

Authoritarian Shadows in the European Union: Bulgarian MEPs' Voting Patterns

This analysis focuses on the role of the Bulgarian Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) in the process of debating European foreign policy by casting a light on MEPs' voting patterns on resolutions concerning authoritarian regimes (primarily Russia and China). Given that voting records in the EP are publicly available, the analysis relies on data from the quantification of votes on the part of individual MEPs and parliamentary groups as presented in two indexes: the Counter-authoritarian Index (CAI) and the Kremlin-critical Index (KCI).¹ CAI and KCI measure respectively the level of support for authoritarian regimes in general and the Russian regime, in particular. The analysis shows how the voting patterns exhibited by the Bulgarian MEPs compare with the positions usually taken by their respective national parties, European parliamentary groups and Central and Eastern European counterparts in the EP.

A number of **key shared trends** in voting patterns in the European Parliament stand out from the CAI and KCI results. The largest EP groups (the center-right European People's Party, the centrist Renew Europe and the center-left Socialists and Democrats) tend to be highly critical of autocratic practices. Nevertheless, European parliamentary groups are nowhere close to being united or unanimous, mainly due to differences among their national party delegations. MEPs from Central and Eastern Europe (including Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Austria, Romania and Bulgaria) are on the whole more supportive of a strong stance against authoritarian regimes than the average European representative (i.e., when taking into consideration the voting patterns of MEPs across all 28 EU member states).

The voting patterns of the **Bulgarian MEPs** are generally consistent with the stances that their respective national parties espouse in relation to Russia² and China in the Bulgarian political context. The ruling center-right party, **GERB** (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria), has sent over the years mixed signals in relation to Russia and China. On the one hand, it has been consistently in favor of the country's Euro-Atlantic strategic orientation, both in its public stance and in its actions. On the other hand, GERB and, more specifically, its leader, Prime Minister Boyko Borisov, has been **balancing this pro-West orientation with pro-Russian positions**, particularly in the sphere of energy (gas and nuclear projects) and economic ties (tourism, military-industrial complex, etc.). GERB's MEPs³ tend to vote in line with their European family, the European People's Party, on Kremlin-critical resolutions in the European Parliament. However, there have been exceptions, as for example one MEP from the

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¹ Péter Krekó, Patrik Szicherle, and Csaba Molnár, "Project Rationale," in *Authoritarian Shadows in the European Union. Influence of Third Countries on EU Institutions* (Political Capital, 2020), 16.

² For a more detailed assessment of Bulgarian political parties' stance towards Russia, please see Ruslan Stefanov and Martin Vladimirov, "The Kremlin Playbook in Southeast Europe: Economic Influence and Sharp Power," *Center for the Study of Democracy*, 2020. The analysis provided here is based on a review of voting patterns and individual stances of Bulgarian MEPs in the European Parliament and the Center for the Study of Democracy's work on Russian influence in Europe.

³ Including MEP Alexander Yordanov who has been elected on a GERB ticket although formally from a small GERB coalition partner – Union of Democratic Forces (UDF).

ruling party has struck down an amendment inserting a reference to the Magnitsky Act into a text, and several GERB MEPs did not partake in votes condemning Russian and Chinese actions (e.g., Foreign Agents Law, Uyghurs, Hong Kong).

GERB's current coalition partner in government, **VMRO** (Bulgarian National Movement, ECR), generally represent radical nationalist, occasionally anti-Russian positions but often anti-EU stances as well. VMRO's MEPs vote accordingly in the European Parliament. While the parliamentarians representing the party did support several resolutions critical of the Kremlin and Beijing, they abstained on decisions concerning, for instance, the Russian Foreign Agents law and human rights violations against the Uyghurs.

