

Who is who in the Bulgarian coup?

Radosveta Vassileva

Magazine article published in *New Eastern Europe* on 10 August 2022,
<https://neweasterneurope.eu/2022/08/10/who-is-who-in-the-bulgarian-coup/>

The downfall of Bulgaria's new anti-corruption government is still shrouded in mystery. Whilst domestic figures well known for their controversial practices are suspected of orchestrating an effective coup, the evidence also points to potential Russian involvement in these events.

June 22nd marked a historic moment for Bulgaria – the first successful [no confidence vote](#) against a government in the country since the fall of the Berlin Wall. Those following the [battles](#) between Kiril Petkov's coalition government and the status quo forces of GERB and DPS preceding this vote, however, know that what happened on that day was more reminiscent of a coup rather than an ordinary motion of no confidence. According to the [Collins Dictionary](#), a coup d'état is “the sudden, forcible overthrow of a ruler, government, etc., sometimes with violence, by a small group of people already having some political or military authority”. While there was no violence, the deposition of Petkov's government was certainly sudden, forcible, and orchestrated by a small group of people who disapproved of his attempts to expose corruption.

In parliament, Petkov [declared](#) dramatically that “It was an honour for him to lead a government overthrown by [Delyan] Peevski, [Boyko] Borissov, [Stanislav] Trifonov and [Eleonora] Mitrofanova.” For those unacquainted with these names, Peevski is a key DPS figure who was [sanctioned](#) for corruption by the US government under the Global Magnitsky Act in 2021, whilst Borissov is the leader of the GERB party and Bulgaria's former prime minister with close ties to Peevski. At the same time, Trifonov is the leader of the ITN party and Mitrofanova is the Russian ambassador to Bulgaria. In June this year, ITN, which was one of Petkov's coalition partners, abruptly left his government and joined forces with DPS, GERB, and the pro-Russian Revival party to support the no confidence vote and sabotage the adoption of anti-corruption legislation. In a recent [interview for The Times](#), Petkov further blamed the Kremlin for the coup and stressed that corruption was Moscow's best meddling tool in the Balkans. These comments attracted an [immediate sarcastic response](#) from the Russian foreign ministry's spokesperson Maria Zakharova.

Did these figures really conspire to dethrone Petkov and to what extent are his claims that Moscow devised the no confidence vote in Bulgaria believable? Understanding the political dynamics that conditioned the collapse of Petkov's government will show the extent to which democracy in Bulgaria is now under threat. The future certainly looks uncertain as the country is now headed towards a fourth parliamentary election in the span of a year and a half.

A weak coalition with a Trojan horse

Before venturing into more details about the figures mentioned in Petkov's speech, it is important to stress that from the moment Petkov's government was conceived and [elected](#) in December 2021, it was clear that its ambitions to eradicate corruption did not match its capacity. Fighting corruption in an [autocratic regime](#), where most key institutions, including the omnipotent Prosecutor's Office, which has a monopoly on criminal investigations, are controlled by the corrupt status quo is a tremendous challenge. It seems that Petkov's government approached these epic battles against powerful enemies of democratic values with enthusiasm and bold claims in the media, but with little preparation and a rather weak team.

First, dismantling a "[FrankenState](#)" like the one built by Borissov requires innovative solutions. Instead, Petkov's government employed tactics doomed to fail spectacularly. An example is provided by the [request](#) of the minister of justice, Nadezhda Yordanova, to the Supreme Judicial Council to dismiss controversial General Prosecutor Ivan Geshev for undermining the prestige of the judiciary. This body is known to be heavily [politicised](#) and loyal to Borissov's circle, to which Ivan Geshev belongs. While Yordanova's request had its merits, believing that a heavily compromised institution could reach a just conclusion was rather naïve and showed that Petkov's government did not navigate the rough legal landscape properly. Key experts in criminal law [argue](#) that the pathway taken to remove Geshev from office should have been different. This should have involved small but efficient reforms of the Code of Criminal Procedure and the Law on the Judiciary.

Second, Petkov himself has [admitted](#) that he realised too late that the country's rampant corruption was intrinsically linked to Russian meddling. This is surprising considering an array of obvious, yet suspicious signs. For years, analysts had [wondered](#) why, while presenting himself as a passionate Euro-Atlanticist, former Prime Minister Boyko Borissov had maintained such close ties with Russia when it was no longer politically fashionable to do so following the 2014 US sanctions related to Ukraine. With Borissov's blessing, Bulgaria's prosecutor's office, known for whitewashing corruption, built an inexplicably close relationship with their Russian counterpart. In May 2017, for instance, former General Prosecutor Sotir Tsatsarov travelled to Moscow for [a high-profile meeting](#) with Russia's then General Prosecutor Yuri Chaika, who is known for his loyalty to Vladimir Putin and human rights abuses. Later that year, Tsatsarov [signed](#) a cooperation agreement with Chaika – a rather unusual move for the prosecution of an EU member state. Even further, Bulgarian media [established](#) that the current General Prosecutor Ivan Geshev also participated in exchange programmes with the Russian prosecution in Moscow.

