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**BULGARIA - OUTLOOK ON
SECURITY POLICY
DEVELOPMENT AND
NATIONAL EXPECTATIONS
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I. INTRODUCTION

“Always with Germany, never against Russia.” These words attributed to Tsar Boris III reflect the prevailing attitude in Bulgaria when it comes to foreign affairs. Of course, these days it is the West, the EU and the US, rather Germany. But the dictum has not lost its relevance. Bulgaria has been part of the Western alliance for more than a decade. The EU and NATO are cornerstones of its foreign policy. At the same time, Sofia’s strategy is geared towards engagement rather than confrontation with rival powers such as Russia, Turkey and China.

Membership in the EU and NATO and links to the main Western states are the main focus of Bulgarian policymakers. Prime Minister Boyko Borisov takes pride in the close ties he has forged with leaders in key capitals. From the U.S. President Donald Trump, who welcomed Borisov to the White House in November 2019, to Angela Merkel, to Emmanuel Macron. Bulgaria earned Washington’s praise after it agreed to purchase eight F-16 fighters from Lockheed Martin, a deal worth USD 1.67 bn.¹ In the first half of 2018, Sofia held the rotating presidency of the EU Council and sought to promote the Western Balkans’ integration into the Union and to foster dialogue with Turkey.²

¹ Jaroslaw Adamowski, Bulgaria approves draft deals to buy F-16s in record defense procurement, Defense News, 10 July 2019. <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2019/07/10/bulgaria-approves-draft-deals-to-buy-f-16s-in-record-defense-procurement/>

² Dimitar Bechev, Bulgaria and the EU. Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics, May 2018. <https://oxfordre.com/politics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-508>

Relations with Russia have always been a top priority, though never short of controversy either. The prime minister makes no secret of his preference for working with Moscow. On January 8, 2020, Borisov was seen side by side with Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Istanbul as they inaugurated TurkStream, a pipeline to pump Russian gas to the EU through Turkey and the Balkans. President Rumen Radev has gone an extra mile in that direction. The former chief of the Bulgarian airforce, schooled at the Air War College in Montgomery, Alabama, won against a candidate backed by the ruling party in November 2016 on the promise to improve ties with Moscow. “De jure Crimea is Ukrainian,” he riffed on during his campaign. “De facto it is Russian. There is a Russian flag flying over it.”³ Though Radev has certainly gone an extra mile, he and Borisov do share a common view of relations with Moscow. Both have on repeated occasions criticised the Western sanctions – though taking no concrete action in Brussels to undermine them. Borisov has played down an espionage scandal which resulted in the expulsion of Russian diplomats in late 2019 and early 2020 too.⁴ Working with Moscow, while using the protection afforded by NATO and sticking to the EU, remains Bulgaria’s policy by default.

This working paper examines Bulgaria’s balancing act between the West and the East. Since the start of post-communist transition in the early 1990s, the country has gone a long way. It joined NATO in 2004 to become, three years later, member of the EU as well. Yet its position in the Western alliance coupled with internal vulnerabilities provide outside actors

³ Andrew MacDowell, Russia is preying on Bulgaria’s next president, Politico, 5 November 2016. <https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-is-preying-on-bulgarias-next-president-tsetska-tsacheva-rumen-radev/>

⁴ Dimitar Bechev, Russia’s spy war in the Balkans, Al Jazeera, 3 February 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/russia-spy-war-balkans-200203083400861.html>

with extensive influence over its internal and external affairs. The paper starts off by looking at factors shaping elites and the public outlook. Then, it discusses Bulgaria's position within the EU and NATO. Lastly, it zooms in on its relations with Russia and Turkey.

II. FACTORS SHAPING BULGARIA'S OUTLOOK

Bulgaria's foreign and security policy reflects its geographic position, relative power in the EU and NATO and vis-a-vis neighbours, domestic politics and institutions, and ideas and attitude in society.

