



Regional Security and Cooperation

Landscapes: Insights into Bulgaria
and Europe



Author: RESECO Bulgaria

E-mail: info@resecobg

Website: <https://resecobg/en/>

Contact person: Martin Stoyanov

Phone: +359876740068

E-mail: martin.stoyanov@resecobg

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Foreword



RESECO is a newly established institute of young researchers who are at the beginning of their scientific carrier. Their collected research papers, covering a wide range of political and economic topics about Bulgaria, Southeast Europe, the European Union, the Black Sea Region, Russia, Ukraine, and international relations, are impressive with their depth und maturity.

The Konrad Adenauer Foundation promotes understanding between EU Member States, fosters regional cooperation and rejects nationalist and populist tendencies. The aim of our work is to strengthen the transatlantic partnership and the European Union's Common Security and Defence Policy as a precondition of peace. We support analyses which provide food for thought via dialogue with politicians and citizens, offer fundamental guidance and formulate practical solutions.

The texts in this book are in accordance with our mission and we gladly support their publication. Everyone who wants to delve deeper and better understand the current situation in Bulgaria and its neighbours, regional cooperation, the Black Sea region, and Europe is well advised to study this book. He will be rewarded with valuable insights which will allow him to gain a clearer picture of the world.

Norbert Beckmann-Dierkes
Director of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation - Bulgaria

Foreword



RESECO Bulgaria was established as a non-profit organization in June 2023 with the aim of creating bridges between academia, stakeholders in politics, civil society and experts. Our team of young experts has been analyzing various issues during this period, such as the war in Ukraine, the European enlargement process, as well as other matters related to security and regional cooperation. RESECO Bulgaria has also organized events open to the public which have addressed the aforementioned topics, podcasts, trainings, seminars, amongst other activities, yet this collection of works best encapsulates the way of thinking and the worldview of our organization's members, who have strived to develop and promote the principles of democracy, the rule of law, transparency and parliamentarism through their work.

All of the authors published in this collection have recently graduated from university or are at the end of their studies, yet they have shown an impeccable balance between proposing pragmatic ideas for solutions to issues spanning decades, as well as their hope for a better, united European future. The active participation of youth in the processes of policy-making in a period where political apathy is taking over is a powerful tool to combat nihilistic tendencies in society, which is why our organization has been adamant on targeting younger members of civil society and creating educational content for them, whether via seminars, trainings or written works.

Despite this, RESECO Bulgaria could have not achieved any of its goals without the financial support and mentorship of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung office in Bulgaria, for whom we are grateful. The balance of experience and clear-headedness from their side and our ambition to change the world for better, be it one event at a time, has let us work towards our goals as an organization and we hope to continue doing so for the foreseeable future.

Martin Stoyanov

Executive Director of RESECO Bulgaria

Bulgaria's road to Schengen

Simona Nikolova

For over a decade, Bulgaria and Romania have been pursuing accession to the Schengen Area, which has been a prominent and successful aspect of European integration since its inception in 1985. To date, only four countries in the European Union have not been granted membership: Ireland, Cyprus, Bulgaria, and Romania. In a 2011 opinion, the European Commission determined that Sofia and Bucharest had successfully met the technical requirements for admission. However, the implementation of this decision has been impeded over the years by the opposition of member states such as Finland, Germany, and France. In December 2022, the vetoes of Austria and the Netherlands constituted a significant impediment to the Schengen accession process.

A year later, Eastern European countries are once again confronted with the prospect of becoming part of Schengen, although the outcome remains uncertain.

1. The fears of Austria and the Netherlands

The concerns of Austria and the Netherlands were voiced during the Justice and Home Affairs Council meeting on December 8-9, 2022. The governments of Austria and the Netherlands exercised their right of veto with regard to the vote on Bulgaria and Romania joining the Schengen area. The Austrian Interior Minister, Gerhard Karner, has identified two key reasons for his country's opposition to the admission of Bulgaria and Romania to the Schengen Area. Firstly, there is a lack of confidence in the successful implementation of external border controls. Secondly, there is a fear of an increase in the number of illegal crossings from Turkish territory. In 2022, the issue of illegal immigration was a dominant topic in Austrian public discourse due to the significant influx of asylum seekers into the country and the considerable number of undocumented border crossers among them. The Austrian authorities have asserted that a significant proportion of those entering the country irregularly originate from Hungary and Serbia, having previously traversed Bulgaria and Romania. This assertion is supported by their own research findings.

Furthermore, the Austrian government has consistently voiced reservations regarding the Schengen area, particularly with regard to its operational procedures and the prevailing challenges in the domains of security and border protection. In its estimation, the Schengen Agreement would benefit from substantial enhancements prior to its expansion.

The Netherlands' primary rationale for exercising its right of veto with respect to Bulgaria is the existence of significant challenges pertaining to the rule of law, levels of corruption, and the prevalence of organized crime. In light of these considerations, the Dutch Parliament adopted a resolution in October 2022 stating that Bulgaria's admission could potentially pose a threat to the security of the Netherlands and all countries in the Schengen area.

2. What is the European position?

Among the European institutions, Bulgaria and Romania have received considerable support with regard to their aspirations to become part of the Schengen area. The European Parliament and the European Commission have on numerous occasions acknowledged the preparedness of the two Eastern European countries to join the Schengen area. On July 12, 2023, the European Parliament and the Council are scheduled to adopt the Schengen acquis. The Parliament adopted a resolution urging the EU Council to approve their application for admission. The resolution emphasizes that the Council's rejection of Bulgaria and Romania's membership application in December 2022 lacks a "legal justification linked to the accession criteria."¹ Instead, it is primarily driven by political considerations. MEPs have asserted that this decision will have a long-term adverse social and economic impact on the development of both countries.

The governments of Bulgaria and Romania have achieved several significant successes that serve to confirm their readiness for membership. On September 15 of this year, the Commission terminated the "Cooperation and Verification Mechanism" with respect to both countries. This mechanism was designed to serve as a provisional measure to facilitate the process of reform in the judicial system and the fight against corruption and organized crime. This action signals a clear development in the area of the rule of

¹ Bulgaria and Romania should be in Schengen by end of 2023, says Parliament | News | European Parliament. (2023, December 7). Retrieved December 20, 2023, from <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20230707IPR02431/bulgaria-and-romania-should-be-in-schengen-by-end-of-2023-says-parliament>

law, as evidenced by the reforms and actions taken by the Bulgarian and Romanian authorities in implementing the relevant indicators.

Moreover, at the conclusion of November this year, the third fact-finding mission was conducted on the territory of the two candidate countries. This mission was comprised of experts from EU Member States, the European Commission, and FRONTEX. In the subsequent report², the delegation concluded that Bulgaria continues to meet the conditions necessary for the full implementation of the Schengen acquis. As a result of these confirmations, the government in the Netherlands has modified its stance on the veto, which has considerably enhanced the likelihood of membership.

The admission of the Eastern European countries currently awaiting admission to the Schengen Area is among the priority objectives of the Czech Republic and Spain, which are serving as the current and subsequent presidencies of the Council of the European Union, respectively, in the 2020s. In October, Spain's Interior Minister Fernando Grande-Marlaska confirmed that Madrid is working towards an agreement during the Justice and Home Affairs Council, scheduled to take place on December 4-5 of this year. Despite the efforts of the European institutions, the government of Acad. Denkov's and Marcel Ciolacu's efforts, the desired result was not achieved after the planned vote on the enlargement of the Schengen area was dropped from the agenda of the meeting of European interior ministers. The main reason for this is the ongoing negotiations on the formation of a government in the Netherlands. The next possible time for a vote is on 24 January.

3. Green light on the road to Schengen

In December, a shift in the positions of Austria and the Netherlands was observed, accompanied by advancements in the negotiations pertaining to the enlargement of the Schengen zone.

Foreign Minister Karner put forth the concept of an "air Schengen," which would streamline the regulations for Bulgarian and Romanian citizens traveling by air to Schengen countries, eliminating the necessity for passport inspections. Vienna has set forth a number of preliminary conditions.

² *Report of the third voluntary fact-finding mission to Bulgaria - latest developments in the application of the Schengen acquis* (No. 16090/23). (2023). Council of the European Union. Retrieved December 23, 2023, from https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-12/Report%20fact-finding%20mission%20to%20Bulgaria_en.pdf

- The European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) mission in Bulgaria should be tripled in size and the infrastructural protection of the border with Turkey should be strengthened.
- Border surveillance measures between Romania and Bulgaria should be reinforced, as well as between Romania and Hungary. Hungary and Serbia
- Austrian experts on documentation issues will be assigned to work with teams at Bulgarian and Romanian airports
- There will be an increase in the number of asylum seekers in the two Eastern European countries (mainly from Syria and Afghanistan)

In light of these considerations, the Bulgarian government responded with skepticism to the proposal of a partial entry into the “air Schengen,” which was met with approval by the European Commission and Romania as a constructive step in the accession negotiations. The victory of Geert Wilders of the far-right Freedom Party in the Dutch parliamentary elections has introduced a further element of uncertainty regarding the future of Schengen, given the prominence of anti-immigrant rhetoric in the election campaign. In a letter to the Dutch parliament, Mark Rutte’s outgoing government asserted that Bulgaria has fulfilled the requisite criteria for membership in the visa-free zone and, as a result, Sofia should be supported. In the final parliamentary session of the year, a motion proposed by the New Social Contract party, which advocates for Austria’s stance on “air Schengen,” did not garner the requisite majority of votes. Although this was not an official vote to lift the veto, this news was interpreted as a final indication of support for Bulgaria’s membership by the Netherlands.

On December 28, the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that an agreement in principle had been reached on the phased entry of Bulgaria and Romania into the Schengen area. The initial phase, which encompasses air and sea transport, is scheduled to commence on March 31, 2024. This necessitates the consensus of all EU member states. However, the Austrian Interior Minister has definitively stated that the establishment and fulfillment of additional conditions is required for the two countries to enter the “air Schengen.”

It would appear that the only remaining obstacle to the implementation of the Schengen Agreement is Austria. The Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP), which has governed the country in coalition with the Greens since 2019, has made

the fight against illegal migration and dissatisfaction with the functioning of the Schengen area central themes in its rhetoric. As a result of a series of corruption scandals, public dissatisfaction with the handling of the covid-19 pandemic, high inflation, energy shortages, and migration pressures, the party's credibility is gradually eroding. In 2024, the country will hold parliamentary and European elections. In accordance with the findings of preliminary polls³, the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ), distinguished by its espousal of analogous anti-migrant perspectives, is poised to secure a substantial advantage. In light of these circumstances, it is challenging to anticipate a shift in Vienna's stance on the comprehensive acceptance of Sofia and Bucharest, given the prevailing sentiment of disapproval among the general public and the ruling coalition.

4. Air and water Schengen

The agreement reached on partial entry into the visa-free zone is undoubtedly a political success. The use of air transport will be facilitated, as no checks on identity documents will be made when traveling (by plane between Bulgaria, Romania, and other members of the zone), although security checks will remain in place. The implementation of more efficient controls at maritime borders will facilitate the transportation of goods through Bulgarian ports, resulting in a reduction in transit times and enhanced operational efficiency. These changes will have a positive impact on both trade and tourism, rendering Bulgaria a more accessible destination.

Nevertheless, the economic advantages of partial Schengen membership will be less discernible than those associated with full membership. The majority of trade in goods is conducted via land routes, where delays in crossing borders give rise to a number of issues. The lengthy periods of waiting experienced by hauliers at border crossings give rise to a number of issues, including heightened tensions, increased costs and a greater degree of uncertainty with regard to the transportation of goods. The facilitation of seamless border crossings is of paramount strategic importance, as it will serve to mitigate the considerable losses incurred by Bulgarian and Romanian businesses, as well as foreign investors, on an annual basis. Membership

³ Busquets, A. (2023, February 16). POLITICO Poll of Polls — Austrian polls, trends and election news for Austria. POLITICO. <https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/austria/>

in the Schengen zone is expected to facilitate the single European market, with an anticipated increase in trade with other Member States and an improved environment for foreign investment.

5. Is change needed?

The difficulties encountered by Bulgaria and Romania in their efforts to gain entry into the Schengen zone, in light of the veto exercised by several member states, have given rise to a number of discussions concerning the decision-making process within the EU Council. In order to facilitate the operations of the European institutions, there is a proposal to expand the use of qualified majority voting, which would replace the current requirement of unanimous consent. Some have expressed concern that the veto may be used as a means of “blackmail.” This is how some EU members view the actions of the Hungarian government, which has blocked or delayed several European initiatives over the past two years. These include the introduction of a minimum corporate tax, the commencement of EU membership negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova, and the adoption of a four-year €50 billion financial aid package for Ukraine. In the event that Sofia does not abolish the transit fee for gas through the Turkish Stream pipeline, Budapest has threatened to veto Sofia’s entry into the Schengen zone. This compelled the Bulgarian parliament to vote on the question of abolishing the fee. To some extent, these concerns are valid, given that some member states are abusing the veto to advance their own interests.

In light of the imminent commencement of EU membership negotiations for Ukraine and Moldova, coupled with the forthcoming European elections in 2024, the necessity for reforms to the decision-making process will become increasingly pertinent.

6. Concluding remarks

The following conclusions may be drawn from the preceding analysis.

- It is feasible for Bulgaria to become a full member of the Schengen Area, although this is unlikely to occur by 2024. It seems implausible that an agreement on Schengen will be reached during the period of election campaigning and increased migrant pressure in Austria. Notwithstanding the ongoing negotiations, the Austrian government maintains its position of requiring a phased accession and the

establishment of additional conditions. The lack of clarity regarding the identity of the parties that will comprise the future government also indicates the potential for a postponement in the process. The precise modalities of the partial entry into Schengen by water and air remain unclear. The Dutch Parliament did not vote in favor of the Austrian proposal, and its implementation is contingent upon the consent of all member states. In light of these circumstances, it is evident that Bulgaria's prospects of attaining Schengen membership remain uncertain. Moreover, the possibility of achieving full membership by the end of 2024 appears implausible.

- It is evident that reforms are required with regard to the manner in which decisions are reached within the EU. The Schengen veto, the challenges associated with foreign policy action, and the deceleration in European integration indicate a necessity for a reassessment of the domains in which the EU reaches decisions by means of unanimous voting. In light of the anticipated expansion of the EU and the necessity of avoiding institutional gridlock, the issue of EU reform must be a prominent topic in the 2024 electoral discourse.
- It would be prudent for Bulgaria to adopt a more assertive stance in its dealings with Austria. Bulgaria is demonstrably meeting the requisite criteria for inclusion in the Schengen area. The dissolution of the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism signifies a substantial acknowledgment of Sofia's comprehensive support and confidence from the European institutions. In light of these circumstances, it would be prudent for the Bulgarian authorities to advocate for a definitive timeline for full accession and to adopt a more assertive posture in negotiations with Vienna.

The Resurgence of the Far Right in Europe and the New Pact on Migration and Asylum

Simona Nikolova

- Far-right formations in European countries have successfully exploited growing anti-immigrant public attitudes to achieve political gains.
- The preliminary agreement on the New Pact on Migration and Asylum is a significant achievement for the EU, but it raises serious doubts. Its formal adoption before the dissolution of the EP is crucial for the future of European migration policy.
- During the European election campaign, migration will be at the center of the political debate. The political group “Identity and Democracy” is expected to have a high level of electoral support.

1. Introduction

Finding a common way to regulate and respond to migration processes is an essential part of the European political debate. The 2015 high influx of migrants and refugees highlighted the weaknesses of the Dublin system and the need to reform the current model. Among the major successes of the Spanish Presidency of the Council of the EU is the agreement on the revision of the European migration policy. This marks the end of extensive negotiations between national governments and the European Parliament (EP) that began in September 2020. At that time, the European Commission (EC) presented the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, which aims to update and coordinate policies related to migration, border control, and asylum.

The Member States’ mutual agreement on the Pact is an undoubted success for European politics, given the strong opposition of some of them. Through the agreed changes, the European institutions are seeking to assist the frontline countries while emphasizing the principle of solidarity. The Pact also includes stricter regulations on the entry of migrants into the Union’s territory and a simplification of the deportation procedure for people who are unlikely to be granted asylum.

The upcoming European Parliament elections in June provide an incentive for EU lawmakers to finalize the ratification process of the Pact in the coming months.

