from other political forces in the run-off.

After the first round of local elections, the BSP leadership determined the outcome of the local elections as good for the party and that it was returning to local government. In reality, in the previous local elections in 2015, BSP achieved some of its weakest results of any elections, so the present result must also be viewed positively. At the same time, however, BSP cannot yet be recognised as a political alternative to GERB. For this reason, the strategy of BSP in the mayoral elections in many places in the country was to support independent candidates and to rely on anti-GERB votes, especially in constituencies where there were run-offs. It is no coincidence that BSP leader Korneliya Ninova urged party members and supporters in the country to vote against GERB candidates in the run-offs. Ninova called on socialists to support the candidates of Democratic Bulgaria in the run-offs for elections for district mayors in the capital.

As well as in Rousse, BSP won the run-off in Razgrad, where BSP candidate Dencho Boyadzhiev received 54.3% of the vote. In Pernik, BSP also succeeded in the second round, with party candidate Stanislav Ivanov winning by a small margin.

The leadership of BSP said the party had increased its results by 150,000 votes and doubled its number of municipal councillors and mayors compared to the 2015 elections.

Internal party conflicts were, however, also evident in these local elections, especially in Varna. There, due to a conflict between the party leadership and the local party organisation, Anelia Klisarova, the candidate nominated by the BSP for mayor of the city, failed to qualify for the second round. The main reason for this was the conflict with the leader of the city organisation Borislav Gutsanov, from whom the party leadership withdrew confidence on the eve of the elections. It would certainly appear that some elements in the BSP structures around Gutsanov sabotaged Klisarova's candidacy in favour of nationalist Kostadin Kostadinov of the "Revivalist" party. Prior to the elections, the city organisation of BSP in Varna had demanded that Kostadinov be the BSP-backed candidate, but the Party's National Council blocked the decision and nominated Klisarova. The BSP leadership threatened Gutsanov and all those who worked against the party's nomination with exclusion. After the run-off, Gutsanov said he would ask for the resignation of

Korneliya Ninova, because after the presidential election, the leadership as seen in her person made many mistakes, the consequences of which were the loss of the parliamentary elections, and this year the European elections.

Ninova stated during the campaign that she had no intention of resigning, whatever the election result might be. She said the issue would be resolved next year, when the party would elect its leader by direct vote.

2.3 MRF

As expected, MRF won the mayoral elections in Kardzhali after the first round. As in previous elections in all municipalities in the district, the candidates for municipal mayors of the MRF won at the first time of asking. MRF won in the Haskovo municipality of Madzharovo, where they hitherto not had a mayor. However, GERB did not put forward a mayoral nomination in the municipality. In the Haskovo municipality of Stambolovo, MRF also won the mayoral post in the first round with over 88% of the vote. On the other hand, MRF refused to nominate a mayoral candidate for the regional town of Haskovo, which allowed GERB to win after the first round. This heightened suspicion of certain preliminary agreements between GERB and MRF in this district.

MRF increased its influence on the Kazanlak City Council, making the party the fourth political power in the city with a result of nearly 13%. The party consolidated its position in the Targovishte region. The MRF candidate for Targovishte mayor, Hamdi Iliyazov, remained second, but he made it to the run-off over 37% of the actual votes. However, the second round was won by GERB. The MRF will have a mayor in three of the four municipalities in the Targovishte district after victories in the first round - in Antonovo, Omurtag and Opaka. MRF has traditionally performed strongly in the municipalities of Silistra, Razgrad, Shumen and Blagoevgrad.

In these elections too, MRF failed to get a representative on the city council, although it was one of the goals the party set itself before the election. Just over 5,000 people voted for MRF candidates in Sofia.

MRF Chairman Mustafa Karadayi said the party had expanded its involvement in local government. He said that MRF will have 47 mayors, 37 of whom are entirely MRF candidates. However, Karadayi criticised the election process. According to him, the entire state machine was unlawfully harnessed in the campaign of those in power, and "the state apparatus was transformed into a machine for winning elections and in its most ugly form - through threats, pressure and repression". He said there were many other electoral violations that "questioned the legitimacy of the elections."

2.4 NATIONALIST FORMATIONS

During the election campaign, IMRO and NSFB, on one hand, and "Ataka" on the other, became involved in an ex-

treme confrontation with the active participation of Volen Siderov. Siderov sharply attacked the candidate for mayor of Sofia Angel Dzhambazki of IMRO with offensive qualifications, urging him to leave the European Parliament and become a municipal councillor rather than tricking voters into believing that he really intended to work for Sofia. Siderov said that he himself would set an example and leave the National Assembly to show that he really wanted to become mayor of Sofia and that he would not lie to the citizens of Sofia by giving up his seat on the municipal council. Siderov's resignation has already come to pass, with him having left the National Assembly and he will become a municipal councillor in Sofia. This move is likely to show a clear distinction with other nationalist formations and also to stop the depersonalisation of the party.

