

SECURING DEMOCRACY: NATO AND EU CONTRIBUTIONS TO BULGARIA'S POST-1989 TRANSITION

OSIGURAVANJE DEMOKRATIJE: ULOGA NATO-A I EU U RAZVOJU BUGARSKE NAKON TRANZICIJE 1989.

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Abstract

At the end of the 1980s, the Cold War ended, shifting the balance of power. The disintegration of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact led to the democratization of communist systems in Central and Eastern Europe. Despite the rapid political changes, NATO and the European Community acted to fill the void left by the Soviet Union. To ensure the continuation of the democratization process in Bulgaria, it was necessary to prioritize security, which was realised through NATO membership. From a NATO perspective, Bulgaria's membership was an important opportunity to protect Europe's eastern borders¹ and the Black Sea region². In addressing this geopolitical issue, the primary objective was to integrate Central and Eastern European countries transitioning from communism to democracy into NATO and the European Union. While the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has played a role in securing the democracies of its member countries, the European Union (EU) has contributed to political integration and the strengthening of democracies. Bulgaria has faced various challenges and achieved successes on its path towards democratization since 1989. Two significant external factors influenced the consolidation of democracy in Bulgaria: NATO and the European Union. Given that Bulgaria lacks a democratic tradition, its membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU) has addressed two key deficiencies. Firstly, it has provided a means of safeguarding the country's nascent democracy. Secondly, it has facilitated the consolidation and deepening of democratic processes. The primary objective of the article is to examine the influence of two external factors, NATO and the EU, on Bulgaria's democratic development.

Cljučne riječi: Bulgaria, Democratization, External Factors, EU, NATO

Sažetak

Krajem 1980-ih, završen je Hladni rat, što je rezultiralo promjenom ravnoteže snaga. Raspad Sovjetskog Saveza i Varšavskog pakta doveo je do demokratizacije komunističkih sistema u Centralnoj i Istočnoj Evropi. Uprkos brzim političkim promjenama koje su se dešavale, NATO i Evropska zajednica djelovali su kako bi popunili prazninu koju je ostavio Sovjetski Savez. Da bi se osigurao nastavak procesa demokratizacije u Bugarskoj, bilo je potrebno dati prioritet sigurnosti, što je ostvareno članstvom u NATO-u. Iz perspektive NATO-a, članstvo Bugarske bila je važna prilika za zaštitu istočnih granica Evrope i regije Crnog mora. U rješavanju ovog

geopolitičkog pitanja, primarni cilj bio je integracija zemalja Centralne i Istočne Evrope, koje prelaze iz komunizma u demokratiju, u NATO i Evropsku uniju. Dok je Sjevernoatlantski savez (NATO) odigrao ulogu u osiguravanju demokratija svojih zemalja članica, Evropska unija (EU) doprinijela je političkoj integraciji i jačanju demokratija. Bugarska je prošla kroz različite izazove i uspjehe na svom putu ka demokratizaciji od 1989. godine. Dva značajna vanjska faktora uticala su na konsolidaciju demokratije u Bugarskoj: NATO i Evropska unija. S obzirom na to da Bugarskoj nedostaje demokratska tradicija, njeno članstvo u Sjevernoatlantskom savezu (NATO) i Evropskoj uniji (EU) riješilo je dva ključna nedostatka. Prvo, obezbijedilo je sredstvo za zaštitu nove demokratije u zemlji. Drugo, olakšalo je konsolidaciju i produbljivanje demokratskih procesa. Primarni cilj članka je ispitati uticaj dva vanjska faktora – NATO-a i EU – na demokratski razvoj Bugarske.

Keywords: Bugarska, Demokratizacija, Vanjski faktori, EU, NATO

1. INTRODUCTION

Turbulent changes on the international political and economic level marked the last decades of the 20th century. However, it was not “the end of history”, as Francis Fukuyama (1989) wrote, rather it was a new world order and a new competition between superpowers and regional players; in other words, it was the beginning of recent history. The end of the Cold War followed the collapse of the Soviet Union and its military and collective defence agreement, the Warsaw Pact. Additionally, the emergence of newly independent states in Europe and Asia marked a noteworthy success for the liberal democratic system, under the leadership of the United States and NATO. As Western Europe and the United States represented democracy, they took on the task of spreading it and served as the external factor in the transition of many countries from totalitarian and authoritarian regimes to democratic ones. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, many countries in Central and Southern Europe began the process of democratization and a shift in international orientation.

The Soviet Union’s downfall was merely an external factor in the early stages of democratisation in the countries under its influence. As Искра mentions in her article that: “The great upheavals experienced by Bulgaria in the second part of the twentieth century enable historians to compare the two transitions – the one made after World War II and the one that began after the end of the Cold War. Both The transitions are not specifically Bulgarian but are the result of global processes and ideologies – the first is a consequence of the triumph of the Soviet Union in World War II and Marxism, and the second, the defeat of the USSR in the Cold War and liberalism, declared a little hastily in the early 90s for the ultimate winner in the world struggle of ideas.” (Iskra 2011, 330-341)

Since the fall of the totalitarian communist regime in 1989, Bulgaria has experienced a transition to a democratic political system and an open market economy. This

transition has been bloodless and peaceful. The initial focus of governments in this process was on improving the economy, combating corruption and bribery, and enhancing the standard of living. Certainly, not every process proceeds as planned, and sometimes there are some hindrances along the way. As Bulgaria has entered a period of rapid change, it has faced challenges in consolidating democracy.

Bulgaria's relationship with Russia is significant for understanding the country's historical events throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Firstly, Bulgaria achieved independence with Russia's assistance, leading the majority of the population to adopt pro-Russian sentiments. Secondly, the ideology of communism persisted long after the First World War, and it attained governance after the Second World War.

These two important elements have influenced the democratization process in Bulgaria. The populace's ideology did not swiftly alter, and the process of democratization progressed gradually over an extended period. However, as the public underwent political and ideological changes over time, the pace of democratization in domestic politics accelerated. When pro-democracy groups gained power in domestic politics, this time the path was taken towards EU and NATO membership. With the emphasis on fulfilling the membership requirements of the EU and NATO, the democratization process has reached certain results with the interaction of internal and external factors.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methods in this study were intended to be developed in line with the envisaged goals and objectives. Therefore, a qualitative research method is preferred for this study. According to Creswell, "Qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The research process involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant's setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data." (Creswell 2014, 32)

A single-case study approach is used in the article. A case study is a thorough and detailed analysis of a single case or a small number of cases that aims to provide insight into the larger population through observational data (Gerring 2017, 28). It is a method in which the researcher seeks meaning in the characteristics of a bounded system (time or activity), and it is defined as the interpretation of events limited in space and time.

