



Anti-government protests in Kiev, 2014

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Bulgaria - The Importance of Being Outright: Bulgarian Reactions to the Ukrainian Crisis

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The situation in Ukraine is the subject of an intense discussion in the public sphere and the media across Europe. But what do we know about how our neighbouring countries are reflecting on the crisis, its historical background and its meaning for the relationship between our countries, Ukraine, Russia and the European Union? During 2014 and 2015 the Cultures of History Forum asked historians and sociologists from more than 15 European countries, the US, Israel and Turkey to reflect on the media coverage and public debates regarding the Ukrainian crisis in their countries. This article focuses on Bulgaria.

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Bulgaria - The Importance of Being Outright: Bulgarian Reactions to the Ukrainian Crisis

The political developments in the Ukraine after the decision by its former President Viktor Yanukovich to withdraw from signing the EU accession agreement in November 2013 were followed with keen attention by the Bulgarian public and widely reflected by the Bulgarian media, in print publications and on the internet. Soon after the proclamation of this decision and the beginning of the protests, the events in Ukraine took the spotlight in all Bulgarian TV programs, radio broadcasts, newspapers, journals and electronic news websites. On the television screen, the evolution of the Ukrainian crisis was followed regularly in news reports and discussed at roundtables with the participation of politicians, political scientists and public figures; the crisis occupied the front pages of the press for several months and was seen as the most important public event for the wider audience.

While the clashes in the center of Kiev and the assaults by police on the protesters in the Euromaidan logically attracted most of the public interest, all other major episodes of the crisis (the protests, the repressive measures of the Ukrainian state forces, the referendum, the annexation of Crimea, the clashes in the border regions, the Presidential elections, etc.) were systematically followed and discussed in different public and media contexts. To a great extent, they have overshadowed internal political and social events in Bulgaria since the end of 2013, such as protests against the government, the strike of university students, conflicts between different political parties in and outside the Bulgarian Parliament, and even the elections to the European Parliament in May 2014.

Whether seen in comparison to other events of the period or considered in its own right, the abundance of publications and the intensity of forum discussions^[1] mark out the Ukrainian crisis as one of the hottest topics in Bulgaria over the last months, one that has drawn a plethora of diverse and conflicting reactions. There are several reasons for this interest in the situation in Ukraine. The major one is that these events challenge Bulgarian politicians to choose whether to side with Russia and her pressure on Ukraine, or with Ukraine and its response to Russian influence, and also to position themselves with regard to EU- and US- sanctions after the annexation of Crimea. The difficulty of taking positions (for Bulgarian politicians, state institutions, and for the public at large) results from the complexity of historical, political and cultural relations between Bulgaria and Russia that have guided many of the state's political decisions after the national liberation in 1878 and generally shaped the country's development throughout the 20th century. In this paper, I will shed light on some aspects of this historical background, which influenced the Bulgarian reactions on the developments in the Ukraine and which shaped the proposed visions of Bulgaria's official position on the Ukrainian crisis.

The historical background of Bulgarian-Russian relations

For Bulgarians, the historical and cultural relations with Russia date back to the Middle Ages and find expression in the common Slavic origin, the common Christian Orthodox faith, the Cyrillic alphabet (exported from the Bulgarian to the Russian lands at the end of the 10th century), and the close cultural contacts in Medieval times, which continued after Bulgarian state's fall under Ottoman rule in 1396. From the 14th to the 18th century, the Russian lands lent continuous support to the efforts of Bulgarian

churches and monasteries to maintain their religious and cultural life under Ottoman rule, and in the 19th century, the schools and universities of the Russian Empire were major educational venues for Bulgarian students. It was at that time that Russia was increasingly seen as the only plausible power to help liberate Bulgaria. This was actually confirmed by the Russian-Ottoman war of 1877 – 1878, as a result of which Bulgaria was re-established on the map of Europe. Gratitude to the Tsar as Liberator was dampened by fears that the state might become politically dependent on the Russian Empire, causing a permanent rift between Russophiles and Russophobes in Bulgaria. During the 20th century, this rift expressed itself in the complications of Bulgaria's involvement in the two world wars, the peculiarities of the imposition of Soviet rule in post-1944 Bulgaria and in the sharp polarization of the political spectrum during the time of post-communist transition. Nowadays, whilst the left-wing parties demonstrate unconcealed pro-Russian sentiment, other political groups fall into those who maintain overtly anti-Russian political orientations and others, mostly nationalist parties, that see the affiliation with Russia as symbolic of the greatness of the Slavic idea, Tsardom, Orthodoxy, and political centralism.

