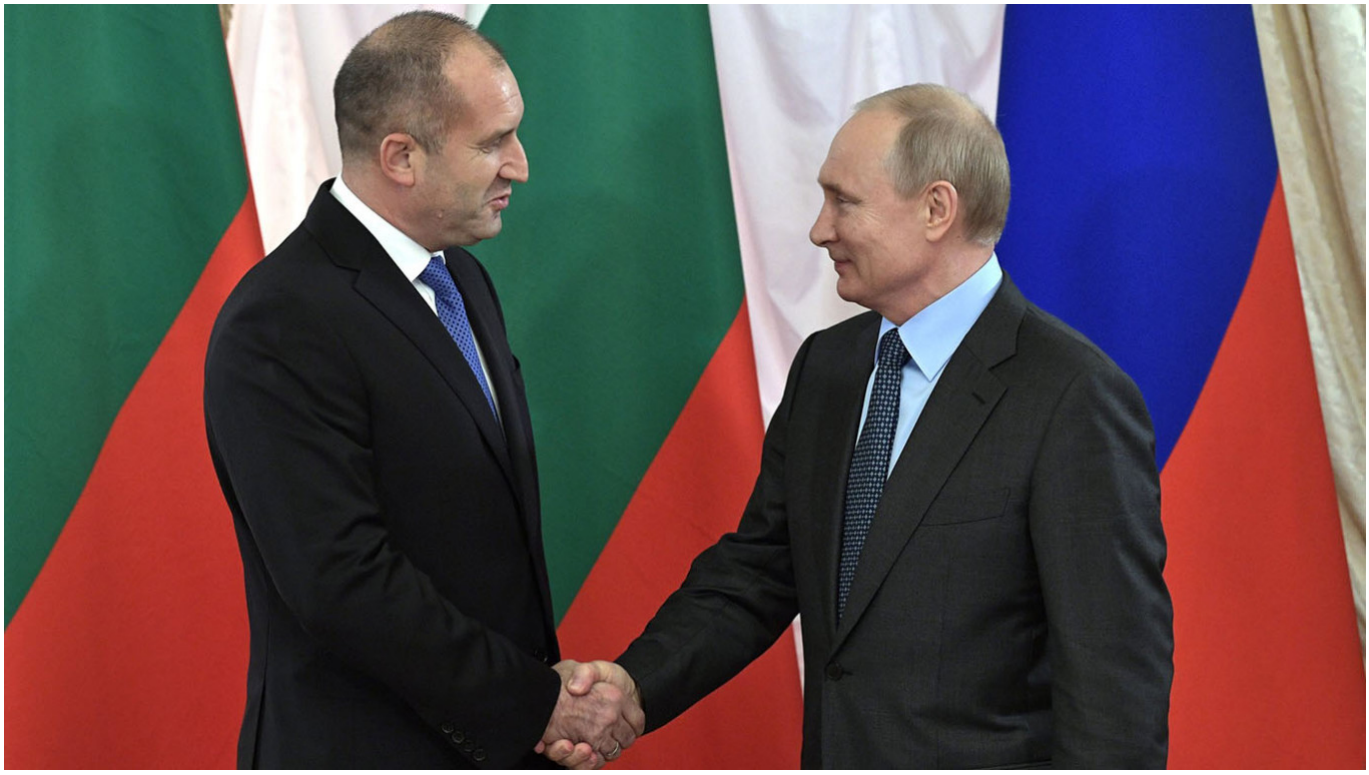
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Why Bulgaria's New Leader May Not Become Putin's New Trojan Horse

By Dalibor Rohac

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Rumen Radev and Vladimir Putin in 2019. **kremlin.ru**

Will Bulgaria become the next Hungary, holding up the bloc's effort to rearm and to help Ukraine prevail in the war against Russia? That is not an unthinkable proposition, given the nature of Bulgaria's new parliamentary majority and public opinion in the country.

Yet, the concern should be tempered by the fact that Viktor Orbán has been a unique figure, not only politically savvy but also driven by a distinct ideological project. The incoming Prime Minister of Bulgaria Rumen Radev — who previously served as president for two terms — may not lack political skills. But only time will tell whether he is also a figure with ambitions resembling Orbán's, or whether he is a more parochial leader, weighing in on strategic questions only in the pursuit of narrow domestic goals.

Other factors, including Bulgaria's political instability and its dependence on the EU, migigate the prospect of its leading a dissenting, "pro-peace" coalition seeking to throw a wrench into

the EU's geopolitical works.

