

The party of incumbent Prime Minister Boïko Borissov, Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) running favourite to win the general election on 4 April

On 4 April, 6,732,316 Bulgarians are being called to the polls to renew the 240 members of the National Assembly (*Narodno sabranie*), the only chamber of Parliament. For the first time since 2009, the legislative elections are not being held ahead of time.

22 political parties and 8 coalitions are running. Some independent candidates are also running in some constituencies. In addition, a record 467 polling stations have been opened in 69 countries for Bulgarians living abroad. Turkey, the UK and Germany were the three countries with the highest number of polling stations.

Due to the health situation, it is planned for mobile polling stations to go to the homes of people affected by the coronavirus or contact cases so that they can fulfil their civic duty. It is worth noting that Bulgaria ranks first in Europe and second in the world, after Mexico, in terms of mortality caused by Covid-19 (4%), according to a study carried out by Johns-Hopkins University in the United States. The government ordered a 10-day lockdown on 22 March.

The official election campaign started on 5 March. The pandemic has reduced the possibility of meetings. Nevertheless, some can be organised indoors if certain guidelines are followed, for example, a venue must not be filled to more than 30% of its capacity.

Corruption, unemployment, the health situation and social issues have been the major issues in the campaign.

According to an opinion poll conducted by the Trend Institute in mid-March, five political parties are likely to be represented in parliament. The Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB, which means “*coat of arms*”) of outgoing Prime Minister Boïko Borissov is

expected to lead the ballot with 28.8% of the vote. The Socialist Party (BSP) is expected to take second place with 23.6%, followed by *Such a People Exist (Ima takuv narod, ITN)*, a populist party founded by singer and TV presenter Slavi Trifonov, with 12.7% and the *Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS)*, a party representing the Turkish minority, with 12.1%. *Democratic Bulgaria*, with 5.9% of the vote, is expected to pass the 4% threshold for representation in the Assembly.

Get up Bulgaria! Get the Bandits Out! (Izpravi se BG! Moutri van!), a coalition formed by former ombudswoman Maya Manolova and the Poisoned Trio after the protests that inflamed the country in 2020, and the far-right National Movement (IMRO-BNM) of Krasimir Karakachanov, GERB's partner in the outgoing government, are also close to the threshold.

THE GERB, FOR WANT OF SOMETHING BETTER?

Bulgaria experienced major protests expressing the discontent of part of the population in the summer of 2020. These followed a real estate scandal that broke in March 2019 in which several members of the GERB party, including the ministers of Justice, Sports, Energy and Culture, were involved. The party of the outgoing Prime Minister, heavily tainted by this scandal, then fell sharply in the opinion polls.

In response to the protests, Boïko Borissov reshuffled his government, but the protesters demanded his resignation and also that of the Prosecutor General. On 6 August, the Prime Minister offered to step down if his party could stay in power until the parliamentary elections in spring 2021. On 14 August, he reiterated this proposal in exchange for a Grand National Assembly to draft a new constitution and proposed to reduce the

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number of parliamentarians as well as to limit the powers enjoyed by the Prime Minister, the Minister of Justice and the Prosecutor General. The proposal was rejected by everyone: the President of the Republic, the demonstrators, the opposition forces and GERB's government partners.

Now GERB is running in coalition with Rumen Hristov's *Union of Democratic Forces* (SDS) as in the European elections on 26 May 2019. The programme, entitled *Bulgaria Next Generation*, is based on 3 pillars: the continuation of infrastructure modernisation policies, justice reform and increased investment in education (up to 5% of GDP), as well as reform of the health and public services sectors. The party promises to raise the minimum wage to €500, the average wage to €1000 and the average pension to €300 by 2025. These salaries are being expressed in euros because Boiko Borissov wants his country to join the euro zone in 2024.

The party also plans to increase the average salary of teachers and university professors. Last January, the government adopted a 10% increase in public wages. A 5% increase in pensions has been passed and will come into effect in July.

Although GERB is likely to come out ahead in the parliamentary elections; the question is whether they will be able to form a majority and, above all, one that is stable.

The *Movement for Rights and Freedoms* (DPS), a party representing the Turkish minority led by Mustafa Karadayi, is a potential partner but a coalition of these two parties would damage Boiko Borissov's already tarnished reputation, because of the negative image of Ahmed Dogan, honorary president of the DPS. Moreover, such an alliance would be very unstable as many other parties would be keen to oust the DPS from office. No alliance can be envisaged between GERB and the BSP or *Such a People Exist*, which participated in the 2020 protests.

GERB can only hope that the National Movement (IMRO-BNM) and Valeri Simeonov's *National Front for*

Salvation (NFSB), its current partners in government, manage to maintain their representation in parliament.

A WEAKENED AND FRAGMENTED OPPOSITION

The opposition to GERB is strong but divided. The Socialist Party (BSP) is running in coalition with four other movements: the *Ecoglasnost Political Club*, the *Communist Party*, *Nova Zora* and the *Trakjia Political Club*. The main opposition party has made the issues of health, education, poverty, inequality and the level of wages and pensions the main themes of its election campaign. The BSP favours the reintroduction of a progressive income tax in place of the current flat tax of 10% (single rate tax for VAT, income tax and corporation tax).

