



Protesters march during an anti-government rally in Sofia, Bulgaria, December 15, 2025.

PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK

WINTER OF DISCONTENT AND ELECTIONS

Understanding Bulgaria's 2025 protests and issues of Bulgarian politics

by **Alexandra Brankova**

abstract

Widespread anti-government and anti-austerity protests erupted in Bulgaria in December 2025, reflecting intense public opposition to the state's fiscal policies, governance models, and lack of transparency in political and judicial processes, which eventually led to the resignation of the Zhelyazkov Government. The eighth round of parliamentary elections in just five years took place on April 19, 2026 and resulted in victory for Progressive Bulgaria, the new party of the former president Rumen Radev. The country faces ongoing political instability. The current essay sheds light on the central misrepresentations in the portrayal of the protests and underlying structural issues in Bulgarian politics based on the analysis of state documents, media coverage, corruption investigation cases, and digital observations.

KEYWORDS: Bulgaria, protests, elections, media, clientelism.

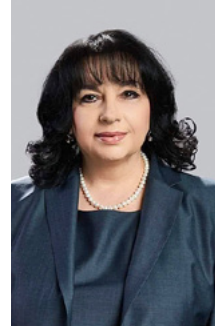
Bulgaria appeared on various international news segments at the end of 2025 due to its mass protests and its entry into the eurozone. The protests were largely depicted as an anti-budget movement¹ or “Gen Z” uprising.² While governmental spending and the suggested 2026 budget were key pillars of discontent, the reasons for the demonstrations remain more multi-layered and complex. Opposition to systemic corruption, state capture, clientelist relations, a malfunctioning judicial system, and a lack of transparency are some of the underlying and foundational issues of relevance to the public. The article is based on the analysis of state documents and decisions, Bulgarian media coverage, corruption investigations, and digital observations. The current essay attempts to shed light on some of the misconceptions about how Bulgaria's 2025 protests have been depicted and to reflect on the deeper issues in Bulgarian politics.

Misconception 1: **This is just a protest against the budget? – Not really**

The Zhelyazkov Government (GERB-UDF) suggested the 2026 budget, supported by their coalition partners ITN (There is Such a People, *Ima Takuv Narod*) and BSP-UL (Bulgarian Socialist Party – United Left). The oligarch Delyan Peevski, sanctioned under the Magnitsky Act, backed it with his party Movements for Rights and Freedom – New Beginning (DPS-NN). The budget was designed to meet the 3% government deficit requirement under the Maastricht criteria for eurozone entry.³ It included refinancing the former debts, increasing borrowing through the financial instrument Security Action for Europe (SAFE), and raising the debt ceiling.⁴ Why did the budget encounter such strong opposition, and what does this reveal about contemporary Bulgarian politics and society?

The proposed fiscal plan faced criticism from business owners and the private sector. Some of the key changes envisaged by the suggested 2026 framework included a rise in dividend tax from 5% to 10% and increased government spending on public-sector personnel.⁵ Bulgarian businesses would also be financially affected by the mandatory requirement to connect to the National Revenue Agency's software for management of sales (*SUPTO*), inflicting additional costs.⁶ The employer and industrialist representatives, Dobri Mitrev and Kiril Domuschiev, met with the former finance minister Temenuzhka Petkova (GERB-UDF) to mitigate the proposed increases in the social security contributions and dividend tax.⁷ Concerns exist that the tax hikes on private businesses to fund state-sector wages can be considered a governmental mechanism to limit the private sector and increase grip over state institutions and funding streams.⁸ Citizens also remained cautious about the increased borrowing and the long-term effects of the budgetary framework.

