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## Bulgaria 2022 – a new beginning?

*In 2021, Bulgaria went through an unprecedented series of three parliamentary elections plus elections for president, with two short-lived parliaments and two caretaker governments appointed by President Rumen Radev in between. This extraordinary set of developments was the result of mass protests in the summer of 2020 against the rule of former prime minister Boyko Borissov's GERB party, which had lasted more than a decade and was marked by rampant corruption and embezzlement of public funds. After two unsuccessful attempts to form a government by the parties associated with the protests, a four-party coalition cabinet was eventually voted into office in December 2021, with a completely new party called 'We are continuing the change' in the lead after it won the elections of 14 November. These developments have resulted in high expectations for a new beginning for the country. The Bulgarian Socialist Party also joined the government, but nevertheless suffered three heavy electoral losses.*

On 13 December 2021 a new cabinet was sworn in by the newly elected 47th parliament of Bulgaria. The cabinet is composed of an unprecedented four-party coalition, with the complete newcomer – the party 'We are continuing the change' (PP) that had come out first in the elections of 14 November – being joined by the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), the television-show-inspired party 'There is such a people' (ITN), and the liberal Democratic Bulgaria (DB). Equally notable was the exclusion from power of former prime minister Borissov's GERB, together with their partner in government, the nationalist IMRO, which had been informally supported by the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS) throughout their reign in office over the last 12 years since 2009 (with a brief break in 2013-14).

### The new political landscape

The uniqueness of this outcome is even more notable considering that it was the result of a third parliamentary election, on 14 November, coming after those of 4 April and 11 July. This third election in the same year was brought about because of the failure of the new parties in the two short-lived parliaments resulting from the previous two elections to form

governing coalitions, instead engaging in often acrimonious exchanges among themselves. The deep shifts in voter support over the course of only the last eight months in 2021 are clearly reflected in the votes cast in the three consecutive elections and the mandates gained by the parties represented in the three successive parliaments:

	4 April 2021	Mandates	11 July 2021	Mandates	14 November 2021	Mandates
PP					25.67%	67
GERB	26.18%	75	23.51%	63	22.74%	59
ITN	17.66%	51	24.08%	65	9.52%	25
BSP	15.01%	43	13.39%	36	10.21%	26
DPS	10.51%	30	10.71%	29	13.00%	34
DB	9.45%	27	12.64%	34	6.37%	16
IMV/IBNI	4.72%	14	5.01%	13	2.29%	0
REVIVAL	2.45%	0	3.01%	0	4.86%	13

Source: the official bulletins of the central election commission ([www.cik.bg/](http://www.cik.bg/)) with the final results of the elections.

The three results highlighted in red denote the two new parties to enter the parliament as a result of the 14 November elections (PP and Revival) as well as the failure of IMV/INI to gain re-election.

The acronyms of the parties and coalitions are derived from their names in Bulgarian, having the following English translations:

PP – ‘We are continuing the change’, the newly established party, represented principally by the newly elected prime minister Kiril Petkov and Asen Vasilev, the minister of finance in the new government

GERB – Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria, the centrist party of former prime minister Borissov in coalition with smaller centre-right and nationalistic partners

ITN – ‘There is such a people’, a new party that has emerged from the popular Slavi Show TV programme

BSP – the Bulgarian Socialist Party, the oldest party with a history of over 130 years

DPS – the Movement for Rights and Freedoms, a mostly ethnic Turkish party with a significant constituency also among Bulgarian Turks living in Turkey

DB – Democratic Bulgaria, a coalition of three centre right parties

IMV/IBNI – ‘Stand up! Brutes out!’, renamed for the last elections as ‘Stand up Bulgaria! We are coming’, a loose coalition of newly emerged protest movements and smaller parties

The only exception as to naming is that of Vazrazhdane, the new entry to the parliament, with its English translation as Revival.

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These electoral shifts represent the result of the dynamics unleashed by the mass protests of the summer of 2020, mainly in the capital Sofia and including blockades of major avenues and roads, with insistent calls for the immediate resignation of Borissov and his government, the summary dismissal of the chief prosecutor Ivan Geshev, plus the adoption of a new constitution (the existing one having been adopted back in 1990 and thus seen by most of those protesting as the major barrier to long overdue modernisation). At the root of these protests was the increasingly mounting discontent and disgust with the corrupt and quasi-authoritarian exercise of power by GERB, which downgraded the

role of parliament and provocatively refused any accountability for notorious instances of gross misdemeanours, some of which personally involved the prime minister.

