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Observation of the early parliamentary elections in Bulgaria (9 June and 27 October 2024)

Election observation report
Ad hoc Committee of the Bureau
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1. Introduction

1. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) has observed all national elections in Bulgaria since 1990. This includes the recent cycle of seven early parliamentary elections held since 2021, following the successive failures to form stable governments.[1] This report covers the two most recent early parliamentary elections held on 9 June and 27 October 2024.

2. For thirty years, the Assembly has been committed to supporting Bulgaria's democratic development. Bulgaria joined the Council of Europe on 7 May 1992. It was subject to the full monitoring procedure from 1994 to 2000 and since then it has been under a post-monitoring dialogue[2] on a number of outstanding concerns arising from the obligations incumbent upon every member State of the Council of Europe under Article 3 of the Statute of the Council of Europe (ETS No. 1) with regard to democracy, the rule of law and human rights. The latter commits the Bulgarian authorities to invite the Assembly to observe national elections and referendums.

3. At its meeting in Strasbourg on 19 April 2024, the Bureau of the Assembly decided to set up a 20-member cross-party ad hoc committee in accordance with the d'Hondt system, plus the two co-rapporteurs of the Committee on the Honouring of Obligations and Commitments by Member States of the Council of Europe (Monitoring Committee), to observe the early parliamentary elections of 9 June 2024 in Bulgaria. Furthermore, the Bureau appointed Mr Oleksii Goncharenko (Ukraine, EC/DA) as Chairperson of the ad hoc committee (see the composition of the delegation in Appendix 1).

4. After another series of failed attempts to form a government over the summer of 2024, President Rumen Radev called for new parliamentary elections to be held on 27 October 2024. The Bureau of the Assembly decided at its meeting on 6 September 2024 to observe these early elections. Given the very short timeframe since the previous early parliamentary elections of 9 June, it agreed to maintain the same list of members. Mr Goncharenko not being available on the new dates, the Bureau agreed to appoint Mr Alfred Heer (Switzerland, ALDE) as the new Chairperson of the ad hoc committee[3] (see the composition of the delegation in Appendix 4).

5. In line with the co-operation agreement signed on 4 October 2004 between the Assembly and the European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission), Ms Katharina Pabel (Austria) and Mr Richard Barrett (Ireland) represented the Venice Commission respectively as its legal experts on these two election observation missions.

6. In both contexts, the PACE delegation was the only international parliamentary organisation observing these elections. Of the usual partner organisations, only a limited expert team of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights fo the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE/ODIHR) was present in the country for these elections (see the programmes of the meetings in Appendices 2 and 5). At the end of both missions, the delegation held a press briefing and issued a statement (Appendices 3 and 6).

7. The PACE delegation would like to extend its appreciation to the Bulgarian authorities for the invitations, and in particular the staff of the Human Rights Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the PACE delegation for their assistance to the success of its missions.

2. Political crisis leading to the successive early elections

8. Since July 2020, Bulgaria has been confronted with a major political crisis which has resulted in seven consecutive early parliamentary elections. For most of this period, the country has been governed by technical caretaker governments with limited mandates.

9. The period between July 2020 and April 2023 was marked by a political crisis and instability following mass demonstrations. These were triggered by numerous corruption scandals surrounding, *inter alia*, the allocation of EU funds, infrastructure projects and government subsidies. Only two of the last six elections

1. Last parliamentary elections: 4 April, 11 July and 14 November 2021, 2 October 2022, 2 April 2023, 9 June and 27 October 2024.
2. See Committee on the Honouring of Obligations and Commitments by Member States of the Council of Europe (Monitoring Committee), Post-monitoring dialogue with Bulgaria, Doc. 15947, 25 March 2024.
3. Mr Alfred Heer previously led the PACE election observation missions to Bulgaria for the first four rounds: 4 April, 11 July and 14 November 2021 and 2 October 2022.

(14 November 2021 and 2 April 2023) resulted in the formation of a government, but both coalitions failed after reform-oriented leaders tried to tackle corruption and end the country's dependence on the Russian Federation for energy and security.

10. The 5th round of early elections on 2 April 2023 produced a government coalition between the two biggest political groups, Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) and We Continue the Change – Democratic Bulgaria (PP-DB), with a rotational premiership: Mr Nikolay Denkov from the PP-DB as Prime Minister for the first nine months and then Ms Mariya Gabriel from GERB who until then was to serve as Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister.

11. On 5 March 2024, Prime Minister Denkov resigned in line with the rotation agreement. However, the planned government rotation and formation of a new administration failed on 20 March. Despite negotiations under the first mandate continuing through late March, no workable government emerged. After two more unsuccessful negotiation rounds, new elections were announced on 26 March, scheduled for 9 June 2024 to coincide with the European Parliament elections.

12. Under Article 99 of the Constitution, if no agreement on forming a government is reached after all three negotiation mandates, the President, in consultation with parliamentary groups and on the proposal of a candidate for caretaker prime minister, appoints a caretaker government and schedules new early elections within two months of its inauguration. On 29 March 2024, President Radev appointed the Chairman of the National Audit Office, Dimitar Glavchev, as a candidate for caretaker prime minister.

13. The early parliamentary elections on 9 June 2024 – the sixth in three years – were marked by unprecedented political disengagement. Voter turnout hit a historic low of 34.41%, reflecting deepening apathy and frustration among the electorate. This record low made non-voters the most significant "force", highlighting widespread disengagement. Over the past three years, mainstream parties have lost over 1.2 million voters. The seven parties that entered the 50th National Assembly fell short to represent 70% of Bulgaria's population.

14. The former coalition partners faced backlash from their voters. Although the GERB-Union of Democratic Forces (GERB-SDS) emerged as the winner with 24.7% of the vote and secured 68 seats, it actually lost 21% of its supporters, dropping from 670 000 votes in April 2023 to 526 000. PP-DB saw its support halved, plummeting from 621 000 to 308 000 voters. The Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), one of the country's oldest political forces, continued its steep decline, with its electorate shrinking to just 151 000 votes (19 seats). Conversely, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF (DPS)) and There Is Such a People (ITN) improved their performances by 5% and 22% respectively, with MRF (DPS) achieving significant gains by adding 11 seats in the 50th National Assembly. Without the record low turnout, the party "Velichie" would not have entered parliament with its 4.65% of the vote.

15. This outcome set the stage for further political deadlock, as no single party or bloc secured a majority in the 240-seat National Assembly, perpetuating Bulgaria's ongoing political fragmentation and instability. Despite winning the most votes, GERB-SDS found itself 53 seats short of the 121 needed to form a government, with few potential coalition partners. The PP-DB alliance categorically rejected any co-operation with GERB-SDS after their previous failed coalition. The MRF (DPS), traditionally a pivotal player in coalition politics and holding 47 seats – enough to form a majority coalition – remained a polarising force. In July 2024, the MRF itself split over whether to join a new coalition government.

