

Rethinking Bulgaria's Euro-Atlantic Choice

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Abstract: The article aims at rethinking Bulgaria's Euro-Atlantic choice made by our country in the first decade of the post-socialist transformation. Tracing back in time the origins and evolution of the concept of Bulgaria's accession to the Western integration space, the author highlights events that have formed the broad outlines of the process while searching for possible explanations of why things have gone wrong in the long run. Against this background, the issue of the expedience of the country's geopolitical reorientation from the East to the West is also brought forward from a historical perspective as well as from a contemporary perspective. The author pays due attention to the role of the "international factor" and the correlation between the dynamic development in the field of geopolitics and the negative ideological evolution of the concept of "opening" to the West.

Keywords: transition, transformation, Eastern Europe, Bulgaria, EU, NATO.

Bulgaria's Euro-Atlantic choice was made in the second half of the 1990s in the effort of the Bulgarian post-socialist state to refute the pro-Soviet "satellite syndrome" by replacing it with the new "European civilizational values". The present article aims to outline the historical parameters of this process while analysing its contemporary geopolitical implications by means of political science. The text examines exclusively the "case of Bulgaria", regarded in the mandatory broader international context. Therefore, the research is multi-layered and multi-aspect, without striving to be fully comprehensive in every factological issue appearing in it. Thus,

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the main focus is the place of Bulgaria in the post-Soviet world order, with the reasoning purposefully oriented towards clarifying the role and influence of the “international factor” in formulating Bulgaria’s foreign policy decisions. The main findings are focused so as to provide a most unbiased answer to the question of what provoked our country’s post-socialist “opening” to the West and how its hasty implementation into economic and political practice led to a number of short-sighted management decisions that already require revision and reassessment.

In order to achieve a comprehensible logical sequence in the text to follow, it is necessary to “rewind the tape” by recalling the original motivation of Bulgaria’s integration into the transatlantic political-economic and military-political space. The concept of the Bulgarian reorientation from the East to the West emerged from the party directive to discover a “tactical alternative” to the already disintegrating structures of the Council of Mutual Economic Assistance and the Warsaw Treaty Organisation. The official “green light” to this end was given by the adoption of the so-called “July Concept” in 1987 in the light of Soviet “perestroika”. In the geopolitical environment of the late 1980s, the implementation of the “tactical alternative” meant searching for ways of reorientation towards enhanced cooperation, initially in the field of foreign trade and later in that of foreign policy, with the institutions and structures of the Western European integration space (International Relations 1988, 3–5). The then ruling Bulgarian Communist government had no other “winning” option, as CPSU Secretary General Mikhail Gorbachev’s policy of reforming the Soviet-type model of the state socialism had one leading long-term consequence for Bulgaria, namely depriving it of its privileged position as the military-political and economic “centre” of the Eastern bloc while gradually pulling it afar to the “peripheral” zone of the geopolitical “buffer” space between the East and the West. Thus, finding itself in an unexpected state of “transition” between the economic systems and the dynamically changing external and internal socio-political situation, the country was pushed once again into chaos and forced to start its most recent search for a new place in the changing power balance between the global geopolitical players (Kalinova and Baeva 2002).

The accession to the European and transatlantic integration communities became a top state priority after all the other possibilities for finding

alternative foreign trade and policy partners proved to be inconsistent. The “exotic” options for closer cooperation with the Arab countries, Japan, or China, as well as the attempts to establish “individually based” relations with the Federal Republic of Germany as a key representative of the geopolitical space beyond the “Iron Curtain”, turned out to be lacking in long-term perspective for various reasons in the status quo before 1989, as well as immediately after the “velvet revolution” and the change of power it pretended to bring.

