

Bulgarians go to the polls for the sixth time in three years

Corinne Deloy

ANALYSIS

On 5 April, the President of the Republic, Rumen Radev, invited Bulgarians to go to the polls on 9 June to renew the 240 members of the National Assembly (Narodno sabranie), the only chamber of Parliament. This general election will be the sixth to be held in the country since April 2021. Teodor Slavev, a political scientist, points out: "*We are the world champions in elections.*" 20 political parties and 11 coalitions are standing for election on 9 June.

Following the previous general elections on 2 April 2023, the resolve to put an end to repeated elections, the country's considerable economic difficulties and the concession made by the leader of the Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) and former prime minister (2009-2013, 2014-2017, 2017-2021), Boyko Borissov, to accept the principle of a control mechanism for Prosecutor General Ivan Guechev — accused for several years of preventing the continuation of investigations into oligarchs subject to international sanctions — led to the signing on 22 May of an agreement between GERB and *We continue the Change* (PP), the party founded by Kiril Petkov and Asen Vassilev, former ministers of the economy and finance respectively in Stefan Yanev's first interim government (May-December 2021). This agreement provided for the formation of a coalition government made up of experts for a period of at least 18 months, with a rotation every 9 months between members of the two parties in the post of Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister. On 6 June 2023, Nikolai Denkov (PP) was appointed head of a government of national unity. He was to be replaced by Mariya Gabriel (GERB) in March 2024. On 5 March, Nikolai Denkov resigned as planned to allow Mariya Gabriel to succeed him as head of government. On 20 March, GERB and *We continue the Change* failed to agree on the control of certain ministries.

The President of the Republic Rumen Radev then asked 3 other personalities, including the singer and television presenter Slavi Trifonov, leader of the populist party *Such a People Exist* (*Ima takuv narod*, ITN), to form a government. To no avail. None succeeded. He

therefore appointed an interim government tasked with managing current affairs and calling new elections within two months. Dimitar Glavchev, an economist, former speaker of parliament (April-November 2017) and former member of GERB, was appointed prime minister on 9 April.

The coalition formed in June 2023 was somewhat unnatural, with *We continue the Change* being a party founded on its opposition to the President of the Republic Rumen Radev and its pro-Russian orientation, and on the objective of dethroning Boyko Borissov's GERB.

"*The failure to form a government is the responsibility of GERB, which has made itself at home while the corruption proceedings have come to nothing*", said Antony Todorov, professor of political science at the New Bulgarian University in Sofia. Ivan Guechev, a public prosecutor accused of protecting politicians in power who were suspected of corruption, was nevertheless removed from office on 12 June 2023 by the Supreme Judicial Council. A first in Bulgaria's history.

According to the opinion poll conducted by the Mediana opinion institute, published on 19 May, GERB is once again in the lead in the general elections, with 27.5% of the vote, followed by the nationalist Revival (Vazrazhdane, V), with 15.7%, and the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS), representing the country's Turkish-speaking minority, with 14.2%. *We Continue the Change* is in decline and is expected to take 4th place with 13.7%. This reflects internal tensions and suspicions of wrongdoing on the part of some of its

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members. The Socialist Party (BSP) is expected to take 9%, and Such a people exist (ITN) 6.2%. "GERB and DPS could form the next government. They have the potential (...) They are close to a majority but it remains to be seen whether they will decide to form a government on their own. We expect a broad coalition to be formed," said Dobromir Zhivkov of the Market Links opinion institute.

Turnout is expected to be low, due to the number of elections Bulgaria has seen since April 2021, but also, according to Boriana Dimitrova, director of the opinion institute Alpha Research, to the succession of public controversies between the country's two main parties. Bulgarians will be voting in the European elections on the same day. Some are hoping that this double vote will help to attract a large number of voters to the polls.

THE ELECTORAL CAMPAIGN

The real issue at stake in the general elections is the country's political stability. Nonetheless, many expect the elections to result in a fragmented parliament, given the divisions and polarisation of the Bulgarian political landscape, which would make it difficult, if not impossible, to form a coalition. "The configuration that may emerge from the snap election may not be beneficial for the country's pro-European orientation", said Boriana Dimitrova. "Russian influence remains strong and Moscow has a vested interest in Bulgaria's instability" added Teodor Slavev.

The President of the Republic, Rumen Radev, is hostile to support for Ukraine and sanctions against Russia. The invasion of Ukraine by Russian armed forces on 24 February 2022 shook the government formed by Kiril Petkov to the core, and it was sharply divided over support for Kyiv, with the BSP, for example, opposing any arms deliveries to Ukraine. *We Continue the Change* strongly condemned Moscow and pledged its support for Ukraine. The Prime Minister refused to open a rouble account to pay for the delivery of gas. As a result, Russia cut off supplies to Bulgaria, which imports 90% of its gas from its eastern neighbour. This decision led to a complete breakdown in relations between Prime Minister Kiril Petkov and Bulgarian President Rumen Radev.

