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BULGARIA'S GEOPOLITICAL AND GEOECONOMIC REORIENTATION (1989–2019)

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Abstract

Until the late 1980s and the dawn of the end of the Eastern Bloc, communist Bulgaria was considered to be the closest ally of the Soviet Union. Now, 30 years later, the Bulgarian state has been integrated into the main Euro-Atlantic organisations. Taking these radical changes as its starting point, this article outlines the process and consequences of post-1989 geopolitical and geoeconomic reorientation of Bulgaria. The aim was also to present the main geopolitical challenges in Bulgaria's relations with Russia and Turkey. These states have been influencing the political, economic and cultural development of Bulgaria for centuries. The effects of their influence have remained problematic to this day. As Bulgaria remains a country with a complex geopolitical position, it continues its twentieth-century strategy and tries to maintain balance between its own national interest and the influence of the main centres of power. The author draws particular attention to the fact that the model based on the variability of geopolitical priorities was once again confirmed in the analysed period. This model is not only based on pragmatism in relations with the outside world, which is traditional for the Bulgarian political elite, but is also dependant on the temporary distribution of power within the Balkan geopolitical knot. It seems that the model will continue to be valid, at least in the near future.

Key words

Bulgaria, Balkans, European Union, Russia, geopolitical reorientation, energy geopolitics.

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1. Introduction

2019 marks the 30th anniversary of the beginning of democratic changes in Bulgaria. While neighbouring Romania underwent a bloody revolution, and Yugoslavia, a series of violent civil wars, Bulgaria managed to go through the system change peacefully. There was a fundamental shift in the geopolitical position

of Bulgaria in that period. Ideological priorities have been re-evaluated and the political and economic relations were thoroughly reoriented geographically. The same happened to the Bulgarian governments' approach to internal geopolitics. The most fundamental changes occurred in the state's policy towards its Muslim minority, especially towards the Turks. In the mid-1980s, at the end of the communist

era, the state apparatus began to use various measures aimed at denationalising and assimilating this population, a significant part of which was forced to flee to Turkey. As a result, Bulgaria was internationally isolated. However, when Todor Zhivkov was removed from power, the discriminatory laws were very quickly removed from the books. Bulgaria has become an example of ethnic and religious tolerance (Lütem, 1999; Anagnostou, 2005), which has undoubtedly become a great asset in the process of Euro-Atlantic integration.

Given the fundamental transformation of Bulgaria's geopolitical position on the map of Eurasia, the article attempts to formulate a synthetic overview of the results of this evolution, indicating the most significant changes which have taken place in 1989–2019. It is an important and timely issue, as 30 years after the political changes, there has been a recent increase in Eurocepticism. Just like Poland and Hungary, Bulgaria is influenced by an internal, heated debate over advantages and disadvantages of its presence within the European community and the issue of its national sovereignty. One of the main reasons for addressing this topic in this article is the fact that publications devoted to the geopolitics and foreign policy of contemporary Bulgaria are few and far between in English-language literature and their scope is often limited to repeating general stereotypes. There have been several comparative analyses of Bulgaria and Romania with an emphasis on the countries' economic problems, their difficulties with adopting the EU regulations and their contribution to NATO military operations (e.g. Linden, 2009), as well as publications focused on Bulgaria's role in the security policy in the Balkans and the Black Sea region (Tashev, 2005; Triantaphyllou, 2007) and Bulgaria's place in modern energy geopolitics (Tchalakov et al., 2013; Maltby, Hiteva, 2017; Tchalakov, Mitev, 2019).

This article presents and discusses the ideas of selected Bulgarian geopoliticians and takes into account the deeper historical context, which is necessary to understand the complex geopolitical situation of Bulgaria and its centuries-old attempts to conduct multi-vector relations on a European and global scale. Without this context, knowledge of Bulgaria's geopolitical identity would be not even incomplete but simply devoid of objectivity and cognitive depth. These are the factors that are necessary to predict possible scenarios of future actions of the state on the international stage.

2. Bulgaria's geopolitical identification

The geopolitical orientation of each state, Bulgaria's in particular, depends on the dynamics of European and world geopolitics, as well as internal political and ideological conditions. In the era dominated by the confrontation between the Eastern and Western Bloc (1945–1990), the socialist identity of Bulgaria, and of other Eastern Bloc countries, was the only applicable or rather the only possible option. There were no alternatives during this period, because there was only one geopolitical division in Europe – into socialist and capitalist states.

Understanding Bulgaria's geopolitics is impossible without knowledge of its long and complicated history (the beginnings of the Bulgarian state date back to the end of the seventh century), which is inextricably linked to Bulgaria's location within the Balkan geopolitical knot, between Europe and Asia, at the meeting point between Orthodoxy, Western Christianity and Islam. The interests of great powers have always collided within this complex space. These conditions and complex environment, especially after the end of the nineteenth century, have made it impossible to maintain a clear geopolitical line, with clearly defined allies and enemies, for a longer period of time. It is particularly true in the case of small and medium-sized countries that are unable to conduct independent geopolitical strategies and always have to take into account the interests of larger, economically and militarily stronger countries when defining their own objectives. As noted by S. Siedlecka and M. Sułkowski (2017), Bulgarian compasses point in the West-East direction, where West means technology and money, and East means raw materials.