However, political disagreements at the national level regarding the issue persist, which are further intensified by growing public concern over increasing irregular migration¹. Certain European countries, such as Italy, Finland, and Sweden, are therefore implementing stricter measures to reduce the flow of arrivals at their borders. A worrying trend is the growth in support for previously marginal far-right political formations. These parties are expected to make significant gains in forthcoming elections, including the European elections, which raises questions about the direction in which the EU will develop. The purpose of this paper is to examine the growing anti-immigration sentiment and the role of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum.

2. Anti-immigration sentiment across Europe

The issue of migration, which dominates the political discourse in various European countries, has proven to have the potential to influence the political balance in Europe. According to a Eurobarometer survey², European citizens identify the war in Ukraine and migration as the most significant issues for the EU. The increasing migrant flows have led to a rise in anti-immigration and anti-refugee narratives at the national level. The perception of migrants as an economic and cultural threat is the main reason for such sentiments.³ This creates an opportunity for far-right parties to expand their support by capitalising on public concerns and promoting ethno-nationalist rhetoric.

In recent years, the far right has become a leading political force in parliamentary elections or has entered government in several European countries. In November 2023, the Party for Freedom (Partij voor de Vrijheid-PVV) won the election in the Netherlands after focusing its campaign on the issue of rising migration coupled with economic instability in the country. The party's leader, Geert Wilders, has taken a strong anti-Islamic and anti-immigrant stance, which has resonated

¹ According to Frontex data, in 2023 there is a significant increase in the cases of illegal crossings of the EU's external borders. This is the highest increase since 2016 and a 17 % increase compared to 2022; Significant rise in irregular border crossings in 2023, highest since 2016. (2024, January 16). <https://www.frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/news-release/significant-rise-in-irregular-border-crossings-in-2023-highest-since-2016-C0gGpm?fbclid=IwAR02tNVARKysMMnd-0E6nkjBRW8Ek6dXLCeruaMEN4XyKaFvjxITzVe7hvs>

² *Europeans continue to strongly support Ukraine, Eurobarometer shows.* (2023, December 13). European Commission - European Commission. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_6563

³ Tabaud, A.-L. (2020, November 30). Explaining the main drivers of anti-immigration attitudes in Europe. Eyes on Europe. <https://www.eyes-on-europe.eu/explaining-the-main-drivers-of-anti-immigration-attitudes-in-europe/>

with a majority of Dutch voters. In the 2022 Italian elections, Giorgia Meloni, the leader of the far-right Italian Brothers (Fratelli d'Italia) party, pledged to halt the illegal flow of migration from the Mediterranean by tightening measures and strengthening border controls. In the Scandinavian countries, which are traditionally more welcoming to immigrants, the same trend is emerging. Migration is a significant dividing line for the Eurosceptic Sweden Democrats, whose support is crucial for the Swedish minority government. The Finns Party, a far-right nationalist group that campaigned against immigration and the European Union, is part of the coalition government in Finland.

The issue of migration is a powerful mobilizing factor of electoral support, which can be used to gain political power. The rise of far-right governments poses a challenge not only to European migration policy but also to the stability of European institutions. The Eurosceptic nature of some of their policies can hinder the ability of the Union to respond quickly and cohesively to current issues. Additionally, they challenge the EU's ability to uphold fundamental European values such as inclusion, human rights, protection of minority rights and solidarity in the face of diverging national priorities.

Conversely, some centrist governments in power are taking a stricter stance on their migration policies. Guided by the current political climate, they are attempting to address the population's concerns and prevent the growth of more radical political movements. This is a proactive measure aimed at maintaining public trust in the government and expanding its support base. At the end of 2023, Germany adopted more restrictive measures on migration processes, aimed at speeding up asylum procedures, limiting social benefits for migrants, and increasing federal funding for local communities.⁴ Similarly, France has passed a controversial law that introduces migration quotas and tightens migration rules.⁵ However, the empirical evidence suggests that the tougher political stances on migration adopted by the major governing parties have significantly contributed to the rise in popularity of far-right parties.⁶ This further legitimizes anti-migration positions, making such extreme measures more acceptable to the public.

⁴ Pieper, O. (2024, January 1). *German immigration policy: What's changing in 2024?* dw.com. <https://www.dw.com/en/german-immigration-policy-whats-changing-in-2024/a-67753472>

⁵ Ciesnik, S. (2024, January 25). French immigration law: What are the measures deemed unconstitutional? *France 24*. <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20240125-french-immigration-law-what-are-the-measures-deemed-unconstitutional>

⁶ Krause W, Cohen D, Abou-Chadi T. Does accommodation work? Mainstream party strategies and the success of radical right parties. *Political Science Research and Methods*. 2023;11(1):172-179. <https://doi.org/10.1017/psrm.2022.8>

3. What is the New Pact?

The New Pact on Migration and Asylum covers all aspects of migration regulation. MEPs aim to establish a more effective framework for a common migration policy while addressing the concerns of European citizens caused by the growth of migration across Europe. The rise of far-right support at the national level has further motivated European institutions to reach a political consensus after years of negotiations. The EU is aiming to demonstrate political will with these actions, in an attempt to counter Eurosceptic claims of ineffectiveness in crises.

There is agreement in principle on five proposals for legislative changes⁷ :

- **Screening Regulation:** Introduces a procedure for verifying the identity, health, and security of persons within 7 days of arrival at a Union border. Member States are required to establish an independent mechanism to monitor compliance with fundamental rights during the check.
- **Eurodac Regulation:** All individuals over the age of 6 are to be registered in the Eurodac database with biometric and facial data.
- **Asylum Procedures Regulation (APR):** After screening, there are two possible stages for asylum seekers: the accelerated border procedure⁸ and the ordinary asylum procedure, which can take several months before a final decision.
- **The Asylum and Migration Management Regulation (AMMR):** Establishes a “compulsory solidarity” mechanism to be triggered in cases of disproportionate pressure on a Member State. Each year, an EU solidarity pool will be created, giving member states the option to either commit to accepting migrants or providing financial support.
- **Crisis and force majeure regulation:** Emergency rules are foreseen in case of a sudden and crisis increase of irregular migrants or case of force majeure situations (such as the COVID-19 pandemic). In such cases, Member States may use stricter measures to manage migrants and seek solidarity support from other EU countries.

⁷ New pact on migration and asylum. (2023, December 20). Migration and Home Affairs. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/new-pact-migration-and-asylum_en

⁸ It will apply in cases where there is a security threat or the person comes from a country with a low percentage of approved asylum applications (below 20%). In this situation, they will be placed in special reception centers without official access to EU territory. *Amended proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a common procedure for international protection in the Union and repealing Directive 2013/32/EU - General approach* (No. 10444/23). (2023). Council of the European Union. Retrieved January 20, 2024, from <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10444-2023-INIT/en/pdf>

While the agreement reached is a step forward for Europe's common migration policy, it raises substantive concerns that undermine its credibility. The flexible criteria for sharing responsibility in solidarity and the introduction of mandatory border procedures are likely to perpetuate the issue of uneven migration flows in border states, particularly those in southern Europe. Furthermore, many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have highlighted the risk of migrants' fundamental rights being violated. These concerns stem from the accelerated screening process, logistical obstacles (such as limited access to legal representation), and the possibility of mass detention, including of vulnerable groups such as children and persons with special needs, in border countries.⁹

The Pact places great emphasis on partnership with 'safe third countries' to prevent migrants from reaching the Union's territory. The EU provides financial assistance in exchange for cooperation in controlling migration processes. However, this approach raises ethical questions about supporting countries with a dubious record in guaranteeing basic human rights, such as Libya, Egypt, or Tunisia. It is possible that migration may be used from third countries as a diplomatic, political, or economic tool to pressure the EU.¹⁰

Discussions on the technical details of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum are ongoing. The Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU aims to formally approve it before the June elections, prepare an implementation plan, and establish a financial framework.

4. Concluding comments

The issue of migration is expected to be a key factor strongly influencing the political dynamics during the European elections. Far-right parties throughout Europe are capitalizing on the migration issues to boost their electoral support. According to a forecast by Europe Elects¹¹, Identity and Democracy (ID) is likely to become the third largest party in the European Parliament. The increasing influence of far-right groups is impacting the

⁹ Amnesty International. (2023, December 20). EU: Migration Pact agreement will lead to a "surge in suffering." <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/12/eu-migration-pact-agreement-will-lead-to-a-surge-in-suffering/>

¹⁰ Swan, Emily, "EU Migration Policy: Analyzing the Coercive Responses of Transit Countries Within the EU's Framework of Externalization" (2023). Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection. 3635. https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/3635

¹¹ Garscha, M. (2023, December 30). EU parliamentary projection: *Le Pen's Right-Wing ID rises to third place*. Europe Elects. <https://europeelects.eu/2023/12/30/december-2023/>

political agenda, bringing issues of border control, national identity, and migration restrictions to the forefront of the electoral debate. While the far right is unlikely to gain an absolute majority in the EP, its impact on policymaking, particularly in migration-related areas, is becoming more pronounced. This challenges the prevailing centrist consensus and prompts a reassessment of EU priorities.

The finalization and ratification of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum will be a crucial task for MEPs in the coming months. Despite its shortcomings, it will demonstrate the unity and determination of European institutions to address the complex dimensions of migration policy. In the context of growing public anxiety about rising migration pressures, the lack of a common strategy at the European level will further fuel Eurosceptic sentiment. The EU will therefore be challenged to address concerns and calm internal tensions while upholding its core values and maintaining a sense of unity among member states.

The outcome of the elections and the new composition of the EP will influence the overall direction of EU policy, shape its response to migration issues, set the stage for future policy debates, and define the nature of the EU for years to come.

European Elections: What Will Be the Key Issues for European Voters?

Margarita Dilova

Given the dynamic geopolitical developments, the 2024 European elections and their potential outcomes are of great importance for the future of the Old Continent. The growing protests by farmers and agriculturalists in Europe against European policies show that the agenda of the people and that of the European institutions may not be the same. Although the sentiment of solidarity and the professing of values is not lost in Europe, we are increasingly seeing disagreement with the Union's policies. These developments will open the way for populism and populist formations, which are likely to gain serious support from European voters.

The existence of an unresolved social and political issue immediately before a scheduled election for an institution runs a huge risk of distorting even the most thorough opinion polls and is often a harbinger to the emergence of new political actors. When a crisis situation forms, it can distort the political process and provoke either voter passivity or a punitive vote, which certainly changes habitual attitudes and leads to surprises and discrepancies between polls and results. There is currently a wave of protests that is cumulating energy around itself and could attract new voters who could rearrange the political map. Depending on whether and how the European institutions manage the unresolved issues before the elections, there could be one result or another after the elections.

The European Parliament is an institution that reflects not only pan-European sentiments but also national politics. In many Member States there is a process of stratification of political entities, the emergence of new ones, including those with undefined ideologies, which are still unpositioned on the European political scene.

The attempt to predict the future choices of European citizens should go through a very careful reading and analysis of the constantly changing map of the newly emerging protest movements in the Member States. In this respect, protests such as those of the grain growers and farmers could seriously predict both the turnout for the European elections and the results of the elections themselves. For the old political formations, there will be the serious question of how to mobilise their electorates. In general, crisis situations stimulate

civic activism by voting both in favour of a particular force and punitively against another. The question of what kind of Europe Europe's citizens want has no clear answer at all. Whether voters trust European institutions and the EP's ability to steer European policy has a direct impact on turnout.

1. What are we voting for?

In the upcoming elections, which will take place between 6 and 9 June 2024, European citizens will have the opportunity to elect their representatives to the European Parliament. Its work is crucial in terms of the decisions it takes and the legislation it adopts shaping EU policy.

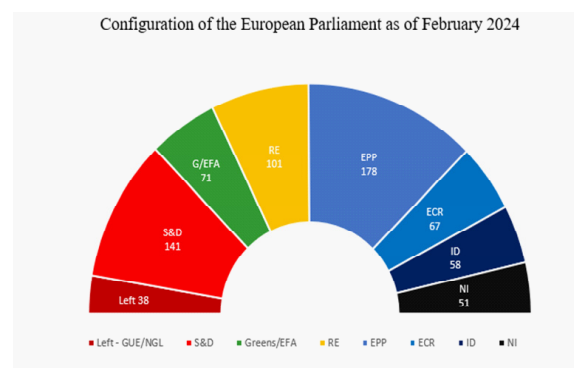
2. Main functions of the Parliament:

- Debates legislation
- Passes or rejects laws, and can introduce amendments (though not in all cases)
- Supervises the institutions and budgets of the Union

3. Configurations of the EP

European Parliament elections are held every five years. Member states are allocated seats according to their population, with the number of seats per country ranging from 6 to 96, out of a total of 705 in the current parliamentary configuration and 720 in the next one.

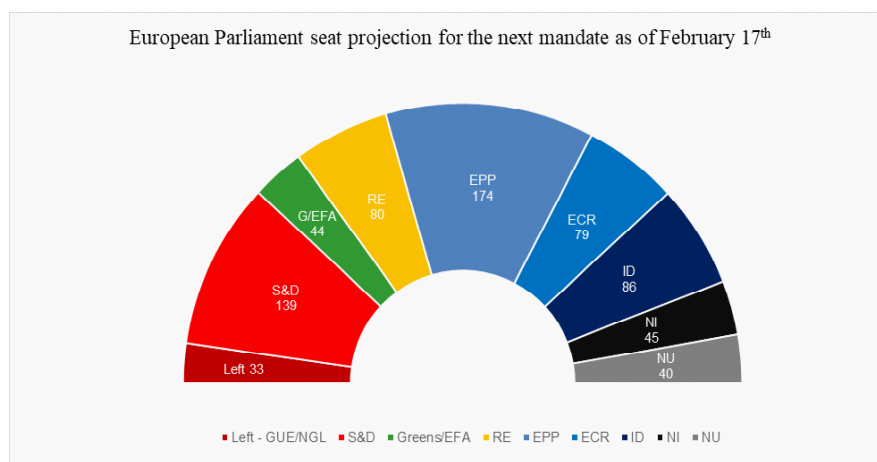
The last elections to the European Parliament were held in 2019, when the EPP group won the most seats in the Parliament which has been a recurring trend since 1999, but its share was reduced compared to past results. The trend of erosion in support for the EPP and S&D, the so-called "Grand Coalition", and the corresponding political climate, has resulted in the following configuration of the European Parliament that is in place today:



Tracking the registered roll-call votes in the European Parliament in its current configuration, it is striking that different coalitions tend to dominate different areas of European politics. For example, a coalition made up of the centrist EPP and S&D, often with support from Renew Europe, usually prevails on issues relating to budgets, budgetary control, culture and education, economic and monetary affairs, foreign affairs, external market and consumer protection, legal affairs, transport and tourism.

On the other hand, the coalition of centre-left political groups, comprising S&D, Renew Europe, Greens/EFA and the Left, usually prevails on civil liberties, justice, home affairs, development, employment, social affairs, the environment, women's rights and gender equality. In contrast, the coalition made up of centre-right groups (EPP,

Renew Europe, ECR and sometimes ID) usually prevails in areas such as agriculture, rural development, fisheries, industry, research and international trade.



As of February 2024, a POLITICO poll¹ shows that the positions of the EPP and S&D will not undergo much change and the groups will remain first and second in numbers, respectively, albeit with a reduced share due to the increase in the total number of representatives from 705 to 720. The Identity and Democracy (ID) group is placed third, displacing Renew Europe, which, according to the survey, suffered a significant drop and lost 21 seats. Fourth in numbers at the moment looks set to be the Renew Europe group with a projected 80 seats, followed by ECR with one seat less. The most noticeable

¹ POLITICO. (2024). POLITICO Poll of Polls — European Election polls, trends and election news. POLITICO.
<https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/european-parliament-election/>

loss will be suffered by the Greens/EFA group, which is predicted to lose 27 seats in the next EP mandate, while the Left – GUE/NGL parliamentary group will remain the smallest with five fewer representatives than the current composition. The final allocation of the New Unaligned actors (NUs) to the groups will further shift the landscape of the structure of the next parliament, as it is not yet clear which political group parties such as Hungary’s Fidesz, Spain’s Sumar and the Bulgarian PP-DB coalition will join.

The results so far show that the current coalitions are likely to be maintained in most districts, at least at the beginning of the next parliamentary term. The centrist grand coalition, even with the support of Renew Europe, is likely to be less dominant on some policy issues due to its smaller size. In particular, on economic and monetary issues as well as on the internal market and consumer protection, the grand coalition is winning votes in the current Parliament by a smaller margin.

