

Voting despite the state: How Bulgarians living abroad are making their voices heard

*Coalition negotiations following the Bulgarian parliamentary election in April have failed to produce a government. With the country now set to hold a new vote later in the year, **Julia Rone** reflects on how Bulgarians living abroad have sought to make their voices heard.*

The [parliamentary election held in April in Bulgaria](#) saw the ruling Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) experience a substantial fall in support, with six different parties entering parliament. Beyond the headline results, however, a key element of the election was the role that Bulgarians living abroad played in the campaign. Their political preferences became the object of increasingly polarised media debates, while there was also heightened attention paid to the obstacles they face when attempting to cast their vote.

The importance of the emigrant vote goes beyond the Bulgarian case and points to several fundamental normative, political, and practical challenges emigration poses for political participation, especially in the context of freedom of movement within the EU. The issue is nevertheless particularly striking in Bulgaria as the country has been labelled [the fastest shrinking country in the world](#), owing to its high levels of emigration, high mortality and low birth rates.

Political participation in the context of mass emigration

There are [6.9 million Bulgarians](#) registered in the country and [1.3 million](#) living abroad – that is, approximately a sixth of all Bulgarians. And while for Bulgarian emigrants to the US in the 1990s emigration often meant a rupture with their country of origin, emigration within the context of the EU today is often short-term, related to studying or [precarious seasonal work](#).

Bulgarian migrants in the UK and in EU countries such as Germany maintain a strong personal connection to Bulgaria, frequently [coming home](#) to receive healthcare and maintain family ties. As the political activist and journalist Maria Spirova noted in a follow-up interview for a [recent study](#), many emigrants see their stay abroad as temporary and, what is more, legally speaking, they are only allowed to vote in parliamentary and presidential elections in Bulgaria. This situation has raised several important issues for political participation and representation.

The economist Albert Hirschman once [famously claimed](#) that dissatisfaction leads people either to stay and voice their discontent or to exit and ‘vote with their feet’. But in the context of low-cost flights, digital connectivity and increased precariousness, Hirschman’s famous dilemma between exit and voice [no longer seems to hold](#). This was evident during the [anti-government protests](#) held in Bulgaria in 2020, which were strongly supported by [students returning home](#) due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Driven by the momentum generated by these protests, Bulgarian emigrants showed [unprecedented interest in voting](#) in the 2021 election.

Obstacles to participation

Bulgarian emigrants do not vote through a postal voting system but instead organise in-person voting sections. Volunteers helped by embassies and consulates rent spaces, create information campaigns, and count votes, among numerous other tasks. In the 2021 election, volunteers organised 473 voting sections abroad where more than 170,000 Bulgarians voted, often having to wait in [huge queues](#). The reason for these queues was a 2016 change in the Electoral Code, introduced by the Patriotic Front electoral alliance, which set an upper limit of 35 sections per country in non-EU countries.

The aim of this initiative was to curb the electoral turnout of Bulgarian citizens in Turkey. In the 1980s, a forced assimilation policy known as the [‘Revival Process’](#) led to large numbers of people in Bulgaria emigrating to Turkey. These Bulgarians in Turkey have consistently voted for the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS), which has been embroiled in a series of scandals.

While the logic of the Patriotic Front’s initiative was clearly unconstitutional, it also had little practical justification given the number of votes cast in Turkey [had already started to decline before 2016](#). Indeed, Spirova argues that Bulgarian voters in the UK after Brexit were likely to be among the hardest hit by the change in the Electoral Code as there was demand in the UK for far more than 35 voting sections.

Furthermore, as Stefan Manov from the Citizen Council of the Central Electoral Commission has noted, once it became clear that there was mass mobilisation to vote abroad in 2021, [parties sent their representatives to replace experienced volunteers](#), causing chaos. Bulgarian emigrants felt in some cases they managed to vote *despite* the Bulgarian state. Receiving states and communities were also not always supportive: the French town of Moissac, for example, forbade the [opening of a Bulgarian voting section](#) due to Covid-19 restrictions.

Whom did emigrants vote for?

Bulgarian national media reported extensively not only on the obstacles to voting abroad but also on the results. The liberal right electoral alliance Democratic Bulgaria (DB) had played a [key role in the 2020 protests](#) and prided itself on attracting the 'educated vote' from abroad. Thus, when it became clear that it was the populist ITN (There is Such a People) that had received the largest share of the emigrant vote, heated debates started among DB supporters.

The results challenged simplistic narratives concerning the country's 'brain drain' and revealed clearly that after years of [artificially maintained low wages](#), local corruption and [administrative racketeering](#), the profile of people who have left Bulgaria is cross-sectional, comprising both highly-educated professionals and manual and care workers for whom emigration was a bid for economic survival.

Rushed electoral reforms

Following the election, the elected parties [failed to reach an agreement](#) to form a government and new elections in July are now on the horizon. One of the top priorities for the ITN and DB, who both won large shares of the emigrant vote, has been to implement changes to the electoral code before the National Assembly is dissolved. After a marathon session of parliament on 29 April, [a number of amendments were adopted](#), including the introduction of voting machines, and expanded powers for the President when it comes to appointing members of the Central Electoral Commission.

Crucially for emigrants, the National Assembly accepted [a proposal by the ITN](#) to remove the 35 voting sections limit in non-EU countries. At the same time, a proposal by the DB for postal voting did not gain enough support. Finally, a proposal to create a multi-mandate 'overseas' electoral region that would allow emigrants to elect their own representatives was [accepted 'in principle'](#). However, this was rendered meaningless by the rejection of the subsequent proposal to redistribute mandates from Bulgaria to the overseas region.

The ambiguous nature of these changes stemmed from both the rushed procedures used and the fragmentation of the parliament. The redistribution of mandates from Bulgaria to an overseas region is a particularly complex question which requires broader public discussion. It is bound to open a normative debate on citizens' loyalties and rights, as well as on how to [articulate the common interests of people based in different countries](#).

Ultimately, only [around 20 per cent of Bulgarians abroad voted](#) in the April elections – a high turnout among this group, but significantly lower than the 50 per cent turnout in Bulgaria. What the elections made clear though was that emigrants want to be heard and that there are more and more political parties ready to listen to them. Continuing to ignore the one sixth of the Bulgarian population that lives abroad – many of which would consider returning to Bulgaria – is clearly untenable in the long term.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [OSCE Parliamentary Assembly \(CC BY-SA 2.0\)](#)
