

In the midst of political crisis, Bulgarians are searching for accountability and justice from their government.

Blog Admin

Bulgaria has experienced a wave of protests and demonstrations by those dissatisfied with endemic corruption and the lack of law and order in the country. These protests recently culminated in the resignation of Prime Minister Boyko Borisov. Ekaterina Rashkova writes that new elections are now highly likely, as the other Bulgarian parties will find it difficult to form a government in the current parliament.



Last week's shock resignation of Bulgaria's Prime Minister, Boyko Borisov, and the concurrent street protests, are part of a new historic wave of change for the country. The country is experiencing a severe political crisis, demonstrations, and social unrest as it did in its transition to democracy in 1989, and again in 1997. Bulgarians are once again expressing their discontent at living in poverty, as well as their repulsion for levels of corruption in the country, the enrichment of a select few, and the lack of law and order, which seem to have been the key characteristics of the past 23 years of Bulgaria's history.

With citizens taking to the streets for more than two weeks, the resignation of the Borisov Cabinet, and the choice of a new head of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church this past Sunday, Bulgaria is once again on the threshold of change. Will change come however, and if it does, what will it entail? While the outcome is hard to predict, it is important to reflect on the demands of the protesters, and on how the political elite plans to react to popular demands.

On February 20th, after eleven days of spiraling protests, Prime Minister Boyko Borisov announced the resignation of his cabinet to the parliament. He stated that he will not lead the country when 'the police is beating the people...and since the people want the street to rule the country, let it do that'. Borisov also stated that GERB (his party) will not take part in an interim government and will work toward early elections. According to Article 99 of the Bulgarian Constitution, in the event of a government failing to serve its full tenure, the President of the Republic has to consecutively offer the right to form a cabinet to the first two largest parliamentary groups, or to a third parliamentary group of his choice. If none of the parties accepts the mandate, the President needs to appoint a caretaker government, whose primary purpose is then to prepare the country for early elections.



Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borisov Credit: Cafe56.net (Creative Commons BY)

In Bulgaria's case, President Plevneliev has to offer the mandate for an interim government first to GERB (the center-right party of PM Borisov); second to BSP (the left-wing Bulgarian Socialist Party, which led the previous government known as the triple-coalition with prime minister Sergey Stanishev); and finally, to a third parliamentary group of his choice. All parties have stated that they will not accept a mandate for the formation of a cabinet under this parliament and that they are united in their desire to bring about an early election. This is a predictable step for GERB, given Borisov's claim that his mandate was given

to him by the people, and he is now, as a result of the social unrest, returning it to the people. Similarly, the other two parties, BSP and the centrist Turkish party, DPS, would face a GERB-majority parliament if they agreed to join a new government. This would sentence them to failure as they would then be unable to pass any reforms of which the GERB majority did not approve. As of Monday, Borisov had officially rejected the President's offer to form a new government, and thus kept his word. We are yet to see the reactions of the other two parties and the subsequent decisions which President Plevneliev is likely to make.

Meanwhile, street protests are continuing across the country. February 24th was appointed as a day for nation-wide protest, with mass and peaceful protests being organised in more than 14 different cities, according to the daily newspaper Dnevnik. Reports indicate that citizens of more than 40 towns took to the streets. What began as local protests against high electricity bills, has evolved into a nation-wide protest 'against everything and everyone (in politics)'. One of the most active hubs for the protests is the Black Sea city of Varna, where protesters are firmly standing behind the slogan "Change, and not ExChange".

The protesters have numerous demands, which vary in terms of viability. According to Capital daily, they range from preventing the dissolution of parliament, to the nationalisation of the energy sector: a demand that would mean a backward step in Bulgaria's democratic development. The most important demands, however, are reasonable and just: people want control over the monopolies, they want the creation of a public council with a quota for citizen participation, and they want accountability. To achieve the latter, the protesters want a radical change in the electoral system – a move from the current proportional representation to a fully majoritarian electoral system (something which was originally proposed in the early 1990s by Phillip Dimitrov of the United Democratic Forces, but was never accepted). They also call for ending the immunity of parliamentarians, which in the eyes of many allows for corrupt behavior and illegal practices that no one is subsequently held responsible for. Other demands include the abolition of public funding for political parties, more money for education, and the termination of all court cases against people who have not paid their bills (until their legitimacy has been established).



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For the moment, most political parties are waiting to see the reaction of BSP and DPS when offered a mandate and the President's further decisions, if they are necessary. The mood among the political elite is definitely one of preparation for early elections, which are expected to happen in late April or early May. In the likely event of such elections, the political crisis may deepen and the quality of representation may deteriorate if additional political formations manage to enter parliament. This will cause further factions to develop in the already fragmented legislature.

The negative consequences of the coming elections are potentially most harmful for the political right. The original democratic formation of the right was as the United Democratic Forces (UDF): the main umbrella organisation for opposition to the previous regime in the 1990s. However, after several turbulent years of splits, mergers, and more splits, Bulgaria's right has still not managed to find one uniting voice for the former UDF partners. Nevertheless, the potential for upcoming changes and decisions to increase accountability and strengthen the link between the elite and the masses is something we all hope for, but have yet to see.

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