
FORCE MULTIPLIERS

THE INSTRUMENTALITIES OF IMPERIALISM

The New Imperialism, Volume 5

Edited by
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Chapter 4

BULGARIAN MEMBERSHIP IN NATO AND THE PRICE OF DEMOCRACY

Lea Marinova

The 10th anniversary of Bulgaria's admission as a member in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) occurred in 2014. Bulgaria was one of several new NATO members in 2004, joined by Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia (NATO, 2004). Also, 2014 marked 25 years since the fall of the Berlin Wall. In 1991, the first democratically chosen government was elected in Bulgaria. Bulgaria's entrance in NATO is praised by government officials, and generally by a large part of the population. It is proclaimed as an important step for Bulgaria in the route towards democracy and independence. It is interesting to note that Bulgaria's membership in NATO and the EU (joined in 2007) has not really resulted in the improvement of the standard of living in Bulgaria. Bulgarian accession to NATO resembles membership in an "elite club" (Slatinski, 2012), a prestigious network of white men who have a hobby of shopping for new weapons. Whether the weapons are of mass destruction or more mundane, these weapons are intended for "the new hybrid war, which combines conventional methods with guerrilla, cybernetic and information war" (Bulgarian Ministry of Defence [MoD], 2014a; for more on "hybrid war" as discussed in US military documents, see the Introduction to this volume). In the context of a country whose gross domestic income is one of the lowest in Europe as of 2006, around 2.6% of the budget is invested in the military. This percentage of military investment surpasses that of richer NATO members like Austria and Germany by 1.5%. (Chobanov, 2007). Furthermore, as reported by the EU's risk analysis team, Bulgaria is not identified as being in any danger of external attacks (Chobanov, 2007). The biggest issue, as listed by numerous

sources, is organized crime within the country, viewed as an important problem by 96% of Bulgarian respondents (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2014, pp. 2, 5). Foreign threats, real or imagined, are often used as an attention-grabbing tactic to distract a population from the internal problems of a country. This was a technique that was well elaborated during the socialist era in Bulgaria, a time when the West and all that was connected to it were considered the enemy. Today, a similar technique is used by the US, and is known as the risk of a terrorist attack (Harvey, 2003, p. 12). The question remains then, if there is no actual risk of foreign attack, why is all the funding for military equipment needed? If Bulgaria's membership in NATO is not really serving the Bulgarian people by facilitating development, then how does Bulgaria benefit from such an association? This chapter focuses on NATO's use of Bulgaria as an instrument of US imperialism. It is argued here that the main goal of the instrumentalization of Bulgaria is to augment US power and influence through the addition of allies, or "force multipliers" as explained in the Introduction to this volume. This chapter will thus broadly discuss the importance and nature of Bulgaria's NATO membership. Furthermore, it will investigate Bulgaria's *responsibility* as a member of NATO, as well as its participation in NATO's military operations.

Historical Predisposition

A dichotomy between pro-Russian and anti-Russian sentiments has "a long history" in Bulgaria (Andreev & Cekov, 2014/3/26). According to Bulgarian anthropologist, Ivaylo Dichev (cited in Andreev & Cekov, 2014/3/26), in the Bulgarian media one finds commentary that predominantly favours "the interests of the EU and NATO, while the [pro-]Russian perspective remains underrepresented and even demonized". This separation thus still structures popular opinion and can play an important role when painting a picture of the domestic political situation, one that echoes with the rhetoric of the Cold War and provides a historical predisposition that opened the way for NATO membership.

In her ethnographic study, Eleanor Smollett remarked on what she found was a certain "infatuation" of Bulgarians with the USA. Some of the youth with whom she talked said that they could not believe that unemployment could possibly exist in countries like the US, opinions which Smollett characterizes as an expression of ignorance, and repudiation of the socialist regime (Smollett, 1993,

p. 10). Such popular opinions did not appear organically from thin air, but rather were formed in a consistent manner. In other words, the pro-Russian and anti-Russian dichotomy exists because it has been imposed.

