ATTITUDES TOWARD DEMOCRACY AND EU IN TRANSITIONAL SOCIETIES: THE BULGARIAN CASE

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ABSTRACT— In 1989, like other countries from Central and Eastern Europe, Bulgaria began its transition to democracy. It started with enthusiasm and great expectations, which later led to disappointment and blaming the democracy for every negative situation, both on personal and national level. In 2007 Bulgaria became member of the EU, which gave the society a new hope for better life, especially in its financial and economic dimensions. Nevertheless, some challenges for the EU of the last few years have been leading to a rise of Euroscepticism. Thus, the purpose of the paper is to examine the transformation of the attitudes toward democracy and the EU since Bulgaria became member of the Union. The data used is from EIU Democracy Index and Standard Eurobarometer. The raw data of the Standard Eurobarometer from 2007 and 2017 was used and the results for Bulgaria were compared and analyzed. Alongside, the results from 2017 were compared to the results of the three most democratic countries in the EU (according to EIU Democracy Index). The results indicate that the share of Bulgarians with positive attitudes toward EU decreased but in many aspects Bulgarians share opinions very close to the countries who are ‘full democracies’.

Keywords: Bulgaria, democracy, European Union, Euroscepticism, transition

1. INTRODUCTION

In the early 1990s it looked like the liberal democracy had won the final victory over other forms of socio-political organization of societies, especially across Europe (Fukuyama, 1992). It was a time of great enthusiasm for the people of the post-totalitarian countries and of excitement for all of the supporters of the liberal democracy. In fact European countries still value and approve democracy but some of the states (the post-totalitarian in particular) are dissatisfied with the results of its functioning (Pavlović, 2016). In that time, like the other countries from Central and Eastern Europe, Bulgaria began its transition to democracy. It also started with enthusiasm and great expectations, which later led to disappointment and blaming the democracy for every failure, both on personal and national level. The widespread disappointment of the society led to alienation from the political life and caused a decrease in the institutional trust and in the levels of participation.

In Bulgaria, the dissatisfaction with democracy began in the mid-1990s, largely due to the deterioration of the socio-economic environment. The latter reflected a total collapse of the confidence in the state institutions, which has not yet been restored. The demonstrative overthrow of the rule of law by the political elite and the quarrels between the political parties have intensified the alienation of the citizens from the social and political life. The perspective of membership in the EU gave the Bulgarian society a new hope for better life, especially in its financial and economic dimensions.

The process of integration of Europe in the second half of the XX century started with the aim of guaranteeing the peace on the continent after the devastating wars from the first half of XX
It has been a smooth process, which reached its peak after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the enlargement of the Union after 2000. However, in the process of its establishment, many things have changed, and nowadays there are other kinds of challenges that Europe faces. During the last few years, there have been waves of Euroscepticism related to various reasons, and some far-right parties have gained support. The latter led to their participation in the executive authorities in some of the EU member states. In Bulgaria, there aren’t any radical far-right political parties, but the so-called ‘patriotic’ political parties received mandates in the Parliament in the context of the migrant crisis.

Since the beginning of membership in 2007, the political elite in Bulgaria have not managed to govern as effectively as the society expected in the context of the membership. On one hand, 40% of the Bulgarian society is still at risk of poverty or social exclusion, which is the largest share, compared to the other EU countries (the EU average is 23.5%) (Eurostat, 2018). On the other hand, very frequently, the politicians have trampled the rule of law and the moral in politics. Because of the latter, there was a wide civic activity and a mobilization in defence of democracy and its principles. Despite the current relative stability in the political life in Bulgaria, the ongoing European migrant crisis has the potential to undermine the trust in both the national and EU institutions.

Therefore, the main purpose of this paper is to identify whether the Bulgarian society is supportive of democracy and the European Union. In the process of achieving this purpose, I study the dynamics of the attitudes in 2017 compared to 2007 when Bulgaria became a member of the EU. Furthermore, I compare the Bulgarian results in 2017 to the results of the three most democratic countries in the EU. In the current paper, the ‘most democratic countries in EU’ are called those member states, which are ‘full democracies’ according to EIU Democracy Index and are the first three from the EU with the highest score. In 2017, these are Denmark, Ireland, and Sweden.

I use the comparative method in two dimensions: time (as I compare Bulgaria in 2017 to Bulgaria in 2007) and space (as I compare Bulgaria to Denmark, Ireland, and Sweden). I also use a secondary processing of quantitative data from the Standard Eurobarometer 67, 68, 87, and 88. The indicators, which are most relevant to the aim of the study are selected. The data is processed using the statistical software IBM SPSS Statistics v. 23 using frequencies and crosstabs. The tables and figures are prepared in Microsoft Excel 2016.

Using the data mentioned above, I try to find answers to the following questions:

1) How the attitudes of Bulgarians toward EU have changed since the beginning of membership?

2) Do Bulgarians associate the EU with democracy?

3) How the attitudes of Bulgarians toward democracy and civic participation have changed since the beginning of membership in the EU?

4) How do the attitudes of Bulgarians mentioned above differentiate from the attitudes of the citizens of the three most democratic countries in the EU?

The main hypotheses of the research are as follows:

1) The positive attitudes of Bulgarians towards democracy and the EU have decreased since 2007;

2) The attitudes of Bulgarians and the citizens of the three most democratic members of the EU differ significantly.

