

Election Watch for the Digital Age



Bulgaria

Preelection assessment

Legislative elections set for April 2021

Bulgaria will hold parliamentary elections in April against a backdrop of democratic deterioration and antigovernment protests. The vote is seen as a test of the ruling coalition, which is composed of the center-right Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) party and its junior partner, the nationalist United Patriots alliance. The Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), the main opposition, holds the second-most seats in parliament, followed by the centrist Movement for Rights and Freedom (DPS).

Anticorruption protests began in the summer of 2020 and continued into the winter, with demands ranging from judicial reform to snap elections and the resignation of the government, including Prime Minister Boyko Borisov and chief prosecutor Ivan Geshev. In October, the European Parliament passed a resolution condemning Bulgaria's "significant deterioration in respect for the principles of rule of law, democracy and fundamental rights, including the independence of the judiciary, separation of powers, the fight against corruption and freedom of the media." Legal changes in 2019 allowed unlimited private financing for political parties, opening the door for increased oligarchic influence and vote buying. In September 2020, the electoral code was amended to allow polling places to use a combination of electronic and paper ballots, instead of switching to electronic voting as planned. The use of mixed voting mechanisms could compound a lack of trust among voters.

Freedom House has identified the following as key issues to watch ahead of election day:

- **Influence operations:** Multiple factors may negatively impact the online information environment ahead of the elections. Concentrated media ownership, which extends to online outlets, allows the government and oligarchs to exert extensive influence over reporting. Political parties have been linked to social media influence operations in the past, leading several parties to sign an agreement in 2015 against the use of these campaigning tactics. Nonetheless, recent research has documented separate domestic and Russia-based influence operations to bolster attitudes on Russia or spread divisive and misleading content about Bulgarian politics. These combined media factors may disrupt voters' ability to engage with reliable information ahead of the election.
- **Cyberattacks:** Government agencies have been targeted by cyberattacks in recent years, including a 2019 breach of the National Revenue Agency, and DDoS attacks on the Central Election Commission (CEC) in 2015 and 2013. Following these attacks, the CEC identified DDoS attacks as a main technical risk during elections, along with personal data leaks and other compromising cyberattacks. In January 2021, a platform for a volunteer ballot monitoring initiative was hacked, and the personal data of thousands of Bulgarians was uploaded to the initiative's online recruitment platform.

Bulgaria has a score of 76 out of 100, with 100 representing the least vulnerability in terms of election integrity, on Freedom House's Election Vulnerability Index, which is based on a selection of key election-related indicators. The score reflects a history of credible elections, despite concerns about state capture and declining media freedom. The country is rated **Free** in *Freedom in the World 2020*, with a score of 80 out of 100 with respect to its political rights and civil liberties, and as a **semi-consolidated democracy** in *Nations in Transit 2020*, with a score of 59 out of 100 for the country's democratic progress. To learn more about these annual Freedom House assessments, please visit the Bulgaria country reports in [Freedom in the World](#) and [Nations in Transit](#).