

INTERIM REPORT
13 – 30 March 2026

1 April 2026

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 19 April early parliamentary elections will elect 240 members of parliament through an open-list proportional representation system in 31 multi-member constituencies, with a 4 per cent threshold for parties and coalitions; independent candidates must surpass the constituency quota. The elections were called following the appointment of a caretaker government on 12 February and take place amid continued political instability following the government's resignation after public protests.

The legal framework, primarily based on the Constitution, the Election Code, and the Political Parties Act, has undergone several amendments in recent years, including changes to candidate eligibility, voting procedures, and election administration, as well as a recent limitation on polling stations abroad. ODIHR EOM interlocutors noted remaining gaps and inconsistencies in the legal framework, and a number of prior ODIHR recommendations, including on the residency requirement, electoral dispute resolution, and inclusive participation, remain unaddressed.

The elections are administered by a three-level structure, led by the Central Election Commission (CEC), with 31 District Election Commissions and 11,836 Precinct Election Commissions, and preparations are generally conducted within legal deadlines. Sessions of the CEC and DEC are public, and materials are published in a timely manner. The CEC has undertaken some initiatives to facilitate the participation of persons with disabilities. While technical preparations, including the deployment of electronic voting machines in most polling stations are ongoing, some ODIHR EOM interlocutors raised concerns about limited institutional control over voting technologies.

Some 6.6 million voters are included in the preliminary voter lists. Citizens aged 18 and over are eligible to vote, except for those deprived of this right by a court decision on the grounds of intellectual or psychosocial disabilities or those serving prison sentences, a blanket restriction which was recently challenged before the Constitutional Court. Voter lists are compiled automatically based on the national population register and made available for public scrutiny. There are no major concerns raised by ODIHR EOM interlocutors regarding the accuracy of the voter lists.

A total of 4,786 candidates on 744 candidate lists nominated by 14 political parties and 10 coalitions, as well as 1 independent candidate, were registered. Women represent some 30 per cent of contestants. One list was rejected due to insufficient supporting signatures, and candidate eligibility was further assessed through verification of age, residency, and multiple registrations across constituencies.

Women remain underrepresented in public and political life, with women holding less than one-third of parliamentary seats and a limited share of government positions, despite some high-level representation. The Constitution prohibits the establishment of political parties based on ethnic, racial, or religious lines. It requires that election campaigns be conducted only in the Bulgarian language, a provision criticized by regional organizations for limiting minority participation.

The official campaign commenced on 20 March and is active, with contestants engaging in rallies, media appearances, and outreach, including on social networks. Campaign messaging centres on corruption and oligarchy, while key policies focus on energy, the economy, and the judiciary. Authorities have introduced measures to address electoral violations, including vote buying and undue

pressures, as well as disinformation and external interference. Such measures were assessed generally positively by ODIHR EOM interlocutors, though some noted the need for stronger co-ordination on potential disinformation campaigns and hybrid threats.

The legislative framework for campaign finance remains unchanged and allows for both public and private funding, with defined spending limits and oversight by the National Audit Office. However, despite previous ODIHR recommendations, there is no requirement to report campaign expenditure before election day, and gaps remain in transparency, particularly regarding online advertising and the lack of regulation of third-party campaigning.

A diverse range of outlets, including television, online news portals, and social networks, are primary sources of political information. The Constitution guarantees freedom of expression and access to information; however, defamation remains a criminal offence despite prior ODIHR recommendations, and key reforms foreseen under the European Media Freedom Act remain unimplemented. ODIHR EOM interlocutors raised concerns about longstanding political and economic influence over the media, leading to editorial interference and self-censorship, as well as inadequate protection against strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) and increasing intimidation of journalists.

The election dispute resolution system combines administrative and judicial review, with expedited deadlines ranging from three days to one hour on election day. While any citizen may file alerts on alleged electoral violations, the right to challenge election results is limited to a small number of institutions. Efforts were announced to increase enforcement activity by initiating more proceedings and related measures; however, concerns persist among ODIHR EOM interlocutors regarding the independence of the prosecutor's office and its impact on the handling of electoral offences.

The Electoral Code provides for observation by citizen and international observers, as well as representatives of contestants. To date, 16 citizen observer groups intend to observe the election day proceedings.

II. INTRODUCTION

Following an invitation from the authorities of the Republic of Bulgaria to observe the 19 April early parliamentary elections and based on the recommendation of a Needs Assessment Mission (NAM) conducted from 16 to 19 February 2026, the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) established an Election Observation Mission (EOM) on 13 March.¹ The ODIHR EOM, headed by Dunja Mijatović, consists of a 12-member core team based in Sofia and 14 long-term observers (LTOs) deployed on 20 March to 7 locations across Bulgaria. Observers are drawn from 18 OSCE participating States, and 42 per cent of mission members are women. ODIHR has requested participating States to second 200 short-term observers to observe election-day proceedings.

