



## **Weekly Briefing**

**Bulgaria external relations briefing:**  
**FOREIGN POLICY AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS OF**  
**BULGARIA 2019 - OUTLOOK**  
**Evgeniy Kandilarov**

### **China-CEE Institute**

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.  
Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin  
Kiadásért felelős személy: Huang Ping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.  
 +36 1 5858 690  
 [office@china-cee.eu](mailto:office@china-cee.eu)  
 [china-cee.eu](http://china-cee.eu)

# FOREIGN POLICY AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS OF BULGARIA 2019 - OUTLOOK

Bulgarian foreign policy and international relations during 2019 will definitely continue to following the top priorities of the government, outlined in the Governing Program for the period 2017-2021 that determine the work of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs during the last years. These priorities are formulated the following way:

- Priority 1. Active participation in the elaboration and implementation of European policy and deepening of the bilateral political, economic and cultural relations with the countries of Southeast Europe;

- Priority 2. A targeted policy for maintaining the Bulgarian identity, language and culture in traditional and new Bulgarian communities abroad;

- Priority 3. Sustainable solution to the problem of migration;

From these document as well as from the government acts and the Bulgarian foreign policy tendencies within a long period of time we can clearly see that during the last few years the main directions of the Bulgarian foreign policy are determined to a great extent by the complicated geopolitical situation in which Balkan region and Bulgaria as central part of it has been situated.

This means at least three main geopolitical focuses of the Bulgarian foreign policy that will definitely continue to be priority for the Bulgarian Government in 2019. First one, which is at the top of the priorities, is the one coming from the participation of Bulgaria in the **EU** as well as in **NATO**. These two organizations not every time means one and the same directions of the international positions as well as geopolitical interests.

The **European Union** in 2019 faces multiple pressures, including the controversial Brexit, or the U.K. plan to leave the EU; trade issues between the union and its partners; the migration crisis; the growth of populism across the region; and a shaky relationship with the **USA** administration. As part of Europe, it is natural that the threats of an arms race, the deepening of relations between the great powers, the weakening of the EU in its current form, the migratory flows from the Middle East and North Africa and terrorism are also largely related to the Balkans.

The main problems in the region, however, remain the unresolved ethnic-national problems and the interference of external factors, some of which are underestimated and others exaggerate. Very rarely, in expert analyzes, not even all the factors pursuing their interests on

the Balkans are listed and their real weight is ignored: the **US and NATO, Turkey, some Arab countries, Russia and even China**. Judging by military bases and an opportunity for direct political influence, we must first put the United States. This place also seeks Turkey, which is most often and inexplicably missed by the analysis, despite its persistent ambitions and systemic forms and methods of influence. Especially dangerous for Bulgaria is the creeping Islamization that comes to Europe and the growing activity of Turkish state agencies and intelligence services through the use of religious communities. The hybrid methods and operations of the intelligence services of all these external factors are particularly active.

The obligations of Bulgaria coming from the **NATO** membership are strictly dependent on the geopolitical interests of **USA** which not every time are strictly parallel and in harmony with the EU political visions and interests. That's why one of the biggest concerns for the EU in 2019 are its relationship with the U.S. and the elections to the European Parliament between May 23 and 26 that will see new leadership in the region, including new heads of the European Central Bank and the European Commission. U.S.-EU ties are tense with indications that they could get worse. Trump called the EU a foe of the U.S. when it comes to trade, and at the beginning of 2019 his administration last downgraded the EU delegation in the U.S. without informing them. He has also periodically threatened to levy tariffs on EU cars imported into the U.S., prompting EU officials to prepare for a trade war similar to the U.S.-China tariff conflicts of the past two years.

The other very important for Bulgaria foreign policy direction is related to the Balkan region and especially with a focus on **Western Balkans** with a special focus on **Macedonia**.

Since Zoran Zaev heads the government in Macedonia, there is an improvement, though timid, in the relations between Sofia and Skopje. There is a reduction in tension, and peoples of the two countries are not talking so negatively about each other. The most difficult task for the Bulgarian foreign policy is the issue about the enlargement of the EU without new destructive processes and without turning the West Balkans into a real powder keg. Although our EU partners were skeptic in the beginning when this issue was raised as one of the Bulgarian priority during the EU Presidency, the fact that the issue is discussed by the Austrian and the Romanian Presidency is encouraging.

