

# The end goal of the post-communist transition in Bulgaria: societal transformation or EU membership?

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## Abstract

The end of the Cold War resulted in an unprecedented geopolitical situation in Europe, presenting a challenge to the security in the continent and the integration achieved so far. The only solution to this geopolitical problem was the integration of the post-communist Central and Eastern European countries (CEE) into the European Union (EU). The CEE countries therefore had to undergo deep societal reforms, while simultaneously pursuing a new foreign policy agenda away from the orbits of Russia. The EU was perceived as a solution to all existing problems. The results of the research conducted in Bulgaria, presented in this article, demonstrate that preparation for meeting the membership criteria which on the surface seemed to correspond to the aims of the transition, substituted the due structural reform. Thus, the EU accession instead of being an instrument for achieving sustainable long-term goals, became an end goal in itself, as if it would be an international testimony of a successful transition. The reforms were formal, partial and superficial, and therefore reversible. As a result, the rule of law is deteriorating, and we can observe a facade democracy.

**Keywords:** EU enlargement, Europeanisation, CEE countries, EU integration, Bulgaria, rule of law, transition.

## Końcowy cel transformacji postkomunistycznej w Bułgarii: transformacja społeczna czy członkostwo w UE?

### Streszczenie

Zakończenie zimnej wojny zaowocowało bezprecedensową sytuacją geopolityczną w Europie, stanowiącą wyzwanie dla bezpieczeństwa na kontynencie i dla dotychczasowej integracji europejskiej. Jedynym rozwiązaniem tego geopolitycznego problemu była integracja postkomunistycznych krajów Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej (EŚW) z Unią Europejską (UE). Kraje EŚW musiały więc przejść głębokie reformy społeczno-gospodarcze, jednocześnie realizując nowy program polityki zagranicznej z dala od orbity Rosji. UE była postrzegana jako rozwiązanie na wszystkie istniejące problemy. Zaprezentowane w niniejszym artykule badania, przeprowadzone w Bułgarii, wskazują, że przygotowanie do

spełnienia kryteriów członkostwa, które z pozoru odpowiadały celom transformacji, zastąpiło odpowiednią reformę strukturalną. Tym samym przystąpienie do UE, zamiast być instrumentem osiągania trwałych, długoterminowych celów, stało się celem samym w sobie, jak gdyby miało być międzynarodowym potwierdzeniem udanej transformacji. Spowodowało to w efekcie, że przeprowadzone reformy stały się formalnością, były częściowe i powierzchowne, a co za tym idzie odwracalne. W wyniku następuje pogorszenie rządów prawa, i obserwujemy fasadową demokrację.

**Słowa kluczowe:** rozszerzenie UE, europeizacja, kraje Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej, integracja europejska, Bułgaria, rządy prawa, transformacja.

With the end of the Cold War, Europe was facing an unprecedented geopolitical situation that was presenting a challenge to the security in the continent and the integration achieved so far. The Western European countries were threatened on the one hand, by the disbalance created within the European Communities with Germany's unification and its growing power. On the other hand, the instability emanated from the newly established post-communist states threatening with regional conflicts, ecological and ethnic crises. Last but not least, Russia's geopolitical and economic interests in the Central and Eastern European region were still not clearly articulated, while it's military power and possession of natural resources placed the Western countries in a position of dependence, but to a different degree. This complex geopolitical challenge had only one possible non-military solution – the integration of the CEE countries (Central and Eastern European countries) to the European structures (see: O'Brennan 2006).

For the CEE countries this seemed to be the only opportunity to resolve the problems they were facing within this newly established geopolitical order. On the one hand, Western Europe provided a new stable foreign policy path, guaranteeing geopolitical, economic and security partners. On the other hand, it provided a model for progress and development and a framework for achieving the deep long-term societal reforms needed to complete the post-communist transition (Ágh, Ferencz 2007; Katsikas, Siani-Davies 2018). Thus, joining the newly formed EU became a primary goal, which was reinforced by the fact that the conditions for candidate countries, at least on the surface, corresponded to the aims of the transition – as they were related to the existence of liberal democracy, functioning market economy and the rule of law (Balazs 1997; Dimitrov 2016b). The much-desired accession to the EU was accompanied with high expectations for economic and social prosperity (Ágh, Ferencz 2007; Dimitrov 2016b; Katsikas, Siani-Davies 2018).

