

SEPTEMBER 2022

PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN BULGARIA

The major political parties, possible alliances, and complicated context created by the Russian aggression in Ukraine.



Source: <https://euobserver.com/eu-political/124652>

Bulgaria will hold snap elections on October 2nd, the fourth parliamentary vote in one and a half years. This election follows after the dissolution of Kiril Petkov's reformist coalition government, which was deposed following a no-confidence vote in which one of the coalition's four parties, the populist "There is such a people" (ITN), turned against the alliance.¹

In the upcoming elections, Petkov still has a chance to regain power. His party, "We continue the Change" (PP), is still in second place in the polls, 3% off the "Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria" (GERB) of the longtime political figure and ex-prime minister Boyko Borisov.²

The October elections appear to be highly contested, and their outcome will most likely be determined by the alliances formed by each party. According to recent polls, around seven parties could be represented in the new parliament.³ The current geopolitical context has to be carefully considered as well, as Russia's invasion of Ukraine has created political and economic tensions in Bulgaria, especially when it comes to inflation and the cutting of Russian gas during winter.⁴ This is especially true given Bulgaria's reliance on Russian energy, which, according to some analysts, may result in increased voting preferences for pro-Russian parties.⁵

¹ Muniz, Luanna. "Bulgarian president calls snap election on October 2". *Politico*, August 1, 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/rumen-radev-kiril-petkov-bulgaria-parliamentary-election-october-2nd-2022/>

² "Bulgaria — National parliament voting intention". *Politico*, <https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/bulgaria/>

³ Ibid.

⁴ "Bulgaria to hold snap election on 2 October". *Euractiv*. August 1, 2022, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/elections/news/bulgaria-to-hold-snap-election-on-2-october/>

⁵ Ibid.

Author: Mr. Marcu SOLOMON,
External Relations Expert, New
Strategy Center

Coordinators: George SCUTARU,
CEO, New Strategy Center

Ms. Maria ION, Research
Manager, New Strategy Center

BRIEF HIGHLIGHTS

Context

The Main Parties

Possible Coalitions

Russia's impact on Bulgaria and the Upcoming Elections

Conclusion

THE MAIN PARTIES

1) *Citizens For European Development Of Bulgaria-Union Of Democratic Forces (GERB-SDS)*

The “Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria” or “GERB” party has been at the forefront of Bulgarian politics for at least 15 years, being defined by its leader, 63-year-old Boyko Borisov.

As a former firefighter during the communist era, Borisov founded his own security company in the 1990s, which counted Todor Zhivkov, the former leader of Communist Bulgaria, among its clients.⁶ Later, he joined politics, after being promoted by one of his security clients, namely the former Bulgarian monarch-turned-PM, Simeon Saxe-Coburg Gotha. Soon, he was promoted from chief secretary of the Interior Ministry to Mayor of Sofia, to Prime Minister, a position for which he has been reelected twice.⁷ With Borisov at its head, GERB has become one of the most successful parties in Bulgaria’s post-communist history.

The popularity of Borisov and his party stems from two main aspects. Firstly, GERB has demonstrated a capability to maintain a fairly neutral stance in foreign affairs, without pushing for a particular ideology.⁸ While it can be described as a center-right conservative party, over time, GERB has positioned itself as pro-NATO and pro-EU, while also maintaining tight relations with the Russian Federation, especially in the business sector.⁹ This balance has appealed to Bulgarians for quite some time.

Secondly, Borisov is a political figure that relies upon a populist image of a “man of the people”, that understands the struggles of the average person.¹⁰ This has helped him maintain power for many years, but the considerable number of controversies have finally accumulated and have decreased his popularity, especially in the last few years. It has been alleged that Borisov has social and business ties with the Bulgarian Mafia, which was further emphasized by a Wikileaks report submitted by a former United States Ambassador to Bulgaria.¹¹

Furthermore, his economic policies, which entail large public spending and avoid promoting pro-entrepreneurship measures,¹² have kept Bulgaria the poorest country of the European Union, with high levels of corruption and with a quarter of the population kept under the poverty line.¹³



Former Prime Minister Kiril Petkov before the no confidence vot on June 22.
Source: <https://www.rferl.org/a/bulgaria-cabinet-collapse-no-confidence/31909803.html>

⁶ Cheresheva, Mariya. Boryana Dzhambazova. “Boyko Borissov, ‘People’s Man’ and EU’s ‘Golden Boy’”. Balkan Insight. 2016, <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/07/08/boyko-borissov-people-s-man-and-eu-s-golden-boy-07-06-2016/>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ganev, Venelin I. “Explaining Eastern Europe:” Soft Decisionism” in Bulgaria.” Journal of Democracy 29, no. 3 (2018): 91-103, p. 93.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid 6

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid 8, p. 93.

