

# **The EU's Eastern Border Dilemma**

## **A Sociopolitical Approach to the Case Study of Bulgaria's Post-Accession Experience**

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## Abstract

The thesis examines the case of Bulgaria after the provisional closure of the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism in connection with the 2020-21 protest cycle and following political crisis. The case study is used to deduce potential EU implementations for stronger governance measures in candidate countries as part of the pre-accession process and to uphold democratic standards post-accession. Adopting the notion of the EU's enlargement strategy as a securitisation tool to stabilise external political insecurities and mend intra-state relations in the post-Soviet space, strong parallels can be drawn to the geonormative dilemma of Bulgaria's accession, where a hastened accession process of geopolitical interest has led to delayed reactions of dissatisfaction with the EU's conditionality efforts.

Employing a sociopolitical approach to understand the social processes in which Bulgaria's political elite has reshaped the democratic governance and security discourse in ways that challenge the EU's geonormative authority, the analysis aims to grasp the social meanings of policy actions and narrative representations. To do this, it builds on the notion of post-accession hooliganism as a theoretical approach to understanding the behavioural patterns of the political elite both before and after accession. The study further develops on this notion to establish a stronger theoretical framework that aims to bridge the empirical gaps of the EU's enlargement and conditionality strategy by employing notions of ontological security and counter-democratic concepts. In doing so, it connects identity politics with de-Europeanisation as a series of social processes used to examine the role and influence of civil society in representative democracies.

By employing this model of analysis, the study suggests that the destabilisation of Bulgaria's normative frames is a result of public disappointment with EU Membership and the outcome of the democratisation process. By analysing the political identity narratives, a pattern is observed that suggests that civic stabilisation objectives are shaped by externally influenced positive or negative self-perceptions. With this, anti-democratic narratives have been identified to emerge as viable alternatives to the status quo through the elite's projection of negative self-perception, establishing perceived inabilities to influence bottom-up change. Looking at these points in view of the proposed counter-democratic theoretical framework, it is proposed that EU policy priorities should plan for the long-term care and strengthening of counter-democratic institutions through NGO and civil society organisations as key elements of institutional oversight to ensure representative accountability in democratic institutions.

## List of Abbreviations

**BSP** - Българска социалистическа партия [Bulgarian Socialist Party]

**CEE** - Central Eastern Europe

**CSD** - Center for the Study of Democracy

**CVM** - Cooperation and Verification Mechanism

**ECtHR** - European Court of Human Rights

**EU** - European Union

**GERB** - Граждани за европейско развитие на България [Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria]

**IIR** - Institute of International Relations (Prague)

**IR** – International Relations

**ITN** - Има такъв народ [There is such a people]

**LGBTQ+** - Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (shorthand for the queer community)

**MECh** - Морал, Единство, Чест [Morality, Unity, Honour]

**MEP** - Member of the European Parliament

**MPs** - Members of Parliament

**NGO** - non-governmental organisation

**PP-DB** - Продължаваме промяната - Демократична България [We Continue the Change - Democratic Bulgaria]

**PM** - Prime Minister

**RRP** - Recovery and Resilience Plan

**SJC** - Supreme Judicial Council

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## Introduction

The international and European order has been greatly destabilised by Russia's full-scale invasion and continuous warfare in Ukraine. The war has had significant implications for the formulation of foreign policy and domestic narratives of geopolitical affiliation, especially in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). The looming threat of Russian encroachment across the CEE region and the political polarisation between pro-European and pro-Russian ideologies have, in turn, compelled the European Union (EU) to pursue stabilising operations along its Eastern borders. In the research area of European security, EU enlargement has long been regarded as one of the EU's strongest strategies for stabilising and countering the external security risks posed by unstable democracies. Now, two decades after its CEE enlargement project, the EU has reformulated the political agenda to once again include accession negotiations of the states most subjected to Russian influence and encroachment. With this, the Union has reopened accession talks with Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine.

The current focus on Eastern stability in the EU's enlargement plans strongly reflects the geopolitical motivation behind the relatively hastened accession of Bulgaria and Romania in 2007. Seeking to mend intra-state relations in the Black Sea region, the EU prioritised geopolitical goals in concern of regional instability over the reassurance of stable democratic fundamentals.

While many scholars have found the negotiation process of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia's candidature to have progressed at an unprecedented pace, the nations have for a long time exhibited a motivated behaviour towards democratic reform that aligns well with the EU's values-based logics in great cooperation with other EU partners. Ukraine is often highlighted or isolated as an extraordinary case in the EU enlargement talks due to its long pursuit of EU membership and contemporary identity-building based on the democratic values and fundamental freedoms of the European standards. Further, since 2014, the nation has stood in direct military defiance to the oppression of the Russian authoritarian rule, upscaled in 2022 by Russia's full-scale invasion, which has painted the nation's perseverance as a symbol of hope for democracy.<sup>1</sup>

Likewise, Georgia has been in an Association Agreement with the EU since 2014 and has since continued to nurture its strong ties to the European identity. Despite the paused accession

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<sup>1</sup> Gry A Z Lassen, "Portrait of a Hero: Exploring the Strategy and Agency Behind the Zelensky Phenomenon" BA Thesis *Aalborg University*, June 6, 2023

negotiations in November 2024 due to the EU's rejection of the Georgian Dream party as the legitimate winner of the 2024 parliamentary election, the pro-EU mass protests that followed across the country have reassured the European choice of the majority of Georgian citizens.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to the strong civic adherence to European accession and democratic structure, the Republic of Moldova stands out with its marginal majority in support of EU membership.<sup>3</sup> Despite Moldova's recent endeavours to actively pursue membership through EU-funded initiatives promoting democratic governance, transparency and accountability in local and central institutions, the republic remains deeply divided on its geopolitical alignment. The existence of the pro-Kremlin breakaway state Transnistria is a testament to these deep divisions, which Chisinau has tried to subdue with the help of EU initiatives.

