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**Bulgarian Elections 2005  
A Difficult Result  
for EU Accession**

**James Pettifer**

**July 2005**

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## **A Difficult Result for EU Accession**

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### **Key Points**

- \* Bulgaria and Romania may be approaching EU accession, but serious domestic issues remain, as illustrated by the recent Bulgarian elections.
- \* Bulgaria's swing to the right also highlights a serious disconnect between popular views and those of the political elite on EU and NATO membership, as in the EU itself.
- \* The opening of negotiation with Turkey for membership is likely to strengthen the extreme right in some Balkan candidate nations, and may bring wider regional instability.

## **Bulgarian Elections 2005 A Difficult Result for EU Accession**

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Bulgaria, with Romania, is scheduled to enter the European Union on January 1st 2007,<sup>1</sup> and the Bulgarian elections on June 25th 2005 were mainly important insofar as the resulting government will preside over the pre-accession process. The European Union had hoped for a strong reforming government that would be able to push through the remaining measures that are required for full membership. This hope has not been fulfilled, and a coalition government is inevitable. The programme of the previous government emphasized a rapid dash for economic growth and social and judicial reform to comply with EU directives. There has been a mixed pattern of failure and success in this field, with good progress on the remaining privatization process and the development of the institutions and legal framework for finance capital, but a rising burden of debt (both public and private). Servicing this debt has only been possible as a result of a dramatic rise in property and land prices. The current account deficit has soared, with a rise of 34% between January and May this year, to over 6% of GDP. Bulgaria is thus typical of many 'second world' economies where the rapid rise in the oil price has had dramatic economic effects, and where, as a result of trade liberalization demanded by imminent EU accession, imports of cheap Chinese goods have bankrupted many local factory producers. The 2005 election was dominated by popular dissatisfaction over the results of these policies.

The Centre Right coalition dominated by the National Movement party of King Simeon had been faltering, after being elected with a secure mandate in the 2001 poll, with 120 out of the 240 seats in the National Assembly. The familiar problems of high unemployment, emigration of skilled people, lack of sufficient new foreign investment and entrenched corruption have dominated the social and political scene. The 2005 poll has also been marked by a new factor, the anti-Turkish racism and chauvinism of the extreme right.

Opinion polls had forecast an overall victory for the ex-communist opposition Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), up to as much as 40% of the vote. In the event it did not do as well as the polls had suggested it, and ended up with about 31%. The King's governing party saw its vote shrink sharply, so that in the new Assembly it will have 53 seats. It is unclear whether the King will be able to maintain his position as Prime Minister in a new coalition.<sup>2</sup>

The overall 2005 results were marked by a sharp swing to the populist right, with all other parties in the Assembly apart from the small ethnic Turkish Movement for Rights and Freedoms being either of the hard right, or the racist ultra nationalist new ATAKA party, so the final poll result for Assembly seats was as follows:

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Bulgarian Socialist Party	82
National Movement of Simeon II	53
Movement of Rights and Freedoms (Turkish Minority)	34
ATAKA	21
United Democratic Forces	20
Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria	17
Popular Union	13

The combined forces of the hard right and extreme right amount to about 70 votes, and if these parties worked together, they would be almost as large a force in the Assembly as the Socialist Party. This is not very likely. Although rent by personality clashes (both the Popular Union and the Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria are breakaways from the original United Democratic Forces), and policy differences (the UDF has in the past worked with the Turkish party in government), their emergence marks as significant a swing to the populist and nationalist right as similar movements within neighbouring states or within the European Union itself. It is a signal that there is as serious a structural dislocation between the people and the political elite in the pre-accession countries as there is in existing member states. In a sign of similar alienation from the leadership view on the value of Bulgarian membership of Euro-Atlantic institutions, support for NATO membership has dropped considerably in Bulgaria, from about 80% at the time of the 2002 invitation to join to only about 25% currently. A main cause of this is the unpopularity of Bulgarian involvement in the Iraq war coalition.

The emergence of ATAKA with its outspoken racist and anti-Turkish agenda is likely to indicate to both foreign and domestic observers that the anti-Turkish element in the Bulgarian political psyche that was very strong in the later period of the Todor Zhivkov communist regime has not disappeared.<sup>3</sup> Some critics of ATAKA have claimed that it is merely a creature of the old KGB-allied secret services who have now captured a new popular nationalist constituency. It is certainly true that among the constituent founders of ATAKA there are ex-military figures believed to have close Russian links, but this is not an adequate analysis of the New Right growth.

Another view is that the move to the populist right and the emergence of ATAKA can be explained by mostly economic and social factors. Many areas of Bulgarian life and economy have improved little since the mid-1990s and there are still a very large number of people in rural areas and among the poor who feel a strong nostalgia for communism. The worthwhile areas of the economy were largely commandeered and asset stripped in the early 1990s by recent ex-communists who formed an often kleptocratic elite. Most of these people, particularly from the younger generation, have rebranded themselves politically as pro-capitalist 'moderates', and enjoy foreign approval. But problems remain about the legitimacy of their power and asset ownership/control in many popular eyes. There is still substantial Russian influence in parts of the economy, and organized crime has a sophisticated and often pervasive influence. The emphasis in EU discourse about the importance of the need for judicial reform before EU membership is possible is actually a message to the Sofia political establishment that the influence of organized crime and the Mafia is a major issue for the EU.