V. Krăstev (2008) emphasised that Bulgaria's position in the geopolitical structure of the world is determined by several objective premises: the geographical location of the state's territory, the neighbouring geopolitical regions (Eurasia, Central Europe, Western Europe, Middle East, etc.); its close proximity of conflict-driven and unstable regions, and location in the heart of the Balkan geopolitical knot. The key elements of Bulgaria's geopolitical potential include the size of its territory (111 thousand km²) and population (7 million people in 2018). Another indicator is GDP, which shows the country's global economic position. According to the World Bank, Bulgaria's GDP amounted to USD 65 billion in 2018, which gave the country 74th place among 205 countries across the world (The World Bank, nd). All these basic data indicate that the rank of Bulgaria's geopolitical position is relatively low, both on the global and continental scale. The state's geopolitical

orientation is highly dependent on strong external influences, mainly those of great powers (Krästev, 2008).

In the early 1990s, many varied, foremost non-standard suggestions concerning the future place of Bulgaria within the political and civilization geography of Europe were made both by politicians and academics. The place dictates specific geopolitical priorities of the state. In the opinion of political scientist Kiril Neshev, Bulgaria's old strategic path led either in the direction of north-west (Germany) or north-east (Russia). However, according to Neshev, these geostrategic directions did not bring much benefit to the country. He did not recommend completely ignoring the north-west and north-east axes in the new post-1990 reality, but recommended supplementing them with another geopolitical direction – south and southwest, aimed at such countries as Greece, Spain or Portugal. This political scientist justified his idea by stating that there are more similarities between Bulgarians and southern Europeans not only in terms of their temperament and way of life, but also in the scope of tradition, culture and economy (Neshev, 1994).

In one of the few monographs devoted to the political geography of Bulgaria, Todor Hristov combined an analysis of the geopolitical situation of the state with an attempt to formulate a list of priorities for its geostrategy and foreign policy. According to the author, Bulgaria's main assets are its Black Sea coast, which it shares with significant countries, i.e. Russia, Ukraine and Turkey, the fact that the national territory belongs to the Danube's geopolitical and economic axis, and its location on the routes which connect transport corridors with the Baltic region, Belarus, Russia, Moldova, Romania and the Aegean Sea, as well as Turkey and the Middle East with the Balkans and Central and Western Europe (Hristov, 2001). In the context of the Macedonian-Albanian conflict, which began at the dawn of the twenty-first century, T. Hristov proposed a non-standard solution – reorganisation of Macedonia on a federal basis or even establishment of a federation composed of Bulgaria, Serbia and Macedonia.

E. Kazakov, a specialist in foreign policy, whose research and analytical skills were shaped under the influence of the French school of geopolitics, highlighted two fundamental aspects of the impact of the new post-1990 geopolitical situation on Bulgaria's foreign policy. First of all, in the strategic foreign policy approach, there is a unanimous agreement as to the state's main goal – belonging to the European Union. Secondly, the structure of Bulgaria's foreign policy and geostrategic thinking remains divided in an antagonistic way. The main geostrategic dividing

line passes between "neutralists" and "atlanticists". Big differences are also noticeable between "right-wing" and "left-wing" nationalism. "Left-wing" nationalism sees the Orthodox religion and Slavic solidarity as values, which makes Russia, Serbia and Greece its natural main allies. On the other hand, "right-wing" nationalism is excessively focused, especially in historic terms, on Macedonia, defending the thesis of the Bulgarian character of its Slavic population. In the context of the "right-wing" nationalism, Bulgaria's opponents and allies are defined solely on the basis of the principle stating that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend". As emphasised by Kazakov, this is the basis upon which right-wing nationalists have identified their enemies (Yugoslavia/Serbia, Greece and Russia) and allies (Germany, Croatia and Turkey) almost throughout the entire twentieth century (Kazakov, 2007).

Taking into account the dynamics of the situation in Eurasia and Bulgaria's position in the international arena, S. Ralchev (2015) describes Bulgaria as a state with dichotomous identity. On the one hand, its membership in NATO and the EU places Bulgaria among the countries of the Euro-Atlantic geopolitical circle whose objectives have been growing increasingly divergent from Russia's since 2013–2014, slowly turning into open distrust and political hostility. On the other hand, the country remains relatively strongly dependant on Russia. This dependency is determined by several factors: energy dependence (e.g.: Bulgaria imports 90-100% of its natural gas from Russia; since 1999 its sole oil refinery is owned by Russian Lukoil); Bulgaria is dependent on spare parts and maintenance of its military equipment, most of it Russian-made; Russian tourists are among the most numerous and well-off foreign tourists in Bulgaria. The fact that relations between the countries of the EU-Russia-Turkey have chilled and became more ambiguous has a clear negative impact on Bulgaria as a country located on the border between East and West. The shift is in turn motivated by the fact that whenever Bulgarian governments and their advisers define strategic geopolitical priorities, they have to strive to maintain equilibrium between: (1) its current commitments to its allies and democratic values; (2) two Eurasian powers with which Bulgarian society has very deep historical connections and relations, which are additionally determined by geography, demography and economy (especially in the energy sector). It can therefore be concluded that although the importance of some of the above-mentioned premises can be slowly minimised, they cannot be completely eliminated from geopolitical and geohistorical awareness of the Bulgarian society.

