

Bulgaria as a breeding ground for Russia's influence in the Balkans

The Balkans, historically known as a region of great powers' clashing interests, have seen a new wave of political instability in the past year. Hotspots include: tensions on Kosovo-Serbian border, government crisis in Montenegro and Bulgaria and, lastly, the long lasting institutional deadlock in Bosnia and Herzegovina that could cause a new outbreak of violence. Traditionally, domestic politics in the region are characterised by prevailing corruption and weak democratic institutions, which

Bulgaria represents a particular example in the Balkans: it is the only European Union and NATO member, where Russian influence has not waned since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine.

makes states highly susceptible for external influence of malign actors. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has affected the Balkans both politically and economically and the region has proved to be one of the most vulnerable to the consequences of the conflict Bulgaria represents a particular example in the Balkans: it is the only European Union and NATO member, where Russian influence has not waned since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. The ongoing government crisis, which was preceded by widespread anti-government protests in 2020-2021, was even further exacerbated with Putin's invasion. Expectedly, the Bulgarian political landscape turned out to be highly divided over the response to the Russian aggression.

In December 2021 Kiril Petkov, a pro-Western reformist with a strong anti-corruption agenda was appointed as a prime minister. However, 6 months later his government collapsed as a result of a vote of no confidence supported by the old elites submissive to the Kremlin's influence. Among the reasons for the dismissal were refusal to pay Moscow in roubles for gas, new gas deal with Azerbaijan and active political and humanitarian support of Ukraine. Later Petkov admitted that "We didn't understand that corruption and Russian influence in Bulgaria are the same thing. Corruption is Moscow's best foreign policy instrument in the Balkans."¹ Despite snap parliamentary elections being held in October 2022, their outcomes did not bring much clarity into Bulgarian politics. None of the major parties succeeded in creating a stable government, which have brought about fifth elections in under two years and, worse yet, further undermined faith in democracy and pluralism.

Historical ties with Russia as a justification for politicians in Sofia

One of the underlying historical narratives in present-day Bulgaria holds that the modern state owes its independence to Russia, which in the course of the 1877-1878 war liberated it from the Ottomans. The Treaty of San Stefano, which concluded the war, stipulated huge territorial gains in Bulgaria's favour and ended 500-years Turkish rule in this country. Nowadays the 3rd of March is an official state holiday in Bulgaria, which commemorates those events. The most symbolic battle of that war took place at the Shipka Pass in August 1877, where the main Russian forces aided by Bulgarian volunteers repelled a Turkish offensive. It has become a tradition for many people to pay tributes to the defenders at the site of the battle, but not only. In 2022 Russian diplomats based in Sofia, together with the ambassador Eleonora Mitrofanova, and Russian Orthodox Church clergy paid a visit to the Shipka Pass and used it as an opportunity to promote their political agenda. Another landmark is the Monument to the Tsar Liberator, that is the Russian emperor Alexander II, who according to the official historiography liberated Bulgaria. The monument is located right in front of the Bulgarian parliament, which is quite symptomatic of the role that Russia plays in the history of this Balkan state.

The so-called "Second Liberation" of Bulgaria came after the 1944 coup staged by local communists. From 1946 to 1990 People's Republic of Bulgaria was Moscow's satellite, which determined the official line of interpretation of World War II. Up to 1989 both Bulgarian and Soviet history textbooks taught younger generations that "the victorious Red Army liberated Bulgaria from fascism."² According to some contemporary historians, most Bulgarians still have nostalgia to socialism – the period in the country's history, when rapid industrialisation led to improvements of living conditions, mainly due to close economic ties with the Soviet Union. Despite some debates on whether the socialist period was an occupation or not, numerous monuments to Soviet soldiers remain present in Bulgaria.

Like many other ex-Eastern Bloc states paving their way to NATO and the European Union, Bulgaria had, among others, to undergo a democratic transition. However, there is one key feature that makes Sofia's transition quite incomplete – lack of settled old scores with the past. Institutions tasked with prosecuting Soviet and Nazi crimes, lustration of former security services, revealing archives and demolishing communist propaganda in history were created in most of Central and Eastern European states, but never appeared in Bulgaria.

Lack of well-conceived politics of past has led to the situation, when the myth of Russian fraternal help is still well functioning in the public awareness of Bulgarians, which, in some experts' views, has even evolved into the gratitude complex towards Russia.³ It still has a great effect on the political

preferences of ordinary citizens. Inconsistency of Bulgaria's approach to its own past was particularly noticeable during the diplomatic conflict with Russia in 2019. To commemorate the 75th anniversary of the 1944 communist coup the Russian cultural centre opened an exhibition called "The Liberation of Bulgaria". The government in Sofia protested against such interpretation of the past and reminded about a half century of repressions, distorted economic development and backwardness.⁴ It did not however bring about a comprehensive policy against Kremlin's mythmaking.

