

**BULGARIA'S PRE-ACCESSION AGENDA  
AND THE EUROPEAN UNION'S  
POST-ENLARGEMENT AGENDA IN 2005  
(analysis of positions on key topics)<sup>1</sup>**

KRASSIMIR Y. NIKOLOV

Jean Monnet lecturer in European integration, Secretary General of the  
Bulgarian European Community Studies Association (BECSA)  
email: [knikolov@becsa.org](mailto:knikolov@becsa.org)

**GENERAL COMMENTS**

Bulgarian positions on EU-related issues that are included in the EU-25 Watch survey – among them the constitutional crisis, negotiations on the next financial framework, prospects for further enlargement, foreign policy, security and defence, etc. – reflect one major preoccupation of the country and its political elite: forthcoming EU membership. Bulgaria is still an acceding country, and not (yet) a full-fledged EU member state. This status impacts on political priorities, on practical action by the government and political parties, and on public debates. Accession is the country's immediate goal, and the whole Bulgarian domestic and foreign policy making is dominated by the pre-accession agenda. The latter is in some respects distinct from the EU's post-enlargement agenda.

*Politics.* At the stage of government formation following the parliamentary elections of June 2005, the imperative of membership was the most powerful consolidating factor. The stalemate resulting from a distribution of seats in parliament with no clear winner was overcome after a six-week negotiation process only with the argument that further delays in swearing in a stable government might undermine the country's credibility and its capacity to respect commitments made during the negotiation process. That, in turn, could endanger the prospects of Bulgaria's entry in the EU on 1 January 2007 and lead to the imposition of a safeguard that would postpone accession until 2008. Despite the bitter wrangling between socialists and liberals during the electoral campaign and even after the new parliament was summoned, a three-party centre-left coalition was established between the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), the National Movement Simeon II (NDSV) and the Movement of Rights and Freedoms (DPS – a party that represents primarily Bulgarian Turks). They formed the so-called "government of European integration, economic growth and social responsibility".

*Debate.* Almost the entire post-electoral political debate was accession-driven. Both in anticipation of the publication (on 25 October 2005) of a monitoring report by the European Commission and after that, political discourse rotated around criticisms about delays in the country's preparedness to meet commitments made on specific sub-divisions of the chapters of the *acquis*. This report not only set the agenda of national debates in substantive terms, but it served as a unique point of reference and source of authority, and it "contaminated" the vocabulary employed in the media with the specific Euro-jargon.

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper was written in the framework of the EU-CONSENT international network of excellence.

**Reform policies.** Domestic reforms were characterized, on one hand, by a general “reform fatigue”. However, on the other hand, there was the ambition to demonstrate a concerted effort to respond to the critical findings of the Commission’s monitoring report. The governing political elite, most specialized units of the civil service, expert circles and related social groups (such as the magistrates and the branches of the legal profession as a whole) took part in this exercise. Insofar as political and economic reforms were dictated by pre-accession requirements, they clearly shifted from a horizontal effort to transpose EU legislation towards a focused strain in those sub-sectors that had raised serious EU concerns.

As can be seen from the above summary, the pre-accession agenda was dominant at the levels of politics, policies and public debates. Its major thrust was to secure Bulgaria’s entry in the EU on 1 January 2007, and avoid or minimize the risks of postponing accession until 2008. On this background, all other issues, which were of major significance for the EU (or were at least perceived as such), but which did not derive directly from the pre-accession process, were treated with a set of complementary tactics:

**Non-involvement.** This approach emphasises Bulgaria’s status of a not-yet EU member. In popular debate, this line of argument reads: “We should take pains at doing our pre-accession “homework”. The EU should deal with its internal problems.” It draws a clear distinction between the pre-accession and the post-accession agenda. It is based on the understanding that meeting entry requirements, fulfilling commitments made during the negotiations, adopting and implementing EU legislation – these are all activities that the acceding country should perform not only “in order to” achieve EU membership, but also “until” it does so. In the race towards EU membership, the date of entry is seen as a finish line, beyond which one starts a new game (a new race) with a different set of rules. That is usually the rationale behind the attempts of the political and business elite, while the country finds itself at the pre-accession stage, to distance itself from analyzing and debating problems that stand high on the agenda of the EU-25.

**Defensive/negative involvement.** This is an approach to dealing with current EU developments, which reveals the limitations of non-involvement. In one way or another, the most important cleavages within the EU-25 appear on issues that demonstrate the implications of the 2004 phase of the Eastern enlargement. These are, for example, EU-wide debates on the constitutional treaty, on the 2007-2013 financial framework, on the prospects for further widening. In most of the “old” EU members, these deliberations show a certain “enlargement fatigue” (of a different intensity), which is of a crucial short-term importance for Bulgaria and Romania. The coincidence of a “post-2004-enlargement fatigue” in the EU and a “pre-2007-accession reform fatigue” in Bulgaria and Romania has a cumulative negative impact on these two countries’ entry prospects. Moreover, the specific modalities of these “internal” EU debates and some set-backs (such as the two negative referenda or the much criticized UK budget package proposal of November 2005) imperil, more often than not, the seemingly unrelated issue of Bulgaria’s and Romania’s accession date. In such a context, the tactical approach adopted by national representatives is to try to prevent or at least limit potential damage: “Bulgaria should not be punished or endure negative consequences because of processes which do not depend on us.”

**Positive involvement.** Despite the preeminence of the above two tactical approaches, Bulgaria has resorted to a positive involvement in the debate on high priority EU issues, as well. As a rule, the expression of concrete views has taken place on specific substantive issues that are relatively non-contentious. On the contrary, Bulgarian representatives have tried to avoid















