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Bulgaria: The Resignation of Rosen Zhelyazkov's Government. Society versus the Captured State

On 11 December 2025, the government of Rosen Zhelyazkov resigned. The decision followed the largest wave of social protests since 1989, which spread across the entire country. The immediate trigger for public opposition was the shape of the budget planned for the coming year. Following provocations directed at demonstrators by the leaders of GERB and DPS-NP-Boyko Borisov and Delyan Peevski, respectively—subsequent protests revealed the scale of public dissatisfaction. If a new government cannot be formed by the current parliament, Bulgaria will face its eighth snap parliamentary election since 2021.

Government resignation. On Thursday, 11 December, Prime Minister Rosen Zhelyazkov submitted his resignation, which was accepted the following day by 227 of the 240 members of parliament. In accordance with the constitution, the president must initiate the procedure for forming a new government by consecutively granting a mandate to the largest party, the second-largest party, and then one of the remaining parliamentary parties. If this procedure fails three times, the president is obliged to appoint a caretaker government and set a date for new parliamentary elections. On 15 December, President Rumen Radev began consultations with the first- and second-largest parties in parliament. The outcome of these talks suggest that the formation of a new government within the current parliament is unlikely. The political destabilization has occurred on the eve of Bulgaria's accession to the euro area, scheduled for 1 January 2026.

The immediate cause of Zhelyazkov's resignation was an attempt to pass a controversial budget for 2026. The draft envisaged, among other measures, an increase in pension contributions and corporate income tax, as well as pay rises limited to selected professional groups, suggesting unequal treatment of citizens. Over the course of three successive demonstrations, the demands of the protesters evolved. The wave of discontent spread across the entire country, leading commentators to conclude that these were the largest protests in Bulgaria since 1989.

Support base of the minority government. The formation of Rosen Zhelyazkov's government brought an end to a period of political crisis that had lasted since 2021. For the first time in four years, following the elections of 27 October 2024, Boyko Borisov and his party, Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria (GERB), rebuilt their political position, marginalizing their main rival—the coalition of reformist parties We Continue the Change – Democratic Bulgaria (PP-DB) (see [Rozmowa IEŚ nr 434](#)). Formally, Zhelyazkov's cabinet was a minority government. The governing coalition included the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) and There Is Such a People (ITN), which together held only 102 seats in the Bulgarian parliament. During the first two months, the government also received support from the Alliance for Rights and Freedoms (APS), which did not hold any ministerial posts. After APS withdrew its support, parliamentary backing for the government was ensured by the Movement for Rights and Freedoms – New Beginning (DPS-NP), led by Delyan Peevski, who has been sanctioned under the Magnitsky Act by the United States and the United Kingdom. Until July 2025, the government could also count on the political neutrality of the reformist parties PP and DB, which declared that they would support efforts toward euro area membership until the accession process was completed.

Sources of social frustration. The immediate cause of the resignation was a draft budget imposed by the government without public consultation and accompanied by blatant violations of parliamentary procedures. Critics also pointed to dangerous provisions in the budget that could have exposed Bulgaria to the EU's excessive deficit procedure as early as the end of the following year. Equally important was the growing wave of public

outrage over the unjustified detention of the mayor of Varna, Blagomir Kotsev, a member of PP-DB. The demonstrative nature of the arrest, the humiliation, and the harassment based on the testimony of a single prosecution witness were intended to send a signal to society at large and intimidate political opponents. This blatant lawlessness became a catalyst for renewed civic mobilization against those in power.

Another source of public opposition was the very manner in which power was exercised in Bulgaria. Through his conduct, Prime Minister Zhelyazkov repeatedly reinforced the public perception that he was merely an executor of the will of politicians who bear no political responsibility and hold no formal public office. The first of these figures is Boyko Borisov, who, upon returning to power, concluded that nominating a non-controversial prime ministerial candidate would be more advantageous for maintaining control over the state. Nevertheless, while formally remaining outside the government, Borisov actively shaped the government's agenda on a daily basis. The second figure is Delyan Peevski, who, after engineering a split in the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS) in the summer of 2024 and creating DPS-NP, became the de facto guarantor of the minority government's survival. Peevski's arrogant, crude, and aggressive media appearances were intended to demonstrate to society where real power lay. He also initiated a process of taking over GERB's local structures, which contributed, among other things, to the party's defeat in the local elections in Pazardzhik in October 2025 (see ["IEŚ Commentaries", no. 1455](#)). During those elections, civic activists exposed mechanisms of electoral vote-buying and police passivity, providing incontrovertible evidence of violations of basic democratic principles and the ineffectiveness of public institutions. This reinforced the public conviction that with Zhelyazkov's government not only had the pathological practices of the Borisov era (2009–2021)—which drove people into the streets in 2020–2021—returned, but that the current political trajectory was even more dangerous, especially given that Peevski does not conceal his ambition to take full control of the state.

Government resignation and the euro area. After the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union completed the necessary legislative steps in early July 2025, it became clear that Bulgaria would become the twenty-first member of the euro area on 1 January 2026. However, accession to the euro area has been consistently contested by the nationalist party Revival (*Възраждане*), which since 2022 has sought a referendum on the issue and subsequently organized protests. President Rumen Radev also joined efforts to block the introduction of the common European currency, submitting his own motion for a referendum—ultimately rejected by pro-European parties on 3 December 2025. Both the president and Revival attempted to use the resignation of Zhelyazkov's government to delay Bulgaria's accession to the euro area, citing the political crisis. These efforts, however, are blocked by the clear parliamentary dominance of pro-European parties.

Conclusions. The fall of Zhelyazkov's government does not resolve the structural problems of Bulgaria's political system. Despite the resignation, the Council of Ministers will continue to exercise power until a date for new elections is announced. Nor can the possibility be entirely ruled out that the ruling parties will attempt to propose a new cabinet. Even if, after three failed attempts, the president announces new elections and appoints a caretaker government, the overwhelming majority of potential prime ministerial candidates are linked to GERB and DPS. Given that the parties against which people took to the streets will continue to govern for several more months, the reformist parties have announced their determination to fight for fair elections. In light of widespread electoral corruption, the absence of judicial sanctions, and police passivity, the course and outcome of the next parliamentary elections will be decisive for Bulgaria's future.

Behind the façade of political confrontation between protesters and the ruling majority lies the real challenge: dismantling the model of the captured state, steered by Delyan Peevski through networks of dependence within the prosecution service and the judiciary. The resignation of Zhelyazkov's government can be seen as a success for civil society and reformist forces. However, only a decisive victory by reformist parties in parliamentary elections could create the conditions necessary for meaningful change and for dismantling the economic, political, and administrative networks that underpin the captured-state model.

If new parliamentary elections are held in the first months of 2026, social mobilization in support of electoral fairness, transparency, and credibility will play a key role. Tangible support in this area would come from the involvement of non-governmental organizations from European Union member states.