

Bulgaria's Contribution to the B&R Initiative in the Context of the Geopolitical State of the Balkans

Mariana Tian, Ph.D., is Associate Professor at the Institute for Historical Studies of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. This is the edited text of her address to the International Schiller Institute conference on "Fulfilling the Dream of Mankind," Nov. 26, 2017, in Bad Soden/Taunus, Germany, which she presented under the title, "Bulgaria's Contribution to the B&R Initiative in the Context of the Geopolitical State of the Balkans." Some subtitles have been added.



Mariana Tian

Dear organizers, dear colleagues,

From the European geopolitical point of view, the Balkans have always been a region difficult to understand and to rule. They are an important connection point between Europe and Asia. The land infrastructure is most commonly associated with trade routes to the Middle and Far East.

Nowadays the Balkans continue to have some problems, but the breezes of change—and to a better future, if I dare to say it—have started to blow again. Some of the contributing factors to this improvement and increased intensity of relations among the Central and East European (CEE) countries are related to the Chinese initiatives “16 + 1” and “Belt and Road.”

I would like to stress a few key points here:

- The West Balkans are something like the hot topic of the future. Even for our Presidency of the Council of the European Union (EU) next year, Bulgaria will have the West Balkans as a priority in regard to future EU enlargement plans.

- Nevertheless, we should not forget the importance of the East Balkans, because they have their geopolitical strengths: big harbors on the Black Sea, political and economical stability, they are already members of the Union and a final frontier.

- Only united—by analogy with Chinese philosophy of harmony and peaceful development—will the Balkans progress and step ahead.

As Prof. David Gosset of the Academia Sinica Europaea in Shanghai noted in the Fifth Euro-China Forum, Bulgaria is a key component of the Black Sea system. This system has traditionally connected the two edges of Eurasia. It was a part of Marco Polo's journeys on the Silk Road. Nestorian Monk Rabban Sawma, envoy of China's Emperor, also crossed it. The Black Sea system has an important role to play in the construction of a more cooperative Eurasia.

The geopolitics of the wider Black Sea region sug-



gests that it will be important for the development of the Silk Road Economic Belt, which spreads over this territory.

On this path is the Europe-Caucasus-Asia Transport Corridor. Part of it is the connection between the Georgian and Bulgarian (and also Romanian) seaports, respectively: Poti (Georgia), Varna and Burgas (Bulgaria), and Constanta (Romania).

The Sea2Sea Corridor

The continuation from the Bulgaria seaports to other corridors is being strategically addressed at the moment. Our Prime Minister, Boyko Borisov, and the Transport, Information Technology, and Communications Minister, Ivaylo Moskovski, have signed a memorandum for a rail transport corridor with Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras and his Infrastructure, Transport, and Networks Minister, Christos Spirtzis.

This event expresses the political willingness of Bulgaria and Greece to create a transport corridor on the Aegean Sea-Black Sea-Danube axis. Named “[Sea2Sea](#),” the project will develop the transport corridor concept by executing connections between the Greek ports of Thessaloniki, Kavala, and Alexandroupoli (on the Aegean Sea) to the three Bulgarian cities

of Burgas and Varna on the Black Sea and Ruse on the Danube, through railway links. It would be a full multi-modal corridor in compliance with the core [Trans-European Transport Network](#) (TEN-T as they call it), so it could possibly get finance through the Juncker Plan and the European Investment Bank. A few of the important benefits of this corridor are these:

- Alexandroupoli has become a strategic port, which provides a fast connection to Burgas and Varna and, according to the experts, the cost of the railway transport will be much lower in terms of dues.

- It will bypass the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits in Turkey and will reduce the travel time from two days to six hours. Of course, this is not only about time; the situation in Turkey is not as easily predictable as in the past, so the construction of this corridor is strategically supported.

- The Ruse-Varna connection will increase the benefits, because it will give access not only between the seas, but also to one of the main transport arteries of Europe—the Danube river.