Twelve years after Bulgaria and Romania (the last two countries from the Fifth Enlargement) joined the EU, however, the CEE countries still experience deep societal problems such as corruption, organised crime, economic instability, rule of law deterioration, ethnical conflicts, nationalistic movements (Racovita, Tanasoiu 2012). Moreover, Bulgaria and Romania are still not integrated into all EU structures – they are still not part of the Schengen Area or the Eurozone, and continue to be subjects to post-accession conditionality. Apparently, they are still not prepared to meet the full responsibilities of the membership, while at the same time they have not completed the much-needed societal reform.

## Aim and hypothesis

This article aims to identify the reasons for the incomplete post-communist transition and the superficial, partial and reversible "Europeanisation" in the country. In order to achieve this, a case-study analysis will consider the specific way in which the EU membership preparation was conducted in Bulgaria. In particular, the article will analyse the initial vision of the Bulgarian political elites towards EU membership, and the essence of the subsequent work that was done to get the country ready.

The task involves an analysis of the personal interpretations, perceptions and views of the participants of the process, that can be achieved most adequately through in-depth interviews with the actors. Therefore, the analysis will use the empirical data from a joint research conducted by the *Jean Monnet Center of Excellence* at the Faculty of Philosophy at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", and the *Bulgarian Diplomatic Institute*, aiming at investigation of the Bulgaria's EU-integration process through the memories of the participants<sup>1</sup>.

The analysis will examine the following two-fold hypothesis:

*The end goal of the post-communist transition in Bulgaria has been the complete societal transformation and 'Europeanisation' of the country,*

*or: in the course of the membership preparation, the technocratic rule transfer and compliance with EC's recommendations became the central aim, completely replacing the effort for conducting structural reforms, and thus became the one and only goal of the transition.*

If the first hypothesis is true, it can be assumed that the empirical data would reflect the centrality of the goal for overall societal transformation, and this should be expressed in the collective memory of the participants in the process in clear, concrete and instrumental terms. If, however, the second hypothesis is true, we can expect the answers to demonstrate prevalence of the technocratic aspect of the preparation, references to the day-to-day tasks and abstract unclear and inconsistent statements when the participants are invited to speak about Bulgaria's vision in the process.

An important clarification is due at this stage: this article does not aim to provide an evaluation or search for the faults of the process. The aim of this analysis is to find an explanation of the logic that led to the specific results. Because of the unprecedented character of the process and the lack of preliminary knowledge about the way it should be conducted, and furthermore because of the deep socio-economic crisis which marked its starting point, it is not surprising that the desire to expedite the events became a main dominator. The understandable impatience to complete the transition as early as possible determined a course of political behaviour, which aimed to minimise the scope and the degree of complexity of the task. The focus of the article will be on providing an in-depth understanding of this political behaviour and the process itself, rather than on the abstractive search of an ideal variant.

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<sup>1</sup> Research project *Creating a National Archive of Memories of the Process of Bulgaria's Accession to the European Union (2017-2018)*. Team members: Prof. Ingrid Shikova – Head of Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence; Tanya Mihaylova – Director of the Bulgarian Diplomatic Institute; Prof. Georgi Dimitrov – Team Member; Assoc. Prof. Mirela Veleva – Team Member; Bilyana Decheva – Team Member; Svetlosar Kovachev – Team Member on behalf of Diplomatic Institute; Lubomira Popova – PhD student, Team Member.

## Justification of the country choice

The choice of Bulgaria as a case study for the analysis has a particular value. Bulgaria, along with Romania, was one of the last countries from the Fifth Enlargement. Throughout the entire process it seemed that while most of the candidate states were advancing, more or less, well with their preparation, Bulgaria and Romania were just "lagging behind" (due to the more unfavourable local conditions), yet they were moving in the right direction along with the others and would be able to "make up for the lagging" (Yanakiev 2010; Schimmelfennig, Sedelmeier 2005). This logic was based on the widespread institutionalist approach to the process, which is based on the belief that the EU has an unconditional potential to produce "Europeanisation" due to its "transformative power" backed by an implicit "power asymmetry" existing between the member states and the candidate states (Grabbe 2006; Sedelmeier 2011; Dimitrov et al. 2013). However, this is not the entire story.

