

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

POLIT-BAROMETER

Year 21 Issue 9
November 2021

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The party system in Bulgaria is in a period of significant transformation.



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1

THE POLITICAL SITUATION

The formation “We Continue the Change”, led by former caretaker ministers Kiril Petkov and Asen Vassilev served up the greatest surprise by winning the early parliamentary elections. Days before the vote, no polling agency predicted this result. The polls even showed a victory for GERB with a difference of 10%. Sociological agencies failed to detect the growing trend of support for “We Continue the Change” because they did not take into account the large number of hesitant voters. The electoral collapse in “There is Such a People”, “Democratic Bulgaria” and “Rise up, Bg! Here We Come!” overflowed in a wave of support for “We Continue the Change”. The reasons for this collapse are mainly due to the disappointment of many voters with the so-called protest parties, who twice failed to form a regular government.

The election results have led to an even more fragmented parliament than the previous one. Seven political forces will be represented in parliament, with two of them – “We Continue the change” and “Vazrazhdane” (“Revival”) finding a place in the National Assembly for the first time. In giving victory to “We Continue the Change” a significant number of the Bulgarians

once again showed that they want a real change and a break with the model of governance of GERB, which has been imposed in recent years. “The Harvard Boys”, as the media called them, demonstrated determination and courage as ministers in the caretaker government, which explains their popularity. Kiril Petkov and Asen Vassilev conducted an active campaign by visiting almost all the regional cities in the country. They were greeted with great enthusiasm by hundreds of citizens, and this was a sign that their election campaign was in the ascendancy in terms of support.

GERB accepted the defeat, but accused the caretaker government of “subjecting to terror” supporters of the party, explaining that it was fighting against “vote buying”. The position of the MRF was similar, who had accused the caretaker Interior Minister Boyko Rashkov of repression in the previous elections. Rashkov dismissed the allegations, saying that in these elections, too, police tried to reduce vote trading and controlled voting to a minimum, proof of which was a record number of 369 files and 97 pre-trial proceedings. He pointed out that, in these elections too, the votes in favour of GERB and MRF were the ones most actively “bought”.

Table 1
Results of the parliamentary elections conducted on November 14th

Party / Coalition	Votes	%	Seats in the National Assembly
We Continue the Change	673,170	25.6	67
GERB-UDF	596,456	22.74	59
MRF	341,000	13	34
BSP	267,817	10.21	26
There is Such a People	249,743	9.52	25
Democratic Bulgaria	166,968	6.37	16
“Vazrazhdane” (“Revival”)	127,568	4.86	13
Rise up, Bg! Here We Come!	60,055	2.29	-

Source: Central Election Commission

Rumen Radev and Iliana Yotova convincingly won the presidential elections after a runoff. In the first round, they received the support of nearly 50% of voters. Rumen Radev’s categorical victory was expected. The candidate supported by GERB, Prof. Anastas Gerdzhikov, conducted a sluggish campaign. He tried to demonstrate independence, but stuck close to GERB’s

position, both on reform of the judicial system and on corrupt practices under the previous government. On both topics, Gerdzhikov assumed evasive positions and thus could not attract additional votes beyond those of GERB. The televised debate between Radev and Gerdzhikov aroused more serious interest before the runoff, in which Radev presented himself more convincingly.

The parliamentary elections and the first round of the presidential election took place with a record low

turnout of 40.5%. The activity in the second round of the presidential elections was even lower - 34%.

Table 2
Results of the elections for President and Vice-President

Candidates	First round		Second round	
	Votes	%	Votes	%
Rumen Radev/ Iliana Iotova	1,322,385	49.42	1,539,650 733,791	66.72 31.80
Anastas Gerdzhikov/Nevyana Miteva	610,862	22.83		
Mustafa Kradayi/Iskra Mihaylova	309,681	11.57		
Kostadin Kostadinov/Elena Guncheva	104,832	3.92		
Lozan Panov/Maria Kassimova	98,488	3.68		

