



## Language

Bulgaria did not experience a full scale internal revolution in 1989 – although there was a degree of public internal dissent on economic, minority rights and ecological issues during the year. The ruling Communist Party moved to forestall major public unrest by forcing the resignation of its long term leader, Todor Zhivkov and adopting a number of resolutions on political and economic reform. The Party also agreed, after public protests mobilized by an opposition coalition demanding democratization, to hold negotiations on a new constitution. Initially, however, the Party (renamed the Bulgarian Socialist Party, but a still unreconstructed old-style party machine) was able to maintain political dominance, although it legalised private property. Bulgaria experienced a number of unstable coalition governments in the early 1990s, but in 1994 the Socialist Party returned to power and tried to promote a 'Bulgarian third way'. between state socialism and western neoliberal capitalism.

The main opposition to the Bulgarian Socialist Party was the Union of Democratic Forces (soon effectively a right wing party with strong backing from conservative parties and groups in Europe), and the final triumph of the UDF in the 1996 presidential election, and especially in the April 1997 parliamentary elections, was more clearly a victory of the ideological right than in most of the countries covered in this Section. Bulgaria was also under strong pressure from the IMF. But two factors make it relevant to include Bulgaria here: 1. the significant role of public protests, by workers, pensioners and students (organizing brief strikes, occupying buildings, threatening to block roads and using street theatre) in forcing the Bulgarian Socialist Party to hold early parliamentary elections; and 2. the role of Bulgaria in the transmission of protest tactics – learning from the Serbian protests of 1996-97, and providing advice to the Slovak campaigners of 1998 (see below). The Bulgarian demonstrations were primarily centred on economic discontent, rather than on civil rights and democratization, but by January 1997 daily peaceful rallies in the capital (now led by the UDF) drew also on high school students and ordinary citizens, and were portrayed by parts of the Bulgarian media as 'the conscience of the people' opposed to the government.

### **Political Developments since 1997**

After being defeated by the right in the 1997 parliamentary elections, the Bulgarian Socialist Party began to change its economic and foreign policies - by endorsing a market economy as well as the EU and NATO - and to transform itself into a western style social democratic party. This transformation, supported by socialist parties in the west, contributed to the decision to allow Bulgaria (together with Romania) to become a member of the European Union in 2007.

Bulgaria qualified for EU membership because it had a parliamentary system based on regular elections, and a constitution embodying the principles of an independent judiciary and freedom for the media. However, subsequent political developments have shown how hollow this liberal constitutional framework is. Real power is exercised corruptly through close links between dominant economic and political interests, judicial independence has been subverted, and centralised political control of the media prevents real political debate and journalistic scrutiny. These developments are linked to the political rise of a populist strongman, former policeman and security company boss, Boyko Borissov, who came to power in 2009 at the head of his new party, GERB (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria), which allied with various right-wing groups in parliament. Borissov has been Prime Minister for much of the time since then - though he was displaced after mass protests in February 2013, and after the May 2013 elections lost out in the parliament to a coalition led by the Socialist Party, which remained in power until August 2014. Borissov returned to power after elections in October 2014. Unlike some other authoritarian leaders in Eastern Europe, Borissov does not promote a far right ideology or policy agenda, but he does consolidate illiberal and undemocratic forms of control.

Borissov's dominance has been aided by the lack of a strong left-wing opposition. The Socialist Party is nervous of promoting economic and social policies that might evoke comparison with its Communist past, and it has failed to challenge the prevailing political culture and corruption. It is in this context that popular movements protesting about economic injustices, demanding an end to corruption, and often calling for basic political change, have erupted. There were three waves of protest in the winter, summer and late autumn of 2013. Another significant uprising demanding fundamental political change erupted in the summer and autumn of 2020.

### **The Protests of 2013 and Borissov's Resignation**



**The 2013 movement is covered in more detail in Vol. 2 H. under 'Campaigns against Government', but a summary is relevant here as background to the movement against the Borissov regime in 2020.**

The mass protests of February 2013 were sparked by a steep rise in electricity bills issued by foreign-owned companies, unregulated by the state. (Power supplies had been privatized in 2005). The protesters who marched in most Bulgarian cities, also calling for an end to corruption, represented a wide cross section of Bulgarian society. The protests quickly escalated to involve blocking roads and setting up barricades and were met by police violence. The scale of unrest led Borissov to offer his resignation at the end of February. The President's attempts to hold talks with protesters and experts, and to form a new government broke down. His proposals to form an interim government of experts and for parliamentary elections in May angered protesters, now demanding a new kind of assembly and elections with no parties, as well as an end to the existing privatization of key services.

