

Bulgaria's Greens: From Street Protests to Government

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From July 2020 until the end of then-Prime Minister Boyko Borissov's third term on 16 April 2021, Bulgaria was engulfed in daily demonstrations against government corruption and impunity. Following Borissov's resignation, two inconclusive elections were held before a four-party coalition achieved a majority in November 2021. As a result, Greens are now in government in a breakthrough for the region. In January 2022, Pavel Antonov spoke to Deputy Prime Minister for Climate Policy and Minister of Environment and Water Borislav Sandov, one of the co-founders of the Green Movement party, about the political legacy of the protests, Green politics and ideas in Bulgarian society, and the priorities for government.

Pavel Antonov: Let's start by looking back at the anti-government protests of 2020-21. The Bulgarian Green movement, including the political party of the same name, played an active role in the protests, and you were personally involved. To what extent did the party's identity and Green political messages stand out during the demonstrations?

Borislav Sandov: The protests focused on various government policies at that time, particularly in the field of the rule of law, judicial reforms, and so on. But they also had an environmental aspect. The Green Movement [GM, formerly The Greens] has been an active part of civil society for many years, and protest is one of the ways we express ourselves. But in addition to taking a stand *against* something, we always try to stand *for* something: suggesting solutions to a problem or offering an alternative viewpoint. And of course over time we have managed to get to a level at which we can actually work to bring about change. The Green Movement's participation in the protests was visible via the involvement of its members, and the key political message that stood out was that the Greens are not only concerned with protecting the environment but also social issues: justice, political fairness and equity, human rights, sustainable development, and tolerance between individuals and in society in general.

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The protests brought together a rather unexpected configuration of participants from across the political spectrum, united in opposition to the government. To what extent do you think this laid the ground for today's diverse governing coalition?

To a very large extent. The protests were an expression of opposition to a lengthy rule defined by the concentration of power in the hands of a single individual and non-compliance with rules, whether European or national. They raised the combined energies of representatives of different political parties and poured them into the elections that followed. As a result, parties of protest and change, which had not been part of the government for some time, gained a wider base of trust and greater electoral weight. Then at the elections in November 2021, we managed to gather sufficient strength to form a coalition government of protest parties and movements.

A significant number of “Green” protestors joined the newly formed centrist We Continue the Change Party (PP), now the head of the ruling coalition. How much did this affect the Green Movement, and was it seen as a loss?

We Continue the Change was formed as an electoral alliance rather than a political party, which makes it difficult to confirm a move from one party to another.[1] That said, some of those who were an integral part of the Green Movement did migrate to the PP, but only very few.

More importantly, many voters who previously trusted us were hesitant to vote for Democratic Bulgaria [a centrist/centre-right electoral alliance of which the Green Movement is a member]. Following the emergence of PP as a political movement they chose to vote for them. We shouldn't look at this with jealousy, but instead simply recognise that these people were looking for something fresher politically. They weren't necessarily disappointed with GM. However, some were certainly unhappy with the configuration of the coalition we belonged to at these elections. Others may have been attracted by the fact that PP was expected to do well in the elections and had a real chance of replacing the incumbent GERB [Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria] Party, which had been in power for many years.

With regard to the Green Movement, we experienced virtually no internal conflicts as a result of migration to the PP. We expected to work together with PP anyway. Some people chose to vote for them, others to run as PP candidates for parliament. A few of these became MPs. But throughout all of this we kept open the possibility of working together on the same topics with the same principles and the same political direction.

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Prior to the protests, current Prime Minister Kiril Petkov was involved with Let's Save Coral, an NGO working to protect the Bulgarian coastline from over-development. Did this contribute to the new government's greener image?

Yes, for sure. It's important to remember that GM does not encompass the entire civic green movement. Politically, the movement is just as well represented now as it was prior to the November 2021 elections. And it has made it into government, which is a big

difference. While in the past it was primarily present within GM and in policy nuances within a few other parties including the newly formed PP, now it is fully represented within government.

