

WORKING PAPER

**Bulgaria between the Black Sea
region and the Western Balkans:
an island of stability or
a captured state?**

DR NELI KIRILOVA

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This Working Paper by the LSE IDEAS Sotirov Visiting Fellow, Dr Neli Kirilova, examines the case study of Bulgaria, as an island of relative stability between two conflict-prone regions: the Black Sea region and the Western Balkans. First, it analyses the geopolitical location of the country, considering three historically competing vectors: the West (EU, UK), the East (Russia) and the South (Türkiye). Second, in relation to these vectors, the voting attitudes are examined in seven rounds of elections during the cycle of recent political instability, 2021-2024. Third, network analysis shows the relative importance of each actor measured through the number of diplomatic meetings for the last one year, 2024 (Jan-Dec). The meetings are assessed by actor and by topic, in the theoretical framework of *six power elements*. These elements are: Military/Security, Economy/Investment, Energy/Climate, Diplomacy/Politics, Governance/Society, Information access/ Exchange. The results contribute towards elaborating balanced cooperation and minimising conflictual interests.

The Author

Dr Neli Kirilova is a scholar with experience in international relations and diplomacy. Dr Kirilova holds a PhD in International Relations and Security Studies acquired at the Corvinus University of Budapest, Hungary, in collaboration with the European Doctoral School on CSDP/CFSP at the European Security and Defence College (ESDC), Brussels, Belgium. She explores the geopolitical competition and the incompatible concept of power as reasons for international conflicts and security crises. Her particular focus is the power competition between the EU, Russia and Türkiye in the Black Sea region. In her PhD dissertation, *Power Perception and Conflict Prevention in the Black Sea region: the EU, Russia and Türkiye*, Dr Kirilova develops a new theoretical framework on conflict prevention, suggesting the six elements of power theory (Kirilova, 2024) as qualitative assessment tool. Dr Kirilova examines the concept of power in IR and analyses how the perception of power relates to conflict prevention.

The aim of her research at LSE IDEAS is to identify the potential relation between power competition and political (in)stability, applied to a selected case study country - Bulgaria. Furthermore, she examines the areas of power competition between the regional competitors, based on the six power elements framework. The methodological part includes assessment of the relation between diplomatic negotiations and foreign policy meetings during the latest year of electoral instability, 2024. Her main publications are available at ORCID.¹

¹ See: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3583-6783>.

1. INTRODUCTION

Bulgaria: messy politics or an island of stability between conflict-prone regions?

Is Bulgaria a predictable partner? Can the West rely on its consecutive policies? What is the country's role in the Balkans, the Black Sea and South-Eastern Europe? These and other questions are further discussed.

In the context of ongoing war in the Black Sea region, unresolved conflicts in the Balkans, repetitive elections and falling governments, 'stability' becomes a questionable term. Is the political instability of repetitive elections in Bulgaria for the period 2021-2024 related to a functioning democratic process, or to a failure of governing? Considering its neighbourhood and history, can Bulgaria be an island of stability among conflictual regions in Europe's South-East? The current research locates the country within the geopolitical competition for foreign influence between three vectors: Russia, Türkiye and the West (i.e., the European Union and the United Kingdom). Despite the UK's exit from the EU, in 2025 the cooperation between both has increased on FIMI (Foreign Information Manipulations and Interference), security, defence, science, education and youth policy.

More broadly, the term 'the West' might include the USA and NATO militarily, but the current research is focused on actors of geopolitical proximity only. Distant actors with potential of regional interests, such as the USA, China, Iran, are left behind its scope. Furthermore, the government of Trump 2.0 in the USA has a mandate for (questionable) policies towards Europe, and commitments within the West.

In international relations, avoiding foreign influence is barely possible. However, can it be balanced in relatively equal shares – where areas of cooperation and competition overlap? And can a country develop optimal relations with each competitor? These and further questions are examined below.

Problematic for Bulgaria are the seven rounds of elections throughout the three years between 2021 and 2024, which led to a change of fourteen governments. It remains unclear whether this happens due to internal political instability or due to competing

external interests. How are the levels of external influence fluctuating within the country and how does this relate to the stability of governance? Is this a challenge for the Western democratic order, or is it a blessing of an active democracy? Is it a sign of Western democracy or a weakness due to lack of capacity to select and sustain a government from within the country? Or an attempt of the regional actors to compete on influencing the government, based on affiliation of the parties?

This research examines the relation between power perception and conflict prevention in a case study country. It tests the theory of power competition by three geopolitical actors. The perspectives for the West are discussed, considering the other regional competitors: Russia in the East, and Türkiye in the South. Based on the findings, recommendations for policymakers are formulated. The results might contribute to developing the relations of Bulgaria, within the EU, with the UK.

The theory of six elements of power (Kirilova, 2024) presumes that power competition happens on several tracks: 1) Military/Security; 2) Economy/Investment; 3) Energy/Climate; 4) Diplomacy / Politics 5) Governance/ Society; 6) Information access/ Exchange (Kirilova, 2024). Groups 1, 2 and 3 belong to hard power (including technology and innovation); groups 4 and 5 belong to soft power (including culture, history and education); group 6 belongs to sharp power (including science and educational exchanges) – see Fig. 1 (Kirilova, 2024).

