



Weekly Briefing

Bulgaria external relations briefing:
Bulgaria Celebrates 20 years of Joining Nato with a Large Scale
Government Program
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Bulgaria Celebrates 20 years of Joining Nato with a Large Scale Government Program

Summary

On March 29, 2024, Bulgaria celebrated the 20th anniversary of its membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization - NATO. On this occasion on February 1, 2024, the Bulgarian government adopted a "National Program" with large scale initiatives to mark this anniversary. The program includes a large number and variety of events - conferences, exhibitions, open days, sports events - which will be held throughout 2024. On the eve of the anniversary, on March 28, an exhibition on the topic "The Bulgarian Army - 20 years part of NATO" was opened in the National Museum of Military History, and on March 29 a National Conference was organized under the title "20 years of Bulgaria in NATO: Because we are stronger together". Among the official participants of the conference were the President of the Republic of Bulgaria Rumen Radev, the Prime Minister Nikolay Denkov, the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Maria Gabriel and the Minister of Defense Todor Tagarev. The anniversary of Bulgaria's membership in NATO provided an opportunity for the government, as well as the opposition political forces, to assess the importance and role of NATO for Bulgaria in contemporary world.

In the year marking the 75th anniversary of the establishment of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Bulgaria is celebrating 20 years of joining the Alliance. On March 29, 2004, Bulgaria officially became a member of NATO.

Twenty years ago in Washington, USA, Prime Minister Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha handed the ratification document for Bulgaria's accession to NATO to US Secretary of State Colin Powell, who accepted it on behalf of the USA - the depository country of the Treaty. The Treaty was ratified by the Bulgarian Parliament on March 18, 2004 and entered into force the same day.¹

The long road of Bulgaria's accession to NATO

Bulgaria's accession to the Alliance began in the 1990s. On July 13, 1990, with a Declaration of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Republic of Bulgaria accepted the invitation

¹ <https://www.vesti.bg/bulgaria/sylzi-i-entuziazym-20-godini-bylgariia-v-nato-6194928>;
<https://www.mfa.bg/bg/3948>

to establish regular diplomatic relations with NATO. In December, the same year, Lyuben Gotsev made the first visit of a Bulgarian foreign minister to the Headquarters of the Alliance. In 1991, Manfred Wörner's visit to Bulgaria marked the first official visit of a NATO Secretary General to the country. At the end of the same year, at the invitation of the North Atlantic Council, Bulgarian President Zhelio Zhelev visited the Headquarters of the Alliance in Brussels.²

At the end of 1993, the Bulgarian National Assembly adopted by consensus a Declaration expressing the country's aspiration to join NATO and the Western European Union. The following year, 1994, Bulgarian President Zhelio Zhelev signed the Framework Document and Bulgaria joined the Partnership for Peace (PfP) program.³

The convinced position of Bulgaria for full membership in the Alliance was expressed by the President Petar Stoyanov during his visit to the Headquarters of the Alliance in 1997. At that time, a National Program for the preparation and accession of Bulgaria to NATO was adopted, and a Decree of the Council of Ministers created a mechanism for coordination of efforts for the preparation and joining the organization - Interdepartmental Committee for NATO Integration.⁴

On May 8, 1997, a Declaration of National Consent was adopted, which defined Bulgaria's accession to NATO as a major national priority. In the same year, with a Decision of the Council of Ministers, the Permanent Diplomatic Mission of Bulgaria to NATO and the West European Union was opened in Brussels. The first Head of Bulgarian Mission presented his credentials on 18 March 1998.⁵

A few years later, on November 21, 2002, Bulgaria and six other candidate countries - Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia - received an invitation to start negotiations to join NATO. The decision was announced by Alliance Secretary General George Robertson on the first day of the NATO summit in Prague.⁶ On this occasion, Bulgarian President Georgi Parvanov, stated that the Bulgarians accept *"this decision with deep satisfaction, because our efforts over the past 12 years, the results of difficult reforms and our contribution to regional stability and world security, have been appreciated"*.⁷ Bulgarian head of state assessed the prospect of further expansion of NATO as *"the best guarantee for lasting stabilization of the European southeast"*.⁸ On the same date, November 21, 2002, at a joint

² <https://www.mfa.bg/bg/3948>

³ <https://www.mfa.bg/bg/3948>

⁴ Ibidem.

