

BULGARIA



Populism and Polycrisis in Bulgaria on the Eve of the 2024 European Parliament Elections

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Abstract

The 2024 European Parliament election in Bulgaria took place amidst a prolonged political crisis and economic uncertainty. The EP elections, for the first time, coincided with national legislative elections – the sixth parliamentary elections in just three years. This two-in-one vote led to a complete overshadowing of the debate on Europe by domestic issues and concerns over the composition of the next national parliament and the likelihood of forming a stable government. The centre-populist GERB convincingly won the elections, although the populist radical right increased its representation by one MEP. Like many European countries, Bulgaria has had to contend with the rise of populism and nationalism, in addition to its continued struggle against corruption and, as a result of the war in Ukraine, with a population divided in attitudes towards Russia. This polycrisis has led to continued political fragmentation and polarization with little prospect of stable government and a growing disillusionment among voters.

Keywords: *European Parliament elections; populism; polycrisis; Bulgaria; new parties*

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Introduction

The 2024 European Parliament election in Bulgaria took place amidst a prolonged political crisis and economic uncertainty. The EP elections, for the first time, coincided with national legislative elections – the sixth parliamentary elections in just three years. This two-in-one vote led to a complete overshadowing of the debate on Europe by domestic issues and concerns over the composition of the next national parliament and the likelihood of forming a stable government. The centrist populist GERB convincingly won the elections, although the populist radical right (PRR) increased its representation by one MEP. Like many European countries, Bulgaria has had to contend with the rise of populism and nationalism, in addition to its continued struggle against corruption and, as a result of the war in Ukraine, with a population divided in attitudes towards Russia. This polycrisis has led to continued political fragmentation and polarization with little prospect of stable government and a growing disillusionment among voters.

Anatomy of a polycrisis: Between economic uncertainty and political turmoil

The past four years in Bulgaria have been characterized by political instability, turmoil and never-ending electoral campaigning. A string of caretaker governments, six parliamentary elections (with a seventh one scheduled for October 2024), a presidential election and a local election have led to politicizing every issue in society for electoral gain. During this period, a number of new parties have appeared with varied success dramatically changing the configuration of political actors and patterns of voter support, while voter turnout has steadily decreased (Figure 1). This political uncertainty is unfolding in the context of multiple pressing issues: 1) economic downturn and slow recovery from the pandemic, coupled with lack of political consensus on economic priorities; 2) geostrategic uncertainty as a result of the war in Ukraine and the escalating conflict in the Middle East with the war in Israel, Gaza, and now also in Lebanon; 3) deepened divisions among political actors and voters along the long-standing pro-Russian/anti-Russian divide; 4) rising nationalist sentiments stirred by deteriorating relations with Russia and North Macedonia (Zankina 2024b).

With the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, Bulgaria plunged into a period of economic uncertainty and political turmoil. Four years later, Bulgaria still struggles

with economic recovery and is unable to effectively absorb and utilize funds from the European Recovery and Resilience Facility. Prolonged anti-government protests that started in July 2020 unleashed a never-ending cycle of parliamentary elections and a mushrooming of new political formations.

Between April 2021 and June 2024, Bulgaria held six parliamentary elections and had two short-lived regular governments. Interim governments appointed by President Radev became the norm while a series of parliaments failed to agree on a governing formula. Thus, early elections were held in July 2021, November 2021, October 2022, April 2023 and June 2024. The leading parties have changed significantly compared with just a few years ago. Although Citizens for European Development (GERB), which has dominated domestic politics since 2007 and has led three governments, still attracted the most votes in the elections of October 2022, April 2023 and June 2024, it lost over half a million votes (or more than half of the voter support it had in 2017). The centre-left Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), the oldest political party in the country and the heir to the former communist party, saw its vote share drop to 7% in June 2024 compared to 28% in 2017.

In the meantime, new parties emerged as dominant political forces—namely Prodalzhavame Promyanata (PP—We Continue the Change), a new anti-corruption and pro-European party, and Vazrazhdane (Revival), a starkly nationalist and pro-Russian party. More new parties have come and gone, with some managing to register momentary success, such as the populist party headed by prominent folk-pop singer and television showman Slavi Trifonov, Ima Takav Narod (ITN—There Is Such a People), which won the July 2021 early elections with 24% of the vote, but failed to form a government and has since oscillated around the parliamentary threshold. Others, such as, Izpravi se! Mutri vun! (Stand Up! Mafia, Get Out!) led by a former ombudswoman, Maya Manolova, managed to pass the threshold in April and July of 2021 but then disappeared altogether. The democratic centre-right witnessed yet another reconfiguration in a new collation called Demokraticzna Balgariya (Democratic Bulgaria, DB), bringing together Demokrati za Silna Balgariya (Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria, DSB) and Da Balgariya (Yes, Bulgaria) and a new nationalist formation called Velichie (Glory) surprised political analysts with 4.65% at the national elections in June 2024.



Table 1. Results from Bulgarian parliamentary elections (2017–2024)

Type	Party	Mar-17			Apr-21			Jul-21			Nov-21			Oct-22			Apr-23			Jun-24		
		Votes	%	MP	Votes	%	MP	Votes	%	MP	Votes	%	MP	Votes	%	MP	Votes	%	MP	Votes	%	MP
Established/Mainstream	GERB	1,147,292	33.5	95	837,707	26.18	75	842,165	23.51	63	598,456	22.34	59	634,575	25.33	67	669,924	26.49	69	530,568	24.71	68
	BSP	955,490	27.9	80	480,146	15.01	43	965,695	13.39	36	267,817	10.21	26	232,342	9.3	25	225,941	8.93	23	151,560	7.06	19
	MRF	315,976	9.24	26	336,306	10.51	30	292,514	10.71	29	341,000	13	34	344,621	13.76	36	346,437	13.72	36	366,310	17.06	47
Other/hybrid	Volla	145,637	4.25	17	75,926*	2.13*	0	85,795*	3.14*	0	7,067	0.27	0									
	RBH/DB	107,407	3.14	0																		
	DaBG/DG	101,177	2.96	0																		
New parties/protest parties	ITN				302,280	9.45	27	345,331	12.64	34	166,968	6.37	16	186,493	7.44	20	621,069*	24.56*	64*	307,849*	14.33*	39*
	ISMV ecc				505,014	17.66	51	657,829	24.08	65	249,743	9.52	25	96,071	3.83	0	103,971	4.11	11	128,007	5.96	16
	PP				150,940	4.72	14	136,885	5.01	13	60,055	2.29	0	25,207	1.01	0	564,53	2.24		31,476	1.47	
Nationalist/PRR	VMRO										28,322	1.08	0	115,858	4.63	12	77,420	3.06		12,322	0.57	
	NFSB	318,513	9.7	27	75,926*	2.13*	0	85,795*	3.14*	0	8,584	0.33	0	3,520	0.14	0				21,272	0.99	
	ATAKA				15,659	0.49	0	12,585	0.46	0	12,153	0.46	0	7,593	0.3	0	10,505	0.42		295,915	13.78	38
No one	Vazrazhdane	37,896	1.11	0	78,414	2.45	0	82,147	3.01	0	127,586	4.86	13	254,808	10.17	27	358,174	14.16	37	99,862	4.65	13
	Velichie																					
	Voter turnout	3,682,151	54.1		3,334,283	50.61		2,775,410	42.19		2,669,260	40.23		2,601,963	39.41		2,683,606	40.69		2,268,849	34.41	

*Running in a coalition together

Source: Central Electoral Commission, cik.bg

Within this period, Bulgaria had two short-lived regular governments. A new coalition government was formed in December after the November 2021 elections, under the premiership of Kiril Petkov, uniting the winner of the election PP (25.67%) with three coalition partners—BSP, ITN and the DB alliance. The government survived until June 2022, when it was removed by a parliamentary vote of no confidence initiated by GERB after ITN ended its support for the government and withdrew its members from ministerial posts. The Petkov government had the difficult task of dealing with the war in Ukraine, which erupted in February 2022 and divided public opinion in Bulgaria. With a large pro-Russian population, the war enabled parties like Vazrazhdane to thrive while constraining the government to maintain a delicate balance between the country's commitment to its Euro-Atlantic partners and pressure from pro-Russian groups. Although Bulgaria enforced EU sanctions on Russia, phased out Russian oil deliveries, and provided military support for Ukraine, there has been continuous opposition from both inside and outside the National Assembly to these actions (Zankina, 2023).

The second regular government was formed following the April 2023 elections. In these elections, GERB placed first, with 26.5% of the votes and 69 seats, closely followed by an alliance between PP and DB, which obtained 24.6% of the votes and 64 seats. GERB sought to form a coalition government with PP–DB. After several rounds of difficult negotiations and a second mandate granted by President Radev, the two alliances agreed on a technocratic government with a rotating prime minister. Despite the strong antagonism and competition between the two leading blocs in parliament, GERB and PP–DB recognized as a greater threat the continued rise in electoral support for Vazrazhdane and the growth in pro-Russian sentiments in the country. Hence, a government headed by Nikolai Denkov of PP–DB was approved by the National Assembly. Denkov was to be replaced by the Deputy Prime Minister and minister of foreign affairs and former European Commissioner, Mariya Gabriel of GERB, after a period of nine months. As expected, the rotation did not take place,

and the coalition partners slid into political bickering and mutual accusations. The government collapsed in March 2023, and two-in-one elections (European parliament plus early parliamentary elections) were scheduled for June 2024.

Populism in Bulgaria

Populism has been a permanent feature of Bulgarian political life since the early 2000s, expressing itself both in the centre and the radical right. While there have not been left populist parties in Bulgaria, both centre and radical-right populists have been noted for advocating various left and extreme left policies, from significant increases in pensions to nationalization of entire industrial sectors. In addition to the PRR, which has had a permanent presence in the national parliament since 2005, Bulgaria is also notable for having populists in government who have held power almost uninterruptedly between 2009–2021 and, most recently, in 2023–2024.

Centre populism

Centrist populists have had much greater success than radical-right populists in Bulgaria, all of them having led or participated in governing coalitions. This participation makes the Bulgarian case rather unique. Unlike radical-right populists who represent varying combinations of authoritarianism, nativism and nationalism, centrist populists in Bulgaria have been *decidedly pro-European*. The main mobilizing factor in their success has been a mix of charismatic leadership and anti-corruption appeals.

Populism made its grand entrance on the Bulgarian political scene in 2001 when the former Bulgarian king, Simeon Saksoburggotski (King Simeon II from 1943–1946), who had been in exile for nearly six decades, made a dramatic reappearance. Heading the National Movement Simeon the Second (NDSV), the former king convincingly won the 2001 parliamentary elections and became prime minister. A typical personalist and populist party, NDSV had loose structures based on circles of associates, proclaiming itself to be not a party but a “coalition of like-minded individuals”. Capitalizing on disillusionment with the transition and established elites, NDSV relied on a vague platform and ambitious promises such as “fixing the country in 800 days” (Gurov and Zankina, 2013). The NDSV government firmly pushed the country towards the Euro-Atlantic alliance and oversaw Bulgaria’s entrance into NATO. Despite such success, in the subsequent 2005 elections, NDSV lost its leading position, taking part instead in a BSP-led coalition



government. By 2009, NDSV had all but disappeared from the political scene, only to be replaced by another personalist and centrist populist party – GERB. The short-lived success of NDSV marked the birth of populism in post-communist Bulgarian politics and legitimized the personalist party model, which dominates politics to the present day.

GERB was formed in late 2006 by Boyko Borisov, while he was mayor of Sofia. Shortly after its establishment, GERB gained the endorsement of the European People's Party (EPP) at the first European Parliament elections in Bulgaria after the country joined the EU in 2007 and secured 5 of the 18 Parliament seats allocated to Bulgaria. By the time of the July 2009 Bulgarian legislative elections, GERB had established itself as a major political force and received over 40% of the votes. Boyko Borisov became the dominant figure in Bulgarian politics, serving as prime minister three times (Spirova and Sharenkova-Toshkova, 2021).

Replicating Saksikoburgotski's formula, GERB at first lacked an established party structure and ideological coherence. GERB's program consisted of elusive and symbolic issues, such as 'corruption' and 'crime', which appealed to a discontented electorate, while its party officials represented a hastily and often apparently randomly selected group of experts and people from Borisov's personal circle. In the course of its long and successful rule, GERB developed dense structures throughout the country, penetrating the national, regional and local governments and establishing a loyal electoral base. These structures have been crucial in securing GERB's almost uninterrupted hold on power for over a decade and the party's continued success in every parliamentary and European election since 2007.

GERB's rule ultimately became associated with the corrupt status quo, provoking prolonged anti-government protests on several occasions. The 2020–2021 anti-government protests posed the greatest challenge to GERB's hold on power, with demands that Borisov and the prosecutor-general, Ivan Geshev, resign, calls that were backed by President Radev. The protests gave birth to a string of new political formations, the most notable of which was ITN.

Electorally, the most significant party to emerge and achieve success from the anti-government protests was founded and led by the prominent singer and long-standing television showman Slavi Trifonov: Ima Takav Narod (There Is Such a People, ITN). Although his party was new, Trifonov was not new to politics; most notably, he had been a driving force behind the 2016 referendum on reform of the electoral system.

Trifonov used his media appearances, including his own TV station and virtual concerts, to spread his anti-corruption and anti-status quo message to voters at home and abroad alike, striking a chord of homeland undertones (Haughton, Neudorfer and Zankina, 2024). In the July 2021 elections, ITN garnered 24.1% of the votes and 65 seats and succeeded in narrowly defeating GERB, which only managed to attract 23.5% and 63 seats, marking the first time since 2007 that GERB or a GERB-led coalition had not been placed first in elections. ITN failed to form a government and was eclipsed by yet another populist party from the centre, Prodalzhavame Promyanata (We Continue the Change, PP).

Formed by entrepreneurs and Harvard graduates Kiril Petkov and Assen Vassilev, PP reaped the popularity its leaders had gained as ministers in the outgoing caretaker government. PP placed first in the November 2021 legislative elections with 25.7% of the vote and 67 seats. Running on an anti-corruption platform and declaring to “promote left politics with right instruments”, PP managed to undercut other new protest parties, including ITN. A new coalition government was formed, headed by Kiril Petkov, with three coalition partners – BSP, ITN and DB. Since its appearance in the fall of 2021, PP has already lost more than half of its electoral support, although its coalition with DB has managed to remain among the top three political formations in the national parliament. Most importantly, the PP–DB alliance managed to return to government in coalition with GERB in 2023 on a pro-European and reform-oriented platform. Coalescing with GERB proved disastrous for the PP–DB coalition, which lost over half of its support in the concurrent national and EP elections of June 2024.

Radical-Right Populism

In 2005, Bulgaria witnessed the firm establishment in politics of the populist radical right (PRR), which since then has been represented in parliament as well as in the European Parliament. Radical-right populism in Bulgaria emerged relatively late compared to other East European countries. Since 2005, various configurations of nationalist populist radical-right parties have been represented in parliament and, between 2017–2021, even in government. Those include Ataka, the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (VMRO), the National Front for Salvation of Bulgaria (NFSB), and, more recently, Revival (Vazrazhdane) and Greatness (Velichie). In the decade and a half before 2021 and the cycle of early parliamentary elections, around one in ten voters cast their ballots for nationalist parties (Haughton, Neudorfer and Zankina, 2024).

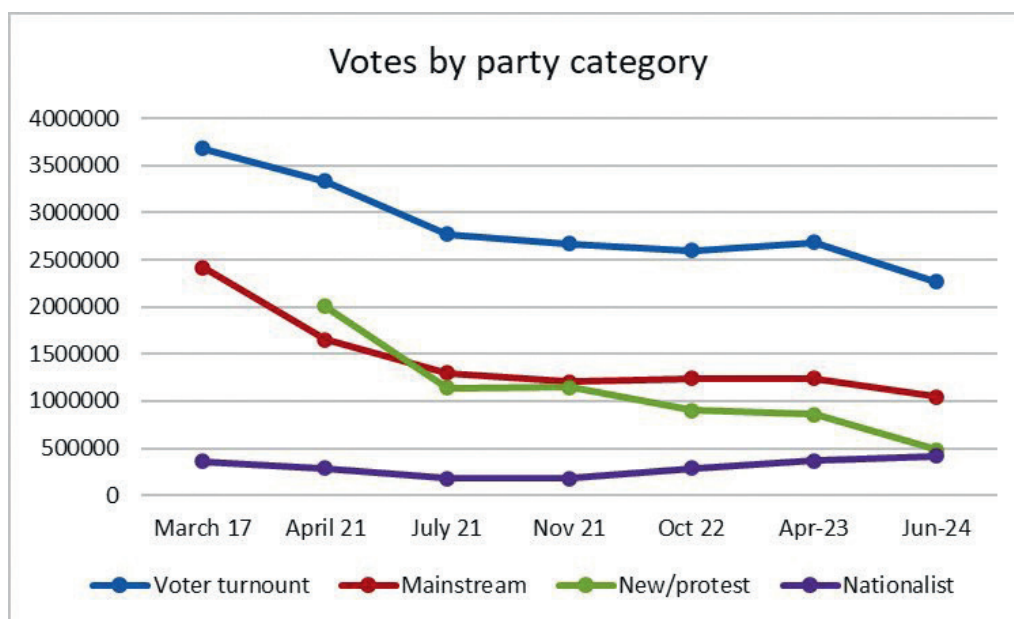


Most recently, the PRR vote has significantly increased, reaching over 18% in the June 2024 elections, a function also of the historically low voter turnout (Figure 1). The PRR vote has been extremely volatile and shifting between various PRR parties and new protest parties. In the July 2021 election, for instance, IMRO–Bulgarian National Movement, the Volya Movement and NFSB came together under the umbrella of Bulgarian Patriots. But during the November 2021 election, all three of those parties and Ataka ran separately, yielding no seats for any of them, at the expense of Vazrazhdane, which increased its support tenfold from March 2017 to April 2023 (ibid., 2024).

PRR parties rely on the usual repertoire of dividing issues. Bulgaria's sizeable ethnic Turkish and Roma minorities, as well as a string of migration crises in Europe, have provided fertile ground for nationalist rhetoric and mobilization. Most of those actors are clearly anti-elite, anti-West, and even antidemocracy (Zankina, 2023). PRR parties have cashed in on the overall discontent with politics and political elites, as well as on particular issues such as ethnic minorities, LGBTG+ rights, social provisions and welfare chauvinism, as well as criticism of NATO and EU memberships. With 58% of the population reporting positive attitudes towards Russia and Putin before 2022, the war in Ukraine has provided a fertile ground for PRR parties who have been pronouncedly pro-Russian (Zankina, 2023). Vazrazhdane has been particularly successful in benefiting from the polycrisis, combining anti-vax, anti-NATO and anti-EU rhetoric.

The war in Ukraine provided an unprecedented opportunity for Vazrazhdane's leader, Kostadin Kostadinov, to broadcast his pro-Russian views and stage eccentric activities, attracting ever more votes with each subsequent early election (Zankina, 2024a). In the combined June 2024 elections for the national parliament and the European Parliament, Vazrazhdane scored close to 14%, becoming the third largest party in the Bulgarian parliament with 38 MPs, coming in fourth in the European Parliament elections and sending 3 MEPs to Brussels. While most parties have adopted a cordon sanitaire towards Vazrazhdane, the party has become a key factor in Bulgarian politics and an actor to reckon with. Just like Vazrazhdane managed to steal the votes from early PRR formations, Velichie has managed to grab enough votes to enter parliament. Its party group dissolved only a couple of weeks after entering parliament, and the party is unlikely to pass the threshold in the October 2024 election. Velichie's success illustrates what we observe at the European level – that the radical right has a permanent and growing presence, yet it is highly divided.

Figure 1: Bulgarian parliamentary election results by party category (2017-2024)



Source: Authors' calculations based on data by the Central Electoral Commission: cik.bg

The 2024 European Parliament elections

Centrist and radical-right populists have been represented at the European Parliament since the first EP elections in Bulgaria in 2007 (See table 2). GERB is considered an important partner for the EPP, sending five to six MEPs in each parliament. Populist radical-right parties, in turn, have been represented among the Non-attached (NA), the ECR and now also the ESN.

The 2024 EP elections are the first EP elections in Bulgaria to coincide with national legislative elections. Analysts expected a higher voter turnout due to the mobilizing effect of national elections. While voter activity in 2024 was about 1% higher than in 2019 (33.78% and 32.64%, respectively), the voter turnout for the national elections dropped to 34.41% from 40.69% in April 2023. This record-low voter turnout due to the multiple early parliamentary elections in the past three years did not have the expected mobilizing effect. Of those who did not vote, 40% indicated a lack of trust in politics as their reason to abstain – almost double the EU average (Eurobarometer, 2024). Yet, Bulgaria was not the one with the lowest voter turnout, as Lithuania and Croatia registered the lowest figures at 28.97% and 21.35%, respectively.

Table 2: Bulgarian European Parliament election results (2007-2024)

Party	Positioning	EP group	2007		2009		2014		2019		2024	
			%	MEPs	%	MEPs	%	MEPs	%	MEPs	%	MEPs
GERB	Centrist populist	EPP	21.68	5	24.36	5	30.42	6	31.07	6	23.55	5
BSP	Left	S&D/PSE	21.41	5	18.5	4	18.93	4	24.26	5	7.01	2
DPS	Centre	Renew Europe/Alde	20.26	4	14.4	3	17.27	4	16.55	3	14.66	3
NDSV	Centrist populist	Alde	6.27	1	7.96	2						
PP-DB	Centrist populist, centre right	Renew Europe/EPP									14.45	3
DB, etc	Centre right	EPP	4.35	0	7.95	1	6.45	1	6.06	1		
ITN	Centrist populist	ECR									6.04	1
Vazrazhdane	Populist radical right	ESN									13.98	3
Ataka	Populist radical right	NA	14.2	3	11.96	2	2.96	0	1.07	0		
VMRO, etc	Populist radical right	ECR			2.25	0	10.66	2	7.36	2	2.09	0
NFSB	Populist radical right						3.05	0				
Voter turnout			28.6	18	37.49	17	35.84	17	32.64	17	33.78	17

Source: Central Electoral Commission: cik.bg

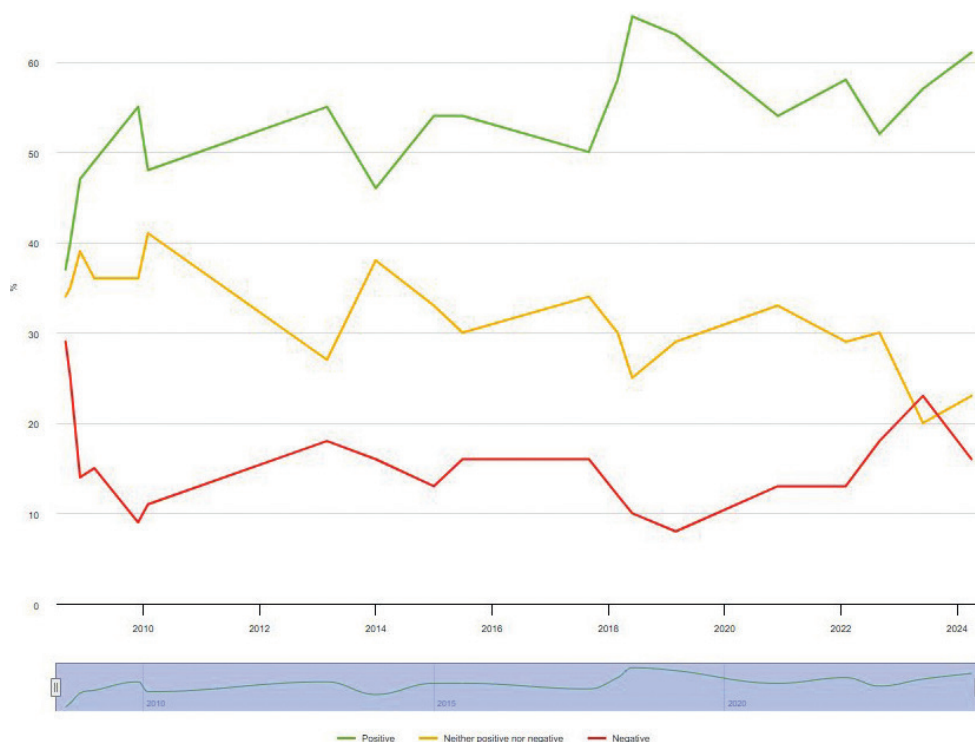
More importantly, the two-in-one elections significantly shifted the debate towards domestic issues. Opinion polls indicated corruption (59%), low income (57%), and healthcare (45%) to be the top three issues of voter concern (Alpha Research 2024a), while poverty and equality were singled out as the top priorities the EU should focus on (Trend 2024). Rising prices and increased cost of living (56%) along with the economic situation (53%) were the main motivators for Bulgarian voters – much more so than the EU average of 42% and 41%, respectively (Eurobarometer 2024).

In the context of six national legislative elections and a string of caretaker governments, the European debate was completely overshadowed by preoccupations over the composition of the future national parliament and the likelihood of forming a stable government. Even pressing topics such as expanding Schengen to land borders and joining the Eurozone remained in the background. The former coalition partners GERB and PP–DB, the two most pronouncedly pro-European parties in the country, were caught in political bickering and mutual accusations, failing to effectively articulate their priorities for the next European Parliament. In

the meantime, Vazrazhdane ran an aggressive anti-EU campaign with the slogan “Out of the EU and NATO”. Less Eurosceptic parties like ITN advocated for national sovereignty and energy security, opposing the European Green Deal and the closing of coal electric plants. The Green Deal is strongly criticized by Vazrazhdane as well. The war in Ukraine prominently featured in the campaign, dividing political parties over support for Ukraine (GERB, PP–DB, and DPS) vs. maintaining neutrality and spending the money on other priorities (BSP, Vazrazhdane and ITN). The division perfectly aligns with the anti-Russian and pro-Russian attitudes of the respective parties and their supporters – one of the key dividing issues in Bulgarian society for the past two centuries.

Although there was little debate about Europe, Bulgarian voters remain starkly pro-European, with over 60% approving EU membership and only 16% having negative attitudes (Figure 2), while 60% are optimistic about the future of Europe (Eurobarometer, 2024). A study by Trend further indicates that 41% of respondents think that Bulgaria has benefitted from EU membership, with free travel and EU funds being singled out as the top benefits (Trend, 2024). The same study found that 45% of respondents feel safer in the current geostrategic situation thanks to EU membership, and 41% think membership also contributes to greater economic and social stability.

Figure 2: Attitudes towards Bulgaria's membership in the EU



Source: Alpha Research: <https://alpharesearch.bg/monitoring/12/>

GERB convincingly won the 2024 European Parliament elections with 23.55% of the votes and five seats. Second came Dvizhenie za Prava i Svobodi (Movement for Rights and Freedoms, DPS) with 14.66% of the votes and three seats, closely followed by the PP–DB alliance, with 14.45% and the same number of seats, and Vazrazhdane (Revival) with 13.98% and also three seats. While pro-EU parties received the majority of the votes in the election, the results of Vazrazhdane and the increase of radical-right MEPs from 2 to 3 are a cause for great concern amidst an overall rise of the populist radical right in the European Parliament.

Similarly, GERB won the national elections with 24.7% of the votes, which made little difference in terms of forming a government. Parties in the fragmented and polarized parliament failed to agree on a governing formula, and subsequently, a seventh legislative election is scheduled for 27 October 2024. Early forecasts predict seven political formations in the subsequent parliament with little prospect for a governing coalition. In fact, 53% of voters do not believe that the new parliament will be able to produce a regular government (Alpha Research 2024b). Who benefits from yet another round of early elections, although, is Vazrazhdane who will have more opportunities to broadcast their pro-Russian, anti-EU and anti-NATO rhetoric and attract more disillusioned voters. Bulgaria's future remains uncertain – politically, economically and geostrategically.

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