

# THROUGH NEIGHBOURING EYES: THE CHANGING MUTUAL PERCEPTIONS OF BULGARIANS AND ROMANIANS IN THE PROCESS OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

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The period between 1997 and 2007 when Bulgaria and Romania were actively engaged in negotiations for accession to the European Union marks not only a decisive moment in the relations of the two countries with Europe, but also a significant moment in the bilateral relations. This article explores the changing public images of Bulgaria for the Romanians and of Romania for the Bulgarians as presented in the media. It argues that the common road to the EU not only opened new possibilities for cooperation between the two countries, but in the end it was also to bring about an important change in the mutual perceptions and attitudes.

For Bulgaria and Romania the process of European integration proceeded with a marked simultaneity. From the very beginning the two neighbouring countries were moving on the road to the EU together and their goals coincided at the various stages of the negotiation process. Bulgaria and Romania started their slow road of transition to EU membership in the beginning of the 1990s by signing Trade and Economic Cooperation Agreements with the European Commission. This was followed by the signing of Europe agreements for association with the EC, which came into force for both countries in 1995. In the same year the two countries approved and submitted official applications for membership in what had in the meantime become European Union. In December 1997, along with the decision to start negotiations for accession with Hungary, Poland, Estonia, the Czech Republic and Cyprus the European Council in Luxemburg decided to accelerate the preparation for negotiations with Bulgaria, Latvia, Slovakia and Romania by starting a screening of their legislation. In 1999 Bulgaria and Romania both graduated to become formal candidates for EU membership and actual negotiations started in February 2000. In October 2002 the European Council in Brussels arrived at the decision that the Commission and the Council were to prepare a “package” for Bulgaria and Romania to be presented at the Copenhagen meeting of the Heads of State in December 2002 that should contain a detailed “roadmap” for accession of both countries. At the Copenhagen Summit EU leaders set 2007 as the target date for Romania and Bulgaria to join the Union. In June 2004, the EU decided to set a new “safeguard clause” for the two countries, which could delay accession by one year if the countries failed to meet their targets.

Meanwhile, on March 29, 2004, Romania and Bulgaria joined NATO. On 25 April 2005 the two countries signed their common EU Accession Treaty in Luxemburg and were to celebrate together full membership in the EU on 1 January 2007.

The common way to Europe ought to have bound Sofia and Bucharest in a new kind of partnership. Interestingly enough, instead of uniting their efforts for the achievement of the common goal, for the most part the two countries were denigrating each other, evoking stereotypes from the past. For a long time these established stereotypes were to form the reciprocal images of the two countries. In the period from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century until 1944 a variety of factors made these images rather negative, among them playing a particularly important role was the problem of South Dobrogea<sup>1</sup>. In the period to follow, although the two countries fell in the same ideological camp, there was little mutual interest and knowledge, which was to nourish arrogance, a tendency to look down to the neighbour and to take him mainly as a negative point of reference. Generally, the mentioning of the other on both sides of the Danube evoked the image of peasants, robbers, less developed. With the end of communism this situation still seemed very difficult to change. As a British journalist observed, "Bulgarian-Romanian contacts are still tentative not from any historical enmity, but from decades of non-communication and mutual ignorance"<sup>2</sup>. The purpose of this study is to explore how were the mutual perceptions evolving in the process of European integration and to determine the major factors that were to transform these attitudes over time.

## IN A RACE TOWARDS EUROPE

For Brussels Bulgaria and Romania looked as if they were states-twins. In almost all publications in the European press the mentioning of the name of one of them was followed by that of the other. But instead of partners, the two countries were acting more as rivals in a competition for a better appraisal from Europe. And although the political leaders spoke about a "common mission"<sup>3</sup>, there was a general feeling among the people in both countries that they were in a race among themselves for who would perform better in the eyes of the EU and thus reach first into the desired land of plenty.