All three were granted candidate status in June 2022, affirming the sudden expedition of the accession process in light of the Russian threat. With enlargement being one of the EU's strongest strategies for stabilising border countries, Bulgaria and Romania serve as strong cases for how hastened accession, based primarily on external factors of instability and security, comes at the expense of the economic, social, and democratic stability of the Union.

While the most extensive CEE enlargement occurred in 2004, Bulgaria and Romania at the time still lacked significant demonstrations of commitment to EU democratic values. However, the EU's geopolitical motivation to accept the laggards in 2007 led to the installation of the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM). The CVM was introduced during Bulgaria and Romania's accession to the EU in 2007 as a transitional measure to ease the progress of rule of law implementations, as described in the Copenhagen criteria for EU Membership.<sup>4</sup> For Bulgaria, the post-accession instrument was employed to promote judicial reform and the fight against corruption and organised crime. The CVM is made up of a series of benchmarks addressing the shortcomings and was implemented through an annual report system that ensured vigilance over the progress and strengthened contact between the relevant actors.

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<sup>2</sup> Lion Ax and Constance Victor, 'Hope and Turmoil: The EU's Role in Securing Georgia's Democratic Future', ECFR, 13 February 2025, <https://ecfr.eu/article/hope-and-turmoil-the-eus-role-in-securing-georgias-democratic-future/>.

<sup>3</sup> Ionela Ciolan and Mihai Mogildea, 'A Quiet Victory: Key Takeaways from Moldova's EU Membership Referendum', ISPI (blog), 24 October 2024, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/a-quiet-victory-key-takeaways-from-moldovas-eu-membership-referendum-188251>.

<sup>4</sup> European Commission, "Rule of Law: Commission Formally Closes the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism for Bulgaria and Romania," *Press release* (September 15, 2023), [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_23\\_4456](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_4456).

In its October 2019 report, 12 years post-accession, the Commission could provisionally conclude Bulgaria's satisfactory fulfilment of its CVM recommendations. Due to a demonstration of continued commitment to specific issues, the CVM was concluded fully in June 2023. This decision was partly based on the reported performance of the required benchmarks in the field of rule of law and partly on the satisfactory display of Bulgarian commitment to the Union's normative framework through steady progress. The Commission now regards their continued cooperation under the annual Rule of Law Cycle, which examines developments across all Member States.<sup>5</sup>

Not long after the provisional closure of the CVM did Bulgaria leap into a democratically devastating political crisis, hindering the formation of a functioning government since 2021, following the forced resignation of the Borissov government. The 2020-21 protest cycle against entrenched corruption and institutionalised clientelism has emphasised the impermanence of the values-based incentives associated with being an affirmed member of the European community. Exacerbated by widespread clientelism, which only reinforced the public perception of systemic corruption, the political crisis has uncovered a number of vulnerabilities in the Bulgarian democracy and a susceptibility to oligarchic influence.

While the political crisis has inspired calls for change and promises of reform, the inability to form a government of political cohesion has left the public fatigued and uninspired. After four years of political stalemate and instability due to the public distrust in the ten-year rule of the GERB party, the new Cabinet was formed by a close associate of former PM, Borissov, and included ministers from the very same GERB party, the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) and the populist There is Such a People (ITN) party.<sup>6</sup> While ITN is one of these new parties born from the protest movement against the political status quo, the others have a long history as the leading parties in Bulgaria, with BSP is the reformed version of the Soviet Bulgarian Communist Party. Coalition negotiations had been ongoing since the election on October 27, 2024, and almost resulted in the loss of €9 billion on the national Recovery and Resilience Plan (RRP) from the EU Commission due to the lack of anti-corruption and climate change initiatives implemented under the caretaker governments.<sup>7</sup> Noticeably, the economic and social resilience chapter of the RRP

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Dimitrina Solakova, "GERB-UDF Mandated to Form Cabinet, Unveil Proposed Lineup," *bta.bg*, January 15, 2025, <https://www.bta.bg/en/news/bulgaria/815213-gerb-udf-mandated-to-form-cabinet-unveil-proposed-lineup>.

<sup>7</sup> Krassen Nikolov, "Bulgarian President Slams Borissov for Prolonging Political Crisis," *Euractiv*, January 7, 2025, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/bulgarian-president-slams-borissov-for-prolonging-political-crisis/>.

specifically includes comprehensive anti-corruption measures such as “reforms to ensure the accountability and criminal liability of the Prosecutor General.”<sup>8</sup>

Protest cycles continue in smaller formats to enforce political accountability for the recently formed GERB-coalition government. The government, led by Prime Minister Zhelyazkov, was finally formed after seven snap elections in four years and was supposed to be the beginning of the end of the crisis. However, since the last election in October 2024, allegations of voter fraud and vote-buying have flourished. Outset by a hacktivist group, BG Elves, publishing a list of 200 potential vote-buying candidates back in early October.<sup>9</sup> This is the same group which previously leaked emails proving Russian involvement in Bulgaria's Turkstream negotiations in 2019, which makes the Bulgarian Bulgartransgaz dependent on Russian gas through Turkey, overruling the EU sanctions.<sup>10</sup> A Constitutional Court ruling in March has now given new credibility to the allegations of voter fraud in the recent election, as it disqualifies the election of 17 Members of Parliament of various parties.

