

# Political change in Bulgaria: interpreting the 2009 General Election results\*

## Abstract

This article reviews the 2009 results of the General Election in Bulgaria, an election which brought a new party almost to the point of being able to govern alone. The election results also increased the vote of apparently populist parties, which the author sets into the context of the post-accession crisis within the EU, affecting not only Bulgaria, and continuing voter disappointment with the solutions offered and with the political process. The author describes four characteristics of the 2009 elections – a new voting system, the close timing with the elections to the European Parliament, the election campaigns themselves, and the higher than expected turnout – before describing the likely impact of the actual results, which saw significant changes in the parliament and in the government, on the political life of the country. The author assesses the state of each of the parties participating in the new parliament, which will need to overcome a great deal of inexperience in the critical period facing the economy and which is itself a sign of the instability of the party political system.

**Keywords:** EU accession, political crisis, voter disaffection, turnout, voting systems, populism, party political system, economic crisis, coalition government

## Introduction

At first glance unexpectedly, various new EU member countries, almost immediately after accession to the EU, experienced severe political disturbances. Some authors even use the term *post-accession crisis* with regard to the political systems. Others, without connecting the political crisis directly to the effects of membership, nevertheless arrive at the conclusion that the political systems of these new democracies cannot hold out against the complexity of the new EU environment.<sup>1</sup>

The problem is not membership itself, but the political vacuum arising out of the lack of a new consensual objective. This vacuum coincides with disappointment and discontent with the current economic, social and cultural situation and, more generally, with the results of the transition as a whole among great parts of the population. This kind of *milieu* is most favourable for entirely new political actors which have orientations bordering on the right-wing and the populist.

\* The article is a revised and expanded version of the publication *Parliamentary Elections in Bulgaria 2009: Specifics and Results* Friedrich Ebert Foundation: Bulgaria Reports, May 2009.

1 Ehrke, M (2005) 'Ein Jahr danach. Ostmitteleuropa in der Beitrittskrise?' *Internationale Politikanalyse, Politik Info* Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, p. 4.

The 2009 general elections in Bulgaria illustrate this specific situation against a background of phenomena which include the inevitable change of the respective ruling party, high voter volatility and the emergence of political populism of different kinds.

The party system is in a state of permanent instability:

The repeated radical changes of electoral preferences due to the search for new miracles and the ensuing collapse of each governing party provide the evidence for deep disappointments of the electorate with the party system and the political parties in the country.<sup>2</sup>

During the first decade after the transition, a relative stability of political parties and the party system in Bulgaria could be claimed in so far as two large parties – the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) on the left; and the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) on the right – dominated the political space. This situation was, however, severely challenged by the dramatic election outcomes in 2001, when the UDF, being at that time the governing party, lost almost 1.5m votes and the BSP some 150 000, while an entirely new political movement (NDSV), led by the former Bulgarian king Simeon II, won two million votes from scratch. In 2001, almost half of Bulgarian voters changed their preference in elections which had an unexpectedly high turnout.

NDSV relatively soon dried up, although the power of the former king's charisma extended to participation as a junior partner in a triple coalition under the socialist Prime Minister Stanishev (2005-2009).

In 2009, towards the end of the term of this government, there emerged the next breakthrough of a newly-established party of a populist type (GERB). Another new party (RZS), although rather smaller, competed with it in populist rhetoric, while the right-wing populist Ataka had already gained its position in the Bulgarian parliament.

There were clear signs of crisis in the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), part of a trend throughout Europe.

### Specifics of the 2009 parliamentary elections

The seventh parliamentary elections in Bulgaria since the beginning of the transition were held on 5 July 2009. Nearly seven million officially registered voters had the opportunity to give their preferences to 18 parties and coalitions.

These elections were characterised by several specifics which distinguished this from the other national elections held so far.

### New voting system

First of all, the elections were held in accordance with a new voting system. After an initial experiment in 1990 with a 'mixed' voting system, according to which half the members of parliament (MPs) were elected through a proportional voting system, with a 4 % election threshold, and the other half through a majority voting system in two rounds in single-mandate constituencies, a fully proportional voting system has

<sup>2</sup> Genov, N (2010) *Ups and Downs of Social Democracy in Bulgaria* Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Office Bulgaria: *Analyses* June, p. 28.

been consistently applied since 1991. Voting legislation underwent only minor and technical amendments and alternations. Meanwhile, the percentage participation in elections gradually declined, reaching 55 % in 2005 from above 90 % in 1990. This presented sufficient ground for changes in the voting system to be pursued.