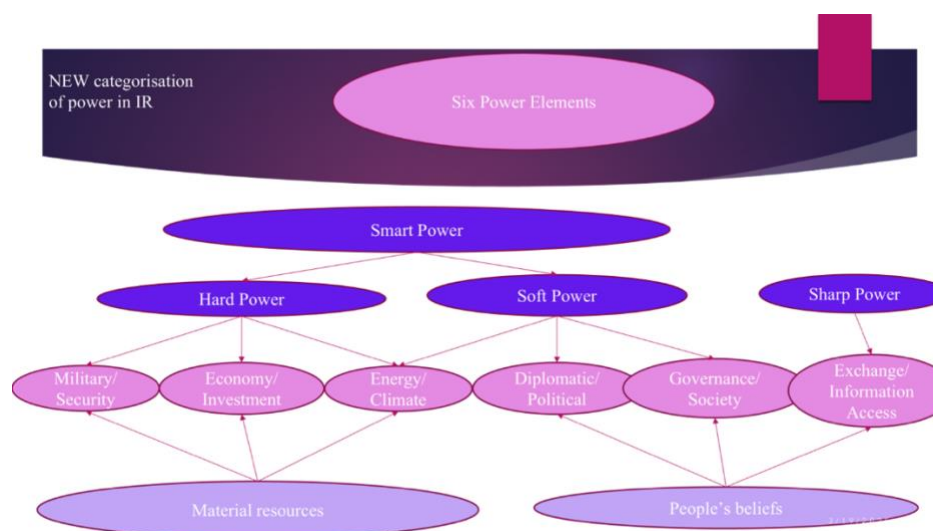


Fig. 1. Six Power Elements. Source: Kirilova (2024).

Conceptual Framework of analysis:

The conceptual framework consists of three regional competitors (Russia, Türkiye, the West), six power elements, and one case study country. The external relations of the country, and the potential foreign influence by the three regional competitors, are assessed. The current research is conducted in the context of several international crises: Crimea in 2014; terrorism in 2015; Syrian migration in 2015; the Brexit referendum of 2016; COVID-19 2019-2020, and the full-scale Russia-Ukraine War from 2022.

Methodology and Methods

The research assesses how power competition in the Black Sea region between Russia, Türkiye and the West affects the governmental stability of a country. The methodology is a qualitative assessment, in which three methods are applied: case study selection, electoral analysis and network analysis.

2. METHOD I. GEOPOLITICS: Suitability of the Case Study – Bulgaria

Geostrategic context: competing actors, neighbouring conflict-prone regions

Bulgaria is located at the South-Eastern part of Europe, on the Balkan peninsula and the shores of the Black Sea, as shown on the maps below. The current territory of Bulgaria covers 110 996 km², with population of 6,445,481 (2024) people (European Union, n.d.). The country is locked between two conflict-prone geopolitical regions: the Western Balkans and the Black Sea region. In the latter, conflicts in different phase of intensity exist between Azerbaijan and Armenia, Georgia and Russia, and Ukraine and Russia. In the Western Balkans, conflicts in different phases of intensity exist in between Serbia and Kosovo, within Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro, and around the Republic of North Macedonia (between Albania, Greece, Bulgaria).



Fig. 2. Map: Bulgaria. Source: Encyclopædia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Bulgaria>

Bulgaria has been shaped into a parliamentary democracy ever since 1990, after it left the Soviet Union-aligned Eastern Bloc and Warsaw Pact. The country is member of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) organisation, founded by Türkiye in 1992, right after the Soviet Union dissolved – the BSEC was created aiming to preserve the region from Western influence. Furthermore, Bulgaria entered the Western alliances – NATO in 2004 and the EU in 2007, currently led by 27 Member States and previously with the strong role of the UK until 2016's Brexit referendum.

Bulgaria's NATO membership since 2004 means strengthened relations with the other NATO members and the USA in the military security aspect. Other NATO members in near proximity are Albania, Croatia, Greece, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Slovenia, and Türkiye. The Eastern Flank crossing the Black Sea has specific importance for NATO, as a borderline with the post-Soviet states (NATO, n.d.).



Fig. 3. Map: The Balkans. Source: Encyclopaedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Balkans>

Bulgaria's EU membership since 2007 means active participation on all spheres of governance, including democracy, the rule of law, and economic prosperity. However, some internal disruptions might be caused by attempts towards foreign influence by Russia and Türkiye, based on historical dependencies or geopolitical interests by land or by sea. The EU updated its Black Sea Strategy in 2025, while its first Black Sea Synergy has been active since 2007 (European Commission, 2025). Bulgaria's EU neighbours are Greece and Romania – those are its most stable surrounding countries, despite their numerous internal issues. Recent examples of unrest show waves of protests in Serbia, Romania, Greece, Georgia, and Bulgaria throughout 2024 and 2025.



Fig. 4. Map: The Black Sea region. Source: Encyclopaedia Britannica.

