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## **BRITISH DIPLOMACY IN BULGARIA: 1989 TO THE PRESENT**

**Abstract:** *The article surveys the British diplomatic goals, activities and efforts in Bulgaria after the beginning of democratic changes. It argues that the British embassy in Sofia seemed to focus not only on the country itself but to be more or less an instrument to a large degree in light of the British interests in the Balkan region (Yugoslavian wars and later Western Balkans) and wider geopolitical field (East Europe, Black sea region, Turkey). The mission was mainly interested about the cooperation with Bulgarian in the framework of NATO and EU, the Russian sphere of influence in Bulgaria, energetics, human rights issues, corruption and organized crime, and regional developments on the Balkans.*

**Keywords:** Bulgaria, British diplomacy, Bulgarian-British relations, EU, NATO, Russian influence, East Europe, Balkans, embassy.

### **Introduction**

Bulgaria has a specific geographical location in Europe and on the Balkans - not far away from Russia, Central Europa, the Middle East, Caucasus and the shores of the Black sea; a border country between Europe and Asia and a major transport corridor. This geographical uniqueness and historical developments often put the country in the situation to act as an external border in different geopolitical configurations. The United Kingdom is one of the countries that has global interests and is a significant political player in Europe, a permanent member of the Security Council of the UN, the world biggest former colonial state, distinguished decision maker in NATO and the EU, a military and economical power, and a nuclear country. Bulgaria more or less is just a regional player. Contemporary Bulgarian-British relations are a rarely explored topic in scientific literature.

Sofia holds a humble place among the priorities of London not only in regards to Europe, but even in respect to the Balkan region itself. All bordering countries to Bulgaria, with no exception, traditionally have maintained a closer relationship to the United Kingdom. The diplomatic ties between the two countries officially get established on July 10th, 1879. Bulgaria has never been Britain's main foreign policy priority as it has been underlined in numerous statements by British diplomats, researchers and politicians. Until 1990, the Foreign Office does not have an official appointee (chief of division, somebody who oversees/primarily

responsible for the relations with) in regards to Bulgarian affairs. The two states have been rivals for long periods during the XX-th century. As British Ambassador in Sofia Roger Short (1994-1998) puts it, „*The relations between Bulgaria and Great Britain have not been good in the course of an on-going tradition*“. A starting point for development of a new era of relationship was not a good one. The British interest and work in Bulgaria, for example, was still far behind from those of the Germans, French, Austrians or Russians. It started to change gradually, together with Bulgarian application for a membership in EU (1995) and NATO (1997). The tipping point of that trend was in 1997 after the huge street protests and demonstrations, the socialist government was overthrown and the new one was elected on the wave of ever-high europolitivism. The change of the British foreign policy toward Bulgaria is quite visible through the work and characters of its ambassadors in Sofia. The trend is from low profile to high activity.

The key subject of the present article is to explore in detail the work of the British embassy in Sofia. The main objective of the text is to argue that the British embassy in Sofia seemed to focus not only on the country itself but to be more or less an instrument to a large degree in light of the British interests in the Balkan region and a wider geopolitical field (the former USSR, Eastern Europe). Given the lapse of time, its importance has changed concerning the British agenda in the region. Success on two main issues would result in accomplishing this goal. At first it was of utmost significance to define the British major interest in Bulgaria and subsequently to foster and develop the multifarious nature of that interest in the course of time. The research timeframe spans from resignation of the last Bulgarian communist leader Todor Zhivkov (10 November 1989), which marked the fall of the Communist regime to nowadays. Considering the focus of the text, the main method of analysis is based on archives research, interviews, memoirs and diplomatic and political documents and statements.

