

Bulgaria's Foreign Policy and EU Sanctions against Russia

Europeanization, Politicization and Small Country Diplomacy

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Abstract

The adoption of the EU sanctions on Russia provides a good case study to assess Bulgarian foreign policy under the conditions imposed by EU membership. This paper emphasizes the limits of both the foreign policy and Europeanization approaches when looking at national foreign policy and EU membership. It underlines the need to develop alternative approaches. These alternative approaches relate, in the first area, to the use of the concept of politicization of EU foreign policy; and in the second, to the conduct of a small country's foreign policy within the EU framework. Although each of these approaches taken separately accounts poorly for the understanding of how EU membership affects the conduct of national foreign policy, each of them offers potentially interesting insights, without however being entirely conclusive.

Keywords

European Union – foreign policy – Europeanization – diplomacy – Russia

1 Introduction*

There is no doubt that the Russian-Ukrainian crisis following the illegal annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol constituted the first major test for post-NATO

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and post-EU accession Bulgaria's foreign policy (Dimitrov and Mihaylova, 2017). As such, this also makes it an ideal issue on which to assess the country's foreign policy under the conditions imposed by EU membership.

With the development of an EU foreign policy identity, political scientists have tried to grasp its relationship with national foreign policy. Constructivist approaches concluded that there was the possibility of a gradual change of perceptions and identity formation on the part of national foreign policy as a result of EU membership. In other words, EU membership would lead to identity and interest convergence that would shape Member States' foreign policy (Hill and Wong, 2011).

This article will have as its main research question whether such a process of convergence can be found in Bulgarian foreign policy as applied to the case of the EU sanctions on Russia adopted in the aftermath of the Ukrainian crisis of spring 2014. Its main thesis is that Bulgarian membership in the EU did not fundamentally alter the country's foreign policy, which remained mostly of a reactive nature and keen to climb aboard the prevailing consensus despite rhetorical attempts to deviate from it. On the more theoretical level, this article makes a case for expanding the existing approaches to European foreign policy analysis and Europeanization with alternative ones dealing with the concept of politicization of EU foreign policy and the analysis of small-state foreign policy behavior within the EU framework.

This paper is organized into three sections. The first will re-visit briefly the different approaches to understanding the impact of EU membership on national foreign policy. The second will look at EU sanctions, both from the point of view of domestic politics and of foreign policy in Bulgaria. The third part will discuss Bulgaria's foreign policy in light of the different approaches mentioned above.

2 National Foreign Policy and EU Membership: Different Approaches

If the scholarship looking into the relationship between EU membership and national foreign policies usually operates in the relatively straightforward framework wherein EU membership is understood as the independent variable and national foreign policy as the dependent variable, the main

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approaches developed, while showing some levels of similarities, also diverge to some degree.

2.1 *European Foreign Policy Analysis and Europeanization Approaches*

The first approach to this topic was developed in the early 2000s by Manners and Whitman who took stock of the shortcomings of foreign policy analysis when applied to the EU, considering it too state-centric. Instead, Manners and Whitman developed a specific approach that would better account for the specific features of EU foreign policy. This approach was divided into three main sections with six related questions. The first section dealt with adaptation through EU membership. The second section emphasized the socialization process affecting foreign policy makers. The third section looked at the impact of EU foreign policy both in terms of constraints and of providing new areas of opportunity for national foreign policy (Baun and Marek, 2013).

As mentioned in a recent publication, a number of major developments have called for a refinement if not a transformation of such an approach (Hadfield, Manners and Whitman, 2018). These developments are as follows: first, EU enlargement, which has added considerable new material produced by the inclusion of the national foreign policy of 13 new Member States for which national foreign policy is little known or poorly covered by scholarship; second, the Treaty of Lisbon, which brought some important institutional developments, especially as far as EU foreign policy is concerned, such as the creation of the new positions of the European Council President and of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy / Vice-President of the Commission, as well as the establishment of the European External Action Service (EEAS), which provides the main magnet for the development of EU foreign policy and diplomacy; third, the need to come to terms with new theoretical developments that claim to widen the scope of foreign policy analysis beyond the state-centric approaches to include non-state actors. As a result, Whitman, Manners and Hadfield proposed a four-mode spectrum that would account for the different degrees of Europeanization of national foreign policy (see Table 1).

In this spectrum, modes I and II would reflect strong evidence of Europeanization while mode III the weakest evidence and mode IV the absence of Europeanization (Hadfield, Manners and Whitman, 2018)

The second approach, or set of approaches, is based on the concept of Europeanization, which is usually understood as a two-way relationship between the EU level and the national level of policy making. If such a concept was first developed in the analyses of supranational policymaking, it has been more recently used in more intergovernmental policy settings, such as that provided by the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) (Hill and Wong, 2011).

TABLE 1 Four-mode spectrum (Hadfield, Manners and Whitman)

Mode I	Member State foreign policy operating within established EU frameworks in a deeply institutionalized, integrated, potentially supranational fashion.
Mode II	Member State foreign policy operating within established EU frameworks, according to intergovernmental mechanisms.
Mode III	Member State foreign policy conducted bilaterally or multilaterally between EU Member States, but outside established EU frameworks and/or the EU <i>acquis</i> .
Mode IV	Member State foreign policy conducted between EU and non-EU Member States prioritizing state goals above or in opposition to perceived EU goals.

TABLE 2 Main dimensions in Europeanization approaches

Top-Down	Impact of EU on National Foreign Policy.
Bottom Up	Uploading of National Foreign Policy Issues onto the EU Level.
Cross-Loading	Redefinition of MS National Interest/Identity in Foreign Policy.

