

Bulgaria's Parliamentary Elections in 2026 – From a Permanent Campaign to a Permanent Majority?

Executive summary

- This article argues that Bulgaria's cycle of repeated elections did not produce stability alone but enabled a structural realignment in which electoral competition redistributes control over networks of power.
- Eight parliamentary elections in five years were not a sign of indecision but the accumulation of unmet expectations in society – on judicial reform, prosecution of state corruption, and basic government accountability. The 19 April 2026 vote was the catalyst.
- Former President Rumen Radev's coalition Progressive Bulgaria's victory is both electoral and structural. It absorbed the infrastructure of power, not just the protest vote – drawing support from every major formation simultaneously: radical right, pro-Russian, anti-system, socialist, ethnic minority, and centrist pro-European voters.
- It is largely unclear what Progressive Bulgaria's strategy is, but Rumen Radev's track record as President gives some signals on possible governing directions.
- Rumen Radev's careful framing of Eurosceptic views as non-threatening and pragmatic, rooted in economic concerns rather than ideology, the need to abstain from arming Ukraine to avoid prolonging the war while calling for peace, sovereignty, justice, solidarity and anti-corruption as anchors of his mission allowed him to speak simultaneously to audiences with different expectations without triggering alarm in any of them. That is what makes it potentially durable but also potentially dangerous.
- Whether this election produces genuine systemic change or a managed transfer of network control will be revealed through the new government's attitude towards the main gateways for Russian influence in Bulgaria – if reforms to the judicial system are structural, rather than cosmetic, and if energy commitments remain aligned with European policy.
- The scale of the shift brings genuine democratic hopes but the concentration of power in a single political formation, with unclear institutional strategy and an ambiguous relationship to European values, is a risk to Bulgaria and to Europe. The November 2026 Presidential elections in Bulgaria are on the horizon as the next test.

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Introduction

When people hear 'eight parliamentary elections in five years' perhaps most think of a country that cannot make up its mind. The 8 ballots in Bulgaria since April 2021 were topped up with two presidential rounds (2021), local elections with mayoral runoffs (2023), and European elections (2024) sketching a political system in continuous mode of mobilisation. Despite the electoral whirlwind, Bulgaria still managed to join Schengen and the Eurozone, kept a reasonable deficit and stayed aligned with most of its European commitments. After five years with no government ever fully settling in and no voter ever fully switching off, the permanent political campaign, at least partially, ended on 19 April 2026. It was the third time since 2021 that a new actor has won a majority of the vote on an anti-corruption claim – only this time it delivered a ruling majority, too. Former President Rumen Radev and his broad coalition 'Progressive Bulgaria'¹ secured 44% of the vote and a solid majority of 131 out of 240 seats in parliament. Has the 13th ballot been the lucky one?

2020 – 2025: The build-up of unmet expectations

The cycle of repeated elections was set in motion in 2020, when major anti-corruption protests challenged the third cabinet of Boyko Borissov, led by the centre-right 'Citizens for a European Development of Bulgaria' (GERB) in coalition with the nationalist 'United Patriots'. The government did not resign and the subsequent regular parliamentary elections in April 2021 produced a fragmented parliament and no governing coalition. President Rumen Radev appointed a caretaker government on 12 May 2021. The snap elections in July 2021 again failed to yield a stable majority, leading to the reappointment of a caretaker cabinet in September. However, they marked a turning point: the newly formed anti-system party 'There Is Such a People' (ITN) won the vote, breaking GERB's electoral dominance for the first time since 2009. These caretaker governments played an important role giving public visibility as ministers to figures who would later found the reformist party 'We Continue the Change'. They won the third round of elections in 2021 in November, held alongside the re-election of Radev as President, and formed a coalition government with the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), 'There Is Such a People', and Democratic Bulgaria

(DB). It collapsed after seven months due to internal tensions on foreign policy and uneven willingness for reform among the parties. Yet, the reformists led a government at a key moment for the country – at the start of the war in Ukraine and amid the break-up with Gazprom.

The 2020 protest wave re-fragmented the party system, generating a succession of short-lived parliaments, inconclusive elections and facilitated the partial restoration of GERB as the central actor on the electoral map, albeit under conditions of persistent decline in net support, and in overall turnout.

What the protests did achieve, however, was the break-up of a stable yet stagnant system and the introduction of a persistent challenger to the established model in the face of 'We Continue the Change' (PP) and the centre-right pro-European coalition Democratic Bulgaria (DB). Later, their joint coalition PPDB solidified as the platform of reformist, liberal and pro-European voters. Nevertheless, state level corruption remained unsanctioned by the State Prosecutor, figures sanctioned under the Magnitsky framework remained embedded in parliament and continued to underpin governing coalitions, reinforcing the perception that protest energy failed to translate into institutional change.

After the seventh round of elections in October 2024, things circled back to a GERB-led minority government along with BSP and ITN, backed by Magnitsky-sanctioned media mogul Delyan Peevski², leader of the splinter party of the ethnic Turkish minority. However, the government fell in December 2025, following the largest protests since the early 1990s. The trigger was a fiscally risky budget with inflated support for the public sector at the expense of businesses and taxpayers. It quickly grew into renewed demands for judicial reform and an end to corruption. President Radev stepped down in January 2026 – less than a year before the end of his second term, remaining ambiguous but clearly moving directly into party politics.