### **The beginning of democratic changes**

After the Democratic changes, the British interest towards Bulgaria gradually begins to improve. Evidence for this is the 50% increase of Embassy staff and the appointment of a special referent at the Foreign Office. It is apparent that the British Diplomacy is still working on fleshing out its exact position within the country and it is actively looking to build an administrative structure that will build the foundation for long lasting relations between the two countries. According to the observed dynamic of the work of the British embassy in the first years of the Bulgarian transition, it could be concluded that FCO was not sure in which direction will turn the country in its geopolitical development. The fall of communism marked the beginning of the building of a new kind of bilateral relationship as a whole. From fewer contacts the relations began to develop steadily in the field of politics, public administration, security and economy.

Sir Richard Thomas, British Ambassador to Sofia for almost five years (1989 – 1994) was the witness of the first years of democratic transition in the country. His mandate is an exception in the British diplomatic practice, which preferred to rotate ambassadors on every 3-year basis. Ambassador Richard Stagg later viewed this period as wasted time for Bulgaria.

The typical British pragmatism is evident by the words of Ambassador Thomas, who claims that the British government does not have any permanent priorities over the countries in Central and Eastern Europe. The British interests practically arise only in particular moments in regards to specific political or economic matters. In one of those moments, the political ties between Sofia and London begin taking action. The start of those so-called new relations takes place with the appointment of a permanent governmental deputy to the Foreign Office (equivalent to the Continental Deputy Minister) – Patrick Right, who arrives to Sofia in November 1989. The State Minister of Foreign Affairs Douglas Hogg visits Sofia in 1991 as well. The key points to his agenda during the visit are terrorism, Bulgaria's position towards the Yugoslavia conflict and the country's relationship with the Soviet Union.

During this period the relationship between the two states becomes much warmer with numerous gestures of good will and new points of collaboration. Bulgaria assists the British authorities in the investigation of Georgi Markov's murder. The Bulgarian dissident writer, a BBC World Service journalist, was poisoned with an umbrella-gun in London (1978), which put a shadow on bilateral relations. Scotland Yard and Bulgaria's authorities start working together on the Markov's case. Based on documents and publications in the media, it is apparent the British keep pressing on the issue during almost every meeting between the two regardless of its level of importance. Bulgarian president Zhelio Zhelev (1990-1997) discusses the matter with his Russian counterpart Boris Yeltsin and receives his affirmation that the Russians will cooperate in verifying of any possible Russian part-doing in the assassination. The video surveillance of the British Embassy in Sofia is aborted in February 1991, a gesture met with Ambassador Richard Thomas's gratitude. Western diplomats were not entitled to visit the country's border zones without special permission, a rule that gets suspended in 1992. They follow the elections by sending a special convoy, which monitors the whole process. An avid interest is also shown towards the Bulgarian-Albanian relations while exploring Bulgaria's cooperation and opinions on establishing a British Embassy in Albania as well. Richard Thomas becomes a figure of isolation, which is thanks to the new shape of the Bulgarian-British relations and their transformation. For example, he is not notified in advance for any invitations for visits between Bulgarian and British foreign ministers. During this period, Bulgarian politicians are very keen on securing meetings with high-level British politicians, which is evident by insistent invitations sent through all kinds of channels.

One of the main topics of interest for the British immediately after the Democratic changes is Bulgaria's production and trade of firearms. Based on their internal investigations, they constantly question and express concerns over weapon deliveries and mutual operations (Hungarian-Bulgarian, Russian-Bulgarian) with Croatia, Jordan and Iraq. The biggest concern is over the information that Bulgarian firearms are being used by Irish Republican Army (IRA). The embassy showed special interest in the ties between Bulgaria and some countries from the Third world, some of which were former British colonies. Bulgaria maintained close

relations with several Middle East and North African countries, especially Iraq and Syria, and later with the regime of Colonel Gaddafi in Libya.

In comparison to the military actions in Yugoslavia and the street riots in Romania, Bulgaria is perceived as a stable nation. British ambassador Thomas describes the country as “the island of reason” in his reports.

