

Between Brussels and Moscow: Bulgaria's 2026 Election and What it Means for Europe

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A New Savior....Again

Bulgaria's parliamentary election of April 2026 produced a decisive outcome in a political system torn by turmoil and instability. After eight elections in five years and a succession of caretaker governments, Rumen Radev's Progressive Bulgaria—a party formed only a few months before the vote—secured over 44 percent of the vote and an absolute parliamentary majority, something Bulgaria had not seen in many years. To understand what this means for Bulgaria, it's relationship with the European Union, and the current geostrategic context one must understand what drove this result.

Radev's victory reflects, first and foremost, growing frustration among the population with the prolonged political instability and disillusionment with the mainstream parties. But more than anything, his success stems from his ability to combine two deep and enduring cleavages within Bulgarian society: the pro-EU versus pro-Russian divide, and the anti-corruption (clean vs. corrupt) divide.

On the anti-corruption axis, Bulgaria has a well-worn template. More than once in its recent history, a new savior has emerged and swept parliamentary elections without even existing as a party before the campaign, promising to rid the country of corruption. In 2001, Bulgaria's former king, Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, received 43 percent of the vote with a party formed only months before the election, running on an anti-corruption and pro-European platform and promising to “fix” the country in 800 days. He served a full four-year mandate, after which his party became a junior coalition partner and then disappeared. In 2009, Boyko Borisov and his GERB (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria) replicated that formula running on an anti-corruption platform and scoring also 43 percent of the vote. GERB's tenure, however, proved much more durable, governing almost uninterruptedly from 2009 to 2021. Radev's 44 percent debut thus fits a recognizable pattern—and so do the risks that follow from it. Corruption is easy to mobilize voters around, but extremely difficult to address through specific institutions. Voters may, once again, become disappointed.

Radev's anti-corruption mandate is therefore real, but its delivery faces formidable obstacles. Combatting corruption requires complex measures, including reform of the judiciary and changes in the constitution. Constitutional reforms require a supermajority he does not possess. It remains to be seen whether he will convince opposition parties (including GERB) to support him in these efforts. Combatting corruption further requires strong and clear moral stand against corrupt practices that permeate all branches of government. Yet, one of the very first votes taken by his new absolute majority was, revealingly, a vote against investigating MP and oligarch Delyan Peevski— one of the two figures his entire campaign was built around opposing (the other being Borissov). While he has started making personnel changes, simply removing people from positions, or removing their security details (as he did with Borissov and Peevksi), does not dismantle the underlying networks and the so-called Peevski-Borissov model. There will be enormous pressure from oligarchic circles to preserve the system by replacing one figurehead with another while continuing to operate through behind-the-scenes deals. Whether Radev's people in key positions can resist that temptation will be the defining ethical test of this government.

On the geopolitical axis—the pro-EU versus pro-Russian divide—Radev's position is complex and nuanced. He is clearly pro-Russian: during the war in Ukraine he refused to call it a war, continuing to refer to it as a 'military operation.' He opposed military aid to Ukraine, criticized a defense cooperation agreement that Bulgaria recently signed with Ukraine, and argued against energy sanctions on Russian gas and oil, framing these positions as defenses of Bulgarian sovereignty and neutrality. At the same time, he has not positioned himself as anti-European and his critiques towards the EU are cautious and limited. His strategy, rather, is to walk a fine line—embracing pro-Russian positions on issues such as energy and defense while maintaining pro-EU policies, especially in matters related to EU funding.

This balancing act is conditioned by a structural reality that places firm limits on how far Radev can deviate from the European mainstream: the majority of the Bulgarian population remains fundamentally pro-European. EU membership has brought visible changes in average incomes, labor mobility, and everyday living standards that citizens can directly experience. Despite political instability, Bulgaria's integration into the European project has limited politicians' ability to seriously damage the country's economic situation. Were Radev to threaten Bulgaria's EU affiliation or seriously obstruct the recently acquired eurozone membership—which he has publicly opposed—he would face massive street protests. EU structural funds are simply irreplaceable; the idea that they could be substituted by Russian support would be catastrophic in terms of maintaining domestic popularity.

