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Bulgaria and its security challenges in the Balkans and Black Sea

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Executive summary

- The Black Sea region is of vital importance in terms of geopolitics, infrastructure, economics, energy and transport, both for Bulgaria and for the other countries on its shores. This region creates an opportunity for Bulgaria to acquire the status of a key transit country for raw materials for power production from the Caspian Sea and Central Asia to the EU market. In addition, Bulgaria aims to play the role of an intermediary in contacts between Western organisations and the Balkan states. Meanwhile, with regard to the smaller Black Sea states it wishes to be a guide on their road towards integration with the EU and NATO.
- The situation of contemporary Bulgaria has also been shaped by historical circumstances (Turkish vassalage, the effects of the 2nd World War, the liberation of Bulgaria by Russia, and the communist era). As history shows Bulgaria has always had to appeal to larger states for help in order to survive as a state. There is also a range of factors ensuring that Bulgaria

maintains proper relations with all the states in the Black Sea region – cultural similarity to Turkey, the dependence of the Bulgarian economy on Russian gas (during communist times its economy followed the Soviet model), and the European values shared by Bulgarians.

- The internal dimension of Bulgaria's security challenges is a by-product of the structural inefficiencies of the state, related to the lack of independent judiciary, a symbiosis between organized crime and the state, prevalent corruption, and weak public institutions.
- The inability of the state to streamline its efforts for the pursuit of common, instead of particular, interests leads to the lack of confidence in the state institutions and law enforcement structures.
- Impoverished and marginalized groups of the society are exposed to external influence that can be exploited against the security of Bulgaria and its NATO and EU allies.
- The dominance of the clientelist type of professional career and allegiance to informal structures facilitate the infiltration of Bulgarian state structures, which raises concerns about the level of protection of classified information and constitutes a threat to NATO and the EU.
- Bulgaria's security is very dependent on the Western Balkans' security due to geographical proximity and historic and political ties.

- Bulgaria's best interest is to support the EU accession of North Macedonia and Albania more actively and continuously as an incentive for regional security.
- The diverse cooperation of the region with competing geopolitical powers may pose security challenges to the Western Balkans and have implications for both Bulgaria and the EU.



Tomasz Stępniewski

Bulgaria and the Black Sea's geopolitics

Introduction

Bulgaria is situated strategically by the Black Sea. It is located at the crossroads of three cultural and civilisational areas – the Orthodox Russian Federation, the unifying European (European Union) and Muslim Turkey, which is the gateway to the Middle East. Bulgaria is also part of the Balkan Peninsula.

This chapter analyses the foreign policy of the Republic of Bulgaria with regard to the Black Sea region after the Cold War. Bulgaria's foreign policy can be divided as follows: 1) actions as part of the EU; 2) regional collaboration (incl. BSEC, the Western Balkans, South-East European Cooperation Process, Central European Initiative, and also the Macedonian problem in Bulgaria's foreign policy); 3) security questions

(as part of NATO¹) and 4) multilateral cooperation (including the UN, OSCE, and Council of Europe)². In the 1990s and early 21st century, Bulgaria's policy focused on realising the main goal of integration with the Euro-Atlantic organisations – NATO and the EU, and with regard to energy. It may thus be stated that the policy towards the Black Sea region is not a leading aim of Bulgaria's activities, but arises only in the context of energy matters and relations with the Russian Federation or Turkey. Bearing in mind Bulgaria's geostrategic position, it can be said that this is a major factor in the stabilisation in the Balkans, and that it holds a very active position in the matter of regional integration, maintaining as it does multilateral projects in order to strengthen the collaboration among countries in this area within both the EU and NATO.

1. Bulgaria's geopolitical position

From the point of view of its geopolitical position, Bulgaria as a state on the Black Sea – similar to Romania – forms an excellent entry point to the Balkans. Its geographic position may be described as strategic. Bulgaria's territory is shaped almost like a rectangle whose sides are formed by the Danube in the North and mountains in the south and west, while the east is lapped by the waters of the Black Sea³. The Danube enables Bulgaria to maintain connections with

¹ Wider: J. Becker, *Defence spending, burden-sharing and strategy in NATO's Black Sea littoral states: domestic, regional, and international systemic factors*, "Southeast European and Black Sea Studies" 2021, vol. 21, issue 3.

² *Foreign Policy*, The Republic of Bulgaria, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <http://www.mfa.bg/>.

³ A. Koseski, M. Willaume, *Nowe kraje Unii Europejskiej: Bułgaria, Rumunia*, Warszawa 2007, p. 15.

all the states on river, while the Black Sea connects it with the other countries on its shores, and the Bosphorus and Dardanelles with other bodies of water. This geographical location – the transport routes from Central and Eastern Europe pass through its territory on the way to the Middle East – creates a convenient geostrategic position in contemporary international relations. Due to its geostrategic position, Bulgaria is also an important country on the map of Russia's energy routes⁴.

The geopolitical position of Bulgaria in the world's structures, similar to that of Romania, depends on its location in relation to large spaces, on the geo-economic and cultural conditions of the region, and also on the proximity of conflicts in unstable regions (stoked by ethnocultural differences). Bulgaria's geopolitical potential – the size of its territory (approx. 110,000 km²), population (approx. 7.5m inhabitants) and economy – place Bulgaria at a very low level in both the global and regional power structures, which makes it strongly dependent on other states and/or organisations⁵.

⁴ More details on the rivalry among the powers in the post-Soviet region in: O. Polegkyi, T. Stępniewski (eds.), *Conflict in Donbas: Endless negotiations and (im)possible solutions*, "IEŚ Policy Papers", no. 5, Instytut Europy Środkowej/Institute of Central Europe, Lublin 2020, www.ies.lublin.pl; O. Polegkyi, T. Stępniewski (eds.), *Security dilemma in the Black Sea region in light of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict*, "IEŚ Policy Papers", no. 5, Instytut Europy Środkowej/Institute of Central Europe, Lublin 2021, www.ies.lublin.pl; K. Raik, S. Saari (eds.), *Key Actors in the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood Competing perspectives on geostrategic tensions*, "FIIA Report", no. 47, The Finnish Institute of International Affairs, Helsinki 2016, www.fia.fi; T. Forsberg, H. Haukkala, *The European Union and Russia*, London–New York 2016, pp. 44–74; and also: E. Wyciskiewicz, *Caspian Gas and Oil – What Relevance for the West?*, [w:] A. Eberhardt, A. Iwashita (eds.), *Security Challenges in the Post-Soviet Space: European and Asian Perspectives*, Warsaw–Sapporo 2007, pp. 214–228; M.B. Olcott, A. Åslund, S.W. Garnett, *Getting It Wrong: Regional Cooperation and the Commonwealth of Independent States*, CEIP, Washington, DC 1999, p. 166.

⁵ *Savremenno geopoliticheskoto polozhenie na Bulgaria* [Съвременното геополитическо положение на България], www.geopolitica.eu.

It is worth adding that the geopolitical situation, and in particular the regional conditions, also affects the economic development of Bulgaria. One example is the events that took place in the former Yugoslavia (the Kosovo crisis, US intervention), or Turkey's actions limiting the flow of ships through the Black Sea straits – factors that increased the dependence of the Bulgarian economic (and energy) space on the dynamic changes occurring in the region.

It should be remembered that Bulgaria's EU accession – like that of Romania – contributed to an opening of the European structures onto the Black Sea region. Public opinion stresses a desire to create a stable neighbourhood, democratic and wealthy, which would be an expression of a genuine community of states equal in terms of effort, responsibility and benefits. This is due to the fact that Bulgaria has port cities, the largest of which are: Burgas (construction of an LNG terminal is planned) and Varna (which the South Stream line is to run through). Bulgaria can thus be seen as an exceptionally attractive country if we consider its geo-strategic position. Taking into account the importance of the Danube in the context of river transport and shipping, though, it has to be admitted that Romania has far greater opportunities than Bulgaria.

2. Historical conditions

The history of Bulgaria is full of twists and problematic issues⁶. The Bulgarian nation formed from three ethnic

⁶ More details on the historical circumstances affecting the situation in the Balkans: B. Jelavich, *Historia Bałkanów*, vol. 1: *Wiek XVIII i XIX*, trans. J. Polak, K. Salawa; vol. 2: *Wiek XX*, trans. M. Chojnacki, J. Hunia, Kraków 2005; V. Dimitrov, *Bulgaria. The Uneven Transition*, London–New York 2001, pp. 93–118; P. Simic, *Do the Balkans Exist?*, [in:] D. Trianta-

groups – Slavs, Proto-Bulgarians and Thracians. Its so-called golden age occurred when neither Poland, nor England, nor Russia featured on the map of Europe⁷. Its relations with Turkey in particular are strongly conditioned by questions of history. Bulgaria was a vassal of the Ottoman Empire and formed part of it for nearly five centuries. As a result of the Russo-Turkish War (1877-1878), it obtained autonomy in 1878, then 30 years later in 1908 it gained independence from the Ottoman Empire and became a kingdom. Bulgaria's entry into the war in October 1915 led to an escalation of military action on the Balkan Front. Bulgaria eventually surrendered on September 29, 1918, resulting in the situation on the Balkan Peninsula being brought under control. Pursuant to the Neuilly Treaty (November 27, 1919), the size of the Bulgarian armed forces was limited to 35,000 men, while the country lost part of its territory, namely Thrace (ceded to Greece), part of Macedonia (to the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes), and part of Dobruja (to Romania), while also being forced to pay reparations.

