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Looking to the Future

Matilda Nahabedian

Bulgaria, on its own

Bulgarian society has recently experienced diverse and difficult emotions. Three events typify the prevailing sentiments: the murder of a little child, the expulsion of three Russian diplomats and a short visit to the country by FBI Director Louis J Freeh. The events have encouraged the Bulgarian people to think about both their past and future and about the path they are currently moving along.

Although these events are considered separate and unrelated by some, there is a direct link between them that gives a strong indication that Bulgaria has finally started a process of emancipation from the Russian orbit of influence, and an ambitious pursuit of its own national interests, of which the strongest is integration with Euro-Atlantic structures.

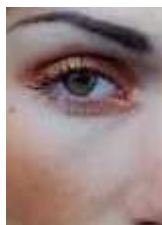
Furthermore, these events demonstrate that Bulgaria will receive the necessary foreign help in its fight against the damaging influence of the Russian secret service and the harmful, yet hidden, implications of their activity in the country.

The death of a child threatens the government

On Friday 16 March, thousands of taxis blocked downtown Sofia in protest over the abduction and the killing of a three-year-old child—the son of a fellow taxi driver. Thousands of people gathered in front of the Parliament building to protest the incident, sending shock waves across the country.

The crowd expressed their solidarity and fury over a recent wave of violent crimes in the country, which have included the murders of prominent underworld figures and the shooting of a 16-year old girl in central Sofia in January. However, the protestors also called for the resignation of the government and the parliament, and when Prime Minister Ivan Kostov addressed the angry crowd, the people shouted: "Murderers" to him and representatives of his Cabinet.

The opposition parties backed the protests, and also



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called for the resignation of the government—two months before the constitutional mandate expires.

The following day, police found out that the mentally ill mother of the child had killed him and that she had invented the abduction story. Nevertheless, the opposition reiterated its demand for the resignation of the cabinet despite the Interior Ministry presenting strong evidence proving the mother's responsibility.

Bulgarian rift with old ally, Russia

While the nation was still recovering from the tragedy, on Saturday 17 March, the electronic journal *Mediapool.bg* announced that three high-ranking Russian diplomats would be expelled from the country over "actions incompatible with their status." The journal quoted sources from the Russian Foreign Ministry. One of the diplomats concerned was the military attaché Vladimir Lomakin who was recalled from Poland in 1993 over a similar "spying" scandal.

The expulsion of a Russian diplomat is an unprecedented event in Bulgaria's history since the end of the Second World War. During Communism Bulgaria was considered the closest ally of Russia and the country was *de facto* labeled "the 16th Republic of the USSR."

Bulgarian Foreign Minister Nadezhda Mihailova confirmed the information in an unusual address to the public on prime time television the next day: "Bulgaria is ready to pay the price for its sovereignty and its national dignity." She added that the Interior Ministry has facts proving officials of the Russian Embassy systematically committed actions that threatened Bulgaria's national interests and security as well as being a direct intrusion into its domestic affairs.

Minister Mihailova also wrote to her Russian counterpart Igor Ivanov saying "the greatest gesture of goodwill towards our Russian partners is that we did not make public the facts about the illegal activity of diplomats from the (Russian) embassy..."

As expected, on Monday Moscow announced that it had decided to expel three Bulgarian Embassy officials of the same rank as the departing Russians. Russia's Foreign Ministry used unusually harsh language, accusing members of the Bulgarian government of waging an "anti-Russian campaign." The official press release went as far as to comment Bulgaria's national interests: "We are convinced that the resolving of momentous tasks of the current political situation must correspond to the real, not the fabricated, national interests of Bulgaria," it reads.

In a separate statement, Moscow's embassy in Sofia called the row "a fierce, anti-Russian spy-mania campaign."

FBI back Bulgaria

On Tuesday 20 March, FBI Director Louis J Freeh praised Bulgaria for asking Russia to withdraw the three

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diplomats and for fighting Russian organized crime groups operating on its territory. Freeh was the first FBI chief to ever visit the country.

"It is very important to identify and prevent agents of other countries from conducting intelligence operations in our democracies," Freeh told a press briefing. He qualified Bulgaria as a "key and strategic partner of the USA" and announced plans to build a permanent FBI office in Sofia. He praised the government for expelling major figures from Russian organized crime last year and for preventing others from entering into the country. Amongst the expelled last summer was Russian Mafia sharks Deniz Ershov and Michael Chornyi.

On Wednesday 21 March, Bulgarian Minister of Defence Boiko Neov and NATO Secretary-General George Robertson signed a memorandum in Brussels for transitional passing of NATO forces through the territory of the Bulgaria. The Bulgarian authorities said that this is a "unique" agreement for a candidate-member of the Alliance that gives further guarantees for Bulgaria's security.

