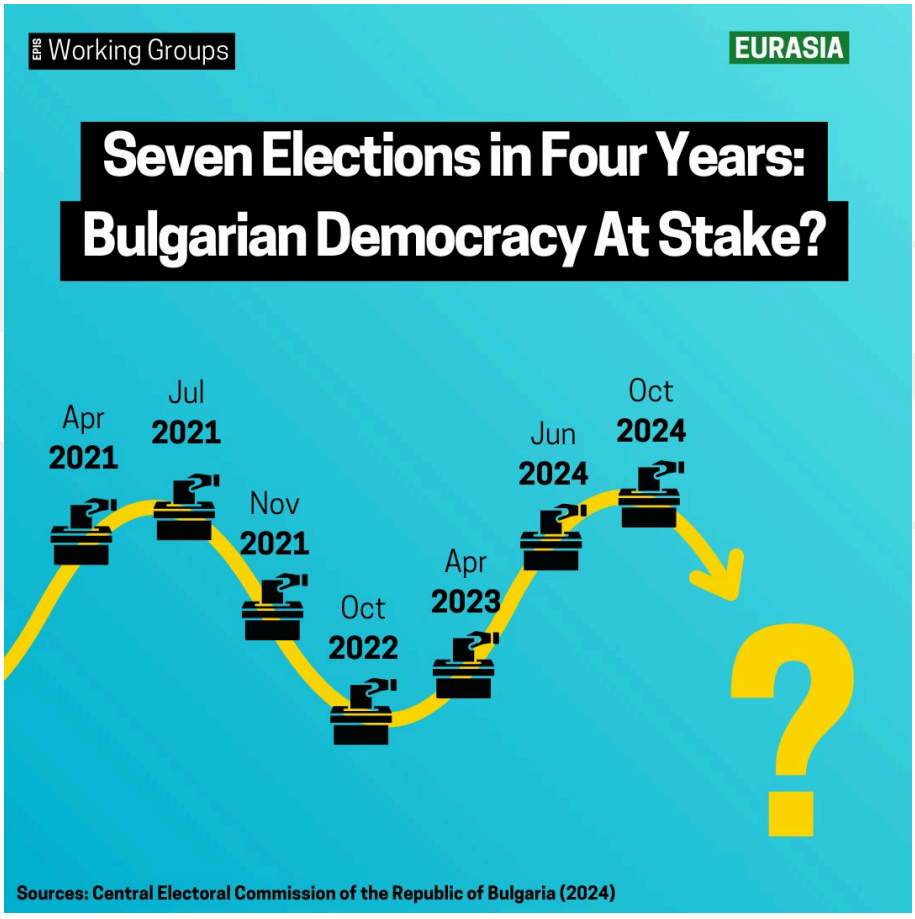
Bulgaria's Seventh Parliamentary Election in less than four Years

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The Republic of Bulgaria: A country plagued by endless elections?

Since 2020, the Republic of Bulgaria has been at a political standstill after the country witnessed a wave of anti-government protests, driven by fierce anger over widespread corruption, a lack of judicial independence, and the socio-political influence of powerful and entrenched oligarchs within the political sphere. The protests were initially triggered by a police raid on the offices of Bulgaria's President Rumen Radev on July 9th, 2020, target-

ing Radev's secretary on legal affairs and anti-corruption and his political advisor on security and defence on accusations of disclosing state secrets and extensive influence peddling.

Despite months of widespread protests and occasional violent clashes between protestors and police authorities, Prime Minister Boyko Borissov, leader of the party for the Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB), was hesitant to step down. Instead, he proposed a new constitution and government reshuffles, hoping to appease the ongoing protests and civil unrest.

Nonetheless, with the four-year term of the government officially coming to an end in April 2021, it paved the way for a wave of unsuccessful parliamentary elections and continuous political and economic instability within Europe's poorest member state. Since then, Bulgaria has witnessed six parliamentary elections, one presidential election, one municipal election, and finally one European Parliament election.

A fragmented and polarised political landscape: The outcome of Bulgaria's seventh consecutive parliamentary election

Bulgaria's seventh consecutive parliamentary election was triggered by the failure of Bulgaria's political parties to form a stable and functioning coalition government after an inconclusive election on June 9th, 2024, with a voter turnout of just 34.41%, the lowest voter turnout since the end of the Bulgarian communist era.

The most prominent of all political parties is arguably the two-party coalition between GERB and the "Union of Democratic Forces" (SDS). The two-party coalition GERB-SDS usually presents itself as a conservative-right party focused on economic growth, public safety, and pro-European policies. The second largest, and former ruling party, "Continue the Change – Democratic Bulgaria" (PP-DB), positions itself as a reformist coalition dedicated to combating entrenched national corruption and strengthening democratic institutions within the Bulgarian state. On the other hand, The pro-Russian nationalist party "Vazrazhdane" (Revival) follows traditional national values and economic sovereignty, appealing to Eurosceptical voters who prioritise national identity over a European identity. Next to this big pro-Russian party, which received almost 14% in the last elections, smaller pro-Russian parties such as "Morality, Unity, and Honour" and "Velichie" each gained around 4% of the vote.

Examining the election results, it remains certain that pro-Russian and Eurosceptic parties are on the rise. Despite winning five out of seven parliamentary elections since 2021, GERB-SDS has continuously failed to form a stable coalition. With both GERB-SDS and PP-DB explicitly ruling out a coalition with "Revival", coalition-building could become increasingly difficult and suggests a likelihood of ongoing government instability in the upcoming months. Furthermore, it remains to be seen, to what extent the

election of Donald J. Trump as the 47th president of the U.S. will impact the coalition building dynamics.

With yet another inconclusive parliamentary election that furthers the deeply entrenched socio-political cleavages, projecting a potential eight parliamentary election in spring 2025 appears increasingly plausible. Additionally, after accusations of election fraud allegedly conducted by election officials and failed live broadcasting of several poll stations, various parties, inter alia, PP-DB, ITN, Velichie, and BSP, have called for an appeal to the Constitutional Court for a full or partial annulment of the election results under Article 66 of the Bulgarian Constitution.

Consequently, these accusations severely poison the political landscape within the Bulgarian state, ultimately further weakening the trust of the civilian population and with that weakening the very foundations and integrity of Bulgarian democracy. However, even if coalition talks prove successful in the upcoming months, it is unlikely that such a government would possess the stability and the socio-political backbone needed to guide Bulgaria effectively forward.

Why the European Union should pay more attention to its eastern flank:

The European Union's (EU) continuous inaction and the deliberate silence of European leaders on the socio-political situation in Bulgaria could lead to increased Euroscepticism, heightened nationalism, and further alienation, leading to a heightened political drift towards the political preferences of the Kremlin. Such sentiments can be identified in the October election results, recent controversial policies, such as the anti-LGBTQ law, and persistent pro-Russian sentiments, with a November 2023 poll showing that 56% did not view Russia as a threat. While Bulgaria remains an integral state, not only within the EU but also within NATO, its socio-political drift towards Moscow and continuing political instability could pose profound risks to NATO's Black Sea Security and Ukraine's ammunition supply. The political vacuum that has been created through repeated unsuccessful parliamentary elections will be used by anti-system parties, ultimately to gain ground and disseminate anti-Western, pro-Kremlin, and nationalistic narratives. This has been evident not only in Moldova but also in Georgia. Consequently, a weak and unstable Bulgaria, threatened by increasing pro-Russian, Eurosceptic, and nationalist sentiment, would significantly weaken the EU's and NATO's integrity and security in the Eastern flank. It is time for European leaders to act now and pay more attention.