

# HOSTILE NARRATIVE BRIEF

## WAR IN UKRAINE

Political Context: Bulgaria



June 2023



## About The Beacon Project

The International Republican Institute strengthens citizen voices and helps make their leaders more accountable and responsive. To put it simply, IRI encourages democracy in places where it is absent, helps democracy become more effective where it is in danger and shares best practices where democracy is flourishing.

Vladimir Putin is actively trying to sway public opinion throughout Europe using hostile propaganda, disinformation, and political subversion as a way to destabilize its neighbors. Therefore, in 2015, IRI launched the Beacon Project to counteract this misinformation.

The Beacon Project does not prevent disinformation from occurring—a laudable but impossible goal. Nor does it confront every instance of disinformation—though we work with partners who do just that. IRI's focus is to dismantle the underlying conditions that allow disinformation to spread. Strengthening democracy is the best approach for nations to respond not just to today's threat, but to better endure in the face of future threats in whatever form they take.

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# Introduction

Bulgaria has been mired in a political crisis since the spring of 2021, with five parliamentary elections taking place in two years. During this time, traditional parties repeatedly gained and lost ground; new players arose and quickly peaked, before losing some or all popular appeal; nationalists dramatically increased their visibility and influence; the president emerged as the key power broker and decision maker; traditionally apolitical institutions became embroiled in political infighting; much-anticipated judicial reforms were stalled; and crucial political decisions, including the adoption of the euro, were heatedly debated and ultimately postponed.

In the initial stages of the crisis, opposition parties, some of them newly formed, challenged the dominance of the hitherto ruling party, GERB. Having been in power almost continuously between 2009 and 2021, GERB and its leader, former three-time PM **Boyko Borisov**, were widely accused of facilitating endemic corruption, catering to oligarchs, and suppressing civil protests. The elections in April and July 2021 demonstrated GERB's eroding popularity but did not result in a new governing coalition, as GERB's diverse opponents failed to find common ground. The country was meanwhile governed by a caretaker cabinet appointed by President **Rumen Radev**.

The elections in November 2021 yielded an unstable coalition centered around a recently founded party, We Continue the Change (PP), and its leader, **Kiril Petkov**. The uneasy alliance included both the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), which is traditionally left-wing and pro-Russian; and Democratic Bulgaria (DB), a free-market and pro-Western party. Another member was a populist entity, There Is Such a People (ITN), whose political orientation was (and still remains) ambiguous.

The government ruled for only seven months and collapsed in the summer of 2022. President Radev proceeded to appoint another interim government, which is widely seen as a tool for his own political agenda. The elections of October 2022 produced a hung parliament and the subsequent negotiations between the parties ended in a gridlock, further deepening the crisis. Meanwhile, the radical far-right party Revival (Vazrazhdane), led by the staunchly pro-Russian **Kostadin Kostadinov**, exploited the crisis and steadily increased its popularity.

The latest parliamentary vote took place in April 2023 and saw GERB come in first, closely followed by a coalition comprising PP and DB. Following months of campaigning against the adoption of the euro and the provision of military aid for Ukraine, Revival marked its best-ever performance and took the third spot. In late May, GERB and the PP-DB alliance announced an agreement to form a rotation government. At the same time, several massive and potentially related scandals erupted. The first pitted GERB against a former ally, Chief Prosecutor **Ivan Geshev** – himself a divisive figure hailed by some as a vigorous crime fighter and disparaged by others as a stooge of the mafia. The second scandal began after a PP member leaked a recording made secretly during a meeting of the party's leadership.

Bulgaria continues to be in the midst of a political crisis, where news comes in every few minutes and no forecast of what a stable government may look like is available. At the time of the writing of this report, PP-DB is aiming to suggest a cabinet with a rotating Prime Minister. The idea is for two candidates, Nikolay Denkov (PP-DB) and Mariya Gabriel (GERB) to be taking terms as PMs every nine months in an effort to form a pro-Western government. There is no way to predict whether this idea will be successful, or whether Bulgaria is headed to yet another general elections in the fall of 2023 (in addition to much anticipated local elections at the same time).