At first it was Romania the one to lag behind. Bulgarian politicians protested against the decision their country to be placed in the same category with its northern neighbour, fearing its slower progress might delay Bulgaria's own admission

<sup>1</sup> See Njagulov, Bl., *Les images de l'autre chez les Bulgares et les Roumains (1878-1944)*, „Etudes balkaniques”, 1995, 2, pp. 3-25.

<sup>2</sup> Pond, El., *Endgame in the Balkans. Regime Change, European Style*. Brookings Institution Press: Washington D.C., 2006, p. 63.

<sup>3</sup> For example, this idea was stressed upon in an interview of the president of Romania Traian Băsescu for a Bulgarian newspaper on the eve of the signing of the EU treaty, pointing out that "our two peoples hold the key to Europe", „Standart”, 29 March 2005.

to the EU. This position was clearly expressed in the autumn of 2000 in regards to the possibility of getting out of the Schengen visa list. As Bulgaria was doing better than Romania, it was considered that going into a package with Romania might harm the country's chances in this direction. The government of the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) led by Ivan Kostov advanced the idea the two countries to be treated separately. In an article in the Bulgarian newspaper *168 chasa* entitled "We can drop out of the positive visa list because of Romania" it was stated that according to a source in Brussels Romania was turning into a big problem that hindered Bulgaria getting out of the negative list for the EU<sup>4</sup>. The political reaction in Romania on the Bulgarian position was quite hostile. The Bulgarian media cited the Romanian Minister of Foreign Affairs Petre Roman to warn that the bilateral relations might get worse and claiming it was the Bulgarian Prime Minister Ivan Kostov who harmed good-neighbourly relations<sup>5</sup>. The whole Romanian press commented Kostov's speech in the European Institute in Sofia on 27 October 2000 where he showed bewilderment of why should Bulgaria and Romania always be treated as a group and argued that visas should be abolished for Bulgaria because it managed to achieve more in the fulfilment of the EU criteria. But actually the reactions were not only negative. In an editorial commentary the Romanian newspaper *Adevărul* stated that this position was actually justified and put the blame on the Romanian president Emil Constantinescu for placing Romania into a "sidetrack". The situation was used for addressing critical remarks to the Romanian government. In an article in the same newspaper entitled "Romania is getting back into the grey zone of European politics" Bogdan Chireac presented Bulgaria as a good example: "... on the south of the Danube, in a small Sofia a big politics is being made, even though just three years ago, Bulgaria was facing a bankruptcy"<sup>6</sup>. This was followed by praise for the government of UDF and then he made a reproach to the Romanian government for the bad economic policy, saying that "even Bulgaria reached a point to claim from Brussels not to be assessed into package with Romania, because that would not be in her benefit"<sup>6</sup>.

At the same time a Bulgarian newspaper cited the Romanian president Emil Constantinescu criticizing Bulgaria for "distancing from Romania at a very crucial moment" in an interview for the newspaper *Cotidianul*. Constantinescu praised Hungary and criticized Bulgaria at the same time: "While Hungary, he said, did not abandon Romania at any time on issues related NATO or EU integration, although because of some specific circumstances it might had been a step ahead of Romania, Bulgaria behaved in a way which does not make her credit at all and does not correspond to all the gestures Romania has made for her so far"<sup>7</sup>. In a more diplomatic way the Romanian ambassador in Bulgaria Constantin Grigorie stated

<sup>4</sup> „168 chasa”, 18–24 August 2000.

<sup>5</sup> „Sega”, 31 October 2000.

<sup>6</sup> Cited by BTA, 1 November 2000.

<sup>7</sup> „Monitor”, 7 November 2000.

that the slogan "Together we can achieve more" could become leading for the two countries and that Romania supported the individual assessment of the candidate-states, but having in mind the established pattern of relations within the EU such differentiation would hardly be quite rational<sup>8</sup>. Actually, on 1 December 2000 Bulgaria was excluded from the Schengen visa list, which was considered within the country as the first great success on its road to Europe. The Romanian press reacted on that with commentaries on the ensuing negative impact for Europe but at the same time it was used as an occasion to put the blame on the Romanian government for its inefficiency<sup>9</sup>.

