



The Anti-Corruption Protests in Bulgaria

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The anti-corruption protests in Bulgaria that have lasted for two months are not weakening. Marchers demand the depoliticisation of the prosecutor's office and the dismissal of Prime Minister Boyko Borisov. After a decade in power, Bulgaria has the highest recorded level of corruption and the least media freedom in the European Union. Despite this, Borisov is not criticized by EU institutions or the largest Member States, which opt for stability in a country that lies on key migration routes over demanding devotion to high standards of democracy.

As a three-time prime minister since 2009, Borisov has a dominant position on the Bulgarian political scene. His party, Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB), currently co-rules with the United Patriots, an alliance of three small, nationalist parties. When these partners resist, GERB passes laws with the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS), the party of Bulgarian Turks, which in fact protects the interests of oligarchs Ahmed Dogan and Delyan Peevski. The only real opposition to GERB is the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BPS), but Borisov's main adversary is the independent president, Rumen Radev.

Protests. The demonstrations began on 9 July against the government's use of the prosecutor's office in its political struggle. The direct causes were detentions of the president's advisors and searches of his office, after which Radev called for the resignation of the government and the general prosecutor. The actions of the prosecutor's office were in reaction to the president's demand for an explanation why state services were protecting Dogan's villa. The increased public outcry comes atop a recent attempt by prosecutors to extort entrepreneurs and a Spanish investigation into money laundering by Borisov.

The protests have strong public support. In an Alpha Research survey from mid-summer, 62.5% of respondents backed them. However, a minority of respondents had definite expectations of the outcome—45% wanted the government to resign and 43% expected the general prosecutor to step down. Immediate early elections were demanded by 39% of the respondents and 24% said that the current parliament should elect a new cabinet. However,

37%, stated that Borisov should rule till the end of his term in spring 2021.

Decade of GERB. The party came to power using slogans about fighting corruption and enabling modernisation. Borisov built his position by leading Bulgaria out of recession after the 2008 global economic crisis. He also unblocked EU funds suspended by the European Commission (EC) in 2008 a year after Bulgaria's accession to the EU due to the enormous scale of corruption in the BPS governments. In 2015–2019, Bulgaria's annual economic growth was 3–4%, and although it is still the poorest in the EU, in 2019 its GDP per capita was 53% of the EU average. On 10 July, it joined ERM II, the mechanism [preceding the adoption of the euro](#).

The public, however, increasingly connects GERB with structural corruption. DPS also derives profits from the system in return for supporting Borisov's party. For example, in 2018 most of the €255 million for drainage and irrigation projects was paid to companies connected to DPS. A typical way of embezzling funds—including EU funds—is overstating cost estimates by 30–40%, which is tolerated by the government. According to a 2018 report by the faction of the European Parliament (EP) Greens-European Free Alliance, Bulgaria loses around €11 billion annually due to corruption—around 14% of GDP. In Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, in 2012–2013 it was second to last in dealing with corruption, and in 2014–2019, it was the lowest-ranked country in the EU.

Bulgarians are also concerned about limitations of media freedom under GERB's rule. There have been attacks and intimidation of investigative journalists. Oligarchs also buy

out anti-government media, for example, Nova TV in 2019. About 80% of the media market is controlled by the oligarch Peevski and fear of attacks through his media outlets keeps the government from interfering in his businesses. Bulgaria ranks 111th out of 180 countries in the 2020 Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index. In 2009, at the beginning of GERB's rule, it was 68th. As of 2016, it was the only EU country in Europe besides Belarus, Russia, and Turkey, where the media situation is assessed as "difficult".

Borisov's Tactics. The PM is trying to wait out the protests and avoid escalation with police actions. He also makes small or apparent gestures to show his willingness to compromise while expressing there is no alternative. This has been effective: According to Alpha Research, GERB would win a potential election with just 26.7% of the vote, the rest fractured across other parties. In July, the PM dismissed four ministers said to be oligarch supporters. He also announced he might resign, but withdrew it, supposedly under pressure from his coalition partners.

