

Bulgaria's Deepening Political Crisis: An Opportunity to Separate the Wheat from the Chaff

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Abstract: *On 2 April 2023, Bulgaria will face its fifth parliamentary election in the span of two years. To restore democracy and the rule of law, one must sideline all toxic actors – from those who inflicted damage on the country's rule of law to the poisonous lookalikes flooding the political stage.*

After the failure of its 48th National Assembly ([19 October 2022](#) – 2 February 2023) to elect a government, Bulgaria is now headed towards a new snap parliamentary election in April 2023. It will be the fifth one in the span of two years. To this end, foreign analysts have [pointed out](#) that “crisis” is the “new status quo” in Bulgaria.

Indeed, at first glance, the fact that a country has not managed to elect a steady regular government for two years and has plunged into an endless spiral of parliamentary elections may appear disconcerting. However, one should not forget how this perceived crisis started – with the desire to put an end to Boyko Borissov's [stable autocratic rule](#) which sparked the [mass anticorruption protests](#) of 2020. Clearly, when challenged, an autocracy will employ all mechanisms possible to ensure its survival – from sabotaging fair elections, through deviating votes via newly created fake opposition parties, to trying to persuade foreign actors to put pressure on the true opposition to collaborate with Borissov's GERB party.

Hence, considering the particularities of Bulgaria's context, this crisis is a much-needed purgatory and an opportunity to separate the wheat from the chaff – namely, distinguish the real harbingers of change from the imposters – and learn some tough lessons. But who are the lessons for? First, we, Bulgarian citizens, should realize that cynicism on the Bulgarian political stage has reached new heights and should be wary of wolves who claim that they have changed their character. Second, Bulgarian political parties dedicated to anticorruption efforts and rule of law reforms should raise their game – an autocracy will not collaborate in its dismantling. Finally, Bulgaria's Euro-Atlantic partners should be aware that by endorsing Borissov, they not only

damage their reputation in the eyes of the critical Bulgarian public but deliver a blow to the very values they endorse.

How Did We Get to the October 2022 Snap Parliamentary Election?

To understand the aftermath of the October 2022 snap parliamentary election, one needs to delve into the circumstances that led to it:

An Autocrat Who Does Not Want to Go Away

In 2020, Bulgaria saw [mass protests](#) against the corruption of Boyko Borissov's regime and General Prosecutor Ivan Geshev. Borissov tried to rely on [a large arsenal of tricks](#) to attempt to deceive the public and prevent a snap parliamentary election – from teary public speeches, through a cabinet reshuffle, to a bogus proposal for a new Constitution. While he indeed managed to avoid a snap election, at the [regular parliamentary election](#) in April 2021 his GERB party was unpleasantly surprised – they came in first, but they did not have enough seats in parliament to elect a government.

Sadly, the opposition was in a difficult position too for it did not have enough seats to elect a government either. A snap parliamentary election in July 2021 was inevitable.

The “Poisonous Lookalike” Phenomenon

At the time of the regular election in April 2021, the largest new opposition party, which made it to parliament, was Slavi Trifonov's “There Is Such People” (ITN). What the majority of Bulgarian citizens did not suspect, however, was that this party was in the role of a “poisonous lookalike”. When it comes to mushrooms, there are poisonous lookalikes of edible mushrooms that may easily be confused with edible mushrooms. When it comes to political parties, there are parties that try to portray themselves as opposition parties, but, in reality, have toxic dependencies behind the scenes. They seem to be created with the only purpose of deviating votes.

Oblivious of this, many who wanted to see some positive changes in Bulgaria voted for ITN at the [snap parliamentary election in July 2021](#). This is when ITN showed its true colors of the first time. They came in first with 65 seats in parliament. While in such cases of bittersweet victories, it is standard practice to negotiate for a coalition government, Slavi Trifonov made an obnoxious “take it or leave it” offer of a cabinet of alleged experts... via his own TV channel.

To add insult to injury, some of the familiar faces he proposed had clear unhealthy links to Bulgaria's status quo (including former controversial governments) while some of the fresh faces were implicated in scandals of their own. For instance, Trifonov's proposed minister of justice, Petar Iliev, was [found guilty of plagiarism](#) by Sofia University.

Kiril Petkov's Naïve Faustian Bargain

ITN's shenanigans prolonged the agony and opened the way to a new [snap parliamentary election in November 2021](#). They also motivated others who were tired of such abuses of public confidence to run for office. Kiril Petkov and Assen Vassilev, ministers in the first caretaker government appointed by Rumen Radev in 2021, established their "We'll Continue the Change" (PP) political organization in September 2021.

PP [won](#) the November election, earning 67 seats in parliament. Committed to forming an anticorruption government, they made a Faustian bargain. Namely, PP reached an agreement for a [coalition government](#) led by Kiril Petkov with Democratic Bulgaria (DB), the Bulgarian Socialist Party (the successor to the Bulgarian Communist Party), and... ITN. The fact that these parties belonged to different parts of the political spectrum and were difficult to digest together already indicated that the government could be unstable. Even worse, ITN's participation raised concerns that a Trojan horse was present in the coalition, too.

