

The 2014 elections in Bulgaria: Political instability without end

Abstract

This article reviews the outcome of the 2014 general election in Bulgaria, which was held under complicated political, social and geo-political conditions which had led to the defection of one coalition partner and a premature end to the previous government. The election resulted in a highly-fragmented parliament with the unprecedented presence of eight parties, a level of party pluralism reflecting the lowest-ever turnout and general dissatisfaction with the larger parties. The author analyses the electoral performance of the different parties, as well as the implications of the result for the stability of the party system. After the election, the prospects of the institutionalisation of the system look rather pessimistic while numerous important indicators of its stability seem to have been aggravated. An unusual coalition between four parties – two centre-right, one nationalist and one centre-left – has been created, but it remains to be seen whether such diverse parliamentary support will prove lasting or whether one has witnessed another transitional election in Bulgaria.

Keywords: Bulgaria, parliamentary election, European election, political participation, voter turnout, party system, fragmentation, coalition building, government

Prelude

Only one and a half years after the early parliamentary election in May 2013, another snap election took place in Bulgaria on 5 October 2014, the ninth election to the Bulgarian parliament since 1990. After a period of political and parliamentary stability between 1997 and 2009, a wave of instability seems to have overwhelmed political life in the country. The signs after this last election point in the same direction.

The results of the election to the European Parliament in May 2014 became the turning point for the next pre-term parliamentary election in Bulgaria. At first glance, this effect seems to contradict the traditional thesis that European elections are ‘second-order national elections’ without any significant consequences for the domestic political arena. Hence, it was a very specific set of circumstances, which were already in place at the time of the election, that made such an effect possible.

In May, the centre-right party GERB (Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria) received 30.40% of the votes, far ahead of the ruling Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) which remained second with 18.93%. The Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS) – the party of ethnic Turks – came third with 17.26%. A newly-established party, Bulgaria without Censorship (BBZ), received 10.66% of the ballots cast. The last formation which managed to exceed the 5.88% threshold, with 6.45% of the vote, was the

Reformist Bloc, a coalition of several parties from the so-called traditional centre-right in Bulgaria.

Table 1 – European elections in Bulgaria: 2007, 2009 and 2014 results

Party / Coalition	Votes number			Votes %			Seats		
	2014	2009	2007	2014	2009	2007	2014	2009	2007
GERB	680 838	627 693	419 301	30.40	24.36	21.69	6	5	5
BSP	424 037	476 618	414 786	18.93	18.50	21.42	4	4	5
DPS	386 725	364 197	392 650	17.27	14.14	20.26	4	3	4
Ataka		308 052	275 237		11.96	14.20		2	3
NDSV		205 146	121 398		7.96	6.27		2	1
Blue Coalition		204 817	176 225*		7.95			1	0
BBZ	238 629			10.66			2		
Reformist Bloc	144 532			6.45			1		

Source: Compiled by the author using data from the Central Election Commission: <http://www.cik.bg/> (home page)

It was the result of the BSP, the leading party in the governing coalition, that provided the reason for the early election. In fact, the socialists themselves received a similar result as in previous European elections (414 000 votes and 21.4% in 2007; 476 000 and 18.5% in 2009; and 424 000 and 18.9% in 2014). Moreover, the two parties in government – BSP and the DPS – attracted more votes together than the major contender – the centre-right GERB.

It was the unexpected large distance between GERB and the BSP that played the decisive role. The BSP itself declared an unrealistic aim of being first in the election. Most of the electoral forecasts also predicted a neck-and-neck battle between the main rivals. The election ended, however, in a lead of 11 percentage points for GERB. The discrepancy between the much higher target set by the BSP and the reality was interpreted as a change in the balance of power in favour of the opposition.

This was used as the pretext for the other coalition partner, the DPS, to distance itself from the coalition and to provoke new elections. The defection of the DPS was the beginning of the end for the government.

Initial situation: parliamentary stalemate, protests, bank closures, Ukraine crisis

The rift with the junior partner in the government, not the result of the EP election, was the main reason for the resignation of the cabinet after little more than one year in office. The truth is, however, that the cabinet itself and its parliamentary support did not succeed in governing effectively in complicated circumstances. In order better to understand the announcement of the early elections, as well as the election results and

their consequences, we have to return to the very specific features of the political, social and economic situation in Bulgaria during the last two years.

First to be mentioned as playing an important role should be the consequences of the election results in 2013, which resulted in the formation of the BSP-DPS coalition without having a majority of at least 121 seats in parliament. The allocation of the mandates – 120 seats for BSP and DPS; 97 for GERB; and 23 for Ataka – shows that the two-party coalition had a majority *vis-à-vis* GERB in terms of the parliamentary vote, but could not form an independent quorum of 121 deputies so that a parliamentary sitting could be opened. If GERB MPs did not register at a sitting (and they continuously failed to do so), BSP and DPS needed to rely on at least one Ataka-registered MP.¹ The behaviour of GERB in the new parliament showed that it relied on boycott tactics and tried continuously to destabilise parliamentary and political life. At the end of the day, the stalemate in parliament, the absence of a relative majority and the permanent boycotting tactics of GERB made parliamentary life extremely difficult, even near-impossible.

Then, shortly after the government, under Prime Minister Plamen Oresharski, took office came the scandalous and poor decision to appoint the DPS MP and media mogul, Delyan Peevski, head of the State Agency of National Security. Peevski was broadly perceived as a symbol of political corruption, and so the natural consequence was spontaneous mass street protests in Sofia against the government. The protests, albeit with diminishing intensity but with growing organisational support from the opposition parties, lasted for months and further eroded the legitimacy of the cabinet.