# War in Ukraine in the Political Discourse

Russia's war on Ukraine exacerbated the already existing divisions in Bulgarian society and politics. Pro-Russian sentiments have long been widespread in Bulgaria due to the two countries' linguistic, religious, and historical links. These sentiments have been strengthened in the last decade by a deluge of anti-Western and pro-Russian propaganda distributed across various media channels, which frequently gets amplified by political actors. After the initial shock and confusion from Russia's invasion of Ukraine waned, Russia-leaning politicians and celebrities began efforts to erode the Bulgaria's support for Ukraine, often parroting the Russian Embassy's talking points. In March 2023, the Center for the Study of Democracy (CSD), a local think-tank, compared the communication activities of several Russian embassies in Balkan countries. According to **the study**, the embassy in Sofia was by far the most active and effective in its communication efforts, having published 7,193 posts and collected over 2.33 million interactions in the period 2021-2022.

**Ukrainian refugees** arriving in Bulgaria became easy early targets for hostile rhetoric. Social media posts and media articles denigrated Ukrainians as **rich**, spoiled, and ungrateful. One of the most prominent detractors is Revival's Kostadinov, who has repeatedly **called** Ukrainians "*tourists posing as refugees*" and declared that his party would expel them if it comes to power. Since its appointment in August 2022, the caretaker cabinet has been largely **indifferent** to the **plight** of the refugees and disinterested in managing the government-led accommodation program. The anti-refugee discourse tends to fuse with variations of the **denazification** narrative, which continues to circulate in the media. A leading reinforcer of this narrative is again Kostadinov, who has even gone so far as to **suggest** that Bulgaria also needed to be "*denazified*".

**Sanctions against Russia**, especially in the energy sector, have been another divisive issue. Moscow's early threats to cut energy supplies to Bulgaria were widely shared by Bulgarian media outlets. Politicians, including President Radev, **warned** the government against jeopardizing Bulgaria's energy ties with Moscow. Still, the Petkov cabinet (2021-22) rejected Russia's ultimatum to pay for gas in rubles, and in response, Gazprom **discontinued** its deliveries in April 2022. Following the demise of the coalition government a few months later, the Radev-appointed caretaker cabinet attempted to resume negotiations with Gazprom and announced plans to re-export petroleum products made from Russian oil, a move that would have **breached** the EU-imposed embargo. The anti-sanction narrative has weakened somewhat since the beginning of 2023, as the economic disaster and the "*cold and dark winter*" **prophesied** by pro-Kremlin actors failed to materialize.

The war has also incited debates around Bulgaria's status and responsibilities as a **NATO member**. Russia's narrative that NATO was to blame for the war has spread widely: in May 2022, a **YouGov survey** found that 44% of Bulgarians shared this view, while another 13% believed that Russia and NATO bore equal responsibility. The notion that Bulgaria might consider exiting NATO was attributed to former defense **minister** Stefan Yanev, who had been sacked from the Petkov cabinet soon after the invasion and later formed his own party. President Radev repeatedly **stated** that he would **not support** Ukraine's request for NATO membership, suggesting that his approval would have meant Bulgaria's active involvement in the war.



An intense public debate on the provision of **military aid to Ukraine** unfolded for much of 2022 and ended in November with a parliamentary vote in favor of the proposal. The decision sparked outrage among pro-Russian parties and media outlets, with prominent critics including **President Radev**, Socialist MEP **Elena Yoncheva**, and Revival leader **Kostadin Kostadinov**, among others. The debate was rekindled in January 2023, when Die Welt published an **investigation** revealing that the Petkov cabinet had secretly and indirectly provided Ukraine with weapons and fuel during the first months of the war. While the publication was well-received abroad, in Bulgaria it only served to further stoke political and societal tensions already inflamed by another looming election.