III. BACKGROUND AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

Following large-scale protests, the government resigned on 11 December 2025.² The protests were triggered by the government's announcement of the draft budget proposing increases in social-security taxes and in the salaries of the state administration against a broader backdrop of longstanding concerns

¹ See previous [ODIHR election reports on Bulgaria](#).

² The October 2024 early parliamentary elections produced a fragmented parliament with initially eight political parties and coalitions: Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) in coalition with the Union of Democratic Forces (SDS), We Continue the Change in coalition with Democratic Bulgaria (PP-DB), *Vazrazhdane* (Revival), Movement for Rights and Freedoms-New Beginning (DPS-NN), Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP)–United Left, Alliance for Rights and Freedoms (APS), There Is Such A People (ITN) and Morality, Unity, Honour (MECh). A minority government was formed, headed by Prime Minister Rosen Zhelyazkov and composed of GERB-SDS, BSP–United Left, and ITN, with the support of APS. Following the Constitutional Court [decision](#) in March 2025, the recount of votes enabled *Velichie* (Greatness) to enter the parliament

related to governance, clientelism, and corruption.³ On 23 January, Vice-President Iliana Iotova assumed the role of acting president after President Rumen Radev stepped down, with the intention of participating in the upcoming elections. Following constitutionally required consultations, on 12 February, the acting president appointed Andrey Gyurov, Deputy Governor of the Bulgarian National Bank and former member of the parliament from We Continue the Change party (PP), to form a caretaker government. These elections will be the eighth parliamentary elections since 2021.

Women remain underrepresented in public and political life. In the outgoing parliament, they make up 28.75 per cent of members, while in the caretaker government, 6 of 21 positions are held by women. At the same time, a woman currently serves as acting President, and women hold 8 of the 15 seats in the Central Election Commission, and 6 of the 12 seats on the Constitutional Court.

The public discourse has been significantly shaped by the limited trust among political actors and concerns regarding electoral integrity. These concerns have been further amplified by claims questioning the tenure of the prosecutor general.⁴ In addition, with a view to consolidating administrative control, the caretaker government replaced all 28 regional governors, as well as most directors of provincial directorates of the Ministry of Interior and police chiefs.⁵

In an attempt to restore public confidence in the electoral process, the caretaker government has established a Co-ordination Council for Preparation of the Elections, appointed an adviser on elections, introduced a temporary co-ordination mechanism to counter disinformation and hybrid threats, and provides regular communication on pre-emptive activities on potential electoral violations. The pre-election public discourse is also shaped by contentious issues related to the energy sector and economy, in the context of broader geopolitical developments.⁶ Rising cost of living and inflation remain topics of concern for the electorate, fatigued by repeated election cycles.

IV. LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND ELECTORAL SYSTEM

Parliamentary elections are primarily governed by the 1991 Constitution, the 2014 Election Code, and the 2005 Political Parties Act, and complemented by decisions of the Central Election Commission (CEC).⁷ Bulgaria is party to key international and regional instruments that set out obligations pertaining to the conduct of democratic elections.⁸ Most notable amendments to the Election Code were adopted in 2022 and 2023. These included the removal of the prohibition on dual citizens standing for parliamentary office; provisions regulating voting and counting methods and procedures, as well as their oversight; the introduction of safeguards aimed at enhancing transparency; and revision to the organization of the election administration and polling station arrangements, partially addressing

³ The vote to approve the budget sparked public discontent, accompanied by allegations of opaque power networks, and evolved into broader expression of distrust in public institutions and DPS and GERB leaders Delyan Peevski and Boyko Borisov.

⁴ The Supreme Judicial Council appointed an acting prosecutor general on 16 June 2023. Amendments to the Judicial Act in January 2025 set a six-month term for such temporary roles, raising questions about the legality of the acting prosecutor general's tenure.

⁵ Personnel shifts have also occurred within several agencies under the Ministry of Agriculture.

⁶ While the former Prime Minister Rosen Zhelyazkov signed to approve Bulgaria's accession to the Board of Peace, the caretaker government refused to propose the ratification bill requested by the parliament. The Constitutional Court opened a case on the legality of the parliament's request upon the government's appeal. The prime minister [attributed](#) the signing of the treaty to the attempt to remove Delyan Peevski from the US government [imposed sanctions](#)' list for acts of significant corruption.

⁷ Other applicable legislation includes the 1968 Criminal Code, the 1969 Administrative Violations and Sanctions Act, and the 1990 Law on Gatherings, Meetings and Manifestations. Some notable CEC decisions cover the [registration of parties and coalitions](#), the [determination of the number of mandates](#), [voter lists](#), and [out-of-country voting](#).

