

Opinion

by Associate Prof. Dr. Daniel Mihailov Smilov

on the dissertation "Empirical reconstruction of political interactions in the history of Bulgarian integration in the European Union (Research on the memories of participants in the process)" by Prof. Dr. Georgi Dimitrov Dimitrov, submitted for the acquisition of the scientific degree "Doctor of Sciences" in the direction 3.3 Political science (European studies)

Professor Georgi Dimitrov has conducted innovative research and written a large-scale and remarkable in many respects scientific work, which represents a significant contribution to Bulgarian political science and, in particular, to the study of Bulgaria's European integration. Together with the other publications on the subject and the overall presence of Prof. Dimitrov in the Bulgarian academic environment, this work constitutes sufficient grounds for awarding the degree of "Doctor of Science" in direction 3.3 Political Sciences (European Studies).

The study of the "memories of the participants in the process" of Bulgaria's accession to the EU is an ambitious empirical project that is based on nearly 50 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with politicians and experts. The respondents are at the highest level in the country's government and administration, and an attempt has been made to balance the representation of the different parties. Experts are among the leaders in this field. The collected archive of 1,200 pages is in itself an empirical database that can be used for various future projects. Professor Dimitrov's research highlights over 8,000 semantic highlights among the collected information, which are analyzed in the large-scale 800-page dissertation.

It is a great achievement that the text deploys the analysis of empirical data in an ambitious interpretive framework. The data are presented in a summarized form, with the author using different methods of analysis. Qualitative summaries based on the extracted semantic accents are leading, but in individual chapters there are also interesting variants of content analysis (such as measuring the number of mentions of an individual country, NGO-organizations, prime ministers, etc.) In the author's words about his main approach :

This methodological attitude is located in the gap between content analysis and discourse analysis, distinguishing them in several ways: - it considers as a unit, a carrier of meaning, not a separate word or word combination, but the entire paragraph of speech; - Searches not for the number of references to individual words, but for an extremely wide range of explicit or implicit meaning-value dimensions in which the stated statements are located, located in continuums of meaning alternatives; - Searches for a particular, characteristic of the specific researched subject, its systemic-structural integrity in the recognized meaning-value dimensions; - Identifies socio-historical structural grounds for interpreting the system of recognized semantic-value accents. (p. 57)

With some of the data from the content analysis, such as those on the mentions in a positive or negative sense of the EU countries, regression analyses were also made for quantitative illustration and confirmation of some of the trends. From this point of view, Prof. Dimitrov's research is at a serious methodological level of sophistication.

The most important premise of the chosen methodology is that the collective narrative of the participants in the negotiations and the process of accession of Bulgaria to the EU provides an empirical basis for conclusions about the nature of the accession process itself. This premise—within reasonable allowances for the subjectivity of the participants—is justified. There is also an initial limitation in the approach - the "collective memories" on the part of the EU are absent, but the clarification of the Bulgarian point of view towards the process is also important and sufficient as a contribution to existing science.

The main argument that the thesis defends is that:

the way of conducting Europeanization through conditionality is, in fact, neither natural nor universal, i.e. only possible. It is politically-historically constructed, insofar as it is imperatively imposed by the entire above-mentioned complex of social-political circumstances of the time. (p. 36)

The dissertation takes a critical perspective on the enlargement process. It defines this process as "ambivalent", especially from the point of view of achieving a goal, which is considered by the author to be central. This goal is the "Europeanization" of Bulgaria, and by this term is understood the internalization not only in the political elite, but also among the population of certain value-based, normative attitudes and practices. Along with many other researchers, Prof. Dimitrov finds that in Eastern Europe and especially in Bulgaria, internalization is shallow, controversial and perhaps even reversible. This is the central fact that, according to him, justifies his critical perspective and the effort to think about possible alternatives to the EU's enlargement policy.

Before starting the presentation of his own research, the author provides a review of the literature on EU enlargement that is detailed, useful and balanced. An attempt is also made to describe the challenge of the accession and Europeanization of countries, former members of the socialist camp, to the EU. The difficulty of the task is indisputable, especially if the goal is a complete transformation of societies and their modernization. Here are just some of the difficulties the author points out:

A very heavy second economic factor is the quality of the labor force, but not so much as the demographic structure and competences, although in this respect devastating trends unfolded in the countries of the region in the 1990s. It's about the unquantifiable work ethic - the attitude with personal qualities to ensure your prosperity. The opposite, half a century of "building socialism" creates a prevailing attitude of passivity and dependence on state care - first of all in health care, education, social protection, but also more generally: in the widespread attitude that "the state must give". (Page 80)

