

PUBLIC OPINION IN BULGARIA WITH REGARD TO THE EU MEMBERSHIP IN THE CONTEXT OF THE ECONOMIC CRISIS

Towards a 'Bulgarian Exception'?

Anna Dimitrova

Centre international de formation européenne | *L'Europe en Formation*

**2012/2 - n° 364
pages 289 à 304**

ISSN 0014-2808

Article disponible en ligne à l'adresse:

<http://www.cairn.info/revue-l-europe-en-formation-2012-2-page-289.htm>

Pour citer cet article :

Dimitrova Anna, « Public Opinion in Bulgaria with Regard to the EU Membership in the Context of the Economic Crisis » Towards a 'Bulgarian Exception',
L'Europe en Formation, 2012/2 n° 364, p. 289-304. DOI : 10.3917/eufor.364.0289

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Public Opinion in Bulgaria with Regard to the EU Membership in the Context of the Economic Crisis

Towards a 'Bulgarian Exception'?

Anna Dimitrova

Anna Dimitrova, PhD, is Professor of International Relations at ESCE - Business School on International Trade (École supérieure du commerce extérieur) in Paris. Her research interests are focused on the transatlantic relations, the US foreign policy and the political debates about globalization. Some of her latest publications on these subjects are: La mondialisation en débat: perceptions comparées franco-bulgares (Editions universitaires européennes, 2010), "Y a-t-il une "doctrine Obama" en matière de politique étrangère?", L'Europe en formation 360, summer (2011), La Géopolitique en 1000 QCM with Eddy Fougier (Ellipses, 2011) and "Le débat sur la politique étrangère d'Obama: quelle nouvelle "grande stratégie" pour les Etats-Unis?", Études internationales, N° 2, juin 2012.

A shorter version of this article was published in Les Cahiers de recherche de l'ESCE 15, CIR-CEE, mai, (Paris: École supérieure du commerce extérieur, 2012).

On 1 January 2012, Bulgaria celebrated five years since it joined the European Union (EU) as a full member state. The fifth anniversary of accession is a good opportunity to assess how the country's EU integration is viewed by the Bulgarian citizens in the current European debt crisis marked by a skyrocketing public debt in most of the Eurozone member states, most notably in Greece, whose gross government debt represented 165,3% of its GDP by the end of 2011;¹ an increasing unemployment, especially in Spain where it rose to 25,1% in August 2012;² and numerous austerity plans implemented both in Greece and Spain, as well as in some other European countries. In this situation, Bulgaria is actually facing a double challenge. On the one hand, the country still needs to catch up economically and politically with the other EU member states or to prove that its accession was not premature and that it should not be regarded as one of "the two laggards of the Eastern Enlargement,"³ the other one is considered to be Romania. On the other hand, although the record of Bulgaria with regard

1. According to Eurostat, the gross government debt of Greece fell to 132,4% as percentage of its GDP during the first quarter of 2012.

2. Eurostat.

3. Florian Trauner, "Post-accession compliance with EU law in Bulgaria and Romania: a comparative perspective", in Frank Schimmelfennig and Florian Trauner (eds), *Post-accession Compliance in the EU's New Member States*, European Integration online Papers, Special Issue 2, Vol. 13, Art. 21, (2009): 2.

to the transposition of the EU legislation remains quite positive and the country's post-accession compliance with the EU law has been successful so far, the government keeps on struggling with the implementation of the judicial reform and the problem of corruption and organised crime. In 2008, the discovery of blatant corruption in the disbursement of EU funds done by some state institutions hit the headlines and led to the suspension of millions of funds pooled to the country by the European Commission.⁴ Thus, Bulgaria became the first EU member state that lost EU funds because of government's mismanagement and incapability of dealing with high-level and pervasive corruption.

Given the above described context that has generated a strong increase of Euroscepticism, this paper argues that unlike most of the EU member states where Euroscepticism defined here as “*a general term for opposition to the process of European integration,*”⁵ seems to be on the rise, the public opinion in Bulgaria remains quite optimistic about the importance of the country's EU membership and the role of the EU in dealing with the crisis. Furthermore, it seems that despite the “*rigorous conditionality*”⁶ imposed on Bulgaria during the pre-accession period, as well as the on-going monitoring process focused on the country's compliance with the EU rules and norms (especially the creation of the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM) established in 2006 to reinforce EU post-accession conditionality in the country), Bulgarian citizens consider this ‘dual conditionality’ as necessary for ‘putting order in their house’ and tend to trust the EU institutions more than the state institutions. Drawing on some quantitative studies made by the European Commission such as the Eurobarometer, as well as on a number of public opinion polls conducted by national and foreign survey agencies, this article attempts to explain the paradox mentioned above by analysing Bulgarians' perceptions and expectations in regard with the EU membership.