For a very long time, the only alternative to socialist news sources was Radio Free Europe, and it was largely funded by the CIA and private US donors (Johnson, 2008). Today, similarly there are not many media outlets that are free of private foreign funding or other interests. Educational institutions, such as the American College of Sofia,¹ a prestigious secondary institution founded by US missionaries in the 1860s, and the American University in Bulgaria at Blagoevgrad, founded in 1991,² were instances of US influence in education. First, American missionaries were sent to educate children, who later took working positions in the administration of the country. The work of the missionary schools was suspended in 1940. Throughout the 1990s in Bulgaria, there was also the appearance of numerous NGOs and think tanks that were largely funded by the US (Center for the Study of Democracy, 2010, p. 14). All these sources shaped not only Bulgarian public opinion, but the military community is also highly inspired by NATO ideology and the US Army. Interestingly, the historical binary opposition of pro-Russian and anti-Russian is used in official documentation and political discourse, especially as an argument for certain political decisions, such as the project named “Vision 2020”.

Vision 2020

Vision 2020 is a project that was put into place by the Bulgarian Ministry of Defence and NATO. Its aim is to upgrade all of Bulgaria’s military equipment by replacing older Soviet and Russian equipment with US-made weapons. The upgrade of military equipment ties into the larger project of adding to the US’ network of allies, through membership in NATO. The central intention is to expand the budget Bulgaria spends on military equipment every year, until reaching 2.6% of GDP projected for 2020. The central argument for the increase in spending is security. In the last meeting between the Bulgarian Defence Minister Velizar Shalamanov and the Assistant Secretary General for Defence Policy and Planning, Heinrich Brauss, it was claimed that the modernization of the Bulgarian army is necessary because there is a “real risk for us to be outwitted by our enemies” (Novinite, 2014/10/13). Brauss warned

that if the Bulgarian government failed to follow the realization of Vision 2020, there would be a penalty procedure against Bulgaria initiated by NATO headquarters in Brussels. In terms of who and what Bulgaria must defend itself against, this Vision 2020 document frames its logic in terms of the Russian conflict in Ukraine and its “illegal annexation” of Crimea, classing this as a “negative development [that] has direct implications for Bulgaria’s security” (MoD, 2014a, p. 3). Here the pro-Russian, anti-Russian dichotomy becomes very useful even if inaccurate, or at least insufficient. In her 2008 report on Bulgaria and Southeast Europe, Antoinette Primatorova³ discussed the central issues surrounding the development of Bulgaria in a “globalizing world”. She identified climate change, energy issues, internal corruption and organized crime as the central issues in the country. Primatorova argued that the Bulgarian political context, after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, was simply not ready for participation in any exterior, international decision making, adding:

“The political agenda in Bulgaria has been defined in recent years mostly so as to comply with demands from or blueprints delivered by international organizations and bodies—be it the Council of Europe, the European Union, NATO, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank”. (Primatorova, 2008, p. 5)

Given that Russia still controls the energy supply, this refrains Bulgaria from participating in the creation of a common European policy for energy. Otherwise, since the collapse of the Soviet bloc, the driving forces behind reforms in Bulgaria have been NATO, the EU and the Council of Europe, and they have shaped to a great extent the political and economic decisions for the last 14 years or so (Primatorova, 2008, p. 8).

It is important to note that the EU and NATO have been central in shaping the Bulgarian socio-political context since the collapse of the Soviet-backed government. However there has not been enough critical questioning of the work of these organizations, simply because they are globally influential and thus taken-for-granted. Through the freedom and democracy discourse promoted by NATO and the soft power of the EU, those institutions appear as if they are arriving in Bulgaria for nothing else but to save the day. But such an outlook is rather naïve. Through the insertion of a set of values, the remaking of every possible system within a society, be it journalism, the army, or the official erection of private interests over public ones, these structures slowly create an ally in

the likeness of NATO and the EU. NATO is interested in the upgrading of the Bulgarian army, not out of an altruistic impulse, but because it would be greatly beneficial if Bulgaria could participate in NATO's "peace missions" and thus effectively perform as an ally—or, as a "force multiplier," as conceived by the US military strategists discussed in the Introduction to this volume (see Figures 4.1 and 4.2). The geopolitical position of Bulgaria permits easier entry to three important geographical regions: the Middle East, Russia, and Europe. Bulgaria forms part of south-eastern Europe and is situated next to the Black Sea, where the Middle East, Russia, and the rest of Europe connect. As Dr. Slatinski emphasizes in his analysis of Bulgarian membership in NATO, the accession of Bulgaria to the Alliance is not so much a sign of Bulgaria's development after the fall of the Berlin Wall, but rather "the result of an already determined geopolitical tendency" (translated from Slatinski, 2012). Today, Bulgaria plays a subordinate role in NATO. In 2013, NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen commented on Bulgaria's role, saying the country was to be "praised for its [*sic*] contributions to the Alliance and its commitment to transatlantic security" (NATO, 2013). The number one threat to the NATO alliance's security is identified as global terrorism (NATO, 2014a). Since 9/11, NATO has officially declared itself in support to the US in the "global war against terrorism," thus enforcing the US' right to increase security, to impose the US military presence in facilities in allied countries, and to demand foreign assistance in its campaigns. One of these forms of assistance is NATO's "peacekeeping missions". As a member of NATO, Bulgaria is left with no choice but to follow the steps of US imperialism.

