



Federal Foreign Office



Europäische Akademie Berlin

Bulgaria and the EU in 2035

Scenario report on the third European Future Summit 2017

With the kind support of the Federal Foreign Office

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Workshop participants:

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Three alternate futures of Bulgaria and the EU

Without ignoring the progressive stance of the Bulgarian government and the country's determination to engage deeply in joint policies, joint political strategies, as well as in EU legal and normative frameworks, the three scenarios, as they were debated during the workshop, assess the current state of politics, society and the economy in Bulgaria in a highly critical manner.

One part of this assessment was that a constructive relationship between Bulgaria and the EU is vital to the future of the country. Bulgaria's progress, as the collective debate brought to the fore, appears to depend to a significant degree on positive relations with the EU, i.e. to Brussels, as well as to other EU member states on several levels. In view of the Bulgarian domestic situation, whereas a step-wise process, working through challenges facing Bulgaria, appears to be the most likely scenario, at least the desire for a sudden breakthrough towards a speedier reform process, for example driven by organised civil society, was clearly part and parcel of the joint debate during the meeting.

Further key points in the three scenarios may be summarised as follows. While the first scenario takes a deeper look at Bulgarian domestic affairs, focusing on the Bulgarian state, the second scenario pays closer attention to Bulgaria's role in the Western Balkans and the Black Sea region. The third scenario returns to the domestic level, in which the role of Bulgarian civil society is put into focus. The third scenario may be read as one possible response to the first scenario.

Scenario 1 – Bulgaria drifts into isolation

The first scenario posits gradual stagnation of the reform process in Bulgaria, eventually cart-wheeling into downward spiralling in the country's politics and economy, which continues throughout the entire scenario timeframe. This development would entail the country experiencing wide-ranging 'state capture', i.e. the Bulgarian state coming increasingly under the influence of powerful individuals, private stakeholders and their personal and economic interests. On the domestic level, as this scenario posits, this development might be conditioned by a lack of reforms, especially of the judiciary, and might run hand in hand with an intensifying demographic crisis. The latter would include emigration by young Bulgarians to more affluent European countries, as they might become increasingly frustrated with the principal economic and political situation in their home country.

Crucially, this entirely negative scenario would be conditioned as well, as was discussed during the workshop, by far-reaching fragmentation in the EU, where constant disputes over joint policies might deprive this body of the necessary political strength to maintain sustainable dialogue and fruitful relations with Bulgaria.

Scenario 2 – Bulgaria emerges as significant regional player

The second scenario concentrates on Bulgaria's role in the Western Balkans and the Black Sea region. It posits that Bulgaria might experience political and economic progress, conditioned by its success in further improving relations to its neighbours. Possibly through intensified relations to Romania, including strengthened cooperation between the two countries on the European level, Bulgaria and Romania might establish a strong position, being able to affect EU politics to their advantage. Furthermore, this scenario debates the possibility that Bulgaria, through varying forms of deepened regional cooperation, might play a crucial role in promoting in the EU the interests of various Western Balkan states, particularly in the EU enlargement process.

Moreover, it was considered that Bulgaria's overall fruitful relations to Russia might serve as an advantage to the EU, as Bulgaria might excel vis-à-vis Russia as a trusted broker of European interests, and vice versa. Hence, as this scenario posits, the EU and its member countries would come to realise Bulgaria's potentials as a crucial partner in the region, rather than seeing the country as a 'buffer zone' between the EU and its eastern and south-eastern neighbours.

Scenario 3 – Bulgaria experiences radical transformation

In the view of the third scenario, workshop participants engaged in an attempt to think through varying possibilities for radical political change in Bulgaria, geared towards an accelerated reform process in the country. Whilst this scenario, as originally sketched out during the workshop, was eventually deemed to be highly unlikely, if not implausible, it perhaps reflects best the claim that political progress in Bulgaria today is highly dependent on engagement itself by Bulgarian civil society. While there seem to be no plausible reasons to assume any external shock event, dramatic enough to unite the Bulgarian people as a whole, to reform politics and the state both from the ground up and all at once – as was tentatively posited during the workshop – this scenario nevertheless pays attention to a culture of progressive civic engagement which is deeply rooted in Bulgarian society.