### **Roger Short**

Fear of Turkey is a constant in Bulgarian society. This largest neighbor has often been seen as a military, economic and demographic threat. The topic of the Muslim minority became central to British foreign policy, when the so-called “Revival Process” in Bulgaria commenced in the mid 1980’s. The Communist party took a decision to change the names of the Bulgarian Muslims from Arabic-Turkish to traditional Slavonic, Christian and Medieval Bulgarian ones. The leadership fear of the demographic rise of the Muslim population compared to the decline in numbers of the Christian population in some regions, and an apprehension of a Cypriots division scenario, gave a start to the whole process (1984/85). The tension led to a mass emigration of Bulgarians from Turkish descend to Turkey, culminating in the summer of 1989 when more than 360,000 Bulgarian Turks emigrated there. The traditional allied relations between Great Britain and Turkey automatically made British diplomacy an active player in the issue.

The British diplomacy pay a close attention to the relations between Bulgaria and Turkey. The dominating liberal agenda has a strong interest towards the issues with minorities. The main British focus on the Balkans remains at the Muslim communities. The United Kingdom does a fine balancing act between Turkey and Greece, while always giving a certain leeway to Ankara. London and Athens seem to have disagreements over the Macedonian and Cyprus issues. Unlike Germany and France, Great Britain does not pass an open judgment against the Turkish army’s attacks on Kurds’ rebel bases of PKK on Iraqi territory in the early 1990’s. London keeps supporting the idea for an independent Macedonian nation, which is in contrast with the Bulgarian stand on the matter.

The appointment of Sir Roger Short (1994-1998) as an ambassador in Sofia reiterated an on-going, underlying interest of the British diplomacy toward the multiethnic relations on the Balkans. Short was one of the biggest experts on Turkey in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. He was known for his brilliant handle of the Turkish language and society. The possible explanations of his appointment was the intensification and significant improvement of the Bulgarian-Turkish relations (Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation was recently established 1992). Of course we should also take into consideration the British apprehension of another Yugoslavian scenario of multiethnic clashes. Although the Turkish minority was already present in the political life of the country and all its rights were guaranteed, including the resolution of the most sensitive issue – the reinstatement of the traditional Arabic names. The problems with the Muslim population in Bulgaria in the 1990’s were believed to be resolved. Short died tragically in a bombing attack in Istanbul in 2003 during his posting as a British Consulate General there. In all obituaries published in the British media, his love towards Turkey was underlined. Despite his affinity for the country, he never

reached the position of an ambassador there. The Guardian newspaper published an article named “*Career diplomat with a special love for Turkey and its Ottoman Islamic heritage*“. The articles in The Times, BBC and The Telegraph were quite similar. Ambassador Short’s tragic outcome left him unretired and unable to publish his memoirs as was the practice with most of the British Foreign Service officers. He was not very active in public appearances as an ambassador in Bulgaria. In the Bulgarian national library, there are just a few interviews with him during his mandate. At one of his rare appearances, he noted that Great Britain was the second ranking investor in Bulgaria after Germany, which was a traditional Bulgarian partner. Old rivalries have transformed into renewed economic competition. In the beginning of his mandate (1995-1996) he spoke more about good relations, democracy and philosophy, which was his education, and towards its end about Bulgaria joining NATO, EU and the British support in that process. Bulgaria left the Warsaw pact in 1991 and in 1997 became a candidate member for NATO. This significantly changed the British attitude towards the country, which is clearly visible in the work and messages of the British ambassadors. The decreasing influence of the Russians in Eastern Europe and permanent crisis and instability during the presidency of Boris Yeltzin, gave the British an opportunity to fill the geopolitical vacuum, to find new allies.

