

Unity makes strength? How the radical right could become kingmakers in Bulgaria

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Much of the coverage of Bulgaria's presidential election on 13 November has focused on what the victory of Rumen Radev means for the country moving forward. But as [Manès Weisskircher](#) and [Julia Rone](#) illustrate, the election also saw success for radical right parties. They argue that a multiparty radical right platform is well placed to win a large share of the vote in the snap elections now planned for next year, and they could even emerge as kingmakers in the negotiations over the next Bulgarian government.



On 13 November, the [former air force General Rumen Radev](#) won [Bulgaria's presidential election](#). Supported by the opposition Socialists, he defeated Tsetska Tsacheva, the candidate from the ruling GERB (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria). After this defeat, Prime Minister Boyko Borisov resigned. Borisov and his party were the clear losers of the elections; however, Radev and the Socialists were not the only winners. The radical right platform also fared exceptionally well. Running as United Patriots, presidential candidate Krasimir Karakachanov and his vice-presidential nominee Yavor Notev gained 15 per cent of the vote, finishing third only behind the mainstream parties' candidates. While largely ignored by observers outside the country, the importance of this development [has not been overlooked](#) within Bulgarian media.



As the radical right have noted themselves, their biggest victory was that they finally managed to unite. Indeed, the main players behind the United Patriots – the Patriotic Front and Ataka – have previously endured a tense rivalry. Continuously with parliamentary representation since first entering parliament in 2005, Ataka was highly successful at the beginning of its life as a party. They peaked in 2006, when founder and leader Volen Siderov entered the second round of the presidential elections. Back then, he was supported by almost a quarter of all voters. One year later, Ataka gained 14 per cent at the European Parliament elections. However, the new Patriotic Front has recently outperformed Ataka, entering the National Assembly with more than 7 per cent of support in the latest elections in 2014. The Patriotic Front itself is an alliance of far right players, including IMRO – Bulgarian National Movement and the National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria (NFSB).

A major split among the radical right occurred in 2009 over Volen Siderov's support for the first government led by Borisov. Valeri Simeonov, the owner of the TV channel SKAT, which gave a platform to Siderov's television show 'Ataka', accused him of betraying the principles of nationalism. Siderov went on to create his own TV channel ALFA, while Simeonov created his own party, the NFSB, which ironically currently provides support for the second Borisov government as part of the Patriotic Front.

When it comes to the United Patriots' leader and presidential candidate Karakachanov, only five years ago [he claimed that Siderov needed a psychiatrist](#) after an Ataka-led clash at a mosque in Sofia. With differences left behind, they united, pointing as their main motivation to the rise of the far right across Europe as well as the refugee crisis. It was precisely these transnational dynamics that provided the final push for consolidating the dispersed forces of the nationalists.

All quiet on the south-eastern front?

Only in the past few years has immigration become a salient political issue in Bulgaria. Far right players in the country, in a similar fashion to other Eastern European cases, have focused on the Roma as an 'internal enemy'. An important feature of the Bulgarian context, however, is the presence of 'Turks', a label used to indiscriminately

designate ethnic Turkish individuals with Bulgarian citizenship and ethnic Bulgarians who are Muslim.

Although the electoral rise of the radical right only started in the mid-2000s, Bulgaria has had a long history of nationalism. The Turkish question has its origins in the nationalist politics of the Bulgarian Communist regime that, during the 'Revival Process' in the 1980s, forced the Turkish minority to adopt Bulgarian names, with about 300,000 Turkish Bulgarians leaving in 1989. Since the 1990s, the liberal party Movement of Rights and Freedoms (MRF) has consistently gained the votes of ethnic Turkish Bulgarians. Its persistent electoral strength has given MRF strong political influence, including in government coalitions.

In May of this year, the Patriotic Front proposed a series of reforms to the country's electoral legislation that included making voting obligatory and reducing the number of electoral sections abroad. However, opponents of the reform argued that this would impede the more than one million Bulgarian migrants in the EU and US from voting. Paraphrasing [Bertolt Brecht](#), the radical right in Bulgaria tried not to elect its own people but to define who the people are. But the calculations turned out to be more complicated: the radical right in Bulgaria operates in a situation in which it has to deal both with the emigration of ethnic Bulgarians to the West and the electoral strength of ethnic Turkish Bulgarian citizens in Turkey.

