

Fifth general elections in two years in Bulgaria

As the country faces a political crisis preventing the formation of stable government coalitions, Bulgarians are being called to the polls on 2 April for the fifth time in two years to elect 240 members of the National Assembly (Narodno sabranie), the single chamber of Parliament.

5,621 people from 14 political parties and 7 party coalitions are officially candidates for this election. 750 polling stations will be open in 34 countries around the world.

This fifth legislative election is being held in the context of high inflation and economic stagnation. Sofia's adoption of the euro has been postponed by one year to 2025 due to political instability, as the crisis has prevented the adoption of the reforms necessary for its introduction.

THE POLITICAL CRISIS

In the summer of 2020, Bulgaria experienced major demonstrations that reflected the deep discontent amongst part of the population. These followed a real estate scandal in which several members of the Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) party of Prime Minister Boyko Borissov (2009-2013, 2014-2017, 2017-2021), including the Ministers of Justice, Sports, Energy and Culture, were involved. The head of government reshuffled his coalition but GERB fell sharply in opinion polls.

A few months later, the general elections of 4 April 2021 failed to produce a majority. None of the three leading parties - GERB, Such a People Exist (Ima takuv narod, ITN) and the Socialist Party (BSP) - managed to secure a majority in their own names or to reach an agreement to form a majority government, leading to a further general election on 11 July 2021. Following this, the leaders of the three parties were again asked by President Rumen Radev to form a government. Once again, each of them failed.

On 14 November 2021, Let's Continue the Change, a coalition founded by Kiril Petkov and Asen Vassilev, created a surprise by coming first in the third general elections with 25.32% of the vote, winning 67 of the 240 seats in parliament. Boyko Borissov's GERB came second with 22.44% of the vote and 59 seats, ahead of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS), a party representing the Turkish-speaking minority, which won 12.83% and 34 seats. Let's Continue the Change formed a government in December 2021 with the Socialist Party, Such a People Exist and Democratic Bulgaria, a liberal coalition that brings together Yes Bulgaria, Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria and the Greens. The coalition agreement uniting these 4 parties focused on the fight against corruption, the reform of the justice system and the modernisation of the health system. However, this coalition was subject to a no-confidence motion on 22 June 2022, a first in Bulgaria's history.

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As a result, new general elections were held on 2 October 2022 which failed to find a solution to the political crisis in Bulgaria. GERB came out ahead with 24.48% of the vote, followed by Let's Continue the Change, 19.62%, and the Movement for Rights and Freedoms, 13.29%. Turnout was very low, partly due to voter fatigue after four legislative elections (and one presidential election) in eighteen months. Fewer than one in four voters (39.30%) went to the polls (25.58%).

The elections confirmed both the continued popularity of Boyko Borisov and the impossibility for him to gather a majority under his name. No coalition was able to obtain the approval of the 240 members of the Parliament.

On 3 February 2023, the President of the Republic, Roumen Radev, again dissolved parliament and called new general elections for 2 April.

According to the latest opinion poll carried out at the end of February by the Market Links institute for the BTV television channel, the coalition formed by Kiril Petkov and Asen Vassilev's Let's Continue the Change and Hristo Ivanov's Democratic Bulgaria are forecast to come out just ahead of GERB with 20.9% and 20.40% of the vote. The Movement for Rights and Freedoms, representing the Turkish-speaking minority and led by Mustafa Karadayi, is expected to get 13.3% of the vote, Revival (Vazrazhdane, V), a nationalist party led by Kostadin Kostanidov, which is in favour of Bulgaria's exit from the European Union and NATO and a rapprochement with Russia, is expected to get 11.8% of the vote, and finally, Korneliya Ninova's Socialist Party (BSP), 6.60%.

No other party is expected to surpass the 4% threshold required to be represented in Parliament.

THE PARTIES RUNNING

GERB is still the country's largest party. It accounts for about a quarter of the voters. *"Many people have not yet made their choice for the general elections. At the moment, two forces are fighting for the top spot and are practically tied,"* said political scientist Dobromir Zhivkov, who pointed to the resources of Revival.

"With the initiative of a referendum on the euro, it is once again trying to make a power move in the electoral campaign and to mobilise more than just its supporters," he said.