3. From the closest ally of the Soviet Union to a NATO member. Bulgaria's re-positioning in the European and global geopolitical space

1989 is the beginning of a new historical phase for the geopolitics of Bulgaria. However, it is worth to start by first identifying the difference between the current geopolitics and the strategies which dominated in the previous decades of the twentieth century. From the end of the nineteenth century to the end of World War II, Bulgaria was politically, militarily and economically connected with Germany and Austria, which it supported during both world wars. In September 1944, the communists, who had hitherto constituted the main force acting against the pro-German regime, seized control of the country with the help of the Red Army, which did not in fact carry out war operations on the territory of Bulgaria. Tens of thousands of pre-war politicians, entrepreneurs and intellectuals who were associated or suspected of having ties with Western European countries, not only fascist Germany, were removed from power, and often killed. This was the context in which a new socialist identity was imposed on Bulgaria, and the state spent 45 years as a member of the communist bloc. At that time, Bulgaria became the state which had the closest relation with the Soviet Union.

After 1989, a new radical concept was formed in accordance to which Bulgarians had to make a "civilisational choice" between the "liberal and rich" Euro-Atlantic West and the "totalitarian and poorer" Russia. The freedom, prosperity and security of Bulgarians depended, and still depends, on this choice. Since the beginning of the 1990s, the state's foreign policy has gradually begun to support the priorities of Western powers and their approach to solving urgent international problems, including those taking place beyond the Bulgarian western border. The old ideology of the Slavic and Orthodox "brotherhood" was forgotten, giving way to cool-headed pragmatism, and the government supported NATO's intervention in Yugoslavia in the spring of 1999. This position was most accurately summed up in the then political slogan – "NATO – yes, Milošević – no". The right-wing nationalists (in Kazakov's understanding of the term) were in power at that point. Still, most of the population strongly opposed the use of military to resolve the conflict. However, after the end of the Cold War, Bulgaria's traditional enemy and historical partitioner, Turkey, became one of its most significant geopolitical and geoeconomic partners. Since the very beginning of Bulgaria's political transformation, the country's bilateral relations with Ankara have been based on an unprecedentedly positive

and open dialogue. The two countries are also connected by their membership in NATO (Mihaylov, 2010a, 2010b).

After the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, Bulgaria had to reorient itself in the new security situation and decided to focus on the NATO membership. After joining this organisation in 2004, Bulgaria became a member of the largest military alliance in the world, seven years after the country's membership aspirations had been first announced by its then president. Political circles which immediately after 1989 opposed such a solution, fearing that it may lead to a direct confrontation with Russia, have long reconciled with Bulgaria's NATO membership. The country took part in military operations in Afghanistan, Iraq and Afghanistan, and four military bases were created on the territory of Bulgaria, primarily used by the US. Those who oppose NATO bases in Bulgaria, usually leftist in their political orientations, are critical of foreign bases, arguing that even during the communist era, there was no Soviet army, representing the "Big Brother" of the time, stationed in Bulgaria. A similar response arose in mid-2019, when a contract was signed for the purchase of eight American F-16 Block 70 fighters, which are to be delivered by the end of 2023, with eight more arriving in the future. The public opinion does not oppose the idea of purchasing a new generation of fighters for the Bulgarian air force to replace the outdated and depleted Russian air planes. Still, a heat discussion arose in response to the high price of the fighters (\$ 1.256 billion), which was especially strongly criticised by left-wing president, Rumen Radev, a general and military pilot. Additionally, some part of the public opinion opposed the deal due to unfavourable conditions, i.e. the requirement to prepay the entire amount, which forced an update of the state budget.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, external relations with the European Union are the most important in both political and economic terms. The rapprochement and integration with the European community was the leading priority of the state after the fall of communism (tab. 1). When Bulgaria acceded to the EU on 1 January 2007, some state politicians described this event as the most achievement achievement in the long national history. Compared to the first half of the twentieth century, the direction of the Western Bulgarian geopolitics was significantly diversified in the post-communist period. There have been some changes in relations with the West, which were dictated by the new distribution of forces within this geopolitical and cultural circle. The United States's presence in the Southeastern Europe became significant only

in the 1990s. Washington took over from Germany, France and the UK, who used to set the pace for Europe for more than a century, especially in the field of security. These European states' indecisive reaction and policy towards the Yugoslav Wars, the EU's in particular, was a sure signal that, in both political and military terms, Western European powers' role in this region would decrease. Traditionally, for Bulgaria, orientation towards the West meant an alliance with Germany, because their geostrategic interests were divergent with the interests of Bulgaria's regional enemies. France, in turn, traditionally supported the aspirations of Romania, and Serbia/Yugoslavia, while the United Kingdom offered its backing to Greece. Despite some economic benefits, such as supply of modern military equipment or fostering of social modernisation of Bulgaria, the alliances from the first half of the twentieth century have always resulted in failures. Sofia failed to achieve its geostrategic goals in their entirety, losing territories to Romania, Yugoslavia and Greece.