The unit of analysis is an organization, group, individual or critical incident. Case studies are conducted using different sources of information, including sites and historical documents. The result of the case study is an interpretation and

description of the case, which depend on the case's social, economic, cultural, geographical, and historical contexts.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section is devoted to a literature review, particularly on the democratization process in Bulgaria.

Daskalov (1999) provides an overview of the transition period without delving into excessive detail. The author argues that Bulgaria's transition from a totalitarian regime to a democracy was largely unsuccessful. Daskalov presents the current state of affairs and approaches the issue from a socio-political context. The author analyses cultural, international, internal political, psychological, and demographic factors that contribute to the issue. From a political perspective, the author identifies several reasons for democracy's deadlock, including equal power between communists and anti-communists, political polarization, weak opposition, a lack of strategy, and societal division. The author discusses two crucial issues in the democratization process: the unhealthy economic development and unresolved ethnic issues.

Dimitrova (2004) provides a critical perspective. She argues that Bulgaria's transition to democracy differed significantly from that of other Central European countries. According to Dimitrova, there are three key points to consider. Firstly, the opposition before the transition to democracy was weak and unprepared to manage the new system. Secondly, Bulgaria owes Russia for gaining its freedom from the Ottoman Empire, which has led to a pro-Russian sentiment among most of the population. Thirdly, the elites in Bulgaria do not tolerate any criticism of Russia. Dimitrova argues that the Bulgarian transition was primarily led by the elites, with only a small number of civil protests³.

Lakov (2014) presents an alternative perspective on Bulgaria's democratization process. Lakov draws attention to the significant economic challenges that existed before the transition began. He argues that if Bulgaria had implemented the Rahn-Utt economic development plan⁴, it would have had a more stable economy and navigated the political crises of 1996 and 1997 more effectively.

Spirova (2010) argues that Bulgaria underwent a peaceful transition from communist one-party rule to a multi-party political system. The author suggests that Bulgaria's difficulties may be linked to its historical economic ties with the Soviet Union and with non-democratic countries. Bulgaria had a centralized financial system, but during the transition to democracy, it struggled to adapt to a free-market economy. Despite economic difficulties, Bulgaria has faced political and social challenges due to the firmly established communist ideology by the political elite and society⁵.

Raychev and Stoychev (2008) approach to the democratisation of Bulgaria from a sociological perspective and discuss the issue from two different angles. Firstly, the revolutions were initially influenced by the events unfolding on the world political stage during that period. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and its communist ideology, the satellite states began their transition to democracy. Secondly, the authors analysed the role of elites in this revolution. According to the authors, Bulgaria has experienced prolonged instability during its democratization.

Crampton (2005) argues that the fall of Bulgaria's communist leader, Todor Zhivkov, was not a revolution but rather an interparty or palace coup. According to Crampton, ordinary people had little influence on leadership changes during the transition period. Crampton states that Bulgaria experienced political and economic crises until 1997, which interrupted the democratization process. The instability was caused, in part, by the establishment of short-term governments. As a result, Bulgaria was unable to pursue its desired foreign policy objectives while addressing internal issues. These developments have created public discontent and distrust, which profoundly affected the state.

The literature review aims to identify the challenges Bulgaria faced during its transition to democracy. The literature on Bulgaria's transition from a totalitarian regime to democracy has primarily been analysed from economic, historical, cultural, and sociological perspectives.

This study examines the influence of NATO and EU as an external factor on Bulgaria's democratisation process. The political literature lacks a direct study on this context, making the research an important contribution to the field.

4. THE ROLE OF NATO AS AN EXTERNAL FACTOR AND THE IMPLICATIONS OF BULGARIA'S NATO MEMBERSHIP PROCESS

Following the end of the Second World War, Bulgaria fell within the Soviet Union's sphere of influence. It later joined the Warsaw Pact. The Warsaw Pact was created for strategic action and mutual defence among communist countries. The Bulgarian military was ideologically aligned with communism and acted in the interests of the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe.

In the final years of the 20th century, Bulgaria underwent a transition from an oppressive communist regime to a democratic system. In replacing the institutions of the communist system with democratic ones in domestic politics, the country severed its ties with the USSR and the Warsaw Pact. It began to pursue a policy oriented towards NATO and EU membership.

Zhelyu Zhelev, the first president of the democratization period and the chairman of the UDF, had a clear orientation towards NATO and the EU. Also, he pursued

a policy of fostering good relations with neighbouring countries. Bulgaria's two neighbours, Turkey and Greece, have been NATO members for a long time. It was hoped that improving relations with them would facilitate Bulgaria's path to NATO membership. However, Bulgaria's withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact left the country with a security gap. The only viable solution for Bulgaria, which was striving towards democracy, was to become a member of NATO. The continuing communist influence in the country delayed the process. However, the changing domestic political balance later accelerated the steps towards membership. "Zhelev made several visits⁶ to the West, including Western Europe, the United States and Japan in 1990-91 to demonstrate the country's reorientation away from Moscow"(Tashev 2004, 4)

However, contrary to the new president's Western orientation, the Bulgarian Socialist Party opposed this plan⁷ and strategy, especially the intention to join NATO, and sought to protect Bulgaria's national unity, emphasising that this would be done by continuing political ties and relations with Russia.

The Bulgarian Socialist Party⁸ did not show a favourable attitude to Bulgaria's integration into NATO. For this reason, the relationship with NATO did not develop in a progressive manner at the beginning of the 1990s.⁹

The UDF won the 1991 parliamentary elections and formed a coalition government with the MRF. The establishment of a democratic government meant improved relations with the democratic West and its organisations, NATO and the EU. In this period, political steps on the way to NATO membership accelerated.

Although NATO relations have been running slowly, in 1994 Bulgaria joined NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) program. The purpose of the program was to prepare the countries on the NATO and Euro-Atlantic membership path individually. As for NATO's next plan: "The NATO Enlargement Study, published in September 1995, placed a strong emphasis on the democratisation of candidate countries, the protection of individual freedoms, human and minority rights, and the pursuit of legitimacy"(Jeffrey 1998, 94). The implementation of a democratic system was emphasized as a prerequisite for a country's membership in NATO and Euro-Atlantic institutions. It was also reiterated that NATO assumes the role of defending the democratic system.

