

RELUCTANT FELLOW-TRAVELERS: BULGARIA AND ROMANIA ON THE ROAD TO THE EU

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These are some observations on the difficulties encountered by Bulgaria and Romania towards reaching the final point in the integration in UE. The text can serve in the study of the recent diplomatic history, concerning relations between the two countries and Bruxelles.

For Bulgaria and Romania the road to Europe/EU has been both very long and very short.

Historically, to be European, to become part of the civilized Europe has been the national project of all the countries of South Eastern Europe, or as Paschalis Kitromilides puts it – this was the ‘red thread’ through their modern history. A dream, an aim and a norm, this metaphoric Europe has embodied simultaneously the nations’ invariable aspirations and the nations’ complexes of backwardness; it was vis-à-vis this Europe that they all struggled to define their complicated national identity.

For a number of reasons the two neighbors, living side by side on Europe’s periphery, have always had a rather different attitude to Europe.

An ‘island of Latinity in the Slavic sea’, Romania has had strong cultural ties to France and consequently had felt much closer to Europe. The Romanians emphatically reject to belong to the Balkans. Romania, claimed Nicolae Iorga in 1940, was not a Balkan country, since “a country does not belong to the space where it stands, but to the target it looks at” – something that a contemporary Sorin Antohi calls a “geocultural bovarism”¹. Romanians in large numbers graduated from Paris schools and universities, spoke fluent French and enriched world culture with names like Eugène Ionesco, Emil Cioran, George Enescu; Bucharest was proudly called the small Paris of the East.

In contrast, Bulgaria willingly admits its Balkanness. Slavic, Balkan, Eastern Orthodox, Bulgaria gained its independence in the late 19th C. after being part of the Ottoman Empire for five centuries. It has felt much more divided between East and West. For the Bulgarians Europe was a distant place over the horizon, somewhere you get to by taking the Orient express. During the Balkan war Simeon Radev, a diplomat and a writer, reached with his detachment the Marmara Sea and

¹ Simeon Radev, *Tova, koeto vidiah ot Balkanshata voina* (What I Saw from the Balkan War), “Narodna kultura”, Sofia, 1993, 42–43.

showed to his soldiers the opposite Asian bank. They were truly surprised: if that was Asia, they were standing on the European shore and were Europeans after all?¹ In the words of Aleko Konstantinov's 19th C satirical hero Bay Ganyu, words that every Bulgarian knows from school age, "we are Europeans, but not quite". Strong doubts about the European character of Bulgaria permeate historical and cultural writing².

This different distance to Europe has another rather unexpected implication. Paradoxically at first glance, when it comes to following the European example, Romanians have had stronger hesitations, stronger fears, and stronger cultural resistance. The antinomy between East and West has permanently preoccupied Romanian intellectuals, who can be roughly divided into two camps: of westernizers and traditionalists. Fanatic modernizers like Stefan Zeletin opposed another group of intellectuals who glorified the country's autochthonous past and rejected any 'inorganic' cultural and institutional borrowing from the West. Interestingly, sometimes the two trends came together, like in the great figure of Nicolae Iorga: a cosmopolitan teaching at *College de France* in Paris, who spoke and wrote in all the major modern European languages, expressed his distaste for cultural imports, as unhealthy to the national well-being and urged for return to an idealized agrarian, patriarchal, free of conflicts past³.

On the contrary, Bulgarians' image of Europe, more distant and idealized, has always been more pragmatic and instrumental. European models were hardly ever put to doubt but embraced with true enthusiasm. In Bulgaria there is no radical consistent anti-Western anti-European intellectual trend or social movement of the type of the Russian *narodniki* or Greek and Romanian indigenists⁴. Even the ideology of the powerful Bulgarian Agrarian National Union – Europe's most successful peasants' party – never rejected a European type modernity.

But all these differences in the two countries' attitude to Europe were reduced to zero after the communist takeover in 1944 when they both found themselves on the wrong side of the Iron Curtain. The regimes established meant first and foremost a decisive break with the past century-long, gradual, step-by-step modernization, *i.e.* Westernization/Europeanization of their economies and societies. Europe became 'the West', the ideologically dangerous enemy and political adversary, from which they were separated and isolated together with the entire Eastern Europe.

