



Weekly Briefing

Bulgaria political briefing:
Bulgaria 2023 - Overview of the Political year
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

Bulgaria 2023 - Overview of the Political year

Summary

The 2023 political year for Bulgaria was extremely turbulent, full of contradictions and dramatic twists. At the beginning of the year, the Bulgaria was in situation after parliamentary elections, but without any good prospects for establishment of a regular government, due to the lack of a stable majority in the parliament and a total lack of will for a coalition government. This led to dismissal of the National Assembly and scheduling of new elections, which were held in April. After these next elections, the chances of forming a government were not much better. With the existing risk of continuation of the political crisis and lack of regular governance, some of the political forces in the parliament took a hard decision to form a coalition government. The problem, however, was that the coalition government of the Bulgaria was established between two political forces that appear to be complete opposites in terms of political positions. This made the current cabinet of the country extremely unstable, and the political tension between the participants in the government constantly creates crises that often threaten the fall of the government. At the end of the year, in November, local government elections were also held in Bulgaria. This led to severe political clashes in various big cities and smaller towns. The biggest change was related to the fact that, after 12 years in power, the GERB political party lost the local elections in capital city of Sofia, where the winner was a representative of the "We Continue the Change" political party.

Bulgarian political government in a deadlock

At the beginning of 2023, Bulgaria continued to be in a severe political crisis caused by the fact that in the previous two years four national parliamentary elections were held and only one regular government was elected, which lasted only half a year. This was the government of Prime Minister Kiril Petkov. 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 different caretaker governments.

After the parliamentary elections in November 2022, the new parliament was again unable to produce a regular government, as none of the political forces in it could gather a stable parliamentary majority to elect and support such a government.

Thus, at the beginning of 2023, Bulgaria continued to be with a caretaker government and the parties in the newly elected National Assembly were unsuccessfully negotiating to secure parliamentary support for a possible regular cabinet.

The president Rumen Radev handed the first mandate to form a regular government to the coalition GERB-Union of Democratic Forces, which was the largest political force in the parliament, but they failed to gather enough support for a cabinet and returned the first mandate unfulfilled. The same thing happened with the opposition party "We continue the change", to which Radev gave the second mandate as a second largest political force in the parliament. After they also failed to find support to form a government, the third, final mandate was given to the Bulgarian Socialist Party which made an attempt to get support for a government based on four important priorities for the country, which were consistent in the programs of all political forces in the parliament. It was a matter of adopting the necessary laws under the Recovery and Resilience Plan, the state budget for 2023, the admission of Bulgaria into Schengen area and the judicial reform.¹

After failing in her attempt, on January 24, 2023 the leader of the Bulgarian Socialist Party, Kornelia Ninova returned the third mandate to form the government of President Rumen Radev. According to the Constitution the President dissolved the 48th National Assembly on February 3, 2023. The head of state has scheduled new extraordinary parliamentary elections for April 2, 2023. Until then the head of state appointed a new caretaker government from February 3, 2023 headed by Galab Donev.²

The most important question at that moment for the Bulgarian society was whether the next elections will put an end to the political crisis and whether Bulgaria will finally be able to form a regular and stable government and a functioning parliament.

New preliminary parliamentary elections

The early parliamentary elections on April 2 were the fifth consecutive elections in the last two years. For the first time, the party of the former Prime Minister Kiril Petkov "We continue the change" and "Democratic Bulgaria" party appeared in a coalition, but not individually. This coalition announced that their main goal is to defeat GERB and to finally form a stable cabinet. However, this did not happen.

¹ <https://dariknews.bg/novini/bylgariia/sled-liderskata-sreshta-niama-izgledi-za-pravitelstvo-s-mandata-na-bsp-2336724>

² <https://m.president.bg/bg/news7032/prezidentat-podpisa-ukazi-za-razpuskane-na-narodnoto-sabranie-na-3-fevruari-i-za-naznachavane-na-sluzhebno-pravitelstvo.html>

On April 6, the Central Election Commission announced the final results of the elections. A total of 6 political forces managed to cross the four percent barrier of all citizens who voted, which according to the Bulgarian electoral legislation is a mandatory condition to be passed in order for a political force to be represented in the parliament.