### **Richard Stagg**

Unwritten rule in Bulgaria to be sent low ranking British diplomats was broken by appointment of Sir Richard Stagg (1955) for ambassador in Sofia (1998 – 2001). He falls under the category of so-called *mandarins* – high-ranking British diplomats with considerable influence in the FCO system and in the shaping of the UK foreign policy as a whole. The Analysis shows that his arrival) is the beginning of a new level of bilateral relations. His personality and work need a deeper research, because he was an original phenomenon in the work of the British embassy in Sofia. All his interviews in the Bulgarian printed media are taken into account. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office’s decision to choose Stagg as the next British Ambassador to Sofia illustrated an increased British interest towards the country. Contrary to his predecessors, his career was linked previously to Bulgaria. He first arrived in Sofia as a third secretary at age of 24 and was responsible for the information policy of the Embassy (1979 – 1982). He stressed that he continued to be interested in the Bulgarian affairs after the end of his first appointment. Relatively young, at the age of 42, he became the head of the UK diplomatic mission in Sofia. This could be one, not the foremost, of the explanations for his energetic and extremely active ambassadorial work. The appointment of special diplomats (trained, experienced, influential, and energetic) in important historical moments is a common political practice. Stagg is the frontrunner for securing the British support for the Bulgarian acceptance in NATO. He is the emblem of the British policy in the fast-changing climate in Bulgarian politics. There was a quantitative and qualitative increase of the Embassy’s activities during his mandate. He was a frequent media guest, public lecturer and participant in all kind of events. His media appearances were incomparable as a number to that of his predecessors.

There are twice as many interviews preserved in the Bulgarian National library of Stagg than of his successor Ian Soutar (2001-2003).

The advancement of the political dialogue remained central in the relationship with the Bulgarian authorities. However, there was also a tilt in bilateral relations towards the sphere of economy and security following Bulgaria's forthcoming acceptance in the NATO and the EU. The economic theme received a more central position in light of the modest Bulgarian-British trade and economic relations. Evidence in this direction is that the ambassador addressed the public through specialized financial editions (such newspapers as Money, Cash, Capital, The Banker). Providing economic recommendations was permanently present in all his media appearances. Bulgaria's emerging market became attractive for the British and other western European businesses with a lot of free capital, looking to invest in a safe way. At that time, the UK was the second largest world investor. Yet, Bulgaria remained at the far end of the British investments in Eastern Europe. Great Britain was lagging behind Germany, Austria, Greece and Russia in terms of investments during the privatization of the Bulgarian state economic assets. British diplomatic efforts were mainly focused on facilitating British private investments in the country.

### **Bilateral contacts**

One of the main tasks of every diplomatic mission is to prepare official visits for its country. The biggest event in this line of work is the organization of state visits. The British ambassadors do not have much to do in that sense before the end of the 1990's. The British tread very carefully and slowly regarding this issue. The level of international meetings is drastically different to those of Bulgaria and other European nations such as Germany, France, Italy, Austria and Greece. Germany is the first one to sign a treaty for international collaboration with Bulgaria. The early 90's mark significant visits in Sofia from high-ranking officials such as the Germany's foreign minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher and respectively France's Roland Dumas. On the contrary London dispatches only departmental heads and deputy foreign ministers. There is not a real reciprocity in the political relations until the visit of Prime Minister Tony Blair in 1999. It was the first visit of a British prime minister in the British-Bulgarian history. When asked, why British premier has not paid a visit to Bulgaria for the past 120 years, Stagg explained in his typically direct style the philosophy of British foreign policy. "*The UK diplomatic practice is not a supporter of such protocol events. It is more important to get the job done*". Often the British geopolitical rhythm is very close to the American one. The First American president making a state visit to Bulgaria was Bill Clinton (November 1999). Blair government is almost obsessed by the concept of human rights, which tries to implement everywhere often no matter of circumstances. This messianic approach leads to liberal interventionism. The wish to be a "big player" on world stage ( Blair, 2010: 410) One of the key points of his discussion are the Kosovo crisis and the Russian energy influence in Bulgaria. The British Ambassador claims in an interview that his country's position is about implementing an on-the-ground operation, so the refugees can return home safely. The Bulgarian government declines to grant asylum to refugees from the conflict

and instead finances a refugee camp (Radusha) in vicinity to the Macedonian-Kosovo border.

The heir to the British throne Prince Charles visited Bulgaria in 1998. President Zhelev extends an invitation for a visit to a member of the Royal family and he suggests that this should be the heir of the throne during his visit to the UK during February 1991. After Bulgarian accession to the EU and NATO official and unofficial meetings between the prime ministers and foreign ministers of the two countries are regular.

