

After yet another election, where are you heading Bulgaria?

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Bulgaria continues to be marred by a seemingly never-ending cycle of parliamentary elections. While civil society has continuously called for real reform, numerous parties have collaborated with the country's status quo forces behind the scenes. This has been made especially clear in light of the recent election in October.

On the Bulgarian political stage appearances are often deceiving – what political actors say to the public usually contradicts the shameful, unprincipled agreements they conclude behind the scenes. In a previous article titled [“Who is who in the Bulgarian coup?”](#), I explained how seemingly unrelated political parties surprisingly united in their efforts to overthrow the anti-corruption coalition government led by Prime Minister Kiril Petkov (December 2021 - August 2022). This unexpected move interrupted critical reforms. Moreover, it paved the way for a new snap parliamentary election on October 2nd – the fourth parliamentary election in the country in the span of only a year and a half.

Sadly, the aftermath of this October election shows that Bulgaria's rule of law continues to be under threat. Yet, it also serves as a form of purgatory, as it has shone a light on the hypocrisy of influential political actors, who have been trying to present themselves as harbingers of change to the public while collaborating with the status quo behind the scenes. Indeed, Bulgaria's corrupt status quo is currently desperately trying to form an unprincipled regular government that will put an end to anti-corruption efforts and ensure that those suspected of corruption will continue to act with impunity. Even more scandalously, these efforts are presented as a defence of Euro-Atlanticism in a true Kafkaesque fashion.

A panoply of Trojan horses

As soon as Petkov's government was [formed](#) in December 2021, it was clear that it would not survive for long because it was an amalgam of parties from different parts of the political spectrum whose only common goal was to allegedly eradicate corruption in Bulgaria. They included Petkov's “We'll Continue the Change Party” (PP) that emerged from the [mass anti-corruption protests](#) against Boyko Borissov's third government and controversial General Prosecutor Ivan Geshev in 2020, the Democratic Bulgaria (DB) mini-coalition, Slavi Trifonov's ITN party, and the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), which is the revamped successor to the Bulgarian Communist Party. Even at the time, there were suspicions about ITN's true intentions to support Petkov's government because of its [consistent efforts to sabotage](#) the formation of a government after the prior parliamentary election in July 2021 – it was likely that they were a Trojan horse of the status quo.

However, in December 2021, few could predict the drama that would unfold in July 2022 – ITN allied with GERB and DPS, the two status quo political forces perceived by many as symbols of corruption, and with the far-right and pro-Russian “Revival” party to adopt a motion of no confidence against Petkov’s government. The main goals of this ad hoc alliance were obvious to any vigilant member of civil society – sabotaging the adoption of critical [anti-corruption legislation](#) and, in the words of Kiril Petkov himself, [serving the Russian interest](#).

Yet, in the aftermath of the October 2022 election, one sadly sees that ITN was not the only Trojan horse in Petkov’s government. Recently, the BSP has also started to show its true colours. Even more problematically, President Rumen Radev, who became well known during the 2020 protests for his [“Mafia Out!” slogan](#), seems to be currently serving the interests of those he himself labelled as the mafia in the (then) GERB and DPS-dominated executive. One should not forget that in a move of panic amidst the protests of 2020, [Borissov himself asked](#) four of his ministers to resign. Civil society suspected that they represented the interests of DPS in the GERB-led government, even though DPS did not formally participate in Borissov’s government.

What do the October election results mean?

Before exposing the hypocrisy of BSP and President Rumen Radev, a quick look at the [results](#) of the October 2022 parliamentary election is necessary to understand the nature and depth of yet another drama that is about to unravel in Bulgaria. Seven parties passed the four per cent threshold to enter parliament. According to Bulgarian law, the votes for parties that did not pass this barrier are redistributed among those parties that did make it into the parliament.

The good news for those who were shocked by ITN’s unprincipled actions against Petkov’s government in 2022 is that ITN did not make it into the 48th National Assembly. The main surprise, which leaves a bitter taste, came from the recently formed “Bulgarian Rise” party led by Stefan Yanev, who served as President Rumen Radev’s prime minister in both caretaker governments appointed by Radev in 2021. Yanev himself was initially appointed as defence minister in Petkov’s government. However, Petkov [asked him to resign](#) after he referred to the war in Ukraine as a “special operation”, clearly subscribing to Russia’s narrative.

Forming a government in Bulgaria is ultimately a question of mathematics. Unfortunately, the recent coalition partners from PP, DB and BSP together hold only 98 seats in the 48th National Assembly, while 121 votes (out of 240 seats) are necessary to elect a cabinet.

Party	Percentage of votes after redistribution	Seats
<i>GERB</i>	25.33	67
<i>PP</i>	20.20	53
<i>DPS</i>	13.75	36
<i>Revival</i>	10.18	27
<i>BSP</i>	9.3	25
<i>DB</i>	7.45	20
<i>Bulgarian Rise</i>	4.63	12

CAPTION: *Parties that passed the four per cent threshold in the October 2022 election. Source: [Central Election Commission](#)*

Who wants an unprincipled cabinet shielding corruption?

