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European enlargement as maker or breaker of the democratic  
political culture

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## 1. Introduction

The political transformation in the post-communist world represents particular interest for the political science, for its sub-disciplines of the international relations as well as the comparative politics. Among a multitude of factors considered to create causal mechanisms toward political democratization: legacies, post-communist institutional choices, political leadership, and external factors, the European integration plays a special role. The literature, however, is rather ambiguous on the nature of the EU influence; it is generally divided between those who see it as a positive factor for democratization, hereafter to be referred to as euro-optimists, and those who criticize it for undermining the domestic democratic process, or euro-pessimists. Despite their apparent differences, these two mutually excluding visions share some common methodological points that warrant to be mentioned. They are largely positivist, hypothetico-deductive, and tend to favor discrete data leaning toward quantitative methods of analysis; regarding the EU influence on the post-communist democratization, in particular, they tend to focus on the presence or on the absence of some political institutions, procedures and norms, and also on the strategic behavior of the domestic political elite as a result of objective instrumental rational calculations.

This paper, without underestimating these formal criteria that are considered important for the presence of the modern democracy, tends to put and accent on its cultural dimension. Borrowing from Max Weber's ontology and methodology, I consider the democracy as a complex of institutional *and* cultural phenomena, not only as a sum of procedures but also as an ethic that helps people make sense of these formal institutions as far as their social and political roles are concerned. How people see the political world they live in is of no less importance than the presence or the absence of certain formal rights and norms. Therefore, in order to understand how exactly the EU enlargement influences the democratic process, we need to assess how this enlargement influences the political culture in the newest EU members. To do so, we need to go beyond the simple compilation of discrete statistical data and to employ more hermeneutic if not ethnographic methods that allow us to see the dynamic of the cultural transformation on micro level.

Far from uncritically accepting the vision that links the European integration with the political democratization, this analysis shows that the European integration under some specific conditions can lead toward destruction of the national identity and the democratic culture related to it, and therefore, is able of producing the opposite of its original intentions. In a similar vein, the EU integration can be singled out as a causal mechanism that increases the level of political apathy as a cultural predisposition for political activity, and even as a factor that culturally mixed with some preexisting popular feelings, such as the ethnic nationalism, facilitates the political extremism. However, on a "positive" side, the analysis shows also that the EU integration and the construction of new pan-European identity mixed with some other preexisting popular feelings, such as the group-based shame, can create conditions for new type of behavior that increases the level of social cooperation, and therefore to act in the direction consistent with the pro-democratic predictions.

## **2. On the research question**

The process of political changes in the post-communist countries in Eastern Europe occupies a special place within the so-called transitology literature of the last 20 years. My MA thesis (Mitropolitski 2007) tried to evaluate the main approaches and schools within this literature regarding their theoretical predictions on the possibility of democratization. There I took the post-communist countries either in general, or as specific cases of different regime trajectories. Following the Kitschelt's (2003) methodological advice, I united the existing explanations within four main groups: legacies (social, cultural, political, and economic); institutional choice after the fall of the communism; political leadership; and, finally, the role of some external factors.

After testing these four groups of factors on dissimilar cases in a usual case of hypothetico-deductive approach (Belarus as a country that moves toward authoritarianism, Romania that democratizes, and Macedonia that remains in stable intermediate position throughout the entire post-communist period), my tentative conclusions were that: 1. Not a single rigid model is capable of explaining all possible trajectories within the post-communist world; 2. Some hypotheses within the institutional choice (e.g. electoral system choice) can make us understand the different trajectories for countries such as Belarus and Romania; 3. Some legacies (such as the presence or absence of a strong national feeling shared within the entire population) can contribute to understand the intermediate cases (e.g. Macedonia). To become useful, the models must become much less rigid, to encompass elements of different theoretical models and to eliminate some elements that usually go together. What we gain as "predictability" we lose as theoretical coherence.