The remaining part of the current study presents an overview of scientific ideas and review of
the research, regarding the notion of transitional societies. Furthermore, there is a review of the existing studies on the support for democracy and support for EU, especially in post-totalitarian transitional societies. Then I present the empirical examination on the attitudes toward democracy and the EU in Bulgaria and its results. In the concluding part of the study there is a discussion of the results and of the options for future research on the topic.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Transitional societies

Last about hundred years various transformations have happened very dynamically all around the world. These transformations to high extent have been related to the democratization of the countries and these process was called waves of democratization by Samuel Huntington (1993). Thus, the notion of transitional societies may refer to many regions and situations – Latin America, South Africa, Middle East, Central and Eastern Europe, etc. (Axtmann, 2010). Nevertheless, the focus of the current study are the processes that happened in the European post-communist countries after 1989. There is a huge amount of literature, regarding the development of the latter. As Dufek, Holzer and Mareš (2016) point out during the first years after the fall of the Berlin wall the studies were mainly focused on how the transition happened in these countries. These studies were followed by research, which aimed at identifying the levels of consolidation of democracy across the examined countries.

Since the beginning of the XX century Europe have passed through events, which have change the structure and the predominant values of the continent. The process of transformation have become even more intensive since the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989. Even though various transitions and transformations continue to happen in many countries from different regions, the focus of the current study are only the European states and the societies, which made a transition from totalitarianism to democracy. For about 45 years these countries shared very common (but not identical) institution, legislation and social values during the communist governance. However, they differ from one another as they have their own historical background before the communism and different political cultures (both of the elites and the masses). Then, the historical and cultural factors of these countries were complemented by the geopolitical choice made after 1989 as most of them became members of NATO and/or European Union. (Table 1)

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Table 1. NATO and EU membership of some post-communist countries

Sources: [https://europa.eu](https://europa.eu) and [https://www.nato.int](https://www.nato.int)

All these taken together led to differences in the development of these countries. Some of them to large extent succeeded in establishing functioning democracy and respectively a functioning market economy. Thus, the hopes for better life after the fall of communism were justified.
Alongside, some of the countries failed dramatically in the process of transition in both the political and economic area (Fish, Gill & Petrovic, 2017). Furthermore, the failure of the countries in the area of economy predetermined the challenges in the area of the political culture of the people, because the socio-economic factors affect the system of values in a given society (Naydenov, 2015). As Ristovski (2016) notes the harmonization of legislation of some post-communist countries with the legislation of European Union, didn’t manage to achieve the expected results. According to author ‘it is necessary to undertake measures that might incent changes to the cultural matrix and the value based model of organizing the societies’. Thus, we observe variety of developments across the post-totalitarian countries, which results in a wide gap as regards the prosperity of the countries, both in the socio-political area and in the economy (Figure 1).

Figure 1. GDP per capita (2017) and Democracy Index (2017) of some post-totalitarian countries

Source: Author’s calculations, based on data from Eurostat and EIU Democracy Index

* According to EIU Democracy Index all the countries are in the group of ‘Flawed democracies’, except for Albania, which is in ‘Hybrid regime’.

But what does the term ‘transitional society’ refers to in the context of post-totalitarian states? Allaste and Cairns (2016) suggest that this is a ‘situation in which the political structure changes from single-party rule to a parliamentary system, with administrative institutions reorganised, central planning converted to a capitalist free market economy and a society of shortages replaced by consumerism’. The authors also share the opinion that among the characteristics of a transitional society is the dissonance between the institutional and cultural change (Allaste & Cairns, 2016, p. 3). The same situation is identified and observed by Bulgarian scholars. Mitev (1996, p. 11) called the systems, established in Bulgaria and other Eastern European ‘protodemocracy’. It is characterized by democratic political institutions and lack of a relevant political culture. Thus, the author identifies a dissonance between the established institutions and the social environment. Furthermore, Milina (2004, p. 123) states that the rule of law and the civil society are formaly established but there aren’t enough mechanisms, which can allow them to work as they should in a functioning democracy.
Thus, three kinds of transformations that happen in the transitional societies can be identified, namely institutional and administrative, economical and in the area of culture. Similarly, Ralph Dahrendorff (1990, p. 99-100) identifies three areas, which need to be transformed in order democracy to function properly in the post-totalitarian societies: the formal process of constitutional reform, the transformation of the economy into a market one, and the provision of social foundations that will make the progress in the area of political institutions and the economy sustainable. According to the author, the social transformation is the slowest process. It requires some decades and change in the generations. Furthermore, according to Clammer (2016) many of the challenges that the post-communist societies faces nowadays are rooted not only in the political structure, namely institutions but in the political culture as well.

Thus, we should pay more attention on the transformation of the political culture of these countries in order to identify if it corresponds to the values of democracy. Since 1989 the political culture of the post-totalitarian states is in a constant process of alteration. Such development is based on the association between the culture and the structure. It is important the latter to be consistent with the political culture of the society in order to ensure stability, but alongside, the structure of the political system affects the values of the citizens and, thus, contribute to the transformation of the political culture.

According to Almond and Verba political culture consists of attitudes toward political system, its input and output and towards the personal role in the system. The authors believe that these orientations can be cognitive, affective and evaluative. (Almond & Verba, 1963). These three types of orientations are highly interrelated and affect each other. In a democratic environment the only element that can be affected by the authorities is the cognitive element of the orientations, namely the knowledge. The civic knowledge is rather significant, because it has the potential to increase the support for the democratic values, to promote the political participation, it helps citizens to understand more clearly their interest and how the politics work. Thus it helps people not to be afraid to take part in the political process and be more active. Furthermore, civic knowledge makes the position of the citizens more consistent, reasoned and based on rational rather than emotional factors (Galston, 2004, p. 264).

