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Bulgaria: Political Developments and Data in 2023

The Make-Shift Cabinet

MARIA SPIROVA
Leiden University, *the Netherlands*

Abstract

In 2023, Bulgaria saw the first regular, politically accountable, Cabinet after two years of caretaker cabinets following early elections in April. The election saw Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (*Grazhdani za evropeysko razvitie na Bulgaria*, GERB) emerge as the plurality winner but without a clear majority, and a coalition government between GERB and We Continue the Change–Democratic Bulgaria (PP-DB) materialized. Seen as an artificially cobbled-together creation, the Cabinet faced increasing opposition and two failed no-confidence votes. A constitutional amendment in late 2023 limited the president's power to appoint caretaker cabinets. Bulgaria remained divided on its stance toward Russia and nationalism, and political apathy rose, casting doubt on future stability.

Introduction

The year 2023 brought a new term to Bulgarian politics: *сглобка*, or cobbled together, or make-shift Cabinet. Following two years of extreme instability, 2023 saw, finally, the installation of a politically accountable Cabinet between Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (*Grazhdani za evropeysko razvitie na Bulgaria*, GERB) and We Continue the Change (*Prodalzhavame promyanata*, PP)–Democratic Bulgaria (*Demokratichna Bulgaria*, DB). Seen as a political creation artificially cobbled together under the influence of various Western actors, the Cabinet struggled with increasing opposition and a declining public image throughout the year. While steps toward further EU integration were made, and the influence of the openly pro-Russian President Radev was curbed both formally and de facto, the country remains split on the Russian question, while rising nationalism and political apathy do not promise a clear positive political horizon.

Election report

Twenty-two parties and coalitions registered and ran in the early elections on 2 April 2023. These were the fifth early elections in a row, keeping in the spirit of the previous two years (for details, see Spirova 2022, 2023). The campaign started in early March and was dominated by two main events. One was the formation of an electoral coalition between PP and DB in early February. Under the acronym PP-DB, they appeared together at the elections and vowed to govern together, having signed a formal agreement that set up their policy

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priorities of making Bulgaria a normal, democratic, European state with a high standard of living and guaranteed rights. The second was the release, by the United States, of a second list of names of Bulgarian businesspeople and companies alleged to have participated in various corrupt dealings in the spirit of the Magnitsky law, many of whom were linked to GERB (US Department of the Treasure 2023). Neither of these prevented, however, the emergence of GERB as the plurality winner of the elections in April.

With a voter turnout of 40.6 per cent, just as in 2022, the elections did not produce a clear majority winner (Table 1). GERB solidified its plurality with a few percentage points more, while the PP-DB coalition, in fact, lost votes and seats, compared to 2022. The nationalist Revival (*Vazrazhdane*) drew even more support than previously and emerged as the third party in Parliament. The Turkish-dominated Movement for Rights and Freedoms (*Dvijenie za prava i svobodi*, DPS) preserved its vote share but dropped to fourth party faction in the legislature. The Socialists (*Bulgaraska socialisticheska partiya za Bulgaria* [BSP]) continued on their downward trend. In a somewhat surprising development, There is Such a Nation (*Ima takuv narod*, ITN), which had remained outside Parliament in 2022, managed to pass the 4 per cent threshold and obtained representation in Parliament. Overall, however, the seat distribution did not promise an easy solution for a Cabinet. In the context of two years of caretaker cabinets, which de facto gave power to President Radev (see Spirova 2023), this was an unwelcome development.

Cabinet report

The year 2022 had ended with the failure of GERB to form a Cabinet (based on the 2022 election results), and early 2023 did not bring anything new. PP was given the possibility to form a Cabinet next but did not even try, and neither did the next in line, the BSP. There were no serious talks between the parties for a possible coalition and in early February, the 48th National Assembly was disbanded, and the caretaker government (Donev II) remained in power as new elections were scheduled. The Cabinet remained the same as the previous one except for a change of the Minister of Culture, who resigned in February for personal reasons (see Tables 2 and 3).