At the beginning of 2007, in a speech about broad reforms to the political system, President Georgi Parvanov appealed to MPs for changes aimed at introducing a majority element in the existing voting system. Initially, this proposal was accepted by the political parties, but in parliament it encountered a silent resistance. With the elections in 2009 approaching, BSP broke the silence and proposed that 58 MPs be elected through a majority system. Only in April 2009, after continuous and heated debates, was a proposal to elect 31 out of 240 MPs through a majority system, supported by the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF), accepted.

The main problem with the 31 MPs elected through the majority system is that they are elected within the existing electoral constituencies predetermined for the proportional system. These differ significantly in terms of the population and number of MPs that they elect. In this way, a single MP is elected by a significantly differing number of voters in different constituencies.

Other important changes in the law were connected with the funding of pre-election campaigns, as parts of the previously amended Law on Political Parties were repealed. Donations from legal entities are prohibited. Donors are obliged to provide declarations on the origin of funds, and all donations exceeding 5 000 Bulgarian leva (€2 500) can only be carried out via bank transfer. Parties must maintain a public register of their donors.

The revised voting system, i.e. with 209 MPs elected through a proportional voting system in 31 poly-mandate constituencies, with a barrier of 4 %, and 31 MPs elected through the majority system in a single round ('first past the post') in the same constituencies, created a difficult environment for participants not only because of the insufficiently thought through introduction of a partial majority vote system, but mostly due to the last-minute amendment of the voting legislation. These amendments played a decisive role in the end results of the elections, since they significantly increased the number of MPs of the biggest party.

#### *Timing*

The second specific in the 2009 elections was the close temporal link with the elections for the European Parliament. This was the first time in the past twenty years that two elections at national level were held within one month (7 June and 5 July). To a large extent, they were treated both by participants and electorate as two parts of one and the same election, and they led both to an untypically long election campaign as well as the results of the European elections being reflected in the national ones, which would not have occurred were the elections to have had a different timing.

The European elections were seen as a competition for winning starting positions in the national elections, as well as an opportunity to test and legitimise new participants with a view to the national elections.

It was precisely at the elections for the European Parliament that the main participants in the parliamentary elections were outlined, and the new ratio of powers became evident. This refers in particular to the newly-created party of Boiko Borisov, the Mayor of the Bulgarian capital, Sofia, called ‘Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria’ (GERB), which was participating in parliamentary elections for the first time after a successful participation in two European elections (2007 and 2009) and one local election (2007). This showed the best performance during the first elections as it won most of the votes and gained most members of the European Parliament (MEPs). This reconfirmed its aspirations to be the biggest political party and the main participant in the future government of the country.

The European elections were also a test of the new formula of participation of the traditional right-wing parties, since the ‘Union of Democratic Forces’ (UDF) and ‘Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria’ (DSB) – which had parted after deep discrepancies and continuous scandals – again came together for both elections in the so-called ‘Blue Coalition’, which could be considered as an ‘old-new’ participant in the elections. This coalition showed a comparatively low result in the European elections, but the mere fact of unification and the single mandate that it won provided reasons for higher confidence in the ‘real elections’.

In the European elections, two other parties received their legitimisation. The first of these is the ‘Order, Law, Justice’ (RZS) party, created on the model of the Polish PiS party, with a strong populist notion and a nationalist orientation. It is true that it did not return an MEP, but it achieved a respectable result of 4.67 % of the vote, thereby stating its ambitions to enter the national parliament. The second of these – LIDER – is a party of a corporate type, representing a tendency shown very clearly in the national elections in 2007, i.e. the involvement of business interests in politics through a utilisation of the influence that an employer has over its employees. With the 5.7 % it gained, it remained just below the voting threshold, but also showed potential for parliamentary participation.

The emergence of new political actors which were absent in the last parliamentary elections, and legitimised in part just before the 2009 elections, meant a continuation of the process of the particularisation of the party system and heralded serious changes in the future parliament.