Bulgaria, Soviet Union's most loyal satellite, turned literally to the East. Most of its cultural, scientific and human exchange together with nearly 80 per cent of its trade were directed to the USSR and the other CMEA countries.

² For the best account see the collection Roumen Daskalov, Ivan Elenkov (eds.), *Zasto sme takiva?* (Why are we like that?), Prosveta, Sofia, 1994.

³ Nicolae Harsanyi, *Romania between East and West*, unpublished manuscript; Katherine Verdery, *National Ideology Under Socialism. Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceausescu Romania*. University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford, 1991.

⁴ Roumen Daskalov, *Mezhdú Iztoka i Zapada. Bălgarski kulturni dilemi* (*Between East and West. Bulgarian Cultural Dilemmas*), Lik, Sofia, 1998, p.41.

Romania's place within the block was different. As early as 1958 a Party plenum marked a turn in Romania's foreign trade policy in direction of a reorientation away from the Soviet bloc. In 1959 prime minister Ion Maurer made a discreet tour of Western Europe to explore the possibilities of trade and credits⁵. Playing the card of Romanian autonomy and a national road to socialism, in the late 1960s and the 1970s Ceausescu developed connections with Western and particularly Latin Europe. France and Italy became important commercial partners.

As part of this tentative opening Romania established contacts with European Economic Community at a time when the two European economic integrational blocks the EEC and the CMEA 'did not notice' each other. In 1974 Romania was the first of the CMEA states to establish official relations with the EEC: the Community included Romania (then member of GATT) in its Generalized System of Preferences and gave her the status of a developing country, member of the Group-77, regulating its industrial import. In 1980 Romania became also the first CMEA country to sign a 5-year trade agreement with the Community and to create a joint commission⁶.

The development of the relations however was mutually disappointing – the special relations with the West did not influence Romanian communist regime. The debt repayment policy and the worsening human rights record doomed the continuation of the agreement with the EEC. In the 1980s Nicolae Ceausescu put an abrupt end to this selective and tentative opening to the West and turned again to the East, displaying strong anti-Westernism. Romania lost its status of a privileged partner of the Community and was soon left behind Hungary and Poland.

In March 1989 six Romanian dissidents in an open letter to Romanian president Ceausescu wrote: "Romania is and remains a European country.... You have begun to change the geography of the rural areas, but you cannot move Romania into Africa"⁷.

In 1988 Bulgaria was the last CMEA country to establish official diplomatic relations with the Community; it happened after a official green light of the normalization of the relations CMEA-EEC. In May 1990 the first Agreement of trade, commercial and economic cooperation was signed.

The East European revolutions of 1989, which Timothy Garton Ash called *refolutions*, and Jürgen Habermas – the "rectifying revolutions", had one slogan "Back to Europe!" Europe became the new mantra, a promise and a guarantee, the other name for normalcy. Europe meant a shortcut to prosperity and democracy, to the smoothly operating European institutions and the long deserved inclusion. This was true not only for Central Europe – Milan Kundera's 'kidnapped Occident,

⁵ John Michael Montias, *Economic Development in Communist Romania* Cambridge, Massachusetts: The M.I.T. Press, 1967), p.201.

⁶ On the early stage of the relations of the EEC/EC with Bulgaria and Romania see Ekaterina Nikova, *Balkanite i Evropeiskata obstnost. (The Balkans and the European Community)*, Izdatelstvo BAN, Sofia, 1992.

⁷ Quoted after Katherine Verdery, *op. cit.*, p.133.

fallen under Russia domination' – but also for the countries of the European South East, Romania and Bulgaria at first place. Thus in Bulgaria as early as in 1990 the Grand National Assembly adopted a declaration in favor of a speedy integration into the EC and the Bulgarian Left formed a party named "The road to Europe". In the euphoria and chaos of the first years of post-communist transition both countries hoped that once they take the true path, they would quickly shorten the distance and join the developed part of the continent. Soon these hopes turned out to be illusionary and the road to Europe – longer, more difficult and more expensive than they believed. Going a bit further, let us remind that the first grand enlargement to the East would occur fifteen years after the regime change, and Bulgaria and Romania would be admitted to EU two and a half years later than the CEE and seventeen years after 1989⁸. At that time Bulgaria and Romania had approximately the same economic indicators of Portugal.