The 2026 campaign environment: continuity and change**Institutional aspects**

A caretaker government's mandate is formally the same as a regular government but limited to organis-

1 'Progressive Bulgaria' is a political coalition established to participate in the snap parliamentary elections held on 19 April 2026.
2 Charlotta Gall. 'Bulgaria's Election Pushes Europe to Confront Another Russia-Friendly Leader. *The New York Times*. April 23, 2026. <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/04/23/world/europe/bulgaria-radev-election-russia-europe.html>

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ing free and fair elections. Still, it can use the available institutional space actively. Some aspects of the pre-election and election period stood out.

- Paper, scissors, rock: last-minute changes to the electoral code

Traditionally, last minute changes to the electoral code are part of every election in Bulgaria. The political efforts to diminish the role of machine voting even further went by proposals to replace them with paper ballot scanners. It did not pass but it further undermined the legitimacy of the voting process. Additionally, voting sections outside the EU were limited to 20 (outside Bulgarian consulates and embassies). The amendments passed with the votes of GERB, BSP, ITN, and Vazrazhdane. DPS-New Beginning positioned themselves against them due to the impact on voters in Turkey but given their weak performance there in the previous elections, their incentive was weak – the group still supported the voting procedurally because the amendments disproportionately affected their rival formation APS.³

- Anti-Vote-Buying Efforts: Gains and Gaps

This election saw unprecedented anti-vote-buying efforts by the Interior Ministry under the caretaker government, which reported a lot more intercepted activity than in previous cycles. This fed into an overall mood that it is both acceptable and worthwhile to report violations, and crucially, that institutions would act on such signals – as their number demonstrated, six times or 204% more signals were reported. This can be read as a small but significant albeit momentous cultural shift with a growing level of trust in law enforcement and respective citizen engagement. Yet, the Prosecution service – the sole institutional authority in initiating criminal investigations – appeared inactive regarding alleged electoral fraud despite numerous police referrals reinforcing longstanding concerns about selective prosecution in Bulgaria.⁴ At the same time it launched investigations against members of the caretaker government during the campaign, raising doubts it relies on a familiar practice of employing political pressure disguised as law enforcement. This preserved a structural block on accountability and highlighted

the degree of interdependence between political and judicial powerholders, between organised vote-buying and prosecutorial discretion.

- First official disinformation alarm on state level in Bulgaria during elections

For the first time, the well-established and widely documented disinformation ecosystem in the country became an explicit target of state activity. In the run-up to the elections, as measures against foreign interference were introduced, and given the experience of neighbouring countries, the caretaker government's focus on the digital space was not surprising. Internally, in March 2026 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs established a dedicated coordination mechanism to combat disinformation and hybrid threats ahead of the elections, appointing Bellingcat investigative journalist Christo Grozev⁵ as an advisor. Internationally, the caretaker government formally requested European Commission assistance in protecting the online campaign environment, asked for activation of the EU's Rapid Response System under the Code of Conduct on Disinformation, and sought EEAS assistance to identify and neutralise social media manipulation campaigns.

- Foreign policy: Ukraine – never a good time

The outgoing minority government prime minister in resignation, arguably under direct pressure by Delyan Peevski, signed Bulgaria onto Trump's Board of Peace in the government's final days. The caretaker government that followed made it a foreign policy priority to mitigate the damage on Bulgaria's standing as a trusted European partner with its allies while explicitly reaffirming support for Ukraine by signing a bilateral cooperation agreement. Radev was openly critical of both moves, and the mostly symbolic Ukraine deal came in the middle of the campaign. The critical stance against it most likely activated further support for Radev.

Structural aspects

Progressive Bulgaria's entry into the electoral fight brought a significant structural change in the competitive environment. As a result, every major player entered this campaign with more than one main com-

3 *Bulgarian National Television (BNT)*. 'Parliament Approves Final Amendments to Election Code, Capping Polling Stations in Non-EU Countries at 20', 5 February 2026, <https://bntnews.bg/news/parliament-approves-final-amendments-to-election-code-capping-polling-stations-in-non-eu-countries-at-20-1377739news.html>.

4 Emilya Milcheva. 'Изглежда като саботаж: проверки срещу Гюров, Дечев и другите' ('It looks like sabotage: investigations against Gyurov, Dechev, and the others'), *Deutsche Welle Bulgaria*. April 18, 2026. <https://www.dw.com/bg/izglezda-kato-sabotaz-proverki-sresu-gurov-decev-i-drugite/a-76840258>

5 Russia has issued an arrest warrant for Christo Grozev for his work exposing Russian spy operations including the poisoning of Sergei Skripal in (2018) and the poisoning of Alexei Navalny (2020).

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petitor and no party could focus its campaign message against a single opponent. This is a structural departure from previous cycles where competition had clearer axes: corruption versus anti-corruption, pro-European versus Eurosceptic, pro-Eurozone versus anti-Eurozone. PB broke the more simple lines of conflict that defined Bulgarian politics in the last five years. In terms of regional trends, Romania's stress-test at the Presidential elections in December 2024 meant somewhat heightened attention or understanding to the role of disinformation in political communication and it was used as a reference point in public debate.

The outcome of the Hungarian elections held just a week before the Bulgarian vote contributed to a broader sense that change is possible. Yet, it was read differently by different actors in the competition: GERB read it as a warning, PPDB as encouragement, and Radev's camp as an anti-establishment model.