Fear-mongering became a popular election campaign tactic. Ahead of the last election, both **Revival** and **BSP** spread manipulated stories and conspiracies about Bulgaria's supposedly imminent active involvement in the war. Self-described citizen groups organized a series of marches that expressed support for Russia under the guise of demands for "**peace and neutrality**". The most recent of these events was attended by several thousand people, some of whom **vandalized** the European Commission office in Sofia.

Additional hostile narratives, commonly based upon manipulated claims and hoaxes, entered the local media discourse. Examples include allegations of US bioweapon laboratories, Western mercenaries secretly fighting on the frontlines, Ukrainian false flag attacks, fake war atrocities manufactured to be blamed on Russia, President Zelenskyy's drug addiction, contaminated foodstuffs imported from Ukraine, and so on. Mainstream political figures rarely reference such narratives in their rhetoric, but fringe politicians, biased media outlets, and online influencers continue to spread them. The Bulgarian social media environment, especially Facebook, provides fertile ground for the proliferation of Russian-sponsored disinformation and propaganda.



# Main Political Actors

## President Rumen Radev

Although the role of Bulgaria's president is primarily symbolic, the current head of state, Rumen Radev, plays an active part in the country's politics. He positioned himself as an opponent of GERB leader Borisov, which helped him win a second five-year term in November 2021. Even prior to his election in 2016, Radev had been suspected of harboring pro-Russian sentiments. Before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, he had repeatedly voiced the view that sanctions against Russia should be repealed. While he had **called** the annexation of Crimea "a violation of international law", he had also suggested that the peninsula was "Russian". After the war began, Radev repeatedly **emphasized** that energy ties with Moscow must be preserved, rejected any form of military assistance for Ukraine, and **refused** to back Kyiv's bid for NATO membership. Such statements provoked Mykhailo **Podolyak**, an advisor to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, to say that Radev wanted to see Ukraine "on its knees". Conversely, Radev has also made strong pro-Ukrainian statements during visits abroad and in **interviews** with foreign media. The Radev-appointed caretaker government did implement the parliament's decision to transfer weapons to Ukraine. However, it also attempted to circumvent EU sanctions and re-establish energy relations with Russia.

### Online presence:

- Official Facebook page of **Rumen Radev** (close to 370K followers)
- Top post in 2023: **statement** honoring International Women's Day (13K interactions)
- Top Ukraine/Russia-related post in 2023: a **declaration** that Bulgaria will neither participate in the EU's joint procurement of ammunition nor send any of its own fighter jets, tanks, and artillery (11.8K interactions).



## Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria (GERB)

Populist center-right party GERB openly states its pro-European orientation and its commitment to Bulgaria's integration into the Eurozone and the Schengen Area. However, it has also been accused of furthering Russian interests, particularly in the energy sector through the construction of the Balkan Stream gas pipeline. Still, GERB and its leader, Boyko Borisov, have publicly **voiced** their support for Ukraine and condemned Putin's war. The party backed the sanctions against Russia and the provision of military assistance to Ukraine. Its pro-Ukrainian stance was **described** by BSP as an insurmountable hurdle preventing the socialists from supporting a GERB-led government. Since the spring of 2021, Borisov has repeatedly attacked both President Radev and his rivals from the PP-DB alliance, accusing them of plunging the country into chaos. At the same time, he has frequently **urged** PP-DB to join GERB in forming a "Euro-Atlantic" (i.e. pro-EU and pro-NATO) governing coalition. PP-DB accepted a form of this proposal in late May 2023.



