



# THE RISE OF NATIONALIST POLITICAL LEADERS IN THE BALKANS: THE EXAMPLES OF BULGARIA AND ROMANIA

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- What are the main drivers of nationalism in the Balkans?
- Who are the nationalist leaders in Bulgaria and what are their ideas?
- Who are the nationalist leaders in Romania and what are their ideas?
- What can we expect from the Rise of Nationalist Political Leaders in the Balkans?

In the Balkan countries, such as Bulgaria and Romania, a multi-factorial analysis is required in order to comprehend the ascent of nationalist leaders. Whilst external powers have undoubtedly exerted an influence on the escalation of nationalist rhetoric in these countries, internal factors and dynamics have also contributed to this process. The following discussion will firstly examine the role of external and internal factors in the rise of nationalist rhetoric in the Balkans. Secondly, it will analyze the leadership of nationalist parties in Bulgaria and Romania. Finally, the potential consequences of the rise of nationalist leaders in Bulgaria and Romania will be discussed in the context of contemporary global affairs. Given Bulgaria and Romania's involvement in institutions such as the EU and NATO, it is imperative that these two countries adhere to certain principles. However, the discussion will also address the question of whether the rise of nationalist leaders could potentially compromise their relations with Euro Atlantic institutions.

## The main drivers of nationalism in the Balkans

The Balkans, a peninsula that remained under the rule of the Ottoman Empire for a protracted period, exhibited a markedly diverse ethnic composition during the Ottoman era. The absence of a robust concept of nationhood within the state apparatus ensured the maintenance of justice and peace in the region. However, with the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire in the 18th century, the emerging powers of the era, most notably Russia, began to champion the Orthodox Christian communities in the Balkans. This shift in patronage led to the resurgence of the nation-state concept among these populations, while concurrently driving a policy of state-building grounded in the notion of national identity. Following the loss of a significant portion of the Balkans by the Ottoman Empire in the late 19th century, the emergence of nation-state conceptions was marked by the establishment of states such as Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, and Montenegro.

The Ottoman Empire, a multinational state, disintegrated, and the Balkan countries, which had recently gained independence, were faced with a highly heterogeneous ethnic population. The different ethnic groups within the states that were formed based on the concept of nation were regarded as a source of problem for the identity of the established state rather than a source of wealth. In order to assimilate and melt the ethnic groups, the politics of assimilation and deportation were employed. Following the Second World War, communists in Bulgaria and Romania ascended to positions of authority within the newly established political systems, with both countries adopting a position within the Eastern Bloc, which was under the influence of the Soviet Union. Concurrently, there was an escalation in nationalist rhetoric. The convergence of these two ideological streams, nationalist rhetoric and communist ideology, precipitated a concerted effort by Bulgarian and Romanian political leaders to consolidate their authority within their respective nations. This endeavor took the form of the implementation of assimilation policies directed at the country's existing ethnic minorities, a strategy that has been shown to foster the persistence of extreme nationalist ideologies in the two countries for several decades. Concurrently, ethnic minorities have resorted to diverse strategies in their efforts to preserve their rights, thereby contributing to the perpetuation of elevated levels of tension in the countries.

Another significant factor contributing to the rise of nationalism in the Balkans can be identified as economic and political crises. Bulgaria and Romania experienced significant revolutions in 1989, akin to those witnessed in other Central and Eastern European countries. The erstwhile oppressive communist regime was superseded by a democratic system, and the democratization process ensued in both countries. However, this transition period did not yield the desired results in the first phase, and on the one hand the countries experienced political problems, while on

the other hand the economic crisis overwhelmed the people. Consequently, there was a reversion to traditional nationalistic and identity-based movements as a means of responding to these crises.

This crisis period also prepared the ground for the emergence of leaders who brought nationalism and identity to the forefront again.

Membership of the European Union and NATO has also played an external role in the rise of nationalist currents and ideas in the Balkans. On the one hand, membership in Euro-Atlantic institutions has become the main goal of leaders and politicians in the democratization process in Bulgaria and Romania. On the other hand, in order to become members of the EU and NATO, the countries had to accept many conditions and compromise on national sovereignty. Some politicians equated EU and NATO membership with a compromise of national sovereignty. In this context, these politicians have used anti-EU and anti-NATO rhetoric to influence the public and increase their own political power by prioritizing nationalism.

