



GERB Wins Early Parliamentary Elections in Bulgaria

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The centre-right Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) of the former long-time prime minister, Boyko Borisov, won the early parliamentary elections on 2 October. It is unlikely that the party will be able to form a majority coalition, just like the parties that have been ruling so far, which are GERB opponents. If they maintain their opposition to cooperation with the winning party, another election is likely in February 2023, which would be the fifth in two years. The protracted political clinch will not cause radical changes in Bulgaria's foreign policy but will perpetuate the traditional balancing between the West and Russia.

Why was there another early election?

After the early elections in November 2021, the social-liberal We Continue Changes (PP), the post-communist Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), the liberal Democratic Bulgaria (DB), and the eclectic There is Such a People (ITN) built a ruling coalition in opposition to GERB. President Rumen Radew called for early elections again in June 2022 after the cabinet of Prime Minister Kiril Petkov from PP received a vote of no confidence. He lost the majority when ITN broke the coalition less than a month earlier. Its leader, the chimerical celebrity Slavi Trifonov, accused Petkov of increasing the deficit and of betraying national interests by accepting the so-called French proposal to settle [the identity dispute with North Macedonia](#), which enabled it to start accession talks with the EU.

How will the new parliament be different?

In the 240-member National Assembly, GERB will be the largest faction. It won 25% of the votes and 67 seats, eight more than in November 2021. The next strongest party, PP, received 20% and 53 seats, but lost 14. The third-strongest will be the Movement for Rights and Freedoms, which enjoys steady support from Bulgarian Turks. It won 14% and 36 seats, picking up one more. BSP collected 9% and 25 MPs, losing one. DB, coordinating its campaign with PP, received 7.5% and 20 places, adding four more. In fact, the most

successful parties were the pro-Russia and nationalist groups, which took over many ITN votes. Extreme Revival won 10% and 27 seats, 14 more, and the first-time, more moderate Bulgarian Rise gained 4.5% and 12 seats. The 4% electoral threshold was not exceeded by the ITN, which had 25 seats so far, although after the early elections in July 2021 it had been the strongest faction with 65 deputies.

What was the main subject of the campaign?

The primary topic was the economic situation, especially high prices—in September, inflation hit 15% year on year—and electricity or gas cuts. Parties opposed to Petkov's government attributed responsibility for this situation to him. GERB mainly accused him of ineptitude, presenting itself as a responsible Euro-Atlantic grouping. On the other hand, the pro-Russia groups accused Petkov of breaking Bulgaria's traditional ties of friendship with Russia by siding with Ukraine, and blamed this stance for [the cessation of gas supplies by Gazprom since April](#). These parties, as well as the pro-Russian BSP, proposed a policy of benevolent neutrality towards Russia, which was to ensure the resumption of Russian gas supplies. The idea of transferring military equipment to Ukraine was identified as a direct threat of Bulgaria's involvement in the war. The postulates of fighting corruption, which ensured the success of PP and DB in the previous elections, were left on the sidelines.

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Will a new coalition be formed?

The chances of forming a coalition are limited. Unless the parties change their pre-election announcements, the upcoming parliamentary term will continue to suffer from the political clinch that prevents the formation of a majority government. Therefore, probably in February 2023, after three unsuccessful attempts to form a government, the next round of early elections will be held. Although Borisov points to his willingness to cooperate with the PP and DB, citing shared Euro-Atlantic values, and suggests a readiness to resign from the post of prime minister, these parties so far have rejected his offer. They argue that Borisov and his party, and the DPS cooperating with them, have transformed Bulgaria into a country of systemic corruption. It is also unlikely that GERB will form a coalition with other parties, as it would have to include both the Turkish party and nationalists, which are hostile to each other. Both GERB and Revival are clear they will not form a coalition.

How will the elections affect Bulgaria's foreign policy?

From the fall of Petkov's government until the appointment of a cabinet that can win a vote of confidence, Bulgaria has been headed by a technical cabinet appointed by the president. Gylyb Donev, the current acting prime minister has no political ambitions of his own but is a close associate of President Radev. This has given the president great influence on the policy of the cabinet, especially foreign and security policy. Despite unequivocal Euro-Atlantic declarations, he actually seeks to continue the traditional Bulgarian policy of balancing between the West and Russia. Therefore, while [he condemned the Russian aggression against Ukraine, he excludes the supply of arms to it](#). Similarly, the Donev government declares that it will fulfil its obligations towards its allies from the EU and NATO, including the announced purchase of eight F-16 fighters from the U.S., as well as at the same time readiness to resume talks with Gazprom to restore gas supplies. This means a departure from Petkov's policy of unequivocally tightening Bulgaria's Euro-Atlantic ties. However, it should not be expected that Bulgaria will attempt to follow Hungary and counteract further EU sanctions against Russia.