

Bulgaria's Experience in Peace Support Operations

This paper is trying to examine rather the Bulgarian initial inexperience and step-by-step involvement in Peace Support Operations during the first decade after the end of the Cold War. It is based mainly on some new archival material and official analyses as well as on the latest political, sociological and military research in the country. A study of the oral testimonies of the participants in the described events and more thorough critical examination of our modest experience in the matter have just started.

Under the conditions of the bi-polar post-war confrontation Bulgaria strictly follows the political line of the Soviet Bloc determined by Kremlin. This position is observed in regard of the UN peacekeeping operations, too. In the Cold War years no Bulgarian military units or observers directly participate in any armed conflict nor are they included in any UN missions. During the Korean War in March 1952 a group of Bulgarian army physicians (26 people) is sent to the province of Northern Pyongyang. Even the members of the group management themselves are not quite aware whether it should be treated as a military unit or a humanitarian mission under the Bulgarian Red Cross¹.

A Bulgarian participation in UN military forces is more seriously discussed for a first time by the Bulgarian authorities immediately after the flare-up of the Cyprus Crisis (December 1963 - March 1964). In March 1964 Canada and some Scandinavian countries put forward for discussion the creation of permanent UN armed forces. The Bulgarian position is strictly defined by the Soviets' negative reaction to the proposal, which is treated by them as a sequence of the US idea to form "international police forces"². The matter is discussed at a special session of the Bulgarian Communist Party Politburo in December 1964, chaired by *Todor Zhivkov*.³ Within the boundaries of the intelligence information exchange among the Warsaw Pact Secret Services in 1965 strictly confidential information is received in Sofia by the State Security Council of Rumania regarding "the behind the scenes Western countries' preparation of UN peacekeeping forces"⁴. In the beginning of 1967 Bulgaria officially supports a Soviet Memorandum which keeps on maintaining die Kremlin's previous attitude in regard of die UN peacekeeping operations⁵.

A radical change in die Bulgarian Government's attitude toward this problem is only observed after die 1967 Middle East War. In July 1970 an expert report regarding the possibility to get Bulgarian contingents ready "for UN needs" is made out by die Ministry of Foreign Affairs⁶. At die culmination of the next Israeli-Arab war on October 26 1973 Egypt addresses die UN Security Council with an urgent appeal for support. As early as die next day at an extraordinary session die Bulgarian political leadership for die first time in die country's post-war history adopts a principal resolution that a positive answer is to be given to "a possible proposal for Bulgarian participation with armed forces in die UN contingent for securing control of cease-fire in die Middle East"⁷. An invitation of such kind for Bulgarian

¹ Central State Archive /CDA/, Sofia, Fond 1b, Record 24, File 134, p. 1-5.

² Kronlund Jan, Proposal by Canada on a Permanent UN Stand-By Force and Finnish Reaction to it - Peacekeeping 1815 to Today [1995], p. 393-402.

³ CDA, Fond 1b, Record 6, File 5708, p. 1-25.

⁴ Archive of the Ministry of the Interior /AMVRJ, Sofia, Fond 1, Record 10, File 338, p. 64-67

⁵ CDA, Fond 1b, Record 6, File 6626, p. 1-14.

⁶ Diplomatic Archive, Ministry of Foreign Affairs /DAMVNR/, Sofia, Record 21p, File 453, p. 1-3.

⁷ CDA, Fond 1b, Record 35, File 4426, p. 1.

participation in the UN mission in the Middle East/UNEF II/ is not subsequently made. At the end of its rule, in September 1988, the Zhivkov regime replies in positive as well to an application of SWAPO for including Bulgarian representatives in the UN mission in support to the realisation of Namibia's period transition toward full independence/UNTAG/⁸ A special proposal on the issue is made out in April 1989 by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, *Petar Mladenov*⁹ but the drastic strain of the political situation at home in consequence of the protest actions of the Bulgarian Turks and the simultaneous actions of anti-governmental dissident groups in the course of the following month obviously make this topic dropped from the agenda.

Immediately after the first more serious international crisis after the end of the Cold War the new Bulgarian government declares its willingness to join the world's organisation's actions directed toward the settling of armed conflicts. During the military operations preparatory period of the multinational forces under the UN aegis in the Persian Gulf for the first time the idea of Bulgarian participation with an armed contingent is officially set forward. The suggestion to send a Bulgarian Engineers' battalion in the Persian Gulf made by President Zhelyu Zhelev brings about animated debates in the National Assembly but a timely decision is not reached owing to the speedy conclusion of "Desert Storm" operation. Among the arguments opposing an extempore and hasty decision on this matter is the one claiming that differently from some other East-European countries, Bulgaria has no experience in such operations¹⁰ Thus, for instance, in the period 1948-1992 Poland, with its personnel or military observers, has taken part in seven out of the total fifteen UN peacekeeping operations, while Czechoslovakia has participated in five¹¹.