Two separate incidents in July 2020 provided the spark igniting the outburst of mass action. One incident was the authorities' physical prevention of the leader of DB from personally accessing, as an act of defiance, an illegally closed off strip of Black Sea beach forming part of the sumptuous summer residence of the honorary chairman of the DPS. The other incident was the intrusion into the seat of the Presidency in the centre of Sofia by armed members of a witness protection unit within the chief prosecutor's office, under the pretext of seeking evidence for breaches of the law by an adviser to the president. Both of these acts were seen as the last straws in the collapsing public trust in both government and the judiciary in general.

The ensuing mass action took the form of daily demonstrations throughout July and August 2020, plus open-air evening rallies in front of the Presidency with a wide variety of speakers addressing those attending. The protests came to involve a broad spectrum of participants, with the tone set mainly by young people without previous involvement in organised political action. Among them, there was a significant number of students and young academics, who were back home for the summer holiday from their respective places of study or academic careers throughout Europe and beyond, and who added a particular note of resolute rejection of the entrenched brutish practices by those in power in their home country.

Reflecting the degree of involvement and the reactions to these protests, the DB, ITN and INI/IBNI came to be considered as *parties of the protest*, or *protest parties* and thus *non-systemic parties*, while GERB and the DPS were classified as *parties of the status quo*, or *systemic parties*. The BSP was seen as occupying a somewhat ambiguous position, on the one hand having been in opposition to GERB over the years, yet on the other hand failing to leave the parliament at the time of the protests and thus not providing a final push for the government to resign.

The main issues debated in the course of the series of elections during the three successive campaigns of 2021 therefore very much reflected the demands voiced in the course of the previous year's protests. A leading issue came to be the urgent need for reform of the judiciary, and in particular the removal of the chief prosecutor, plus constitutional changes to ensure proper accountability of the prosecutor's office. Another issue was the need to expose and punish cases and practices of drastic corruption and of inadmissible misuse of power by those in government – for example, favouring preferred companies for public contracts, coupled with administrative pressure on those declining to submit to the demands of those in power.

Yet another issue to be debated continuously was the severe lack of freedom of the press and the pervasive influence of oligarchic circles over the various media outlets. A particular case in point was that of a leading figure in the DPS, Delyan Peevsky, who was seen as controlling vast business interests and either owning or controlling a media conglomerate including the leading tabloid editions. A notorious development in this regard was his naming by the US Treasury as falling under the Magnitsky sanctions for illegal activities, together with another person considered to be among the few wealthiest in the country.

## Renewed hope and expectations

The extraordinary shifts in electoral support, together with the formation of a government of such diametrically diverse parties, were seen by many as an indication and promise of no less than a clear break with years and indeed decades of corrupt government and a self-serving political class, inspired by the mass protests of the previous summer of 2020. The youthful vigour of the new Prime Minister Petkov and the new faces of the representatives of the PP have introduced a new note of optimism and hope that it is actually possible for things to really start changing for the better – that it might actually be possible to make a decisive break with the past three decades of painful disappointments including evermore drastic social inequalities, broadly dysfunctional government, and rank embezzlement of public funds.

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Such expectations are nevertheless coupled with apprehension about yet another round of disappointments. So how can it be determined whether Bulgaria is truly on the verge of a new beginning that offers the possibility to revive parliamentary governance and responsible government and thus to regain broad public support for a new agenda of

deep reforms, transforming the country into a European member state success story? Or are Bulgarians instead facing a future of largely the same as before?

Furthermore, could the latest truly astounding developments in Bulgaria also be seen in a broader context, as an ongoing case in point for long-overdue change not only in Central-East European member states, but also throughout Europe and beyond?

Embarking on the examination of these pivotal questions, it is necessary to consider the role of President Rumen Radev as an important factor for driving change forward – despite the fact that under the Constitution, the president, though elected by popular vote, possesses mostly consultative and representative functions. In the course of the summer of 2020, the president had openly sided with the mass protests against Borissov and GERB, and was therefore sharply attacked by GERB for allegedly breaching his constitutional role of symbolising national unity.

A large majority of people nevertheless came to regard Radev as a key unifying figure for all those standing up for change and the end of arbitrary GERB rule. A former air force general and thus far from yet another representative of the standard political class, Radev had won a first term as president in November 2016 with the massive support of over 2 million votes, amounting to 59.37 per cent of all votes cast. Iliana Yotova, a former Member of the European Parliament, served as his vice-president, having been nominated by the BSP – which had supported their candidacy.