The onset of the crisis: considering a Bulgarian reaction

To the complexities of the historical and cultural background is added the fact that Bulgaria is an EU- and NATO- member and despite the existing pro-Russian sentiments needs to comply with positions that may politically be unfavorable for Russia. This was especially obvious with regard to the Ukrainian events, where Bulgaria found herself in a delicate position, having to maneuver between her political alignment with EU and NATO and her customary support for the Russian position. The multifaceted reactions started with the very refusal of the association agreement between the Ukraine and the EU in November 2013, when there was visible restraint on the part of Bulgarian politicians to comment on President Yanukovich's unexpected decision.^[2] This restraint stood in stark contrast to the volatile public reactions that ranged from interpreting the refusal as an "aggressive" expression of Russian bullying of her neighbor state to acclaiming the "wisdom" of the Russia's policy to keep Ukraine within its economically powerful orbit.^[3] In many respects, these reactions mirrored directly the bitter realities of post-communist transition – on the one hand, the difficulties of getting out of the communist/ Soviet grip, and on the other hand, the disillusionment in the face of the economic and social collapse of the post-socialist years. The situation in Ukraine thus provided from its inception a convenient testing ground both of the lingering nostalgia about the communist era in Bulgaria, and of attitudes towards the EU integration. Many problems of post-socialist transition were automatically transferred and ascribed to EU membership; they were turned into launching points for criticisms of the choices Bulgaria had made, as well as warnings to Ukraine to be careful about defining her geopolitical orientation.

In fact, unease about defining Bulgaria's position has marked the reactions of all state institutions since the very beginning of the Ukrainian crisis and was regularly expressed in the statements of different parties in Bulgarian Parliament. The protests against President Yanukovich were carefully observed but did not demand to the taking of overt positions on the internal situation in Ukraine and the most declarative statements about the crisis on the Bulgarian side were made when violence escalated in January 2014.^[4] Expressing his disagreement with the violation of human rights in the country, the Bulgarian President, Rossen Plevneliev, postponed a planned visit to Ukraine in 2014, condemning the violence and appealing to political leaders to take action in the interest of a peaceful and democratic solution.^[5] Although in the context of the escalating tension in Ukraine this was an expected statement on the part of the president, it was criticized by several political parties as inconsistent with the country's "balanced" position.^[6] Similarly critical reactions accompanied the visit of the Bulgarian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Kristian Vigenin, in Kiev in early March 2014, which ended with a declaration of support

of the sovereignty, integrity, and independence of Ukraine – a position which until then had been difficult to maintain or publicly express for most Bulgarians.^[7] The visit included meetings with executive officials and members of the temporary government in Kiev, and was perceived by many Bulgarians as symbolical confirmation of the legitimacy of the Euromaidan.

Divergent visions and unifying statements

Apart from these statements, Bulgaria's official position on the Ukrainian crisis remained a "balanced" one until mid-March, and no clear preference for any side of this conflict was revealed. Internally, there were actually three projects by political parties regarding the Ukrainian crisis – each following its own purpose and visions. The Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria (Граждани за европейско развитие на България/Grazhdani za evropeysko razvitie na Balgariya, GERB) insisted on the general position of the European Union, the condemnation of the annexation of Crimea, and warned against problems that might ensue after new sanctions against Russia, especially in the military sphere and in tourism. The Bulgarian Socialist Party (Българска социалистическа партия, БСП; Bulgarska sotsialisticheska partiya, BSP) appealed to the Russian military to pull out of Crimea, but argued against sanctions against Russia because of their possible consequences for other European countries and the region in general. According to the nationalist party "Ataka" (Партия Атака/Partija Ataka), which maintained a Russophile stance, the results of the referendum in Crimea on 16 March 2014 should be recognized.