Figure 4.1: NATO Training Bulgaria for “Interoperability”



This photo from May 15, 2014, shows members of Bulgarian Special Operation Forces conducting combat marksmanship training in preparation for “Exercise Combined Resolve II” at Grafenwoehr Training Area, Germany. It also provides a graphic sample of the meaning of the “force multiplier” concept. “Combined Resolve II” is a US Army Europe-directed multinational exercise, including more than 4,000 participants from 15 allied and partner countries including special operations forces from the US, Bulgaria, and Croatia, that involves “interoperability training” to promote “security and stability among NATO and European partner nations”. (US Army photo by Visual Information Specialist Gertrud Zach)

Afghanistan, Iraq, Kosovo, Somalia, Yemen and the War on Terrorism

Bulgaria is actively participating in several of NATO’s “peace-support” missions. As presented in the objectives set out by Bulgaria’s Ministry of Defence, Bulgarian participation in these missions is essential for the enhancement of the country’s “international prestige” (MoD, 2014b). In Afghanistan, the Bulgarian mission has reached its third stage already, that is, the participation of Bulgaria in training the Afghan Army. In Kosovo, attached to the Dutch contingent, the Bulgarians participated mostly in the building of facilities for the local population. The mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina had a similar mandate. Currently, Operation Active Endeavour consists in detecting and protecting against terrorism in the Mediterranean. Also, Bulgaria is part of NATO Training Mission-Iraq (NTM-I), as of 2014, which aims at the “relief and reconstruction of Iraq” (MoD, 2014b).

What is common to all of these missions? They all follow a similar model of intervention. NATO justifies such intervention as a means of countering terrorism, or potential terrorism. NATO thus claims to be bringing peace by facilitating the eradication of terrorism (NATO, 2014b). Such missions are part of the larger spectrum of crisis-management operations, in which the US and NATO collaborate, “from combat and peacekeeping, to training and logistics support, to surveillance and humanitarian relief” (NATO, 2014c). Peace-support is a euphemism for combat.

The “counter-terror” cover can also serve as a useful pretext for placing US forces in proximity to Russia. This justificatory logic is echoed in the report, “International Involvement in the Western Balkans,” where Georgi Kamov deduces that, “probably the only real motive for more than symbolic US presence in the Western Balkans is the anti-terror campaign and the possibility of intensified terrorist activity in the near future” (Kamov, 2005, p. 10). The actual danger of such terrorist attacks and the meaning of them are details omitted in this report, as is the case in all others. Plamen Pantev discusses in his article “Bulgaria in NATO and the EU: Implications for the Regional Foreign and Security Policy of the Country,” how Bulgarian policy is manipulated in order to fit in the larger paradigm of the war on terrorism:

“The wisdom of the last 16 years of the country’s foreign and security policy that contributed to the appearance and effective performance of a network of partnerships in a difficult period of wars and high tensions requires refreshing. This already happens with the clear Bulgarian commitments to focus on ‘completing the job’ in the Western Balkans and taking simultaneously responsibilities in dealing with the geopolitical obligations as a NATO and soon EU country in the Black Sea area and in the fight on terrorism and stabilising war-torn societies in the broader Middle East. The *purpose of ‘Europeanising’ the Balkans with the instrumental involvement of EU and NATO and preserving positive US interest* will constitute the contents of Bulgaria’s foreign and security policy in a region, considered a high security priority for the country”. (emphases added, Pantev, 2005, p. 5)

This statement openly accepts that such organizations as NATO and the EU are instruments operating to transform societies and inject US interests. From this perspective, it is clearer what is meant by an enemy. All of those who are perceived as enemies of the US, are also enemies of the members of their “elite clubs”. For the past decade or so, the enemy has been “terrorism”. Perhaps a brief review of the history of the Bulgarian relationship with this perceived

phenomenon might shed some light on what exactly is meant by the controversial term “terrorist”.