This time around, one of the specific features of the November 2021 elections was that the vote for the parliament was coupled with the new elections for president, which took

place in two rounds – the first coinciding with the parliamentary vote of 14 November, and the run-off taking place a week later on 21 November. Radev, again in tandem with Yotova, was re-elected for a second five-year term with an overwhelming majority of 66.72 per cent of the vote against 31.80 per cent for his GERB-supported opponent, the rector of Sofia University Anastas Gerdzhirov.

In the course of 2021, the president was called upon twice to form caretaker cabinets, since the two successive legislatures to emerge after the parliamentary elections of 4 April and 11 July proved to be short-lived, failing to put together government-supporting majorities. The first of these cabinets, made up of independent professionals, gained broad recognition for starting to expose and curb GERB-instituted entrenched corruption practices for the first time after years of scandalous official inaction. Leading roles in this regard were performed by two cabinet members – the ministers of the economy Kiril Petkov and of finance Asen Vasilev.

After the first of the two short-lived parliaments folded in June, Petkov and Vasilev, rather than continuing in the second caretaker executive, undertook to launch a new political party with the message – and name – that ‘we are continuing the change’ (PP). Building on their backgrounds as Harvard University graduates and successful start-up entrepreneurs, they developed their whole campaign on the proposition that far from being a hopelessly backward country, Bulgaria had great potential – with its successful young achievers, its untapped natural resources, and its decidedly business-friendly taxation regime all being held back only because of a pervasive and embedded network for massively syphoning off public funds and resources in favour of illegitimate private beneficiaries.

The defining policy message of the two co-leaders of the new PP party was to aim for ‘left-wing objectives by right-wing means’. This was presented as meaning that better healthcare, education and pensions, for example, are to be achieved without raising taxes but rather through effective tax collection, thus putting an end to corruption and encouraging private investment and entrepreneurship. The leading figures of the new party explained this policy line with the understanding that the various political ideologies and ideas had lost their relevance in modern times and therefore ought to be supplanted by pragmatic policies that do the job. To a public weary with years of empty platform promises by mainstream parties, this message, presented with smiling bonhomie, struck a responsive note.

With the results of the 14 November elections in, it became clear that the three so-called protest parties, namely the PP, ITN and DB, could together come up with no more than 108 members of parliament – that is, 13 short of the 121 required for a simple majority to form a government in the 240-seat parliament. GERB and the DPS were seen as ‘toxic’ because of their past record in government and thus as totally beyond consideration as possible coalition partners. So was the new entry, Revival, due to its explicitly extreme nationalistic stance. Although down to an unprecedented 26 deputies in parliament, the BSP therefore emerged as the fourth party necessary for assembling the support for a gov-

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erning coalition of at least 121, in this case amounting to a majority of 134 members of parliament.

Setting out to construct this coalition in the days immediately after 14 November, Petkov and Vasilev initiated an intensive round of consultations with the other three potential partner parties. Their aim was to have a detailed coalition agreement that spelled out concrete commitments to govern jointly for a full four-year term in office. They also wanted this agreement to be ready for signature by the time they were entrusted with a mandate by the president to form a new government as leaders of the largest parliamentary group. The method they chose to achieve such an agreement combined discussions in 18 working groups by policy area. These were held in open online sessions broadcast on social media outlets. There were then leaders' negotiations to finalise the agreement. In the course of the negotiations each party spelled out its particular priorities and red lines not to be crossed.

During these negotiations, the BSP emphasised the need for strong social policies, including raising incomes and pensions, help for young families, and free childcare. In addition, the chairperson of the party, Kornelia Ninova, spelled out two red lines. The first reiterated the unanimous position, adopted by the parliament and broadly supported by the public, not to lift Bulgaria's veto on the start of EU accession negotiations for the Republic of North Macedonia (RNM) before the latter recognised the constitutional rights of ethnic Bulgarian citizens of the RNM and put an end to the hate Bulgaria speech inherited from former Yugoslavia times. The other red line was not to ratify the Istanbul Convention, which was seen as containing the threat of so-called gender ideology and third-sex indoctrination, and which the Constitutional Court of Bulgaria had previously ruled to be in contradiction with the basic law of the country.