It is worth mentioning Bulgaria's relations with another power. In 1985 Sir Jeffrey Howe became the first British foreign secretary to visit Bulgaria in the twentieth century (Curtis (ed.), 1992). As K. Metodiev stresses, Bulgaria has never been among Britain's foreign policy priorities as it has been underlined in numerous statements by British diplomats, researchers and politicians. All neighbour countries, with no exception, traditionally have maintained a closer relationship to London. British-Bulgarian relations started to change gradually, together with Bulgarian application for a membership in EU in the middle of 1990s (Metodiev, 2015). But, in spite of this changes which were mainly symbolic ones, political and economic relations with the United Kingdom do not matter much for Sofia as they are with Germany, United States, Russia or Turkey. The exception is the process of formation of a relatively large Bulgarian emigrant population in Great Britain in the last 10–15 years.

Despite its membership in the EU and NATO, Bulgaria remains a country where the influences and interests of several geopolitical centres intersect. This divisions are visible in the stated geopolitical priorities of the country's leading political parties and in the politics and positions adopted by many mass media and non-governmental organisations in international politics. Some of the most active foundations and media operating in the country are financed by Western foundations (mainly German and American) and use anti-Russian rhetoric when commenting on ideological, military and economic issues. In turn, other institutions are directly or indirectly financed by Russian entities, especially by known oligarchs or energy companies operating in Bulgaria. They argue that deepening cooperation with Russia would bring economic benefits to the country and work to undermine Bulgaria's attempts to deepen its Euro-Atlantic integration. A serious scandal occurred in September 2019, when the leaders of the so-called "Russophiles", considered to be one of the largest NGOs in the country, were accused of spying on behalf of Russia and trying to turn Bulgaria away from the West.

Relations with Russia have always been an important element of the national socio-psychological discourse. The only exceptions are Macedonia and the EU as a whole. There are more Russia-focused scientific and media publications than publications about any other country. It should be remembered that after several unsuccessful uprisings, Bulgaria finally gained its independence from the Ottoman Empire at the end of the nineteenth century with the help of Russia. Despite this, in the years immediately following the Russian-Turkish war (1877–1878), there was rapid reorientation towards Germany and Austria-Hungary. This behaviour is in line with Bulgaria's traditional pragmatism in the international sphere, not only in relation to political, but also military and economic issues.

After 1990, relations with Russia went into a slump. However, despite the chosen pro-Western

Tab. 1. Major post-1989 events of Bulgaria's geopolitics and its international relations

Date	Event
10 November 1989	The collapse of the communist regime; Todor Zhivkov is removed from power
04 April 1991	Establishment of the Bulgarian Atlantic Club – the first non-government organisation of this type in a non-NATO country
14 February 1994	Bulgaria joins the Partnership for Peace programme
14 December 1995	Application for EU membership
15 February 2000	Commencement of negotiations concerning Bulgaria's membership in the European Union
29 March 2004	Bulgaria joins NATO
01 January 2007	Accession to the European Union

Source: elaborated by the Author.

course, Bulgaria's geopolitics and some of its tactical foreign policy decisions always had a very specific character in the context of relations with Russia. Unlike Poland, Lithuania, Estonia or Ukraine, Bulgaria has never been part of the Russian Empire or the Soviet Union. For this and other reasons, the image of Russia does not evoke as strong anti-Russian resentments. Bulgarians and Russians share a common religion and use the same Cyrillic alphabet, which, importantly, originates from medieval Bulgaria. However, it does not mean that Bulgarians would always opt for a political or economic alliance with Russia. It should also be taken into account that there have always been large, determined and influential anti-Russian circles in Bulgaria, which did not accept Russia's political and social system or any further rapprochement between the two countries in terms of politics and security. The exception was the communist period, when pro-Western groups were eliminated from social life.

During the post-communist transition, and especially after joining the EU, a political and media discourse developed which criticised Bulgaria for its "insufficient gratitude" towards Russia for its role in the revival of the Bulgarian state in the second half of the nineteenth century. Key representatives of the Russian state and society tend to have a paternalistic or even disregarding attitude towards Bulgaria. For example, in 2016, Pyotr Tolstoy, a well-known TV journalist and MP, representing the United Russia party, almost caused a diplomatic scandal when he stated the following: "We will soon buy the entire Bulgaria. We have already bought a half of the coast" (Ruski deputat...).

Out of all other global powers, the one which shows the greatest potential for political and economic influence is China, which has only recently become more active in Bulgaria. Just as in the case of the other Balkan states, Beijing's influence is mainly limited to the economic sphere, especially projects concerning energy, infrastructure, as well as rail and sea transport (Sokolov, 2016). At the beginning of the twenty-first century, China has become one of Bulgaria's top ten trading partners, mainly as the result of significant imports from this country. The trade balance is clearly negative from Bulgaria's point of view, with the deficit of almost 300 million dollars (2018).

4. Zero problems with neighbours. The regional geopolitical relations of Bulgaria

It is worth to begin this section by commenting briefly on the regional aspects of Bulgarian geopolitics, although they are not the primary topic of this article. After all, it is a sphere in which Bulgaria still has some resources and persuasive tools to conduct its own policy in the field of energy, transport, protection of minority rights, and regulation of disputed historical issues, etc. With the exception of Turkey, other countries with which Bulgaria shares a common border (Macedonia, Serbia, Romania and Greece) are inhabited mostly by nations which are ethnically, linguistically or religiously related to Bulgarians.

