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## The Future of Russia-Bulgaria Relations after the Bulgarian Presidential Election

Jakub Pieńkowski

*On 13 November, Rumen Radev was elected president of Bulgaria. Supported by the opposition Bulgarian Socialist Party (BPS), he received nearly 60% of the votes in the second round. He promises to strengthen cooperation with Russia and remains sceptical of NATO reinforcement in the Black Sea region. Tsetska Tsacheva, the candidate for the ruling party Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB), received 36% of the votes. Her loss brought with it the resignation of the Boyko Borisov government. GERB announced it would not participate in a new government coalition. BPS has limited ability to form a new coalition, meaning early parliamentary elections may take place at the beginning of 2017 and could further strengthen the pro-Russian parties.*

**Election in Context.** The aim of Bulgarian foreign policy is to maintain a balance between good relations with its EU partners on the one hand and with Russia and Turkey on the other. The most important challenge it faces is to prevent Turkish-Russian cooperation because it could marginalise Bulgaria. The latter attempts to use existing animosity between the two countries to strengthen its own political position in the Black Sea region. The Bulgarian authorities are particularly interested in improving relations with Russia.

Bulgaria is located on a mass migration route from Turkey to Western Europe and had become dissatisfied with the EU aid response to the crisis. In September, during the informal summit of the European Council in Bratislava, Bulgaria was promised to receive €160 million in aid. Despite this, the presence of 10,000 migrants has increasingly led to tension in Bulgaria. Politicians there accuse their EU partners of a lack of solidarity. The government announced that it would not accept people sent back under the EU's Dublin Regulation, the so-called quota system, from Western Europe where they had travelled to seek asylum.

Russia plays a crucial role in the Bulgarian economy. Even with the EU sanctions on Russia, it remains Bulgaria's second-largest trade partner. However, this trade fell by about 33% from €5.35 billion in 2013 (just €150 million less than with Germany at that time) to €3.55 billion in 2015. The Bulgarian tourism industry was badly affected. In 2013, almost 700,000 Russians visited the country, but in 2015 fewer than 500,000 entered, a drop of nearly 30%.

Like Germany or Hungary, Bulgaria is considering new energy projects and sees Russian participation in them not as a threat but as an opportunity to strengthen its own political position and gain investment. In 2013, the European Commission put on hold the construction of a nuclear power plant in Belene. As a result, Bulgaria had to pay \$620 million in compensation to a Russian state company that had invested in the project. At the end of 2014, Russia abandoned the South Stream gas pipeline project, which would have run via the Black Sea directly from Russia to Bulgaria. Russia took the decision in light of questions by the EC about whether the project complied with EU public procurement law. At the same time, Russia announced its intent to work on an alternative pipeline project—Turkish Stream. Meanwhile, in Germany, the idea appeared to build the Nord Stream II pipeline, which would bypass Ukraine, now a key transit country, and would not meet the goal of diversifying the EU's sources of supply. This revived the Bulgarian government's hopes for a return to the South Stream project, but it will require improved relations with Russia.

Bulgaria considers Russia to be the only force capable of balancing Turkish influence in the Black Sea region. The Bulgarians' negative assessment of the situation only increased after reports of repression after the failed coup in Turkey and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's questioning of the Greek-Turkish border and threats to not block migrants from

going to the EU despite a deal in place. These are among the reasons why the Bulgarian government was sceptical of reinforcing the NATO presence in the region. As a result, in July, Bulgaria rejected a Romanian move to establish permanent NATO naval forces in the Black Sea, because they would be dominated by the Turkish navy.

These regional and other changes tread on Bulgaria's traditionally very good political and social relations with Russia. Due to their geographical proximity, Bulgaria's economy has felt the deterioration of relations with Russia more harshly than many other EU countries. In addition, the Bulgarian public's sympathy for Russia is partly due to their Orthodox ties, language, and the memory of Russian participation in the liberation of Bulgaria from the yoke of the Ottoman Empire.