Source: Central Election Commission

Immediately after the elections, "We Continue the Change" began consultations with BSP, "There is Such a People" and "Democratic Bulgaria" regarding forming a government. 18 expert-level working groups were organised to seek consensus and common decisions to be included in the coalition's programme of governance. The leaders of "We Continue the Change", Kiril Petkov and Asen Vassilev stated that the end-goal is to sign a coalition agreement. The parties united on issues related to judicial reform, the removal of Ivan Geshev as chief prosecutor and Sotir Tsatsarov as chairman of the Anti-Corruption Commission. This body will be restructured with the aim of achieving greater efficiency in its work. The four parties have announced that they will issue a declaration after the National Assembly convenes, calling on Ivan Geshev to resign. Support will be sought for a change in the constitution to limit the powers of the Prosecutor General at the constitutional level, and not just through a change in the Judiciary Act. President Radev also announced that he would submit a draft of constitutional changes. The accelerated introduction of e-government and administrative reform in the public sector is envisaged. The idea of demonopolising the Health Insurance Fund and eliminating the current model with clinical paths was put forward. Emphasis will be placed on prevention

and pre-hospital care. With regard to the Republic of North Macedonia, bilateral talks are expected to intensify, but the parties will adhere to the current position - unless the disputed issues are resolved, Bulgaria will not give the green light to start negotiations. BSP were especially insistent on this, whilst "We Continue the Change" show a greater penchant for dialogue and resolving the issue.

"We Continue the Change" stated that their suggestion for Prime Minister would be Kiril Petkov, and for Minister of Finance it would be Asen Vassilev. The two said they were ready to accept other proposals from other parties. However, BSP said it was only right for the Prime Minister to be put forward by the party holding the mandate. Probably some of the caretaker ministers will keep their posts, such as, for example, Interior Minister Boyko Rashkov and Minister of Education and Science Prof. Nikolay Denkov. It is expected that the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy will be the responsibility of BSP, and the Ministry of justice will be taken by "Democratic Bulgaria".

By the end of November, the number of people infected with coronavirus had decreased, although mortality remains high. This will be the first challenge that the new government will face.

2

CONDITION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE PARTY SYSTEM

“We Continue the Change” won in 14 out of 31 multi-member constituencies (MMC). They won in all three metropolitan areas, including in the 25th MMC, where popular rap musician Hristo Petrov, better known as Itzo Hazarta, defeated GERB leader Boyko Borisov. The new formation won in the former bastions of GERB - Varna and Burgas, as well as in Plovdiv, Ruse, Veliko Tarnovo, Dobrich, Pleven, Stara Zagora, Haskovo, Yambol and Montana.

For the second time this year, GERB have lost elections - twice for parliament and also for President. GERB lost another 50,000 votes compared to the elections on July 11th. The presidential candidate backed by this party, Anastas Gerdzhikov, did not contribute to attracting additional votes, with the narrow party core voting for him in the first round. The former ruling party hoped that a series of crises in the country - health, economic and political - would lead to a reversal of electoral attitudes and they would once again become the first political force. These expectations did not come to fruition and the main reason for this is that Bulgarian citizens want change. GERB has become synonymous with corruption - a reputation that can only be cleaned up with serious internal party changes, including in the political leadership.

At the height of the election campaign, an investigation was announced by the Ministry of Interior and the State Agency for National Security for tens of millions of leva leaked to hollow companies during the construction of the Hemus motorway. The money was withdrawn at a cash desk from a bank close to the former governors by the socially disadvantaged and unemployed. These hollow companies were registered in their name. The Interior Ministry said it was continuing work on the issue - to track where the money went after it was withdrawn.

As with the previous two short parliaments, Borisov once again resigned. Despite the isolation of the party and the second consecutive loss, the topic of Borisov's resignation as leader of GERB is not currently being discussed in the party.

MRF increased their result by nearly 35,000 votes compared to the elections of July 11th. This is primarily due

to the significant mobilisation in Turkey, where more than 85,000 people voted for the party. This result is a consequence of the massive support raising campaign in the Turkish media for Mustafa Karadayi, who was presented as the first Turkish presidential candidate in Bulgaria. The Bulgarian side protested against the interference of the Turkish government in the election process by inviting the Turkish ambassador to the Foreign Ministry for an explanation. The Turkish side reciprocally summoned the Bulgarian ambassador to Ankara. Eyewitness accounts have appeared in the Bulgarian media of how members of election commissions in Turkey voted on behalf of voters who were simply waiting on the sidelines. In the second round of the presidential election, MRF voters did not go out to vote in such great numbers, but over 70% of them supported Anastas Gerdzhikov. The only area in which Gerdzhikov won was the bastion of MRF - Kardzhali. Over 95% of the votes in Turkey also supported Gerdzhikov.

