

The relations of the People's Republic of Bulgaria with Austria in the 1950s

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Abstract. Although contacts between Bulgaria and Austria were quickly re-established after the end of World War II, their bilateral relations became hostage to the geopolitical changes brought about by the Cold War. The decade from 1950 to 1960 proved to be a pivotal period for both countries, in which the foundations were laid for good cooperation in the following three decades.

Key words: Austria, Bulgaria, Cold War, Austrian-Bulgarian Relations

Research on Austrian-Bulgarian relations has mainly emphasized bilateral ties in the cultural, economic and political spheres.¹ Unfortunately, the evolution of Bulgarian policy towards Austria has been studied in a too schematic and superficial way – an aspect that undoubtedly deserves more attention and is therefore the subject of the present article. Furthermore, this study seeks to uncover to what extent Bulgaria adhered to Soviet policy in the 1950s. The time frame adopted is not accidental, but coincides with the beginning of militarization in the East-West confrontation (in the context of the Korean War), changes in Bulgarian foreign policy – which, taking into account new trends in international relations after 1956, was oriented toward the fulfillment of the country's main economic tasks, and the election of Bruno Kreisky as foreign minister in 1959 – one of the driving forces of Austrian “Ostpolitik” in the following years. The article is based on Austrian and Bulgarian archives and research, as well as on previously unused documentary collections from the Central State Archives and the Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Bulgaria.

The capture of Berlin by the Red Army in May 1945 and the subsequent surrender of the Third Reich ended the Second World War in Europe. For Austria and Bulgaria, this meant falling, for the second time after WWI, into the camp of the defeated. Both countries were occupied by foreign troops, governed by Allied Control Commissions, had limited sovereignty, and were virtually un-

¹ Bachmaier 1998; Baeva 2007.

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able to conduct an independent foreign policy. However, this is where the similarities between Sofia and Vienna end.

Like Germany, Austria was divided into four occupation zones, but the attitude of the Allies towards the two countries, especially in the early post-war years, was quite different. The Austrian state was given a special role in Stalin's plans, and the Moscow Declaration of spring 1945 formed the basis of Soviet policy in Austria. To this end, Soviet propaganda constantly stressed that Berlin was the culprit of the war, and that there were no common interests between the Austrians and the Germans. The deliberate treatment of Austria as a "victim" should serve to create a new national consciousness, strongly differentiated from its larger German neighbor, in order to ward off the possibility of a new "Anschluss."² In practice, the Austrian question, linked to the signing of a (state) peace treaty with Vienna, was an integral part of Soviet policy on the German question until 1953, and the effort to keep Germany divided and weak. It was not long before the United States, too, began to view Austria as an important plank in its doctrine to contain communism.³ Austria became the only Soviet-occupied country to participate in the Marshall Plan. This had immediate economic dimensions and played no small role in Vienna's cultural and political orientation towards the West.

Economically, Austria could also provide reparations and compensation to the USSR for its losses in the war. Under the pretext of the implementation of the Potsdam Agreement of 2 August 1945, the country's material wealth from the eastern (Soviet) zone began to be exported by looting, dismantling industrial and commercial facilities, or confiscating entire companies as "German assets."⁴ This seized industrial potential gave rise to the Administration for Soviet Property in Austria (Управление советским имуществом в Австрии, USIA), a Soviet concern that existed until 1955. The occupation of Austria also played an important role in the Sovietization of Eastern European countries and was used as a legal justification for the maintenance of a Kremlin military presence in Hungary and Romania, as an important factor in providing the logistical link to the Soviet occupation forces in Eastern Austria. In the context of the Tito-Stalin split, the Soviet occupation zone also provided another advantage in maintaining military tensions along the Yugoslav-Austrian border.⁵

The situation was different in the case of Bulgaria, which had been in the Soviet sphere since 1944. Although the peace treaty of 1947 created the basis

² Stelzl-Marx *et al.* 2018, p. 174, 175; Pavlenko & Ruggenthaler 2018, p. 205, 206.

³ Ruggenthaler 2015, p. 35, 103.

⁴ Freeman 1978, p. 864.

⁵ Ruggenthaler 2015, p. 103; Pavlenko & Ruggenthaler 2018, p. 206, 208.

for settling Bulgaria's bilateral relations with a number of countries and, at least formally, the right to free elections, in practice Sofia's path in international relations passed through Moscow. The leadership of the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP) pursued a policy based on the purposeful inculcation among the Bulgarian people of the notion of the uniqueness of Bulgarian-Soviet relations as a guarantor of national security.⁶ According to Georgi Dimitrov, Prime Minister of Bulgaria and General Secretary of the Communist Party, the new socialist order could be built only with the help of the dictatorship of the proletariat, as in the USSR. Any deviation from the path charted by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union was considered treason and betrayal of the ideas of Marxism and socialism. In the words of Todor Zhivkov, "during the first years of our socialist development, almost every step we took had to take into account the Soviet experience [which] could not but affect ... the international orientation [of the country]." The cost proved too high, because the foreign policy consequences of this stance were the abandonment of independence in international relations and the voluntary acceptance of the doctrine of limited sovereignty. Bulgaria began to be perceived as one of the Kremlin's closest and most privileged satellite allies. In 1947, under Soviet pressure, Sofia (among other Eastern European states) abandoned the Marshall Plan. In response to the American program of economic reconstruction in Europe, in the autumn of that year the countries of the so-called Eastern bloc and the USSR undertook collective action to strengthen relations, characterized by the accelerated conclusion of a series of treaties of "friendship, cooperation and mutual assistance."⁷

Undoubtedly, the process of East-West confrontation left a huge imprint on the formation of Bulgaria's policy towards Vienna. The first three or four years after the war saw a positive development between the two countries, the roots of which can be traced back to the traditional conflict-free political and economic relations before 1938. Already on 10 May 1946 the Council of Ministers of Bulgaria decided to recognize the Republic of Austria, and on 18 October of the same year the Allied Control Commission in Vienna allowed the Austrian government to restore diplomatic and consular relations with Sofia.⁸ This was followed by the signing of a Bulgarian-Austrian trade agreement on 26 July 1947 and a second one in 1948, which was approved by the Allied Council in November 1948.⁹ However, this positive trend did not last long.

