

Calendar of the most important dates for democracy building and the rule of law crisis in Bulgaria

November 1989 - Post-communist transition in Bulgaria starts with a 'palace coup'

The Secretary General of Bulgarian Communist Party and leader of the country Todor Zhivkov is removed from office by his comrades at the November Plenary Meeting of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party. The event took place after the fledgling dissident movement (gathered around the 'Ekoglasnost' organisation) in Bulgaria managed to organise its first rallies in late October and early November.

January to May 1990 - Roundtable talks between representatives of the ruling Communist party and the newly established Union of Democratic Forces (comprised of successors of pre-WWII parties, alongside anti-communist dissidents) to negotiate the peaceful transition to democracy took place, where there holding of the first free elections and a New Constitutions were also agreed.

July 1991 - The new Constitution of Republic of Bulgaria is adopted by the Grand National Assembly, giving strong guarantees for separation of powers and judicial independence (including both prosecutors and investigators)

Summer 1991 - The Constitutional Court of the Republic of Bulgaria established.

The first case it was called to decide (case 1/91) concerned the constitutionality of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (ДПЦ in Bulgarian, henceforth DPS) – the party representing Ethnic Turks in Bulgaria. As art.11 (4) of the Constitution explicitly forbids creating ethnic political parties in Bulgaria, MPs from the Bulgarian socialist party (ex-communist) challenged the registration of DPS and the election of MPs from this party. In an internationally acclaimed decision from April 1992 (decision 4/1994) the Court ruled that DPS was constitutional.

November 1991 to December 1992 - the first anti-communist government after 1989, led by Philip Dimitrov (UDF) was formed, aimed at 'changing the system through radical reforms' (privatisation, restitution of property to its former owners, decommunisation, etc.)

It was a minority government (the winner in the Oct. 1991 parliamentary elections UDF had 110 MPs) and was elected with support from DPS (third party in Parliament). The government resigned at the end of 1992 after DPS withdrew its support.

May 1997 to July 2001 - The pro-reform government of Ivan Kostov.

The financial (hyperinflation) and economic collapse of the country in late 1996 was brought by the policies of Zhan Videnov's BSP majority government (Jan 1995 – Feb 1997) and provoked mass protests. In the subsequent early elections of 1997 UDF won an absolute majority with a mandate for radical reforms. Kostov's cabinet introduced pro-market reforms (including thorough privatisation), modernisation of the state (social sector, healthcare sector, etc.) and started EU accession talks. It was the first government in Bulgaria after 1989 to serve its full term and accumulated a lot of resentment due to the radical reforms it implemented.

June 2001 - The movement led by ex-king Simeon II, NDSV ('National Movement Simeon the Second'), won the parliamentary elections, gaining 120 of 240 seats, shortly after Simeon's return to Bulgaria.

The ex-king could have had absolute majority had two other parties not have used his name in their registration to confuse voters. Exploiting the reform fatigue and resentment toward the previous pro-reform government, the ex-king ran on an anti-corruption ticket of 'restoring morality in politics'. He made a series of populist promises to solve all remaining problems of the country "within 800 days": raise living standards, double the average monthly salary, and fight corruption in government. The NDSV formed a coalition government with DPS.

2001 to 2009 - NDSV and DPS rule together, and after 2005 their coalition is joined by BSP.

The years around Bulgaria's EU accession in 2007 are a period of rapid economic growth and development. It is also a period during which the influence in Bulgaria of oligarchic circles – forming around the 'bank of power' Corporate Commercial Bank – grew and became difficult to control.

The 21 year old Delyan Peevski, son of the President of the Bulgarian National Sports Lottery Mrs. Irena Krasteva – a well-connected politically business woman – becomes a member of NDSV. He is immediately appointed as Chair of the Board of the biggest harbour in Bulgaria – Varna harbour – without having the requisite education or experience. During Stanishev's government – the triple coalition between NDSV, DPS and BSP – Peevski becomes vice-Minister responsible for the National Reserve. During the period 2001 – 2009 Peevski rapidly becomes a leading politician, businessman and media mogul, buying media outlets and other businesses, using both his political connections and his close association with Tzvetan Vassilev, the owner of the 'bank of power', Corporate Commercial Bank. In 2009 Peevski becomes member of DPS and is elected as an MP. In 2021 he is sanctioned by the US Treasury department on the Global Magnitsky law – for high profile corruption and

trading in influence.