In 1994, the Bulgarian Socialist Party's re-election and rise to power caused a significant setback in NATO relations¹⁰. As a result, Bulgaria decided to withdraw from the talks on NATO integration, and agreements were made with Russia to purchase new military equipment. The years between 1990 and 1997 were considered the seven lost years in Bulgaria's NATO integration (Jeffrey 1998, 94).

5. UDF PERIOD BULGARIA NATO RELATIONS

In 1996, the United Democratic Forces (UtdDF) coalition was formed, comprising the UDF, the Bulgarian Social Democratic Party (BSP), and the People's Union (PU). The coalition came to power under Prime Minister Ivan Kostov after the general elections held on 19 April 1997 (Harper 2003, 336). Ivan Kostov had a background in economics and took significant steps to get Bulgaria out of the crisis, including signing new agreements with the IMF.

The Kostov government experienced major changes on the road to NATO membership. At the 1997 NATO Summit in Madrid, the idea of enlargement to Central and Eastern Europe prevailed. This was the hope of the newly formed democratic government¹¹ in Bulgaria for NATO membership.

Between 1998 and 1999, the Kosovo War broke out¹². Western borders of Bulgaria were in danger¹³ and urgent steps have been taken regarding the Kosovo war. The Declaration was adopted by the Bulgarian Parliament on 23 October 1998 and contained clear decisions on how to approach the on-going Kosovo war and how to develop relations with NATO (Костов 2019, 367).

The majority in parliament favoured the Euro-Atlantic side of the argument, and this was the starting point for Bulgaria's future path.¹⁴

On 18 April 1999, NATO asked Bulgaria to open its airspace to them indefinitely, and this request was accepted by the Bulgarian government. When the Russians made the same request, it was rejected and granted for a later period, subject to certain conditions.

NATO and the EU have welcomed Bulgaria's positions, and the first NATO membership has been realised, with the path to EU membership accelerated. Due to its geostrategic location, Bulgaria's membership of the European Union preceded its membership of NATO. Once Bulgaria was strategically and militarily secured from Russia's sphere of influence, the path to EU membership improved significantly.

According to Solomon Passy¹⁵ the shortest and most certain way to join the European Union was through NATO membership, as these two structures are closely linked (Паси 2017, 24). He emphasised that Bulgaria's prestige would increase with its membership of NATO and the EU. This is because member states have the right to veto, allowing them to determine their own destiny (Паси 2017, 24).

In 1999, NATO began the enlargement process towards Eastern Europe, opening a new chapter. While Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Poland were new members of NATO, Bulgaria has begun to stabilize its progress along the integration path. The United Democratic Forces (UtdDF) government, which established a supra-ministerial committee, began implementing changes at NATO's request.

The Kostov Government worked effectively under difficult conditions and ensured that Bulgaria was on the right path to integration into the European democratic community. During the reign of King Simeon, who came after the Kostov government, the fruits of these efforts began to be seen.

6. THE NATIONAL MOVEMENT SIMEON II PERIOD BULGARIA NATO RELATIONS

In 2001, Bulgaria was preparing for new parliamentary elections. Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha¹⁶, the former king of Bulgaria, returned from exile in Spain with the aim of entering politics. Simeon focused himself on the upcoming parliamentary elections and founded the National Movement Simeon II (NMSII) party (Сакскобургготски 2014, 239). Simeon set the party's goals as "decisive economic growth, rapid membership to the EU and NATO, and abolishing bribery from the country," and in this direction, he welcomed the coalition of parties that share the same ideas.

The parliamentary elections were held on 17 June 2001. Simon's party won 43% of the vote and 120 of the 240 seats in parliament. Although the UDF Coalition did not perform well in the elections, the BSP also experienced a decline. The MRF received 7.5% of the vote in the elections and gained 21 seats in parliament. They formed a coalition with the NMSII, resulting in the formation of a coalition government¹⁷.

In October 2001, the parties were preparing for the presidential election, scheduled for November, and six candidates had been determined. As a result of the presidential elections, Georgi Parvanov, the leader of the BSP, won the presidency. Bulgaria's NATO membership was realized during the terms of President Georgi Parvanov and Prime Minister Simeon.

Simeon's tenure coincided with the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq by the United States and its military coalition. While these events created an opportunity for Bulgaria to become a member of NATO, it was necessary to send soldiers to NATO missions in different countries as a condition of membership in the coalition. Simeon had a difficult time in the decision-making process regarding sending troops to Iraq and expressed this in his own words, "We had to follow America to become a member of NATO" (Сакскобургготски 2014, 243).

Additionally, Bulgaria was required to implement military reforms on the path to NATO membership, and within the scope of these reforms, it was envisaged to restructure and deploy the military, as well as to reduce the military's numbers.

7. BULGARIA'S NATO INTEGRATION

Bulgaria's strategic location in the Black Sea region makes it a key player in the area. Russia has maintained political and economic relations with Bulgaria to maintain its influence in the region. Therefore, to be protected from Russian influence, Bulgaria first had to become a member of NATO. According to Prime Minister Simeon: "NATO was above all a treaty for the mutual protection of countries that shared the same values", while the EU did not have a military sector (Сакскобургготски 2014, 270). In April 2004, Bulgaria joined the NATO alliance as a result of its efforts towards Europeanization (Сакскобургготски 2014, 267).

Bulgaria became a NATO member in 2004 and gained some significant benefits:

- Bulgaria faced a security crisis upon leaving the Warsaw Pact and resolved it by joining NATO.
- Due to Bulgaria's strategic location and its border with the Black Sea, NATO membership has prevented the potential for increased influence of different powers, particularly Russia, in Bulgaria.
- Prior to NATO membership, Bulgaria was a military and technological breakaway from Russia. As a result, Russia's influence in the country decreased, and the path to membership was expedited.
- NATO membership has helped resolve political disagreements in Bulgaria regarding Euro-Atlantic membership, leading to the stabilization of democratic rule.
- Bulgaria underwent a transition to democracy following the collapse of the communist system. Its path towards EU membership was facilitated by its NATO membership.
- The fact that NATO is composed of democratic countries and has a policy of promoting democracy has been instrumental in strengthening Bulgaria's democratic institutions.
- Bulgaria's NATO membership has helped to protect and secure democracy across Europe, from its western to eastern borders.

