



Contemporary Southeastern Europe

An Interdisciplinary Journal on Southeastern Europe

The 2022 Elections in Bulgaria: Another Dead-end Street

Election Analysis

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Contemporary Southeastern Europe, 2023, 10(1), 21-28

DOI 10.25364/02.10:2023.1.2



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The 2022 Elections in Bulgaria: Another Dead-end Street

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Keywords: elections; Bulgarian politics; corruption; party systems; new parties

Introduction

In October 2022, Bulgarian voters went to the polls for the fourth time in 18 months. The elections produced a fragmented parliament unable to agree on a coalition government and new early elections are scheduled for April 2023. In fact, only one of the previous four elections resulted in a government which stayed in power for seven short months. For the rest of the time since April 2021, Bulgaria has had a series of caretaker governments appointed by the president, a scenario that will continue at least until April 2023.

One reason for the multiple elections is a specific clause in the Bulgarian constitution limiting the time to form a government. Once official results are announced, the president must hand a government-forming mandate to the first party in parliament, though there is no time limit on when to do that. In fact, President Radev has taken more time than usual following the October elections to hold meetings with parliamentary represented parties, thus providing more time for negotiations among them. By contrast, once a mandate is handed, the party has only one week to propose a cabinet which is to be voted in parliament. If the first party fails, a mandate is given to the second party in parliament. Should the second mandate fail as well, as has already happened three times in the last four elections, including this latest election, the president has the right to choose the third party which is to be given a government-forming mandate. On the one hand, this grants the president considerable power to choose a party of his own liking. On the other hand, a third party is very unlikely to be able to form a government given that the two largest parties in parliament have already failed to do so. If the third party fails to form a government as well, parliament must be dissolved, and new elections must be called. This scenario has already played out in April 2021, July 2021, and following the October 2022 elections. In trying to allow more time for negotiations, President Radev handed out the third mandate a whole 106 days after the election, but to no avail. As the third party also failed to form a government, new early elections were called for 2 April 2023 – exactly six months after the last election. Within this constitutional framework, the president has considerable power in determining the timeframe of negotiations and the pace of the constitutional process, but the outcome ultimately depends on the ability of the parties in parliament to reach an agreement.¹

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The main reason for the failed attempts of parliament after parliament to form a government is the unwillingness and inability of parliamentary represented parties to cooperate and agree on policy priorities, as well as to negotiate and compromise with each other. Instead, party leaders seem to be stuck on proclaimed ideological positions, quoting reasons why they could not ally with this or that party, while awaiting yet another election with the unreasonable expectation that it would bring each of them more votes. In the meantime, voters become ever more disillusioned and turn away from the polls. The April 2021 election had a voter turnout of 54.07%, by October 2022 this figure was down to 39.41% (Table 1).

Status quo, new, and nationalist parties

Elections in the past 18 months have seen a dynamic configuration of political actors that fall in three categories: 1) the established/mainstream parties, also negatively labeled as “*status quo*” parties; 2) a continuously changing group of new parties; and 3) nationalist parties, where we have seen a mix of established parties and new players (Diagram 1)

Table 1: Parliamentary election results 2017-2022

Type	Party	Mar-17 Votes	%	MP	Apr-21 Votes	%	MP	Jul-21 Votes	%	MP	Nov-21 Votes	%	MP	Oct-22 Votes	%	MP
Established/Mainstream	GERB	1,147,292	33.5	95	837,707	26.18	75	642,165	23.51	63	596,456	22.7	59	634,575	25.3	67
	BSP	955,490	27.9	80	480,146	15.01	43	365,695	13.39	36	267,817	10.2	26	232,942	9.3	25
	DPS	315,976	9.24	26	336,306	10.51	30	292,514	10.71	29	341,000	13	34	344,621	13.8	36
Other/hybrid	Volia	145,637	4.25	17	75,926*	2.13*	0	85,795*	3.14*	0	7,067	0.27	0			
	RB*/DB DaBG/DG	107,407 101,177	3.14 2.96	0												
New parties/protest parties	ITN				302280	9.45	27	345331	12.64	34	166968	6.37	16	186493	7.44	20
	ISMV				565,014	17.66	51	657,829	24.08	65	249,743	9.52	25	96,071	3.83	0
	PP				150,940	4.72	14	136,885	5.01	13	60,055	2.29	0	25,207	1.01	0
	BV										673,170	25.7	67	505,985	20.2	53
	IMRO													115,858	4.63	12
Nationalist/PRR	NFSB	318,513	9.7	27	116,434	3.64	0	28,322	1.08	0	8,584	0.33	0	20,177	0.81	0
	ATAKA				75,926*	2.13*	0	85,795*	3.14*	0	15,659	0.49	0	3,520	0.14	0
	Revival	37,896	1.11	0	78,414	2.45	0	12,585	0.46	0	12,153	0.46	0	7,593	0.3	0
Voter turnout		3,682,151	54.1		3,334,283	50.61		2,775,410	42.19		2,669,260	40.2		2,601,963	39.4	

