



Weekly Briefing

Bulgaria political briefing:
The Results of the Local Government Elections in Bulgaria
Evgeniy Kandilarov


China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Ju Weiwei

Kiadásért felelős személy: Feng Zhongping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.

 +36 1 5858 690

 office@china-cee.eu

 china-cee.eu

The Results of the Local Government Elections in Bulgaria

Summary

On October 29 and November 5, 2023, in two consecutive rounds, regular elections were held in Bulgaria, which are of key importance for politics in the country. This time the vote was for the local governments which mandate is for the next four years. A total of 265 municipalities elected their own municipal, regional or local mayors together with municipal councillors. The main political competition was between the political forces represented in the parliament, namely the coalitions "We continue the change" - "Democratic Bulgaria", GERB - "Union of Democratic Forces", "Bulgarian Socialist Party", "Movement for Rights and Freedoms", political party "Revival" and the "There is such people" party. The results show that GERB are again the first political force for the 12th consecutive time in local elections, although the party has significantly reduced its result in terms of the number of mandates in the municipal councils. The most disputed was the battle for mayor of Sofia, which was ultimately won by the candidate of the coalition between "We continue the change", "Democratic Bulgaria" and the political party "Save Sofia". The local elections caused an upheaval in the ruling coalition between "We continue the change" - "Democratic Bulgaria" and GERB - "Union of Democratic Forces", as during the election campaign the political clash between them intensified mainly because of their competition for the local power.

Local elections in Bulgaria are one of the most important from the point of view of political power in the country. It is clear to all major political powers that if they have more power at the local level, this can certainly provide them with the opportunity to increase their influence at the national level, which is of great importance when holding elections for a national parliament. That is why the political forces in Bulgaria are always making huge efforts to gain stronger positions in the local governments, which is expressed in electing more mayors of municipalities, municipal councilors, mayors of regions and mayors of the so-called town halls, which are smaller populated places.

According to the Constitution of Republic of Bulgaria, as well as by virtue of the Law on Local Self-Government and Local Administration, the local government gives citizens the most opportunities to determine the future of their local communities.

Local government and local administration in Bulgaria

Local self-government is in the hands of the municipal council, which discusses and adopts decisions, and the local executive power is carried out by the mayor and the municipal administration, which implements the decisions of the council. Together, the mayor and the municipal council make up the local government. The mayors work closely with the municipal council. At the same time, each municipality has its own municipal offices, which are responsible for the implementation of policies in different areas – social, educational, economic, etc.¹

According to many political experts, the local elections are the most important elections for Bulgaria, since all the problems that the people have, first of all relate to the mayor and the municipal council. That is why these elections are largely majoritarian. Local citizens vote for individuals who gain their trust that exactly these candidates can deal with the problems of the local community.

Mayoral candidates are the leading actors of local election campaigns. In reality, however, all important decisions about development and rules in municipalities are accepted by their municipal councils.

As a rule, the composition of local parliaments is elected in the first round of elections, and there is a runoff only for mayors, when none of the candidates won more than 50% of the votes in the first round.

The adoption of the local budget, the amount of local taxes and fees as well as all municipal orders depends mainly on the municipal council. It manages the municipal economy, elects the heads of municipal companies, and even approves some of their investments.

The fact is that the mayor is the one responsible to the local government, but any proposal or plan of his - for example, to build new kindergartens, give more money or autonomy to district mayors, buy new vehicles for public transport, introduce measures to reduce casualties on the streets - must get the support of municipal councilors .

Usually, when voting for municipal councilors, the party vote is stronger, and not the majority vote, although there are also preferences. In the mayor elections, it is usually the opposite, and there people often vote for the person himself, without being so influenced by the party or coalition that nominated or supports the respective candidate. This is especially true for smaller towns and villages.²

¹ <https://www.mrrb.bg/en/local-government-and-local-administration-act/>

² <https://www.mediapool.bg/mestnata-vlast-kmetat-e-vazhen-no-obshtinskiyat-savet-e-klyuchov-news352668.html>

Bulgaria is divided into 28 regions in which there are a total of 265 municipalities. Municipalities are the main administrative-territorial units with local self-government in the modern administrative-territorial division of Bulgaria. Each municipality has a certain territory, borders, population, name and administrative center. The municipality includes one or more neighboring settlements, and its territory is the totality of the territory of the settlements included in it. A municipality usually bears the name of the settlement that is its administrative center.³

The municipality is a legal entity and has the right to property and an independent municipal budget.

