
BULGARIA'S GEOPOLITICAL EXPOSURE TO A CHANGED SECURITY ENVIRONMENT: THE STRENGTHS AND VULNERABILITIES OF A DIFFERENT "BORDER COUNTRY"

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Abstract: Bulgaria is a country with unique geographical position as the only EU-member Black Sea country that shares a terrestrial border with the Muslim World. In the recent few years such a vicinity to two of the regional powers – Russia and Turkey, which normally is considered an advantage, turned into a challenge following Kremlin's annexation of Crimea, on the one hand, and the Middle Eastern wars, that brought to Europe the twin dangers of Islamist terror and mass immigration, on the other. The article outlines the acutely felt exposure of this border country to a series of new crises, in addition to the older security problems following the dissolution of Yugoslavia. The authors claim that such a combination of security challenges is the rationale behind "the Bulgarian difference" in what concerns it's foreign and security policies and conclude, that if one applies the opposition between hawks and doves' metaphor to countries' foreign policies, one should say that Bulgaria is not and will never be a hawk.

Keywords: geopolitics, Russian expansionism, "Arab Spring", Black Sea, militarization, East-West confrontation.

INTRODUCTION

The last few years we are witnessing worrying levels of destabilization in several regions bordering the European Union. The Ukrainian crisis and the Crimea annexation by Russia, in addition to a succession of conflicts in the Middle East in the framework of the ill-conceived project "Arab Spring" (Although initially the popular uprisings in a number of Arab countries were the expression of perfectly legitimate grievances, many regional and world powers exploited the ensuing crises for implementing their own projects that do not coincide with the interests of Arab peoples, while endangering regional stability and global peace. Such was the outcome of military interventions in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen, that transformed these countries into failed states and caused humanitarian calamities and destruction) were the expression of long held imperial and nationalistic ambitions, aimed at revising the existing status quo. The implosion of the Middle East gave rise to some of the world vilest threats, namely global Jihad and terrorism, and the parallel immigration "tsunami" targeting Europe, where the displaced and dispossessed are hoping to find a safe haven. All these developments expose Bulgaria – a country with unique geographical and geopolitical position – to new threats and opportunities that demand a reassessment of its security policies in a changed international environment.

THE CHALLENGES TO THE POST-COMMUNIST MODEL OF EUROPEAN SECURITY

Following the breakdown of the Warsaw Pact and of the Soviet Union itself came the reunification of the previously divided European continent with the accession of the former Communist states, in addition to the Baltic Soviet republics, to NATO and the European Union. During the 1990s even post-Communist Russia was no longer perceived as the main threat for liberal democracy at large, while pro-EU Russian elites grew confident that the former empire was on a track to becoming a normal democracy [1]. Describing that tumultuous yet hopeful period Eugene Rumer wrote in 'Carnegie Endowment Europe' that the three books, which were considered the most influential among Russian elites, where Francis Fukuyama's "The End of History and the Last Man", Samuel Huntington's "The Clash of Civilizations", and Zbigniew Brzezinski's "The Grand Chessboard". While the first of them is heralding the liberal democracy global triumph following Communism's demise, the second prophetically stresses the coming confrontation between civilizations and above all the clash between the Western Christian civilization and that of the Muslim-Arab world, the third analyzes the geopolitical settings and trends, insisting on the importance of preventing Russian domination of the Eurasian landmass [2]. Russian public opinion was divided between guarded optimism rooted in the belief of inevitability of democratic transformation of this vast country, and pessimism stemming from realization of its civilizational and historically coded aloofness from core European values.

As far as Western experts and politicians were concerned however, such dichotomy did not exist: the successful integration of Eastern Europe into the two main Western clubs during that period reinforced the thesis

that liberal democracy scored a decisive and final victory over concurrent political projects worldwide. Such triumphalism was fueled to a large extent by the “unipolar moment” in US foreign and security policies during Bush the Elder’s and Clinton’s tenure, when *Pax Americana* filled the vacuum left by the Soviet Union dissolution. This firm conviction coupled with the self-assurance about the nonconflictual character of NATO/EU eastbound enlargement with a number of ex-Soviet republics considered eligible for membership was mirrored by the policies of associating Arab Mediterranean countries plus Israel in the framework of the southern dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy (termed “The Southern Partnership”). The initial rosy prospects however, were seriously challenged by the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 21st century, when the newly elected Russian president Putin described the dissolution of the Soviet Union as the modern-day geopolitical catastrophe and stated Russia’s resolve to fight back any further Western push eastward.

