

The Strategic Dimension of the Bulgarian–Israeli Partnership

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Plamen OreshbarSKI was the Prime Minister of the Republic of Bulgaria from May 2013 until August 2014. This text is adapted from his address to the Israel Council on Foreign Affairs on May 20, 2014.

Bilateral cooperation between Bulgaria and Israel has developed to unprecedented levels in the past few years.

Recent high-level visits are just part of the all-encompassing relationship between the two countries. Government-to-government meetings in 2011 and 2012, as well as a forthcoming one in 2014, are the logical culmination of such an upturn. The composition of both countries' delegations, including multiple cabinet members, demonstrates how strong this cooperation is.

There is no doubt that our relations have evolved into a full-fledged strategic partnership. We are grateful to Israel for the support we received during the investigation into the terrorist act at Sarafovo Airport in Burgas; today I can report that we will soon indict the perpetrators of that heinous crime. I am confident that our cooperation in the security sector will continue to grow, and I hope that in the future we will be able to counter such irrational acts, since they are completely unacceptable and can never be justified under any circumstances. The tragedy in Burgas is further proof of our meaningful bilateral relations. This incident immediately mobilized our two countries' authorities, and demonstrated an efficient partnership.

This is an opportunity to highlight aspects of our bilateral relations that in my opinion are of special relevance.

Bulgaria and Israel are relatively small states that are situated in regions where sociopolitical transformation has generated political turbulence and social instability—the Arab Spring and the crisis in Ukraine. Even so, Bulgaria and Israel cherish shared values: democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights, free market economy, and enterprise.

Bulgaria perceives Israel as a close partner and a pillar of stability in the tempestuous Middle East. For its part, Israel needs reliable partners in geopolitical proximity with which to interact and cooperate in a spirit of trust and friendship. While

Bulgaria will always be a solid and well-intentioned partner for Israel, even in times of hardship, it should be emphasized that the close relations and cooperation between the two states will not be advanced at the expense of other countries and nations.

The strategic nature of our bilateral relations will build upon three strong pillars:

- political relations, which are based on shared principles and mutual trust;
- economic and commercial relations, with high-quality outcomes for both states; and
- cordial people-to-people relations.

Bulgaria expects that the development of the Leviathan and Tamar offshore gas fields will enable exports of this valuable natural resource north of Israel. The future construction of a pipeline to Greece that will feed the flow of gas to Bulgaria and Central Europe, and eventually Italy, is a project of extraordinary strategic importance to Israel, which will become a major player in the energy diversification needs of the European Union.

There is great untapped potential for the future development of Bulgarian–Israeli economic relations. Agriculture, medicine, information and communication technologies, water resource management, tourism, trade and investment, start-ups, security, and defense are all sectors in which we will continue to develop bilateral cooperation in pursuit of positive results.

The progress of bilateral relations would have been impossible were it not for the special bonds of friendship between our two nations. As a statesman, and as a human being, I believe that if policymaking is not imbued with the human touch, our efforts as politicians will be unsuccessful.

The warm relationship between our two nations is historic. It is not just our parents who are proud of the fact that Bulgarian Jews were saved during World War II; we are equally proud of it. I am proud that the Bulgarian people saved the Jews of Bulgaria from the death camps, and I am happy that the Jewish people remember this fact with gratitude. Much has been said about what my nation did during the dark years of the Holocaust—the most inhuman and odious episode of the twentieth century. While my compatriots saved their Jewish neighbors, friends, and fellow citizens, they also rescued Bulgaria’s ideals and deep love of humanity.

We in the modern world must strive to combat any form of discrimination. I am confident that tolerance will be the value that leads to peaceful coexistence between different ethnic populations and different religious. In this regard, it is of

fundamental importance to keep historical memory alive for future generations in order to understand the tragedy of the Holocaust and to prevent any similar such event in the future.

In 2013 we were happy to jointly mark with the State of Israel the seventieth anniversary of the rescue of Bulgarian Jews. During the course of that year, we organized events in Bulgaria, Israel, and elsewhere. We believe that by doing so, we commemorated this chapter in our history and have encouraged the present and future generations to become aware of the tragedy of World War II and to preserve its memory. I would call that moment in our nation's history a shining example of humanity at a time of appalling cruelty. The world should know about this, and not because Bulgarians were involved, but simply because it is a positive, inspiring example that nourishes the soil on which the beautiful but fragile flower that is tolerance will grow. I am confident that together with our Israeli friends, we have managed to plant this flower in many places around the world and to demonstrate, time and again, that where Israel and Bulgaria are concerned, these are relations between two nations which, over the course of many years, have lived in close proximity, enjoying mutual respect and friendship.

The Bulgarian community in Israel is unique. While Bulgarian Jews in Israel still cherish their country of origin, Bulgaria, they exhibit patriotism for their homeland, Israel. This is a heartwarming combination. It was a thrilling experience to meet such people who, after having lived in Israel for fifty years or longer, still speak fluent Bulgarian, sing old Bulgarian songs, and feel strongly attached and devoted to Bulgaria.

These people, who still have such tender feelings toward their land of birth, are excellent ambassadors of Bulgaria in Israel. This makes me happy and proud to be a Bulgarian visiting Israel. Certainly, the Bulgarian community in Israel has played a major role in contributing to the favorable climate in which our bilateral relations develop.

Finally, to conclude on a metaphorical note, the friendship between Bulgaria and Israel can be likened to a millennial tree with deep and hardy roots that are able to withstand the historical tribulations and ordeals, and emerges stronger as a result. Today this tree bears abundant fruit. It is our mission to maintain and enhance this hospitable climate so as to enable that tree to become even sturdier and to bear more fruit.