

The Effect of EU accession on Bulgaria

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1. Background

Bulgaria and Romania entered the European Union (EU) almost three years later than the other ten new EU member states, which provides for only modest membership experience. It is still too early to conclude about stable behavioural patterns or trends of performance inside the Union, or to map the establishment of possible (functional) coalitions on a variety of issues within the broad spectrum of EU policies. The impact of Bulgaria's accession to the EU on the internal political and economic situation and performance of the country can be traced and analysed more in terms of considering the accession process as a whole, rather than specific post-accession empirical data.

The background of Bulgarian membership in the EU during the first two years after accession includes a generally positive trend of steady economic growth that has started well before accession and continued in 2007-2008. On the other hand, the EU's labours in overcoming its institutional reform impasse, after the failure of the Constitutional Treaty in 2005 and the Lisbon Treaty ratification difficulties in 2008, which are coupled with a visible "enlargement fatigue" among citizens of "old" member states, renders Bulgaria's smooth integration into the EU system more problematic.

In terms of external policy, EU actions in the Western Balkans and the development of the Eastern segment of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) offer the most important setting of Bulgaria's involvement in EU foreign policy making.

2. Macroeconomic effects⁶¹

There are different economic effects of the EU accession process in Bulgaria. This analysis illustrates only part of them, related to some of the main economic indicators, namely: growth of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), level of Foreign Direct Investments (FDI), current account deficit, external debt and inflation.⁶²

Gross Domestic Product

Some of the most important indicators that demonstrate the effects of accession are those related to the GDP, i.e. the total market value of all goods and services produced in a country in a given year, equal to total consumer, investment and government spending, plus the value of exports, minus the value of imports. The table below presents the GDP in million BGN as well as the GDP growth rates.

(61) This section is written by Kaloyan Simeonov.

(62) A detailed analysis of the effects of Bulgaria's EU accession is provided in: SIMEONOV, Kaloyan (2005): *Costs and Benefits for Bulgaria from EU Membership*, Institute for Public Administration and European Integration, Sofia, p. 175.

| Table 1: GDP indicators of Bulgaria | | | | | | |
|-------------------------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|---------|
| | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | Q1 2008 |
| GDP (million BGN) | 34 628 | 38 823 | 42 797 | 49 361 | 56 520 | 13 484 |
| GDP growth* | 5,0 | 6,6 | 6,2 | 6,3 | 6,2 | 7,0 |

* Annual real growth rate (%); Source: Bulgarian National Bank: www.bnb.bg

The figures for the period from 2003 to the first quarter of 2008 clearly show that the GDP has grown constantly over the years. At the same time, the GDP growth in the EU, the main trade and economic partner of Bulgaria, is substantially lower than the GDP growth in Bulgaria.

The main reason for the high GDP growth in Bulgaria during that period is related to the effects of accession preparations and the gradual integration of the Bulgarian economy into the EU economy. The effects of EU accession are consumed to some extent even before the actual joining of Bulgaria. Some of the reasons for the positive impact of accession preparations for GDP growth are:

- ☒ Internal market legislation as well as legislation on the EU common policies (including common competition policy, common transport policy, etc.) was introduced in Bulgarian legislation well before the date of accession. This legislation was transposed in time because it was necessary for national companies to prepare in advance for participation in the EU internal market and common policies. The introduction of the majority of EU rules and standards some time prior to accession allowed the increase of trade between Bulgaria and EU member states, which had a very positive effect on GDP growth.
- ☒ The introduction of EU rules stimulated also the increase of FDI (as shown below) that has further positive influence over GDP growth.
- ☒ GDP per capita in Bulgaria is the lowest among the 27 EU member states. It is considered to be roughly 38-40% of the EU-27 average (EU27=100%). The low starting level plus the EU integration process and its positive effects facilitated to a great extent a higher GDP growth rate in the country. In this sense, the Bulgarian economy has been “catching up” with the level of economic development in the EU-27.

Although EU accession has a very positive impact over GDP growth in Bulgaria, it is expected that the current financial crisis will also influence that indicator, slowing down economic growth. One of the reasons for that will be the strong trade and economic integration of the Bulgarian economy with the EU economy. The problems of the latter also influence economic growth in Bulgaria.

