

# The New cycle of Populist parties in Bulgaria: from the “people’s” to the “citizens’” Populists

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**Abstract.** The chapter aims to shed light on the new political actors in Bulgaria, which appeared in the extraordinary electoral year 2021. For the first time in the country’s democratic history, three consecutive national elections were held in one year: on April 4, on July 11 and on November 14, 2021. They took place in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, a deepening political crisis, mass citizen protests in 2020 against the ruling party Citizens for the European development of Bulgaria (GERB), coupled with the radicalisation of the attitudes of politicians, parties, and voters. A new major dividing line was imposed: “new parties” or “protest parties” (in the name of the “sovereign” or of “the ordinary citizens”) from the extra-parliamentary opposition versus all established and parliamentary parties. Our attention is focused on the new political actors because their role - constructive or disruptive - matters for the quality of the liberal parliamentary democracy and the EU and NATO integration of the country.

**Keywords:** elections 2021, Bulgaria, populism, instability, radicalisation.

## Introduction

More than 32 years since the end of the communist rule, Bulgaria which joined NATO in 2004 and became a member of the EU in 2007, is still struggling to consolidate its democracy. The country has regularly been classified as a semi-consolidated democracy.<sup>1</sup> Corruption and poverty have

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<sup>1</sup> Freedom House, “Nations in Transit 2022. From Democratic Decline to Authoritarian Aggression,” 2022, [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-04/NIT\\_2022\\_final\\_digital.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-04/NIT_2022_final_digital.pdf), 14.

been the main marks of Bulgaria for decades. Bulgaria is also a country with strong historical pro-Russian feelings amongst a part of the populations and parties. Geopolitical crises such as the Russian war in Ukraine risk to put into question how deep its integration in NATO and the European Union is. Like other East-European countries, Bulgarian democracy suffers from weaknesses and among the main concerns remain the unreformed judicial system and the Rule of Law. Studies on transitions in East-Central Europe have pointed out that “the new transitology,” focused on the effectiveness of regimes and on informal power networks, uses now concepts such as “competitive authoritarianism,” “patronalism,” “neopatrimonialism,” and “mafia-state” to describe political and international security processes in the region.<sup>2</sup> The party Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria and its founder Boyko Borisov have established and maintained for 12 years their political hegemony and have developed a network of clientelism and patronage, while weakening opposition, civil society, and the freedom of media. The elections in 2021 were the expression of the rejection of the model of government, imposed by GERB, defined by the opposition forces as “authoritarian,” “state capture,” “mafia,” etc.

In the Bulgarian political history, there are traditions for the emergence of different types of populisms - from the extreme right to progressive ones. One example is the “green” or “peasants’ dictatorship” of the agrarian leader Alexander Stambolijski (1919-1923), who served as a prime minister after the debacle in the aftermath of the Grande guerre. This government was ended by a military coup d’état on June 9, 1923, while Stambolijski was cruelly killed by members of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation (VMRO).

The populist phenomena and parties in the new democratic period in Bulgaria have been analysed by a great number of studies, books<sup>3</sup> and a

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<sup>2</sup> Mikhail Minakov, “The Transition of ‘Transition:’ Assessing the Post-Communist Experience and Its Research,” in *Meandering in Transition. Thirty Years of Reforms and Identity in Post-Communist Europe*, eds. Ostap Kushnir and Oleksandr Pankiev (Lanham: Lexington Books, Rowman&Littlefield Publishing Group Inc., 2021) 25-37.

<sup>3</sup> Petia Gueorguieva, “L’Apologie de la Nation Bulgare” (The Apology of the Bulgarian Nation), in *Populismes. L’envers de la démocratie* (Populisms. The Reverse of Democracy), eds. Marie-Claude Esposito, Alain Laquieze, and Christine Manigand (Paris, Editions

special issue on “National populism.”<sup>4</sup> Different populist cycles have evolved from the discontent with the established parties. The core issue of each populist cycle has constantly been the corruption and the sense of injustice and the inequalities between the winners and the losers of transformations. The elections in 2001 provided for the victory of the former king Simeon the Second and his National Movement Simeon the Second (NDSV), which for months in 2001 became the largest party in the country, causing electoral losses to the traditional democratic right. The very personalised NDSV was defined as “centrist populist” party. In 2005, the populist radical right party Ataka made its first electoral breakthrough and achieved its first parliamentary representation.

In 2009 a new populist and personalized formation around the personality of Boyko Borisov – “Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria” (GERB) emerged. During this populist cycle, other parties appeared such as Law, Order and Justice. GERB succeeded in imposing its political hegemony and won all parliamentary elections from 2009 to July 2021. The mass protests against the corruption and established parties in 2013-2014 paved the way for the electoral ascent of the populist radical right

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Vandemaires), 193-203; Petia Gueorguieva, “Les Patriotes unis aux rênes du pouvoir” (The Patriots United at the Reins of Power), in *Nationalismes en Europe, Revue L’Action nationale* (Nationalisms in Europe. The National Action Review), ed. Hubert Rioux, vol. CVIII, no. 3 (March 2018): 104-18; Petia Gueorguieva, “La ‘normalisation’ de la droite radicale populiste en Bulgarie après 2009” (The “Normalisation” of the Radical Populist Right in Bulgaria after 2009), in *L’Etat face à ses transformations* (The State and Its Transformations), ed. Benjamin Biard (Louvain: La-Neuve Academia, L’Harmattan, Collection Science Politique, N° 22, 2018), 259-78; Blagovesta Cholova, and Jean-Michel De Waele, “Populism in Bulgaria: The Politics of Resentment,” in *Southeastern Europe* 38 no. 1 (2014): 56-86, <https://doi.org/10.1163/18763332-03801003>; Anna Krasteva and Gabriella Lazaridis, “Far Right. Populist Ideology, ‘Othering’ and ‘Youth’,” in *Populism, Media and Education. Challenging Discrimination in Contemporary Digital Societies*, ed. Maria Ranieri (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 9-25; Emilia Zankina, “Populism, Voters and Cleavages in Bulgarian Politics,” in *Politologický Casopis/ Czech Journal of Political Science* 1 (2017): 56-71; Birte Siim, Anna Krasteva, Anna Aino Saarinen eds., *Citizens’ Activism and Solidarity Movements. Contending with Populism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Ildiko Otova and Evelina Staykova, *Migration and Populism in Bulgaria* (London & New York, Routledge, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> Special Issue “Politics in Time of Crisis,” *Political Studies*, Sofia, Bulgarian Political Science Association Review no. 1-2 (2021).

partis National Front for Salvation of Bulgaria (NDSV), Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization VMRO-BND, and the revival of Ataka.

