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Understanding Europeanization in Bulgaria and Romania: following broader European trends or still the Balkan exceptions?

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ABSTRACT

This special issue provides a much-needed occasion for reflection on Bulgaria and Romania's integration into the European Union (EU) and subsequent Europeanization. Reflection and empirical examination are much needed to put both countries' records and development in a broader comparative perspective in the context of current studies of democratic backsliding, Europeanization and politicisation of European integration.

KEYWORDS

Europeanization; Bulgaria; Romania; Balkans; European Union

1. Introduction: why Bulgaria and Romania?

This special issue provides a long-awaited occasion for reflection on Bulgaria and Romania's integration into the European Union (EU) and subsequent Europeanization. Reflection and empirical examination are much needed to put both countries' records and development in a broader comparative perspective in the context of current studies of democratic backsliding, Europeanization and politicisation of European integration.

There is much to gain by critically exploring aspects of Bulgaria and Romania's European integration. The label of reform 'laggards' and a host of deserved or undeserved stereotypes have clung to both countries since they handed in their applications for accession in the early 1990s. Subsequently, their accession to the Union had hardly been completed when a chorus of experts and politicians claimed that it had taken place prematurely and that both countries should have been subjected to longer and more stringent conditionality to induce them to complete their reforms. Whether endless prolongation of the application of external conditions aiming to drive difficult reforms is likely to deliver a similarly endless upward curve of achievements is still a question for debate. Yet the opinion that Bulgaria and Romania were not ready to join the EU and remain deficient, 'second class' EU members is so wide-spread that a separate and careful examination at their record as members and the effects of EU rules and policies in both countries is needed.

Therefore, researching Bulgaria and Romania's Europeanization serves at least two purposes: it fills the gap of knowledge about the two countries in terms of their European

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policies and development and it addresses the question whether they are substantially different from other new or older EU member states. In this article, I aim to engage with both questions with the help of – and sometimes in disagreement with – the various analyses and arguments presented in this collection.

2. Eternal laggards or the roots of enlargement exceptionalism

Without delving into historical accounts of the troubled relations between the Balkans and the core, centrally located states of the European continent, a quick overview of the history of the last enlargement creates the impression that Bulgaria and Romania were eternal laggards. Their path to EU accession was difficult and their membership uncertain to the very last moment, due to, among others, weak economies, slow reforms and persistent problems with rule of law, organised crime and corruption. Yet, the weaknesses and evidence of incomplete democratisation that the two countries have been singled out for have recently emerged also in post-communist states previously considered the best reformers in Central and Eastern Europe. The apparent commonality of processes of democratic erosion in the whole post-communist region, if not the whole of the EU, provides a good reason to question the two countries 'Balkan exceptionalism'.

Furthermore, it would not be controversial to say that of all the countries taking part in the EU's 2004–2007 Eastern enlargement, Bulgaria and Romania have been least known and least supported. While some EU leaders pushed forward the enlargement process for Central European states driven by a sense of historical obligation or belief in the reformist credentials of Poland, Hungary or Czechoslovakia (Christoffersen, 2007; Friis, 1998; Vassiliou, 2007), there were few strong advocates of the two Balkan states.¹ Even for those who knew the countries well, frustration with the stagnation and slow reforms in both, combined with justified concerns about the particularly heavy legacy the countries carried from communism in terms of political oppression and the state of their economies.² In addition, the EU leaders and officials were not immune to stereotypes and discourses that placed the two countries on the wrong side of perceived cultural or even geographic divides (Todorova, 1997).³

The leadership of the two countries needed both hard work and extensive lobbying to convince EU member states and Commission officials that their countries were ready for accession. Political support for NATO actions in Kosovo in 1999 changed perceptions in Brussels and helped convince the Commission and member states that Bulgaria and Romania could join the group of candidates in starting negotiations (Baun, 2000, pp. 122–123).

