

PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS AFTERMATH IN BULGARIA: UNCERTAINTY & TURMOIL REIGN

Results & possible scenarios

14 April 2021

Over a week has passed since Bulgaria's parliamentary elections (held on 4 April), but the country remains at a political impasse, with the results showing no clear path to a new government and a new election remaining a distinct possibility. The only certainty is that a period of relative political stability is seemingly at an end, with a fragmented parliament and an opposition united only by their unwillingness to enter a coalition with the conservative former ruling party, GERB. Below we take a more detailed look at the election results and chart potential paths forward.

ELECTION RESULTS

Prior to the election, most polls predicted victory for long-time Prime Minister Boyko Borissov's GERB party (Civil Movement for European Development of Bulgaria) with a low turnout among an electorate fatigued by years of government scandals¹, the outbreak of mass protests and a response to the COVID-19 pandemic seen as disastrous by many. However, voter turnout was higher than expected (at 40.18% or 2,621,909 voters, it was consistent with recent elections), with long queues of voters forming in spite of the pandemic, particularly at polling stations abroad.

Despite winning more votes than any other party, GERB is being depicted as the loser of these elections, since its share has dropped from a stable one-third to 26% of the vote. This is not only the party's worst performance in over a decade but also brings an end to the GERB ruling hegemony and, rumours suggest, could even lead to a split within the party. GERB's traditional rival, the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) performed even worse, trailing in third with its worst ever result (15%).

Sandwiched between these two parties in second place is the election's biggest winner, political newcomer Slavi Trifonov, a famous singer, entertainer and TV talk show host, and his party There is Such a Nation, ITN (rumours are rife as to the source of funding behind Trifonov). Defying most pre-election predictions, ITN secured almost 18% of the vote (and approximately a third of the vote abroad), a result which has stunned the political classes of Bulgaria.

¹ See here for background on last year's corruption crisis: <https://www.politico.eu/article/corruption-crisis-puts-bulgarian-prime-minister-boyko-borissov-on-the-ropes/>

Despite its popularity, ITN has no formal platform beyond a self-professed anti-establishment agenda, making its performance all the more staggering. Trifonov refused to take part in any political debates during the election campaign and was silent for almost a week after the results were announced, before issuing a vague statement of gratitude to his supporters. Neither the pandemic nor last year's protests explain ITN's result: the party has taken a COVID-sceptic stance in the past and, while it endorsed the protests, was not actively engaged in them. Instead, many are interpreting this result (more than a third of seats in the National Assembly will be taken by parties not represented in the last parliament) as a 'punishment vote' against the incumbent government and established parties, drawing parallels with the infamous 'return of the king' election in 2001 when Simeon Saksoburggotski won by a landslide, breaking up the post-communist electoral dynamic of the 1990s.

Election Results Count (as of 14/04/21)

Party	Percentage won	Seats in Parliament
GERB	26,14 %	75
"There is such a people" by Slavi Trifonov	17,73 %	51
BSP /Bulgarian Socialist Party/	15,02 %	43
MRF /Movement for Rights and Freedoms/	10,34 %	30
Democratic Bulgaria / coalition /	9,52 %	27
"Stand up! Mutri out" with Maya Manolova	4,74 %	14
VMRO	3,67 %	<i>(Below minimum threshold to enter parliament)</i>

Source: Central Election Commission. Turnout: 40%

Other notable aspects of the results include:

- › An unexpectedly high return for Democratic Bulgaria (DB), which ran on an anti-corruption platform and traditionally represents the urban middle class of Sofia and other cities. DB was very active in the protests of the past summer and as a result managed to improve its showing, even coming out on top in two of Sofia's three voter districts. DB did not expand its electoral outreach beyond its urban strongholds, but a significant part of the capital's population will once again have parliamentary representation.
- › New party Stand Up! Mobsters Out! (ISMV), centred around former BSP heavyweight Maya Manolova and three prominent organisers of last summer's protests. ISMV is set to cross the threshold to enter parliament, but overall its success is limited, particularly in light of the extensive media exposure it received and Manolova's earlier popular but ultimately unsuccessful run for the Sofia Mayorship.
- › The Movement for Rights and Freedoms, MRF: as the party catering primarily to Bulgaria's Turkish minority, it can count on a stable electorate and generally is not exposed to significant voter volatility. Nevertheless, in the elections of 2017, DPS suffered a significant loss of seats due to a hostile run by its ousted former chairman: many of those lost seats now seem set to return to the DPS.

