

Radev's government in Bulgaria: status quo despite hopes for change?

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On 8 May, the government of Rumen Radev, the country's former president and leader of the conservative-social Progressive Bulgaria (PB), survived a confidence vote in the Bulgarian parliament. In the April elections (see: ['Bulgaria's elections: Radev secures a breakthrough victory'](#)), PB won 131 seats in the 240-member National Assembly, becoming the first Bulgarian party in the past quarter-century able to govern independently.

Radev's government will have to contend with high public expectations, fuelled by campaign promises to combat corruption and curb the capture of public institutions. In foreign policy, the new cabinet may criticise selected EU actions more strongly than its predecessors and challenge the bloc's policy towards Russia and Ukraine.

Commentary

- **The composition of the cabinet suggests a concentration of power in Radev's hands.** Eleven of his eighteen ministers previously served in caretaker governments appointed by Radev at his own discretion while he was serving as president until 2023, during periods of political instability. Many of them have administrative rather than political experience and are unlikely to challenge the prime minister's position. Moreover, several ministers are dogged by ties to the previous administration, while the agriculture minister faced accusations in 2022 of attempting to sabotage state efforts to eliminate the influence of organised crime at the country's largest border crossing with Turkey.
- **The government's most immediate challenge will be to balance fiscal stability with social spending.** Its key task will be to adopt the 2026 budget, which is intended to replace the current provisional arrangement. The new government intends to pursue a conservative fiscal policy by maintaining the 10% flat income tax rate and keeping public debt below 40% of GDP. However, it also plans to introduce measures aimed at cushioning the impact of rising living costs (the average inflation rate between January and April this year stood at 4.5%). In addition, parliament must adopt a series of legislative measures by 31 August in order to avoid losing €2.9 billion in funding under Bulgaria's Recovery and Resilience Plan.
- **The first steps taken by the new majority do not indicate any real intention to 'dismantle the oligarchic-corruption model', as promised during the election campaign.** The criticised system is embodied by former Prime Minister Boyko Borisov, leader of the GERB party, and the oligarch Delyan Peevski, head of the Turkish minority party. So far,

however, PB has neither presented a concrete plan nor demonstrated the political will to hold them accountable. Its MPs did not support a motion submitted by part of the opposition to establish a parliamentary commission tasked with investigating the assets of Peevski, who is under US and UK sanctions. Furthermore, the government's credibility has been weakened by the appointment of ministers previously associated with the discredited There Is Such a People (ITN) party, which co-formed the last GERB-led government.

- **The vote on appointing a new Supreme Judicial Council (SJC) will serve as a test of the government's real intentions.** This was one of Radev's few concrete campaign promises. The SJC is responsible for appointing a new Prosecutor General, which could initiate a process of depoliticising the judiciary. Electing the council requires a two-thirds parliamentary majority (160 votes). If the government seeks cooperation with the former pro-European coalition We Continue the Change-Democratic Bulgaria (which split into two factions after the election) in order to secure this majority, it would signal a genuine willingness to pursue reform. Conversely, an agreement with GERB would risk preserving the existing oligarchic and corrupt networks within the judiciary.
- **Radev's government has pledged to continue Euro-Atlantic cooperation, but it is likely to challenge certain EU actions more forcefully.** It may criticise the bloc's energy and climate policy and provide support for the domestic coal industry, which accounts for around 30% of the country's total electricity generation. Moreover, the new cabinet is unlikely to make concessions to North Macedonia, which remains unable to open EU accession talks because of Bulgaria's veto, the lifting of which is conditional on Skopje recognising the Bulgarian minority in its constitution (see: ['Waiting for Godot: Prospects for resolving the Bulgaria–North Macedonia dispute'](#)).
- **The new Bulgarian government is likely to call for dialogue with Russia and may end military assistance to Ukraine.** Radev has regularly questioned the rationale for supporting this country, although he has pledged not to block EU instruments in this area. The future of arms deliveries to Ukraine remains uncertain, even though their continuation is economically beneficial for Bulgaria. Invoking economic pragmatism, Radev has criticised sanctions on Russia, and called for imports of Russian hydrocarbons to resume, particularly in light of rising energy prices driven by the ongoing conflict in the Persian Gulf. His government is likely to continue employing this rhetoric, as illustrated by the appointment of Ivo Hristov, an anti-Western journalist regarded as PB's ideologue, as deputy prime minister without portfolio. At the same time, Radev does not appear willing to obstruct the EU's decisions on Russia single-handedly, partly because of his weak position within the EU: PB has not joined any political group in the European Parliament.