¹³ “Poverty headcount ratio at national poverty lines (% of population) - Bulgaria”. World Bank, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.NAHC?locations=BG>



Boyko Borisov. Source: <https://atalayar.com/en/content/all-photo-boyko-borisovs-downfall-bulgaria>

Also, under Borisov, the freedom of the press was not fully respected, as threats and attacks against journalists have become commonplace. As such, Bulgaria has been ranked as low as 112th place in a global press freedom report from 2021.¹⁴ Throughout his many mandates as Prime Minister, there have also been allegations of voter fraud and manipulation, in elections at both local and European Parliament level.¹⁵ The most recent controversy was his arrest on March 17th, 2022, for misuse of EU funds and blackmail. He was, however, released after 24 hours as the Prosecutors Office didn't bring charges against him.¹⁶

GERB currently sits at 24% of the votes and, due to its versatility, it is open to many different alliances, as long as GERB will be the main political actor in power. In the last election, GERB received 22.44% of the vote, behind their biggest rivals, the pro-European party running on an anti-corruption platform, PP. As in the case of GERB, PP also has a popular central figure, that of the now former Prime Minister, Kiril Petkov.

2) PP (“We continue the Change”)

Founded less than a year ago, the PP party managed to win the last parliamentary elections and secure a majority, in a government that managed to last only around six months. Its leader, Kiril Petkov, is a Harvard University graduate in Business Administration.¹⁷

Petkov first entered politics in May 2021, where he served as the Minister of Economy in a “caretaker government”. Since then, he became a notable figure, as he criticized the Bulgarian Development Bank, meant to support small and medium businesses, for distributing its funds to only eight companies owned by four businessmen.¹⁸

Throughout his short mandate as Prime-Minister, Petkov has nevertheless made some radical policy changes, both on an internal and foreign relations level. Internally, he has focused on combating corruption and organized crime, exposing, for example, in his last days in power, criminal groups operating smuggling operations on Bulgaria's border with Turkey.¹⁹ He has also exposed the clear links between oligarchs and criminal organizations operating in Bulgaria and the Russian influence present in the country.²⁰ Despite the fall of his government, he was a politician that was able to hold a very volatile alliance for six months, which included the left-wing mildly-pro-Russian Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), and the conservative, populist party of ITN (“There is such a people”).

¹⁴ “Bulgaria RSF”. Reporters Without Borders, 2021, <https://rsf.org/en/country/bulgaria>

¹⁵ “Chaos, Fraud Mar Bulgaria's Local Election and Referendum”. OCCRP, 2015, <https://www.occrp.org/en/daily/4555-chaos-fraud-marr-bulgaria-s-local-election-and-referendum>

¹⁶ Nikolov, Krassen. “Ex-PM Borisov released following arrest”, Euractiv, 21 March, 2022 https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/ex-pm-borisov-released-following-arrest

¹⁷ “Службеният министър на икономиката Кирил Петков бе отличен сред Достойните българи”. [“The Minister of Economy Kiril Petkov was awarded among the Worthy Bulgarians”]. 24 Chasa, 11 May 2021, <https://www.24chasa.bg/bulgaria/article/9783772>

¹⁸ Economy Minister demands explanations over loans granted by Bulgarian Development Bank”. BNR.bg, <https://bnr.bg/en/post/101471719/economy-minister-demands-explanations-over-loans-granted-by-bulgarian-development-bank>

¹⁹ Simeonova, Maria. “Bulgaria's European awakening”. European Council on Foreign Affairs, July 29, 2022, <https://ecfr.eu/article/bulgarias-european-awakening/>

²⁰ Ibid.

The latter would be the one to betray the coalition in the no confidence vote - allegedly, according to the head of ITN, Slavi Trifonov, over disagreements on the budget and on Petkov's position regarding North Macedonia.²¹ Petkov argues that it was more than that, stating that Russia was also involved in this sabotage.

On a foreign policy level, PP has had the toughest anti-Russia stance in the post-communist history of Bulgaria. The reformist government has refused to pay for Russian gas in rubles, which led to Gazprom cutting Bulgaria's gas deliveries.²² Petkov has been a staunch supporter of Ukraine in this war, visiting President Volodymyr Zelensky, and expelling 70 Russian diplomats from Bulgaria.²³ As an alternative to Russian gas, Petkov started efforts to bring liquified natural gas (LNG) to Bulgaria through vessels, stating LNG is the best solution to reduce Bulgaria's energy dependence.²⁴

²¹ "Bulgaria's Petkov points finger at mafia and Russia as government collapses", Politico, June 22, 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/bulgarian-pm-petkov-government-lose-no-confidence-vote/amp/>

²² Ibid 19

²³ Ibid.

