

Bulgaria Post-Election Update

November 2007

Bulgaria held its fifth local elections since beginning its transition to democracy in 1989. The elections will be remembered for the exceptional amount of political competition: 88 parties fielded a total of 60,000 candidates. The elections took place following high rates of inflation over the summer and in the midst of a general teachers' strike that closed 90 percent of schools in Bulgaria for five weeks. Several days prior to the election, the National Commission on Opening Former State Security Files publicized information that 445 of the municipal mayoral candidates collaborated with the State Security before 1989, most of which were from the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) (76), the Movement for Rights and Freedoms MRF (60), and Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) (40).

This post-election report highlights political developments, campaign events, and election results. In Bulgaria, NDI currently implements programs funded by the National Endowment for Democracy to increase the political participation of Roma and women.

Turnout

First round turnout was moderately low, averaging 42.43% across the country, with Pleven recording the lowest voter activity at 31.17%, and seaside resorts registering the highest at 80% in Nessebar and at 58.29% in Bourgas. Turnout in Sofia was lower than the national average at 35.89%. The second round of voting drew an even lower turnout of approximately 28.79%. In contrast, voter turnout in the 2003 local elections averaged 47% across the country.



Forty-two percent of voters went to the polls for the first round of voting

This relatively low turnout was interpreted as an expression of the growing disillusionment of the majority of Bulgarian citizens. People did not believe that their vote mattered, and were generally disappointed with the record number of candidates and parties running. New local business parties were established to compete in the elections, while the historic political parties formed numerous and diverse coalitions throughout the country, making it difficult for voters to become oriented with the principles and ideology of a given party or candidate. Most candidates did not commit themselves to addressing particular issues, so as not to face other candidates in a direct debate. In the words of Ivan Krastev, Director of the Center for Liberal Strategies, citizens had the right to vote, but not the right to choose.

In certain municipalities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) conducted get out the vote (GOTV) efforts. NDI was pleased to observe that the civil society-driven GOTV seeds, planted and nurtured by the Institute between 2001 and 2005, continue to bear fruit



independent of international funding and technical support. The Youth Center in Sevlievo, a former NDI partner in national GOTV programs, held a GOTV campaign in its municipality entitled *Ti Izbirash*, which targeted youth. Another former NDI partner, the Romani NGO Center for Interethnic Dialogue, *Amalipe*, organized a voter education and GOTV program entitled, “Don’t Sell Your Vote!” targeting Romani voters. The center *Naya*, a women’s NGO and long-term NDI partner, organized a campaign targeting women voters in Targovishte. Another women’s NGO, *Ikar*, organized a voter education and GOTV campaign in the Haskovo municipality, targeting voters with disabilities.

Election Campaign and Election Day Conduct

The elections were held in compliance with domestic laws and international standards, generally demonstrating integrity of the balloting process with no serious flaws.

However, the number of incidents reported to the Central Election Commission reached record highs in comparison to previous elections in the country, particularly reports related to vote buying. Prosecutors launched more than 20 subsequent investigations under the newly-amended penal code, which criminalizes both vote *buying* and vote *selling*. The two most significant types of violations were the organized busing of voters from abroad and vote buying.

The organized busing of people from abroad is known in Bulgaria as “election day tourism”. As in previous elections, buses from Turkey brought Bulgarian Turks to ethnically mixed municipalities (and Kardzhali in particular), where they exercised their right to vote. The Prime Minister estimated that on October 28, these voters amounted to between 8,500 and 10,000 people. Although all Bulgarian citizens registered in the country more than 10 months ago have the right to elect local governments, the system of organized busing—paid for by anonymous people to transport huge masses of voters to targeted localities—swings the vote substantially and poses serious questions about local representation. Whereas buses from Turkey have become customary in every election, election day tourism from Macedonia is a relatively new development, with 2,800 voters traveling to Bulgaria to vote in Sandanski and Blagoevgrad.

As reported above, vote buying reached unprecedented rates. Despite recent legislative measures, the practice was not deterred. Indeed, the price of one vote has increased dramatically from 10 BGN previously to 50, 100, and even 150 BGN (approximately \$110) per vote, as reported by the media. In combination with the relatively low turnout, vote buying is likely to have a lasting effect in further decreasing turnout and increasing the price of votes, unless Bulgaria develops a unanimous political will to combat it.



Voting in Roma communities gathered crowds

The large size of the ballot papers, as well as the constant changes in the balloting process from election to election, were expected to cause some trouble to both voters and the election

administration. The Central Electoral Commission announced that eight percent of all ballots cast nationwide were invalid. This represents a disconcerting amount of votes and may be used as a rationale to contest election results in court.

Results

The local councilors in all 264 municipalities were elected on October 28 through a proportional, closed list ballot system. Out of 264 municipalities, 102 mayors were elected in the first round—including Sofia, Varna and Plovdiv—with the remaining 162 elected in the second round. In Sofia, incumbent mayor and former secretary of the interior ministry Boyko Borissov won a sweeping victory with 52.9% of the popular vote. He was followed by Martin Zaimov, a candidate for the right-wing Alliance for Sofia, with 18%, and the BSP candidate, Brigo Asparuhov, with 15.8%.