The last straw in the resignation of the government was the banking crisis, assessed by *The Economist* as the worst run on banks in seventeen years.² After several days of panic as customers withdrew their deposits, the fourth largest bank in the country – the Corporate Commercial Bank – remained without a licence and was put under the special supervision of the National Bank. It has remained closed since June, leaving 200 000 investors and companies without access to their funds. The turmoil with regard to the banking system revived the bad memories of the severe banking crisis in 1996-97 as many Bulgarians lost their savings.

Last, but not least, a clear geopolitical aspect could be identified when describing the political crisis in Bulgaria. The Ukraine crisis has also thrown its shadow over the election process. Sanctions against Russia and the anticipated difficulties with gas supplies have troubled parts of the Bulgarian electorate. More significant was, however, the controversy around the South Stream pipeline. The BBC commented:

...The South Stream pipeline, meant to carry Russian gas to Western Europe via Bulgaria, also played a big part in the government's downfall. Mr Oresharski was criticised for moving ahead

1 Kanev, D (2013) 'Parliamentary elections in Bulgaria 2013: How durable are the tendencies of authoritarian populism in a fragile democracy?' *SEER Journal for Labour and Social Affairs* 16(1): 21-35.

2 'Why the run on banks?' *The Economist* 1 July 2014
<http://www.economist.com/blogs/easternapproaches/2014/07/bulgaria>.

with construction of the pipeline, a project frowned upon by Brussels for breaching EU rules.³

Concluding, the government and its parliamentary support stood, from the very beginning, under intense pressure – both from the inside and from the outside.

Winners and losers: the 2014 parliamentary election results

About 6.8 million voters were called to the polls to make their choice among the seven coalitions and 18 parties who stood for office.

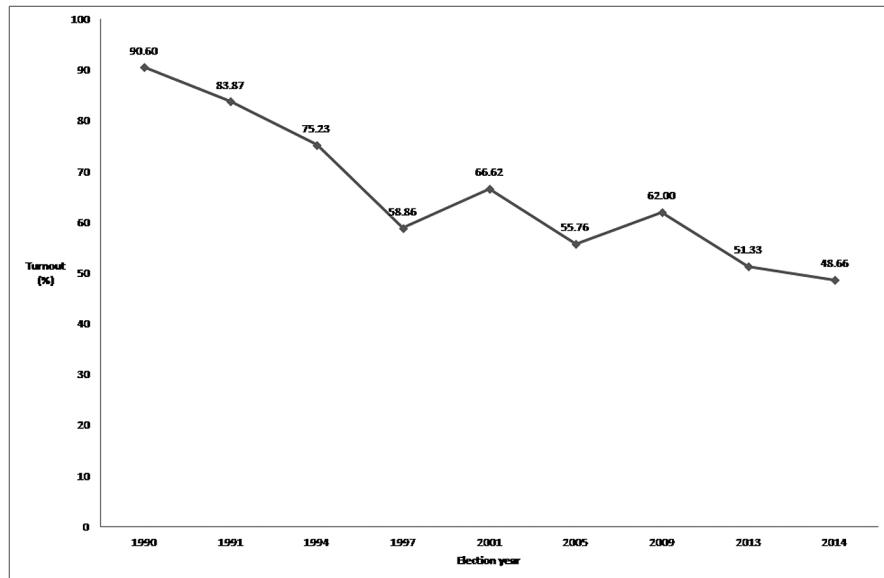
The elections were conducted according to the new election law of 2013, which continued to apply a proportional representation system, with a four percentage point threshold, but, instead of a closed electoral list, for the first time in parliamentary elections a loosely-bound list was introduced. Here, the order of the candidates could be changed should someone get over seven per cent of the votes on each list. More than one-third of the electorate made use of this. Other innovations were associated with relief for smaller parties and independent candidates. Nevertheless, the number of running parties and coalitions was almost one-half that of the 2013 election, when 38 parties and coalitions registered for the vote.

The election campaign itself was less dramatic, even subdued in tone. The reason was not only voter apathy because of the occurrence of three national elections within a short period, as well as political instability and two interim cabinets, but also because of the relative satisfaction of the larger parties with the election forecasts and the fear of making mistakes in a complex political, economic and social situation. Then, there was the tragedy with the explosion in an explosives factory in which fifteen people died. Two days of national mourning were proclaimed before the election day and so the parties waived the final events of their campaigns.

The turnout, which stood at 48.66%, was the lowest level of all the elections to date; in comparison, 2013 saw 51.3% and 2009 62%. Only about 3.5 million voters made their way to the polls. In 2013, there were 3.63 million and, in 2009, 4.32 million.

³ ‘Centre-right GERB party ahead after Bulgaria election’ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-29494877>.

Figure 1 – Parliamentary elections in Bulgaria, 1990-2014: voter turnout



Source: Compiled by the author, using data from the Central Election Commission <http://www.cik.bg> (home page)

The general dissatisfaction with the situation in the country, and the alienation from politics and politicians, have made their contribution in terms of leading participation below the psychological threshold of 50%. Typically, the most active voters were older people while, at the opposite pole, only 10% of young voters (18-25 years old) appeared at polling stations.

The low turnout was a crucial factor behind another precedent in Bulgarian politics. For the first time since 1990, eight parties/coalitions are represented in the 43rd National Assembly – twice as many as in the previous Parliament. The largest number so far was seven parties/coalition in 2005 but, at that time, it had been possible to create a three-party coalition between BSP, the Tsar party NDSV and DPS. Today, the situation is opaque because the large number of parties in parliament has drastically transformed the distribution of seats.

