Bulgaria: President Radev resigns

Jan Nowinowski

On 19 January, in a special address, Bulgarian President Rumen Radev announced his resignation. Once the Constitutional Court formally approves the resignation, his duties will be assumed by the incumbent Vice President, Iliyana Iotova, who will serve in this capacity until the end of the current presidential term in January 2027. In his speech, Radev, who has held office since 2017, criticised the growing influence of domestic oligarchs and corrupt decision-makers, pledging to continue combating these abuses. In recent years, he has repeatedly delivered scathing assessments of successive governments, particularly those led by Boyko Borissov and his party, Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria (GERB), which held power (with brief interruptions) from 2009 to 2021 and again in 2025.

Radev's resignation is likely driven by his intention to establish his own party and contest the upcoming snap parliamentary elections, expected to take place in late March or early April. Given the high level of public trust in the now former president and the anticipated nationalist left-wing profile of his new party, this move could reshape Bulgaria's political landscape. At the same time, should the party achieve electoral success, Bulgaria may adopt a more conciliatory stance towards Russia.

Commentary

- **Radev's resignation underscores his ambition to engage in parliamentary politics.** While he has not formally announced the creation of his own party, he indirectly signalled this intention in his address. However, the timing of his resignation came as a surprise, as he had been expected first to set the date for snap parliamentary elections and to appoint a caretaker government following the resignation of Rosen Zhelyazkov's cabinet in December 2025 (see '*Bulgaria: government falls under pressure from public protests*'). Radev most likely sought to distance himself from these decisions in order to avoid accusations of backing the incoming interim prime minister, who will be responsible for organising the snap election. Thanks to the existence of a vice presidency, an institution that is unique in the European context, he could afford to step down without aggravating the political crisis.

- **Radev's prospective party is likely to adopt a nationalist left-wing orientation**, reflecting the views of the former president, who was elected to office with the backing of the post-communist Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP). A strong anti-corruption stance and demands for domestic reform, particularly in the judiciary, are likely to be among the party's defining features. In foreign policy, it is expected to adopt a sovereignty-focused position, marked by criticism of the EU and NATO, and by calls to normalise relations with Russia.

On the international stage, Radev has so far positioned himself as a supporter of the Euro-Atlantic course, but domestically he has been calling for a more assertive stance towards the country's Western partners. He refrained from openly criticising the Kremlin following the launch of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine and opposed both sanctions against Russia and military assistance to Ukraine.

- **Radev's project stands a strong chance of achieving a solid result in the upcoming parliamentary elections.** The former president enjoys the highest level of public trust (at around 45%) and is widely seen as untainted by political backroom deals or corruption schemes. In particular, his party could attract inactive voters; turnout in the last election stood at a mere 39%. According to a December poll by Alpha Research, as many as 40% of Bulgarians believe that an entirely new political force should take power following the resignation of Zhelyazkov's government. Radev's party could also create new opportunities for forming coalitions in a fragmented and polarised parliament. Owing to its sovereigntist rhetoric, its potential partners include nationalist parties, such as the pro-Russian Revival (see '*A nationalist voice of protest: the resurgence of radical parties in Bulgaria*'). At the same time, its anti-corruption and reformist agenda opens up space for cooperation with the pro-European coalition We Continue the Change – Democratic Bulgaria (PP–DB). The limited time available to build pre-election structures is likely to pose the greatest challenge for Radev. His party's potential personnel base includes individuals from his inner circle at the Presidential Office and some current and former members of the BSP.
- **Iliyana Iotova will become Bulgaria's first female president.** Under the country's electoral system, she was elected on a joint ticket with Radev, first in 2016 and again in 2021. Their cooperation has been smooth, suggesting that she will continue her predecessor's political course. Her immediate tasks include calling parliamentary elections – expected to take place in late March or the first half of April – and nominating a caretaker prime minister from among ten senior state officials designated by the constitution. She is most likely to name Andrey Gyurov, Deputy Governor of the Bulgarian National Bank, who is regarded as a candidate with particularly limited links to GERB and the influential oligarch Delyan Peevski.

Annex. Profile of Bulgaria's new president

Iliyana Iotova (born in 1964 in Sofia) holds degrees in Bulgarian and French philology. She began her professional career as a journalist with the public television broadcaster. Between 1997 and 2007, she was affiliated with the press office of the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP). Representing the BSP, she served in the National Assembly from 2005 to 2007 and subsequently in the European Parliament from 2007 to 2017. Following the 2016 presidential election, with the support of the BSP, she was elected Vice President of Bulgaria alongside Rumen Radev, securing a second term in 2021. She has played a supporting role to the head of state, focusing in particular on issues such as assisting Bulgarian communities abroad. In 2025, she endorsed Radev's proposal to hold a referendum on the timing of Bulgaria's adoption of the euro.