

RESEARCH REPORTS 15

**BULGARIA'S ROLE AND PROSPECTS IN
THE BLACK SEA REGION: IMPLICATIONS
OF NATO AND EU ENLARGEMENT**

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I. Introduction

In the evolving situation of EU and NATO eastward enlargement within a dramatically changed global security environment Bulgaria's role and prospects are shaped by powerful yet hard to organise and realise in practice interests:

First, the interest of serving as a reliable boundary state of both EU and NATO while projecting the image and influence of a trustworthy bridge, linking a stable and well established region of EU and NATO states with countries of a still shaky though bearing positive economic opportunities area. With the support of EU and NATO Bulgaria is in a position to mobilise its potential to serve these uneasy jobs.

Second, the interest not to be pushed or even just to be left in the position to choose between the EU and NATO as well as between the EU and the leading NATO country – the United States. Bulgaria's perceptions of the world – from the point of view of EU and US interaction, is a place, calling for cooperation in approaching and solving the hard issues of the globe and not for trying to counter-balance the Americans. Any other reading of the EU/US relationship by Bulgaria would practically dilute and even dissolve the country's chances to play an effective and forward targeted boundary and bridge roles.

Third, the interest to project to the contending for EU and NATO membership countries in the Balkans and in the Black Sea area the lesson Bulgaria has learnt in the accession years, that joining the two institutions is not an issue of geopolitical bargaining, but one of mostly meeting standard conditions that would lead to social and economic progress of the aspirants themselves and make them compatible with the other members of the Union and the Alliance.

II. Geopolitical, Geo-economic and Geo-strategic Environment Defining Bulgaria's Operational Scope

Fundamental perceptions of the geopolitical, geo-economic and geo-strategic environment influence decisively Bulgaria's interests, operational inclinations and plans

in the Balkan-Black Sea encompassing region¹. Situated on the western coast of the Black Sea, Bulgaria takes into account the interaction of a multitude of actors with strong interests in the area. What are the perceptions about these actors?

First, EU and NATO are deeply engaged in the progress and integration of South East Europe, they know the processes are not yet finished there and cannot allow themselves to fail in this endeavour.

In the Black Sea region the EU is getting closer to Russia, Ukraine and Turkey – a zone dominated very much by Russia, a zone of instability and a zone on which the Union depends for its energy supplies. The East-West and the North-South strategic corridors are important factors in shaping the attitudes of the Union in the region. The zone is also notorious for its migration and drugs' pressures on the EU. At the same time the Union has not yet shaped a robust military arm that would add guarantees to the broad spectrum of EU interests.

NATO's perspective from the northeast extension of the Mediterranean – the Black Sea, is of constructing cooperative attitudes with Russia and Ukraine while focusing on the Greater Middle East. The landlocked Black Sea is emerging as a strategic path for transport of resources and particularly fossil fuel resources. The approaches to Central and South Asia, to the Middle East itself and northeast Africa from the Black Sea region are of utmost importance. NATO is already in Afghanistan, 18 out of the 26 NATO members and invited states are in Iraq. NATO considers the Greater Middle East as the main source of major threats for its members and the world and the Alliance has accepted the fact it will be on the front lines where the problems are².

Second, the United States has a lasting interest to integrate the Balkans into a Europe whole, free and at peace; to shift responsibilities to Europe while helping it to succeed; to hasten the day that peace is self-sustaining and NATO can withdraw its military presence in Bosnia and Kosovo, and to ensure that the region does not become a safe haven for global terrorism³. The United States has the longer-term interest of NATO's expansion to Georgia, Azerbaijan and Ukraine and the shorter-term one to have a network of smaller bases in Bulgaria, Romania and elsewhere in Eastern Europe. They are needed for rapid

deployment purposes on the way to the conflict theatres in the Black Sea, the Caucasus or the Middle East. The United States would support the construction of NATO bases in the same Black Sea countries too, partly for counter-terrorist and for ballistic missile defence purposes. The Black Sea area is strategically important for the USA as a crossroad of two strategic corridors – the East-West Corridor (the 'Silk Way') and the North-South Corridor, connecting Russia with Iran and India. The United States is not indifferent to the oil and gas energy reserves of the area – as big as they are. And finally, the traditional geopolitical concept of Eastern Europe as the heartland of the world-island of Europe, Asia and Africa also matters for the American understanding of the role of the Black Sea region.

Third, Russia was involved in a benign behaviour in South East Europe and its cooperation with EU, NATO and the United States had a positive impact on the completion of the hot conflicts in ex-Yugoslavia. Diversification of oil and natural gas resources to the Balkans, apart from the dominating Russian ones is a high priority interest for the South East European countries. Russia is not expected to be helpful in the eastward expansion of NATO and the EU, because this would contradict to its own ambitions to dominate over the post-Soviet space to the south and to serve as an integration magnet to the South Caucasian countries and Ukraine. The developments in the Northern Caucasus continue to influence negatively the broader security situation in the Black Sea-Caspian Sea area.

Ukraine drifts hardly to democracy and market economy in an uneasy geopolitical environment. The countries from the Southern Caucasus and from Central Asia are far from the standards of democracy. The expectations of the profits from oil are quite reduced. Caspian oil can serve for a certain diversification of the energy sources at the world markets with no dramatic consequences, and eventually for the economic progress of the countries from the region. However, Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia and the Central Asian states matter for the peace and stability in the broader Black Sea-Caspian Sea region; they matter very much in the peacekeeping activities, despite the differences in the democratic values. They participate in ISAF in Afghanistan and in the Coalition Forces in Iraq. They strive for the same conflict prevention aims as

the EU and NATO members and aspirant countries. They are important cooperative security partners in the region of the Black Sea.