If, for example, we were to consider the “Middle Eastern dimension” in Bulgarian foreign policy from those years, we would notice that maintaining contacts with countries like Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Algeria was actually pursued to achieve several very specific goals, which included support for the decolonization process, demonstration of the achievements of the ideology of state socialism as well as securing the geopolitical positions of the USSR and the “socialist East” over those of the US and the “capitalist West” in the region. However, Mikhail Gorbachev officially declared denunciation of the “spheres of influence” at the end of the 1980s, rendering this political line meaningless. As for China, Japan, and the Federal Republic of Germany, in all three cases it was a question of unsuccessful management choices due to the direct collision with the global geopolitical interests of the USSR. With China, because of Zhivkov’s attempt to use the nuanced differences between the “Chinese” and “Soviet” models of socialism to criticise Gorbachev’s concept of the “perestroika”; with Japan, due to the fact that, in an effort to quickly acquire Japanese technological know-how, Bulgaria was on the verge of revealing secret product information and Soviet patents in the field of military-technical industry; with the Federal Republic of Germany, because of the unrevoked decision to deploy US missiles on its territory, despite the ongoing disarmament negotiations and Zhivkov’s attempt to use this country as an intermediary in the diplomatic talks with the EEC “behind Moscow’s back” (Filipova 2008; Kandilarov 2014, 510-568; Marcheva 2016, 541-544). Therefore, the ruling elites, before 1989 and in the first post-socialist decade either, demonstrating impressive continuity in their views about the future development of the country and regardless of their party colouring, began to regard the option of an accelerated “return to the West” as a panacea for solving the accumulating problems in the fields of economy and national security. A little-known and somewhat reluctantly admitted truth, even by

scholars and experts, for example, is the fact that it was as early as 1986-1988 when official relations with the then EEC were established. That happened through the two-stage exchange of verbal notes between the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Petar Mladenov, and the European Commissioner for External Relations, Willy de Klerk (see DAMFAa 113-128; and DAMFAB, 5). The party-political regime skilfully took advantage of the momentum of mutual recognition between the Council of Mutual Economic Assistance and the Western European economic integration institutions (JD, 1988). On the other hand, although not yet at an official bilateral level, the first attempts to contact NATO representatives were made within the framework of the negotiations between the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and the Warsaw Pact on disarmament issues held in Stockholm from January 1984 to September 1986 and later on in Wien on February 17, 1987 (Baev 2010, 380-382). We could not speak yet, however, of a sharp breaking up of all the ties within the socialist integration model. At that point, even countries with the most advanced reforms towards political liberalisation and the introduction of free market mechanisms, like Poland or Hungary, were not fully prepared for such a radical step (Baeva 2019, 64), despite the fact that it was there that the US foreign propaganda funds were spent most lavishly in order to achieve “an ideological break-through” against the Soviet influence. According to available diplomatic sources of the period, preserved in the Diplomatic Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Bulgaria, in 1985 and for propaganda purposes in Poland, only the US National Endowment for Democracy (a non-profit foundation dedicated to the growth and strengthening of democratic institutions around the world) allocated as much as 600,000 USD (DAMFAC, 81-84). The comparative amount allocated for the same “anti-Soviet” propaganda in Bulgaria was not small either, estimated at up to circa 200,000 USD, but the momentum of inter-bloc relations in the Soviet sphere at that time was still strong, and the process of its self-destruction had not yet reached its final stage. On the other hand, exclusively dissolving the “Bulgarian case”, it was particularly hard for Socialist Bulgaria to break up with the USSR, given the decades-long policy of “comprehensive rapprochement” with Moscow (Baeva 2017, 21-39), which could serve as an explanation of why the management programmes of the first transition governments after 1989 contained just vaguely defined calls for maintaining “a balance of relations” with all Bulgarian external partners, stating at the same time that the country

should remain “open” to “everything useful and valuable created by modern civilization” (GD 1990, 596). Only when the military-political and political-economic structures of the Eastern Bloc were officially disbanded in the summer of 1991 was the need to find an urgent and adequate alternative for Bulgaria’s future development inevitably put on the agenda.