During the inter-war years, Bulgaria found itself politically and economically isolated from its neighbours. Not wishing to exacerbate its international situation, the government in Sofia merely tried to ameliorate some of the provisions of the Neuilly Treaty, those whose implementation depended

phyllou (ed.), *The Southern Balkans: Perspectives from the Region*, "Chaillot Papers" 2001, no. 46, pp. 17-35; I. Kadare, *The Balkans: Truths and Untruths*, [in:] D. Triantaphyllou (ed.), *The Southern Balkans*, pp. 5-16; D. Bechev, *Contested Borders, Contested Identity: The Case of Regionalism in Southeast Europe*, "Southeast European and Black Sea Studies" 2004, vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 77-95; M. Todorova, *What Is or Is There a Balkan Culture, and Do or Should the Balkans Have a Regional Identity?*, "Southeast European and Black Sea Studies" 2004, vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 175-185; Y. Lacoste, *Geopolityka Śródziemnomorza*, trans. R. Stryjewski, Warszawa 2010, pp. 310-312.

⁷ Z. Klejn, *Bułgaria: szkice z dziejów najnowszych*, Pułtusk 2005, p. 5.

on the good will of the Entente powers and neighbouring countries⁸. Revisionist assertions were limited, and attention focussed on realising the provisions of the treaty, with the intention of changing the perception of Bulgaria on the international arena⁹. Independently of the aforementioned circumstances, the Bulgarian nation achieved significant successes both economically and culturally. Their country's isolation in terms of foreign policy forced the Bulgarian elite to turn once again towards the guarantor of its independence, which at that time was Germany.

As a result of the 2nd World War, Bulgaria found itself within the Soviet sphere of influence as a satellite state, member of the Warsaw Pact and Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, and in 1946 a referendum brought an end to its existence as a monarchy and transformed it into a People's Republic. As indicated by Katarzyna Gelles, "the fact that Bulgaria found itself within Moscow's orbit diametrically changed its situation. It is worth adding that in terms of culture, tradition, language and religion, the Bulgarian lands always gravitated towards Russia, which in the 19th century had harboured ambitions of forming a Greater Bulgaria as a bridgehead for its influences in the Balkans"¹⁰.

The situation of contemporary Bulgaria has also been shaped by historical circumstances (Turkish vassalage, the effects of the 2nd World War, the liberation of Bulgaria by Russia, and the communist era). As can be seen from history, Bulgaria has always had to appeal to larger states for help

⁸ E. Znamierowska-Rakk, *Federacja Słowian południowych w polityce Bułgarii po II wojnie światowej. Korzenie, próby realizacji, upadek*, Warszawa 2005, p. 42.

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ Ibidem.

in order to survive as a state. There is also a range of factors ensuring that Bulgaria maintains proper relations with all the states in the Black Sea region – cultural similarity to Turkey, the dependence of the Bulgarian economy on Russian gas (during communist times its economy followed the Soviet model), and the European values shared by Bulgarians.

3. Bulgaria's regional policy

According to Marin Lessenski, Bulgaria has two priorities in its regional foreign policy. The first of these is its policy regarding the Balkans, where Bulgaria has interests dictated by history. The changes taking place in the Western Balkans in the 1990s were observed by Bulgaria with particular concern and fear for any potential spill-over of those conflicts onto Bulgarian territory. In addition, the Western Balkans are of vital importance for Bulgaria due to close economic and trading ties. The second regional priority for Bulgaria is the Black Sea region. Until recently Bulgaria, like other Western states, was not particularly concerned with the Black Sea area. Its lack of interest in this region resulted from being absorbed with internal reforms and a desire to achieve the so-called critical aims of its own foreign policy, namely membership of NATO and the EU. Meanwhile in geopolitical categories, throughout the 1990s Bulgaria was part of the security grey area of South-Eastern Europe. The lack of interest in Bulgaria's situation by the European Union and United States resulted in their involvement in resolving the conflicts on the territory of the former Yugoslavia. This meant that the Black Sea coast seemed to them at that time to be distant in time and space. Despite, Bulgaria being a member of the BSEC since its formation in 1992, it

has only occasionally taken an interest in realising potential power infrastructure projects, such as AMBO, Burgas – Alexandroupolis, or the TRACECA transport corridor. Although those projects were created in the mid-1990s, they were not entirely successfully due to a lack of both financial resources and political will (more broadly – of a strategy towards the Black Sea region)¹¹.

Bulgaria, aware of the benefits arising from its geographical location, makes efforts at the BSEC forum and other regional organisations, aimed at protection of the environment, particularly with regard to clean waters. In other words, Bulgaria wishes to benefit from the tourist industry, so when energy-related investments are undertaken (e.g. building pipelines), environmental questions are increasingly taken into account. Possession of a coastline and two major seaports, Burgas and Varna, provides Bulgaria with a further opportunity for economic development. Clean waters are also beneficial for fisheries. The problem of environmental protection for the Black Sea is thus becoming a matter of key importance for Bulgaria which is connected economically with the rest of the region and the world mainly via the ports at Burgas and Varna (Bulgaria carries around 60% of its international trade through these). This means that the security of the maritime routes is of fundamental significance for the country. Bulgaria supports the functioning of regional organisations aiming to improve the security of the region, such as BLACKSEAFOR and Black

¹¹ See: M. Lessenski, *The Black Sea Cooperation: An Outlook from Bulgaria*, [in:] P. Manoli (ed.), *Unfolding the Black Sea Economic Cooperation: Views from the Region*, International Centre for Black Sea Studies, "Xenophon Paper", July 2007, no. 2, p. 38.

Sea Harmony¹². In addition, five out of ten trans-European transport corridors pass through Bulgaria, four of which are of regional (Black Sea) importance¹³.

4. Bulgaria's Euro-Atlantic integration

The fall of the communist regimes in Central-Eastern and South-Eastern Europe set the new states, including Bulgaria and Romania, on their march towards the West. The goal was Euro-Atlantic integration. The democratic transformations in Bulgaria began on November 10, 1989. A new constitution was adopted, functioning of political parties was restored, and the privatisation process commenced¹⁴ – a broad systemic change. Bulgaria's foreign policy priority became membership of the EU and NATO¹⁵. On March 29, 2004, Bulgaria, along with Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia, became a member of the North Atlantic Alliance. For Bulgaria, NATO membership was an external guarantee of its security. In the historical and geopolitical reality of the 1990s, NATO was the only political and military organisation that could provide such a guarantee. It should be noted that Bulgaria (like Romania) saw participation in the North Atlantic Alliance as an important

¹² For more details see: D. Sanders, *Maritime Security in the Black Sea: Can Regional Solutions Work?*, "European Security" 2009, vol. 18, no. 2, pp. 107, 111.

¹³ See: M. Lessenski, *The Black Sea Cooperation: An Outlook from Bulgaria*, pp. 39-40.

¹⁴ *Foreign Policy*, The Republic of Bulgaria, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <http://www.mfa.bg/>.

¹⁵ For more details see: D. Keridis, Ch.M. Perry, M.R.P. d'Assunção Carlos (eds.), *Bulgaria in Europe: Charting a Path Toward Reform and Integration*, IFPA – Kokkalis Series on South-east European Policy, vol. 4, Herndon, VA 2006; K.Y. Nikolov (ed.), *Europe on the Black Sea Shore: Opportunities and Challenges for Bulgaria*, Bulgarian European Community Association – BECSA, Sofia, June-November 2007; also: A. Inotai, *The European Union and Southeastern Europe: Troubled Waters Ahead?*, "College of Europe Studies", no. 7, Brussels 2007.

step towards membership of the European Union, as it considered NATO membership a guarantee of stable conditions for its economic growth and the creation of proper relations with its immediate and further surroundings¹⁶.

As far as integration with the European Union is concerned, it should be remembered that Bulgaria signed its first agreement with the European Economic Community in 1982. Diplomatic relations with the EEC were established in 1988. The whole of the 1990s was for Bulgaria (as well as for Romania) a period of tedious negotiations and problems connected with meeting the requirements of European Union membership. Fortunately for Bulgaria, at the EU summit held on December 12-13, 2004, the leaders of the 25 member states decided that Bulgaria would join the European Union on January 1, 2007. The leaders of the EU member states approved the signing of an *Accession Treaty* with Bulgaria and Romania in April 2005. On January 1, 2007, after the membership criteria were met, Bulgaria became a full member of the EU. The table below presents a synthesis of the most important events in the European Union's relations with Bulgaria (and Romania).

