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# National interests of Serbia and Bulgaria after major adverse events: Between continuity and change

## ABSTRACT

The subject of this paper is to examine the persistence of the previously held notions of national interests of Serbia and Bulgaria in the face of major events that prevented these interests from being fully realized. Did the national interests change or remain the same after major adverse events in Serbia and Bulgaria? Were only the means of the achievement of previously held national interests, such as alliances, and not the interests themselves, what was changed? In reaching the answers to these questions, authors use historical and comparative methods, by tracing and comparing the national interests of Serbia and Bulgaria regarding four variables: territory and sovereignty, national integrity, wellbeing (economic prosperity) and security. The authors will determine the perception of national interests regarding these four variables before and after major adverse events. In the case of Serbia, this is a break-up of Yugoslavia and NATO military intervention in 1999 and, in the case of Bulgaria, the results of the First World War, which were referred to in the historiography as a “national catastrophe”, the results of the Second World War, as well as the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and the beginning of the democratic transition. The authors conclude that the previously held national interests did not change significantly, but were constrained due to systematic

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KEYWORDS: *national interests, Bulgaria, Serbia, NATO interventions, Yugoslavia, World Wars*

## INTRODUCTION

Determining national interests in contemporary world politics is a complicated task as much as contemporary regions and the world as a whole are interconnected and intertwined. The rule of capitalism that brings into the world scene giant private actors such as transnational corporations and contested great power politics and the rising role of the middle or emerging powers make it even harder for the smaller states to determine and preserve their national interest. As much as global hegemony did, the new global shifts in power open new possibilities that require states to adapt themselves once again to survive. This paper tries to address how two neighboring and very close states address the contemporary international situation and changes and not only compare their present position but also the ways they responded to some key adverse events in history, in order to identify the patterns of continuity and change. In this way, the paper also addresses the current determination of the national interests of Serbia and Bulgaria and gives some hopefully useful comments and recommendations for both academicians and policy-makers.

The article does not explore in depth the process of formation of national interests through the prism of perception of political elites, economic factors, influence of the public opinion, refugees from lost territories etc. How these interests are formed may be the subject of future research. The authors selected four variables: territory and sovereignty, national integrity, well-being (economic prosperity), and security before and after major adverse events: in the case of Serbia, the break-up of Yugoslavia and NATO military intervention in 1999 and, in the case of Bulgaria, the results of the First World War, which were referred to in the historiography as a “national catastrophe”, the results of the Second World War, as well as the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and the beginning of the democratic transition are events that led to a rethinking of the country’s foreign policy course to that day. The authors conclude that the previously held national interests did not change significantly, but were constrained due to systematic conditions such as an unfavorable balance of power and the evolution of international law, which led them to start searching for new means of their achievement.

## SERBIAN NATIONAL INTERESTS

Serbian national interest was driven by the desire for liberation, territorial, regional and national integration and preservation of favorable position on the world stage. The liberation of Serbian population took many forms over several hundred years and many “Battles for Balkan” took place against different conquerors.<sup>1</sup> Territorial integration of the Serbian state continues to be “unfinished business”, since the status of the break-up province of Kosovo and Metohija is still contested. The continuous dilemma over the merger of territorial and national integrity of Serbs still exists, if we have in mind the occasional appearance of the possibilities of the independence of the Republic of Srpska, although it was temporarily set during Yugoslavia. Yugoslavia set many of the interests regarding the international position since it was one of the important countries on the world stage during the Cold War, and especially within the Nonaligned Movement. The dilemma of the level of overlapping of territorial and national integrity of Serbs is of course not only driven by Serbian interest but is also highly influenced by the activities of other nations in the region, primarily Albanians, Bosniaks and Croats. Even with the possible recognition of the independence of Kosovo, issues over the municipalities with the Albanian majority population in Serbia reappear as well as Bosniak issues primarily in the Raška (or Sandžak) region.<sup>2</sup> The issue of Croats might be raised once the Republic of Srpska would declare its independence. These unresolved issues regarding territorial and national integrities of the Balkan nations, and problems with the implementation of the highest standards of the recognition and protection of national minorities drive foreign actors to pressure Balkan countries into various forms of regional integration after the dissolution of Yugoslavia.<sup>3</sup> But with the lessons learned during the previous rounds of integration, there is little chance that the EU will integrate this region until the territorial, national, economic and security issues are properly set among the still unsettled peoples of the region.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Duško Lopandić, *Bitke za Balkan*, Arhipelag, Beograd, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Marina T. Kostić, “Preševo, Bujanovac i Medveđa – status/manjine, paralele i stavovi EU i SAD”, *Nacionalni interes*, Vol. 26, No. 2, pp. 85–107.

<sup>3</sup> Dragan Đukanović and Marko Dašić, “Modeliranje regionalne saradnje na Balkanu nakon 1999. godine: evropska iskustva i njihova primena”, *Međunarodni problemi*, Vol. 73, No. 4, pp. 617–636.

<sup>4</sup> Marina Kostić, “Politika proširenja Evropske unije: koncept, naučene lekcije i slučaj Srbije”, *Srpska politička misao*, Vol. 45, No. 3, pp. 219–233.

## PRESERVING SOVEREIGNTY AND TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY OF YUGOSLAVIA AND SERBIA

The primary interest of Serbia before 1999 concerned the identification of area of Serbian sovereignty and territorial integrity. Actually, the whole “adverse event” of 1999 is connected to the process of determination of Serbian sovereignty and territorial integrity mostly manifested after the 1970 and onward regarding the changes of the Yugoslav constitution of that time. This issue was primarily concerned with the level of identification of Serbia with Yugoslavia – from full overlapping to reducing this identification – and the issue of equality of Serbia with other federal republics that did not have “autonomous provinces” with veto powers on their territories. With the weakening of the identification of Serbia with Yugoslavia, i.e. with the weakening of centralization of Yugoslavia, the Serbian interest in reducing the strength of autonomous provinces and consolidation of Serbian sovereignty and unitary status over the whole territory of the republic grew.

The NATO bombing of FR Yugoslavia at first did not challenge the essential national interests of Serbia as then defined – Serbian attempts to preserve what remained of Yugoslavia, together with territorial integrity that included Kosovo and Metohija as its province, since United Nation’s Security Council Resolution 1244 established international “interim administration for Kosovo under which the people of Kosovo can enjoy substantial autonomy within the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia”, with the development of institutions of self-governance in Kosovo.<sup>5</sup> However, it soon led to the change of government which was ready to break up with the first interest – the preservation of Yugoslavia. This was manifested in the acceptance that FR Yugoslavia was not the only successor of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia and the application for membership in the UN on November 1, 2000. While there was a break-up with this first interest in 2000, the second one – defining Serbian territorial integrity – remained strongly embedded in the Serbian consciousness and primary legal document since 2006 when the Constitution was adopted. Following the Constitution, all strategic documents in the security and defense field still define the preservation of the Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija as part of the Republic of Serbia as the primary national interest. The Serbian Security Strategy notes that:

“The Republic of Serbia will not recognize unilaterally declared independence of its southern province, however, in the interest of regional stability and the best possible relations between Serbia and Albania, it will continue the dialogue with

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<sup>5</sup> RESOLUTION 1244 (1999), Adopted by the Security Council at its 4011th meeting, on 10 June 1999, point 10; Матијас Кинцел, *Пут у рат, Немачка, НАТО и Косово*, Службени гласник, Београд 2022, 58-66, 169-190.

the Provisional Institutions of Self-Government in Priština with the mediation of the European Union until a lasting, sustainable and mutually acceptable agreement is reached.”<sup>6</sup>

This means that the notion of Kosovo and Metohija has still not been deontologized from the Serbian national identity and security considerations.<sup>7</sup> However, attempts in this direction exist and the change of this national interest might take an opposite form – that the break-up with the “Kosovo myth” is actually what best serves Serbian survival, economic prosperity, and stability and not the other way around. In his address to the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia in September 2022, for example, President Aleksandar Vučić stated:

“...we must adapt our myths to understand their importance in creating the spirit of the Serbian people, so that without them we would not have survived to this day, but also to avoid collapse and dangers that we often did not avoid in the past..., so that we don’t die for a crazy head, to think about how to develop satellites and artificial intelligence...it is a difficult task that we must complete in order to survive as a country and people.”<sup>8</sup>

However, Serbia will not give up fighting for territorial integrity, but it remains questionable whether it will isolate itself again in that fight. Thus, the change of this first national interest regarding survival, territorial integrity and sovereignty was changing from preserving Yugoslavia and Serbia with two autonomous provinces to the possible perception that Yugoslavia was never in the Serbian interest and that further fight for Kosovo inside Serbia would only weaken the Serbian progress, unity and economic wellbeing. The other thread of this line of transformation is related to the second group of Serbian national interest, which I will address in more detail further, and that is the preservation of the Serbian people in other entities and states, which creates the tension between territorial and national integrity of Serbia and Serbs and their self-determination. The recent All-Serbian Assembly held on June 8, 2024 is a good example.

The means of defending Serbian territorial and national integrity changed from the position that Serbia would defend its territorial integrity and sovereignty by all means to the position that Serbia would never again go to war. While before 1999, means of preserving the Serbian territorial integrity

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<sup>6</sup> Security Strategy of the Republic of Serbia, Ministry of Defence, 2020, p. 35.

<sup>7</sup> On the issue of the ontological security and Kosovo see: Filip Ejdus, *Crisis and Ontological Insecurity: Serbia's Anxiety over Kosovo's Secession*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Vučić: Odgovorna politika ne počiva na mitovima; Srbija neće ni posredno ni neposredno priznati nezavisnost Kosova i Metohije, RTV, [https://rtv.rs/sr\\_lat/politika/vucic-odgovorna-politika-ne-pociva-na-mitovima\\_1373109.html](https://rtv.rs/sr_lat/politika/vucic-odgovorna-politika-ne-pociva-na-mitovima_1373109.html)

and sovereignty included military and security actions besides the constant negotiations with international actors, the “fight” for the preservation of Kosovo inside Serbia has afterward taken the form of only diplomatic means – international negotiations, asking an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the technical and substantive negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina delegations with the various mediation roles of the EU. A brief attempt of Belgrade to take more coercive measures like the lowering of diplomatic relations with the states that recognized the Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) of Kosovo failed. The preservation of this national interest greatly influences the foreign policy and security options of Serbia – one is the preservation of strong ties with Russia and China, and the other preserving the position of military neutrality, that was introduced in 2007.

### PRESERVING SERBIAN PEOPLE IN THE TERRITORIES OUTSIDE SERBIA

What Yugoslav rulers failed to achieve was the creation of a single Yugoslav nation. National and religious identifications and tendencies toward more autonomy and later states of the constitutive elements of the Yugoslav Federation prevailed over the sense of identification, common history, and Slavic origins. Moreover, a sense of “elitism”, both cultural and economic, that was strengthened after the unification of Germany in the 1990s, of those nations that were at some point in history under Austro-Hungarian rule, accelerated their division and distinction from those “unprogressive” nations in Yugoslavia that were under Ottoman rule before the First World War. At first, Serbia tried to preserve those states with a large Serbian population in the framework of Yugoslavia. However, after 1995, the main interest was to preserve Serbs on the territories of the former Yugoslav republics as the constitutive peoples. Thus, failure to successfully define and defend territorial integrity and sovereignty after the change of government in 2000 over the years led to some kind of exchange in interests between the preservation of the territorial integrity of the Republic of Serbia to the preservation of national integrity and unity of Serbs in the area of the former Yugoslavia. This “exchange” or “transfer” of interest is most visibly expressed in the sentence “Serbia is where the Serbian people live.” This sentence could, however, also imply that Kosovo is not Serbia, because there are fewer and fewer Serbs and that Serbia should be oriented toward the preservation of the territories where Serbian people live in the majority – an attempt to establish an Association of Municipalities with a Serbian Majority envisaged by the Brussels Agreement from 2013, but primarily the Republic of Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Слободан Рељић, „Сенка Бриселског споразума над Републиком Српском- Како се појам „издаја“ појавио у српском националном дискурсу”, Зборник радова:

This Serbian position and change is not only self-driven but primarily forced from the international position on the issues of territorial integrity and self-determination. However, what is self-driven is the way to that – by expectation that all decisions regarding Serbs should be taken in Belgrade. Here, the interest of gathering Serbs under one umbrella and leadership still remains the national interest of the Republic of Serbia.<sup>10</sup>

Although the interest remained the same, the tendency toward the centralization of the control over the Serbian population strengthened. The idea of the “Serbian world” presented by the then Minister of Interior Aleksandar Vulin in September 2020 was an attempt to overcome the difficulties of Serbian division among the several post-Yugoslav states and centralize the process of decision-making in Belgrade. In June 2022, Vulin stated in Novi Sad: “The Serbian world means that the Serbs are a single political people, that means that we decide on the most important national issues together, that means that we are always there with our Serbia, just as Serbia is with us no matter where we live.”<sup>11</sup> The issue of state and national integrity in the case of Serbia and Serbs is significantly strained and might cause further tensions in the future. However, this concept should be seen only in identity terms, without implying any militaristic tendencies or a desire to create “Great Serbia”. Still, the tendencies of the unification of Albanian people in Albania and Kosovo might lead to tendencies of integration of Serbian people.

## ECONOMIC PROSPERITY AND WELLBEING

During the SFRY period, economic relations inside the Federation were significantly unbalanced and unequal. Slovenia was one of the most prosperous countries with the production of final products for export, while Serbia, with its divided territory with the Autonomous Provinces, was largely producing raw materials. The Serbian interest at that moment involved gaining equal status with other republics of Yugoslavia, and Slobodan Milošević, at that time member of the Serbian Communist Party, was particularly concerned with the creation of a single and integrated SFRY market. At the Seventeenth Session of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Serbia in 1984, he highlighted the obstacles to the functioning of a unified market as the “essential political question posing a threat to the survival of the system” and declared all obstacles unconstitutional because they put economic agents

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*Република Србија и Република Српска – стари и нови политички изазови*, Београд 2013, 142–155.

<sup>10</sup> Дејан Мирковић, *Бриселски споразум: хронологија и последице*, Catena Mundi, Београд 2019, 62–85.

<sup>11</sup> Vulin: Stvaranje srpskog sveta proces koji se ne može zaustaviti, *Al Jazeera*, 25 June 2022, <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2022/6/25/vulin-stvaranje-srpskog-sveta-proces-koji-se-ne-moze-zaustaviti>

in Yugoslavia in an unequal position.<sup>12</sup> The violent break-up of Yugoslavia and comprehensive sanctions put the FR Yugoslavia in a very difficult position during the 1990s – with galloping inflation, poverty, the rise of criminality/criminal networks, and a great rate of emigration. From the very suspicious attitude toward the market economy and privatization, after 1999 and with the new government in 2000 FR Yugoslavia and later Serbia opened up its market and conducted a massive privatization of state and social ownership. All the reforms in this direction were justified under the newly defined national interest of Serbia – membership in the European Union. However, from one extreme in the form of communism and state ownership and guidance during SFRY, Serbia is now reaching the other extreme of not controlling much of the production and technology on its soil.<sup>13</sup>

The national interest here, however, was still very much preserved – merging of markets in the area of the Western Balkans – but with an uncertain future. This aim is now manifested through two initiatives – The Berlin Process, but primarily the Open Balkan Initiative.<sup>14</sup> The Open Balkan was launched in 2019 by three leaders – the President of the Republic of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, and Prime Ministers of the Republic of Albania and the Republic of North Macedonia, Edi Rama and Zoran Zaev, with the aim of free movement of goods, services, people and capital according to the EU model.<sup>15</sup>

## NATIONAL SECURITY INTERESTS

Having passed through violent wars, Serbia maintained a high level of militaristic culture and distance from Euro-Atlantic integration, although it became part of the NATO Partnership for Peace Program in 2006. After the developments surrounding the process of resolving the status of Kosovo in 2007, Serbia declared its military neutrality. The National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia on 26 December 2007 adopted the Resolution on protection of sovereignty, territorial integrity and constitutional order, which, in point six states:

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<sup>12</sup> Mentioned according to: Dr Aleksandar R. Miletić, “Generations of Serbian (Re) centralists, 1968–1990: Justified Demands or the Road to the Disintegration of Yugoslavia?”, *YU Historija*, Case Study 3, [https://www.yuhistorija.com/yug\\_second\\_txt01c3.html](https://www.yuhistorija.com/yug_second_txt01c3.html)

<sup>13</sup> Miloš Šolaja, “Regionalna politika – Stub spoljne politike ili kriterijum za članstvo u EU”, *Zbornik radova: Spoljna politika Srbije i zajednička bezbednosna politika EU*, priredili Dragan Đukanović i Miloš Jončić, Institut za međunarodnu politiku i privredu, Beograd 2011, 81–90.

<sup>14</sup> More on the Open Balkan Initiative see: Митко Арнаудов, *Отворени Балкан – економска интеграција у контексту политичких и безбедносних размимоилажења*, Институт за међународну политику и привреду, Београд, 2023.

