

Experts react: 2014 Bulgarian parliamentary elections

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07/10/2014

Bulgaria held parliamentary elections on 5 October following the resignation of the country's government in July. We asked six experts in Bulgarian politics for their reactions to the result, which saw former Prime Minister Boyko Borisov's Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) emerge with the largest share of seats in parliament.

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Dimitar Bechev: Who's the winner then? Arguably, the smaller parties

In my career as a pundit I have seen many an election where many if not all the contenders would declare themselves winners once results emerge. Bulgaria's early polls held last Sunday may be a case to the contrary. The two leading parties both have clear reasons to feel sorry. The centre-right [Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria](#) (GERB), which finished ahead of everyone else with a respectable 32.7 per cent, secured just 87 seats – a far cry from its 116-strong caucus in 2009-13 or even its 97 MPs back in May 2013. The party led by Boyko Borisov will find it difficult to form a coalition. Adding the [Reformist Bloc](#) (RB) as a partner won't do the trick as the new government will still fall short of a majority in the Bulgarian legislature.



But things look even worse for the [Bulgarian Socialist Party](#) (BSP). Once “the natural party of government”, the post-communist outfit recorded its lowest result (15.4 per cent) since the start of multi-party politics in 1990. The humiliation is double: not only is the percentage twice as low as GERB's, but the party came close to being overtaken by the [Movement for Rights and Freedoms](#) (MRF), supported mainly by Bulgarian Turks and Muslims. Had that happened it would have dealt it a heavy psychological blow. Sofia is abuzz with conspiracy theories that MRF actually reined in its proverbially disciplined voters, both in Turkey and in Bulgaria, to artificially lower its own vote count and avoid such a scenario.

One thing is certain however, BSP is no longer the sole competitor for the votes of those nostalgic for the “golden era” pre-1989. A splinter party led by ex-President Georgy Parvanov, BSP's erstwhile leader, won enough votes to make it past the 4 per cent threshold. From the perspective of Sunday's vote, it is not inconceivable that the Socialists repeat the fate of their centre-left counterparts in Poland and Hungary, especially given their abysmal performance in all age brackets under 60 and the failure to win first place in any of the electoral districts.

Who's the winner then? Arguably, the smaller parties. Starting with the Reformist Bloc, gathering parties that all go back to the 1990s anti-communist opposition, which came out strongly with nearly 9 per cent of the vote. Populists such as [Bulgaria Without Censorship](#) (BWC) and the Patriotic Front also did exceptionally well. But against the odds, Parvanov's [Alternative for Bulgaria's Renaissance](#) (ABV) and the ultranationalist [Ataka](#) cleared the 4 per cent

hurdle, too.

But let's not forget that the overall success of "second-tier" parties has lots to do with the exceptionally low, even by Bulgarian standards, turnout. Final data are still to be released but it is certain that less than half of the eligible voters bothered to come to the polling stations. It sets a grim record in Bulgaria's post-communist history, with widespread distrust in politicians and institutions being the principal cause. Ironically, Borisov owes his political career to his ability to market himself as the purveyor of justice standing in for the common man and against predatory parties and their business clients. This time round he is on the receiving end as the fragmented parliament, in effect, denies him the kind of victory he was hoping for.

Bulgaria is heading for weeks of nerve-wrecking efforts to cobble together a government. GERB's relations with the Reformist Bloc are strained due to their condition that Borisov should not be at the cabinet's helm. Choosing a third partner also causes much headache. The Patriotic Front is ready and willing but its nationalist rhetoric, though moderate in comparison to Ataka's, will surely be frowned upon by both GERB's much courted Western European partners and at least some of the Reformist Bloc's liberal-minded constituents. But all this does not necessarily preclude forming a three-way coalition. In the meantime, Borisov is toying with the idea of a minority government (a non-starter for sure), occasionally hinting at a European-style grand coalition with the Socialists, and, most recently, issuing unveiled threats that without him in power a new cycle of instability would ensue leading to fresh elections several months down the road. Still, such words have the whiff of bargaining tactics.