What did Bulgarians Expect from the EU Accession?

Bulgaria's accession to the European Union (EU) was largely supported both by the Bulgarian political elite and Bulgarian citizens. According to a poll conducted by the Market Links Agency and the Open Society Institute (OSI) in Sofia, one year before the entry of the country in the EU, 72% approved the idea that Bulgaria should become part of the EU and the majority (62%) considered that this should happen as early as 2007, while only 16% were in favour of a one-

4. Quoted in: Milada Anna Vachudova, “Corruption and Compliance in the EU's Post-Communist Members and Candidates”, *Journal of Common Market Studies* 47 (2009): 43-44.

5. Krisztina Arato and Petr Kaniok (eds.), *Euroscepticism and European Integration*, (Zagreb: Political Science Research Centre, 2009).

6. Antoanette Primatarova, “On High Stakes, Stakeholders and Bulgaria's EU Membership,” *European Policy Institutes Network (EPIN) working paper* 27 (2010): 2.

year delay and some 20% thought that a further delay was possible.⁷ In fact, during the whole negotiation and pre-accession period, the public opinion remained highly positive and there was practically no anti-European or Eurosceptic project to challenge the national consensus on the country's EU integration and adoption of the European values.

Following the aforementioned survey, the expectations of Bulgarian citizens regarding the consequences of their country's accession to the EU were very positive and associated with three main advantages. The first one was related to the belief that Bulgaria's EU membership would boost the economic growth as declared by 69% of the respondents. For 88%, the positive economic impact represented mostly an increase of the foreign direct investments to the country. Other economic benefits outlined in the 2006 OSI survey were: faster integration of the domestic economy into the global economy, increased competitiveness (including a boost of the competition on the domestic market), enhanced foreign trade, incentives for local companies to improve their productivity and efficiency and channels for transfer of technologies and know how.⁸

The second advantage, stressed by 68% of the interviewees in the same survey, referred to the democratization of the state institutions and the improvement of political stability. More specifically, 78% of the respondents referred to the quality of goods and consumer protection, 74%—the mitigation of organized crime and 71%—the fight against corruption. In fact, the survey reveals that most of Bulgarians saw the European integration as a way of imposing order and discipline from the 'outside' in order to reform the political system and state institutions that were deeply affected by clientelism and corruption. In this perspective, the country's EU membership was conceived as a strong corrective not only to the government but to political parties as well, necessary to control, monitor and enforce reforms in all problematic areas, namely those pointed out by the European Commission in its latest monitoring reports, i.e. corruption, organized crime and judiciary system.

Finally, the third advantage concerned the recognition of Bulgaria as a truly European state and the 'Europeanization' of Bulgarian society. Concerning their personal situation, 30% of the respondents expected that the EU membership would improve their standard of living, a score that was lower compared to the one that existed at the beginning of the transition process in the end of the 1990s, when the majority of Bulgarians shared the utopian image of the affluent West

7. Open Society Institute (OSI), "Impact Analysis of the Possible Scenarios of Bulgaria's Membership in the EU Envisaged in the Accession Treaty", *Group for European Prognoses and Studies*, March (Sofia: OSI, 2006): 7.

8. *Idem*, 3.

and imagined the European accession mostly as a golden opportunity for a better living.⁹

Were Bulgarians Expectations Related to the EU Accession Met? Surviving in hard economic times

Five years after Bulgaria joined the EU, the results of the country's EU membership are quite ambivalent. Although some substantial economic reforms were implemented during the first two years after the country's entry into the EU, thus bringing about a strong domestic demand-driven real GDP growth of above 6% on average (6.4% in 2007 and 6.2% in 2008),¹⁰ in 2009, the Bulgarian economy was deeply affected by the global economic and financial crisis and the national economic growth dropped into negative 5.5%.¹¹ In the second half of 2010, the national economy started slowly recovering and by the end of 2011, the GDP growth returned to positive levels.¹² Although Bulgaria's GDP growth in 2011 (2,2%) was higher than the EU average real GDP growth for the same year (1.6%), it remains far below the country's pre-crisis levels, and the forecast of quite a weak GDP growth of 2.3% in 2012 confirms the slowing down of the catching-up process as shown in the table below.