The six political forces that enter the new 49th National Assembly of Bulgaria were:

- the coalition GERB-Union of Democratic Forces,
- the coalition "We continue the change"- "Democratic Bulgaria",
- the nationalist party "Vazrazhdane",
- the party "Movement for Rights and Freedoms", supported mainly by the ethnic Turks and other minorities in Bulgaria,
- the coalition of the Bulgarian Socialist Party, named "BSP for Bulgaria"
- the party of the musician and showman Slavi Trifonov, "There is such a people".

The competition for the first place was very contested between GERB-UDF and "We continue the change"- "Democratic Bulgaria". Finally, however, the results show that the GERB- "Union of Democratic Forces" Coalition won with a small lead over the "Continuing the Change"- "Democratic Bulgaria" coalition.

According to the Central Electoral Commission, the coalition GERB-Union of Democratic Forces received 26.49% of the votes of the citizens, and the coalition "We continue the change"- "Democratic Bulgaria" - 24.56%.³

In third place was the nationalist party "Vazrazhdane". It won 14.16% of the citizens' vote.⁴

In the fourth place was the "Movement for Rights and Freedoms" with 13.75%.⁵

In the fifth place was the Bulgarian Socialist Party with just 8.93 percent of those who voted.⁶

It was surprising for some people that "There is such a people" party, which was not represented in the previous parliament this time managed to regain its support and to cross the 4 percent barrier, becoming a member of the 49th National Assembly.

One of the most indicative results of the elections was the number of people who voted with the option "I do not support anyone". This explicit protest vote has tripled for the last 2 years. These votes were more than four percent of all those who voted, which means that they

³ <https://results.cik.bg/ns2023/rezultati/index.html>

⁴ Ibidem.

⁵ Ibidem.

⁶ Ibidem.

are enough for the entry of another party into the parliament. However, the message of the people who made this choice was clear and it is related to the total decline of political trust in all political forces that dominate the Bulgarian political space at the moment.

The most important question after the elections was again whether the new parliament will be able to elect a regular government. It appeared that this will be an extremely difficult task. According to some political experts, this was practically impossible.

None of the elected parties or political coalitions had a majority in order to form its own government. The first two political forces in the parliament, the coalitions GERB – “Union of Democratic Forces” and "We Continue the change" - "Democratic Bulgaria" had almost equal number of deputies - 69 and 64, respectively. The results showed that in order to have a political majority in the parliament, which can elect a stable government and pass laws, some coalition formula, must be found. The problem, however, was that a large part of the parties represented in the parliament made statements that they will not enter into coalitions with some of the other parties. Negotiations and the search for a formula to form a government were extremely difficult.

A month after the April elections in Bulgaria, it was still not clear whether a regular government with strong parliamentary support can be formed. The main reason was the existing relative parity between the first two coalitions in the parliament, and accordingly each of them firmly stayed on the position that it will not form a coalition with the other. At the same time, neither had a parliamentary majority and needed the support of other political forces in order to form its own government.

Finally, in order for the parliament to start working after all, the two largest parliamentary groups at least managed to reach several important agreements.

First, they agreed on the election of the Chairperson of the National Assembly, and then on the most urgent laws that must be adopted as soon as possible.

On the second place, deputies from the two largest parliamentary groups reached an agreement on drafting a "legislative program" for the first session of the new parliament.

The program included bills related to the implementation of the reforms provided for in the National Plan for Recovery and Sustainability, bills related to Bulgaria's admission to Schengen and the country's admission to the Eurozone, and other important laws related to the reform of the judicial system in Bulgaria, etc.

An understanding was also reached for the adoption of the State budget for 2023 with set deficit in it up to 3 percent in order to pursue the priority of entering the Eurozone since this is one of the Maastricht criteria that an EU member state must meet in order to adopt the euro.⁷

According to the Constitution, the president handed the first mandate to form a government to the first largest political force in the Parliament, the coalition GERB - "Union of Democratic Forces". Then they nominated for Prime Minister Mariya Gabriel who was member of GERB, and European Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth since 2019.