In terms of the number of voters supporting party lists for municipal assemblies, GERB came first with 594,138 voters, followed by BSP with 519,570 voters. The MRF fell to third in terms of popular support, followed by *Ataka* in fourth. This was Boyko Borissov’s major argument for claiming victory in the elections. Indeed, the change in the political spectrum and the establishment of a major alternative political force to the BSP is clear.

On the other hand, the number of votes does not directly translate into the number of elected officials. Thus, in terms of elected local councilors, BSP came in first with 1,265 out of 5,232 total seats, followed by GERB with 1,006 elected local councilors. This provided BSP with its own grounds on which to claim victory.

Local Councilors

Party	<u>Elected Local Councilors¹</u>	
	# local councilors (total 5,232)	% popular vote
BSP	1,265	23.73
GERB	1,006	17.44
MRF	740	14
<i>Ataka</i>	440	8.31
NMS	141	2.67
UDF	136	2.25
DSB	108	2.05

The table above lists only elected officials who ran on a single party list, and not those who ran as independents or those supported by coalitions, all of which form a sizeable share of all elected officials. Many local, and often times business, parties also managed to have elected local councilors. The influence of right wing forces and National Movement for Stability and Progress (NMS) decreased, whereas MRF demonstrated a slight increase, and GERB made a very successful debut. *Ataka*, for which these were also the first local elections, confirmed its position as the fourth most powerful political party in the country.

The largest Romani parties (*Evrroma*, *Roma*, DROM, and PLAM²) had a total of 96 Romani local councilors elected from their individual party ballots. However, where the Romani parties ran in coalitions, the number of Roma elected has yet to be counted. Many Romani trainees of NDI were elected or re-elected on a Romani party list.

¹ All tables include only elected officials on single party ballots, and not coalitions or independents.
² A new Romani formation active mainly in northwest Bulgaria

An unprecedented number of mainstream parties – predominantly MRF but also BSP, New Time, the Green Party, NMS, GERB, Oder, Law and Justice, and others – included Roma on their candidate lists. Romani candidates ran independently as well, particularly for mayor in small villages. Many NDI Roma graduates ran for and were elected as local councilors on the



ballots of mainstream parties: Zdravko Kotov (MRF) in Knezha; Yuksel Yasharov (New Time) in Peshtera; Marian Kurtashev (Green Party) in the Vulchedrum Municipality; Stela Kostova (GERB) in Sliven; Nikolay Kirilov (NMS) in Lom; and Ahmed Ahmed (BSP) in Tervel. The significantly broader representation of Roma in mainstream parties is a positive development that is likely to grant Roma greater access and influence in internal party structures and processes, and encourages more effective local policies targeting Romani issues.

The new system for the redistribution of seats, known as the Hare Quota³, introduced a threshold quota for local councils. In the vast majority of cases, this meant that smaller parties could not pass the threshold. However, there were some exceptions. In Sandanski, where the Romani community is small and *Evroroma* received more than 6 percent of the popular vote, the party received the majority of local council seats because the rest of the mainstream Bulgarian vote was dispersed among 39 parties, only three of which were able to pass the threshold. Thus, one Roma party will dominate a local government, setting a precedent in Bulgaria's political history.

There are a few other unprecedented successes in terms of Romani representation. For the first time, there is an elected Romani local councilor in Sofia (Iliya Iliev, GERB). There was also an increase in the number of Romani women elected in comparison to 2003, including NDI trainees Fanya Gadularova (*Evroroma*) in the Karlovo municipality, Stela Kostova (GERB) in the Sliven municipality, and Emilia Mihajlova, (right-wing coalition) in the Dupnitsa municipality. Despite the lack of comprehensive data, the number of elected Romani women remains low compared to the ratio of women local councilors nationwide.

A fact of concern is the relatively lower re-election rate of Romani incumbents compared to the nationwide ratio. The main reason for this was that many Romani councilors were placed in non-winning positions on their party lists, usually due to the party leadership's desire to change the representation, but also in isolated cases, to the desire of individual Roma to withdraw gradually from elected office while continuing to support the party. These are commonly Romani individuals who were elected at a young age and but were not fully prepared, and had a difficult term in office.

The other major reason for the low reelection rate is the instability of most of the Romani parties. Many Romani local councilors elected in 2003 found themselves without a political force to nominate them for the 2007 elections. Parties like the Central Unifying Movement *Spasenie*, the Democratic Congress, or the *Edinstvo* Coalition ceased to exist, while others, like *Roma*, shrunk significantly. Therefore many Roma had to negotiate with other parties to include them on their candidate lists, resulting in less favorable list positions and a loss of confidence and resources to make the party known among Romani communities.