From the perspective of twelve years after the accession of Bulgaria and Romania, there is some serious proof demonstrating that this was not just a "lagging behind" but an early evidence of the unfitness of the policy approach towards "Europeanisation" (or the methodology of enlargement – see: Maniokas 2004) in these countries. It was an early symptom of the upcoming crisis that has been manifested through the different social, economic and political problems the countries have been experiencing today. In this sense, the case study of Bulgaria, as the most symptomatic example, is expected to provide a wide range of data and proof for analysing the overall logic of the approach and its fitness to the context of the post-communist CEE countries (Dimitrov et al. 2013). Even if we assume that the 10-year period 1997–2007 was simply "not enough", the question is why was it not enough and why the continuation of the accession through conditionality (which was later converted into a post-accession conditionality for Bulgaria and Romania in the form of Cooperation and verification mechanism) did not work either? The short answer to this crucial question is that the accession process was meant to substitute the Europeanisation of the acceding countries while the latter historical process, according to the Copenhagen criteria, should have been accomplished already in order for the EU-nization to be successful.

This is not a matter of historical interest only – why things evolved the way they did. In terms of societal and cultural specificities, from all EU members from CEE, Bulgaria is considered closest to the countries of the Western Balkans, which are currently undergoing their membership preparations. Thus, the case of Bulgaria will be the most applicable one to provide guidance and recommendations for the approach towards this upcoming enlargement (Veleva-Eftimova 2018).

## Clarification of relevant terms

The conceptual model of the study is built on the terms: "**Europeanisation**"; "**Conditionality**" and "**Compliance**", which will be used widely in this article and thus need to

be clarified as the existing academic literature does not offer a single, widely accepted definition for them.

For the purpose of the current analysis, Radaelli's definition of **Europeanisation** will be used, according to which "Europeanisation consists of processes of a) construction, b) diffusion and c) institutionalisation of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, 'ways of doing things' and shared beliefs and norms which are first defined and consolidated in the EU policy process and then incorporated in the logic of domestic (national and subnational) discourse, political structures and public policies" (Radaelli 2004: p. 3). This broad and substantive definition is widely used in the analysis of these processes in both Western European countries and the "newcomers" from the CEE. The problem is that the EU fundamentally relies on the embeddedness of its core values in the societies it encompasses and on the fluent operation of the set of institutions which guarantee the respect of these values. However, in the case of the fifth enlargement of the EU, Europeanisation implies the need to create anew of the entire set of these institutions – a task, for which there were no *aquis* at all. This is to say, in this particular case the "the rule transfer" could not mean authentic Europeanisation.

While the term "Europeanisation" refers to the macro-framework of the EU enlargement policy, the central instrument for conducting "Europeanisation" in the "EU toolbox of enlargement" is "conditionality".

"**Conditionality**" will be understood as "a process of interaction between multi-level actors, perceptions, interests, different rewards and sanctions, temporal factors, institutional and policy compliance" (Hughes et al. 2005: p. 2). The value in this definition is that it presents conditionality not as a process of transferring rules from a stronger to a weaker party but as a complex interaction on multiple levels reflecting the interests and subjectivity of a multitude of actors. It sets grounds for understanding the logic behind the emergence of the central role of this mechanism exactly in the context of the Eastern enlargement. In the course of the fifth EU's enlargement conditionality surprisingly arose to the status of a main leverage because the burden of the deep Europeanisation transformed the governments of the acceding countries into "reluctant regimes" (Grabbe 2006). Hence, a coercive device was needed, because the EU did not have any of this kind. In this particular case conditionality began to mean compliance with European Commission's recommendations, since this institution was the "locomotive of enlargement" (Hughes et al. 2005).

A new definition for the term "**compliance**" is offered, which reflects the overall meaning applied to this term by the different explorers of the process of "Europeanisation". For the purpose of this article "compliance" is understood as "incorporation of the European Commission's recommendations in the local policies". This is the lowest and narrowest level of interaction between the candidate states and the EU, which has to do with the EC's requirements in regard to the law approximation, mainly, and the creation of institutional capacity for its application.

