



BULGARIA ELECTION UPDATE II

June 11, 2001

Parliamentary Elections in Bulgaria

On June 17, 2001, Bulgarians will go to the polls to vote in parliamentary elections. In this final week of the pre-election period, NDI's resident representatives in Sofia take to the road to provide insight on the elections. By maintaining contact with candidates and activists trained in NDI's Parties in Parliament Program, and by following NDI's civic partners as they conduct their non-partisan voter education and get-out-the-vote campaigns, NDI is in a unique position to provide a snapshot of Bulgarian political parties and civic organizations on the eve of the election. Election Update II focuses on the political and civic campaign in south central Bulgaria, specifically Plovdiv, Pazardzik, and Assenovgrad.

THE NATIONAL CAMPAIGN

With just a week left in the campaign, polls show Tsar Simeon's coalition enjoying 35 to 40 percent popular support; a 15 to 20 point lead over the second-ranked Union of Democratic Forces (UDF), and 20 to 30 points ahead of the Bulgarian Socialist Party's (BSP) Coalition for Bulgaria. Observers attribute a weekend burst of support for the Tsar to a June 5 speech, in which the Tsar further detailed his "biggest goal, [which] is to help every citizen, every family in Bulgaria."

Neither the UDF nor the BSP have excluded the possibility of joining the National Movement Tsar Simeon (NMS) for a coalition government, although both party leaders note that the Tsar's renunciation of his claim to the Bulgarian monarchy would be a prerequisite to any governing partnership. NMS has not committed to any future coalition and will likely wait until all seats are allocated. Should support for the Movement for Rights and Freedoms fall below the four percent threshold, NMS may be able to form a government on its own.

Meanwhile, Bulgarian President Petar Stoyanov and Prime Minister Ivan Kostov (both UDF) are increasingly vocal about Bulgaria's need for macroeconomic stability, asserting that such stability could only follow from a continued UDF government, and cautioning Bulgarian's citizens that, "On the eve of elections for a new parliament, the political situation is heavy with uncertainty." The president's implication that a Tsar-dominated parliament would be seriously detrimental to Bulgaria echoes through much of the UDF campaign.

CAMPAIGN IN SOUTH CENTRAL BULGARIA

Party efforts vary in Plovdiv and Pazardzhik*

With a population of 360,000, Plovdiv is the second largest city in Bulgaria, and was the UDF's principal base of support in the 1991, 1994, and 1997 parliamentary elections. Prime Minister Kostov has been a Plovdiv candidate in every election, and leads the list this year. In 1997, the two Plovdiv districts returned 13 of 21 deputies from the UDF coalition to office. Pazardzhik, a smaller city located 27 miles west of Plovdiv, filled six of its nine mandates with UDF coalition candidates in 1997.

In an effort to bolster voter turnout in an area of strong support, the UDF's campaign in the Plovdiv and Pazardzhik districts is focused on direct mail as a means of generating voter enthusiasm; on Friday, both campaign offices were furiously addressing more than 47,000 cards to first time voters with a handwritten reminder from Prime Minister Kostov to "take the future in your hands" on election day. UDF staff in Pazardzhik had also created a brochure highlighting UDF accomplishments in the region using local photographs.

* Multiple party staff in both cities attended NDI training in March of this year.

As a new coalition with no regionally specific bases of support, NMS launched an effective poster campaign based on the slogan “*honesty in everything.*” In the last five days, poster portraits of Tsar Simeon appeared across the country in significant numbers, creating an impression of momentum. Tsar Simeon’s personal appearances and general pledges of economic improvement continue to characterize the NMS campaign. Targeting their own base of support, the Plovdiv BSP campaign opted to generate interest through informal voter contact and an event at the local pensioners’ club.

Civic bus-tour steams into Plovdiv region

On Sunday, June 10, the *Ti Izbirash* coalition launched a nationwide get-out-the-vote bus tour. Making scheduled stops across Bulgaria, the tour is designed to visibly connect the coalition partners’ local events around the country to *Ti Izbirash*’s national campaign.

The bus’s first stop was Plovdiv, where teams of student volunteers from the Bulgarian Association for Fair Elections (BAFE) had been going door-to-door to distribute voter education leaflets encouraging citizens to vote. Although most respondents assured the volunteers that they would vote, some were disillusioned and said they saw no point in casting a ballot. On these occasions, the team politely but emphatically stressed that voting is important, based on the training they had received from local BAFE leaders[†]. BAFE volunteers across the country will continue similar canvassing efforts through June 16.



[†] BAFE leaders were trained by NDI in mid May.



In addition to BAFE canvassing, The Women’s Alliance for Development (WAD) was busy phone banking to determine who was planning to vote; the lists they complete will be used on Election Day to remind women to go out to the polls. Because canvassing and phone banking are new activities for civic groups in Bulgaria, by June 6, *Ti Izbirash*-Plovdiv members had received three calls from local media interested in covering both efforts.

Earlier in the week, 30 women gathered for a candidate debate on health care, education, and youth employment organized by *Ti Izbirash* member KNSP, a trade Union. On the same day over a hundred citizens of Asenovgrad gathered for a candidate forum broadcast by local television. Podkrepa, another *Ti Izbirash* partner, organized this event.

Voting increase expected in Nevo Drom

As part of the Center for Intercultural Relations and Minority Studies’s (IMIR) *Ti Izbirash* effort, the north-western Nevo Drom Roma community held children’s running races to attract attention to the “Mommy, Daddy Vote for My Future” campaign. Over a hundred parents and children gathered outside the community center to participate in the races, which were covered by Roma TV. According to the IMIR Center Director, although political participation by Bulgarian Roma has declined in years past, voter turnout for these elections could be as high as 90 percent in Nevo Drom.

NDI conducts programs in Albania, Bosnia, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, and Slovakia. For more information on NDI’s Bulgaria programs, please contact Alicia Phillips in Washington, D.C. at 202-328-3136 or NDI in Sofia (Rick Asplund 359-2-989-7238 or Ann Liston at 359-2-980-7753).