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## **The EU Eastern Enlargement Policy Under the Pressure of Geopolitics. The Bulgarian Case (Russia's Little Brother)**

### **Abstract**

The Bulgarian case is symptomatic of the susceptibility of the EU enlargement policy under geopolitical pressure. The aim of this text is to add arguments to the statement that the dynamic of Bulgaria's accession to the EU has been strongly influenced by external factors – mainly Yugoslavia's disintegration and the subsequent Kosovo crisis. This crisis brought up the issue of the huge Russian influence over Bulgarian politics and societies and, as a result, predetermined the perception of Bulgaria as a high security risk for EU. In this situation, Bulgaria was an object of de-securitisation by the EU's enlargement policy, but at the same time its main instrument, namely, the conditionality policy, was neglected. From this point of view, the Bulgarian case is important because: it illustrates the effects of this discrepancy to date; it is instructive in the context of EU enlargement policy towards the Western Balkans with huge Russian influence; and also in the context of the acceleration of the EU's eastern enlargement policy toward Ukraine and Moldova because of the pressure of the ongoing Russian military invasion. The opportunity for accelerating the pre-accession process under the influence of unpredicted external events created prerequisites for politicising the whole process, including the political use of the conditionality and the consequently unfinished pre-accession preparation of the newcomers. The research task is fulfilled by a synthesis of primary and secondary sources organised around three main questions – Which external circumstances? Why? and, How? The results of a discourse analysis of interviews with key participants in Bulgaria's EU integration process are used as a starting point.

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## Introduction

The Eastern Enlargement of the European Union (EU), when ten post-communist countries from Eastern Europe acquired full membership of the Union, is an exceptional success story with undeniable historical significance. The achievement of this result has premised the transformation of the enlargement policy into a central foreign policy instrument of the EU (Smith, 2011, p. 300; Sedelmeier, 2010, pp. 401–405; Dinan, 2010, p. 483). Meanwhile, from today's point of view, the effects of the enlargement do not seem unambiguously positive. The Europeanisation of part of the newly-acceded Central and Eastern Europe countries (CEECs) seems to be, in fact, unstable and even reversible (Dimitrov, 2019, pp. 28–29; Agh, 2016, pp. 26–27). The European Commission (EC) started penalty procedures against Poland and Hungary in December 2017 and September 2018 respectively, despite those countries being considered as excellent performers as regards accession preparations. For the laggards – Bulgaria and Romania – the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM) was introduced, through which the deficits of their pre-accession preparation were to be overcome – this, however, wasn't achieved for more than ten years.<sup>1</sup> These effects testify to the presence of disadvantages in the EU enlargement policy. Their discovery and subsequent quashing acquired critical importance in the context not only of the European perspective of the countries from the Western Balkans, but also of the new membership applications of Ukraine and Moldova.

Some researchers of the EU's enlargement policy look for the reasons for its deficits – inconsistency, insecurity, lack of coordination – in the content and application of conditionality policy (Maniokas, 2004, pp. 23–24; Kochenov, 2004, p. 23; Grabbe, 2017, pp. 126–128; Elezi, 2013, pp. 250–251). Others pay attention to the huge geopolitical issues which stimulate and, at the same time, make it difficult for the policy's application (O'Brennan, 2006, pp. 13–15; Skalnes, 2005, pp. 213–214; Smith, 2011, p. 300; Vachudova, 2014, pp. 123–124).<sup>2</sup> The first of the aforementioned

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<sup>1</sup> In September 2020, EC Vice President Vera Jourova, in an interview for Bulgarian National Television, stated that: “As you know, there were plans for it to be terminated. However, there is still unfinished work, especially on the part of the authorities”.

<sup>2</sup> The receiving of “candidate status” by Ukraine and Moldova in the face of Russia's military aggression is an illustrative example for the reasonableness of this geopolitical argumentation to date.

researchers ignored the reasons for the limits of the conditionality policy outside of its own content, while the second one ignored the concrete effects of the geopolitical factor's influence. But it is exactly this connection between external issues including, *inter alia*, the disintegration of Yugoslavia, and conditionality policy *and* the susceptibility of this policy to political influence which are the prerequisites for the unpredicted results of the EU's Eastern Enlargement policy.

