

RELEASE DATE
JUNE 2025



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ELECTORAL VULNERABILITY INDEX 2025-2026

COUNTRY ANALYSIS

BULGARIA

PRESEDENTIAL ELECTIONS: EXPECTED BY FALL 2026



BACKGROUND

Bulgaria, which transitioned from communism to a parliamentary republic in 1991, has faced significant challenges since then, including political instability, state capture and concerns about democratic backsliding. Public distrust in institutions is widespread, fueled by persistent corruption and a perceived lack of accountability.

UPCOMING ELECTIONS

The upcoming presidential elections in Bulgaria, scheduled for no later than the fall of 2026, will be pivotal. The incumbent president is not eligible for re-election, which opens up the political landscape and key issues are in play, its economic direction (specifically regarding the adoption of the euro and the balance between fiscal responsibility and populism), and its international alignment, especially concerning its relationship with Russia versus its alignment with the EU and NATO.

The two most likely candidates identified in the sources for the 2026 elections are **Iliana Malinova Iotova**, who has served as Vice President of Bulgaria since 2017 and **Nikolai Denkov Denkov**, a former Prime Minister.

Confidence in Bulgaria's electoral process is currently undermined by allegations of errors in electoral lists, claims of biased electoral commissions, and a lack of transparency in vote counting.

Additionally, there have been accusations of intimidation and violence against opposition activists and journalists in past elections. Mainstream political parties have been accused of employing coercion, voter suppression tactics, police action, and bribery to manipulate voter behavior, particularly targeting marginalized communities such as the Roma.

POTENTIAL DRIVERS OF CONFLICT

According to the Electoral Vulnerability Index (EVI), these are the factors that contribute most to the increased potential for violence:

- Number of consecutive previous elections with violence
- Violence during the last election
- Government Intimidation during the last election
- Lack of autonomy of the Electoral Management Body
- Government Dissemination of false information
- Boycotts during the last election
- Net Official Development Assistance received per capita
- The existence of restrictions on opposition parties during the last election.



RECOMMENDATIONS

LONG-TERM:

- **Strengthen rule of law and democratic institutions:** Shoring up the independence and capacity of the judiciary and legislative bodies, ensuring transparent public finance management, and **reducing corruption and clientelism**, which are major sources of grievances and distrust in electoral outcomes.
- **Address social inequalities:** It is crucial to tackle both real and perceived inequalities among different groups, as these can be significant sources of tension during elections. Promoting inclusivity and equal participation across ethnic, gender, and social lines is essential.

SHORT & MEDIUM-TERM:

- **Establish Codes of Conduct:** Political parties and candidates should be required to sign and adhere to codes of conduct that explicitly prohibit violence and inflammatory rhetoric. Strong sanctions, including disqualification, should be enforced for violations.
- **Inclusive dialogue and prevention fora:** Creating platforms for dialogue involving all stakeholders—political parties, civil society, security services, and religious organizations—is vital to address grievances and build consensus before, during, and after elections.
- **Community engagement:** Empowering local organizations and community leaders is key for monitoring tensions, mediating disputes, and reporting early warning signs of violence.
- **Training and capacity building:** Providing interactive training for polling station staff, including scenario-based exercises, can help them handle complaints and de-escalate tensions on election day. Deploying mobile troubleshooting units at the district level can also quickly address incidents.
- **Monitoring and reporting:** Implementing robust monitoring systems, such as the Election Violence Education and Resolution (EVER) methodology, is recommended to track and analyze incidents of electoral violence and inform rapid responses.
- **Transparent dispute resolution:** Ensuring a transparent and speedy mechanism for addressing electoral complaints and disputes can reduce the likelihood that unresolved grievances escalate into violence.
- **Prevent vote-buying and pressure on voters:** It is necessary to address widespread practices like vote-buying and the misuse of administrative resources, which have been noted in recent Bulgarian elections and can increase tensions. Enforcing legal provisions against such practices and ensuring accountability for offenders is critical.

(Recommendations continued on next page)



RECOMMENDATIONS CONT.

SHORT & MEDIUM-TERM:

- **Protect journalists:** Attacks on journalists covering elections must be investigated and sanctioned, as media freedom and safety are crucial for transparency and trust in the process. Parties should also be encouraged to discipline members involved in intimidation or violence against the press.
- **Promote transparent campaign practices:** Ensuring equal access to media and fair campaign finance oversight is important to prevent undue advantages and perceptions of unfairness.
- **Address minority representation and rights:** Reconsidering restrictions on campaigning in minority languages and promoting the participation of ethnic minorities can foster inclusivity and reduce potential sources of conflict.

INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT & BEST PRACTICES:

- **Leverage international observation and mediation:** Inviting international observers to monitor elections and provide impartial assessments is beneficial. Furthermore, using high-level mediators from regional or international organizations to intervene if tensions escalate can be effective.