The campaign

GERB entered the campaign caught between denying involvement in corruption, promising fiscal discipline despite their government's frugal budget leading to the snap elections, yet distancing themselves from Peevski after their visibly closest cooperation to date. They also called for dialogue with Radev. With a strategy of 'deny, distance, dialogue' coupled with painting PPDB as their main antagonist, GERB had to simultaneously fight Radev but not aggressively given his strong margin to win, distance themselves from Peevski and avoid losing ground to PPDB at the same time. Their usual anti-PPDB rhetoric, however, highlighted a party that has lost strategic clarity as the 30-point gap between Radev and GERB in the final result showed.

PPDB got into a different kind of trap. They had to remain the credible antagonist to the GERB-Peevski model, compete with Radev for the same protest and anti-system vote, and hold the pro-European and pro-Ukraine electorate all at once. Three things worked against them: 1) their messaging was disproportionately targeted by every other actor in the race; 2) they over-relied on the anti-Borisov-Peevski frame as sufficient mobilisation; 3) they contemplated between embracing or denouncing a possible coalition with Radev until the end of the campaign when they vehemently rejected such a scenario following the screening of a picture of Radev with Putin at the closing event

of his campaign. It is unclear whether the strength of this call to action despite possibly bringing them extra votes in the last days, didn't have the effect of activating extra votes for Radev as well; 4) they miscalculated the extent of support of the Gen Z (protest) voters, expecting recognition as the more credible bearers of change. They added 60,000 net votes to their result and came second in the proportion of votes of the younger generation. The bilateral cooperation agreement with Ukraine, signed by the caretaker government associated with their ranks, however, became a specific trigger for intensified attacks.

Vazrazhdane ran on its known anti-EU, anti-NATO and anti-Eurozone platform, trying to stand out by attacking the former president in a realisation they are losing ground. Ultimately half of their voters went to Progressive Bulgaria.

Radev's Progressive Bulgaria ran an overall moderate campaign in the first two weeks before intensifying attacks on the cooperation agreement with Ukraine and on PPDB. Russia was mentioned in the context of diplomatic concerns and the need for good faith negotiations to end the war.⁶ Euroscepticism was framed as pragmatism rather than opposition. The anti-corruption message was kept broad enough to speak simultaneously to protest voters, Eurosceptic audiences and segments of the pro-European electorate – feeding different messages to different groups without triggering major alarms in any of them.

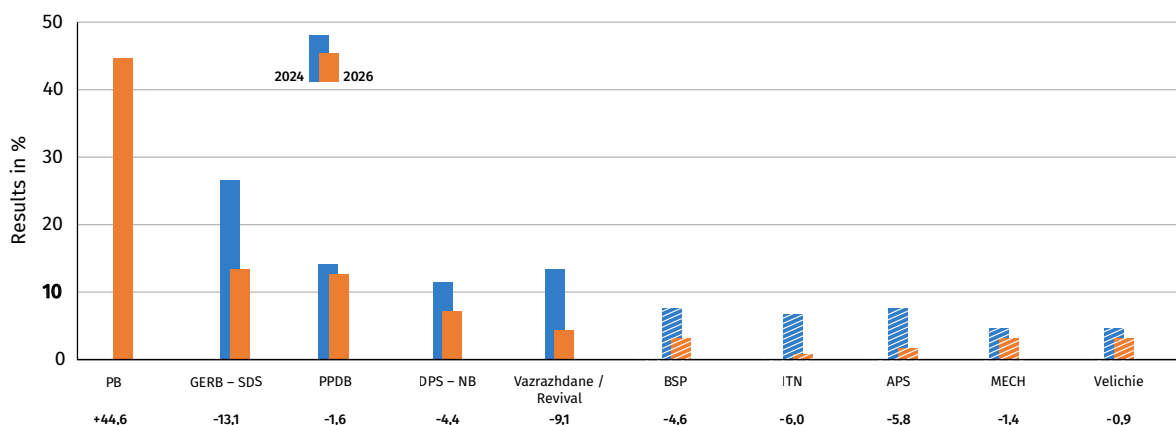
The results

Progressive Bulgaria won a decisive victory with 44% of the vote and 131 out of 240 seats – a lead of around 30 percentage points over the second place. It drew support from across the spectrum. Around half (45%) of Vazrazhdane's electorate – the radical right, pro-Russian party – and 49% of the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) voters migrated to PB, leaving the successor of the Bulgarian Communist Party out of parliament for the first time in the post-communist period. 60% of anti-system populist 'There Is Such a People' (ITN) support and importantly, 67% of previous non-voters, of whom approximately 300,000 returned to the ballot, all went to PB. Centre-right GERB and pro-European anti-corruption PPDB each retained around 70% of their 2024 core vote while donating roughly a fifth-to-a-quarter each to PB. PB dominates across all age groups (42–46%) and is

6 Charlotta Gall. 'Bulgarian Voters Back New Political Coalition Led by Rumen Radev'. *The New York Times*. April 19, 2026. <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/04/23/world/europe/bulgaria-radev-election-russia-europe.html>.