O'Brennan examined the connection between geopolitical issues and eastern enlargement in general terms. Firstly, he would "analyse the most important geopolitical issues that eastern enlargement has brought to the fore" (thus answering the "which" question). Secondly, he argues that "constructivist imagery best explains the way in which EU actors interpreted key geopolitical issues within the enlargement framework" (the "why"). Thirdly, he would "present enlargement as the expansion of the existing European security community, wherein geopolitical issues were subject to a process of securitisation and desecuritisation" by subjecting them to the pre-accession process" (the "how") (O'Brennan, 2006a, pp. 155–156).

The Bulgarian case is clear example for the above statement. Bulgaria was a candidate country that had a distinctly uneven pace as regards its progression to full membership. From a country consistently lagging behind in the first few years of the enlargement policy's implementation, within several days it had caught up with the more advanced countries with regard to their pre-accession preparation. This acceleration can be explained via the influence of external threats on the enlargement policy, because of the unprecedented nature of the relations between Bulgaria and Russia among the other CEECs, but not with the acceleration of the fulfilment of the criteria for membership. In this way, it illustrates the discrepancy between the declared principles of the enlargement policy and the method of its implementation. And the effects of this discrepancy to date – systematic problems with the rule of law and corruption and, as a consequence, the sustainability of Russian influence on politics and society which made Bulgaria a weak place – made for a Russian trojan horse in the EU (Eurobarometer, 2022).<sup>3</sup> The Bulgarian case stands out in the context of EU enlargement policy toward the Western Balkans dealing with huge Russian influence – Serbia makes for a good example

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<sup>3</sup> Bulgarians represent a significant exception from the average results of the EU citizens because of the high levels of the positive evaluation for Russia after its military aggression in Ukraine this year and the negative evaluation for the USA, as well as with low levels of support for priority of the European values at the expense of prices and living expenses.

(Euroactiv, 2022) – and illustrates that there is a high risk for EU security if the Bulgarian path is taken again; the vast majority of Bulgarian society actually professes their allegiance to the Russians in the ongoing war in Ukraine. It is definite also in the context of the acceleration of EU eastern enlargement policy toward Ukraine and Moldova in the face of the huge external threat that is the Russian military invasion.

The aim of the text is to add arguments to the statement that the dynamic of Bulgarian accession to the EU has been strongly influenced by external factors, and because of the special Bulgarian-Russian relationship. This relationship transformed Bulgaria into an external threat in the context of the Kosovo conflict because of the possibility of political destabilisation and the deviation from the EU orbit towards an Eurasian orbit under Russian pressure. For this reason, Bulgaria was the subject of desecuritisation by inclusion in the negotiation process but without clear evidence of the fulfilment of the criteria for membership (conditionality). Therefore, the Bulgarian case is clear evidence of a discrepancy between the declared principles of enlargement policy for the objective application of membership criteria and political instrumentalisation of conditionality in the face of geopolitical circumstances. Following the argumentative logic of an article by O'Brennan in which the Bulgarian case is, on one hand, an additional argument and, on the other hand, a more detailed examination of the third part (how exactly desecuritisation works), the text is organised in three main parts, answering the three research questions. *Which* were the geopolitical powers/circumstances that influenced the pre-accession process in Bulgaria? *Why* (due to which reasons) did they have influence? *How* did they have influence?

The answers are derived from a synthesis of primary and secondary sources. As a starting point, the results from a discourse analysis of the 33 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with key participants in Bulgaria's EU integration process (high-ranking politicians, diplomats, and experts) on one of the sixteen questions of the questionnaire is used – *Do you remember whether any geopolitical circumstances or powers had a great influence on the pre-accession process?*<sup>1</sup> The answers are organised around the above three research questions – which, why, and how. The results are put in a broad context of the secondary sources of the same questions. This cumulative discourse supplements and verifies the research thesis.

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<sup>1</sup> They were collected in a documentary archive of memories within the Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence project of the European Studies Department at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridsky" (2016–2019) <http://jeanmonnetexcellence.bg/> and were published in 2020, <https://bdi.bg/data/paper/LA1.pdf>.

