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Ever Increasing Circles: How Bulgaria Is Straying from Russia's Orbit

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Ever Increasing Circles: How Bulgaria Is Straying From Russia's Orbit

Once [dubbed](#) by Moscow its “Trojan horse” in the West, Bulgaria largely seems to live up to that description until recently.¹ President Rumen Radev has been fiercely critical of the military assistance sent to Ukraine, recent parliamentary elections in October 2024 saw pro-Russian parties secure over a [quarter](#) of the vote,² and Sofia's foreign policy debate is still centered around relations with Moscow, which over [half](#) of Bulgarians believe to be no threat.³

It is indeed a tall order to curb Russian influence in a country whose very statehood was reestablished in the late 19th century as part of Russia's drive through the Black Sea to the Mediterranean under the banner of protecting the empire's Slavic and Orthodox brethren. Bulgarian party politics was born out of disagreement on how close the country should be to Russia. And neither fighting on opposite sides in the two world wars, nor cheerless decades spent in the Soviet camp during the Cold War did much to damage the pro-Russian sentiment in Bulgarian society. Little wonder that in the 21st century, Moscow has viewed Bulgaria as a malleable partner whose historical ties can be leveraged to get better access to Europe, to address Russia's security concerns, or to sow discord among the Kremlin's opponents in the West.

¹ “Vladimir Chizhov: Vie ste nashiyat troyanski kon v ES v dobriya smis” [You Are Our Trojan Horse in the EU, in a Good Sense], *Capital*, November 10, 2006, https://www.capital.bg/politika_i_ikonomika/bulgaria/2006/11/10/293214_vladimir_chijov_vie_ste_nashiiat_troi_anski_kon_v_es_v/php?storyid=293214.

² “Rezultati ot parlamentarnite izbori 2024” [Results of Parliamentary Elections 2024], Tsentralna izbiratelna komisiya na Balgariya [Central Election Commission of Bulgaria], <https://results.cik.bg/pe202410/rezultati/index.html>.

³ Rumena Filipova, “Bulgarian Public Opinion, 2024: Increasing Commitment to Allies and Improving Perceptions of Media Freedom amid Continuous East-West Ambivalence,” Briefing Paper No. 6, Institute for Global Analytics, April 2024, <https://globalanalytics-bg.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Bulgaria-Report-2024-Final-Version.pdf>.



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Still, history is not destiny—even in the Balkans. Since Bulgaria joined the EU and NATO in the mid-2000s, its efforts to emancipate itself from Moscow may have lacked consistency, but they have been greatly aided by Russian arrogance and self-seeking policies. After years of gradual deterioration, numerous Russo-Bulgarian ties were finally severed in the wake of Moscow’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Today, Bulgarians may still know the name of the Russian ambassador better than the frequently changing heads of their own government, but beyond the media buzz, most of Moscow’s leverage in Bulgaria has perished in the flames of Russia’s war against Ukraine.

Declining Energy Leverage

Unlike in other states of post-communist Europe, Moscow retained a key role in the Bulgarian economy long after the end of the Cold War. Russia remained Bulgaria’s largest import partner well into the 2010s, outstripping even leading EU economies.⁴

The main reason for that was the all-encompassing dependency of the Bulgarian energy sector on Russian deliveries. Russia’s Gazprom was the only source of Bulgaria’s gas imports, Rosatom provided fuel for Bulgaria’s Kozloduy nuclear power plant, and Bulgaria’s sole oil refinery in Burgas was privatized by Russia’s Lukoil, which turned it into a bridgehead to dominate the Bulgarian market and expand into other Balkan countries.⁵

⁴ “Exports, Imports and Trade Balance by Groups of Countries and Main Partner Countries of Bulgaria,” National Statistical Institute of the Republic of Bulgaria, https://www.nsi.bg/sites/default/files/files/data/timeseries/fTrade_1.1.2.2_en.xls.

⁵ Dimitar Bechev, “Russia’s Influence in Bulgaria,” New Direction, 2018, <https://newdirection.online/2018-publications-pdf/ND-report-RussiasInfluenceInBulgaria-preview-lo-res.pdf>.



