

# Eastern Europe Is Turning into an Energy Battleground

By [RFE/RL](#)

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*Bulgaria has agreed to allow NATO to use its Black Sea port for naval coordination efforts as tensions rise between the Western military alliance and Russia.*

The agreement was reached following a meeting between U.S. **President Donald Trump** and Bulgarian **Prime Minister Boyko Borisov** at the White House on November 25.

NATO has bolstered its defenses in Eastern Europe, including the Black Sea region, which is becoming a [new frontier for energy geopolitics](#), after Russia annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula in 2014 and seized Ukrainian Navy vessels last year.

NATO earlier this year carried out military exercises in the Black Sea that involved more than 20 ships and crews from Romania, Bulgaria, Canada, Greece, the Netherlands, and Turkey to the consternation of Moscow. Russia's Black Sea fleet is based in Crimea.

"Viewing with concern the security situation in the Black Sea, the United States welcomes Bulgaria's offer to provide a maritime coordination function at Varna in support of NATO's Tailored Forward Presence initiative," the United States and Bulgaria said in a joint statement.

U.S. and Bulgarian officials will hold high-level meetings to discuss further maritime military cooperation, the statement said.

NATO members Bulgaria, Romania, and Turkey border the Black Sea along with Ukraine, Georgia, and Russia. Both Ukraine and Georgia have expressed a desire to join NATO.

Trump hosted Romanian **President Klaus Iohannis** last month as part of a series of engagements with leaders from Central and Eastern Europe, including Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, and Austria.

Prior to his arrival in Washington, Borisov told journalists that he would not allow a permanent NATO military base on the Black Sea, a move that would anger Russia.

Bulgaria agreed to continue increasing its military spending to modernize its military and meet NATO's spending targets of at least 2 percent of gross domestic product, a threshold it will surpass this year following the purchase of its first F-16 fighter jets from the United States.

It's part of a \$1.67 billion package that is the country's biggest military procurement since

the fall of communism in the early 1990s. It includes ammunition, training, and support from the United States.

The eight F-16 jets are expected to be delivered to Bulgaria in 2023 and 2024 to replace the Bulgarian Air Force's fleet of Soviet-built MiG-29s.

Washington agreed to seek defense-industry partnerships with Bulgarian companies, while Sofia agreed to open its defense procurement to U.S. companies, a separate joint statement from the two presidents said.

### **Energy Diversification**

Washington will aim to help Bulgaria wean itself off Russian energy dependence, not just through [exports of natural gas](#) but also through the supply of nuclear fuel, the joint presidential statement said.

Bulgaria's only nuclear plant, Kozloduy, runs on energy supplied by Russia while it imports the majority of its oil and gas from Russia. The United States will send a "technical team" to Bulgaria to study cooperation in different areas of energy, including nuclear.

"The United States and Bulgaria also plan to work together to enhance Bulgaria's energy security by supporting expeditiously the licensing and use of American nuclear fuel for the Kozloduy nuclear power plant," the joint presidential statement said.

The United States also called on Bulgaria to fight corruption and protect media freedoms, which have eroded over the past decade as the energy sector comes under the control of politically connected oligarchs.

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