⁸ The [1950 European Convention on Human Rights](#) and its Protocol No. 1 (Article 3), the [1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#), the [1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women](#), the [1965 International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination](#), the [2003 United Nations Convention against Corruption](#), and the [2006 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#). Bulgaria is also a member of the Council of Europe's Venice Commission and the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO). As of the time of reporting, Bulgaria has signed but not ratified the [2011 Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence](#).

previous ODIHR recommendations. The most recent amendments, adopted in February 2026, introduced a cap of 20 polling stations in non-European Union (EU) countries, limiting the establishment of polling stations outside diplomatic and consular premises.⁹

Several ODIHR EOM interlocutors noted that, while the legal framework provides a generally sound basis for the conduct of elections, it remains fragmented, with certain gaps and inconsistencies.¹⁰ A number of prior ODIHR recommendations remain unaddressed, including those concerning the residency requirement for candidates, the transparency and oversight of campaign finance, the effective investigation and sanctioning of electoral violations, legal avenues to challenge election results, and measures to enhance the participation of women and minority groups. Since 2024, several political parties have proposed amendments, including changes to voter registration modalities, a full transition to machine-based voting, adjustments to procedures for counting machine votes, and revisions to candidate eligibility criteria; however, these proposals have not been considered by parliament.¹¹ Similarly, a CEC proposal addressing a number of technical and administrative aspects of the electoral process, including adjusting deadlines for the appointment of polling station commissions, refinements to public procurement procedures to accommodate tight electoral timelines, and simplification of certain vote-counting procedures, has not been considered.¹²

The parliament is composed of 240 members elected for a four-year term through an open-list proportional representation system in 31 multi-member constituencies. The constituencies largely correspond to the country's administrative divisions, with Sofia divided into three constituencies and Plovdiv into two.¹³ The number of mandates in each constituency, which cannot be lower than four, is based on the most recent population census.¹⁴ The electoral threshold for political parties and coalitions is four per cent of the valid votes cast nationwide, while independent candidates must meet the constituency quota. Members are elected from open candidate lists with a single preferential vote. If no preference is indicated, the vote is counted for the list. To alter the order of candidates on a list, a candidate must have preferential votes amounting to at least seven per cent of the total votes cast for that list in the respective constituency.

V. ELECTION ADMINISTRATION

The elections are jointly administered by the election commissions, which oversee electoral preparations, as well as state ministries, local authorities, and technical service providers.¹⁵ The election administration comprises the CEC, 31 District Election Commissions (DECs), and 11,836 Precinct Election Commissions (PECs) within the country.¹⁶ The CEC is a permanent body composed of 15 members appointed for a five-year term, with its current composition established in May 2021. Eight of its members are women, including the chairperson and the spokesperson.

All 31 DECs, comprising 439 members, were appointed by the 27 February deadline. In 29 DECs where the governor's offices could not reach an agreement, the CEC intervened to appoint members, of which about 12 members were subsequently replaced in March. Overall, women account for an estimated 60 per cent of the DEC members, including 55 per cent of chairpersons. The PECs comprise

⁹ The amendments were vetoed by the president; the veto was subsequently overridden by the parliament. Authorities informed the ODIHR EOM that they are working to establish additional polling stations within diplomatic missions with a view to facilitating voting abroad.

¹⁰ In its 2025 [decision](#), the Constitutional Court underlined that the fact that the Election Code was amended 27 times since its adoption in 2014 “does not contribute to building and strengthening trust in the electoral process and its results, guaranteeing the universal, equal and direct right to vote by secret ballot for every citizen”.

¹¹ The amendments were proposed by APS, BSP, ITN, PP-DB and Revival.

¹² See the CEC 2024 [Report](#).

¹³ On 27 February, the CEC published a [decision](#) determining the number of seats in the multi-member constituencies.

¹⁴ The last [Population and Housing Census](#) was held in 2021.

¹⁵ For these elections, the Council of Ministers co-ordinates election preparation. The [first briefing](#) was held on 23 March.

¹⁶ In total 493 PECs were established abroad in 55 countries.

between five and nine members, depending on the number of registered voters at the respective precinct.¹⁷ No concerns were raised on their appointment by the 25 March deadline; however, modalities for their training remain to be determined. As the concerns on the last-minutes replacements persisted, the CEC stated that it would apply the legal provisions strictly, requiring that any cancellation be duly justified.¹⁸ In a separate decision, the CEC determined that PEC members who demonstrate proficiency and accuracy in performing their duties may receive a cumulative bonus of up to 20 per cent of the initial indemnity.

Technical preparations for the elections are underway, in line with legal deadlines. The CEC and DEC's hold regular public sessions that are open and available via live streaming or recording. In addition, most election materials and decisions are posted on their respective websites in a timely manner. No sign language interpretation or closed captioning is provided for live or recorded CEC sessions, and the CEC website only includes basic accessibility features such as adjustable font size.

To date, the CEC has conducted an extensive public awareness campaign addressing key issues related to voting rights and registration, as well as voting arrangements for voters with disabilities.¹⁹ The main video messages of the awareness campaign are accessible to persons with disabilities, as they include sign language interpretation and closed captioning. On 24 March, the CEC reaffirmed co-operation between local authorities and DEC's to facilitate voting by persons with disabilities.²⁰ However, on 26 March, the CEC revised some previously announced technical measures after the Ministry of Electronic Government (MEG) indicated that, according to regional governors, the production of audio files was not feasible within the available timeframe. ODIHR EOM was informed throughout the country that, additional measures would be implemented for the physical accessibility to polling stations.

