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RUSSIAN OCTOPUS IN THE BLACK SEA REGION

identifying vulnerable areas - strengthening resilience

*Case of **BULGARIA***





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Russian Octopus in the Black Sea Region: Identifying Vulnerable Areas and Strengthening Resilience. Case of Bulgaria¹

A significant part of Bulgarian elites and society has prerequisites for expressing loyalty to Russia. They consist of decades of political, economic, historical and personal ties between countries and nations. In this context, unlike many other states of the wider Black Sea region, Bulgaria is in a particularly vulnerable position with regard to influence from Moscow. Probably amid the aggression against Ukraine and the desire to rearrange the world order, the Kremlin counted on some Bulgarian actors to promote its interests in the Black Sea and the Balkans, as well as to undermine the unity of the EU and NATO. These Russian plans were not implemented after February 24, 2022, due to the positions of various executives and institutions in Sofia. However, Bulgaria still has many vulnerabilities that the Kremlin can use to strengthen its influence on the country.

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VULNERABILITY IN HARD SECURITY



Despite being the part of the NATO security system, the Bulgarian Armed Forces remain old-fashioned and rely on the Soviet era weapons.

In 2021, Bulgaria was ranked #15 in Europe by the number of active military personnel, with 36 950 personnel (the total population of Bulgaria is 6.52 million). The country was #8 among the Black Sea Economic Cooperation states with this amount.

The Army of the Bulgarian Armed Forces consisted of one reconnaissance battalion, two mechanised brigades, one mountain infantry regiment, one artillery regiment, one engineer regiment, one chemical protection battalion, and one logistics regiment. Also, there are one special operations brigade, several units of the Navy and the Air Forces. At the same time, Bulgaria had quite a low reserve for the armed forces – estimated at only 3000 people (0.000046% of the total population). For comparison, the reserves of the Turkish Armed Forces comprised approximately 378 700 personnel (0.0044% of the total population) and the Romanian Armed Forces – 53 000 citizens (0.0027% of the total population).

In the 2020s, the Bulgarian Armed Forces reached their current capacity after the [permanent reduction](#) of the late 1990s. Total [expenditures](#) of the Bulgarian state for military purposes have reached their highest point in 2019 since the establishment of the democratic government in 1990. In 2021, it amounted to USD 1.154 billion, which was more than 120% of the average targeted budget spending in 2010 – 2020. In the same year, the defence expenditures of Bulgaria comprised 1.59% of the country's GDP, which ranked it 23rd in Europe and 8th in the Black Sea region. For comparison, the same indicator for Romania reached 1.95% and for Türkiye – 2.06%.

The armoured fighting vehicles produced or designed back in the Soviet era still remain the technical basis of the Bulgarian Armed Forces. However, it is worth noting that some of them are modernised. For example, the only available main battle tanks for the Bulgarian Army are 90 T-72M1/M2+, infantry fighting vehicles – 90

BMP-1 and 70 BMP-23, armoured personnel carriers – 100 MT-LB and 20 BTR-60, armoured recovery vehicles – T-54/T-55, MTP-1, MT-LB, artillery – 48 self-propelled howitzers 2S1, 24 towed gun-howitzers D-20, surface-to-surface missiles launchers – 24 multiple launch rocket systems BM-21, an unknown number of short-range ballistic missile launchers Tochka, air defence systems – 24 9K33 Osa, 12 S-200, an unknown number of S-300P and an unknown number of S-125 Pechora anti-aircraft launch rocket systems, etc. However, some Western heavy machines are operated by the Army, such as 17 M1117 ASV and 27 Plasan SandCat armoured utility vehicles.

A quite similar situation is with the Bulgarian military aircraft, where the Soviet jets and planes comprise the majority. There are 15 MiG-29/MiG-29UB fighters and an unknown number of MiG-21, three Su-25K/Su-25BK strikers, one An-30 intelligence plane, three C-27J Spartan (Western), two L-410UVP-E (Western), one PC-12M (Western) and one An-2T transport planes, six Mi-24D attack helicopters, five Mi-17 and 12 AS532AL Cougar (Western) transport helicopters, not mentioning light and training models.

The composition of the Bulgarian Navy is mixed, including the warships produced in the Soviet Union and the NATO countries. It consists of three ex-Belgian Wielingen-class frigates, four ex-Soviet corvettes of Tarantul, Pauk and Koni-classes, as well as light patrol, auxiliary, and technical fleet.

Bulgarian Armed Forces (2021)

Type of equipment	Subtype of equipment	Equipment model / class	Number	Origin of the model
Armoured fighting vehicles	Main battle tanks	T-72M1/M2	90	Soviet
		BMP-1	90	Soviet
	Infantry fighting vehicles	BMP-23	70	Soviet / Bulgaria *
		MT-LB	100	Soviet
	Armoured personnel carriers	BTR-60	20	Soviet
		M1117 ASV	17	Western
	Armoured utility vehicles	Plasan SandCat	27	Israel
	Armoured engineering vehicles	MT-LB	-	Soviet
		T-54/T-55	Unknown	Soviet
		-1 MTP	Unknown	Soviet
Armoured recovery vehicles	MT-LB	-	Soviet	
	BLG67	Unknown	Soviet / Poland	
Engineering and Maintenance vehicles	Vehicle launched bridge	TMM	Unknown	Soviet
Self-propelled howitzers	2S1 Gvozdika	48	Soviet	
	Towed gun-howitzers	D-20	24	Soviet

	Multiple launch rocket system	BM-21 Grad	24	Soviet
Artillery	Mortars	Tundzha / Tundzha Sani	80	Bulgaria
Surface-to-surface missiles launchers	Short-range ballistic missiles	Tochka	Unknown	Soviet
		9K33 Osa	24	Soviet
		S-125 Pechora	Unknown	Soviet
		2K12 Kub	Unknown	Soviet
		S-200	12	Soviet
Air defence systems	Surface-to-air missile	S-300P	Unknown	Soviet
		MiG-29	15	Soviet
	Fighters	MiG-21	Unknown	Soviet
	Strikers	Su-25	3	Soviet
	Intelligence planes	An-30	1	Soviet
		C-27J Spartan	3	Western
		An-2T	1	Soviet
		L-410UVP-E	2	Western
Aircraft	Transport planes	PC-12M	1	Western
	Attack helicopters	Mi-24	6	Soviet
	Multi-role helicopters	Mi-17	5	Soviet
		AS532AL Cougar	12	Western
Helicopters	Transport helicopters	Bell 206 Jet Ranger	6	Western
Principle surface combatants	Frigates	Drazki class (ex- Wielingen class)	3	Western
		Smeli class (ex- Koni class)	1	Soviet
		Molnya class (ex- Tarantul II class)	1	Soviet
Patrol and coastal combatants	Corvettes	Reshitelni class (ex-Pauk I class)	2	Soviet
	Mine hunter coastal	Tsibar class (ex- Flower class)	1	Western
Mine countermeasures	Mine sweeper coastal	Briz class (ex- Sonya class)	3	Soviet
	Mine sweeper inshore	Olya class	3	Soviet
Amphibious	Landing craft medium	Vydra	1	Soviet / Bulgaria

Data: Military Balance 2021 * An equipment or its basic version was originally designed in the Soviet Union but lately was significantly re-designed in another country

After the accession to NATO in 2004 and the EU in 2007, Bulgarian governments (despite political affiliation) introduced several strategic documents to re-organise the national armed forces to meet the standards of the respective organisations. But the first of them – Plan for the development of the Bulgarian Armed Forces 2009 and the 10-year Bulgarian Security Strategy 2011 – were primarily targeted at the general structure of the defence system, optimisation of the expenditures, and ensuring civilian monitoring and control of the sphere. Although the purchase of new weapons and technologies is part of the process of modernising the armed forces, Bulgaria did not purchase new military equipment like battle tanks, armoured vehicles, jets etc., from the fall of communism until 2014. During that period, the only heavy import was the procurement of 3 Wielingen-class frigates that Belgium had previously decommissioned.

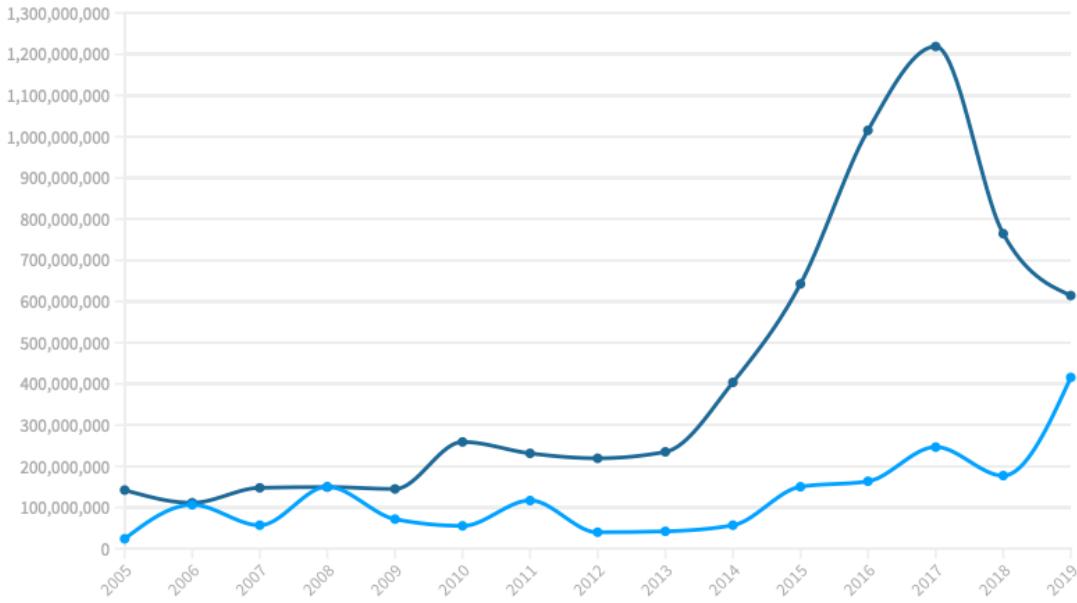
From the socialist times, Bulgaria inherited [vast industry potential](#) to produce small arms, manual anti-aircraft and anti-tank weapons, armoured and tactical vehicles, specialised vessels, light and heavy artillery (mostly 2S1), machines, devices, and software for surveillance and cybersecurity, and munitions. The country is also able to repair and modernise old military equipment – battle tanks, armoured and engineer vehicles, aircraft and vessels – using the capabilities of its defence industry. Generally, Bulgaria is a large exporter of limited categories of goods for armies of other countries. At the same time, the state ought to rely on the imports of military equipment in order to keep its defence capability on a proper level.