However, it is immigration that has become one of the key issues in contemporary Bulgarian politics. Already in 2013, Bulgaria had experienced a [substantial increase](#) in asylum seekers. More than 7,000 individuals applied for asylum in that year, while the annual average during the decade before was about 1,000. As a response, the Bulgarian government decided to build a fence at the border. While the [cost of this fence](#) is rising, it remains unfinished and some of the completed parts are already in need of repair. At the same time, the refugee crisis has intensified. In 2014, the number of asylum seekers [rose](#) to 11,081, then in 2015 20,391 individuals applied for asylum. Similar to other European countries, asylum seekers in Bulgaria experience poor housing conditions and some of them have faced violations of their human rights.

Among the more notable stories to emerge during this period has been Dinko Valev, a self-styled '[vigilante migrant hunter](#)', who has made it into international media for tracking down immigrants on the Bulgarian Turkish border. Curiously, the [legal investigation](#) against him was only able to progress after the presidential elections. Any attempt to sentence him during the campaign would have led to a public backlash as there is massive public support for his actions. The German [Tatjana Festerling](#) has also participated in a similar vigilante group in the Bulgarian South-East, pointing to the [transnationalism](#) of some PEGIDA style groups.

As might be expected, the United Patriots based much of their presidential campaign on plans for curbing immigration. At a press conference on the evening after the first round of the election, they emphasised the necessity of finishing the Turkish border fence and advocated revoking a decree on the integration of refugees in local municipalities. In addition, they have also raised issues related to the welfare state, promising to raise the minimum pension as currently 25 per cent of retired people in Bulgaria live on less than 200 levas (100 euro) a month, which is below the poverty threshold.

Interestingly, and despite their ideological differences (for example, Ataka is explicitly pro-Russian), the so called 'patriotic' parties are also united by calling for nationalisation, especially in relation to power distribution companies and goldmines. Some of their demands have been implemented, even against strong criticism: in October, the Bulgarian parliament followed some other countries in [effectively banning](#) the wearing of the niqab in public, after such prohibitions had been established in several cities across the country.

Prospects for the radical right after the presidential election

Not all contemporary developments are working in favour of the Bulgarian radical right. On the day of the first round of the presidential election, a referendum on key aspects of the country's political system was also held. One of the questions asked was whether the country should replace its proportional electoral system with a majoritarian system, with 74 per cent of those who participated in the referendum approving of this proposal. However, some

opponents of this and other changes boycotted the referendum and ultimately, the turnout was slightly too low for it to become legally binding.

But after losing the presidential election, GERB declared it would pursue the electoral reform. If adopted, the United Patriots might end up similar to UKIP and the Front National: parties that suffer from majoritarian systems which impede their electoral success. If a new electoral system is adopted, this will probably not happen before the snap elections now expected for the first half of 2017 – although there is already speculation that at least some majoritarian elements could be adopted by then.

As the United Patriots made clear, the November elections were just a test for the next parliamentary elections. The key question is whether their alliance will hold. If it does, they could also attract the supporters of Veselin Mareshki, a businessman and politician who is not quiet about his hostility towards Roma. Mareshki's fourth place and 11 per cent at the presidential election points to the potential size of the United Patriots' electorate.

Their biggest problem is that the rhetoric they have adopted is embraced across the political spectrum – from the Socialists to GERB, there is consensus on most of their main demands. The question will be the extent to which they are able to stand out from the crowd and claim ownership of these issues. If they manage to do so, their political influence is likely to increase.

So far, the radical right has not excluded the possibility of forming a government within the current parliament, preventing the appointment of an expert government. However, their most realistic prospect is to become kingmakers during the next government formation process. This would further increase the leverage of the radical right in Bulgarian politics. Far from being exceptional, however, such a development would correspond to the recent developments in many other countries in Europe and beyond.

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