Bulgarians force further democratic reforms, 1997

21 December 1996

to: 4 February 1997

Country: Bulgaria
Location City/State/Province: Sofia

Goals:
That the Socialist Party and Parliament dissolve and that elections for a new leader and government be held two years early, in May 1997

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 037. Singing
- 038. Marches

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 037. Singing
- 038. Marches

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 032. Taunting officials
- 038. Marches
- 170. Nonviolent invasion

Methods in 4th segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 019. Wearing of symbols
- 037. Singing
- 038. Marches
- 131. Refusal to accept appointed officials

Methods in 5th segment:

- 037. Singing
Methods in 6th segment:

- 037. Singing
- 038. Marches
- 044. Mock funerals
- 106. Industry strike
- 131. Refusal to accept appointed officials
- 144. Stalling and obstruction
- 172. Nonviolent obstruction

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 035. Humorous skits and pranks

Classifications

Classification:
Change
Cluster:
Democracy
Group characterization:

- Bulgarian Citizens
- Bulgarian Students

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
Union of Democratic Forces

Partners:
Bulgarian student leaders, Bulgarian labor union leaders

External allies:
Not known

Involvement of social elites:
Not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:
Groups in 2nd Segment:
Groups in 3rd Segment:
Groups in 4th Segment:
Groups in 5th Segment:
Groups in 6th Segment:
Additional notes on joining/exiting order:
Joining order not known
Segment Length: 7.5 Days

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:
Bulgarian Government, Stoyanov, Nikolay Dobrev
Nonviolent responses of opponent:
None known
Campaigner violence:
Fires at exits of Parliament building
Repressive Violence:
Teargas, beatings with clubs

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:
6 points out of 6 points
Survival:
1 point out of 1 points
Growth:
3 points out of 3 points

In 1989, Bulgaria was part of the "wave" of nonviolent revolts against domination by the Soviet Union and its Communist-led governments in Eastern Europe (see Bulgarians campaign for democratic reforms and multi-party rule, 1989-90).

In 1994, the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), formerly the Communist Party, regained a majority in parliament and was able rule Bulgaria with a government headed by Zhan Videnov. Following the Socialist takeover, the Bulgarian economy spiraled out of control, with more than 60% of banks insolvent by the winter of 1996-97. Average salaries were around $3-4 USD and pensions averaged about $1-2 USD per month. Bulgaria was in trouble, and the citizens blamed the government.

On 21 December 1996, Zhan Videnov and his government resigned, and the BSP prepared to form a new government to rule for the remainder of the two years until election time. President Stoyanov took the position at the end of December despite expressions of disagreement from citizens.

Opposition to the new ruler was extremely small at first, starting in later December. Stoyanov authorized Nikolay Dobrev (the next Socialist leader) to form a government. This sparked the first protests, which began small and grew with time following the New Year.

Demonstrators, led by the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) demanded that the Socialist party resign and that elections be held two years early (in May) to elect a new government. The first protest took place on 6 January 1997 and consisted of several hundred people marching near the Presidential palace. These smaller protests continued for several days, until citizens began a massive national strike on 10 January 1997.
Opposition attacked the Bulgarian Parliament building, locking legislators inside the building and setting fires near the exits so they couldn’t get out. They insisted that they would not let the officials out of the building until they were promised early elections and the dismantling of the socialist party.

There were around 50,000 protestors at the building. Before police arrived, protestors formed a human chain around the building and chanted complaints of low wages, high inflation, and increased rates of crime.

Police arrived quickly and no legislators were hurt. The police beat protestors with clubs and used teargas.

Late in the evening of 10 January the President rejected the opposition’s demands and stated that the Socialist government would not resign. The government also refused to vote on a motion to hold early elections.

In response to the negative reactions of the President and government, the opposition called for civil disobedience and strikes nationwide. Led by the UDF, protestors gathered every day for the rest of the month of January to fight peacefully for a better political system. Each day organizers announced the time of the new demonstration, the place where the people should meet, the route of the march, and the final destination. Protestors then started their daily march, made up of both students and laborers, as well as UDF officials and other citizens.

One of the typical march routes began in front of the Presidency building, where tens of thousands of protestors gathered each day. They marched to the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral while chanting for the dismantling of the current Socialist government.

Students held a large part in the demonstrations, and a week after 10 January, they developed slogans (such as “Clean up the Red trash” because red signified Communism) and began wearing blue to signify their support for the UDF. Students began to dress in costume as well, some wearing fireman outfits and standing in front of national banks to demonstrate “extinguishing” the national debt, with others wearing their pajamas and holding alarm clocks to signal that the country needed to “wake up”. Protestors also sang Bulgarian folk songs to represent the unity of the people.

One of the best known demonstrations carried out by students happened towards the end of January. Demonstrators held a mock funeral to bury “The 100 year old ‘one’” (i.e. the Communist Party).

Students began to blockade the main freeways and the roads into the cities, and at the very end of January city transport workers went on strike as well. Most of Bulgaria was immobilized, and at this point the government was forced to make a decision. With most of their labor force and students out in the streets daily, the Bulgarian economy was at its lowest point. The entire nation was suffering.

The President and BSP decided to hand over the government, and on 4 February 1997, Dobrev returned Stoyanov’s authorization to form a new socialist government. Stoyanov stepped down, and a caretaker government was appointed as a placeholder until May, when new elections were scheduled to take place.

In May, Ivan Kostov (the leader of the UDF) was elected the Prime Minister of Bulgaria, and the economy began its upward turn. Members of the UDF have been holding positions in the government since 1997.

Research Notes

Influences:


Sources: