Strategic Role of Bulgaria in European Integration

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Abstract— The process of European integration, which began in the last century, continues to this day. Having determined the vector of their development, Western countries created a powerful national association of the European Union in the form of a new regulated structure with its own ideology based on the so-called ‘European values’. Since most of the economic and political potential of Europe is concentrated within the EU, it is reasonable to understand the mutual influence of the processes of expanding the borders of the community and deepening European association. In addition, it is worth realizing deeper processes that accompany the unification of Europe. They are inextricably linked with the geopolitical factor and the role of the United States as a world leader. This article focuses on the strategic role of Bulgaria in various European Union development processes. The main focus here is on retrospective analysis of such aspects as economic, social and geopolitical. As information sources of the first two aspects, statistical data from organizations such as Eurostat, Comtrade, World Bank and various public institutions in Bulgaria are selected.

Keywords: Bulgaria, European Union, geopolitics, integration

I. INTRODUCTION

In order to characterize the strategic position of Bulgaria in the European unification process, it is necessary to refer to its basics. They are geopolitical concepts of European integration, which emerged in the XX century [4]. Among them are pan-Europeanism and Atlanticism.

Proceeding from the generally accepted definition, pan-Europeanism reflects the integration processes in Europe, which are based on the idea of creating pan-European bodies and associations between the states on this territory. It is noteworthy that this idea is rooted in the beginning of the last century, in the proclamation of the Manifesto of R. Kudenhove-Kalergi ‘Pan-Europe’, calling for uniting European countries in the face of threats. It declared that a united Europe would become the third independent pole between the USSR and the USA. The concept of pan-Europeanism was based on the principle of continentalism meant independence from the influences of the United States, Russia and Britain.

Another well-known concept is Atlanticism, which implies the geopolitical and cultural influence of different regions on each other and other world regions as a whole. The narrower definition of this term originally came down to the spread of Western civilization from the Mediterranean to the north to the British Isles and beyond. In geopolitical terms, it implies the division of Western Europe into maritime and continental, in which the former dominates with the decisive influence of such Anglo-Saxon values as open society, liberalism, individualism and pragmatism. An example of the action of the concept of Atlanticism can be the steps taken by Britain, which prevented the emergence of the leader on the continent. The evolution of these concepts after the Second World War and the place of Bulgaria in it will be described in more detail below.

II. RESEARCH RESULTS

Since 1945, the concept of Atlanticism has acquired a new meaning: the growing dominance of the United States must be supported in order to establish international order. The unifying link was the myth of the ‘Soviet threat’. The adherents of this idea, calling it Euro-Atlantic or Trans-Atlantic, perceived the integration of Europe not as a self-sufficient goal, but as an instrument of geopolitical reorganization of the world.

The result of this approach was the creation of NATO in 1949, the purpose of which was to contain the USSR, achieve control over the continental military potential and prevent member countries from excessive armament. In implementing its plans, America relied on the promotion of the plan of J. Marshall, who revived the European economy and satisfied the interests of American companies. It was purpose to creation of a single market space that could be easily controlled with the help of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, as well as the prevention of possible conflicts between member countries by strategic economic issues. In other words, the US goal was deterrence. It was applied to the USSR and China needed to be prevented from reaching the World Ocean and realizing their potential. The second element of the American approach was to achieve a regional balance of power between Germany and France, on the one hand, and Eastern European countries, on the other hand. The third element of the approach was to prevent the creation of a European state, since it contradicted the interests of the United States.

It is noteworthy that during long confrontation of the concepts of pan-Europeanism and Atlanticism, the first one was defeated. The European project in the 1970s was influenced by the supporters of Atlanticism, turning into a tool of the ‘Cold War’ and the implementation of the geopolitical plans of the United States and NATO.
Some researchers believe that, despite the official politically correct rhetoric about a common European future as the only possible path to political, economic and inter-ethnic stabilization, the process of European integration leads to the destruction and decline of newly adopted countries [4]. On the example of Bulgaria, the situation can be traced through the analysis of some statistical data.

Sharp increase in foreign debt and the budget deficit are the main aspects of the criticism of the situation in Bulgaria among others (see Fig. 1-2).

The data specified on the Figures demonstrate that after the country’s accession to the EU in 2007, the indicators under consideration had indeed a negative trend. However, by 2016, changes began to occur in a positive way. It is also confirmed by GDP indicators (see Fig. 3).

As it follows from this Figure, after the crisis period of 2008-2009 unemployment rose, however, starting with 2015, the situation is changing for better. At the same time, the crime situation, according to the organization Oversees Security Advisory Council, is really unfavorable, however, in many respects it is improving.

Studying of demographic situation demonstrates the decrease of population (see Fig. 5).

First of all, it is due to the fall in the birth rate (9.1 per 1000) and the rapid increase in the death rate (15 per 1000). It is worth noting that the mortality rate in Bulgaria is the highest in the European Union. At the same time, the number of people over 65 has increased almost 1.5 times, and there is comparable decrease in the number of people aged 15-64. In accordance with Eurostat data, there is high level of migration of the population (3 per 1000) predominantly to the highly developed countries.

These data indicate that joining the EU has become a stressful factor for Bulgaria. It manifested itself most vividly when the 2008 financial and economic crisis broke out. It exacerbated existing problems and created new ones. As a result, the idea of joining the EU has ceased to be Bulgaria’s motivating factor for state development and has lost its consolidating role. It led to the inability of the government to solve problems, destabilization of political system, ideological vacuum and cooling citizens towards democratic processes [1].