8. THE ROLE OF EU AS AN EXTERNAL FACTOR AND BULGARIA'S ACCESSION PROCESS TO THE EUROPEAN UNION

The expansion of the European Union into Central and Eastern Europe has occurred simultaneously with NATO's expansion of NATO¹⁸. The European Union, as a supranational organization, has the mechanisms to restructure and transform the internal politics and political institutions of member states¹⁹. As a result, the transition to democratic systems and their consolidation in these countries has been successful.

Economic causes and development primarily drove the initial enlargement of the European Union. This was particularly evident in 1989, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, when Central and Eastern European countries began the process of transition from communism to democracy and applied for membership in the European Union. After the 1990s, the European Union's enlargement policy became more political, particularly with the inclusion of Central and Eastern post-communist countries. During this period of enlargement, NATO membership was granted to ensure military and security guarantees for these countries. As a result, it became easier for these countries to join the EU.

Under the European Union Treaty, countries seeking membership must adhere to the EU's democratic principles and pledge to implement them in their domestic policies. In 1993, the European Commission established criteria for countries seeking EU membership. These criteria, known as the Copenhagen criteria, require aspiring members to meet certain standards²⁰.

"In accordance with the Copenhagen criteria, the candidate country must demonstrate the existence of stable democratic institutions, respect for the rule of law and respect for human rights. The EU's foreign policy adds value by promoting democratic principles and values as a means of resolving international conflicts. The European diplomatic model is based on democratic dialogue and cooperation, and connections with third countries are seen as a mechanism to stimulate the process of their democratisation" (Корнажева, М., и Станчева 2013, 68–69).

In the 1990s, the states of the European Communities were parliamentary democracies with multi-party systems. Bulgaria, like other post-communist European countries, aimed to become part of a democratic society and took the first steps towards that goal.

9. BULGARIA'S EU MEMBERSHIP PROCESS

The Bulgarian Socialist Party, which won the first democratic elections in Bulgaria, kept its distance from NATO membership but accepted membership of the European Union. Since the transition from communism to democracy in Bulgaria, the country has been committed to pursuing EU membership. While participating in the EU enlargement process, Bulgaria has endeavoured to implement the Copenhagen Criteria in its domestic policies.

In December 1990, the Bulgarian parliament has set its sights on full membership of the European Union. This decision was accepted, indicating the political and economic elite's eagerness for such membership (Özen, 2020, 263). In the same year, Bulgaria participated in PHARE, a program established by the European Community to provide aid to transition countries in Eastern Europe. On 20 March

1992, the Council of Ministers in Bulgaria established an interdepartmental commission for cooperation with the European Communities Association (Костов 2019, 99).

Considering the internal politics of the period, Bulgaria's desire to become a member of the European Communities can be explained through several reasons:

- Bulgaria's communist regime past and assimilation policy towards the Turks have resulted in international isolation of the country. However, the country has taken a significant step towards ending this isolation by engaging in association negotiations.
- Bulgaria has made efforts to integrate into democratic societies. As a result, it has targeted becoming a member of the European Union.
- In the early 1990s, Bulgaria underwent a transition period marked by an economic crisis²¹ that lasted until 1997. To overcome this difficult situation, the country required foreign aid and investors. As a result, Bulgaria initiated the application process to join the European Communities, which was considered the most reliable supranational organization.
- Bulgaria requires democratization experiences and oversight from Western European democratic communities.

Bulgaria joined the Council of Europe in May 1992 and subsequently came under its supervision in the adoption of new laws. Following its accession, Bulgaria signed Association Agreements with the European Union between February and March 1993 (Petrovic 2008, 130). After signing an association agreement, the governments established by parties with different ideologies shared a common goal: membership in the European Union. This became the primary focus of politics in Bulgaria. Upon signing the EU accession criteria, Bulgaria was left with no choice but to align its political and economic systems with the EU's standards.

After the democratization process began, Bulgaria aimed to strengthen its European identity. As a result, it participated in Central European and regional cooperation, including the Central European Initiative (CEI), which it joined in 1994 (Bechev, 2009, 21).

On 18 December 1995, the democratic government formed by the UDF and MRF coalition in Bulgaria applied for full membership to the European Union. However, the application was not accepted due to political and economic reasons²². Despite these adversities, Bulgaria continued to be kept within the framework of the EU enlargement policy. With the establishment of the new democratic government in 1997, the steps towards EU integration accelerated.

In 1999, Bulgaria joined the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA)²³. The primary objective of this regional organization was to liberalise trade and facilitate the flow of goods in the region.

10. BULGARIA'S ENTRY INTO CEE

In the mid-1990s, Bulgaria and Romania joined the Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) group. The European Union developed a specific enlargement policy and group-specific participation strategy for this group (Demetropoulou 2002, 91). Different groups of countries have received varying levels of assistance and different approaches have been employed. The European Union harmonised the political situation of post-communist Central and Eastern European countries that intended to become members of the Union. This was achieved through the application of conditionality principles, which also encouraged modernisation, economic growth, and social development (Spenzharova 2003, 144). The European Union supported the Central and Eastern European countries in two ways. Firstly, it provided financial assistance to improve the economies and social standards of these countries. Secondly, the EU provided guidance on specific issues to help them reach the level of member state (Grabbe 2002, 253).

Prior to commencing the enlargement process of the European Union, the countries that transitioned from communism were categorised based on political, economic, and social factors. These groups were the Visegrad Four (the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia) and the Baltic Cooperation Countries (Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia). While Slovenia, Albania, and the former Yugoslav states constitute the Western Balkan group, Bulgaria and Romania were included in the Southeastern European group.

The Central European states completed the process swiftly, but Bulgaria and Romania faced delays due to economic problems and high levels of corruption. The EU membership plan for Bulgaria was in 2004²⁴ but membership took place on January 2007 due to not fulfilling certain conditions on time (Andreev 2009, 390).

On June 10, 1999, The European Union initiated to establish the Stability Pact for SEE (SP) for South-Eastern Europe. The primary aim of the Pact was to prevent war and maintain stability in the region, particularly after the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the escalation of the Kosovo war. Bulgaria quickly joined the Pact and became a member (Bechev 2017, 34).

Bulgaria has occasionally taken a leading role in initiatives aimed at accelerating the democratization process and strengthening membership, such as initiating the South-East European Cooperation Process (Özen 2020, 264).

The European Council meeting at the Helsinki Summit, held on 10 and 11 December 1999, was productive, resulting in significant decisions on Eastern Europe's enlargement. The Helsinki Summit was a significant event for Bulgaria, as it marked the beginning of negotiations for European Union integration. In the early 2000s, negotiations between Bulgaria and the EU commenced.