Another Cabinet change followed in May, when the Foreign Affairs Minister, Nikolay Milkov, was sent to Brussels and was replaced by Ivan Kondov in the caretaker Cabinet.

The formation of the postelection Cabinet followed relatively quickly in comparison to the prolonged formation periods in the previous two years. With pressure from the EU, a joint Cabinet of GERB and PP was formed in an open attempt to limit the de facto power of President Radev. With an openly pro-Russian stance, his ability to appoint caretaker cabinets had caused worry in Brussels. By 15 May, GERB had received the mandate to form a Cabinet, and negotiations started on the personnel and policy decisions. A new formula was introduced, one or rotating Prime Ministers (PMs), with PP-DB taking over the PM position in the first nine-month period, and GERB providing the vice-PM. The plan was to rotate to a situation of GERB PM and PP-DB vice-PM in March 2024. GERB politician, Maria Gabriel, resigned as European Commissioner to return as vice-PM, while PP-DB nominated academician and nonparty member Nikolay Denkov to lead the Cabinet. The Denkov–Gabriel Cabinet was voted in on 6 June 2023 (Table 4).

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Table 1. Elections to the 49th National Assembly (*49-to Narodno Sabranie*) in Bulgaria in 2023

Date of election	2 April 2023	Previous election	2 October 2022
Electorate	6,594,593	Total seats	240
Total votes cast	2,683,606	Turnout	40.7%
Valid votes cast	2,638,024	Share of valid vote	99.0%

			Votes			Seats			
Party			*N*	%	Δ%	*N*	%	Δ*N*	Δ%
Citizens for European Development-Union of Democratic Forces	*Grazhdani za evropeysko razvitie na Bulgaria-Sayuz na democratichnite sili*	(GERB-SDS)	669,924	26.5%	1.2%	69	28.8%	2	0.8%
Coalition We Continue the Change-Democratic Bulgaria	*Koaliciya Produlzhavame Promyanata-Demokratichna Bulgaria*	(PP-DB)	621,069	24.6%	−3.1%	64	26.6%	−9	−3.4%
Revival	*Vazrazhdane*		358,174	14.2%	4.0%	37	15.4%	10	4.4%
Movements for Rights and Freedoms	*Dvijenie za prava i svobodi*	(DPS)	347,700	13.8%	0.0%	36	15.0%	0	0.0%
Bulgarian Socialist Party for Bulgaria	*Bulgaraska socialisticheska partiya za Bulgaria*	(BSP)	225,914	8.9%	−0.4%	23	9.6%	−2	−0.4%
PP There are such people	*PP Ima takuv narod*	(ITN)	103,971	4.1%	0.3%	11	4.6%	11	4.6%

Notes:
1. There is an option on the ballot "I do not support any of the nominated," which received 109,095 votes.
2. Since the last election, PP and DB created a coalition. DB is an electoral alliance formed by three parties. The results for Δ% and Δ*N* were calculated by adding the results from PP and DB as separate parties during the last election.
Source: Central Election Commission (2023) (Parliamentary Elections, https://results.cik.bg/ns2023/rezultati/index.html).

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Table 2. Cabinet composition of Donev I in Bulgaria in 2023

Duration of Cabinet	Inception	2 August 2022	Dissolution	3 February 2023					
Period covered by table	From	1 January 2023	Until	3 February 2023					
Type of Cabinet	Non-partisan								
				Seats in Cabinet		Seats held by women		Seats in Parliament	
A.	Party/gender composition on 1 January 2023			*N*	%	*N*	% of party	*N*	%
	Non-partisan	*Nezavisim*		19	95.0%	3	15.8%	0	0.0%
	We Continue the Change	*Prodalzhavame promyanata*	(PP)	1	5.0%	0	0.0%	53	22.1%
	Totals			20	100.0%	3	15.0%	53	22.1%
B.	Composition of Donev I Cabinet on 1 January 2023 See previous editions of the Political Data Yearbook for Bulgaria or http://politicaldatayearbook.com								
C.	Changes in composition of Donev I Cabinet during 2023			Outgoing minister		Outgoing date		Incoming minister	Comments
	Ministerial title								
	NONE								
				Seats in Cabinet		Seats held by women		Seats in Parliament	
D.	Party/gender composition on 3 February 2023			*N*	%	*N*	% of party	*N*	%
	Non-partisan	*Nezavisim*		19	95.0%	3	15.8%	0	0.0%
	We Continue the Change	*Prodalzhavame promyanata*	(PP)	1	5.0%	0	0.0%	53	22.1%
	Totals			20	100.0%	3	15.0%	53	22.1%