Whatever the shape and the composition of the next government, it will face formidable challenges. There are two immediate ones: first, what to do about the ailing Corporate Commercial Bank which has long been at the centre of political corruption in Bulgaria and now is facing bankruptcy as collateral damage in a ruthless clash within the oligarchic network behind it. Second comes the energy sector, which has been in dire straits due to delayed reforms and the billions siphoned off thanks to large-scale projects such as the Belene nuclear plant or indeed the Bulgarian section of South Stream. Whoever takes over power in Sofia is not in for a pleasant ride.

Dimitar Bechev – LSE

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Aneta Spendzharova: The new government will need a thick skin to solve the country's latest predicaments – and, perhaps, a hint of magic

GERB has emerged as the frontrunner to form Bulgaria's next government, with [33 per cent of the vote](#). Its leader, Boyko Borisov, will need to find political parties that are willing to take risks and show that coalition politics can be principled and transparent.



Among GERB's possible coalition partners, I would single out the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) with a currently projected 38 seats, Reformist Bloc (RB) with 23 seats, and Patriotic Front (PF) with 15 seats. Yet Bulgarian politics is more akin to *House of Cards* than *The West Wing*. MRF has not been able to dispel its reputation for corruption and clientelism, and RB has clearly stated that it will not take part in any coalition that includes MRF. One of RB's leaders, Radan Kanev, stressed that he will not support a government led by Boyko Borisov. All in all, GERB's starting point is to go it alone. However, a minority government forebodes instability and ad hoc crisis management.

Consider a few items on top of the next government's agenda. First, the government will need to find a bail-out solution for Corporate and Commercial Bank (CCB), which has been under the conservatorship of the Bulgarian National Bank since June 2014. The latest estimates indicate that the government will need at least 2 billion leva (€1

billion) to recapitalise the bank. Second, it will need to cover the losses of the National Electricity Company (NEC), which has been used as a piggy bank by preceding governments. So far, NEC has registered a net loss of 249.2 million leva (€124.6 million) for 2014. Third, the new government will have to invest in comprehensive maintenance of the crumbling socialist-period infrastructure, such as dams and water ways. Fourth, the budget deficit will need to be reduced back down to 3 per cent of GDP. Currently, the projected deficit stands at 4 per cent and might increase further.

Party leaders' statements during election night [suggest](#) that a GERB-led minority government or coalition will take Bulgaria's commitments to the EU more seriously than the preceding BSP-MRF government. But will it dare address the country's pressing problems? Bulgarian public opinion has shown little tolerance for slow responses and waffling about long-delayed structural reforms. Against this backdrop, the new government will need a thick skin to solve the country's latest predicaments – and, perhaps, a hint of magic.

Aneta Spendzharova – *Maastricht University*

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Boyko Vassilev: Bulgarian media have a problem – public awareness on this issue is crucial

The electoral campaign was boring, but this was not entirely down to the media. It was boring for two reasons: the winner (GERB) was obvious, and there was the feeling that [this winner would have hard tasks to solve](#). So what was left open in the campaign was only the question of who the winner would form a coalition with. This question is still open right now. There was only one topic in the campaign: the crisis of the Corporate and Commercial Bank (KTB). Politicians did not want to address this issue in depth because nobody actually knows the details. But this was not a particular spin given by the media – it was rather the peculiarity of the political situation.



The problems surrounding Bulgarian media, however, should not be underestimated. The issue is extremely complicated and it should be addressed. I can speak of my personal experience at the public broadcasting service. The Bulgarian National Television is the most underfinanced public broadcaster in the whole of Europe. While we were trying to cover objectively the turmoil and the protests that have shaken the previous government, 5m leva in subsidies – a substantial percentage – were cut. That happened shortly after the protests started. We were not provided with a plausible explanation and have the suspicion that this was done because of our independent coverage.