MRF were not invited by “We Continue the Change” to negotiations to form a government. The oligarch Delyan Peevski, sanctioned by the Magnitsky law, was elected MP, which will lead to an even more severe political isolation of the party.

BSP recorded their weakest result in the most recent democratic history of the country. Expectations of greater mobilisation due to the presidential election did not materialise. Immediately after the elections, the “internal opposition” in BSP raised the issue of the resignation of the party chair. Korneliya Ninova handed in her resignation and proposed that the National Council of the party convene a congress in January 2022 to schedule an election for leader of the party. She still refuses to answer the question as to whether she will run again. There is already a candidate for party leader - Krum Zarkov. He is a lawyer by education, who graduated in France and, in the last 4 years, has established himself as one of the young, authoritative and promising politicians in the party. He is liked not only by the Socialists, but also by a wider circle of voters. He is emerging as one of the favourites for the post. Ninova said she and Zarkov have differences over the adoption of the Istanbul Convention. In her words, he “fiercely defends the acceptance of it” whilst she is a staunch opponent. Moreover, Ninova

set two topics as a red line during the talks on forming a new government: relations with the Republic of North Macedonia and the Istanbul Convention. The raising of the issue of the Istanbul Convention by Ninova shows yet again that BSP have distanced themselves from the values of the European left.

The results of the parliamentary elections show that BSP are in need of urgent reforms if they are to survive as a party. Some of them regard personnel and are organisational, and others are ideological. In recent years, BSP have taken a national-populist course by imposing the idea of left-wing conservatism. Thus, the party has moved away from the political centre and repelled moderate voters. For this reason it is a priority for the party to return to the field of European social democracy and become attractive to young voters.

"There is Such a People" (Ima Takav Narod - ITN) lost almost two-thirds of its vote compared with the early parliamentary elections on July 11th, when it won. The party will be the fifth largest parliamentary group in the 47th National Assembly. This result was predictable in view of the disappointment of voters, who had twice backed "There is Such a People" this year. The formation of showman Slavi Trifonov is mainly to blame for it being impossible to form a government with their mandate after the July 11th elections. On the night after the last elections, Trifonov said he accepted the result, saying that even if he could go back, he would still do exactly the same thing as on July 11th. Despite this, ITN showed a will to engage in dialogue during the talks initiated by "We Continue the Change" to develop a programme of governance before signing the coalition agreement.

"Democratic Bulgaria" suffered a serious electoral collapse in the parliamentary elections. The main reason for this was that a large number of the supporters of the coalition supported "We Continue the Change". A great deal of the blame for the unconvincing performance of "Democratic Bulgaria" lies with the presidential candidate backed by the formation, Lozan Panov, who ran an extremely controversial campaign in terms of messages and behaviour, harshly criticising incumbent President Rumen Radev as well as his other opponents. This outraged many supporters of "Democratic Bulgaria", especially those who sympathise with President Radev. A few days before the election, Lozan Panov even attacked "Democratic Bulgaria" and its leaders. In the end, only 3.7% voted for him, fewer even than leader of "Vazrazhdane" ("Revival") Kostadin Kostadinov.

After the elections, the leaders of the three parties in "Democratic Bulgaria" resigned. The chairman of "Yes, Bulgaria" Hristo Ivanov took personal responsibility for the poor result and submitted his resignation. The entire national leadership of the party resigned. Ivanov said that a very serious analysis should be made – as to why in these elections "Democratic Bulgaria" was not recognised by the representatives of the democratic community in the country. He expressed the opinion that the union "Democratic Bulgaria" has a place in the political life of Bulgaria and should be developed. The leader of DSB (Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria), Atanas Atanasov, and the two co-chairs of the "Green Movement", Borislav Sandov and Vladislav Panev, also resigned. "Democratic Bulgaria" congratulated the winners of the parliamentary elections and pledged to support the government with the mandate of "We Continue the Change". Hristo Ivanov stressed that the two formations have similar programmes and visions for the development of the country, and described Kiril Petkov and Asen Vassilev as "friends and like-minded people".