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Figure 1: Election Results by Electoral Formation in Comparison to the Elections in 2024



Source: Bulgarian Electoral Commission: Elections 2024 <https://results.cik.bg/pe202410/rezultati/index.html>; Elections 2026: <https://results.cik.bg/pe202604/rezultati/index.html>

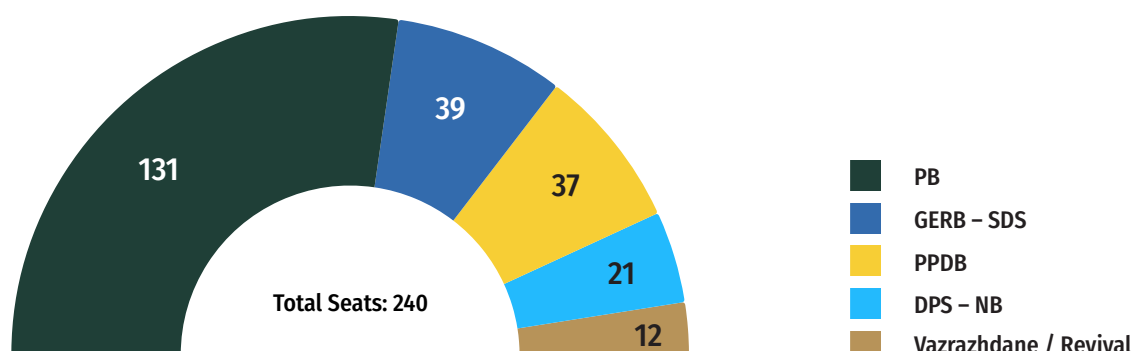
strongest among 60+ voters. Notably, PPDB does best with the youngest voters (18–30: 20%), dropping sharply among older groups to 8% among 60+ voters.⁷ This potentially suggests somewhat of a generational divide within the pro-European electorate rather than between it and PB. PPDB attracted the second largest proportion of the younger generation's vote and came second in the vote from abroad.

PB leads across all education levels. It made major inroads in Sofia but nevertheless is weakest there in comparison to the rest of the country with 36% support but is strongest in regional cities at 48%. PPDB scores a significant 30% in the capital, leaving it as the stronghold of the more explicitly pro-European vote. DPS is essentially absent in Sofia but commands its highest support of 18% in villages and dominates among voters with primary education (and below) at 27%. GERB has an equal distribution among age groups, fairs a bit better in regional cities than else-

where. Overall, they lost one third of their support or around 200,000 votes. Ethnically, they command the second highest Roma vote – 20% – after DPS – 30%. This can be an indication for vote-buying in some regions.

There is arguably a gap between electoral behaviour and deeper public attitudes. Bulgarians may vote for pro-EU parties while simultaneously believing that arming Ukraine is both futile and dangerous – those two things coexist as voters prioritise domestic issues, cost of living, or anti-corruption over foreign policy positions. The hybrid threat paradox sharpens this: Bulgarians are more worried about specific Russian actions – e.g. paying journalists, lobbying for leverage in the energy sector – than about Russia as a general security threat. That suggests people recognise the mechanisms of Russian influence even when they don't frame Russia itself as an enemy, possibly because those mechanisms are already deeply embedded in

Figure 2: Distribution of Seats by Electoral Formation



Source: Bulgarian Central Electoral Commission: <https://results.cik.bg/pe202604/rezultati/index.html>

7 Alpha Research. 19 april 2026: 'Демографски профил на гласувалите на изборите за Народно събрание' [19 April 2026: Demographic profile of voters at the National assembly elections] <https://alpharesearch.bg/post/1049-19-april-2026-demografski-profil-na-glasualite-na-izborite-za-narodno-subranie.html>.

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Table 1: Competing Parties in the 2026 Elections and Results

Party Acronym	Party Name (Original)	English translation	Lead Candidate	% of votes	Number of Seats	Seat Change	European Party Family
PB	Коалиция "Прогресивна България"	Progressive Bulgaria Coalition	Rumen Radev	44.59	131	+131	N/A
GERB – SDS	Коалиция "ГЕРБ – СДС"	Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria – Union of Democratic Forces	Boyko Borisov	13.39	39	-30	EPP
PPDB	Коалиция "Продължаваме Промяната – Демократична България"	We Continue the Change – Democratic Bulgaria	Asen Vasilev (We Continue the Change), Ivaylo Mirchev (Da, Bulgaria)	12.62	37	0	Renew Europe / EPP
DPS – NB	Движение за права и свободи – Ново начало	Movement for Rights and Freedoms – New Beginning	–	7.12	21	-9	Renew Europe
ITN	Възраждане	Vazrazhdane / Revival	Kostadin Kostadinov	4.25	12	-23	ESN
BSP	Коалиция "БСП – Обединена Левица"	Bulgarian Socialist Party	Krum Zarkov	3.02	0	-20	S&D
ITN	Има такъв народ	There Is Such a People	Slavi Trifonov	0.74	0	-18	ECR
APS	Алианс за права и свободи	Alliance for Rights and Freedoms	–	1.67	0	-19	N/A
Mech	Морал, единство, чест	Moral, Unity, Honour	Radostin Vasilev	3.2	0	-12	N/A
–	Величие	Velichie / Greatness	Ivelin Mihaylov	3.1	0	0	N/A

Source: Compilation by the author. Election results from the Bulgarian Central Electoral Commission: <https://results.cik.bg/pe202604/rezultati/index.html>

Bulgarian society and politics. NATO support is improving since the start of the war in Ukraine but remains fragile. As of 2025, 29% want to leave the Alliance which is uniquely high for the region.⁸ The pro-Western vote may be consolidating electorally while underlying ambivalence about Russia and Ukraine remains widespread. The question is how durable that consolidation actually is if the narrative environment remains this permeable to Russian framing.

