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CONTESTING THE WEST? DOMESTIC CONTESTATION IN BULGARIAN FOREIGN POLICY FROM 2014 TO 2022¹

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the evolution of Bulgarian foreign policy since the start of the Russian Ukrainian crisis of 2014 until 2022 through the prism of domestic contestation of foreign policy choices and decisions. The article reviews four key votes that took place during the period that related to NATO decisions and EU-related decisions towards the situation in Ukraine. This article raises three central questions. First: to what extent were Bulgarian foreign policy decisions related to NATO and the EU increasingly contested and politicized in domestic politics? Second: what is the impact of domestic political dynamics in terms of fragmentation, coalition building and role of smaller fringe extreme right political parties on the growing politicization and contestation of Bulgarian foreign policy towards NATO and the EU? Third: to what extent might such politicization and contestation question Bulgaria's commitments to both NATO and the EU?

KEYWORDS

Russia; NATO; Sanctions; Foreign Policy; European Union; Bulgaria.

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INTRODUCTION

The role of domestic actors in foreign policy is far from a new topic of interest in international relations. The central focus of foreign policy analysis has been how domestic politics and decision-making affect foreign policy choices. Mainstream international relations theories have also increasingly turned their attention to these domestic factors even though there are gaps remaining between the two main perspectives².

The concepts of politicization, and more recently of contestation, have become central to the analysis of the domestic dimensions of foreign policy. These two concepts can be found in a growing body of scholarship aimed at dealing with how decisions and policies made by international organizations, especially the European Union and to a much lesser extent NATO, are being discussed within the realm of domestic politics.³

This contribution will take as its main case study how Bulgarian foreign policy decisions related to NATO and EU are being discussed, if not challenged in Bulgarian domestic politics. This article raises three main questions. First: to what extent were Bulgarian foreign policy decisions related to NATO and the EU increasingly contested and politicized in domestic politics? Second: what is the impact of domestic political dynamics in terms of fragmentation, coalition building and role of smaller fringe extreme right political parties on the growing politicization and contestation of Bulgarian foreign policy towards NATO and the EU? Third: to what extent might such politicization and contestation question Bulgaria's commitments to both NATO and the EU?

The main thesis of the paper is that since the start of the Ukrainian crisis in 2014, both NATO related decisions and EU policy decisions have been increasingly politicized at the domestic level, leading to some forms of contestation in Bulgarian politics. The extent of these forms should not be exaggerated, and their impact on Bulgarian foreign policy was limited. If anything, the contestation of NATO and EU related decisions pushed the pro-Western parties to work together on these questions even though they may have great divergences in terms of domestic politics

In terms of methodology, this paper consists of a qualitative analysis of four key votes that relate to the question of NATO, Russia and EU sanctions that took place within the National Assembly from 2014 to 2022 while relying on Bulgarian official documents, parliamentary discussions as well as the media.

1. Domestic Role Contestation in Foreign Policy towards NATO and the EU

Since the end of the Cold War, there has been an increasing interest in the concepts of politicization and contestation in foreign policy. If these two concepts have been widely used in relation to the relationship between national foreign policy and EU foreign policy, they have, in contrast, remained absent when it comes to foreign policy decisions related to NATO. Certainly, NATO with its stricter intergovernmental structure does not reflect the same level of integrative ambition as the European Union. Therefore, NATO does not create the same set of tensions between widening competences and national identity⁴.

² Juliet Karboo, "A Foreign Policy Analysis Perspective on the Domestic Politics Turn in IR Theory", *International Studies Review* Vol 17, No 2 (June 2015): 189-205. //DOI:10.1111/misr.12213

³ Katja Biedenkopf, Katja, Oriol Costa & Magdalena Góra. "Introduction: shades of contestation and politicization of CFSP", *European Security*, Vol. 30 No 3 (25 August 2021): 325-343 // DOI: 10.1080/09662839.2021.1964473

⁴ Mariana Lovato, "The Internal Contestation of EU Foreign and Security Policy", *Joint Research Paper*, 1 (September 2021): 6 // https://www.jointproject.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/joint_rp_1.pdf

Nevertheless, it would perhaps be wrong to assume that national foreign policy decisions related to NATO, including military deployments, have not been free from political disagreements within the different member states.⁵ Even if the war in Ukraine led to a strengthening of public support towards NATO across Europe, it has also led to the resurfacing of the old oppositions to it both from parts of the extreme right and extreme left in countries such as France, Italy, and Spain.⁶

This article is interested in a specific type of contestation: domestic contestation of Bulgarian foreign policy related to both NATO and the EU during the period from 2014 to 2022. Unlike politicization, which can account for greater domestic scrutiny of policies and decisions made by each of the two international organizations, contestation goes beyond this by questioning established norms and practices and calling into question their very existence. In that respect, and as far as EU is concerned, contestation has been linked to the emerging literature on de-Europeanization of national foreign policy in relation to EU foreign policy.⁷

Domestic contestation of foreign policy is nothing new. Foreign policy analysis approaches have already emphasized the role of domestic actors to explain states' foreign policies. Putman's two-level approach, which became a three-level analysis in an EU context, included the role of domestic actors but fell short of capturing the dimensions related to the internal contestation of national or EU foreign policies. For this, one has to turn to the scholarship on role theory and on contestation and politicization of EU foreign policy.