The dilemma seemed to be partially solved by the progress of the talks on mutual cooperation with the institutions of the European Economic Community (Nikova 1992, 273; Yakimova 2019, 289). The decisions of the 14th Extraordinary Communist Party Congress (January 30, 1990-February 2, 1990) served as a “political catalyst” in this regard, with the party delegates officially denouncing the Soviet Communist Model and adopting instead the Western European Social Democratic Concept (Kandilarov 2010, 154-157). That was a move with unequivocal implications at the international level. It created the necessary prerequisites to finalise the negotiations on the long-prepared Agreement on Trade and Commercial-Economic Cooperation between Bulgaria and the EEC, signed on March 8, 1990. Soon after Bulgaria received observer status in the European Parliament, it was invited to the PHARE Programme (September 17, 1990) and became a member of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (September 26, 1990), and submitted its application to join the Council of Europe. Much more complicated, however, seemed to be the situation in the national security field, where the disappearance of the protective rear of the Warsaw Pact became a serious challenge that could not be overcome (at that historical stage) otherwise than by establishing close interaction with the structures of the transatlantic military-political space (Baeva 2019, 68). In popular language, this imperative found a simple and easily understandable expression in the slogan that Bulgaria was building “a road to Europe”. The latter was broadly used as a major propaganda instrument, especially by Prime Ministers Filip Dimitrov (November 1991-October 1992) and Ivan Kostov (1997-2001), President Petar Stoyanov (1997-2002), or by the Chairman of the Atlantic Club, later Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dr. Solomon Passi. In their public speeches, the building of “a road to Europe” often appeared as inevitably linked with the necessity of making a new “civilization choice” and adopting “the Euro-Atlantic values” (see, for example, Stoyanov 1997; Passi 1996).

There is something that should be explicitly stressed in the abovementioned context. The more Bulgaria embarked on the Euro-Atlantic negotiation process, the more its political elite became dependent on the so-called “Western factor”, being obedient to decisions and even directives coming from far beyond Bulgaria’s state management environment and the geographical territory of the country. Even before the Bulgarian “velvet revolution” of November 1989, the dissident movement in the country relied almost entirely on US financial and material support. It would be enough only to mention here the actions and direct interference of US Ambassador Sol Polanski in the political turmoil of the early 1990s, which were not kept secret but, on the contrary, were openly welcomed by the Right-wing opposition represented by the Union of the Democratic Forces (UDF). There is a document kept in the archives of the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs containing the direct accusation that the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Lyuben Gotsev addressed in the autumn of the turbulent year 1989 to the US participants in the Meeting on Environmental Protection of the Council for Security and Cooperation in Europe held in Sofia from October 16 to November 3, 1989. The dissidents used the international spirit of that meeting and its wide Western media coverage to organise a demonstration in the park space in front of the Kristal Confectionery in Sofia on October 26, 1989. After they were scattered by the militia forces, the Deputy Minister expressed his displeasure at the activity of the American Ambassador Sol Polanski himself and other US Embassy officials in Sofia among the informal dissident groups opposing the regime (DAMFAd, 131). Following November 10, 1989, Ambassador Sol Polanski was already a frequent participant in the crowded demonstrations of the UDF, and he and his successors in office firmly supported the actions of the opposition in its struggle to assert its political positions (see Ludzhev 2012, 97, 112, 115). Later on, the trend became a matter of common practice, leading to the point when the expansion of the cooperation scope with the Western integration structures and institutions gradually turned Bulgaria into a target rather than a subject of foreign policy. Actually, there was little new in an international state status like that, as the country had already experienced the “brotherhood relationship” with the other socialist states within the Eastern Bloc, and just like then, the pace of integration rapprochement after the fall of the Iron Curtain was in a way proportional to the process of

“opening” the Euro-Atlantic space itself to closer cooperation with the European East.

