

# OPINION

on the dissertation of **Prof. Georgi Dimitrov Dimitrov**

*An empirical reconstruction of political interactions in  
the history of Bulgarian integration into the European Union  
(Research on the memories of participants in the process),*

submitted for the degree of Doctor of Political Science

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## General review

The dissertation has an impressive length of the main text of 1050 pages; in addition, it contains a bibliography of 332 titles (73 in Bulgarian, the rest in English), 25 illustrative figures, 16 tables with empirical data, two appendices with information on the accomplished empirical research. The overall dissertation design is developed in 10 chapters proposing solutions to a series of interrelated specific problems and creating a systematic historicized picture of integration interaction between Bulgaria and the EU. The work defends the thesis that Bulgarian accession to the EU is a process with national specificity, revealed through the complementarity of details that express its overall political character (SUM, p.4).

The author's aim is not to support or challenge the assessments of Bulgaria's accession to the EU, but to create a more general meaningful picture that can serve as a point of departure for understanding what happened, the enthusiasm of the direct participants in the processes at the time, as well as the results of Bulgaria's EU integration today (DIS, p. 5). This is the essence of the claim, stated in the title itself, for an "empirical reconstruction of political interactions" in the history of Bulgarian European integration. Hence the focus on "the breadth and diversity of detail in the process of Bulgarian preparations for EU membership"<sup>1</sup> (DIS, p. 5), which naturally transforms itself into an exploration of "the mechanisms of EU integration as the embodiment of a distinctive political approach" (SUM, p. 6).

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<sup>1</sup> I will adhere to the following citation system: when referring to the full text of the dissertation I will use the designation DIS, e.g. - (DIS, p.xxx), and for the dissertation summary - the designation SUM, e.g. - (SUM, p.xxx).

## **Relevance and dissertational validity**

According to prof. Dimitrov the Bulgarian accession to the EU deserves to be a subject of research because it is a problem for the future of the EU. The interest in it is stimulated by the desire to understand the general logic and specific mechanisms of an extremely important European macro-historical process. The search for alternative models for EU enlargement policy is historically crucial for the whole continent. In other words, the responsible pursuit of an EU integration policy requires an in-depth understanding of the process, of which Bulgaria's accession to the Union is a particular, but also particularly important part. The quality of the EU integration of one member state affects the whole Union, because the very meaning of membership lies in the national contribution to its development. The relevance of the study follows from the fact that interest in Bulgaria's EU integration has been small and steadily declining over the years, despite the importance of this unfinished episode in the country's history.

According to the author of the dissertation the study of this subject is based on a conceptual synthesis of the achievements of previous experience in research on EU enlargements. Most of the previous studies fall into two main groups: a) following a chronological or factual-descriptive approach and b) testing the validity of dominant theories (SUM, p.6). Thus, the actual mechanisms of the integration process as a whole have remained beyond the scope of research interest mainly due to concerns about the very problematization of the effectiveness of the policies pursued by the European Commission. At least two intentions have been clearly stated to ensure the high dissertational validity of the proposed work: 1) that empirics are not only used to test preconceived mental schemas, but as a source of new information on the complexity of the subject under study, and 2) that the dialectic of a two-way interaction between the EU and the candidates, which was unsuspected before the research, is taken into account. Rather than seeking “the universally common” through a theoretically oriented effort, the cognitive priority is declared to be “the specific” to the processes under consideration (SUM, p. 7).

## **Methodology**

Prof. Dimitrov defines the methodology of the empirical research, the results of which created the basis of the dissertation, as follows: " an analytical reconstruction of Bulgarian EU integration through the memories of key actors, based on a critical dialogue with the previous academic tradition, through which we identified the thematic emphases in the group narrative of our EU-integrators" (SUM, стр.8). The research team has gathered the empirical information through an in-depth semi-standardised interview, contained in the Appendix. The questions asked relate to key events and aspects of Bulgaria's accession to the EU, with a strong focus on those that are controversial in the academic literature: different techniques were used to ensure that the collected information has the necessary plurality of roles and voices so that the aggregate discourse is typologically representative of the integration process itself rather than being just a summation of private views. The careful selection of names and the fieldwork, which lasted for more than a year, and before the pandemic, guarantees a solid foundation for the thesis. The work done along these lines will remain as a primary source for all researchers on the subject from now on.

The high degree of methodological sensitivity is also demonstrated by the claim to adhere to Erik Erikson's methodological imperative as a basic scientific orientation, namely "the significance of any fact in a situation derives from its meaningful contribution to the elucidation of other facts in it, and it itself draws its new, enriched meaning from that contribution" (DIS, p. 5). We should remind ourselves that the text we are reviewing was written by an author with many years of experience as a participant and supervisor of numerous projects related to the topic, with several successful PhD students, many publications and contributions to international fora that are well known to the professional community. I would like to state that from a scientific point of view our author is formally the best prepared Bulgarian researcher on the topic of Bulgarian integration in the European Union. This is proven once again by a well-founded and carefully thought-out methodology, precisely defined concepts, whose network covers the entire scope of the study with the necessary clarity and consistency.