As the empirical analysis will demonstrate, a dual transformation has taken place in the course of the membership preparation of the CEE countries – firstly, the enlargement

policy conducted under the charge of the European Commission has been reduced by the logic of conditionality to "compliance" with the recommendations, while "conditionality" has become the only instrument for Europeanisation in the candidate countries. At least the formal logic of this substitution and reduction was that the EC, in its orchestration of the accession process, should have been guided by the set of Copenhagen criteria, which in their turn should have covered both the free market and democracy transitions that were assumed to be at least the post-communist transition core. The fact that the latter process was paid lip service only, remained unnoticed throughout the accession period. The Europeanisation throughout the EU accession process received heavily one-sided, implicit neoliberal interpretation (see: Grabbe 2006) prioritising the integration in the free market of the Union.

The problem is, however, whether this narrow, sector specific goal was sufficient as a reform of the post-communist world of the CEE countries. The fundamental crisis of the rule of law systems in countries like Hungary, Poland, Romania and Bulgaria gives justification to a negative answer to this pertinent question.

This is exactly where the empirical study should begin – how come the one-sidedness of the Europeanisation effort passed unnoticed at the end of the 1990s when it was up to the political class to decide on the goals and orientation of the national policies of reforms.

### **Specifics of the research subject**

The process of integration of the former socialist countries into the EU is a complex, unprecedented process aiming at providing a resolution to the security challenge, which appeared with the new geopolitical situation that emerged in Europe after the collapse of the bipolar order (O'Brennan 2006; Balazs 1997). It appeared to be the only possible non-military way out of this complicated situation, which is why John O'Brennan refers to it as an act of "desecuritisation" (O'Brennan 2006). As András Inotai argues, the Eastern enlargement must take place at any cost, because "if the EU fails to enlarge, a new dividing line in Europe will be emerging. Along this new borderline and to the East and South of it, stability will be seriously questioned" (Inotai 2000: p. 2). Therefore, "Urgent steps are needed to (re) define the future borders of Europe in terms of security" (Inotai 2000: p. 2).

Presenting the only possible guarantee to the security in Europe, however, the integration of the post-communist societies is an impossible task because of the contradictory cultural and value systems of these countries (Maresceau 1997). For the first time, societies, built upon completely opposite principles, have to be integrated into the community of Western European countries, which even though experiencing identity issues (Verheugen 2013), are still united around the common principles of democracy, the free market and the rule of law. Therefore, these societies must be totally transformed. The task is compounded by the low economic resources these countries possess, their huge population and territory, and the significant differences between them, both from

a cultural and a historical point of view, but also in terms of the reforms already undertaken in the transition to democracy and market economy (Maresceau 1997; Cameron 1997; Toshkov 2012; Maniokas 2004).

At this stage, it is worth paying attention to some of the historical specificities of the Bulgarian society which make the "Europeanisation" of Bulgaria particularly complicated, even compared to the other CEE countries, because, as Georgi Dimitrov notes: "Bulgaria's road and mode of accession to the EU has been directly and very heavily path-dependent" (Dimitrov 2016b: p. 279).

An important characteristic of the Bulgarian society is the tradition of seeking external support; external donor; saviour; someone to tell us what to do. This predisposition of the country to external dependencies and the expectation that the development should come from outside (Russia, USA, International Monetary Fund) is transferred to the EU (Dimitrov 2001). Considering this, it is understandable that the country cannot function properly as a full member of the Union, take initiative and develop policies. Instead, the Bulgarian governments obediently follow the conditions imposed by the external donor, as their predecessors traditionally used to do.

Secondly, we should pay attention to the capacity of the Bulgarian economy to function effectively in the conditions of the free market, since market integration is an essential element of successful Europeanisation. As a number of influential Bulgarian economists argue, there are historical factors which portend the severe problems that the Bulgarian economy is experiencing within the frames of the EU market (Hristova, Slanchev, Angelov 2004; Avramov 2007). According to Rumen Avramov, Bulgaria historically suffers from a deeply-rooted model of thinking created upon a value system, in which two contradictory logics compete – the communal and the individual. In Avramov's opinion, the "bacillus of the communal beginning" makes free market competition impossible and thus condemns the economy to inefficiency and poverty (Avramov 2007: p. 57).

