Political Leadership as (De)Stabilizer: How Bulgarian Political Leaders Engage with Public Administration During Periods of Uncertainty (2021–2025)

Kalina Petrova, Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", Bulgaria, kalipetrova8@gmail.com[1]

Abstract

The period from 2021 to 2025 in Bulgaria was marked by unprecedented political instability, characterized by repeated parliamentary elections, frequent caretaker governments, and a shifting balance between political and administrative authority. This paper examines how political leadership attempted to stabilize the government during these uncertain times and how these actions were perceived within the administrative system. The paper analyses presidential and prime-minister engagement with the administration, focusing on expectations for administrative continuity and the strategies used to maintain functionality during periods of executive frequent changes. This paper's main thesis is that leadership discourse and actions play equally significant roles in shaping administrative stability. The research incorporates qualitative interviews with participants from the Summer Academy for Young Leaders in Public Administration organized by the Institute of Public Administration in Bulgaria. Their input shows how early-career public servants navigate uncertainty and manage expectations regarding neutrality, professionalism and democratic responsibility. Combining institutional analysis with the opinions of young public administration leaders, the paper offers a multi-level understanding of political leadership as both a stabilizing force and a source of uncertainty. It argues that strengthening democracy requires not only institutional capacity and legal safeguards but also leadership actions that imply stability, ethical behaviour, and responsible engagement with the administration.

Key words: Administrative resilience, Caretaker governments, Executive-administrative relations, Political leadership

1. Introduction

Democratic stability is an essential component of contemporary administration, as it ensures the peaceful and effective operation of democratic institutions and a prosperous society (Frederiksen, 2022). Effective democratic governance requires a stable political environment that provides individuals and businesses with security and predictability. Without stability, democratic nations become susceptible to political risks, social unrest, and economic instability (Ridge, 2022). Contributing to democratic stability are political practices such as political

[1] Kalina Petrova is a PhD student in the field of "Political Science" in the Department of Public Administration at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski". Bachelor of Public Administration, Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" (2022) and Master of Public Management and Policies, Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" (2023). The topic of the dissertation research is "Features of political leadership for shaping the public environment in conditions of political crisis." Currently, the PhD student is actively involved in civic activism and non-governmental organizations. Her scientific interests are in the field of leadership, strategizing, civil society development and sociology.

leadership, a conducive political culture, and effective public policy (Leggett, 2022). Conversely, good governance ensures that government actions are transparent, accountable, and responsive to citizen requirements (Mansoor, 2021).

According to Zhu (2012), leaders who prioritize ethical behaviour and respect the rule of law can inspire public confidence and promote social cohesion. However, in Bulgaria, mass anti-corruption protests and the application of the U.S. Magnitsky Act against high-profile figures have highlighted a crisis of confidence where domestic politics is often viewed not as a neutral background but as an active obstacle to democratic development.

Existing academic articles on governance in times of instability have predominantly focused on formal institutional mechanisms that ensure continuity, emphasizing legal frameworks, bureaucratic autonomy, and procedural safeguards as the primary sources of administrative resilience. However, this institutional perspective often underestimates the role of political actors in shaping administrative stability, particularly through leadership practices, communication strategies and informal interactions with administration structures.

This paper examines how political leadership in Bulgaria between 2021 and 2025 has engaged with public administration during a period of prolonged instability. Expanding beyond a purely institutional analysis, it explores how leadership practices and discourse have influenced administrative functioning, perceptions of neutrality and professional identity. The situation in Bulgaria provides a particularly valuable context for such analysis due to the prominent role of caretaker governments appointed by the president, the shifting balance between executive actors and the absence of sustained parliamentary majorities.

The central argument in this paper is that administrative resilience in contexts of prolonged political instability is co-produced through both institutional arrangements and political leadership practices. Specifically, it argues that political leadership in Bulgaria during the reviewed period has simultaneously contributed to stabilizing administrative processes while also generating new forms of uncertainty and tension. This dual role highlights the need to conceptualize leadership not only as a political variable but also as an important component of administrative governance.

