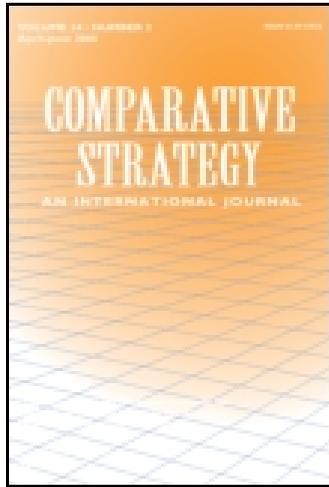


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NATO's Mafia Ally: The Strategic Consequences of Bulgarian Corruption

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By a number of accounts, NATO's membership expansion has been viewed favorably, with many analysts pointing to the positive impact NATO's enlargement has on the democratic development of civil-military relations across Central and Eastern Europe. Within this context, Mosès Naím's recent essay in Foreign Affairs was especially striking due to his piercing criticism of Bulgaria due to its significant problems with internal domestic corruption. We examine the potential impact of a Bulgarian mafia-oriented society on NATO from three perspectives, which include assessments of Bulgaria's military, its military capabilities—including its recent weapons purchases—as well as its willingness and ability to participate in NATO's major operations. In our view, these measures provide at least a partial assessment of Bulgaria's role within the alliance in an era that parallels claims of widespread corruption. The findings suggest that Bulgaria's corruption does have some impact on its ability to contribute to NATO's major alliance objectives, which apart from the deleterious impact on Bulgaria, also has broader implications for NATO's ongoing interest in membership expansion.

Introduction

Despite the predictions of realist scholars after the Soviet Union's collapse, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) continues to evolve to meet new security challenges. NATO operations in Afghanistan, Libya, the Indian Ocean, and Kosovo, as well as NATO's expanding strategic concept with an array of partners, all indicate that its members have created an alliance that is more flexible and global in orientation.¹ One element of NATO's post-Cold War change has been its membership expansion, which has now occurred in three rounds, producing twelve additional members. NATO experts, however, have devoted little scholarly attention to NATO's seven Prague Summit members.² Thus, Mosès Naím's recent essay in *Foreign Affairs* was especially striking due to its piercing criticism of Bulgaria, one of NATO's newest allies. In his view Bulgaria qualifies as a "mafia state" due to significant problems associated with internal domestic corruption.³ Indeed, the 2013 collapse of the Bulgarian government, coupled with widespread political protests across the country and a failed assassination attempt on a political party leader, has only fed into Naím's general claims of Bulgaria's corruption.

By a number of accounts, NATO's membership expansion has been viewed favorably, with many analysts pointing to the positive impact NATO enlargement has on the democratic development of civil-military relations across Central and Eastern Europe. Many of the NATO allies have also made significant defense reforms, and have found ways to contribute to the alliance's most critical operations.⁴ Perhaps due in part to this record, NATO remains committed to membership expansion, which was demonstrated at NATO's most recent summits in Lisbon and Chicago. Nonetheless, a mafia-oriented society contrasts sharply

with the stated goals of NATO's membership standards established in the 1995 *Study on Enlargement*, which set the groundwork for future membership expansion rounds.⁵ Moreover, NATO is an organization founded in part on the principle of protecting democracy, and today works to advance democratic development and human rights across its various missions.⁶ Thus, within this context, Naïm's charges against Bulgaria raise questions about how this corruption may impact its ability to contribute to the alliance, and more broadly raises policy concerns over the wisdom of future expansion decisions. This article addresses these issues, and also speaks to the broader issue of future NATO expansion and the potential risk of inviting an ally with precarious domestic political practices into the alliance.

We approach the potential impact of a Bulgarian mafia-oriented society on NATO from three perspectives, which include assessments of Bulgaria's military, its military capabilities—including its recent weapons purchases—as well as its willingness and ability to contribute to NATO's major operations. In our view, these measures provide at least a partial assessment of Bulgaria's role within the alliance in an era that parallels claims of widespread corruption. We begin with a short history of Bulgaria's effort to join and conform to NATO's standards, including some assessment of Naïm's arguments, and then follow with an analysis of these variables to determine the impact of Bulgarian corruption on its ability to contribute to NATO's major alliance objectives.