The authorities can support the enhancement of the civic knowledge through the educational system by teaching the students how to be a participatory citizen. As concerns the affective and evaluative orientations, if the state attempts to transform them by power this would be contrary to the rights and freedoms of the individual, proclaimed by the principles of the democracy. However, during the communism, a specific type of political culture was required to ensure the legitimacy of the regime. Thus, the authorities used various kinds of methods to cultivate the needed values. This have had a long-run effect as the values formed under the former political system continue to exist among some of the people and in some cases they even are passed on to the next generation.

Although almost 30 years have past since the fall of the communist regime, it still affects various aspects of the social and political life. It affects the way that people look at the national institutions, their trust in the latter and the levels of interpersonal trust among the people. In fact, scholars observe such effects of the past on the present values, beliefs and behaviour even when it concerns the more distant past. Cairns and Allaste provide an example how the political activism of youth in Estonia is sometimes based on values and symbols, rooted in past events (Cairns & Allaste, p. 102).

The reason for such situation is in the process of political socialization, in particular the early period of socialization. The latter affects the formation of political culture and produces the values that are incorporated in the culture and which form the orientations and behaviour in the later stages of life. That is why the post-totalitarian states have controversial political cultures and
according to some authors, they even lack any democratic political culture. Such situation affects the attitudes and support for the democracy and its values in these societies. As Pavlovic argues ‘after several decades of authoritarian rule and a lack of democratic political culture, the support for democracy in ex-communist societies is rather instrumental than intrinsic, based not on values, but perceived system performances in political and economic terms’. (Pavlovic, 2014, p. 31)

2.2 Understanding and support for democracy in transitional societies

As discussed above the sustainable development of the democratic political system and the economy of a transitional society to large extent depends on the political culture. A significant element of this political culture is the approval for the current political system, namely the democracy. A challenge for the post-totalitarian transitional societies is the understanding for democracy. Giovanni Sartori (1987, p.3) says that his book ‘The Theory of Democracy’ is worth writing at least because ‘wrong ideas about democracy make democracy go wrong’. The reason for this is because there is no single author of some kind of democratic theory. Sartori makes a comparison with the communism and socialism, which are based on the ideas of Karl Marx (Sartori, 1987, p. 3).

In fact the transition to democracy in the post-totalitarian states started with very wrong ideas among the societies about what is ahead and what they have to expect. Furthermore, I believe that neither the politicians, nor the society had clear idea what democratic political system and market economy are all about and what are they supposed to do in such conditions. The reason for the latter is that these were generations, who had never experienced democracy and never had the chance to have personal impressions about the democratic political systems abroad. Besides, they weren’t educated about the principles, values and the functioning of democracy and market economy.

Thus, the societies started the democratic transition with a significant excitement but with lack of enough knowledge and democratic experience. There is an empirical evidence for existence of this situation. Korzeniowski (2015) made a study on the understanding of democracy in Poland during the democracy consolidation. He shared results from new democracies where ‘democracy is sometimes understood in a way that is incompatible with its dictionary definitions’ and he finds out that in Poland the understanding of people about democracy coincides with ‘welfare state’ (Korzeniowski, 2015, p. 71).

During the communism, people had some kind of financial security but lacked freedom. The excitement about the fall of the previous regime was related to the expectations for more freedom. At that time, the discussion about losing something, namely this financial security, was not on the agenda. Thus, people in post-totalitarian societies burdened democracy with all their expectations for a better life after the fall of communism. Later, the contradiction between expectations and reality led to decrease in the satisfaction with the new regime. The opponents of democracy have used the latter in order to mislead the citizens that new political system is responsible for their problems.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that the citizens don’t react uniformly to the latter. Different social groups might react in different ways to such propaganda in accordance on their views about democracy. Such views may depend on various factors. One of them is certainly the political knowledge. A more enhanced civic knowledge may prevent wide spread of false claims about democracy. In this sense, I believe that a significant challenge for the post-totalitarian transitional societies is the improvement of its citizens’ knowledge about the democracy. The latter can be established by introduction of the subject “civic education” in the schools. In Bulgaria the subject is going to be introduced from the 2020/2021 school year.
Alongside with the knowledge another significant factor affecting the understanding of democracy is their position in the social hierarchy. According to Ceka & Magalhães (2014) people with low socioeconomic status and those with high status have different understandings about what democracy is. Furthermore, their understanding also depends whether they are citizens of an established democracy or of a new one. The results indicate that the latter turns the understandings vice-versa. (Ceka & Magalhães, 2014). Similarly, Tufis (2014) also identifies variations of beliefs about democracy among the European countries based on their democratic experience. Moreover, he divides the post-totalitarian European countries in two groups. According to him ‘the first group includes those countries that have managed the transition rather successfully (Western ex-communist countries/Central Europe), while the second group includes the laggards and those that have failed to complete the transition (Eastern ex-communist countries/Eastern Europe)’ (Tufis, 2014, p. 166).

The variety of democratic attitudes across the transitional post-totalitarian European countries is also visible in the results of the EU attempts to promote democracy across the countries from Western Balkans. The EU model for doing such promotion succeeded in some former socialist countries from Central and Eastern Europe but it did not produce the same result in others, namely some Balkan states (Fuksiewicz & Kaca, 2010, p. 2). Similarly Pereira (2012, p. 63) identifies variations in the support for democracy across Europe. She puts the countries into six groups. She also concludes that there are different types of support in the transitional post-totalitarian societies (Figure 2).