To empirically explore these dynamics, the paper adopts a qualitative case study approach combining institutional analysis with data collected through feedback from participants in the Summer Academy for Young Leaders in Public Administration, organized by the Institute of Public Administration in Bulgaria. These early-career professionals offer insights into how political instability is experienced within the administrative system, particularly in terms of professional identity, ethical reasoning and perceptions of responsible governance.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Defining Leadership and Resilience

Despite being the subject of much research in recent decades, the concept of leadership still lacks a unified definition. In this particular analysis, I will focus on the meaning that Robert Elgie (2018) gives to leadership in formal positions of institutional authority. Leadership is defined as a way of fulfilling the role, understood as the

interaction between the elements of the personality in the role of a leader in relation to a given community/followers, within a certain situation in order to solve a group problem (Taneva, 2005).

There are many authors who write on the topic of the importance of political leadership in conditions of political crises. This text refers to the article by John Kotter (with a focus on leadership deficit), Robert Elgie (with a focus on political leadership), James McGregor Burns, Barbara Kellerman.

This article's theoretical framework suggests that political leadership, political culture, and public policy are significant determinants of democratic stability. Political leadership is a crucial factor in determining democratic strength. (Johnson & Williams, 2020) When leaders prioritize ethical behaviour, they foster fair and effective work practices. This type of leadership inspires public trust and confidence in the political system, leading to greater participation and engagement in democratic processes (Lam & Xu, 2019). Additionally, political culture is a significant factor that influences democratic stability. Political culture is the norms, values, and beliefs that influence political behaviour (Pulatovna, 2022).

Public administration systems are designed to provide continuity, predictability, and rule-based governance regardless of political change. Classical public administration theory, most notably rooted in the work of Max Weber, conceptualizes bureaucracy as a rational-legal structure characterized by hierarchy, merit-based recruitment, and political neutrality. Within this framework, the administrative apparatus is expected to function independently of political fluctuations, ensuring stability in policy implementation. However, the realities of contemporary governance challenge this idealized separation between politics and administration. In contexts of prolonged political instability- characterized by frequent government changes, fragmented political authority and weakened parliamentary majorities, as in Bulgaria- the boundaries between political leadership and administrative systems become increasingly unclear. Rather than operating as structures, public administrations are embedded within dynamic political environments that shape their behaviour and priorities.

One thing that should also be noted is the concept of administrative resilience- traditionally, resilience has been understood in institutional terms- as the capacity of administrative systems to absorb disturbances while maintaining core functions. This perspective emphasizes legal safeguards, organizational routines, and professional norms as key sources of stability. Yet, recent developments in governance theory suggest resilience is increasingly viewed as a dynamic and relationship-based process, shaped by interactions between actors and contextual factors. Scholars such as Christopher Hood have highlighted the importance of institutional behaviour and adaptive capacity, while Mark Bovens emphasizes accountability and legitimacy as central to sustaining governance systems under stress (or instability).

From this perspective, administrative resilience includes not only structural capacity but also interpretive and behavioural aspects. Civil servants must continuously interpret signals from political leadership, adapt to shifting priorities, and navigate uncertainty in their professional roles. This suggests that resilience is partially constructed through clarity of expectations and trust in leadership, rather than being solely embedded in formal rules. In this sense, resilience becomes an administratively experienced phenomenon- one that is shaped by both institutional frameworks and the quality of interaction between administration and politicians.

Frequent changes in leadership, however, can produce inconsistent policy directions, shifting expectations and competing interpretations of administrative responsibility. In such contexts, civil servants may face dilemmas

between maintaining neutrality and responding to political pressures. This is especially relevant for early-career professionals, whose administrative characteristics are still being formed.

2.2. Political Leadership as an Administrative Variable

Leadership is increasingly recognized as an integral component of governance, shaping not only policy outcomes but also institutional dynamics and administrative behaviour. In the context of instability, political leaders play a significant role in signalling expectations, framing priorities and establishing the tone of executive-administrative relations. Leadership can contribute to stability by providing clear direction, reinforcing professional norms, and supporting administrative autonomy. Simultaneously, it can generate uncertainty through inconsistent communication or attempts to exert control over bureaucratic processes.

This dual role suggests that political leadership functions as both a formal authority and an informal institutional force. Its impact extends beyond decision-making to include symbolic and communicative dimensions that influence how administration interprets and responds to its environment. Through public discourse, media presence and organizational interactions, political leaders shape the broader climate within which civil servants operate. This includes influencing perceptions of legitimacy, trust and professional security- factors that are central to administrative resilience.