### **Russian influence**

That closeness and trust between Sofia and Moscow during the “Cold war” (at least before the arrival of Mikhail Gorbachov) determined a specific British interest towards Bulgaria. Analyses of the Russian influence over the country were among the main priorities of British diplomacy. The reason to have a British embassy in Sofia during the communist period was to keep a *listening post* (Bache, 2000:6); *watching post* (Longworth, 2006:18); *important source of information for the Southwest border zone of the Soviet Empire*. (Speaight, 1958:43). The major task of the embassy was to evaluate the Soviet influence in Bulgaria, the relations between the two communist parties and the military and economic cooperation. The main priority in achieving that goal was to gather information about the Russian military equipment, scientific developments trade and economic production, strategic plans, dynamics in party leadership, Russian experts in Bulgarian institutions, etc.. As ambassador Anthony Lincoln wrote in his first cable from Sofia (1960): “...*We want to see a weakening of the Russian connection*”.(Lincoln, 1960:79).

After the beginning of the democratic changes that policy had been further explored. The first parliament delegation, which visits Bulgaria on February 13th, 1990 after the fall of the Communist regime raised the question of the country’s close historical relationship with the Soviet Union and will this hinder it’s growing incorporation with greater Europe. Stag was the diplomat who spoke about that in unusually open and direct manner. The culmination of his public speaking was reached in one of his interviews where he stated, “*if you look for companies to work successfully in a market economy then naturally you should not look for them in Russia*”. It was the first time British Ambassador made a direct statement on a topic, which in the best case was only commented by retired or not-acting diplomats. Stag’s message had a clear addressee – the Bulgarian government. The British government considered the economic privatization during the government led by prime-minister Ivan Kostov (1997-2001) as a key moment for the country’s future and the limitation of Russia’s involvement in it, as a first-rate British interest. The occasion for his statement was the running privatization of Burgas oil refinery. Stag’s reaction showed that the United Kingdom did not want this strategic facility to be sold to a Russian company. Analysis shows that security issues made the British look into every aspect of the Russian influence in Bulgaria with a high-degree of suspicion. Stag is again direct: “*Russia has a huge war machinery, which is a potential threat*”. Energy security, as a matter of concern, reaches a major importance in the British agenda in Bulgaria from that moment on. British ambassadors expressed publicly negative attitude toward all common Bulgarian-

Russian energy projects – oil pipeline Burgas-Alexandropoulos; nuclear power plant “Belene”; natural gas pipeline “South Stream”.

### **Yugoslavia**

One of the reasons why Bulgaria became a country of deeper interest for the United Kingdom after its turning to democracy in the 1990’s was the beginning of the disintegration of Yugoslavia. The vast territory from Austria to Greece turned into an arena of ethnic wars. Possible involvement of Bulgaria or other countries in Southeast Europe in these wars could lead to a further destabilization of the region and thus set the conditions for an all-European security crisis. The British political stand in regards to the on-going disintegration of Yugoslavia can be described as multi-layered. The British request for the United Nations to only interfere in the conflict by implementing a firearms embargo. Such agenda only helps the Miloshevich regime, since the Yugoslavian People’s Army is the only military formation at the territory of the country that has sufficient military equipment and resources and it’s also under a direct control from Belgrade. At the same time, London openly criticizes the Serbian leader’s style of governing and supports the rights of all minorities, especially of those from the Muslim and Albanian communities. It should not be forgotten that Britain is one of the architects of post-war Yugoslavia, which has very similar characteristics to the state system of United Kingdom. British Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd wants permanent channel in Bulgaria to exchange information on events in the former Yugoslavia. The lack of trust from the British towards Bulgaria is evidenced by the fact that most British delegations in the 90’s pay visits to the Bulgarian-Yugoslavian border to inspect the embargo’s implementation. This starts to change gradually.

