

A very Bulgarian drama: What Rumen Radev's presidential election victory means for Bulgarian politics

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14/11/2016

*Rumen Radev, the candidate backed by the Bulgarian Socialist Party, won Bulgaria's presidential election on 13 November. **Dimitar Bechev** assesses what the result means for the country, stating that while Radev has been described as a pro-Russian candidate, the more important implications will be for Boyko Borisov and the Bulgarian government. Borisov has tendered the resignation of his cabinet and elections are now likely to be held in the spring of 2017.*



There are two ways to headline General Rumen Radev's victory in the second round of the Bulgarian presidential elections. The first one: Russia's candidate won, the EU's lost. I, however, prefer the second one – a military man thwarts the former chief of police, Boyko Borisov. The caption should therefore read "Army 1–0 Police".

This was a rare setback for Borisov who, since embarking on a political career in 2005, has beaten the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) in no less than 11 polls (local, parliamentary, presidential, EU). This time around, his talent failed him. Exit polls suggest Radev carried the day with close to 60% of the vote, against 35.6% for Tsetska Tsacheva, the National Assembly speaker fielded by the governing Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB). That compares to 25.4 vs. 21.9% in the first round held on 6 November. In other words, the general drew support not only from the predominantly ethnic Turkish Movement of Rights and Freedoms (MRF, 6.6%) but also from other quarters, including voters previously affiliated with GERB as well as those leaning to the (ultra)nationalist bloc of parties whose candidate, Krasimir Karakachanov, finished third with little under 15%. Figures indicate that 60% of nationalists and 92% of MRF voters chose Radev in the second round.

That the former commander of Bulgaria's airforce could woo nationalists is not surprising. In an Orbán-like fashion, Radev spoke against the resettlement of refugees in Bulgaria and even called for the abolition of the Dublin Regulation (I am not sure he, or for that matter other presidential hopefuls playing the migration card, ever cared to read it). The BSP's elderly base is similarly socially conservative and holds in high regard institutions such as the army and the Orthodox Church (not unseen elsewhere in post-communist Europe). We will find out more about the substance of the deal struck between the BSP and MRF, coalition partners in 2005-9 and 2013-4, shortly. On a broader note, those who follow Bulgarian politics would be anything but surprised by the mix between the veneration of the rule by strong hand, the marriage of convenience between Socialists and minority politicians, and a good dose of nationalism. Borisov's winning recipe is not that different, in fairness.

What comes next? As he promised, Borisov tendered the resignation of his cabinet. That paves the way for a caretaker government (number 3 for the outgoing president Rossen Plevneliev who oversaw the formation of such cabinets in 2013 and 2014). Constitutionally, general elections could be held at the earliest two months after the inauguration of the new head of state, which already puts us at the end of March, possibly April. GERB will pull all its resources, not least its strong presence in local government, to score another big win.

As parliament will remain in session for another two months (it cannot be dissolved as a president's term is about to expire), the governing party will push for changes to electoral legislation in line with the referendum held parallel to the first round of the presidential polls. While the plebiscite was not valid because it failed to pass the turnout threshold, more than three million voted to introduce a majority voting system. With the possible exception of MRF, no other party but GERB shares an interest in such a radical change. But when they all gang up to block Borisov's proposals, he will no doubt play his well-rehearsed role of the authentic spokesman of the people battling the status quo (let's see if that works!)

Come April, there are two scenarios. Voters can return GERB as the largest party in parliament, which will empower Borisov to form a new coalition. Alternatively, the BSP and MRF could repeat what they did in the summer of 2013 – team up with smaller players to encircle GERB and deny it the prize. In other words, presuming the BSP could ride high in the polls on the back of Radev's victory, nationalists could turn out to be the kingmakers. If events in 2013 give us any clue, Borisov will face heat from MRF allies in the judiciary, such as the Prosecutor General Sotir Tsatsarov, and the powerful media group around tycoon Delyan Peevski. Such vested interests, as well as the MRF, have always been the bellwether in Bulgarian political life – they always bandwagon with the winner. But let's not write Borisov and GERB off, not just yet. The BSP will struggle to repeat their success in the next iteration.

A word about Radev. Part of his success is that he sold himself as a non-party candidate (formally he was nominated by a group of citizens and only then backed by the BSP). Once in power, he might try to steer an independent course and the Socialists will have to rein him in. That seems to be the mission assigned to his running mate, Vice-President elect, Iliana Yotova, who in contrast to Radev, is a party insider. However, Bulgaria's recent history is replete with examples of presidents clashing with their own party so I don't expect it to be a problem-free relationship.

General Radev might even end up aligning or at least co-operating with Borisov, a Major-General himself. Vain and macho, they can wheel and deal, leaving the Socialist leader Kornelia Ninova in the cold, then fight, then embrace one another yet again, in an endless cycle. Such a turn of events would not be without precedent: the love-hate relationship between Borisov and President Georgi Parvanov, the former BSP leader who held the office between 2002-2012, were worthy of a soap opera.

One thing to bear in mind is that Radev has little political experience – to play the game and survive in the Byzantine world of his country's politics he will have to learn the ropes quickly. Otherwise he will get caught in the cross-fire as seasoned and wily players such as Borisov, the MRF's honorary leader Ahmed Dogan, as well as an assortment of oligarchs, media bosses, ex-security services characters and magistrates of murky reputation start moving the figures on the chessboard.

Lastly, there is the question that preoccupies everyone at present: will Radev turn Bulgaria toward Russia? The answer is yes and no. The rhetoric will change insofar as President Plevneliev is a harsh critic of the Kremlin who wouldn't be out of place in Tallinn or Warsaw. The substance will not, however. Having won, Radev, an alumnus of the Air War College in Montgomery, Alabama, is sure to play his Western credentials. His message will be that Bulgaria can have its cake and eat it: i.e. be a loyal partner in the EU and NATO while reaching out to Russia. That is not very different from the position advocated by Borisov who also favours engagement.

In the run-up to NATO's Warsaw Summit, the prime minister shunned a Romanian proposal for a permanent flotilla stationed in the Black Sea. He also restarted energy talks on Moscow – if only to create the impression that mega projects such as the Belene Nuclear Power Plant and South Stream could be resurrected (highly unlikely). At the last minute, Borisov tried to use scare tactics and paint Radev as Moscow's preferred choice (which he might well be) but the election outcome testifies to the futility of that move. President Radev might offer an olive branch to Putin but, truth be told, he will make little difference.

The EU will discuss whether to renew sanctions in December, before he comes into office. Once the issue resurfaces again in the summer of 2017, it will be up to the new prime minister, whatever his or her name is, to decide. Radev won't backpedal on initiatives such as the Bulgarian contribution to the multinational NATO brigade stationed next door in Romania. Nor will he be willing or able to pull the plug on U.S. bases in the country (which date back to 2006 when the BSP was in government). There will be no shortage of drama in Bulgaria over the coming months, to be sure, but it will be driven by local forces not the geopolitical contest between Russia and the West.

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