With regard to foreign affairs, in particular EU support for Ukraine, the majority in the forthcoming European Parliament is expected to approve the continuation of the financial, logistical and military aid that Western countries have been providing to Kyiv since February 2022, although political groups of far-right formations, such as the ID and ECR, will increase their presence in Parliament.

4. Key policies that will be at the centre of the discussion in this campaign:

- Agricultural and Trade policy
- Energy Independence and Climate Change
- EU Enlargement policy
- Migration policy
- Security

5. Agricultural and Trade policy

In the new programming period up to 2027, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) places greater emphasis on environmental protection and biodiversity. The CAP is now aligned with the objectives of the European Green Pact and should contribute to achieving them. As a result, payments are now linked to stricter requirements. For example, each farm must allocate at least 3% of its arable land to biodiversity and non-productive elements. Overall,

around 40% of the CAP budget is allocated to climate-related activities.

The Union's agricultural policy was met with discontent among farmers and growers across Europe. The main problems cited are low farm gate prices, rising production costs, duty-free corridors for Ukrainian grain and food, and the Commission's renewed negotiations to conclude a trade agreement with MERCOSUR (a South American common market between Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay), an agreement that is feared to significantly reduce or eliminate import tariffs altogether, putting European production in an uncompetitive position with South American agricultural imports.

The war in Ukraine, the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the decline in living standards as a result of high inflation have posed major challenges for the world economy and in particular for a region such as Europe that supports huge welfare states. The contraction of the economy and the need to pursue more conservative economic policies is creating discontent and uncertainty among the people, and the protests by farmers and agriculturalists in Europe are just one expression of this sentiment. Although the agricultural sector is only a small part of the Union's economy, the wave of protest has caused a huge backlash and forced the Commission to back down on some policies and regulations. Green policies burden farmers with harsh regulations and rules, such as the ban on the use of pesticides, without providing an alternative means of crop protection, which makes production more expensive and creates the need to review policy in this sector.

6. Energy Independence and Climate Change

The debate on the shift to renewables and the use of nuclear energy is to be conducted in a new configuration after the elections. At the World Climate Action Summit (COP28) in Dubai in December, a declaration to triple the share of nuclear power (to which Bulgaria has agreed to) was formally announced. According to the document, global nuclear capacity should triple between now and 2050. The summit also decided to phase out fossil fuels by 2050, although the text of the agreement does not clearly state the phasing out of coal, oil and gas. German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock said that for the EU the agreement was only a starting point. Global uncertainty, multiple crises and military conflicts are drastically changing the political landscape, and the conversation on nuclear energy development is back on the agenda. Even in Germany, leading members of Germany's conservative CDU/CSU alliance and the pro-business Free Democrats (FDP) are calling for a reversal of the country's nuclear phase-out.

In 2019, when the last European elections were held, due to numerous extreme weather events, green parties made significant gains in many EU countries in what were called “the first climate elections”. The result prompted the then new President of the Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, to present an ambitious climate programme to gain the approval of the European Parliament. With rising prices and the need for security, things are no longer that way. Public opinion polls published by Europe Elects² in EU Member States show a rise in support for conservative right-wing parties that are sceptical of progressive climate policy and the ‘Green Deal’. This has also triggered opposition from centre-right parties to important legislation such as the Nature Recovery Act. It is the June 2024 elections and the configuration of the groups in Parliament that will prove decisive for the development of European policy in this area.

7. Enlargement policy

Currently, the candidate countries to join the EU are Montenegro, Serbia, Turkey, North Macedonia, Albania, Ukraine, Moldova, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Georgia. In December last year, the EU launched membership negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova, and Georgia was granted candidate country status. Giving Ukraine the green light a few months before the elections could give populists in some EU states an electoral weapon, as the prospect of Ukraine’s accession puts the Union under pressure to reform itself by increasing its entire budget through additional taxes or larger contributions from member states and reducing agricultural subsidies per hectare. The way to avoid this would be to postpone the enlargement issue for a few months until after the European Parliament elections and a new College of the European Commission, which would look at the situation with a fresh set of eyes. The notion of reforming the EU in such a way that decisions in some structures are taken by qualified majority rather than unanimity is also being given publicity, but this change also requires unanimous agreement of all member states.

8. Migration policy

In December, the Council and the European Parliament agreed on the reform of the EU asylum and migration system. A key priority for the Union

² Garscha, M. (2023, December 30). EU parliamentary projection: Le Pen’s Right-Wing ID rises to third place. Europe Elects. <https://europeelects.eu/2023/12/30/december-2023/>

will be to step up efforts to establish an effective, humanitarian and safe European migration policy. The reform foresees stricter procedures, such as a mandatory solidarity mechanism between member states to ease the burden on border states, whereby if a country refuses to accept asylum seekers, it should pay financial compensation or make another contribution. An agreement between the EU and Egypt, similar to the one with Tunisia last year, is also currently being worked on to prevent illegal migration. Under this agreement, in return for financial aid of more than EUR 1 billion, Tunisia has committed itself to preventing migrants from crossing the Mediterranean towards Europe.

EU migration policy will continue to be a major issue in 2024. There has been a significant increase in the political influence of far-right parties, whose rhetoric is strongly anti-migrant. In France, a new and stricter migration law was adopted with the support of the Union Nationale, which Le Pen declared a victory. Similarly, migration policies in Sweden and Finland are also becoming tougher, after the far right in Finland became part of the government and in Sweden tolerated it. In the Netherlands, Geert Wilders won the parliamentary elections last autumn with an anti-migrant message. Indeed, according to a study by the consulting firm Portland Communications provided to POLITICO³, there has been a rise of populist groups and far-right movements across the continent.

9. Security

Donald Trump's statement earlier this month⁴, effectively suggesting that Russia should attack any NATO member that fails to meet its defence spending obligations, is indicative of the urgent need for a strong common European defence strategy. To ensure security in a changing world, the European Union must be able to guarantee the security of its citizens through an autonomous defence policy and greater investment in defence industries. Although Europe does not have the ability to produce the necessary raw materials, such as graphite, which is an important material in the production of helicopters, submarines, artillery and missiles, and 70% of its global production comes

³ Camut, N. (2024, February 12). French far right poised for record surge in EU election, poll shows. POLITICO. <https://www.politico.eu/article/french-far-right-poised-record-surge-eu-parliament-election-poll-shows-bardella-national-rally/>

⁴ FitzGerald, B. J. (2024, February 11). Trump says he would "encourage" Russia to attack Nato allies who do not pay their bills. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-68266447>

from China, long-term planning and coordination of purchases could be implemented. It is important to pursue a vision of strengthening Europe's defence capabilities and industrial base, as well as the security of NATO's borders on European territory, beyond the duration of the war in Ukraine.

10. Attitudes of Bulgarian society

The forthcoming rotation of prime ministers will be the uncertain environment in which the election campaign in Bulgaria will take place. A Eurobarometer poll⁵ shows an overwhelming unawareness in Bulgarians about when the European Parliament elections will take place. 38% of respondents do not know and 20% gave the wrong answer, 17% of respondents are informed that elections will be held in 2024 but do not know exactly when, and only 25% gave the right answer. The negative trend is not surprising given the low voter turnout in the country in recent years. This makes the task of our MEP candidates even more difficult.

The positioning of the PP-DB coalition will be interesting, as the two formations have different self-identification - "Democratic Bulgaria" to the centre-right and "We Continue the Change" rather to the centre-left, which could lead to a divergence in their positioning on a European level. On the other hand, "Revival" also has to decide which European family it wants to join. In December, the party's leader Kostadin Kostadinov attended a joint meeting of the presidents of the Identity and Democracy member parties. It is possible that for the first time Bulgaria will have a representative in this far-right parliamentary formation.

11. Conclusion

The forthcoming European elections in 2024 are of great importance against the backdrop of evolving geopolitical dynamics and the growing disagreement of European citizens on key policy areas such as agriculture, energy, EU enlargement and migration. The potential for increasing support for populist movements highlights the need for careful analysis of emerging protest movements and their impact on turnout and electoral outcomes. Furthermore, the complex nature of predicting the affiliation of MEPs and the challenges faced by candidates, particularly in countries such as Bulgaria with low turnout, highlight the dynamic and multifaceted nature of European politics. As the elections for the European institutions approach, it remains

crucial for political formations to propose solutions to the outstanding problems and to present their vision effectively in order to win the trust and support of European citizens. Traditional parties will have the difficult task of mobilising their electorates with messages that what has been achieved in Europe can easily be lost if it is not continuously defended by the voice of the voters.

⁵ European Parliament, Directorate-General for Communication, (2023). European Parliament Eurobarometer: Parlemeter 2023: Six Months Before the 2024 European Elections, Publications Office of the European Union, 140-142. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2861/58496>

The Sixth Amendment of the Constitution. Are we expecting an improvement in justice?

Margarita Dilova

On December 20th, the Sixth Amendment of the Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria became a fact. The constitutional amendments were voted on the third reading in the Parliament, with a roll-call vote. The amendments provided the following changes:

- The Supreme Judicial Council (SJC) is splitting in two – one for judges, one for prosecutors
- The powers of the Prosecutor General are limited and his term is reduced
- Citizens are allowed an indirect access to the Constitutional Court
- Dual citizens are allowed to become MPs and ministers
- The President's powers are narrowed regarding caretaker governments

This occurred after on the 16th and 17th of December the Constitutional Commission of the National Assembly examined and voted on the proposed amendments, submitted by "WCC-DB", GERB and DPS on the second reading. The draft law on Amendments and Additions to the Constitution, submitted on 28 July 2023, sparked heated and controversial reactions, which led the Members of the National Assembly to make edits to the proposed texts. Some of the original proposals included:

- Dividing the SJC into a SJC and a Supreme Prosecutorial Council, abolishing the Plenum
- Different proportions of the parliamentary and judicial quota of members for the two councils
- May 24th to become the National holiday
- Shorter terms for the Prosecutor General and the Presidents of the SCC and the SAC
- Changes in the formation of caretaker governments

The Venice Commission expressed support for the division of the Supreme Judicial Council, but also criticism regarding the lack of public debate, as well as criticism regarding the distribution of members in the Prosecutorial Council,

recommending a balanced representation of the prosecution. The committee's report also says that there is no international standard on the need for a Prosecutorial Council, but properly constituted councils strengthen the autonomy of the prosecution system in relation to other branches of government, as well as the internal autonomy of individual prosecutors. The independence of individual members of the Prosecutorial Council should not be a prerogative or privilege granted in their own interest, but a guarantee in the interest of the fair, impartial and efficient functioning of the prosecution system. The Commission recommends reviewing the composition of the Prosecutorial Council in order to avoid the risk of political influence on the prosecution service. Despite the recommendations, the final text remained the same.

1. What was adopted?

The President retains the power to appoint and dismiss the Prosecutor General and the Presidents of the Supreme Courts. In the original bill, this power was removed, but after criticisms and discussions, MPs decided to keep it among the powers of the head of state. A text was adopted according to which, if the President does not issue a decree appointing the President of the SCC, the SAC or the Prosecutor General within 7 days, the decision on the selection of the respective council or position will be promulgated and the appointment will come into effect.

The Prosecutor General retains the methodological leadership of the prosecution, and will establish a uniform standard for cases in the pre-trial phase, although they will not be prepared by him alone, but on the proposal of the Supreme Prosecution's Office.

The Supreme Judicial Council will be divided into two councils - the Supreme Judicial Council and the Supreme Prosecutorial Council. The new Supreme Judicial Council will have 15 members - the presidents of the SCC and the SAC, 8 members elected by judges and 5 by the National Assembly. The new Supreme Prosecutorial

Council will consist of 10 members - the Prosecutor General, two members elected by the prosecutors, one by the investigators and 6 by the Parliament.

A General Assembly will succeed the Plenum of the SJC, with its powers limited to deciding only on certain issues. In this Assembly, the Prosecutor General and the Minister of Justice will have no voting rights. It will be

chaired by the President of the Supreme Court of Cassation and, in his absence, by the President of the Supreme Administrative Court.

The mandate of the Judicial Council will be four years, of the Prosecutorial Council also four, of the Prosecutor General - five, of the presidents of the Supreme Courts - seven. The proposal of "There is Such a People" that the Prosecutor General be elected by the general public was dropped.

The current composition of the SJC, although with an expired mandate, will continue to act for at least another nine months. This was adopted by transitional and final provisions, which stipulate that within six months after the entry into force of the amendments to the Constitution, the National Assembly "shall adopt the laws relating to the implementation of the amended texts". Thereafter, another three-month period is prescribed from the entry into force of the laws to conduct the procedure for the election of council members. The current SJC will now only be unable to appoint Presidents of Supreme Courts and a Prosecutor General.

The Supreme Administrative Prosecutor's Office is being closed. Thus, in practice, there will be no Supreme Cassation Prosecutor's Office and no Supreme Administrative Prosecutor's Office. The prosecutor's office will no longer be able to carry out checks in all administrations, but it will retain the right to attack administrative acts and to intervene in cases where the public interest or the interest of people in need of special protection must be protected.

Despite the opinion of the Inspectorate to the SJC of 5.12.2023 with a proposal to expand the composition of the Inspectorate and the number of the Inspectorate from 10 to 15 together with the Inspector General, the Inspectorate remains unchanged. Inspectors will be eligible for re-election to the same position for another term.

The caretaker Prime Ministers will be elected from among the president of the National Assembly, the president of the Supreme Court of Cassation, the governor or sub-governor of the Bulgarian National Bank, the president or vice-president of the Court of Auditors and the ombudsman or his deputy. The original draft envisaged a narrower range of persons who could become caretaker Prime Ministers.

Dual citizenship is allowed for MPs. The original draft stipulated that they must have lived in the country for the last 18 months. This amendment also allows dual citizenship for ministers, and there will be no residency requirements for them.

The idea that the Parliament should not be dissolved if it is impossible to form a cabinet is maintained. This will avoid a legislative vacuum when elections are held. The new text now looks like this:

“Article 64. (1) The National Assembly shall be elected for a term of four years.

(2) In the event of war, martial law or any other state of emergency occurring during the term of office of the National Assembly, the term of office of the National Assembly shall be extended until such circumstances cease to exist.

(3) Elections for a new National Assembly shall be held not later than one month before the expiry of the term of office of the current National Assembly.”

(4) The oath of office of the newly elected Members of the National Assembly shall terminate the powers of the previous National Assembly.”

Through the courts, citizens will be able to appeal to the Constitutional Court. Any court can refer a case to the Constitutional Court at its discretion or at the request of a party, but only for the unconstitutionality of a law applicable to a particular case - there will be no possibility to ask for an interpretation of the Constitution.

The wording for the text on regulators will be broader: “The National Assembly shall respect

the principles of openness, transparency, publicity and reasonableness in the selection of members of bodies which it fully or partially appoints, in order to ensure their independence. Decisions on elections shall be adopted by a two-thirds majority of all deputies, where this is provided for by law,” reads the new version of the text.

The proposal to change the national holiday from 3 March to 24 May was dropped.

2. The opposition is against the amendments of the Constitution.

The leader of “Revival” Kostadin Kostadinov said that they are unconstitutional and that “Revival” will attack all changes of the Constitution.

BSP leader Kornelia Ninova expressed suspicion that the government had

opened the door for negotiations with President Rumen Radev because no explicit text had been adopted stating that a special law would limit the powers of the caretaker cabinet.

“There is Such a People” also strongly criticized the changes and expressed certainty that the Constitutional Court would stop them.

3. What opinions were given on the reforms?

The SCC, in an official opinion, strongly disagreed with the proposal that the President of the Supreme Court of Cassation be included in the circle of persons from among whom a caretaker Prime Minister should be appointed, as this would contradict the principle of separation of powers and would affect his independence. The opinion further states that the proposal thus made contradicts the independence of the judiciary proclaimed in Article 117 of the CRC and is unconstitutional.

The Supreme Bar Council made a proposal in its opinion to the Constitutional Commission to create a guarantee at the Constitutional level that the “public quota” will indeed be such and will not be political, by explicitly stating that members of political parties and organisations and MPs cannot be elected by the National Assembly. In its opinion, the SBC disagrees with the proposal to extend the powers of the Inspectorate through the proposed power to carry out inspections for systematic violations of the law and the rules of court procedure, as this would affect the independence of the judiciary.