Historical context

A brief historical overview of the country shows lasting geopolitical competition, where the interests of Russia, Türkiye and the West overlap; this competition has severely harmed Bulgaria's development. Initially three tribes made up the polity: proto-Bulgars (travellers, coming from Crimea and previously from Ancient Bulgaria upon Volga), Slavs (semi-local), and Thracians (local). The First Bulgarian Empire was established in 681AD; over the next 1,344 years, for half of these Bulgaria was a flourishing independent state and the other half was spent under foreign occupation/subordination. Preserving its national consciousness over fourteen centuries is impressive, considering the repetitive change of independence with occupation periods.

Flourishing periods are the First Bulgarian Empire (681-970), Second Bulgarian Empire (1185-1396), Third Bulgarian Kingdom (1878-1946), and the Democratic Republic of Bulgaria (1991-ongoing). Occupation/subordination periods are by the Byzantine Empire, inherited by Greece (970-1080), the Ottoman Empire, inherited by Türkiye (1398-1878) and the People's Republic of Bulgaria (1946-1990), under the heavy influence of the Soviet Union, inherited by Russia. This national experience predefines changing attitudes of external influences and internal strength, embedded in the political behaviour of the country.

Conclusion on the suitability of the case study

Ideally, a case study country on the power competition between the West, Russia and Türkiye is a country of the Black Sea region or the Western Balkans, which is not currently affiliated to the EU, Russia or Türkiye. Suitable case studies include Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, the Republic of North Macedonia, Albania, Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, from a geostrategic perspective, Bulgaria belongs to both regions, the Western Balkans and the Black Sea region. The internal political processes in the country are similar to those in its neighbouring states. From a geopolitical perspective, Bulgaria is currently a part of the West but its historical background makes it a unique example of how competition for influence by regional hegemons has been progressing through centuries, currently still present in the political

life of the country. Based on its geopolitical location, historical background, and current political structure, Bulgaria is a suitable case study to test the theory of power competition in South-Eastern Europe.

3. METHOD II. ELECTORAL ANALYSIS: Internal Political Instability, External Interests

Vivid Elections: 'stable' democracy vs constant electoral changes

The case study of Bulgaria is taken as an example, illustrating the political instability in the country during recent years, 2021-2024. Repetitive elections for government in three years led to seven rounds of elections and 14 acting governments - seven regular and seven caretaker ones. The short period of constant changes of political elite created obstacles for consistent policies.

This part examines the relation between repetitive elections and possible competition for foreign influence between Russia, Türkiye and the West. Two key questions are concerned: what is the affiliation of political parties and how are they related to possible external influence? And which parties are consistent in their programs and policies? A stable partner for external IR actors requires consistent words and actions. However, as a result of diverse geopolitical fluctuations, the consistency of some parties is problematic.

The contemporary political structure of the country consists of four main groups of parties: left (socialist), right (democrat), minorities, and nationalist. This electoral analysis assesses the affiliation of political parties with each of the three competitors, considering them as pro-Western (democrats), pro-Eastern/Russia (socialists), pro-Southern/Türkiye (minorities), and nationalist.

Current political context

Bulgaria is a Parliamentary Republic, with its main law The Constitution since 1991. Its main division of internal power includes three branches: Executive (the President and the Council of Ministers), Legislative (the Parliament) and Judiciary (the Court of Justice).

Since 1989, Bulgaria has had relatively balanced pro-Eastern and pro-Western wings for the period 1990-2005, followed by decreased socialist and increased democratic parties. The seats of parties of minorities progressively grow. The so-called 'protest vote', which goes to newly formed nationalist parties, remains relatively stable (Central Electoral Committee of Bulgaria, 2024). The stable positions of GERB party (democratic, pro-West) continued for the decade between 2009 and 2019. In 2019, massive protests started against its rule, due to problematic functioning of different spheres.² The protests were interrupted by COVID-19 and Russia's war on Ukraine. Since that moment, a process of political instability in Bulgaria has occurred. Some preconditions are related to the lack of trust and continuous protests on diverse aspects prior to 2019, combined with the inflow of Bulgarians who previously lived abroad, attempting to propose renovation of the governance system based on their experiences in other countries. The restrictive measures against COVID-19 contributed to the accumulation of disappointment with the ruling government, both for permanent citizens and newcomers.

At the time of changing governments, a stable political figure remained the President – Mr Rumen Radev – for two consecutive mandates, with total of ten years in power: 2017-2022 and 2022-2027. He was initially elected from the Bulgarian Socialist Party, while for his second term he won the majority of votes as an independent candidate.

An overview of the presidential elections, the winning parties and new party formations over the time of electoral unrest, shows the competition for influence between Russia, the West, Türkiye.

² Details about the effects of the protest movements on the change of the political system can be found in Dinev and Stoyanov (2025).

Presidential elections

Presidential elections in Bulgaria happened in: 1990/1992, 1996, 2001/2006, 2011 and 2016/2021. Out of them, OSCE-ODIHR missions observed: 2006 (2 rounds), 2011, 2016, 2021 (Nov 2 rounds). President Radev was elected in a two-round democratic vote, during an unstable political situation for the parliament. Therefore, the institution of the presidency has a stable current discourse.

