

International

# Bulgaria presidential poll seen testing anti-graft reform appetite

## Radev is the country's most popular politician

**SOFIA:** Bulgarians voted yesterday to elect their president, a largely ceremonial role that the current incumbent has transformed and put at the heart of the struggle against corruption in the European Union's poorest country. Incumbent President Rumen Radev, the frontrunner with 49 percent in the first round of voting last weekend, faces off against academic Anastas Gerdjikov after neither could secure an outright majority.

While Radev, a former fighter pilot, is the country's most popular politician, Bulgaria itself is riven by fractious political parties that have failed to deliver a stable government needed to tackle deep-seated graft and the worsening coronavirus pandemic.

ty after last weekend's surprise victory in the third general election this year of a new anti-graft party.

We Continue the Change now hopes to find coalition partners to end six months of political deadlock that have drawn out the worst political crisis since the end of communism three decades ago. But while Gerdjikov, also 58, only drew 23 percent in the first round, the University of Sofia rector is backed by the GERB party of former conservative premier Boyko Borisov, which came a close second in the general election. Gerdjikov will also probably garner strong support from the nation's sizeable Turkish minority, comprising about nine percent of the seven million population.

### Moscow's man no more

The Turkish MRF party has been allied with GERB and has been snubbed by We Continue the Change in coalition talks. Analysts also say that voter apathy might make the win more difficult for Radev, who was backed by the Socialists for his first five-year term but now runs as an independent.

Only 40 percent of those eligible turned out for the first round last Sunday, and lacking a party machine the former air force chief of staff depends on a broad spectrum of backers. These include We Continue the Change, whose founders-Harvard graduates Kiril Petkov and Assen Vassilev-served as ministers in the first interim administration Radev appointed in May after the inconclusive April poll.

Radev had supported the protests against Borisov's 10-year rule last summer, shouting "Mafia out!" with his fist raised in the air as he briefly joined the crowd. He has also turned around perceptions that he is pro-Russian, said Gallup analyst Parvan Simeonov. "Radev is no longer considered a Moscow man," he said.

"On Sunday, vote for the president who started the change," Petkov urged in a video address this week. In a presidential debate on Thursday, Radev said he



**SOFIA:** An electoral staff member of a mobile polling center, wearing Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), presents a ballot box to a woman in self-quarantine to collect her vote for the second-round of the presidential election and the parliamentary elections. —AFP

regretted most that he "didn't manage to contribute to the toppling of Borisov's regime sooner".

### Pandemic failure

But the end of Borisov's reign also marked the beginning of the political deadlock. And that has coincided with an onslaught of the coronavirus in the EU member with the lowest COVID-19 vaccination rate and one of the world's highest pandemic mortality rates. The second caretaker administration Radev appointed after parties failed yet another attempt to

form a government after polls in July was strongly criticised for its poor handling of the outbreak. The country has struggled to roll out jobs in the face of strong anti-vaccination sentiment and prolific fake news.

Both interim administrations did, however, win plaudits for an avalanche of revelations about corruption, fraud and mismanagement under Borisov, which Gallup analyst Svetlin Tachev said "played in Radev's favour". Polls, which opened at 7:00 am (0500 GMT), were due to close at 1800 GMT with the first exit poll results due shortly afterwards. —AFP

“A clash between two visions”

"Everything's going wrong. I want that to change for my children, grandchildren and former pupils," retired teacher Dobrinka Nakova told AFP in the capital Sofia while out to vote. New Bulgarian University political science professor Antony Todorov summed up the vote as "a clash between two visions" in the eastern European country.

It is one between "the soft tolerance of endemic corruption and the firm opposition to a model of governance that uses public power for private purposes," Todorov wrote in a blog post this week. A clear win for Radev, 58, may usher in a period of political stabilisation.

## India police charge Amazon executives over online drug sales

**NEW DELHI:** Indian police have charged executives from Amazon's local arm over claims the US retail behemoth's online portal was used to smuggle and sell marijuana. Two men were arrested last week with 21 kilograms (46 pounds) of the drug in central

Madhya Pradesh state and told officers they were using Amazon's India platform to ship their goods elsewhere in the country.

They admitted to shipping their crop by falsely marketing it as stevia leaves, a natural sweetener, according to a police report seen by AFP yesterday. Executives from Amazon's India unit had been included in the charges because of contradictions between evidence collected in the police investigation and responses received by the firm, the report said.

Neither police nor Amazon gave any indication of how many employees were facing charges. Amazon said it was investigating the case and pledged full cooperation with police in a statement to AFP. "We do not

allow the listing and sale of products which are prohibited under law to be sold in India," a company spokesperson said.

India is a key market for Amazon with local investments worth \$6.5 billion in the country since its 2013 debut. The drugs case is the latest legal headache for the online marketplace's Indian arm, which is also facing an anti-trust probe along with Walmart subsidiary Flipkart.

Both firms are being investigated by competition watchdogs over claims they gave preferential treatment to some sellers. Amazon also launched an internal probe after reports in September that one or more of its Indian employees had bribed government officials. —AFP

## Kremlin slams US 'hysteria' over Ukraine conflict

**MOSCOW:** Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov yesterday slammed the United States for driving "hysteria" over a possible Russian invasion of Ukraine, after Western countries accused Moscow of a troop build-up near the ex-Soviet country.

His comments come as Western countries this week raised alarm over Russian military activity near Ukraine and Washington said it has "real concerns" over what it called "unusual" activity. "This hysteria is being whipped up artificially," Peskov said on state television.