The envisaged changes are criticized with regards to the exclusion of the Prosecutor General from the circle of subjects with general competence to appeal to the Constitutional Court in case of violation of rights and freedoms of citizens, otherwise the Prosecution would be deprived of a mechanism to carry out its function to ensure legality.

The Supreme Bar Council also proposed that the powers of the Ombudsman and the SBC to refer cases to the Constitutional Court be expanded in view of the subject scope of the requests, by removing the restriction that the requests should be limited to the unconstitutionality of laws, which violate fundamental rights and freedoms of citizens, which in the practice of the Constitutional Court has been interpreted narrowly and deprives of the possibility to obtain constitutional protection all rights of citizens which are not regulated in Chapter Two of the Constitution and especially economic rights which are regulated in Chapter One.

Next, it was proposed that the possibility of referral to the Constitutional Court should be expanded by allowing the request not only to the unconstitutionality of the law applicable to the case, but also to the incompatibility of the law applicable to the case with an international treaty to which Bulgaria is a party.

The Supreme Judicial Council, for its part, expressed support for the envisaged majority of judges elected by judges in the Judicial Collegium, but considered the proposals to abolish the Plenum of the SJC and to create two separate councils unconstitutional, citing the Constitutional Court's Decision No. 3 of 10 April 2003 in Case No. 22/2002 and Decision No. 3 of 10 April 2003 in Case No. 22/2002, according to which this can only be done by a Grand National Assembly. For this reason, the deputies adopted on second and third reading that the Plenum of the SJC should be called the General Assembly of the Supreme Judicial and Supreme Prosecutorial Council, since its abolition requires the convening of a Grand National Assembly.

4. Which are the problematic changes?

The texts regarding the judiciary have caused the most controversy in the public space. The idea that the public quota in the newly created Prosecutorial Council should prevail was criticised on the grounds that there should be no political influence in the state Prosecution. The aim of this change is to ensure that the Prosecutorial Council is not dominated by members nominated by the prosecution service, over whom the Prosecutor General has influence. In order to avoid political influence, it was accepted that the members elected from the public quota should not be party affiliated.

Allowing dual citizenship for MPs and ministers also raises concerns and mixed reactions. The main concerns are that this would open the door to foreign influence by giving foreign nationals access to the state government. According to the provisions adopted, a Bulgarian citizen who also holds another citizenship and has lived in the country for the last 18 months can be elected as an MP. The residency requirement will not apply to ministers. In the Constitutional Committee, when discussing the amendments on second reading, the experts from the Public Council raised the issue of the way "sedentariness" would be proved. It was also pointed out that this could lead to a potential case of discrimination, as a number of other positions are prohibited from holding dual citizenship.

As is clear from the opinion of the Supreme Court of Cassation, the inclusion of the President

of the Court in the circle of options for a caretaker prime minister could also lead to problems, as it creates a risk of violating the principle of separation of powers.

5. Conclusions

The Constitutional amendments have been adopted by the Parliament, but the obstacles towards the Constitutional reform are not yet over. There are already requests from the opposition that the amendments will be attacked before the Constitutional Court. The Court could overturn the adopted texts if it finds that the ordinary National Assembly has encroached on the competence of the Grand National Assembly, as many experts have expressed fears about. Such a decision would create a normative vacuum and a host of problems, as declaring the new provisions unconstitutional would not automatically “resurrect” the old ones (see the Constitutional Court’s Decision No. 3 of 2020).

In spite of all the criticism that the amendments to the Constitution have received, the sixth amendment of the Constitution was extremely necessary and desirable. These changes have their logic, following the dynamics of political life in Bulgaria in recent years. The absolute power of the General Prosecutor and the rule of the President’s caretaker cabinets were among the main prerequisites for seeking and finding a solution in a democratic manner..

The Sixth Amendment of the Constitution in Action

Margarita Dilova

1. The New Constitutional texts:

- The Supreme Judicial Council is divided into two
- A new procedure for the formation of a caretaker cabinet
- Parliament will not dissolve if it does not elect a government
- Parliament members and ministers allowed to have dual citizenship
- Shorter mandate for the General Prosecutor
- Parliament to elect regulators by two-thirds majority

2. The president can choose who to nominate as caretaker prime minister between:

- The President of the National Assembly
- The President of the Court of Auditors or his deputies
- The Governor or Deputy Governors of the Bulgarian National Bank
- The Ombudsman or his deputies



In December of the previous year, members of parliament voted on proposed amendments to the Constitution. The adopted texts were met with criticism

and raised concerns about their potential impact, particularly from the president, the prosecutor's office, and the Supreme Judicial Council. The inability of the government to implement the agreed rotation between them has necessitated the implementation of new texts regarding the formation of a caretaker cabinet. In accordance with the amendments to the Constitution, in the event that a cabinet cannot be elected, the president is empowered to appoint a caretaker government in consultation with the parliamentary groups. The nominated caretaker Prime Minister, who is required to be a person holding one of the public offices listed in the Constitution, is responsible for proposing the composition of the Council of Ministers.

The primary concern was that the occurrence of an unprecedented situation might be imminent if any of the individuals on the list were to decline the offered position.

This did not happen because the President of the Court of Auditors Dimitar Glavchev agreed to take the post. However, it remains unclear what would have happened if the President did not agree with the proposals for ministers and refused to sign the decree on the formation of a caretaker cabinet. The lack of spelled-out procedures in such scenarios could create a risk of triggering a constitutional crisis. Without a presidential decree, a caretaker government cannot be appointed. In the event of a presidential objection to the candidate for caretaker prime minister or the composition of the cabinet, the incumbent government should propose another option and thus reach a consensus. This is the procedure for the appointment of ambassadors and should apply by analogy in this case. The amendments to the Basic Law do not provide for a time limit within which a decree should be issued for the formation of a caretaker government, but the statesmanship of the President should serve as a guarantee that such a decree would be issued within a reasonable time, as has been the practice so far.

3. The Glavchev Cabinet

Dimitar Glavchev is the first caretaker prime minister of Bulgaria elected under the new rules. His position as president of the Court of Auditors raised the question whether there is a conflict of interest, given that it is the Court of Auditors that audits state institutions. The issue of who has political responsibility for this cabinet was also raised. The President is distancing himself from it, and the political parties know that taking responsibility for

this government will be used against them by their opponents in the election campaign. The possibility of the National Assembly taking responsibility is also illogical, because that would mean taking responsibility for a government it did not elect. Dimitar Glavchev's relationship with the GERB party raises doubts about the fair organisation of the elections, which is the main task of the new Council of Ministers. The retention of Kalin Stoyanov as Interior Minister reinforces these concerns. Such suspicions came about because most of the changes in the Constitution were conjunctural. The figures who had the possibility to occupy the caretaker prime minister's seat, with the exception of Andrei Gyurov, were in one way or another persons linked to the GERB party. It is this illogical new construction that creates the premise for legitimate concerns about the potential inability of the caretaker cabinet to be able to organise the elections impartially.

A poll by the Trend polling agency¹ reports a higher level of disapproval than approval for Dimitar Glavchev's caretaker cabinet. 39% of those who participated in the poll disapprove of the caretaker government, 20% express support and over 40% cannot yet give an assessment. The dynamic political processes and the change of ministers in the caretaker government are likely to influence the public's final assessment of the cabinet's policy.

Already in the first weeks changes were made in the composition of the Council of Ministers. On 22 April, President Rumen Radev released a decree appointing Dimitar Glavchev as foreign minister. Stefan Dimitrov had held this post until then. A few days earlier, Dimitar Glavchev proposed Daniel Mitov to take Stefan Dimitrov's post in the foreign ministry, but the deputy chairman of the GERB party withdrew his candidacy. The stated reason for the requested change of the foreign minister is the difficult communication with Stefan Dimitrov. Another change that was made in the caretaker cabinet was the replacement of Kiril Vatev with Georgi Tahov as Minister of Agriculture.

The changes made in the composition of the caretaker cabinet caused sharp political reactions and new suspicions about GERB's influence on the caretaker prime minister's decisions. In the next month, combining the positions of prime minister and foreign minister, Dimitar Glavchev will have the difficult task of overturning all these concerns by organising fair parliamentary and European elections..

¹Trends. (2024). Trend - Attitudes of Bulgarians towards the main institutions and parties (April 2024) <https://rctrend.bg/project/1нагласи-на-българите-спрямо-основнит-20/>

4. What might the Constitutional Court decide?

The Constitutional Court was referred by the President, "There is such a people" & "Revival". It was the texts covering the constitution and dissolution of the National Assembly and the appointment of a caretaker government that were attacked. Proclaiming the texts in question unconstitutional would lead to an unclear result. According to Decision No 3/2020 of the Constitutional Court, a normative vacuum would arise which would place the country in an unprecedented constitutional crisis, without a legitimate government and parliament and with the possibility of attacking every decision of the executive and legislative bodies. Another possible reading of the matter is that this hypothetical does not fall within the scope of the Constitutional Court decision in question, since the lack of restorative effect in the repeal or amendment of a statute only applies to provisions of traditional legislation with provisions of the Constitution. If this is accepted by the Constitutional Court, the eventual repeal of the new texts should lead to the automatic reinstatement and application of the old ones. In the coming months, the Constitutional Court will issue a ruling that will answer all the questions raised by the changes to the Constitution.

The Future of American Aid to Ukraine

Antonio Dafinov

1. Overview

The present paper focuses on the indispensable nature of the US military and financial aid to Ukraine during the full-on-invasion stage of Russo-Ukrainian war. Later on, it describes the several trends in American politics which threaten the continuation of the American aid to Kyiv. It concludes by emphasizing the need for a new European defense structure and a substantially larger EU financial engagement in the Russo-Ukrainian war. The conclusions of the present policy paper can be summarized as follows:

- The USA has been the largest military contributor to Ukraine so far. Without its aid, it is improbable that Ukraine would have fought for so long and with such success.
- The current dispute in the American Senate concerning the billions of dollars in aid to Israel and Ukraine will likely be resolved in 2024 at the price of Democrat concessions.
- In the future the USA will be less involved in Europe and more hawkish in the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific, regardless of the results in the 2024 presidential election.
- Countries in Europe need to take urgent action towards building up their defense forces and cyber security networks, while increasing energy independence and aid to Ukraine.

2. The essence of the problem

2.1. The importance of foreign supplies to the Ukrainian war effort

The February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine was met with unexpectedly fierce Ukrainian resistance. From the very onset of the war, the Western world rallied up support for Ukraine by providing diplomatic pressure, humanitarian aid, cash and arms. Without this aid it is unlikely that Kyiv would have been able to hold the aggression, let alone inflict casualties to Russia of that magnitude.

During the early months of fighting, the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) managed to halt and partially repulse the initial Russian attack. Russian forces, however, gained ground in the southern regions of Ukraine and created a much-needed land-bridge to annexed Crimea. 2023 saw the pace of the war change and no major alterations occurred on the fronts. The armed confrontation turned into a war of attrition with both parties becoming increasingly exhausted from material and personnel losses.¹

Given the circumstances, Western aid is a *conditio sine qua non* for the Ukrainians. Without NATO weapons they would find themselves mismatched due to Russian numerical superiority. Financial contributions have been equally as important to Kyiv, as the expected budget deficit for the fiscal year 2024 is a staggering \$42 billion, owing to a 22% of GDP defense bill.² From the point of view of the Kremlin, the so called 'Ukraine fatigue' could be the only viable exit option. Russia has found itself stuck in an expensive military quagmire with no sight of tactical victory. In the meantime sanctions strangle its economy, casualties rise and AFU receives more weapons. For that reason it has engaged in a hybrid strategy with a goal of diminishing Western support for Ukraine with its eyes on the 2024 American election.

2.2. The size of the American aid.

The most generous donor in terms of weaponry has, by far, been the USA with \$43.9 billion in aid to Ukraine since Jan. 2022.³ With its contribution the USA outpaces the arms supplies of Germany, the EU institutions, the UK and Canada combined.⁴ Cash-wise the USA has provided some significant \$25 billion.⁵ For comparison, the Cold War American assistance to the Afghani mujahedeen against the Soviets amounted to \$3.2 billion.⁶

The combined American aid to Ukraine since 2022 comes out at about \$70 billion. This colossal figure has been castigated by certain Republican legislators, who seek to discredit the Biden Administration in an attempt to win the White House in 2024 and gain favor with their own voter base.

¹ Estimates vary, but most agree that both sides lost thousands of pieces of equipment and sustained hundreds of thousands of casualties.;

² Ministry of Finance of Ukraine, 09 Nov 2023, *Parliament of Ukraine adopts State Budget for 2024*, last visited 22.12.2023, <https://www.kmu.gov.ua/en/news/verkhovna-rada-ukrainy-pryniala-derzhbiudzheth-na-2024-rik>;

³ Trebesch et al. (2023) 'The Ukraine Tracker' Kiel Institute for the World Economy;

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Feifer, G. *The Great Gamble. The Soviet War in Afghanistan*. HarperCollins e-books. 2009. p.131; \$3.2 billion amounts to approx. \$9.9 billion adjusted for inflation (December 2023);

3. The near future of American aid

Republican political backlash has led to a conundrum in the Senate on the latest American foreign aid bill. The total cost of Biden's funding request is pegged at just over \$110 billion⁷ and all Republican senators voted 'no', with the majority of them citing the concerning situation in the Mexican border. They make the argument that it is senseless for the USA to send such a sum in foreign aid with thousands of illegal border crossings occurring each day, accompanied by a dramatic rise in fentanyl trafficking. US Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) summed up his party's position – no foreign aid bill until measures are taken to restrict Mexican border crossings.⁸

Meanwhile, a lot Republican legislators actually support aid to Ukraine, as shown by their media statements. In the end, a deal will likely be reached after Democrat concessions on the Mexican border issue, as senators from both sides claim progress on the negotiations. This, however, is not expected to happen until 2024, which will gravely endanger Ukraine on the battlefield.⁹

It is important to note that this particular tactic – political blackmail in Congress – is nothing new in American politics. Republican legislators managed to force major concessions out of their Democrat counterparts in the debt-ceiling deal – a cap on non-defense spending in 2024 and 1% increase in 2025. What connects the foreign aid bill and the debt-ceiling bill is that they have been useful tools for Republicans to push their legislative partisan interests, while mobilizing their voter base for the coming elections.

On the subject of elections, ex-President Trump seems to be the evident Republican candidate for the presidential battle in 2024, as the gap between him and Florida governor DeSantis increasingly widens.¹⁰ As of Dec 2023, polls show that Trump also holds an advantage against Biden.¹¹ This raises the question – what would happen to the aid for Ukraine should Trump be inaugurated again.

⁷ \$61 billion of that sum will be allocated for Ukraine.

⁸ Republican leader Mitch McConnell News Room, 14.12.2023, Senate Cannot Claim To Address National Security Without Restoring Border Security, last visited 22.12.2023, <https://www.republicanleader.senate.gov/newsroom/remarks/senate-cannot-claim-to-address-national-security-without-restoring-border-security>;

⁹ The White House Briefing Room, 04.12.2023, *Letter to Congressional Leadership Regarding the Need for Urgent Action to Support Ukraine's Defense*, last visited 22.12.2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/briefing-room/2023/12/04/letter-to-congressional-leadership-regarding-the-need-for-urgent-action-to-support-ukraines-defense/>

¹⁰ FiveThirtyEight Interactives Latest Polls, last updated 21.12.2023, last visited 22.12.2023, <https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/polls/president-primary-r/2024/national/>;

¹¹ FiveThirtyEight Interactives Latest Polls, last updated 21.12.2023, last visited 22.12.2023, <https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/polls/president-general/2024/national/>;

The former president has taken his trademark approach by claiming that he would end the Ukraine war 'in 24 hours of being elected', which has concerned many, who fear Trump would force Ukraine to accept the current territorial status-quo.

While some assume that the statement is merely a part of Trump's anti-establishment rhetoric, a dangerous precedent can be seen in Trump's withdrawal from Afghanistan¹² and Syria, which left regional American allies in shambles. In regard to Ukraine, a leaked phone call showed Trump pressure Zelenskyy into investigating the Biden family while holding aid as bargaining chip. Trump did actually provide weapons for Ukraine during his presidency, but only after being convinced by his advisors. When he took hard stances against American adversaries it was against Beijing and Teheran, and not Moscow. This tendency will probably continue in the case of a new Trump presidency, owing to the general electoral attitude of his support base.¹³

Even though Trump is notorious for being unpredictable, the most realistic scenario seems to be one in which support for Ukraine diminishes in the case of a Republican win in 2024. A strong bipartisan effort in Congress could circumvent Trump's reluctance to aid Ukraine, but that seems more and more unfeasible in light of the ongoing process of polarization of American politics.

