

Changing Perspectives on the EU in Bulgaria, 2007 - 2008

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Objectives

To gain an understanding of, and attempt to answer, the following questions:

- Do Bulgarians perceive any benefit from EU membership one year after joining?
- If so, or if not, is this a uniform perception across different segments of the population, or is it more nuanced?
- Do these perceptions correlate well with objective facts?
- Broadly speaking, do Bulgarians now perceive themselves as "European?" Do they even understand or have their own ideas about what this label means?

While conducting this research, to adequately use and develop appropriate research techniques and to gain a more in-depth understanding of both the research process and the subject matter.

Methodology and Approach

A combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches were used, as described; much paper-based research was complemented by some basic fieldwork. Methods included:

- Monitoring and analysis of media reporting
- Background reading including journal articles and literature on the EU, EU integration and Bulgaria
- Examination of key documents, such as Eurobarometer surveys and EC reports
- Interviews

Issues: European Ideals vs Local Realities

One of the recurring obstacles that was identified by both the literature, the media and the interviews was the role of the Bulgarian government: The general perception is that, far from facilitating EU integration, the bureaucracy of the government is standing in the way of EU funds being acquired. On a deeper level, a standard lament is that the real reason for joining the EU is not idealistic at all - it is a base opportunity for the ruling echelons (by this, the entire political elite is understood, not any particular party) to make a private profit, or to secure plum jobs within the EU's ranks. The European Commission report of July 2008, coming half-way through this research project, appears to corroborate these perceptions by confirming that large-scale corruption has paralysed the governmental structures in charge of using EU pre-accession and accession funds. However, a significant element of media hype and dramatisation was noted at every stage of checking these perceptions: often, success stories were underreported, and there is a general tendency to villify any individual or organisation benefiting - rightly or wrongly - from EU membership. This suggests, as the findings outline below, a flawed attitude towards membership as a whole.

Findings: Identification Disconnect (or, "what does it mean to be European?")

Perhaps the most important (and alarming) finding of the project is that neither ordinary Bulgarians nor the political elite seem to have a coherent answer to the question of what "being European" means. Usually, the answer is defined in negative terms: eg. "not to be corrupt", "not to break the rules", "not to be as selfish as we are", while conversely, being Bulgarian is defined as everything that is not European. Crucially, very few of those questioned considered even *themselves* European, despite having identified a virtuous ideal. One revealing finding showed that after the EC blocked funding for Bulgaria, rather than provoking a nationalist backlash at being treated as "second-class citizens" by Brussels, Bulgarians' trust in the EC increased.

Conclusions

From the findings, some of the questions raised can best be answered as follows (others proved unquantifiable):

- Broadly, Bulgarians do not perceive any material benefit from membership, but blame this on local politics; indeed, they see EC sanctions as a welcome punishment for their government.
- Bulgarians do not adequately understand what the European label represents

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