The unprecedented nature of the fifth enlargement leads to serious improvisation both on the part of the candidate countries (especially Bulgaria) and on the part of the EU:

For all these reasons, the process must be without a legal format. Whatever happens and which country succeeds... But with these political prerequisites, additional features of the EU's enlargement policy come to the fore, which express the special nature of this historical process - a) an unprecedentedly large role of the European Commission in the implementation of this policy and dependence on its course (timing – phases and rates of deployment) and b) decisive influence of political personalities in the leadership of the Commission. (Page 90)

Ultimately, according to the author, this leads to a "political" nature of the accession:

The facts presented above are definitive proof of the predominantly political nature of the EU accession process in the Bulgarian-Romanian case, with very significant national specificities. In the words of a key participant in the negotiation process: "It's not just a matter of ticking off points - acquis here, acquis there. Is not that. It was never that." (int. 27). (p. 40 Authoreferat)

Prof. Dimitrov's critical meta-narrative goes into great depth and detail. The study itself is indeed an empirical reconstruction of the negotiation process from its inception to its (ultimately successful) conclusion. Multiple factors – structural, personal, social, etc. - have been accounted for. Here is an example of personal problems that have remained in the collective memory:

Chief negotiator for BG. Bulgaria did not succeed "with a suitable chief negotiator". Not only because a number of figures passed through this position, but also because they precisely figured in their institutional role without leaving any trace of a memorable deed or at least a politically significant act. (p. 44 Author.)

One of the important conclusions that Prof. Dimitrov makes is that the accession did not lead to a rationalization of the policy-making process and its connection with the formulation of political priorities:

What is missing is the structured political connection between the two, which is done through sectoral policies. And it contains two extremely important things on which good governance depends. First is understanding the highly complex and non-obvious internal connections economy, education, health, etc., each of which is sufficiently internally differentiated to be invisible at all, for example, how the school and higher education systems are connected, what is the relationship between the latter and the research and development system; between sustainable market economy and rule of law, etc. And such a complex political understanding of the goals of governance is not impossible in a post-communist society, as the Polish case testifies (Hausner 2005).

The second is even more important – the understanding of governance as a process of conducting public policies to solve problems in the interest of the citizenry and, therefore, in partnership with it. Namely, these two things are supposed to be the content of a social development strategy in general and, in particular, in the EU integration strategy (as there was, for example, but not accidentally, in Poland). (Page 152)

At times, Prof. Dimitrov's critical perspective gains too much momentum and leads him to conclusions that cannot be defended within the framework of his research. Starting from the salience of informal practices in Bulgarian politics (something that is indisputable), the author comes to the conclusion that EU membership only strengthens them:

On the contrary, integration policies are to a decisive extent shaped by the way non-public policies are conducted in our country (Karamfilova 2012), in which the decision-making process, including, but not exclusively, on matters concerning the utilization of public funds, is largely left to the field of political discretion. Behind it, as a rule, corporate interests manifest themselves, changing as holders, but constant as a principle of action (whether they are ethnic, regional or party, this is irrelevant in this case). In other words, EU membership is not a solution to the problems of modern Bulgarian society - it only multiplies, deepens and makes them visible, above all - in a comparative international plan (Page 175)

Such a hypothesis is possible, but it should not be inserted into the text with such certainty without actually being verified and proven. And the fact that a given problem becomes visible is the first mandatory step towards its solution.

Critical inertia leads to stumbling towards unfounded conclusions also regarding the benefits/costs of EU membership in general. Although Prof. Dimitrov explicitly says that this problem remains for another study, he poses questions of the following kind as rhetorical questions:

a) if the result of EU membership is "nothing special" or "normality of our lives", then it seems that achieving such a final result is not something exceptional;
b) if the price paid for historical success is the partiality, superficiality and reversibility of Europeanization, then it cannot be an exceptional achievement either. (Page 195)

It is true that in a scientific study triumphalism is inappropriate. But criticisms that are not or cannot be empirically supported are also a form of bias.