In 2019, the total [of Bulgaria's export](#) of military goods reached EUR 614.4 million. For comparison, the average annual level of these indicators in EUR 2015 – 2019 was 851.1 million, in 2010 – 2014 – EUR 269.7 million, and in 2005 – 2009 – EUR 139.2 million. Also, in 2019, Bulgaria exported weapons and military equipment worth EUR 415.7 million. The country's average annual amount of such trading in 2015 – 2019 is assessed at EUR 230.7 million, in 2010 – 2014 – EUR 62.3 million, in 2005 – 2009 – EUR 81.9 million. The top destinations for Bulgarian defence export were Afghanistan, Poland, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States of America. The main groups of goods that the country has been selling abroad were bombs, torpedoes, rockets, bullets, munitions, other explosive devices, and smoothbore weapons of calibre less, equal to or bigger than 20 mm.

At the same time, the biggest importers of weapons and other military equipment to the country were the companies from Belarus, Romania, Russia, Serbia, and Slovakia. The most popular categories of imported defence goods were ordnance supplies, explosive devices, bombs, torpedoes, rockets, aircraft, aerial vehicles (including unmanned), aircraft engines, and equipment.

Bulgaria's External Arms Trading

■ Total exports amount, EUR ■ Total imports amount, EUR



Source: Interministerial Commission for Export Control and Non-Profleration of Weapons of Mass Destruction of the Republic of Bulgaria

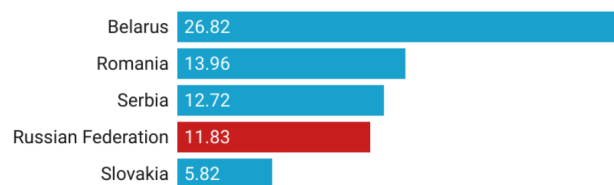
Correspondingly, in 2019, dual-purpose goods worth more than EUR 13.6 million were exported from Bulgaria. The top destinations were Algeria, Armenia, Czechia, Russia, and Ukraine. The main deliveries were processing materials, nuclear materials and equipment, electronics, computers, space vehicles and propulsion systems. In the same year, dual-purpose imports reached EUR 113 million. Almost all of them – 99.4% – came from Russia and mainly were represented by nuclear materials and equipment, special materials, space vehicles and propulsion systems.

Arms exports from Bulgaria, top 5 countries, 2019



Source: Interministerial Commission for Export Control and Non-Profleration of Weapons of Mass Destruction of the Republic of Bulgaria · Created with Datawrapper

Arms imports to Bulgaria, top 5 countries, 2019 *



Created with Datawrapper

In 2015, amid the need to meet NATO standards and the obsolescence of existing appliances, the Bulgarian government, for the first time in 25 years, decided to purchase new fully-prepared military equipment. It booked ten armoured utility vehicles M1117 ASV of the Textron Marine & Land Systems Company (USA) for USD

15.22 million. Since 2018, the Bulgarian government has started to spend more resources on developing defence capabilities, with a significant peak in 2019.

Bulgaria had not reached any agreements with the Russian government or companies to supply the used or new fully-prepared military equipment. But due to the composition of the arsenal of the Bulgarian Armed Forces, Sofia may need to cooperate with Russia to maintain and modernise its own equipment, especially aircraft.

Also, the amendments to the [National Security Strategy](#) (till 2020) were adopted in 2018, and the new [Armed Forces Development Plan](#) (till 2032) was approved in 2020 by the responsible institutions. Those documents stated the necessity to improve Bulgaria's military capabilities. Due to them, in 2019-2020, the Bulgarian government signed several contracts, including a contract with the Netherlands government for supplying two ocean-going minehunters, Alkmaar, for the amount of USD 1.99 million, with the Lockheed Martin company (USA) for purchasing eight fighters F-16V for USD 1.26 billion and with the Lürssen Werft company (Germany) for getting two Modular Multi-role Patrol Boats (Corvettes) for USD 0.58 million.

So, the procurement of eight fighters F-16V was presented by the Bulgarian [government members](#) as a [step](#) toward decreasing the dependence on Russian suppliers. The outdated MiG-29 fighters are planned to be in service until the end of 2023. The first deliveries of Lockheed Martin's planes are expected in 2025, which could [leave](#) Bulgaria without essential part of air defence for two years. In October 2022, the Bulgarian executives [approved](#) the procurement of the second batch of F-16 fighters from the US: four F-16C and four F-16D.

As a member of NATO and the EU, Bulgaria participates in the training and peace missions of these organisations. The Bulgarian Armed Forces personnel is deployed in Bosnia and Herzegovina within the EUFOR mission (Operation Althea; the EU's initiative), in Mali, within the EUTM mission (the EU's initiative), and in Kosovo, within the KFOR mission (the NATO's initiative). Also, the country has participated in NATO's Operation Resolute Support in Afghanistan till 2021. The Bulgarian units regularly participate in NATO training in the Black Sea and Aegean regions.

At the same time, since Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014, attention to the Alliance activities and its presence in South-Eastern Europe, including Bulgaria, has increased. In 2014, at the NATO summit in Newport, the member states adopted the Readiness Action Plan, a part of which was the decision to form six NATO Force Integration Units on its eastern flank – in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania,

Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria. Their task was the support of collective defence planning. At the Warsaw NATO summit in 2016, the Allies [decided](#) to establish NATO's forward presence in the northeastern and southeastern countries of the Alliance. Under the NATO Readiness Action Plan, the US Air Forces in 2016 and the Italian Air Forces in 2017 patrolled the Bulgarian airspace for two weeks and four months, respectively. Taking into account the full-fledged invasion of Russia in Ukraine, in 2022 the Alliance [re-enforced](#) its presence in the Eastern flank, deploying additional battlegroups in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia. Thus, along with the Bulgarian forces, the US and Albanian troops of 1650 personnel currently [serve](#) in Bulgaria. Moreover, NATO's Air Policing Mission protect the Bulgarian sky.

Sofia participates in regional and bilateral defence initiatives. First of all, the country is a side of the Bucharest Nine – the format of the NATO Eastern countries' cooperation for a common response to the threats. Secondly, in 2016, the joint Bulgarian-Romanian brigade was established under the leading role of NATO. However, Sofia [did not express support](#) for the idea of the Ukrainian government to create a joint Bulgarian-Romanian-Ukrainian brigade and rejected the suggestion of Bucharest to establish a Bulgarian-Romanian-Turkish fleet group. Finally, within NATO, in 2014, Bulgaria and Greece reached the agreement that the Greek Air Forces would partially take care of the Bulgarian airspace. But the initiative was not implemented due to the lack of resources in Sofia. Also, in 2020, Bulgaria signed a 10-year Defence Cooperation Roadmap with the USA, by which Washington guaranteed Sofia assistance in force development, including meeting NATO capability targets.

Due to the limited amount of personnel and reserves for its empowerment, and the lack of aircraft and logistic equipment, Bulgaria relies on the support of the Allies.

But the current Bulgarian [Armed Forces Development Program](#) declares the necessity of recruiting a wider number of personnel and keeping specialists in the armed forces, as well as the importance of equipment modernization for the land, air, and navy forces. At the same time, it aims to develop Bulgaria's capabilities to cope with the hybrid threats and enforce its cyber-defence system. This document, among others, sees Russia as a challenge to stability, security, and Euro-Atlantic values in the Western Balkans and the Black Sea region. Particularly, it states that Moscow will try to delay Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkan countries, using hybrid instruments of influence, and will maintain the changes in the military-strategic balance in the Black Sea in its favour. Also, the Plan's authors expect Russia and China to try to ensure a permanent presence in the region.

It is worth noting that since 2014 Bulgaria has faced at least eight explosions at munitions warehouses with undetermined causes – four in 2014, two in 2015, one in 2020 and one in 2022. Later, Russian agents [became suspected](#) of organising two of them.

Some of those facilities are owned by the Bulgarian arms trader Emilian Gebrev, who survived a bout of [poisoning](#) in 2015. He suspects Russian agents to be connected to the explosions, particularly that one in [2022](#). Also, in 2016, Sofia [accused](#) Moscow of violating its airspace with military aircraft.

