

## Bulgarian Elections: Ahead of New Polls?

Bolgár választások: új szavazások előtt?

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**Abstract:** The current analysis describes the path to the elections in Bulgaria on 11 July, 2021, as well as their outcome. It argues that the political stalemate after the April elections can be overcome by the new election results. In July a recently founded party, There Is Such A People (ITN), led by late-night showman Slavi Trifonov, was able to overtake Boyko Borisov's party, which has not been achieved by any other politician for 12 years. Nevertheless, Trifonov's party will not be able to form a government alone without forming a coalition with other parties because it is far from a majority in parliament. Without a coalition, there is high probability for lasting political instability in Bulgaria. According to the pessimistic scenario, snap elections will be held along with the presidential elections in mid-autumn of 2021.

**Keywords:** Bulgaria, Elections 2021, European Union

**Összefoglaló:** Az elemzés a 2021. július 11-i bulgáriai választásokhoz vezető utat és annak eredményeit kívánja bemutatni. A választási eredmények alapján az áprilisi választások után előállt patthelyzet akár meg is oldódhat. Ezúttal a Slavi Trifonov showman által nemrég alapított Vannak ilyen emberek (ITN) pártnak sikerült Bojko Boriszov pártját legyőznie, amire egy politikus sem volt képes az utóbbi 12 év alatt. Ugyanakkor Trifonov pártja egyedül nem lesz képest kormányt alakítani, mert messze áll a parlamenti többségtől, ugyanakkor koalícióra sem akar lépni senkivel. Koalíció nélkül pedig nagy az esélye, hogy marad a politikai instabilitás, így könnyen lehet, hogy az őszi elnökválasztásokkal egy időben ismét előrehozott választásokat fognak tartani Bulgáriában.

**Kulcsszavak:** Bulgária, 2021-es választások, Európai Unió

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Bulgaria held its second general elections on 11 July, 2021.
- Showman Slavi Trifonov's party, There Is Such A People (ITN), won the elections by receiving 24.08 percent of total votes and 27 percent of parliamentary seats.
- Former Prime Minister Boyko Borisov's party, GERB, received only 23.51 percent in coalition with UDF. This is the first time since 2009 that GERB has lost primacy in the parliament.
- Coalition talks are moving ahead, even if Trifonov initially refused to form a coalition with any other parties.
- Without tangible backing from other parties, the prospect for a stable government remains low, and lasting instability is expected; the probability for new snap elections in autumn at the same time as the presidential elections is high.

## INTRODUCTION

In the past year Bulgaria was hit by the COVID-19 pandemic and faced economic challenges as well as mass anti-corruption protests, which shook the credibility of Boyko Borisov's centre-right government and helped the emergence of anti-corruption parties. The elections in early April 2021 showed the gradual loss of general support for Borisov's party, Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB), but they ended in a political stalemate, as no other parties or party blocks were able to bridge a coalition government.

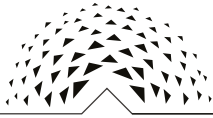
The recent elections on 11 July have altered the electoral landscape in Bulgaria: a party founded in early 2020 by showman Slavi Trifonov, called There Is Such A People (ITN), defeated former governing party GERB and acquired some 27 percent of parliamentary mandates. While traditional parties like GERB and the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) lost votes and had to face a smaller parliamentary presence (with the only exception of the Turkish Movement for Right and Freedom, whose electorate votes along ethnic lines), anti-corruption parties such as ITN were able to acquire almost half of the mandates altogether but fell short of reaching a majority.

Without having a majority in the legislature, it will be a difficult task for Trifonov to create a functioning government. His proposed government would be led by Nikolay Vasilev (an economist and deputy prime minister in 2005-2009), and it would contain a high number of Western-educated people, including eight women. This clearly indicates that Trifonov wants to forge an 'expert government.' The current situation foreshadows a rather unstable domestic political landscape for the upcoming months, which can culminate in new snap elections in autumn.

