

Bulgarian parliamentary elections: victory for GERB, the outlook is uncertain

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The early elections to Bulgaria's 240-seat National Assembly, held on 2 October, were won by the centre-right GERB-SDS bloc of former Prime Minister Boyko Borisov. It won 25% of the vote and 67 seats. With 20% of the vote, the Continuing Change (PP) party of Kiril Petkov (who served as prime minister until July) came second with 54 seats. There were followed by: the Turkish minority party Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS, 13%, 36 seats), the nationalist and pro-Russian Revival (10%, 27 seats), the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP, 9%, 24 seats) and the centre-right Democratic Bulgaria (DB, 7%, 20 seats). The smallest party which crossed the electoral threshold is Bulgarian Rise (BW), which will enter parliament for the first time and which has a conservative and pro-Russian profile; it is led by former prime minister and defence minister Stefan Yanev (4%, 12 seats). The threshold was not crossed by the There is Such a People (ITN) party, whose front was the cause of the break-up of the ruling coalition. 37% of eligible voters went to the polls – the lowest percentage in a parliamentary election in Bulgaria's democratic history.

Commentary

- GERB's victory is not surprising. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the party had been gaining in the polls due to the deepening animosity among the forces of the government coalition (formed by PP, BSP, DB and ITN) against this backdrop and growing economic problems. The cut-off of Russian gas supplies in April triggered increases in energy and fuel prices and worsened inflation (17.7% in August). Domestically, concerns about the stability of gas supplies during the heating season are intensifying. GERB criticised the Petkov government for ineffective diversification efforts and the lack of new long-term gas contracts (including delays with the commissioning of the Greek-Bulgarian ICGB interconnector, which guarantees Azeri supplies; it only became operational on 1 October). The economic problems have pushed the issues of former Prime Minister Borisov's corruption scandals into the background. He declares that the continuation of gas and oil diversification, the development of nuclear energy in cooperation with the US (the construction of the Belene power plant), the acceleration of the delivery of US F-16 aircraft (the contract was signed by the previous Borisov government in 2020, but was delayed by production stoppages and lack of components) and support for Ukraine will be non-negotiable axioms in the formation of the new cabinet.
- A fourth parliamentary election in two years did not produce clear-cut results, and the results are not conducive to forming a stable majority. The largest parties did not

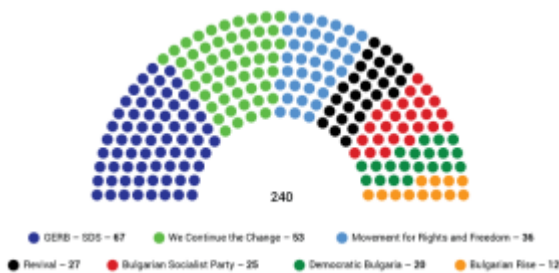
significantly increase their share of the seats. Due to the great animosity between them, it is difficult to predict the final shape of the governing coalition. The most likely scenario involves the formation of a minority cabinet of GERB, DPS and possibly DB (unlike the other parties in the previous ruling coalition, DB has not explicitly ruled out cooperation with Borisov), with the informal support of the pro-Russian Rebirth or BW. However, a GERB alliance with pro-Russian groups in a situation of war in Ukraine would be poorly received by the West. A less likely option is a minority coalition of PP, the Socialists, DB and DPS, informally supported by GERB.

- An alliance of the centre-right GERB and PP would also be theoretically possible, but should rather be ruled out. While there are no fundamental programmatic differences between them – both are in favour of an active presence in Euro-Atlantic structures and assistance to Ukraine – an agreement with GERB would undermine the credibility of PP, which leaped to prominence while contesting the abuses of power (corruption and state capture) under the former three-time prime minister and has for several months been declaring that it would not enter into any coalition with GERB. Borisov's detention in March for less than 24 hours on suspicion of embezzling EU funds entrenched the mutual hostility between the two former heads of government. In addition, Borisov's propensity to pursue a policy of balancing the West and Russia is highly questionable. Although during his cabinets there were strengthened ties with Washington and tensions with Moscow (expulsions of diplomats, disputes based on the interpretation of liberation of Bulgaria from Ottoman rule in 19 century with the help of tsarist Russia), nevertheless Bulgaria's dependence on Russian resources increased. In addition, GERB was one of the main advocates of the construction of the TurkStream gas pipeline in cooperation with Gazprom. The Socialists, who stood in opposition to GERB throughout its years in power, are similarly critical of PP, but both groups are united by their inclination towards pragmatic cooperation with Russia.
- The Turkish minority party DPS will be the kingmaker in forming a government. It declares itself open to various governmental scenarios and avoids polarising issues in its campaign, emphasising the role of dialogue and national understanding in the face of a difficult international situation. The party's leader, Mustafa Karadayi, met with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan during the political crisis following the collapse of the Petkov cabinet and assured him that Bulgaria wants to work towards regional stability. The party is controversial in the West because of its long-standing entanglement in corruption at the level of the regions it governs, and its former leader Ahmed Dogan, who retains influence in the party, is one of the country's most important oligarchs.
- The low voter turnout indicates the weariness a large proportion of Bulgarians feel about the protracted political instability and successive short-lived governments. The distribution of support for the various parties shows that it was mainly their most devoted followers that voted for them. Overtly pro-Russian groupings will be strong in the new parliament. The leader of the fourth largest party, Rebirth, Kostadin Kostadinov, called a few days ago for the results of the sham referendums conducted by Russia in the occupied territories in Ukraine to be recognised. Also pro-Russian, although less radical in its rhetoric, is the new Yanev grouping, who was dismissed from his post as defence minister in the Petkov government after the Russian invasion of Ukraine because

he objected to the use of the word “war”.

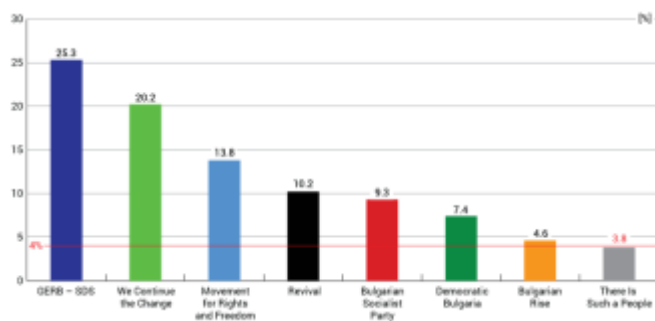
- Given the inconclusive outcome of the elections and the need to make key decisions before the coming winter, the position of President Rumen Radev – an advocate of maintaining pragmatic relations with Russia – is growing. In the current situation, Radev, now in office for a second term, presents himself as a cross-party arbiter looking after the security of citizens frightened by rising energy prices and worried about war. The country has been administered since August by a cabinet which Radev appointed and led by Gailab Donev, a former presidential advisor. In the Bulgarian constitutional system, this government has considerable powers – it can take decisions that would otherwise require parliamentary approval. It has already dismissed the entire management of the national corporation Bulgargaz and appointed Radev’s trusted people to top positions. Energy Minister Rossen Hristov has also announced a return to negotiations with Gazprom, but so far it is unlikely that an agreement has been reached to enable the resumption of Russian gas supplies. Should the attempt to form a government fail, the president could again dissolve parliament, call fresh elections in spring 2023 and again appoint an interim cabinet.

Chart 1. Distribution of seats in the National Assembly after the elections on 2 October



Sources: dnevnik.bg, cik.bg.

Chart 2. Individual party results



Sources: dnevnik.bg, cik.bg.