Both countries experienced periods of intensive reforms and catching up in political, economic and regulatory terms with other candidate states. After a wave of protests and dramatic economic decline that led to a change of government, from 1997 onwards Bulgaria underwent 'a momentous transformation' (Ganev, 1997, p. 125). More recently, Romania has been seen as the success story of anti-corruption efforts and Europeanization (Sedelmeier, 2014; Spendzharova & Vachudova, 2012).

Despite this progress and indeed, the political and societal mobilisation that ensured that Bulgaria and Romania were finally able to join the EU despite a postponement in their accession reflecting economic and governance problems, challenges and problems remain. Political realities and democratic institutions continue to be negatively affected by

the efforts of rent seeking elites to capture state institution and use them for personal gain and political influence. The EU's efforts to monitor and improve governance through the monitoring reports of the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM) installed at accession, have been largely unsuccessful, as Dimitrov and Plachkova argue in this issue.

Bulgaria's democratic indicators improved in the late 1990s and early 2000s, only to decline again more recently (especially with regard to media freedom and rule of law). More importantly, Dimitrov and Plachkova argue that in terms of socio-economic development Bulgaria and Romania continue to stand apart from other EU member states. Furthermore, the analysis by Mendelski in this issue suggests the actual political, legal and societal consequences of the CVM driven successful anti-corruption campaign in Romania have been quite complex and not uncontroversial.

Thus, both countries appear to be stuck in a halfway house between European pluralist democracy and competitive particularism (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015), policy reform and rent seeking equilibrium. But is this because or rather despite EU membership? The question what Bulgaria and Romania would look like in terms of development and political institutions had they not participated in the process of EU accession suggests, at least to this author, alternatives would not have been better. While probably most observers would agree that both countries development has been better with rather than without European integration, it is still important to understand what role have EU accession preparation and EU membership played and continue to play in the unfolding political, economic and societal processes in both countries.

Before I look at how its various contributions have analysed, assessed and reviewed aspects of Europeanization in Bulgaria and Romania, a word of caution about our expectations. There are good reasons to be cautious about the strength of the EU's impact and the depth of Europeanization in the domestic arena, not only in Bulgaria and Romania, but in the whole of the EU. The EU's failed or – at best – partially successful efforts to bring authoritarian tendencies in member states in check suggest that the Union is not a *deus ex machina* that can swoop from the sky and resolve long-standing domestic democratic weaknesses. Domestic elites and the role they play in the evolving political economy of post-communist states are the ones that define domestic political dynamics. In interplay with these elites, societies at large, citizens and key constituencies such as business and civil society can determine the direction and pace of improvement (if any) in terms of democracy (Dimitrova, 2018). If we accept this primacy of domestic dynamics and actors, we should view Europeanization in Bulgaria and Romania – and, for that matter, the rest of Central and Eastern European member states – as the product of the interactions between the EU and domestic actors, where domestic actors and institutions are much more important than they were in pre-accession. The articles in this special issue make a welcome start in bringing *domestic* developments in Bulgaria and Romania – environmental activism, anti-corruption campaigns or political party positioning and programmes – together with the effects of membership in the EU. This is a welcome approach that de-centres the EU and emphasises domestic actors and dynamics.

Therefore, the special issue does not precisely follow the established early agenda of Europeanization studies looking at the effects of European integration (rules, policies or tools) on domestic polity, policy and politics. The aspects investigated here sometime follow and sometimes diverge from the accepted emphasis on policy in Europeanisation studies and give more emphasis on polity in line with earlier findings that Europeanisation

East has had more political effects (Héritier, 2005). Some articles address the most commonly used criterion for evaluating the performance of a member state across the literature: the implementation of EU laws (Buzogany in this issue). Foreign policy goals and performance are examined in a comparative perspective by Nitoiu and Moga. Others review the effects of structural funds as a way of quantifying the EU's impact in terms of distributive and institutional effects (Surubar, in this issue). Yet others provide a broad overview of multiple aspects of the societal and political transformations affected (or not) by EU conditionality (Dimitrov and Plachkova). Public opinion trends and especially Euroscepticism in the rhetoric espoused by political parties in Bulgaria are investigated by Stoyanov and Kostadinova.