**Online presence:**

- Official Facebook pages of **GERB** (46.5K followers) and **Boyko Borisov** (319K followers); the party also communicates through the numerous pages of its regional and youth branches
- Top post in 2023: Borisov's photo from the **birthday** of his grandson (19.2K interactions)
- Top Ukraine/Russia-related post in 2023: one year after the invasion, Borisov **described** the war as “*an absolute madness*” started by “*a dictator like Putin*” and declared that Bulgaria should send weapons to Ukraine (3.3K interactions)



## We Continue the Change (PP) and Democratic Bulgaria (DB)

PP was founded in 2021 and almost instantly won the next parliamentary election on an anti-corruption, anti-GERB platform. Initially seen as affiliated with President Radev, it became the center of a diverse coalition also featuring the pro-Western DB, the Russia-leaning BSP and the populist ITN of showman Slavi Trifanov. Following the invasion, PP and DB **voiced** their unconditional **support** for Ukraine and harshly condemned Russia, in stark contrast with the ambiguous stances taken by Radev and BSP. These differences **strained** the relationship between Radev and PM Kiril Petkov and contributed to the unraveling of the coalition in July 2022. The war in Ukraine was one of several issues on which PP and DB saw eye to eye, which resulted in their eventual alliance in early 2023. The PP-DB coalition came in second in the April 2023 elections and entered protracted, tortuous negotiations with rival GERB. In late May 2023, PP-DB and GERB seemed to **agree** on a power-sharing formula involving the rotation of the PM post, with the explicit aim of strengthening Bulgaria's EU and NATO allegiances. The agreement polarized the PP-DB supporters, some of whom hailed it as a blow to the pro-Russian forces in Bulgaria, and others decried it as a ploy to legitimize Borisov and bring him back to power. At the time of writing, no formal agreement has been signed.

**Online presence:**

- Official Facebook pages of **PP** (92K followers), **DB** (41K followers), and **Yes, Bulgaria!** (one of DB's constituent parties, 191K followers), as well as PP leader **Kiril Petkov** (113K followers) and DB leader **Hristo Ivanov** (53K followers)
- Top posts in 2023: an **election ad** from PP's page (21.3K interactions) and an election campaign **video** from Hristo Ivanov's page (5.7K interactions)
- Top Ukraine/Russia-related post in 2023: two posts by Kiril Petkov's page, one about his visit to **Bucha** (5.4K interactions, posted on the anniversary of the invasion) and one about the Die Welt **article** revealing how Petkov's government secretly helped Ukraine (5.3K interactions)





## Revival (Vazrazhdane)

Revival's platform incorporates a radical form of Bulgarian nationalism and anti-systemic populism. The party took full advantage of the political turmoil and quickly grew out of obscurity, multiplying its election result from 2.4 percent in April 2021 to a whopping 13.6 percent in April 2023. This trend is also reflected in Revival's online presence: in the 12 months leading up to the October 2022 election, the party's official Facebook page **garnered** more than half of all user interactions with political pages. Since the beginning of 2023, Kostadinov's posts have received 3.5 million interactions, over five times more than the second-most interacted with politician (ITN's Slavi Trifonov). Revival's FB publications have generated 1.1 million interactions this year, twice as many as the second-best performing party (PP). This astonishing popularity is the result of a string of well-publicized stunts, from attempts to **storm** the parliament during an anti-vaccination rally to a well-organized campaign to collect signatures for a proposed referendum on Bulgaria's adoption of the euro. Revival and its leader, Kostadin Kostadinov, brazenly support Russia and frequently transmit the Kremlin's propaganda narratives directed against Ukraine and the West. For example, the party **opposed** the import of Ukrainian grain, **recognized** the illegitimate "*independence referendums*" in four Ukrainian regions, and **denounced** the decision to deliver arms to Kyiv. In March 2022, Kostadinov was **banned** from entering Ukraine for 10 years, and in April 2023, he was explicitly **endorsed** by the Russian ambassador, Eleonora Mitrofanova.

