

# Election exacerbates political crisis in Bulgaria

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According to the first results, the right-wing conservative GERB party of government leader Boyko Borisov once again emerged as the strongest force from Sunday's parliamentary elections in Bulgaria. It only achieved around 24 percent of the vote, losing about 10 percent compared to the 2017 election, and voter turnout was at an all-time low of 47.5 percent.

Although the final election results are not expected until today, it is already clear the majority of the population not only rejects the policies of the right-wing Borisov government but also has no confidence in the other establishment parties in the Balkan country. The opposition Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) came in at around 15 percent after the preliminary count, losing about 12 percent compared to the last election. The ultra-nationalist WMRO, which had last formed a coalition with Borisov, failed to clear the four-percent hurdle and will not be represented in the new parliament.

On the other hand, the "Democratic Bulgaria" party, which with ex-justice minister Hristo Ivanov was involved in the organisation of the mass demonstrations against Borisov last year, will enter parliament. With around 10 percent, it was just ahead of the party of the Turkish minority, which will again enter the 240-seat parliament with 9.4 percent.

The party "There is such a people" of TV presenter and singer Slavi Trifonov was able to benefit from the defeat of the establishment parties. Founded in 2019, it became the second strongest force in its first election participation with over 18 percent of the vote.

Yet the party's political programme is limited to vague criticism of rampant corruption in the country and the government's influence on the media. During the election campaign, Trifonov did not hold any events or rallies; its election closing event was a music concert

in an empty hall. Most voters under 30 voted for Trifonov.

The fact more than half of Bulgarians stayed away from the polls and almost a fifth of the electorate voted for a well-known entertainer with no political programme to speak of says volumes about the political conditions in the poorest EU member state.

The fact that Borisov enjoys hardly any support among the population had already become apparent after the last election in 2017. To achieve a wafer-thin parliamentary majority, GERB entered into a coalition with the fascist party alliance United Patriots (VP). The alliance included the National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria, the Macedonian Internal Revolutionary Organisation (WMRO) and Ataka.

WMRO, the largest of the three organisations, is the successor to a nationalist militia that had used terrorist means fighting for decades for a Greater Bulgaria including Macedonia. The National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria also openly advocates fascist and racist positions. It emerged from the Ataka party in 2011.

Last year, thousands of people demonstrated against the prime minister and the government almost every day for two months. They demanded its resignation, new elections and fundamental reforms in the state apparatus. Borisov, who started his career in the Stalinist Communist Party, is seen as the embodiment of a system characterised by corruption and a close intertwining of oligarchs, politics and the state. Although the protests were organised by equally discredited figures, they expressed widespread opposition to the political and social circumstances in the country.

While the living conditions of the general population continued to deteriorate, the government increased

spending on the repressive state apparatus and military and conducted racist campaigns against refugees and the Roma minority.

A report by the Federation of Independent Trade Unions shows that 65 percent of the population is currently unable or barely able to cover their living costs. With monthly costs for a household of two adults and two children at €1,300, 22 percent of households earn less than the €185 per household member per month considered to be the poverty line. Another 43 percent of households have a monthly income that lies between this poverty line and €1,300. Accordingly, only 35 percent earn incomes above €1,300.

The coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated the situation over the past year. While unemployment has risen, the average hourly wage has fallen in 2020. It is now only €2.40. In the tourism industry, wages fell by almost 30 percent, while the number of workers fell by 40 percent. In the air transport industry, wages have fallen by 28 percent and the number of workers by 19 percent.

At the same time, government policies are responsible for the catastrophic impact of the coronavirus pandemic. In the country of almost 7 million inhabitants, the number of new daily infections exceeded 4,200 at the end of March, reaching new highs. Meanwhile, according to official figures, 13,589 people have died from COVID-19. The country's hospitals are completely overloaded. "We are almost at our limit," Assen Baltov, director of Bulgaria's largest emergency hospital, said in a recent radio interview. With 12,145 cases, infections among medical staff are extremely high.

As late as March 1, with another wave already looming, the government opened up the dining sector and other facilities after a lockdown late last year. Although medical experts warned of the consequences of such a step, government representatives praised this "Bulgarian model." The result was a rapid and dramatic increase in the number of cases, which continues.

The Roma minority is particularly affected. Last year, entire settlements were sealed off by the police, allegedly to prevent the spread of the virus. Residents were only allowed to leave their neighbourhoods in exceptional cases. Not infrequently, the few who had one lost their jobs because they could not reach it.

Roma receive state support only in rare cases.

The virus spreads easily in Roma communities. Large families must live together in a very small space. While the average person has 23 square metres of living space, among the Roma it is only 11. Half of the houses inhabited by Roma do not even have a connection to the sewage system. Technical conditions that would be necessary for homeschooling for children do not exist in these settlements.

It is already clear that forming a government will be difficult and there may have to be further elections if the parties are unable to reach an agreement. Notwithstanding its coalition with fascist forces and its disastrous coronavirus policies, the GERB government enjoys the support of the most powerful states in the EU because Borisov follows an EU-friendly course and does not maintain close relations with Russia.

Borisov responded to the electoral defeat by calling for the formation of a "government of experts" supported by all parties. "I am glad that so many parties have come to parliament because I am tired of being in charge alone," he declared. Borisov is well aware that under the present circumstances mass protests could break out again, which none of the discredited parties can contain.



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