2.3. Analytical Implications for the Study

Building on this theoretical framework, the present article conceptualizes administrative resilience as a co-produced outcome of institutional structures and leadership practices. It examines political leadership along two dimensions:

- **Stabilizing practices**: actions and narratives that reinforce continuity, clarity and professional norms
- **Destabilizing practices**: signals and behaviours that generate uncertainty or ambiguity

These are then analysed in relation to administrative perceptions, particularly among young public administration professionals, focusing on:

- Professional identity
- Neutrality and ethics
- Motivation and trust

By integrating the above-mentioned approaches to public administration, the article aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how governance systems function under prolonged political instability, highlighting the central role of leadership in shaping administrative resilience.

3. Executive-Administrative Relations in Bulgaria (2021-2025)

3.1. Political Instability and Institutional Context

The period between 2021 and 2025 represents one of the most politically unstable phases in Bulgaria's recent democratic development, characterized by repeated failures to form stable governing coalitions. Within this timeframe, the country held multiple parliamentary elections, often within short intervals, reflecting both declining public trust in political parties and their inability to produce stable majorities. A central institutional consequence of this situation was the enabling of the appointment of caretaker governments. These governments, appointed by the president in the absence of a functioning parliament, were intended as temporary mechanisms to organize elections and ensure continuity. However, their frequent use during this period effectively transformed them into a recurring governance form, as between 2021 and 2025, Bulgaria spent more time under caretaker cabinets (led by Stefan Yanev, Galab Donev, and Dimitar Glavchev) than under elected ones.

From a public administration perspective, this created a unique institutional environment in which formal stability mechanisms were continuously relied upon, raising questions about their long-term implications for administrative functioning and democratic accountability.

3.2. Caretaker Governments as a Governance Form

The repeated appointment of caretaker governments between 2021 and 2025 significantly altered the practical role of these institutions. Traditionally constrained to limited administrative functions, caretaker governments were increasingly required to engage in substantive governance activities, including policy coordination, crisis response, and international representation. This functional expansion blurred the distinction between temporary and fully mandated governments. While caretaker governments continued to operate under formal limitations, the absence of stable political leadership demanded a more active role in governing processes.

For public administration, this shift had several implications. On one hand, caretaker governments provided a level of continuity, ensuring that core state functions were maintained despite political instability. On the other hand, their temporary status introduced uncertainty regarding policy direction, strategic planning and long-term administrative priorities. This duality shows a key tension: mechanisms designed to ensure stability in some circumstances may produce vagueness when they become routine. The normalization of caretaker governance therefore contributed to both the resilience and the fragility of administrative processes

3.3. The Role of Presidential Leadership

A distinctive feature of the Bulgarian case during this period is the enhanced role of the presidency in executive governance. Through the repeated appointment of caretaker governments, the president became a central actor in shaping administrative leadership and institutional direction. This development represents a shift in the balance of executive authority. While Bulgaria is a parliamentary republic, the prolonged inability of parliament to produce stable governments increased the practical influence of the presidency. This influence extended beyond formal constitutional powers to include agenda-setting, leadership selection and public communication.

In December 2023, a constitutional amendment limited the choice of potential caretaker PMs to the people occupying one of four state positions or their deputies: the chair of the National Assembly, the Bulgarian National Bank Governor or their deputy, the Chair of the Audit Office or their deputy, and the Ombudsman or their deputy. This amendment was made in an open move to limit the powers of the president, and in particular, those of President Radev, who had appointed four separate caretaker cabinets in the post-2021 period and who had been

seen to use them for his own political interests. At the same time, the Constitution was also amended to mandate that the National Assembly remain in session until a new Parliament is elected (Spirova, 2024).

3.4. Policy Interactions Examples

Caretaker governments were forced to engage in functional governance, such as the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) and preparations for Eurozone and Schengen accession. Examples also include:

- **NRRP and Reform Obstacles:** Administrative capacity was severely tested by the "money-for-reforms" principle of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP). While technical staff completed most of the planned investments, the lack of a stable parliamentary majority caused critical reform bottlenecks. For instance, in 2024, the assessment made by the European Commission reported that up to 653 million euros were at risk due to the country not carrying out the necessary reforms on time. Similarly in 2026, energy sector reforms regarding the restructuring of the Bulgarian Energy Holding were stalled by legislative inaction despite being technically ready.
- **Energy Crisis Management:** Caretaker Energy Minister Traicho Traikov adopted a long-awaited ordinance on "energy poverty," establishing an automated data-exchange mechanism between administrative bodies to identify vulnerable citizens critically dependent on electricity-powered life-support. The process had started in 2023 and it was announced in 2026, however it is a strong example of how the administration implemented and targeted social assistance based on technical criteria.
- **Schengen Accession Readiness:** The administration demonstrated successful mobilization to meet technical criteria for Schengen entry. Administrative requirements were met, leading to the removal of air and maritime restrictions in 2025.