In the 2000s, as the economic situation began to stabilise²⁵, Bulgaria's progress towards European Union membership accelerated. As a result, Bulgaria was granted the right to travel visa-free in both EU member states and the Schengen area (Crampton 2007, 243). During this period, Bulgaria was not under significant pressure, but it aligned itself with the programs and policies of political leaders and parties related to European integration. Bulgaria underwent rapid reforms, particularly after 2001, which facilitated the Europeanization of institutions and rules.

11. PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN BULGARIA BEFORE EU MEMBERSHIP

Following Bulgaria's entry into the democratization process, governments formed until the 2000s alternated between the pro-democracy opposition, the UDF, and the BSP, which represented the communists²⁶. In the 2000s, significant changes occurred between the two political poles, resulting in a significant break²⁷ in the party system in Bulgaria. While the opposition on the democratic right has adopted a more pragmatic, moderate policy, the leftists have taken a sharp turn towards the West and become advocates of integration with the European Union and NATO.

After the 2001 parliamentary elections, rapid progress was made towards EU integration. Bulgaria was preparing for its final parliamentary elections before joining the EU, as progress was being made in solving issues related to minorities and military restructuring²⁸. The last parliamentary elections in Bulgaria before Bulgaria's accession to the European Union took place in 2005.

The 2005 election campaign started on May 25, one month before the elections. While the unifying feature in the campaigns of the parties preparing to participate in the elections was the subject of EU integration, the development of the economy, the revision of the judiciary, healthcare, education, and social security issues were also kept on the agenda.

In the period leading up to the elections, particularly after NATO membership, extreme nationalists who were against this membership established populist parties. As a result, the ATAKA party was formed.

The newly established ATTACK Party (ATAKA) also participated in these elections. The Attack Party, located in the Centre-Right and with a populist ideology, made an impact during the period by opposing NATO and conducting

a negative campaign against minorities. The party attracted a large following of ultra-nationalists resentful of the ruling parties.

In the parliamentary elections, seven parties were eligible to enter the parliament. The June 2005 elections resulted in the most fractional parliament in the history of Bulgaria's democracy to that date, despite low voter turnout. The Bulgarian Socialist Party received the most votes in the elections and formed the government with the MRF and the NDS. A coalition government of BSP, NDSV and MRF was formed in mid-August (Spirova 2011, 620).

With the establishment of the new government, the EU membership process has once again become a prior item on the political agenda. In 2006, the Maastricht criteria came to the fore in the agenda of Prime Minister Sergey Stanishev in order to align policies with the EU. Although Bulgaria was not initially considered ready for full EU membership, concerns were raised when Germany, the Netherlands, and France expressed their disapproval of the membership. However, despite this negativity, the membership took place on January 1, 2007, as planned. Bulgaria has achieved its second most important goal, EU membership, which it has pursued since the transition to democracy. This accomplishment follows its integration into NATO.

12. THE IMPACT OF EU MEMBERSHIP ON THE DEMOCRATIZATION PROCESS IN BULGARIA

The European Union has had a significant impact on Bulgaria's democratisation, particularly in constitutional reform, minority rights, and the depoliticisation of the army.

a) EU impact on the Constitutional Reform

Replacing Bulgaria's communist constitution with a democratic one in 1991 was a significant and successful step in the country's democratization process. Bulgaria was the first among Central and Eastern European countries to adopt a democratic constitution. However, due to the Bulgarian Socialist Party's dominance²⁹ in its creation, some articles were later revised. The political polarization that existed between 1990 and 2001 prevented the implementation of the requested changes to the constitution for an extended period. Constitutional changes in Bulgaria were implemented due to two significant factors.

- First, with the establishment of the NDSV government in 2001 and the end of polarized politics, it became easier to amend certain articles of the constitution.

When the NDSV government came to power, it was decided to accelerate the steps towards EU membership. Action was taken in line with the EU's reform requests.

- Second, the European Commission's request for institutional reforms as part of Bulgaria's path to EU membership (Hein 2016, 152).

Bulgaria's accession to the European Union required harmonisation of its constitution with the founding agreements of the European Communities. Constitutional changes were deemed important for accelerating the path to EU membership. In this way, the EU indirectly influenced the changes to the Bulgarian constitution.

The European Union has significantly influenced Bulgarian constitutionalism³⁰ and democratization policies (Smilov 2010, 96). At the outset of the democratization process, the Bulgarian government made significant changes to facilitate EU membership. To comply with EU standards, Bulgaria has amended certain articles at different times to ensure a democratic constitution.

The Bulgarian Constitution of 1991 provides four types of immunity: for the President, Members of Parliament, Judges, and Members of the Constitutional Court (Танчев 2002, 9).

Restricting or abolishing the immunity rights of MPs and judges has been a long-standing topic in domestic politics. The importance of this change lies in enabling MPs and judges to be questioned and in preventing corruption in the country. Meanwhile, Bulgaria was required to reform its judiciary. However, this constitutional amendment was necessary for Bulgaria to achieve full EU membership. As a result, the democratic constitution was amended only after the 2000s.

b) *First constitutional amendment in 2003*

The first constitutional amendment was adopted in 2003 by the NDSV coalition. The Bulgarian democratic constitution underwent significant changes in the Judiciary section, the sixth chapter. The changes were made to certain articles (Hein, 152-154). The first significant change was the limitation of judges' immunity actions. The Supreme Judicial Council may revoke the immunity of judges upon the decision of one-fifth of the judicial members or at the request of the Chief Prosecutor (Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria, 1991, Art. 131-132). The second amendment to the constitution states that judges will become irremovable only after serving for 5 years instead of 3. This situation must be evaluated positively by the Supreme Judicial Council (Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria, 1991, Art. 129, sec. 3-4). The third change in the judiciary is that those in judicial positions will no longer be appointed for life. Instead, they will be appointed to a five-year term until they are appointed to another position (Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria, 1991, Art. 129, sec. 5-6).

