

# **She Is with Us: Independently-Running Trade Unionist Vanya Grigorova Shakes Up the Bulgarian Campaign for the European Parliament**

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## **Established Bulgarian Parties' Lack of vision and Credibility**

European elections in Bulgaria rarely generate excitement. With the possible exception of the first elections after Bulgaria's 2007 EU accession, turnout has been low (around 35%). Bulgarians speak about "Europe" as a remote entity they do not belong to. Understandably so given that Bulgaria "enjoys" the lowest wages and living standards in the EU. Also, European elections in Bulgaria tend to be very parochial as political actors treat them as ersatz-polling for national and local elections.

"European issues" rarely surface in EP campaigns dominated by local controversies and wagers. For example, in the run-up to the 2014 elections, the BSP (Bulgarian Socialist Party) promised to defend the Cyrillic alphabet in Europe. This year the elections are dominated by the largest corruption scandal in recent history, the so-called "Apartmentgate" which revealed that senior politicians receive cheap luxury apartments in exchange for services or embezzle EU-funds to build private villas. The revelations knocked off a few percentage points of the ruling party GERB (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria) and according to current polls, the GERB is slightly trailing behind the BSP. On its part, the BSP mistakes the aversion to GERB engendered by the Apartmentgate scandal for real support for itself. As a result, the Bulgarian Socialist Party has jacked-up anti-corruption rhetoric, thereby poaching the field of the liberal-right, traditionally concerned (primarily) with corruption. Unfortunately, the BSP's frontrunner, the renowned investigative and war-zones journalist Elena Yoncheva was also implicated in "Apartmentgate". The other repertoire the BSP borrows liberally from is that of the far-right, whipping up [the hysteria over the Istanbul Convention](#) which led to a dramatic showdown with the party's ex-leader and incumbent president of the PES (Party of European Socialists), a neoliberal technocrat with the odd progressive position.

The BSP is not the only party on the nominal left that raids the ideas of others, betraying its total ideological and political bankruptcy. The ABV (Alternative for Bulgarian Revival), a BSP splinter group, joined a coalition with the Bulgarian Left under the name "Coalition for Bulgaria", a moniker which, up until the last election, had been used by the BSP for many years. Unable to compete on interesting and new ideas, the Coalition for Bulgaria hopes to deflect votes from confused BSP-voters, a gamble even more pathetic than the stealing of liberals' and far-right topics which forms part of the BSP's strategy.

The Left-bank is a scorched, nay, barren field. The sole exception is Vanya Grigorova, a trade

unionist running as an independent candidate on a workers' and disability rights platform, without explicitly positioning herself as a Left-wing candidate.

### **An Unusual Candidate: An independent Trade Unionist Running on Workers' and Disability Rights**

Grigorova is from a working-class family living in a marginalized neighborhood of Sofia. Nowadays she advises the president of the second-largest trade union in the country on economic matters but she began her working life as a school cleaner, followed by work in a fast-food chain. She manned a stall for clothes in Sofia's largest and cheapest bazaar, patronized by workers and the poor. She also put hours as a market researcher and worked for a telecom that went bankrupt and didn't pay her last two salaries. That experience led to her active interest in workers' issues and involvement in the trade union movement. As a head of the progressive NGO "Solidary Bulgaria", she has a decade of experience in "civic" causes and initiatives such as the anti-TTIP/CETA fight and the struggle for just taxation for which a coalition of NGOs, trade unions and small parties collected 30,000 signatures in 2017.

This last experience has been formative in her decision to go into politics. Grigorova recounts that when she tried to bring up the issue of the flat tax in the parliamentary committee dealing with the state budget, she was brutally shushed by GERB commissioner Stoyanova. Stoyanova's words were: "we are not interested in the issue and if you want to change it, you need to take power". As Grigorova says, civic initiatives, pressure from below, mediatized expertise and negotiations can only do so much and if the Left really wants to change anything, it must take power and use the tools of popular sovereignty to force its agenda on capital and the bourgeois parties. It was especially exhilarating to hear her say this to sanitation workers she once helped organize into a union – and Vanya is the only candidate who dares agitate among them – that we need to take things into our own hands and organize our own political representation and table our own issues.

What Grigorova hopes to bring to the political debates – and she harbors no illusions about other plausible outcome of the race – is focus on the real problems of two of the most vulnerable demographics in Bulgaria: workers and people with disabilities. They stand for two of the most pressing problems in the country: exploitation and austerity because the disabled depend disproportionately on the ever-thinning social safety net. If she is not there to talk about their problems, the established political parties would only speak about the phantasmatic third sex the Istanbul Convention would supposedly introduce in school curricula and a non-existent "migrant threat".