The resulting document consists of a principal text plus 18 attachments by policy area and a final attachment containing the legislative agenda agreed upon for the four-year parliamentary term. The main commitments, representing the compromises reached, include the aim for Bulgaria to become a model for successfully tackling corruption; judicial reform that ensures accountability of the chief prosecutor; and green and digital transformation together with innovation as the drivers of economic growth. In the 18th attachment, entitled international relations, the main points regarding foreign policy include reaffirming the geopolitical adherence of Bulgaria to the EU and NATO; promoting regional cooperation and EU enlargement; and entering negotiations for membership to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

As to relations with the RNM, the commitment is to maintain the previous unanimously supported position at the national level, but coupled with the intention to constructively develop bilateral business, direct air and land communications, and cultural exchanges. However, a subsequent interview by Petkov, already as Prime Minister, in the *Financial Times* of 14 December was seen as diluting the refusal to lift Bulgaria's veto on the RNM starting its EU membership negotiations before satisfactory bilateral agreement on the outstanding issues of citizens' rights in the RNM, and before the end of hate speech. This has caused speculation regarding external pressure on the new Bulgarian government to lift the veto by the United States government and European partners.

The joint agreement on the coalition was finalised by means of a round of bilateral signatures between the leaders of the PP and each of the three other parties on the eve of the parliamentary vote to install the new government. The document also spells out the allocation of ministerial portfolios with the understanding that each minister has the freedom to appoint his deputies and senior staff at their own discretion, rather than having each party appoint their own nominees for sub-ministerial positions as a means of achieving balance and coherence between the four parties.

## The challenges ahead

The portfolios in the new 21-member cabinet are allocated in proportion to the parliamentary mandates of each of the four parties. Beside the premiership, the PP receives one of five deputy prime minister positions, that of a new function named efficient governance, plus seven more ministerial posts – those of finance, education, growth and innovation, internal affairs, defence, transport, and culture. The BSP is represented by its chairperson, Ninova, as deputy prime minister and minister of the economy and industry, and three more ministers – those of labour and social policy, agriculture, and tourism. An ITN nominee became deputy prime minister and minister of regional development, with three more of his colleagues as ministers of foreign affairs, energy, and sport. The DB meanwhile took the post of deputy prime minister for climate policies and minister of the environment and waters, plus justice, and electronic governance. Health was taken by a non-party affiliated candidate.

The first emergency the new government had to address was the exploding prices of electricity, both for commercial and private customers. The prime minister had vowed that no increase in prices for private consumption would be allowed. However, fulfilling this commitment turned out to require the introduction of a moratorium on price increases for electricity, water and central heating. The measure was passed by the parliament after several mishaps regarding the effective date of its entry into force – but it provoked heated debates about whether such a measure is at all permissible or advisable in a market economy, and about what the consequences would be for the power-generating sector. It also provoked suspicions that the cabinet is actually massively favouring specific businesses that are reaping enormous profits thanks to their particular market positions.

Another immediate challenge remains dealing with the Covid pandemic. In an atmosphere of rampant scepticism regarding vaccination in particular, and anti-Covid measures in general, Prime Minister Petkov announced the introduction of a Green Certificate as his first measure in office. Presentation of the certificate is the necessary requirement for entering the building housing the government. Answering criticism that such a measure does not figure in the coalition agreement, Petkov stated that his intention was to demonstrate leadership and to implement his decision as a test case as to whether it could be introduced in the other ministries. This remained an open issue at the end of 2021.

Alongside these challenges, another hot issue – that of the stand-off between the cabinet plus the president on one side, and the chief prosecutor on the other – has further been exacerbated. Both the prime minister and the new minister of justice have publicly voiced

new calls for Geshev to resign in recognition of the lack of public trust in him personally and in the effectiveness and impartiality of the prosecution system as a whole. However, Geshev shows no sign of any such intention, and is instead trying to strike a more conciliatory tone towards the government, while at the same time starting investigations against prominent cabinet members.

One such investigation is against the prime minister himself, concerning the issue of double citizenship. Ever since becoming part of the first caretaker cabinet as economy minister, Petkov has faced charges of knowingly concealing the fact that he was also a Canadian citizen when signing the required declaration for lack of obstacles to assuming government office – a misdemeanour entailing legal sanctions. Petkov's answer was that prior to taking office he had revoked his Canadian citizenship by means of an explicit declaration before a notary to that effect. Nevertheless, the case was brought before the Constitutional Court, which ruled that in fact Petkov had breached regulations since the procedure for loss of citizenship had not been completed because final confirmation of the fact by Canadian authorities had not been received in due time.