Connecting the study of the national case to the international dimension of the current EU enlargement project, this research aims to create frames of reference to further study of other CEE candidate countries and their readiness for accession. In this, it tries to highlight points that are particular to the national case in a theoretical matter, which can help deduce early signs of rule of law backsliding in connection to the specific case of post-Soviet EU Member States based on their common experience as new democracies in close vicinity of geopolitical instability and foreign influences. The research at hand examines the case of Bulgaria due to its deep-rooted democratic crisis, aiming to uncover the most prominent patterns of its sociopolitical vulnerability. This is considered in connection to the understanding of ontological securitisation as a new dimension to the enlargement discussions, which have previously focused primarily on physical and economic security understandings. The distinctions of these understandings are further clarified in the literature review.

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<sup>8</sup> European Commission, “Bulgaria's Recovery and Resilience Plan,” *Economic and Social Resilience*, commission.europa.eu, [https://commission.europa.eu/business-economy-euro/economic-recovery/recovery-and-resilience-facility/country-pages/bulgarias-recovery-and-resilience-plan\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/business-economy-euro/economic-recovery/recovery-and-resilience-facility/country-pages/bulgarias-recovery-and-resilience-plan_en).

<sup>9</sup> Antoaneta Roussi, “Bulgaria's Hacking ‘Elves’ Lift Lid on Election Fraud Racket,” POLITICO, October 25, 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/bulgaria-ethical-hacking-group-bg-elves-oligarch-delyan-peeovski-election-fraud-vote-buying/>.

<sup>10</sup> BG Elves, “The ‘Lost’ Road Map,” Turkstream.exposed, 2024, <https://turkstream.exposed/en>.



The thesis aims to contribute to the broader debate on the EU's balance of values-based security, identity, and governance in its enlargement geostrategy. With this, it highlights Bulgaria's political struggles during a time of widespread geopolitical instability, to demonstrate how failure to address foundational democratic weaknesses effectively can lead to long-term instability and vulnerability to foreign influence. Unlike traditional security analyses that focus on economic or military dimensions, this study emphasises how political actors, institutions, and public sentiment shape Bulgaria's struggles with democracy, EU alignment, and external influences. The research leads with the question:

**How has the 2020 protest cycle and political crisis in Bulgaria reshaped the democratic governance and security discourse in ways that challenge the EU's geonormative authority?**

And will be supported by three sub-questions, which are addressed in each their own chapter:

- 1. To what extent has the political crisis affected and delayed Bulgaria's post-CVM rule of law implementation and essential judicial and democratic reforms?*
- 2. How have political actors leveraged the political crisis in ways that have reshaped Bulgaria's social governance and contributed to its vacillating process of de-Europeanisation?*
- 3. How have national discursive constructions of security promoted geopolitical realignment?*

The sub-questions are formulated to address the three dimensions of the analysis paradigm: normative-national, sociopolitical-regional, and geopolitical-international, and have been developed based on the identified gaps in the literature, as will be presented more comprehensively below. They are developed to contribute to a smoother transition between the analytical dimensions.

## Literature Review

The geopolitical strategy of the EU's enlargement project has been well researched and discussed since the Eastern expansion of the Union in 2004 and 2007. Although most scholars agree on the fact that the EU has shifted its enlargement strategy away from values-based logics, the promotion of democratic fundamentals and respect for human rights to pursue geopolitical incentives, discussions have resurfaced on how much geopolitical motivations should matter in the accession process. These geopolitical motivations are manifold and include all from territorial market influence to the expansion of the democratic sphere. The reopening of the scholarly debate roots in

the current accession negotiations that recently reinstated Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia with EU Candidacy status.

Reviewing the motivations behind this new CEE enlargement negotiation wave, the Czech Institute of International Relations Prague, *IIR*, identifies security and economics as the main factors both for and against such enlargement, in either capacity.<sup>11</sup> Examining the security situation and the EU-NATO relationship as a part of the bigger geopolitical situation, experts at IIR speculate on the EU's ability to live up to its outward image as a provider of national security. With the potential eradication of the so-called Eastern 'buffer zone' of neutrality, the involvement of NATO as a stronger security enforcer is deemed necessary to counter the security risks warranted from by intrusion. Arguing that a possible enlargement would go beyond the EU's control and scope on security on multiple factors, the IIR's policy brief presents an EU credibility problem in the security sector.<sup>12</sup> In turn, it highlights Sweden's and Finland's recent endeavours to join NATO over the EU based on the direct security assurance of the respective Treaties. This also means that due to the increased security risks of warranting a Russian response of aggression, as was exhibited in February 2022 against Ukraine in the midst of EU trade talks, admission to the EU would not be sufficient. It simultaneously warrants an admission to the security network of NATO as a militarily enforced guarantee against potential regional conflict. While security is one of the main motivations in response to Russian aggression in the Eastern bloc, the EU is unable to provide sufficient security guarantees, which implies that security is not the sole driver of the reopened enlargement negotiations.

