

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

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Analysis

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

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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 Bloc, which signed an agreement with The Voice of the People's Party led by Svetoslav 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%

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Political Parties	Number of votes won	% of votes won	Number of seats
Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria (GERB)	1 072 491	32.67	84
Socialist Party (BSP)	505 527	15.40	39
Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS)	487 134	14.84	38
Reform Bloc	291 806	11.80	23
Patriotic Front	239 101	7.28	19
Bulgaria Uncensored (BBC)	186 938	5.69	15
Ataka (A)	148 262	4.52	11
Alternative for Bulgarian Revival (ABV)	136 223	4.15	11
Others	215 710	6.57	0

Source: Central Electoral Commission <http://results.cik.bg/pi2014/rezultati/index.html>

Outgoing Prime Minister Boyko Borissov wins his wager and also the general election in Bulgaria

Results

The Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria (GERB, the party of outgoing Prime Minister (2009-2013 and 2014-2016) Boyko Borissov, came out ahead in the snap election that took place in Bulgaria on 26th March. The head of government therefore won his wager and has asserted himself for the fourth successive time in the ballot box after 2009, 2013 and 2014. The GERB won 32.64% of the vote. The Socialist Party (BSP), the main opposition

"The Bulgarians have chosen security and brought the GERB back into office, counting on their future in the European Union. The socialists have failed to convince the electorate that they could be the actors of change," analyses Genoveva Petrova, Director of the pollster Alpha Research.

The Patriotic Front, the nationalist alliance rallying the National Movement (IMRO-BNM) of Krasimir Karakachanov, the National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria led by Valeri Simeonov and Ataka (A) led by Volen Siderov, came third with 9.06% of the vote. It came out ahead of the Movement for Rights and Freedom (DPS), the party representing the Turkish minority of Bulgaria (700,000 people, around 10% of the total population), which is against the policy undertaken by the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan (Party for Justice and Development), led by Mustafa Karadayi, 9.04% of the vote. The general elections were a test for the two parties representing the country's Turkish minority. The Movement for Rights and Freedoms won the battle against Dost (which means "Friend" in Turkish), which was openly supported by the Turkish government, which, with 2.89% of the vote, failed to enter the National Assembly (*Narodno sabranie*), the only chamber in Parliament.

Finally Volya (Will) will be represented in

parliament – a populist movement launched by a businessman, a self-proclaimed "Bulgarian Trump", Vesselin Mareshki who won 4.15% of the vote.

However, the Reform Bloc, a coalition formed by five parties (Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria, the Movement Bulgaria for Citizens, the Union of Democratic Forces, the People's party for Freedom and Dignity and the National Agrarian Union) which was a member of the outgoing government failed to retain its place in parliament. It won 3.02% of the vote, i.e. less than 4% of the vote necessary to be represented in the National Assembly.

This election followed the resignation of outgoing Prime Minister Boyko Borissov after the second round of the Presidential election on 6th and 13th November last, which was lost by the GERB candidate Tsetska Tsatcheva and won by the candidate supported by the Socialist Party, Rumen Radev. Whilst the head of State has an essentially honorary role in Bulgaria Boyko Borissov turned the presidential election into a vote of confidence regarding his government.

Turnout was about the same as that registered in the previous general elections on 5th October 2014: only half of the Bulgarians turned out to vote.

Results of the General Elections on 26th March 2017 in Bulgaria

Turnout: around 50%

Political Parties	No of votes won	% of votes won
Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria (GERB)	1 128 218	32.64
Socialist Party (BSP)	937 269	27.18
Patriotic Front	313 117	9.06
Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS)	312 347	9.04
Volya	143 354	4.15
Reform Bloc	104 553	3.02
Dost	99 794	2.89
Others	412 963	12.02

Source : Central Election Committee <http://results.cik.bg/pi2017/rezultati/index.html>

"The best part about democracy is that the people govern the country via its will. We have been correct and we resigned so that we could settle our accounts. This result undoubtedly confirms that GERB has to lead the way in the Bulgarian government," declared Boyko Borissov, who should therefore lead the next Bulgarian government. Bulgaria's strong man has again succeeded in snatching victory from the Socialist Party that is undergoing reconstruction. In this way the GERB has wiped out part of the defeat suffered in the presidential election of 6th and 13th November.

Boyko Borissov, who is the first head of the Bulgarian government to undertake two mandates (the first between 2009 and 2013, the second between 2014 and 2016), stands as the guarantor of his country's political stability, which he wants to be a loyal member of the European Union and NATO. However he has not ruled out maintaining "pragmatic" relations with Moscow. "The pro-Western consensus has been maintained. The rise in Russia's foreign policy ambitions played a role in mobilising the electorate," indicated Parvan Simeonov of Gallup. International issues – the weight of Russia's influence and tension with neighbouring Turkey – dominated in the electoral campaign.

"The Bulgarians who are not satisfied with the GERB's policy supported Boyko Borissov so that the socialists did not come to power. He succeeded in reassuring, in adopting the role of a unifier, a conciliator," analyses political expert Haralan Alexandrov.

"The socialists hoped to take advantage of the impetus, which in November last took their candidate Rumen Radev, former head of the air force, to the presidency of the Republic," stressed Daniel Smilov of the Centre for Liberal Strategies. "The Socialist Party stood as a vector of change but it over did it in presenting itself as an alternative to the status quo in terms of foreign policy and by advocating a rapprochement with Russia," declared political expert, Ognian Minchev. The left-wing opposition seems in effect to have scared off the Bulgarians.

Aged 57 and from Bankya (a suburb of Sofia), Boyko Borissov started his professional career as a fireman. After having worked at the Home Affairs Ministry he founded his own business – Ippon – in the 1990's. Firstly specialised in the textile trade he then turned to the security sector. Boyko Borissov worked as the bodyguard for the former leader of communist Bulgaria (1971-1989), Todor

Jivkov, then for King Simeon of Saxe-Cobourg-Gotha as he returned from exile in 1996. When the latter became Prime Minister in 2001, he became Secretary in Chief of the Home Affairs Ministry, i.e. chief of the national police force. Elected MP during the general elections on 25th June 2005 he chose not to sit in Parliament and on 8th November 2005 he won the local by-election to become mayor of Sofia. On 3rd December 2006, Boyko Borissov founded Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria (GERB), which the following year asserted its position as the country's main opposition party before winning the general elections that took place on 5th July. He resigned in 2013 amidst protests against poverty and corruption before returning as head of the government after the elections on 5th October 2014. Mr Borissov resigned again and placed his mandate in the balance after the defeat of his party's candidate Tsetska Tsacheva in the

presidential election on 6th and 13th November last. The GERB will probably form a coalition with Volya and the Patriotic Front, which we should recall said it was prepared to govern with them as well as the Socialist Party. *"The Patriotic Front does not really want to govern. It has no expertise and no solutions. Their agenda is conservative, xenophobic and linked to the Church. In the eyes of many Bulgarians these aspects are part of their national identity but they are not those which count the most in their daily life. Corruption and inequality are major stakes,"* indicated Christian Nitou of the London School of Economics (LSE).

"Whoever the victor, the general elections will probably lead to an oligarchic government model that fosters corruption," maintains Evgueni Daynov, analyst and director of the Centre for Social Practice.

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