Nevertheless, the unpleasant surprises for Bulgaria's civil society and, respectively, those who defend the rule of law do not end here. Shortly after the October election, in an unexpected move, the [BSP joined efforts with GERB and DPS](#) to disfigure the country's Election Code overnight. This heavily controversial step led to [mass protests](#) against "the assault" on fair elections. To those who are aware of the [strategies for electoral manipulation](#) used in Bulgaria in the past, it is evident that these parties are working on a "Plan B". Essentially, they are preparing the ground in order to artificially increase their votes in the next snap parliamentary election. The BSP's ad hoc alliance with these parties sadly raises suspicions about a deal struck behind the scenes. This is naturally a great worry for those demanding a real fight against corruption in Bulgaria and those who naively thought that the BSP had evolved, parting ways with its prior toxic habits.

Meanwhile, the recent questionable decisions and statements by President Radev beg the question – *Cui bono?* Pursuant to Article 99 of [Bulgaria's Constitution](#), which details the procedure for the election of a government, after a parliamentary election the president holds consultations with the parties that passed the four per cent barrier. After that, she/he hands out a mandate to a candidate prime minister proposed by the first political force, who has seven days to propose a cabinet. If she/he fails to propose a cabinet, the mandate goes to the second political force. The final third mandate goes to a party of the president's choice – ideally the one that has the biggest chance of finding common ground with others.

In stark contrast to prior practice, Radev significantly [extended the time for consultations](#) and handed out the first mandate to GERB only on December 5th. Even more suspiciously, during the consultations with PP, Radev [argued](#) that "Compromises and clear goals are necessary for the sake of Bulgaria's future. The cycle of elections after elections is not the best solution." Radev's words are surely not benign considering that PP's only natural ally in the 48th National Assembly is DB. Both PP and DB rose to prominence because they opposed the corruption associated with GERB and DPS – collaborating with them will indeed be equivalent to political suicide. It will also put an end to anti-corruption efforts in Bulgaria. Meanwhile, given Revival's pro-Russia stance and Bulgarian Rise's uncertain position on Moscow, seeking common policies with them will send the wrong message to both voters and Bulgaria's foreign allies. In other words, Radev's commitment to compromise only seems to serve the interests of GERB and DPS.

Euro-Atlanticism as a façade

Since the mass protests of 2020, which eventually triggered the election spiral in Bulgaria, GERB have tried every trick in the autocratic playbook to prevent the formation of a stable government without them. Their latest hoax is a [hypocritical call](#) for the formation of a Euro-Atlantic government – an empty slogan [previously used by DPS](#). Why is this an empty phrase? These two parties may label themselves as Euro-Atlantic in outlook but they surely do not abide by Euro-Atlantic values in practice. Both are marred by scandals of corruption which are clearly incompatible with the Euro-Atlantic value of the rule of law. In 2021, the [US Treasury even](#)

[sanctioned](#) DPS MP Delyan Peevski for “corruption, using influence peddling and bribes to protect himself from public scrutiny and exert control over key institutions and sectors in Bulgarian society”. Despite this, DPS has fiercely defended him and has taken every step possible to ensure that he keeps being re-elected as an MP.

Furthermore, Borissov’s governments have a long history of serving Russia’s interests even after the 2014 US sanctions related to Ukraine. From [TurkStream](#), which does not benefit Bulgaria, to the transferring of strategic security assets to [sanctioned Russian banks](#) with the help of Bulgarian state institutions, one can find numerous examples exposing Borissov’s unhealthy pro-Kremlin dependencies. These have made Bulgaria one of Russia’s key Trojan horses in the European Union.

Quo vadis?

Since Borissov rose to power in 2009, Bulgaria’s rule of law has been under threat. He and his circle managed to consolidate an [autocracy](#) which is difficult to dismantle. The 2020 mass protests and the subsequent election spiral delivered a blow to this model and sparked hope that Borissov’s circle may be held accountable one day. However, without large-scale reforms of the captured institutions, this will not happen. Kiril Petkov learned this the hard way when the Borissov-friendly institutions, including the omnipotent Prosecutor’s Office, [waged a war](#) on his anti-corruption government.

It is this fear of accountability which explains all the tricks employed by Borissov, his GERB party and his behind the scenes ally DPS. It is this fear that also leads to shedding light on unsuspected secret arrangements between Borissov and other influential actors, who have been trying to present themselves as Borissov’s rivals to the public.

Considering that PP and DB have made it clear that they would not become accomplices with the status quo, one thing is certain – if a regular government is formed this time, its goal will not be to protect the future of Bulgaria, but to ensure the impunity of Borissov and the key players in his autocracy.

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