Women's local council representation increased slightly from 21% to 23% (1,161 women elected). More than 30 of NDI's women trainees became first-time councilors in Targovishte,

³ The Hare Quota is a calculation method used in STV and is determined by dividing the number of votes placed by the number of seats contested.

Gabrovo, Montana, Kula, Silistra, Sliven, Tsar Kaloyan, Karlovo, and Vidin. These newly elected councilors are affiliated with several different political parties, including GERB, BSP, the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF), MRF, *Evroroma*, *Gergyovden*, Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria (DSB), and the Green Party.

The general trend was that bigger cities (regional centers) elect more women, and accordingly the newly elected Sofia local council will have 18 women councilors (27.8%) compared to the previous nine. Most of the regional centers showed rates of women’s representation between 25% and 33%: Bourgas and Varna – 25%; Plovdiv – 27%; Sofia – 27.8%; Silistra – 30%; Dobrich – 31.7%; Stara Zagora – 33%; and Vratsa – 37.8%. Although there are individual cases of women’s representation in smaller municipalities exceeding 50% (for instance in Saedinenie) these are rather isolated cases, and do not represent sustainable trends. In 12 (or 4.5%) municipalities, there were no women elected at all. These municipalities are in the regions of Razgrad, Smolyan, Targovishte, Haskovo and Shoumen, with ethnically mixed populations.

Key Mayoral Races

Elected Mayors of Large Cities/Regional Centers (total 27)

Party	# elected mayors
BSP	11
GERB	10
UDF/DSB	5
MRF	1

The regional centers, or district capitals, have always been seen as the “premier league” in an election, therefore they attract more resources and greater public attention. Generally, the election battle was fought between GERB and BSP. The strong representation of **GERB** in their first local election is impressive and demonstrates that the party building process has been successful thus far. **BSP**, despite gaining victories in new territories such as Pernik and Shumen, has lost some support elsewhere and, with the exception of Varna, is still not influential in the biggest and most economically vibrant cities. **The right wing forces** lost several traditionally supportive cities, though they have managed to preserve strongholds like Pleven and Montana. **Ataka** did not manage to win a regional city mayoral position, though the party’s candidate in Bourgas reached the second round. Additionally, *Ataka* supported the right wing coalition which won in Kyustendil. However, *Ataka* managed to have local councilors elected in all but two regional centers. NMS lost its two previous regional mayors (one of them was re-elected but on GERB’s ballot).



*Rositsa Yanakieva,
new mayor of Pernik*

The vast majority of the mayors from the largest cities were re-elected, though some of the incumbents changed their party affiliations. The high reelection rate was one of the most significant trends in these elections. The number of women mayors in the largest cities remained the same including two incumbents re-elected in Dobrich and Smolyan, and a newly elected woman mayor in Pernik. The new Pernik mayor, Rositsa Yanakieva, is an NDI trainee and partner in the informal women’s parliamentary caucus.

Elected Mayors of Municipalities (total 264)

Party	# elected mayors
BSP	111
GERB	46
MRF	35
UDF	17
NMS	11

For the first time, several Romani candidates ran for municipal mayoral positions. Most were NDI trainees, including Zdravko Kotov in Knezha, Emiliya Kovacheva in Ihtiman, and Nihat Galibov in Levski. While no Romani municipal mayors were elected, this represents a positive trend of greater participation.

Thirty-two women were elected mayors in the municipalities and in the districts of Sofia, Plovdiv and Varna, comprising 12% of all mayors elected. This is a three percent increase in comparison to the previous local elections in 2003, when the number of women mayors was only 23. The political party breakdown of elected women mayors is as follows: BSP 9; GERB 8; UDF/DSB 6; MRF 2; Green Party 1; and coalitions or independents 5. It is important to note that this increase is primarily due to the high number of women elected mayors in the Sofia district. Prior to the elections, an amendment to the Local Elections Act had introduced the election, rather than appointment as had previously been the case, of district mayors in the three largest cities; in Sofia, eight out of 24 newly elected district mayors are women. This fact demonstrates that increasing women's representation is not a natural development that takes place equally across the country, but that larger cities are more favorable to women candidates, and voters there are more likely to support them.

Conclusions

The elections outlined a new change in the Bulgarian political spectrum with a move toward two major actors – GERB to the right and BSP to the left. The traditional right-wing parties, such as UDF and DSB performed poorly and *Ataka* somewhat stabilized its party structures and influence in certain areas, and showed some signs of further mobilization. GERB will now have its first chance to participate in the governing process, and is very likely to look for opportunities to gain representation in parliament, possibly through early elections.

The newly elected local councils are quite diverse in terms of political representation, which is likely to make them less dependent on the Sofia-based party headquarters, but may also make the everyday decision-making process more difficult.

Vote buying significantly undermined public confidence in the balloting process as well as in political parties. It also negatively affected Romani representation and the public image of Roma. The vast majority of Romani local councilors are newly elected and will require training and technical assistance. The coming months NDI plans to provide governance training to address this need.