⁶ Baeva & Kalinova 2003, p. 118; Kalinova & Baeva 2002, p. 106.

⁷ Baev 1996, p. 60; Zhivkov 1997, p. 486; Ognyanov 2012, p. 321, 322, 324; Ognyanov 1999, p. 315, 316.

⁸ Bachmaier 1998, p. 93; Baeva 2007, p. 23, 24.

⁹ Centralen darzhaven arhiv (CDA), f. 1477, op. 5, a.e. 18, l. 36.

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In the period 1949–1950, several events had a major impact on the international situation: the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty (4 April 1949); the successful Soviet nuclear test ending the US monopoly on atomic weapons; and the Korean War (1950–1953), which had a major political and psychological impact because of the possibility that this conflict could quickly escalate into a war between the US and the USSR. This became a turning point in the East-West confrontation, which in the long run led to the further militarization of the collective security system of the Western states.¹⁰

Its geographic location in the center of Europe put Austria closest to the Eastern bloc countries and is the reason why several Western intelligence agencies opened their headquarters in Vienna.¹¹ According to reports from the Bulgarian legation in the Austrian capital, the work took place under “conditions unparalleled in any other country, [where] the contradictions between the democratic and imperialist camps clash most sharply.”¹² The Communist regime in Sofia regularly criticized Austria for allowing the “Bulgarian National Committee” to carry out anti-communist activities on its territory. Diplomatic contacts at the government level were almost completely suspended and the Austrian Communist Party (KPÖ), which followed a pro-Kremlin line, became the only ardent propagandist of the Bulgarian Communist regime in Austria.¹³

The Kremlin’s ambition to lead Austria to a peaceful transition to a people’s democracy was the other significant factor influencing Sofia’s policy. The Soviet leadership understood that it was impossible to apply the same approach in Eastern Europe as that applied in Bessarabia, Bukovina, Eastern Poland, and the Baltic republics in 1939–1941. Thus, the choice fell on the strategy of “national fronts”, which proved to be quite successful not only in organizing resistance in the German-occupied European countries, but also laid the foundations of the USSR’s post-war political influence. This concept implied that communist-dominated governments would fight “reactionary” influences, make alliances with other left-wing parties, draw the masses after them, and win broad support through free elections.¹⁴ Joseph Stalin’s plan envisaged the Austrian state being drawn into the Soviet orbit by governments pursuing a policy of close bilateral economic and political ties.¹⁵ This led to the establishment in 1945 of the provisional government under Karl Renner,

¹⁰ Baev 2010, p. 53, 54; Egorova 2003, p. 197; Uezersbi 2003, p. 257, 258, 259.

¹¹ Baeva 2007, p. 24, 25.

¹² Arhiv na Ministerstvo na vashnite raboti (AMVnR), op. 4p, a.e. 8, l. 67-68.

¹³ Bachmaier 1998, p. 94, 96.

¹⁴ Mark (n/a), 7, 8, 14, 15, 16, 33, 34.

¹⁵ Mueller 2011, p. 15.

consisting of an equal number of social democrats, conservatives and communists, raising fears in the West that Austria might follow the path of the other Eastern European states.¹⁶

The Soviet Union constantly supported the local communists in their struggle for power, with the aim of consolidating their influence in the Soviet enterprises of the USIA concern and establishing various “democratic” organizations. The forces of the communists must be increased step by step, overshadowing the political opponents with the result that a people’s democracy and then socialism could be built without revolution. Parallel to this, attempts were being made to split the non-communist parties.¹⁷ In connection with this strategy, and in the context of the Kremlin’s struggle against the formation of Western blocs such as NATO and the European Defence Community (EDC), in the first half of the 1950s Austrian communists joined their comrades in Western Europe in propagandizing for peace and neutrality, which would prevent Austria from joining any Western alliance.¹⁸

Sofia also contributed to Moscow’s efforts to expand its sphere of influence. According to the Bulgarian minister plenipotentiary in Vienna, Nikola Razlogov, the various pro-Soviet initiatives such as the “struggle for peace” started late. In August 1950, in a conversation with Soviet ambassador Koptelov, the latter expressed a desire for Sofia to regularly send propaganda material to the newspaper *Österreichische Zeitung*, a publication of the Soviet Information Centre in the Austrian capital, which would help “expose” the government coalition consisting of the People’s and Socialist Parties. In the words of the Soviet diplomat, “the fight against them must be waged ruthlessly and the KPÖ must be assisted.” In the same vein, the Bulgarian legation recommended that the central KPÖ press organ, the *Volksstimme* newspaper, and the party-affiliated newspaper *Die Abendzeitung* should also be used.¹⁹

The pages of the Communist Party’s printed newspaper organ, *Rabotnichesko Delo* (*Workers’ Deed*), began to devote a good deal of attention to issues related to the Austrian state treaty, celebrations of the anniversaries of Lenin’s death, the October Revolution and Austria’s liberation by the Red Army in 1945, statements by the KPÖ leadership condemning “Tito’s fascist clique”, and the internal political situation in the Central European country.²⁰ Apart

¹⁶ Mueller 2006, p. 63, 67; Ferring 1968, p. 654; Stelzl-Marx *et al.* 2018, 175.

¹⁷ Mueller 2017, p. 66, 79; Mueller 2006, p. 71.

¹⁸ Mueller 2011, p. 46.

¹⁹ AMVnR, op. 2p, a.e. 2, l. 22, 36, 37, 72.