The first factor to consider is the broader geopolitical context Bulgaria finds itself in. The country is located on the periphery of the Western alliance, with two large and ambitious powers, Russia and Turkey, next door. The post-Cold War order is currently coming under tremendous strain. The surge of populism in core Western democracies, the aftershocks of the 2008 global financial crisis, the shift of power from America and the EU to assertive non-Western states are all aspects of the above shift. Inevitably, it affects Bulgaria as well as its neighbourhood. There are several trends to take into account.

The EU and to some degree NATO enlargement is reaching its limits. Countries of the so-called Eastern Partnership (EaP), Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, in the first place, do not have a credible prospect. In 2019, North Macedonia and Albania have been prevented from starting membership negotiations with the EU because of a veto by the French President Emmanuel Macron. NATO is expanding to the Western Balkans but the next likely member, Bosnia and Herzegovina, is internally polarized and therefore unlikely to take bold steps in the near future. Serbia adheres to neutrality and juggles between Russia and the West, making overtures to China too.⁵

⁵ See Florian Bieber and Nikolaos Tzifakis (eds.) *The Western Balkans in the World: Linkages and Relations with Non-Western Countries*. Routledge, 2019.

Russia as well as Turkey have emerged as competitors of the West. Vladimir Putin's return to the Kremlin in 2012, the annexation of Crimea and the war in Eastern Ukraine led to an unprecedented crisis in relations with both EU and the United States. In consequence, NATO reinvented containment – deploying multinational troops in the Baltics and Poland under “enhanced forward presence” - while the Union adopted unprecedented economic sanctions against Moscow. Russia has been waging political warfare in order to undermine the West from within.⁶ Turkey, whose membership talks with the EU entered a stalemate by 2009, has drifted further away from its Western allies too while its political system has transitioned to what scholars label as competitive authoritarianism.⁷ For all the tensions poisoning ties with Washington, Ankara is not set to leave NATO, yet the relationship has turned largely transactional. What is more, the war in Syria has brought President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Vladimir Putin closer than ever, in defiance of the West.

Europe is meanwhile facing a host of challenges. The surge of Euroscepticism in a number of core EU members stiffens the opposition to further enlargement and open borders. Even if support for integration has been on the rebound, the Union's priority is internal reordering and consolidation rather than territorial expansion. Last but not the least, the 2016 election of Donald Trump as US president, a fierce critic of liberal internationalism and multilateralism, has ushered in a crisis in transatlantic relations. Though the US commitment to NATO remains firm, tensions have already taken toll on trade relations and might well lead to structural shifts. Isolationist tendencies in America are watched closely

⁶ Angela Stent. *Russia against the West and with the Rest*. Twelve, 2019.

⁷ Berk Esen and Şebnem Gümüşçü. *Rising competitive authoritarianism in Turkey*. *Third World Quarterly* 37 (9), 2016, pp. 1581-1606.

in Central and Eastern Europe, with some countries rushing to reinforce bilateral ties with Washington.

Next, one should turn domestic political and economic conditions. Membership in Western clubs has reshaped Bulgaria's external relations but its impact on domestic governance has been ambivalent. State capture and corruption are entrenched. Successive governments' patchy reform record has been keeping the country out of the EU's inner sanctum, the eurozone and Schengen. Though the economic benefits of membership are hard to dispute, given the inflow of EU funds, the access to the Single Market as well as the free movement of people, growth rates have not yet reached the levels from before the 2008 crisis. On the positive side, Bulgaria has improved its export performance with the core EU countries as its primary market. The EU enjoys the support of a majority of Bulgarian citizens yet is clearly not a fix for the general lack of trust in public institutions. In the meantime, far-right populism has made political inroads, especially after the United Patriots joined the cabinet in 2017. Checks and balances are not working properly. In contrast to neighbouring Romania, Bulgaria's judiciary has failed to hold high-level corruption to account. Media is another sore spot. International watchdogs such as Reporters without Borders have registered a steady decline in terms of transparency and freedom of expression over more than a decade. Civil society has strong roots in big cities, where a new generation of tech-savvy youth engage with social and political causes but is less visible in smaller towns and rural areas. Emigration to western Europe and beyond affects negatively society's capacity to mobilise and stand up for the public interest.⁸

