



# Weekly Briefing

**Bulgaria external relations briefing:  
Overview of the Bulgarian International Policy in 2023**  
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# Overview of the Bulgarian International Policy in 2023

## Summary

*In terms of foreign policy the year 2023 was extremely dynamic and full of challenges for Bulgaria. One of the biggest foreign policy challenges for Bulgaria was the ongoing war in Ukraine. During the year, various Bulgarian governments did everything possible to provide military-technical assistance to Ukraine and demonstrated full support for Ukraine's position internationally. The second foreign policy priority for Bulgaria this year was related to the political and military cooperation with the USA, as well as the issue of expanding the Bulgaria's commitments within NATO. In this context, in the newly adopted national defense strategy of Bulgaria, the country's membership in NATO is considered fundamental from the point of view of the Bulgaria's national security. Another foreign policy priority for Bulgaria this year was related with its relation to Russia. In 2023 Bulgaria-Russia relations continued to deteriorate and reached a climax with the inclusion of Russia in the Bulgaria's National Defense Strategy as a major foreign policy threat. A permanent priority for Bulgaria's foreign policy is further integration within the EU. In 2023, the most important goal for Bulgaria was solving the issue of the country's accession to the Schengen area. However, despite all efforts, at the end of the year this issue remained not completely solved, mainly due to the continued mistrust of Austria.*

In 2023 **Russia's war against Ukraine** continued to be the most serious international challenge in Europe. This challenge was particularly important for Bulgaria, which is relatively close to the conflict and at the same time plays an important role in the security policy in the Black Sea region, as part of the so-called Eastern flank of NATO.

One of the main priorities of Bulgaria's foreign policy in 2023 was to do everything possible in **support of Ukraine** within the framework of the EU's general initiatives regarding the conflict. From the very beginning of the war, Bulgaria stood entirely on the side of Ukraine, and at the end of 2022 Bulgarian National Assembly voted to send military aid to Ukraine in the amount of 10 million EUR.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, Bulgaria has increased the amount of humanitarian aid planned for Ukraine several times in 2022.

At the first EU Foreign Affairs Council meeting held on January 23, 2023, Bulgaria's Minister of Foreign Affairs Nykola Milkov expressed full support for Ukraine's initiative to launch the so called Peace Plan. The Bulgarian position was consistent with the EU's strong

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<sup>1</sup> <https://news.bg/politics/die-welt-balgariya-stranata-koyato-tayno-spasi-ukrayna-oshte-minalata-prolet.html>

and comprehensive support for Ukraine, including within the framework of the EU Military Assistance Mission with a non-executive mandate to Ukraine and the provision of assistance to the Armed Forces of Ukraine under the European Instrument for Peace.<sup>2</sup> Bringing to justice all who committed serious international crimes in the context of Russian aggression, the reconstruction of Ukraine, the provision of energy and food security was also confirmed at the January 2023 meeting of the Council of Foreign Ministers of the EU.<sup>3</sup>

On March 20, eighteen European countries signed the project of the European Defense Agency to jointly purchase ammunition for Ukraine and to replenish the national stocks of the member states providing the aid. Bulgaria was not among the signatory countries.<sup>4</sup>

Bulgarian President Rumen Radev on March 23 objected to the **delivery to Ukraine of ammunition** that Bulgaria sells to other European Union states. Radev confirmed to journalists that Bulgaria would engage only in the production of ammunition for other EU members. *"Bulgaria does not support and is not part of the general order for the supply of shells to Ukraine,"* Radev said. *"Our country will support European diplomatic efforts to restore peace."* Radev made the comment in front of the EU foreign and defense ministers meeting in Brussels which endorsed a plan to send Ukraine 1 million rounds of artillery ammunition.<sup>5</sup>

After the adoption of the decision by the European Council, the Bulgarian president emphasized once again that *"Bulgaria supports the European mechanism for strengthening peace."*<sup>6</sup> In addition, President Radev stated that Bulgaria will set a condition that the shells it sells to member states of the European Union will not be reselling to Ukraine.<sup>7</sup>

In May 2023, EU states finalized a deal to send 1 million 155mm shells and missiles to Kiev by March next year, agreeing to provide ammunition immediately from their own stockpiles and member states to receive partial reimbursement for their efforts. They agreed on €1 billion for that part of the plan and another €1 billion for a joint procurement scheme to provide shells to Ukraine and replenish their stockpiles.