²⁰ Rabotnichesko delo, vol. 1, 1 January 1951, p. 4; vol. 127, 7 May 1950, p. 6; vol. 135, 13 May 1950, p. 4; vol. 179, 28 June 1950, p. 4; vol. 272, 29 September 1950, p. 4; vol. 312, 8

from criticism of the ruling coalition, which was accused of terror against the opposition (the communists), the Bulgarian public was also made aware of the “growing influence of democratic forces” through various initiatives such as the “struggle for peace and neutrality”, defined as “the most important task of the Austrian communists.” In connection with the 1950–1953 bloc confrontation Austria was even seen as part of the Belgrade-Athens-Ankara axis that was to link this coalition with West Germany as part of the overall NATO strategy.²¹

In parallel with this, *Rabotnichesko delo* published a number of articles which should testify to the good relations between the Bulgarian and Austrian “working people.” These related above all to the celebration of anniversaries of the death of Georgi Dimitrov, addresses from the Central Committee of the BCP to the Central Committee of the KPÖ on various occasions and visits by prominent Austrian Communist activists to Bulgaria.²²

Hopes for a strengthening of communist (and hence Soviet) influence in Austria, however, were not fulfilled. Drawing attention to the propaganda in the pages of the Bulgarian press, Oliver Reséguier, temporary head of the Austrian legation in Sofia, noted that the Cominformbureau liked to speak of “terror” rather than “the pitiful performance of the Austrian Communists” in the elections.²³ In an interesting report to the Bulgarian Foreign Ministry, ambassador Razlogov sought to find the reasons for these weaknesses in the KPÖ’s inability to sway the youth, especially the student population. Students in Vienna were described as “inert”, “passive” and “politically unoriented”, representing a “crude mass waiting for its master.” According to him, “the strength of the youth movement is a measure of the acuteness of the struggles,” but at the same time the student was not helped to understand “on which side his interests lie, which camp provides him with a better future.” Thus, in the opinion of the Bulgarian diplomat, the poor work of the Austrian comrades among the youth predetermined

November 1950, p. 6; vol. 23, 23 January 1951 p. 4; vol. 26, 1 May 1951, p. 4; vol. 135, 15 May 1951, p. 3; vol. 43, 9 February 1952, p. 4; vol. 355, 20 December 1952, p. 3; vol. 20, 20 January 1953, p. 4; vol. 243, 31 August 1953, p. 4.

²¹ *Rabotnichesko delo*, vol. 46, 15 February 1950, p. 4; vol. 96, 6 April 1950, p. 4; vol. 115, 25 April 1950, p. 4; vol. 123, 3 May 1950, p. 4; vol. 133, 18 May 1950, p. 4; vol. 139, 19 May 1950, p. 4; vol. 41, 10 February 1951, p. 4; vol. 67, 8 March 1951, p. 4; vol. 79, 20 March 1951, p. 4; vol. 150, 30 May 1951, p. 4; vol. 328, 24 November 1951, p. 3; vol. 48, 12 February 1952, p. 4; vol. 51, 20 February 1953, p. 4; vol. 257, 14 September 1953, c.3; vol. 272, 29 September 1953, p. 3.

²² *Rabotnichesko delo*, vol. 251, 8 September 1950, p. 4; vol. 254, 11 September 1950, p. 4; vol. 308, 24 November 1951, p. 3; vol. 185, 4 July 1953, p. 4; vol. 195, 14 July 1953, p. 4.

²³ Österreichisches Staatsarchiv (ÖStA) AdR, BKA/AA, Pol, Bulgarien-3, GZ.317160/1953, Zl. 318090/1953, Innenpolitik, Zeitungsartikel. Die bulgarische Presse zu den österreichischen Wahlen. 27 Februar 1953, p. 1.

the expulsion of the party from the political and social life of the country.²⁴

Following the Soviet strategy, the impression was given that the People's Republic of Bulgaria refracted its relations with Vienna through the prism of contacts between the BCP and the KPÖ rather than with the Austrian government. For the period 1950–1953, only one brief notice was published on the pages of the printed organ of the BCP, that between 21 May and 7 June 1952 official negotiations were held in Sofia between Bulgarian and Austrian delegations to increase the exchange of goods between the two countries.²⁵ Almost all the news relating to Austria on the pages of *Rabotnichesko delo* came gravitated around the Communists in the Central European country, the Soviet occupation authorities, and publications of the Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union (TASS).

The situation of the trade between the two countries was not much different. After the Second World War, Austrian exports were mainly oriented toward highly developed industrial countries. On the one hand, because of its participation in the American reconstruction program, the Austrian government undertook certain restrictions in its trade with the people's democracies and especially in the export of raw materials, which were considered strategic. The reports of the Bulgarian legation to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 1950 onwards consistently stated that the output of heavy metal and mechanical engineering from the western occupation areas, in which the Bulgarian government was interested because of its industrialization plans, was being absorbed entirely by the West.²⁶ On the other hand, however, Bulgarian commercial organizations also found themselves unprepared to trade with the "capitalist world."²⁷

The exchange of goods between Sofia and Vienna was carried out on the basis of the 1948 Agreement and, according to Art. 9 of the Agreement, a joint commission was set up to examine, renew and propose new lists of goods. As a result, for the period 1950–1955, with a 13% (at times dropping to 6.9%) of Western countries' share in Bulgaria's foreign trade, Austria was always among the three most important Western European trading partners of Sofia, with an overall participation of nearly 3.2%.²⁸ However, the implementation of the Austrian-Bulgarian clearing agreement was not smooth for several reasons. As a system, clearing relies on the clearing of imports and exports, which means that all the terms of a contract, especially the delivery of the predetermined quantity

²⁴ AMVnR, op. 9p, a.e. 2, l. 3–5.

²⁵ *Rabotnichesko delo*, vol. 162, 10 June 1952, p. 4.

²⁶ AMVnR, op. 2, a.e. 2p, l. 75; op. 9p, a.e. 2, l. 67; op. 6, a.e. 141, l. 18; Rathkolb 1995, 136.

²⁷ AMVnR, op. 9p, a.e. 2, l. 67; op. 5p, a.e. 1, l. 123.

²⁸ Bachmaier 1998, p. 97; Kostov 2016, p. 618; Marcheua 2016, p. 87.

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and quality of goods, will be fulfilled, but in practice, in the period 1950–1956, according to the Bulgarian legation, the implementation of the agreement was very problematic and even threatened the trade relations between the two countries.