January 2007 - Bulgaria joins the EU without having fulfilled all EU membership requirements - most conspicuously with regard to fight against corruption and judicial reform.

Amendments to the Constitution were introduced in 2006 in order to strengthen judicial independence and increase the accountability of magistrates, by creating an Inspectorate attached to the Supreme Judicial Council.

The European commission starts post-accession monitoring of the country under the Cooperation and verification mechanism, which has not been formerly lifted to this day. The EC produces annual reports which have increasingly achieved fewer and fewer results.

2009 to 2021 - GERB - the party of the charismatic mayor of Sofia Boyko Borissov, who rose to prominence as Internal Ministry Secretary under NDSV - wins all parliamentary elections and forms three governments.

Only in 2013 does it fail to form a cabinet after winning elections - which allows DPS and BSP to form their own, minority cabinet.

2013 - A year of anti-corruption protests, which saw two waves of protest shake the country.

The first, in February, were anti-monopoly protests against the First Borissov cabinet, whilst there were

also year-long protests against Oresharski's government, triggered by the appointment of Delyan Peevski as Chair of State Agency for National Security - the main anti-corruption body of the country.

July 2014 - After a run on the 'bank of power', Corporate Commercial Bank - provoked by rumors of a break-up in the politico-business tandem of Tzvetan Vassilev/Delyan Peevski and a raid on the bank's offices by the Prosecutor's Office - the bank collapses.

The bank had been providing loans without the necessary guarantees to business and political friends (Peevski's business empire was financed by CCB, but his was not the only one) who had been buying cheap assets in the wake of the financial crisis. After its collapse some 4 billion leva of uncollectable loans were lost.

November 2014 to February 2017 - The second cabinet of Borissov was formed after early elections.

It was a coalition cabinet between the election winners GERB and the Reform bloc - a groups of parties that were involved in the 2013 anti-Oresharski government protests. The

bloc ran on a ticket of radical judicial reform and stepping up the fight against corruption and entered the coalition on the condition that changes were introduced in the Constitution with regard to the structure and the appointment of the Supreme Judicial Council – the body managing the judicial system. After it became clear that the changes to the Constitution that were actually to be adopted, the Minister of Justice from RB, Hristo Ivanov, resigned.

Fall of 2019 - Protests are held against the appointment of Ivan Geshev as the new Prosecutor General, provoked by his alleged links to behind-the-scenes power figures (notably Delyan Peevski) and oligarchic circles.

Media outlets owned by or gravitating around Peevski began a campaign promoting Geshev's candidacy and discrediting his critics.

July 2020 - months-long anti-corruption protests start, demanding the resignation of both PM Borissov and the Prosecutor General Ivan Geshev start after raids on the offices of the president of the Republic by the prosecutor's office and after a protest organized by the Democratic Bulgaria coalition against the illegal seizure of a Black Sea beach by the DPS's informal leader Ahmed Dogan.

The protests lead to the dismissal of five cabinet ministers, including the justice minister, with some of them being dismissed for 'alleged links to Delyan Peevski'. PM Borissov does not resign, and completes his first full term in office. His GERB party wins the regular parliamentary elections on April 4, 2021, but cannot form a government as it is by then politically isolated.

February 2021 - amendments to the Code of Criminal Procedure (CCP) and the Judiciary Act come into force.

The position of a so-called 'special prosecutor', who can investigate the prosecutor general and his deputies, is introduced. These amendments are an attempt by the ruling coalition (GERB and United Patriots) to fulfill their obligations to bring in some control over the prosecutor general. However, the president challenges their constitutionality and in May 2021 the constitutional court rules that the new texts adopted in the CCP and the Judiciary Act are unconstitutional.

June 2021 - the US Treasury Department announces that three Bulgarian individuals and their expansive networks are sanctioned for engaging in corruption under the Magnitski Act.

This is said to be the largest 'Global Magnitsky action taken on a single day in the history of the program, targeting over 65 individuals and entities for their significant acts of corruption in Bulgaria.' Shady businessman and 'oligarch' Vassil Bozhkov, who flees the country to avoid prosecution for multiple crimes, and Delyan Peevski, MP from DPS and

businessman, are the main targets of this action.