In August, GERB submitted a draft new constitution to use to blame the president and the opposition for the lack of reform of the judiciary. President Radev considers the purpose of the proposed changes to be apparent and announces he will file his own project, but only after the government's resignation. Moreover, GERB's demand to halve the number of deputies to 120 has triggered a protest from small parties afraid of losing the chance to be elected. In line with Borisov's assumption, Radev, BPS, and the small Volya party have refused to convene a constituent body, and some United Patriot factions also set barriers.

Foreign Reactions. Despite the protests, Bulgaria's international partners have avoided criticizing the Borisov government. Only the U.S. ambassador has publicly supported the demonstrators with a balanced statement. The EC recognised citizens' right to protest, and in the EP only the factions took positions. The European People's Party, to which GERB belongs, defended Borisov. The demonstrators were supported by the Party of European Socialists and the Greens.

Borisov is effectively presenting himself as the guarantor of Bulgaria's pro-Western orientation and as a loyal partner of the largest EU countries. He maintains a particularly close relationship with Chancellor Angela Merkel. He also notes his personal contribution to persuade the Turkish authorities to respect the migration agreement with the EU. Borisov presents the possible takeover of power by the BPS as openly pro-Russian, anti-Turkish, and corrupt. That party is second in the parliament and in polls, with 19.2% of votes. Despite clear corruption resulting in the embezzlement of EU funds, Germany demonstrates its full support of Borisov and other partners praise his efforts to seal the border with Turkey.

Also, Bulgaria is treated leniently by the EC, as confirmed in its autumn 2019 report announcing for the first time the

possibility of the abolition of the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM). It was imposed on Bulgaria at the moment of accession to the EU because of failures—which continue to this day—in ensuring the independence of the judiciary and fighting corruption and organised crime. CVM is not a formal obstacle [to access the Schengen area](#); however, the Netherlands and Austria, for example, use it to prove that the rule of law in Bulgaria endangers the security of the zone.

Conclusions and Perspectives. Bulgarian society supports the protests but is cautious about the demand that the cabinet resign or new elections be called, as it sees no alternative to GERB rule. For residents of large cities especially, the alternative is not the pro-Russia and likewise corrupt BPS. That is why the protests will probably not induce Borisov to resign. He will continue to try to avoid their escalation, counting on the demonstrators fading energy. Borisov's announcements of his resignation and the draft of a new constitution are not aimed at real reforms, but rather to build himself an image as a leader who puts the public good above his personal ambitions.

Having the highest level of corruption in the EU discourages investors and, in the long run, threatens Bulgaria with stagnating to the level of "medium development". The scale of corruption may be a political argument against Bulgaria's accession to the euro area despite meeting the formal convergence criteria. Limits on media freedom weaken the public's oversight of the authorities and strengthens corruption systems while lowering the standards of democracy and the rule of law, which are fundamental EU values. Leaders of the largest states and EU institutions tolerate this situation, as they see Borisov as a personal guarantor of Bulgaria's stability and ensuring the security of the border with Turkey. Therefore, actions such as suspending the payment of EU funds or starting the procedure under Art. 7 TEU, especially given the ineffectiveness of this instrument in the disputes between EU institutions and Hungary and Poland, are remote.

The ongoing anti-corruption protests are unlikely to affect the closure of the CVM, as stipulated by the EC, even though the mechanism has not fulfilled its role. In 2021, the EC may start consultations on this matter with the EP and the Council. The end of the CVM will deprive the opponents of Bulgaria's entry into the Schengen area of their main arguments. However, this does not mean a rapid expansion of the zone, especially not as long as there is opposition in the Netherlands and Austria among their societies about the inflow of cheap labour. Enlargement of the Schengen area is a fundamental part of Poland's European policy of equal treatment of all countries within the EU. In addition, Bulgaria's accession to Schengen, possibly together with Romania and Croatia, would improve trade and the integration of Central European societies.