THE PROTESTORS demanded the resignation of the Zhelyazkov Government seen as a façade for the rule of Boyko Borisov and alignment with Delyan Peevski.⁹ Interviewed participants shared that they are opposing the political model based on clientelist relations between state institutions and affiliated personal networks. Holding banners of Borisov, Peevski or Petkova, they expressed a desire to remain in Bulgaria, while also conveying concerns about the high proportion of young Bulgarians emigrating due to rising inequalities, limited economic opportunities, and deficiencies in fairness and institutional justice.¹⁰ Fears of public funds being diverted into corruption schemes were salient. Strategic appointments to key ministries and agencies – such as the Ministry of Energy (e.g. Chiren gas storage



Boyko Borisov (GERB), Delyan Peevski (DPS-NN), and Temenuzhka Petkova (GERB).
PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

“THE PROTESTS IN BULGARIA ARE DRIVEN NOT MERELY BY FISCAL GRIEVANCES BUT BY WIDESPREAD FRUSTRATION WITH SYSTEMIC CLIENTELISM AS WELL AS THE LACK OF TRANSPARENCY AND EFFECTIVE JUDICIAL ACCOUNTABILITY.”

and the case of The European Public Prosecutor's Office against *Bulgartransgaz*, the Ministry of Regional Development, and the Bulgarian Road Infrastructure Agency – illustrate how political influence is consolidated across critical sectors of governance limiting competition.¹¹ The protests in Bulgaria are driven not

merely by fiscal grievances but by widespread frustration with systemic clientelism as well as the lack of transparency and effective judicial accountability.

The judicial system also experiences similar mechanisms with the appointment of the only candidate for Prosecutor General, Borislav Sarafov. The independent investigative outlet BIRD discussed that with the arrival of Sarafov in 2024, various key cases (such as Turkish Stream pipeline case, the Plovdiv Fair case, Barcelona Gate, Skullgate, among others) were either terminated or discontinued.¹² Borislav

Sarafov's tenure as acting Prosecutor General of Bulgaria has become a focal point of constitutional and political dispute, with the Supreme Court of Cassation ruling his mandate expired in July 2025, while the Supreme Judicial Council maintains he remains in office, generating institutional gridlock.¹³ New protests against Sarafov took place in January 2026. Oppositional parties demand his removal, and questions are raised about the impartiality of the judicial system.

VARIOUS ACADEMIC STUDIES discuss the role of clientelism in contemporary Bulgarian politics,¹⁴ understood as the distribution of benefits to individuals or groups in exchange for various kinds of political support¹⁵. Some of these examples include economic clientelism through public tenders or electoral clientelism. A policy paper from the World Bank Group indicates a high risk of corruption in Bulgaria when it comes to public procurement tenders between connected buyers and suppliers, as the risk is highest on local government level.¹⁶ The report outlines formal or informal



The Continuing Change party placed a pink piggy bank in central Sofia. The pig became a symbol of corruption during the protests.

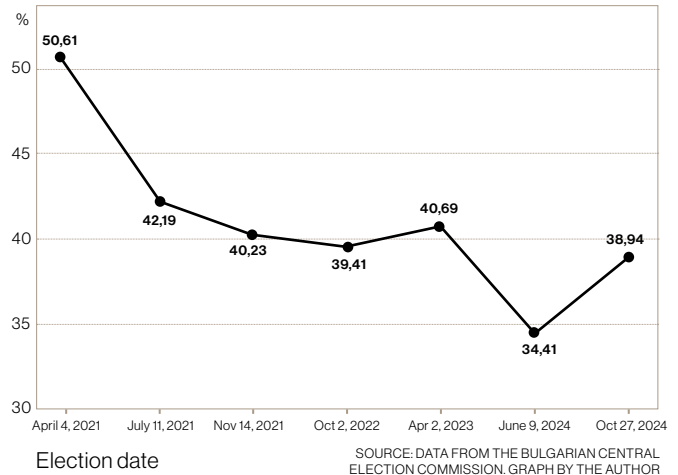
mechanisms affecting public procurement deals, such as tenders with one bidder and no actual competition, short submission periods providing an advantage to bidders with internal information, personal ties between buyers and suppliers, as well as limited public information.¹⁷ Such case was the public tenders of the Bulgarian Road Infrastructure Agency (API) for horizontal road marking in several Bulgarian regions. Miroslav Manolov, formerly associated with “Trace Group Hold” AD offered Anton Taskov, owner of “Bitulight” Ltd. to secure a regional contract in exchange for a 7% commission – 5% allegedly for senior API officials and 2% for himself.¹⁸ Bulgaria has the second-highest road fatality rate in the EU¹⁹, and corruption in the road infrastructure sector can be linked to compromised safety standards.