The May elections did however go ahead and resulted in the Socialist Party winning half of the seats and so forming an unstable coalition government. Renewed protests soon broke out against this new government, after the appointment of a controversial businessman to head the State National Security Agency. The appointment was revoked, but protests continued, raising broader issues of political corruption and the need for transparency. With some slogans attacking a 'Red Mafia'. Public anger was still being manifested in October, when students held a three week sit-in at Sofia University (as part of a wider campaign against the Socialist government), and then stunts and other citizens tried to blockade parliament in early November.

**The Protests of 2020 and Repercussions in 2021**

A new wave of popular anger and demonstrations against the corrupt and autocratic nature of Bulgarian politics erupted in July 2020, challenging the Borissov government, and his parliamentary ally the ethnic Turkish DPS party, which included figures well known for their dubious corporate interests and political influence, in particular Ahmed Dogan, associated with many construction projects, and Delyan Peevski, who controlled much of the media. The immediate cause of public anger was a police raid on the office of the President, Rumen Radev, then engaged in a dispute with the Borissov government over provision of public security to Dogan and Peevski, after widespread publicity about security officials forcibly ejecting three protesters near Dogan's Black Sea mansion. The police arrested two of the President's aides on doubtful charges, apparently as a prelude to impeaching President Radev, who was supported by the Socialist Party. This highhanded action was seen as both a proof of levels of government corruption and as a challenge to constitutional principles. People took to the streets demanding the resignation of both Prime Minister Borissov and of the Attorney General, an end to corruption and respect for the rule of law.

The protests that began in July 2020 involved daily protest marches by thousands in the capital Sofia and some other parts the country, as well as setting up tents to block major streets in Sofia. After they had continued for 100 days, though with some reduction in numbers demonstrating, their significance and prospects were assessed by a number of commentators. The protests had not only attracted considerable active support, but also had the approval of over 65 per cent of the population. The Bulgarian diaspora in major European cities also demonstrated against the Bulgarian regime. The demonstrations remained at the top of the news inside Bulgaria, but also attracted coverage in international media (often uninterested in Bulgaria), and prompted a debate and the passing of a resolution very critical of the Bulgarian government in the European Parliament. Moreover, five of the ministers in Borissov's government, including the Justice Minister, had to resign.

Borissov himself initially canvassed various possible reform measures, but remained in power and refused to resign, pointing to the immediate Covid crisis and elections scheduled for early 2021 as reasons for his staying on. When elections were held in April 2021, including several new reform parties, the results were inconclusive. Neither GERB (which won the most seats) nor the Socialist Party were able to form a majority coalition in parliament, so the President called for new elections in July. Borissov insisted that his experience and links to some EU governments made him the most credible candidate for prime minister. However, he came under increasing pressure, especially after a parliamentary committee, investigating the past conduct of the Borissov government, heard lurid testimony about the extent of the corrupt control exercised by economic bosses close to Borissov and the behaviour of the inner circle. Borissov and those criticized denied the claims, but his opponents hoped that more details of corrupt undemocratic control would emerge before the July 2021 elections.

Because Bulgarian politics is not usually covered by international media, or widely studied by the academic community, references are limited. But a number of articles on the nature of Bulgarian politics and on the 2013 and 2020 protests are included below.



Barnes, Andrew, [Extricating the State: The Move to Competitive Capture in Post-Communist Bulgaria](#) [1], Europe-Asia Studies, Vol. 59, issue 1, 2007, pp. 71-95

Barnes notes that, although academic analysis initially stressed the need to end extensive state control of the economy in post-Communist states, there was now increasing recognition that private economic interests can capture the state and prevent full-scale political reform. While no single economic group can control the political institutions, competing groups can struggle to gain leverage for their own economic benefit.