Although there are points in the general theoretical framework that may be controversial or exaggerated, it is solid enough to allow the empirical research to become a real contribution to the study of Bulgarian European integration. The chapters on the collective memories of the beginning of the process, on the countries participating in it, on the role of the Bulgarian politicians, the administration, the NGO sector, on their perceptions of the difficulties are the core of the work and they are at a remarkable height. In terms of methodology, the chapter on the EU countries in the memories of the Bulgarian participants stands out. One of the takeaways here is that:

Only two countries are of greatest importance – Romania and Germany. Romanian participation is the largest in absolute terms, but is slightly negative compared to all other countries. The German one is smaller in volume, but it is distinctly more positive. (Page 324)

In this chapter there are interesting applications of content analysis, combined with regressions and delineation of different "clusters" of countries that were relevant or not in the process of Bulgarian integration. The next chapter, which is about the role of the EC in the negotiation process, is also very useful in terms of knowledge. It outlines the indisputable leading role of the EC, while also listing a number of defects in the work of this body. For example:

The persons from the two institutional ranks are different, but the conclusions of the analysis of the content in the narratives - for the presidents of the EC and for the main negotiators with Bulgaria - are almost identical. As a rule, simply put, "there is no one", and to the extent that there is always someone - "there is no benefit" for the preparation for our membership in the EU, especially in the proper political sense of progress towards the goal of the process. So we come again to the very delicate question of the rank of priority of Bulgarian membership in the EU for the Union itself, (which in no way belittles the really well-done work of the EC at the administration level). (Page 455)

The collective memory here is somewhat ambivalent. In general, everyone considers the EC's good role towards Bulgaria, although some of the respondents avoid calling it a "friend":

And in practice, the Commission has implemented the most favorable models of behavior for Bulgaria, which leave no room for doubt in its benevolence, even among those who object to the qualification "friend" addressed to it. Because it sustainably supports and honorably defends the Bulgarian cause, provides the necessary highly competent expertise, complies with our positions and participates in partnership interaction, and even appears as an ally in difficult battles, including - in a broader international plan (Page 496)

The chapters on the Bulgarian participants in the accession are also very valuable from a research point of view, as the positive role of Prime Minister Kostov and his administration, as well as the negative role of Videnov's administration, clearly stand out in the collective memory. The analysis including the presence in the memories of the NGO sector is important:

As an overall picture, the research establishes - through each of the analyzed dimensions, that there was a real, albeit partial, and also disproportionate in terms of quality and intensity involvement in the process of the country's accession to the EU by the Bulgarian civil society. (Page 592)

In addition to the participants, the study also contains special chapters on substantive issues that make the accession process complex. Here, the author analyzes memories of the vicissitudes of certain negotiation chapters, extracting

the factors that make negotiations difficult. In fact, there is one meta-problem that explains all the difficulties:

And in fact, the problem is in the conceived, but unfinished Europeanization, which allows the existence of such a model of symbiosis between politics-law-crime, the personification of which are those listed above. (Page 624)

But apart from this meta-problem, it actually turns out that the explanation for difficulties is highly contextual and influenced by numerous factors:

That is why we get the highly individualized profile of relative weight of each individual chapter, expressed in the different duration of the negotiations. It results from a combination of too many disparate factors, which even in number vary from case to case, not to mention the intensity of their manifestation. (Page 736)

The study ends with a chapter on the reflections of collective memory on the question "could it have been different". This is important for Prof. Dimitrov because his overall attitude is to problematize one characteristic of much of the academic literature on EU enlargement, namely:

In its framework, there seems to be no room for questions: - why does enlargement policy have, literally speaking in the academic jargon of this tradition, a "nature" (Grabbe 2006; Sedelmeier 2013; Gateva 2014, 2015, 2018)? (Page 780)

In general, many of the interviews follow the scheme of the "no alternative" of the EU enlargement policy, although each of the respondents also has recommendations for improving the process.

In the final, tenth chapter, the author summarizes the vast information into a few central statements. From a substantive point of view, the conclusion is:

Therefore, the result of the integration is essentially marked by the original contradiction. On the one hand, Bulgaria realizes a stable macroeconomic development and, above all, a qualitative jump in its trade relations with the EU countries, measured by times compared to the starting position from the beginning of the accession process, but on the other hand, it became a member of the Union predominantly formally - with access to European funding, which is absorbed partially and incompletely, sometimes with a high degree of violation of the rules (which is why in 2008 the EC brought to us an unprecedented measure in the history of the EU to stop funding for a member state of the order of half a billion euros). (Page 802)

From a methodological point of view, the author argues that:

...it is absolutely pointless to approach an explanation of this historical process with the model of rational choice. Because, if to a certain extent it can be assumed that the EU is acting within the framework of the "calculating attitude" or "formal rationality",³⁶⁴ Bulgaria acted during the entire 10-year process in the form of a "value rationality" (in the language of Weberian sociology). (Pages 790-791)

My overall assessment of the work is high - as a significant contribution to Bulgarian political science and innovative research in the field of European integration. However, I allow myself the following critical remarks, which I hope will be useful to the author in his future research:

1) There is one controversial assumption in the thesis: that complete Europeanization must precede EU membership and therefore partial Europeanization after EU membership is a defect. The examples of the countries of the Western Balkans demonstrate that remaining outside the EU in itself can be a factor of "de-Europeanization". In this sense, the author should take more seriously the words of many of his respondents, who correctly (in my opinion) assess the "window of opportunity" that has opened before Bulgaria. I.e. the hypothesis that membership itself reinforces Europeanization, that it is a (slightly) risky gambit that pulls certain societies out of a difficult situation, should not be ruled out. (Ukraine and its aspiration to the EU is a clear example of the difficulties of countries remaining outside the EU - the other equally risky strategy).

2) Prof. Dimitrov's critical perspective is in itself ambivalent. On the one hand, accession participants are criticized for not having a clear agenda, vision and plan for achieving their goals (Chapter 3). This is a constant point in the other chapters as well, especially when it comes to the relationship between the "real" problems of society and the policies being pursued. From this point of view, the Bulgarian rulers do not meet the ideal of good governance, which is nevertheless related to following rules: good governance is an algorithm of actions over time. On the other hand, the author criticizes the EU for reducing the accession to a specific algorithm - mostly the adoption of *aquis* - by the candidates. In the absence of specific algorithms from the Bulgarian side, isn't it good that the EC has presented a specific algorithm that complies with the Union rules. What else could be stepped on in a situation where both parties knew little about each other?

3) The same ambivalence exists in relation to the EC. On the one hand, the Commission is criticized for relying too much on *aquis* - EU law. On the other hand, it is criticized that its approach is too discretionary and political. Both criticisms cannot be simultaneously true;

4) The greatest ambivalence comes from the fact that Prof. Dimitrov does not have a clear position on the issue of whether or not EU membership is actually beneficial for Bulgaria - this question remains open within the framework of the study. As indicated above, there is occasional doubt in the text that the benefits of membership are superficial, ephemeral or insignificant. Without a more concrete answer to this question, however, the critical perspective risks becoming incomprehensible. Because if membership is useful, it makes sense to criticize the weak internalization of European norms and values. But if it is not useful, then this weak internalization seems a completely justified immune reaction of politicians and society;

5) The following (perhaps apparent) paradox needs to be explained. On the one hand, the accession process, according to Prof. Dimitrov, is driven by "value rationality" and political considerations - also on the part of the EU, but especially on the part of Bulgaria. At the same time, what is lacking and is a

defect is precisely the lack of internalization of values. There must be some theory that explains the dominance of values and their actual absence - how does this divergence happen? Is it about mimicry and insincerity on the part of the candidates? Or have other rulers and politicians come in the place of the enthusiasts? Or have the general moods changed?...

6) Prof. Dimitrov is aware that the EU is also changing. But one change in the EU is not adequately accounted for in the analysis. It is true that after accession there was a deconsolidation and erosion of liberal and democratic values in Eastern Europe. But similar processes (Brexit, Le Pen, rise of Euroscepticism, etc.) were also observed in the western part of Europe. This parallelism can be interpreted as a pan-European tendency, which is not simply a product of a bad internalization of European values in Eastern Europe. From this perspective, the erosion of values may also be the result of (negative) Europeanization;

7) The author is right to look for alternatives to the current enlargement policy (which anyway tries to account for the mistakes of the fifth wave regarding the Western Balkans). But it remains slightly unclear in which direction the solution is sought: whether more pre-set rules and unified institutions are needed (which the author is rather against) or more values and political decisions (which he also seems to be against). If the dichotomy between rules and discretion is not useful, then there should be other guidelines for "fixing" EU policy. Otherwise, the request that it could be better remains a bit abstract.

8) The claim that the analysis rejects the validity of rational choice explanations and affirms value-based, constructivist approaches is not well defended. For the respondents themselves, the benefits of European membership undoubtedly and repeatedly exceed possible negatives - this is a fact that clearly emerges from the text. Maybe you they are wrong in this assessment, but there is no way to establish this in the research (and in principle it is quite arguable that they are wrong). In this sense, from the point of view of the respondents, the rational choice is quite clear and it does not go against other values that they have.

In conclusion, I once again confirm the high evaluation of Prof. Dimitrov's dissertation work and my support for awarding him the degree of Doctor of Science. The research he submitted meets all the criteria of a legal and professional nature. Moreover, it is a serious contribution to political science and, I hope, will generate productive academic debate on the topics covered.

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