A couple of articles investigate themes linked to Bulgaria and Romania's 'laggard' states: Mendelski looks at the impact of the EU and its Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM) on the fight against corruption in Romania. The lack of desired effect of the CVM and 'post accession conditionality' are explored by Dimitrov and Plachkova. Finally, the study by Soare and Tufis of environmental protests in Romania explores the EU's indirect effects by concentrating on a specific occasion symptomatic of a rising societal trend of activism linked to the EU's continued presence as an important external influence.

The themes and questions addressed in this special issue do not exhaust all the relevant aspects of Europeanization in Bulgaria and Romania, but can be viewed as the opening salvo for further comparative endeavours to integrate the countries in the broader European research themes. Given how understudied Bulgaria and Romania have been as EU member states, this is quite a positive development. The main themes and findings that emerge from the various contributions provide a helpful broad overview for those unfamiliar with both countries, while several articles highlight new findings and counterintuitive perspectives that should provoke further debate.

3. Investigating Bulgaria and Romania's Europeanization: key trends and findings

One of the more complex contributions to this special issue, by Dimitrov and Plachkova, starts by challenging the effects of what we can call the holy grail of EU's transformative efforts: conditionality. Dimitrov and Plachkova argue conditionality applied in Bulgaria and Romania after their accession has not achieved its stated goals. Their initial focus on conditionality as both a conceptual framework and a policy tool creates some confusion for the reader. Whether conditionality was successful or not depends on what expectations we set as researchers on its effects. In addition, criticising conditionality as a scholarly paradigm of research investigating these effects creates some confusion.

It should be recognised that the EU's mission to achieve political and economic transformation in candidate states was an accidental and in a certain sense, unwanted one. The initial goal of enlargement negotiations has simply been, as with every previous accession, ensuring that the new member states adopt EU rules (e.g. Avery & Cameron, 1998). In the end, even as the enlargement negotiations became a complex process of applying conditions in exchange for reforms, domestic conditions and actors defined and continue to define political development. In fact, recent analyses suggest that also in other member states (e.g. the Czech Republic, Poland or Hungary) EU membership does not change substantially domestic trends of democratic backsliding even if there are certainly

EU officials and member states attempting to stop backsliding (Cianetti, Dawson, & Hanley, 2018; Dawson, 2018; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015).

In contrast to Dimitrov and Plachkova, I would argue that EU conditionality is not in crisis and has not been a failure inasmuch as it is a policy tool designed to ensure above all compliance with the EU *acquis*. What it – and EU membership – has not achieved – as Dimitrov and Plachkova rightly state – is a far-reaching societal transformation in candidate states. However, this fact, which Dimitrov and Plachkova establish through an inductive, empirical comparison of a host of social and economic indicators, does not yet mean a failure of conditionality. Neither does the persistent absence of complete convergence with the rest of the EU, in my view, invalidate Europeanization as an analytical approach aiming to understand EU impacts on policy or polity.

Despite this difference in perspectives, the Dimitrov/Plachkova article sets out several bold and important themes and opens the debate on some key arguments linked to the theme of Balkan exceptionalism. Their argument that Bulgaria and Romania have not transformed sufficiently to achieve the formally stated objectives of the EU's CVM to promote rule of law is certainly persuasive. It is particularly important to pay heed to their warning that without a transformation of state-societal relations, rule of law and good governance remain unattainable.

The main purpose of the tool of EU conditionality has been, of course, to achieve compliance with EU *acquis* in order to ensure the creation of a level playing field for the internal market. Whether candidate states from Central and Eastern Europe would be able to implement EU legislation and apply EU rules used to be one of the main concerns and worries of those involved in the enlargement process (Dimitrova, 2002). Driven by this concern, the European Union and the Central and Eastern European candidate states – Bulgaria and Romania included – upgraded ministerial coordination and mechanisms for implementation of the *acquis* long before accession. Their transposition and implementation records immediately after accession were much better (Toshkov, 2008) than anticipated by those unfamiliar with the administrative efforts and institutional upgrades made in pre-accession period.