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Moreover, Bulgaria featured prominently in Russian plans to bolster its status as an energy superpower. Moscow viewed the friendly Balkan nation as an ideal partner whose weak negotiating position could be abused to bypass more demanding transit states on the way to European energy markets. This approach engendered a number of massive energy projects that Russia planned to implement in and with Bulgaria.

The oil pipeline from Burgas in Bulgaria to Alexandroupolis in Greece would have allowed Russian oil exporters to access the Mediterranean without the need to wait in line in the Turkish Straits. The completion of Bulgaria's second nuclear power plant, Belene, would have proved that Rosatom's nuclear expertise is good enough to construct more power plants in EU states. And the South Stream gas pipeline connecting Russia to Bulgaria under the Black Sea would have granted Gazprom direct access to the EU gas market, bypassing Ukraine.

These projects were also supposed to showcase the benefits of energy cooperation with Russia—especially for local ruling elites, whom generous Moscow would have allowed to have their share of multibillion rents generated by massive construction and future energy flows.

The Russian plans were never to materialize. They proved too grandiose for Bulgaria's modest means and too opaque to attract Western investors. All three projects collapsed one by one in the early 2010s under the burden of spiraling costs, deficient planning, and poor understanding of EU [regulations](#).⁶

⁶ "South Stream bilateral deals breach EU law, Commission says," *Euractiv*, December 4, 2013, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/competition/news/south-stream-bilateral-deals-breach-eu-law-commission-says/>.

Their legacy, however, proved resilient enough for a scaled-down comeback. In 2021, on the eve of invading Ukraine, Moscow finally pressured Bulgaria into [completing](#) a reduced version of the South Stream, rebranded the Turkish or Balkan Stream.⁷ The pipeline had far smaller capacity and came ashore in Turkey, but still decreased Russia's dependency on transit through Ukraine.

The Belene nuclear power plant saga also [seemed](#) to be on course for a new chapter in 2016, when Moscow won an international arbitration case against Sofia, forcing the latter to pay for two nuclear reactors already manufactured by Rosatom.⁸ Since they were gathering dust on the bank of the Danube, Bulgaria had few options but to resume talks with Russia.

But Moscow's invasion of Ukraine dashed all hopes for revival. Russia resorted to energy blackmail in a bid to stop European aid to Ukraine, but that backfired badly in Bulgaria. When in April 2022, Moscow demanded payments for gas to be made in rubles, Sofia jumped at the chance to sever the decades-old dependency and [stopped](#) buying Russian gas altogether.⁹

Instead, thanks to a number of new interconnectors to neighboring states constructed with EU assistance, Bulgaria struck new long-term deals with [Azerbaijan](#) for pipeline gas¹⁰ and with

⁷ "Serbia starts receiving gas from Bulgaria through Turkish Stream", *bne IntelliNews*, January 1, 2021, <https://www.intellinews.com/serbia-starts-receiving-gas-from-bulgaria-through-turkish-stream-199400/>.

⁸ Maxim Samorukov, "The Balkan Cycle: Why Russo-Bulgarian Relations Are Growing Again," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 25, 2018, <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2018/05/the-balkan-cycle-why-russo-bulgarian-relations-are-growing-again?lang=en>.

⁹ "Energy Minister: Bulgaria Rejects Paying for Russian Gas in Roubles," *The Sofia Globe*, April 3, 2022, <https://sofiaglobe.com/2022/04/03/energy-minister-bulgaria-rejects-paying-for-russian-gas-in-roubles/>.

¹⁰ "Bulgaria Resumes Russian Gas Imports via Turkey," *Interfax*, January 9, 2023, <https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/103872/>.

[Turkey](#)¹¹ and [Greece](#)¹² to access their LNG facilities. It may well be that the gas Bulgaria is buying from other countries partly still originates in Russia, but the restoration of Gazprom's monopoly and ensuing Kremlin influence is now out of the question.