It is also worth adding that the difficulties in Bulgarian and Romanian accession to the EU and the general belief, *ex post facto*, that these countries were accepted too quickly, led to the adoption of tougher membership conditions for

¹⁶ For more on how NATO was perceived by Bulgaria and Romania in the 1990s: A. Angelov, *The Bulgarian Regional Diplomacy in the Context of the NATO Enlargement Toward the Balkans*, <http://www.ucm.es/BUCM/revistas/cee/15766500/articulos/PA-PEo4o412o0o8A.PDF>, p. 13; G. Popescu, *Diaspora Geopolitics: Romanian-Americans and NATO Expansion*, "Geopolitics" 2005, vol. 10, no. 3, pp. 455-481; D. Turnock, *Romania: Contemporary Geopolitical Perspectives*, "Geopolitics" 2001, vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 119-140.

other EU candidates after 2004 (the Western Balkan states and Turkey)¹⁷.

By becoming the next EU member state on January 1, 2007, Bulgaria performed a major re-evaluation of its own interests – it began to stress its specific role and importance in the region, while at the same time maintaining its drive to strengthen its position in the Black Sea (and also Caspian) region, its desire to form multifaceted and multilateral regional cooperation while simultaneously implementing EU rules in the fields of economic, social and political stabilisation, as well as democratisation and security. In this way, Bulgaria retained a balance between realising its interests in accordance with its national interest, and taking into account its own benefits at the local, regional and European levels. From the moment it joined the EU, Bulgaria also acquired an opportunity to fulfil a role as a kind of bridge between the EU and the neighbouring areas (e.g. the Western Balkans and the South Caucasus). This has allowed it to pass on Euro-Atlantic values to states in its immediate and further vicinity. It is also worth stressing that for Bulgaria, EU membership is confirmation of its European identity, while for its neighbours it sends a positive signal connected with hope for European integration. Those countries perceive their own stability and security as being achievable through European integration.

¹⁷ R. Balfour, C. Stratulat, *The Democratic Transformation of the Balkans*, European Policy Centre, "Issue Paper", November 2011, no. 66, p. 7.

Conclusions

The Black Sea region is of vital importance in terms of geopolitics, infrastructure, economics, energy and transport, both for Bulgaria and for the other countries on its shores. This region creates an opportunity for Bulgaria to acquire the status of a key transit country for raw materials for power production from the Caspian Sea and Central Asia to the EU market. Several pipelines must be completed in order to achieve this goal. The problem is that it is highly improbable that all the investments will be realised, due to economic and political factors. In addition, Bulgaria aims to play the role of intermediary in contacts between western organisations and the Balkan states. Meanwhile, with regard to the smaller Black Sea states it wishes to be a guide on their road towards integration with the EU and NATO.

Bulgaria's policy in the Black Sea region should be analysed not only by its independent actions, but also seen as an element of NATO and EU policy. As a result of NATO and the EU expanding to include Bulgaria and Romania, the importance of the Black Sea region to those organisations has successively increased. Bulgaria, as a fully-fledged EU member since 2007, wishes to take on the role of an intermediary between the EU and the Black Sea and Balkan region. It also takes part in realising EU policy towards states in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, Turkey and Central Asia. It defines its position in the region as a major factor in the stabilisation of the international situation.

One significant aspect of Bulgarian foreign policy is its good contacts with the other countries of the Black Sea region, from the largest such as Turkey and Russia, to the smallest, for example Moldova. Good relations are main-

tained due to an understanding of Bulgaria's interests, and to the adapting and coordination of the EU's eastern policy. Bulgaria's major interests in the Black Sea region are undoubtedly connected with energy matters, the construction of transport infrastructure intended to extend trading contacts among the Black Sea states (and those of the Balkans), and improvement of relations between the communities of those states through the development of cultural and economic cooperation with Muslim states. According to Marin Lessenski, in order for Bulgaria to be a reliable country on the EU forum, it must achieve a compromise between close cooperation with Russia with regard to energy, and being a responsible member of the EU representing the interests of the Community. The development of collaboration in the Black Sea area will also depend on the international circumstances which have a significant impact on the situation in the region. This means bilateral relations between the EU and Russia, NATO and Russia, the EU and Turkey, and Russia and Turkey, as well as the relations between all the aforementioned actors and the current superpower – the United States, which has a political, economic and military presence in the region¹⁸.

Bulgaria has enormous potential for growth and development. It depends on the abilities of the decision-making centre in Sofia whether or not benefits can be drawn from

¹⁸ M. Lessenski, *The Black Sea Cooperation: An Outlook from Bulgaria*, p. 52; S. Meister, *Strategic sovereignty in the EU's Southeastern neighborhood: The Black Sea as part of a larger geopolitical region*, 28 January 2021, Heinrich Böll Stiftung, Tbilisi – South Caucasus Region, www.boell.org; A. Cohen, C. Irwin, *U.S. Strategy in the Black Sea Region*, The Heritage Foundation, "Executive Summary Background", 13 December 2006, no. 1990, http://www.heritage.org/research/russiaandeurasia/upload/bg_1990.pdf.

the new conditions in which the country functions. Bulgaria's geopolitical position creates the appropriate conditions in this regard. After acquiring EU membership, Bulgaria has seen an increase in the number of investments made in its economy. Whether Bulgaria takes advantage of this positive situation depends on its development as a Black Sea state, but also as a member of the EU. Bulgaria is increasingly aware of the necessity to collaborate with the Black Sea states (especially Romania) within the European Union, which testifies to its desire to take advantage of its chance in the new international reality of the 21st century.

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Spasimir Domaradzki

Bulgaria's security – the internal dimension

Introduction

Bulgaria is not among the countries considered as exposed to internal security challenges. Instead, it is largely perceived as a stable and safe country with a friendly climate for tourism. At the same time, over the last three decades, the country has faced numerous security challenges. During the first fifteen years after the end of communism, the country went through substantial internal security destabilization driven by the collapse of state institutions and the prompt overtaking of the emerging security vacuum by private security companies. These entities blended formal security services with illegal activities such as drugs, arms, and oil trafficking and were additionally emboldened by the abrupt process of Yugoslavia's dissolution and the collapse of the state institutions.

The ranks of these private security companies were replenished with sportsmen and young men who were well

trained in martial arts and were encouraged by the Bulgarian Communist Party's Central Committee Secretariat in June 1989 in order to handle the problem of increasing informal associations in the country and the salvation of the communist achievements¹. With their outright brutality and disregard for any law, they contributed to the dismantling of the state and undermined the establishment of the rule of law in the country. These groups will remain a constitutive element of the post-communist political reality in Bulgaria.

Their prominence and impact on the political life of the country are well studied. Misha Glenny's *McMafia* starts with the case of Ilya Pavlov, a personification of the Bulgarian post-communist organized crime leaders. Pavlov's audacity went as far as to provide financial support for Bill Clinton's election campaign. The donation was denied by the Democrat candidate under concerns for the origin of the donation. Until the end of the first decade of the 21st century, Bulgarians were witnessing endless clashes between rival criminal groups. Simultaneously, with the instalment of proxy politicians, the state institutions were captured from within to the extent that the former head of the Bulgarian secret services claimed that "every country has its mafia, but only in Bulgaria the mafia has its own country".

The coming into power of Boyko Borisov, himself an owner of a security company and, as the US Embassy cables revealed, closely connected to organized crime, brought an end to the gang clashes but did not eliminate organized

¹ I. Znepolski, *Bylgarskiat komunizym, Sociokulturni cherti i vlastova traektoria*, Institut za izsledvane na blizkoto minalo, Siela 2008, p. 338 [И. Знеполски, *Българският комунизъм. Социокултурни черти и властова траектория*, Институт за изследване на близкото минало, Сиела 2008, с. 338].

crime. Instead, it created a unique symbiosis between organized crime, formal economic activity, and the draining of public and EU funds under the umbrella of the official institutions. The aim of this discussion is to trace the consolidation of the political regime under Boyko Borisov and to identify the implications of Bulgaria's internal security challenges since 2009.

The next sections will focus on the following dimensions of Bulgaria's internal security concerns: radical Islamism, organized crime, and cases of espionage. These examples offer a glimpse of the weaknesses of the Bulgarian judiciary, consistently criticized by the European Union within its Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM) reports and provide an explanation of the challenges that the country faces in the context of its EU and NATO membership.

Radical Islamism

Although Bulgaria is not among the countries constituting a security concern in the context of the global war on terror, over the last twenty years the country's Muslim population was also exposed to attempts of radicalization. This situation endures due to the economic and social collapse of rural areas and the de facto segregation of the Roma communities. Bulgarian Muslims are largely Sunni and Alevi, and the nature of their religious practices accents more on tradition than strict execution of daily religious obligations². The Muslims in Bulgaria are among the poorest and most ethnically diversified. The Bulgarian Turks, Roma Muslims,

² A. Nenkov, *Bylgarskite miusulmani. Takiva kakvito sa* [A. Ненкова, *Българските мюсюлмани. Такива каквито са*], Deutsche Welle, 9 December 2011.

Pomaks, Tatars, and Alevis are among the main constitutive elements of the Muslim community in the country. Young Muslims took advantage of existing scholarship opportunities offered by educational institutions and foundations from the Middle East. Upon return, they pursued efforts to change the local traditions in accordance with the Salafi practices, clashing with the older generations³.