The **Bulgarian Socialist Party** (BSP, S&D) is currently the largest party in opposition in the Parliament. As the successor of the Bulgarian Communist Party, it has since 1989 gradually come around to grudgingly support Bulgaria's Euro-Atlantic integration (particularly EU), but has also strongly favored closer political, economic and cultural ties with Russia. As a consequence, the Bulgarian Socialist Party seems to have been **the most supportive delegation towards authoritarian regimes in the S&D Group in the European Parliament**. They voted uniformly against the Magnitsky Act amendment, either struck down or abstained in the vote on the crimes of the Third Reich and the USSR, and abstained or did not participate in multiple decisions on issues related to Moscow or Beijing. Two socialist MEPs, however, did condemn China for human rights violations against the Uyghurs.

The most **significant disparity** between a party's public rhetoric, ties and behavior in the national and European context can be observed in relation to the **Movement for Rights and Freedoms** (MRF), member of the Renew Group. The MRF represents and draws its support primarily from the ethnic Turkish constituency in Bulgaria. Despite the open espousal of pro-Russian positions on the part of its honorary chairman⁴ as well as alleged ties of the party's members with Russian groups and interests,⁵ **MRF's MEPs⁶ have voted most uniformly and consistently in favor of Kremlin-critical positions** (other than a few instances of non-participation). Moreover, nationally, the party has constantly tried to portray itself as the staunchest supporter of the country's Euro-Atlantic orientation.

The only MEP of **Democrats for Strong Bulgaria** – an electoral alliance that is currently not present in the Bulgarian Parliament – has voted consistently in support of positions condemning Russia and China. This is in line with Democratic Bulgaria's staunch Euro-Atlantic stance in domestic politics. The party is one of the very few coherent critics of Russia and China domestically as well.

Overall, the voting patterns of the Bulgarian MEPs show that **Democratic Bulgaria and the MRF demonstrate the most categorical support for pro-EU positions and Russia- and China-critical stances**. MEPs from GERB and VMRO demonstrate somewhat diluted Russia- and China-critical postures. BSP's MEPs have generally shown pro-Russian and pro-Chinese policy preferences.

Taken together, **the voting patterns of the Bulgarian MEPs can be characterized as less critically-oriented towards authoritarian regimes** in comparison to the stances adopted by

⁴ Clubz.bg, “Доган: Широка руска душа и голямата руска земя нямат граници (Dogan: The Big Russian Soul and Expansive Russian Land Know No Boundaries),” 2016.

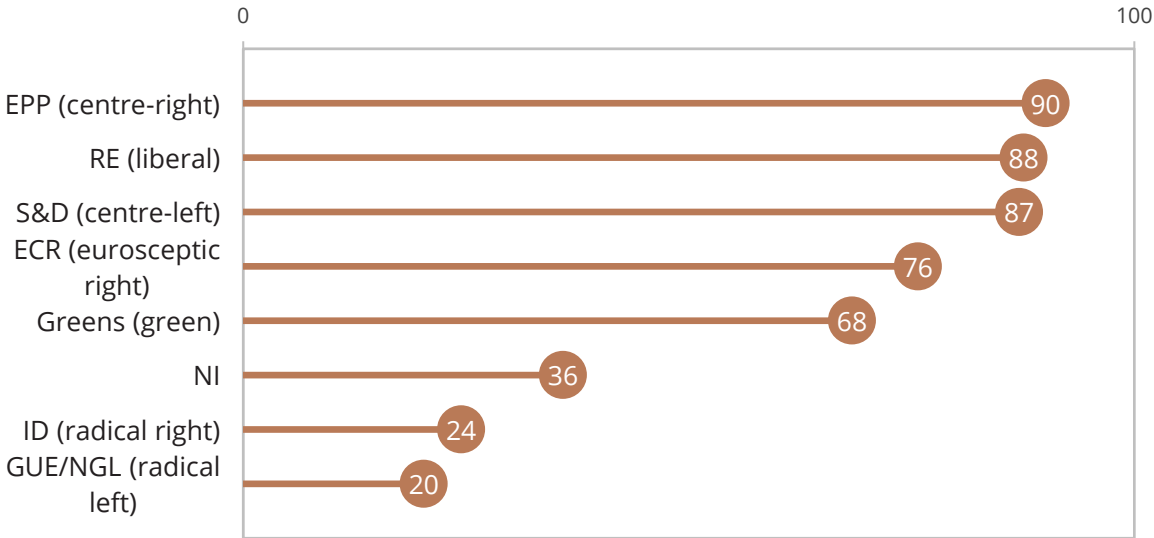
⁵ Bivol.bg, “Как руските корпорации контролират власт и медии в България (How Russian Corporations Control Power and Media in Bulgaria),” 2020.

