

BULGARIAN-RUSSIAN RELATIONS AFTER THE ACCESSION OF BULGARIA TO NATO IN THE PERIOD FROM 2004 TO 2024

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Introduction

Bulgaria is situated in the heart of the Balkan Peninsula and south-eastern Europe, covering a territory of 111,000 km². It shares borders with the Black Sea region to the east and is in close proximity to the Turkish straits. Bulgaria's location at the crossroads of Europe and Asia gives it significant geostrategic importance. The map below illustrates Bulgaria's geostrategic position in the Balkan region.

The Ottoman-Russian War in 1877-1878 resulted in the establishment of a new Bulgarian state after gaining independence from the Ottoman Empire. During both World War I and II, Bulgaria was allied with Germany. After the conclusion of World War II in 1946, Bulgaria became a one-party socialist state and part of the Eastern Communist bloc. In 1990, Bulgaria transitioned from a communist regime to a democracy, marking the beginning of the country's shift towards a democratic system and a new liberal market economy. This was achieved through the first multi-party election in the country, which was allowed by the communist party. The new democratic system opened the gate for other parties and organizations to compete. Bulgaria changed its political structure, based on the 1991 democratic Constitution (Curtis, 1993).



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Map 1: The geostrategic position of Bulgaria in the Balkan region (Haines, 2016, p. 1)

Thanks to the establishment of a new liberal government in 2001, Bulgaria achieved its first goal and became a member of NATO in 2004. Subsequently, in 2007, Bulgaria became a full member of the EU.

Russia, amidst political and economic crises in the 1990s, remained silent regarding the NATO membership of post-communist central and eastern European countries, taking it for granted. For a brief period, many post-communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe joined NATO, extending its geopolitical borders to the edge of the Russian Federation. However, this enlargement policy also led to Russia adopting aggressive policies, such as the Georgian war, annexation of Crimea, and invasion of Ukraine.

The Georgian War, the annexation of Crimea and the invasion of eastern Ukraine by Russia constituted pivotal moments in this conflict. As Zbigniew Brzezinski¹ (1997: 112-114) observed in his book *The Grand Chessboard*, if Russia were to extend an invitation to Ukraine, it would signify the reawakening of the soil of the former Soviet Union and the necessity for the United States and the NATO to implement new measures to prevent the further spread of Russian influence over the legacy of the USSR. These events will prompt the world to reflect more deeply on the concept of balance of power and security.

1 Zbigniew Brzezinski (born 28 March 1928) is a Polish-American diplomat.

The primary objective of the study is to examine the relationship between Bulgaria and Russia following Bulgaria's accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 2004. In order to achieve this, the following research questions are considered:

1. What are the advantages for Bulgaria of being in alliances with the West?
2. Has Bulgaria's relationship with Russia changed since its integration into NATO?
3. Why does Russia consider Bulgaria's membership of NATO to be a strategic threat?

A number of articles and books have been written and researched on the issues related to the Bulgaria-Russian relations in general. The study, however, focuses on the specific relations between Bulgaria and Russia, particularly in the context of Bulgaria's accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Another contribution of this study is the representation of Bulgaria as an important strategic Balkan country for both the NATO and the Russian Federation. The books and journals as well as newspapers had its contribution to the work. The temporal scope of this research project encompasses the period between the admission of Bulgaria to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in 2004 and the outbreak of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Literature review

In her 2015 book, "Bulgarian-Russian Relations in the Context of Global Powers' Geopolitical Strategies in the Balkans", Penka Peeva examines the Bulgarian-Russian relationship in the context of the European Union's diminished influence in the Balkan Peninsula and the geopolitical advancement of the Russian Federation in the region. The author posits that the current crisis EU affords Russia greater scope to shape its foreign policy towards Bulgaria and other countries in the South-East region of Europe. Peeva asserts that Russia is capitalizing on the opportunities and advantages presented by the EU crisis to enhance its influence in the region. As a historian, she asserts that Bulgaria occupies a pivotal position in Russian geopolitical and geographical considerations, as well as in historical relations between the two countries. Concurrently, she posits that Bulgaria's integration into NATO and EU has exacerbated its relationship with Russia. The reasons for the freezing of relations in the 1990s were twofold. Firstly, Bulgaria had turned away from Russia, which had previously been a relatively weak power, and sought a new alternative in Western countries. Secondly, the dissolution of the Soviet Union had created a power vacuum in the region, which Bulgaria was

keen to fill. The accession of Bulgaria NATO represented a significant turning point in the country's foreign policy. Russia has sought to identify alternative avenues to impede the activities of NATO and extend its influence within the region (Peeva, 2016).