Because of Turkey's growing significance, it is very important for Bulgaria, and the Balkans as a whole, to maintain a constructive dialogue between Brussels and Ankara (Sokolov, 2016). This is even truer nowadays when the migration route from the Middle East to Western Europe passes through Bulgaria, and there are about 3 million refugees in Turkey. Bulgaria itself was affected by the refugee crisis, which reached its peak in 2015, when the largest number of refugees submitted their applications for asylum. In the face of the great number of refugees, the Bulgarian state built costly, over 230-kilometre-long fence on its border with Turkey.

A new, ambitious course of Turkey's foreign policy emerged in the 1980s. Turkey has shown great progress in science, technology and economics, becoming a modern role model for the countries of the former Ottoman sphere of influence. From the Turkish perspective, those are precisely the countries on which Turkey should focus in its geopolitical efforts, especially those related to economy (Hinkova, 2014).

One of the most important conditions conducive to the Turkish influence on Bulgaria is the fact that the country has a large Turkish minority which represent about 9.0% of its population. Citing a study conducted among this ethnic minority, S. Hinkova (2014) noted that they have great respect for Turkey, especially ethnic Turks and Pomaks. What is more, respondents to the study emphasised Turkey's successful economic development and higher salaries earned by their relatives and friends who live in Turkey. The Muslim minority in Bulgaria unanimously considers Turkey to be a positive lifestyle model.

However, because of the 500-year rule of the Ottoman Empire over the Bulgarian lands and the inhibition of the country's civilisational development, the anti-Turkish ideology is one of the pillars of the modern Bulgarian identity. It is still firmly rooted in

people's consciousness (Mihaylov, 2015). Nonetheless, at the beginning of the twenty-first century Bulgaria is probably the only neighbour of Turkey that maintains normal relations with this country, meeting all the requirements required by the modern democratic standards (Lütem, 1999; Bishku, 2003; Rusev, 2006). Many post-1989 Bulgarian governments and most political groups have demonstrated openness and willingness to cooperate with Turkey. This is a further proof that pragmatism plays an important role in the Bulgarian geopolitics and foreign policy. However, the Bulgarian state and secret services are closely following some of the Turkish state's actions in the country, as Ankara finances Muslim parties and organisations in Bulgaria and regularly intervenes in parliamentary and local elections.

As M. Sokolov states (2016), while Turkey is a NATO member, its relationship with Moscow can change the political environment in the whole Balkan region. With realisation of Turkish Stream and the renewed friendship between Presidents Erdogan and Putin it is uncertain what this will mean for Bulgaria and the Balkan states.

Conceptually, instead of an open confrontation, in the first half of the 20th century, Bulgaria chose to apply the tactics of modern Turkey and its policy known as "zero problems with neighbours". This approach is evident, for example, in Bulgaria's approach towards Macedonia, which it accuses of falsifying history, but still treats much mildly than, for example, Greece. The exception to this rule was the above-mentioned lack of solidarity with Serbia during the breakup of Yugoslavia, although contemporary relations between the two countries are undoubtedly positive. Bulgaria's relations with Greece and Romania are also constructive and friendly. In the past, these two neighbouring countries and Serbia have been the traditional enemies of the state which together pursued anti-Bulgarian policy and in the twentieth century became the main obstacle on the path to the complete unification of the Bulgarian lands. Today, however, Bulgaria does not make any territorial claims against its neighbours (and neither do they) and managed to establish with them proper partnership-like relations within the EU and NATO.

Macedonia (North Macedonia) still remains the country which evokes the greatest emotional response in the context of Bulgaria's geopolitics. Historically, Bulgarians have long had a complex about Macedonia. This complex is among the biggest obstacles on Bulgaria's road to achieving its geopolitical goals (Pavlov, 1999). Bulgaria's relations with Macedonia gained new quality and dynamism after the breakup of Yugoslavia. At that time, the Bulgarian authorities demonstrated their independence

in the realm of foreign policy. Bulgaria became the first country in the world to recognize Macedonia's independence on 15 January 1992. Despite this gesture, many unresolved and controversial issues still plague the Bulgarian-Macedonian relations, especially matters regarding their common history, genesis of the language and identity of the Macedonian nation which has been traditionally treated in a paternalistic manner by Bulgarians, as a regional faction of the Bulgarian nation. Already in 2006, the then President and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bulgaria made it clear that the country's support for the European integration of Macedonia would depend on Skopje's willingness to pursue a policy of good neighbourly relations (Bozhinov, Stoyanova-Toneva, 2018). Even more so, as both the EU and NATO require their candidates for members to resolve all territorial disputes in the accession process.

The two agreements for friendships signed in 1999 and 2017 respectively were to help solve problems in the Bulgarian-Macedonian relations during the transformation years. The signing of these agreements was a testimony to the temporary goodwill of the leaders of both countries, but the documents did not resolve any of the difficult issues. According to V. Bozhinov and Y. Stoyanova-Toneva (2018), Bulgaria should set at least several requirements before signing any agreements for good neighbourly relations with Macedonia – renovation of Bulgarian cultural monuments, honouring the memory of thousands of Bulgarians who gave their lives in the struggle for national liberation, and stop of harassment of Macedonian citizens who identify as Bulgarians (police interrogations, dismissals from work, no possibility to freely express their views). Relations between Bulgaria and Macedonia should be regulated on the basis of bilateral agreements, which should become part of Macedonia's future EU accession treaty.