### Online presence:

- Official Facebook pages: **Revival** (107K followers) and **Kostadin Kostadinov** (300K followers); the party also communicates through the numerous pages of its regional branches
- Top post in 2023: Kostadinov sharing a **video** of his speech at the inauguration of the new parliament (30.8K interactions and almost 300K video views)
- Top Ukraine/Russia-related post in 2023: a live **video** of Kostadinov on the anniversary of the invasion, in which he claimed that Russia was winning the war and accused PP-DB, GERB, and the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS) of conspiring to send Bulgarian soldiers to the front in order to serve US interests (19.5K interactions and over 156K video views)







## Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP)

BSP is the successor of the Bulgarian Communist Party and describes itself as center-left and social-democratic, but its platform has become more socially conservative in the last few years. An example is the party's proclaimed **opposition** to what it calls "*gender ideology*", a term it uses to paint all LGBT issues and sex education in a negative light. Even though a BSP-led coalition oversaw Bulgaria's accession to the EU in 2007, the party retains some of its traditional orientation towards Moscow. Following the Russian invasion, the BSP leadership called for an end to the hostilities but stopped short of explicitly condemning the aggressor. In the subsequent months, BSP tried to block the **adoption** of sanctions on Russia and the **approval** of military assistance for Ukraine. However, BSP leader Korneliya Ninova, who was the economic minister in the Petkov cabinet, was rumored to have secretly overseen arms deliveries to the Ukrainian army in the early arms of the war – a claim that she **denied**.

### Online presence:

- Official Facebook pages of **BSP** (close to 60K followers) and **Korneliya Ninova** (87K followers)
- Top post in 2023: Ninova's publication about a **protest** for the preservation of the Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia (32.7K interactions). A potential removal of the monument in question is a hot topic of debate.
- Top Ukraine/Russia-related post in 2023: Ninova's **call** for a temporary ban on the import of Ukrainian grain (8.5K interactions) and BSP's **denouncement** of GERB and PP-DB as "the coalition of war" due to their willingness to send weapons to Ukraine (4.1K interactions)



## Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS)

DPS describes itself as staunchly liberal, despite relying on a conservative-leaning core constituency of rural and Muslim voters. Despite the party's declared pro-EU stance, it has been **accused** by opponents and former members of **maintaining** shadowy ties with Kremlin-controlled corporations. Following the invasion, the party publicly declared its support for Ukraine, **backed** the arms deliveries, and **sponsored** a bill banning the export of products made from Russian-imported oil.



**Online presence:**

- Official Facebook page of **DPS** (43K followers); few prominent party figures are present on social media
- Top post in 2023: a **statement** in Turkish and Bulgarian by the party's honorary leader, Ahmed Dogan, in which he expresses sympathy for the victims of the earthquake in Turkey (2.6K interactions)
- Top Ukraine/Russia-related post in 2023: none

**There Is Such a People (ITN)**

ITN was founded in 2020 by Slavi Trifonov, a well-known musician and TV host, and enjoyed wide popular support early on. It won the July 2021 parliamentary election but then failed to reach a coalition agreement with potential partners. Later, it became part of the coalition behind the Petkov cabinet, but its withdrawal in June 2022 led to the disintegration of the government. ITN's inability to deliver on its promises for a major political overhaul, as well as its erratic and blunt behavior, caused an outflow of voters. The party fell below the electoral threshold in the November 2022 snap election and only barely returned to the National Assembly in April 2023. While most of ITN's rhetoric is focused on domestic issues, Trifonov explicitly **endorsed** the arming of Ukraine.

**Online presence:**

- Official Facebook pages of **ITN** (115K followers) and founder **Slavi Trifonov** (more than 653K followers, the most-followed Bulgarian party leader)
- Top post in 2023: Trifonov's **tribute** to a friend who was nearly killed in an accident (56.5K interactions)
- Top Ukraine/Russia-related post in 2023: Trifonov's statement of **support** for removing the Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia (6.8K interactions).



# Main Challenges

At first glance, it may appear that the balance of power in Bulgaria is tilted towards pro-Ukrainian forces. Indeed, GERB, PP-DB, DPS, and ITN have all voiced their support for Ukraine, while the inferred Russian leanings of BSP and President Radev have been watered down with calls for peace and declarations of EU-allegiance. Revival is the only major party that openly champions Russia. However, the real situation is complicated by several factors.