<sup>15</sup> *Open Balkan*, <https://en.pks.rs/open-balkan>, 10.1.2024.



“Due to the overall role of NATO, from the illegal bombardment of Serbia without a Security Council decision to Annex 11 of the rejected Ahtisaari’s plan, which determines that NATO is “ultimate supervisory authority” in an “independent Kosovo”, the National Assembly hereby declares the neutral status of the Republic of Serbia towards effective military alliances until a referendum is called, at which the final decision on this issue will be made.”<sup>16</sup>

The declared neutrality is now internally widely accepted as a politics of military neutrality but is not yet permanent neutrality embedded in the Constitution and related law (like in the case of Switzerland or Austria). This might be considered a continuation of the long-standing historical pattern in Yugoslav politics regarding the military blocs, which followed the model of engaged non-alignment. This trend continues today with the current model of Serbian engaged military neutrality. The policy of military neutrality, as is now defined, adopts a model similar to the Swiss that is based primarily on deterrence, non-confrontation with great powers regarding sensitive issues, the emphasis on arms industry, and constant search for the balance with Croatia or Albania and cooperation with all key actors on the world stage today that are in competing relations. But, this policy could also adopt a more similar model to that of Austria with active engagement not only in cooperation with great powers but also regarding global, transnational, and humanitarian issues such as climate change or nuclear disarmament. This means that most responsibility for the national security issues would lie with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and active diplomacy. Concerning other states, this diplomacy would preserve a pragmatic character, which would make any adoption and implementation of a one-sided foreign and security strategy very hard (in difference from Bulgaria), but concerning global issues, it must take a clear stance and readiness to fight for a better future.

## THE HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF THE UNDERSTANDING OF THE NATIONAL INTEREST OF BULGARIA

### *Unifying all Bulgarians*

Bulgarian medieval kingdoms had a long history before being finally conquered by the Ottomans in 1396.<sup>17</sup> This tradition, along with Christianity, helped the Bulgarians to maintain the consciousness that they were a separate people

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<sup>16</sup> Resolution of the National Assembly on the protection of sovereignty, territorial integrity and constitutional order of the Republic of Serbia, <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/kosovo-metohija/en/42050>.

<sup>17</sup> In 1393 the Tsardom of Tarnovo had been conquered, and in 1396 the small Tsardom of Vidin, another medieval feudal Bulgarian state, fell under the Ottomans.

during the centuries of the Ottoman rule. In the middle of the 18th century, the Bulgarian National Revival began. With the penetration of new ideas after the French Revolution, and after the First Serbian Uprising (1804), and with the Greek Uprising and the establishment of an independent Greece in 1829, a new political climate emerged in the Balkans in which Bulgarians began a struggle for ecclesiastical independence. Because of Greek independence, the Ottomans decided that the separation of a Bulgarian autocephalous church from the Greek "millet" in the Ottoman Empire would help balance Greek national aspirations, and in 1870 the independent Bulgarian Exarchate was established.

The Diocese of the Exarchate covers the lands of modern Northern Bulgaria, large parts of Southern Bulgaria, as well as the dioceses of Niš, Pirot and Veles. An important clause of the founding *firman* is clause 10, which stipulates: "In addition to those listed above, all those places whose inhabitants, all or at least two-thirds of them, would request it, shall also be allowed to submit to the Bulgarian Exarchate."<sup>18</sup>

Bulgaria was resurrected on the map of Europe as an independent state as a result of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878. According to San Stefano Preliminary Peace Treaty of 19 February 1878, "Bulgaria is established as an autonomous principality within the borders where the majority of the population is Bulgarian. Its boundaries shall in no case be smaller than those adopted by the Constantinople Conference" (in 1876). At that time the Bulgarians were the most numerous Christian people in the Balkans, and Russian diplomacy painted a maximalist picture with the aim of creating a large Slavic state in the Balkans with an area of about 170,000 sq. km. covering Northern Bulgaria, Pirot and Vranje regions, almost all of Macedonia (excluding the southernmost areas), part of Eastern Thrace and Southern Dobrudja.

However, the balance of power policy in Europe between the Great Powers, which is the principle, regulating European affairs since the Congress of Vienna in 1815 meant that the other Great Powers opposed the creation of Bulgaria within these borders. On 1 July 1878, the Congress of Berlin convened and revised the clauses of the Treaty of San Stefano. An autonomous Bulgarian principality and an autonomous region of Eastern Rumelia were established within the Ottoman Empire. Macedonia, Eastern and Western Thrace remained under the direct authority of the Sultan. Serbia retains Southern Pomoravia, which it conquered during the war, with the cities of Nis, Pirot and Vranje. Northern Dobrudja was given to Romania as compensation for Southern Bessarabia, which had been taken from it in favour of Russia. Nevertheless, Bulgaria as envisaged in Treaty of San Stefano

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<sup>18</sup> Васиљ Поповић, *Источно питање, историјски преглед борбе око опстанка османлијске царевине на Леванту и Балкану*, Балканолошки институт САНУ, Београд 2006, 49-51; 137-160.

remained the leading national ideal for Bulgarians in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.<sup>19</sup>

