

The 2021 Bulgarian election: A 'QAnon turn' for Eastern European politics?

One of the key stories from Bulgaria's parliamentary election on 4 April was the rise of a new party led by talk show host and musician Slavi Trifonov, which finished in second place. [Nikolay Marinov](#) and [Maria Popova](#) write that the election underlined the existence of a new 'conspiracy cleavage' in Eastern European politics.

Journalists covering Eastern European elections used to have it easy. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, liberal reformist pro-European parties promised anti-corruption and the rule of law and fought ethnonationalist Eurosceptics and former-Communists-turned-state-captors.

Over the last decade, this neat picture has been complicated by the emergence of parties that bundle anti-corruption with nationalism and illiberalism, while state captors and heads of clientelist networks manage to portray themselves as competent statesmen and the EU's true and reliable partners. A left-right cleavage has never structured post-Communist political competition, but now the liberal-authoritarian or pro-European-nationalist cleavages may be in decline.

In an upcoming working paper, we argue that a new conspiracy cleavage is rising where parties either stick to mainstream facts and politics, while sometimes engaging in corruption and state capture behind the scenes, or challenge the status quo, using a wide range of conspiracies – some real (ongoing state capture), many imagined (Covid-19 and world government plots).

Bulgaria's 2021 election

Bulgaria's 4 April parliamentary election illustrates this dynamic. The incumbent centre-right GERB, which has won four elections and formed three governments since its founding in 2009, went into the campaign weakened by sizeable anti-government protests over endemic grand corruption, a politicized judiciary, and tightening control of the media, as well as by testy cohabitation with a Socialist-backed President. After weathering the first Covid-19 wave well, Bulgaria was hard-hit in the autumn. The health system was brought to the brink of collapse by case and mortality rates among the highest in Europe. In the final campaign stretch, as the third wave was picking up, the government often switched policies – closing some businesses only to reopen them the next day. Against the backdrop of these setbacks, punishment for GERB at the polls was to be expected.

Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borisov's strategy was to sidestep the corruption and rule of law issues altogether, project statesmanship, and emphasise his good relationship with Europe. The summer protests fizzled out and in the autumn he communicated directly with his supporters through Facebook live streams. He toured the country, driving his own SUV and showing off his government's major infrastructure projects funded by EU subsidies, boasting of his close partnership with Merkel and Macron and his competent handling of the pandemic.

Occasionally, this [James-Corden-esque format](#) included guests riding in the back seat with the PM discussing policy, as in November when the Health Minister and the director of Sofia's biggest hospital joined to see a newly built highway and discuss the containment of the second wave. Borisov's campaign strategy paid off as his party retained its plurality with 26% of the vote.

The new conspiracy cleavage in Bulgarian politics

Why did the opposition miss the opportunity to hold GERB accountable? The answer, we argue, lies in the emergence of a conspiracy cleavage, which divided the opposition. The biggest story of the elections was the second place showing of a new political party, headed by TV talk show host and musician, Slavi Trifonov. With nearly 18%, Trifonov's ITN displaced the Socialists (former Communists, BSP) from the top-two spot for the first time in 20 years.

