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The Development of the Economic and Political Landscape of
Bulgaria since 1990: A Global Studies Perspective

verfasst von | submitted by
Darina Stoytcheva

angestrebter akademischer Grad | in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
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Abstract: Many developments have riddled Bulgaria's political and economic landscape since the 1990s. Through the vestiges of the fall of communism in 1989, the globalization movements at the end of the 20th century, its democratization and subsequent European integration, Bulgaria has been put through the runner. While the main assumption and common conception is that Bulgaria has been on an upward positive journey since 1989, how much that is true remains to be seen. Combining economic measures with political considerations that Bulgaria has not had a linear trajectory since 1990: its democratization process is not a break from the past, its economic stability directly impacts electoral support and European integration has created opportunities and provided funding but with questionable results.

Keywords: Bulgaria, democratization, Eastern Europe, development, transition, integration

Zusammenfassung: Seit den 1990er Jahren haben viele Entwicklungen die politische und wirtschaftliche Landschaft Bulgariens durcheinander gebracht. Durch die Spuren des Sturzes des Kommunismus im Jahr 1989, die Globalisierungsbewegungen am Ende des 20. Jahrhunderts, seine Demokratisierung und die anschließende europäische Integration wurde Bulgarien durch die Mangel gedreht. Zwar wird allgemein angenommen, dass sich Bulgarien seit 1989 auf einem positiven Weg nach oben befindet, aber inwieweit dies zutrifft, bleibt abzuwarten. Kombiniert man wirtschaftliche Maßnahmen mit politischen Erwägungen, so zeigt sich, dass Bulgarien seit 1990 keine lineare Entwicklung genommen hat: Der Demokratisierungsprozess ist kein Bruch mit der Vergangenheit, die wirtschaftliche Stabilität wirkt sich direkt auf die Unterstützung durch die Wähler aus, und die europäische Integration hat Möglichkeiten geschaffen und Mittel bereitgestellt, allerdings mit fragwürdigen Ergebnissen.

Stichworte: Bulgarien, Demokratisierung, Osteuropa, Entwicklung, Übergang, Integration

List of Abbreviations

ABV	Alternative to Bulgarian Revival - <i>Алтернатива за българско възраждане</i>
APS	Alliance for Rights and Freedoms - <i>Алианс за Права и Свободи - АПС</i>
BBB	Bulgarian Business Bloc
BBC	Bulgarian Without Censure - <i>България без цензура</i>
BCP	Bulgarian Communist Party - <i>Българска Комунистическа партия – БКП</i>
BSP	Bulgarian Socialist Party - <i>Българска Социалистическа партия - БСП</i>
BV	Bulgarian Rise - <i>Български Възход</i>
BZNS	Bulgarian Agrarian Union - <i>Български земеделски народен съюз</i>
CBA	Currency Board Arrangement
CEFTA	Central European Free Trade Agreement
CMEA	Council for Mutual and Economic Assistance
COMECON	Council for Mutual Economic Assistance
CVM	Cooperation and Verification Mechanism
CVM	Cooperation and Verification Mechanism
DPS	Movement for Rights and Freedoms - <i>Движение за права и свободи – ДПС</i>
DSB/DB	Democratic Bulgaria - <i>Демократична България</i>
EC	European Commission
ECB	European Central Bank
EPP	European People's Party
ERM II	Exchange Rate Mechanism
EU	European Union
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GERB	Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria
GFC	Global Financial Crisis
GNI	Gross National Income

HDI	Human Development Index
IMF	International Monetary Fund
ISMV	Stand Up! Mafia Out! - <i>Изправи Се! Мутри Вън!</i>
IT	Information Technology
ITN	There is Such a People – <i>Има Такъв Народ - ИТН</i>
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NDSII	National Movement Simeon II – <i>Национално Движение Симеон II</i>
NEM	New Economic Mechanism
NS	People’s Union - Народен съюз
ODS	United Democratic Forces – Обединени демократични сили
PES	Party of the European Socialists
PF	Patriotic Front - <i>Патриотичен Фронт</i>
PM	Prime Minister
PP	We Continue the Change - <i>Продължаваме Промяната</i>
PP-DB	We Continue the Change – Democratic Bulgaria
PPP	Purchasing Power Parity
PRR	Populist Radical Right
RRP	Radical Right Populism
RTT	Round Table Talks
RZS	Order, Law and Justice - <i>Ред, законност и справедливост</i>
SDS	Union of Democratic Forces - <i>Съюзът на демократичните сили – СДС</i>
UDF	Union of Democratic Forces - <i>Съюзът на демократичните сили – СДС</i>
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

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Chronology

681	First Bulgarian State Established
1018-1185	Byzantine domination
1185	Second Bulgarian State Established
1396	Bulgaria subjugated by the Ottoman Empire
1396-1878	Ottoman domination
1876	April Uprising
1878	Treaty of San Stefano and Treaty of Berlin, foundation of the Third Bulgarian State
1885	The unification of the Bulgarian principality with Eastern Rumelia. Bulgaria defeats a Serbian attack
1908	Bulgaria declares formal independence from the Ottoman empire
1931	The last free parliamentary elections before the Second World War
1934	The People's Bloc government was overthrown in a military coup. Political parties are banned
1935	King Boris assumes supreme power
1946	Bulgaria declared a People's Republic after a referendum on the abolition of the monarchy
1947	Communist Party assumed supreme power
1954	Zhivkov becomes party leader
14 Dec 1955	United Nations Membership
1962	Zhivkov assumes the role of Prime Minister
1988-1989	First dissident groups become vocal
10 Nov 1989	Zhivkov's resignation
7 Dec 1989	UDF with Zhelyu Zhelev at the head: Union of Democratic Forces (UDF), united most opposition groups under an umbrella organization
15 Jan 1990	Vote for Article 1 of the Constitution is revoked (the article on monopoly of the party in power)
1990	The Communist Party renames itself the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) and pledges to embrace democratic reforms
1 June 1990	The first multiparty parliamentary election is held (BSP wins clear victory)
June 1990	First democratic elections, BSP wins clear victory, forms Lukanov cabinet
Sept 1990	International Monetary Fund Membership
10 July 1991	Adoption of a new democratic constitution that established a parliamentary republic and initiates the shift towards a market based economy
15 Jan 1992	Opposition leader Zhelyu Zhelev elected as the first president of the Republic by the Grand National Assembly
1992	DPS withdraws support for the government, and Dimitrov's cabinet resigns; Popov's cabinet is sworn in with the support of DPS and BSP
1994	BSP wins early parliamentary elections and forms Videnov's cabinet
1996	UDF leader Stoyanov wins presidential elections

1 Dec 1996	World Trade Organization membership
1997	Financial and economic crisis (hyperinflation and banking collapse); strict IMF economic reforms and austerity measures, Videnov's cabinet resigns, and President Stoyanov schedules early elections
Feb 1997	Adopts a currency board arrangement to stabilize currency, initiates privatization and structural reforms under guidance IMF
April 1997	UDF wins the elections in alliance with several other parties, forms the Kostov government
1998	European Union negotiations start
1998	NATO negotiations start
25 April 2001	Ex-monarch King Simeon II, Saxe-Coburg-Gotha becomes the prime minister after his party sweeps the regular June elections
29 March 2004	NATO membership
2005	BSP wins plurality of votes in the June elections, forms a coalition Stanishev cabinet with BSP and NDSV
1 Jan 2007	Bulgaria becomes a member of the European Union
2009	Recession
Feb 2013	Nationwide protests against systemic corruption and poor economic conditions lead to the resignation of the government
27 Jan 2013	Referendum on whether Bulgaria should develop its nuclear power by building a new nuclear power plant
20 June 2014	Collapse of the Corporate Commercial bank, the Bulgarian National Bank takes control of it, marking the onset of a significant banking crisis
25 Oct 2015	Referendum on whether Bulgaria should introduce electronic voting
6 Nov 2016	Referendum on 3 questions: Whether they supported limiting public funding of political parties The introduction of compulsory voting in elections and referendums Changing the electoral system for the NA to the two-round system
2017	Bulgaria experiences economic recovery with improved GDP growth supported by the manufacturing sector and exports, though demographic challenges due to emigration and low birth rate persist. Implementation of tax reforms aimed at stimulating growth and addressing public fiscal concerns
13 March 2020	Declares a state of emergency due to the COVID-19 pandemic affecting public health and economy; government measures for businesses and individuals are introduced. Fiscal stimulus packages and healthcare spending increases
2021	Political instability with multiple elections held due to the inability to form a stable government
2022	Global inflation and energy crisis. Energy diversification and economic resilience reforms
2023	Efforts to improve energy independence and digital infrastructure in alignment with EU criteria
2024	Focus on judicial reforms to better align with the EU standards and enhance efforts against corruption
Jan 2025	Bulgaria joins the Schengen Area

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1. Introduction

A country of interim governments, mafia politics, state capture, crony capitalism, political messianism, corruption – all of these terms have been used to describe Bulgaria in recent decades. Its inability to form a stable governing government since 2021, its recent membership into the Schengen Area, and the fact that it remains one of the most marginalized cases in Eastern European studies academia, makes its historical study that much more interesting. History has shown that its trajectory has been that of surviving through adversity: through a series of transformative events, periods of domination and external rule, Bulgaria has preserved and persevered, always managing to retain its national elements on the sideline of history.

Trying to juggle misconceptions of the Balkans with dominant (generalized) Eastern European narratives is detrimental to understanding the complexities of the Bulgarian reality. It is not simply enough to say that Bulgaria went through a period of transition, or talk about a post-1990 communist Bulgaria. Evoking globalization and EU integration as the only tools and causes of political and economic change over the last two decades is a gross oversimplification. The understudied nature of Bulgaria, and the lack of academic saturation makes it an interesting case study, especially since its analysis could influence our understanding of post-communist transition, of East/West distinctions, and even the internal machinations of national systems.

The first part of this thesis will be aimed at the theoretical, methodological, literary and historical frameworks: Chapter 2 will first outline the theoretical framework that we will be employing within the following case study; after briefly explaining what the global studies framework entails and defining key terms, Chapter 3 will set forth the methodological framework and operationalization tools that will be utilized throughout the remainder of the text; Chapter 4 will provide a literature review on the overall topic of the development of Bulgaria's political and economic landscapes since 1990; and Chapter 5 will set the scene for the contextualization and start of the historical analysis. The second part of this thesis will consist in a sectioning into four time periods as divided in Chapter 6 and will explore a multitude of avenues of analysis within each. By examining each timeline in detail, the main purpose is to provide a comprehensive overview of the development of Bulgaria's political and economic landscape since 1990 by examining different factors of political economic, culture, and society. The goal is to establish a clear temporal timeline of the layers of progression seen through a global studies lens.

2. Initial Remarks

2.1 Positionality

This thesis needs to be read with the knowledge that the author is of Bulgarian origin. While most of my time and educational background has been spent and acquired abroad in various locations and systems across the world, the fact remains that my family and myself identify and feel Bulgaria. Steps have been taken to try to avoid personal bias when discussing the subject. That is why the sources chosen vary from internal to external, from Bulgarian to European to Latin American; the data is also sourced from across various platforms including Bulgarian governmental archives, European Union databases, international organizations such as the IMF, OECD and peer-reviewed authors. The aim is to approach the topic through the most objective lens possible, by not starting on the basis of any assumptions, but rather building up the foundation for the analysis by following the evolution of the different statistical data over different periods of time. By building this thesis up from a quantitative perspective, the objective is to avoid planting any ideas and opinions into the analysis and using a qualitative approach to read further into the complexity of the quantitative results.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This thesis is written within the framework of Global Studies, which means that certain positions and approaches might be misunderstood if seen from a singular perspective. Global Studies presupposes that phenomena such as globalization, democratization and so forth are acted upon and themselves act on multiple levels and within multiple spheres simultaneously. That being said, it is important to note that the perspective adopted here forth combines a combination of theories and concepts from across the multiple disciplines in the social sciences, history, politics, economics, and international relations. The most prominently featured frameworks will be global studies and political economy.

Modern scholars tend to stick to singular fields of analysis, either economic, political, social, cultural, judiciary, etc... As outlined in the literature review chapter below, this is exactly the case of academic literature on the subject of Bulgaria's historical development since 1990. What I am arguing here, is that a holistic approach to Bulgaria's historical progression since 1990 might reveal new aspects of exploration. Examining each of the aforementioned disciplines

separately, and not analyzing the data in tandem would not yield an accurate representation of the ‘big picture’. Adopting a global transdisciplinary framework “posits a holistic global perspective and teases out new theoretical, analytical, and methodological modes of inquiry that are better suited to understanding evolving processes of globalization and their accompanying reconfigurations of social, cultural, economic, and political relations” (Smith and McCarty 2017, 10). This integrated paradigm would ultimately try to understand these interconnected processes beyond the constraints of each discipline’s boundaries.

Two important aspects of global studies theory are the local-global continuum and the breaking of binaries, both important elements that will be incorporated into the ensuing thesis whenever possible. On the one hand, understanding that global trends and theories are important also means understanding that the local is equally as important: insofar as seeing that local phenomena can be seen at a global scale and vice versa, we conclude that understanding the smaller-scale histories and developments are fundamental to the study of global trends. At the same time, it is imperative to recognize that most knowledge production in academia typically adopts a binary Western perspective when analyzing global and local interactions. Breaking down these binaries of Western versus Eastern thinking, of the so-called ‘Global North’ and ‘Global South’, but also of Eastern and Western Europe is important: this black and white thinking often results in analyses that miss the bigger picture, oversimplify an issue, or even lead to vast misconceptions of important historical events (Smith and McCarty 2017, 50). Therefore, this transgressive and integrative aspect of global studies will be important in the following case study as we try to superpose and understand the complex series of events that have transpired in Bulgaria since 1990.

Within this scope, we will not only take on a global studies lens, but also incorporate theories on development, globalization, post-communist transition, and Europeanization in order to examine the different facets of Bulgaria’s history. For the purpose of this study, we will attempt an interdisciplinary dialogue between different fields, methods, and theories to establish a fluid historical timeline of events.

2.3 Key Definitions

Development

Development here will be used as in “the process in which someone or something grows or changes and becomes more advanced” (Cambridge Dictionary). More along the lines of

evolution and progress(ion), rather than development in terms of political science or economy. Any reference to development theory and the discipline of development studies will be avoided as the foundation of its definition and the discipline centers on the contrary establishment of ‘underdevelopment’ and concepts of ‘Global South’ which are endemically problematic and detrimental to this study: they presuppose the existence of one entity that is superior to another, and overlooks questions of inequality, distributional effects and hegemony.

Globalization

In its original archaic definition: corresponds to “global financial transactions, the impact of new digital technologies, enhanced global mobility in terms of the movements of goods and people, and global cultural flows” (Steger 2017, 53). The use of this archaic definition means limiting the timeframe and falling into already conceived historical periods of waves of globalization like 1990-2000. It would be more accurate to name it economic globalization as many of the elements that it refers to include only economic considerations and everything else would be as a result of these economic developments. Even though this is a vast generalization, and there have been attempts to redefine globalization at its core to encompass a broader definitional scope, the general consensus remains as such. While studying the effects of economic globalization will be one of the focal aspects investigated in this study, I want to note that it would only apply to a certain portion of the investigation, rather than being founded on the basis of it.

Therefore, we will use it in establishing the preliminary economic timeline in the parts to come, keeping in mind that it has various shortcomings and should only be used as one point of analysis rather than the entirety: we will start off with examining various aspects of the economic globalization of Bulgaria since 1990 in terms of the neoliberal elements of GDP, GNI, and growth. However, we will then move on to its succeeding phase of ‘advanced view of economic growth’ measured in terms of HDI, and intersperse it with policy analysis, and political factors to see if there are correlations with the aim of seeing whether it indeed paints a true historical picture or not. The objective here is to make sure to view the full extent of the development path of Bulgaria and not focus solely on the neoliberal and material economic confines of globalization theory.

Post-Communist Transition

Post-communist transition theory will also be important when investigating the development of Bulgaria since 1990. As we are taking the year 1990 as the point of departure for

our empirical research, it is important to understand what post-communist transition theory is and where it stems from. While more information on the specific events will be provided below in the historical contextualization, a definition of the theory will be provided here.

The year 1989 as a critical juncture in history is an important aspect of post-communist transition theory. From then, a domino effect is known for the former members of the Soviet bloc, from which they ‘transition’ from a communist regime to a democratic one – referring here to the countries of Eastern and Central Europe. The earlier theory follows the change from an authoritarian system to various forms of democracy, often characterized by a normative approach (Jovic 2010, 61). However, the early normative approach focuses on the outcomes going forward, rather than historical complexities interlinked with the transitional phenomenon. In this paper we will adopt the global studies perspective on post-communist theory which centers on the multidimensional changes in these societies that is more contextually embedded and interdisciplinary (Kollmorgen 2013). According to this theory, there are key features of the political and economic restructuring of these countries: democratization via the implantation of multiparty systems, electoral politics, and establishment of democratic institutions; and market liberalization via privatization and deregulation policies.

Europeanization

Europeanization is the theory that follows the study of the effects of EU integration on states – member, candidate, or neighboring – and its influences on their political, legal, economic, and social processes (Mtchedlishvili 2018). A few important factors need to be noted here: the focus is on the part of the scholarship that refers to Europeanization as the study of the actions of pan-European institutions on states with varying national factors, which means that it is not a static but a dynamic process that would not be applied or seen in the same way across different regions. Mtchedlishvili (2018) makes the distinction of two different types: ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’, the former examining the EU influence on domestic change through a *downloading* process, and the latter examining the influence of the said country on the European level through an *uploading* process (82). This distinction is important as it ties into one of the fundamental notions of global studies: that flows go both ways, and not unidirectionally.

While most studies would approach the analysis by adopting a single theoretical view, in this case we will avoid approaching the subject through the lens directly. Rather, we will attempt

to view the data independently of these theories in order to see whether a causal relationship can indeed be established. Adhering to one theory could in fact lead to inconclusive results and completely undermine how each of these processes play off of each other and are interconnected.

3. Operationalization and Methodology

This thesis is based around a case study of Bulgaria. The objective being to explore the multiple facets of its development as a whole: viewing the multiple causes, outcomes, actors, phenomena, etc... The aim of this holistic approach to the time period 1990-2024 would be to view where, how, and why the overall path has been heading. Using different methodological tools from various disciplines including culture, economics, history, and social sciences as only an interdisciplinary approach would be able to fully grasp the different mingling perspectives and layers of transformation in order to create an overview of the broad spectrum of political, economic, and social developments. The biggest limitation of this thesis would be that it would serve to provide a birds-eye view of the historical progress, however due to the fact that the topic is under-researched compared to other Central and Eastern European countries such as Hungary, Poland, and Romania, it would positively contribute to existing literature by providing a blueprint for future analysis.

3.1 Research Design and Methodological Approach

This [global studies] framework enables an integrated approach to addressing global issues that involves selectively analyzing relevant historical, spatial, economic, political, and social dimensions and engaging with a range of theories and methods driven by one's research questions rather than one's disciplinary training.

- Darian-Smith and McCarty 2017, 74

A mixed methods approach will be adopted in this case study, combining both quantitative and qualitative measures to get the most accurate image of the complex multi-layered development that happened in Bulgaria between the years 1990 and 2024. The year 1989 marking the beginning of the collapse of the communist bloc and communism in Bulgaria, is one of the caesura points of Bulgarian history insofar as the major developments that followed can be traced back in one way or another to that point in time. The main goal of this thesis would be to transpose the economic and political developments that happened in Bulgaria during this time in order to see if any major themes and periods emerge. This would constitute the first modus operandi of the analysis that will

follow: what kind of correlations can be drawn between the different timelines – if any – and then delve deeper into each one to see what are the factors that caused the changes.

On the one hand, a quantitative approach will be used for measuring the economic and political development over those three decades and conducting a comparative analysis throughout those years. For the economic aspect, we will be sourcing data from the National Statistical Institute of Bulgaria, the World Bank, the European Union, the IMF and various other organizations, which will showcase the various economic prognoses, outlooks, and historical developments. Statistical data on the Growth Domestic Product (GDP), GDP per capita and their growth, unemployment, trade balance, inflation rate and Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) will be compiled from the aforementioned sources into figures in the following text. These factors will be interlinked with political indicators such as, parliamentary election results, voter turnouts, etc... to help outline the progression of the political parties in party, the governments, the change in cabinets, etc... Survey data will be used parallelly to help gauge the overall government 'health' of a government, its corruption, practices, policy orientations, and peoples' confidence in the system to see how we can link different phenomena together through the years.

On the other hand, a qualitative analysis will be necessary when establishing the link between the economic and politic, the phenomena and the results, as well as within the politics sphere itself. For the qualitative aspect, an analysis of political documents, speeches, and policy reports will be used, aiming to follow and examine the different causality links that exist within the different periods that could explain why there is an increase or decline in a specific timeframe. There will be a plethora of different databases used: reports from the IMF, the EU Commission, Bulgarian National Statistical Institute, etc... The timeline of political parties in power, superposed with the economic one, could give us insight into whether – and in a further step, how – the political party has an impact on the economy and the people and how exactly their policies figure into the equation. This will be more difficult to study during the 1997-2007 period and during the European integration period, seeing as there is a double phenomenon happening: the balance between IMF or European Union conditionalities and national policies and party politics.

Initial thoughts and research on the subject lead me to believe that there would be a positive overall effect of the democratization, globalization, liberalization, and EU accession insofar as the general standard of living, real GDP per capita, and corruptions indexes have all lowered. The

diachronous temporal study could reveal patterns in its history. However, the political aspect remains a bit blurry at the moment, especially considering the rising political instability of the last decade. While a case could be made for democratic backsliding or corruption, it would be interesting to see whether the political and economic timelines align in some way to understand this evolution, and if not, then why won't they and what could be the explanation. This is what will be attempted below in order to understand the fundamental nature of development in Bulgaria.

3.2 Limitations

There are various limitations to this study that need to be acknowledged. Firstly, the time frame that is employed here focuses primarily on the period 1990-2024, therefore we must recognize that there are existing historical conditions and legacies pre-1990 that will need to be included in the analysis for contextualization; these two extremities are not a strict cut-off in the sense of non-existence before and after. Secondly, this is a singular case study focused on Bulgaria meaning that while it does take into account external factors and influence, it does not adopt a directly comparative approach that would put it in line, for example, with other Eastern European countries. Thirdly, the positionality as outlined above makes it important to adhere to the data and try to distance oneself from personal interpretations. Finally, what could be the most important limitation is that the topic is not centered around a singular topic or factor: instead of focusing on a singular political/economy theory or mechanism, I am aiming to provide a broad overview of the chronological development and establish a view of the progressive changes rather than breakages.

4. Literature Review

4.1 Academic Works

Academic works on the Bulgaria's trajectory since 1990 have been conducted through the last few decades, however, there is a consistent lack of inter- or multidisciplinary approaches. There are on the one hand, political analyses focusing on the history of party politics (Smilov 2008), electoral behavior, civic participation (Todorov 2011), etc... and on the other hand economic studies centering around topics of macroeconomic policies (Bobeva 2021), privatization (Dimitrov 2004), Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) (Totev 2005). Research on social topics also exists, with a focus on migration (Patashev 2019), brain drain, ethnic minorities – specifically Turkish and Roma minorities (EUAfr 2018) – and finally

civil society. While these studies can be comprehensive and encompass the whole period since 1990, they remain one-faceted in the sense that they are published through a unidisciplinary lens.

Research and scholarly work have already been conducted on European integration generally and on specific case studies, especially in the Southeastern Europe area. There is an abundance of research and scholarly work more generally on the pathways towards democracy in Southeast Europe (Danijela 2013; Krastev 2002). A particularly recurring subject is the case of democratic backsliding, populism and its waves (Smilov 2008), personalism (Zankina 2017) and illiberal politics in the West Balkan countries, but not always related to the European Union or globalization specifically (Bieber 2018; Sitoropoulos 2017). The literature on the history of political parties is fairly saturated in Bulgarian academia (Karasimeonov 2010; Ganey 2024) democratic backsliding is fairly saturated, providing accounts of different actors, undermining political institutions and mechanisms of democratization through media and court manipulation, political opponent or election manipulation and others. Cases have been made establishing links between European integration and weak states such as in Romania (Vukov 2020); others argue for a correlation between EU enlargement and state capture in the Western Balkans – again overlooking the rest of the Balkans (Vachudova 2019; Richter 2020).