Buzogany's article (this issue) on implementation shares the conclusions of most recent analyses, namely that there is no discernible legal compliance problem in Bulgaria or Romania (see also Börzel, Dimitrova, & Schimmelfennig, 2017; Sedelmeier, 2008; Toshkov, 2008). Buzogany's detailed analysis draws on the latest theoretical and empirical approaches to compliance and includes different measurements of compliance and implementation to capture different aspects of formal compliance (transposition) and implementation. It shows some interesting dynamics over time: while both countries had excellent formal compliance record after accession, there is some deterioration, especially in Romania, since 2012. In terms of infringement procedures, the record of both countries is less stellar, but remains under the EU average, although Buzogany notes that from the fifth year of membership both Bulgaria and Romania perform worse than Central European member states (on average). The most counter-intuitive finding of Buzogany's implementation analysis suggests that with increase of economic power, compliance decreases, yet this decrease is small and by and large Bulgaria and Romania perform similarly to other EU member states.

State capture, elite rent seeking and high-level corruption have increasingly crystallized as stubborn features of the political landscape in both Bulgaria and Romania. Some have

argued that a positive trend has emerged in Romania based on the establishment and activism of Romania's anti-corruption bodies (Sedelmeier & Lacatus, 2016). However, Mendelski's article in this issue provides a much-needed counterpoint by analysing the Romanian anti-corruption campaigns in terms of their effects on rule of law and individual rights. He starts by asking whether, rather than a success, the anti-corruption drive in Romania should not be interpreted as a worrisome excess. Mendelski shows that Romanian authorities and civil society have embraced the output driven approach to anti-corruption promoted by the EU, which has resulted in both an acceleration of the judicial process and aberrations in terms of human rights and procedural safeguards in the area of rule of law.

In an approach that shows parallels to the one advocated by Dimitrov and Plachkova, Mendelski suggests changing the emphasis analyses of the success of the CVM and anti-corruption campaigns from input and outputs to processes and principles. He stresses that anti-corruption activities in Romania have violated certain key normative principles of legality, proportionality and key aspects of individual rights. Mendelski's argument is supported by a quantitative analysis of pre-trial, during and post-trial activities of the Romanian Intelligence Service and Anti-corruption Directorate. For example, the worrisome trend of issuing interception warrants with regard to threats to national security has risen in recent years. Interviews with judges, lawyers and prosecutors confirm the view that excessive and disproportional efforts made against corruption can lead to what Mendelski calls aberrations instead of improvements of rule of law in Romania.

Mendelski's contribution, similarly to Dimitrov and Plachkova, is particularly interesting as they provide a glimpse into effects of EU external guidance which can be seen from a normative perspective as 'perverse' Europeanization. That EU policies or even funds can cause unintended institutional, legal or economic effects is evident also from the article by Surubaru on the role of the structural funds in Bulgaria and Romania.

Surubaru's analytical overview of the structural funds and their impact on growth raises more questions than it resolves, which is quite justified given the growing number of economic analyses and the disparity of conclusions they reach. Among others, the article discusses the issue of the assumed link between post accession availability of relatively large amounts of structural funding and economic convergence of Bulgaria and Romania and the rest of the EU. This assumption is, on the one hand, natural, as it reflects the stated purpose of the EU's structural and cohesion funds. However, analyses that focus on structural funds sometimes lose sight of the economic effects of business investment and the internal market, (e.g. Foreign Direct investment (FDI) in the run up to accession and the first decade after).