The following year Romania came up with the famous idea of a "tandem". During his official visit to Bulgaria on 14 August 2001 the Romanian Prime Minister Adrian Năstase advanced the necessity of adopting a joint formula, the formula of "tandem", building on the notion that EU and NATO were common priorities for the two countries and they had to mutually support each other for their realization. The idea was not welcomed by the Bulgarian side and that was to cause again strain in the relations between the two countries. The reaction of the UDF (then in opposition) was quite abrupt: "the formula "tandem" contradicts the accepted formula so far, according to which each of the countries should be assessed for its individual progress. The Bulgarian Minister of Foreign Affairs Solomon Passy formulated this position in a more diplomatic way, but the meaning was the same: "We do not compete with Romania for NATO and EU membership and we do not think that a competition would be beneficial for both countries. On the opposite, we should support each other and whichever reaches the aim first, we should all be happy of that. But each of the states should elaborate for herself a plan for joining and should be assessed in accordance with its fulfilment"<sup>10</sup>.

The response of the insulted Năstase was widely reflected in the Romanian media. For example, *Cotidianul* wrote: "The Prime Minister Năstase did not show irritation yesterday to the Bulgarian authorities' refusal to support the model of tandem he suggested. Năstase said he was just presenting an idea and added that Romania was unable to help an old lady crossing the street if she did not wish to. He also said we have enough balls to continue the game alone, but now the ball is in the Bulgarian side of the playground and we should only wait to see how Bulgarians would play it"<sup>11</sup>. *Adevărul* cited Năstase saying that the idea of tandem he had presented in Bulgaria meant in its essence that when you swim with someone in one and the same direction you should not drag him to the bottom, and not hugging each other in catching the plane to Brussels together. "Let us remind ourselves, he continued, what others, at least as intelligent as the Bulgarians, did –

<sup>8</sup> In an interview for the Bulgarian *Darik Radio* on 11 November 2000.

<sup>9</sup> BTA, 10 April 2001 (citing an article of Bogdan Chireac in „Adevărul” entitled “We lived to see the back of the Bulgarians”).

<sup>10</sup> „Kesh”, 17 August 2001.

<sup>11</sup> Cited from BTA, 22 August 2001.

the countries from the Vishegrad walked along together and did not make a mistake”<sup>12</sup>. In an editorial comment in the same newspaper entitled “You can’t squeeze blood out of a stone” it was said outwardly that a natural political gesture made with good feelings from the Prime Minister Năstase had turned into an occasion for airs and graces and demonstration of Balkan type complexes of stupidity. *Cotidianul Național* cited Năstase saying his visit to Bulgaria made it possible to see that for years on end, regardless of the small distance between Romania and Bulgaria, there was a real lack of communication. But, nevertheless, he added, he considered there was a possibility to achieve with the new Bulgarian government much better and constructive relations<sup>13</sup>.

In the next few years EU annual reports indicated that Bulgaria surpassed Romania both according to the indexes of economic reform and the number of closed chapters in the negotiation process with the EU. In the beginning of 2004 Romania was severely criticized by the reporter for the European Parliament for Romania Baroness Emma Nicholson for corruption, the lack of reform in the juridical sphere, police abuse and particularly international child adoption. For the first time then the European Parliament discussed a possibility the two countries to be separated and even to break down negotiations with Romania. Consequently, Bulgarian media was full of negative qualifications about Romania. The notion implied was that Bulgaria had turned into a captive of its northern neighbour, as well as the fear that it could be delayed on the road to Europe because of its northern neighbour.