There is, however, a major problem within the group of the external factors, in general, and regarding the role of the European integration that affects the post-communist democratization, in particular. In brief, the answers provided in the literature are mutually incompatible. This major problem constitutes the starting point for my present research.

## **3. Literature review**

Which are, in brief, the positions held by different groups of authors within the debate over the role of the European integration in the post-communist democratization. On the one side are the euro-optimists; for Vachudova (2005), the European integration changes the expectations and the rational calculations within the political elites in East Central Europe; the rapprochement between the Union and these countries increases the chances of democratization (if this regime is still not present at the beginning of the post-communist era) or increases the quality of the democracy (if it is already present). For this author, the EU acts sometimes as a "passive leverage" and sometimes as an "active leverage" regarding the democratization. "Passive leverage" means that the EU changes the expectations, and also the rational calculations of the domestic political elite by manipulating

their expectations; the active leverage of the EU, on the other hand, changes some structures that in turn are considered essential for introducing more political competition (2005, 161). For Vachudova, the EU role increases with the increasing of the prospects for EU membership; it gradually turns from passive into active leverage with the identification of the membership as possible goal in the mid-1990s and with the beginning of the formal negotiations for membership from the end of the 1990s. This EU role is always positive; giving promises for EU membership increases and never decreases the chances for democratization. With some nuances, this optimistic vision is shared by some other authors such as Pridham (2001; 2005; 2007), Levitsky and Way (2005a' 2005b; 2007), Coricelli (2007), Rose-Ackerman (2007) and Schimmerfennig (2007).

Within the literature, however, there is a euro-pessimist group that links the growing EU influence over the post-communist prospective members with some erosion within the quality of their democracy. Raik (2004) defends this position for three reasons: the EU destroys the democratic process of decision making; the EU introduces a model of administrative subordination between Brussels and the post-communist countries; and finally, the EU detaches the local political elites from their electoral base. To this author, the logic of the European integration makes the decision-making more bureaucratic; it gives political advantages to the local executive and decreases the role of the parliaments. In a similar vein, Bideleux (2001) adds that the economic liberalization in the post-communist prospective members under the EU influence destroys the democratic type of negotiations around important social and economic issues; the weak parliaments lose control and strong governments gain additional power. If there is a correlation between the democratization and the liberalization, it is always negative. Once being put on the fast track for joining the EU, the post-communist countries become governed by rules, norms and decisions made and remade in Brussels.

Between these two groups that only for convenience I call here euro-optimists and euro-pessimists, there is a third, intermediary group. Kolarska-Bobinska (2003) looks at the EU as an actor that in different historic moments can facilitate or impede the post-communist democratization. In the short run, the EU decreases the quality of the democracy for the reasons already mentioned while presenting Kristi and Bideleux, but in the long run, the process changes direction for reasons similar to those presented by the euro-optimist school of thought. Once the country is invited to join the EU, the "western" democratic know-how becomes affecting positively the former communist nation (2003, 97). Grzymala-Busse and Innes (2003) share this ambivalent vision that distinguishes the EU influence as not entirely democratic in a short and pro-democratic in a long run. Dimitrova (2002) also makes such distinction, but contrarily to Kolarska-Bobinska and to Grzymala-Busse, it is before the formal integration that the EU influence is stronger and more beneficial to the democratic consolidation. According to her, with the integration completed, the new domestic institutions and their goals can be gradually modified under the influence of some domestic veto points. The "rent-seekers" that hound the post-communist democratization from the beginning, and that are supposedly weakened while the EU imposes its conditionality, may again become powerful enough to impose different logic of political development.

