



## Bulgaria Before the Parliamentary Elections

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On 4 April, Bulgaria will hold elections to the unicameral National Assembly. Prime Minister Boyko Borisov's party, Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB), has the best chance to win. Social dissatisfaction with systemic corruption would ensure the election of new opposition parties. The probable continuation of Borisov's government would bring further efforts to join the euro area, but also little chance of a real fight against corruption, necessary for Bulgaria to move closer to entering the Schengen area.

GERB has governed this term with United Patriots, an alliance of small nationalist parties. When they protested, Borisov has turned to support from the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS), a party of Bulgarian Turks that protects the interests of oligarchs, or the populist party Will. Only the post-communist Bulgarian Socialist Party (BPS) comprises the parliamentary opposition, and Borisov's main adversary is President Rumen Radev, who is backed by BPS.

**A New Deal in Parliament.** The presumed win would allow Borisov, the three-time prime minister since 2009, to maintain his political domination. According to polls from March, GERB could obtain 28-31% of the votes. BPS would pick up 23-24%, putting it second. DPS has a very loyal electorate and would get 11-12%. The parties of the United Patriots would split the remainder. The Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation-Bulgarian National Movement (IMRO-BND) and the National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria—forming now a joint list with Will—would strive for the same electorate and overcoming the 4% electoral threshold.

New parties would likely enter parliament after presenting themselves as opposition to the corrupt establishment. The strongest of these, There Is Such a People, may win 8-13%. It is an eclectic group that combines postulates of European integration, economic freedom, direct democracy, and traditional values. It is based on its charismatic leader, the musician and celebrity Slavi Trifonov, who avoids debates and questions from journalists. The liberal and pro-ecological Democratic Bulgaria may gain 4-6% of the votes.

On the threshold is Stand Up! Mafia Out!, a coalition of the former ombudsman Maia Manolova's left-wing movement and [the leaders of the 2020 anti-government protests](#).

**Elections During a Pandemic.** In 2020, Bulgaria had the highest increase in deaths in the EU compared to 2019, at 2,293 per million inhabitants, compared to the EU average of 1,039. However, Borisov has convinced the electorate that other countries are envious of the alleged "Bulgarian model" of fighting COVID-19. Therefore, despite an escalating third wave of infections, the government has allowed restaurants to be open since 1 March this year and delayed return to a lockdown until 18 March, indicating that restrictions are ineffective and costly. However, this stance corresponds to voters' moods—according to a MarketLinks survey from the beginning of March, 60% wanted to ease the restrictions. At the same time, Borisov, posing as a leader preferring public health over party interests, ordered the health minister to stop campaigning and focus on the pandemic.

In the campaign, the prime minister presents the vaccination programme as a great success of his government. This could be confirmed by the decision that everyone who wants to be vaccinated could queue up since the middle of February and projections that vaccination herd immunity will be reached in the summer. By mid-March, however, only 4.2 in 100 people had received the first of the two required doses—in the EU, only Latvia had a worse result. The reason was that Bulgaria purchased initially only a third of the doses it was entitled to under a deal brokered by the European Commission (EC). The

government also preferred the cheaper AstraZeneca vaccines, the delivery of which was delayed by producers. To shake off responsibility, Borisov, along with the heads of the governments of Austria, Croatia, Czechia, Latvia, and Slovenia, accused the Commission of an unfair distribution of the vaccines. The electorate's fear of the third wave and its [pro-Russia sentiments](#) are being exploited by BPS. The party applied to buy Sputnik V, which was rejected in March by parliament. The BPS announced that if it won the elections, it would start talks about acquiring vaccines from China and Russia.

**Other Internal Issues.** GERB presents economic stabilisation as its main success, confirmed by Bulgaria's accession to the banking union and ERM II in July 2020. To strengthen this claim of success among the electorate, the government announced in March that Bulgaria would introduce the euro from 2024, and therefore promises increases in salaries and benefits with this currency. At the same time, GERB accuses the opposition of trying to destabilise the economy by its proposal of replacing the current 10% flat tax with a progressive system.