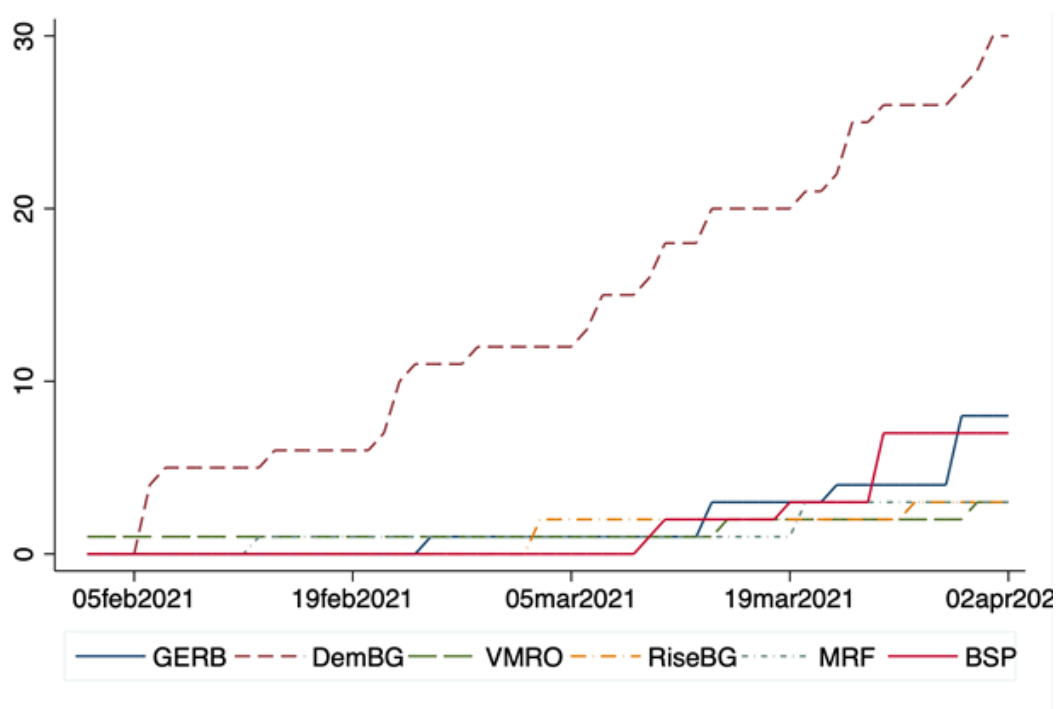
Trifonov is more Trump than Zelensky. This was his first election, but he is not a political novice. He has built a cultural and political brand over the last 30 years, based on populism, soft nationalism, and casual misogyny (his 1999 hit song lyrics are a textbook example of rape culture: “*There’s no ‘I don’t wanna’, there’s no ‘don’t’, if I wanna have you, I turn into a villain, you’ll be with me, if I say so*”). He talks the anti-corruption talk, but has not walked the walk – in 2017, he was the driving force behind a populist and accountability-reducing referendum proposal to dramatically decrease state financing of political parties. His party’s name – There is Such a People! (ITN) – is a play on a popular phrase expressing exasperation at the failure of the Bulgarian state to produce competent and just government: “There is no such state (anywhere)!” The implication is that the Bulgarian people can change the Bulgarian state, if only they elect the right politicians.

On the left-right/authoritarian-liberal dimension, ITN is indistinguishable from GERB, as this recent election compass study [shows](#). But on the conspiracy cleavage, ITN is diametrically opposed. Where GERB claims charges of shadowy oligarchs pulling the strings of Bulgarian politics are just conspiracy theories, ITN amplifies them. Rhetorically at least, GERB has repeatedly aligned with the EU: on the Covid-19 scientific consensus now; previously, on how to handle the migration crisis; and on fostering political stability through European solidarity. Trifonov through ITN, by contrast, has dabbled in the related conspiracies – Covid-19-denialism, anti-vaxxerism – and has flirted with Euroscepticism and anti-immigration positions, again from the conspiratorial viewpoint that the migration crisis was a tool for the Great Powers to weaken Bulgarian sovereignty.

Two other opposition parties who have criticised GERB’s corruption and collusion with organised crime made gains, coming on the heels of successful social mobilisation during the summer protests. Democratic Bulgaria (DemBG), which missed the 4% threshold in the 2017 election, got nearly 10% and a newcomer, named Rise Up, Bulgaria/Mafia Out (RiseBG), passed the 4% barrier.

While both parties have largely liberal reformist platforms, they have also flirted with nationalism and conspiracies. Our analysis of parties’ Facebook communications over the last two months (all the major parties, except ITN, who posted only clips of the show, rather than statements), reveals that among all parties, DemBG were the most likely to use conspiratorial language (Figure 1 below). One of RiseBG’s four co-leaders, downplayed the seriousness of the pandemic by borrowing Bolsonaro’s “little flu” diminutive and boasting that despite the government’s fearmongering, people are not afraid.