For the management of each municipality, its residents with the right to vote elect directly a municipal council and a mayor of the municipality. The municipal council is composed of councilors, which are from 11 to 61 in number, depending on the size of the municipality. The mayor appoints a secretary of the municipality, who organizes the municipal administration.⁴

The capital municipality, Sofia, due to its size, is an administrative-territorial unit that also has the status of a district.

Municipalities can include relatively independent units: settlements (governed by town halls) and urban areas, which are managed by district mayors. The Metropolitan Municipality and the municipalities of the cities of Plovdiv and Varna are divided into such urban areas governed by elected district mayors.⁵

Electoral system and the importance of Local elections in Bulgaria

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 council are elected, and in the second (also called a runoff), the mayor is elected in the municipalities where none of the candidates was elected with more than 50% of the valid votes cast in the first round.

The main state body that prepares and organizes the local elections in Bulgaria is the Central Election Commission.

According to political analysts in Bulgaria, the biggest battle between the political forces is to win the elections, especially in the 28 regional center-cities of the country, called district towns, which have the largest population and respectively the greatest political and economic

³ <https://www.mrrb.bg/en/local-government-and-local-administration-act/>

⁴ Ibidem.

⁵ Ibidem.

importance. Within these district towns, the cities of Sofia, Plovdiv, Burgas, Varna, Ruse are especially important, as these are the cities that often decide who will be represented in the National Parliament of Bulgaria. From these districts, 95 of the 240 mandates in the National Assembly are allocated. This is the reason why the efforts of the biggest parties are focused exactly on winning the local elections at these cities.

Before the local elections in late October and early November this year, political analysts predicted that the results of the elections in these five district cities will also give an answer to the question of whether there will be any change in the political situation and the balance of political forces that are represented in the parliament. Finally, it turned out that the dominance of the ruling governmental coalition was also reproduced at the local level regarding these five cities. Sofia and Varna were won by "We continue the change" - "Democratic Bulgaria", Plovdiv and Burgas were won by GERB - "Union of Democratic Forces", and Ruse - by the "Bulgarian Socialist Party".

Even before the elections, a number of sociologists and political scientists predicted that the main battle in the big cities would be between GERB and the coalition "We continue the change" - "Democratic Bulgaria", with the most emblematic clash in Sofia. So it finally happened.

The registration of candidates for mayors and municipal councilors in the Central Electoral Commission began on September 4 and ended on September 26. A total of 58 parties and 9 coalitions were registered to participate in the elections.

Bulgarian Local Elections 2023

At the end of October and the beginning of November in Bulgaria, elections were held for municipal councilors and mayors in a total of 265 municipalities, also for mayors of districts in cities where there are separate district municipalities, and also for mayors of town halls.⁶

The President of Bulgaria, Rumen Radev, scheduled the elections for October 29, 2023. The previous general elections for local authorities in the country were held in 2019.

The elections were held in two consecutive rounds on October 29 and November 5, 2023 respectively.

In the first round of elections, on October 29, 2023, municipal councilors (members of municipal councils) and mayors (of municipalities, districts, town halls) were elected. The second round (run-off), on November 5, 2023, was for mayors in places where none of the

⁶ The town hall is a constituent administrative-territorial unit within a given municipality in Bulgaria.

mayoral candidates was elected with more than 50% of the valid votes cast in the first round. The mayoral candidates with the highest two results from the first round competed in a runoff.

In the elections, voting was done with four types of ballots: for the mayor of a municipality, for municipal councilors, for the mayor of a town hall and for a regional mayor.

In the local elections on October 29, 5,053 municipal councilors were elected all around the country.