Nevertheless, neither NDSV in 2001, nor GERB in 2009 and afterwards achieved an absolute majority in the National Assembly. In consequence, the country had to adapt to governmental coalitions. The first GERB government from 2009 to 2013 was a one-party minority cabinet which benefited from the parliamentary support of parties such as Ataka or Law, Order and Justice or non-allied deputies. GERB put in place a strategy of division of parties and co-optation. The second GERB government from 2014 to 2017 was a minority coalition led by GERB with partners the democratic right parties coalition Reformist Bloc and the populist leftist coalition Alternative for Revival of Bulgaria (ABV). The government was supported in parliament by the alliance Patriotic Front made up of two populist radical right parties, the National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria and the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (VMRO-BND ). The third government from 2017 to 2021 was a coalition between GERB and the alliance United Patriots consisting of three populist radical right parties: the National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria, the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization VRO-BND and Ataka. In 2017 a small, personalized populist radical right party, Voliya (Will), also entered parliament. The GERB's political dominance has allowed and facilitated the legitimation and the institutionalization of populist radical right parties. For more than two decades, the fight against corruption has been a fertile ground for the appearance of number of parties and movements: NDSV; Ataka; GERB; Law, Order and Justice; Will; Da, Bulgaria! etc.

The elections of 2021 are distinguished by the number of new anti-corruption challengers which appeared at the same time: There is such a People!, Stand Up! Mafia get Out!, We continue the change!. All these actors compete against the established parties and among each other. Their successes are different, and it is too early to consider their institutionalisation. Nevertheless, there is a new anti-corruption populist cycle which could have durable impact on the party system.<sup>5</sup> In this wave,

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<sup>5</sup> Rumiana Kolarova, "2021 Triple Parliamentary Elections Phenomenon in Bulgaria," *Political Studies. Special Issue Politics in Time of Crisis*, no. 1-2 (2021): 28-57; Antony Todorov,

the populist radical right in not in the forefront. Except for the new far-right anti-European, anti-NATO, pro-Russian party Revival (Vazrazhdane), the new challenger and populist parties differ from the established populist radical right and their nativist, xenophobic, nationalist and anti-European stances. New parties and movements like There is such a People! (ITN), Stand Up! Mafia Get Out! elaborate anti-establishment messages in the name of the empowerment of “the sovereign” (ITN); the “ordinary people” (Stand Up. BG!). We continue the Change! appeared to achieve “zero corruption,” to reform the country and to give voice to “all honest and honourable people.”

### Political crisis

A special issue of the Bulgarian Political Science Association’ review *Political Studies*, mentioned above, focuses on this extraordinary situation of three consecutive national elections held in the same year 2021. In 2021, over 61 per cent of Bulgarian citizens expressed their dissatisfaction with democracy.<sup>6</sup> Also 73% of Bulgarian respondents are concerned about the final results of an election being manipulated;<sup>7</sup> 70% are concerned about people being pressured to vote a particular way.<sup>8</sup> The attitudes towards the work of government are traditionally negative but the highest rates – 60% of negative attitudes were registered in September 2020 in the end of to the third government of GERB.<sup>9</sup> (Alpha Research). Similarly, the attitudes toward the work of the National Assembly are traditionally negative with the highest levels of dissatisfaction registered in September 202, 61% with only 7% of positive attitudes in December 2020.<sup>10</sup>

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“Elections of Change or Failure?,” *Political Studies. Special Issue Politics in Time of Crisis*, no. 1-2 (2021): 5-27.

<sup>6</sup> European Union, “Standard Eurobarometer 94, Winter 2020-2021,” April 2021, <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2355>.

<sup>7</sup> European Commission, “Special Barometer 507. Democracy in the EU,” March 2021, [https://fronteirasxxi.pt/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/ebs\\_507\\_en.pdf](https://fronteirasxxi.pt/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/ebs_507_en.pdf), 18.

<sup>8</sup> European Commission, “Special Barometer 507,” 23.

<sup>9</sup> Alpha Research, “Attitudes Towards the Work of Government 2008-2022,” n.d., <https://alpharesearch.bg/monitoring/27/>.

<sup>10</sup> Alpha Research, “Attitudes towards the Work of the National Assembly,” n.d., <https://alpharesearch.bg/monitoring/31/>.

**Table 1.** Political Crisis in Bulgaria 2021-2022

I. April 4th, 2021 elections of the 45th National Assembly	II. July 11th, 2021 early elections of the 46th National Assembly	III. November 14th, 2021 early elections of the 47th National Assembly	IV. October 2d, 2022 early elections of the 48th National Assembly
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• pick of the third wave of Covid-19;</li> <li>• regular elections after the end of the 44th National Assembly and of the third government of the party GERB (2017-2022) in coalition with the populist radical right alliance United Patriots;</li> <li>• results: GERB remains first political force but is in isolation; fragmented parliament - 6 parties and coalitions elected</li> <li>• breakthrough of new parties and coalitions : "There is Such a People!", "Stand Up! Mafia get Out!"</li> <li>• failure to elect new government and lack of majority in Parliament</li> <li>• 12 May 2021 - dissolution of the 45th National Assembly and early elections</li> <li>• Caretaker government appointed by the President R. Radev, PM Stefan Yanev</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• more favourable sanitary situation but lower turnout;</li> <li>• mandatory machine voting is implemented in all sections with more than 300 registered voters;</li> <li>• results: for the first time since 2009 GERB loses its hegemony of first political force from the populist party "There is such a People!"</li> <li>• fragmented parliament - 6 parties elected;</li> <li>• failure to elect new government because of the radical strategy of "There is Such a People!" and the isolation of GERB; lack of majority,</li> <li>• 15 September 2021 - dissolution of the 46th National Assembly and new early elections.</li> <li>• Caretaker government appointed by the President R. Radev, PM Stefan Yanev</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• rise of the fourth wave of Covid-19; lower turnout;</li> <li>• results : new challenger wins the elections - a coalition called "We continue the Change!"; fragmented parliament: 7 parties elected; breakthrough of the far-right party Vazrazhdane (Revival)</li> <li>• new coalition government formed by four parties and alliances : "We continue the change!", Bulgarian Socialist Party, "There is such a People!" and Democratic Bulgaria ( 13 december 2021 - 2 august 2022)</li> <li>• There is such a People leaves the coalition in June 2022; GERB initiates a vote of non confidence,</li> <li>• failure to form new parliamentary majority and to elect new government;</li> <li>• 2 August 2022: dissolution of the 47th National Assembly</li> <li>• caretaker government of appointed by by the President R. Radev ; PM Galab Donev</li> </ul>	

The first regular elections were held on April 4, 2021, after the end of the legislative term of the 44<sup>th</sup> National Assembly and the third government of Prime-minister Boyko Borisov and his party GERB. It is important to note that this was the first national government since 2009 to complete the entire four years mandate provided by the Constitution. These elections were marked by the Covid-19 pandemic, mass discontent and radicalisation. In July 2020 the country was shaken by mass protests calling for the resignation of Prime minister Boyko Borisov and his government and the resignation of the Prosecutor general Ivan Geshev, appointed in 2019. Before the first elections held on April 4, 2021, the extra parliamentary opposition imposed a new dividing line and conflict: the cleavage opposing the “parties of the protest” to all established parties.