Governing Event (2021-2025)	**Administrative Impact**	**Leadership Signalling**
NRRP Approval (May 2022)	Delayed implementation due to political turnover.	Focus on "technical compliance" over reform.
Rotation Failure (2024)	Breakdown in long-term policy coordination.	Heightened polarization.
Schengen Accession (Jan 2025)	Successful administrative mobilization for land borders.	Continuity narrative and state persistence.

4. Political Leadership as a Stabilizing Force

Despite the prolonged political instability characterizing the period 2021-2025, political leadership in Bulgaria demonstrated several practices that contributed to maintaining administrative continuity and institutional functionality. These stabilizing dynamics were not primarily rooted in formal institutional reforms, but rather in patterns of leadership communication, symbolic signalling and selective reinforcement of bureaucratic norms.

4.1. Continuity Narratives and Institutional Reassurance

A key stabilizing mechanism identified in the analysis is the use of continuity-oriented narratives by political leaders, particularly within caretaker governments. Public statements frequently emphasized the importance of maintaining the functioning of the state, safeguarding administrative processes, and ensuring uninterrupted service delivery.

Such narratives played a critical role in reducing perceived uncertainty within the administration. By framing the role of public servants as essential to state continuity, political leaders reinforced the legitimacy of bureaucratic routines and encouraged adherence to established procedures. This aligns with the theoretical understanding of leadership as a source of interpretive stability, providing cognitive frameworks through which administrative actors can navigate uncertainty.

4.2. Reinforcement of Professionalism and Neutrality

Another stabilizing dimension of political leadership during this period is the explicit reinforcement of administrative professionalism and neutrality. Caretaker governments, in particular, often positioned themselves as technocratic and non-party actors, emphasizing expertise and procedural correctness. This positioning had important implications for administrative behaviour.

While such perceptions may not fully capture internal dynamics, they nonetheless highlight the importance of leadership signalling in shaping administrative expectations. The emphasis on professionalism functioned as a stabilizing force by aligning political discourse with core public administration values.

4.3. Functional Coordination and Administrative Adaptation

In addition to discursive practices, political leadership contributed the stability through efforts to maintain functional coordination within the executive. Despite frequent personnel changes, administrative systems demonstrated a capacity to adapt, relying on institutional memory and procedural continuity. Political leaders, particularly within caretaker governments, often relied heavily on senior civil servants and existing administrative structures. This reliance can be interpreted as both a necessity and a stabilizing strategy, reinforcing the role of the administration as a repository of expertise and continuity. Despite frequent personnel changes, administrations relied on institutional memory. Caretaker PMs, such as Dimitar Glavchev, often reappointed a majority of ministers from preceding interim cabinets to ensure continuity in policies like Finance and Defense.

This observation underscores a key paradox: political instability can, under certain conditions, enhance the relative importance of the administration, thereby strengthening its stabilizing role.

4.4. Stabilization Through Limited Ambition

Finally, the limited policy ambition of caretaker governments may itself be understood as a stabilizing factor. By avoiding major reforms and focusing on essential functions, political leaders reduced the scope of disruption within the administrative system.

This "minimalist governance" approach aligns with the constitutional role of caretaker cabinets but takes on added significance in a context where such governments operate repeatedly. The restraint exercised by political leaders contributed to preserving administrative balance, even in the absence of long-term strategic direction.

5. Political Leadership as a Destabilizing Force

While political leadership contributed to administrative stability in certain respects, it simultaneously functioned as a source of uncertainty and disruption. These destabilizing effects were not always the result of direct intervention but often emerged through indirect signals, inconsistent communication, and the broader political environment.

5.1. Inconsistent Signals and Shifting Expectations

One of the most significant destabilizing factors identified in the analysis is the inconsistency of political signals directed toward the administration. Frequent changes in government resulted in shifting priorities, management styles, and expectations, requiring civil servants to continuously recalibrate their behaviour. This lack of continuity in leadership created ambiguity regarding administrative roles and responsibilities.