VULNERABILITY IN POTENTIAL INFLUENCE ON POLITICAL ELITES



Analysing different political actors in Bulgaria regarding possible Russia's influence or narratives promotion, it is worth starting with President Rumen Radev. A retired major general and former commander of the Bulgarian Air Force, he became head of state in 2017 as a nominee of the Bulgarian Socialist Party and the Alternative for the Bulgarian Revival party. If his predecessor Rosen Plevneliev unequivocally [supported](#) Ukraine's territorial integrity and efforts to defend against Russian aggression, emphasized the need to strengthen NATO's role in the security of the Black Sea region, Rumen Radev took a more ambiguous position towards Moscow. Just after being elected to the presidential post in 2016, he [said](#) that de jure Crimea is part of Ukraine, but de facto, it is under the flag of Russia. Moreover, during the election campaign in 2021, Rumen Radev [expressed](#) a similar opinion, saying that today Crimea is Russian, implying that the Kremlin controlled the peninsula. At the same time, President Radev is one of [the initiators and consistent supporters](#) of replacing the Soviet MiG-29 fighters in the Bulgarian Air Force with modern Western military aircraft. He is also in favour of strengthening the Bulgarian navy so that the country would be able to defend its military sovereignty and protect its economic and energy interests.

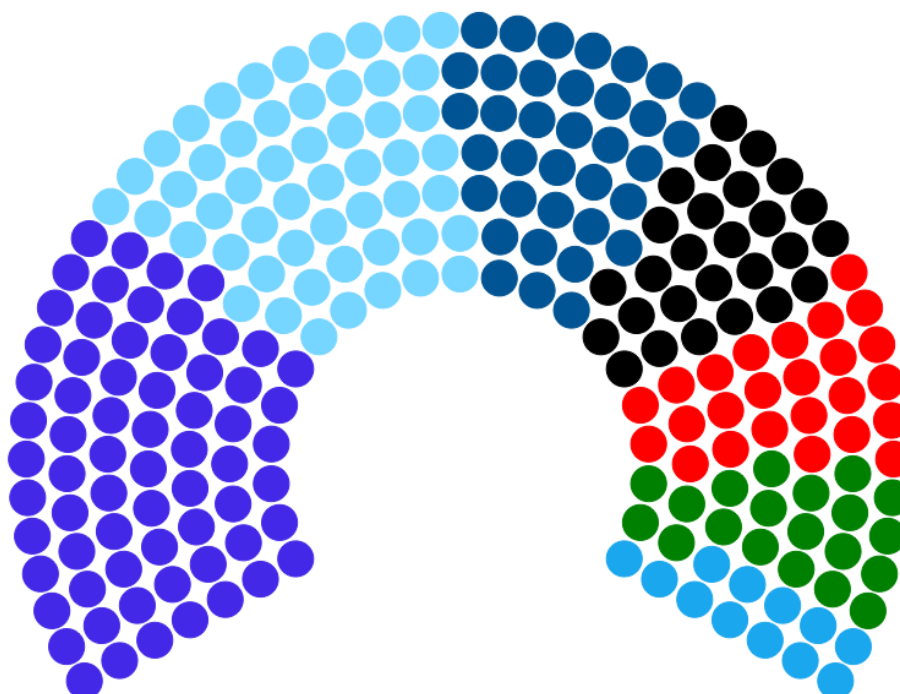
Still, even after the start of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, Rumen Radev continued his two-fold, ambiguous politics.

On the one hand, he [guaranteed](#) humanitarian aid and treatment of wounded Ukrainian soldiers. He also said that "Russia can win the war, but it will not achieve peace; you cannot win with [aggression](#)." On the other hand, he opposed the delivery of weapons from Sofia to Kyiv and in May 2022 [criticized](#) the decision of the Bulgarian Parliament on military-technical assistance to Ukraine, as such that had been not clear enough (he mentioned that 'military-technical assistance' could also mean the weapon supply). According to the President of Bulgaria, such steps could make his country a party to the Russian-Ukrainian war. In November 2022, the new composition of the National Assembly of Bulgaria [voted](#) for permission to provide Bulgarian weapons to Ukraine. Rumen Radev again criticized that decision. He also failed to support Ukraine's application to join NATO, [saying](#) that

Kyiv’s integration into the Alliance was impossible while the war continued.

The current composition of the National Assembly of Bulgaria is very diverse. Seven political groups representing 11 political parties are present in the parliament. In June 2022, the previous ruling coalition collapsed, and the government was voted no-confidence. On August 1, 2022, Rumen Radev dissolved the parliament and called extraordinary elections, the fourth in the last two years (1 ordinary + 3 extraordinary). The duties of the prime minister until the new coalition establishment has been performed by former Minister of Labor Galab Donev, who heads the caretaker government appointed by the President.

Current National Assembly of Bulgaria Composition



Party	Number of seats
● GERB-SDS (ГЕРБ-СДС)	67
● We Continue the Change (Продължаваме промяната)	53
● Movement for Rights and Freedoms, DPS (Движение за права и свободи, ДПС)	36
● Revival (Възраждане)	27
● BSP for Bulgaria, BSP (БСП за България, БСП)	25
● Democratic Bulgaria, DB (Демократична България, ДБ)	20
● Bulgarian Rise (Български възход)	12

Elections of October 2, 2022

The elections were held on October 2, 2022. As a result, the biggest number of mandates were won by the conservative pro-Western political alliance GERB-SDS, led by former prime minister Boyko Borisov. The liberal We Continue the Change party of the previous head of government Kiril Petkov got the second place. The Movement

for Rights and Freedoms (DPS), which predominantly represents the Turkish national minority of Bulgaria, was the third one. The fourth-biggest faction was won by the anti-systemic right-wing populist party Revival (Vazrazhdane). The fifth was the Bulgarian Socialist Party for Bulgaria (includes BSP and ten small left-wing parties), and the sixth was a liberal alliance Democratic Bulgaria (formed by the pro-European and green parties Yes Bulgaria, Democrats for Strong Bulgaria and Green Movement). The smallest representation in the current parliament has gone to Bulgarian Rise, the party of the former defence minister Stefan Yanev who was fired by Kiril Petkov after he refused to define Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a war, and insisted on Putin's description of "special military operation".

Since mid-October, when the new parliament started its work, the parliamentary parties have been trying, with no success as early as December 2022, to agree on a formula for electing a government. The winners of the elections, the GERB-SDS, have the constitutional right to be the first to propose a government. Already in October, Boyko Borisov [offered](#) pro-European parties to unite in a coalition in order to [oppose](#) the Russian meddling in Bulgaria. However, the other main Euro-Atlantic forces, We Continue the Change and Democratic Bulgaria – declined this proposal. Borisov, who has repeatedly stated that his party is open to compromise, sees as a part of that compromise the fact that he himself is not planning to [head](#) a future government; however, this is not enough for the other Euro-Atlantic parties as they regard GERB as a part of the old corrupt system and see the very rationale of their own political project as a dismantling of the GERB model of government. Another potential majority participant, DPS, has agreed to join the government team. Kirill Petkov, the leader of We Continue the Change, [said](#) that his party would keep its pre-election promise and would not form a coalition with either GERB-SDS or DPS. The former prime minister has not forgiven these two parties for supporting a no-confidence vote for his government in the summer of 2022. On the other hand, We Continue the Change cannot form a coalition with other parties: an alliance with Revival is impossible due to ideological considerations, and a union with other like-minded political forces will not reach a majority.

Thus, Bulgaria entered yet another political stalemate over the past two years. Under such conditions, the fourth consecutive extraordinary parliamentary elections within two years will likely be held in March 2023. This situation weakens the country's resistance to economic instability and external influences, which are especially threatening in light of Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

In addition, the parliamentary crisis strengthens the position of President Rumen Radev, who may well continue to concentrate power in his hands. At the same time, the government appointed by the President [refused](#) to submit to the parliament the draft budget of Bulgaria for the year 2023, waiting for the appointment of a new prime minister. However, this is not yet possible, as no coalition has been formed in the parliament.

Despite all other conflicting positions, the Bulgarian parliament has a large (over two-thirds) majority on the issue of Bulgaria's geopolitical orientation. Thus, in early November 2022, the National Assembly of Bulgaria [passed](#) a decision to supply Bulgarian weapons to Ukraine directly, despite warnings from the President and BSP. The only factions whose MPs voted against it were the BSP and Revival. Socialists' leader Korneliya Ninova [said](#) that "more weapons mean more war." After this decision of the Bulgarian parliament, the Revival party called on its supporters to protest, saying that such aid to Ukraine "pushes Bulgaria into war." There were no significant public meetings after that appeal.

Since the paper considers the mechanisms of Russian influence in Bulgaria and the response of Bulgarian actors to the actions of the Kremlin, it is also necessary to provide an overview of the decisions made by the parliament and the government during the previous parliamentary cycle as they were in charge of national policies during the first months of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The former parliamentary coalition consisted of "We Continue the Change" of the previous Prime Minister Kiril Petkov, the Bulgarian Socialist Party headed by the previous Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Economy Korneliya Ninova, the block "Democratic Bulgaria", and the populist "There Is Such a People" (ITN) led by showman Slavi Trifonov. ITN left the coalition in June, referring to disagreement around a corruption scandal at the Kapitan Andreevo border checkpoint as well as the government's decision to lift the veto on the process of EU membership negotiation with the Republic of North Macedonia. This decision of ITN precipitated the no-confidence vote and the fall of the Petkov cabinet.