Regarding these conflicting positions, Bulgarian Parliament could not agree on a common stance in the Ukrainian crisis and the issue of a declaration was forwarded to the Consultative Council of National Security (Консултативният съвет за национална сигурност (КЧС), CCNS) at the Bulgarian President, where it was finally passed on 24 March 2014.^[8] This official statement supported the sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of Ukraine as well as signing the accession agreement with the European Union and the holding of free and democratic presidential elections. The declaration did not recognize the Crimean referendum of 16 March 2014, but on the other hand did not mention anything about Bulgaria's consent to sanctions against Russia, in marked difference from the general EU position. The statement of CCNS received wide approval in Bulgarian Parliament laboriously negotiating Bulgaria's membership of the EU and NATO and her good relationship with Russia, which was considered in the national interest.

In the context of this development, several factors emerged that were of particular relevance to the Bulgarian officials and the general public, particularly the large number of people of Bulgarian ethnic origin (around 300 000) living in present-day Ukraine, Bulgaria's position at a crossroads of geopolitical interests, and the deep entanglement of the Ukrainian events with the problem of the gas supplies and the so-called "South Stream" pipeline. The presence of a substantial Bulgarian community in Ukraine was a major point of discussion during the visit of the Bulgarian Foreign Minister to Kiev as well as in official statements by the President and by public institutions.^[9] They all pointed out the necessity to guarantee the rights of Bulgarians in Ukraine and the status of the Bulgarian language at a regional level.^[10] The alarming situation of their co-nationals in Ukraine touched a sensitive nationalist cord as well. After the escalation of violence after the withdrawal of Viktor Yanukovich in late February, a volunteer formation of patriots and members of nationalist groups left for Ukraine to defend the Bulgarian minority.^[11] They wanted to be seen as international observers that had been invited by the Crimean regional government and as a Bulgarian security force protecting the Bulgarian communities against what was perceived as attempts of the Ukrainian authorities' for minorities' discrimination.

The Crimean crisis and the specter of a gas crisis

The Russian annexation of Crimea alarmed various sides. The leader of the Socialist Party speculated openly about the regions in the Southeast of Bulgaria which might similarly be targeted by a referendum about joining the neighboring country, Turkey.^[12] Although these speculations caused considerable discontent among different political groups and provoked accusations of endangering the national security, they made it possible to publicly express some of the fears in Bulgarian society that the annexation of Crimea might serve as an example to other parts of Europe as well. Putin's declaration that the intervention in Crimea aimed to protect Russians in the Ukraine was quoted in relation to whether Bulgaria should also lend such defensive support to Bulgarians in neighboring countries, or whether such states might attempt to annex parts of Bulgaria in similar fashion. The acclamatory rhetoric surrounding Crimea's annexation by Russia was, in fact, also influential, but it came mostly from Russophile circles in Bulgaria, which saw the annexation as a "success in the Third Crimean War and therefore as a success of all Orthodox Christians in the world" (conveniently forgetting that Ukrainians were also Orthodox Christians). In view of Russia's unconcealed imperial ambitions, the annexation of Crimea was regarded as a perfect political model, a combination that might well wrench away further territories from Ukraine and defend Russia's historical and political interests in these areas. There were, however, many Bulgarians who considered the annexation a bad calculated move that increased Russia's international isolation, awoke the suspicions and enhanced the hostile attitudes of her immediate neighbors, and paved the way for a possible military conflict, in which Bulgaria – a NATO member – would be directly involved.

A third major consideration related to the crisis in the Ukraine was the gas supply of Bulgaria and the development of the controversial "South Stream" pipeline which was conceived of as a means to ensure a steady delivery and bring Bulgaria profit, but which would also make the country politically and energetically dependent. The debates about this project had been ongoing well before the events in Ukraine, but they heated up considerably during the crisis, questioning both the project itself and the details of Bulgaria's involvement.^[13] Against the background of Russia's unconcealed ambitions to accomplish the project and monopolize the gas supplies to Europe, the demands of EU partners to have the project accorded fully with European legislation made Bulgarian authorities feel uneasy. On one side were the Russophiles in Bulgaria, who insisted that the country depended on the energy supplies from Russia and was unavoidably under her geopolitical influence, on the other side there were speculations that Bulgaria would suffer more than anyone else from the Ukrainian crisis and from a possible EU embargo on Russian fuel. Ironically, it was repeatedly pointed out that Ukraine managed to sell its terrible situation to the EU well and receive financial support as compensation for the effects of the crisis. In their own turn, due to their geopolitical position and pressure from both East and West, Bulgarians perceived themselves as being in a disadvantageous position again – becoming thus victims of competing powers for influence in the region, and unable to profit properly from allowing the gas transfer to Europe through their territory.