Table 1: Bulgaria's real GDP growth compared to the EU-27 average real GDP growth, 2007-2012

Year	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011 (e)	2012 (e)
Bulgaria	6,4%	6,2%	-5,5%	0,2%	2,2%	2,3%
EU-27	3,1%	0,5%	-4,3%	1,9%	1,6%	0,6%

Source: Eurostat. (e): estimates

The deterioration of Bulgaria's economy during the crisis was also marked by an increase in the inflation rate that rose from 7.6% in 2007 to 12% in 2008.¹³ Compared to the EU-27 average inflation rate, the one of Bulgaria still remains quite high as illustrated by the following figures.

9. Idem, 8.

10. Eurostat.

11. Idem.

12. See European Commission, Directorate-General for Economic and Financial Affairs 10, autumn, (2009).

13. Eurostat.

Table 2: Bulgaria's inflation rate compared to the EU-27 average inflation rate, 2007-2011

Year	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Bulgaria	7,6%	12%	2,5%	3%	3,4%
EU-27	2,3%	3,7%	1%	2,1%	3,1%

Source: Eurostat.

Concerning the budget deficit, the situation in Bulgaria looks definitely better than the one in most of the other EU member states whose governments, especially in Greece, Spain, Italy, Ireland and Portugal (PIIGS), but also in France, are fighting with the increase of their deficits and gross government debts. In fact, Bulgaria has one of the lowest budget deficits inside the EU-27 (minus 3.2% in 2010), which made the credit rating agency Moody's upgrade the country's credit rating of from BAA3 to BAA2 with a stable outlook on 22 July 2011.¹⁴ Moreover, the country has the second lowest ratio of government debt to GDP in 2011 (16,3%), after Estonia (6%). Regarding the country's gross government debt, Bulgaria is one of the few EU countries that still comply with the rules established by the Stability and Growth Pact despite the fact that the country is not a member of the Eurozone yet.¹⁵ The Stability and Growth Pact aims at providing an economic stability of the Eurozone member states based on a budgetary discipline that is intended to prevent them from having too high deficits and government debts. However, a number of countries including the PIIGS, but also Germany and France, have failed to respect this agreement, which resulted in an increase of both their deficit and government debt far beyond the authorized levels. The table below compares Bulgaria's gross government debt with the EU-27 average rate.

Table 3: Bulgaria's general gross government debt compared to the EU-27 average rate in percentage of GDP, 2007-2011

Year	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Bulgaria	17,2%	13,7%	14,6%	16,3%	16,3%
EU-27	59%	62,5%	74,8%	80%	82,5%

Source: Eurostat

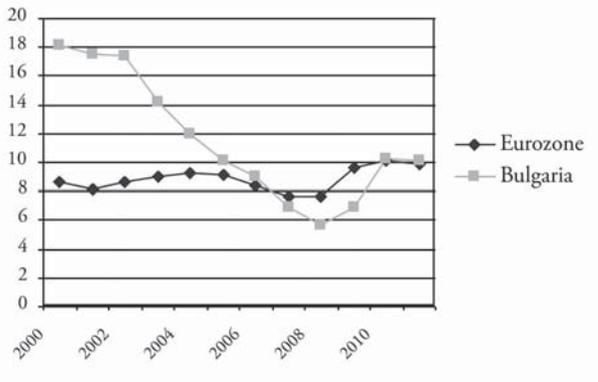
14. Quoted in: "Rating Boost," *The Sofia Echo*, 29 July (Sofia, 2011).

15. Signed in 1997 by the Eurozone member states, the Stability and Growth Pact was intended to ensure that the Eurozone member states maintain budget discipline in order to avoid excessive deficits. For this purpose, it laid down three main rules. The first one stipulated that the public deficit should be kept inferior to 3% of the GDP. The second one concerned the gross government debt that should be kept below 60% of the GDP. The last rule was related to the need for implementing a budgetary discipline that all Eurozone countries must pursue. Cf. The European Commission, "Stability and Growth Pact and Economic Policy Coordination", <http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/economic_and_monetary_affairs/stability_and_growth_pact/index_en.htm>

Despite the country's very good performance in terms of budget deficit and public debt, Bulgaria remains the poorest country of the EU in terms of GDP *per capita* in Purchasing Power Standards (PPS). According to the Eurostat Index measuring the GDP per capita in Purchasing Power Standards (PPS), the index of Bulgaria in 2011 was the lowest one at 45 out of 100 (100 being the EU average and 274 being the best score marked by Luxembourg), followed by Romania's index (49). What is really striking is the fact that Bulgaria's score on this index was worse than some candidate countries such as Croatia (61) and Turkey (52). Furthermore, the country has the lowest minimum monthly wage, which represented only 148 € in July 2012 compared to the highest one of 1801 € in Luxembourg.¹⁶