The opposition in the Bulgarian parliament was represented by parties that, due to ideological differences and different interests, did not act in a consolidated manner. The largest association there was the group of former Prime Minister Boyko Borisov, "Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria" – GERB. Also in the opposition was the liberal party "Movement for Democratic Rights and Freedoms", which has traditionally been supported by Bulgaria's Turks. The radical nationalist party Revival was also in opposition.

Traditionally, among the mainstream parties, the Bulgarian Socialist Party has been the most loyal to cooperation with Russia, although it has somewhat transformed its position over the last two decades.

At the beginning of the 21st century, politicians from this political force repeatedly headed the state and government. In particular, Bulgarian President Georgi Parvanov and Prime Minister Sergey Stanishev held talks with Moscow on the joint construction of the Southern Stream gas pipeline and a nuclear power plant in Belene. Since 2014, BSP leaders and representatives have repeatedly called on the European Union to soften or remove sanctions against Russia for annexing Crimea due to their "inefficiency".

After the start of a full-scale invasion of Russian troops into Ukraine, representatives of this political force in the National Assembly [voted](#) in favour of a declaration condemning Moscow's actions but did not support the clauses it contained on new EU sanctions against Russia. Also, the leader of the association, Korneliya Ninova, had repeatedly stated that she and her party opposed supplying weapons and other military equipment from Bulgaria to Ukraine. Also, ministers of the 2021 – 2022 government, delegated by the BSP (a total of 4 out of 21), voted against the deployment of additional NATO forces in the country in the spring of 2022 and opposed the dismissal of Defence Minister Stefan Yanev, who had refused to call Russia's actions in Ukraine as a war. This position was [explained](#) by the argument that the war could not be stopped through the supply of weapons – it could be stopped by negotiations. Moreover, in 2021, Korneliya Ninova, as the Minister of Economy, during the discussion of the draft budget for 2022, spoke against the refusal of purchases of Russian materials for the maintenance of MiG-29 aircraft. In March 2022, when the EU Council was discussing an oil embargo against the Kremlin, the minister [insisted](#) that her country had no alternative sources to replace Russian fuel.

In May 2022, Korneliya Ninova [said](#) (and [repeated](#) it a few months later) that Russia is a friendly country for Bulgaria because Bulgarian citizens think so. She also said that Sofia would veto an embargo on Russian oil but did not rule out that her country would work to convert its refineries to fuel from other countries. Commenting on Gazprom's unilateral stop of gas supplies to Bulgaria in April 2022, Korneliya Ninova said that this could be a move in response to the sanctions imposed against Russia. In her opinion, this Gazprom decision proved the need to stop introducing new restrictions and counter-restrictions because they harmed everyone. It is worth noting that the then opposition – primarily [GERB](#) and [Revival](#) – had been accusing the Bulgarian government of sending weapons to Ukraine via indirect routes (although GERB [had been proposing](#) to send weapons directly). Because of this, the BSP as a member of the former coalition and Korneliya Ninova as a member of the government at that time, found themselves in a paradoxical political situation: publicly denying even the possibility of military support for Kyiv, the socialists had to maintain that no export of military equipment was in place, while in practice authorizing such exports. They were thus accused of duplicity

and deception. In particular, Korneliya Ninova [responded](#) to the request of GERB MP Khristo Hadzhev regarding the number of government permits for the export of Bulgarian arms for March – June 2022. The indicator reached a mark of 289 for the amount of EUR 1.02 billion. For comparison, in 2019, a total of 571 permits were issued worth EUR 857.13 million.

Another parliamentary political movement showing consistent loyalty to Russia has been the Revival party.

It had the smallest faction in the dissolved National Assembly that operated in the first half of 2022. This party was founded in 2014 by Kostadin Kostadinov, a former member of the VMRO nationalist movement. The Revival [manifesto](#) states that Bulgaria is on the periphery of the geopolitical project of the European Union and that the country is ruled by Brussels and Washington as a colony. The 2021 [political program](#) states that “contrary to the propaganda that the world is reduced to the US and the EU, it is bigger; relations with old economic partners, such as Russia, the Arab world, the Far East and all countries outside the EU, are important for Bulgaria's economic development.” At the same time, Revival declares that Russia a priori is not an enemy of the Bulgarian state but can be a partner and ally. Also, this political force sees care for Bulgarian minorities abroad and integration with North Macedonia as foreign policy priorities.

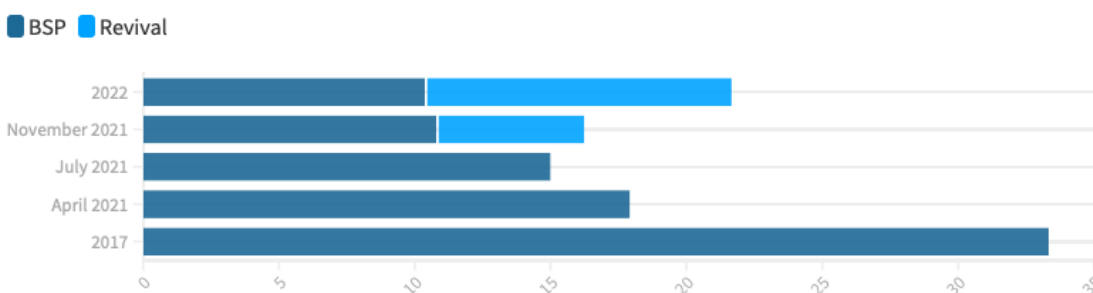
Following the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Revival voted in parliament against Bulgaria's support for EU sanctions toward Russia. In a party statement dated March 1, it was [stated](#) that the government in Sofia was trying to drag the country into the conflict. In addition, it stated that the brotherly peoples (Russians and Ukrainians) have been fighting and that the Bulgarian society had to support the Bulgarian minority in Ukraine in all possible ways during that difficult time. Later, Iskra Mykhaylova, a member of parliament from the Revival party, [said](#) that her country should become a peacemaker in the war between the Russians and Ukrainians. During the celebrations on Mount Shipka in March 2022, some activists of Revival [carried](#) Russian flags. The party [explained](#) that as a gesture of gratitude to the Russian soldiers who participated in the gaining of Bulgaria's independence 144 years ago. Also, in March, the party's supporters took action against sending Bulgarian weapons to Ukraine, carrying the Bulgarian and Russian flags. Although former Prime Minister Kiril Petkov previously assured that Sofia had not been considering such a step. Revival has also repeatedly [organized](#) the collection of humanitarian aid for citizens of Ukraine. It is worth noting that in April, speaking before the parliament, Kostadin Kostadinov [accused](#) refugees from Ukraine in Bulgaria of aggression

and of wanting to hang Ukrainian flags at Bulgarian institutions. He also stated at that time that the fighters of the Azov regiment could get to Bulgaria.

Commenting on Gazprom's decision to stop supplying gas to Bulgaria in violation of the contract, Kostadin Kostadinov [said](#) that the step should not be surprising. After all, according to him, this was a logical response to the sanctions imposed by Sofia against Russia. He also said that restrictions against Russian trade partners had a negative impact primarily on Bulgarian citizens. He later [accused](#) the US of interfering in Bulgaria's internal affairs, asking, "Why when Russia attacks other countries it is an occupation, and when the US does the same – it is a democracy?" Also, the leader of Revival [called](#) the Euromaidan in Ukraine "an event produced by the Americans" that sparked the "civil war" and brought suffering to the Ukrainian people. Later, he also [criticized](#) the arrival of Ukrainian agricultural products to Bulgaria, which, according to him, were of dubious quality and endangered Bulgarian producers. It is worth reminding that Sofia have been helping Kyiv in exporting agricultural goods when the Russian Navy blocked Ukrainian ports.

Speaking about the influence of those two political forces on decision-making in Bulgaria, it is worth noting that the BSP, as a member of the former parliamentary coalition and a former participant in the government, had real tools for this. At the same time, the party controlled only four out of 21 votes in the Council of Ministers, so it could not block the institution's decisions at will (a simple majority made decisions). However, this government has already ceased its work. In the current parliament, the BSP-group has 10.4% of all mandates. In the previous legislature, it had 10.8% (just one more seat; elections were held in November 2021). According to the results of another two snap parliamentary elections in Bulgaria in 2021, the party received 15% (July 2021) and 17.9% (April 2021) seats in the National Assembly. The BSP has been in a steady decline; in the 2017 elections, the BSP took second place and received a faction of 80 deputies – 33.3% of mandates.

BSP and Revival's shares of seats in National Assembly of Bulgaria (2017 – 2022)



Therefore, since the last ordinary election cycle, the BSP had been consistently losing support, but in 2021, after a decade in the opposition, it was able to join the government. In contrast, Revival objectively did not play a key role in the parliamentary votes during the previous cadence and did not enter the government. Due to the small number of parliamentary seats and the radicality of their political agenda, this party acted as an out-of-system force. Thus, due to its willingness to cooperate with other political forces, generally, the BSP is more likely to join situational coalitions than Revival.

Currently, the Revival has the biggest in the party's history number of its MPs in the parliament (11.25% of all mandates). Public [support](#) for this alliance had been growing amid the political bargaining of the mainstream parties since the previous parliament started its work. It reached the statistical plateau of the rating in the spring 2022, while the then coalition was discussing Bulgaria's response to Russia's aggression. Since then, public support for the Revival has fluctuated between 9% and 11%. In the October 2022 elections, the party got 9.8% of all votes. It may be assumed that part of the alliance's support came from the BSP's electorate: the rate of the socialists decreased from 10.1% in the previous elections to 9% in 2022.

