



Article by the Bulgarian Ambassador to Greece, H.E. Valentin Poriazov, on the occasion of the National Day of Bulgaria



Allow me to thank Greek Diplomatic Life for giving me the opportunity to address its distinguished audience on the occasion of the National Day of Bulgaria.

On March 3rd we celebrate the Liberation of Bulgaria. This date is a symbol of a new beginning, of hope, of our resurrection as a free nation.

Winston Churchill has once said that the Balkans produce more history than they could possibly bear. I could easily agree with that notion. Coming from a place situated at the crossroads of continents, cultures and religions, I would just add: No country can escape from two things - its geography and its history.

Our liberation was the result of a war between two empires: the Russian and the Ottoman. The war ended with the peace treaty of San Stefano, signed on March 3rd



1878. Bulgaria has reappeared on the map of Europe after almost five centuries of Ottoman rule. *But, what were the real reasons for that war, what were the events that led to it?*

As sometimes in history, in the beginning there was a man. He was born in 1837. He lived just 36 years. As a child he studied to become a priest, and as a matter of fact he entered a monastery and became a monk; but not for long. He was obsessed with the idea of freedom. Freedom was above religion in his mind. So, he created a whole system of ideas and practical actions on how to liberate Bulgaria. He left the

monastery and started travelling all around the country. He created hundreds of clandestine committees to prepare the grounds for a National Revolution.

In 1873 the Ottoman authorities captured him and executed him on February 19th 1873. **His name was Vasil Levski.**

Ordinary Bulgarians thought of him as a Saint and called him the Apostle of Freedom. The seeds of the revolution had been planted and nothing could stop them to grow. Over the Easter days of 1876 the biggest Bulgarian revolt erupted.

The Bulgarian issue was on the front pages of all major European newspapers. Extraordinary sessions of European Parliaments were convened. Europe was shocked by the atrocities that followed the Uprising and its 30,000 victims. Bulgarians showed the European powers that they



deserved their freedom.

European public opinion leaders, as we would have called them today, like Victor Hugo, Oscar Wilde, William Gladstone, Januarius MacGahan, Tolstoy, Turgenev and many others, raised their strong voices in support of the Bulgarian freedom.

In January 1877 the European powers, the so-called European Concert, convened a meeting in Constantinople and issued an ultimatum to the Ottoman Empire to give autonomy to Bulgaria which was refused. Acting on behalf of the European Concert of powers, Russia declared war on the Ottoman Empire.

Bulgarians called this war - a war

The history of the relations between Bulgarians and Greeks is very, very old. We have been neighbours for many centuries. We have shared the dark past of the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and the modern history of the Balkans and of Europe, marked by ups and downs, wars and peace, opposing blocks and alliances.

of Liberation. Thousands of them participated as volunteers and many of them died for the liberty of their country. Bulgarians will be forever grateful to the tens of thousands of Russian, but also Finnish, Romanian, Ukrainian, Polish and other soldiers in the Russian Emperor's Army who fell in search of their freedom.

I will not elaborate much more on history, let me just mention that **in 1879 the Bulgarian kingdom was re-established.** It was the third Bulgarian kingdom.

As a matter of fact, Bulgaria is one of the oldest States in Europe. It is one of the very few States that preserved the same name ever since its founding in the 7th Century, **681.** The Cyrillic alphabet was created in Bulgaria and then passed on to other Slavic nations. We adopted Christianity from the Byzantine Empire back in the 9th Century in **870** and from Bulgaria it was passed on to other Slavic people. This has created a strong cultural bond through the centuries with the neighbouring Greek people.

Being situated in the centre of the Balkan lands of the Ottoman Empire, Bulgaria was the last of all

Christian nations to earn its freedom. A few decades earlier, Greeks rejected the foreign rule after a heroic and successful war of independence. The Greek Revolution of 1821-1828 had a great importance not only for Greece, but also for the other peoples in the former Ottoman Empire, inspiring their ideas of liberation and aspirations. It was met with a sincere and warm sympathy worldwide. Volunteers flocked to Greece to fight for the country's freedom and to protect the cradle of European civilisation. Being the closest neighbour of Greece and having shared the century-long Ottoman rule, many Bulgarians took part in the uprising, considering it a common cause. Thousands of Bulgarian volunteers participated in the fight for the Liberation of Greece, demonstrating that unity can be achieved in the name of higher ideals. I take this opportunity to wholeheartedly congratulate all Greeks on the 200th Anniversary of the Greek Revolution.

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One might say, it is a miracle that after more than a thousand years of controversies, today Bulgaria and Greece enjoy such a high level of good-neighbourly relations. The truth is that took decades of common efforts of wise politicians, diplomats and ordinary people, as well as a lot of good will and dedication in order to overcome the shadows of the past and to build mutual respect, trust and confidence. We are proud that our two nations have managed to put an end to centuries of rivalry.

The words of the famous Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard come to mind: *"You can understand life only looking backwards, but you can live your life only looking forward"*.

Last year Greece and Bulgaria celebrated the 140th Anniversary of their Diplomatic Relations, established on December 9th 1880. Greek-Bulgarian relations have a solid ground - our common values and our strong belief in an international system based on rules and with full respect for International Law.

Today our two countries belong to one and the same political and economic family - the European Union, and we are allies in NATO. The Greek support for Bulgaria's European and Euro-Atlantic integration will be remembered. We both strongly believe in the future of the EU as a global player and we are confident that it will continue to be a beacon of peace, stability, democracy and human rights for the whole world.

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In February 2020, the Fourth Meeting of the High-Level Cooperation Council between the Governments of our two countries was held in Alexandroupolis. A wide range of projects of bilateral cooperation was discussed, among them energy, railway connectivity, investments, tourism, migration, police cooperation in the fight against cross-border and organised crime, culture.

In August 2020, the process of participation of Bulgaria in the LNG terminal near Alexandroupolis was finalised and the contract signed.

In 2020, despite the pandemic, the President, the Prime Minister and the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bulgaria paid visits to Greece.

We are satisfied with the steady increase in bilateral trade, amounting to over 3 billion euros annually. Greece is among Bulgaria's leading foreign trade partners, ranking 4th in terms of export and 6th in terms of our total imports, and one of the leading investors in Bulgaria, especially in the sectors of trade, financial intermediation and real estate.

Bulgaria and Greece are blessed with a variety of remarkable natural and historical sites and the tourist exchange between our countries is particularly active. The sector of tourism provides significant opportunities for growth and has a considerable potential. Every year more than a million Greeks visit Bulgaria and around the same number of Bulgarians visit Greece.

The strategic nature of our relations is further proven by numerous infrastructure connectivity projects that will contribute not only to the energy security of our two countries, but also to the economic prosperity of the entire region.

The Greece-Bulgaria Interconnector (IGB) is of strategic importance, as it will diversify the supply of natural gas from the Southern Gas Corridor, as well as



from the future liquefied natural gas terminal near Alexandroupolis in which Bulgaria holds a 20% stake of the share capital. The IGB gas interconnection is also a key component in the implementation of the joint initiative of Greece, Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary to build a Vertical Gas Corridor for South-North supply.

Greece and Bulgaria are also building a new multisystem electrical grid which will significantly improve connectivity between the Bulgarian and Greek energy networks, adding more possibilities for exchange.

Our nations share common hopes and concerns. The answer to the changing security environment, climate change and other global challenges lies in the further strengthening of our bilateral cooperation and our partnership within the European Union.

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