From a public administration perspective, such uncertainty undermines the predictability that is essential for effective bureaucratic functioning. Even in the absence of direct politicization, inconsistent leadership signals can generate instability by complicating decision-making processes.

5.2. Politicization Through Discourse and Perception

Another key destabilizing dynamic is the politicization of administration through public discourse. During the period under study, political rhetoric often included criticism of existing administrative structures, allegations of corruption, and calls for personnel changes.

While such discourse may reflect legitimate political concerns, it also has important implications for administrative systems. Repeated narratives questioning the integrity or neutrality of the administration can erode internal cohesion and create defensive or risk-averse behaviour among civil servants. This highlights the role of leadership communication not only as a stabilizing force but also as a potential source of destabilization when it undermines trust in administrative institutions.

5.3. Erosion of Motivation and Institutional Trust

A further destabilizing consequence of prolonged political instability is its impact on motivation and institutional trust. The absence of stable leadership and long-term policy direction can reduce the perceived meaningfulness of administrative work, particularly for younger professionals.

This suggests that instability affects not only organizational processes but also the subjective experience of public service. Over time, such effects may have implications for recruitment, retention, and the overall quality of the administrative system.

6. Administrative Perceptions and Identity: Empirical Evidence

To understand the internal dynamics of the Bulgarian administration during this crisis, this study incorporates results from the national "Is Yours a Learning Organization" survey and qualitative feedback from the Summer Academy for Young Leaders in Public Administration.

6.1. Findings from the National IPA Survey

The 2023 cycle of the IPA survey, which included 4,373 employees from 79 administrations, provides a critical data point on the impact of prolonged uncertainty on administrative culture.

- **Cultural Benchmark Gap:** The overall assessment of the learning culture in the Bulgarian administration scored 62 points, significantly lower than the international benchmark of 74 points. This suggests that approximately 75% of foreign organizations possess a more robust learning and adaptive culture.
- **Leadership and Environment:** Scores in "Leadership" (66 points vs. benchmark 76) and "Learning Environment" (61 points vs. benchmark 71) reveal a persistent lag in how administrative leaders foster innovation under pressure.
- **Weakest Link: Processes:** The domain of "Processes" was the weakest, scoring only 60 points (benchmark 74), which corresponds to the 25th percentile internationally. This indicates that the frequent turnover of political leadership has prevented the institutionalization of stable administrative routines.
- **A Resilience Advantage:** Interestingly, Bulgaria retains an advantage in "Time to Reflect" on organizational processes. This suggest that the "minimalist governance" of caretaker periods may paradoxically offer civil servants the space to analyse and refine internal structures without the pressure of radical legislative shifts.

6.2. Insights from the Summer Academy for Young Leaders

The Summer Academy, established in 2016 to form a network of young civil servants with leadership potential, offers a unique window into the formation of administrative identity during crisis. The feedback reveals a nuanced critique of the relationship between young professionals and their senior leadership.

- **Negotiating Professional Identity:** Qualitative feedback indicates that early-career professionals view administration as a space requiring continuous "ethical negotiation". Neutrality is not a fixed rule but a lived practice where individuals must balance responsiveness to the current minister with the long-term interests of the state.
- **Critique of Sovereign Leadership:** Participants noted that current leadership often follows a "sovereign" or top-down model that is poorly suited for complex, modern public policy. They expressed frustration that their knowledge often goes unused because they lack the influence to impact final

decisions, which are frequently driven by short-term political responsiveness rather than long-term technical expertise.

- **Bureaucratic Isolation and Silos:** Feedback indicated that many administrations operate as "closed systems," making it difficult for early-career professionals to develop cross-administrative solutions. Young leaders highlighted that their own administrations often lack the "space for development" and the collaborative pathways necessary for genuine professional growth.
- **Eroding Motivation through Political Noise:** Participants shared that the "wait-and-see" culture imposed by rotating cabinets leads to a sense that their efforts are temporary. This erosion of "public service motivation" is directly linked to leadership signals that treat the administration as a scapegoat for political failure.

Dimension of Perception	Participant Feedback / Survey Data	Proposed Shift for Efficiency
Leadership	66/76 score; seen as too top-down.	Move from "Sovereign" to "Participatory" leadership.
Processes	60/74 score; weak institutional memory.	Institutionalize cross-administrative networks.
Neutrality	Practice of "ethical negotiation."	Use "Time to Reflect" for process optimization.
Motivation	Eroded by scapegoating and silos.	Adopt "Collaborative Innovation" models.

