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CONTENTS

POLITICAL PROCESS IN RUSSIA

- Boltenkova L.F., Alekhnovich S.O.** To the Question
of Continuity of the Russian Statehood 239
- Velikaya N.M.** Transformation of Local Self-Governance in Small
and Medium Cities of Russia Through the Eyes of the Expert Community 246
- Astvatsaturova M.A.** Ethnopolitical Notes from the Diary
of the North Caucasus Federal District 253

PROBLEMS OF EURASIAN AND POST-SOVIET COOPERATION

- Brusilovskiy D.A., Esipov I.I.** Two Worlds – Two Integrations:
The Specificity of Connection of Civilizations with Islamophobia..... 261
- Musaev O.R., Karshiev Sh.C.** Some Aspects of Strengthening International
Relations in Polyethnic States (On the Example of Uzbekistan)..... 272
- Shamarov P.V.** Russian Peacekeeping Model in the Post-Soviet Space 279

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND WORLD POLITICS

- Sardaryan G.T.** Reasons for the Crisis
of Christian Democracy in Western Europe..... 285
- Milka Malfait, Chernyavskiy S.I.** The Russia-EU Perspective:
National Security and Counterterrorism from a Different Angle..... 293
- Rustamova L.R.** Social and Humanitarian Cooperation
Between Russia and Germany in the Conditions Of Sanctions..... 304
- Dubrovina O.V., Salamov R.R.** Paradiplomacy
as a New Architecture of International Relations 311
- Haddad Mohannad** Strategies of Main Actors
of World Policy Regarding the Middle East and Modern Syria
(On the Example of the USA and the European Union)..... 316
- Jia Yuanpey** Experience, Prospects and Problems of Cooperation
Between China and Turkmenistan in the Field of Natural Gas 323
- Burda M.A., Horeva E.E., Larkina M.A., Belyaeva V.P.** National-State Identity
in Modern Europe in the Context of Migration and Political Processes..... 330
- Rodionova M.E.** Cooperation of Russia and Bulgaria:
from History to Modernity. Dynamics of Relations
in the Context of European Integration (On the 140th Anniversary
of Diplomatic Relations Between Russia and Bulgaria)..... 337

REVIEWS

- Slizovskiy D.E., Medvedev N.P.** Reflections on the Read 342

OUR AUTHORS..... 349

AUTHORS' GUIDELINES 351

COOPERATION OF RUSSIA AND BULGARIA: FROM HISTORY TO MODERNITY. DYNAMICS OF RELATIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION (on the 140th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Russia and Bulgaria)¹

The purpose of this article is to consider Bulgarian-Russian relations, taking into account transformations in the international system, economic aspects of cooperation with the account of the European sanctions and scientific prerequisites for further development. The article considers the issues of regional cooperation within the framework of the Organization for the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), it touches the spheres of tourism, education and energy in bilateral relations. The material is dedicated to the celebration of 140 years of diplomatic relations between the countries and a number of meetings on the eve.

Key words: Bulgaria, Russia, the European Union, the political environment, economic cooperation, the BSEC, energy, the spheres of science and education, tourism, the 140th anniversary of diplomatic relations.

Russia and Bulgaria have a long and rich history of relations. The two countries are united by a common history, a common cultural foundation, the Orthodox faith and the Slavic soul. Speaking at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum (SPIEF-2019), Bulgarian President R. Radev emphasized Russia's role in the history of Bulgaria's development: "Russia received its written language from Bulgaria. Both Christian faith and Church Slavonic language came to Russia from our lands. A millennium later, in 1878, Bulgaria received its freedom from Russia, for which thousands of Russian soldiers gave their lives.

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We, the Bulgarians, never forget it” [4]. The historical memory remains between the countries to this day: in 2019 the Immortal Regiment marched in more than 30 cities of Bulgaria, which, of course, the Russian side supports and appreciates.

July 7, 2019 marks 140 years since the first Russian Consul in Sofia Alexander Davydov presented his credentials to the Bulgarian Prince Alexander Battenberg, which is considered the beginning of diplomatic relations between the two countries. What is the basis for bilateral cooperation between the countries now?

Despite the complicated situation in Europe, the ongoing anti-Russian propaganda campaign, attempts to demonize Russia (aggravation of Russian-Ukrainian relations), Russian-Bulgarian relations are developing quite dynamically at the present stage. The political dialogue has recently received a positive development vector. The interest of the two countries in cooperation is indicated by a series of meetings not so long ago, starting from the official working visits of President of Bulgaria Rumen Radev and Prime Minister Boyko Borisov to Russia in May 2018, and in October 2018, the meeting of the heads of government of the two countries at the Asia – Europe Summit in Brussels; March 2019 was marked by the arrival of the Chairman of the Government of the Russian Federation D.A. Medvedev with an official visit to Bulgaria, within the framework of which a protocol on consultations between the foreign ministries of the two countries was signed; and finally, the SPIEF-2019 meeting of the heads of the countries marked an achievement of a number of agreements on the bilateral cooperation [2]. The dialogue at such a high level continues with the preparation of the autumn visit of Deputy Prime Minister and Minister Yekaterina Zakhariyeva to Moscow at the invitation of Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. Over the past couple of years, the Russian-Bulgarian forum has already been held three times.