The heated debates about Bulgaria's involvement in the "South Stream" that resulted directly from the Ukrainian crisis diverted most attention away from the new escalations of violence in Ukraine around the Presidential elections in May. Having been in the foreground as the most popular topic in the Bulgarian media and internet forums for several months, the Ukrainian events gradually lost their allure as a "hot" topic to Bulgarian society and were focused on mainly in terms of their immediate impact on Bulgaria's economic and political situation. Remarks that had recurred since the fall of 2013 – that the crisis was exclusively about whether Ukraine belonged to Russia's or the EU's political orbit and about economic

considerations related to the gas trade in Europe – were, it seems, ironically confirmed in the Bulgarian case, where discussions of the crisis ultimately returned to these two major factors. This is how attentions shifted in the context of the internal political development of Bulgaria during the six months of the crisis: in late fall, the country was at the height of its protests against a discredited Parliament and government, in spring, the idealistic hopes for a political change had largely withered away. Criticism of Russia for destabilizing the situation in Ukraine and of her threats regarding completion of the "South Stream" project continued to be voiced.^[14] However, their rigor was reduced by gloomy predictions that no sanctions would be sufficiently serious to frighten Russia and that what Bulgaria promoted as her "balanced" position would succeed only in raising the suspicions of both Russia and the other EU member states.

The main cases where the "balanced" position was abandoned and support for Ukraine openly declared were not political statements or economic agreements but expressions of civic protests that happened repeatedly at protest meetings at the Russian embassy in Sofia. The monument to the Soviet army in Sofia was symbolically painted in the colors of the Ukrainian flag in late February.^[15] Displaying inscriptions like "Glory to Ukraine" and "Hands off Ukraine", such campaigns were met by declarations of protest by the Russian authorities, who insisted that the monument's violators be punished. In several cases such threats actually succeeded – for example, after the Russian pressure to take down a photograph of the decorated monument from the Facebook profile of the Euronews TV channel.^[16] Although (as on previous occasions) the monument was soon cleaned up copies of this visual protest were widely distributed on the internet and became an expressive part of the visual culture supporting Ukraine's striving for political autonomy from Russia. Against the backdrop of so much protracted positional "balancing", such performative acts helped emphasize how an openly stated civic position may hold more power than any amount of putative political speculation and economic consideration.