A year later, Resolution No.49 of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria of February 7 1992 suggests that the National Assembly should endorse a "participation of a Bulgarian armed contingent (one infantry battalion) in UN peace-keeping operations". On April 15th 1992 the National Assembly nearly unanimously votes in favour of sending one Bulgarian infantry battalion to Cambodia. This unanimity shows the concern of the highest political ruling body in the Republic of Bulgaria with the flare-up of multiple fires of tension, one of which (that in Bosnia) is a close-by Bulgarian border. There are also a number of critical remarks in the analysis of the first Bulgarian armed participation in a UN peacekeeping Operation (UNTAC). The main conclusion is that the preparation period of the Bulgarian participants (who numbered nearly 900 people¹²) was extremely short, considering the complicated circumstances in the region of operation¹³. A careful consideration of the experience gained through this participation of a Bulgarian armed contingent makes possible to improve the selection, preparation and organisation of a future Bulgarian inclusion in peacekeeping operations. In the course of the next months Bulgarian military and police observers are sent in different crisis areas, i.e. with the UN mission in Angola UNAVEM II and the mission in Tadjikistan UNMOT, where more than sixty Bulgarian officers have passed through in the course of the last five years.

⁸ See: Crocker, Chester, *Peacemaking in Southern Africa: The Namibia-Angola Settlement of 1988 - Herding Cats. Multiparty Mediation in a Complex World* [Peace Institute, Washington, 1999], p. 207-244.

⁹ CDA, Fond 1b, Record 35, File 150-88; Record 36, File 181-89.

¹⁰ Bechar, Nansen, *Possibilities for a Bulgarian Participation in Peacekeeping: New Experience and New Dilemmas - International Relations*, Sofia, 1994, No. 5, p. 18.

¹¹ *The Military Balance. 1992/1993*, [IISS, London, 1992], p. 247-250.

¹² An infantry battalion of 850 persons, 4 staff officers, 16 officers as military observers and 11 as military police.

¹³ Yankov, Yanko, *The Cambodia Diary*; Naydenov, V., *The Cambodia Mission: Lessons Learned - Military History Journal*, Sofia, 1994, No. 2, p. 2-6, 86-93.

Further to the bilateral agreements in the defence field concluded with the neighbouring NATO member countries - Greece and Turkey in 1991-1992 and a more intensive participation in the NATO military structures' activities in 1993¹⁴, the achievement of operational compatibility/interoperability/ with the NATO' principles of command, standards and normative regulations during joint military exercises, seminars and other military-political and military-technical initiatives is put forward as a target of predominant importance. Even immediately after the dissolution of the Organisation of the Warsaw Pact on July 1st 1991 the Bulgarian State and military leadership shows an increased interest in the widening of professional contacts and co-operation with NATO. During his talks with *Manfred Wörner*, Secretary-General of the Pact, in the NATO Headquarters in Brussels in November 1991, Bulgarian President *Zhelyu Zhelev* puts forward several topics related to the bilateral and multilateral co-operation: opening a dialogue "on the possibilities to undertake ad hoc initiatives and procedures for prevention and settlement of crisis situations and conflicts; of widening the contacts in the military field through sending Bulgarian officers in NATO military schools as well as through co-operation in the sphere of military planning, civil-military relations, the control of the air space, etc. The President *Zhelev* explicitly states: "We are prepared to take part in the joint planning of combined Operations in cases of natural disasters and flows of refugees as well as in cases of other non-conventional security threats in Europe"¹⁵.

