

Although the two countries, since joining the European Union are often viewed as a whole with the same problems, the Government of Romania and the Government of Bulgaria do not show too much initiative for cooperation. While the cross-border flow of people and goods is rising, the price of lack of joint projects is paid by the residents of poorly developed border regions.

On Sunday evening, January 8 this year, Bulgaria has made a request for the urgent supply of electricity from Romania due to low temperatures, which amounted to between minus 11 and minus 16 degrees Celsius. As television BTV reported, on that day electricity consumption reached a record 7,700 megawatt-hours by 7 PM - a level that has not been recorded in the previous 20 years.

On the same night Bulgaria has tried to run the so-called "frozen reserves" from several coal-fired plants, which are usually not active, but are always ready to start producing electricity. After initial problems during their activation, the process has finally been successful and the electrical system was able to meet the increased needs of the citizens. Romania refused Bulgaria's request citing its own "delicate situation" in terms of production and electricity reserves. Bulgaria has previously rejected similar requests from Turkey and Greece for additional export of electricity. However, it is interesting that, despite the described panic, both countries continued regular electricity exports to third countries. In those days, the Romanian electricity exports to Hungary was used at full capacity. During the coldest days Bulgaria continued electricity supply to countries such as Serbia, Macedonia, Greece and Turkey, where part consisted of Bulgarian exports, and a part from the transfer of the Romanian system. Sofia began to limit their own electricity exports only on January 13.

Bulgarian authorities were eager to assure the nation that asking support in electricity from northern neighbor is nothing special or extraordinary. Temenuzka Petkova, the former Minister of Energy, even stressed that the suspension of electricity supply for export purposes is a "common practice" and that there is no need to worry. However, during those cold evenings users of social networks in Bulgaria shared and commented the news on Romanian refusal of the Bulgarian requests, as well as the impression that the Bulgarian energy system was in jeopardy.

Without much analytical effort, the media discourse about the cold weather and various energy and infrastructure difficulties of both countries reveals that Romania and Bulgaria are facing similar problems. It is no secret that their social problems, income levels, etc. are also strikingly similar, putting them at the last place of different rankings among countries of the European Union. Brussels treats two countries as a group, and their comparison on

various economic and other indicators is easy to find in different Romanian and Bulgarian media. However, there is at least one thing that unites them – the expressed resistance to mutual cooperation. Energy and infrastructure projects can serve as a good example of this generally lack of engagement and interest.

Of course, the situation has become more complicated since the two countries joined the EU. For example, in 2013 the “New Europe Bridge” over the Danube was opened and it connected the Bulgarian city of Vidin and the Romanian city of Calafat with road and rail. In addition, in November 2016 the pipeline between cities Ruse and Giurgiu was officially opened. However, even these achievements in bilateral energy and infrastructure integration, implemented with the financial and political support from the European Union, has shown already mentioned unwillingness for cooperation. The pipeline is currently one-way, from Bulgaria to Romania. On the Romanian side it is necessary to construct a compressor station so that gas could flow towards Bulgaria.

While some are willing to blame Bucharest because of unusual “one-way pipeline” there are indications that the Bulgarian government has not negotiated this issue in a good way. On the other hand, the “New Europe Bridge” is the shortest route between the north of Greece and Central and Western Europe and it redirected at least part of the Greek freight transport, which traditionally passed through Macedonia and Serbia. However, long thirteen years have passed since the contract signing between Sofia and Bucharest related to its construction to its opening for traffic. Construction was speeded up after both countries joined the European Union, and as a result of the European pressure. Romania generally opposed to bridge construction because it reduces the distance and time that foreign cars and trucks spend on Romanian soil on their way to Central and Western Europe.