As it appears from the Wikileaks cables, the potential for Islamic radicalization was closely followed by the Bulgarian authorities and the CIA⁴. Since the early 1990s, various organizations promoting Islamic radicalization have operated in Bulgaria, among which a leading role has been played by Salafi and pan-Turkic groups. In Bulgaria, the Turkish foundation Dyianet Vakfi, with close ties to Erdogan's AKP party and the Turan sports clubs, had to compete with the registered (in 1993) Al Waqf al Islami or the connected with Pakistan Ahmadiya⁵. Over the years, these organizations were able to exert influence on local communities and, at places, managed to shape the educational process and interact with the formal structures of the Bulgarian mufti office.

In 2010 the Bulgarian authorities accused thirteen imams of preaching anti-democratic ideologies and religious hatred. Most of the imams were sentenced to confinement for a period between 2 and 3 years, with the longest sentence

³ E. Troeva, *Bylgarski miusiulmani* [Е. Троева, *Български мюсюлмани*], *Balgarska Etnografia*, <https://balgarskaetnografia.com/grupi-i-obshtosti/etnicheski-grupi-i-obshtnosti/balgarski-musulmani.html>.

⁴ Wikileaks, *Bylgarskite miusiulmani – mishena na islamskia fundamentalizam* [Българските мюсюлмани – мишена на ислямския фундаментализъм], Bivol, 13 July 2011, <https://bivol.bg/wislambg.html>.

⁵ *Radikalniyat islam v Bylgaria* [Радикалният ислям в България], News.bg, 17 March 2009, <https://news.bg/comments/radikalniyat-islam-v-balgariya.html>.

of 8.6 years for Ahmed Musa⁶. In 2018 a Bulgarian was sentenced to seven years in prison for the planning of a terrorist attack in Austria⁷. A year ago, the Bulgarian authorities arrested Mohammed Abdulkader, a Bulgarian from a mixed Bulgarian-Syrian origin, for participation in the activities of the Islamic State⁸.

Still, with regard to the fact that Bulgaria is among the countries with the highest percentage of Muslim communities in Europe, its level of radicalization remains marginal. Nevertheless, the country has not resolved the roots of radicalization connected with the marginalized role of the Muslim communities in Bulgaria. The mass shifts of local communities from one religion to another (religious transfer) for financial reasons, particularly among the Roma, and the infiltration of the Bulgarian Muslims by Middle Eastern foundations and educational institutions highlight the threats posed by the existence of impoverished and alienated communities. The circulation of foreign resources within these communities and the lack of strict control over the Muslim cultural and religious institutions increase the country's vulnerability. The replacement of local religious practices with imported rituals from the Middle East can

⁶ *Oshite edna prisysda za Ahmed Musa i 13-te mu poddryzhnici po deloto za radikalen islam* [Още една присъда за Ахмед Муса и 13-те му поддръжници по делото за радикален ислям], BNR, 19 December 2019, <https://bnr.bg/plovdiv/post/101202662/oshte-edna-prisada-za-ahmed-musa-i-13-te-mu-poddryzhnici-po-deloto-za-radikalen-islam>.

⁷ *Bylgarin osyden na 7 g. zatvor v Avstria za namereni u nego planove za teroristichna ataka* [Българин осъден на 7 г. затвор в Австрия за намерени у него планове за терористична атака], Offnews, 28 November 2018, <https://offnews.bg/sviat/balgarin-osaden-na-7-g-zatvor-v-avstria-za-namereni-u-nego-planove-za-692872.html>.

⁸ *Bylgarin, obvinen kato terrorist i dzhihadist, otiva na syd* [Българин, обвинен като терорист и джихадист, отива на съд], Sega, 20 February 2021, <https://segabg.com/hot/category-bulgaria/bulgarin-obvinen-kato-terorist-i-dzhihadist-otiva-na-sud>.

become a root cause of serious ethnic and religious turbulence in the country⁹.

During the last decade, Bulgaria has for the first time become also a battlefield of endless Middle Eastern confrontation. Bulgaria is among the favourite destinations for Israeli tourists. On July 18, 2012, a group of Israelis was attacked by a suicide bomber, who killed himself with five Israeli citizens and the local bus driver at the airport of Sarafovo near Burgas. The investigation acknowledged that among the reasons for the terrorist attack were a loosened border control and insufficient patrolling at the airport¹⁰. The investigation led to the conclusion that the terrorist attack was foreign-born, and sentences against the perpetrators were issued *in absentia*. Despite the formal legal closing of the case, the attack itself revealed the porous nature of the Bulgarian security that facilitated the execution of the terrorist attack.

Bulgaria's organized crime

The consolidation of the political system in Bulgaria after a period of transition led to a symbiosis between the organized crime and the political elites. The turning point was at the beginning of the century, when the state institutions were taken over by the organized crime structures with Boyko Borisov's nomination as the secretary of the Minis-

⁹ P. Marchev, *Dvoynna zaplaha za Bylgaria ot iugoiztok: isliam i neoosmanizym* [П. Марчев, *Двойна заплаха за България от югоизток: ислям и неоосманизъм*], 168 chasa, 8 December 2020, <https://www.168chasa.bg/article/9279960>.

¹⁰ *Dvama livanci poluchiha dozhivotni prisadyi za atentata w Sarafovo* [Двама ливанци получиха доживотни присъди за атентата в Сарафова], Mediapool, 21 September 2020, <https://www.mediapool.bg/dvama-livantsi-poluchiha-dozhivotni-prisadi-za-atentata-v-sarafovo-news312280.html>.

try of Interior. Although the country was still facing street shootings and ostentatious murders, by the time Borisov became PM, the phase of gang wars was extinguished, probably because the rivalry was replaced by the overtaking of the state institutions.

With the completion of the process, organized crime became a part of the economy and shifted from “mutri” to “white collars”¹¹. A 2020 report by the Bulgarian Center for the Study of Democracy (CSD) highlighted fourteen different areas of organized crime activities. Along with the “classical” activities of human and drugs trafficking, car thefts, forced tributes, and tobacco smuggling, the list contains a plethora of activities draining the national budget and EU funds, among them phone beguilements, cybercrimes, and skimming. Organized crime also takes advantage of membership in the EU not only by spreading its activities beyond the state borders, but also by fostering illegal logging and the medication trade¹².

The existence of these crimes might not be profoundly different than in other countries. However, a closer look at the context of judicial proceedings and the sentences in cases of high public importance, such as the Insolent Ones (Naglite) and the judicial sloppiness and practical impunity of gangsters of local reputation like Mladen Mihalev – Madjo and the Galevi brothers, reveal the implications of the “cap-

¹¹ B. Mitov, *Ot mutrenskia period kym belite iakichki: kak izglezhda organiziranata prestypnost v Bylgaria dnes?* [Б. Митов, *От «мутренския период» към «белите якички»: как изглежда организираната престъпност в България днес?*], Svobodna Evropa, 6 December 2019, <https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/30309716.html>.

¹² *Osenka na zpalahite ot organiziranata prestypnost v Bylgaria* [Оценка на заплахите от организирана престъпност в България], CSD, 2020, https://csd.bg/fileadmin/user_upload/publications_library/files/2020_10/BOCTA_BG_WEB.pdf.

tured state” for national security. The illegal activities of the defendants are discounted by the inability (or, even worse, the unwillingness) of law enforcement and the judiciary to deliver timely judgements and efficient punishment, thus allowing the defendants to flee the country without any hindrance.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the 2012 report underlines the overwhelming opinion of over 90% of the interviewed subjects that “cases of public interest” are just a fig leaf with no real justice done. The judiciary is also considered unpredictable and corrupt, which a lack of public trust in it logically follows¹³. The 2020 European Commission Rule of Law report on Bulgaria diplomatically recognizes the continued need for reforms of the judiciary¹⁴.

Poisoning, spying and the state

Bulgaria’s state capture has serious implications for its internal security. Despite the lack of direct proof, particular cases reveal the inability of the national authorities to deal with cases that serve not only as litmus tests for the efficiency of Bulgarian authorities, but also constitute a serious concern from the perspective of the security of NATO.

There is probably no more pertinent example than the case of the poisoning of Emilian Gebrev and his son, long-

¹³ *Grazhdani, klienti i sydii za sydebnata reforma, kachestvoto na predostavianite usluzhi i pravorazdavaneto v Bylgaria* [Граждани, клиенти и съдии за съдебната реформа, качеството на предоставяните услуги и правораздаването в България], Alpha Research, August 2012, pp. 6-7, [https://alpharesearch.bg/userfiles/file/PRSS%20ALPHA%20RESEARCH%20REPORT\(1\).pdf](https://alpharesearch.bg/userfiles/file/PRSS%20ALPHA%20RESEARCH%20REPORT(1).pdf).

¹⁴ 2020 Rule of Law Report Country Chapter on the rule of law situation in Bulgaria, Brussels, 30 September 2020, SWD(2020) 301 final, https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/bg_rol_country_chapter.pdf.

time associated by investigative journalists with the poisoning of Sergey Skripal in Salisbury, United Kingdom¹⁵. Neither public awareness and popular headlines nor the serious security concerns across Europe forced the Bulgarian authorities to conduct a thorough investigation of the case.

Bulgarian authorities reacted only recently in the midst of a diplomatic scandal between Czechia and the Russian Federation which revealed that the explosion of ammunition storage in Czechia in 2014 was sabotage action by Russian secret services against the transfer of weapons for the Ukrainian army by the Bulgarian arms trader Emilian Gebrev.