Preparing for Admission to NATO

Bulgaria first interacted significantly with NATO in early 1994, when it became a member of NATO's Partnership for Peace program. Although Bulgaria entered into this program voluntarily, it still had many economic and political problems to overcome before becoming more attractive to the NATO allies.⁷ Among its internal challenges, the newly democratic state still had strong ties to its communist past. After the Soviet Union fell, the Bulgarian Socialist Party held power until the late 1990s and still continued to purchase tanks and aircraft from Russia as late as 1995.⁸ In addition, Bulgaria suffered from poor economic decisions and systemic corruption, which plunged the country into an economic depression.⁹ After being defeated at the polls in 1997, Communist Party political and military elites created an emerging mafia, which placed pressure on farmers and forced the sale of grain for profit rather than domestic consumption.¹⁰ However, because of the economic collapse and ongoing interest in NATO membership in the region, the International Monetary Fund gave Bulgaria a loan with the condition of setting up a currency board to provide new fiscal oversight of the country. The new Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) government, for its part, made considerable efforts to move away from the corruption of the former socialist government by privatizing state assets, cracking down on mafia conglomerates and protection rackets, and creating a deregulated market in an attempt to sever the ties between the state and the economy.¹¹

Given that Bulgaria was never a serious contender for full membership at NATO's 1997 Madrid Summit, it came as no surprise when Sofia's bid for membership was turned down. However, after the summit Bulgaria sought to make up for lost time and began the process of implementing necessary changes. A new foreign policy focus on European Union and NATO membership prompted the creation of new initiatives aimed at increasing its tolerance of ethnic minorities.¹² By early 1999, a heightened tolerance of Turkish and other minorities was taking effect, and relations with Turkey and Macedonia had also improved.¹³ Along with these political reforms, Bulgaria also increased its regional security coordination, participated in a regional free-trade initiative, and improved its cooperation among Black Sea states on environmental issues.¹⁴

In 1999 Bulgaria also faced another test with NATO, as the alliance contended with the crisis in Kosovo. Overall, Bulgaria took a cautious approach by avoiding direct participation in the Kosovo conflict. Bulgarian leaders did not immediately respond to NATO's request for assistance, turning to the National Assembly for a resolution before allowing NATO planes into Bulgarian airspace during the crisis.¹⁵ On the other hand, Bulgaria showed considerable faith in the alliance by refusing Russian aircraft the same request. This move was significant given Bulgaria's history of close cooperation with Russia even after the Soviet Union's fall, coupled with ongoing Russian opposition to Bulgarian membership in NATO.¹⁶

Along with Bulgaria's political reforms, in the 1990s it also instituted a number of democratic civil-military reforms. In 1998 the Bulgarian parliament approved a new Concept for National Security, one that emphasized control over the military by the Council of Ministers rather than its previous autonomous governance structure. In 1999, a new Military Doctrine was approved, which crafted a security and defense policy based on three pillars: defense reform intended to develop Bulgarian capabilities, reform in preparation for integration into NATO, and increased cooperation with the allies and regional partners to ensure security.¹⁷ Though these reforms proved to be challenging domestically, Bulgaria's bid for NATO membership received a major boost when the United States signaled its desire to have a major membership expansion in June 2001. When the Bush administration shifted its foreign policy focus to the defeat of terrorism, Bulgarian-U.S. relations improved considerably.¹⁸ Bulgaria allowed Americans to use its airspace after the September 11, 2001, terrorist strikes and committed to spending almost 3 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on defense, showing solidarity with the American cause and strengthening its prospects for accession.¹⁹ This new security climate, coupled with Bulgaria's ongoing structural reforms, its efforts to overcome corruption, and the development of an improved market economy resulted in Bulgaria's full membership invitation at NATO's Prague Summit in 2002. It became an official member of the alliance in 2004.