With only a few days to go before the elections, the BSP is nevertheless suffering from a number of handicaps. First of all, its electorate includes many elderly people, which is undeniably a problem in times of pandemic. It is not clear that they will turn out to vote. The BSP also lacks a strong leader and a coherent policy. Although it participated in several events in 2020, it has failed to present itself as a real alternative to GERB, particularly because of its internal divisions and some of its positions that are sometimes considered unreasonable by Bulgarians. Finally, the BSP, which occupies the whole space on the left of the political spectrum, can hardly broaden its electorate.

On 1 February, the President of the Republic Rumen Radev, who was supported by the BSP during his election in November 2016, announced that he will run for a second term as head of State in the presidential elections scheduled for next autumn. By announcing his candidacy, he clearly hopes to influence the legislative poll. "*Voters have a choice between the status quo and change, between accepting or overturning the current one-man behind-the-scenes model of repression, corruption and injustice for ordinary Bulgarians,*" he said.

On the left, former ombudsman Maya Manolova and the *Poisoned Trio*, who were very active during the 2020

protests, have joined forces in the coalition *Get Up Bulgaria! Get the Bandits Out!* coalition to participate in the parliamentary elections. The *Poisoned Trio*, named by journalist Sasho Dikov, comprises lawyer Nikolai Hadjigenov, sculptor Velislav Minekov and public relations specialist and former journalist Arman Babikyan. This coalition could potentially be a partner for the BSP, even if there are differences between the two camps, especially regarding foreign policy (the BSP is traditionally pro-Russian).

If an alliance of *Rise Bulgaria! Get the Bandits Out!* with GERB is out of the question, this is not the case with *Such a People Exist (Ima takuv narod, ITN)*, a populist party created by Slavi Trifonov (*Such a People Exist* is the title of one of his songs). ITN is campaigning for a reform of the judiciary and a change in the voting system (from proportional to a 2-round majority, compulsory vote). ITN refuses any alliance with GERB or the BSP. If it were to enter parliament, it does not appear that it would be an alternative force. "*The voices critical of the government have grown stronger but the demonstrations have not produced a strong figure or a clear coalition,*" said analysts at the Alpha Research opinion institute.

On the right there is Democratic Bulgaria, a liberal coalition. Formed in April 2018, it combines 3 parties: *Yes Bulgaria, Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria* and the Greens. It is led by Hristo Ivanov. The coalition is pushing for an increase in the retirement pension and the average wage by 2025. It proposes a 50% pay-rise for teachers, medical workers and social workers.

THE POLITICAL SYSTEM

The Bulgarian Parliament is unicameral. Its single chamber, the National Assembly (*Narodno sabranie*), has 240 deputies, elected every 4 years in 31 multi-member constituencies corresponding to the country's *oblasti* (departments). The voting system is mixed: 31 deputies are elected by majority vote (first past the post system) and 209 by proportional representation (closed lists). The Hare-Niemeyer method is used for the distribution of seats.

A minimum of 4% of the votes cast is required for a political party to be represented in parliament. Candidates must be at least 21 years old. Parties must collect signatures from at least 15,000 voters and they must deposit 10,000 lev (€5,113) which will be reimbursed if they receive a minimum of 1% of the votes cast.

Independent candidates must be supported by at least 10,000 voters in the constituency in which they are running.

Since 2016, Bulgarians have also been able to cast a ballot paper in both the presidential and parliamentary elections, expressly stating "I do not support any of the candidates".

5 political parties are represented in the current Parliament:

- Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB), founded in 2006 by outgoing Prime Minister Boiko Borissov, won 95 seats;
- The Socialist Party (BSP), led by Korneliya Ninova, won 80 seats;
- The Patriotic Front, a nationalist alliance comprising the National Movement (IMRO-BNM), the National Salvation Front (NFSB) and Ataka (A), which was dissolved on 5 February, won 27 seats;
- The Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS), a party representing the Turkish minority, founded in 1989 and led by Mustafa Karadayi, won 26 seats;
- Volya (Will), a right-wing populist party founded and led by businessman Vesselin Mareski, won 12 seats.

Bulgarians also elect the President of the Republic by direct universal suffrage. On 13 November 2016, Rumen Radev, supported by a committee of voters and the BSP, won the 2nd round of the presidential election with 59.37% of the vote. He beat Tsetska Tsatcheva, supported by GERB, who received 36.13% of the vote. Turnout stood at 50.44%.

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Reminder of the results of the 26 March 2017 parliamentary elections in Bulgaria

Turnout: 53.85%

Political Parties	Number of votes won	% of votes cast	Number of seats
Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB)	1 147 292	32.65	95
Socialist Party (BSP)	955 490	27.19	80
Patriotic Front	318 513	9.07	27
Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS)	315 976	8.99	26
Volya	145 637	4.15	12
Independents	5 116	0.15	0
None of the candidates	87 850	2.50	
Others	706 625	15.30	0

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

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