In the “Century of Nationalism” that was the 19th century, the unification of all Bulgarians in a single state was the leading national ideal (interest). In 1885, the Principality of Bulgaria and Eastern Rumelia declared their unification, despite the displeasure of some of the great European powers. Serbia even attacked Bulgaria, but its offensive failed and the Bulgarian troops launched a counteroffensive, which stopped only after an Austro-Hungarian ultimatum. However, after some diplomatic maneuvering, the act was recognized by the European powers. Nevertheless, the Unification and its military defense remain rather an exception to the pattern of Bulgarian foreign policy in these decades. The political elite of the Bulgarian Principality was aware of the military weakness of the state created just a few years ago and has a cautious foreign policy approach. That is why in the subsequent years new Ottoman territories, inhabited mainly by Bulgarians, were incorporated into the spiritual jurisdiction of the Bulgarian Exarchate with Sultan’s *firmans*. At the same time, attempts at armed struggle against the Ottomans in Macedonia through the armed groups (chetas) and through a mass uprising in Macedonia and Adrianople region (the Ilinden-Preobrazhenie uprising of 1903) were made. They stood no chances against the Empire. When they failed, it became clear that the limit of what could be achieved by these means had been reached. All this led to a rethinking not of the national interest but of the means to achieve it.<sup>20</sup> In the meantime, Bulgaria managed to strengthen its statehood, the nation-building institutions such as army, church, school were created, and literacy among the young generations increased significantly. Also, after the economically successful years in the period 1901–1911, the economy and finances of the state were stabilized. These processes give the Bulgarian political elite the opportunity to consider the arms as a way to change the country’s borders at the expense of the crisis-ridden Ottoman Empire.

Bulgaria, Greece and Serbia all had appetites for the Macedonian lands that remained under Ottoman rule. The three countries were in competition with each other, but the liberation of Macedonia from the Sublime Porte was not in the power of either of them, and it also poses the risk of a reaction of the other two countries. Therefore, Athens, Belgrade and Sofia decided to join forces. The three countries, as well as Montenegro, waged war against the Ottomans in October 1912, who were defeated, and on 17 May 1913, the Treaty of London

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<sup>19</sup> For general information about Bulgarian history, cf. Richard Crampton, *A concise history of Bulgaria*, Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997; Ivan Ilchev, *The Pose of the Balkans*, Colibri, София, 2005. In Serbian see Милорад Екмечић, „Место Берлинског конгреса 1913. у српској историји”, Зборник радова: *Европа и Источно питање (1878–1923)*, Одговорни уредник Славенко Терзић, Београд 2001, 68-71; 84-88.

<sup>20</sup> Група аутора, *Историја Бугарске*, Клио, Београд 2008, 229–271.

was signed, ending the war. Just two days after it, on 19 May 1913 Greece and Serbia concluded a secret alliance against Bulgaria. This was due to the fact that earlier the three countries did not agree on a mechanism to divide the territories liberated from the Ottoman Empire, especially in Macedonia.<sup>21</sup>

The escalation of disputes over the redistribution of the territories pushed the Bulgarian Tsar Ferdinand towards the step which is known in Bulgarian historiography as the “criminal folly”. On 16 June 1913, he ordered an attack against Greek and Serbian troops in Macedonia. Taking advantage of the situation, Romania and Turkey attacked Bulgaria in the rear. Since the Bulgarian army was on Western and Southern front against Greek and Serbian forces, they met practically no resistance. Bulgaria was thus forced to capitulate and sign the Treaty of Bucharest on 28 July 1913. Although its units fighting against the Ottoman Empire in 1912–1913 were the most numerous and it made a major contribution to the victory against the most combat-capable Ottoman units, Bulgaria received almost nothing from Macedonia, lost not only lands in Thrace it occupied during the war, but also the fertile region of Southern Dobrudja (the breadbasket of the country), which was annexed by Romania, and Turkey regained Eastern Thrace. These events enter the national memory under the name of “First National Catastrophe”.<sup>22</sup>

The reasons for this result lay in the combination of great self-confidence of the Bulgarian political elites due to the successful military defense of the Unification in 1885, the fact that Bulgaria was the largest and most populous country among the three allies, as well as the perception of Greece and Serbia that Bulgaria is a treat for their interests due to the fact that Bulgaria was the youngest state in the Balkans, but only seven years after its independence it became the largest Christian state on the Balkans.<sup>23</sup>

All this pushed Bulgaria towards a revisionist foreign policy. After the outbreak of the First World War, Bulgaria initially took a wait-and-see stance, but willing to change the status quo, which after the end of the war again placed it among the losers, it gradually oriented itself towards an alliance with the Central Powers. However, after the defeat of the Central Powers by the Entente, on 27 November 1919, a treaty with a very severe clauses was imposed on Bulgaria. The treaty, signed in Neuilly-sur-Seine in the outskirts of Paris, was similar to the Treaty of Versailles with Germany, the Treaty of Saint-

<sup>21</sup> Richard Crampton, *Bulgaria 1878–1918: a History*. Boulder, Colorado; New York, 1983, pp. 399–427.

<sup>22</sup> Владимир П. Потемкин, *Историја Дипломатије, Дипломатија Новог Доба (1872–1919)*, свеска друга, Архива за правне и друштвене науке, Београд, 1949, 196–206; Душан Т. Батаковић, *Србија и Балкан, Албанија, Бугарска, Грчка 1914–1918*, Прометеј, Нови Сад, 2016, 14–18, 387–393.

<sup>23</sup> After Iskra Baeva, Why Modern and Contemporary Bulgaria Did Not Have Loyal Allies in the Balkans, Re-Imagining the Balkans: How to Think and Teach a Region – Festschrift in Honor of Maria N. Todorova, edited by Augusta Dimou, Theodora Dragostinova, and Veneta Ivanova, De Gruyter, 2023, 83–93.

Germain with Austria and the Treaty of Trianon with Hungary. In Bulgarian historiography these events are called the “Second National Catastrophe”.<sup>24</sup> The treaty confirms the previous loss of territories, as Macedonia and Aegean Thrace were placed under the sovereignty of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (regardless of the changes of the name of the state) and Greece) and Greece, hundreds of thousands of refugees from the lost lands are pouring into the country, severe reparations were imposed on Bulgaria.