In a similar vein on security, O'Brennan's early contributions have probed the enlargement strategy by exploring the rhetoric and understanding of security and security threats that the EU actors employed within the framework of the 2004 Eastern enlargement through a constructivist approach.<sup>13</sup> In his research, he emphasised the role of securitisation and desecuritisation in shaping inter-state relations in Eastern Europe to facilitate democratic transition and Europeanisation. This validates the IIR's notion, in that, while the CEE enlargement wave was

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<sup>11</sup> Braun, Mats, et al. "The Future of EU Enlargement in a Geopolitical Perspective." Policy paper in *Ústav Mezinárodních Vztahů Praha*, January 22, 2024. <https://www.iir.cz/en/the-future-of-eu-enlargement-in-a-geopolitical-perspective-1>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 3.

<sup>13</sup> John O'Brennan. "'Bringing Geopolitics Back In': Exploring the Security Dimension of the 2004 Eastern Enlargement of the European Union." *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 19, no. 1 (2006). <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557570500501911>.

driven primarily by notions of security, calling it a 'contemporary security-enhancing project',<sup>14</sup> it was a measure to expand EU territory of influence in a way that would embed EU democratic norms in the former Soviet-space as part of the nations' early state-building. The argument is that the CEE enlargement was an execution of 'soft' security as a way to normalise geopolitical concerns as part of the EU's internal agenda through measures of desecuritisation. Introducing a similar nexus, Professor Giselle Bosse considers how both geopolitical and normative approaches shape the accession process by highlighting the push-and-pull effects of various foreign policies and value-driven strategies.<sup>15</sup> In this, she underlines the point that the Eastern enlargement has not and will not be sufficiently explained by entirely geopolitical sentiments, instituting geonormative considerations in a security-value nexus.

It is evident that scholars widely characterise the CEE wave of enlargement as having been primarily driven by external risks as key factors for an accelerated accession process. Professor Veleva-Eftimova highlights in particular the Kosovo crisis of 1999 and the disintegration of Yugoslavia as the main drivers of Bulgaria's hastened accession process as a way to influence stable reform, despite the country's unsatisfactory fulfilment of the Copenhagen Criteria.<sup>16</sup> As the CEE enlargement in 2004 and 2007 drew on external risk factors of fundamental destabilisation, the enlargement project was accepted through modes of securitising new and salvageable democracies in the post-Soviet space. The modes of desecuritisation employed to facilitate the stabilisation framework have, in turn, established a new norm that overlooks unsatisfactory fulfilment of the Copenhagen Criteria.

Scholarly debates around the EU's Eastern enlargement often highlight how the securitisation of accession overshadowed persistent rule of law and democratic deficiencies. These arguments have been explicitly expanded in the accession of Bulgaria and Romania. Critics have previously stressed the geopolitical prioritisation over the democratic consolidation in Bulgaria and Romania as a grievous consequence of the development of the EU foreign policy agenda.<sup>17</sup> In response to these concerns, the European Commission introduced the CVM in December 2006, as a

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 161.

<sup>15</sup> Giselle Bosse, 'Has the EU Really Become Geopolitical?', *European Democracy Hub* (blog), 21 May 2024, <https://europeandemocracyhub.epd.eu/has-the-eu-really-become-more-geopolitical/>.

<sup>16</sup> Mirela Veleva-Eftimova. "The EU Eastern Enlargement Policy under the Pressure of Geopolitics. The Bulgarian Case (Russia's Little Brother)." *Studia Europejskie* 27, no. 1 (April 1, 2023): 76. <https://doi.org/10.33067/se.1.2023.3>.

<sup>17</sup> Svetlozar A. Andreev. "The Unbearable Lightness of Membership: Bulgaria and Romania after the 2007 EU Accession." *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 42, no. 3 (2009): 375–93. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48609637>.

post-accession monitoring tool aimed to monitor and assess rule of law deficits.<sup>18</sup> In Professor Vassileva's case study of Bulgaria's CVM, she contends that the implementation of the monitoring tool transformed, what had previously been, a purely political process into a politico-legal process of judicial, administrative and economic reform to meet foundational EU criteria.<sup>19</sup>

The implementation of the CVM post-accession as a response to concerns over the EU's geostrategic foreign policy expansions is especially relevant for the present study, as it provides a foundational lens through which Bulgaria's institutional development can be examined. It has become rather well established through previous studies that the CVM monitoring tool has served as a key instrument in the EU's justification of its reformed enlargement policy. It is therefore imperative for the case study to examine how the unaddressed problems of Bulgaria's institutions continue to shape its democratic resilience. As Vassileva concludes in her case study of the CVM and its (in)effectiveness, the structural problems of Bulgaria's judicial system have been severely underestimated by the Commission.<sup>20</sup> It is found that the challenges that were allegedly addressed in the CVM has, since its lifting, turned into sources of great institutional instability and a subsequent sustainer of governmental and judiciary corruption.

Recognising that the EU's geostrategic expansion often compromises the firmness of its own conditionality, experts on the area argue that the monitoring mechanism has encouraged implementation of superficial institutional reforms aimed at showcasing or performing continued commitment to EU standardisation, rather than achieving substantive democratic consolidation that would decentralise the power of the elite. Venelin Ganev uses the term 'post-accession hooliganism' to describe this phenomenon.<sup>21</sup> Post-accession hooliganism is derived from the sociological understanding of hooliganism as it is known in, for example, sports, where actors demonstrate acceptable and favourable behaviour on a daily basis, but choose to perform acts of misbehaviour in small disruptive bursts that does not actively seek to dismantle social systems.<sup>22</sup> In the context of EU enlargement, the hooligan actors are understood to be the political elite, who know which type

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<sup>18</sup> European Commission. "Cooperation and Verification Mechanism for Bulgaria and Romania." [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/upholding-rule-law/rule-law/assistance-bulgaria-and-romania-under-cvm/cooperation-and-verification-mechanism-bulgaria-and-romania\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/upholding-rule-law/rule-law/assistance-bulgaria-and-romania-under-cvm/cooperation-and-verification-mechanism-bulgaria-and-romania_en).

