
***Modernizing the Bulgarian Military:
Not Those Drones***

Andro Mathewson

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Abstract: Recently, Bulgaria has made several important steps towards modernising its armed forces. While some of these steps are commendable, the author is rather critical on others and recommends to focus on advanced UAV technologies. In the procurement of UAVs, the Bulgarian defence ministry should pay particular attention on interoperability, efficiency, and the relations with allies.

Keywords: drones, Bulgaria, military technologies, NATO

Andro Mathewson is a Capability Support Officer at the HALO Trust and an International Relations MSc student at the University of Edinburgh. He is interested in international security and military technology. Andro has previously contributed to UK Defence Journal and The Texas National Security Review. Before his current studies, he was a research fellow at Perry World House at the University of Pennsylvania, where he also received his Bachelor of Arts in Politics, Philosophy, & Economics, and German. The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official position of The HALO Trust.

Резюме: България направи няколко важни стъпки към модернизирание на своите въоръжени сили. Въпреки че някои от тези стъпки са похвални, авторът е доста критичен към други и препоръчва държавата да се съсредоточи върху модерните технологии на безпилотните летателни апарати (БЛА). При поръчката на БЛА българското Министерство на отбраната следва да обърне особено внимание на оперативната съвместимост, ефективността и отношенията със съюзниците.

Ключови думи: дрони, Българска армия, военни технологии, НАТО

Андро Матюсън работи в международната неправителствена организация HALO Trust и е студент по международни отношения в Университета в Единбург. Интересува се от международна сигурност и военни технологии. Публикивал е статии в UK Defence Journal, Texas National Security Review и Bulletin of Atomic Scientists. Преди настоящото си обучение е бил научен сътрудник в Perry World House в университета в Пенсилвания, където е получил бакалавърска степен по Политика, Философия и Икономика (PPE) и Немски език. Мненията, изразени в тази статия, са на автора и не отразяват официалната позиция на The HALO Trust.



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Editors: Todor Tagarev, Velizar Shalamanov, Venelin Georgiev, Valeri Ratchev

In the first week of December 2020, the Bulgarian Ministry of Defence announced the purchase of 98 new armored vehicles¹ and the modernization of 44 Soviet-era T-72 tanks² for a cost of over €100 Million in total. Along with Bulgaria's recent purchase of F-16s³ from the United States and plans to acquire two new German-made patrol ships for its Navy, this is another instance in a recent series of government decisions with the intent of expanding and modernizing the Bulgarian Armed Forces. Surprisingly, the Minister of Defence, Krasimir Karakachanov, also announced that there are plans to procure one or two submarines. Instead of focusing on traditional military warfare, Bulgaria's modernization efforts should focus on newer technology, such as unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), supplied by Western allies, to effectively participate in low-intensity and unconventional conflicts, and provide the Bulgarian military with cost-efficient technology to monitor its borders and assist in collective security efforts, including humanitarian responses.

This mass modernization of the Bulgarian Armed Forces may be seen as a step in the right direction by those abroad in Europe and NATO, and domestically by supporters of a larger and more effective Bulgarian military. But these events also raise the following questions: Why is Bulgaria expanding its armed forces with such speed in the middle of a pandemic? Why is it modernizing outdated Soviet-era machinery rather than purchasing new technology? And why would Bulgaria need submarines? Many of these decisions, especially that regarding submarines, could simply be pandering to the electorate in the run-up to the elections next year, or be nepotistic and corrupt dealings, the like of which are commonplace throughout Bulgaria, especially since both the purchase of armored vehicles and the tank modernization project were handed to Bulgarian firms with no public procurement competition⁴ whatsoever.

Bulgaria, which is currently ruled by GERB, a center-right party led by Boiko Borisov, a former bodyguard of Communist Bulgaria's longest-serving dictator, Todor Zhivkov, recently made headlines for another reason: its objections to North Macedonia's accession to the European Union, citing unresolved historical issues. Similar to the earlier spat between North Macedonia and Greece, this conundrum is fueled, on both sides, by nationalistic sentiments. Many analysts have noted that Bulgaria's objection is nothing more than a populist attempt to deflect attention away from the ongoing anti-corruption protests which began in July 2020. Similarly, the ongoing modernization and expansion of Bulgaria's military forces can easily be seen as yet another turn to populism and an attempt by the government to distract protesters, thus deflecting attention away from its abysmal handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. With over 8,000 deaths and 200,000 infections⁵ in a country of slightly less than 7 million, the Bulgarian government has failed to keep the virus under control. Additionally, amongst the populace, conspiracy theories⁶ are widespread,

¹ "Defence Ministry signs 50M leva contract with Bulgarian firm for 98 armoured vehicles," The Sofia Globe, December 8, 2020, <https://sofiaglobe.com/2020/12/08/defence-ministry-signs-50m-leva-contract-with-bulgarian-firm-for-98-armoured-vehicles/>.