Regarding the labour market, the unemployment rate in Bulgaria is higher (12,5% in August 2012)¹⁷ than the average rate of EU-27 (10,5% in August 2012).¹⁸ Nevertheless, the country's accession to the EU seems to have contributed to a significant decrease of the country's unemployment rate. Compared to the years prior to its EU membership, Bulgaria had a very high unemployment rate reaching up to 20% in 2000,¹⁹ whereas since it joined the EU the unemployment rate tends to align with the average one of the Eurozone member states as shown in the graph below.

Figure 1: Bulgaria's unemployment rate compared to the Eurozone average unemployment rate, 2000-2011.



Source: *International Monetary Fund (IMF)*

16. Eurostat.

17. Idem.

18. Idem.

19. IMF.

According to some public opinion polls regularly conducted by the European Commission studying the social impact of the crisis, Bulgarians appear to be very pessimistic regarding the situation of the national economy and in particular their own financial status and standard of living. The majority of respondents in Bulgaria (81%), but also in Greece (92%) and Portugal (84%), believe that poverty has increased over the past twelve months.²⁰ Bulgarians are also quite numerous (around 36%) to declare that their households are most likely not to have sufficient money to maintain their living in the twelve months prior to the survey,²¹ and at least 3 out of 10 respondents state that their households are struggling to keep up with day-to-day bills and credit commitments.²² Interviewees in Bulgaria are also among those who show the highest level of pessimism, together with respondents in Greece, Lithuania, Cyprus, Spain and Slovakia about their ability to keep their jobs in the next twelve months²³ and about their financial household situation, which they believe will get worse in the future.²⁴

The results of a public opinion poll conducted by the national survey agency Alpha Research-Sofia in September-December 2011, confirm Bulgarians' pessimistic perception with regard to the economic situation in the country with 65% of the people interviewed assessing it as deteriorating, 29% reporting that it remains the same and only 6% stating that it is improving. In regards to standard of living, it was viewed as deteriorating by 53% of the respondents, while 42% estimate that it remains the same and only 5% consider that it is improving.²⁵

Another survey released by Gallup-Sofia in December 2011 reveals how residents across much of the EU countries²⁶ assess their overall personal well-being during the current financial crisis. The survey identifies three social categories that are called: the "*thriving*", the "*struggling*" and the "*suffering*." People are considered as "*thriving*" if they rate their day-to-day and future lives a "7" or higher on a scale from 0 to 10. If they give a rate of "4" or lower, they are classified as "*suffering*" and those in-between are defined as "*struggling*".²⁷

According to this poll, the largest gap between the "*thriving*" and the "*suffering*" is in Bulgaria, where 45% of the respondents are ranked as "*suffering*" and only 5% as "*thriving*". Other EU countries where people assess their lives very poorly are Romania, Hungary, Greece, Latvia and Portugal. By contrast, 66% of the citizens in the Netherlands are presented as "*thriving*", while only 1% is

20. European Commission, *Flash Eurobarometer 338* (April 2012): 11.

21. *Idem*, 25.

22. *Idem*, 30.

23. *Idem*, 55.

24. *Idem*, 45.

25. Alpha Research (Sofia: 2011).

26. Sweden and Belgium are not included in the survey because of unavailable data at time of publishing.

27. "More Suffering than Thriving in Some EU Countries," *Gallup*, December (Sofia, 2011): 14.

placed in the category of the “suffering”. The situation is similar in Denmark, where 2% rank as “suffering” and 74% as “thriving”. It is interesting to note that disparities between the “suffering” and the “thriving” diminish while moving from the Central and Eastern European countries towards the Northern and Western European countries. Accordingly, the perceptions concerning the level of satisfaction with the personal standard of living are largely negative when looking at the first group of countries. The lowest satisfaction is measured in Bulgaria, where 72% of the respondents declare to be dissatisfied with their current standard of living, followed by the Baltic countries, Romania, Greece and Hungary. By contrast, the highest satisfaction is expressed by the residents of Luxembourg (95%), Austria (93%) and the Netherlands (91%)²⁸ (Gallup 2011) as presented in the table below.

Table 4: Percentage of the “Thriving”, the “Struggling” and the “Suffering” in the EU.
Sorted by percentage of Suffering.