In comparative studies, there have been monographs and collections published on the Central and Eastern European area in general, but further exploration shows that even if Bulgaria is included among them, the analyses tend to be shorter and less in-depth than its counterparts (Smilov et al. 2008; Peterson & Lubecki 2023). Studies through a political economy lens have also been conducted, case in point is Reneta Dimitrova's 2021 book on the *Specificities of the Bulgarian Transition*. However, again, the author's approach focuses mainly on economic considerations, mixed in with political evolutions, but fails to take into account other linked factors such as political culture.

The literature outlining the economic benefits is vast. There are multiple social science, business and finance reports and findings on the economic benefits of the Bulgaria so-called 'transition', EU integration and economic globalization and liberalization of the market economy (Belchev 2018; EU Central Bank). The economic transition (Durova 2016) and reforms (Dimitrov 2004) are amongst the top researched topics, especially in terms of liberalization and fiscal policies. Further studies have also been done on export competitiveness (Zhelev 2012) and trade

relations more generally, even on de-development (Vassilev 2003) and convergent economy in European integration (Iotsov 2024). On the social aspect, Milena Nikolova and Boris Nikolaev (2016) operationalize life satisfaction in Bulgaria in context to the 2007 EU enlargement and find that that membership increased average life satisfaction at least in the short-term. They provide interesting theoretical considerations; however, the studies are clearly limited to the immediate pre- and post-1990 or 2007 moments and do not study the natural progressions that extend past those years.

To reiterate, there are vast amounts of literature, reports, and data on the economic aspects of Bulgarian integration, including reports from central banks and EU institutions, all of which lack a global studies perspective, and a comprehensive analysis linking it to other aspects such as the political, as I am suggesting here. Even the existing literature on the political ramifications: cases made surrounding topics of political parties and cultures (Ganev 2024), elites (Prodanov 2015), state capture (SELDI 2024), etc... approach the subject from a single side only.

4.2 Nationally diffused works

It would be interesting to point out here that there exist a great number of autobiographies and personal journals that have been published centering on specific topics of Bulgaria's history: the communist era, the transition, membership to a specific party, prominent figures, etc... If one browses through the political section of any bookstore in Bulgaria, we can say that a third of the books are memoirs, diaries, or interviews with political and economic leaders through the years. For example, the ex-tsar that headed his own political party Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha (Simeon Saksoburggotski in Bulgarian) authored a book called "Simeon II: A unique destiny" (2014); one example of the multitudes that exist about Boyko Borisov, a prominent figure in Bulgarian politics, is "Interview with a Dictator" by Ognyan Stefanov (2021); Todor Zhivkov published "Memoirs" (1997); Filip Dimitrov wrote "Myths of the Bulgarian Transition" (2003), etc... These books are generally hard to come by in English translations and therefore are not very commonly included or mentioned in most academic works. Their credibility in the academic sphere, and their positionality are the two main issues surrounding them, however the fact that they are widely diffused to the Bulgarian population is notable and should be an area for future study to be incorporated with questions of media. None of these types of books will be used in the subsequent thesis.

4.3 Research gap

I see this filling a gap in existing literature and scholarly conversations, as it approaches the history of Bulgaria since 1990 in an interdisciplinary manner not yet explicitly analyzed. While the scope remains broader than most master's level productions, it seems to me an imperative step in understanding the broader image of Bulgaria's historical path, with the goal of providing a comprehensive overview as well as a practical path for further studies in the global studies field. Bulgaria is vastly understudied compared to other Southeast European countries even in the books, collections and monographs on the Eastern and Central European region, and post-Communist studies, Bulgaria's contribution tends to be smaller, more general, and not as nuanced as the other case studies. Many of them tend to overlook crucial details – that could either be due to the author's background, academic and disciplinary orientation or it could be the fact that there is a smaller degree of existing literature and data compilation on the subject, even without the language gap.

5. Historical Context and Background

Bulgaria has long been one of the poorest countries in Europe, economically speaking, and has unfortunately been on the losing side of history far too many times. While the First Bulgarian State was founded in 681 A.D. it has gone through a series of transformative events, periods of domination and external rule, and somehow managed to retain its name, its people and a large part of its territory in the almost fourteen centuries since then (Detrez 2006). Geopolitically, Bulgaria is an important location, at the crossroads of important trade routes, between the Black Sea and Turkey which is the link with the Middle East and Asia. However, it tends to be overlooked especially considering its lower economic output compared to other European nations.

The momentum of the communist influence and movement in the mid-1900s, paired with the abolition of the monarchy, growing Soviet support and elimination of the opposition were all contributing factors to the communist parties rise to power, culminating in the assumption of supreme power by the BCP (Bulgarian Communist Party) in 1947 (Detrez 2006, 127). The following two decades were tumultuous: stuck between Stalinization narratives and Tito's influence, the BCP cycles through multiple leaders who end up being ousted, when Todor Zhivkov becomes the party leader in 1954 and subsequently the Prime minister in 1962 (Detrez 2006, 493). During this time, Bulgarian economic development was heavily influenced by Soviet and Chinese

influence as well, incorporating several five-year plans, some of which were shaped after the Chinese Great Leap Forward campaigns (Zofka 2018, 326). This is the beginning of the last stage of the communist period in Bulgaria or what history now refers to as the ‘Zhivkov’ era.

5.1 Late communist period 1960s-1984

Zhivkov was the longest-serving leader in any of the Soviet-bloc nations of Eastern Europe. For 35 years he served as the party leader of the BCP and as ruler of Bulgaria until he was forcibly ousted in 1989 (Detrez 2006, 495). He was “a complex and contradictory figure”, on the one hand Bulgarian history books paint him as a national hero whose policies improved the population’s welfare and standard of living (Dimitrov 2001, 30). On the other hand, this whitewashed narrative fails to take into account the repressive measures he used on his opposition, his controversial ‘Bulgarianization’ campaign, lack of civil and human rights, and his close affiliation with the Soviet Union.

From the beginning, and even as a result of his upbringing, Zhivkov focused on a strong pro-Soviet rhetoric, even going as far as suggesting to Soviet First Secretary Nikita Khrushchev in the early 1960s that Bulgaria should join as the 16th republic of the Soviet Union (Baeva, 2015). Strategically placing himself on the Soviet side, allowed him to garner support, and remain virtually unchallenged during his reign – attempts were made but failed and anyone who showed signs of opposition was promptly eliminated one way or another. Zhivkov’s policies aligned with the Soviet mentality in the 1960s including industrial and land nationalization, and a central planning market system (Giatzidis 2002, 24). While the agricultural sector had been the most important thus far, following the Soviet pattern of development, Bulgaria started a rapid industrialization through collectivization that ultimately lost momentum and did not yield the results that Zhivkov had promised the people.

After the death of Stalin in 1962, Bulgaria embarked on a mission to expand its outside relations. Being part of the CMEA and the Warsaw Pact meant that it abandoned its previous isolationism mentality and expanded cultural and trade relations with their neighbors and the countries of the Soviet bloc. However, the Soviet Union remained its biggest trading partner, and its dependence on the Soviet market and Soviet preferential oil prices was not a long-term advantageous move. As part of the Soviet Bloc during the Cold War, Bulgaria also figured within the COMECON – the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance – which tried to incorporate trade

between the Eastern bloc and the so-called ‘Third World’ economies, diminishing trade flows with Central Europe, between 1958-1968 between 70 and 80% of Bulgarian imports and exports figured with other Comecon countries (Unspecified 1970, 4). This number also does not take into account that the recipient of 75% of that trade was the Soviet Union, meaning that the most promising Bulgarian markets had little to no competition, which means low investment and higher public expenditure, which, as history would show, does not lead to long-term sustainable positive growth (Curtis & Keefe 1993). In the 1970s, there was an attempt to redirect to non-socialist countries in the so-called Western world and developing ‘Third World’ countries but the majority of the trade volume still remained with the USSR and other CMEA partners, the ‘Western’ and ‘Third World’ trading partners accounting for less than a quarter of the foreign trade between 1960-1980 (Giatzidis 2002, 33).

By the mid-1970s it was clear that the economic returns were declining and the policies would not be sustainable in the long-run. Therefore, in 1979 the New Economic Mechanism (NEM) was introduced in an attempt at “updating the technical infrastructure of Bulgarian industry and improving the quality of Bulgarian exports to raise hard-currency income” which did not yield the anticipated results (Curtis 1993, 134). Aspects of the liberal trends were thus attempted, in a way as to mirror the perestroika: The central planning system and reliance on the COMECON came with their own drawbacks, and they were ultimately not the answer to its economic prosperity and by the end of the 1980s, were seeking out capitalist market solutions (Gomes & Henrique 2021, 11).

5.2 Zhivkov’s resignation: a breaking point

The communist party in Bulgaria was in power for the better part of the 20th century, and Zhivkov its leader for more than half that time. From the end of the Second World War until 1989, the Communist Party BCP was in charge and maintained not only a close relationship to the USSR, but also mirrored their economic model closely (Detrez 2006, 158). They exerted economic power in Bulgaria through a command economy based on centralized planning, with an emphasis on heavy industry and collectivization of agriculture, a method that turned out to be profitable in the short-term and unsustainable in the long-run (Dimitrova 2021, 23). As a result, its economic situation pre-1990 was not the most stable, and constituted a period of high inflation, growing debt,

creating and even contributing to the political turmoil (Dimitrova, 2021, 23). While there was no public outrage, the growing discontent was clear and only helped in deposing Zhivkov.

Zhivkov's last efforts to sustain the economic and renew his power between 1984 and 1989, ultimately led to his demises: the Revival Process, also known as the Bulgarization campaign were not successful and only exacerbated public and external pressures. The Revival Process was a series of policies that mandated name changes for ethnic Turks and other Muslim minorities, and repressed their cultural practices and expression (Curties 1993, 56). These policies ultimately led to an implied 'soft' expulsion of 300,000 Turkish minorities, as the people who did not want to adhere to these policies, left the country. This so-called 'regenerative process' earned a lot of international condemnation in terms of violation of human rights and freedom. This placed Zhivkov and Bulgaria in an unfavorable light abroad (Crampton 2005,205). Bulgarians have had a long turbulent history with Turkey, and yet this was a direct manifestation of the totalitarian vestiges of the communist party, which had not happened to this degree in its modern history. The 'Great Excursion' of these minorities was most likely a decisive factor in the creation of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS) party in early 1990, which could arguably be the most stable party on the political scene through the whole period of 1990 to the present day.

During this time Bulgaria was "unaffected politically or ideologically by the upheavals in Hungary in 1956, in Czechoslovakia in 1968 or the anti-communist movement in Poland in 1980", despite the persecution of intelligentsia and political opponents by Zhivkov, the decaying economic conditions during the 1980s, the latter retained his power and control (Giatzidis 2002, 23). However, external factors did play a role in the 1989 transition: the increased external condemnation from the West, the domino fall of communism across the Soviet bloc and the public voice of the Ekoglasnost party all played a role in the ousting of Zhivkov from the regime, and the subsequent democratization efforts.

The economic disillusionment paired with the political repercussions of the 1989 democratization movement spurred the economic transition of Bulgaria to a market economy. After the beginning of the fall of communism across Eastern European nations in 1989, the Communist Party took it upon itself to action an internal coup. Especially since the rhetoric employed by Zhivkov insinuating reforms and change in the economic conditions of the people was unfulfilled, as Dimitrov (2001) mentions that "Talking about reform served as a substitute for real reform"

(31). What followed was a series of slow and gradual political changes and economic reforms that transformed Bulgaria's economic and political landscape.

5.3 The creation of the Republic of Bulgaria and democratization

The creation of the Republic of Bulgaria and its modern Constitution came about due to a number of factors including the creation of a dissident group under the impact of Perestroika in 1988, the formation of the umbrella movement Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) in 1989, the external factors and Western influence, all culminating in the decision by the BCP Central Committee to abolish the constitutional guarantee of the BCP as the leader party in December of 1989. Consequently, in 1990, the BCP and UDF agreed to meet in a series of Round Table Talks (RTT). The results of this were almost immediate: in November 1990 the Grand National Assembly invalidated the old 1971 communist constitution, and in July 1991 after the Warsaw Pact was disbanded, the Grand National Assembly adopted a new Constitution that forms the basis of today's Bulgarian political system (Dimitrov 2004, 15). The new Constitution established the framework for a democratic, pluralistic state which established it as a parliamentary republic, replacing the single-party system that dominated the 20th century politics, and adopted the principles of separation of the legislative, executive and judicial powers. Furthermore, it implemented articles expanding civil liberties, protecting freedom of speech, press, association and freedom, protection of property, rule of law and human rights provisions, all aspects of democratic rule and fundamental rights and freedoms, marking a decisive break from the authoritarian framework of the socialist era. The first manifestation of this Constitutional change can be seen through the first free parliamentary elections in 1991, where the UDF movement won the majority of votes (see Annex A).

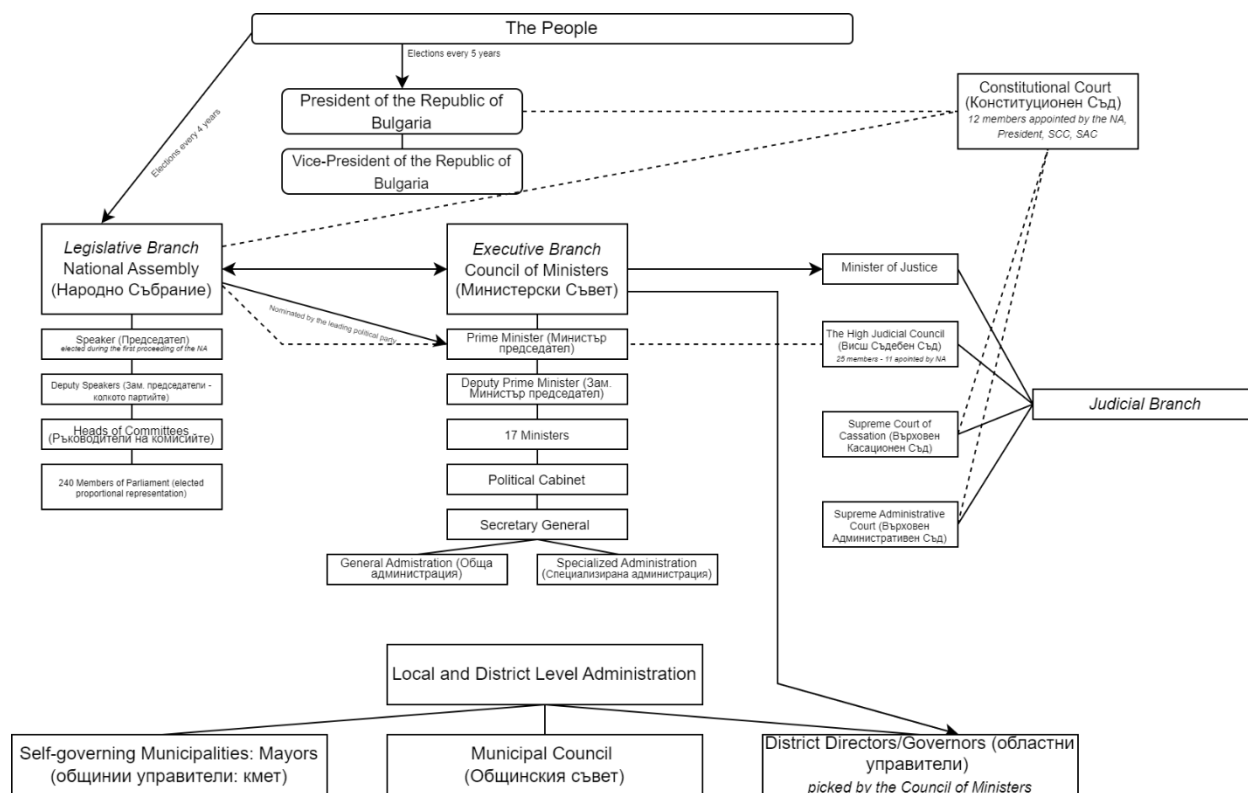


Figure 1 The State System in Bulgaria

Figure 1 is the author's attempt to demonstrate the new state system of Bulgaria as per the 1991 Constitution. It shows the division of the three branches of power and how the political state system is organized today. The head of state, the President, is elected every 5 years by the people, and he or she then selects his Vice-President. The legislative branch of government is established through parliamentary elections held every 4 years, where the people vote according to which political party they support. The National Assembly is then established according to a proportional representation system, the electoral rule being that parties must secure at least 4% of the total valid votes in order to earn seats in the National Assembly. As with all democratic pluralistic systems, it is possible to form coalitions between parties.

While the democratization efforts on the political side were advancing, it is important to note that there is a certain degree of path dependence that needs to be analyzed. While the Constitutional framework changed, certain aspects of the communist-era party structures remained and were repurposed by the BSP during the RTT. Moreover, economic liberalization and privatization were slow and not immediate. Some large state-owned enterprises and banks were still managed by actors of the previous regime and consolidated oligarchic ownership and crony

capitalism. The economic situation in 1990 was not yet favorable to total system overhaul: while the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (Comecon) disintegrated and liberalization efforts began, the political deadlock between the elected parties made it difficult to overcome the high debt, outdated industry and replace the overreliance on the Soviet market. The loss of its export markets, high inflation and high public debt accumulated in the previous decades culminated in shortages of basic consumer goods, rising unemployment, decline in the standard of living and a moratorium on its public debt. The economic meltdown in 1996-1997 was therefore inevitable, but was indeed the push needed to overhaul the system, stop the political deadlock and implement privatization and market liberalization reforms, although at a slower pace and more gradual compared to Hungary for example (Perone 1998).

5.4 The Uniqueness of the Bulgarian Case Study

The Bulgarian case study has a few unique aspects that separate it from other historical analyses of Central and Eastern European post-communist states. On the one hand, the uniqueness of the Bulgarian case even within the ‘East’ European analyses rests on its historical political culture. In order to understand this, we must understand the Bulgarian political culture and its layers. On the other hand, its so-called ‘transition’, so the change from the socialist model to the democratic pluralistic model was not a complete breakage pre and post-1990 as the Communist Party technically retained its significance through this change by undergoing internal changes and even won the majority in the 1994 parliamentary elections. Therefore, the Communist legacy did not simply disappear and was not immediately replaced by the democratic forces. It morphed, transformed and adapted to the new political and international environments, and transitioned to a more nuanced communist approach. This continuity of the communist elite makes it a unique case: there was dissidence within the party which ultimately led to a split, allowing the formation of the BSP with many former members of the BCP retaining power and limited the pace of political reform compared to rapid system overhauls in East Germany or Romania for example. A more specific explanation is provided in Part 7 below. “The Bulgarian example of an ex-communist party, which retains in itself a nationalistic element proves to be unique for the old socialist block” as this nationalism was not build upon an anti-Russian narrative, but on an anti-Turkish based, allowing the nationalistic subculture to garner support in the 1994 elections (Ganev 2024, 278).

Furthermore, the left- and right-wing orientation in Bulgaria is blurred and does not conform to Western standards at this point. The continuity and adaptation of the parties means that there is a certain level of fluidity involved: the BCP for example, although nominally left, adapted a certain level of market orientation and privatization stances, not falling within the usual socialist-capitalist divide (Kandilarov 2010, 64). This distance from concrete ideological adherences has permeated the Bulgarian political landscape since and is seen even today with the manifestation of shared reform agendas between left and right parties, coalitions despite differing political rhetorics and even through the political pendulum that shows through the elections results, whereas the public radically changes its support from one side to another – usually following a crisis of confidence in the ruling party.

6. Preliminary timelines

For the purpose of this study, I will divide my analysis by subsequent periods of time and delving deeper into each one in order to see the complexities of the multi-faceted developments during those years and how they intertwine and influence one another. Thus far, most of the literature has divided the time into the following increments: 1990-2000, 2000-2007, 2007-2013, 2013-2024. The aim of this next section is to assess whether the latter increments would serve as the best starting point of analysis according to collected data. For this objective, the following economic and political timelines were gathered and created in order to see if any trends and patterns emerge.

Previous studies on the economic development and reforms in Bulgaria have pulled the following timelines: 1989-2007, 2007-2019 (Ganev 2020), or 1989-1997, 1997-2003 – although this article was published in 2003, we can assume logically that it would have extended to 2007 or later if it had been published at a later date (Dimitrov 2004) and Dimitrova (2021) also established 1990-1997 and 1997-2007. Previous studies in political history have focused on the pre and the post-1990 periods of time, without limiting their timeframes for specific reasons. They have usually centered around the formation and existence of a certain party or analyzed it linearly.

Insofar as we are adhering to the global studies framework, it is important not to focus solely on the macroeconomic perspective such as growth and performance through GDP as it is an inaccurate measure of the overall progression of Bulgarian evolution. Figure 2 which depicts the

GDP growth rate of Bulgaria from 1981-2023, shows eight distinct trends: 1990-1996, 1996-2000, 2000-2008, 2008-2010, 2010-2019, 2020-onwards. If we assume a purely economic view, then 1990-1996, 1997-2008, 2009-2019, 2019-present would be the established timelines, however this fails to take into account the monumental changes in the political landscape: the breakages and changes on the political scene which are due or caused by economic reasons. Moreover, analysis of GDP growth only goes so far in showcasing the macroeconomic output of a country and completely overlooks the social, political and microeconomic aspects. On the other hand, we also cannot focus on a strictly political timeframe as that would fall within the post-communist trap: it would imply breaking down the timelines to 1990-2001, 2001-2009, 2009-2024 since 1990/91 would be considered the caesura point in its political history since that was when the socialist era framework was dismantled, and would go up to 2001 when there was a dramatic shift in popular support for a new party, completely disregarding the continuity of socialist legacy and the natural evolution.

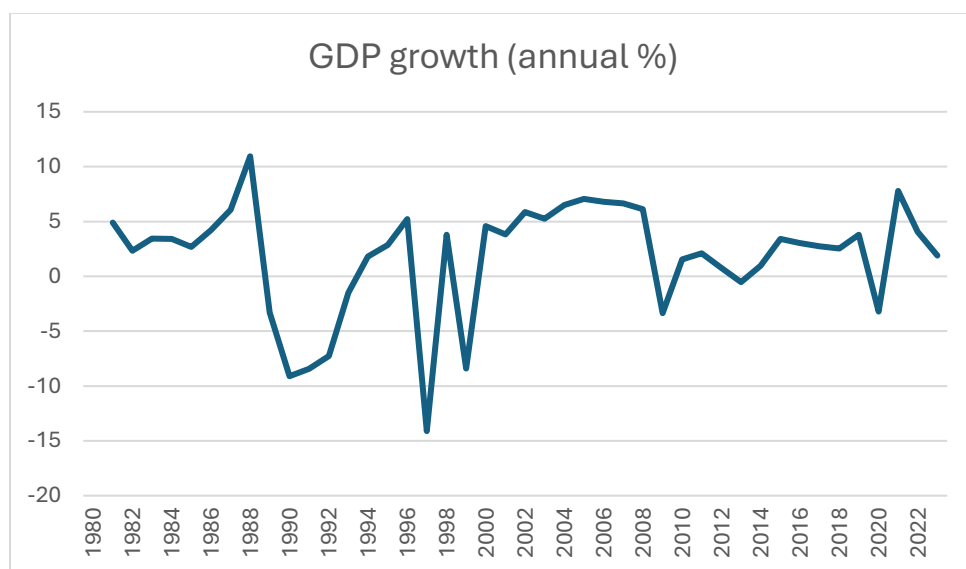


Figure 2 GDP Growth in Bulgaria, annual %. Source: World Bank Database.

Figure 2 shows us that annual GDP growth hit its lowest point in 1997. This is consistent with the 1997 crisis and the high inflation rate of the time, the highest annual change seen before and ever since then. In addition, Figure 4 depicts the results of the parliamentary elections in

Bulgaria since 1991. It shows each party that earned a representation in the National Assembly, in other words each party that won more than 4% of the total votes. According to those results, during the elections in 1994, the BSP held the highest percentage of voters. This theory aligns with the fact that 1989/1990 was not a caesura point for Bulgaria in terms of political disillusionment: in fact, the socialist influence and support from the public remained in place which managed to win them the majority in the 1994 elections again. However, there is a dramatic decline in public support shown in the election results in 1997 whereas the BSP gathered less than 25% of the votes of the represented parties, an important decline from the previous elections. This goes along with the idea of 1989-1997 being a period of ‘incomplete transition’, and the ‘real transition’ only beginning in 1997 (Crampton 2005, 236). Therefore, we can conclude that there was probably a significant shift in the popular mentality of the people in regards to the party itself, and to the political goals of the parties as the UDF support more than doubled during this time. The cutoff for this first time period will thus be 1997, seeing as two major shifts happened at this time, both economic and political.