Possibly because he knew he did not have much time, Petkov took quick steps to expose the [corrupt practices](#) of key institutions of Borissov's autocracy. While he certainly knew many of the risks this could entail, he probably did not suspect what was to follow – a [coup](#) against his government! In an arrogant move, ITN joined forces with Borissov's GERB, DPS (GERB's behind-the-curtain ally), and far-right and pro-Russian "Revival" to support a [no confidence vote](#) against Petkov's government. Not only this put an end to anticorruption efforts in Bulgaria, but pushed the country towards a new, unnecessary snap parliamentary election in October 2022.

The Aftermath of the October 2022 Election

As soon as Bulgaria's Central Election Commission announced the [results](#) of the October 2022 parliamentary election, it was clear that the 48th National Assembly would be so fragmented that the chances of forming a regular government were slim. It was also evident that Bulgarians could expect more cynical political theater.

The Anatomy of the 48th National Assembly

While it came in first and technically could claim that it won this election, Boyko Borissov's GERB party earned 67 seats. Meanwhile, PP and its closest ally DB – got, respectively, 53 and 20 seats. DPS got 36 seats, Revival – 27 seats, and BSP – 25 seats. To the surprise of many, Bulgarian Rise, a new party established by Stefan Yanev in 2022, also made it to parliament with 12 seats. Yanev had served as President Rumen Radev's caretaker prime minister in 2021.

The only good news from the October election was that ITN received its just desserts after all damage that it inflicted: it did not make it to parliament!

GERB's Best Laid Plans

Electing a government in Bulgaria is a question of simple mathematics – one needs 121 seats out of 240 seats in parliament. PP and its coalition partners in Petkov’s government (DB and BSP) had 98 seats altogether. Meanwhile, PP had a [clear stance](#) that a collaboration with GERB was out of question, considering PP appeared on the political stage to challenge Borissov’s autocracy.

Meanwhile, there were two main options for GERB. One was to expose their behind-the-curtain alliances and form a mish-mash coalition with DPS, Revival, and Bulgarian Rise – an idea publicly [supported](#) by the leader of Bulgarian Rise. These public statements, however, only fueled suspicions that Bulgarian Rise was just another poisonous lookalike on the political stage – such subservience to GERB was rather striking. The mish-mash coalition was certainly Borissov’s less-preferred option having in mind his consistent efforts to portray GERB as a party endorsing Euro-Atlantic values – how could he shake hands with a pro-Russian party (Revival) and a Russia-neutral party (Bulgarian Rise)?

So, Borissov chose the second option – cheap theater! It was meant not so much for the masses, but for Bulgaria’s Euro-Atlantic partners who have been anxious about the nebulous state of Bulgarian politics.

GERB’s Abuse of Euro-Atlanticism

Shortly after the October 2022 election, Borissov [called](#) for the formation of a Euro-Atlantic government. From a Bulgarian perspective, this was rather tragicomic for several reasons. First, Bulgaria has been a NATO member since 2004. Second, the only party represented in parliament which has an anti-NATO stance is Revival. Third, the [rule of law and anticorruption efforts](#) are primary Euro-Atlantic values, which Borissov’s regime had repeatedly assaulted while in power. Fourth, [Borissov’s regime has a history of doing favors for Russia](#) after the 2014 US sanctions related to Ukraine.

PP and DB, which Borissov primarily wanted to lure into a trap, refused to play GERB’s game. That’s why, Borissov’s party modified their strategy after they received the first mandate to propose a cabinet from President Radev. GERB pulled ITN’s trick from July 2021 – they made “a take it or leave it offer” in the shape of a [cabinet](#) of alleged experts. Many of these names were well-known to the Bulgarian audience, but not necessarily in a positive light. This shows that the point of the whole endeavor was not to inspire confidence at home. GERB merely wanted to deceive Bulgaria’s Euro-Atlantic partners that it was doing everything possible to form a government, but the “bad guys” from PP and DB did not want to support these extraordinary efforts. One may suspect GERB hoped that PP and DB would be pressured from abroad to collaborate with them.

After the expected failure of GERB’s mandate, Radev handed the second mandate to PP and the third one – to BSP. These were mere formalities as the fragmentation and polarization of parliament evident from the election results clearly showed that a new snap parliamentary

election was in the stars. Yet, throughout these procedures GERB's theater continued. "There is still a chance for a Euro-Atlantic government", [said](#) Borissov before Radev handed out the last mandate, shamelessly reasserting GERB's willingness to be part of a future cabinet.

Where Next?

In order to eat the wheat, one must remove the chaff. In a similar fashion, to restore democracy and the rule of law in Bulgaria, one must sideline all toxic actors – from those who inflicted the damage on the country's rule of law to the poisonous lookalikes flooding the political stage.

GERB may be temporarily away from the executive, but it is no secret that all key Bulgarian institutions are still dominated by their behind-the-curtain alliance with DPS. Large scale reforms are needed to return to a bare minimum of normality. That is why, the April 2023 parliamentary election will be decisive.

Bulgarians know who they are dealing it – it is high time that Bulgaria's Euro-Atlantic partners also realize that GERB are not who they present themselves to be.