It is clear now that both sides delayed the process of integration. Neither the EU was prepared institutionally, economically, emotionally, nor the East Europeans suspected how long and painful their transition to market and democracy would be. Things were further aggravated by the beginning of the war in Yugoslavia and Europe's disastrously bad policy towards the warring and to the not-warring Balkans⁹.

The first agreements between the EC and the ex-communist countries, the so-called Europe Agreements (signed in December 1991), were commercial in essence. They dealt with issues like a 10-year term of liberalization of trade, specified long transitional periods; in sensitive sectors like steel, textile and agriculture the Community took care to impose various anti-dumping procedures and bans. In general, strict protectionism controlled half of the East's export to the West. Several scandalous cases of trade wars between the Twelve and Poland and Hungary made the front pages of the newspapers. When the first democratically elected Bulgarian government asked for compensations for the rising losses from the economic sanctions against Yugoslavia, the Community promised to accelerate in return the implementation of the Association agreement – a promise it never kept because of anti-dumping measures¹⁰. These restrictive policies were a great disappointment for the East European countries; the access to the Community's markets was made more difficult just when they were trying to reform their economies and re-orient them from East to West.

⁸ On the timetable and problems of the EU Enlargement to the East see. http://ec.europa.eu/comm/external_relations/ceeca/index.htm. On the delay see Ash, Timothy Garton. The Grim Wedding, „The Guardian”, June 27, 2002.

⁹ In Timothy Garton Ash's strong wording: "Then the wall came down. What did we do? We decided that what the whole house needed most urgently was a superb new computer-controlled system of air-conditioning in the western half. While we prepared to install it, the eastern half of the house began to fall apart and catch fire." "Europe's Endangered Liberal Order", *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 1998, p. 61.

¹⁰ Eyal, Jonathan, *Is the EC a Free Trader? Just Ask Bulgaria*, "Wall Street Journal", November 30, 1993.

Ironically, Bulgaria and Romania were less disappointed than the Central Europeans of the Visegrad troika.

Bulgaria and Romania signed the Europe agreements a little bit later – in 1993, by the time these agreements had lost sense for the Central European states. Nonetheless the delay was insignificant and the texts – almost identical. The two groups of countries were not separated from each other; to the contrary they are treated equally and got the same promises and perspective as the Visegrad three. The EC was concerned about the political violence in Bucharest – the coming of the miners, brought by the ex-communist to intimidate their political opponents. The only reaction was the postponing and the inclusion of the paragraph on human rights and minority rights – a clear signal that Romania and Bulgaria were different after all. Romanian dissidents were disappointed that the Europeans did not want to grasp the meaning of their “hijacked revolution”. Some later observers would find the evenhandedness and equality that Bulgaria and Romania enjoyed from the EU governments stunning and would ask whether this had not been a mistake since it conferred domestic legitimacy to the illiberal elites that ruled the two countries and dragged feet on reforms¹¹.

Unlike Central Europe, the first free elections had brought to power the ex-communists. Consequently, both in Romania and Bulgaria there was no societal consensus about the necessity of urgent and radical break with the past. The resilient Left and the critical mass of Bulgarians and Romanians that kept it in office shared illusions of a smooth, socially acceptable transition, or of an alternative ‘third road’. In the case of Bulgaria there were strong voices for restoring relations with Russia and rejecting categorically NATO membership. Feet-dragging on reform meant delayed privatization, further drop in production, mass impoverishment, and finally – the collapse of the financial system. As a result, the deepening crisis opened the gap between the two parts of Eastern Europe.

In the 1990s, the decade of the Yugoslav wars, it became fashionable to study the image of the Balkans. Prompted by the West’s failure to understand what was happening in the region and even less – to act adequately, scholarship concentrated on the negative conceptualization of the Balkans, of a Balkanness opposed to the Europeaness and equated to hopeless backwardness and ‘ancient ethnic hatreds’. Much to the surprise of the essentialists, reproaching the West for the perpetuating the negative image of the region,¹² the EU enlargement did include the Balkan countries and secondly, it followed its own logic and dynamics and was only slightly influenced by the ongoing wars in Yugoslavia.