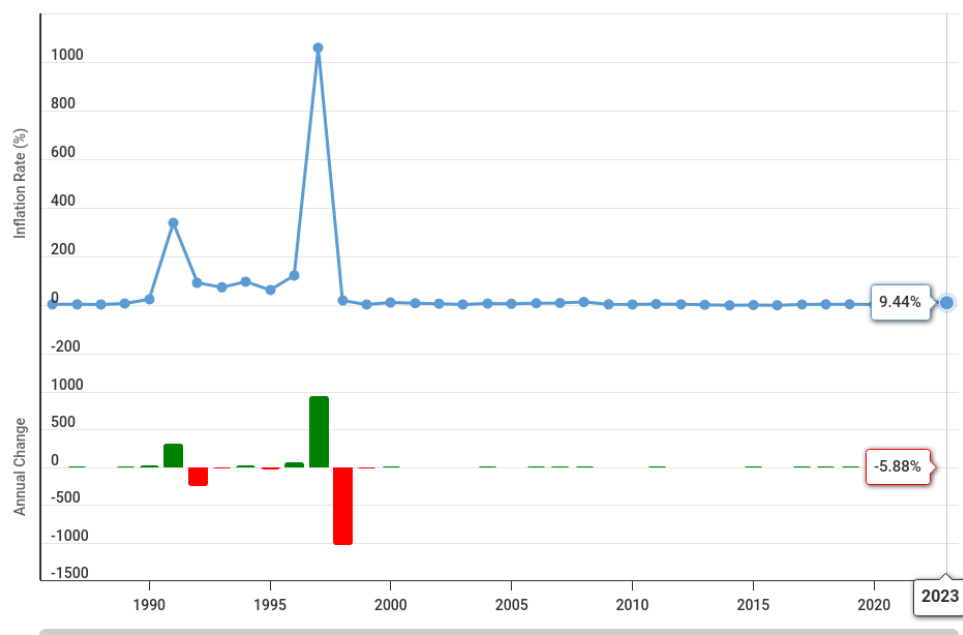


Figure 3 Bulgarian Inflation Rate 1986-2023. Source: Macrotrends.net and the World Bank.

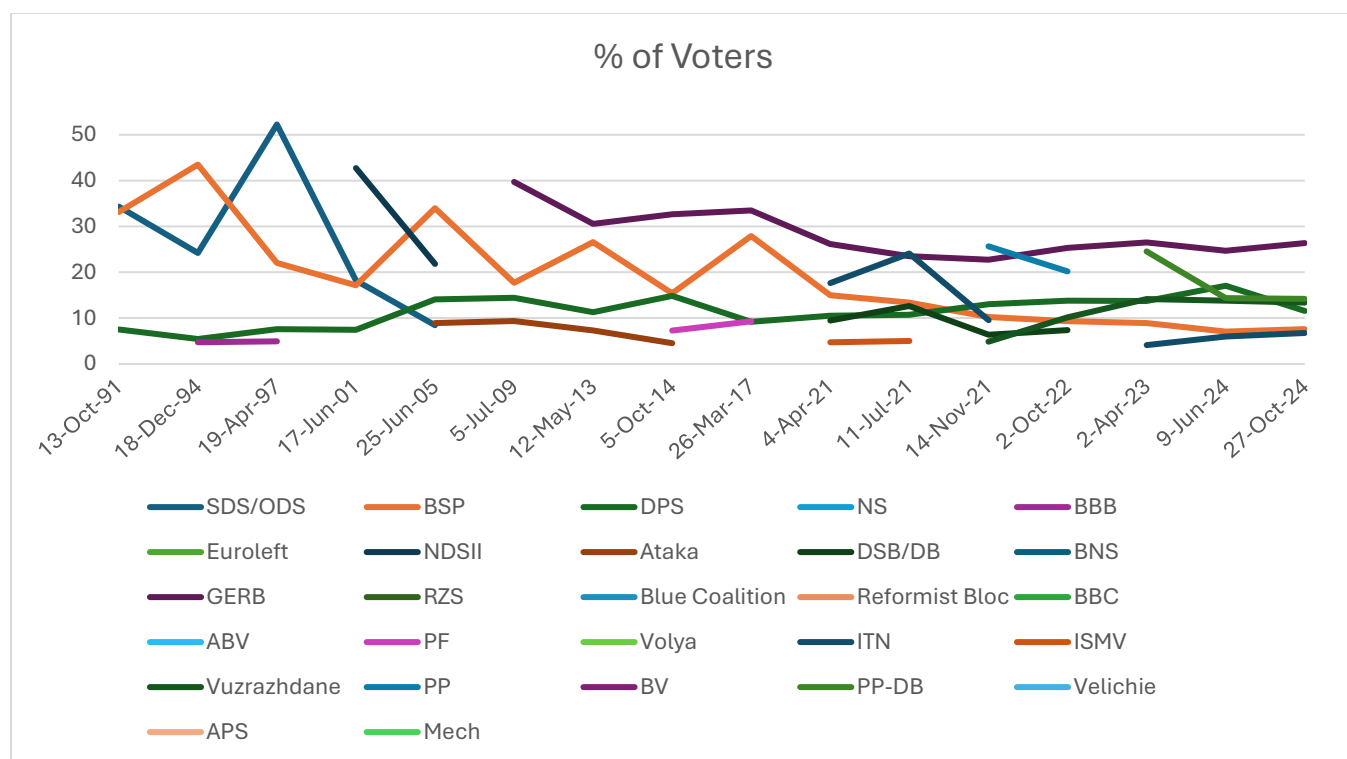


Figure 4 Political Parties in Power, % of Voters. Source: Author's own compilation of data from the Central Election Committee Bulgaria.

The second cutoff for the time period is a little trickier to narrow down. However, in this case we will choose to follow the status quo and the logic of the established works thus far and pick 2007 the next external point. The 2007 Global Crisis and Bulgaria's EU accession happen during this year, making it another important milestone in Bulgarian history and worth analyzing its preconditions and consequences thereof. The fluctuations in GDP are considered to be normal in times of crisis and this also overlaps with another phenomenon of Figure 4: the UDF rapid popular support decline and emergence of GERB on the political scene.

The third period will be 2007-2013 because, on the one hand, this was a time of recovery from the crisis meaning that there are a string of new policies and reforms taking place. Furthermore, because of the EU Accession it means that there are significant political and economic institutional reforms and new flows in regards to this phenomenon. Upward economic trend since 2007 but the political side tells another story. All of these seem to culminate and somehow lead up – we could even go as far as say cause – the political instability and protests in 2013. Further analysis could lead us to discovering the foundational cracks that led to this, especially considering that the political situation in Bulgaria has not historically improved since

then and only seems to be deteriorating in the decade that followed. Figure 4 shows us that a government has not been able to stay in power for its full 4-year term since 2013 (for a full list of the regular and interim governments see Annex B). The exception being the Third Borisov Government that served between May 2017 and May 2021. It would be interesting to examine exactly how and why this cabinet managed to stay intact compared to the others.

Considering the latter, the fourth and final period would be 2013-2024 – to the present. There are no clearly discerning characteristics and upheavals during this time – barring the lack of political stability and failure of most cabinets to stay in power during this time, GERB has been a prominent political facet during this time. Economically, there is an overall general positive trend according to the GDP (Figure 2), its political corruption level which has remained more or stable since 2013, the Corruption Perception Index showing a slight increase from 41 to 43 between 2013 and 2024 (Transparency International 2025).

While we will use the aforementioned time periods as bases for the study ahead, it is important to note that we will follow a fluid analysis wherein we will also look into comparing the two sides and how the transition between them happened. Analyzing what was different and why specific policies and reforms suddenly work, which policies and practices were adopted in order to bring about the change and were there any specific actors behind it. (political parties advocating for EU integration, a government that supported one policy/attitude over another, external pressures and engines, other national institutes or actors (ex-president when in power, interim governments taking advantage, etc...)

7. Initial “Globalization”, Economic Liberalization and Democratization Efforts: 1990-1997

The period of time between 1990-1997 will serve as the first timeline for analysis in this thesis for two main reasons: one, the BSP is the majority party in the 1991 and 1994 elections, but the rapid decline and disillusionment that leads to it taking a step back in 1996 is an important historical step in Bulgarian history, seeing as its communist legacy had so far been upheld. Second, the exacerbated economic decline and the crisis of 1996-1997, overlaps with the aforementioned political phenomenon. Looking at it from a political economy perspective, these two phenomena are connected, exactly to what degree remains to be seen. Furthermore, 1990 marks the beginning of the Round Table Talks (RTT), which is one of the cataclysmic factors of change during this time period. While most countries were experiencing public uproar, like in Serbia, or military intervention, like in former Yugoslavia, the Bulgarian government was aiming to get out in front of the movements seen in other Central and Southeastern Europe nations, in order to on the one hand retain power, but also to invite the material gains of the liberal trends coming from the so-called ‘Western’ world (Uvalic 2011, 4;18) . Due to a combination of strategic distancing, external pressure, adaptability and historical legacies, the governments of this time period manage to start the transformation of the Bulgarian political and economic landscapes.

In order to understand the specifics behind this transformation, we need to analyze the nature of governance in Bulgaria and its characteristics, the political ideologies, and its economic characteristics. We will try to distance ourselves in a way from the traditional sense of ‘post-communist transition’. That is to say, most case studies tend to refer to post-1990 as a period of transition in Bulgaria. However, deeper analysis of these years goes to show that 1990-1997 did not constitute a transition so much as a stalemate – firstly, on the political schema as the legacy of the Communist party remains and governs some of the implemented policies and secondly, on the economic level as it is not a strict liberalization process.

To contextualize, following the public discontent and internal dissidence, Zhivkov was forced to resign in November of 1989, leaving the party fragmented, but also allowing the space for the establishment of the Constitution and the start of democratization efforts. Economically

speaking, Bulgaria was experiencing a series of domestic hurdles of economic instability, high public debt, decreased trade balance and rising inflation.

7.1 Delving into the initial phase: Establishing the Constitution and Historical Legacy

The unique aspect of the Bulgarian ‘transition’, what makes it stand out from the rest of the socialist bloc, is the fact that there was no political rupture and no public uproar against the Communist party as a whole. Ideologically, the people did not get disillusioned as witnessed in the other Eastern and Central European countries. The Communist party did not simply disband and disappear from the political landscape: the internal conflicts led to the renaming of the party and changes in its agenda and ideological orientation, but also to the creation of other parties now that the Constitution had been amended to allow the formation of a pluralist democracy and opposition parties as per Article 1 and 11 (Kandilarov 2010, 155). Which means that this communist legacy of the social party, its supporters and even its ideological influence over the political and economic policies of the government did not vanish into thin air, making it not so much a caesura point of history, but a progressive shift that has been so far overgeneralized in political and economic history.

By the mid-1980s, as a result of the failed ‘Bulgarization’ efforts – also known as the Revival Process – the negative economic outlook, and external discontent from the ‘West’, the Communist Party managed to shift the blame and the discontent onto Zhivkov themselves, and ousted him from power, effectively using him as a scapegoat and allowing the political elite to recalibrate their political attitudes and actions (Rossi 2012). Consequently, this internal ‘coup’ proved advantageous as it allowed the Party to remain at the head of the liberalization and democratization efforts of the regime. This is also due to the fact that there was no real opposition during this time: leading up to the 1989 events, only certain intelligentsia spoke out against the one-party system and the state. According to Ganev (2024), there is no massive discontent observed in Bulgaria, instead there are individual contrarian opinions from intellectuals, and dissident organization comes relatively late, comparable to the Soviet case (168). The political persecution during the Zhivkov era, and the disorganized contrarian voices and fledgling youth dissidence made it impossible to garner enough public support to enter the political field. It was not until the creation of the UDF umbrella movement that a real opponent stood face-to-face with the historical roots of the Communist regime (Todorov 2010, 13). The political stalemate between

the UDF and BSP continued to dominate the political landscape until the early 2000s. This bipolar party model system remained in place for a long time thereafter: only disappearing at the turn of the century.

After the establishment of the UDF, and the abolishing of the constitutional guarantee of the BCP's leading role in December 1989, the elections of the first Grand National Assembly in June 1990 show the BSP receiving more than half of the votes (see Table 1 below). However, after a series of resignations and tumultuous political governments, the first parliamentary elections in October 1991 demonstrated the continuing public support for the BSP, which managed to win 33.14% of the majority vote in the October 1991 parliamentary elections, and again 43.5% in the December 1994 elections as depicted in Table 1 below. In order to understand the logic behind this, it is imperative to explore the inner machinations of the political subcultures in Bulgaria and the economic background.

Table 1 Majority Parties in the National Assembly, 1991-2001

Party	October 1991		December 1994		April 1997		June 2001	
	%	Seats	%	Seats	%	Seats	%	Seats
UDF/ODS	34.36%	110	24.23	69	52.26	137	18.18	51
BSP	33.14%	106	43.5	125	22.07	58	17.15	48
DPS	7.55%	24	5.44	15	7.6	19	7.45	21
NS	-	-	6.51	18	-	-	-	-
BBB	-	-	4.73	13	4.93	12	-	-
Euroleft	-	-	-	-	5.5	14	-	-
NDSII	-	-	-	-	-	-	42.74	120

Source: Central Election Committee Bulgaria.

To fully understand how the communist party managed to retain its power and influence for almost a full decade after most other ex-Soviet bloc states, we must delve into one of the methodological tools of cultural and sociological studies, as it pertains to political history: subculture theory. Bulgarian analyses of political cultural typically adhere to the consensus that it is not static, rather a dynamic process based on historical processes and norms and on the memory of the past onto which play a number of political, economic and global factors that evolves over time, especially in times of change (Ganev 2024, 24). While many definitions exist for 'political culture', we will stray from traditional definitions and focus on 'political culture' hereafter as "[the]

perception towards political phenomena, shaped by value orientations, historical traditions, cultural features and social environment” (Ganev 2024, 24). This definition will allow us to venture further into the paradigms of political culture, as it is not enough to explore the dominant political culture to understand the underlying dynamics and historical developments of the Bulgaria political thinking. It is important to note that their effects are not one-sided: dominant political cultures and subcultures are both cause and effect; they interact and influence one another in turn. Subcultures are not elements of the system, but manifestations of the system; they are not counter to a dominant culture, but part thereof. Therefore, the sum of the subcultures would not cover the whole of the national political culture. Which is why making this distinction is imperative to our analysis, as we will see in which ways the emergence of subcultures have been agents of change.

There are, according to Ganev (2024), four fundamental and independent layers to the Bulgarian political ‘soil’: the Geographical, Balkan, Orthodox and National layers.. According to him, while there is no superior level to another, the National layer is the dominating one in the decades since the Liberation. The political subcultures in Bulgaria include: the Socialist, Nationalistic, Democratic, Ethnoreligious, according to Ganev, to which we must add the mass political culture (2024, 239). However, this oversimplification into four categories seems to fall within the avoidance trap of the meta-theory of social development in historical research. Other researchers such as Alexander Karakachanov and Nina Debruyne (2023), identify six: Real Socialism, Anti-Communism, Wrestlers/Mutri, Honest Entrepreneurs, Environmentalists and Chalga (210). Ganev argues that during the actual ‘transition’ period, what we witness is the interplay between the Western-diffused liberal model and the existing subcultures and dominant political culture, however that seems to oversimplify this complex period of time and completely disregard the effect that the dissident and youth population had on the changing political environment. Therefore, I suggest the following revised groups: Socialist, Nationalist, Democratic, Ethnoreligious, Business, and Youth. Subcultures not to be confused with mass political culture: one of the main differences of mass political culture is the lack of ideological, formational or representational affiliation.

While there may be different opinions on the number and manifestations of subcultures, a common conclusion between different researchers is that in the early 1990-1997, the political process is dominated by the ‘Socialist/Nationalistic’ and ‘Anti-Communist/Democratic’

subcultures. The juxtaposition of these two entities reflect the domination of the bipolar nature of the political system until 1997. The socialist legacies that became a part of the political characteristics of Bulgaria, the nationalistic elements and the historical legacies make it so that the liberal trend and external influences are not a breaking point. While they manifested, created and influenced the subcultures and political sentiments in the population, there was no caesura: the landscape saw a progressive change and even still, the vestiges of the past are still felt within the soil. In fact, it was these historical legacies and subcultures, that with the help of the RTT helped the newly renamed BSP remain in power and the UDF gain traction between 1990-1997 (Dimitrov, 2001, 39).

The period 1989-1992 constituted a period of economic crisis and reform. Following the failed Revival Process, the economic situation was daunting at best. Political and economic changes were happening simultaneously, leading to disjointed implementations in the institutional frameworks. During the political struggle, and in the small period of time between 1985-1988, where the Communist Party was still in power, the transition to market economy was already beginning, as it was a last attempt to adapt to the external events, the domino effect, without fully overturning the system and abdicating control. The following table taken from Wight and Fox (1998) summarizes the main economic and political reforms taking place between 1989-1992 (144-145):

Table 4
Political and Economic Reforms in Bulgaria, 1989-92

1989			
November	Todor Zhivkov, who had held power for 35 years, is replaced as Communist Party leader and Chairman of the State Council by Peter Mladenov.	July	Reform process slows as new constitution adopted; parliament blocks small business privatization program, worried that nomenklatura would seize ownership.
December	Mass demonstrations; National Assembly approves constitutional reform which removes communist political monopoly.	October	National Assembly elections; the first non-communist government is narrowly created in November by Filip Dimitrov (UDF) as Prime Minister, in an informal coalition with the Turkish Movement for Rights and Freedoms ("MRF"). Of 240 seats, UDF won 110, BSP won 106, and MRF won 24.
1990		December	Small business restitution begins.
February	New government of Andrei Lukanov, Bulgarian Socialist Party ("BSP") installed. BSP is the former Communist Party.		
April	Peter Mladenov elected to Presidency by National Assembly.	1992	
June	First multiparty election to National Assembly. BSP holds power in coalition cabinet	January	Zhelev re-elected President in first direct voting by population. More liberal foreign investment law enacted to attract foreign capital inflows.
September	Bulgaria joins International Monetary Fund ("IMF"), thereby becoming eligible for balance of payments loans and providing a strong incentive for economic reforms.	April	Privatization law enacted. The law created an Agency for Privatization to carry out the sale of medium- and large-size companies. The Agency was not fully constituted until August, however, and did not begin work until September.
December	Andrei Lukanov's government resigns in the midst of a general strike and mass demonstrations. Replaced by government of Dimitar Popov.	October	Dimitrov government falls in crisis over economic policy and foreign affairs; the MFR, trade unions, the business lobby, and the mass media objected to austerity measures. In December Lyuben Berov becomes new Prime Minister.
1991			
February	Major economic reforms enacted. Price controls removed (except on energy) and demonopolization programs begun; first land restitution law enacted (but implementation delayed); a unified floating exchange rate created; tight monetary policy to control inflation leads to high interest rates.		
May	Law on foreign investment enacted; it was later replaced by a more liberal law in January 1992.		

The removal of price controls, demonopolization programs, first land restitution law, floating exchange rate, changes in monetary policy, law on foreign investment, privatization law and the entry to the IMF all contributed to the development of the Bulgarian market economy, and to the beginning of its links with the capitalist system. We can clearly see how the influence of the outside world, the perestroika and the liberalization trends around Europe were leaking into Bulgarian mentality. This was, however, only the beginning. While the ultimate effects were not felt until almost two decades later, the groundwork for international economic interconnectedness were laid out from this moment, but economic progress would prove to be slow and difficult, because of the massive public debt accumulated over the previous decades, the inability to find foreign debtors and financiers, the transplantation of an ineffective external model, and due to the political battle and instability of the bipolar party system.

7.2 Inherited Legacies and Transplanted Models

Despite the absence of military intervention in 1989, the transition in Bulgaria during the 1990s was full of dramatic events. Criminals ruled the streets and corruption dominated the privatization process. In 1996, former Prime Minister Andrei Lukanov was publicly assassinated. The factories were distributed to the selected few for only 1 lev. The annual inflation reached 310%. Nineteen banks went bankrupt and people lost their life savings with the collapse of security and order that communism had long provided them with. Democracy came hand in hand with an average monthly salary of 5 USD and frequent street riots. In early 1997, the financial and political crisis led to mass protests and the occupation of the parliament building on 10 January. The MPs were quickly evacuated from the parliament, while protesters kept entering the building and smashing its interior.

- Documenta Zagreb, ENRS

The informal battle raged between the UDF and the BSP between 1990-1997 meant two things: political instability and reform pendulum. As outlined in the previous section, the two dominating parties were guided by different subcultures and opposing ideologies. While it is not simply enough to label them communist/socialist vs anti-communist/democratic, it is also not enough to limit the narrative discourse to left and right leanings on the political scale (Dimitrov et al. 2004, 16).

The political stalemate between the UDF and BSP was due to the continuity of the socialist legacy and increased pro-Western Europe narratives, but also due to the fluid left-right political distinctions. In the early years of the BSP's creation, there were two main factions: on the one hand, the non-reform faction with pro-communist/pro-Soviet orientation, who also had an anti-

market and anti-Western orientation (Dimitrov et al. 2004, 13). Their goals centered around the preservation of old economic and political structures, and did not support a market economy, only certain aspects of Perestroika (following the Soviet experience). Within this bloc, there were members of the communist nomenklatura that wanted to transform their political power into economic power but also support from the masses in the lower income nexus. On the other hand, there was the reformist group with social-democratic orientation. Their rhetoric was not anti-Soviet, but rather pro-Western Europe and they wanted a social market economy. This distinction and fragmentation of the party further ties into the fluidity and nuances of the left/right-wing orientations on the Bulgarian political scale. Parallely, the UDF movement had similar problems. While it claimed to belong to the right, it encompassed a wide political spectrum as it combined different groups with different political orientations, which meant that its political agenda had no specific direction. In a study conducted by Georgeta Nazarska (2024) focusing on the perception of the post-communist business elites on the economic transition in Bulgaria, the author's focus groups findings were that "the picture painted by the ex-communist and anti-communist subcultures is politically distorted and highly ideologized" (289).

While this political blurriness was the reason behind the somewhat peaceful transitional period, it ultimately led to a stalemate period, where neither side was willing to compromise, multiple governments came into power and resigned and reforms were pushed and pulled in opposite directions with no positive effects, especially when taking into account that because of the non-directional orientation of the parties, the narrative and discourse during this time reduced itself to "reform or non-reform". Consequently, it culminated in the devastation of the Bulgarian economy, the highest inflation rates since 1986 (see Figure 3), the crisis of 1997, the resignation of the BSP party's leader Zhan Videnov in 1996 (see Annex B), the dissolution of the BSP-led government and the rise in support for the UDF.

The problem was that the communist government pre-1990 had accumulated a vast amount of public debt mostly to Western creditors, which ultimately led to its exclusion from the international capital markets for the better part of the 1990s (Gomes & Henrique 2021, 11). "In March 1990 the Bulgarian government declared a unilateral moratorium on the foreign debt payments" meaning that it single-handedly marginalized its old allies and partners, and its potential future ones, creating an atmosphere of mistrust that did nothing to attract any foreign aid or

partnership, except the IMF and World Bank, which as we now know, are not the ‘saviors’ that early neoliberal economic theory had us believe (Dimitrov 2003, 15). The Bulgarian moratorium on the settlement of public debt in March 1990 happens in a period of time where the traditional external relations with its partners from the Eastern bloc fall apart, leading to stagnation of exports and an economic recession (Oresharski 2021, 113). The debt that had accumulated from 3-4 billion USD rose to an approximate amount of 11 billion USD and was impossible to pay back, making the announcement of bankruptcy inevitable. It is an important factor to consider, especially in comparison to the transitioning countries as it makes it more difficult and lengthy for it to join the Euroatlantic structures, inviting distrust and doubts regarding repayment plans. The external indebtedness in hard currency made it hard to diversify its external partnerships and consequently increase its level of external economic activity. This lack of capital is one of the reasons why positive developmental effects were not felt from the on-set. The first popular elections at the beginning of the 1990s, showed that while the public wanted change, it was not willing to implement drastic reforms and changes just yet, especially in terms of privatization and complete decentralization. Moreover, hindsight proves that while on paper the economic reforms were upturning Bulgaria’s economy, they were so slow and gradual that their effects were virtually unfelt, especially since the frog-leaping cabinets would dismantle the previous one’s initiatives.