⁸ Bechev. Bulgaria and the EU. op.cit

Third, Bulgaria's policy mirrors attitudes in society. Popular support for Western institutions remains high: more than two-thirds of citizens share a favorable view of EU membership and around 60% of NATO. Though the perception of Russia is generally positive, only about 25-30% would vote "yes" in a putative referendum to leave the Atlantic Alliance and enter into a security pact with Moscow.⁹ At the same time, surveys indicate that a majority favours a friendly relationship with Russia. This viewpoint is reinforced by the media, including online outlets and social networks, where positive coverage of Russia and of Vladimir Putin prevails.¹⁰ The same goes for China but not Turkey, whose image is still tainted by the nationalist stereotypes in the history textbooks. Anti-Western sentiments meanwhile are stoked through fake news. The Council of Europe's Convention on Preventing Violence against Women is a case in point. It became target of a campaign portraying it as a vehicle to promote single-sex marriages. The Constitutional Court ruled the convention unconstitutional. Both the far right and the center left, the post-communist Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), jumped on the bandwagon.¹¹

⁹ Survey data from Alpha Research. <https://alpharesearch.bg/?lang=en>

¹⁰ According to the pollster Gallup International (no connection to Gallup Inc), 54% of Bulgarians held a favourable view of Putin in 2018 and 26% unfavourable view. Global Leaders 2018. Gallup International's 42nd Global Opinion Poll in 57 Countries around the World, October-December 2018. https://www.gallup-international.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/2018_End-of-Year_Global-Leaders.pdf

¹¹ Radosveta Vassileva, Bulgaria's constitutional troubles with the Istanbul Convention, *Verfassungsblog*, 2 August 2018. <https://verfassungsblog.de/bulgarias-constitutional-troubles-with-the-istanbul-convention/>

III. BULGARIA IN THE EU AND NATO

In both the EU and NATO, Bulgaria has more often been a follower than policy entrepreneur. Yet it has always had some ambitions to that effect. In 2007, then under a BSP-led coalition, Bulgaria along with Romania proposed Black Sea Synergy. The initiative aimed to advance EU's relations with Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova, adding to the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). More than a decade later, during the 2018 presidency of the EU Council, Borisov vowed to spearhead enlargement to the Western Balkans. In May 2018, he presided over EU summit with Western Balkan leaders in Sofia. One of its main achievements was the progress made by Greece and (North) Macedonia in resolving their long-standing name dispute, a goal attained with the Prespa Agreement a month later. In parallel, Borisov initiated a series of four-way meetings with Greece, Romania and Serbia with the aim of upgrading cross-border cooperation in areas such as infrastructure and energy.¹² In June 2018, Sofia hosted the annual 16+1 summit between Central and Eastern Europe (including the Western Balkan 6) and China. Similar to other member states in the east, Bulgaria has been keen to attract Chinese investment rather than advocate for a robust common policy to pressure Beijing on issues such as market access.¹³ Borisov worked hard to position himself as a go-between the EU and Turkey, negotiating an extension of the 2016 refugee deal at the time. In short, Bulgaria became much more visible in regional and EU diplomacy thanks to the prime minister's focus on neighbours. Yet practical achievements, such as the

¹² Bechev. Bulgaria and the EU. op.cit.

¹³ For some background, see Jacopo Maria Pepe. China's Inroads into Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europe. Implications for Germany and the EU. DGAP Analyse, Berlin: Forschungsinstitut der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik e.V.. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-56045-3>

Good Neighbourliness and Cooperation Agreement signed with (North) Macedonia in 2017, haven't been as numerous.

