



Weekly Briefing

Bulgaria external relations briefing:
MAIN TRENDS AND CHARACTERISTICS OF THE
BULGARIAN FOREIGN POLICY IN 2019
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MAIN TRENDS AND CHARACTERISTICS OF THE BULGARIAN FOREIGN POLICY IN 2019

Bulgarian foreign policy in 2019 retained its main characteristics and priorities. They consist in promoting the country's relations primarily with the European Union and the United States. On the second place we can distinguish Bulgarian policy toward its neighbors on the Balkans which basically is also a function of the first mentioned priority in the Bulgarian foreign policy. On the third place, we can highlight the Bulgarian relations with Russia or the countries of the region of East Asia.

Traditionally, the main priority of Bulgarian foreign policy is relations with the European Union, with the most influential countries in it, such as Germany and France, and especially the relations of the country with the European institutions in Brussels. From this point of view, in 2019, it was extremely important for the Bulgarian government that the ruling party GERB won the European Parliament elections. Another extremely crucial issue for the government in terms of the country's relations with Brussels was the improvement of the Bulgarian Maria Gabriel's nomination for commissioner in the new European Commission under the leadership of Ursula von der Leyen. At 1st of October the Culture and Education and Industry and Research and Energy committees of the European Parliament have approved the nomination of Bulgaria's Mariya Gabriel to the Innovation and Youth portfolio in the forthcoming European Commission. Later in the year the tasks of Mariya Gabriel has been expanded, and her portfolio was renamed to Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth. So Gabriel's responsibilities now include cultural and sport issues. It was great International success for the Bulgarian ruling party also that Maria Gabriel was elected as First Vice-President of the European People's Party (EPP) on November 21.

The most notable event in the relations of Bulgaria with the EU was the EC recommendation to remove the country's internal affairs and justice monitoring. 12 years after its accession to the Union in 2007, Bulgaria received recognition at the end of October 2019 that it had fulfilled the requirements of the rule of law and the fight against corruption. There has been no formal decision on the matter by the EU Council and the European Parliament, but there is no fear that it would be negative. In principle, several countries were expected to object to the abolition of monitoring of Bulgaria, but they would remain a minority persuaded to swallow the EC decision. However, after the first meeting of diplomats from the Member States, in which they took note of the report on the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism,

France and Germany were also dissatisfied. In December the chairman of the European Parliament's Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs, Juan López, has sent a letter to the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Layen, about the EC's intention to suspend monitoring of Bulgaria through the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism. He said that after the discussion, the parliamentary committee supported the abolition of the mechanism for Bulgaria. So far, there is no formal opinion from the EU Council on the EC's intention to end the mechanism for Bulgaria. The opinions of ministers and MEPs are advisory, not binding, when the European Commission adopts the final decision to suspend monitoring.

Again in October, a signal came from the European Banking Restructuring Council that Bulgaria could join the ERM II during the first half of 2020. If it does, according to Fitch, the country may adopt the Euro in early 2023. The year is not so optimistic about the cause of joining the Schengen area. Despite continued assurances of support from different countries, by the end of 2019 the prospect of full access to the free movement of persons and capital remains too vague.

One thing is clear and it is that Bulgaria's dependence on the institutions and member states of the European Union make this vector of Bulgarian foreign policy the most important and priority, which will remain so in the future.

With regard to the relations between Bulgaria and the US, we have to say that the most important for them is the membership of the country in NATO and the military-political commitments that result from this fact.

After the government paid about 1.1 billion euros for eight new F-16 fighter jets, Bulgaria ranked second in NATO after the United States in terms of defense spending. Defense spending in Bulgaria exceeded 3%, ranking it ahead of countries such as Greece, England, Estonia, Romania, Poland, Latvia. It has been announced these days that Bulgaria has offered to set up a NATO Naval Coordination Center for the Black Sea area in Varna. Thus, towards the end of 2019, it was evident that Bulgaria had a special place in the Alliance's plans to strengthen its presence in the Black Sea region.

By late November, Prime Minister Boyko Borisov and President Donald Trump had signed in Washington a Framework Document on strategic cooperation between Bulgaria and the United States. According to the document recognizing the need to enhance the collective security, Bulgaria intends to continue investing in modernizing its armed forces, improving interoperability and meeting the declared capability targets within NATO. In line with the defense spending assurances made by all allies at the 2014 NATO summit in Wales, Bulgaria intends to continue to implement its plan to reach the planned defense spending by 2024. Again

in the same document both sides announced their intention to build on the successful 2006 defense cooperation agreement by jointly developing a roadmap to support bilateral defense cooperation to counteract maritime, cyber and hybrid threats in the Black Sea region over the next decade. The talks at the highest level were the subject of the Belene NPP project, gas corridors through Bulgaria, military modernization and security in the Black Sea. The American companies Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, Oshkosh Defense, Textron and IBM have expressed interest in joint production of weapons and military equipment with Bulgarian factories and in tendering for new equipment for the Bulgarian Army.

The extent to which Bulgaria's relations with the United States are a priority and extremely important speaks to the inability of the Bulgarian government to pursue a balanced foreign policy towards one of the main US geopolitical opponents in the region, such as Russia. In 2019, relations between Bulgaria and Russia not only remained cool, but were also shaken by several serious diplomatic scandals involving allegations of espionage.