Source: National Electoral Commission: cik.bg

*Running in a coalition together

The October 2022 elections (as well as those in April 2021) were won by the Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (*Grazhdani za Evropeisko Razvitiie na Bulgaria*, GERB) – a party that has dominated the political scene since 2009. GERB’s leader and three-time prime minister, Boyko Borissov, was in power almost uninterrupted between 2009-2021, becoming the most enduring and powerful political figure in the country’s post-communist history.² Although

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¹ Kolarova, Romyana. 2019. *Demokratichni institucii v Bulgaria: sravnitelna analiz (1991-2019) [Democratic Institutions in Bulgaria: A Comparative Analysis (1991-2019)]*. Sofia: St. Kliment Ohridski University Press, 82.

² Spirova, Maria and Radostina Sharenkova-Toshkova. 2021. Juggling Friends and Foes: Prime Minister Borissov’s Surprise Survival in Bulgaria. *East European Politics* 37(3), 432-47.

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GERB's rule did not remain unchallenged domestically, Borissov was praised by European leaders for his unwavering pro-EU position and for bringing stability and economic growth to the country.³ Yet at home, GERB's rule came to be identified with corruption and a steady decline in democratic governance. Anti-democratic tendencies in the country deepened during GERB's three cabinets, with media freedom progressively deteriorating, legislative changes restricting political competition were enacted, and a prosecution office that has been accused of systemic abuse of power.⁴ Once seen as a new party gaining support through its anti-corruption platform, GERB became equated to "the corrupt status quo". Despite losing voters over corruption scandals, strong local networks helped stabilize GERB's position. Borissov may be tainted by corruption allegations, but he seems to offer stability that many Bulgarians want.⁵ Within this tradeoff of novelty vs. stability, GERB won the October 2022 elections with over a quarter of the vote but was unable to gather parliamentary support for its proposed "expert government" and had to return the mandate.

Two more parties are seen as part of this "*status quo*" – the Bulgarian Socialist Party (*Bulgarska Socialisticheska Partiya*, BSP) and the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (*Dvizhenie za Prava i Svobodi*, DPS). The BSP is the oldest political party in parliament, tracing its origins to the 19th century and the early years of independence. As the successor to the Bulgarian Communist Party, the BSP has long-standing links with Russia which became ever more evident with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.⁶ The BSP has headed several governments since the 1990s and in the last decade has portrayed itself as the best alternative to GERB. Yet, the party has itself suffered from accusations of corruption, has been torn by internal conflict, and has witnessed a dramatic decrease in support, garnering under 10% in the last election. Part of the short-lived government of Change Continues (*Prodalzhavame Promyanata*, PP), the BSP remained a loyal coalition partner until the collapse of the government in June 2022, despite disagreements over sanctions against Russia and armed support for Ukraine. 106 days after the October 2022 election, the BSP was given the third mandate to form a government and just like GERB and PP failed to gather parliamentary support.

The DPS, another party often accused of corruption, has been a permanent factor in Bulgarian politics relying on steady support. Gathering more than 13% of the vote, its success is based largely — but not exclusively — on support by ethnic Turkish voters both in Bulgaria and in neighboring Turkey.⁷ Although the DPS has declared its willingness to negotiate with everyone, its negative reputation has made it even more isolated than GERB as a viable coalition partner.

New parties have become the norm in the last 18 months, with a total of five new parties entering parliament at some point during that period (Table 1). Some of

³ Smilov, Daniel. 2021. [Three Paradoxes in the Bulgarian Parliamentary Election](#). *Center for East European and International Studies*, 31 March 2021.

⁴ Zankina, Emilia. 2022. Bulgaria: History. In *Central and South-Eastern Europe 2023* (23rd edition), Routledge: Abingdon, UK, ISBN 9781032273167, pp. 110-115.

⁵ Deegan-Krause, Kevin / Haughton, Tim and Emilia Zankina. 2021. [In Bulgaria's Third Election in 2021, Another New Party Won the Most Seats. But Can It Form a Government?](#), *The Washington Post*, 19 November 2021.

⁶ Zankina, Emilia and Tim Haughton. 2022. [Bulgaria Is No Closer to a Stable Government After Sunday's Elections](#). *The Washington Post*, 4 October 2022.

⁷ Zankina and Haughton, *Bulgaria*.

those parties were born out of the 2020 anti-GERB protests, while others appeared even more recently. All of them exploit an already well-established formula in Bulgaria and across Europe of novelty, anti-corruption appeals, with a dash of celebrity.⁸ Each has had varied success, but they all have experienced fluctuating voter support.

