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# The Politics of Bulgaria

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## Introduction

Bulgaria, situated in the heart of the Balkans, boasts a vibrant tapestry woven from centuries of political change. From its time as a medieval empire, through periods of Ottoman domination, kingdom, communist state, and ultimately a parliamentary republic, the country's political story both echoes wider European trends and unfolds along its own distinctive path.

The modern political system of Bulgaria was forged in the wake of profound upheaval. The collapse of the communist regime in 1989 triggered the difficult but ultimately successful transition to democracy and a market economy. At the foundation of this journey stands the Constitution of 1991, which formalized the separation of powers, established fundamental rights and freedoms, and set the contours for a multiparty parliamentary republic. Today, Bulgaria is defined by a complex interplay of institutions: a unicameral National Assembly, a directly elected President, an executive Council of Ministers led by the Prime Minister, and an independent judiciary.

This transformation has been neither swift nor smooth. The post-communist landscape in Bulgaria has seen waves of optimism and disillusionment, marked by flourishing civic energy and periods of political instability. The legacy of authoritarianism, persistent issues of corruption, and the challenges of building functional political competition in a new era have repeatedly tested Bulgaria's democratic resolve. Yet, alongside these difficulties, Bulgaria has achieved significant milestones—joining NATO in 2004, and the European Union in 2007—anchoring itself firmly in the Euro-Atlantic community.

Political contestation in Bulgaria is fiercely competitive, with a proliferation of parties reflecting the country's social, ethnic, and ideological diversity. Coalition governments are the norm, but instability and snap elections highlight the challenges of representation and consensus-building. Meanwhile, civil society has become steadily more active, striving to push for transparency, the rule of law, and greater civic participation, even as it confronts obstacles such as mistrust, underfunding, and occasional restrictions.

This book provides a comprehensive guide to Bulgaria's politics and political system, offering insights not only into the workings of government and the machinery of elections, but also into the broader social and historical contexts that shape political life. Each chapter explores a crucial theme—from constitutional design and institutional structure, through the dynamics of electoral competition, to Bulgaria's evolving place in Europe and the world.

Whether you are a student, researcher, policy-maker, or simply a reader curious about the forces shaping contemporary Bulgaria, this book aims to illuminate the links between past and present, institutions and actors, challenges and achievements. By understanding the politics of Bulgaria, we gain a window into a vital and ever-evolving part of the European political landscape.

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## CHAPTER ONE: The Echoes of Empires and the Birth of a Nation

To truly grasp the intricate dance of contemporary Bulgarian politics, one must first delve into the layers of history that have shaped the nation. It's a story of empires rising and falling, of identity forged in the crucible of foreign rule, and of a persistent yearning for self-determination. This journey takes us back centuries, long before the ink dried on the 1991 Constitution, to the very bedrock of Bulgarian statehood.

The narrative begins in the 7th century, with the arrival of the Proto-Bulgars, led by Khan Asparuh, in the northeastern Balkans. Here, they encountered the already settled Slavic tribes. This was no simple merger; it was a strategic alliance that led to the foundation of the First Bulgarian Empire around 680-681 AD. This early state quickly grew in power, becoming a significant force in Southeastern Europe and a frequent rival of the Byzantine Empire. The reign of Simeon I in the late 9th and early 10th centuries marked a "Golden Age," a period of significant territorial expansion, cultural flourishing, and the adoption of Old Bulgarian as an official language. The Cyrillic alphabet, developed in Preslav, became a lasting legacy, influencing literacy across much of Eastern Europe.

However, the wheel of history kept turning. Internal strife and external pressures, particularly from the Byzantine Empire, led to the decline and eventual fall of the First Bulgarian Empire in 1018. For over a century and a half, Bulgarian lands were under Byzantine rule. But the desire for independence never fully extinguished. In 1185, an uprising led by the boyars (noblemen) Asen and Petar re-established Bulgarian statehood, ushering in the Second Bulgarian Empire with its capital at Turnovo. This era also saw periods of considerable power and influence in the Balkans, particularly under Tsar Ivan Asen II.

Yet, the Balkans remained a complex and contested region. The rising power of the Ottoman Empire in the 14th century posed a new and existential threat. Gradually, Bulgarian lands fell under Ottoman control, with the complete subjugation occurring by 1396. This marked the beginning of nearly five centuries of Ottoman rule, a period often referred to in Bulgarian history as the "Turkish slavery."

