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# For and even against: 100 days of Radev's government in Bulgaria

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16 August marked 100 days since Rumen Radev's government was sworn in. Despite its pre-election promises, the single-party cabinet of the conservative-social Progressive Bulgaria (PB) has so far taken few steps indicating a desire to pursue fundamental domestic reforms or swiftly hold previous governments to account. On the international stage, the prime minister has criticised the EU's foreign policy mainstream but has refrained from blocking its decisions in order to preserve Bulgaria's image as a constructive partner. His approach to Ukraine has been the most ambiguous: Sofia has distanced itself from military and financial support for Kyiv while simultaneously seeking to strengthen bilateral cooperation.

**Stability first, reforms in doubt**

The Radev government's immediate priority was to put the public finances on a more stable footing. In July, parliament passed the long-awaited budget for the remainder of the year, replacing the provisional budget that had been in place until then. The most controversial element was the deficit, which stands at 5.7% of GDP. The government has blamed its predecessors for the shortfall, alleging that they concealed or deferred some payments in order to meet the convergence criteria and join the eurozone at the beginning of 2026. In July, the EU opened an excessive deficit procedure against Bulgaria. Meanwhile, delayed funding from the EU's Recovery and Resilience Facility, unlocked through legislative changes, has provided an important boost to the public finances. Since the new government took office, the European Commission has disbursed just under €900 million to Bulgaria, while the remaining approximately €2 billion is contingent on further legislative steps that must be completed by 31 August.

PB has made only limited progress on its campaign pledge to 'dismantle the oligarchic-corruption model', a commitment that helped secure the party's landslide electoral victory. Rather than pursuing a comprehensive reckoning, the government has confined itself to the symbolic step of withdrawing state protection from two politicians who epitomise the criticised system: former prime minister and GERB leader Boyko Borisov and oligarch and Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS) leader Delyan Peevski. The Ministry of Interior and the National Audit Office have also launched investigations into Peevski to establish how the oligarch, who has been under US sanctions since 2021, was able to make regular use of private airlines in Bulgaria that were theoretically at risk of US secondary sanctions. The presence of officials close to GERB in the new cabinet undermines its credibility, as does the fact that Borisov's and Peevski's parties have repeatedly supported proposals put forward by the government and PB.

Progress on the promised judicial reset has also been slow. The primary objective is to select a new membership of the Supreme Judicial Council (SJC), whose statutory term expired in 2022. Since then, parliament, which appoints 11 of the SJC's 25 members, has failed to muster the required two-thirds majority. So far, PB has made one significant move by imposing a moratorium that bars the council's discredited holdover members from exercising certain powers, including making judicial and prosecutorial appointments. The election of new SJC members, scheduled for this autumn, will require PB to reach an agreement with the opposition. However, the debate to date offers no guarantee that the body will be depoliticised and may merely result in its members being replaced with figures close to the new government.

Public support for the government is gradually falling. In addition to the sluggish pace of reform, this decline also stems from the rising cost of living, driven primarily by external factors, with annual inflation averaging 5.6% between May and July. According to a July survey by Market Links, 42% of respondents trust the cabinet, down 8 percentage points from May, while 50% trust Radev himself, down 6 percentage points. At the same time, the governing PB continues to poll strongly, with 46% support among decided voters.

**Timid sovereigntism**

Fears of being branded an obstructionist in EU decision-making have kept the government from pursuing a more confrontational foreign policy. Radev has criticised what he portrays as the escalatory approach of Western partners to the Russia-Ukraine war, calling instead for greater efforts to reach a peace agreement. In doing so, he has continued the rhetoric he employed as president (2017–26), when he did not shy away from narratives that echoed Kremlin propaganda. Consequently, Bulgaria did not support the proposal to establish a special tribunal for crimes committed by Russia in Ukraine. It also watered down the EU's 21st sanctions package against Russia by securing the removal of Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, Lukoil's largest shareholder Vagit Alekperov and oligarch Iskander Makhmudov from the sanctions list. Radev argued that sanctioning the cleric would not increase pressure on the Kremlin, while restrictions on the other two men would allegedly threaten Bulgaria's economic interests. Lukoil owns the country's only oil refinery, while a Makhmudov-linked company, which has been under sanctions since 2023, has supplied several dozen carriages for the Sofia metro. Having secured these concessions, Bulgaria backed the remaining provisions of the 21st sanctions package. Radev also signed the final declaration adopted at the NATO summit in Ankara, which identifies Russia as a long-term threat to Euro-Atlantic security.