Moscow was particularly adamant of the “Eastern Partnership” policies targeting Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine [3]. It didn’t help that Poland, along with the three Baltic states, were assigned active roles in furthering this eastbound push in an effort to integrate the isolated ex-Soviet republics situated in what Kremlin considers “Russian’s backyard” (the politically correct term used is “The Near Abroad”). The newly born tensions in the EU-Russia-Eastern Partnership countries’ triangle seriously affected the Black Sea region stability, which ultimately concerns Bulgarian security and geopolitical identity.

Russian resentment at Western policies soon materialized in concrete efforts to check the seemingly unrelenting enlargement process. In 2008 Russian-Georgian conflict Kremlin used the military campaign waged by president Saakashvili in the breakaway South Ossetia region to invade that Georgian territory. The military occupation was followed by the recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia cessation from Georgia and their independence [4]. This conflict augured the 2014 Ukrainian crisis with the following annexation of the Crimea peninsula and the conflict between the two Ukrainian breakaway republics of Donetsk and Lugansk. In retrospect one could conclude, that

The disintegration of the Soviet Union and the ensuing Russian attempts to restore its influence and achieving leading positions in the Black Sea region and in South Caucasus revitalized the so-called “frozen conflicts” not only in Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia), but also in Azerbaijan (Nagorni Karabakh), and Moldova (Transnistria). The geopolitical implications of the Crimea annexation by the Russian Federation, include Moscow’s newly found control of this strategically important peninsula and it’s highly prized from a military vintage point gulfs of Sebastopol and Balaklava. The annexation of the Crimea and Sebastopol tripled the length of the Russian coastline – from 475 km to 1200 km, i.e. approximately one quart of the whole coastline length. All those developments led to altering of the geopolitical power balance along NATO/EU Southeast flank. These arrangements that do not conform to international law, led to a de facto Russian control over almost half of the Black Sea aquatory [5]. But more was to come. During the Ukraine crisis and following the Crimea annexation the bigger part of the Ukrainian Black Sea Fleet, stationed at Sebastopol, passed into Russian hands. Afterwards Ukraine ceased to be a credible naval force with only a few vessels left in Odessa’s aquatory.

During the last few years there is a 30% rise in the number of the exercises and training missions of the naval and air patrols of both Russia and NATO in the Black Sea. The military arms race between NATO and Russia has spiraled dangerously as the real risks from mistakes, escalation of tensions and unwarranted situations could eventually cause a direct conflict [6]. The recent naval incident at the Kerch Bridge when Russian Navy detained three Ukrainian military boats, underlined the rising tensions over navigation and control of shared/internal Azov Sea [7].

The deterioration of relations between NATO-members and Russia following the Russian-Georgian War and especially after the Crimea annexation led to the imposition of a wide array of Western sanctions targeting Russian elites and key economic sectors in that country. But even more worrying is the relapse of the whole international system into a renewed military and even nuclear East-West competition which is somewhat remindful of the Cold War before the Détente. It is however a dangerous delusion to interpret the current challenges in relations between the Atlantic partners and post-Communist Russia as the rerun of total confrontation along past lines: neither the existing ideological setup, nor Russian’s greatly diminished military and especially economic capabilities and ambitions, permit such analogy. What we witness is not a *déjà vu* resurgence of a global ideological challenge to the free world, but instead a much reduced in its sway Russian drive to assert a great power status in what Kremlin’s ideologues perceive as a multipolar world to inherit the unipolar global system.

