



Weekly Briefing

**Bulgaria external relations briefing:
Bulgaria and Greece announced strategic partnership at all levels of
cooperation
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Bulgaria and Greece announced strategic partnership at all levels of cooperation

On February 26 at the city of Alexandroupolis, northern Greece, took place the 4th Greece-Bulgaria High Level Cooperation Council. On this high-level meeting attended almost all members of the two governments headed by of the Prime Minister of Republic of Bulgaria Boyko Borissov and the Prime Minister of the Hellenic Republic Kyriakos Mitsotakis. Boyko Borissov and delegation of 10 ministers were greeted with military honours at Alexandroupolis Airport. The two prime ministers held a one-to-one meeting as well before the fourth sitting of the High-Level Co-operation Council between the two governments. Borisov and Mitsotakis last spoke in Thessaloniki last November within the framework of the Thessaloniki Economic Forum.

The neighboring countries decided to continue and enhance cooperation in defense, security, civil protection, economy, energy, transport, infrastructure, cross-border cooperation, culture, education and sports. One of the key messages of the meeting have been highlighted by Bulgarian Prime Minister and it was that the co-operation between Bulgaria and Greece ensures the stability and prosperity not only of the two countries, but of the whole region as an axis of stability in Southeast Europe.

The focus of the talks between the two governments and the two Prime Ministers was the bilateral energy and infrastructure cooperation as well as the economic relations in general. Guaranteeing energy security and diversification of natural gas sources and routes is a top priority for the Bulgarian government, not only nationally but also regionally. That is why at this meeting both Prime Ministers were talking about the gas connection Bulgaria-Greece, the liquefied gas terminal in Alexandroupolis, in which Bulgaria declared a 20% shareholding and the intermodal railway corridor "Thessaloniki-Kavala-Alexandroupolis-Bourgas-Varna-Rousse". As part of the development of the Southern Gas Corridor, the Bulgaria-Greece interconnection will provide the region with access to alternative supplies from the Caspian region. The project is also important because of the possibility of importing natural gas from the existing and planned new LNG terminal in Greece. The main gas suppliers to the Alexandroupolis terminal are expected to be companies that export liquefied natural gas, originating in the USA, Qatar, Algeria, Nigeria and other LNG producers. *"Energy is a priority sector in our economic relations,"* said Prime Minister Borissov. He welcomed the clearly declared political will to pursue bilateral and regional energy projects such as the Greece-

Bulgaria gas interconnector (IGB) and the liquefied natural gas terminal in Alexandroupolis. *"Creating a competitive energy market with equal treatment of all projects is necessary to ensure energy security of European citizens. In this way, they will have affordable and reliable energy at a fair market price,"* he said.

The meeting discussed the economic relations between the two countries in general and the upward trend in trade. Between January and October 2019, trade between Bulgaria and Greece increased by 9.3% year-on-year, amounting to approximately EUR 3 billion. Greece is among the five leading investors in Bulgaria, with Greek companies investing in banking, telecommunications, metallurgy, textiles, construction.

Finally, within the 4th Greece-Bulgaria High Level Cooperation Council, Greece and Bulgaria signed several memorandums of cooperation on security, economy, energy, transport, infrastructure and cross-border cooperation. Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said in joint statements with his Bulgarian counterpart Boyko Borisov that the MoUs enhance the two countries' strategic partnership at all levels of cooperation.

In particular, the collaborations include the Greece-Bulgaria cross-border rail traffic agreement, signed between Transport Minister Achilleas Karamanlis and his Bulgarian counterpart Rossen Jeliaskov. Karamanlis praised the agreement as one that *will "create a framework that facilitates and accelerates bilateral cross-border cooperation."*

The Enterprise Greece-Invest Bulgaria Agency memorandum of understanding will provide for the exchange of information on investment opportunities in the two countries, market research and the provision of statistics.

The two countries also signed a Joint Declaration on the completion of 140 years of formal diplomatic relations, which Mitsotakis said shows that *"Greece and Bulgaria have decided to move along the path of peace and development, in our countries, in the Balkans and throughout our wider region."*

A Joint Declaration on the promotion of cooperation in tourism was also adopted. Here should be pointed out that Greece is the sixth largest investor in Bulgaria, while some 1.5 million Greeks traveled there in 2019 and Greece remains the top European tourist destination for Bulgarians.

In addition, the rail cross-border traffic agreement will also help achieve *"our goal to connect the cities of Kavala, Alexandroupolis, Burgas and Varna by rail to the Danube,"* Mitsotakis noted.

Two major road networks will be built to better interconnect the two countries, especially the one that will connect Alexandroupolis with Dimitrovgrad and will contribute towards a new

commercial significance of all Greek ports in the Aegean, now connected with Ruse port on the Danube.

Mitsotakis and Borissov also agreed to look into the upgrading of the Nymfea-Makaza border crossing to allow trucks and buses through.

