

Bulgaria: the Borisov government resigns following a wave of protests

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The centre-right cabinet led by Boyko Borisov announced its dismissal on 20 February. The reason for this was the desire to prevent an escalation of public tension resulting from demonstrations against rises in the price of electricity. These demonstrations have been continuing for more than a week now. These protests are the greatest outburst of public dissatisfaction in Bulgaria since the mid 1990s. More than ten thousand people took to the streets in a number of cities and some roads were blocked. The demonstrations were gaining momentum despite certain ameliorating factors, including: the resignation of the unpopular deputy prime minister and minister of finance, Simeon Djankov, the launch of government control among electricity distribution companies, announcements being made that the licence of one of the companies (CEZ Bulgaria) would be cancelled and the fact that the government had promised to reduce electricity prices. The prime minister's resignation has come as a surprise to all political parties, and it is unclear whether parliament will decide to hold a snap parliamentary election or set up a new government which would take charge of the country until the planned parliamentary election in July 2013.

Commentary

- The reason behind this dismissal was the desire to reduce public tension but also certainly an attempt to avoid a further decline in support for the ruling party, Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB), which could bring the party poor results in the upcoming parliamentary election. Prime Minister Borisov's personal charisma and populist rhetoric has earned GERB the dominant position on the Bulgarian political scene; GERB won the parliamentary election in 2009 and the presidential and local elections in 2012. However, public support for the centre-right has been declining over the past few months, and GERB's support levels in January fell below 20% for the first time. Thus GERB was rated the second most popular party in public opinion polls after the Bulgarian Socialist Party. The party is becoming less popular because the public is tired with the government's fiscal discipline (despite populist slogans, the Borisov government was consistent in keeping the budget deficit and the public debt at a low level). Another reason is the lack of clear progress in combating corruption, which was among GERB's main promises. Seeing the mass demonstrations, Prime Minister Borisov chose to step

down and maintain his image of the people's leader, which he had been building for years.

- The largest opposition parties, the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS), which represents the interests of the Turkish minority, and the pro-Russian and radically nationalist Ataka party have insisted so far that a snap parliamentary election should be held as soon as possible. Nevertheless, it can be concluded from statements made by opposition leaders that as a last resort they are willing to agree to the establishment of a technical apolitical cabinet. However, it seems that none of the major political forces, including GERB, which has governed the country so far, wants to take responsibility for the situation in Bulgaria a few months ahead of the parliamentary election.
- The new government is likely to be formed by the BSP after the upcoming election, as it has greater potential to build a coalition. Nevertheless it cannot be ruled out that Borisov's early resignation will help him to win a renewed mandate. The character of the demonstrations and the slogans used during them have manifested the growing popularity of left-wing populism and a high degree of public disillusionment with the economic transformation seen in the country so far. As a consequence, the fiscal policy will become less restrictive, regardless of who wins the election.