Source: Council of Ministers. www.government.bg/en/Cabinet/CABINET-MEMBERS (2023).

Table 3. Cabinet composition of Donev II in Bulgaria in 2023

Duration of Cabinet	Inception	3 February 2023	Dissolution	6 June 2023
Period covered by table	From	3 February 2023	Until	6 June 2023
Type of Cabinet	Non-partisan			

			Seats in Cabinet		Seats held by women		Seats in Parliament	
A.	Party/gender composition on 3 February 2023		*N*	%	*N*	% of party	*N*	*N*%
	Non-partisan	*Nezavisim*	19	95.0%	3	15.8%	0	0.0%
	We Continue the Change	*Prodalzhavame promyanata* (PP)	1	5.0%	0	0.0%	53	22.1%
	Totals		20	100.0%	3	15.0%	53	22.1%

B.	Composition of Donev II Cabinet on 3 February 2023				Minister		
	Ministerial title						
	Prime Minister	*Minister-Predsedatel*	Galab	Donev	1967	Male	Unaffiliated
	Deputy Prime Minister for Social and Economic Policies, Minister of Labour	*Zamestnik minister-predsedatel za Socialnite i Ikonomicheskite politiki, Minister na Truda*	Lazar	Lazarov	1970	Male	Unaffiliated
	Deputy Prime Minister for Internal Order and Security, Minister of Interior	*Zamestnik minister-predsedatel za Obshtestveniya red i Sigurnost, Minister na Vatreshnite raboti*	Ivan	Demerdzhiev	1975	Male	Unaffiliated
	Deputy Prime Minister of Transport, Information Technologies and Communications	*Minister na Transporta, informatsiyata, tehnologiite i saobshteniyata*	Hristo	Aleksiev	1980	Male	Unaffiliated

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Table 3. (Continued)

B.	Composition of Donev II Cabinet on 3 February 2023 Ministerial title		Minister				
	Deputy Prime Minister for EU Funds Management	*Zamestnik minister-predsedatel za Sredstvata ot Evropeyskiya sayuz*	Atanas	Pekanov	1991	Male	Unaffiliated
	Minister of Finance	*Minister na Finansite*	Rositsa	Velkova-Zheleva	1972	Female	Unaffiliated
	Minister of Defence	*Minister na Otbranata*	Dimitar	Stoyanov	1968	Male	Unaffiliated
	Minister of Foreign Affairs	*Minister na Vanshnite raboti*	Nikolai	Milkov	1957	Male	Unaffiliated
	Minister of Justice	*Minister na Pravosadieto*	Krum	Zarkov	1982	Male	Unaffiliated
	Minister of Healthcare	*Minister na Zdraveopazvaneto*	Asen	Medzhidiev	1968	Male	Unaffiliated
	Minister of Education	*Minister na Obrazovanieto u Naukata*	Sasho	Penov	1960	Male	Unaffiliated
	Minister of Agriculture and Foods	*Minister na Zemedelieto*	Yavor	Gechev	1978	Male	Unaffiliated
	Minister of Environment and Waters	*Minister na Okolnata sreda i Vodite*	Rositsa	Karamfilova-Blagova		Female	Unaffiliated
	Minister of Energy	*Minister na Energetikata*	Rosen	Hristov	1974	Male	Unaffiliated
	Minister of Tourism	*Minister na Turizma*	Ilin	Dimitrov	1983	Male	PP
	Minister of Economy	*Minister na Ikonomikata*	Nikola	Stoyanov	1976	Male	Unaffiliated
	Minister Regional Development	*Minister na Regionalnoto razvitie i Blagoustroystvo*	Ivan	Shishkov	1963	Male	Unaffiliated
	Minister of Culture	*Minister na Kulturata*	Nayden	Todorov	1974	Male	Unaffiliated
	Minister of Youth and Sports	*Minister na Mladezhta i Sporta*	Vesela	Letcheva	1964	Female	Unaffiliated
	Minister of e-Government	*Minister na e-Upravlenie*	Georgi	Todorov	1972	Male	Unaffiliated
	Minister of Innovation and Growth	*Minister na Inovaciite i Rasteja*	Aleksandar	Pulev	1981	Male	Unaffiliated

