

Bulgarian-Romanian relations in a historical and contemporary geopolitical context ¹

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Bulgaria and Romania are an inseparable part of the historical-political, economic, ethno-cultural map of Southeastern Europe. Geography and history have determined that Bulgarians and Romanians coexist in close proximity. The neighbourhood has established itself as a sustainable factor in shaping national models of political behaviour, economic interdependence, mutual cultural influence, and perceptions of security and threats.

The geographical location of Sofia and Bucharest in the east-central part of the Balkan Peninsula, with access to the Black Sea and sharing a common border of nearly 630 km along the lower reaches of the Danube River, has turned them into a trade, transport, cultural and geopolitical corridor connecting Central Europe with the wider Black Sea region.

The mutual connection between the two peoples from the period of recent history dates back to the 18th -19th centuries, when many Bulgarians took advantage of the opportunity to develop free entrepreneurial, craft and commercial activities north of the River Danube, beyond the borders of the Ottoman Empire. The Romanian cities of Bucharest, Braila and Galati became centres of the Bulgarian revolutionary emigration, personified by its leaders - Rakovski, Botev, Levski and Karavelov - and a logistical base for the preparation of our national liberation movement. In terms of cultural and educational connectivity during this period, the Romanian lands were favourable for the development of independent Bulgarian printing activities (the publication of newspapers and books with a national liberation focus). Bulgarian schools and community centres were established in Bucharest and other Romanian cities, which helped to strengthen Bulgarian national self-awareness and identity and the formation of the pre-liberation Bulgarian intelligentsia.

Every year, on the day of the national holiday – March 3rd, Bulgarian officials express gratitude for the participation of Romanian military units (led by King Carol I) in the liberation of Bulgaria during the Russo-Turkish War (1877-1878). This gratitude has not only ceremonial, but also a deep historical and political meaning. Romania's participation in the military operations (especially in the siege and liberation of Pleven) contributed significantly to the outcome of the war. It also created favourable geopolitical conditions for achieving Romania's full independence from the Ottoman Empire, and through its liberation, Bulgaria embarked on the path of restoring its statehood, which ended in 1908.

Bucharest was among the first to recognise the Principality of Bulgaria and establish diplomatic relations with it in 1879. The establishment of bilateral diplomatic relations gave an initial impetus to the development of interstate relations and high-level political dialogue.

In a historical context, the relations between the two peoples being evaluated have been marked by periods of mutually beneficial and balancing cooperation and of rivalry provoked by

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military conflicts for control over territories and resources. In this regard, Bulgarian-Romanian relations cannot be studied in isolation, as they are a function of the specific historical and geopolitical context - Balkan, European, global - in which they develop. Their dynamics are determined not only by bilateral factors, but also by alliance configurations, conflicts and balances of power. The period of the beginning of the 20th century is indicative in this regard. During the Second Balkan (Inter-Allied) War, as well as during the First World War, Bulgaria and Romania found themselves in opposing allied blocs, which predetermined the hostile nature of their relations during this historical period. At the same time, in a different geopolitical context, Sofia and Bucharest demonstrated a capacity for pragmatic cooperation. One such example was the complex bilateral negotiations over Southern Dobrudja in 1940, which ended with the Treaty of Craiova, through which Bulgaria and Romania managed to settle one of their most sensitive territorial disputes peacefully. From a Bulgarian perspective, these negotiations are an example of bilateral balancing and pragmatic diplomacy in the conditions of the dynamically changing international environment at the beginning of World War II. For Bulgaria, the Craiova Agreement is particularly important because our country succeeded, by means of the tools of diplomacy, in peacefully revising the Bucharest Peace Treaty of 1913 and the unfair clauses of the Treaty of Neuilly.

During the period of the Cold War (1947-1989), Bulgarian-Romanian relations developed within the framework of the Warsaw Pact alliance, which predetermined their geopolitical orientation and party-institutional ties. The two neighbouring countries maintained an active political dialogue at both expert and high government levels, including through regular meetings between party and state leaders. The bilateral Bulgarian-Romanian political dialogue has also been carried out within the framework of multilateral cooperation formats in South-Eastern Europe (the Balkans), which, although limited by bloc opposition, are important channels of communication, offering a pragmatic model of cooperation and trust-building. An example of this has been the meetings of the foreign ministers of the Balkan states, initiated in the 1970s during the period of *détente*. During this period, Sofia and Bucharest also coordinated their economic policies within the framework of intergovernmental consultations of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance. More broadly, bilateral Bulgarian-Romanian relations developed in the context of a deep inter-bloc confrontation between East and West. However, they retained a certain degree of nuance and autonomy. A characteristic feature of this historical period is that the high-level bilateral political dialogue was based on the principle of good neighbourliness, practical cooperation in various fields, and the avoidance of tensions in bilateral relations, rather than ideological solidarity. This is to some extent determined by the fact that our northern neighbour pursues a relatively more independent policy within the Eastern bloc. Thus, Bulgarian-Romanian relations do not remain entirely subordinate to ideological logic, but show elements of bilateral pragmatism and balance of interests.