One of those LNG sources will come from the United States, with which they have struck a deal in May 2022.²⁵ He has also supported and attended the start of an LNG terminal construction from Alexandroupolis, Greece.²⁶ Lastly, Kiril Petkov reopened the very sensitive bilateral relations between Bulgaria and North Macedonia, by renouncing the veto over the latter's accession to the European Union.²⁷ Receiving 25.32% of the votes in the last election and currently sitting at 21% of the voter intentions, PP still has a chance to govern. It all depends on the alliances it is willing to make, which definitely do not include GERB as an option, since the party has built its platform as an anti-GERB, anti-establishment party. Furthermore, Petkov declared that with a working judicial system in Bulgaria, Boyko Borisov should at the moment be in prison.²⁸ An alliance with Borisov's party would prove fatal to the young "We continue the Change" party.

²⁴ "Russian Senator: Bulgaria should Freeze because it is an Unfriendly Country". Novinite, August 11, 2022, <https://www.novinite.com/articles/216250/Russian+Senator%3A+Bulgaria+should+Freeze+because+it+is+an+Unfriendly+Country>

²⁵ Nikolov, Krassen. "Bulgaria to replace Russian gas supply with cheaper US LNG". Euractiv, May 12, 2022, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/energy-environment/news/bulgaria-to-replace-russian-gas-supply-with-cheaper-us-lng/>

²⁶ Lazarov, Ivan. "Kiril Petkov Cabinet: Government amid Multiple Crises". Bulgarian News Agency, https://www.bta.bg/en/news/bulgaria/305912-kiril-petkov-cabinet-government-amid-multiple%20crises?fbclid=IwARoqRqtszcmJkXFbUaC5oUHATide_Wj_OGortVRqiWpJlVHdOVRhPSfCDI

²⁷ Ibid 19

²⁸ Ibid 25



Petkov campaigning. Source: <https://emerging-europe.com/news/continue-the-change-what-to-expect-from-the-winners-of-bulgarias-latest-elections/>

3) Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS)

DPS is a party that draws the majority of its voter base from Bulgarian ethnic minorities. It does not have a clear, consistent political ideology, but it thrives through the votes of the significant Turkish and Romani minorities of Bulgaria, which represent around 9% and 5% respectively, according to the most recent census.²⁹

The party polls at around 12%, which is similar to the party's previous election victory of 12.83%. There have been accusations of corruption inside the party, with one of its MPs, Delyan Peevski, even being placed under sanctions by the United States in 2021.³⁰ Despite these controversies and accusations of corruption, DPS has been throughout the last decade a staunch supporter of pro-EU causes, such as Bulgaria's accession in the eurozone or different issues on minority rights, being part of the Renew Europe euro parliamentary group.³¹

In the last year though, DPS has started establishing relations with Recep Tayyip Erdogan, with whom the 2021 DPS presidential candidate, Mustafa Karadayi, has met. This has been seen by some analysts as the beginning of DPS's radicalization.³²



Karadayi visits Erdogan. Source: <https://www.bagimsizhaber.com.tr/mobil/haber/baskanerdogan-mustafa-karadayiyi-kabul-etti-46178.html>

It is the third biggest party in Bulgaria, and it could be a wild card and a decisive party for forming the next government coalition.

4) Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP)

The successor of the Bulgarian Communist Party, BSP, has gone through some ideological shifts in its history, maintaining a socialist line in the 1990s, then shifting to a much more socially liberal, social-democratic ideology, and now returning to a softer version of the 1990s ideology, under the leadership of Korneliya Ninova (since 2016).³³

Its ideology can be described as economically left-wing and socially conservative, with a more favorable than opposing stance on Russia. Under Ninova, the BSP has been using communist nostalgia as a political tool, which can also be illustrated by her first act as BSP party leader: doing a pilgrimage at the birthplace of the former Bulgarian Communist dictator, Todor Zhivkov.³⁴

Still, when the Russian war in Ukraine started, BSP chose to join PP in this condemnation of Russia's actions. Also, Ninova, as Minister of Economy in the previous government, has signed and delivered weapons to the Polish border, to aid Ukraine, but acted as if she did not know where the weapons were going, in order to not upset her Russophile electorate.³⁵ This is also showcased by one of her recent declarations, in which she stated that the Russo-Ukrainian war should not erase the history of beneficial Bulgarian-Russian relations.³⁶

²⁹ "Население по местоживеење, пол и етническа група" [Population by place of residence, sex and ethnic group]. Censusresults.nsi.bg (in Bulgarian). 1900–2011.