Surubaru's discussion is more focused on the political and institutional than on the purely economic effects. Its broad perspective is very useful as it highlights various models and estimates of the effects of structural funds and their very different conclusions. The debate on structural funds effects is still ongoing and clearly, we are still a way off from having some scholarly or expert consensus on their positive or negative contribution to economic growth and good governance. It is important to stress, however, that both economies are growing steadily and have been catching up with the rest of the EU, albeit perhaps not quite as fast as their citizens would have hoped.⁴

Surubaru provides a welcome focus on the potential institutional effects of EU funding, for example public finance systems and their levels of transparency and accountability. His qualitative analysis, drawing on interviews with officials in Brussels and the national

capitals, identifies some interesting issues that need further investigation: e.g. that the presence of EU funding requiring higher levels of accountability may lead to the existence of two track system of public finances, with domestic public finances being less accountable and vulnerable to fraud. Another question raised by Surubaru's discussion which will require further investigation is whether EU funding and the accompanying programming requirements are crowding out domestic efforts to create viable strategies for development and allowing domestic elites to eschew their own responsibility.

Connecting further to the literature on development assistance would be, as suggested by the author, an important strategy to enrich the set of explanatory factors, mechanisms and theories to assess available empirical data on EU funding and its impacts. Interestingly both the analysis of structural funds and their yet unproven effects on economic convergence and Dimitrova and Plachkova's analysis of the persisting socio-economic differences between Bulgaria and Romania and the rest of the EU member states, brings us back to the well-known development dilemmas regarding the role of external funding and expertise which can be both insufficient for development and overwhelming for domestic capacities.

Following the general behaviouralist turn of European integration research, the examination of economic and policy trends is complemented by Stoyanov and Kostadinova's excellent analysis of Euroscepticism in political parties' positions in Bulgaria. Similar to Surubaru's work on the structural funds, this article starts from a broad perspective. Commendably, the authors not only review the Bulgarian parties' role in pre- and post-accession, but also assess it in the context of the broader literature on political parties and public opinion in Europe – a methodological approach that would have added value to all the contributions in the special issue, but unfortunately is missing from some of them.

Stoyanov and Kostadinova establish that Euroscepticism has emerged at the end of Bulgaria's accession preparation and is here to stay. Finding out that, bucking a trend of years of unified party support for European integration, Euroscepticism has become a part of the political landscape in Bulgaria, is not a surprising, but still an important development. A more interesting finding of this article highlights the low salience of EU issues for mainstream political parties, accompanied by the rising link between national populist parties and Euroscepticism in terms of discourses and themes. This trend fits well with prominent existing analyses of parties' stance towards European integration throughout the EU that highlight the importance of Eurosceptic discourses and cues for parties at the extreme ends of the political spectrum (Hooghe & Marks, 2009; Kriesi, 2016). Stoyanov and Kostadinova's analysis sets Bulgarian trends in a European context and shows that, as in many other European countries (Kriesi, 2016) socio-cultural divides certainly play a role in the emergence of Eurosceptic trends among Bulgarian support for nationalist and populist parties. Fears of Islam and the influence of Turkey in Bulgaria have been easy to mobilise considering historical legacies in Bulgaria. The critique of 'Gayropa' which Stoyanov and Kostadinova highlight is a more recent phenomenon, possibly, although without evidence confirming this yet available, fed by Russian propaganda discourses targeting European values. Evidence of anti-immigrant stances and rhetoric blaming Brussels for 'liberal' policies towards immigration is, however, abundant, as shown by the work of Krasteva (2016) and Dandolov (2014) cited by Stoyanov and Kostadinova.

One could also wonder whether this support for populist parties, including their Euro-sceptic rhetoric, is strengthened by public disappointment with the uneven economic effects of European integration and especially the social and demographic effects on villages and the countryside, as found in the citizen discourse analyses by Dimitrova and Kortenska (2017).⁵

4. The end of Balkan exceptionalism?

The contributions of this special issue bring us closer to understanding better Europeanization processes in Bulgaria and Romania. Some of the analyses suggest the need of more extensive research to address the questions they pose and the issues they raise. By and large (with the exception of Dimitrov and Plachkova's article), the analyses and empirical evidence do not provide cause to claim that Bulgaria and Romania's exceptional position as laggards of the enlargement negotiations has translated into a qualitatively different kind of membership. Even Dimitrov and Plachkova, while arguing that Bulgaria and Romania remain the twin Cinderella's of the EU's fifth enlargement because of the persistent socio-political differences between them and the other member states, note that recent democratic erosion in Poland and Hungary hints at similar processes unfolding there.