Foreign Direct Investments

The level of FDI is one of the most important indicators showing the positive effects of EU accession. The figures for Bulgaria of the total FDI in million euro and the FDI as a percentage of the GDP are listed in the following table.

Table 2: Foreign Direct Investment indicators

| | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 3Q 2007 | 3Q 2008 |
|-------------------------------|--------|-------|-------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|------------|------------|
| FDI (million euro) | 1103,3 | 903,4 | 980,0 | 1850,5 | 2735,9 | 3152,1 | 6005,6 | 6516,9 | 4715,2 | 3659,8 |
| FDI (% of GDP) | 8,1 | 5,9 | 5,9 | 10,5 | 13,8 | 14,4 | 23,8 | 22,6 | 16,3 | 10,8 |

Source: Bulgarian National Bank: www.bnb.bg

On the basis of the above data on FDI, one may distinguish two periods over the last eight years. The first period is 2000-2002, when FDI were to some extent constant but on a relatively low level of around 1 billion euro. Once the perspectives of EU accession be-came much clearer, this was a major incentive for potential investors to take decisions to realise their investments in the country. After 2003, FDI in the country increased steadily reaching more than 6 billion euro a year. There is a slow decrease in the level of invest-ments (third quarter of 2008 compared to third quarter of 2007) but this is due mainly to the financial crisis as well as to some other reasons.

The substantial increase of FDI is related to a great extent to the EU accession process. The reasons for that are very similar to those related to GDP growth, namely the adoption of EU internal market legislation and common European rules and standards for operat-ing business. It is true that FDI growth is also due to other factors such as the introduc-tion of some reforms in the country, the establishment of the currency board after 1997 with a fixed exchange rate to the euro (before 1999 with a fixed exchange rate to the Deutsche Mark), etc. Nevertheless, the main factor behind the very positive FDI develop-ments is the EU accession and integration process.

The other indicator – Foreign Direct Investments as a percentage of GDP - improved substantially, taking into consideration also that not only there is a FDI growth but GDP growth as well. This indicator developed from 5,9 in 2001-2002 to 23,8 and 22,6 for 2006 and 2007 respectively.

As it was stated, FDI increase in Bulgaria is mainly due to EU accession. On the other hand, the increase of those investments is one of the main prerequisite for the modernisation of the country and for the gradual integration of the economy into the EU economy.

Current Account Deficit

EU accession does not have only positive effects on the developments in the country. Economic development coupled with the substantial increase of FDI and consumption in Bulgaria had a negative impact on the Current Account (CA) deficit. The table below shows data for the CA deficit as a percentage of GDP and the ratio FDI related to CA deficit.

| Table 3: Current Account Related Indicators | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|---------|---------|
| | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 3Q 2007 | 3Q 2008 |
| CA (% of GDP) | -5,6 | -5,6 | -2,4 | -5,5 | -6,6 | -12,4 | -17,8 | -21,8 | -13,5 | -15,8 |
| FDI/CA deficit (%) | 144,9 | 105,6 | 243,5 | 190,3 | 209,3 | 116,5 | 133,4 | 103,4 | 120,9 | 68,0 |

Source: Bulgarian National Bank: www.bnb.bg

The CA deficit widened constantly and substantially after 2002. It is true again that this is due to a variety of reasons such as the increase of income and consumption of foreign products and services in the country, the introduction of a currency board with fixed exchange rate to the euro that does not stimulate export but has a positive impact on the imports, etc. The main reason behind the increase of the CA deficit is EU accession and the fact that Bulgaria is at the same time a small and open economy. The CA deficit for 2006 and 2007 of 17,8% and 21,8% of GDP respectively is less and less sustainable, and, therefore, appropriate corrective measures should be taken at macroeconomic level in order to remedy this situation.