4. American aid in the years ahead

The Russian Federation is a foremost and direct concern for European security. No matter who is elected president in 2024, there are a few ongoing trends in American politics, which European nations should beware of in the coming years.

The focus of American military and financial might has shifted towards the People's Republic of China (PRC). The American 2022 National Defense Strategy recognized the PRC as the 'most comprehensive and serious challenge to US national security'.¹⁴ Although the same document characterized Russia as an 'acute threat'¹⁵ funds will naturally be relocated in the Indo-Pacific. The USA will seek to create new alliances and bolster

¹² The final troop withdrawal occurred during the Biden presidency, but by 2021 the Trump administration had reduced the troops to 2,500 – the lowest number since 2001.;

¹³ Andy Cerda, Pew Research, 08.12.2023, About half of Republicans now say the U.S. is providing too much aid to Ukraine, last visited 22.12.2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/12/08/about-half-of-republicans-now-say-the-us-is-providing-too-much-aid-to-ukraine/>;

¹⁴ United States Department of Defense, 27.10.2023, 2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America, last visited 22.12.2023, <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.PDF>;

¹⁵ Ibid.

existing ones for the sake of creating an anti-China coalition. Recent Chinese hostilities against Taiwan will only accelerate this process. Other NATO allies in the regions will understandably also shift focus.

In the Middle East, the Israeli-Iranian proxy conflict is also intensifying. The Israeli army intervened in Gaza with its ground force while the risk of armed confrontations with other pro-Iran proxies remains. As one of the most vital US allies on the globe, Israel is likely to receive increasing amounts of aid from D.C.

There is all time high level of distrust and unfavorable views between Republicans and Democrats in America.¹⁶ This major gap can only translate into more friction between the parties in Congress and all across the political space. This means that bipartisan cooperation will become an increasingly rare sight.

The presented combination of factors shows no bright future for future US aid to Europe and Ukraine. Even though the USA manifestly recognizes Russia as a threat, other pressing needs shift its focus away from the Old Continent. Meanwhile, European nations do not seem to be preparing for a change in American foreign policy as only six EU member-states spent more than 2% of GDP on defense in 2021.¹⁷

5. Final thoughts

European overreliance on the USA for protection seems to have finally showed its flaw. American detachment from the Old Continent, continued European energy dependence from Russia and Kremlin hybrid warfare will create a perfect storm for European security which could very well turn out to be an insurmountable challenge.

To protect itself from Russian hybrid aggression Europe needs to urgently increase military spending, create a common security network, accelerate aid to Ukraine before American support begins to dwindle and facilitate work towards a higher-degree of energy independence. There is no arguing that this will come at a high monetary cost. A Russian win in Ukraine, however, is a worst-case scenario for the security of the continent, as this will only embolden future Russian hybrid aggression with Moscow's grand idea being the revision of the post-Cold war status quo. With that being said, the price for guaranteeing security shall be paid sooner, rather than later.

¹⁶ The Economist, 17.08.2022, How Democrats and Republicans See Each Other, last visited 22.12.2023, <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2022/08/17/how-democrats-and-republicans-see-each-other>;

¹⁷ World Bank Data - Military expenditure (% of GDP) – European Union

The Future of EU Enlargement Policy and the 2024 European Parliament elections

Martin Stoyanov

1. Key points:

- Enlargement of the EU is a top priority for the remainder of the terms of the European Parliament and the European Commission;
- All eyes are on the European Council meeting on 14-15th December in Brussels;
- Elections for the European Parliament in 2024 are going to be a pivotal moment in the EU's history

"Completing our Union is the call of history, it is the natural horizon of the European Union."

Ursula von der Leyen

The President of the European Commission's statement¹ on November 8th regarding the 2023 Enlargement Package has allowed us a glimpse into the European institutions' need for a new and improved approach to enlargement policy – an approach that is vital and urgent for the future of the Union. Russia's war in Ukraine has dramatically shifted the geopolitical situation in Europe, leading to events such as the applications of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia for accession to the EU in 2022, Bosnia and Herzegovina being granted candidate status in 2022, Finland and Sweden's applications for NATO membership last year, an increase in military spending by member-states of the EU², and the push for a European Defense Industry Strategy (EDIS).

The Enlargement Package reports have outlined the progress, or lack thereof, of all candidate countries and Georgia, which is yet to be granted an official candidate status, towards meeting the Copenhagen criteria and

¹ Ursula von der Leyen. (2023). *Statement by President von der Leyen on the 2023 Enlargement Package and the new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans*. Accessed 7 December 2023. <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_23_5641>

² European Defence Agency. (2023). *Record high European defence spending boosted by procurement of new equipment*. Accessed 7 December 2023. <<https://eda.europa.eu/news-and-events/news/2023/11/30/record-high-european-defence-spending-boosted-by-procurement-of-new-equipment>>

the Commission's recommendations regarding fundamental chapters of the accession process. In the case of Ukraine, Ursula von der Leyen stated³ that more than 90% of the steps that the Commission recommended last year have been completed, which should merit the opening of accession negotiations by the European Council. Right after that remark, however, she went on to state that the Council should adopt a negotiating framework once Ukraine has completed all of the steps outlined by the Commission, with the Commission obliging to provide a report on progress by March 2024. This ambiguity and uncertainty regarding the concrete next steps and timing of Ukraine's accession to the EU could be the blueprint for a revised enlargement policy in the future, which could allow the candidate countries to start accession negotiations while still implementing key reforms regarding accession criteria. Fast-tracking steps of the accession process under immense pressure and threats to a country's very existence by adopting key reforms in sectors such as de-oligarchization processes and the reforms of the Constitutional Court of Ukraine, which appear to be the biggest hurdles for Ukraine on its road to starting accession talks in regards to the 7 conditions set by the Commission, could lead to ineffective reforms in the judicial system which would neither guarantee the Rule of Law, neither function in the intended state.

The recommendations of the European Commission to open accession talks with Ukraine and Moldova immediately and Bosnia and Herzegovina whenever they meet the set conditions, as well as grant candidate status to Georgia, are on the agenda for the European Council's meeting in Brussels on 14-15th December. Unlike candidate countries, who have to comply with rigorous accession criteria, the gate-keeping European Council bases its decision to a large extent on a political level, with a unanimous vote needed between the 27 member-states in order to grant candidate status or open accession negotiations.

As is often the case⁴, Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán has been vocal about his disapproval of Ukraine entering the European Union. With less than a week to go until the European Council decides on the future of enlargement, amongst other topics on the agenda, special attention needs to be paid to

³ Ursula von der Leyen. (2023). *Statement by President von der Leyen on the 2023 Enlargement Package and the new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans*. Accessed 7 December 2023. <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_23_5641>

⁴ Nicolas Camut. (2023). *Hungary's Orbán rejects talks on Ukraine's EU bid*. Accessed 7 December 2023. <<https://www.politico.eu/article/hungary-pm-viktor-orban-rejects-talks-on-ukraine-eu-membership-bid/>>

the Hungarian PM, who could attempt to leverage his veto power in a case of horse-trading.

EU leaders also have to address the support and aid to Ukraine, with pressure rising as the United States Congress failed⁵ to pass a bill featuring \$61 billions in aid to Ukraine due to demands by the Republican party in another case of horse-trading across the Atlantic.

The Parlemeter 2023 offered great insight into the climate of opinion on topics such as EU enlargement efforts (fig. 1) and voter tendencies (fig. 2) regarding the European Parliament elections set to take place 6-9th June 2024.

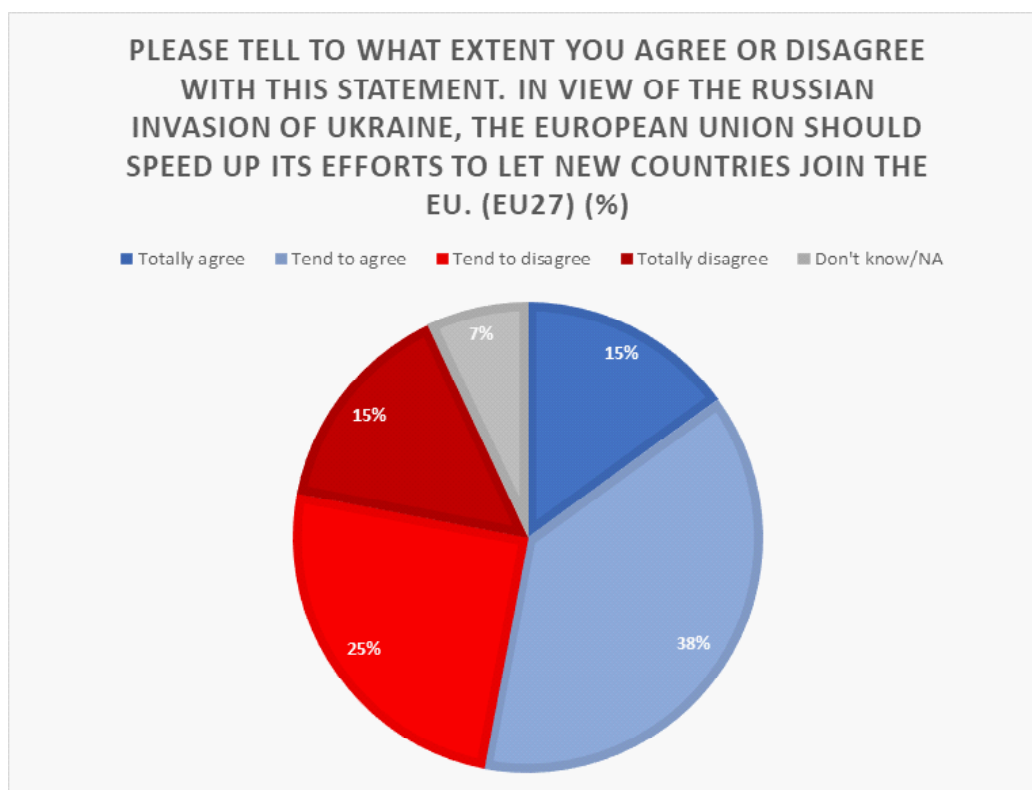


fig.1⁶

The total percentage of people who agree with the statement sits at 53% with Lithuania (72%), Spain (68%), Croatia (68%), Ireland (68%), Poland (68%) being the countries with the highest percentage of affirmative responders in contrast to the Czech Republic (37%), Slovakia (40%), Cyprus (41%), which are the 3 countries with the lowest rate of agreement. The survey

⁵ Bernd Debusmann Jr. (2023). *Ukraine aid from US in doubt after failed Senate vote*. Accessed 7 December 2023. <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-67637679>>

⁶ European Parliament; Verian (producer). (2023). *EP Autumn 2023 Survey: Six months before the 2024 European Elections*. Public Opinion Monitoring Unit within the Directorate General for Communication of the European Parliament. <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3152>, 93-94

shows that a majority of the citizens of the EU believe that the processes of enlargement should be optimized.

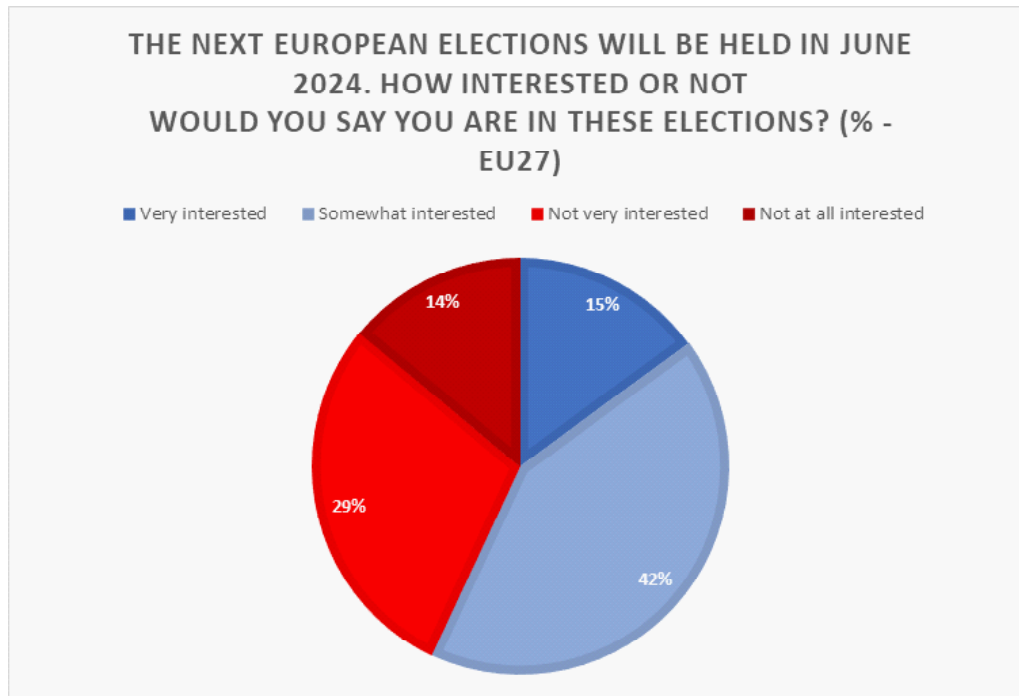


fig.2⁷

The growing role of the European Parliament since the Lisbon Treaty has led to an increase of interest in the elections with 57% of responders expressing their interest, up 6% from a similar survey carried out in September 2018, 8 months before the elections took place in 2019⁸. The countries with the highest proportion of those interested in the elections are the Netherlands (69%), Malta (68%), and Poland (68%), with the least interest responders coming from the Czech Republic (28%), Slovakia (31%), Latvia (38%), Bulgaria (39%).

It is imperative to note that interest in elections does not correlate to voter turnout, however the increase in interest in the election process is a hopeful sign for the recognition of the importance of democracy and the work of the European institutions as a whole.

The European Parliament which will constitute after the 2024 elections will undoubtedly be tasked with heavy decisions on budgeting and foreign aid in particular with the ongoing support of war-torn Ukraine. The next European Commission College will face challenges which are just as crucial, as the momentum and push for enlargement should not be blundered.

⁷ Ibid., 148

⁸ Ibid., 145

The Changing Tides of Black Sea Power Dynamics. Freedom of Navigation and Connectivity in the Black Sea Region

Martin Stoyanov

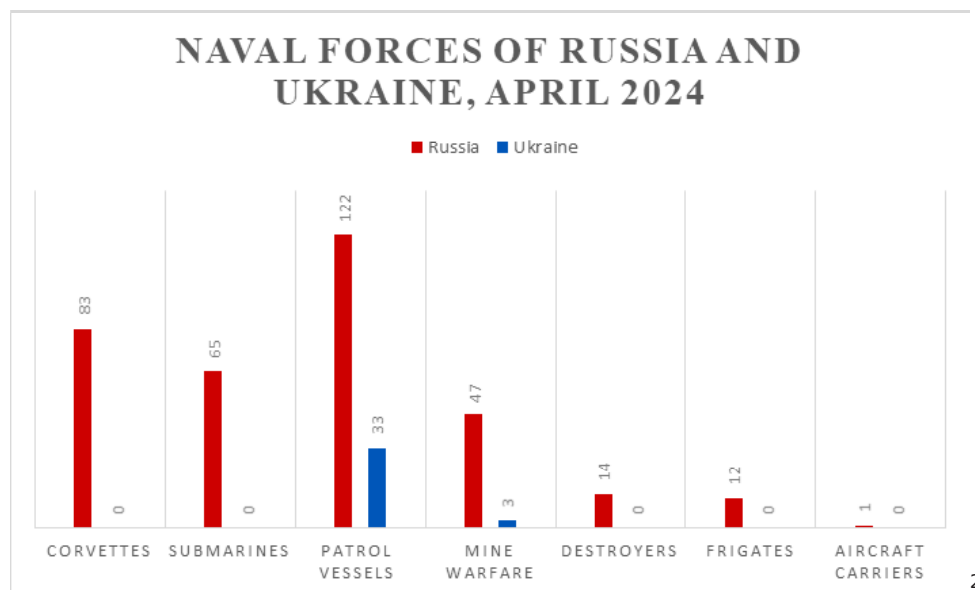
1. Key points:

- The Black Sea Region's geopolitical significance and power dynamics have massively changed since the start of the war in Ukraine with Turkey coming out on top;
- The lack of a regional strategy for the Black Sea Region is detrimental to security, trade, and freedom of navigation;
- Joint investments in energy infrastructure could be a deterring factor in the region for future aggression.