While the structure of competition evolved, the underlying logic of mobilisation remained consistent. The systematic tendency of established parties to bleed out continued – this time BSP, ITN and several smaller formations either lost significant support or fell below the 4% threshold entirely. The dominance of corruption as the central electoral frame meant ideological distinctions between parties continued to blur, as they have since 2020.

And, for the third time since 2021, a new actor won the majority of the vote on an anti-corruption platform – adding another chapter to a pattern of high electoral

volatility that has become a defining feature of the Bulgarian party system after ITN (at their first ever election) in July 2021 and 'We Continue the Change' (at their first ever election) in November 2021.

Fatigue as a feature or a bug? From voter to network realignment

Bulgarian politics is periodically restructured by a newly emerging political actor winning a (decisive) majority on an anti-corruption and anti-system platform and restructuring the party system around itself. This is not just the result of voter preference, however, and not all electoral victories are equal: what matters is the ability to absorb the underlying infrastructure of power. As such, Bulgarian elections largely redistribute control over institutional, economic and political networks that can either aid or re-direct mobilisation – and what looks like voter fatigue may actually be the mechanism that enables these periodic realignments.

Voters, personnel and local networks from across the spectrum were absorbed by NDSV ('National Movement for Stability and Progress'⁹) in 2001 and more success-

8 Hajdu, Dominika, Katarína Klingová, Jana Kazaz, and Barbora Dobó. 2025. *GLOBSEC Trends 2025*. Bratislava: GLOBSEC. p. 13 <https://www.globsec.org/what-we-do/press-releases/new-globsec-poll-central-and-eastern-european-societies-back-increased>.

9 Led by the former King of Bulgaria Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, and also known as the National Movement Simeon II, NDSV won the parliamentary elections in 2001, taking 120 out of 240 seats. Its government was supported by DPS (MRF). After the 2005 general election, NDSV dropped significantly but remained in government as a junior partner to BSP, with the government again supported by DPS. The 2009 general election was won by GERB, marking its first victory in a national election.

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fully and durably by GERB in 2009. While ITN broke GERB's dominance for the first time when they won the vote in July 2021, their rise was only short-lived because they failed to absorb the broader infrastructure of power such as networks of influence on the local and state level, the corporate vote, and the institutional backing of the judicial system which GERB and DPS controlled at that point. Yet, they remained a persistent presence in subsequent parliaments acting as extensions of Peevski's interests and playing a destabilising role in major legislative initiatives. They even made it into two governing coalitions. When 'We Continue the Change' won the vote in November 2021 and formed a reformist-led majority, it demonstrated that institutional change was possible – but the coalition with ITN and BSP proved too fragile on fighting corruption and on foreign policy (Ukraine, North Macedonia) to consolidate it.

Thus, the last five years were marked not so much by indecision but by a build-up of unmet expectations – on judicial reform, prosecution of state corruption, and basic government accountability. Each cycle carried the promise to achieve this, but the election in 2026 was finally the catalyst for the accumulated disappointment.

What is different this time are the scale and the structural reach. PB's victory was not just electoral, but structural: it absorbed local government representatives, small coalitions, independents, activists and former politicians from radical right, nationalist, anti-system, strongly pro-Russian splinters of the Bulgarian Socialist Party, the majority of the vote of BSP, Vazrazhdane and smaller populist, anti-system parties and pro-Russian parties, representatives of the Turkish minority, defectors from both wings of DPS – Peevski's 'DPS-New Beginning' and Ahmed Dogan's Alliance for Rights and Freedoms (APS). Given GERB's lowest ever result, leading figures also left the party like Stara Zagora's mayor ending GERB's almost two-decade dominance in regional cities. This is all before the coalition Progressive Bulgaria was even formally constituted as a party and it seems PB is already building momentum for the 2027 local elections by drawing cadres from every major formation¹⁰.

PB cracked the structural capture on the ethnic minority vote – reaching into the most controlled and

hardest to move segments of the electorate. It made inroads into Roma communities in areas with no compact Muslim population, previously considered structurally captured through financial incentives and clientelist pressure, with allegiance split between DPS and GERB. This is not just a protest vote dynamic but rather a shift in the map of electoral control also of informal clientelist networks that are opportunistic by nature – naturally, their loyalty follows power, not principle. The question raised by these results is whether networks of influence have simply switched sides. The irony remains: the exact mechanism Radev named as a threat to democracy when he was president – financial mobilisation for elections – appear to be part of the geography of his own victory.

Critical tensions behind a slogan: what Radev's track record can tell about his likely course

'We can, we are ready and we will' – but who is 'we'? Progressive Bulgaria's campaign slogan is stated in the first person plural but given the scarce information Radev shared about his plan when stepping down, the process of putting his coalition together, how and by whom the candidates were recruited, who would be leading figures in a government to lead the major reforms promised, as well as little transparency on who sponsors his campaign, the question of who is 'we' remained open in the third week after the elections. Nevertheless, even though much is still unknown about Progressive Bulgaria, their financial backing and strategy, a few conceptual seeds can help analyse and interpret whether the new majority's instinct is for power or for justice.

