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# Battered by Geopolitical Winds, Bulgaria Struggles to Restart Much Needed Reforms

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## Introduction

In 2021, Bulgaria went through a turbulent political year, followed by an even more turbulent first half of 2022. In the domestic arena, divisions between established parties serving rent seeking elites (Dimitrova, 2018) and newer movements challenging the state capture model in Bulgarian politics became clearly visible in the course of a year that contained three parliamentary elections and a presidential one. In the arena of EU policy making, various European Union (EU) actors, including Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Varhelyi, German Chancellor Scholtz, French President Macron and diplomats working as part of the French Presidency of the Council of Ministers have been working on a compromise proposal opening the way for lifting Bulgaria's veto on the start of accession negotiations with North Macedonia. Domestically, however, some political actors have attempted – and partly succeeded – to politicize relations with neighbouring North Macedonia and to mobilize public opinion against a compromise. The complexity on the domestic and European fronts that challenged pro-reform political leaders trying to re-start reforms and restore the eroded institutions of governance increased further with the Russian invasion of Ukraine. While Bulgaria was not the only European country battered by the harsh geopolitical winds, the Russian invasion of Ukraine exposed the extensive penetration of Russian influence in Bulgaria and laid bare Russia's destabilizing influence on societal debates and democratic political processes.

This contribution provides an overview of these developments and argues that the opening for reform of institutions of governance created by the rise of reformist parties, such as Democratic Bulgaria and 'We Continue the Change' has been, in contrast to the past, endangered, rather than reinforced by interactions in the European arena.

There are two trends to be observed. On the one hand, in the domestic arena, a significant cleavage has become visible between pro-reform and status quo parties. Specifically, in 2021 pro-reform parties became a force to be reckoned with, while at the same time under a banner of change and with anti-corruption rhetoric populist movements also arose ultimately serving to protect the status quo. The most important domestic cleavage thus became one separating those committed to govern based on universalist principles and the rule of law and those engaged in 'competitive particularism' (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015,

p.31–2).<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, domestic politicization of the choices to be made at the EU level in the context of enlargement policy and Russian influence after the start of the Russian invasion in Ukraine have delineated a cleavage between nationalist and pro-Russian politicians on the one hand and Euro-Atlantic ones, on the other. Crucially, these two cleavages do not overlap, as they have usually done in Bulgarian history, as some pro-European parties are engaged in informal and populist politics and aim to preserve corrupt practices and institutions.

This article argues therefore, that the EU and Bulgaria have been presented with a dilemma which is more complex than ever. For the EU, the choice between supporting a new government committed to far-reaching reforms of the kind the EU has been calling for since Bulgaria's accession – enhancing rule of law and limiting corruption – and applying pressure to facilitate the start of negotiations with North Macedonia, important for reasons of fairness, policy coherence and credibility, has been a stark one. While the French presidency of the Council of the EU brokered a compromise that made it possible to unblock the deadlock on North Macedonia (Bechev, 2022b), the mismatch between domestic and foreign policy cleavages in Bulgarian politics will likely continue to cause problems.

The article will proceed as follows. After sketching the context of Bulgaria's path to the European Union, the first section discusses stagnation and backsliding that characterized the end of a decade of GERB (*Grazhdani za Evropejsko Razvitie na Bulgaria*: Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria) rule. The section outlines domestic political trends and developments that led to mass protests targeting corruption and problems with the rule of law in 2020–21. Subsequently, the dynamics of emerging protest parties and movements in 2021, when elections took place three times, will be explained with an emphasis on sources of electoral volatility. The article then turns to the first six months of 2021 to follow the six months of a reformist government formation and the challenges that brought its quick demise, to arrive at a first analysis of the mismatch between domestic cleavages and geopolitical developments that create the tensions and dangers for Bulgarian democracy.

## I. Bulgaria's Decade as an EU Member

Bulgaria, along with Romania, has been labelled an EU laggard since accession (Dimitrov and Plachkova, 2021; Dimitrova, 2020). In the early 2000s, during the final stages of Eastern enlargement, concerns about rule of law, especially the accountability of certain parts of the judiciary and prosecution, state capture and the role of organized crime led the EU to postpone Bulgaria's (and Romania's) accession to 2007. Bulgaria's Accession Treaty included additional suspension clauses, in addition to the safeguards introduced by the EU for the 2004 accession group (Noutcheva and Bechev, 2008). Post-accession, the EU created a monitoring mechanism for both Bulgaria and Romania, the so-called Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM) that involved regular reports from the European Commission focusing on areas of persistent concern such as the rule of law. This mechanism, however, resulted in no great success in improving the rule of law

<sup>1</sup> As Mungiu-Pippidi (2015, p. 31) has theorized, in the governance context of new democracies informal particularistic structures exist alongside and undermine formal universalistic institutions. Elites spoiling the state co-exist with other elites, creating a context of institutional pluralism coexisting with competitive particularism.