#### **4. Discussion of the literature**

Looking over the literature on the European integration and its influence on the post-communist democratization, I can safely conclude that it is not only unable to determine the direction of influence, but also it contains an important omission regarding the causal mechanisms of influence. In general, the priority is given to factors such as the institutional diffusion to the East, as well as the rational choice of the politicians, especially those in the post-communist countries. The question of the cultural perception of the European integration, the integration as meaning, and also the question of the integration as value transforming process, both on the level of political elites and on the level of general population; a value transformation as cultural phenomenon, including the domestic political culture, these questions are almost absent within the literature. The culture means here not some socio-economic prerequisites that have their presentations on the level of perceptions, a tradition that goes far away in the past (Almond and Verba 1963) and that still have ardent followers (e.g. Radu 1998). For all of them the culture is an epiphenomenon that refers to another social fact (like the personal income, the level of education), it has no ontological life on its own. I take another view of the culture that follows McFalls' political ethnography studies; the culture here is conceived as symbolic interaction, representing the result of the dynamic process between actors, that includes also the subjective interpretation of this interaction. How imported or imposed from abroad institutions are adapted symbolically is a question little or not analyzed within the post-communist context. Is the specific image of the EU playing a role in this political interaction, and if yes, then how? Given the near absence of the question of cultural perception within the ontological vision of the presented main approaches (both euro-optimist and euro-pessimist), with the exception of the school linked to the cultural prerequisites, it is of no surprise that the literature of the EU influence on the post-communist democratization deals mainly with the formal institutions and their transfer, and also with the behavior of few key actors within the national executives.

Another major problem with the existing literature is that it deals mainly with post-communist countries from East Central Europe, such as the Czech republic or Hungary. These countries, by all accounts are already democratized rather quickly after 1989. It is therefore difficult to measure the effect of the EU on their democratization given that this new factor began affecting these countries well after their democratization was completed or almost completed. Instead, I am looking at another region of post-communist countries, a region where the cases of democratization are gradual, tentative, and perhaps still reversible. Among these countries that populate the Balkan region, I have chosen two cases to represent the EU influence in comparative perspective: Bulgaria and Macedonia (F.Y.R.O.M.); the first being already an EU member since January 2007, the second still in the waiting room for the beginning of negotiations that ultimately must lead to full membership.

Bulgaria represents several challenges to the euro-optimist literature. Ganev (2001; 2006; 2007) shows that the state in this country exists for the most of the time only to protect some special economic interests from domestic and foreign competitors. The elections look like a trade exchange in which the votes go to the

highest bidder. Andreev (2006) adds that the political system excludes systematically the ethnic minorities from the decision-making. If Bulgaria (and Romania) are admitted in the EU, this does not mean that they have solved all their problems with the quality of the democracy (Bojkov 2004). On the contrary, according to this author, the EU still considers these countries as problematic, and this is the reason to admit them separately from the other post-communist countries that are EU members since 2004. For Bojkov, this is a clear signal to the other Balkan countries (still in the “waiting room”) that the EU has huge discretionary power, both in presenting gifts and in imposing penalties.

The EU continues to exercise a pressure on Bulgaria to make substantial reforms in fields that directly affect the democratic regime quality: the judicial system, the fight against corruption, the fight against the organized crime, the money laundering, and the financial control (mainly over the EU funds, but not only). The lack of progress in these fields is the reason given by the EU to freeze temporarily many important projects in Bulgaria beginning in 2008, i.e. just one year after it becomes EU member. The country that, according to the institutional and procedural criteria of *Freedom House* and *Policy IV*, should not create any problem regarding the quality of democracy (and the EU membership is a proof that such quality is supposed to exist) is in fact very problematic on this issue. This makes Bulgaria an ideal candidate for studying the effects of the European integration based on alternative theoretical basis.

The choice of Bulgaria as principal case study allows for utilization of interpretative methods for which an intimate knowledge of the local language is necessary (Bulgarian is my mother tongue). To eliminate the risk that the explanations will not affect but Bulgaria, a risk to produce an idiographic study that pretends to be comparative, after having found the mechanisms of influence in one or another direction (increasing or reducing the quality of the democracy), I am making comparison with the second case study, Macedonia, a country where the spoken language is too close to Bulgarian. Adding new cases will automatically shift the methodology toward using less ethnographic techniques in order to produce comparable results. Being inductive, my research does not aim to produce big generalizations covering the entire post-communist world. This is the reason why I have rather deeper than broader attitude toward the phenomenon under research: the EU influence on the post-communist democratization.