Electoral clientelism is also ubiquitous in times of political instability and multiple national parliamentary elections in Bulgaria. Gherghina, Saikkonen, and Bankov theorize three types of electoral clientelism and explore them among Bulgarian constituencies.²⁰ Electoral clientelist exchanges can be positive, negative (coercive), or programmatic.²¹ Voters are “offered money, goods, or preferential access to jobs or welfare services” in positive clientelistic relations, while negative ones are characterized by “punishment for voting the wrong way”.²² Programmatic approaches include the mobilization of social and electoral support in favor of proposed policies based on goals. The practice of vote-buying²³ affects the outcome of the elections, especially with generally low levels of electoral turnout (Figure 1, above). The multiple rounds of elections demonstrate lowering voter turnout with a slight increase in October 2024.

“THE TEMPORAL CONTINUITY OF PROTESTS AGAINST PEEVSKI AND BORISOV FOR MORE THAN A DECADE WAS REPRESENTED IN MEMES, SONGS, POSTERS, AND POPULAR CULTURE.”

Figure 1.

Voter turnout: Bulgarian parliamentary elections (2021–2024)



In the context of low voter participation, electoral fraud – specifically vote-buying – can skew parliamentary representation by allowing a small number of paid votes to determine a party’s success. The provisional government of Andrey Gurov, alongside the deputy Minister of Interior Ivan Anchev, took tougher actions against electoral manipulations through vote buying by carrying out over 226 police operations, detaining over 288 individuals, and issuing over 4000 warning protocols.²⁴

These recent developments demonstrate the scale of the practice. After the elections, the interior minister, Emil Dechev, announced the names of the parties with most allegations of electoral fraud: 631 alerts for DPS-NN and 318 alerts for GERB.²⁵ Vote-buying takes place on regional or local levels, which increases the importance of local elections and the forming of mayoral networks. This can further explain the pressure on oppositional mayors in Sofia and the recent imprisonment and release of the mayor of Varna,

characterized by clashes between GERB-UDF and Continuing Change (*Produljavame Promyanata*, PP) representatives.

INTERESTINGLY, Gherghina, Saikkonen, and Bankov found that voters who are dissatisfied with the state of democracy or democratic institutions, as well as voters with little political knowledge, are more likely to accept positive clientelist relations.²⁶ These observations are relevant for understanding the mass protests of 2025 and 2026 as a larger dissatisfaction with institutions and the judicial system brought politically engaged Bulgarians to the streets of major cities such as Sofia, Plovdiv, and Varna.²⁷ However, the situation in rural areas or smaller towns is less

clear. The electoral turnout in April 2026 was higher than previous elections campaigns (see Figure 1) getting closer to the rates from April 2021.²⁸ This demonstrates increased willingness to participate but still remains quite low as about half of the eligible voters abstained. The tougher measures against votes purchasing practices and increased turnout may also help explain shifts among the leading parties in 2026. Increasing voters' turnout, political engagement outside big cities, and active civil society can ensure fairer elections.