<sup>19</sup> Radosveta Vassileva. "Threats to the Rule of Law: The Pitfalls of the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism." *European Public Law*, vol. 26 no. 3 (2020): 744. SSRN. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3857073>.

<sup>20</sup> Vassileva. "Threats to the Rule of Law:" 767-768.

<sup>21</sup> Venelin I. Ganev, 'Post-Accession Hooliganism: Democratic Governance in Bulgaria and Romania after 2007', *East European Politics and Societies* 27, no. 1 (1 February 2013): 26–44, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325412465086>.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 39.

of behaviour is favourable to the situation to demonstrate adherence to the rule system. In the pre-accession process, there is an incentive to demonstrate willingness, commitment and compliance to become part of the collective through performances of behaviour that are acceptable within the social group; once in the EU, the incentives become weaker, and the self-interested impulses of the elite become stronger.

The superficiality of the democratic governance reforms adopted under the CVM are therefore argued to have been performances of willingness and compliance to the Union's conditionality, but only as a way to continuously satisfy minimal conditionality to keep EU funding flowing into the country.<sup>23</sup> The dialogic approach to rule of law assessment within Member States is deemed to pose a methodological challenge in the confirmation of information regarding rule of law developments.<sup>24</sup> For example, Vassileva specifically highlights the lack of recommendations to reform the Prosecutor General's Office. These studies have provided useful insight into how Bulgaria's accession process has shaped its democratic resilience and susceptibility to political crisis on both a social and a normative level. With negotiations of eurozone entry opening in Bulgaria as part of the government's plans to finalise the state's accession process, it therefore makes sense to undertake some of the same dimensions of analysis to contribute to further assessment of the EU's monitoring tools.

While much research has focused on EU conditionality development in the pre-accession process, there is a lack of thorough investigation into long-term post-accession backsliding. To fill this gap, the present study aims to demonstrate how superficial compliance with EU benchmarks can mask constitutional weaknesses and contribute to democratic erosion post-accession. While the existing literature indicates a strong consensus on the effectiveness of the CVM, or rather, a lack thereof, the present chapter has aimed to assemble notions of *why* it is ineffective to better understand the areas of concern. Identifying these, the case study of Bulgaria is able to utilise the theoretical framework of Ganey henceforth to understand the behavioural patterns of the political elite and how they may have leveraged the political crisis in self-interest.

It is understood that, while the CVM was implemented as a means to ensure conditionality in the values-based foundations of the EU, that geostrategy has prevailed in the CEE enlargement to exert influence over post-Soviet spaces during their early stages of state-building.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 37.

<sup>24</sup> Vassileva. "Threats to the Rule of Law:" 765.

Some scholars even maintain that the EU has facilitated the establishment of stabilitocracies in the Western Balkans by ignoring or downplaying signs of democratic backsliding in the informal power structures, while applauding superficial democratic integration.<sup>25</sup> Although the Candidate Countries of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia have previously been somewhat consistent in their demonstrated support for values-based EU accession, the lengthy negotiation process has revealed instabilities in the elite's capacity and willingness to align with EU conditionality. The reopening of the negotiation process has introduced a dilemma of competing geopolitical incentives and values-based commitments to the EU enlargement strategy, also referred to as a 'geonormative paradox'.<sup>26</sup>

To understand the implications of the geonormative paradox, it is imperative to depart from basic understandings of security as physical or territorial insurances. As argued extensively by experts at the Bulgarian thinktank, Center for the Study of Democracy (CSD), in their collection of works, *The Kremlin Playbook*, the security of EU Member States does not stem from accession in itself, but from the establishment of robust democratic governance structures capable of resisting malign foreign influence.<sup>27</sup> The 2016 report identifies two main channels of Russian interference: economic capture through governance loopholes; and internal political destabilisation via cultivating relationships with key political actors and Russian sympathisers.<sup>28</sup> The former is more thoroughly scrutinised in Ganev's article on post-accession hooliganism, in its identification of behavioural patterns of corrupt elites in transitory periods that seek to mimic the democratic standards of the reward-granting entity, in this case is the EU, as a means of securing continued legitimacy and benefits.<sup>29</sup> Meanwhile, the latter channel concerns the political exploitation of social weaknesses to forms of persuasion, misinformation and media capture. After Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, CSD further reports that Russian cognitive capture in Bulgaria is

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<sup>25</sup> Marko Kmezić et al., 'The Crisis of Democracy in the Western Balkans. An Anatomy of Stabilitocracy and the Limits of EU Democracy Promotion', 1 March 2017. & Bosse, 'Has the EU Really Become Geopolitical?'

<sup>26</sup> Bosse, 'Has the EU Really Become Geopolitical?'

<sup>27</sup> Ognjan Šentov, Ruslan Stefanov, and Martin Vladimirov, eds., *The Kremlin Playbook in Europe*, (Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2020) <https://csd.eu/publications/publication/the-kremlin-playbook-in-europe/>; Heather A. Conley et al., *The Kremlin Playbook: Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe*, CSIS Reports (Lanham, MD: Center for Strategic & International Studies | Center for the Study of Democracy, 2016), <https://csd.eu/publications/publication/the-kremlin-playbook-understanding-russian-influence-in-central-and-eastern-europe/>.

