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Introduction

As part of NATO's Eastern flank, Bulgaria's defence capabilities are crucial to European security. While Sofia has embarked on crucial reforms since the fall of the Communist bloc in 1991, its Armed Forces are still far from being at the same level as its NATO allies. Nevertheless, Bulgaria is boldly enhancing its military power. Initiatives such as its accession to FINABEL show the political commitment to share defence and interoperability.

With the fall of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact in 1991, Bulgaria started a long process of democratisation and liberalisation that brought it towards the West. Economic and political stability, along with guarantees for its security and sovereignty, attracted Bulgaria to both NATO and the EU, which Sofia joined in 2004 and 2007, respectively. Nevertheless, Bulgaria still faces issues in becoming interoperable with its allies and achieving operational effectiveness.

This analysis aims to identify and delineate Bulgaria's land forces deficiencies and the steps it has taken to address its weaknesses, arguing that Bulgaria would greatly benefit from modernising its defence capabilities in a European framework. This paper begins by summarising the evolution of the Bulgarian Armed Forces (BAF) since the fall of the Communist regime. It continues by presenting the flaws in the BAF, mainly regarding its equipment and obstacles to modernisation. Lastly, it underlines Bulgarian efforts and possible ways forward. Bulgaria recently signalled a strong commitment to its defence and meeting Western military standards by joining FINABEL as its 25th member, so it is fitting to review Sofia's efforts in defence modernisation and alignment.

From East to West

Sofia shares strong ties with Moscow, which date back to Russian involvement in the Bulgarian liberation from Ottoman rule in the nineteenth century (Berglund & Karasimeonov, 2019). However, Russia and Bulgaria fought on opposite sides during both World Wars, and therefore the historical bond must not be exaggerated. During the Cold War, the West considered Bulgaria to be one of the most Moscow-loyal countries in the Warsaw Pact, going as far as to propose fully integrating into the USSR, only to be turned down by Moscow (Berglund & Karasimeonov, 2019; Robinson, 2023). Even today, Russophile sentiment is still widely held by the Bulgarian population (Robinson, 2023).

Bulgaria held a significant strategic position for the Red Army. In the event of a military confrontation between the Warsaw Pact and NATO, the main theatre of operations was widely expected to be the West German plains (Robinson, 2023). Nevertheless, the Southern Front, where Bulgaria was highly significant, would have been tasked with securing the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits to allow the Soviet Black Sea fleet to enter the Mediterranean Sea (Robinson, 2023). Because this aggressive strategy demanded a lot of manpower to be effective, the Bulgarian People's Army was large relative to Bulgaria's size. In 1988, the land, air, and navy forces comprised 152,000 men, and the land forces focused on manoeuvrability, with four motor rifle divisions, five tank brigades, and three motor rifle divisions in reserve (Robinson, 2023).

With the fall of the Soviet Union, the Bulgarian Armed Forces went through a profound restructuring process. Notwithstanding a brief initial period in which Bulgaria tried to strike a neutral position (Berglund & Karasimeonov, 2019), Sofia quickly shifted to a pro-Western stance, which led to Bulgaria's accession to NATO in 2004 and the EU in 2007. The BAF's purpose changed drastically because of this political transformation. The BAF was built around two primary tasks: to invade Greece and Turkey in the event of war and ensure that the Bulgarian Communist Party held on to power, both of which were rendered nonsensical by the democratic and pro-Western shift. As per Tzvetkov (2014), the BAF had to go through three separate transitions:

1. From a politicised army to a professional one subjected to civil control.
2. From a mass armed force of conscripts to a highly trained force composed of volunteers.
3. From using outdated soviet equipment to more sophisticated NATO weapons systems.