In this reciprocal relationship, it is a bit more difficult to distinguish the independent from the dependent variables. Instead, Europeanization approaches emphasize its multidimensional aspects and identify three main types of interactions. The first one (see Table 2) is the top-down approach that relates to the EU's impact on national foreign policy. The second one is the bottom-up process that consists of projecting national preferences, ideas and policy models onto the EU level. A more horizontal process is referred to as cross-loading, and leads to the redefinition of national interests, if not identity, between the national and the supranational levels (Baun and Marek, 2013). This last approach is criticized as not taking sufficient account of historically embedded factors defined as "country-specific macro-institutional patterns, state traditions, legal patterns or market and civil service traditions [which] condition a country's reaction to a European impact" (Major and Pomorska, 2005: 3).

2.2 *Alternative Approaches: Politicization and Contestation of EU Foreign Policy and Small Country Diplomacy*

If both approaches outlined above have been used with relative success in the analysis of the interactions between the EU level and the national level in the field of foreign policy, they should not discount other possible approaches.

The first of these relies on the concept of politicization of the EU integration process. Such a concept, created by Hooghe and Marks, relates to the extent to which EU policy making is becoming increasingly contentious (Hooghe and Marks, 2009). Contestation plays a central part in this process. At the domestic level, such contestation takes two main forms: the horizontal form, between political parties, and the vertical one, between the executive and the legislative. From this perspective, there is a growing interest in the role of political parties in the framing of EU foreign policy, focusing mostly on the ones from the extreme right (Liang, 2016). More recently, such scholarship has expanded to the question of populism and its impact on foreign policy (Chrysogelos, 2017; Balfour, 2016).

Another strand in the politicization scholarship places more emphasis on different scenarios that may be conducive to politicization of EU foreign policy issues rather than the dimensions of such politicization. For example, and according to Costa, the more a policy is centralized at the EU level, and the more such authority is internationalized, the more likely politicization is taking place. But Costa restricted his analysis of the politicization of EU external relations to the EU level and does not include the national level (Costa, 2018).

For our purposes, we will propose three key indicators for assessing the level of politicization of EU foreign policy (see Table 3). The first one is the salience of the issue in domestic political debates. The second is the extent to which an EU foreign policy issue reflects a cleavage in domestic politics. The third is whether the positions of the different political parties on EU foreign policy can be considered as a key variable in their electoral successes or failures.

The second approach views foreign policy from the standpoint of small states' diplomacy within the EU framework, both in terms of challenges and opportunities within the international system, and more particularly within the EU system. Such an approach emphasizes the different criteria in terms of commitment, network capital, immaterial resources and capacity to deliberate moving discussions forward and forging consensus as key variables for a small state's ability to influence EU foreign policy (Narsa, 2011, see Table 4).

TABLE 3 Key indicators of politicization

Salience of EU foreign policy issue in domestic politics.

Extent to which such an EU foreign policy issue is producing a cleavage in domestic politics.

Extent to which electoral results of parties can be explained by their positions on EU foreign policy issues.

TABLE 4 Key variables of small country diplomacy's ability to influence EU within EU policy

Commitment	Network capital	Immaterial resources	Moving discussions/ Forging consensus
Proponent of a unified EU approach.	Capacity to build coalitions.	Knowledge/ Expertise.	Leadership over issues.

3 EU Sanctions in Bulgarian Domestic and Foreign Policy

The Russian-Ukrainian crisis and the ensuing adoption of EU sanctions took place in a specific domestic political context in Bulgaria that was characterized by a high degree of political instability. This section will first consider this context before moving on to the issue of EU sanctions and how the issue played out in Bulgarian domestic politics and in Bulgarian foreign policy.

3.1 *Bulgaria's Domestic Politics and Foreign Policy Since 2014*

There is no doubt that Bulgaria's membership in the EU led to a fundamental realignment of its foreign policy from its Cold War priorities (Katiskas, 2012:177–186). Yet, authors and analysts agree that Bulgarian foreign policy has since been only partially Europeanized (Bechev, 2009; Bechev, 2013). To be sure, Bulgarian foreign policy adapted to the new situation of EU membership in terms of administration and procedures. But as for substantive political priorities, the country's foreign policy remained largely that of a policy taker rather than that of a policy maker. The absence of proactive foreign policy is often explained by historical and political factors such as the legacy of a long period in Bulgarian history where Bulgaria's foreign policy was mostly dictated from outside—Istanbul and Berlin in the 19th century and Berlin and Moscow in the 20th Century; the attitudes towards these historical experiences; and the domestic political context (Linden, 2009). This led to the view that Bulgarian foreign policy has traditionally been more reactive than proactive, or as an author put it that of a “policy taker” rather than of a “policy maker” (Bechev, 2009:221–222).

Only in 2011 did Bulgaria review its post-NATO and EU accession security strategy by adopting a National Security Strategy (NSS) for 2011–2020, to be reviewed yearly. The NSS stresses the commitments of Bulgaria to the Euro-Atlantic community while asserting the need for the establishment and maintenance of EU and NATO relations with the Russian Federation in accordance with the principles enshrined in the UN Charter, the OSCE Charter and the

NATO Treaty and the Treaty on the European Union (National Security Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria: para. 131).

The lack of proactive foreign policy can also be understood as a result of the populist features of Bulgarian domestic politics. Populism pervaded Bulgarian domestic politics since the coming to power of Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha in 2001 (Cristova, 2010). Authors also argue that populism is more deeply rooted in Bulgarian political history and can be traced back to the independence of the country from the Ottomans and the adoption of its first constitution in 1879 (Malinov, 2007).

In Bulgaria such populist features take on different dimensions. First, they are reflected in the main political leaders of the largest party, and especially in the actions of Boiko Borissov, the leader of the center-right party GERB, who has built its leadership on a high degree of personalization and paternalistic streaks, helped by a complacent media. The same degree of personalization can be found in the actions of the newly-elected socialist president, Rumen Radev (see Table 5), who also demonstrates strong populist inclinations (Bechev, 2016). Second, these populist features are being reflected in the rise of political parties around individuals without any clear political affiliation, if not private interests in being elected politicians. Third, such populism is reflected by the presence of extreme right nationalistic parties, among which *ATAKA* is the oldest (Cristova, 2010).

