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Citizens vs. Elites: Symbolic Battles Over the Uses of Political Crises in Bulgaria

Policy Recommendations

1. New parties with reformist ambitions, such as *We Continue the Change*, should seek European legitimisation by joining European political families.
2. Protest parties, which are stronger in opposition, should also learn to govern in order to be able to translate protesting citizens' expectations into policies.
3. Active citizens should regularly, and not only through protests and elections, control elites by diversifying the forms of accountability of elites' responses to the various crises.

Abstract

The Policy Brief analyses the symbolic battles between elites and citizens for framing and dominating political crises. Four crises are examined, compared, and mapped along the axes of democracy/post-democracy and civic activism/populist mobilisations. The financial and political crisis of 1997 is the only one that reformist elites and citizens together managed to turn into transform-

ative change. The migration crisis of 2015–2016 consolidated the mainstreaming of populism. The protests of 2020 expressed the maturity of civic activism against oligarchisation and state capture. The 2021–2023 political crisis created by the elites has been virtuously used by them for their own benefit to whitewash their image from purveyor of corruption to guarantor of stability.



Citizens vs. Elites: Symbolic Battles Over the Uses of Political Crises in Bulgaria

Introduction

Crisis after crisis, or how the exceptional becomes the most constant and the crisis – the new normality (Bauman & Bordon, 2004; Krasteva, 2019), is the starting point of the analysis. This Policy Brief addresses the question: How do elites and citizens address, use, or lose political crises? It is structured in three parts. The first part outlines the conceptual history of crisis from ‘the end of history’ to a mega-metaphor of contemporary society. The second part examines four crises in Bulgaria. The conclusion maps the crises along the axes of democracy/post-democracy and civic activism/populist mobilisations.

The choice of crises was indeed difficult – how to choose the most significant ones among the huge variety and number of crises? Three criteria determined the selection: being emblematic and marking key transitions and trends in the Bulgaria’s thirty-year post-communist period; being of different types; and showing different constellations of elites and citizens as winners or losers of the crises.

Four crises are at the centre of the present analysis:

- 1997: economic bankruptcy of the state by the post-communist communist elites;
- 2015–2016: migration “crisis” caused by geopolitical factors but successfully instrumentalised by the national populist elites;
- 2020: post-democratic crisis of state capture by oligarchic elites;
- 2021–2023: political crisis of an “avalanche” of snap elections and inability to form a regular government.

Crisis: from the “end of history” to the mega-metaphor of contemporary society

The 20th century ended with a radical non-crisis discourse: Francis Fukuyama’s (1992) “end of history” expresses the triumph of democracy and globalisation, their victory over aberrations like communism, the advancement of politics and society towards a shared horizon. The 21st century has replaced Fukuyama’s triumphant optimism with Zygmunt Bauman’s “state of crisis” (Bauman and Bordon, 2004) as a mega-metaphor for contemporary society and “a structural signature of modernity” (Reinhart Koselleck) (Schulz, 2017, p. 10).

From a deformation, the crisis becomes the new normality: “We must learn to live with the crisis, just as we are resigned to living with so much endemic adversity



imposed on us by the evolution of the times: pollution, noise, corruption, and, above all, fear" (Bauman & Bordoni, 2004, p. 7).

Post-communist bankruptcy of the state by post-communist communist elites: citizens and reformist elites for a transformative change

"Post-communist communist elites" is an oxymoron, but it is relevant to the paradoxes of [Bulgaria's] long and non-linear democratic transition. The post-communist elites were elected in pluralist elections. But just as the communist elites wrecked the economy and the state, so too have the post-communist communist elites, who came back to power, bankrupted the economy and the state.

The year is 1997. Inflation has reached a staggering hike of 300%, the average wage has plummeted to 5 USD a month, families that have saved for a decade for an apartment can only buy a fridge, and the link between past and future has been brutally severed, leaving a bleak and dismal present of total crisis. At the opposite pole, the so-called credit millionaires, who had gotten rich from the millions uncontrollably handed out by the banks, further benefit from the crisis, which has melted their debts away. Fifteen banks have gone bust. A "grain crisis" has broken out: more grain is exported and sold than the amount needed to produce bread in the country. Bulgaria has descended into economic collapse; the crisis is multifaceted: economic, financial, grain, and political. The opposition declares a national political strike, calls for civil disobedience, and organises a protest march on the National Assembly. Angry citizens stormed Bulgaria's Parliament on 10 January 1997.