Radev was among the most visible political supporters of Bulgaria's 2020 anti-corruption protests, speaking of dismantling 'the model' and blaming 'the mafia' for the country's inability to reform.¹¹ Once he gained institutional leverage through successive caretaker governments though, not much of this materialised – no public reports, revelations or major institutional consequences followed, no meaningful confrontation at the moments that counted. His critique remained entirely on the rhetorical level. The counterargument that caretaker governments have limited powers is valid but only goes so far. The previous government of Andrey Gyurov demonstrated what institutional presence with

10 Vesselina Gospodinova, Dessislava Nikolva, Franciska Kutevska. 'С кои хора Румен Радев тръгва към парламента и властта' ['With whom is Rumen Radev heading toward parliament and power'], *Capital*. March 19, 2026, https://www.capital.bg/politika_i_ikonomika/bulgaria/2026/03/19/4894085_s_koi_hora_rumen_radev_trugva_kum_parlamenta_i_vlastta/.

11 OFFNews, 'Радев излезе пред протеста: 'Не' на страха. Ще си върнем България. Мутри – вълн!' ['Radev appeared at the protest: 'No' to Fear. We will take Bulgaria back. Mafia Out!'], July 9, 2020, <https://offnews.bg/politika1/radev-izleze-pred-protesta-ne-na-straha-shte-si-varnem-balgaria-732467.html>

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reform intent looks like even under the same constraints – actively calling the Supreme Judicial Council to act on the Supreme Court's decision that the State Prosecutor is no longer legally allowed to remain in office, as well as taking a more proactive stance on vote buying, disinformation, and, with doubtful success, on foreign policy. Radev's caretaker governments' relative inactivity on the anti-corruption front does not look like an accident. His last appointed caretaker government – before a 161 majority in parliament (GERB, PPDB, DPS and Peevski) curtailed his constitutional powers¹² in December 2023 to appoint one – sealed a major energy deal with the Turkish BOTAŞ. It obliges Bulgaria to pay a fixed price of USD 500,000 per day regardless of actual consumption while it utilised only around 11% of that capacity by mid-2025, with no termination clause and cheaper alternatives available. Turkish access to Bulgarian transmission infrastructure is a way to supply third parties without specifying the origin of the gas. This is seen as a backdoor for Russian gas to enter the EU market unchecked¹³. Radev insists this deal has allowed Bulgaria to compensate for the break-up with Gazprom in spring 2022, for which he blames the government of PPDB, and survive the winter, yet the deal was sealed on 3 January 2023.

In this context, it is important to note that the total time Radev-appointed caretaker governments were in office since 2021 was longer than any regular government. In a way, his access to executive power is not as novel and concerned with major decisions of state policy like this in the energy sector.

Furthermore, Radev openly ridiculed the caretaker government's initiative to seek EU assistance against disinformation and foreign interference as a paradox. In a Facebook post he derogatively referred to PPDB as “the assemblers” referring to the ad-hoc coalition behind a Constitutional majority that took away the unlimited Presidential powers to appoint interim governments, and accused them of “already working to hijack the parliamentary elections”, describing the

request for EU assistance as a plan built on “suggestions of alleged hybrid influence on the elections”. Framing EU oversight of the digital space not as a safeguard but as foreign interference itself notably mirrored the narrative by Russia Today (RT) and Russian state media after the activation of the EU anti-disinformation mechanism.¹⁴ The ‘Tiktocracy Tracker’ report¹⁵ by the Bulgarian AI Platform for Media and Disinformation Intelligence ‘Sensika’ and Balkan Free Media, investigating algorithmic manipulation in the Balkans and ways coordinated activity shaped recent elections also showed that content in support of Radev dominated social media before the elections while all other political actors lagged behind significantly. It remains hard to determine whether this reflected genuine public support or automated scaling of reach. Meanwhile, research¹⁶ shows how Facebook groups that previously agitated in support of Russia rebranded and redirected their activity towards Radev before the campaign began, with considerable activity. His irritation at additional oversight despite the experience of neighbouring Romania and the documented permeability of the Bulgarian information ecosystem to disinformation and hybrid threats remains unaccounted for.

On Europe itself, Radev has never been too categorical – there are always conditions, nuances, and qualifications that often underplay achievements. In his resignation speech, he stated that the European milestones of the Eurozone and Schengen “did not bring satisfaction and stability” to the Bulgarian people. However, Bulgaria's relative stability through years of political turbulence is not despite its European path, it is because of it. Presenting European integration as a failed or underdelivering promise rather than the only reliable source of security is not a critique of the system but an invitation to undermine the structural anchors that have kept the country functional while its politics imploded.

With regard to the Eurozone, he insisted that the political elite refused the people their right to choose – Radev

12 The changes significantly limited the President's powers to choose a caretaker Prime Minister: where he previously had full discretion, he was now restricted to a handful of public officials – many of whom were appointed by GERB/DPS to their positions and respectively are considered their loyalists. This meant that the caretaker government, while nominally under the President's authority, now remained under the indirect influence of GERB/DPS.

13 Vladimirov, M., Nikolov, T., Levi, I., and Wickenden, L. ‘The Last Mile: Phasing Out Russian Oil and Gas in Central Europe.’ Center for the Study of Democracy (CSD) and Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air (CREA), May 2025. p.21. Available at: https://energyandcleanair.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/CSD_CREA_HU_SK_05_25.pdf

14 Mediapool. ‘Експерти: Руска пропаганда е заляла България след активирането на ЕС’ [‘Experts: Russian propaganda flooded Bulgaria after the activation of the EU mechanism’]. 17 April 2026 <https://www.mediapool.bg/eksperti-ruska-propaganda-e-zalyala-bulgaria-sled-aktiviraneto-na-es-news382427.html>

15 Balkan Free Media Initiative (BFMI) and Sensika Technologies. 2026. ‘TikTokcracy Tracker: Algorithmic Manipulation in the 2026 Bulgarian Elections’. <https://www.balkanfreemedia.org/tiktocracy-tracker-2026-bulgarian-elections>.