**Table 2.** Results of parliamentary elections held on April 4, 2021 in Bulgaria

<b>Party, Coalition, Initiative Committee</b>	<b>Valid Votes</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Parliamentary seats / 240</b>
GERB-SDS	837 707	26.18%	75
There is such a People!	565 014	17.66%	51
BSP for Bulgaria	480 146	15.01%	43
Movement for Rights and Freedoms - DPS	336 306	10.51%	30
Democratic Bulgaria – Union (Da Bulgaria, DSB, Green Movement)	302 280	9.45%	27
Stand Up! Mafia Out!	150 940	4.72%	14
VMRO-BND	116 434	3.64%	-
BNO	94 515	2.95%	-
Revival	78 414	2.45%	-
Patriotic Coalition – Will and NFSB	75 926	2.37%	-

Source: Central Electoral Commission, <https://results.cik.bg/pi2021/rezultati/>

The GERB party remained the first political force but was in a severe isolation, while its allies from the populist radical right lost their parliamentary representation. The extra parliamentary opposition of the protest parties achieved parliamentary representation. The new populist party There is such a People! of showman Stanislav Trifonov became the second political force with 51 seats out of 240. The coalition Democratic Bulgaria (Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria, DA, Bulgaria! and the Green movement) won 27 seats out of 240. The coalition “Stand Up! Mafia get Out!” received 14 seats. The established opposition – the Bulgarian socialist party lost electoral support and became the third parliamentary force for the first time since 1990. The cooperation among these four anti-GERB forces was not possible, because Democratic Bulgaria and There is Such a People! refused to cooperate with the BSP. The impossibility to form a majority and to elect a government led to the dissolution of the 45<sup>th</sup> National Assembly and to early elections

**Table 3.** Results of early parliamentary elections, July 14, 2021

<b>Party, Coalition, Initiative Committee</b>	<b>Valid votes</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Parliamentary seats</b>
There is such a People	657 829	24.08%	65
GERB- SDS	642 165	23.51%	63
BSP for Bulgaria	365 695	13.39%	36
Democratic Bulgaria – Union (Da Bulgaria, DSB, Green Movement)	345 331	12.64%	34

<b>Party, Coalition, Initiative Committee</b>	<b>Valid votes</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Parliamentary seats</b>
Movement for Rights and Freedoms – DPS	292 514	10.71%	29
Stand Up! Mafia Out!	136 885	5.01%	13
The Bulgarian Patriots – VMRO, Will, NFSB.	85 795	3.14%	-
Revival	82 147	3.01%	-
Citizens’ Platform Bulgarian Summer	49 833	1.82%	-

Source: Central Electoral Commission, [https://results.cik.bg/pi2021\\_07/rezultati/index.html](https://results.cik.bg/pi2021_07/rezultati/index.html)

The early elections on July 11, 2021 were won by the populist party There is such a People!. For the first time since 2009 the GERB party was not the winner of parliamentary elections. The chairman of There is such a People!, Stanislav Trifonov proposed a minority government of its own party, even though it had only 65 seats out of 240. They declined the possibility to form a coalition with other protest parties. This move provoked indignation on behalf of all other anti-GERB opposition parties. During the 46<sup>th</sup> National Assembly, the conflicts between the “protest parties” dominated and led to the early elections on November 14, 2021. The elections on July 11, 2021 confirmed the beginning of long lasting electoral changes, such as the decrease of the common weight of the established parties like GERB, BSP or DPS and possible transformation of the entire party system.<sup>11</sup>

**Table 4.** Results of the early elections on November 14, 2021

<b>Party, Coalition, Initiative Committee</b>	<b>Valid votes</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Parliamentary seats</b>
We Continue the Change	673 170	25.67%	67
GERB-SDS	596 456	22.74%	59
Movement for Rights and Freedoms	341 000	13.00%	34
BSP for Bulgaria	267 817	10.21%	26
There is such a People	249 743	9.52%	25
Democratic Bulgaria – Union (Da Bulgaria, DSB, Green Movement)	166 968	6.37%	16
Revival	127 568	4.86%	13
Stand Up BG! We Come!	60 055	2.29%	-

Source: Central Electoral Commission, <https://results.cik.bg/pvrns2021/tur1/rezultati/index.html>

The third early elections, held on November 14, 2021 presented two surprises: the ascent of a new movement “We continue the change!” that

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<sup>11</sup> Todorov, “Elections,” 20.

became the first political force, and the success of the far-right party Revival which achieved a parliamentary representation. The parliamentary populist radical right parties incurred major losses during the three elections held in 2021. Parties such as Ataka, the National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria (NFSB) or the short-lived party Volya (Will) have almost disappeared. The Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation also suffered the defeat even though it has two MEPs who ensure the party's visibility. These parties tried different coalitions for the three elections in 2021 but it was not enough to reach the threshold of 4% to enter parliament. The nationalist votes went to the new populist party There is such a People! or to other minor political formations. The party Vazrazhdane (Revival) benefited from the instability and the consecutive elections.

**Table 5.** Electoral results of Populist radical right parties in Bulgaria 2005-2021

Parliamentary elections	ATAKA Votes, %	VMRO-BND Votes, %	NFSB Votes, %	Volya (Will) Votes, %	Vazrazhdane (Revival) votes, %	Bulgarian Summer	Total Votes
2005	296 848, 8.93%		n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	296 848
2009	395 733, 9.36%		n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	395 733
2013	258 481, 7.29%	66 803, 1.88%	131 169, 3.70%	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	456 453
2014	148 262, 4.52%	Coalition Patriotic Front 239 101, 7.28%		n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	387 363
2017	Coalition United Patriots 318 513, 9.31%			145 637, 4.26%	37 896, 1.11%	n.a.	502 046
4.2021	15 659, 0.49%	116 434, 3.64%	Patriotic coalition Volya and NFSB 75 926, 2.37%		78 414, 2.45%	94 515 2.95% (BNO)	380 948
7.2021	12 585, 0.46%	Coalition Bulgarian patriots 85 795, 3.14%			82 147, 3.01%	49 833, 1.82%	230 360
11.2021	12 153, 0.46%	28 322, 1.08%	coalition Patriotic Front 8 584, 0.33%	7 067, 0.27%	127 568, 4.86%	n.a.	183 694

Source: Central Electoral Commission

In the three 2021 parliamentary elections the support for all populist and challenger parties that received more than 1 percent of all valid votes, grew from 33.79% in April 2021 to 44.93% in November 2021. Their share of parliamentary seats also increased from 65 in April to 105 in November 2021. The trends are uneven between the parties. In July 2021, the party "There is

such a People” became the first political force and the first party able to get ahead of the GERB party since the 2009 elections. In November 2021 the newly appeared political challenger – “We continue the change!” became the first political force while the coalition Stand Up! We Come! lost its parliamentary representation. The party “There is such a people !” received its lowest results in 2021 with less than 400 000 votes in comparison with the previous elections.