Misconception 2: **This is a Gen Z protest? – Yes and no**

Young Bulgarians were active during the 2025–2026 protests. Some defined the opposition to the budget as “Gen Z”-led initiative and as generational mobilization against repression, corruption, and social injustice through social media networks.²⁹ While it is true that many young Bulgarians were present in the protests and actively used Instagram, TikTok, or Facebook to raise awareness, to call people to come to the Square, it is important to note that they were not the only generation represented. Classifying the protest as “Gen Z” belittles their scale. Millennials, Generation Y, and X were all present as they were reminiscing about the lack of progress since the 2013–2014 mass protests against the Oresharski Cabinet, when Delyan Peevski was proposed for the head of the State Agency for National Security (DANS). The temporal continuity of protests against Peevski and Borisov for more than a decade was represented in memes, songs, posters, and popular culture.³⁰ Continuing Change installed a large pink pig statue (picture on the previous page) on the square in front of the Council of Ministers in Sofia, which created viral buzz and became a semiotic representation of corrupted politicians. PP and DB used the pink pig afterwards for their respective campaigns for the recruitment of volunteers called “Protect the Elections” and “You, Count!”.³¹ These initiatives promote bottom-up participation from citizens when counting the votes or observing the elections.

ANOTHER ASPECT worth mentioning for the 2025–2026 protests is that they united both liberal and conservative or far-right political opposition parties despite the differences in their geopolitical affiliations and ideological stands. This aspect remains neglected in various commentaries and coverage of the events. “Revival” and “MECh” announced through social media channels that they are joining the protests organized by PP-DB.³² Radostin Vasilev, the leader of “MECh”, called to join the protest on a Facebook vertical video, concluding:

This is a nonpartisan issue; here we are talking about our country. We are not talking about left or right, about Russophiles or Americophiles – we are talking about Bulgaria!³³

This temporary alignment, despite geopolitical and ideological differences, helps to explain both the scale of the protests and the participation of various voter groups.



The two screenshots are from the channels Evrokom (available at <https://www.youtube.com/live/dAPR6xf-IgU?si=NEiZX-ILvoB8F1HH>) and BNT1 (available at: <https://youtu.be/ZiFeZ-53HAA?si=Pk1kLaBQ1-wZQTNO>). Both programmes aired on November 26, 2025. The faces of protestors are blurred for safety reasons.

Misconception 3: **Freedom of the Bulgarian media and framing the protest? – Questionable**

During the first days of the protests, a comparison of the television coverage by the Bulgarian National Television (BNT) and a smaller channel, *Evrokom*, went viral on Facebook. BNT depicted scarcely spread protestors and a lack of activity, while *Evrokom*, broadcasting at the same time, showed a different story. The streets were full of people holding national flags and placards on the “*Delnitsi*” show with Nikolai Kolev (see the two screenshots above). Two very different perspectives and depictions. This example raises questions about the accurate representation of events and the agency of media outlets and journalists in political processes. Slavtcheva-Petkova, Pogson, and Karadjov suggest that the long rule of Boyko Borisov and gradual media capture changed the role of outlets as they trade influence and manipulate information.³⁴ Their study discusses that corruption practices have been observed by journalists as they have increasingly precarious roles caught between political and business interests.³⁵ The framework of media capture is discussed by investigative journalists, who have been removed from large television networks and are currently working on private projects or have YouTube channels (such as Mirolyuba Benatova and Genka Shikerova). The “empty chair” in a television studio became a symbol of media censorship and removal of journalists asking difficult questions.

The “empty chair” metaphor appeared in Bulgarian public



Left: The bTV host Maria Tsantsarova with the cup that her employer claimed had a political message.

The “empty chair” metaphor was first used in 2017, and resurfaced in December 2025 with the removal of Maria Tsantsarova.

space in 2017 with the removal of Anna Tsoleva from the morning blog of NOVA TV as her partner Viktor Nikolaev was leading the program alone for a limited time. Nikolaev was asking various questions about the purchase of fighter aircraft to the members of parliament Anton Todorov (GERB) and the deputy prime minister at the time Valeri Simeonov (NFSB, Patriotic Front). They threatened that he would lose his job if he continued to ask questions about the purchase of fighter aircraft for the Bulgarian Air Force.³⁶ This discussion concerned the debate between Rumen Radev and GERB-Patriotic Front about the purchase of the Swedish (Gripen) or American (F-16) fighter jets.³⁷ Anton Todorov said to Viktor Nikolaev:

You use very strong words, they will eat your bread [...] They have already eaten your colleague’s bread (referring to Anna Tsoleva). She [...] and she had kind of gone in some direction, but I see that her chair is missing.³⁸

The “empty chair” phenomenon resurfaced in December 2025 with the removal of Maria Tsantsarova, the host of bTV’s morning show.

