The Bulgarian general elections on 26th March might not lead to a majority

On 24th January the new President of the Republic of Bulgaria, Rumen Radev, elected on 13th November 2016, dissolved the National Assembly (Narodno sabranie), the only chamber of Parliament in Bulgaria and convened a snap election on 26th March. This will be the third since 2013. According to political analysts it might not lead to a strong majority able to implement the economic and institutional reform that Bulgaria so badly needs. "None of the parties seem able to win an absolute majority which, will lead to a divided parliament and a weak government coalition," indicated Andrius Tursa, a political expert of the consultancy Teneo, Outgoing Prime Minister Boyko Borissov, (Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria, GERB), deemed that it would certainly be difficult to form a government after the election.

12 parties and 9 coalitions are running in these elections. According to the most recent poll by Trend, the GERB is running neck and neck with the Socialist Party (BSP) with 29.7% and 28.7% respectively. The Patriotic Front stands third with 9.9% of the vote, followed by the Movement for Rights and Liberties (DPS), a party representing the Turkish minority, is due to win 9%. The Reform Block is only credited with 3.4% of the vote and is due to follow Volya (Will), a populist party founded by businessman Vesselin Mareshki, the unfortunate candidate in the November presidential election (11.17% of the vote in the first round). Volya is promising to increase the minimum pension and wage, to reach 600 lev (306.4 €) (the latter lay at around 460 lev – 234.9 € – in January 2017).

The general election follows the resignation of outgoing Prime Minister Boyko Borissov after the second round of the presidential election on 6th and 13th November last won by the candidate supported by the BSP, Rumen Radev. Whilst the head of State only occupies an honorary role in Bulgaria, Boyko Borissov transformed the presidential vote into one regarding confidence in his government.

Bulgaria is now led by an interim technical government with Ognyan Gerdjikov, former parliament leader as its head (2001-2005) whose task it has been to prepare for the upcoming general elections and to ensure the smooth running of the State until his successor is appointed.

An extremely unstable political scene

Boyko Borissov is the first head of the Bulgarian government to have undertaken two terms in office: the first was from 2009 to 2013, then from 2014 to 2016. He is promoting his results as head of State. He points to the drop in unemployment (8%) and the increase in the minimum wage (460 lev, i.e. 235.1 €). He also points to the fact that during his term in office the State’s finances have returned to positive balance and that the country’s motorway system has been developed and modernised. However a major share of the Bulgarians deems that Boyko Borissov has failed on several counts, such as the reduction of poverty (ten years after its accession to the EU Bulgaria is the poorest Member State) and the reform of the judicial system.

In its programme the GERB is promising to introduce an anti-corruption plan that would include the abolition of parliamentary immunity for MPs, an increase in the minimum wage to 650 lev (332.3 €) and the average wage to
General Elections in Bulgaria
26th March 2017

1,500 lev (766.9 €) over the next four years of the legislature, to double teachers’ pays and to help large families more (3 children and +), to privatise health insurance and to complete the national motorway programme. The GERB maintains that it will increase the country’s wealth so that for the GDP to reach 120 billion lev (61.3 billion €) in 2021. He says is firmly against any possible alliance with the socialists.

Boyko Borissov is accusing his main rival of treachery and lies. He maintains that the Socialist Party wants to do away with the flat tax (a single tax rate set at 10% for the VAT, income and corporate tax) and to re-introduce progressive tax rates.

Former Home Affairs Minister (2015-2017), Rumiana Bachvarova (GERB), has said that the party has an interest in choosing its government partners amongst the members of the European People’s Party (EPP), which means for example the Reform Bloc.

The Bulgarian right is suffering from its various divisions. In the 2000’s this political trend was split between the National Simeon Movement II (NDS II) and the United Democratic Forces (SDS). In 2009, the SDS joined forces with the Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria (DSB) and three other parties in the Blue Coalition (Sinyata Koalitsia) but was finally beaten by the GERB, a party created by Boyko Borissov who won the ballot in the general elections on 5th July 2009.

In December 2013, 5 parties (the Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria, the Bulgarian Citizens Movement, the Union of Democratic Forces, the People’s Party for Freedom and Dignity and the Agrarian Union) formed the Reform Bloc which entered into the government formed by Boyko Borissov after the general elections of 5th October 2014. The Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria led by Radan Kanev have left this coalition.

The Reform Block, which signed an agreement with The Voice of the People’s Party led by Stvetoslav Vitkov, leader of the rock group Hipodil, is standing as an alternative to the GERB. It is fighting for a reduction in taxes, greater freedom for SMEs, the transparency of the judicial system and a better economic environment; it also wants institutions that can counter the cartels and monopolies. It is asking for a 50% increase in civil servants’ wages likewise workers in the private sector over four years, an increase in the average salary to each 700 lev (357.5 €) and a 9% reduction of the VAT on basic foodstuffs, medicines and books.