Additionally, a study was conducted by Heather E. Colney, James Mina, Ruslan Stefanov and Martin Vladimirov, entitled "The Kremlin Playbook: Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe" (2016). The objective of the study was to examine the economic impact and influence of Russia in Central and Eastern Europe, with a focus on five countries: Bulgaria, Hungary, Serbia, Slovakia, and Latvia. Russia established a network of patronage in the region, which it then leverages to influence and direct decision-making processes. The authors provide illustrative examples of how Russia employs leaders to establish pro-Russian parties in each state and undermines democratic institutions, utilizing corruption as a primary instrument, and exploits the inherent weaknesses of capitalism through economic influence. The book uncovers the methods through which Russian influence is infiltrating the state system. Finally, the authors present a list of potential solutions to halt the expansion of Russian influence in Bulgaria.

There is another similar study represented by David Clark and Dr Andrew Foxall whose research is about *Russia's Role in the Balkans –Cause for Concern?* (2014). The authors posit that the Russian foreign policy has become more assertive and influential under the leadership of President Putin. The authors posit that EU policymakers must have a clear understanding of Russia's strategic intentions in the Balkans and the absence of preventive measures by EU, the situation may become irremediable.

Vincent Pouliot is an author who analyzes the relationship between two former rivals NATO and the Russian Federation in his book *International Security in Practice: The Politics of NATO-Russia Diplomacy* (2010). The author employs historical and qualitative analysis based on interweaves to demonstrate that the establishment of a security community between NATO and the Russian Federation is constrained by the enduring animosity between the two entities and Russia's perception of NATO's continued expansion as a threat. The author concurs that NATO plays a dominant role and frequently assumes a superior position towards Russia, which Russia perceives as a highly significant factor in its elevated position within the international security hierarchy. Consequently, the contemporary Russian–Atlantic relationship is primarily characterized by intense symbolic power struggles that impede the development of the security community (Pouliot, 2010). This book is of significant value to this study because an understanding

of the relationship between NATO and the Russian Federation allows us to determine the nature of Russia's relations with Bulgaria, which is a member state of NATO.

Also, there is report written by Dimitar Bechev, *Russia's influence in Bulgaria* (2016). The author identifies intricate interconnections between Russia and Bulgaria, discernible in the realms of politics, economics, and religious and cultural activities. Bechev highlights that throughout history and in the present day, this ongoing conflict between the West and the East persists. The prevalence of personal interests and corruption in Bulgarian policy has the effect of undermining national sovereignty. By accepting Bulgaria as a member of the NATO and EU, this country has a significant opportunity to pursue comprehensive political reforms that will facilitate economic growth and social advancement. Nevertheless, Russia has sought to expand its influence in Bulgaria through the implementation of ambitious energy and economic initiatives, such as the South Stream project. This has resulted in notable economic and political challenges for the country. The author delineates the Russian sphere of influence in Bulgaria, which is manifest in the energy and banking, economic and tertiary sectors, as well as the media and press. Ultimately, Bechev proposes recommendations for counteracting Russian influence in order to safeguard Bulgaria's reputation and national interests.

Alejandro Sanchez Cornejo Nieto is author of article *A Drop in the Ocean: Bulgaria's NATO Membership and Black Sea Geopolitics* (2008). In the article, Nieto addresses the issue of Bulgaria's accession to NATO and the country's military activities within the Alliance. At the outset of the article, the author delineates the process of preparation and negotiation surrounding Bulgaria's entry into NATO. What benefits does NATO derive from Bulgaria? This question constitutes the principal focus of this article. Nieto posits that Bulgaria offers more benefits to the NATO than the reverse, yet the inefficiency of Bulgaria's military structures in implementing military reforms has resulted in the country's loss of legitimacy and reputation among other NATO members. The reason for this situation is undoubtedly the invisible link between Bulgaria and Russia in the military sphere, particularly in the area of military equipment.

