



Bulgaria — Va-PoReg Country Report

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07/13/1878 Start Autocratic Monarchy [semi-sovereign, external affairs under Ottoman Empire, Autocratic Monarchy]: On this date, the Treaty of Berlin was signed and set up the autonomous state, the Principality of Bulgaria.¹ Thereby, Bulgaria, as we know it today, became de facto independent from the Ottoman Empire. However, the Ottoman Empire still controlled the foreign policy of Bulgaria. On 04/16/1879 the Tarnovo Constitution, the first Bulgarian constitution, was adopted. Under this constitution, Bulgaria was established as a hereditary monarchy with a unicameral parliamentary system where members were elected by the people.² The first prime minister was Todor Stoyanov Burmov, chosen on 07/17/1879.³ On 09/30/1879 and 10/07/1879 elections for the unicameral parliament (National Assembly) were held.⁴ In 1881, Prince Alexander I. influenced the Grand National Assembly to suspend the constitution, granting himself unlimited power for seven years. In 1888 the constitution was restored. According to our observations, only multiparty legislative elections were present during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. V-Dem's EF&FI indicates that elections held during this time were ambiguous regarding freedom and fairness and were according to their CEI not clean. LIED categorizes the elections accordingly as not competitive. Based on Polity5's assessment, during this period, the executive operated with unlimited authority, facing no institutional checks on power. For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE and LCE are both interpreted by us as indicating moderate constraints on the executive.

10/05/1908 Continuation Autocratic Monarchy [as independent country]: Bulgaria became independent from the Ottoman Empire de jure and a kingdom on this date.⁵ The Russian Revolution of 1917 also had a great effect in Bulgaria, spreading anti-monarchist sentiments. Hence, Tsar Ferdinand agreed to abdicate in favor of his son Boris III, who assumed the throne on 10/3/1918. In the elections on 03/28/1920, the Bulgarian Agrarian National Union (BANU) obtained most votes and Stamboliyski established the inaugural truly democratic government in Bulgaria.⁶ In a coup d'état Aleksandar Tsankov became prime minister on 06/09/1923.⁷ Boris III was the monarch at this time, but the prime minister was in charge. Furthermore, elections were held in November 1923 which legitimated Tsankov's government.⁸ V-Dem's EF&FI scores the Bulgarian elections during this time as somewhat free and fair. However, their CEI indicates that they were still not really clean and LIED continues to categorize the elections as not competitive. According to V-Dem's PCLI political liberties were somewhat present from 1900 to 1912 and ambiguous from 1913 to 1933. Since 1900 LIED coded political liberties as absent. According to our observations, only multiparty legislative elections were present during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. Until 1917, based on Polity5's assessment, during this period, the executive operated with unlimited authority, facing no institutional checks on power. Since 1918, as per Polity5's classification, the executive's authority was subject to minor institutional constraints. From 1909 to 1930, V-Dem's JCE is classified by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were moderate, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were also moderate. From 1931 to 1933, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were moderate, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were robust. For the year 1934, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were moderate, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were limited.

05/19/1934 End Autocratic Monarchy/Start Military Autocracy: In a coup d'état the Zveno and the Military Union with the help of the Bulgarian Army overthrew the Tsankov government.⁹ In 1930, Zveno was established as a Bulgarian political organization by politicians, intellectuals, and officers from the Bulgarian Army.¹⁰ Zveno was a palingenetic nationalist movement. It primarily consisted of radical civilians who had grown disenchanted with a government hindered by military control. The new regime dissolved all parties and political organizations like trade unions.¹¹ All their property got confiscated and severe sentences were provided for attempting to renew a party in any form or to establish a new party. Tsar Boris was reduced to the status of a puppet tsar as a result of the coup.¹² The new government introduced a corporatist economy, similar to that of Benito Mussolini's Italy.¹³ Zveno supported an Integral Yugoslavia that included Bulgaria as well as Albania within it.¹⁴ According to our observations, multiparty legislative and executive elections were absent during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. LIED identifies political liberties as absent, while V-Dem's PCLI is classified by us as indicating that political liberties are not really present. For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were moderate, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were absent.

01/22/1935 End Military Autocracy/Start Autocratic Monarchy: On this date, exploiting rumors of the group's alleged intention to establish a republic, King Boris III, whose influence had dwindled, garnered support among military officers, initially backers of the Zveno government. Consequently, he ousted Georgiev and his administration.¹⁵ After the coup the political process was overseen by the Tsar, yet a version of parliamentary rule was reintroduced, albeit without the reinstatement of political parties.¹⁶ According to our observations, only multiparty legislative elections were present during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. V-Dem's EF&FI indicates that elections were ambiguous regarding freedom and fairness and V-Dem's reflects that they were not clean. LIED still ranks them as not competitive. V-Dem's PCLI scores political liberties as not really present from 1934 to 1944 and LIED codes them as absent. Until 1942, as per Polity5's classification, the executive wielded unrestricted authority without any formal limitations. Therefore, we classify this period as an autocratic monarchy. For 1936 and 1937, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive are moderate, while V-Dem's LCE is missing, which usually indicates that no parliament exists, and thus no legislative constraints on the executive are possible. For the rest of the regime period, V-Dem's JCE and LCE are both interpreted by us as indicating moderate constraints on the executive. While there is no V-Dem's LCE there was de facto a parliament in the whole regime period. Parliamentary elections were held in Bulgaria on 12/24/1939, with voting extending into January 1940 in some areas. Officially, the elections were conducted on a non-partisan basis, as the Bulgarian Agrarian National Union and the Bulgarian Communist Party were banned. However, the process was closely controlled by Tsar Boris III, who by then wielded ultimate authority in the country. Despite the non-partisan framework, candidates affiliated with political parties did participate, with pro-government candidates ultimately securing the majority of seats.¹⁷