It should be pointed out that in its trade with Austria, Bulgaria used the practice of so-called “package” deals, which means that the Alpine country was offered not only the goods that were valuable to it, such as wheat, tobacco, corn, rye, oils, etc., but also other goods that they agreed to buy but did not need, only to be sold the items they needed. The trade representative in Vienna, Mihail Paskalev, repeatedly spoke of “great dissatisfaction” with Bulgarian trade practices. In his words, all Bulgarian proposals were viewed with suspicion and the Austrian Foreign Trade Commission was even beginning to insist in front of the trade representatives that when contracts were renewed, the Bulgarian side must sign a written pledge that it will fulfil its delivery commitments. For these reasons Bulgaria ranked last among the people’s democracies with which Vienna traded.²⁹ The poor state of the exchange of goods between the two countries was also the subject of a conversation between the director of the Austrian Foreign Trade Commission and the Bulgarian trade representative at the legation on 20 June 1951. The occasion was a discussion of the trade lists of goods to be imported into Austria to cover the clearing obligations of the People’s Republic of Bulgaria. In them the Austrian representative stated unequivocally that they would be accepted only because they included the supply of goods such as tobacco and eggs, and that if they were not fulfilled Sofia’s “avenues for further work in Austria would be closed.”³⁰

This marked the beginning of the criticism in Nikola Razlogov’s reports to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (a practice that would continue under his successor Varban Angelov), that the Ministry of Foreign Trade was not fulfilling its clearing agreements, and in December 1953 he even stated that the latter were “conducting a trade policy of sabotage with Austria. Consciously or not, they are frustrating every single commercial transaction.”³¹ In support of his thesis, the Bulgarian diplomat used a memorial note by the new trade representative Nikola Nikushev, on the trade lists drawn up by the Ministry of Foreign Trade and the foreign trade organization Hraneksport, dated December 1953. In it, out of the 30,000 tons of wheat, 10,000 tons of rye, 3,000 tons of corn, 3,000 tons of sunflower seeds, 500 tons of rice, 200 tons of sunflower oil, etc. that had

²⁹ AMVnR, op. 3p, a.e. 10, l. 28.

³⁰ AMVnR, op. 9p, a.e. 2, l. 48.

³¹ AMVnR, op. 6p, a.e. 103, l. 25; op. 9p, a.e. 2, l. 67.

been planned, it turned out that a large part of the goods could not be exported, and that only a few days after the goods lists had been handed over to Vienna. Subsequently the lists were immediately revised, but only goods which the Austrians did not need were offered.³²

As a result, during the discussion of the budget of the Ministry of Trade in the Austrian Parliament, Razlogov, who was present at the meetings, witnessed the sharp criticism leveled at the People's Republic of Bulgaria for the failure to meet the clearing commissions, for the poor quality of Bulgarian production and for the inability of the Bulgarian side to trade. In a report on this occasion, he again pointed out that the Ministry of Trade must understand that Bulgarians could not "impose on the Austrians what is advantageous to us ... we must be more flexible in trade."³³ Eventually it was trade that would become the main instrument of Sofia's new course toward Vienna in the period 1954–1960.

Interestingly, those in the Austrian Legation who were relatively well informed about Bulgaria's economic development tended to attribute the supply problem less to unrealistic production plans than to the international context of bloc confrontation generated by the Cold War. According to Reséguier, Sofia was more interested in expanding economic relations with the USSR and the people's democracies, while "trade with the rest of the world is not discussed." The Austrian diplomat even concluded that trade relations with non-socialist countries would only be tolerated as improvised and within very narrow limits.³⁴

Stalin's death in 1953 was a turning point in international relations and marked the beginning of a certain "thawing" and easing of tensions between the Eastern and Western blocs as a result of the ideological and military-political confrontation that had begun in 1947. Under Nikita Khrushchev's leadership and following the 20th Congress of the CPSU, Soviet policy began to emphasize "peaceful coexistence." War, especially nuclear war, was seen as equally unacceptable, which placed emphasis on peaceful paths to social revolution and peaceful competition between capitalism and socialism. Essentially without abrogating the two-camp theory of Andrei Zhdanov, one of the leading ideologues in the CPSU, peaceful coexistence relied on mutually beneficial trade and cultural exchange, while revolution was defined as a private matter of in-

³² AMVnR, op. 6p, a.e. 103, l. 27-28.

³³ AMVnR, op. 9p, a.e. 2, l. 67; op. 6p, a.e. 103, l. 25, 26.

³⁴ ÖStA, AdR, BKA/AA, Pol. Bulgarien-3, GZ. 146908/1952, Zl. 159394/1952, Bulgarien wirtschaftlicher Situationsbericht, Bundeskanzleramt, Auswärtige Angelegenheiten, Abteilung, p. 2.

dividual countries and peoples.³⁵ In parallel, Soviet policy promoted “neutrality” and “non-alignment” in order to slow down the integration of non-socialist states into the Western sphere, which was directly linked to the processes of decolonization in Africa and Asia and the entry of West Germany (after the failure of the EDC) into NATO in 1955. This played no small role in the signing of the Austrian State Treaty on 15 May 1955, the result of formal and informal negotiations between Vienna and Moscow, and ensured not only Austria’s permanent neutrality but also the possibility for the latter to be presented as a “model” or “example” of coexistence that would be tempting to other European states (e.g., Italy and the FRG).³⁶

The signing of the treaty undoubtedly had a serious impact on Bulgaria’s policy toward Austria, but the roots of the change of course can be traced back to 1954. In Valko Chervenkov’s report to the Sixth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union on 20 February 1954, besides expressing unreserved support for the “peace-loving foreign policy of the USSR,” the Bulgarian government also stated its desire to normalize relations and develop trade ties with capitalist countries.³⁷

Adhering to the Soviet policy on international problems and especially on the Austrian question, the Communist Party of Bulgaria, using the party organ *Rabotnichesko Delo*, began to change the image of Austria. For the period February 1954 – April 1955, alongside articles stressing the danger of the “revival of West German militarism,” of the “Anschluss” and the “natural connection between the German question and the Austrian question,” it nevertheless allowed the appearance of material which dealt with the geographical situation of the country, its resources (natural, demographic, and productive), and what impact this would have on NATO. This is why the peace treaty with Vienna was placed under the heading of “the cause of peace in Europe” and “ensuring the safety of the European peoples,” which only a “sovereign,” “democratic,” and “independent” Austria could ensure.³⁸

Also of interest is the minimization of critical materials towards the Austrian government on the pages of the BPC’s press organ – whose ultimate source was

³⁵ Gaddis 2005, pp. 122–123; Mastny 2010, pp. 316–318; Mueller 2011, p. 45, 47.