The Copenhagen Council in 1993 was the starting point of the fifth enlargement. The EU formulated a clear engagement to admit the six East European countries (Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania) and defined the membership criteria. The Copenhagen criteria implied the

¹¹ Vachudova, Milada Anna, *op. cit.*, 77–78.

¹² The two most illustrative cases are: Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, Oxford University Press, New York Oxford, 1997 and Vesna Goldsworthy, *Inventing Ruritania: The Imperialism of the Imagination*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1998.

countries of CEE and SEE might expect to become full members of the Union once they have achieved: stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, rule of law, respect for human rights and protection of minorities. They also had to prove the existence of a functioning market economy as well as the capacity to cope with the competitive pressure and market forces within the Union, to cope in a word with all the obligations deriving from the EU membership. The Copenhagen criteria – an ultimate and blunt material expression of the ideal of Europeanization – set the agenda of the process of the political and economic conditionality.

The Central European states applied for full membership in 1994, Bulgaria and Romania followed closely – Romania submitted its application in June 1995 and Bulgaria – December the same year.

Up to the mid-1990s the six east European countries were approximately in a group. The distinction between front-runners and laggards became visible in the second half of the decade. It is tempting to ascribe this to the negative image of the Balkans, but the facts are different: the difference came mostly from their different perception and attitude vis-à-vis the EU. Milada Anna Vachudova, author of one of the best accounts of the Eastern enlargement *Europe Undivided* proves how the different domestic conditions put the democratizing states on different trajectories and predetermined their relationship with the EU. She identifies two groups – the liberal and the illiberal democracies. She argues that the tremendous benefits combined with the substantial requirements of membership have set the stage for the EU's unprecedented leverage on the domestic policy choices of aspiring member states. At no time in history have sovereign states voluntarily agreed to meet such vast domestic requirements and then subjected themselves to such intrusive verification procedures to enter an international organization¹³.

According to Vachudova in the initial five years of the transition (1989–1994), EU passive leverage reinforced the reform strategies in the liberal states while it failed to break corruption and rent seeking behavior in the illiberal ones.

In 1989–1994 the Visegrad troika countries carried out profound reforms; the perspective of EU membership fortified their conviction to go along this road. Their reformist elites insisted and worked for full membership and *a priori* rejected any alternative forms of regional or other cooperation. Unsatisfied with the associated status of the Europe agreements, they insisted on explicit engagement from the part of the Community/Union; they required dates, road maps, and criteria. In June 1993 on the eve of the Copenhagen summit the presidents of the Visegrad troika made a joint statement – the three countries had one common goal and this goal was full membership¹⁴.

Meanwhile, in the “illiberal,” Romania, Bulgaria, and Slovakia, the ruling elites deriving straight from the communist party, did sign duly all the EU agreements, submitted application for the EU and used the rhetoric of Euro

¹³ Milada Anna Vachudova, *Europe Undivided. Democracy, Leverage and Integration after Communism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

¹⁴ Vachudova, Milada Anna, *op. cit.* p.95.

membership for internal legitimation. Nobody could allow being against the EU integration, but Europe was defined mostly as a foreign policy task. But these same elites were slow on reforms, because their implementation would erode their own power basis, would strengthen the hand of the anti-communist opposition and would put an end to the economic rent seeking in the muddy waters of the delayed transformation. In the case of Romania (and Slovakia) taking seriously the EU would have meant also to give up using ethnic nationalism as a means of political mobilization. In sharp contrast to the consensus in central Europe, in South East Europe there were influential forces indifferent or hostile to EU; the slow and reluctant reforms reduced the speed of the EU accession.

For both countries the situation changed dramatically in 1996–1997.