According to Central Election Commission the number of people who voted on 29 October totaled 2,713,979 or 44.94% of eligible voters. For comparison the turnout was 49.76% in the 2019 local elections. The invalid ballots in the 29 October, 2023 elections totaled over half a million, including 412,711 ballots for municipal councilors, 94,195 for municipality mayor (down from 128,204 in 2019) and 34,235 for mayoralty mayor.⁷

Voter turnout in the second round of elections was even lower. The data shows that of all 3,897,6091 eligible voters, only 437,005 voted, which is 36.87%. This is the data for the entire country.⁸

In general, the results of the local elections confirmed in the big cities the positions of the main political forces that won the trust of the Bulgarians in the parliamentary elections in April 2023. However, the political forces GERB, "We continue the change"- "Democratic Bulgaria", "Revival" and especially the "Bulgarian Socialist Party" do not have reason to feel satisfied.

Firstly, because now the total number of voters was about 5% less, compared to the local government elections four years ago, in 2019. Regardless of the fact that the interest in this vote should be greater than the one for parliament, the number of voters in the last parliamentary elections and the first round of local elections (on October 29) is approximately equal. That is, an extremely low voter turnout, which shows the ever-increasing apathy and lack of motivation among Bulgarians towards politics, which is largely related to the disillusionment with political parties and the political process in general. This is a dangerous trend for the country's democratic development.

Secondly, because of local political players, in some cities, which are usually backed by local business interests (and in some cases they directly participate in the vote, such as the situation in Varna and Plovdiv), the results of the main parliamentary political parties at these elections are significantly lower than the ones they received in the parliamentary elections in April.

⁷ <https://results.cik.bg/mi2023/tur1/rezultati/2246.html>

⁸ <https://results.cik.bg/mi2023/tur2/aktivnost/index.html>

This applies especially to the compositions of the municipal councils (local parliaments), which in some municipalities are extremely fragmented, which will eventually lead to more difficult formation of governing majorities, especially if the two main political forces, in the form of "We continue the change"- "Democratic Bulgaria" and GERB - "Union of Democratic Forces", did not reproduce at the local level the kind of coalition in which they are in the current national government.⁹

The general picture of the results after the two rounds of the elections shows that the GERB party remains the largest party in the local government.¹⁰

GERB are the first political force for the 12th time in local elections, although they have significantly reduced their result in terms of the number of mandates in the municipal councils.

The detailed results in the large regional cities (the district cities) of the country are representative. GERB individually, and somewhere in a coalition, has a total of 277 municipal councilors, while the "We Continue the Change"- "Democratic Bulgaria" coalition has twice as few - 138 municipal councilors. Bulgarian Socialist Party is on third place with total of 112 mandates in the municipal councils of the biggest regional centers. The "Movement for Rights and Freedoms" won 103 mandates in the District cities, and the nationalist party "Revival" - 85. More modest than the others is the presence of the political formation "There is such a people", which, like "We continue the change", is running for the first time in local government elections and received 45 mandates in local parliaments of the largest regional cities.¹¹

At the same time, it should be noted that after many years of control in the government of the most important cities in Bulgaria, GERB lost the elections in the capital, as well as in several other regional cities. In Sofia, Varna, Blagoevgrad and Pazardzhik, the candidates of "We continue the change" - "Democratic Bulgaria" won the elections.

Apart from the loss of key cities, the party of the country's former long-term prime minister Boyko Borisov retained its primacy in a large part of the municipal councils, but even as the first political force in them, now it became increasingly dependent on the formation of a majority. This is because of the already mentioned problem with highly fragmented municipal councils, which requires complex negotiations to form a working majority in them.

9

https://www.capital.bg/politika_i_ikonomika/bulgaria/2023/11/03/4547329_podkrepat_za_gerb_erozira_pp-db_ne_postigna_glasovete/

¹⁰ <https://bntnews.bg/news/58-partii-i-9-koalicii-shte-uchastvat-na-mestnite-izbori-1248350news.html>

¹¹ All official data on the election results are available on the website of the Central Election Commission: <https://results.cik.bg/mi2023/tur1/rezultati/2246.html>

The retreat of GERB is most visible in the capital city of Sofia, where, in addition to the mayoral seat and the leading role in the Metropolitan Municipal Council, the GERB party also lost a huge part of the run-offs for district mayors. After the second round of the elections, "We continue the change" - "Democratic Bulgaria" won a total of 19 out of 24 elections for the district mayors of the capital. GERB won only three district mayors. The remaining two positions of district mayors were taken by nominated as independent candidates.¹²