In the end of April 1993, Gen. *Lyuben Petrov*, Chief of General Staff of the Bulgarian Armed Forces on the invitation of the NATO Supreme Allied Commander in Europe Gen. *John Shalikashvili*, participates in a conference of the NATO Military Committee and in the 'SHAPEX-93' exercise, dedicated to the issue of "Crisis Management - a Role for NATO". At the NATO Military Committee's conference on April 28th 1993 Gen. *Petrov* reminds of Bulgaria's principle position that "none of the Balkan and neighbouring states should be involved in military actions in the former Yugoslavia", at the same time expressing a high appreciation of NATO's efforts and actions "for the implementation of the peace plan to resolve the conflict". He informs his colleagues of the idea to set up in Bulgaria a training center for peacekeeping force personnel and addresses the NATO member countries with an appeal for any methodological or material assistance on their part. In his speech on the report "Crisis Management - a Role for NATO", the Bulgarian Chief of Staff stresses again: "We share the appraisal that for the time being apart of NATO there is no other institution which has at its disposal the necessary political and military structures and which can be used under the UN auspices in the interest of collective security and in support of the international efforts for peaceful settlement of regional conflicts. We believe that the military exercises related to the application of the procedures for crisis control can prove to be an exceptionally useful form of testing the political and military decision-forming techniques under circumstances of similar character. We highly appreciate every possibility to learn from NATO's experience in this respect"¹⁶ In the spirit of the Bulgarian Government's active aspirations for its incorporation into the international peace-keeping efforts in 1994, the first national Concept for the Participation of the Republic of Bulgaria in the Peace-Support Operations (PSO) is made out.

In the course of the next years an important form of co-operation aimed at securing interoperability during the preparation for participation in peace support and humanitarian operations is to make sure the Bulgarian participation in joint military exercises under the

¹⁴ See: Military Cooperation 1991/1993. A Survey - *Bulgarian Military Review*, Sofia, 1993, No. 2, p. 79-92.

¹⁵ Diplomatic Archive, Sofia, Record 48-10.

¹⁶ Here and later on there is used as new source an available data from General Staff, Bulgarian Armed Forces Documentation.

“Partnership for Peace“ (PfP) on the Balkans and the interaction with the specialised military structures of NATO. At the first conference of the national armament directors (CNAD) with the PfP partners held in Brussels in November 1995, the Bulgarian Delegation is handed a Memorandum which permits submitting of over 500 standards of NATO. Another more than 58 codification documents and classifiers of NATO are permitted for use, too.

After joining the Partnership for Peace initiative in February 1994 the Bulgarian government declares its readiness to organise “Breeze-94” - an operational and tactic military exercise in the spirit of this initiative with the participation of the naval forces of eight countries. This military naval exercise is a first one of this kind on the Black Sea. In it 9 warships and 10 auxiliary ships of the Bulgarian Naval Forces with crews of 1060 people and 8 foreign ships with crews of 1088 people take part¹⁷. The successful execution of this military exercise confirms the common belief that such exercises can play a more and more significant part in the preventive diplomacy and crisis management within the boundaries of the major international security structures. Bulgaria hosts as well the first NATO naval military exercise under PfP “Cooperative Partner-95” and the first major land forces military exercise in the Balkans region “Cooperative Determination-96”.

Regardless of the internal political changes in Bulgaria, in the period following its joining “Partnership for Peace”(1994-2000) all Bulgarian governments make efforts to provide an active participation in joined military exercises and conferences for the achievement of a better interoperability with the NATO armed forces at their carrying-out peace support operations. The main problems to be faced are related predominantly with the necessity to accept a normative basis in compliance with the contemporary doctrinal concepts as well as the obsolescence of the material and technical equipment and gear of the Bulgarian armed forces. The discussions regarding the contents of the future National Security Doctrine and the Military Doctrine, going on for quite a few years, are no doubt with a negative effect, regardless of the fact that the legal ground for the country’s participation in PSO is defined in Art. 84 of the Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria as well as in the Law of the Defence and Armed Forces adopted by the National Assembly in December 1995. Another unfavourable factor proves to be the progressive deterioration of the gear and equipment of the individual branches of the armed forces. Thus, for instance, at the live air exercises “Olympia-97” in Greece and “Hezarfen-97” in Turkey Bulgaria sends only military observers since in both cases it has been found that “the condition and the availability of aviation equipment in good working order does not permit our participation in the exercise with flying machines.”

When such multinational military exercises are carried out, the main objective is to achieve interoperability in the preparation for peace support and humanitarian operations. During the multinational operative and tactical military exercise “Cooperative Partner-97” in Bulgaria, for instance, convoy, humanitarian and embargo Operations are carried out under the command of the Headquarters of the NATO Allied Forces in Southern Europe (AFSOUTH). In 1997 the Bulgarian Army participates with military observers, staff officers or military units in 23 military exercises¹⁸ under or in the spirit of “Partnership for Peace”, nine of them in the Balkans. In the next 1998 year there is a Bulgarian participation in 28 PfP exercises or seminars. The increased participation in military exercises in the Balkans – 11, is distinctively characteristic, in nine of them the participation is with military units and weaponry. When the NATO program under “Partnership for Peace” for 1999 is made out, a Bulgarian participation

¹⁷ *Military History Journal*, Sofia, 1994, No. 6, p. 198-204.