Under Ottoman rule, the Bulgarian state apparatus was dismantled, and the local nobility was largely eliminated. The Bulgarian Orthodox Church, a key institution for preserving national identity, was placed under the control of the Greek Patriarchate in Constantinople. While the Ottomans implemented a centralized system of governance, it became increasingly characterized by arbitrary repression as the empire declined.

Despite the loss of political independence and the pressures of assimilation, Bulgarian culture and traditions persevered, particularly in rural areas and through the continued activity of the Orthodox Church.

The 18th and 19th centuries witnessed the stirrings of the Bulgarian National Revival, a period of intellectual and cultural awakening. This movement was initially more focused on cultural and religious self-assertion, particularly against Greek influence within the Orthodox Church, than on outright political rebellion against the Ottomans. Key figures like Paisiy Hilendarski, with his "Slaveno-Bulgarian History," reminded Bulgarians of their glorious past and instilled a sense of national pride. The development of Bulgarian-language education and literature flourished, contributing to a growing national consciousness.

Economic changes within the declining Ottoman Empire also played a role, leading to the rise of a Bulgarian urban middle class that supported cultural and educational initiatives. Inspired by Enlightenment ideas and the successes of other Balkan nations in gaining independence, the movement gradually took on a more explicitly political dimension. Revolutionary committees were formed, advocating for national liberation. The April Uprising of 1876, though ultimately suppressed with brutality, drew international attention to the plight of the Bulgarians.

This international outcry, particularly in Russia, contributed to the outbreak of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878. The war proved decisive, leading to the defeat of the Ottoman Empire. The Treaty of San Stefano, signed in March 1878, initially envisioned a large autonomous Bulgarian state. However, the other Great Powers, fearing increased Russian influence in the Balkans, revised this treaty at the Congress of Berlin later that year.

The resulting Treaty of Berlin created a much smaller, autonomous Principality of Bulgaria, located between the Danube River and the Balkan Mountains, with Sofia as its capital. An autonomous province, Eastern Rumelia, was created to the south, remaining under Ottoman sovereignty but with a Christian governor. Macedonia and other territories with significant Bulgarian populations were returned to Ottoman control. This division was a source of deep dissatisfaction and would shape Bulgarian foreign policy and national aspirations for decades to come.

Despite the disappointment of the Treaty of Berlin, the re-establishment of a Bulgarian state, even a truncated one, was a momentous event. The Principality adopted a democratic constitution in 1879, and political life began to develop, albeit with early tensions between liberal and more autocratic tendencies. In 1885, Eastern Rumelia was unified with the Principality of Bulgaria through a bloodless coup, a significant step towards realizing the national ideal. Full independence from the Ottoman Empire was finally declared in 1908, with Prince Ferdinand of Saxe-Coburg assuming the title of Tsar.

The newly independent Bulgarian state in the late 19th and early 20th centuries embarked on a path of modernization, building institutions and developing its economy. However, the unresolved issue of territories with Bulgarian populations remaining under Ottoman rule, particularly Macedonia, fueled irredentist ambitions and led to Bulgaria's involvement in the Balkan Wars and subsequently, World War I. These conflicts, in which Bulgaria ultimately sided with the Central Powers and suffered significant losses, resulted in further territorial concessions and national trauma.

The interwar period was marked by political instability, economic challenges, and social unrest. Various political factions, including agrarians, social democrats, and nationalists, vied for influence, leading to a series of governments, coups, and periods of authoritarian rule alternating with fragile attempts at democracy. The desire for national unification remained a potent force in the political landscape.

As World War II loomed, Bulgaria initially attempted to remain neutral but eventually allied with Nazi Germany in 1941. While Bulgaria did not participate in the war against the Soviet Union and notably resisted the deportation of its Jewish population, its alignment with Germany placed it on the losing side of the global conflict.

In September 1944, as the Red Army advanced into the Balkans, a coup d'état in Bulgaria brought the Fatherland Front, a broad coalition dominated by communists, to power. This marked the beginning of a new era, as Bulgaria fell squarely within the Soviet sphere of influence. The monarchy was abolished in 1946 following a referendum, and the People's Republic of Bulgaria was proclaimed. The Bulgarian Communist Party rapidly consolidated its power, eliminating opposition parties and establishing a one-party totalitarian regime closely aligned with Moscow. The next four decades would be defined by communist rule, a period of centralized planning, nationalization, and suppression of dissent, shaping the political culture and societal structures in profound ways.

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