![Figure 2: Different types of affective support for democracy across Europe](source: Ferrin Pereira, M. (2012). What is Democracy to Citizens (PhD thesis))

Moreover, Pereira identifies another factor that affects the understanding of democracy among people. She believes that the historical background of a country may be an important reasons for
different believes of the people about what democracy is all about. The author gives an example with two established democracies as Italy and United Kingdom, stating that their citizens have different views about democracy depending on the different historical developments of the countries. (Pereira, 2012, p. 2)

Finally, the economic issues shouldn’t be underestimated when we speak of the factors that influence the support for democracy. The citizens from countries in crisis feel less closer to their democratic political system in comparison to those, who belong to countries with successful economic performance (Armingeon, Guthmann & Weisstanner, 2016). Furthermore, Cordero & Simón study the effect of economic crisis on attitudes towards democracy, and they identify that the support also depends on whether the country is bailed-out or non-bailed-out (Cordero & Simón, 2015).

Nevertheless, as the focus of the current work are the European transitional post-totalitarian societies we are interested mostly about the democratic support in their context. Fuchs and Roller (2006) examine the consolidation of democracy in 13 transitional countries during the first decade of their transition. They limit their study to one aspect of the consolidation, namely ‘support for democracy by citizens or the demos as the ultimate sovereign’. Their research indicates that this first decade is marked by incompleteness of the democratic consolidation across the countries from Central and Eastern Europe. (Fuchs & Roller, 2006, p. 93). Alongside, Babos shares the opinion that each of these countries have political party, which promotes anti-democratic attitudes (Babos, 2018, p. 23).

Using data, which was collected twenty years after the start of democratic transition Pavlovic (2016), identifies who are the ‘most intense supporters of democracy’. According to him, these are the post-materialists in the context of Inglehart’s idea about the materialism and post-materialism (Inglehart, 1977). Moreover, Pavlovic believes that the support for democracy in the transitional societies might be increased if the democratic political system produces more results that are positive. The latter has the potential to fulfil ‘the great expectations of East Europeans’ and thus make them satisfied with democracy (Pavlovic, 2016, p. 52). Thus, his conclusion corresponds to the idea of Ronald Inglehart that the material prosperity has the potential to increase the share of post-materialists and the latter seems to be more supportive for the democracy.

2.3 Support for the European Union in transitional societies

The approval for the EU membership around the transitional societies is also an important issue because the Union creates the normative framework in which the national political system exists and works. On one hand, the EU membership led to higher life standard in many of the post-totalitarian countries, but on the other, they had to give up partially their sovereignty. The latter may become a demagogic instrument in the hands of some political groups if there isn’t enough satisfaction with the EU membership among the citizens and the support for the EU is low.

The European Union is to large extent a guarantee not only of the peace on the continent but also of the democracy in Europe. Thus, it is rather significant to study the support for the Union across the transitional countries. It is important to know whether the people from the latter perceive the EU as structure, which protects the democratic values and listen to its citizens. This predetermines the support for the Union and respectively its stability. Alongside, the EU institutions need to be careful and listen to the signals sent by societies whether they are established democracies or transition societies. These attitudes have become a focus of many scientific researches.

First of all it is important to note that Boomgaarden et al. identify that in various studies the
terms EU support and Euroscepticism have been used as interchangeable (Boomgaarden et al., 2011). The connection between these two categories increased initially because of the economic and financial crisis from 2007-2008. The further spread of Euroscepticism was provoked by the migrant crisis. These two factors taken together contributed to the decrease in the trust in EU and to the rise of some far right political parties.

Due to the economic crisis and migrant crisis during the last few years, the image of EU as supporter of democracy and human rights have been under threat (Hackenesch & Castillejo, 2016). The 2014 elections for the European Parliament show undoubtedly, that the economic and financial crisis from 2007-2008 affected the support for EU and led to wider support for Eurosceptic and far right political parties (Levy & Phan, 2014). It looks like that the during the recent years the attitudes towards EU and its further integration vary and are even polarized (Kanthak & Spies, 2017). Furthermore, the results of various studies show that in many EU countries those who are against European integration have gained support (Hobolt, de Vries, 2016).

Indeed the economic challenges from 2007-2008 fueled the Eurosceptic attitudes among the most affected countries but it is also the performance of national governments, which plays a significant role on support levels. Morselli and Passini identify that the protests around Europe are provoked not only by some kind of personal values but also because of the life conditions. (Morselli & Passini, 2018). These life conditions most often are result of the national politics. In fact ‘confidence in national political institutions is negatively correlated to Euroscepticism’ (Serricchio, Tsakatika & Quaglia, 2013). And it is important to know what the societies of each country thinks, because ‘starting point for regaining trust lies primarily at the level of the member states, not the EU’. (Schout & Holderied, 2017, p. 6). Thus, the national governments are also responsible for the image of EU as sometimes (at least in Bulgaria) they use the EU as an excuse for some of their policies. If the latter are not approved by the society, it may contribute to a certain level of mistrust in the EU.

2.4 Bulgaria’s transition to democracy

During 1990s, Bulgarians passed through various challenges. They were marked by very high levels of crime as well as economic and financial crisis. During these years, the trust in politicians, political parties and national institutions decreased significantly. The lack of trust covers almost all of the decision made by the governments. Petkov and Vladikov believe that some of the challenges that Bulgarian society faces are its Euroscepticism and low levels of trust in the good intentions of the Government concerning its actions in the economic area (Petkov & Vladikov, 2011).

In 2002, the Commission of the European Communities declares that Bulgaria is a ‘functioning market economy’ (Commission of the European Communities, 2002). Although Bulgaria’s recent economic performance is one of the worst in the EU, the country made an enormous progress during the last two decades. Bulgaria has various preconditions for growing economic development as it has natural resources, key geostrategic position and because of the latter it also ‘provides transport corridors from North to South and from West to East’ (Kenova, Anguelov & Nikolova, 2018).