Fourth, Turkey's success in the region as an evolving democracy will have broader consequences for the Greater Middle East. Turkey is a country that must not be allowed to feel excluded by Europe, should not be left to slide into economic and social backwardness and emotions of moral injustice done to it. Its economic, historic, security and energy ties to Europe can hardly be denied. Our expectations are that Turkey would meet the Copenhagen criteria and the EU would be ready to integrate it once Ankara achieves them.

Fifth, Romania is considered the neighbouring country with similar interests and tasks in the Black Sea region as Bulgaria. However, Romania will, probably, have a more specific role in the implementation of strategies in north and east direction, while Bulgaria – in south and east. This does not exclude efforts of Bulgaria in the northeast and of Romania in the southeast directions. It would be of the mutual interest of the two countries to become simultaneously members of NATO in 2004 and of the EU in 2007.

The unsolved puzzle remains to what extent EU, Russia and the USA will be willing and able to work cooperatively in the Black Sea-Caspian Sea region at least as they did in South East Europe. Further consideration of how to match the interests of these actors in the East-West and North-South strategic corridors, crossing each other in this area may give some answers.

III. Role and Capacity of Bulgaria as an Acceding Country and Future Member of NATO and EU

The role that Bulgaria plays and can play in the future is defined by the specific perception of the geopolitical, geo-economic and geo-strategic environment and the capacity the country has to implement eventual tasks. Most generally, Bulgaria has two basic roles to play: first, actively participating in the completion of the job of EU and

NATO enlargements in South East Europe and, second, serve as boundary of the EU and NATO and bridge of the same institutions to the east shores of the Black Sea and beyond.

The first major role is to be an agent of carrying out the tasks of stabilising South East Europe and continuing the enlargement policy of the Union to the last country of the region. Bulgaria should accentuate on successfully finishing by the end of 2004 of its accession negotiations to the Union. Sofia should be also focusing on the stabilisation of the Western Balkans as strongly as on the preparation of the countries in the troubled area for EU membership⁴. The need of crisis management, conflict prevention and reform assistance in the Western Balkans would revive Bulgaria's engagement with regional cooperation aiming at preparing the Balkans for EU membership.

The second major role is to exert effort of mobilising the Balkan region for the task of embarking on supporting the further expansion of the civil and security space eastwards by involving the other states of the Black Sea basin and the Caspian area into stabilisation efforts and building-up the prerequisites for future EU membership. As Karl Kaiser wrote recently – the Balkans can serve as a model to other areas for coping with conflicts and difficult issues as well as for regional progress⁵. Raising the awareness of the other Balkan nations for the new needs and tasks, requiring a new level of responsibility in domestic and foreign political behaviour is a role Bulgaria would play very naturally due to its geographic position and experience. In practical terms, certain South East European formats of cooperation should be provided to such countries as Moldova, Ukraine and the Southern Caucasian states. The Pact of Stability for South East Europe may bring in Moldova in the regional interactions; GUUAM states could be attracted to the different forms of acquiring a new, NATO and EU strategic culture. The South East European Defence Ministerial (SEEDM) and SEEBRIG – the Multinational Peace Force South East Europe, may find their new reason to exist by more closely interacting with individual countries from the GUUAM configuration of states. The OBSEC may receive additional impulses by the EU to attract more closely the countries from the region into a more meaningful cooperative economic effort too. The same holds true also for BLACKSEAFOR and NATO – to the extent Russia will be ready to cooperate with the Alliance in the Black Sea.

Thirdly, the added value Bulgaria could bring to the EU as an acceding country and future member is linked to its membership in NATO in mid-2004. The country's stabilisation potential will be magnified substantially by the Alliance. The western coast of the Black Sea will include NATO states only. Already functioning bilateral military contacts with the Southern Caucasus states could continue more vigorously. In anyway, Bulgaria will be engaged with enforcing the border police, custom and coast guard regimes that are expected to protect the NATO and EU countries.

Fourth, Bulgaria will certainly provide one of the needed safety belts when EU is trying to meet the challenge of integrating the Islamic world, liberating it from the fear of being excluded from the process of globalisation. The specific Bulgarian advantage in that respect is the successfully experienced for some two-centuries model of ethnic and religious tolerance. The participation of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) in the domestic political life and government of Bulgaria and the exemplary bilateral relations of Bulgaria and Turkey are additional assets in this direction.

IV. Conclusions

While trying to perform these roles Bulgaria may also try to add effort in bridging the interests of the EU, Russia and the United States in dealing with the hard issues of the Black Sea region and finding the right formula for their own interests. The upcoming presiding of the OSCE in 2004 by Bulgaria could be the right opportunity of doing that. The regulation and resolution of the Nagorno Karabakh and of the Transdnistria conflicts might be significant directions to reach that goal. OSCE with Bulgaria at the helmet for a certain period may include also other ambitious goals, concerning the cooperation among the EU, Russia and the USA, mainly in the stabilisation of the regional situation. Bulgaria's capacity to implement these tasks will for sure be strengthened once the country joins the Alliance and the Union.

Endnotes

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