Hence the scenario posits that Bulgarian civil society, including Bulgarian expatriates all over Europe, constitutes a vital resource for meaningful continuation of the reform course of the country. In this regard, it was posited that constructive political dialogue might spring from controversies over ecological and social concerns, including environmental issues, questions regarding gender equality and debates over asylum policies.

What to take from this report?

Clearly, these conclusions posit more questions rather than provide solutions to current challenges. Nevertheless, apart from underlining several key policy issues, the debate during the workshop, as is briefly summarised and concluded in this document, exhibits a shift in perspective on the future of Bulgaria and the EU. While this debate, on one hand, mirrors also the frustration of at least some participants over a seemingly fruitless reform process in Bulgaria, on the other hand, it clearly stresses and highlights the very potentials and the extremely crucial role of Bulgaria in Europe. The latter includes both the lively interest and determination in Bulgaria, in civil society and among political and economic elites, determinedly to promote the country's reform process as well as country's crucial geopolitical position.

Concurrently, as it has been mentioned above, the reform process in Bulgaria depends much on EU consolidation and wider and further reaching cooperation among EU member states, mindful of Bulgaria's power and potential themselves.

Background & acknowledgements

This report summarises key outcomes emerging from an expert workshop entitled ‘Bulgaria and the EU in 2035’. The workshop took place in Berlin in November 2017, bringing together an interdisciplinary panel of experts from Bulgaria and Germany who kindly agreed to engage in an open and innovative debate on the future of Bulgaria and the EU.

The workshop was part of the project entitled ‘European future summits 2017 – Social cohesion and transnational security in Europe – a scenario workshop series on the future of Greece, Poland and Bulgaria’. The project was conducted by the European Academy Berlin with kind support from the Federal Foreign Office. Furthermore, the present workshop was realised in cooperation with the Sofia office of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, with the kind additional assistance of which allowed a number of Bulgarian participants to attend the workshop in Berlin. We are indebted to all those mentioned above, to whom we wish to express our deepest gratitude.

Objectives and method

Similar to previous scenario reports of the European Academy Berlin,¹ this paper emerges from a scenario workshop which was conducted along the lines of the ‘alternate futures’ approach by Michael Oppenheimer.² The overarching objective of this approach is to develop three alternate future scenarios or future narratives, indicating three different pathways of how the future of a given country or issue might possibly evolve. Thus each scenario is meant to posit a distinct future trend and show how this trend might play out in practice.

Based on an open dialogue among multiple parties, this endeavour does not aim at an exhaustive analysis of the issue at stake, nor to determine the most likely future of a given country or issue. Instead, it aims to provide concise lines of reasoning, making plausible assumptions regarding possible future events and developments. By that means, surprising turns and unexpected outcomes might also come into focus.

The workshop in question concentrated on several pressing issues facing Bulgaria, hand in hand with debating equally pressing challenges ahead for the EU. By reflecting on this debate, this paper aims to provide new impulses, contributing to a rich and productive debate on the future of Bulgaria and the EU.

Authorship

As this document aims to give a voice to all workshop participants and further interlocutors involved in the process, developing it included the difficult task of giving room to varied and at times even opposing arguments and views. For this reason, those individuals mentioned here have agreed to take responsibility for what is said here only to the extent that the paper documents a controversial debate to which they contributed. Hence, the paper reflects neither a common position nor the distinct viewpoint of any one of the contributors and organisations mentioned. Instead, it is a record of a widely ramified and vivid discussion, presented here in the form of three future scenarios with the objective of igniting an even more thorough-going debate.

¹ Samuel F. Mueller (ed.), ‘Greece and the EU in 2035: Scenario report on the first European Future Summit 2017 in the European Academy Berlin’, *European Academy Berlin*, Dec. 2017, online. URL: <http://bit.ly/2rYGxqI>.

² Michael F. Oppenheimer, *Pivotal Countries, Alternate Futures: Using Scenarios to Manage American Strategy*, Oxford University Press, 2016.

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