



The Cambridge Security Initiative

## UNPARALLELED BULGARIAN BACKLASH RE-DEFINING RUSSIA TIES

---

MARCH 2020

Dr. Victor Madeira

Bulgaria's Prosecutor General has [charged](#) three Russian military intelligence (GRU) officers with the attempted murder in 2015 of three Bulgarians, issuing [international](#) arrest warrants and extradition requests for the [Unit 29155](#) officers. The original investigation [stalled](#) in 2016 but Bulgarian authorities re-opened the case in 2018, following British diplomatic lobbying and increased intelligence-sharing after the Salisbury *novichok* attack. The charges are part of a series of unprecedented measures against Russia that are straining historically close ties. While these actions may also serve to deflect attention from allegations of political [corruption](#) as Bulgaria seeks new energy suppliers and [Euro](#) area membership, they also indicate that Russian hostility is causing Bulgaria to re-think its East–West balancing act.

Exposure last year of [GRU operations](#) in Bulgaria added to tensions between the President and the Prime Minister over matters of [national interest](#), including [Cabinet-level](#) corruption. Since September, Sofia has [charged](#) a former politician with spying for Russia; [banned](#) two prominent Russians—an oligarch and a former top intelligence officer—from Bulgaria for 10 years; [expelled](#) three Russian intelligence officers and denied entry to another one; and criminally charged three more. Bulgaria's activity coincides with energy and Euro area talks, so it is likely the recent burst of activity is partly intended to deflect attention from corruption scandals and partly to elicit Western support despite security concerns. However, the 2015 GRU assassination attempts showed Russia's tendency to view Bulgaria as its 'backyard,' and the contempt the action displayed for Bulgaria's sovereignty may have been a step too far.

Beyond a close cultural affinity, Russia applies leverage through the energy sector; until 2019, Russia supplied up to 98 per cent of Bulgarian liquid natural gas (LNG) needs. It is unsurprising, therefore, that Sofia has sought to improve national energy resilience, in part by signing a [contract](#) in June to buy 140 million m<sup>3</sup> of U.S. LNG, at a price 10 per cent lower than Russia offered. Bulgaria also has significant [shale gas](#) reserves that it once looked set to develop. However, a Russian [influence campaign](#) in 2012 quickly mobilised large [environmental protests](#), leading to a fracking ban that stopped Bulgaria from even [quantifying](#) its shale reserves.

### OUTLOOK

In response to Bulgarian actions, Russia has [expelled](#) a Bulgarian diplomat and intelligence officials are [accusing](#) the West—especially the U.S.—of being behind Bulgarian measures, to undermine Russia. Its Foreign Ministry has also publicly [attacked](#) Bulgaria's recent actions.

Bilateral tensions in the near term will remain high, especially as Sofia seeks to roll out fiscal and economic reforms needed to meet Euro area membership requirements by July 2020, when Bulgaria is due to join the Exchange Rate Mechanism (often described as the Euro area ‘[waiting room](#)’). The outcomes of on-going corruption probes focused on Bulgaria may also keep tension high, especially if they expose the extent of Russian malign influence to subvert the country.

Despite the short-term developments described above, Bulgaria will continue to seek good relations with both European/NATO partners and Russia in the longer term due to the realities of Bulgaria’s geo-economic situation.