

Briefing on

Parliamentary Elections in Bulgaria

9 June, 2024

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40.69%

voter turnout in 2023

20/11

running political parties
and running coalitions

240

seats in the National
Assembly

About the elections

After early parliamentary elections in Bulgaria in April 2023, a government was formed between *Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria-Union of Democratic Forces* (GERB-SDS) and *We continue the Change-Democratic Bulgaria* (PP-DB). They agreed on a system of rotating prime ministers – but this very rotation ultimately led to the downfall of the government. Following the resignation of Prime Minister Nikolay Denkov, attempts to form a new government under Foreign Minister Mariya Gabriel, who was to become the next Prime Minister, failed. As a result, Bulgarian citizens will head to the polls again on 9 June, marking the sixth election in only three years. They will cast their votes twice – once for the EU election and once for the national election.

Background

Since 2021, when former Prime Minister and GERB-leader Boyko Borisov was voted out of office following corruption allegations and months of protests, Bulgaria has struggled to form a stable government. After a total of five early elections and an unsuccessful four-party government consisting of PP, DB, *There Is Such A People* (ITN), and the *Socialist Party* (BSP) under PP-leader Kiril Petkov, new hope for resolving Bulgaria's political stalemate emerged in 2023.

The negotiations following the elections in April 2023 resulted in a joint government of GERB-SDS and PP-DB.

The joint government, deliberately not called a coalition but referred to as a "gentlemen's agreement", faced challenges from the beginning. PP-DB's original goal had always been to oppose GERB and Borisov and, during the election campaign in 2023, the party had pledged not to form a government with GERB-SDS.

During its one-year term in office, the government faced numerous economic and social challenges. What united GERB-SDS and PP-DB was a common pro-European orientation, prioritising Bulgaria's accession to the Schengen Area and the Eurozone. The country's integration into Schengen by air and sea in March 2024 was a step in this direction, although the country is still awaiting full membership.

Progress was also made in the area of justice. Prosecutor General Ivan Geshev, accused of corruption, abuse of power and interference in politics, was removed from office in 2023. Additionally, constitutional amendments were enacted to limit the power of the Bulgarian president.

According to these amendments, the Kremlin-close president Rumen Radev no longer has the right to appoint an interim prime minister of his choice, but must choose from a list of nine people: the speaker of the parliament, the governor of the National Bank and deputies, the ombudsman and deputies, the head of the Court of Auditors and deputies.

The system of rotating prime ministers stipulated for Nikolay Denkov to resign after nine months, with former Foreign Minister Mariya Gabriel assuming the role. As planned, Denkov resigned on 5 March, but GERB-SDS and PP-DB were unable to agree on the appointment of certain ministries for the new government. Attempts to form a government under the mandate of other parties also failed. Consequently, President Rumen Radev appointed an interim government, naming Dimitar Glavchev, President of the Bulgarian National Audit Office, as interim Prime Minister on 9 April. New elections were scheduled for 9 June to coincide with the EU elections.

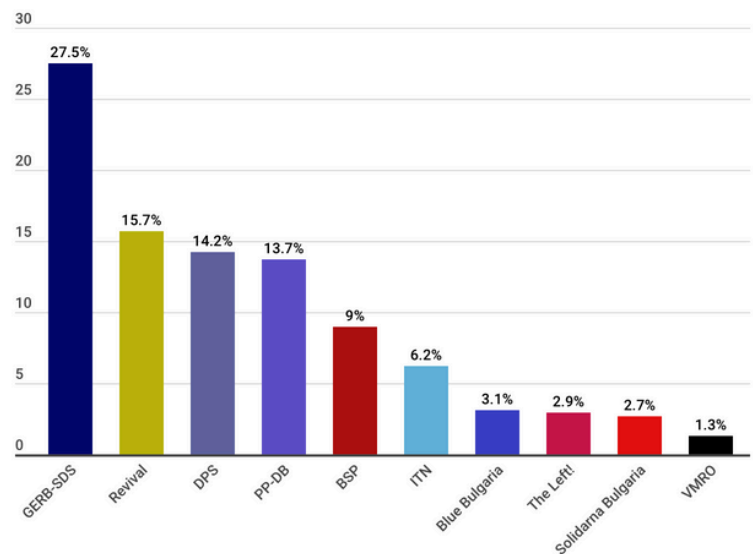
Opinion Polls

The most recent opinion poll by the Mediana opinion institute, conducted between 12 and 18 May and published on 19 May, shows GERB leading in the national elections with 27.5% of the vote. This would represent a slight gain for Borisov's party compared to last year's elections (26.5%). In contrast, the party of the last prime minister, Denkov, is expected to lose significant support. While polls conducted in April and the beginning of May (by Gallup International Balkan and Market Links) still expected PP-DB to come second place after GERB, this one shows PP-DB on fourth place, dropping from 24.6% in 2023 to just 13.7%. Many PP-DB voters are disappointed, particularly due to the coalition with GERB.