First, **most of the pro-Ukrainian parties are adversaries** in domestic politics and thus unwilling to collaborate. This is best illustrated by the relationship between PP-DB and GERB. Even though both sides profess adherence to EU values, they spent years trading accusations of corruption, incompetence, and even of Russian dependence. Now that they seem to have finally achieved an awkward power-sharing agreement, many of their supporters **responded** with frustration and disbelief. Cooperation between PP-DB and DPS is also implausible, whereas ITN seems prone to abrupt shifts in its allegiances.

Second, **widespread Russophilia and endemic distrust in the West** limit the options available to these parties. GERB and DPS can rely on core constituencies with more or less constant sizes, but many of their voters appear susceptible to pro-Russian propaganda. It must be noted that many media outlets that are seen as close to either GERB or DPS (or both) are also active in **spreading** anti-Western and anti-Ukrainian narratives. PP-DB and ITN, on the other hand, are predisposed to serious fluctuations in their electoral support. In particular, the opponents of PP-DB have labeled it “the coalition of war” due to its backing for Ukraine, which may have limited its popularity beyond its core demography of young urban voters.

Finally, **Revival targets a wide pool of apolitical citizens**, many of whom rarely or never vote in national elections (including the so-called protest voters). The party uses a two-pronged approach of appealing to patriotic stereotypes and inciting fear in order to mobilize voters outside the traditional base of nationalistic movements. The war provides ample material for its scare tactics. Its leaders have repeatedly spread narratives including the threat of a World War, the alleged plans to send mobilized Bulgarians to the frontline, the supposed Nazi oppression of Bulgarian nationals in Ukraine, the claimed inferior quality of Ukrainian grain, and so on. As both the war and the political crisis drag on, these messages are likely to reach more and more people.



## Forecast: If the elections were held in May, what effect would they have?

Bulgaria did, in fact, hold elections in April and the negotiations between the parties dragged on for almost two months, so it is possible to observe the effect taking place in real-time. The two largest political entities, GERB and PP-DB, may be agreeing to a **rotation government with a clear pro-Western stance**. Such a cabinet is likely to extend more assistance to Ukraine and confirm Bulgaria's commitment to NATO. It is also expected to be strongly pro-EU and work to achieve Bulgaria's membership in the Eurozone and the Schengen Area. A rapprochement with Russia is improbable as long as the war continues, although the new government might be hesitant to impose additional economic sanctions. The situation of Ukrainian refugees, however, may not change significantly.

The unlikely agreement between GERB and PP-DB, if at all agreed, is certain to be very fragile due to their mutual animosity, the pressure from their uncompromising supporters, and scandals such as the ongoing ones involving the **Chief Prosecutor** and the leaked **PP recordings**. Their current relationship could unravel at any time, especially when the moment arrives for the sitting prime minister to be rotated. The municipal elections in the fall of 2023 may be another possible breaking point. While GERB may still look for other partners beyond PP-DB, a government that loses one of its chief backers will almost inevitably collapse. Furthermore, a hypothetical cabinet backed by GERB and PP-DB will inevitably be the subject of fierce attacks from opposition parties such as BSP and Revival, with Ukraine bound to be one of the main topics. The blueprint was already set when the Petkov cabinet rejected Gazprom's ultimatum in the spring of 2022 and when the National Assembly voted to provide military assistance in the fall of the same year. The pro-Kremlin actors will probably continue to exploit any chance to **instill fear and resentment** among the population.

Another election in the immediate future will allow Revival to consolidate and maybe even expand its recent gains. The party, which openly declares that its objective is to secure a majority and rule alone, is on an upward trajectory. A **recent poll** by Gallup International showed it increasing its popularity among potential voters by yet another percentage point. A Revival-dominated government would greatly jeopardize not just Bulgaria's support for Ukraine, but also its general geopolitical orientation and its membership in NATO and the EU. Another distinct possibility is for the cycle of fruitless elections to continue indefinitely, thus allowing President Radev to extend his dominance over the government. Pro-Western parties thus need to take steps to counter the rise of the nationalists and to assert the independence of the executive branch. Effective and transparent governance is essential to this end, as is the prompt debunking of pro-Russian disinformation and propaganda spread by local actors.





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