Following the elections on November 14, 2021, a fragile governmental coalition was formed by four parties and coalitions: We Continue the Change!, the Bulgarian socialist party, There is such a people! and Democratic Bulgaria. Kiril Petkov was elected as Prime minister.

The main characteristic of this coalition was its heterogeneity and an impossible union of oppositions. During its brief existence, the coalition went through internal differences and divides. The party There is such a People! was opposed on issues related to the Covid-19 pandemic and sanitary measures. The Russian aggression in Ukraine revealed divisions on geopolitical questions. On the one hand, Democratic Bulgaria and We continue the Change! are pro-European, pro-NATO and clearly opposed to the Russian aggression in Ukraine. They called for strict sanctions on Russia, for helping Ukraine with military aid and for the end of the gas dependence on Gazprom and Russia. The government of Kiril Petkov refused to pay in roubles to Gazprom and at the end of April 2022 Gazprom cut the supplies to Bulgaria and Poland. On the other hand, the Bulgarian socialist party has opposed the sanctions on Russia, the supply of military equipment to Ukraine, and the end of contract and ties with Gazprom. The BSP repeatedly affirmed that Russia has been a friendly state and the party has been opposed to the expulsion of 70 Russian diplomats and personnel from the Russian embassy in Bulgaria in June 2022.<sup>12</sup> The Bulgarian socialist party and There is such a People! rejected the possibility that the Republic North Macedonia start negotiations of accession in the EU. In June 2021, the coalition partner “There is such a People!” decided to leave the coalition formally because of the conditions to unblock the start of negotiations between the Republic

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<sup>12</sup> Christian Oliver, “Bulgaria Expels 70 Russian Diplomats and Spies,” Politico, June 28, 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/kiril-petkov-bulgaria-expels-70-russian-diplomats-and-spies/>.

North Macedonia and the EU. The opposition party GERB initiated a no-confidence vote and on June 22, 2022 the coalition government collapsed with 123 votes for the end of the government and 116 votes in favour of the government.<sup>13</sup>

## Populism

For decades, numerous analyses, books and studies have been focusing on the populism. At the same time, populist parties became more and more influent, institutionalized and entered parliaments and governments in Western and in East-Central European countries. Ilvo Diamanti and Marc Lazar defined the transformations of democracies as “popolocrazia.”<sup>14</sup> We will mention here only few studies and authors. The “minimal definition” of populism is “a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, the ‘pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.”<sup>15</sup> Populism is founded on three core concepts: the pure people; the corrupt elite and the general will. All manifestations of populism are based on the moral distinction between “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite.” “In summary, we define populism as thin centred ideology with three core concepts and suggest that in the real world the populism hardly ever exists by itself. It has a ‘chameleonic’ character: populism can be left-wing or right-wing, organized in top-down, or bottom-up fashion, rely in very strong leader or even leaderless.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Deutsche Welle, “Bulgarian Government Collapses after a No-confidence Vote,” June 22, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/bulgaria-government-collapses-after-no-confidence-vote/a-62224345>.

<sup>14</sup> Ilvo Diamanti and Marc Lazar, *Peuplecratie. La métamorphose de nos démocraties* (Peoplecracy. The Metamorphoses of Our Democracy) (Paris: Gallimard, 2018).

<sup>15</sup> Cas Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist,” *Government and Opposition: An International Journal of Comparative Politics* 39 no. 4 (2004): 543, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x>.

<sup>16</sup> Cas Mudde and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser, “Exclusionary vs. Inclusionary Populism: Comparing Contemporary Europe and Latin America,” in *Government and Opposition* 48, no 2 (2013): 153.

## Populist radical right

The maximum definition of populist radical right parties encompasses a combination of three core ideological features: “nativism, authoritarianism, and populism.”<sup>17</sup> The populist radical right believes that society should be structured according to strict rules and that the rule of law should be upheld at all costs.<sup>18</sup> The key issue of the authoritarian program of the populist radical right is the fight against crime through “an uncompromising (kompromissloses) approach against criminals,” calls for a “zero tolerance” policy on crime. “The populist radical right further calls for a significant strengthening of the independence of the judiciary and police force. They want both institutions be free from (party) political influence. Regarding the judiciary, many parties claim that the judges are politically appointed and thus serve their partisan political masters, while the police are seen as being hindered in their work by political correctness and lack of political backup because of the cowardice of the established parties.”<sup>19</sup> Populist radical right parties appeal to return the word to the people and to use plebiscitary instruments.

## Centrist and technocratic populists

In his study “Throwing Out the Bums: Protest Voting and Unorthodox Parties after Communism,” Grigore Pop-Eleches has focused on protest voting – “the practice for voting for a party not because of the actual content of its electoral message but in order to ‘punish’ other parties.”<sup>20</sup> He proposed three types of unorthodox parties: radical left, extreme nationalists, and new/centrist populists. The new/centrist-populist parties “do not adopt radical ideologies but rather attempt to sidestep ideology altogether by claiming to be nonideological antipolitical formations” and the

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<sup>17</sup> Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 22.

<sup>18</sup> Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties*, 145.

<sup>19</sup> Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties*, 146.

<sup>20</sup> Grigore Pop-Eleches, “Throwing Out the Bums: Protest Voting and Unorthodox Parties after Communism,” *World Politics* 62, no. 2 (2010): 223.

most prominent case is the Bulgarian National Movement Simeon II (NDSV)."<sup>21</sup> Their leaders create the parties "as vehicles for their personal political ambitions usually just prior the elections. Such parties are almost completely unencumbered by ideological constraints and are therefore free to tell the voters what they want to hear." These new/centrist-populist parties avoid anti-Western and anti-capitalist stances and they promise to fight corruption.

