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Bulgaria's Protests: Upholding Principles and Breaking the Political Impasse

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A casual observer of current events might conclude that Bulgarians are capricious and excitable people who should beware of what they wish for. Last February widespread demonstrations precipitated the resignation of the centre-right government followed by the dissolution of parliament just two months before the end of its term. Having gone through an early general election in mid-May that brought a centre-left government to power, the country has again been gripped by new vigorous political protests. The current campaign builds upon previous waves of discontent, particularly on environmental issues and energy policy where fraud and mismanagement seem to be endemic. However, today's rallies are primarily driven by insistence on upholding the fundamental principles of democratic rule. Whether the mobilised

people will force more accountability, transparency and morality in government and policy-making depends on breaking the precarious balance in the new National Assembly. Together, the two ruling parties, the Socialists (BSP) and the centrist Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) have exactly half the number of deputies and are vulnerable to the increasingly radical antics of an extremely nationalistic formation, Ataka. More importantly, such [division](#) represents significant discord in society as a whole.

Street activism in Bulgaria fits into a wider global momentum with distinct regional variations. After in the face of radical reforms, [tensions in Greece](#) are still running high as witnessed by the reaction to the closing down of the state broadcaster earlier this month. Austerity-struck itself, Bulgaria followed events evolving to the south with mixed feelings of sympathy for ordinary people, reluctant understanding of the shock reforms and fear of the spill-over of the financial and economic crisis. Turkey's continuing anti-government protests grew from a local environmental problem into a wider national movement posing profound questions of the political status quo: in outlook, motivation and aims the activists of [Taksim square](#) have more in common with those marching in central Sofia.

Historically Bulgarians have been on the whole fractious and slow to gather around nation-wide causes. After the heady initial years of dismantling of the Communist system, there has been only one strong show of discontent: in early 1997 a Socialist government which presided over rising unemployment and hyperinflation fell under mass pressure and sporadic outbursts of violence. It is therefore somewhat surprising that in this instance impressive numbers of people have taken to the streets twice within four months to voicedisappointment and disapproval of the government. Even more striking is the fact that the two waves have been directed against different governments. In [February the outrage erupted](#) in response to what were generally considered fraudulently high energy bills: a multitude of political demands soon followed. After clashes with the police and a string of self-immolations, Prime Minister Boyko Borisov decided to cut his losses declaring that he was unwilling to hold power against the will of the people.

The current protests have raged for over three weeks and set a record by calling for the resignation of a government barely into its third week, with not even all ministerial positions yet confirmed. Such short-temperedness was triggered by the new Prime Minister, Plamen Oresharski's, nomination of Delian Peevski – a 32-year-old parliamentary deputy whose family controls a vast media empire – as head of the country's security agency. The proposal –both in terms of the choice of personality and the manner in which it was made – stunned a significant number of deputies, including a good few from the senior coalition partner, the (BSP); it incensed Bulgarians from all walks of life. Peevski's political reputation is rather bleak, having been previously twice promoted to high office for which he had no qualification and from which he was dismissed amidst [allegations of blackmailing and corruption](#). His prospering conglomerate of newspapers, TV channels and internet sites has been at the centre of rumours and scandals due to questionable origins, business connections and methods of operation. Moreover, in what is itself recognition of his unsuitability, Peevski assumed his post in [a near-conspiratorial manner](#): special statutory amendments were hastily adopted to adjust the job description to his CV, the government deputies were given a three-line whip and no hearings were allowed.

Yet, what parliament stomached, society refused to put up with. After an explosion in the social media, spontaneous rallies gathered across the country on the evening of Peevski's instalment. The following morning [the appointment was annulled](#) and

while the ruling politicians switched to damage-limitation mode, it became obvious that some invisible line of political and moral decency had been crossed. Peevski's whole known public career mirrored the nepotism and abuse of power that have long been identified as contaminating Bulgarian politics and statehood. Thus reinforced, the distrust of institutions that has chronically marked [Bulgarian contemporary history](#) spilled out fueling something more than a demand for the reversal of a single ill-judged move.

The immediate short-term [aim of the protesters](#) is the resignation of the cabinet. Indeed, the handling of the crisis by Oresharski, overnight dubbed "Oligarch-ski", has revealed the real relations of the political powers supporting him and compromised his credibility as an authoritative financial and economic expert called upon to reinvigorate the faltering economy. His arrogant refusal to explain the motives and the process which led to the ill-fated nomination of Peevski have exposed him as little more than a non-partisan figurehead for the BSP, whose [own leader](#) chose to stay out of office in an effort to emphasize commitment to broad national interest. The Socialist leadership itself was shown to have acted under an ultimatum from the junior partner in the governing coalition, the MRF, main repository of the ethnic minority vote in Bulgaria and to whom Peevski belongs.

So far, the demonstrators in Sofia have proven [resilient and creative](#) – adopting humorous Twitter hashtags, initiating additional rallies for "a morning coffee with the deputies" and sensibly condemning the media-hungry [Ataka](#) who has continuously provoked clashes. They stand above all for civilised dialogue and morals in public life as all too often Bulgarian politics has bred scandal but no real debate. Even as another early election seems increasingly plausible, the results may prove to be far from the vision of the protestors who are momentarily united by a long-term ideal but differ as to how it is to be achieved. Many are apprehensive of bringing back the previous governing party, GERB who in fact received the largest single vote in May. The ability of the democratic right – which was unable to return a single deputy due to chronic splintering and lack of popular politicians – to reinvent itself is also uncertain. New charismatic personalities – like the ex-king or his security guard who formed new parties and became prime ministers in 2001 and 2009 respectively – are not in sight. The European Union's various official expressions of [concern](#) and even the ongoing monitoring of judicial reform and [fight against corruption](#) appear to make negligible difference. The most realistic goal for the thousands of demonstrators is that the Bulgarian political class – in and out of government – will begin to show more respect for the boundaries of political integrity and accountability. Only if the foundations of civil society are thus reinforced, can genuine democratic progress be made. This will benefit not only the activists in Sofia but also the many more silently disillusioned Bulgarians.

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