Part of the Bulgarian Balkan policy is also the relations with **Turkey**. According to the position of the Prime Minister Boiko Borissov, for Bulgaria, as well as for the EU, Turkey is a strategic partner, a friendly neighbor, a NATO ally and an important partner in security and public order. In this term Bulgaria underlines that the stable and sustainable development of bilateral relations between Bulgaria and Turkey is a priority of Bulgarian policy. From this

point of view in 2019 Bulgarian government will most probably continue to try to play a role of mediator in the relations between Turkey and EU.

Traditionally absolutely inevitable and very important direction in the Bulgarian foreign policy is related to **Russia**. The need of maintaining sustainable relations with Russia comes as well from the fact that Bulgaria is to a great extent dependent on Russia for its energy balance and security. Unfortunately the growing tensions between USA and Russia as well as EU-Russia policy of sanctions and other restrictions makes the situation of Bulgaria extremely difficult how to manage with the balance between Russia and the West (USA, NATO, EU).

Bulgaria should not be an area of tension between Russia and the United States. Through a policy of agreement and dialogue, refraining from deploying weapons, infrastructure in the interests of both major powers, Bulgaria can contribute to both the Bulgarian interest and the stabilization of the relations between the West and Russia. Unfortunately, the trend from previous years, which is likely to continue in 2019, is that Bulgaria does not work to achieve this balance. An example of this is the fact that during the visit of the Russian Prime Minister Dimitriy Medvedev to Bulgaria in March 2019 Bulgaria did not raise the issue of the Small and Medium-Range Missile Treaty, which expires in 2021 and is one of the few contracts that put an obstacle to the arms race. Once this obstacle has been lifted, the region, here in Europe, will begin to fill up with devastating nuclear weapons and missiles that have so far been banned. Bulgaria will be one of the victims. It neither produces such weapons to support its own economy by participating in this race, nor does it have any interest in them to be located in its territory. Bulgaria should be among the countries that insist on the renewal of Europe's agreements and guarantees on arms issues.

Because of the difficulty of maintaining a balance between EU-USA-Russia interests, Prime Minister Boyko Borissov described the government foreign policy as "needle-stick", so as not to spoil relations with either the US or Russia. Indeed, efforts to leave all satisfied are evident. One of the main issues related to the Bulgaria-Russian relations is related with the energy security issue. The start of the procedure for construction of the Bulgarian section of the pipeline project called "Turkish Stream" (without an official decision of the Russian side!) Is quite fast for the local conditions. Within four months, "Bulgartransgaz" went through all stages to declare readiness to carry out the core of the project by the end of 2019. In comparison, interconnection activities with neighboring countries take four to five years and, in most cases, are not fully realized. At the same time, the dialogue with the United States and NATO raises strident rumors that beyond the protocol courtesy, the prime minister has committed to accept military equipment (in more radical versions - nuclear weapons) and building new bases on the Black Sea coast, aimed at restraining Russia.

Regarding the issue about the **energy security** on the Balkans which is very much related to Bulgarian foreign policy it is important to be pointed out that Bulgaria has 80% of the energy infrastructure in the Balkans. For Bulgaria, the field of energy is an outstanding priority and work towards guaranteeing energy security is important not only for Bulgaria but also for the whole of Europe. By building the interconnectors, gas connections, the European gas hub called "Balkan", Bulgaria is making a huge step forward in the path of the energy diversification needed for all Europe.

In 2019 the battle for gas supplies will obviously shift from the North to the Southeast and the Mediterranean. North Stream 2 will definitely happen after the EC said it was difficult to comply with US demands because of its advanced phase. Denmark's only resistance to resolving can be overcome, experts and politicians say. However, Washington will continue its efforts to sabotage the "Turkish stream" in its second half.

Europe will push for an agreement between Ukraine and Russia on a gas contract ending in 2019, but at this stage it seems absolutely impossible for both sides to sit on a table. The quantities transited through Ukraine will shrink from 95 billion cubic meters in 2018 to 15 billion cubic meters in 2021, and some of the old 40-year pipes will have to be dismantled.