NATO-Russia Relations

During the Cold War, the world was divided into two opposing ideological blocs, forming a bipolar international system. The Western bloc, led by the United States, was capitalist in nature, while the Eastern bloc, led by the Soviet Union,

was communist. Since WW2, the relationship between these two blocs has been characterized by mutual hostility. In response, NATO was established with the objective of preventing the subsequent expansion of the Soviet Union, initially in Europe and subsequently in other regions of the globe. Conversely, the Warsaw Pact was established with the objective of safeguarding the interests of the communist bloc and defending it against perceived threats of capitalist expansion. “The NATO was created to counter both Soviet expansion and the possibility of a resurgence of militant nationalism” (The NATO, 2017). The year 1990 marked the beginning of a new era in relations between NATO and Russia, which was experiencing significant challenges on both the domestic and external fronts, including economic and political difficulties following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. It was incumbent upon NATO to exploit all opportunities to advance towards its future goals and to consolidate its position to the greatest extent possible beyond the sphere of Russian interest. The enlargement strategy led to the integration of numerous post-communist states into the NATO.

In 1999, Vladimir Putin assumed the role of prime minister, marking a pivotal moment in the construction of a new Russia and symbolizing the struggle to reclaim Soviet-era assets. In 2013, Russia allocated a greater proportion of its gross domestic product (GDP) to defense than the United States for the first time in a decade. Russia, under the leadership of Putin, has taken a series of actions that can be perceived as a contra-step toward USA and the NATO expansion. The Georgian War, the annexation of Crimea and the invasion of eastern Ukraine occurred subsequent to the intention of the NATO to integrate these countries into the organization and to establish a military presence there (Tisdall, 2014). This could result in significant alterations to the international system and compel small and weak states to reconsider their allegiances if there is only one viable option.

A Historical Overview of the Relationship between Russia and Bulgaria

The populations of Bulgaria and Russia share numerous similarities and interactions, which are shaped by their historical heritage (Peeva, 2015). Historically, Bulgaria and Russia shared mutual interests. Bulgaria’s geopolitical and geostrategic position on the Balkan Peninsula made it a crucial partner to Russia. Conversely, Russia was also Bulgaria’s indispensable ally due to its reliance upon the latter’s economic and energy resources.

Following the Second World War, Bulgaria was situated within the geopolitical sphere of the Soviet Union and became a member of the communist military

bloc, the Warsaw Pact, for mutual defense. Bulgaria possessed a formidable military apparatus and was consistently prepared to defend the interests of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in the eastern part of Europe. However, the 1980s marked the beginning of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the transition period for Bulgaria. The eastern communist regime was undergoing a transformation towards a more Western-oriented democracy, and the country was transferred to the geopolitical sphere of the United States.

In the final decade of the 20th century, Bulgaria experienced a profound yet peaceful transition from dictatorship to democracy. Following the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the transformation of the international political landscape in 1989, Bulgaria initiated a new era of foreign policy. This coincided with a shift in the country's foreign relations, away from Russia and towards NATO and the European Union (Tashev, 2004).

During the period of transition, Bulgaria lacked the capacity to develop a robust foreign policy. The initial step taken by the country was to repair relations with Greece and Turkey, both of which are members of NATO. Another action was to take care of regional stability by recognizing the independence of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia.

Internal political differences² over Bulgaria's approach to reorienting its alliances towards the West and the NATO led to internal party conflict. Following the Union of Democratic Forces' victory in 1997, a new phase of Bulgarian foreign policy began, characterized by efforts to integrate the country into the NATO alliance. The most significant rationale for this revised foreign policy agenda was to ensure the security and stability of Bulgaria (Boneva, 2012).

The inaugural democratically elected president of post-communist Bulgaria, Zheliu Zhelev³, from UDF, espoused a distinctly pro-Western stance, advocating for Bulgaria's integration into EU and NATO, with the expectation of fostering harmonious relations with neighboring countries.

Bulgaria seized the opportunity to pursue a new security strategy and economic development through an alliance with NATO. The action had negative

2 Following Bulgaria's transition to a democratic system, the government changed hands between the communist and democratic opposition parties for many years. This resulted in a delay in NATO and EU membership. When the communists formed a government, they generally followed an anti-NATO policy and looked favourably on relations with Russia. Consequently, this affected Bulgaria's foreign policy.

3 Zheliu Mitev Zhelev (March 3, 1935- January 30, 2015, Sofia), Bulgarian politician who served as president of Bulgaria from 1990 to 1997.

consequences for the relationship between Bulgaria and Russia. This unavoidable decision on the part of Bulgaria effectively defined its position in the international arena. This resulted in Bulgaria assuming new responsibilities in matters of security and defense, while precipitating a crisis in its relations with Russia.