The democratic political system and the market economy are closely connected. In addition, the market economy to some extent depends on the entrepreneurial culture of a given society. However, the development of an entrepreneurial culture is related to the character of the political culture of the society (Pastarmazhieva & Angelova, 2017). In the area of politics, Bulgaria is rather stable but as every transitional society, it has issues regarding the dissonance between the democratic structure and the political culture. The political culture is still a great challenge for the
Bulgarian society. According to the data of EIU Democracy index, Bulgaria’s score concerning the political culture are still rather low. In fact, the political culture is the most problematic element of those covered by the EIU Democracy Index. (EIU, 2017)

However, Hein (2016) suggests that Bulgaria achieved a lot since 1989 and notes that according to Freedom House it is the ‘most successful post-socialist democracy in South Eastern Europe in recent years’. The authors draws the attention to the fact that Bulgaria was the first post-communist country, which adopted a new constitution, which has very few amendments, most of which were made because of the EU membership. He believes that the constitution is a factor, which caused the relatively well functioning of the Bulgarian democracy. However, the author also notes that there are problems, which still persist: ‘politics is dominated by informal decision-making processes and actors that maintain non-transparent ties with economic stakeholders; the rule of law cannot yet be considered consolidated; corruption continues to be widespread in many fields; and certain basic rights such as the freedom of the press, minority rights, and the rights of refugees and asylum seekers are only partially protected in practice’.

3. METHODS AND RESULTS

3.1 Data Selection

The first stage of my research was to identified the countries, which I am was going to study. As I wanted to compare Bulgaria to some established democracies of the EU, I used the EIU Democracy Index as a source for such information. EIU measures how democratic the countries are as the groups of indicators are electoral process and pluralism, functioning of government, Political participation, Political culture and Civil liberties. The total score of each country may vary from zero to ten – the more democratic a country is the higher score it has. Based on their result the states are grouped in full democracies, flawed democracies, hybrid regimes and authoritarian regimes. In 2017 are studied 165 independent states and nineteen of them cover the requirements for ‘full democracies’. Among them there are eleven EU member states. The three EU member states with the highest score in this group are Sweden (9.39), Denmark (9.22) and Ireland (9.15). Bulgaria is in the group of ‘flawed democracies’ and its overall score is 7.03 (Table 2). (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2018).

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<th>Overall score</th>
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<th>II Functioning of government</th>
<th>III Political participation</th>
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<th>V Civil liberties</th>
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Table 2. Scores and ranks of Sweden, Denmark, Ireland and Bulgaria, EIU Democracy Index, 2017

Source: EIU Democracy Index, 2017

The second stage of the study was the selection of indicators, relevant for the purposes of the current research. The data provided by the Eurobarometer to very high extent covers the needed
indicators and it was selected as reliable source of information. I was able to use its database, because the Eurobarometer measures the public opinion of European citizens on various topics. The surveys have been conducted twice a year – Spring and Autumn. Although some of the questions in the questionnaires may vary across the studies, the main part of the surveys is the same. For the purposes of the current study data from Standard Eurobarometer 67 (Spring 2007), 68 (Autumn 2007), 87 (Spring 2017) and 88 (Autumn 2017) was used. The comparison was made on the following variables:

- the idea of EU,
- EU image
- evaluation of the EU membership
- opinion on EU future
- EU meaning
- democracy satisfaction
- trust in the EU
- trust in the national parliament
- trust in the national government
- trust in the political parties.

Detailed description of the variables, questions, answers and the approach for results presentation can be found in the Appendix.

Secondary processing of the quantitative data of the Eurobarometer was process through the statistical software IBM SPSS Statistics 23, using frequencies and crosstabs. The figures were made in Microsoft Excel.

For the purposes of the current study I use a comparative approach. The comparison was performed in two dimensions. First, as I compare Bulgaria in 2017 to Bulgaria in 2007 it is a comparison of the same object at different time. Furthermore, as I compare the results of Bulgaria in 2017 to the results of Denmark, Ireland and Sweden in 2017, this is comparison in space.

3.3 Results

Traditionally Bulgarians are supportive to democracy and the European Union but are not satisfied with the functioning of democracy in the country. The discontent is mainly related to the low income in Bulgaria. The migrant crisis has the potential to create more dissatisfaction but mostly with the EU rather than the national institutions. The reasons for such assumption is because at the beginning of the crisis more than the half of the Bulgarians believe that refugees are threat to the country and do not support the allocation of additional funds from state budget for them (Pachkova, 2016). However, the empirical results indicate that eventually it didn’t affect the positive image of EU among Bulgarians (Zhekova & Pastarmadzhieva, 2016).
The 2017 Eurobarometer results confirm the latter as EU has positive image for more than the half of Bulgarians. Indeed, that share decreased in comparison to 2007, but this reduction is only 7 points. Such reduction may be explained with the unrealized expectations for welfare, prosperity and financial stability. Furthermore, in comparison to the three most democratic countries, the share of Bulgarian who have positive attitudes towards the EU is 7 points higher than the average for Denmark, Ireland and Sweden (47.2%). Even though there is a slight decrease, such result confirms the image of Bulgaria as one of the most supportive for the EU among other member states (Figure 3).

Similarly, in 2017 more than half of the Bulgarians believe that the membership in the European Union is a good thing (54.4%). Here, there is also a slight decrease in this share in 2017 compared to 2007, when it was 56%. Nevertheless, when compared to the top three full democracies in the EU it is obvious that their citizens are more convinced about this as their share is over 70% (Figure 3).