(Dimitrov and Plachkova 2021; Dimitrov et al., 2014, Gateva, 2013). The main reason was that institutional adjustments remained formal and piecemeal, while underlying, informal relations structured politics along patron-client lines (Dimitrova, 2018; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015) and undermined the ability of the institutions of governance – the judiciary and regulators – to fulfil their functions.

Yet in the last decade, the escalating conflict over the rule of law and democracy in Hungary and Poland and the EU's inability to address backsliding in these member states (Kelemen, 2020), made unreformed Bulgaria look good, or at least not as bad, to the EU. Successive Bulgarian governments under Boyko Borissov and his GERB party did not engage in very visible moves to undermine democratic institutions, replace judges or ban media outlets. At the EU level, GERB and Borissov had a reputation of following Germany's lead in the Council and aligning with European People's Party (EPP) in the European Parliament. These alliances and the use of emphatically pro-European rhetoric have served to mask the shortcomings of Bulgarian democracy. Bulgaria's long-standing Prime Minister, Boyko Borissov, was careful not to engage in anti-European rhetoric, in contrast to Viktor Orban in Hungary. In crucial votes, such as the 2015 vote on the ill-fated Commission plan for redistribution of asylum seekers and subsequent Council decision taken by qualified majority,<sup>2</sup> Bulgaria voted for the decision and did not join the Visegrad group in their dissent. Bulgaria's 2018 presidency of the Council of Ministers was reasonably successful and managed to make some progress in key dossiers, including enlargement with the Western Balkans (Veleva-Eftimova and Haralampiev, 2022).

## II. Stagnation Followed by Backsliding

Despite compliance and a seemingly smooth record in the EU, the state of Bulgarian democracy until recently could be described as stagnation disguised as stability. Under the almost uninterrupted dominance of GERB and its leader Boyko Borissov since 2009 (except for a brief Socialist party led coalition in 2013–14), a barely discernible transformation unfolded over three successive cabinets, leading to a more pronounced trend of democratic backsliding in 2018–19. Backsliding set in with several key features: a more overt and visible fusion of business and politics led by, but not limited to the DPS (*Dvizhenie za Prava I Svobodi* – Movement for Rights and Freedoms) and GERB, increasing dominance of personalized politics around the figure of Borissov, and politicized prosecution. Ultimately, a serious erosion of democratic institutions occurred from the first to the third Borissov cabinets. Initially, his government incorporated some political and expert heavyweights and respected democratic checks and balances, but by the end of the third GERB coalition government it combined executive aggrandisement and nationalist discourses with informal, but powerful influences from dubious figures sanctioned by the US, such as member of parliament and media tycoon Peevski.

The outline of a harder authoritarian trend in Bulgarian politics became visible in 2019 through developments such as the strengthening of the Office of the Prosecutor in Chief and the creation of specialized prosecution and courts. The Prosecutor in Chief, Ivan

<sup>2</sup>COUNCIL DECISION (EU) 2015/1601 of 22 September 2015 establishing provisional measures in the area of international protection for the benefit of Italy and Greece.

Geshev, had been appointed in October 2019, despite his candidacy attracting serious concerns over politicized prosecution and leading to protests (Gotev, 2019). Indeed, under Geshev the Prosecutor's office soon engaged in politically motivated and unfounded prosecutions against inconvenient politicians and public figures such as the case against former ministers Simeon Dyankov and Traicho Traikov and newspaper owner Ivo Prokopiev in 2020. Ultimately, the case was dismissed with the judge stressing that normal political and advisory activities were presented as criminal by the prosecution. Prokopiev, for example, was accused of expressing an opinion in his capacity of a member of a national advisory council body, while Traikov and Dyankov acted in professional capacity and competent manner (Mitov, 2020a, 2020b).