EU country*	% of Thriving	% of Struggling	% of Suffering	% of Thriving minus % of Suffering
Bulgaria	5	50	45	-40
Romania	18	54	28	-10
Greece	15	57	28	-13
Latvia	16	60	25	-9
Portugal	14	65	22	-8
Estonia	24	60	17	7
Poland	23	60	17	6
Lithuania	23	57	16	7
Slovenia	32	53	14	18
Germany	42	52	6	36
Czech Republic	34	53	13	21
Slovakia	27	61	12	15
Malta	34	55	11	23
Spain	39	54	7	32
Cyprus	44	49	7	37
Italy	23	71	6	17
United Kingdom	52	44	6	46

28. Idem.

EU country*	% of Thriving	% of Struggling	% of Suffering	% of Thriving minus % of Suffering
Ireland	54	43	4	50
France	46	50	4	42
Austria	59	38	3	56
Finland	64	34	3	61
Denmark	74	24	2	72
Luxembourg	45	54	1	44
Netherlands	66	33	1	65

* Data unavailable for Sweden and Belgium. Source: *Gallup*

In terms of peoples' expectations about their standard of living, the results confirmed by the Flash Eurobarometer and the Alpha Research surveys state that the majority of Bulgarians are very pessimistic, with 62% reporting that their lives are getting worse. Greece is the only country where the percent of those who have a very pessimistic vision of the future is higher (71%) than the one in Bulgaria.²⁹

The paradox is that despite the current bleak economic situation in Bulgaria and Bulgarians' confirmed pessimism about their personal well-being worsened by the impact of the global economic crisis, Bulgarians' attitude towards the EU remains highly positive. Furthermore, while most of the Europeans seem to blame the EU for not being able to deal with the crisis and some even manifest a Eurosceptic attitude, five years after the country joined the EU "*Bulgarians remain the greatest fans of the EU.*"³⁰ At least one example can be provided by way of illustration. It is related to the results provided by the Standard Eurobarometer survey about the "*Europeans' Perceptions on the State of the Economy*" published in August 2011. According to this survey, while Europeans appear quite divided about the efficiency of EU's actions to combat the crisis, the majority of respondents in Bulgaria (62%) consider that the EU is acting efficiently. The percentage is higher only in Romania (68%), while in twelve other member states the opinion is firmly negative, especially in Greece (75%) and Cyprus (66%) where the way EU manages the crisis is seen as very "*ineffective.*"³¹ Important variations also exist between member states concerning the question whether the EU goes in the right direction or in the wrong direction to exit the crisis and face new challenges.

29. Idem.

30. "Bulgarians Still EU's Greatest Fans 5 Years On," *Novinite.com*, 3 January (Sofia, 2012), <www.novinite.com/view_news.php?id=135334>

31. European Commission, *Eurobarometer 75* (2011): 15.

A very high proportion of “*in the right direction*” answers is recorded in Bulgaria (62%), as well as in Sweden and Lithuania (66% both), and in Finland (63%).

To sum up, the analysis provided so far suggests that although five year after Bulgaria’s entry into the EU the economic situation in the country remains very weak and unsteady, thus triggering the rise of social pessimism in Bulgarian society, Bulgarians are among the few EU citizens who continue to trust in both the economic benefits of the country’s EU membership and the EU’s capacity to deal with the economic crisis.

Fighting corruption

Regarding the second expectation, namely the consolidation of democracy and political stability through the ‘transposition’ of EU rules and values on the national ones, the results achieved up to now seem to be disappointing because state institutions are incapable of implementing reforms, a fact which prevents the European law from being efficiently enacted.

Already during the pre-accession process, both Bulgaria and Romania were defined as “*laggards in government effectiveness and regulatory quality, though they have improved substantially over time.*”³² The widespread corruption at all levels of the Bulgarian government, the lack of transparency and professionalism of state institutions and the inefficiency of the judiciary system were the main reasons that made the European Commission extend the conditionality mechanism beyond accession. Thus, Bulgaria’s membership, as well as Romania’s, were accompanied with an unprecedented condition: the establishment of a Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM), which is aimed to tackle “*remaining issues*” as defined in the Commission’s monitoring report of 26 September 2006, “*in particular in the accountability and efficiency of the judicial system and law enforcement bodies.*”³³ The CVM actually allows the Commission to create ‘benchmarks’ for assessing the progress made by Bulgaria in some problematic areas such as judicial reform, corruption, and organized crime, and to set up teams to monitor domestic institutional change in these areas.³⁴

Since 2007, the Commission has published 11 monitoring reports on Bulgaria (six main reports in June/July and five interim reports in February of each year). The latest report released in July 2012 remains very critical, especially concerning the reform of judiciary and the fight against corruption within judiciary

32. Aneta Spendzharova and Milada Anna Vachudova, “Catching Up? Consolidating Liberal Democracy in Bulgaria and Romania after EU Accession,” *West European Politics* 35 (Routledge, 2012): 41.