³⁰ Prince, Todd. "U.S. Places Sanctions On Bulgarian Power Broker, Gambling Tycoon, Citing Influence Peddling". *Radio Free Europe*, June 3, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/bulgaria-sanctions-us-peevski-boshkov-zhelyazkov-corruption/31287870.html>

³¹ "Bulgarian elections marked by radicalisation of ethnic Turkish party". Euractiv, link: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/elections/news/bulgarian-elections-marked-by-radicalisation-of-ethnic-turkish-party/>

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid* 8, p. 95.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ "Ex-Head of Bulgarian Weapons Company: In 4 months, 4200 tons of Weapons were Exported with the Signature of Ninova", *Novinite*, <https://www.novinite.com/articles/216170/Ex-Head-of-Bulgarian-Weapons-Company%3A-In-4-months%2C-4200-tons-of-Weapons-were-exported-with-the-Signature-of-Ninova>

³⁶ Petrov, Angel. "War in Ukraine Threatens to Upend Politics in Bulgaria". *Balkan Insight*, <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/03/18/war-in-ukraine-threatens-to-upend-politics-in-bulgaria/>

While in the past BSP has been the top or the second most important party in Bulgarian politics, now it has lost that popularity and it relies on alliances. The most probable one is a new collaboration with PP, as, despite ideological differences, PP and BSP managed to coexist, especially through their opposition towards a new Borisov government. In the last elections, BSP had obtained 10% of the vote, and it is currently sitting at 12% in the polls.

5) *There is Such a People (ITN)*

ITN is a populist, conservative party, headed by a Bulgarian folklore singer, Slavi Trifonov. Its positions coincide with the ones of GERB (pro-NATO and pro-EU) but ITN created its niche in the electorate through the anti-establishment persona of Trifonov, who is popular especially among the youth.³⁷ He has also shown pro-Ukraine positions, even launching a song in support of Ukraine.³⁸

He has promised anti-corruption measures and electoral reforms, but simultaneously he has left the anti-corruption coalition, which led to its demise. Besides these issues, ITN has often been described as a “big tent” party, that covers a large array of policies, but without having a well-defined ideology.³⁹

As mentioned previously, the party was part of Kiril Petkov’s coalition and was ultimately responsible for the ousting of the government, switching sides during the no confidence vote in parliament from June 2022.

Trifonov was also noticed and initially gained popularity using the wave created by the pandemic. ITN has been active in participating in protests against pandemic measures and has supported conspiracy theories regarding the efficiency of vaccines.⁴⁰

His bombastic style and showmanship were not enough for Trifonov’s party to remain relevant in Bulgarian politics. After the no confidence vote, ITN started losing massively from its electorate, and has been on a downwards slope even before that, mainly due to vague and inaccurate positions.

Whereas in the July 2021 elections they received 24.08% of the vote, winning the election, in November 2021 they dropped down to 9.4%, and are currently only polling 3%, below the 4% threshold. Although ITN is on the edge of entering the next Bulgarian parliament, it has played a significant role in shaping the political arena in the last year, sabotaging Petkov’s reformist government. If it does enter, it will most likely side with Borisov’s GERB.

6) *Revival (Vazrazhdane)*

“Revival” is a far-right, nationalist, pro-Russia party, that is largely opposed to NATO and the European Union. Their leader, Konstantin Kostadinov, is a highly controversial and radical political figure in Bulgaria. He has expressed racist views, describing the Roma minority as “parasites” and “non-human vermin”⁴¹, and has called for “Russophobes” to be “exterminated like pests”.⁴²

³⁷ Nikolova, Milana. “Why young Bulgarians voted for a populist party founded by singer Slavi Trifonov”, *Emerging Europe*, 2021, <https://emerging-europe.com/after-hours/why-young-bulgarians-voted-for-a-populist-party-founded-by-singer-slavi-trifonov/>

³⁸ “Slavi Trifonov and Azis with a common song about the war in Ukraine”. Darik News, March 20, 2022 <https://darik.news/en/slavi-trifonov-and-azis-with-a-common-song-about-the-war-in-ukraine.html>

³⁹ “Bulgaria Parliamentary Elections”. CSIS. 2021, <https://www.csis.org/programs/european-election-watch/2021-elections/bulgaria>

⁴⁰ “Може ли антиваксерството да стане държавна политика?” [“Can anti-vaxxing become state policy?”] *Deutsche Welle*. 2021, <https://www.dw.com/bg/%D0%BC%D0%BE%D0%B6%D0%B5-%D0%BB%D0%B8-%D0%B0%D0%BD%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%B2%D0%B0%D0%BA%D1%81%D1%8A%D1%80%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B2%D0%BE%D1%82%D0%BE-%D0%B4%D0%B0-%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B5-%D0%B4%D1%8A%D1%80%D0%B6%D0%B0%D0%B2%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%Bo/a-58701219>

⁴¹ Kostadinova, Simona. “Kostadin Kosadinov “Kopeykin”- the new Siderov”, *Mediapool.bg*, <https://www.mediapool.bg/kostadin-kostadinov-kopeykin-noviyat-siderov-news303086.html>