The impact of rising populism has been twofold. On the one hand, it has fueled greater political instability as, since 2009, no Bulgarian government has succeeded in governing for a full mandate. On the other hand, it has contributed to the lack of clarity and substance in the formulation of foreign policy objectives. As a result, small populist parties, while keeping a high degree of vagueness and indeterminacy in their foreign policy views, are keen to offer more extreme positions breaking with what is seen as the prevailing consensus. However, these positions are often confined to slogans, with very little attention paid to deep strategic thinking. For example, the extreme right party *ATAKA* limited its 2009 electoral platform foreign policy to anti-Western, anti-US and Anti-NATO rhetoric without formulating any credible alternative (Novaković, 2015). In truth, foreign policy does not rank high on the agenda of right-wing populist parties. In Bulgaria, their interest in these issues is not high and often lacks consistency (Levy, 2015). Another example of this is the extreme right-wing political alliance named the United Patriots¹ that is part of the current

1 The United Patriots, or *Обединени патриоти*, was established in 2016 as a coalition of three parties, *ATAKA*, the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (*IMRO*) and the National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria (*NFSB*).

ruling coalition as a junior partner and which includes both a pro-Russian faction, i.e. *ATAKA*, and others that are openly anti-Russian (Haines, 2017).

As far as the nature of the political regime is concerned, Bulgaria is defined as being a parliamentary republic with a unicameral system and a directly elected but institutionally weak president (Kanev and Hristova-Valtcheva, 2016). In this system, the conduct of foreign policy is shared between the president, the Council of Ministers and the National Assembly. If the role of president is essentially of a symbolic nature, it still enables him to conclude international agreements that have to be ratified by the national assembly. The president is also the formal head of the national armed forces and chairs the Consultative National Security Council (Todorov, 2010).

The relations between prime ministers and presidents have not been without tensions, including in the field of foreign policy. In 2011, Prime Minister Borissov clashed with the socialist president, Georgi Parvanov, over the demise of a number of ambassadors on account of the fact that they acted as informants for the communist-led security services (Novinite 2013; Bechev, 2013). The two leaders had different approaches to the planned pipeline project in collaboration with Russia, *South Stream* (see Table 5), with the former being less openly supportive than the latter (Bechev, 2013). The same Borissov showed some degree of divergence from Parvanov's successor, Rosen Plevneliev, who although from the same party (*GERB*), took much stronger pro-Euro-Atlantic positions than his prime minister. More recently, Borissov and the newly elected socialist president, Rumen Radev, showed their differences on a wide range of foreign policy issues, with the former appearing as more pro-Russian and the latter more committed to the Euro-Atlantic commitments of Bulgaria. One should, however, remain cautious before reaching foregone conclusions on these differences, as they often respond to internal political dynamics rather than deep political divergences (Bechev, 2017).

The Ukrainian-Russian crisis took place in the context of great political instability. Since 2013- 2014, Bulgaria underwent three major domestic political crises. The first one was triggered by the resignation of the first Borissov government in 2013 following growing discontent over rising prices, and in particular rising prices of electricity. This crisis led to the formation of a socialist-led government overseen by the socialist Plamen Oresharski, that survived less than a year. The second crisis was marked by the resignation of the government in late July 2014, amidst mass protests against its failed attempt to appoint the controversial media mogul Deyan Peevski as head of the security services. The ensuing elections brought Borissov back to power with a coalition made up of both center-right and center-left parties. The third crisis was triggered by the resignation of Borissov's second government following the defeat of his candidate at the presidential elections of November 2017. The next national

elections that took place on March 2017 brought the same Borissov to power, this time in a coalition with the extreme right nationalist parties, under the umbrella of the United Patriots (Gurov and Zankina, 2018).

It is difficult to assess the impact of such political instability on Bulgarian foreign policy. Clearly, the Oresharski government had little time to pay attention to foreign policy issues (Tcherneva 2015). That being said, and despite the political instability, the quasi-omnipresence of Boiko Borissov as Prime minister (see Table 5) provided for some sort of stability in the conduct

TABLE 5 Bulgarian governments and coalitions since 2009

Years	Ruling Coalitions	Prime Minister	Foreign Minister	President
2009– 2013	GERB-led minority government	Boiko Borissov (GERB)	Rumiana Jeleva (GERB), replaced in 2010 by Nikolay Mladenov (GERB)	Georgi Parvanov (BSP from 2002 to 2012)
2013– 2014	BSP-led government with non-partisan independent ministers supported in the National Assembly by the so-called Turkish party MRF and extreme right ATAKA	Plamen Oresharski (BSP)	Kristian Vigenin (BSP)	Rosen Plevneliev (GERB) from 2012 to 2017
2014– 2016	GERB-led coalition with center-right Reformist Bloc and center-left ABC and supported in Parliament by the extreme right Patriotic Front.	Boiko Borissov (GERB)	Daniel Mitov (RB)	
2017–	GERB-led coalition with a sub-grouping of extreme right parties called United Patriots and supported in Parliament by a newly formed party, Voyla	Boiko Borissov (GERB)	Ekaterina Zakharieva (non- affiliated but close to GERB)	Rumen Radev (independent can- didate supported by the BSP) elected in November 2016 and took office on 1 January 2017

of foreign policy, even though he preferred to concentrate in his first mandate on domestic issues and particularly the development of infrastructures in Bulgaria, such as the building of highways. Only recently, and especially as a consequence of pipeline diplomacy and then of the EU-Russian crisis, was Borissov led to pay more attention to foreign policy issues. Such interest grew with the Bulgarian rotating Presidency during spring 2018 (Bulgarian Presidency .EU, 2018).

The analysis of the question of Bulgarian foreign policy and EU sanctions against Russia will proceed in three steps. The first will provide a chronological overview of the EU sanctions on Russia. The second will account for the importance of the EU sanctions in Bulgarian domestic politics, while the third one will discuss the EU in light of Bulgarian foreign policy.