16. The inability of the top vote-getting parties to bridge ideological divides, coupled with the continued rise of nationalist-populist movements like Revival, which refused to co-operate with any mainstream party, effectively paralysed the post-election political process. Despite multiple rounds of negotiations and after GERB, PP-DB and ITN exhausted their attempts to form a government, no stable coalition could be formed, leaving Bulgaria without a functioning government in the aftermath of the elections.

17. Following weeks of failed coalition negotiations, Bulgaria was forced to call a new round of early parliamentary elections and to continue with a caretaker government. On 9 August 2024, the Bulgarian President as a consequence appointed the Vice-President of the National Audit Office, Goritsa Grancharova-Kozhareva, as the next caretaker prime minister. She was granted 10 days to form a proposal for the caretaker government to be appointed on 20 August. On 19 August 2024, Ms Grancharova-Kozhareva fulfilled the mandate, but President Rumen Radev refused to sign the decree appointing her cabinet. The key reason for his refusal was her decision to keep Kalin Stoyanov as Minister of Interior.[4] President Radev requested a new candidate for the position, citing political tensions surrounding Mr Stoyanov, but Ms Grancharova-Kozhareva declined to make changes. As a result, President Radev rejected her cabinet and re-appointed Dimitar Glavchev as prime minister.

18. The "Glavchev II" caretaker government was finally sworn in on 27 August 2024**,** after President Radev accepted a revised cabinet with changes in the ministries of interior, foreign affairs, and transport. The next round of early elections was called for 27 October 2024.

19. Meanwhile, following the general elections of 9 June, the MRF (DPS) experienced significant internal strife. Supporters of one of the party's leaders, the media tycoon Delyan Peevski sanctioned under the US Magnitsky Act for corruption, initiated efforts to expel members aligned with the former leader and co-founder of the party, Ahmed Doğan. The conflict stemmed from opposing views on forming a GERB-led government: Ahmed Doğan was against it, while Delyan Peevski was in favour. In parliament, this division was evident as 30 MRF (DPS) deputies voted for the government and 15 voted against it.

20. On August 27, Delyan Peevski was ousted as party chairman, and seven of his closest deputies were expelled, leading to a split within the DPS. Mr Peevski's supporters formed a new faction called DPS-New Beginning, joining forces with the Bulgarian Voice Party and the New Leaders Party. Those loyal to Ahmed Doğan initially took the name Democracy, Rights and Freedoms and later allied with the United Patriots (SBOR) and the National Agrarian Union. Both groups sought to keep the DPS acronym, but following a decision of the Supreme Administrative Court to consider Mr Peevski's electronic registration as the first one, his faction was allowed to retain the name, while Mr Doğan's group ultimately adopted the name Alliance for Rights and Freedoms.

3. Constitutional and legal framework

21. The National Assembly of Bulgaria is a unicameral body composed of 240 members. Members of Parliament are elected through an open-list proportional system from 31 multi-mandate constituencies. One extra constituency is for voters abroad.

22. The Election Code of 2014 is the main piece of legislation governing parliamentary elections and has been amended many times since then. The most recent amendments occurred in December 2023 and concern voting via machines, following a decision by the Constitutional Court which declared parts of the relevant regulation unconstitutional. The authorities did not consult the Venice Commission on the different electoral amendments adopted since the last opinion on electoral matters issued in June 2017.[5]

23. Article 99 of the Constitution is the relevant provision dealing with early elections and the formation of a caretaker government. According to this provision, if no agreement on the formation of a government is reached after all three negotiation mandates, the president, in consultation with the parliamentary groups and on the proposal of a candidate for caretaker prime minister, appoints a caretaker government and schedules new early elections within two months of its inauguration.

24. The constitutional reform of December 2023 mainly dealt with provisions concerning the Bulgarian judiciary and the prosecution service. However it is also significant in the context of repeated early parliamentary elections.[6] Aimed at reducing the president's powers, the reform limited the latter's discretion in appointing a caretaker prime minister to a restricted group of high-ranking officials. It also stipulated that the incumbent National Assembly's mandate would terminate only when the newly elected Assembly takes office and that elections for a new National Assembly must take place no later than one month before the current Assembly's term expires. Additionally, the reform granted citizens with dual citizenship the right to be elected as members of Parliament and ministers, provided they meet an 18-month residency requirement.[7]

25. President Radev opposed these changes and challenged them before the Constitutional Court in January 2024. Prior to their adoption, the Venice Commission had issued an opinion welcoming, with certain reservations, certain elements of the constitutional reform.[8] On 26 July, the Court annulled provisions related to the division of the Judicial Council, changes in the distribution and election of members in different chambers, limitations on the powers of the Prosecutor General, and the reduction of mandates for both the Prosecutor General and the Judicial Council.

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4. The controversy surrounding Mr Stoyanov's appointment highlighted deeper political divisions. PP-DB and Revival called for Mr Stoyanov's removal, accusing him of being too closely aligned with Delyan Peevski, Co-Chairman of the MRF (DPS)**,** who advocated for Mr Stoyanov's continued leadership. Be it noted that in the recent elections, Mr Stoyanov led the MRF-New Beginning list, confirming concerns about his influence on the election process.
5. See Venice Commission, CDL-AD(2017)016, "Bulgaria – Joint opinion on amendments to the electoral code".
6. The sixth amendment of the 1991 Constitution was adopted on 20 December 2023. Its main focus was the judiciary and prosecution service.
7. The 18-month residency requirement only applies to candidates to the National Assembly.
8. See Venice Commission, CDL-AD(2023)039, "Bulgaria – Opinion on the draft amendments to the Constitution".

26. However, the constitutional judges were split 6-6 on the above-mentioned elections-related amendments, namely the procedure for appointing a caretaker prime minister, the rules on the term of the National Assembly and the passive suffrage rights of Bulgarian citizens holding dual nationality. Since no majority decision was reached on these provisions, they remained in force.

27. The Central Election Commission (CEC) is a permanent body of 15 members appointed for a five-year term, with its current composition established in May 2021. Since its appointment, this CEC has already organised elections eight times – six for the National Assembly, one presidential and one local election. By law, the CEC should proportionally reflect the composition in the parliament. However, due to a series of early elections, some parties represented in the outgoing parliament were either not represented in the CEC, or their representation did not correspond to their number of seats in the parliament.

28. The first chamber of the Supreme Administrative Court is the relevant body in charge of dealing in last instance with electoral complaints. The PACE delegation covering the 27 October elections met on 25 October the first chamber, composed of 14 judges, and the Vice-President of the Supreme Administrative Court. The latter explained that the Court received about 50 election-related cases this year, all settled by then.

29. The electoral threshold to access parliament is 4% of valid votes at national level, while independent candidates must pass the electoral quota calculated based on the Hare-Niemeyer method. Voters can therefore express preferences within a list.[9] A candidate benefits from the preference vote if the number of received votes is at least 7% of the votes cast for the candidate list.