This disillusionment and general public discontent helped bring about radical economic change and policies that were frowned upon and unattractive beforehand were now beheld in a new light: advance of privatization, the redundancy of state-owned enterprises and their stakeholders saw the emergence of small entrepreneurs, the backbone of attracting foreign interest and IMF backing under certain conditions (Dimitrov et al. 2004, 32). Finally, the bleak economic outlook of Bulgaria was starting to see some rays of sunshine, some hope for economic growth.

8. 1997-2007 The ‘Real Transition’

The bleak economic outlook and environment culminated in mass protests in January 1997. The public perception being that the policies that resulted in their economic circumstances were due to the Socialist Party which was in power at the time of the crisis, or supported the governments in office previously. The mass street protests led to the ousting of the government and “The general disillusionment with the previous policies translated into broad public support for a radical change in the course of economic reforms.” (Dimitrov 2001, 31) paving the way for what some authors have deemed the ‘real’ transition in Bulgaria’s history. The caretaker government and the subsequently elected UDF party started implementing ‘real’ reforms. Having won the majority in the 1997 elections, it created its own government. The IMF also took interest with this change in political orientation and attitude and offered financial support with conditions for role in macroeconomic management.

Post-1997 is when real institutional change began: “The change in government in mid-1997 was accompanied by a major change in macroeconomic policy and the subsequent introduction of comprehensive structural and institutional reforms” (Dimitrov et al. 2004, 34). What followed was a joint effort between the IMF and the UDF, coupled with a more favorable public opinion which meant that macroeconomic stabilization policies such as a Currency Board Arrangement (CBA) were much more favorably received (Dimitrov et al. 2004, 34). So, the bolstering of the monetary policy through the anchoring of the nominal exchange rate, derailing of the sovereign monetary meddling, the establishment of a fiscal framework and banking regulations were all part of the new policy mix that followed the 1996 crisis and set Bulgaria on the path to positive economic improvement and, by default, fulfilling the economic conditions of the Maastricht criteria and NATO Accession and global market integration (Angelov 2004, 33;57).

Furthermore, Bulgaria continued its efforts to penetrate the international market by establishing or reestablishing relations with external countries: Bulgaria became a member of the World Trade Organization in 1996, joined the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) in 1999; it established free trade agreements with: China (1995), Turkey (1999), Macedonia (1999), Israel (2002), Albania (2003), Serbia and Montenegro (2004), Bosnia and Herzegovina (2004), and Moldova (2004) in an effort to increase its contact and partnership with outside forces.

8.1 Political Fragmentation, Ideological Shifts and IMF support

Post-communist historians might view 1997 as the ‘real’ start date of the Bulgarian transition. It marked the year that the socialist legacy subculture lost some of its influence due to a mass disillusionment and general discontent with the results of the government. Hearing and seeing the positive economic changes happening in the Western European countries, compared to experiencing shortages of food and fuel would lead almost anyone to blame the governing faction and want a change. The historic BCP that had so far managed to hold onto its power and maintain its hold on the political scene, finally capitulated to popular discontent following the protests in January 1997, effectively handing over the power to the UDF movement. The fact of the matter is that there was still at the time international strife within the BSP, not surprising given the pendulum of political attitudes that shaped the last 7 years. The reform/non-reform faction division that had so far been the main narrative dominating the political orientation of the political landscape now gave way due to the economic and external pressures. It was a moment to adapt to the status quo or perish.

Table 2 Parliamentary Election Results of Major Parties, 1997-2009

	19-Apr-97		17-Jun-01		25-Jun-05		5-Jul-09	
	%	Seats	%	Seats	%	Seats	%	Seats
UDF	52.26	137	18.18	51	8.44	20	-	-
BSP	22.07	58	17.15	48	33.98	82	17.7	46
DPS	7.6	19	7.45	21	14.07	34	14.45	38
BBB	4.93	12	-	-	-	-	-	-
Euroleft	5.5	14	-	-	-	-	-	-
NDSII	-	-	42.74	120	21.83	53	-	-
Ataka	-	-	-	-	8.93	21	9.36	24
DSB/DB	-	-	-	-	7.07	17	-	-
BNS	-	-	-	-	5.7	13	-	-
GERB	-	-	-	-	-	-	39.72	116
RZS	-	-	-	-	-	-	4.13	10
Blue Coalition	-	-	-	-	-	-	6.76	15

Source: Central Election Committee Bulgaria.

Table 2 shows the parliamentary results in 1997 where the UDF took the vast 52.26% majority of the votes and received more than half the seats in the National Assembly, whereas the BSP took only 22.07% of the votes, a significant decrease from the 1994 elections it won with 43% (see Table 1). This constitutes a major moment in the political history of Bulgaria, as for the first time

since the early 20th century, the BSP is not the leading political faction. A splinter in its membership in 1993 and 1994 made it lose an important number of its constituents: the DEMOS faction left in 1993 citing “ideological incompatibility” which is not surprising considering the patchwork factions that had permeated it beforehand (Spirova 2008, 490). The BSP was ultimately forced to adapt and underwent a major overhaul post-1997, after the non-reform faction left from within its ranks to create its own Bulgarian EuroLeft. The reformist faction thus took full control and oriented itself to market reforms and advocate of rapid accession to EU, positioning itself on the same wavelength as the UDF government that had swept the 1997 elections, the cabinet led by Ivan Kostov. This effectively ended the main discursive element that put the two main parties in opposition to each other, ended the reform pendulum that had prevented sustainable reforms in Bulgaria from taking place, and finally allowed the space for the legislative, economic, social and political reforms necessary for its economic and political stabilization, macroeconomic diversification and EU Accession to truly be implemented and change undergone. The BSP went from a left-wing party to a social-democratic orientation: they went from advocating for a social market economy to a pro-European social democratic stance effectively distancing themselves from the traditional and nostalgic aspects of its political campaign (Spirova 2008, 491). To legitimize itself even further and solidify its presence and support now that the splinters within had grown, the party even became part of the PES (Party of the European Socialists) in 2005 after the BEL party lost its momentum and significance in the face of the BSP as seen in the 2005 elections results, where they did not even secure 4% of the votes necessary to secure NA seats. The link to its historical legacy is definitely a defining factor in the latter. The fact is that nationalist subculture, narratives of maintaining the protection of Bulgaria ideals, garnering pro-European, and small business supporters, strategically establishing coalitions – Coalition for Bulgaria in 2001 was still among the three biggest contenders – and finally attracting legitimacy from abroad, makes the analysis of the BSP that much more interesting in terms of its survivability in modern times.

The parties were aligned on the basis of three main points: that reforms were needed, that the CBA needed to be established and that accession to the EU and NATO were priorities. Now that the UDF had swept the elections, the next logical step was the implementation of the Currency Board Arrangement (CBA), which was a non-negotiable pre-condition for new funding from the IMF, the first step in helping the Bulgarian economy recover from its hyperinflation and instability, and the first step in stabilizing it – even though the head of the government at the time Ivan Kostov

was against it as it reduced the degree of future policy freedom (Dimitrova 2021, 30). The CBA implied a nominal exchange rate that would be fixed against the deutsche mark (subsequently to the euro). This plays into the endemic factors of Bulgaria’s economic development that were discussed in part 7.2 pertaining to transplanted models. There was no room for sovereign monetary policy. What indeed happens when a CBA is implemented is that the economic system “borrows” the monetary policy of the country of the reserve currency. In this case, it was first fixed by the Deutsche Bundesbank then after European Central Bank (ECB). History has shown us that a country without the existing faculties will not be able to adequately help itself in terms of diversifying its economic output and investing into its own projects, especially in a country that has no large wells of natural resources to cultivate – although this has proven to be detrimental in the long-run anyway, leading to resource curse paradigms and exploitation – no large labor force, and a vast amount of debt to external creditors and virtually no prospects. Naturally, this would lead to accepting and even inviting IMF support.

A report published by the IMF in 2007 on selected issues mentions the “successful operation of the currency board” in assuring macroeconomic stability. In just one year, the inflation rate drops almost 35 times to less than 6% in 1998. Though macroeconomic stability is not the only reform that the IMF guided, adding another clause to the agreement for crediting: privatization or liquidation of the biggest loss-inducing enterprises, according to a specific list. The growing stability of the economic climate and the privatization efforts of the government are one of the main causes creating a more favorable environment for international private creditors, resulting in increased FDI flows and economic integration. Dimitrova (2021) even goes as far as suggesting that the PM Kostov defended against allegations of elitist, criminal privatization by making them seem anti-institutional (31).

Table 3 *The Economy before and after the implementation of the Currency Board*

Икономиката преди и след въвеждането на валутния борд		
Показатели (средногодишно)	1990-1997	1998-2002
Инфлация (%)	210.1	5.7
Инфлационна данъчна ставка (%)	54.9	5.3
Растеж на БВП (%)	-4.6	4.1
Ръст на инвестициите (%)	-8.8	20.1
Бюджетен дефицит (% от БВП)	-6.3	-0.1
Държавен дълг/БВП	168%	75%
	1990-1996	1997-2002
Чуждестранни инвестиции (милиони долари)	63.2	692.4
Чуждестранни инвестиции (% от БВП)	0.8	5.6

Източник: НСИ, БНБ, МФ, АЧИ, собствени изчисления

Source: Angelov et al 2004, 21

Table 3 shows statistics on the state of the economy before and after the implementation of the Currency Board. There is a clear improvement of the economic situation: the inflation rate dropped drastically from a high of 210.1% in the period 1990-1997 to 5.7% in the period 1998-2002, GDP growth turned positive, and investment growth was climbing fast from -8.8% to 20.1%. Solely based on the Currency Board, there were already a positive economic outlook following this period of crisis, making it an important facet of macroeconomic development in Bulgaria.

8.2 End of the bipolar political system and investment boom

The BSP was not the only entity to transform post-1997: the UDF also took this opportunity to reorganize itself from a coalition to a single party. The combination of different subcultures that existed within the umbrella UDF party and that had allowed them to place themselves as an actual serious opponent to the BSP in the early elections, did not exist any longer as the non-democratic subculture adherents broke away. Moreover, this division was necessary in order to diminish the fragmentation and the large scope of the political orientations of its members.

Even though the BSP had lost an important part of its supporters, and despite its alignment with the UDF on certain policies, the two parties still maintained the lion share of support in 1997. The elections of 2001 showed a surprising result: the newly formed party National Movement for Simeon II (NDSII), spearheaded by the ex-king Simeon Saxe-Coburg swept almost half of the votes, coming in at 42.74% of the share of majority votes, effectively putting an end to the BSP/UDF dominated system and performing a miracle. Simeon's objective was first and foremost to become President, however, the Constitutional Court declared that he was not eligible because of his Spanish residency, causing him to take part in the parliamentary elections instead. To understand how his victory stemmed from a short and last-minute campaign, there are three factors to consider: on the one hand, the person himself, not just as a charismatic persona, but also as a new face of a new movement that has not been part of the disappointing – for the general public – political atmosphere of the last 12 years; on the other hand, the loss of trust of Bulgarians in the political parties due to the still declining microeconomic environment – and a string of scandals and corruption allegations surrounding the governing party – and finally the political vacuum that was left once the support for the two parties in the bipolar system waned (Karasimeonov 2010, 119; Vasov et al. 2021).

While the NDSII's victory can be traced back to the latter these factors, its popularity – and ultimate demise – also stems from the populist narrative in its election campaign. In what Emilia Zankina (2016) refers to as “new populist personalist parties”, the researcher offers a new theoretical approach for the study of populism whereas it constitutes a political strategy based on a transaction-cost analysis (189). The idea is that by increasing the use of informal political institutions to institute fast change. Zankina (2016) refers to the 2001 elections as the “emergence of populism in Bulgarian post-communist politics”, at least on the larger scale taking into account a party that took a majority of votes and seats in the National Assembly (189). Having only campaigned for 11 weeks prior to the elections, it is truly exceptional that the party managed to capitalize that quickly and successfully on the popular frustration of the people with the dominant political actors. The BSP and UDF were more or less with back on equal ground with one another, obtaining 18% and 17% of the votes respectively, but they were both crushed by popular demand. As Genov (2003) remarks, “His remarkable come-back became a clear manifestation of the cleavage between voter's expectations and the performance of all governments during the period of reforms”, this cleavage of expectation versus reality is what caused the decrease of support for the BSP/UDF and finally the NDSII (18). The fact of the matter is that, the privatization and the complete immediate withdrawal of the state from economic interventions caused the masses to be disillusioned to the promises of the parties. Similarly, the NDSII ran on a narrative of “decency, honesty and transparency” and failed to deliver results as promised (Kostadinova 2012, 107). Yannis Sygkelos (2010) conducted a discourse analysis on Simeon Saksoburggotski's speeches which bounced between a patriotic and European narrative. He promised to deliver change within only 800 days, to bolster the Bulgarian people, to help them, through EU integration and market orientation because it was in their interest, their national interest. The victory was short-lived and some could even argue that the only reason that the NDSII won, was because the rival parties lost. Ultimately, all of his promises of change were politically meaningless, and “the same cleavage between expectations and reality [for which his victory is due] underlies the rapid loss of public trust and undermines the credibility even of the government headed by the ex-king and current Prime Minister” (Genov 2003, 18).

Furthermore, the 2001 elections not only broke the bipolar model, but also reformed the whole party system. Ganev (2024) believes that it is from this moment therefore that every subculture has its own political representative and no formation will father more than one political

subculture under its wing for at least two decades. The mass political culture no longer revolves around the communism/anti-communist narrative, but now supports Simeon II, while each subculture finds its own representative: the Democratic through UDF, the socialist through the Coalition for Bulgaria and the Ethnoreligious through the DPS. It is at this moment that we can see a return to Bulgaria's historic pattern of looking at people and results rather than ideology. Since the BSP and the UDF failed in the eyes of the public as shown by the economic crisis, then the new savior Simeon II with a combination of liberal ideas and populist pledges dominated the new political sphere (Todorov 2010, 21-22). This political upheaval happened at an opportune moment, as the results of the CBA were being seen and the European Accession talks had begun, making Bulgaria seem like a stronger more trustworthy partner.

The upward trend seen in the economic domain is due to multiple reasons. On the one hand, the stabilization of the Bulgarian lev through the Currency Board had a major impact on international trade, monetary stability is a key factor to the stability and prosperity of any economic system in attracting confidence, internal and external (Ganev & Wyzan 2005, 177). It is a cornerstone not only of monetary and fiscal policy, but also foreign policy, political stability, and social accord as well. On the other hand, with limited domestic market and a desire to reap the benefits from the globalization phase, broader access to foreign markets and trade would need to be acquired for an export-led economic model. For that to happen, an adequate foreign economic policy is needed, and between the post-1997 policy mix, EU Accession criteria and IMF conditionalities, Bulgaria was able to open its doors and invite more actors in. In hindsight, the Chinese case study has shown that a socialist market economic model has some – economic – merits too insofar as the countries saw exceptional economic development, international market integration and enrichment, despite several social and political ramifications (Virmani 2005). However, with Bulgaria's marginalization of previous economic alliances through its moratorium, high public debt, lack of external ties, and lack of state capital, that was not an option Bulgaria could consider and had to turn to the IMF, the WB, and the EU.

The stabilization of the lev, the political stabilization, and the overall more favorable economic environment attracted a lot more attention from wealthy actors, increasing the amount of foreign direct investment (FDI) to the country, and introducing major international trade partners (see Figure 5). There exists a positive correlation between FDI flows and GDP growth (Hanzl-

Weiss & Jovanovic 2022, 23). According to Hanzl Weiss and Jovanovic (2022), average annual FDI flow in Bulgaria between 2001-2010 was at its highest at a significant 12% of GDP, compared to its 2-4% before and after this period (16). This would correspond well with the EU Accession in 2007, and the result of IMF supported policies, specifically the Currency Board (IMF Report 2007) placing investor confidence at a historical high due to its backing by the European institutions, further explained by its decrease following the GFC in 2008.

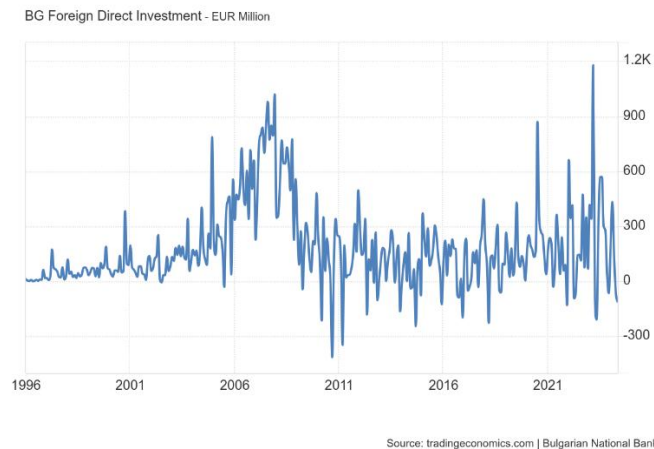


Figure 5 Foreign Direct Investment in EUR Million in Bulgaria from 1996 to 2023. Source: Trading Economic and the Bulgarian National Bank

8.3 Pre-EU-Accession Talks and Preparations

Now that the political situation was quieter and the macroeconomic landscape stabilized, Bulgaria was finally invited to start official accession negotiations with the EU in 1999. The EU conditionalities and reforms were a lot more layered than the IMF, unsurprisingly considering the nature of the European Union versus the IMF which is just a smaller monetary institution that does not constitute a geographical entity as well. Negotiations under 30 chapters of the EU's *acquis Communautaire* took place – constituting an almost complete overhaul of economic legislation and regulations and major changes in public institutions to make them compatible with EU law and rules. This happened on a number of levels including economic, judiciary and social reforms. Once the political parties had aligned on the issue of Bulgaria's integration to the EU, all that was left was to undergo negotiations, and adopt the changes outlined. In the Accession Partnership established in March 1998, the terms of the pre-accession strategy for Bulgaria were laid out for the priority areas in which progress had to be made before membership to the European Union.

From 1998 to 2005, numerous reports were made on the progress of Bulgaria to do just that. Table 4 outlines the main changes and policies that were adopted under ten distinct categories, each corresponding to a priority matter: economic reforms and privatization, judicial reforms, public administration and anti-corruption measures, protection of minorities and Roma inclusion, human rights and social policy, agriculture, rural and environmental developments, regional policy and structural funds preparation, internal market and competition and finally justice and home affairs. While these categories are not exhaustive, they do summarize the main goals of pre-EU Accession protocol and conditionalities. Table 4 below contains a non-exhaustive list of measures undertaken to comply with the conditions.

While the 2001 elections, upended the political system in Bulgaria, the NDSII did in fact adhere to their pro-European Agenda and continue with pre-EU Accession conditionalities. The 2001 EU Commission Report states that “Integration of the country into the EU remains a key priority for the new government. The consensus of all political forces in parliament towards the goal of integration into the EU and NATO remains very strong” (15). This shift to Western attitudes is due in part to the aftermath of the 1997 economic crisis, the restructuring of the BSP and UDF, international environment and the political parties’ rhetorics. The progress that Bulgaria made in addressing the EU’s concerns contributed in turn to its economic and political instability, inviting renewed investor confidence.

Table 4 *Reforms Adopted in View and in Condition of EU Accession*

Economic Reforms and Privatization	1997–1999: Stabilization under a currency board arrangement and reduction of inflation. Initial privatization of large state enterprises. (EC 1998, 12-14) 2000–2001: Acceleration of privatization in banking, industrial, and energy sectors; liberalization of price controls in agriculture. (EC 2000, 31; EC 2001, 31-33) 2002–2003: Business environment improvements through simplification of licenses and reductions in subsidies for loss-making firms. (EC 2003, 38-29)
Judicial Reforms	1999–2000: Initial measures to strengthen the independence and accountability of the judiciary, including legislative amendments. (EC 1999, 12) 2002–2003: Further changes to procedural codes, with emphasis on streamlining pre-trial investigations and reducing case backlogs. (EC 2003, 105) 2004–2006: Reform of court administration, adoption of new penal procedures, and setting up specialized training for magistrates. Implementation advanced gradually through 2007 in alignment with EU benchmarks. (EC 2007, 7)
Public Administration and Anti-Corruption	1998–2000: Civil Service Law adopted (1999) to professionalize public administration. (EC 1999, 55) 2000–2001: New anti-corruption measures established and first specific measures to tackle high-level corruption introduced. (EC 2001, 19) 2002–2004: Upgrades to administrative capacity for EU funds management (e.g., creation of centralized bodies coordinating Phare/ISPA/SAPARD). Anti-corruption efforts continued, though with noted need for more robust enforcement. (EC 2004, 7)
Protection of Minorities and Roma Inclusion	1999: Launch of the National Council on Ethnic and Demographic Issues to coordinate minority policies. (EC 1999, 15) 2001–2002: Child Protection Agency set up (2001); partial steps to implement the Framework Programme for Equal Integration of Roma in Bulgarian Society (adopted in 1999). (EC 2001, 96) 2003–2004: Revised Action Plan for the Framework Programme with budget allocations, focusing on housing, health care, education, and employment. Efforts toward desegregation of Roma schools began. (EC 2003, 25)
Human Rights and Social Policy	1999: Implementation of new labor regulations and improved social dialogue provisions following EU recommendations. (EC 1999, 45) 2002–2003: Reforms in social assistance, child protection, and health insurance in line with EU standards, though implementation gaps persisted. (EC 2003, 27) 2004: The Parliamentary Ombudsman institution in Bulgaria was established by the Law on the Ombudsman (EC 2004, 21) 2004: Adoption of comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation, which entered into force in January 2004. (EC 2004, 23)
Agriculture and Rural Development	1998–1999: Ongoing land restitution process and legislative measures to align with the EU's Common Agricultural Policy basics. (EC 1999, 37) 2000–2002: Administrative structures for veterinary/phytosanitary control upgraded to meet EU food safety regulations. (EC 2001, 50) 2003–2004: Bulgaria further harmonized agricultural market organization rules and stepped up preparations for SAPARD program implementation. (EC 2003, 58)
Environmental Reforms	1999: Adoption of a broader environmental framework law, including water and waste directives. (EC 1999, 47-48) 2000–2002: Strengthening the Environment Ministry and inspectorates to enforce pollution control, air quality, and industrial emissions standards. (EC 2001, 76) 2003–2004: Implementation of EU directives in waste management and nature protection, though with recognized need for enhanced investment. (EC 2004, 110-113)
Regional Policy and Structural Funds Preparation	2000–2001: Creation of National Fund units in the Ministry of Finance and specialized Phare Implementing Agencies to manage pre-accession funds. (EC 2000, 84; 93) 2002–2004: Adoption of legislation on regional development and establishment of internal systems for the future management of Structural Funds. (EC 2004, 44; 131-132) Bulgaria's capacity was still developing through 2004. (EC 2004, 138)
Internal Market and Competition	1999–2000: Revisions to public procurement law, introduction of state aid monitoring bodies, and partial alignment of technical standards. (EC 1999, 55;60) 2001–2002: Legislative updates for competition policy (antitrust, merger control) and intellectual property rights. (EC 2003, 53-54) 2003–2005: Continued strengthening of consumer protection, removal of tariff and non-tariff barriers, and further improvements in state aid controls. (EC 2004, 113-114)

Justice and Home Affairs	1999–2001: Launch of reforms to align visa policy and border management with EU standards; intensification of the fight against organized crime. (EC 2001, 79-80; 83) 2002–2003: Strengthened policing framework and pre-trial procedures, along with establishing specialized units for trafficking and financial crime. (EC 2003, 73; 100-101) 2004–2007: Implementation of the Schengen Action Plan, introduction of more secure travel documents, and ongoing efforts to reduce cross-border crime. (EC 2007, 19)
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Source: Author's own compilation from European Commission Reports 1997-2007. European Commission.

Up until the mid-2000s, Bulgaria's economic development and international market appearance is relatively low and slow. Most economic indicators seem to show an important upward trend starting from the mid-2000s. Figure 6 shows the GDP of Bulgaria in billions of USD from 1980 to 2023. It just goes to show that the economic, political and institutional reforms up until now were seeing minimal benefits from a macroeconomic standpoint. They only gained traction and showed real growth from the mid-2000s as evidenced by the increase of FDI (see Figure 5) and balance of trade (see Figure 7 and Figure 8 below).