In their analysis of Andrej Babis and his party ANO 2011 (Action of Dissatisfied Citizens 2011), Vlastimil Havlik, Lenka Bustikova and Petra Guasti have developed the concept of "technocratic populism" and the populist politics of "ordinary people." "Technocratic populism uses the appeal of technical expertise to connect directly with the people, promising to run the state as a firm, while at the same time delegitimizing political opponents and demobilizing the electorate by instilling civic apathy."<sup>22</sup>

Havlik emphasizes the features of technocratic variant of the centrist populism: anti-political technocratic discourse; emphasis on anti-corruption and anti-elite rhetoric; ideologically unfocused - they avoid traditional labels "left" or "right" and present themselves as standing above what they consider to be outdated ideological conflicts; not so radical as populist radical right parties; the leaders proclaims themselves to be outsiders without political experience but often they are successful businessmen, etc. "An important part of ANO's populist anti-political narrative was de-ideologisation, or even depoliticization, and its resistance to being presented in terms of traditional party families or a left-wing ideological orientation. Although the party initially leaned to the right...it soon decided to sidestep a clear ideological profile and sought to target all groups of voters with non-ideological appeal."<sup>23</sup>

Milada Anna Vachudova develops the concept of ethnopopulism, which is "different from ethnic nationalism in that it is far more flexible and

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<sup>21</sup> Pop-Eleches, "Throwing Out the Bums," 231.

<sup>22</sup> Vlastimil Havlik, "Technocratic Populism and Political Illiberalism in Central Europe," *Problems of Post-Communism* 66 no. 6 (2019): 369-84, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2019.1580590>; Lenka Bustikova and Petra Guasti, "The State as a Firm: Understanding the Autocratic Roots of Technocratic Populism," *East-European Politics and Societies and Cultures* 33, no. 2 (2019): 302.

<sup>23</sup> Havlik, "Technocratic Populism," 369.

can cast a wider net. For ethnopopulists, 'the people' need not be defined only as a nation; they can also be defined very flexibly in terms of a culture, ethnicity, religion or even civilization."<sup>24</sup> The "enemies" are also flexible and can be adapted to different contexts and crises - the refugee crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic. Ethnopolitism can mix with a technocratic frame.

For Catherine De Vries and Sara B. Hobolt, most populist parties can also be classified within a broader category of "challenger parties" – "those parties that have not (yet) had the opportunity to control policy or government" and have every incentive to challenge the dominance of existing players through political innovation."<sup>25</sup> Challenger parties are most likely to succeed throughout a twofold innovation strategy based on "issue entrepreneurship" and on anti-establishment rhetoric to weaken the competence advantage of established parties."<sup>26</sup> Anti-establishment groups seek to devalue the dominant party's "brand" as a whole, to condemn the ruling classes as an elite pursuing only their own self-interest. They point out that if all populists are anti-establishment, not all parties that employ anti-establishment rhetoric are populist. The effects of successful challenger parties on national politics could be positive or disruptive. They can change the composition of parliaments; provide greater choice to voters and may increase feeling of representation. On the other hand, the success of challenger parties can increase the fragmentation and the polarization of the party system and make difficult the formation of governments which are less stable and effective.

In the next part we will focus on two parties: There is Such a People! and We continue the Change! which won the elections in July and in November 2021.

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<sup>24</sup> Milada A. Vachudova, "Ethnopolitism and Democratic Backsliding in Central Europe," *East European Politics* 36 no. 3 (2020): 320-21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2020.1787163>.

<sup>25</sup> Catherine E. De Vries and Sara B. Hobolt, "Challenger Parties and Populism," in *Populism. Origins and Alternative Policy Responses*, eds. Andrés Velasco and Irene Bucelli (London: London School of Economics Press), 54-55.

<sup>26</sup> De Vries and Hobolt, "Challenger Parties," 63-65.

## There is Such a People! – between antisystem and technocratic populism

The party *Ima takuv narod* / There is such a People (ITN) is a personal and personalized political project of showman Stanislav Trifonov, popular among generations of Bulgarians because he started his TV career at the beginning of the post-communist transition. Slavi Trifonov is a professional in the show business. In 2016 Slavi Trifonov and its team initiated a national referendum aimed to change radically the political system.<sup>27</sup> The Constitutional court declared as unconstitutional some questions proposed by Slavi Trifonov: the reduction in the number of representatives in the National Assembly from 240 to 120; the direct election of chiefs of police under a majoritarian rule in two rounds with an absolute majority. Bulgarian voters supported all three proposed changes at the referendum with majority, but because of the insufficient turnout, the its results were not validated.

**Table 6.** Results of the National referendum on November 6, 2016

Questions	"YES" votes	"NO" votes	Without a clear answer	Invalid votes
Question 1: "Do you support the national representatives to be elected by majoritarian electoral system with an absolute majority in two rounds?"	2,509,864; 71, 95%	560,024; 16.05%	330,928; 9.49%	87,668; 2.51%
Question 2: "Do you support the introduction of compulsory voting in elections and referendums?"	2,158,929; 61.89%	905,691; 25.96%	336,180; 9.64%	87,668; 2.51%
Question 3: "Do you support the annual subsidy for financing the political parties and coalitions to be 1 BGN for every valid vote in the last parliamentary elections?"	2,516,791; 72.16%	523 759; 15.02%	359,778; 10.31%	87,668; 2.51%

Source: Central Electoral Commission <https://results.cik.bg/pvrnr2016/tur1/referendum/>

In 2019 Slavi Trifonov announced the launch of its own TV channel 7/8 TV and his intention to enter politics and to form a political party. The

<sup>27</sup> Stoycho Stoychev, "The 2016 Referendum in Bulgaria," *East European Quarterly* 45, no. 3-4 (September-December 2017): 187-94.

first attempt to register a party called “There is no such State” failed. The second attempt to register a party called “There is Such a People!” succeeded on June 22, 2020. From the beginning, the party acts as an anti-system party, its aim is to change the system. Nevertheless, in applying the typology proposed by Zulianello, There is such a People! fits the category of “half house” parties, that are integrated in the system but question some of its core characteristics.<sup>28</sup> The behaviour of the chairman and its team is anti-elitist and anti-establishment. The attitudes towards institutions like Constitutional court, media, parties, parliament aims at their delegitimation. Trifonov rejects media and journalists; he makes declarations and addresses exclusively on his own TV channel 7/8 TV directly to citizens and audience. The party started as a TV party. ITN refused to form a coalition with other parties after the elections in July 2021. There is Such a People! caused the end of the four-party coalition in June 2022 and the dissolution of 47<sup>th</sup> National Assembly.

There are similarities between There is such a People! and the Italian populist party Five Star movement, and also between There is Such a People! and the populist right party Kukis’15 founded by the former rock star Pawel Kuskis. The focus in the populist rhetoric of Slavi Trifonov is put on “the sovereign people” and the moral element in politics and in general.

“There Is Such A People! is a party of free Bulgarian citizens who believe in democracy and civil society,” announces the website of the party. “Bulgaria is a free country, but The Bulgarian citizens aren’t free,” “the political class in a rude and demonstrative way ignores people’s wishes and is caring only for its own benefit and de facto takes power away from its own people.”<sup>29</sup> The party appeals for an “Unmediated power to the sovereign people:” “Article 1 of the Constitution provides that ‘the entire power of the state stems from the people.’ It means that according to the Constitution the Bulgarian people is at the top of the power. We want to transform Bulgaria

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<sup>28</sup> Mattia Zulianello, “Anti-System Parties Revisited: Concept Formation and Guidelines for Empirical Research,” *Government and Opposition* 53, no. 4 (2018): 668, <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2017.12>.