⁴² Pounova, Polina. Tony Wesolowsky. “It Denies COVID And Wants Out Of NATO And The EU. Now Bulgaria’s Pro-Kremlin, Far-Right Revival Party Is In Parliament.” *RadioFreeEurope*, November 22, 2021 https://www.rferl.org/a/bulgaria-revival-party-parliament-eu/31572826.html?fbclid=IwAR2dkqSc1l9QzsYp2S_uatF7Nk2NXGZcPrr1PZlXZ7fC-kZgfQj3jSAs4

Also, in the past, Kostadinov has led a gang of white supremacist “skinheads” in an attack against a Roma community near the city of Varna.⁴³ Kostadinov has also had his fair share of corruption scandals. He has been accused of receiving state money designated for his party and using it to buy real estate and luxury cars.⁴⁴ Conversely, GERB has been in alliance with nationalist parties in the past,⁴⁵ so it is not a variant that has to be excluded.

“Revival” has also stood out through its positions regarding COVID-19. In the same manner as the ITN, Revival party members have participated in protests against COVID restrictions, calling the pandemic a government hoax, and have even stormed the building of the government in January of this year, amid the pandemic protests.⁴⁶

In the November 2021 elections, Revival has barely passed the 4% threshold, scoring 4.8% of the votes. Since then, and especially in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war, Revival has grown substantially in the polls, currently being marked at 9% of voter intentions.

7) Democratic Bulgaria (DB)

DB is a conglomerate of parties which ideologically can be described as liberal conservative, anti-corruption, and environmentalist parties, whose political positions are very much akin to the ones of PP.⁴⁷ The party has come into the spotlight of the Bulgarian political scene through their protests organized against the Russian gas company, Gazprom.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ “The Vazrazhdane Party: A Study in Polarization in Bulgaria”, *DemocraticErosion.com*, March 7, 2022, https://www.democratic-erosion.com/2022/03/07/the-vazrazhdane-party-a-study-in-polarization-in-bulgaria/?fbclid=IwARiK3Ge6GQsLCI8ZR-7Crrq3GHZJGyJULB8mG6oYv-OHZQxLW_RUP-jyXDE

⁴⁷ Nordsieck, Wolfram. “Bulgaria”. *Parties and Elections in Europe*, <http://www.parties-and-elections.eu/bulgaria.html>

⁴⁸ “Leader of “Democratic Bulgaria”: “Gazprom” is a Geopolitical Weapon”. *Novinite*, August 2, 2022, <https://www.novinite.com/articles/216202/Leader-of+%E2%80%99CDemocratic+Bulgaria%E2%80%99D%3A+%22Gazprom%22-is+a+Geopolitical+Weapon>

⁴⁹ Ibid.

One of the co-chairs of the party, Hristo Ivanov, claimed that Gazprom is more than an energy supplier, “a geopolitical weapon of Russia, which is in a severe confrontation not only with Ukraine, but also with the EU and NATO”.⁴⁸ As such, the dependence of Bulgaria on Gazprom through the signing of another contract is considered a tremendous problem by Democratic Bulgaria.⁴⁹ These protests against Gazprom have been repeated, as members of DB have also protested against the Bulgarian President, Rumen Radev, and against the current government,⁵⁰ which recently has declared that resuming Russian gas supplies is inevitable.⁵¹ In the last election, DB scored only 6.2% of the votes, and at the moment it is situated at 9% of voting intentions. This party could prove to be a crucial tool for the return of the “We continue the Change” party to power.

8) Bulgarian Rise (BV)

The last relevant party in this electoral scheme is the newly created party of the former defense minister, Stefan Yanev. He was minister under Petkov’s cabinet, until he was relieved from his position by Petkov himself. The reason for that was that Yanev was opposed to the idea of creating a NATO battle group in Bulgaria. Later, he also refused to call the invasion of Ukraine a war, preferring the Russian version of “special operation”.⁵²

He then created his own party, with a Russophile profile, which is currently sitting at 4% of the voting intentions. Still, if it enters parliament, it could be a useful ally of Borisov and GERB, if the calculations for the next coalition become complicated.

⁵⁰ “Bulgaria: Hundreds Protested against the President and his Caretaker Government Last Night”, *Novinite*, August 6, 2022, <https://www.novinite.com/articles/216187/Bulgaria%3A+Hundreds+Protest+ed+against+the+President+and+his+Caretaker+Government+Last+Night>

⁵¹ “Bulgaria says talks to resume Russian gas supplies are ‘inevitable’”, *Reuters*, August 22, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/europe/bulgaria-says-talks-needed-resume-russian-gas-supplies-2022-08-22/>

⁵² Ibid 36



Pro-Russia Bulgarian protester. Source: <https://cepa.org/vladimir-putins-people-or-are-they/>

POSSIBLE COALITIONS

Having analyzed the major Bulgarian parties, it is now important to consider which coalitions might form.