- The closure of the 'justice and home affairs' chapter was ensured by the first amendments made in the 1991 democratic constitution, which led to the conclusion of all EU accession negotiations in June 2004 (Hein, 155).

c) *Second constitutional amendment 2005*

The constitution underwent two significant changes following the 2005 election victory of BSP³¹ and during its coalition with NDSV and MRF. The second constitutional amendment was passed in 2005 and primarily concerned laws related to the institutionalization of EU membership (Hein, 155-156). The articles covered by these amendments are as follows: Bulgaria's contribution to the development and construction of the European Union (Art. 4, Sec. 3), giving the EU the rights arising from this constitution (Art. 85, Sec. 1, No 9), the Council of Ministers denouncing the National Assembly from EU membership, at the same time, the Council of Ministers is required to inform the National Assembly in advance and inform about its actions when participating in the preparation and adoption of European Union instruments (Art. 105, Sec. 3-4), to be regulated by the law on participation in elections of members of the European Parliament and participation of EU citizens in local elections (Art. 42, Sec. 3), the right of foreigners to own land in the country under the conditions arising from Bulgaria's accession to the EU (Art. 22, Sec. 1), the inability of any Bulgarian citizen to be abandoned to another country or to an international court in accordance with certain international agreements (Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria, 1991, Art. 25, Sec. 4).

- Following these amendments to the constitution, Bulgaria gained the right to sign an EU accession treaty (Hein, 156).

Although all parties accepted the amendment to Bulgaria's democratic constitution regarding EU membership, there were difficulties, particularly in the reform of the judiciary. The EU insisted that Bulgaria make changes in this area as a priority.

d) *Third constitutional amendment 2006*

In 2006, amendments to the law were made, particularly regarding deputies' immunity. In 2006, several changes were made to the constitution, including the limitation of deputy immunity. The limits of a deputy's immunity have been defined. If a deputy commits a criminal offense, prosecution requires a decision from either the National Assembly or the President of the Assembly. If the deputy is caught in the act, this decision is not necessary, but the parliament must be informed (Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria, 1991, Art. 70, Sec. 1-2). At the request of the EU, the Bulgarian Assembly has enacted a law governing the election of an Ombudsman³² whose role is to safeguard the rights and freedoms of the people (Art. 91a, Sec. 1).

These were some of the changes to the Bulgarian constitution before its accession to the EU. The changes ensured the stability of Bulgaria's EU membership, which was confirmed in January 2007, and prevented any further postponements.

The European Union requested changes to Bulgaria's constitution in three areas.

The first area concerned the reform of the judiciary, including its strengthening and the revision of judges' immunity, taking into account their fallibility. The two main requests were to take new constitutional measures to prevent corruption in the country and to implement the changes necessary to support them. Finally, Bulgaria was requested to remove some restrictions and expand the scope of freedoms to comply with EU membership requirements. As a result of these demands and observations, Bulgaria successfully implemented these changes, making its system more democratic and deserving integration with the democratic world.

e) *EU impact on Minority Rights*

In Bulgaria, the Council of Europe and the European Union have played a significant role in promoting minority rights and improving relations with minorities since the beginning of the democratization process. Minority rights are a crucial indicator of a country's democracy. Resolving the minority problem in Bulgaria has been challenging³³.

The main problem faced by the Muslim minority (mostly consisting of ethnic Turks) is that assimilation attempts have been on-going since the repressive communist regime. Despite constitutional and legal guarantees of minority rights, the government has not respected them in practice.

Turkish participation in politics and the Movement for Rights and Freedoms party, which represents them, has played a significant and decisive role in all Bulgarian governments since the democratization process began, up until the country's integration into the EU. However, during the MRF's early years, nationalist and communist members of parliament attempted to prevent the party's participation in elections. Therefore, due to warnings and calls for change from the European Union, Bulgaria has since made mandatory policy changes regarding minorities and has made significant progress in this regard.

In the mid-1990s, Bulgaria held its first successful democratic elections, which led to the adoption of a new constitution in 1991, marking the beginning of progress towards democratisation. To become a member of the Council of Europe, Bulgaria was required to harmonize its human rights framework with that of the European Union, which was addressed in the democratic constitution.

The Copenhagen criteria require strict implementation of the article on minority rights in order to progress towards EU membership. In August 1992, following progress in association negotiations, the National Assembly ratified the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, marking a significant step towards reforming Bulgaria's old system (Костов,101). The ratification of the Convention granted Bulgarian citizens the right to seek redress for human rights violations in the European court.

On February 18, 1999, the Bulgarian parliament ratified the Council of Europe's Convention on the Protection of National Minorities with a majority vote. This momentous decision played a crucial role in shaping Bulgaria's policy towards minorities and was seen as a step towards democratization and EU membership. Significant changes were made to the constitution regarding minority issues, especially after the 2000s, which facilitated the membership path and demonstrated that the EU accelerated Bulgaria's democratization.

13. DE-POLITICIZATION OF THE ARMY IN BULGARIA

One of the obligatory steps taken by Bulgaria on the path to EU membership was the de-politicization of the army and the creation of a civilian and administrative structure under the Ministry of Defence (Ratchev 2002, 91). During the communist era, the military both monitored and endorsed the actions of political administrations. Over 80% of military officials were members of the Communist Party.

During the intra-party coup against Todor Zhivkov, the Bulgarian army maintained its neutrality³⁴. It declared its intention to remain apolitical and provide stability during the peaceful transition period. This stance contributed to a smooth transition in Bulgaria (Soper, 238).

In 1991, the Bulgarian military was transitioning from a highly politicized army to a depoliticized one (Soper, 238). During the initial years of the democratization period, the democratic opposition held sessions and stressed the importance of depoliticizing the military. The Round Table Meetings also extensively discussed this matter. During the national roundtable meetings, a crucial decision was made to "depoliticise the army, police, judiciary, prosecution, and diplomacy"³⁵.

Since the period of democratization, the aims and objectives of the Bulgarian army have undergone significant change. Previously tasked with protecting the communist system, the army has been transformed into an institution that will fight for the country's national interests of the country (Soper, 239). The army's primary responsibility is to safeguard the nation's borders, territorial integrity, and independence. To ensure political neutrality and ideological consistency, high-ranking military officials with communist leanings were retired.

Bulgaria's efforts towards EU membership have resulted in the depoliticization of the military, which was previously influenced by the communist system. The EU has indirectly contributed to this positive development.

14. IMPACT OF EU MEMBERSHIP ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE DEMOCRATIC SYSTEM IN BULGARIA

The European Community and the European Union were a critical external factor from the beginning of Bulgaria's democratization process. In this context, the European Union has enabled countries to transform their systems through the conditionality policy it has applied to member countries.

