

The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership in Bulgaria's Foreign Policy Priorities on the Eve of European Union Accession

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Background Features of Bulgaria's Foreign and European Policy

Analysing the role and significance of the Mediterranean and, more specifically, of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, Bulgaria's foreign policy has to be placed in several broader frameworks. These are the general features of the country's foreign policy making patterns, the setting of its "European policy" on the eve of accession to the European Union (EU), and the specific context of the design and implementation of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). Furthermore, such analysis has to bear in mind a set of factors influencing the process of goal setting and implementing concrete foreign policy actions.

Bulgarian foreign policy has traditionally been perceived as tending to follow already established agendas rather than contributing to the design and formulation of new ones. The pattern of foreign policy making, based on both geopolitical and historic premises, can be characterized as re-active rather than pro-active. The Bulgarian "political horizon" is quite low and dictates the predominance of short-term preoccupations. It is connected with spending political resources and capital on immediate achievements, sometimes to the detriment of strategic interests or visions. Even in cases where long-term political vision is displayed, it normally has two features. Firstly, such vision is careful not to deviate too much from the "mainstream", or it

is *suiviste*, in the words of the former French President François Mitterrand. Secondly, in many cases it is limited to declaratory activism, which stops short of producing concrete foreign policy deliverables. The above features can be explained also by a relatively modest institutional and expert capacity in the country's foreign policy making field that is difficult to overcome but in a long-term perspective.

On the eve of EU membership, Bulgaria's "European policy" – the second framework that has to be considered – was focused almost exclusively on accession. The internal dimension of pre-accession preparation aimed at stepping up efforts in key areas monitored by the European Commission with special concern (e.g. fighting corruption and organized crime). Its foreign policy dimension followed a consistent programme of action to secure the ratification of its Accession Treaty by all 25 EU member states. In order not to antagonize political elites in the "old" EU-15, and especially in those states that had not yet completed ratification (e.g. Germany and France), Bulgarian political actors adopted an attitude of general *non-involvement* in internal EU affairs. They preferred to focus on "doing the pre-accession homework" and to distance themselves from debating problems that stood high on the agenda of the EU-25. However, insofar as the ratification process was taking place in the general ambience of a "post-2004-enlargement fatigue," the above approach was complemented by a sort of *defensive/negative involvement*, an attempt at damage limitation, which was meant to prevent Bulgarian accession from being taken hostage by non-related internal EU developments and negative public attitudes.

All pre-accession preparations were targeted at the gradual internalisation of EU policies – a process that was relatively easy in the field of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), in comparison

with internal community policies. Experience gained since the mid-1990s of adherence to EU positions on foreign policy and security issues contributed to a relatively smooth upgrade of Bulgaria's role of active observer (in 2006) and full-fledged participant in the CFSP and the ENP as of accession. The CFSP problematic in general and specific issues related to the EU's neighbourhood were among those, where Bulgarian foreign policy displayed *positive involvement* by expressing concrete views on specific substantive issues that were relatively non-contentious. It served a double purpose. First, as a PR tool, developing "pro-European" positions in support of non-conflicting causes would help Bulgaria build the image of a "good European" and would further promote the country's accession. Second, on substance, this could be a modest contribution to fleshing out the current debate and, in the medium term, could help distinctly place Bulgaria on the "map" of EU foreign policy making.

The Mediterranean in the Bulgarian Neighbourhood-Related Agenda

From "day one" of EU membership, Bulgaria fully faces the challenge of participating in common EU foreign policy making. For objective political, economic, demographic and other reasons, the country lacks sufficient policy-making capacities to get efficiently involved and effectively deliver within the vast spectrum of external policy actions – not only regarding the Union's global role, but also within the scope of the ENP. Bulgaria has to prioritize and select target countries even within the geographical coverage of the EU's "Wider Europe – Neighbourhood" concept, in order to be able to claim a more pro-active role in foreign policy.

