Bulgaria external relations briefing:
Overview of the Bulgarian International Relations in 2021
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Summary

From the point of view of international relations for Bulgaria, 2021 was very dynamic and quite difficult. The difficulties come mainly from the fact that the country is in a region where geopolitical tensions are growing. This is the region of Southeast Europe and the Black Sea. The main foreign policy priorities of the Bulgaria remain unchanged. They are linked to the country's Euro-Atlantic orientation and membership in both the EU and NATO. This fact predetermines not very smooth relations between Bulgaria on the one hand and Russia and China on the other. A special place in the country's foreign policy is occupied by relations with the USA. From a geopolitical point of view, Bulgaria has complicated relations with Russia, with which it is otherwise traditionally and historically connected. Another key foreign policy priority for the country in 2021 was the Balkan region, and in particular relations with the Republic of Northern Macedonia, which are also highly complicated, due to a number of historical disputes.

Bulgaria and USA

Rising tensions in Ukraine and the intensification of the geopolitical struggle between the United States and Russia in the Black Sea region makes Bulgaria an extremely important country from a strategic point of view. Bulgaria's membership in NATO and the country's predominantly transatlantic political orientation make Bulgaria one of the United States' most important partners in Southeast Europe and the Black Sea region.

This was especially evident this year when one of the largest NATO military exercises called Defender Europe 2021 took part. From mid-May to mid-June, Bulgaria, alongside Germany, Romania, Hungary, the Republic of North Macedonia and Albania hosted and participated in a series of multinational military exercises in order to enhance its armed forces' operational capabilities.

The importance of Bulgaria in the US strategic plans in the Black Sea region was clearly stated in the words of NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe Gen. Tod Wolters who, in the middle of December 2021 has suggested the alliance should deploy additional troops in Bulgaria and Romania after Russia's military buildup near the Ukrainian border.
In a response Bulgarian defense minister Stefan Yanev underlined that, according to him, up to that moment there is no need to deploy NATO troops in the country because "such a decision would not match [NATO allies'] interests nor the national interests of Bulgaria."

Another important manifestation of Bulgaria's allied strategic relations with the United States in 2021 was Bulgaria's active participation in the US-dominated strategic initiative called "Three Seas" which is part of the US geopolitical strategy in the Black Sea region against Russia and China. Bulgaria hosted the Sixth summit of the Three Seas Initiative (3SI) on 8-9 July 2021 which was the most important international event in the country for the year.

The topic of the Sixth Summit was *Three Seas Initiative: A Path to a Stronger, United and Competitive Europe*. The meeting was attended by high-level representatives of all 12 members, as well as the European Commission, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States, alongside other delegations from other parts of the world.

A delegation from the U.S. Congress also visited Bulgaria to demonstrate support for the Three Seas Initiative and also to engage with Bulgaria’s leaders and its people about their shared values and interests. They also pointed out the contribution of the Three Seas Initiative to energy diversification in the region and to the development of infrastructure connectivity between countries in Central and Eastern Europe, which according to the US position is of importance for the sustainable development of a united and prosperous Europe.

From August 23-25, 2021, a second delegation from the U.S. Congress visited Bulgaria to meet with government officials for talks on defense and security in the region, the economic environment, and the broader bilateral relationship. This visit, underscored the importance of the U.S.-Bulgaria strategic partnership to the U.S. government and to the security of the region.

**Bulgaria and Russia**

In 2021, relations between Bulgaria and Russia continue to be complicated and difficult. The establishment of a NATO naval coordination center in Varna last year, the holding of large-scale joint military exercises with participants from outside the region and the use of Russia's image as an "enemy" contributed to the rise of tensions between Bulgaria and Russia.

Mutual mistrust has led to a series of diplomatic scandals in which Bulgaria has accused Russia of espionage. In 2020 Bulgaria has declared Russian citizens accused of espionage persona non grata four times and at the beginning of 2021 two more Russian diplomats were ordered to leave in accusations of espionage as well.

In March 2021, relations between Bulgaria and Russia have been shaken again by a spy scandal that has led to new diplomatic tensions between the two countries. The Bulgarian prosecutors and the State Agency for National Security announced the arrest of six officials
working for the Defense Ministry and Military Intelligence Service on suspicion of spying for Russia. They were accused of passing classified information related to NATO military technology and strategic plans. Soon after that Bulgarian Foreign Ministry declared two secretaries of the Russian embassy persona non grata and invited them to leave the country in 72 hours.