⁶ For a more detailed overview of the MRF's political stances, see Heather Conley et al., *The Kremlin Playbook. Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

their respective European parliamentary groups as well as in the context of the voting record of their Central and East European counterparts.

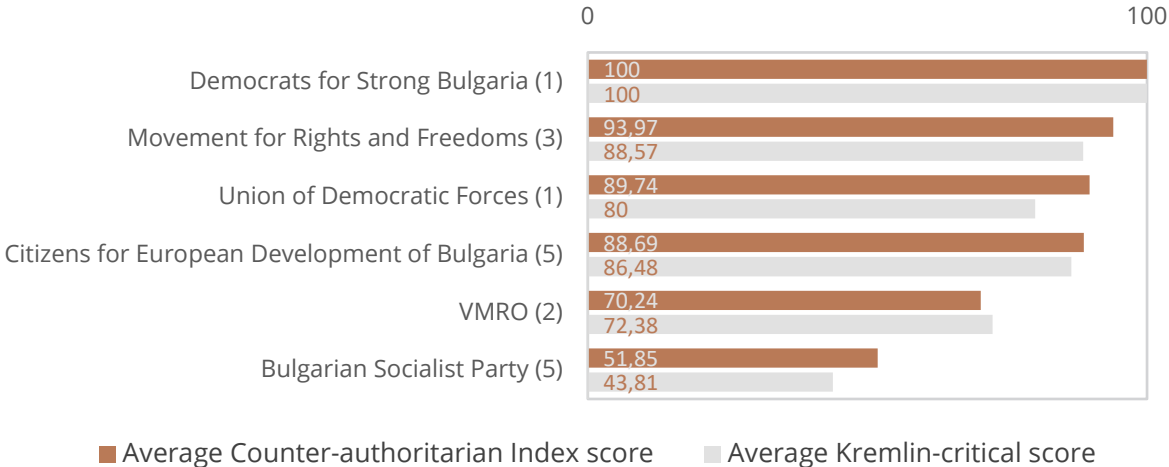
The representatives of the two largest Bulgarian parties in the European Parliament, GERB and BSP, are distinguished by taking less firm positions on Russia and China in contrast to the average voting behavior of their EP groups – the European People’s Party (EPP) and the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D). For instance, while 94% of the socialist EP caucus supported upholding Hong Kong’s autonomy, Bulgarian socialist MEPs either abstained or did not participate. Both GERB- and BSP-affiliated MEPs stood out from their respective European groups in the vote on paragraph 13 of the Russian Foreign Agents Law resolution, calling for upholding the sanctions against Russia until the country meets its international obligations. GERB’s Kremlin-critical index (KCI) score stands at 86.48, which is lower than the EPP’s average of 90. Even more drastically, the BSP’s Kremlin-critical index (KCI) score of 43.81 is significantly lower than the average of 87 measured for the S&D.

Figure 1. European parliamentary groups ranked based on their attitudes towards the Kremlin (average per MEP from a given group). The higher number represents a more critical stance concerning the Kremlin.



Source: Data based on Political Capital’s calculations.