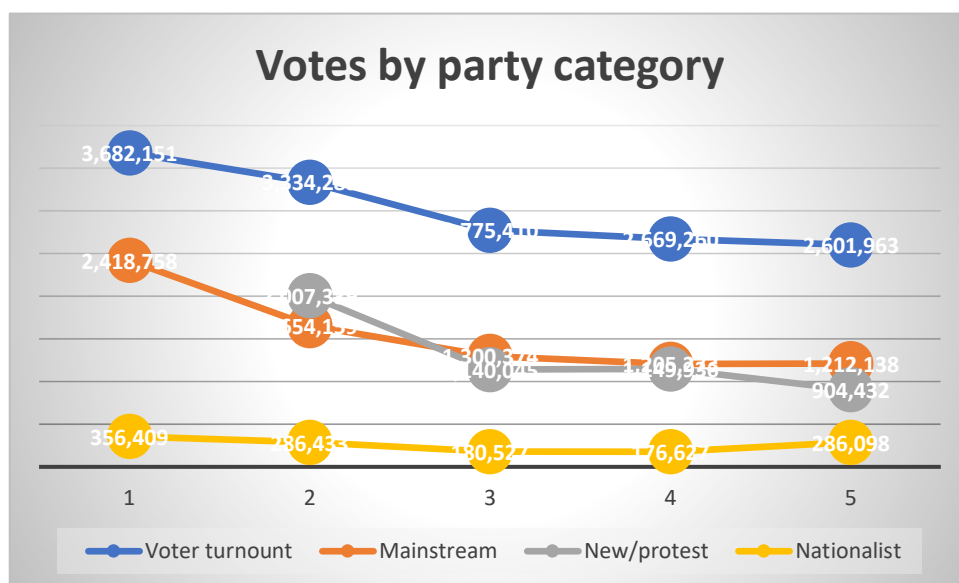
Most successful among the new-comers has been Change Continues (*Produlzhavame Promyanata*, PP) – a name that intends to imply novelty, though it is also particularly fitting of the current political situation. Formed by two entrepreneurs who made their names in the caretaker government of May 2021, PP won the November 2021 elections with over a quarter of the vote. Running on an anti-corruption platform and center-left issues such as higher pensions and more kindergartens, party leaders Kiril Petkov and Asen Vasilev managed to form a coalition government with the BSP and two other new parties. Their lack of experience in navigating the corridors of power and their struggle to deliver on their promises brought down the coalition government with a no-confidence vote in parliament in June 2022, thus paving the way for the October 2022 elections. In this latest election, PP saw its support slip to 20% making it the second party in parliament and the recipient of the second government-formation mandate. Just like GERB, PP did not manage to gain parliamentary support for its proposed government and had to return the mandate. However, PP did not lose most of its support as other new parties have and has taken the role of the opposition while awaiting its next chance.

The success of Change Continues undercut other new parties that were active in the series of early elections. The most popular among them was There is Such a People (*Ima Takav Narod*, ITN), formed by musician and talk show host Slavi Trifonov. Despite winning the July 2021 election with 24% of the vote, Trifonov failed to form a government. Subsequently, his support fell to 9% in November 2021 and below the 4% threshold in October 2022. Other new parties such as Stand Up! Thugs Out! (*Izpravi Se! Mutri Van!*, ISMV) made a surprise appearance in parliament only to lose their seats in subsequent elections. Democratic Bulgaria (*Democratichna Bulgaria*, DB) – a coalition of old and new parties and an ideological mishmash of conservatives and greens – has managed to stay afloat through this electoral rollercoaster, gathering under 8% in the latest election. A junior partner in Petkov's government, DB was hoping in vain for the third mandate which instead went to the BSP.

⁸ Deegan-Krause and Houghton, *The New Party Challenge*.

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Diagram 1: Votes by Party Category



Source: National Electoral Commission: cik.bg

No account of Bulgarian politics would be complete without mention of the nationalist parties. Nationalist parties have been attracting around a tenth of the votes. Since 2005, various configurations of nationalist parties have been represented in parliament and, between 2017-2021, even in government. Those include Attack (*Ataka*), the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (*Vatreshna Makedonska Revoluzionna Organizaciya*, VMRO), the National Front for Salvation of Bulgaria (*Nazionalen Front za Spasenie na Bulgaria*, NSFB), and as of late, Revival (*Vazrazhdane*). While older nationalist parties have all but lost parliamentary support, Revival and its controversial leader Kostadin Kostadinov grew its support from just over 1% in 2017 to over 10% in the most recent election. The Russian invasion of Ukraine and Russia's energy politics have heightened divisions in Bulgarian society, given the strong historical ties between Bulgaria and Russia, and have fueled support for Revival – a nationalist and pronouncedly pro-Russian party. Another new party with a pro-Russian orientation, Bulgarian Rise (*Bulgarski Vazhod*, BV), won just under 5% of the vote. In 2022, Kiril Petkov dismissed its leader, Stefan Yanev, as defense minister after he refused to describe Russian President Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine as a war.⁹ Subsequently, Yanev formed his own party before the October 2022 elections.