His government's early performance, however, illustrates the gap between electoral success and governing capacity. The cabinet assembled by Radev is drawn predominantly from former caretaker governments—eleven of eighteen ministers came from that background—plus figures from his presidential political cabinet. The professional bench is shallow, and the new party has not had time to develop the institutional depth needed to govern effectively. The result, in the first weeks, has been visible chaos: a notable absence from a NATO meeting in Bucharest, whether deliberate protest or organizational failure; economic policy proposals, including price controls, that were greeted with alarm by business associations and economists; and a reactive rather than proactive governing style. Radev himself has a sincere desire to succeed, but he is learning very quickly that governing is entirely different from shouting at the government from the presidential palace across the street.

Is Radev the new Orbán?

The question that most concerns European observers is whether Rumen Radev will replace Viktor Orbán as Moscow's primary proxy within the European Union. With Orbán's defeat in Hungary's 2026 election, the EU lost its most persistent internal disruptor on questions of Russia, Ukraine, and sanctions. The comparison between Radev and Orbán is instructive, but its limits are as important as its parallels.

There are meaningful similarities. Both leaders rose through personalist politics, bypassing formal party structures to build direct relationships with voters. Both exploited anti-establishment sentiment and anti-corruption rhetoric as primary electoral mobilizing tools. Both combined a heterogeneous coalition of voters—drawing from across the political spectrum, including nationalists, disaffected former supporters of traditional parties, and new participants—around a strong personal brand rather than a coherent ideological program. Most importantly, both have demonstrated pro-Russian inclinations that diverge from the EU's collective position on Ukraine, energy sanctions, and strategic autonomy.

But the differences matter greatly. Radev is much more ideologically flexible and much less rigidly positioned than Orbán. He is a political survivor whose worldview is pragmatic rather than dogmatic. We should not expect to see an authoritarian Orbán-type figure in Radev immediately—and it is important to remember that Orbán himself did not begin as one. In the late 1980s, before the collapse of communism, Orbán was strongly criticizing the communist regime. He became who he is over the course of several decades. Dictators are never born; they become dictators. Erdoğan, when he first came to power, was not a dictator. Putin, when he first won elections, was not a dictator. What happens is that once leaders gain power and begin accumulating more and more control, their willingness to relinquish that control declines very sharply. For Radev to follow that path would take time—even if that is ultimately where he is headed.

A more accurate immediate comparison is with Robert Fico of Slovakia. Fico similarly combines pro-Russian positions with continued EU membership and formal commitment to European processes. He challenges EU consensus on Russia, energy, and Ukraine, but does not do so as aggressively or as systematically as Orbán did when he had a consolidated power base, a fully captured media landscape, a rewritten constitution, and a disciplined party machine built over fifteen years. Radev, like Fico, will try to subvert European consensus where possible but will not dare to do so as explicitly as Orbán. Partly this is because he still lacks a fully consolidated party structure; partly it is because he knows that going too far risks bringing people into the streets.

The institutional context also differs fundamentally from Hungary under Orbán. Orbán spent fifteen years systematically dismantling democratic checks: subordinating the judiciary, capturing the media, rewriting electoral rules, and entrenching his party's dominance through constitutional engineering. Bulgaria's democratic institutions are deeply imperfect and riddled with corruption, but they have not undergone that degree of deliberate dismantlement.

Most importantly, Radev's room for maneuver at the EU level is structurally constrained in ways that Orbán's was not. Radev can challenge EU consensus at the level of the European Council and meetings of heads of state and foreign ministers—and with Fico as an ally on energy and Russia, he will try. But he cannot do so in the European Parliament: there are still three years until the next European parliamentary elections, and it remains entirely unclear whether Progressive Bulgaria

will be able to secure a significant presence there in 2029. Orbán's power within the EU derived from the combination of his domestic institutional consolidation and his long-established presence in European parliamentary politics. Radev currently has neither.

Bulgaria also remains highly dependent on EU funds in a way that places a hard ceiling on any confrontational strategy. And Radev governs on behalf of a coalition of voters with very different orientations—some who lean toward Moscow, others toward Brussels. Playing the pro-Russian card too aggressively risks fracturing that coalition. His strategic ambiguity is therefore not only a rhetorical posture; it is a political necessity.

What do the Bulgarian elections mean for Europe?

The 2026 Bulgarian elections illuminate several trends that are reshaping European politics more broadly.