These authoritarian trends, enabled by GERB's decade long dominance on the political stage, were challenged by mass protests that started in the summer of 2020 and continued until April 2021. The initial impulse for the protests was provided by the leader of the right centre party 'Da, Bulgaria' Hristo Ivanov in an action that brilliantly illustrated the problem of state capture. Ivanov attempted to land with a boat on a beach near the Bulgarian Black Sea port of Burgas where Ahmed Dogan, the former Party chairman of DPS (representing the Bulgarian Turkish minority) had built a private port and summer residence and taken over parts of the coast. Despite the constitutional provision that beaches are public property, Ivanov and his companion were stopped by Dogan's bodyguards. Transmitted live via social media, Ivanov's failed attempt to plant the Bulgarian flag on the guarded beach near Dogan's compound attracted attention and caused indignation.

'Da Bulgaria' and other political figures, notably the President Rumen Radev, condemned the actions of the security guards, especially as it became clear that they were employed by a state institution, the National Service for Protection (of politicians), despite the fact that Dogan was not an active politician. When, a few days later, members of a specialized unit of the Prosecutor's office raided the Presidency in apparent retaliation for his criticism, there was widespread anger that led to popular mobilization. Broad and diverse groups of citizens were mobilized to protest, demanding the resignation of the government and the Prosecutor in Chief.

### III. Protests and Elections

Against this background of stagnation followed by backsliding and mass mobilization, 2021 became a remarkable year in Bulgarian politics, bringing citizens to the polls for no less than three parliamentary elections, four if we count the presidential election scheduled in November 2021. Bulgarian politics entered a period in which, on the one hand 'civic activism produced change and change bearers' (Krasteva and Todorov, 2020, p. 184) and on the other, high levels of political fragmentation and lack of experience with broad coalitions presented serious obstacles to both political stability and the impulse for reforms desired by protesters.

The parliamentary elections in April, July and November 2021 became a rollercoaster of winners and new formations bursting in the political arena with programmes for change. In continuing to make choices in favour of new formations on the political stage, however, the electorate sometimes showed signs of being angrier than informed, to paraphrase Krasteva and Todorov's apt formulation (Krasteva and Todorov, 2020, p. 184).

All three elections returned fragmented parliaments signalling dissatisfaction with GERB and long-established political parties such as the Bulgarian Socialists. All three elections challenged GERB's dominance but did not produce a winner with a strong majority. Most of all, the decline of voter turnout from 50.6 per cent in April to 40 per cent in November 2021 signalled broad dissatisfaction with political elites and an electoral fatigue that politicians would ignore at their peril.

The April 2021 election provided for the first break with GERB-led stability when 31.9 per cent of the vote going for different parties and formations associated with protests. The rise of a movement formed by talk show host Slavi Trifonov, called '*Ima takuv narod*' ITN ('There is such a people') was remarkable. Despite being a newcomer without a clear political programme, ITN received 17.7 per cent of the vote in April 2021. ITN would play a key role in the turbulent political year that followed, campaigning as a new alternative to existing parties. It soon became clear that their rise as a shooting star on the horizon of Bulgarian politics fit into a post 1989 tradition of formations achieving success out of nothing in the Bulgarian political stage. Trifonov enjoyed an especially privileged starting position due to his many years as the host of a popular talk show on Bulgarian television, but his style of politics put him firmly into a line of charismatic politicians engaging in populism and identitarianism (Gurov and Zankina, 2013; Krasteva, 2016, Krasteva and Todorov, 2020).

Democratic Bulgaria, Ivanov's electoral coalition uniting '*Da, Bulgaria*' campaigning for judicial reform and the Greens, reaped some benefits from their successful political activism and grew to 9.5 per cent. Another new protest linked movement named *Izpravi se! Mafiata vun* ('Get Up! Out with the mafia') also made it to parliament. Given the unwillingness of these formations and the Socialists to form a government with GERB, the winner of the April 2021 election (with 26.2 per cent of the vote), no government could be formed after this first election and a new one was scheduled for July. In July 2021, Trifonov's ITN defeated GERB to become the narrow winner with 23.8 per cent of the vote. Yet Trifonov's populist approach to politics, unclear priorities, unwillingness to engage in constructive dialogue with other parties and to compromise on personnel decisions led to another failure to form a government.