Alongside the Reform Bloc, we find the Patriotic Front, a nationalist alliance rallying the National Movement (IMRO-BNM) led Krasimir Karakachanov, the National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria led by Valeri Simeonov and Ataka (A) led by Volen Siderov. The Patriotic Front is promising to increase the minimum retirement pension to 300 lev (153.2 €). Two other parties have been created over the last few weeks. Former Justice Minister (2014-2015), Hristo Ivanov, founded “Yes Bulgaria” which is standing as a force to counter corruption and is fighting for the true reform of the justice system. Hristo Ivanov believes that by fighting firmly against corruption Bulgaria could gain 2 points in GDP growth.

Finally, Radan Kanev, a former member of the Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria founded the New Republic with several MPs of the Reform Bloc. The party is positioning itself as the only alternative to the GERB. It wants to reduce social aid granted to the unemployed who do not follow training, a measure that is targeting the Roma population. “We must open a right front. I am convinced that Yes Bulgaria does not need New Republic to enter parliament and vice-versa. If both parties enter parliament we will be united and strong and we shall work towards the creation of an anti-corruption bloc,” declared Hristo Ivanov.
On the left of the political scale, the Socialist Party has allied itself with five parties (the Communist Party, the political club EcoGlasnost, the New Dawn Party, the Agrarian Union Alexander Stamboliiski and the political club Thrace). Socialist leader Korneliya Ninova maintains that 40% of the lead candidates are newcomers. The BSP wants to change the tax system by maintaining a flat tax at 10% for most Bulgarians, but increase it to 20% for all of those who earn more than 10,000 lev (5,113 €) per month. It wants to enable each working parent to take off 50 lev (25.56 €) from their taxable income per child under their charge. Finally, it is asking for retirement pensions to be recalculated and increased by 20% just like teachers’ wages; it says that it will increase the cultural budget to total 1% of the GDP. It is promising, in the event of victory, growth of at least 12% of the GDP over the next four years.

The Bulgarian Political System

The Bulgarian parliament is monocameral. Its only chamber, the Narodno sabranie, comprises 240 MPs, elected every four years within 31 multimember electoral districts which match the country’s oblasti (counties). The voting method is mixed: 31 MPs are elected by a majority vote (according to the first past the post system) and 209 according to the proportional method (closed lists) according to the Hare-Niemeyer method.

It is vital to win a minimum of 4% of the vote for a political party to be represented in parliament. Candidates have to be aged at least 21. Parties have to have 10,000 lev (5,113 €), a sum which is reimbursed if they win a minimum of 1% of the votes cast and collate at least 15,000 voters. Independent candidates must be supported by at least 10,000 voters in the electoral district in which they are standing.

On 6th November last i.e. on the same day of the first round of the presidential election the Bulgarians were called to vote by referendum on three points of the recent reform of the electoral bill. 71.92% of the electorate approved the replacement of the proportional vote by a single list majority two round vote to elect their MPs; 61.83% voted in support of the obligatory vote and 72.16% said “yes” to the reduction of government subsidies paid to the political parties.

The quorum was not achieved but the turnout was over 20%, and parliament will vote on the voting method changes in the months to come.

8 parties won seats in the last general elections on 5th October 2014:
- Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria (GERB, which means “shield” in Bulgarian), created in 2006 by Boyko Borissov, former Prime Minister won 84 seats;
- the Socialist Party (BSP), led by Korneliya Ninova, won 39 seats;
- the Movement for Rights and Freedom (DPS), the party representing the Turkish minority founded in 1989 and led by Mustafa Karadayi, won 38 MPs;
- the Patriotic Front, rallying the National Movement (IMRO-BNM) led by Krasimir Karakachanov and the National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria led by Valeri Simeonov, win 19 MPs;
- The Reform Bloc, a five party coalition (Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria, the Bulgarian Citizens’ Movement, the Democratic Forces Union, the People’s Party for Freedom and Dignity and the National Agrarian Union) whose spokesperson is Petar Moskov. Member of the outgoing government, won 23 seats;
- Bulgaria Uncensored (BBC), a populist party created and led by former TV journalist Nikolay Barekov, won 15 MPs;
- Ataka (A), a right wing populist party founded in 2005 and led by Volen Siderov, won 11 seats;
- The Alternative for Revival (ABV), a left wing party created in 2014 by former President of the Republic (2002-2012) Georgi Parvanov, won 11 seats.
Reminder of the general elections results of 5th October 2014 in Bulgaria

Turnout: 49.51%

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political Parties</th>
<th>Number of votes won</th>
<th>% of votes won</th>
<th>Number of seats</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria (GERB)</td>
<td>1 072 491</td>
<td>32.67</td>
<td>84</td>
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<tr>
<td>Socialist Party (BSP)</td>
<td>505 527</td>
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<td>Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS)</td>
<td>487 134</td>
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<td>Reform Bloc</td>
<td>291 806</td>
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<td>Patriotic Front</td>
<td>239 101</td>
<td>7.28</td>
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<td>Bulgaria Uncensored (BBC)</td>
<td>186 938</td>
<td>5.69</td>
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<td>Ataka (A)</td>
<td>148 262</td>
<td>4.52</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alternative for Bulgarian Revival (ABV)</td>
<td>136 223</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>215 710</td>
<td>6.57</td>
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