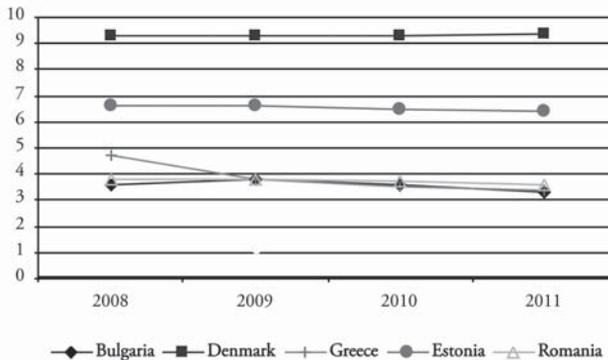
33. Antoanette Primatarova, “On High Stakes, Stakeholders and Bulgaria’s EU Membership,” *European Policy Institutes Network (EPIN) working paper* 27, April, (Brussels: 2010): 3.

34. Aneta Spendzharova and Milada Anna Vachudova, “Catching Up? Consolidating Liberal Democracy in Bulgaria and Romania after EU Accession,” *West European Politics* 35 (Routledge, 2012): 47.

that still suffers from “a lack of direction in policy.” Actually, the issue of corruption has become a particularly salient problem in Bulgaria, which brought about in 2008 some very strict sanctions against the country for irregularities and fraud in the management of EU funds that led to the suspension of over €500 million of aid to Bulgaria.³⁵

According to the most widely used index of corruption elaborated by Transparency International, Bulgaria is perceived as the most corrupt country of all EU member states ranking 86th out of 183 countries in the 2011 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) with a score of 3.3 on a scale from 0 to 10, with zero being the most corrupt and 10 being the least. Following the same ranking, the only two EU states that obtained scores close to the one of Bulgaria are Greece and Romania, which ranked 80th and 75th respectively according to the 2011 CPI Report. The best performing EU member state in 2011 is Denmark with a score of 9.4, while Estonia had the best result among the Central and Eastern European EU member states for the 2008-2011 period. Contrary to what one might expect, since Bulgaria’s EU accession, the corruption in the country has been increasing as showed in the figure below. This disappointing result means that although Bulgaria’s transposition record concerning the EU law is quite positive, the European rules and norms have not been fully implemented and remain so far in the “world of dead letters.”³⁶

Figure 2: Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index, 2008-2011



Source: Transparency International’s *Corruption Perceptions Index* (CPI), 2008-2011.

35. Milada Anna Vachudova, “Corruption and Compliance in the EU’s Post-Communist Members and Candidates,” *Journal of Common Market Studies* 47, (Blackwell Publishing, 2009): 54.

36. Florian Trauner, “Post-accession compliance with EU law in Bulgaria and Romania: a comparative perspective,” in Frank Schimmelfennig and Florian Trauner (eds), *Post-accession Compliance in the EU’s New Member States*, European Integration online Papers, Special Issue 2, Vol. 13, Art. 21 (2009), p. 16.

Corruption is also measured by the World Bank in its World Governance Indicators Report as one of the six dimensions of governance. Thus, the report aims to “capture perceptions of the extent to which public power is exercised for private gain [...], as well as ‘capture’ of the state by elites and private interests.”³⁷ The latest report comparing more than 200 countries over the period 1996-2010 in terms of control of corruption reveals that the corruption in Bulgaria tends to increase, especially between 2009 and 2010.

A third report that also deserves to be mentioned here is *Nations in Transit* published by the Freedom House. The report tracks the reforms record in the former communist states of Europe and Eurasia. In the 2011 edition studying 29 countries and administrative areas, Bulgaria’s democracy score (the average of each country’s ratings for electoral process, civil society, independent media, national democratic governance, local democratic governance, judicial framework and independence and corruption) was 3.07 on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 7 the lowest. While all the other post-communist states (including the Baltic states, Poland, The Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia and Hungary) had a better score and were defined as “consolidated democracies”, Bulgaria and Romania were the only two EU states to be ranked in the group of the “semi-consolidated democracies”, in which one can find some current EU candidate countries like Croatia, Serbia, Macedonia and Montenegro.³⁸

