

Opinion

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)

by John O'Brennan, Jean Monnet Professor at Maynooth University, July 2022

Academic and public relevance of the research work;

This dissertation engages with the EU Enlargement process and Bulgaria's experience of European integration. This is – as the dissertation states by way of justification – a significantly under-researched academic topic within the academy, especially relevant to the extraordinary importance of the issues raised by Bulgaria's membership for Bulgarian society and for the EU. This latter point is extremely important – the enlargement process involves the 'us' negotiating with the 'future us', as Commission expert and author Graham Avery put it many years ago. The dissertation points to the reciprocity implied by the interdependence logics of the EU and why every EU member state and citizen has a stake in Bulgaria's membership. Interest in the subject has been rather narrowly located and declining over the years.

Given that Bulgaria has now been a member of the EU for 15 years, it seems a very appropriate juncture to go back and examine the processes that made membership possible. It is also timely for the dissertation to remind readers that the 2007 'coda' enlargement has not come to an end: the CVM process is still alive, if indeed largely ignored both in Brussels and in Sofia. Finally, the dissertation invokes (and, through exploration of the Bulgarian case) substantiates Prof. Christophe Hillion's (2011) notion that the gap between the demands

of the EU accession process and the obligations of membership are significant and point to a very flawed and ambiguous accession process which is *still* having an impact on the integration system, almost three decades after the Copenhagen Criteria were specified by the European Council.

The dissertation does an excellent job of identifying the national specificities and oddities which characterise the enlargement process but often get ignored in favour of the 'big picture' issues. National specificities matter, both in the negotiations and subsequently when the candidate state becomes a member state. The dissertation does an impressive job of identifying and explicating the significance of these in the integration context. The different ways in which the abuse of the rule of law in Hungary and Poland has made its way on to the agenda at the highest level of the EU is evidence enough of the critical ways in which recently acceded states can impact on the integration process, rather than (as much of the literature suggests) simply constitute passive actors or 'rule takers' within the overall integration schema. Thus the enlargement *does not just* change 'them' or the 'future us' (to use the Avery term). It also emphatically changes 'us' (the existing collective of member states).

Finally, much of the recent discussion about the abuse of the rule of law in the EU has ignored the abuses evident in Bulgaria, and the abuses which began to thrive (ironically) after membership was achieved in 2007. (what Prof. Venelin Ganev refers to as 'post-accession hooliganism') There is a real public significance to the way this dissertation draws attention to how some of these abuses derive from the accession process itself. Bulgaria isn't just a 'rule taker' of integration. As a full and equal member of the European Council it helps to shape the rules that define the integration process for a population of 447 million across 27 member states.

Knowledge of the state of play in the respective academic field;

The author demonstrates a very impressive knowledge of both the extant EU Enlargement literature and the domestic Bulgarian literature on enlargement and European integration. What is more the author does not just describe these literatures; he actively engages with, interrogates and challenges some key parts of the body of knowledge about the process and politics of enlargement. In part his ability to do this stems from decades of work in this field. It demonstrates a real and convincing mastery of the landscapes of integration, including the variegated 'Europeanisation' literature as well as the enlargement and post-accession literatures. It also demonstrate the extent to which Bulgarian authors have contributed (in my view, in an over-sized and impressive manner) to intellectual analysis of the enlargement of Europe. This field includes the author of this dissertation but also highly respected figures like Dr. Dimitar Bechev, Prof. Antoaneta Dimitrova, Prof. Rilka Dragneva, Prof. Venelin Ganev, Prof. Anna Krsteva, Prof. Gergana Noutcheva, and Prof. Popova.

Level of originality

This is a highly original piece of work. As someone who has worked on EU enlargement policy for more than 25 years, I can vouch for the significant contribution it makes to the extant literature. It both challenges received wisdom about the overall process and provides compelling evidence to support the claims made about the nature of Bulgaria's incorporation into the EU. These claims are supported by empirical evidence drawn from 47 in depth, semi-standardized interviews with key actors in the enlargement negotiations and integration landscape – from Prime Ministers and Foreign Ministers of Bulgaria to (perhaps even more important) the senior officials within the public administration and diplomatic community who witnessed and/or were part of these historic developments. The empirical material provides a truly rich quality to the intellectual propositions that the dissertation teases out. The approach taken to interviews is also novel: it does not proceed from the standard vernacular position but from a position which seeks to explore and explain the manifold

contradictions which characterise the overall accession process and the micro interactions within such. The dissertation is all the more original for taking such an approach.