## **5. Democracy from a hermeneutical point of view**

The democracy as any other political regime has an institutional side, formal and relatively easy to observe and find by asking these simple questions: Who governs? Using which means? Following which procedures? The democracy however has also subjective side, or how the institutions are interpreted by those who live under this regime. The literature of the EU influence on the post-communist democratization is largely centered on the first of these two sides. On the contrary, I am interested with the second cultural dimension, the possibility of constructing democratic ethic, ethic understood as life-guide following Max Weber. This cultural dimension is supposed to lead toward better functioning of the democratic institutions. It is neither necessary nor sufficient condition for democracy; it is a parallel world that makes it

more stable. The democracy is always defined, following Przeworski, as stable rules leading toward non-predictable results. The democratic ethic, therefore, should logically correspond to his procedural world, it should put as a norm for the people this stability of the rules and instability of the results.

In addition to the construction of a norm that respects the democratic procedures, an ordinary citizen should also have the feeling that it has some civic competence, utilizing the vocabulary of Almond and Verba from *The Civic Culture*. In other words, the democratic ethic requires that the person feels capable of understanding and domesticating the political life, that this person feels powerful enough in order to act and to influence, but not powerful enough to eliminate this right to the others. This feeling that a person is capable of civic competence is directly linked to the possibility of constructing "us"-group more or less restrained, according to each case, in order to influence the world throughout collective political action.

As we can see, the democratic ethic is a complex phenomenon that includes more than one element that is relatively autonomous from one another (a norm to respect the procedures, some civic competence). A third element, linked but not identical to the civic competence, may add some colors to the picture. It is the possibility on subjective level that one person can join forces with another for collective political action. The elimination of persons for such action solely on the basis of their race, ethnic origin, mother tongue or religion reduces largely the chances of collective action, thus reducing the chances of construction of stable democratic ethic. The preliminary case study in Bulgaria in June and July 2009 shows that some types of personalities have already underwent profound changes regarding their collective point of reference; these persons feel more "European" than "Bulgarian". Even if this is not necessary from a theoretical point of view, these persons feel like the "Europeanization", a highly desirable process, should be synonymous to a symbolic "denationalization". Therefore these people have decided willingly to cut any possibility of collective action within the Bulgarian nation. They still respect the democratic procedures and feel civically competent, but at another level, the European. The observations within the Bulgarian case shows that the Bulgarians, in their large majority, still stand profoundly attached to the ethnic vision of their nation, and that even after joining the EU in 2007 they still do not consider the ethnic minorities (Turkish, Roma) as potential allies within any collective political action. Such cultural problems for collective action that have no other "material" reason is another way to show the importance of the democratic ethic as an independent factor in understanding democratization.

Conceiving the possibility of collective political action, however, does not always lead toward increased presence of democratic ethic. The Bulgarian case shows that there are alarming number of vertical associations of dependence of mafia type; as far as the life and the goods protection are concerned; the Bulgarians still prefer to run for help to private structures linked to the organized crime. This reflex to private protection is generally considered as more efficient (being less expensive and speedier) than the means of political and judicial action that are more frequently used in many EU countries.

In brief, the democratic ethic, or the democracy from a hermeneutical point

of view, as an element of the better functioning of the democratic regime, is a complex of norms within the symbolic world of people that makes them easier to respect the democratic procedures, to feel being more civically competent on the national level, and also to feel the need of joining forces with other people for common political action based on the symbolic equality between citizens. For the purposes of this research only, this democratic ethic will not be measured by using discrete indicators; being part of the symbolic world of the people, it will be traced instead by using only interpretative if not ethnographic techniques.