¹⁸ According to a General Staff Information. In other source it is noted participation in exercises during 1997 (<http://www.md.government.bg>).

in 33 military exercises and working seminars is planned, the bigger part of those are aimed at increasing the interoperability and fighting skills in carrying-out peace-support and humanitarian operations. According to an official Report, in 1999 Bulgaria took part in more than 470 activities “in the spirit” of the Partnership for Peace, including 21 exercises, 130 seminars and workshops (22 of them hosted by Bulgaria)¹⁹. Bulgarian officers take part also in the biggest NATO military exercise on the Balkans for the year 2000 - “Cooperative Dragon 2000” held in July in Albania. During the participation in the “Partnership for Peace” initiative (1994-2000) Bulgaria has participated in 108 PfP exercises and in 2 NATO exercises (“Strong Resolve 98” and “Linked Sea 2000”) with approx. 700 officers and 4 800 soldiers in total²⁰.

On April 16th 1998 the Bulgarian Parliament (National Assembly) adopted at last the country’s National Security Concept. As predominating factor for the maintaining of national security is stated the pursuing of an “active foreign policy for pacifying the Balkans. This policy is the most important element of the Bulgarian interests preventive defence strategy”. In this way Bulgaria might turn into “a generator of security” in the region²¹

The main priority specified in the Military Doctrine, adopted with a Resolution of the National Assembly of April 8th 1999, is the country’s integration into the new all-European security and defence architecture while as main sources of military threat and risk are stated “the actual and potential conflicts in different parts of the region”. Therefore, the document assigns an important place to the matters related to the armed forces’ participation “in peace support operations and any other Operations different from war”. Among the most significant suggestions are those for the establishing of a Situation Center for the carrying-out of such Operations and the creation of Multinational Peace Forces in South East Europe. According to the Action Plan for Membership in NATO adopted on April 23-25 1999 at the Washington Summit, the Bulgarian government is to work out its own national Program in which the following five main lines are to be formulated, i.e. political and economic; defence; resource; legal and security matters. Among the specific purposes are the “creating of a crisis control System - modern and compatible with the NATO member-countries” and accordingly the “building-up of operational possibilities” for taking part in multinational Operations “for establishing peace under the leadership of NATO, WEU or a coalition of states”. In late 2000 the General Staff of Bulgarian Armed Forces adopted some doctrinal and concept documents, among them a Doctrine for the Operations different from war²².

On September 26th 1998 in Skopje during the Third Meeting of the Ministers of Defence of the South-East European Countries an agreement - a “Memorandum for the Creation of Multinational Peace Forces in South-East Europe” (MPFSEE) is signed. This agreement provides for the establishment of a multinational brigade which should be used for humanitarian assistance, conflict-prevention, peace-keeping and peace-enforcement with a UN or OSCE mandate under the leadership of NATO or WEU. The seat of the MPFSEE is in the town of *Plovdiv* while a Turkish general is head of the brigade. Each participant’s share in the common budget is in proportion to the participating military units, i.e.: Albania - 11,76%; Bulgaria - 23,53%; Greece - 17,65%; Italy - 2,94%; Macedonia - 8,82%; Romania - 11,76% and Turkey - 23,53%. The commanding & staff military exercises of MPFSEE are planned to take place in Bulgaria in the period 1999-2001 and in Romania in the period 2002-2003.

¹⁹ White Book of Defense and Armed Forces of Republic of Bulgaria, Sofia, Ministry of Defense, 2001.

²⁰ A Guide for the Participants in Peacekeeping Missions. Psychological Aspects, Sofia 2000, p. 9.

²¹ Darzhaven Vestnik [State Gazette], Sofia, No. 46, 22 April 1998.

²² A Doctrine for operations different from war. General Staff of Bulgarian Army, 29 November 2000, 42 pages.

According to the approved preliminary program, in December 1999 “SEEBRIG-99”, first command staff exercise of the multinational brigade was held, and in September 2000 – the second one, “SEVEN STAR – 2000”, with the participation of troops.

A new initiative is in a progress – the formation of an operative group for naval co-operation in Black Sea area (BLACKSEAFOR). This multinational group should be used in relief, humanitarian, ecological and other naval operations. Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, Russia, Turkey and Ukraine are intending to participate with own vessels in the project.