At the legal level, much legislation has been passed under EU pressure to improve the general climate, and the obvious Mafiaisation of the 1990s has been moderated, but much of the legislation has made little or no difference to the life of the ordinary Bulgarian. Institutions and economic enterprises still lack transparency, as the

last government programme pointed out - 'Strict application of the rule of law, transparency of institutions and timely response to complaints and grievances are essential for the government if law and order are to be maintained.'<sup>4</sup>

Organized crime now uses more sophisticated methods and front organizations than it used to, but the fact still remains that Bulgaria has a large and coherent economic underground ultimately sustained by the steady flow of heroin and other drugs through the country en route from the producer countries in the east to Europe via Turkey and the Balkans. The absence of a strong governing party after this election means that it is very unlikely indeed that the role of organized crime will be significantly reduced in the period up to January 2007, and the admission of Bulgaria (if it takes place) will bring to the EU the first new member with a significant and deeply entrenched Mafia problem. In Bulgaria this is not simply a matter of a significant part of the economy falling under the influence of the Mafia, as is certainly the case with some enterprises in Poland, Estonia, the Czech Republic and elsewhere, but in Bulgaria the survival of Soviet-era informal inner-state networks has integrated the economic capacity and cash generation of the Mafia with bigoted and racist nationalism. This is the significance of the appearance of ATAKA as a new political force. Many of the same tendencies are also problems in Romania, a candidate member with the same timeframe for accession as Bulgaria.

European public opinion in the current member countries has not been informed of the negative aspects of the social and political reality in the potential new member states.<sup>5</sup> There is virtually no reporting from these nations in newspapers in the UK or most European countries. In the US media Bulgaria has received a certain amount of neo-con approval, as a 'Christian' country with a functional state that can provide soldiers for US-led coalitions that is also near the Islamic world. The exact nature of the Bulgarian state and the distribution of real economic and social power within it does not receive much detailed examination in Washington, nor does the central issue of relations with Turkey.

EU concerns about the election have been muted in the chaos following the Dutch and French constitutional votes, but the Sofia result is bound to put a serious question mark over what is going to happen in 2007 and 2008. Postponement of accession, as allowed for in the February 2005 agreement, would offend the United States, where geopolitical considerations over US Black Sea policy make Bulgarian and Romanian EU membership a priority. In turn, the geopolitical factors that have affected the Bulgarian electorate are closely tied in with the prospect of negotiations opening on Turkish EU membership in autumn 2005.

The EU and the US will at some point have to face the uncomfortable fact that it is the prospect of EU membership and in particular a pattern of enlargement including Turkey that has assisted and in the future will continue to assist the Bulgarian extreme right. In the Balkans, the Turkish state is still often viewed through traditional eyes as a massive 'Islamic' neighbour with a recent history of imperial oppression. The preferred image of Turkey as a 'moderate secular Moslem nation' in the United States has little meaning at street level in many Balkan countries, particular Christian majority nations like Bulgaria where the Orthodox church played an important role in the struggle against Ottoman domination.

The swing to the hard and new right cannot be explained by reductionist economic and social analysis, or conspiracy theories about the influence of the revived Russian security apparatus in Bulgaria. Nor does it reflect the traditional 'Greater

Bulgarian' agenda that would threaten Greece and/or Macedonia. The latter was hardly mentioned in the campaign, and it is arguable that the Bulgarian minority in the Pirot area of south east Serbia is a much more active focus of Sofia's human rights concerns than anything in Skopje. Greek/Bulgarian relations are currently good, and there is substantial Greek investment in Bulgaria, although some aspects of it (ie outworking by textile workers for very low wages) has given rise to other concerns. The popularity and revival of anti-Turkish racism is linked to underprivileged groups' fears about an open border with Turkey and population movement, and the sense of Bulgaria as an Orthodox Christian society on the frontier of south east Europe with the Muslim world that is about to have its current stable border with Turkey disrupted. The rise of ATAKA is mostly a response to this aspect of globalisation and the prospect of increasing population movement and border openings tied to the onset of EU membership.

The EU itself, as the main local agent of globalisation, has a responsibility for what has happened in this election. The Turkish minority in Bulgaria is concentrated mainly in the south east adjoining Turkey and the relative or total opening of the border is envisaged as Bulgaria joins the Union and Turkey moves closer to Europe. There has been little coherent analysis to date in the existing EU member states as to how far further enlargement involving Turkey will actually bring the stability in south east Europe that proponents of enlargement claim. There is a massive and growing perceptual gap between Brussels and the Balkans on this issue.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> See 'Commission adopts favourable opinion on the accession of Bulgaria and Romania', Brussels, EU Press Release, 22 February 2005.

<sup>2</sup> At time of writing (14 July 2005) his party is demanding that he does so, but other coalition partners are resisting the proposals.

<sup>3</sup> For background, see 'Turkish and other Muslim Minorities of Bulgaria' by Ali Eminov, C Hurst & Co, London, 1997.

<sup>4</sup> Republic of Bulgaria, Council of Ministers, 4 November 2002.

<sup>5</sup> See 'Le Monde', Paris, 28 June 2005.

## **Want to Know More ...?**

See: H T Norris, "*Islam in the Balkans*", C Hurst & Co, London, 1998

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