

# Mass protests in Bulgaria: Government collapses immediately ahead of introduction of the euro

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Sustained mass protests forced the Bulgarian government of Prime Minister Rossen Zhelyazkov (GERB) to resign last week. This further intensifies the political crisis in the country, which plans to introduce the euro as its currency on January 1, 2026.

On Wednesday evening, more than 150,000 people demonstrated in the government district of the Bulgarian capital Sofia. They protested against the planned budget for the coming year, which envisages tax increases, as well as against the pervasive corruption in the country, and demanded the resignation of the widely hated government.

Large numbers of people also took to the streets in the country's second-largest city, Plovdiv, as well as in more than 20 cities across Bulgaria, including Varna, Burgas, Veliko Tarnovo and Razgrad. Bulgarians also gathered for demonstrations abroad on Wednesday, including in London, Berlin, Vienna, Zurich and New York.

The protests have been continuing for weeks. Previously, more than 50,000 people demonstrated in the capital. Two weeks ago, clashes with the police occurred following a rally, as reported by the AFP news agency.

An office of the governing party GERB was vandalised, and several police vehicles were damaged. Officers used tear gas and batons. There were at least 10 arrests and at least three people were injured. Some demonstrators attacked the headquarters of the DPS, which supports the government, with stones and bottles.

The governing coalition of the right-wing, pro-EU party GERB, which ruled together with the Socialists (BSP) and the nationalist ITS, was deeply hated among

the population. Zhelyazkov had only been in office since the beginning of the year. Following massive protests in 2020 against the then government of Prime Minister Boyko Borissov (GERB), the southeastern European country has already experienced seven snap elections.

The next elections are also very unlikely to bring a stable government to power. The most recent governing alliance also depended on the support of the Turkish opposition party DPS. This party is led by the oligarch Delyan Peevski, who controlled a significant part of the Bulgarian media before being forced to divest parts of it following US sanctions for corruption. The United Kingdom also imposed sanctions on Peevski in 2023.

Last week, President Rumen Radev directly invited the largest parliamentary faction to begin talks on forming a government. If both the largest and the second-largest factions fail, new elections will be held in two months, which is considered likely. Until then, a caretaker government will be installed.

This government will attempt to pass the draft budget for 2026, which has provoked such fierce opposition among the population and which the now-resigned government was ultimately forced to withdraw due to the mass protests. It provides for further tax increases, higher social security contributions and a massive expansion of the security apparatus.

The budget represents the culmination of drastic attacks on the population, which has had to endure ever more severe cuts in recent years to meet the criteria for the introduction of the euro.

Since the country joined the European Union in 2007, countless governments have adopted ever new austerity packages, and the EU has most recently demanded

increasingly harsh cuts to budgets to maintain the convergence criteria for euro adoption. The introduction of the currency originally planned for 2024 failed due to extremely high inflation.

Bulgaria is now set to become the 21st member of the eurozone, making it the poorest country to use the common currency. Forty percent of the population live in poverty or are at risk of poverty. The minimum pension is below €300 per month, and the average pension, at just over €500, is only slightly higher.

Average wages are around €1,000 per month and thus well below the EU average. The situation is particularly precarious for young people. Finding adequately paid work with which to support oneself and a family is virtually hopeless. Around 1.8 million Bulgarians currently live abroad; they are often highly qualified young people who see no prospects in the country.

It is therefore not surprising that young people are playing a major role in the recent protests. The *Wall Street Journal* described the protests in Sofia as the first successful overthrow of a government by Gen Z in Europe. In Europe as well, in fact, the combination of poverty, lack of prospects and a ruthless, corrupt ruling class is driving young people to protest, as in Indonesia, Morocco, Madagascar and Nepal.

At the same time, the widespread opposition among the population finds no expression in the establishment parties of the country, almost all of which have been involved in government over the past 20 years and have implemented the same policies. In the last parliamentary elections, voter turnout fell to less than 40 percent.

The planned introduction of the euro is also opposed by a large majority. A survey by the Ministry of Finance had to concede that a majority were against the introduction. Independent surveys put opposition at nearly 60 percent.

Although the previous currency, the lev, has been pegged to the euro since 1999, and before that to the Deutsche Mark, the conversion will be accompanied by price increases. The president of the European Central Bank (ECB), Christine Lagarde, stated that the introduction of the euro in January would fuel inflation.

Berlin and Brussels have pushed for the introduction of the euro—on the one hand for economic reasons and to bind Bulgaria even more closely into the alliance against Russia. Despite strong domestic political

pressure, the GERB government stood by the EU and supported the war against Russia in Ukraine. One concern within the EU, therefore, is that in the event of new elections, more pro-Russian forces could increase their influence.

Bulgaria plays an important geostrategic role due to its central location in southern Europe and its access to the Black Sea. While the budget for areas such as education, health and social services was cut back drastically, the government planned the purchase of new fighter jets for almost €1 billion. Naval units are also to receive new ships.

At the beginning of the Ukraine war, Bulgaria had already delivered extensive quantities of Soviet-era military equipment. Now the country's arms industry is being restructured and expanded.

German arms manufacturer Rheinmetall is planning a new plant in Sopot that will produce gunpowder and 155-millimetre artillery shells. The company and Bulgarian officials have signed a corresponding contract with a volume of more than €1 billion. The plant is scheduled to begin operations in 2027.

In September, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen visited the factory and emphasised Bulgaria's importance as a weapons supplier for the war against Russia. At the beginning of the war, "one-third of the weapons used in Ukraine came from Bulgaria," according to von der Leyen.

Most recently, Rheinmetall also concluded a joint venture for propellant powder in the Romanian town of Victoria. By 2030, 20,000 tonnes of propellant powder are to be produced there annually, which serves as the propulsive power for tanks and rockets.



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