The reduction in the size of the Bulgarian army was a consequence of both Bulgaria's accession to NATO and the fact that the country's national security was dependent on the organization. The Bulgarian army was required to participate in NATO operations, for example in Afghanistan and Iraq, and to grant permission for the construction of United States and NATO military bases on Bulgarian territory. In addition, Bulgaria was confronted with an energy crisis with Russia (Novakova, 2009).

Model of Russian influence

Conley in the Kremlin Playbook describes Russia's inflows as a slow-moving virus:

"...in the 2004-2008 study time as a period as Russian influence slowly infected different sectors of economy (energy, financial, media, and infrastructure sectors) and regions...Russian-linked entities work to support select state actors who in turn work on their behalf. This support can include investing in rising politicians, cultivating relationships with prominent businessmen, or helping to ensure that its business affiliates become well positioned in government. From a position of authority and power, these local affiliates can work to expand a system of Russia patronage by ensuring that lucrative contracts and rewards are doled out to Russia's preferred partners, who then are beholden to the Kremlin's network and become instruments of its influence" (Conley and Stefanov, 2016: XIII, XIV).

The Russian network model of influence is described as a *univirtuous circle* and its goal is to reduce the credibility of democracy and governments in the countries of the region and through the economy and politics lead the countries to *state capture*⁴ (Conley and Stefanov, 2016). The state capture is followed by economic capture and political capture. The term "economic capture" is used to describe the manipulation of economic sectors that are of vital importance for the

4 The actions of small number of firms, groups (military, ethics), kleptocratic politicians to shape rules of the game to their advantage through nontransparent provision of private gains to public officials (Conley & Stefanov, 2016, p. 1).

country. “Political capture,” on the other hand, refers to the creation of groups of nationalists and Russian sympathizers, with the goal of providing a stable foundation for the policy agenda promoted by Russia.

Russia exploits the vulnerabilities of the Bulgarian government and state apparatus to gain access to state institutions through economic and political initiatives. In this manner, it gained the capacity and sway to influence all significant resolutions pertaining to the national interest in Bulgaria. Russia often used corruption-illegal ways of achieving its interests and establishing a network of links in the private and state sectors (Conley and Stefanov, 2016). Corruption is employed in economic and political transactions. Russia also engaged in the creation of political power (parties and politicians) and provides financial support to the formation of new entities that espouse euroscepticism, populism, nationalism, and pro-Russian sentiments. This model has a number of additional objectives. Russia was seeking to gain economic and political benefits, which were reflected in the reduction of Western influence in Bulgaria. This would have the effect of weakening NATO and the European Union influence, while strengthening Russian domination in the region.

The second objective was to enhance and actualize financial benefits through investment projects. Russia employed a range of political influence tactics, tailored to the specific regional context and interests at stake. In the case of countries that do not enjoy privileged status within the Russian Federation or that are situated in close proximity to it, Russia has opted to employ a hard power approach. In regions that are relatively distant from Russia, such as the Balkan countries including Bulgaria, soft power is employed primarily through energy and economic investment projects.

The Russian strategy for business projects has the following guidelines:

- Russia uses nature of national and local operating environment; weak regulations and oversights.
- The projects are designed to create dominance over local companies.
- Privatization of state companies.
- Creating a good friendly relationship between a different companies rather than competition relation (Conley and Stefanov, 2016).

Russia employed a multifaceted strategy to expand its influence, encompassing a complex network of businesses, companies, political networks, and contacts. Furthermore, Russia is attempting to diminish the enthusiasm of countries in the region for engagement with the West and, in particular, the European Union,

in order to prevent the integration of the region into the EU structure. Finally, Russia's aspiration is to demonstrate its model of governance and open economy as a superior alternative to EU and USA.

Energetic Influence of Russia over Bulgaria

Bulgaria's lack of natural resources, particularly gas and oil, has been a significant challenge for the country. Bulgaria has historically relied on Russia for these resources, which have been crucial for its economic development. In fact, the gas and oil have become one of the most significant instruments at Russia's disposal for exerting influence over the Balkan region and Bulgaria.

Over the last decades, the impact of Russian foreign policy in the Balkans has become increasingly evident. The ascendant power of Russia, under the leadership of Vladimir Putin, is manifesting in a series of ambitious investment initiatives. Russia was the preeminent energy supplier in the Balkans.