A broad public understanding of the strong link between widespread corruption and inefficiency of the judiciary system has risen especially after the scandal regarding the fraud with the management of EU funds. Thus, the February 2012 Special Eurobarometer survey examining the attitudes of Europeans towards corruption clearly showed that 95% of the polled Bulgarians consider that corruption is the most important problem in the country. This percentage is even higher in Greece (98%), Portugal (97%), Cyprus (97%), Romania (96%) and Hungary (96%).³⁹ Bulgarian respondents are also the most numerous (75%), right after those in Greece (80%) and Romania (78%), to consider that corruption is more widespread in their country than in other EU member states.⁴⁰ At the same time, respondents in Bulgaria have the most positive perception of the role the EU takes in helping to reduce corruption in their country, with 46% agreeing that it does help.⁴¹ A relatively high proportion of Greeks (34%) share this opinion, followed by the polled Polish (32%) and Hungarians (31%). In fact, contrary to

37. World Bank, *World Governance Indicators* 1996-2010.

38. Freedom House, *Nations in Transit*, (2011).

39. European Commission, *Special Eurobarometer* 374, (2012): 14.

40. Idem, 25.

41. Idem, 84.

most of the Western EU member states, most Bulgarians trust the EU institutions more than the national ones. The latest survey released by the previously mentioned Alpha Research survey company in September-December 2011 reveals that 53% of the Bulgarian interviewees do not trust the Law court, only 9% do and the rest 38% having neither positive nor negative opinion. Every other person declared that he does not trust the Prosecution office, while only 10% expressed a positive opinion.

The conclusion that can be drawn from these various public polls related to Bulgarians' perceptions to corruption and the role of the EU and the state institutions is that the EU institutions are seen as more reliable and more efficient in dealing with the problem of corruption. The surveys also reveal that many citizens doubt the Bulgarian government and political elites' capacity, and will to handle the issue of corruption and bring the judicial reform to a successful implementation. Thus, citizens call for more decisive reforms that could not be implemented, according to them, unless the government feels the 'stick' of EU conditionality: *"Every time the EU penalized the two laggards [Bulgaria and Romania], their governments would rapidly respond by presenting revised reform strategies and making pledges for additional measures."*⁴²

Bulgarians' perceptions regarding the failure of the two major European projects

Last but not least, the country's EU membership was associated by most of Bulgarians with *"two major European projects"*⁴³—the Bulgaria's entry into the Schengen area and the country's entry into the Eurozone. However, at the end of 2011, it became clear that both projects had failed. Although Bulgaria has met all Schengen accession criteria and its membership was scheduled for March 2011 at the European Council 2011 September meeting, Finland and the Netherlands blocked Bulgaria and Romania's entry into the free movement area by stating that both countries would not be able to control their borders effectively because their governments still have more urgent issues to handle, namely deficiencies related to the judicial reform and the fight against corruption and organised crime. Surprisingly enough, according to a number of public polls conducted with regard to Bulgaria's delayed entry into the Schengen area, Bulgarians do not seem to blame the EU. Rather, they tend to attribute this delay to deficits in the country itself. This trend is confirmed by the Open Society Institute survey released in August 2011, which shows that 54.12% of the respondents consider that the

42. Gergana Noutcheva and Dimitar Bechev, "The Successful Laggards: BG and Romania's Accession to the EU," *East European Politics and Societies* 22 (114), (2008): 124.

43. Marin Lessenski, "A Schengen Wannable: Public Opinion and Bulgaria's Membership Bid for Schengen," European Policies Initiative (EPI), *Policy brief* 34, September (2011).

main reason is the unconvincing performance of the government in fighting corruption, organised crime and reforming the judiciary. Only 7.24% of the interviewees think that there are external factors to be blamed, such as populist or anti-immigration parties in the Schengen member states themselves.⁴⁴ The same public poll also reveals that a large part of Bulgarian citizens (33.56%) think that the EU's decision to delay Bulgaria's entry into the Schengen area is a "*harsh but fair decision*," while 26.48% consider this an unfair decision with some 40% having no opinion on the issue.⁴⁵