## Part One – Which?

According to the respondents' answers, the geopolitical powers/circumstances that had considerable influence on Bulgaria's accession to the EU were – *the disintegration of Yugoslavia, the war in Yugoslavia, the disintegration of the USSR, the conflict in Kosovo, the Stability Pact, the accession to NATO, the USSR, and Russia.*

The content diversity of the received answers is striking. Some of them are related to certain states – the USA, Russia, whereas others are processes – the disintegration of Yugoslavia, the disintegration of the USSR, accession to NATO; the latter being the nature of events – the conflict in Kosovo, and the Stability Pact among others. This diversity, however, can be organised around one common historical parallel – all these powers/circumstances/processes have been evoked by the disintegration of the Communist camp and the subsequent, massive political destabilisation in Eastern Europe.

Defining these external factors confirms one of the main conclusions in academic literature as regards the Eastern Enlargement (Skalnes, 2005, pp. 213–214; O'Brennan, 2006a, pp. 155–156; Bindi, 2011, pp. 84–85), in that it is mostly an instrument for achieving security for the Union. The formation of the EU enlargement policy which, hitherto, did not exist, is a result of the shocking collapse of Communism and is intended to overcome the unprecedented risks that it causes. Moreover, the very creation of the EU with its own Common Foreign and Security Policy is a result of a protective reflex to this massive geopolitical change. It brings two considerable foreign policy threats to the European Economic Community (EEC). On the one hand, there arises instability in Central and Eastern European countries (CEECs) as a result of the massive process of redrawing the State borders in the region. The emergence of new States and the concomitant redrawing of borders created a potential for conflicts, as was the case with the Yugoslavian civil war. It provides unambiguous evidence of the high risk of such cases arising in a region where historical heritage has predetermined the explosive combination of: a) considerable minorities in neighbouring countries; b) their special treatment by the governments of these countries; and c) the weakness of the emerging State structures of the new democracies. This unfavourable historical heritage is combined with a set of problems concerning so-called “soft security” – transborder crime, the trafficking of people and drugs, and potential, considerable emigration due to deteriorating social conditions in the post-communist countries.

On the other hand, considerable problems for the EEC's security ensued from the fragmentation and the internal political instability in

Russia immediately after the disintegration of the USSR, along with unclear Russian reactions to the Westernisation of the CEEC, but also with the dependence of a great number of the EU Member States on Russian energy supplies. Meanwhile, the political elites in the Member States feared that Russia could try to restore its control over the CEECs. It was considered as a potentially aggressive power, but at the same time and because of this, and also because of economic interests, it was imperative to establish partnership relations with it. Accessing CEECs seemed to be a reliable strategy, through which the threat of Russian aggression in the region could be rejected, and, simultaneously, the development of a new, Russia-EU strategic partnership could be guaranteed (De Bardeleben, 2013, pp. 50–51).

In a summary of the analysis in answer to the first research question – which are the geopolitical powers/circumstances that influenced the pre-accession process in Bulgaria?: 1) as in the general case with the other CEECs, these are powers and circumstances provoked by the disintegration of the Communist camp; 2) in the Bulgarian case – with the dangerous combination of its geographical proximity to the Yugoslavian war, domestic political instability, and massive Russian influence on politics and society – the Kosovo conflict was a geopolitical factor of decisive influence over its EU accession (see below).

## **Part Two – Why?**

The result of the analysis of the respondents' answers shows that most of them explain the influence of the external powers/circumstances on the process of Bulgaria's accession to the EU with geopolitical interests. The interests are defined with a different degree of specificity – “to guarantee peace and stability”; “the EU enlargement is one geopolitical problem and process”; “Russia's ambitions for control over the Kosovo events convinced them that the Balkan countries need more guarantees for security, not fewer”; “increasing the risk of destabilisation in the region”; “not to leave it [Eastern Europe – author's note] to the Russians”; “competition for East-West spheres of influence”; “Russia's ambitions as regards the region are not clear”; “they considered us a political satellite of Russia”; “strengthening the geopolitical influence of the Euro-Atlantic community in South-East Europe”; “as a means for deterring Russian imperial policy as renewed by Putin”; and “guaranteeing stability in our region”.

Despite the considerable differences in the specificity of the answers, they lead to one and the same main conclusion. Firstly, according to

most of the respondents, the reasons for the influence of external powers/circumstances on the EU's enlargement policy are geopolitical interests and, secondly, in relation to these interests, Bulgaria creating a specific problem. This conclusion has its explanation and can respectively be justified in each one of its two parts.