Bulgaria is one of the East European countries that is the most reluctant to embrace a simplistic interpretation of the current tensions between the West and Russia [8]. The reasons for such an attitude, widely

shared by both the political class and the majority of the population, are rooted in both history and geography/geopolitics. For a variety of reasons, in recent years Bulgarians felt that their South-Eastern border is more vulnerable in comparison with the threats coming from the North, i.e. from Russia [9]. A recent and particularly eloquent reaffirmation of Bulgarian's apprehensions materialized under the form of the refugees' "tsunami" in the period 2015-2016 that swept along "the Balkan route", with a portion of this human stream passing through Bulgarian territory (despite the fact that the country escaped some of the worst immigration crises that swept neighboring Greece and Macedonia in particular). This influx of illegal immigrants caused serious problems of a logistical, security and political nature to a country with limited resources and administrative capacities. These problems were further exacerbated by rising public fears about the prospects of Islamist extremists' and terrorists' infiltration and the potential vulnerability to radicalization of the local Muslim communities, although it was assumed that no Bulgarian citizens took part in the "Syrian Jihad". An illustration of Bulgarian fears from a repetition of the 2015-2016 refugee wave is the erection of a fence on the border with Turkey, in addition to deployment of both police and military forces along it, which could be compared to the Cold War border infrastructure and security arrangements under Communism.

Even if these challenges to Bulgarian security experienced in the above mentioned period are not unique, it is the combination between the Middle Eastern implosion in the framework of the "Arab Spring", on the one hand, and Turkey's uneven political and security development in recent years, on the other, that nurtured a traditional mistrust of the neighboring Muslim world. As a Turkish neighbour, Bulgaria was affected negatively by the persisting EU "politics of confusion" vis-à-vis Ankara's increasingly ambitious foreign and security policy agenda with the strengthening of Erdogan's grip to power and the ensuing authoritarian transformation of Turkey's politics. No Bulgarian political party, nor a sensible leader, can ignore the rising neo-Ottoman nostalgia underlined by Erdogan's fiery speeches, questioning the Lausanne Treaty and the existing territorial status quo, in addition to his push for a greater Turkish role in the Balkans with a focus on Muslim and ethnic Turk minorities [10].

Further complicating the regional security setup is the new dynamics in Turkey-Russia strategic partnership, especially following the resolution of the crisis linked to the downing of a Russian plane in the Syrian front. It is a peculiar situation, when a NATO-member enters into a long-term partnership with the country, perceived by both Brussels and Washington as the main security threat on a par with Islamist terrorism. However, Russian-Turkish rapprochement is a significant factor shaping the Black Sea security setup that cannot be ignored; certainly not by Bulgaria, which is the only country in the region to share a maritime vicinity with Russia and a terrestrial border with Turkey. A sensible approach to this partnership should appreciate both the risks and opportunities arising for Bulgaria's own security.

A third axis of instability and inherent threats to Bulgaria is represented by the festering problems in the Western Balkans. Although a relapse in the 1990s military conflicts is highly unlikely, creeping ethnic and religious tensions could nurture instability and invite foreign meddling and even regional great-power competition that negatively impact the prospects for a European integration of these countries [11]. It was no coincidence, that during the Bulgarian presidency of the European Union in the first half of 2018, one of the main priorities was the reinforcement of their European perspective and connectivity between Balkan countries [12] as an antidote to isolation and great-power confrontation for sub-regional domination. Bulgaria also facilitated and supported the agreement between Athens and Skopje on the future name of the Macedonian entity, seen as an important step towards the stabilization of the Balkans.

PIVOTING A BULGARIAN SECURITY MIX

We certainly realize, that it is a rather unusual proposition for a middle-sized EU and NATO member country considered to be a part of Europe's periphery, to articulate its own strategical considerations albeit within the general Western security outlook. Bulgaria's current National Security Strategy dutifully reflects the country's role as an EU and NATO member [13], while the political leadership emphasizes the "exemplary conduct of the country as a reliable ally". Still the emergence of the two completely different vectors of destabilization threatening the EU countries – Russian expansionism and the Middle Eastern implosion and its aftershocks, in addition to other sub-regional crisis trends (as the above mentioned Western Balkans problems) – has revealed different priorities in security threat's perception in the EU North-East flank (Poland and the Baltic states), on the one hand, and Bulgaria or other South European countries, on the other. It is only too obvious, that neither the refugee crisis, nor the Islamist terrorist threats – to name the two major Bulgarian security obsessions, are relevant to the Baltic region, while Bulgaria does not share the ex-Soviet republics' fears from a Russian occupation.