## GENERAL OVERVIEW

During the last 12 years, Bulgaria was under the rule of the centre-right GERB, founded in 2006 by Boyko Borisov, former bodyguard of communist leader Todor Zhivkov, later secretary general of the interior ministry (2001-2005) and Mayor of Sofia (2005-2009). In 2009, GERB managed to defeat the BSP-MRF-NMSS (National Movement Simeon the Second) coalition and seize power with nearly 40 percent of the votes by forming a minority government supported by nationalist parties.

Although GERB remained the strongest parliamentary faction and the most popular party, it never received enough votes to form a majority government alone, making its governance vulnerable. Borisov resigned over protests triggered by high electricity bills and general discontent over the social and economic situation in early 2013. The snap elections in May 2013 led to a BSP-MRF coalition, supported



occasionally by the far-right ATAKA party. However, due to the appointment of Delyan Peevski, a tycoon and MRF MP as the head of the State Agency for National Security, the mass protests resumed, which lasted some 400 days and ended with the withdrawal of MRF from the government.

The new snap elections in 2014 brought GERB back to power by relying on the smaller, centre-right party Reformist Bloc and centre-left Alternative for Bulgarian Renaissance. Nevertheless, it was not able to form a majority government this time, either. The second Borisov government resigned after the 2016 presidential elections because Rumen Radev, supported by BSP, was elected instead of Borisov's candidate. GERB won the elections in March 2017 again but remained unable to form a government alone. This time it formed a coalition with United Patriots, an alliance of three nationalist parties.

Taking the last ten years into consideration, it is fair to say that the stability of the Bulgarian government is low: only one government could stay in power for its four-year term, and the country has had five snap elections (including the one this year), usually resulting in minority governments. At the same time, Bulgarian parties have demonstrated relatively high flexibility in forming coalitions or supporting the minority government as non-coalition partners.

This flexibility has also boosted the image of interparty corruption, which has dominated public discourse this past year. Bulgaria, along with Romania, joined the European Union on 1 January, 2007, as the least developed country in the community. There was general hope and confidence in the country at the time concerning catching up to the more developed Member States, or at least attaining bigger prosperity. The accession seemed to be a good decision, and EU funds started to flood the Bulgarian economy, from the agricultural sector to infrastructural projects. In the 2014-2020 period the country received around 10,164 million EUR from the European Cohesion and Investment Fund, [an average of 1,363 EUR per person](#). The Bulgarian GDP started to increase (with an annual growth between 0.326% and 3.99% from 2010 to 2020), and purchasing power parity grew from 16,572 USD in 2007 to 22,381 USD in [2020](#).

In spite of these rather optimistic trends, the country could not change its general position within the EU, and it has remained its most underdeveloped member. More strikingly, Romania has performed much better during the last few years (Romanian PPP was 19,773 USD in 2007 and 28,832 USD in 2020), giving the impression that faster convergence to the EU core is possible. More alarmingly, other neighbouring countries in the Western Balkans neighbourhood have been able to demonstrate relatively high GDP growth since the global financial crisis ([Serbia has outpaced](#) Bulgaria in recent years) despite the lack of EU funding Bulgaria possesses.

Moreover, Bulgaria has one of the fastest-aging population in South-eastern Europe. While its population was [8.95 million](#) in 1985 at its historical peak, it decreased to [7.36 million in 2011](#). A low fertility rate accompanied by relatively high emigration towards wealthier EU countries contributed to this sharp decline, which could not

be hindered despite various governmental efforts. Economic growth also did not affect the various social classes in the same manner. As the [GINI index](#) shows, wealth disparity increased from 36.1 in 2007 to 41.3 in 2018 in favour of the rich, which has paved the way towards mass discontentment.

Not surprisingly, in the public opinion the relative underdevelopment of the country is linked to the omnipresent corruption, which is supported by various reports from international organizations. The [Corruption Index was 44 in 2020](#), which is one of the lowest within the European Union. Although the country joined the EU in 2007, the accession occurred with reservation: the European Commission prepares a report about the Bulgarian justice system every year, and these reports are [very critical](#) of the Bulgarian judiciary system and point to high-scale corruption. Various issues revealed by OLAF have also directed public attention to graft in Bulgaria.