The opposition's main proposal though is to remove GERB from power as necessary to eliminating corruption and the oligarchic system. In 2020, Bulgaria was cited as having the lowest media freedom and, along with Romania and Hungary, the most corrupt in the EU. However, during his decade in office, Borisov has convinced a large part of the electorate that he is the only guarantor of Bulgaria's pro-Western course and that the fight against corruption is being sabotaged by BPS and only the country's *raison d'état* is forcing him to cooperate with the oligarchic DPS. An example of this is the support from Movement in voting for [the purchase of F-16s from the U.S.](#), which was opposed by the pro-Russia part of United Patriots. Borisov presents the return to power of BPS as a return to the corruption that reached such a scale that in 2008 the Commission suspended structural funds for Bulgaria.

**The Macedonian Issue in the Campaign.** To further distract the society away from the protests in 2020, GERB exacerbated the identity dispute with North Macedonia. This resulted in [a Bulgarian veto of the start of Macedonian accession negotiations with the EU](#). Bulgaria's partners accuse it of undermining the Union's credibility in the Western Balkans. However, Borisov cannot soften his stance given the consensus in society to impose a Bulgarian vision of history and identity on North Macedonia. This policy is supported by 84% of Bulgarians, according to Alpha Research from November 2020, and the political opposition; what is more, BPS and President Radev even accuse the government of being too compliant on this issue.

During the campaign, GERB left the Macedonian issue to IMRO-BND. It aims to help its coalition partner gather the nationalist electorate and cross the electoral threshold. Therefore, Borisov has avoided fuelling the dispute and

only reacts to Radev's accusations that the government is passive in the face of alleged harassment by Macedonian Bulgarians. On the other hand, he does not restrain the deputy prime minister and minister of defence, the leader of IMRO-BND, Krasimir Karakachanov. The latter provoked his Macedonian ideological rival, the anti-Bulgarian IMRO-Democratic Party of Macedonian National Unity, by publishing a list of that party's politicians who had declared themselves Bulgarians in order to receive Bulgarian citizenship and an EU passport.

**Conclusions and Perspectives.** According to the current support for government parties, GERB would need additional support to create a stable coalition. It could find it in the DPS or by peeling away support from the loose collective There Is Such a People. If construction of a coalition is not possible, Borisov may seek to form a minority government with the informal support of DPS again. On the other hand, while a victory by BPS is less likely, it cannot be ruled out due to the slight difference in the polls and the exacerbation of the pandemic in Bulgaria just before the elections (higher incidence) and the government's inconsistency in the restrictions. A coalition with the socialists is rejected by both GERB and the new groups.

Future GERB governments would maintain Bulgaria's current foreign policy, including [military cooperation with the U.S.](#) and [energy cooperation with Russia](#). The possible lack of nationalist parties in the new term would favour an agreement with North Macedonia. Attempting to achieve it before the autumn presidential elections in Bulgaria could weaken the chances of a future GERB candidate against Radev, who is seeking re-election and who is willing to use the Macedonian issue. Blocking North Macedonia's integration with the EU is unfavourable for Poland, which supports EU enlargement in the Balkans by [working for over a decade to strengthen Macedonian state institutions](#).

A GERB government would maintain the current political and business systems in Bulgaria. Further simulations of the fight against corruption and organised crime would remain an argument by, for example, the Netherlands to oppose the Bulgarian accession to the Schengen area. In turn, Bulgaria's accession is important from the point of view of the ambitious infrastructural and development plans of the Three Seas Initiative. Deficiencies in combating corruption may also be proof of [Bulgaria's lack of real convergence](#), justifying, for example, Austrian opposition to its entry into the euro area despite meeting the ERM II requirements. The EU partners have not decided to use other instruments towards Bulgaria, such as financial ones, but the U.S.—considered by GERB as the guarantor of state security—may try to force a change. The Biden administration has announced its will to press for high anti-corruption standards and the rule of law in cooperation with its partners.