In the context of the uninvestigated poisoning of the Bulgarian arms trader Emilian Gebrev and his son and the explosions in various parts of Bulgaria in the period 2011-2015¹⁶, the reaction by Borisov's governments was temperate. When compared to decisive steps taken by the British government after the poisoning of Sergey Skripal or the current Czech expulsion of eighteen Russian diplomats, the Bulgarian inaction is even more telling. During subsequent Borisov's government, there was an apparent unwillingness to investigate Russia's activities in the country, and the question remains whether turning a blind eye was a conscious policy or a consequence of institutional ineptitude?

¹⁵ G. Corraera, *Salisbury poisoning: What did the attack mean for the UK and Russia?*, BBC, 4 March 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-51722301>; *The Skripal Suspect Linked to 2015 Bulgaria Poisoning*, Bellingcat, 7 December 2019, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2019/02/07/third-skripal-suspect-linked-to-2015-bulgaria-poisoning/>.

¹⁶ B. Mitov, "Dosta symnitelno". *Poseshteniata na agenti ot GRU syvpadat s vzrivove i v Byl-garia* [Б. Митов, «Доста съмнително» Посещенията на агенти от ГРУ съвпадат с взривове и в България], Svobodna Evropa, 22 April 2021, <https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/31215569.html>.

The recent statement by Attorney General Ivan Geshev sheds light not so much on the cases, but on the attitude of the Bulgarian authorities, and confirms the findings of the international journalist investigative network that the response was only to provide confusing “facts” that led to open confrontation with Gebrev’s company¹⁷. Regardless of future findings, two very important conclusions deserve attention. Firstly, Bulgarian authorities did not consider the case of a Skripal-type of poisoning on their territory as seriously as the UK. Secondly, the investigation into the explosions in military storage in Bulgaria was also largely not considered an important security concern. These two facts lead to the conclusion that either the Bulgarian state was not interested or was incapable of providing a proper investigation. Either of the two explanations decreases the credibility of the Bulgarian authorities as a reliable NATO ally. Adding to that, the continuous implementation of Russia’s energy projects and the ambiguous attitude on sanctions against Russia, the cases of Gebrev and the explosions reveal the negative implications of the state capture in Bulgaria. The inefficient judiciary, institutional sloppiness, and practical disregard for serious security concerns constitute a serious challenge for the EU and NATO security.

Conclusions

While often considering the internal shortcomings as matters of local importance with insignificant implications for

¹⁷ *Prokuraturata izvednyzh otkri ruska namesa za zrivovete na voenni skladove u nas* [Прокуратурата изведнъж откри руска намеса за взривовете на военни складове у нас], Mediapool, 28 April 2021.

international relations, the discussed cases underline the serious implications of the state capture and overwhelming corruption for state security in Bulgaria.

The selected cases of internal security concerns in Bulgaria are only a glimpse into the wider political, economic, and social implications of the captured state. This chapter does not allow space to cover a plethora of cases where state institutions failed to deliver stability, order, and justice. The cases of beaten journalists, self-immolations, death caused by the carelessness of the national and self-government institutions, and abuse of power constitute Bulgarian reality during the last twelve years. The demographic decline and the dysfunctional Bulgarian army are two consequences of this rule. People vote with their feet, and the army lost its ability to perform its constitutional duties, which should be an alarming signal for the NATO allies. The purchase of F-16 fighters is surely a step in the right direction, but only a first one.

The dominant model of political and institutional careers in a captured state is based on clientelism and loyalty with little or no regard for competence and professionalism. Since the main purpose is to drain public resources, any accountability, self-restraint, and responsibility are considered vices, not virtues. Hence, many of official declarations and statements of the Bulgarian authorities during Borisov's governments become empty rhetoric without any practical impact.

The symbiosis of Bulgaria's formal belonging to the West with its daily non-democratic political practices turned it into a security concern for NATO and the EU. The weakness of the state is an invitation for assertive actions by global

and regional players, which identify the country's internal weakness as potential for the destabilization of the European Union, NATO, and the United States. Borisov's twelve years rule turned Bulgaria into one of the battlefields in the global confrontation between the West and the rest.

Epilogue

The current state of affairs in Bulgaria has triggered mass protests and led to the temporary removal of Boyko Borisov from office. The April 4 post-election political stand-off led to the announcement of the new elections on July 11. Aware of the subservience of the law and public administration to GERB party interests, the interim government introduced a policy of expedient replacement of the heads of law enforcement and public agencies. Although this policy is in line with public expectations, whether it will have lasting effects will be determined by the results of the July elections. Should GERB manage to regain political control, the country's internal security challenges will endure.

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Asya Metodieva

Bulgaria's security in the context of the Balkan region

Introduction

Bulgaria's geography and history make the country vulnerable to sources of instability in the Balkan region. The Western Balkans (WB) has a legacy of bloody wars following the dissolution of Yugoslavia (Bosnian War 1992-1995 and Kosovo War 1998-1999). Although the UN, the EU, and NATO still maintain crisis-management activities, the region is experiencing a period of general stability. Following post-conflict transformations, the WB turned from a security recipient into a security provider¹. The perspective of EU accession has been a stimulus for democratization and peacebuilding in the long run, including conducting security sector reforms,

¹ D. Emmini, D. Marku, *Rethinking Security: Western Balkans as a Security Provider*, SETthink Net, July 2018, <https://idscs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Rethinking-security.pdf>.

promoting dialogue between different communities, and transitional justice².

However, the promise for Euro-Atlantic integration has lately shown its limitations as long-lasting political disputes between Balkan states keep posing political and security challenges. While the Prespa Agreement³ and the NATO accession of North Macedonia was a positive sign, there was also a disappointment with the EU blocking North Macedonia and Albania from starting membership talks in 2019⁴. Skopje was hoping to finally open negotiations with the EU in autumn 2020 when Bulgaria blocked this process and justified its political move with open bilateral disputes over history and language⁵.

This paper discusses three contentious issues that may have implications for Bulgaria's security in the mid to long term: the relations between Bulgaria and North Macedonia, the dispute between Serbia and Kosovo, and the presence of rival foreign powers in the region, among them Russia, China, Turkey, and the EU. The study argues that the stability of the WB is highly dependent on the Euro-Atlantic integration of the countries in the region. Thus, Bulgaria's best interest is to prioritize this aspect of regional security through continuous support for EU accession of the region.

² K. Djokic, *EU, NATO and Beyond: The Security Dynamics of the Western Balkans*, [in]: G. Fruscione (ed.), *The Balkans: Old, New Instabilities. A European Region Looking for Its Place in the World*, Milan: Italian Institute for International Political Studies, May 2020, pp. 69-70.

³ The Prespa Agreement signed on June 12, 2018 between Greece and Republic of Macedonia under the UN auspices, resolves a long-standing dispute over the latter's name.

⁴ *EU Blocks Albania and North Macedonia Membership Bids*, BBC News, 18 October 2019, sec. Europe, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-50100201>.

⁵ Ts. Tsoleva, *Bulgaria Blocks EU Accession Talks with North Macedonia*, Reuters, 17 November 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bulgaria-north-macedonia-eu-idUSKB-N27X245>.

Priorities of Bulgaria's regional security

In the latest versions of its strategic documents, Bulgaria has become more vocal in binding its national security with the political reality inside the WB. The stabilization of the region has left it off the political agenda of the EU for at least a decade⁶. The absence of a strategic debate about the future of the region has led to a slowdown in the Euro-Atlantic integration of the region. Political disputes among countries in the region have contributed to this tendency⁷. The lack of a comprehensive EU political strategy has exhausted and discouraged some of the states from their pro-European aspirations.

Bulgaria's voice has not been continuously active, but the country recognized these processes as an argument to put the EU integration of the region on its agenda during the 2018 Presidency of the Council of the EU. The 2018 Sofia Summit focused on connectivity in all its aspects, as well as joint responses to common security challenges, such as illegal migration, organized crime, terrorism, hybrid threats, and cybersecurity. All of these issues are tightly related to the resilience of the WB and Europe as a whole. The Sofia Declaration emphasizes the link between stability and EU expansion in the region and states that the EU and the WB countries share security challenges that require increased cooperation. The declaration acknowledges that results in fighting corruption and organized crime are essential for

⁶ The interest of big geopolitical powers has diminished following the 2008 Kosovo declaration of independence.

⁷ P. Karaivanova, *Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the European Union: Outcomes for the Western Balkans*, "International Journal on Information Technologies & Security" 11 (2019), pp. 107-108.

the region's political and socio-economic transformation, as well as for regional stability and security⁸.

Bulgaria's 2018 Security Strategy defines as a priority the further stabilization and full integration of the WB into Euro-Atlantic and European political and economic spaces⁹. According to the strategy, strengthening NATO-EU cooperation to stimulate and support democratic processes in the WB is a key factor in generating stability in the region. Accelerating the accession of the countries of the region to NATO and the EU is a necessary condition for lasting stabilization of the WB (p. 8). The strategy notes that manifestations of nationalism and the existence of interethnic and religious contradictions represent risks to stability in the region. According to the document, actions by external forces aim to destabilize the processes of ethnic and religious reconciliation, as well as to spread radical ideologies and practices that pose potential risks to regional security (p. 8). The regional threats defined in the document include terrorism, organized crime, human trafficking, and hostile foreign intelligence activities. According to the document, Bulgaria's foreign policy in the region is aimed at neutralizing the risk of interethnic conflicts (p. 25).