² Alexander Markov, "Borissov in Terem: T-72 tanks modernized in Bulgaria," BNT news, 21.12.2020, <https://bntnews.bg/news/borisov-v-terem-modernizirat-tankovete-t-72-v-balgariya-1088215news.html>.

³ Slav Okov, "Bulgaria Agrees to Buy F-16 Jets From U.S. in \$1.25-Billion Deal," Bloomberg, July 10, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-07-10/bulgaria-agrees-to-buy-f-16-jets-from-u-s-in-1-25-billion-deal>.

⁴ "Defence Ministry signs 50M leva contract with Bulgarian firm for 98 armoured vehicles"

⁵ "Bulgaria's Covid-19 death toll passes 8000-mark," The Sofia Globe, January 8, 2021, <https://sofiaglobe.com/2021/01/08/bulgarias-covid-19-death-toll-passes-8000-mark/>.

⁶ Yosha Weber, Mikhail Bushuev "Coronavirus: Lies Roughly and Wholesale," Deutsche Welle, 09.08.2020, <https://www.dw.com/bg/коронавирус-лъже-се-гръбо-и-на-едпо/a-54502305>.

and anti-Western vaccine sentiment is high, fueled primarily by Russian propaganda efforts⁷.

Despite being a member of NATO, Bulgaria's military strength has greatly weakened in the last couple of decades. While never a relatively large military force, Bulgaria was an active member of the Warsaw Pact and was well equipped by the Soviet Union. Since the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, however, much of Bulgaria's equipment either fell into disrepair or was smuggled out and sold⁸ on the black market. However, the country still possesses a large indigenous defense industry and was ranked⁹ as a medium-sized small arms exporter according to the Small Arms Survey.

Bulgaria lies at the heart of the Balkans and has an extensive coast on the Black Sea, which has long been strategically important¹⁰, especially regarding Russian containment¹¹. Despite the recent decision to modernize the Bulgarian armed forces, and the need to increase forces in the region, due to an emboldened Russia, Bulgaria is unlikely to reach the 2% of GDP, under NATO requirements anytime soon. Given the COVID-19 recession, it seems unwise for the Bulgarian government to be spending millions on fixing outdated Soviet tanks and purchasing new armored vehicles, especially during a time of questioning traditional military technology. The recent conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh has shown that with the rise of modern technologies, such as bait drones and loitering munitions, old technologies have become more vulnerable¹². Although tanks, due to their versatility and heavy firepower, still hold an important place in any modern army, they are slowly becoming behind the times, especially in unconventional conflicts and with the democratization and development of the precision strike complex¹³.

In a time of economic and security turmoil, vast spending on modernizing antiquated equipment is neither effective nor efficient. Upgrading Bulgaria's current T-72 Tanks will cost almost €2 million per unit, and each new armored vehicle will cost €250,000. While the refitting of a certain number of tanks, and the purchase of armored personnel carriers would be beneficial to the armed forces, and the purchase of American F-16s is a step in the right direction, Bulgaria currently doesn't produce or purchase¹⁴ UAVs, despite having the funding, capacity, ability and licensing necessary. With its strategic location, the Bulgarian armed forces, and its allies, would benefit greatly from Bulgaria pursuing its own fleet of drones, or even its own indigenous drone industry.

⁷ "The lies of Russian propaganda about the coronavirus," Webcafe, 10.04.2020, <https://webcafe.bg/analiz/lazhite-na-ruskata-propaganda-za-koronavirusa.html>.

⁸ Raymond Bonner, "Bulgaria Becomes a Weapons Bazaar," The New York Times, Aug. 3, 1998, <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/08/03/world/bulgaria-becomes-a-weapons-bazaar.html>.

⁹ "Annexes to Chapter 1 of the Small Arms Survey 2011: States of Security," 2012.

¹⁰ Michael Peck, "Russia's best strategy for controlling the Black Sea? Divide and conquer," Forbes, 11 December 2020, <https://112.international/politics/russias-best-strategy-for-controlling-the-black-sea-divide-and-conquer-57263.html>.

¹¹ Philip Breedlove and Michael E. O'Hanlon "The Black Sea: How America can avoid a great-power conflict," Brookings, December 15, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/12/15/the-black-sea-how-america-can-avoid-a-great-power-conflict/>.

¹² Peter Suci, "Does the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict Prove the Tank is Toast?" The National Interest, October 5, 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/does-nagorno-karabakh-conflict-prove-tank-toast-170155>.