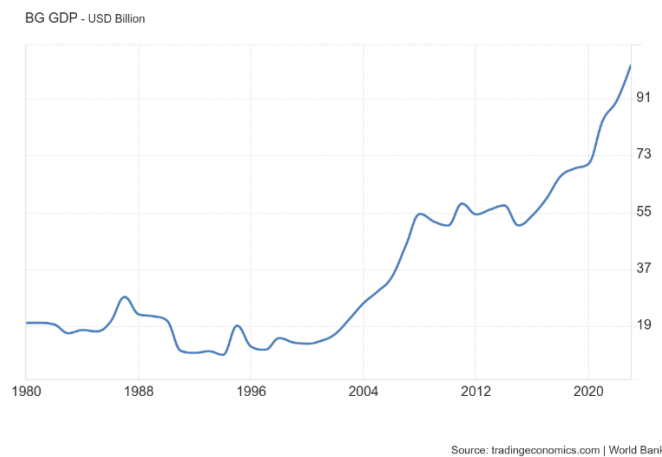


Figure 6 GDP of Bulgaria in USD Billion from 1980-2023. Source: Trading Economic and the World Bank.

As seen above, upward economic development and international integration took an upward turn in the mid-2000s. In recent years, the numbers show that trade has more than doubled since then, while the last few years have shown a decrease in exports and imports – although it could be argued that the reasons behind that were out of anyone's control, i.e. the COVID-19 pandemic for example – the general trends continue to show a positive improvement over time as shown in Figures 7 and 8. The same is true for the GDP and GDP per capita, showing that economic development since the 1990s shifted back up and that global integration has been a major contributor to this success. "Data on the current account balance reflects that there was a substantial switch from being a net importing country (−8.3% in 2009) to a net exporting country (6.3% in 2019)" during this period which reflects its improved external position and return of confidence (Bulgamaa 2024, 242). International trade and investment continue to be a pillar of economic growth in Bulgaria with key sectors having significant contributions, like the IT, tourism and

agriculture sectors. The tertiary sector in particular has been the major source of FDI inflows between 1990-2020 (Henzl-Weiss & Jovanovic 2022, 18).

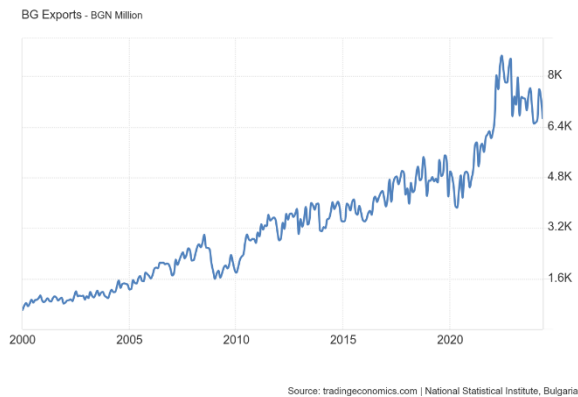


Figure 7 Bulgarian Exports in BGN Million, 2000-2023.
Source: Trading Economic and National Statistical Institute, Bulgaria

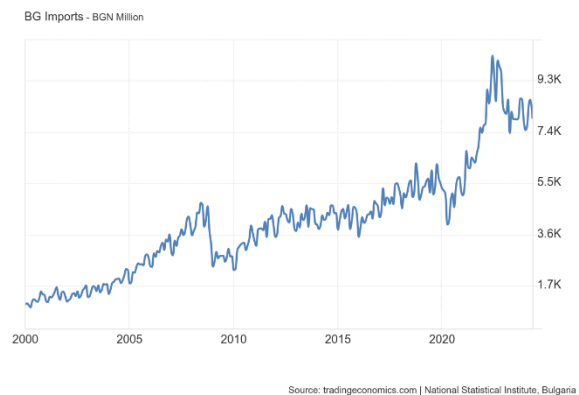


Figure 8 Bulgarian Imports in BGN Million, 2000-2023.
Source: Trading Economic and National Statistical Institute, Bulgaria

It could be argued that the redistribution process of FDI inflows has not been productive or sustainable in the long run. The larger part of them have not gone into research and development methods in an effort to modernize the economy, which is what a long-term plan should be looking into (Zhelev & Kussainova 2024, 318). Therefore, what we are seeing here might be positive results from an intermediary step: the evolution of the policies and reforms of the previous two decades were just a temporary fix for a short-term improvement. While Bulgaria is witnessing positive economic indicators, it is not a sustainable long-term plan; it is not using the tools at its disposal in the best possible way. In order to stimulate the economic potential of its capabilities, it is imperative that it uses FDI as a more effective tool to increase competitiveness, productivity and job creation through proper redistribution.

Therefore, cause and effect play a major role here. On the one hand, the macroeconomic factors explored above, and summarized in Table 3, show that the IMF and the EU played a major role in turning the tide of the economic situation in Bulgaria. Economic development could be credited to a combination of factors such as the CBA and privatization, but also the preparation for EU membership which required a certain amount of economic and structural reforms to be implemented, influencing in turn trade, investment and the economic policies of the country. Bulgaria submitted its application for EU membership in 1995, even before the devastating hyperinflation and crisis, therefore a case could be made that the EU pre-accession conditionalities were not the only a contributing factor to the development of its various state apparatuses, and that the influence went both ways: the desire to want to join spurring economic developments – at least once the BSP resigned – but also the actual criteria mapping out the blueprint for its reforms.

A small country like Bulgaria with no wells of natural resources, limited amount of labor, extremely high public debt, and an economy still reeling from industrialization programs that were not tailored to meet its needs sustainably, coupled with a disillusioned population and political parties that were ideologically ambivalent and mutually destroying each other's attempts at reform would of course turn to the only momentarily available alternative: the IMF and EU. Hindsight has shown that the IMF and WB conditionalities and help packages have actually been more detrimental than good, for example in Nigeria, but keeping in mind the international and local context – Eastern European countries reaping benefits in the short-term, America becoming a 'superpower' (archaic use of the term) – short of the public debts disappearing into thin air and an external financier popping up from one of the Asian tigers, this was inevitably to be Bulgaria's path (Shafiu et al 2023). Without this decade of IMF and EU-led social, legislative, economic and political reforms who knows where the path would have led instead. Since Bulgaria, even with its democratic status is seeing still experiencing weak institutions, political instability, corruption and persisting inequalities, perhaps an economic model more closely resembling the Chinese socialist market economy, for example, could have been beneficial – although this is pure speculation and it is hard to know whether it would not have been 'blacklisted' from Western institutions and drawn back instead of forward.

9. 2007-2013: Recovery and Adaptation

The Global Financial Crisis, its aftermath and EU integration overlapped during Bulgaria's history. Having signed the accession protocol coming in effect on January 1st, 2007, Bulgaria officially became a part of the European Union. With the reemergence of populism and personalist parties, EU reform mechanisms, and political upheavals, the period of time between 2007 and 2013 could be considered a period of recovery as well as adaptation. During this time, while the economic situation was more stable – apart from the exogenous factors – the reforms and orientation of the governments seemed to be focused on EU integration. It seems that once the basis of liberalization was established as given by IMF reforms, the reorientation turns towards EU integration. The corruption allegations of the NDSII party and allegations of clientelism and state capture of the coalition government led by BSP 2005-2009 is said to be the cause of the EU's insisting on promoting institutional reform and change (SELDI 2024, 3). Published in 2005 by the EU, the Act of Accession lays out all the terms Bulgaria needs to comply to and adopt before becoming a member of the Union. Amendments to the articles were drafted and passed all the way through to 2007, the terms evolving as the situation was. Finally, the EU implemented a mechanism that would serve to keep track of Bulgaria's progress throughout this period of time.

9.1 Populism and Personalism

There is a history of populism and personalism in Bulgarian politics, it is not a recent phenomenon. While the post-Zhivkov era 1989 to roughly 2001 was devoid of populist rhetoric and personalist parties, they did re-emerge in the post-1989 era through four different waves, starting in 2001. Populism is generally understood in academia as a particular ideology or political strategy which centers around the opposition of 'the people' with the corrupt 'elites'. The personalization of politics is also not a new phenomenon and tends to refer to the centralization and emphasis on a political figurehead. Early antecedents, and their combination thereof can be traced back millennia, to Ancient Greek "Demagogues", Ancient Roman *populus* movements. The formula populism/personalized party is also not an uncommon phenomenon and can be found in more modern interpretations: in Latin American Caudillismo, Alexander Stamboliyski's agrarian union in the 1920s, Mussolini and Hitler's regimes in the 1930s and even today's Viktor Orban's Hungary, and Donald Trump's America. The formula applies to post-1989 Bulgaria as well and can be divided into four waves (see Table 13): the first starting in 2001 with NDSII and Simeon

II, the second in 2005 with the emergence of the political party Ataka, centered around the journalist Volen Siderov, the third wave with the creation of GERB which has Boyko Borisov at its head, and then the fourth wave with the political party There is Such a People (ITN) spearheaded by the famous TV show host Slavi Trifonov in 2021. It is not uncommon to reproach populist personalized parties with authoritarian vestiges, therefore the allegations of corruption, state capture and clientelism that emerged in the early 2000s, during NDSII's incumbent government 2001-2005 and the BSP-NDSII coalition government 2005-2009 can be linked. So, there was a shift from the dominating communist/anti-communist subcultures to mass political culture support for NDSII – not just nationalistic, which was directed towards Ataka. Then the mass political culture turned towards support of GERB. Is it such a coincidence that the mass political culture oriented itself towards a populist personalized party?

National and international surveys find that during the 2001-2005 period of time, corruption persisted in Bulgaria. Between 2001 and 2005, Transparency International reported that the Corruption Perception Index (CPI) was 3.9, 4, 3.9, 4.1, 4 respectively in those years, meaning that it was still relatively perceived as an important problem in Bulgarian society (the scale ranging from 0 – highly corrupt, to 10 – very clean). Combined with multiple articles published in various newspapers alleging that Simeon II was bribing public officials, the multiple reshufflings of members of the cabinet, and finally the undelivered promises after the 800 days elapsed, we can explain the decline in popular support of the NSDII and the EU's emphasis on anti-corruption measures, reforms and monitoring that followed post-2005 (BTV 2006; Tribune 2024).

9.2 Adoption vs Implementation of EU rules: The CVM

The pre-EU Accession conditions were finally met to the extent needed to sign the Accession Treaty in 2005, confirming the official entry date as January 1st, 2007. The allegations of corruption and clientelism, the emergence of friendly circles and shadow economy meant that the EU had to address such concerns not only in its pre-accession clauses, but also during and after its accession protocol as it goes against the values and norms that it upholds and are detrimental in the present and future. The problems surrounding Bulgaria and Romania's accession – concerns regarding judicial reform, corruption and organized crime – meant that the EU wanted to closely monitor their progress. Therefore, the Commission Decision 2006/929/EC published on the 13th of December 2006, establishes a mechanism for cooperation and verification (CVM) of progress

in Bulgaria – and Romania – surrounding the problematic topics. Six benchmarks were outlined in the CVM report and reports were made every 6 months relating to the areas of concern and progress made (EC 2006, Annex):

- “1. Adopt constitutional amendments removing any ambiguity regarding the independence and accountability of the judicial system.*
- 2. Ensure a more transparent and efficient judicial process by adopting and implementing a new judicial system act and the new civil procedure code. Report on the impact of these new laws and of the penal and administrative procedure code, notably on the pre-trial phase.*
- 3. Continue the reform of the judiciary in order to enhance professionalism, accountability and efficiency. Evaluate the impact of this reform and publish the results annually.*
- 4. Conduct and report on professional, non-partisan investigations into allegations of high-level corruption. Report internal inspections of public institutions and on the publication of assets of high-level officials.*
- 5. Take further measures to prevent and fight corruption, in particular at the borders and within local government.*
- 6. Implement a strategy to fight organised crime, focussing on serious crime, money laundering as well as on the systematic confiscation of assets of criminals. Report on new and ongoing investigations, indictments and convictions in these areas.”*

As outlined in the previous section, the incentive guiding economic and institutional change in Bulgaria since 1990 had been economic stabilization in the 1990s and then EU integration until 2007. With its accession in 2007, the incentive changed: now that EU integration had been reached, in order to continue motivating relative change on the institutional scales, the EU had to leverage funds for reform. This first took form under a ‘safe-guard’ clause which was included in the Act of Accession signed in 2005. Failure to comply with the commitments undertaken in the agreement meant the postponement of its accession, and was even applicable up to three years post-accession. The safeguard clause was never actually invoked, neither pre- nor post-accession and no temporary restrictions were applied in this regard. However, the monitoring mechanism then replaced the safeguard clause (the threat of postponement) and served as a tool for tracking the efforts made towards judicial, anti-corruption and anti-organized crime reforms after membership up until 2019, when the last CVM report was issued for Bulgaria, deeming the requirements of the six benchmarks satisfactorily met.

Table 5 depicts a non-exhaustive list of measures adopted and taken towards each benchmark, as well as results, drawn from the yearly and interim reports on the co-operation and verification mechanism. We can see that progress and institutional changes were made and implemented in each benchmark, the degree varying. The logic being that, while significant efforts were made to align the country with EU legislation and norms, there was still a relatively big margin for improvement and adoption left to bring it up to par with the rest of the EU countries. The fact of the matter is that Bulgaria – and Romania – are still considered the poorest countries in the EU in terms of GDP, with a declining population, widening income gap and political instability. While it is understandable that the level of financial distrust and political history make it so that Bulgaria and Romania were the only ones subjected to the CVM – other methods were employed for Croatia’s accession in 2013 – it is interesting to note that it was not until 2019 (2022 for Romania) that the benchmarks of the CVM were finally deemed satisfactorily met by the Commission.

Table 5 Progress and Results towards the Six Benchmarks of EU Accession, 2007-2012

Benchmark	Steps Taken	Results (from EC Report 2012)
1. Adopt constitutional amendments removing any ambiguity regarding the independence and accountability of the judicial system.	2007: Amended the Constitution to clarify judicial independence and create an independent Judicial Inspectorate under the Supreme Judicial Council (SJC) (EC Report 2007, 6) 2008-2009: Revised the Judicial Systems Acts (JSA), defining SJC powers over appointments, promotions and discipline; Inspectorate became operational and began inspections (EC Report interim 2009, 3) 2010-2012: Additional JSA adjustments (i.e. mandatory integrity checks for promotions) to bolster accountability structures (EC Report interim 2011, 3)	Inspectorate introduced routine inspections of courts and prosecution offices SJC appointments often lacks transparency or followed unclear criteria, undermining confidence in independence. Disciplinary procedures existed but showed inconsistencies in application or sanctions, and alleged integrity violations were not always pursued rigorously Constitutional and legal frameworks in place, but practical enforcement by SJC weak and uneven
2. Ensure a more transparent and efficient judicial process by adopting and implementing a new judicial system act and the new civil procedure code. Report on the impact of these new laws and of the penal and administrative procedure codes, notably on the pre-trial phase.	2007: Enacted the new Judicial Systems Act, Civil Procedure Code, plus updated Penal and Administrative Procedure Codes (EC Report 2007, 7-9) 2008-2010: SJC Inspectorate recommended improved court management; PPC amendments included witness protection clarifications and new evidence-gathering powers (EC Report interim 2009, 4; EC Report 2010, 3) 2011-2012: Additional PPC revision aimed at reducing delays (i.e. reserve defense counsel, tighter evidence rules); specialized training introduced for complex case handling (EC Report 2011, 9)	Legislative framework for more efficient civil, administrative and criminal procedures but long court delays persisted, especially in pre-trial phase Repeated referrals from court back to prosecution due to gaps remained common SJC Inspectorate issues management recommendations Improvement in case allocation and backlog reduction but modest gains
3. Continue the reform of the judiciary in order to enhance professionalism, accountability and efficiency. Evaluate the impact of this reform and publish the results annually.	2007-2009: Launched the SJC Inspectorate, creation of new disciplinary mechanisms and ethical code for magistrates (EC Report 2007, 10; EC Report interim 2009; 3) 2010: JSA Amendments required mandatory integrity checks and expanded specialized training via the National Institute of Justice (EC Report interim 2011, 3) 2011-2012: SJC monitored select high-profile cases and sought to standardize disciplinary practice (EC Report 2012, 14-15)	Professional inspections and discipline efforts increased but remained lenient and somewhat inconsistent High-profile integrity violations only addressed after intense public or media pressure Senior appointments and promotions often lacked transparent, merit-based procedures raising suspicion Implementation and efficiency still lacking and patchy
4. Conduct and report on professional, non-partisan investigations into	2007-2009: Formed or strengthened anticorruption units in the prosecution, Ministry of Interior and the State Agency	Increased investigations into high-level corruption but few convictions reached a final stage in court

allegations of high-level corruption. Report on internal inspections of public institutions and on the publication of assets of high-level officials.	for National Security (SANS); Closure of duty-free shops (EC Report 2007, 13; EC Report 2008, 3) 2010: National Anticorruption Strategy and action plans on local-level administrative transparency 2011-2012: Drafted legislative improvements on conflict-of-interest checks; continued joint police/prosecution investigations into alleged corruption (EC Report interim 2011, 5)	Many cases failed on procedural grounds or got held up in lengthy proceedings Administrative corruption saw slight decline thanks to electronic services and staff rotation
5. Take further measures to prevent and fight corruption, in particular at the borders and within local government.	2007-2008: Implementation of Border Checkpoint Reforms (staff rotation, automation) to reduce bribes; closed duty-free shops (suspected smuggling/corruption points) (EC Report 2007, 16) 2009-2010: Broader anticorruption strategies (e-government tools, streamlined administrative services, proposal of special conflict-of-interest commission) (EC Report interim 2011, 6) 2011-2012: Preparation of public procurement law amendments and introduction of local-level transparency portals (EC Report interim 2011, 6)	Reduction in border corruption and petty bribery at front-office services Persistent gaps in public procurements controls and local tender processes Uneven conflict-of-interest enforcement; local elections often marred by alleged vote buying Partial progress but calls for tighter oversight
6. Implement a strategy to fight organised crime, focussing on serious crime, money laundering as well as on the systematic confiscation of assets of criminals. Report on new and ongoing investigations, indictments and convictions in these areas.	2007-2009: Specialized joint teams (police/prosecution, SANS) targeted known organized crime groups (EC Report 2007, 19; EC Report interim 2009, 6) 2010-2011: Reorganization of the MoI's criminal police structure (EC Report interim 2011, 5) 2012: Specialized Criminal Court put in place; Adoption of new asset forfeiture law (EC Report 2012, 12)	Numerous high-profile arrests but rare convictions Increased seizures of criminal assets but loopholes delayed freezing measures until late in proceedings The EC acknowledged progress in police operations but stressed a lack of deterrent sentencing and recommended focusing on complex financial investigations, consistent asset-freezing and ensuring the specialized court had qualified staff

Source: Author's own compilation from EU Commission Reports 2007-2012.

9.3 Personalism and Populism: Second Wave

Corruption not only fueled EU's conditions and CVM benchmarks, but also played an important part in the rise of populism in Bulgaria. Following the exceptional victory of the NDSII movement in the 2001 elections, more and more populist personalized parties started surfacing. The most prominent ones being the far-right party Ataka of Volen Siderov and subsequently the GERB party with Boyko Borisov. Ataka's success can be compared to that of the NDSII as its pre-electoral strategy was similar, the difference being in the discourse and language. Whereas NDSII focused on anti-elite and people-oriented narratives, Ataka employed a thinly veiled racist language and nationalistic narrative, which resonated with the journalist's established network of followers, plus TV SKAT channel's viewers (Smilov 2008, 17). While its success and popularity is not on the scale of NDSII or GERB, it is undeniably a unique aspect of Bulgaria's political history, as it won almost 9% of the valid votes in the 2005 elections and almost 9.5% in the 2009 elections (as depicted in Table 6). How does this translate to subculture: the nationalistic subculture veered towards BSP and subsequently Ataka. Parallely, mass political culture veers towards NDSII and then GERB by preaching anti-elite, anti-corruption narratives, and placing themselves in line with the people. There is an effective power vacuum after the dissolution of the two-party model which means there is no longer a consolidation of the political subcultures under the two dominating political parties (Ganev 2024, 285).

Table 6 Parliamentary Election Results, 2001-2009

	17-Jun-01		25-Jun-05		5-Jul-09	
	%	Seats	%	Seats	%	Seats
UDF	18.18	51	8.44	20	-	-
BSP	17.15	48	33.98	82	17.7	46
DPS	7.45	21	14.07	34	14.45	38
BBB	-	-	-	-	-	-
Euroleft	-	-	-	-	-	-
NDSII	42.74	120	21.83	53	-	-
Ataka	-	-	8.93	21	9.36	24
DSB/DB	-	-	7.07	17	-	-
BNS	-	-	5.7	13	-	-
GERB	-	-	-	-	39.72	116
RZS	-	-	-	-	4.13	10
Blue Coalition	-	-	-	-	6.76	15

Source: Central Electoral Committee Bulgaria.

9.4 GERB and Boyko Borisov

The Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) is a political party founded in 2006 as a populist party by Boyko Borisov. Similarly to both NDSII and Ataka, it was created not long before it won a significant portion of the electoral votes in the next parliamentary results. Analyzing the creation and rise of the GERB party in Bulgaria is important to its political history as the party held the leading position as governing party or opposition in the parliament for over 15 years, since 2009 more or less. While other personalist parties have emerged since then – like Slavi Trifonov’s ITN party – none have seen the popularity and stable permeation of GERB. One of the main reasons behind this is Boyko Borisov himself: a prominent businessman during the 1990s, ex-bodyguard to the former communist leader Todor Zhivkov and to Simeon II, head of police and then mayor of Sofia. Monopolizing on this public perception, network and influence, he managed to convert them into political support for an emergent party. Soon after, they won the 2007 Bulgarian European Parliament Elections and became a part of the European’s People’s Party in 2008. Culminating in the 2009 parliamentary elections where it took 39% of the valid votes and 116 seats in the NA, just five short of the majority, forming a minority government. Since then, it has remained an important player on the executive and legislative scene, despite multiple protests and resignations in 2013, scandals in 2019 and so forth (Tsolova 2013; Vassileva 2020).

Zankina (2016) argues for a transaction-cost framework to populism: “It argues that populism is a political strategy utilized by personalist parties to reduce the transaction costs of politics by increasing the use of informal political institutions, which have an association with direct and immediate action, and decreasing the use of formal political institutions, which have connotations of slow or non-action” (192). According to this train of thought, monetary investment and the legitimacy provided by the EPP’s support has been instrumental in ensuring the sustainability of the personalist party, both from investors and voters alike. Within the transaction-cost framework, there are also two types of populism: soft vs hard. The “soft” populism would be those who are pro-EU and pro-democracy such as GERB and the “hard” populism would be those adopting a radical right ideology such as Ataka (Zankina 2017, 61). Populist parties by definition exploit anti-elite and salvation rhetorics, with this new brand of “soft populism” however arise issues relating to voter behavior, political engagement and democratic values: since the narratives employed are not ideology-centered but based on promises, if these ‘saviors’ fail to deliver concrete results, the voters tend to be disillusioned and change their votes thereafter, which would

explain the rapid loss of support for NDSII and the protests that followed in the next decade against GERB and specifically Borisov (Zankina 2017, 61). This directly ties into a theory of the politics of memory: mnemonic abnegator. In other words, the person in question focuses on a narrative that does not utilize the memory of the past as a way of garnering support, and instead orients themselves towards the future and promising change. It is the same method employed by Simeon II and shows a deeper connection to existing patterns in Bulgarian history (Petrovic 2022, 13).

Table 7 Parliamentary Elections Result of Majority Parties, 2009-2014

	5-Jul-09		12-May-13		5-Oct-14	
	%	Seats	%	Seats	%	Seats
UDF/ODS	-	-	-	-	-	-
BSP	17.7	46	26.61	84	15.4	39
DPS	14.45	38	11.31	36	14.84	38
Ataka	9.36	24	7.3	23	4.52	11
GERB	39.72	116	30.54	97	32.67	84
RZS	4.13	10	-	-	-	-
Blue Coalition	6.76	15	-	-	-	-
Reformist Bloc	-	-	-	-	8.89	23
BBC	-	-	-	-	5.69	15
ABV	-	-	-	-	4.15	11
PF	-	-	-	-	7.28	19

Source: Central Electoral Committee Bulgaria.