From a “Western” perspective, the framework of relations with the former Soviet satellites could be considered established, in its broad outlines at least, with the adoption of several “milestone” political documents in the early 1990s. Striving to attract the Eastern European countries to the “transatlantic” sphere of influence, in compliance with Zbigniew Brzezinski’s concept of the rearrangement of the “Grand Chessboard” in the aftermath of the Cold War, which excluded every possibility of a spatial vacuum in Central and Eastern Europe (Brzezinski 1998, p. 91), the European Council published its Rome Summit Conclusions in mid-December. The summit’s decisions introduced a special form of close interaction with the European East, the so-called “European Association Agreements” (ECPC, 1990). Meanwhile, at NATO level, the North Atlantic allies adopted their Message from Turnberry (June 8, 1990), followed soon after by the London Declaration (July 6, 1990), both documents stating one and the same priority goal: to “reach out to the countries of the East, which were our adversaries in the Cold War, and extend to them the hand of friendship” (LD 1990, §4; MT 1990). These gestures of what then looked like an unconditional partnership, however, were soon complemented by a number of additional criteria the Eastern European candidate countries had to complete in order to obtain full membership status. Thus, for example, in the official documents from the meetings held at the highest European level in those years, we can read that the future cooperation with Eastern Europe is going to be determined not just by the generally expressed intention of each country, but also by the specific progress in building “democratic institutions” guaranteeing the “rule of law” and “human rights”, by the presence of functioning market relations and the competitiveness of the candidate’s economy, and by the speed of harmonisation of national legislation with the relevant legal norms of the “*acquis communautaire*” (AC, 1993). On the other hand, in the field of military cooperation and security, the North Atlantic Council also brought forth a series of recommendations for “modernization” of the Eastern European armies, implying no more, no less, the complete destruction of “obsolete” Soviet weapons and their replacement with technology that is “compatible” with and “meets” the NATO standards (PPFD 1994; PPID 1994). It was namely the strict implementation of these same criteria that outlined the new state-

political doctrine of the Bulgarian post-socialist transition, the latter being built entirely on the premise of rejecting the “Communist past” and the necessity of making a “new civilizational choice” by adopting “Western values” and development models.

It should be stressed that in this regard, Bulgaria made no exception from the rest of the former Soviet satellites in their quest to “return to Europe”, from which their elites believed they had been forcibly separated when being geopolitically incorporated into the Eastern Bloc in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. However, as more and more time passes, the “Pro-Western” choice Bulgaria made two decades ago begins to look somewhat static, unduly axiomatic, and somehow outdated. As we know from Hegel’s popular thesis, human history never stands still; the wheel continues to turn, and events repeat periodically in a kind of imaginary spiral, but always with an upgrade. The history of Bulgaria’s post-socialist transition is a most symbolic confirmation of this theory. And, if the transition seemed to have come to an end quite naturally in a geopolitical sense with Bulgaria’s admission to NATO in 2004 and a little later to the EU in 2007, from a present-day perspective, it is hard to admit that such statements cannot stand up to the unbiased verification of the historical development. In the 30 years that have elapsed since the turning point of 1989, the geopolitical picture in the Eastern part of Europe has evolved beyond recognition, and currently we once again appear to be standing at a historical crossroads where neither the East nor the West are the same anymore. In fact, as early as in the decade immediately following the collapse of the Eastern European socialist integration model, the newly formed Russian Federation turned to the political philosophy of Neo-Eurasianism, which gradually became the foundation of its foreign policy doctrine. With the beginning of the new 21st century, Moscow directed its attention to the creation of a “new Eurasian empire” built around the geopolitical axes of Moscow-Berlin-Paris to the West, Moscow-Beijing to the East, and Moscow-Tehran to the South (Dugin 1997, 162). It was namely this ideology that presupposed the voluntary withdrawal from the Eastern European space at the expense of the progressive mastery of the Eurasian “heartland” (Mackinder 1904, 421–444). And while the ruling elite in Washington continued to boast about what still looked like their unconditional victory in the Cold War and, on that ground, considered it their implicit right to act as a “global arbiter” of the “American” world order (Kissinger 1997, 705–733; Brzezinski 1994, 158–159; Brzezinski