Bulgaria has been a notch or two less active within NATO. In the 2000s, it worked hard to be a loyal ally, contributing to ISAF in Afghanistan as well as sending troops to the US-led multinational force in Iraq (and taking casualties as a result). The country invested in security ties with Washington too. The government of Sergei Stanishev (2005-9) also oversaw the conclusion of a bilateral agreement with the US granting the American military access to Bulgarian bases, as did Romania too at the time. During that period, it assisted Georgia in deepening cooperation with the Atlantic Alliance. However, Bulgaria was not at the forefront of the effort to upgrade NATO's presence in the Black Sea, in contrast to Romania where President Traian Basescu lobbied for such policies. Rather, in the mid-2000s, Sofia sought to avoid conflict with Russia as well as with Turkey. Though expanding NATO's footprint would have been beneficial to national interest, Bulgarian elites considered Russia mostly as a partner and not a challenge - e.g. in the domain of energy. Sofia joined regional security arrangements proposed by Russia and Turkey such as BLACKSEAFOR, excluding the US and other non-littoral countries.¹⁴

The story repeated itself after the Ukraine crisis from 2014 onwards. Bulgaria sided with the Western sanctions but did so begrudgingly. It sought to demonstrate it remained in favour of engagement. In the run-up to NATO's Warsaw Summit in July 2016, Borisov blocked a Romanian initiative for a permanent Black Sea naval force as a response to Russia's growing military presence in the area. The prime minister publicly downplayed fears about the militarisation of Crimea and Moscow's strategic advantage over littoral countries in terms of

¹⁴ Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power. Russia in Southeast Europe*. Yale University Press, 2017, Chapter 3.

capabilities. The prime minister famously argued that he viewed the Black Sea as a site of yachts, tourists and pipelines rather than armed confrontation.¹⁵

Such rhetoric has stood at odds with Sofia's actions. Hiding its bets, Sofia contributed to the multilateral brigade deployed in Romania as part of NATO's «tailored forward presence». It has been taking part in all naval and land-based exercises conducted by the Alliance and the US in Southeast Europe and the Black Sea.

Bulgaria has committed to overhaul its armed forces and acquire new capabilities in order to deliver on expectations within NATO. But that is happening at a frustratingly slow pace. With the exception of the past year, Sofia has fallen short of NATO's target of spending the 2% of GDP on defence. The modernisation of the armed forces has been generating one scandal after the other with regard the misappropriation of public funds. Since 2009, two defence ministers have gone on trial for the abuse of office (both have been acquitted). As in other countries of the former Eastern bloc, the replacement of the Soviet-made MiGs fighter jets with a system compatible with NATO standards has been a central issue. The F-16s purchase from the US is a gamechanger because it reduces dependence on Moscow and advances integration and interoperability with NATO. However, the deal has spurred controversy too. President Radev, ex-commander of the airforce, has backed a rival bid from Sweden's SAAB.¹⁶ Though SAAB initially won the tender, Borisov's government, with

¹⁵ Bulgaria says it will not join any NATO Black Sea fleet after Russia warning. Reuters, 16 June 2016. <https://www.reuters.com/article/nato-bulgaria-blacksea/bulgaria-says-will-not-join-any-nato-black-sea-fleet-after-russian-warning-idUSL8N19835X>

¹⁶ Radev vetoed parliament's decision in favour of F-16 but MPs subsequently reconfirmed the deal. Bulgarian president vetoes \$1.26 bn deal for F-16 fighter jets, Reuters, 23 July 2019. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bulgaria-defence/bulgaria-president-vetoes-1-26-billion-deal-for-f-16-fighter-jets-idUSKCN1UI1ZJ>

backing from parliament, overturned the deal and signed a new contract with Lockheed Martin. The decision was in no small part driven by politics. It deepened ties with the US, provided Borisov access to Trump and also helped Bulgaria meet the NATO target on expenditure in 2019. Thanks to the F-16 purchase the defence budget reached the the unprecedented 3.1%.

IV. RELATIONS WITH RUSSIA

Russia is a focal point in Bulgaria's foreign policy but also in domestic affairs. During the Cold War, Sofia was the Soviets' most loyal satellite in the Warsaw Pact. Commercial, political and societal links were downgraded in the 1990s but still survived and even rebounded in the 2000s thanks in no small part of the boom during Putin's early years in power. Moscow views Sofia as a gateway to the EU. Vladimir Chizhov, Russian ambassador to the Union, dubbed Bulgaria "a Trojan horse" on the eve of its 2007 accession. Russia's footprint in the economy, particularly the energy and real estate sectors, is substantial. The Kremlin's influence runs strong with the post-communist left as well as the ultranationalist Ataka party. Putin enjoys overall positive media coverage. At the same time, Bulgaria has been the target of "active measures" by the GRU such as cyber-attacks against government institutions,¹⁷ disinformation, and even an assassination attempt in 2015 targeting a local arms' dealer.¹⁸ In short, Russia has an array of instruments to influence Bulgaria - from coercive (military force, covert operations) to co-optative (business deals with local oligarchs and politicians) to subversive (support for extreme factions such as Ataka or anti-migrant vigilantes).

