

European
Elections monitor

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ANALYSIS

Bulgarians, whose country is going through a serious political crisis, are being called to the polls for the fourth time in eighteen months

On 2 August, the President of the Republic, Rumen Radev, announced to the Bulgarians that a snap parliamentary election would be held on 2 October. This election, following the fall of the government led by Kiril Petkov on 22 June, is the fourth of its kind in 18 months.

After the political parties failed to form a new government^[1], the Head of State appointed former Labour Minister and current social policy advisor to Rumen Radev, Galab Donev, as acting Prime Minister until a new head of government is appointed in the upcoming elections.

BULGARIA, A COUNTRY IN CRISIS FOR OVER TWO YEARS

In the summer of 2020, Bulgaria experienced major demonstrations expressing the discontent of part of the population. These followed a real estate scandal in which several members of Prime Minister Boyko Borissov's Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) party (2009-2013, 2014-2017, 2017-2021), including the ministers of Justice, Sports, Energy and Culture, were allegedly involved. The head of government then reshuffled his coalition but GERB fell sharply in opinion polls.

A few months later, the parliamentary elections of 4 April 2021 failed to produce a majority. None of the three leading parties - GERB, Such a People Exist (Ima takuv narod, ITN) and the Socialist Party (BSP) - managed to secure a majority for themselves or to agree on a government of experts, leading to a new parliamentary election on 11 July 2021. The leaders

of these three parties were again asked by the Head of State to form a government. Once again, they all failed. On 14 November 2021, We continue the change, a coalition founded by Kiril Petkov and Asen Vassilev, created a surprise by coming first in the new elections with 25.32% of the vote, winning 67 of the 240 seats in the National Assembly, the single house of parliament. Boyko Borissov's GERB came second with 22.44% of the vote and 59 seats, ahead of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS), a party representing the country's Turkish-speaking minority, which won 12.83% and 34 seats.

The turnout was very low, partly due to election fatigue after three legislative elections in seven months. Less than one in four voters (38.43%) fulfilled their civic duty.

We continue the Change was able to form a government in December 2021 with the Socialist Party, Such a People Exist and Democratic Bulgaria, a liberal coalition that brings together Yes Bulgaria, the Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria and the Greens. The coalition agreement that united these four parties focused on the fight against corruption, the reform of the justice system and the modernisation of the health system.

But this was without Vladimir Putin. Indeed, Russia's aggression against Ukraine on 24 February 2022 considerably shook the government formed by Kiril Petkov, which was strongly divided on support for Kyiv. We continue the Change strongly condemned Moscow and stood by Ukraine. The Prime Minister refused to open a rouble account to pay for his gas deliveries. As a result, Moscow turned off the gas tap

^[1] Bulgarian electoral law provides for three attempts to form a government following elections or the collapse of an incumbent team. Three failures automatically lead to the convening of parliamentary elections.

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to Sofia. This decision caused a complete breakdown in relations between Kiril Petkov and the President of the Republic Rumen Radev. Within the government, the Socialist Party opposed any arms supplies to Ukraine and Such a People Exist chose to leave the coalition in June.

GERB saw the government's divisions as an opportunity and quickly tabled a motion of no confidence in the government coalition, pointing to rising energy prices and denouncing the *"failure of the government's economic and financial policy"*.

Kiril Petkov's government fell on the vote of this motion on 22 June: 123 deputies voted the motion of no confidence against 116. This is a first in Bulgaria's history.

"In this country traditionally close to Moscow, the war has deepened divisions, weakening the government," said Ruslan Stefanov of the Centre for the Study of Democracy. *"The unprecedented cut-off of Russian gas supplies has played a key role in the current crisis. Bulgarian oligarchs who received commissions on these supplies were deprived of income, which aggravated tensions within the government coalition and between business circles and the government"* said Ognyan Minchev, Director of the Institute of International Studies in Sofia.

In addition to tensions over arms deliveries to Ukraine, the interruption of Russian gas supplies, which is causing major uncertainties over Bulgaria's energy supply and very high inflation, the coalition parties were also divided over Bulgaria's veto on the launch of negotiations for the accession of Northern Macedonia to the European Union.

THE ELECTORAL CAMPAIGN

The election campaign has been virtually non-existent. It is mainly focused on state aid in the face of inflation (fuel and food) and on the need to stock up on gas for the winter. Political observers expect a low turnout on 2 October, as Bulgarians are tired of repeated elections (they will also elect their president on 14 and 21 November 2021). Finally, many believe that the

legislative elections will not lead to the formation of a stable government, which may result in the need for a fresh vote in 2023, which would be catastrophic in a context of high inflation and economic stagnation. The current Finance Minister, Rositza Velkova-Jeleva, recently warned that the budget deficit would reach 6.8% of GDP in 2023.

In addition, Bulgaria has dropped four places in the Human Development Index 2021. Ranked 68th, the country also has become the only EU Member State not to enter the category of most developed countries. Sofia has now fallen behind of all its neighbours except for Northern Macedonia, as well as Montenegro and Georgia.