Lastly, as the present analysis will demonstrate, Bulgaria, even more sharply than the other CEE countries, experiences a lack of conscious understanding of the need for European integration and a clear vision of the goals and results it should bring (Dimitrov 2016b; Veleva-Eftimova 2018).

Due to the fundamental differences between the Eastern and Western European countries, the incompatible initial visions, the historical specificities of the Bulgarian society and the fact that the EU countries have no previous experience, mechanisms and tools to transform post-communist societies, the task becomes impossible to accomplish. As Georgi Dimitrov and Mirela Veleva summarise, the integration of the CEE countries must be completed for the sake of peace and security in the continent, but at the same time, it is not feasible (Dimitrov 2017; Veleva-Eftimova 2018). Due to the fact that "it must, but it cannot" be done (Dimitrov 2017), the process is doomed to take place without a strategy – the only possible strategy is the maximum delay in time. András Inotai (2000) criticises the EU countries for leading the process with no timetable, no dates, no clarity, and Peter Balazs (1997) – for the "crawling strategy", but in reality this seems to be the only possible way. According to Marc Maresceau's (1997) interpretation,

the “strategy” of saving time translates into the breakdown of the process into many small steps. The existence of intermediate steps gives the EU countries control over the timing, scope, resources and the overall progress of the process. At the same time, the initial contradiction (“it must, but cannot”) predetermines its entire course – it is being transformed and reappears in every subsequent stage. Thus, with every step there is a shift in the right direction, but at the same time the end point remains as uncertain as in the beginning. Each new step, however, presents a completely new situation – not in the sense of a set of circumstances, but in a substantive, structural and value-oriented definition of the integration process itself.

At the same time, from Inotai’s and Balazs’ critique of the EU approach described above, it becomes clear, that in CEE countries there is a strong urge to complete the process as soon as possible. As the empirical data will demonstrate, in these countries the EU was viewed in value-based implicit terms, often mythologised and seen as ‘a place of prosperity’, ‘a bearer of normality’ and the only opportunity to ‘break up with the past’. Having this in mind, analysing the initial visions of the participants in the Bulgarian European integration process is the key to understanding the logic of the process and the transformations of the final goal that led to the specific results.

## Materials and methods

The article presents a qualitative analysis of empirical materials collected through 46 in-depth, semi-structured interviews, conducted with highest level politicians (prime ministers, deputy prime-ministers, ministers), diplomats and experts, who have participated in Bulgaria’s preparation process for EU membership.

The analysis covers the participants’ answers to the following question: *At the start of the negotiations process, was there a clear vision of the aims of Bulgaria’s accession to the EU outside the general idea of keeping up with the other post-communist states?*

And the following supplementary question: *Do you remember an official forum during which this vision has been discussed?*

The analysis will be carried out in three stages. Firstly, all the different aspects of individual interpretations in the answers will be identified and listed. In the second stage these aspects will be grouped and ordered in such a way that they form an integral meaning. Finally, the aspects that are considered most relevant in providing understanding about the final goal of the process and its transformations will be selected and analysed in-depth.

## Data analysis

The process of preparation for EU membership is an active process constructed through the interaction of multi-level actors participating with their own ideals, values, dispositions, and ambitions. Its active character assumes a high degree of subjectiveness and, thus, demonstrates the significance of each participant’s personal perceptions in

the course of development. Therefore, the question about the "initial vision" is extremely important – on the one hand, it provides in-depth knowledge about the participants' perceptions; on the other hand – it shows the level of shared understanding between the participants in regard to the purpose of their effort.

Throughout the analysis of the contents of the respondents' answers, 425 different aspects of the individual interpretations were identified. This demonstrates the huge importance of the personal perceptions, values, ideas, goals that shape the understanding of the process and its vision and end goal. The wide spectrum of interpretations testifies for the substantive importance of the question under consideration, yet, at the same time, it is a testimony not only of the complexity of the subject-matter but of the extraordinary high level of nebulosity of its political definition. Obviously behind the registered variance of opinions stands the lack of coherent, forged through public discussion, understanding of the stakes, goals and the means for their achievement.

