

BULGARIANS SET TO BACK GOVT IN EU PARLIAMENT VOTE

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SOFIA (Reuters) - Bulgarians voted on Sunday in their first elections for the European Parliament, with the ruling Socialists favoured to win despite disenchantment with the country's rampant corruption.

Polls show the Socialist party of Prime Minister Sergei Stanishev may win a third of the vote, capturing as many as seven of Bulgaria's 18 seats in the EU assembly.

The election comes after Bulgaria and its larger neighbour Romania joined the European Union in January.

"I backed the Socialists," said Violeta Atanasova, a 61-year-old teacher, after casting her ballot in downtown Sofia on a chilly and rainy morning. "It is true that corruption is huge but I saw the governments before them that were worse."

An expected low turnout underlines frustration among voters in former communist Bulgaria where living standards remain poor, despite strong economic growth, and crime bosses and corrupt officials thrive in a climate of impunity.

Surveys show fraud is costing the state millions of euros (dollars) a year, while many Bulgarians still lack basic services.

The ruling coalition is also caught up in a graft scandal involving the economy minister and the country's top investigator. How the government and judiciary handle it is regarded as a litmus test of its willingness to root out abuse.

Polling stations opened at 6 a.m. (0300 GMT) and the first exit polls will come out after voting ends at 7 p.m.

Typically, elections to the European Parliament attract lower turnout than national votes because they have little impact on domestic policy and often turn into popularity tests for ruling politicians.

STRUGGLING TO CLEAN UP

Among coalition parties, polls show the centrist NMS of former king Simeon Saxe-Coburg bearing the brunt of voter dissatisfaction.

The Socialists and the third coalition partner, the ethnic Turkish MRF party, are likely to escape unscathed, due to a traditionally loyal voter base. MRF could win three or four seats and the NMS one or two.

"The elections are important for the stability of the country and for whether we will continue to build on what we have achieved so far and solve many problems that the country still has," Stanishev said after voting in Sofia.

Another five may go to a new rightist group, the GERB party of maverick Sofia mayor Boiko Borisov,

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which campaigns on promises to fight corruption and help business.

Right-wing parties which led Bulgaria's transition from communism may end up with only one seat. Bulgaria joined the EU after a late flurry of reforms of its communist-era judiciary and state institutions. But it still has to prove it is serious about fighting crime to avoid sanctions, possibly soon after a June 27 progress report from Brussels.

EU diplomats say member states are increasingly concerned, with some going as far as to say Bulgaria and Romania were admitted too soon.

Reuters (IDS)