30. There were 6 138 050 eligible voters for the 19 June elections, and 6 601 262 for the 27 October elections, which are unusually high figures compared to the official population, estimated at 6 445 481 in 2024 (European Union data).[10]

31. Regarding voting abroad and the 27 October early elections, 719 polling stations were installed abroad, in 57 countries, and about 30 000 voters were registered in advance to vote abroad. It is also possible to vote simply by presenting an identity document, despite not being registered in advance. Most of the polling stations abroad were hosted on diplomatic and consular premises, and some on private premises provided by diasporic communities.[11]

32. Over the past decade, machine voting has been a contentious issue in Bulgaria's electoral process, creating significant divisions among political parties. Initially introduced experimentally in 2014 to reduce electoral fraud by minimising invalid ballots and human error, machine voting was mandated in larger polling stations starting from 2021. However, from 2021 to 2024, frequent policy shifts occurred due to changing political alliances, with parties alternately supporting and opposing machine voting based on their own interests. By late 2022, a coalition of GERB-SDS, MRF and BSP reintroduced mixed voting, arguing that voters should have the choice between machines and paper ballots. This move reduced voting machines to mere ballot printers, with paper ballots counted manually, sparking criticism from parties like PP-DB that advocated for machine voting to prevent electoral manipulation. In the June 2024 parliamentary elections, machine voting usage sharply declined from 59.12% in 2022 to 39.02% in 2024, partly due to confusion following the CEC's suspension of machine use during the 2023 local elections and political messaging favouring paper ballots.

33. The return to mixed voting reignited concerns about election fraud, particularly the resurgence of controlled and bought votes that machine voting had helped to limit. The Minister of E-Governance explained to us on 26 October 2024, that dedicated experts had authenticated 3 306 machines and their related algorithms. He reported that the contractor, Ciela Norma AD, had refused to co-operate in updating the operating system of the machine voting system (version 2023) and in particularly the kernel (which dates from 2019), and had not installed the machines according to the agreed schedule. This resulted in a delay in the inspection phase. As Bulgaria moves forward, the debate over machine versus paper voting remains central to discussions on ensuring free and fair elections. 157 polling stations abroad were equipped with voting machines.[12]

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9. Voters abroad do not express preferences. Their votes are however included in the total votes obtained by parties for the allocation of seats at national level.
10. https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/eu-countries/bulgaria_en.
11. Elements provided by the Director of Human Rights of the ministry of Foreign Affairs met on 25 October 2024.
12. Elements provided by the Central Election Commission met on 26 October 2024.

4. Candidate registration and major campaign issues

34. A total of 24 parties and 9 coalitions registered for the seventh round of early parliamentary elections, with one coalition unable to compete due to insufficient signatures. Compared to previous elections – 20 parties and 11 coalitions in June 2024, and 14 parties and 7 coalitions in April 2023 – the increase in political actors raised concerns among observers. Many interlocutors were worried that as voters moved away from mainstream parties, the resulting fragmented parliament would struggle even more to form a stable government.

35. The 9 June elections, held alongside the European elections, focused largely on European issues. Key topics included whether Bulgaria would receive €5.69 billion from the EU's recovery plan and join the eurozone on 1 January 2025. Other significant issues were the general economic situation, unemployment, cost of living, healthcare availability, and the education system.

36. Interlocutors described the 27 October election campaign as low-key for mainstream parties, mainly consisting of smear campaigns against opponents. The campaign was conducted primarily on social media and through traditional methods in rural areas. The Ministry of Interior reported 415 pre-election events with 63 840 participants. Media representatives and the CEC noted the absence of leadership debates and traditional interviews, with politicians favouring communication through platforms and declarations rather than face-to-face interactions with journalists or the public. GERB representatives highlighted their extensive rural campaign, while other political forces accused GERB of misusing administrative resources and engaging in controlled voting.

37. The split within the MRF (DPS) camp generated significant political debate, bringing into focus issues like the independence of law enforcement and the judiciary, corruption, Delyan Peevski's dominance over local media, and suspicions of extensive vote-buying in favour of MRF-New Beginning.

38. While controlled and bought votes have long been a feature of Bulgarian elections, interlocutors emphasised the high stakes of these elections and allegations of widespread vote-buying schemes. They estimated that controlled voting could account for 8-10% of votes and vote-buying for about 3-4%. The Ministry of Interior was perceived as inefficient in addressing these issues, selectively targeting certain neighbourhoods.

39. In a meeting with three ministers of the caretaker government responsible for organising the elections,[13] we were informed about the measures that the interim government had taken to protect citizens' political rights. A national interdepartmental unit comprising the Prosecutor's Office, Ministry of Interior, and State Agency for National Security was established. By 25 October, police had received 512 reports of electoral violations, 408 related to vote-buying for political parties or coalitions. Authorities had executed 1 450 warning protocols, initiated over 110 pre-trial proceedings, and detained 51 individuals. Compared to the same period in previous elections, this represented an increase of 65.7% in reports, 21% in pre-trial proceedings, and 36% in warning protocols. A hotline was also set up to receive alerts on election day.

40. Major issues leading up to the elections included the election of the Prosecutor General, amendments to the Preschool and School Education Act, and attempts to introduce a "foreign agents" bill.

41. The Bulgarian Prosecutor General holds extensive constitutional powers, making this position pivotal in the country's political landscape. The Supreme Judicial Council decided without debate to restart the process of electing a new Prosecutor General following a call by MRF (DPS) co-chairman Delyan Peevski possibly to maintain his influence. The election process, initially delayed in 2023 due to pressure from GERB, PP-DB, and MRF, was paused pending a Constitutional Court ruling, which ultimately overturned proposed judicial reforms in mid-2024. Despite long-standing demands for justice reform, the Prosecutor General remains largely unchecked, wielding substantial control over the judiciary.

42. In August, the Revival party initiated a parliamentary amendment banning LGBTQ+ "propaganda" in schools, inspired by similar legislation in the Russian Federation. This amendment is discriminatory and in direct contradiction with the Bulgarian Constitution, the European Convention on Human Rights (ETS No. 5) and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Adopted by a large majority,[14] the amendment prohibits

13. The meeting on 26 October involved the Minister of Innovation and Growth, responsible for co-ordinating ministries with functional competence in these elections, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of E-Governance.

14. The bill was moved by Revival with the support of the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) and "There is Such a People" (ITN) and backed by a large majority of GERB MPs and independent MPs from the splintered group of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF (DPS)) who just a year ago supported amendments to the Criminal Code that provided for harsher penalties for some hate crimes based on homophobic motives.

the promotion of or incitement to ideas related to "non-traditional sexual orientation" or any definition of gender identity other than biological. Starting from the 2024/2025 school year, students, parents, or teachers could face prosecution and public shaming for allegedly promoting different sexual orientations. The law's vague wording allows broad interpretation, making it a tool for exerting pressure on individuals and civil society organisations. By October 2024, many schools had cut ties with non-governmental organisations to avoid legal risks. The Revival party appears to have gained voter support after proposing this legislation.