Ten years after the illegal annexation of Crimea and two years after the start of the war in Ukraine, the Russian ambition of establishing dominance over the Black Sea is more apparent than ever. By launching attacks on Russia's Black Sea Fleet, improvising a naval route which hugs the coasts of NATO member-states and utilizing the Danube as an alternative to the Black Sea for its shipments, Ukraine has been able to continue exporting goods to the rest of the world, something which is imperative for a war-torn economy. Despite the successes of Ukraine in resisting Russian aggression, a long-term strategy is needed in order to ensure the security and economic prosperity of the region. While NATO has recognized Russia as a threat to the region, the United States has adopted a strategy for the region in the form of the Black Sea Security Act, various bi- and multilateral partnerships have emerged, the tension in the region still remains high within littoral states.

Historically, the Black Sea has de facto been a mare clausum with Russia and Turkey as the most dominant forces in the region. The weakening of the Russian Black Sea Fleet and the historic role of Turkey in regards to the provisions of the 1936 Montreux Convention have led to a shift in regional power dynamics and swift calls for cooperation amongst littoral states and stakeholders. While Turkey has tried to maintain a nuanced approach in regards to Russia and the West since the start of the war in Ukraine, it has undoubtedly repelled Russian

attempts of choke holding the region with acts such as closing off the Turkish straits for warships less than a week after the war started, trying to broker the renewal of the Grain Deal in 2023, establishing a coalition with Bulgaria and Romania to demine the Black Sea, amongst others. Without doubt, Turkey will remain the key actor amongst the littoral states which will continue to play an important role in the power distribution of the region for the years to come, the implementation of a common security strategy in the region, as well as a balancing factor between Russia and the West. While discourse on the topic of whether the Montreux Convention from 1936 should be revised in the medium-term future after cases such as Turkey denying two UK minehunter ships to pass through its waters in the beginning of the year has arisen lately, it is imperative for the international community not to simply scorn Turkey, but instead remain constructive and come up with alternative solutions, such as utilizing the Danube river as a transport route for vessels after excluding Russia from the Danube Commission¹, as well as by expanding and enhancing infrastructure and defense capabilities in neighboring countries, such as Romania and Bulgaria.



Despite the vast imbalance of naval forces between Russia and Ukraine, the latter has managed to successfully deploy the so called “mosquito fleet” strategy, which was set in motion after the illegal annexation of Crimea, to inflict

¹ Colibășanu, A. (February 2024). Freedom of Navigation in the Black Sea Area and the Strategic Significance of the Danube. New Strategy Center & Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung. <https://www.kas.de/documents/278807/278856/Freedom+of+navigation+and+the+Danube+-+NSC+study.pdf/27a4c653-7f9c-faaf-fca5-6ffa3a70b4c1?version=1.0&t=1713447230909>

² Statista. (2024, April 9). Comparison of the military capabilities of NATO and Russia 2024. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1293174/nato-russia-military-comparison/>

serious damage to Russia's Black Sea Fleet, which led to pushing away Russian warships from the south-eastern coastline of Ukraine, and most importantly – the much important seaport of Odesa³. Failure of Russia to subdue Ukrainian naval routes has led to the replacement of its navy chief in March this year, yet Russia continues to do what it does best – launching rockets at civilian and infrastructure targets in the region of Odesa from the annexed Crimean Peninsula. The damage done by Ukrainian UAVs has allowed the country to regain control over some of its ports with its exports of goods such as grain surpassing the levels during the Grain Deal period, although freedom of navigation in the region is still obstructed. Russian naval exercises, which encroached upon Bulgaria's EEZ, the floating mines in the Black Sea as a result of the maritime blockades, which endanger vessels, cargo, and the environment of the area, rising insurance premiums, which lead to economic disturbances, as well as a general security threat to littoral states, have underlined the need for a common strategy that is based on a regional cooperation approach.

Such approach should not be simply limited to an increase in defense spending, the establishing of new NATO bases in proximity to the Black Sea⁴, but also by focusing on intragovernmental projects for energy security and diversification. The Black Sea Submarine Cable Project, which aims to improve connectivity between the EU and the South Caucasus region and lower dependence on Russian fiber-optic infrastructure, as well as exploring the Black Sea's energy potential in wind, gas, and oil sources, are critical for the future of the Black Sea Region.

While Romanian lawmakers adopted a law on offshore wind energy earlier in April, with production set to start by 2032, the Bulgarian draft Bill on Energy from Renewable Sources in Maritime Spaces was not even put up to voting on second reading in the National Assembly earlier this year⁵. The draft law attracted criticism from activists, the political opposition, and people employed in the tourism and fishing industries, due to the act's ambiguity and lack of public discussion before its adoption. Regardless of the draft

³ Григоренко, Ю. (2024, February 15). Ukrainian sea corridor performance for half a year. *GMK*. <https://gmk.center/en/posts/ukrainian-sea-corridor-performance-results-for-half-a-year/>

⁴ Nikolov, K., & Mandilara, S. (2024, April 16). Blinken says Putin was wrong about allies in the Black Sea. *www.euractiv.com*. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/blinken-says-putin-was-wrong-about-allies-in-the-black-sea>

⁵ Buljan, A. (2024, February 21). Bulgarian offshore wind bill passes first parliament reading, faces strong opposition. *Offshore Wind*. <https://www.offshorewind.biz/2024/02/21/bulgarian-offshore-wind-bill-passes-first-parliament-reading-faces-strong-opposition/>

bill's fate, the potential of offshore wind energy in Bulgaria is large enough to warrant a reconsideration of the matter by the next National Assembly after the elections on June 9th. The fixed-bottom offshore wind potential of 2 GW, part of the total of 26 GW technical potential, is comparable to the output of Bulgaria's NPP "Kozloduy" – 1.966 GW net. The war in Ukraine has proven yet again that diversification in energy sources is the key to ensuring energy security and security in general, with the Black Sea remaining as a potential centerpiece of such approach.

In conclusion, several key recommendations for the region can be laid out:

- The development of a comprehensive strategy for the region by littoral states and stakeholders should take into account the historical power dynamics and their development since the annexation of Crimea. Turkey will remain a key player in the region and the link between the West and Russia, so it is imperative not to underestimate its position and interests.
- The mismatch in naval forces in the region and current legal and factual statute of the Black Sea demands a regional strategy which would allow littoral states to defend themselves from encroachment and disruption of navigation and trade.
- Investments in energy infrastructure would diversify the energy supply of littoral states and Europe, which will weaken the dependence on Russia while largely benefitting stakeholders.
- The National Assembly of Bulgaria should reassess the bill on Energy from Renewable Sources in Maritime Spaces and follow the example of Romania in unlocking the potential of the Black Sea.

Navigating rough waters: security challenges in the Red Sea

Alexandra Kirilova

In an era of globalisation, ever-changing geopolitical dynamics and accelerated technological development, we are witnessing a trend of deteriorating security worldwide. Global security has been significantly weakened by the hostilities in Ukraine and the Gaza Strip, which have taken on an international dimension. At the same time, security threats at regional level, such as the war in Sudan, are also affecting the stability of global security. On European territory, the Black Sea, which is facing a security crisis as a result of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, and the Red Sea, approximately 2 600 km away, have become conflict zones. The topic we are about to examine is the escalation of tensions in the Red Sea, caused by the aggressive actions of the Houthis against international shipping.

Let us start with who the Houthis are. They call themselves Ansar Allah, which means supporters of God. The name Houthi comes from the name of their leader, Hussein Badreddine Al-Houthi. Hailing from the mountainous northwestern regions of Yemen, the Houthis are part of the Sadah social stratum that makes up the religious aristocracy. Its status of superiority is questioned by the local tribes who define it as inferior to them.

The most important social characteristic that largely determines the goals and actions of the Houthis is religion. According to the International Centre for the Study of Law and Religion, 65% of Yemen's population is Sunni and only 34% is Shia. Ansar Allah fit precisely into that 34%, as adherents of the Zaidi branch. Why is this so important? The Zaidi revival is a movement that is fundamental to the formation of Houthi identity and ideology, and explains to some extent their relationship with Iran. At present, the Shia minority, represented by the Houthis, has succeeded in keeping the Sunni majority in Yemen subjugated through aggression. It is important to emphasise that Iran and Yemen have distinct forms of Shi'ism, which differ. However, religion can be used to bring the two countries closer together, as Yemen's neighbours practise a different Islam. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has a predominantly Sunni majority (between 85% and 90%), which gives rise to a confrontation based on religion between Saudi Arabia on the one hand and Yemen and Iran on the other.

From where the Houthis are funded is a significant question. It is believed that Iran provides them with financial aid and weapons and is involved in their military training. Tehran denies this, but there are Iranian sources who confirm the support for the Houthis. According to the Final Report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen established pursuant to Security Council Resolution (2023), the Houthis' revenues come from legal and illegal means, such as customs duties, taxes, non-tax revenues, illegal fees and forced confiscation of real estate. Oil imports are also an important source of funding, with the Houthis earning around 271.935 billion Yemeni riyals in customs revenue alone for the period April to November 2022.

The Red Sea is a very important international transport corridor. Its great geopolitical importance is due to the fact that it represents the shortest route for the transport of goods between Europe and Asia/Australia.

The Houthis began their attacks on ships in the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea in November. The vessels belong to the United States and the United Kingdom. According to Ansar Allah, these are actions in response to the military conflict in Gaza. The Houthis could exploit the current situation in order to exert influence in the region. Their position is formed on the following premises: 1. Anti-Semitic sentiments; 2. They have funding for their activities; 3. They have the support of Iran. Al-Houthi sees in Iran the opportunity to lead the Arabs to "dignity and glory"; 4. Have the ambition to become a regional player; 5. Diplomatic meetings between Riyadh and the Houthis mediated by Oman since late 2023. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia seems to want to end the 8-year war that has led to one of the worst humanitarian crises and implement the planned peace agreement. The Houthis are certainly taking the Palestinian side in the conflict, but they are also taking advantage of the aforementioned factors to become an important international player and increase their influence at regional level.

The region around the Red Sea is characterised by weakened security due to pre-existing regional conflicts: civil wars, inter-neighbourhood wars and humanitarian crises, but so far these have not escalated to hostilities in the water basin itself.

The disruption of the passage of 40% of the water vessels through the Suez Canal due to the Houthi attacks is causing significant economic deficits in the international market. The victims are large companies from various industries, such as: the automotive industry - Tesla, Michelin, Volvo, etc.; the energy

industry - BP, Shell, Qatar Energy, etc.; logistics companies - DHL, FedEx; the merchandising industry - Adidas, Danone, Ikea, Target, etc.

The economic losses and the threat to regional security are prompting international intervention in the conflict. The United States launched its military operation Prosperity Guardian at the end of December, and on 19 February the European operation EUNAVFOR ASPIDES was launched, which we will look at in more detail. The two military operations operate independently of each other, but are expected to exchange good practices and important information. The European operation aims to restore security in the Red Sea, as well as to protect international trade and private EU interests. It is important to stress that it is acting from a defensive position. The EUNAVFOR ASPIDES operation is not linked in any way to other regional conflicts such as those in Palestine and the Sahel. The actions expected to be taken during the operation are repelling or eliminating Houthi drones and missiles and providing assistance to attacked ships. There can be no talk of militarizing the region, because EUNAVFOR ASPIDES is a response to the aggressive actions of Ansar Allah and when they are terminated, the operation will be over.

The headquarters of the operation is located in Larissa, Greece. The Operation Commander, Vasileos Griparis, is of Greek origin and the EU Force Commander, Stefano Constantino, is from the Italian Navy. All Member States are voting in favour of EUNAVFOR ASPIDES, but only five of them are currently contributing vessels-Italy, France, Greece, Germany and Belgium. The remaining Member States are expected to join by providing financial support or provisions. It is likely that the operation will also receive support from countries in the region.

The first successes of the operation have been reported shortly after its launch. On 27 February, the warship EUNAVFOR ASPIDES (the German frigate HESSEN) repelled two drones coming from Houthi-controlled territories that posed a security threat.

Let's look at the possible scenarios for the development of the situation in the Red Sea. At the moment, an alternative solution to the economic problem is to change the route through the Cape of Good Hope. However, by doing so, the voyage is extended by 3,300 nautical miles and 10 days longer than the Suez Canal route, which takes 26 days. This is a temporary solution as the situation requires sustainable measures to be taken. The

security threats in the Red Sea have to do with international security, not just regional security. Moreover, if it is not ended soon, the conflict will deal a serious blow to the international economy. Yemen has been facing financial instability since 2015 and the closure of Yemeni ports will have a severe impact on the country's economy.

Since the Houthis have announced that the aggression in the Red Sea is in support of their Palestinian brethren, this means that in the event that hostilities in Gaza are stopped, the Houthis must cease their attacks. If the hostilities in Gaza are stopped but Ansar Allah continue their attacks, a new military conflict will emerge in which they will play a central role. There is little likelihood that hostilities in Gaza will cease in the coming month, making it necessary to look for an alternative way of stabilising security in the Red Sea.

The actions of the Houthis in the Red Sea could delay the implementation of the three-step peace plan between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis. The first stage of the plan involves the payment of salaries to civil servants at the request of the Houthis. The mood in Congress is anti-Houthi and it was voted to include them on the list of terrorist groups. This will have a negative impact on the ceasefire process between the Houthis and the Saudi-led coalition. Washington is using the ceasefire as an ultimatum to end the Red Sea attacks. The Saudis have a softer stance and are trying to preserve the good relations that have been achieved with much effort.

The likelihood of direct intervention by regional actors is very low. The Gulf countries prefer a foreign policy of non-interference and maintaining good neighbourly relations. The Sultanate of Oman, which borders Yemen, acts as a mediator between the Houthis and the West. The countries of the Sahel are facing severe internal political crises and are unable to engage with what is happening in the Red Sea.

At this point it seems that the Houthis are not ready for fruitful negotiations and peace. Yemen is not in a good position, given the deepening humanitarian crisis and the expected decline in the incomes of the local population. It is also possible that critical infrastructure in the Red Sea could be destroyed. The situation is unfavourable for all stakeholders. Peace and stability in the Red Sea are paramount as they pave the way for economic prosperity, sustainable development and social cohesion.

Russian Political Instruments of Influence in Bulgaria

Alexandra Kirilova

Two events have played a particularly large role in shaping Russian foreign policy since 2014 - the 2008 global financial crisis and the 2014 annexation of Crimea. The former allowed Russia to consolidate its position in the economic market and actively apply its economic mechanisms of influence. The second event led to changes in Russia's foreign policy strategy and determined the nature of Russia's influence mechanisms.

There are conflicting views among the academic community as to whether the annexation of Crimea can be seen as a manifestation of contemporary Russian imperialism or whether the Kremlin's actions are influenced by neo-Eurasianism. After the end of communism in Russia, a vacuum in ideological space was created, which was filled by Eurasianist philosophy. It combines anti-Western sentiments, nationalism, Orthodox religion, and Russian ethnicity into a philosophical concept that sees Russia as a unique geopolitical object. There are claims that President Putin's policies are influenced by Dugin's Eurasianism and neo-Eurasianism. Putin's 2014 doctrine refers to ethnicity and tradition in a context characteristic of the intellectual movement, and the Eurasian Economic Union has been described by some experts as a product of Eurasianism. However, there is insufficient evidence to support this theory and the Kremlin has not come out with an official position on the matter. Imperialism is part of Russia's historical legacy of governance. Dugin is identified as one of the creators of modern imperialism. If we accept this as true, we should add that the Kremlin's imperialism is not as "noisy" and openly extreme as Dugin's imperialism. The annexation of Crimea, the war in Ukraine and Russia's foreign policy towards the countries of Eastern and Central Europe are proof that the Kremlin is working for its imperial interests.

The Russian drive to impose influence in the Balkans and Bulgaria is not driven by Eurasian ideology, which values Russian civilization and the peoples of Central Asia and the Slavic nations most highly. Bulgaria and the Balkan countries do not have enough cultural and geopolitical similarities, according to the Eurasian notion, to be counted among Eurasia. We should conclude that Russian interests in Bulgaria are not based on Eurasian ideology, but rather on Russian imperialism.