Dependency on Russian oil was next in line to be severed. Although the EU granted Bulgaria a waiver, allowing imports to continue till the end of 2024, Sofia completed the decoupling ahead of schedule. The once omnipotent Lukoil saw its oil terminal in Burgas transferred under the operational control of the Bulgarian authorities in August 2023. In October, Sofia imposed a 60% tax on the refinery's profits, and finally [banned](#) the import of Russian oil from March 2024, replacing it with deliveries from Iraq and Kazakhstan.¹³ The refinery itself is [reportedly set](#) to be sold by Lukoil in coming months.¹⁴

As for the country's nuclear plants, in June 2024, Kozloduy [started](#) using fuel produced by the United States' Westinghouse and France's Framatoma, with the full transition to be completed in

¹¹ "Как България успя да се раздели успешно с руския газ" [How Bulgaria Successfully Separated from Russian Gas], Deutsche Welle, January 5, 2023, <https://www.dw.com/bg/apokalipsist-ne-dojde-kak-blgaria-uspa-da-se-razdeli-uspesno-s-ruskia-gaz/a-64291995>.

¹² "The First LNG Deliveries to Bulgaria Arrived at the Terminal in Alexandroupolis," Ministry of Energy of the Republic of Bulgaria, May 4, 2023, <https://www.me.government.bg/en/news/the-first-lng-deliveries-to-bulgaria-arrived-at-the-terminal-in-alexandroupolis-3516.html?p=eyJ0eXBlljoiaG90bmV3cyJ9>.

¹³ "Bulgaria Replacing Russian Crude with Oil from Kazakhstan, Iraq, Tunisia," *Reuters*, January 12, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/bulgaria-replacing-russian-crude-with-oil-kazakhstan-iraq-tunisia-2024-01-12/>.

¹⁴ "Russian energy group Lukoil considered sale of Bulgarian refinery to Qatari-British consortium," *Financial Times*, November 5, 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/b77822f6-e2a7-420a-bb23-43a8d21548f2>.

four years.¹⁵ In the meantime, talks are underway to [sell](#) Ukraine the two reactors from the aborted Belene plant.¹⁶

The resulting collapse of Russian economic leverage in Bulgaria can hardly be overestimated. Russia's share in Bulgarian imports was [reduced](#) to a mere 1.3% in 2024 — a sharp contrast with the 20% around which it hovered just a decade ago.¹⁷ Sanctions and war-incurred transport disruptions also demolished Bulgarian exports to Russia (to a share of 0.9% in the same period) and the [flow](#) of Russian tourists to Bulgaria (the number of visits in the summer of 2024 was more than ten times lower than in the summer of the pre-pandemic 2019).¹⁸

The swift dismantling of the multi-faceted economic dependency on Russia was neither painless (inflation [hit](#) 15% in 2022)¹⁹ nor universally supported in Bulgarian society and the political class. But several years already spent without Russian deliveries and the long-term framework of new energy agreements make the reversal unlikely.

A Polarizing Issue

¹⁵ "Bulgarian Nuclear Plant Starts to Replace Russian Fuel," *The Moscow Times*, June 10, 2024, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/06/10/bulgarian-nuclear-plant-starts-to-replace-russian-fuel-a85363>.

¹⁶ "Украина планирует купить у Болгарии российское оборудование для АЭС" [Ukraine Plans to Purchase Russian Equipment for a Nuclear Power Plant from Bulgaria], *Коммерсантъ* [*Kommersant*], March 23, 2024, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/6592698?ysclid=m3vnejg5si180853589>.

¹⁷ "Exports, imports and trade balance of Bulgaria with main non EU partner countries," National Statistical Institute of the Republic of Bulgaria, <https://www.nsi.bg/en/content/7503/main-trade-partners>.

¹⁸ "Arrivals of Visitors from Abroad to Bulgaria by Months and by Country of Origin," National Statistical Institute of the Republic of Bulgaria, <https://www.nsi.bg/en/content/1969/arrivals-visitors-abroad-bulgaria-months-and-country-origin>.

¹⁹ "Inflation and Consumer Price Indices," National Statistical Institute of the Republic of Bulgaria, <https://www.nsi.bg/en/content/2445/inflation-and-consumer-price-indices>.



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The economy is not the whole story, however. The ties between Russians and Bulgarians date back centuries and are far more diverse than contracts with Gazprom. Russia's role as the liberator of Bulgarian lands is ingrained in Bulgarians' national memory, and a shared Orthodox and Slavic heritage still resonates with a significant part of Bulgarian society. In comparison with other Eastern European states, Bulgarians feel far less resentment toward the communist era, with Soviet nostalgia driving them closer to Russians. Tens of thousands of Bulgarians speak Russian, have worked or studied in Russia, and have Russian friends and relatives.