<sup>29</sup> Politicheska partia Ima takuv Narod (The Political Party Ima takuv Narod), n.d., <https://pp-itn.bg/>, last access September 2022.

into a genuine free country where the society takes the decisions, and the politicians execute them.”<sup>30</sup> The party’s goals are: “enhanced citizens’ participation in the decision making throughout direct popular consultations; change of the electoral system from proportional to two rounds majoritarian with absolute majority required; decreasing the number of MPs in the National Assembly from 240 to 120; e-voting at elections and referendums; introduction of mandatory voting; direct citizens’ election of the chiefs of regional directions and of the directions of district of the ministry of internal affairs, the general prosecutor of the Republic, the Ombudsman of the Republic; reform of the public health system and ensuring equal access for all citizens to quality and adequate health care; implementation of reform of the administrative system.”<sup>31</sup> There is such a People! is for the enhancing the role of Republic of Bulgaria in EU, the country’s integration in the Schengen agreement and the Bank Union of the EU for the integration in the Eurozone.

An important feature of the party is the authoritarian personalized style of leadership of Slavi Trifonov. In August 2022, the party proposed a new national referendum for the transformation of the parliamentary into a presidential regime. Ahead of the early elections on October 2, 2022, There is such a People! run with the populist and antisystem slogan “Alone against All. Together with You.” In relation with the different types of populism discussed earlier, ITN has some characteristics of the technocratic populism and of the ethnopopulism. Further institutionalization may lead to more conservative and nationalist identity or even to the populist radical right.

### **The President of the Republic and the new populist cycle**

Several events have led to the protest cycle in 2020, but two have had an important impact on the citizens’ mobilization. The first was the attempt

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<sup>30</sup> Politicheska partia Ima takuv Narod (The Political Party Ima takuv Narod), n.d., <https://pp-itn.bg/>, last access September 2022.

<sup>31</sup> “Statutes of Political Party There Is Such a People,” n.d., <https://pp-itn.bg/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/%D0%A3%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B0%D0%B2-%D0%98%D0%A2%D0%9D.pdf>, last access September 2022.

on July 7, 2020 of the chair of the then extra-parliamentary opposition party “DA, Bulgaria!” (part of the coalition Democratic Bulgaria) Hristo Ivanov and his colleague Ivaylo Mirchev to reach by boat the public beach near the property of the honorary chairman of the party “Movement for Rights and Freedoms” (DPS), Ahmed Dogan. The bodyguards, who turned out to be from the National Service of Protection, pushed them back.<sup>32</sup> The purpose of their beach-embarkation at Rosenets park was “to show that Bulgarian people are not allowed to use a piece of land, which is a public state property and belongs to them and that Dogan enjoys some kind of privileges which includes violations of the law.”<sup>33</sup> Hristo Ivanov served as a Minister of Justice in the second GERB government but he resigned in 2015 because of the lack of will to reform the judiciary and to limit the uncontrolled powers of the prosecutor general, a position which is considered to be politicised and used to protect the corruption among politicians and their networks. In 2017 Hristo Ivanov founded the party DA, Bulgaria!, which joined in 2018 the coalition Democratic Bulgaria along with two other parties – Democrats for a strong Bulgaria and the Green movement. Hristo Ivanov’s action on the boat of was livestreamed on Facebook and became viral.

The second event that fuelled the mass protests was the action of the Prosecutor general Ivan Gechev’s office on July 9, 2020 during which police officers entered the building of the Presidency of the Republic and arrested the president’s advisers. This action was perceived by the civil society and opposition parties as a violation of the separation of powers and democracy and gave the signal for the long-lasting mass protests in Sofia and several other cities. President Roumen Radev, elected in 2016 as a candidate of the Bulgarian Socialist Party, has been the most popular politician for years. The prosecutor’s action has mobilised even the democratic right parties in defence of the head of State in the name of protecting democracy. The citizens and parties that joined the protests were heterogenous: the civil

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<sup>32</sup> Novinite.com, “Democratic Bulgaria, Hristo Ivanov: There Must Be Early Elections, People Are Ready For Them,” July 13, 2020, <https://www.novinite.com/articles/205262/Democratic+Bulgaria%2C+Hristo+Ivanov%3A+There+Must+Be+Early+Elections%2C+People+Are+Ready+For+Them>.

<sup>33</sup> Novinite.com, “Democratic Bulgaria.”

society organizations, left-wing and right-wing parties, the extreme right party Vazrazhdane (Revival) but united against what they saw as an attempt to impose an authoritarian rule on behalf of GERB. In this context president Roumen Radev joined the protesters on July 9, 2020 and with his fist raised in the air declared: "I see people from all political horizons, it is no coincidence, I see young and old people and it is no coincidence (...)The Bulgarian mafia has achieved the impossible: it has united the honest people against itself (...) It is up to us, up to all of us, to throw the mafia out of the executive power, to throw the mafia out of the prosecution. The mafia uses the prosecution as its own shield and for political repressions, the Bulgarian mafia is abrupt because we have tolerated it for too long ...but today the anger pours on the square, the anger from the lies from the robbery ...it is our fight for a modern and European Bulgaria (...) I would like to remind the words of the judge Giovanni Falcone which used to be my foe '*Cowards die every day, the brave – only once!*' ...No to the fear! We will get Bulgaria back! Moutri out! (Mafia out)." <sup>34</sup>

This populist statement is important for the understanding of the cleavage that divided the "protest parties" of "the honest," "ordinary people" versus all established parties, represented in parliament. This stance allowed the rise of new challenger populist parties during the elections in 2021: the coalition called "Stand Up! Mafia get Out" and We continue the Change!, and the "Bulgarian Rise." The president of the Republic has legitimized the populist divide of "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite" and has emotionally defined en bloc as "mafia" all members, deputies and militants of some established parties. In this way, President Radev justified an exclusionary approach by suggesting who is the good and the pure people who has the right to be in parliament and to govern and who is not and fostered the radicalisation and moralisation in politics. As Nadia Urbinati notes, "the central claim of all populist movements is to get rid of the establishment, or whatever is posited as lying between 'us' (the people outside) and the state" and that "the attack against the political establishment

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<sup>34</sup> Bulgarian Free Television, "The Declaration of President Roumen Radev on July 9<sup>th</sup> 2020 at the Protest for Democracy," July 9, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RwyVTR9f9nU>.