After 1919, the political elite in Sofia realised that the previous methods of achieving the national ideal had been exhausted, mainly because of two reasons. First, the country was surrounded by three victors in the First World War (Greece, Kingdom of Yugoslavia and Romania) and Turkey. After the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, the borders of the newly created Turkey were stabilized and internationally recognized.<sup>25</sup> Second, due to the clauses of the Treaty of Neuilly, Bulgaria had army with a very limited armament and numbers. Bulgaria tried to change the outcomes of the war via diplomatic means, trying to achieve concessions from its neighbours, relying on interpretation of the treaties and international law favorable for its interests. Bulgarian policy in the interwar period is therefore known in the literature as “peaceful revisionism”.

In order to counter the revisionist aspirations mainly of Italy<sup>26</sup> and to a lesser extent Bulgaria, in 1934 Greece, Romania, Turkey and Yugoslavia formed the so-called Balkan Pact. The pact further limits the room for maneuvering of Bulgarian foreign policy, but gradually the divergence of interests between the countries participating in it and the rise of revisionist Germany, which completely changed the political landscape in Europe, turn the agreement into one only on paper. Although the Bulgarian policy of “peaceful revisionism” stood little chance, it did achieve one success – in September 1940 Romania returned Southern Dobruja to Bulgaria. The return was not simply due to the fact that these were Bulgarian-populated lands, but mainly to the international context. After France was occupied by Germany in 1940, one of Bucharest’s main allies disappeared. Romania, which was overblown after the end of the Great War, was forced to cede Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina to the Soviet Union in June 1940, Northern Transylvania to Hungary in August, and Southern Dobruja to Bulgaria in September.

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<sup>24</sup> Чедомир Попов, *Од Версаја до Данцига*, Завод за уџбенике, Београд 2015, 158–167.

<sup>25</sup> Spyridon Svetas, *The Legacy of the Treaty of Lausanne in the light of Greek-Turkish relations in the twentieth century: Greek perceptions of the Treaty of Lausanne*, *Balkanica* XLVI (2015), 195–200.

<sup>26</sup> Among the diplomatic problems between Belgrade and Rome in this period are the control of Istria, Rijeka and Dalmatia, the presence of national minorities of the respective countries in the other one, struggle for influence in Albania, independent since 1913, Italian support for the Croatian and Bulgarian armed organizations, active in and outside Yugoslavia.

Faced with the threat of the German army in Romania and because of the pro-German government in Sofia, Bulgaria joined the Tripartite Pact on 1 March 1941 during the Second World War. The main motivation is again the return of territories inhabited by Bulgarians or included in the San Stefano Treaty under Bulgarian sovereignty. Bulgaria sends occupation units to Greece and Yugoslavia. However, in September 1944, the opposition, in which the Communists, who had displayed armed resistance against the Nazis and pro-Nazi government, also took leading part, came to power. Bulgaria joined the Allies in the final stage of World War II, fighting against German troops and even advancing to Hungary and Austria as part of the Allied forces, paying the steep price of almost 30,000 dead, wounded and missing soldiers. After the war Bulgaria fell into the Soviet sphere of influence and this provided it with a powerful ally, which at the Paris Peace Conference prevented the country from losing territory.<sup>27</sup> After the end of the Second World War, Bulgaria abandoned the policy of “peaceful revisionism” and the borders with its neighbours have not been changed until now.

## THE BULGARIANS IN THE TERRITORIES OUTSIDE BULGARIA

In the Balkans, almost all countries have their “twins”, populated by people from the same ethnic group – Albania and Kosovo; Bulgaria and the Bulgarians left outside its borders in Macedonia, Serbia and Greece; Serbia and Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and the Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina; Greece and Cyprus. This historical phenomenon requires an explanation, which can be sought in the following factors. First, the intervention of the Great Powers who were unwilling to allow the creation of large Balkan states that would have been able to conduct a more independent foreign policy. Second, the actions of the regional states, which were also aimed at ensuring that none of the fellow Balkan neighbours would gain too much power and influence. Third, the internal weakness of the respective Balkan countries, which were relatively recent creations, and have neither sufficient state capacity nor sufficient economic, industrial and other resources to realize the massive task of national unification through military means.

For Bulgaria preserving the rights of the Bulgarians living abroad (including them in the diocese of the Bulgarian Exarchate, creating Bulgarian schools), was perceived as a way to create suitable conditions later on the territories, inhabited by Bulgarians, to be incorporated in the Bulgarian state. This was part of the Bulgarian policy in Thrace and Macedonia from the Liberation to the Balkan Wars.

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<sup>27</sup> After Група аутора, *Историја Бугарске*, 307–333; 343–347.

The two national catastrophes, mentioned earlier, resulted in thousands of Bulgarians either being massacred and expelled or remaining outside the territory of Bulgaria. The Bulgarians in Adrianople Thrace were almost entirely exterminated in 1903 and 1913, and those who escaped sought refuge in Bulgaria as refugees. Similar was the fate of the population remaining in Aegean Thrace from the Greek side of the border. Those who remained in Greece were assimilated. People with Bulgarian identity remained in the lands of today's Republic of North Macedonia and Serbia. Although the peace treaties after the end of the First World War provided for the protection of minorities, it remained on paper. First, at that time the international legal system was still in its infancy. Secondly, Bulgarian minorities abroad lived in the countries, which were winners of the war, which made protection of their rights extremely difficult.

During the Cold War, the closed borders between Bulgaria and its neighbours Greece, Turkey and Yugoslavia were not conducive to the economic, educational and cultural exchanges, human contacts, etc., that states usually used to maintain contact with the representatives of their minorities or diaspora abroad. Also, despite the significantly improved legal framework for the protection of minorities compared to the interwar period, these issues are generally seen by the countries as an attempt to interfere in their internal affairs by countries from the other ideological bloc. The issue of the claims of the presence of the so-called Macedonian minority in Bulgaria and the protection of the Bulgarian heritage in the SR Macedonia are one of the main causes of tension between Sofia and Belgrade in this period.<sup>28</sup>

All in all, in these two periods the international environment was not permissive for the policies of protection of the minorities.

