

Unless the West strengthens its support for Bulgarian civil society, the country is in danger of drifting back into the arms of Russia.

LSE blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2013/09/04/unless-the-west-strengthens-its-support-for-bulgarian-civil-society-the-country-is-in-danger-of-drifting-back-into-the-arms-of-russia/

04/09/2013

*Bulgaria joined the European Union in 2007 and has been a member of NATO since 2004. **Iveta Cherneva** argues, however, that recent developments suggest the country may be turning toward Russia. The current government led by Plamen Oresharski has backed a number of Russian led energy projects in the country, such as the construction of a new nuclear power plant. A wave of anti-government protests has also swept over Bulgaria during the summer, calling for new elections and the eradication of corruption. Unless the United States and the European Union strengthen support for Bulgarian civil society and the anti-government protesters, there is a very real risk that the country could reorient itself toward the Kremlin.*



When in 2011 Russia's President Vladimir Putin announced his idea for an intergovernmental organisation called the **Eurasian Union**, few in Bulgaria thought the idea could pose a threat to democracy and Bulgaria's Western orientation. Few took seriously Russia's Ambassador to NATO who, back in 2008, notoriously described Bulgaria as "Russia's Trojan Horse in the EU". Russian political scientist Dmitry Orlov mentioned Bulgaria among the countries under consideration as Eurasian Union potentials "loyal to Russian economic interests", by putting Bulgaria in the company of international community renegades such as Cuba and Venezuela. Even after Russian politicians and political scientists alluded to Bulgaria's future in the Eurasian Union, few were paying attention. After all, Bulgaria had joined the EU in 2007 and became a fully-fledged NATO member in 2004. What could go wrong?

Recent **developments**, however, should make many in the West revisit their comfortably static understanding of Bulgaria's Western orientation, raising the potential that the Eastern European nation might indeed be sliding eastward. The influence of Russian oligarchs in the country appears to be growing, in no small part due to the help and safeguards provided by the current government of Prime Minister Plamen Oresharski. Alongside established points of friction between the US and Russia, such as disagreements over Syria, human rights, energy, and the Snowden scandal, Bulgaria may soon need to be added to the list. Three developments in particular might lead us to the conclusion that Bulgaria is slowly, but surely turning toward Russia.

First, there is the issue of the South Stream natural gas pipeline. In July, the Bulgarian government signed a deal with Russia's natural gas giant Gazprom, according to which Gazprom would develop the pipeline through Bulgarian territory and would comfortably exploit it for free for 15 years. The Oresharski government announced that the project would cost nothing to the Bulgarian taxpayer. Unofficially, however, a Russian bank is known to have commissioned a multi-billion euro loan with an 8 per cent interest rate – something which the Bulgarian taxpayer would have to cover in the future.

Second, following an **inconclusive referendum** in January on the construction of a new nuclear power plant in



Plamen Oresharski, Credit: BGNES (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

Belene, in the North of Bulgaria, the Oresharski government announced its intention in July to re-open the project. Many Bulgarians oppose building the power plant, which was being constructed by Russia's state energy company Rosatom. Last, there are indications that military contracting plans in Bulgaria are being reoriented toward Russian military contractors, instead of NATO partners.

These developments beg the question: is the US watching? At this point, there are at least two policy options available to the US government to ensure that Bulgaria doesn't slip completely into Russia's orbit. The first is to strengthen US support for Bulgarian civil society and the recent anti-government protests which have taken place since June. For close to three months, thousands of Bulgarians have engaged in peaceful protests calling for new elections and the resignation of the current government. Thousands have joined [mass rallies](#) against the influence of 'oligarchs', corruption, and the appointment of senior officials with alleged links to criminality.

The government has not only provoked a negative reaction from its international partners, but has above all angered many of its own citizens. The protests have been variously described as a '[Bulgarian Spring](#)' and have [called into question](#) the functioning of the government. The role of social media has also been noted, with the protests being labeled a '[Twitter Revolution](#)'. France and Germany are the two major players who have issued a strong statement of support for the protestors, reminding the Oresharski government that it needs to cut ties with oligarchs and that 40 per cent of all Bulgarian EU funds come from France and Germany. So far a similarly strong and engaged position by the US Ambassador in Sofia has been lacking. The failure to back Bulgarian civil society now at the local level would be a mistake, and a missed opportunity.

The second option for the US is to strengthen its diplomatic approach to Bulgaria. In December 2012, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made the US position clear on the Eurasian Union by [stating](#): "let's make no mistake about it. We know what the goal is and we are trying to figure out effective ways to slow down or prevent it". So far President Obama and Secretary Kerry have been silent on the Bulgarian question. There is a larger role for the US to play in actively supporting the voices of Bulgarian citizens, whose interests happen to coincide with the goals of US foreign policy.

The US should seriously consider a strong diplomatic stand before it's too late. There is a very real risk that Bulgaria could drift back into Russia's political and economic orbit and the US could lose a close NATO ally in turn, potentially creating another Cuba or Venezuela. It's time for President Obama to quash President Putin's Eurasian Union ambition and make clear that the US will not allow NATO's Eastern European members to be chipped away one by one.

[Please read our comments policy before commenting.](#)

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPPE – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

Shortened URL for this post: <http://bit.ly/15ttmb>

About the author

Iveta Cherneva

Iveta Cherneva is an author in the spheres of security policy, human rights and sustainability. She heads a research consultancy firm she founded in 2011, and is the author of the book *Trafficking for Begging* (2011), editor of *The Business Case for Sustainable Finance* (2012), *The UN Security Council*, *The ICJ and Judicial Review: Lockerbie Revisited* (2013), and a co-author of *Beyond Market Forces: Regulating the Global Security Industry* (2009).