Today’s traffic on the bridge is huge and the company, which manages the bridge has earned from tolls more than EUR10 million in the first nine months last year. But road and rail infrastructure that the bridge connects on both sides of the Danube is yet to be developed. However, Calafat Mayor, Lucian Ciobanu and citizens of Vidin complain that the promised economic growth of underdeveloped region has not yet been achieved. Head of “Department for Strategic Development and Investment Projects” of Bulgarian State Railways, Maria Cakarova, said in April last year that upgrade of the rail network leading to Vidin is “still a priority”, but that it currently “has no positive economic value” as the railway on the Romanian side is not electrified. “Logic requires that the works take place at the same time as the works of Romanian colleagues on their side,” explains Cakarova. Her analysis excludes the fact that during the former government Bulgaria Railways were in

a terrible situation. Railway transport is not attractive at all for the Bulgarian citizens, but few who use the services of BDZ are constantly complaining about being late, delays, poor quality of service and other problems. Bulgaria invests in highway and railway infrastructure, using the resources of the European Union, but these investments are limited to southern Bulgaria, which is more developed than the northern part. While it can be argued that the major transport corridors from Istanbul and Thessaloniki through Sofia towards west are worth developing because of their economic potential and importance for Europe, northeastern Bulgaria remains the least developed region of the European Union. At the same time, residents of Ruse, the city on the Bulgarian side of the Danube that is less than 70 kilometers away from Bucharest, more and more realize that their natural economic center is the capital of Romania. It seems that the whole region between Ruse and the Black Sea port of Varna realize the same fact. The citizens of this part of Bulgaria widely use Bucharest's airport "Otopeni" and their tourist visit to Romania, business relations, as well as education in Romanian universities - are flourishing. Similarly, the opening of its southern neighbors in recent years is noted among Romanians - each year about one million Romanian tourists visit Bulgaria, and most visited are Bulgarian areas on the Black Sea. Upgrading the existing infrastructure is necessary for all this cross-border movement of people. "The Friendship Bridge" that connects Ruse and Giurgiu was built in 1954 and, beside the railway line in each direction; it has one lane for motor vehicles. The capacity of the bridge and border crossing points on both sides often cannot respond to the amount of traffic, both from Bulgaria and Romania, as well as from the Middle East and from Western and Eastern Europe. The two countries signed the agreement for the construction of two more bridges, one of which should connect Silistra and Calarasi, 120 km east of Ruse. At this moment, these places are connected with one of the most-used ferry lines, as it is close to highway Bucharest - Constanta.

In general, it can be said that Bulgaria is more eager than Romania to increase bilateral cooperation. But resistance is visible from both sides of the Danube. There are disputes over the planned route of the Black Sea highway, as well as the route of the underwater power cable from Romania to Turkey. The issue of power cable again restored the issue of separation of economic areas in the Black Sea, which was never carried out. The Romanian-Bulgarian disagreement on matters related to energy and infrastructure could be explained by the different priorities of their foreign policies. Bucharest strategists see the national policy on the regional level in the expansion of relations with Poland. In addition to eternal interest vectors directed towards Moldova, their views are directed towards the west and north, and much less to the south. At the same time, it appears that the foreign policy

priorities of Bulgaria change under different ministers, but in general it can be said that Sofia is actively politically involved with its southern neighbors - Greece and Turkey and the Western Balkan countries.

Hope for the improvement of the Romanian-Bulgarian relations in any area will first come from citizens rather than from governments. For years Romania takes the place of the third-largest trade partner of Bulgaria in the EU, after Germany and Italy, with trade, which in 2016 approached, and perhaps exceeded, the amount of four billion euros. In 2015, more than 2100 Bulgarian companies were registered in Romania, and more than 2,500 Romanian companies in Bulgaria. Cultural and interpersonal communication is also increasing and it can be seen especially in Ruse, where there are regular exhibitions, poetry readings, theater performances and concerts with the participation of Romanian artists. There are also cross-border communities that communicate intensively, promoting cooperation and overcoming national egoism.

All these economic and cultural contacts could eventually lead to changes of governments attitudes of the two countries. Certainly there are some reasons for the reluctance of politicians to advocate for the improvement of bilateral relations. There are historical, cultural and political stereotypes which continue to affect the attitudes of Romanians and Bulgarians. Rivalry of Bucharest and Sofia is also an important component of the state logic in terms of bilateral relations. But there is an economic and human logic behind mutual and equal opening of cooperation.

Ten years after the European Union integration, there is a need for new way of thinking. Until a few years ago, there were only three public transport lines that daily connected Ruse and Bucharest. Today, the number of daily public bus/van lines has risen to eight, and two of them are directly connecting Varna too. In other words, rapid connection of Romania and Bulgaria has already been dictated by their citizens. The question is - will the politicians follow them?