

BULGARIA 1990

Between Two Europes: The Situation in Bulgaria during the
End of Europe's East–West Division

From one-party rule to the first free elections



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The European Context, 1989–1990

The Cold War division of Europe collapses

Nov 1989

The Berlin Wall falls; communist regimes across Eastern Europe collapse in months

1990

Free elections sweep Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Romania — and Bulgaria

Oct 1990

German reunification symbolically ends the East–West divide

1990–91

Warsaw Pact and Comecon begin to dissolve; the USSR itself weakens



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10 November 1989: The Fall of Todor Zhivkov

The day after the Berlin Wall fell

A palace coup, not a revolution

Zhivkov, in power for 35 years — the longest-serving leader in the Eastern Bloc — was removed by his own Politburo, led by Petar Mladenov and Andrey Lukanov.

Reform from above

The Communist Party tried to control the transition, renaming itself the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) in April 1990.

35

years of Zhivkov's rule
(1954–1989)

*Removed one day after
the Berlin Wall fell*



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An Opposition Is Born

Civil society awakens after decades of one-party rule

1

UDF

Union of Democratic Forces founded (Dec 1989) — a coalition of ~16 dissident groups led by philosopher Zhelyu Zhelev

2

MRF

Movement for Rights and Freedoms formed, representing Bulgarian Turks after the forced-assimilation “Revival Process” of the 1980s

3

Streets

Mass rallies in Sofia demand democracy; Ecoglasnost and Podkrepa trade union mobilize thousands



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The Round Table Talks (Jan–May 1990)

Negotiating the transition — the Bulgarian model of peaceful change

Legalized political pluralism

The Communist Party's constitutional monopoly on power (Article 1) was abolished in January 1990

Agreed on free elections

Elections for a Grand National Assembly set for June 1990 — the first free vote since 1931

Kept the transition peaceful

Unlike Romania, Bulgaria avoided large-scale violence; change came through negotiation

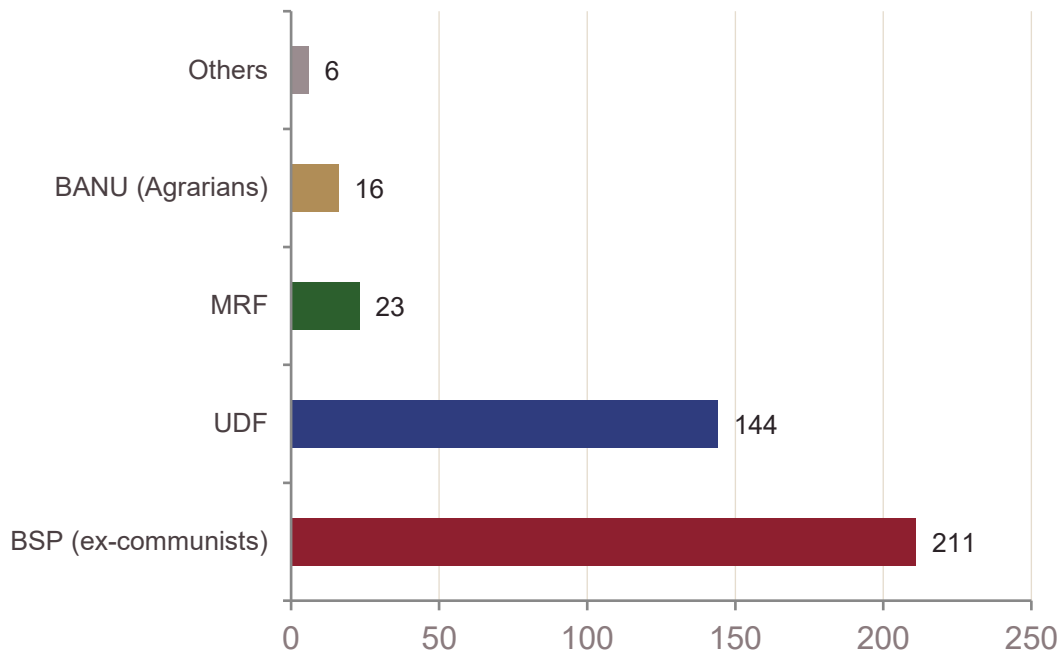


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June 1990: The First Free Elections

Grand National Assembly — 400 seats



A surprise in the East

Unlike most of Eastern Europe, the ex-communist BSP won an absolute majority — strongest in villages and small towns.

The UDF dominated the big cities and refused to join a coalition, deepening polarization.