In the Bulgarian foreign policy agenda setting, the southern and eastern coasts of the Mediterranean as a region (i.e. the Southern dimension of the ENP) and the Barcelona Process in particular face the competition of two other regions. Firstly, there is the Eastern dimension of the ENP, itself sub-divided in two overlapping sub-areas – the ENP towards the Eastern European countries along the land border of the enlarged EU-27, and the ENP towards the Black Sea Region. The second competitor is the region of

the Western Balkans, which should not be omitted for two reasons: on the one hand, during the initial stages of designing the ENP, the EU itself hesitated as to how to approach these countries¹. On the other hand, despite the initial promise of EU membership for the Western Balkan countries made in Thessaloniki in June 2003, the general mood of post-2004-enlargement fatigue has led to downgrading the status of this area in the political discourse of many EU Member States.

How could we expect Bulgaria to prioritize the Southern dimension of the ENP, if compared to its Eastern dimension and to the Western Balkans? What factors could influence the reduction of the geographical focus of Bulgaria's involvement in the ENP?

Geopolitical considerations, in the version relevant for a small state such as Bulgaria, are decisive for goal setting. Bulgaria "measures" the ENP against its own – more restrained – perception of neighbourhood. Bulgaria's circle of neighbours is, of

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course, much narrower than Europe's. The Balkan Peninsula and the Black Sea area have always stood central in defining Bulgarian foreign policy priorities. Projecting geopolitical leverage beyond these two segments of the ENP zone of action could be expected only in cases where other factors demonstrate clear preponderance – specific vested interests, specific know-how, politically sensitive questions, etc. (Nikolov, 2005: 264.)

Strategic foreign policy choices made by Bulgaria – membership in NATO and the EU – will impact participation in the ENP. These choices, especially in the field of security, and the ensuing obligations are likely to involve bearing costs in terms of bilateral relations. With a view to the country's accession to NATO, Bulgaria's decision back in 2003 to join the US-led "coalition of the willing" and send troops to Iraq negatively affected relations with Arab countries. In the future, this could indirectly reduce the country's potential to take part in activities in the Southern dimension of the ENP.

¹ Such pre-accession experience is, however, of lower significance for the Mediterranean ENP partners and of greater significance for those countries neighbouring the EU from the East that cherish EU-membership aspirations. By the end of 2006, Bulgaria had already signed bilateral memoranda for cooperation in the field of European and Euro-Atlantic integration with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

Traditions of bilateral relations in the political or economic field are a necessary point of departure for developing a pro-active Bulgarian policy within the ENP. A distinction should be made, however, between the real potential of traditionally good, “mutually beneficial” bilateral relations, on one hand, and public perceptions and discourses sometimes based on myths, on the other. A tradition that has once been positive might have become a myth after clashing with strategic priorities of a higher degree. For example, traditionally good Bulgarian-Arab relations during the Cold War have been overshadowed by recent strategic commitments. After about ten painful years of demystification, changing realities are finally recognized by Bulgarian policy makers. Thus, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ivailo Kalfin, admits the “lowered intensity” of Bulgarian-Arab relations prior to EU accession and emphasizes the need to heighten such intensity again in a new EU membership framework (Kalfin, 2006a). However, recurring references to “the good traditions, which we continue to develop” in the official discourse even at the highest level of the Prime Minister (Stanishev, 2007) are telling about the persistence of myths. Stripping bilateral links from such myths will be useful for narrowing down and focusing the future ENP activity of Bulgaria.

The above factors are instrumental in explaining the place of each of the three geographic regions neighbouring the EU-27 – (1) the Western Balkans, (2) Eastern Europe and the Black Sea area, (3) the Southern and the Eastern Mediterranean – within the general order of priorities of Bulgarian foreign policy. Among them, Bulgaria has always attached and will continue to attach greatest importance to the Western Balkans and will therefore work for maintaining the European perspective of the region. In 2006, the country’s diplomatic action was concentrated both on assisting EU efforts in solving outstanding problems blocking regional progress (such as the status of Kosovo), and on helping the countries in the region to enhance their pre-accession preparation. At official level and in the framework of public debates triggered by the International Commission on the Balkans in 2006, Bulgarian policy makers and opinion leaders advocated a firm EU commitment for a future accession of Western Balkan countries to the EU (International Commission, 2005). The immediate proximity of the Black Sea area and the fact that Bulgarian and Romanian EU membership brings the Union’s external borders to this region

raises the latter’s importance on the list of Bulgarian foreign policy priorities. The seriousness of the country’s commitment is proved by the adoption of a novel approach – the elaboration of a special governmental policy paper “Bulgaria and the Black Sea Region” in November 2006 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2006).