According to analysts, the reasons for the significantly weaker results of GERB are complex - from a punitive vote against the party, through a misjudgment of the situation in some municipalities, to the re-nomination of already compromised candidates for mayors who didn't receive the support of citizens in the local communities. Thus, in addition to regional centers that are symbolic for the party, such as Sofia and Varna, GERB lost positions in a number of medium-sized and smaller municipalities, which were traditionally considered the backbone of the party.¹³

At the same time, GERB's main opponent in the form of the "We Continue the Change"- "Democratic Bulgaria" coalition scored some key successes in these elections, but they couldn't manage to generate some very great electoral support in their favor nowhere around the country. Even in Sofia, where the coalition won the elections, polls show that the party coalition has lost more than 30% of voters compared to the last parliamentary elections earlier this year. The same data show that GERB lost 40% of their electoral support in Sofia, compared to the parliamentary elections in April 2023.¹⁴

In the second round of the elections, in the 19 regional cities (district cities) where a runoff was held for the election of the mayors, most of the clashes were exactly between the two political forces represented in the state government - GERB and "We continue the change" - "Democratic Bulgaria", and this led to a strong tension in the relationship between them. Even before the runoff, the leader of GERB, Boyko Borisov, threatened that he could withdraw his support for the cabinet, while accusing "We continue the change"- "Democratic Bulgaria" of participating in various coalitions around the country against GERB.

In addition to the six parliamentary forces, in almost all municipal councils there were other local formations and coalitions that found their place in the city government. Thus, in

¹² <https://results.cik.bg/mi2023/tur2/rezultati/2246.html>

¹³

https://www.capital.bg/politika_i_ikonomika/bulgaria/2023/11/09/4550740_kude_zagubi_pobediteliat_gerb/

¹⁴ <https://epicenter.bg/article/Politolozi-i-sotsiolozi-obsadiha-mestniya-vot--Doverieto-v-izborniya-protses-e-na-kritichno-niski-niva/332602/11/0>

some local municipalities there were 13 and even up to 15 political forces and coalitions that enter the municipal councils.¹⁵

The local elections and the „Battle for Sofia“

The most contested battle of the local elections was for the capital city, Sofia. The initial polls predicted that the main clash will again be between "We continue the change" - "Democratic Bulgaria" and GERB - "Union of Democratic Forces". The first coalition nominated as its candidate Vasil Terziev, who is a Bulgarian businessman and investor in technology companies, co-founder of the software company "Telerik". In recent years, Terziev has focused on consulting and investing in Bulgarian startups through the venture capital fund Eleven Ventures and the San Francisco-based organization Bulgaria Innovation Hub. He was also engaged in educational activities through the Telerik Academy Foundation. Terziev is an investor in over 100 start-up technology and innovative companies. In addition, he actively participates in the global startup ecosystem, being part of the board of directors of Endeavor Bulgaria, the American MacStadium and Payhawk. His candidacy for the mayoral elections in Sofia was raised in June. Three parties that stood behind him were "We continue the change", "Democratic Bulgaria" and "Save Sofia". The goal they announced was to end the 18-year rule of GERB in the capital.¹⁶

For their part, GERB announced their candidate for the mayoral elections in Sofia at the last minute, and he was surprising to many. The nomination was for the journalist Anton Hekimyan. He is a popular person around the country, mostly because of his journalistic career in one of the largest private national televisions - BTV. Since 2020, Anton Hekimyan held the position of Director of "News, Current Affairs and Sports" department at bTV. At the same time, his candidacy was surprising, since his name was not associated with politics, as well as with the activities of the political party GERB until that moment.¹⁷

Initially, sociologists predicted that the main battle would be precisely between these two candidates.