3.2 *EU Sanctions on Russia: An Overview*

In March 2014, Russia decided to annex the secessionist region of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol following an armed intervention carried out in February and the ensuing referendum on its independence held on 16 March. A few days later, the peninsula was integrated into the Russian federation upon request of the independentists. These events took place in a context of worsening relations between Russia and the EU after the so-called Maidan events in November of the previous year (Youngs, 2017). In reaction to the annexation of Crimea by Russia, the European Union decided to impose a set of sanctions on Russia. The first set of sanctions, of a diplomatic nature, called for the suspension of all bilateral meetings between the EU and Russia and of the negotiations on a future renewal of the EU-Russia partnership agreement. Later in the month, the EU adopted the first set of restrictive measures, consisting of a freezing of assets for 38 entities and a visa ban affecting more than 149 Russians. In July, the EU adopted a new type of economic sanctions following the shooting down of Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 purportedly carried out by Russia. In August, the EU strengthened these economic sanctions in reaction to the opening of a new front in the Eastern part of Ukraine following the battle of Ilovaisk that had revealed the presence of Russian armed forces (Pozzo di Borgo and Sutour, 2015). These economic sanctions targeted the sectorial cooperation and trade between the EU and Russia so as to prevent access to the European financial markets for Russian businesses, to impose an arms embargo, and to severely reduce all cooperation in the field of energy between the two parties. In March 2015, the EU decided to link the duration of these sanctions to the full implementation of the Minsk-2 accords concluded the previous 15 February, with the view of putting an end to the armed conflict in the Eastern Ukraine (Christie, 2017).

The EU sanctions on Russia fulfill therefore a dual objective. The first one concerns the illegal annexation of Crimea and the second one the implementation of the Minsk Accords. These sanctions are renewed every six months, in March and in September, in the absence of a Russian implementation of the Minsk agreements and a change of course regarding Crimea and Sevastopol.

3.3 *EU Sanctions and Bulgarian Domestic Politics*

The crisis in Ukraine and the EU sanctions on Russia were widely discussed in Bulgarian domestic politics. First, the 2013 crisis triggered by the Maidan events and the ensuing conflict with Russia in early 2014 collided with the ongoing discussions related to the South Stream project that highlighted all the ambivalence in Bulgarian-Russian relations (see below). Secondly, it coincided with the campaign for the European elections of May 2014 that were seen as a major political test for the Socialist-led government constituted the previous year by Plamen Oresharski, that had been facing waves of protests on the street. As a result, the government was confronted with a crisis of confidence and an all-time low in public opinion by the end of 2013 (BNR, 2013). The EU elections then offered an ideal battlefield for party competition and the issue of EU sanctions a perfect issue to mobilize the electors, not only for extreme parties but also for mainstream ones, especially on the left.

In early March, the visit of the Bulgarian foreign affairs minister Kristian Vigenin to Ukraine, officially to enquire about the situation of the Bulgarian minority in the country, triggered the first discussions on the situation in Ukraine in Bulgarian domestic politics. The foreign affairs minister attracted some strong criticisms, including from his own party, the BSP, but also from the two other parties supporting the coalition, the Turkish party and the extreme right party ATAKA (Novinite, 5 March 2014). At the same time, when the possibility of EU sanctions was discussed in the aftermath of the so-called independence referendum of 7 March, the question started to be widely discussed by domestic parties. Within the National Assembly, the different parties failed to adopt a declaration on the situation in Ukraine. Not surprisingly, the Socialists and the extreme right expressed their opposition to the adoption of possible EU sanctions. If the foreign affairs minister openly condemned the referendum as illegal, he also shied away from possible sanctions. As for the main opposition party (GERB) and its leader Borissov, they were slow to react and waited until April to openly support the sanctions, even if the president expressed strong support for them (President of the Republic of Bulgaria, 19 March 2014).

Finally, on 24 March, Bulgarian President Plevneliev succeeded in forging a common consensus between the main political parties, with the exception of АТАКА, on the illegality of the Russian annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol while falling short of endorsing the possibility of EU sanctions (Novinite, 24 March 2014). A day later, on 25 March, the prime minister, Oresharski, stated that Bulgaria would not veto the adoption of EU sanctions (Novinite, 25 March 2014).

In this context, it is no surprise that the question of EU sanctions and of the relations between Bulgaria and Russia became a major issue in the European elections held on 25 May 2014. The positions of the political parties remained unchanged. The Socialists, and their secessionist movement called ABC, and АТАКА remained openly opposed to the EU sanctions and expressed their willingness to preserve the best possible relations with Russia. The main right-wing party, GERB, after some hesitations took a position in favor of the sanctions while the center-right Reformist Bloc appeared as the most supportive of the EU decisions. In May a poll conducted by the national pollster agency Alpha Research on the question of attitudes towards the EU and Russia gave a better idea of the state of public opinion on the question. In this survey, 60% attributed the responsibility of the crisis to the West, 38% supported the independence of Crimea, while 35% approved the decision of not recognizing it and 24% expressed no opinion on the topic. On the topic of future relations between Bulgaria and Russia, 40% expressed their support for EU membership and 22% for a hypothetical Bulgarian membership in the Eurasian Economic Community launched by Russia. The supporters of EU membership were in their great majority (65% and 60%) GERB and Reformist Bloc voters, while only 38% of АТАКА's and 33% of BSP's voters shared such views (Novinite, 14 May 2014). Another survey, carried out a bit less than a year later in February-March 2015, revealed that 63% of the respondents supported Bulgaria's NATO and EU membership while 33% supported the idea of a re-orientation of the country's foreign policy towards Russia and the Eurasian Union (ECFR Blog 2015).