Moscow has always been keen to abuse this legacy in order to undermine the Western unity behind initiatives it deemed anti-Russian. In the 1990s, the Bulgarian leadership was reluctant to pursue integration with NATO so as not to alienate Moscow. In 2014, Sofia dragged its feet on supporting EU sanctions against Russia over the annexation of Crimea. And in 2018, Bulgaria was one of few Western states to [refuse](#) to expel Russian diplomats in response to a Moscow-sponsored attempt on the life of ex-spy Sergei Skripal in the UK.²⁰

The combination of historical affinity with Russia and a certain disenchantment with the West also makes Bulgarian society vulnerable to Russian disinformation campaigns. Through social media and "mushroom" websites, Moscow [capitalizes](#) on Bulgarians' deep-seated fears of being swamped by migrants and losing their "true identity" in the "godless and cosmopolitan" West.²¹ Russian propaganda also [intertwines](#) its own narratives about "fake Ukrainian statehood" with

²⁰ "Western Allies Expel Scores of Russian Diplomats Over Skripal Attack," *The Guardian*, March 26, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/mar/26/four-eu-states-set-to-expel-russian-diplomats-over-skripal-attack>.

²¹ "Annual Report 2023," Human and Social Studies Foundation, April 2023, <https://hssfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Report-ENG.pdf>.

similar feelings some Bulgarian nationalists harbor toward neighboring North Macedonia, which they consider to be an integral part of historical Bulgarian lands.²²

The results are easy to see in Bulgarian public opinion. A 2024 poll [revealed](#) that after over two years of war next door, as many as 57% of Bulgarians believe that Russia poses no threat to their country. Nearly half—47%—hold the West and/or Ukraine responsible for the start of the Russo-Ukrainian war, while 61% are convinced that by aiding Kyiv militarily, Bulgaria risks being dragged into the hostilities.²³

Such fears have spawned a plethora of populist politicians who feed on them, playing into Moscow's hands: first and foremost, Bulgarian President Rumen Radev, a former air force general. In the EU, he is second only to Hungarian leader Victor Orban in his skepticism over military assistance for Ukraine. Radev [claims](#) that such aid undermines Bulgaria's own security and escalates the war. He regularly uses his limited presidential powers to slow down deliveries of aid.²⁴

That narrative is largely shared by the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) with which Radev is informally allied. One former BSP parliamentary deputy, Nikolai Marinov, who led the pro-

²² Dimitar Vatsov, Veronika Dimitrova, Ljubomir Donchev, Valentin Valkanov, and Milena Iakimova, "The Pro-Russian Propaganda Machine in Bulgaria, and the Russian Style Representations of North Macedonia," *Identities: Journal for Politics, Gender and Culture*, <https://identitiesjournal.edu.mk/index.php/IJPGC/article/view/530>.

²³ Rumena Filipova, "Bulgarian Public Opinion, 2024: Increasing Commitment to Allies and Improving Perceptions of Media Freedom amid Continuous East-West Ambivalence," Briefing Paper No. 6, Institute for Global Analytics, April 2024, <https://globalanalytics-bg.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Bulgaria-Report-2024-Final-Version.pdf>.

²⁴ "Радев обвини Украйна, че 'настоява' да води войната, която Русия започна" [Radev Accused Ukraine of 'Insisting' on Waging the War That Russia Started], *Свободна Европа [Free Europe]*, July 14, 2023, <https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/radev-voyna-ukrayna-rozhen/32503610.html>.



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Russian movement Russofilis, was even [detained](#) on charges of espionage for Russia in 2019.²⁵ Once an influential force comprised of former communist apparatchiks, BSP is now a shadow of its former self. But the party is still able to master enough support to secure a parliamentary group and at times a role of a junior partner in Bulgaria's frequently changing ruling coalitions, including the current one.²⁶

Finally, the rising star of the pro-Russian camp is the Vazrazhdane (Revival) party led by firebrand Kostadin Kostadinov. He minces no words in his pro-Russian pronouncements, lambasts Ukraine, and openly calls for Bulgaria to leave NATO. Having started as an anti-vaccine agitator during the pandemic, Kostadinov quickly brought his radical party from obscurity (1% of the vote in the 2017 elections) to 13% in October 2024. He is also good at manipulating public opinion to get his initiatives through parliament, such as a Russia-inspired and Vazrazhdane-drafted ban of "LGBT-propaganda" among minors, which Bulgarian deputies [adopted](#) this August, mainly out of fear of a public backlash if they voted against it.²⁷