Oppositely, politicians in Sofia have been conveniently selecting specific historical narratives as a basis for fostering a special relationship with Moscow. Against the backdrop of Russia's geopolitical confrontation with the West, historical ties have been used by many Bulgarian politicians as a reason to abstain from taking harsher steps against Russia.

Firstly, Russophiles (Revival, Bulgarian Rise, Bulgarian Socialist Party) as well as old corrupted elites such as GERB⁵ and DPS⁶ who ousted reformist Petkov from power do not wish to implement substantial anti-corruption reforms. Unlike the Western institutions that put emphasis on the anti-corruption agenda in relations with Southern and Eastern European states, Russia takes advantage of corrupted politicians as an instrument of establishing influence in various countries, which makes the Kremlin a particularly convenient ally for many Bulgarian politicians.

Secondly, peripheral states located on the intersection point of Western and Russian influences have a tendency to use their location as an instrument in geopolitics. In the literature this phenomenon is called the multivector policy and was earlier observed in Ukraine, Moldova, Kazakhstan etc. Preserving friendly ties with Russia is crucial for many pragmatic politicians in Bulgaria as they may reap benefits from being loyal to the Kremlin at the time of its isolation. For example, currently Hungary maintains friendly political ties with Moscow despite the mounting political pressure from Brussels and Washington. It agreed to pay Russia for gas in rubles and signed a new long-term gas contract with Gazprom, which allows Orbán to curb rising living costs in the country. It is not clear yet if Bulgaria would follow the pattern, but history certainly serves as an additional factor to preserve good relationships with Moscow at the expense of Western unity.

Political and institutional weaknesses

From a purely political standpoint, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has exposed the ideological gap between pro-Russian and pro-Western parties while also highlighting the insincerity of some of the latter formations. Formally, Moscow's aggression was denounced even by the Socialists (BSP) and the nationalists. However, they were quick to underline the importance of maintaining "neutrality",

avoiding "Bulgarian involvement in the war" and refraining from sending aid to Ukraine in order to preserve the military's stockpile.

In this explicitly pro-Russian camp, Bulgarian politics feature a seemingly paradoxical alignment of socialists and nationalists on foreign policy. Both of these groups rely on Russia-friendly voters, albeit ones with a different profile. As the direct successor of the Bulgarian Communist Party, the BSP is popular among older voters who feel disillusioned with the transition to democracy and capitalism. The nationalists, on the other hand, are supported by younger voters who see Russia as a historical ally and a defender of traditional values. Roughly a quarter of Bulgarian voters support such political formations. Unsurprisingly, these parties are also positioned against Bulgaria's further integration into the EU, abstaining and voting against a recent parliamentary resolution that aims to ensure the country's long-delayed entry into the Eurozone by 2024.

Political parties that theoretically espouse Western values currently enjoy much higher support, with the top four (GERB, PP, DPS, DB⁷) winning over 60% of the vote in the last elections. However, this camp is bitterly divided over domestic policy issues. Much of the electoral support for two of the parties (PP, DB) is founded on their public commitment to investigate allegations of high-level corruption against the other two (GERB, DPS). It is also worth noting that GERB and DPS united with the nationalist, pro-Moscow Revival party in the vote of no-confidence against Petkov's reformist government. This decision is in line with the two parties' history of protecting Russian interests despite their formal Euro-Atlantic orientation. In short, regardless of their nominal stance, Bulgaria's status-quo powers show a willingness to act in concert with each other to prevent a pro-rule of law, anti-Russian government from remaining in power.

The line separating the openly pro-Russian formations from the supposedly Pro-Western GERB and DPS becomes even more blurred in light of the recent revelation that, while in power, Petkov provided covert assistance to Ukraine through vital fuel and ammunition shipments. Naturally, this has prompted suspicions that the removal of Petkov's government was at least partially motivated by the desire to halt aid to Ukraine.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that the political crisis has turned Rumen Radev, Bulgaria's pro-Russian President, into the country's most powerful political figure. Much like in other parliamentary Republics, the president is Bulgaria's nominal head of state and chief of the armed forces. His role in day-to-day politics is limited, but becomes substantial when elections fail to result in a regular government, as the president must then appoint an interim government and schedule snap elections. In this case, the removal of Petkov's government allowed President Radev to appoint a new interim government, which quickly moved to ease tensions with Moscow by, among others, resuming negotiations with Gazprom. The President himself has recently hardened his pro-Russian

stance, even declining to sign a joint declaration of support for Ukraine by Eastern and Central European heads of state in October 2022. This decision did not negatively impact Radev's high approval ratings. Trust in him has since declined due to his inability to resolve the political deadlock, but he remains by far the most popular political figure in Bulgaria.⁸ As another parliamentary election looms ahead, Radev will retain his ability to influence the country's orientation through the interim governments he appoints.

