

Is Bulgaria Stuck in a Cycle of Political Turmoil?

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Bulgarians have gone to the polls four times in the last two years as the country's democratic transition faces multiple roadblocks. Despite the growing culture of political activism, an unstable government, corruption scandals, and regular protests dampen the prospect of lasting change. We asked researcher [Maria Mateeva-Kazakova](#) about the source of Bulgaria's political woes and how to understand its position on issues like the environment and the war in Ukraine.

Edouard Gaudot: Bulgaria has seen one election after another, disgruntled voters, and support for populist movements in recent years. What's causing this turbulence?

Maria Mateeva-Kazakova: Four developments have shaped Bulgaria's political landscape: the political isolation of the GERB (the largest political party) and the banding of other political parties against the former ruling party; the inability to form a stable government; the emergence of new but fleeting populist movements; and the strengthening of the role of President Rumen Radev, who appoints technocratic governments between elections.

Bulgaria's unstable democracy dates back to the period following the fall of the communist regime in 1989. At the time, a partisan political system emerged with the communist party turned social democratic party on one side, and the anti-communist movement (made up of several smaller parties formed almost overnight) on the other.

Populists have been in power since 2001, starting with two terms by the former king Simeon Saxecoburggotski followed by his bodyguard Boyko Borisov in 2009. In his 13 years in power, Borisov gave the illusion of stability. But today, the electorate is rebelling against this sort of stability.

We are witnessing a fairly organised citizen activism against the Borisov government, as well as in support of other political actors. A civil society is taking shape. Despite the noticeable shift in political culture, there is a permanent crisis of political representation as evidenced by multiple elections that fail to produce a stable governing coalition. Bulgarians have gone to the polls four times in the last two years.

Bulgarian politics has launched new players onto the political stage. Is this contributing to the instability?

Fragmentation of the political system has rendered the country ungovernable. In the April 2021 elections, the There Is Such a People movement broke through with 17.66 per cent of the vote. It represented a desire for democratic renewal as well as an anti-elitist protest vote espousing moderate patriotism. The movement was essentially built on the stances of

its leader, Slavi Trifonov, an actor and musician who, for the first time, has stepped out of the world of culture and onto the political stage. However, no government has been formed as a result of the movement's unwillingness to form a coalition while it plays up the anti-everything protest party image. Despite finishing second in the election, There is Such a People wanted to form a single-party government, which wasn't feasible.

The party's vote share increased to 24.08 per cent at the July 2021 elections. This made it the largest political party, by a slender margin, ahead of the GERB, which received 23.5 per cent of the vote. However, because the party continued to reject coalitions, no government could be formed after the election.

The situation was so fluid that in the third election of 2021 (held in November), a new party promising rapid change emerged as the leading political force: We Continue the Change won 25.67 per cent of the vote. Kiril Petkov and Asen Vasilev, two relatively young former international finance experts and technocrats of President Rumen Radev government, created the party. This election showed the instability of populist movements like There Is Such a People, which only received 9.5 per cent of the vote.

The election enabled the only government during this period of crisis to be formed. It was a coalition between We Continue the Change, the Bulgarian Socialist Party and the Yes, Bulgaria!. It governed for a short time, from December 2021 and August 2022.

After the October 2022 election, the political deadlock returned. The election result made it impossible for stable government to form. The We Continue the Change party became the second-largest party with 20.20 per cent of the vote, while There Is Such a People, formerly the biggest political party (July 2021), was no longer represented in parliament.

At the same time, this period of instability coincided with the parliamentary breakthrough of Revival, a new anti-everything party that seeks to shake up the status quo and is openly pro-Russian. It received 4.86 per cent in the 2021 election and 10.18 per cent in October 2022.

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So what are the main takeaways from this cycle of successive elections over the past three years?

The last election produced the same results as the three previous elections. Citizens continue to protest against the system, as they have done for the past 20 years, but through new populist parties.

This mix of protest parties is unable to form a coalition because they are parties whose electoral success is based on protest. They oppose everything, and they are enemies of one another.

Other political actors have emerged, particularly new far-right movements that are openly pro-Russian. However, populist parties have proven to be highly unstable and incapable of offering anything beyond protest. We must really focus on building political bonds. The trust placed in a charismatic leader evaporates as soon as they enter a ruling coalition and repeat the cycle of corruption. Power is so discredited that nobody survives it.

Do you mean corruption is the main source of citizen distrust of political representatives?

Yes, corruption is the main cause of eroding political bonds. In Bulgaria, corruption has been a key problem since the start of the transition to democracy. It grew out of the way public property was privatised to benefit a few old communist elites. Since this initial period, there has been chronic political and administrative corruption. After Bulgaria joined the EU, misuse of European funds became a major issue, which is paradoxical considering the EU's earlier success in fighting corruption.

The Bulgarian media and political opponents attacked Boyko Borisov over corruption connected to major construction projects in Bulgaria financed by the EU. We also saw local elites adapt to the new political reality after joining the EU. Consequently, Bulgaria saw a rise in corruption 8 to 10 years after it became an EU member state. According to the report "State Capture Unplugged": Countering Administrative and Political Corruption in Bulgaria" published by the Center for the Study of Democracy, corruption in 2016 returned to levels last seen in 2000.