On the other hand, there is another indicator that also has a great influence over the sustainability of the CA deficit – the ratio between FDI and the CA deficit as a percentage, i.e. the FDI coverage of the CA deficit. For the whole period 2000-2007, the latter is positive and very high, reaching 200% in some years. The only exception is the beginning of 2008 when the financial crisis and the decrease of FDI had negative impact over the FDI coverage of the CA deficit.

Gross External Debt

Data on the gross external debt (ED) and its dynamics, presented in the table below, show relatively mixed results over the period from 2000 to the third quarter of 2008, with a focus on the public sector and private sector ED developments.

| Table 4: Gross External Debt | | | | | | | | | | |
|------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|---------|---------|
| | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 3Q 2007 | 3Q 2008 |
| Gross External Debt* | 86,9 | 78,6 | 65,0 | 60,1 | 63,8 | 70,9 | 81,7 | 99,8 | 90,0 | 104,6 |
| Public Sector ED* | 72,2 | 63,8 | 48,1 | 39,8 | 33,2 | 23,8 | 18,0 | 14,2 | 14,2 | 11,7 |
| Private Sector ED* | 14,7 | 14,7 | 17,0 | 20,3 | 30,6 | 47,1 | 63,7 | 85,7 | 75,8 | 92,9 |

* as % of GDP; **Source:** Bulgarian National Bank: www.bnb.bg

For the period between 2000 and the third quarter of 2008 there is initially a decrease of the gross ED and afterwards a gradual increase of this indicator.

The picture is quite mixed if the comparison is carried out between the public sector and the private sector ED. The public sector ED decreased dramatically over the last years from 72,2% of GDP to only 11,7% of GDP in the third quarter of 2008. The picture is absolutely the opposite in the private sector ED dynamics. Private sector ED increased substantially from 14,7% of GDP in 2000 to 92,9% of GDP in the third quarter 2008. Taking into consideration also the financial crisis, the high increase of private sector ED may have a negative impact on financial and economic stability in the country. This increase is again due to a great extent to EU accession, economic growth and integration to the EU internal market that facilitated borrowing money abroad.

Inflation

EU accession has also a very distinctive influence on inflation in Bulgaria. As demonstrated by the table below, the Consumer Price Index increased steadily over the last years.

| | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 |
|--|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Consumer price index (annual change, %) | 5,6 | 4,0 | 6,5 | 6,5 | 12,5 |

Source: Bulgarian National Bank: www.bnb.bg

The Consumer Price Index as annual percentage change is one of the main indicators that present inflation dynamics. This indicator has grown from 5,6 in 2003 to 12,5 in 2007, which is also far above the Maastricht convergence criterion for entry into the eurozone. Both public opinion and economic analyses demonstrate that one of the clear effects of EU accession not only in Bulgaria but also in the other countries from Central and Eastern Europe is the increase of inflation. It is true that at the same time there is an increase in personal income but the problem is that there is no equal distribution of this income among different groups in society.

Summary of Economic Effects

In conclusion, with regard to economic effects one could emphasize that EU accession has had many positive impacts on the economic development of Bulgaria. This is the case, for example, for GDP growth, the increase of FDI and the decrease of public sector ED. On the other hand, EU accession is linked to higher inflation, increase in the CA deficit and private sector ED. The effects of EU accession for Bulgaria are quite similar to those effects in the other countries from Central and Eastern Europe that have joined the EU earlier. It should be stressed, however, that the first couple of years after EU accession clearly show that the positive economic effects prevail over the negative ones.

3. Domestic changes in Bulgaria's EU politics

Like all other new EU member states, the two 2007 entrants Bulgaria and Romania had to comply with safeguard clauses – the possibility to suspend full membership rights in specific policy areas – which still places them in a “quarantine period” during the first three years of membership. While by the end of 2008 these safeguards are long since forgotten in the other new EU members, they stand firmly on the European agenda in Bulgaria. Within the so-called “partnership and monitoring mechanism”, reports of the European Commission written twice a year are placed into the limelight of public attention and transformed into a tool of influencing domestic politics and policy. These tools represent a visible “bridge” between the pre-accession and post-accession stages of internal political and economic reforms.