Increases in prices and security issues were the focal points of the 2022 election campaign in Bulgaria. While in government, the representatives of the BSP [have not fulfilled](#) their pre-election promises in the social sphere, such as family income taxation and a tax-free minimum, a differentiated VAT rate on food and medicine, an increase in benefits for the birth of children, etc. So, it is difficult for the party to restore the voters' trust amid growing economic problems. Given previous statements, it should be expected that the BSP may blame the sanctions against Russia for the deterioration of the social situation and call for restoring "business as usual".

However, Revival is also active in this field. The growing trust in this party among Bulgarian citizens can be explained by the fatigue caused by the mainstream politicians who cannot agree on a new government and push the country towards the fourth extraordinary parliamentary election. Revival will probably use the rising social tension as political capital and be likely to consider restoring economic ties with Russia as one of the options to overcome the difficulties. Currently, the party is getting benefits from the coalition talks crisis. During the first speech to the parliament of the current convocation, Kostadin Kostadinov [accused](#) pro-Western alliances of neglecting people's problems. He appealed to that electorate who did not participate in the voting on the 2nd of October. Thus, the politician intends to gather the support of a wider audience, given the fact that his party does not participate in the coalition negotiations, so the public might not associate it with the current political crisis.

The BSP and Revival do not have enough political capital to effectively influence decisions by either parliament or government. But they would try to gain it. For example, these parties may see a source for increasing their support in the politically and socially dissatisfied voters who are the most loyal to Moscow.

Respondents to the [GLOBSEC Trends 2021](#) survey in Bulgaria most often (45% of responses) called Russia the main partner of their country among the "great powers". In the 2022 study, this figure [dropped](#) to 30%. So even amid the invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin remains an important ally of Sofia for a large part of Bulgarian citizens.

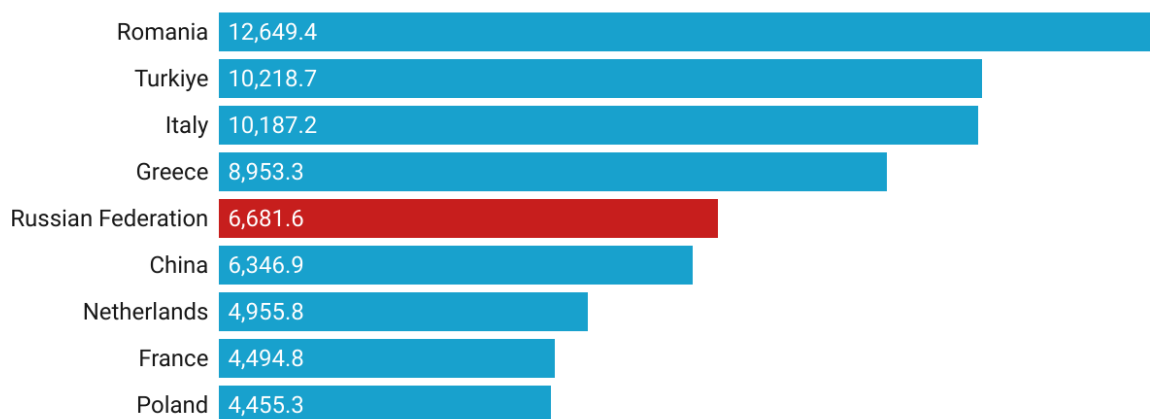
ECONOMIC VULNERABILITY



Russia is not Bulgaria's main foreign economic partner, but Russian companies are leading the list of suppliers of certain goods to the country. In [2021](#), the total turnover amounted to BGN 6.68 billion (over EUR 3.41 billion). Thus, the trade between Bulgaria and Russia came close to the pre-pandemic figures – in [2019](#), it amounted to BGN 7.54 billion (about EUR 3.86 billion) and in 2020 – to BGN 4.5 billion (EUR 2.3 billion). In 2021, Moscow ranked sixth among all foreign economic partners of Sofia in terms of total trade volume.

Bulgaria's Top 10 Foreign Trade Partners by total turnover 2021

(by countries; BGN)



Source: National Statistical Institute of Bulgaria • Created with Datawrapper

However, a closer look reveals an imbalance in trade relations between Bulgaria and Russia. In [2021](#), Bulgarian manufacturers exported goods worth BGN 848.5 million (EUR 433.5 million) to Russian consumers; while imported goods worth BGN 5.83 billion (EUR 2.98 billion). Russia's share in Bulgaria's exports was 1.25%, and in imports – 7.6%. This situation characterises trade between the two countries in general and is not specific to a particular year. In [2019](#),

these indicators were 1.76% and 9.87%, respectively, and in 2020 – 1.51% and 6.11%, respectively.

The main categories of [exports](#) from Bulgaria to Russia in 2020 were chemical products (pharmaceuticals, cosmetic oils and other substances, reagents for industry; 35.82% of exports to Russia), machines for industry (mechanical devices, their parts and electronics; 29.14% of exports to Russia), and food and tobacco industry products (animal feed, chocolate, tobacco; 10.61% of exports to Russia). Russian companies most often supplied Bulgarian partners with mineral products; almost all volumes fell on oil and its derived products – 59.44% of all Bulgarian imports from Russia. Metals (iron, aluminium, copper; 15.86% of imports from Russia), equipment for industry (nuclear reactors, mechanical devices, electrical equipment; 7.75% of imports from Russia), and agricultural products (grain and oilseeds, cereals, vegetables; 6.84% of imports from Russia) also made significant inflows.

In 2019, Russia [accounted](#) for almost 59% of all fuel imports to Bulgaria.

Russia is an important but not critical [direction](#) of Bulgarian exports. The main category of sales of national manufacturers to Russian companies is products of the chemical industry, 4/5 of which is accounted for by pharmaceuticals. In 2020, only 13.2% of Bulgaria's total pharmaceutical exports went to Russia, when the industry as a whole provided 3.62% of the country's total exports. Another important component of Bulgarian companies' sales to Russian partners was industrial equipment, which, however, accounted for only 2.6% of Bulgaria's total exports in this category.

As for logistics issues, Bulgaria is not dependent on Russia as a chain of transportation for its goods. In 2021, 66.38% of Bulgarian exports and 60.4% of Bulgarian imports [went](#) to and from EU countries, in the transmission of which there are no Russian transport networks or agents. The main foreign economic partners of Bulgaria from outside the EU, except for Russia, were China (3.21% of exports and 5.38% of imports), the USA (2.41% and 0.73%, respectively), and the United Kingdom (1.83 % and 0.8%). For trade with them, Bulgarian companies mainly use transport corridors that do not pass through Russia. In particular, the Chinese direction is predominantly shipped by sea, and the land corridor goes through Turkey, although [transportation](#) from Bulgarian ports to Asia through the Black Sea ports of Russia plays an important role. However, this route may now be blocked due to the Kremlin's hostilities against Ukraine in the Black Sea.

Recent years energy was a key driver of the economic connection between Sofia and Moscow.

During 2016-2020, the share of imports in Bulgaria's total energy consumption [varied](#) from 36.3% to 39.4% (37.9% in 2020). In the total energy production of Bulgaria in 2020, the share of solid fuels (primarily coal) was 34.5%, nuclear energy – 40%, renewable sources and biofuels – 23.8% (other sources accounted for less than 1%). In the same year, oil and its derived products accounted for 68.6% of Bulgaria's energy [imports](#), natural gas – 23.2%, solid fuel – 3.9%, electricity – 3%, renewable sources and biofuels – 1.4% (other sources reached less than 1%). It is worth noting that Bulgarian companies also sell energy abroad. In 2020, oil and its derived products accounted for 78.4% of Bulgaria's total energy exports, electricity – 16.5%, renewable sources and biofuels – 4.6%. Of the 7.2 million tons of oil and oil products the country imported in 2020, more than 2.9 million tons were resold abroad, mostly as refined products.

Considering the structure of Russian imports to Bulgaria and indicators of energy cooperation, it can be concluded that the trade in oil and products derived from it is the core of economic relations between Sofia and Moscow.

At the same time, this component of foreign economic activity is a vulnerable point for the Bulgarian state. The country not only buys most of its oil from Russia for domestic consumption. The country's oil refining industry also depends on it, providing jobs and part of Bulgarian exports. In particular, the subsidiary plant of the Russian oil company Lukoil – Lukoil Neftochim Burgas (LNB) – is located near the city of Burgas. It is the largest enterprise in the industry in Bulgaria and one of the largest in Southeast Europe. The LNB plant [has](#) a total capacity to process nearly 7 million tons of oil annually. This is almost the entire volume of oil and related products that Bulgaria imported in 2020, 3/4 and 9/10 of the volume of imports in 2019 and 2018, respectively. At the same time, the plant processes approximately 4.2 million tons of oil annually. Let's recall that in June 2022, the Council of the EU [approved](#) the embargo on the supply of Russian oil by sea to the EU at the proposal of the European Commission. The institutions have made some exceptions, notably for Bulgaria, which is set to implement limits by 2025. Probably, dependence on fuel from Russia, technological features and interests of Lukoil Neftochim Burgas have led to this exception.

