

# BULGARIAN EUROATLANTISM: ONE OF THE MAIN PRINCIPLES BEHIND KEY FOREIGN POLICY DECISIONS AFTER 1989

**Gergana Tosheva, PhD**

*European Studies Department, Sofia University*

## *Abstract*

*The current paper examines Bulgarian foreign policy after 1989 and aims to answer the scientific question: „What is the main principle of the decision-making processes concerning Bulgarian foreign policy?“. The research period is from 1989 – the beginning of transition towards democratic governance and market economy, until 2022 – the end of the post-Cold War security architecture in Europe, marked by the Russian invasion in Ukraine. The research resources are decisions made by the political elite that demonstrate Bulgarian geopolitical position as part of the value-based Euro-Atlantic Community. The actuality of the paper originates from the political instability in Bulgaria, as we have 5 parliamentary elections in 2 years, and the observation that some political actors are disputing our geopolitical orientation in order to gain more electoral votes.*

**Key words:** foreign policy, decision-making process; European Union; NATO; geopolitical orientation

The current geopolitical context is characterized by worsen security situation in Europe and contestation of key values of the Western societies by undemocratic and revisionist power – the Russian Federation. The current security architecture in Europe is shaped by the loss of the Cold war by the Soviet Union and logical disintegration of its sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. As a result, all of the countries started a process of geopolitical reorientation towards the Euro-Atlantic community.

In this perspective the Eastern enlargement is a security question and to be effective it should be value-based so to be sustainable solution to prevent destabilization in the region. For the countries in Eastern Europe to be part of the Euro-Atlantic community, formed by the European Economic Community/European Union and NATO, is a civilizational choice for new identity – European identity. The geopolitical shock of the disintegration processes in the Eastern part of Europe is strong and in time the Eastern enlargement is seen an instrument to stabilize the post-communist countries to restrict possible spill-over effect of soft security challenges in the Western part of Europe (O' Brennan, 2006). There is only one but key impediment for the sustainability

of the European integration and it is the deep-rooted pro-Russian sentiments in some post-communist countries - for example Bulgaria.

The beginning of Bulgarian reorientation towards Euro-Atlantic orientation is with the decisions of the Parliament for full membership of Sofia in the European economic community (EEC) and the Council of Europe, voted in 1990. Up to now, 2023, Bulgaria has more than 30-year-long history of foreign policy decisions that make us part of the Euro-Atlantic community. As they are based on a conscious and strategic decision-making process, we can say that they are an expression of the Bulgarian Euroatlantism - a guiding principle of our foreign policy. It is important to outline it because this principle sometimes contradicts to popular pro-Russian sentiments in some parts of our society. These feelings are a result of the Bulgarian history and the role of Moscow in it.

### **The so called „Satellite syndrome“ or how to manipulate history**

There are scholars (Kramar, 2022) that define Bulgaria as the most loyal satellite of the Soviet Union during the Cold War as we are supporting Moscow's policy undeniably. Although, this statement is far too strong as the Bulgarian foreign policy after 1989 shows because of its undoubtable and quick reorientation of Sofia towards European integration in the post-Cold war geopolitical situation. For decades, the well-established Russian propaganda machine shaped extremely positive sentiments in the Bulgarian society towards the Moscow. One of the main narratives is that the Russian empire liberated Bulgaria from the Ottoman rule and the Soviet Union liberated Sofia from the monarchy-fashism of tsar Boris III. So obviously the purpose of such propaganda was to deeply root the sense of thankfulness and appreciation towards the Russia as guardian of Bulgaria's well-being as every time we face an existential threat, Moscow intervenes to protect Sofia.

But historical evidence gives us examples, related to those two major events in Bulgaria, used by the Russian propaganda, that contradicts to Moscow's narratives. First, concerning the Bulgarian liberation from the Ottoman empire. In 1895 during a meeting of the so-called European concert of Great powers, the Russian empire agrees that a large Slavic country on the Balkan peninsula would never be consolidated irrelevant of Russian war success. The reason is the fear of the European Great powers that such a state will be Moscow's instrument for access and control over the Bosphorus and Dardanelle. So, the proposal of the so-called San Stephano treaty that suggests large Bulgarian state is not realistic and it is well known in the Russian empire. This treaty is used as a propaganda instrument.

The second example is from the end of the Second World War. Bulgarian political elite tries to obtain for Sofia the same status as Italy has - a state that participated in the war against the Nazi. Actually, exactly the Soviet representative during the meeting when this issue was discussed - Andrej Vishinski, opposed to this possibility.

To summarize, based on the historical events, we can extrapolate that obviously the Russian policy is not in favour of Bulgarian national interest although parts of our society are clearly with strong pro-Russian sentiments. But decades-long Russian

propaganda during socialist Bulgaria and our transition to democracy is probably one of the reasons behind the results of a survey of Eurobarometer on the occasion of one year of the Russian aggression towards Ukraine. According to it while average support in the whole European Union for the sanction policy of Brussels towards Moscow is 74%, for Bulgaria it is 47%. Giving humanitarian support for the Ukraine refugees in the EU is 91%, in Bulgaria is 81%. Financial assistance to Kiev is approved by 77% in the EU, while in Bulgaria - 55%. The support for financial aid of the EU that is specifically for military assets is approved by 65% in the EU and only by 33% in Bulgaria.

But it must be noted that this data that shows pro-Russian sentiments in our society, even during obvious Moscow's deviation from the international rules-based order, do not interrupt Bulgarian Euro-Atlantic orientation. The explanation is that although there are strong pro-Russian feelings in some people, most of the Bulgarian society is purely pro-European and exactly it has strong political representation as the Bulgarian institutions.

