Bulgaria political briefing:
Outlook of the Political Challenges for Bulgaria in 2023
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Summary

At the beginning of 2023, Bulgaria is still in a severe political crisis. The newly elected National Assembly in November last year has not yet succeeded in electing a regular government for the country. Bulgaria is governed by a caretaker government, and the political division in the parliament is becoming increasingly deeper. What certainly lies ahead for Bulgaria is a last attempt to form a government after the top two political forces in parliament failed to collect parliamentary support. It seems that the chances of a regular government within this parliament are minimal. This means holding new elections in the spring. This will be another challenge as this election will be the fifth in a row in less than three years. Political apathy among the population is increasing, which makes the chances of higher voter turnout very small. At the same time, this year in Bulgaria other extremely important elections must be held in the fall - those for local government. Their results are of crucial importance from the point of view of the local government of the country and the stability of the individual political parties.

Overcoming the political crises or not?

At the beginning of 2023, Bulgaria continues to be in a severe political crisis caused by the fact that in the last two years four national parliamentary elections were held in the country and only one regular government was elected, which lasted only half a year. The government of Prime Minister Kiril Petkov is the shortest-governing government in the last thirty years. Meanwhile, during these last two years, the government of the state was practically taken over by the president, who, according to the country's constitution, issued three successive caretaker governments.

After the last parliamentary elections, which took place in November 2022, the new parliament is again unable to produce a regular government, as none of the political forces in it can gather a stable parliamentary majority to elect and support a government.

Thus, at the beginning of 2023, Bulgaria continues to be governed by acting Prime Minister Gulab Donev, and the parties in the newly elected National Assembly are unsuccessfully negotiating to secure parliamentary support.
The first two largest political groups in the parliament in the face of the coalition GERB - Union of Democratic Forces and the former ruling party "We continue the change" failed to gather the necessary support to cast a regular government. According to the Bulgarian constitution, in about a week, President Rumen Radev will hand over the last third mandate to form a government to a political force chosen by him.

For now, it is not clear which political force will receive this mandate. The media claim that the president will not give the mandate either to the anti-Western nationalistic party "Revival" or to the Movement for Rights and Freedoms. Therefore, he has three other options: to hand the mandate to the Bulgarian Socialist Party or to choose one of the two smallest formations in the parliament: "Democratic Bulgaria" and the new political formation of the former acting Prime Minister Stefan Yanev, called "Bulgarian Rise".

**Challenges for the next early elections**

Although there is still a formal possibility of forming a regular government, all political analysts agree that the chances of this happening are minimal. The reason is that the parliament is highly fragmented and there is almost no possibility of forming a parliamentary majority. This practically means only one thing. After the third mandate cannot be fulfilled, the president must dissolve the national assembly and form a new caretaker government, which in turn must hold new early elections for parliament within two months.

If all the stipulated deadlines are met, it is assumed that April 2 is emerging as the first possible date for a new vote.

This would be the fifth parliamentary election within two years. The sociological surveys currently indicate that they will reproduce a similar situation of political balance in the next National Assembly.

However, let us remember that the 2021 election produced three different winners, one of whom dropped out of parliament in the fourth election in 2022. Some others dropped out and new ones got into parliament. There are social dynamics that can hardly be measured in advance, so the arrangement of the political parties certainly cannot be the same in future elections.

**Challenges for the political forces in Bulgaria and the political system**

The more serious problem that remains as the main political challenge for 2023 is related to the state of political parties and the overall party system, as well as the ever-decreasing
turnout in elections. This shows the complete political apathy of Bulgarian society, which is caused by the completely eroded trust in political mechanisms and institutions.

The problem is that the Bulgarian party system is in a severe crisis, which in turn is shaking the entire political system and causing an increasing number of Bulgarians to doubt that democracy works in their interest. Bulgarians are becoming easily influenced by radical and even anti-democratic ideas to change the system. This problem is likely to remain and worsen in 2023.

A part of the Bulgarian society believes that if the parliamentary form of government was replaced by a presidential republic, things would get better. However, according to analysts, nothing like that will happen because the problem will remain - the same parties, the same elites, the same deputies, unreservedly loyal to their irreplaceable leaders.

At the same time, according to experts, such a change would lead to an even more drastic reduction of democracy in Bulgarian society and state governance.

From the point of view of the condition of the main political parties in Bulgaria, 2023 foresees a new mobilization in regard with the upcoming elections. The trends reported by sociological surveys is that the political party GERB is regaining its position as a leading political force, in contrast to the loss of confidence and positions by many other traditional political forces. Such, for example, is the case with the Bulgarian Socialist Party, which is increasingly losing electoral support. At the same time, one more trend should be noted and it concerns the nationalist party "Revival", which is gradually gaining more and more confidence and support and according to sociologists, in the next elections it may even come in second place, ahead of the main opposition force currently in the face of "We Continue the Change". The party of former Prime Minister Kiril Petkov and Finance Minister Asen Vassilev lost a large part of its support as a result of the previous cabinet's failed and prematurely ended administration.

**Challenges for the local elections**

In addition to the likely next early parliamentary elections in Bulgaria in 2023, another extremely important election must be held. It is about the local government elections.

Regular local elections are held every 4 years. They are held in 2 rounds on a non-working day, traditionally on 2 consecutive Sundays. In the first round, the mayor and municipal councils are elected, and in the second (also called a run-off), the mayors are elected in the
municipalities where none of the candidates was elected with more than 50% of the valid votes cast in the first round.

Traditionally in Bulgaria, local government elections are extremely important, as they form a significant part of the electoral base of the main political parties, such as GERB, Bulgarian Socialist Party and Movement for Rights and Freedom. The local government elections are the basis of their dominance in Bulgarian political life for years. For example the data shows that the map of the sections from which GERB’s votes come, almost completely coincides with the map of its presence in the local government as mayors or as majorities in the city councils. In this sense, if GERB loses the elections in Sofia, Plovdiv or some other places, a new political cycle will begin. From this point of view the big event of this year is the local elections. It is especially important who will take power in the capital Sofia. That is why the race for local government will be extremely powerful, as the further electoral base for the parties at the local level depends on it.

**Conclusion**

Undoubtedly, the main challenge for Bulgaria in 2023 will be overcoming the political crisis, forming a regular government and gradually solving all pressing political, economic and social tasks that only a regular government can solve. How and whether this will happen is difficult to predict, but it seems that the Bulgarian society will again have to appear in national parliamentary elections.

At the same time, the other main political event in the country for the year will be the upcoming local elections in the fall of 2023. According to experts, local government elections are even more important for political parties, since their outcome is related to securing electoral support for local level for the next four years.

All that aside, there are three key political issues for Bulgaria to address in 2023. These have much longer-term horizons in terms of political impact and should therefore be a top priority for the government and parliament. First of all, it is about the country's entry into the Eurozone. This is a question of whether Bulgaria will integrate itself, will sit permanently at the table where the most important decisions about the policy of the European Union are taken. Secondly, it is about the acceptance of Bulgaria in Schengen. This is not simply about the convenience of Bulgarians traveling faster and with fewer checks. It is about Bulgaria being integrated into the fundamental framework of EU security policies.
And thirdly, the situation is the same with certain decisions related to the Bulgarian Recovery and Resilience Plan and its implementation as a tool for change. It is also a key political task, on the solution of which a number of other economic and social issues depend.