Parliamentary elections

Parliamentary elections in Bulgaria have occurred in: 1997, 2001, 2005, 2009, 2013 (Early), 2014 (Early), 2017 (Early), 2021 (April), 2021 (Early, July), 2021 (Early, Nov), 2022 (Early, Oct), 2023 (Early, April), 2024 (Early, June), 2024 (Early, Oct) (OSCE, n.d.).

The Parliament's mandate is four years without interruption, with 240 MEPs. For the course of three years, 2021 – 2024, preceded by pre-covid protests locally and affected by the neighbouring Russia-Ukraine War, in Bulgaria early parliamentary elections were held seven times. This led to fourteen governments in only three years, marking political instability and inconsistency. This political instability, however, marks an actively evolving democratic process.

Nevertheless, it remains unclear whether the country is a subject of competition for external influence expressed through politics, and, if so, what shares per actor represent its current political composition. This question is examined, in a time of political instability, combined with the changing affiliation of the population towards political parties.

Affiliation of political parties, organised in descending order (winners, top 3)

These are the main groups who won the elections in the last few years: roughly, West (EU/UK) – East (Russia) – South (Türkiye).

Election round	Winner 1 (% of votes)	Winner 2 (% of votes)	Winner 3 (% of votes)	Affiliation (relative)
2021 (April)	GERB-SDS (22.8)	ITN (17.4)	BSPzB (15)	West, New nationalist, East
2021 (July)	ITN (23.8)	GERB-SDS (23.2)	BSPzB (13.2)	New nationalist, West, East
2021 (Nov)	PP (25.3)	GERB-SDS (22.4)	DPS (12.9)	New West, West, South
2022 (Oct)	GERB-SDS (24.5)	PP (19.5)	DPS (13.3)	West, New West, South
2023 (April)	GERB-SDS (25.4)	PP-DB (23.5)	Revival (13.6) DPS (13.2)	West, New West, New nationalist, South
2024 (June)	GERB (24)	DPS (16.5)	PP-DB (13.9) Revival (13.4)	West, South, New West, Nationalist
2024 (Oct)	GERB-SDS (26.4)	PP-DB (14)	Revival (13.4) DPS-New beginning (11.5)	West, New West, Nationalist, New South

Table 3. Top three winning parties, seven rounds of elections. Source: Central Electoral Committee of Bulgaria, (2024).

These trends show strong Western affiliation of the dominant parties. There are two types of Western-leaning parties: New and Well-Established, which depend on the trust of the population in the internal political system, the parties, and the political leaders.

These internal processes are not related to the external affiliation of the parties. Some relevance to proposed programmes as pro-economy, pro-society, or pro-inclusion is possible. Each election round, with a few months difference from the previous one, shows repetitive trends and surprises. Among the key trends are: 13-23% of the votes go for nationalist parties; the votes for the socialist party progressively reduce; and the votes for the pro-Turkish minorities party progressively grow.

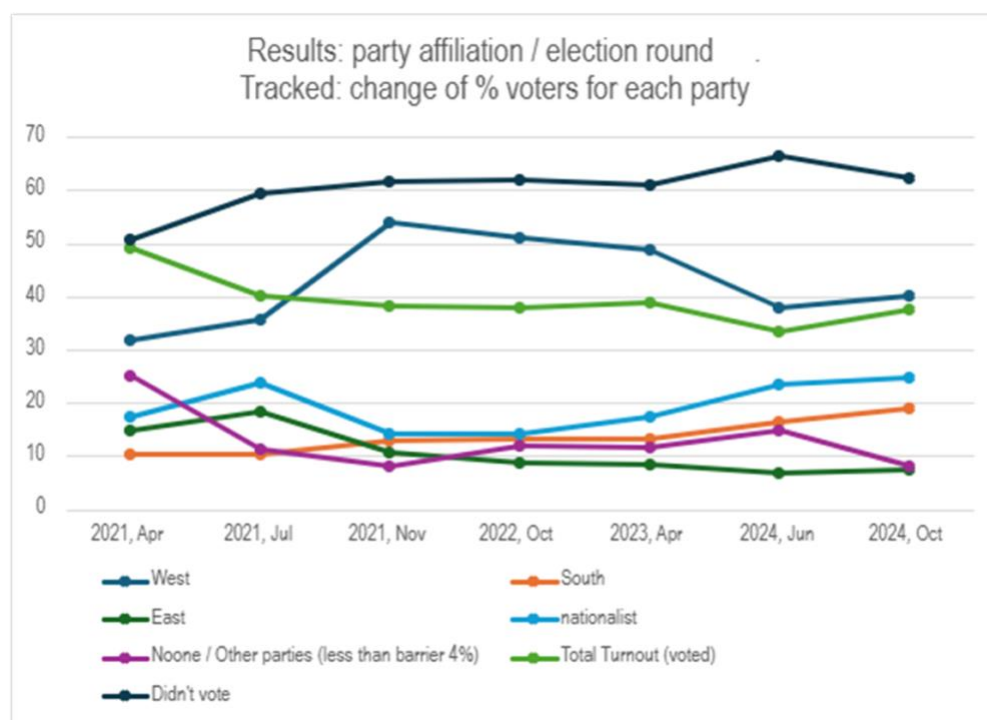


Fig. 5. Graph on party affiliation - change of vote, 2021-2024. Source: Central Electoral Committee of Bulgaria, (2024).