The tentative cost of the project in its Bulgarian section is around 1 billion euro and about 4 billion for its counterpart in Greece. The transport facilities are supposed to be built within 10 years or so.

The Danube strategy will also play a part in defending the project proposal.

Pan-European Corridor VIII

Another important corridor that goes from the Bulgarian Black Sea coast is the [Pan-European Corridor VIII](#). In this regard, the recent development in the relations between Bulgaria and Greece could also be seen as something positive. There is a political will to strengthen the ties between the two states, which is ar-



ticated with the signing of the Treaty of Friendship, Good-Neighborliness, and Co-operation. This act was necessary and will boost infrastructure cooperation as well as cooperation in other sectors.

Most important, it is another step toward finally starting working on Corridor VIII.

The corridor will link the Black Sea and Adriatic Sea via Bulgaria, Macedonia, and Albania. This link was too long postponed for different reasons, but will be of great benefit in the development of the countries on this East-West axis. During the meeting in July with Macedonian Prime Minister Zoran Zaev, our Foreign Minister, Ekaterina Zaharieva, said that building Corridor VIII will be a high priority for both countries.

Just to mention, last month during the third Cultural Cooperation Forum between China and the Central and East European Countries (CEEC) in Hangzhou, Bulgaria did the right thing (as did other countries in the 16+1 initiative) in supporting the establishment of a China-CEE cultural coordination center in Macedonia.

I will get back to this corridor in a moment.

Bulgaria-Macedonia. Bulgaria and Macedonia will build the rail link between Sofia and Skopje (through Kyustendil and Gyueshevo, and it must be completed by 2027).

The government has approved a memorandum of understanding between the Ministry of Transport, Information Technology, and Communications of the Republic of Bulgaria, and the Ministry of Transport and Communications of the Republic of Macedonia, on the development of the railway links between Sofia and Skopje.

The Bulgarian State is committed to the construction of the railway link between Sofia and Pernik-Radomir-Macedonian border by 2027. Macedonia is in charge of the construction of the segment Kriva Palanka-Deve Bair-Bulgarian border by the end of 2025.

Bulgaria-Albania. Albania, the other concerned party in this initiative, is also experiencing a boost in bilateral relations with Bulgaria. The government in Tirana voted for the amendments to the Minority Pro-



tection Bill, approved by consensus in the country's parliamentary legal committee, identifying that there is a Bulgarian minority, and now it is officially recognized by Albania.

Bulgaria-Serbia. After Serbia built new sections of the highway from the city of Nish, the connection between Bulgaria and Serbia is getting better. In this regard, a good boost in Bulgaria will lead to the Parliament voting for the launch of a toll roads system, which should come into action in 2018. This will untie the hands of the government when they are proposing projects for big investors, and Chinese companies have already expressed interest in this sector in Bulgaria.

Corridor VIII in Relation to Sea2Sea

I will give my expert opinion on Corridor VIII, because there are some controversies over it. There is a belief that the signing of the Sea2Sea memorandum of understanding with Greece in Kavala, on September 6,

was intended to block the realization of the Corridor VIII project. I dare to say that Sea2Sea and Via Egnatia are not mutually exclusive. [A significant part of Corridor VIII follows the ancient Roman road, Via Egnatia, which went from Italy to the Black Sea and Constantinople. Today this route is called Via Egnatia, Egnatia Odos, or the A2 motorway. —ed.]

Here are some facts:

- In northern Greece, the direct railroad connection from Thessaloniki to Igoumenitsa is still to be constructed, as is the Thessaloniki-Kavala-Xanti line.

- The same is the case with Florina (Lerin) in Greece, to Pogradec (Ohrid Lake) and Durrës port (on the Adriatic), both in Albania.

- With some small exceptions (Thessaloniki-Plati), the railroad is not electrified in northern Greece from the border with Bulgaria at Svilengrad to the Ionian Sea.