2004, 126, 150), the Russian Federation gradually regained the positions of influence which the former USSR had renounced and started consolidating around itself new economic and political alliances. After a decade of ideological wandering, the political debate in Russia was finally raised to a new point where the main challenge was to find a proper answer to the question of how to build the new modern state identity while reconciling it with the “Soviet past”. It was in this context that Alexander Dugin proposed his theory of the new “Eurasian” way of Russia’s future development (Dugin 2014), generally opposing Alexandr Shevyakin’s implicit thesis of the necessity to re-establish the deliberately and untimely destroyed USSR (Shevyakin 2010), both of them thus building the philosophical foundations for more “modernistic” thesis, like, for example, that of Prof. Darina Grigorova, who brings forth the idea of an entirely new geopolitical future for Russia based on its “imperial” and “Soviet” past (Grigorova 2018). In the process of implementing this task in the field of foreign policy, Russia initiated the creation of new generation international structures, such as the BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Apart from that, a series of bilateral agreements for economic and military-political cooperation with China, India, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey were signed. The post-American world order is already established with its new realities and spheres of redistributed influence. Within its framework, Russia’s geopolitical importance could be defined as, if not superior, at least fully equal to that of several other major spatial players (Bachev 2022, 10, 18). So, we are currently witnessing not just the general transformation of the system of international relations but also the global restructuring of the architecture of international security. The first diplomatic legitimation of this large-scale process was the meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and his American counterpart, President Joe Biden, in the early summer of 2021. This meeting was a sign that Washington, albeit reluctantly, recognises the Russian Federation as its equal antagonist in the international arena for the first time since the collapse of the USSR. Everything that the world has observed afterwards – the denouement of the military clash in Syria, the tension over Iran’s nuclear programme, the outburst of the conflict in Ukraine, the Taiwan issue – are just the different practical dimensions of the modern confrontation between the West and the East, which is becoming increasingly complex and much more multi-layered if compared to the confrontation between the two superpowers and their “satellite” military-

political blocs in the decades of the Yalta-Potsdam status quo. The major result of this new geopolitical opposition is the gradual but sustainable shift of the global centre of historical development in an Eastern direction. The process is unprecedented, not just since the end of the Cold War but since the time of the Great Geographical Discoveries, and it is high time to admit the plain facts. Whether we like it or not, after the total dominance of the “*Rimland*” for more than half a millennium after the collapse of the Byzantine Empire in the 15th century, the contemporary global geopolitical “*centre of gravity*” is once again shifting to the core of the “*Heartland*”, namely, to the heart of Eurasia. Thus, the “*end of history*”, announced by Francis Fukuyama in the early 1990s, turned out to have been a fundamental new beginning of processes that developed with unexpected historical dynamics in less than 30 years, placing the political elites throughout the world before the imperative for a mental readjustment and urgent adaptation to the inevitable changes at all three spatial levels, global, regional, and national. The existing international system, with its familiar structures of economic integration and security, has never been that close to its actual collapse as it is now. And if those structures had no alternative since the disappearance of the Council of Economic Assistance and the Warsaw Pact Organisation in the early 1990s, at the beginning of the 21st century, they are already somewhere there. The alternative economic exchange system and security are already in an advanced stage formation stage beyond the Euro-Atlantic area. And that is an objective process that will determine all global vectors of development, at least for the next fifty years.

Taking into account all the above-mentioned, it appears that the time has come for careful reconsideration of the geopolitical choice the Bulgarian political elite made during the 1990s to break all ties with the its traditional foreign partners in the East, namely Russia, the post-Soviet states, and the Arab countries, and seek new counterparts in the West, i.e., Western Europe, the United States, the European Communities, and NATO, instead. In the dynamically changing surrounding world, the more time elapses since the Eastern European “*velvet revolutions*” of 1989–1990 with their now outdatedly sounding ideological quests, the more the revision of theses and interpretations becomes inevitable, posing (or maybe it would be more precise to use the term “*revive*”) some fundamental questions like, for example, whether Bulgaria has been prepared enough for the status of a full member of the transatlantic community structures and institutions.