The results show that, despite noise related to the repetitive elections, a major change in voting is not present. New parties appear, some parties with nationalist motives enter parliament, but the democratic parties constantly win the majority of votes. The 2024 round of elections distinguished old parties versus newly established ones, with the old ones forming a government. This led to massive protests in 2025, to be discussed below.

Several surprises happened in the seventh round of elections in 2024: decomposition of the pro-Turkish party, with total votes of 19% which is significantly higher than previous results; unification of the socialist pro-Russian parties, with total amount of votes 7.6% which is slightly more than the previous elections round, but still quite low result for the

party. The democratic pro-Western parties have accumulated result of 40%, however they oppose each other based on 'old' and 'new' model of ruling. The nationalist parties have accumulated results of nearly 25%.

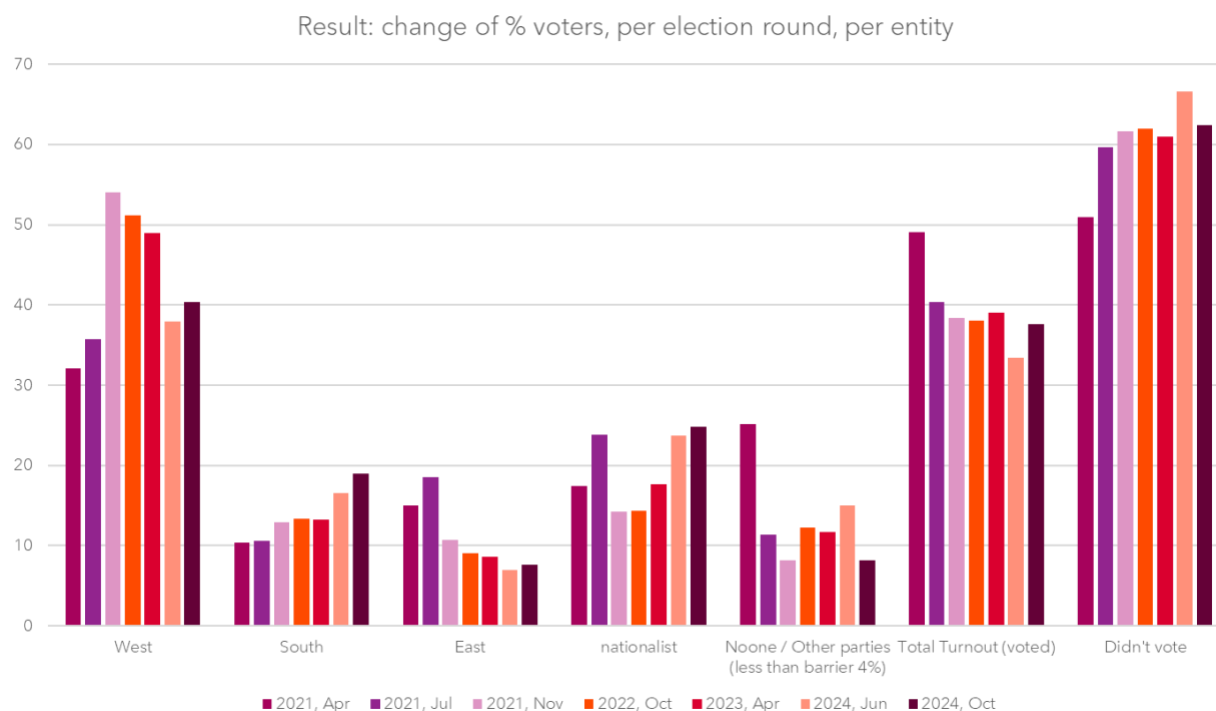


Fig. 6. Graph on change of % voters per election round, 2021-2024. Source: Central Electoral Committee of Bulgaria, (2024).

From the established parties, the situation is as follows: GERB(-SDS), which is pro-Western, either alone or in coalition, permanently wins between 22-26% of votes. DPS, which discusses minorities and is pro-Turkish, constantly wins between 10-13% - increased to 16% in 2024. Presuming the elections are fair, this could be due to the large Bulgarian diaspora in Türkiye, speaking the Turkish language and/or practising Islam. However, OSCE-ODIHR reports and different media sources show that often undereducated organised groups arrive to the polls with the purpose of targeted voting.³ The correctness of the results is questionable. The party BSPzBG, (pro-Russian Left) has decreased progressively from 15% to 7%, affected by the ongoing conflict between Russia-Ukraine, combined with internal challenges of party leadership. The change of

³ As observed in the OSCE-ODIHR reports.

leader and slight change of name may have allowed for progress of 0.7% more votes in the latest round.

This shows a trend of progressively positive reactions from Bulgarian society towards newly formed parties and coalitions. Simultaneously, waves of discontent towards the previously governing parties prior to 2019, GERB and DPS New Beginning, have escalated.

On 1 December 2025, more than 150,000 people in Sofia and the other main cities held protests, supported from abroad by Bulgarian communities in: London, Frankfurt, Prague, Berlin, Brussels, Vienna, Malaga, Munich, Hague, and Paris. Triggers for the protest include the 2026 Budget, the adoption of the euro in the country from 01 January 2026, and, most importantly, the high-level corruption (including that impacting on the state budget).