At the same time Bulgaria still has a strong economic interest in maintaining good relations with Russia. Extremely important is the fact that Bulgaria is almost entirely energy dependent on Russia, which is a major supplier of crude oil and natural gas.

**Bulgaria and EU**

Milestone of the Bulgaria-EU relations in 2021 was the new temporary recovery instrument for the period 2021-2027 called “Next Generation EU” the centerpiece of which is the so-called Recovery and Resilience Facility. This temporary recovery instrument allows the European Commission to raise funds to help repair the immediate economic and social damage brought about by the coronavirus pandemic.

In the middle of October Bulgaria finally approved and sent in Brussels its Recovery and Resilience Plan. With its implementation, almost BGN 13 billion should be invested in the Bulgarian economy in the next few years. According to the Government the plan meets both the priorities of the European institutions to strengthen the environmental and digital transition, and the Cabinet's desire to drive key reforms.

The Recovery and Resilience Facility represents a historic opportunity for Bulgaria to carry out major transformations with the objective of shaping a fairer, greener and more resilient future.

**Bulgaria and Western Balkans**

Finally, one of the most important and priority areas of Bulgarian foreign policy in 2021 remained the region of the Western Balkans.

Blocking the start of EU membership talks of the Republic of Northern Macedonia (and Albania) continue during the whole year. In 2021 Bulgaria continued to actively negotiate with the Republic of Macedonia, seeking an opportunity for compromise.

On May 20, 2021 the Portuguese Foreign Minister Augusto Santos Silva and EU Neighborhood and Enlargement Commissioner Oliver Varheleyi had a series of meetings with Bulgarian officials in an attempt to break through Bulgaria's position on Skopje's EU integration. The answer Bulgaria was that “the implementation of the neighborhood agreement
from 2017 remains of a key importance." According to the Bulgarian government, clearing history textbooks of misinterpretations is a key condition for Macedonia on its path to Europe.

On June 17, Bulgaria was visited by an official delegation from the Republic of North Macedonia led by Prime Minister Zoran Zaev. Despite hopes of making progress in the political dialogue between the two countries, Bulgaria was compelled to postpone again lending its support for the start of the accession negotiations with the Republic of North Macedonia at the June 2021 General Affairs Council.

The position of Bulgaria was that it will continue to insist on receiving reliable guarantees that its fundamental interests shall not be infringed. The practice of suppressing the rights of people in the Republic of North Macedonia who identify themselves as Bulgarians must cease. Bulgaria wants to see an irreversible, comprehensive and effective implementation of the Treaty on Friendship, Good-Neighborly Relations and Cooperation of 2017.

A tentative route out of the 10-month deadlock emerged on October 6 after a meeting between Bulgarian President Rumen Radev, Northern Macedonian Prime Minister Zoran Zaev, outgoing German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and French President Emmanuel Macron on the sidelines of an EU-Western Balkans summit at Brdo Castle in Slovenia. Bulgaria was under evident EU pressure to unlock Northern Macedonia’s EU path.

That time Bulgaria listed three demands before withdrawing its objection to EU talks for Skopje.

The first was to treat Macedonian Bulgarians on an equal footing with other “constituent parts of peoples” in the Macedonian constitution and answer “their request to be inscribed” in it.

The second request was for the number of Bulgarians in Northern Macedonia to be “adequately reflected in the census process” of the Macedonian population.

The third – Northern Macedonia to recognizes the “historical truth”, as it did in the treaty with Greece, and that Macedonian textbooks would not instill hatred towards Bulgaria.

In the middle of December 2021, during the sixth summit of the Eastern Partnership initiative, Bulgaria stated that it was not yet ready to lift the blockade on Skopje.

At the end of the year the newly elected Bulgarian Prime Minister Kiril Petkov promised a “very fast” new process that should help Sofia lift its veto and unlock the start of North Macedonia’s EU accession negotiations.
Conclusion

We must say that the outlined main priorities and trends in Bulgarian foreign policy in 2021 will most probably remain unchanged in the next 2022.

It seems that Bulgaria will continue to be strongly influenced by global geopolitical struggle between the USA from one side and Russia and China on the other. From this point of view, the Euro-Atlantic orientation of Bulgaria, in which NATO membership and special allied relations with the United States are of particular significance, will remain crucial for the country's foreign policy.

In the regional plan, the main priority next year will remain Bulgaria's policy towards the Western Balkans, in which relations with the Republic of Northern Macedonia are of particular importance.