The European elections of May 2014 were seen as a key test for such disagreements. Their results, however, showed a rather different picture. Despite a low turn-out (33%, up 6% compared with the 2009 EU elections), the elections led to the clear victory of the pro-EU parties, such as GERB,² which won just about 30% of the votes, while the Reformist Bloc maintained its position

2 GERB, or ГЕРБ in Bulgarian, Граждани за европейско развитиена България (in English: Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria).

with 6,45%. On the other side, the pro-Russian parties barely maintained their status quo, like the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) (18%, up 0,43%), if they did not suffer significant losses such as АТАКА (2.96%, down 9%), or the ABC³ party, which only managed to get 4%. Another winner of the elections was the newly-created party Bulgarian Without Censorship⁴ (10% of the votes) which campaigned mostly on domestic issues (Bechev, 2014; Novinite, 26 May 2014). After consultation between the Bulgarian President and the major political parties, it was decided that the Oresharski government would resign and be replaced on August by a caretaker government while waiting for the elections set for October 5 (Novinite, 29 June 2014).

During the campaign, the issue of the EU sanctions played a less important role compared with the EU elections of the previous May. Yet, the pro-Russian extreme right and the BSP showed their support to Russia but did not take up the issue of the sanctions. The campaign was largely dominated by domestic issues such as the collapse of the fourth largest bank of the country, the Corporate Commercial Bank (КТВ), and the question of the inclusion of the Turkish party in the government. The election results confirmed to some extent the result of the earlier European elections, even though they led to the most fragmented parliament in Bulgarian post-cold war history, by seeing eight political parties entering the National Assembly (Deloy, 2014). The question of sanctions did not play any significant role in the difficult negotiations leading to the formation of the new government that included GERB as the main party in coalition with the Reformist Bloc (pro-EU sanctions) and the ABC (against EU sanctions). The position of foreign affairs minister was given to Daniel Mitov, already in office within the caretaker government and close to the Reformist Bloc (Tcherneva, 2014).

The presidential elections of November 2016 offered another opportunity to discuss the question of EU sanctions and EU/Bulgaria-Russian relations. These elections are usually not considered high-profile. The main parties even struggled to appoint strong candidates for the ballot. The BSP chose Rumen Radev, a former general with no political experience, while GERB chose a former president of the National Assembly, TsetskaTsatcheva, considered as a second-rate candidate (Deloy, 2016). If these elections were presented in the international media as a test case for the future relations between Bulgaria, the West and Russia (Cooper and Olivier, 2017), the agenda was more dominated by the refugee crisis than anything else. As for the issue of the EU sanctions, it

3 ABC, or in Bulgarian АБВ:Алтернатива за българско възраждане (in English: Alternative for Bulgarian Revival), consist of a splinter group from the BSP led by the former Socialist President of Bulgaria, Georgi Parvanov (2002–2012).

4 In Bulgarian: България без цензура.

failed to attract the same level of attention as in the European elections of 2014. Among the candidates, only the one from the Reformist Bloc, Traicho Traikov, took a clear position against the annexation of Crimea and in favor of the EU sanctions against Russia (*Revue de Presse*, 2 November 2016). The two last candidates for the Presidential elections even ended up sharing the same position, in favor of waiving the EU sanctions, even if they disagreed on the question of Crimea, with Tsatcheva voicing her opposition to the annexation and Radev being much more ambivalent (*Revue de Presse*, 21 October 2017). In addition, diverging parties on the issue even concluded alliances, such as in the case of the extreme right that decided to propose a candidate under the name of the United Patriots, which included both pro-Russians and anti-Russians. In the end, Radev won the elections somewhat by default against the weak GERB candidate. For some local observers and analysts, Radev's election would lead to a shift in Bulgarian foreign policy towards Russia, but this quickly failed to materialize beyond his pro-Russian rhetoric (see Figure 1).

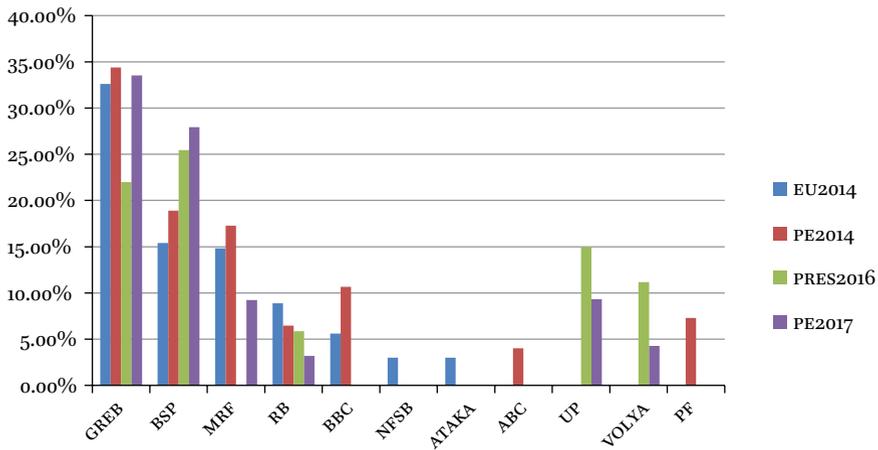


FIGURE 1 Electoral results 2014–2017 (in % of votes cast)⁵
 DATA COLLECTED BY THE AUTHOR ON THE BASIS OF THE ONES PROVIDED
 BY THE CENTRAL ELECTION COMMISSION OF BULGARIA, AVAILABLE IN
 BULGARIAN AT: [HTTP://RESULTS.CIK.BG/](http://results.cik.bg/)

5 Turnouts at the respective elections: 39,2% (EU Elections May 2014); 49,51% (PE or Parliamentary Elections, October 2014); 52,29% (First Round Presidential Elections or PRES, November 2016); 54,7% (PEs March 2017). GERB: Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria; BSP: Bulgarian Socialist Party; MRF: Movement for Rights and Freedoms—please note that the MRF did not propose a candidate for the presidential election of 2016 and gained 9,24% of the votes in the parliamentary elections of 2017; RB: Reformist Bloc; NFSB: National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria; PF: Patriotic Front, in a coalition with BBC for

In the aftermath of these elections, Prime Minister Borissov decided to resign and to propose yet another election, this time a national one scheduled for 26 March 2017. In these elections, the issue of EU sanctions was hardly discussed, even if the Socialists released a poster promising their lifting if they returned to power (Novinite, 3 March 2017). The elections were dominated by the discussion of socio-economic issues, such the fight against corruption, the minimum wage and the future of the pension system and of the health system (Deloy, 2017). As in the previous presidential elections, the extreme right renewed its coalition between anti- and pro-Russians. In the end, Borissov secured a tight victory over the BSP and decided to form a coalition with the extreme right, gathered within the United Patriots (Novinite 27 March 2017).