It is important to note that following the 2008 economic crisis, there was a notable rise in public discontent towards governments, creating a favorable environment for populist leaders to consolidate their power.

## **The nationalist leaders in Bulgaria and their ideas**

In the context of contemporary Bulgaria, nationalism has become a conspicuous phenomenon, particularly since the 2000s. This phenomenon can be attributed to a confluence of historical, sociological, economic and political factors.

As a consequence of the issues referenced in the introduction, a number of significant political leaders came to the fore within the nationalist

movements in Bulgaria, exerting a profound and long-lasting influence on the political landscape. The primary focus of these nationalist leaders was on society, specifically the segment that had distanced itself from the prevailing political parties and was discontented with the state of affairs and the trajectory of the country. These political actors, who sought to sway this constituency through populist means, particularly by espousing nationalist ideologies, played a pivotal role in the escalation of nationalism within the country. It is noteworthy that Bulgarian nationalist and extreme right-wing leaders are predominantly affiliated with the pro-Russian and Russophile current. The following section will present a comprehensive list of key actors in Bulgaria who adhere to a nationalist ideology, along with a detailed exposition of their ideological tenets and the parties they have established.

## Volen Siderov and ATAKA Party

The presence of numerous nationalist leaders in Bulgaria can be attributed to the country's historical, political and minority contexts. Volen Siderov, a prominent figure in the nationalist and extreme right-wing political landscape, exemplifies this phenomenon. His political ascent in Bulgaria commenced with the establishment of the ATAKA party in the early 2005, marking the inception of his leadership career. Drawing inspiration from historical events, including the prolonged period of Ottoman rule and the presence of significant Turkish and Roma minority groups, Siderov has established the ideological foundation for his political movement and program.

Siderov is a leader who employs populist rhetoric and advocates for the prioritisation of strengthening relations with Russia. The ATAKA party, representing the extreme right wing in Bulgaria, has achieved significant electoral success since its establishment, participating in various coalitions without securing a parliamentary ma-

majority. The populist rhetoric employed by Siderov has proven effective in garnering support from segments of the population that have become disillusioned with the parties, particularly those that have been unsuccessful in addressing the prevailing political and economic crises from 1990s. With regard to the ideological standpoint of Siderov and the ATAKA party, the following observations can be made:

1. First, it is in favour of preserving the Bulgarian identity and creating a homogeneous community structure.
2. Second, its tough stance against the minorities in Bulgaria and its idea of continuing the legacy of the communist era, such as the assimilation of minorities.
3. Third, its sceptical stance against Euro-Atlantic institutions. Its idea of revising the EU-Bulgaria relations and its desire for a freer Bulgarian foreign policy in this context. Its policies of leaving NATO if necessary or at least not participating in operations and operations carried out within the framework of the NATO coalition.
4. Fourth, while suggesting that Bulgaria should stay close to Russia and establish strong relations, it stands out as the representative of Russophiles and the party supporting the Eurasian ideology in Bulgaria.

## Kostadin Kostadinov and Vazrazhdane Party

Another nationalist leader who has come to the fore in Bulgaria and has shown his influence in the country's politics is Kostadin Kostadinov. He founded the Vazrazhdane party in 2014. Kostadinov, like other nationalist leaders, advocates the following ideas: preserving the Bulgarian identity, continuing his loyalty to the Orthodox Christian Church, and defending the sovereignty and unity of the state.

The Vazrazhdanae party is an exemplary illustration of a Russophile party in the Balkans, characterized by its overt sympathy for Russia and the policies it advocates. The party's precipitous ascent in the nation's political landscape can be attributed to its ability to appeal to voters disillusioned with the populist rhetoric employed by competing parties. It is noteworthy that the party's ideological and political strategy is shaped by the vision of its leader, Kostadinov.

Kostadinov, who represents the nationalist leaders in Bulgaria, has determined some important strategies of his party. In this context:

1. Firstly, the Vazrazhdane party is known for its tough stance against the minorities in the country and has a homogeneous nation-state mentality.
2. Secondly, it is sceptical of globalization, and thinks that Bulgaria should leave NATO in particular and that the EU should revise its relations with Bulgaria.
3. Thirdly, for economic development, it foresees the improvement of the domestic economy, increasing exports rather than foreign investments, and in a way, reviving the economy domestically.