Anyway, the signal that came from Europe was that Bulgaria and Romania must keep together on their way to the EU. Regardless of the theoretical possibility the two countries to be separated in the negotiations, this could not happen in practice, was the general view in Brussels. “Pray for Romania” was the unambiguous remark of a high standing Brussels official addressed to the Bulgarian authorities<sup>14</sup>. The signal was well understood by the Bulgarian politicians. After a meeting with the Portuguese Prime Minister Jose Manuel Durau Barroso, who was on a two-day visit to Bulgaria in the beginning of February 2004, the Bulgarian Prime Minister Simeon Saxkoburggotski stated that Bulgaria and Romania should continue together the process of accession to the EU and that such were actually the Bulgarian intentions. After all, he stated, this does not depend on us, but on the European Commission. In a press conference after the meeting Barosso made it clear that if any idea of postponement of one of the two countries came into sight to wait for a next accession that would have a negative impact on Europe<sup>15</sup>. “Nobody separates Romania from Bulgaria”, declared the Bulgarian Minister of European Integration Meglena Kuneva in an interview for the Bulgarian *Radio Net*. She

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> „Dnevnik”, 4 November 2003.

<sup>15</sup> BTA, 10 February 2004.

acknowledged that there were some nuances in the report of the European Parliament of 10 March 2004 that in Bulgaria are interpreted more energetically than necessary, but she stated she would try to help her Romanian colleagues to advance quickly in the process, as she was convinced that working for one's own benefit did not mean working to the detriment of the neighbour<sup>16</sup>. The Bulgarian Minister of Foreign Affairs Solomon Passy on his part upon his arrival in Vienna to present the priorities of the Bulgarian leadership of the OSCE stated that he was satisfied Romania managed to evade the "worst" scenario, as it was in Bulgaria's interest Romania to go ahead and to join the EU on the fixed date, for stopping or delaying the negotiations with Romania would cause a delay in the integration of the whole region of the Balkans.

By the beginning of 2006 it was already Romania that was taking the lead, but as far as the political elite was concerned there was already a clear understanding on both sides that they were destined to go together towards the common goal.

### **THE IMAGE OF THE OTHER AS THE UNDESIRED IMAGE OF ONESELF**

Throughout the period in hand the media in both countries was on the whole not very helpful in breaking the old stereotypes and creating a positive image of the other. When it wrote about the neighbouring state, it was usually in negative terms, to describe the neighbour's economic and political problems. The accent was usually placed on corruption, fraud, organized crime – issues both countries were mostly criticized by the EU. Instead of focusing on their common internal problems, this kind of reciprocal media pictures bolstered feelings of superiority and arrogance. "Bulgaria sunk into poverty and corruption", "The Bulgarian government lost the bet with the standard of living", "It has already become a tradition the important events for Bulgaria's accession to the EU to be accompanied by corpses" – these are just some titles from the Romanian press<sup>17</sup>. The Bulgarian media also concentrated on the northern neighbour's misfortunes and adopted a similar superior note.

On 21 February 2004 in its major news broadcasting program the Romanian television presented 8-minute report defaming Bulgaria. The information that had to be conveyed to the public was that in the last report Bulgaria had received a much better assessment from Brussels than Romania. On the background of this information, however, in the beginning of the reportage shown by the TVR, it was said: "Traffic of drugs, traffic of people, organized crime, that's how neighbouring Bulgaria looks like". The commentary of the speaker of the Bulgarian government

<sup>16</sup> Cited in „Dnevnik”, 13 March 2004.

<sup>17</sup> BTA, 12 May 2006.

Dimitar Tzonev was rather calm. It stated that the material was giving a notion to the viewers that Bulgaria had fallen a pray to mafia gangs, that every week made attempt at someone's life on the street, while the police and official authorities were watching from a distance the alarming situation. He said there would be a Bulgaria reaction but carried through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and added that there was also an idea to invite Romanian journalists to observe the situation on the ground. The political reaction in Romania was rather quick. It was stated that the reportage did not present the opinion of any member of the government. At the same time the deputy from the opposition from the Democratic Party Ion Unisei, member of the Commission on culture and media, named the material falsification. Other opposition parties, for example the NLP wanted the resignation of the director of the TV Valentin Nikolau<sup>18</sup>.