From today's perspective, this sounds like a success story. But after the November elections, things looked rather different, and both you and Vladislav Panev resigned as GM's co-chairs. What was the reason for these resignations?

It was a natural move to take responsibility for the party's poorer-than-expected performance at the November elections as part of the Democratic Bulgaria coalition, although it is hard for us to measure how much support our party actually lost. But in the end, this was the natural thing to do, and our coalition partners within Democratic Bulgaria took similar steps. At our next national congresses, these issues will be discussed and voted on by our collective decision-making bodies and, depending on who is running, there could be an overlap between old and new leaderships. This is an issue that needs to be discussed in a broader sense too. Of course we recognise that we made some mistakes, but we also understand that, totally aside from this, a new dynamic has emerged. I hope that developments within GM integrating ideas, concepts, and approaches both old and new will be able to satisfy disappointed voters as well as those who continued to support us.

One of the major concerns of supporters of the current governing constellation was whether the members of Democratic Bulgaria, known for their strong anti-communist traditions, could reconcile themselves to governing with the Socialists. How was this achieved? Was it difficult?

When we started talking specifically about how to solve people's problems rather than exchanging ideological clichés, we saw that the differences between us were not so stark. On a separate note, aware of the situation in Bulgaria following two unsuccessful elections, we found that the responsibility to form a government began to weigh heavily on us. While campaigning for the elections, we concentrated on solving our country's problems. So, when we compared our political programmes, we saw a lot of overlap. There are still issues on which we need to weigh up the various proposals and find the most effective approach. But, for the most part, we have reached agreement on the key issues that need to be addressed. This has opened up an opportunity to diminish ideological confrontation, to think pragmatically about solutions. We are in the grip of a number of interlocking crises: a health crisis caused by the pandemic; a climate crisis; a socio-economic crisis partially triggered by the first two; and above all a political crisis resulting from the inability to form a functioning government. There is a need for reform, for a vision that extends beyond the two or three months between snap elections. All this may have generated a sense of commitment and a responsibility to bring our country out of these crises and follow a European development trajectory that surpasses ideological opposition.

During the election campaign, you and other GM leaders personally engaged with issues that are controversial in Bulgaria, such as gender and equality and a just transition away from carbon. Do you think that the Green Movement has succeeded in opening up the debate to more progressive views? Did this pay political dividends?

To deal with your last question first, I am not convinced that dealing with these issues has

brought us political dividends in terms of electoral weight. Quite simply, they have always been embedded in our politics, a Green politics which also spans human rights, sustainable development, respect for difference, and the fight against discrimination. In Bulgaria, with its often conservative, traditional Eastern European cultural context, such an approach is unlikely to create the conditions for broadening electoral support.

However, within the governing coalition we are creating an opportunity to fight for these issues – at least partially – by addressing violence. For example, certain initiatives tackling domestic violence have already been launched. We may not be able to legalise same-sex marriage during this parliamentary term, but if we win further terms it could happen at some point in the future; of course, only if there is sufficient support in society. If not, GM will continue to advocate for this idea even without the opportunity to implement it. In any case, I think that even without adopting a more extreme stance, we are allowing these topics to be opened up for debate and brought in from the margins. Gender and equality issues were previously the preserve of fringe political parties that aren't even represented in parliament. Now these issues have the support of political parties such as GM, which not only have seats in parliament but are actually in government, allowing us to discuss them more openly without stigma and prejudice.

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One of the first political hot potatoes served to your government was the dilemma over the Bulgarian position on the start of EU accession negotiations by North Macedonia. How can you find a balance between the national and European perspectives to resolve this problem?

The way this question is posed is misleading. It is in Bulgaria's national interest for North Macedonia to be a member of the EU. The longer North Macedonia remains outside the EU, the longer it will be exposed to the influence of third countries. Furthermore, EU integration would better guarantee the rights of the Bulgarian minority in North Macedonia, as well as weakening the influence of countries such as Russia and China, who are trying to gain a foothold in the Balkans. EU integration would offer improved opportunities in a board range of areas: cultural, historical, economic, transport, and environmental. An example is our recent conversation with the North Macedonian environment minister on cross-border protected areas for lynx, a priority species for conservation in Europe. Clearly, the Bulgarian nationalist position on North Macedonia should support its more rapid integration into the EU. Wouldn't that be the easiest way? If we call someone our brother, we should let him enter the room we share with other members of our European family.