For its part, Let's Continue the Change has decided to form a coalition with Democratic Bulgaria. The parties have set thirteen goals, including reforming the prosecutor's office, joining the Schengen area and the eurozone, and creating a better environment for an honest business climate. The leader of Let's Continue the Change, former Prime Minister Kiril Petkov, is still refusing any alliance with GERB, a party that he believes embodies *"Bulgaria's corrupt past"*.

The Socialist Party, struggling in the polls, is beset by strong tension. Its leader Korneliya Ninova has said she will not enter into an alliance with GERB but was heavily criticised at the 50th BSP congress. Several members have been expelled from the party in recent weeks, and hundreds have resigned.

A group of former Socialist Party members, led by Valeri Zhablyanov, has formed a coalition with 6 other parties called the Left (Levitsata). The coalition includes Rumen Petkov's Alternative for Renewal (ABV), Maya Manolova's Stand Up IS, Tatyana Doncheva's Movement 21 (D 21), Krasimir Iankov's Progressive Line (BPL), Georgi Kadiev's Normal State (ND) and Spas Panchev's Agrarian Union 'Alexander Stamboliyski' (ZS-AS). Wage increases, price cuts and the fight against monopolies and corruption are their priorities.

The election campaign started on 3 March and will end on 31 March at midnight.

THE BULGARIAN POLITICAL SYSTEM

The Bulgarian Parliament is unicameral. The National Assembly (Narodno sabranie) has 240 deputies, elected every 4 years in 31 multi-member constituencies corresponding to the country's oblasti (counties). The voting system is mixed: 31 deputies are elected by the majority system (first past the post) and 209 by the proportional representation system (on closed lists).

The Hare-Niemeyer method is used for the distribution of seats.

A minimum of 4% of the votes cast is required for a political party to be represented in Parliament. Those wishing to run must be at least 21 years old. Parties must collect signatures from at least 15,000 voters and are obliged to deposit with the electoral authorities the sum of 10,000 lev (€5,113) which is reimbursed if they obtain a minimum of 1% of the votes cast.

Independent candidates must be supported by a minimum of 10,000 voters from the constituency in which they are running.

Since 2016, Bulgarians have also been able to cast a ballot paper in both the presidential and general elections with the explicit statement "*I do not support any of the candidates*".

7 political parties are represented in the current Parliament:

- Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB), founded in 2006 by former Prime Minister (2009-2013, 2014-2017, 2017-2021) Boiko Borissov, has 67 members;
- Let's Continue the Change, a liberal coalition founded by Kiril Petkov and Asen Vassilev, has 53 seats;

- The Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS), founded in 1989 and led by Mustafa Karadayi, has 36 seats;

- Revival (Vazrazhdane, V), a nationalist party, founded in 2014 and led by Kostadin Kostanidov, has 27 seats;

- The Socialist Party (BSP), led by Korneliya Ninova, has 25 MPs;

- Democratic Bulgaria, a liberal coalition that brings together Yes Bulgaria, Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria and the Greens and led by Hristo Ivanov, has 20 MPs;

- Bulgarian Rise (BV), a party founded by Stefan Yanev, former Prime Minister of an expert government (May-December 2021) and former Minister of Defence (December 2021-March 2022), who was dismissed by Kiril Petkov because of his weak support for Ukraine, has 12 seats.

Bulgarians also elect their President of the Republic by direct universal suffrage. On 21 November 2021, Rumen Radev, supported by the Socialist Party, Let's Continue the Change, Such a People Exist and Stand Up Bulgaria! We are coming! (Izpravi se BG! Nie idvame!), was elected for a second term in the second round of the presidential election with 66.72% of the vote. He beat Anastas Gerdzhikov, supported by GERB and the Union of Democratic Forces (ODS), who won 31.80% of the vote. The turnout stood at 33.55%.

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Reminder of the results of the 2 October 2022 general elections in Bulgaria

Turnout: 39.30%

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Political parties	N° of votes won	% of votes won	N° of seats
Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB)	634 627	24.48	67
Let's Continue the Change	506 099	19.52	53
Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS)	344 512	13.29	36
Revival (Vazrazhdane, V)	254 952	9.83	27
Socialist Party (BSP)	232 958	8.98	25
Democratic Bulgaria	186 528	7.19	20
Bulgarian Rise (BV)	115 872	4.47	12
There is such a people (Ima takuv narod, ITN)	96 071	3.71	0
Stand up Bulgaria! (Izpravi se BG!)	25 207	0.97	0
Others	205 122	7.54	0

Source : <https://results.cik.bg/ns2022/rezultati/index.html>

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