The removal of Maria Tsantsarova caused an uproar in Bulgarian journalistic circles as many gathered in front of the headquarters of the media outlet. While bTV initially kept quiet, a statement was published later. bTV claimed that Tsantsarova:

[...]allowed herself to express her political preferences on air [...] One example of this was her appearance on air with a branded cup with a message that is clearly associated with a currently ongoing political campaign alongside criticism towards her supervisor influencing the editorial content.³⁹

The branded cup had the print of “Time to make real change” as she published a photo of it on her Facebook page during the protests. While her confrontational interview techniques and perceived political biases surfaced in live broadcasts or debates

with guests, Tsantsarova asked challenging questions and carried out investigative work. bTV Media Group’s journalistic impartiality faced scrutiny previously after Anton Hekimyan, their former Director of News, Current Affairs and Sports, stepped down just two days before being announced as the GERB party’s nominee for the 2023 Sofia mayoral elections.⁴⁰

After Tsantsarova’s removal from the morning blog, she crowdfunded and organised a parliamentary debate through the new media platform “IZVUN EFIR” (meaning OFF AIR). It

was broadcast online through social media and partnering organisations such as Dnevnik⁴¹, circumventing larger television groups. Progressive Bulgaria, GERB, BSP, and PP-DB participated, while Revival and DPS-NN refused to show up or did not respond to the invitation. Tsantsarova entered the hall after a close-up shot of the notable mug.

CHANGES IN Bulgarian media landscape and its media capture were

discussed with another former Director of News and Current Affairs at bTV, Venelin Petkov. His interview with Darik Radio summarized well current developments. Petkov stated about bTV:

I will not discuss the entertainment shows or the choice of primetime content, but from the journalistic practice point of view[...] it disappeared. It was replaced by information, infotainment, and publicist broadcasts where political propaganda is practically pouring in from one, another, and a third direction [...] What is left then? News without context.

Bulgarian media system is characterized by high levels of political parallelism as media ownership is concentrated and influenced by business interests leading to a lack of critical reporting especially concerning sensitive issues or corruption.⁴² Low levels of media freedom are also observed and a small number of media companies dominate the market.⁴³ The organization of the Bulgarian media system further deters journalistic investigations of corruption, transparency of decision-making, and availability of impartial

“THE ‘EMPTY CHAIR’ PHENOMENON RESURFACED IN DECEMBER 2025 WITH THE REMOVAL OF MARIA TSANTSAROVA, THE HOST OF BTV’S MORNING SHOW.”

information to Bulgarian audiences. YouTube and various podcasts still provide platform for more investigative journalism as Bulgarian audiences search for alternative channels of information and discussions. Bulgarian audiences, their media repertoires, and lowering media trust remain some areas neglected by researchers.

April 2026: Campaigning

A recent report showed that the majority of large political parties invested substantial resources in collecting donations and media campaigning. Rumen Radev resigned from his presidential role in January 2026, joining the elections with “Progressive Bulgaria”. He was earlier estimated to lead among preliminary polls.⁴⁴ His party is reported to have received the largest amount of donations both in terms of sum and number of donations – 779 834 euros, followed by DPS-NN with 300 350 euros and PP-DB with 44 671 euros.⁴⁵

Similar trends are reflected in the spending on media. “Progressive Bulgaria” was a forerunner in advertising expenditure, spending over 196 000 euros followed by PP-DB with over 172 000 euros and Revival with 163 000 euros. However, the parties differed in their selection of outlets and approaches. “Progressive Bulgaria” and “Revival” focused on major television channels such as BNT, Nova, bTV, and Evrokomb. PP-DB had a more mixed approach by choosing similar television channels, but also radio (BNR and Darik Radio), and news outlets. Delyan Peevski’s DPS-NN and GERB did not follow the same pattern but prioritized digital web/news portals or aggregators such as Vesti.bg, Dir.bg, 24 hours, Epicenter or Aktualno with lower general expenditure.⁴⁶ Social media campaigning through Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram was also visible as political leaders often presented themselves visiting constituencies or campaigning.