Two key figures - the leader of DPS New Beginning Party (sanctioned by the US Magnitski Law and by the UK) Mr Delyan Peevsk, and the leader of GERB Party, Mr Boyko Borissov – have been accused of corruption. These two figures are at the head of the ruling governmental coalition of the 2024 elected government. Bulgaria's judiciary system has not taken any action against them so far. Protestors demanded the 'resignation of the government' and 'mafia' structures to be permanently stopped and punished – a public response to a captured state. The only political figure who supported the protests is President Rumen Radev. He called for the resignation of the government and new early elections, on 2 December.

The protests highlight the issues of perceived unpunished corruption, state capture, and urgent need for supremacy of the rule of law. To achieve these, Bulgaria cannot currently cope alone. It needs support from better developed democracies, and supranational organisations, especially for the purpose of cutting the power of structures capturing the state, achieving fair prosecution and judiciary activities, and imprisonment of all corrupt figures, accompanied with their respective structures. This is the necessary precondition for the future flourishing of democracy in Bulgaria.

4. METHOD III. NETWORK ANALYSIS: Six Power Elements, External Interests⁴

Measuring regional influence: three main actors; six elements of power

This research aims to identify whether and how the political instability is related to power competition between the three geopolitical actors, applying the *six elements of power* framework (Kirilova, 2024) which assesses the areas of negotiations with different actors and regions, thus suggesting areas of competition and opportunities for cooperation. This part examines whether the foreign policy of the case study country is consistent, in line with the party affiliation during the elections. Diplomatic meetings are assessed with the three major geopolitical competitors for the latest year of electoral instability covered in this paper – 2024.

Data collection⁵

The data collection process has been completed for the period 01 January – 31 December 2024. The interpretation of further results can be added for wider time periods.

The network analysis provides cross-assessment for the three competitors, over the *six elements of power* framework. The dataset includes diplomatic meetings for the selected period, collected from the websites of the executive power structures of the country, responsible for its foreign policy. Three institutions belong to the executive power of the country, and relate to its foreign activity in strategic, representative and executive functions. These are the Presidency, the Council of Ministers, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). Data on high-level meetings is collected from the website of the President of Bulgaria (n.d.) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (n.d.).

Results from the Presidency and Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA, Jan-Dec 2024):

⁴ This method has been suggested by Dr Rohan Mukherjee. It is widely used in his work, the latest of which includes the book *Ascending order: rising powers and the politics of status in international relations* (2022).

⁵ The data has been collected from official websites, accessible to the wide public.

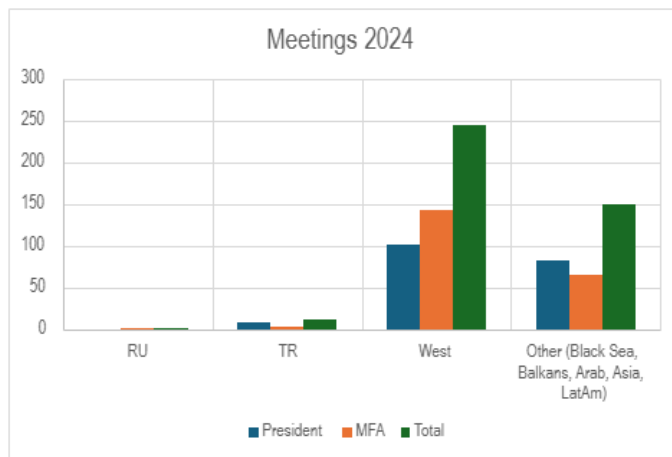


Fig. 7. Graph on Meetings 2024, President and MFA. Data collected from Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bulgaria, <https://www.mfa.bg/bg/news> and President of the Republic of Bulgaria, <https://www.president.bg/news/>

For the period 2024-2025, the presidential institution – President and Vice-President – had a total of 102 meetings with Western partners, and 84 meetings with ‘Other’ partners – the later divided into Arab (23), the Black Sea countries (13), Balkan (16), Asian (20), and Latin American (1).

Topics of meetings for the President by power element: Military/Security (45 West, 27 Other), Economy/Investment (39 West, 37 Other), Energy/Climate (20 West, 12 Other), Diplomacy/Politics (55 West, 48 Other), Governance/Society (26 West, 11 Other), and Information Exchange/Access (40 West, 42 Other).

For the same period, the MFA had 144 meetings with Western partners and 67 meetings with Other partners: 29 Arab, 2 Latin American, 12 Asian, 7 Balkan, and 14 with countries from the Black Sea region. Topics of the MFA meetings, by power element: Military/Security (West 82, Other 39, Türkiye 9), Economy/Investment (West 132, Other 17, Türkiye 5), Energy/Climate (West 13, Other 10, Türkiye 5), Diplomacy/Politics (West 146, Other 2, Russia 4, Türkiye 10), Governance/Society (West 22, Other 1, Russia 1, Türkiye 6), and Information Exchange/Access (West 25, Other 19, Türkiye 5).