Ultimately, the November 2021 parliamentary elections produced yet another new winner, the two-month-old protest movement PP (*Produlzhavame Promyanata* – 'Continue the Change'), led by Kiril Petkov and Assen Vassilev, who had featured as ministers in a President-appointed caretaker interim government bridging the gap until a regular government could be formed. Both Harvard graduates, Petkov and Vassilev had distinguished themselves with energy, sensitivity towards socially disadvantaged parts of society and willingness to challenge key administrative and agency appointments of GERB and DPS. The two young politicians conducted an energetic campaign. Benefitting also from disappointment in ITN's failure to form a government, PP provided new hope for dismantling the GERB model, campaigning on a slogan of zero tolerance for corruption. Thus, in the third parliamentary election of 2021, Petkov and Vassilev's PP won with 25.7 per cent of the vote, against 23.2 per cent for GERB.

The shifting support for different (marginal) winners in these successive elections can be understood as a reinforcement of the trend of electoral volatility explained by Krasteva and Todorov as an internalized and polarized view of democracy. Since the 1990s



Bulgarian voters have been punishing successive ruling elites for being unable to translate electoral promises into effective policies (Krasteva and Todorov, 2020, p. 183). Building on this, a somewhat more optimistic interpretation would focus on the increasing voter support for pro-reform movements and parties, be they on a liberal (PP, Democratic Bulgaria) or populist spectrum (ITN), as a rejection of the GERB model of politics and Borissov's increasing slide into authoritarianism.

Petkov and Vassliev's movement needed, however, several partners to form a governing coalition: Bulgaria's 46th parliament, resulting from the November 2021 election, was highly fragmented.<sup>3</sup> As the winner, PP approached Trifonov's ITN, the Socialists and Democratic Bulgaria (an electoral coalition representing *Da, Bulgaria* and the Greens). The choice of potential coalition partners was determined not only by the election results, the political programme of PP and their intention to have zero tolerance against corruption that excluded GERB and DPS, but also the liberal character that excluded far right, pro-Russian formation *Vuzrazhdane* (Revival).

An important break with previous practices of murky political deals taking place behind closed doors was the process of coalition building itself, which under the leadership of PP took place in working groups whose discussions was transmitted live for the public. The focus of the coalition agreement were the programmes of the four formations in key policy areas.

Despite the potential for posturing and symbolic politics, the working group approach was unexpectedly successful. When, in December 2021, barely two months after the last election, Petkov announced that a government based on a four-party coalition would be formed, this was a real achievement. Not only was there an answer to the rather mixed messages sent by the electorate, but coalition formation was conducted with reference to programmes and electoral promises, rather than personalities.

#### IV. Policy Achievements and New Tensions

A significant policy achievement of Petkov's government in its brief period of office was the completion of an innovative Resilience and Recovery Plan and the European Commission's approval of that plan on 7 April 2022. Domestic press coverage focusing on the Commission's comments obscured the fact that the plan was approved relatively swiftly and with praise for its green and digital elements. Commission President von der Leyen praised the fact that almost 60 per cent of the planned investments aimed to facilitate the Bulgaria's green transition, making the plan one of the greenest approved to date (European Commission, 2022). Indeed, with the envisaged measures to facilitate Bulgaria's energy transition, the plan has the potential to deliver mid- and long-term gains not only for development and green transition, but also for Bulgarian energy security and energy independence from Russia.

Among the other policy priorities of the Petkov government that were addressed early on were social policy measures such as increase of basic old age pensions, and institutional reforms such as a law abolishing specialized courts. Further steps were taken towards reforming anti-corruption institutions such as the Commission for Combatting Corruption and Confiscation of Illegally Acquired Property. With some changes in the

<sup>3</sup>Central Electoral Commission, results here: [https://results.cik.bg/pi2021\\_07/rezultati/index.html](https://results.cik.bg/pi2021_07/rezultati/index.html).

mandate of the Commission, its last chairman, former Prosecutor in Chief, Sotir Tzatzarov was dismissed, but the appointment of a new and proactive chairman was blocked by ITN, one of the coalition parties (Paunova and Lazarov, 2022).

Despite these relatively successful first steps, the period in which the coalition government was able to function in a relatively normal way was very brief. The patchwork coalition between recently arisen formations (PP, ITN, Democratic Bulgaria) and the Socialists, the oldest Bulgarian political party, differed profoundly on key dimensions of domestic politics and foreign policy. These differences were exacerbated when Bulgaria was exposed to the strong wings of geopolitical change and the emerging symbolic – and real – dividing line in Europe between democracy and autocracy marked by the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Only two months after the Petkov government took office in December 2021, the Russian invasion in Ukraine brought underlying divisions over geopolitical orientations into the spotlight.