Particular points of friction between the two countries exacerbated reciprocal media images. Some of them were long standing, others were rather incidental. The problem of the minorities, one of the constant troubling issues in the bilateral relations, was also present in the period in hand. Political concerns particularly about the situation of the Romanian minority in Bulgaria were repeatedly brought forward now in regards to EU accession of the two countries. For example, during his official visit to Bulgaria in April 2003 the Romanian president Ion Iliescu stated that Bulgaria had to recognize the Romanian minority and grant it with the same rights, enjoyed by the Bulgarian minority in Romania. "On the way to Europe, he said, this right of the people should be acknowledged, as it is a part of the democratic development"<sup>19</sup>. The newspaper *Ziua* published a large material, where it was stated that the situation of the Romanian community outside Romanian borders was getting worse because of the position of Bulgaria and pointing at the fact that Bulgaria had decided to close down the schools of the Romanian community<sup>20</sup>. Anxiety in Romania was caused following Bulgaria's decision to give a green light to the project for the construction of AES "Belene". The Romanian newspapers wrote about the protest of the inhabitants of Turnu Măgurele against this project and the critical remarks of the chairman of the municipal council of Teleorman Liviu Dragnea on the possible risks. "Danger on the south of the Danube – stop the nightmare!" Under this title the Romanian newspaper *Ziua* published an appeal for halting the construction of AES "Belene"<sup>21</sup>. The negative attitudes against Bulgaria were evoked once again on the occasion of the incident with the Romanian journalist George Buhnic, who was charged with espionage for shooting with a hidden camera at the Danube border zone in January 2005. On this occasion *România liberă* published an article entitled

<sup>18</sup> BTA, 25 February 2004.

<sup>19</sup> In an interview for the Bulgarian newspaper „Trud”, 16 April 2003.

<sup>20</sup> BTA, 1 October 2004.

<sup>21</sup> BTA, 8 September 2004.

“Bulgaria – the excellent student-repeater” with a subtitle “How the freedom of the press is violated on the south of the Danube”<sup>22</sup>.

In the summer of 2006 tension in the media was stirred again when Bulgaria was put into the “yellow” list at the page of the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs indicating the states where Romanians had to be very careful in regards to their safety. On this occasion the Romanian newspaper published a material entitled “Diplomatic-tourist war between Sofia and Bucharest”, where it was said that the recommendations of the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs for Romanians travelling abroad, where Bulgaria is described as a risky destination together with Iran had unleashed a real war of exchange of retorts between the diplomacy in Sofia and Bucharest. It was pointed out that immediately after the warning from Bucharest, the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs had made a similar recommendation to the Bulgarian citizens planning to visit Romania, which was cited, as follows: “Bulgarians should open their eyes widely, especially in zones like train stations, supermarkets and the public transport; quite often Bulgarians must pay a bribe to Romanian customs officers at the amount of hundreds of EURO. Romania constitutes a threat of meningitis, conjunctivitis and hepatitis infection, while the danger of bird flu should not be neglected, too. The Bulgarians should also be prepared for earthquake as Romania is located in seismic zone”. The commentary in *Adevărul* on this matter was that probably Sofia and Bucharest would not be agitated that much, had they read the advices published on the internet page of the British Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where the British people get one and the same recommendations for travelling in both Bulgaria and Romania, namely “keep your pockets and beware of being stolen your cars”<sup>23</sup>.

The two countries were in constant comparison and competition among each other on various issues, which was presented in the media as a sign of one's own progress. But looked from the outside, the situation seemed rather ridiculous. For example, in a material entitled “Sofia and Bucharest in a comic competition” the Bulgarian newspaper *Trud* reprinted an essay published in the German weekly journal “Parliament” with the telling title “Autistic Neighbours”. Its major idea is that regardless of the lack of dialogue between Bulgaria and Romania, the two countries demonstrate a peculiar conduct of competition, *i.e.* they are very careful that by any chance the one does not surpass the other. This is presented as a conduct typical for the European periphery – rivalry with no direct competition, sometimes acquiring comic features<sup>24</sup>.

The futility of such competition was in fact also noted from the inside. Regardless of the negative overtones in the media in both countries, sober voices placing more emphasis on similarities, common goals and the necessity to overcome negative attitudes based on ignorance or misunderstanding were also to

<sup>22</sup> BTA, 26 January 2005.