The two prime ministers reaffirmed their close coordination and mutual support at multilateral organizations, including the United Nations, and reiterated their support for the European accession of the western Balkans and their willingness to further cooperate in this direction.

On the recent tension in the Aegean Sea and Greece-Cyprus-Turkey relations It became clear that the views of Bulgaria and Greece also coincide on the importance of respecting international law, more so in the troubled region of the southeastern Mediterranean the aggressive challenges coming from the East should not be misinterpreted or underestimated. With this regard both countries agree that the European Union and all member states must therefore send clearer and stricter messages to Ankara. Borissov also underlined the importance of the joint efforts to accelerate the pace of implementation of the projects on which the two countries cooperate.

He cited the IGB Gas Interconnector Greece-Bulgaria project, and how its construction, as well as the supply of the required pipes, was contracted by *“a completely transparent tender”* to two Greek companies. He asked Mitsotakis to go ahead with required actions that will see the completion of this project within the year.

Borissov made a special reference to the migration crisis and congratulated Mitsotakis on the measures taken by his government, thanks to which, he said, *“Bulgaria has zero influx of migrants.”*

Regarding relations with Turkey, Albania and North Macedonia, Borissov expressed the view that both Bulgaria and Greece have respected their commitments to Albania and North Macedonia, and emphasized that these countries should do the same for Greece and Bulgaria.

In the context of marking the 140th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries, the Ministers of cultures of both countries also discussed the possibilities of exchanging events. The possibilities for reciprocal presentation of the rich cultural heritage of the two countries were specified, as well as joint events in the field of contemporary art such as concerts, performances and participation in different forums of centers of cultural life that are significant for both countries. *“It is crucial for us to find new opportunities to further promote Bulgarian culture in Greece and, accordingly, Greek in Bulgaria,”* said Bulgarian Minister of Culture Boil Banov during the meeting. The Ministers of Culture of Bulgaria and Greece also discussed the possibilities within the framework of the

INTERREG Cross-border Cooperation Program, of which one of the main investment priorities is the preservation, preservation, promotion and development of the natural and cultural heritage. So finally both sides agree that a memorandum on culture will be signed between the ministries of Bulgaria and Greece in April this year. The document will help to widen contacts between institutions and professionals in the field of protection and promotion of cultural heritage and opportunities for presenting contemporary arts.

The newly emerged critical situation with the coronavirus was also among the topics of the talks between the two governments. Two days ago at a meeting with EU Commissioner for Internal Affairs, Prime Minister Borissov stressed the need for a common European solution to counter the virus.

In conclusion, this intergovernmental meeting definitely contributed to strengthening the ties between Bulgaria and Greece helping them to reach a higher level in their strategic political economic and cultural relations. Issues and projects of mutual interest were discussed and the joint priorities of the two countries aimed at achieving higher economic growth, cohesion, stability and security in the region were settled. In the context of marking the 140th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Bulgaria and Greece this 2020, the two sides send a strong message of co-operation and good neighborliness. Bulgaria and Greece provide a clear example of how historical contradictions can be successfully overcome and confidence and partnership built up in the spirit of shared European and Euro-Atlantic values. Within the European Union and NATO, Bulgaria and Greece also cooperate very actively. The situation in SEE and the wider region as well as the European integration of the Western Balkans are priorities for both countries. Bulgaria is also showing strong interest in co-operation with Greece on topics such as migration, climate change and tourism. Bulgarian Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ekaterina Zaharieva and Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias expressed their conviction for the need to deepen bilateral co-operation and partnership, as well as belief in the future of the European Union as a global player on the world stage.

In his closing remarks, the Bulgarian Prime Minister stressed that there is nothing better in the European Union than for Member States to demonstrate friendship, closeness, connect their energy systems, road links, cooperate in the fields of ecology, defense, security etc.

Here Bulgarian Prime minister emphasized that the strategic meaning of most of the Bulgarian-Greek joint projects he sees as part of the so called the Three Seas initiative and Bulgaria has already invested more than BGN 1 billion in it. In this regard the Prime Minister Borisov emphasized once again the construction of the interconnector with Greece, the partnership of Bulgaria with 20% in the LNG terminal, the new aircraft, the Balkan Stream. *"The investments are entirely Bulgarian. The railway, the Struma highway, what we are talking*

about today, from Aleksadropulis to the Maritza highway, is all about the Three Seas initiative. Everything is done with Bulgarian money - they are already invested. We have already done it, we are doing it" Borissov commented. The Prime Minister also emphasized the importance of transport corridors 4, 8 and 10. According to him, a third bridge over Silistra is also very important.

It is difficult to predict how relations between Bulgaria and Greece will develop in the future on the base of the concluded and signed joint agreements, but at this stage the two countries clearly demonstrate that they have overcome their historical contradictions and have found the intersection of their mutual interests, which makes them important and valuable partners in the region of Southeast Europe.