Regarding the impact of EU membership on the development of the democratic system in Bulgaria, the following results have been obtained:

- Bulgaria has made agreements with the EU on various issues, demonstrating its commitment to democracy.
- On its path towards EU membership, Bulgaria has made significant progress in addressing minority issues and has successfully resolved this problem.
- The path towards EU membership has played a crucial role in safeguarding and reinforcing Bulgaria's democratic institutions.
- At the beginning of the democratization process, Bulgaria replaced its communist constitution with a new democratic one. The new constitution underwent significant changes in line with EU standards, making it more democratic.
- Bulgaria has taken steps towards EU membership by de-politicizing its military and returning it to its primary function of supporting and protecting the democratic system.

The establishment of a democratic system in Bulgaria was a lengthy and challenging process, but the desired outcome was eventually achieved. Bulgaria's NATO membership facilitated its accession to the EU, and 2007 marked a significant milestone in the country's democratic progress. Following its EU membership, Bulgaria has continued to work to strengthen and consolidate its democracy.

15. CONCLUSION

Between 1990 and 2007 Bulgaria went through three important transitions:

- “1. Political transition in which a democratic system of government was established
2. Economic transition from centrally planned economy to open market economy
3. The constitutional transition took place with the constitution created in 1991 and as a result of these transitions; EU membership has been realized” (Kostova 2016, 241).

Bulgaria's democratization process after the collapse of the communist regime in 1989 culminated in its membership in the EU and NATO (Smilov, 96). From

the outset, Bulgaria aligned its political and economic orientation with that of the EU and NATO. However, accession to these two organizations posed significant challenges. Bulgaria faced obstacles before its membership in NATO and the EU.

Due to the bipolar politics carried out at that time, different views emerged. During the 2000s, Bulgaria's domestic politics underwent significant changes, marked by the decline of bipolar politics and the emergence of liberal parties. Between 2001 and 2005, discussions about EU and NATO membership took place in the Bulgarian parliament. It was observed that there was political consensus among the parties on both matters. Inter-party political consensus has accelerated both the democratization process and the way to NATO and EU membership.

Bulgaria has striven assiduously to become a member of the European Union and NATO, two of the most esteemed Euro-Atlantic organisations. It successfully implemented a foreign policy within this framework and was rewarded by becoming a full member of the EU on January 1, 2007 (Bechev 2009, 210).

From an external perspective, it is difficult for the European Union to exert pressure on a sovereign state and influence changes in its domestic politics. However, if a country expresses its desire to become an EU member, the Europeanization process can have an impact on internal political changes within that country. Although seeking membership in the EU required internal changes to align with membership requirements. Additionally, external factors such as the EU and NATO emphasized the conditions for membership prior to joining.

Bulgaria's aspiration to join the EU required fulfilment of the Copenhagen Criteria, the membership requirements.

The domestic social, economic, institutional, and political changes were intertwined with the external dynamics of the participation process. These internal changes benefit Bulgaria's democratization and economic development, rather than the EU. Therefore, the changes emphasized by the EU are for the benefit of Bulgaria's young democracy. The implementation of these conditions helped to promote democracy both internally and externally in Bulgarian politics.

Economic sanctions were imposed by the EU when Bulgaria faced obstacles to its democratization, resulting in a delay in its membership. This demonstrates the EU's ability to exercise its check and balance power over candidate member states. Although Bulgaria has a communist past, it has successfully overcome various challenges and eventually achieved EU membership, which was a significant milestone towards democracy.

To conclude Bulgarian society and politicians expressed enthusiasm towards joining the EU, with high expectations such as:

- Firstly, Bulgaria's EU membership is expected to drive economic development through integration into the global economy. This is likely to attract investment from EU companies (Dimitrova, 2012)
- Secondly, the EU expected assistance in democratizing the country and its state institutions. As Dimitrova stated: "The Bulgarian government viewed the European integration process as a potential avenue for introducing external oversight and regulatory standards, aiming to reform the country's political system and institutions that had been significantly influenced by patronage and corruption. This approach posited that EU membership would serve as a significant corrective force for both government and political parties. Its objective was to facilitate the implementation, monitoring, and enforcement of reforms in areas identified as problematic by EU institutions, including the European Commission, namely corruption, organised crime, and the judiciary system" (Dimitrova, 2012)
- Bulgaria's acceptance as a full European state is the third expectation of EU membership (Dimitrova, 2012). This expectation stems from Bulgaria's long history of communism.

Endnotes

1 As for the other crucial issue, the territory of Bulgaria has turned into a logistic piece of land for NATO to open towards the Middle East (Rozoff 2010) and American bases have been established there.

2 Bulgaria was under Russian influence for an extended period, resulting in a strong bond between the two countries. However, with the collapse of the USSR, Russia's influence decreased. Nevertheless, in the 2000s, Russia regained its strength. In response to this situation, NATO expedited its policy of integrating CEE countries that were formerly under communist rule. Bulgaria's strategic location was a factor in its accelerated accession to NATO, which aimed to limit Russia's influence in the region.

3 The author suggests that the process was influenced by the elites of the old regime.

4 Following Bulgaria's transition to a democratic system, President Zhelyu Zhelev requested assistance from the United States in regards to economic development. As a result, American experts and economists were sent to the country to prepare an economic development plan. This plan, known as the Rahn Utt plan, was unfortunately never implemented in Bulgaria.

5 Public awareness and acceptance of the existence of a system is crucial to systemic change in a country. A system that is approved by both the public and the elites will be durable and robust.

6 After a long period of communist rule, Bulgaria sought to improve its relations with Western democracies through Zhelev's visits. The assimilation process applied to minorities in Bulgaria during the communist period had a negative impact on the country's international image. The visits also helped to correct this bad image.

7 During the initial years of the democratization process in Bulgaria, short-term governments were established. Due to ideological differences and debates between the parties, a stable orientation towards NATO and the EU was not possible.

8 Following the collapse of the communist system, the BCP underwent a significant internal transformation. This was spearheaded by the pro-reform wing, which led to the renaming of the party as the BSP. The BSP went on to win the first democratic elections and maintain its influence in Bulgarian foreign policy.

9 Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the declaration of independence by the Russian Federation in 1991, Bulgaria recognised this independence and decided to maintain its political relations with Russia. During this period, debates between the BSP and the opposition in the Bulgarian parliament centred on the choice between aligning with the East or the West. Although the communists attempted to maintain strong relations with Russia, the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia's internal political and economic crises, and the democratic opposition's strong pressure led to a growing interest in orienting towards the West.