At the next stage of analysis, these 425 aspects were grouped and organised in a hierarchical order showing the position of dependence between them. The order reflected the active character of the process, following the central role of the actors and the significance of the interaction as determining the course of the process. The two main actors – the EU as an integral actor on one side, the Bulgarian country on the other – were placed on top of the hierarchy, and the interaction process between them was placed in the middle. Underneath, the hierarchy followed the number of different actors and sub-actors within each of the two integral ones, and subsequently, the different levels of interactions.

Then the groups considered most relevant for testing the initial hypothesis were selected. With regard to the initial problem and hypothesis in this article, all aspects that provide knowledge about the logic of the process and the initial vision of the actors and its involvement throughout the interaction process were considered relevant.

The aspects, which did not fall within these categories, were left aside. These included the broader geopolitical picture, parallels with other CEE countries, competition between the CEE countries, relations with the different Western countries, analyses of the negotiation chapters, and others.

In order to verify the hypothesis, the selected groups were classified in a way that allowed to study the degree of clarity, concreteness and instrumentality in the understanding of the accession process by the different actors. To achieve this, the answers falling under the different categories were classified in the following way:

- **end goal:**
  - membership vs. reform;
- **characteristics of the end goal:**
  - value-based (e.g. *freedom, prosperity*) vs. instrumental (e.g. *foreign investments*),
  - specific (e.g. *market integration*) vs. abstract (e.g. *a better future*),
  - clear (e.g. *to join the already functioning mechanisms of the EU*) vs. unclear (*we do not understand where we are going*);

- **vision:**
  - debated (a product of a productive debate) vs. implicit (default understandings of the vision);
- **motivation:**
  - value-based (e.g. *to live like the European citizens do*) vs. instrument-based (*to travel without a visa*);
- **results:**
  - planned (e.g. *a result of clear consecutive steps*) vs. coincidental (e.g. *faith*);
- **tasks:**
  - required by the EU (e.g. *introducing legislation, transferring directives*) vs. initiated in Bulgaria (e.g. *setting new foundations*),
  - technocratic (e.g. *creating tables, following templates*) vs. reform-oriented (e.g. *building new institutions*);
- **preparatory work:**
  - technocratic approach (e.g. *preparation the paper, writing strategies and documents with little or no consistency*) vs. reform-oriented approach (e.g. *stabilising the democratic process*).

There is a reasoning behind the order of the selected aspects, which follows the logic of the argumentation. Of primary importance is to understand the end goal of the process – what is it that the actors were striving to achieve. After clarifying the goal, the next step will be to understand how it was perceived by the actors – in value-based or instrumental terms; as clear or as unclear. Following from there, the analysis will look at the vision and the motivation of the process, which are closely linked. The next step will be to investigate, how is the result perceived by the actors – as coincidental and planned – which emanates from the previous aspects. Finally, the analysis will take a close look at the working approach and seek to identify how it relates to the aspects already analysed, and how the combination of them explains the peculiar way the membership preparation was conducted in Bulgaria.

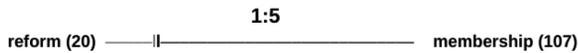
Once the classification was completed, the number of times each answer which falls under one of the selected categories appears in the text was counted, and the sum of the usages of all aspects that fall under the same dimension of the answer was calculated.

## Results of the research

The results were placed on axes, each side of which presented one of the extremes. The end results of this experiment present completely conclusive and convincing empirical findings.

First of all, taking a look at the end goal of the process, according to the participants, it is obviously membership rather than actual social reform. This is how the axis looks like:

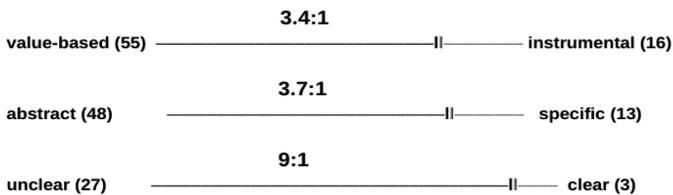
**End goal**



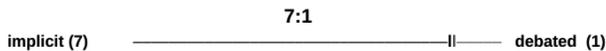
In concrete terms, the answer that the aim of the processes was “membership” or “accession” was found 107 times in the interviews, while the answer “reform” or “transition” – 20 times. This clearly demonstrates that the end goal of reforming the country has been lost in the way through the EU preparation.