The strategic documents and various forms of political engagement seek to demonstrate Bulgaria's priorities in the region. If the relationship between national security and regional stability is understood as the key one, there are several contentious issues on which Bulgaria's strate-

⁸ EU-Western Balkans Summit, Sofia Declaration, 17 May 2018.

⁹ *Updated National Security Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria*, Defense Committee, National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria, 2018.

gic behaviour may have implications to the security of the region: the relations with North Macedonia, the dispute between Serbia and Kosovo, and the interests of rival geopolitical powers in the WB.

Bulgaria-North Macedonia relations and regional security

As an EU member state, Bulgaria's security interests are inevitably tied to the EU integration of its neighbours. Although relations between Bulgaria and North Macedonia are not perceived as a security concern, they have been characterized by contentious politics on both sides. In 2020, Bulgaria blocked North Macedonia from entering the negotiation cycle with the EU, a move that has renewed the tension between the two countries. Skopje and Sofia signed a friendship treaty in August 2017 that boosted the Euro-Atlantic integration of North Macedonia, which would otherwise be impossible without improving the relationships with Bulgaria and also Greece by signing the Prespa Agreement. Fruscione notes that Macedonia changed its name to North Macedonia in part to facilitate its transition process and to pursue true political stability¹⁰. While in March 2019, North Macedonia became the thirtieth member of NATO, Skopje faced the French "no"¹¹ to start the EU accession process, followed by the Bulgarian "no" in late 2020. This development has been the most recent stumbling block for the region to speed up its European integration. As contentious political

¹⁰ G. Fruscione, *After the Nineties: A Never-Ending Political Transition*, [in:] G. Fruscione (ed.), *The Balkans: Old, New Instabilities...*, p. 22.

¹¹ In October 2019, French president Emmanuel Macron had refused to approve the start of the EU accession negotiations with Albania and N. Macedonia.

issues still prevent countries of the WB from having a clear timeline for their EU membership path, such disputes pose possible risks of escalation.

Bulgaria's approach towards North Macedonia to bind an identity-related argument with the EU accession of Skopje is unlikely to enhance bilateral relations essential to stability in the region or a smooth negotiation process with the EU. Points of contention with Bulgaria concern the official language of North Macedonia and a dispute over historical events and figures. In May 2020, the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences published a brochure that claimed that people in North Macedonia speak a south-west regional form of Bulgarian but not Macedonian. On the Macedonian side, researchers from the institute "Kraste Misirkov" stated that the Macedonian language is real, and that the common future should be based on mutual trust and friendship¹². Meanwhile, a joint committee of historians appointed by the governments in the two neighbouring countries has been blocked. In 2020, Bulgaria insisted that the EU recognized the formulation "official language of the Republic of North Macedonia", and Sofia expects Skopje to give up pursuing the recognition of Macedonian minority in Bulgaria.

In October 2019, the government in Sofia came up with a framework position that specified its political demands toward Skopje. The framework position states that the accession of North Macedonia to the EU is an important step in ensuring peace, stable and sustainable development, and

¹² N. Lalov, *Is there a Macedonian language? Skopje: it is a reality* [Н. Латов, *Има ли македонски език? Скопје: тој е реалност*], Mediapool, 11 May 2020, <https://www.mediapool.bg/ima-li-makedonski-ezik-skopie-toi-e-realnost-news307204.html>.

prosperity in the region. On the other hand, the document emphasizes that “Bulgaria reserves the right, for reasons of national security, to suspend its support in the enlargement process, including with regard to the actual implementation of the Treaty and the progress made in the work of the Joint Multidisciplinary Expert Commission on Historical and Educational Issues”¹³.

From Bulgaria's point of view, the stated demand makes sense because they are in line with its own political interests. Moreover, the start of negotiations with the EU is usually the moment when pressure can be applied on a country candidate. However, if these are tactical moves tailored to tactical gains, the question is whether they will benefit Bulgaria and the region at the strategic level. Bulgaria's requests have created new waves of anti-Bulgaria rhetoric in Skopje's domestic politics and further inspired the “state-sponsored ideology based on anti-Bulgarian sentiments”, as formulated in the framework position adopted by the Bulgarian government in 2017¹⁴. As this contributes to the agenda of the national-conservative party VMRO-DPMNE, it may have negative consequences for the country's foreign policy towards Bulgaria in the event of a change in the government

¹³ Government of Republic of Bulgaria, *Framework Position on EU enlargement and the stabilization and association process: The Republic of Northern Macedonia and Albania* [Министерски съвет на Република България, *Рамкова позиция относно разширяване на ЕС и процеса на стабилизиране и асоцииране: република Северна Македония и Албания*], October 2019, <https://www.gov.bg/bg/prestsentar/novini/ramkova-pozitsia>.

¹⁴ D. Bechev, *Looking for a meaningful conversation. Why Bulgaria will not benefit from the pressure on Skopje* [Д. Бечев, *Търси се смислен разговор. Защо България няма да спечели от натиска върху Скопие*], Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 11 May 2020, <https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/30605446.html>.

in Skopje and a scenario in which VMRO-DPMNE returns to power¹⁵.

If Bulgaria's strategic goal is to enhance regional security, its current political approach towards North Macedonia is not understandable to EU member states. In a joint statement, Czechia and Slovakia opposed the EU Enlargement Conclusions encouraging Bulgaria's demands towards North Macedonia to be part of the EU accession¹⁶. Prague and Bratislava argued against disputes over history and language to become criteria for the EU membership talks. This view has been shared by other member states, as has arguing in favour of good will and diplomacy between Bulgaria and North Macedonia. As far as Sofia defines its strategic interests in relation to regional security, this means that both countries should focus on solving their disagreements without necessarily using the EU negotiation table for this purpose.

The dispute Serbia-Kosovo

Being one of the arenas for the geopolitical battle between Russia and the West, the dispute between Serbia and Kosovo has been a major security concern for the Western Balkans and the EU more broadly¹⁷. Kosovo declared its independence in 2008 and is currently recognized by more than 110 states, but not by Serbia, Russia, and five EU members.

¹⁵ G. Fruscione, *After the Nineties: A Never-Ending Political Transition...*, p. 23.

¹⁶ E.W.B. Archives, *The Czech Republic and Slovakia Have Blocked EU Council Conclusions on Enlargement, European Western Balkans* (blog), 18 December 2020, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/12/18/the-czech-republic-and-slovakia-have-blocked-eu-council-conclusions-on-enlargement/>.

¹⁷ A. Metodieva, *Russian Narrative Proxies in the Western Balkans*, The German Marshall Fund of the United States, 5 June 2019, p. 10, <https://www.gmfus.org/publications/russian-narrative-proxies-western-balkans>.

In fact, recent Serbian security strategies identify Kosovo's independence as the biggest threat to its national security¹⁸. Dialogue has been led by the EU following the 2013 Brussels Agreement, and the EU has been engaged in stabilization and peacebuilding through the EULEX rule of law mission (until June 2020), support for judicial reforms, civil society interethnic dialogue initiatives under the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA), and political dialogue facilitated by High Representatives¹⁹.

However, lately the US has been competing with the EU over who should be in charge of mediating the normalization of relations between Pristina and Belgrade²⁰. Yet, after Pristina cancelled the June 2020 invitation from the White House for peace talks with Belgrade (the meeting was derailed by the war crimes indictment of the Kosovo President Hashim Thaci), the EU is taking back the initiative, offering a Kosovo-Serbia Summit to take place in Paris²¹. The US became more involved in the matter in 2019 by appointing two special representatives tasked to resume political dialogue, and NATO remains in charge of providing hard security and leads KFOR, the UN-mandated crisis-management operation²².

While the dispute between Kosovo and Serbia is central to the process of reconciliation in the region, the status of Kosovo remains undefined. Dialogue between Pristina and Belgrade has been frozen since Kosovo's imposition of

¹⁸ K. Djokic, *EU, NATO and Beyond...*

¹⁹ Ibidem, pp. 72-73.

²⁰ G. Fruscione, *After the Nineties: A Never-Ending Political Transition...*

²¹ M. Stojanovic, *Europeans Offer to Host Serbia-Kosovo Summit in Paris*, Balkan Insight, 26 June 2020, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/06/26/europeans-offer-to-host-serbia-kosovo-summit-in-paris/>.

²² K. Djokic, *EU, NATO and Beyond...*

100% tariffs on goods from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, which was a reaction to the Belgrade-led diplomatic bloc against Kosovo's accession to INTERPOL. Meanwhile, the Kosovo Security Force (KSF) is being transformed into a proper military force based on legislation passed in December 2018²³. Although NATO has cautiously warned against any change to the KSF mandate²⁴, the transformation of the KSF has not had security consequences to the region, even if it may increase tensions in the long term as Pristina seeks to take over the field of defence. This has been just the latest crisis between the two states, showing that the West has failed to bring a lasting resolution to the dispute²⁵. The relations between Belgrade and Pristina have been repeatedly disrupted by crises, such as the provocative train sent to Kosovo by Serbian authorities in early 2017²⁶.

