

# Interview with Bulgarian presidential candidate Traycho Traykov: “The EU needs to speak with one voice when dealing with Russia”

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*Bulgaria will hold presidential elections on 6 November, with a referendum on party funding and the electoral system taking place on the same date. In a discussion with Adelina Marini, [Traycho Traykov](#), the candidate for the Reformist Bloc, outlines where he believes Bulgaria needs to improve, why the EU could do more to exert its influence on the global stage, and what the UK can expect from its negotiations to leave the EU.*



**How would you describe the current situation in Bulgaria regarding the rule of law, media pluralism, and democracy in general?**

You have started with the most important issues. These are precisely the areas where we see problems in Bulgaria and it seems like we will have to start all over again from the very foundations of the state. No one expected that 27 years after the start of our democratic transition and 9 years after our accession to the EU, we will once again have to discuss basic values like the rule of law, the fair administration of justice, protecting the rights of individuals, and the strength of our institutions in order to guarantee that rules are the same for everyone and that they are followed.

And these issues touch on the radical judicial reform which is currently being discussed in Bulgaria. On the one hand it is good that for the first time these issues are at the centre of public attention. Until now they have been largely the domain of lawyers and constitutionalists. Now a large number of people in Bulgaria understand their importance and it will be a central focal point in the upcoming presidential elections.

**Bulgaria is not the only country in which these issues are being discussed: much has been made of recent developments in Hungary and Poland, with some commentators stating that there is a ‘march toward illiberalism’ taking place. Do you see parallels between these two countries and Bulgaria?**

I am convinced that the future of Bulgaria is within the family of free European nations, and the interesting thing is that this was even said by [Vasil Levski](#) all those years ago. He stated that “we want Bulgaria to be a part of the free family of European peoples” – because Europe, with Bulgaria as a part of it, is the most powerful economic bloc in the world. Through NATO, Bulgaria is also a member of the strongest military alliance in human history. And the question is how do we see ourselves: as a mere member of these organisations, as an intermediary between them, or as decision-makers within them? I believe it should be the latter.

I believe that what we are witnessing currently, namely the sort of sliding and separation of several tectonic plates within the EU, is a reflection of a long period of neglecting problems across Europe. On one side we have the richer Northern states, we have the Southern states who have their own issues, and we have some Central Eastern European states with their own distinct problems. The differing current priorities we see today seem completely normal to me. What is not normal is that they are not being solved adequately enough in the form of common European decisions. And I believe that every single problem should have a common European solution.



**Would you define yourself as a pro-European and do you believe there should be closer integration or a looser relationship between EU states?**

Let me begin with several examples. I believe, for example, that it is a great deficit of the EU that it fails to transform its economic prowess into political influence in the world. And this is not an abstract point, where we wish to somehow become the world's policeman, but something which has purely practical dimensions. A politically strong EU needs to be able to provide a zone of well governed peaceful states around itself. And in this we have seen a complete failure.

Let us not forget that there was a time several years ago, when this task was formulated exactly the way I am telling you now. However, we did not find the energy – or perhaps the will – to deal with the problem appropriately. Partly this is because senior positions in the EU have been filled on the basis of political compromises and the individuals who have taken on these roles have usually not the people with the best set of qualities for that position. They are often people who simply no one objects to particularly strongly – and not only within the EU, even Russia does not object to these individuals being appointed.

**Are you concerned that because of current problems at the EU level, notably the migration crisis and Brexit, other issues within Bulgaria are being overlooked?**

The situation with Brexit is obviously important for both Bulgaria and the EU. Personally, I am still not convinced that it will come to that, but if we assume that the most likely scenario is the UK does now leave, as a result we will have an even more dominant euro area and an even weaker periphery outside the euro area with a tremendously changed balance of power. And this does worry me as more and more important decisions will be made within the euro area, which do however affect countries outside it as well.

**Do you see Bulgaria's future as a member of the euro area and, if so, are you concerned about possible scenarios where it is necessary to bail out countries such as Greece?**

Definitely, I see Bulgaria's future as a member of the euro area. The important thing here is the will of the authorities to take the necessary steps. The fact that Bulgaria has not yet taken steps to join the banking union and the common banking supervision, which are within our grasp and could happen very quickly, shows that this is not a priority of the current government. This needs to change.

