

Snap elections in Bulgaria: who is ready for political suicide?

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Bulgarian civil society has been leading a lonely fight for years against the [autocracy](#) built by Boyko Borissov's GERB party and its allies. This battle became more visible to Western observers in the summer of 2020 when [mass protests](#) erupted in response to the corruption of Borissov's third government and General Prosecutor Ivan Geshev.

Although the protests lasted for months, Borissov pulled [a series of tricks](#) to avoid resignation and waited for the regular parliamentary elections in April 2021. The results of these elections were bitter-sweet for many voters. It was clear that even though GERB remained the most popular party, it could not form a government because all other parties which made it to the parliament refused to be associated with it. However, it was also [evident](#) that the new opposition made up of There Are Such People (ITN), Democratic Bulgaria (DB), and Stand Up! Mafia Out! (SUMO), could not form a government of their own because together they did not have the necessary 121 seats in parliament. While snap parliamentary elections were scheduled for July 11th, they did not necessarily deliver the justice that many Bulgarians hoped for. Indeed, there are serious indications that Bulgaria's deep state may have hijacked part of the opposition.

The glass half full perspective: the positive aftermath of the July elections

On paper, [the results](#) of the July elections published by the Central Election Commission show a massive victory for Bulgaria's civil society. ITN came in first and earned 24.08 per cent of the vote, dethroning GERB which came in second with 23.51 per cent of the vote. DB and SUMO, respectively, earned 12.64 per cent and 5.01 per cent. The other parties that passed the four per cent barrier to enter parliament are the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) with 13.39 per cent and the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS) with 10.71 per cent. Meanwhile, GERB's far-right coalition partner during its third government (VMRO) did not even make it to parliament.

GERB's marginal, but effective loss is not the only good news. These elections were arguably fairer than prior votes. The short-lived 45th National Assembly convened after the April elections took a number of measures to limit electoral manipulations, including vote buying and relying on phantom voters. This parliament also made vital changes to the Election Code making voting with machines mandatory. While this solution may appear unusual, it automatically closed the door to souls who mysteriously managed to vote from beyond the grave. It also put an end to several [electoral fraud strategies](#), such as "the Bulgarian train" and the "Take a selfie with your ballot" trick.

In the “Bulgarian train” scenario, a person enters the voting station with a filled in ballot that he or she keeps hidden. They then take an empty ballot and enter the voting booth where they swap them. After that, the voter gives the ballot, which was completed in advance, to the election committee and the empty ballot — to their payer. In the “Take a selfie with your ballot” strategy, a person who has been paid to vote a certain way takes a selfie with the paper ballot in the voting booth in order to prove how they voted to the payers. As voting with a machine does not take place behind a curtain, both of these practices have now been stopped.

The caretaker government appointed by President Rumen Radev was also proactive in exposing and preventing vote buying schemes. The caretaker Minister of Interior Boyko Rashkov has been exceptionally [dedicated to mobilising the police](#) against those known for facilitating electoral fraud.

Numbers do not lie: support for GERB is vanishing

At first glance, the turnout at these elections appears lower than in the vote in April. In such cases, analysts are often quick to judge that this shows political disillusionment. However, a closer look reveals a very different picture. The table below shows the actual votes that the six parties that passed the four per cent barrier received in the elections in April and July.

Political Party	Number of votes in April	Number of votes in July
GERB	837,707	642,165
ITN	565,014	657,824
BSP	480,146	365,695
DB	302,280	345,329
DPS	336,306	292,439
SUMO	150,940	136,879

Source of data: Results published by the Central Election Commission in [April](#) and [July](#) 2021

It is clear that ITN and DB, two of the new opposition parties, massively improved their results. Meanwhile, the results of the parties of the status quo, such as GERB and their behind-the-scenes ally DPS, plummeted. This drop in support for the pro-establishment parties is due to two main factors. On the one hand, the fresh opposition parties may have attracted some swing voters through their promises to fight corruption and rule of law decay. On the other hand, it seems that the strategies to prevent buying votes have been successful. In principle, the vulnerable Roma minority in Bulgaria is traditionally exploited by parties. In the aftermath of the July elections, nevertheless, observers [noted](#) that the significant support from which GERB and DPS benefited in Roma neighbourhoods in April had disappeared in July.