<sup>23</sup> BTA, 11 July 2006.

<sup>24</sup> „Trud”, 8 July 2006.



be heard and they were to become more discernible in the recent years. For example, in an article in *Adevărul* entitled “Bulgaria and Romania in a common melting pot” we read: “We were doomed to live in a common geographic space and to have a similar destiny. We passed through the long night of communism, we entered together in NATO and together again we were knocking on the doors of the EU. Not to speak that in the mental picture of the West the two countries are often mixed and it is spoken of Sofia, the capital of Romania. But regardless of our common fate, there are no established traditions of communication among us. More often we fuss over trifles, we throw into our faces epithets like “greengrocers” or “*mamaliğari*”, we raise our hands to be the first to be asked in class by the European “teachers”. Recent events though show how lacking sense is all that... In brief, we are in a common melting pot... May be the improvement of communication will help politicians”<sup>25</sup>. Again an article in the Romanian press we read that the bureaucrats in Brussels had seen in Bulgaria and Romania more similarities which the two countries divided by one border line only were not able to notice. Presenting the similar road they had to pass, the author points out that it had become evident that the Bulgarian-Romanian tandem was not a mistake and makes a reproach that instead of acknowledging how similar the two countries are, each of them only sees the bad things in the neighbour<sup>26</sup>.

Similar commentaries were also to be seen in the Bulgarian press, the two countries were often being referred to as twins. Getting to know each other as a clue to real partnership between countries bearing a lot of similarities – that was the main point in a material of the journalist Alexander Andreev broadcasted on *Deutsche welle*<sup>27</sup>. Another publication was entitled “Bulgaria and Romania are twins, who do not know each other” was the title of another publication conveying the same message<sup>28</sup>. “Both countries have turned their eyes to Europe but they can not or do not wish to do away with their provincial mentality. The accent is put on the lack of mutual knowledge and curiosity. While in the old communist times there were some more contacts, now we have absolutely no interest in what is going across the two banks of the Danube. We have all gazed only at Europe, we plan our European future and do not wish in any way to occupy ourselves with our Balkan present and poor neighbours. We dream that our joining on paper the EU would in a way change our identity, too. Not only to wake up as “Europeans”, but if possible to move also geographically from Europe’s fringe. Thus we engaged into an unhealthy race on the road to the EU. The matter in hand here is collective mentality and not the competition between two cultures. Actually, the author says, we are not so different and what characterizes us most is the fact that we are deep

<sup>25</sup> BTA, 1 August 2005.

<sup>26</sup> „Evenimental zilei”, 3 August 2005. The author of the article is the journalist Romulus Capulescu.

<sup>27</sup> The material was published in the newspaper „*Dnevnik*” with the telling title “Many-tongued twins. Bulgarians and Romanians: as much being alike, as little knowing each other” – „*Dnevnik*”, 20 August 2002.

<sup>28</sup> „Standart”, 11 October 2005.

European provincials. We should first of all clearly realize who we are and where we stand, otherwise we would always be considered “second hand” people“ – this was written in an article in the Bulgarian newspaper *Sega* entitled “The Second Interallies War”<sup>29</sup>.

## **THE DAY AFTER. TOWARDS A REALIZED NECESSITY OF PARTNERSHIP**

The process of integration to the EU opened new possibilities for closer relationship between Bulgaria and Romania – more intensive trans-border cooperation, development of joint projects. But the strongest effect in this direction was to be seen after the two countries became actual members of the EU. Cheerful reportages informed about “the great migration of peoples” in the very first day of membership of Bulgaria and Romania in the EU, celebrated with a symbolic removal of the border between the two countries. Prompted by mere curiosity many people on both sides of the Danube tried to take advantage of the easy access to the neighbouring country, for some of them that was to be the first “going abroad”. What was new now was the aroused interest in each other among the ordinary people. Against a background of negativity and competition, the two nations were starting to get knowing each other, which is the best way for discarding inadequate and stereotypical images.