Conclusion: What is next?

The political mobilization of Bulgarian citizens, unity across oppositional parties, and the sheer scale of the protests resulted in the successful withdrawal of the budget. That being said, a new budget has not yet been approved, as Bulgaria has entered the Eurozone without a budgetary framework. Some media outlets claimed that the budget would not be approved until the summer, thereby continuing the previous year’s financial framework.⁴⁷ This gives the impression of a country running on autopilot without long-term policy planning. The new party of the former Bulgarian president Rumen Radev will play a key role in deciding the 2026 budgetary framework. Bulgarian political landscape will be restructured after Rumen Radev’s electoral victory in April 2026. His party “Progressive Bulgaria” has been the first one to gain full majority since 1997 when the UDF won 137 seats.⁴⁸ Five parties are expected to enter the Bulgarian parliament.

Rumen Radev’s party “Progressive Bulgaria” is the winner in April 2026 with 44.59% of the votes in the 52nd National Assembly.⁴⁹ The difference between Progressive Bulgaria and GERB-UDF (13.39%) or PP-DB (12.62%) is substantial, demonstrating Bulgarians wish for change or a new alternative. Other parties entering the parliament are DPS (7.12%) and Revival (4.26%). Pro-

gressive Bulgaria and PP-DB were the most popular among gen Z and millennial voters. According to Trend research, Progressive Bulgaria captured 18.5% of former PP-DB voters and 15.7% of those previously aligned with GERB, demonstrating that constituencies with Euro-Atlantic leanings also chose Radev.⁵⁰ Rumen Radev’s position favouring a more “pragmatic” approach to relations with the Russian Federation has also attracted former voters of Revival (10.7%).⁵¹ BSP remains outside the parliament for the first time after the transition period in the 1990s. Both ITN and BSP-UL failed to cross the electoral threshold, similar to the electoral fate previously experienced by GERB’s former coalition partners, such as the Patriotic Front and the former Reformist Bloc. A similar governing arrangement (sglobka) eroded PP-DB’s support in previous elections. Radev addressed the nation after the election day stating in front of Associated Press:

Bulgaria will make every effort to continue on its European path. But believe me, a strong Bulgaria and a strong Europe need critical thinking and pragmatism. Europe has fallen victim to its own ambition to be a moral leader in a world without rules.⁵²

This statement summarises aspects of the party’s ideology, foreign policy orientation, and national priorities.

Winning the elections is not a guarantee for stability in Bulgarian politics. Smaller parties were ousted from Bulgarian politics in April 2026 while Radev’s majority can put an end to an endless cycle of elections. However, little is known about the new party, its policy goals, its commitment to profound reforms, or its geopolitical stands within the European Union. More substantial reforms require political partnerships with other parties. For example, Progressive Bulgaria and PP-DB can work together towards the replacement of the Supreme Judicial Council, but their geopolitical differences remain alongside GERB and DPS presence in the Parliament. The Bulgarian voters have opened the political arena to a new actor in times of instability and rising costs of living, but the present consolidation of public trust remains uncertain. Political parties will have the significant task of negotiating and reaching agreement on key domestic policies and reforms, as a lack of alignment on foreign policy or public expenditure can be major obstacles. In Bulgaria, protest is not merely a reaction – it is a form of democratic participation, as the results from this round of elections demonstrated a willingness for change despite the unknown. Each wave of mobilization reflects a society unwilling to relinquish its commitment to accountability, transparency, and reform as Bulgarians want to live in a fairer and more equal state. 

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Note: Borislav Sarafov submitted a resignation request to the prosecutors’ office April 22, 2026.

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