The Mediterranean, therefore, comes third on Bulgaria’s neighbourhood-related agenda. Single issues – such as the trial against five Bulgarian nurses in Libya – which grasp public attention and are capable of mobilizing and even overstraining political and diplomatic efforts, are no more than exceptions that prove this conclusion. The impasse of the trial in Libya illustrates serious shortcomings not only in bilateral relations between Sofia and Tripoli but also in the approach to the country’s Arab partners in general.

The “lowered intensity” of Bulgaria’s foreign policy action within the Southern dimension of the ENP is complemented by the absence of a public or even of an academic debate, which would develop approaches or generate ideas to facilitate Bulgarian participation in the ENP. While the EU is gradually starting to appreciate the trouble-making effects of excluding political Islam from the various formats of the ENP and the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (Springborg, 2007: 2-3), such a linkage is not established in the Bulgarian academic discourse. A recent conference on “Islam and Politics” held in Sofia (International Conference, 2006) could serve as an example: Although the formulation of the conference title included the notion of a “Wider Europe”, the ensuing debate was not focused on EU policy. On the contrary, the Southern dimension of the ENP was barely mentioned and even its shortcomings did not “earn” any substantive criticism coming from speakers and the audience. Increased attention to political Islam as a field of study detached from the ENP remains problematic.

Bulgarian Positions on the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership

The ENP has been identified by Bulgarian policy makers as an EU policy area where the country could contribute to policy shaping and implementation from the outset, and especially after accession. Solid experience gained both in the framework of the enlargement process and in bilateral relations with

ENP partner countries is the rationale behind the assertion of President Parvanov that Europe's "new neighbours" are not new for Bulgaria and that the "credit of trust" of the country among ENP partner countries could play a favourable role in future ENP actions (Parvanov, 2004). Pre-accession experience has been stressed as a relevant asset in the transformation and modernization efforts of the ENP partner countries². The emphasis made on conducting the ENP as a whole is that it should be balanced and effective and should take into account the interests of neighbours. From this general perspective, Bulgaria has supported the efforts of successive EU Presidencies (especially the Finnish Presidency in 2006) for a broader application of the regional approach in deepening group-to-group relations within this policy.

While shaping its own contribution to the ENP, Bulgaria has established shared democratic values as a point of departure. The fundamental ENP principles are to be implemented in a differentiated and flexible manner and by building up specific action models for individual countries. Progress in bilateral relations of the EU with each partner country under the ENP should be assessed according to the set of fundamental principles and values and the country's individual merits and achievements. The Summit of Heads of State and Government in the framework of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership on 27-28 November 2005 in Barcelona offered a unique opportunity for Bulgaria to formulate its overall attitude and specific positions on the Southern dimension of the ENP even prior to EU accession. The participation of Prime Minister Stanishev in the forum was viewed as a key impetus for developing a European dimension to Bulgaria's bilateral relations with Mediterranean countries, which would be an additional playing field for Bulgaria as from 2007 onwards. In his address to the summit, Stanishev outlined the involvement of Bulgaria in such a multilateral framework as a basic format of cooperation and interaction in the future (Stanishev, 2005).

An important accent in Stanishev's speech was the understanding that the creation of a Euro-Mediterranean area of peace and stability should be based on common democratic principles and should protect human rights. Among the priorities of the Five-Year Working Programme adopted by the forum,

Bulgaria's government leader outlined good and democratic governance, sustainable economic growth and reforms, education, justice, security and social integration. He expressed the hope that reforms initiated in the countries from the region would enhance the rule of law, the development of active civil societies, as well as the protection of human rights and the freedom to express personal opinions. Both summit documents – the comprehensive working programme mentioned above and the Code of Conduct on Countering Terrorism – were assessed as adequate for enabling partner countries from the EU and the Mediterranean to meet the challenges of the new century. On the issue of fighting terrorism, the Bulgarian position expressed was to develop concrete cooperation measures on strengthening control over illegal migration flows, on preventing terrorist acts, as well as on initiating relevant legislative changes.