Moving to the next level, the same abstractness and unclarity is noticed when analysing the characteristics of the end goal; the vision of the process and the motivation for EU membership:

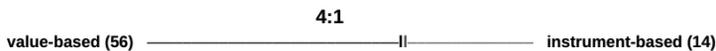
**End goal (characteristics)**



**Vision**



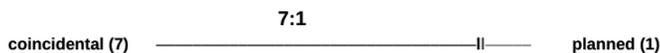
**Motivation**



As the results demonstrate, the membership preparation has been conducted in an unclear atmosphere with implicit goals and tasks and a value-based approach – the EU was mythologised, understood as a “return to Europe, where the country naturally belonged”, turning to “the other world”, where the bright future of Bulgaria is a given.

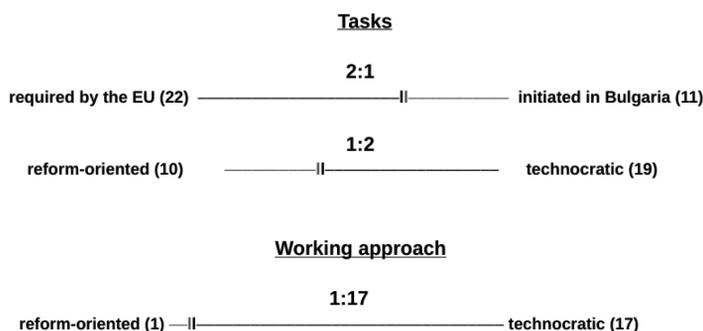
Considering this, it is not surprising that the final result was perceived as coincidental, rather than planned:

**Result**



The participants consider it "faith" (interview 16, 2018), "chance" (interview 17, 2017), an event "dependent on forces outside our control" (interview 35, 2018) and only one of the respondents said that it is "the result of clear steps" which were followed (interview 5, 2017).

Moving to the next level, the actual preparatory work and the tasks that needed to be completed, there is a clear tendency towards technocratic work and preparation "on paper", and a focus on complying to the EU-imposed criteria, rather than on the reforms needed in the country:



As it becomes obvious, the tasks were predominantly technocratic and imposed by the EU such as "acquis transfer", "responding to the criteria", "templating", "filling in tables".

This tendency is even more evident when it comes to the overall approach to the preparatory work. According to the respondents, the preparation was "a waste of funds" (interview 6, 2018), "making nonsense" (interview 7, 2018), a "series of meaningless exercises" (interview 11, 2018), "documents", "papers", "programmes" (interview 36, 2018).

In complete accordance with the results above, a few interesting observations deserve to be pointed out. Firstly, it is interesting to note that while almost all of the respondents stated that there must have been a forum, where the vision had been debated, in fact only one of the 46 interviewees was able to refer to a specific one – namely, to a forum which took place in 1998 – years after the vision should have been formed according to respondents' statements. All the other participants could not remember and were unable to provide an example. Apparently, as the results also indicate, the membership preparation was conducted without a debated and well-defined vision and aims.

The other interesting observation is in regard to the certified predominance of the values in the perception of the EU membership. While the ideal of "returning to Europe" appeared in the interviews in 38 different formulations ("to return to the place, where the country naturally belongs"; "to re-establish the European image and identity"; "to join the world of progress and prosperity where, Bulgaria's natural place is", etc.), one of the specific instrument-based dimensions of the membership, which is traditionally perceived as one of the main benefits too (i.e. the free movement) – appeared as the 134th consecutive accent among the individual interpretations, long after value-based interpretations described above. This is quite conclusive in regard to the centrality of

the values dictating the course of membership preparation. This is meant to be the achievement of the EU accession – both a symbolic victory, a fundamental breach with the communist past, a benefit for everyone (or at least for the young generation), but not a practical premise for doing business. This is how an instrument is transformed into an end-goal in itself because of the value accent placed on it.