Footnotes

1. See the abundance of commentaries by readers of online publications in the newspapers [Dnevnik](#), [Capital](#), [Trud](#), [24chasa](#), [Sega](#), and [Duma](#), as well as on news websites, such as [Darik News](#), [Mediapool](#), [NewsBG](#), etc., all of which attracted wide popular reaction to the crisis. Another good source of information on public attitudes and interpretations of the crisis are the comments and discussions in forums, such as [dir.bg](#), [gbg.bg](#), [all.bg](#), etc., as well as on social networks and platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter.
2. Aside from the declaration of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that Bulgaria was disappointed with the Ukraine's refusal to join the EU, [Dnevnik](#) (23 November 2013), there was a visible restraint on behalf of most political parties and public institutions in Bulgaria to comment on what was to turn into a long-lasting crisis in Ukraine.
3. The range of these opinions is presented well in all the comments to publications on the Ukrainian crisis in electronic media in Bulgaria. For expressive coverage of these reactions at the beginning of the crisis, see especially: Sergey Lavrov, EU exercises unforgivable pressure on Ukraine, [Dnevnik](#) (19 November 2013). 2587 readings, 98 comments; Over 100 000 Ukrainians demanded accession to EU at a meeting, [Dnevnik](#) (24 November 2013). 7470 readings, 225 comments. The data is based on visits to the electronic archive on 22 June 2014.
4. Although in late November politicians in Bulgaria had already warned about the use of force in the public protests in Ukraine, major reactions came only in late February, when political parties and state institutions condemned the escalation of violence. See the many reports on this in [Dnevnik](#) (19 February 2014).
5. Rosen Plevneliev osadi proyavite na nacilie v Ukrayna, [Darik News](#) (19 February 2014), retrieved 16 June 2015, URL: http://dariknews.bg/view_article.php?article_id=1220730; Yana Bayarova, Plevneliev osadi nasiliето v Ukrayna, [Actualno](#) (19 February 2014), retrieved 16 June 2015, URL: http://politics.actualno.com/Plevneliev-osydi-nasiliето-v-Ukrayna-news_16246.html. The position was in accordance with the statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which appealed to Ukraine to acknowledge the civil rights of its citizens. MVnR prizova Ukrayna da zachita pravata na protestirashtite, [Mediapool](#) (23 January 2014), retrieved 9 July 2015, URL: <http://www.mediapool.bg/mvnr-prizova-ukraina-da-zachita-pravata-na-protestirashtite-news215911.html>; MVnR zove: Pravitelstvoto na Ukrayna da zachita pravata na grazhdanite, [btv Novinite](#) (22 January 2014), retrieved 7 July 2015, URL: <http://btvnovinite.bg/article/bulgaria/mvnr-zove-pravitelstvoto-na-ukraina-da-zachita-pravata-na-grazhdanite>.
6. Despite the recommended "balanced position", after 19 February many political parties and institutions condemned the escalation of violence and insisted on maintaining dialogue between the warring sides. See: Ventsislav Mikhaylov, GERB osadi s deklaratsiya nasiliето nad protestirashtite v Ukrayna, [Fakti](#) (19 February 2014), retrieved 7 July 2015, URL: <http://fakti.bg/bulgaria/88892-gerb-osadi-s-deklaracia-nasiliето-nad-protestirashtite-v-ukraina>; Stanishev: Temata za izbor mezhdru ES i Rusiya samo vloshava neshtata v Ukrayna, [Darik News](#) (19 February 2014), retrieved 7 July 2015, URL: http://dariknews.bg/view_article.php?article_id=1220738; Nikola Lalov, Vigenin: Upravlyavashtite nosyat osnovnata otgovornost za nasiliето v Ukrayna, [Mediapool](#) (20 February 2014), retrieved 7 July 2015, URL: <http://www.mediapool.bg/vigenin-upravlyavashtite-nosyat-osnovnata-otgovornost-za-nasiliето-v-ukraina-news217065.html>.
7. See some of these pronouncements in early March: Vigenin v Kiev: Balgariya podkrepya suvereniteta, tselostta i nezavisimostta na Ukrayna, [Logbg](#) (4 March 2014), retrieved 7 July 2015, URL: <http://logbg.info/vigenin-v-kiev-balgariya-podkrepya-suvereniteta-tselostta-i-nezavisimostta-na-ukrayna/>; Vigenin: Balgariya nyama da priznae rezultatite ot referendum v Krim, [Kapital](#) (11 March 2014), retrieved 7 July 2015, URL: http://www.capital.bg/politika_i_ikonomika/bulgaria/2014/03./11/2259364_vigenin_bulgariia_niama_da_priznae_rezultatite_ot/.
8. Stanovishte i predlozheniya na Konsultativniya savet za natsionalna sigurnost otnosno riskovete pred Balgariya, svarzani s razvitiето na krizata v Ukrayna, [President](#) (24 March 2014), retrieved 7 July, URL: <http://www.president.bg/news1819/stanovishte-i-predlozheniya-na-konsultativniya-savet-za-natsionalna-sigurnost-otnosno-riskovete-pred-balgariya-svarzani-s-razvitiето-na-krizata-v-ukrayna.html>.
9. Vigenin zaminava za Kiev zaradi sigurnostta na balgarskoto maltsinstvo, [24 Chasa](#) (3 March 2014), retrieved 31 August 2015, URL: <http://www.24chasa.bg/Article.asp?ArticleId=3499798>.
10. Vigenin: Otmyanata na ezikovite prava na besarabskite balgari e greshka, [LOGBG](#) (14 February 2014), retrieved 31 August 2015, URL: <http://logbg.info/vigenin-otmyanata-na-ezikovite-prava-na-besarabskite-balgari-e-greshka/>; Ostra balgarska reaktsiya sreshthu otmeneniya ezikov zakon v Ukrayna, [News.bg](#) (24 February 2014), retrieved 31 August 2015, URL: http://news.ibox.bg/news/id_1055688179.
11. Petima ot "Ataka" zaminavat za Krim kato nablyudateli na referendum, [Mediapool](#) (14 March 2014), retrieved 31 August 2015, URL: <http://www.mediapool.bg/petima-ot-ataka-zaminavat-za-krim-kato-nablyudateli-na-referendum-news217920.html>; Desislava Dimitrova, Siderov: Nablyudateli ot "Ataka" na referendum v Krim, [Dnes](#) (14 March 2014), retrieved date 31 August 2015, URL: <http://dnes.dir.bg/news/ataka-referendum-krim-16309447>; Kmetat na Topolovgrad otiva kato dobrovolets v Krim, [Mediapool](#) (13 March 2015), retrieved 31 August 2015, URL: <http://www.mediapool.bg/kmetat-na-topolovgrad-otiva-kato-dobrovolets-v-krim-news217857.html>.
12. About this statement and the reactions that it provoked, see: Krasina Krasteva, Sergey Satnishev: A ako utre nyakoy