As mentioned above there is not a significant difference regarding this variable in 2017 compared to 2007. So even in 2007 less than 60% of Bulgarians were convinced that EU membership is a good thing. Such phenomena can be explained with several factors. For 45 years Bulgaria was closely related to the USSR and so were many Bulgarians. This connection wasn’t only on political level. On one hand, we have the inter-personal relations of Bulgarians and Russians, established on various levels. On the other hand, it is the persisting propaganda for almost 45 years about the closeness of Bulgarian and Russian people on the basis of Slavianism. Furthermore, it is the propaganda about Russia’s motives for Russo-Turkish war (1877-1878), which led to Bulgaria’s liberation. People are taught that Russia initiated the war, led by love to the brotherly Bulgarian people. So this made a significant part of the population to feel closer and grateful to Russia. We can assume that for these parts of the society, the friendship with the West and with the EU in particular is some kind of betrayal of the Russian friendship. Thus, such attitudes have the potential to decrease the confidence that the membership in the European Union
is a good thing.

During the 1990s, because of the regime change Bulgaria increased its partnership with the Western countries and with the USA in particular. Similar was the situation with the Bulgarian people. A lot of them attempted at following the American values, style of living and even moved to live there. It was a time of great enthusiasm about Bulgarian-American friendship. However, these years were also marked by economic and political crisis, which led to disappointment with the democracy and everything that was related to it. Thus, this took away from the trust in the West and may be one of the reasons for the moderate enthusiasm about the EU membership in 2007. Nevertheless, results show that besides the slight disappointment, most of the Bulgarians continue to believe that EU membership is good thing.

Although it looks like that Bulgarians are less enthusiastic about the EU membership, in 2017, almost 60% of the people in Bulgaria are optimistic about the future of Union. Indeed their number decreased since 2007 but it still over the half of the society, who believe in the positive development of the European Union. Of course, we should have in mind the processes and challenges before the EU, namely the migrant crisis. At the beginning of the latter, Bulgarians were rather anxious about the politics of the Union regarding the situation. In fact, the decrease in optimism about the EU future is some kind of realistic view in the context of Eurosceptic arguments discussed above. As concerns the comparison to the full democracies of the EU Bulgarian result is about 8 points lower (Figure 3).

![Figure 4A. Meaning of the European Union, Bulgaria](image)

Source: Author’s calculations, based on data from Standard Eurobarometer 67 (Spring 2007) and 87 (Spring 2017)

Most of the Bulgarians both in 2007 and in 2017 find the meaning of the EU in the freedom to travel, study and work anywhere in the Union. In 2017 their share is 53.3% and although it is 3 points lower compared to 2007 it is still over 50%. However, there are some disturbing numbers. There is a significant decrease in the number of people, who associate the EU with peace, democracy, economic prosperity and social protection. (Figure 4A).
Euro
Not enough control at external borders
Loss of our cultural identity
More crime
Waste of money
Bureaucracy
Unemployment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2017</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Euro</td>
<td>14.0%</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not enough control at external borders</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>16.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loss of our cultural identity</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More crime</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waste of money</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bureaucracy</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 4B. Meaning of the European Union, Bulgaria**

Source: Author’s calculations, based on data from Standard Eurobarometer 67 (Spring 2007) and 87 (Spring 2017)

Furthermore, there is an increase in the share of Bulgarians, who believe that the European Union means not enough control at external borders, loss of cultural identity, more crime, waste of money, bureaucracy and unemployment (Figure 4B). We should note that this is a small part of the society, who have such opinions, but we should be careful having in mind the increase of their shares. The numbers are doubled since 2007 as regards the control at external borders, waste of money and bureaucracy, which I believe is also related to the migrant crisis, which affected Bulgaria.

The last thing that Bulgarians connect the EU with is the unemployment, an option selected only by 5.3% in 2017 (Figure 4B). At first, I was tempted to explain this result with the specifics of the former totalitarian regime, the financial, economic and political crisis from 1990s and the unemployment rate in Bulgaria. My explanation would be that during the totalitarian regime Bulgarians didn’t have the chance to travel whenever they wanted, then they needed visas and now with Bulgaria being member of the EU they have the chance to do it freely. On the other hand, many Bulgarians have found solution for their financial challenges through employment in another EU member state and so I thought that this must be the reason why the least selected answer is ‘unemployment’.

Nevertheless, when I processed the data of Denmark, Ireland and Sweden, I found out that most of their citizens also find the meaning of the EU in the freedom to travel, study and work anywhere in the EU (Figure 5). In 2017 in Denmark they are 50.4%, 55.7% in Ireland and 72.2% of the Swedish people put this meaning of the EU in first place. Obviously, this freedom is some kind of common value among the European citizens and is not specific for Bulgarians. Furthermore, in 2017 the citizens of full democracies also put the ‘unemployment’ as the least possible meaning of the EU. Only Irish people put something else on last place and it is ‘more crime’ (6.9% in 2017).
One of the questions in the 68th and 87th Standard Eurobarometer Surveys was if the respondents connect the idea of the European Union with certain words. One of them is ‘democratic’. In 2007 as much as 93.4% of Bulgarians believe that ‘democratic’ describes the idea of EU rather well. In 2017 this share decreased with more than 15 points to 76.3%, but such trend is explainable. Since the fall of totalitarian regime, Bulgarians put great expectations on the new system, the USA as a ‘Big Brother’, NATO and then the EU. The expectations often have been related to fast economic progress, increase of income and pensions. As the expectations have not been covered the satisfaction among Bulgarians decreased. Nevertheless, when we take a look at the comparison with the leading democracies in the EU, we will note that Bulgaria is the country with the largest share of those who believe that ‘democratic’ describes the EU rather well. (Figure 6)

In the previous parts of this paper, it was discussed that the satisfaction with democracy in Bulgaria decreased since 1989. The numbers on Figure 6 clearly show that there is an increase in the satisfaction with democracy in own country among Bulgarians since the beginning of the EU membership. In 2007 it is just 25.4% and in 2017 it increases to 33.3%, which is rather good trend in the development of the country.