The far-right party Vazrazhdane (Revival) is projected to take second place, with 15.7% of the vote, up from 14.2% in 2023. The Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS), which represents the interests of the Turkish minority, could come third with 14.2% (up from 13.8% in 2023). The socialist BSP party is expected to be after PP-DB in fifth place with 9% (8.9% in 2023),

and the populist ITN in sixth place with 6.2% (up from 4.1% in 2023). Other parties, such as *Blue Bulgaria*, *The Left!*, *VMRO* and *Solidarna Bulgaria* are not expected to secure the 4% needed for representation in parliament, according to the poll.

However, the survey also indicates that around a quarter of voters are still undecided. That means the election outcome could still change significantly and it could be a tough race between PP-DB, DPS and Revival for second place. Although some believe that holding the national and European elections simultaneously could encourage more people to vote, turnout is generally expected to be low (2023: 40.69%). The population has become disenchanted with politics due to the ongoing government crisis and frequent elections. According to surveys, only 35% of people consider the EU elections important, and just 52% regard the national elections as important.



Main running political entities

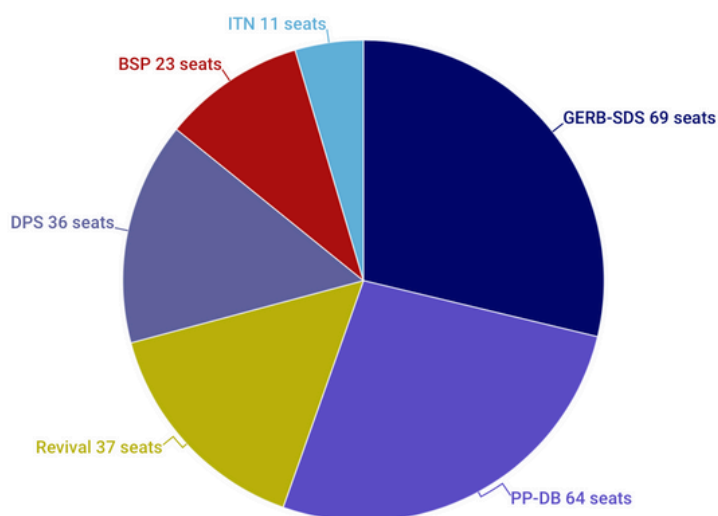
20 parties and 11 coalitions will run for domestic parliament as well as for the European Parliament on 9 June 2024 in Bulgaria.

Main running political entities

Political entity	Party leader	Political Orientation	Group in the EP
GERB-SDS	Boyko Borisov	Centre-right, conservative	EPP
PP-DB	Kiril Petkov	Centre, liberal	Renew Europe/ EPP
BSP	Korneliya Ninova	Centre-left	S&D
DPS	Delyan Peevski	Centre, Turkish speaking/Muslim minority	Renew Europe
ITN	Slavi Trifonov	Right-wing	wants to join ECR
Revival	Kostadin Kostanidov	Far-right	ID

Current distribution of seats in the Parliament

The Bulgarian Parliament has 240 members (121 are needed for a majority), who are elected every 4 years in 31 constituencies. A party needs to secure at least 4% of the total votes cast to gain representation in parliament.



Political instability and foreign influence

Once again, the political stability of the country on the Black Sea is at stake. After Borisov, who had been in power for almost 10 years, was voted out of office, and through parties such as PP-DB, many Bulgarians hoped for a change in the status quo and for reforms. This hope has now, after ongoing government crises, significantly diminished.

Since the new collapse of the government, political divisions have become more entrenched than ever. According to polls, the political stalemate seems to have caused the least damage to GERB, which is poised to become the strongest force. Borisov's party could join forces with the DPS, but this alliance will probably not secure a majority in parliament. A partnership with PP-DB seems unlikely, especially as long as Delyan Peevski, who is accused of corruption and banned from traveling to the USA and the UK under the Magnitsky Act, remains influential in the DPS. A three-way coalition of GERB, DPS, and the populist ITN, led by entertainer Slavi Trifonov, could be possible.

Additionally, recent history in Bulgaria has shown that political instability is a breeding ground for Russian disinformation. Russian propaganda about the EU and the war in Ukraine is widespread in Bulgaria, with misinformation proliferating on social networks, traditional media, and through politicians, especially in the lead up to elections. Vazrazhdane in particular gained four percentage points in 2023 and is likely to gain more votes in this year's election. The party is overtly pro-Russian and sent a delegation to Moscow in early 2024 at the invitation of Russian President Vladimir Putin's United Russia party.

There is significant concern that the fragmentation and polarization of the Bulgarian political landscape will make it difficult, if not impossible, to form a government after the 2024 elections.