As far as the upcoming EU elections of May 2019 are concerned, the issue of EU sanctions has lost even more visibility in the political debate. Only one political party, the extreme right *ATAKA*, is campaigning openly for their lifting. But, for the time being, all pre-election polls suggest that the party will be most likely unable to secure even one seat in the European Parliament for the coming legislature. As far as the main opposition party, the *BSP*, is concerned, it prefers to focus on domestic social and economic issues, not without taking advantage of some recent corruption scandals that have affected the ruling party, *GERB* (EUElectionsBulgaria.com, 2019).

3.4 *EU Sanctions and Bulgarian Foreign Policy Towards Russia*

The issue of the EU sanctions against Russia is difficult to dissociate from the larger context of Bulgarian-Russian relations. The relationship between the two countries goes back to the 19th century when Russia helped the fight for the independence of Bulgaria. Despite the close cultural relationship between the two countries, their relations were never easy due to Russia's meddling in Bulgarian domestic politics. Such a close relationship did not prevent Bulgaria from joining opposing sides to Russia during the two World Wars of the 20th century. In the post-Cold War era, if Bulgaria's membership in the EU proved uncontroversial, NATO membership proved to be more problematic. In the end, Bulgaria joined NATO in 2004 and the EU in 2007 (Bechev, 2017).

As a matter of fact, the post Euro-Atlantic accession period saw relations between Bulgaria and Russia being dominated by the failure of three major energy projects supported by Russia.

the EU elections of 2014, then regrouped with *NFSB* and *IMRO* in August 2014. *BBC*: Bulgaria without Censure; *ABC*: Alternative for Bulgarian Revival; *UP*: United Patriots, established in 2016 in replacement of the *PF* that includes *ATAKA*, the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (*IMRO*) and the National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria (*NFSB*); *Volya*: Party "Will," created in 2007 by the businessman, Veselin Mareshi.

The first one concerned the construction of an oil pipeline linking Burgas and Alexandroupolis, which was abandoned by Borissov using the pretext of a local referendum opposing the project on the grounds of protection of the environment (Bechev, 2018a).

The second one was the saga of the construction of a new nuclear plant in Belene, the contract for which was first given to a Russian company, Atomstroyexport. After many complex twists and turns, the project never materialized and led, in 2016, to an international arbitration ruling condemning Bulgaria to pay a fine of more than 550 million euros for its cancellation of the contract with Atomstroyexport (World Nuclear News, 16 June 2016).

The third one, and perhaps the most important, consisted of the Russian-led project of a trans-European pipeline called South Stream. The project competed with another pipeline project supported by the US and called Nabucco, that also planned on crossing Bulgaria. As a consequence, Bulgaria found itself in the middle of these two competing projects. Successive Bulgarian governments decided then to support both of them even if political parties had their preferences for one or the other (Bechev, 2015). That being said, the South Stream project also raised some important questions about its compatibility with EU law and the provision of the EU's third energy package, aimed at promoting a more open energy market in Europe and requiring amongst other things third-party access to the planned pipelines. Facing the threat of its cabinet's disunion with its coalition partner, the MRF,⁶ on the issue and growing EU pressure, the Oresharski government decided to suspend the project until it would meet these EU requirements (Bechev, 2018a). Finally, the crisis in Ukraine and the ensuing EU sanctions put an end to the project. In this context, it became clear that on top of its legal objections, the EU could not support the project politically. Such a situation led the Kremlin to pull the plug on South Stream in December 2014 (Bechev, 2017).

More recently, in 2017, the Russians in cooperation with Turkey launched another project called TurkStream, linking the two countries through the Black Sea and reaching out to the EU via the Balkans. This time again, Bulgaria

6 In Bulgarian: Движение за права и свободи, or Movement for Rights and Freedoms, also referred as the Turkish party as its electoral base mostly consisted of Bulgarians of Turkish origins and other Muslim Bulgarians also called Pomaks. The MRF is affiliated with the ALDE political group in the European Parliament. In December 2015, the party split on the issue of the shooting down of a Russian plane by Turkey and a splinter group led by Lyutvi Mestan decided to set up a new party called ДОСТ (in Bulgarian: Демократизаотговорност, свобода и толерантност, or Democrats for Responsibility, Freedom and Tolerance) also meaning "Friends" in Turkish, that sided with Turkey and its leader Erdogan while the MRF remained more pro-Russian.

showed strong interest in being included in the project. The main gas company, the Bulgarian state-owned firm Bulgartransgaz, even demonstrated its interest in building and operating the pipelines on its national territory. However, such a proposal is still facing both financial and legal uncertainties, the latter concerning the equal access of suppliers to TurkStream required by the EU (Bechev, 2019). In early March 2019, the Russian prime minister Dmitry Medvedev visited Sofia in view of seeking guarantees that the Bulgarians would commit to the extension of TurkStream on their territory (Mediapool Weekly, 2019).

