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BULGARIA AS A MEDIATOR BETWEEN RUSSIA AND THE EU: WANTING IS ONE THING, BEING CAPABLE OF DOING IS ANOTHER

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"...yet it doesn't work this way: Wanting is one thing, being capable of doing is another, and doing is third and fourth"

N. Haytov, *Manly Times*

The relationship between Russia and the EU reached the lowest point in its history as a result of the attack against a former Russian double agent and his daughter with toxic poisoning substance in Salisbury. In a common declaration of the ministers of foreign affairs from 19 March, the EU countries explicitly condemned this hostile act declaring "unqualified solidarity with the UK and its support, including for the UK's efforts to bring those responsible for this crime to justice". In the next days, most of the Member states also initiated their own national measures as a reaction to the "Scripal" case,

mainly through expulsion of different number of Russian diplomats.

In this situation, Bulgarian politicians occupying some of the highest posts in the country dare to recommend that Bulgaria plays the role of a mediator. The basic argument behind this proposal is the trouble-free dialogue with Russia, which is an issue for the Western politicians and diplomats, while for us it is just a "givenness", as the Bulgarian Vice President declared on 30 March 2018.

The adequacy of the claim that the Bulgarian country could play a mediator's role, however, lies on at least three preliminary assumption that are quite problematic. Firstly, the reactions to the diplomatic crises of Russia and/or the EU stipulates the immediate search of a mediator. In other words, at least one of the two parties has already demonstrated its will to initiate constructive



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dialogue. Secondly, the special relationship between a EU country with a third country, which is also a very influential one from a global perspective, are interpreted positively from the other Member countries. Thirdly, "this special relationship" is of such nature, that it provides sufficient proof for the ability of the EU country - Bulgaria, in this case - to play the role of a mediator in the relations between Russia and the European Union.

The evolvement of the international crisis is currently heading to a direction opposite to the search for dialogue and mediation. The process of extrapolation and expulsion of senior diplomats from the EU and most of the Member states continues. At the same time, besides the pay-bac responses - expulsion of Western diplomats - Russia blamed the United Kingdom for "provocative actions", and on 30 March spread information for the conduction of a military training flight (for the first time after the collapse of the USSR) through the North Pole to the North American coasts. This situation does not provide sufficient proof for the presence of a strong will to seek dialogue on behalf any of the two sides.

On the other hand, even if a mutual search for dialogue was present, the special relations between a Member state and a third country with a strong international influence, would not necessarily serve as a testimonial for a reliable partnership and respectively, mediation within the EU. The basic argument behind the spectacular denial of the British application for membership in the European Economic Community in 1963, was namely, the special relationship between the UK and the USA. Back then, the French President de Gaulle declared that due to its strong strategic dependence on Washington, Britain would play the role of an American "Trojan horse", whose aim would be to upset the European integration. The other countries indeed resented the French veto but this resentment was dictated not by its content, but by its form - a

unilateral French decision. In the more recent history of the EU, the close relationship between Poland and the US is being viewed as a potential risk to the integrity of the foreign policy of the Union. This commitment to Washington is an important argument, although not the only one, for the difficulties in the interaction between Warsaw and Brussels during the pre-accession preparation of Poland. Moreover, some of the other Member States of the Community, especially France, share serious concerns that not only Poland, but also the other acceding countries, are too dependent on the US and can act as "Trojan horses" of the United States within the EU. And in these cases the United States was a strategic ally to the countries of the Union, whereas the situation with Russia is not same, but on the contrary - it is currently considered a hostile to the Union country conducting deliberately aggressive policy targeted at undermining the integrity of the EU.

In other words, from a historical point of view, the special relations with the US have been considered unreliable dependencies. The Bulgarian situation can be viewed as an example illustrating this type of dependence, which is a logical consequence of a Russian foreign policy systematically and persistently followed during the last centuries. Currently, this dependence is at the same time economic, political and strategic, but above all, it is a mentality dependence. Namely as a result of the latter, this special Bulgarian-Russian relationship (of dependence) is a fact, which traditionally has the power of a natural law. As one of the founders of contemporary Bulgaria P. Karavelov wrote - "There are truths so obvious, that they need no proof - the summer is hot, the winter is cold, the sun is shining during the day, the moon at night, Bulgarians should always be grateful to the Russians, Russia is the natural patron of Bulgaria". During the communist times the Bulgarian-Soviet friendship was "like the sun and the air for every human being".

And after the rejection of the communist rule the Bulgarian-Russian relationship remained of "vital" importance to Bulgaria for many Bulgarian politicians. This naturally unquestionable Bulgarian-Russian intimacy was clearly demonstrated at the visit of the Russian Patriarch on 3 March this year, when the Vice President of Bulgaria welcomed him with "proskineza" (a special ritual for greeting a senior dignitary with a low bow), and subsequently, and quite logically, the Patriarch gave an admonishing speech to the Bulgarian President on the standards of formulating and demonstrating the Bulgarian gratitude to Russia.

In this situation, the claim for playing the mediator's role does not seem very adequate. Its prematurity with an accent on the Bulgarian-Russian close relationship, in fact leads towards the opposite to the desired direction, underlining the inability of the Bulgarian country to cope with the role. Moreover, this claim might have unpredictable negative consequences on the image of the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU. It draws attention to a traditional Bulgarian problem, which cannot be apprehended as a problem and therefore cannot be overcome, exactly because it is "traditional". In the meantime it has already turned into a EU problem, because it is clearly visible from the outside - Bulgaria's vulnerability to Russian influence (the "Trojan horse of Russia in the EU") - and the resulting potential risks to the security of the Union.