³⁶ Harrod 2010, p. 219; Stourzh 1981, p. 181, 186; Ferring 1968, p. 656, 658; Mueller 2011, p. 47, 48, 79; Rathkolb 1995, p. 132; Pavlenko & Ruggenthaler 2018, p. 203, 215, 216.

³⁷ CDA, f. 1-B, op. 5, a.e. 132, l. 27; *Rabotnichesko delo*, vol. 57, 22 February 1954, p. 2.

³⁸ *Rabotnichesko delo*, vol. 45, 14 February 1954, p. 4; vol. 46, 15 February 1954, p. 3; vol. 137, 17 May 1954, p. 4; vol. 251, 19 August 1954, p. 3; vol. 233, 21 August 1954, p. 4; vol. 363, 29 December 1954, p. 3; vol. 124, 4 May 1955, p. 4; vol. 72, 13 May 1955, p. 4; vol. 103, 13 April, 1955, p. 3; vol. 118, 28 April 1955, p. 3; vol. 123, 3 May 1955, p. 3.

usually the KPÖ. It could be said that the orchestrated propaganda gave the impression of a neutral attitude toward the ruling coalition in Austria, which from 1954, although retaining its pro-Western image throughout the pages of *Rabotnichesko Delo*, also began to emerge in a different light, as a “victim” of US pressure, which prevented the resolution of the Austrian question.³⁹

The improvement in relations was also linked to the new economic policy, which first began to be applied in the USSR and then in the other Eastern bloc countries. Within the framework of the emerging specialization, Bulgaria was given priority to develop traditional industries, such as agriculture and the food industry, which did not appeal to the ruling elite in Sofia, which also wanted to develop heavy industry. After the refusal of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON) to increase imports of Bulgarian products from the latter sector, the country's leadership was forced to seek outlets for Bulgarian goods and purchase the products refused by Moscow on the international market. The goal was to increase exports as a way out of the crisis, which would stimulate the expansion of commercial contacts. The admission of the People's Republic of Bulgaria to the United Nations in 1955 helped to achieve this. Then, a number of economic agreements with West Germany, France, Turkey and others were renewed.⁴⁰

The change in the Bulgarian policy was also reflected by the new temporary head of the Austrian legation in Sofia - Adolf Hobel. In the conversation he had with the Bulgarian deputy foreign minister Lyuben Gerasimov in May 1954, they discussed the possibility of importing larger quantities of Austrian industrial goods related to the implementation of the new five-year plan. Since the exchange of goods between the two countries was on a clearing basis, it was expected that the Austrian side would also take over the import of more Bulgarian agricultural produce.⁴¹ Two months later in July, this time when the Austrian diplomat met with the Bulgarian Foreign Minister Mincho Neychev, the latter stressed the interest of the Bulgarian government in the full normalization of relations between Austria and Bulgaria. To this end, a new Bulgarian diplomatic representative was sent to Vienna – Varban Angelov, who was described as an “excellent economist.”⁴² This proba-

³⁹ Rabotnichesko delo, vol. 60, 1 March 1954, p. 6; vol. 71, 12 March 1954, p. 3; vol. 135, 15 March 1954, p. 3; vol. 136, 16 May 1954 p. 3; vol. 138, 18 May 1954, p. 3; vol. 88, 29 March 1955, p. 3.

⁴⁰ Marcheva 2016, p. 106, 113, 117, 118; Zhivkov 1997, p. 504.

⁴¹ ÖStA, AdR, BKA/AA, Pol, Bulgarien-2, GZ.143998/1954, Zl.261256/1954, Zu den österreichischen-bulgarischen Beziehungen, p. 1.

⁴² ÖStA, AdR, BKA/AA, Pol, Bulgarien-2, GZ.143998/1954, Zl.261256/1954, Vorsprache

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bly played its part, because on 13 November 1954 a new Austrian-Bulgarian trade agreement was signed for the following year, which provided for the clearing to reach \$8,000,000. On this occasion, Sofia did its utmost to increase its quotas for corn and wheat, despite the existing difficulties in fulfilling them, in order to meet Austrian needs as much as possible. Moreover, taking advantage of all this during one of Hobel's visits to the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs after the clearing deal was concluded, the Bulgarian side even expressed its hope that bilateral agreements would not be limited to the economic sector.⁴³

Taking advantage of the declaration of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR of 9 February 1955 on the establishment of relations between the parliaments of the various countries, on 29 August the National Assembly of Bulgaria proposed first to invite parliamentary delegations from the USSR and the Balkan countries, and then from France, Great Britain and Italy, which played an important role in international affairs, as well as from Austria and Sweden, which Sofia was interested in expanding economic and cultural ties to.⁴⁴ All this, together with the appointment of Varban Angelov as Minister Plenipotentiary, may be said to have marked the main lines of Bulgarian policy toward Austria, which was directed toward improving the climate in the commercial and economic spheres. In turn, this should lay the foundations for closer cultural, and eventually political, contacts.

The pursuit of this strategy, however, necessitated a change in trade policy, and this in the period 1955–1957, when trade between the two countries was at a standstill and, according to the Bulgarian legation, the prospects for growth were pessimistic. The reasons can be found in the structure of Austrian exports – industrial products such as tools, machinery and means of transport that Bulgaria needed were competitive and well marketed on international markets, where it was more profitable for Vienna to market them. At the same time, Bulgarian exports to the Central European country were such that the latter did not feel compelled to expand its trade with Sofia, which forced Bulgaria, according to Angelov, to “ask for the purchase of goods, which is too unprofitable.”⁴⁵ The withdrawal of Soviet troops from Austria also had a serious impact on Bulgarian trade policy. By 1955, Bulgaria had become the largest supplier of foodstuffs to the USIA. This Soviet concern encompassed over 400 enterprises

beim Aussenminister Mintscho Neitscheff, p. 1.

⁴³ ÖStA, AdR, BKA/AA, Pol, Bulgarien-2, GZ.143998/1954, Zl.261256/1954, Zu den österreichischen-bulgarischen Beziehungen, p. 1–2.

⁴⁴ CDA, f. 1-B, op. 6, a.e. 2653, l. 24, 26, 28.