Shortly after the two countries became members of the EU a Bulgarian journalist visited the Romanian capital and shared his impressions of it and the attitudes of the Romanians towards Bulgaria. The first thing he noticed was that a month after Bulgaria and Romania joined the EU the importance of the topic which of the two countries was better prepared had not still faded away, something, he considered inescapable. It was his feeling that a tour in the two capitals or within the countries for that moment gave the impression they were both accepted in the European family somewhat out of pity. In his view as a whole Bulgaria and Romania shared quite similar problems and despite the advantages in some criteria and the flaws in others, the result was rather equal. As for the Romanians he got the idea that only a few hours of communication with them are enough to notice that they are proud of what they are and the things they have achieved. But although he saw them as kind and hospitable in general, at times, he wrote, one could feel they look at the Bulgarians as good neighbours but coming from a country a little more underdeveloped as theirs. But at the same time, he said, they also acknowledge Bulgaria's advantages. It was his impression that one of the things Romanians envy the Bulgarians was the state of the Bulgarian Black Sea resorts. He then made the observation that every Romanian who had recently been in Bulgaria noted that Bulgarian hotels are much newer, luxurious and cozy, while on the Romanian

<sup>29</sup> „Sega”, 7 September 2006.

Black Sea coast the atmosphere typical for the period of socialism had not gone yet. Surprisingly, he wrote, none of his interlocutors had complained about the construction works on the Black Sea coast, but were glad to mention how profitably it was to spend the holidays in Sunny Beach and Golden Sands. He noticed that Romanians were also impressed by the numerous coffee shops and restaurants they found in Bulgaria and the pleasure to take a walk in Sofia<sup>30</sup>.

The simultaneous European membership of Bulgaria and Romania added some additional fuel to the fire of the natural competition between the two neighbouring countries in attracting foreign investment. The rapid growth of Romanian economy and the progress made in terms of foreign investment, especially as compared to the situation in Bulgaria did not remain unnoticed by the Bulgarian press. "Five months after EU membership the primary enthusiasm in Bulgaria has faded away by contrast with our Romanian neighbours, who continue to jump over south of the Danube for shopping and on holidays. And on their way back, apart from cheaper goods they started to take away some investors in defiance of Bulgaria's expectations of a foreign capital influx in the Bulgarian economy, wrote an article in *Dnevnik*, with the telling title "Romania – the new hit on the Balkans". It made the observation that expectations for increased foreign interest to the Bulgarian market after 1 January were to some extent justified, although at that stage it were mainly trade companies investigating the possibilities to step in Bulgaria, while at the same time "Nokia" chose Romania for building its successive manufacturing base, wrote the same newspaper, finishing with the conclusion that the first strikes of globalization were already a fact – big foreign companies which up to that moment had been present in both countries were enlarging their production, moving it entirely in Romania<sup>31</sup>. "Business heaven at a river distance" – under this title the Bulgarian weekly *Capital* published an extensive material on this topic, where Romania's development was presented as a good example for Bulgaria<sup>32</sup>.

The great surprise for Bulgaria that came with the joint EU membership was that it quickly turned into a N1 for the Romanian tourists. The official statistics of the Bulgarian National Statistics Union show that Romania and Germany were the countries that have sent the greatest number of tourists to Bulgaria for the first nine months of the year. This data confirmed the tendency of Romania turning into a leading market for the Bulgarian tourist industry. Bulgarian press cited the statistics that for the first nine months of the year about 1.3 million Romanians have visited Bulgaria which was 40% more as compared to the same period of the previous year, about 600 million of the visitors being on holiday or excursion. Thus, it was inferred, Romanians were the biggest group of tourists visiting Bulgaria, outnumbering Bulgaria's major tourist markets hitherto – Germany and Great

<sup>30</sup> „*Dnevnik*”, 7 February 2007. The author of the article is Georgi Paunovski.

<sup>31</sup> „*Dnevnik*”, 14 Mai 2007.

<sup>32</sup> „*Capital*”, 6–14 September 2007.