The beginning of the democratic transition and the start of the European integration process of the Western Balkan countries provide better opportunities for the protection of minorities, including the Bulgarians living beyond the border of Bulgaria. They receive the right to education in their mother language, textbooks from Bulgaria, scholarships to study in Bulgaria, often Bulgarian citizenship and passports.

## ECONOMIC PROSPERITY AND WELLBEING OF THE CITIZENS

After its liberation Bulgaria started an economic modernization, which achieved certain but unevenly distributed successes in different areas. The

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<sup>28</sup> Евгения Калинова, Балканската политика на България – предизвикателствата от Запад и от Юг (1944-1989 г.) in *„Изследвания по история на социализма в България“*, Фондация „Фредрих Еберт“, Център за исторически и политически изследвания, С., 2010, 712–781.

country took steps to create its own industry, but these were hampered by the problems of backward economies – a chronic foreign trade deficit, lack of significant capital accumulation to be used for investment, among others. By 1944, 80% of the population remained rural.<sup>29</sup>

With the establishment of communist rule, the country began a process of intensive urbanization and industrialization on the Soviet model. Bulgaria was given its own production and market niches within the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA). Heavy industry was built up, although not always founded on places with the necessary resources, solid light industry, and breakthroughs in some higher technologies were achieved. After 1989-1990, society experienced a transition not only in the political sphere from one-party to multi-party rule, but also in the economic sphere from a centrally planned to a free market economy. The breakdown of ties with the CMEA countries, cutting of the common supply-chains in the Socialist block, the closure of a number of enterprises, and privatization came at a heavy social cost. Many Bulgarians emigrated to the USA and Western Europe in search of a better life.

In the same time, the economy was gradually shifting towards cooperation with European enterprises and the EU-markets. By around 2000, the privatization was completed and ownership redistributed. Parallel to the political processes of Euro-integration, an upward trend in the world economy began around the same year, allowing the Balkan economies to grow as well. Bulgaria also benefits from EU pre-accession funds. The favorable conjuncture contributed to Bulgaria's EU membership in 2007. This membership has been stated as a major national priority and interest by almost all political parties.<sup>30</sup> Currently, Bulgaria enjoys the highest level of GDP in its history. However, uneven distribution of wealth, regional disparities, decline of some industries, the brain-drain and the contraction of the population are serious problems that have to be solved.

Bulgarian economic development is related to the political development of the country, and after 1945 it was almost always part of larger economic blocs. After the end of the Second World War, Bulgaria joined the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, and after the end of the Cold War, the country moved towards integration with the EU. Participation in such blocs gives Bulgaria markets and provides sources of resources and technologies. Although the economic development of the country as a whole has always been one of the leading considerations of the political elite since the Liberation of Bulgaria, it is noteworthy, however, that the economic well-being of the citizens was brought up as a significant interest only in the late

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<sup>29</sup> Румен Даскалов, *Българското общество 1878–1939 г.*, Гутенберг, София, т. I, 2005, 249–429.

<sup>30</sup> Искра Баева, Евгения Калинова, *Българските преходи (1939–2010 г.)*, Парадигма, София, 2010, 81–397.



years of the socialist era and in the years after 1989 a lip-service is paid to it by the politicians, but mainly in an internal political plan.

## NATIONAL SECURITY INTERESTS

Before the Balkan Wars, Bulgaria bordered three countries – Romania to the north, Serbia to the west and the Ottoman Empire to the south. There were no conditions and prerequisites for a conflict with Romania, Bulgaria at that time had a larger territory and population, which allowed it to successfully repel the attack of Serbia in 1885. International treaties largely served as a safeguard against a threat from the Sublime Porte. Therefore, during this period, Bulgaria's non-participation in a military alliance in the Balkans does not pose a direct threat to the country's national security and territorial integrity. The main goal of the young Bulgarian state was to build a combat-capable army, which could in a longer run fight against the Ottomans for the liberation of other Bulgarian territories

The territorial disputes between Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire created the conditions for a *détente* between Bulgaria and the other Balkans states, but it could not last because their contest over the Empire's legacy put their national security interests at odds with each other. After the Second Balkan War (also known as Inter-Allied War) between the allies of the First Balkan War) in 1913 and World War I Sofia found itself in a very precarious position. First, the number of the neighbours of Bulgaria rose from three (the Ottoman Empire, Romania and Serbia) to four, since Bulgaria started to share a common border with Greece on the south as well. Second, the fact that Bulgaria, Greece, Romania and Serbia were on the opposite sides of the barricade in the two wars prevented establishing common security interests between them. The refusal of the Republic of Turkey after 1923 from direct attempts to return the lost Ottoman territories in the Balkans largely stabilized Bulgarian-Turkish relations in the interwar period, despite some crisis moments in them. However, for Turkey was also important to have good-neighbourly relations with all of the Balkan countries, which put it closer to the other neighbours of Bulgaria, which is evident in the creation of the Balkan Pact in 1934. In general, in the interwar period Bulgaria was isolated and did not participate in military alliances in the Balkans, but this posed risks to its sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The Cold War was a period of classical bipolar geopolitics on global scale. This has its repercussion for the Balkans too, and Greece and Turkey became members of NATO in 1952, while Bulgaria and Romania – of the Warsaw Pact in 1955. Yugoslavia (and Albania after 1961) in a specific position of a non-allied state. Thus, Bulgaria's borders with its neighbours to the West (SFRY) and to the South (Greece) and South-East (Turkey) were assured, since the outbreak of a conflict would mean not just a conflict between Bulgaria and

the country concerned, but respectively a conflict between Yugoslavia and the Soviet bloc or between NATO and the Warsaw Pact.