July 2021 - Prof. Yanaki Stoilov, justice minister in the first caretaker government of Stefan Yanev, submits a proposal to the supreme judicial council (SJC) to dismiss Prosecutor General Ivan Geshev for actions detrimental to the prestige of the judiciary, citing a report by Interior Minister Boyko Rashkov.

The plenum of the SJC refuses to consider the request of the caretaker minister as inadmissible due to the lack of a specific procedure. Prof. Stoilov goes to the supreme administrative court (SAC) to appeal against this decision and requests the constitutional court to provide a binding interpretation of the constitutional text. The question is whether the justice minister can propose the removal from office of the presidents of the supreme court of cassation (SCC) and the supreme administrative court (SAC), as well as of the prosecutor general.

July 2021 - early parliamentary elections are held as Parliament fails to elect a government after the regular elections in April.

The GERB won in April, yet could not form a government as no parliamentary party was willing to rule together with the GERB. The July elections are won by a newcomer – the party ‘There is Such a People’ (ITN) led by the TV personality and showman Slavi Trifonov. The ITN tries to form a minority government without agreeing the terms of support with the other protest parties also campaigning for a ‘change to the mode of Borissov government’. The ITN also refuses to support these parties’ attempts to form a government committed to changes. Early elections are called for November, coinciding with the presidential elections.

September 2021 - The witness protection bureau is transferred from the office of the prosecutor general to the Department of Justice.

December 2021 - Justice Minister Ivan Demerdzhiev - minister in the second caretaker government of Stephan Yanev - proposes to the prosecutorial college of the SJC to initiate disciplinary proceedings against Ivan Geshev.

The reason given for this is that the refusal by the prosecutorial office to provide information on the random distribution of cases constitutes a violation of the regulations. This motion is submitted after the justice minister has not received any answers to two letters requesting information from the prosecutor’s office. The prosecutor general provides the internal rules for the allocation of files and pre-trial proceedings only after the submission of the proposal to the SJC.

The early parliamentary elections in November 2021 are won by yet another newcomer – the newly formed political formation (which becomes a party much later) ‘We Continue the

Change'. Its leaders are key ministers from Stefan Yanev's caretaker cabinet (appointed by President Rumen Radev). The new formation manages to form a coalition made up of four parties, which is ideologically very incoherent – including liberals, conservatives, socialists and even populists from Slavi Trifonov's ITN. What arguably holds them together is their claim to be willing to implement deep reforms and a new way of governing.

January 2022 - Andrey Gyurov, the chairman of the PP parliamentary group in the 47th national assembly, reads out a declaration on behalf of the ruling coalition, calling on the prosecutor general to resign and thus take responsibility for his actions, and enable the prosecution to exercise its constitutional functions.

January to February 2022 - The constitutional court accepts that the justice minister after 2021 had the authority to take the issue of the removal of the prosecutor general to the SJC.

The SJC refuses to consider the proposal of Minister Stoilov for the early dismissal of Gashed. Shortly afterwards the SAC also reopens the case for the removal of the prosecutor general and returns the file to the SJC, obliging the latter to rule on the merits of the case.

March 2022 - Justice Minister Nadezhda Yordanova submits a reasoned request to the SJC for the dismissal of Prosecutor General Ivan Geshev.

The majority of the supreme judicial council votes in favor of Geshev and he remains in office.

April 2022 - Parliament amends the Judiciary Act, voting to abolish the specialized criminal court, the specialized criminal court of appeal, the specialized prosecutor's office and the specialized prosecutor's office of appeal.

The amendments also remove staff and financial bonuses for members of the supreme judicial council and judicial inspectors.

June 2022 - Petkov's cabinet is ousted after a vote of no confidence is successful in Parliament for the first time in Bulgarian history.

This happens after Slavi Trifonov and the ITN withdraw their support for the cabinet and the cabinet loses its majority. 123 MPs vote against and 116 in favor of Petkov's cabinet. After the GERB fails to form a new government, Parliament is dissolved and new early parliamentary elections are called.

October 2022 - The early elections, won by the GERB, produce another hung parliament that fails to form a government.