VI. VOTING TECHNOLOGIES

The Election Code mandates the use of electronic touchscreen voting machines (EVMs) in all polling stations with at least 300 registered voters. Paper ballots are used only in polling stations with fewer than 300 registered voters, in special polling stations, or when EVMs malfunction. Consequently, of the 11,836 in-country polling stations, 9,354 stations will be equipped with EVMs.²¹ The certification of EVMs, based on a methodology developed by the MEG, began on 23 March and is planned to be completed in the first week of April, ahead of the legal deadline.²² The trusted build of the EVM software will be conducted in the presence of accredited representatives from political parties, civil society, and the media.²³ Several ODIHR EOM interlocutors expressed their concern regarding the CEC's institutional control of EVMs and the use of technology in elections. They have also highlighted that these devices are only used for printing "paper ballots", which, in their view, differs from their intended purpose.²⁴

¹⁷ In some smaller PECs where the number of members is due to be between five and seven only, some DEC's informed ODIHR EOM that they had to appoint up to nine members to represent all nine parliamentary parties.

¹⁸ See the [decision](#) from 4 March.

¹⁹ The CEC spokesperson holds weekly press conferences, and she and the CEC chairperson have each participated in several extensive interviews on mainstream television (TV) programmes.

²⁰ See the [decision](#) from 24 March, which had reaffirmed that co-operation between local authorities and DEC's would facilitate voting by person with disabilities, focusing on accessibility, visual assistance, transport and voter information.

²¹ The same private company, Ciela Norma, which has provided EVM manufactured by Smartmatic in previous elections since 2021, signed its contract with the CEC on 18 March. Ciela Norma was the only company that submitted a bid. Responsibilities of Ciela Norma include: carrying out maintenance activities, updating EVM software, managing logistics and deployment, and providing the CEC with associated training and voter information outlets.

²² The MEG, the National Institute of Standardization (NIS) and the National Institute of Metrology (NIM) are responsible for conducting: (i) the test on the software and the generation of the source code ("trusted build"), the review of the documentation and the certification checks and (iii) the conduct of the mechanical and functional tests on a sample of ten EVMs in total.

²³ Representatives from five coalitions and two civil society organizations [registered](#).

²⁴ The CEC does not have a dedicated unit to address technological issues. For these elections, it contracted an expert.

The video live streaming and recording system will be used throughout the counting process and will remain largely unchanged in its methodological framework. The Election Code does not provide specific sanctions for failure to conduct recordings. The CEC noted that the system functioned in 98 per cent of polling stations in previous elections and emphasized its ease of use through public communication. Software updates, under the responsibility of the MEG, began in March and include additional features aimed at increasing the proficiency in use of the devices.

VII. VOTER RIGHTS AND REGISTRATION

Citizens aged 18 and over have the right to vote, except where this right has been revoked by a court decision on the grounds of intellectual or psychosocial disabilities, or where individuals are serving a prison sentence, irrespective of the severity of the offence. On 23 March 2026, the blanket restriction on voting rights for prisoners was challenged before the Constitutional Court. The appeal argues that such a restriction should be considered on a case-by-case basis and imposed only by a court sentence.²⁵

All eligible voters with a registered permanent address are automatically included in voter lists, which are compiled by municipal administrations ahead of each election based on data from the National Population Register maintained by the Directorate General of Civil Registration and Administrative Services (GRAO) of the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works. The October 2024 amendment to the Citizens' Registration Act has enabled approximately 32,945 citizens who previously lacked a registered permanent address and were therefore unable to exercise their voting rights to obtain a designated address.²⁶ Some ODIHR EOM interlocutors expressed concern that the authorities did not complement this measure with proactive public information campaigns aimed at maximizing participation. At the same time, no specific concerns have been raised to date regarding the inclusiveness and accuracy of the voter lists. According to preliminary data, voter lists include 6,641,768 voters, including 121,708 first-time voters. Some 60,897 voters applied to vote abroad; however, final number is expected to be higher as there is no requirement for prior registration.²⁷

The preliminary voter lists were made available for public scrutiny on 9 March, and until 4 April, voters may request a change of address or inclusion in the voter lists at the place of their current address, while certain categories of voters may apply for absentee voting certificates allowing them to vote at any polling station of their choice. Special voter lists are compiled for voters who requested mobile voting or who will vote in special polling stations in healthcare and social-service institutions and pre-trial detention centres, based on applications submitted by 13 April.