Although not an easy and always pleasant read, the hundreds of pages of this dissertation leave no doubt as to whether the stated aim has been achieved. There is a convincing and progressively thickening empirical reconstruction of the political interactions in the history of Bulgarian European integration, the contours of which emerge in the course of the elaboration and are by no means predetermined. The lack of a pre-set theoretical model may be irritating, the unusual focus on the breadth and

variety of detail may indeed be difficult to come to terms with, but the author has fairly warned us what he wants to achieve and what there is no point in looking for in his text. The traditional inertia of political scientist's expectations remains at the expense of those expecting the usual structure and exposition.

### **Critique of Rational Institutionalism**

I shall switch to a looser literary style for a moment, because sometimes a few metaphors would do a better job than anything else. The dissertation does not have the structure of an architectural blueprint, a complex chemical formula, or even a set of logical chains, despite its dogged adherence to the numbering system of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, which I do not find to be helpful, but rather self-serving. The work is like weaving a canvas. The end result is a multi-colored tapestry, containing at least 8638 threads that have been twisted before our eyes and gradually interwoven by the shuttle. The fabric is patterned and strong, but it is up to the observer/reader what images or at least simple shapes he/she will discover. There are, however, several very bright spots for everyone to see; personally, I am most impressed by a silver one, which may well be gold. It is the spot of the critique of rational institutionalism.

The empirical reconstruction achieved by the author refutes the fundamental assumptions of rational institutionalism that dominates the research on the Fifth EU Enlargement (DIS, p. 634). According to this paradigm, the EU and the candidate country rationally calculate benefits and costs in order to calculate the maximum mutual benefit that becomes the basis of the contract between them. According to its internal logic, the enlargement policy of the Union has a "nature" that is defined as "transfer of rules"; the enlargement conditionality treats this as europeanisation of national societies and it is from here that practical problems arise in the contemporary implications of this policy (SUM, p. 71). Here, in the form of a critique, we find an indisputable scholarly contribution, the precise formulation of which has been supported by convincing evidence. "The very presumption of rationality, of whatever kind, presupposes a stable definiteness and orderliness of the relations under consideration. It is precisely these characteristics that are least valid for constitutive relations in the Bulgarian EU integration process" (DIS, p. 635). This is a key conclusion of immense value that has not been reached by theoretical means or due to inspired insight. It is preceded by

hundreds of pages demonstrating in an undeniable way how much enthusiasm, passion, euphoria, illusion and even incompetence accompany the integration process.

In this way, the problems arising from the “radical otherness” of post-communist societies are rehabilitated, without denying the historical necessity of the enlargement of the European Union as a central feature of its politics (DIS, p. 782). Our author puts an end to the comfortable inertia driven by theories derived from the early phases of integration into the European Communities, which were before all about economic integration where rational institutionalism is in its element. It is time to acknowledge that the task of integrating CEE societies is of a completely different order to previous enlargements and to shift the focus to the essential difference of the EU's Eastern enlargement. It is time to acknowledge the existence of qualitative multivariation in the process of integration, of which this dissertation is a brilliant illustration (DIS, p. 782).

I therefore fully agree with the content and manner in which Prof. Dimitrov has formulated his most important contributions in this regard, all of which are carefully listed at the end of the dissertation summary and to which I have no objections. His research is significant in at least two dimensions: 1) in political terms, it provides a conceptual-methodological framework for an analytical assessment of innovation in EU enlargement policy towards the Western Balkan countries; 2) in academic terms, it offers a factually grounded dialectical, historicized alternative to the positivist orientation in mainstream EU enlargement policy research. And I will repeat his words that these achievements "have no precedent in Bulgarian political science, and as far as we know, in international political science too" (SUM, p. 782).

After reading this dissertation, I was left with a strong sense of something missing. Formally it is not related to the previously stated aims and intentions of prof. Dimitrov and should not be perceived as a criticism of the incompleteness of the work. However, since he himself dares to touch upon political and practical aspects of European integration, I expected him to take a stand on the so-called “Revised enlargement methodology”, which has been announced for several years and will be applied to the integration of the Western Balkans. I would like to know how this, in my opinion, bold and reasonable revision looks like in the light of the analysis of the “Bulgarian case”. I will venture the opinion that even without having read the work of prof. Dimitrov's work, the invisible but far from anonymous decision-makers in Brussels have nevertheless understood and realised (long before this study) many things that come close to his conclusions. Is that really so?

I would like to ask for a principled and brief explanation of a series of facts to which I could also personally testify. Apart from Greece's financial crisis and Brexit, the biggest problems for the EU caused by its members in the last ten years were generated by Hungary and Poland, whose quality of EU accession Professor Dimitrov would describe as immeasurably higher than Bulgaria's. Their behaviour led to the introduction of a new mechanism for affirming the rule of law and linking it to EU funds. Theirs, not ours – despite the unfinished and unthought out process of our EU integration and despite our lowest indicators on numerous key indicators. Why are we not the 'black sheep' - and we should have been, according to the inexorable logic triggered by the wrong beginning?

In conclusion, I would like to point out that, considering the merits of the dissertation research and the mentioned scientific contributions, which are only a part of what has been achieved, I strongly and emphatically recommend to the members of this esteemed jury to support the awarding of the scientific title of Doctor of Political Science to Professor Georgi Dimitrov Dimitrov.

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