Bulgaria's territory was of strategic significance for the EU. It was in close proximity to the region of a military conflict and was potentially vulnerable to a penetration of destructive powers which would have increased the risk for the Union's external borders. The outlet on the Black Sea created the potential for commercial relations with Asia, but, at the same time, it also created a risk of suspending relations between the Member States of Hungary and Greece (Chiva, Phinnemore, 2012, pp. 150–151). This risk of isolating Greece became particularly distinct during moments of destabilisation for the former Yugoslavian Federation. Bulgaria's territory was also an important prerequisite for the diversification of energy supplies of Russia, but at the same time, due to its strong dependence on them, the Bulgarian state itself could have turned into a risk factor during the international crisis in the immediate vicinity of the Union (European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs, 2018, pp. 4–6). The issues with so-called "soft security" are also important. The high levels of corruption (state capture) and the related organised crime created prerequisites for the export of the criminal contingent, the stimulation of the illegal trafficking of people, drugs, and guns to EU Member States, which would threaten their internal order (Conley et al., 2018, pp. 18–20).

The destabilisation in South-East Europe premised increasing the competition between the USA and Russia over the strengthening and spreading of their influence in the region. In this context, Bulgaria was strategically significant, but, at the same time, it was a particularly vulnerable territory due to the specifics of Bulgarian-Russian relations. The combination between the stable-through-the-centuries Russophile ideological tradition and the Bulgarian satellite-like condition during the Cold War has no parallel in the other candidate countries from Eastern Europe (Veleva-Eftimova, 2017, pp. 203–204).

Assiduously and systematically cultivated by imperial Russia ever since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Bulgarian Russophilia was affirmed as a leading political idea during the struggles for national liberation. It turned into a forming base for the Bulgarian foreign policy perspective during the building of the Third Bulgarian state in 1879. A central conceptual emphasis was the maintenance of special close relations with Russia, based on unconditional gratitude and trust. The communisation of the

Bulgarian state after the Second World War led to a peculiar apotheosis of the ideological formulations of Russophilia, as well as of its practical political events. The Bulgarian-Soviet friendship was presented as a natural law – it is “like the sun and the air for every living creature”<sup>2</sup>, due to which, along with persistent and repeated requests by the Bulgarian government, the Bulgarian state turning into a sixteenth republic of the USSR seemed natural.<sup>3</sup> In this context, during the communist period, Bulgaria acquired its own distinction of the most faithful Soviet satellite among the other satellites from Eastern Europe.

The Russophile ideological tradition cemented the special Bulgarian-Russian relations, and the Bulgarian foreign policy orientation was set in accordance with the Russian/Soviet policy for long periods of time from the history of the Third Bulgarian state. This historical legacy exerted considerable influence on the Bulgarian geopolitical transition after the end of the Cold War.<sup>4</sup> Firstly, this transition was relatively belated – it did not start not until the ruling of the first government that wasn’t dominated by the former Communist Party (that of Philip Dimitrov) in 1991. Secondly, it was marked by the limited internal institutional integrity of the bodies called upon to make foreign policy – the National Assembly and the Council of Ministers, which was also reflected in the effective accomplishment of this foreign policy priority. Thirdly, although there was a high degree of continuity between the Bulgarian post-communist governments as regards goal setting and the accomplishment of the reorientation to European integration, it occurred in parallel with maintaining close relations with Russia, and was with an increased intensity with the governments dominated by the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) (Katsikas, 2012, pp. 46–47). This particular dual position of the Bulgarian rulers created the impression that Bulgaria was susceptible to Russian influence and of limited reliability as a strategic partner of the EU, and therefore was a high risk of deviating from the EU’s orbit.

The Kosovo crisis brought this risk to the fore and led to a change in the position of the leading countries in the Union – Great Britain, Germany, and France – as regards Bulgaria’s application for membership. Up to that moment, Bulgaria hadn’t received any active and steady support of EU Member States; it didn’t even have its own patron per the example of

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<sup>2</sup> A phrase from the first leader of the Bulgarian Communist Party, Georgi Dimitrov, turned into a slogan of the Communist regime.