16 Ekaterina Vasileva Днес е за Русия, утре ‘Прогресивна България’: Как групи във Фейсбук агитират за Румен Радев. [Today it's for Russia, tomorrow ‘Progressive Bulgaria’: How Facebook groups campaign for Rumen Radev]. *Svobodna Tochka* [Formerly Bulgarian branch of Radio Free Europe] 13 March 2026 <https://svobodnatochka.bg/dnes-e-za-rusiya-utre-progresivna-balgariya-kak-grupi-vav-fejsbuk-agitirat-za-rumen-radev/>

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called for a referendum on when Bulgaria should adopt the Euro which parliament did not consider. This is a misleading and manipulative claim. Political parties have on multiple occasions secured sufficient majorities in support of Eurozone membership – a process that has been underway for over 20 years. The transition has been smooth institutionally but price inflation is an issue and will remain a key discursive anchor in Radev's upcoming government as a line of subtle attack on European values. Otherwise, PB's campaign pitch rests on a genuine grievance – Bulgaria completed its European integration, joined Schengen and the Eurozone, yet degrees of uncertainty and need for reform remain. The questions he raises are real.

PB's programme called for the restoration of the Presidential right to appoint a caretaker prime minister directly – a right curtailed by the 2023 constitutional amendments. These changes directly restricted Radev while in office as President. Yet he does not contest the other changes adopted in the same legislative package which the Constitutional Court voted down: the reduction of the term of the Prosecutor General, and the introduction of parliamentary oversight over their otherwise unaccountable figures. At the same time PB's stated reform ambition focuses on electing the new parliamentary quota to the SJC, which will in turn appoint a new Prosecutor General. Changing the members in the SJC is thus a highly consequential decision which will unblock the system initially and is a necessary step – however, it is also a cosmetic one. Changing the person(s) in office does not change the nature of the office itself.

That is why the selective reading of the constitutional package – calling for restoring Presidential powers while leaving the need for more profound institutional checks and balances on the Prosecution service untouched – is less of a technicality and more of a signal for long-term intentions if it remains unchanged. Not focusing on it means either that structural reform shifting the balance of power away from the all-powerful Prosecutor General is not a priority – or that PB has its own conception of such reforms which have never been publicly discussed.

Meanwhile, three weeks after the elections, until the appointment of the government on 8 May, it remained

unclear who would be the leading figures on the promised consequential reforms.

Importantly, in the first week of the campaign, when asked to name a single strategic partner, 56% of Bulgarians chose the EU, suggesting that the pro-European sentiment remains the dominant public orientation, while 19.5% answered Russia¹⁷. As of February 2025, 61% of Bulgarians approve of EU membership, and when faced with a direct choice between US and European positions, 59% say Bulgaria should support the EU's common positions and strengthen its unity and cohesion¹⁸. Thus, as around 60% of Bulgarians continue to support EU membership, Radev is careful that his narratives are not understood as anti-European in function. The framing of Ukraine is a key example. Presenting it as the sure loser in the war, referring to those backing the arming of Ukraine as "war mongers" (PPDB in particular), citing the close proximity of the war and propagating a 'pro-peace narrative' due to too many casualties on both sides, he offers a pragmatic reading – not out of pro-Russian sympathy but out of concern for Bulgarian interests. Support for Ukraine is framed as an uncritical submission to Western/EU pressure. He has called for dialogue with Russia pointing to the potential of Bulgaria to be the bridge for that based on the uniqueness of Orthodox, Cyrillic and cultural proximity.

Pro-Russian sentiment in Bulgaria operates primarily through symbolic and narrative channels but its political consequences are powerful. In the first place because history reading is perhaps the strongest instrument of power and this reading of history will continue to shape attitudes toward the war and toward Russia well beyond its end. Similar to Hungary, the 'peace narrative' plays on Bulgarian political memory of resistance to great powers and a refusal to give up sovereignty as a value. For a country that spent centuries in the Ottoman Empire and decades under Soviet dominance, then navigated a difficult post-1989 transition, the rhetoric of 'we won't be dragged into someone else's war' is understood as supporting independence rather than as deference to Moscow. If Radev's 'peace' narrative continues to operate within this register, this government will run into an unavoidable paradox: First, a political platform built on calls for sovereignty, solidarity, justice and freedom while

17 Alfa Research Agency. 'Обществени и електорални нагласи: проблемите, стратегическите партньори, очаквана управленска конфигурация' ['Public and Electoral Attitudes: Problems, Strategic Partners, Expected Governing Configuration'], March 19–26, 2026. <https://alpharesearch.bg/post/1045-obshtestveni-i-elektoralni-naglasi.html>

18 Alfa Research Agency. '59% от българите – България да защитава общите позиции на ЕС, да допринесе за единството и силата му' ['59% of Bulgarians: Bulgaria Should Defend the EU's Common Positions and Contribute to its Unity and Strength'], February 20–28, 2025. <https://alpharesearch.bg/post/1033-59-ot-bulgarite-bulgaria-da-zashtitava-obshtite-pozicii-na-es-da-doprinasia-za-edinstvoto-i-silata-mu.html>

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denying Ukraine the right to fight for these values; second, bringing arguments against arming Ukraine and in favour of reconsidering the supply of Russian Gas, framed as economic pragmatism while buying from the aggressor is itself prolonging the war. This is a strong reminder that 'Europeanness' may be read as a value commitment and belonging, but alternatively also as economic pragmatism. Naturally, it is hard to make the distinction in political campaigns when the language is the same.