At the same time, the transition process could not be easy due to significant differences between the state and European countries. To correct this situation in relation to the new member states, the European Union implements regional strategy [11] that provides a solution to political problems by economic means. Management is carried out at the national, sector and territorial levels. Funding is provided through
specially created funds. The main objectives of a regional policy based on legislation are as follows:

- Rapprochement of countries in terms of socio-economic development;
- Increasing the competitiveness of the regions and the level of employment;
- Territorial cooperation for the removal of economic barriers related to national borders.

Turning back to statistics, it can be noted that, unlike the economic component, the social sphere is far from ideal in Bulgaria. However, it is not static. It is actively influenced by measures of social policy of the European Union [8]. The latter is based on Christian values, principles of commitment to democracy, which is based on human rights and freedoms, prosperity through social justice, economic freedom, and equal security. The aim of the social policy of Europe is the stabilization of the capitalist system through the creation of a social and institutional structure. Despite the fact that this goal has not been fully achieved, the development of the social model based on the existing potential continues. It is assumed that social dialogue will unite the political, social and civil forces of society to achieve a state of real political union.

General view to the unity of the EU demonstrates that it is based on such three dimensions as economic, social and territorial cohesion and solidarity between member states [5]. Analysis of the EU cohesion indicator showed that, compared with 2004, in 2015 it increased almost 1.3 times. Moreover, this pattern is reflected in the figures of Bulgaria. However, there are certain gaps in relation to these measurements. In economic cohesion, the country is lagging behind in the export of high-tech products due to insufficient development of R & D. In social cohesion, there is a lag in poverty (according to Eurostat data, it is the highest in the EU) and social exclusion of the population. Regarding territorial cohesion, the density of roads, wastewater collection and treatment systems are underestimated and the railway networks do not meet the standards, which impedes the development of high-speed communications and reduce the competitiveness of this type of transport for passengers. On the whole, the infrastructure quality indicators are not at a high level (see Fig. 6).

The result of joining Bulgaria to the EU was more changes in the economy, while changes in the political sphere were barely noticeable. They did not influence the positions of political parties [6], did not improve the quality of political competition, and did not bring results in the fight against corruption. The formal side of the political process turned out to be noticeable through the introduction of legal norms and procedures promoting the development of civil society [3].

Thus, the strategic role of Bulgaria in European integration, first of all, is determined by territorial, demographic and institutional factors that underlie the idea of a united Europe. Some researchers [9] believe that for the EU it includes two main aspects:

1. Economic, implying the provision of access to its market for the sale of goods of highly developed European countries.

2. Geopolitical, aimed at expanding NATO to the East.

The economic aspect can be represented by the example of statistical data on imports in the context of supplying countries (see Fig. 7).

![Fig. 7. Bulgaria’s imports in 2017, bln. dollars](source: COMTRADE)

Along with this, there are powerful latent movements associated with the geopolitical rivalry of a number of countries, strenuous efforts and conflicts. The example of Bulgaria, which, according to the data of the European Court of Auditors, lagged behind in many respects for adoption in the EU (lack of judicial reform, corruption, etc.), shows that the geopolitical criteria applied to the participating countries are much more important rather than formal Copenhagen. It is noteworthy that even now, after 12 years, in accordance with the data of the European Commission, the country is not ready to switch to the euro and to enter the Schengen Agreement.

Through the adoption of this country into the European Union, it was possible to expand the Euro-Atlantic zone to the East and put Bulgaria on one of the first places in the implementation of the containment policy of Russia [4],
which fits into the geopolitical concept of Atlanticism. At the same time, this problem includes the whole range of sensitive issues. An important factor here is the energy security of Europe. In addition to the geopolitical aspect, there is also an economic one. Bulgarian experts believe that in the long term, despite the failure of the South Stream project, the country may become a strategic center for the possible creation of pipelines, as well as a market that influences regional and international cooperation in the field of energy, including nuclear (Kozloduy and Belene projects) [7].

It should be mentioned that the strategic position of Bulgaria is also taken into account in such a matter as the geopolitics of the Black Sea region. The Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation, which emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1999, implied the interaction of the Black Sea countries in the economic sphere. However, its tasks differed from the American Eurasian doctrine and strategy of global competition. As a result, the established organization did not show its effectiveness. There was a reformatting of the region in favor of such major players as [2]:

- European Union, in which Bulgaria and Romania joined;
- The United States, whose military bases are present in Bulgaria and Romania. Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine are in the zone of influence of America;
- Turkey and Russia, which historically control the passage of ships through the Bosphorus.

As a result, competition for transit functions between players prevails over regional cooperation projects, including through various strategic choices of the Black Sea countries.

It is worth noting that this region is not the only one in the zone of US interests. Separately, it is necessary to mention the Balkan Peninsula, the dominance strategies on which were developed by the Americans back in the 1990s. Accordingly, the strategic role of Bulgaria in this project is indisputable [10].

III. CONCLUSION

Twelve years have passed since the entry of Bulgaria into the European Union. Various EU influences are dominant, while the opposite effect is insignificant. Perhaps weak attempts were made last year, when Bulgaria presided over the EU Council. Nevertheless, the integration process itself already demonstrates the strategic role of Bulgaria for Europe. However, the country's position is much broader and its development occurs in the mainstream of various geopolitical arrangements, the main role in which is played by the USA.

At the moment it is difficult to estimate the results of the changes that have occurred in the country, since it is still in a transitional stage more concerned with the economic and social spheres. However, current standards of living disappoint voters regarding their presence in the European Union. It leads to an increase in right-wing parties of a nationalistic nature. At the same time, a more global problem remains unresolved within the framework of Bulgaria’s integration into the EU: the division of Europe into West and East. Within its framework, it remains unclear whether the expansion of the EU could push Bulgaria and other Eastern European countries to new development trajectory. This problem is particularly relevant in the light of the new trend of reviving the idea of pan-Europeanism, which comes to replace Atlanticism.

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