

# POSSIBLE SCENARIOS FOR BULGARIA'S LATEST SNAP ELECTIONS

## Analysis & implications of the upcoming parliamentary vote

**27 September 2022**

On Sunday, Bulgarians will head back to the polls for the fourth time in just 18 months, 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 seems more likely.

The latest election comes after the multi-party coalition government – led by ex-Prime Minister Kiril Petkov and his centrist We Continue the Change (PP) movement – was toppled in a no-confidence vote in June, leading to the dissolution of the country's parliament and a subsequent call from President Rumen Radev for early elections.

With a wide range of incoming parties fiercely opposing each other, the latest snap election seems unlikely to produce a stable parliamentary majority and a government with a popular mandate, potentially setting the stage for a fifth consecutive parliamentary election in just two years. However, several domestic factors could yet influence the outcome of Sunday's vote, and thus produce alternative scenarios, with Petkov's PP and its main electoral rival, the centre-right GERB party of former PM Boyko Borissov, among the key parties to watch.

Below, Aretera provides further insight into Bulgaria's political landscape and the implications of the upcoming parliamentary vote.

### This memo will cover:

-  an introduction into Bulgaria's pre-election political landscape,
-  the reasons leading to the upcoming parliamentary election,
-  a summary of the country's snap electoral cycle,
-  possible forward scenarios for the snap parliamentary vote,
-  implications for international businesses.

## PRE-ELECTION LANDSCAPE

On 2<sup>nd</sup> October, 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 fourth consecutive parliamentary election in just 18 months.

The election was called after Bulgaria's multi-party coalition government – led by Prime Minister Kiril Petkov and his centrist We Continue the Change (PP) movement – collapsed following a no confidence vote in the country's parliament. Supported by the populist There is Such a Nation (ITN) party, which withdrew from government, opposition MPs – led by the former ruling centre-right GERB party of ex-Prime Minister Boyko Borissov – toppled the government<sup>1</sup> on 22<sup>nd</sup> June.

In line with the Bulgarian constitution, the collapse of the Petkov Government was followed by three attempts to establish a new governing majority in Bulgaria's multi-party parliament. None of these attempts were successful, prompting Bulgarian President Rumen Radev's call for snap parliamentary elections scheduled for Sunday.

## AN UNWANTED ELECTORAL CYCLE

Petkov's We Continue the Change (PP) movement rose to power in the second half of 2021, in the midst of an ongoing, fragile electoral cycle that continues to shape Bulgarian politics. The last constitutionally scheduled parliamentary elections in April 2021 produced a hung parliament and no governing majority coalition, leading to snap parliamentary elections three months later.

Held in July 2021, the first snap elections saw the rapid emergence of the populist There is Such a Nation (ITN) party of Bulgarian singer Slavii Trifonov. His ITN party, which campaigned on an anti-corruption platform (and with largely vague plans for the country's future) came first in the July 2021 vote, defeating the longtime ruling of Borissov's GERB party. However, Trifonov's movement failed to agree on a new government with other parties in the Bulgarian parliament.

ITN's failure to form a new government resulted in a huge loss of support for the party and yet another snap parliamentary election held last November, which saw the rapid emergence of Kiril Petkov's We Continue the Change party. Largely due to his anti-corruption crusade in Bulgaria's 2021 caretaker governments, in which he served as Economy Minister, Petkov's political movement rode to power on a surge of support, winning the second, November snap election.

Realizing public pressure was mounting on the political elite to finally form a stable cabinet, Petkov's PP led successful coalition talks with the longtime GERB rival Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP for Bulgaria), the liberal-centrist Democratic Bulgaria coalition and – in need of securing a parliamentary majority – Trifonov's ITN. These talks led to the formation of the Petkov Government last December.

However, Petkov's coalition proved to be short-lived. Citing a number of disagreements on state finances, anti-corruption measures and the country's troubled relations with North Macedonia, the ITN withdrew from government, setting the stage for yet another snap election and a new caretaker government, this time led by Galab Donev, the former Chief Social Policy Advisor of Bulgarian President Rumen Radev.

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<sup>1</sup> See [here](#) for our overview about the collapse of the Petkov Government and the formation of the Donev Government from June 2022.

## POSSIBLE FORWARD SCENARIOS

Our baseline scenario assumes another hung parliament with a fifth consecutive election looming on the horizon. Latest polls show that a minimum of six parties and coalitions will enter the Bulgarian parliament. Alongside the Borissov-led GERB, Petkov's PP, the centre-left BSP for Bulgaria and the liberal-centrist Democratic Bulgaria, these include the ethnic Turkish Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS), as well as the far-right, pro-Kremlin and anti-vaccination Revival (Vazhrazhdane).

Furthermore, the actual number of incoming parliamentary parties may turn out to be higher as Trifonov's ITN and the newly formed Bulgarian Rise party of former caretaker PM Stefan Yanev are also polling around the 4% election threshold. This ideologically diverse setting could easily result in new snap elections for early 2023, however the final turnout on 2<sup>nd</sup> October, along with the performance of Galab Donev's caretaker government, could also be decisive factors.

Along with other socio-economic circumstances shaping the elections, including Russia's war on Ukraine, the unfolding energy crisis and the European economic downturn, these factors might benefit one of the two main election rivals – Borissov's GERB and Petkov's PP - towards which other, smaller parties might gravitate following the Sunday vote.

In March, GERB overtook PP in the polls and now maintains a commanding lead over Petkov's party. The ethnic Turkish DPS – previously also an external supporter of GERB – is likely to finish third and could prove key in upcoming coalition talks, while Trifonov's ITN is campaigning on a referendum to transition Bulgaria into a presidential republic. Support for the far-right Revival has also grown steadily, which could prove concerning for political stability prospects.

## LOOKING AHEAD

Should the upcoming snap parliamentary elections fail to produce a new, democratically elected government with a popular mandate, Bulgaria will likely continue to be run by Galab Donev's caretaker government. As in the case of the 2021 snap election cycle, the country's interim cabinet could emerge as a key stakeholder for international businesses operating in Bulgaria.

Failure to produce a government, however, would not only elevate the status of Donev's interim cabinet but also that of Rumen Radev, the country's independent President, who was re-elected for his second term last November. As head of state, Radev holds vast constitutional powers on how to lead the country in case of dissolved parliaments and collapsed governments, while the majority of the Donev Government is also closely linked to the President politically. Meanwhile, tension over how to respond to Russia's war against Ukraine and its impact on Bulgaria have visibly grown between Radev and the staunchest pro-European parties, including Petkov's PP.

This political uncertainty comes as multiple issues are at stake in this crucial snap parliamentary vote, including Bulgaria's Russia policy in the wake of the continuing war in Ukraine, the country's dependence on Russian fossil fuels, Sofia's ties with not only Russia but the European Union and the United States, as well as the country's overall political and economic stability.

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