43. The Revival party also introduced a "foreign agents" bill targeting individuals and organisations receiving over €1 000 from abroad within a year. It would strip them of certain civil rights, bar them from teaching or carrying out political activities, and require them to label themselves as "foreign agents." The bill's authors claim it aims to promote transparency and protect national interests. This was Revival's third attempt since 2022 to pass such legislation, so far without success.

44. Before the closing of the 50th National Assembly, the adoption of the updated Climate Neutrality Roadmap was significant, potentially securing over €500 million for the reclamation of coal mine sites in Bulgaria. The final working day of parliament presented a critical opportunity to preserve more than BGN 2 billion under the Recovery Plan. Two draft decisions, tabled by GERB-SDS and MRF PP deputies and negotiated with trade unions who had organised a protest in Sofia, were proposed to ensure access to these funds. However, the session was derailed when deputies from ITN and Revival blocked the parliamentary rostrum. After three failed attempts to gather a quorum, the parliament was dissolved. As a result, Bulgaria risks losing hundreds of millions in EU funding tied to the Recovery Plan and the European Green Deal, leaving miners protesting for a fair transition and against unfulfilled promises.

5. Media landscape

45. Bulgaria's media landscape is diverse, with numerous broadcasting and print outlets. Television remains the main news source, followed by online media. Traditional media have expanded online and are active on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok. The Bulgarian National Television (BNT) and Bulgarian National Radio (BNR) are the most trusted news sources. However, concerns have arisen due to the Council for Electronic Media's (CEM) inability to appoint a director for BNT for over two years, potentially affecting governance and public trust.

46. Media ownership concentration is a significant issue. Two major groups – the PPF Group and United Group – dominate about two-thirds of the media market. In February 2024, United Group further consolidated its position by acquiring Bulsatcom, raising concerns about media pluralism and compliance with Council of Europe recommendations. While laws protect freedom of expression and the right to information, defamation remains criminalised, contrary to international standards, leaving journalists investigating corruption vulnerable to litigation.

47. Election coverage on public media is regulated by law and agreements approved by the CEC. Media outlets must disclose any contracts with political parties on their websites. The Election Code mandates equal participation for all political contestants in public media. Critics argue this can hinder meaningful coverage by diluting debates and giving a platform to fringe parties that may use hostile speech, reducing the quality of public discourse.

48. The CEM monitors media content during campaigns and reports violations to the CEC, which can impose sanctions. During the June and October elections, numerous violations were reported, including the premature release of exit polls, failure to disclose media-party contracts, misuse of national symbols, and lack of mandatory messages about the illegality of vote-buying. While protections against offensive language exist, the online media environment is largely unregulated, with widespread negative messaging against the LGBTI community, migrants, and Roma people.

49. Initiatives like the partnership between Google News Initiative, the Association of European Journalists Bulgaria (AEJ), and FactCheck.bg were launched to combat election disinformation. Despite these efforts, journalists faced intimidation and violence during the elections. The AEJ documented four incidents where journalists were threatened or assaulted while covering the October elections. In three cases, the aggression came from representatives of MRF-New Beginning. Another incident involved threats from a person posing as a GERB-SDS representative and a mayor affiliated with the coalition.[15]

15. For more detailed reading on the cases, please refer to: https://aej-bulgaria.org/en/aej-bulgaria-strongly-condemns-the-violence-and-threats-against-journalists-on-election-day/.

50. The AEJ condemned these attacks, calling on political parties to ensure professional communication and avoid intimidation. It urged authorities to protect journalists. Our delegation echoes this sentiment, emphasising that violence and threats against journalists are unacceptable and undermine democratic processes. Such actions threaten press freedom and should not be tolerated.

51. Another disturbing element is the dramatic decrease in women participating in the campaign and having access to the airwaves, as pointed out by the acting chairwoman of the CEM in a press statement on 14 November 2024.

6. Election day observations

52. On 9 June 2024, the PACE delegation was composed of five teams, which observed the electoral process in Blagoevgrad, Breznik, Kyustendil, Pernik, Pleven, Plovdiv and Sofia. On 27 October 2024, the PACE delegation was composed of seven teams, which observed the process in Barzia, Blagoevgrad, Breznik, Dupnitsa, Etropole, Komarevo, Lovech, Montana, Pazardzhik, Pernik, Plovdiv, Rila, Sofia, Sredets and Vraca.

53. Our observers noted several consistent findings across both polling days. Overall, the elections were technically well-administered, with Precinct Election Commissions demonstrating commendable professionalism. Voters were generally familiar with the voting procedures, though the process remained somewhat bureaucratic and cumbersome.

54. Despite the smooth administration, the delegations identified issues that warrant attention. There were instances where the secrecy of the vote was compromised, particularly with machine voting. Technical problems with voting machines, such as bugs and the need to reboot devices, were reported, potentially causing delays and voter frustration. In areas with significant Roma populations, observers noted cases of electoral infringements. Additionally, suspicions of voter intimidation arose due to the presence of groups of men, recognised as party officials, outside polling stations.

55. A persistent concern was the low voter turnout in both elections, reflecting significant voter fatigue, a lack of enthusiasm, and disillusionment with the country's governance. The delegations highlighted a deep-seated mistrust among the electorate toward the main political actors and scepticism about the possibility of meaningful political change.

56. The delegations also expressed serious concerns about persistent allegations of vote-buying, as well as corporate and controlled voting. Such practices undermine the integrity of the electoral process and erode public confidence in democratic institutions. Addressing these issues is crucial for restoring faith in both the political leadership and the electoral system.

57. Regarding the use of technology, the observers noted the potential benefits of increased technological integration on election day. However, they questioned the effectiveness of using voting machines merely as printers alongside paper ballots, which could lead to additional errors within polling stations. The delegations emphasised that while information and communication technologies alone cannot restore trust or eliminate corrupt practices, they can boost voter confidence if coupled with legal safeguards and transparent electoral practices.

58. PACE observers also highlighted other "chronic" concerns, such as low participation of women in politics and the lack of legal provisions to foster the participation of minorities; the limitations of voting rights of people placed under judicial interdiction or serving a prison sentence or the unaddressed recommendations of the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) on campaign finance, including those related to reporting on expenditures before election day.

59. Our respective delegations reiterated that the responsibility for overcoming the current political impasse rests with Bulgaria's political forces. The Bulgarian people deserve leaders committed to providing a functioning democratic government. It is imperative for political actors to address the highlighted issues – such as electoral irregularities, voter intimidation, and public disillusionment – to strengthen democracy and ensure that future elections are conducted fairly and transparently.