09/09/1944 End Autocratic Monarchy/Start Communist Ideocracy: The Fatherland Front made up of Social Democrats, the Agrarian Union, Zveno (a nationalist group of officers), and the Communists seized the government immediately after the Soviet invasion. The communists did not dominate the coalition numerically but were better organized and more disciplined. They secured the Interior and Justice Ministries in the new government, which enabled them to repress opponents. Thousands were executed and sent to concentration camps during the first year. The Interior Ministry also gave the communists control of local government and the 1945 elections. While the initial prime minister belonged to the Social Democrat party, the communists proved more adept at influencing events, leading to an unequivocal communist dominance in the regime by the conclusion of 1945 (Van Dyke 1947:358-360, 364-369, Curtis 1992, Brunnbauer 2008:52, Geddes/Wright/Frantz 2014: 48-49). In 1945, universal suffrage including women and men serving in the army was instituted by the government of the Fatherland front.¹⁸ Long-time dictator Todor Zhikov, was deposed in a coup d'état by reform communists in November 1989. National Roundtable Talks held from

January through March 1990 initiated a number of political reforms, including agreements on a new constitution and electoral rules (Curtis 1992, Geddes/Wright/Frantz 2014: 48-49). According to our observations, only non-multiparty legislative and executive elections were present during this period, which aligns the observations of LIED. Per FH, for this regime period, the country scores between 11 and 14 as not free, which we also interpret as not free Political liberties were absent for this period (V-Dem PCLI, LIED). Until 1988, based on Polity5's assessment, the executive faced slight limitations on power during this period. In 1989, based on Polity5's assessment, the executive's power was noticeably limited but not substantial, fitting Intermediate Category 2. For the year 1945, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were absent, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were moderate. For the following two years, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were absent, and V-Dem's LCE is similarly interpreted as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were also absent. From 1948 to 1989, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were limited, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were absent. For 1990, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were robust, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were comprehensive.

06/10/1990 End Communist Ideocracy/Start Electoral Democracy: On this date elections for the constitutional assembly were held. The reformed communist party, known as the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), emerged victorious in the elections (Haggard/Kaufman/Teo 2016: 17, Marshall 2018e). On 08/01/1990, the parliament (National Assembly), still controlled by the BSP, chose Zhelev, leader of the opposition UDF, as president after the communist leader Mladenov resigned. Zhelev was a compromise candidate; a nonpartisan (interim) prime minister, Dimitar Popov, was chosen in November 1990 to replace the BSP prime minister. This marks the end of the communist regime before new elections were held in 1991. In these elections, Filip Dimitrov of the SDS was elected as the first fully democratic legitimated prime minister. In 1992, however, he was forced out of office by motion of no confidence.¹⁹ His government was succeeded by a number of caretaker governments and formally elected governments, all having to resign prematurely due to lacks in performance legitimacy. The first prime minister to serve a full term was Ivan Kostov of the SDS, from 1997 to 2001.²⁰ Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. LIED classifies the election as competitive. V-Dem's CEI scores the elections as somewhat clean. Their EF&FI scores them as free and fair. As classified by FH for 1990, the country is partly free with a score ranging from 6 to 7, which we place in the rather free category. For the years 1991 and 1992, the country receives a score of 5 as free, which we categorize as rather free. Per FH, for the period between 1993 and 1995, the country is classified as free, scoring between 2 and 4, which we also place in the free category. During 1996 and 2000 Bulgaria is rated as free with a score of 5, which we interpret as rather free in our framework. From 2001 onwards the country is considered free with a score ranging from 2 to 4, which we also interpret as free in our framework. LIED classifies political liberties as absent until 2000 and as present from 2001 onwards. Whereas V-Dem's PCLI classifies political liberties as present since 1990 except in 2018 the outcome was somewhat present. Based on Polity5's assessment, during this period, the executive was either equal to or subordinate to other institutions, demonstrating strong constraints on decision-making authority. On 10/13/1991 elections were won by the UDF, completing the transition (Curtis 1992, Geddes/Wright/Frantz 2014: 48-49). A similar story is being told by FH, who list Bulgaria as partly free in 1990 and as free since 1991. Bulgaria's democratic electoral system features multiple parties vying for power, resulting in several shifts between rival parties in recent decades. However, the nation grapples with persistent challenges, including political corruption and organized crime. The political discourse is tainted by hate speech, particularly targeting minority groups and foreigners, predominantly emanating from smaller right-wing parties. Although the media landscape remains diverse, there is a growing concern about ownership concentration, leading news outlets to align coverage with the interests of their proprietors. Journalists, at times, encounter threats or violence while performing their duties. Discrimination against ethnic minorities,

