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Elections in Bulgaria

Bulgarian Government. Bulgaria is a unitary parliamentary republic with a unicameral National Assembly composed of 240 representatives and with 17 representatives in the European Parliament. The chief executive is the prime minister, but executive decisions are made by the Ministerial Council (cabinet), which is selected en bloc by the parliament with absolute majority. There are currently six parties in the Assembly, three of which participate in the governing coalition. The president is the head of state and the commander-in-chief of the army; he has the right to veto legislation from parliament, but can be overridden by absolute majority.

Eligibility to Vote and Be Elected. Any citizen at least 18 years of age can vote for president and National Assembly anywhere in the country by presenting an identity card, if not in judicial custody; there is no such thing as voter registration. Candidates for parliament have to be at least 21 years old, should not hold any other citizenship and should not be in judicial interdiction. Presidential contenders should meet all the requirements for running for the National Assembly, should have been born in Bulgaria, should be at least 40 years of age and cannot be elected for more than two 5-year terms.

Presidential Elections. The president is elected directly by the citizens by simple-majority runoff. If no one gets an absolute majority of the votes in the first round, the two candidates with the largest number of votes go to a runoff, usually held a week later (elections are always scheduled for the weekend). The precise date for the election is set by the National Assembly within a few months before the end of the current president's term. In order to run, candidates must have the support of a registered political party or gather a certain number of signatures. Parties may decide to hold primaries in order to nominate presidential candidates – this is typically done by coalitions of smaller parties in order to determine which the most electable person is – but usually nominations are made by party caucuses.

Parliamentary Elections. The president designates a date for parliamentary elections if the National Assembly fails to choose a cabinet, its 4-year term is about to expire or it decides to dissolve itself. The seats in parliament are allocated proportionally to the number of votes gathered by each party countrywide. In order to qualify for any seats, however, a party must get at least 5% of the ballots cast in the election (or a smaller percentage for independent candidates). Parties register a list of candidates before the election – the higher on the list, the more likely a candidate to get a seat in the National Assembly. Some parties have instituted informal internal quotas for women, which has resulted in a dramatic increase of the number of female representatives. Depending on party bylaws, the lists of candidates are determined by caucuses or the governing body of the party. Formal discriminatory quotas of any kind as well as ethnic or religious parties are constitutionally prohibited. The rules for electing national representatives to the European Parliament are very similar.

The Technology of an Election. All elections are conducted by the independent Central Electoral Commission (CEC), whose 25 members are appointed by the National Assembly and the president. On election day, voters go to their electoral section, mark their party or candidate on a paper ballot, put it inside an envelope supplied by the sectional commission and place the envelope in an urn. The commission counts the ballots (as well as the envelopes!) and reports to the Regional Electoral Commission (REC), appointed by the CEC. Sectional-commission members are appointed by parliamentary parties proportionally to their number of seats in the National Assembly; there are also members from other parties. After the results are reported to the CEC, every REC is responsible for

preserving all election materials such as ballots and envelopes in case the results are contested. Should the election be disputed, the Constitutional Court may order recounts, invalidate the election or parts thereof or take other steps according to the improprieties found.

Political campaigning normally begins no more than three months before the election date. Political ads on TV are not as common as in the US and they rarely seek to disparage competing candidates. There are very severe restrictions and disclosure rules on how to obtain campaign financing. On election day, campaigning, announcing survey data and the sale of alcohol are prohibited.