Table 2 – Parliamentary elections in Bulgaria: 2014 results

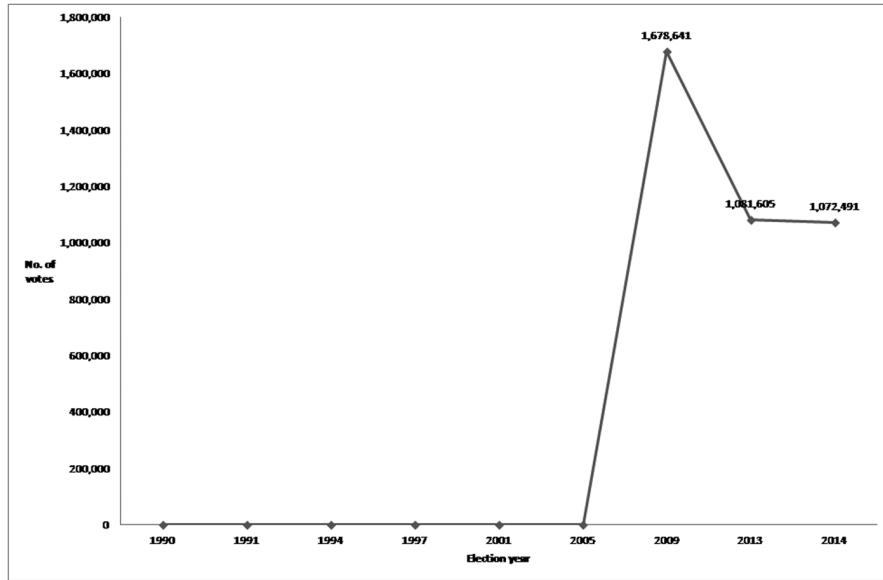
Party / Coalition	Votes (No.)	Votes (%)	Mandates (No.)	Mandates (%)
GERB	1 072 491	32.67	84	35.00
BSP	505 527	15.40	39	16.25
DPS	487 134	14.84	38	15.83
Reformist Bloc	291 806	8.89	23	9.58
Patriotic Front	239 101	7.28	19	7.91
Bulgaria Without Censorship	186 938	5.69	15	6.25
Ataka	148 262	4.52	11	4.58
ABV	136 223	4.15	11	4.58

Source: Compiled by the author, using data from the Central Election Commission <http://www.cik.bg> (home page)

The clear winner of the election was Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) which was, as expected, able to confirm its position as the leading political force for the third time since 2009. Given the large gap to the next closest parties (the second and third largest parties together received fewer votes), it is clear that GERB has regained a dominant position in the party system. GERB emerged as the leading party in all but five election districts, these being ones with a mainly ethnic Turk population where, as usual, DPS won most votes.

In the 2013 election, GERB lost one-third (or 600 000) of its 2009 voters and, with its 97 mandates, received more than twenty parliamentary seats fewer than in 2009. Now, the party saw the number of its voters stand at almost the same level (1.072m in 2014; 1.081m in 2013) but, with 32.67% of the votes, it has received a much smaller number of mandates (84). This is far from its declared, ambitious electoral aim (of 100-120 seats) and is also a way away from seeing a parliamentary majority of 121 seats. It looks like voters did not want to see power concentrated in the hands of GERB alone.

Figure 2 – GERB voters, 2009-2014

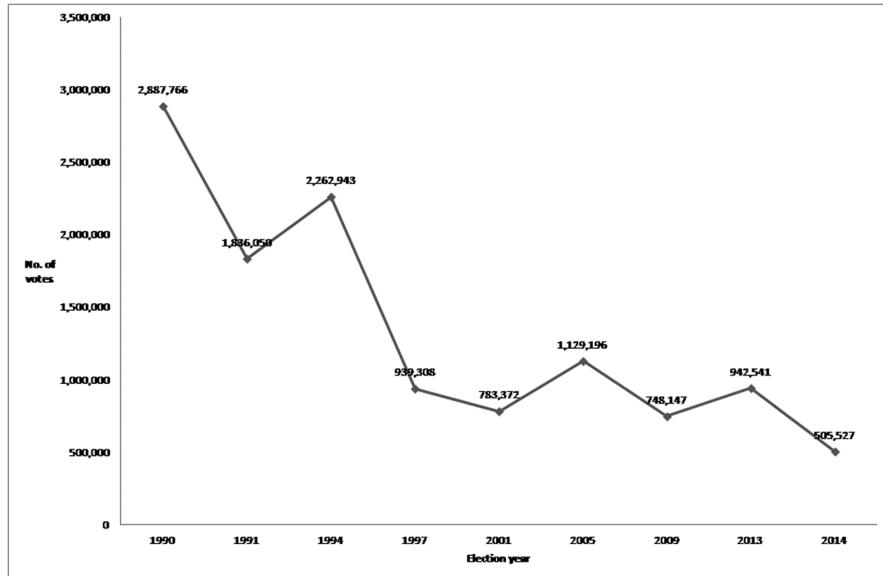


Source: Compiled by the author, using data from the Central Election Commission <http://www.cik.bg> (home page)

The election result was a major blow for the co-governing Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP). In the 2013 election, the Party was able to attract nearly 200 000 new votes, doubling its share of seats in the National Assembly (taking 84 seats in 2013 compared to forty in 2009). Then, the socialists were the only parliamentary party to succeed in increasing their number of votes and seats in comparison with 2009. In addition, they achieved their best election result since 1994. The BSP was able to reduce the gap to GERB from one million votes in 2009 to only 130 000 in 2013, and received better results even in constituencies where some well-known GERB politicians led the lists.