Role theory approaches were first developed in the early 1970s by Holsti with the main objective of bridging the agent-structure debate in international relations. More precisely, such an approach proposes to unpack agents' domestic politics when contesting their state's role⁸. Such a contestation may take two different dimensions. The first, horizontal, refers to contestation of government policies by opposition parties or divisions between political parties within different ruling coalitions, or even within advisers or government agencies. The second, vertical dimension, refers to extending contestation to protest movements.⁹

The scholarship on contestation prefers to focus on types of internal contestation that may occur at different policy stages such as agenda setting, policy formation, policy adoption and policy implementation. Three main channels of contestation are identified: communicative discourse, coordinative discourse, and litigation. The first relates to communication between policy makers and the public. The second looks at

⁵ Stephanie C. Hofmann, "Party preferences and institutional transformation: revisiting France's relationship with NATO (and the common wisdom on Gaullism)", *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 40: 507–512. DOI: 10.1080/01402390.2016.1227258; Wolfgang, Wagner, *The Democratic Politics of Military Interventions: Political Parties, Contestation, and Decisions to Use Force Abroad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 1–13.

⁶ Euronews, "From anti-vax to pro-Putin, how conspiracy theorists are backing Russia's war in Ukraine (May 2022) // <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/05/13/from-anti-vax-to-pro-putin-how-conspiracy-theorists-are-backing-russia-s-war-in-ukraine>

⁷ Patrick Müller, Karolina. Pomorska & Ben Tonra, "The Domestic Challenge to EU Foreign Policymaking: From Europeanisation to de-Europeanisation?," *Journal of European Integration*, Vol. 43, No. 5, (2 July 2021), 521–522 // DOI: 10.1080/070 36337.2021.1927015

⁸ Ryan Beasley, Juliet Kaarbo & Kai Oppermann, "Role Theory, Foreign Policy, and the Social Construction of Sovereignty: Brexit Stage Right", *Global Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 1, No 1 (26 February 2021): 2–3 // DOI: 10.1093/isagsq/ksab001

⁹ Ryan Beasley & Juliet Kaarbo, "Explaining Extremity in the Foreign Policies of Parliamentary Democracies", *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 58, No 4 (December 2014): 729–732. // DOI <https://doi.org/10.1111/isqu.12164>

exchanges between decision makers and experts. The third includes the legal proceedings aimed at overturning policies¹⁰

Lastly, the scholarship also identifies a set of actors from whom contestation may originate. These range from political parties to NGOs and even to the media. There has been a renewed interest in research on how political parties influence foreign policy decisions.¹¹ In this respect, some scholars also highlighted the importance of the political systems in which parties operate, whether they are part of coalitions, or whether they are part of single party governments or in opposition¹²

The growing interest in the role of political parties also stemmed from the rise of populist and nationalist political parties across the European Union. In some member states such populist parties entered ruling coalitions. If their impact on government policies and foreign policy is assessed as marginal, such populist parties still lead more mainstream parties to adopt more radical positions. When populist parties have been able to lead national governments, they were, in some cases, able to impose structural changes in the administrative apparatus of their own foreign policy. The case of Poland is quite illustrative where the coming to power of the PiS [*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* or Law and Justice] led to some reforms in the Foreign Affairs Ministry.¹³

In general, populist parties are not interested in investing in foreign policy discussions even though they will focus on specific issues viewed as important from the point of view of their country's national interests. In relation to these issues, however, their contestation has remained much more rhetorical than actually affecting the substance of foreign policy decisions.¹⁴

Their impact should also be assessed through the prism of the political systems such as the one prevailing in Bulgaria during the period from 2014 to 2022. Such a system was characterized by political fragmentation and great voting volatility. The combination of these two elements led to the creation of unstable governments, dependent, in some cases, on the support of smaller fringe political parties either from the extreme right or from the left. As a result, and as a recent contribution showed, the Bulgarian governments constantly tried to mediate between the implications of the EU sanctions on their country's domestic politics and their commitments deriving from EU decisions such as in the case of EU sanctions on Russia.¹⁵

2. EU Foreign Policy and NATO-related Decisions within Bulgarian Domestic Politics Since 2014

Both the Ukrainian crisis in the aftermath of the annexation of Crimea in spring 2014 and the war following the Russian invasion on February 2022 can be considered a major test for Bulgarian foreign policy since the country joined the Euro-Atlantic political and security institutions.

¹⁰ Katja Biedenkopf, Oriol Costa & Magdalena Góra, *supra* note 12.

¹¹ Tapio Raunio & Wolfgang Wagner, "The Party Politics of Foreign and Security Policy", *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Vol.15 No 4 (26 September 2020), 517-520 //DOI: /10.1093/fpa/oraa018

¹² Ryan Beasley & Juliet Kaarbo, *supra* note 13, 732-734.

¹³ David Cadier & Christian Lequesne, "How Populism Impacts EU Foreign Policy", *Policy Papers*, 8 (November 2020): 6 // https://www.cidob.org/en/content/download/76901/2469687/version/2/file/EU-LISTCO%20POLICY%20PAPERS_08.pdf

¹⁴ Rosa Balfour et al. *Europe's Troublemakers: The Populist Challenge to Foreign Policy* (Brussels: European Policy Centre, 2026), 14.