On June 23, 2023, the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria adopted a new package of military-technical assistance for Ukraine in implementation of the decision of the National Assembly from December 9, 2022. The approved list was comparable in volume to the aid from the first package allocated by the caretaker government in December 2022. According to a press release of the government, the provision of this aid did not violate the

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.mfa.bg/bg/news/36125>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.mfa.bg/bg/news/36125>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/32326750.html>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.rferl.org/a/bulgaria-radev-balks-delivery-ammunition-ukraine/32331667.html>

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.struma.com/bulgariya/radev-sled-zasedanieto-na-evropeiski-ya-suvet-v-bryuksel-bulgariya-i\\_205355/](https://www.struma.com/bulgariya/radev-sled-zasedanieto-na-evropeiski-ya-suvet-v-bryuksel-bulgariya-i_205355/)

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/32331152.html>

norms of stocks for action of the armed forces of the Republic of Bulgaria and their combat training.<sup>8</sup>

The position that Bulgaria should more actively engage in military support for Ukraine was announced at the very beginning of the election of the new regular government of Bulgaria, headed by Prime Minister Nikolay Denkov. With the election of a regular government came the first signals that Bulgaria is preparing to give real military aid to Ukraine - arms and ammunition.

Bulgaria is one of the countries in Eastern Europe that stockpiles and produces ammunition compatible with the older Soviet weaponry that the Ukrainian army is fighting with. Since the beginning of the war, pro-Russian parties and politicians in the country such as “Revival”, the “Bulgarian Socialist Party”, as well as President Rumen Radev have opposed sending military aid to Ukraine arguing that it draws the country into the war and creates a risk to its national security.

On June 29, after a meeting with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg in Brussels, Bulgarian Prime Minister Nikolay Denkov stated that the best defense for Bulgaria would be a victory in the war in Ukraine, and therefore Bulgaria would continue to support Ukraine. Denkov identified the Russian invasion of Ukraine as the biggest risk for Bulgaria, because *"for the first time since the Second World War, someone was ready to violate the borders". "The best way to reduce this risk is to help Ukraine, because the victory of Ukraine in the sense of restoring its territory is the best way to protect the other countries, including Bulgaria, after this invasion,"* the prime minister pointed out.<sup>9</sup>

The American ambassador to Bulgaria expressed gratitude to the Bulgarian government for military support to Ukraine. *"The new Bulgarian cabinet shows solidarity with Ukraine. The USA is lucky that Bulgaria is a member of NATO."* This was stated by the American ambassador to Bulgaria, Kenneth Merten, during the Sofia Economic Forum.<sup>10</sup>

On the same June 29, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg also expressed gratitude to Bulgaria at a joint briefing with Bulgarian Prime Minister Nikolay Denkov at NATO headquarters. His words were as follows: *"I thank Bulgaria for providing military protection to Ukraine. This helps Ukrainians to assert their right to self-defense as enshrined in the UN Charter. To continue to strengthen NATO and our support for Ukraine, we must invest more in*

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.gov.bg/special/bg/prestentar/novini/pravitelstvoto-odobri-nov-paket-voenna-pomosht-za-ukrayna-v-izpalnenie-na-reshenieto-na-narodnoto-sabranie>

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.dnevnik.bg/sviat/voinata\\_v\\_ukraina/2023/06/29/4501871\\_denkov\\_v\\_nato\\_nai-dobrata\\_zashtita\\_za\\_bulgariia\\_e/](https://www.dnevnik.bg/sviat/voinata_v_ukraina/2023/06/29/4501871_denkov_v_nato_nai-dobrata_zashtita_za_bulgariia_e/)

<sup>10</sup> <https://frognews.bg/novini/amerikanskiat-poslanik-noviiat-kabinet-pokazva-solidarnost-kam-ukraina-imame-kasmet-balgariia-kato-saiuznik.html>

*our security. And I count on Bulgaria to make a commitment to a more ambitious investment in defense, which it will decide on at the summit in Vilnius".<sup>11</sup>*

Undoubtedly, the most important foreign policy event for Bulgaria regarding Ukraine was the visit of the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, at the invitation of the Bulgarian Prime Minister Nikolay Denkov.