Then suddenly, the second political force in the parliament "We continue the change" - "Democratic Bulgaria" agreed to start negotiations with GERB - "Union of Democratic Forces" for common government. At the same time, one of the key conditions raised by them was that they would not support a government with the mandate of GERB. In addition, they also announced their proposal of a future ministerial council, nominating for prime minister the former minister of education and science in the cabinet of Prime Minister Kiril Petkov, Nikolay Denkov. He is a professor of physical chemistry in Sofia University.

Finding a coalition formula and the establishment of “Denkov-Gabriel” regular cabinet

On May 22, Maria Gabriel and Nikolay Denkov made a joint statement in which they announced that GERB is about to return its mandate without fulfilling it in order to be established a joint government with the second mandate of the "We continue the change" - "Democratic Bulgaria" coalition. It was announced that the first and second political forces in the Parliament had reached an agreement according to which Maria Gabriel and Nikolay Denkov would rotate the post of prime minister for a period of nine months. Denkov will be the first prime minister, while Gabriel will be deputy prime minister and minister of foreign affairs. After nine-months, Denkov should give way to Gabriel and become Deputy Prime Minister accordingly.

Denkov also announced that changes in the composition and structure of the future government will be made only with the consent of both political forces, and declared that if there is a deviation from the main priorities, he will resign. His stated priorities include: constitutional reform for changes to the prosecutor's office and the Supreme Judicial Council,

⁷ <https://www.bta.bg/bg/news/bulgaria/442789-gerb-sds-obyaviha-proekta-za-zakonodatelna-programa-po-koyato-sa-postignali-s; https://fakti.bg/bulgaria/774288-pokazaha-zakonodatelnata-programa-po-koato-gerb-sds-i-pp-db-postignaha-saglasie>

entry into the Eurozone and Schengen area, passing a budget with a 3% deficit without tax increases.⁸

On June 6, with a total of 131 votes "for", the Parliament elected the new regular coalition government of Bulgaria, with Prime Minister Nikolay Denkov. Everyone from "We continuing the Change" and "Democratic Bulgaria" and all but one person from GERB voted for the new Prime Minister and his Council of Ministers.⁹

The cabinet was also supported by two deputies from the "Movement for Rights and Freedoms" - party chairman Mustafa Karadayi and Delyan Peevski, whose personality is one of the most controversial and contested in Bulgarian political life, as he was sanctioned by the US so-called Magnitsky law, for corruption.¹⁰

Although the new government was headed by Professor Nikolay Denkov, it was called the "Denkov-Gabriel" cabinet, since according to the agreement, now the prime minister is Nikolay Denkov but after nine months he will hand over the post to Maria Gabriel from GERB, who until then will be deputy prime minister and foreign minister. If the rotating coalition survives 18 months, there will be another rotation.

As the cabinet's most urgent priorities, Denkov announced the adoption of a new state budget with a deficit of up to 3%, with preservation of social payments and no increase in taxes.

Among the other priorities of the government, Denkov pointed out:

- acceptance of Bulgaria into Schengen area this year;
- admission of Bulgaria to the Eurozone on January 1, 2025;
- acceleration of the work on the Recovery and Resilience Plan;
- balanced development of the economy with a focus on education and innovation;
- priority support to farmers through subsidies, but also control over their spending;
- constitutional reform of the prosecutor's office and the Supreme Judicial Council.¹¹

Finding a coalition formula for a regular government was, on the one hand, a stabilizing factor for Bulgarian political life. On the other hand, however, the coalition is extremely unstable, leading to constant upheavals in the cabinet and threatening its fall from power at any moment. The problem comes from the fact that the government was formed and elected as a result of an informal agreement between the two largest political forces in the parliament which

⁸ https://www.capital.bg/politika_i_ikonomika/bulgaria/2023/05/22/4486562_gerb_i_pp-db_obiaviha_obshto_pravitelstvo_s_premier_na/

⁹ <https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/32446765.html>

¹⁰ <https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/32446765.html>

¹¹ <https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/32446765.html>

at the same time are extreme political opponents. This makes understanding between them extremely difficult.