Closely related to the above mentioned issues is another key weakness, namely the flawed nature of Bulgaria's democratic institutions.⁹ The country ranks among Europe's most deficient democracies and has persistent issues with corruption, rule of law, institutional transparency and political accountability. Media plurality and press freedoms are also limited due to a highly concentrated ownership structure. These problems have eroded the public's trust in state institutions, leading to deep scepticism towards democracy. A clear example of this is the extremely low approval rating of the Bulgarian National Assembly, which currently stands at around 7%.¹⁰ This is especially concerning in light of the fact that Bulgaria is a parliamentary republic.

These institutional weaknesses further strengthen the anti-democratic, conspiratorial worldview promoted by Moscow. The presence of Kremlin narratives in Bulgarian social media and online news outlets is significant. A detailed recent NGO report shows a sudden, nearly tenfold increase of pro-Russian news articles shortly before February 24.¹¹ A large number of these were direct translations of Russian state media publications, or used very closely related language. This disinformation campaign is still ongoing. In fact, Bulgarian news articles containing wording and arguments that can be traced back to Russian propaganda outlets continue to be published at rates several times higher than the already substantial pre-war levels.

Economic vulnerability and gas dependency

Economic factors also play a key role in shaping Sofia's stance towards Russia. First, Bulgaria is the EU's poorest member¹² state and has been struggling with some of the Union's highest levels of poverty and income inequality for decades.¹³ Economic deprivation has given rise to social tensions and a strong sense of dissatisfaction with the country's development over the past several decades. Naturally, this creates fertile ground for the aforementioned conspiracy theories, anti-Western narratives and Soviet nostalgia that galvanise pro-Russian sentiment.

Second, the country was heavily dependent on Russian gas and oil until Gazprom cut deliveries in April 2022. In fact, in 2021 Bulgaria imported about 80% of its natural gas from Russia.¹⁴ Citizens' low income levels mean that basic goods like food, energy and fuel take up a larger-than-average proportion of the Bulgarian consumer basket. The prices of these staples have soared due to

Russia's war in Ukraine, resulting in an annual inflation rate of over 15%, which is putting pressure on consumers and businesses. The vulnerability of the Bulgarian economy is further underlined by recent Eurobarometer polls,¹⁵ which found that 62% of Bulgarians have already seen their standard of living decline due to the war. What is even more telling is that for 70% of Bulgarians, maintaining the cost of living is more important than defending European values. Both of these percentages are the highest in the EU.

Conclusions

1. History serves politicians as a tool to justify their decisions both in domestic and international politics as well as cover up their genuine interests. Bulgaria's historical ties with Russia are used by politicians in Sofia to legitimise their reluctance to provide Ukraine with military aid in the hope to maintain close politico-economic ties, especially in the energy sector, as gas discounts offered by Gazprom may help them to gain popularity among voters at the time of growing living costs.
2. Bulgarians have a more positive view of Russia than of the USA, their NATO ally¹⁶. President Radev is therefore politically free to make pro-Russian decisions. A decisive turn away from Moscow would require the end of the current political stalemate, but even a regular elected government can be neutralised through the Kremlin's toolkit, which includes the dissemination of propaganda among the population and the instrumentalisation of corruption against the political elite. Thus, without a major breakthrough for genuinely pro-Western factions, Bulgaria will continue to be an unreliable NATO member at best and, at worst, critically undermine the alliance's position in the Balkan region.
3. Fragile democratic institutions, weak civil society and media monopolised by oligarchs make Bulgaria exceptionally vulnerable to external influence of malign actors. Russia is known for using corrupted politicians to achieve its national interest and this poses a huge threat to the unity in the Euro-Atlantic community. For instance, the Bulgarian veto against launching North Macedonia's accession talks is also obstructing Albania's bid for membership and potentially brings instability to the Balkans.
4. Bulgaria's nominally pro-Western status-quo powers (GERB and DPS) have in fact shown a clear tendency to protect the Kremlin's interests, as cooperating with Moscow brings considerable political benefits.
5. Economic hardship, which has affected many Bulgarians, makes them prone to populism and disinformation. The ongoing political crisis is only compounding the economic situation in the country. A stable, consensus-based government is required in order to make unpopular decisions to prevent future economic deterioration.
6. Although Russian state media have been banned across the EU, Kremlin-sponsored narratives are still finding their way into the European information space. Bulgaria thus functions as one of the

main entry points for propaganda, possibly facilitating its spread into member states with similar domestic conditions.