Moreover, differences are obvious even between the two neighbors Romania and Bulgaria. Romania is effectively shielded from both the illegal immigration threat as the itinerary of the Middle Eastern migrants passes through the Western Balkans in their final destination – Central and Northern Europe, and from risks emanating from Islamist extremists and terrorists, as it has not a sizable Muslim minority, nor a history of Middle Eastern involvement. On the other hand, however, Romania has high political stakes in neighboring Moldova, as a culturally akin country [14], which puts Bucharest in direct conflict with Russia over the Transnistria status quo and, more generally, on Moldova's integration within NATO and the EU – issues that obviously are not considered as a security priority by Bulgaria – indeed they are totally ignored by both local politicians and public opinion.

This divergent strategic outlook and the ensuing political agenda between Bucharest and Sofia reflected itself in a diplomatic incident on the issue of the so-called “Black Sea fleet”. The idea was flouted back in 2016 by Romanian president Iohannis as a new type of military cooperation between the naval forces of Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey in the face of Russia's expansionism. Mr. Iohannis, while of an official visit to Bulgaria, received a backing of the “fleet idea” by his Bulgarian counterpart Mr. Plevneliev, only to be rebuked the next day by Prime Minister Boyko Borissov. Flanked with both Mr. Plevneliev and Mr. Nenchev – the then defense minister, the Prime Minister was unusually frank: “There are hawks, who want to be at the cutting edge and they should mind their own business. Forming a joint (Bulgarian-Romanian-Turkish) fleet is rejected by all three of us. Nobody doubts in our pro-NATO positions, but we are a peace-loving country. We want tranquility, sea projects and to welcome tourists arriving to Bulgaria. The country should not become a military *place d'arms*” [15]. This was a signal to Brussels' headquarters where the issue of forming such a fleet was quietly dropped [16]. It also underlined the Bulgarian opposition to the militarization of the Black Sea region, despite persistent efforts to the contrary by NATO officials.

Another project which does not correspond to Bulgarian priorities, is the so-called “Three Seas Initiative” (3SI) [17], which is reminiscent of Pilsudski's Intermarium idea, aimed at establishing a Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth uniting several Central and Eastern European countries. Although it provides for infrastructural and economic cooperation and integration, geopolitically at least the 3SI is considered as a reincarnation of the “cordon sanitaire” along Russian borders. Predictably, Bulgaria is far from enthusiastic in its official support of the idea [18].

In recent months Bulgaria's nascent Black Sea strategy got some additional feedback from Bulgarian prime minister. Faced with the acute crisis that followed the arrest of three Ukrainian military boats at the Kerch strait by the Russian authorities, Mr. Borissov opted against an escalation of the military confrontation in the Black Sea. Reinstating his earlier position favoring demilitarization and peaceful cooperation instead, Bulgaria's premier was unusually frank in his refusal to allow even allies to turn the Black Sea in a military confrontation zone: „We do hope that a reasonable attitude will prevail and that a political campaign or internal political problems should not lead to escalating tensions in the Black Sea. We understand that otherwise it is a perfect region for waging wars, as it produces less than 1% (of the EU/NATO countries') BNP which is deemed negligible...If they think that we are dupes that ignore such tactics, they are wrong” [19].

Another dimension of Bulgaria's strategic outlook is the importance of neighboring Turkey as an increasingly ambitious regional power and an expanding economy. With the ascendance of president Erdogan as the autocratic ruler of this vast Muslim country, a neo-Ottoman drive is evident in Ankara, albeit in its soft nonmilitary reincarnation. So far the attempts by Turkey to use the one-million strong Turkish minority as a Trojan horse in Bulgarian politics has ominously failed [20], but there is a constant uneasiness among Bulgarian public about the EU nonchalant attitude to potential Turkish expansionism [21-22]. And given the Cyprus precedent, Bulgaria feels that NATO doesn't provide efficient safeguards to Bulgarian territorial integrity in the worst-case scenario in future Sofia-Ankara relations.

This complexity of Bulgaria's geographical exposure and its geopolitical posture however, did not lead to a more consistent strategic consideration in Sofia and in Brussels as well. The country did not push forward with its own national security agenda that acknowledges both the threats and the opportunities of its appurtenance to the Balkan-Black Sea region. In the energy security field this was plainly evidenced in the “South Stream” episode. Sofia was put under intense EU/US pressure to scrap the initial Gazprom “South Stream” project, which was due to transform Bulgaria into a Russian gas hub (eventually providing Turkey, along with several Balkan and Central European countries, with Russian gas), only to helplessly watch a rerouting of Russian gas exports to the Turkish European coast (The “Turkish Stream” is currently near completion) and to hope that its EU ramifications will include Bulgaria. This “gas saga” is a pertinent example of the complex situation facing Bulgaria – a failure to strongly advocate its national interests is likely to further subject the country to the interplay between great/regional powers that include also Western hawks' clubs and nostalgic cold-warriors from both sides of the Atlantic.