**Change of President.** Radev was formally an independent candidate but had the support of BPS in his election campaign. He stressed issues of migration and improved relations with Russia. He considers membership in NATO and in the EU as the irreversible choice of Bulgarians, although in his opinion, Bulgarian politicians who identify with this point of view and at the same time express Russophobia, particularly outgoing President Rosen Plevneliev, make a great mistake. Strengthening relations with Russia appears to be significant to Radev. Although not a priority, Radev promised to strive to cancel the sanctions on Russia because of they are detrimental to Bulgaria's economy. He also proposed modernisation of the country's military and does not exclude cooperation with the Russian defence industry. Radev's opinion on Russia's annexation of Crimea is ambiguous. Moreover, in appealing to Bulgarian national pride, he easily collected the nationalist vote, whose candidate, Krasimir Karachanov, received in the first round 15% of the votes.

That Bulgarians voted for a presidential candidate unrelated to the existing political scene should be viewed as a protest of the Borisov government and a large part of the country's political class. Until August, Radev had been the commander of the Bulgarian Air Force with the rank of major general. He quit his post in protest of the government's proposal to establish a NATO Air Policing mission over Bulgaria. A significant part of the cost of this mission would come from the Bulgarian budget, mainly because a lack of funds made it difficult to maintain the combat readiness of Bulgarian fighter jets. Earlier, Radev had had a dispute with Defence Minister Nikolai Nenchev. Although the contract for the maintenance and upgrade of the country's MiG-29 fighters was won by a Polish firm, Radev regarded the Russian offer as more favourable. That dispute gained him some popularity but others accused him of lobbying on behalf of the Russian armaments industry.

The campaign statements of the new president run counter to the policies of Plevneliev, who did not seek re-election. His decision not to run again was announced in May and was a surprise to many Bulgarians. Plevneliev seemed to be the GERB's natural candidate because he enjoyed the second highest poll ratings after GERB leader Borisov (who was prime minister in 2009–2013 and again since 2014). However, GERB's lack of support for him was caused by his perceived anti-Russian attitude—he demanded implementation of the sanctions against Russia, supported reinforcing NATO's southeastern flank and accused Moscow of hybrid warfare against the EU.

**GERB's Defeat and Resignation of the Government.** Radev's victory was ensured primarily by the nomination of GERB candidate Tsetska Tsacheva, the Speaker of Parliament, who is recognizable, but not a charismatic politician. In her campaign, she declared she was in favour of cancelling the sanctions on Russia and wanted compensation for Bulgarians from the EU for the losses caused by them. However, in contrast to her rival's ambiguity, she declared that Crimea is part of Ukraine. In practice, her strategy was to convince Bulgarians of her close connections to popular Prime Minister Borisov, credited by the public for improving the country's economy—GDP grew by about 3% a year—and fighting corruption.

After Tsacheva lost, Borisov fulfilled his pre-election promise to announce his resignation and the end of his government, probably resulting in an impasse in Bulgarian politics for several months. President Plevneliev is obligated to start negotiations with parties to create a new government but is unlikely to be successful. Borisov has said he will not search for a new coalition partner. Strengthened by Radev's victory, the opposition has called for early parliamentary elections. Because President Plevneliev in his last three months in office has no right to terminate parliament, it would only come after Radev is sworn in on 22 January 2017. New elections must be held within two months after that decision.

**Conclusions.** All of Bulgaria's main political parties support improving relations with Russia. The new president will search for rapprochement with Russia while trying to maintain good relations with the EU and NATO partners. Radev has no political experience or prior political base. Probably his closest associates are BPS politicians, who will have the chance to significantly influence his policies. Even after the probable early elections, GERB will continue to be the largest party in parliament, but it may lose some seats to BPS and the nationalists, who support the pro-Russia policy much more.

Russian-Turkish economic cooperation without regard to Bulgaria's interests is particularly dangerous for the latter. Therefore, Radev will support government efforts to lobby for an EU political agreement to restart South Stream if it returns during the Bulgarian-Russian negotiations. Russia has already suggested this possibility but wants financial guarantees securing its investment first. This reduces the chances to construct the pipeline. On the other hand, even raising the South Stream issue will help Bulgaria undermine the Turkish Stream project.

Poland's efforts to reinforce NATO's Eastern Flank and its presence in the Black Sea region, as well as the country's unequivocal position against Russia's actions in Ukraine will not receive Bulgarian support. All the main political parties in Bulgaria favour ending the sanctions and only President Plevneliev has been able to counter that position on the international level. Although Bulgaria is unlikely to block the extension of EU sanctions, it will question them more openly and try to persuade other countries to take the initiative.