Following this summit, 2006 was a year of a plethora of sectoral dialogues and meetings at political, official and non-governmental level, in which Bulgaria participated. Among them, the 8th Euro-Mediterranean Conference of Ministers of Foreign Affairs, which was organized by the Finnish Presidency of the EU on 27-28 November 2006 in Tampere, was a key forum giving the opportunity to summarize the achievements of sectoral developments and to flesh out specific foreign policy positions and initiatives. The speech of Bulgaria's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ivailo Kalfin at the meeting outlined the country's views on the Southern dimension of the ENP and the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership immediately on the eve of EU accession (Kalfin, 2006c). It stated the commitment of Bulgaria to play an even more active role in pursuing the objective shared on both sides of the Mediterranean to define a common area of peace and stability, to construct a zone of shared prosperity and to develop a comprehensive social, cultural and human partnership.

Bulgaria has made a substantive effort to meet the challenge of developing specific positions on the broad spectrum of issues covered by the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership by trying to focus on the potential added value that trans-regional initiatives can bring to bilateral relations. Preparation for full-fledged EU membership and for responsible participation in CFSP actions has usefully coincided with the re-launch of the Euro-

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Mediterranean Partnership at the 2005 summit. This has helped the elaboration of views on the following areas of cooperation:

Political and Security Dialogue

From a Bulgarian point of view, the Barcelona Process is seen as a forum for furthering mutual understanding that contributes to the promotion of progress in the Middle East Peace Process. The achievement of a just, comprehensive and lasting settlement of the Middle East conflict in accordance with the principles of the Road Map and on the basis of relevant UN Security Council resolutions is of utmost importance for establishing lasting peace and security in the Middle East.

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As an integral part of the EU as of 1st January 2007, Bulgaria welcomes the Union's increased engagement in the region in view of the escalation of violence in 2006. Sofia has made the assessment that the efforts of the EU's Institutions and Member States to achieve cessation of hostilities and to alleviate humanitarian suffering were active and constructive.

The above prudent evaluation of the role the EU played in the Lebanon war in 2006 was reflected also in terms of public discourse. Debates in the electronic media and the press in July-August employed a very restrained language. Politicians in power or in opposition, many analysts and even a significant number of journalists generally avoided calling the war "a war". This hot topic was referred to as an "escalation of tension," "conflict," "outbreak of hostilities," "crisis," but very rarely a "war". Such attitude was consistent with the official discrete and *suiviste* positions expressed by high representatives of the Bulgarian executive. Thus, Foreign Minister Kalfin explicitly pled for precaution in formulating the country's position on the Lebanon War and on the participation of the country in the UNIFIL. In his words, "right after [...] European states demonstrate their clear stand for participation [in the UN-led mission in Lebanon], then we can take our position" (Kalfin, 2006b).

An advancement of the Middle East Peace process will, without any doubt, exert a positive impact on the dynamisation of the Barcelona process. On the contrary, adverse developments in the Levant, such as those in July-August 2006, will most likely deprive this multi-lateral format of a true sense of direction in the political and security field. In general, the fundamental objectives of the Barcelona Process are a solid point of departure in promoting the understanding that this forum should be used for advancing dialogue and cooperation on political and security issues, conflict prevention, crisis management activities and partnership building measures in accordance with universal standards and existing international obligations.

The Implementation of the Code of Conduct on Countering Terrorism

The adoption of the Code of Conduct on Countering Terrorism at the Barcelona summit in 2005 was a very important achievement. It showed that all Euro-Mediterranean partners were united in the struggle against terrorism and that they all recognized the threat that terrorist activities posed to these countries' security, prosperity, values and principles. The focus in continuing efforts to combat terrorism should be placed on strengthening national mechanisms as well as on advancing cooperation and coordination to respond to this global challenge. In conformity with the principles of the Code of Conduct, proper attention should also be devoted to addressing the underlying causes of terrorism. In parallel to stepping-up anti-terrorist action, governments cooperating in the Euro-Mediterranean area should not forget, in Bulgaria's views, the fundamental principles and values that form the basis of cooperation. They should strive to ensure that counter-terrorism activities do not impede the enjoyment of basic human rights and fundamental freedoms and do not deviate from domestic and international legal frameworks. In this respect, Bulgaria welcomed the initiative to hold a Euro-Mediterranean Seminar in 2007 on ensuring respect for human rights in the fight against terrorism in accordance with international law.