Bulgaria's EU accession has started with an unfinished reform agenda. The most important policy field where domestic transformation has remained incomplete is justice and home affairs. Until the last progress reports of the Commission on the eve of accession, Bulgaria had remained the only Central European (then) candidate where the reform of the police and the judiciary was indicated as problematic. In addition, reforms were pending in such important and socially sensitive sectors as health care and education. A related field demanding a continuous effort was reform of the army necessitated by NATO membership since 2004. The situation was exacerbated by a long-term demographic downturn coupled with a massive drain of relatively younger and better educated workers westwards. These challenges were combined with the need to maintain strict financial discipline and to outline a liberal economic policy with the objective of attracting foreign investments.

Despite unfinished business, strenuous pre-accession efforts resulted in a “reform fatigue”, whereby the day of accession (1 January 2007) was met with relief by the political class (by the governing coalition in particular) and the (central) administration. Instead of stepping-up mobilization, reform efforts were considerably relaxed and the implementation of reform programmes resulting from pre-accession commitments slowed down. On the contrary, public debates reflected wide-spread preparation for reaping short-term benefits from accession – additional financial resources that would come from EU funds in much greater amounts than the pre-accession assistance programmes. Policy makers who had been involved in the negotiation process adopted a new stature and a new attitude (displayed in 2007 and early 2008) towards EU institutions (mostly the Commission) and EU legislation and rules of behaviour. They shared the understanding that the “teacher-and-pupil” relationship with the EU, which had been characteristic of the pre-accession phase, was over and in a moment when Bulgaria was already a full-fledged EU member, they were “masters of the game”. Therefore, in many cases they adopted a complacent and condescending mode of behaviour vis-à-vis their former “teacher”, the European Commission, and neglected the maintenance of proper inter-institutional communication between Brussels and Sofia. The drain of competent administrators away from civil service towards private business, consultancy firms and abroad additionally aggravated the state's policy making capacity. This all resulted in a serious crisis in mid-2008.

Public debate on Bulgaria's performance in the field of internal EU policies in 2007-2008 was overshadowed by and focussed on the publication of regular Commission reports, which were supposed to assess the appropriateness of introducing safeguard clauses in a number of fields.

Traditionally, the most critical field that has risked the application of such a clause is Justice and Home Affairs. Reports in 2006 (pre-accession) and 2007 have been critical to the performance of the Bulgarian police and judiciary, but have stopped short of imposing a safeguard clause. This instrument had never been used in the case of other former candidates. Prudence on the part of the EU reflected assessments about the limited effectiveness of this instrument, which would prevent Bulgaria from fully participating in the area of freedom, security and justice. However, despite the lack of an official sanction, the Bulgarian police and judicial system seem to have been sidelined in terms of practical cooperation with their EU counterparts⁶³, and the risk of long-term isolation should not be neglected.

Mismanagement in the implementation of the pre-accession assistance programmes PHARE, ISPA, SAPARD became the most scandalous cases testifying Bulgaria's inadequate preparation for adopting EU structural funds. Misuse of funds in projects of road infrastructure (assignment of projects despite conflict of interests), food processing (purchase of second-hand instead of new machines) and others led to a series of audit inquiries by independent auditors and by the staff of the EU Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF). The Commission prepared an additional report that had not been envisaged under the partnership and monitoring mechanism and that was very critical and used a very un-diplomatic language. The slow and inadequate reaction of the government and the unwillingness to demonstrate determination in its willingness to curb down practices of maladministration led to the Commission's decision to temporarily withdraw its accreditation for two implementation agencies and to freeze over 50.000 € pre-accession funding. By the end of 2008, almost half of this amount was definitively lost, as was the accreditation of one of the payment agencies. The negative impact of these failures was magnified as the implementation of the operational programmes under the structural funds was also threatened. Moreover, all government-run programmes under the EEA financial mechanism were also frozen. The only one that is being carried out is the NGO fund, which is operated independently from the government.

The problems of managing pre-accession funding can have a negative impact on Bulgaria's EU membership in several respects:

- ☒ There is a clear risk of losing substantive amounts of pre-accession money, which will make Bulgaria a net donor in the EU budget in the first years of membership. In a country with a relatively limited investment potential this can have substantive further implications in terms of growth.