Despite Bulgaria's membership in NATO, its critics, including governmental opposition voices in 2013, continue to claim that the country is plagued by corruption. Certainly, by some measures, such claims have merit. Despite some improvements since 2008, Transparency International, a non-governmental organization that monitors and measures international corruption levels, continued to give Bulgaria rather marginal grades in 2012.²⁰ While not as corrupt as some of its neighbors, Bulgaria measures nowhere close to the standards of many of NATO's Western European members. In addition, the World Bank, which also measures a state's internal democratic governance practices, indicates that Bulgaria achieved its best, or "most democratic," score in 2004—its first year as a full member of NATO—and has declined since that time. Although the World Bank finds that Bulgaria has improved slightly in its attempts to control corruption since 2008, and ranks slightly better than its neighbors Romania and Albania during this time frame, its scores are still quite low, especially considering that Albania is considered by some as the most corrupt country in Europe.²¹

In 2013, public protests across Bulgaria indicated widespread concern with governmental corruption. The protests began due to high electricity prices and worsening living standards believed to be the result of high-level corruption, seemingly verified by a series of corruption scandals involving high-ranking government leaders. On February 20, 2013, after a clash between protestors and police ended violently, Prime Minister Boiko Borisov submitted his government's resignation and further stated that his party would not take place in the interim government assembled until new elections were held.²² The Parliament accepted the resignation of the prime minister and his Cabinet almost unanimously,

reflecting citizens' perceptions and opposition party accusations of corruption and poor economic management in the government.²³ Borisov's resignation, however, did not pacify Bulgarian citizens as protests also spread to at least 25 cities as well as outside the presidential administration building.²⁴

In the month preceding the government's collapse, the Bulgarian public also experienced an ostensible assassination attempt on Ahmed Dogan, the leader of Bulgaria's Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) Party, an ethnic Turkish party, which has also been accused of endemic corruption. Some allege, however, that the assassination attempt was staged in an effort to generate sympathy for the MRF.²⁵ Whatever the reasons for this incident, the journalistic coverage that followed certainly feeds into the perception that Bulgaria suffers on many fronts from corruption. Thus, whether measured by international organizations, domestic public opinion, or journalistic coverage, Bulgaria continues to be plagued by the appearance of political corruption. How these very recent developments and Bulgaria's internal challenges impact its involvement in NATO, however, deserves additional analysis, especially in light of NATO's ongoing interest in membership expansion.

Military Reforms and Force Modernization

One measure of Bulgaria's ability to contribute to NATO revolves around the capabilities of its armed forces. With 31,315 active military personnel, Bulgaria, a country of just over seven million people, maintains one of the largest militaries in the Balkans. Its army holds 16,304 troops; the navy is assigned 3,471 people; the air force maintains 6,706 troops; and the remaining 4,834 are members of the Central Staff. For comparative purposes, for every 10,000 people, Bulgaria supports 44 active-duty troops, while the country's larger Balkan neighbor, Romania, supports only 30 troops.²⁶ Size, however, is not necessarily a good indicator of a military's ability to project force, and so despite its size, Bulgaria has faced challenges with regard to maintaining the quality and capabilities of its troops. This problem has plagued Bulgaria and has led to changes in its defense policy that have become increasingly evident over time. These changes affect the manning, structuring, and budgeting of the Ministry of Defense and its subordinate components. Bulgaria has sought to reduce and reorganize its force size, reorient armed forces expenditures, streamline organizational structures, and reduce the fixed defense budget, while increasing the battle readiness of individual troops.