Crime as an instrument against the government

Looking back to the tragic murder with the three-year-old Peter, a drama of everyday life that it was, the Bulgarian people reacted in a fierce and exaggerated manner. "Part of the people that protested before the parliament were unconsciousness victims, they were used by certain forces and I should say that the government is aware of who these forces are," Kostov told reporters without elaborating.

Home Affairs Minister Emanuil Yordanov speaking on national TV said the same people who will not forgive him for expelling Michael Chornyi from the country have called for his resignation. These people expect Chornyi to return to Bulgaria if early elections were held.

The obvious conclusion is that Bulgaria is still a victim of Moscow's expansionist interests, and its desperate attempts for a role on the world political stage would hardly be a surprise for anyone who's been following current international events. It is enough to recall the more and more frequent spying scandals between Washington and Moscow, the Kosovo conflict and the efforts of Russia to establish its independent sector there (prevented by the refusal of Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania to provide Russia with air corridors in June 1999).

Russia has still to get over the enlargement of NATO and the European Union (EU). According to a recent report by *Jane's Intelligence Review*, the Kremlin is currently activating its spying activity in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), using new methods, including economic expansion. Two examples supporting this thesis could be the recent Roma scandal in Hungary and the expansion abroad of the activity of the Russian economic giants, such as LUKoil.

In Bulgaria, however, most people believe Russia is their traditional economic, political and cultural ally that not only offers unlimited trade opportunities, but has helped the country through various moments in its history. The old Communist propaganda is still very alive in the hearts of many Bulgarians, and its leftovers are obvious today when the public doesn't trust the authorities enough when they say three Russian diplomats have committed criminal actions in the country.

There are also many people who still maintain close ties with the Russian secret service. The current Bulgarian government is strongly Western oriented and is the first one after the collapse of Communism in Bulgaria that is going to serve an entire mandate, and it achieved incontestable successes ranging from economic growth to starting negotiations for EU entry. Needless to say, however, there are forces that deny these achievements and have quite different ambitions for the country's future. And of course, they try to prevent Bulgaria from breaking off from its Soviet satellite past.

"Today we face the effects of a powerful and arrogant campaign against the current government, organized by the Russian special services and their ex-Communist lobbies in Bulgaria," Ognyan Minchev, a prominent Bulgarian political scientist, said.[1] According to him, "they foster an everyday hysteria of the Bulgarian public, in which criminal cases are only one element."

However, crime is hardly the only method used by Russia in its attempt to regain control over Bulgaria, and subsequently, over the Balkans. "They have also succeeded in splitting a section of the governing Union of Democratic Forces (UDF), represented mainly by MPs whom, in my opinion, have corrupt relations with the major Russian criminal interests residing in the country," Professor Minchev, who heads the Institute for Regional and International Studies, said.

Some of the Russian criminal groups are financing spy operations in Bulgaria that create purposeful feelings of insecurity and inspire civic discontent. The last time when there were mass rallies for the resignation of a Bulgarian government was in the hungry winter of 1996 and 1997 when the ex-Communist cabinet of the current opposition allowed a four-digit inflation, robbed the country and caused its practical collapse. Now, four years later, things have significantly changed for good. Still, people gathered to call for the resignation of the government over, as they put it, its failure to fight crime...

Help needed

This is a battle, however, that Bulgaria will not be able to win by itself. The small Balkan country faces many economic problems and is incapable of resisting the harmful and destabilizing campaigns financed by Russia. The country has decently contributed to the goals of the international community in the Balkans and its efforts for achieving stability in the region. Now, in a period when Bulgaria is heading for parliamentary elections, it needs support from abroad.



One such demonstration of support was the lifting of the visa regime of the EU for Bulgaria—a move that was a matter of geo-strategic importance for the government and a matter of dignity and self-esteem for Bulgarians. The

memorandum with NATO and the eventual establishing of a FBI office in the country would be further signs that the international community cares for Bulgaria and considers it an important partner.

"Of course, the elections are solely Bulgaria's business. Hence, it is necessary to let the Bulgarians decide them without any pressure to feed into the covert ambitions of post-imperial Russia and its Mafia. But we really need help in resisting this pressure," Minchev said. According to him, if the pro-Western forces lose the elections, Bulgaria's prospects for positive reforms will be meager in the next five to seven years.

Last year's elections in Romania where the choice for a president in the second round vote was between an extreme nationalist and an ex-Communist, only confirms that the belated help of the West results in desperation and discontent. The current events in neighboring Macedonia prove that sometimes the international community underestimates potential risks resulting in conflicts and along with them the political and economic problems that they entail.

Matilda Nahabedian, 26 March 2001

Disclaimer: Matilda Nahabedian is a Bulgarian journalist. The views presented in this article are her personal and independent opinion.

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Footnotes:

1. All comments of Ognyan Minchev in this text were originally expressed in private but are published by CER upon his explicit permission.



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