The Bulgarian participation in international peacekeeping and conflict-preventing initiatives in the recent years is concentrated in the region of South-East Europe. Units of the Bulgarian Army take part in SFOR in Bosnia and in KFOR in Kosovo, also humanitarian aid as well as a non-combatant and medical assistance party (108 people) are sent to the “Radusha” refugee camp in the Republic of Macedonia²³. Bulgaria takes part in SFOR since 1997 with an engineering platoon (30 people) included in the Dutch contingent, and since 1998 – with an automobile platoon (26 people) in the “BELUGA” group under Greek command. According to a representative sociological research in regard of the Bulgarian military contingent in Bosnia (June 1998 - January 1999) the Bulgarian participants in SFOR demonstrate “a knowledge of and a readiness to follow the main principles of the peace-keeping” (observing non-partiality toward any one of the hostile parties, a minimal use of force and arms). A successful accomplishment of such a mission is dependent on the character of the mutual relations with other nations’ representatives and the local population. Significant is the fact that after the conclusion of the mission, the bigger part of the investigated members of the armed forces (90,5%) state that their relations with their colleagues (Dutch and Greeks) were “friendly”, more than a half of them (53,7%) assess their contacts with the local population in Bosnia and Herzegovina as “friendly”. At the same time, there is a certain discrepancy between the expectations and the reality in regard of the preliminary training as well as a fall of trust in the commanding staff after the conclusion of the mission. The researchers draw the following general conclusion: “We learn very little from our mistakes and our previous experience. A bigger part of the problems faced during Bulgaria’s first participation in PSO in Cambodia (1992-1993) are also repeated in Bosnia ...”²⁴. Some of the lessons learnt during the previous participation in the PSO are never the less taken into consideration in the training of military contingents for future missions. In the process of selection and training of Bulgarian military units for participation in KFOR all the participants are first of all sent to short-term courses at specialised military educational and training centers in Holland and Germany.

From February 9th 2000 a Bulgarian engineering section (40 people) takes part in the NATO controlled operation in Kosovo (KFOR) as a unit of the 43rd Armoured Engineering Company of the 1st Restoration Battalion of the Multinational Brigade South²⁵. Apart from that, members of the Bulgarian military forces are sent to the commanding outpost of KFOR in Thessaloniki as well as in the chief commanding post in Pristina. In Kosovo there are also Bulgarian medical officers sent to help with the overcoming of the humanitarian crisis as well as police units to take part in the restoring of the public order and security in the area. In consequence of the increased participation of Bulgarian contingents and military observers²⁶

²³ *Military History Journal*, Sofia, 1999, No. 5, p. 159-169.

²⁴ Yanakiev, Yantzislav; Georgi Petkov, Bulgarian Army in Peace Support Operations - *Military Journal*, Sofia, 1999, No. 4, p. 94-106.

²⁵ In the first four months period Bulgarian unit is under the Netherlands’ command and from June 2000 - under the command of a German contingent staff.

²⁶ Bulgarian military observers are included in an OSCE Mission in Albania, too.

in PSO in the Balkan region additional problems related to a more effective control, co-ordination of actions and summarising of the accumulated information arise. Military experts suggest a discussion of the idea, in the future, together with the Situation Center functioning at the Ministry of Defence “to have in the region of the mission... formed a national commandment, following the NATO countries’ experience”²⁷ The progress of the regional integration process in the field of defence training and the achievement of interoperability makes imperative a search for new approaches and initiatives for the realisation of the bilateral and multilateral military co operation in South East Europe.

New perspectives for more active and broader Bulgarian participation in peace support Operations appear in early 2001. In response to a UN DPSO invitation in February 2001, Bulgarian government approved a decision for sending 15 officers as military observers in Ethiopia and Eritrea²⁸. In a process of preparation for a peace support mission in Cyprus is another battalion of approx. 400 recruiters.

The past decade clearly indicated the determinative tendencies in the international relations sphere, characterising the world’s global and regional processes in the beginning of the new century. There is no doubt that the redefining and giving of a new meaning to the concepts and methods for the prevention and resolution of international and social crises and armed conflicts have been among the priority tendencies of the international community’s activity. The modest initial experience of Bulgaria in peace support Operations ifl last ten years gradually outlined a number of essential conclusions. Their implementation requires a well planned, purposeful and long-term strategy for integrating the country in the international and regional security structures and the forthcoming more and more active participation of Bulgarian military and police units and civil organisations in peace support and humanitarian Operations meant to establish security and stability in the region of South East Europe.

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²⁷ Uzunov, Slavcho, Armed Forces Participation in Crisis Management – *Military Journal*, Sofia, 2000, No. 1, p. 58.

²⁸ Bulgarian Army Daily, Sofia, No. 15 029, 9 February 2001, p.92