<sup>3</sup> In Bulgarian historiography, is a well-known fact that the Bulgarian state proposed to be accepted as the sixteenth republic of the Soviet Socialist state via a merger between Bulgaria and the USSR (1963, 1965, 1973).

<sup>4</sup> About the actual representation of Russophile ideology, see Decheva, 2023.



the rest of the CEE candidates (Veleva-Eftimova, 2021, pp. 275–276). But when the geopolitical interests turned out to be under threat in the context of the Kosovo conflict, the leading countries united around the view that the situation in Bulgaria was dangerous. The pro-Western government in Bulgaria was under massive internal pressure. The Russophile public's opinion didn't approve of the decisions of Ivan Kostov's government as regards logistic support for NATO's military intervention in Serbia and the rejection of a Russian request for an air corridor. There were mass anti-government and pro-Russian street demonstrations which were supported by one of the main political parties in the form of the Bulgarian Socialist Party (a former Communist Party) (Kalinova, 2010, p. 312).

This situation made the potential fall of the pro-Western government very realistic. Such a change, however, could have provoked the political and economic destabilisation of Bulgaria in the short term (Boev, 2021, p. 428)<sup>5</sup> and in the long term – it could have diverted the country from the EU's orbit under Russian control. In this way, by the Kosovo conflict, Bulgaria became a high external risk with the capacity to continuously undermine the interests of the Western countries in the region (Marsh, Rees, 2012, p. 114; Gateva, 2015, p. 108).

By that moment, Great Britain actively and steadily supported the accession of all the ten CEECs to the EU, but without the Bulgarian application being a concrete recipient of support. The global nature of the British interests to the EU's enlargement – stabilisation through democratisation and reducing the federal perspective – predetermined the relative lack of patronage in its relationship with the candidates (as per the example of Germany's support for Poland or Sweden's support for Estonia). The United Kingdom didn't favour any of them in absolute terms.

The Kosovo crisis and the behaviour of Bulgaria's and Romania's governments changed the British position towards Bulgaria not so much in content, but rather in intensity and specificity. Considering the risks of Kostov's cabinet, Tony Blair's government, in unison with the then American administration, declared its unconditional support for the inclusion of Bulgaria as well as Romania into the negotiation process. In May 1999, the British Prime Minister visited Sofia and Bucharest and declared that he would work for their inclusion in the negotiation process (Debati, 2019). Unlike the British case, Germany's interests were much more specific and differentiated. As the most powerful export economy in the Union, Germany would have considerable benefits from the accession

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<sup>5</sup> The Bulgarian government has information from the Bulgarian intelligence services about operation Podkova as regards mass ethnic cleaning in Kosovo.

of the former communist states to the common market, because of, *inter alia*, the inevitable reduction of the costs for maintaining its external border. It is this specificity of interests, however, that predetermined the limited attention towards Bulgaria as a candidate country, both because of its geographic remoteness and because of the market capacity, including the Yugo-embargo, at the expense of favouritism towards the immediate neighbours – Poland, Czechia, and Hungary.

Until the Kosovo crisis in 1999, the German government supported a strategy for enlargement in two so-called “waves”, as in the first wave there would be the abovementioned three advanced countries included in the transition reforms. The escalation of the conflict and, respectively, the increasing of the risk of regional destabilisation led the German government to conclusions similar to those of the British government. From this point of view, the German Chancellor also motivated the need for covering the Kosovo events by the enlargement policy. In April 1999, Schröder made a statement in which he related these events with the enlargement, as, according to him, they illustrated the fact that political stability was not possible without economic stability (Milzow, 2012, pp. 84–86).

Unlike Great Britain and Germany, France was generally skeptical towards the EU’s enlargement to the East, with Paris believing that it didn’t have any immediate economic benefits. The French leaders’ opinion was indeed rather to the contrary – their thinking being that the accession of a large number of net beneficiaries within the CAP and regional policy, as were the candidate countries, would lead to budget losses. Moreover, in the long term, the newcomers would undermine the opportunities for a deepening of the integration process, considered by Paris as a significant interest. Meanwhile, the global policy for the stabilisation of Eastern Europe was moving in parallel with the risks of increasing Germany’s influence at the expense of the indisputable, dominating French position in the European integration project, but also of reducing the opportunities for effective control over its powerful neighbour (Veleva-Eftimova, 2019, p. 92).