<sup>28</sup> Conley et al., *The Kremlin Playbook*. XI.

<sup>29</sup> Ganev. "Post-Accession Hooliganism:"

increasingly supported by militarised security sector networks to exploit weakened institutions and political legitimacy.<sup>30</sup>

This broader understanding of security stresses the importance of establishing democratic resilience in the pre-accession process, both as a normative goal and a strategic necessity. With security as one of the cornerstones of the EU's enlargement and stabilisation framework, it is imperative for the study to define its security dimension. Reviewing the literature along with the current policy discourse, it is made clear that this study aims to contribute to the scholarly understanding of the EU enlargement and its security-value nexus approach. Unlike studies that have examined the economic paradigm of security, which find that the strategic Eastern enlargement of EU territory would be a good opportunity to future-proof the European market against sanctions and potential encroachments,<sup>31</sup> the sociopolitical paradigm is being avidly debated due to the shortcomings of the EU's democratic integration methodology. To accentuate the social dimension of the study, the analysis applies an intersection of ontological security and identity politics to the security-value nexus. It does so in the context of Bulgaria's recent political crisis, which has intensified political polarisation, by analysing how narratives of geopolitical affiliation are embedded within and shaped by domestic political discourses of identity. With this, the study explores how narratives of national sovereignty and identity are mobilised by political actors to oppose Europeanisation.

De-Europeanisation methods operationalised through populist tools of nostalgia have previously been identified to support a leniency towards authoritarianism and anti-democratic ideologies in specific cases.<sup>32</sup> Gueorguieva's case study of the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) has provided helpful insight into how to identify patterns of broader polarisation within the political sphere on the basis of rhetorical analysis of party discourses and identity rhetorics. As such, the case study relates identity politics to rule of law backsliding and de-Europeanisation as socially constructed processes. The main disadvantage of Gueorguieva's case study is the continued marginalisation of the BSP and its vacillating identity journey, which casts some doubt around their relevance in more general studies of Bulgaria's governance progress. Instead, this study highlights

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<sup>30</sup> Gloria Trifonova and Svetoslav Malinov, 'Operation "Disinformation"', (Sofia: CSD, November 2024), <https://csd.eu/publications/publication/operation-disinformation/>.

<sup>31</sup> Veronica Anghel & Erik Jones. "The Geopolitics of EU Enlargement: From Club to Commons." *Global Politics & Strategy* 66, no. 4 (July 3, 2024). <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2024.2380203>.

<sup>32</sup> Petia Gueorguieva. "The Bulgarian Socialist Party on the Path to De-Europeanization." *Romanian Political Science Review* 23, no. 2 (February 20, 2024): 261–97. <https://doi.org/10.62229/sprps23-2/3>.



the emerging far-right nationalist party, Vazrazhdane, as a strong opposition to the incumbent government, to analyse how narratives of identity are used to reshape civil self-perception, particularly during periods of political polarisation.

## Research Design

### Ontology & Epistemology

The overarching aim of the thesis is to understand the national case of Bulgaria's post-accession experience in the EU and identify the sources of the sociopolitical security dynamics that determine its democratic trajectory. To understand this topic in consideration of the literature review, it adopts a social constructivist approach as its main ontology. This way, the identified dimensions of the theoretical frameworks are employed to aid the understanding of reality, expanding the inductive scope of the theory, in lieu of trying to describe a set reality. By employing a social constructivist approach, the knowledge obtained from the research is analysed through a theoretical framework that is comprised of a vetted collection of relevant theories, meshed into a filter for analytical interpretations that will be applied to a multi-dimensional model. The dimensions explored in this model are the normative-national, sociopolitical-regional, and geopolitical-international.

The social constructivist paradigm is context-dependent in the way in which it emphasises the subjective perception of social reality and the reality of multiple interpretations and representations of a single event or action.<sup>33</sup> Focusing on Bulgaria's post-accession experience, the thesis' ontology is grounded in the geopolitical dynamics that initially accelerated the pre-accession process, and subsequently aims to understand how the democratic trajectory is shaped by the EU's post-accession conditionality. Building on this framework, the research examines the particularities of the national case to identify potential patterns of weaknesses in the EU's post-accession conditionality mechanisms. To do this, the study examines the strategic use of normative reform, the populist mobilisation of civic distrust, and representations of internal and external security threats through identity-based narratives to emphasise the internal instability rooted in Bulgaria's post-accession democratic self-perception.

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<sup>33</sup> Alan Bryman et al., *Bryman's Social Research Methods*, 5th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021). 29.



It remains imperative to highlight that social constructivism aims to discuss how reality is represented through different lenses, rather than classifying a single existing reality.<sup>34</sup> By this logic, the dominating Bulgarian branches of self-identity should be equally validated by the nature of their historical and cultural legitimacy. This means that, while the study reflects a Eurocentric perspective of democracy, it still validates contradictory perspectives and respects the legitimacy of self-identities that are more deeply rooted in the nation's Soviet historical culture. By legitimising these collective identities, the study seeks to analyse more objectively through comparative interpretations of the dominating political discourses.