The first is the continued decomposition of traditional party systems and their replacement by personalist vehicles. Historical political parties in Bulgaria have been decimated. The Bulgarian Socialist Party—the communist successor party that attracted nearly one million votes in 2017—failed to clear the four-percent threshold in 2026. The Movement for Rights and Freedom, historically the electoral vehicle of the ethnic Turkish minority, was dramatically weakened. What filled the vacuum was a party formed months before the election, built around a single figure's personal brand rather than any organizational depth or ideological coherence. This pattern—which has also appeared in Italy, France, and elsewhere in various forms—raises serious questions about the durability of what these movements produce in government. The research literature on new parties in Central and Eastern Europe documents a consistent pattern: they win elections with ease and govern with difficulty.

The second trend is the growing centrality of the geopolitical axis—specifically the Russia question—in domestic European politics. The war in Ukraine has forced every European electorate to take a position on questions that were previously the preserve of foreign policy specialists. In countries with strong historical ties to Russia, these questions activate deep reservoirs of cultural memory, economic anxiety, and elite interest that cut across conventional left-right divisions. Bulgaria is a particularly striking case: its pro-Russian sentiment has multiple and overlapping roots—the shared Orthodox and Slavic heritage, the memory of Russian military assistance in liberation from the Ottoman Empire, the Soviet-era modernization that transformed a predominantly agrarian society, energy dependency, and the economic anxieties associated with inflation and insecurity. Before the war in Ukraine, Bulgaria's dependence on Russian energy sources stood at approximately 90 percent; it has since fallen dramatically largely due to external EU pressure rather than domestic willingness. Energy costs in Bulgaria (and elsewhere) have skyrocketed recently and people understand that when energy prices rise, everything else follows. In this context, politicians who promise to protect cheap energy while maintaining EU membership have discovered a genuinely powerful formula—one that Germany itself practiced under Merkel for decades.

The third and perhaps most consequential signal is the persistence of the strategic ambiguity model as an electoral strategy. Radev's formula—anti-corruption rhetoric combined with pro-Russian sympathies expressed in moderate, sovereignty-inflected language—was successful precisely because it allowed him to appeal simultaneously to voters with opposing and incompatible views.

His arguments are delivered in a reasonable, polished tone, but we should not mistake the packaging for the content. When he makes arguments about EU directives overriding Bulgarian culture, or about sovereignty being threatened by European energy sanctions, he is exploiting a genuine political vulnerability—the fact that within a union of twenty-seven member states, some directives will inevitably be unpopular—to advance a hidden Eurosceptic and pro-Russian agenda. The moderate presentation is strategic. Orbán was explicit about his worldview; Fico is somewhat less so; Radev is less explicit still. But the direction of travel is similar.

What does this mean for Europe more broadly? The defeat of Orbán in Hungary was widely celebrated as a democratic correction, and in institutional terms it genuinely was: the €90 billion aid package to Ukraine was immediately approved, and Hungary's systematic obstruction of EU decisions was removed. But Orbán's departure has not removed the structural conditions that produced him. As long as the EU's eastern periphery faces chronic problems of institutional weakness, judicial capture, energy vulnerability, and economic insecurity relative to the western core, the political entrepreneurs who exploit these conditions will continue to find audiences. The emergence of Radev in Bulgaria, and the continued influence of Fico in Slovakia, suggests that the bloc of voices within the EU willing to challenge the collective position on Russia, Ukraine, and sanctions has not disappeared; it has simply become less consolidated and less explicit.

There are a few indicators worth watching carefully. First, whether the Bulgarian opposition can remain coherent—the immediate fragmentation of Democratic Bulgaria into its component formations after the election was inauspicious. Second, whether GERB under Borisov, which abstained rather than voted against the new government, is genuinely playing a long waiting game as the 'safe European alternative' for when Radev stumbles—a very plausible scenario. Third, whether Radev's anti-corruption mandate is translated into institutional action or quietly traded away for governing stability. And fourth, whether his energy policy choices reveal the true direction of his geopolitical loyalties. These four indicators will determine whether 2026 is remembered as the beginning of Bulgaria's democratic stabilization or as the opening chapter of something more troubling. Radev will try to walk the fine line between Brussels and Moscow, distributing enough pro-European reassurance to preserve EU funds and enough pro-Russian signaling to maintain his base. Whether that line can be walked for a full four years, without being forced off it by events—energy crises, EU sanctions, oligarchic pressure, or by his own governing inexperience—is the central question that Europe should be watching in Sofia.