notably the Roma community, persists. Despite funding limitations and other hurdles, civil society groups have been active and exert influence in Bulgarian society.²¹ In 2007 Bulgaria became part of the European Union. The Economist Intelligence Unit rated Bulgaria a „flawed democracy” in 2020.²² Comparative regime data sets, namely BMR, CGV, LIED, MCM, PRC and RoW consistently classify the regime period from 1991 onwards as democratic. However, there are serious flaws of democracy and LIED as well as RoW classify the regime as the subtype of an electoral democracy. However, according to LIED competitive elections were held since 1991. V-Dem’s EF&FI and CEI continue to score the countries elections as free, fair and somewhat clean. According to Polity5, during this period, the executive was subordinate to or held equal power with other institutions, indicating executive parity or subordination. For 1991, V-Dem’s JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were robust, while V-Dem’s LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were comprehensive. For the rest of the regime period, V-Dem’s JCE and LCE are both interpreted by us as indicating comprehensive constraints on the executive. Between 07/09/2020 and 04/16/2021 mass anti-government protests took place because of allegations of corruption surrounding the prosecutorial office and several politicians, demanding for the resignation of Geshev and prime minister Borisov.²³ The protests ended on 04/16/2016, when the formal resignation of the 3rd Borisov government had been accepted by the new parliament.²⁴ From 05/12/2021 to 12/13/2021 two interim governments were established after no party was able to form a government after the elections in April and July 2021. They were headed by Radev as interim president. General elections for the National Assembly were held in Bulgaria on 11/14/2021, coinciding with the presidential elections. They were the country’s third parliamentary elections in 2021. A second round of the presidential elections were held on 11/21/2021 as no candidate was able to receive a majority of the votes in the first round.²⁵ The third round of polling election resulted in the consolidation of a coalition government under Prime Minister Kiril Petkov. Presidential candidate Radev, who had appointed two provisional governments during that year, won re-election in November with 65.8 % of the vote.²⁶ After further parliamentary elections in 2022 and 2023 in which coalition negotiations and the approval of a new government failed, the Bulgarian people prepare to go to what will be their 6th snap election since 2021²⁷, with turnout rates dropping (in 2022 to a record low at 39%).²⁸ On 10/27/2024 snap elections were held after three failed attempts of forming a government.²⁹ Bulgaria’s election process is generally described as professional and impartial, although some flaws have been reported in past elections and since the end of communist rule in 1990, there have been multiple peaceful transfers of power between rival parties through elections. However, one weakness concerns the independence of media, which is substantially dependent on funding and thus pressured to run government-friendly material.³⁰

Electoral Democracy as of 07/01/2025 continued.

Additional sources (Brunnbauer 2008, Crampton 2005, Curtis 1992, Dellin 1957, Elklit 1994, Fish/Brooks 2000, Poppetrov 2001, Riedel 2010, Todorov 2010, Van Dyke 1947)

Notes

¹ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Bulgaria_\(1878%E2%80%931946\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Bulgaria_(1878%E2%80%931946))

² <https://www.parliament.bg/en/15>

³ <https://www.britannica.com/place/Bulgaria/Treaties-of-San-Stefano-and-Berlin>

⁴ <https://www.novinite.com/articles/226516/History+of+Parliamentary+Elections+in+Bulgaria>

⁵ That was 09/22/1908 according to the old calendar.

⁶ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Bulgaria_\(1878%E2%80%931946\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Bulgaria_(1878%E2%80%931946))

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aleksandar_Tsankov

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aleksandar_Tsankov; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/November_1923_Bulgarian_parliamentary_election

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1934_Bulgarian_coup_d%27%C3%A9tat; <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Zveno-Group>

¹⁰ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Zveno-Group>

- ¹¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zveno>
- ¹² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boris_III_of_Bulgaria
- ¹³ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zveno>
- ¹⁴ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zveno>
- ¹⁵ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Zveno-Group>
- ¹⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boris_III_of_Bulgaria
- ¹⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1939_Bulgarian_parliamentary_election
- ¹⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universal_suffrage#cite_note-centralasiainstitute.org-37
- ¹⁹ <http://www.chisols.org/narratives.html> , see narratives for version 5.0, Bulgaria_V: 2.
- ²⁰ Ibid. Bulgaria_R: 2-3, Bulgaria_V: 2
- ²¹ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/bulgaria/freedom-world/2022>
- ²² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bulgaria#History>
- ²³ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/bulgaria/freedom-world/2022>
- ²⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2020%E2%80%932021_Bulgarian_protests
- ²⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2021_Bulgarian_general_election
- ²⁶ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/bulgaria/freedom-world/2022>
- ²⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2024_Bulgarian_parliamentary_election
- ²⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2022_Bulgarian_parliamentary_election
- ²⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/October_2024_Bulgarian_parliamentary_election
- ³⁰ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/bulgaria/freedom-world/2022>

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