Two major Russian energy companies, Gazprom and Lukoil, have a significant influence on the trade relations between Moscow and Sofia (Bechev, 2016). In 2012, the South Stream tender was awarded to Russian companies Stroytransgaz and the Bulgarian company Gasproekat. However, two years later, the Russian gas company Gazprom assumed control of the pipeline. In 2014, the Bulgarian government, under pressure from Washington and Brussels, suspended construction of the South Stream pipeline, which was to pass through Bulgaria (Clark and Foxall, 2014).

In 2017, Bulgaria participated in the construction of the Turkish Stream pipeline through Russia's Gazprom, although it did not benefit from the project in any way. This fact illustrates the strong Russian influence in the Bulgarian energy sector. In 2022, after 12 years, the Greece-Bulgaria Interconnector was completed as an alternative to the Turkish Stream pipeline (Tcherneva, 2023).

In response to the closure of the four nuclear reactors at Kozloduy by the EU in 2004, Bulgaria has reinvigorated the project for the construction of a nuclear station at Belene. Russia has emerged as a highly successful investor. The Energy Minister stated that the construction of Belene would be unfeasible without Russian involvement (Bechev, 2016). Following the unsuccessful conclusion of the Belene construction project, Bulgaria was obliged to pay 620\$ million in compensation to a Russian state-owned enterprise that had invested in the venture (Pienkowski, 2016).

Economic Influence of Russia over Bulgaria

As a former member of the Soviet Union, Russia was able to gain rapid access to the Bulgarian economic and trade market. However, Russia's primary focus remains on the economic sectors, particularly energy and trading. According to German reports, one-third of Bulgaria's economic output is either directly or indirectly controlled by Moscow (Traufetter, 2014). However, there has been a notable decline in this trade, with a 33% reduction from €5.35 billion in 2013 to €3.55 billion in 2015.

Russia exerts considerable influence over the banking sector in the Balkans, particularly in Bulgaria. The most significant and largest bank is VTB Bank, which is majority-owned by Russian interests. In 2011, Vneshtorgbank (VTB) undertook a series of acquisitions of major Bulgarian companies, including Bulgartabac (a tobacco processing company of significance to minority populations in the southern regions of Bulgaria) and the largest Bulgarian corporate bank, Commercial Bank (Corpbank or KTB). The latter entity proceeded to purchase the largest telecommunications company in Bulgaria, BTK (the Vivacom mobile operator). One of the country's most influential business magnates is Tzvetan Vassilev, a prominent banker. His KTB bank handles a significant portion of the capital inflow from Moscow into state-controlled Bulgarian industry, particularly the energy sector (Trauftter, 2014). Additionally, Vassilev's New Media Group holds a monopoly over press distribution.

The second area, in which Russia exerts influence in the Bulgaria, is in the field of tourism. Among foreign nationals in Bulgaria, Russians own the largest number of properties in this country. The majority of these are located in towns on the Black Sea coast. However, the demand for and sale of property in Bulgaria reached its peak in 2012, followed by a decline in the value of the Russian ruble due to sanctions imposed by EU and the USA.

Furthermore, the influence of Russia is discernible in the media landscape, encompassing radio, television, news agencies, and print media. Prominent examples include Bulgarian National Radio (BNR), Bulgarian National Television (BNT), BGNews Agency, and the Duma and Scat TV newsletter, which is managed by the Ataka party, a pro-Russian political entity in Bulgaria. These media outlets have been observed to express overt support for Russia, a phenomenon that was particularly evident during the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. In 2014, the Bulgarian President Rosen Plevneliev asserted that "90% of the media in Bulgaria are under the influence of Russian interests" (Bechev, 2016).

Political and Diplomatic Influence of Russia over Bulgaria

Russia’s influence on Balkan politics is predicated on its long-standing religious and cultural ties with the region, particularly with Bulgaria. Russia is attempting to encourage pro-Russian politicians to assume prominent roles within the government. The influence was based on the strengthening of right-wing nationalist parties that espouse Russian political ideology. The most prominent parties were ATAKA and the Bulgarian Socialist Party, which were opposed to Bulgarian membership in NATO.