Daimov, E., [The Awakening: A Chronicle of the Bulgarian Uprising of January-February 1997](#) [2], Sofia, Democracy Network Program: Centre of Social Practices NBU, 1998, pp. 127

Notes that Bulgaria maintained a stable Soviet-style system until the collapse of the Soviet Union, but has made a surprisingly effective transition to parliamentary government and a market economy.

Dainov, Evgenii, [How to Dismantle a Democracy: The Case of Bulgaria](#) [3], OpenDemocracy, 15/06/2020,

Dainov analyzes Borissov's style of government, noting that democracy can be destroyed not only by far right ideologues, but also by non-ideological 'macho males' like Borissov.

Dimitrov, Martin, [How a Flag Planted on a Beach Led to a Bulgarian Uprising](#) [4], 04/09/2020,

Bulgarian reporter Martin Dimitrov explains the events which sparked the 2020 mass protests in Bulgaria against the Borissov government and corrupt political system.

Dimitrov, Vesselin, [Bulgaria: The Uneven Transition](#) [5], London, Routledge, 2001, pp. 132

Charts transition to multiparty democracy and a market economy from 1989, with a focus on party coalitions and alignments.

Ganev, Venelin, [Explaining Eastern Europe: "Soft Decisionism" in Bulgaria](#) [6], Journal of Democracy, Vol. 29, issue 3, 2018, pp. 91-103

The author discusses 'patterns of democratic backsliding' in Eastern Europe, but concentrates primarily on 'constitutional retrogression' in Bulgaria. The article argues that the declining political influence of the middle class has undermined respect for the rule of law, so enabling 'oligarchic networks' to capture key parts of the judiciary, and undermining media independence. Ganev describes Borissov's personalistic form of governing, suggesting this can be conceptualised as 'soft decisionism'.

Ganev, Venelin I., [Bulgaria's Symphony of Hope](#) [7], Journal of Democracy, Vol. 8, issue 4 (October), 1997, pp. 125-139

Hallberg, Delia ; Ossewaarde, Ringo, [Protest and Recognition in the Bulgarian Summer 2013 Movement](#) [8], In Thomas Davies, Holly Eva Ryan and Alejandro Milciades Pena (eds), Protest, Social Movements, and Global Democracy since 2011: New Perspectives - Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change, Emerald Books, pp. 85-106

Against the background of the world-wide protests of 2011, the authors discuss the Bulgarian movement in early 2013 and its stronger manifestation during the summer. They aim to draw out aspects of the prolonged protests that are unique to Bulgaria, arguing they represent a 'distinctive struggle for cultural recognition' with links to the



earlier 19th century National Awakening movement when Bulgaria was part of the Ottoman Empire.

Ivancheva, Mariya, [The Bulgarian Winter of Protests](#) [9], OpenDemocracy, 15/03/2013,

Article explaining the economic, social and political context of the protests that forced Boyko Borissov to resign at the end of February 2013, and the immediate repercussions. Ivancheva is highly critical of 'monopolies in the hands of private companies' within a context of no state regulation, and notes problems in electoral law making it hard for smaller parties to contest elections.

Nikolova, Madlen, [Anti-Corruption Protests Show the Hollowness of Bulgaria's Democracy](#) [10], Jacobin Magazine, 2020

This article provides an analysis of the socio-economic and political framework within which the movement of 2020 erupted, noting that both the right and the left in Bulgarian politics were accused of corruption, which indicated the 'lack of real political alternatives'. It also notes that issues such as high unemployment, low wages and failing health system are scarcely raised in parliament, even by the Bulgarian Socialist Party. Concludes by pointing to parallels with the 2013 protests.

Petrova, Tsveta, [A Postcommunist Transition in Two Acts: The 1996-7 Antigovernment Struggle in Bulgaria as a Bridge between the 1989-92 and 1996-2007 Democratization Waves in Eastern Europe](#) [11], In Bunce; McFaul; Stoner-Weiss, [Democracy and Authoritarianism in the Postcommunist World](#) [12] (D. II.1. Comparative Assessments [13]), New York, Cambridge University Press, pp. 107-133

A clear summary of developments from 1989-1997, that also lays emphasis on the role of popular mobilization and protests.