Such an increase can be explained with the relative political stability during this period. The latter have created conditions for better economic environment and have improved some macroeconomic indicators. During the last almost thirteen years of membership, a new political party (GERB) was established and it has governed the country since 2009. The only period during which they were not in office was 2013-2014. Although their governments resigned twice, they were reelected after parliamentary elections. During GERB’s governance there also have been protests but very often the government have satisfied most of the demands of the protesters although such behavior has its critics.
Democratic describes rather well the idea of EU Democracy Satisfaction (Own Country) and Democracy Satisfaction (EU). Bulgaria, 2007 shows a high satisfaction with democracy, with 93.4% of respondents describing the idea of EU democracy rather well and 25.4% satisfied with democracy in their own country, and 63.0% satisfied with democracy in the EU. In 2017, these figures were 76.3% for the idea of EU democracy, 33.3% for satisfaction in their own country, and 54.3% for satisfaction in the EU. The DIS Average for 2017 was 68.8% for the idea of EU democracy, 81.6% for satisfaction in their own country, and 59.7% for satisfaction in the EU.

Figure 6. European Union and Democracy

Source: Author’s calculations, based on data from Standard Eurobarometer 68 (Autumn 2007) and 87 (Spring 2017)

Furthermore, the leader of the party Boyko Borisov takes actions that are perceived as protection of the national interest, even before the EU administration. Such is the case with migrants (Bulgarian News Agency, 2018). All these factors taken together may be the reasons, which have contributed to the increased democracy satisfaction in Bulgaria. Nevertheless, the data shows that the average democracy satisfaction in own country is much higher in the three most democratic countries of the EU, where it is over 80%. (Figure 6)

The results are different when we look at the numbers, concerning the satisfaction with democracy at EU level. The average for Denmark, Ireland and Sweden is lower than the result for own country and it is 59.7%, which is more than 20 points lower. Such results can be explained with the factors that increased the Euroscepticism across European citizens. The latter may also be the reason for the decreased share of the Bulgarian people satisfied with democracy in the European Union. This share was 63% in 2007 and in 2017 it is 54.3%. Nevertheless, such result is 20 points higher than the democracy satisfaction in own country and is close to the result of the EU full democracies.

It was already discussed above that the trust in the institutions is an important element of the democracy. As Figure 7 illustrates there is a significant difference in the share of Bulgarians who trust in the European Union compared to those who trust in the national institutions. This is particularly valid for 2007, when 74% of Bulgarians tend to trust the EU and only 12.7% trust in the national parliament. Although in 2017 there is a decrease in the share of those who trust in the EU and an increase in the share of Bulgarians who trust in the national institutions, the difference in the numbers is still significant.

As concern the most recent result as much as 53.5% of Bulgarians in 2017 trust in EU and only 19.3% trust in the national parliament. The trust in national government and the political parties in Bulgaria also increased in 2017 compared to 2007. In 2007 less than 20% of the Bulgarians tend to trust in the national government and in 2017 they are almost 30%. The trust in the political parties almost doubled in 2017 compared to 2007. It increased from 8.6% to 15.3%. However, these are still low levels, especially as regards the political parties.
In the three most democratic EU member states the average trust in the political parties in 2017 is also lower as in Bulgaria, compared to other national institutions and EU (Figure 7). But it is almost as twice as much than Bulgaria, almost 30%. The average trust in 2017 in the other national institutions in these three countries is significantly higher than in Bulgaria and is about 50%. As concerns the trust in the EU the result of Bulgaria in 2017 (53.5%) is close to the average result of Denmark, Ireland and Sweden (49.6%).

![Figure 7. Trust in political institutions](image)

Source: Author’s calculations, based on data from Standard Eurobarometer 68 (Autumn 2007) and 87 (Spring 2017)

Thus, the results show that Bulgarians continue to be more confident in foreign institutions, such as the European Union and this confidence is higher than the confidence in the EU of the citizens of some full democracies from the Union. The result is vice versa as regards the national ones – very low levels of confidence in Bulgaria, which is significantly lower than the studied full democracies.

4. CONCLUSION

The results of the Eurobarometer data partially confirmed my initial hypotheses. They definitely show that the positive attitudes of Bulgarians towards democracy and the EU have decreased since 2007, which confirms my first assumption. However, as concerns the second hypothesis I can’t say categorically that the attitudes of Bulgarians and the citizens of the three most democratic members of the EU differ significantly, because on some of the indicators they seem to be rather close and in some cases Bulgaria has better results.

On the basis of the Eurobarometer data it can be concluded that ten years of being a EU member Bulgarian society continue to be supportive both for democracy and EU membership but in a more moderate way. The beginning of transition to democracy and the beginning of membership in the EU were both marked with enthusiasm and great expectations. However, neither the Bulgarian political elite, nor the European institutions have been able to meet the
expectations for fast prosperity and welfare. Therefore, currently Bulgarians continue to value EU and democracy but in a more realistic manner.

Nevertheless, after ten years of membership Bulgarians still believe that democracy describes rather well the idea of EU. Furthermore, Bulgarians are more satisfied with the democracy in own country and the trust in the institutions have increased since the beginning of the membership. I believe that this is a result of the partially improved economic environment and the relevant political stability since 2009.

In comparison to the three most democratic EU member states Bulgaria has some deficits, which are related to the functioning of the political system in the country. This is visible in the significantly lower levels of satisfaction with democracy in own country and in the trust in the national institutions.

In conclusion, Bulgarians support democracy and the EU in general, but the poor economic and institutional performance in the country leads to a certain level of dissatisfaction and distrust.

