

Briefing on
**Parliamentary elections
in Bulgaria**
October 2, 2022

Vladislava Gubalova
Senior Fellow, GLOBSEC Policy Institute

GERB
election winner

39,40%
voter turnout

67 seats / 240

Introduction

Bulgaria has endured its 4th parliamentary elections on the past two years. In the midst of the Russian war in Ukraine, the last Bulgarian government had only a six-month tenure, with the Prime Minister Kiril Petkov resigning after a vote of “no confidence” of the parliament in late June 2022. The results from the latest elections do not suggest an outright solution to what has become a perpetual governing crisis in the country. With Bulgaria already being the poorest EU member state, the exponential increase of prices and cost of living, toppled with energy supply uncertainty and societal political apathy, it paints a rather grim winter picture for the country. Some attempts are being made to find common grounds among parties to form a new coalition government (needing the support of 121 votes in the parliament) but any common ground would be most likely another unstable basis for governing.

The background

After the elections in November 2021, a coalition government was formed, led by the new political movement “We Continue the Change”, established only two months before the elections. The coalition was based on a common anti-corruption platform and a desire from all partners to distance themselves from

the long-running previous government of prime minister Boyko Borisov. The coalition partners were from the left to the right on the political spectrum, with left, center, center-right and populist representation. This broad coalition was unable to overcome internal disagreements on important issues such as Bulgaria’s geopolitical stand in the wake of the Russian aggression, the policy towards North Macedonia and its start of EU accession negotiations, the appointments of different public administrators, etc. Once the coalition partner “There are Such People” withdrew its support, the government lost the “confidence” vote.

With the president Rumen Radev appointing yet another caretaker government to his liking, and announcing new elections, the political parties began a new pre-election cycle.

The Campaign

This time around, the campaign was as almost non-existent, rather dull and concentrated on social media channels. It is not very surprising to see focusing campaign messages in Bulgaria on social media. Recent Special Eurobarometer on Media and News (Spring 2022) revealed that Bulgarians receive their news more

often through online news platforms at 60% (EU avg. 43%) as well as social media platform/blogs at 47% (EU avg. 26%) than EU average. They also trust less the printed press at 18% than EU average at 39%. The lack of trust in traditional media outlets due to long-standing concerns, including concentration of media ownership and symbiotic relationship between some media and political parties has been progressing for some time.

The main issues being present at the pre-election campaign included energy (prices and supply), inflation and cost of living/rising prices, and corruption but in very shallow terms. Much blaming and little constructive solutions were presented to the citizens. Of course, the whole campaign was in the context of the war, which geographically is very close to Bulgaria.

What made this campaign different was the visible participation of the president, the vice president and the caretaker government, targeting negatively some of the campaigning political formations.

The results

There were no surprises to the results on 2 October. The most interesting part, although not crucial to coalition-building prospects, was if “There are such People” will make the 4% threshold barrier. In the end, they fell short. The winner is GERB under the leadership of the former Prime Minister Boyko Borisov, followed by “We Continue the Change”, co-led by the last government’s Prime Minister Kiril Petkov and the former finance minister Asen Vasilev. With a steady support, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms is third, followed by the rising disruptive far-right and populist party Revival, the Bulgarian Socialist Party, Democratic Bulgaria and yet another newcomer Bulgarian Rise, led by the former defence minister, who was hesitant to use the term “war” but rather stuck to Kremlin’s definition of the Russian aggression in Ukraine.

- 1 GERB 25%, 67 seats
- 2 Continue the Change 20%, 53 seats

- 3 Movement for Rights and Freedoms 13.8%, 36 seats
- 4 Revival 10%, 27 seats
- 5 Bulgarian Socialist Party 9%, 25 seats
- 6 Democratic Bulgaria 7%, 20 seats
- 7 Bulgarian Rise 4.6%, 12 seats

Source: Bulgarian Central Election Committee

Main Observations

With 39% the turnout of these elections is the lowest in the free elections history of Bulgaria. With the 4th attempt in two years, the citizens have entered a state of apathy and have to a certain extent resigned from the active political life. Further evidence is found in the “punishing” vote of 3.5% for “I do not support anybody.” With 4% being the threshold for entering the parliament, it suggests that even when citizens seek alternative for a new government, the current political parties and movements are unable to fulfill it. There will be seven parties represented in the new parliament, reflecting on top of the settling apathy, the undercurrent of societal polarisation—especially exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic and later ushered into the Russian war in Ukraine.

Given this context, it is likely that the patience of the former PM Boyko Borisov is being slowly rewarded. Two years ago, there were mass demonstrations on the streets calling for his resignation, with the civil society briefly awoken and united (at last at the time of protests). Today, the desire for change (structural and political) has taken a back seat.

