



Elections in Bulgaria: Voters Play It (Mostly) Safe

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The parties winning seats in the parliament

On March 26, 2017 Bulgaria held snap elections and five parties managed to get over the 4% threshold. The elections took place after PM Boyko Borissov of GERB resigned in November 2016 after his candidate lost the presidential elections to the rival BSP.

The center-right GERB won the vote with 32.66%. The center-left Bulgarian Socialist Party came second with 27.19%. The nationalist parties, gathered in the United Patriots coalition, came in third with 9.07% of the votes. The Turkish-minority Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS) is forth with 8.99%. The newly formed populist Volya (Will) of tycoon Vesselin Mareshki managed to get 4.15%, building popularity on discount medicines and gasoline. Some 2.50% of people chose the option “I don’t support anyone” on the ballot.

Bulgaria Elections Results, 26 March 2017	
Party	Votes %
GERB	32,65%
BSP	27,20%
United Patriots	9,07%
DPS	8,99%
Volya	4.15%
Reformist Bloc coalition	3.06%
Yes, Bulgaria coalition	2.88%
DOST	2.86%
New Republic coalition	2.48%
Don't support anyone option	2.50%

Some notable outsiders

The parties that stayed out of parliament are worth noting too as they aspire to provide alternatives to the big players in the center, left, and among the Turkish community.

Three smaller pro-EU, center-right coalitions with similar positions received between 2.5% - 3% each after deciding to go alone instead of seeking larger coalition. The Reformist Bloc, which was part of the previous government and hopefuls for joining a new GERB cabinet had 3.6%.

Two coalitions with a strong anti-corruption message: the Yes, Bulgaria coalition with former justice minister Hristo Ivanov and the New Republic coalition of Radan Kanev - received 2.88% and 2.48% respectively.

The center-left ABV-Movement 21 coalition seriously underperformed as their plan to offer alternative to the BSP in the left have failed for now.

The new DOST party of the Turkish minority won 2.85% of the votes by taking a chunk of its established competitor DPS. DOST is so far the most serious attempt to challenge the domination of the DPS party over the Turkish and Muslim community, which account for about 10% of the population.

The campaign dynamics

The leader of GERB Boyko Borissov benefited from portraying the party as the moderate catch-all player. The BSP, which sought to be alternative to the discontent from GERB, may have overplayed with Euro-skepticism, socialist-era nostalgia and even anti-democracy overtones in

the final stage of its campaign. This approach seems to have backfired and pushed more people to vote for GERB. The main nationalist parties combined reached a peak result of about 9%.

DOST, which sought to replace DPS as the party representing Bulgarian Turks, overplayed Ankara's support. This gave birth to accusations to meddling in the domestic affairs of a neighbor and benefited its competitor's DPS image and provided a pretext for the campaign of the United Patriots.

The EU inadvertently played a role in the elections as the majority of voters were increasingly put off by anti-EU messages. The usual criticism of "Brussels" was turned on its head by the scare of a multi-speed Europe with Bulgaria in the periphery or outside of the EU. Junker's five scenarios published in the start of Bulgaria's campaign may have served a role as a shocker. Bulgarians are among the most supportive to the EU with 49% having a positive image of the EU compared to 35% on average EU28 (EB86) and only about 20% would vote for a party that would like Bulgaria to leave the EU, according to OSI-Sofia survey (2016).

The most pro-EU parties, appealing to younger, urban voters, failed to get representation as they preferred to run as smaller coalitions. They bet on strong anti-corruption message as a basis for broader mobilization and it is yet to be seen if they will succeed in attracting larger shares of the population.

Overall, the trend for safe behavior at the elections might have been prompted by the general context: the economy grew at 3.4% in Q42016 compared to the same period in 2015 and was the third highest in the EU. Unemployment fell to 7.6% and exports increased by 15% on annual basis. Despite legitimate grudges against the situation in the country, there was nothing extraordinary to condition abrupt changes.

The next governing coalition: will third time be a charm for Borissov?

The most likely prospect is a GERB-led government with the support of the United Patriots and Volya of Mareshki. This will make Boyko Borissov a third time prime minister, after his two unfinished terms in 2009-2013 and 2014-2016. Alternatively, if GERB fails to form a government, BSP will form a cabinet with the Patriots, Mareshki and possibly DPS. There is the usual talk of a grand coalition, but it is less likely to happen and a minority government of a single party is even less likely.

It is expected that any government talks to include compromises and bargains. Neither of the prospective partners is particularly easy. The inclusion of nationalists in government positions will make many wary and the businessmen Mareshki comes with an unclear personal agenda.

The new parliament might immediately face a decision how to overhaul the electoral system following a referendum promoted by the showman Slavi Trifonov, which seeks to introduce a majoritarian system. This is a very controversial issue and might end up with more political turmoil and significant impact for the country's politics.

There are several tasks ahead of the country that any government coalition should tackle. The country is long overdue another major reform - in the judiciary and anti-corruption measures - but there is hardly a chance as the parties in the new parliament prefer the situation as it is. There is an upcoming EU presidency in the first half of 2018 to be held by Bulgaria in a trio with Austria and Estonia. The presidency might serve as a reason to avoid new political crisis and new snap elections in the short term. In regard to the EU agenda, a more positive outlook might expect the next government move closely to the center of the EU by pushing for Schengen and Eurozone membership – both delayed for years. The prospect of staying behind in a multi-speed Europe might provide a momentum for more assertive EU policy.



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