7. Election results and post-electoral developments

60. Beyond the low turnout, the results of both the 9 June and 27 October early parliamentary elections revealed a continuation of Bulgaria's fragmented political landscape, as shown in this comparative table of the seven rounds of parliamentary elections held between 2021 and 2024:

Party	April 2021	July 2021	Nov. 2021	Oct. 2022	April 2023	June 2024	Oct. 2024
GERB-SDS	75	63	59	67	69	68	69
We Continue the Change (PP)	-	-	67	53	64	39	37
Democratic BG	27	34	16	20			
Revival	-	-	13	27	37	38	35
MRF (DPS)	30	29	34	36	36	47	-
MRF-New Beginning	-	-	-	-	-	-	30
ARF							19
BSP for Bulgaria	43	36	26	25	23	19	20
Bulgarian Rise			-	12	-	-	-
ITN	51	65	25	-	11	16	18
Velichie	-	-	-	-	-	13	-
MECh	-	-	-	-	-	-	12
Nr of parties in parliament	5	5	6	7	6	7	8
Turnout in %	50,61	42,19	40,23	39,42	40,69	34,41	38,94

61. As the turnout was at 38.94%, higher than the unprecedented low turnout recorded in the previous early elections of 9 June (34.41%), in numerical terms, all parliamentary parties to be represented in the 51st National Assembly gained (back) votes compared to the previous polls. The MRF-New Beginning faction outperformed the pre-election polls, winning 4% more of the vote share than predicted. Delyan Peevski thus won the contest with Ahmed Doğan whose ARF performed in line with the pre-election polls, winning heavily among the biggest community of voters abroad in Türkiye. Allegations of vote-buying are common in Bulgaria, but there are certainly reasons to question MRF-New Beginning's result.

Party	April 2023	June 2024	October 2024	Trends
GERB-SDS	669 924	530 658	642 931	+112 273
PP-DB	621 069	307 849	346 063	+38 214
Revival	358 174	295 915	325 468	+29 553
MRF (DPS)	347 700	366 310	-	(+97 319)
MRF-New Beginning	-	-	281 366	
ARF	-	-	182 263	
BSP for Bulgaria	225 914	151 560	184 403	+32 843
ITN	193 971	128 007	165 160	+37 153
Velichie	-	99 862	-	-
MECh	-	-	111 946	+111 946
"Nobody"	109 095	63 913	82 618	+18 705

62. Following the announcement of the 27 October election results on 30 October, protests erupted in Sofia organised by the anti-corruption movement BOEC, calling for the elections to be cancelled due to alleged ballot-rigging. Several leading parties, including PP-DB, announced plans to submit a request for a full recount to the Constitutional Court. They cited concerns such as up to 5% of votes being invalid, significant discrepancies between paper receipts from machine voting and the digital records, and irregular voter turnout ranging from low percentages in some regions to as high as 80% in others.

63. Additional parties like the ARF and the nationalist "Velichie" party, which narrowly missed the 4% threshold to enter parliament by just 21 votes, are also disputing the results. Pro-Russian party Revival and nationalist parties ITN and MECh have joined the call for an investigation. In contrast, GERB – the election winner – dismissed these claims as distractions, despite long-standing accusations by opponents of exerting undue influence over votes in municipalities where it governs.

64. The newly convened 51st National Assembly met on 11 November 2024 but failed in three attempts to elect a chairperson, reflecting the continuing deep political impasse. With eight parties represented in parliament, forming a majority is theoretically possible but complicated. Several parties have stated they will

not work with Delyan Peevski, and PP-DB has called for a *cordon sanitaire* against him. Excluding Peevski's 30 seats from coalition calculations makes reaching the required 121 seats for a majority significantly more challenging.

65. While GERB has expressed willingness to negotiate with all parties except Revival, potential coalition partners remain hesitant. Most viable paths to a majority would require a deal between GERB and PP-DB, but past conflicts and ongoing distrust hinder this possibility. PP-DB's conditions for any coalition include radical anti-corruption reforms and appointing an independent, non-partisan prime minister – not GERB's leader Boyko Borissov. Even if an agreement was reached, their combined 106 seats would fall short of a majority, requiring additional support and potentially leading parties to break previous commitments.

66. Revival invited four other parliamentary forces – BSP-United Left, ITN, PP-DB and MECh – to talks on 20 November 2024. Its leader, Kostadin Kostadinov stated explicitly that GERB, MRF-New Beginning, and ARF are not invited. Revival and the four entities invited to the talks control a majority of 122 seats in the new 240-seat National Assembly.

67. The political stalemate in Bulgaria mirrors broader European trends of increasing support for radical right and anti-establishment parties, which poses challenges to democratic governance. In Bulgaria, support for the radical right has grown from 10-12% to over 20% in the latest election. This shift not only reflects rising nationalism but also enhances potential Russian influence in domestic and European politics, as some radical-right parties are sympathetic to the Russian Federation. If the Constitutional Court deems the election results illegitimate – a decision that requires a petition signed by 1/5 of MPs – new elections would be organised within two months, possibly leading to an eighth election since 2021.

8. The ways forward

68. Following these two early electoral processes – part of a total of seven early parliamentary elections – the political future of Bulgaria remains more uncertain than ever. Both observed election cycles led to an even more fragmented parliament, offering no clear solution to the political gridlock.

69. Several long-standing recommendations from previous election rounds remain relevant. The country needs some improvements in its electoral legislation and practices. However, undertaking amendments to the Election Code amid the current political crisis, with the possibility of another election looming, could be like opening Pandora's box. Therefore, any further changes to the Election Code, aside from essential one-off measures to help resolve the crisis, should be put on hold for now.

70. Nevertheless, based on its observations during the last two elections and recommendations from previous election observation missions, the ad hoc committee has compiled a "roadmap" of electoral reforms. These issues need to be addressed immediately after a new government is formed, and the roadmap presented to the forthcoming government coalition once it is established.

8.1. Addressing electoral malpractices

71. Persistent practices of intimidation, vote buying, and controlled voting undermine the integrity of electoral processes. The Bulgarian authorities should tackle these issues decisively. A competent and independent judiciary must promptly and effectively investigate all allegations of such malpractices, holding those responsible accountable. Encouraging the reporting of unlawful activities and launching awareness campaigns to educate voters on their rights and the safeguards in place will contribute to fairer elections.

8.2. Combating corrupt practices

72. To address corruption effectively, Bulgaria should implement the outstanding recommendations from GRECO regarding campaign finance, including those related to reporting on expenditures before election day. Strengthening the anti-corruption framework involves enhancing the independence, competence, and oversight capacity of the National Audit Office, particularly by increasing transparency in campaign financing. This also means enforcing rules on conflicts of interest rigorously. Officials, especially members of Parliament, should have their declared assets regularly and substantively checked by an independent oversight body within a reasonable time-frame, ensuring accountability and integrity in public office.