Still, sporadic successes notwithstanding, Russia's popularity is on the wane in Bulgarian public sentiment, even if inertia is far stronger in this area than in the economy. The invasion of Ukraine may have failed to mobilize the whole of Bulgarian society against Russia, but has polarized it over the issue. The share of Bulgarians who view Russia negatively has [risen](#) to 34% in 2024 from

²⁵ "Bulgarian Ex-Lawmaker Accused of Spying For Russia Elected Chief of Moscow-Backed Group," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, March 15, 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/bulgaria-mp-malinov-spying-russia-elected-moscow-group/32319655.html>.

²⁶ Marton Dunai, "Bulgarian pro-Russia party joins coalition government," *Financial Times*, Centre for Eastern Studies, January 16, 2025, <https://www.ft.com/content/82358d2c-b984-4eb8-b23c-bd346d71c064>.

²⁷ "Bulgaria's Parliament Unexpectedly Outlaws LGBT 'Propaganda' in Schools," *Balkan Insight*, August 7, 2024, <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/08/07/bulgarias-parliament-unexpectedly-outlaws-lgbt-propaganda-in-schools/>.



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just 8% in 2018.²⁸ Those who see Russia as a strategic partner stood at 45% in 2021, but fell to 30% in 2022, and further decreased to 23% in 2024.²⁹ In the meantime, support for NATO membership has gone the opposite way, rising from 28% to 40% over the past seven years.³⁰

Bulgarian society fears war, mistrusts the country's political class, and is tired of the protracted stalemate in parliament. Having seen seven inconclusive elections in the past four years, it is now bracing itself for the possibility of an eighth one in the coming months. But pro-Russian radicals of Kostadinov's type are unlikely to come out on top as the result of this lengthy crisis. Rather, he is performing at his peak now, enabled by public apathy.

Radev and his entourage have better chances of becoming eventual winners, but he has long been part of the system and won't challenge the EU and NATO consensus, reserving rhetorical flirting with Russia for the domestic audience. During his presidency, Bulgaria has been an important provider of military and other aid to Ukraine, and even though Radev has repeatedly clashed with the government over the issue, he has avoided bringing the standoff to the extreme. If he acquires more powers, it will come with greater international exposure, leaving him less space for pro-Russia maneuvering.

²⁸ Krassen Nikolov, "Bulgarians Increasingly Pro-NATO, EU as Support for Russia Wanes," *Euractiv*, August 22, 2024, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/bulgarians-increasingly-pro-nato-eu-as-support-for-russia-wanes/>.

²⁹ Rumena Filipova, "Bulgarian Public Opinion, 2024: Increasing Commitment to Allies and Improving Perceptions of Media Freedom amid Continuous East-West Ambivalence," Briefing Paper No. 6, Institute for Global Analytics, May 2024, <https://globalanalytics-bg.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Bulgaria-Report-2024-Final-Version.pdf>.

³⁰ Krassen Nikolov, "Bulgarians Increasingly Pro-NATO, EU as Support for Russia Wanes," *Euractiv*, August 22, 2024, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/bulgarians-increasingly-pro-nato-eu-as-support-for-russia-wanes/>.



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The pro-Russian nucleus of 20-25% is set to stay in Bulgarian society for the foreseeable future, sustained by historic inertia. That will be enough for Moscow to continue with the narrative that Bulgarian people are genuinely pro-Russian and have simply been misled by treacherous pro-Western elites. But it's unlikely to be enough to turn Bulgaria into a serious troublemaker within Western structures.

Unseen Influence

The least visible but arguably most efficient channel of Russian influence in Bulgaria lies beneath the surface of public politics. Despite the two decades that Bulgaria has spent in NATO, Moscow still commands a far-reaching network of informal connections within the Bulgarian political class, intelligence services, big business, and organized crime. Many of these ties date back to the communist era, when the Bulgarian state cooperated with the USSR so closely that the country was called the 16th Soviet republic. Since then, attempts to weed out this influence have brought only partial success.