In 2019 Bulgaria will continue facing the dilemma or resist the enormous pressure of the United States against the Turkish stream, despite the future dependence on Turkey, or to become even worse, dependent on partial supplies of expensive liquefied natural gas through Greece and Russian gas through Central Europe. Liquefied gas containers that are going to be presented to Bulgaria in April this year by US experts may seem an interesting form of delivery, but we should remember that a gas transformation facility will be needed, which is quite expensive, as well as the gas itself.

Other international issues involving the Bulgarian foreign policy position and the EU-USA-Russia tensions are several cases with a wide range international impact. On the one hand, the new development of the case "Skripal" risks turning Bulgaria into a recent example of direct assault of Russia over another sovereign state. On the other hand, the affair with Venezuelan petrodollars makes Bulgaria an example of the need for financial isolation of the Maduro regime. Declarations in support of his adversaries are clearly not enough. Bulgaria can serve as a reason for intelligence and banking measures on a very large scale.

Last but not least recently very important direction in the Bulgarian foreign policy that will possibly continue to be one of its priorities in 2019 is the opportunities coming from the rise of **China** and its influence in the CEEC region which is part of Chinese global political project called Belt and Road Initiative in which the format "16+1" plays a crucial role in the approach of China to the Europe in general. While Sofia is staring at the development of warm

relations with its traditional partners in Brussels, Washington and Moscow, the world sharply and dramatically changes. The development of multipolar model of international cooperation, the globalization of the world economy, trade, finance and information are inevitably engaging Bulgaria in a much more complex world.

Although the so called New Silk Road initiative does not have a specific plan but rather a guideline, Bulgaria's geographic position predetermines the possible active participation. Several options are currently proposed that include the Balkan Peninsula. Turkey is expected to join the land-based economic corridor and Greece is already actively working to promote the sea route. Although the thesis of Bulgaria's "strategic geographic position" is often included in a variety of official comments, until last year there was no reasoned position or priorities of Bulgaria on this initiative. Even serious investment projects and intentions, on which the Bulgarian neighbors have been working for decades, remain little known in Bulgaria. Bulgaria is part of the 16 + 1, but the participation is formal, often lurid and generally passive. The negative perspective comes from the lack of a meaningful, practical and lasting strategy for improving Bulgarian foreign policy and relations with non-EU countries. Although such expert advice can unite the political elite, such an agreement is currently lacking. For example, as already noted, the Government foreign policy Priorities for the period 2017-2021 focuses entirely on Euro-Atlantic integration, not including the rest of the world. The document "Vision for Bulgaria" adopted by the Bulgarian Socialist Party as an alternative vision of the Government, has shortly determined that the country "should strengthen its participation" in the New Silk Road. The hosting of last year's 16 +1 summit meeting in Bulgaria gives reason to assume that Bulgaria will step up its activity in its relations with China by implementing commitments made in 2018. Bulgaria's Cabinet approved a memorandum of understanding with China that envisages the creation of a Global Partnership Centre in Sofia. It is expected this year this initiative will be possibly realized. The Global Partnership Centre will have various functions, including to co-ordinate and conduct research to contribute to the development of sustainable economic co-operation and partnership between 16 + 1 participants. It will organize training and consultancy activities and exchanges to promote cooperation in the fields of trade, investment and infrastructure. The centre will also assist the various actors in the "16 + 1" format in order to better understand the laws and regulations in China of the CEE and EU countries. It will establish a network of contacts between institutions, trade and business associations, enterprises from CEE countries and China to facilitate business contacts and exchange of information. That's why the statement of the Bulgarian prime minister was that this Global Partnership Centre of CEECs and China would help the entering of Chinese companies & investors to the European market while meeting the EU requirements.

In **conclusion** the outlook of the Bulgarian foreign policy and international relations in 2019 will face quite a lot challenges coming from the very dynamically changing situation both in EU and in the rest of the world which means that Bulgaria should be very careful and smart in the decision making regarding its international position in order to defend its own political, economic, energy interests as well as its national security. At the same time the biggest challenge for the Bulgarian foreign policy is how to manage with the delicate balance between its Euro-Atlantic partners in the face of EU and USA and the non-European geopolitical forces as Russia and China. Unfortunately we see some growing tensions between these two sides which will put Bulgarian Government in a very difficult situation.