

# SCENARIOS FOR BULGARIA'S LATEST SNAP ELECTIONS

## Analysis & implications of the upcoming parliamentary vote





**28 March 2023**

On Sunday, Bulgarians will head back to the polls for the fifth time in just two years, to participate in the country's latest snap parliamentary elections. Plagued with political instability and short-term governments throughout its recent history, Bulgaria heads into this crucial vote hoping to move towards a firmer political footing. However, with most commentators predicting yet another hung parliament, further confusion and instability seem more likely.

The snap election on Sunday comes after the previous parliamentary election, held last October, failed to produce a functioning parliamentary majority. Despite winning at the polls, the centre-right GERB-SDS party of former longtime Prime Minister Boyko Borissov was unsuccessful in forming a new government, as were, in turn, both the centrist We Continue the Change (PP) movement of reformist ex-PM Kiril Petkov and the centre-left BSP for Bulgaria. Three consecutive failed attempts to form a government then triggered the latest snap parliamentary vote.

While our baseline scenario assumes Bulgaria will head to a sixth consecutive parliamentary election later this year, several domestic factors could yet influence the outcome of Sunday's vote, and thus produce alternative scenarios. Below, Aretera provides further insight into Bulgaria's political landscape and the implications of Sunday's election.

### This memo will cover:

-  a recap of Bulgaria's latest snap election and its consequences,
-  the key takeaways from the country's unwanted cycle of snap elections,
-  the prospects of a new government & additional scenarios.
-  short-term risks and long-term implications for international businesses.

## POST-ELECTION LANDSCAPE

On 2<sup>nd</sup> April, Bulgarian voters will head to the polls to elect the 240 members of the country's National Assembly for a four-year legislative term in a much-anticipated snap parliamentary vote – the fifth consecutive parliamentary election in just two years. The election was called after Bulgaria's latest snap elections held last October failed to produce a functioning parliamentary majority.

The last snap parliamentary elections<sup>1</sup> produced another hung parliament with seven ideologically and politically diverse parties. The centre-right GERB party of former longtime Prime Minister Boyko Borissov came in first during the last election, securing 25.3% of the popular vote. Borissov's party overtook the centrist We Continue the Change (PP) party (20%) of former reformist PM Kiril Petkov, GERB's main electoral rival. Five other parties also made it into parliament: the Turkish ethnic Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS), followed by the far-right, pro-Kremlin and anti-vaccination Revival, the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP for Bulgaria), the pro-EU Democratic Bulgaria coalition (DB) and the Bulgarian Rise party of former caretaker Prime Minister Stefan Yanev.

While both Borissov's GERB and the Petkov-led PP aimed to garner a functioning governing majority in Bulgaria's multi-party National Assembly, neither succeeded. The third-placed BSP for Bulgaria also failed to form a government, and so after three unsuccessful attempts<sup>2</sup> President Rumen Radev called snap parliamentary elections scheduled for this Sunday, dissolved parliament in February and reappointed the Caretaker Government of Prime Minister Galab Donev.

## AN UNWANTED ELECTORAL CYCLE

Bulgaria's underlying political instability comes after a series of inconclusive parliamentary elections in April 2021 and three consecutive snap elections, none of which were able to produce a governing coalition. While GERB came first in the last constitutionally scheduled parliamentary elections in April 2021, Borissov's longtime rule as PM came to an end, as those elections produced a multi-party parliament and all other parties refused Borissov's coalition overtures. Strong ideological differences and deep divisions between newly founded and "establishment" parties then led to the July 2021 snap elections, in which the populist There is Such a Nation party (ITN) of Bulgarian singer Slavii Trifonov unexpectedly finished first, overtaking GERB as the most popular party.