As for the development of bilateral cooperation, first of all, of course, such areas as energy, trade and economics are considered the most interesting, but do not underestimate, for example, the tourist sector, labor migration, the role of Russian investments in Bulgarian real estate, as well as the development of new developing branches of IT industry, pharmaceutical industry, digital economy, as well as cultural and scientific cooperation between the two countries. From the economic point of view, there is a positive trend: the Bulgarian-Russian Intergovernmental Commission for Economic, Scientific and Technical Cooperation (the 17th regular session of which is due to take place in September 2019) continued its work, the working group on energy and real estate continues to function [1].

Russia is an important foreign economic partner of Bulgaria and primarily in the field of energy (energy sources, energy security). One of the most significant and difficult projects is the Turkish Stream gas pipeline, which initially opened up great opportunities for joint efforts. Important is the possible participation of ROSATOM in restarting the existing project for the construction of a nuclear power plant in Belem. It is also worth noting that in 2017-2018, Rosatom helped to extend the life of the fifth and sixth power units of the only Kozloduy nuclear power plant operating in the country for 30 years [2].

Both countries, Russia and Bulgaria, are striving for active trade and economic relations and a higher level of bilateral trade, as noted by Atanas Krystin, Bulgarian Ambassador to Russia, in a TASS interview [4]. Specialists from both sides are working to strengthen trade and economic ties, including within the framework of the Intergovernmental Commission for Economic, Scientific and Technical Cooperation (IGC), one of the main topics of which is the consideration of the issue of increasing bilateral trade, which after growth in 2017 by 24%, increased in 2018 by only 0.6%. One cannot but note the existing potential for an increase of export of Bulgarian products.

One of the key topics in bilateral cooperation is the tourism sector, which has reached the level of strategic partnership. More than half a million Russian citizens visited the resorts of Bulgaria in 2018. Russia ranks sixth in the number of foreign tourists visiting Bulgaria. A large number of children's camps, which are in high demand among Russians, are located in Bulgaria. More than 400 thousand Russian citizens purchased a second home in Bulgaria [4]. The prerequisites for the further expansion of the tourist exchanges remain in the focus of attention to this day, a topic raised in the framework of the Russian-Bulgarian tourism business forum held on March 5, 2019 in Sofia. And vice versa, in 2018, a record number of Bulgarians visited Russia: more than 60 thousand. Active work is being carried out both by the Ministry of Tourism of Bulgaria and the Federal Agency for Tourism of the Russian Federation on declaring 2020 and 2021 years of tourism in Bulgaria and Russia, respectively.

Numerous agreements signed between the secondary and higher educational institutions of both countries indicate the positive dynamics in the development of relations in the field of education and science. Government programs at the Russian universities provide unique opportunities for Bulgarian students to study there, as a result, in recent years we witness an increased interest in studying in Russia. About 600 Bulgarian students are currently studying in the Russian Federation. Starting from the next year, an increase in the number of scholarships for Bulgarian students is planned. Moreover, from September 2019, they will be entitled to hourly work, which will give them an opportunity to provide financial assistance for themselves. The growing interest of Russian youth in Bulgarian education is noted by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Bulgaria.

The significance of regional cooperation in the modern globalizing world remains on the agenda and is expressed in promoting and strengthening a positive interstate agenda, strengthening trust and mutual understanding between the peoples. One of the key roles in this direction is played by the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation, an intergovernmental (interstate organization) uniting 12 Black Sea and Southern Balkans countries, created with the aim of developing cooperation, peace, stability and prosperity in the Black Sea basin. In 1992, Russia and Turkey initiated the creation of a platform for international cooperation in the Black Sea region.

On June 25, 1992, the heads of state and government of eleven countries: Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Moldova, Romania, Russia, Turkey and Ukraine signed the Summit Declaration and the Bosphorus Statement giving birth to the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation in Istanbul [5]. It emerged as a unique and promising model of a multilateral political and economic initiative aimed at promoting interaction and harmony between member states, as well as ensuring peace, stability and prosperity, encouraging friendly and good neighborly relations in the Black Sea region. The organization has comprehensive coverage: from macroeconomic issues to individual industry areas. The areas of cooperation between the countries include agriculture, banking and finance, culture, customs, education, energy, environmental protection, the exchange of statistical and economic information, healthcare and pharmaceuticals, information and communication technologies, institutional updates and management, science and technology, tourism, trade, economic cooperation and others. A whole range of structures supporting its activities has been formed around the BSEC: the bank, the Parliamentary Assembly and the Business Council. A separate area is the development of ties with the business community. According to S. Lavrov “success of the work in the regional format depends on the compliance with a number of conditions such as openness, inclusiveness and a focus on harmonization and interconnection [2].” Promotion of the concept of “integration of integrations” was reinforced by V.V. Putin’s initiative to form a Greater Eurasian Partnership, which involves the integration of various integration processes unfolding in Europe and Asia.

BSEC has repeatedly become the only platform for a dialogue between the countries in the conditions when both political and diplomatic relations were interrupted. Since 1999, the organization has received the status of a regional international organization primarily engaged in the economic cooperation. And it is the economy that can and should become the main unifying factor. It should be noted that BSEC created the Black Sea Trade and Development Bank and in 2016, Russia voluntarily contributed to it one million US dollars [3]. The establishment of mutually beneficial practical cooperation in a number of areas that are most important for some countries (tourism, culture, information and communication, transport, trade, etc.) can and should contribute to the general improvement and strengthening of the situation in the Black Sea region. A number of existing old trade routes, energy and transport corridors and the creation of new ones may become one of the sources of global economic growth, a stronghold in the supply chains in the Eurasian space.

It is important for both countries to maintain a constructive dialogue based on the mutual consideration of interests, respect and trust; openness for the further deepening and expanding of the multifaceted interaction.

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