As far as EU sanctions were concerned, successive Bulgarian governments restricted their opposition largely to rhetoric rather than action. If the Russian authorities allegedly tried to lobby a number of Southern European Member States, including Bulgaria alongside Greece, Italy, Hungary and Slovenia, to lift the sanctions, the Bulgarians always went along with the other Member States in adopting their periodical renewal (Novinite, 30 July 2016). Even the election of Rumen Radev did not alter the pattern. In truth, the power to decide on the sanctions belonged to the prime minister and not to the president, even if the latter did not make any secret of his opposition to them. The Bulgarian EU presidency offered another opportunity for Bulgaria to put the issue of EU sanctions on the EU agenda. However, this issue was not included in the priorities of the EU presidency, despite declarations that this would be done in the fall of 2017 (Bechev, 2018b).

On other issues, where the EU's consensus was less strong, the Bulgarian government was quick to distance itself from its partners' main positions. While in charge of the EU presidency, the Bulgarian authorities refused to join the coordinated action by some EU Member States to expel Russian diplomats in retaliation for the alleged use by Russian agents of nerve gas against the former GRU officer Sergei Skripal that took place in Britain, under the pretext of a lack of convincing evidence. Yet, Bulgaria was not the only EU Member States to break EU solidarity on this issue. Other countries included Austria, Cyprus, Portugal and Slovenia (BulgarianPresidency.EU, 2018).

4 European Foreign Policy Analysis, Europeanization and Alternative Approaches – Politicization of EU Foreign Policy and Small Country Diplomacy

In this section, we propose to discuss Bulgarian foreign policy in light of four different approaches. The two first ones are: European foreign policy analysis and Europeanization approaches. The second one is based on the concept of

politicization of EU foreign policy. The third one is the one of small country diplomacy.

4.1 *Bulgarian Foreign Policy on EU Sanctions in the Light of European Foreign Policy Analysis and Europeanization Approaches*

The impact of EU membership on Bulgaria's foreign policy can first be assessed using the two main approaches, namely that of European foreign policy analysis and that of Europeanization.

As far as the first one is concerned, Bulgaria's foreign policy on EU sanctions reflects a strong evidence of alignment of its foreign policy with the main EU positions, while it never tried either to lead or to openly challenge the main views in Brussels (Mihaylova and Dimitrov, 2017). In line with the 4-mode spectrum model proposed by Hadfield, Manners and Whitman, Bulgarian foreign policy shows a rather low level of Europeanization. Certainly, Bulgarian foreign policy did not reveal strong commitment to deeper integration, if not supranational foreign policy at the EU level. In terms of Mode II, Bulgaria's foreign policy operated within the established intergovernmental framework but without attempting to propose alternative proposals and by following the general consensus. In terms of Mode III, Bulgaria's foreign policy tried to preserve its bilateral relations with Russia while remaining committed to the broad EU objectives. Finally, as far as Mode IV is concerned, Bulgaria's foreign policy did not attempt to break away or to directly oppose EU goals (see Table 6).

As far as Europeanization approaches are concerned (see Table 7), EU sanctions on Russia were very much viewed as imposed from the top on Bulgaria's foreign policy, and while there was no attempt to upload a position at the EU level, neither was there any sign of redefining Bulgaria's foreign policy identity as an EU Member State (i.e. cross-loading). If anything, and as shown in the Skripal affair, the Bulgarian authorities were quick to break ranks whenever an opportunity to do so presented itself.

These two assessments show the extent to which such alignment should perhaps not be understood as strong evidence of the Europeanization of Bulgarian foreign policy. As already pointed out, the Europeanization of Bulgarian foreign policy has not only been protracted, but also superficial and largely procedural and administrative rather than political (Bechev, 2013).

However, these two approaches only provide a snapshot in terms of the weak Europeanization of Bulgaria's foreign policy, but fail to provide any explanatory framework for apprehending the reasons for such a situation when it comes to EU sanctions on Russia.

Indeed, the main discourses on the issue very much centered on the future of Bulgaria's bilateral relations with Russia, especially in view of saving major

TABLE 6 Bulgarian foreign policy and EU sanctions: European foreign policy analysis

Mode I: Member State foreign policy operating within established EU frameworks in a deeply institutionalized, integrated, potentially supranational fashion	No—the Bulgarian government remained committed to the intergovernmental structure of the CFSP.
Mode II: Member State foreign policy operating within the established EU frameworks, according to intergovernmental mechanisms	Yes.
Mode III: Member State foreign policy conducted bilaterally or multilaterally between EU Member States, but outside established EU frameworks and/or the EU <i>acquis</i>	Not really: on the issue of sanctions, the Bulgarian government did not resist them, nor did it try to circumvent them.
Mode IV: Member State foreign policy conducted between EU and non-EU Member States prioritizing state goals above or in opposition to perceived EU goals	No—however, even if the Bulgarian government did not openly challenge the EU sanctions, these were perceived as being against its best interests.

TABLE 7 Bulgaria's Foreign Policy and Europeanization Approaches

Top down	Bottom up	Crossloading
Yes	No	No

energy projects such as South Stream (Bosse and Hincu, 2017). The final abandonment of this project was less the result of Bulgaria's decision than the result of pressure from Brussels which made the Russians prefer to give it up rather than to endorse the EU legal requirements (Bechev, 2017). In this view, Bulgaria's foreign policy towards the EU sanctions only reflected a very limited degree of Europeanization (see Table 7).