¹⁵ Jean Crombois, "Bulgaria's Foreign Policy and EU Sanctions against Russia Europeanization, Politicization and Small Country Diplomacy", *Southeastern Europe*, Vol. 43, No 2 (23 August 2019): 184-185 // DOI: /10.1163/18763332-04302005

The eruption of the Ukrainian crisis of 2014 questioned the sense of security provided by membership in both the EU and NATO and fed into a new perception of vulnerability due to the country's geographical situation and its energy dependency on Russia. In a Non-Paper released in preparation for the NATO meeting in Wales in September 2014, Bulgarian security experts warned that "the Republic of Bulgaria is in one of the areas with the highest concentration of risks and threats within the Euro-Atlantic community".¹⁶ These risks and threats stem from the change in the balance of power in the Black Sea because of the conflict in Ukraine, combined with the negative effects of sanctions and the country's energy dependence on Russia. In other words, even if the conflict in Ukraine was not seen as posing a direct threat to Bulgaria's territorial integrity, it still had a disruptive impact with respect to its socio-economic security, most significantly the country's energy security.

There is no surprise, therefore, that in such a context foreign policy issues related to Russia, NATO and the EU have been increasingly debated in the Bulgarian Parliament since 2014. The following four votes that took place within the Bulgarian National Assembly reflect such situation.

First Vote: April 2015 on the Establishment of a NATO Communication Centre in Bulgaria

Bulgaria's membership of NATO in 2004 was anything but an easy road. From the onset, NATO membership divided public opinion and political parties between the liberal-democratic camp, for whom such membership would anchor the country in the Euro-Atlantic institutions, and the communists and post-Communist parties that were against NATO membership, advocating instead a non-alignment policy on the Alliance. The War in former Yugoslavia and the fear it generated of an escalation of the conflict to Bulgaria also contributed to shape negative attitudes towards NATO.¹⁷

However, this did not prevent the Bulgarian government, led by a right wing and pro-Western party, from opening its air space to NATO planes engaged in operations in Kosovo. Nor did it prevent Bulgaria actively taking part in a substantial number of NATO led operations, from Kosovo to Afghanistan. In any case, the national consensus in the country on NATO membership remained fragile and had to deal with openly anti-NATO political forces on the extreme right and in some parts of the Bulgarian Socialist party. The eruption of the war in Ukraine reignited these divisions.¹⁸

In this context, it is not surprising that in May 2015, when the Bulgarian National Assembly had to approve the establishment of a NATO Deployable Communications Module (DCM) in Bulgaria, what appeared first as a technical issue gave rise to lengthy discussions and divisions between and within the different political parties.

The establishment of the Communication centre had been decided in February 2015 by NATO defence ministers and was part of a project to create six such centres in Central and Eastern Europe, including in Bulgaria. These DCMs were part of the NATO Readiness Plan at the 2014 NATO summit with the objective of increasing NATO's

¹⁶ Non Paper, "National Program Bulgaria in NATO and in European Defence 2020", (2 September 2014): 3 // file:///C:/Users/user/Downloads/Bulgaria%20in%20NATO%20and%20in%20European%20Defence%202020.pdf

¹⁷ Alejandro Nieto, "A Drop in the Ocean: Bulgaria's NATO Membership and Black Sea Geopolitics", *European Security*, Vol. 17, No 4: 520-521 // DOI: 10.1080/09662830802569004

¹⁸ Velina Tchakarova, "Bulgaria's Accession to NATO. Ten Year on": 193-195, in: Arnold & Benjamin Zyla, eds., *Peacebuilding starts at home. NATO and its new members after Crimea* (Baden-Baden: NOMOS).

collective security in Central and Eastern Europe after the Russian annexation of Crimea and the start of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. Their main reason consisted of planning and organizing exercises and communication of command.¹⁹

In 2015, Bulgaria was under the second government headed by Boiko Borissov whose party, GERB²⁰, came first in the October 2014 elections. The lengthy process of coalition formation was due to the fact that the 2014 elections led to a highly fragmented Bulgarian National Assembly with a total of eight political parties securing seats.²¹ The ruling coalition was no less irregular and included the right-wing Reformist Party and a splinter party from the Bulgarian socialist party called Alternative for Bulgaria, and was supported from outside the coalition by the extreme right and nationalist Patriotic Front parties, while the extreme right party ATAKA remained in opposition.²²

The Head of State, Rosen Plevneliev, a former GERB minister had been elected in 2012 as Bulgarian President. President Plevneliev was considered a staunch supporter of Bulgaria's membership in both NATO and the EU, and in some cases his positions would diverge from those of Borissov, who kept a much more ambivalent position, especially towards Russia.²³

The NATO vote, meant to be purely technical, gave way to a three-day discussion in the National Assembly. The two most active party representatives in these discussions were the Bulgarian Socialist Party and ATAKA. While the first used the discussions to criticize US foreign policy, the second called into question Bulgarian membership of NATO. The most significant aspect of the discussion was the division between the two extreme right parties, the Patriotic Front and ATAKA. For the first, the establishment of the NATO DCM would enhance Bulgarian security in the face of different threats coming mostly from the Middle East, the Balkans and from the so-called Islamic State. According to head of the Patriotic Front and Defence Minister from 2017 to 2021, Krassimir Karakatchanov:

This module would not only improve the defense capabilities, experience and skills of the Bulgarian military. I did not say that this is being done only and solely

¹⁹ NATO, "Defense Ministers decide to bolster the NATO Response Force, reinforce collective defense", (24 June 2015) // https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_120993.htm

²⁰ To keep track of the names of the political parties in Bulgaria is not an easy case due to the volatility in their number and names. Here is a list of political parties: AbB (in Bulgarian: Алтернатива за българско възраждане or in English: Alternative for Bulgarian Revival) consists of a splinter group from the BSP led by the former Socialist President of Bulgaria, Georgi Parvanov (2002-2012); ATAKA is an extreme right nationalist party founded by Volen Siderov; BDC (in Bulgarian: Български Демократичен Център or in English: Bulgarian Democratic Center founded in 2007 and dissolved in 2016; BSP (Bulgarian Socialist Party); DB (in Bulgarian: Демократична България or in English: Democratic Bulgaria founded in 2018; DPS (in Bulgarian: Движение за права и свободи Dvizhenie za prava i svobodi or in English: Movement for Rights and Freedoms) also referred as the Turkish party; GERB (Граждани за европейско развитие на България or in English: Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria); ITN (in Bulgarian: Има такъв народ or in English: There is such a People, party founded in 2020 around a singer and TV anchor called Slavi Trifonov; Reformist Bloc (in Bulgarian: Реформаторски блок) is center-right political party founded in 2013 and dissolved in 2017); PP (in Bulgarian: Продължаваме промяната or in English: We Continue the Change), center-right pro-EU and pro NATO party founded in April 2022; Patriotic Front (in Bulgarian: Патриотичен фронт) was an alliance of two nationalist parties that was dissolved in 2017; United Patriots (in Bulgarian: Обединени Патриоти) that consisted of an alliance of three nationalist parties established in 2016 including the party ATAKA that left it in 2019 – the alliance was dissolved in 2021; Vuzrazhdane (in English: Revival), extreme-right pro-Russian party founded in 2014.

²¹ Corinne Deloy, *GERB, the main opposition party, comes out ahead in the Bulgarian general elections* (Foundatinon Robert Schuman) 5 October 2014 // <https://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/doc/oeo/oeo-1545-en.pdf>

²² Euractiv.com, "Bulgarian parties approve coalition agreement, cabinet, 7 November", (7 November 2014) // <https://www.euractiv.com/section/elections/news/bulgarian-parties-approve-coalition-agreement-cabinet/>

²³ Jean Crombois, "Bulgaria's Foreign Policy and EU Sanctions against Russia Europeanization, Politicization and Small Country Diplomacy", *Southeastern Europe*, Vol. 43, No 2 (23 August 2019): 168 // DOI: /10.1163/18763332-04302005

because of the problems in the Middle East. If you had listened to me well and carefully, you would have remembered what I said – that Bulgaria has problems related to a neighboring country that openly makes neo-Ottoman claims not only in relation to Bulgaria and the Balkans, but also in the Middle East itself.²⁴

For the other extreme right party, ATAKA, the situation created by the crisis in Ukraine should lead the country to leave NATO and resort to a policy of neutrality. According to Volen Siderov, Party Chairman:

Bulgaria should come out and say something sovereign, to say that at the moment we do not want these bases or the NATO command center. The situation is completely different from 2005. The situation has changed terribly. In 2005 NATO and Russia were in partnership, now NATO and Russia are enemies. We must choose. We don't want to choose. We at Ataka want neutrality. Neutrality - this is embedded in our program and I have been consistent since 2005.²⁵

At the end, the vote pitted the parties supporting the ruling coalition against the opposition parties with two important exceptions. The Movement for Rights and Freedoms, in opposition, voted in favor of it while the MPs from the ABB party²⁶, part of the ruling coalition, preferred not to show up for the vote.

Table 1. Vote on the Ratification of the Agreement between Bulgaria and SHAPE Base Support for Deployable Capability Module [9 April 2015]

	Favour	Against	Abstain	Absent
GERB	84	0	0	18
BSP	0	10	6	23
DPS	23	0	0	13
RB	14	0	0	9
PF	16	0	0	11
BDC	8	0	0	6
ATAKA	0	10	0	1
AfB	1	0	0	10
IND27	1	0	0	3
TOTAL	120	20	9	94

²⁴ Original quote in Bulgarian: "Този модул от 55 души войници и двама офицери български граждани би могъл само да подобри отбранителните възможности, опит и умения на българските военнослужещи. Не съм казал, че това се прави само и единствено заради проблемите в Близкия изток. Ако бяхте ме слушали добре и внимателно, щяхте да запомните какво казвам аз – че България има проблеми, свързани със съседна държава, която открито предявява неоосманисти претенции не само по отношение на България и Балканите, но и в самия Близък изток". Straja, "Stenograh paragraph 227 (8 April 2015) // <https://www.strazha.bg/sessions/2015-04-08/steno/227/>

²⁵ Original quote in Bulgarian: "Най-после България да излезе и да каже нещо суверенно, да каже, че в момента не искаме тези бази или команден център на НАТО. Ситуацията е съвсем различна от 2005 г. Ситуацията е страшно променена. През 2005 г. НАТО и Русия бяха в партньорство, сега НАТО и Русия са във враждебност. Ние трябва да избираме. Ние не искаме да избираме. Ние от „Атака“ искаме неутралитет. Неутралитет – това е заложено в нашата програма и аз съм последователен от 2005 г». Straja, Stenograh paragraph 235 (8 April 2015) // <https://www.strazha.bg/sessions/2015-04-08/steno/235>

²⁶ ABC or in Bulgarian АБВ: Алтернатива за българско възраждане (in English: Alternative for Bulgarian Revival or ABB) consist of a splinter group from the BSP led by the former Socialist President of Bulgaria, Georgi Parvanov (2002-2012).