Since the Soviet Union's collapse, Bulgaria has gradually implemented force size reductions to levels that meet the country's modern defense and foreign policy initiatives. Bulgaria's most recent *White Paper on Defense*, adopted by the National Assembly in 2010, states that the armed forces personnel will be reduced from 44,100 to 37,000, a 16 percent reduction between 2010 and 2014. The army will bear the brunt of this sequestration by reducing its size by 7,000 personnel, which will include 5,700 active-duty troops and 1,300 civilian personnel. Of the 37,000 active personnel planned for the 2014 force, 73 percent will be military on active duty and 19 percent will be civilian personnel. The remaining 8 percent will be a force of 3,000 reserve troops that will be assembled during this period of restructuring.²⁷ With its new goals in place, these reductions are moving forward. In early 2013, the Defense Ministry reported that 3,063 positions were eliminated in 2012 and another 800 were planned for elimination in 2013. At this time, Defense Minister Anyu Angelov noted that the military was on schedule with its force size reduction efforts.²⁸

To accommodate the personnel reduction, the *White Paper* also called for revision of command structures of the branches of the armed forces. The army, being by far the largest branch, will see the most thorough alterations. In this branch, one command, five brigades,

five regiments, four self-dependent battalions, and two training grounds will be reorganized into one command, two brigades, four battalions, and four self-dependent battalions, with one training ground. The much smaller air force and navy will also be heavily impacted, with the air force having two air force bases rather than the current four. The navy will also shrink from having two naval commands to one.²⁹

As its number of military personnel has been cut, other efforts have been made to increase the quality and readiness of its troops through training exercises with current NATO and other regional allies, especially the United States. For example, in July 2012, Bulgaria hosted a multinational military training event at its Novo Selo Training Area, which incorporated American, Macedonian, Ukrainian, and Serbian Troops. The operations included parachute jumps by Bulgarian special forces and U.S. Marines, the landing of Cougar helicopters to secure ground for the subsequent landing of an American tanker aircraft, and the refueling of the helicopters. The goals of this training exercise were to improve interoperability of Bulgarian and U.S. forces in peacekeeping and counterterrorism operations.³⁰

American troops have also been training in Bulgaria since 2004. In 2008, the United States gave Bulgaria \$90 million to fund new facilities and equipment for joint training operations.³¹ Moreover, in his address to Bulgarian troops at the United States Joint Multinational Readiness Centre in Hohenfels, Germany in October 2012, Bulgarian President Rosen Plevneliev stated that 1,700 Bulgarian troops had trained at American training centers in 2012, up from 600 in 2011.³²

With at least three scheduled multinational exercises per year, Bulgaria is a leading navy on the Black Sea. Bulgaria has participated in Seabreeze, an annual naval drill involving NATO members from Belgium, Canada, Germany, Norway, Turkey, the United States, and others including Algeria, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Israel, Moldova, Sweden, and the United Arab Emirates, for the last fifteen years.³³ Bulgaria is also a member of the Black Sea Naval Force. This group of all countries bordering the Black Sea conducts biannual exercises including defense drills, the boarding of suspicious civilian ships to prevent human trafficking, and interdiction efforts to prevent the smuggling of arms and dangerous substances. Bulgaria also practices rescues at sea. These operations all occur in the Black Sea.³⁴ Thus, by these measures, Bulgaria continues to have an active role in the region with extensive interaction with the allies and regional partners.

With regard to internal corruption issues, the military has faced fewer accusations of rampant corruption than have such civilian authorities as the prime minister, the finance minister, and the Electricity Regulation Authority.³⁵ This, however, is not to say that the military has been devoid of corruption charges. With the resignation of the Cabinet in February 2013, then Defense Minister Anyu Angelov was replaced by the caretaker Defense Minister, Todor Tagarev.³⁶ Interim Minister Tagarev has stated that a priority of his administration would be developing a “map of corruption risks” as well as short- and long-term plans to deal with these risks, all of which suggests a systemic corruption challenge that has impacted the military.³⁷ Some of the problems with corruption were highlighted in the 2010 *White Paper*, which noted that Bulgaria’s failure to fulfill the NATO-guided Armed Forces Force Goals by 2010 was due to corrupt defense spending practices, seriously harming the modernization and interoperability of the Bulgarian Army.³⁸ Another 2011 report published by the Bulgarian Defense Ministry noted an “endemic corruption problem,” and pointed to the need for heightened transparency in all areas of defense procurement.³⁹ Critics maintain that, at the time, defense expenditures received little oversight, resulting in wide independence for the defense ministers who were later charged with the misuse of funds and extravagant spending practices.⁴⁰ Thus, though important and commendable