5. Reorientation of Bulgaria's economic ties and undecided attempts to change its energy geopolitics

As part of the global economy, Bulgaria has significantly diversified the number of its foreign trading partners. The change in geopolitical priorities went hand in hand with the diversification of export directions. Significantly, in 1985, Bulgaria maintained trading relations with 113 countries, while 20 years later (2005), the number of its trading partners increased to 206. 30 years after the system change, the national economy became more open and flexible (Nestorov, 2002).

Until 1990, the Soviet Union and the countries of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (fig. 1 and 2) dominated Bulgaria's foreign trade (84.5% of total export and 76.7% of total import). Russia's importance has been gradually decreasing until it was significantly reduced, mainly through the loss of the Russian/Soviet market for Bulgarian agricultural, pharmaceutical, electrotechnical and other products. As shown in fig. 3, in 2018, Russia's share in Bulgarian export amounted to mere 1.4%, which proves that the significance of this former main trading partner is now incomparably smaller, especially in comparison with Germany, and the EU countries in general.

The significant share of raw materials and energy resources is definitely a drawback of Bulgaria's foreign trade, with a clear trade deficit on the state's

side. The country's share in world trade is definitely weaker when it comes to consumer goods. A large part of the foreign trade deficit is caused by the negative trade balance with the post-Soviet countries, mainly with Russia and Ukraine, which supply 3/4 of all of Bulgaria's imported energy resources (Levkov, 2013).

In total, export to European Union countries amounts to more than 52.0% of all country's export, while import to the EU members represents over 70.0% (Fig. 4). Thus, Bulgaria also has a negative trade balance in relation to this group of countries. The share of EU countries in Bulgaria's trade in consumer goods is particularly high (over 70.0%) (Levkov, 2013).

Energy policy, especially the supply of Russian gas and oil, is one of the most critical issues in the

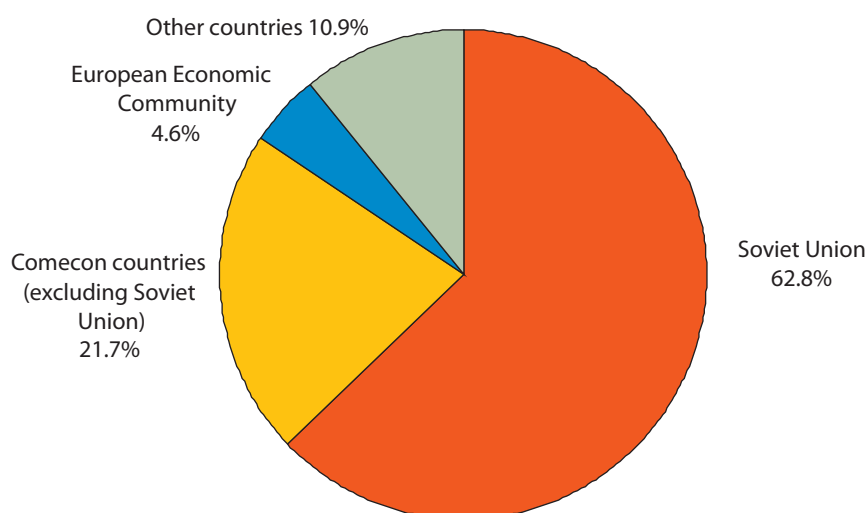


Fig. 1. Structure of Bulgaria's export in 1988, by economic partners

Source: elaborated by the Author on the basis of: National..., nd; Nestorov, 2002.

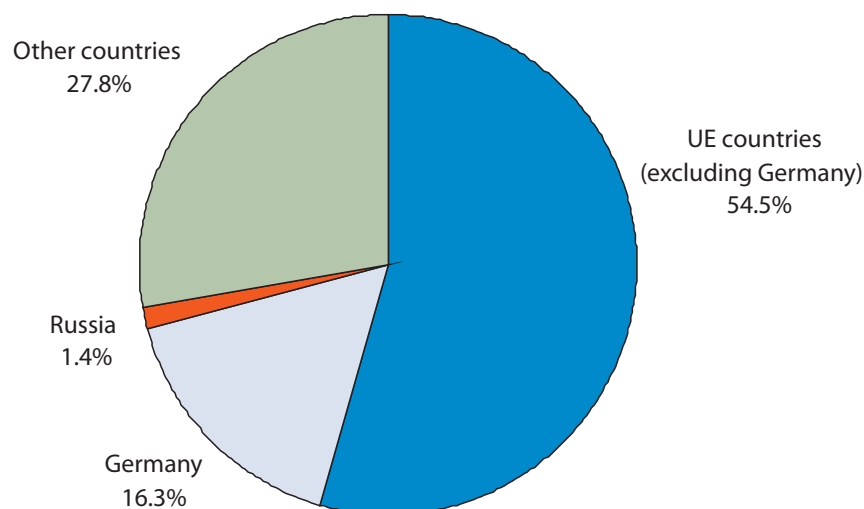


Fig. 2. Structure of Bulgaria's export in 2018, by economic partners

Source: elaborated by the Author on the basis of: National..., nd; Nestorov, 2002.