The fragmented results are unprecedented in recent Bulgarian history and represent a major barrier to forming a stable and functioning government, with most opposition parties so far refusing publicly to entertain the concept of a coalition with GERB.

WHAT HAPPENS NOW?

The Bulgarian Constitution requires that the newly elected parliament convenes for its first sitting by May 4 at the latest – although it has been announced that the new 45th National Assembly will start work on 15th April. The government of Boyko Borissov must resign, after which President Rumen Radev will start the procedure for forming a government. Thereafter, confusion reigns in terms of how and when a new government can be formed, with little of substance being publicly stated by the leading parties.

GERB has stated it will not form a coalition with BSP or MRF, but all of the remaining parties have also ruled out teaming up with GERB. A minority GERB government with tacit support from MRF has been mooted, but seems difficult and unlikely at this stage. As GERB's current candidate for Prime Minister, Borissov will have seven days after the mandate is given to either propose a composition to the Council of Ministers or return the mandate unfulfilled.

Initially, until the election, party members claimed that GERB had no other candidate for Prime Minister but the incumbent Borissov. On election night, however, Borissov himself called for peace and to put "experts ahead" by December, which may indicate he is willing to step aside and propose an expert government to lead the pandemic recovery. On the other hand, he also announced that no one was more experienced than him, so seemed likely to try and cling to power, until an announcement on 14th April that he will consider proposing a GERB-led government under an alternative PM.

DPS, meanwhile, may find itself in the role of kingmaker, secure in its improved performance, driven in part by the absence of controversial media mogul Delyan Peevski as a formal candidate (his past association with the party was a source of public outrage due to corruption allegations).

If Borissov/GERB fail to form a government, the previously unimaginable scenario of the Presidential mandate being extended to Slavi Trifonov could come to pass. So far, Trifonov has not publicly commented on who would be his party's candidate for Prime Minister, and he himself avoided a direct answer to this question in a conversation with his supporters, saying that the Prime Minister is appointed by parliament. The BSP candidate for Prime Minister is party leader Cornelia Ninova, who has claimed there will be no BSP coalition with GERB.

So far, "There are such people", "Democratic Bulgaria" and "Stand up! Mutri, out" have allowed at least some interaction with each other. Representatives of "Democratic Bulgaria" have stated that they cannot work with GERB, BSP, MRF and "Stand up! Mutri, out!" that they would not form a coalition with GERB, MRF or VMRO (which they refer to as "Borissov's crutches"). Plotting any route to any form of coalition against this fragmented backdrop is looking increasingly difficult.

If the second mandate to form a government also fails, the President may himself choose who should receive the third request, however given the current landscape it seems unlikely that any such choice after the two leading parties could prevail. This could also spark a voter backlash if, for example, BSP was asked to form a government from third place.

A more likely outcome at this stage is that the President himself directly appoints a caretaker government and calls early parliamentary elections, which he can do at any time before the final three months of his term (sufficiently far off in this case at 21 October).

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

It seems increasingly doubtful GERB will be able to hang onto power, whether under Borissov's leadership or not, given the narrowing opportunity he has to strike a difficult coalition deal in the current political climate. The chances of a GERB-led coalition may indeed depend upon Borissov stepping aside and allowing an alternative PM candidate to lead the new government, as he has seemingly suggested. This could theoretically allow other parties to join a coalition without breaking their anti-corruption stances and pre-election promises not to work with Borissov, however this currently seems a very unlikely scenario. Trifonov and his anti-corruption party may hold the key, but if he was to work with Borissov or GERB it would disappoint many of his voters.

If Borissov fails to form a government, he must hand off his mandate to Trifonov. Finding consensus with other anti-corruption parties and beyond would be important to Trifonov's success in forming a governing coalition. In the meantime, the prospects of a caretaker government and another election in fall 2021 are already dominating discussions. Given the increasingly combative political rhetoric and the stand-off between the key parties, this currently looks the most likely outcome.

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