If, as I have argued above, we set more limited expectations for the extent of the EU's transformative influence, we can certainly find both countries have progressed, albeit unevenly, in policies and institutional reforms with the help of EU's pre-accession funds and conditionality. We can agree with the nuanced assessment provided by Stoyanov and Kostadinova, who label Bulgaria (and – we could extend this to Romania) as a 'country committed to free and fair elections, a market economy and rule of law', yet a still evolving, fraught democracy, ridden by contradictions (p. XX, this issue).

The findings presented here about the effects of structural funds or transnational mobilisation in environmental activism suggest that within such a contradictory and fraught domestic environment, the accession to the EU and its various influences on processes and actors can produce differential effects that are not always beneficial. The most unique and paradoxical case is perhaps the case of anti-corruption policies encouraged and driven by EU monitoring, which achieve visible results and yet threaten or even erode the rule of law.

One area where we can speak of unequivocal success is perhaps foreign policy. According to Nitoiu and Moga's analysis of foreign policy priorities and policies of Bulgaria and Romania, joining the EU has been regarded as an achievement, as it fulfilled Romania and Bulgaria's long-term goal of 'returning to Europe'. Post accession, however, the two countries, have not established new priorities but have taken a rather passive stance as EU member states. Such a stance represents a marked contrast to the CEE countries that joined in 2004, that have actively worked to shape at least some aspects of EU foreign policy.

In conclusion, the findings of this informative set of studies are not sufficient to establish whether Bulgaria and Romania have become 'normal' member states of the EU. This is not surprising given that the standard of normal in the EU is challenged by other member states that have engaged in practices eroding rule of law and democratic institutions. In other words, Bulgaria and Romania may have remained the same, but other member

states have deteriorated, showing the same symptoms of unfinished or fragile democratisation. The effects of joining the EU have been diverse, yet neither political nor economic development would have been better had the two countries remained outside. The best task for future scholarship in the light of Europeanization's differential character is to continue studying aspects of it in a comparative European perspective.

Notes

1. Greece, mentioned as a supporter of Bulgarian accession (Baun, 2000) was also spending political capital supporting Cyprus in the 2004–2007 enlargement, while Romania's cause was advocated by France and Hungary, yet the relationship with the latter has been also fraught with uncertainty.
2. Romanian leader Ceausescu's justified reputation as one of the worst dictators in the communist realm may have made Bulgaria's Zhivkov look good by comparison, as claimed in the memoirs of former Bulgarian foreign minister Mladenov (1992), but both led their countries on disastrous economic paths that left them with huge external debts in the start of the 1990s.
3. For example, during an expert interview in the early 1990s, a Commission official from DG enlargement suggested to the author that the two countries belonged to the Eastern orthodox civilisation in the sense defined by Huntington (1993) and that made them culturally unsuited to adapting to EU politics and norms, in contrast to the Central European candidate states that were culturally closer to the EU. For a similar mention of cultural divide, see also Mayhew (1998, p. 184) although the importance of the 'Huntington fault line' is presented there in a more neutral fashion.
4. Based on the European Commission's economic forecast in spring of 2019, Bulgaria and Romania were both expected to grow by 3.3 per cent in 2019 and with this were among the highest growing economies in the EU (behind Poland 4.2 per cent, Ireland 3.8 per cent, Hungary 3.7 per cent and Slovakia 3.7 per cent).
5. The analysis of citizen perceptions and discourses for which we gathered data on discourses among citizens of villages and smaller towns in Bulgaria sheds some light on these disappointments (Dimitrova & Kortenska, 2017).

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