

Schuman Paper

n°751

4th June 2024

Maria MATEEVA-KAZAKOVA

The resurgence of the Russian dilemma on the Bulgarian political scene

Impact on the polls to be held on 9 June 2024

The position adopted by Bulgaria towards Russia is turning into a structural divide. On the eve of the [legislative](#) and European elections of 9th June 2024, Moscow is back as a cultural alternative and geopolitical model, but without succeeding — for the moment — in ruining the country's pro-European orientation. The situation in this European Union^[1] member state merits closer attention, as it organises its sixth parliamentary elections since 2021 and at a time when battle is being waged against Russian interference.

PROMOTION OF THE RUSSIAN MODEL IN BULGARIA

The return of Russia as a central issue in Bulgarian political discourse took place gradually between 2013 and 2016. Indeed, between 2003 and 2013, when the orientation towards NATO and the European Union became almost consensual, parties claiming to be pro-Russian, such as *Ataka*, were not very active on the political scene in this respect. However, given the disappointments since Bulgaria's accession to the Union in 2007, and Russia's growing assertiveness on the international stage, the possibility of a relevant Russian model has returned to the Bulgarian political debate.

The emergence of certain Eurosceptic views and the rise in pro-Russian tensions go hand in hand. A [study devoted to Bulgarian media content](#), between 2013-2016, highlighted the fact that the number of Eurosceptic publications in Bulgarian multiplied by 16 and the number of anti-American/anti-NATO publications had multiplied by 34. At the same time the number of publications that focused on praising Russia (for its "increased political and spiritual power", its "Russian weapons", to name but a few examples) multiplied by 144.

^[1] Bulgaria joined the European Union on 1 January 2007 and NATO on 29th March 2004.

At the same time, in 2014, a new far-right political player with a pro-Russian stance emerged. The party *Vazrazhdane* (Revival) started to gain ground to a backdrop of rising Euroscepticism and the return of Russia to the national debate. It now taking advantage of the [political crisis that started in 2021](#). The party has gained an increasing number of votes in the elections held between 2021 and 2024. From 3% of the vote in the 2021 legislative elections, it rose to 14.16% in the 2023 legislative elections. "This sixth election should above all provide an opportunity for *Vazrazhdane* (V), Kostadin Kostanidov's nationalist party, to make progress (...) It is now in second place in opinion polls" explained Corinne Deloy on 21 May. This party has therefore gradually taken the place of *Ataka*, which as previously mentioned is traditionally anti-elite, anti-European, anti-American, anti-NATO and pro-Russian. The latter was represented in Parliament between 2005 and 2017 and defended pro-Russian ideas, but these were not actively exploited, since the important thing, at that time, was to oppose everything that had anything to do with Turks.

2

THE PRO-RUSSIAN LEANINGS OF FAR-RIGHT PARTIES

The attraction of the Russian model for far-right parties in Bulgaria appears to be a common European trend. Several of these parties have claimed to be pro-Russian, to varying degrees, especially during the 2010s. Parties such as the Austrian FPÖ and the German AfD, as well as the French Front National (FN) (now *Rassemblement National* - RN), are relaying Russia's anti-democratic and anti-liberal rhetoric[2]. Viktor Orban's regime has even been qualified as "[Putin's Trojan Horse](#)" within the Union. In the European Parliament, the far-right representatives in 2014[3] and then the former *Europe of Nations and Freedoms* group, created by Marine Le Pen and Geert Wilders in 2015, are opposed to the sanctions imposed on Russia following the invasion of Crimea. [In a 2014 study](#) Hungarian think-tank, Political Capital, attached to the Central European University in Budapest, spoke of the intention on the part of certain parties to create a pro-Russian bloc in the European Parliament. This shows the extent to which pro-Russian political ideas were already spreading across Europe. It also confirms that this does not concern a division between East and West. The *Vazrazhdane* party, which is likely to enter the European Parliament this year, is part of this trend and would join the *Identity and Democracy* group if it wins seats in the European elections.

[2] Benoit Massin, «a Russie de Poutine et la collaboration des extrêmes droites occidentales», *Cités*, 2023/1 (n° 93), p. 113-126.

[3] Xavier Follebouck, « "Ukraine's pain is Europe's shame". The European Parliament and the Ukrainian Crisis », *Cahiers Sens public*, vol. 17-18, n° 1-2, 2014, pp. 143-167.

[4] *A history of Bulgarian anti-communist politics*, V. Antony Todorov, "[Where is the Right? Bulgaria](#)", *Fondapol*, 2010,

Over and above these advances, which can be seen throughout the Union, each national background plays a role in the reception of the Russian model: the states occupied by the Red Army at the end of the Second World War include citizens who have memories — idealised or real — of Soviet hegemony and react accordingly to this Russian model. However, since 24 February 2022, it has to be admitted that the armed Russian invasion of Ukraine is clearly signalling a change in the Kremlin's soft power in Bulgaria that deserves attention.

INCREASINGLY REGULAR OPPOSITION TO PRO-RUSSIAN DISCOURSE

The return of the divide over the reception of the Russian model in Bulgaria is illustrated by the clear-cut political initiatives, but above all by their great symbolic significance. Proposals to abolish pro-Russian symbols from Bulgarian heritage come in particular from the parties in the coalition "*We continue the Change - Democratic Bulgaria*" (PP-DB). This coalition comprises small parties from the former anti-communist front[4] (notably Democratic Bulgaria), as well as movements structured around political leaders with little experience, such as Assen Vassilev or Kiril Petkov, even though the latter was Prime Minister between 2021 and 2022. Although elements of language that might be qualified as anti-elite can be found in their discourse, from the point of view of their geopolitical orientation, they are a [pro-European and pro-Western coalition](#). This is how the [increase in arms exports](#) to Ukraine in 2022, the decision [to end the concession granted to the Russian oil company Lukoil](#) in the port of Rosenets in the summer of 2023, and the recent hunt for [pro-Russian paramilitary groups are to be interpreted](#).