This is only one example that shows how complicated the media scene is. In the case of public media, I believe that support for a public independent service is crucial. In Bulgaria, perhaps even more than elsewhere, this is really a matter of survival: for Bulgarian society, but also for the state itself. Nobody would benefit if the messenger is corrupted or oppressed. Or, in the case of restricted funds for national television – put on the margins. Unfortunately, the problems for Bulgaria are so many that I wonder if media would come first on a list of priorities, or even second.

It should be noted that there are some electoral campaigning regulations which apply only to public media. Private media can do whatever they want – they can rely on self-regulation. In the case of the three main television programmes, I think the election coverage was quite fair and unbiased. But again, the substance of the campaign depends very much on the actors. You can provide extra opportunities for them to debate, but if they don't want to debate, they won't. In this case, parties were very careful – especially the big players, while the small players were less so. And they still are very careful. I think that public awareness that Bulgarian public media have a problem is crucial if we want to settle the state beginning from A and B.

Boyko Vassilev

Boyko Vassilev is Chief Editor of current affairs at Bulgarian National Television. He is also moderator and producer of the weekly Panorama news talk show.

James Dawson: GERB finds itself in a very strong position internationally

If, as seems likely, GERB will be able to form a coalition government with the help of some smaller parties, then it is reasonable to expect that the party's leadership will work hard to restore the confidence of investors and international financial bodies who have been unimpressed by the calamitous 14-month cohabitation in government of the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) and the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF). Whether the party, still led by the colourful strongman Boyko Borisov and his resignation-proof deputy [Tsvetan Tsvetanov](#), will pursue this programme in a way that actually strengthens democracy in the country is much more open to question. Their previous term in power suggests that we ought to be sceptical on this front.



In the context of the spectacular implosion of the BSP-MRF coalition amid bank runs and stories of collusion with the Kremlin, it is unsurprising that many Bulgarian analysts are greeting the probable return to government of the enthusiastically pro-EU pro-NATO GERB party [as a bit of a relief](#). It should be remembered that the previous GERB administration of 2009-2013 oversaw a conspicuous deterioration in the country's standing in [Press Freedom \(RWB\)](#), [Corruption \(TI\)](#) and [Democracy \(FH Nations in Transit\)](#) indices, yet, then as now, many of the country's intellectuals were inclined to give the party [the benefit of the doubt](#).

After all, GERB at least managed to back up its 'fiscal discipline' rhetoric by implementing classic austerity policies that kept the country on the right side of the ECB and the IMF. Such congruence of word and deed is unusual in a domestic political context where the BSP has long combined social democratic rhetoric with actual policies much more accommodating to its rich backers than its impoverished supporters, while the MRF has done little to allay suspicions that it is dedicated to improving the socio-economic condition of the country's Turks only one party official at a time.

Another decisive factor in GERB's favour is the revived big-brother sponsorship offered to the party by Germany's ruling Christian Democratic Union. Ahead of GERB's election win in 2009, the CDU had sent senior party officials to share the stage with Borisov and make stirring speeches in support of the party. Similarly, the party's Presidential candidate Rosen Plevneliev [was afforded](#) a meeting and photo opportunity with Merkel ahead of that poll in 2011. During GERB's term in office, however, this relationship was accompanied by whispers around the *stiftungs* in Sofia that the flair GERB displayed for [wire-tapping](#), [media control](#) (see also [here](#)), [tampering with electoral codes \(OSCE 2012\)](#) and [cooperation with dubious businessmen](#) (and [here](#)) was causing misgivings about this arrangement within the CDU, especially when the GERB government collapsed in the face of massive popular protests (triggered by the combination of high energy bills and low living standards) in early 2013.

However, fast-forward to the eve of this election and we can find that Chancellor Merkel is [telling the Bulgarian electorate](#) that GERB 'exemplifies European values' such as democracy, the rule of law and stable government. In short, GERB has been given a free pass. At a time when the Kremlin is acting more aggressively than it has for a few decades and many European leaders remain desperately in need of allies to shore up the shaky political consensus in favour of continent-wide austerity, GERB finds itself in a very strong position internationally. GERB promises deeper European integration, a return to fiscal discipline and the consolidation of democracy. The first two of these may be considered priorities.