Trifonov's movement, however, also failed to secure a governing coalition with other parties in summer 2021, resulting in a huge loss of support and yet another snap election. This election in November 2021 saw the rapid emergence of the centrist We Continue the Change (PP) party. Led by former caretaker Economy Minister Kiril Petkov, the PP rode to power on a surge of support for its anti-corruption agenda and won the next snap elections in November 2021. In December 2021, the PP formed a coalition with the longtime GERB rival BSP for Bulgaria, the Democratic Bulgaria coalition and Trifonov's ITN. However, this four-party coalition proved to be short-lived. A number of policy disagreements and ITN's withdrawal from the coalition led to its collapse<sup>3</sup> last June, the formation of the country's current (caretaker) government – led by Galab Donev<sup>4</sup> – a month later and the latest (and again) inconclusive snap parliamentary vote held on 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2022.

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<sup>1</sup> See [here](#) for Aretera's overview of Bulgaria's latest snap elections from October 2022

<sup>2</sup> See [here](#) for Aretera's outlook on Bulgaria for 2023 from January 2023

<sup>3</sup> See [here](#) for Aretera's overview of the collapse of the Petkov Government from June 2022

<sup>4</sup> See [here](#) for Aretera's overview of the Donev Government from August 2022

## LATEST ELECTION RESULTS & POST-ELECTION POLLING

Party/Alliance	Popular Vote – October 2022 (%)	Polling Average – March 2023 (%)
Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria – GERB-SDS (centre-right, pro-EU)	25.3	25
We Continue the Change & Democratic Bulgaria – PP-DB (electoral coalition, reformist, pro-EU)	ran separately (PP: 20.2, DB: 7.4)	25
Movement for Rights and Freedoms – DPS (ethnic Turkish, centrist)	13.6	13
Revival – Vazrazhdane (nationalist, pro-Kremlin, anti-vaccination)	10.2	13
Bulgarian Socialist Party – BSP for Bulgaria (centre-left coalition)	9.3	8
The Left (multi-party coalition, left-wing, Russia-leaning)	ran separately	4
Bulgarian Rise (Russia-leaning, led by former caretaker PM Stefan Yanev)	4.6	4
There Is Such a Nation – ITN (populist, anti-establishment)	3.8	3

(Source: CEC of Bulgaria, [POLITICO Poll of Polls](#), Electoral Threshold: 4%)

## SHORT-TERM SCENARIOS

**Our baseline scenario assumes that Bulgaria will head for a sixth consecutive election in September.**

Borissov's GERB and the PP-DB coalition are currently running neck-and-neck in the polls, with public support for each standing at around 25-27%. Given the strong divide between "new" and "establishment" parties, the chances of a stable governing coalition remain low. The prospects of an agreement between otherwise firmly pro-EU/NATO parties – GERB, PP and DB – are also slim due to Borissov's tarnished reputation over corruption scandals and his refusal to judicial reforms demanded by the PP-DB alliance.

Due to the limited time between the latest and the upcoming snap election, most parties have had a difficult task attracting new voters, suggesting significant movements in voter sentiments are also unlikely. Combined, these create the possibility of yet another snap election, likely to be held in September when Bulgaria will organize local elections, as well as the reappointment of the Galab Donev-led caretaker government, probably with minor personnel changes.

**Additional scenarios include a minority government and a technocratic cabinet.** With Bulgarians heading to the polls for the fifth time in two years and the country facing a number of challenges, pressure is mounting on the next parliament to produce a functioning majority. While the PP-DB bloc has repeatedly ruled out joining a governing coalition that includes GERB, public pressure to form a democratically elected government might lead to an informal governing majority that would support a technocratic and/or minority cabinet consisting of jointly appointed but largely non-partisan figures. At the same time, such a government would face severe stability concerns.

**Recent changes to the election system and growing election fatigue might also influence the outcome of vote.** Last December, the Bulgarian parliament – with support from GERB, BSP for Bulgaria and the ethnic Turkish DPS – voted to restore a combined election system that offers voters a choice between using paper ballots or voting machines at polling stations. This amendment might support the electoral chances of the three parties that voted for the amendments.

Furthermore, an additional factor likely to influence the outcome of the snap elections is the increasing public dissatisfaction with the current parliamentary parties, which could significantly reduce voter turnout, thus undermining confidence in public institutions and leading to surprise election results. The latest snap elections held on 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2022 also saw the lowest voter turnout in the country's democratic history, pointing to already visible election fatigue among the Bulgarian population.

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