Subsequently, it turned out that, surprisingly for many, the main competitor for mayor elections in the capital was Vanya Grigorova who was the candidate of a large left-wing coalition, which included the "Bulgarian Socialist Party" and other left-wing formations. Vanya

¹⁵ <https://dnes.dir.bg/na-fokus/kartinata-v-oblastnite-gradove-gerb-gubi-v-chisla-no-pecheli-16-ot-tyah-bsp-s-dvoen-sriv>

¹⁶ <https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/vasil-terziev-kandidat-kmet-sofia/32472635.html>

¹⁷ <https://darik.bg/koi-e-anton-hekiman->

Grigorova is a Bulgarian economist, trade unionist, labor activist, and politician. Before entering the race for the mayoral elections in Sofia, from 2015 to 2023, she was an economic counselor of one of the largest labor unions in Bulgaria - the Confederation of Labor Podkrepa.

The greatest surprise came after the first round of the elections, when the results showed that the candidate of the left-wing political coalition, headed by the Bulgarian Socialist Party, came in second place with the support of 80,875 votes or 21.59% of the vote. The surprise was mainly due to the preliminary forecasts, which predicted that the candidate of GERB would be in second place as a contender for the mayoral seat.

Vanya Grigorova's run for mayor of the capital looks like a political revival of the left and especially of the BSP after the series of increasingly weak election results that the party achieved in recent years. However, the real situation is more complicated, since Vanya Grigorova is not only a candidate of the BSP, and in addition, friction and disagreements between her and the leadership of the socialist party are often observed in the media. Moreover, it is no secret that it was very difficult for her to get the support of the BSP's central leadership when the socialists had to decide whether to nominate their own candidate or support Grigorova's candidacy. At the same time, sociologists are unanimous that the support for Vanya Grigorova is far from being limited to the BSP electorate, but is much broader. Part of it is also due to a protest vote directed against the candidates of the currently governing state coalition.

The final results of the elections in Sofia show that Vasil Terziev, the candidate of "We Continue the Change" – "Democratic Bulgaria", was elected with just 4,786 more votes than his competitor in the runoff, Vanya Grigorova. This means that Terziev won over Grigorova with a lead of only 1.31% of the votes of the people of Sofia.

The data from the Central Election Commission indicate that Vasil Terziev received 175,044 of the votes of those who went to vote, or 48.20%. For Vanya Grigorova voted 170,258, or 46.89%. Voter turnout in Sofia was only 34.64%, or 1.4% lower than the turnout in the first round.¹⁸

The data showing that 17,834 or 4.91% of the residents of Sofia went to vote and cast the ballot "I do not support anyone" are very revealing.¹⁹

¹⁸ <https://results.cik.bg/mi2023/tur2/rezultati/2246.html>

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

Conclusion

The results of the two rounds of local government elections in Bulgaria show several important trends.

Although GERB actually won the most mandates for municipal councilors, as well as half of the mayoral seats in the central regional cities of the country and thus took the place of the winner, the results for the party are much lower than the previous elections.

This gives reason to conclude that the influence of GERB in the local government is clearly decreasing. The most indicative of this conclusion is the fact that, for the first time in almost 18 years, Boyko Borisov's party lost power in Sofia. This was emblematic, since Sofia is the city, from which the political career of the leader of the formation and the party itself started.

At the same time, it became clear that the main political opponent of the GERB party, the "Continuing the Change"- "Democratic Bulgaria" coalition, apart from some municipalities and some larger regional cities, does not have any definite huge national support at all in order to irreversibly shift the influence of GERB in the local government.

The elections gave the Bulgarian Socialist Party the opportunity to regain some of its self-confidence with the winning of 4 regional cities, but also with victories in some smaller municipalities, recently dominated by GERB.

The political party "Revival" entered the municipal councils for the first time, but its overall result was lower than that of the last parliamentary elections.

However, one of the most important conclusions is that the elections for mayors and municipal councilors, held at the end of October and the beginning of November, did not cause much activity among the population, even though in theory they are the closest to everyday life of people. At the same time, their results are about to change many things. First of all, because of the new mayors in the big cities, and secondly because of the upheavals they caused in the relations between the main parties and political coalitions that participate in the current state government.

As for the low voter turnout, according to experts, it is due to the fact that more and more people, including young people, do not see the point in voting. The consequences of not voting, however, can be very serious and dangerous, because it can bring to power many more populist or anti-system political formations, which can be dangerous for the democratic principles on which the whole society and the state government is based on.