The Russia-Turkey cooperation as evidenced by the “Turkish Stream” has recently developed in different sectors and benefits from mutual interests that are not only economic, but also political and strategic. The Moscow-Ankara rapprochement after the 2015 bitter dispute over Syria signals the emergence of a new geopolitical axis, which runs counter to the traditional East-West divide recently propelled by the NATO-Kremlin confrontation; an axis which arguably will shape the security environment in the Black Sea and in the Balkans for the foreseeable future. Far from being an anomaly, it represents a new phenomenon, which predates the emergence of a multipolar international system where traditional big powers (in this case Russia) will interact with emerging regional states (Erdogan’s Turkey is the perfect example of regional states which strive to achieve a great power status in the future), in addition to political and security blocs (like NATO and the EU).

As the country that lies at the intersection of the geostrategic interests and power projection zones of Russia and Turkey, Bulgaria is in a unique position to try to reconcile the interests and priorities in the triangle Russia-Turkey-EU. In this respect, Greece is in a somewhat comparable geopolitical situation vis-à-vis the EU-Russia relations, which explains why recently its Prime-Minister Tsipras launched the idea of a Greek bridge between Moscow and Brussels [23]. On the other hand, however, the persistent Greek-Turkish tensions, fueled by both Ankara-Athens territorial dispute over the Aegean Sea islands [24], in addition to the still unresolved Cyprus problem, precludes any potential Greek role as a go-between the EU and Turkey.

In contrast, the absence of serious contentions between Bulgaria and its neighbours is another Bulgarian privilege, although an underestimated one by both local and European politicians; it gives Sofia the chance for building upon traditional friendly relations with Russia and Turkey [25]. Here again the “Turkish Stream” represents a telling episode in development: the coincidence of the economic interests of all three countries - Russia, Turkey and Bulgaria – in addition to the would be beneficiaries like Serbia, Hungary, and Austria, requires a concerted push to overcome EU and US objections, based on ill-conceived strategic considerations. The Bulgarian authorities appear to be confident that this time Brussels will approve a deal with Gazprom for linking the country’s gas infrastructure to “The Turkish Stream”. The economic stability and prospects of some of EU member-states should not be put into jeopardy by big power rivalry or Cold War 2.0 strategists.

It is not however only economic interests that dictate a greater cooperation between Russia and the EU: those who claim that gas imports from Russia will be tantamount to widening of Kremlin’s political and ideological clout over Eastern Europe [26] ignore basic realities: As the Bulgarian case shows, despite the fact that over the last quarter of century up to 90% of this country’s oil and gas consumption depended on Russian imports, it proved to be a faithful NATO ally [27] and its positions on all contentious issues of international politics were aligned with Western stands and priorities, despite Russian objections. Based on this positive experience one can logically claim that Russia will not sacrifice its huge economic interests in exchange for dubious hypothetical benefits of a political or/and geopolitical nature.

CONCLUSION

Bulgaria’s national interests dictate the lessening of confrontation and instability in EU/NATO relations with the two neighboring regions – Eurasia/Russia and “The Bigger Middle East” (i.e. the Arab World plus Iran and Turkey). A third vulnerable region that impacts negatively on Bulgarian security is the Western Balkans with the unresolved territorial and nation-building problems in the post-Yugoslavia period. This explains both Bulgaria’s priority on further integration of the Balkans within the EU and its insistence on avoiding a Cold War 2.0 scenario that could undermine peace and stability in the Black Sea and in Europe as a whole. If one applies the opposition between hawks and doves’ metaphor to countries’ foreign policies, one should say that Bulgaria is not and will never be a hawk. How this geopolitically and historically motivated Bulgarian specificity should be reconciled with harsher international realities and what concrete initiatives the country should launch or support are the tough questions that both Bulgarian strategists and politicians should answer to achieve success in safeguarding the country’s security and stability.

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