Bulgaria expelled a Russian diplomat suspected of espionage after refusing to take such a measure in 2018 over the Skripal case despite external pressure. In response, Russia announced as persona non-grata the first secretary of the Bulgarian Embassy in Moscow. President Vladimir Putin has accused Bulgaria of deliberately delaying the implementation of the “Turkish Stream” gas pipeline project on its territory. Prime Minister Boyko Borisov, however, firmly replicated that this is not the case, and if the progress of the project is not so rapid, it is because unlike countries such as Serbia, Turkey or Russia, Bulgaria complies with EU mandatory requirements and procedures. Officially, Borisov and the Russian Ambassador to Sofia Anatoly Makarov have stated that there are no prerequisites to impede the development of bilateral relations in a pragmatic and well-meaning spirit. It is obvious that the relations are clearly far from their former good form and highly influenced by Bulgaria's relations with its European and Euro-Atlantic partners. Synthesizing the situation, Prime Minister Borisov stressed that relations with Russia are not deteriorated, but pragmatic and accurate, and in the dialogue with Moscow Sofia will be guided by national interests with adherence to common European and Euro-Atlantic policies.

In terms of its Balkan policy, one of the most important issues for the Bulgarian government was the one related to the relations between Bulgaria and Northern Macedonia in the context of the further implementation of the Treaty of Friendship, Neighborhood and Cooperation signed by Prime Ministers of the two countries Boyko Borisov and Zoran Zaev on August 1, 2017. At the heart of these relations is the possibility for achieving an agreement on a number of contentious issues concerning the two countries' shared historical past as a condition for Bulgaria's support for the opening of negotiations for Northern Macedonia's

accession to the European Union. To this end, a joint commission was set up between the two countries to discuss at scientific level all the issues at stake and find ways to overcome them.

Finally Bulgaria decided to support Macedonia's membership but on a condition. In a declaration by the Bulgarian National Assembly on EU enlargement and the Stabilization and Association Process of Northern Macedonia and Albania has been announced that Bulgaria fully supports the integration of Northern Macedonia into the European Union but it insists on accepting the historical truth about our common history, which these two countries and peoples share. The condition is for fully implementation of the agreements reached within the Joint Multidisciplinary Expert Committee on Historical and Educational Affairs, reflecting them in curricula and materials as soon as possible. The Declaration of the National Assembly also urges the abolition of all forms of "hate speech" against Bulgaria and the citizens of Northern Macedonia with Bulgarian consciousness, including in the media, inscriptions on monuments, plaques and more.

With regard to Albania, Sofia wants to guarantee, to the maximum extent, the right of the Bulgarian national minority to study literary Bulgarian as a mother tongue in the regions in which it lives - Golo Bardo, Gora, Prespa, Korca, Elbasan, Kukas. The declaration also calls for a census in accordance with European standards in order to objectively reflect its ethnicity.

How the process of rapprochement and improvement of relations between Bulgaria and Northern Macedonia will continue to be seen, but the situation undoubtedly allows for resolving perennial insurmountable differences between the two countries and finding a way to building new relations of good political, economic and cultural cooperation.

With regard to relations between Bulgaria and the countries of East Asia, although this trend is not of paramount importance in Bulgarian foreign policy, in 2019 Bulgaria has made symbolic progress in its relations with China, Japan and the Republic of Korea.

Bulgaria and China marked the 70th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries with the official visit of Bulgarian President Rumen Radev to China and the signing of a document announcing the raising of relations between the two countries at the level of "strategic partnership". In addition, the Bulgarian Government has repeatedly emphasized Bulgaria's strategic importance in the context of the Chinese project "One Belt, One Road" and was trying to play a more active role within the 16 + 1 format (already 17 + 1).

Bulgaria and Japan marked the year of the Triple anniversary, namely 110 years since the establishment of official contacts, 80 years since the establishment of diplomatic relations and 60 years since their restoration after the WWII. This was the occasion for Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono's official visit to Bulgaria. Both countries announced their expectations

that trade relations between Japan and Bulgaria will expand due to the entry into force of the Japan-EU Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) in February 2019.

The year was marked also by the first visit of the Bulgarian Prime Minister to the Republic of Korea. President Moon Jae-in on Sept. 27 hosted a summit with Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borissov on strengthening bilateral relations and expanding cooperation. With next year to mark the 30th anniversary of diplomatic ties between the two countries, Borissov is the first Bulgarian head of government to make an official visit to Korea. Both leaders discussed boosting beneficial and forward-looking ties in fields such as trade, investment, energy, infrastructure, national defense, the defense industry, culture and education. They also commended the rise in trade and investment between both nations amid the global trend of trade protectionism, and agreed to continue support to this end. President Moon lauded the Bulgarian policy of granting "strategic investor status" to Korean companies, saying he expects them to promote more investment in the Balkan country.

The motivation and interests of the Bulgarian government for each of these Asian countries are different. However, one thing is clearly visible regarding all three countries and it is that the main Bulgarian interest is mainly related to the possibilities of attracting more and profitable foreign direct investments. The other unifying thing has already been emphasized and it is related to the fact that all countries outside the Euro-Atlantic area, irrespective of the region in which they are located, are not of paramount importance for Bulgarian foreign policy.

In conclusion, we could say that in 2019 there were no sharp deviations or changes in the main trends followed by the Bulgarian foreign policy in recent years. From this point of view, we could predict with great certainty that this trend will remain unchanged in the next 2020 year, unless there are some fundamental International shifts that could possibly change the foreign policy context of international relations and eventually can put Bulgaria and Bulgaria's foreign policy in some kind of new challenge.