²⁷ IND or Independent Members of Parliament, not affiliated to any political party

Second Vote: vote on a review of the EU sanctions [8 October 2015]

The issue of EU sanctions imposed upon Russia in the aftermath of the illegal annexation of Crimea and the eruption of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine quickly became a divisive issue in Bulgarian domestic politics. In March 2014, the main political parties were divided on how to react to the illegal annexation of Crimea by Russia. In Parliament, they failed to produce a common resolution. Only on March 24, following the meeting of the Consultative National Security Committee convened by President Plevneliev, did the main political party leaders agree, with the exception of the leader of the extreme right party ATAKA, on a resolution calling for the protection of the territorial integrity of Ukraine and the need for Bulgaria to act as a loyal member of both NATO and the EU²⁸.

Among the political parties, the Socialists were the most divided on the issue. Their leader, Sergey Stanishev, was defending a pro-EU position while an important pro-Russian faction led by the controversial Nikolay Malinov was openly supporting Russia. These pro-Russian views were also supported by AbB, a splinter group of the BSP, in favour of preserving the best possible relations with Russia. The main right-wing party GERB, after some initial hesitations, took a position in favour of the sanctions while the centre-right Reformist Bloc appeared most supportive of the EU decisions. If these centre-right parties were not part of the ruling coalition, they could count on the President of Bulgaria, Rosen Plevneliev, who came from GERB and who had showed very early on strong support for both EU and NATO positions on Russia. As for the extreme right party ATAKA, its pro-Russian inclinations meant that it was deeply opposed to the EU sanctions as well to NATO policies towards Russia.²⁹

In May 2014, a poll conducted by the national polling agency, Alpha Research, on attitudes towards the EU and Russia gave a better idea of the state of public opinion on the question. In this survey, 60% attributed the responsibility of the crisis to the West, 38% supported the annexation of Crimea while 35% approved the decision of not recognizing it and 24% expressed no opinion on the topic. On the future relations between Bulgaria and Russia, 40% expressed their support of EU membership and 22% for a hypothetical Bulgarian membership of the Eurasian Economic Community launched by Russia. The supporters of EU membership were in the substantial majority (65% and 60%) GERB and the Reformist Bloc (RB) voters while only 38% of ATAKA and 33% of BSP voters shared such a view.³⁰ One year later, the proportion of people showing positive attitudes towards Russia in Bulgaria remained over 60%, compared with a little less than 27% at the EU-wide level, with negative attitudes found mostly among young people between 18 and 30 years old living in the big cities.³¹

In October 2015, the Bulgarian Socialist Party, under the new leadership of Maxim Bitov, succeeded in tabling a motion calling for a review of EU sanctions on Russia, including the lifting of the travel ban imposed upon the members of the Duma to save the inter-parliamentary dialogue between the Bulgarian and the Russian National Assemblies. The discussion was mostly used by the Socialists to denounce the harmful impact

²⁸ Plamen Dimitrov & Aneta Mihaylova, "In Line with Brussels. Romanian and Bulgaria Position on the Ukrainian Crisis", *Europolity*, 11 No 1 (2017): 96–99 // http://europolity.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Europolity_vol.11_no.1_2017_art05_Plamen.pdf

²⁹ Marin Lessenki, "Bulgaria: increasingly assertive but not hawkish": 7–8; in Joerg Forbrig, ed., *A Region Disunited? Central European Responses to the Russian Ukraine Crisis* (Washington: The German Marshall Fund in the United States, 2015).

³⁰ Novinite, "40% of Bulgarians – For EU, 22% – For Eurasian Union" (14 May 2014) // <https://www.novinite.com/articles/160507/40+of+Bulgarians+-+For+EU%2C+22+-+For+Eurasian+Union>

³¹ ECFR Blog, "Public Opinion Poll: Bulgarian foreign policy, the Russia-Ukraine conflict and national security" (26 March 2015) // https://www.ecfr.eu/article/public_opinion_poll311520

of the sanctions on different sectors of the Bulgarian economy and their ineffectiveness in achieving their main goals. According to Maxim Bitov:

Inter-parliamentary contacts are becoming more difficult - contacts with representatives of the Russian parliament, with the parliaments of the European Union and, in particular, with the Bulgarian parliament. The traditionally good relations between the Bulgarian and the Russian people are being broken, because there are harsh comments and harsh sentiments in the public of the Russian Federation regarding the positions related to the sanctions. In the long run, this will have a very heavy impact on our cultural cooperation, on our economic cooperation and in general on our friendly relations.³²