"Those who have brought their armed forces from overseas are accusing us of unusual military activity on our own territory. That is, the United States." Ukraine's army has been locked in a simmering conflict with pro-Russian separatists in two breakaway regions bordering Russia since 2014, after

Moscow annexed Crimea from Ukraine.

Kiev and its Western allies accuse Russia of sending troops and arms across the border to support the separatists—claims Moscow denies. Peskov's comments come after US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Saturday declined to say whether US intelligence believed Russian President Vladimir Putin was aiming to seize land from Ukraine.

"We don't know what President Putin's intentions are. But we do know what's happened in the past," Blinken said. "We know the playbook of trying to cite some illusory provocation from Ukraine or any other country and using that as an excuse for what Russia plans to do all along."

Putin for his part said Thursday that the West is "escalating" the Ukraine conflict by holding drills in the Black Sea and flying bombers near its borders. After an uptick in violence at the beginning of the year, Russia massed around 100,000 troops on Ukraine's borders in the spring, raising fears of a major escalation in the conflict.

Russia later announced a pullback but both Ukraine and its ally the United States said at the time the withdrawal was limited. The conflict has claimed the lives of more than 13,000 people. —AFP

## Border crisis 'greatest' bid to destabilize Europe

**BOHONIKI:** Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki yesterday called the migrant crisis on the Belarusian-Polish border, the EU's eastern frontier, the "greatest attempt to destabilise Europe" since the Cold War.

The premier issued his strong remarks as he prepared to meet with EU leaders

promises of an easy crossing into the European Union.

Belarus has denied the claim, instead criticising the EU for not taking in the migrants.

Caught in the middle, migrants often report being forced to cross the border by Belarusian officials, then being pushed back into Belarusian territory by Polish authorities.

Belarusian President Alexander "Lukashenko launched a hybrid war against the EU. This is (the) greatest attempt to destabilise Europe in 30 years," Morawiecki said on Twitter.

"Poland will not yield to blackmail and will do everything to defend the EU's borders." He linked to a video statement in which he cautioned that "today the target is Poland, but tomorrow it will be Germany,

### Divert attention

Brussels and NATO have previously also described the migrant crisis as a "hybrid tactic". Morawiecki is visiting the Baltic states — two of which also share a border with Belarus — yesterday to discuss the conflict and has announced he will visit other EU capitals this week.

Some observers believe Poland is using its rhetoric on the border issue to try to distract from controversial reforms that the EU believes limit the independence of the judiciary.

The European Commission wrote to Poland on Friday to launch a process that could lead to it being deprived of funds over threats to the EU legal order.

"While the problem on Poland's border is serious and requires Western solidarity — for example by sanctioning Belarus — Morawiecki blows it out of proportion to divert attention from Poland's violation of the rule of law," political expert Marcin Zaborowski told AFP.

The policy director at the Globsec think tank argued that the Belarus action "pales in comparison with the war in Ukraine, cyber attack in Estonia in 2007 and Russian support for far-right extremism in Europe."

Yesterday, Poland's border guards reported new attempted crossings, including by a "very aggressive group of around 100" migrants.

Poland's Defence Minister Mariusz Blaszczak said Saturday that Belarus has now changed tactics by directing smaller groups of migrants to multiple points along the border. He added that he expected the border showdown to last months.

### Migrant deaths

The migrants have spent thousands of dollars to fly into Belarus on tourist visas, determined to reach the European Union. Many are desperately fleeing war and poverty in the Middle East.

Once at the border, they are faced with squalid, freezing conditions.

Polish media say at least 11 migrants have died since the crisis began over the summer. A Yemeni migrant who died in Poland in September will be laid to rest on Sunday in the eastern village of Bohoniki, with his brother in attendance.

Yemen's foreign ministry said he "died on the border between Poland and Belarus as a result of the severe drop in temperatures." On Saturday, the Belarusian health ministry said that a World Health Organization (WHO) mission had arrived in Belarus to help organise medical support for the migrants. —AFP



**VILNIUS:** Lithuania's Prime Minister Ingrida Simonyte (R) and Poland's Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki (L) arrive to address a joint press conference during their meeting on the migrant crisis on the Polish border with Belarus, in Vilnius yesterday. — AFP

at a time when Warsaw is facing not only a border crisis but heightened tensions with Brussels over allegations it is breaching its commitment to the bloc's democratic principles.

The West accuses Belarus of artificially creating the crisis by bringing in would-be migrants — mostly from the Middle East — and taking them to the border with

Belgium, France or Spain."

He also claimed that Lukashenko had the "back-room support of Vladimir Putin," the Russian president and an ally of the Belarusian regime.

Lukashenko told the BBC earlier that it was "absolutely possible" his forces had helped people cross into the EU but denied orchestrating the operation.

**CONSUMER PROTECTION DEPARTMENT**

**RECALL INFORMATION**

**MERCEDES-BENZ**  
MODEL: S-Class (223 Platform)  
MODEL YEAR: 2021 – 2022

**S-Class**

**RECALL REASON**

Mercedes-Benz AG has determined that on certain S-Class (223 platform) vehicles the software of the airbag control unit might not meet specifications. The control unit for the occupant recognition might be deactivated permanently by the airbag control unit at vehicle shut down. As a consequence, the passenger airbag might be deactivated despite a person sitting on the passenger front seat.

**REMEDY**

As a precautionary measure, Mercedes-Benz AG, via its Mercedes-Benz service partners, will update the software of the airbag control unit on the affected vehicles. The required work will certainly be carried out free of charge.

**CONTACT**

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