Predictably, the impact of the war in Ukraine on the Bulgarian political stage has been very significant, due to its geographical proximity, historical links and divided public opinion influenced by active propaganda coming from Russia. Since the start of the war, the intensification of the spread of fake news and opinions promoting Russia's position on the war has been noteworthy (Nikolov and Sideris, 2022). Some Bulgarian politicians, most notably the President, were supportive of or even aligned with Russian interests through their official stated positions. Prime Minister Petkov's early dismissal of the minister of defence, Stefan Yanev, following Yanev's calls for neutrality and usage of the Russian term for the war as 'a special operation' was one indication of the conflicts associated with Russian influence (Oliver, 2022a). This was followed, in late June, by the expulsion of 70 Russian diplomats as one of the last and most significant policy decisions of the Petkov government (Oliver, 2022b).

In May 2022, requests from the Ukrainian government for assistance with weapons and munitions of a Soviet compatible calibre were discussed in the Bulgarian parliament and opened further rifts within the governing coalition. The Socialists, with a traditionally pro-Russian electorate, were adamant they would not allow weapons export or donations to Ukraine. Democratic Bulgaria, which united the pro-European 'Da Bulgaria' and Green parties, however, voted in favour of and campaigned for support to Ukraine.

Prime Minister Petkov's government took a supportive position towards Ukraine in the months following the invasion, signalling Bulgarian allegiance to EU's joint positions and sanctions. It was met by an increasingly negative rhetoric by the Russian authorities, labelling Bulgaria a hostile state together with the other EU member states (Al Jazeera, 2022). Despite Russian pressure, Bulgaria voted for the successive packages of sanctions adopted by the EU without reservation and became, in May 2022, one of the first two states to stop receiving gas from Gazprom due to the government's refusal to pay for gas in roubles, in keeping with EU sanctions (Bedrov, 2022).

Domestic opposition to the pro-Ukraine stance taken by the government was led by the President Rumen Radev, formerly a political ally of Petkov and Vassilev. Radev made a number of statements in favour of neutrality, presenting the conflict as a standoff between great powers rather than an invasion and a breach of international law by Russia. Politicians from the far-right party *Vuzrazhdane* (Revival) and especially its chairman openly supported Russia in the conflict.



Next to these tensions running through Bulgarian politics and society, another domestic political crisis unfolded in the spring and summer of 2022 in the tail-end of turbulence that started in 2021. Rather than following geopolitical dividing lines, this crisis developed along the pro-/anti-reform dividing line, the cleavage between politicians committed to restoring institutions and those involved in particularistic, patronage politics undermining democratic institutions. This crisis displayed the difference between governance according to democratic rules and constitutional principles and informal governance with use of social media (mostly Facebook) for decision making and communication. The protagonists representing both sets of political actors, reformists versus rent seekers, were respectively PP with Petkov and Vassilev on the one side and ITN with Trifonov, on the other.

In early June 2022, ITN leader Trifonov announced, via Facebook, that he was ‘withdrawing his ministers’ from the government (RFE/RL news 2022). His explanation for the withdrawal was that the government had managed public finances in an unsatisfactory way and that the Prime Minister had ‘made secret deals’ with European partners to lift Bulgaria’s veto for the start of accession negotiations with North Macedonia (Bedrov, 2022). Subsequently, on various occasion Trifonov accused the Prime Minister of treason for exploring solutions for the impasse with North Macedonia. In their turn, Prime Minister Petkov and others revealed that ITN’s real grievances were the government’s refusal to allocate funds to construction companies for dubious contracts and to open the door to a political approval criterion in the assessment of public procurement tenders (Paunova and Lazarov, 2022).

A vote of no confidence against the Petkov government was tabled by GERB a few days after Trifonov announced his withdrawal of support from the governing coalition. The vote was held on 22 June 2022 and was successful, supported by GERB, DPS, former coalition partner ITN and far right formation *Vuzrazhdane* (Revival), bringing down the Petkov government (RFE/RL Bulgarian Service News, 2022).