After 1989, Bulgarian-Romanian relations entered a new qualitative period of development, characterised by a transition to multi-party democracy and a market economy. The contractual and legal framework of bilateral relations in the context of the systemic changes that had begun in both countries was the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Good Neighbourliness, signed in 1992 and entered into force a year later. The Treaty reaffirmed the relations of friendship

between the two neighbouring peoples, defining the main areas of cooperation – economy, tourism, ecology, transport, education and culture. The old party-ideological framework was eliminated and, most importantly, the inviolability of existing borders and the rejection of mutual territorial claims were reaffirmed. In a statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Bulgaria in connection with the 30th anniversary of the signing of the treaty in 2022, it was emphasised that the friendship treaty starts a new page in the recent history of Bulgarian-Romanian relations and confirms the desire of Sofia and Bucharest to develop and deepen cooperation in the new political and economic realities.

Both countries underwent a change in their foreign policy orientation after the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe. This process culminated in accession to NATO in 2004 and the EU in 2007. During the transitional period from the early 1990s to 2007, bilateral political dialogue was gradually institutionalised within the new integration framework of European and Euro-Atlantic structures.

In the period 2004-2025, the two countries achieved a high degree of political convergence through enhanced coordination of their national policies and priorities within the framework of European and Euro-Atlantic institutions and decision-making mechanisms. If in the pre-accession period (2004-2006) the leading focuses in the Bulgarian-Romanian political dialogue were judicial reform, the fight against organised crime and corruption, then in the post-accession integration period (2007-2019), the focus shifted to sharing good practices for the effective use of European structural funds, the development of cross-border infrastructure (including the construction of a second bridge over the River Danube, Vidin-Calafat), and the management of the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism. The period ends with the celebration of 140 years since the establishment of bilateral diplomatic relations. The third period of development of relations (2020 -), which continues today, is dominated by the completion of the Schengen accession process, issues regarding regional security (including in the Black Sea region) and the development of infrastructure and energy connectivity, etc. (including the Bulgaria-Romania vertical gas connection).

The good Bulgarian-Romanian coordination of approaches and priorities (from expert-institutional to the highest political level) regarding the conduct of their rotating presidencies of the Council of the EU is indicative. The synchronisation is carried out in the form of the “triple presidency” (Bulgaria, Austria, Romania) within the framework of an 18-month programme. In 2019, Romania included the topic of European integration of the Western Balkans, strategically set as a European perspective for the region during the Sofia Summit in 2018, but with an emphasis on the inclusion of young people from the Western Balkans in European standards and values. The issues of enlargement, regional connectivity, migration issues are also present in both presidencies.

The joint package accession to the Schengen area is one of the successful examples of bilateral strategic coordination (at political, institutional and operational-border levels). Sofia and Bucharest coordinate their diplomatic efforts through their embassies in Bucharest and Sofia, and the permanent representations in Brussels in the different configurations of the Council of the EU, formulating common positions to overcome the reservations of key member states.

They communicate in a coordinated manner with the European Commission regarding technical readiness, implementation of recommendations and monitoring mechanisms. In practical terms, the two countries are introducing joint models of border control and patrolling the EU's external borders, testing fast-track procedures and integrated security systems. Schengen is not a purely instrumental and technical issue for Sofia and Bucharest. The joint efforts to join it have deepened Bulgarian-Romanian institutional cooperation and contributed to the building of joint management capacity. There is also joint action by political elites, state administrations, and security services. The wars in Ukraine and the Middle East are dramatically worsening the strategic security environment and are an additional catalyst for the integration of Bulgaria and Romania into Schengen. The importance of both countries as external borders of the EU is increasing, and Schengen is seen as an element of common European security.

Bulgaria and Romania share common views on preserving the extremely important funding for them under the Cohesion Policy and the Common Agricultural Policy. Sofia and Bucharest also have identical positions on strengthening NATO's military presence in the Black Sea region and using the tools of the Common Foreign and Security Policy and the Common Security and Defence Policy of the EU, with a view to limiting the security risks of South-Eastern Europe and the Black Sea (including working together to achieve infrastructure connectivity under the military Schengen for the region: Greece-Bulgaria-Romania)