4.2 Bulgarian Foreign Policy and Politicization of EU Foreign Policy

In the case of the EU sanctions, the issue became only partly politicized as demonstrated by the attempts made by part of the extreme right and the left

TABLE 8 Results politicization

Salience of EU foreign policy issues in domestic politics	Somewhat, but decreasing importance over time.
Extent to which such EU foreign policy is producing a cleavage in domestic politics	Difficult to say—but does not seem so.
Extent to which electoral results of parties can be explained by their positions on EU foreign policy issue	Not really—if anything gap between positions of parties and public opinion.

to put them center-stage in the political debate (see Table 8). Indeed, these questions quickly lost their importance in the successive elections that took place after the EU elections of May 2014. The parties that decided to campaign directly on their opposition to the EU sanctions such as *ATAKA*, *ABC* and partly the Socialists did not gain much in terms of electoral results. Conversely, parties such as the Reformist Bloc that strongly supported the EU sanctions also saw their share of votes decreasing from one election to another. Finally, the two big parties, *GERB* and the Socialists, that adopted more ambivalent positions, were able to increase their share of the votes (see Figure 1). That being said, it is always difficult to differentiate between the different political issues that drive Bulgarian politics, which has been subject to high-level political volatility since the end of communism. Such high volatility is generally attributed to the lack of a strong cleavage structure in the country's national political system (Karasimenonov and Luybanov, 2013). In this vein, it is still unsure whether the question of Bulgaria-EU/Russia relations reflects a strong cleavage or merely overlaps with existing questions (Todorov, 2018). There are strong signs, however, that the pro-EU and pro-NATO attitudes are much more prevalent in 18–30-year-olds living in the urban areas, while the pro-Russia attitudes are more prevalent in 60-year-olds and above (ECFR Blog, 2015). This should not, however, be a reason to underestimate the ability of populist parties to mobilize their electorate beyond those alleged cleavages (Zankina, 2017; Todorov, 2018). But in any case, these attempts by the populist parties failed to convince the public opinion to question the Euro-Atlantic commitments of their country in any significant manner. In April 2018, a poll gave the results that more than 74% of the Bulgarians supported their country's membership in the EU while 58% supported NATO membership. These figures have remained largely stable in Bulgaria over the last 10 years (Sofia Globe, 26 April 2018).

TABLE 9 Bulgarian foreign policy and EU sanctions from a small country diplomacy perspective

Commitment	Network Capital	Immaterial Resources	Moving Discussions/ Forging Consensus
Weak: attempt to preserve bilateral Bulgaria-Russia relations.	Non-existent: less likely coalition member (ECFR Coalition Explorer).	Present but not used.	Not able to take any leadership on the issue.

4.3 *Bulgaria's Foreign Policy and Small Country Diplomacy*

Another way to look at Bulgaria's foreign policy and the issue of EU sanctions is to approach it from the perspective of a small state's diplomacy under the conditions of EU membership (see Table 9). There is no doubt that EU foreign policy is usually understood as being driven by its larger Member States. If this holds true to some degree, the European Union also presents small Member States with opportunities to influence EU foreign policy. Factually, Bulgaria would easily qualify as a small Member State. Research on small Member States' diplomacy has emphasized four main variables that may account for their ability to shape EU foreign policy (Narsa, 2011; Jakobsen, 2007). The first is commitment, the second network capital, the third immaterial resources and the fourth capacity to deliberate in moving discussions forward and forging consensus. In the case of EU sanctions, Bulgaria, as a small Member State, failed in at least three of these factors. First, in terms of commitment, the attempts made by Bulgaria to preserve its bilateral relations with Russia clashed with the preference displayed by the majority of policy makers in favor of a unified EU approach (Klavehn, Janning and Zunneberg, 2017). For example, Prime Minister Borissov met with Putin twice since the adoption of EU sanctions, first in August 2016 and then in late May 2017. Upon his election, President Radev forwarded an invitation to Vladimir Putin for 2018 in view of commemorating the 140th anniversary of the liberation of Bulgaria. The visit was however not possible due to its clash with the Russian presidential elections, but has been postponed for later in 2018. On 21–22 May, President Radev also visited Vladimir Putin in Moscow, officially to discuss cultural issues in connection with the Day of Bulgarian Culture and Literature (Novinite 30 May 2018). Such bilateral contacts raised the question of Bulgarian commitment to a unified EU approach on Russia, even though other leaders such as Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron also paid a visit to Putin in spring 2018 (Novinite 30 May 2018).

In terms of network capital or coalition building, Bulgaria got the reputation of the least likely Member State with whom the others might consider making a coalition when it comes to EU foreign policy (Klavehn, Janning and Zunneberg, 2017). As a result, it is quite unlikely that Bulgarian political leaders will ever prove to be able to move the discussion on EU sanctions in any direction, even less be able to forge a new consensus. Only as far as immaterial resources are concerned, Bulgaria would have the potential expertise needed to deal with the situation, due to its still strong knowledge asset regarding Russia and Eastern Europe in general, while such expertise has not left the country.

5 Conclusion

This paper discussed the case of Bulgarian foreign policy vis-à-vis the EU sanctions on Russia as a test case of conducting national foreign policy under EU membership. In doing so, it started by analyzing the issue through the lenses of European foreign policy analysis and Europeanization approaches, then continued by resorting to the concept of politicization of EU foreign policy and small country diplomacy within the EU context.

Each of these approaches taken separately accounts poorly for how EU membership affects the conduct of national foreign policy. In terms of European foreign policy analysis and Europeanization approaches, EU membership had a limited impact on Bulgarian foreign policy. Clearly, however, the EU position had some constraining effect on Bulgarian foreign policy. It should also be pointed out that Bulgaria did not seek to challenge the EU position openly. This would point to some degree of convergence on the part its foreign policy. That being said, our analysis suggests that if the EU dimension adds a layer to Bulgarian foreign policy, it remains largely unconnected to it.

In terms of politicization, if attempts were made to politicize the issue of EU sanctions, it has had, over time, a decreasing importance in terms of domestic politics and did not contribute to any substantial shift in Bulgarian foreign policy towards Russia. Bulgaria's foreign policy analyzed in the context of small country diplomacy within the EU framework highlighted the challenge, if not the reluctance, of Bulgaria to engage EU foreign policy, let alone to try influencing it.

Finally, these findings showed the extent to which any plan to introduce a qualified majority system in the adoption of foreign policy decisions at EU level (Kelemen and Orenstein, 2017), if ever agreed upon, may constitute a challenge for Bulgarian foreign policy. It would indeed induce the country to be more pro-active in joining if not building alternative coalitions instead of

finding comfort in its position of policy taker by abandoning the initiative of policy making to the largest EU Member States.

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