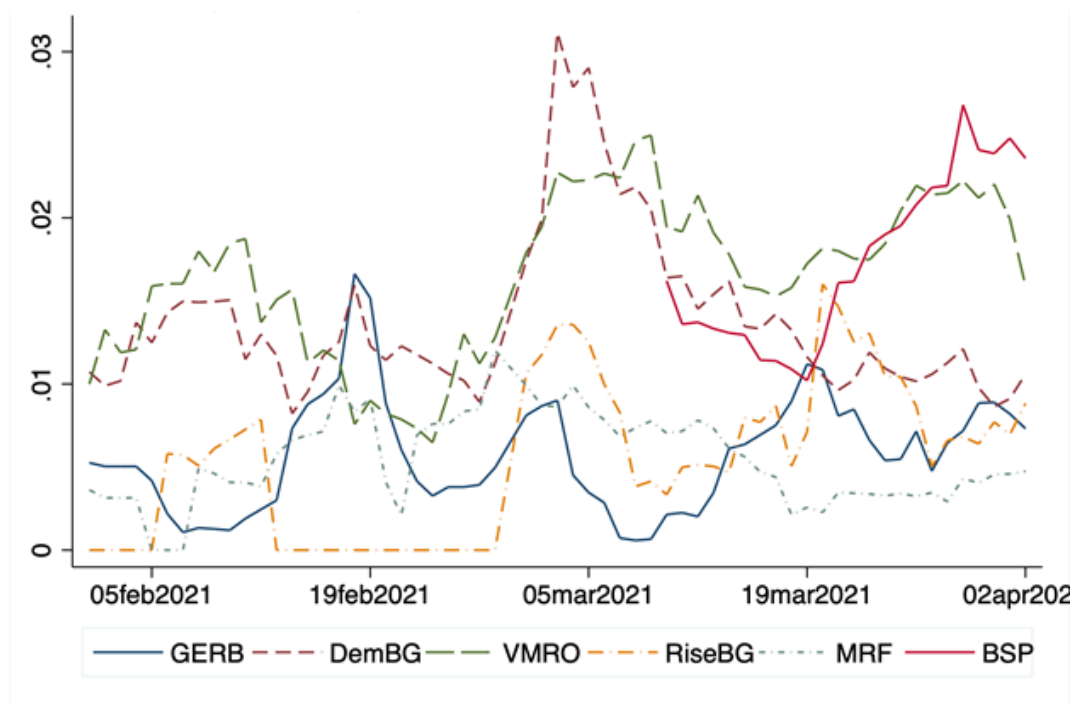
Figure 1: Cumulative mentions of conspiracies in the Facebook communications of Bulgarian political parties (Feb-April 2021)



Note: Figure compiled by the authors.

On the nationalism issue, we find that DemBG, the far right, ethnonationalist VMRO, and the mainstream, state-capture-tainted Socialists (BSP) register the highest frequency of mentions of country and nation (Figure 2). It appears that DemBG was pushed to compete with the nationalists by packaging anti-corruption and pro-European reforms with patriotic appeals – a rather unnatural combination – instead of turning to civil and political rights expansion. For example, DemBG could have reopened the debate into Bulgaria's refusal to sign the Istanbul Convention on women's rights and domestic violence.

Figure 2: Percentage of Facebook communications by Bulgarian parties that mention 'Bulgaria' or 'Bulgarian' (Feb-April 2021)



Note: Figure compiled by the authors.

The Bulgarian election results were consistent with other recent elections in the region. [Romania's autumn election](#) saw the emergence of a conspiracy-peddling populist ethnonationalist party, AUR. In Serbia, President Aleksandar Vučić's party won a landslide victory over the summer by emphasising its pro-European stance and painting opposition protesters as conspiracy-minded anti-maskers. The pandemic has increased conspiratorial stock everywhere, and these examples demonstrate that we now need more research on the influence of conspiracy beliefs on political competition in democracies.

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [European Council](#)