

What lessons can be learned from the failure to form a government in Bulgaria and the Netherlands?

*Both Bulgaria and the Netherlands have experienced failed coalition negotiations this year following parliamentary elections. **Antoaneta Dimitrova** and **Bernard Steunenberg** assess what we can learn from a comparison of the two cases.*

Bulgarians head for the polls on 14 November in what will be the third parliamentary election in the space of a year. The country has been ushered into a political crisis by the repeated failure to form a governing coalition following the two previous parliamentary elections held in April and July.

The problem is not only that Bulgaria's [fragmented 46th parliament](#) did not manage to form a government, but that the chaotic and personalised politics accompanying the formation attempts will likely further undermine citizens' motivation to vote. Between the parliamentary elections in April and July, voter turnout declined from [50.6%](#) to [42.2%](#).

This time around, a decision has been taken to arrange the parliamentary election on the same day as a scheduled presidential election. Holding the two elections on the same date may temporarily alleviate the voter turnout issue, but it will do little to address the wider trend of a lack of voter involvement. Nor will it help reverse the ['hollowing'](#) of Bulgarian democracy, to use the words of Béla Greskovits.

The failure to form a government is particularly problematic in Bulgaria given its abysmal Covid-19 vaccination record, the need to develop and submit the country's plan for using EU recovery funds, and because we are at a crucial phase of Bulgaria's green transition. All of these issues require urgent attention and a long-term strategy. Furthermore, in the context of Bulgarian politics, negotiations aimed at securing a broad coalition government are quite unusual. Inexperience and the lack of established practices for what is acceptable in such negotiations have impeded progress.

A tale of two countries: Bulgaria and the Netherlands

Some useful insights can be gained from a comparison between the situation in Bulgaria and that in the Netherlands – a country that has substantial experience with broad coalition governments, but which is also currently in uncharted waters. Political dynamics in the Netherlands since the country's last election on 17 March have, much like Bulgaria, been defined by unsuccessful efforts to form a government.

While the Netherlands has no constitutional constraints dictating how long government formation may take, dividing lines between the parties have hardened, preventing the formation of a governing coalition led by the winner of the election, the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD). The high turnout in the March parliamentary election, at [78.7%](#), suggests that Dutch democracy is healthier than the Bulgarian one. There are, however, some interesting similarities and differences.

First, it is worth noting that the end of stability may be good news for both countries. Bulgaria has been governed by Boyko Borisov's Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) since 2009, save for a brief interlude between 2013 and 2014. The most recent coalition – the third Borisov government – included GERB and the United Patriots. This government was repeatedly challenged by political protests against increasing corruption.

During GERB's period in power, the party has successfully practiced 'politics as management' with the ['subjection of public policies to privileged private interests'](#), as documented by Anna Krasteva and Antony Todorov. Recently, however, GERB's governance has tilted towards more overt repression, spearheaded by the country's Chief Public Prosecutor, Ivan Geshev, whose nomination in 2019 led to a wave of protests.

In this light, the results of the April and July elections, which both delivered a fragmented parliament, might paradoxically be good news for democracy. In the July election, GERB suffered a narrow defeat to a new political movement formed by a talk show host, Slavi Trifonov. The success of Trifonov's 'There is such a people' (ITN) created an opening to dismantle GERB's increasingly authoritarian model of governance. Unfortunately, this opening has not been fully utilised. Furthermore, the inability to form a government has eroded public support for the ITN. The main stumbling block has been the reluctance of Trifonov's movement to sign a formal coalition agreement that includes some of the smaller parties' policy issues.

Meanwhile, in the Netherlands, the last election [resulted](#) in the country's [most fragmented parliament since World War II](#). The previous VVD-led coalition government, fronted by Mark Rutte, had been marred by political scandals, notably in relation to allegations that the national tax service had engaged in racial profiling and had wrongly accused thousands of families of fraud. In the March election, Rutte's VVD won by a relatively small margin, much like GERB in Bulgaria in April. But the task of finding a four-party coalition that can muster a majority in the Dutch parliament has proven to be difficult for both ideological and personal reasons.

Ideologically, while the left-wing Labour Party (PvdA) and GroenLinks, together with the more centre-left D66, are looking to correct the increasingly right-wing course that VVD-led governments have set for the Netherlands, the VVD, its long-term coalition partner the CDA, and another small party, the Christian Union (CU), have been keen to draw red lines in terms of policy. In trying to avoid any watering down of the VVD's agenda, Rutte has clung to the CDA and signalled that he will not govern with more than one party from the left (the PvdA or GroenLinks), in addition to the D66.

The most important – and unusual for the Netherlands – similarity between the Bulgarian and Dutch situation is the important role that personalities have played in this deadlock. The early coalition talks in the Netherlands were derailed after notes were photographed suggesting that the popular CDA MP Pieter Omtzigt, who was a key figure in revealing the tax service scandal, could be found a position in the cabinet. Rutte's initial denial of this led to him facing a no-confidence vote in the Dutch parliament, which he survived. Bulgaria has faced a similar affair over cabinet appointments, with a proposed ITN minister, Petar Iliev, being [forced to withdraw](#) due to plagiarism allegations.

The VVD and the CDA's stance on the ideological dimension have frustrated the coalition talks, as has the informal coalition of the parties on the left. The possibility of a minority government is being explored and even new elections cannot be ruled out, though the latter solution is not supported by a majority. The results of the previous election are still too attractive to the 'winning' parties to depart from them. Furthermore, the outgoing Rutte cabinet, which is acting as a caretaker government, continues to tackle urgent policy issues such as pandemic restrictions, vaccinations, the country's economic recovery, and the recent withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Breaking the deadlock

An important difference between the two countries is that in Bulgaria, political parties receive a time limited mandate to form a government from the President, while in the Netherlands there is a mandate without a time horizon. Nevertheless, discussing various political options for months without results is not a sustainable process. In the Dutch context, the introduction of some form of time limit might become relevant to prevent extended rule by a caretaker government, given the current government's lack of legitimacy and public support.

Another crucial difference lies in the attitude toward potential coalition agreements. In the Netherlands, with its long tradition of broad coalitions, there is an understanding that party promises as well as key posts are important and have to be secured in a coalition agreement. In Bulgaria, the formal winner of the last election, the ITN, refused to contemplate such an agreement, arguing that as election winners they were free to choose all of the ministers. This position is clearly not viable given control over ministerial posts is [crucially important to policymaking](#) during a new administration.

Both the Bulgarian and Dutch processes underline that coalition formation can be a sensitive process with negotiations taking place simultaneously both in public and behind closed doors. It is necessary to reach agreement between coalition partners on policy, but also on personalities. If such an agreement can be reached, it carries the potential to create confidence among the parties that their cooperation will lead to the implementation of at least part of their agenda and will be appreciated by their constituencies. As yet, however, neither political system has found a way to address their respective impasses.

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [European Council](#)