James Dawson – *University College London*

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(Ashgate, forthcoming).

Cristina Chiva: Given the options, the real question is whether GERB can afford to keep the Movement for Rights and Freedoms out of government

All the votes have been counted and the results are in: altogether, eight parties are to enter Bulgaria's parliament after the October 2014 elections. The winner of the elections is Citizens for Bulgaria's European Development (GERB, 32.67 per cent of the vote), followed at some distance by all the other parties. In the spring of 2013, GERB had to hand back the mandate to form a government. In the autumn of 2014, GERB is faced with a wide range of potential coalition partners. Yet, none of the options on the table is fully palatable for the GERB leadership.

A first option would be for GERB to form an alliance with the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF). Given the two parties' performance in the elections, the coalition would bring a large parliamentary majority. The problem is that MRF has become uncoalitionable: the Oresharski government's decision to appoint DPS MP Delyan Peevski as head of the Bulgarian security services led to street protests and eventually to the resignation of the government.

A second option would be an alliance between GERB and the Reformist Bloc. The problem here is that the two parties together would have approximately 110 of the 240 seats in the National Assembly, and would therefore need a third party to secure a majority. None of the other parties appear particularly attractive, be it because they are on the left side of the spectrum (Bulgarian Socialist Party, Alternative for Bulgarian Renaissance), on the populist side and potentially GERB's competitor (Bulgaria without Censorship), or nationalist (Ataka, the Patriotic Front).

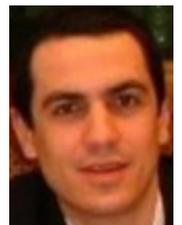
A third option, which the GERB leadership seems to prefer at the moment, is a minority government. Nevertheless, this would be the least like to result in a stable government over the next parliamentary term. Given the options, the real question is whether GERB can afford to keep the Movement for Rights and Freedoms out of government. After all, this is the only scenario where a stable parliamentary majority is possible over the long term.

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Dragomir Stoyanov: The elections show the increasing alienation of citizens from the democratic political process

The elections came after a year of civic protests in Sofia against the coalition government of Plamen Oresharski (under a coalition between the Bulgarian Socialist Party and the Movement for Rights and Freedoms, supported by the nationalist party Ataka). The goal of these protests has been to make domestic politics more transparent and accountable, as well as to encourage greater participation among citizens. The results of the 5 October elections show us that this goal has not been achieved.



First, the turnout in this election has been unexpectedly low – below 50 per cent. This is the lowest in the entire history of democratic elections in Bulgaria since the fall of communism, and it illustrates the deep divide that exists between the political class and citizens, which is symptomatic of the current state of democracy in the country. Second, there is the rise of populist parties in the country. Apart from Ataka, two new populist coalitions will have MPs in the new composition of the Parliament. “[Patriotic Front](#)”, a coalition of IMRO and National Front for Salvation of Bulgaria (NFSB) can easily be classified as a coalition of nationalist-populists. Another coalition, “[Bulgaria Without Censorship](#)” (which is a member of the European Conservatives and Reformists in the European Parliament, alongside the UK's Conservative Party) is a party with a short history and an aggressive populist discourse, promising everything to everybody.

Finally, there is the victory of GERB for the third consecutive time. A party with strong personal leadership, in the face of Boyko Borisov, it will try to form a minority government by recruiting partners and seeking support among other parties and coalitions represented in the parliament. The formation of a new government will not be an easy task and will most probably require some under-cover compromises, putting on hold crucial reforms in sectors such as education, healthcare and social policy.

The elections show the increasing alienation of citizens from the democratic political process. Coupled with the long-standing corruption, nepotism and patronage which exists in Bulgaria, this may indicate a degradation of the democratic political system of the country in the long term. In this respect, the European commitment of the country will continue to be under threat.

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