Against this background, the age we are living in has already raised certain serious doubts about the effectiveness of the economic integration of Bulgaria into the European Union, particularly in light of the hard recovery from the COVID-19 crisis and the introduction of European sanctions against the Russian Federation after its special military operation in Ukraine. First of all, there is the general issue of the initially negotiated conditions of our accession to the EU and the doubt of whether some of the so-called “negotiation chapters” had not been prematurely closed, needing urgent reopening in the changed political-economic European environment. Several particular issues arise in this context, concerning mainly the deadlines for closing the nuclear power plant in Kozloduy and the coal-fired power stations (in compliance with the European Green Transition), the deadlines for the introduction of the free market requirements directed at liberalisation of electricity prices for business and household consumers, as well as the cases of the electricity distribution companies and water transmission network ownership (currently both sectors are fully owned by foreign private companies and foreign state-linked structures) (Bachev 2022, 79-80). In the sub-field of agriculture as well, several outstanding disproportions, arising directly from the poorly protected Bulgarian national interest during the pre-accession negotiations, should be properly corrected. It would be quite enough to mention here just the fact that, as an EU member, Bulgaria has voluntarily agreed to comply with Article 34 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU (TFEU), regulating the free movement of goods within the Community. During the years, this has created huge imbalances in the goods supply of the biggest retailer supermarkets operating in Bulgaria, like Billa, Lidl, Kaufland, Carrefour, and Fantastico, which prefer selling foreign goods rather than those of domestic Bulgarian origin. In an attempt to protect Bulgarian producers, on April 14, 2020, the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria adopted Decree No. 70, which obliged retailers to favour domestic food products (DCM 2020). The result was unequivocal, as only several months later, in October of the same year, the European Commission asked Bulgaria to remove the mandatory supply of local products in hypermarkets or it would refer the matter to the Court of Justice of the EU. The motivation of the EC was incontestable: the actions of Bulgarian authorities had led to a violation of the EU common market (ECMIPKD 2020).

On the other hand, many negotiation chapters seem to need reopening because expected fast macroeconomic development of Bulgaria after the accession year 2007 looks imperfect, if not totally unsuccessful, if we were to compare some basic figures. The notorious among experts, though still not as publicly popular Bulgarian politician and Facebook influencer Kiril Gummerov, has recently posted several tables containing interesting data about the economic situation in Bulgaria at the beginning of 2007 and, later, in the fourteen years of Bulgaria's EU membership. The data are collected from the corresponding technical documentation of the Ministry of Agriculture and the National Statistics Institute and lead to highly negative conclusions about a permanent recession trend in key economic sectors, like fruit and vegetable production (Fig. 1) or industrial development (Fig. 2).

Figure 1: Decrease in fruit and vegetable production (2007-2020/2021)

	Total production for 2007 (Accession year)	Total production for 2020/2021 (Fourteen years after Bulgaria's accession to the EU)
Grapes	376 000	178 000
Tomatoes	213 000	115 000
Peppers	157 000	51 000
Potatoes	386 000	192 000

Source: Ministry of Agriculture and Food (Gummerov 2023a; Gummerov 2023b)

Figure 2: Decrease in the total number of employed
in the field of industry (2008-2020)

Employment by industrial sector	2008	2020	Decrease in the number of employed	Decrease in %
Employed in the non-financial sector	2 219 261	2 091 074	- 128187	- 6%
Employed in the mining industry	29854	20084	- 9970	- 32.8%
Employed in the manufacturing industry	623 652	491142	- 132 510	- 21.3%
Employed in the construction industry	255 523	145 165	- 110 362	- 43.2%
Employed in the production and distribution of electrical and thermal energy, as well as gaseous fuels	36122	31146	- 4976	- 15.5%
Employed in the field of administrative and support activities	82762	104883	Rise by + 22 121	+ 26.7 % (Administrative staff)

Source: National Statistical Institute (Gumnerov 2023c)