The end of the Cold War left a political and security vacuum, and the painful process of disintegration of Yugoslavia started in the Balkans. In parallel with the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, Bulgaria quickly oriented itself towards integration into NATO structures. According to one scholar, during that period Bulgarian foreign policy was based on four pillars: a) end of the implementation of the communist ideology; b) European orientation; c) democratization of the foreign policy based on consensus and transparency; d) pragmatism and rationality. In its policy towards the Balkans, two more pillars can be added: a) multilateralism (e.g., participating in regional initiatives such as the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization; Southeast Europe Cooperation Initiative; Southeast Europe Cooperation Process; NATO Partnership for Peace Programme), and b) equidistance (no participation in regional conflicts).<sup>31</sup>

In the 1990s, some circles in Bulgaria, especially those close to the Bulgarian Socialist Party, promoted the idea of the country's military neutrality. The decision of Ivan Kostov's right-wing government to open Bulgarian sky to NATO aircraft for bombing raids on the neighboring Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1999 was met with widespread disapproval. There is also widespread dissatisfaction with the need to significantly reduce the size of the army, its military capabilities and get rid of some Soviet types of military hardware such as missiles and rockets in order to fulfil the NATO-accession criteria. Nevertheless, at that time joining NATO as a step towards joining the EU was considered the only possible game in town in Central and Eastern Europe. In this regard, Bulgaria sent a military mission to Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein. A couple of Bulgarian soldiers had been killed in Iraq, but in 2004 Bulgaria officially became a NATO member. The Alliance is considered the main pillar of the Bulgarian national security architecture ever since.

## CONCLUSION

This paper examined how Serbia and Bulgaria addressed the contemporary international situation and defined their national interests in the face of major adverse events in their history in order to identify the patterns of continuity and change. The authors did this assessment through four variables – territorial integrity, national integrity, economic prosperity and security.

Regarding Serbia, the authors conclude that after the change of government in 2000 Serbia stopped identifying itself with former Yugoslavia

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<sup>31</sup> Birgül Demirtaş-Coşkun, *Turkish-Bulgarian Relations in the Post-Cold War Era: the Exemplary Relationship in the Balkans*, in *The Turkish Yearbook of International Relations*, 2001, 32.

but searched for ways to preserve the national integrity of the Serbian people through initiatives such as the Serbian world or All-Serbian Assembly. Serbia continued its interest of creating a wider regional market and is doing that through initiatives such as Open Balkans. It also continues the politics of non-alignment, after which former Yugoslavia was famous, but in the form of military neutrality established in Serbia after the NATO role in the attempt to create “independent Kosovo”.

Regarding Bulgaria, this short review is trying to demonstrate that there was a hierarchy of the understanding of the national interests since 1878. From the Liberation of Bulgaria in 1878 until the end of the First World War, the national interest was mainly defined as the unification of all territories inhabited by Bulgarians. This unification proved illusionary, since regional neighbours and great powers alike were at uneasy with these prospects. In this period, the military means were considered acceptable tool in the international relations. However, Bulgarian strength pushed neighbouring countries to search for counter-balancing strategies and as late as 1919 pursuing its goals through military power was proven as counter-productive for Bulgaria. In the period of 1913–1919 almost everything, achieved by Bulgaria in an incremental way through diplomacy, church influence, education etc. in Macedonia and Thrace in the previous four decades was gone.

After 1919 the emphasis changed, the political elite’s and society’s outlook became more defensive and shifted to the defense of the borders and territorial integrity of the country. A remnant of the previous policy was the peaceful return of Southern Dobrudja to Bulgaria in 1940. Bulgaria tried to protect the rights of the Bulgarian minorities abroad on the international fora, but this was difficult due to its position of a country, which was among the defeated countries during the World War I.

After 1945, Bulgaria participated in a bloc policy, being part of the Warsaw Pact during the Cold War (1955–1990) and of NATO since 2004 and the both pacts were considered as the best way to guarantee the Bulgarian territorial integrity and national security. In this sense, Bulgarian foreign and security policy is highly dependent on the international conjuncture.

Preserving the rights of the Bulgarian minorities living abroad, is perceived as a way to create suitable conditions later on the territories, inhabited by Bulgarians, to be incorporated in the Bulgarian state. Even after the realization that this policy is utopian, the preservation of the interest of the minorities abroad remained as a policy. It was, again, highly dependent of the international context, and the Interwar and Cold War period being not very suitable for this policy. The post-Cold War context, related to democratization and European integration provides bigger opportunities for the protection of minority rights abroad.

The well-being of the citizens is the newest national interest. Its realization is in direct correlation to the general economic conditions of the country. During the socialist period in Bulgaria, the country was part of the CMEA.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, a painful process of industry transformation and reorientation towards Europe began. Bulgaria was forced to search for new European market and production niches. The country has been a member of the EU since 2007, but it still has unresolved issues related to the economic well-being of parts of the population.

A conclusion could be drawn that from 1878 until 1919 the unification of the Bulgarian territories was the ultimate national interest, but later on it was replaced of the preservation of the territorial integrity and the rights of the Bulgarians abroad in the Interwar period, and the territorial integrity, rights of the compatriots beyond the current state borders after 1945 until now. Economic well-being of the citizens completes the list. Thus, there is certain level of change, but also continuity of the understanding of national interest of Bulgaria in the last 150 years.

Based on the historical review, it could be argued that in the cases of Bulgaria and Serbia, an asymmetry of adverse historical events (the term preferred by the authors) or historical junctures (the term, preferred by the tradition of historical institutionalism) is observed. In Bulgaria, the events, requiring a rethinking of the national interest or the means to pursue it, occurred earlier than in Serbia. Because of the fact that Belgrade was among the winners of the First and Second World Wars, a significant rethinking of national interests occurred later – after the breakup of Yugoslavia at the end of the twentieth century.

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