In 2014, this picture radically changed. The BSP, under its new chair, Mihail Mikov, has seen massive losses, arriving at a share of the vote of only 15.4 per cent. It has lost almost one-half of its 2013 voters (942 000 in 2013; 505 000 in 2014). This result was a historic low; the worst election result of the Party since the beginning of democratisation. Its parliamentary faction was more than halved and it will contribute only 39 deputies to the new parliament, dropping for the first time below 40. The distance between the GERB and BSP parliamentary groups grew up from 13 in 2013 to 45 in 2014.

Figure 3 – BSP voters, 1990-2014



Source: Compiled by the author, using data from the Central Election Commission <http://www.cik.bg> (home page)

The gloomy picture is completed by the results in the individual constituencies. For the first time, the BSP did not lead any of the 31 constituencies; in 2013, it was the most powerful force in eleven. The BSP suffered significant losses in Sofia, but also in most of its former electoral citadels. The social profile of the socialist electorate also gives pause for thought: the Party could attract only seven per cent of young voters (between 18 and 30 years old) and between 15 and 16 per cent of voters in the capital and in the big cities, and among those with higher education.⁴

There are different reasons for the poor performance of the once-largest Bulgarian party. Given that the negative changes occurred within a very short period of time, it was the ineffectiveness of the government that played the major role. It was, practically, the BSP alone, and not DPS, which has paid the price of governance in a fragile and unpopular coalition. Some BSP leaders declared that the election result was partly due to the harm brought by the coalition partner. However, there have also been serious political mistakes in the party leadership that have unsettled and demobilised many Party supporters.

The complicated situation facing the BSP was worsened further by the establishment of Alternative for Bulgarian Revival (ABV), split off from the Party by its former

4 According to Alfa Research *Socio-demographic profile of the voters in parliamentary election 2014* http://alpharesearch.bg/bg/socialni_izsvedvania/socialni_publikacii/socialno-demografski-profil-na-glasuvalite-v-parlamentarnite-izbori-2014.829.html.

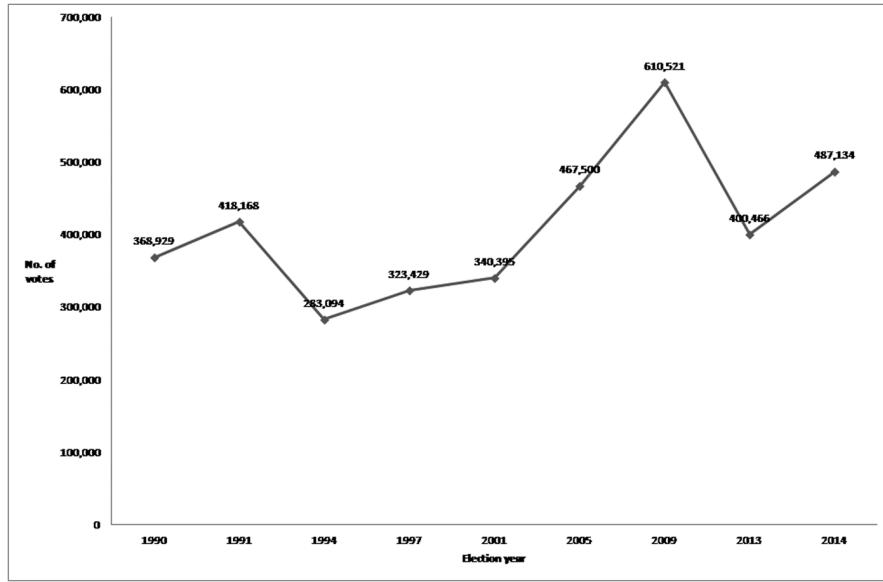
chair and, later, President of the state (between 2002 and 2012), Georgi Parvanov, which developed into a serious competitor. The internal Party turbulences associated with the split alienated even traditional voters. As expected, some former BSP voters (estimated at around 70 000) have switched over to ABV.

Exit poll data show, however, that a large part of the BSP voters from 2013 (250 000 people) did not change their party preference but rather did not go to the polls. Abstention was the way for them to show dissatisfaction with the Party. This situation could be interpreted as a remaining chance for the Socialist party to regain at least part of its electorate. In fact, history has shown that this Party has been able to overcome severe electoral defeats, as happened after 1997 and 2009. However, in the short-term future, the BSP will stay in opposition and will be facing a difficult process of necessary changes in organisation and policy and among its leading personnel.

In general, the situation in the centre-left has changed after these elections. For the second time since 1997, when Euroleft broke away from the BSP and entered parliament, this political space has once again been split. The Alternative for Bulgarian Revival, formed as a party in June 2014, barely passed the four per cent threshold, surpassing this by only 5 000 votes. With 4.15 per cent of the vote, it will have eleven deputies. Another 1.2% of the voters went to a second BSP splinter – Movement 21, initiated by the former BSP MP, Tatyana Dontcheva. At the moment, it is difficult to predict how this differentiation process will evolve, but it is more likely that the new parties will attempt to maintain their independent position in the party system.