Nevertheless, it seems above all that Petkov did not fully understand that he had a Trojan horse in his own fortress. His government was already an unusual group of parties associated with different parts of the political spectrum that are difficult to digest together – his "We'll Continue the Change" party, the Democratic Bulgaria coalition, the Bulgarian Socialist Party, and Trifonov's "There Are Such People" (ITN). However, following ITN's efforts to [sabotage](#) the election of a government after the July 2021 parliamentary election, Petkov could have deduced that ITN chose to be part of his government in December to stall rather than support reform.

The dreamer against the FrankenState

All of these figures mentioned by Petkov could potentially have a vested interest in removing him from power. The fact that Petkov was a dreamer without a viable strategy to dismantle the FrankenState just made it easier.

Peevski and Borissov are two of the key politicians that Petkov tried to expose and seek accountability from, so they have too much to lose if their wrongdoings are properly investigated. Petkov himself has [identified](#) Peevski as one of twenty people responsible for corruption in Bulgaria and has criticised the prosecutor's office for repeatedly whitewashing him. Meanwhile, in March 2022, Petkov's Ministry of Interior [arrested Borissov](#) on suspicions of corruption and asked the prosecutor's office to press charges and start a proper investigation into his alleged corruption.

Appealing to the conscience of those working in the most crucial institution in Borissov's FrankenState – the prosecutor's office – and expecting just outcomes, however, is rather imprudent. The body refused to press charges and start a formal investigation into Borissov despite the evidence gathered by Petkov's ministry of interior. Furthermore, shortly after the fall of Petkov's government, the prosecutor's office [announced](#) that it had terminated the latest inquiry into Peevski, declaring that there was no criminal activity to investigate. The prosecutor's office had started a pro forma inquiry into him after he was sanctioned under the Global Magnitsky Act. This conclusion, of course, begs the question as to why the rampant corruption in Bulgaria is more visible to the US government than to the only local Bulgarian authority competent to investigate the matter.

The umbrella of the prosecutor's office saved Borissov and Peevski on this occasion, but it is very likely that both fear that a reformed prosecutor's office or a new general prosecutor may have a different take. This may shed light on why GERB and DPS were at the forefront of the motion of no confidence against Petkov.

Nevertheless, GERB and DPS could not realise their plan for overthrowing Petkov on their own. Even though they did not want to, they had to expose some connections which they maintained behind the scenes. It is truly ironic that both of these parties that portray themselves as proponents of Euro-Atlantic values were happy to accept the help of the pro-Russian Revival party for the non-confidence vote. The fact that ITN tried to fool voters for so long that it was an opponent of GERB and DPS, but did not mind doing them a service is even more revealing.

This, of course, brings us to the other two names mentioned by Petkov. For long, analysing the [rhetoric and policies](#) of Stanislav Trifonov's ITN party, which emerged on the Bulgarian parliamentary scene after Borissov fell from power in 2021, raised doubts regarding its intentions. It appeared that it was a project meant to steal votes from the real anti-corruption parties, thus helping GERB and DPS. Their latest actions have not alleviated these fears. In fact, a number of former ITN members of parliament who quit the party this summer in protest have [revealed](#) the strange, authoritative ways in which the party is governed. Meanwhile, the Revival party does not hide its [warm relationship](#) with the Russian embassy.

Overall, Petkov's government fell victim to Bulgaria's corrupt status quo. It is no secret that some of the figures mentioned by Petkov have ties to Russia and that Moscow would much rather see Borissov as prime minister of Bulgaria. However, it is too early to conclude whether this means that the Kremlin was the main engine behind the coup.

Lessons for Petkov

The next parliamentary election will take place in October this year. It is very likely that Petkov's We'll Continue the Change party will either come first or second and may have a chance to form a government again. Hopefully, while campaigning, Petkov will make time to learn some tough lessons. He must finally realise who he is dealing with, build a team competent enough to tackle the challenge of dismantling an autocracy, and find more allies. Dreaming is never a waste of time, but to quote the famous Bulgarian writer Nikolay Haitov: "It is one thing to want to do something, it is a second thing to be able to do that thing, and it is both a third and a fourth thing to actually do it."