8.3. Electoral legislation and system reform

73. Political leaders and lawmakers are encouraged to consider changes to the electoral system that foster stable governments while ensuring that votes cast are truly representative. Any substantial amendments to the electoral legislation should be adopted through an inclusive and consultative process, effectively implemented, and adhere to the Venice Commission's guidelines for successful electoral reform. This approach emphasises the importance of broad consensus and public consultation to enhance the legitimacy of electoral changes.

8.4. Voter registration and disenfranchisement

74. It is crucial to remove any legal restrictions on voting rights based on intellectual or physical disabilities. Additionally, the blanket disenfranchisement of prisoners should be abolished to align with Article 3 of the Additional Protocol to the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (ETS No. 9). Ensuring that all citizens have the right to vote strengthens the democratic process and promotes inclusivity.

8.5. Enhancing ethical standards

75. Political parties and coalitions should adopt and enforce codes of ethics concerning their internal structures and representatives, including their members of Parliament. Promoting awareness of ethical standards is essential and can be achieved through designated guidance, training, and confidential counselling on issues such as conflicts of interest, limits on contacts with third parties, and the acceptance of gifts. Consistent enforcement of ethical principles and clarification of sanctions for infringements will reinforce the commitment to ethical governance.

8.6. Preventing misuse of administrative resources

76. To uphold a level playing field and ensure equality of opportunity during elections, legislation covering the conduct of all public officials, including members of Parliament, during election campaigns should be introduced and effectively enforced. This legislation should prevent the misuse of administrative resources and impose timely and effective sanctions for violations. Adherence to GRECO's recommendations and the Venice Commission's guidelines will provide a robust framework for these measures.

8.7. Voting methods and technology

77. An independent evaluation of the different voting methods used in previous elections, including electronic voting procedures, should be undertaken with the assistance of the Council of Europe's expertise. Any introduction of or change to election technologies must allow sufficient time for piloting, auditing, and certification of equipment and its functioning. Transparency can be increased by involving independent external auditors, reinforcing public confidence in the process. Investing in voter education on new technologies, especially among disadvantaged groups, and providing special training for polling station staff will enhance the effectiveness of these technologies.

8.8. Enhancing voter participation

78. Re-establishing trust in institutions is essential to enhance voter participation. Political leaders should consider adopting courageous electoral reforms aimed at ending the cycle of early elections. Such reforms require a united, trans-partisan approach to regain the electorate's trust and re-engage citizens in democratic processes. The responsibility rests with Bulgaria's political forces to demonstrate strong political will in this endeavour.

8.9. Inclusion of women and minorities

79. Immediate legislative and policy actions are needed to achieve greater representation of women in elected offices. This could involve introducing temporary special measures, positive discrimination in placing women in electable positions, and implementing training and capacity-building programs. Similarly, legislative incentives should be introduced to promote minority participation within party leadership and as candidates, ensuring that the diversity of Bulgarian society is reflected in its governance structures.

8.10. Media freedom and election coverage

80. Media freedom in Bulgaria has been assessed as fragile and unstable. New legislative measures should be adopted to protect journalists and media workers from abusive court proceedings on defamation grounds. The authorities should foster the editorial freedom of public service media, granting it greater independence in covering election campaigns in regular news and information programmes. Additionally, the distinction between journalism and political advertising must be maintained by avoiding the use of journalists in paid campaign material for electoral contestants, such as paid interviews and campaign reports.

8.11. Transparency in parliamentary work

81. A transparent legislative process is fundamental to a functioning democracy. The effective enforcement of provisions regulating the parliament's interaction with civil society, commercial and non-commercial entities, and citizens in the law-making process is necessary. Establishing adequate timelines for considering bills will secure meaningful and effective engagement by all interested parties, enhancing the quality and legitimacy of legislation.

8.12. Stability of institutions

82. Frequent changes in voting policies from 2021 to 2024, driven by shifting alliances among major political parties, have led to a lack of consistency and trust in electoral processes. Legal certainty is a precondition for effective and long-term policies, and as GRECO has noted, frequent amendments and poor enforcement undermine the stability of legislation and erode legal certainty. Bulgarian authorities are urged to show strong and genuine political will to establish stable institutions and address all observed shortcomings. This commitment aligns with the Reykjavik Principles for Democracy, aiming to secure and strengthen democracy and good governance, and to encourage democratic participation through free and fair elections.

83. By implementing these recommendations, Bulgaria can enhance the integrity of its electoral processes, strengthen democratic institutions, and rebuild public trust in its governance systems. The collective effort of political leaders, lawmakers, and civil society is essential in achieving these goals and ensuring the country's democratic future.

9. Conclusions

84. The PACE delegation acknowledges the significant challenges of conducting seven elections within three years. We commend the successive caretaker governments and the Bulgarian electoral management authorities for successfully organising free, competitive, and well-administered elections under these circumstances. However, the ongoing cycle of elections has plunged Bulgaria into near-constant campaign mode, intensifying political challenges and leading to entrenched instability. The latest elections on 27 October 2024 failed again to resolve the prolonged political crisis, offering little hope for the formation of a stable and durable government. Our observations reveal a troubling erosion of traditional parties, increased political fragmentation, a surge in populism, and widespread public disillusionment. This deepening crisis of representation makes it increasingly difficult for moderate forces to unite the dissatisfied electorate and break the current impasse.

85. Moreover, the paralysis of parliamentary functions – evidenced by the failure to elect a president – and the inability of competent institutions to appoint key judicial positions such as the prosecutor peneral and the president of the Supreme Administrative Court raise concerns about a potential institutional crisis affecting the functioning of democratic institutions.

86. While calls for a referendum to shift to a presidential system have emerged, such significant constitutional changes require careful consideration and extensive public consultation, not decisions made under political duress. The fundamental issue lies not with parliamentary democracy but with persistent high-level corruption and the electorate's continued support for corrupt leadership.

87. The difficulties in forming a workable government are exacerbated by a stark divide between pro-European Union and pro-Russian stances. GERB and PP-DB's pro-European orientation contrasts sharply with the strong pro-Russian lobby represented by the BSP, the radical right Revival, and newcomer MECh, which together secured about 25% of the votes. Echoing recent elections in Georgia and in the Republic of Moldova, Revival's success underscores how elections in the region have become battlegrounds for Russian influence. However, Bulgaria's political deadlock highlights not only external pressures but also the significance of anti-corruption efforts, personality clashes, and challenges in coalition-building.

88. If the recently elected political forces cannot reach a stable coalition under the current circumstances, they should remain open to innovative and possibly temporary solutions, such as forming a government of technocrats or experts or other workable measures that could help break the cycle of repeated elections yielding the same outcomes. However, any such solution should be achieved through broad-based consensus, ensuring it reflects the will of the electorate and adheres to democratic principles.