Table 1: Political Parties in Bulgaria

	Political Parties
Pro-Russia	Ataka Patriotic Front Bulgaria Communist Party Bulgarian Socialist Party BSP Alternative for Bulgarian Revival National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria NFSB Bulgarian National Movement BNM National Movement of Russophiles NMR Movement for Rights and Freedom DPS
Anti-Russia	Reformist Bloc People’s Party for Freedom and Dignity Union of Democratic Force SDS Bulgaria without Censorship BBT
Neutral	Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria CEDB (GERB)

Source: (Haines, 2016, p. 3)

In 2014, BSP was in coalition with the Movement for Rights and Freedom (DPS), which represents the Turkish minority in Bulgaria. The Bulgarian Socialist Party and DPS constitute the governing coalition in Bulgaria. Additionally, BSP has established close relations with Moscow, as well as with other social democratic parties across the European Union (Traufetter, 2014).

Russia's diplomatic strategy was to form a "strategic partnership" with the Balkan countries (Clark and Foxall, 2014). Russia expressed a high level of dissatisfaction when Bulgaria entered into NATO in 2004 and into EU in 2007, through the suspension of diplomatic relations. Diplomatic relations between these two countries were restored in 2013, following the change of government to BSP. Russia, however, leveraged this diplomatic initiative with Bulgaria to mitigate economic sanctions imposed by EU and USA on Russia in response to concerns about Crimea. In a statement released from Brussels, the leader of the Socialist Party, Stanishev, asserted that "There is no justification for the imposition of economic sanctions against Russia" (Clark and Foxall, 2014).

Since 2022, Bulgarians' attitude towards Russia has changed: Moscow's image has been affected by its invasion of Ukraine so the opposition has returned to domestic policy decisions (Mateeva-Kazakova, 2024).

Military Influence of Russia over Bulgaria

There are several reasons for Bulgaria's accession to NATO. One such reason is NATO's ability to exit to the Black Sea, which is a geostrategic important position (Nieto, 2009). The second and rationale for Bulgaria's accession to NATO is the potential for Bulgaria to become subject to the influence of the Russian Federation. However, since 2004, there has been a notable decline in enthusiasm surrounding Bulgaria's prospective membership in the NATO alliance. This shift in sentiment has created an opening for Russian influence on the military forces of Bulgaria. Bulgaria continues to utilize antiquated land and air artillery systems inherited from the Soviet Union, despite the NATO's emphasis on the modernization of Bulgaria's military capabilities. The maintenance and repair of such outdated military equipment is costly and can only be carried out in Russia. Additionally, there have been disputes between Russia and Bulgaria regarding military patents that were originally owned by Bulgaria but were subsequently acquired by Russia during the Soviet era. This issue was resolved when Bulgaria forgave 30 USD million in Russian debt (Bechev, 2016).

Conclusion

The paper aimed to analyze Bulgarian- Russian relations after the Bulgarian integration into NATO. Following a decade of negotiations, Bulgaria became a full member state of NATO in 2004. Following Bulgaria's accession to NATO, relations between Russia and Bulgaria were suspended. However, the Russian Federation, under the leadership of Vladimir Putin, has been actively pursuing the

expansion of its influence and domination in the Balkans and Europe through the implementation of new strategic plans.

Bulgaria is one of the poorest countries in Europe, which provides an ideal environment for the spread of Russian influence in this region. Indeed, the majority of businessmen in Bulgaria occupy a significant position within the political landscape, with the assistance of Russian financial resources. They have a role in strengthening Russian influences and ideas, and in reducing the influence of the NATO and the European Union in Bulgaria.

Russia's investment in projects in the energy and economic sectors is perceived as a significant economic presence in the region. However, a closer examination of the investments and projects sponsored by the Russian Federation, such as the construction of the South Stream gas pipeline in Bulgaria and the region, or the reconstruction of the Belene nuclear power station in Kozloduy, reveals that they have not been fully realized due to prolonged negotiations surrounding long-term financing or construction bans.

Furthermore, Russia has a controlling interest in the largest Bulgarian bank, KTB – Corporation Commercial Bank, as well as significant holdings in telecommunications, mobile operations, media and press, and oil and gas distribution (Lukoil and Gazprom).

Russia has been able to exert influence over Bulgaria's national affairs and interests by infiltrating various sectors, including energy, the economy, banking, the media and political parties. This has enabled Russia to advance its economic and political goals and to consolidate its presence in the Balkans. These developments have a detrimental impact on Bulgaria's national sovereignty and the well-being of its citizens, who are facing severe economic challenges and a lack of opportunities.

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