

## Better Luck Next Time?

### The Early General Elections in Bulgaria on 2 October 2022

*Marin Lessenski*

#### The political turmoil 2020-2022

On 2 October 2022, Bulgaria held its consecutive early general elections. These were the fifth elections for the past 18 months with 3 parliamentary elections and a presidential election in 2021 alone. This reflects the deep political crisis which started in 2020 with massive anti-corruption protests. The protests were against the GERB-led coalition government and its alleged tacit partnership with the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF). GERB has been ruling for the past 12 years with just a short gap of a BSP-MRF coalition government in 2013-2014, which was accompanied by over 400 days of consequent protests. These protests were triggered by the appointment as the main security agency director of MRF politician and businessman Mr. Delyan Peevski, deemed highly controversial.

During the 2020 protests, the public anger was turned mainly at three figures that according to the protesters personified the main problems in the country - the leader of GERB and prime minister Boyko Borissov, MRF politician and oligarch Delyan Peevski, sanctioned by the US under the Magnitsky Act and Prosecutor General Ivan Geshev, accused by his critics of providing protection of high level corruption. Arguably, many of the questions in today's Bulgarian politics are related to the role and political future of these persons as a number of parties make cooperation dependent on them leaving active politics.

Two parliaments in 2021 failed to elect a government. The third elections made possible the government led by Kiril Petkov of We Continue the Change, a new liberal party, running on an anti-corruption program and initially enjoying the support of President Rumen Radev, the most popular figure in political polls at the time. The complex four party coalition government survived just 8 months, which led to the October 2022 elections.

The political turmoil turned President Rumen Radev (re-elected for a second term in 2021), a figure with limited competences in Bulgaria, into an unusually strong player as the president can appoint caretaker governments between elections. Coupled with the popularity of the former Air-Force commander, Radev has been able to assert his views, as initially helping the anti-corruption drive as well as his pro-Russian stance.

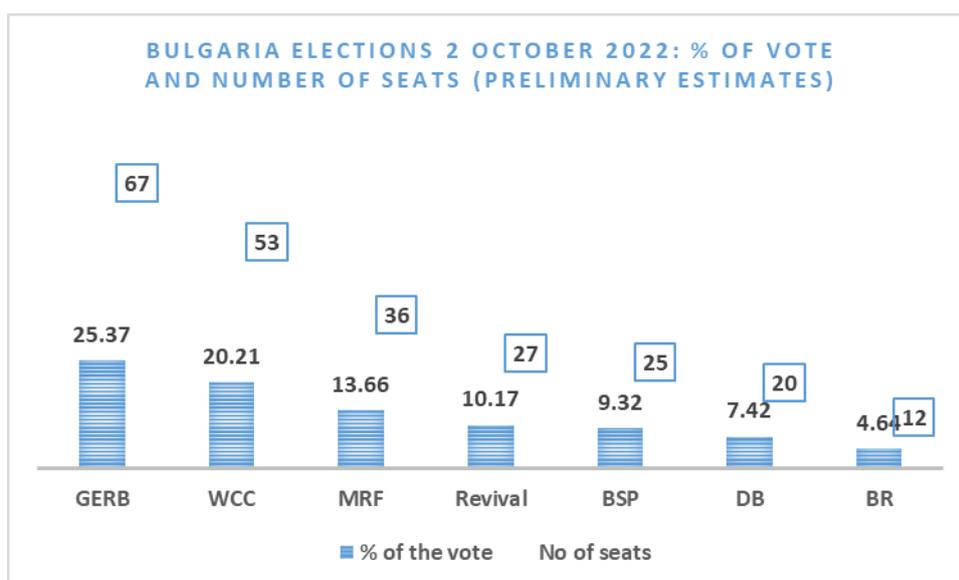
### The run-up to the October 2022 elections