## The nationalist leaders in Romania and their ideas

In contemporary Romania, the rise of nationalism has been precipitated by numerous internal and external factors. Among the internal factors that have contributed to this rise are concerns regarding minority rights and the preservation of Romanian identity and cultural heritage. Additionally, the need to safeguard state independence against external influences, particularly the perception of EU membership as relinquishing national sovereignty to international bodies, has been a significant driver. Furthermore, the

influx of refugees and migratory patterns have added to the prevailing sentiment, further exacerbating the sense of nationalist fervour.

Romania and Bulgaria are two neighbouring countries. They became members of the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in the same period and underwent analogous procedures during the membership process. Consequently, both states became significant transit points for refugee movements originating from Eastern regions. A notable similarity in the rise of nationalism has been observed between the two countries, which can be attributed to the common challenges they have faced. The rise of nationalism has become a tool that political leaders with extreme right-wing ideologies can use to further their own agendas.

## George Simion and the Alliance for the Union of Romanian Party

George Simion is among the leaders who have a nationalist discourse in Romania. Simeon has extreme right-wing; nationalist approaches and defends the idea of Romania's unification with Moldova. In this context, Simeon's approaches are dangerous in terms of the EU's unifying and inclusive politics and strategy.

George Simion is currently the president of the Alliance for the Union of Romanians party. Founded in 2019, the Alliance for the Union of Romanians has a far-right and nationalist program and although it has not had much success in local elections since its founding, it has risen to the second strongest party position in the 2025 parliamentary elections.

The main goals of the Alliance for the Union of Romanians party are to protect Romania's sovereignty and unity and to ensure that the country has its own say in the international arena. In this context, it strives to protect the Roma-

nian identity in the country and to increase this awareness.

In order to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the AUR party's ideological framework, it is imperative to distil its primary tenets into a concise summary. The following section outlines the primary ideological tenets of the party.

1. The AURA party has undertaken the primary duty of protecting the Romanian national identity, taking care of the family and continuing the loyalty to the Christian Orthodox Church.

2. Secondly, the AURA party is distinguished by its circumspect stance towards the European Union, to safeguard the unity and sovereignty of the Romanian state. This approach is analogous to that adopted by other extreme right-wing parties, particularly those who advocate for rejecting EU membership. The accession process to the EU entails relinquishing a portion of national sovereignty and the authority to make independent decisions, as the country agrees to a system of collective decision-making.

3. Thirdly, the AURA party is known for its tough stance against minorities in the country and has generally managed to attract communities that are uncomfortable with the policies of other parties to its side with populist rhetoric. It is also worth emphasizing that populist rhetoric has generally become one of the most important methods used by far-right and nationalist parties and leaders in Europe, and the AURA party also uses this method.

## Feature expectation from the Rise of Nationalist Political Leaders in the Balkans

The ascent of nationalist leaders in the Balkans, and the prospective circumstances that may ensue, can be examined through some distinct

lenses. Primarily, in Bulgaria and Romania, and the emergence of leaders espousing extreme nationalist ideologies has garnered significant attention in the political science. The underlying factors that precipitate such occurrences within the contemporary political landscape warrant investigation.

The emergence of nationalist and extreme right-wing leaders in Bulgaria, along with the electoral outcomes they have achieved, is not unexpected in the context of the dynamic events unfolding within the country and on the global stage. The nationalist faction has historically wielded significant influence in Bulgarian politics since the establishment of the Bulgarian state. The contemporary rise of far-right and nationalist leaders, accompanied by their electoral gains, ensures their representation in the government coalition. However, when policies aligned with their ideologies are not endorsed, these leaders often opt for a withdrawal from the government and the initiation of new elections, thereby engendering a chaotic and destabilising environment within the nation's political landscape. Should the current state of affairs persist in Bulgaria, the formation of a new government may be impeded. This, in turn, could potentially result in the state being compelled to hold new elections, which might consequently lead to the perpetuation of the prevailing political crisis within the country.