is the 'spirit' of populism in power'.<sup>35</sup> Cas Mudde emphasizes that the populism is based on monism and moralism.<sup>36</sup> As a monist ideology it sees the people "as one" and one group is legitimate, "because the elite are corrupt and therefore do not deserve the rights and protections of a legitimate opposition."<sup>37</sup> The moralism is "central" for populism that distinguishes the morally pure from morally corrupt. Urbinati points out that "antiestablishmentarianism does not belong to populism but is a category that populism takes from democracy. The thing that makes populist antiestablishmentarianism distinctive (...) is the way in which it is constructed according to the binary assumption that breaks politics and its actors into two different groups, defined according to the position they occupy in relation to the state power (...) from the assumption of the existence of predefined polarized groupings and enmity."<sup>38</sup>

President Radev provided an opportunity structure for the appearance of new challenger parties, by appointing caretaker governments. Two new challenger/ populist parties appeared from the caretaker governments in 2021: the party "We continue the change!" and the party of the former prime minister of the caretaker government Stefan Yanev, "Bulgarian Rise". President Radev ensured the promotion of Kiril Petkov and Asen Vasilev by appointing them as ministers of the economy and of the finances in the first caretaker government he created in May 2021. Petkov and Vassilev, both businessmen and graduates from the University of Harvard, undertook decisive and mediatic actions of monitoring, reforming, and fighting the corruption. They became very popular due to the media and especially to the social media. In September 2021, after the dissolution of the 46<sup>th</sup> National Assembly, Petkov and Vassilev revealed they intention to launch a new political platform. On September 19, 2021 they announced the project "We continue the Change" and the creation of "a coalition of the

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<sup>35</sup> Nadia Urbinati, *Me the People. How Populists Transform Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019), 40-75.

<sup>36</sup> Cas Mudde, "Populism in Europe: An Illiberal Democratic Response to Undemocratic Liberalism (The Government and Opposition/Leonard Schapiro Lecture 2019)," *Government and Opposition* 56 no. 4 (2021): 579, <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2021.15>.

<sup>37</sup> Mudde, "Populism in Europe," 579.

<sup>38</sup> Urbinati, *Me the People*, 74.

honourable” citizens. They claimed that their candidates “have high levels of integrity, have a carrier and successful life outside the politics, it is very important for us because being independent means to have an alternative.”<sup>39</sup> Also, they affirmed that with the right instruments their goals can be achieved: “it means that we are not going to raise taxes, but we are going to attract investments, to free the business from corruption, to ensure more revenues for retirees, better public health, better education, in other words we cannot tell that we are on the right “with right methods to achieve left goals.”<sup>40</sup> They tried to attract several small parties. To run in the elections, they registered the coalition “We continue the Change!” with two other small parties: the European middle class and Volt. “We continue the Change” won the elections on November 14, 2021 without a clear political program, without having built a political party. This is not a precedent, 20 years earlier the NDSV won the elections in 2001 without a registered party. In April 2022 “We continue the Change” created a political party.

The project “We continue the Change” defines itself as a project of the government of Bulgaria that will achieve “a high economic growth through zero corruption and expertise at all levels.” The party announces 17 principles and priorities: zero corruption; stop wasting public resources; empower independent, competent and decent people in the government; work for a quick, effective and fair administration and justice; don’t change taxes, but collect them, etc.<sup>41</sup> As a Prime minister Kiril Petkov affirmed: “Yes, I truly believe we can (run out corruption)... Our entire party came mostly from the private sector, from businesses. We are all just sick and tired of connecting Bulgaria and corruption as common brands. Our true dream is in four years when we say corruption, Bulgaria to be a positive brand, due to strong leadership in the anti-corruption campaign Bulgaria has been able

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<sup>39</sup> Mediapol, “Вече официално: Кирил Петков и Асен Василев поемат с лелящ старт към изборите (видео)” (It’s Now Official: Kiril Petkov and Asen Vassilev Are off to a Flying Start to the Elections (video)), September 16, 2021, <https://www.mediapool.bg/veche-ofitsialno-kiril-petkov-i-asen-vasilev-poemat-s-letyasht-start-kam-izborite-video-news-326382.html>

<sup>40</sup> Mediapol, “Вече официално.”

<sup>41</sup> Produljavame promianata (We Continue the Change), “Prioriteti” (Priorities), n.d., <https://promeni.bg/prioriteti/>, last access September 2022.

to eradicate the levels of corruption. So, I really hope to have a Harvard case in about four years, where we can say leadership can kill corruption in very fast way.”<sup>42</sup>

Based on some elements of its rhetoric, the party We Continue the Change! could be defined as a centrist populist challenger and/ or technocratic populist party. The statement of Kiril Petkov on 28, 2022 on the Ukrainian refugees who were more acceptable than the Syrian refugees provoked indignation and accusations of racism. Petkov said: “These are not the refugees we are used to; these people are Europeans...These people are intelligent. They are educated people.... This is not the refugee wave we have been used to, people we were not sure about their identity, people with unclear pasts, who could have been even terrorists.”<sup>43</sup> On the front of fighting corruption, Petkov and We Continue the Change! counted on the strongman Boyko Rashkov, who served as minister of the Interior. On March 17, 2022 former PM Boyko Borisov was arrested, but then released without charges.<sup>44</sup> These points evoke the concept of ethnopopulism, defined by Vachudova.

We Continue the Change! appeared as a challenger party based on centrist populism and some technopopulism. Since the electoral campaign for the early elections on October 2, 2022, We continue the Change! has tried to develop a more centre-left identity. The leadership refused the proposal of the centre-right coalition Democratic Bulgaria to form an electoral alliance with the argument that the later has been too right-wing.<sup>45</sup> We continue the Change! in power achieved the greatest separation from Russia since 1990 and has affirmed the European identity of Bulgaria and its place in NATO.

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<sup>42</sup> BBC HARDtalk, “Kiril Peskov, Prime Minister of Bulgaria,” February 11, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aNDxlo1Gy0U>.

<sup>43</sup> Associated Press, “Europe’s Different Approach to Ukrainian and Syrian Refugees,” February 28, 2022, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/europe-racism-ukraine-refugees-1.6367932>.

<sup>44</sup> Christian Oliver, “Arrest of Bulgaria’s Borissov Marks Start of Major EU Rule-of-law Showdown,” Politico, March 23, 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/arrest-bulgaria-boyko-borissov-start-major-eu-rule-of-law-showdown/>.

<sup>45</sup> Valentin Evstatiev, “Asen Vassilev: Continue the Change Is Centrist, Not Rightist,” Bulgarian News Agency, August 14, 2022, <https://www.bta.bg/en/news/bulgaria/311768-asen-vassilev-continue-the-change-is-centrist-not-rightist>.