Instead Grigorova calls out every government's tired strategy of pitting the organizations of people with disabilities against each other, in order to cut social assistance budgets. Grigorova speaks tirelessly of the importance of standing united, about the growing inequalities and what she would do to fortify the European Pillar of Social Rights, for now an empty shell of wishful rhetoric rather than a concrete set of proposals for how to actually achieve a more socially just Europe.

Grigorova could not predict the extent to which her participation would influence the entire campaign for EU elections. Much like how the effect of the far-right on established parties is to push them further into the Right in a bid to coopt the former, Grigorova soon found some of her ideas "borrowed" by other candidates. In that sense, despite her being an independent newcomer to the political field, she found herself in a position of power, if by this we understand the ability to set the limits of the possible, the sayable and the thinkable.

Somewhat paradoxically, Grigorova exercises her political power from the anti-political position of the seasoned expert who constantly calls out her opponents' lack of knowledge about intricate legal

and policy details. But the technocratic envelope belies some very radical ideas.

For example, we read in her program a proposal to force multinational corporations to pay the same rates for the same jobs in different locations. This sounds like a modest social-democratic demand, especially in comparison to the more radical soundbite of “European minimum wage” that other candidates are peddling. But should this happen, its effects would be far more comprehensive. For example, it will put an end to the “race to the bottom” states engage in to attract foreign investment. The strength of corporations lies in their capacity to exploit wage and tax differentials to their advantage. The “same rates for the same job regardless of location” policy would annul Bulgaria’s development model, currently based on low wages and low taxes. It would force local capitalists to pay comparable wages if they want to keep turnover low, meaning an increase in wages across the board. It would ensure that not only the workers in one country but workers in Europe as a whole will enjoy more equitable conditions of work and remuneration. Relatedly, Grigorova has been a vocal supporter of the EU’s Mobility Package, hoping it will put an end to the horrendous exploitation of Eastern European freight drivers, forced to drive during the day and be night watchmen for free during the night. (The Mobility Package regulates labour conditions in the European road transport sectors.)

Grigorova’s campaign has not neglected the sphere of reproduction, either. Gesturing towards the claims of radical feminist movements from the 1970s, she calls for the introduction of weekly paid leave for parents of young children, taking care work away from the private sphere and making it effectively a remunerated, public concern. In addition, Grigorova wants care for children and the elderly to count toward one’s work experience, demands free day care for all children and state job guarantees for the disabled.

In fact, her bid to represent workers and especially the disabled, turns her candidacy into an important political premiere, implicitly establishing a precedent. The independent candidate launched her signature collection campaign in the Plovdiv chapter of the Union of the Visually Impaired and has also agitated among workers with disabilities throughout the country. These are not arbitrary demographics and places: Grigorova falls back on her experience as a trade unionist who has been deeply involved in the issues of people with disabilities and has a long experience with fighting the austerity regime which in Bulgaria is imposed via the mobilization of outright lies about the so-called “fake disabled” or Roma abusing the supposedly generous welfare system.

Grigorova has mobilized the networks of people working around these issues for the purposes of the campaign. This makes her stand out from the typical politician who visits would-be constituencies only during electoral campaign, trying to achieve a semblance of representation. In marked contrast, Vanya Grigorova speaks mostly to audiences she already knows in her capacity as a trade unionist. As someone who often accompanies her in visits throughout the country, I have witnessed how the demands of these constituencies begin to populate her program. This process can lead to somewhat contradictory results. For example, Grigorova wants to represent coal mine workers who want from the EU to grant a derogation from the limits on their mine’s ‘shelf life’ but also calls for comprehensive environmental protections as well as urgent measures against climate change. However inasmuch as modern society is constituted by contradictory and antagonistic groups and interests, even within the same social class, this is perfectly normal. In fact, there is no unified working class any more than a unified capitalist class. Workers are split along gender, ethnic, occupational and even disability status and Vanya tries her best to group and balance together their disparate demands into a single program crowned by the slogan “People before profits”. And while all the other candidates and parties scramble to define “the national interest” (that often happens to express the interests of business owners) they solemnly pledge they will most faithfully represent, Vanya knows that there is no such thing, there are only particular interests, even within the same social class, and crafting a durable unity from them is the art of the political as she understands it.

For the first time the workers and the disabled have a genuine representative while people on the Left who normally avoid elections for lack of real choice have someone worth their vote. Her name is Vanya Grigorova.

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