(63) In the summer and autumn of 2008, the "Kotse-Matsa" case provided an example of Bulgarian authorities having been bypassed and left uninformed about the issue of a European arrest warrant by a German court against a Bulgar-

- ☒ Bulgarian negotiating positions in the framework of the mid-term budget review will be seriously undermined.
- ☒ More generally, Bulgarian reputation in the EU will be weakened, which might have an impact on the country's participation in other EU policies that are high on the national agenda (e.g. the ENP).

The damage limitation strategies adopted by the government followed two parallel paths. First, a lot of effort and public funding was invested in improving communication with "Brussels". High level contacts with representatives of the respective Commission services, including OLAF, were substantively intensified. More importantly, several consultancy firms specialised in high-profile lobbying and public relations were employed with the goal of reaching out to key policy makers in the Commission and in the most critical "old" EU member states, as well as to broader audiences by means of increased visibility in electronic and paper media. The government's most ambitious step was the appointment of a special "advisory board" consisting of high-ranking European personalities.⁶⁴

The second path of action was meant to rectify failures in implementing pre-accession funding programmes. Both "positive" and "negative" measures were adopted. "Positive" steps included mostly structural changes necessitated by the criticisms contained in the Commission reports. The re-organisation of implementing agencies, including the appointment of new directors at key positions, was coupled with the establishment of a special vice-prime ministerial post (with administrative back-up) who would be responsible for supervising future absorption of EU funds. These measures marked a trend of centralising the management of EU money during the last months before the parliamentary elections (due in mid-2009), in contrast to the dominant (so far) fragmented pattern of governance that characterised the practice of the three-party governing coalition in all policy fields.⁶⁵ To demonstrate heightened scrutiny and vigilance, the government took several pre-emptive actions, on its own initiative, whereby EU-funded projects were cancelled if they had been endorsed as a result of compromised procedures. Such self-restrictive measures were meant to restore trust in the capacity of Bulgarian policy makers and the state administration to implement EU programmes. The whole package of emergency measures suffers at least one serious shortcoming – lack of sustainability. The real (supposedly positive) impact of all changes introduced in the course of 2008 will require time to take effect, due to the slow programme cycle, while the pre-electoral clock has started ticking and makes time the scarcest resource the current government possesses. The fact that the structural changes are temporary (e.g. the administrative back-up of the new vice-premier) and will last no longer than until the parliamentary elections in mid-2009 makes them look like a "fire brigade" mode. This approach means that another such

(64) The board was formed in November 2008 with a six-month mandate and was composed of Dominique de Villepin, former French prime minister (chair), Josep Pique, former Spanish foreign minister, Antonio Vitorino, former EU JHA commissioner, Aunus Salmi, former member of the European Court of Auditors, Paul Demaret, rector of the College of Europe – Bruges, and Casimir de Dalmau, legal advisor.

(65) Following the June 2005 elections, the coalition government between the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), the National Movement for Stability and Progress (NDSV) of former king Simeon Saxe-Koburg-Gotta, and the Movement for rights and Freedoms (DPS / Turkish party), was formed according to the formula 8:5:3, which was applied at the distribution of posts at political and senior administrative levels and resulted in a "feudalisation" of government.

structure might be needed soon after the elections.

The “negative” steps to be taken comprised political action by the government, as well as judicial action. The resignations of people directly responsible for mismanagement of EU funds were demanded and obtained slowly and reluctantly. Success was minimal also with regard to bringing the cases of supposed abuse to court. By the end of 2008, none of the much debated examples of fraud was solved by the judicial system with a valid sentence.

The top-down pressure exerted on the Bulgarian government by EU institutions was only partially successful. In structural terms, the temporary character of structural changes, although capable of producing some short-term results, leaves a lot of uncertainty about their sustainability in the mid-term perspective. At sub-political/agency level, the most scandalous civil servants were fired but have not yet been brought to trial. At ministerial level, the changes of government ministers carried out in April 2008 were unrelated to criticisms coming from “Brussels”. The ministers who resigned were the victims of internal wrangling in the governing coalition, while those whose names were associated with maladministration kept their posts. Yet the judicial system, although strongly criticised for its ineffectiveness in combating crime, remained almost out of reach of EU influence, and continues to represent a problematic area. This leaves open the question of a possible imposition of a safeguard clause in the JHA field – a risk that is still pending until the end of 2009 and will have to pass the tests of the Commission’s progress reports of February and July 2009.

