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Bulgaria: another early election without a result

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Early elections were held in Bulgaria on 2 April, and once again they failed to produce a clear outcome. The two strongest blocs, both led by former prime ministers – GERB-Society of Democratic Forces (GERB-SDS) under Boyko Borisov, and Continuing Change-Democratic Bulgaria (PP-DB) under Kirill Petkov – received similar levels of support, 26.5% (69 seats) and 24.5% (64) respectively. Entering the 240-member National Assembly besides them were the pro-Russian Revival party, with 14.2% of the vote (37 seats), the Turkish minority's Movement for Rights and Freedoms party (DPS) with 13.7% (35), the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) with 8.9% (24), and There Is Such a People (ITN), which just crossed the electoral threshold with 4.1% (11). Turnout was 40%.

These were the fifth elections Bulgaria has held since April 2021. The immediate reason this time was the parties' inability to form a cabinet which a majority of MPs would support after the elections on 2 October last year. Neither the winner, GERB-SDS, nor the second-largest parliamentary party (PP) or the third-largest (BSP) were able to form a majority government; nor did any force in the previous term of the National Assembly want to support a minority cabinet. As a result, President Rumen Radev dissolved the parliament, which had been in existence for only three months, in February this year.

Commentary

- The close result for the two largest blocs, which together accounted for nearly half of the voters, portends a continuation of the crisis. Compared to previous elections, GERB-SDS minimally increased its share (by 2 seats). The formation of the joint PP-DB bloc just before the elections did not bring the increase in support it had expected: it will now have 10 fewer seats than the two parties had together in the previous parliament. The DPS recorded a slight increase in the number of seats (by 2). One significant beneficiary of the election is Revival, which became the third force in parliament and increased its representation by 11 seats. This far-right, openly pro-Russian grouping achieved its best result in the history of its existence, likely thanks to channelling dissatisfaction at the political crisis and the votes of the anti-system electorate. A similar situation, albeit on a smaller scale, is taking place with ITN, led by musician and celebrity Slavi Trifonov. The party again crossed the electoral threshold after being absent from the previous parliament. The BSP, which did slightly better than polling suggested, also retained its place there; it did not suffer from its recent internal split, or the formation of the new Left! grouping, which failed to enter parliament.

- The quiet course of the campaign reflected the apathy and disillusionment of a large part of Bulgarian society with the protracted political crisis and the inability of the main parties to overcome their differences. The low turnout (albeit 1 percentage point higher than it was last October) shows that it was mainly the competing parties' core electorates which turned out to vote; the flows between them were minimal, within the limits of statistical error.
- It seems unlike that the new parliament will be able to form a coalition, raising the possibility that President Radev will appoint another interim government. There are three potential coalition scenarios: a government centred around PP-DB, a cabinet with a central role for GERB-SDS, or a grand coalition of the two strongest blocs. However, a possible coalition under Petkov (PP-DB, BSP and ITN) would not have enough seats. The DPS, which represents the Turkish minority, has asserted that it is open to any alliance in the new National Assembly, but PP-DB and GERB-SDS remain reluctant to work with it, seeing it as a party of the past. Borisov and Petkov have never governed together with it, and it has only entered government once in the past decade (when it cooperated with the Socialists in 2013–14). The DPS also raises concerns due to the connotations with corruption embodied by its former leader Akhmed Dogan (who still wields considerable informal influence within the grouping), as well as its close relations with Ankara. In turn, a 'security cordon' has been stretched around the pro-Russian Revival party by much of the country's political class, and a new cabinet with the parliamentary support – or even the formal participation – of that party would make a bad impression in Bulgaria's relations with its EU and NATO partners.
- After yet another inconclusive election, President Radev will continue to play a key role. During the campaign, he criticised the state of Bulgarian democracy and the political representatives' enduring unwillingness to compromise. At the same time, he called PP-DB and GERB-SDS "parties of war"; he expressed his scepticism of the increase in military aid to Ukraine that both groups support, and claimed that their stance weakens the potential of the country's armed forces. He also announced that, as after previous elections, "there should be no rush" to form a new government, as the interim cabinet in power is actually working quite well: in the last eight months it has resolved a number of gas and energy security issues (signing a long-term contract with Turkey, strengthening state control over the Neftokhim refinery) and finalised the purchase of another tranche of eight F-16s from the US. This indicates the president's persistent tendency to obstruct and delay the process of appointing new cabinets based on a parliamentary majority; it also reveals his ambition to run the state on a quasi-presidential model (which the constitution does not provide for).
- Prominent among the campaign themes was how to approach the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The two largest blocs competed with each other in insisting that, had they been in power, Bulgarian military support for Kyiv would have been significantly greater. This coincided with press reports that according to various reports, the Petkov government, with the cooperation of key NATO allies, provided significant military aid (ranging from €1bn to €2.5bn) to Ukraine during the first six months of the war. The Socialists and Revival, on the other hand, continued to express their reluctance to support Kyiv, and warned against "getting Bulgaria involved in a global war". The best way to maintain

Bulgaria's pro-Western course and help Ukraine would be the formation of a 'grand coalition' of GERB-SDS and PP-DB, but it seems this would be difficult to achieve. The leaders of both blocs, and the former prime ministers Petkov and Borisov, are divided by strong personal animosities, and PP-DB came to prominence by opposing the corruption-tainted GERB government. That will make it difficult for them to cooperate in a coalition or to support a minority government.