¹³ Michael C. Horowitz, Joshua A. Schwartz, "To Compete or Retreat? The Global Diffusion of Precision Strike," SSRN, December 20, 2020, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3752391.

¹⁴ "Why is Bulgaria Not Buying UAVs?" Bulgarian & International Military and Defence News, Nov 1, 2019, <https://bulgarianmilitary.com/2019/11/01/why-is-bulgaria-not-buying-uavs/>.

Rumors have surfaced¹⁵ that Bulgaria is in talks to buy six¹⁶ Bayraktar TB2 UAVs from Turkey, which would make it the first European nation to own TB2 drones. Having seen action in Libya, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Syria, the TB2¹⁷ can reach an altitude of 24,000 feet, has a range of up to 150 kilometers, and can carry payloads of up to 120 pounds. Bulgaria's plans to acquire Turkish UAVs might still be in their early stages, but any purchase of TB2 drones by the Bulgarian forces would be a mistake. Not only have some of Bulgaria's main allies, including the United States and Germany, imposed¹⁸ export restrictions on UAV components to Turkey due to its internationally criticized military operations abroad, but also Turkey's major development and questionable use of drones have further strained¹⁹ its relationship with NATO. If Bulgaria is to move forward with purchasing UAVS, either unarmed for surveillance and intelligence or armed, its closest allies, especially the United States, can offer better options than Turkey's Bayraktar TB-2. This will ensure greater interoperability, cooperation, and efficiency, while also minimizing the likelihood of any friction between Bulgaria and its allies.

As Bulgaria is currently a potential weak link²⁰ in the Western-allied defense chain and security system, instead of planning to build submarines, and since, despite the pandemic, the Bulgarian Chief of Defence plans to go forward²¹ with the modernization of its armed forces, Bulgaria should work with its allies in NATO and beyond, to procure reconnaissance drones, while leveraging its current industrial capacity to begin its own UAV production facilities. Avoiding cheap and unreliable UAVs, for example from China and Turkey, Bulgaria should work with the United States, Germany, and its other closest allies to expand its capability into the sphere of uninhabited aerial vehicles, as some of its neighbors²² have already done. Bulgaria could then use these to monitor both its maritime and land borders, and assist in collective security efforts, and humanitarian efforts²³, in the Balkans.

¹⁵ Ruslan Trad, "The Turkish press reports rumors that Bulgaria is in talks to buy six Bayraktar TB2 drones," Jan 28, 2021, <https://twitter.com/ruslantrad/status/1354826797179789321>.

¹⁶ Boyko Nikolov, "Bulgaria with interest in buying Turkish Bayraktar TB2 UAVs," January 27, 2021, <https://bulgarianmilitary.com/amp/2021/01/27/bulgaria-with-interest-in-buying-turkish-bayraktar-tb2-uavs/>.

¹⁷ Baykar Makina, "Bayraktar TB2 Tactical UAV," Army Technology, 2020, <https://www.army-technology.com/projects/bayraktar-tb2-tactical-uav/>.

¹⁸ "Canadian decision to halt tech exports exposes key weakness in Turkish drone industry," Turkish Minute, October 17, 2020, <https://www.turkishminute.com/2020/10/17/turkish-drones-built-by-erdogans-son-in-law-used-in-war-zones-critics-say/>.

¹⁹ Dan Gettinger, "Turkey's military drones: an export product that's disrupting NATO," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, December 6, 2019, <https://thebulletin.org/2019/12/turkeys-military-drones-an-export-product-thats-disrupting-nato/>.

²⁰ "Russia 'Used Bulgarian Airspace' To Deliver Military Equipment To Serbia," *RFE/RL's Bulgarian* December 17, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-planes-bulgarian-airspace-military-equipment-serbia/31006388.html>.

²¹ Emil Eftimov, "Modernization of Bulgarian Armed Forces until 2032 will cost EUR 15 billion," *Bulgarian National Radio*, 05.06.2020, <https://bnr.bg/en/post/101271028/modernization-of-the-bulgarian-armed-forces-until-2032-will-cost-eur-15-billion#:~:text=Modernization%20of%20Bulgarian%20Armed%20Forces%20until%202032%20will%20cost%20EUR%2015%20billion,-published%20on%205&text=The%20complete%20modernization%20of%20the,the%20Bulgarian%20Army%20-%20May%206>.

²² Jaroslaw Adamowski, "Eastern European NATO allies ramp up drone buys to protect their borders," *Defense News*, August 6, 2020, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2020/08/06/eastern-european-nato-allies-ramp-up-drone-buys-to-protect-their-borders/>.

²³ John R. Emery, *The Possibilities and Pitfalls of Humanitarian Drones* (Cambridge: University Press, 2016).