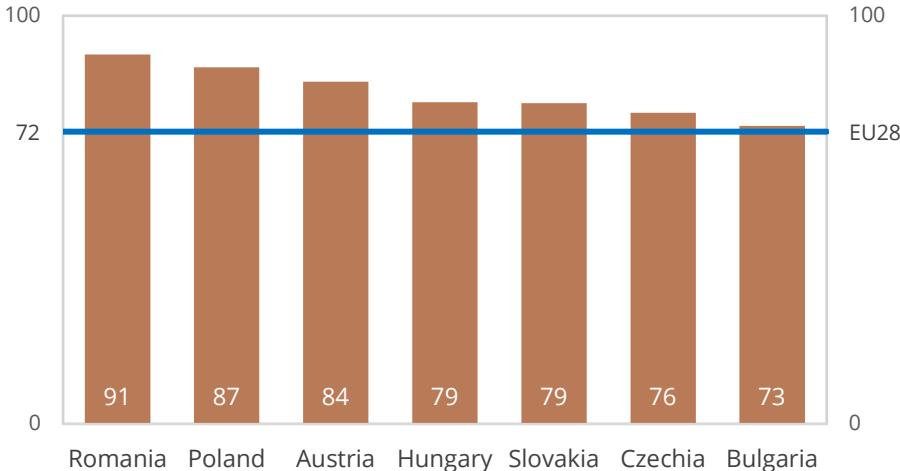
Figure 2. Average Counter-authoritarian and Kremlin-critical Index scores among Bulgarian MEPs, broken down by national party. The higher number represents a more critical attitude towards authoritarian regimes in general and the Kremlin in particular, respectively. Numbers in parentheses represent the number of MEPs.



Source: Data based on Political Capital’s calculations.

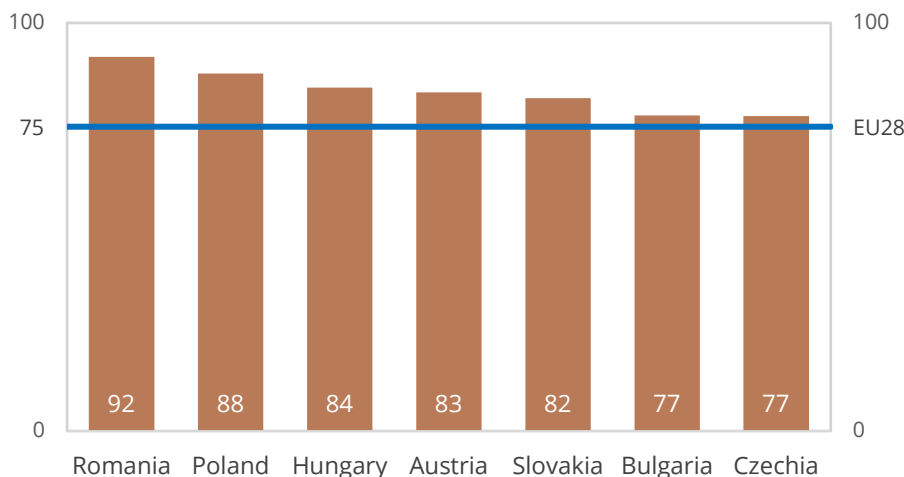
Moreover, the aggregation of all of the Bulgarian MEPs’ voting patterns makes up a **Kremlin-critical index of 73**, which is the lowest score among the 7 Central and East European states examined in the study (V4, Austria, Romania, Bulgaria). **The Counter-authoritarian index of Bulgarian MEPs is likewise the lowest**, equalling the Czech score of 77.

Figure 3. The average Kremlin-critical Index scores of the seven CEE countries, marking their attitude towards Moscow. The higher number represents a more critical stance. The blue line represents the EU28 average. Numbers are rounded to the nearest integer.



Source: Data based on Political Capital’s calculations.

Figure 4. The average Counter-authoritarian Index scores of the seven CEE countries, marking their attitude towards authoritarian regimes in general. The higher number represents a more critical attitude. The blue line represents the EU28 average. Numbers are rounded to the nearest integer.