- poiska referendum za Kardzhali?!, Trud (19 March 2014), retrieved 31 August 2015, URL: <http://www.trud.bg/Article.asp?ArticleId=3716928>; Mestan ripna sreshtu Stanishev: Analogiite mezhdu Krim i Kardzhali sa bezotgovorni!, Pogled (19 March 2014), retrieved 31 August, URL: <http://bulgarski.pogled.info/news/53247/Mestan-ripna-sreshtu-Stanishev-Analogiite-mezhdu-Krim-i-Kardzhali-sa-bezotgovorni>; Boris Mitov, Stanishev pod krastosan ogan ot GERB i DPS zaradi sravnenieto mezhdu Krim i Kardzhali, Mediapool (19 March 2014), retrieved 31 August 2015, URL: <http://www.mediapool.bg/stanishev-pod-krastosan-ogan-ot-gerb-i-dps-zaradi-sravnenieto-mezhdu-krim-i-kardzhali-news218118.html>.
13. Preuelicheni shtet za Balgariya ot sanktsii sreshtu Rusiya, Kapital (1 March 2014), retrieved 31 August 2015, URL: http://www.capital.bg/politika_i_ikonomika/bulgaria/2014/03/11/2259429_preuelicheni_shteti_za_bulgariia_ot_sankcii_sreshtu/.
 14. In the middle of June Bulgarian government furthermore complicated the situation with the "South Stream" pipeline by postponing the development of this project across Bulgarian territory. See: Oresharski razporedi spirane na "Yuzhen potok" do razbiratelstvo s Bryuksel, Vesti (8 June 2014), retrieved 31 August 2015, URL: <http://www.vesti.bg/temi-v-razvitie/tema-iuzhen-potok/spirame-iuzhen-potok-do-razbiratelstvo-s-briuksel-6014211>.
 15. Elitsa Petrova, Pametnikat na cavetskata armiya s nadpis za Ukrayna, Dnes (2 March 2014), retrieved 31 August 2015, URL: <http://dnes.dir.bg/news/ukrina-pametnik-16232813>; Pametnikat na Savetskata armiya osamna s ukrainski nadpis. Bnews (23 February 2014), retrieved 31 August 2015, URL: <http://www.bnews.bg/article-99159>.
 16. The photo was by Rheuters, but it stayed at the front page of Euronews for only five hours, because after its publication reactions of protest came from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and comments accused Euronews of supporting vandalism. See: Pod ruski natisk Euronews svali vav "Feysbuk" snimka ot Sofiya, Logbg (25 February 2014), retrieved 31 August 2015, URL: <http://logbg.info/euronews/>.