- In many places there are no railway lines at all, and wherever they are, all are one-way [single track]. The modernization of Ormenio-Alexandroupoli has not been accomplished. Only partial rehabilitation of Thessaloniki-Florina has been done.

The situation of railroad transport on Corridor VIII is as follows:

- Bulgaria is working on the modernization from Burgas to Sofia, with more than two-thirds of the distance being a two-way electrified line. After that, Gyueshevo should be upgraded and electrified from Radomir to the border.

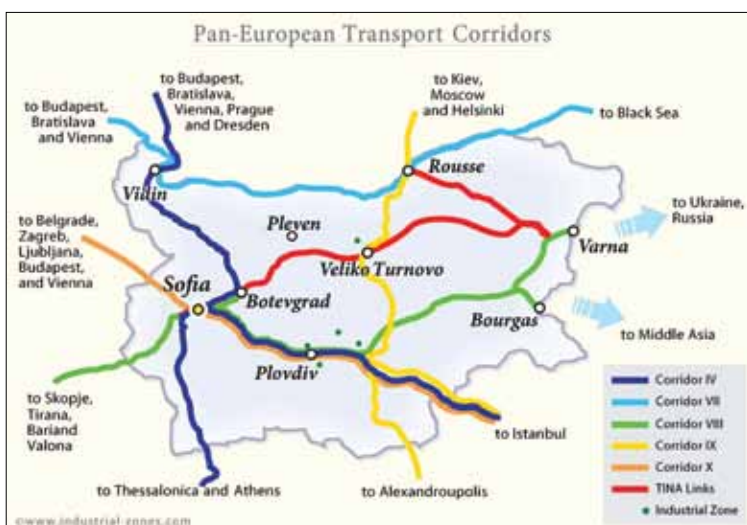
- In Macedonia, new sections should be built from Kumanovo to Gyueshevo, and from Kichevo to the border with Albania. These sections are much shorter than those of the corridor Egnatia. Kumanovo-Gyueshevo will be funded with money from the European Commission and the European Investment Bank (EIB). The remaining route from Kumanovo to Kichevo is for modernization.

- In Albania, the entire, existing route from Drach to Ohrid Lake and the border is for modernization.

This leads to the following overview:

- At first sight, Greece has a significant advantage over Bulgaria, Macedonia, and Albania, because A2 is entirely ready for the southern neighbors and next year Greece is expected to complete the rehabilitation of Ormenio-Ardanio/A2.

- On the other hand, if we analyze, the highway



route from Burgas to Dupnitsa (through Sofia) is ready in Bulgaria, [while the] Dupnitsa-Gyueshevo connection remains. To the west, there is a ready route from Kumanovo to Gostivar and it has been built from Kichevo to Struga (Ohrid). Kumanovo-Gyueshevo remains, [as also] Gostivar-Kichevo and the detour to Kifasan and the Albanian border.

- In Albania the highway from Durrës (Drac) to Tirana is ready and is being built next to Elbasan, which should soon be completed. It remains [to be built] from Elbasan to Kefalasan.

Igoumenitsa is much further from Bari and Brindisi (both in Italy) by sea than the Albanian port of Durrës, and if the destination is southern Italy, even now the time from Burgas along Corridor VIII is less than that of Egnatia.

If the destination is Gibraltar/Atlantic Ocean, then from Bulgaria one travels from Burgas to Kulata to Igoumenitsa on the Struma Motorway, and again, even in terms of the still unfinished A3 route, it is faster on Corridor VIII in Bulgaria than on A2 in Greece.

If the destination is the Suez Canal/Indian Ocean, you can still use the Trakia Highway in Bulgaria to Thessaloniki and Athens, instead of Egnatia.

Lastly, if the destination is Kavala or Alexandroupoli on the Aegean Sea, then the route goes naturally through Svilengrad. The same arguments apply equally to Varna and Ruse.

Whatever Greece does, it cannot stop Corridor VIII, and it will be gradually built.

This concludes my review of the Balkans with respect to the 16+1 and Belt and Road initiatives. Thank you for your attention!