Table 3. (Continued)

C.	Changes in composition of Donev II Cabinet during 2023 Ministerial title		Outgoing minister	Outgoing date	Incoming minister	Comments
	Minister of Foreign Affairs	*Minister na Vanshnite raboti*	Nikolai Milkov (1957, male, unaffiliated)	5 February 2023	Ivan Kondov (1968, male, unaffiliated)	Decision taken by the president. Sent to Brussels for diplomatic position

			Seats in Cabinet		Seats held by women		Seats in Parliament	
D.	Party/gender composition on 6 June 2023		*N*	%	*N*	% of party	*N*	%
	Non-partisan	*Nezavisim*	19	95.0%	3	15.8%	0	0.0%
	We Continue the Change	*Prodalzhavame promyanata* (PP)	1	5.0%	0	0.0%	64	26.7%
	Totals		20	100.0%	3	15.0%	64	26.7%

Source: Web Archive (2023) (May, https://web.archive.org/web/20230524182607/https://www.gov.bg/en/Cabinet/CABINET-MEMBERS).

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Table 4. Cabinet composition of Denkov I in Bulgaria in 2023

Duration of Cabinet	Inception	6 June 2023	Dissolution	Still in office at the end of the year
Period covered by table	From	6 June 2023	Until	31 December 2023
Type of Cabinet	Minimum winning coalition			

			Seats in Cabinet		Seats held by women		Seats in Parliament	
A.	Party/gender composition on 6 June 2023		*N*	%	*N*	% of party	*N*	*N*%
	Independent		12	60.0%	1	5.0%	1	0.4%
	Coalition We Continue the Change-Democratic Bulgaria	*Koaliciya Produlzhavame Promyanata-Demokratichna Bulgaria* (PP-DB)	7	35.0%	2	10.0%	63	26.3%
	Citizens for European Development-Union of Democratic Forces	*Grazhdani za evropeysko razvitie na Bulgaria-Sayuz na democratichnite sili* (GERB-SDS)	1	5.0%	1	100.0%	69	28.8%
	Totals		20	100.0%	4	20.0%	133	55.5%

B.	Composition of Denkov I Cabinet on 6 June 2023 Ministerial title		Minister				
	Prime Minister	*Minister-Predsedatel*	Nikolai	Denkov	1962	Male	PP-DB
	Deputy-Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs	*Zamestnik minister-predsedatel i Minister na Vanshnite raboti*	Mariya	Gabriel	1979	Female	GERB
	Minister of Finance	*Minister na Finansite*	Asen	Vasilev	1977	Male	PP-DB
	Minister of Interior	*Minister na vutreshnite raboti*	Kalin	Stoyanov	1981	Male	Independent

Table 4. (Continued)