VIII. CANDIDATE REGISTRATION

Eligible voters who are at least 21 years of age can stand for elections. Candidates subject to the 18-month residency requirement forfeit this right. Candidates may be nominated on the lists of registered political parties or coalitions, or run independently in a single constituency, supported by nomination committees of three to seven voters.²⁸

The registration is undertaken by both the CEC and the DEC in two phases. Between 24 February and 4 March, the CEC received requests to register political parties, which were accompanied by a

²⁵ See the appeal, [case No 6/2026](#).

²⁶ According to GRAO, following the introduction of the concept of a “business address”, 27,060 individuals were registered with such an address as their permanent residence and added to the voter list (58 per cent men). GRAO noted that 20,339 Bulgarian citizens above 18 years old lack an accurate permanent address and an identification card, preventing their inclusion in the voter list, of whom some 55 per cent are women.

²⁷ The 49 per cent of those who requested to vote abroad are concentrated in Türkiye, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America, although citizens abroad with Bulgarian identity documents can vote at any polling station.

²⁸ Individuals prohibited from membership in political parties, such as military personnel, members of the security services, diplomats, judges, and prosecutors, may contest elections as independent candidates.

minimum of 2,500 supporting signatures from eligible voters and a deposit of EUR 1,278. By the 9 March deadline, the DEC had registered 2 nomination committees for the registration of individual candidates upon submission of supporting signatures of at least 1 per cent of registered voters in the constituency, but not more than 1,000 signatures, and a deposit of EUR 51. By 17 March, registration documents and candidate lists were verified by the respective DEC and the GRAO.²⁹ During this process, GRAO identified candidates who did not comply with the age and residency requirements.³⁰ The verification process also identified candidates who had registered in more than two constituencies.

Within the legal deadlines, the CEC registered 14 political parties and 10 coalitions.³¹ These included a total of 4,786 candidates and 744 candidate lists, as well as 1 independent candidate. In total, 1,439 women were registered, representing 30 per cent of the contestants. Registration was denied to one party and coalition due to deficiencies in the supporting signatures.³² On 18 March, the CEC held a public ballot draw to determine the order in which the 24 contestants would appear on the ballot paper.

IX. CAMPAIGN ENVIRONMENT

The official campaign started on 20 March, 30 days before election day. The campaign silence period, including the prohibition of publishing opinion polls, takes effect 24 hours before election day. All campaign materials must identify the issuer and contain a statement that vote-buying and selling are criminal offenses. The legal framework contains some regulations aiming at preventing the misuse of administrative resources during the campaign, but does not address campaigning by public officials who are not candidates.

The caretaker government regularly informs about activities aimed at curbing potential electoral violations, which were largely linked to allegations of vote buying and pressure. It established a national interagency unit, the Co-ordination Council, to facilitate co-operation, share information, and respond swiftly to election-related offences.³³ The government also launched initiatives and mechanisms to prevent, detect, and protect election infrastructure and the campaign from external interference, disinformation, and cyberattacks. This includes the introduction of a temporary co-ordination mechanism to counter disinformation and hybrid threats at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA).³⁴ While ODIHR EOM interlocutors generally assessed these efforts positively, some highlighted the need for better inter-institutional co-ordination in addressing disinformation.

Campaign activities have been prominent since the start of the campaign, with the main political contestants, largely current parliamentary parties, as well as the former president Rumen Radev and his newly formed coalition Progressive Bulgaria (PB), engaging in rallies, meetings with voters, and press conferences.³⁵ Several parties have leveraged their representation by inviting foreign politicians as speakers.³⁶ Campaign messages have focused on corruption and oligarchy, with frequent criticism

²⁹ In the event that some candidates were withdrawn, political entities could submit substitutes to the DEC until 19 March.

³⁰ One candidate held 2 nationalities and did not meet the 18-month residency requirement. GRAO also noted that no candidate had failed to meet the age requirement and that 19 candidates held more than one nationality.

³¹ Registration of parties and coalitions ended on 4 March; candidate registration ended 18 March, with a final check on 19 March.

³² On 19 March, the CEC published [the provisional list of candidates](#) per entity and per constituency with about 1,019 candidates standing in 2 candidate lists.

³³ On 23 March, the Ministry of Interior reported receiving 151 signals, out of which 126 are related to vote buying, 5 for illegal campaigning and 3 for corporate voting, with 53 pre-trial proceedings. On 25 March, the Interior Ministry detained a local post office head for allegedly pressuring aid workers to influence voters to vote for DPS; on 26 March, the minister stated that party members, led by a mayor and parliamentary candidate for DPS, attempted to enter police building to secure his release.

³⁴ The main goal is to ensure a co-ordinated and timely institutional response to increased attempts at disinformation campaigns and manipulation of foreign policy information in the pre-election period. ODIHR EOM was informed that the country's representation in Brussels sent the request to the European Commission and the EU External Action Service to activate the Rapid Alert System assisting member states in tackling disinformation campaigns.

³⁵ ODIHR EOM observed ten campaign events in Blagoevgrad, Plovdiv, Ruse, Sliven, Sofia, Stara Zagora and Varna. Most of them were accessible to persons with physical disabilities.

