

Bulgaria

Period of democratic transition: 1989–1990

Pro-democracy civic movement: present

Having sided initially with Germany in World War II, Bulgaria's government fell to a Communist-led coup when Soviet forces invaded in 1944, and the monarchy was abolished shortly after the war. From 1954 to 1989, Communist leader Todor Zhivkov ruled the country.

Bulgaria's international reputation became tarnished in the 1980s through a series of issues including severe energy shortages, persecution of Turkish minorities, and growing political differences between Moscow and Zhivkov. In 1989, environmental, civic, political, and trade union organizations joined the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF), a loose, broad-based movement that pressed for democratic reform. Protests, strikes, and mass rallies forced Bulgaria's Socialist Party (the former Communist Party) to agree to June 1990 multiparty parliamentary elections, which the party won by a narrow margin. Civic activism also spread to the large Turkish minority, which in 1990 won significant minority rights. Amid a political scandal and rising nonviolent civic ferment, the country's Socialist president resigned and UDF leader Zhelyu Zhelev was elected president by Parliament with support from Communist and pro-Communist legislators who responded to pressure from the growing mass protest movement. A multiparty system was established by a new constitution adopted in 1991, and parliamentary elections were held in October, with the UDF winning the largest share and establishing a reform government. President Zhelev was elected to the office in a nationwide, contested vote in January 1992.

Bulgaria's transition to a multiparty system was made more difficult by an entrenched Communist bureaucracy. The UDF was instrumental in paving the way for additional democratic reforms in the late 1990s, which was furthered by former child king Simeon II, who promised faster movement toward democracy in the early 21st century. Free and fair elections in 2006 ensured European Union membership for Bulgaria.