As for other energy sources, Sofia has much less dependence on Russia. Bulgaria [consumes](#) about 3 billion cubic meters of natural gas

per year. For comparison, the smaller population of Slovakia [uses](#) 4.7 to 5.5 billion cubic meters of gas annually. The main [consumers](#) of this energy source in Bulgaria are not individuals but industries. With this in mind, any changes in the flow of natural gas to the country can be controlled by the government and should not cause deep social upheaval. This was illustrated by the situation in April 2022, when the Russian monopoly Gazprom announced the unilateral early termination of its obligations under the contract with Bulgargaz. This came after Deputy Prime Minister Asen Vasilev [said](#) Sofia would not buy natural gas from Russia starting in 2023, and the Bulgarian fuel operator refused to pay under the contract in rubles. Prime Minister Kiril Petkov called it an attempt to influence stability in the country and blackmail (Sofia had transferred the funds, although not in rubles, earlier). Also, according to him, the Bulgarian government intended to revise not only the contracts with Gazprom for the gas purchase but also for its transit to Serbia and Hungary. Petkov's government worked to ensure alternative ways of supplying natural gas from Azerbaijan through pipelines and elsewhere through LNG terminals in Greece.

Later, Sofia [agreed](#) with the USA to supply LNG. After Petkov's resignation, the caretaker Bulgarian prime minister Galab Donev and the President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev [confirmed](#) that Azerbaijan's gas would be supplied to Bulgaria as well as to some other countries of South and Central Europe. Finally, in December, official Sofia [launched](#) negotiations with its counterparts in Ankara for purchasing the fuel arriving at the LNG terminals in Turkiye.

The fact that the Balkan Stream gas pipeline passes through Bulgaria gives the Bulgarian government tools to put pressure on Moscow in energy matters, but it also creates a risk of Russian provocation. In conditions where the Kremlin deliberately blocked the transit of gas to Europe through Ukraine and reduced the volume of supplies through Nord Stream 1, the way through the Balkans became an important element of its aggressive foreign policy.

Bulgaria's nuclear power industry is also [linked](#) to Russia.

The country currently operates two reactors at the Kozloduy nuclear power plant (four were decommissioned upon joining the EU). Between 2012 and 2019, these facilities were modernized by Rosenergoatom, a subsidiary of the Russian corporation Rosatom. Also, since the end of the 1980s, the Bulgarian government has been considering the possibility of building a new nuclear power plant at Belene. In 2008, the project was re-launched, and Sofia signed a contract with the Russian company Atomstroyexport (subordinate to Rosatom) to supply reactor corpora, steam generators, and related

equipment. They were provided in 2010 – 2012. The Russian side also produced one reactor for Bulgaria. However, since the beginning of the project implementation, the Bulgarian government and other parties interested in the construction could not find investors for all the works, so in 2013 the construction of the NPP was stopped, although the site for its construction had already been prepared. This became the subject of a legal dispute between Rosatom and the Bulgarian National Electricity Company.

As an alternative, the Bulgarian government started considering that the equipment received from Russia for the Belene NPP could be used to construct two power units at the Kozloduy NPP. This project has also been discussed since the end of the 1980s; at various times, Rosatom, Westinghouse, and Toshiba companies expressed interest in its implementation. During 2020 – 2021, the Bulgarian Nuclear Regulatory Agency approved the prospect of building two new power units, and the country's government adopted a work plan, noting that the new facilities would use US technologies. The Bulgarian and American governments [signed](#) the corresponding Memorandum of Understanding. At the same time, in 2018, the National Assembly supported the resumption of the construction of the Belene NPP. In 2019, the government announced the acceptance of applications from strategic investors for the project, and in 2020, Rosatom, the French company Framatome and the American company General Electrics agreed to form a consortium to carry out the work. However, the story is far from end. In January 2021, the Bulgarian government [emphasized](#) its intention to complete first the construction of a new reactor at the Kozloduy NPP, while the Belene NPP project is on hold in search of investors.

All fuel for Bulgaria's nuclear power plants is provided by the Russian company TVEL (subordinate to Rosatom). Likewise, all spent fuel from Bulgarian power units is disposed in Russia, according to the 2002 contract between Sofia and Moscow. However, in 2022, the previous Bulgarian government announced its intention to [purchase](#) fuel for Kozloduy NPP from non-Russian suppliers.

As for capital investment by Russian individuals and legal entities in Bulgaria, in 2021, Russia was in 10th place among all countries in terms of [foreign direct investment](#) in the Bulgarian economy. Russian investors accounted for 3.9% of all inflows to the country. However, the same year, the volume of capital outflow to Russia from Bulgaria exceeded the inflow.

The total [flow of foreign investments](#) from Russian individuals and legal entities to the Bulgarian economy in 2021 reached EUR -349 million. This is the largest indicator of capital outflow for investments

(primarily due to payments on loans and other obligations) among all of Bulgaria's partners. For comparison, next in the ranking of the investment flow is Switzerland, with an indicator of EUR -137.1 million.

INFORMATION VULNERABILITY



Russian narratives have channels of infiltration into Bulgaria, although the country has increased its resistance to such influence in recent years and especially months. In 2013, before the EU summit in Vilnius, at the European People's Party meeting, then Bulgarian President Rosen Plevneliev [said](#) that "90% of the media in the country work for Russian masters." Such a statement has never been confirmed by special studies. However, it demonstrates the concern of a top politician whose country began to face Russian hybrid threats when the Kremlin was planning its aggression against Ukraine and preparing to challenge the order in Europe and the world.

In recent years, the Russian media have been the direct disseminators of Moscow's disinformation in Bulgaria.

Until the beginning of March 2022, channels spreading Kremlin propaganda – RT, Sputnik and affiliated outlets – had been working in the country's information space. After the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine and the decision of the European Commission to ban the broadcasting of these two Russian government media, the Council for Electronic Media of Bulgaria [blocked](#) the activities of these outlets in the country. In addition, in March, the satellite operator Bulgaria Sat EAD [excluded](#) RT from its network. However, those steps were more of a situational reaction to actual events than a systemic struggle against targeted destructive informational influence on Bulgaria. For example, other Russian TV channels – Pervyi Kanal or NTV MIR – have been broadcasted in Bulgaria without interruptions. Although that does not diminish the importance of such steps.

At the same time, several Russian media targeting the Bulgarian audience continue to operate.

First of all, this is *Rossiya Segodnia*, the Russia Beyond outlet (formerly Ruski Dnevnik), which is part of Russia Beyond the Headlines project of the Kremlin-owned Rossiyskaya Gazeta. Today, this media concentrates on promoting stories about the culture, gastronomy, education, technology, and lifestyle of Russia. However, from time to time, it publishes explanatory texts about the Russian economy, for example, about where Russian producers [export](#) oil or about the [words](#) of the dictator Putin about his country's hydrogen ambitions. Previously, this media also wrote on political topics spreading Russian narratives about [Europe](#) and [Ukraine](#).

In addition, it is worth noting that the outlet BgNews, which publishes news from the Bulgarian media space in Russian, obviously directs its work to native speakers of the language. The main caution about this media activity is related to its agenda: it only publishes news about problems and crises in Bulgaria, as well as comments from Kremlin politicians about relations with Sofia and the situation in the world. Also, the publication does not provide all the available information in the messages, resorting to manipulations. For example, the [news](#) about the suspension of the TPP in Bobov Dol omits the [data](#) that the situation is caused by the fault of the fuel supplier; at the same time, the media presents information as if in the country, according to the principle of dominoes, TPPs began to stop due to a lack of subsidies from the state. At the same time, on some days, BgNews may not publish news at all, and on others, it may be active. The publication chose the phrase "What is indeed happening" as its motto.

Other channels for spreading Russian narratives and fakes in the country are the Bulgarian media, which have or had connections with Russian organizations or individuals.

The largest of such outlets in the country is *the Duma*, which has more than a century of history and was affiliated with the Bulgarian Communists, and is currently the official outlet of the Bulgarian Socialist Party. Since 2009, its publisher has been the BSP member Nikolai Malinov, who also headed the "Russophiles" organization and officially represented 11 main Russian TV channels in Bulgaria. The movement led by this man advocated cultural and political rapprochement with Russia, participated in Russian embassy events and lobbied for Moscow's economic interests, such as the revival of the Belene NPP project. However, in 2015, Malinov left the BSP, and in 2019, the special prosecutor's office [detained](#) him on charges of espionage for the Kremlin. The law enforcement authorities also arrested the editor-in-chief of the Duma Yuri Borisov, but he was soon released. After some time, Malinov made a deposit of 28,000 USD and was released on bail, with an obligation not to leave Bulgaria. The USA imposed sanctions on judge Andon Mitalov, who allowed the

bail. The Duma website is still operating and, in particular, spreads false information from the press releases of the Kremlin and the Russian Ministry of Defence about the war against Ukraine, as well as about the situation in the world. For example, in August 2022 their authors wrote that Russian troops [destroyed](#) two HIMARS installations (which was refuted by the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine) and that [evidence](#) of the US participation in hostilities in Ukraine was found (which is not reliable information). Nikolai Malinov continues to comment in the national media, in [particular](#) on Bulgarian Radio.

Bulgaria also has other examples of national media spreading Russian narratives.

In particular, it is *BSTV*, which mostly [reproduces](#) press releases of the Ministry of Defence of Russia to report on the Russian-Ukrainian war and [uses](#) fakes about the inability of the Ukrainian army. The next one is [pogled.info](#), which publishes the texts of the ideologist of Russian fascism Alexandr Dugin or spreads conspiracy theories about the dominance of the United States in the world.