## **6. Methodology notes**

I am looking to understand how the Bulgarian and the Macedonian political cultures change (or do not change) under the influence of one particular factor, the European integration. For this reason, I use some techniques that help understand the symbolic world of the people in both countries. This study is ethnographic. It builds upon the holistic approach that society is an interrelated system, and if there are signs of influence coming from the EU, they can be traced in more than one, apparently different, areas (from the personal relations between the ordinary citizens to the public statements made by the president of the republic). A study that wants to be both inductive and ethnographic is always in a making; a new element or piece of information found anywhere within the social tissue can completely change the way we interpret the facts observed in other areas. This problem of size notwithstanding, this study can contribute to the advancement of our knowledge, by reaching a level of saturation (comprehensive satisfaction of our curiosity which does not increase by adding new information). As the ethnography adopts holistic approach to any social group, the different techniques of collecting information increase the chances of arriving at comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon; this understanding becomes possible when different sources converge toward one coherent interpretation. This possibility to understand is the reason explaining my preferences toward a multitude of techniques in different areas instead of utilizing one only.

The techniques vary depending on the level of analysis: the politicians, the civil servants, and the ordinary people. For those who make decisions, I use the discourse analysis and make some observations over their behavior, but I also reach out for their symbolic world by making some biographical interviews. Given that the reliable sources revealing the political significance in Bulgarian (and in any other country) political life are potentially limitless, I am studying events and discourses during the recent years that reveal the change of the democratic ethic. Here is an example of using such source. Bulgaria in 2009 went through an electoral cycle, in which the parliament majority, under the influence of the president of the republic (elected by popular vote), tried to decrease the level of political competition (and thus the quality of the democracy) by changing the electoral law barely weeks before the election. Such a move represents clear case of non-respect of the democratic procedures. The most interesting thing in this affair, from a hermeneutical point of view, is that a small part of the parliament majority did not follow this path, dangerous for the democracy, despite the obvious political interest and despite the pressure coming from the party leadership.



On the level of the civil servants with business connections with EU officials and on the level of the ordinary people, the biographical interviews are my preferred technique. I met so far with more than 30 persons in Bulgaria; a half of them were small civil servants within different ministries dealing with the EU files. To these interviews I added more than 20 ordinary people that I met during my research in Bulgaria, but also with some Macedonians that I contacted via the Internet. The important part in these biographical interviews is how these people perceive the European integration with respect to important moments in their personal lives like carrier orientation or with respect to some important social issues, like the freedom of movement within the EU. In the case of the Bulgarian interviews, this evaluation of the integration is done retrospectively, which explains the importance of comparative analysis in Macedonia, which is still at the beginning of the process of integration.

## **7. Some preliminary results**

The results so far, pending new facts that within the inductive logic could change the interpretation of already collected information, show that there is no unique way of understanding the influence of the European integration on the political behavior of the post-communist nations. Some people remain profoundly attached to their culture of being only subjects to the state policies and generally of external forces; subjects in the sense that give to the word Almond and Verba in *The Civic Culture*; these people simply reproduce their earlier socialization made in different historical context, in our case during the heydays of the communism. Other interviewed persons, however, are not so attached to particular values. They can change them, and this change can, at least partly, be attributed to the influence of the EU integration, by creating new collective points of reference and new more complex collective identities. This change can also take different directions. Some people literally turn their backs to the Bulgarian political community, and stop thinking about any collective political action on national level only; they rather look for using possibilities for such action on the European level. In general, these people fit well with the instrumental hypothesis within the literature; according to this hypothesis people can change under objective rational calculations. To put it in other words, Bulgarians become Europeans because it is worth it. The EU integration, however, produces also the opposite outcomes. Some people become politically more engaged in the Bulgarian social life, seeing in the EU rules new political and legal framework, clearer and more transparent, for promoting their social interests. For many of those in the latter group, this increased engagement is not a simple result of instrumental calculations; many interviewed civil servants and ordinary people show symbolic overcharge that cannot be explained with simple objective interests.