"Rising prices are of much greater concern to voters than the geostrategic issues that agitate the parties," said Antony Todorov in 2023. "In previous legislative elections, the division was based on the model of governance of the last 10 years embodied by former Prime Minister Boyko Borissov and his party. This time, the main issues are stability and keeping prices low, and dealing with the consequences of the war. The main division in the country is now between East and West rather than between the status quo and change", said Parvan Simeonov, political analyst at the Gallup International opinion poll.

GERB is hoping to take advantage of the new institutional crisis. Boyko Borissov, who continues to pull the party's strings, is working to preserve the judicial *status quo* with regard to the ongoing investigations into corruption charges. In this, he is being ably assisted by Delyan Peevski, a former media magnate and current co-leader of the DPS, who is the subject of several corruption allegations. Delyan Peevski is subject to sanctions from the UK and the US, where he is barred from entry under the Magnitsky Act.

GERB won the local elections on 29 October and 5 November 2023, but was defeated in Sofia, which it had held for 18 years, and in Varna, the country's second-largest municipality. Its slogan for the European and general elections on 9 June is "A stable Bulgaria in a secure Europe".

"As long as Delyan Peevski controls GERB, we will not take part in any coalition with it, whatever the election result. Many members of this party will understand me" said Kiril Petkov. According to Nikolai Denkov, the leader of the DPS represents "Bulgaria's greatest misfortune", adding "He was the one who wanted general elections and we are having a snap election because of him".

This 6th election should above all allow Revival (Vazrazhdane, V), Kostadin Kostanidov's nationalist party, to gain ground. It won 13 seats in the poll on 14 November 2021, 27 in the poll on 2 October 2022 and 37 on 2 April 2023. It is now in 2nd position in

opinion polls. Revival is positioned to the left on economic issues (the party is in favour of nationalising companies and raising retirement pensions and the minimum wage) but is conservative on social issues (it defends Christian values and the traditional Bulgarian family). It does not hesitate to describe the Roma and the Jews as being guilty of all evils. It relays conspiracy theories about the appearance of Covid-19 and vaccination. Finally, Revival is pro-Russian and is calling for a referendum on Bulgaria's exit from NATO and the European Union.

THE BULGARIAN POLITICAL SYSTEM

The Bulgarian Parliament is monocameral. The Assembly has 240 members, 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 (according to the first past the post system) and 209 by proportional representation (on closed lists). The Hare-Niemeyer method is used to distribute 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. To be able to run candidates, parties must collect the signatures of at least 15,000 voters and are obliged to deposit the sum of 10,000 lev (€5,113) with the electoral authorities, which is refunded if they obtain at least 1% of the votes cast. Independent candidates must be supported by at least 10,000 voters from the electoral district in which they are standing.

Since 2016, Bulgarians have also had the option, in both the general and presidential elections, of placing a ballot paper expressly stating, "*I do not support any of the candidates*".

5 political parties and 1 coalition are represented in the current parliament:

- Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB), founded in 2006 by former prime minister (2009-2013, 2014-2017, 2017-2021) Boyko Borissov, has 69 elected members;
- We continue the Change-Democratic Bulgaria (PP-DB), a liberal coalition uniting the party founded by Kiril Petkov and Asen Vassilev with Democratic Bulgaria, which includes Yes Bulgaria, the Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria and the Greens and is led by Hristo Ivano, has 64 seats;
- Revival (Vazrazhdane, V), a nationalist party founded in 2014 and led by Kostadin Kostanidov, has 37 MPs;
- The Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS), representing the Turkish-speaking minority, founded in 1989 and chaired by Delyan Peevski and Djevdet Chakarov, has 36 seats;
- The Socialist Party (BSP), led by Korneliya Ninova, has 23 deputies;
- Such a People Exist (Ima takuv narod, ITN), a populist party founded by singer and TV presenter Slavi Trifonov, has 11 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 *Bulgaria Rise! We are coming!* (Izpravi se BG! Nie idvame!), was elected for a 2nd term in the 2nd round of the presidential election with 66.72% of the vote. He beat Anastas Guerdjikov, supported by GERB and the Union of Democratic Forces (ODS), who won 31.8% of the vote. Turnout was 33.55%.

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Results of the general elections in Bulgaria on 2 April 2023

Turnout: 40.63%

Political Parties	Number of votes	Percentage of votes	Seats
Citizens for the European development of Bulgaria (GERB)	669 924	25,39	69
We Continue the Change - Democratic Bulgaria (PP-DB)	621 069	23,54	64
Revival (Vazrazhdane, V)	358 174	13,58	37
Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS)	347 700	13,18	36
Socialist Party (BSP)	225 914	8,56	23
Such a people exist (Ima takuv narod, ITN)	103 971	3,94	11
Others	180 514	7,63	0
Independents	924	0,04	0
None of these parties	109 095	4,14	

Source : <https://results.cik.bg/ns2022/rezultati/index.html>

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Publishing Director : Pascale JOANNIN

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