The third largest party in the parliament will be the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS), the party of Bulgarian ethnic Turks. For the first time in parliamentary elections, it managed to win almost the same number of votes as the socialists; the difference remained only half of one per cent. With more votes (487 000 in 2014, compared to 400 000 in 2013), and with a larger share of the mandates (14.84% in 2014, compared to 11.3% in 2013), DPS is the only party represented in the previous National Assembly that now has more MPs than in 2013 – 38, instead of 36. The Party was successfully able to mobilise its traditional electoral potential, but was also able to win the vote of almost one-half of Roma voters.

Figure 4 – DPS votes, 1990-2014



Source: Compiled by the author, using data from the Central Election Commission <http://www.cik.bg> (home page)

The Reformist Bloc (RF), a newly-formed coalition of warring parties on the so-called traditional centre-right, got 8.89% of the vote (291 000 votes), winning 23 mandates.

In the 2013 election, the major parties in this coalition had participated separately, and remained all together outside parliament. Neither Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria (DSB) nor the coalition around the Union of Democratic Forces (SDS) could surpass the four per cent threshold. The same was true for the party founded by the former European Commissioner, Meglena Kuneva, the Bulgarian Movement of Citizens (DBG), which was, with 3.33% of the vote, then close to entering the National Assembly.

In reaction to this failure, Reformist Bloc was established at the end of 2013. These three parties, together with NPSD (People's Party of Freedom and Dignity, which was launched as a competitor to DPS among the Turkish population), and BZNS – one of the many agrarian formations – entered as partners into a coalition which should, later on, be transformed into a party. The number of votes received by RF in 2014 was not more than the sum of the 2013 vote of the parties appearing separately (DBG, DSB and SDS got a total of 267 509 votes, or 7.65 per cent, plus more than one per cent for NPSD), but the integration process has paid off.

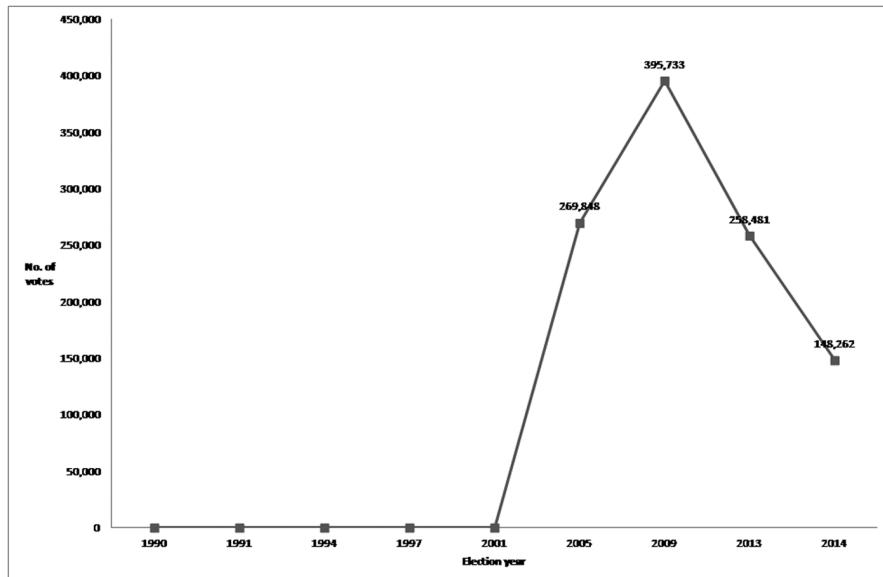
The problem facing this coalition lies in the different positions of the various parties on important issues. There are already signs that this association is not very stable.

Another newcomer is the populist party Bulgaria Without Censorship (BBZ), which was founded in early 2014 by the former TV journalist Nikolai Barekov. After its success in the European elections (10.6% of the vote and two seats in the EP), and despite subsequent difficulties arising from its alleged proximity to the chief of the closed Corporate Commercial Bank (KTB), BBZ will be represented in the new parliament. It got fewer votes than expected, but still 5.69% of the total and, with 15 MPs, will move into parliament for the first time.

There will be not one but two nationalist formations in the new parliament. The Patriotic Front (PT) is a coalition between the National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria (NFSB), formed by cable TV SKAT, and the traditional VMRO. It was supported by almost 240 000 voters and received 7.28 per cent of the vote. With nineteen seats, it is the fifth largest party in the parliament.

One of the surprises in this election was the Ataka result. It has long been assumed that the nationalist party would lose its traditional voters to other nationalist formations because of Ataka's sporadic contribution to the parliamentary quorum, which was interpreted as support for the BSP-DPS government. In the final sprint of the campaign, Party leader Siderov managed, through his energetic stand against electricity price increases and sanctions against Russia, still to gain enough votes. At the end of the day, Ataka, with 4.52% of the vote (148 000 votes) and eleven deputies, was able to maintain its presence in the new parliament.