Russian influence in Eastern Europe and the Balkan Peninsula follows two lines of action: imposing economic influence by dominating strategic sectors and undermining democracy by deepening political divisions and spreading corrupt practices. Corruption is a key factor enabling the development of political channels of influence. 1. 2. NGOs with pro-Russian positions. They exist and serve the Kremlin successfully for several reasons: unstable political situation in Bulgaria, deficits of liberal democracy and increasing distrust in Euro-Atlantic integration. The basic principle of the Kremlin is “divide and conquer” and the goal of the Russian mechanisms is precisely to keep the targeted countries as far away as possible from alliances and international organisations in which they participate.

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Three parliamentary parties can be given as examples of the Kremlin’s political influence in Bulgaria. The Bulgarian Socialist Party, the successor of the Bulgarian Communist Party, has been present in the country’s political space for more than 30 years. The party “pursues a policy of social democracy for the development of an active welfare state according to European models in accordance with Bulgarian conditions as a path to the realization of the fundamental values of democratic socialism”. This is written in the BSP programme¹, but in reality, the party’s policy is largely determined by the views of its chairman. Thus, in the period in which Sergei Stanishev and Georgi Parvanov occupy the highest office, a period of Europeanisation is taking place in the party. The BSP, with its current president Kornelia Ninova, is acquiring a pro-Russian identity. The BSP is taking the path of the conservative left, and the European line in the socialist party has been replaced by a nationalist Eurosceptic one. Patriotism, which was enshrined as the party’s main hallmark in its 2008 programme, has taken on more extreme manifestations during Cornelia Ninova’s presidency. An example of this is the support for the implementation of the referendum “Let’s keep the Bulgarian lev”, organised by the far-right party “Renaissance”. In 2021, all BSP MEPs voted against the ‘EU Strategy for the Promotion of Democracy in Russia’². The aim of the policy in question is to oppose Russian aggression and to reduce the threats to democracy posed by the Putin regime. In the ranking of the worst-performing national party delegations in the European Parliament in terms of countering authoritarian influence, the BSP, part of the S&D Group, came fourth, behind two far-right and one far-left party from Czechia and Slovakia³. BSP MEPs voted unanimously against the Magnitsky amendment. They voted against or abstained on the crimes committed by the Third Reich and the USSR. The Socialist party leader’s position on

¹ Programme of the Bulgarian Socialist Party, adopted by the Decision of the 47th BSP Congress
22 and 23 November 2008, Sofia. Page 6

² Press release. MEPs call for new EU strategy to promote democracy in Russia. // [europarl.europa.eu](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/), 16.09.2021 <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/>

³ Authoritarian shadows in the European Union. // Political Capital Kft, 2020 https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/authoritarian_shadows_in_the_eu_2020_09.pdf
pg.27., table 6

the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women (the Istanbul Convention) is that the Convention threatens 'traditional values' and the BSP opposes the threat from so-called 'genderists'. It propagates with the typical Kremlin narrative of harmful Western values and excessive liberalism. The BSP's support for Turkish Stream and the initiation of a referendum on the Belene nuclear power plant are examples of the party defending the Kremlin's interests.

The political parties "Ataka" and "Renaissance" have a large number of similarities and it can even be argued that "Renaissance" is an updated version of the "Ataka" party. Many similarities can be found when comparing the political profiles of Volen Siderov and Kostadin Kostadinov. The leaders of the two parties started as presenters of TV shows at SKAT TV, and Kostadinov later worked at Alpha TV. The behaviour of the two leaders in public appearances is identical- aggressive and provocative. An example can be given with the forced entry of Volen Siderov and members of the Ataka party into the NATFIZ in 2015 and the forced entry of Kostadin Kostadinov and members of the Renaissance party into the Court House in 2020. The leaders of the two pro-Russian parties have visited Moscow several times and have had interactions with various Russian politicians and public figures. The great similarities between the two parties can be explained by their nationalist character. The beliefs of the Ataka and Revival parties are based on populism, pro-Russian sentiments, anti-Western sentiments and xenophobia. We can find ideological similarities between Renaissance and Ataka on the issues of minorities, patriotism, national identity, etc. The two parties share views on national interest, namely - Bulgaria should separate from the West and work to improve its relations with Russia. Western values are defined as decadent. The xenophobic sentiments of both parties are expressed in hate speech and political action against Roma and migrants. Leaders and members of both parties repeatedly make false or misleading statements. An example is the manipulated information published by the Renaissance Party on its official website regarding the adoption of the euro in Bulgaria⁴. The Ataka and BSP parties are actively lobbying for projects that are disadvantageous for Bulgaria, such as the Belene nuclear power plant. The Ataka party supports the annexation of Crimea, and its leader said

⁴ The fight for the Bulgarian lev .// vazrazhdane.bg , <https://vazrazhdane.bg/bulgarski-lev/>

'...Crimea is not annexed or occupied, as the hybrid militants against its annexation say'⁵.

Russia reoriented its preferences after Ataka lost a large number of voters due to the radicalism and aggressive actions of some of its members and the party's chairman, and ceased to be represented in parliament. By 2024, the party receiving the most support from the Kremlin is the Renaissance Party, which is openly pro-Russian and more radical than Ataka, but nevertheless has a large number of supporters and is parliamentary represented. The BSP is losing ground in Bulgarian politics, which is also leading to a decline in Kremlin support. The Socialist Party continues to act as a conduit for Russian influence in Bulgaria in its attempts to improve relations with the Russian government. The Kremlin's interference in political life through the parliamentary representation of Revival and the BSP poses a challenge to Bulgaria's democratic processes and security.

⁵ Siderov announced from Yalta: Crimea is not occupied. // mediapool.bg, 19.04.2018
<https://www.mediapool.bg/siderov-obyavi-ot-yalta-krim-ne-e-okupiran-news278158.html>

Russian Mechanisms for Influence in Bulgaria

Alexandra Kirilova

Historically, Russia has had a significant influence on Bulgaria's development and the shaping of the country's foreign policy. The apogee of Russian influence in the country was in the years around the liberation of Bulgaria, when the historical ties between the two countries were consolidated. Russia participated in the construction of the new Bulgarian state, which enabled it to extend its influence over various spheres - social, political, cultural and economic. Another peak of Russian influence in the country was during the existence of the People's Republic of Bulgaria in the period from 1946 to 1990. The Bulgarian Communist Party tied the country ideologically, economically and politically to the Soviet Union, following the example of Soviet politicians in decision-making and policy-making. Culture and education were active instruments of influence through soft power. Because of these two periods in Bulgarian history, a part of the population accepts Russia as a brotherly country. According to data from a study by Angelina Markova and Ami Lope on the impact of communism on Bulgarian attitudes towards the war in Ukraine, positive attitudes towards Russia increase with age, with the 71-75 age group showing a 100% positive attitude towards Russia¹. This can be explained by their nostalgia for the Soviet regime, cultural and religious similarities between the countries, and the creation of the image of "liberator country".

The main mechanisms of Russian influence can be conventionally categorized into four groups - media environment, economic sphere, political instruments, historical and cultural ties. The basic principle used by the Kremlin is "divide and rule". Each of the above mechanisms is used to distance the targeted country from the collective West and to bring it closer to Russia.

The Gerasimov Doctrine² effectively changes the way war is fought by emphasizing the use of non-military means to achieve strategic objectives. Hybrid warfare has become a key element of modern Russian strategy,

¹ Markova An., Loope A. (2023) The Influence of Communism on the Bulgarian Attitude Towards the Russia-Ukraine War. Osceola Fundamental High School
<https://www.jsr.org/hs/index.php/path/article/view/4938>

² English Military Review January-February 2019 Gerasimov 3 . Army University Press
<https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/English/JF-19/Gerasimov-III-print-2.pdf>

employing not only military but also economic, political, and informational tools. The Kremlin uses media and information platforms to influence public opinion in targeted countries and to shape the desired image of Russia.

The Kremlin's mechanisms for imposing Russian influence in the media environment include the use of various means of manipulation, such as propaganda and disinformation, as well as media manipulation. The Kremlin funds and supports local media channels in individual countries to serve the government's objectives. It is important to note that there are media outlets and specific programs in Bulgaria that voluntarily and knowingly promote the Russian narrative and work for the Kremlin's goals. Examples of media outlets that spread blatantly pro-Russian propaganda and disinformation are Blitz³, Pogled.info⁴, Fakti.bg⁵. Some of the newer sites that speak on behalf of the Kremlin are Kritichno⁶ and Mediamall⁷. Peter Volgin's "Politically Incorrect" and the "Poles" program with Magdalena Tasheva are examples of the lack of journalistic objectivity as they only reflect the Russian point of view. Some of the channels for the dissemination of Russian propaganda that operate internationally are the media chain Rossiya Segodnya/Russia Today and Radio Sputnik.

The effectiveness of Russian propaganda is due to the large number of dissemination channels, which include television, radio, social networks and the Internet. In the digital age, Russian propaganda has undergone a transformation by integrating modern technologies to achieve strategic goals. The effectiveness of this approach has been demonstrated in the case of Platform X, where the spread of disinformation by some 50,000 fake accounts was identified. The aim is to discredit the German Government for sending aid to Ukraine. Experts say with great certainty that the campaign

³ "West holds its breath waiting for Moscow's nuclear exercises, wonders what will be used" https://blitz.bg/analizi-i-komentari/zapadt-zatai-dkh-v-ochakvane-na-yadrenite-ucheniya-na-moskva-chudi-se-kakvo-shche-bde-izpolzvano_news1016835.html

⁴ Akopov P., "Putin diagnoses Western hegemony" <https://pogled.info/svetoven/russia/putin-postavi-diagnoza-na-zapadnata-hegemoniya.161331>

⁵ Atanasova M., Ukrainian general made a terrible forecast for his country and NATO <https://fakti.bg/world/878847-ukrainski-general-napravi-ujasna-prognoza-za-stranata-si-i-nato>

⁶ "Robbery": Ursula accused by Kim Dotcom of stealing Russian money" <https://kritichno.bg/politika/grabezhi-ursula/>

⁷ Connolly K., (26 януари 2024 г.), The Guardian <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/jan/26/germany-unearths-pro-russia-disinformation-campaign-on-x>

is the work of Russia. Another factor that determines the success of Russian propaganda is the large amount of manipulated information that is presented in such a way as to appear to be the only truth. Russian propaganda is spread with the help of popular personalities, which increases its influence even more. As an example, we can use the politicians of various pro-Russian formations in Bulgaria. In some cases, active media appearances and excessive attention-grabbing do not favour the Kremlin. Such is the case of Russia's ambassador to Bulgaria, Eleonora Mitrofanova, who rather damaged the country's image with her provocations. The Kremlin's strategic objective is to wage information warfare in an inconspicuous manner without being clear about the source of the information and whose objectives it serves.

The partial media monopoly in Bulgaria is another prerequisite for the dissemination of manipulated information. Politicians own entire media groups and thus have a very great influence on the formation of public attitudes. The concentration of media ownership in a small number of individuals threatens the political independence of the media. A medium risk (60%) to media pluralism has been reported for 2022⁸.

Ways to counter Russian influence in the media environment are:

- Media awareness campaigns;
- Public refutation of false information likely to affect political and public life in the country;
- Increasing the number of media owners;
- Stimulating independent and transparent media;
- Investigate pro-Russian media - where and how they are funded, do they pose a threat to national security;
- Monitoring and institutional support from the European Union for the development of a democratic media environment.

⁸ Spasov O., Ognyanova N., Daskalova N., "MONITORING MEDIA PLURALISM IN THE DIGITAL ERA", (2023), European University Institute, Pg 9, Political independence https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/75716/Bulgaria_results_mpm_2023_cmpf.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

Mechanisms of Russian influence in the energy sector

Alexandra Kirilova

The economic strategies that the Kremlin uses to exert its influence include the export of energy resources, investment in strategic sectors and the development of business activities outside Russia's borders. In the context of Bulgaria, the distinctive economic mechanism for asserting Russian influence is in the energy sector. The Kremlin has successfully implemented its strategy of occupying entire economic sectors in targeted countries, successfully imposing a monopoly on the energy sector in Bulgaria for a certain period of time. Economic influence has been used to create political influence, and corruption is the conduit that facilitates its spread at different levels in the targeted countries.

The energy sector is used by the Russian rulers not only to impose economic dependence, but also to exert influence over the media sector and to covertly finance foreign political parties that support Russia.

The largest media conglomerate is Gazprom media, owned by the state-controlled energy giant Gazprom¹. The media group consists of TV channels- NTV, THT, THT4, Friday!, TV-3, Match-TV; digital platforms- PREMIER, RUTUBE, Yappy, NTV-PLUS, Match Premier, 101.RU; technology services- D.lab, GPM Digital Innovations, GPM Digital Technologies.

Russia's energy policy aims to keep the countries that are supplied with energy by the country dependent. First and foremost, and most importantly for Bulgaria, are imports of Russian oil and natural gas. According to Bulgaria's economic report², as of 2018 100% of the country's natural gas was imported from Russia, and by 2021 the percentage is 80. Bulgaria's imports of Russian oil in 2018 were 64%. The main sources of energy used in the country are coal, nuclear fuel and oil. Natural gas does not have a large consumption in Bulgaria. According to Eurostat, there is a more than 20% decline in natural gas consumption in the period August 2022 - March 2023³. The problem is that Bulgaria has been in a situation where natural gas supplies are

¹ Holding's assets .// <https://www.gazprom-media.com/ru/business/>

² European Commission. 2023 Country Report Bulgaria .// https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-06/ip226_en.pdf

³ "EU gas consumption decreased by 17.7%" . // 19.04.2023. <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/DDN-20230419-1>

completely dependent on Russia. From 10 August 2022, EU sanctions on imports of Russian coal came into force. This is not a problem for Bulgaria, as the country's mines provide the necessary amount of coal. After the start of the war in Ukraine, Bulgaria took action to reduce its dependence on Russian energy. Imports of Russian Urals oil will be stopped at the end of 2024 due to the sanctions imposed on Russia by the European Union.

Diversification of energy sources is a good solution for Bulgaria, which will reduce the influence coming from Russia. A problem that Bulgaria has already faced is the likelihood that the main source will remain the same, even though the contract has been signed with another supplier. Experts say Bulgargas buys Russian gas, which is supplied by the Greek company Mytilineos via Strandja-2. In addition to the manipulation of the origin of the product, transit fees are saved for the Greek company⁴. Another case that raises concerns for two reasons is the contract with Botas - firstly, there is no transparency and it is not clear where the gas to be sold is coming from and, secondly, the contract was signed during a caretaker government with a prime minister whose positions are pro-Russian.

The scale of Russian influence in Bulgaria's energy sector is so great that projects are being implemented that are of no interest to the country and fully fulfil Russian objectives - Turkish Stream. Bulgaria neither receives fuel nor has the right to manage the capacity of the pipeline. Furthermore, there is no profit from transit fees, as they serve to repay the loan granted for the construction of the pipeline. Apart from the economic benefits the project brings to the Kremlin, it has strategic importance and allows the Russian government to strengthen its influence in the region.

The political parties BSP, Ataka and Renaissance support the Russian energy projects, although it is uncertain what the benefits for Bulgaria are. At the end of 2013, after the referendum on the Belene NPP initiated by the BSP took place, the Ataka party submitted a proposal to the National Assembly to continue the construction of the NPP. The Belene NPP project is very controversial and a large number of politicians are involved in the decisions leading up to it. The reactors for the nuclear power plant were purchased from Russia before the project was ready and investors were in place. In practice, the Belene NPP project only leads to the expenditure of Bulgarian

⁴ Chobanov Atanas. "Data from Russian customs: Russia stopped the gas? Not for everyone!" . // 27.04.2024. <https://bird.bg/gas-ru-bg-war/>

funds without any benefits for Bulgaria. In this case, the benefits are only for Russia, which receives financial benefits without the project being implemented.