B. Composition of Denkov I Cabinet on 6 June 2023 Ministerial title		Minister				
Minister of Regional Development and Public Works	*Ministar na regionalnoto razvitie i blagourstroystvo*	Andrey	Cekov	1973	Male	PP-DB
Minister of Labor and Social Policy	*Minister and Truda i Socialnite Politiki*	Ivanka	Shalapatova	1974	Female	Independent
Minister of Defence	*Minister na Otbranata*	Todor	Tagarev	1960	Male	Independent
Minister of Justice	*Minister na Pravosadieto*	Atanas	Slavov	1979	Male	PP-DB
Minister of Economy and Industry	*Minister na ikonomikata i industriata*	Bogdan	Bogdanov	1986	Male	Independent
Minister of Energy	*Minister na Energetikata*	Rumen	Radev	1968	Male	Independent
Minister of Education	*Minister na Obrazovanieto u Naukata*	Galin	Tzokov	1962	Male	Independent
Minister of Health	*Minister na Zdraveopazvaneto*	Hristo	Hinkov	1953	Male	Independent
Minister of Environment and Waters	*Minister na Okolnata sreda i Vodite*	Julian	Popov	1959	Male	Independent
Minister of Innovation and Growth	*Minister na Inovaciite i Rasteja*	Milena	Stoycheva	1967	Female	Independent
Minister of Agriculture and Food	*Minister na Zemedelieto i Hranite*	Kiril	Vatev	1958	Male	Independent
Minister of e-Government	*Minister na e-Upravlenie*	Alexander	Yolovski	1975	Male	Independent
Minister of Transport and Communications	*Minister na Transporta i Comunikaciite*	Georgi	Gvozdeikov	1976	Male	PP-DB
Minister of Youth and Sports	*Minister na Mladezhta i Sporta*	Dimitar	Iliev	1975	Male	PP-DB
Minister of Culture	*Minister na Kulturata*	Krastyu	Krastev	1956	Male	Independent
Minister of Tourism	*Minister na Turizma*	Zaritsa	Dinkova	1973	Female	PP-DB

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Table 4. (Continued)

C.	Changes in composition of Denkov I Cabinet during 2023 Ministerial title	Outgoing minister	Outgoing date	Incoming minister	Comments
	NONE				

D.	Party/gender composition on 31 December 2023			Seats in Cabinet		Seats held by women		Seats in Parliament	
				N	%	*N*	% of party	*N*	%
	Independent			12	60.0%	1	5.0%	1	0.4%
	Coalition We Continue the Change-Democratic Bulgaria	*Koaliciya Produlzhavame Promyanata-Demokratichna Bulgaria*	(PP-DB)	7	35.0%	2	10.0%	63	26.3%
	Citizens for European Development-Union of Democratic Forces	*Grazhdani za evropeysko razvitie na Bulgaria-Sayuz na democratichnite sili*	(GERB-SDS)	1	5.0%	1	100.0%	69	28.8%
	Totals			20	100.0%	4	20.0%	133	55.5%

Source: www.government.bg/en/Cabinet/CABINET-MEMBERS (2023).

From the Cabinet's inception, speculation abounded that the Cabinet could not make its proposed 18-month tenure, as the newly minted coalition partners had vouched to never join a Cabinet with each other during their electoral campaigns. The accusations of being a marriage of convenience, a make-shift Cabinet (*sglobka/сглобка* in Bulgarian) in the hands of foreign embassies and representatives, only intensified in the months that followed. They were particularly strong coming from the opposition BSP, ITN, and *Vazrazhdane*.

After the summer, opposition to the Cabinet intensified in anticipation of the local elections in late October. A vote of no confidence was introduced by the BSP, *Vazrazhdane*, and ITN on 5 October. The vote was justified by the alleged failure of the Cabinet to maintain price and supply stability in the energy sector and was rejected on 13 October. A second vote was introduced in November, justified by the alleged failure of the Cabinet to deal with issues of national defense and national security, and was rejected on 22 November. Both votes attempted to play up the makeshift nature of the Cabinet and to capitalize on it in time for the local elections, which took place on 29 October and 5 November. The Cabinet, however, was not only in control of more than 55 per cent of the seats in Parliament, but it could also rely on support from the DPS, whose leader, Delyan Peevski, had emerged as a tacit supporter of the Cabinet. The opposition, despite being quite vocal, could not destabilize the Cabinet, which remained in power and without personnel changes until the end of the year.