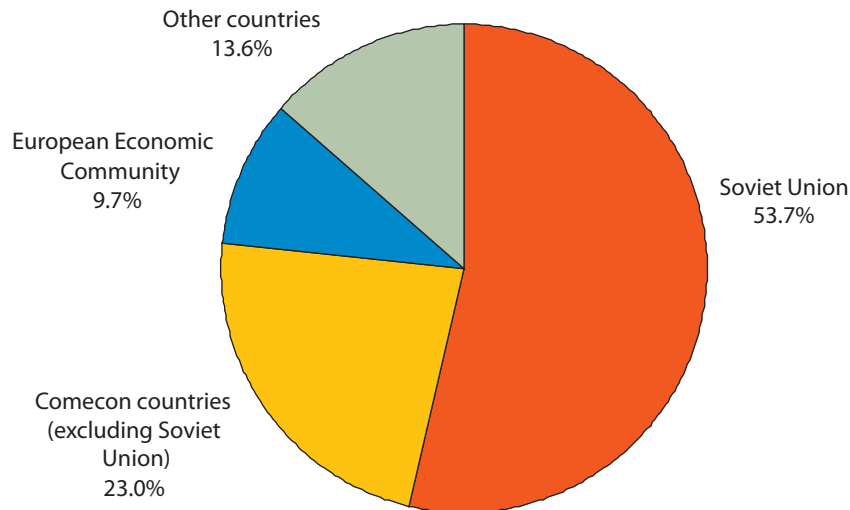


Fig. 3. Structure of Bulgaria's import in 1988, by economic partners

Source: elaborated by the Author on the basis of: National..., nd; Nestorov, 2002.

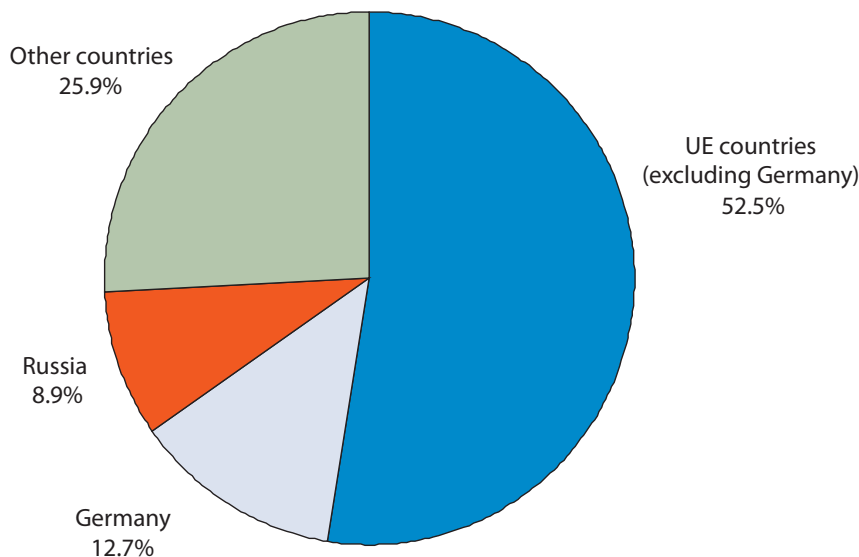


Fig. 4. Structure of Bulgaria's import in 2018, by economic partners

Source: elaborated by the Author on the basis of: National..., nd; Nestorov, 2002.

Bulgaria-EU-Russia triangle. The European Union, as the world's largest importer of the above-mentioned energy sources, seeks to diversify the supply sources. How do Bulgaria's interests and possibilities fit into this situation?

Although Bulgaria did not give up other energy projects, there was some rapprochement with Russia in the field of strategic energy projects during the presidency of left-leaning Georgi Parvanov (2002–2012). In 2008, the then president announced Bulgaria's winning "Grand Slam" strategy, which involved contracts signed with Russia for the construction of the South Stream gas pipeline, the Burgas-Alexandroupolis pipeline and the second Bulgarian nuclear power plant in Belene. These projects were to solidify Bulgaria's role as an energy centre in the Balkans. The Bulgarian state was to profit, especially

through the transit of Russian gas to Italy and Austria. Bulgaria and other member states felt the consequences of the imperfect EU energy policy in the winter of 2009, during suspension of the Russian gas supplies to Europe. Bulgaria was one of the most affected countries. It was a clear signal to join the debate concerning the common EU energy policy, as individual member states are unable to solve this problem on their own (Pargov et al., 2009). After breaks in supplies of Russian gas, which had a serious impact on the national economy, it became clear that the vision of Bulgaria's future as an energy centre of the Balkans would not be possible to implement in the near future.

The most important challenges for Bulgarian energy geopolitics include completion of the construction of the second nuclear power plant in Belene. In

2016, the International Court of Arbitration of the International Chamber of Commerce in Geneva issued a verdict that Bulgaria's National Electric Company must pay Russian company Rosatom 550 million euros for the ordered nuclear reactors. Bulgaria resigned from the purchase of these reactors after deciding to cancel the plan to construct the second nuclear power plant. Finally, in 2017, both Russian reactors were transported to Belene. After the tender announced by the Bulgarian government in mid-2019, several candidates submitted their tender bids for the power plant construction, including Rosatom, the Chinese National Nuclear Company, and Korean Hydro & Nuclear Power Co. Additionally, French company Framatome and General Electric are interested in supplying equipment for the new power plant.