The energy sector is the most direct link between the two countries as well as a source of leverage for the Russians. The bulk of the gas and crude oil is imported from the Russian

¹⁷ Huge hack attack on Bulgaria election authorities "not to affect vote count". Novinite, 27 October 2015. <https://www.novinite.com/articles/171533/Huge+Hack+Attack+on+Bulgaria+Election+Authorities+%27Not+to+Affect+Vote+Count%27>

Bulgaria warns of Russian attempts to divide Europe, BBC, 4 November 2016. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-37867591>

¹⁸ Bechev, Russia's spy war in the Balkans.

Federation, as well as the fuel for Kozloduy nuclear power station on the Danube. Thanks to that, Russia is consistently the second largest importer in the country. Lukoil Neftochim is one of the largest corporations in Bulgaria and owner, since the late 1990s, of the refinery next to the port city of Burgas. Between 2006-2014, Sofia was key to plans for South Stream pipeline under the Black Sea. Putin decided to abandon the project. and the sanctions imposed against Moscow at that time made the completion of the South Stream gas pipeline, a multi-billion Russian project involving Bulgaria, impossible. Contrary to Moscow's expectations, Sofia was neither willing nor able to push back against the Commission regarding the legal dispute blocking the pipeline, which involved EU competition rules (the so-called Third Energy Package of 2009 requires energy companies like Gazprom to allow access to rival suppliers to new pipelines they put in place). Yet in 2018-9, Bulgaria negotiated its inclusion in Turk Stream, a pipeline proposed as a replacement for South Stream. The difference is that the section running through Bulgarian territory remains under the ownership of the state-owned company Bulgartransgaz, rather than a joint venture with Gazprom. In theory, "Balkan Stream" could be used by suppliers other than Russia to ship gas to ex-Yugoslavia and Central Europe. Bulgaria has been pursuing plans for building a second nuclear power plant (NPP) in partnership with the Russian state-owned corporation Rosatom. The Belene NPP was a major item on Prime Minister Medvedev's agenda during his visit to Sofia in March 2019.¹⁹

Bulgaria has a real chance to diversify natural gas supplies away from Russia. The government works towards the completion of TurkStream's Bulgarian section ("Balkan

¹⁹ See Ruslan Stefanov and Martin Vladimirov, *The Kremlin Playbook in Southeast Europe: Economic Influence and Sharp Power*. Center for the Study of Democracy (Sofia), January 2020. <https://csd.bg/publications/publication/the-kremlin-playbook-in-southeast-europe-economic-influence-and-sharp-power/>

Stream) but also is making steps towards tapping into alternative sources. The so-called Southern Gas Corridor is becoming a reality, thanks to the Transanatolian Pipeline (TANAP) connecting Turkey to the Caspian and its extensions, the Transadriatic Pipeline (TAP) which runs through Greece, Albania and Italy. The Bulgaria – Greece Interconnection (ICGB) is to bring Azeri gas and cover one-third of Bulgarian consumption. Sofia and Athens have joined forces on a liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminal near the northern Greek port of Alexandroupolis.²⁰ Yet the lack of resources, bureaucratic inertia, and powerful vested interests at home stall progress towards shedding dependence from Russia. In the short term at least, Moscow continues to wield a great deal of leverage in energy relations.