Radev's own party, founded just this year, merges several left-wing political groups under one umbrella, united by economic populism, a vague sense of nostalgia for the communist past, and a distrust of the West. Much like Robert Fico's Smer in Slovakia, Progressive Bulgaria exemplifies the horseshoe theory of politics. Ahead of the election this April, for example, it has received support from VMRO — the Bulgarian National Movement — a nationalist party which has a long history of extremist rhetoric, some of it targeting the country's sizeable Roma population.

As President, Radev opposed Bulgaria's military assistance to Ukraine as well as the country's impressive and sudden decoupling from Russian energy sources. Earlier, he weighed in on the government's purchase of F-16 fighters from the United States, criticizing it as overpriced. (It is worth noting that Radev is a former fighter plane pilot himself.) He also sought, unsuccessfully, a referendum on the country's accession to the eurozone, clashing with the country's Constitutional Court, which declared such plebiscite unconstitutional.

As Radev's success in the election suggests — having secured 135 seats in a 240-strong legislature — there is popular demand for his brand of politics. Yet, although Bulgaria is one of the most Russia-sympathetic countries in the EU, the warmth has been eroding markedly since 2022. In one 2024 survey, half of Bulgarians expressed a desire to remain aligned with the EU and NATO, as opposed to just 17% keen to bring their country closer to Russia.

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Progressive Bulgaria's appeal may reflect a general state of dissatisfaction with other factions in Bulgarian politics rather than a decisive turn toward Russia. The new government, of course, will get to make its own decisions, including on strategic and foreign policy matters. Yet, its maneuvering space will not be unlimited.

For one, Bulgaria is a significant beneficiary of EU funds. Relative to its GDP, it has counted among the largest recipients of agricultural subsidies in the bloc. Overall, financial flows from the EU, typically in the form of grants, averaged at a little less than 3% of the country's GDP. That is not an overwhelming figure, but it can be the difference between healthy and unsustainable paths for Bulgaria's public finances.

To be sure, Hungary's dependence on EU money did not stop Orbán from becoming the spoiler in collective decisions. Yet the history of that process matters. Orbán's initial and most important goal was the consolidation of his power. In was in the pursuit of that goal, rather obstructionism at the European Council, that he gambled away some of the EU funds in the process of his consolidation of power.

In 2021, his behavior prompted the EU to adopt and use the Rule of Law Conditionality Regulation, which then blocked a significant portion of Hungary's funds. What ensued was a process of bargaining through which Orbán frequently used his veto power over foreign policy and other matters in order to unfreeze parts of the funding from Brussels. With the EU's Rule of Law Conditionality tool readily available and hanging over Radev's head, the incentives favor relatively constructive behavior at home and internationally, at least relative to the

earlier period when Orbán acted with complete impunity on the domestic and European stage.

Arguably, the bloc's treatment of Orbán was a special case, in part because he was the first one to start pushing the envelope, both in terms of domestic governance and obstructionism at the European level. He did so often quite skillfully, and for many years enjoying the backing of the European People's Party (EPP), from which he was finally expelled in 2021. Radev's starting point is different, if only because the EU is likely to go much harder after Orbán's imitators than it did after Orbán himself. With the exception of (maybe) Fico, he lacks natural allies. And the fact that Fico's government in Slovakia did not make a peep about the bloc's 90 billion euro ($105.3 billion) loan to Ukraine, approved this week, suggests that few others will dare to play Orbán's game.

An important element of the EU's adaptation to bad-faith behavior of actors such as Orbán has been the emergence of an increasing number of initiatives, especially in areas of defense and security, where smaller subsets of member states (and sometimes non-members) pursue agendas of mutual interest — think the Coalition of the willing on Ukraine, the Joint Expeditionary Force, or (for an earlier example) the Bucharest Nine. Gradually, the shadow of Orbán has forced EU leaders to think of more flexible, devising schemes that accommodate dissent without paralyzing the bloc. The idea that Radev will manage to hold the remaining 26 members hostage on consequential matters is thus fanciful.

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Finally, a dose of realism about Bulgaria's domestic politics might be in order. In the past decade, it has gone through nine different prime ministers. Since 2021, it has held seven snap elections (in 2021, there were three, in a single year). Now, Radev may well be the person who — like Giorgia Meloni in Italy — will infuse Bulgarian politics with a sense of stability. But that is unlikely to happen if he starts his mandate with a full-frontal assault, holding very few cards, against EU decisions on matters that other member states find existential.

It is equally likely, if not more, that Radev and his last-minute political party will find governing difficult. They will probably be mired by corruption and other scandals and that the former president's background as a ceremonial head of state will not be terribly useful in an executive role, under constant fire from the opposition and civil society.

Making predictions is notoriously difficult, Yogi Berra used to say, especially about the future. There may still come a time when Bulgaria will become a hard-to-manage problem for the EU and for its neighbors, but that time is not now. And, with some luck, it may never arrive.

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