## But first, what is Euroatlantism?

For the purpose of this research, we can define it through the treaties that form the Euro-Atlantic community – the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the European Union. Both are consolidated after the end of the Second World War, and this is why their most important objective is to guarantee peace and stability on the continent. This is the reason their enlargement is seen as an instrument for extension of the security community (O' Brenna, 2006). In this context it is important to outline that without security there is no possibility for economic prosperity. This is the nexus between the organizations – without the security provided by NATO, the common market of the EU is not possible. This is the logic behind the unofficial precondition for NATO membership before the EU membership for the post-communist and Western Balkans states – only in secure environment free market competition and democratic rule can exist.

According to article 1 of the North Atlantic Treaty „the parties undertake, as set forth in the Charter of the United Nations, to settle any international dispute in which they may be involved by peaceful means in such a manner that international peace and security and justice are not endangered, and to refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force in any manner inconsistent with the purposes of the United Nations“ and article 2 states „the Parties will contribute towards the further development of peaceful and friendly international relations by strengthening their free institutions“.

According to article 2 of the Treaty on the European Union „The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.“

Based on these articles from both treaties of the organizations that form the Euro-Atlantic community, we can define Euroatlantism as **a value-based foreign policy principle**:

- that promotes a political system that is pluralistic and representative of all of the interest groups in the society;

- that is based on rule of law that guarantees respect for human rights including minority rights and justice;
- that uses dialogue as a key foreign policy instrument and respects the territorial integrity of other countries.
- Only this model of governance can ensure sustainable economic prosperity based on the right of private economic initiative.

## Bulgarian Euroatlantism in practice

As far as Bulgarian foreign policy after 1989 is concerned, we can definitely conclude that the political elite makes decision based on the principles of the Euro-Atlantic community even before Sofia is officially part of it. The most prominent examples for the strong Euroatlantism of Bulgaria are to defend the values on which this community is based in contradiction with the strong pro-Russian sentiments in our society. The examples for this that can be divided in two groups:

- decisions that are against undemocratic regimes that do not respect human rights and
- decisions that oppose Bulgaria to Russia.

In the first group we can include a decision taken during Sofia was a member of the Warsaw Pact in 1990. Bulgaria becomes part of the international coalition, leaded by the United States, against the invasion of Iraq in Kuwait. Although Bulgarian troops do not participate in the war and our input is logistical support, Bulgarian president attended the Victory Parade in the USA the same year. In 2001 and 2003 Sofia supported the efforts of Washington to democratize Afghanistan and Iraq as their undemocratic regimes pose serious threat on other states through their support of terrorist organizations and potential to elaborate weapons of mass destruction.

In the second group of foreign policy decisions that are markers of Bulgarian Euroatlantism concerns Russian policy. In 1999 Bulgarian parliament gives air corridors to NATO forces participating in operation „Joint Force“ against the Serbian autocrat Slobodan Miloshevish and refuses to allow Russian military airplanes to pass the Bulgarian air space. The situation is decisive as Moscow supports a regime that in 1995 committed genocide in Srebrenica in Bosnia and Hercegovina against Muslim men and boys. Operation „Joint Force“ was launched only after the ambassador of the United States went to a village in Kosovo - then part of Serbia. He acknowledged that a genocide was committed again by the Serbian army against Kosovo Albanians. The Bulgarian decision was value-based as we were part of the democratic community as candidate state for EU and NATO. Even though there were protests in Sofia in support of Serbia and Russia, the political elite of our country demonstrates Bulgarian Euroatlantism as a principle of foreign policy decision-making and the geopolitical orientation of Bulgaria.

As a member state of the EU and NATO in 2022 Bulgaria stays firmly in the Euro-Atlantic community with the decisions to not allow the foreign minister of the Russian Federation to fly in our air space towards Serbia for a work visit. Another key decision is the approval of the Parliament to give Ukraine humanitarian, financial and military-technical support for its self-defence war against Russia.

## Bulgarian Euroatlantism – Responsibility for strategic governance

In conclusion we can summarize that Bulgarian political elite after 1989 takes decision with responsibility for the future of our country which is in the European union and NATO. This why Bulgarian politicians pursue foreign policy, based on the principle of the Bulgarian Euroatlantism. Although due to the communist rule in Bulgaria (1944-1989), with the adherent pro-Russian propaganda, in our society there are groups with strong pro-Russian sentiments. They see Moscow as a friend, saviour, and defender of Sofia. These individuals are in their active years and this why their voice and opinion are so strong – as is obvious in the Eurobarometer survey. But we should outline some specific generational fault line in the Bulgarian society – the younger the people, the more pro-Western they are. So, in the years ahead the cleavage based on pro-Russian sentiment will be closed and Bulgarian Euro-Atlantic orientation will be undisputable in the public narratives, as it is indisputable in the political decision-making process.

### Bibliography

- Official internet page of the Bulgarian Parliament: <http://www.parliament.bg/bg/plenaryst>
- Free Europe (2022). *Bulgaria, Republic of North Macedonia and Monte Negro forbids a flight of Sergej Lavrov to Serbia*. Svobodnaevropa.bg
- Kramer, M (2022). *The Soviet Union and Eastern Europe (1941-1991)*. Sofia: Ciela Norma
- Baeva, I. (2010). *Eastern Europe in 20 Century. Ideas, conflicts, myths*. Sofia: Paradigma
- Jhelev, J. (2014). *Myths and legends for the Bulgarian transitions*. Sofia: Ciela
- O'Brennan, J. (2006). *The Eastern Enlargement of the EU*. Routledge
- O'Brennan, J. (2006). Bringing Geopolitics Back In': Exploring the Security Dimension of the 2004 Eastern Enlargement of the European Union. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 19:1, 155-169