⁵ Ibidem.

⁶ Ibidem.

⁷ <https://www.vesti.bg/bulgaria/sylzi-i-entuziazym-20-godini-bylgariia-v-nato-6194928>

⁸ Ibidem.

press conference in the Congress Center in Prague, Bulgarian President Georgi Parvanov and Bulgarian Prime Minister Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha expressed their gratitude to *"all those who over the past ten years have made efforts to realize the strategic goal of our diplomacy - the accession of Bulgaria to NATO"*.⁹

At the beginning of 2003, the first and second rounds of talks on Bulgaria's accession to the Alliance took place.

On March 26, 2003, the permanent representatives of the member countries signed a protocol for the accession of Bulgaria in Brussels. The document is an addition to the North Atlantic Treaty, which allows the accession of Bulgaria and expands the territorial scope of the treaty. After the Bulgarian Parliament voted on the ratification of the treaty on March 18, 2004, on March 29, 2004, at a ceremony at the US Department of the Treasury in Washington, the Prime Ministers of Bulgaria and six other Eastern European countries presented to the US Secretary of State Colin Powell the documents for the ratification of the North Atlantic Treaty. With this, Bulgaria and the other six countries became full members of NATO.¹⁰

On April 2, 2004, the official ceremony of raising the national flags of the seven new members took place in Brussels in front of the NATO headquarters. It was the fifth expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, founded on April 4, 1949 as a military alliance of 10 European countries, the United States and Canada.

In his speech before the meeting of the North Atlantic Council on the occasion of the acceptance of the seven new members of NATO, Bulgarian Foreign Minister Solomon Passy stated that the consensus between the political forces in Bulgaria during this 14-year period from the beginning of the 90s, when the beginning of Bulgaria's path to NATO started, was achieved thanks to great efforts, and if in 1990 the followers of this then "heretical" idea were less than 15 percent of society, then in 2004 over 70 percent of Bulgarian citizens supported the accession of Bulgaria to NATO.¹¹

Celebrating the twentieth anniversary of Bulgaria's membership in NATO

On February 1, 2024, a decision of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria adopted the *"National program with initiatives for the celebration in 2024 r. on the 20th anniversary of the membership of the Republic of Bulgaria in NATO"*.

According to the text of the program, the Council of Ministers approved a number of initiatives to mark the anniversary all around the country and abroad during the whole of 2024

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹ Ibidem.

year. These celebrations are linked by a comprehensive concept and common messages that *"demonstrate Bulgaria's belonging to the largest and most successful political-military union in history and to the single community of shared values, interests and readiness for mutual protection."*¹²

The program was developed on the initiative of the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Maria Gabriel by an Interdepartmental Working Group with the participation of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Defense, Interior, Education and Science, Finance, Innovation and Growth and the Council of Ministers.

In the celebration program, along with the events to mark the anniversary of Bulgaria's accession to the Alliance, initiatives and an accompanying information campaign are planned throughout the year, with the aim of increasing the understanding, especially among the young generation, of the essence and goals of NATO, for the positives for Bulgaria from membership in the organization, as well as to *"dispel the circulated fake news and narratives, and build resistance against external influence, information manipulation and disinformation."*¹³ Initiatives outside Sofia, in a number of municipalities around the country, are also planned.