6.3. Proposed Changes for a More Efficient Processes

Based on their experiences, participants in the Summer Academy proposed several structural and behavioural shifts aimed at improving PA efficiency:

- **Adopting Collaborative Innovation:** Young leaders strongly advocated for "leadership of participation" (collaborative innovation). This model, common in EU institutions, involves engaging stakeholders and experts early in the policy cycle to improve internal efficiency and legitimacy.
- **Cross-Administrative Synergies:** Instead of working in institutional silos, participants suggested creating formal professional networks that allow projects to be developed jointly across different ministries. They emphasized that peer feedback from mentors and colleagues across the system acts as a "stabilizing anchor" that preserves project quality regardless of political rotation.
- **Institutionalizing "Time to Reflect":** Interestingly, participants identified the "Time to Reflect" on organizational processes as a core Bulgarian advantage that should be formalized. They proposed that caretaker periods should be used strategically to refine internal structures and tasks while the "noise" of major legislative reform is absent.

- **Modernizing Talent Attraction:** A key reform proposal concerned the recruitment and retention of young experts. Participants emphasized the need for modern advocacy and lobbying skills training to help civil servants protect national interests during periods of lack of political direction.

The findings indicate that prolonged political instability significantly shapes how emerging public administration professionals understand their roles. Rather than viewing administration as a stable and clearly defined career path, respondents describe it as a space requiring continuous adaptation and negotiation. Professional identity, in this context, is not fixed but constructed in response to external conditions.

6.4. Neutrality as a Lived Practice

Consistent with the theoretical framework, neutrality emerges as a practiced and context-dependent concept. Rather than being understood solely as non-bias, it is interpreted as a combination of professionalism, adherence to rules, and careful navigation of political signals. Senior non-elected public servants translate shifting political priorities into concrete outcomes while simultaneously negotiating the thin line between administrative objectivity and the responsiveness expected by temporary ministers. This reinforces the argument that administrative resilience depends not only on formal norms but also on the capacity of individuals to interpret and apply those norms under pressure.

7. Discussion

The findings of this study offer important insights into how public administration functions under conditions of prolonged political instability, contributing to ongoing debates in both classical and contemporary public administration scholarship. The described situation in Bulgaria demonstrates not only a fragmented political field, but also the reaching of the limits of political mediation between parties (including political leaders) and citizens - the inability of parties to express and shape the public interest into specific policies achieved through consensus. By examining the Bulgarian case between 2021 and 2025, the paper highlights the need to move beyond institutionalist explanations of administrative resilience and to incorporate the role of political leadership as a central analytical variable.

7.1. From Institutional Resilience to Interpretive Resilience

A key implication of the analysis is the need to reconceptualize administrative resilience as not only a structural or institutional property but also as an interpretive and relational phenomenon. Traditional approaches in public administration emphasize the role of formal rules, organizational structures, and professional norms in ensuring continuity. While these elements remain essential, the findings suggest that they are insufficient to fully explain administrative behaviour under conditions of sustained instability.

In the Bulgarian case, administrative resilience was not simply “embedded” in institutions but was actively produced through ongoing processes of interpretation and adaptation. Civil servants relied on leadership signals, organizational cues, and peer interactions to make sense of uncertain environments. This highlights the importance

of what may be termed interpretive resilience- the capacity of administrative actors to navigate ambiguity and maintain functionality despite unclear or shifting expectations.

This perspective complements and extends existing governance-oriented literature by emphasizing the micro-level processes through which resilience is enacted. It suggests that future research should pay greater attention to how administrative actors perceive and respond to instability, rather than focusing exclusively on institutional design.

7.2. The Administered State and the Accountability Gap

The normalization of caretaker governance has led to the emergence of an "administered state," where a permanent bureaucracy governs by default while political leaders focus on symbolic crisis management. While this ensures "functional continuity"- ensuring that pensions are paid and the lights stay on- it creates a significant accountability gap. When caretaker cabinets make long-term commitments, such as signing long term contracts or referring parliamentary decisions to the Constitutional Court, they operate outside the traditional feedback loop of a four-year mandate. This shift raises fundamental questions about democratic legitimacy: can technocratic expertise legitimately guide decision-making when the "voice of the people" is unheard (as they haven't directly participated in elections)?