It also provides an original and important methodological contribution to the field. In particular the employment of a cross country comparative framework of Europeanisation to the enlargement process and the testing of empirics as a source of new information about the process stands out. The result is that the dissertation captures very well the inherent contradictions of the enlargement process and the two way interactions between the EU and candidate states. Each of the agents are treated as having *real agency*, with their own interests and values, and the capacity to harness 'repertoires of action', something that often does not happen in integration studies and international relations. The justification for situating the work somewhere between content analysis and discourse analysis is also convincing.

Critical comments

My criticisms of this dissertation are very minor in nature. One claim made in the dissertation that needs to be explored is that the European Commission's goal of 'Europeanisation' involves a goal of 'substantive civilizational transformation' in the candidate/acceding states which does not feature in the accession preparation agenda. I would counter by suggesting that, first, 'Europeanisation' is not mentioned in the Copenhagen criteria and in fact does not feature much in the discourse of the Commission over the years. Second, the term 'Europeanisation' is notoriously fissiparous; it can literally mean anything one might want it to mean. And while the dissertation does an excellent job at teasing out some of the key meanings of the term, its very ambiguity means that it is not particularly helpful in teasing out the contours of the accession experience. Thirdly, the notion of 'substantive civilizational transformation' seems problematic to me for a whole variety of reasons. It (again) does not feature in Commission discourse on enlargement. There is a reluctance to

embrace, much less define, any notions of 'civilisation' because of the very heterogeneity of the European Union and the emphasis placed on diversity as an asset to the Union.

I also wonder about the contention that the 2007 accessions impacted significantly on the EU in the ways the author suggests. The derailment of the Constitutional Treaty really came about in 2005 with the French and Dutch referendum failures. Certainly a mood of 'enlargement fatigue' can be traced back to this period. But I have always felt that the opposition to further enlargement of the Union which emphasised the lack of preparedness of Bulgaria and Romania as an excuse to put enlargement on the backburner, was really just the lazy instrumentalisation of reasons that somehow seems to have a degree of credibility but could have been any reason at all. It was merely convenient to point to integration 'failures' in Bulgaria and Romania as a way of preventing discussion of further enlargement.

Finally, I am not sure that the dissertation's depiction of the enlargement process is wholly correct in pointing to ambiguities that are more or less ignored at the time but really begin to matter later. The entire European integration process has been characterised by ambiguity (especially about the desired 'endpoint' of integration) as a way of accommodating the very heterogeneity that characterises the collective. The situation in the 1990s was extremely fluid, so can we really criticise those who produced the Copenhagen Criteria in 1993, for example, as the framework to guide the enlargement preparations? There was - literally - no guidebook on how to proceed and the entire process was marked by great fluidity. Does the dissertation venture towards 'over determining' the way the enlargement process developed from the point of later knowledge of how everything proceeded? How to account for the uncertainty that policymakers grapple with at any given time, both nationally and in Brussels?

I look forward to discussing this particular point with the author.

Univocal 'yes' or 'no' on the whole

In my view this is not just a wholly satisfactory thesis on a hugely important topic, it is *the defining contribution* to the literature on Bulgaria's accession to the European Union. It challenges the orthodox verities about the enlargement process and then explores that process and how it unfolded in the Bulgarian setting in very impressive and novel ways. The utilisation of the interview material and its integration into the dissertation is very impressive and provides a rich tableau of evidence from policymakers who were literally 'there' as these dramatic developments were unfolding. Thus both intellectually and theoretically the dissertation constitutes a very welcome and thoroughly insightful contribution to the field of enlargement studies and Bulgaria's experience of European integration. I strongly commend it. It will become the standard work on this topic for years to come.

Signature:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'John E. ...', written in a cursive style.