Together with the National Program in 2024 an international program of celebrations will also be carried out, in line with emerging events abroad, including on the basis of initiatives on current proposals by the Bulgarian diplomatic missions. The opportunities for joint celebrations in places with the countries with which Bulgaria is celebrating together the anniversary of NATO membership will also be used.¹⁴

By decree, the Council of Ministers also approved additional expenses under the budget of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for 2024 in the amount of up to 76,530 euros, which had to be used to finance the implementation of the National Program with initiatives to mark in 2024 the 20- th anniversary of Bulgaria's membership in NATO events.¹⁵

The politicians' assessment of Bulgaria's accession to NATO 20 years later

On the eve of the celebration of the anniversary of Bulgaria's accession to the North Atlantic Treaty, a publication has been published on the website of the Bulgarian Council of Ministers, which stated that *"as a family of shared values, today NATO guarantees the peace*

¹² <https://www.gov.bg/bg/prestsentar/zasedaniya-na-ms/dneven-red-na-zasedanie-na-ministerskiya-savet-na-31-01-2024-g>

¹³ Ibidem.

¹⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁵ <https://www.gov.bg/bg/prestsentar/zasedaniya-na-ms/dneven-red-na-zasedanie-na-ministerskiya-savet-na-22-02-2024-g>

and security of 32 member countries and over one billion citizens."¹⁶ The official accession of Bulgaria to the Alliance on March 29, 2004 was assessed as *"a key historical moment, because NATO provides the most significant guarantees for our independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, contributing to the free and democratic development of our country."*¹⁷ The official position of the Bulgarian government is that *"the unity of the Alliance and the strong transatlantic relationship are important prerequisites for the future and prosperity of the Allies, because over the years we have proven that only together we can deal with crises, challenges and security threats."*¹⁸

According to the "National Program" adopted by the Council of Ministers, under the auspices of the government, on March 29, the Diplomatic Institute of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, together with the Information Center of the Ministry of Defense, the Atlantic Club in Bulgaria and the Sofia Security Forum organized a national conference at the Central Military Club on topic *"20 years of Bulgaria in NATO: Because we are stronger together"*.

The same day, the commemoration of the anniversary continued with a concert entitled *"20 years of Bulgaria in NATO"*, organized by the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Guards Representative Brass Band, the Representative Ensemble of the Armed Forces of the National Guard and the NATO Jazz Band, which is visiting Bulgaria for the first time, took part in the concert. The Jazz Band is part of the International Orchestra of the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SHAPE).

Among the official participants of the conference *"20 years of Bulgaria in NATO: Because we are stronger together"* were the President of the Republic of Bulgaria Rumen Radev, the Prime Minister Nikolay Denkov, the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Maria Gabriel, as well as the Minister of Defense Todor Tagarev. The celebration of the anniversary of Bulgaria's membership in NATO provided an opportunity for the head of state and the government to assess, review and address the importance and role of NATO for Bulgaria in contemporary world.

Here are the highlights of their positions expressed during their keynote speeches:

In his speech at the national conference, President Rumen Radev highlighted the historical contribution and organizational efforts of a number of institutions, Bulgarian diplomacy and our allies, for Bulgaria's accession to NATO and the importance of our country's

¹⁶ <https://www.gov.bg/bg/prestentari/novini/s-konferentsiya-i-tarzhestven-kontsert-zapochvat-proyavite-povod-20-godini-balgariya-v-nato>

¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁸ Ibidem.

belonging to an area of shared democratic values, freedom and peace, respect for human rights and the rule of law.

The President pointed out that the supreme efforts of generations of statesmen, politicians, diplomats, soldiers, and public figures have been made for the country's membership in NATO.

According to the head of state, Bulgaria's membership in NATO is above all a responsibility towards its own security, and this means building adequate and modern defense capabilities. President Radev defined as extremely wrong the narrative from the first years of the country's accession to the Alliance, that there is no need to make efforts for modernization and military exercises, since *"NATO will protect us and there is someone to watch over our security"*. Rumen Radev called for the continuation of common efforts to place defense issues at the center of society in order to solve the acute personnel shortage, which is dangerously deepening, as well as regarding the debate on the military training of citizens.