In the 1990s, fledgling Bulgarian oligarchs often expanded their fortunes in cahoots with their Russian counterparts. Russian businessmen eagerly [benefited](#) from non-transparent privatization deals in Bulgaria.³¹ In the 2000s, it was not at all unusual for a Bulgarian minister to be first in charge of negotiations with one of the Russian energy giants, and then to get a lucrative [position](#)

³¹ Maria Simeonova, "Staying Afloat: How the EU Can Navigate the Black Sea to Counter Russian Aggression," European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), October 7, 2024, <https://ecfr.eu/article/staying-afloat-how-the-eu-can-navigate-the-black-sea-to-counter-russian-aggression/>.

in that same corporation.³² And once in a while, a public scandal would reveal the sizable presence of Russian agents in the Bulgarian intelligence community.³³

Such connections facilitate all kinds of informal and often malevolent Russian activities in Bulgaria itself, the Balkan region, and Europe as a whole. Moreover, these ties are often fluid, free of ideology, and driven by corruption, which makes them difficult to track. The influential Bulgarian oligarch Delyan Peevski, for example, who runs a parliamentary party and a media empire, is currently known for his strong pro-Western rhetoric, even though he is on the U.S. and UK sanctions lists for extensive corruption.³⁴ But just a decade ago, the same Peevski was hailing cooperation with Russia and lining his pockets via the murky South Stream construction project.

The same is true—to a certain extent—of Bulgaria’s largest party GERB. Ostensibly, it pursues a pro-Western center-right agenda, but numerous corruption scandals suggest that some of its functionaries would still be happy to do business with Russia if offered the right price. After all, it was GERB’s government that pushed through the construction of the controversial Turkish Stream at a record pace and with little regard for formal procedures—right on the eve of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

³² Dimitar Bechev, “Russia’s Influence in Bulgaria,” New Direction, 2018, <https://newdirection.online/2018-publications-pdf/ND-report-RussiasInfluenceInBulgaria-preview-lo-res.pdf>.

³³ Mark Kramer, “A Weak Link in NATO? Bulgaria, Russia, and the Lure of Espionage,” Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies, Harvard University, April 1, 2021, <https://daviscenter.fas.harvard.edu/insights/weak-link-nato-bulgaria-russia-and-lure-espionage>.

³⁴ “Treasury Sanctions Influential Bulgarian Individuals and Their Expansive Networks for Engaging in Corruption,” Press Release, U.S. Department of the Treasury, June 2, 2021, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0208>.

Another Bulgarian institution laden with multiple personal links to Russia is the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. Many of its priests have studied in Russia and share an ultra-conservative anti-Western world outlook. The Bulgarian Church is a relatively small institution with limited domestic influence, but the recent [election](#) of the pro-Russian Daniil as the new Bulgarian patriarch proved a boon for the standing of the Russian Church in the global Orthodox community.³⁵

Despite its widely criticized support for the Russian invasion, the Moscow Patriarchy has gained another ally in its rivalry with Constantinople. Daniil has refused to recognize the autonomy of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, condemned Kyiv's moves against the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which is still in communion with Moscow, and [backed](#) some other points of Moscow's agenda, including the ban of "LGBT propaganda."³⁶

The most problematic area, however, is Russia's use of its Bulgarian connections for espionage and sabotage. The recent waves of expulsions revealed that Moscow has commanded a diverse crowd of agents in Bulgaria, from [diplomats](#)³⁷ to [journalists](#)³⁸ and [priests](#),³⁹ who conducted their

³⁵ Svetoslav Todorov, "Bulgaria's New Patriarch Sparks Alarm Over Pro-Russian Views," *Balkan Insight*, July 1, 2024, <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/07/01/bulgarias-new-patriarch-sparks-alarm-over-pro-russian-views/>.

³⁶ "‘Като грижовна майка’: Църквата приветства анти-ЛГБТ закона и поиска още ‘инициативи’ за децата" [‘As a Caring Mother’: The Church Welcomes the Anti-LGBT Law and Calls for More ‘Initiatives’ for Children], *Свободна Европа* [Free Europe], August 8, 2024, <https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/bpc-pozicia-anti-lgbt-zakon/33070800.html>.