In November 1996 the Romanians voted out the government of ex-communists that had been ruling their country since 1989 and handed the rule to President Emil Constantinescu and a center-right parliamentary coalition led by his Democratic Convention of Romania (CDR). The Bulgarian opposition had a better record than the Romanian one; it had been strong enough to participate in the political struggles and even to form a short-lived cabinet in 1991, but was not strong enough to stay in office and to push for the indispensable reforms. In 1997 after an acute crisis and strong street pressure the Bulgarian socialists were forced to resign; early parliamentary elections gave to the reformist Union of the Democratic Forces a mandate for reforms.

In these second revolutions the slogan 'back to Europe' was raised again, this time specified as "catching up with the Central European front-runners". From that moment Bulgaria and Romania joined the accession's dynamic process. Gradually but steadily, the EU acquired the role of a first rate factor for their developments; the EU perspective structuralized and catalyzed the process of transformation. From purely foreign policy aim, EU membership turned into the main engine of domestic policies. Its strong impact changed the balance in favor of the pro-reformist forces. The conditionality of the pre-accession process put the rate of accession in dependence to the progress of the overall reforms¹⁵. It deprived the enemies of the changes of two important arguments: that gradual slow reforms were good for the people and that ethnic nationalism was good for the nation. The pressure from Brussels – visible, transparent, served as a justification for the painful unpopular measures and as a further legitimation of the reformist forces. And although reformers like Kostov and Constantinescu fell from power and were replaced by the resurrected Iliescu in Romania and the former monarch Simeon Sax-Coburgotski in Bulgaria, for both countries the road to Europe looked irrevocable.

¹⁵ On the EU conditionality in South East Europe see Vachudova, Milada Anna, *op. cit.*; Aneta Spendzharova, *Bringing Europe In? The Impact of EU Conditionality on Bulgarian and Romanian Politics*, "Southeast European Politics", Vol. IV, No. 2–3 November 2003; Othon Anastasakis, *The Europeanization of the Balkans*, "Journal of World Affairs", summer / fall 2005, Vol. XII, Issue 1; Othon Anastasakis & Dimitar Bechev, "EU Conditionality in South East Europe: Bringing Commitment to the Process. South East European Studies Programme. European Studies Centre", St Antony's College University of Oxford, April 2003.

In July 1997 the European Commission published its opinion on the status of each of the ten candidates (the six former CMEA members, plus Slovenia and the three Baltic republics) and their perspectives for admission. On this basis, in December the same year the EU Council in Luxembourg took the decision to start negotiations with five candidates – Poland, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary and Slovenia. The two Southeast European countries Bulgaria and Romania (together with Latvia, Lithuania and Slovakia) were assigned to the waiting room. The Commission noted the fresh start of the reforms in both countries, but found them unprepared for to meet the EU criteria.

We can only guess how long this waiting status would have lasted. But then something extraordinary happened – the new round of the Yugoslav war – the Kosovo. This last crisis was extremely important for the European Union; after years of a inconsistent and short-sighted policies towards the Yugoslav conflict, finally the EU learned the most important lesson: the security and the stability of Europe were inseparable from the security and the stability of the Balkans.

When Europe decided to act all its previous doubts about the “Europeanness of the Balkans” and its negative image were miraculously dispersed. To the contrary, as Joschka Fischer said: “.... There are no political, economic, cultural, or religious reasons to abstain from giving to the people of Dubrovnik, Sarajevo, or Belgrade, what people from Dublin, Frankfurt or Warsaw already have – and that is a firm place in Europe... And if the terrible conflict in Kosovo brought something good that is that we understood better that we belong to each other”¹⁶.

The new round of the Balkan wars – the Kosovo crisis – led to a revision of the enlargement policy. At that time the Union was negotiating with six countries with the intention to add Slovakia and Latvia. Leading EU members like Great Britain and Germany insisted to including Malta and Lithuania, also Bulgaria and Romania¹⁷. An International Commission on the Balkans urged the EU to keep open the door, to show that it had the power to transform weak states and divided societies, because “if it did not, it would remain mired as a reluctant colonial power”.

The two countries of the region had to be rewarded for their loyalty to the West during the crisis¹⁸, but also for their reserved behavior during the whole Yugoslav crisis. The EU hardly had any illusions about their degree of preparedness. Yet, it was recognized that after the delay of the first half of the 1990s, the two countries undertook decisive reforms.