The year 2009 marks the beginning of the 3rd party system since 1989, whose main characteristic is the hegemonic aspect of a center-right party, the parliamentary election results in 2009 shows the marginalization of the ‘old’ right-oriented parties which came from the dissolution of the UDF party (Karasimeonov 2019). GERB secured 39.7% of the valid votes for the parliamentary elections, just short of a majority government. Furthermore, Borisov also managed to be picked as Prime Minister, effectively encompassing the majority of the executive and legislative power, despite the minority government (Table 7). This presents a dramatic shift from the previous 17 years: the power has always been somewhat shared between the BSP and SDS, and never so much surrounding a singular “Man of the people” figure such as Borisov.

9.5 Populism and the Economy

Benczes (2024) argues that the GFC of 2008 “amplified critical voices against both liberal democracy and market capitalism” (1). While it seems that the literature surrounding economic populism is not wide, certain case studies have been attempted in a collection titled *Economic Policies of Populist Leaders*, wherein Urangoo Bulgamaa (2023) writes a case study on Bulgaria, arguing that populism has become the mainstream and tries to establish a link between the economic policies and the populist so-called leader of the time Boyko Borisov. GERB was the strongest governing actor during its years of power since 2009, meaning that it was the main policy-maker during the Global Financial Crisis and its aftermath. Usually, populist leaders and governments tend to be associated with unsustainable economic policies, especially if we consider the usual authoritarian aspects of populism. Bulgamaa establishes that in the period between 2001-2008, the presence of a populist leader in government did not translate to expansionary macroeconomic policies since its guiding hand was the EU Accession which left no margin for deviation with its safeguard clause and CVM reports.

The period of 2008-2013, however, is a different story. Austerity measures were encouraged by the EU and IMF, and the economy contracted in 2009 but recovered quickly by 2010 (see Figure 2) thanks to an investment boom but the growth rate has been slow ever since. The recession had an important negative impact on unemployment, coupled with emigration following EU Accession, brain drain/deficit of skilled labor, all of which have still not fully recovered since (Tomev 2015, 9). During this time, Bulgaria switched from a net import to net exporting country, increased its government expenditure not towards households but neoliberal policies such as infrastructure and development projects. The focus was on macroeconomic policy and not on social spending and redistributive taxation meaning that the living standard of people did not increase during this time so the social and economic conditions and inequalities worsened (Tomev 2015, 11). This distortion of what was promised vs what happened – the rhetoric on which Boyko Borisov won “for the people” vs the actual focus on macroeconomic policies - is what ultimately led to the mass discontent of the people towards the government shown by the 2013 protests, as will be outlined in the following section.

9.6 Political Instability and Protests 2013

Protests broke out in Bulgaria in January of 2013, and culminated to the resignation of the Boyko Borisov government on the 20th of February 2013. The civil demonstrations first began as a reaction to the extremely high electricity bills of the Bulgarian population and then turned into protests against the government and its austerity measures. It was a nation-wide civil mobilization that spread to over 30 cities, and even Bulgarian populations abroad.

Due to the monopolistic nature of the main city district's heating provider – *Toplofikatsiya Sofia* – Bulgarians had been voicing concerns over the high prices for years beforehand. Until 2005, electrical power distribution in Bulgaria was managed by a state-owned monopoly, which then sold 67% of its shares to three foreign distributors: Germany's E.ON, Austria's EVN, and Czech's CEZ, all serving different areas of Bulgaria (Ganev 2009, 14). By 2012, it had sold its remaining shares to CEZ. As a result, the Bulgarian population saw doubled electricity bills; bills that were calculated on a prognosis basis, rather than usage basis. As one of the lowest-income countries in Europe, most people found these prices to be astronomical and unpayable, especially considering the lack of improvement in the microeconomic sphere that Borisov had promised, hence the demonstrations against the privatization and against the prices began.

On the 24th of January 2013, the European Commission even referred Bulgaria to the European Court of Justice for failing to fully transpose the EU energy market rules (European Commission 2013). This event can be linked to past and present regional contexts: for example, the Hungarian political crisis since the mid-2000s, the financial crises that have caused political turmoil in Italy, Greece and Romania. This is all part of a larger pattern that has swept the Balkan and Eastern European area. Again, there is an instance where economic crisis has vastly usurped the public's support for a party. Although, it is surprising that with the background of the political protests in 2013, the GERB party still managed to secure 30.5% of the valid votes during the elections in 2013, which took place two months ahead of time. However, the subsequent BSP-DPS cabinet did not last long as another series of protests started not long after during the first half of 2014, surrounding the topics of the Belene Nuclear Power Plant restart, construction in protected areas including on dunes on the Black Sea Coast, and also the appointment of Delyan Peevski as the head of the Bulgarian State Agency for National Security (DANS) (Reuters 2013). This next

series of protests also led to the resignation of the Bulgarian and snap elections being held in October 2014, where once again, GERB secured the majority of the popular votes.

10. 2013-2024: The Country of Interim Governments

Within the space of one year, between 2013-2014, there were 2 government resignations, the 2 interim provisional governments and a number of protests and demonstrations spanning months at a time, revolving around austerity, environmental, and corruption topics. The year 2013 would thus mark the beginning of a long series of political turmoil, discontent, upheaval and interim governments for Bulgaria.

It is important to note that due to its more contemporary setting, it is more difficult to discern the bigger picture as it was viewed in previous sections. The development arc in terms of political terrain, EU integration and economic development are more intertwined and thus harder to discern the cause and causality links. Therefore, we must go into this section with a more tempered approach which separates the interdisciplinarity that we have tried to impose until now. Furthermore, one needs to keep an open mind while proceeding in the post-2013 timeframe, as there are many more factors to consider than in previous sections: not only are there two major global phenomena, but also political greyness and lack of consistency, coupled with soft European and economic directionism.

10.1 Populism Permeates and Persists

Populism continues to permeate the Bulgarian political landscape but so far never to the degree of success of NDSII, GERB or even Ataka. That is to say that the political discontent and protests in 2013 did not have negative lasting effects on the popular support for GERB it seems as it garnered support in the multiple following elections since. However, it did result in the creation of a multitude of new political parties, four of which secured seats in the NA after the results of the 2014 parliamentary elections: a center-right alliance (the Reformist Bloc), the right wing alliance Patriotic Front (PP), the populist party Bulgaria Uncensored (BBC), and the Alternative for Bulgarian Revival (ABV) which splintered from the BSP as depicted in Table 8 below. The existence of a large number of parties has been an aspect of the Bulgarian political system since 1991, since its electoral law allows smaller-scale parties to run. However, it is not often that these parties receive the 4% minimum vote requirement for seat allocation in the NA. However, in the

2014 snap elections, 2 alliances and 2 political parties manage to do just that as shown in the parliamentary election results in Table 8.

Table 8 Parliamentary Election Results 2013-2017

	12-May-13		5-Oct-14		26-Mar-17	
	%	Seats	%	Seats	%	Seats
BSP	26.61	84	15.4	39	27.89	80
DPS	11.31	36	14.84	38	9.22	26
Ataka	7.3	23	4.52	11	-	-
DSB/DB	-	-	-	-	-	-
GERB	30.54	97	32.67	84	33.49	95
Reformist Bloc	-	-	8.89	23	-	-
BBC	-	-	5.69	15	-	-
ABV	-	-	4.15	11	-	-
PF	-	-	7.28	19	9.3	27
Volya	-	-	-	-	4.25	12

Source: Central Electoral Committee Bulgaria.

Despite the protests, the scandals and the resignation, GERB sweeps the majority of the votes in the 2014 snap elections and forms the Second Borisov Government with a minority coalition government by allying with the Reformist Bloc and garnering support from ABV and the PF (Euractiv November 2014). The article goes on to mention that “analysts see the coalition as fragile and predict that the cabinet would hardly survive a full term” which is exactly what ends up unfolding as two of the cabinet ministers resign (Euractiv November 2014). The ABV party also withdrew its support in May 2016 (Gulubova 2016). The final component which led to the resignation of the Second Borisov government in November 2016, was the presidential elections in 2016: the opposition’s candidate Rumen Radev received the majority of votes in the second round of the elections, winning over GERB’s candidate for presidency. So, the third caretaker government in 4 years was introduced, appointed by President Radev. That, however, did not stop the GERB party from running once again and securing a coalition majority with the help of the United Patriots party in the March 2017 parliamentary elections.

The Bulgarian political landscape between 2009 and 2021 was dominated by a mass political culture centered around GERB. While the other subcultures remained represented with at least one party, their influence was not great enough to knock them out of the central position. Once again, we notice that Bulgaria’s mass political culture is centered not around an ideology,

not around an ideal but around a person, just like with Zhivkov pre-1989 and similarly to Simeon II's brief political journey. Borisov's Third government ended up being the only government to see the end of its full term since 2012 and to the present day. All future governments that were established resigned before their full term was up (see Annex B). While this period of time is known for GERB's almost supremacy in power between 2013-2021 despite the resignations, the President Radev's journey is not one to be overlooked, as he was re-elected in the presidential elections in 2017, has been head of state since then, making sure that the vacuums of power were filled with his appointed caretaker governments, and utilizing these periods of political uncertainty to push forward a certain agenda.

Borisov's GERB Party somehow managed to retain the power during almost 12 years insofar as the resignations always happened near the end of their term. They were thus much more poised than other political actors at the time to institute change and yet based on the World Governance Indicators and the CVM Mechanism reports, the institutional quality and challenges that Bulgaria faced did not improve over this time period. The following table sourced from Bulgamaa (2024) depicts the author's results of a compilation of data from the WB, and World Governance Indicators. It shows that while GERB was in power between 2009-2020, the institutional quality of the government, the regulatory quality, the rule of law and corruption deteriorated. The only factor that improved according to the calculations were political stability, only due to the fact that the party kept forming a coalition government and remaining the more influential political actor amongst the others.

Table 9 Change in institutional quality in Bulgaria (2000-2020)

<i>World governance indicators</i>	<i>2000–2005 NDSV</i>	<i>2005–2009 BSP led triple government including NDSV</i>	<i>2009–2020 GERB</i>
Voice & accountability	Improved	Deteriorated	Deteriorated
Political stability & absence of violence/terrorism	Deteriorated	Improved	Improved
Government effectiveness	Improved	Deteriorated	Deteriorated
Regulatory quality	Improved	Improved	Deteriorated
Rule of law	Improved	Improved	Deteriorated
Control of corruption	Improved	Deteriorated	Deteriorated

Source: Bulgamaa (2024)

If we disregard the brief periods of the provisional governments, the GERB-led governments constituted the better part of the 2009-2021 period. This would put it in a very advantageous position in terms of capitalizing on change and reform. However, it seems that during this time GERB pursued macroeconomic policy objectives, but disregarded other requirements and norms prescribed by the EU. Since the end of the single-party rule in 1990, GERB under Prime Minister Boyko Borisov is the longest-governing party in terms of total time in office. While the BSP and UDF parties governed the 1990s and early 2000s, the nationalist parties of NDSII and GERB were the ones dominating the political landscape of the 2000s and 2010s. Some even go as far as invoking the similarities with political ‘messianism’ (Ganev 2024).

10.2 The CVM, the EU and Mixed Impressions

The CVM in force since 2007 continued to be in place through the period of 2013-2019, when the last report was published. The report by the EC Commission published on January 2017, 10 years after the official beginning of the CVM monitoring, states that important efforts and developments have been made by governments and judicial institutions, but effective progress has been slow and fragmented. Since the CVM is the official monitoring mechanism for Bulgaria, then it is inevitably linked with EU Programs, funding and subsequently to entry into the Schengen zone. The incentives for proceeding with reforms according to the benchmarks and programmes remain, however how effective they are, remains in question, and the true progress made remains a grey area as well. The only thing that is certain is that all the political parties, be it NDSII, GERB (Boyko Borisov), or Presidents Plevneliev and Radev, were all oriented towards European integration as it meant increased opportunities for Bulgaria. Table 10 provides a non-exhaustive list of the measures taken towards each benchmark of the CVM from 2014-2017. It also summarizes the results as expressed in the yearly CVM Reports published by the EC.

Table 10 Progress and Results towards the Six Benchmarks of EU Accession, 2014-2019

Benchmark	Steps Taken	Results
1. Adopt Constitutional amendments removing ambiguity on judicial independence and accountability	2014: the new SJC started 2015: Drafted a new Judicial Reform Strategy (adopted Jan 2015) proposing to reorganize the SJC into two “colleges” (judges, prosecutors) 2016: Enacted Dec 2015 Constitutional amendments: split SJC into two “colleges,” reduced secret voting, gave Inspectorate new powers on conflict-of-interest. 2017: Commission’s January 2017 report recommended transparent SJC elections and better follow-up on integrity issues. The SJC elections used “one magistrate, one vote” for the judicial quota, a significant improvement. 2019: Bulgaria created a new “post-monitoring council” to sustain reforms after CVM.	Commission found the structural basis largely in place; urged final clarifications on ensuring genuine autonomy. The Commission welcomed Bulgaria’s plan to keep a domestic oversight mechanism for judicial independence going forward.
2. Ensure a more transparent and efficient judicial process; report on impact of new Judicial Systems Act, plus civil/penal/admin procedure codes	2014: SJC tried to address workload imbalances; the Commission noted limited impact. The PPC and JSA reforms from 2007 were still in force but needed better implementation. 2015: The Ministry of Justice advanced legislative packages to refine procedures, address random case allocation, and unify managerial approaches. Attempted to weigh workload reassignments. 2016: Bulgaria adopted wide-ranging amendments to the Judicial Systems Act (JSA), clarifying career development, internal governance, random allocation. The MoJ launched a reflection on CPC amendments to reduce trial formalism. 2017: Further IT-based random allocation improvements and legislative updates were debated. Additional changes to the CPC faced some delay due to caretaker government early in the year. 2019: SJC refined the IT random-allocation system with more frequent audits. Debated new JSA amendments, though some proposals risked weakening earlier reforms; certain contentious measures were withdrawn.	The Commission reiterated that legislative changes must be well-consulted to avoid eroding gains. Overall, random allocation was improved but needed transparent oversight and robust security testing to restore confidence.
3. Continue judiciary reform to enhance professionalism, accountability, efficiency; publish annual evaluations	2014: The SJC Inspectorate did routine checks but rarely addressed deeper corruption/ethics. Disciplinary rules existed but lacked consistency. Results: No decisive progress on ensuring consistent accountability. The Commission urged the SJC to step up integrity checks and unify disciplinary decisions. 2015: 2015 Strategy implementation began: the SJC proposed updated promotions/discipline and more robust training. Plans to formalize random assignment and unify ethics oversight.	Commission said success depends on continuing transparent SJC decision-making and consistent Inspectorate follow-up. Warned that last-minute legislative proposals risked

	2016: The SJC and Inspectorate got new powers (e.g. integrity checks), started analyzing judge workloads more systematically, considered reallocation strategies. 2017: The SJC took steps to unify disciplinary practice, but the Sofia City Court scandal (manipulated case assignment) tested the system; the Commission recommended the SJC respond firmly and promptly. 2019: The SJC and Inspectorate advanced new internal policies for discipline, promotions, and random allocation. The government launched a “post-CVM” monitoring mechanism (Sep 2019) to track progress and produce regular public reports.	undermining stable reform.
4. Conduct professional, non-partisan investigations into high-level corruption	2014: Specialized anticorruption units existed; the government recognized corruption as top priority but needed new legislation. Few final convictions. 2015: Debates on a comprehensive anticorruption law aimed at merging conflict-of-interest oversight with corruption investigations. Prosecutors pursued some high-profile corruption cases. 2016: New anticorruption strategy advanced, aiming to unify enforcement bodies and refine investigative procedures. Proposed single authority for conflicts of interest, asset forfeiture, corruption probes. 2017: Draft law to create a single anticorruption authority (merging conflict-of-interest, asset forfeiture, corruption investigations). Some high-profile corruption inquiries were launched but not finalized. 2019: Bulgaria established a unified anticorruption commission (KPKONPI) combining conflict-of-interest checks, asset freezing, and investigative powers. Several large-scale inquiries (e.g., property-acquisition scandals) were initiated.	The Commission welcomed the new structure but stressed the need to see final convictions. Cases involving resignations or charges lacked final judicial outcomes by late 2019.
5. Take further measures to prevent/fight corruption at borders and in local government	2014: Reforms at border checkpoints (staff rotation, partial e-systems) continued. Government proposed additional e-procurement modernization and conflict-of-interest oversight but faced legislative delays. 2015: Government advanced new e-procurement pilots, local-level anticorruption strategies, conflict-of-interest legislative changes. 2016: e-government expansion to reduce face-to-face interactions continued. Some local anticorruption pilot programs launched. 2017: In 2017, the planned single anticorruption body was also meant to handle local-level corruption oversight. The government pushed some expansions of e-services in municipalities. 2019: KPKONPI was tasked with conflicts-of-interest oversight for local officials; e-procurement steps expanded further. Government pledged the new	Although some improvements in e-tenders, local-level corruption allegations (e.g., direct awards, personal connections) persisted. The Commission called for thorough enforcement at local level.

	“Coordination & Cooperation Council” would monitor local anticorruption measures regularly.	
6. Implement a strategy to fight organized crime; focus on serious crime, money laundering, systematic asset confiscation	2014: Joint police–prosecution teams targeted known crime groups. The specialized criminal court was still new; laws on asset forfeiture were under discussion. 2015: Government re-committed to the specialized criminal court, reorganized police teams for serious crime. Proposed an updated asset-forfeiture law; adoption was pending by year’s end. 2016: Specialized structures for organized crime in police/prosecution were consolidated. Draft amendments to expedite confiscation were tabled. 2019: Further reinforced specialized prosecution/police synergy; expanded specialized court’s jurisdiction.	Some progress on institutional capacity, but final convictions in major cases remained scarce. The Commission reiterated the necessity of systematic financial investigations and timely asset seizures for real deterrent effect.

Source: Own construct compiled from European Commission Reports 2014-2019.

The EU Commission COM(2017) 43 final report also puts forth key remaining steps that would need to be taken to realize the goals of the CVM. A summary of the recommendations put forth for each benchmark have been pulled and compiled into Table 11 below. This number of specific recommendations under each benchmark would need to be irrevocably met to put an end to the CVM process (14). In 2019, the European Commission “concluded that Bulgaria had fulfilled the remaining CVM recommendations satisfactorily, and that Bulgaria had made sufficient progress in meeting its commitments at the time of its accession to the EU and that all benchmarks can be satisfactorily closed” (European Commission Press Release 2023). Even the official conclusion by the EC was that “sufficient” progress was made: this can mean a number of things, and is not a quantifiable measure which means that it leaves large room for interpretation. Especially if we consider the subsequent anti-corruption protests in 2020 and the clientelism allegations against Boyko Borisov. Progress in this regard can mean a number of things to different people and actors, while systemic corruption and institutional reform cannot be tackled overnight, it should be something that garners change across different levels within a country not just in institutional changes and constitutional amendments, but through media outlooks, societal conditions and life perception.

Table 11 Recommendations for Meeting the Six CVM Benchmarks

	<i>Recommendations</i>
<i>Benchmark 1: Adopt constitutional amendments removing any ambiguity regarding the independence and accountability of the judicial system.</i>	- <i>Ensure a transparent election for the future SJC, with a public hearing in the National Assembly before the election of the members of the parliamentary quota, and giving civil society the possibility to make observations on the candidates.</i> - <i>Establish a track record of transparent and merit-based appointments to high-level judicial posts, including the upcoming appointment of a new President of the Supreme Administrative Court.</i> - <i>To improve the practical functioning of the ISJC and the follow-up by the Supreme Judicial Council to the inspectorate's findings, in particular on integrity issues, consider soliciting external assistance, for example from the SRSS and/or Council of Europe.</i>
<i>Benchmark 2: Ensure a more transparent and efficient judicial process by adopting and implementing a new judicial system act and the new civil procedure code.</i>	- <i>Adopt amendments to the Criminal Procedure Code and the Criminal Code to improve the legal framework for the prosecution of high-level corruption and serious organised crime.</i>

<i>Benchmark 3: Continue the reform of the judiciary in order to enhance professionalism, accountability and efficiency. Evaluate the impact of this reform and publish the results annually.</i>	- <i>Publish a report for public consultation detailing the progress made implementing the national judicial reform strategy and setting out the remaining steps to be taken. Establish a mechanism for continued public reporting of progress for the remaining duration of the strategy's implementation.</i> - <i>Address the workload situation in the busiest courts based on the new workload standards, and agree a roadmap for the reform of the judicial map in parallel with the development of e-justice.</i> - <i>Establish a roadmap for the implementation of the recommendations of the SRSS report concerning the reform of the Prosecutor's Office and its interactions with other institutions, including a mechanism for the reporting of progress to the wider public.</i> - <i>Establish a roadmap for the implementation of the recommendations of the study, including a mechanism for the reporting of progress to the wider public.</i>
<i>Benchmark 4: Conduct and report on professional, non-partisan investigations into allegations of high-level corruption. Report on internal inspections of public institutions and on the publication of assets of high-level officials.</i>	- <i>Adopt a new legal framework on the fight against corruption in line with the intentions set out in the anti-corruption strategy, and ensure its implementation. Set up an effective anti-corruption authority.</i> - <i>Adopt and implement a reform of the law on public administration to strengthen the internal inspectorates in the public administration.</i> - <i>Building on the analysis of past cases, establish a roadmap between all relevant institutions to address shortcomings in the investigation and prosecution of high-level corruption cases, including a mechanism for the reporting of progress to the wider public.</i> - <i>Establish a mechanism for public reporting on progress in high-level cases which are in the public domain. General Prosecution to report – whilst respecting the presumption of innocence – on investigations and indictments. Supreme Court of Cassation and Ministry of Justice to report on convictions as well as the enforcement of sentences.</i>
<i>Benchmark 5: Take further measures to prevent and fight corruption, in particular at the borders and within local government.</i>	- <i>Carry out an external review of the ex ante checks of public procurement procedures and their follow-up, including ex post checks, as well as on cases of conflicts of interest or corruption discovered and remedial measures taken to address identified shortcomings.</i> - <i>Put in place risk-based measures to address low-level corruption in high-risk sectors within the public administration, taking inspiration from what has been done in the Ministry of Interior. Continue the efforts in the Ministry of Interior.</i> - <i>Establish a mechanism for public reporting on the implementation of the national anti-corruption strategy</i>

	<i>covering the remaining duration of the Strategy's implementation.</i>
<i>Benchmark 6: Implement a strategy to fight organised crime, focussing on serious crime, money laundering as well as on the systematic confiscation of assets of criminals. Report on new and ongoing investigations, indictments and convictions in these areas.</i>	- <i>Establish a mechanism for public reporting on progress in high-level cases which are in the public domain. General Prosecution to report – whilst respecting the presumption of innocence – on investigations and indictments. Supreme Court of Cassation and Ministry of Justice to report on convictions as well as the enforcement of sentences.</i> - <i>Adopt the necessary amendments to the law on confiscation of criminal assets and ensure the Illegal Asset Forfeiture Commission continues to operate independently and efficiently.</i>

Source: EU Commission Report COM(2017) 43 final.

The CVM was formally closed after Romania satisfactorily closed its benchmark goals in November 2022, after which the Decision published in July 2023 formally marked the end of the CVM in Bulgaria and Romania (EU Commission 2023). Consequently, Bulgaria has since adhered and been monitored by the Rule of Law Cycle, applicable to all other EU member states, which produces reports on an annual basis. What is interesting here is that Bulgaria seems to have met the benchmarks to European standards in 2019, and as experience would show, political instability is not synonymous with easy investor confidence. By this, we not only imply capital investors but also the European Union as a creditor and benefactor. Therefore, the question of how exactly it managed to not only garner European Union funds and support but also gain accession into the Schengen area and subsequently the Eurozone remains. It is possible that the GERB's party association with the EPP, and Borisov's close ties with them played a part in this, seeing as political stability is not something that can be attributed to Bulgaria in 2019 after 7 governments were formed in the space of six years (Euractiv 2020). In 2008, the EU suspended 500 million euros of funding to Bulgaria, following through with its threat to withdraw aid until changes are made and proper reforms adopted (OCCRP 2008). However, between 2013-2019 no such measures were taken and there were no true negative repercussions employed, despite the minimal progress made forward. The very slight progress – or lack of significant change – outlined in the CVM reports extends beyond that as well. While the GERB party has been more or less in power since 2009, the economic situation of the everyday person has not increased, with the slowdown due to the GFC and also the COVID-19 pandemic, public discontent rose and people's trust in the party deteriorated. As history has shown, Bulgarian people do not adhere to a political ideology,

their support stems from results and changes that they can feel in their everyday lives (we are excluding media influence for the time being as this would require further in-depth analysis). Therefore, protests were bound to break out and shake the already fragile political stability (Vassileva 2020). What is surprising, however, is how Borisov then attempts to defuse these protests by suggesting constitutional changes to the judiciary system, one of the main objectives of the CVM, and yet this happens after the mechanism was informally stopped; this never came to fruition (Al Jazeera 2020; Walsh 2020).