Bulgaria’s capacity to “turn the tide” of maladministration in the management of EU funds and to improve its image of an EU member state on the basis of sound performance in the implementation of internal EU policies will be a major determinant for the Commission’s further steps in the framework of the monitoring and partnership mechanism. It will not be an easy task for the policy makers and top administrators in Brussels, because after the financial sanction and criticisms in the reports they are left with a limited instrumentarium at their disposal – the safeguard clause is probably the only effective negative tool that has remained unused. The combination of both negative and positive instruments of influence on domestic politics and policy making is essential if one thinks strategically about the development of increased state capacities in Bulgaria. On the other hand, the broader context of the current EU enlargement towards the Western Balkan countries should not be forgotten as a factor strengthening the Commission’s motivation to act as a strict and uncompromising “watch-dog” for the implementation of European law throughout the EU.

4. Performance in the field of external EU policies

Bulgaria’s gradual involvement in the making of EU external policies started much earlier than accession and included several stages of rapprochement – association with EU documents, consultations on specific policy options (esp. after the end of accession negotiations) and fully-fledged participation in policy making. The nature of such participation can be explained if some fundamental characteristics of Bulgarian foreign policy

are understood – mainly its *suivism*, in the words of the late French President François Mitterrand. Bulgarian foreign policy has traditionally been perceived as tending to follow already established agendas rather than contributing to the design and formulation of new ones. The pattern of foreign policy making, based on both geopolitical and historic premises, can be characterized as re-active rather than pro-active. The Bulgarian “political horizon” is quite low and dictates the predominance of short-term preoccupations. It is connected with spending political resources and capital on immediate achievements, sometimes to the detriment of strategic interests or visions. Even in cases where long-term political vision is displayed, it normally has two features. First, such vision is careful not to deviate too much from the “mainstream”, and second, in many cases it is limited to declaratory activism, which stops short of producing concrete foreign policy deliverables. The above features can be explained also by a relatively modest institutional and expert capacity in the country’s foreign policy making field that are difficult to overcome in a short-term perspective. In terms of geopolitical orientation, Bulgarian foreign policy positions have always departed from the strategic commitments and obligations of the country as member of the EU and NATO. In practical terms, specific policy options espoused by Bulgaria have always sought to ensure that they are, first of all, European, and second, Atlantic. Other considerations – regional or “traditional” (an euphemism for the sympathies of part of the political class to Russia) – stand lower on the priority lists.

The above basic features have facilitated the Europeanisation of Bulgarian foreign policy and the participation of Bulgarian diplomacy in the complex process of coordination with the other EU partners. The shift of the locus of policy making from Sofia to Brussels on a broad spectrum of issues has been, on the whole, smooth and productive, in situations where a European consensus was easy to achieve. On the other hand, Bulgaria has enjoyed an augmentation of external action capacity and international prestige as a result of EU membership. However, Bulgarian choices have been rendered difficult on controversial issues where (bigger) EU member states remained split and a European position was problematic – such as in the cases of Iraq (2003) or energy security. On this background, three specific foreign policy cases deserve attention, in order to illustrate the involvement of the country in EU foreign policy making in the first two years of EU membership:

1. The recognition of the break-away Serbian province of Kosovo, and
2. Bulgaria’s participation in the Eastern dimension of the ENP and in the EU’s “Black Sea Synergy”.