Radev's government is withdrawing from mechanisms for supporting Ukraine. In June, it ended deliveries of free military aid to Kyiv, although it has continued far more significant commercial supplies, mainly of Soviet-standard ammunition. The decision appears to have been aimed primarily at satisfying the pro-Russian segment of PB's electorate, as the scale of non-commercial assistance had long been modest, totalling 13 such packages. In July, Radev also announced Bulgaria's withdrawal from the so-called Coalition of the Willing, whose members support military assistance and security guarantees for Ukraine. However, his government's approach to the format remains inconsistent. Following the Ukraine–South-East Europe summit, Bulgaria's foreign minister was listed in the customary declaration, which expressed a readiness to increase participation in the Coalition's activities.

The government is seeking to offset the reduction in its support for Ukraine by creating the impression that it wants to deepen bilateral energy cooperation. Radev has discussed this issue twice with President Volodymyr Zelensky on the sidelines of summits in Ankara and Brussels. The talks are expected to produce an agreement on natural gas supplies to Ukraine. The government has managed to temporarily renegotiate the highly unfavourable terms of its contract with the Turkish state-owned company BOTAŞ – under which the Bulgarian operator was paying €500,000 a day regardless of how much capacity it used – opening up new opportunities for Bulgaria to re-export gas. In addition, the Bulgarian section of the so-called Vertical Gas Corridor is due to become operational this autumn. Once fully developed, the corridor will enable Ukraine and Moldova to increase gas imports from Greek LNG terminals via Bulgaria and Romania. Radev has also proposed to Zelensky that the two countries jointly build a nuclear power plant in Belene using two Russian-made reactors that Ukraine had previously sought to purchase from Bulgaria (see: '*Ukraine: controversial decision to purchase Russian-made nuclear reactors*'). However, the proposal appears unlikely to be implemented.

Relations with the United States have also exposed the limits of the government's ability to pursue a sovereigntist foreign policy. Under a decision taken by its predecessors, the US could station Boeing KC-135 tanker aircraft at Sofia Airport until the end of June, providing logistical support for US military operations in the Middle East. In late May, Radev made any extension of this deployment conditional on the United States lifting visa requirements for Bulgarian citizens. Washington did not publicly respond to his 'ultimatum' (Bulgaria's visa refusal rate remains too high), forcing the aircraft to leave the airport temporarily. However, in the second half of July, parliament approved a government request to permit the deployment of eight US KC-135s again, this time at the Bezmer military base in the east of the country. The government's change of position could have been prompted by pressure from Washington, which may have signalled that any further exemption of Lukoil's Bulgarian subsidiaries from US sanctions would depend on Sofia's decision. The current exemption remains in force until 29 October (see: '*A blow to Russia's influence in Central Europe? US sanctions target Russia's oil sector*').

**Bulgarian-style pragmatism**

On the international stage, Radev's government is likely to continue questioning the rationale for providing military support to Ukraine while promoting a 'peace narrative' on the Russia-Ukraine war. It may also seek to water down further sanctions on Russia, citing the need to protect national interests. However, it is unlikely to block EU decisions outright, in order to avoid criticism from its European partners and comparisons with the policies pursued by Hungary under Viktor Orbán. Western leaders may have sought such assurances from Radev during his first foreign visits to Berlin, Paris and Brussels.

Radev's government supports further EU enlargement. Although it argues that the Western Balkan countries should be given priority in this process, it is unlikely to oppose the opening of further negotiating clusters with Ukraine and Moldova. However, it could still obstruct the accession talks at a later stage, for example by citing the rights of the Bulgarian minority in Ukraine, which numbers up to 200,000 people. The government aims to establish a bilateral commission on this matter by the end of the year.

Radev's cabinet may seek to enhance economic cooperation with China, which has already become the country's sixth-largest trading partner, although Bulgaria runs a trade deficit of nearly €2 billion with it. Bulgarian public attitudes towards China are broadly favourable. According to a 2024 ECFR survey, only 14% of Bulgarians regard it as a rival or enemy of the EU. However, the scale of Chinese investment in the country remains modest; greater openness to such investment would be consistent with Radev's calls for a pragmatic, multi-vector trade policy. In June, he met a delegation from China's State Council, presenting Bulgaria as a 'gateway to the European market'.

The presidential election scheduled for 25 October will serve as a test of public support for the government. PB will back the incumbent, Iliana Iotova, who served as Radev's vice-president before assuming the duties of head of state following his resignation in January 2026 (see: '*Bulgaria: President Radev resigns*'). Iotova is the frontrunner in the election, and her defeat would suggest that Bulgarians have grown disillusioned with the government's failure to deliver promised reforms and tackle corruption.