Regarding the first two transitions, Bulgaria improved considerably. The BAF was no longer the Communist Party's instrument to hold on to power. It abandoned Cold War provisions such as Political Officers and established civil control over the Ministry of Defence. Moreover, greater competence in martial matters and education of the BAF's highest ranks compared to the Cold War era reflect increasing military professionalism. Tzvetkov underlines that during the Cold War, "A significant portion of the high-ranking officers in the officer corps did not have professional but rather "antifascist" backgrounds" (p. 69), which is now no longer the case (Tzvetkov, 2024). Simultaneously, what in 1988 was a 152.000-strong conscript army was drastically reduced to a professional and voluntary structure (Robinson, 2023). This change is readily apparent as the BAF had been reduced to 36.950 military personnel on active duty and 3.000 in reserve by 2023 (IISS, 2024).

Still A Long Way To Go

The third transition is where Bulgaria has struggled the most. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies' Military Balance (IISS, 2024), the BAF's army comprises one Reconnaissance Battalion, two Mechanised Brigades, and one Mountain Infantry Regiment, with supporting artillery, engineering, Nuclear-Biological-Chemical defence, and logistics forces. The BAF inherited a force structure that centres on mechanised infantry from the Communist era, which was organised into three motor rifle divisions at the time.

The BAF also inherited most of its defence equipment from that period. Its tanks are two variants of the T-72, which entered service in 1972 and has seen a resurgence in fame due to the war in Ukraine. The armoured vehicles that form the bulk of the Bulgarian defence systems are the BMP-1, a first generation fighting vehicle that entered service in the '60s, the MT-LB, which is also from the '60s, the twenty years younger BMP-23, and the BTR-60, which some argue is too thinly armoured (Mansoor, 2024; ODIN, n.d.; Kirill, 2013; Axe, 2023).

Beyond ageing, BAF's systems are not interoperable with other NATO forces. For example, the BAF's artillery relies on 122mm and 152mm shells, which are incompatible with Western systems that use the 155mm NATO-standard shell (Department of State, 2009).

The lack of interoperability could significantly diminish the BAF's effectiveness in the event of war and worsen logistical hurdles to operating outside Bulgarian territory as they cannot resupply from allied ammunition depots. Granted, Bulgaria is not the only NATO Eastern Bloc country that with 122mm and 152mm artillery. However, all the other Eastern European Armed Forces have acquired 155mm artillery systems (IISS, 2024) or plan to do so shortly (Defence Industry Europe, 2024). Other Eastern NATO members, like the Czech Republic, have the industrial production capabilities to manufacture NATO-standard artillery (Pivoňka, 2022).

In addition, the BAF's predominantly Russian equipment is a liability, and reliance on the Russian defence industry must be minimised in the interest of Bulgarian and NATO security (Department of State, 2024; Radio Bulgaria, 2022). Most Bulgarian defence firms produce small arms or optic and electronic systems, and the only firm that specialises in major platforms, Tarem SHC, is mainly concerned with the maintenance, life extension, and modernisation of old platforms (Bulgarian Defence Industry Association, 2019). In short, Bulgaria's push for military modernisation has so far failed to reach a satisfactory level of interoperability with the rest of NATO.

Bulgaria faces grave challenges that hamper its ability to effectively develop its defence capabilities to NATO standards. In this context, Bulgaria's socioeconomic situation must be taken into account. Bulgaria has the lowest GDP per capita in the EU, and its population is rapidly declining (Eurostat, 2023; Department of State, 2024): from 8.7 million at the fall of the Communist regime, the Bulgarian population has shrunk to 6.47 million in 2022 (The World Bank, 2024). Recurring corruption scandals are also an issue for the country. While the BAF appears less susceptible to corruption than other Bulgarian institutions and prioritises counteracting corruption, it is not free from it (Dicke, Hendrickson, & Kutz, 2014). Another obstacle is that Bulgaria, like many European countries, cut its military budget to prioritise other spending after the 2008 financial crisis (Dimitrova, 2022). These structural weaknesses hamper Bulgaria's ability to move forward with the modernisation of its Armed Forces.