Still, a more important effect of the European elections appeared to be their influence on the attitudes and behaviour of the voters, especially those who do not usually participate in elections.

Extrapolated to the future parliament, these results predicted a power ‘tie’ in the parliament, enormous difficulties in creating a working coalition government and, most likely, new elections within a few months. This perspective obviously scared voters, especially in the state of economic crisis which was already becoming tangible in Bulgaria as well. The fear of a continuing political deadlock was also the main reason for the significant activation of new segments of voters within the perspective of determining a clear subject of governance and a widespread search for a sustainable alternative. This state of public consciousness proved extremely profitable for GERB, which won because it was a factor of change, on the one hand, and yet a factor of stability on

the other. The convincing victory of GERB seemed for many voters the only option to protect the country from political crisis and an inability to constitute a government.

### *The election campaign*

The third specific was that unlike in other occasions, the electoral campaigns and what happened during them played a significant role in the outcome of the elections. Indicative in this respect is that, at the dawn of the elections, no researcher was able to predict what would happen. Inevitably, in the last ten days preceding the elections, unanticipated events took place; these increased the activity of voters and this led to unexpected results.

On the whole, the election campaign passed in a comparatively unusual manner. The leading party in the governing coalition, the BSP, was predictably trying to emphasise the successfulness of its government, to outline concrete positive results, to persuade of its experience and qualities in applying the appropriate anti-crisis programme and to guarantee financial stability and social protection in the difficult economic situation. Alongside this, however – untypically of the governing party and its traditions – BSP put more energy into a negative campaign targeted against GERB and its possible co-operation with the Blue Coalition, personalised in the DSB leader, Ivan Kostov. At the same time, it chose to lead its entire campaign on the basis of a ‘clash of leaders’ – ‘Stanishev vs. Borisov’ – which was also untypical as well as unprofitable for the BSP. The negative campaign might have consolidated the hard core of the BSP electorate, but it was generally not well received by potential voters. Another consequence was much less beneficial for BSP, i.e. that such a campaign politicised and activated many more of its opponents.

The case with the MRF campaign was a similar one – it mobilised its own supporters to the utmost, but this became the reason for the activation of those social segments which treat it with mistrust and animosity.

Actually, the trigger that led to the strong degree of polarisation was a statement of the leader of the MRF, Ahmed Dogan, which was interpreted by the media as if he would single-handedly distribute the financial resources of the state. In this way, an ethnic bias which is rooted in the past and which had been avoided since the beginning of the transition became a more dominant feature of the campaign.

Until recently, this had been typical especially of the nationalist ‘Ataka’ party but, at these elections, even before Dogan’s statement, major actors such as GERB, the Blue Coalition and RZS also relied on an anti-MRF message. RZS even changed its slogan during the campaign, from ‘Stop corruption’ to ‘Stop Doganisation’. The next step was to ‘tie’ BSP to the MRF and to ascribe negatives to the two parties as participants in the triple governing coalition (Boiko Borisov: ‘BSP and MRF are one and the same party’).

In such a situation, the opposing parties, and most of all GERB, skilfully used resentments with an ethnic basis as an electoral instrument to attract voters and predominantly for the activation of passive voters.

In comparison with the incorrectly-constructed electoral campaign of its main opponent, the BSP, GERB took advantage of every chance and focused its efforts on

appeals for votes, for a concentration of the vote and against the coalition form of governance.

Even though all the parties had prepared comparatively serious election platforms, actual discussion on the real problems of the country was scarce during the campaign. Comparison and choice between different strategies to overcome the economic crisis were lacking. To a large extent, the programmes remained an artificial appendage to the campaign; not referred to even when the opponent presented them in an untoward manner.

The slogans of the parties – even though, in most cases, they were used in both campaigns and were repeated in the public space over a period of two months – left no definite trace in the consciousness of the citizens. According to research from the National Centre for the Study of Public Opinion, NZIOM, between 72 % and 88 % of people interviewed during the campaign could not distinguish the slogans of the different parties in the campaign.

Eventually, the ethnicisation and politicisation of the campaign gave credit predominantly to GERB as the strongest opposition party, which had not participated in the central governing coalition and which attracted the biggest part of the activated protest vote.