As elsewhere in Southeast Europe, public opinion is overall well-disposed towards Russia. That is in stark contrast with the polarised public debate, which features both extreme pro-Kremlin voices and hawkish Russia-sceptics who would not be out of place in Poland or Estonia. At the same time, such sentiments are diffuse and seem not to pay off electorally. Ataka's waning appeal, even to ultranationalist voters, proves the point. The party which used to campaign for Bulgaria's exit from NATO is nowhere near its popularity which peaked in the mid-2000s. Borisov's moderate message stressing the benefits from both continued membership in the EU and the Atlantic Alliance and joint project with Russia has the broadest purchase. Furthermore, there is no evidence that Bulgaria, despite its "Trojan horse" reputation, has done much to resist the sanctions, let alone cast a vote against them in the EU Council.

²⁰ Bulgaria to buy 20% stake in Greek LNG terminal, Reuters, 8 January 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bulgaria-greece-lng/bulgaria-to-buy-20-stake-in-greek-lng-terminal-idUSKBN1Z71JP>

Bulgarian policy is therefore complex and at times contradictory. On the one hand, the economic and political leverage Russia wields is an incentive for Sofia to thread carefully and avoid confrontation. Radev and Borisov's dovish tone offers an illustration. Bulgaria's actions speak for themselves too. In contrast to most other EU and NATO members, the government refused to expel Russian diplomats in response to the Skripal affair in March 2018.²¹ Four years earlier, the then prime minister Georgi Bliznashki (a non-party caretaker) intervened to redact a white paper on defence which had blamed Russia for waging a hybrid war.²² On the other hand, malignant activities attributable to Moscow have been a matter of concern. In October 2019 that Bulgaria declared a Russian Federation embassy staff a persona non grata for espionage. Several weeks beforehand, Nikolay Malinov, the leader of the Russophiles Movement and former member of parliament from BSP, received criminal charges.²³ For years, the General Prosecutor's office turned a blind eye to allegations that the agents of the Russian military intelligence (GRU) had been involved in an poisoning attack against a local arms' dealer, allegedly connected to the Skripal case in the UK. That changed in in early 2020 when prosecutors issued indictment against three GRU operatives. This shift indicates that the law enforcement officials and the

²¹ Alissa de Carbonnel and Tsvetelia Tsoleva. Old ties with Russia weigh on Bulgaria's decision in spy poisoning case. Reuters, 29 March 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-britain-russia-bulgaria/old-ties-with-russia-weigh-on-bulgarian-decision-in-spy-poisoning-case-idUSKBN1H52BR>

²² Bechev, Rival Power. Chapter 3.

²³ Bulgaria charges a former lawmaker with spying for Russia, RFE/RL, 10 September 2019. <https://www.rferl.org/a/bulgaria-charges-former-lawmaker-with-spying-for-russia/30157289.html>

National Agency for State Security (DANS) – which cooperates with the US - are wary of Russian infiltration and subversive activities on Bulgarian soil.²⁴

²⁴ Bulgaria expels two Russian diplomats over espionage, Reuters, 24 January 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bulgaria-russia/bulgaria-expels-two-russian-diplomats-for-espionage-idUSKBN1ZN10K>

V. BULGARIA AND TURKEY

Bulgaria's attitude to Russia is often justified with historical, cultural and religious links. Yet the case of Turkey, an immediate neighbor to the country's southeast, suggests that the preference towards engagement is a standard feature in the country's foreign policy. Unlike Russia, the Bulgarian national narrative demonises Turkey as heir to the Ottoman Empire and a perennial threat. There is no shortage of hate speech against Turks and Muslims in the media too, stoked and skillfully exploited by populist and nationalist commentators and politicians. Yet, starting from the early 1990s, successive governments in Sofia invested in building an overall cooperative relationship with Turkey.