The coalition government of Prime Minister Kiril Petkov (December 2021– August 2022) came on power on an anti-corruption and reformist program, but its actions were severely undermined by two factors. Firstly, the anti-corruption drive was met by strong resistance of those who could be most affected by it. Secondly, the Russian war against Ukraine and the ensuing energy crisis suddenly altered the context, deteriorating economic and social conditions, polarizing public opinion and party relations. The severing of deliveries by Gazprom after refusing to pay in roubles (at nearly 100% dependence) and expulsion of 70 Russian diplomats triggered negative reactions by pro-Russian parties within the government and in opposition. President Radev turned from a supporter of the government into a vocal critic, de facto aiding the opposition GERB and MRF, as the cabinet led independent policy and assumed a more assertive position towards Russia.

### The October 2022 election results

The elections produced a hung parliament with 7 parties in the 240 seat parliament: the often described as populist centre-right GERB (25.3%), the liberal We Continue the Change (20.2%), the so-called Turkish-minority party Movement for Rights and Freedoms (13.8%), the pro-Russian and nationalist Revival (10.2%), the centre-left (with a conservative tilt) Bulgarian Socialist Party (9.3%), the centre-right/liberal/Green coalition Democratic Bulgaria (7.5%) and the new pro-Russian, opportunist party Bulgarian Rise (4.6%). The populist party There is Such a People of entertainer Slavi Trifonov, which finished first in the July 2021 elections and second in the April 2021 elections, failed to enter parliament in 2022, another indication of the volatility of the party system.

The turnout was 37.8% in a trend of decreasing participation, e.g. compared to a turnout of 50.6% in April 2021 and the lowest registered since 1989 (the last turnout may have actually been higher as it was calculated on outdated population data).



### The possible government options

Before the elections, the expectations were for four options of coalition government in this parliament. As the elections results came in with the distribution of seats, it transpired that first two options listed below are much less likely, the fourth one is not feasible too and the third option is the most talked about in the moment. However, the party leaders are yet to define their positions and the consequent negotiations may bring changes to these options:

1. *Pro-Western and anti-corruption* – represented by the policy priorities of We Continue the Change and Democratic Bulgaria, but as the election results showed it is nearly impossible in the current parliament as they could not gather enough seats. There is hypothetical opportunity of GERB supporting the justice reform ideas thus making this option possible.
2. *Anti-corruption but not pro-Western* – this option would be represented by the Bulgarian Socialist Party but it has also little chance of success as the parties that would back it could not gather enough seats either. Furthermore, the BSP's own anti-corruption record has been less than stellar and it may drop this position in favour of other priorities.
3. *Pro-Western but not anti-corruption* – this is the option favoured by GERB, which promotes an “Euro-Atlantic coalition” with We Continue the Change (WCC) and Democratic Bulgaria (DB) but in exchange for dropping their anti-corruption drive. The problem is that WCC and DB do not seem to be willing at all to compromise with their anti-corruption agenda and partner with GERB and MRF.
4. *Neither pro-Western nor anti-corruption* – this is somewhat feasible option, in which the anti-corruption drive is rejected but the government is not pro-Western, in a compromise mix of different players such as by GERB, MRF and possibly BSP and Bulgarian Rise. But the initial reactions of the party leaders indicate that not all these players are willing to cooperate (e.g. BSP under its current leadership rejected a similar option).

From the initial reactions of the party leaders it seems that it will be very challenging task to form a government. Should this parliament fail to produce a government, there would likely be new elections in early spring of 2023. President Rumen Radev would then appoint a new caretaker government under his control.

### Several takeaways from the elections

*The pro-Western geopolitical orientation:* The election campaign was characterized by polarizing views regarding the geopolitical orientation and a number of players openly challenged it. The pro-Russian Revival party dubbed the elections “referendum on EU and NATO membership”. However, the elections results indicate that the parties that publicly support the pro-Western orientation gather at least 67% of the vote. From that point of view, the “referendum” was in favour of EU and NATO membership.

