

# Pro-European Union, right-wing candidate wins Bulgarian presidency

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Rosen Plevneliev, the candidate of the right-wing ruling party GERB (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria) won the Bulgarian presidential election held October 30.

In the run-off election, Plevneliev received 52.5 percent of the vote, while the opposition candidate Ivaylo Kalfin of the Socialist Party (BS—the successor to the Bulgarian Communist Party) gathered 47.4 percent. Kalfin's candidacy was supported by 25 nominally “left” organizations—including social democrats, Stalinists, environmental organizations and the union of Thracian associations. The national voter turnout was 48 percent.

Winning the presidency means that GERB now controls all important government positions in Bulgaria. The party's founder, Boyko Borisov, has been prime minister for the past two years and GERB deputy Tsetska Tsacheva is parliamentary speaker. The right-wing party was also the biggest winner in the local elections that took place at the same time as the presidential ballot.

Borisov, who established GERB in 2006, is a member of the European People's Party (EPP), an alliance that includes the German conservative ruling parties, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Christian Social Union (CSU), and French president Nicolas Sarkozy's UMP party. GERB won the 2009 Bulgarian general election amid widespread public disaffection with the previous Socialist Party government of Sergei Stanishev, which implemented massive welfare and wage cuts, together with a 10 percent flat tax, offering businesses the lowest rates in Europe.

Borisov began his career in the interior ministry under Stalinist rule in Bulgaria and trained the country's karate team. In 1991 he founded a private security company, and later took over as head of the federal police and mayor of Sofia. His trademarks are economic liberalism, law and order, anti-communism and a strong orientation towards the

European Union (EU). His minority government in parliament is dependent on support from the extreme right, xenophobic Ataka party.

Plevneliev, the new president, is regarded as one of Borisov's close allies. He was previously minister for regional development and public projects in Borisov's cabinet. He has close links with the EU and especially Germany, where he worked in the 1990s. As subcontractor for the Lindner construction company, he was involved in several dozen construction projects, including the construction of the CDU headquarters in Berlin.

After Plevneliev's return to Bulgaria, his firm company built the Sofia Business Park, based on a commission from Lindner. His company also received contracts for the construction of the Sofia subway and a ring road around the capital city. Allegations of corruption have since been levelled at the millionaire Plevneliev, considered to be the richest member of Borisov's cabinet.

During the presidential election campaign, Plevneliev posed as a technocrat who had successfully managed infrastructure projects connecting Bulgaria to the EU, such as the transport and energy routes that link Central Europe to the Caspian region and the Middle East via Bulgaria and southeastern Europe. He has declared that this new source of energy will help free Bulgaria from its current dependence on Russia.

As minister for regional planning, Plevneliev had also supported the EU “Danube Strategy”, together with the German state of Baden-Württemberg. This project is aimed at increasing the German state's access to the favourable investment conditions and cheap labour in southeastern Europe and other regions.

A recent article in Bulgaria's leading business magazine

dealing with the presidential election proudly carried the headline: “Our German boy”. The German connection runs deep. Leading members of the CDU, CSU and the conservative think tank, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, backed the GERB from the start, offering it help and media coaching for local, federal and European elections.

Plevneliev’s list of supporters includes German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Wilfried Martens, president of the rightist EPP. In mid-October the European Commission’s president, José Manuel Barroso (a former Maoist) also travelled to Sofia to praise the construction of the city’s new metro as a shining example of successful European business development.

Plevneliev won the presidential election despite the fact that Borisov’s government went back on all the promises it made in its 2009 manifesto. In 2008 the average wage was just €270 (\$366 US) a month, and since then it has fallen in real terms. At the same time the official unemployment rate has risen to over 11 percent.

A very restrictive fiscal policy has had disastrous consequences for public education, and the country’s pension and health care systems face collapse. In July of this year, Finance Minister Simeon Djankov pushed his “Financial Stability Pact” through parliament. The pact sets a limit of 2 percent of GDP for net borrowing and anchors the flat tax rate at 10 percent.

According to the Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies, Bulgarian companies have a huge debt problem following the 2008 crisis. Loans and investments from abroad have petered out and attempts by the government to subsidise business and the banks have increased the country’s national debt to 120 percent of GDP.

The country’s planned accessions to the euro zone and the Schengen area (25 mostly EU nations that operate as a single state for travel purposes) have also floundered.

The government has also lost credibility over its central claim to fame, the fight against organized crime and corruption left behind by the BSP administration. This year GERB prevented a vote taking place on a law establishing a “Mafia Commission”, when its deputies left the chamber before the vote. Owners of luxury homes, yachts and other assets are not obliged to account for the source of their fortunes.

That GERB was able to triumph in the presidential and

local elections is principally due to the right-wing course of the Socialists, who emerged from the Bulgarian Stalinist state party. In his electoral campaign, the BSP’s Kalfin addressed the EU demands for deregulation and privatisation by seeking to exploit nationalist sentiments.

The presidential campaign as a whole failed to raise any issues relevant to the social situation in the country, which is characterized by extreme poverty and insecurity for working people, obscene wealth for a tiny elite, a generalized economic crisis and gangster-like relations in the political sphere.

At the end of September, pogrom-like attacks took place against the poverty-stricken Roma minority in the country. The riots were incited by the extreme right Ataka party (full name, National Union Attack) and its presidential candidate Volen Siderov. The police largely stood by as the attacks on the Roma took place. Plevneliev was initially silent on the vicious assault and then only broke his silence to play down the riots as politically insignificant.

After the first round of the presidential vote, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) observers criticized ballot irregularities, including a so-called “banned list” of 400,000 eligible voters who were prevented from voting in the local elections.

After the second ballot, Alexander Andreev from *Deutsche Welle* (Germany’s international broadcaster) expressed the view that “that GERB had influenced the election result, paying out up to €50 million to buy votes.” The Socialist candidate Kalfin also accused the GERB of “vote-buying, and applying pressure and threats against voters.”



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