# Bulgaria and 'the Western project'

## Kyril Drezov, Keele University



The panel's topics are 'Bulgaria's Sense of 'Europeanness', 'History and Culture', 'In Search of a European Identity beyond East and West'. By necessity the debate will become more speculative, as we depart from hard data and grapple with issues of identity and civilization. I will explore the broader issues of 'Bulgaria' and 'the West', rather than the more familiar pair Bulgaria and Europe (or EUrope). Two reasons for this:

- In 2000 the invitation to Bulgaria and Romania to begin membership negotiations with EU was widely seen as payback for the support extended by these two countries to NATO's war against Yugoslavia in 1999. This clearly illustrates that NATO and the American alliance are the proverbial 'skeletons in the cupboard' that are rarely talked about, but of great importance when a country is considered for EU membership.
- 'Europe' is much harder to define than 'the West', when it comes to identity and civilization. Spengler famously said that Europe is nothing and means nothing (unlike Western civilization, which was dear to him) and Huntington more recently focused on 'the West and the Rest' and discounted Europe as a meaningful term.

If one identifies the old historical 'core' of the West with the lands once ruled by Charlemagne (France, the Low Countries, West Germany, and North Italy), then, of all former Soviet satellites in Europe, Bulgaria was the one least connected with 'the West.' In the middle ages, Bulgaria was central to the Slav-Orthodox 'project' and only episodically involved in anything to do with the West. This helps to explain the later affinity of Bulgaria with Russia, and Bulgaria's centuries-old attraction to the Russian 'pole.' Viewed from Charlemagne's Europe, Bulgaria's present-day pride in the allegedly 'European' mission of SS Cyril and

Methodius seems entirely misplaced. The Cyrillic alphabet and medieval Slavonic (also known as Old Bulgarian) may be central to Russia and other Orthodox Slavonic nations, but they are completely irrelevant for Charlemagne's Europe and for the Anglosphere.

Under Ottoman rule, the Bulgarians were the Balkan nation furthest from Western influence, with nothing comparable to the centuries-old contacts that existed between the Albanians and Italians, between the Serbs and Austrians, and between the Greeks and the Mediterranean world. After gaining independence in the late 19th century, Bulgaria entered into formal alliances with forces inimical to the new 'core' countries of the West - France, Britain, and the United States. Bulgaria allied itself, first, with the Second and the Third Reichs, and, subsequently, with the Soviet Union. From the 1960s and until 1990 Bulgaria was perceived as the East European country closest to the Soviet Union. Bulgaria's alliances in the two World Wars and in the Cold War inflicted lasting damage to its image in the West.

The post-1989 transition in Bulgaria underlined the peripheral place of this country to Western influences and concerns. This transition was doubly derivative - inspired in the first place by non-Western factors (democratization in the USSR and in Central Europe), which were themselves inspired by Western models. The first semi-opposition groups in Bulgaria had emerged as late as 1988 and their names displayed clear indebtedness to contemporary Soviet trends: 'Club for the Defence of Glasnost and Perestroika' and 'Ecoglasnost'. Until 1991, when USSR collapsed, Bulgaria could be described as having imitated other transitions and undergone only indirect Westernization. Only after 1991 would Bulgaria enter a period of direct adaptation to Western models.

To sum up, in the early 1990s Bulgaria was little known in the West, and what little was known was mostly not good. One could hardly expect such a country to change perceptions quickly and become 'an island of stability and democracy in the Balkans' and a dependable ally of Western countries. And yet this is what happened in the course of the 1990s and later. Bulgaria's recognition of Kosovo's independence in 2008 is just the latest example of Bulgaria aligning resolutely with the leading Western countries - abandoning in the process its own long-standing policy on the Kosovo issue, risking the enmity of its most important

neighbour (Serbia lies atop Bulgaria's main trade routes) and breaking solidarity with the other two EU Balkan members and partners, Romania and Greece.

This paper looks at what can be described as a Bulgarian paradox: since 1989 the Balkan nation perceived as traditionally furthest from the West has seemingly developed along lines that are more in accord with Western objectives and expectations than **all** the other post-communist countries in the region. In other words, the country that has been traditionally perceived to be furthest away the West (defined here as a community based on shared history, traditions and values), has been most successful in internalizing Western values after 1989. To underline the paradox: the country furthest away from the traditions and values that have shaped the Western project, seemed most visibly influenced by this same project.

What do I mean by 'the Western project'? Borrowed from Karen E. Smith, *the policies of Western governments and multilateral organizations that promote democracy in Eastern Europe*, in other words, policies that aim to strengthen the process of democratization in Eastern Europe. When Karen Smith talks about 'a Western project to encourage democracy', she adds the important caveat that 'this term implies a collective strategy, thus far not articulated, and more coordination among the actors than has actually been the case'. In discussing the impact of Western objectives, Smith puts great emphasis on multilateral organizations (EU, OSCE, Council of Europe, NATO). In my understanding 'the Western project' denotes *the policies of Western governments and multilateral organizations that promote the total Westernization of the post-communist countries in Eastern Europe, in the political, economic and cultural spheres.*

What do I mean by Bulgaria as a putative success story for 'the Western project'? Until 2005 at least, Bulgaria was clearly a 'knight in shining armour' in the Balkans - no Romania Mare, no Seselj, no HDZ and Tudjman; longest record of free and fair elections; and until 2001 longest established two-party system. It all started in early 1990, when Bulgarian politics was characterized by Round Table Talks and negotiated transition, while, at the same time, Romania, under Iliescu, resurrected one-party controls and harassed the opposition. In short, from the lifting of Soviet controls to the threshold of EU membership, Bulgaria had shown itself more susceptible to Western concerns than many of its post-communist neighbours. However, the closer Bulgaria was getting to EU, the greater were the

doubts about its virtues. By 2007 Bulgaria was clearly seen as a laggard in comparison with Romania. Something had clearly gone wrong.