This preference became obvious in 2013-14 the increasing number of asylum seekers from Syria, Afghanistan, and elsewhere crossing into Bulgaria from Turkey. The Bulgarian government sought to engage Turkey bilaterally in order to stem the flow, eschewing criticism of the neighbour's authoritarian drift, before but especially after the failed coup attempt in July 2016. For instance, authorities handed over to Turkey several of its citizens linked to the Gülen movement, blamed for the putsch, without due process.²⁵ Prime Minister Borisov strongly backed the refugee deal struck between the European leaders and Erdoğan in March 2016, and even proposed to act as a go-between with Brussels and Ankara, winning both plaudits and criticism at home. Just before the official launch of Bulgaria's EU Council presidency, Borisov and Erdoğan were together at the grand opening of the historic Bulgarian church of St. Stephen in Istanbul, renovated with Turkish state

²⁵ Martin Dimitrov, Strasbourg court quizzes Bulgaria over Gulenist's extradition. *BalkanInsight*, 24 April 2018. <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/04/25/strasbourg-court-questions-bulgaria-on-the-extradition-of-gulen-supporter-04-24-2018/>

funds. “We, EU and Bulgaria, are not just neighbors of Turkey, [the country with] NATO’s largest army in Europe which forms NATO’s southern flank,” Borisov told the Anatolian Agency. “Instead of shunning Turkey, we must upgrade diplomatic ties and enhance trust”.²⁶ In March 2018, Borisov hosted an EU-Turkey summit in Varna where he lobbied for the renewal of the 2016 agreement and a second tranche of EUR 3 billion to help millions of Syrian refugees residing on Turkish territory.

Bulgaria has gone to greater length than other EU members in accommodating Turkey. In July 2018, Bulgarian President Rumen Radev became the only head of state from the Union to attend Erdogan’s inauguration as a president.²⁷ The event marked the shift from a parliamentary to a presidential system following a referendum the previous year. The constitutional change came under enormous criticism in Turkey itself as well as in the West, and the 2017 plebiscite turned out to be a close call. In the run-up to the presidential and parliamentary elections Erdogan had clashed with prominent EU members such as Germany and the Netherlands, which had barred him from campaigning on their territory. Yet Bulgaria put aside concerns about its neighbor’s authoritarian turn, putting the health of bilateral relations before other concerns.

The policy towards Turkey is also influenced by extensive economic relations. In 2017, Turkey overtook Italy as Bulgaria’s second most important export market after Germany. At the EU level, Bulgaria has, again, keeps a low profile. It officially supports Turkey’s bid and, unlike other member states, has never played the role of a spoiler. Policymakers in Sofia

²⁶ Turkey-EU summit to be held in Varna, Anatolian Agency, 25 March 2018.

²⁷ Bulgaria’s President Radev attended Erdogan’s inauguration ceremony, Bulgarian National Television, 10 July 2018. <https://www.bnt.bg/en/a/bulgarias-president-radev-attended-erdogans-inauguration-ceremony>

believe that Turkey's EU ambitions are a matter to be decided by Erdogan and big EU countries invested in the process. Borisov shies away for making strong statements in relation to Ankara's demands, such as the upgrade of the 1996 Customs Union with the EU or the lifting of Schengen visas.

As with Russia, Bulgaria's attitude to Turkey is shaped by the apprehension of its meddling in domestic affairs. The Movement of Rights and Freedoms (MRF) supported mainly by ethnic Turks and other Muslims, notably those 400,000 dual citizens with residence in Turkey, plays an outsize role in politics. However, the relationship between the state of Turkey and MRF have rarely been harmonious, especially since Erdoğan took charge in the early 2000s. Indeed, Ankara openly sided with splinter factions such as Democrats for Responsibility, Freedom and Tolerance (DOST) headed by Lütfi Mestan (MRF's former leader who was sacked after clashing with the party's founder, Ahmed Doğan, in 2016). In the 2017 general elections, DOST chipped away 100,000 votes, no mean feat, but still failed to clear the 5% threshold for entering parliament. In contrast to the positive or neutral media coverage of Russia, Turkey and its proxy DOST were cast in negative light.²⁸ In early 2016, Bulgaria had expelled a Turkish diplomat over "Islamist activities" causing a reciprocal move by Turkey.²⁹ The move coincided with the Turkish-Russian crisis in Syria and gave the pro-Kremlin media outlets plenty of ammunition in pressing ahead with the argument that Turkey, rather than Russia, constitutes the top national security threat to Bulgaria. Against

²⁸ Tsvetelia Tsoleva. Bulgaria's PM says taking steps to prevent election meddling by Turkey, Reuters, 17 March 2017. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bulgaria-election-turkey-idUSKBN16O1Q1>

²⁹ Bulgaria expels Turkish diplomat for conducting Islamist activity, Euractiv, 22 February 2016.