The case with the recognition of Kosovo is an example of the need for taking a stance in a situation where an EU-wide consensus was missing. In addition to disagreements between other EU member states, Bulgaria’s choices were complicated by two more factors. First, the socialist party, which is the leading partner in Bulgaria’s governing coalition, had traditionally been quite close to Serbia’s ruling elite in the 1990s, and the acquiescence to NATO strikes on Serbia in 1999, was probably the most difficult catharsis the party had to go through. Second, Bulgarian business kept bitter memories from its physical isolation from major European partners during the Yugoslav wars and feared a retaliation from Serbia (e.g. closing the borders for transit transportation to Western Europe) in case of

Bulgaria's recognition of Kosovo. Both these factors prompted rather low-profile behaviour during the last months of decision-taking on this issue. The least damaging choice was finally considered to be a joint decision in favour of recognition, which was taken together and announced on the same day (on 20 March 2008, i.e. over a month after the proclamation of independence) by Bulgaria, Hungary and Croatia.

Bulgaria's involvement in the implementation of the ENP's Eastern dimension and the "Black Sea Synergy" in particular took place in a much more favourable setting, which allowed not only for the integration of national views into the formulation of general European standpoints, but also provided an opportunity for developing a leadership profile. Bulgarian positions were listened to, national written contributions were incorporated in EU documents, Bulgaria was encouraged to develop a pro-active stance in the elaboration of the EU's policy vis-à-vis countries in the Black Sea region. The policy model proposed by Bulgaria in designing the EU's involvement around Black Sea was based on a "network-of-networks" approach.⁶⁶ It was closest to the "synergy" philosophy, proved to be functional (and functionalist), "European" and equi-distanced from the policy models advocated by other EU member states (Greece, Romania), which had been perceived as promoting the interests of other global players in the region (Russia and the USA respectively). The country proved its capacity to be a respectable contributor to the Union's policy towards its Eastern neighbourhood.

The third specific case – the liberation of Bulgarian medics from Libyan prison – tested the capacity of the country to "upload" its own vested interest on a concrete foreign policy issue into EU decisions and actions. While previous Bulgarian governments had tried bilateral or international approaches, it was the decision of the current government to fully europeanise the case that involved coordinated work with several EU Council presidencies and the RELEX Commissioner and that finally led to a successful resolution. The medics' case was incorporated in the overall EU policy towards Libya and became one of its essential facets. It is indicative that the medics, who had been arrested in March 1999, could freely travel back to Bulgaria only after the country's accession to the EU.

5. Public opinion after accession

Bulgarian public opinion on the EU remained steadily positive after accession. It was backed up by two kinds of positive associations of the general public with "Europe".

In 2007, the EU brought positive messages to Bulgaria on two occasions: From a symbolic perspective, it was important for identity building that the EU agreed to allow Bulgaria to use the denomination "evro" (and not "euro") when the single currency was to be written in the Cyrillic alphabet. This issue was one of the few active standpoints taken by Bulgarian policy makers during the last stages of negotiations on the Lisbon Treaty.

From a human/humanitarian perspective, the successful resolution of the trial against

(66) A comprehensive justification of Bulgaria's approach is given in: NIKOLOV, Krassimir Y. (2007): *Black Sea Regional*

the Bulgarian medics in Libya and their safe arrival at home was associated with “Europe”. Despite the extravagant move of the French president (and first lady), it became clear for the Bulgarian public that success became possible thanks to the concerted efforts of several EU presidencies and member states and the External relations Commissioner.

In 2008, the Bulgarian public adopted a positive attitude to the efforts of EU institutions/ organs responsible for financial control to watch the actions of presumably corrupt politicians. The EU was seen as an alternative to the national government that proved incapable of governing in a transparent and lawful manner. Interference into domestic politics was, therefore, perceived positively by public opinion. Such a positive attitude is different from the general unease and criticism, with which “the interference of Brussels in domestic affairs” is more often than not perceived negatively by public opinion in most “old” EU member states. On the other hand, if interpreted in a domestic context, this positive perception of the Commission and OLAF as “watchdogs” of the rule of law risks falling into the trap of the search for a “saviour from abroad/above” that is a recurring psychological pattern in Bulgarian social behaviour. A word of warning is in order here. Although capable of constructing a positive image of the EU as a whole in the short-term, it risks turning unsustainable in the long term, in view of the limited effectiveness of instruments of influence referred to earlier, thus leading to disillusionment.

