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An election overshadowed by Moscow

For the fourth time in the last year and a half, Bulgarians are voting — with little hope that the elections will reduce their political uncertainty

On 2 October, Bulgaria will vote in early parliamentary elections - for the fourth time in the last year and a half. That testifies to the serious political instability in the country after the 12-year rule of the GERB (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria) party and its leader Boyko Borisov, which has become, for many Bulgarians, synonymous with corruption, stagnation and authoritarian practices. GERB's stay in power ended amid mass public protests and gave way to a new party, 'We Continue the Change'. Established by Western-educated young people, it raised hopes that the impasse could be broken and the country brought closer to European standards. However, the government formed by 'We Continue the Change' lasted only 7 months, under a complex four-party coalition, and collapsed under the weight of the contradictions among coalition partners. That is why the Bulgarians have to go to the polling stations again.

As expected, the big intrigue of the vote is precisely the clash between GERB and 'We Continue the Change'. While the new political actor is portraying this clash as a choice between the 'status quo' and 'change', the former long-term rulers present it more as a dilemma between 'stability' and 'amateurism'. Polls indicate that GERB is currently leading at around 25 per cent against 20 per cent for 'We Continue the Change'.

Post-election scenarios are also not entirely clear. 'We Continue the Change' hopes to re-create almost the same coalition with which it governed until now, albeit without one of the participants. While GERB seems to lean more towards some kind of expert technocratic cabinet without pre-agreed participants. At the same time, no one excludes the threat of political deadlock and new early elections.

Russophiles, Russophobes and the

President

The pre-election situation has two more unconventional features. Firstly, there is the role of President Rumen Radev. According to the Constitution, Bulgaria is a parliamentary republic, and the head of state has, largely, representative functions, but also the prerogative to appoint caretaker governments in the event of a political crisis. Since the April 2021 elections, the country has been governed longer by the Radev cabinets than by regular cabinets elected by parliament. That is why politicians and experts have been increasingly commenting that the incessant confrontation among the parties creates conditions for long-term presidential rule.

Radev ran in 2016 as an independent candidate for the Bulgarian Socialist Party, the successor to the Communist Party. He remains the most popular politician in the country. Moreover, the members of his cabinets are also estranged from the party's leadership. Thus, their political future largely depends on the future political influence of the President himself. Bulgarian public opinion, for its part, likes Radev's balanced positions in foreign policy. That turns the head of state into a rival of the parties in the interpretation of the ongoing processes, but also into an unspoken participant in the campaign due to his ability to set the political agenda.

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Another major factor is the war in Ukraine, which stands in the focus of the election campaign. This is unusual because, as a rule, the elections in Bulgaria, even those for the European Parliament, have been revolving around domestic problems without hardly ever touching international issues. However, the Russian invasion exacerbated the deep divide between Russophiles and Russophobes in society. For cultural and historical reasons, Bulgaria is one of the EU countries with the highest share of sympathy for Russia. Pro-Russian politicians from the left and the nationalist spectrum insist on pragmatism and 'neutrality' regarding the conflict, and oppose any military assistance to Ukraine. In contrast, the traditional right parties, and also somewhat the newcomer 'We Continue the Change', appeal to a clear pro-European and pro-Euro-Atlantic position of the country, which rejects any rapprochement with the Putin regime.

Since the start of the war, relations with the Russian gas giant 'Gazprom' have become a bone of contention too. President Radev and his caretaker government, as well as the Socialist Party and even the former rulers of GERB, are accused of intending to negotiate deliveries from 'Gazprom' and thus perpetuating the energy dependence on Russia. While the right and 'We Continue the Change' are arrogantly ignoring the severe social and economic consequences of a possible lack of gas and raw materials in the coming winter. Paradoxically, in the election campaign, only the radical nationalist party 'Vazrazhdane' (Revival) openly declared itself in favour of improving relations with Moscow. The others – from the President to GERB – are suspected of covert, behind-the-scenes protection of Russian interests.

Low expectations and disappointment

These two factors – the President's increased political influence and geopolitical tensions – are shifting attention away from the race of election platforms and party candidates and make the outcome of the 2 October election more difficult to predict. After all, neither the President officially supports any party, nor do any of the leading parties officially support Russia. Nevertheless, the political debate is largely concentrated on the activities of the President and the relation towards Russia.

The last early election in November 2021 set a record low turnout as only 40 per cent of voters exercised their right to vote. Some analysts now expect even lower turnout. A large part of the people do not understand why the parties systematically fail to produce a working government to address the coming social crisis. Low voter turnout erodes the democratic legitimacy of the political system. Widespread comments that a government will not be formed this time around and that new elections will be called for in late winter only add to the political apathy. This could give chances to radical parties and proponents of constitutional changes, which in turn could deepen the general political uncertainty in the country.



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