In 2011, the High-Level Cooperation Council was established, which institutionalises political dialogue at the governmental level (the first joint meeting of the two governments was held in Bucharest, and five meetings have been held so far). The thematic agenda of the meetings within the Cooperation Council is evolving from strategic-declarative (discussion of common trade and economic issues, first stage of accession to the Schengen area, formation of common positions regarding European community policies, etc.) to functional-project and pragmatic (the implementation of strategic projects of mutual interest is agreed upon (bridge infrastructure, transport and energy corridors, regional cooperation under the EU Danube Strategy, etc.). The meetings are supported by departmental expert working groups on various issues of sectoral cooperation, which formulate recommendations and operational decisions. In this way, the Cooperation Council is transforming the bilateral Bulgarian-Romanian relations from a formal political dialogue into sectoral integrated cooperation. At a later stage, issues of a strategic nature are also included in the discussions, such as border and migration security, the security of the Black Sea region, energy diversification, etc.).

In 2023, Presidents Rumen Radev and Klaus Johannes signed a joint Political Declaration on Strategic Partnership, thereby strengthening bilateral Bulgarian-Romanian relations and adapting them to the dynamically changing system of international relations.

The Declaration builds on the deep historical ties and good neighbourliness, the bilateral Treaty of Friendship of 1992, shared European and Euro-Atlantic values, and the principles of international legal order. At the same time, it takes into account the deteriorating security environment following the Russian invasion of Ukraine (in 2022), the need for enhanced regional cooperation, and the increased strategic importance of the Black Sea Basin. It also

notes the role of the Cooperation Council as an important institutional framework for bilateral relations.

The main directions of sectoral cooperation are being updated, with the focus on the implementation of a new economic-innovative model of relations. The latter implies not only the development of traditional trade and investment cooperation, but also the implementation of joint access to third markets, the construction of industrial zones, logistics networks, technology parks, and the strengthening of cooperation in the field of digitalisation, science, and technology.

The declaration reaffirms the importance of connectivity as the backbone of the strategic partnership (emphasising the need to build the long-awaited connecting bridge infrastructure, the implementation of the “Fast Danube” project, and the implementation of shared projects in the field of telecommunications and energy connectivity, including that based on renewable energy sources).

For the first time, defence and security issues are included in such an important strategic document. Military-political dialogue and cooperation in civil-military training, cyber security and technical defence are encouraged (for example: the Diplomatic Institute partners on an annual basis with the Police Academy of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Romania “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” in the co-organisation of a training course on crisis management and response to natural disasters in the context of the Common Security and Defence Policy, held under the umbrella of the European Security College and Defence – Training structure of the European External Action Service).

Regarding cooperation between ministries of the interior, the importance of combating organised crime and providing assistance in managing natural disasters is traditionally reaffirmed.

The humanitarian dimension of relations also has a special place as an important element of mutual understanding and understanding between the two peoples. This can be achieved through enhanced cultural and educational exchange, media cooperation, development of ties between civil societies, and, in general, national diplomacy.

An important aspect of the humanitarian dimension is the cooperation among research and analytical centres of the two countries. For example, in September 2025, the Bulgarian Sofia Security Forum and the Romanian New Strategy Centre think tanks are co-organising an international conference on the topic “The EU Black Sea Strategy and Bulgarian-Romanian Cooperation on the Protection of Offshore Critical Infrastructure”. Such bilateral forums are becoming platforms for analysing hybrid and conventional threats in the Black Sea basin and jointly preparing expert recommendations, both for the governments of the two countries and for the military-political structures of the EU and NATO.

To summarise, the Declaration proposes a 5-pillar model of strategic partnership:

First, bilateral integration (in the areas of economy, infrastructure, energy, and also technology and innovation);

Second, coordinated actions in the EU (Schengen, enlargement towards the Western Balkans and Moldova, based on covered criteria and merits, support for community policies important for both countries, strengthening the European single market, support for green and digital transformation, and also the development of cyber capacity);

Third, regional interaction to achieve stability and security (in South-Eastern Europe, the Black Sea and the Danube). Bulgaria is interested, in tandem with Romania, in giving new impetus to the regional negotiation formats and initiatives of the South-Eastern Europe Cooperation Process and the Black Sea Economic Cooperation [in particular, implementation of projects in the blue economy of coastal regions, scientific and research activities for the protection of Black Sea ecosystems], the EU Danube Strategy, and the stated strategic potential and goals of the “Three Seas Initiative” to be used to build vertical transport, energy, and digital connectivity (north-south). From a geopolitical point of view, Bulgaria could be a gateway for Romania to the Mediterranean in coordination with Greece (bypassing the uncertainty of the Black Sea water corridor), and Romania could be a connecting bridge for Bulgaria to quickly reach Central and Western Europe (as an alternative transport corridor, which, for us, passes through Serbia).