As a result, President Radev schedules another parliamentary election, the fifth in two

years, to take place on April 2, 2023. President Radev appoints his fourth caretaker cabinet in just two years. During this period the executive power is de facto dominated by the president. According to the Bulgarian constitution, the chief task of a caretaker government is to organize elections and govern while these elections are prepared and held. However, the long period of political instability and parliamentary crises resulted in President Radev ruling the country for almost two years through the caretaker governments he appointed.

April 2023 - The election produce yet another hung parliament, with the GERB winning the elections yet not being able to form a government.

May 2023 - A small home-made bomb explodes on the road between Samokov and Sofia, damaging the car in which Prosecutor General Ivan Geshev is traveling.

The incident remains unsolved to date - it is not known who has organized the bombing and why. The prosecutor general calls it an assault on himself and the Bulgarian state. However, the evidence is not conclusive and the official version of the prosecution is contradicted by the prosecutor's office itself.

May 2023 - Prosecutor General Ivan Geshev asks the constitutional court whether the SJC can remove him with an expired mandate.

On the same day President Radev gives a second mandate for forming a government to the PP-DB nominee Nikolay Denkov - after the GERB, given the first mandate, failed to form a government. Radev explicitly tells Denkov that it would be better not to take up the mandate.

This time, however, the coalition between 'We Continue the Change' and 'Democratic Bulgaria' (PP-DB), which has come second in the elections, manages to form a government with the support of the GERB and the DPS. The PP-DB and the GERB agree to form a PP-DB led government with a 'rotating PM'. The GERB appoints Mariya Gabriel, a former Bulgarian EU commissioner, to serve as foreign minister and take the position of PM after the first nine months, during which Professor Nikolay Denkov will serve as PM. This cabinet Denkov-Gabriel with 'rotating PMs' is very unstable, as it is made up of parties which consider each other their main political opponents. The coalition's prime motivation is geopolitical - its main goals are Bulgaria's entry into the Schengen zone and the eurozone, support for Ukraine and amendments to the constitution to implement judicial reforms. In addition to these factors, it is held together by a wish to put an end to the president's rule through unaccountable caretaker governments - as the president can dissolve Parliament and call new elections before appointing a caretaker government

May to June 2023 - The prosecutor general requests to lift the immunity of a number of MPs, including the leaders of the newly formed grand coalition, Kiril

Petkov and Boyko Borissov.

Cases against Borissov, which have been delayed for years, are reactivated.

June 2023 - Parliament finally adopts a new mechanism for investigating the prosecutor general, new rules for his appointment, dismissal, and for controlling his actions.

June 2023 - The SJC decides with 16 votes in favor and 4 against to dismiss Prosecutor General Ivan Geshev, quoting as a reason 'that with his overall behavior Ivan Geshev undermined the prestige of the judiciary'.

June 2023 - Borislav Sarafov, one of Ivan Geshev's deputies, is elected acting prosecutor general by the college of prosecutors with the SJC.

June 2023 - The dismissed Prosecutor General Ivan Geshev announces his own political project.

July 2023 - The ruling majority, the PP-DB and the GERB, form a 'constitutional majority' with the support of the DPS, i. e. a majority sufficient to change the constitution within an ordinary rather than a grand national assembly, and submits a bill to amend the constitution.

Among the proposed amendments is a split of the supreme judicial council (SJC) into two separate councils, a judicial and a prosecutorial, limiting the powers of the prosecutor general, reviewing the status of caretaker governments and changing the date of Bulgaria's national holiday.

July 2023 - The Bulgarian Helsinki Committee and more than 100 public activists demand a ban on 'Vazrazhdane'.

The prosecutor's office is given a list of the party's actions, said to be unconstitutional.

July 2023 - Protests erupt across the country after brutal violence against a woman.

The protesters demand legal guarantees of protection against domestic violence. Parliament urgently convenes and adopts the requested amendments to the Penal code and the Domestic Violence Act.

August 2023 - Alexei Petrov, a controversial businessman with a shady past during the early transition period, is killed in Sofia.

It has been claimed that he brokered the negotiations between the leader of the PP, Kiril Petkov, and the leader of the GERB, Borissov, which resulted in the government Denkov-

Gabriel.

August 2023 - Controversial businessman Vasil Bozhkov, a fugitive from the justice system, returns to Bulgaria and is arrested on 19 criminal charges.

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