The Bulgarian president emphasized also that after decades, the strategic concept of the Alliance has finally returned to its real and most important mission - guaranteeing the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of the member countries. This requires speeding up the process of modernization of the Bulgarian Armed Forces, deepening the relationship between defense science and industry and greater investments in the field of defense. According to Ruman Radev, allocating 2% of GDP to defense in the context of current crises and challenges should not be seen as a ceiling, because many member states allocate 2.5%, even 3% of their GDP as necessary to guarantee their defense. Bulgarian President also pointed out that the program for investment projects of the Bulgarian Army until 2032, which was optimized for 6 months by the current government, was finally submitted to the parliament on November 30, but not adopted yet by the National Assembly.¹⁹

In his speech at the conference, Prime Minister Nikolay Denkov stated that joining NATO was the first and greatest achievement of Bulgaria in its recent history after 1989, which predetermined the clear direction of the country's development and *"so expected by generations return to the family of European democracies"*.²⁰ According to Denkov, 75 years after its founding, NATO has proven that it can successfully adapt to the threats and challenges that have recently increased. At the same time, according to him, "united force is the most powerful message for potential aggressors - unification makes us more protected and safer". In the words

¹⁹ <https://m.president.bg/bg/news7681/prezidentat-radev-chlenstvoto-v-nato-e-otgovornost-kam-sobstvenata-ni-sigurnost-a-tova-oznachava-izgrazhdaneto-na-adekvatni-i-savremenni-otbranitelni-sposobnosti.html>

²⁰ <https://www.gov.bg/bg/prestentar/novini/premierat-nikolay-denkov-prisaedinyavaneto-kam-nato-e-parvoto-i-nay-golyamo-postizhenie-na-balgariya-v-nay-novata-ni-istoria>

of the Bulgarian Prime Minister, the expansion of the Alliance is essentially *"expansion of the territory of democracy, the rule of law, peace and security in all their dimensions"*, which is why *"there is no way we can have economic, energy, social, health, educational and administrative sustainability, without the necessary guarantees for preserving the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Bulgaria"*. According to Denkov, Bulgaria got all this thanks to its admission to NATO on March 29, 2004.²¹

In his speech, the Bulgarian Prime Minister also emphasized the missed opportunities in the last 10 years. In his words, *"Bulgaria could have advanced with the modernization of its armed forces, if defense spending had not been reduced to just over 1% of GDP between 2011 and 2018, [...] while at the same time having a surplus for the Kremlin's projects such as Turkish Stream and to stimulate corruption in Bulgaria"*. The prime minister pointed out that Bulgaria could have been energy independent and not serve the sick geopolitical ambitions of the Kremlin, including thereby supporting the military aggression against Ukraine. According to Denkov, *"Democracy still wins in Bulgaria. And it wins precisely because of the tireless work of those who contributed to Bulgaria being once again part of the family of developed democracies as a member of NATO and the EU. This was the conscious responsibility of those of our predecessors who did not succumb to the corrupt temptations of the Kremlin."*²²

In his speech, the Bulgarian Prime Minister was very clear that Bulgaria cannot afford to miss the next 10 years of NATO adaptation and Bulgaria's priority task is to be an active participant in this process and, in addition to relying on collective capabilities in all aspects of security and defense, it must develop its own capabilities, which is only possible through a clear vision, a consistent and unwavering policy, and by finally overcoming and breaking once and for all the chains and networks of corrupt dependencies existing during the years of the transition period.²³

In conclusion, Prime Minister Denkov stated that *"The fact that today the Kremlin is waging an aggressive hybrid war against Bulgaria is direct evidence that democracy has won in our country - and Bulgaria's accession to NATO and the EU plays a major role in this."* In his words, it is the Alliance that guarantees the country's security through collective defense, shared responsibility, the strong transatlantic relationship, and NATO's adaptive power to changing security challenges and threats.²⁴

²¹ Ibidem.

²² Ibidem.

²³ Ibidem.

²⁴ Ibidem.