Dismantling the monument erected in 1954, [in honour of the Soviet army in the centre of Sofia](#) is symbolically the most significant act in this redefinition of the link between Sofia and Moscow. This caused notable tension in December 2023: opponents of parties from the former communist parties and the Bulgarian far-right protested in vain and together displayed the same pro-Russian affinities, while others welcomed the demise of this immense (45 metre high!) symbol. In terms of political forces, the parties involved were, in particular, *Vazrazhdane* and the Socialist Party (BSP). The dismantling of the monument marked the end of one of the key symbols of the "special" link between Bulgaria and Russia, but discussions are intensifying and interference in the country's memory is on the increase. Hence many Bulgarians acknowledge Russia's positive role in [ending Ottoman domination](#) in 1878, but refute the relevance of a monument associated with Russia's Soviet past and,

by extension, with communism, and oppose the promoters of pro-Russian discourse in Bulgaria.

In the same vein, a plan is emerging to replace the day set aside for National Day, currently 3 March. Presented by the "*We continue the Change-Democratic Bulgaria*" coalition, the aim would be to replace the date of 3 March marking the abolition of Ottoman domination with a day of more universal significance, and not linked to Russia, like that of [Cyrille and Methodius](#) who were the origin of the Cyrillic alphabet[5]. This initiative, which was one of the key elements of the 2023 draft amendment to the Constitution, ultimately failed. The coalition's objective was clear: to cut the link with Russia.

A PRO-RUSSIAN TREND THAT IS ENCOURAGING A FEAR OF EUROPE

Bulgaria therefore has a particular attitude towards Russia that differs from that of the other EU Member States and the former 'party states': favourable opinions of Russia and Vladimir Putin have fallen sharply with the war of aggression in Ukraine, but Bulgarians remain relatively uncritical of Russia compared with the average for Central and Eastern European countries. The 2023 [GLOBSEC study](#) on the Czech Republic, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Slovakia and Romania highlights these Bulgarian specificities. Bulgaria has slightly less affection for the European Union and NATO, and its citizens are less critical of Russia than the average country in the region. This can be explained by the

fact that Bulgaria is the country where citizens feel least threatened by Moscow, despite its geographical proximity, but also because Bulgarians are the most supportive of illiberal leaders. In particular, 48% of Bulgarians have some sympathy for Viktor Orban. His image of resistance to the "*powers of the West*" seems to appeal most.

Since 2022, Bulgarians' attitude towards Russia has undergone an original change: opposition has returned to everyday debates and domestic policy decisions, Moscow's image has been affected by its attempted illegal invasion of Ukraine, but it has not yet been ruined, as shown for example by the arguments in favour of maintaining the monument to the glory of the Soviet army. The return of debate, and the multiplication of arguments in favour of or minimising Russia's poor image, has inevitably had an impact on Bulgarians' feelings about European integration. While 71% of Bulgarians want their country to remain a member of the EU, the same proportion report a feeling of "*diktat on the part of Brussels*". By extension, the adoption of the euro [6] is a source of concern – 56 % of Bulgarians agree with the statement that "*the introduction of the euro will undermine our sovereignty and impoverish our economy*".

These are fears to be heeded, because it is in these loopholes that Russian disinformation slips in, stirring up fears and disrupting institutional and political life.

[5] On the traditional image of Russia in Bulgaria, V. Antony Todorov, « [Les discours diplomatiques bulgares au sujet de la Russie](#) », *Hermès, La Revue*, vol. 81, n° 2, 2018, pp. 141-147.

[6] In February 2023, the then Bulgarian Finance Minister, Rositsa Velkova, announced that the target date for her country's accession to the euro zone was now "[1st January 2025](#)", i.e. a year after the planned date.



Globsec Study 2023, p. 69

Russia has made a limited comeback as a cultural alternative and geopolitical model in Bulgaria, but without succeeding in ruining the country's pro-European orientation and majority support for the European Union and NATO. Bulgaria is part of a logic common to several European countries: that of the accession of far-right ideology with pro-Russian ambitions. It has a special history with Russia,

but this is the subject of disagreement and does not mean blind adherence to the model currently promoted by the Kremlin. Far-right activists are acting as agents of Russian interference all over Europe, [as current events show](#). It is therefore fears about the European Union and the lack of political stability in Bulgaria that seem to have encouraged the pro-Russian discourse at the recent polls, rather than Bulgarians accepting the supremacy of the model advocated by the Kremlin.

Maria Mateeva-Kazakova,

Director, [Research Analysis and Strategy Institute](#), Sofia

You can read all of our publications on our site:

www.robert-schuman.eu/en

Publishing Director: Pascale JOANNIN

ISSN 2402-614X

The opinions expressed in this text are the sole responsibility of the author.

© All rights reserved, *Fondation Robert Schuman, 2024*

THE FONDATION ROBERT SCHUMAN, created in 1991 and acknowledged by State decree in 1992, is the main French research centre on Europe. It develops research on the European Union and its policies and promotes the content of these in France, Europe and abroad. It encourages, enriches and stimulates European debate thanks to its research, publications and the organisation of conferences. The Foundation is presided over by Mr. Jean-Dominique Giuliani.