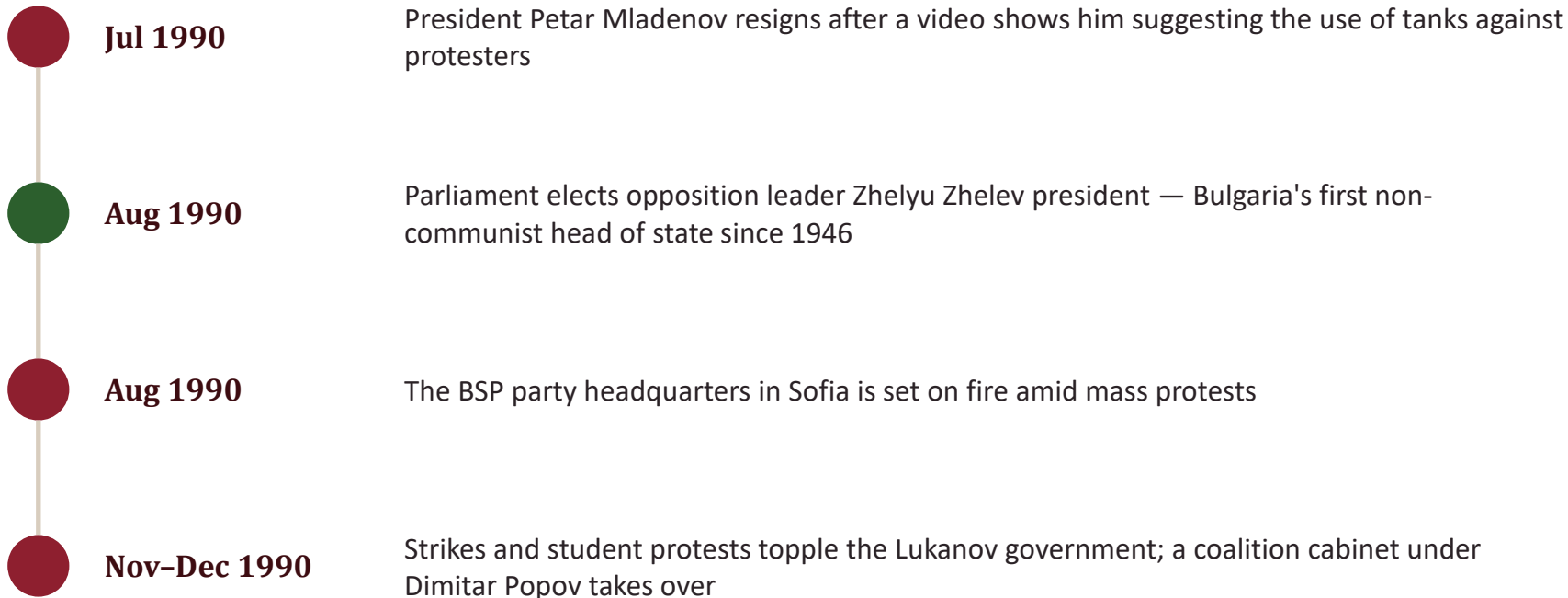


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A Turbulent Year in Politics

1990: governments and presidents change under street pressure



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Economic Collapse

The command economy disintegrates as its Soviet lifeline disappears

\$10+ bn

foreign debt; in March 1990 Bulgaria declared a moratorium on debt payments — locking it out of credit markets

~9%

fall in output in 1990 as Comecon trade with the USSR — over half of all trade — collapsed

Shortages

rationing of basic goods, empty shops, fuel and electricity crises through the winter of 1990–91



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A Society Between Two Worlds

Hopes for Europe, fears of the unknown

Looking West

- “Return to Europe” becomes the rallying idea of the opposition
- Free press, travel, and open debate flourish for the first time in decades
- First contacts with the EC, Council of Europe, and Western investors

Weighed Down by the Past

- Deep urban–rural and generational divide between UDF and BSP voters
- Ethnic tensions after the 1980s assimilation campaign; ~300,000 Bulgarian Turks had fled in 1989
- Emigration wave begins as living standards fall



1990: The Year Bulgaria Chose Its Path

- ✓ A peaceful, negotiated exit from communism — but led at first by the old elite
- ✓ Free elections, a democratic president, and the drafting of a new constitution (adopted July 1991)
- ✓ Severe economic crisis made Bulgaria's transition slower and harder than in Central Europe
- ✓ The “return to Europe” begun in 1990 was completed with NATO (2004) and EU (2007) membership



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