³⁶ European People's Party Secretary General spoke at the GERB opening campaign event, while a Member of the European Parliament from the German party Alternative for Germany (AfD) spoke at the Revival's opening of the campaign.

of other parties, while the main proposed policies are related to the energy sector, the economy, and the judiciary. Several actors promoted narratives targeting civil society organizations, portraying them as acting against national interests and family values. Few parties have promoted women candidates, and even fewer have campaigned on topics related to women's participation in public and political life. Messages targeting youth emphasize social benefits proposed by Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), There Is Such A People (ITN), and We Continue the Change in coalition with Democratic Bulgaria (PP-DB) frequently references the protests that lead to early elections, attributing them to youth dissatisfaction with the political system. Since the start of the campaign, Greatness and PP-DB have also been actively promoting youth candidates.

Social networks and personal blogs are not considered media services, and campaigning on such platforms is not regulated. However, online platforms play a significant role in the campaign, and most contestants and their supporters use both organic and paid content. In November 2025, under the Law of Electronic Communication, in response to the Digital Services Act (DSA) requirements, the Communications Regulation Commission (CRC) was designated as the Digital Services Co-ordinator (DSC). The delay in the full implementation of the DSA is attributed, according to ODIHR EOM interlocutors, to political instability. Some also expressed the view that the CRC currently lacks the resources to analyze information, and that requests for access to platform data would require amendments to the CRC's internal regulations.³⁷ The ODIHR EOM is monitoring the campaign on social networks for a qualitative assessment of its narrative and tone.³⁸

X. CAMPAIGN FINANCE

The legislative framework governing party and campaign finance remains unchanged.³⁹ Parties and coalitions that received at least one and four per cent of the valid votes nationwide in the previous elections, respectively, are entitled to annual public funding, which may be used for campaign purposes.⁴⁰ The amount of public subsidy is calculated based on the cost per vote determined annually in the state budget. Political parties and independent candidates not entitled to annual public funding receive a subsidy of approximately EUR 20,000 and EUR 2,500 for media coverage.⁴¹

Campaigns may be financed by contestants' own funds and by monetary or in-kind donations from natural persons. Donations exceeding one minimum monthly wage (approximately EUR 620) must be accompanied by a declaration on the origin of the funds. There is no cap on individual donations. Contributions from legal entities, religious institutions, anonymous or foreign sources are prohibited. The legislation allows political parties to obtain bank loans, which may not exceed two-thirds of the party's revenue for the preceding calendar year. Transactions exceeding EUR 511 must be conducted via bank transfer, and contestants are required to maintain a dedicated campaign account for all campaign-related expenses. Campaign expenditure is capped at EUR 1,533,876 for parties and coalitions and EUR 102,258 for independent candidates.

Oversight of political and campaign finance is exercised by the National Audit Office (NAO). Contestants are required to regularly disclose to the NAO their income and contracts concluded with

³⁷ The Center for the Study of Democracy (CSD) co-ordinates a network of organizations working on disinformation, partnering with the Bulgarian-Romanian Observatory of Digital Media which serves as the European Digital Media Observatory-related hub covering Bulgaria and Romania. CSD's [report](#) provides an anticipatory threat assessment for Bulgaria's 2026 elections, mapping out Russian-led information manipulation and offering actionable policy recommendations.

³⁸ On 16 March, the ODIHR EOM started monitoring 25 accounts of political parties, coalitions, political leaders and candidates, state institutions and officials, as well as qualitative analysis of posts of 13 influencers, prominent figures and civic movements.

³⁹ GRECO has [previously noted](#) that most recommendations related to party funding and corruption prevention amongst officials, including MPs, have been largely addressed, but criticized the lack of reporting on expenditures before election-day and the limited oversight mandate of the NAO.

⁴⁰ In 2025, four political parties and five coalitions received direct public funding

⁴¹ On 18 March, the CEC [determined](#) the allocation to 9 parties with the total amount of EUR 184,065.12 and 7 coalitions with the total amount of EUR 126,118.10; one independent candidate will receive EUR 2,556.46.

the media prior to the elections.⁴² Within 30 days after the elections, contestants must submit final reports, which the NAO publishes within 15 days of receipt and subsequently audits within 6 months. Despite previous ODIHR recommendations, there is no obligation to report on campaign expenditure before the elections. In addition, advertising on online platforms does not require to follow the same disclosure requirements, and there is no regulatory framework governing third-party political advertising, including on social media platforms.