Bulgaria's position on the Kosovo-Serbia dispute can be assessed as consistent with the Euro-Atlantic prospects of the region. Bulgarian officials have repeatedly expressed support for dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina²⁷. However, this support has occasionally caused "misunderstandings" with

²³ BIRN, *Kosovo Votes to Turn Security Force Into Army*, Balkan Insight, 14 December 2018, <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/12/14/kosovo-votes-ksf-transformation-into-army-12-14-2018/>.

²⁴ Allied Jointed Force Command Naples, *Foggo Meets with Kosovo's Senior Security Officials*, NATO, 23 May 2019, <https://jfcnaples.nato.int/newsroom/news/2019/foggo-meets-with-kosovos-senior-security-officials>.

²⁵ A. Metodieva, *Russian Narrative Proxies in the Western Balkans...*

²⁶ The train inscribed with words "Kosovo is Serbia" in 21 languages, including Albanian had as its goal to reinforce nationalistic sentiments. *Serbia Sends 'provocative' Train to Kosovo*, Deutsche Welle, 14 January 2017, <https://www.dw.com/en/serbia-sends-provocative-train-to-kosovo/a-37133573>.

²⁷ *Bulgarian PM Borissov Calls For Dialogue between Kosovo, Serbia*, BTA, 16 April 2018, <http://www.bta.bg/en/c/DF/id/1783409>.

Serbia²⁸. In 2019 Serbia's then Foreign Affairs Minister Ivica Dačić told Bulgarian former PM Borissov to respect the European Union's position on Kosovo's independence rather than "deliver lessons" to the EU High Representative Josep Borrell. Dačić reacted to Borissov's comment that the Spanish diplomat should represent the EU's interests regarding Kosovo's independence and not those of his own country, which does not recognize Kosovo's sovereignty. Dačić said the EU position "is not that Kosovo is independent"²⁹. This exchange of political reactions testifies to tensions in political dialogue at the regional level and with the EU. It contributes to the further politicization of contentious issues, keeping them as ongoing obstacles to the region's Euro-Atlantic path.

Although Bulgaria does not seek to be a power player in regional security, its political responsibility as an EU member state requires it to continue the efforts stated during the 2018 Presidency of the Council of the EU. Moreover, resolution of the dispute between Kosovo and Serbia is the key to their further Euro-Atlantic integration, which is essential to stability in the region, including to Bulgaria's security. It is worth recalling that the Yugoslav wars had a tangible negative impact on Bulgaria. The UN sanctions on Yugoslavia disrupted economic exchange and, as a consequence, Bulgaria demanded UN compensation for the losses. Another

²⁸ Vucic: Bulgaria and Serbia have a temporary misunderstanding, but good relations, N1 Srbija, 7 July 2019, <http://rs.n1info.com/English/NEWS/a497936/Vucic-Bulgaria-and-Serbia-have-a-temporary-misunderstanding-but-good-relations.html>.

²⁹ Ibidem.

implication was the consolidation of Bulgarian organized crime³⁰.

Geopolitical powers and their influence on Western Balkans' security

In recent years, external political players have renewed their interest in projecting power in the WB³¹. The “stop-and-go” approach of the EU towards the region has encouraged Balkan countries to develop new political partnerships. Thus, the WB has once again become a crossroad of geopolitical ambitions, which raises concerns about regional security³². Powers competing with the West benefit from several factors: the weakening pull of the EU; the stalling and in some cases reversal of the process of democratization; and local players' preference for diversifying their international links³³. While developing a peace-building project is essential for any post-war region, foreign powers' competing interests may create new risks to regional security³⁴.

As the EU has failed to reward countries of the WB as expected, the concept of conditionality has diminished its power in the region³⁵. Consequently, power actors China, Russia, Turkey, and the UAE could benefit from the void left by the West. Russia exploits the rhetoric of the Orthodox brotherhood to pursue its geopolitical interests, namely, to

³⁰ S. Domaradzki, *Bulgaria's security after 30 years*, “Politika Nacionalne Bezbednosti” 18, no. 1/2020, 25 May 2020, p. 90, <https://doi.org/10.22182/pnb.1812020.4>.

³¹ D. Bechev, *Making Inroads: Competing Powers in the Balkans*, [in:] G. Fruscione (ed.), *The Balkans: Old, New Instabilities...*, p. 48-68.

³² G. Fruscione, *After the Nineties: A Never-Ending Political Transition...*, p. 22.

³³ D. Bechev, *Making Inroads...*, p. 50.

³⁴ K. Djokic, *EU, NATO and Beyond...*

³⁵ N. Burazer, *Europe and the Balkans: The Need for Mutual Integration*, [in:] G. Fruscione (ed.), *The Balkans: Old, New Instabilities...*, pp. 29-47.

counterbalance the EU and to support Serbia in the dispute with Kosovo. Similarly, Turkey presents itself as the supporter of the Balkan Muslims, while China, showing no desire to interfere with local politics, is deepening trade relations that may threaten small countries in the region due to their economic and political vulnerabilities³⁶. The increased presence of external powers may be seen as a security concern since they provide support and patronage which strengthen individual countries in both, their domestic politics and their regional disputes³⁷. Russia, for example, is Serbia's most persistent political guardian in the dispute with Kosovo.

Russia

The WB is only one among many venues for geopolitical confrontation between Russia and the West. Two factors facilitate this clash: the general disappointment with the West and Slavic/Orthodox identity ties to Russia³⁸. These factors boost the expansion of Russia's power toolkit in the region, including interventions in the energy and media sectors, security cooperation, support for nationalistic and paramilitary groups, investment in cultural organizations, NGOs, and academia.

The latest expulsion of a Russian diplomat from Bulgaria followed diplomatic disputes between Moscow and former Soviet-bloc countries after Czech accusations that Russia

³⁶ L. Jones, Sh. Hameiri, *Debunking the Myth of 'Debt-Trap Diplomacy'*, Chatham House – International Affairs Think Tank, 19 August 2020, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/08/debunking-myth-debt-trap-diplomacy>.

³⁷ D. Bechev, *Making Inroads...*, p. 53.

³⁸ A. Metodieva, *Russian Narrative Proxies in the Western Balkans...*

was behind a blast in an arms depot in 2014³⁹. Since October 2019, Sofia, one of the Soviet Union's closest allies in the past, has expelled eight other Russian diplomats for alleged spying activities⁴⁰. There have been suspicions about ties between senior Bulgarian politicians and business circles and Moscow on account of their affiliation with the communist-era secret police, which, at the time, reported to the Soviet security apparatus⁴¹. Unlike other EU and NATO member states, Bulgaria refused to expel Russian diplomats after the 2018 Skripal case. In early 2020, Sofia charged three Russians with the attempted murder of three men, one of them Emilian Gebrev, an arms dealer whose name was linked to the scandal between the Czech Republic and Russia regarding the 2014 depot explosion⁴².

Russian security agencies have shown renewed interest in WB's politics in recent years. In 2017, the publication of intelligence documents revealed how the Russian embassy in Skopje conducted subversive activities through direct funding of media outlets and setting up over 30 cultural organizations⁴³. The report further suggests the involvement of Serbian intelligence. In May 2019, 13 people, including two Russian military intelligence officers and two opposi-

³⁹ *Bulgaria Expels Russian Diplomat over Arms Depot Blasts*, Reuters, 29 April 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/bulgaria-expels-russian-diplomat-over-arms-depot-blasts-2021-04-29/>.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁴¹ D. Bechev, B. Radelić, *Russia and the Balkans*, "Russian Analytical Digest" 2018, no. 226, p. 11, <https://doi.org/10.3929/ETHZ-B-000301365>.

⁴² G. Gotev, *Bellingcat Connects the Dots between Czech Explosion and Bulgaria Poisoning*, Euractiv (blog), 27 April 2021, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/bellingcat-connects-the-dots-between-czech-explosion-and-bulgaria-poisoning/>.

⁴³ A. Belford et al., *Leaked Documents Show Russian, Serbian Attempts to Meddle in Macedonia*, OCCRP, 4 June 2017, <https://www.occrp.org/en/spooksandspin/leaked-documents-show-russian-serbian-attempts-to-meddle-in-macedonia/>.

tion leaders in Montenegro, were sentenced for organizing the 2016 attempt to assassinate Montenegro's then Prime Minister, Milo Djukanović and hinder the country's entry into NATO. There were allegations by the Greek government that Russian intelligence operatives worked against the rapprochement with North Macedonia to prevent the expansion of NATO in the region⁴⁴.

Diplomatic tension between Russia and EU members has manifested in various forms in recent years, while Russia remains interested in being a geopolitical factor and keeping allies in the WB. Moscow's ties with Serbia and Republika Srpska (Bosnia and Herzegovina) are of strategic importance because they allow Moscow to maintain the image of either a balancing or an opposing factor to the Euro-Atlantic integration of the region. On the one hand, Russia may play the role of a balancer in unresolved conflicts, such as the one between Kosovo and Serbia, especially when the West is failing to provide long-term solutions. On the other hand, Russia is not in favour of NATO expansion in the region and, thus, seeks to slow down the engagement of countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina or Serbia with the alliance. Being involved in some of the longstanding disputes over sovereignty in the Balkans, Russia is the key supporter of Serbia in the dispute with Kosovo, even while it tries to assume the role of a mediator⁴⁵. Russia is an inevitable factor in this matter due to its veto power in the UN Security Council. The Kremlin has been blamed for encouraging Serbian nationalists in order

⁴⁴ D. Bechev, B. Radeljić, *Russia and the Balkans...*, p. 4.