However, the results of the early elections held on October 2, 2022 and the third early elections in a row since July 2021, are rather inconclusive for the institutionalisation of the two challenger parties There is Such a People! and We continue the change!. The electoral trajectory of ups and downs of There is Such a People! reflects the weight of the protest voting, of the electoral volatility and the destabilisation of the Bulgarian party system. In a year and a half, this populist party ran in the elections for the first time in April 2021 and placed second behind the incumbent party GERB; then won the July 2021 elections and became the first political force to achieve a victory over GERB but lost electoral support in the November 2021 elections when it became the fifth parliamentary force and finally disappeared from the parliament in October 2022, failing to reach the 4% threshold.

Its successes in 2021 caused the disappearance from parliament of the traditional populist radical right parties, which was considered to be a shift from the national populism to a more citizens populism. However, the debacle of There is Such a People! in October 2022 goes along with the spectacular growth of the far right, pro-Russian, anti-European, anti-American and anti-NATO party Vazrazhdane (Revival). Revival won more votes than the Bulgarian Socialist Party which follows the trajectory of continued marginalisation similar to the Polish, Hungarian or Czech socialist and social democratic parties.

A new political party, Bulgarian Ascent, created in 2022 by Stefan Yanev, succeed to enter the parliament in October 2022. This conservative leader's party is another example of top-down political engineering influenced by the Presidency. A former army general and former Prime minister of the caretaker governments appointed in May and September 2021 by president Radev, Stefan Yanev served also as a minister of Defence from December 2021 to March 2022 in the government of Kiril Petkov. Yanev was pushed to resign by Petkov because of his refusal to define the Russian aggression in Ukraine as a war. He and his party joined the presidential camp and the political forces such as the Bulgarian Socialist Party and Revival that oppose the provision of military aid to Ukraine.

**Table 7.** Results of the early parliamentary elections October 2, 2022

Party/ coalition	Valid Votes	% of valid votes	Seats
Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria (GERB)	634 627 (+ 38 171)	25.33%	67 (+8)
We Continue the Change!	506 099 (- 167 099)	20.20%	53 (-14)
Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS)	344 512 (+ 3 512)	13.75%	36 (+2)
Revival (Vazrazhdane)	254 952 (+127 384)	10.18%	27 (+14)
Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) for Bulgaria	232 958 (-34 958)	9.30%	25 (-1)
Democratic Bulgaria	186 528 (+19 560)	7.54%	20 (+4)
Bulgarian Ascent	115 872 (+ 115 872)	4.63%	12 (+12)
There is Such a People!	96 071 (-153 672)	3.83%	0 (-25)
“I don’t support any party”	87 635 (+51 890)		

Source: Central Electoral Commission, <https://results.cik.bg/ns2022/rezultati/>

In the eighteen months from April 2021 to October 2022, the Bulgarian political landscape provided an exceptional “laboratory” for testing the fortunes of parties but without resolving the political crisis. The citizens voted in four general elections where the supply side of protest, populist challenger parties from the radical right to the centre has been expanding. The multiplication of crises and the war in Ukraine along with traditionally high levels of disapproval of institutions have created the political opportunity structure for radicalisation and for the quick appearance and disappearance of parties.

Four main points should be summed up to conclude this brief overview of the new challenger parties which entered the political scene during the long electoral year 2021.

Firstly, the fragmentation and the polarisation of the party system is not a Bulgarian exceptionality. Early elections, and rise of populism are visible in several European countries too. The main hypothesis to be confirmed is that the elections in 2021 would lead to the replacement of the existing parties with new ones. At this stage, the fragmentation is confirmed, and the formation of national governments has become more and more difficult. Since parties act in an uncertain environment, they remain in electoral campaigning mode and refuse to make compromises in order to form a national government with the GERB party or DPS on the grounds of the European and NATO orientation of the country. The newly elected 48<sup>th</sup> National Assembly in October 2022 seems to be incapable of moderation, or

a constructive approach to coalition building even following the appeal of GERB to find common ground and build a government of pro-European and pro-NATO parties against the pro-Russian forces. The GERB attempt to impose the cleavage related to the foreign policy which opposes the pro-European to pro-Russian forces is not successful. The protest parties from the right, the centre, or the left refuse to cooperate with GERB. It seems that the rejection of the model of government developed by GERB since 2009 creates a deeper cleavage and an insurmountable division between GERB on the one hand and We Continue the Change, Democratic Bulgaria, Bulgarian Socialist Party, on the other. At the time of writing the probability of new elections looks real. Hence, the elections do not resolve crises and do not bring stability. Parties prove to be incapable to be moderate and to form a stable government and parliament.

Secondly, while the established populist radical right has been marginalised, new populist actors fulfilled their niche again with the promise to fight corruption and with anti-establishment rhetoric. These new challengers are close to centrist populist and technocratic populist types, well spread in Central and Eastern Europe. There is one great exception – the ascent of the populist radical right party Revival, which is anti-European, anti-NATO, pro-Russian and does not hesitate to undertake violent protest actions. Revival, which is like a renewed version of the party Ataka, has been on the path of continued growth of its electoral support. It entered the parliament for the first time in November 2021 elections and has doubled its votes and parliamentary seats in the October 2022 elections.

Third, the populist cycle is something Bulgarian voters know well from 2001 and the victory of the movement of the former king Simeon the Second and then in 2009 with the arrival of the GERB party. The Bulgarian citizens continue to vote for populist entrepreneurs mainly to express their protest vis-à-vis the established parties. In 2021-2022 elections, they proceeded by test and error choices by supporting new radical parties like There is such a People! which promised to “expunge” GERB from power, and then by giving the victory to We Continue the Change! whose leaders appeal for zero-corruption. These forces seemed to be the most prone to put an end to GERB’s hegemony. However, GERB again won the elections in

October 2022 which could be a sign that the voters are fed up with the radicalisation and look for stability and moderation. The fatigue from the repeated elections is reflected in the decreasing turnout: 42.19% of all registered voters voted July 2021; 40.23% voted in November 2021 and they were only 39.% to vote in October 2022. The continued radicalisation of political parties and their leaders do not match the expectations and the concerns of citizens.

Forth, the duration of the political crisis gave more powers to the President of the Republic. The Presidency has interfered in the parliamentary and parties' stances and work. His caretaker governments ruled the country for long periods in 2021 and in 2022. The caretaker government is not the result of democratic elections but depends on the personal decisions of the Head of State. The president defends more consensual attitudes with Russia and Gazprom and at the same time tacitly encourages parties which disagree with the EU sanctions on Russia and Gazprom. In the absence of parliament, a parliamentary majority and government, all important decisions lay in the hands of the caretaker government including those in the field of foreign policy. Two political forces have raised voices in favour of rule by the President: There is Such a People, which proposed a referendum for the introduction of a Presidential regime, and the far-right party Revival.

The lack of capacity of parties and leaders to reform or to moderate risks to transform the current political crisis is a crisis of the parliamentary democracy in Bulgaria.

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