10.3 2020 and Post-2021, a critical juncture?

The year 2020 could potentially constitute a critical juncture point in Bulgarian history. The events that have transpired since have not yet come to an end – in the sense of no definitive ending has yet come to fruition. Therefore, while future studies could further divide the timeframe by adding a time period beginning in 2020, we will for the moment not attempt to make it so. Multiple changes took place and have transpired since 2020, mainly on the political level, but also economically as the macroeconomic indicators have held steady since the GFC, despite a contraction due to the COVID-19 pandemic; the unemployment rate has improved, and Bulgaria was admitted to the Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM II) in 2020 on its way to euro adoption. Previously, we had seen times of economic hardship but with a stable government – insofar as they were completing their terms at the least – but now however, the situation has changed and the economic indicators are maintaining a stable level, while the political and social decline.

Protests broke out in 2020-2021 against the government and against Boyko Borisov. However, despite scandals and allegations, the Prime Minister managed to survive a vote of no-confidence in parliament and the Third Borisov government was the only one to come to term, even though the Borisov did submit his formal cabinet resignation in April 2021 (Bloomberg 2021). A study conducted by Alpha Research in 2020 on the question of Support of the general population for the protests in the country showed that around two thirds of the Bulgarian population over the age of 18 continue to support the protests. The data shows that between June 2020 and September 2020, the level of confidence in the President, the government, the government and in Parliament went down, more so in the latter two. While the survey showed that 44 % favored the immediate resignation of the government and snap elections, this did not end up happening. Since Borisov won the no-confidence vote and there was a coalition majority in Parliament, the nation-wide protests were unsuccessful. The general disillusionment of the people

with the government and specifically Boyko Borisov did however have an impact in the following elections. For the first time since 2009, GERB was not able to secure a minority government nor form a new coalition government. The number of votes secured declined significantly: as Annex A shows they received 1,147,292 votes in the 2017 parliamentary elections, and only 642,165 votes in the July 2021 elections, and 596,456 votes in the November 2021 elections, less than half of their electoral support base from 2017. The pattern reemerges once again with the popular discontent of the person in charge failing to deliver results and change, this time with Borisov as the main culprit.

Sergiu Ghergina and Petar Bankov (2023) creates a compelling argument that democratic backsliding started with GERB's rise in 2009 and it was halted in 2021 by opposition parties – not reversed and not stopped entirely but halted (1598). The reasoning behind this would be that the decreased electoral support and tarnished public image, and its isolation by the opposition, allowed other parties to take the reins by creating a coalition government that excluded GERB for the first time since 2009 (Ghergina and Bankov 2023, 1590). After two failed attempts at forming a government and two snap elections in July and November 2021, the PP, ITN, DB and BSP parties formed a coalition majority. Even though the cabinet resigned after a vote of no confidence was put forth for Kiril Petkov's government on June 22, 2022, the author's idea that this marked a significant new shift in Bulgaria's political landscape is not unfounded: just as the end of the bipolar party system came about in 2001 and marked the beginning of a new era of populist politics in Bulgaria, 2021 can be deemed the end of GERB's *de facto* supremacy since 2009.

Table 12 Parliamentary Election Results of Majority Parties, 2013-2024

	4-Apr-21		11-Jul-21		14-Nov-21		2-Oct-22		2-Apr-23		9-Jun-24		27-Oct-24	
	%	Seats	%	Seats	%	Seats	%	Seats	%	Seats	%	Seats	%	Seats
BSP	15	43	13.39	36	10.21	26	9.3	25	8.93	23	7.06	19	7.56	20
DPS	10.51	30	10.71	29	13	34	13.8	36	13.75	36	17.06	47	11.54	30
DSB/DB	9.45	27	12.64	34	6.37	16	7.4	20	-	-	-	-	-	-
GERB	26.18	75	23.51	63	22.74	59	25.3	67	26.49	69	24.71	68	26.39	69
ITN	17.66	51	24.09	65	9.52	25	-	-	4.11	11	5.96	16	6.77	18
ISMV	4.72	14	5.01	13	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Vuzrazhdane	-	-	-	-	4.86	13	10.2	27	14.16	37	13.78	38	13.35	35
PP	-	-	-	-	25.67	67	20.2	53	-	-	-	-	-	-
PP-DB	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	24.56	64	14.34	39	14.2	37
BV	-	-	-	-	-	-	4.6	12	-	-	-	-	-	-
Velichie	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	4.65	13	-	-
APS	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	7.48	19
Mech	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	4.59	12

Source: Central Election Committee Bulgaria.

However, the idea that democratic backsliding was halted in 2021 implies that democratization was in fact consolidated pre-2021. Reviewing it from afar, the bipolar party system dominated the political sphere until the early 2000s and the NDSII party cannot exactly be considered as a positive example of democratic change since technically speaking, despite its narrative and positioning, it can be considered a manifestation of the political elite that they were trying to supposedly oppose insofar as Simeon II is a vestige of the past monarchy and had ulterior motives as he wanted to be king, and then PM, and wanted to reclaim his confiscated properties and push forward his own agenda. Then, despite the end of the two-party domination, and the appearance of populist parties, whether the Bulgarian political situation between 2005-2009 can be described as more democratic is a questionable prospect. Therefore, if democratic improvements remain murky and grey, then democratic backsliding is logically questionable as well. The same applies to the CVM and systemic change: if reports show that only slight progress has been made, then what does that show for European passivity? A step forward in a marathon is comparatively nothing, while the path might be ahead, it does not necessarily mean that we are physically on it or advancing.

The political sphere was once again splintering its fragile stability. The advantage being that the de facto supremacy of GERB was ended, and protesters were now demanding judicial institutional changes to the system – which should have already been implemented because of the CVM and yet progress was slow – rather than a simple resignation (Walsh 2020). Since the electoral law was amended into so-called mandatory voting in 2016, and the “none of the above” option introduced in the electoral ballot, we can see that on the one hand voter turnout decreased by almost 15% between the parliamentary elections in 2017 and the ones in November 2021 (see Figure 9). Parallely, new parties and coalitions have appeared, making the political scene even more fragmented and stretched out. The most notable new parties have been ITN, PP (We Continue the Change) and Vuzrazhdane (Revival) – other ones like Izpravi Se! Mutri Vun! did not appear for long and disbanded shortly after being formed. The new coalition Democratic Bulgaria and Velichie (Glory) also permeated the political arena, showing the extent of the systemic fragmentation. Interim governments during this time have also become the norm (see Annex B): there have been 9 governments – 6 of them caretaker governments – since GERB was unable to form a new coalition after the April 2021 elections, all of them appointed by President Radev. All of these factors make for a bubbling pot of political turmoil.

Populism continues to dominate Bulgarian politics, even gearing towards radical-right populism (RRP): while radical-right populism has not started dominating Bulgarian politics yet, its appearance and importance is noticeable through Vuzrazhdane’s accession to the scene in 2021 and its increased support through the 2024 elections (Zankina 2024, 78). As Table 12 shows it first appeared with almost 5% of the votes in 2021 and has since almost tripled its voter support and received almost 14% of votes in the November 2024 elections. Zankina (2024) argues that “the war in Ukraine has provided fertile ground for PRR parties” and that Vuzrazhdane “has been particularly successful in benefiting from the polycrisis, combining anti-vax, anti-NATO and anti-EU rhetoric” which is especially interesting to consider in terms of European integration and Schengen and Eurozone accession (78). Increased popular support for these parties, decreased support for pro-EU parties like GERB, and political instability would, in normal circumstances, be considered as negative elements and not conducive to further European integration into the Schengen and Euro zones, and yet that is exactly how events played out.

10.4 Pre-Schengen and Euro adoption criteria

Bulgaria officially entered the Schengen Area, along with Romania, on the 1st of January 2025. Adopting the Euro depended on economic and legal convergence criteria set out in the Maastricht Treaty. Membership into both of these spheres centered on technical compliance, and trust in the political and economic systems. However, considering the instability of the political scene in Bulgaria, and its rocky economic path, it is somewhat surprising that its accession into the eurozone and Schengen happened. While the CVM was in place to meet the basic requirements for accession, despite its questionable results, and the OPs were there to ensure adequate use of EU funds, there were also the Stability and Growth Pact and Convergence programmes that were there to help with economic policy, governance and growth prior to the Euro adoption. According to the Stability and Growth Pact, each member state outside the euro area must provide an annual document to the EC that outlines their economic policy and fiscal planning – also known as the Convergence Programme (Ministry of Finance Bulgaria). Bulgaria has been submitting these reports as well as the National Reform Programmes as part of the European semester since its accession in 2017. On the one hand, acceding to the Eurozone does not hinge on the same conditions as acceding to the Schengen Area. Bulgaria must enforce the Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM II) since July 10th, 2020 (European Commission), which is linked with the CBA.

Bulgaria, just like other Eastern European nations has a lot of potential for economic growth and international integration. However, just like we've seen with other emerging economies, the policies that were thrust upon them by powerful economic organizations and actors in the past have not always been to their benefit and adopting them blindly without prior adaptation to its economic environment and existing capacities has proven to be detrimental to fast economic growth and development. The liberalization policies that were first introduced in the late 80s and 90s in Bulgaria did not yield immediate results; the economic landscape of Bulgaria was bleak at that moment as a result of its historic experience. While the wave of globalization, economic liberalization and democratization helped it move in a certain direction, it is almost impossible to conclude that it was the reason behind its eventual economic enrichment. Its placement in the European area, and its European integration were factors that contributed to its success. While the country is not itself abundant in resources or production capacities and capital, the extent of its economic development can perhaps only be attributed to its European Union integration. Before the start of the accession negotiations, Bulgaria's economic situation was bleak: with large foreign

debt and its moratorium, it was only because of the IMF and subsequently the EU conditionalities that managed to stabilize its economy and help develop it, as explored in section 8.

Some challenges and setbacks have been present over the years that were out of the control of economic actors – like the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) and the COVID-19 pandemic, which were characterized with a slowdown of economic growth and international trade. The recovery from both of these were not easy, yet both have seemed to make a positive impact. However, there remain some issues that affect international economic development such as corruption, bureaucracy and income inequality; similar situations apply to most of the post-communist, Eastern European nations which have shown signs of democratic backsliding, corruption, even authoritarian trends. According to one study by Urangoo Bulgamaa (2024), the income inequality is the highest among the EU member states as the income gap expressed by the Gini coefficient reached a peak of around 41 units as of 2019 (236). While the macroeconomic conditions of Bulgaria increased, the microeconomic factors deteriorated – or remained the same proportionately speaking. The social stratification and class divide has also come with a high case of unemployment and mass emigration that has led to a dying population. While the post COVID-19 pandemic period has shown a surprising backwards migration, the outlook does not seem very promising on a local level. The last few years have seen more elections, more political resignation and loss of power than the few decades before combined. This is obviously not a good sign for foreign investors, and not a good image to present to trade partners, losing trust from all actors alike (Petkov 2023, 20). Furthermore, there has been a general degradation of the institution quality – whether as a consequence of or instigator of the political instability remains uncertain – while on the quest for macroeconomic improvement. Bulgaria's role in the EU contributed to its ability and capacity to implement such macroeconomic changes, but also to participate in regional and international economic initiatives, but at a price. While its economic indicators have seen positive improvements, and its international participation is unprecedented in its history, its political and social situation continue to deteriorate further playing into the discourse of development economics on whether economic development through IMF, WB and Western directives only do more harm than good. Considering that Bulgaria managed to join the Schengen area despite its political instability, it would seem that macroeconomic theory and investment theory cannot adequately explain this phenomenon.

We could argue that the period since 2021 could constitute its own main period of analysis, however since we are still only at the beginning of 2025 it is unsure what the cutoff would realistically be as the path Bulgaria is headed on could change. One thing is certain: the political upheaval, the Schengen and Euro Zone accession have set it on a new course and will definitely need to be studied further. As history has shown, time puts things into perspective: as we can now see clearly the path that Bulgaria walked through 1990 to 2021 in a better light than temporal-centered analysis, the same will be said for this post-2021 timeframe in later years.

11. Where the Path is Headed: Long-term Considerations and Implications

Taking a look back through the years, there are definitely a few things that stand out in Bulgaria's history, and some aspects reminiscent of older patterns. Democratization, liberalization, global and European integration, have all unfolded over 35 years, sometimes overlapping. The general consensus is that there are positive improvements in all aspects compared to the starting point, but there is still a long way to go.

The political soil in Bulgaria is still being sown, but there are certain patterns that emergence through the electoral behavior and are shown through the changing governments and influences. Table 13 is this author's attempt to summarize the political arena of Bulgaria since 1990 within the periods established above and through the subculture categories that we outlined in Section 7.1. By combining the parliamentary election results – the parties that achieved the 4% threshold and were represented in the NA - with subculture theory to see what we can deduce.

Table 13 Political Culture in Bulgaria since 1990

	subcultures					mass culture	
	<i>nationalistic</i>	<i>socialistic</i>	<i>democratic</i>	<i>ethnoreligious</i>	<i>business</i>	<i>youth</i>	
1990-2001	<i>NDSII</i>	<i>Pre-election union</i>		<i>DPS</i>	<i>BBB</i>	<i>Euroleft</i>	<i>UDF/BSP</i>
2001-2005	<i>NDSII</i>	<i>Coalition for Bulgaria</i>	<i>UDF</i>	<i>DPS</i>	<i>BBB</i>		<i>NDSII</i>
2005-2009	<i>Ataka</i>	<i>Coalition for Bulgaria</i>	<i>UDF</i> <i>DSB</i> <i>BNS</i>	<i>DPS</i>			
2009-2021	<i>PF</i> <i>United Patriots</i> <i>Ataka</i> <i>Vuzrazhdane</i> <i>RZS</i> <i>ABV</i> <i>Volya</i>	<i>Coalition for Bulgaria</i>	<i>Blue Coalition</i> <i>Reformist Bloc</i> <i>Izpravi Se!</i> <i>Mutri Vun!</i>	<i>DPS</i>	<i>VMRO</i>	<i>BBC</i>	<i>GERB</i>
2021-2024	<i>GERB</i> <i>ITN</i> <i>ISMV</i> <i>Vuzrazhdane</i> <i>Bulgaria Rise</i> <i>Velichie</i> <i>Mech</i>	<i>BSP</i>	<i>PP</i> <i>DSB</i>	<i>DPS</i> <i>APS</i>			

At first glance, it is obvious that the nationalistic subculture has been playing an important role in the political sphere; more and more parties are appearing in that category. There are also a few patterns that emerge, for one whenever the mass political culture is dominated by a political party it has been a personalist populist one: first with the NDSII and Simeon II, then with GERB and Boyko Borisov. While two instances would not normally establish a pattern, this also ties in with the historic past and the “specific Bulgarian political culture, legacy of our historical experience lies in this model – to trust a specific person to rule us, giving him the full power in his hands” (Ganev 2024, 330). The first decade is different since the communist-anticommunism rhetoric is ever present, nevertheless the ‘specific’ person theory does apply to an extent, as the BSP is the ‘face’ of the past itself, and remains present as one of the main actors until the inevitable economic plunge. We could say that the mass political culture of Bulgaria since 1990 has been populist in nature: that is to say it has centered around one person, and this person has been the head of a so-called populist party. However, people can only be let down and pick a new ‘face’ for promised change so many times. It seems that this distrust in the person not only causes a pendulum between parties but also absence in general. The turnout for the elections keeps decreasing as depicted in Figure 9. The elections in June 2024 had the lowest voter turnout since the first free elections, counting only 34,43% voter turnout. While the emigration trends might account for part of that decrease, it also shows a deeper mistrust that is not so easily covered with pretty promises. Especially considering the number of protests and all the allegations as of late of corruption, the rise of populist party numbers and influence and we have an interesting case of a paradoxically democratic Bulgaria (Krasteva 2016).

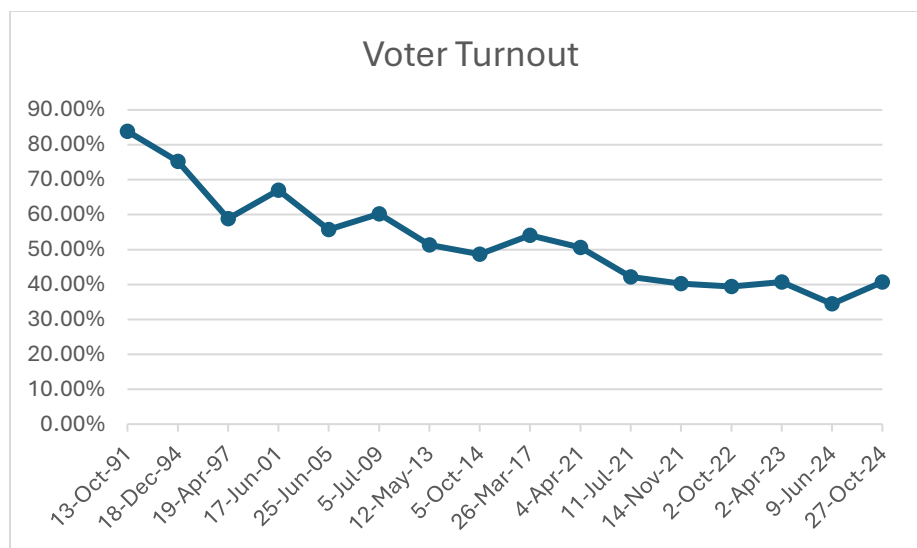


Figure 9 Voter Turnout, in % 1991-2024. Source: Central Election Committee Bulgaria.

The second noticeable aspect is the fact that DPS has been the most consistent in its standing since its establishment in 1990. Not only did it not go through the painful fragmentation processes that some of the other parties had to fight through, but they also kept their electoral support base, and their party intact until the last few years at least. More research into the DPS specifically could study how exactly the ethnoreligious subculture helped them retain their position.

Public attitudes towards corruption in Bulgaria are a long-standing issue. According to a survey conducted in early 2024, 53,6% of respondents said that the system of democracy “needs a lot of change” and 40,2% believe that the level of corruption hasn’t changed and 33,33% that it has “increased to some extent (Global Metrics 2024, 6-9). Pairing this with the debated progress on the CVM and the benchmarks, and the continue support but also prominence of nationalist populist parties and the Bulgarian case certainly contains some paradoxes and unique events.

With continued protests and political instability, the path of Bulgaria is unclear. In the last 35 years, the major changes to the political system have happened with the appearance of a personalist populist party after an economic downturn. What would the next stage in Bulgaria’s history look like? At this moment in early 2025 there are allegations of election fraud and cover-up, which is not a new tune: “In recent years, the prosecution has been increasingly accused of siding with those in power or not acting on major allegations and investigations. It never investigated sanctions imposed under the US Magnitsky Act from 2021 and 2023 on various

Bulgarian politicians, including GERB members [Vladislav Goranov] and [Delyan] Peevski” (Todorov, 2025). Somehow, despite all the allegations and protests, and political fragmentation, the European Union still continues forth with its integration efforts, and no international backlash makes a difference where popular parties and their leader and associators are concerned. They implemented electronic voting to be more in line with EU and ‘Western’ standards, but somehow it backfired: electronic voting was supposed to diminish corruption and vote tampering, and yet the opposite seems to have happened (IDEA 2025). A group of ‘hacktivists’ have even gone so far as to investigate and form a list of 200 people who have allegedly bought votes for an emerging personalist party (Roussi 2024).

In sum, there is potential for further integration into the global economy, particularly in the technology and innovation sectors, as well as international trade and investment partnerships. Recent years have shown an interesting development of the service sector in terms of offshoring, as well as what seems to be a return of the entrepreneurial small business mindset. Bulgaria might never be a leading actor in the international economic arena, as is the case for most of the world’s nations, but the lessons one could draw from this case could help other transitioning economies learn from their mistakes. However, there is growing concern over wages and quality of life: “Currently the polarization of income of the richest 20% and the poorest 20% of the population in Bulgaria is very high, while only 10 years earlier it has been equal to the average EU levels.” (Dobрева 2023, 29). If the income gap is widening and the polarization of the lower and higher quarts is high and increasing, then what does that mean for the promises of a better standard of life, especially with the Eurozone just ahead. Further studies could look into how the economic policies perhaps reflect a desire to move away from Western influence and return to a local focus; on the full impact of the political instability on economic backwardness; or on how political and economic changes in Bulgaria are depicted in its geographical landscape. Post-COVID there has been a return migration phenomenon occurring which could mean a myriad of new possibilities, in terms of labor force, diversification, and macroeconomic benefits. One topic that is not even considered due to historical and cultural biases, is the large untapped work force that could help with the declining population – integration of Roma people for example, but major ethnic biases and prejudices still exist.

Concluding Remarks

Identifying global-scale issues, finding patterns in and connections between them, and proposing new ways to address these issues are some of the core functions of global studies as a field of inquiry.

- Smith and McCarty 2017, 30

It is said that we are living in the most peaceful time in history, meaning that there are plenty of opportunities for problems to shine through in our national systems. Bulgarians are no longer concerned about war, food shortages, survival; now, it is all about prospering, having a good standard of life. If we look at the period of time since 1990, the economic, political and social conditions are more favorable compared to the starting point, but that is not the full story. While this paper chose to deal with a single case study, and not a transregional analysis, there was still an effort to identify the defining processes in Bulgaria's history since 1990 and find pattern and connections between them to establish a linear timeline and view of the past. The result of this was a clear view of what happened during the first and second decade, and yet the last decade remains somewhat unfinished.

Economy and politics are fundamentally linked in our present world, and it is visible through Bulgaria's analysis: any time the economy does badly, the government usually gets turned out one way or another. In the last 35 years, the major changes to the political system have happened with the appearance of a personalist populist party after an economic downturn. First in 1997 when the UDF won popular support; then in 2001 when they failed and Simeon the II appeared; in 2007 with the accession to the EU; 2009 with GERB's first appearance and subsequent hegemony. The exception here being the year 2013, however that could be argued as the government resigned and there were anti-corruption protests at the time. The pre-2013 period in Bulgaria very clearly has three overarching periods as was outlined in Section 6. The first years 1990-1997 were characterized by an economic desire for change but a political and historical desire to stick with the status quo: while the creation of the UDF was a significant event in Bulgaria's democratization process, the first electoral win, the presence and adaption of the BCP party into the BSP make it unique to other Balkan states. Only the worsening economic situation in 1996-1997 made the BSP lose more support, allowing the UDF the win. Both continued to define the scene together until Simeon II came and overturned the system temporarily, paving the way for other populist and personalist parties to appear, and even to characterize the system. Bulgarian

political perception ping-pongs easily and does not center on ideology or political affiliations but on results, looking for their ‘savior’ The populist parties in Bulgaria closely resemble older political elite models even though they were formed in contradiction to them, implying that the issue must be investigated on a deeper level of the party politics and mechanisms. Democratic transition in Bulgaria has not been linear and has not followed a straight path: the paradoxes live within the system; liberalization on the other hand has gone according to the IMF and WB expectations; European integration has had questionable results: firstly, it helped stabilize the economy, secondly, while it demands that some reforms are adopted, with others they are a lot more lenient, even though there have been multiple allegations and protests surrounding the topic of judiciary reforms in Bulgaria.

The last period of time encompassed 2013-2024. With the escalating situation in Bulgaria, the fraud allegations, the Euro adoption, the political fragmentation and populism, the path ahead is not yet forged and thus could lead in different directions. Similar instances with populist parties are rising in the European Union and can be seen in Germany and Austria, for example. Therefore, in a few years the suggestion of splitting this further in 2021, is going to have empirical data to back it up. Future studies should look into delving deeper into each of the time periods and points of analysis, as there could be further aspects that played – or will play – an important part in its trajectory.