The extreme right party ATAKA reminded the Assembly that it was a Socialist Prime Minister, albeit head of the caretaker government, that supported the EU sanctions and had refused to recognise the legality of the referendum in Crimea. According to Volin Siderov, the leader of ATAKA:

When you talk about sanctions, Mr. Mikov, you should turn to your colleague who is behind you - Christian Vigenin, who was your Minister of Foreign Affairs, who went and legitimized the fascist junta in Ukraine, who rejected our request to recognize the referendum in Crimea. You rejected this demand of ours the entire time you were in power. All the time you were in power, you recognized the fascist junta that came to power in Ukraine with a bloody coup. What are you hypocrites for now? To whom do you present your alleged requests for non-expansion of sanctions?³³

The outcome of the vote was a victory against the lifting of EU sanctions but by a small margin [52 votes against; 47 in favour and 31 abstentions]. Such a narrow victory must be mitigated by the fact that many MPs decided not to show up for the vote. That being said, and unlike the vote on NATO, it did not pit the coalition parties against the opposition. The Prime Minister's party vote overwhelmingly against the motion even if 17 of its members abstained. Only one member of the Patriotic Front, that supported the ruling coalition from outside, voted in favour of the motion while the rest preferred not to take part in the vote. Only one member of the small left party of AbB votes in favour while the rest either abstained [7] or did not take part in the vote [3]. The internal divisions between the Socialist party were reflected by the fact that while 26 of its MPs votes in favour of the motion, other 26 of its members did not take part in the vote. Finally, only the extreme right of ATAKA voted massively in favour of the motion.

³² Original quote in Bulgarian: "Затрудняват се междупарламентарните контакти – контактите с представители на парламента на Русия, с парламенти на Европейския съюз и в частност с българския парламент. Разбиват се традиционно добри отношения между българския и руския народ, защото в обществеността на Руската федерация има тежки коментари и тежки настроения по повод позициите, свързани със санкциите. Това в перспектива ще даде много тежки поражения върху нашето културно сътрудничество, върху нашето икономическо сътрудничество и въобще върху приятелските ни отношения". Straja, Stenograph 07 October 2015, <https://www.strazha.bg/sessions/2015-10-07/steno/17/>

³³ Original quote in Bulgarian: "Когато говорите за санкции, господин Миков, трябва да се обърнете към Вашия колега, който стои зад Вас – Кристиан Вигенин, който беше Ваш министър на външните работи, който отиде и узакони фашистката хунта в Украйна, който отхвърли нашето искане да признаем референдума в Крим. Вие отхвърляхте това наше искане през цялото време, докато управлявахте. Вие през цялото време, докато управлявахте, признавахте фашистката хунта, дошла с кървав преврат на власт в Украйна. За какво сега лицемерите? Пред кого представяте тези Ваши уж искания за неразширяване на санкциите?". Straja, Stenograph, 7 October 2015, <https://www.strazha.bg/sessions/2015-10-07/steno/35s://www.strazha.bg/sessions/2015-10-07/steno/17/>

Table 2. Vote on proposal to review EU sanctions against Russia [7 October 2015]

	Favour	Against	Abstain	Absent
GERB	0	40	17	00
BSP	26	0	0	26
DPS	0	3	0	33
RF	0	8	3	12
PF	1	0	1	16
BDC	0	1	5	8
ATAKA	10	0	0	1
AbB	1	0	7	3
IND	2	0	0	4
Total	38	52	31	107

Third Vote: vote on a declaration condemning Russian invasion [24 February 2022]

The third vote on a declaration condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine took place in a different political context than the two previous ones. Following the legislative election of 26 March 2017, Boiko Borissov had formed a third government comprising GERB and a coalition of nationalist and extreme right parties regrouped into the United Front with the initial support of a new Party called Volya. At the end of its four-year mandate, new elections were held on 4 April 2021. At these elections, the party of the former Prime minister lost 20 seats while a new populist party, *There is Such a People* (ITN) established by well-known TV entertainer Slavi Trifonov, came second. Facing the impossibility of forming a government, Boiko Borissov resigned and new elections were called for July 2021. These elections confirmed the breakthrough of Trifonov's party that came first but a coalition still proved impossible to achieve, and new elections were held on 14 November. These elections led to the victory of another new party called *We Continue the Change* (PP) founded around two former ministers in one of the caretaker governments, Asen Vassiliev and Kiril Petkov. The new party came first at the elections on a strong pro-EU, pro-NATO and anti-corruption platform. It managed to form a coalition with the third-placed ITN party, along with the center-right coalition of Democratic Bulgaria and the Bulgarian Socialist party. This coalition, slightly unusual given the inclusion of the Socialist party, proved to be the only possible option, considering that none of the parties were willing to govern either with GERB or with the DPS.³⁴

On 24 February 2022, the Bulgarian parliament had to vote on a declaration denouncing the Russian aggression against Ukraine and backing both NATO and EU decisions, including sanctions against Russia. The Bulgarian Socialist party had objections to the question of EU sanctions and proposed that the text be voted on separately for each article. Parliament voted overwhelmingly in favor of this suggestion from the Socialists. The two opposition parties, GERB and MRF, supported the article related to the sanctions while most of the Bulgarian Socialists abstained, and the extreme right voted against. During the discussions, Kostadin Kostadinov, the leader of the extreme right Party, *Vuzrazhdane*, reiterated his party's opposition to the EU sanctions and denounced the fact that Bulgaria had lost its independence when it came to foreign policy. According to him:

³⁴ Reuters, "Bulgaria's centrist PP party seals deal for coalition government" (10 December 2021) // <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/bulgarias-centrist-pp-party-seals-deal-coalition-government-2021-12-10/>

Our opinion is that there should be no sanctions. Our opinion is that in this conflict Bulgaria will suffer damages, which will be serious economic damages, for which at the moment we do not see anyone concerned about who will pay them [...] We are not here in a contest to declare our loyal vassalage. Bulgaria is an independent country. This independent country must make its own decisions. If it is in our national interest to impose sanctions, we will impose them.³⁵

The remainder of the motion was voted for by the governing coalition along with the two main opposition parties of GERB and MRF, while the extreme right party Vuzrazhdane opposed it.

Table 3. Declaration in connection with the aggressive military actions of the Russian Federation against Ukraine –Second Vote [24 February 2022]

	Favour	Against	Abstain	Absent
PP	65	0	2	0
GERB	54	0	0	5
DPS	34	0	0	1
BSP	0	1	19	6
ITN	23	0	0	2
DB	16	0	0	1
Vuzrazhdane	0	13	0	0
Total	192	14	21	15

The vote also took place in a tense political context due to criticism of Bulgarian commitments to NATO expressed by the Defense Minister, Stefan Yanev. A hold-over from the previous interim government and without political affiliation, Yanev refused in a posting on his Facebook page to call the situation in Ukraine a 'war', preferring to use the Russian terminology of a "special military operation." A couple of days later, Yanev indirectly denounced the policies and decisions made by both NATO and the EU, stating that these were orchestrated by the big powers and would harm Bulgaria's national interests. These comments led the Bulgarian Prime Minister Kiril Petkov to sack Yanev on March 1st and to replace him with Dragomir Zakov, former Bulgarian permanent representative to NATO.³⁶

In this vote both the opposition parties, GERB and DPS, supported the motion alongside PP, DB and ITN, which belonged to the ruling coalition. The Socialists, also part of the ruling coalition, chose to abstain while the new extreme right party of Vuzrazhdane voted against it.

³⁵ Original quote in Bulgarian: "Нашето становище е, че санкции не бива да има. Нашето становище е, че в този конфликт България ще понесе щети, които ще са сериозни икономически щети, за които към настоящия момент не виждаме някой да се е загрижил за това кой ще ги плаща. Те ще бъдат щети, които ще бъдат както за държавата, така и за гражданите [...] Ние не сме тук на състезание да декларираме верноподанически си васалитет. България е независима държава. Тази независима държава трябва да си взема решенията сама. Ако в нашия национален интерес е да наложим санкции, ще ги наложим. Искам някой да излезе тук и да ми обясни: каква точно е ползата на България от налагането на санкции, в резултат на което ще загубим ние". Straja, "Stenograph 254" (24 February 2022)// <https://www.strazha.bg/sessions/2022-02-24/steno/254>

³⁶ BalkanInsight, "Bulgaria Replaces Ousted Defence Minister with NATO Envoy" (1 March 2022), // <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/03/01/bulgaria-replaces-ousted-defence-minister-with-nato-envoy/>

Fourth Vote: Vote for military assistance to Ukraine [4 May 2022]

The vote on the question of possible military assistance by Bulgaria to Ukraine took place in the context of worsening relations between Bulgaria and Russia. On 27 April 2022 the Russians, via Gazprom, decided unilaterally to stop supplying the country with gas following the Bulgarian government's refusal to abide by the Russian demand to pay for its supplies in rubles. On the same day, Bulgarian Prime Minister Kiril Petkov met with Ukrainian President Zelensky in Kyiv, unambiguously demonstrating full support for Ukraine.³⁷

On May 4, the Bulgarian parliament discussed and voted on two different motions. The first one was proposed by the main opposition party GERB and the coalition party of DB and was aimed at providing Ukraine with immediate military support. This motion failed to gather support due to the abstention of most of the MPs of the main governmental party PP and the strong opposition of the BSP.

The second proposal was proposed by the main ruling party We Continue the Change (PP) and was based on a letter sent the evening before by Ukrainian President Zelensky listing six requests that did not include direct military aid to his country. Instead of direct military assistance, the proposal included provisions for repairing Ukrainian military equipment in Bulgaria which was more acceptable for the BSP. The proposal passed by 200 votes in favor, 16 against and one abstention. The greatest number of negative votes came from the extreme right party *Vuzrazhdane* that repeated its opposition to both EU sanctions and NATO's stance on the conflict, including the denouncing of the strengthened NATO military presence in Bulgaria. According its leader Kostadin Konstadinov:

In practice, our country is currently occupied, it is occupied by foreign troops, which are increasing every day, and soon, perhaps within the next month, the number of foreign troops present in Bulgaria will equal the number of Bulgarian troops, which, for to still have a balance, it is decreasing, driven by an active anti-Bulgarian policy in the last 30 years, especially since we joined NATO.³⁸

Table 4. Motion to take measures in connection with the war in Ukraine [4 May 2022]

	Favour	Against	Abstain	Absent
PP	60	1	0	6
GERB	48	0	0	11
DPS	32	0	0	2
BSP	22	1	0	3
ITN	22	1	1	1
DB	16	0	0	0
Vuzrazhdane	0	13	0	0
Total	200	16	1	23