#### *High turnout*

The fourth specific of the parliamentary elections in 2009 – and the decisive one – can be seen in the unexpectedly high voter turnout. None of the observers predicted a higher participation rate than that of 2005 – around 3.5-3.7 million voters, or around 55 %. The reasons for this were connected with the global tendency towards decreasing participation, as well the fatigue after two consequent election campaigns, the summer season, etc. Reality proved different. The specifics of the campaign listed above, as well as the highlighting of problems such as the buying of votes, the so-called corporate vote, the release of arrested individuals due to their registration as candidates in the elections, the expectations of the massive voting of citizens with dual Turkish citizenship and for ‘voting tourism’ inside the country, the feeling that the last-minute changes to the voting legislation were meant to work in favour of the governing parties, the fear of an inability of being able to form a government – all this turned into a complex impulse to activate the voters. Ultimately, over 4.3 million citizens voted, or 62 % of the electorate.

**Table 1 – Participation in parliamentary elections in Bulgaria, 1990 – 2009**

| Elections | Number of votes | Turnout (%) |
|-----------|-----------------|-------------|
| 1990      | 6 333 334       | 90.60       |
| 1991      | 5 694 842       | 83.87       |
| 1994      | 5 264 448       | 75.23       |
| 1997      | 4 291 257       | 58.86       |
| 2001      | 4 608 135       | 66.62       |
| 2005      | 3 747 822       | 55.76       |
| 2009      | 4 323 581       | 62.00       |

Bearing in mind that voting lists, which are the basis for calculating participation, are imprecise, we could say that around 70 % of actually eligible voters voted. In this way, the election excitement caused by former Tsar Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha in 2001 was, to a large extent, repeated, while the trend for relatively low participation in elections after 2001 has been turned.

**Table 2 – Participation in elections in Bulgaria, 2005 – 2009**

| Elections                                  | Number of votes | Turnout (%) |
|--|-----------------|-------------|
| Parliamentary elections, 2005              | 3 747 822       | 55.76       |
| Presidential elections 2006 – First round  | 2 856 731       | 44.10       |
| Presidential elections 2006 – Second round | 2 757 441       | 42.62       |
| European Parliament elections, 2007        | 1 955 451       | 29.22       |
| Local elections, 2007                      | 3 440 312       | 49.71       |
| European Parliament elections, 2009        | 2 601 677       | 38.91       |
| Parliamentary elections, 2009              | 4 323 581       | 62.00       |

Moreover, 21 per cent of voters made their decision in the last few days and forty per cent of them voted for GERB.<sup>3</sup>

3 [http://www.aresearch.org/bg/general\\_election.html](http://www.aresearch.org/bg/general_election.html).

**Table 3 – Parliamentary elections, 2009: Alpha Research exit poll**

|                | Decision for support was taken: |  |               |
|----------------|---------------------------------|--|---------------|
|                | A month ago                     | Last month, during the election campaign | Last few days |
| GERB           | 39.3 %                          | 40.1 %                                   | 40.6 %        |
| BSP (CB)       | 20.3 %                          | 13.0 %                                   | 13.5 %        |
| MRF            | 11.8 %                          | 17.6 %                                   | 11.6 %        |
| Ataka          | 9.5 %                           | 7.9 %                                    | 8.5 %         |
| Blue Coalition | 8.9 %                           | 4.8 %                                    | 3.9 %         |

The additional participation of 600 000 to one million voters has significantly changed the picture of the election results, as well as the expectations of most of the participants in the elections.

### The results

Even though the expected rearrangement of the parties took place, the ratio of their powers proved entirely different.

The results set out in the following tables underline that significant changes have occurred in the new parliament and government of the country.