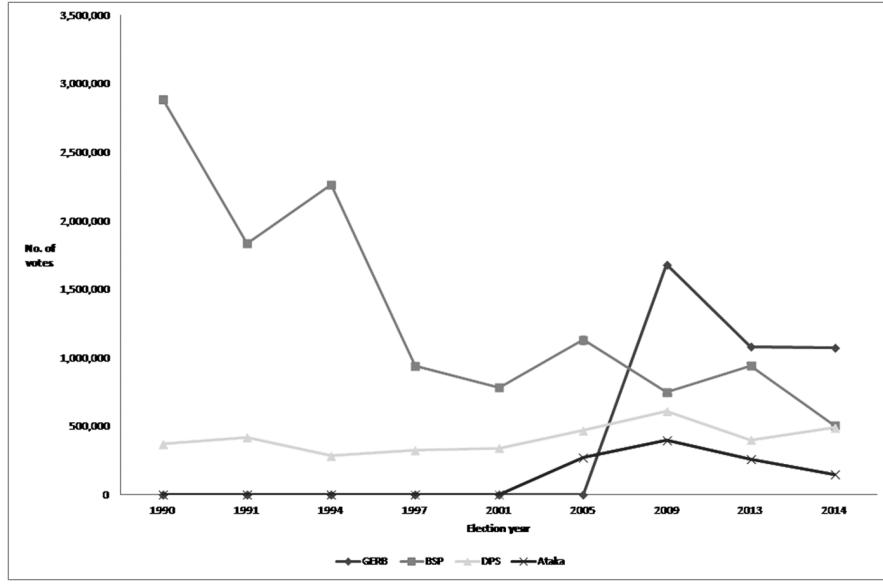
Figure 5 – Ataka voters, 2005-2014



Source: Compiled by the author, using data from the Central Election Commission <http://www.cik.bg> (home page)

The total number of votes cast for the various more long-established parties featured in this section, on the same chart and to the same scale, looks like this:

Figure 6 – Votes cast for selected parties in each election, 1990-2014



Source: Compiled by the author, using data from the Central Election Commission <http://www.cik.bg> (home page)

The party system under stress

The election results of 5 October 2014 have brought to life a highly-fragmented parliament. The painful and ineffective functioning of the previous parliament, as well as its short life, gave a chance to parties outside the legislature: in looking for alternatives, voters chose to punish the major parliamentary parties and give that chance to smaller ones. The low turnout has also significantly contributed to the extreme party pluralism. Such a continuing fragmentation process bears serious problems for the Bulgarian party system and its institutionalisation.

It was clear before these elections that the process of the institutionalisation of the party system is not yet complete in Bulgaria. There are even grounds to speak of a process of its de-institutionalisation after the landslide victory of the former king's party in 2001.⁵ After the 2014 parliamentary election, the prospects for the institutionalisation of the Bulgarian party system look somewhat pessimistic: numerous important indicators of the stability of the party system seem to have been aggravated.

5 For a more detailed analysis of the Bulgarian party system in the period 1990-2013, see: D. Kanev (2014) 'Parties, party system and the quality of democracy' in: D. Kanev and A. Todorov (Eds.) *The Quality of Democracy in Bulgaria* East-West Publishing: Sofia (forthcoming).

On the one hand, if we look at commonly used indicators, such as the effective number of parties, we can conclude that the Bulgarian party system is relatively stable (see Table 3).

Indeed, the effective number of parties indicator, in its two versions,⁶ shows moderate values when measuring the Bulgarian party system. In this respect, fragmentation does not appear to be one of the serious problems which characterises it.

Table 3 – Effective number of parties in Bulgaria, 1990-2014

	1990	1991	1994	1997	2001	2005	2009	2013	2014
Legislative parties (ENLP)	2.72	2.52	2.76	2.54	2.92	4.80	3.34	3.16	5.10
Electoral parties (ENEП)		4.18	3.85	2.99	3.93	5.4	4.4	5.49	5.65

Source: D. Kanev (2014) 'Parties, party system and the quality of democracy' in: D. Kanev and A. Todorov (Eds.) *The Quality of Democracy in Bulgaria* East-West Publishing: Sofia (forthcoming).

Nevertheless, the relatively large difference between the two indicators, manifested in certain years, points towards another shortcoming of the party system. This refers to the presence in certain elections of a relatively large number of electors of parties which did not enter parliament but which still received fairly good results and which might, therefore, be defined as relevant parties. This creates certain tensions which might lead to too-intensive actions of a non-parliamentary nature. This is actually what has been happening in 2013-2014.

On the other hand, it is the easy and quick breakthroughs of new parties, and the decline of established ones, that relativise the data concerning these indicators.

Developments in such direction can be identified through an indicator measuring the number and strength of 'old' and 'new' parties in the parliament ('new' parties are those which did not have seats in the parliament during its previous term of office).

This indicator shows that the party system in Bulgaria is characterised by a surprising influx of new contenders at certain points in its development and is, therefore, far from being stable. In the period prior to 2001, this indicator fluctuated within a range of low (below 5%) to moderate (10-15%) values, but there was a marked leap in 2001 and the values have persistently been 'high' (up to 20%) ever since, even exceeding this threshold on three occasions (2001, 2009 and 2014). Even the average for the whole period between 1990 and 2014 (21.35% of seats being taken by 'new' parties) speaks of there being a high degree of evolution of the process of the emergence in parliament of new parties with serious electoral strength.

⁶ The number of legislative parties (ENLP) is a count of the parties in a parliament weighted by their share of the seats in it; while the number of electoral ones (ENEП) represents the same count weighted by each party's share of the vote.

Table 4 – ‘Old’ and ‘new’ parties in the Bulgarian parliament, 1991-2014

	1991	1994	1997	2001	2005	2009	2013	2014
Number of ‘old’ parties in parliament	3	3	4	3	4	4	4	4
Percentage of valid votes for ‘old’ parties	75.0	73.2	86.8	42.8	71.3	48.28	100	67.43
Number of seats of ‘old’ parties	240	209	212	120	189	113	240	172
Percentage of seats of ‘old’ parties	100	83.09	94.2	50	79.75	47.5	100	55.83
Number of ‘new’ parties in parliament	-	2	1	1	3	2	-	4
Percentage of valid votes for ‘new’ parties	-	11.2	5.0	42.7	19.4	44.04	0	26.01
Number of seats of ‘new’ parties	0	31	28	120	51	127	0	68
Percentage of seats of ‘new’ parties	0	12.91	5.8	50	21.25	52.5	0	28.32

Source: Compiled by the author, using data from the Central Election Commission <http://www.cik.bg> (home page)

The same picture can be seen if we measure the ‘party age’, i.e. the degree to which parties are rooted in society (the percentage of seats in the respective parliaments taken by parties aged ten years or younger).