On July 6, President Volodymyr Zelensky visited Bulgaria for the first time and succeeded to conclude several important agreements with the Bulgarian government. Bulgaria and Ukraine agreed to intensify their cooperation in the defense sector. Zelenskyy and Denkov discussed another package of military aid for the Ukrainian army. Bulgaria showed commitment to participate in the post-war reconstruction of Ukraine. President Zelensky and Prime Minister Denkov also signed a bilateral political declaration in support of the Euro-Atlantic integration of Ukraine when it becomes possible. In addition, the energy ministers of the two countries signed a memorandum of understanding expressing the desire of both countries to exchange scientific-technical, engineering and operational experience for the more efficient use of renewable energy sources and new energy technologies.

However, the meeting between the Ukrainian president and the Bulgarian president Rumen Radev took place in a much more tense spirit. The Bulgarian president stood against sending weapons to Ukraine and called for negotiations between Kiev and Moscow. The Ukrainian president opposed the positions of his Bulgarian colleague on the war in Ukraine.

On November 22, Bulgarian parliament ratified the agreement between Ukraine and Bulgaria on the donation of 100 armored personnel carriers to Ukraine. Just a few weeks later, on December 7, the Bulgarian Parliament approved provision of additional military aid to Ukraine - malfunctioning, redundant or over-the-top portable anti-aircraft missile systems and anti-aircraft missiles of various types from the Armed Forces of Bulgaria.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, the draft decision of the parliament envisaged Bulgaria joining the coalition of countries that provide F-16 fighter jets to Ukraine for "conducting joint training", including in Bulgarian airspace.<sup>13</sup>

Bulgaria's position regarding Ukraine is directly related to two other issues of the country's foreign policy.

The first one is the **Bulgaria's alliance commitments within NATO**. Bulgaria plays a key role in strengthening the Eastern Flank of the Alliance, after NATO established four additional multinational battle groups in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia in 2022, in

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<sup>11</sup> <https://debati.bg/yens-stoltenberg-lichno-blagodari-na-bulgaria-che-pomaga-na-ukrayna/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/ukrayna-bulgaria-voenna-pomost/32722629.html>

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem.

addition to the battle groups in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. In this way, a base for logistical support of Ukraine's defense capability is being formed in Eastern Europe.

After the first day of the summit of the Alliance in Vilnius in July 2023 Bulgarian Prime Minister Nikolay Denkov announced that NATO will expand the multinational battle group stationed in Bulgaria. The group will grow into a brigade and additional forces will be provided for this purpose, the Bulgarian Prime Minister also said.<sup>14</sup>

Nikolay Denkov also commented on the NATO decision to adopt three regional defense plans, one of which concerns the Black and Mediterranean Sea areas. Denkov said that they have *"only a protective and restraining character"* but at the same time *"they mean that the risk of escalation should be taken seriously"*. *"When there are forces like that, any aggressor would think twice about wanting to take a chance on that."*, Bulgarian prime minister added.<sup>15</sup>

From the strategic documents of NATO it became clear that Bulgaria has an important role in the overall strategy to contain Russia in the Black Sea region.