Starting with GERB, it is open to an alliance with almost any party, as long as they are the main party in this alliance. Thus, it is wiser to look at the other party preferences and see if they could accept an alliance with GERB.

As said before, “We continue the Change” is fully opposed to a GERB alliance, but it is more than open to a new collaboration with Ninova and the BSP, since Kiril Petkov has specified during the last government that Ninova has been a “great partner”, despite the ideological differences.⁵³ As such, a new PP-BSP alliance is on the table.

When it comes to the DPS, the pro-minority party, it can go either way, although it leans more towards GERB, since Petkov’s anti-corruption platform can be rejected by the oligarchs which have leading roles in DPS. Still, if DPS chooses to go with GERB, then most likely GERB will lose the support of the nationalist “Revival” party, as an alliance between the Turkish-Roma party and the nationalists is hard to envision.

As such, “Revival” is either siding with GERB, but without DPS in the coalition, or it goes in opposition, as in the previous parliament. An alliance with Petkov’s party, which has an opposite ideology to that of the nationalists, is very unlikely.

For Democratic Bulgaria, as said, the equation is straightforward: allying with PP. As it stands, a PP-BSP-DB alliance can prove powerful against a GERB-DPS/GERB-Revival coalition.

The reason for which the ITN and Bulgarian Rise parties have been mentioned in this report, despite their low percentages, is because they could change the whole balance of the election in the favor of Borisov. Both of these parties would side with Borisov, and as such, if one of them enters parliament, it could move things in GERB’s favor. If both of them enter (ITN is around 0.8% from the threshold), then Borisov really has a shot at a majority.

This election is one of the tightest ones in the history of Bulgaria. That is also because of a rise in some Russophile parties, which is a consequence of Russia’s war in Ukraine. In the following section, the paper will go through the Russo-Bulgarian relationship in the context of these elections.

⁵³ “Kiril Petkov: We have done Terribly Good Things for the People, Ninova is a Great Partner”. *Novinite*
<https://www.novinite.com/articles/216323/Kiril+Petkov%3A+We+have+done+Terribly+Good+Things+for+the+People,+Ninova+is+a+Great+Partner>

RUSSIA'S IMPACT ON BULGARIA AND ON THE UPCOMING BULGARIAN ELECTIONS

Russia and Bulgaria have long-standing ties that have made them partner countries or even allies. Despite the shared ethno-cultural background, as both countries are Slavic, Orthodox Christian, and Cyrillic-using nations, they have also been close under different forms of government. In communist times, during the Soviet Union, Bulgaria was also known as “the sixteenth republic” [of the USSR], because of Sofia’s very close relationship to Moscow. These communist ties have been maintained even since the 1990s onwards, as many of the Bulgarian communist nomenklatura remained part of the political establishment after the fall of communism.⁵⁴ If we go even further back, a historical reference that is highly significant for the Russo-Bulgarian bilateral relationship is the 1877-1878 Russo-Turkish war, in which Russia’s victory brought an end to the nearly-500-year Ottoman rule over Bulgaria. Thus, Russia is still seen nowadays as a liberator in the eyes of many Bulgarians.⁵⁵



Anti-Putin protester. Source: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/anti-gazprom-protest-bulgaria-russia-1.6547462>

In the current political context, Russia did not expect Bulgaria to be so prompt in its refusal to pay for gas in rubles. Conversely, it was not a surprise that Russia cut the gas for a country such as Poland, which has a very adverse attitude towards Russia, but it was a surprise when that was done to Bulgaria as well, a nation with a completely different bilateral relation with Russia, as opposed to Poland. Members of the Russian Parliament have even gone as far as threatening to let Bulgaria freeze for being an “unfriendly country”.⁵⁶

On a political level, Russia-Bulgaria relations worsened during Petkov’s government. It can be considered one of the most anti-Russian stances in modern Bulgarian history. For example, in June 2022, the Russian Embassy in Sofia launched a charity to support the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which resulted in Petkov expelling 70 Russian diplomats due to espionage concerns.⁵⁷ Also, when Petkov’s government collapsed, he did not shy away from naming the Russian ambassador in Sofia as instrumental in the collapse of his administration, by exercising his influence over certain Bulgarian MPs.⁵⁸ Thus, on a political level, a new Petkov government would prove to be a nightmare scenario for the Kremlin, when it comes to both its influence in Bulgaria and its regional influence.