5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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6. REFERENCES


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Reuters. (2013). *Bulgarians protests over media magnate as security chief.*


### 7. APPENDIX

#### Table A1: Variables from Standard Eurobarometer 67 (Spring 2007)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N</th>
<th>Variable Name</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Result</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>V119</td>
<td>QA8 Please tell for each of the following words if it describes very well, fairly well, fairly badly or very badly the idea you might have of the European Union (DEMOCRATIC)</td>
<td>For the purposes of the current study the results for answers ‘very well’ and ‘fairly well’ are combined in answer ‘rather well’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>V129</td>
<td>QA11 In general, does the European Union conjure up for you a very positive, fairly positive, neutral, fairly negative or very negative image?</td>
<td>For the purposes of the current study the results for answers ‘very positive’ and ‘fairly positive’ are combined in answer ‘rather positive’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>V130-V145</td>
<td>QA12 What does the European Union mean to you personally? The possible answers are: Peace, Economic Prosperity, Democracy, Social Protection, Freedom to travel, study and work anywhere in the EU, Cultural diversity, Stronger say in the world, Euro, Unemployment, Bureaucracy, Waste of money, Loss of our cultural identity, More crime, Not enough control at external borders</td>
<td>For the purposes of the current study the share of those who mentioned each of the answer is provided.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>V367</td>
<td>QA37 Would you say that you are very optimistic, fairly optimistic, fairly pessimistic or very</td>
<td>For the purposes of the current study the</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
pessimistic about the future of the European Union…?

Note: Eurobarometer primary data was retrieved from https://www.gesis.org/eurobarometer-data-service/search-data-access/data-access/, filename: ZA4530_v2-1-0.sav

Table A2: Variables from Standard Eurobarometer 68 (Autumn 2007)

<table>
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<th>N</th>
<th>Variable Name</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Result</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>V149-V152</td>
<td>QA8 How much trust you have in certain institutions? The possible answers are: ‘Tend to trust’ or ‘Tend not to trust’</td>
<td>For the purposes of the current study the share of those who choose answer ‘Tend to trust’ is provided.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>V173, V174</td>
<td>QA11A On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied or not at all satisfied on the way democracy works in (OUR COUNTRY)? QA11B And how about the way democracy works in the European Union?</td>
<td>For the purposes of the current study the results for answers ‘very satisfied’ and ‘fairly satisfied’ are combined in answer ‘rather satisfied’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>V175</td>
<td>QA12a Generally speaking, do you think that (OUR COUNTRY)'s membership of the European Union is...? The possible answers are: ‘A good thing’, ‘A bad thing’, ‘Neither good nor bad’</td>
<td>For the purposes of the current study the share of those who choose answer ‘A good thing’ is provided.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Eurobarometer primary data was retrieved from https://www.gesis.org/eurobarometer-data-service/search-data-access/data-access/, filename: ZA4565_v4-0-1.sav

Table A3: Variables from Standard Eurobarometer 87 (Spring 2017)

<table>
<thead>
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<th>N</th>
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<th>Question</th>
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<tbody>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
1 qa11_1

QA11 Please tell me for each of the following words if it describes very well, fairly well, fairly badly or very badly the idea you might have of the EU (DEMOCRATIC)

For the purposes of the current study the results for answers ‘very well’ and ‘fairly well’ are combined in answer ‘rather well’.

2 qa9

QA9 In general, does the European Union conjure up for you a very positive, fairly positive, neutral, fairly negative or very negative image?

For the purposes of the current study the results for answers ‘very positive’ and ‘fairly positive’ are combined in answer ‘rather positive’.

3 qa10.1-qa10.16

QA10 What does the European Union mean to you personally? The possible answers are: Peace, Economic Prosperity, Democracy, Social Protection, Freedom to travel, study and work anywhere in the EU, Cultural diversity, Stronger say in the world, Euro, Unemployment, Bureaucracy, Waste of money, Loss of our cultural identity, More crime, Not enough control at external borders

For the purposes of the current study the share of those who mentioned each of the answer is provided.

4 qa19

QA19 Would you say that you are very optimistic, fairly optimistic, fairly pessimistic or very pessimistic about the future of the European Union…?

For the purposes of the current study the results for answers ‘very optimistic’ and ‘fairly optimistic’ are combined in answer ‘rather optimistic’.

5 qa8a_5, qa8a_7, qa8a_8, qa8a_9

QA8a How much trust you have in certain institutions? The possible answers are: ‘Tend to trust’ or ‘Tend not to trust’

For the purposes of the current study the share of those who choose answer ‘Tend to trust’ is provided.

6 qa17a qa17b

QA17a On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied or not at all satisfied on the way democracy works in (OUR COUNTRY)? QA17b And how about the way democracy works in the EU?

For the purposes of the current study the results for answers ‘very satisfied’ and ‘fairly satisfied’ are combined in answer ‘rather satisfied’.

Note: Eurobarometer primary data was retrieved from https://www.gesis.org/eurobarometer-data-service/search-data-access/data-access/, filename: ZA6863_v1-0-0.sav
Table A4: Variables from Standard Eurobarometer 88 (Autumn 2017)

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<td>1</td>
<td>qa10</td>
<td>QA10 Generally speaking, do you think that (OUR COUNTRY)’s membership of the EU is...? The possible answers are: ‘A good thing’, ‘A bad thing’, ‘Neither a good thing nor a bad thing’</td>
<td>For the purposes of the current study the share of those who choose answer ‘A good thing’ is provided.</td>
</tr>
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Note: Eurobarometer primary data was retrieved from https://www.gesis.org/eurobarometer-data-service/search-data-access/data-access/, filename: ZA6925_v1-0-0.sav