Table 5 – Age of the parliamentary parties in Bulgaria, 2001-2014

Year of parliamentary elections	Age of the parties represented in parliament
2001	58.75
2005	30.83*
2009	61.66
2013	50.00
2014	67.90

Source: Compiled by the author, using data from the Central Election Commission <http://www.cik.bg> (home page)

If we apply the quantitative thresholds (with party age being high when over 50%), developed on the basis of comparative studies, we come to the conclusion that, ac-

cording to this criterion, Bulgaria has shown very high values, reaching in 2014 the highest ever share of young parties.

Clearly, a great number of parties quickly decline, while others easily come to the forefront of the political arena. However, an indicator based on the absolute number of parliamentary parties also records relatively high values (see Table 6).

Table 6 – Absolute number of parliamentary parties in Bulgaria, 1990-2014

	1990	1991	1994	1997	2001	2005	2009	2013	2014	1990 - 2014
Number of registered parties and coalitions	40	38	48	39	50	22	18	36	25	35.11
Number of parliamentary parties	4	3	5	5	4	7	6	4	8	5.11

Source: Compiled by the author, using data from the Central Election Commission <http://www.cik.bg> (home page)

Bulgaria still does not exhibit stable development in this respect, with periods in which deviations from this tendency come to the fore. For a long time, Bulgaria (together with Hungary) has recorded the lowest values of this indicator. In the period of the 'first party system' (1990-2001), this indicator showed an average of 4.25, which is a medium value. The change occurred in the period of the 'second party system', particularly between 2005 and 2009, when the number of legislative parties increased significantly. Even with a return back to lower levels in 2013, this criterion stands at 5.25 for the period after 2001. 2014, however, marks a peak, with eight parties represented in parliament. The trend towards an increase in the value of this indicator is present, beyond any doubt, notwithstanding the four per cent electoral threshold.

At the end of the day, it is the high level of electoral volatility that turns out to be the major problem pertaining to the stability of the Bulgarian party system. Owing to this, new parties continuously keep on emerging, while others recede or disappear, leading to significant changes taking place both in political personnel as well as in political proposals.

Table 7 – Electoral volatility in Bulgaria, 1991-2014

1991 / 1990	1994 / 1991	1997 / 1994	2001 / 1997	2005 / 2001	2009 / 2005	2013 / 2009	2014 / 2013	Average
13.6	14.7	28	48	40.2	47	28.2	32.25	31.5

*Source: D. Kanev (2014) 'Parties, party system and the quality of democracy' in: D. Kanev and A. Todorov (Eds.) *The Quality of Democracy in Bulgaria* East-West Publishing: Sofia (forthcoming).*

Indeed, for Bulgaria this indicator shows, after an average low value in the period 1991-1997 of less than 15%, a sharp rise during the following years. Bearing in mind

that values over 25% are considered to be high, it is obvious that, across the whole period 1997-2014, electoral volatility in Bulgaria has been permanently in this high-risk range, particularly in the 2001-2009 period, when it reached values almost double this threshold. An average value of 31.5% demonstrates a manifestation of the extreme instability of the preferences of Bulgarian electors and of the weakened connections between parties and society in Bulgaria. The 2014 election shows trends in the same direction.

In other words, the results of the different indicators used here show that, even though fragmentation is at a relatively low level with respect to the effective number of parties in Bulgaria, other indicators show a level of instability not in terms of their number and weight but of the subjects themselves who occupy parliamentary or electoral positions.

It is a vicious circle – a combination of high volatility, weak social roots, insufficient organisational strength of the parties and the polarised behaviour of party elites, plus a low level of legitimacy, inevitably poses questions as regards the institutionalisation of the party system and, thence, as regards the quality and sustainability of democracy in Bulgaria.

The long road to majority and government formation

The extreme level of party pluralism in parliament produced by the election result has obviously made majority and government formation very difficult.

The electoral arithmetic shows that coalition has become unavoidable. Theoretically, GERB could form a two-party coalition only with BSP or with DPS. However, politically this was barely even conceivable. During the election campaign, GERB declared itself against entering a government coalition with DPS and this statement was confirmed after the elections.

BSP in turn, after the electoral debacle, would not risk the position of being a weak junior partner in a GERB-led government. The socialists chose, rightly, to stay in opposition. In addition, there were too many differences between the two parties with regard to the main questions that urgently need resolving – updating the budget; the remedying of the position of the Corporate Commercial Bank; and tackling failed energy projects. All this made a ‘grand coalition’ in Bulgaria non-viable.

Given the large number of parliamentary parties, however, there are several options for three-party or four-party coalitions. Despite these many options, Boyko Borisov and GERB initially proposed a variant of a one-party minority government with the support of other parties. This was called ‘minority cabinet with shared responsibility’. This might seem surprising, because the party had only 84 of the 121 seats necessary. But it was typical of the political mindset of Borisov. For him, it was hard to imagine governing in a coalition where other opinions must be taken into account.