The invitation to Bulgaria and Romania to start negotiations (Helsinki 1999) was part of the package of measures to stabilize the Balkans. In the spring of 1998

¹⁶ Joschka Fischer, „Rede bei der Vorbereitungskonferenz zum Stabilitätspakt für Südosteuropa“, Petersberg, 27 May 1999 (http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/6_archiv/2/r/r990527b.htm).

¹⁷ Stefan Wagstyl, and Peter Norman, *Verheugen guarantees standards*, „Financial Times“, September 13, 1999.

¹⁸ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Kosovo – a failed strategy*, „Le Monde“, 14 septembre 1999, Bulgarian translation, „Kultura“, 24 September 1999.

accession negotiations had opened for "fast-track" countries (Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, and Estonia), opened in February 2000 for "slow-track" countries (Bulgaria, Slovakia, Romania, Latvia, and Lithuania).

On this occasion the prime minister of Bulgaria made a triumphal speech: "The invitation to start negotiations for European membership is a realization of the longest-lived dream in modern Bulgarian history... With the EU membership we are taking the time machine ...we are getting a chance to leave the twilight zone. This is a guarantee that we and our children will live neither in the third nor in the second world, we'll be in the first world"¹⁹.

In retrospect, the Enlargement is estimated as a huge success. Regardless of the difficulties, the inclusion of the former communist countries turned out to be the EU's most successful foreign policy instrument. The EU's soft power and its conditionality are successfully working in favor of a 'Europe whole and free'.

In both countries the accession process was loaded with enormous expectations. It was supposed to add vigor to the reform process, to create new institutional framework, to build a new political culture and economic philosophy, to be a guarantee against deviations and mistakes. "Europe watches us", the EU monitoring process and the Commission's regular reports became an important domestic political factor influencing the economy, the judiciary, human rights, corruption and crime. The carrot of the EU membership has been sweetening the bitter pill of the reforms and was the best way to sell them to the nation²⁰. The high aim was justifying the means. In Bulgaria and Romania the EU had the highest rates of approval among all the aspirants – 75–80 percent, no mainstream political party could allow declaring itself unconditionally against it. Even the nationalists like the Bulgarian VMRO started speaking of an "enlightened nationalism in accordance with the European values". The president of the state Romanian TV Paul Everac claimed that because of an ancestor like the Roman Emperor Trajan (53 A.D.–117), Romanians are not only part of Europe, they are actually Europe's ancestors. Bulgarian historian and Director of the national Museum of History Bozhidar Dimitrov wrote a book "The Bulgarians – the First Europeans" reminding that Bulgaria was the first European country to have been founded²¹.

The EU accession is supposed to solve all the problems of the unfulfilled modernization of the two peripheral states – both the one of the period prior to 1944 and the twisted socialist modernization. But first and foremost EU membership added to the so much needed sense of belonging and put an end to the doubts "who are we?"

¹⁹ „Demokratzia”, December 10, 1999.

²⁰ Ivailo Dichev, *Evropa kato legitimatzia* (Europe as a Legitimation), „Sociologicheski problemi”, 2000, 1–2.

²¹ Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, *Identity Crisis*, "Transitions", April 1998; Bozhidar Dimitrov, *The Bulgarians – the First Europeans*, Sofia, 2002.

The Commission tended to treat the two of them as a block. In the beginning of the negotiations Bulgaria was much more ahead in the reform process than Romania. The country got better evaluation in the Commission's regular Reports on the Progress towards Accession; in 2004 Bulgaria was recognized as a functioning market economy, able to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the Union in the medium term. Bulgaria was the first close all the chapters of the *acquis communautaire*. Romania presumably profited from being packed together with Bulgaria and the Bulgarians were afraid that their bigger northern neighbor was holding them back. Bulgarian governments rejected the idea of a tandem. Later Romania registered better achievements in fighting crime and corruption, which led to a reversal – now the Romanians were accusing the Bulgarians for an eventual delay. Sensationalist press and irresponsible politicians added to a very Balkan and very provincial war of words across the Danube. The fact is however that unlike the Visegrad and the Baltic countries, Bulgaria and Romania could not unite efforts to act together in front of the Commission.