With Türkiye, the President had nine meetings, while the MFA had four. With Russia, the President did not have any meetings. However, the MFA required one visit for an explanation of Russia’s action towards its own political prisoners and two appointments

of new foreign ambassadors based in Moscow.⁶ The MFA supported all EU documents and common declarations, condemning actions of Russia in this period.

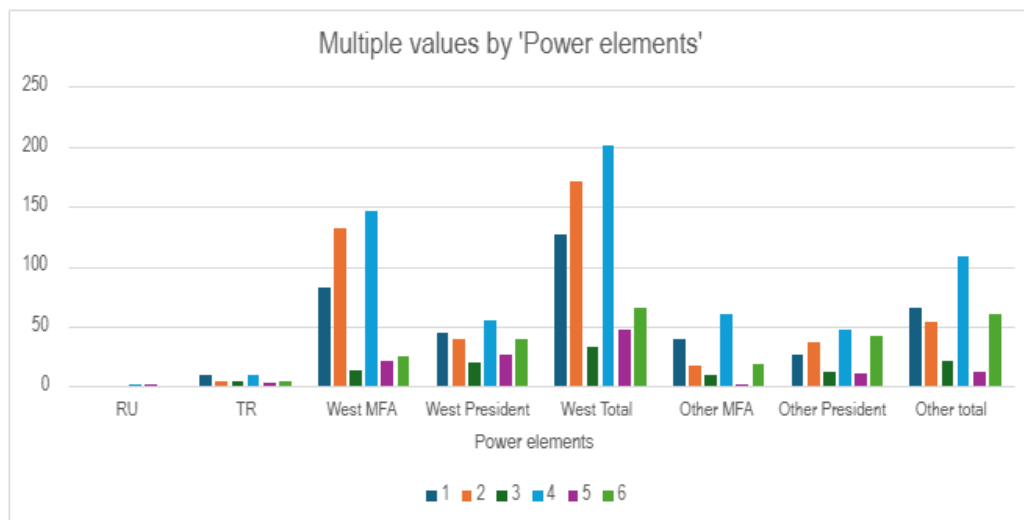


Fig. 8. Graph on discussed topics, by six power elements, by the President and MFA with foreign partners, in 2024. Coding: 1)Military/Security, 2)Economy/Investment, 3)Energy/Climate, 4)Diplomacy/Politics, 5)Society/Governance, 6)Information access/exchange. Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bulgaria (n.d.) and President of the Republic of Bulgaria (n.d.).

In conclusion on external partners, consecutive foreign policy meetings of the MFA for the 2024-2025 show a clear direction visible toward the West – the EU and NATO, in line with the UK and the US.⁷ Some meetings are related to the Middle East and the stability of the region, necessary in the current turbulent times.

5. CONCLUSION

In this research, Bulgaria is examined as an island of stability between two conflict-prone regions: the Black Sea region and the Western Balkans. The geopolitical stability, electoral democracy, and topics of cooperation with external competitors for influence are discussed. The analysis is applicable to other case study countries, with similar

⁶ The case is related to A. Navalny - Bulgaria expressed a diplomatic demarche. Details: <https://www.mfa.bg/bg/news/40103>

⁷ The collected data is only from official websites, accessible to the wide public.

logical structure, but different data sets. Recommendations for policy-makers are provided at the end.

This research addressed the following questions: Is Bulgaria a predictable partner? Can the West rely on its consecutive policies? What is the country's role in the Balkans, the Black Sea region and South-Eastern Europe?

5.1. Academic aspects

In the context of regional competition, a case study country was examined. This empirical case study was justified by the geopolitical location and historical past of Bulgaria. Its main purpose was to test a theory on power competition and regional conflict prevention. The current case study addressed the relation between the ongoing political instability, including seven rounds of elections and fourteen governments in the last three years. It evaluated whether or not the recent electoral changes in the country are related to the external power competition. Network analysis showed their relative importance among other geopolitical actors. The observed attitudes towards the three competitors in the internal political reality based on election results, and the external diplomatic meetings, were discussed.

The results tracked changes in: 1) geopolitical background; 2) electoral unrest and its relation to the three competing actors; 3) network analysis of foreign policy / diplomatic meetings with each of the three competitors, and topics of discussion, based on the six power elements framework.

The results from *Method I*, the geopolitical analysis, on the case study prove its suitability. In the context of repetitive protests and diverse countries in the Black Sea region and the Western Balkans, Bulgaria (EU and NATO member) is actively pro-Western. It is an example of relative stability, surrounded by two conflict-prone regions, the Western Balkans and the Black Sea.

The results from *Method II*, the analysis on recent elections, show that, most importantly, the country is democratic. The constant internal political changes show that the democratic process is ongoing. Elections happen, new parties appear and rooted power

is undermined; Bulgaria is a democracy, but its functioning is still developing. The inability of governments to stay in power to complete their mandate affects the efficiency of the state in completing its obligations. Surprisingly, despite the repetitive elections, constant competition for influence from external actors is not observed. The results show shares of influence through the political parties by their affiliation. In the constant changes, different parties enter the Parliament: democrat (pro-Western), socialist (pro-Eastern), minority-oriented (pro-Southern), and nationalist. However, the ruling majority constantly remains pro-Western and dramatic changes are not observed. The main competition is found between old and new parties. The main problem, which led to repetitive protests after 2019 (including newly intense ones in 2025), is the way of ruling of the previous parties – based on alleged corruption, state capture, lack of supremacy of the rule of law, and rooted criminal structures.