Yet another open challenge has to do with finalising Bulgaria's Plan for recovery and resilience, with the country remaining the last to have its plan accepted for implementation by the European Commission. The unfortunate story of this plan is in itself a case study of government gridlock over the whole of 2021. Initially, by March, the GERB cabinet had a draft ready for submission but refrained from doing so with the argument that a newly elected government should do it. The two caretaker cabinets successively redrew and finally submitted a revised text in September, only for it to be returned by the Commission with two main requirements: one, a clear date for closing a brown coal power generating complex, supplying roughly one fifth of electric power for the country; and the other a requirement for clear steps towards putting in place a fully functioning judiciary, capable of ensuring the proper application of the law.

Further on, there remains the systemic challenge of starting to overcome the deep and pervasive lack of trust by citizens from all walks of life in the institutions of governance, in political parties and politicians, and in the whole democratic process itself. A particular feature of this overall crisis of trust was the turnout in both the parliamentary and the presidential elections, falling to below 35 per cent for the runoff in the latter. During the three parliamentary polls the minister of the interior in the two caretaker cabinets launched vigorous police actions to curtail allegedly rampant purchasing of votes, principally in favour of GERB and the DPS, mostly among socially deprived or predominantly Muslim communities. Another measure to tackle the problem was the introduction, for the first time, of machine-voting. Yet both measures remain hotly contested by those two parties, now in opposition, as both repressive and undemocratic.

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In general, the overall challenge to the country is to find ways of moving towards national consolidation and a sense of a shared future despite historically inherited deep class and ideological cleavages. Meeting this challenge would open the possibility for rapidly rising living standards and a much-improved overall quality of life. This in turn could lead to Bulgaria overcoming its mostly negative image and instead becoming a welcoming home for its millions of citizens who now find their living and future elsewhere in Europe and the world at large.

## The progressive take

So where has the left been in the course of all these transformative events gripping the country throughout 2021? Actually, this very question has become one of the principal subjects of discussion not only among left-leaning circles but also in Bulgarian society in general, with the perception of the need for a viable left for a functioning democracy. Understandably, the main subject of consideration has been the state and performance of the BSP.

In the three parliamentary elections of 2021 the BSP suffered a series of major reversals. Support for the party fell by a full 50 per cent – from over 950,000 in the 2017 parliamentary elections to 480,000 in April 2021. The day after 4 April, the leader of the party, Ninova, stated that the decisive reason for this reversal was the fact that the voters had come to regard the BSP as part of the hated *status quo*, rather than the party of much needed change. Yet in the subsequent two elections the party suffered further substantial loss of support, barely clinging to fourth place behind the DPS and just outstripping the ITN in the newly elected parliament.

The leadership of the BSP has tried to couple recognition for the gravity of its loss of support with charges that the ‘internal opposition’ (used to brand those challenging the course taken by the leadership in the last five years, which could be described as ‘pragmatic left conservatism’) has played a major part in undermining support for the party. Explanations to do with the negative impact of the pandemic have also been charged with undermining support for the BSP, as has the shift to machine voting given that the supporters of the party are mostly of advanced age. After the 11 November vote, Ninova announced she was resigning as party chairperson, but would remain in office until a sitting of the party congress registered her resignation – which, at the time of writing, is due for 22 January 2022. The field has thus become open for alternative candidates for leadership of the party to declare themselves, with one young parliamentarian already having done so.

Within the party leadership there is the expectation that entering the government will lead to restored support for the BSP because the party will be able to promote and implement an ambitious programme of long overdue social policies. However, serious reservations have been voiced as to the advisability of participating in a government of a basically neoliberal approach, with reliance on the market to deliver growth and prosperity, including the vision of Bulgaria as a kind of ‘financial hub’ thanks to its record-low 10 per cent flat

tax rates for both personal and corporate incomes. Those critical of the leadership have put forward the view of the need for the BSP to present a comprehensive alternative for social change, including full trade union rights to organise for full and fair wages, and including democratisation of the workplace, and the provision of basic public services as guaranteed human rights – all elements that are currently missing from the official positions of the party.

At the dawn of 2022, it thus remains to be seen whether change will also take place in the BSP in favour of turning it into a credible force for a progressive alternative to the neo-liberal paradigm that is now being repackaged – not only in Bulgaria – by means of certain concessions to ever more urgent social imperatives. This is a question of no small relevance not only for Bulgaria, but also in the broader context of the all-engulfing change overtaking Europe and the world as we enter this new year. May the answer to this question in Bulgaria provide further hope for a progressive future in general, favouring a life of increasing well-being for the many, in enduring peace and global security.