What is new and what is at stake?

Elections intend to express the popular will and elect governments. That is the conventional wisdom which hardly applies in the Bulgarian case as of recently. In October 2022, Bulgarians went to the polls for the fourth time in 18 months. Once again, the elections produced inconclusive results, political turmoil, and a Bulgarian electorate that is about to see a fifth election in two years. At the same

⁹ Zankina and Haughton, *Bulgaria*.

time, the need for a stable and regular government in Bulgaria is more acute than ever. Geostrategic uncertainties amid Russia's war on Ukraine — coupled with a Europe-wide economic downturn and a worldwide energy crisis — require immediate attention and resolute political decisions. Instead, Bulgarians are confronted yet again with another round of early elections.

Political instability is nothing new to Bulgaria's three-decade old democracy. Since the collapse of the communist regime, Bulgaria has had 15 governments, 7 of which were caretaker governments, with only four that managed to complete their four-year mandate. The volatility of the Bulgarian party system has been well-documented.¹⁰ After 30 years of party competition, the party system continues to be characterized by fragmentation, little grounding in society, and weak party organizations.¹¹

New parties are not a new phenomenon in Bulgarian politics either. Each Bulgarian parliament has witnessed at least one new party that did not exist at the previous elections. Moreover, on more than one occasion a new party has come in and swept the elections, such as the National Movement Simeon II (*Nacionalno Dvizhenie Simeon Vtori*, NDSV) in 2011 and GERB in 2009.

Some of the issues are also not new. The longest-lasting division in Bulgarian society since independence has been between pro-Russian and anti-Russian attitudes. The BSP has always defended Russia's interest on every issue and so have all of the nationalist parties that have appeared since 2005. Similarly, corruption has been a topic that has helped more than one party gain an electoral advantage, including GERB in 2009.

Yet, what we currently experience feels quantitatively and qualitatively different.

The dividing axes — old/corrupt vs. new, Russia vs. the EU — have obliterated any elements of the fragile left-right continuum that was starting to take roots and have resulted in ideologically incongruent political alliances. The pace at which new parties rise and fall has brought political instability to a new level and produced a new type of a party system. Deegan-Krause and Haughton label this “the new party subsystem”¹². Post-Communist EU states, they argue, have seen the breakthrough of numerous new parties. These parties often fail and die out, frequently after a successful first election. More importantly, new parties breed more new parties. This creates a “new party subsystem”, in which an often-changing cast of parties appeals to a somewhat stable group of dissatisfied voters.

¹⁰ See, Karasimeonov, Georgi. 2010. *Partiinata sistema v Balgaria [The Party System in Bulgaria]* (3rd ed.), Sofia: Samlzdad / Friedrich Ebert Stiftung; Kolarova, *Demokratichni institucii*; Krasteva, Anna and Antony Todorov. 2020. From Post-Communism to Post-Democracy: The Visible and Invisible Political Transformations. *Southeastern Europe* 44, 177-207; Todorov, Antony. 2018. *Bulgaria: The Failed Party System Institutionalization*, in *Party System Change, the European Crisis and the State of Democracy*. (Routledge Studies on Political Parties and Party Systems), edited by Lisi, Marco, London: Routledge, 46-62.

¹¹ Spirova, Maria. 2005. Political Parties in Bulgaria: Organizational Trends in Comparative Perspective. *Party Politics* 11(5), 601-22.

¹² Deegan-Krause and Haughton, *The New Party Challenge*, 198.

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This new type of party system and an ever-faster pace of change have mostly benefited President Radev who has dramatically increased his political influence and actual power. Benefiting from a constitutional loophole granting exceptional powers in times of political crises to an otherwise symbolic presidency, Radev in effect has been ruling the country. This shift in the balance of power between president and parliament can have a lasting negative effect on democratic institutions, voting behavior, and political culture. We have seen how in other former communist countries such as Hungary and Poland, once applauded as champions of democratization, strong political figures have managed to polarize voters, alter the institutional framework to their advantage, and undermine democratic mechanisms of checks and balances.

At the same time, there are signs of hope. Despite the rise in nationalist sentiments and pro-Russian attitudes, nationalist and anti-EU parties have but marginal support. If anything became clear at the last elections, is that Bulgarians are for the most part pro-European. Even the divided 48th parliament that could not agree on a government, it has taken several important clearly pro-European decisions. It voted to send arms to Ukraine, to purchase F-16 planes, and to join the Eurozone in January 2024. If there is a parliamentary majority on such key geostrategic matters, perhaps Bulgaria does have a sound foundation to stand on as it tries to find its way out of the current political crisis.

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