⁴⁵ I. Krastev, *Putin's Next Playground or the E.U.'s Last Moral Stand?*, The New York Times, 28 January 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/28/opinion/russia-eu-balkans.html>.

to counterbalance the West⁴⁶. Meanwhile, Russian president Putin offered his support for Serbian president Vučić and Kosovan president Hashim Thaçi's initiative to settle the dispute through a negotiated partition⁴⁷.

Unlike NATO and the EU, Russia is not a direct stakeholder in the regional security of the WB. Following the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia has been more present and more active in its efforts to undermine the role of the West in the region by seeking to prevent NATO expansion and to create distrust in EU institutions⁴⁸. Russian presence is particularly welcomed by the political elites in Serbia and Republika Srpska (RS), the Serbian dominated entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In 2018 Russia donated to Serbia six surplus MiG-29 fighter jets, 30 T-72 tanks, and 30 BRDM-2 armoured reconnaissance vehicles. While Serbia keeps committing to military-to-military cooperation with NATO, there have been joint trainings of Russian and Serbian armies in recent years. Moscow is blamed for fostering Euro-Atlantic scepticism in the Balkans, and it benefits from factors such as the slow EU accession process and the memory of NATO military operations in the 1990s.

China

China does not have a specific foreign policy for the WB as a region but deals with its partnerships in the region at a bilateral level⁴⁹. Unlike Russia, China's general approach is to

⁴⁶ D. Bechev, B. Radeljić, *Russia and the Balkans...*

⁴⁷ Ibidem.

⁴⁸ A. Belford et al., *Leaked Documents Show Russian...*

⁴⁹ Z. Wouter et al., *China and the EU in the Western Balkans*, 2020, <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2020/china-and-the-eu-in-the-western-balkans/1-chinas-approach-to-the-western-balkans/>.

avoid involvement in political and security issues. However, following the COVID-19 pandemic, China has sought to improve its soft power credentials in the region through “mask diplomacy”⁵⁰. Before Chinese interests being manifested through this approach, the Chinese presence in Southeast Europe had been particularly visible through soft loans and large infrastructure projects.

The format 17+1, a cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European countries, is a key venue for promoting Beijing's business and investment relations in the region. This is the context in which bilateral relations with countries of the WB have been developed. The initiative 17+1 is evidence of the growing Chinese presence in both EU and non-EU member states in the region. Bulgaria, among others, seeks to attract Chinese investments. As a part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Athens' Port of Piraeus will be connected with Central Europe through Serbia and Hungary, making Belgrade a main crossroad in the region⁵¹. The Belgrade-Budapest railway, also part of the initiative, is known to be the most expensive infrastructure investment in the recent history of Hungary. On the other side, Belgrade will be connected to Bar, Montenegro, through a motorway that includes about 165 km of roads, 48 tunnels, and 107 bridges and viaducts, all costing € 809 million⁵². The risk

⁵⁰ V. Vukanovic, *China and 'Mask Diplomacy' in the Balkans*, ISPI, 27 April 2020, <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/china-and-mask-diplomacy-balkans-25898>.

⁵¹ *China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative*, Council on Foreign Relations, 19 May 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/background/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative>.

⁵² H. Semanić, *Controversial Chinese Motorway the Largest Montenegrin Project since Independence*, European Western Balkans, 16 April 2019, <https://europeanwestern-balkans.com/2019/04/16/controversial-chinese-motorway-largest-montenegrin-project-since-independence/>.

is that small countries in the region may be heavily indebted towards China and fall into the trap of “debt diplomacy” through which economic dependence could make small economies vulnerable to political influence as well⁵³. In the field of security, China offered the installation of one thousand Huawei cameras with facial recognition technology in Belgrade placed in locations unknown to the public, a decision that would be illegal according to the EU standards⁵⁴.

All of these ongoing projects testify to the increased economic footprint of China in the WB. However, the Chinese objectives are rather limited to increasing economic engagement with the region, which at first glance may not seem at odds with the EU’s objectives of stability and democratization⁵⁵. However, China’s economic engagement with the WB cannot be seen separately from its geopolitical interests⁵⁶. Despite its policy of non-interference in domestic affairs, there is space to be argued that the BRI projects could hamper Western Balkan-EU integration in three ways: trapping countries into debt, lowering environmental standards, and perpetuating corruption⁵⁷. Although in principle Beijing stays away from domestic political and security issues, its influence through large infrastructure deals that do not necessarily comply with the EU rule undermines the EU accession of the WB countries. On the other hand, China is exploiting the lack of Western investments that, if more

⁵³ G. Fruscione, *After the Nineties: A Never-Ending Political Transition...*, p. 24; B. Chellaney, *China’s Debt-Trap*, Project Syndicate, 23 January 2017, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/china-one-belt-one-road-loans-debt-by-brahma-chellaney-2017-01>.

⁵⁴ Ibidem.

⁵⁵ Z. Wouter et al., *China and the EU in the Western Balkans...*

⁵⁶ Ibidem.

⁵⁷ G. Fruscione, *After the Nineties: A Never-Ending Political Transition...*, p. 26.

present, would make local political elites less incentivized to look for partnerships from the East.

Turkey

The power toolkit of Turkey in the region includes economic assistance, support for local politicians, NGOs, and schools, and involvement in regional disputes. Similar to Russia, Turkey's influence in the region is more cultural and political. The country is seen as a partner, but also as a regional power having the ambition to influence domestic politics and to be a political factor in the region. Ankara has been building the image of itself as a reference point for Muslims in the region, in some sense relying on the legacy of the Ottoman Empire that once ruled in the Balkans⁵⁸. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan presents himself as a leader of the (Sunni) Muslim community in the Balkans, similar to Russia's approach towards the Orthodox communities⁵⁹. In addition, Erdoğan has pushed countries like Albania in the region to close Gulen-linked schools, which are formed as followers of Fethullah Gulen, a Turkish preacher accused by Ankara for the organization of the failed coup in July 2016.

Geopolitical powers that have increased their influence in the Balkan region, are particularly welcome in countries demonstrating political fatigue towards the EU accession process. As EU countries in Central and Eastern Europe are also diversifying their cooperation with geopolitical powers, this tendency should be a warning sign for the EU's geopolitical and security interests.

⁵⁸ D. Bechev, *Making Inroads...*, p. 49.

⁵⁹ Ibidem.

Conclusion

The key objectives of the EU towards the WB are to foster peace, stability, rule of law, and democracy. This means that Bulgaria, as an EU member state, has a primary interest in contributing to these goals. Bulgaria's strategic documents state that regional cooperation in the field of security is essential to the country's national and regional security. However, the issues discussed here create challenges to security cooperation, among them variations in political orientations, lack of trust among countries of the region, and a weak sense of regional security identity. Ongoing distrust among regional actors is a key obstacle to fostering transborder cooperation in the field of security⁶⁰. Variations in foreign policy relations may foster instability in the long run.

Some of the WB countries have experienced shared conflicts in the past. Political messages tailored to mobilize domestic political support tend to feed extreme moods in neighbouring countries and could, without any intention of those who send them, lead to a dangerous spiral of provocations and counter-provocations⁶¹. In such a context, discussions about security and security sectors can frequently be fuelled by ethnic nationalism⁶². The use of ethnonationalist sentiments for political purposes exploit old grievances and public scepticism towards Euro-Atlantic integration. These factors may have negative effects on the relations between neighbouring countries in the region. Although this does not mean that a full-scale conflict is inevitable, a low-inten-

⁶⁰ D. Emini, D. Marku, *Rethinking Security: Western Balkans...*

⁶¹ K. Djokic, *EU, NATO and Beyond...*, p. 93.

⁶² D. Emini, D. Marku, *Rethinking Security: Western Balkans...*

sity one could spread through the use of proxy right-wing extremist and hooligan groups and affect the security of people belonging to ethnic and religious minority groups.

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Bulgaria is situated strategically by the Black Sea. It is located at the crossroads of three cultural and civilisational areas – the Orthodox Russian Federation, the unifying Europe (European Union) and Muslim Turkey, which is the gateway to the Middle East. Bulgaria is also part of the Balkan Peninsula.

The Black Sea region is of vital importance in terms of geopolitics, infrastructure, economics, energy and transport, both for Bulgaria and for the other countries on its shores. This region creates an opportunity for Bulgaria to acquire the status of a key transit country for raw materials for power production from the Caspian Sea and Central Asia to the EU market. Several pipelines must be completed in order to achieve this goal. The problem is that it is highly improbable that all the investments will be realised due to economic and political factors. In addition, Bulgaria aims to play the role of intermediary in contacts between western organisations and the Balkan states. Meanwhile, with regard to the smaller Black Sea states, it wishes to be a guide on their road towards integration with the EU and NATO.

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