Parliament report

The year saw a new Parliament come into being after the April elections (Table 5). The 49th National Assembly convened on 11 April 2023, and at first appearance, it did not differ much from its predecessor and thus was not expected to last long. It had one party faction fewer and replaced Bulgarian Rise with ITN. PP and DB kept their promises and, having fielded joint lists and formed one parliamentary faction, thus emerged as the logical counterbalance of GERB. However, with both of them in control of about a quarter of the seats, no easy parliamentary majority was possible, leading to the somewhat forced marriage of the PP-DB-GERB coalition and parliamentary majority. No other major change in the make-up of the National Assembly occurred; women remained at 25 per cent of all MPs, and parliamentary activity was channeled along the government–opposition division.

The Cabinet coalition partners also agreed on a common legislative agenda. This included as the most important legislative priorities: reforms under the EU's Recovery and Resilience Plan, Bulgaria's accession to the euro and Schengen areas, changes in the Code of Criminal Procedure (including the introduction of a mechanism for control over the prosecutor-general), control of corruption, and protection from domestic violence. In addition, they also split the two most important positions within Parliament: GERB would fill the chair of the Parliament, and the chair of the parliamentary legal committee would be nominated by PP-DB.

BSP, ITN, and *Vazrazhdane* joined forces informally to provide opposition to the Cabinet, which they saw as an artificial construction and subjugated to foreign interests. Interestingly, however, the Turkish minority-dominated DPS gradually emerged as a tacit supporter to the GERB-PP-DB coalition: Its leader, previously highly controversial political figure Delyan

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Table 5. Party and gender composition of the 48th and 49th National Assembly (*48-mo i 49-to Narodno Sabranie*) in Bulgaria 2023

			1 January 2023				19 April 2023 Elections				31 December 2023			
			All		Women		All		Women		All		Women	
Party			*N*	%	*N*	%	*N*	%	*N*	%	*N*	%	*N*	%
Citizens for European Development-Union of Democratic Forces	*Grazhdani za evropeysko razvitie na Bulgaria-Sayuz na democratichnite sili*	(GERB-SDS)	67	27.9%	19	32.2%	69	28.8%	20	29.0%	69	28.8%	18	26.1%
Coalition We Continue the Change-Democratic Bulgaria	*Koaliciya Produlzhavame Promyanata-Demokratichna Bulgaria*	(PP-DB)	53	22.1%	10	16.9%	64	26.7%	15	23.4%	63	26.3%	19	30.2%
Movements for Rights and Freedoms	*Dvijenie za prava i svobodi*	(DPS)	36	15.0%	8	13.6%	36	15.0%	9	25.0%	36	15.0%	9	25.0%
Revival	*Vazrajdane*		27	11.3%	6	10.2%	37	15.4%	6	16.2%	37	15.4%	7	20.6%
Bulgarian Socialist Party for Bulgaria	*Bulgaraska socialisticheska partiya za Bulgaria*	(BSP)	25	10.4%	6	10.2%	23	9.6%	6	26.1%	23	9.6%	6	26.1%
PP There are such people	*PP Ima takuv narod*	(ITN)					11	4.6%	1	9.1%	11	4.6%	1	9.1%
Independent	*Nezavisimi*										1	0.4%	0	0.0%
Democratic Bulgaria	*Demokratichna Bulgaria*	(DB)	29	8.3%	6	10.2%								
Bulgarian Rise	*Balgarski vuzhod*	(BV)	12	5.0%	4	6.8%								
Totals			249	100.0%	59	23.7%	240	100.0%	57	23.8%	240	100.0%	60	25.0%

Notes:
1. For 1 January 2023, data about PP-DB are only from PP (see note 2).
2. From 19 April onward, DB is part of PP-DB (see note 1).
3. Some changes occurred in the Parliament between April and December due to local elections in October.
Source: National Council website (2024).

Peevski, became chair of the parliamentary group and, in the opinion of many, a kingmaker in Bulgaria's politics.

Political party report

The political parties in Bulgaria did not undergo any significant changes in 2023 in terms of leadership or organizational development. All major parties preserved their leadership, and no major splits occurred. PP-DB and GERB formed a governing coalition (Table 6) but preserved their legislative and party independence, and PP and DB preserved independent party status. In the DPS, Delyan Peevski announced his future candidacy for chairman of the party, next to being the single chair of the parliamentary faction. The election will take place at the DPS conference in early 2024.