Positive Signs of Progress And The Way Forward

Though the analysis has mainly underlined Bulgaria's weaknesses so far, there are also notable successes and strengths. Weapon system interoperability only relates to technical interoperability, which is one of three types of interoperability (Amble, 2024). Technical interoperability enables procedural interoperability, which is the ability to operate jointly at the tactical level by, for instance coordinating and planning calls for fire. Finally, there is the human level of interoperability, which is the ability to operate together through shared doctrines and operational knowledge. Thousands of Bulgarian troops have received formal training from NATO allies, and Bulgaria regularly participates in NATO exercises (US Department of State, 2022). Even without interoperable equipment, this kind of cooperation creates human interoperability between Bulgarian and other NATO forces, allowing them to fight together more effectively.

In addressing issues brought by spending cuts, the BAF is currently facing a ramp-up in budget and significant investments. After years of underinvestment, Bulgaria is expected to spend at least 2% of GDP on defence in 2024, as per its NATO commitment (Dimitrova, 2022). Three recent procurement programmes promise to greatly enhance the BAF's capabilities in all domains, with the navy being strengthened by two 90m multipurpose patrol vessels by 2026, the air force being strengthened by 16 F-16 block 70s, and ground forces buttressed with a recent deal to purchase 183 armoured Stryker vehicles (Naval Technology, 2023; Nikolov, 2024; The Sofia Globe, 2023). The new platforms will probably replace and complement the ageing MT-LB, BTR-60, and BMP-1, and the importance of this contract for a mechanised infantry-focused Army cannot be overstated. The expected delivery of the first vehicles is by the end of 2025, and they are expected to significantly enhance the BAF's interoperability with other NATO forces (Council of Ministers, 2022, p. 15). Bulgaria's intent here is clear, as stated in the Programme for the Development of Defence Capabilities of the Bulgarian Armed Forces: "At the heart of our efforts to deepen bilateral cooperation, will stand the priority to enhance interoperability and to eliminate the dependence of our defence capabilities on countries outside NATO and the EU. The aim is to put an irreversible end to the dependence on the Russian military-industrial complex for repairs and maintenance of legacy Soviet equipment" (Council of Ministers, 2022, p. 13).

The BAF has made much of the aforementioned progress by leveraging its NATO membership and bilateral relations with the US. Sofia should also leverage EU cooperation in defence. In this regard, Bulgaria should push for European programmes for joint procurement, like the European Defence Industry Reinforcement through common Procurement Act (Regulation (EU) 2023/2418) and the Collaborative Procurement of Ammunition (EDA, 2024). Such initiatives would lower or at least shift the costs of modernisation while increasing cooperation and interoperability with other EU member states. Moreover, Bulgaria should open its market to European defence firms and integrate its own industrial system with the rest of the continent. While it might be painful for a country to abandon defence protectionist policies, Bulgaria's defence industry would benefit from this liberalisation in terms of innovation and efficiency (Andersson, 2023).

Further European integration would also cut residual links and dependencies on the Russian defence apparatus, by reducing the military equipment for which Bulgaria still needs to rely on Moscow for maintenance. Clear evidence of Bulgaria's willingness to increase cooperation with its European partners is its accession to FINABEL during the 2024 COS II Meeting in Bled, Slovenia, on 16-17 April. Sofia's participation in FINABEL will benefit Bulgarian and European interoperability.

Conclusion

The BAF faces problems in its drive for modernisation and interoperability with NATO forces. There are still issues over Sofia's communist-era equipment, low-performing economy, declining population, corruption, and a historic under-prioritisation of defence spending. Notwithstanding the less-than-ideal circumstances that the BAF has been modernising under, Bulgaria has made significant progress. While not wholly interoperable, it has transformed into a professional army. Through NATO and its relationship with the US, Bulgaria is improving its military capabilities and interoperability with its allies. Enhanced cooperation and integration within the European framework in defence matters would finally secure Bulgaria's defence position within the West and sever its remaining ties with Moscow.

Going forward, Bulgaria should prioritise the completion of its armed force modernisation. Significant components of its army are still not interoperable with Sofia's allies. For instance, the BAF lacks artillery systems able to fire NATO-standard 155mm shells. Soon Bulgaria will be the last country in Western Europe without this military capability, and therefore it must be acquired as soon as possible. Further integration with the rest of the European industrial system would be essential for Sofia to achieve this goal.

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