You have just served your first month as deputy prime minister for climate policy and minister of environment and water. At this, the very beginning of your mandate, what are your main priorities?

A key priority is to change public attitudes towards the Ministry of Environment and Water by highlighting the positive work done by the ministry, and of course by meeting public

expectations. I realise that my previous efforts to expose the problems within the ministry are partly responsible for the low levels of public trust in it as an institution. Now I have an unparalleled opportunity to solve these problems from the inside, to raise the ministry's institutional prestige, and to broaden its interactions with different groups in society.

One of my more specific thematic priorities is to resolve the EU's infringement procedures against Bulgaria over environmental issues. Because if we do so, we will also solve some of Bulgaria's most pressing environmental protection, public health, and rule of law issues. In other words, these court proceedings are a test of Bulgaria's readiness to address its environmental problems. The idea is not to improve our image abroad, but rather to create better living conditions here in Bulgaria. Are we managing to preserve Bulgaria's cultural and natural heritage, to attract businesses, and to encourage Bulgarians abroad to return to live here?

I deal with at least one of these procedures almost every day. I promised that within my first six months in office we would close six of the 16 EU infringement procedures opened against Bulgaria. We expect one or perhaps two new procedures to emerge related to violations that took place before we were in office. The problems have accumulated, and we won't be able to solve them all immediately. These are legislative and other obstacles. But our goal is to have the number of infringement procedures down by 50 per cent by the end of 2022, and no environmental procedures against Bulgaria at all by the end of our term in government. Not the European Court cases in Luxembourg, but all infringement procedures.

This challenging goal requires action not only by the Ministry of Environment and Water but also by the National Assembly, which must harmonise Bulgarian legislation with European standards. Local authorities and municipalities also have a key role to play in the implementation of local-level policies and the management of water supply systems and treatment plants, water resources, waste disposal, and air quality. This is one of my main priorities, and I am singling it out because it encompasses many other issues including clean air, effective water resource management, and universal access to safe drinking water.

Can we expect a change in Bulgaria's attitude towards European policies, for example with regard to climate, the European Green Deal, and the abandonment of coal and other fossil fuels?

Yes, I think we can. The fact that, for the first time, Bulgaria has a deputy prime minister for climate policy – and that this post is occupied by a Green – is very symbolic and important. This has been very well understood by our diplomatic service. The development of this new post demonstrates Bulgaria's willingness and ability to fall into step with the developed world's response to global processes, which is increasingly prioritising environmental policies. It is no coincidence that our calendars are packed with high-level international meetings on environmental issues. So from this point of view, Bulgaria seems to be more comfortable on the European scene now.

The European Green Deal requires us to transform our economy and our livelihoods for the better. This is very important to emphasise: for the better! Because the better our environmental conditions, the cleaner our economy and production methods, and the less

dependent we will be on fossil fuel imports. And this would certainly be good for Bulgaria.

Coal alone poses a challenge that I am not convinced I will be able to persuade my colleagues to tackle by 2030. It seems to me that the market will help to resolve it before we do. The cost of our carbon emissions is rising so steeply and seems unlikely to fall in the foreseeable future. So we will be faced with the purely economic decision of whether we continue to burn coal to produce electricity or substitute it with another energy source. Perhaps other processes will help us there too.

Otherwise, in relation to biodiversity and other environmental issues we have made a lot of progress. I believe that Bulgaria will be able to come very close to the standards that are in place in Central and Western Europe, closer possibly than our immediate neighbours. I am convinced we have the potential to do that.

[1] We Continue the Change was officially founded as a political party by Kiril Petkov and Asen Vasilev on 15 April 2022.

This interview was conducted in January 2022.



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