Compatible with this notion of social constructivism is the epistemological approach of interpretivism. The interpretivist knowledge paradigm interconnects subjective and objective meanings to understand personal motivational factors of action in response to the external context.<sup>35</sup> This is relevant when working with previous interpretations of Bulgarian identity and collective self-perceptions as discussed above, but also when researching post-accession behaviour of the political elite. More precisely, the interpretivist paradigm aids in the research of Bulgaria's experience as an EU Member State as it relates objectively detached factors and accepted interpretations of reality to the lived experience and representation of its democratic path.

## Methodology

To access the broader discussion surrounding the EU's contemporary Eastern enlargement negotiations with Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia, it is necessary to examine the existing scholarly literature on the EU's motivations and approaches to ensure democratic integration that complies with the moral obligations of the Union as part of its founding identity. The literature review has provided an overview of the literature in a mix of academic articles and policy papers on the pre-accession challenges of the CEE EU Members. Put simply, the review asserted that the EU enlargement project operates on a geonormative paradox that is guided by both geopolitical incentives and values-based commitments to securitise bordering countries' democratisation processes. Understanding the complexities of the East/West attitudinal axis of the Bulgarian political crisis, as introduced in the introduction, the study operates on the notion of a hegemonic clash between the EU and Russia which drives the emphasis on the external security incentives that

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<sup>34</sup> Ian Hacking. "The Construction of What?" Cambridge, Mass, USA: Harvard University Press, 1999. 33. Quoted in Donatella Della Porta, and Michael Keating. "Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences: A Pluralist Perspective." Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. 24.

<sup>35</sup> Della Porta & Keating. "Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences:" 25.

have encouraged hastened pre-accession processes. Building on this, the literature review focused in particular on Bulgaria's pre- and post-accession as an introduction to the case and the literature's prevalent notions regarding the EU's limited institutional leverage to ensure democratic integration and good governance compliance. Presenting Ganev's concept of post-accession hooliganism as a way to capture the political significance of the distinct pattern of elite behaviour post-accession has provided a great theoretical framework, from which the present study will depart to understand: 1) the destabilisation process of the normative frameworks and 2) the significance of the political elite in the de-Europeanisation and other post-accession backsliding processes.

The national case is chosen due to its current developments in the political arena as a result of the 2020-21 protest cycle, which sparked soon after the provisional closure of the EU's monitoring instrument that oversaw critical rule of law commitments as part of the post-accession measure to ensure the obligations of the Copenhagen criteria. The case study of Bulgaria in the context of EU accession measures is implemented as an intensive study of the national particularities that have benefitted hooligan elites in their endeavours of democratic destabilisation.

The methodological framework of the case study consists of inductive qualitative research, which departs on the gathering of the existing literature and knowledge regarding Bulgaria's political crisis and implementation of the CVM benchmarks. The inductive methodology of the thesis dictates that its conclusions are drawn from the analysis of specific premises, aimed at discerning patterns to lay grounds for the theoretical construct of the conclusion. The contradiction of the inductive research approach in connection with the theoretical understanding of post-accession hooliganism is duly noted but also disputed by the way in which the analysis aims to instrumentalise the concept as a theoretical approach rather than a conclusive theory.

The points of analysis are identified and chosen by reviewing the main existing literature on the topic, as it has evaluated the existing knowledge and approaches to discern key areas of concern for democratic and rule of law development. Through this, the EU-implemented monitoring tool is recognised to be an essential point to the analysis of the EU's enlargement policy going forward, as the Union has taken to a more security-based geostrategy approach in its territorial expansion. With this, it is meant that the contemporary geopolitical instability of the Eastern borders has been securitised through previous enlargement operations which have been found to have neglected the moral obligations of the EU's common ontology, especially concerning

rule of law principles.<sup>36</sup> The CVM is therefore regarded as a pivotal instrument to the EU's authority in the hastened process of accession as it works to urge effective developments based on personalised criteria and encourage a stronger connection to the Union through cooperation.

Therefore, the study is operating in the time period from 2020 to spring 2025 in regard to the provisional closure of the CVM in October 2019 and the outbursts of civil displays of dissatisfaction with the political elite. The 2020 protest cycle remains pivotal in the research of Bulgaria's post-accession experience as an indicator for the sociopolitical discrepancies between the elite and the citizens. These discrepancies are likewise found to be an integral fundamental in the Bulgarian political crisis and obstructionist elite behaviour among the political parties and will therefore act as a central detail to the analysis.

The research methodology is derived from the epistemological approach of interpretivism, as the analysis is conducted to grasp the social meanings of policy actions and narrative representations. The analysis is concerned with interpreting the chosen texts supported by relevant trends and tendencies observed in the pre-existing data and literature to gain an understanding for the social connotations that these present. Post-structural understandings of interpretivism are the driving forces behind the contextual analysis, as it focuses on the politics of representation and how the dominant discourses of politics (re)produce relations of power. In this case, the analysis is broadly focused on dominant discourses of identity politics in relation to ontological security and the legitimisation of political identity dichotomies. It is occupied with how identity and security discourses legitimise certain forms of action, while marginalising other ways, by interpreting the social implications that the discourses and narratives have on the public's sense of Self and self-perception.

The interpretivist analysis approach is therefore deeply interconnected with the study of discourse, where it recognises language as a mediator for the social constructions of reality. In the present study, discourse is more generally understood in the post-structural sense, as the term is used much per Foucault's most vague representation as a collection of verbal or written performances that are constituted in arrangements of meaningful symbolism that influences the social knowledge and apprehension of reality.<sup>37</sup> That is, to understand discourse in a post-structural

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<sup>36</sup> See: Vassileva. "Threats to the Rule of Law:" & Bosse, 'Has the EU Really Become Geopolitical?'