⁴⁵ AMVnR, op. 13p, a.e. 21, l. 146–147; op. 14p, a.e. 23, l. 14–15.

(of which nearly 250 were of prime importance with over 2,000 workers each), used an exception in the Austrian customs treaties, and carried out trade with the Eastern Bloc. For this reason, after 1955 Sofia lost one of its largest and most undemanding customers, which absorbed a significant part of Bulgarian export production.⁴⁶

It is in such conditions that the state and party leadership of the country came up with an initiative to “intensify Bulgarian foreign policy.” At a meeting of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union with the diplomatic representatives of the People's Republic of Bulgaria (28 June – 2 July 1957), Varban Angelov directly stated that the withdrawal of Soviet troops had reduced the exchange of goods between Sofia and Vienna and that, at that point, “real contracts should be concluded and implemented” by the Bulgarian side.⁴⁷ No doubt in this statement he was referring to the poor performance of the exchange of goods with Austria, which for 1955 was realized at only 45% or \$3.6 million of the planned \$8 million. The reason for this, he said, lay in the “inflated trade conventions [which resulted] from the inflated and unrealistic production plans in the country.” He went on to warn that such a policy could have consequences for Sofia, because the Austrian government concluded its treaties not only with a view to its subsistence and production needs, but also, in Hobel's words, to “maintain the traditional ties between Austria and Bulgaria.”⁴⁸ In some of his reports, while talking about relations with Vienna, Angelov made a proposal for a different approach in foreign trade policy. He was of the opinion that Bulgaria was throwing too much energy into its desire to trade with the whole world without taking into account the real possibilities of the country. Sofia should be more modest and “concentrate its exports along traditional routes – few in number, but mapped out thanks to years of practice,” i.e. to the markets of Central and Western Europe.⁴⁹

Another significant factor influencing Bulgarian policy toward Austria was the relationship between Sofia and Bonn. Until 1953, West Germany ranked third among Bulgaria's West European trading partners, while Austria was first and Great Britain second. Taking advantage of the Soviet policy of peaceful co-existence, the Bulgarian leadership expanded its trade relations and in the period 1954–1956 Bonn gradually took first place in Bulgaria's total trade with the West, which led to a reduction in the opportunities for expanding trade with

⁴⁶ AMVnR, op. 7p, a.e. 54, l. 114; op. 2p, a.e. 3, l. 75, 76; op. 8p, a.e. 37, l. 245; op. 8p, a.e. 38, l. 174; Bischof *et al.* 2000, 84, 126.

⁴⁷ CDA, f. 1-B, op. 5, a.e. 269, l. 5, 108.

⁴⁸ AMVnR, op. 7p, a.e. 54, l. 282; op. 7p, a.e. 51, l. 37, 83, 84.

⁴⁹ AMVnR, op. 8p, a.e. 37, l. 245.

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Austria.⁵⁰ It is no coincidence that reports from the Bulgarian legation to the Foreign Ministry placed an emphasis on the country's trade policy toward Vienna, stressing that during the "past ten years [the Austrian state] was the most accessible route for us to the West through the Iron Curtain," and that it was a supplier of much-needed machinery for the country's industrialization.⁵¹ This is probably why Sofia was beginning to pay more attention to the implementation of the clearing agreement. Thus, if in 1955 the fulfilment was only 45%, in 1956 it was 76%, in 1957 it reached 85%, and in 1959 according to the data of the Trade Representation it was 100%.⁵² In practice, this meant a new perception of the importance of Austria, which was not only seen as a traditional market, but now also as a "gateway" to the West.

How valuable the cooperation with Vienna was for Sofia can be seen from an interesting case. In 1956, the Bulgarian Ministry of Transportation undertook the uneasy task of increasing the rail transport of people and goods from Western and Central Europe to the Middle East, by diverting the traffic, which hitherto passed through Greece, through the territory of Bulgaria – shortening the travel distance by over 400 km. However, this could only occur at the annual conferences to draw up international train timetables, making it necessary for Sofia to seek the support of an influential country such as Austria. Austrian railways occupy a central position in Europe and almost all European international trains pass through them. With the assistance of Brunno Kepnik, the director of traffic of the Austrian railways, it was decided that the Simplon-Orient-Express and the Balkan-Express would pass through Bulgarian territory. A subsequent decision of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party recommended that Kepnik be invited to Bulgaria for a holiday, pointing out that cooperation between the Austrian and Bulgarian railway administrations would not only facilitate the carriage of passengers, but that in the future, as Bulgarian exports to Western markets increased, this assistance would be "even more necessary, and personal contact with Kepnik would make it easier for us."⁵³

Bulgaria's policy towards Austria was not hindered even during the Hungarian Revolution of 23 October – 11 November 1956. Of course, Sofia expressed solidarity with the USSR and other socialist countries, and in the period December 1956 – January 1957 several articles in *Rabotnichesko delo* spoke of Austrian authorities "detaining" Hungarian refugees and "helping" them to be

⁵⁰ AMVnR, op. 8p, a.e. 38, l. 175; Dobriyanov 1982, 144.

⁵¹ AMVnR, op. 7p, a.e. 51, l. 84; op. 13p, a.e. 21, l. 146.

⁵² CDA, f. 1-B, op. 5, a.e. 269, l. 188; AMVnR, op. 14p, a.e. 23, l. 13; op. 15p, a.e. 47, l. 1–2.