Sustainable Socio-Economic Development and Reform

One of the pillars of the Barcelona Process is the progressive establishment of a common area of security and prosperity, which includes the creation of a Free

Trade Area by 2010. Bulgaria welcomes the steps already taken in this direction and in particular the results of the Conference of Ministers of Trade in March 2006 in Morocco. It is important that negotiations towards the progressive liberalization of trade in goods and services proceed without unnecessary delays.

Bulgarian views expressed at the forums held in 2006 in this area of cooperation are in support of the opinion that the Mediterranean partners have come a long way towards improving the business and investment climate in their respective countries. In this context, the important role of FEMIP is acknowledged in particular. This gives sound ground to expect positive results of the next Euromed Ecofin Ministerial Meeting scheduled to take place in May 2007.

Sustainable development and economic prosperity are closely related to the establishment and maintenance of a reasonable and well-defined policy in the field of energy. Bulgarian representatives at the relevant forums in 2006 expressed satisfaction that the triple objective of ensuring energy security, environmental sustainability and economic development remains a priority of the Euro-Mediterranean Energy Partnership. In line with Bulgaria's own national policy priorities and in conformity with the efforts of the EU to establish a common strategy on energy policy, the country welcomes the initiatives in the energy field undertaken in the framework of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. In this respect Bulgaria has offered its support for the idea of holding a Conference of Ministers of Energy in 2007.

Tourism can exert significant impact on the enhancement of economic prosperity as well as on the advancement of intercultural understanding since it helps facilitate social exchanges. In accordance with the consensus reached by Heads of State and Government at the Barcelona Summit in 2005, Bulgaria fully supports the call for a Euromed Ministerial Meeting on tourism to be organized in a timely manner.

Education and Socio-Cultural Exchanges

Events unfolding in 2006 confirmed the understanding that the strengthening and enhancement of intercultural dialogue should remain a shared priority. Bulgaria has had a long history of multicultural exchanges that taught the Bulgarian people of the utmost importance of tolerance and mutual respect. Bulgaria confirms its commitment to the principles of dialogue. The establishment of the Euro-Mediterranean Anna Lindh

Foundation in Alexandria and the launch of the Cultural Heritage Programme were important steps forward. Yet efforts at promoting and enhancing dialogue and understanding should continue until the objectives of our partnership are reached.

The Dilemma between Values and Interests – the Libyan Trial as a Test Case

In conclusion of the above overview of the place of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership in Bulgaria's foreign policy priorities, we should outline the impact of a single-issue factor that might influence Bulgarian behaviour as partner in this dialogue. This is an issue that could block or at least minimize Bulgarian efforts to play a role in the Southern dimension of the ENP – the problem of the trial against five Bulgarian nurses and a Palestinian doctor.

The problem of the trial against five Bulgarian nurses is an issue that could block or at least minimize Bulgarian efforts to play a role in the Southern dimension of the ENP

These six medical workers are in captivity in a Libyan prison since February 1999 on the accusation of having established a conspiracy against Libyan national security, in cooperation with Western secret services, by contaminating around 400 children in a hospital in Benghazi with AIDS, some of whom have already died. The trial against them has gone through one death sentence at first instance revoked by the Supreme Court and confirmed for a second time by the first instance court at the end of 2006. Expected to happen in 2007 are: a second pronouncement of Libya's Supreme Court followed by a decision of the Supreme Judicial Council and – as an anticipated but uncertain step – a pardon by the leader Gaddafi.