From this point of view, the Bulgarian application was not of particular interest to France. Indeed, Paris actually favoured Romania. Due to its size and geographic position, this “Latin sister” (Papadimitriou, 2002, p. 104) had the potential to be a counterweight of the Northern dimension of the Eastern Enlargement and, respectively, of the German influence. On the other hand, the problematic pre-accession preparation of Bucharest could have slowed down the pace of the whole process when it would be possible to accede to it (Papadimitriou, 2002, p. 89).

As was mentioned above, the Kosovo crisis provoked interest in Romania's application, and this premised the French support for including Bulgaria in the negotiation process. Put simply, in order to receive Romania's inclusion, France also supported Bulgaria's inclusion.

Greece and Italy, being directly affected by the regional risks, supported the change of the leading EU Member States' approach to Bulgaria and Romania. Austria and the Scandinavian countries, after their accession to the Union in 1995, also actively supported the initiatives for stimulating the process of enlargement to the East. This high degree of support among the EU countries predetermined the acceleration of the Bulgarian accession process.

In summary: 1) the Kosovo crisis in 1999 increased the risks of regional destabilisation of the Union's external borders and brought to the fore the geopolitical interests of the Member States; 2) in this situation, Bulgaria was simultaneously strategically important, yet unreliable as a strategic partner, furthermore it became an external threat because of the Russian influence in the country; 3) this high external risk changed the positions of the leading EU Member States towards the Bulgarian application (see below).

### **Part Three – How?**

As a result of the analysis of the respondents' answers, it can be claimed that the way in which the geopolitical powers/events (the Kososvo conflict) influenced the enlargement process was its resultant acceleration, along with the Yugoslavia war and the USA which also led to the acceleration of the Bulgarian accession.

The respondents talked about: "accelerating Europe's unification"; "the war in Yugoslavia as a strong political factor which opened this window for faster advancement in the negotiation process for us"; "after this, the negotiations opened a little bit after Operation 'Allied Force', that is, and this was something extremely important"; "the EU was stimulated also by the USA to commit itself and in this way [for the process – author's note] to end quickly"; "it absolutely [influenced the speed – author's note]; "... Well, the fact that you prove as a state that you are politically ready to accept risks (...) to undertake actions that are in unison with the club you are striving for – indisputable!"

This result has its explanation. Bulgaria lagged behind the group of candidates preferred for opening negotiations. Together with Lithuania, Latvia, and Romania, according to the EC Report from 1996, it didn't have a functioning market economy and was unable to withstand the pressure

of the internal market. Due to the non-fulfilment of the economic criteria, the country was left in the second group.

As of early 1999, among the EU States, there was a high degree of consensus about the inclusion of three more of the candidate countries in the negotiation process – Latvia, Lithuania, and Slovakia. Unlike them, Bulgaria and Romania continued to be without sufficient progress in their pre-accession preparations and without considerable support from the EU States. The Kosovo war, which started at the end of March 1999, brought about a new context for debating the strategic approach towards Bulgaria – the desecuritisation by inclusion in negotiation process.

In October 1999, EC President Romano Prodi, in unison with the changed position of the EU Member States on Bulgaria's and Romania's applications, called for "a fundamental change" in the EU's enlargement strategy. He also proposed opening negotiations with the rest of the CEE countries in the second group. This new vision on the enlargement strategy was reflected in the main conclusions of the EC's combined report from 1999 on the overall outlook of the progress of the negotiation process. The Commission proposed to the Council a new approach to the process, which contained several fundamental elements. The first was the inclusion of all the candidates in the accession negotiations, which meant opening negotiations with Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, and Slovakia. The second was an increase of conditionality to overcome the risk of slowing the progress in accession preparations and of unacceptable extensions of the negotiation process. This proposal was made exactly with the cases of Bulgaria and Romania in mind, wherein progress on membership preparation was limited. The European Council in Helsinki in December 1999 accepted the Commission's proposals for opening negotiations with Bulgaria, Romania, Lithuania, Latvia, and Slovakia in December 1999 (European Parliament, 1999). This decision demonstrated possibilities for the neglecting (or the political use of conditionality) under the pressure of external threats. At the same time, conditionality was a central element of the pre-accession preparation process, based on the objective standards of assessment and, therefore, on the principal of differentiation. This internal contradiction predicted the relatively low level of implementation of the pre-accession programmes (Papadimitriou, Gateva, 2012, pp. 5–7).