Citizens and reformist elites walked hand-in-hand – in the literal sense – at the thousands-strong protest marches headed by the leaders of the opposition *United Democratic Forces (ODS)* and in the long-term political sense of the common goal of resolving the crisis, ending the post-communist period, and firmly setting Bulgaria on a democratic path. The electoral expression of this unity was explicit and unequivocal: in the early parliamentary elections on 19 April 1997, the *United Democratic Forces* won an absolute majority of 52.26%.

In the deep, multifaceted crisis of 1997, citizens and reformist elites united in a coalition for transformative change.

This crisis marked the end of the post-communist transition. Two indicators reveal the depth of the change: the beginning of the *Bulgarian Socialist Party's* decline, and Bulgaria's European path and its support by the majority of citizens. Unlike in other post-communist countries, the former communist party, renamed the *Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP)*, had remained on the political scene and had won elections – the first democratic elections in 1990 and those in 1994. After bankrupting the economy and the state, the BSP began to decline and today has single-digit support. Bulgaria embarked on a democratic path from which neither populism nor post-democracy have been able to significantly divert it.

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Migration crisis: identity politics or winner takes all?

The years are 2015–2016. Bulgaria, like the Western Balkans and European countries, is in the throes of a migrant crisis, with refugee flows increasing tenfold. Then, as now, Bulgaria is a transit destination; there is no significant increase in integration-related challenges, and the percentage of migrants remains insignificant – around 2% of the population. Despite the insignificant percentage of migrants, the migrant crisis marks a key victory for populist elites. The actors change – while some leaders and parties depart from the political scene, new ones appear – but populism, firstly, has become “Europeanised”, and secondly, it continues to have a lasting and strong impact on the larger mainstream parties.

Despite the insignificant percentage of migrants, the migrant crisis marks a key victory for populist elites.

Bulgarian populism is a paradoxical phenomenon: it was not a major player during the most fragile democracy of the post-communist transition. It emerged relatively late, in 2005, but stormed its way into both the political and parliamentary scene with the party with the telling name *Ataka* (Attack). Today, both *Ataka* and its leader have long since become part of Bulgaria’s turbulent post-communist history, but populism continues to be part of the country’s political present with the new party in electoral ascendancy, *Vazrazhdane* (Revival). The initial target of Bulgarian populism was the Roma, who were rapidly criminalised and marginalised. This target continues to mobilise fans and voters to this day, but the migrant crisis was a turning point in re-designing Bulgarian populism, at which migrants were assigned a central place in the arsenal of haters. I summarise this transition with the paradox, “If migrant crises did not exist, they would have been invented by populist elites” (Krasteva, 2019).

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Bulgaria’s populist elites embraced the migration ‘crisis’ and successfully achieved several results. The first is “Europeanisation” – they have naturally continued to fervently attack Brussels, but they have gotten closer to European populists, whose central targets are migrants. The second change is the continuous production of populist migrant crises, even in periods of small migration flows: election campaigns are opened in a small town with a refugee centre; a Catholic priest who sheltered a Syrian refugee family is forced to leave the country; anti-refugee mobilisations are simulated with a few local nationalists and more vocal haters brought in from elsewhere. The third change is the most significant: the political influence of populism has substantially exceeded its electoral weight, which remains below 15% for now. The mainstreaming of populism is omnipresent: identity politics is promoted, the Bordering/Othering/Ordering triad (van Houtum & van Naerssen, 2002) is generalised – that is, there is an overproduction of ethnic, religious, and symbolic boundaries and differences, as well as the message “There is a place for everyone, but everyone should know their place”. Mainstream parties such as the BSP have fully accepted this political rhetoric; other parties do not offer alternative discourses.

Populist elites are the winners in the symbolic uses of the migrant crisis (later, of the pandemic) and have assumed the self-complacent role of “winner takes all”.



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Where, in this political scene dominated by mainstream populism, are the citizens? At the very beginning of the migrant crisis, they managed to mobilise for humanitarian action. This activism quickly waned, civic activists for rights and solidarity were turned into yet another populist target and declared national traitors and foreign agents. I would summarise the evolution of their public image, following Carl Schmitt, as a transformation from friends of democratisation to foes of populist securitisation.