**Table 4 – Elections to the 41<sup>st</sup> National Assembly (5 July 2009)**

| Party or coalition           | Number of votes | Votes % | Number of seats | Seats % |
|------------------------------|-----------------|---------|-----------------|---------|
| GERB                         | 1 678 641       | 39.70   | 116*            | 48.33   |
| BSP (Coalition for Bulgaria) | 748 147         | 17.70   | 40              | 16.66   |
| MRF                          | 610 521         | 14.50   | 38**            | 15.83   |
| Ataka                        | 395 733         | 9.36    | 21              | 8.75    |
| Blue Coalition               | 285 662         | 6.76    | 15              | 6.25    |
| RZS                          | 174 582         | 4.13    | 10              | 4.16    |
| LIDER                        | 137 795         | 3.26    | -               | -       |
| NDSV                         | 127 470         | 3.02    | -               | -       |
| Greens                       | 21 841          | 0.52    | -               | -       |

\* Including 26 from the majority system

\*\* Including 5 from the majority system

Table 5 – Distribution of seats in the National Assembly (2005-2009)

| Party or coalition | 2005         |         | 2009            |         |
|--------------------|--------------|---------|-----------------|---------|
|                    | Number seats | Seats % | Number of seats | Seats % |
| GERB               |              |         | 116             | 48.33   |
| BSP (CB)           | 82           | 34.17   | 40              | 16.66   |
| MRF                | 34           | 14.17   | 38              | 15.83   |
| Ataka              | 21           | 8.75    | 21              | 8.75    |
| NDSV               | 53           | 22.08   |                 |         |
| Blue Coalition     |              |         | 15              | 6.25    |
| RZS                |              |         | 10              | 4.16    |
| UDF                | 20           | 8.33    |                 |         |
| DSB                | 17           | 7.08    |                 |         |
| BNS                | 13           | 5.41    |                 |         |

The unquestionable winner in these elections was GERB, created and led by Boiko Borisov. As is shown, it benefited to the utmost from the increased levels of participation. This is evident in two respects. On the one hand, GERB achieved a significant difference in comparison with the second party, BSP, in the proportional vote, with its nearly 1.7m voters and ninety mandates. On the other hand, its victory would not have been so convincing if the high participation rates had not led also to its winning most of the majority candidates (26 out of the 31). Thus, having 116 seats in parliament, GERB is only five mandates away from having an absolute majority.

It is indicative that GERB managed to take first place in almost all social groups amongst Bulgarian voters.

**Table 6 – Parliamentary elections, 2009: Socio-demographic profile of voters<sup>4</sup>**

| Vote                       | GERB   | BSP (CB) | MRF    | Ataka  | Blue Coalition |
|----------------------------|--------|----------|--------|--------|----------------|
| <b>By type of location</b> |        |          |        |        |                |
| Sofia                      | 47.5 % | 17.7 %   | 0.6 %  | 4.7 %  | 16.7 %         |
| Regional town              | 48.5 % | 16.8 %   | 2.4 %  | 10.0 % | 8.1 %          |
| Small town                 | 39.1 % | 21.4 %   | 8.3 %  | 10.0 % | 6.2 %          |
| Village                    | 26.6 % | 18.3 %   | 31.2 % | 10.0 % | 3.1 %          |
| <b>By age</b>              |        |          |        |        |                |
| 18-30                      | 45.7 % | 8.2 %    | 14.9 % | 8.7 %  | 5.6 %          |
| 31-40                      | 45.3 % | 8.6 %    | 16.3 % | 7.7 %  | 7.3 %          |
| 41-50                      | 43.2 % | 11.8 %   | 13.2 % | 8.6 %  | 8.5 %          |
| 51-60                      | 37.7 % | 21.8 %   | 11.5 % | 9.3 %  | 9.0 %          |
| 61+                        | 28.2 % | 36.6 %   | 7.5 %  | 11.5 % | 7.4 %          |
| <b>By education</b>        |        |          |        |        |                |
| Higher/university          | 43.4 % | 18.1 %   | 3.7 %  | 6.2 %  | 13.5 %         |
| High school                | 42.6 % | 16.5 %   | 11.4 % | 10.9 % | 5.4 %          |
| Primary and lower          | 20.7 % | 24.7 %   | 36.3 % | 10.0 % | 1.3 %          |

The big loser in these elections turned out to be the leading party in the government, BSP. Its result of approximately 750 000 votes was, to a large extent, decent and expected but, in light of the high voting activity, it was a rather meagre performance in terms of the percentage of votes and seats in parliament (forty). In addition to this, the party could not win a single majority election. In the end, BSP, the strongest party in parliament prior to the election, is now not only in second place, significantly behind the first, but will also have its smallest group in parliament since the first democratic elections after the change in 1990.