XI. MEDIA

A diverse range of outlets, including television, online news portals, and social networks, are primary sources of political information. Most ODIHR EOM interlocutors raised concerns over longstanding, unaddressed political and economic influence over numerous national and regional media outlets, resulting in editorial interference and journalists' self-censorship. The removal of a journalist from bTV, a private broadcaster, in December 2025 was largely perceived by interlocutors as undue influence, which led to public protests.⁴³ Low levels of media trust and literacy were noted by interlocutors as creating fertile ground for mis- and disinformation, which, according to interlocutors, cannot be countered at scale by fact-checking initiatives alone.⁴⁴

On 20 February 2026, following a Supreme Administrative Court ruling that restored its contested legal prerogative, the board of the media regulator, the Council for Electronic Media (CEM), whose members are appointed based on the nominations of parliament and the president, elected the new Director General of the Bulgarian National Television (BNT), ending a prolonged, dispute-marred process.⁴⁵

The Constitution provides for freedom of expression and access to information, but defamation remains a criminal offense, despite prior ODIHR recommendations. In addition, political instability has left the European Media Freedom Act's mandated reforms unimplemented, leaving the provisions, including on transparency of ownership, editorial independence, and self-regulatory mechanisms, unenforced. ODIHR EOM interlocutors also noted inadequate protection against costly strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs).⁴⁶ Journalists reported growing barriers to accessing information from various institutions. They further highlighted frequent online intimidation, including gender-based hostility and smear campaigns, allegedly driven by some politicians and media actors.⁴⁷

The Election Code provides for equal and objective treatment of political contestants in public media, including providing free airtime and organizing debates. On 18 March, the CEC allocated media packages to non-subsidized parties and coalitions that have registered candidates and released approved media advertising contracts under these packages.⁴⁸ By 23 March, according to the CEM, 76 media outlets had published tariffs for advertising, which by law should be clearly identified as such. Major broadcasters started covering the campaign on 20 March, with debates aired by the regional through newscasts, talks shows and debates. ODIHR EOM was informed by several local outlets that they are prioritizing paid content over free-of-charge editorial coverage.

⁴² Contestants must report to the NAO the origin of donations received before the start of the election campaign within five days of its opening, and those received during the campaign within seven days of receipt.

⁴³ See [Top Bulgarian TV Anchor Taken Off Air Amid Fears of Political Interference](#), 22 December 2025.

⁴⁴ The Bulgarian Romanian Observatory for Digital Media (BROD) [shared](#) prebunking narratives with media houses ahead of elections; Factcheck.bg analyzed [misleading information](#) on EVMs.

⁴⁵ On 13 February 2026, the Supreme Administrative Court [declared](#) the appeals inadmissible. The previous Director General continued to serve in an acting capacity following the expiration of his mandate in 2022.

The deadline for the transposition of the [EU Anti-SLAPP directive](#) is set on 7 May 2026.

⁴⁶ See articles [Online Call to Stone Bulgarian Journalist](#), and [Propaganda under the guise of journalism](#).

⁴⁸ Some 9 parties, 7 coalitions, and 1 initiative committee [received](#) media packages ranging from EUR 2,556.46 to EUR 20,451.68, divided among [approved advertising contracts](#). For coalitions, funding is proportional to the participation of non-subsidized parties within the coalition.

The CEM, as an oversight body, monitors audiovisual content during the campaign and reports breaches to the CEC, which can impose sanctions.⁴⁹ To date, the CEM has not submitted any alerts, however, on 24 March, following the broadcast of commercials featuring PB candidates, the Council reminded broadcasters that such a practice is unlawful and that commercials featuring candidates from this party must be suspended to ensure campaign neutrality and equality.⁵⁰ On 20 March, the ODIHR EOM started a quantitative and qualitative assessment of political and election-related coverage by several major media outlets.⁵¹

XII. PARTICIPATION OF PERSONS BELONGING TO MINORITIES

The Constitution guarantees the right of self-identification but does not define the concept of minorities.⁵² While it prohibits discrimination on ethnic or religious grounds, the Constitution emphasizes national unity and prohibits political parties based on ethnic, racial, or religious lines. Additional legal norms regulate the exercise of civil and political rights.⁵³ However, legislation requires that election campaigns be conducted only in the Bulgarian language. According to the Advisory Committee of the Council of Europe, this requirement “restricts both the right of persons belonging to minorities to participate in public affairs and their right to receive and impart information and ideas in their respective minority language without interference by public authorities.”⁵⁴

According to the 2021 census, some 15 per cent of the population identified as belonging to ethnic minority groups, with ethnic Turks and Roma being the most numerous groups, comprising some 8.4 per cent and 4.4 per cent, respectively. Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS) and APS are perceived as representing the interests of the Turkish and Muslim communities and hold 29 seats and 14 seats respectively in the outgoing parliament. In 2024, an internal conflict within the DPS emerged between its honorary chairperson and co-chair, resulting in the latter taking control of the party, while supporters of the former established a new party, APS.