The *Epicenter* website tries to take a middle position between various ideological groups, but in this effort, it also spreads manipulations and fakes beneficial to the Kremlin, sometimes providing a platform for experts loyal to Moscow. This is the spread of the narrative that Europe [rejects](#) itself in development by sanctions against Russia, that a puppet regime [rules](#) in Ukraine, that the Russian army can destroy part of the United States with nuclear warheads, that the West is [tired](#) of war and plans to offer Kyiv to give in territories, and that the action [against](#) Russian spy 'diplomats' in Bulgaria is Washington's operation, and that Bulgaria is [becoming](#) a periphery of the EU and a frontline state in the global confrontation. The same outlet [reprinted](#) articles from Russia's *Komsomolskaya Pravda* about Kyiv's 'gluttony' in requests for help and Russian Minister Lavrov's [comments](#) about Moscow's non-involvement in war crimes in Ukraine. In this context, we should also mention the *Glavosve media*, which disseminates information according to a similar principle. As examples may be considered a [column](#) by the Bulgarian expert Yavor Dachkov about the activities of 'Western propaganda' in Bulgaria and an [interview](#) with the former Prime Minister of Ukraine Mykola Azarov, who said that the Ukrainian authorities committed war crimes.

It is worth noting that among the outlets listed above, none of them was in the top 20 ranking of the most popular online media or newspapers in Bulgaria in [2021](#). Although, in [2019](#), the Duma was on such a list on the press market but only with 0.7% of the share.

Analysing [Russian influence](#) on Bulgaria's media landscape in 2021, the Center for the Study of Democracy (Bulgaria) pointed to one of Bulgaria's most popular sites, *24 Hours*, as a potential channel for spreading Russian narratives. At that time, the authors of the report said that the journalists of the outlet used Kremlin sources to prepare news. An analysis of the publications of 24 Hours over the summer of 2022 months demonstrates that the website does indeed often [feature](#) press releases from Russian state institutions and that these materials are more often used to [describe](#) the war in Ukraine. However, the authors of the media always indicate the source of the published information and, whenever possible, remind readers about Moscow's war crimes. Also, in [columns](#), [interviews](#) and articles, they do not give a platform to speakers who would justify Russia or spread messages of Kremlin propaganda.

We should also mention the [study](#) of Russian influence on Bulgaria conducted in 2018 by Dimitar Bechev. Among other ways of corroding the country's public opinion in the interests of the Kremlin, he pointed to the activity of pro-Russian commentators on the Bulgarian media generally disloyal to Moscow – bTV, Nova TV and public broadcaster BNT. At the same time, the researcher wrote about the program of journalist Petar Volgin on Bulgarian National Radio, who openly sympathizes with the Kremlin and invites like-minded interviewees on the air. In particular, the comments of Nikolai Malinov mentioned above were made precisely within the framework of Volgin's program. Thus, his programme became a platform for spreading Kremlin-style narratives.

The Russian embassy in Bulgaria and the head of the diplomatic mission, Eleonora Mitrofanova, remain the direct translator of Russian political narratives and fakes regarding the relations between Sofia and Moscow, as well as the war in Ukraine and the situation in the world as a whole.

For example, in July 2022, the Russian mission in Sofia [spread](#) fakes about "US bio-laboratories in Ukraine", [denied](#) the terrorist attack by the Russian army in Kremenchuk, and [complained](#) about the minimization of the Russian presence in Bulgaria.

CASES OF SUCCESSFUL OPERATIONS TO DETECT AND LIMIT RUSSIAN INFLUENCE AND MANIPULATION



The Bulgarian state recognizes threats to national security from Russia in various areas. For example, the document of the Council of Ministers, '[Vision: Bulgaria in NATO and European Defence 2020](#)', stated that the annexation of Crimea and the subsequent aggression of the Kremlin against Ukraine created dangerous conditions for the entire Black Sea region and directly affected the Bulgarian state. In this context, Sofia identified the growth of hybrid threats and declared the need to protect against them. They were also mentioned in the updated [version](#) of Bulgaria's National Security Strategy until 2020. In the current [Program for the Development of the Armed Forces of Bulgaria](#), the protection of the country's information space is indicated as one of the priorities of the state's defence policy. In recent years, responsible Bulgarian services have conducted several notable operations aimed at minimizing the Kremlin's negative influence on Bulgaria's security.

The investigation of explosions at the country's ammunition depots became the main event in detecting and preventing new cases of Russian influence on the Bulgarian state in recent years. In 2021, the Bulgarian Prosecutor's Office initially [detained](#) three Russian citizens who were suspected of attempting to assassinate the Bulgarian arms dealer Emilian Gebrev by poisoning. In particular, it was found that Bulgaria had been visited three times in 2015 by Sergey Fedotov, who, according to some Russian media, had been an agent of Russia's GRU (military intelligence). Bulgarian prosecutors then [said](#) there might be a connection between four depot explosions that happened between 2011 and 2020, the poisoning of a businessman and the stay of six Russian citizens in Bulgaria. In addition, law enforcement officials suspected that those events might also be linked to the 2014 explosions at military warehouses in Vrbetice, Czech Republic. Also, the spokeswoman of the prosecutor's office, Siyka Mileva, said that such operations could be aimed at preventing the supply of weapons from these countries to Ukraine and Georgia.

In April 2021, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bulgaria invited the Russian embassy to cooperate in the investigation, but neither the mission nor the head of the diplomatic corps in Moscow agreed. Accordingly, official Sofia [expelled](#) one Russian diplomat from the country. It is worth noting that a month before the start of this

investigation, the Bulgarian prosecutor's office had [detained](#) six Russian citizens who were suspected of espionage. The authorities expelled two Russian diplomats suspected of involvement in military intelligence. These were not the first actions of this kind on Sofia's part. In 2019-2020, at least six Russian diplomats suspected of espionage were [expelled](#) from Bulgaria.

However, these were not the last similar actions of official Sofia. After the start of the Kremlin's full-scale war against Ukraine, a mass (and this word is not an exaggeration) departure of Russian diplomats from Bulgaria began. At the beginning of March 2022, the Bulgarian prosecutor's office [revealed](#) that two more employees of the Russian embassy were spying and not performing a diplomatic function. Official Sofia decided to expel them from the country. In two weeks, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bulgaria [recognized](#) ten more Russian diplomats as persona non grata. According to the government, those specialists also acted outside the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, so they were also expelled from the country. Already at the beginning of April, the Chief Public Prosecutor of Bulgaria, Ivan Geshev, [informed](#) the government about another employee of the Russian embassy who had been engaged in espionage in the host country. He turned out to be the first secretary of the diplomatic mission, Philip Voskresensky, who was declared persona non grata and expelled. Finally, in June, then prime minister of Bulgaria, Kiril Petkov, [announced](#) that the Bulgarian law enforcement authorities suspected another 70 employees of the Russian embassy in Sofia of working for the special services under the protection of diplomatic immunity. They were expelled from the country at the beginning of July.

The most recent example of exposing the mechanisms of the Kremlin's influence on socio-political processes in Bulgaria was the [investigation](#) of the Bulgarian special services, the results of which were announced in July 2022 by then spokeswoman of the Bulgarian government, Lena Borislavova. According to her, there were many experts, journalists, and politicians in the country who, for a salary of EUR 2,000 per month, promoted the narratives of Russian propaganda. The salary was transferred from Russian state structures, claimed Lena Borislavova. According to her, such speakers confused the audience and used false ideas and fears. At the same time, the public uncovering of these figures has not yet occurred. Another notable [case](#) of interference was the Russian hackers' cyber attack on the Bulgarian Defence Ministry, the Interior Ministry, the Justice Ministry, and the Constitutional Court websites in October 2022. Although those activities paralyzed the websites' work for some time, the Bulgarian services prevented the leak of data

ANALYSIS OF THE PROBABILITY OF RUSSIAN REFLEXIVE CONTROL OPERATIONS



Ideological fragmentation of society and close parliamentary elections make Bulgaria more vulnerable to Russian attempts to influence its political field and to make the government in Sofia more loyal to the Kremlin.

Today, Moscow can use several topics to increase pressure on the Bulgarian side. We assume that the Russian embassy in Bulgaria or other Russian agents may increase their activity in these directions in case the political crisis in the country continues and new early elections befall it.

First of all, the processes related to the supply of gas to Bulgarian consumers should be mentioned. It was noted above that the previous Bulgarian government planned not to sign a new contract with Gazprom to purchase this fuel, and the Russian company unilaterally stopped the supply due to Sofia's refusal to pay for it in rubles. This position of the Bulgarian side became possible thanks to the fact that the Bulgaria-Greece interconnector, supported by the European Investment Bank, had been scheduled to start in 2022. [Construction](#) and [pre-certification](#) were completed in July 2022. The pipeline connected the Greek gas transmission network (near the village of Komotini) with the Trans-Adriatic gas pipeline in Bulgaria (near Stara Zagora). This project [opened](#) Bulgarian companies' access to LNG, which arrives at the terminal in the Greek port of Alexandroupolis and to the Turkish ports, and also [allowed](#) Azerbaijani gas to be routed for supply by the Mediterranean sea. The Bulgarian side started preparations for the construction of the interconnector during the time of Boyko Borisov's government in 2017. It is also worth noting that during his tenure as prime minister, Bulgaria refused to build the pipelines "South Stream" and "Burgas – Alexandroupolis" jointly with Russia.