The stance of nationalist leaders in Romania, who are opposed to the EU, and their commitment to safeguarding and ensuring the country sovereignty, could potentially present challenges to the EU in various ways should they come to power. In the context of declining economic prosperity and escalating disparities in social welfare across various nation states, the issues of economic downturn and rising inequality have assumed a pivotal role in the political landscape. These issues have emerged as a potent instrument in the hands of nationalist leaders,

particularly in countries where nationalism is experiencing resurgence. In this context, it is noteworthy that the EU needs to produce new policies and strategies in its member countries.

The ongoing Russia-Ukraine war has also prompted a shift in the behaviour of nationalist leaders in the Balkans. For instance, in Bulgaria, nationalist leaders are known for their Russophile, pro-Russian stance, and therefore they are supporters of Russia. Conversely, nationalist leaders in Romania are known for their anti-Russian stance. The proximity of Romania to Russia has given rise to the notion that, in the event of an invasion of Ukraine, Romania may well face a similar fate. However, in alignment with the Serbian nationalist leaders in the Balkans, they are pursuing pro-Russian policies, thereby engendering an unstable political environment. In order to stabilise this situation, elements such as the EU and NATO, especially with regard to the acceptance of the Western Balkans as members and the prevention of potential crises, are regarded as essential. For the Western Balkans to integrate into the EU in a timely and beneficial manner, the EU must implement effective policies. Failure on the part of the EU to do so may result in the Western Balkans becoming a source of considerable difficulty for EU integration.

As previously stated in the introduction, the presence of nationalism and nationalist leaders within the Balkan region is inevitable, given the historical and geographical context of the region. It is imperative that this trend is addressed by either the elimination of the factors that contribute to its proliferation or by states implementing policies that align with the aspirations of their populations. It is only through such measures that the escalation of nationalism can be mitigated to any significant extent.

## Conclusion

In Bulgaria and Romania, nationalism played an important role in the establishment of modern states and this vein has continued until today. At the same time, historical, political and economic reasons have played a role in the survival of nationalism in these two countries. The deep roots of nationalist movements in the country have also provided suitable ground for the easy rise of nationalist and nationalist-minded leaders in these countries.

Bulgaria and Romania are two countries that host different ethnic and cultural groups. While minorities should be seen as the richness of the countries, nationalist leaders use these groups in line with their own policies with negative approaches and rhetoric, which is not well received, especially by the minorities within the countries, and causes ethnic tension in the countries. This approach of nationalist movements and their leaders towards minorities is contrary to the EU's policy towards minorities and the transparency shown to minorities by the democratic system, and may cause the spread of diseases such as extreme nationalism and racism in countries.

The nationalist leaders in Bulgaria and Romania have adopted the mission of protecting the sovereignty of their countries, protecting national values and maintaining the Christian Orthodox identity, and the use of slogans in this direction during the elections has helped their voters rise. In particular, voters who are disappointed with other parties are shifting to the side of the nationalist parties and leaders. Although it is a unifying factor at the moment, it may also lead to an environment of political polarization in Bulgaria and Romania in the near future.

NATO and the EU are two organizations that play an important role in Europe, both in terms of security and politics and economy. However, the nationalist leaders in Bulgaria and Romania approach these organizations differently, and see membership in these organizations as a loss of sovereignty for the countries. This approach may not pose a great danger now, but it may cause great problems in the near future if Europe faces major crises. While there needs to be more political, economic and military unity in Europe, especially in the on-going Russia-Ukraine war, the sceptical and negative attitude towards Euro-Atlantic institutions by nationalist leaders is a dangerous approach in the Balkans in general.

The discourses of nationalist leaders such as protecting the country's sovereignty and protecting the national culture are quite natural and should be supported, but it is better if this discourse is not used as a tool for division or polarization but for achieving harmony, cooperation and win-win

policies in both domestic and foreign politics. When nationalist rhetoric and actions are used in this manner, not only will strong states emerge, but these states will also make the institutions of which they are members even stronger.

Finally an examination of the programs and strategies of the nationalist leaders mentioned and the parties they formed reveals that they share more or less similar ideologies and programs. Their pro-Russian stance, toughness towards minorities and scepticism towards Euro-Atlantic institutions can be listed. When these factors are taken into consideration, it is observed that this is a completely opposite move to the idea of a United Europe and the democratic values it embraces. Consequently, it is imperative for the EU to assimilate these entities within its political framework, leveraging the latent energy in a constructive manner. Failure to do so will perpetuate the erosion of the prevailing system by these parties and their ideology.

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