XIII. ELECTION DISPUTE RESOLUTION

Election disputes fall under the jurisdiction of both the election commissions and the administrative courts. Decisions of lower-level election commissions may be appealed to higher-level commissions and, depending on the nature of the complaint, further to the competent administrative court or to the Supreme Administrative Court (SAC) as the final instance. Complaints may be filed by subjects who can substantiate a legal interest by having their electoral rights affected, while alerts on alleged violations may be submitted by any citizen.⁵⁵ The Election Code provides for expedited procedures, with deadlines ranging from three days to one hour on election day. However, the sanctioning of electoral violations, which falls under the responsibility of law enforcement bodies, follows general administrative processes, which are often lengthy.⁵⁶ The law does not provide for the possibility to challenge election results protocols, and only the election results may be challenged before the

⁴⁹ The CEM [monitors](#) 41 media in total, 24/7, including 13 public services programmes, 13 commercial broadcasters, 14 online outlets and one video-sharing platform.

⁵⁰ See [CEM address on the principle of equal and neutral coverage of the campaign by broadcasters](#)

⁵¹ This includes public television *BNT1* and radio *BNR*; private television channels *bTV*, *Nova TV*, and radio station *Darik*; and news portals *mediapool.bg*, *actualno.bg*, *novini.bg*, and *blitz.bg*.

⁵² Bulgaria ratified the Council of Europe’s Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities in May 1999.

⁵³ The Protection Against Discrimination Act, the Political Parties Act, and the Assembly, Meetings and Manifestations Act establish mechanisms intended to ensure equal treatment and allow citizens to assemble politically.

⁵⁴ The Advisory Committee, in its 2024 Opinion, called on the authorities “to find effective ways, in consultation with persons belonging to national minorities, to ensure that these persons are able to enjoy their right to political participation and the right to receive and impart information and ideas in minority languages”.

⁵⁵ When a complaint or alert does not involve a violation or if the nature of the violation does not require the CEC to take any action, the CEC issues ‘protocol decisions’ as part of the session minutes.

⁵⁶ Such cases are decided as per the Administrative Violations and Sanctions Act.

Constitutional Court within 15 days of their official announcement by the CEC. Such rights are afforded to a limited number of institutions either upon request or on their own initiative.⁵⁷

The CEC and DEC's maintain public registers of complaints and appeals.⁵⁸ To date, the CEC has registered 26 complaints, mainly related to the composition of lower-level election commissions, candidate registration, and procedural aspects of the electoral process. Most complaints were dismissed or not considered on the merits. DEC's received a total of 22 complaints and alerts, some related to illegal canvassing, but largely concerning the composition of PECs, most of which were resolved at the DEC level or subsequently reviewed by the CEC. The SAC reviewed 17 appeals against CEC decisions. Most appeals were rejected or dismissed, while some resulted in the annulment of CEC decisions related to machine voting procedures.

According to the Ministry of Interior, there has been a notable increase in enforcement-related activity for these elections, including a higher number of pre-trial proceedings and citizen reports concerning alleged electoral violations.⁵⁹ Concerns about the independence of the prosecutor's office were raised by several ODIHR EOM interlocutors, given its role in addressing vote-buying and intimidation cases. Some interlocutors warned that uncertainty surrounding the current prosecutor general's mandate could affect the handling of election-related criminal cases, potentially leading to delays and weakening enforcement.⁶⁰

XIV. CITIZEN AND INTERNATIONAL OBSERVERS

The Electoral Code provides for both citizen and international election observation, with applications allowed until one day before election day. Further, registered contestants are also entitled to appoint their agents to follow the electoral process at all levels of the election administration and proxies to observe at polling stations. Several representatives of citizen organisations are planning to observe these elections, focusing on the polling stations they deem to be at risk according to their previous observations. To date, the CEC has registered 16 entities comprising nearly 260 observers.⁶¹

XV. ODIHR EOM ACTIVITIES

The ODIHR EOM commenced its work on 13 March. The mission has met and established regular contacts with the CEC and DEC's, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Constitutional Court, governmental institutions involved in the electoral process, as well as representatives of political parties, civil society, the media, and the resident diplomatic and international community. ODIHR EOM LTOs have been meeting stakeholders at the local level since their deployment on 20 March.

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) has announced its intention to deploy an observer delegation for the 19 April election day.

***The English version of this report is the only official document.
Unofficial translation is available in Bulgarian.***

⁵⁷ This is limited to at least one-fifth of the members of parliament, the president, the Council of Ministers, the Supreme Court of Cassation, the Supreme Administrative Court, or the prosecutor general.

⁵⁸ See the [CEC database](#); [DEC databases](#) are available under respective DEC's.

⁵⁹ According to the Ministry of Interior, 57 pre-trial proceedings were initiated. In addition, 272 warning protocols were issued, and 152 reports were received from citizens, which are under consideration.

⁶⁰ In December 2023, constitutional amendments reformed judicial governance, restructuring the Supreme Judicial Council and reducing the Prosecutor General's term from seven to five years. These changes were challenged before the Constitutional Court with proceedings ongoing. In January 2025, further amendments to the Judiciary Act introduced rules for appointing an acting Prosecutor General, including a six-month limit. However, differing interpretations of how these rules interact may create legal uncertainty about the duration and termination of such mandates

⁶¹ See the [list of observer groups](#) registered with the CEC.