10 While the Bulgarian Socialist Party was in favour of European Union membership, it was opposed to NATO membership. The rationale behind this stance was to establish and maintain good relations with Russia.

11 Bulgaria's EU and NATO membership process accelerated, especially when pro-EU and pro-reform parties came to power after the 1997 parliamentary elections (Petrovic 2008, 124).

12 In 1996, the Albanians demanded the independence of Kosovo, which eventually turned into an armed conflict between the Albanians and the Serbs. The war was stopped in 1999 by NATO intervention in Serbia.

13 At the outset of 1990, Bulgaria's departure from the Warsaw Pact precipitated a significant security gap. This prompted the country to pursue NATO membership as a means of addressing this vulnerability. Bulgaria's security concerns were similarly heightened during the Kosovo War. The Kosovo War period represented a pivotal moment in Bulgaria's history, marking a significant improvement in its relations with NATO.

14 Bulgaria's proximity to the war zone revealed its importance to both sides. NATO's decision to intervene in the war also affected the Bulgarian position regarding the war. Bulgaria has clearly shown its side by supporting NATO.

15He entered the office of Simeon of Saxe-Coburg as Minister of Foreign Affairs” (Омда, 2004). Solomon Passy had a significant impact on Bulgaria’s admission to NATO and its inclusion in Euro-Atlantic institutions.

16Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha became the tsar of Bulgaria at a young age between 1943 and 1946 during the Second World War, following the death of his father. After the communist revolution that took place in 1946, he was exiled to Spain with his mother and brothers. Returning to Bulgaria in 2001 and establishing a party, Simeon received high votes in the parliamentary elections and became the prime minister from 2001 to 2005 as a result of forming a coalition government.

17The competition between the red and blue parties came to an end, and a coalition with a liberal orientation was established for the first time in Bulgaria following its entrance into the democratisation period.

18 NATO places a greater emphasis on the security of member states, whereas the European Union (EU) is more concerned with the democratic evolution of domestic policies.

19 To become members of the European Union, countries must fulfil the conditions for EU membership.

20ec.Europa. European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations. 1993. Accessed March 16, 2022. https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/enlargement-policy/conditions-membership_en.

21 The collapse of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA), the beginning of the Persian Gulf War, the wars that broke out in the former Yugoslavia (Troxel 1993, 387) and the embargo imposed worsened the Bulgarian economy. Bulgaria lost its former economic partners, especially with the collapse of the Soviet Union (Troxel 1993, 388), which put the country in an economic deadlock and led it to seek new economic aid and partners, especially from the Western democratic world.

22Each new government introduced a unique approach to the democratisation process, which ultimately failed to stabilise the political landscape. In terms of the economy, the country’s new governments adopted disparate strategies, which proved ineffective in resolving the country’s economic crisis. Consequently, the European Union (EU) membership process was accelerated only when the country achieved a balance between its political and economic systems. The process commenced with the election victory of the United Democratic Forces in 1997, which resulted in the fulfilment of the mandate until its conclusion. This was in contrast to the actions of other governments.

23 CEFTA is an international trade agreement that includes South-eastern European countries as its members. Following the collapse of the communist system, CEFTA

played a crucial role in improving economic relations and increasing trade between post-communist countries.

24 Central and Eastern European countries' full membership date to the European Union was planned for May 1, 2004, and the membership of ten countries (Poland, Malta, Cyprus, Slovenia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Hungary, Lithuania and Slovakia) has been realized in that date, but the membership of Bulgaria and Romania to EU took place three years later.

25 Brussels has put pressure on Bulgaria regarding organized crime during the EU membership process (Holmes 2009, 274). Organized crime in Bulgaria, and the groups involved in these activities, was largely a product of the communist era and caused significant issues in Bulgaria from 1990 to 1997. However, since the government took action in 1997, the state has become stronger, the police have been given more power, and organized crime has significantly decreased since the early 2000s (Holmes 2009, 275).

26 This period saw the highest level of polarization between the red communists and the blue democrats, with the government changing hands and the emergence of different political approaches.

27 The power transfer between democrats and communists lasted until the 2000s, and then the liberal-leaning NDSV party founded by Simeon II ended this period.

28 During the communist period in Bulgaria, the military was heavily involved in politics and became an integral part of it. In democratic countries, the military is a mechanism that protects the security of the state and has no relation to politics. However, this situation has become a major problem on Bulgaria's path to NATO and EU membership. The military had to be reorganized, and its boundaries had to be defined.

29 BSP, an extension of the BCP, won the majority in the Grand National Assembly elections and became the dominant party in the formation of the democratic constitution. Although a small part of the opposition protested against the BSP's dominance in the drafting of the constitution, the majority went along with it. However, although some articles in the new democratic constitution were later changed, no significant long-term changes were made.

30 The EU has played a crucial role in enhancing the democratic nature of the Bulgarian constitution.

31 elections, which were the last elections before EU membership. They continued to make changes to the constitution. The Bulgarian Socialist Party formed a coalition government and gained a parliamentary majority, leading to constitutional changes in line with EU standards and conditions. As a result, Bulgaria became a full member of the EU on January 1, 2007 during this government's tenure.

32 In Bulgaria, the Ombudsman is an independent institution appointed by amendments to the laws in the constitution at the request of the EU. The Bulgarian parliament elects the Ombudsman for a five-year term. The Ombudsman is responsible for listening to people's complaints and seeking solutions in compliance with the Constitution and international laws.

33 Because of the assimilation process carried out against minorities by the Bulgarian communist government under Zhivkov, the issue of minorities is very sensitive in Bulgaria. Long-term policies aimed at assimilating minorities have had severe effects on the minority groups. Therefore, correcting this situation requires a significant amount of time. During the period of EU membership initiatives, resolving the minority issue has been a top priority, and EU membership has been considered challenging without its resolution.

34 There was a concern that the Bulgarian military might intervene in the removal of Zhivkov from the administration while the people were taking to the streets for democracy. However, it is crucial for democracy in Bulgaria that the military remains neutral and only maintains public order. The peaceful protests by the Turks in Bulgaria and the lack of military intervention during the overthrow of the communist regime facilitated a peaceful democratization process.

35 Epicenter. "На 3 януари 1990 стартира Кръглата маса, която осъществи прехода към демокрация [On January 3, 1990, the Round Table started, which made the transition to democracy possible]." Epicenter, 2020. Accessed February 15, 2022. <https://epicenter.bg/article/30-godini-ot-Kraglata-masa/202901/11/0>

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