The reasons for this eminent election failure are numerous and include the negative image generated during its period of governance. An important role was also played by the failure to comply with requirements regarding the administration of European funds and the subsequent cessation of a number of pre-accession funds for Bulgaria, as well as the suspicions that this was connected with corrupt practice. Even despite the achieved economic growth and financial stability, problems in sensitive areas such as healthcare and education continued to accumulate. Another reason should be looked for in the organisational state of the party, which has gradually been losing its reputation as the most popular and best organised party in the country. For instance, at these

4 [http://www.aresearch.org/bg/general\\_election.html](http://www.aresearch.org/bg/general_election.html).

elections BSP could not reach out to some of its voting *corps* which used to be stable in the past, for instance people in villages and small towns. The third reason, which should not be underestimated, is an utterly inadequate election campaign which, to a certain extent, managed to mobilise the party's own voters but which also strengthened non-beneficial processes of politicisation and personalisation, and which contributed to the higher results of its opponents. Presuming that the results from the European elections were an assessment of the government and the role of the BSP as a leading party in it, it was evidently second, but significantly closer to the winner, GERB. Obviously, a change occurred in the course of the second campaign, and the results were negative for BSP.

MRF reached their highest result in these elections. This was the first time that the party won more than 600 000 votes. The increase in its vote in comparison with previous elections was significant: its highest score previously was at the 2005 elections – when it won 467 400 votes. It more than accomplished the goals it had set, and came close to being second in power. At the same time, MRF turned into being the main target for its opponents during the campaign and now faces the possibility not only of becoming part of a weak parliamentary opposition, but also to being partially isolated. It will be a serious blow for it to leave central government after eight years of participation in coalition governments.

Ataka proved again that it has taken a permanent place in Bulgarian politics. Defined as extreme right and nationalist, it is going to participate in the next parliament with 21 MPs. However, it will barely overcome political isolation even though, in the closing part of the campaign, it managed to demonstrate moderation and a readiness to participate in a governing coalition. In the new parliament, it is acting as an informal coalition partner of GERB.

Even though the leaders of the so-called 'traditional right' presented their election results as a victory, objective data supports the opposite statement. The Blue Coalition, which unified UDF, DSB and a few smaller parties, managed to collect two to three times fewer votes in comparison with the separate results of its component parts in 2005. Even in its biggest fortress – Sofia – its performance was far from persuasive. The Blue Coalition had predefined its goal as the winning of 400 000 votes and 12-15 % of seats in parliament, but was eventually left with only 285 000 votes and just above 6 % of MPs; in 2009, it won only 15 seats in parliament in comparison with 20 for UDF and 17 for DSB in 2005. Still, its MPs will be necessary for the formation of a parliamentary majority, and this will increase its role in politics over the next years.

**Table 7 – Elections in Bulgaria, 2009**

| Party or coalition | European Parliament elections, 2009 |       | General Election, 2009 |       |
|--------------------|-------------------------------------|-------|------------------------|-------|
|                    | Votes                               | %     | Votes                  | %     |
| GERB               | 627 693                             | 24.36 | 1 678 641              | 39.70 |
| BSP (CB)           | 476 618                             | 18.50 | 748 147                | 17.70 |
| MRF                | 364 197                             | 14.14 | 610 521                | 14.50 |
| Ataka              | 308 052                             | 11.96 | 395 733                | 9.36  |
| NDSV               | 205 146                             | 7.96  | 127 470                | 3.02  |
| Blue Coalition     | 204 817                             | 7.95  | 285 662                | 6.76  |
| RZS                | 120 280                             | 4.67  | 174 582                | 4.13  |
| LIDER              | 146 984                             | 5.70  | 137 795                | 3.26  |

Among the smaller parties, only the new, populist RZS managed to cross the 4 % barrier. With its active and expensive campaign, it focused on the fight against corruption and, at the end, against the MRF. With slightly more than 4 % of the vote, it was able to gain ten MPs which are likely to participate in the game around the formation of the majority in the new parliament.

The ‘National Movement for Stability and Progress’ (NDSV), the party of former Tsar and Prime Minister Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, the third party in the outgoing governing coalition, suffered the worst defeat, as it could not collect 4 % of the vote and thus dropped out of parliament. After its unexpectedly successful performance in the European elections, where it managed to gain two seats in the European Parliament, it became another ‘victim’ of the increased voting activity. Under other circumstances, its 127 000 votes would probably have been enough to enter Parliament, but now these represented only slightly more than 3 % of all votes cast.