³⁷ Tsvetelia Tsoleva, "Bulgaria Expels 70 Russian Diplomatic Staff Over Espionage Concerns," *Reuters*, June 28, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/bulgaria-expels-70-russian-diplomatic-staff-over-espionage-concerns-2022-06-28/>.

³⁸ Полина Мотызлевская [Polina Motyzlevskaya], «Власти Болгарии выдворили из страны журналиста "Российской газеты"» [Bulgarian Authorities Expel Journalist of "Rossiyskaya Gazeta" from the Country], *Коммерсантъ* [Kommersant], November 1, 2023, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/6312343?ysclid=m443mzxf3j537835760>.

³⁹ «Посольство сообщило о выдворении из Болгарии настоятеля подворья РПЦ» [Embassy Reports Expulsion of the Russian Orthodox Church Representative in Bulgaria], *РБК* [RBC], September 21, 2023, <https://www.rbc.ru/society/21/09/2023/650c304c9a794726211d169>.

activities not only in the country, but also in wider Europe. In the 2010s, Russian military intelligence acted freely enough in Bulgaria for its agents to organize several explosions at depots with arms destined for Georgia and Ukraine, make an [attempt](#) on the life of the Bulgarian arms dealer Emilian Gebrev,⁴⁰ and [leave](#) unimpeded to perform similar activities in other parts of Europe.⁴¹

Nor is it uncommon for Bulgarian nationals to become Russian agents. The past few years have seen around a dozen Bulgarians, including acting security officials, charged for espionage for Russia [in Bulgaria](#)⁴² and other European countries. The most recent episode took place in the UK, where six Bulgarian nationals were sentenced for providing freelance espionage services to the Russian intelligence. For several years up until their arrest in early 2023, their activities ranged from shadowing the Bellingcat investigative journalist Christo Grozev to attempts to carry out surveillance of the U.S. training grounds for the Ukrainian military in Germany.⁴³

Given the non-transparency of Russian intelligence activities, it is difficult to accurately determine their current scale in Bulgaria. But the significant number of recent detentions and expulsions on espionage charges indicates that the Bulgarian authorities are now treating this problem more seriously. In the meantime, the severance of Bulgaria's energy dependence on Russia has curbed Moscow's ability to co-opt members of the Bulgarian political and business elites. Gone are the

⁴⁰ Marton Dunai, "Russian Hitmen and Saboteurs Target Bulgaria's Arms Industry, Magnate Says," *Financial Times*, November 19, 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/b1aa5696-6515-487d-ba4d-380c9c431c18>.

⁴¹ Michael Weiss, Christo Grozev, and Roman Dobrokhov, "Exclusive: Inside an Infamous Russian Spy Unit's First Bombing in NATO," *The Insider*, October 20, 2023, <https://theins.ru/en/politics/266039>.

⁴² Svetoslav Todorov, "Espionage Allegations Rock Bulgaria's Top Security Agencies," *Balkan Insight*, February 5, 2024, <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/02/05/espionage-allegations-rock-bulgarias-top-security-agencies/>.

⁴³ Helen Warrell, Martha Muir, Daria Mosolova, "The Wirecard fugitive, Russian intelligence and a Bulgarian spy ring," *Financial Times*, March 7, 2025, <https://www.ft.com/content/d91d6ffc-28ef-4abf-9d55-f48bce9d32f0>



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days when well-connected representatives of Russian energy giants behaved like kingmakers in the Bulgarian economy and domestic politics.

Still, the problem of Russian influence networks in Bulgaria is hardly resolved. The recent [decision](#) of the Bulgarian Constitutional Court to partially invalidate election results due to rigging has been another confirmation that the country's state apparatus remains susceptible to corruption, while the political scene is dominated by clientelistic parties.⁴⁴ Even if right now they are sparing no effort to attempt to portray themselves as pro-Western stalwarts, things may change quickly if Moscow reaches out to them with a lucrative offer.

Conclusions

For over a century and a half, Bulgaria has featured prominently in Russia's Black Sea strategy. Instead of direct annexation, the country was assigned the role of a humble satellite, always ready to facilitate Russia's access to Europe and the Mediterranean as well as ward off other powers from Russia's southern coast.

These objectives haven't changed much in the 21st century. Joint energy projects with Bulgaria were supposed to bring Russian energy giants closer to European markets, bypassing less pliant transit states, while historical affinity with Bulgarians was leveraged to limit NATO's presence in and around the Black Sea.