In the elections in Sofia, Volen Siderov received just over 6,000 votes or 1.44% of the total number. Angel Dzhambazki of IMRO won about 17,000 votes, or 3.9%, far below the expectations of the party. "Ataka" managed to get two municipal councillors to Sofia, and IMRO will have four.

In Plovdiv, Slavcho Atanasov, nominated by NFSB and supported by IMRO, managed to make it to the run-off, but his result was also far below expected. In Plovdiv, as a proportionate list for the municipal council, IMRO and NFSB won 10% of the vote, while "Ataka" got less than 1%. In Rousse, a city where IMRO has traditionally held strong positions, the party's candidate for mayor won 15% of the vote, almost as much as the municipal council lists. In the city of NFSB leader Valeri Simeonov, Burgas, his party won 3.2% in the contest for municipal votes and "Ataka" got just over 1%.

On the whole, the results of the local elections show a visible decline for nationalist formations. The explanation for this is the continuous conflicts over the years that led to the split of the parliamentary coalition after the European elections and the exclusion of "Ataka" from it.

2.5 "VOLYA" ("WILL" IN BULGARIAN)

"Volya" has entered a period of ever more enduring and visible electoral disappearance, as indicated by the results of the local elections. In Sofia, the party mayoral candidate received only 0.37%; the one in Plovdiv got 0.81%, and that in Shumen had 1.3%. Even in Varna, where Veselin Mareshki's political career began, 3.8% of the electorate voted that municipal councillors should be from "Volya". This is one of the few regional cities in the country where "Volya" will have representatives on the municipal council.

2.6 DEMOCRATIC BULGARIA

Representatives of Democratic Bulgaria were among the most active in protests against the election of Ivan Geshev as attorney general. On election day, they interrupted their election campaign, urging their members and supporters to join the protests en masse, leading to a full-day occupation of "Orlov Most", the busiest junction in the centre of the capital, which caused mixed reactions among residents of the city and led to attacks by GERB governing bodies.

Democratic Bulgaria's results in the local elections showed that the coalition is better represented in the largest cities in the country and above all in the capital. This is a trend that was also observed in the elections for European Parliament. It is quite understandable, therefore, that the main focus in the campaign for them was precisely the capital, where the traditionally liberal right wing has the strongest positions. The Democratic Bulgaria City Council will have the third-largest group and 12 municipal councillors - one more compared with the result of the Reformist Bloc four years ago. This shows that Democratic Bulgaria has managed to consolidate the vote of the parties in the democratic sector after the split with the UDF and the Movement Bulgaria for the Citizens. However, the result for mayoral candidate Borislav Ignatov is 2% lower than that for the list, which confirmed the impression from the election campaign that his candidature was not particularly convincing. Thus, many right-wing voters preferred to vote for civic activist and independent candidate Boris Bonev, who was the surprise of the Sofia elections. Despite this, Democratic Bulgaria faced 10 run-offs for district mayors in the capital, winning 8 district mayors, which is another sign of the electoral erosion of GERB in Sofia. This success of Democratic Bulgaria, however, is also due to the call of Maya Manolova and Korneliya Ninova for voters in their camp to support right-wing candidates against GERB.

The leadership of Democratic Bulgaria did not return this gesture, however. Before the run-off in Sofia, Democratic Bulgaria leaders called on their constituents to vote according to their conscience. So, the right-wing community in the capital split. One part of it, including a number of intellectuals, called for an anti-GERB vote and for Maya Manolova to be supported. For others, however, the old identities along the lines of communism-anticommunism prevailed. As a matter of fact, this proved decisive in Fandakova's victory in Sofia.