*A new type of nationalists:* The traditional nationalist parties, which preached aggressive ideology against minorities (ethnic minorities, LGTB, etc.), suffered defeat receiving each less than 1% of support in the last elections. However, the elections gave rise to a new type of extremist, nationalist

party – the Revival party – which does not stem directly from them but it is a new phenomenon. Staunchly pro-Russia and anti-Western, it openly challenges NATO and EU membership and the overall geopolitical orientation of the country. Also, Revival generally attacks ethnic minorities to a smaller extent compared to the other nationalist parties and partially counts on their votes. Reportedly, 9% of the Roma vote was cast for Revival in the last elections. This stands in contrast to the old nationalist parties, who were anti-ethnic minority and much less open about it anti-Western and pro-Russian positions. Revival has been doubling its support in each of the past 4 elections. It is one of the most “digitised” parties (together with the liberal Democratic Bulgaria) using social media for information and campaigning. It also did surprisingly well among Bulgarians abroad (including in Tokyo and Sydney).

*The anti-corruption, liberal parties:* In this parliament, the anti-corruption, liberal parties are represented with about 28% combined. This is a clear improvement over the 2017 parliament when they were not represented at all.

**Concerns of “fans of Orban” coalition:** There are still concerns about a potential ideologically conservative, anti-liberal, pro-authoritarian coalition of “fans of Orban” from the nominally right and left parties, dismissive of open society values and civil society.

### **The elections and the current geopolitical context**

The Russian war against Ukraine, the energy crisis and related effects loom large in Bulgarian politics with polarizing effects on the public and politics. The cabinet of Kiril Petkov, which governed until August 2022, was torn between the pro-Western We Continue the Change and Democratic Bulgaria and the pro-Russian Bulgarian Socialist Party, which vetoed the most decisive actions in support of Ukraine. As a result, Bulgaria welcomed refugees, but ruled out military aid (while tacitly exporting vast quantities of ammunition through intermediaries). Nevertheless, Petkov’s government refused to pay gas in roubles and was punished by Gazprom by stopping fully the deliveries (nearly 100% of gas imports in the country). The cabinet also expelled 70 Russian diplomats in one go in its last days on power.

President Rumen Radev, who acquired an outsized influence in politics, has staunchly pro-Russian views (describing once Crimea as Russian in a presidential debate) and tried to prevent meaningful support to Ukraine but did not challenge the main tenets of the Western position of Russia as an aggressor state.

In the run up to the elections, the pro-Russian political players assumed scare tactics of impending doom due to cut Russian gas deliveries, possible direct involvement of Bulgaria in the war, Western-Russian confrontation with looming nuclear retaliation as arguments to quickly repair relations with Russia.

At the same time, former premier Boyko Borissov has used the situation to advocate for “Euro-Atlantic coalition” in the face of a risk of Bulgaria changing geopolitical course. However, his critics point to his not so solid credentials as he reportedly helped Russia’s plans by building in record time the Turk Stream gas pipeline extension through Bulgaria to bypass Ukraine and transit gas to Moscow’s allies Serbia and Hungary.

The current caretaker government, appointed and controlled by President Radev, tried by reverse course by promising improving relations and resuming deliveries from Gazprom, trying to prevent alternative LNG and Azeri gas deliveries, but more or less failed to do this. President Radev did not

join the October 2022 statement of the presidents of 8 other NATO members in CEE, including neighbouring Romania, North Macedonia and Montenegro, in support of Ukraine. Radev rejected a membership of Ukraine in NATO before “the peaceful resolution of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine”.

As for the future government, even under “pro-Western but not anti-corruption” option, Bulgaria will remain loyal to the main decisions of the EU and NATO but would not challenge directly Moscow and engage if possible with Gazprom. The aid to Ukraine might include some military equipment but not to the tune of the Baltics and Central Europe.

Under a “neither pro-Western not anti-corruption” government, there will be token and lukewarm support to the main Western positions but possible resistance to strengthening measures against Russia and a push to improve relations with Moscow. Bulgaria will not align with Hungary, but be very close to it.

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#### Policy Brief

October 2022

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