Romania and Bulgaria are called the doors of the alliance in Southeast Europe. In terms of military potential, Bulgaria is inferior to Romania, and the goal of the USA and NATO is to increase the combat capability of the Bulgarian army, especially the Navy and Air Force.<sup>16</sup>

The New Bulgarian Defense Strategy, developed and presented for public discussion at the beginning of October 2023 once again strongly emphasized that the defense of the Republic of Bulgaria takes place in the context of NATO's collective defense and within the framework of the Common Security and Defense Policy of the European Union. From this point of view, the fulfillment of allied commitments has been described as a fundamental approach to solving the country's defense task. It is also noted that the high level of harmonization of the texts with the main statements of the Strategic Concept of NATO 2022, the Global Strategy for Foreign and Security Policy and the Strategic Compass of the EU has been achieved in the New Bulgarian National Defense Strategy.<sup>17</sup>

The same New Bulgarian National Defense Strategy sees NATO as the main guarantor of transatlantic security, with an emphasis on expanding its global role in shaping the international security environment.<sup>18</sup>

In addition, the geographical location of Bulgaria has been taken into account, as well as the fact that a large part of NATO's activities to increase the deterrent potential will be

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/denkov-nato-bulgaria/32499845.html>

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.bgonair.bg/a/2-bulgaria/325184-zam-generalniyat-sekretar-na-nato-balgariya-e-izklyuchitelnotsenen-sayuznik-v-aliansa>

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem.

implemented on the territory of the allies on the Eastern flank, including with the active participation of the host countries.

Thus, the Bulgarian defense strategy foresees the deployment of troops of allies from the Alliance on Bulgarian territory, as well as the participation of Bulgarian soldiers in combat groups on the territory of other NATO countries.

In this new strategic reality, the main focus of Bulgaria's defense policy is strengthening its national defense as an element of NATO's defense.

Bulgaria's primary military-political ally within NATO is the USA. Bulgaria's policy towards Ukraine further strengthened the alliance and strategic **relations between Bulgaria and the USA**. In 2023, Bulgaria and the United States marked 120 years since the establishment of diplomatic relations, and this anniversary was celebrated with a series of political and cultural events, culminating in the anniversary month of September.<sup>19</sup>

The strategic partnership between Bulgaria and the USA is stronger than ever. This was said by Kenneth H. Merten, the newly appointed American ambassador to Bulgaria, during an event organized by the Atlantic Club in Bulgaria in July, 2023.<sup>20</sup>

On September 25, 2023, the United States and Bulgaria held the second High-Level Strategic Dialogue to discuss bilateral, regional and global issues of priority importance to both countries. Among the main topics of the strategic dialogue were common approaches to regional and global challenges, deepening of the cooperation in defense and security, economy and energy, rule of law. A Memorandum of Understanding for countering foreign manipulation of information was also signed between the two governments. According to a joint statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the State Department, the document *"provides a solid basis for the two countries to work together against the spread of disinformation and media manipulation, which are a growing threat in Central and Eastern Europe,"*<sup>21</sup>

The position of Bulgaria regarding the Ukraine naturally refers to the relations between **Bulgaria and Russia**. In 2023 these relations continued to deteriorate.

It is indicative of Bulgaria's attitude towards Russia that in the New Bulgarian Defense Strategy, Russia has been described as the main threat to Bulgarian National Security. The arguments presented in the document are that a geopolitical confrontation between NATO and Russia will continue regardless of the outcome of the war in Ukraine. At the same time, it cannot

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<sup>19</sup> <https://btvnovinite.bg/bulgaria/120-godini-diplomaticheski-otnoshenija-mezhdu-balgarija-i-sasht-snimki.html>

<sup>20</sup> <https://bntnews.bg/news/amerikanskiyat-poslanik-strategicheskoto-partnyorstvo-mezhdu-balgariya-i-sasht-e-po-silno-otvsiyakoga-1242365news.html>

<sup>21</sup> <https://bnr.bg/horizont/post/101882497/memorandum-bulgaria-sasht-za-protivodeistvie-na-chujdestranno-manipulirane-na-informacia>

be expected that there will be a significant change in the existing power system in Russia, which has clearly taken a course towards a head-on collision with the West.<sup>22</sup>

It is important to note that, according to the same Bulgarian strategic defense document, the danger of global military and nuclear escalation is increasing, with the possibility of political-economic and conventional confrontation with the West and acceleration of the arms race. Therefore, the tendency for Russia and NATO to remain main geopolitical rivals will necessitate the long-term implementation of measures to increase the NATO **deterrent and defense potential**.