As in an ethnographic study, in addition to interviews, there are other techniques to help the process of triangulation. Within this study, among those other techniques, I utilize the visual representations in the Bulgarian and the Macedonian press such as political cartoons; these representations can show the beginning of the development of a new European identity, especially in the Bulgarian case. I also use some articles in the press and particularly the comments in the readers' forums that follow these articles. In Bulgaria this technique allowed

me to make interesting conclusions regarding the parliament election turnout on 5 July 2009. Since the 1990s a kind of political apathy is growing among many Bulgarian citizens, which is clearly showed in the dropping numbers of people going to vote. The population has developed very cynical attitude toward the active political participation. Following this logic, the elections do not change but the personalities, not the policies. The image of the Bulgarian without interests in the politics that goes to “pick up mushrooms” instead of taking part in the election process on the election day has become a metaphor known to anybody in this country. Just days before this election all pollsters predicted low turnout, around 50 percent. An analysis of the readers' comments in the newspapers, however, showed that there was a radical change in the tone during the days that preceded the election that went unnoticed for the pollsters. The same readers that earlier called not to vote suddenly began to call to go and to vote in order to put down the government. Their old argument against voting was that it legitimized the political oligarchy that hid its nature behind high electoral turnouts; the new arguments to vote were based on the presumption that this oligarchy, with the new electoral law, would deny the people the right to choose. The turnout on the Election Day was 60 percent, instead of 50 percent. This last minute political mobilization was done around ethnic values (the Turkish minority party was part of the governmental coalition) rather than purely civic values. The European integration, however, has played a role in this last-minute mobilization; the arguments *against* and *for* voting were at least partly based on the national group-shame that this election could inflict on the international image of Bulgaria as European country.

To summarize the first findings, the European integration can affect the democratic ethic by using mechanisms throughout the process of (re)articulation of symbols. Among the politicians, the shift of the group of reference toward pan-European political parties can neutralize the pressure exercised by the domestic party leadership and objective political interests. On this level and on the level of the civil servants, the integration can be associated with more transparency and order, and therefore it can help people pull out from what they perceive as post-communist chaos that denies any vision for possible change. Taking distance from the national community, however, can also be dangerous for the democratic political process by making the people less engaged with the local political issues or less engaged with the local political process. On all three levels: politicians, civil servants, and ordinary citizens, the integration can help articulating new collective identity, and therefore help reconsidering the individual presence or absence in the domestic political life. On any of these three levels the European integration can affect the local political culture, by reinforcing some and at the same time by weakening some other elements of the democratic ethic: the respect for the procedures, the feeling of civic competence, and the ability to conceive collective political action. The feeling of collective group-shame, of being constantly watched from and criticized by Brussels, can help overcoming some old cultural roadblocks, but it can also create new ones.

## **8. Conclusion**

The European integration is at the same time maker and breaker of the democratic ethic as important part of the better functioning of the democratic political regime. Under some conditions it can lead toward weakening if not destruction of the national identity and the democratic culture related to it, and therefore, is able of producing the opposite of its original pro-democratic intentions. By doing this, the EU integration can be singled out as a causal mechanism that increases the level of political apathy, and even as a factor that mixed with some preexisting popular feelings, such as the ethnic nationalism, especially strong in the Balkans, facilitates the political extremism. The Balkan and for that matter the Macedonian nationalism is ethnic by nature, and therefore this danger, especially when it is part of the process of becoming European should not be underestimated. On a positive side, I show that the EU integration mixed with other preexisting popular feelings, such as the group-based shame, can create conditions for new type of behavior that increase the level of social cooperation, and therefore help materialize the pro-democratic reforms. The initial question of how the European integration affects the post-communist democratization has no single and direct answer. It can affect it in many ways and move it into different, even opposing, directions. The real question or rather questions are to find as many as possible different cultural trajectories that become possible under the influence of this factor.

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