reforms have been implemented, corruption is having some impact on Bulgaria's ability to assist and cooperate with the allies, due to the presence of fraud in defense spending.

Military Capabilities

Since becoming a NATO ally, Bulgaria has made a number of significant weapons purchases, which arguably provide new, though limited, capabilities to project force. Although efforts to modernize and restructure the military began much earlier, major purchases to that end did not start until 2005, when the country embarked upon a mission to modernize its outdated Soviet weaponry. In that year Bulgaria signed a contract with EUROCOPTOR for 12 Cougar helicopters and 6 Panther helicopters.⁴¹ Two years later the government signed a contract for two second-hand frigates and one mine-hunter ship from Belgium. In 2009, Bulgaria also signed a contract for two more middle-class helicopters and two smaller helicopters. In 2010, however, Bulgaria revised its original contract with EUROCOPTER for three Panther helicopters instead of six. In 2012 it also planned to purchase eight or nine fighter jets.⁴² As of 2012, three operational naval helicopters, 18 air force attack helicopters, 17 air force transport helicopters, with 18 of these helicopters being brought up to NATO standards, and 62 additional operational aircraft with five up to NATO standards.⁴³ Additionally, only one Bulgarian ship has received NATO's Maritime Evaluation Programme (MAREVAL) certification.⁴⁴

Apart from these small but noteworthy military purchases, Bulgaria was also part of a joint effort to purchase three transport planes expressly for NATO use, which squares well with the general push for Smart Defense proposals that have been actively promoted by NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, and were highlighted at NATO's 2012 Chicago Summit.⁴⁵ One of 12 participating countries, Bulgaria paid for a portion of one of the C-17 Globemasters, which operates out of an air base in Hungary. The planes were purchased to strengthen the alliance's Strategic Airlift Capability, a critical need for use in NATO's operation in Afghanistan in particular. The aircrafts were delivered in 2009 and are manned by multinational aircrews.⁴⁶ In short, although not all of Bulgaria's forces and equipment are compatible with NATO's, they are making some headway with some new force capabilities evident.⁴⁷

Along with its modest improvements in force capabilities, for many years Bulgaria has maintained defense expenditures above the 2 percent GDP standard that the NATO allies are requested to meet, though their defense spending trends have experienced significant decline since 2007. In 2008 and 2009, defense spending dropped to 2 percent of GDP exactly before dropping to 1.9 percent in 2010 and 1.5 percent in 2011 and 2012.⁴⁸ Part of these decreases in defense expenditures can be attributed to reduction in force size, which arguably leads to a more professional and modern force structure. Much of the decrease, however, is due to the generally poor economic climate, with the greatest impact felt in late 2009 and 2010. Defense is still a priority, however, as governmental leaders have set a minimum defense spending level at 1.5 percent of GDP.⁴⁹ At the same time, such rapid expenditure decreases, which have similarly been witnessed across all of the allies, is a cause for considerable concern.