A similar combination of initial enthusiasm and rising doubts has been typical of Bulgaria's relations with previous hegemons. Before 1989 Bulgaria was seen as far more enthusiastic in its aping of the Soviet Union than most of the other satellites – in other words, had shown a similar 'sensitivity' to external factors as after 1989. Clearly, EU is not the USSR, and neither the Soviet Union can be equated with the Third Reich, nor the Third Reich can be equated with the Second Reich. Still, it is fascinating to look backwards at how Bulgaria's perceptions have changed: from 'island of democracy and stability in the Balkans' to 'USSR's 16th republic', and than to 'the Third Reich's most faithful ally in the Balkans' and 'Prussia in the Balkans'. And the doubts would be no less palpable than the enthusiasm, especially in diplomatic correspondence. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la meme chose.*

In the 1970s a Soviet diplomat would report doubts whether Bulgaria, faithful as it might be, was really a socialist country, with all these 'feudal cliques' at the local level that had effectively voided the leading role of the communist party. Yet despite these private doubts, the USSR was mostly content to have an ally that seemed unquestionably loyal, even at the expense of its sovereignty. In 1963, at a plenum of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party discussing a possible merger of Bulgaria with USSR, Zhivkov justified the policy of drawing closer to the Soviet Union in his own inimitable way: 'Romanian and Chinese comrades insist that sovereignty should be respected. For the common people, sovereignty means that they have enough to eat and to live. This is what sovereignty is all about - happiness and prosperity for the people. We work for the people, not for some abstract concept.'

In 1943 a German diplomat would similarly report his frustrations with the most loyal ally in the Balkans: Bulgarians would quietly ignore or subvert all that was seemingly agreed with them on the Jewish question, and their King would plead not to be pushed too hard, citing internal and external threats. This mixture of compliance, sabotage and excuses goes back to the beginning of Bulgaria's alliance with the Third Reich in 1940. 'When the time comes – King Boris would say – it is better for Germany to have one faithful little ally in the Balkans, rather than risk its demise.' And for a while this relationship, all pretence and doubts

notwithstanding, suited both sides well: German troops gained an indispensable bridgehead at the heart of the Balkans and were later relieved from policing large chunks of Greece and Yugoslavia, whilst ‘the most faithful ally’ gained territories without ever having to engage in active warfare on the German side, in fact remaining neutral in the Soviet-German war.

If recent history is any guide, Bulgarian internal and foreign policies are likely to give little trouble to the contemporary West (NATO and EU included). This country has a long tradition of self-limiting foreign policies and internal malleability to suit the requirements of a foreign hegemon. So far, it has never put the pursuit of its own national interests over and above Western interests. Bulgaria has emerged as a dependable partner (perhaps even satellite) of the West in a still dangerous region. However, Bulgaria’s seemingly uncritical and self-sacrificial aligning with Western concerns often masks the stubborn resistance of Bulgarian elites to any foreign-induced changes that may endanger their own self-reproduction and survival. Judicial reform is one such issue: the existing unwieldy structure of the judiciary is minutely regimented in the constitution, those manning the present structure have a vested interest not to reform it, and the powers-that-be have a vested interest not subvert the 1991 constitutional arrangement as it underpins the existing power structure. The basics of the 1991 structure of the judiciary remain unchanged, despite constitutional changes passed in 2003, 2005 and 2006. The Cooperation and Verification Mechanism notwithstanding, the odds against radical reform of the judiciary remain overwhelming. Nothing short of a major constitutional overhaul would change the judiciary as established in 1991, and it is an open question whether such change would be for the better, or to the liking of the European Commission.

This paper is structured around a central hypothesis, namely, that historically Bulgaria has tended to adapt to an externally determined environment by opting for self-limiting behaviour. The concept of ‘self-limiting behaviour’ (or ‘voluntary dependence’) describes a situation when a subordinate ruling elite chooses not to exercise all the opportunities for sovereign decision-making that exist in a given hegemonic system, and, in return, expects - and sometimes receives - special favours from the hegemonic power.

However, such self-restraint should not be mistaken for lack of national or elite ambitions, nor it should be taken for granted. Self-restraint in Bulgarian

politics traditionally comes from a feeling of impotence in the face of overwhelming power, and from the expectation that there will be rewards for ‘responsible behaviour.’ In other words, it is a classic survival technique. Traditionally, Bulgarian elites were quick to feel how far they could avoid compliance with the hegemon, and also how to prioritise excessive compliance on issues less sensitive to their own interests (but of greater immediate concern to the hegemon) in order to resist compliance on issues central to their own survival, but of lesser immediate importance to the hegemon.

This paper endeavours to show that similar ‘survival techniques’ define the post-communist positioning of Bulgaria vis-à-vis ‘the West’.