Institutional change report

By far, the most significant change in the institutional set-up was the amendment of the Constitution that changed the power of the president to appoint a caretaker PM.

In December 2023, a constitutional amendment limited the choice of potential caretaker PMs to the people occupying one of four state positions or their deputies: the chair of the National Assembly, the Bulgarian National Bank Governor or their deputy, the Chair of the Audit Office or their deputy, and the Ombudsman or their deputy. This amendment was made in an open move to limit the powers of the president, and in particular, those of President Radev, who had appointed four separate caretaker cabinets in the post-2021 period and who had been seen to use them for his own political interests. At the same time, the Constitution was also amended to mandate that the National Assembly remain in session until a new Parliament is elected. Taken together, the two amendments ensure that in case a regular Cabinet resigns and no new Cabinet can be elected by the sitting Parliament, the executive power will remain in the hands of the currently politically powerful parties rather than in those of the head of state.

In addition, in May 2023, the Parliament adopted a mechanism for an independent investigation of the Attorney General. This happened 14 years after the decision of the European Court of Human Rights in the case "*Kolevi v. Bulgaria*." Back in 2009, the court in Strasbourg established that the Bulgarian chief prosecutor (then Nikola Filchev) was untouchable and obliged Bulgaria to introduce opportunities for criminal prosecution and public accountability. Controversial Attorney-General Ivan Geshev (Spirova 2021) was removed from office in June and later on announced that he was entering politics and created a nationalist movement called "Justice for Bulgaria."

Issues in national politics

The pro/anti-Russian split in the country remained a continuing concern. The positions of the President and leaders of parliamentary represented parties, such as BSP and *Vazrazhdane*, continued to call for neutrality in the Russian-Ukrainian war, while the official government position (after May 2023) aligned with NATO and the EU. The interests of the

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Table 6. Changes in political parties in Bulgaria in 2023

			Party institutional changes in 2023	
We Continue the Change-Democratic Bulgaria	*Produljavame Promianata-Demokratichna Bulgaria*	(PP-DB)	Coalition on 14 February	A coalition is made by the two parties for the upcoming elections on the 2 April. Parties decided that they can have more electoral vote and stand stronger if they are listed together. This is a rather new phenomenon, compared to the emergence of new parties in the last three years

Source: Mediapool (2023) (February 13, www.mediapool.bg/pp-i-db-veche-ofitsialno-sa-koalitsiya-postaviha-si-13-zadachi-news344843.html).

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Russian oil and gas industry were seen as playing a significant role in promoting the pro-Russian position among the population. The Cabinet reacted by an early termination of the Russian-owned Lukoil contract with the port of Bourgas in September 2023, a move that was seen by the opposition as a step guaranteeing a spike of energy prices and thus, irresponsible. In general, Bulgarians displayed the most positive attitude toward Russian President Putin and the lowest levels of perception of Russia as a threat to the security of the country, or Bulgarian identity and values, among all East and Central European countries in 2023 (GLOBSEC 2023).

Ironically, pro-Russian attitudes are also linked to strong nationalist feelings in the country, which are reflected in the increased (in comparison to 2022) electoral support for nationalist parties such as *Vazrazhdane* and ITN. This has been paralleled by increased skepticism to the autonomy of the country to make decisions vis-à-vis Brussels (GLOBSEC 2023), transforming the previous tacit pro-EU consent into creeping Euroskepticism.

The biggest challenge, though, remained the political apathy displayed by the Bulgarian population. Voter turnout was slightly up in 2023 (40.63 per cent), compared to 2022 (39.4 per cent), but it remained extremely low. While trust in democracy remained stable, trust in the government had remained low and declining in 2023 (GLOBSEC 2023). Coupled with a high perception of corruption and never-improving macroeconomic indicators, such as inflation and the cost of living, these political attitudes contribute to a general sense of political inefficacy and a perception of stagnant political and economic development.

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