Three quarters of Bulgarians believe that the situation in their country will deteriorate in the coming months (72%), only 4% believe that it will improve, and one in five (21%) believe that nothing will change in either direction, according to an opinion survey carried out by the Mediana institute in early September.

Two-thirds of Bulgarians (64%) support Sofia buying gas from Moscow if it is cheaper than that offered by other supplier countries. Only 14% are opposed to this idea, with 22% saying they have no opinion.

According to the latest opinion poll conducted by the Sova Harris institute in mid-September, GERB is expected to lead the 2 October parliamentary elections with 28.8% of the vote, ahead of We continue the change, which is forecast to win 18.8%. The Socialist Party (BSP) is projected to take third place with 12.7%, followed by Renaissance (V) (10.4%), a Russian-speaking party that advocates a neutral position for Sofia. Four other political parties are expected to be represented in Parliament: the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS), 8.7%, Democratic Bulgaria 5.7%, Such a People Exist 5.1% and finally Bulgaria Rise, a party created by Stefan Yanev, former Prime Minister of a government of experts (May-December 2021) and Minister of Defence (December 2021-March 2022), who was sacked by Kiril Petkov because of his lukewarm support for Ukraine (4.80%).

The next parliament is therefore likely to be as fragmented as the previous one.

With two weeks to go before the elections, GERB is well ahead of its competitors, but the party has no allies, except for the DPS. All other parties have already announced that they will not collaborate with Boyko Borissov's party.

"You have to decide on 2 October if you want to live in a normal European state or if you want to go back to poverty," Asen Vassilev, co-founder of We continue the Change, said at an election rally. He recalled that the outgoing government had increased maternity leave allowance and pensions and lowered taxes for working parents.

The party's priorities for the election remain the same, including ending corruption and theft, not raising taxes but improving tax collection, reforming the health and education sectors, distributing prosperity fairly and restoring people's trust in their institutions. It supports anchoring Bulgaria in the European Union and NATO. People in urban areas of the country are predominantly in favour of this, while those in rural areas and older Bulgarians are more likely to be Russophiles.

The BSP likes to say that if the socialists come to power, the state will be there for the Bulgarians to help them through the winter. Traditionally Russophile, it is in favour of resuming negotiations with Gazprom on gas deliveries from Russia. It is also in favour of a diplomatic solution to put an end to the war in Ukraine and an end to sanctions against Moscow.

THE BULGARIAN POLITICAL SYSTEM

The Bulgarian Parliament is unicameral. The National Assembly (Narodno sabranie) has 240 deputies, elected every 4 years in 31 multi-member constituencies corresponding to the country's oblasti (counties). 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 are refunded if they receive a minimum of 1% of the votes cast.

Independent candidates must be supported by a minimum of 10,000 voters in the constituency in which they are running.

Since 2016, Bulgarians have also had the possibility, in the presidential and parliamentary elections, to place a ballot paper expressly stating "I do not support any of the candidates".

7 political parties are represented in the current Parliament:

- We continue the Change, a coalition founded by Kiril Petkov, and Asen Vassilev, has 67 seats;
- Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB), founded in 2006 by BoBorissov, has 59 seats;
- The Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS), founded in 1989 and led by Mustafa Karadayi, has 34 seats;
- The Socialist Party (BSP), led by Korneliya Ninova, has 26 seats;
- Such a people exist (Ima takuv narod, ITN), a populist party founded by singer and TV presenter Slavi Trifonov, has 25 seats;
- Democratic Bulgaria, a liberal coalition of Yes Bulgaria, Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria and the Greens, led by Hristo Ivanov, has 16 seats;
- Renaissance (Vazrazhdane, V), a nationalist party, founded in 2014 and led by Kostadin Kostanidov, has 13 seats.

Bulgarians also elect their President of the Republic by direct universal suffrage. On 21 November 2021, Rumen Radev, supported by the Socialist Party, We continue the Change, Such a People Exist and Get Up Bulgaria! Stand up BG We are coming! (Izpravi se BG! Nie idvame!), won the second round of the presidential election with 66.72% of the vote. He beat Anastas Gerdzhikov, supported by GERB and the Union of Democratic Forces (ODS), who won 31.8% of the vote. The turnout was 33.55%.

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Reminder of the results of the parliamentary elections of 14 November 2021 in Bulgaria

Turnout: 38.43%

Political Parties	Number of votes won	% of votes cast	Number of seats
We continue the change!	673 170	25,32	67
Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria (GERB)	596 456	22,44	59
Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS)	341 000	12,83	34
Socialist Party (BSP)	267 817	10,07	26
Such a People Exist (ITN)	249 743	9,39	25
Democratic Bulgaria	166 968	6,28	16
Renaissance (V)	127 568	4,80	13
Others	235 826	8,87	0

Source : [Electoral Commission](#)

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