Conclusion

Structurally, the elections certainly disrupted the symbolic coalition of the 'untouchables' who actively sabotaged judicial reform while facilitating and becoming the prisoners of its descent into state capture. Given the size of the majority of PB, GERB and DPS-Peevski will not be able to block constitutional majority changes which require 161 votes. That is a tectonic shift independently of what PB does with it. Still, PB has stated it will seek the support of PPDB for such changes since the promise Radev gave is to dismantle 'the Borisov-Peevski' model to which PPDB have been the main opposition. After the elections, though, PPDB made a controversial decision to form two parliamentary groups – one for PP and one for DB – which gives them more seats in parliamentary committees and two vice-speakers of the parliament. Essentially, they ended their coalition, yet, remained committed to stay united on key policy fronts but lost their strategic advantage as their split meant that DPS – New Beginning rose as the third largest parliamentary group. It also means PB will have to negotiate with them separately.

The decisive majority also means the government cannot be removed through parliamentary means – a structural position none of its recent predecessors had. With the approaching Presidential elections in November, the risk of excessive concentration of power in one political group remains a threat to the compromised balance of power and institutional checks and balances in Bulgarian democracy.

In terms of future scenarios, the nomination of a new State Prosecutor will be a key test. If Rumen Radev and his Progressive Bulgaria are authentic in their commitment for judicial reform, parliament choosing its Supreme Judicial Council quota to elect a new State Prosecutor should be just the beginning. Without structural change, the risk of the Bulgarian political system to remain a captive of an all-mighty Prosecutor is real and eventually PB will themselves descend into this dependency – just like all before them. If Radev's

Moscow allegiance is real, then inaction on effective anti-corruption will be the signal as corruption is Russia's primary channel with energy politics as its main instrument. Surely though, sensitivity in society and across the EU will remain too high for any drastic moves at the beginning of a first term in power.

Addendum

The new government was sworn in on 8 May 2026, but its reform plans remain unclear. The first steps are focused on intrusive control over prices amid criticism from economists. Several ministerial appointments raised questions about whether loyalty to the former President took precedence over expertise and integrity. Galab Donev, a former caretaker PM (Aug 2022 – Jun 2023) appointed by Radev when he was President, takes the senior role of Finance Minister without qualifications in finance. The Agriculture Minister, Abrovski – a controversial ITN figure with ties to GERB – has been criticised for protecting the interests of Hristoforos Nikos Amanatidis, known as Taki, a figure linked to organised crime and the high-profile corruption scandal at the Kapitan Andreevo border checkpoint which came to light during the Petkov government (April 2023 – June 2024). The profile of the Justice Minister, a former secretary of the Supreme Judicial Council who made his career under the former State Prosecutor Sotir Tsatsarov, raises red flags. Meanwhile, a deputy minister has already resigned over proven conflicts of interest related to EU funds. There are also some noticeable contradictions. One vice Prime Minister – Ivo Hristov – a former speechwriter and Chief of Cabinet to Radev as President - holds openly pro-Russian positions and is an active speaker of the new cabinet. In contrast, the other vice prime minister Atanas Pekanov is a Western-educated economist and a four-time interim minister for EU funds. Radev himself will directly oversee the ministries of Justice, Defence and Interior, as well as foreign policy and national security, retaining a very high degree of control over the executive. On judicial reform, the government has promised a strategy but committed only to revealing it gradually, step by step – which raises questions on why this is the approach if a coherent plan exists. Among the first steps of the new government have been the rushed re-establishment of the Anti-corruption Commission in order to avoid losing €260 million in EU funding rather than as a step of a wider strategy. This commission was a central player in targeting opposition mayors of PPDB before being shut down in January 2026 by the GERB/DPS/BSP/ITN government. Finally, a proposal put forward on 18 May by the Progressive Bulgaria parliamentary majority to accelerate

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legislative procedures risks reducing the time available for opposition oversight, parliamentary debate and ministerial scrutiny significantly. If passed, it is a concerning signal for an excessive consolidation of power

in the ruling majority. Yet, the lack of public statements on policy reform plans and the large share of PB MPs who are new to politics makes any predictions on their legislative behaviour impossible.

Table 2: Cabinet of Radev I elected on 8 May 2026

Position	Name
Prime Minister	Rumen Radev
Deputy PM and Finance Minister	Galab Donev
Deputy PM and Economy, Investments and Industry Minister	Alexander Pulev
Deputy PM	Atanas Pekanov
Deputy PM	Ivo Hristov
Interior Minister	Ivan Demerdzhiev
Defence Minister	Dimitar Stoyanov
Foreign Minister	Velislava Petrova-Chamova
Justice Minister	Nikolay Naydenov
Labour and Social Policy Minister	Natalia Efremova
Education and Science Minister	Georgi Valchev
Health Minister	Katya Ivkova
Innovation and Digital Transformation Minister	Ivan Vassilev
Regional Development and Public Works Minister	Ivan Shishkov
Energy Minister	Iva Petrova
Transport and Communications Minister	Georgi Peev

Source: *The Sofia Globe*, 13.05.2026, <https://sofiaglobe.com/2026/05/12/bulgarias-radev-cabinet-meet-the-ministers/>