An ambassador Sir Richard Stagg noted: *“The stability in this part of the continent is valuable and scarce commodity”*. The British side found itself in a position to seek stable partners in the region. The changing political situation and geopolitical reorientation of Bulgaria showed the country as an appropriate regional partner for the UK, mainly in the British attempts to oppose the Milosevic regime in Belgrade. Some evidence show that the British diplomats have long been aware of the conflict potential of the multicultural Yugoslav conglomerate with diverse ethnic and religious groups - *“It was an absolute bonfire waiting to be lit.”* UK Ambassador in Belgrade wrote in a cable in 1964: *“if two Englishmen constitute a club, three Serbs constitute a civil war. The racial differences in Yugoslavia, of course, aggravate the problem (Wilson 1964: 312)”*. The British diplomacy began to utilize Bulgaria as a base for criticizing Milosevic’s rule in Serbia: *„Bulgaria looks as a plant that cannot thrive in the shadow of a big and stormy (Milosevic)”*. Stagg explained the situation around the Kosovo crisis in a larger geopolitical context which showed the British interest in the region: *“By happy coincidence of the events you free yourselves from the Soviet empire at a time when Milosevic merge with it in Belgrade”*. The message is that Russia should be isolated in Southeastern Europe so the region could integrate with the rest of the continent. Which happened for some of the countries in the next decade – NATO: Bulgaria, Romania, Slovenia (2004), Albania, Croatia (2009); EU: V4, Baltic States, Slovakia (2004), Bulgaria, Romania (2007), Croatia (2013).

At that time, Bulgaria was not a regional troublemaker. Ambassador Stagg considered situation of the Muslim minority in Bulgaria as a very good. The fear of the repeat of the Yugoslavian scenario and instability vanished. The British attention slowly began to shift towards the status of the Gypsy minority, multicultural policy that was part of the liberal line for the rights of different minorities and diversity. The sanctions imposed on Yugoslavia (1991-1992) by UN Security council created pan-Balkan mafia with immense power (Glenny 2009:31). This base for development of a powerful organized crime networks affected the whole European continent. After the beginning of the 1990's the fight with organized crime became a constant topic in public speaking of British ambassadors in Bulgaria. Naturally, the institutional cooperation of the British embassy with the Bulgarian Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs became a high priority. "*After joining the EU Bulgaria will constitute the EU border with Asia.*" Stagg's comments about the border issue soon after beginning of his diplomatic stint in Sofia reflected the Foreign Office's desire for an effective Bulgarian border control in order to curb illegal immigration, terrorism as well as arms and drugs trafficking. The problem of the illegal immigration became central topic for the whole European Union, especially after the Arab spring, which put Middle East and North Africa in social disorder.

### **EU and NATO**

The British are the biggest supporters of the idea for the expansion of the European Union community, which according to them will delay the integration process, something met with strong opposition especially by the Conservative party. The expansion to the East goes perfectly well in accordance with the Bulgarian state's desire to become part of the union expressed very early on in 1990. British foreign minister Douglas Hurd assures his Bulgarian counterpart Stoyan Ganev, that Bulgaria can count on Britain's full support in the country's quest for joining the European community and NATO. The British directly raise the question whether Bulgaria will become a member of the European Union as a single member or part of a group and whether the country will seek Germany's support, which can be of assistance.

The United Kingdom is the most fervent lobbyist for the acceptance of Turkey into the European Union. State secretary Jack Straw reminisces that Germany and France facilitate the acceptance of Bulgaria and Romania and intentionally block the one of Turkey (Straw, 2012: 327) He stressed that both countries don't deserve EU membership, at least not as much as Turkey (Straw, 2012: 431) The British Ambassadors to Bulgaria from the second half of 1990's (Short and Stagg) put actively into life the British interest for maximum enlargement of the EU, which also included the backing of Bulgarian EU candidacy. The foundations and standards introduced by Stagg during his mandate continue to shape the work and activities of the British diplomats in the following years – Russian influence, human rights, energy and state security. He proved to be the most active British Ambassador to Bulgaria up until this period. After his departure from Sofia he became one of the key British diplomats (high-ranking post in the FCO; British High Commissioner to India; British Ambassador to Afghanistan in a state of war).