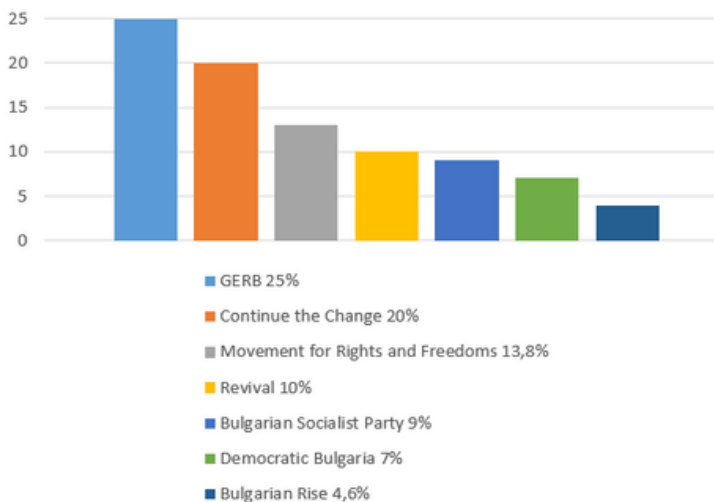
Meanwhile, a populist, pro-Russian, anti-NATO, anti-European, anti-vaccinations disruptive party called “Revival” has been successful in consolidating the votes on the nationalist segments, while harnessing additional votes from the left and right. With 10% of the vote, the party ranks higher than the traditional left, the Bulgarian Socialist Party. The socialists are in their deepest crisis yet. While they were briefly back in government in the last short-lived coalition, their base has been shrinking consistently in the past several

years. The party has been struggling to attract the younger generation, while the older supporters have become disappointed with internal fighting, inconsistency and overall stagnation of the party.

Perhaps the biggest losing side from the latest elections is the “There are such People”. The disruptive and at times puzzling behaviour by the party, who won the vote just two elections ago, have cost them their place in the current parliament. Most likely, they will fizzle out from the political scene.

With the Russian war in Ukraine going on, the Bulgarian society continues to be highly polarised. Bulgaria is a fruitful ground for Russia’s energy, propaganda and informational war. The presence of a large Russian community, large numbers of Embassy employees, the deep sense of cultural/brotherly connection mixed with historical gratitude continues to persevere. The citizens, including the younger generation, continue to be susceptible to skillful propaganda that is not necessarily openly pro-Russian but anti-Western and anti-American. In a spring 2022 GLOBSEC Trends study, Bulgaria was rated as the least pro-Western country in the CEE region. According to a poll, 38% of the respondents wished to exit NATO, with 58% not seeing Russia as a security threat and 30% considering Russia as the most important strategic partner.

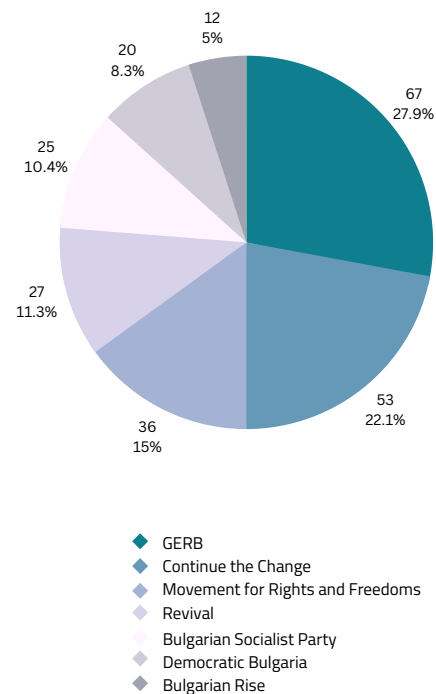
General Election Results 2022



What will be Next?

Two scenarios seem plausible. One possible turn of events would be an inability to form a new government, given the divergent party interests and statements of unwillingness to govern together. This scenario runs with higher probability, keeping the country in a perpetual governmental crisis, while increasing the power and legitimacy of the president. Another possible scenario would be the successful forming of a government, based on a common theme of tackling the economic and security challenges, while adhering to pro-European and pro-Western orientation—desire for stability. Although such prospect seems as a positive development, the price will be at least in short to medium term the end of the attempted changes to the problematic governance structures, judiciary and entrenched corruption. After all, a possible clearly leaning pro-European and pro-Western coalition will have to include GERB, the party of Boyko Borisov.

Allocation of seats in Parliament



As part of a panel discussion series, the Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe analyzes parliamentary elections in the countries of Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe. The event is organized together with the Political Academy of the Austrian People’s Party and the Karl-Renner-Institut.