The Bulgarian government's cooperation with NATO on the Kosovo conflict was an important prerequisite for Bulgarian accession in the North Atlantic Pact (Boev, 2021, p. 428). NATO membership is directly linked with EU enlargement policy. This was a necessary precondition for membership in the EU, but it has become such a significant prerequisite

due to the presence of a reliable perspective for acquiring membership in the Union (Lundestad, 2004, pp. 258–260; Baeva, 2019, p. 68). In this way, membership in NATO, in combination with the previous decision for an accession date for Bulgaria (2007), legitimised the commitment to the West.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, it seems to be the guarantee for accession to the EU, even if the reforms in the country did not provide the required conditions for accession. In this situation, the probability of delaying the reforms increased due to a decreasing of the risk of cancelling the accession (Giatzidis, 2004, p. 455).

In conclusion: 1) the Kosovo crisis accelerated Bulgaria's accession to the EU by opening a negotiation process despite insufficient evidence for pre-accession reform progress; 2) Bulgaria's accession to NATO guaranteed its membership of the EU. In this situation, it seemed that the path towards EU membership was clear and guaranteed. This viewpoint very likely led to the introduction of the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM) after accession. The aim of this institutional innovation was to overcome the deficits of the Bulgarian pre-accession preparation. In this way, CVM is illustrative evidence of the acquisition of EU membership of an insufficiently-prepared candidate country.

## Conclusions

The geopolitical powers and circumstances provoked by the destabilisation of Eastern Europe because of the Communist system's collapse exerted an influence on the Eastern Enlargement process. They predetermined not only the formulation of the geopolitical powers' own enlargement policy, but also a change of the strategic approach for its implementation, and also the positioning of the candidate countries to each other, i.e., their differentiation. Increasing the security risks because of the destabilisation served to accelerate the process. Due to its particularities in terms of geopolitical risks, the Bulgarian case illustrated this connection. Bulgaria was a potentially weak link in Western Europe's security, due to which the Kosovo crisis from 1999 increased interest towards Bulgaria's application for membership. Furthermore, Bulgaria was simultaneously strategically important, but also unreliable as a strategic partner, and it furthermore became an external threat because of the special relationships with Russia and, as a consequence, there came intense Russian influence over the country. This external risk changed the positions of the leading EU Member States as regards the Bulgarian application. Subsequently,

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<sup>6</sup> Bulgaria received a date for accession via the decision of European Council in Helsinki in December 2002.

it was included in the negotiation process. Thus, the crisis accelerated its pre-accession process despite the unsatisfactory fulfilment of the Copenhagen criteria. The country's accession to NATO, as an external factor, guaranteed its membership of the EU and, as a cumulative result, Bulgarian Europeanisation slowed down and was left unfinished.

The pace of the Bulgarian pre-accession process illustrates the discrepancy between the declared principles of the enlargement policy and the methods of its implementation. On the one hand, its central political instrument is conditionality, which is an objective standard for measuring the progress towards membership by the EC. On the other hand, this principle is neither of general validity, nor sustainable. Due to the pressure of external circumstances which brought Bulgarian vulnerability to Russian influence to the fore, and not of the accomplishment of the conditions, negotiations for membership were opened with Bulgaria, and again under the influence of external circumstances (NATO membership) – EU membership seemed to be guaranteed.

The opportunity for the acceleration of the pre-accession process and predetermination of Bulgaria's EU accession under the influence of external factors created enough prerequisites for politicising the whole process, including the conditionality policy. This situation could compromise the application of the principle of differentiation/competition among the candidates on which conditionality is based, and, due to that, its efficiency is also restricted. From this point of view, the policy of EU's Eastern Enlargement contains the potential to reproduce previous disadvantages if, at the goal-setting stage, its action is not placed in a wider global context. This is of critical importance from today's point of view, when the acceleration in Ukraine acquiring the status of a candidate for membership can be defined as an effect of placing the enlargement policy under geopolitical-circumstance pressure. In such a situation, the external security risks for the EU could be transformed into internal integrity risks for the EU if future newcomers' pre-accession preparation is incomplete, echoing Bulgaria's case.

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