<https://www.euractiv.com/section/central-europe/news/bulgaria-expels-turkish-diplomat-for-conducting-islamist-activity/>

the backdrop of mutual suspicions and occasional tensions, it is remarkable that relations between Sofia and Ankara have moved into an overall positive direction over the recent years.

VI. THE NEXT FIVE YEARS

Bulgaria's strategy will be largely reactive. Sofia will adapt to the external pressures and challenges – such as the evolution of NATO amid the frictions between Europe and the US (especially if President Trump is re-elected), the post-Brexit EU effort to consolidate its institutions of governance, Russia and Turkey's respective bids for hegemony in what each considers a privileged sphere of influence. Despite gains made thanks to Prime Minister Borisov's personal diplomacy, Bulgaria's capacity to shape its environment is limited. The main focus of political parties and leaders will be on internal affairs. A new domestic political crisis, akin to the one in 2013-4, is not a far-fetched scenario. Uncertainty at home, social discontent and early elections would leave little bandwidth to foreign and security policy.

The main challenge before Bulgarian policymakers will stem from the EU whose institutions, policies and decisions impact on politics, the economy, and society. The government will continue to push for entry in ERM-2, the antechamber for the euro, with a view of making it in the EU's inner sanctum. The prospect of a differentiated, multi-speed Europe is real and it risks marginalising and putting at a disadvantage small, peripheral countries like Bulgaria.

Bulgaria will continue to adhere to NATO's policy. Modernisation of the military is the yardstick for the country's contribution. In 2019, the Ministry of Defence initiated an EUR 1 million tender for two new patrol boats. Companies from Germany, Italy and Bulgaria itself are bidding. Beyond upgrading capabilities, the tender as well as the F-16 purchase (containing offset clauses) aims to boost the Bulgarian defence sector. The latter has partly

recovered in past years thanks to demand in the Middle East and other volatile regions. Exports reached EUR 1.2 bn in 2019. However, Bulgaria is lagging behind in terms of advanced technology. Even if the country clears the defence spending of 2% of GDP by the middle of the decade, its capabilities alone will be insufficient to deter aggressive action by hostile powers. Ultimately, the Bulgaria would remain dependent on the security provision by NATO. It will also focus on bilateral security and defence ties with the United States, as the ultimate insurance policy.

Relations with Russia are to remain complicated. Bulgaria is unlikely to extricate itself from dependence on Russian energy. The advent of alternative supplies of natural gas would, in principle, give Sofia leverage in renegotiating its long-term contract with Gazprom before its expiry in 2022. Yet bureaucratic inertia and political lobbying on behalf of Russia will slow change in the notoriously opaque energy sector. The current and future governments in Sofia will pursue a balance between the US and Moscow, in order to avoid being caught in the cross-fire of geopolitical squabbles. Borisov - and potentially his successor(s) in office should power changes hands – will be vulnerable domestically to pro-Russian players in politics, business, and the media. The spy scandals of 2019 and the international exposure coming as a result to make it more difficult and costly for security and law enforcement agencies to turn a blind eye to cases of interference in Bulgarian domestic politics. Russia will polarise the public sphere, especially if the geopolitical tussle between Moscow and the West goes on unabated.

For many ethnic Bulgarians, Turkey will continue to appear threatening. However, this deeply entrenched view won't alter perceptions at the elite level. With or without the Borisov-Erdogan special relations, Sofia will seek to be a go-between the EU and Ankara. A repeat of the 2015/6 refugee crisis – e.g. because of an upsurge of violence in Syria - will no

doubt incentivise Bulgarian policymakers to step up lobbying efforts for a new deal with Turkey accommodating Erdoğan's demands. As in the 1990s, Sofia will stay clear from the looming Greek-Turkish dispute and try to be on good terms with all neighbours.