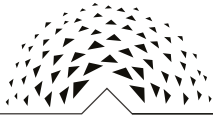
This perception has been strengthened from time to time by scandals that shocked the Bulgarian society and highlighted how entrenched corruption is. Last year such an affair triggered months-long protests when Hristo Ivanov (former GERB Minister of Justice, founder of the Yes, Bulgaria party, and leader of the Democratic Bulgaria coalition) [approached the coastal residence of Ahmet Dogan](#), former chairman and one of the founders of Turkish party MRF, and was intercepted by bodyguards (who were later revealed by president Radev to be members of the National Security Service), showing that state-owned beaches can unlawfully be turned into private property.

The protests started on 9 July, 2020, right after public prosecutors entered the presidential residence and arrested two officials from the presidential administration. The protesters, encouraged by the president, demanded the resignation of the government and Chief Prosecutor Ivan Geshev, who was perceived as Borisov's collaborator.

## APRIL ELECTIONS AND A POLITICAL CUL-DE-SAC

**B**ulgaria has a semi-proportional electoral system, with a four-percent threshold. The country is divided into 31 multi-member constituencies, with a fixed number of seats varying from 4 to 16 mandates, based on the size of the population. [12,200 voting stations](#) were opened within Bulgaria, with a record number of 784 balloting sections established in 68 countries around the world. Due to the legal changes accepted after the 4 April elections, machine voting is used in all sections with at least 300 voters, which means that this method was applied in 9,402 domestic and 273 overseas sections in 23 countries. Paper ballots are used in sections where voter numbers remain under 300 and at mobile ballot boxes at prisons or hospitals.

[The April elections ended in a stalemate](#). GERB only secured 75 mandates by losing 20, which resulted in a much weaker position in the parliament even if it remained the largest party. Furthermore, the continuing dismemberment



and disputes among nationalist parties rendered it impossible to form a viable coalition, and consequently the parties which had been strong allies for Boyko Borisov could not pass the four-percent threshold this time.

The Socialist Party, under the leadership of Korneliya Ninova, received less than 15 percent, which meant a huge failure: it lost 37 parliamentary seats, weakening its position to form a government with its traditional allies, such as the Movement for Rights and Freedom, which is a liberal party based on the 6-10 percent Turkish minority of the country. Despite last year's corruption scandal related to its former president, Ahmet Dogan, it was able to maintain its usual electoral performance, and it received more than 10 percent, with which it managed to acquire 34 parliamentary seats. MRF, as a minority-based party, is one of the most resilient members of the Bulgarian party system, as it has always been able to enter parliament and join or support the government, and it has played the role of kingmaker on several occasions.

However, the emergence of new, 'anti-corruption' parties, which benefited from the growing disillusionment and discontent within the society, could acquire more than 30 percent of the votes and 92 seats altogether. The most successful among them, ITN (There are such People), led by Slavi Trifonov, received 17.4 percent of the votes and 51 seats in the parliament. The others' performance was also of note: the Democratic Bulgaria electoral alliance received 9.3 percent, while the newly-founded Stand up, Mafia get out! party, under the leadership of former ombudsman Maya Manolova, seized nearly five percent.

Seemingly, an unwanted tripolarity emerged in parliament. GERB, without its nationalist allies, was not able to form a government alone, while all the other parties refused to support any Borisov cabinet. The low number of mandates also made it futile for MRF to collaborate with GERB because their combined seats would not be enough to survive the first vote.

The new, anti-corruption parties did not possess a sufficient number of seats, and they also refused to enter into coalition with BSP or MRF. Under these circumstances, it was no surprise that when Korneliya Ninova announced that her [party had returned the mandate to form](#) a government, the President called for new elections.

The new caretaker government appointed by Borisov's tenacious adversary, president Radev, kept pressure on GERB. In line with general anti-corruption sentiments, several issues were put in the limelight, such as [extortion accusations](#), which were rejected by the former governing party. A Watergate-style wiretapping scandal also shocked public opinion (even if similar issues had also occurred during the campaign period), but probably the most influential move came from the [US, when it sanctioned several oligarchs](#) (some of whom are in opposition to Borisov) under the [Global Magnitsky Act](#).

## INTERNATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

Bulgaria's domestic struggles have also had major implications for the neighbourhood because relations with North Macedonia have become politicized again. In the April elections campaign the government decided to use the identity card issue and put pressure on Skopje, and [it blocked](#) the EU membership talks last November. This [stance was maintained by](#) the caretaker government as well, triggering more frustration in its neighbour, which had just overcome its naming dispute with Greece a few years ago.

The Bulgarian and (North-)Macedonian identity debate is not new. Bulgarians claim that current-day North Macedonia's Slavic-speaking population was Bulgarian in the past and that they speak a dialect of the Bulgarian language. This view is rejected by Skopje, arguing that the Macedonian language is a distinct one, and the population of the country does not consider itself Bulgarian (with the exception of Muslim Albanians). This has been a recurring issue between the two countries for the last three decades. Even if Bulgaria was the first state to recognize North Macedonia in 1991 shortly after its declaration of independence, the affairs related to language recognition became more problematic. Although the two parties set up a commission to discuss the identity issue in 2017, relations have remained politicized and a cheap card for nationalist Bulgarian parties to boost their popularity.

## OUTCOME

ITN won the recent elections with a small margin. While Slavi Trifonov's party managed to get 24 percent of the votes and 65 mandates, Borisov's GERB (with its electoral ally, Union of Democratic Forces) secured second place in the parliament with 63 seats. Other anti-graft parties, such as Maya Manolova's Stand up, Mafia get out! and Democratic Bulgaria received 5.1 and 12.64 percent, respectively. The Socialist Party only received 13.4 percent and has to face a diminished parliamentary presence, which may force its current leader to resign (although its likelihood is low). The Movement for Rights and Freedom got 10.71 percent and 29 mandates due to the Turkish votes abroad and their customarily successful electoral mobilisation within the Turkish electorate in Bulgaria. The nationalist parties, similarly to April, were not able to pass the four-percent threshold. This development cut to opportunity for GERB to coalesce with its 'traditional' allies.





Parties	26 March, 2017		4 April, 2021		11 July, 2021	
	Share of votes	Seats	Share of votes	Seats	Share of votes	Seats
<b>GERB</b>	32.65	95	25.8	75	23.51	63
<b>BSPzB</b>	27.2	80	14.8	43	13.39	36
<b>MRF</b>	9	26	10.4	30	10.71	29
<b>DB</b>			9.3	27	12.64	34
<b>ISMV</b>			4.65	14	5.1	13
<b>ITN</b>			17.4	51	24.08	65
<b>OP</b>	9.1	27				
<b>Volya</b>	4.2	12				

On Monday 12 July, 2021, Slavi Trifonov announced that he would propose a government and that he would not enter into coalition with any parties – not even with the other two anti-corruption movements. He also named Nikolay Vassilev as Prime Minister, along [with less well-known technocrats](#). He proposed a diverse program, perceived as populist by some, ranging from opening kindergartens, privatising the state-owned Bulgarian Development Bank, improving transparency in public procurement to confirming Bulgaria’s application for membership [to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the euro zone, and the Schengen visa zone](#).

## CONCLUSION

By having a minority government, the Bulgarian political scene remains unstable. Although the ministers proposed by Trifonov can be considered non-partisan technocrats, the background of the Prime Minister and other ministers points to a rather left-wing and anti-GERB government, which can count on the support of the anti-corruption parties and even backing by BSP and MRF on occasion.

GERB, led by Boyko Borisov, seems to be the biggest loser of the elections by having lost its primacy in the parliament; however, it can still be considered a success that it has maintained the majority of its electorate despite the never-ending scandals. The current situation is reminiscent of 2013, when GERB lost the elections partly due to the mass protests, but one year later it was able to come back to power. Even if GERB has lost many votes, it still has the second largest faction in parliament, and Borisov is still in Bulgarian politics, where the winning party's leadership seemingly refuses to govern the country.

However, the current political situation is still fluid in Bulgaria. Even if the proposed Vassilev government received green light in the parliament, the loose support of the other parties can evaporate fast. Snap elections are of high probability, with speculations that they can be held simultaneously with the presidential elections in October or November this year. In any case, the government would probably do everything to eradicate GERB's support by drawing attention to the various corruption scandals and launching new investigations.