The results from *Method III*, the network analysis, show that the dominant external communication of the country is with Western partners. Official communication with Russia is missing, except for emergencies. Communication with Türkiye is at bare minimum. Further research could examine, for all external actors, the topics of communication per actor in detail. The examined data includes only official communication between governments. It is based on publicly available data. The data of official meetings covers the period January-December 2024.

Relation between the political instability and the external meetings (by three competitors):

These results show that, most probably, the political instability in the country is not related to competition of external actors. The processes are mostly internal, influenced the inflow of Bulgarians from abroad including during COVID-19, rather than by external competition. The main internal competition grew between old and new political structures, rather than political structures supported by competing external actors. However, a major concern is the high levels of corruption in the country, addressed by the Council of Europe's Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) Compliance Report 2025, as well as the EU's Rule of Law Report 2024 (Council of Europe, 2025; European Commission, 2024). Based on these reports, Western democracies might be interested in supporting the country to manage its internal corruption. An additional concern is that

the changes of governments started after protests in 2019, temporarily weakened by COVID-19. Some issues related to governance are not clarified yet – more transparency is needed, as well as supremacy of the rule of law, and budget planning allowing higher income than expenses.

In conclusion, this research shows that Bulgaria has numerous internal issues, which make it a questionable partner in international relations. Those are: repetitive elections, changing political figures, the possibility of external influence on local historical perspectives, and numerous topics discussed over cooperation. Despite these ambiguities, the research concludes that Bulgaria is an island of relative stability, considering its conflict-prone neighbouring regions Western Balkans and Black Sea, historical power competition between external hegemons, and current stable pro-Western attitude in the repetitive rounds of democratic elections. The highest number of high-level foreign meetings is with Western partners, mostly discussing international relations topics of security, diplomacy, and information exchange. Based on these results, and considering its local, historical and political context, Bulgaria is an island of stability for its Western partners. However, the repetitive democratic protests in defence of pro-Western governance, show urgent need for external support to cope with the state capture, coordinated criminal white-collar structures, high level corruption, and lack of supremacy of the rule of law.

5.2. Policy recommendations

To the European Union: the cooperation within all EU member states on all issues is significant. Cooperation within the West is of key importance for its strength. Balanced relations with the other competitors are the basis for building trust, necessary for establishing peace and prosperity. Bulgaria is currently pro-Western. The EU should support the country to overcome its internal challenges, including respect and supremacy of the rule of law, high levels of corruption, criminal structures in power and state capture. This would guarantee lasting stability not only in the country but as an extrapolating effect on neighbouring regions.

To the United Kingdom: the cooperation between the UK and the European Union is significant, especially on the topics of security, information exchange, research, youth, education and culture. The UK's support of the EU Member States in package, rather than by bilateral agreements, would contribute to increasing the trust within the EU towards the UK. Some EU member states, such as Bulgaria, have regional strength in their relations with potential candidate countries in the Western Balkans and the Black Sea region. The UK, by supporting Bulgaria, could strengthen its positions both in the EU and towards its candidate countries from the two regions. However, the UK might propose to Bulgaria some ideas of how to cope with state-capture, high levels of corruption, criminal structures in power, and need for supremacy of the rule of law.

To the West: Based on the elections results, it may be valuable to have external negotiations with the President, as this is the main stable figure of governance in Bulgaria throughout the last nine years. Another strong figure, Ms Mariya Gabriel as Minister of Foreign Affairs, was a charismatic leader, successfully managing the vocabulary of the West. The orientation of the country is pro-Western in all its recent rounds of elections. In the diplomatic meetings through 2024, solid pro-Western attitudes are detected. The topics of cooperation include diverse areas towards different partners from different regions. With the West, diplomacy, security and information exchange are among the main topics, which are significant for strong bonds of cooperation. However, Bulgaria faces difficulties to cope with managing its own corruption at the moment, which seems barely possible without external support. The country needs strong Western partners to support the processes of supremacy of the rule of law in the country, eliminating corruption, dissolving and punishing figures from the criminal structures in power, and coping with state capture.

To Bulgaria: For Bulgaria, the optimal strategy is one of consistent relations with the West (the EU and the UK), while discussing some neutral topics with other partners. Balanced competition of external actors might lead to internal political stability. Balancing the areas of external cooperation, while accomplishing its appointments to Western alliances to which the country belongs – the EU and NATO – is of key importance. The country should perform according to its capabilities and interests, maintaining stability and

strength, contributing to the development of its neighbouring regions, the Black Sea and the Western Balkans. As such, Bulgaria needs to stabilize its internal political processes, aiming for transparency and high quality of implementation of all institutional processes. A key point is the supremacy of the rule of law and freedom from state capture.

Note: The author applies an academic perspective of international relations throughout this research. The final policy recommendations are based on the results of the research, the complete version of which is planned to be published in an academic journal. The recommendations are as objective as possible. The main ideas flowing in the series of protests, which led to repetitive failure of government, including massive mobilisation of the population in 2025, are discussed.

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