3

CONCLUSIONS AND FORECASTS

1. GERB's victory in the elections has enabled the party to complete its governing mandate without pressure. GERB strengthened its position in local government, which allowed for an evaluation of the mistakes made at grass roots level, as well as completion of the clean-up of the party structures that began in the middle of the year. At the same time, there has been some electoral erosion in GERB, most indicative of which were the elections in the capital, which Fandakova won with great difficulty. The elections showed that voters are looking for alternative candidates, but do not recognise a clear party-wide alternative at the national level to oppose GERB. Over the last 10 years GERB has become a cartel party, which distributes through the state a large economic resource, through which strong networked structures of clientele have been built. They have given GERB resilience and stability in electoral terms. However, clientelism leads to widespread corruption, which continues to be a fundamental risk for the democratic development of the country. GERB did not bring the initiated administrative reform to completion because it relies on the state apparatus, which gives the party a significant electoral advantage, especially in smaller municipalities and settlements.
2. In these elections there were also significant weaknesses in the election process. There continues to be a record number of wrong protocols and invalid ballots. This should lead to a reassessment of the way in which members of sectional election commissions are trained, on the one hand, and on the other to a debate about changes in electoral legislation. The buying of votes and controlled voting are becoming more widespread, which permanently and gradually erodes confidence in the electoral process as a whole and repels more and more voters who do not go to the ballot box. Law enforcement agencies have all the information and resources to counter these phenomena, but it is evident that they do not do so convincingly. This further undermines the confidence of citizens in elections and the electoral process as a whole.
3. BSP has made some breakthroughs in regional cities of the country, but the party cannot yet be recognized as an alternative to governance. Internal party struggles and a vague ideological course are among the reasons for another defeat in the elections. BSP as a party has to look at the centre, not the nationalist end of the political spectrum, which has been the focus for more than two years. The so-called. "Left conservatism" - a concept imposed by certain circles gravitating towards BSP, shrinks the party electorally and it cannot attract a peripheral centrist vote. This can only come from younger and progressive voters who are still looking for an alternative and a party moorage. 2020 will be an election year in the BSP, as party bodies will be renewed, which will apparently rekindle old internal party conflicts. And this will give an extra breath of fresh air to GERB. It is not impossible that the BSP, looking at itself and resolving its internal problems, will lose opposition focus, which will give GERB additional strength not only to complete a full term of office, but also to maintain good condition.
4. Democratic Bulgaria has strengthened its position since the European elections, but as an electoral presence it remains rather a regional city party with a more significant presence in the capital. Those on the right wing could not overcome their feelings of anti-communism and return the gesture to Maya Manolova, who called on those in her camp to support the candidates of Democratic Bulgaria for district mayors in the capital. The phenomenon of this election - Boris Bonev showed that the liberal right is not reserved only for Democratic Bulgaria and that it now has a competitor in this field. What is more, Boris Bonev's result was very close to that of Democratic Bulgaria in Sofia.
5. MRF consolidated its presence at local levels and finally recovered from the blow it was dealt by DOST three years ago. MRF is becoming an increasingly important factor in maintaining a parliamentary majority, with economic arrangements and ties between it and the ruling party becoming increasingly evident. For example, the government has pledged BGN 220 million for the expansion and modernisation of the port infrastructure in the Varna region, part of which belongs to MRF Honorary Chairman Ahmed Dogan, who has purchased not only the Varna thermal power plant but also the adjacent port for the coal plant.
6. After the division nationalist formations achieved lower results. IMRO remains the party with the most in-

fluence and presence in local government, but some electoral decline can also be observed in the party. As for the stability of the coalition at this stage, there are no indications that nationalist parties will withdraw their support for the government, even more so since they are in poor condition.

7. Voters continue to seek political alternatives. At the beginning of October, showman Slavi Trifonov founded

the “No Such Country” party, whose court registration is pending. The sociological agency Alpha Research revealed data in its survey from which it is apparent that 8% of voters would vote for Trifonov's party. Therefore, the first steps of this formation must be observed with particular care. Maya Manolova also expressed the desire for a possible political project to lead. All this indicates that significant electoral shifts in the country's party system are possible in the foreseeable future.

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ABOUT THIS STUDY

FES Bulgaria has been publishing the „Polit-Barometer“ since 2000, analyzing current and long-term political processes and identifying trends in Bulgarian politics with a special focus on the political parties as democratic actors. In a situation where

the quality and neutrality of Bulgarian media is under question, we aim to provide a scientific basis for a political discussion for Bulgarian and international readers.

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BSP has made a breakthrough in some regional cities of the country, but it cannot yet be seen as an alternative for a ruling party. Internal party struggles and a vague ideological course are among the reasons for yet another defeat in the elections. BSP as a party needs to look towards the centre, not the nationalist end of the political spectrum, which has been the focus for more than two years.



Nationalist formations achieved lower results after the division. IMRO remains the party with the most influence and presence in local government, but it too shows some electoral decline. As regards the stability of the coalition at this stage, there are no indications that nationalist parties will withdraw their support for the government, even more so since they are in poor condition, which has been the case for more than two years.

Further information on the topic can be found here:
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