

Bulgaria's Presidential Elections 2016: Testing Times Ahead with a Referendum and Government Resignation

Marin Lessenski

On November 13th, Bulgarians elected their fifth president since the 1990. Rumen Radev, a retired Airforce general, won nearly 60% of the vote compared to 36% of his opponent of the ruling party GERB. Radev ran as an independent, but was in fact a candidate of the opposition Bulgarian Socialist Party. Radev won the second round with votes across the political spectrum – primarily leftists and nationalists, joined by the main Turkish minority party, and many center-right voters who deemed him the better choice.

The international press noticed the elections mostly in the context of victories of perceived pro-Russian candidates, including in nearby Moldova. But in Bulgaria, the reality is more complicated and the presidential elections were accompanied by two major other events: a referendum that may change substantially the election system as well as resignation of the government with an ensuing political crisis.

The president has limited powers in Bulgaria, yet the direct vote, the introduced now mandatory voting and other factors attracted substantial turnout by the citizens and made them very contested. The institution has competencies in foreign affairs, veto power, appointment of senior officials in the judiciary, security and diplomatic services, but above all can use the position to shape the agenda in the country. At some point the campaign turned into confidence vote of the government and the ruling GERB party as well as became the focal point of hopes and resentment not directly linked to the position.

Factors in the presidential race

The victory of the Rumen Radev may be attributed to several reasons. There were significant mistakes by the largest opponent party GERB, which was set to win the elections, but became complacent and arrogant and was punished for that. Radev managed to portray himself as the newcomer running against the status quo and channel all sorts of resentments and hopes of the people. Identity politics and fear of migration played a role too, as Radev – former Airforce commander – appeared reassuring to a large part of the people. There is uncanny resemblance to the opposing GERB party leader and prime

minister, who build his image as a former police general. Radev's pro-Russian stance brought him many admirers with the promise to improve relations by opposing the sanctions against Russia and de facto recognize the annexation of Crimea. In turn, the Russian media hailed Radev's victory but many somewhat erroneously assumed Bulgaria will leave the EU and NATO. Indeed, Radev initially flirted with vague claims to "re-examine membership in the EU and NATO" but later pledged loyalty to both EU and NATO.

Despite that the country achieved the second best growth in the EU this year with 3.6% and the lowest unemployment of 7% since 2009, economic grievances may have also played role as Bulgaria remains the poorest country in the EU with high inequality. The government failure to properly address judiciary reform, crackdown on corruption and oligarchic entanglements has disillusioned many in the country.

The referendum, the cabinet resignation and expected aftermath

On November 6, 2016, along with the first round of the presidential elections, Bulgarians also voted in a national referendum initiated by Slavi Trifonov, an entertainer and opinion leader. The outcome of the referendum may have profound effect on Bulgaria's election and party systems and democracy as a whole. The referendum was overwhelmingly endorsed by voters and although short of just 13,000 votes to be mandatory without further sanction it had enough votes to be considered by the parliament. There were three key proposals: adopting a two-round majoritarian system with absolute majority, decreasing substantially public subsidies for political parties and introducing mandatory voting in elections and referenda.

Citizens perceived the referendum as the chance to shake the system, despite expert warnings that the proposals would have detrimental effects on Bulgaria's political system and democracy by limiting participation and cementing two-three big parties. I.e. the referendum may actually aggravate a condition what was supposed to remedy.

The situation in the country became much more complicated as Prime Minister Boyko Borissov of GERB decided to resign with the cabinet following the defeat at the presidential elections nearly two years into the term of the cabinet. There is legal conundrum in terms of transition of the presidents and who and when has the authority to appoint caretaker government and disband the parliament and call for early elections probably in April 2017.

To make the matter worse, the shakedown from the presidential election, the referendum and the upcoming snap electing led to escalating populist promises regarding the election system, taxation, pensions, etc. Several main parties called for convening Grand National Assembly to change the constitution, which opens the door to all options, including switching from parliamentarism to a presidential form of governance. New populist players and nationalist coalitions, boosted by the presidential campaign, will likely emerge as key factors in the near future. The next months and years will be surely testing for Bulgaria.



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