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Annexes

Annex A: Full 1991-2024 parliamentary election results of majority parties

Election Results 1991

Date of Election	13-Oct-91	Previous election					
Electorate	6790006	Total seats	240	Quota:	17324.1		
Total votes cast	5694842	Turnout	83.87%				
Valid votes cast	5540837	Share of valid vote	97.30%				
			Votes		Seats		
Party/Coalition			Number	%	N	%	
Union of Democratic Forces	Съюз на демократичните сили	SDS	1903567	34.36%		110	45.78%
Movement for Rights and Freedoms	Движение за права и свободи	DPS	418168	7.55%		24	10.06%
	Предизборен съюз на БСП, БЛП, ОПТ, ПХЖД, ХРП, НЛП "Ст.Стамболов", СМС, ФБСМ, СДПД "ЕРА-3"	Pre-election union BSP, BLL, OPT, PHJD, HRP, NLP, SMS, FBSM, SDPD	1836050	33.14%		106	44.16%
Total			4157785			240	100.00%

Election Results 1994

Date of Election	18-Dec-94	Previous election	13-Oct-91				
Electorate	6997954	Total seats	240	Quota:	18294.74		
Total votes cast	5264448	Turnout	75.23%				
Valid votes cast	5202065	Share of valid vote	98.82%				
			Votes		Seats		
Party/Coalition			Number	%	N	%	
Union of democratic forces	Съюз на демократичните сили - СДС	SDS	1260374	24.23		69	28.71%
Movement for Rights and Freedoms	Движение за права и свободи - ДПС	DPS	283094	5.44		15	6.45%
Coalition - BSP, BZNS, PK Ekoglasnost	Коалиция – БСП, БЗНС "Ал. Стамболийски" и ПК "Екогласност"	BSP	2262943	43.5		125	51.96%
People's Union - BZNS, DP	Народен съюз – БЗНС, ДП	NS	338478	6.51		18	7.29%
Bulgarian Business Bloc	Български бизнес блок - БББ	BBB	245849	4.73		13	5.60%
Total			4390738			240	100.00%

Election Results 1997

Date of Election	19-Apr-97	Previous election	18-Dec-94			
Electorate	7289956	Total seats	240	Quota	16376.27	
Total votes cast	4291257	Turnout	58.87%			
Valid votes cast	4255301	Share of valid vote	99.16%			
			Votes		Seats	
	Party/Coalition		Number	%	N	%
United democratic forces - SDS, DP, BZNS, BSDP	Обединени демократични сили – СДС, ДП, БЗНС, БСДП	ODS	2223714	52.26	137	57.00%
Democratic Left - BSP, PK Ekoglasnost	Демократична левица – БСП, ПК “Екогласност”	BSP	939308	22.07	58	24.32%
Bulgarian Business Bloc	Български Бизнес Блок – БББ	BBB	209796	4.93	12	4.92%
Euroleft	Евролевица		234058	5.5	14	5.96%
	Обединение за национално спасение	DPS	323429	7.6	19	7.81%
Total			3930305		240	100%

Election Results 2001

Date of Election	17-Jun-01	Previous election	19-Apr-97				
Electorate	6916151	Total seats	240	Quota	16277.58		
Total votes cast	4608135	Turnout	67.03%				
Valid votes cast	4568191	Share of valid vote	99.13%				
			Votes			Seats	
	Party Name	Coalition	Number	%		N	%
National Movement Simeon II	Национално Движение Симеон Втори (НДСВ)	NDSII	1952513	42.74%		120	49.98%
	Обединени Демократични Сили – СДС, Народен съюз: БЗНС-НС и ДП, БСДП, Национално ДПС	ODS-SDS, NS, BSDP, Nationalno DPS	830338	18.18%		51	21.25%
United Democratic Forces							
Koalitsiya za Bulgaria	Коалиция за България	BSP	783372	17.15%		48	20.05%
DPS-Liber., union Evroroma	ДПС (ДПС – Либерален съюз – Еврорума)	DPS	340395	7.45%		21	8.71%
Total			3906618			240	100%

Election Results 2005

Date of Election	25-Jun-05	Previous election	17-Jun-01			
Electorate	6721323	Total seats	240	Quota	13846.4	
Total votes cast	3747793	Turnout	55.76%			
Valid votes cast	3648177	Share of valid vote	97.34%			
			Votes		Seats	
	Party Name		Number	%	N	%
National Movement Simeon II	Национално Движение Симеон Втори (НДСВ)	NDSII	725314	21.83%	53	22.24%
	ОДС - СДС, Демократична Партия, Движение 'Георговден', БЗНС НС - БЗНС-ДРОМ	ODS-SDS, NS, BSDP, Nationalno DPS	280323	8.44%	20	8.44%
Koalitsiya za Bulgaria	Коалиция за България - БСП, ПБС, ПД - Социалдемократи, ДСХ, П. Рома, КПБ, БЗНС - Ал. Стамболийски, ЗПВ	BSP	1129196	33.98%	82	33.98%
Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria	Демократи за Силна България - ДСБ	DSB	234788	7.07%	17	7.07%
Coalition Ataka	Коалиция Атака	Ataka	296848	8.93%	21	8.93%
Movement for Rights and Freedoms	Движение за права и свободи - ДПС	DPS	467400	14.07%	34	14.07%
Union of free democrats - BZNS - National union - VMRO - Bulgarian national movement - Coalition Bulgarian Nation Union	Съюз на Свободните Демократи - БЗНС - Народен Съюз, ВМРО - Българско Национално Движение - Коалиция Бълфарски Народен Съюз		189268	5.70%	13	5.28%
Total			3323137		240	100%

Election Results 2009

Date of Election	5-Jul-09	Previous election	25-Jun-05			
Electorate	7182028	Total seats	240	Quota	16222.03	
Total votes cast	4323581	Turnout	60.20%			
Valid votes cast	4226194	Share of valid vote	97.75%			
			Votes		Seats	
	Party Name		Number	%	N	%
GERB	ГЕРБ	GERB	1678641	39.72%	103	43.12%
	"Ред, законност и справедливост"	RZS	174582	4.13%	11	4.48%
Movement for Rights and Freedoms	Движение за права и свободи - ДПС	DPS	610521	14.45%	38	15.68%
Party Ataka	Атака	Ataka	395733	9.36%	24	10.16%
Coalition for Bulgaria	Коалиция за България	BSP	748147	17.70%	46	19.22%
The Blue Coalition	Синията Коалиция	Blue Coalition	285662	6.76%	18	7.34%
Total			3893286		240	100%

Election Results 2013

Date of Election	12-May-13	Previous election	5-Jul-09			
Electorate	7076123	Total seats	240	Quota	11179.55	
Total votes cast	3632174	Turnout	51.33%			
Valid votes cast	3541745	Share of valid vote	97.51%			
			Votes		Seats	
	Party Name		Number	%	N	%
GERB	ГЕРБ	GERB	1081605	30.54%	97	40.31%
Movement for Rights and Freedoms	Движение за права и свободи - ДПС	DPS	400466	11.31%	36	14.93%
Party Ataka	Атака	Ataka	258481	7.30%	23	9.63%
Coalition for Bulgaria	Коалиция за България	BSP	942541	26.61%	84	35.13%
Total			2683093		240	100%

Election Results 2014

Date of Election	5-Oct-14	Previous election	12-May-13			
Electorate	7195374	Total seats	240	Quota	12781.18	
Total votes cast	3501269	Turnout	48.66%			
Valid votes cast	3283192	Share of valid vote	93.77%			
			Votes		Seats	
	Party Name		Number	%	N	%
GERB	ГЕРБ	GERB	1072491	32.67%	84	35.00%
Movement for Rights and Freedoms	Движение за права и свободи - ДПС	DPS	487134	14.84%	38	15.83%
Party Ataka	Атака	Ataka	148262	4.52%	11	4.58%
Reformatorski blok - BZNS, DBG, DSB, NPSD, SDS	Реформаторски Блок - БЗНС, ДБГ, ДСБ, НПСД, СДС	Reformist bloc	291806	8.89%	23	9.58%
KP Bulgaria without censure	КП България без цензура	BBC	186938	5.69%	15	6.25%
Coalition ABC (Alternative to Bulgarian Revival)	Коалиция АБВ - (Алтернатива за българско възраждане)	ABV	136223	4.15%	11	4.58%
BSP Left Bulgaria	БСП Лява България	BSP	505527	15.40%	39	16.25%
Patriotic Front - NFSB and VMRO	Патриотичен Фронт - НФСБ и ВМРО	PF	239101	7.28%	19	7.79%
Total			3067482	93.43%	240	100%

Election Results 2017

Date of Election	26-Mar-17	Previous election	5-Oct-14			
Electorate	6810341	Total seats	240	Quota	12012.12	
Total votes cast	3682493	Turnout	54.07%			
Valid votes cast	3513419	Share of valid vote	95.41%			
			Votes		Seats	
	Party Name	Coalition	Number	%	N	%
GERB	ГЕРБ	GERB	1147292	33.49%	95	39.58%
Movement for Rights and Freedoms	Движение за права и свободи - ДПС	DPS	315976	9.22%	26	10.83%
	Воля		145637	4.25%	12	5.00%
BSP For Bulgaria	БСП За България	BSP	955490	27.89%	80	33.33%
United Patriots - NFSB, Ataka and VMRO	Обединени Патриоти - НФСБ, Атака и ВМРО	PF	318513	9.30%	27	11.25%
Total			2882908	84.16%	240	100%
"I don't support anyone"			87850			

Election Results April 2021

Date of Election	4-Apr-21	Previous election	26-Mar-17			
Electorate	6588372	Total seats	240	Quota	11134.97	
Total votes cast	3334233	Turnout	50.61%			
Valid votes cast	3247754	Share of valid vote	97.41%			
			Votes		Seats	
	Party Name	Coalition	Number	%	N	%
GERB - SDS	ГЕРБ-СДС	GERB	837707	26.18%	75	31.35%
Movement for Rights and Freedoms	Движение за права и свободи - ДПС	DPS	336306	10.51%	30	12.58%
PP Ima Takuv Narod	ПП Има Такъв Народ	ITN	565014	17.66%	51	21.14%
BSP For Bulgaria	БСП За България	BSP	480146	15.00%	43	17.97%
Democratic Bulgaria - Union (DA Bulgaria, DSB, Green Movement)	Демократична България - Обединение (Да България, ДСБ, Зелено Движение)	DSB	302280	9.45%	27	11.31%
Stand Up! Mafia Out!	Изправи Се! Мутри Вън!	ISMV	150940	4.72%	14	5.65%
Total			2672393	83.51%	240	100%
"I don't support anyone"			47749			

Election Results July 2021

Date of Election	11-Jul-21	Previous election	4-Apr-21			
Electorate	6578716	Total seats	240	Quota	10168.41	
Total votes cast	2775755	Turnout	42.19%			
Valid votes cast	2766426	Share of valid vote	99.66%			
			Votes		Seats	
	Party Name	Coalition	Number	%	N	%
GERB - SDS	ГЕРБ-СДС	GERB	642165	23.51%	63	26.31%
Movement for Rights and Freedoms	Движение за права и свободи - ДПС	DPS	292514	10.71%	29	11.99%
PP Ima Takuv Narod	ПП Има Такъв Народ	ITN	657829	24.09%	65	26.96%
BSP For Bulgaria	БСП За България	BSP	365695	13.39%	36	14.98%
Democratic Bulgaria - Union (Da Bulgaria, DSB, Green Movement)	Демократична България - Обединение (Да България, ДСБ, Зелено Движение)	DSB	345331	12.64%	34	14.15%
Izpravi se! Mutri Vun!	Изправи Се! Мутри Вън!	ISMV	136885	5.01%	13	5.61%
Total			2440419	89.35%	240	100%
"I don't support anyone"			35201			

Election Results November 2021

Date of Election	14-Nov-21	Previous election	11-Jul-21			
Electorate	6635305	Total seats	240	Quota	10094.68	
Total votes cast	2670923	Turnout	40.25%			
Valid votes cast	2658503	Share of valid vote	99.53%			
			Votes		Seats	
	Party Name		Number	%	N	%
GERB - SDS	ГЕРБ-СДС	GERB	596456	22.74%	59	24.58%
Movement for Rights and Freedoms	Движение за права и свободи - ДПС	DPS	341000	13.00%	34	14.17%
PP Ima Takuv Narod	ПП Има Такъв Народ	ITN	249743	9.52%	25	10.42%
BSP For Bulgaria	БСП За България	BSP	267817	10.21%	26	10.83%
Democratic Bulgaria - Union (Da Bulgaria, DSB, Green Movement)	Демократична България - Обединение (Да България, ДСБ, Зелено Движение)	DSB	166968	6.37%	16	6.67%
	Възраждане	Vuzrazhdane	127568	4.86%	13	5.42%
We Continue the Change	Продължаваме Промяната	PP	673170	25.67%	67	27.79%
Total			2422722	92.37%	240	100%
"I don't support anyone"			35745			

Election Results 2022

Date of Election	2-Oct-22	Previous election	14-Nov-21	Quota:	9481.45		
Electorate	6602990	Total seats	240				
Total votes cast	2601963	Turnout	39.41%				
Valid votes cast	2592907	Share of valid vote	99.65%				
			Votes			Seats	
Party/Coalition			Number	%		N	%
	ГЕРБ-СДС	GERB-SDS	634627	25.3%		67	28%
We Continue the Change	Продължаваме Промяната	PP	506099	20.2%		53	22%
Movement for rights and freedom	Движение за права и свободи - ДПС	DPS	344512	13.8%		36	15%
Revival	Възраждане	Vuzrazhdane	254952	10.2%		27	11%
BSP for Bulgaria	БСП За България	BSP	232958	9.3%		25	10%
	Демократична България - България - Обединение (Да България, ДСБ, Зелено движение)						
Democratic Bulgaria - Union (Da Bulgaria, DSB, Green movement)	Движения)	DSB	186528	7.4%		20	8%
Bulgarian Rise	Български Възход	BV	115872	4.6%		12	5%
Total number of votes for the parties participating in the allocation of seats			2275548	90.83%		240	100%
"I don't support anyone"			87635				

Election Results 2023

Date of Election	2-Apr-23	Previous election	2-Oct-22				
Electorate	6594593	Total seats	240	Quota	9694.8		
Total votes cast	2683606	Turnout	40.69%				
Valid votes cast	2638024	Share of valid vote	98.30%				
			Votes			Seats	
	Party Name		Number	%		N	%
GERB - SDS	ГЕРБ-СДС	GERB	669924	26.49%		69	28.79%
Movement for Rights and Freedoms	Движение за права и свободи - ДПС	DPS	347700	13.75%		36	14.94%
PP Ima Takuv Narod	ПП Има Такъв Народ	ITN	103971	4.11%		11	4.47%
BSP For Bulgaria	БСП За България	BSP	225914	8.93%		23	9.71%
	Коалиция						
Coalition We Continue the Change	Продължаваме Промяната - Демократична България	PP-DB	621069	24.56%		64	26.69%
Revival	Възраждане	Vuzrazhdane	358174	14.16%		37	15.39%
Total			2326752	92.01%		240	100%
	"I don't support anyone"		109095				

Election Results June 2024

Date of Election	9-Jun-24	Previous election	2-Apr-23			
Electorate	6593275	Total seats	240	Quota	7834.004	
Total votes cast	2269831	Turnout	34.43%			
Valid votes cast	2211335	Share of valid vote	97.42%			
			Votes		Seats	
	Party Name		Number	%	N	%
GERB - SDS	ГЕРБ-СДС	GERB - SDS	530658	24.71%	68	28.22%
Movement for Rights and Freedoms	Движение за права и свободи - ДПС	DPS	366310	17.06%	47	19.48%
PP Ima Takuv Narod	ПП Има Такъв Народ	ITN	128007	5.96%	16	6.81%
BSP For Bulgaria	БСП За България	BSP	151560	7.06%	19	8.06%
	Коалиция					
	Продължаваме					
Coalition We Continue the Change	Промяната - Демократична					
Democratic Bulgaria	България	PP-DB	307849	14.34%	39	16.37%
PP Velichie	ПП Величие	Velichie	99862	4.65%	13	5.42%
Revival	Възраждане	Vuzrazhdane	295915	13.78%	38	15.83%
Total			1880161	87.55%	240	100%
	"I don't support anyone"		63913			

Election Results October 2024

Date of Election	27-Oct-24	Previous election	9-Jun-24			
Electorate	6601262	Total seats	240	Quota	9331.829	
Total votes cast	2683606	Turnout	40.65%			
Valid votes cast	2638024	Share of valid vote	98.30%			
			Votes		Seats	
	Party Name		Number	%	N	%
GERB - SDS	ГЕРБ-СДС	GERB - SDS	642973	26.39%	69	28.71%
DPS - New Beginning	ДПС - Ново Начало	DPS	281356	11.54%	30	12.56%
PP Ima Takuv Narod	ПП Има Такъв Народ	ITN	165160	6.77%	18	7.37%
	БСП - Обединена					
BSP - United Left	Левица	BSP	184403	7.56%	20	8.23%
	Коалиция					
	Продължаваме					
Coalition We Continue the Change	Промяната - Демократична					
Democratic Bulgaria	България	PP-DB	346063	14.20%	37	15.45%
Alliance for Rights and Freedoms - APS	Алианс за Права и Свободи - АПС	APS	182253	7.48%	19	7.92%
PP Mech	ПП Меч	Mech	111965	4.59%	12	5.00%
Revival	Възраждане	Vuzrazhdane	325466	13.35%	35	14.58%
Total			2239639	91.88%	240	100%
	"I don't support anyone"		82619			

Chronological summary of parliamentary election results of majority parties 1991-2014

	13-Oct-91		18-Dec-94		19-Apr-97		17-Jun-01		25-Jun-05		5-Jul-09		12-May-13		5-Oct-14	
	%	Seats	%	Seats	%	Seats	%	Seats	%	Seats	%	Seats	%	Seats	%	Seats
UDF/ODS	34.36%	110	24.23	69	52.26	137	18.18	51	8.44	20						
BSP	33.14%	106	43.5	125	22.07	58	17.15	48	33.98	82	17.7	46	26.61	84	15.4	39
DPS	7.55%	24	5.44	15	7.6	19	7.45	21	14.07	34	14.45	38	11.31	36	14.84	38
NS			6.51	18												
BBB			4.73	13	4.93	12										
Euroleft					5.5	14										
NDSII							42.74	120	21.83	53						
Ataka									8.93	21	9.36	24	7.3	23	4.52	11
DSB/DB									7.07	17						
BNS									5.7	13						
GERB											39.72	116	30.54	97	32.67	84
RZS											4.13	10				
Blue Coalition											6.76	15				
Reformist Bloc															8.89	23
BBC															5.69	15
ABV															4.15	11
PF															7.28	19
Volya																
ITN																
ISMV																
Vuzrazhdane																
PP																
PP-DB																
BV																
Velichie																
APS																
Mech																

Chronological summary of parliamentary election results of majority parties 2017-2024

	26-Mar-17		4-Apr-21		11-Jul-21		14-Nov-21		2-Oct-22		2-Apr-23		9-Jun-24		27-Oct-24	
	%	Seats	%	Seats	%	Seats	%	Seats	%	Seats	%	Seats	%	Seats	%	Seats
UDF/ODS																
BSP	27.89	80	15	43	13.39	36	10.21	26	9.3	25	8.93	23	7.06	19	7.56	20
DPS	9.22	26	10.51	30	10.71	29	13	34	13.8	36	13.75	36	17.06	47	11.54	30
NS																
BBB																
Euroleft																
NDSII																
Ataka																
DSB/DB			9.45	27	12.64	34	6.37	16	7.4	20						
BNS																
GERB	33.49	95	26.18	75	23.51	63	22.74	59	25.3	67	26.49	69	24.71	68	26.39	69
RZS																
Blue Coalition																
Reformist Bloc																
BBC																
ABV																
PF	9.3	27														
Volya	4.25	12														
ITN			17.66	51	24.09	65	9.52	25			4.11	11	5.96	16	6.77	18
ISMV			4.72	14	5.01	13										
Vuzrazhdane							4.86	13	10.2	27	14.16	37	13.78	38	13.35	35
PP							25.67	67	20.2	53						
PP-DB											24.56	64	14.34	39	14.2	37
BV									4.6	12						
Velichie													4.65	13		
APS															7.48	19
Mech															4.59	12

Annex B: Bulgarian Cabinets from 1986 to 2025

<i>Prime Minister Cabinet</i>	<i>Time</i>	<i>PM Political Party Affiliation</i>	<i>Political Party/Coalition in Power</i>	<i>Reason why it ended early</i>
Georgi Atanasov	1986-1990		BKP, BZNS	
Andrey Lukanov	1990	BSP	BSP	
Dimitar Popov	1990-1991	Independent	BSP, SDS, BZNS	
Philip Dimitrov	1991-1992	UDF	SDS, DP, RDP	Ousted - vote of confidence lost
Lyuben Berov	1992-1994	Independent supported by Movement for Rights and Freedom	ASP, SDS, DPS, BSDP	Resignation
<i>Reneta Indzhova</i>	<i>Interim 1994-1995</i>	<i>Independent</i>	<i>caretaker government</i>	
Zhan Videnov	1995-1997	BSP	BSP	Resignation
<i>Stefan Sofiyanski</i>	<i>Interim 1997</i>	<i>UDF</i>	<i>caretaker government</i>	
Ivan Kostov	1997-2001	UDF	ODS	
Simeon Saksoburggotski	2001-2002	National Movement Simeon II	NDSB, DPS	
Simeon Saksoburggotski	2002-2005	National Movement Simeon II	NDSB	
Sergei Stanishev	2005-2009	BSP	BSP, NDSB, DPS	
Boyko Borisov	2009-2013	GERB	GERB*	Resignation after Presidential candidate of the party not elected
<i>Marin Raykov</i>	<i>Interim 13 March - 29 May 2013</i>	<i>Independent</i>	<i>caretaker government</i>	<i>Ended following the 12 May 2013 snap parliamentary elections</i>
Plamen Oresharski	29 May 2013 - 6 August 2014	Independent supported by BSP and DPS	De facto minority coalition BSP, DPS (relied on external support in Parliament - Ataka)	Resignation on July 23, 2014 after prolonged protests and political instability
<i>Georgi Bliznashki</i>	<i>Interim 6 August - 7 November 2014</i>	<i>Independent</i>	<i>caretaker government</i>	<i>Ended following the 5 October 2014 parliamentary elections</i>
Boyko Borisov II	7 November 2014- 27 January 2017	GERB	Coalition majority (GERB, Reform Bloc + ABV)	Resignation on 14 November 2016 after GERB's candidate lost the 2016 presidential elections to Radev

<i>Ognyan Gerdzhikov</i>	<i>Interim 27 January - 4 May 2017</i>	<i>Independent</i>	<i>caretaker government</i>	<i>Ended after the 26 March 2017 parliamentary elections</i>
Boyko Borisov III	4 May 2017- 12 May 2021 (only one to go full term)	GERB	Coalition majority (GERB, United Patriots)	Concluded after the 4 April 2021 Parliamentary elections and failure to form new coalition
<i>Stefan Yanev</i>	<i>Interim 12 May - 16 September 2021</i>	<i>Independent</i>	<i>caretaker government</i>	<i>No stable government emerged after the July 2021 snap elections</i>
<i>Stefan Yanev</i>	<i>Interim 16 September - 13 December 2021</i>	<i>Independent</i>	<i>caretaker government</i>	<i>Concluded after the November 2021 elections</i>
Kiril Petkov	13 December 2021- 2 August 2022	We Continue the Change	Coalition majority (PP, BSP, ITN, DB)	Lost parliamentary majority because of coalition rift (ITN withdrew); Vote of no confidence June 22, 2022, and resigns; hands over power August 2, 2022
<i>Galab Donev I</i>	<i>Interim 2 August 2022- 3 February 2023</i>	<i>Independent</i>	<i>caretaker government</i>	<i>No new majority formed 2 October 2022 elections</i>
<i>Galab Donev II</i>	<i>Interim 3 February 2023 - 6 June 2023</i>	<i>Independent</i>	<i>caretaker government</i>	<i>Ended following the 2 April 2023 elections</i>
Nikolai Denkov (rotating with Maria Gabriel)?	6 June 2023 - 9 April 2024	We Continue the Change GERB	Coalition majority (PP- DB + GERB-SDS "rotating PM" arrangement)	Resignation 5 March 2024
<i>Dimitar Glavchev I</i>	<i>Interim 9 April 2024 - 27 August 2024</i>	<i>Independent</i>	<i>caretaker government</i>	
<i>Dimitar Glavchev II</i>	<i>Interim 27 August 2024 - 16 January 2025</i>	<i>Independent</i>	<i>caretaker government</i>	<i>No political consensus in Parliament after the elections in October 2024</i>
Rosen Zhelyazko	16 January 2025-		Coalition majority (GERB-SDS, BSP, ITN)	