⁴⁴ "Bulgaria's CEC announces adjusted seat distribution in 51st National Assembly," *The Sofia Globe*, March 24, 2024, <https://sofiaglobe.com/2025/03/13/bulgarias-cec-announces-adjusted-seat-distribution-in-51st-national-assembly/>.

The results of Russia’s efforts, however, are in many ways the opposite of those intended. Moscow’s persistent manipulation of energy deliveries for political gains pushed Sofia into import diversification. Slow and half-hearted at first, the process accelerated after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. In less than three years, Bulgaria managed to wean itself off its longstanding dependency on Russian gas, oil, and nuclear fuel. The tables have turned, and now Russia depends on Bulgaria for the continuation of deliveries via Turkish Stream, which became the last pipeline taking Russian gas to Europe after transit via Ukraine stopped at the end of 2024.

In the security domain, Bulgaria has never been an enthusiastic member of NATO and is unlikely to become one in the foreseeable future. But nor did it yield to Moscow’s pressure when deciding to join the alliance or to host NATO military bases and U.S. soldiers.

Since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Bulgaria has welcomed hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian refugees and generously [provided](#) Kyiv with arms, fuel, and other aid — which was especially valuable during the difficult initial months of the war.⁴⁵ Bulgaria has [defied](#)⁴⁶ Russian attempts to block its territorial waters under the pretext of “military drills” and has preserved safe passage for trade through Ukraine’s Black Sea ports. Russian aggression has also given a new impulse to

⁴⁵ Philip Volkmann-Schluck, “Bulgaria to the Rescue: How the EU’s Poorest Country Secretly Saved Ukraine,” *Politico*, January 18, 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/bulgaria-volodymyr-zelenskyy-kiril-petkov-poorest-country-eu-ukraine/>.

⁴⁶ “България съгласува с НАТО отговор на руската блокада в Черно море” [Bulgaria Coordinates with NATO Response to Russian Black Sea Blockade], Euractiv Bulgaria, September 13, 2023, <https://euractiv.bg/section/%d0%bf%d0%be%d0%bb%d0%b8%d1%82%d0%b8%d0%ba%d0%b0/news/%d0%b1%d1%8a%d0%bb%d0%b3%d0%b0%d1%80%d0%b8%d1%8f-%d1%81%d1%8a%d0%b3%d0%bb%d0%b0%d1%81%d1%83%d0%b2%d0%b0-%d1%81-%d0%bd%d0%b0%d1%82%d0%be-%d0%be%d1%82%d0%b3%d0%be%d0%b2%d0%be%d1%80-%d0%bd%d0%b0-%d1%80/>.



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Bulgarian efforts to upgrade its own Black Sea [navy](#)⁴⁷ and [airforce](#)⁴⁸ to make them independent from Russian services and technology.

Even after years of assisting Ukraine in its resistance against Russian aggression, there is a sizable minority of Bulgarians who believe that it is not the West but Moscow whom Bulgaria should choose as its main ally. But their ability to influence state policies is limited, and Bulgaria's key vulnerabilities lie elsewhere.

Despite two decades spent in Euro-Atlantic structures, a significant part of the country's state apparatus and political elites remain corrupt and opportunistic, ready to offer their services to the highest bidder. Currently, they see the West in that role, and accordingly are bending over backwards to prove their pro-Western credentials. But their Atlanticist pronouncements amount to little more than an attempt to use the geopolitical standoff to alleviate the pressure to adhere to the rule of law and reforms coming from the EU. It's unlikely to be enough to discourage Russia from continuing to treat Bulgaria as a weak link in the West.

⁴⁷ "Bulgaria to Buy Torpedoes for Navy's New Patrol Vessels," *The Sofia Globe*, November 2, 2022, <https://sofiaglobe.com/2022/11/02/bulgaria-to-buy-torpedoes-for-navys-new-patrol-vessels/>.

⁴⁸ Ricardo Meier, "Bulgaria's First F-16 Block 70 Fighter Will Be Completed by the End of 2024," *Air Data News*, January 16, 2024, <https://www.airdatanews.com/bulgarias-first-f-16-block-70-fighter-will-be-completed-by-the-end-of-2024/>.