7.3. Implications for Bureaucratic Neutrality and Administrative Ethics

The findings also contribute to ongoing debates on bureaucratic neutrality and administrative ethics. While neutrality remains a foundational principle of public administration, the study demonstrates that its practical application becomes increasingly complex under conditions of political instability.

In the Bulgarian case, neutrality was not simply a formal requirement but a negotiated practice, shaped by competing signals from political leadership and the broader political environment. Civil servants were required to interpret what neutrality meant in specific situations, often in the absence of clear guidance. This resulted in a more reflexive and context-dependent understanding of administrative ethics.

These findings suggest that neutrality should be conceptualized not as a fixed attribute but as a situated practice, requiring judgment, interpretation, and ethical reasoning. This has important implications for both theory and practice, highlighting the need for training and institutional support mechanisms that help civil servants navigate ethical ambiguity.

7.4. Broader Implications for Central and Eastern Europe

While this study focuses on Bulgaria, its findings resonate with broader patterns observed in Central and Eastern Europe. Many countries in the region exhibit hybrid administrative systems, combining formal adherence to Weberian principles with informal practices shaped by political dynamics and institutional legacies.

In such contexts, political instability can have particularly pronounced effects on public administration, as institutional norms may be less deeply entrenched or more vulnerable to political influence. The Bulgarian case illustrates how prolonged instability interacts with these structural conditions, amplifying the role of leadership in shaping administrative outcomes. At the same time, the findings suggest that administrative resilience in CEE contexts is not necessarily weaker but differently constituted. Rather than relying solely on formal safeguards,

resilience may depend more heavily on adaptive practices, informal norms, and the interpretive capacities of administrative actors.

This points to the value of comparative research examining how different governance contexts mediate the relationship between political leadership and administrative systems. Such research could help identify patterns and variations across the region, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of governance under uncertainty.

7.5. Practical Implications for Governance and Reform

From a practical perspective, the article highlights several implications for governance in contexts of political instability. First, it underscores the importance of leadership behaviour as a determinant of administrative stability. Political actors play a critical role not only in shaping policy but also in influencing the internal dynamics of public administration through their communication and engagement practices.

Second, the findings suggest that strengthening administrative resilience requires attention to both formal and informal dimensions of governance. While legal frameworks and institutional safeguards remain essential, they must be complemented by leadership practices that promote clarity, consistency, and trust.

Third, the article highlights the importance of preparing civil servants to operate under conditions of uncertainty. Training programs and professional development initiatives should incorporate components related to ethical decision-making, adaptability, and resilience, equipping administrative actors with the skills needed to navigate complex and unstable environments.

Taken together, these insights reinforce the central argument of the paper: that administrative resilience is co-produced through the interaction between institutional structures and political leadership practices. The Bulgarian case demonstrates that even well-established administrative systems depend on the quality of leadership engagement to maintain stability, particularly in times of crisis.

8. Conclusion

The 2021–2025 period in Bulgaria served as an existential test for institutional resilience. Political leadership played a paradoxical role, providing a stabilizing technocratic anchor through caretaker governance while simultaneously generating instability through inconsistent signals and the politicization of administrative structures. The lessons from Bulgaria highlight that a robust democracy depends on a "responsible leadership" that respects administrative autonomy. The future of the Bulgarian administration rests on building a stable partnership between the political and administrative spheres, rooted in transparency and a shared vision for the public good.

The findings demonstrate that administrative resilience cannot be understood solely as a product of formal institutional arrangements. While Bulgaria’s administrative system exhibited a notable capacity to maintain basic functionality despite repeated government turnover, this resilience was significantly influenced by the nature of political leadership. Leadership acted simultaneously as a stabilizing and destabilizing force, shaping how administrative actors interpreted their roles, responsibilities, and professional norms.

The study is not without limitations. Its reliance on qualitative data and a relatively small, non-representative sample means that the findings should be interpreted as exploratory rather than generalizable. Future research could expand the empirical base by incorporating a broader range of administrative actors, including senior civil servants and political appointees, as well as comparative perspectives across different national contexts.

In conclusion, the Bulgarian experience between 2021 and 2025 illustrates that governance under prolonged instability is not merely a test of institutional robustness but also of leadership responsibility. Understanding the interplay between political leadership and public administration is therefore essential for explaining how states maintain functionality- and legitimacy- in times of uncertainty.

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