The glass half empty perspective: ITN’s shady ultimatum

Since 2020, it has been clear that GERB’s opposition is fragmented. ITN, DB, and SUMO may share common values about fighting corruption in their programmes, but they attract different voters because of their views in other areas and because of the way in which they pitch their

political messages. Before the April elections, however, civil society hoped that the three would be able to make compromises and work together to put forward a reformist cabinet dedicated to dismantling Borissov's autocracy. After the vote, it became evident that such a cabinet could not be elected without the support of the BSP which has a lot of historical baggage that is difficult to ignore. The new opposition parties' lack of desire to make such a concession is one of the key factors that paved the way for snap elections. It appears that the new opposition believed that fairer elections would ensure better results.

Prior to the July elections, the main source of worry was Borissov's [various attempts](#) to discredit the opposition, sabotage reforms, and even portray himself as a victim. However, it seems that Borissov's shenanigans are by far not the only threat civil society should have worried about.

The day after the snap parliamentary elections, something extraordinary but sinister happened. Before waiting for the President to convene the 46th National Assembly, start consultations with the political parties, and hand out the first mandate to form a government to the winner (ITN), as prescribed by [Bulgaria's Constitution](#), ITN gave an ultimatum. Slavi Trifonov, leader of ITN, [proposed a cabinet](#) of alleged experts via his own TV channel, making a "take it or leave it" offer to everyone else.

This may appear like a bold move and an attempt to claim leadership. However, a party that only gained 24.08 per cent of the vote is in no position to unilaterally impose its views on others. In the spirit of constitutionalism and parliamentarism, it should negotiate with others and build bridges. Unsurprisingly, other opposition parties and civil society members [noticed](#) some unhealthy relationships and murky details in the personal histories of many of the proposed experts. Some of these candidates have already served as ministers in the government of Simeon Saxe-Goburg-Gotha, which had a questionable reputation. This government was responsible for launching the public career of Boyko Borissov himself.

DB, SUMO and BSP publicly refused to participate in this charade. DB leader Hristo Ivanov immediately [suspected](#) that this proposal was not designed by ITN but by Bulgaria's deep state, which appears to have supported Boyko Borissov for many years.

Who will commit political suicide?

At this stage, there are serious concerns that ITN has been hijacked. Since DB, SUMO, and BSP have declined the not so polite offer to elect a dubious cabinet without having any say, ITN can only rely on the two status quo parties — GERB and DPS. In other words, the party presenting itself as an alternative to the status quo can only seek the support of the parties which, according to many, symbolise corruption and rule of law decay. Was this the scenario of Bulgaria's deep state all along?

ITN's leader Slavi Trifonov is a showman who has become a household name in the past few decades and who is perceived as charismatic by the masses. His likeability may have attracted the attention of those who fear substantive reforms in Bulgaria. How and why he may have chosen to play this role in a dangerous political play remains a mystery. However, it should be remembered that the art of the kompromat is well-known in Bulgaria.

At the end of this play, someone will commit political suicide, undermining their chance of a future as a key actor in Bulgarian politics. ITN is trying to guilt the other opposition parties for not supporting their cabinet. However, DB, SUMO, and BSP seem unwilling to betray their voters. This leaves ITN the option of betraying its own voters and exposing its potential ties with GERB and DPS.

Should ITN refuse to commit political suicide by bringing to light such dependencies, Bulgaria will most likely head for new snap parliamentary elections this autumn. Who knows what the deep state will come up with until then? There may be a playbook for building an autocracy, but dismantling one is certainly a mammoth challenge which brings disappointments along the way.