For the first time since the fall of the communist regime, Bulgaria's National Defense Strategy states that Russia is the biggest threat to the country's national security.

On November 22, 2023 Bulgarian Prime Minister Nikolay Denkov participated in the 12th plenary debate themed "This is Europe" hosted by the European Parliament in Strasbourg. There Denkov highlighted once again Bulgaria's strong commitment to resist and oppose the ongoing attempts of Russia to exert influence through targeted hybrid attacks exploiting the economic ties and cultural connections to divide Bulgarian society between pro-Russia and Euro-Atlantic groups.<sup>23</sup>

For the whole of 2023, one of the main foreign policy priorities for Bulgaria was the **accession to the Schengen area**. Bulgaria began work on its accession to the Schengen area in 2008, and already in 2011 its readiness to fully implement the Schengen criteria was recognized. Nevertheless, due to various reasons its accession together with Romania was delayed for more than 10 years.

At the vote on the enlargement of the Schengen area in December 2022, Austria and the Netherlands voted against Bulgaria's accession. The reasons for this vote are various issues like the fight against corruption, the fight against organized crime and the lack of rule of law in Bulgaria. These are usually the arguments used by the countries that do not agree Bulgaria to enter the Schengen. However the most important problem is that recently the migrant pressure through the Bulgarian borders has increased nearly four times compared to previous years. In 2023, the border authorities in Bulgaria noted a record migrant pressure. According to the experts, there is an increase compared to 2022 by more than 50%.<sup>24</sup> The majority of this traffic is directed specifically to the Netherlands, Sweden, Austria, Germany, taking its European route from Bulgaria and Romania.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>23</sup> [https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/video/this-is-europe-debate-address-by-nikolay-denkov-bulgarian-prime-minister\\_I249381](https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/video/this-is-europe-debate-address-by-nikolay-denkov-bulgarian-prime-minister_I249381)

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.mediapool.bg/50-uvelichenie-na-migrantskiya-natisk-news351881.html>



This is why the accession of both Balkan countries in Schengen area turned out to be impossible, as Netherlands and Austria continued to impose veto throughout almost the whole year. At the very end of 2023 suddenly Netherlands removed all obstacles to Bulgaria's full entry into Schengen after a debate in Netherlands's parliament. Thus, Austria remained the only obstacle to the full entry of Bulgaria and Romania into Schengen.

At December 28, before the start of the last meeting of the Council of Ministers for the year, Bulgarian Prime Minister Nikolay Denkov announced that the government has reached an "agreement in principle" with the Austrian authorities on the admission of Bulgaria to the Schengen area but only for the air and sea border control. Negotiations regarding the land borders are about to continue. This statement came after Romanian authorities officially announced previous day that Bulgaria and Romania will join Schengen by air and water on March 31, 2024.

According to Denkov, the agreement reached includes *"substantial support from the European Commission for the protection of the external borders of the European Union with Turkey and Serbia in order to reduce the flow of illegal migrants into Europe"*.<sup>25</sup>

Although this result is not entirely satisfactory, the Bulgarian government notes that this is a significant foreign policy success, since Bulgaria is getting closer to achieving its full accession to the Schengen area.

## **Conclusion**

In terms of foreign policy, the year 2023 was very difficult and full of challenges for Bulgaria. To a large extent, the main difficulties remained the same as 2022 year. The most important challenge continued to be Russia's war against Ukraine and the aspiration of Bulgarian government to provide military and political support to the Ukrainian state. In this regard, Bulgaria did everything possible to strengthen its positions in NATO, as well as its allied relations with the USA. The year of 2023 marked an even more serious strain on relations with Russia, which was declared a primary threat to Bulgaria's national security and defense. At the end of the year, Bulgaria scored a partial foreign policy success regarding the country's accession to the Schengen area. It seems that these key foreign policy trends for Bulgaria will continue in the next year.

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<sup>25</sup> <https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/denkov-potvardi-bulgaria-saglasie-avstria-shengen/32750698.html>