Terrorism and Bulgaria

In July of 2012 a bus exploded close to the airport of Burgas, a city on the shore of the Black Sea. The bus was filled with Israeli tourists according to a BBC report (BBC, 2013/2/5). The article reporting the event cites numerous times different official sources such as the Israeli Prime Minister, the Bulgarian Prime Minister and Interior Minister, the Canadian Prime Minister, the Lebanese Prime Minister, the director of Europol, and the US Deputy National Security Advisor for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism who was also Assistant to the US President. Soon after the explosion, it was claimed that the attack was a terrorist act committed by the Lebanese Hezbollah. The argument was that there are “obvious links” leading investigators to Hezbollah (even implicating Iran), links which were then framed as merely part of a “reasonable assumption”. The individuals identified as the attackers, held Australian and Canadian passports, which raises questions about the so-called “obvious link to Lebanon”—especially since their reportedly Lebanese driver licenses were revealed to be fakes (Barnett, 2013/2/5). It was claimed that the link to Hezbollah had been established because of certain data showing a financial connection to Lebanon and therefore to Hezbollah. The nature of that data however is not explained. US President Barack Obama did not wait long to qualify the act as being a “barbaric terrorist attack” (CNN, 2012/7/18). As soon as it was known that there was a Canadian passport holder involved in the explosion, the Canadian foreign minister declared that beyond a shadow of a doubt Hezbollah was responsible for the attack and that it needs to be internationally listed as a terrorist group (Barnett, 2013/2/5). The reactions of all these actors have something in common: the advancement and preservation of their own geopolitical interests. The event in Burgas was used to reassert the word “terrorism,” at a time when the EU was refusing to class Hezbollah as a “terrorist” group. References to Iran, Lebanon, Hezbollah, terrorism, and “heinous attack” were cast about in the media space as key words in place of substantive evidence and critical questioning. Still, even after the official report was released by Bulgarian investigators, there is no more information surrounding the sources of their information, the nature of the data acquired, or even details about the investigation itself—but there is ample evidence of Israeli, US, and Canadian

authorities capitalizing on the event to pressure the EU to designate Hezbollah a terrorist group.

Another aspect of Bulgarian history which contributes to its present relationship with the issue of “Islamic terrorism” is its relationship with Turkey and its Muslim majority. Five hundred years of Ottoman rule (or “the Turkish yoke” as commonly heard in Bulgaria), which ended with the Russian-Ottoman war, have intensely marked the Bulgarian consciousness. Around 10% of the total population are Turks living mostly in the rural areas of south-eastern and north-eastern Bulgaria. In addition to Bulgarian television news at 8:00 pm every evening, there is a broadcast of the news in Turkish at 5:00 pm. Also, a large number of imported TV series are from Turkey. The rest is inspired or directly comes from the US. Recently, a heated public debate surrounded the appearance of a Turkish language bill, obliging Turkish students to study Turkish in schools as a second language (World Bulletin, 2014). One of the influential parties in the Bulgarian parliament, The Movement for Rights and Freedoms (Dvijenie za Prava i Svobodi, DPS) is an ethnic party that aims to defend the interests of the minority Turk population. This party appeared in 1990, a year after the fall of the Soviet-backed government. In the 1980s, the Bulgarian Communist Party initiated the so-called “national revival process” (Vasileva, 1992; Tavanier, 2010). That process consisted of forced deportations to Turkey, and the negation of Muslim and Turkish cultural identification such as changing Turkish names into Bulgarian ones. During this time there was also the creation of ghettos for the Roma people who were constantly ostracized by the rest of the population. After the end of the regime, the Turkish language was banned from schools.

The Turkish and Roma Bulgarians have been used to produce an image of the other. Scapegoating the other reinforces the totalizing and very negative image of the “Arab” or the “Muslim”. In recent reports, some Syrian migrants have claimed to be victims of abuse by border police in Bulgaria (McCall, 2014/9/26). There are numerous examples of how xenophobia and racism are constantly being inflamed within the population in the public sphere. Casual racism towards Roma, Turkish or simply those known as Arab and/or Muslim populations has even become even the goal of certain political parties, such as Ataka.

Ethnic tensions in the country have also been discussed in the broader context of Bulgaria’s membership in NATO and the democratization process, in which quelling ethnic divisions is seen as an instrumental task to strengthen counter-terrorism:

“Stabilizing and democratising the area, overcoming the ethnic animosities and belated economic and infrastructure modernization of the broader Balkan region, strengthening the state institutions in all countries of the region are key [antidotes] in the fight with terrorism”. (Pantev, 2005, p. 17)

However, in adapting national politics to the US-led “war against terrorism,” when in the Bulgarian context it is precisely the idea of terrorism that is matched with the profile of a population that has been criminalized and marginalized on principally ethnic grounds, we face an aggravation and escalation of such tensions. How is the fight against terrorism helping to overcome ethnic animosities?