89. Members of the PACE delegation are deeply concerned by persistent allegations of vote-buying and controlled voting, which were particularly intense ahead of these elections. While measures such as hotlines implemented by the Ministry of the Interior are positive steps, the significant increase in alerts and higher turnout in certain sensitive areas underscore the urgent need for more effective action against these unacceptable criminal practices. It is crucial for State institutions to thoroughly investigate these claims and bring the perpetrators to justice.

90. These elections do not seem to have produced a breakthrough in the political deadlock. The fact that seven consecutive elections have yielded similar outcomes raises concerns that some influential political leaders may prefer to maintain the *status quo*. The responsibility now rests with these political actors to move beyond partisan divisions and break this cycle of stalemate. The Bulgarian people deserve leaders committed to providing a functioning democratic government that addresses their needs and restores public trust.

Appendix 1 – Composition of the ad hoc committee – 9 June 2024

Chairperson: Mr Oleksii Goncharenko, Ukraine

Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group (SOC)

– Mr Saša Magazinović, Bosnia and Herzegovina
– Mr Yunus Emre, Türkiye

Group of the European People's Party (EPP/CD)

– Mr Corneliu-Mugurel Cozmanciuc, Romania

Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE)

– Mr Mehmet Akalın, Türkiye

European Conservatives Group and Democratic Alliance (EC/DA)

– Mr Oleksii Goncharenko, Ukraine
– Mr Morten Wold, Norway

Group of the Unified European Left (UEL)

– Ms Sevilay Çelenk Özen, Türkiye

Venice Commission

– Ms Katharina Pabel, representative of the Venice Commission
– Mr Michael Janssen, legal advisor, Secretariat of the Venice Commission

Secretariat

– Ms Ivi-Triin Odrats, Deputy Head of the Elections Division, Secretary of the ad hoc committee
– Ms Carine Roller-Kaufman, Assistant, Elections Division

Appendix 2 – Programme of the meetings of the Election Observation Mission – 9 June 2024

Friday, 7 June 2024

15:00-15:30 Meeting of the delegation
- Welcome remarks by Oleksii Goncharenko, Head of Delegation
- Presentation on legal aspects by Katharina Pabel, member of the Venice Commission
- Briefing on practicalities by the Secretariat

15:30-17:00 Meeting with the OSCE/ODIHR Election Expert Team
- Political context, campaign environment – Lusine Badalyan, Team Leader
- Election administration (also focus on the machine voting) – Oleksii Lychkovakh
- Legal aspects and campaign financing – Renata Tardioli
- Media environment – Ágnes Dóka Magdolna

17:15-18:15 Exchange of views with representatives of NGOs active in the field of election observation
- Vanya Nusheva – Transparency International
- Daniel Stefanov – NBU, top analyst, Electoral lab
- Rumyana Dencheva – ex-head of the Civic Consultation Council of CEC

Saturday, 8 June 2024

08:30-11:30: Consecutive meetings with leaders and representatives of political parties and coalitions

08:30-09:00 GERB + SDS
- Georg Georgiev

09:00-09:30 PP-DB
- Nadejda Yordanova
- Lena Borislavova
- Stoju Stoev
- Vasil Pandov

09:30-10:00 DPS (Movement for Rights and Freedoms)
- Stanislav Anastasov
- Hamid Hamid
- Valentin Tonchev

11:00-11:30 ITN
- Pavela Mitova

11:45-12:45 Exchange of views with media representatives
- Mediapool.bg- Tzvetelina Sokolova
- Offnews.bg – Vladimir Yonchev
- Bulgarian National Radio – Milen Mitev
- Bulgarian Telegraph Agency – Genka Ivanova
- Association of European Journalists, Horizon – Irena Nedeva

13:00-14:00 Meeting with the Chairperson and members of the Central Election Commission

16:00 Meeting with ministers of the caretaker government responsible for running the elections
- Georgi Gvozdeykov, Minister of Transport and Communication
- Valentin Mundrov, Minister of E-Governance
- Kalin Stoyanov, Minister of Interior
- Svetlan Stoev, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Sunday, 9 June 2024

07:00-20:00	Election Day – observation in polling stations
20:00-23:00	Observing the closing and counting in polling stations

Monday, 10 June 2024

09:00-10:00	Debriefing meeting of the delegation and adoption of a statement
13:00	Press briefing by the Head of Delegation

Appendix 3 – Press release of the Election Observation Mission – 9 June 2024

Despite free and competitive voting, Bulgaria's elections marred by voter fatigue, record low turnout

The 9 June simultaneous early parliamentary and European elections in Bulgaria were free and competitive, offering voters a pluralistic range of choices. While the electoral procedures were well-managed, voter turnout reflected a significant lack of enthusiasm, with only a third of voters participating in the national elections. This indicates a growing voter fatigue and skepticism about political change, a delegation of observers from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) has concluded.

The eleven-member delegation, led by Oleksii Goncharenko (Ukraine, EC/DA), observed the early parliamentary elections over four days, with five teams deployed in Sofia, Plovdiv, Blagoevgrad, Kyustendil, Pleven, Pernik and Breznik. A full report on the observation will be presented to the PACE Standing Committee in November 2024.

"All recent elections in Bulgaria have been professionally organised and well-implemented," said Mr Goncharenko. "Minor irregularities and technical problems with the voting machines aside, these elections were no exception. The simultaneous European elections did not pose significant challenges. However, the Bulgarian electorate is exhausted from being called to vote for the sixth time in three years, leading to disillusionment with the country's governance. Mistrust in the main political actors and uncertain prospects for political stability risk pushing voters towards extremes. The newly elected parliament must therefore strive to regain the electorate's trust and re-engage with them."

The constitutional reform in December 2023, which *inter alia* granted citizens with dual citizenship the right to be elected as MPs and ministers, is a welcome development in line with previous recommendations from the Venice Commission and the OSCE/ODIHR. However, some other long-standing recommendations, particularly regarding the voting rights of individuals under judicial interdiction or serving prison sentences, remain unaddressed.

The PACE delegation is particularly concerned about persistent issues of vote-buying and corporate and controlled vote – both explicit and implicit, allegations of which were frequently raised by interlocutors and confirmed by the caretaker Minister of Interior. These issues need thorough investigation to restore public trust.

The tone of the campaigns, both online and offline, was predominantly negative and did not improve during the parliamentary campaign period. The PACE delegation was also informed of a number of abusive court proceedings on defamation grounds and reiterates its long-standing recommendation to adopt new legislative measures for the protection of journalists.

On Election Day, voters seemed familiar with the voting procedures, choosing between paper ballots and voting machines. A significant number of voters preferred paper ballots. The process in the polling station was somewhat bureaucratic, involving multiple stamps and identification checks. Despite the professionalism of the members of the Precinct Election Commissions, this would probably lead to delays and long queues if participation was higher.

The secrecy of the vote was not fully guaranteed. The transparency of machine-printed ballots allowed others to potentially see the votes cast. The PACE delegation calls on the new Bulgarian authorities to rethink the current system of electronic voting in use to secure its reliability while making the best use of modern technologies. Whereas it is clear that ICT technologies alone cannot restore Bulgarians' trust in the electoral process or uproot corruptive practices, nevertheless if coupled with legal safeguards and transparent electoral practices, they could gradually boost voter confidence.

Appendix 4 – Composition of the ad hoc committee – 27 October 2024

Revised list of members

Chairperson: Mr Alfred Heer, Switzerland

Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group (SOC)

– Mr Yunus Emre, Türkiye
– Ms Bisera Kostadinovska-Stojchevska, North Macedonia
– Mr Saša Magazinović, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Group of the European People's Party (EPP/CD)

– Ms Andrea Eder-Gitschthaler, Austria
– Ms Maria Syrengela, Greece

Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE)

– Mr Mehmet Akalın, Türkiye
– Mr Alfred Heer, Switzerland

European Conservatives Group and Democratic Alliance (EC/DA)

– Mr José María Sánchez García, Spain
– Ms Heather Wheeler, United Kingdom

Group of the Unified European Left (UEL)

– Ms Sevilay Çelenk Özen, Türkiye

Venice Commission

– Mr Richard Barrett, member of the Venice Commission
– Mr Domenico Vallario, legal advisor, Secretariat of the Venice Commission

Secretariat

– Ms Ivi-Triin Odrats, Deputy Head of the Elections Division, Secretary of the ad hoc committee
– Mr Gaël Martin-Micallef, Committee Secretary

Appendix 5 – Programme of the meetings of the Election Observation Mission – 27 October 2024

Friday, 25 October 2024

14:00-14:45 Meeting of the delegation
- Welcome remarks by Alfred Heer, Head of Delegation
- Presentation on legal aspects by Richard Barrett, member of the Venice Commission
- Briefing by the Secretariat

15:00-16:15 Exchange of views with representatives of NGOs active in the field of election observation
- Ruzha Smilova, Centre for Liberal Strategies
- Vanya Nusheva, Transparency International
- Lilian Nikoforova, Institute for development of public environment

16:30-18:00 Exchange of views with media representatives
- Assen Yordanov, director – online Bivol
- Evgeniya Drumeva, vice general director – BTA
- Viktoria Spasova – newspaper Kapital
- Lubcho Neshkov – bnesbg.bg
- Dimitar Ruskov – dnesbg.bg
- Newspaper Dnevnik

16:15-17:00 Meeting of the Head of Delegation with Judge Cherneva, Vice-President of the Supreme Administrative Court (SAC) and members of the First Chamber of SAC

Saturday, 26 October 2024

08:00-08:45 Meeting with ministers of the caretaker government responsible for running the elections
- Ivan Kondov, Minister of Foreign Affairs
- Rosen Karadimov, Minister of Innovation and Growth
- Valentin Mundrov, Minister of E-Governance

09:00-12:00: Consecutive meetings with leaders and representatives of political parties and coalitions competing in the elections

09:00-09:30 Coalition We Continue the Change – Democratic Bulgaria (PP-DB)

09:30-10:00 Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS)-New Beginning
- Iskra Mihaylova
- Stanislav Anastasov
- Atidje Alieva-Veli

10:00-10:30 Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria – Union of Democratic Forces (GERB – SDS)
- Georg Georgiev
- Elena Naydenova

10:30-11:00 Alliance for Rights and Freedoms (ARF)
- Valentin Tonchev
- Ahmed Haku
- Neriman Mustafa

11:00-11:30 Revival

11:30-12:00 Bulgarian Socialist Party for Bulgaria (BSP)
- Yoan Ivanov
- Kamen Todorov

	– Alexander Simov
12:00-12:30	There is such a People (ITN) – Dimitar Gardev
15:00-15:45	Meeting with the Chairperson and members of the Central Election Commission

Sunday, 27 October 2024

07:00-20:00	Election Day – observation in polling stations
20:00-23:00	Observing the closing and counting in polling stations

Monday, 28 October 2024

09:00-10:00	Debriefing meeting of the delegation and adoption of a statement
13:00	Press briefing by the Head of Delegation

Appendix 6 – Press release of the Election Observation Mission – 27 October 2024

Well-organised but ineffective elections maintain the status quo in Bulgaria, say PACE observers

SOFIA, 28 October 2024: The early parliamentary elections held on 27 October in Bulgaria were competitive and professionally managed by the election administration. The persistently low voter turnout underscored however a deep-seated lack of trust among the electorate in the country's political leadership.

"We once again commend the good organisation of the elections and the continuing efforts of an electorate exhausted by endless cycles of repeated elections", said Alfred Heer, Head of the PACE Delegation, at the conclusion of the four-day election observation mission. "After this seventh round of elections held in three years, political leaders from all parties and coalitions should consider the reality of the disengagement of the Bulgarian people and tackle it. The country is going through a recurrent political crisis – not an institutional one – but that leads to institutionalising the political crisis. There is no functioning democracy without active voter participation."

While some Venice Commission recommendations remain outstanding, the Election Code and related legislation provide for an overall adequate framework for the conduct of fair elections.

The frequent reliance on short-term and caretaker governments has *de facto* replaced the ordinary relationship between elections and the formation of stable governments. This reliance is itself an admission of failure to establish lasting political solutions. Political leaders and lawmakers should consider introducing changes to the electoral system that might be more conducive to stable governments.

The delegation reiterates its concerns over persistent allegations of vote-buying and controlled voting. While the hotline and other measures implemented by the Ministry of the Interior to report such violations are welcome developments, the significant increase in alerts and notably higher turnout in certain sensitive areas demonstrate the urgent need to further address these issues, which by law are a crime.

The lacklustre election campaign was conducted primarily on social media and, to some extent, through traditional means in rural areas. An increasing number of candidates are managing their own political communication, partially bypassing professional journalism, which raises concerns about the quality of information reaching voters.

On Election Day, despite the benefits to be obtained from increased technology, the current combination of voting machines used as printers, along with paper ballots, has resulted in more bureaucratic and procedural steps, increasing the possibility of errors within polling stations.

"These elections have not produced a breakthrough in the political impasse", Mr Heer concluded. "The responsibility now rests with Bulgaria's political forces. They must move beyond partisan divisions to break this cycle of deadlock. The Bulgarian people deserve leaders committed to providing a functioning democratic government."

A 14-member delegation, led by Alfred Heer (Switzerland, ALDE), observed the early parliamentary elections on 27 October. On Election Day, its seven teams were deployed in Sofia, Pazardzhik, Plovdiv, Pernik, Breznik, Blagoevgrad, Dupnitsa, Rila, Montana, Lovech, Vraca, Etropole, Komarevo, Barzia and Sredets. A report on the observation of elections will be presented at the PACE Standing Committee on 29 November 2024 in Luxembourg.