Apart from the specific economic issues, there is another major one arising directly from the current international tension created by the conflict in Ukraine. In light of the development of this military crisis, the official anti-Russian propaganda at the highest political and state levels has become increasingly aggressive and lavishly funded, as revealed by a recently declassified US State Department report for the fiscal year 2021. According to the report, which provides very detailed information about the various programmes supported by the Fund for Countering Russian Influence (CRIF), established in compliance with the provisions of the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), the sum allocated for Bulgaria amounts to 47,709 USD, which are to be used for all sorts of activities directed to combat "Russian influence" (USSDIR 2022, 16). Even

before these striking revelations, however, the constant “anti-Russian” political and media speaking had already brought forth once again to the public agenda the long-muted “pro” and ‘anti’-NATO debate. Posed for the first time in the early 1990s in the direct context of the strained bilateral relations with Moscow and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, the “NATO issue” evolved fast into a priority argument for fierce political confrontation even before the end of the first post-socialist decade. Influential military representatives like the army generals Dobri Dzhurov, Hristo Dobrev, Lyuben Petrov, Stoyan Andreev, or the Prime Ministers Andrey Lukanov and Zhan Videnov, in their political programmes (both referred to the concept of “equidistance” from the East and the West) (see GP 1990, 697-700; GP 1995-1998, 712. 732) argued that Bulgaria needed new security guarantees after the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, but at the same time avoided to directly “promote” the necessity for a NATO-membership. During the 1990s, the debate engaged large public circles, entering a particularly heated phase when the North Atlantic Alliance’s air forces attacked the former Yugoslavia in the spring of 1999. The ruling Bulgarian political elite had already submitted the country’s formal membership application two years earlier (on February 17, 1997). However, the greater part of society openly declared its position against such a step, demonstrating its disagreement with the unprecedented act of military aggression against our neighbour to the West. According to the preserved archival information, more than 30,000 Bulgarians gathered in Sofia to demonstrate against the NATO intervention in Yugoslavia on April 20, 1999 (OMDA 1999), and there were several other crowded demonstrations throughout the tense winter and spring months of 1999. However, with the permanent establishment of Bulgarian Euro-Atlanticists in power and the imposition of the concept of accelerated accession to the Transatlantic space in the first years of the 21st century, the reasonable voices expressing reservations about NATO membership were gradually silenced, purposefully deprived of a public platform. The media were “taken over” by the propagandists of the pro-Atlantic idea, and topics about, for example, the comparison between the positive and negative sides of Bulgaria’s membership in the EU or NATO were branded “taboo” and permanently dropped from public attention. Literally until yesterday.

However, nowadays, the situation has changed a lot. The dynamic and multi-layered development of the political-economic and military-political

processes in Europe, the Balkans, and throughout Eurasia makes it necessary to urgently rethink all the parameters of Bulgaria's Euro-Atlantic choice. Our country is neither technically prepared nor is it in our national interest to take a side in military conflicts that do not concern us in any respect. That has nothing to do with the principle of European solidarity, and it was a general mistake to try to apply this principle to the Ukrainian war. Instead of involving itself in it, no matter how this involvement is being (not very successfully) masked as only "humanitarian" or only "technical support", Bulgaria should act as a mediator to find a peaceful solution. This is a completely feasible role, regardless of the complex geopolitical transformations taking place before our eyes, and its implementation depends not on the predetermined spatial position of Bulgaria but almost entirely on the proper will of the Bulgarian political elite. The "external factor" has its inevitable influence, of course, as it has always had back in time, but in our modern environment, this influence is multidirectional enough, constantly changing, and far from imperative to serve as a convenient excuse. And the part we, the analysts and experts, the historians and political scientists, are to take in the general process is to provide the necessary scientifically based theses and arguments for formulating the Bulgarian national interest and its international protection with a clear political position.

It is a challenge, of course. It is a challenge to find and bring forth as proof the right archival documents to show the interrelationship between the events of the recent past and the developments of the surrounding present. It is also a challenge to remain as impartial as possible about the dynamic world processes, particularly in a media and public environment that constantly generates distorted information and bans all alternative viewpoints. But this is what makes the charm of being a researcher of modern history: to remain immune to attempts at manipulation and faithful to the mere facts.

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