Despite its lofty ambitions, LIDER’s fate proved similar as it was also not able to surmount the barrier as a result of the participation of 4.3 million voters.

Notable, however, is the performance of the Greens which, despite a short existence and a lack of financial and organisational resources, received the highest result amongst the ‘small parties’, some of which had incomparably greater resources. It managed to attract the votes of many young voters in Sofia (21 841 votes; 0.52 %).

Looking at the large margin and the unquestionable leadership of GERB, a relatively easy and quick formation of a new government was expected in the 41<sup>st</sup> National Assembly.

At the same time, the problems connected with the election results can even now be pointed out: these will accompany the Bulgarian Parliament and, on a more global scale, the political system as a whole.

Table 8 – Participation of MPs in the 41<sup>st</sup> National Assembly

|                | Number | Newly-elected | Elected in former legislatures |
|----------------|--------|---------------|--------------------------------|
| GERB           | 116    | 115           | 1                              |
| BSP            | 40     | 15            | 25                             |
| MRF            | 38     | 19            | 19                             |
| Ataka          | 21     | 17            | 4                              |
| Blue Coalition | 15     | 4             | 11                             |
| RZS            | 10     | 8             | 2                              |
| Total          | 240    | 178           | 62                             |

The new National Assembly predominantly consists of inexperienced MPs, as was the case in 2001 except that now this will be even stronger: only 62 MPs remain from previous parliaments. Newly-elected MPs number 178, or over 70 % of the overall total. They do not have much time for adjustment, bearing in mind the difficult situation of the country before the peak of the economic crisis which is already having serious social consequences.

The parliamentary elections offered proof of the lack of stability of the Bulgarian party system, which is also indicative of the political system as a whole. The number of parties (not taking into consideration that there were coalitions) is six, i.e. one fewer in comparison with 2005. However, we still have two new parties in parliament, which were not represented in the previous elections – GERB and RZS. Together, they received over 44 % of valid votes and, for the first time since 1990, they could form an independent majority in Parliament. After the big breakthrough of NDSV in 2001, a repetition of a similar size became possible, but with different actors.

One cannot omit to comment that the level of populism in the Bulgarian party and political system is gaining greater dimensions. GERB still has to show by its governance whether analysts are right to characterise it as a populist party, a judgment currently based on the charisma of its leader. But after Ataka, RZS also entered the Bulgarian parliament. The latter, in certain respects of populism, is even trying to overtake the former, although it also likes to present itself as close to the British Conservatives.

**Table 9 – Parliamentary elections in Bulgaria (1990-2009)**

|   | 1990 | 1991 | 1994  | 1997 | 2001 | 2005  | 2009  |
|---|------|------|-------|------|------|-------|-------|
| Number of registered parties                              | 40   | 38   | 48    | 39   | 50   | 22    | 18    |
| Number of parties in parliament                           | 4    | 3    | 5     | 5    | 4    | 7     | 6     |
| Number of ‘old’ parties in parliament                     | -    | 3    | 3     | 4    | 3    | 4     | 4     |
| Number of ‘new’ parties in parliament                     | -    | -    | 2     | 1    | 1    | 3     | 2     |
| Percentage of valid votes for ‘old’ parties in parliament | -    | 75.0 | 73.2  | 86.8 | 42.8 | 71.3  | 48.28 |
| Percentage of valid votes for ‘new’ parties in parliament | -    | -    | 11.2  | 5.0  | 42.7 | 19.4  | 44.04 |
| Percentage of seats for ‘old’ parties                     |      | 100  | 83.09 | 94.2 | 50   | 79.75 | 47.5  |
| Percentage of seats for ‘new’ parties                     |      | 0    | 12.91 | 5.8  | 50   | 21.25 | 52.5  |

Another risk arises from the increase in the use of ethnic arguments in Bulgarian politics. This can prove dangerous not only for political stability in Bulgaria but would also have a broader impact.

In conclusion, one can only state that truly significant changes are taking place in Bulgarian politics, as far as the leading actors and their announced intentions are concerned.