By contrast, public attitude towards the second major European project, Bulgaria's entry into the Eurozone, seems to be more contrasted. According to the latest results of a public opinion poll conducted by the Open Society Institute—Sofia in July 2011, a growing majority of Bulgarians (52%) thinks that it will not be good for Bulgaria to replace the national currency lev with the euro, while only 25% support this replacement. The disapproval of the country's entry into the Eurozone is related to the Eurozone debt crisis and consequently to the belief that if Bulgaria adopts the euro the country will be bound to contribute with substantial funds to the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) that has been established to assist the EU member states that are most affected by the debt crisis. Almost 57% of the respondents answer that they would disapprove the entry of the country into the Eurozone area if this is the case, while only 13% support the accession in these circumstances.⁴⁶ A similar trend can be observed in the other EU member states that have not adopted the euro yet. The latest Eurobarometer data related to this issue reveals that in contrast to 2009, when the majority supported the introduction of the euro, now most of the people would rather claim to be sceptic about this project and even disapprove it: "*The expectations from the negative effects from Eurozone entry are increasing.*"⁴⁷

A New Kind of Exception in the EU: 'The Bulgarian Exception'?

Based on the analysis made above about the Bulgarians' perceptions and expectations of the country's EU membership since 2007, we can draw at least three conclusions. First, although none of the 'great expectations' related to Bulgaria's EU accession has really been met, Bulgarians remain quite optimistic with regard to the benefits of the EU membership and the role of EU in dealing with the crisis and in improving the economic and political situation in the country by urging the government to implement further reforms. Second, unlike the other

44. Idem.

45. Idem.

46. Quoted in: Georgi Angelov, "The Euro is Losing the Trust of Bulgarian Citizens," European Policies Initiative (EPI), *Policy brief 35*, September (2011).

47. Idem, 2.

EU member states where Euroscepticism tends to rise, in Bulgaria, there seems to be less ground for Euroscepticism since Bulgarians are not blaming the EU for unfair treatment, in particular related to the country's delayed entry into the Schengen area. As revealed by the various opinion polls analysed here, Bulgarian citizens tend to trust the EU institutions more than their own state administration. Third, unlike most of the other EU citizens that are very often sensitive to the question of state sovereignty, Bulgarians claim for more control from the 'outside' and perceive the EU as a necessary corrective mechanism for compensating the inefficiency of the state institutions. In fact, these three particularities depicting the Bulgarian public opinion towards the country's EU membership could be viewed as a new kind of exception in the EU. Unlike the classical idea of the 'French exception,' rooted in the tradition and the ability of the French state to protect its population and therefore stand for its sovereignty and national interests inside the EU, the 'Bulgarian exception' is rather a public reaction to the absence of a strong state and the lack of efficient institutions that Bulgarians are seeking to compensate by pooling their sovereignty to the EU and its institutional system and control. The EU institutions are more trusted than the national institutions, as revealed by the surveys quoted in this study, and they are believed to be even a better guarantee for the country's economic progress, political governance and social well-being than its own government. While the French exception is nestled in the social protection and comfort provided by the French state, the Bulgarian exception is based on the idea of relying more on the EU authority than the national state institutions, and on the belief that the EU rigorous conditionality imposed on Bulgaria after the accession is a 'necessary good' to reform and even correct the flaws of its inefficient and corrupted institutional system.

Abstract

This paper aims to analyse how the economic, political and social situation in Bulgaria is perceived by the Bulgarian public opinion five years after the country's accession to the EU. We argue that in the current context of rising Euroscepticism geared specifically by the ongoing Eurozone debt crisis, Bulgaria appears to be one of the few EU member states where the public opinion remains quite optimistic with regard to the benefits of the country's EU membership and the role of the EU in dealing with the crisis. Drawing on some public opinion surveys made by the European Commission as well as on a number of public opinion polls conducted by national and foreign survey agencies, this article attempts to explain the paradox mentioned above by analysing Bulgarians' perceptions and expectations concerning the EU membership before and after the country's entry in the EU. The article concludes by outlining the idea of 'Bulgarian exception' in the EU.

Résumé

L'objectif de cet article est d'analyser la perception par l'opinion publique bulgare de la situation économique, politique et sociale de la Bulgarie cinq ans après son adhésion à l'UE. Alors que la crise de la dette souveraine provoque une montée de l'euroscepticisme partout en Europe, la Bulgarie semble être l'un des rares États membres de l'UE dans lequel l'opinion publique estime que l'appartenance du pays à l'Union est quelque chose de bénéfique et soutient le rôle de cette dernière dans la gestion de la crise. S'appuyant

sur certaines enquêtes menées par la Commission européenne et de nombreuses enquêtes conduites par des instituts de sondage nationaux et étrangers, cette étude tente d'expliquer ce paradoxe par l'analyse des perceptions bulgares et des attentes relatives à l'adhésion avant et après 2007 pour conclure à l'existence d'une « exception bulgare » dans l'UE.