Stagg could be described as a broad-minded, enthusiastic diplomat who was sent to important and challenging missions. He had underlined interest towards geopolitical processes and global security issues, which was quite visible through the content analysis of his media appearances.

### **Last decade**

One very interesting moment in the activity of the British embassy is the work with young political leaders. Especially energetic in these efforts was Ambassador Jeremy Hill (2004-2007). British embassy was the only one in Bulgaria, which gave special attention to youth leaderships of the structures of parliamentary political parties. They organize occasional meetings, including dinners in ambassador residence, seminars, conferences, invitations for the Birthday party of the Queen (National holiday). This is a strategic approach for a long-term policy.

Ambassador Steve Williams (2007-2011) served as a second secretary responsible for politics and culture in Sofia (1984-1987), so he was familiar with the country. He was not very media orientated. The diplomat stressed numerous times that both countries are allies, Bulgaria has a constructive role on issues like the Western Balkans, the Black Sea, energy, security and the Bulgarian growing presence in Afghanistan. The problems that worry the British are the organized crime, high levels of corruption, gypsy integration and the judicial system. At that time, around 7 000 British citizens live permanently in Bulgaria and the number of tourists is higher than ever. The British Minister of State for Europe greeted Williams with personal letter for his public support of the gay rights in Bulgaria. First gay wedding of British diplomat was held at the Embassy.

The next pick in that kind of diplomatic approach is quite visible during the mandate of Jonathan Allen (January 2012 – January 2015). He was one of the youngest British ambassadors in Foreign office. When he is appointed to head the mission in Sofia is 36 years old, speaks Bulgarian language, uses social medias and is frequent media guest. This puts the embassy in a better public position with colorful PR strategy, compare, for example, to the Russian ambassador who is opposite as appearance and public behavior. The main concerns are again the Russian influence through the energy projects, protection of minority rights (LGBT and gypsy), the lack of reforms in some sectors, especially judicial system, fight with corruption and organize crime. It is often stressed that Romania, which was once on the same level with Bulgaria is now far forward in that process. One new visible topic is the climate change, and especially renewable energy resources (solar and wind) and investments in Bulgarian economy. The ultimate goal is diversification of Russian energy supplies and energy dependency. Additional central issue is the security – new treats are around – Syrian war, ISIS, Ukrainian crisis. Geopolitically Bulgaria is close to all those conflicts, which puts the country in the role of important base for watching, understanding and acting toward them. It is hardly accidental that after the end of his mandate in Sofia he has been appointed on a very high post in security structure of the United Kingdom - Director for National Security at the British Foreign Ministry.

## Conclusion

The British embassy in Sofia has existed throughout the significant changes during the last 60 years. From a small Balkan enemy Bulgaria became a British ally and partner. The key period of the political shift is first registered during the 1990's. The embassy in Sofia developed from a passive place with little space for action to one of the most active and influential foreign missions in Bulgaria. The British position of interest towards Bulgaria shifted from a profound periphery to a slightly closer, not close, country to the center of the UK foreign policy agenda. The peak moment in this process is assuredly the mandate of Sir Richard Stagg, who traced a policy and role model for the embassy's work for years to come.

The analysis proves that the embassy's role and work are often influenced by external factors and developments deriving from a vast geopolitical context – Russian influence, permanent tension in the Western Balkans, the resurgence of the Bulgarian-Turkish bilateral relations, the acceptance of Bulgaria in the European Union and NATO. The British Foreign Office does not view Bulgaria as a country of specific interest. The only constant over the researched period, observed and proved by numerous sources, is the focus of the British Embassy towards every aspect of the Russian presence in the country. The acceptance of Bulgaria in NATO and EU marked the beginning of a new stage in the Bulgarian-UK bilateral relations (on economic, political and security level) and new place for the country in the British foreign policy. Despite the change of British agenda in Sofia, most of their concerns remain the same.

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