Britain<sup>33</sup>. The Romanian newspaper *Ziarul Financiar* also informed that 200 000 Romanians had chosen Bulgaria for their summer holidays, which made Bulgaria together with Greece the most preferred foreign tourist destination for the Romanians in the period May – September<sup>34</sup>. This phenomenon was the topic of the issue of 14 – 20 July 2007 of *Capital*. “Bulgaria received a bit unexpected present after its joining the EU, namely, the influx of Romanian tourists” – that was the beginning of the material. The ratio between quality and price as compared to the situation in Romania was indicated as the major reason for Bulgaria to become a preferred tourist destination for the Romanians. The small distance to an unknown and interesting place was also considered as an important factor in this direction. The article offered a detailed analysis of the characteristics, the expectations and the motives of the Romanian tourists visiting Bulgaria and proposed the appropriate measures the Bulgarian government should take to keep their numbers growing. Particular emphasis was laid on the fact that the influx of Romanian tourists was a great chance for the Bulgarian tourist industry but at the same time it constituted a challenge Bulgaria should be prepared to meet<sup>35</sup>.

Typical economic mechanisms, such as the market and the business, were to stimulate mutual acquaintance. Thus, the difference in the standard of living was to account for the thriving of the so called shopping tourism. Romanian shopping marches being well known in the Bulgarian border town of Russe and the term “weekend tourists” was to be coined. A saleswoman in Varna also revealed that every weekend Romanians literally occupy the shops. Lower prices and proximity are considered to be the major reason for the Romanian influx<sup>36</sup>. As for the business, only a month after the joint membership of the two countries we find the information in the Bulgarian press that Romanian companies in various sectors of the economy open their offices in Bulgaria, while others look for a market in Bulgaria through the import of goods. As an evidence of this growing interest it was pointed to the job announcements, published by the Romanian companies in the specialized media and websites. The representatives of the HR agencies commented this tendency with the desire of Romanian companies to develop new markets, taking advantage of the proximity to Bulgaria<sup>37</sup>.

The development of tourism and the growing mutual interest got an immediate market response, which further contributes to mutual acquaintance. Thus, for example, the menus in some of the restaurants in the Bulgarian Black Sea resorts were written in Romanian, in Nessebar we could find billboards in Romanian, which although not great in numbers are a sign that something new was taking place in the mass Bulgarian tourism. Recently the Bulgarian press informed

<sup>33</sup> „Dnevnik”, 4 November 2007.

<sup>34</sup> „Monitor”, 5 October 2007.

<sup>35</sup> „Capital”, 14–20 July 2007.

<sup>36</sup> „Capital”, 14–20 April 2007.

<sup>37</sup> „Dnevnik”, 5 February 2007.

about a very interesting phenomena: the price of a Bulgarian-Romanian dictionary at the black market in the town of Vidin had reached up to 100 leva, which is explained with the increased interest of the Bulgarians to the Romanian language. The population of Vidin was offered the possibility to learn the language of the northern neighbours at special courses in the University of Craiova<sup>38</sup>.

Of course, there is still a long way to go. There is no need to mention the stereotypes that came back in media verbiage put into practice around football games between the national teams of Bulgaria and Romania – let's only mention Stoichkov's popular joke that when he was driving a Mercedes Romanians were still riding bicycles. According to an inquiry carried out by the Agency for Governmental Strategies, cited by *Mediafax* Bulgaria is at present among the countries with the worst image in Romania because of poverty, political instability and poor economic development (together with Albania and Moldova). Besides, Bulgaria is the least attractive tourist destination among the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, but it is still preferred by Romanian tourists because of the low prices and the small distance<sup>39</sup>.

Anyway, it is important to note that when people start to know each other, prejudices and stereotypes gradually tend to fade away. Fortunately that is more and more coming true, a growing mutual interest being observed particularly among the ordinary people, while new factors breaking the stereotypes are underway. Taking the common road to Europe, the two countries were to gradually start discovering each other, changing their mutual perceptions and realizing the benefits of partnership.

<sup>38</sup> „Standart”, 5 October 2007.

<sup>39</sup> „Dnevnik”, 21 May 2007.