### **Discussion on the empirical findings**

The analysis demonstrates that in the course of transition two substitutes have been made – firstly, the overall societal transformation was substituted by preparation for EU membership, because at that point of time it seemed that the goals of the post-communist transition and Europeanisation substantially coincide. On the second level, the preparation was substituted by technocratic work of writing strategies, preparing policy documents and harmonising law, rather than conducting actual reforms, whereas the focus was on “the political will”, since it was assumed that implementation would swiftly follow suit the moment a government would have had expressed its political will in the form of a strategy or programme. This way, the EU membership from an instrument for achieving reform goals became the end goal in itself. Hence, “compliance” to the EU requirements from an instrument for achieving membership became “the goal”; and the “rule transfer” and paperwork from measures for achieving “compliance” also became a goal – self-evident and self-sufficient. However, this sequence of reductions of the tasks of the due societal transformations was enhanced in a decisive way by the absence of a substantial and substantive long-term goal.

Apparently, as there was no clear instrumental goal for the EU preparations process shared by the participants, the value-based understanding prevailed. This led to a unification of the otherwise separate processes – post-communist reform and Europeanisation, as they seemed to correspond to the same ideals and to be derived from the same values – democracy, prosperity, success. The focal point was the end of the past, not any concrete future in particular. There was much work to be done in the direction of membership preparation – meeting the Copenhagen criteria, which also seemed to correspond to these values and ideals, but also a variety of technocratic tasks required by the European Commission. As a result, the political effort was focused towards joining the EU, and this became the primary goal, completely substituting the aim for deep societal reforms.

In the course of the processes, the task itself was minimised – it became obvious that the Commission did not possess instruments and expertise to conduct deep reforms and Europeanisation. Neither was there an incentive on behalf of the EC to look after such a result. Taking the ownership over the success of the Eastern enlargement the Commission had its own stake to minimize the job of preparation in order to make the membership feasible. The experience of the institution from previous enlargements was in achieving market integration and legal harmonisation. Using this experience, the focus of the fifth enlargement became the same – market integration (Maresceau 1997; Dimitrov et al. 2013; Veleva-Eftimova 2018). With the advancement of the process it started to

become evident that the local countries, perceived until then as partners desiring reform, Europeanisation and EU membership, have become reluctant to undertake policies that would harm their own interests (Grabbe 2006) – an obstacle completely unexpected within the institutionalist interpretation of the enlargement as a “constant success story” (Dimitrov 2016a). This is how “conditionality” became the primary mechanism of the Eastern enlargement – it was imposed as a measure to insert influence based on the assumption of “power asymmetry” between the parties (Smith 2003). However, it was also an instrument for solving political questions that could not be solved with different means: *How many countries should be allowed to join? Which ones? How prepared should they be?*

The contradiction embedded in this instrument doomed it to ineffectiveness, at least in achieving long-term sustainable goals. This way through conditionality the process was simplified once again, this time to “transfer of rules” as conditionality mainly measured the harmonisation of the legislative systems (Dimitrov 2016a). As a result, after a series of transformations and reductions, the end goal of the post-communist transition became the adoption of the EU law to the national law.

## Conclusions

The analysis conducted above provides a very clear picture of the way Bulgaria's preparation for EU membership was conducted. The results demonstrate that the value-based motives for joining the Union prevailed to the instrumental ones. At the same time, the process took place with no clear vision and no shared understanding of the final goals and aims, and as a result its entire course was marked with ambiguity. With the lack of vision, timetable and steps to follow, the effort to meet the membership conditions prevailed, as it was the only clear and understandable by all participants aspect of the process. Thus, the accent was put on the technocratic preparation targeted to the Common market accession mainly, rather than on societal reforms. This was possible because the logic of the accession process was reversed. The Copenhagen membership criteria presuppose that a society needs to be “Europeanised” – to have a functioning economy, representative democracy and the rule of law – and based on this start integrating it into the EU structures through law harmonisation. The Eastern enlargement, however, was conducted in the opposite way – the membership preparation was perceived as an instrument for Europeanisation; and the bureaucratic preparation replaced the reform policy. As one of the respondents noted, “the strategic thinking was substituted by written strategies and documents” (interview 29, 2018). Thus, EU membership became an end goal without having any substance other than simple law approximation, or broadly speaking – “rule transfer”. This way the post-communist transition and deep societal reform expected to emerge along with the membership were substituted by paperwork and the notorious “political will” for reforms embodied in strategies writing and obligations taken (but not fulfilled). This “unfinished business” of both transition reforms and Europeanisation explains to a great extent the variety of social, economic and political problems the CEE countries face today.

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