Unlike in the previous two short parliaments, in which no nationalist party was represented, this time the far-right party "Vazrazhdane" ("Revival") managed to overcome the 4% electoral barrier. The party led by Kostadin Kostadinov is similar to "Ataka" in 2005-2009 in its radical nature. "Vazrazhdane" can be described as a pro-Russian party, although its leader denies it. Anti-American sentiment is also strong, as evidenced by a number of Kostadinov's statements. The success of "Vazrazhdane" is due in part to the party's aggressive election campaign against Covid measures, attracting additional anti-vac (those opposed to vaccination) votes. Kostadin Kostadinov imposed the opinion that all restrictions should be lifted and that the party would fight for this in the National Assembly. He said his formation would not support a cabinet with a mandate of "We Continue the Change" because the government would be a puppet of the US embassy. After the elections, Kostadin Kostadinov said that the goal of "Vazrazhdane" was to rule Bulgaria independently. He expressed confidence that support for the party would grow and that it would very soon become the first political force. "Vazrazhdane" is emerging as an extremely Eurosceptical party, and this line of conduct will be followed within the 47th National Assembly. The formation is opposed to the adoption of the euro by Bulgaria. Similar to "Ataka", "Vazrazhdane" is calling for a referendum on Bulgaria's withdrawal from NATO.

3

PUBLIC OPINION

The exit poll of Alpha Research shows that the voters of “We Continue the Change” are mostly of active age, live in Sofia or big regional cities of the country and predominantly have a higher education. The winning party won the youngest vote, with 27% of people aged 18-30 and 24% of people aged 31-60 voting for it. 19% voted for GERB in the age range of 18 to 30

years of age, and 27% of those aged 31-60. BSP won 28% of the vote of people over 60. BSP also has the lowest support among the youngest voters - 8%. The party system in Bulgaria is in a period of significant transformation. For the second time in half a year, an entirely new political formation won the parliamentary elections.

4

MAIN CONCLUSIONS AND FORECASTS

The party system in Bulgaria finds itself in a period of significant transformation. For the second time in half a year, an entirely new political formation won the parliamentary elections.

The victory of "We Continue the Change" is steeped in high expectations. Kiril Petkov and Asen Vassilev show a high degree of willingness for dialogue and the ability to find consensus. At this stage, there do not appear to be any insurmountable differences between the parties that are in negotiations to form a government - namely between "We Continue the Change", BSP, ITN and "Democratic Bulgaria".

The main challenge facing "We Continue the Change" is whether they will be able to establish themselves permanently as a political entity. This can only happen if, among them, they start the process of creating a normal political party within the next year.

The result of BSP was a historic nadir for the party, and their future looks unclear. The party needs a serious internal parley, with emotions and personal battles being left to one side. In order to regain its position, BSP must embark on a new course with new leadership and a new modern social-democratic vision. The upcoming party congress in January could set this process in motion.

ITN remains completely under the control of its leader Slavi Trifonov. It lacks fully democratic procedures. After the serious defeat for the party in the last elections, it is not clear where its leader will toss it. ITN is a typical populist party.

GERB and MRF will continue to be in political isolation until they reform politically and ideologically, but mostly at the level of the leadership. This requires awkward internal party decisions. GERB faces a complex dilemma - with Borisov at the helm, the party will not be able to break out of isolation and will be doomed to slow and gradual marginalisation. However, without Borisov, the very existence of the party is threatened, because it was built as a personalist formation of the leadership type.

These elections have proven that MRF is greatly dependent on Peevski and other oligarchic interests, and the path to reform will be even more difficult. The isolation of MRF could lead to the radicalisation of the party in the medium term.

After these elections, it appears that there will be a government but, due to the complex nature of the four-party coalition that will support it, it is possible that it will fail to complete the whole four-year term.

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ABOUT THIS STUDY

FES Bulgaria has been publishing the „Polit-Barometer“ since 2000, analyzing current and long-term political processes and identifying trends in Bulgarian politics with a special focus on the political parties as democratic actors. In a situation where

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