Source: Data based on Political Capital’s calculations.

Overall, the analysis of the voting behavior of the Bulgarian MEPs points to the presence of a significant alignment with respective national party positions and a relative divergence from the average positions adopted by their European parliamentary groups and Central and East European counterparts. One possible conclusion could be that the Bulgarian case illustrates that the potential for Europeanization – understood as increasingly taking stances aligned with the other European parties as a result of a convergence on a shared European identity superseding national ideational and interest-based attachments – remains limited. Instead, the primary guidepost for voting in the European Parliament is provided by the stances taken by national parties. Thus, the socialization of MEPs within European fora is likely to have amounted to a modification of procedural behavior (such as greater proneness to a consensual and compromise-seeking style) as opposed to a deeper-seated ideational change in the direction of internalizing common European ideas.

The study’s findings on MEPs’ voting record in relation to foreign policy issues can serve as a useful and interesting reference point for a comparison of **MEPs’ voting behavior on member states’ domestic affairs related to rule of law deficiencies**. Particularly illuminating in this regard has been the recently debated and adopted EP resolution on the rule of law and fundamental rights in Bulgaria.⁷ Induced by the ongoing protest activity in the country demanding greater political transparency, media freedom, independent judiciary and the curtailment of corruption, the motion in the European Parliament has come to demonstrate **the persistent influence of partisan affinities**. The resolution did indeed take a critical approach, condemning and regretting ‘the fact that the developments in Bulgaria have led to a significant deterioration in respect for the principles of the rule of law, democracy and fundamental rights...’⁸ Yet, the discussions surrounding the motion on the resolution have shown that voting on matters concerning domestic rule of law issues is often structured along national partisan

⁷ European Parliament, “Motion for a Resolution to Wind up the Debate on the Statements by the European Council and the Commission Pursuant to Rule 132(2) of the Rules of Procedure on the Rule of Law and Fundamental Rights in Bulgaria (2020/2793(RSP)),” 2020.

⁸ European Parliament, “Motion for a Resolution to Wind up the Debate on the Statements by the European Council and the Commission Pursuant to Rule 132(2) of the Rules of Procedure on the Rule of Law and Fundamental Rights in Bulgaria (2020/2793(RSP)),” 2020, 6.

lines externalized to the European level. The BSP and its MEPs supported the resolution,⁹ although – as shown in this paper, they have generally taken a less critical stance towards autocratic practices abroad. The BSP also later watered down its support for the resolution as a provision calling for the adoption of the Istanbul Convention was introduced into the text, and the Convention has been opposed by the socialists.¹⁰ For its part, the EPP has come out against the resolution, backing its member GERB, yet opening itself up to criticisms of displaying double standards in terms of rule of law issues.¹¹ The debate and vote on the resolution concerning Bulgaria’s governance problems could be an important and worrying indication of how the ongoing discussions over linking up the disbursement of EU funds to the fulfillment of rule of law criteria is likely to take an even more acrimoniously nationally partisan overtone. Such debates also demonstrate the likelihood of **the continued EU overall weakness on global geopolitical matters**, in particular related to the re-emerging global superpower competition but also in terms of regional rivalries involving authoritarian regimes.

⁹ Zdravka Andonova, “След критичната резолюция на Брюксел БСП обяви, че Европа изпраща Борисов в международна изолация (After Brussels’ Critical Resolution the BSP Declared That Europe Is Sending Borisov into International Isolation),” *Dnevnik*, 2020.

¹⁰ OFFNews, “Нинова срещу резолюцията на Йончева: Евродепутатите от БСП ще гласуват против в частта за Истанбулската Конвенция (Ninova against Yoncheva’s Resolution: The BSP MEPs Will Vote against the Section on the Istanbul Convention),” 2020.

¹¹ Georgi Gotev, “EPP Sticks with Borissov in Stormy Debate over Rule-of-Law in Bulgaria,” *Euractiv*, 2020.