⁵³ CDA, f. 1-B, op. 6, a.e. 3281, l. 1–4.

sent to Canada, South America, Australia, and the USA. Some articles also addressed the propaganda of Radio Free Europe and deplored the "recruitment of refugees by West German agents."⁵⁴

It should be noted, however, that these publications were mainly TASS or Hungarian-sourced materials, avoiding statements by Bulgarian officials. In practice, after 1955–1956 Bulgaria committed itself to "monitoring" the observance of Austrian neutrality and avoided taking extreme positions towards Vienna. Thus, in the midst of the Eastern bloc campaign against "Austrian interference" in Hungarian events, in early January 1957, an Austrian government delegation arrived in Sofia for negotiations on the exchange of goods between Austria and Bulgaria, and in November talks were held between the delegations of the two countries on property issues.⁵⁵ In February 1958, in a conversation between the Austrian Foreign Minister Leopold Figl and the Bulgarian Minister Plenipotentiary Pavel Tagarov, the latter raised the issue of appointing a permanent Minister Plenipotentiary in Sofia, which, according to the Bulgarian side, would "undoubtedly lead to even greater economic and cultural rapprochement" between the two countries.⁵⁶

Parallel to trade relations, as part of its policy the Bulgarian party and state leadership paid special attention to the possibilities of expanding cultural relations with Austria. Up to this point, the Committee for Friendship and Cultural Relations Abroad (CFCRA), established in 1951, had set out measures to systematically promote abroad the achievements of the Bulgarian state in science and art. The aim was to export propaganda to Western Europe, which consisted of sending printed material, photographs, and films. The main disseminators were Bulgarian diplomatic missions, ideological supporters and societies for friendship and cultural relations. In the second half of the 1950s, under the influence of factors such as the 20th Congress of the CPSU, a new understanding of the tasks and possibilities of cultural relations began to take shape.⁵⁷

Up to this point, Sofia had relied mainly on Soviet cultural institutes for cultural propaganda. With the transformation of Austria into a neutral state and the withdrawal of Soviet troops from the country, the favorable opportuni-

⁵⁴ Rabotnichesko delo, vol. 336, 1 December 1956, p. 4; vol. 338, 3 December 1956, p. 3; vol. 342, 7 December 1956, p. 3; vol. 345, 10 December 1956, p. 4; vol. 346, 11 December 1956, p. 3; vol. 355, 20 December 1956, p. 4; vol. 2, 2 January 1957, p. 4.

⁵⁵ AMVnR, op. 15p, a.e. 32a, l. 91; Rabotnichesko delo, vol. 11, 11 January 1957, p. 1; vol. 26, 26 January 1957, p. 1.

⁵⁶ AMVnR, op. 14p, a.e. 32, l. 1.

⁵⁷ Kalinova 1997, p. 242, 243.

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ties for the maintenance of propaganda diminished.⁵⁸ A decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union of 8 June 1954 recommended that the Foreign Ministry, in view of the new conditions, should concentrate its attention on countries such as Austria, France and West Germany, which “appear to be the most important for our propaganda.” The Legation in Vienna should work to expand existing contacts and to establish new ones with representatives of the Austrian public, such as university professors, cultural figures, merchants, and local journalists, including representatives of Western telegraph agencies. The existing cultural and educational organization “9 September” in the Austrian capital, which united Bulgarian students, gardeners and merchants, already took into account the “geographical and political position” of Austria in the relations between the “Western world and the popular democracies,” and therefore had to go beyond the internal life of the Bulgarian colony and legation.⁵⁹

This played no small role in the establishment of the Austrian-Bulgarian Society on 17 November 1955, which the Bulgarian state had been trying to establish since 1953.⁶⁰ In March 1956, in a conversation between Karl Braunias, the head of the Cultural Affairs Department of the Austrian Foreign Ministry, and Ivan Nikolov, the secretary of the Bulgarian Legation, the latter noted the favorable attitude of Vienna to the issue of strengthening cultural ties between the Bulgarian and Austrian Academies of Sciences, through the exchange of publications and visits. The possibility of organizing mutual radio broadcasts was also discussed. On this occasion, in connection with the celebration of the 200th anniversary of Mozart’s birth, Radio Sofia organized special broadcasts featuring works by the great Austrian composer.⁶¹ These attempts to strengthen cultural ties were welcomed by the CFCRA, but Nikolov pointed out that “for the time being, we should avoid raising the issue of concluding a bilateral cultural agreement” with the Austrian side. The reason for this was Braunias’s opinion that cultural ties should be “strengthened first,” which was not only his opinion but also the official opinion of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Education of Austria.⁶² In this connection, in 1957, Angelov proposed to proceed step by step and to use the Bulgarian opera singers Dimitar Uzunov and Nikolai Gyaurov as a starting point, with whom “we will struggle to break

⁵⁸ AMVnR, op. 7p, a.e. 56, l. 21; op. 7p, a.e. 98, l. 27.

⁵⁹ CDA, f. 1-B, op. 6, a.e. 2192, l. 64; AMVnR, op. 7p, a.e. 70, l. 29, 30; op. 7p, a.e. 53, l. 9, 18; op. 6p, a.e. 145, l. 49.

⁶⁰ AMVnR, op. 7p, a.e. 70, l. 65; *Rabotnichesko delo*, vol. 324, 20 November 1955, p. 4.

⁶¹ AMVnR, op. 8p, a.e. 50, l. 2, 3, 9.

⁶² AMVnR, op. 8p, a.e. 50, l. 3, 4, 8.

through the iron curtain in culture.”⁶³

Parallel to this, in the period 1957–1960, attempts were also made to “break through” in the Austrian press. Whereas in earlier years Sofia had mainly used KPÖ-related publications, the focus now shifted to the “bourgeois press.” The Legation had to point out the absence of disputed territorial or minority issues between Bulgaria and Austria and the existence of a certain closeness in the past. It was appreciated that much of the information about the Bulgarian state in the Austrian press was objective in nature and could “serve as a starting point for a wider penetration of the Austrian bourgeois press,” with an emphasis on political and cultural publications.⁶⁴ In addition, much of the Austrian press was read by foreign correspondents, who through their articles could influence public opinion in their countries. Particular attention was paid to publications that gravitated around the People's Party (ÖVP) and to the establishment of “casual and friendly” relations with people such as Dr. Herbert Husinsky, the editor-in-chief of the *Neue Österreichische*, and Günther Haziba, the director of the *Österreichische Neue Tageszeitung* (the central organ of the People's Party).⁶⁵

Invitations were sent through various state-owned companies such as Balkantourist to Austrian journalists to visit Bulgaria. The aim was of course, on the one hand, to publish “positive material” in the Austrian press for the development of tourism in Bulgaria, which would attract more foreign tourists, and on the other – to propagandize economic and cultural achievements and expand “economic and cultural cooperation between Bulgaria and Austria.” As a result, in 1958 Husinsky, Haziba and journalists from the newspaper *Die Wirtschaft* were the first representatives of the Austrian press to visit the People's Republic of Bulgaria after the Second World War. The success of this assignment was aided by the deterioration of relations between Rome and Vienna over the Tyrol issue, because of which Austrian tourists began to shift to the Bulgarian Black Sea coast.⁶⁶

Adherence to the previous political course toward Austria became particularly necessary after the Seventh Congress of the Bulgarian Communist Party in the summer of 1958. It was influenced by the campaign launched at the same time in the USSR to reach and surpass the highly developed capitalist countries. To realize this “leap” in the country's development, it was necessary to create additional capacities in heavy and light industry, import machinery and technol-

⁶³ CDA, f. 1-B, op. 5, a.e. 269, l. 188; AMVnR, op. 13p, a.e. 8, l. 21–24.