After the vote, the Prime Minister and other government figures pointed at the government’s decisive actions to stop systematic corruption compromising food and veterinary checks at the border crossing between Bulgaria and Turkey (Oliver, 2022c) as one of the main reasons for the actions of formally opposed political formations to bring down the government. This example illustrates the role played by informal, particularistic governance in Bulgarian politics, involving actors using their position in government for influence and maintaining patronage networks with business but also, sometimes, organized crime.

## V. The (Informal) Veto on North Macedonia’s Negotiations as a Domestic Political Problem

Finally, turning to the foreign affairs front, the main issue dominating 2021 was Bulgaria’s (informal) veto on North Macedonia’s EU accession negotiations. Bulgaria had been an active supporter of North Macedonia and other Western Balkan candidates up to 2019, making enlargement a priority of its Presidency of the Council of Ministers in 2018 (Gotev, 2020). The country shifted position in autumn 2020 from a supporter of the accession of Western Balkan candidates to opposing the start of negotiations with North Macedonia. In October 2019 Bulgaria had adopted a framework negotiation

position, which, despite supporting the start of negotiations with the two countries, specified 20 conditions to be fulfilled by North Macedonia. Many of those were related to ‘the lack of progress and implementation of the Bulgaria-North Macedonia friendship treaty of 2017’ (Marusic, 2019). Among other requirements Bulgaria asked that North Macedonia renounce potential claims on the region which extends beyond the country’s geographical borders into both Bulgaria and Greece. Further claims related to removal of signs denouncing ‘Bulgarian fascist occupators’ from monuments. In the autumn of 2020, former Bulgarian foreign minister Zaharieva quoted ‘hatred, anti-Bulgarian rhetoric and falsifications of history’ as the problems of the Bulgarian government (Gotev, 2020).

More broadly, it can be observed that exporting bilateral claims into enlargement negotiations has been a part, albeit unintentional, of EU enlargement governance from the beginning (Preston, 1997). Enlargement decision-making, involving unanimity at all stages, provides many opportunities of imposing a veto, which have been used in the past overtly or behind the scenes by member states. Cases where bilateral demands referred to points of disagreement unrelated to the *acquis*, such as Austrian demands to repeal the Benes decrees in the Czech Republic, have been particularly problematic, as they go against the objective framing and logic of enlargement policy (Telicka and Bartak, 2007, p. 152). Needless to say, demands relating to the Macedonian language or identity fall into this category and represent a particularly blatant intrusion into a process that already contains many unforeseen obstacles.

Finding a political solution to reconcile two very different understandings of recent history has been difficult. The interwoven history of the region and different perspectives on events of the last century make bilateral issues near impossible to address from a historical perspective and much more likely to be overcome by focusing on current needs (Bechev, 2022b). On both sides of the border, in Bulgaria and North Macedonia, there are political actors who gain popularity by appealing to the past. For example, the changed Bulgarian position was defended by former Deputy Prime minister Karakachanov, coming as a natural extension of the programme of his party, the so called VMRO (*Vutreshno Makedonska Revoliutzionna Organizatzia* – Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization), a coalition partner in Borissov’s third cabinet (Gotev, 2020). VMRO, as their name suggests, are a party that sees itself as a successor of an early 20<sup>th</sup> century revolutionary movement struggling for the liberation of Macedonia from the Ottoman rule. They have been strongly focused on themes related to North Macedonia, although more generally fall into the spectrum of nationalist and far right political formations.

During 2021, in the absence of a regular cabinet, Bulgaria was represented in international and EU fora by President Radev, who defended the hard-line position on North Macedonia reiterated by the Consultative Council on National Security which he chairs and convenes. The Bulgarian Socialist party, a former and future potential coalition partner for Petkov’s formation, has been aligned with the President and ITN’s position (Bechev, 2022a). To neutralize some of the attacks on this issue against him and PP, Petkov announced in early June 2022 that all decisions related to the Bulgarian position on North Macedonia would be discussed and taken in parliament.

Faced with the need to balance opening the door to Ukraine as a candidate state and achieving some progress with North Macedonia and Albania, the EU, through the President of the Commission Ursula von der Leyen, Commissioner for Neighbourhood and

Enlargement Varhelyi, and President Macron as the head of the French Presidency of the Council, took a pro-active position, sometimes putting Bulgaria under pressure and sometimes exploring compromise options. Ultimately, in mid-2022 the Bulgarian Foreign ministry negotiated with the French EU Presidency a proposal that would link some of Bulgaria's demands to the EU accession process, for example the inclusion of a Bulgarian minority in North Macedonia's constitution (Bechev, 2022b). This proposal was put to the Bulgarian Parliament at the same time as the vote of no-confidence against the government led by Kiril Petkov, in late June 2022.