In terms of bailouts, this is the great 'scarecrow'. There were even countries with extremely bad luck like Slovakia, which were fresh into the euro area and had to contribute to the bailout fund and their government had to resign because of it. Here I would raise the level of abstraction, so that we can see that two of the most important EU

systems – the euro area and Schengen – which were created with such care and such dedication when countries were allowed in, suddenly became vulnerable, like a giant with feet of clay. This was demonstrated by Greece on both occasions, but both times the Union managed to deal with the challenge. This is one more reason why Bulgaria can join the Eurozone with no worries.

**One of the other great issues facing Bulgaria as well as other countries in Europe is how to deal with Russia. How would you describe Bulgaria's relationship with Russia?**

Russia will always be the most important neighbour for both Bulgaria and Europe – or at least one of the most important neighbours. There is no reason to remove Russia from our list of potential economic partners and there is also a cultural relationship which covers numerous different aspects. This kind of healthy relationship, however, requires some very important prerequisites.

First of all, we need equality, which Russian leaders must categorically understand they owe to their European partners. It is no secret that large EU countries think they can play Putin's game as equals, one on one, while this is not the case with smaller states. I believe it is vital that the EU has a common face in its relationship with Russia, and not only with Russia.

**Would you define Russia as a 'threat' to Bulgaria as well as a potential partner?**

Russia could be a threat and the EU is obliged to neutralise that possibility by way of diplomacy. When we say this we immediately think about what is going on in Ukraine and Crimea. We witnessed the EU levying sanctions on several oligarchs, friends of Mr. Putin, and several state-owned companies to remove their financing from Western banks and their ability to travel to Western Europe. Putin retaliated by levying sanctions on all Russian and European citizens by preventing European goods from being exported to Russia. Obviously this cannot be seen as a friendly gesture and Europe must face up to this reality.

I think that often the threat arises when balance is violated. And the threat is always bilateral. I do believe that the EU should uphold its responsibilities as a global economic and political power. Then it would be much easier not to get to the point in the first place where someone might believe that Russia could be seen as a threat to Europe.

**Another important issue in the Balkans is the question of future EU enlargement. Do you believe the EU has lost its power of attraction in recent years as a result of the various crises it has suffered from?**

Some attempt to present things this way, but it is curious to see where the children of these people go to school and where they seek jobs, so we can judge whether the EU has lost its power of attraction. The most important thing is that the effect of the Union on the overall situation in Europe is incomparable. I come from such a region in Bulgaria – the South-Western region – where there were many refugees, changes of territories – Macedonia, Greece, Bulgaria. I remember that my grandmother was only once able to see the home she was born in, which was in today's Greece. Nowadays no one pays any attention that somewhere, some time ago, there were borders. It does not matter where you live, where you work, those are your personal decisions and I believe it is totally irresponsible and even criminal to risk these achievements in the name of some short term political goals.

**Finally, much of the discussion around Brexit has focused on the distinction between a 'hard' and 'soft' Brexit. Do you think the EU should extend this option of a soft Brexit to the UK?**

It is important here that terms be defined from the beginning. Do we define a Norwegian style deal as a special allowance made only to particular countries or as something that should also be open to the UK? In many ways it is a special model, but provided the UK is interested in such an arrangement, I would not view it as something that should be beyond reach for the UK.

I think that at the moment it appears the UK is heading for a course toward a harder exit. This is for one particular reason: that the leave supporters currently in power cannot accept any other possibility as it would reveal that they

were dishonest during the campaign. Should they now say “we are going for a softer alternative”, it would mean that they lied to voters about their intentions, and as the British would say, it is not possible to have your cake and eat it.

*This interview was conducted in collaboration with Adelina Marini, a Bulgarian journalist and founder of [euinside](#)*

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## **About the interviewee**

### **Traycho Traykov**

Traycho Traykov is a former Bulgarian Minister of Economy, Energy and Tourism and the candidate for the Reformist Bloc in the 2016 Bulgarian presidential elections.

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