Occupy Bulgaria against oligarchisation and state capture

Summer 2020. Prosecutors raid the President's Office with armed police officers to arrest a presidential advisor (who will later be acquitted). The force demonstrated is completely inconsistent with the purpose of the operation and the total unlikelihood that the suspected senior government official might resist arrest in the well-guarded building. The citizenry erupts in indignation and gathers in large numbers in the square in front of the President's Office. Not to defend the president himself, who deftly tries to ride the wave of civil discontent, but the institution and institutional order itself.

The protests went beyond the mere resignation of the Prosecutor General and demanded a fundamental reform: the convocation of a Grand National Assembly to amend the Constitution regarding the judiciary. The reform of the judiciary should even precede the political transformation. As a protestor pointed out: "It doesn't matter who rules if there is no independent prosecutor's office to work for the rights of the people, not the oligarchs and the mafia" (Krasteva, 2020).

The protests aimed at political transformation, not only resignation. The protesting citizens and the multitude who supported them were fighting against oligarchisation, endemic corruption, and state capture. "Systemic change, not replacement", demanded another protestor. A protester summarised the "total" protest for radical transformation: "against the violation of law, against the authoritarian, pseudo-democratic power linked to the mafia, against the politicisation of all spheres of life, against the status quo, and against conformity with the status quo, which cries 'everyone is a bad guy, what to do?'" (Krasteva, 2020).

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The protests did not immediately achieve their specific goals - the resignations of Prime Minister Boyko Borissov and Prosecutor General Ivan Geshev - but they achieved two significant political results:

- They catalysed the creation of the party *We Continue the Change* as a party actor to fight post-democratic state capture.
- They consolidated the culture of civic activism and contestatory citizenship as grassroots mobilisations against political crises and for holding elites accountable.



From crisis to crisis: hopeless citizens, happy elites

From elections to elections, political impasse, and the political impotence of the parliamentary elites unable to form a government and transform election results into governance. In the short period of two years, from 4 April 2021 to 2 April 2023, Bulgaria's citizens were sent to the polls to vote in six elections: five snap general elections and one presidential election. In terms of party history, this period is extremely interesting; it saw the emergence of a new protest, mildly populist, party, *There Is Such a People (ITN)*, which in a matter of months became the leading political force, only to plunge in the polls, drop out of one National Assembly, and re-enter the next one. No less dramatic was the fate of the newly founded party *We Continue the Change*, which was elected on the promise of radically fighting state capture. It managed to form a government but ruled the country for just six months between December 2021 and June 2022. The *GERB (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria)* party, the personification of the status quo and state capture that was the target of the 2020 protests, lost some elections but managed to take the lead once again in the last elections. At the time of writing, Parliament is once again in limbo, and it is not clear whether it will succeed in electing a government or whether the country will go to the polls again soon.

Citizens are overwhelmed and exhausted by constant elections; there is no energy for activism or mobilising causes.

The rise and fall of parties in record time will long be analysed in political science publications. For the present analysis, the key question is: who is winning the symbolic battle for the use of this parliamentary, constitutional, and governance crisis? The key paradox is that those who are benefiting from this crisis, which has been entirely and solely created by the political elites, are precisely the political elites. Citizens are overwhelmed and exhausted by constant elections; there is no energy for activism or mobilising causes.

The biggest winner is President Rumen Radev. The most dramatic result of the parliamentary crisis is the consolidation of the power of the president, who is ruling the country through caretaker governments without any parliamentary control and is using this enormous power to reorient Bulgaria's geopolitical Euro-Atlantic orientation. Rumen Radev is not Viktor Orbán and Bulgaria is not Hungary, but the political crisis is escalating into a constitutional crisis as the country is moving from a parliamentary republic towards presidential rule.

The biggest winner is President Rumen Radev.

The other winners are the bearers of populism and post-democracy. The far-right *Vazrazhdane* is gaining political capital from its anti-establishment rhetoric against all other elites, who fully deserve such criticism, though not from leaders who are aggravating the crisis. Boyko Borissov, the longest-serving post-communist leader, is using the crisis very shrewdly to make public opinion forget both his personal and party responsibility for state capture, and Bulgaria's persistent place as the poorest and most corrupt country in the EU. Citizens' natural desire for stability is being used to make public opinion accept the return to power of those responsible for Bulgaria's post-democratic oligarchisation.