2006 became the year of unfounded hope and self-deceit caused by an extensive rhetoric on behalf of Bulgarian politicians promising a rapid positive solution. After that, the start of 2007 saw the launch in Bulgaria of a massive public campaign "you are not alone" in support of the cause of the nurses. This trial became a test case for the political meaning of Bulgaria's membership in the EU and for the capacity

of the political class to mobilize effective formats of solidarity within the EU in order to save our compatriots. The failure to solve this human and political problem sparked a heated debate in Bulgaria, whereby the dilemma between values and interests was clearly displayed.

On one hand, the cause of the nurses was seen as one of unjust imprisonment, of confessions extracted by torture serving by far as the major proof of guilt, of depriving them of basic human rights for a number of years of cell-life, of deliberate neglect by the court to recognize the testimony of world-renowned professors in AIDS from France and Italy. In brief, this case has been viewed as essential for demonstrating the EU's capacity to protect its newest "European citizens" on an issue directly related to the problematics of human rights and fundamental freedoms. On the other hand, after the Iraq war of 2003, Libya renounced its plans to develop nuclear weapons and initiated a gradual reintegration of Gaddafi's regime in the international community. Political and economic interests of some EU Member States and multinational companies, which point in the direction of upgrading Euro-Libyan cooperation (especially on energy sources), have dissuaded hopes for a just solution to the trial. In Bulgarian public opinion, the moral obligation of Europe to protect its citizens' rights³ clashes with the promotion of commercial and political interests, often to the detriment of the former. The plea to sideline private interests and to promote the cause that is in conformity with the basic principles of the Union is frequently combined with a certain degree of scepticism about the possibility of this happening. In unison with public opinion, in the context of this trial Bulgarian politicians have intensified their emphasis on human rights and democratic principles. For example, despite all the tactful language employable at the highest state level, Bulgarian president Parvanov expressed his concern about an imbalance between developing profitable businesses in Libya and supporting noble causes. During his first speech before the European Parliament after the date of accession, he stated his concern about the insufficient amounts accumulated in the special Benghazi Fund established jointly by Bulgaria, the EU and its Member States in order to finance medical treatment of contaminated Libyan children. "I find that the participation of the big

oil companies, which have their good business in Libya, is overtly symbolic in this fund." ("Bulgaria launches an offensive").

Bulgarian politicians and public opinion alike point at the EU's dilemma between values and interests, as exemplified in the Libyan trial. The cause of the liberation of the nurses has become a standard bearer of the protection of human rights in the Bulgarian public discourses. Moreover, in several multilateral formats at EU level, Bulgarian representatives have consistently emphasized Bulgaria's adherence to the fundamental democratic principles the EU is built upon, also in the way they are formulated in the framework of the ENP as a whole and in the Euro-Mediterranean partnership in particular. However, at the level of bilateral relations between Bulgaria and the Arab countries, it is economic interests and not so much the Libyan case that dominate the agenda. For example, at his annual meeting with Arab ambassadors in January 2007, Prime Minister Stanishev elaborately explained Bulgaria's priority to "look for new forms for the development of commercial-economic cooperation". He reassured the ambassadors of Bulgaria's commitment to undertake steps in order "to upgrade and harmonize the complete spectrum of bilateral relations, which regulate Bulgaria's relations with the Arab countries in the field of economic and commercial cooperation" (Stanishev, 2007). That is just one example of a common policy-making pattern, which is employed by policy makers in Bulgaria and in other EU member states. Multilateral formats, such as the ENP and the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, are used to promote human rights and democratic values, while bilateral relations are found suitable for pushing forward national economic interests.

The Libyan trial illustrates the difficulty of balancing values and interests, which arises both at EU level and at national level

Overall, the Libyan trial illustrates the difficulty of balancing values and interests, which arises both at EU level and at national level. A successful balance in this test case could have the tremendous positive effect of giving the nurses a chance of liberty and

³ In this general perception of "Europe" shared broadly in Bulgaria, there is no distinction between EU member states and the Union's institutions. However, the analysis of specific steps and initiatives reveals a higher degree of intensity of the involvement of the Union's institutional representatives and a lower degree of involvement of EU member states.

homecoming, and could teach Bulgaria to apply productive methods of coalition building and representation of interests.

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