In fact, today, the Balkan Stream remains the only infrastructural facility connecting Moscow and Sofia in terms of gas, which is served by Bulgarian operators on the territory of their country.

Russia can use these assets to put pressure on the Bulgarian side (for example, by influencing the technical conditions), although its capabilities are extremely limited after Gazprom cut fuel supplies to Europe through the territory of Ukraine, Belarus, and the Nord Stream 1. Also, in August 2022, the Bulgargaz company [requested](#) the Energy and Water Regulatory Commission to increase the gas price on the Bulgarian market by 60% so that the distributor could purchase fuel at market prices. That appeal sounded while the Bulgaria-Greece interconnector [could not operate](#) yet due to bureaucratic obstacles. Finally, it started its work transmitting LNG from the Greek port on the Aegean Sea.

Nevertheless, critical situations on this issue may occur. In August 2022, then-acting Minister of Energy Elenko Bozhkov also [stated](#) that Bulgarian gas storages had enough gas until September. While the country was forced to buy Russian gas from intermediaries and not from Moscow directly. Under those conditions, Gazprom did not resume fuel supplies to Bulgaria, and Russia's envoy Eleonora Mitrofanova [said](#) that in case of payment in rubles, Bulgarian consumers would receive the necessary volumes of gas at a low price. But such statements did not change the situation, as well as attempts of some political forces inside Bulgaria – primarily BSP but also, to some extent, GERB – to manipulate public opinion on the fuel topic. All in all, Bulgaria's dependence on Gazprom has been removed, and the country now gets its supplies independent of the Russian company. Still, in case of some crisis phenomena in the Bulgarian gas market the Russian and pro-Russian actors may manipulate this issue for gaining political benefits.

As for the oil supply, Bulgaria may face obstacles in getting rid of its dependence on Russia for this type of fuel this year.

An oil refinery which is still owned by the Russian company Lukoil may undermine the country's cooperation with alternative suppliers. And political instability will reduce Sofia's ability to act consistently in this direction. In this context, it is noteworthy that the caretaker government of Bulgaria and the Lukoil Neftochim have [agreed](#) that the company can continue to operate in the country and export oil products to the EU until the end of 2024. For this, the enterprise has to pay its taxes, despite warnings from the European Commission that this would violate the sanctions regime. Moreover, Vagit Alekperov, owner of the Lukoil, publicly condemned Russian aggression in Ukraine, and it may be a reason for the Bulgarian public opinion not to be hostile to the Lukoil Neftochim despite it being co-owned by Russian citizens. On the eve of the entry into force of the EU embargo on Russian oil on December 5, 2022, the export of oil products from the Lukoil Neftochim Burgas plant stopped. The company's

management was waiting for the market's reaction to the new circumstances, as well as for determining the logistics conditions for its products.

In addition, Moscow can invest real or symbolic capital in supporting destabilizing sentiments in Bulgarian society and destructive political narratives amid the election campaign.

In recent months, the number of supporters of Vladimir Putin and supporters of political alliances with Russia has more than [halved](#), but the share of such citizens remains significant – 25% and 15%, respectively. At the same time, Bulgarian society is extremely fragmented – according to the electoral [ratings](#), at least eight parties, some of which are ideologically close, pass the threshold for entering the parliament. Spring 2022 polls [showed](#) that approximately half of the potential voters did not approve the actions of Kiril Petkov's government, and a third supported them. A recent public opinion [survey](#) by the Alpha Research company says that more than 65% of respondents do not believe that the upcoming elections would end the political crisis in the country.

Amid growing social apathy, radical parties are able to accumulate support they did not have before. The increase in the rating of Revival during the last six months supports this observation. Even though the party's support has stopped growing now, it can resume in the coming months due to the possible economic turmoil in Bulgaria. This group's anti-Western and revisionist rhetoric may certainly play in favour of the Kremlin's interests not only in Bulgaria but also in wider Central and Southern Europe.

An additional destabilizing factor may be the [statement](#) of the former director of the Bulgarian defence company "Kintex" Aleksandr Mykhaylov, that since the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Russia into Ukraine, Bulgaria has sent about 4,200 tons of weapons to Poland. He claimed that later these cargoes were transferred to the Ukrainian side and that the former Minister of Economy Korneliya Ninova knew about it and even authorized such export. The direct provision of weapons did not have the support of the majority of the population and was not formally approved by the parliament. Certain forces – primarily pro-Russian and anti-Western – may instrumentalize this topic, although formally the government's promise not to transfer military goods to Ukraine has not been violated.

In November 2022, when Korneliya Ninova was not in the government, BSP (after the new elections) was not able to radically influence parliament's decision, and the situative consensus of GERB and We Continue the Change emerged, the National Assembly of Bulgaria adopted permission to transfer the country's arms to Ukraine.

Regarding the issue of military aid to Ukraine, the most important thing is to state clearly that there is a dangerous discrepancy between the position of the parliamentary majority and the public attitudes.

While in parliament, a decision was made with over 2/3 of the vote to provide military aid, this is not reflected in public opinion. More than ½ of the public opposes sending military aid and supports the President's view that Bulgaria should remain "neutral" and that sending aid leads to dragging the country to war. This discrepancy between the current parliament and the public is a potential source of crisis in the coming months.

Ultimately, the Kremlin may use another tool to interfere in Bulgaria's political process – the Russian community in the country.

According to the Bulgarian National Statistical Institute, more than 37000 people officially [migrated](#) to the country in 2020, 24000 of whom had Bulgarian citizenship. Among foreign citizens who changed their place of registration to Bulgaria during the year, there were people from Turkey (24.3%), Syria (9.6%), and Russia (9.3%). It should be added that in 2020, Russia was the most popular destination for emigrants from Bulgaria after Germany. At the same time, according to Eurostat data, as of January 1, 2021, there [were](#) 112 958 foreign citizens officially living in the country, among whom the largest group were Russians – 26 707. And these are the people who did not receive Bulgarian citizenship at that time. It is worth noting that at that time, the share of foreign citizens among Bulgarian residents [was](#) slightly more than 1%. The more recent official data comes from the Bulgarian census of the autumn of 2021, according to which the number of Russians in Bulgaria is 14,218 persons. At the same time, in the summer of 2022, Sofia indefinitely [banned](#) the granting of tourist visas to Russian citizens and visas to property owners from Russia.

However, the Russian community in the country is quite united and consistently maintains its unity and connection with the homeland. In 2018, Dimitar Bechev [drew attention](#) to several Facebook communities created by Russians in Bulgaria, which numbered from 1000 to 20 000 members – 'In favour of Bulgaria in the Eurasian Union', 'Russophiles.bg', 'I love Russia', 'About Russia – in Bulgarian', 'Friends of the 'Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics''. It should be added that on the eve of the start of Moscow's full-scale war against Ukraine, the public movement "For Free Russia!" [was created](#) in Bulgaria, which aimed to fight Kremlin propaganda and oppose Putin's regime.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INCREASING RESILIENCE



In many areas, Bulgaria has connections or difficulties that allow the Kremlin to maintain influence over the country. At the same time, it is worth noting that Moscow's ability to control Sofia's internal situation and foreign policy has been significantly reduced in recent years, and especially months, both due to general EU sanctions against Russia and due to the efforts of the Bulgarian government itself. However, to prevent a rematch of Russian expansion into Bulgaria and finally weaken Moscow's position in the country during the fight against Kremlin aggression, Sofia may need support from external actors. In particular, the steps described below can be valuable.

For the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine and the Embassy of Ukraine in Bulgaria:

1. **To prepare a 'manual' for stakeholders in foreign partner-states on confronting and levelling Russian influence in various spheres of public life.** This option is important not only for Bulgaria but also for all other countries of Central Europe and the Black Sea region.
2. **Conduct an advocacy campaign among Bulgarian politicians, officials, journalists, experts, etc., regarding the challenges and expected results of increasing Russian influence in the country.** For an illustrative picture of perspectives, the example of some post-Soviet countries, such as Belarus or Armenia, can be used.
3. **Proactively react to the fakes spread by the Russian diplomatic mission in Sofia to reasonably refute the lies published by it.** It is also important to describe how the lies of Russian diplomats harm Bulgaria, and why such information was published.
4. **To analyse the possibilities of revitalizing economic cooperation between Ukraine and Bulgaria, amid the refusal of some Bulgarian manufacturers from the Russian market and vice versa.**
5. **To stimulate close cooperation between the civil societies of Bulgaria and Ukraine.**

For EU institutions:

1. **To support Bulgaria's energy and economic reorientation from Russia to other markets.** This support can have both political and infrastructural dimensions. It is already important to provide the country with a clear plan of assistance in diversifying energy sources.
2. **Support Bulgaria in the fight against the spread of Russian disinformation.** Such assistance can be implemented both through pan-European initiatives and specially created national instruments.
3. **In the context of the fight against Russian disinformation, special attention should be paid to the narratives spread by the radical right and radical left parties** of Bulgaria as the most loyal to the Kremlin political forces in the country.

For the expert community of Ukraine:

1. **Implement joint research and practical initiatives with Bulgarian civil society organizations in the field of countering Russian disinformation, infrastructure and energy projects, security cooperation, youth exchanges, etc.** The development of the agenda of such projects should be based on the understanding of Bulgaria as a neighbouring country and not a distant foreign partner.