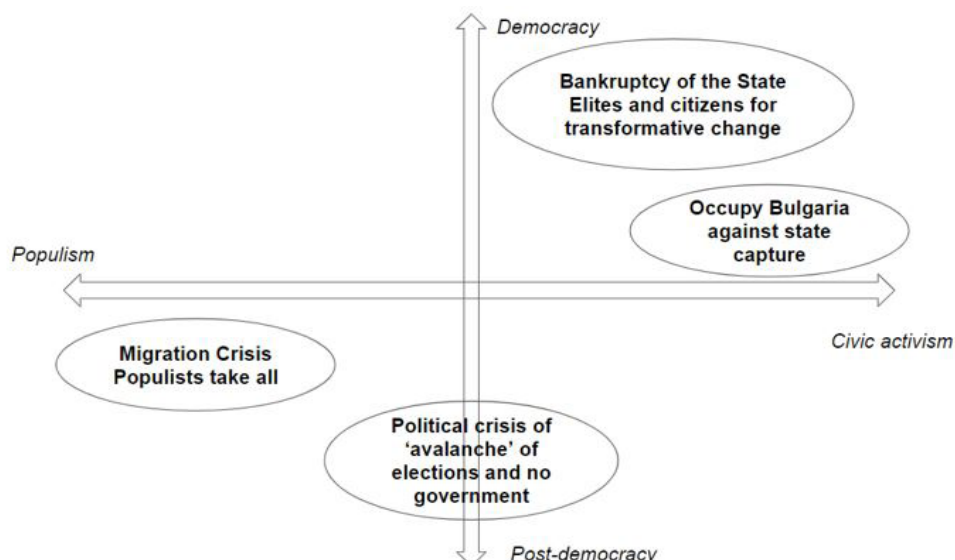
Winners and losers in the symbolic battles to dominate the political crises

The crises are permanent; what has changed are the actors benefiting from the symbolic battles between elites and citizens for their domination.

The financial and political crisis of 1997 is the only one that reformist elites and citizens together managed to turn into transformative change so as to break with the communist past and firmly embark on the path of Euro-Atlantic integration. The migrant crisis of 2015–2016 consolidated the populist parties' symbolic power, which substantially exceeds their electoral results, as well as their ability to frame and lead public debates on identity politics. The protests of 2020 expressed the maturity of civic activism as a continuation of green and mass mobilisations, the citizens' ability to stand up against Bulgaria's oligarchisation and state capture. The 2021–2023 political crisis of an "avalanche" of elections created by the elites unable to form a government has been virtuously used by themselves for their own benefit to whitewash their image from purveyor of corruption to guarantor of stability.

Period	Type of crisis	Winner/s of the symbolic battle for the crisis	Outcomes
1997	Multifaceted crisis - financial, grain, economic and political crisis	Citizens and reformist elites	Transformative change Firm Euro-Atlantic orientation
2015-2016	Migrant crisis	Populist elites	Mainstreaming of populism Deepening of Bordering/Othering/Ordering Human rights activists - from friends to foes
2020	Occupy Bulgaria Protests against state capture	Contestatory citizens	Party of the protest Anti-corruption government
2021-2023	Snap elections after snap elections	Elites of status quo	Return of elites responsible for state capture Immobilisation of citizens Rise and fall of new elites

The following diagram maps the crises along two axes: democracy/post-democracy and civic activism/populism:





The analysis of four emblematic crises in Bulgaria and the symbolic battles of elites and citizens for their symbolic domination shows a lack of linearity.

Elites and citizens for transformative change, as well as *Occupy Bulgaria* against state capture, are located in the field framed by democracy and civic activism. The populist instrumentalisation of the migration crisis is in the field between post-democracy and populist mobilisations. The political crisis of an "avalanche" of elections and governance without a regular government, signifying the return of the status-quo elite responsible for state capture, is located along the axis of deepening post-democratic trends.

The analysis of four emblematic crises in Bulgaria and the symbolic battles of elites and citizens for their symbolic domination shows a lack of linearity. Reformist elites have managed in some cases to transform the crisis into a catalyst for positive changes, but in recent years the winners have turned out to be populist and post-communist elites. At the moment this text is being finalised, Bulgaria is once again flooded with protests. The occasion is particularly cruel domestic violence, and the reason is the inadequate and irresponsible reaction of the institutions, which, with inaction, incompetence, and irresponsibility, in practise protect not the victim, but the aggressor. The mass mobilisations in multiple cities demonstrate the maturity of a citizenry that, albeit after years of relative passivity, is capable of mobilising to demand elite accountability and swift changes in the interests of citizens. Contestatory citizenship is a shield against post-democratic institutions and irresponsible rulers, producing crises instead of resolving them.

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