This kind of minority government was something which had already been seen during the previous GERB cabinet (2009-2013). At that time, GERB had no majority with their 117 MPs. After most of the other parties withdrew their support as time passed, Borisov’s party used dubious means to draw several MPs from other factions, thus securing its domination by destroying other parliamentary factions. Typical of the

case was Ataka, which was halved after 2011 as eleven of its 21 elected representatives declared themselves ‘independent’, most of these announcing their support for GERB. Some RZS MPs also left their party for GERB, as a consequence of which RZS was left without a parliamentary group since the minimum requirement was ten MPs. During the rest of the mandate there was a *de facto* GERB majority government.

In a minority cabinet solution, Borisov would be able to find certain benefits. He could count on the support of DPS when absolutely necessary without the party of ethnic Turks formally entering into a coalition with his party. There have been sufficient signs that DPS is ready for this, from the way the coalition was resolved in the last Parliament up to all the official statements of this party before and after the election.

It looked like there are also plenty of others willing to support a GERB government in parliament. Despite its violent attacks on Borisov during the election campaign, Barekov’s party, BBZ, immediately agreed to do so. Reformist Bloc also backed a coalition with GERB in principle, and it looked quite possible that ABV would also go this same way, as would one of the nationalist parties, the Patriotic Front.

To realise such a model was, however, not easy because GERB needed much larger support than before (in 2009, the Party was only four seats short of a majority, but now it is 37) and it could not be sure of the stability of such support as long as the other parties stayed out of the government. It was highly likely therefore that Borisov, in his manner, would suddenly take a U-turn, and indeed literally the next day this occurred, with his announcement that the one and only option was a formal coalition with the participation in government of all the partners. The option of a ‘minority cabinet with shared responsibility’ was put aside with the possibility of revival in case a coalition could not be born or, later on, it proved to be unstable.

After the decision was made, the next step for GERB was to hold preliminary informal talks with the other parliamentary parties in order to look at routes for possible coalition-building. A news agency describes the whole unprecedented process as follows:

Formally they were more of a ‘feasibility study’, with each party counting the cost of possibly supporting, rejecting or even participating in whatever GERB has to offer as a mandate-bearer. Informally, they had to pave the way for political bargaining. But bargaining descended into a chaotic auction just two days after consultations were over. GERB generally disagreed with the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), agreed with the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS) but refused to join hands with it. It slightly disagreed with the Reformist Bloc but kept reiterating it was their ‘natural partner’, got along with the Patriotic Front, swiftly turned down any co-operation with the populist Bulgaria without Censorship and ultra-nationalist Ataka and (somewhat surprisingly) showed a willingness to work together with the left-wing Alternative for Bulgarian Revival (ABV), the party of ex-BSP President (2002-2012) Georgi Parvanov, usually a fierce critic of the bulk of GERB’s policy proposals.⁷

⁷ Novinite. *Government casting turning ugly* <http://www.novinite.com/articles/164245/Is+GERB%27s+Government+Casting+Turning+Ugly%3F#sthash.lJzqGTKg.dpuf>.

After more than one month of informal talks, and then official consultations conducted, according to the constitution, by the President, a coalition was born. Boyko Borisov, as leader of the largest parliamentary group, received the first mandate for government formation, presenting the new majority and cabinet. On 7 November 2014, the National Assembly voted as follows: the cabinet was supported by 136 MPs, 97 were against and one abstained. Borisov, in the election for Prime Minister, received stronger support – 149 MPs voted ‘yes’, 85 voted against.

The parliamentary support of 136 deputies seems to be sufficient, given that a majority is sustained by 121 MPs. However, the coalition which lies behind it is rather strange in form and content. The core is the minority coalition between GERB and Reformist Bloc (constituting 107 MPs), which signed a formal agreement and allocated the ministerial posts. Then, the government programme was signed by Patriotic Front, whose 19 MPs will support the cabinet in parliament but which will not participate in the cabinet. At the end, Borisov and Parvanov (from ABV, with eleven MPs), in the absence of the other partners, signed a ‘personal agreement’ according to which ABV will provide parliamentary support but will also participate in the cabinet, taking some of GERB’s ministerial quota.

The distribution of the Deputy Prime Minister posts – two for GERB, one for RF (former EU Commissioner, Meglena Kuneva) and one for ABV (Ivailo Kalfin, former Foreign Minister in the BSP-led cabinet between 2005 and 2009, and a former member of the EP) – shows the configuration of the governing coalition.

It is not only the confusing form (2+1+1) but also the political and ideological diversity among the coalition partners that will matter for the stability of the majority and the cabinet. GERB and RF seem to be closest in their political orientation, but there are personal animosities and potential competition for centre-right voters. The RF itself is a coalition of several parties and, between them, there are significant differences and rivalries. The Patriotic Front is doubtlessly an outspoken nationalist formation with some disturbing ideas in its election platform – to build a fence along the border with Turkey and establish a military presence along the border with Greece; to cut welfare benefits to Roma; etc. It was not by chance that both ALDE President Guy Verhofstadt and EPP President Joseph Daul warned Borisov against having such a party in the coalition. ABV is seeking its place in the centre-left political space and has significant divergences from the other parties with regard to its programme.

Bulgaria urgently needs political stabilisation but, after the election, the chances of this are relatively good only in the short-run (until the local elections in a year’s time, or the presidential election in autumn 2016). In the long-run, i.e. over the entire length of the mandate, they are very unclear.

It consequently remains to be seen whether the 2014 election remains only a transitional election, or whether its contribution is otherwise.