The Price of Democracy

The counter-terrorist agenda of the US curiously fits into the context of ethnic tensions in Bulgaria. In a country which is the poorest of the EU, the desire to join a global force such as NATO is immense. On the one hand, it provides status as a democratic country and masks the worms of the recent past and present, that is, the deeply embedded socio-economic problems. On the other hand, Bulgaria becomes an ally in the “war on terror”. Bulgaria is in a unique position, with Greece, as a European country having a border with Turkey, and thus providing an entrance to the rest of the Middle East. In 2014 Turkey politely declined participation in the US-led attack on ISIS in Iraq. Bulgaria is a country which cannot refuse such demands. It has to remain an ally of NATO, leaders think, for the sake of its own survival. Pantev argues that Bulgarian membership in NATO, and consequently its participation in NATO’s military campaigns, are essential for the democratization of the country:

“if we are serious in our intentions and declarations of joining NATO and the EU, we need to prove we can be ourselves vehicles of transition, reform, progress, development and integration. That is why *Bulgaria is not, and no country from the region should be, afraid of ‘getting infected’ by a temporary ‘culture of dependency’*. While dealing with the issues of change, using the external support of the EU, NATO and the USA the ‘know-how’ of being modern and up-to-date in social, economic and political performance can be internalised and turned into a building-block and basic motivation of new Bulgaria, member of NATO and the EU [*si*]”. (emphases added, Pantev, 2005, p. 24)

The discourse of democracy, freedom and equality that NATO uses to justify its military interventions is in striking contrast with actual actions. Nonetheless, imperialism needs the support of as many “allies” as possible, in order to perpetuate its existence. In return, protection and prestige are offered, and sought by some.

Figure 4.2: The US Inspects Bulgaria’s “Modernization”



The original caption for this photograph was: “Secretary of Defense William Cohen (right), accompanied by Bulgarian Minister of Defense Georgi Ananiev (left), inspects the joint service Bulgarian honour guard assembled at the airport in Sofia for his arrival welcoming ceremony, July 12, 1997. Cohen visited the former Soviet satellite nation to see for himself the governmental reforms and planned programs of modernization which have elevated Bulgaria to the forefront among those countries seeking NATO membership”. (Photo: US Department of Defense, via Wikimedia Commons)

Conclusion

In 2009, former Prime Minister Sergei Stanishev stated in the *Harvard International Review*,

“After years of social and political transformation, Bulgaria has uniquely positioned itself among the countries of the Balkans and the Black Sea region. Not only does it currently enjoy unprecedented economic growth and the full trust of foreign investors, but its accession to the European Union and its NATO membership have made it an even more critical strategic player in regional and international relations”. (Stanishev, 2009)

Besides the fact that this statement is false in its asserted facts, it also rests on the fallacy that participation in international relations is positive for the internal development of Bulgaria. As the poorest country of the EU, not only has Bulgaria not improved its economic standing but it is also headed towards greater expense which is far from necessary. As stated earlier, 2.6% of the GDP invested in the military is a budgetary decision that not even countries like Austria and Germany have taken, even though their economic growth is significantly greater than Bulgaria's. It is important for Bulgarians to be critical of any significant socio-political changes in Bulgaria at any moment, no matter if they are introduced by influential organizations such as NATO and the EU, and to examine how any policy (or change in policy) may influence the internal politics of the country. Bulgaria needs to take an independent position, oriented towards its own well-being, in order to become something different than its already established status as a vassal of empire.

Notes

- 1 For more details presented by the American College, see: http://www.acs.bg/Home/About_ACS/History.aspx
- 2 For a minimal presentation of the chronology behind the establishment of the American University in Bulgaria, see: <http://www.aubg.edu/quick-facts>
- 3 Antoinette Primatorova was a Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and later the Bulgarian ambassador to the European Communities: <http://www.cls-sofia.org/en/our-staff/antoinette-primatarova-32.html>
- 4 Ataka is renown in the public sphere as an extreme-nationalist party, which early gained greater visibility by using the motto, "Bulgaria for the Bulgarians". For a statement of the principles of this party, see: http://www.ataka.bg/en/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=14&Itemid=27

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