The refusal of ITN and *Vuzrazhdane* to support the French proposal containing many of the Bulgarian demands, provides further evidence that the North Macedonia issue is used to mobilise nationalist sentiment. Together with the Bulgarian Socialist Party these formations vie for the votes of the large part of the Bulgarian electorate – more than 80 per cent<sup>4</sup> – who do not support Bulgaria lifting its veto until consensus is reached on the historical past (Bechev, 2022a). There are many Bulgarians for whom North Macedonia is an emotional theme deeply connected to recent history and Bulgaria's struggle for independence – just as it is for North Macedonia itself.<sup>5</sup>

Compromise proposals came up against the fact that for various political actors both in Bulgaria and North Macedonia it has been more advantageous to gain electoral support by escalating the conflict. These include, among others, the two parties carrying the name of pre-liberation Macedonian revolutionary movement VMRO: Bulgaria's small VMRO and North Macedonia's main opposition party, VMRO-DPMNE.

## Conclusion

This contribution has outlined the different dimensions accounting for the exceptional complexity and volatility of Bulgarian politics in 2021 and into the first half of 2022. In contrast to the pre-accession period, when the EU's pro-reform demands have strengthened domestic reformers, in the course of the last year the demands of EU politics have added a layer of complexity, which, together with existing politicization of relations with North Macedonia, has led to further instability.

Ultimately, electoral volatility and the fragmentation in 2021, reflecting the underlying cleavages discussed in this article, made a stable government impossible with the current parliamentary configuration. At the time of writing, it appears that consultations for another government within the same parliament are not likely to succeed and Bulgarian voters may be asked to go to the polls again in the autumn of 2022.

The short window of opportunity to embark on further reforms in the domestic arena, involving appointment of pro-active heads of the anti-corruption committee, the banking and competition regulators, among others, is closing for the time being. In their last weeks in office, however, Petkov's government and allies have demonstrated the huge potential they have for making historical changes and reforms eradicating corruption, unseen in Bulgarian politics since the 1990s.

In the foreign policy arena, decisive last-minute actions have led to unexpected outcomes as well. On the day following the vote of no confidence, the Bulgarian parliament

<sup>4</sup>Based on a representative opinion poll by Alpha Research commissioned by GERB MEP Kovatchev in 2020.

<sup>5</sup>The issue is destabilizing and highly problematic in North Macedonia, as attested by the fact that violent protests against the French proposal and government of Prime minister Kovacevski erupted on 5 July 2022 in Skopje (Bechev, 2022b).

accepted the main lines of compromise on North Macedonia contained in the French presidency proposal. PP was supported by GERB and DPS, while ITN, the Bulgarian Socialist Party and *Vuzrazhdane* voted against, demonstrating again that domestic reform cleavages and foreign policy cleavages do not overlap. Albeit too late for the historic European Council of June 2022, Bulgaria amended its position in line with the proposed compromise to allow opening of negotiations with North Macedonia. A second and, no less momentous, historical move was made on 30 June 2022 with the government decision, based on information from the intelligence services, to expel 70 Russian diplomats for espionage (Oliver, 2022b).

For the EU, it is important to grasp that whatever most politicians and member states think of Bulgarian demands regarding minority recognition or the implementation of the bilateral treaty with North Macedonia – and there are not any known supporters of them in the Council –they have a huge potential for nationalist mobilization which could also increase Eurosceptic sentiments in Bulgaria. The same is true of North Macedonia, as mass protests and demonstrations in Skopje against the French proposal in July 2022 attest. On both sides of the Bulgarian-Macedonian border, pro-European politicians struggle to contain nationalist sentiment that eschews compromise and undermines the potential for prosperous and democratic future of both countries. The function of European integration has been to contain such sentiments in other parts of Europe, but such processes have to be put in motion by elites appreciating the need to attend to the needs of the present rather than the grievances of the past (Bechev, 2022b).

Turning back to Bulgaria, the possibility exists that existing nationalistic sentiment and a strong disinformation campaign from Russia could lead, in the next election, to the return of either corrupt and clientelist or pro-Russian parties in government, leaving the EU with an exposed South Eastern flank in an area that is still of great interest to expansionist Russia.

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