Price, Lada, [Media Corruption and Issues of Journalistic and Institutional Integrity in Post-Communist Countries: The Case of Bulgaria](#) [14], Communist and Post-Communist Studies, Vol. 52, issue 1, 2019, pp. 71-79

Drawing on in-depth interviews with 35 Bulgarian journalists, the author argues that the media in Bulgaria - far from exposing corruption as a free media should - has itself become increasingly 'an instrument to promote and defend private vested interests' and is itself corrupted.

Spirova, Maria, [The Bulgarian Socialist Party: The Long Road to Europe](#) [15], Communist and Post-Communist Studies, Vol. 41, issue 4, 2008, pp. 481-495

Examines how the BSP changed from a Marxist party in the 1980s, arguing that it only altered significantly after being defeated in the 1997 elections, when it began to adopt new economic and foreign policies which made accession to the EU possible. The author also discusses the role of socialist parties in Western Europe in promoting this change.

Vassileva, Radosveta, [Europe's Blind Spot: The Movement Against Corruption in Bulgaria](#) [16], Green European Journal, 04/11/2020,

Vassileva, an activist and legal scholar, responds to questions from the *Green European Journal* explaining the origins and causes of the protests that broke out in July 2020, including the nature of corruption and the role of the prosecutor's office.

See also:

Vassileva, Radosveta, 'Bulgaria: 100 Days of Protest', *New Eastern Europe*, 28 October 2020.

<https://neweasterneurope.eu/2020/10/28/bulgaria-100-days-of-protests/> [17]

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Provides a brief commentary explaining how the Prosecutor raided the President's office with the aim of impeaching him (i.e. tried to 'orchestrate a coup') and so precipitated over a 100 days of protest. The author also comments on the role of the EU Parliament (unlike other EU institutions) in passing a resolution very critical of Borissov.

Vassileva, Radosveta, [Europe's Blind Spot: The Movement Against Corruption in Bulgaria](#) [18], *Green European Journal*, 04/11/2020,

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**Source URL (retrieved on 09/08/2022 - 15:06):** <https://civilresistance.info/section/d-resisting-authoritarianism-post-communist-and-post-soviet-regimes/d-ii-electoral-5>

### Links

- [1] <https://civilresistance.info/biblio-item/2007/extricating-state-move-competitive-capture-post-communist-bulgaria>
- [2] <https://civilresistance.info/biblio-item/1998/awakening-chronicle-bulgarian-uprising-january-february-1997>
- [3] <https://civilresistance.info/biblio-item/2020/how-dismantle-democracy-case-bulgaria>
- [4] <https://civilresistance.info/biblio-item/2020/how-flag-planted-beach-led-bulgarian-uprising>
- [5] <https://civilresistance.info/biblio-item/2001/bulgaria-uneven-transition>
- [6] <https://civilresistance.info/biblio-item/2018/explaining-eastern-europe-soft-decisionism-bulgaria>
- [7] <https://civilresistance.info/biblio-item/1997/bulgarias-symphony-hope>
- [8] <https://civilresistance.info/biblio-item/2016/protest-and-recognition-bulgarian-summer-2013-movement>
- [9] <https://civilresistance.info/biblio-item/2013/bulgarian-winter-protests>
- [10] <https://civilresistance.info/biblio-item/2020/anti-corruption-protests-show-hollowness-bulgarias-democracy>
- [11] <https://civilresistance.info/biblio-item/2009/postcommunist-transition-two-acts-1996-7-antigovernment-struggle-bulgaria-bridge>
- [12] <https://civilresistance.info/biblio-item/2009/democracy-and-authoritarianism-postcommunist-world>
- [13] <https://civilresistance.info/section/d-resisting-authoritarianism-post-communist-and-post-soviet-regimes/d-ii-electoral-0>
- [14] <https://civilresistance.info/biblio-item/2019/media-corruption-and-issues-journalistic-and-institutional-integrity-post-communist>
- [15] <https://civilresistance.info/biblio-item/2008/bulgarian-socialist-party-long-road-europe>
- [16] <https://civilresistance.info/biblio-item/2020/europes-blind-spot-movement-against-corruption-bulgaria-0>
- [17] <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2020/10/28/bulgaria-100-days-of-protests/>
- [18] <https://civilresistance.info/biblio-item/2020/europes-blind-spot-movement-against-corruption-bulgaria>