³⁷ BalkanInsight, "Bulgaria to Repair Ukraine's Military Equipment, Despite Internal Tensions" (4 May 2022), // <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/05/04/bulgaria-to-repair-ukraines-military-equipment-despite-internal-tensions/>

³⁸ Original quote in Bulgarian: "На практика нашата държава в момента е окупирана, окупирана е от чужди войски, които нарастват всеки ден и скоро, може би в рамките на следващия месец, броят на присъстващите в България чужди войски ще се изравни с броя на българските войски, който пък, за да има все пак баланс, намалява, воден от активна антибългарска политика през последните 30 години, особено откакто влязохме в НАТО ". Strajza, "Stenograph paragraph 53" (4 May 2022) // <https://www.strazha.bg/sessions/2022-05-04/steno/53>

3. Politicization or/and Contestation? Party Politics and Bulgarian Foreign Policy towards the EU and NATO

The analysis of the four votes discussed above will be made in light of the three questions mentioned in the introduction. First, to what extent were Bulgarian foreign policy decisions related to NATO and the EU increasingly contested and politicized in domestic politics? Secondly, what is the impact of domestic political dynamics in terms of fragmentation, coalition building and role of smaller fringe extreme right political parties on the growing politicization and contestation of Bulgarian foreign policy towards NATO and the EU? Third, to what extent might such politicization and contestation question Bulgaria's commitments to both NATO and the EU?

The four votes analyzed in this article show the extent to which both NATO and EU related decisions towards Russia were subject to some degree of politicization among Bulgarian domestic politics. When looking at the arguments of the different parties involved in the discussions, some lines appear in the sand. First, proponents of the different motions supportive of both NATO and the EU are keen to underline the sense of identity of Bulgarian foreign policy deeply anchored in the Euro-Atlantic structures. Conversely opponents to such Euro-Atlantic identity of Bulgarian foreign policy such as some part of the extreme right and, to some extent, the Socialists prefer to insist on the need to preserve Bulgarian national sovereignty, if not some kind of autonomy from the same Euro-Atlantic security system. Such arguments may fit into the definition of contestation of both NATO and EU related decisions by openly challenging the implications of Bulgarian membership of these institutions. Such contestation is, however, limited to the extreme right parties and the Socialists, and even the extreme right was divided, especially when it came to the voting on NATO, between pro-NATO and anti-NATO camp.

The four votes reflected the impact of some specific domestic politics dynamics when it comes to coalition building and voting behavior of the political parties belonging to the ruling coalitions and to the opposition. First, during the period under analysis, the Bulgarian political systems faced a period of instability caused by its growing fragmentation. This led the main party, GERB, to lead fragile coalitions that has to rely on small fringe parties to maintain its majority in the national assembly. That being said, the impact of that political instability was mitigated by two factors. The first one was that the extreme right parties were themselves divided in a pro-Western and pro-Russian camp. For example, in the two first votes, the extreme right, with the exception of ATAKA voted either alongside the pro-Western parties in the case of the vote on the NATO DCM or preferred not show up to vote in the cases of the vote on the lifting of the EU sanctions. In the period after 2021, the Bulgarian extreme right, re-organized under the new *Vuzdrazhdane* party, would consistently vote against the pro-Western parties. The second factor was that in the voting of these motions, Bulgarian political parties did not vote according to the logic of opposition against ruling majorities on these questions. On each of them, the ruling coalition was able to rely on the support of the main opposition parties to compensate for the defection of some of their coalition partners such as the Socialists when in government between 2021 and 2022. This was revealed in the third vote, while in the fourth vote the Socialists voted alongside their coalition partners. On the whole, the pro-Western part in government [PP] was able in the two votes taking place in 2021 and 2022 to rely on alternative majorities provided

by the other pro-Western parties, namely GERB and DPS even though these two were in opposition.

Finally, the impact of such politicization and contestation on Bulgarian foreign policy towards NATO and the EU needs to be assessed. At face value, the impact was very limited as it did not lead to any significant change in Bulgarian foreign policy towards NATO and the EU. The fact that Bulgarian political parties did not vote according to the logic of opposition against ruling majorities on these questions suggests a strong consensus at the level of the national political elites on the Euro-Atlantic identity of Bulgaria's foreign policy.

CONCLUSION

Both Bulgarian foreign policy decisions related to NATO and the EU have been increasingly politicized since 2014. NATO related decisions should be included in the discussion on the politicization and contestation of national foreign policy. In addition, both NATO related decisions and EU decisions have been, to some degree, contested in Bulgarian domestic politics, especially by the extreme right fringe parties, and to some extent by the Bulgarian socialist party.

The impact of both politicization and contestation on Bulgarian foreign policy seems, however, very limited. They do not appear to question the Euro-Atlantic identity of Bulgarian foreign policy. If anything, the contestation of NATO and EU related decisions pushed the pro-Western parties to work together on these questions even though they may have great divergences in terms of domestic politics. In the recent elections of April 2023, the making of a grand coalition between them, e.g. GERB and the new formed alliance between PP and DB, seems to confirm that trend towards a consolidation of the pro-Western camp in Bulgarian domestic politics.

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