

Bulgaria: government falls under pressure from public protests

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On 11 December, the government led by Rosen Zhelyazkov submitted its resignation, which the parliament approved the following day. The decision came in the wake of what was likely the largest protest Bulgaria has seen in the 21st century, involving more than 100,000 participants. It marked the climax of demonstrations that had been under way since late November, organised primarily by the opposition reformist coalition We Continue the Change – Democratic Bulgaria (PP–DB). The immediate trigger for the public mobilisation was the government's draft budget for the coming year, but the protests quickly evolved into a broader movement of resistance against those in power. The sharpest criticism was directed at Boyko Borissov – leader of the largest ruling party, Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) – and at Delyan Peevski, an oligarch under US and UK sanctions and leader of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms – New Beginning (DPS–NN), whose support had secured a parliamentary majority for Zhelyazkov's minority cabinet.

The government's resignation is the result of an unprecedented wave of civic mobilisation, expressing public opposition to systemic corruption and the capture of state institutions. It is likely to lead to early parliamentary elections, from which both the liberal and nationalist opposition may benefit. The prospect of an eighth election in just five years reflects Bulgaria's continuing political instability.

Commentary

- **The cabinet's resignation represents a victory for the demonstrators and the PP–DB coalition, which succeeded in mobilising citizens to express mass opposition.** The protests extended beyond Sofia to smaller towns across the country. They also attracted many young people, previously regarded as politically disengaged. Their participation led to the emergence of a 'protest pop culture' – music tracks and memes that became additional tools for energising the movement on social media. The immediate cause of the demonstrations was the draft budget for the coming year, which envisaged, among other things, tax increases. Although the government later withdrew the proposal, it served as a catalyst for public discontent with the general functioning of state institutions, resulting in demands for the cabinet to resign and for early elections to be called. The escalation was further fuelled by a series of unpopular government decisions in recent weeks.

- **The driving force behind the protest movement was mounting frustration with the Bulgarian model of governance**, which has led to the politicisation of public institutions and the erosion of substantive decision-making in favour of arbitrary actions by key political figures. Systemic corruption also remains a pressing issue. Combating it was the central theme of the public protests in 2020–2021, which ultimately brought an end to GERB's long-standing rule. Four years on, corruption continues to plague the state, while Borissov's party has returned to power (see '[Bulgaria: a 'grand coalition' government](#)'). According to Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, Bulgaria ranks second to last in the EU in this regard, ahead of only Hungary. The growing influence of Peevski, widely regarded as the 'power behind the throne' in Bulgarian politics, who exercises significant control over state institutions, particularly the judiciary, has become emblematic of the dysfunction within the state.
- **The decision to dismiss the cabinet is likely intended to prevent a further erosion of support for GERB.** Borissov, who effectively controls the government, appears to be calculating that by meeting the protesters' demands, he can defuse the public backlash against his party and shift the 'protest stigma' onto Peevski. Both GERB and DPS–NN recorded a drop in support in a December poll conducted by the Market Links agency (to 17% and 9% respectively). However, both retain a stable core electorate – and, in the case of the oligarch's party, well-developed clientelist networks – which limits the risk of a significant loss of voters. It cannot be ruled out that the biggest losers will be the smaller coalition partners: the post-communist Bulgarian Socialist Party – United Left (BSP–OL) and the national-conservative There Is Such a People (ITN), both of which are already hovering around the electoral threshold.
- **The current situation will most likely be resolved with a snap parliamentary election.** GERB has limited options for forming a new coalition, and the main opposition parties have ruled out participating in any potential cabinet reshuffle. The primary beneficiary of a snap election could be the PP–DB coalition – provided it can harness the momentum of the protests and regain public trust after two previous and relatively unsuccessful attempts at co-governance. Radical parties such as Revival and Sword, which combine nationalist rhetoric with anti-corruption messaging, may also gain support (see '[A nationalist voice of protest: the resurgence of radical parties in Bulgaria](#)'). The idea of holding elections is also supported by President Rumen Radev, a vocal critic of GERB's governments, who is reportedly considering establishing his own national left political party. It remains unclear whether such a party would contest the forthcoming election, but given the president's high levels of public trust, it could mobilise previously disengaged voters or draw support away from the radical parties.