

accommodate in 2015 the expenditures promised during his campaign, i.e. increasing pensions and salaries. The conciliatory statements of Ponta regarding the type of relationship between him and the newly elected president gives hopes that the institutional stability in Romania is likely to increase compared to the last decade. There are two reasons for such an expectation. First, in his conflicts with Basescu, Ponta was mostly reactive, he rarely initiated a public confrontation. Second, Ponta engaged in conflicts with the outgoing president because he could capitalize on his image based on Basescu's unpopularity. Iohannis is popular among many voters and a conflict with him will affect the Prime Minister's image.

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The 2014 parliamentary elections in Bulgaria

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In the last 18 months, voters in Bulgaria went to the polls three times—at two national and one European Parliament (EP) elections. The national legislative elections on October 5, 2014, sent eight parties/coalitions to the National Assembly, making it the most fragmented legislature in the country's post-Communist democratic history. Four formations representing over a quarter of the vote share (Reform Bloc, Patriotic Front, Bulgaria Without Censorship, and Alternative for Bulgarian Renaissance) are newcomers to the legislature. At 51.04%, voter turnout was the lowest for national legislative elections since the Communist collapse. Negotiations for a new government took several weeks, resulting in a two-party minority

coalition cabinet between **Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB)** and the **Reformist Bloc (RB)**. Two other parties—**Alternative for Bulgarian Renaissance (ABV)** and **Patriotic Front (PF)**—voted for the government during the investiture vote and pledged to continue to support it without signing the coalition agreement.

1. Background

The October 2014 elections were announced following the resignation of the Oresharski cabinet in July. The resignation capped a tumultuous year in office, marred by street protests and a banking crisis. The Oresharski cabinet formed in May 2013 as a coalition government of the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) and the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS), supported by the far-right

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Ataka. Its tenure started with the highly controversial nomination of Delyan Peevski as the head of the National Agency for National Security (DANS). Peevski's presumed links to organized business crime through his mother, media mogul Irena Krusteva, and his role in a 2007 corruption scandal spurred a wave of antigovernment protests. Tens of thousands took to the streets of the capital and major cities to demand the government's resignation. Despite the immediate withdrawal of Peevski's nomination, daily protests continued strong through the summer of 2013. During the fall, the daily protest marches were supplemented by student occupations of Sofia University and other universities, which lasted over two months. While most of the protest activity fizzled out in early 2014, sporadic demonstrations took place for the rest of the government's term in office.

Eventually, the government's term was cut short not by the mass protests but by the deteriorating relationship between the coalition partners (DPS and BSP), the Socialists' very poor showing in the European Parliament elections in May, and the banking crisis that threatened macroeconomic instability in June. Oresharski tendered his cabinet's resignation on July 23rd and soon afterward President Plevneliev appointed a caretaker cabinet headed by a constitutional law professor, Georgi Bliznashki. The caretaker cabinet managed to bring the banking sector back to stability, but one major bank—the Corporate Trade Bank (CTB) of oligarch Tzvetan Vassilev—inched towards bankruptcy over the summer. CTB's fate and Vassilev's ties to all mainstream parties became prime fodder for the new legislative electoral campaign.

2. Electoral system

In October 2014, Bulgaria's 240-member National Assembly was elected under the rules of an open-list proportional representation system, which was adopted in March 2014 and used during the European Parliament elections in May 2014. The country was divided into 31 electoral districts, including one for Bulgarian citizens residing abroad. Parties and coalitions needed to receive at least 4% of the national vote to enter parliament. Voters could cast two votes, one for a party and another one for a specific candidate from the list proposed by each party. Such “preferential” voting introduced a majoritarian element in the elections, with some candidates trying to distinguish themselves from their peers on the party list. It also gave voters the option to bypass the party-generated candidate lists. However, the “preferential” vote apparently confused some voters. In several electoral districts, enough voters entered the party-list number in both ballot columns by mistake, rather than with the intention of casting a preferential vote, so that they inadvertently rearranged the party list.

3. Campaigning

Per the rules of the Electoral Code, campaigning started a month before the elections, on Sept. 5, 2014. The campaign was generally considered to be lackluster, with personality conflicts rather than substantive issues dominating the discussion. Yet, a closer reading of the main

parties' election platforms suggests divisions among them along several dimensions.

One such distinction was between parties with specific proposals for restoring economic growth and those with populist messages. GERB, RB, Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS), ABV, and to a limited extent the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) offered ideas about how to overcome the country's economic stagnation. Among these parties, there was a sharp difference between the messages of the right-of-center parties, such as GERB and RB, who favor tax incentives for stimulating economic growth, and the leftist parties (BSP, ABV, and DPS), who promote government spending as a pathway towards economic recovery. The distinction between this group of parties and the rest was even sharper. The election platforms of PF, Bulgaria Without Censorship (BBT), and to some extent Ataka were dominated by statements calling not only for sizeable increases in salaries, stipends, pensions, etc., but also for the state to “care” for its citizens and the economy through subsidies for various industries (e.g., BBT and PF) or against foreign competition (e.g., Ataka and PF). Although there is some overlap, and almost all parties prioritized spending for social needs, education, and healthcare, many of the economic messages of these two groups of parties are irreconcilable.

The populist messages also permeated parties' positions regarding ethnic and religious minorities. Ataka's positions and proposals are well known and analyzed (e.g., [Ghodsee, 2008](#); [Taskin, 2011](#)). Some of the statements by the newcomer Patriotic Front are just as striking. PF is not as blatantly xenophobic as Ataka, and it defines itself positively as pro-Bulgarian and pro-national pride, but its platform was dominated by proposals on how to make the country's ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities (read Roma and Turkish-speaking populations) more “Bulgarian.” This is in addition to suggesting that Roma settlements should be turned into tourist attractions similar to Indian reservations in the United States or Gypsy villages in Hungary. Similar to PF, BBT also promoted mandatory testing of fluency in Bulgarian prior to allowing citizens to vote, and of minimum education requirements for receiving childcare subsidies. Both proposals seem to target the Roma population, which has higher than average illiteracy and birth rates. Such proposals hardly have a chance of being implemented. However, their inclusion in official party platforms, along with the relatively high share of votes that parties promoting such ideas received, are but one indication of increasing ethnic intolerance in the country.

The differentiation among parties along economic proposals and nationalistic fervor overlaps with another distinction: between parties of the status quo and those challenging the established party system. Parties with long-term presence in the legislature (BSP and DPS) de-emphasized the need to change the political system of the country. On the other hand, many of the newcomers called for reforms of the party system (ABV, BBT, and to a minor extent GERB). They advocated severing the ties between parties and state through reduced government financing for political parties. Further, some parties also called for a new administrative division of the country, and such proposals have been present in the platforms of other political parties for several election cycles. Distrust of

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