Authors: Ihor Havrylyuk, Casimir Pulaski Foundation and Viliyan Tsvetanov, external contributor

¹ Tom Kington, "I can fight corruption but not Moscow's meddling, says Bulgarian PM", *The Times*, July 26, 2022, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/i-can-fight-corruption-but-not-moscows-meddling-says-bulgarian-pm-8m8svxhkj>

² Александр Андреев, "Освобождение или оккупация? Скандал в Софии", *Deutsche Welle*, 6 September 2019, <https://p.dw.com/p/3P76M>

³ Veneta Nikolova, "Prof. Ivaylo Dichev: It is high time for Bulgarians to shake off the gratitude complex towards Russia", *Radio Bulgaria*, 3 January, 2022, <https://bnr.bg/en/post/101609166/prof-ivaylo-dichev-it-is-high-time-for-bulgarians-to-shake-off-the-gratitude-complex-towards-russia>

⁴ Съобщение на МВНР относно събитие, организирано от Посолството на Руската федерация, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bulgaria, 3 September 2019, <https://www.mfa.bg/bg/news/22725>

⁵ GERB (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria) is a conservative, nominally pro-European political party founded by Boyko Borisov, ex-prime minister of Bulgaria in the years 2009-2021.

⁶ DPS (Movement for Rights and Freedoms) is a centrist political party representing the Turkish minority in Bulgaria. It was founded by a Bulgarian oligarch and politician of Turkish descent Ahmed Dogan.

⁷ We Continue the Change (PP) founded by Kiril Petkov in 2021, along with another anti-corruption, pro-Western party Democratic Bulgaria (DB), have vowed to reform Bulgaria's key institutions and eradicate the influence of GERB and DPS on them.

⁸ "В очакване на 2023 година - между песимизма и надеждата", *Alpha Research*, December 2022: <https://alpharesearch.bg/post/1003-v-ochakvane-na-2023-godina-mejdu-pesimizma-i-nadejdata.html>

⁹ SGI, "Bulgaria", 2022: <https://www.sgi-network.org/2020/Bulgaria>

¹⁰ "В очакване на 2023 година - между песимизма и надеждата", *Alpha Research*, December 2022: <https://alpharesearch.bg/post/1003-v-ochakvane-na-2023-godina-mejdu-pesimizma-i-nadejdata.html>

¹¹ Yakimova et al, "Russian propaganda in Bulgarian online media: before and during the war in Ukraine", *HSS Foundation* (2022).

¹² GDP per capita, consumption per capita and price level indices, Eurostat: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=GDP_per_capita_consumption_per_capita_and_price_level_indices

¹³ Living conditions in Europe - poverty and social exclusion, Eurostat: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Living_conditions_in_Europe_-_poverty_and_social_exclusion#:~:text=In%202021%2C%2095.4%20million%20people,21.7%20%25%20of%20the%20EU%20population.&text=The%20risk%20of%20poverty%20or,%25%20compared%20with%2020.7%20%25

¹⁴ ACER: Annual report on the results of monitoring the internal electricity and natural gas markets in 2021 (2022): 64

¹⁵ Eurobarometer: Rallying around the European flag: Democracy as anchor point in times of crisis (2022).

¹⁶ *Ibidem*

The Casimir Pulaski Foundation is an independent, non-partisan think-tank specialising in foreign policy and international security. The Pulaski Foundation provides analyses that describe and explain international developments, identify trends in international environment, and contain possible recommendations and solutions for government decision makers and private sector managers to implement. The Foundation concentrates its research on two subjects: transatlantic relations and Russia and the post-Soviet sphere. It focuses primarily on security, both in traditional and non-military dimensions, as well as political changes and economic trends that may have consequences for Poland and the European Union. The Casimir Pulaski Foundation is composed of over 40 experts from various fields. It publishes the Pulaski Policy Papers, the Pulaski Report, and the Pulaski Viewpoint. The Foundation also publishes "Informator Pułaskiego," a summary of upcoming conferences and seminars on international policy. The Foundation experts cooperate with media on a regular basis. Once a year, the Casimir Pulaski Foundation gives the Knight of Freedom Award to an outstanding person who has promoted the values represented by General Casimir Pulaski: freedom, justice, and democracy. Prize winners include: Professor Władysław Bartoszewski, Professor Norman Davies, Alaksandar Milinkiewicz, President Lech Wałęsa, President Aleksander Kwaśniewski, President Valdas Adamkus, Bernard Kouchner, Richard Lugar, president Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga, president Mikheil Saakashvili, Radosław Sikorski, Carl Bildt, president Toomas Hendrik Ilves, Michaił Chodorkowski, president Mary Robinson, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, president Dalia Grybauskaitė, as well as Thorbjørn Jagland and Aleksiej Navalny. The Casimir Pulaski Foundation has a partnership status with the Council of Europe.

www.pulaski.pl