Fourth, strengthening Euro-Atlantic collective defence and security (joint actions to strengthen the deterrent and defence potential of NATO’s eastern flank, adaptation to new threats, joint military structures, emphasis on countering hybrid threats - terrorism, internal radicalisation, cyber threats, disinformation), continued support for Ukraine’s resilience at the bilateral level and within NATO and the EU, support for Moldova’s European integration, its stabilisation in political and economic terms (example: the Diplomatic Institute to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Bulgaria is implementing a multi-year project under the Development Policy, to share institutional and expert capacity with the newly established Moldovan Diplomatic Institute at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs).

Due to the restrictions imposed by the Montreux Convention on the presence of naval forces of non-littoral Black Sea states (including limitations on duration of stay and total tonnage), a structural need has arisen to strengthen intra-regional cooperation within NATO among littoral Allies. The establishment of the trilateral mine countermeasure_task group with Turkey-Bulgaria-Romania, to carry out coordinated patrols, mine clearance operations, information exchange and maritime surveillance, is indicative in this regard. For Bulgaria and Romania, participation in the mine countermeasure group means achieving higher interoperability of their naval forces, interaction with the key regional state - Turkey, and contributing to strengthening NATO’s eastern flank in the context of the deteriorating strategic security environment in the Black Sea.

Fifth, global positioning and support for multilateralism, support for democracy, human rights, the rule of law within the UN system. In view of the advanced negotiations for membership in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, Sofia and Bucharest express mutual political support for their candidacies within international formats and engage in the exchange of expertise.

The Danube Strategy is a key structural document for cooperation of the EU countries geographically connected along the River Danube. The strategy integrates 12 Danube European countries into a common macro-region, similar to the Adriatic and Baltic macro-regions. Bulgarian-Romanian cooperation is of great importance for the practical implementation of the EU Danube Strategy, because the lower reaches of the Danube are critically important for river navigation, trade, and ecological connectivity between the countries of Central and Southeastern Europe. For the European Union, the strategy connects the Danube and Black Sea regions into a common geopolitical and geo-economic space.

Sofia and Bucharest take “Danube cooperation” seriously and responsibly. Within the framework of the bilateral political dialogue, projects are planned to support the socio-economic development of their adjacent Danube regions.

The Bulgarian-Romanian political tandem is working to transform the River Danube from a dividing border into a field of integration and shared regional governance in five main directions:

- Improving navigation (Fast Danube): joint Bulgarian-Romanian cooperation aimed at cleaning the riverbed in the common section of the River Danube to ensure safe river navigation for about 340 days a year, which will contribute to the activation of river freight transport;
- Infrastructure and transport connectivity: emphasis is placed on developing connectivity through the construction of bridges over the Danube, conducting feasibility studies for new connections, as well as modernising the existing infrastructure;
- Joint electricity production: the two countries plan to build shared hydropower capacities under the “Iron Gate” model, with a view to strengthening regional energy security;
- Environmental protection: through joint green initiatives (e.g., Green Fit for Danube), water monitoring and prevention of pollution from shipping and protection of the river ecosystem are planned;
- Disaster and emergency response: enhanced cooperation at political, institutional and operational level to respond to environmental risks and disasters in the Danube regions, and development of relevant mechanisms and procedures for joint management of environmental emergencies.

From what has been said up to now, a clear idea is formed about the dynamics of Bulgarian-Romanian relations and the good prospects for bilateral cooperation, which has grown into a strategic partnership. But there are also challenges, the overcoming of which is important in view of their future development. A number of analysts note the presence of hidden competition between Sofia and Bucharest regarding the extent of their participation in international supply chains, in the opportunities for the development of national industrial

capacity, in the creation of more favourable conditions for foreign investment in their economies, in the processing and transportation of larger cargo flows through their port intermodal infrastructure, and so on. In the initial stage, the competition between them manifested itself in relation to the level of their integration progress in NATO and the EU and their personnel and institutional positioning in the leading European and Euro-Atlantic structures.

The competitive nature of Bulgarian-Romanian relations has historical roots and will probably continue to manifest itself in various forms in the future. In the contemporary context, however, its potentially negative impact can be significantly reduced by strengthening intercultural interaction, placing the emphasis not on differences, but on the search for common ground in the folklore, traditions, and cultural heritage between the two peoples. Over the past two decades, a positive dynamic of active tourist exchange has been observed between the two countries, which creates a favourable environment for expanding interpersonal contacts, mutual understanding, and building ties beyond political and institutional levels. This contributes to the formation of a sustainable cultural and social basis for bilateral relations. The time has come to open cultural and information centres at the diplomatic missions in Sofia and Bucharest, which will become the institutional framework for the implementation of joint projects and programmes in the fields of science, education, culture, arts and sports for the benefit of mutual well-being and good neighbourliness. In the long term, this will guarantee the sustainability of the Bulgarian-Romanian strategic partnership.

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