



## **Bulgarian Parliamentary Elections, Round Three: This Time It Might Work**

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“Your anti-corruption rhetoric and your mention of your grandmother remind me of someone,” said the cautious journalist, while interviewing Kiril Petkov, the leader of the party, which won the majority of seats in the Bulgarian parliamentary election on November 14, 2021 – the third one within seven months. And just like that, the jaded journalist summed up the fears of the overwhelming majority of the Bulgarian population, pundits and international observers alike. The fear is the latest political newcomer will be the same, or worse, than the previous political newcomers. So, the big question is this: how likely is that Kiril Petkov and his three-month old party “We Continue the Change” will not use the anti-corruption rhetoric as an instrument to gain power and become corrupt? Or, as one observer put it, is the best case scenario for Bulgaria the one where the new newcomers “steal just as much, but with more finesse” than their predecessors?

The prediction, which is based on two significant trends, is favorable for Bulgarian democracy. Why could it be different this time around? The first factor is that Petkov and his “We Continue the Change” co-founder Assen Vassilev, both Harvard University graduates, have managed to break the glass ceiling of the Bulgarian electorate, who vote for educated candidates. The second consideration is that Petkov and Vassilev have tipped the scales of the three Ps: they have turned public discourse from Personalities to Policies and Process. Let’s look at the significance and the evidence for these two trends.

To begin with, the new parliamentary winner has made a civilizational breakthrough by presenting themselves as highly educated and, at the same time, gaining the trust of those who are not only not very educated but view educated people with unrelenting suspicion. The significance of this feat should not be underestimated. As a rule, the electorate of

political candidates, who present themselves as “the smart and the beautiful”<sup>i</sup> has a ceiling of 3% as in the 2017 parliamentary elections. The rest 97% are up for grabs. The preceding Bulgarian Prime Minister, Boyko Borissov, had a pronounced appreciation for the electoral potential of the uneducated demographic group. He swayed that population by styling himself as their like-for-like representative: ““I am a simpleton, you are simpletons, that is why we get along.” Moreover, Mr Borissov has publicly confessed that the Bulgarians constitute “bad material” that he has to work with. Unlike Borissov, Petkov and Vassilev are not posturing as simpletons and are managing to bring up their Harvard credentials without alienating this group, whose default is to view the Harvard credentials as a liability.

How did Kiril Petkov and Assen Vassilev pull off the feat of attracting the uneducated? To begin with, they are not using their status of educated people as a justification to be condescending. Petkov has stated that the people, who refuse to get vaccinated, are “neither stupid, nor ignorant” but they have simply not been exposed to the correct information. Bulgaria is the most unvaccinated country in Europe, where some people distrust science and education to such a degree that they believe, for example, that vaccines are produced via the same method that they make fake Coca Cola in their basement. Petkov’s solution, he says, will be to put numerous medical experts on TV, who will provide scientifically proven information about how the vaccine works. Depoliticizing the vaccination issue and making it a matter of a degree of information, rather than an educational degree, is what makes Mr. Petkov and Mr. Vassilev different.

Petkov and his political allies managed to attract the uneducated demographic by being articulate in a way that is profoundly refreshing for the Bulgarian political discourse. In the past, the political elites have addressed the public in various combinations of speaking the “language of the people” and “saying it as it is”. With his run-on sentence structures, Mr. Borissov was the master of it, and the former king Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, who spoke in archaic forms of Bulgarian, was Borissov’s close competitor. Unlike them, Petkov and Vassilev have shown that being educated does not always amount to being thoroughly incomprehensible and, therefore, unbearably boring. To this effect, they have invited a popular hip-hop singer to become a candidate for “We Continue the Change”. This was a daring bet that paid off well: the hip-hop artist beat the former prime minister by 32,1% to 26,1% in their electoral district in Sofia. Some pundits argue that this move makes Kiril Petkov and Assen Vassilev populists but their innovative and creative approach has, in fact, broken the rigid dichotomy of having to choose between (1) good policies and dry rhetoric or (2) bad policies and engaging rhetoric. Learning from and borrowing from the populist PR machine, without going politically to the far-right spectrum, may be just what the doctor ordered.

The second big feat of the new party is that they have turned Bulgarian politics from a game of personalities to a game of policies and a process-oriented thinking. In a political environment infused with the “blat” system of favours,<sup>ii</sup> Petkov and Vassilev refuse to play the person game. They say that “the last thing we want is to throw names in the media space” and play the game of “I will let your person have this ministry, if you let my person

have the other ministry”. Instead, the new party has created 18 working groups consisting of experts from four coalitional parties, which will debate policies. The format of the policy will then define the job characteristic, and the job characteristic will lead, through a competitive process, to the personality of the ministerial post-holder. Some of these coalitional negotiations are currently streamed online.

Reversing the directionality “from a person to policies” logic to “from policies to people” way of making politics is not a small recourse. It remains to be seen whether the new newcomers will be like the old newcomers. The odds look good, for now.

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## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> The phrase gained popularity in public discourse as a label designating the well-educated, pro-Western, well-to-do professionals inhabiting the largest Bulgarian cities, who tend to vote for parties descending from the post-1989 pro-democratic political forces such as the former Reformist Bloc (which garnered a little over 3% of the vote in the 2017 parliamentary elections), later partly reincarnated into Democratic Bulgaria (which received around 6% of the vote in the November 2021 parliamentary elections).

<sup>ii</sup> As Ledeneva has made clear, the blat system – that solidified during Soviet times and persisted beyond the collapse of the USSR, refers to informal contacts, networks and exchanges, which proliferate during periods of shortages in the economy and facilitate cronyism and corruption: Ledeneva, A., 1998, *Russia's Economy of Favours: Blat, Networking and Informal Exchange*, Cambridge University Press