⁶⁴ AMVnR, op. 16p, a.e. 26, l. 4–5; op. 15p, a.e. 68, l. 4.

⁶⁵ AMVnR, op. 15p, a.e. 70, l. 7–8.

⁶⁶ CDA, f. 1-B, op. 33, a.e. 138, l. 35; AMVnR, op. 16p, a.e. 1, l. 1–11; op. 15p, a.e. 70, l. 8.

ogy. In general, the Kremlin supported Bulgaria's rapid industrialization efforts with resources, finances, and materials, but it could not meet all the increased needs in the short timeframe for implementing this plan. Sofia's partners in COMECON were also unable to meet the increased demand for credit and machinery, and Todor Zhivkov turned to the highly developed Western countries. He obtained Khrushchev's agreement to expand trade ties with the West during the talks in the Crimea in 1958 and in February 1959 after the Twenty-First Congress of the CPSU, when the problems of Bulgaria's trade with the socialist countries were discussed.⁶⁷ Then it became clear that the latter did not insist on buying Bulgarian agricultural products and tobacco, nor processed food and industrial goods. As a result, Zhivkov began to encourage contacts with Western countries. From them, he counted on Bulgaria to obtain the necessary machinery, raw materials, and spare parts while the Bulgarian trade headquarters were tasked with marketing agricultural products there.⁶⁸ Accordingly, the Bulgarian legation considered that in terms of policy toward Austria, new opportunities were opening up, since Austria's membership in the European Free Trade Association put it at a disadvantage compared with the larger Western countries, which would direct the government to seek new trade links with the countries of Eastern Europe, Africa, and Asia.⁶⁹

In this connection we should also consider the visit of Zhivko Zhivkov, Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the People's Republic of Bulgaria, Rusi Hristozov, Minister of Internal Trade, and Peko Takov, member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, to Austria from 12 to 20 March 1960. Meetings were arranged with the Minister of Agriculture and Forestry, Dr. Ervard Hermann, the Minister of Trade and Reconstruction, Dr. Fritz Bock, and Vice-Chancellor Bruno Pittermann. At all three meetings, thoughts were exchanged on how to further develop economic and trade ties. The Austrian side appeared to be more interested in receiving some goods "from Bulgaria instead of Italy, because in return for the funds received, [Sofia] will purchase a larger quantity of Austrian industrial goods."⁷⁰

Particularly interesting was the conversation between Bruno Pittermann and Zhivko Zhivkov, which went beyond commercial discussions. In it the Chancellor, besides suggesting that Bulgaria use the Danube River route to attract more Austrian tourists, probed Bulgarian opinion on the participation of the FRG in the Danube Commission, through Bavaria. Asked by Zhivkov wheth-

⁶⁷ Marcheva 2016, p. 137, 147.

⁶⁸ Marcheva 2016, p. 148.

⁶⁹ AMVnR, op. 15p, a.e. 55a, l. 17.

⁷⁰ AMVnR, op. 16p, a.e. 4, l. 1–2.

er this would conflict with the country's constitution, Pittermann noted that with "some pressure from the Bavarians [on Bonn] this matter could be settled." This led the Bulgarian minister plenipotentiary in Vienna, Ivan Daskalov, to conclude that the raising of these issues was not accidental, because just the day before his meeting with Zhivkov, Pittermann had returned from a week's stay in West Germany.

The visit of Zhivkov, Hristozov and Takov was seen as successful, especially in the political sphere, because in parallel with trade issues, the first contacts on a high state level were made. According to Daskalov, this paved the way for "more frequent visits, both official and unofficial." Only a few days after the end of the visit, Austria showed its readiness to increase the contingent of Bulgarian tobacco so that the Bulgarian side would have the opportunity to buy more Austrian industrial goods later. In a subsequent conversation about the complex supplies of machinery and entire enterprises on credit, between Ludwig Gregor, adviser to the Austrian Ministry of Commerce, and the secretary of the Bulgarian legation, Stoyan Konstantinov, the former stated that "we are many times more willing to give such credit to Bulgaria, which is a solid trading partner, than ... to India." Last but not least, Sofia should not worry that Austria's accession to the European Free Trade Association posed dangers for the expansion of trade between the two countries because Vienna was able to give customs facilities for the goods Bulgaria would import. All this paved the way for Dr. Fritz Bock's visit to Bulgaria from 28–30 September 1960 on the occasion of the Nineteenth International Fair in Plovdiv.

The decade from 1950 to 1960 clearly emerged as a milestone in Bulgaria's policy toward Austria. It can also be seen as a founding moment in Austrian-Bulgarian relations until 1989. During the 1950s, contacts between the two countries fell victim to the international East-West confrontation, and in the period 1950–1953 they were probably at their lowest point. Again, the Cold War, in particular the changing situation following Stalin's death, proved to be the driving impulse for a new course. Faced with a number of economic difficulties, Sofia benefited from a policy of peaceful coexistence, without abandoning its pro-Soviet course, and managed to find its way toward a pragmatic policy vis-à-vis Vienna, at the heart of which lay precisely the solution of economic problems. In addition to being a traditional market, Austria began to be perceived as a "gateway" to Western Europe. Not coincidentally, this period set the foundations which, in the 1960s, led to the resolution of some outstanding problems in bilateral relations – for example, the property issue. It would not be an exaggeration to point out that the evolution of Sofia's policy in the period 1950–1960 also laid the groundwork that in the following three decades turned

Bulgaria and Austria into one of the most striking examples of peaceful coexistence of countries with different socio-political systems.

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