At the same time, however, apart from a joint declaration by Nikolay Denkov and Maria Gabriel announced on June 2, which became the basis of the joint cabinet, no more detailed and clear coalition agreement was signed between the political forces that formed and supported the cabinet. This became prerequisite for many mutual accusations, mutual dissatisfaction, lack of trust, as well as some ultimatums.

Cause of misunderstanding are often issues related to personnel appointments to some leadership positions in the state government offices, as well as the election of the leadership of some state regulators such as the Audit Office, the National Health Insurance Fund and the Bulgarian National Bank etc.

The tension between the two main political forces staying behind the Bulgarian government continued until the end of the year and will most probably continue in 2024.

At some point it was clear that first of all they needed to specify a mechanism for the appointments of high government positions. However, according to GERB, this was not enough. GERB wanted clear commitments for the appointments in the executive power as well, to which they insist on direct and equal access, as long as their partners from "We continue the Change" - "Democratic Bulgaria" want to maintain a general majority in the parliament. However, no agreement was reached between the parties that formed a majority in the parliament. The dividing line was whether to sign a traditional coalition agreement or go for an alternative document that bears a different name such as "Mechanism for guaranteeing the reform program".¹²

The lack of a clear coalition agreement between the governmental political coalitions makes the cabinet unstable, and the contradictions between the political parties that support it are becoming more frequent and sharper.

Moreover, from the very beginning the government has been in sharp political conflict with the presidential institution. The head of state distanced himself from the political party "We continue the change", which he created in 2021 and which supported him in his campaign for a second presidential term. In July, 2023, Rumen Radev accused the cabinet of exploiting the issue of military aid to Ukraine in an attempt to cover up its weak governance. Later, in August, President expressed numerous accusations, qualifications or insults directed at the

¹² <https://www.mediapool.bg/nyamame-si-doverie-gerb-i-pp-db-ne-mogat-da-se-razberat-kak-da-zaraboti-upravlenskata-formula-news348963.html>

government.¹³ By the end of the year the conflict between the President and the Council of Ministers continues. The tension between these institutions is expressed in a frequent exchange of highly critical remarks on sides, mutual accusations and a complete lack of trust.

President Rumen Radev accuses the government of serving some behind-the-scenes interests that are different from those of Bulgarian citizens. The prime minister and government ministers claim that the president defends pro-Russian positions and tries to exercise power beyond his constitutional authority.

Bulgarian Local Elections 2023

The other major political event for Bulgaria that took place towards the end of 2023 was the regular local elections. These elections were of key importance for the general political situation in the country. On October 29 and November 5, 2023, in two consecutive rounds, Bulgarians voted 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 councilors.¹⁴ 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 showed that GERB became again the first political force for the 12th consecutive time in local elections, although the party has significantly reduced its results in terms of the number of mandates in the municipal councils.¹⁵

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 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

¹³ <https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/32556923.html>

¹⁴ <https://results.cik.bg/mi2023/tur1/rezultati/2246.html>

¹⁵ Ibidem.

election campaign the political clash between them intensified mainly because of their competition for the local power.

Conclusion

Despite the constant scandals and contradictions between the political forces that support the "Denkov-Gabriel" government, for now it remains in power. During the six months of government, the opposition in the parliament submitted a vote of no confidence twice. First time, with accusations of total failure in "Energy" sector policy and second time, with accusations of total failure in the field of national security and defense policy.

However, for now, the ruling coalitions are supporting the government with the intention that it will succeed to fulfill its main commitments outlined in its government program. So far, the only reforms that have taken place were in the area of the judicial system and the institution of the Chief Prosecutor. Achieving the remaining goals of the government's program is not entirely certain, as challenges and public scandals between the government coalition continue and become more intense. Whether the government will continue to govern in 2024 or whether it will lose the power and this will eventually lead to another political crisis and another early parliamentary election remains to be seen.