To bring Bulgaria in line with the best defense management practices among its allies, the Ministry of Defense is looking to reorganize expenditures. The Ministry aims to proportion expenses in the areas of personnel, operation and maintenance, and capital expenditure to the percentage ratio of 60:25:15 from the 2010 ratio of 75:24:1 by 2014. Because of the drastic drop in armed forces personnel, even with a 15 percent cut in funding, the per capita funding on military personnel will rise from circa 15,000 euro to

22,300 euro. With a rise in capital investment as well as in operational and maintenance funds, Bulgaria hopes to field a better equipped and more efficient military, but will likely see few improvements in the short term in weapons capabilities.⁵⁰

Cooperation with Allies and NATO Operations

Despite the evidence indicating the presence of corruption as well as the challenges associated with Europe's declining financial conditions, as a NATO ally Bulgaria has shown a willingness to participate in alliance operations, as well as in some operations lead by the European Union. That said, their contributions are generally only a small portion of the combined forces, and they have not occupied leadership roles in these operations. In the mission that has dominated much of NATO's life since 2003, and right near the onset of Bulgaria's full membership in NATO, Bulgaria has actively participated in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan since 2002, rotating troops in and out of the country. Its highest troop deployment was approximately 600 forces in 2010. In 2013, Bulgaria had 407 troops deployed in Kabul and Kandahar, dangerous provinces for sure, but were not permitted to participate in frontline combat operations, and instead guard the internal perimeter of airports in the cities. The Defense Minister in 2009, Nicolay Mladenov, suggested consolidating troops in Kandahar to reduce the costs of the mission, but his successor, Anyu Angelov, rejected this idea.⁵¹ Bulgaria also kept a very small contingent of medical personnel in the town of Herat.⁵² A Bulgarian general acknowledged the lessened degree of danger the Bulgarian contingent experienced, calling the risk "indirect," stating that the Bulgarian company did not come into contact with the Afghani population outside of that limited zone.⁵³ Additionally, Bulgaria sustained no casualties in Operation Enduring Freedom, one of the very few NATO countries to do so.⁵⁴ This general unwillingness to commit more broadly to combat operations caused Bulgaria to be identified by some analysts, including former Supreme Allied Commander Europe John Craddock, as one of several allies that could contribute well beyond its current levels.⁵⁵ Bulgarian forces also contributed to training units of the Afghan Security Forces. After 2014, Bulgaria plans to participate in funding the Afghan Security Forces.⁵⁶

Although Afghanistan remains its main NATO deployment, Bulgaria has kept a small number of peacekeepers in the Kosovo Protection Force (KFOR). In 2009, Bulgaria provided 47 troops. As NATO's presence has been reduced, so too has Bulgaria's deployment, with only 10 to 12 peacekeepers over the last two years.⁵⁷

Much like its limited presence in KFOR, Bulgarian participation in NATO's Mediterranean operation, Active Endeavor, is considerably small. From 2005–2009, Bulgaria sent one frigate annually on a month-long deployment, which normally entails approximately 150 crew members.⁵⁸ This same frigate has also assisted in the United Nations's operation in Lebanon.⁵⁹

Bulgaria's contribution to NATO's Libyan operation, Unified Protector, was similarly small. One frigate carrying a crew of around 160 people ran two patrol missions in the Mediterranean. Five Bulgarian officers were sent to the command headquarters, and two medical crews were offered to possible EU medical areas, but were not sent.⁶⁰ Defense Minister Anyu Angelov stated that their frigate, the *Drazki*, would remain in international waters, never entering Libyan naval territory, and further commented that the crew of the *Drazki* would not "take part in direct combat action, except in possible self-defence," assuring the Bulgarian people that the ship would "not come under fire."⁶¹ This was Bulgaria's only military contribution to Unified Protector, which also indicated that it did not have the capability to send the necessary fighter jets.⁶² If one accepts the claims of

aircraft limitations, further doubt is cast upon the level of military modernization that exists in their air force, especially given NATO's and the United States' repeated calls for additional military assistance from any of the allies.