On April 25, 2005 the two countries signed their EU accession agreement and on January 1, 2007 they joined the Union as its 26th and 27th members.

Solemn speeches and champagne notwithstanding, Bulgaria and Romania got a rather lukewarm acceptance in the Union. The “Balkan pair”, the “new kids in the block” differs from their predecessors. Bulgaria's and Romania's GDP per head is less than half of the eight entrants in 2004, about a third of a EU-wide. And they are lagging behind in many other ways: infrastructure and public services are worse than in the rest of Eastern Europe, their agricultural sector is large, yet lawlessness remains the biggest worry – it takes the form of endemic corruption in both of them, in the case of Bulgaria it is further expressed in organized crime. In both countries the old-boys' networks of the former regime managed to adapt perfectly to the new conditions. Kidnapping the state, they forced it to act in their private interests, unimpeded by police, courts, or media.

According to the *Financial Times*, the acceptance was kind of a blank check that the two countries received. The train of the enlargement was heading eastwards driven by its own rhetoric and logic. In broader plan, Bulgarian and Romanian admission had also to play the role of a carrot to promote democratization and economic reform the troublesome Western Balkans and thus lead the way to the stabilization of the entire region.

The Commission neglected influential voices in politics, business, media and academics that the problems of the two new members were principally different, and that their accession should have been subjected to different rules than those of the Central European candidates. As Tom Gallagher put it: “The Bucharest oligarchy, composed of ruthless political survivors, knew how to play the EU game better than the rather effete and complacent Eurocrats whom they interacted with”²².

²² Tom Gallagher, “The European Union and Romania: consolidating backwardness?”; “Romania: the death of reform”, <http://www.opendemocracy.net>.

Brussels could have imposed conditionality in the political area, should have insisted of more powers of oversight and intervention. The oligarchic cleptocratic elites were quick to see that the EU's rule could be easily disregarded or broken.

The first year of membership was neither the catastrophe that some people predicted, nor the panacea that other people hoped. Those who expected that the EU would to solve automatically the problems of their Potemkin (façade) style democracy were disappointed : membership legitimised the corrupt elites of the transition with their suspicious wealth and links to the underground world. The feeling was that now that Romania and Bulgaria were full EU members, Brussels lost leverage to push further reforms. The administrations skillfully learned various tactics of simulating reforms and writing good-looking abstract reports and strategies. As a result, instead of progress, certain fields like the Bulgarian judiciary regressed: the safety clause was efficient as a threat, but it is difficult to impose²³. On several occasions the two new European Union members were warned by Brussels to step up their fight against corruption, but a mid-year critical report was watered down in a bid to shore up reformers in the countries. The European Commission reported that have failed fully to address serious corruption; in the case of Bulgaria there was "insufficient" progress in tackling organized crime²⁴.

Some EU member states have criticized the European Commission for failing to be tougher in demanding Bulgaria and Romania to tackle serious corruption cases. Britain and France have joined Sweden and the Netherlands in calling on the EU executive to keep up the pressure on both countries to continue their legal reforms, warning that otherwise the EU risks undermining its enlargement policy, the Financial Times reports²⁵.

Yet, on a more general, broad-brush approach the year of full membership has brought an important change in the two South East European countries. The newly acquired EU-consciousness amidst various circles is palpable; no doubt it will be transformed into a stronger pressure and will for reforms from within. The hope is that inside the EU the two neighbors have better chances to fight their problems than outside. Despite setbacks, the example of Bulgaria and Romania and the hope for further EU enlargement remains the only operative perspective for the Western Balkans.

²³ Vladimir Shopov, *A Safety Impotence*, "Dnevnik", June 13, 2007.

²⁴ *Bulgaria and Romania warned on corruption*, "The Financial Times", June 27 2007; Stephen Castle and Dan Bilefsky, "Bulgaria and Romania face EU rebuke", IHT Tuesday, June 26, 2007.

²⁵ Lucia Kubosova, *Brussels under fire for being too soft on Bulgaria and Romania*, "The Financial Times", 27.04.2007.