⁵⁴ Dzhambazova, Boryana. “Ukraine war exposes the Kremlin’s lingering reach in Bulgaria”. *Politico*, <https://www.politico.eu/article/ukraine-war-kremlin-reach-bulgaria-kiril-petkov/>

⁵⁵ Dzhambazova, Boryana. “Welcome to Bulgaria, where the Ukraine war is NATO’s fault”. *Politico*, <https://www.politico.eu/article/bulgaria-ukraine-russia-war-nato-fault/>

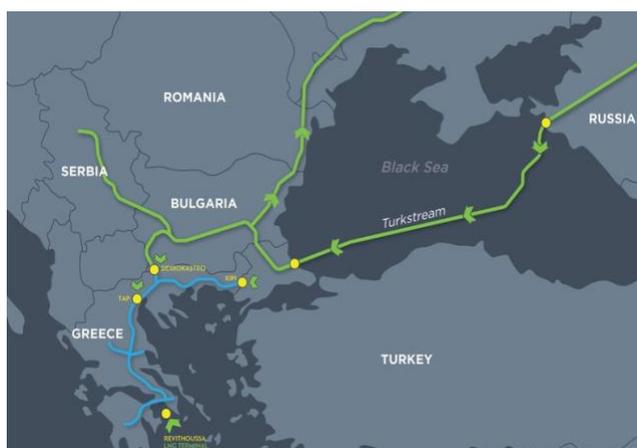
⁵⁶ *Ibid* 25

⁵⁷ Oliver, Christian. “Bulgaria expels 70 Russian diplomats and spies”. *Politico*, 28 June 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/kiril-petkov-bulgaria-expels-70-russian-diplomats-and-spies/>

⁵⁸ “Bulgaria’s Petkov points finger at mafia and Russia as government collapses”, *Politico*, <https://www.politico.eu/article/bulgarian-pm-petkov-government-lose-no-confidence-vote/amp/>

When it comes to the energy market, it could be argued that the Bulgarian energy capacities were captured by the Kremlin. Gazprom has had a monopoly on Bulgarian gas for decades, Lukoil had control on the only Bulgarian oil refinery, and a Russian company has the construction contract for a nuclear power plant.⁵⁹ This capture of the energy sector also entails a tremendous revenue capture by Moscow, which can be used to “buy” certain politicians and businessmen from Bulgaria.⁶⁰

Although the situation may look inescapable for Bulgaria, as former Prime Minister Petkov has shown, there are options. Bulgaria can try to import gas from Azerbaijan and from the United States and get LNG deliveries through Greece, as mentioned previously. That is possible since gas, although dominated by Russian suppliers, only makes up for 6% of Bulgaria’s energy consumption.⁶¹ These projects can also decrease the energy dependence of adjacent countries, such as Romania or North Macedonia, and as such it has a clear regional relevance. It could reduce the relevance of the most important blackmailing tool of the Kremlin: gas.



LNG terminal map (US gas through Greece). Source: <https://seeneews.com/news/bulgaria-gets-first-shipment-of-lng-from-us-report-787466>

⁵⁹ Samorukov, Maxim. “Is Bulgaria Drifting Back Into Russia’s Orbit?”. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, link: <https://carnegieendowment.org/eurasiainsight/87405>

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Roussi, Antoaneta. “Bulgaria, where some are pro-Russian, divided after gas cutoff”. *Al-Jazeera*, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2022/5/3/invasion-of-ukraine-mars-special-bulgaria-russia-relationship>

⁶² “Russia’s Information War Expands Through Eastern Europe”. *VOA News*, <https://www.voanews.com/a/russia-s-information-war-expands-through-eastern-europe-6662042.html>

⁶³ Nikolov, Krassen. “Bulgaria predicts economic slowdown due to Ukraine war”. *Euractiv*, https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/bulgaria-predicts-economic-slowdown-due-to-ukraine-war/

⁶⁴ Ibid 36

⁶⁵ Ibid 59

Still, despite the alternatives, the Bulgarian general population is very concerned about the cutoff of Russian gas, fearing a cold winter and also being heavily affected by the increasing energy prices.⁶²

Indeed, the Russian war does not only affect the energy sector, but the economy as a whole. As an analyst points out, “the military conflict has led to rising energy and basic raw material prices, which will have a negative impact on household purchasing power”.⁶³ As such, the current economic crisis will highly benefit Russophile parties in their growth in polls, who will argue that re-partnering with Russia will avoid an economic and humanitarian crisis.

There is indeed a sizeable number of Russophile Bulgarians who will be manipulated. As a result, the populist parties will exploit this Kremlin narrative, according to which it is the Bulgarian people who are pro-Russian, but their choice is taken away by pro-European elites.⁶⁴ Again, that can be considered a form of Kremlin disinformation, as currently, from a public perception perspective, the polls show Bulgaria as having the biggest collapses in the approval of Russia and Vladimir Putin among all European states. While Russia was viewed positively by 45% of Bulgarians in 2021, this number dropped to 30% in March 2022. In the case of Putin, the popularity collapse was even more dramatic, dropping from a solid 70% to 29%.⁶⁵ If we take the Bulgarian public by age demographics, that percentage ought to be even lower.