Currently, there are several projects underway, at various implementation stages, whose objective is to diversify Bulgaria's gas suppliers. The "Balkan" gas hub project has received support from the European Commission. The goal of this project is to connect the most important gas pipelines in South-eastern Europe and to guarantee transparent access to a wide range of suppliers, with the exception of Russian ones who have declared that they will not participate in this project in any way.

Another project which is meant to contribute to the making the gas market more competitive is the Turkey–Bulgaria gas interconnector (ITB) – a gas pipeline with an annual capacity of about 3 billion m³ and a length of almost 200 km. 75 of those kilometres will be located on the territory of Bulgaria. ITB is expected to be completed by 2022. There is one biggest project that is to be completed by the same date. In 2018, an agreement was signed to implement a gas interconnector between Bulgaria and Serbia. Aside from other advantages, this project will provide opportunities for gas imports from Serbia in the event of suspension of supplies from Russia. The gas pipeline connecting Sofia with Serbian Niš will have a length of 170 km, and its capacity is estimated to be between 1.8 and 3.2 billion m³.

Out of all the discussed group of energy projects, the construction of the interconnector between Bulgaria and Greece (IGB) is the most advanced. The route of this gas pipeline (from Stara Zagora in Bulgaria to the Greek Komotini) is 140-kilometre-long. According to the Bulgarian Ministry of Energy, its annual capacity will be between 3 and 5.5 billion m³.

In addition to the above-listed initiatives, Bulgaria is taking part in the "Eastring" project which it plans to implement together with Slovakia, Hungary and Romania. This project is also supported by the European Union and its objective is to search

for alternative gas sources and ensure secure gas supplies for the countries of the region (Bălgaria..., 2019).

The most crucial issue remains – what gas will flow through these pipelines? It is quite possible that in many cases it will be Russian gas. All the more so, because in September 2019, the Russian Minister of Energy signed a contract with the Bulgarian government for building the section of the Turkish Stream gas pipeline which goes from the Turkish border to the border with Serbia.

Despite all the declarations, intentions and new energy initiatives, in 2019, just as 30 years earlier, almost all of Bulgaria's imported oil and gas came from Russia. The concept of Bulgaria as an energy centre of the Balkans turned out to be a pipe-dream. All major international projects for the transit of natural gas or oil through the national territory (e.g. Nabucco, Burgas-Alexandroupolis, South Stream) have failed to materialise, and the earliest date for the launch of the second nuclear power plant is 2030. Bulgaria is still counting on more decisive support from Western partners in strategic sectors, such as natural gas supply and nuclear energy. For example, the fact that investments of EU countries in energy, or support and promotion of "second-hand" energy projects, such as gas hubs, and interconnectors (Marinov, 2017), are very limited leaves an opening for other players, mainly Russia and China.

6. Conclusions

This article presents a synthetic overview of the process of Bulgaria's post-1989 geopolitical reorientation and its consequences. The model based on the variability of geopolitical priorities was once again confirmed in the analysed period. It is based on pragmatism, which is traditional for the national political elite, and the search for the optimal configuration of relations with great powers. Bulgaria has always had to bear in mind the interests of the Balkans states and the multilateral pressure of great powers. At the end of the nineteenth and throughout the entire twentieth century, Bulgarian governments followed the tactic of joining any coalition which would ensure implementation of the project of unification of Bulgarian lands. At various times, Bulgaria's allies included Russia, Germany, Austria, and, during the First World War, even Turkey. After 1989, Bulgaria's foreign partners in the fields of politics, economy, culture and science became more diversified.

Compared to the early years of transformation, in 2019 Bulgaria is a politically stable country with clear foreign policy priorities and geopolitical allies.

Economic and political life, as well as the external relations of the country, are influenced by Russia (although its influence is incomparably weaker than during the Cold War period) and Turkey (whose influence increased significantly during this period). Despite its geographical location at the historical civilizational, economic and political crossroad, Bulgaria is an internally stable and predictable partner within the Euro-Atlantic community. At the same time, the number of threats to national security is increasing in the area of South-Eastern Europe, the Black Sea region and the broader contact zone between Europe, Asia and Africa. Because of the decisive role of external factors, the Yugoslavian knot is currently in its peaceful phase. However, the area still includes several countries that do not have a well-established geopolitical orientation and are still not fully internally consolidated. The war in Syria and the migration crisis have had a significant impact on the Balkan geopolitics. The Caucasian geopolitical knot is also located near the region. Other potential threats for Bulgaria include the radicalisation and Islamisation of Turkish society and Turkey's growing economic and cultural influence, especially among the Muslim population in Bulgaria. The tense situation concerning Crimea and relations between Russia and Ukraine, which are very important countries from the point of view of geopolitical rivalry in the Black Sea region, also indirectly affect Bulgaria and require rethinking of its security strategy.

A general overview of Bulgarian geopolitics from 1878 to the present allows to draw one more general conclusion. Bulgaria's geopolitics are only tangentially based on history, or such links as a common language or civilisation. The decisive factors include foremost temporary interests of the state and a desire for alliances that, in the subjective opinion of the national authorities, can bring the greatest political and economic benefits.

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