In her address to the conference, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Maria Gabriel stated that *"NATO is a community of shared democratic values and principles, of collective responsibility to address challenges and threats to Euro-Atlantic security, a union of active citizen participation and a common vision for development."* According to her assessment, the last 20 years can be called a *'success story'*. In her words, *"For Bulgaria, joining NATO was not only a strategic foreign policy goal. It was an inspiration for several generations of Bulgarians, an incentive to carry out important reforms, to affirm democratic values"*.²⁵ The Deputy Prime Minister also emphasized that during these two decades, Bulgaria has managed to establish itself as a full-fledged and active participant in the implementation of the three key tasks of the Alliance - collective defense, crisis prevention and management, security through cooperation. In conclusion, Maria Gabriel expressed gratitude and appreciation to the generations of statesmen who *"made the geostrategic choice for Bulgaria to become part of the North Atlantic Pact,"* which, according to her, is *"a union of countries that together protect their security, freedom and economic progress."*²⁶

During the conference, the Deputy Prime Minister awarded with jubilee medals made on the occasion of the anniversary, for special merits for the acceptance of our country into NATO, to Petar Stoyanov, President of the Republic of Bulgaria (1997-2002); Dr. Solomon Passy, Minister of Foreign Affairs (2001-2005); Ambassador Lubomir Ivanov, first representative of Bulgaria in NATO, etc.²⁷

At the opening of the conference, the Minister of Defense of Bulgaria, Todor Tagarev, also gave a keynote speech. In it, he drew attention to the fact that for many years Bulgaria's membership in NATO was perceived *"as a guarantee owed to us by others, and not as our own responsibility"*, but in recent years, *"as a result of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, Bulgaria has already realized what it means to be a member of NATO and what it means to be a worthy member of NATO - a union in which everyone must bear responsibility according to their capacity and work with others in order to guarantee our security together."*²⁸ . Tagarev stated that Bulgaria is working for closer integration within NATO and for the expansion of the alliance's presence on its territory. The Minister of Defense drew attention to the fact that Bulgaria participates in all planning processes of the Alliance and there are participants in some elements of the NATO command and control system in other countries.

²⁵ <https://www.mfa.bg/bg/news/40622>

²⁶ Ibidem.

²⁷ Ibidem.

²⁸ <https://www.mod.bg/bg/>

In conclusion, Tagarev expressed confidence that the European pillar in NATO is about to be strengthened, which, in his words, means *"Significant strengthening and assuming much greater responsibility than what we are used to in Europe."* Finally, the Minister of Defense stated that Bulgaria *"has never been more dignified in NATO"*.²⁹

The positions of the Bulgarian government on the occasion of the anniversary of Bulgaria's accession to NATO are indicative of the dominant assessment and balance regarding the meaning and role of the country's participation in this military-political union over the past twenty years. Today, the majority of the Bulgarian society is fully convinced that Bulgaria's membership in NATO has no alternative, and they consider this the only guarantee for the country's national security and defense. Current data from a survey on support for the Alliance among citizens in NATO member countries shows that 55% of Bulgarians would vote for the country to remain part of NATO, 31% would vote for leaving, and 14% have no opinion on the matter. The survey is part of NATO's annual report for 2023. It shows that in the last year and since the beginning of Russian aggression in Ukraine, support for NATO has increased.³⁰

Conclusion

With the national conference *"20 years of Bulgaria in NATO: Because we are stronger together"* held on March 29, the beginning of large-scale celebrations commemorating this anniversary was given. The same day the celebrations continued with a concert under the title *"20 years of Bulgaria in NATO"*, organized by the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

However, this was only the beginning, since according to the National Program adopted by the Council of Ministers, the celebrations of the anniversary year 2024 will continue with various events throughout the country and throughout the whole year. It is clear from the program, that the purpose of these mass celebrations is obviously to popularize NATO among Bulgarian society and strengthen Bulgarian support for the Alliance. Whether this goal will be completed successfully will only become clear at a later stage.

²⁹ Ibidem.

³⁰ <https://www.standartnews.com/balgariya-obshtestvo/balgarite-haresvat-nato-iskat-da-ostanem-stranachlenka-554920.html>