This again showcases the fact that the division between a Russia or Europe preference is more than a political split, it is a generational difference. While the older generations are more drawn to Russia, because of the communist nostalgia factor and the former Russo-Bulgarian “special relationship”, the youth are much more entrenched in Western values and culture.⁶⁶

In general, Russia has and will still have a great influence over Bulgaria. If the policy line started by Petkov is kept - consisting of anti-corruption and pushing for energy independence, then the economic influence will decrease. Still, Russia will be able to influence the masses, through disinformation, alarmism, and through threats, which helps populist and nationalist parties gain ground, as one has seen with the case of the “Revival” party.

⁶⁶ Kahve, Mert. “Does Bulgaria Really Support Ukraine?”, *Democratic Erosion*, <https://www.democratic-erosion.com/2022/06/12/does-bulgaria-really-support-ukraine/>

CONCLUSIONS

Bulgaria’s October 2nd elections have high stakes, with implications both at internal and external level. The candidates vary in ideologies and their approaches to the EU, NATO, as well as Russia.

Given the current conflict and ensuing economic crisis, Boyko Borisov and his party appear to be the favorites. However, Kiril Petkov and the PP still have a chance to retake power and restart the reforms.

Nonetheless, even if Borisov wins and forms an alliance, Moscow will have less of an enemy in Sofia, but certainly not a friend. While Borisov has been much more open to the Kremlin, the country has maintained its foreign allegiances to the European Union and NATO. He will almost certainly continue to support Ukraine, but not as strongly as Western allies would like.

The refusal of the BSP's socialists in the Petkov cabinet to support Moscow following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine guarantees that the Kremlin can only rely on the nationalists of the "Revival" party.

Still, while GERB is not a staunch supporter of Russia, it may take a "business as usual" approach to the Kremlin in order to score political points. As a result, a GERB-centered coalition could reestablish energy relations with Moscow, reversing all of Petkov's policies toward energy independence. With GERB in power, it is possible that the sanctions regime and military posture toward Russia will soften. We recall the attitude of the Borisov government when Romania proposed, in May 2016, an enhanced naval cooperation and an increase of NATO capabilities, especially in the naval field.



Bulgarian protesters. Source: <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/externe/dupa-protestele-din-strada-bulgaria-a-anuntat-ca-renunta-la-taxa-pe-paine-mareste-alocatiile-pensiile-si-iaftineste-carburantii-1944483>

Bulgarian Prime Minister Borisov rejected the proposal, saying "I always say that we are a peaceful country. I don't want the Black Sea to become an area of conflict."⁶⁷

These factors affect not only Bulgaria, but also the Euro-Atlantic alliance and the Black Sea and Balkans as a whole. Although Bulgaria is not one of the most powerful political actors in NATO or the EU, it is very relevant in the region.

A less pro-European leadership in Bulgaria, for example, could have an impact on Balkan integration in the EU, as GERB and „Revival” are aggressive towards North Macedonia in particular, but are also hesitant towards further European integration in general.

On a military level, the strategic importance of the NATO Black Sea countries increases with the war in Ukraine. An alliance between GERB and one of the Eurosceptic parties, such as "Revival", have an impact on Bulgaria's openness to receive more NATO troops, thus favoring Russia's interests in the Black Sea region.

A new Petkov cabinet, on the other hand, could have a significant impact. The PP's policies on energy independence, its aggressive stance on Russian diplomats and business, and its overall stance on corruption may reverberate throughout the Balkans. The significance of such an approach in the energy domain is also significant for Romania and other countries in the region, which could benefit greatly from the interconnector with Greece and alternative energy sources. It is critical that this interconnector be completed within a year, otherwise there will be no way to decouple from Russian gas dependence.

⁶⁷ Drăgici, Mihai. "La o zi după vizita lui Iohannis în Bulgaria, premierul Borisov anunță că se opune Flotei NATO în Marea Neagră: Nu vreau ca Marea Neagră să devină zonă de conflict militar", *Mediafax*, 16 June 2016, <https://www.mediafax.ro/externe/la-o-zi-dupa-vizita-lui-iohannis-in-bulgaria-premierul-borisov-anunta-ca-se-opune-flotei-nato-in-marea-neagra-nu-vreau-ca-marea-neagra-sa-devina-zona-de-conflict-militar-15497858>

Whoever wins these elections will shape Bulgaria's future, determining its military engagement and stance on sanctions against Russia. It is critical for the EU and NATO that Bulgaria's future leadership promotes a firm policy of support for Ukraine in its fight against Russian aggression. An ambiguous government would be detrimental to Bulgaria both internally and externally, benefiting only Russia.