The recommendations for dealing with Russian influence in the energy sector are as follows:

- Diversification of energy sources under the control and supervision of the competent authorities
- Greater transparency and control in the energy sector through legislative changes
- Investigation of corruption schemes related to Russian energy projects
- Implementation of EU and US sanctions on Russian fuel imports
- Investigating alternative fuel supply sources
- Cooperation with EU structures to reduce corruption in the sector

Russian influence in Bulgaria: soft power, popular culture and hard power

Alexandra Kirilova

The principal characteristics of the contemporary system of international relations are its dynamism and multipolarity. The dynamics of international relations are shaped by the forces of globalization and the rapid development of technologies. The aforementioned environment thus implies the necessity for innovativeness in the methods of exerting influence.

The concept of soft power has its roots in neoliberal international relations theory. The application of this approach to exert influence was initially ascribed to the United States, but the concept subsequently became a central tenet of Russia's foreign policy and is also reflected in the Gerasimov military doctrine. The primary method of exerting influence employed by the major actors in the realm of international relations is the use of force. A preliminary classification of the types of force can be made as follows: "hard power," "soft power," and "sharp power."

In the democratic world, the deployment of "hard power" to attain strategic objectives is considered unacceptable. It is therefore incumbent upon major powers to identify alternative means of exerting influence. Consequently, "soft power" has become the primary instrument through which countries exert influence.

Russia's strategy in Bulgaria is based on the use of persuasive methods rather than coercive tactics to exert influence. This encompasses a range of manipulative mechanisms, including those employed in the political, economic, and media spheres, as well as popular culture. Popular culture encompasses a multitude of artistic and entertainment forms, including music, film, television, literature, religion, fashion, sports, and cuisine. During the period of communist rule in Bulgaria, the country was significantly influenced by Russian popular culture. For over four decades, Moscow exerted considerable control over the dissemination of Russian popular culture in Bulgaria. In 1953, the first successful attempts were made to establish a Bulgarian television network. The inaugural official broadcast event on Bulgarian national television was a demonstration held on November 7,

1959, commemorating the October Revolution¹. In a manner similar to that of the USSR, the Communist Party imposed censorship on television broadcasts. Consequently, the Chernobyl accident and the incident at the Heizel stadium were not broadcast on Soviet and Bulgarian television. A considerable number of Russian feature and animated films were broadcast.² The animated series "Nu, pogodi!" is particularly popular. Following the collapse of the communist regime, Russian films and programmes continued to be watched, but many other genres, including Turkish, Latin American, Bulgarian, and others, began to be broadcast.

Russian writers have produced a substantial corpus of works that have been widely recognized as classics of world literature. The contributions of renowned authors such as Alexander Pushkin, Anton Chekhov, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Leo Tolstoy, Nikolai Gogol, and Ivan Bunin to world literature are unquestionable. Their works have had a profound impact on global culture. During the Soviet era, Russian opera and ballet were frequently presented on Bulgarian stages as part of cultural exchange programs between Eastern Bloc countries. In the current era of democratic governance, this trend has persisted, with Bulgarian stages continuing to host groups from a range of countries, including Russia.

In the context of popular culture, it is noteworthy that a popular chain of food shops, "Beryozka," offers a variety of Russian products, and that a Russian restaurant, "Arbat," is situated in close proximity to the St. Nicholas of Myrlikia Church. During the period of Bulgarian communism, the Russian language was a compulsory subject in the country's educational system. Subsequently, it was supplanted by English, yet its prevalence remains considerable. It is offered as a first or second foreign language in language schools, contingent upon the students' preferences. The Russian Cultural Information Centre in Sofia provides educational opportunities for individuals of all age groups.

The Russian Orthodox Church - Moscow Patriarchate represents the largest Orthodox community in the world.³ The Moscow Patriarchate is subservient to the Kremlin and is utilized as a means of pursuing geopolitical influence.

¹ Iotov F. How the BCP turned television into its weapon. <https://bulgarianhistory.org/kak-bkp-prevarna-televiziqta-v-svoe-orujie/>

² Films of the USSR https://www.cinefish.bg/movies.php?country_id=193

³ The current state of the ministry of the Russian Orthodox Church in places of deprivation of freedom, Archimandrite Yosif (Ivanov). freedom, Archimandrite Yosif (Ivanov) <https://bg-patriarshia.bg/russian-church-1>

The Russian Orthodox Church engages in collaborative endeavors with a multitude of federal institutions, including the Federal Penal Enforcement Service. There have been multiple allegations indicating connections between Russian clergy and security services. During the period of Bulgarian Communist rule, the Bulgarian Church distanced itself from the Ecumenical Patriarchate and moved closer to the Russian Patriarchate. The Bulgarian clergy received their training in Russia. In the present era, a dichotomy exists within the Bulgarian clergy, with some expressing support for Russia and others denouncing the actions of the Russian Patriarchate and the Kremlin. The current Russian Patriarch, Kirill, is reported to have served as a KGB agent in Switzerland under the pseudonym "Mikhailov."⁴ The leader of the Russian Orthodox Church, the Patriarch, has been identified as a staunch supporter of Vladimir Putin. The Russian Orthodox Church, under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate, has designated the conflict in Ukraine as a "holy war." The Moscow Patriarchate exercises administrative control over the St. Nicholas the Wonderworker Orthodox Church. Archimandrite Vassian Zmeyev, the superior of the church, and two officials have been relieved of their duties and expelled from the country on suspicion of engaging in espionage on behalf of Russia. As reported by the State Agency "National Security", clergy members of the Russian Church have employed a range of Kremlin strategies to exert influence over social and political processes in Bulgaria. The Russian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate plays an active role in the political landscape of Russia and Bulgaria. In light of the aforementioned, we can conclude that it is among the most perilous elements of Russia's soft power.

From the period of communist rule until 2020, Russia demonstrated a notable capacity for exerting soft power in the cultural sphere within Bulgaria. Nevertheless, a similar phenomenon can be observed with regard to American and, more recently, Korean popular culture. There is no evidence to suggest that Bulgarians exhibit a preference for Russian popular culture over other forms of cultural expression. Since Russia began employing "hard power" in Ukraine, there has been a notable decline in support for the country, which has also resulted in a reduction in the impact of Russia's soft power, as manifested in the form of popular culture.

⁴ Agent of the KGB: Carrier of the Russian Patriarch Kirill., <https://www.dw.com/bg/agent-na-kgb-semetnata-kariera-na-ruskia-patriarh-kirill/a-64621244>

One striking illustration of Russia's "soft power" in Bulgaria is the Kamchia sanatorium and health complex. In a statement, Sergey Lavrov described the facility as "an ideal model of soft power."⁵ The Kamchia health resort is a privately held company that is owned by the government of the city of Moscow. The complex is situated in the Black Sea resort of Kamchia, approximately 25 kilometers south of Varna. The Kamchia case presents two significant issues. Firstly, the 80-hectare territory was acquired through questionable means. Secondly, The border area is under the ownership of the government of a foreign country that is not a member of the European Union. The Kamchia complex was constructed in accordance with the Soviet model of the Artek and Orlyonok complexes. The Artek complex, which is also situated on the Black Sea coast, comprises nine facilities. The camp has acquired a reputation for questionable practices, primarily due to its location on the Crimean peninsula, which was annexed by Russia, and secondarily due to allegations of forced child relocation from Ukraine to the camp. Since the onset of the armed conflict in Ukraine, children from the regions that have been subjected to attack have been relocated to the camp. However, it has been alleged that this has occurred without the consent of their parents. A number of similarities can be identified between the Kamchia and Artek camps in a number of key areas, including innovation, size and objectives. This is a cause for concern, particularly in light of the circumstances surrounding the Russian camp. The sole Bulgarian officials in a position of authority at the Kamchia SOC are the executive directors, who are individuals with close ties to Russia.

The Kamchia sanatorium and health resort ceased operations in 2022, yet the potential for threat persists. The fact that the complex is owned by a foreign government and located on border territory renders it inherently dangerous even when it is not in operation. A number of potential scenarios could emerge in the event of further investigation. These include the possibility that the camp is being used to store Russian military or technological equipment, or that it is otherwise being used to Russia's strategic advantage in the war in Ukraine. The aforementioned hypotheses remain unproven. A review of Kremlin and Moscow government policy does not indicate that the Kamchia

⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Speech and answers to questions by Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Sergey Lavrov at the 'Government Hour' in the Federation Council of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, Moscow, December 23, 2019." https://archive.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3977671

SOK is being utilized for any purpose other than the application of soft power. However, there have been significant shifts in the Kremlin's foreign policy and military strategy since 2022. In light of these considerations, it seems prudent to consider the possibility that the Kremlin may alter its policy towards Bulgaria. Nevertheless, the probability of direct physical intervention is low. It is imperative that the Bulgarian government take the necessary steps to repossess property in order to completely remove this threat to the country's security.

In addition to the concept of soft power, it is also appropriate to consider the concept of "hard power" in the context of Russia. The term is employed to describe authoritarian regimes that seek to impose censorship or manipulate information. While the concept of soft power is primarily concerned with values, culture, and diplomacy, the concept of hard power is primarily concerned with the production and dissemination of information. The assertion by Russian Ambassador to Bulgaria Eleonora Mitrofanova that Bulgaria is "involved in the conflict" in Ukraine due to the provision of munitions illustrates the practical application of hard power. Such statements are designed to influence public opinion and apply pressure on the government with the objective of limiting support for Ukraine.

The State of European Energy Security a Thousand Days After the Start of the War in Ukraine

Martin Stoyanov

Key points:

- The war in Ukraine pushed Europe towards lowering its dependence on Russian energy sources and furthering its cooperation with the United States;
- Ukraine's energy security remains at risk as winter approaches;
- The new European Commission and President-elect Trump's administration will play pivotal roles in shaping the energy sector in the coming years.

With natural gas prices reaching an all-time high during 2022 following the start of the war in Ukraine, Europe has significantly stepped up its efforts to diversify its energy sources with the U.S., Norway and Qatar offsetting the majority of the Russian oil and gas exports no longer flowing to Europe. While gas consumption went down nearly 20% since 2022 as a part of the measures taken to combat dependency on gas from Russia, import of Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) from the U.S. to the EU ramped up significantly with 50% of Europe's gas supply coming from the U.S. Romania is emerging as a key player with its Neptune Deep offshore gas project in partnership with OMV, potentially becoming the EU's largest gas producer. Meanwhile, Bulgaria has signed agreements with Westinghouse and Hyundai to construct two AP1000 reactors at its Kozloduy Nuclear Power Plant but has yet to fully explore its offshore energy potential. The European Commission's NextGenerationEU plan and the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) have accelerated investments in renewable energy and the phase-out of fossil fuels. Despite these efforts, land-locked EU countries such as Hungary, Czechia, Slovakia, and, until recently, Austria¹, have continued to rely on Russian oil and gas exports, which has led to political tension after Ukraine's decision to not

¹ Euronews. (2024, November 16). Russia stops selling gas to OMV, Austria's main provider. Euronews. <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/11/16/russias-gazprom-to-stop-supplying-gas-to-austria-in-contract-dispute>

extend its gas transit agreement with Russia which is set to expire on January 1st².

The rapid decentralization³ of Ukraine's energy production following Russian attacks on energy infrastructure has offset some of the devastating effects on the country's energy supply, but remains a work in progress with an upcoming surge of electricity demand during the winter months. The occupation and destruction of generation capacities such as the NPP Zaporizhzhia and various thermal and hydro power plants since the beginning of the war has led to Ukraine's sharp decline in energy production with a drop from 55 GW in 2022 to below 20 GW of electricity at present^{4,5}. While efforts have been accelerated to deploy and install generation capacities as well as an increase in EU energy export capacities⁶, Russia has continued to strike Ukraine's energy infrastructure with power outages resulting and a potential regime of power cuts for the coming months. Ukraine's energy crisis is compounded by challenges to short-term investments, such as solar power farms, due to high costs and supply chain constraints. Long-term recovery is further hindered by the targeting of critical energy transportation and production infrastructure, which deters investment prospects.

The new European Commission is set to continue the trajectory of Europe's energy landscape by accelerating the shift toward renewable energy, enhancing energy security, and further integrating energy markets across the continent. The Commission's existing frameworks, including the European Green Deal and the NextGenerationEU recovery plan, prioritize decarbonization and sustainable growth. However, adapting these strategies to address emerging challenges - such as ensuring a secure supply of critical raw materials for renewable technologies and managing disparities in energy

² Silenská, N., & Szumski, C. (2024, October 8). Kyiv stands firm on ending Russian gas transit deal after meeting Slovakia's Fico. [www.euractiv.com](https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/kyiv-stands-firm-on-ending-russian-gas-transit-deal-after-meeting-slovakias-fico/). <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/kyiv-stands-firm-on-ending-russian-gas-transit-deal-after-meeting-slovakias-fico/>

³ Januta, A. (2024, July 31). 'You have power, or you don't:' Ukraine's energy crisis drives power decentralization. *The Kyiv Independent*. <https://kyivindependent.com/you-have-power-or-you-dont-ukraines-energy-crisis-drives-power-decentralization/>

⁴ Miller, C., Hancock, A., & Koshiw, I. (2024, June 12). Russia has taken out over half of Ukraine power generation. *Financial Times*. <https://www.ft.com/content/4d583259-7565-4cbc-972e-ea77f4a76175>

⁵ *Ukraine's energy system under attack – Ukraine's Energy Security and the Coming Winter – Analysis - IEA*. (n.d.). IEA. <https://www.iea.org/reports/ukraines-energy-security-and-the-coming-winter/ukraines-energy-system-under-attack>

⁶ Commission welcomes increased electricity export capacity to Ukraine and Moldova. (2024, October 29). Directorate-General for Energy. https://energy.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-welcomes-increased-electricity-export-capacity-ukraine-and-moldova-2024-10-29_en

reliance among member states⁷, will be key. The Commission's leadership in fostering cohesive energy policies among EU members will also be crucial for maintaining solidarity in the face of geopolitical pressures, particularly regarding Russia's lingering energy influence on certain land-locked states. Across the Atlantic, President-elect Trump's administration is expected to shift U.S. energy policy in ways that could have significant global ripple effects. If Trump prioritizes energy independence and boosts domestic fossil fuel production⁸ as he has in the past, it could create tensions with Europe's renewable energy transition goals. At the same time, Europe's growing reliance on U.S. LNG imports presents an opportunity for stronger transatlantic energy ties, especially in reducing Europe's dependence on Russian gas. Trump's approach to energy diplomacy will be pivotal in determining whether the U.S. supports the EU's broader diversification strategy or emphasizes bilateral agreements that prioritize American energy exports.

The war in Ukraine has acted as a catalyst for reshaping Europe's energy security framework, compelling the region to accelerate its transition away from Russian energy dependence. Looking forward, the European Commission's renewed commitment to energy transition and security will be pivotal in fostering resilience and sustainability among member states, while addressing disparities in energy reliance and advancing renewable energy goals. Across the Atlantic, the U.S. under President-elect Trump's administration may influence global energy markets, presenting both opportunities and potential tension in transatlantic energy cooperation. Ultimately, Europe's ability to balance its climate ambitions with immediate energy security needs will continue to be a critical aspect of security across the continent.

⁷ European Commission. (2024, September 11). State of the Energy Union Report 2024 (pursuant to Regulation (EU)2018/1999 on the Governance of the Energy Union and Climate Action) (Report COM/2024/404). https://energy.ec.europa.eu/publications/state-energy-union-report-2024_en

⁸ Bellamy, D. (2024, November 17). Trump picks climate change sceptic to be his new energy secretary. Euronews. <https://www.euronews.com/2024/11/17/trump-picks-climate-change-sceptic-to-be-his-new-energy-secretary>

About the Authors



Martin Stoyanov is a co-founder and Executive Director of RESECO Bulgaria. He has a Master's degree in Law from Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" and currently works as a jurisconsult in the sphere of Public Law.



Simona Nikolova is a co-founder and Director of Research Activity at RESECO Bulgaria. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Political Science from Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski". Before becoming a part of RESECO Bulgaria, Simona has worked at the Bulgarian Diplomatic Institute as an associate.



Alexandra Kirilova is an associate and the Social Media Manager of RESECO Bulgaria. She has a Bachelor's degree in Political Science from Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" and is currently pursuing a Master's degree in National Security at the "G. S. Rakovski Military Academy".



Margarita Dilova is an associate of RESECO Bulgaria. She is currently in the final stage of pursuing her Master's degree in Law from Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" and is also a member of the European Law Student Association.



Antonio Dafinov is an associate of RESECO Bulgaria who is currently in the final stage of pursuing his Master's degree in Law from Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski". He has worked and interned at law firms, courthouses and the state administration.