Although we have seen very strong movements against corruption in Bulgaria, they seem too ad hoc to lead to structural change. So there are two questions: how can we challenge the cultural stereotypes of the Balkans as a land of corruption? And by what means, both from inside and outside the country, could reform in favour of the public interest take shape?

Clearly, corruption is a major systemic problem which is always there, but not just in Balkan countries. It's somewhat symbolic, but we are also seeing checks imposed by European institutions forcing change in the system. So the European Union has played a positive role on this issue.

However, the system adapts when corruption is challenged. Local players always manage to come to arrangements, to get around reforms - to render them meaningless. The underlying interactions don't change, and corruption continues.

Bulgaria is in the unique position of being both pro-European and pro-Russian while resisting polarisation. Yet this is still finding its way into the Bulgarian political landscape. How has society reacted to this growing polarisation?

The Bulgarian stance is an attempt to exploit opportunities between two poles and combine different historic periods. Within Bulgarian society, two groups are forming: the former communist elites and voters for small pro-Russian populist parties; the elites and citizens with anti-communist backgrounds, who are traditionally quite pro-European. There is a cleavage but, equally, there isn't a political culture that is mainly pro-European or pro-Russian.

In our political culture, the European Union and Russia are viewed very positively. It's a matter of both geography and popular representation. Unlike in Hungary, where anti-European sentiment prevails, in Bulgaria, support for the EU has always been stable and high. At the same time, Russia retains a very positive aura due to its historic role in the abolition of Ottoman slavery and the founding of the modern Bulgarian state. The war in Ukraine is the first time that Russia has suffered a negative impact on its image and lost some of its soft power.

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So pro-Russian sentiment has fallen a bit but nevertheless remains very strong. How does this affect Bulgarian politics?

The Communist Party, despite pledging its support for social democracy and Europe over 20 years ago, remains Russia's friend in Bulgaria. They were part of the governing coalition when Russia invaded Ukraine and were very reticent to take a stance against Moscow.

For the first time, a small openly pro-Russian party has emerged. Its leader has been nicknamed "Mr Kopeks" by other parties, with the implication that he takes money directly from Russia. They represent Russian interests in Bulgaria and openly took the side of the Russian ambassador in a conflict between the Bulgarian government and the Russian embassy in Sofia.

A new page in the history of international relations has been turned between these two countries.

Air pollution, water pollution, the farming system are persistent environmental issues in Bulgaria. What's more, Bulgaria must do its bit for the European Union's climate ambitions. How is this playing out in Bulgarian society? Is there awareness or activism? What's the verdict on the small Green Party's involvement in the recent coalition?

In the 33 years of Bulgaria's democracy, 20 of them under populism, populists have neglected environmental issues because they are too complex, too deep, and can't be solved with promises of quick results. These issues demand investment and sometimes sacrifice that only pay off years later.

Environmental problems are therefore traditionally tackled after other social and economic problems. Occasionally, environmental problems are exploited for political gain.

Deepening environmentalism has depended on other processes in Bulgaria, on structural reforms and their pace but even these come against significant challenge. Bulgaria has already requested several exemptions from the European Commission rules for the region of Maritsa. Despite the pollution and harm to people in the country and beyond, coal-fired power stations are a symbol of national pride as they generate energy for the country amid

the energy crisis.

The environment is not a priority. The position of environment minister carries absolutely no prestige in Bulgaria so nobody wants it. One of its last incumbents, Neno Dimov, was sent to prison for contaminated drinking water in the town of Pernik. It was more convenient for Borisov government to blame the minister rather than investigate the source of the problem and resulting health crisis.

Is there no environmental awareness in the government or in society?

That's why there is a small Green Party that might enter parliament as part of an unstable coalition. Most political parties are quite unstable, but, compared to the Green Party, bigger parties pay absolutely no attention to environmental problems.

Does this mean that the Greens' achievements in government are negligible?

In six months, as part of such a complex coalition, in the context of war on Bulgaria's doorstep, yes.

With mass emigration and a falling birth rate, Bulgaria is experiencing massive demographic and societal changes. Considering this trend, what does the future hold for Bulgaria?

The next 10 years will be more or less comparable with what we've seen to date. But in 20 years, we will have a better view on the political and economic ramifications of the demographic decline. According to the last census in 2021, the total number of Bulgarians has fallen to 6.5 million. The problem of emigration is real, but it should be remembered that there is also a strong tendency for Bulgarians to return. Overall, it isn't all negative. Some systems will suffer, like the pension system, which will likely fall into a permanent crisis. But at the same time, for the first time in years, Bulgaria is seeing demand for reasonably skilled labour with more vacancies than applicants. So unemployment should fall drastically. For the time being, some sectors of the Bulgarian economy are working very well and we're seeing immigration of doctors to Bulgaria for example.



Maria Mateeva Kazakova has extensive consultancy experience. She has undertaken assignments for the European Commission (DG MOVE, DG Connect, DG Grow), the European Parliament, the Council of Europe, different Agencies of the European Union (INEA, EASME, ERCEA) and others. Before that she was an Advisor to the Chair of REGI Committee at the European Parliament. Maria is a GLG Council Member and former Consultant at the Centre for Strategy and Evaluation Services in London. She holds a PhD in Political Science (First-Class Honours distinction) from Paris Sorbonne University (Paris II Pantheon-Assas).

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