Beyond its activities in NATO operations, Bulgaria has demonstrated a willingness to assist the United States in military operations. Bulgaria provided forces to the U.S. war in Iraq, which at its highest reached 480 troops. Though the deployment signaled a willingness to work with the United States in a controversial and dangerous military operation, analysts did point to language deficiencies among some Bulgarian officers, which more broadly speaks to Bulgaria's challenges in meeting NATO's interoperability standards.⁶³ These forces participated in patrols south of Baghdad.⁶⁴ In early 2005, the Parliament voted 110 to 53 to end participation by the year's end, with high levels of public support for the withdrawal after Bulgaria suffered its tenth casualty. Three more Bulgarian soldiers died before the troops were extracted.⁶⁵ In 2006, the Parliament voted overwhelmingly to return troops to Iraq, but not for combat duties. The 154-person contingent instead guarded a refugee camp north of Baghdad and left Iraq in December of 2008 with no additional casualties.⁶⁶ In addition to its contributions to the military operation in Iraq, Bulgaria also provides a very small peacekeeping presence in Lebanon, Bosnia, and Georgia, and one officer to the EU Operation Atalanta/EUNAVFOR to prevent piracy off the coast of Somalia.⁶⁷

Outside of actual military and peacekeeping engagements, Bulgaria's Ministry of Defense has initiated a number of diplomatic steps to strengthen ties outside of the NATO allies. After achieving the main national security objective of becoming a NATO member in 2004, Bulgaria has broadened its military ties around the globe. In 2004, Bulgarian Defense Minister Vlado Buckovski met with Macedonian officials to discuss joint military endeavors.⁶⁸ In 2009, Chinese and Bulgarian officials met in Sofia, releasing a statement hoping that both sides would further enhance military cooperation.⁶⁹ In September 2012, Defense Minister Angelov also signed an agreement with Qatar on military cooperation in the areas of military training, technology, and space sciences.⁷⁰ In January 2013, Angelov held discussions about such a defense cooperation accord with Vietnamese Ambassador Le Duc Luu.⁷¹ Thus, Bulgaria has indeed expanded its foreign policy and defense outreach across the global.

Conclusion

It seems clear that corruption in government, or at minimum, the perception of corruption, continues to plague Bulgaria. Its recent changes in leadership, a previous defense minister's association with corruption, and more specifically, Bulgaria's own 2010 *White Paper*—which noted the impact of corruption in defense spending practices—all may impact Bulgaria's relationship with NATO. In this respect, Naím's assertions and Bulgaria's reputation as a mafia state have broader strategic consequences beyond Bulgaria's own domestic political stability, which will limit Bulgarian foreign policy and its ability to contribute to NATO's security objectives.

To be sure, as established above, Bulgaria has made important advances through meaningful defense and military personnel reforms. It has also taken steps toward increased interoperability according to NATO standards. In addition, Bulgaria cultivates partnerships with NATO allies in training operations and continues to be active in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, Bulgaria's operational contributions to the alliance have been relatively minor; and as witnessed in Operation Unified Protector, its aircraft are not yet able to collaborate in NATO air operations. While one would not necessarily anticipate large-scale contributions to the alliance from Bulgaria due to the absence of modernized military capabilities, it is

still notable how little Bulgaria is able to provide to the alliance. Moreover, one of the previously noted best benefits of NATO enlargement across Central and Eastern Europe is the promotion and stabilization of democracy in its newest members, which is something that Bulgaria is still struggling to achieve. These findings suggest broader policy implications beyond Bulgaria's ability to contribute to NATO. As NATO continues to discuss future membership, the alliance must ensure that aspiring members address the sorts of political challenges faced by Bulgaria as it continues to struggle in its democratic transition.

Bulgaria, like other NATO allies, also continues to suffer from steady declines in defense spending. With much of Europe suffering from economic austerity, Bulgaria is likely to continue this pattern of meager defense spending, which means less equipment that is interoperable with NATO and fewer personnel who are trained according to NATO standards. Having a reputation of widespread mafia practices, coupled with governmental instability, is also likely to discourage foreign direct investment, which will result in less economic growth and fewer governmental resources that could be devoted to meaningful defense spending. In this respect, apart from the challenges faced by Bulgarian citizens who seek a stable, democratic state, our findings suggest that Bulgaria's "mafia" state does impact the NATO allies and Bulgaria's ability to be a constructive member of the alliance.

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