<sup>37</sup> Michel. Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2002): 120-121,  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203604168>.

sense that emphasises the power of language in the formulation of reality, as well as the power of the speaker. To clarify, fitting with the interpretivist approach, the use of 'discourse' in this study refers more generally to the construction and representation of social meaning behind language, both written and spoken, as it aims to identify the power relation of the governance structures.

The analysis of the national case will be split into three sections, or dimensions, of analysis that will address different levels of governance in relation to Bulgaria's democratisation process and governance actions. In the first national-institutional dimension, the complexities of Bulgaria's democratic crisis are scrutinised on the normative level with specific reference to the CVM benchmarks. Here, it examines Bulgarian governance in its post-CVM era to identify key developments and weaknesses following the EU decision to lift the mechanism. More specifically, it is concerned with the structure of civic counter-democracy in connection to the institutional power hierarchy. Herein, the role of civil society in the political crisis is analysed through their ability to exert powers of oversight, prevention and judgement over other institutions. In accordance with Rosanvallon's counter-democracy, the organisation of distrust is a tool of civil society to maintain a representative democratic government that complements the institutions and legitimises their influence through shared acceptance.<sup>38</sup> To this end, it centres around the centralised power of the judiciary, of which concerns a majority of the CVM benchmarks, along with the democratic issues that have arisen with the spark of the political crisis in 2020. The analysis of this uses the theoretical concept of counter-democracy to understand civil society's legitimisation power, and the limits hereof, as a formal institution of the democratic normative framework.

The second section dives into the sociopolitical and regional dimensions of the current political crisis that has worked as a driving factor for the active polarisation of the political sphere encouraged by a susceptibility to anti-democratic narratives. This section examines the erosion of trust in national institutions as a factor for the growing Euroscepticism and ideological Russification driven by narratives of identity. Considering the social dimension of this section of analysis in line with the constructivist paradigm of the thesis, it supports the adoption of a rather unstructured discursive approach of analysis that allows for the identification of social reconstructions of reality within political arguments that accompany key decision-making. The guiding sub-question emphasises key political actors' agency in the political crisis due to the particularities of the

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<sup>38</sup> Pierre Rosanvallon, *Counter-Democracy: Politics in an Age of Distrust* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), <http://archive.org/details/counterdemocracy0000rosa>.

principles of the protest cycle. With this, it is discerned how political parties, movements and actors have leveraged the political crisis to polarise the political divisions through antagonising identity narratives. These identity categorisations are each legitimised through concepts of sociocultural association that reinforce ontological security notions. At length, the sociopolitical dimension introduces the erosion of trust in national institutions as a driving factor for the construction of identity and legitimacy, which has, in turn, facilitated the normalisation of authoritative narratives.

The third and final section of analysis relates the national case more broadly to the international context by ascribing social notions of security and identity, identified in the previous sections, to the dominating national political discourses of security. While working with data from the national case, it is related to the geopolitical-international dimension through the narratives and discourses represented herein. The discourses of interest for the study are constructed and represented around domestic security notions as a response to the political insecurity felt at the time. Determined through the extensive literature review and previous discursive findings pertaining to the notion of identity and their significance to the political crisis, security discourses are used extensively to legitimise political action or inaction. Adopting the understanding of the EU's enlargement policy as a geostrategic securitisation of its Eastern borders, the theoretical framework determines that security, and notions of what security means, is a fundamental component of legitimacy. In this final section of analysis, security is analysed in connection to the geopolitical alignment of Bulgaria through discourses performed mainly from the emerging far-right nationalist parties. In this, the analysis identifies a representation of binary frames that simplifies war and peace in Vazrazhdane's most recent pre-election campaign, that employs, likewise binary, rhetoric that allows for the establishment of recognisable cognitive patterns. With this, the section is concerned with how security is internalised to reinforce disadvantageous self-perceptions under the governance of pro-European leaders. Categorising the government's pursuit of a 2026 entry to the eurozone as part of the EU accession process, it becomes possible to connect the security dimension to Ganev's post-accession hooliganism framework as part of the effort to operationalise the framework to determine performances of mini-spectacle versus realisations of self-visions.

## Qualitative Data Collection

As the study is aiming to apply the theoretical approach of post-accession hooliganism to an analysis of the long-term effects of the EU's geonormative enlargement paradox, the points of analysis are largely collected through close observation of Bulgarian news sites and government

websites to stay up to date on key political and rule of law developments. Specifically, a special eye is kept to BTA, the national news agency of Bulgaria, and other European and international news sites such as Politico, Balkan Insight and Euractiv, as they provide thorough reports on the most pressing developments in Bulgaria in English. However, to gather a more complete comprehension of the Bulgarian situation the limited number of news articles, analytical reports and other sources in the Bulgarian language will be translated with the help of online machine translation tools. These sources are most often found through English cross references, ensuring credibility to their content. The policies of interest are chosen critically based on political, ontological and timely relevance and aim to present a detailed picture of the tumultuous political environment in Bulgaria in a time of critical importance to their prospective rule of law development. The supporting data is collected through thorough internet and database searches, looking for keywords such as security, democracy, CVM, etc. pertaining to the national case

The chosen data is examined through interpretivist and document analysis, where the pre-existing data, such as news reports on political developments, are utilised to reflect the views of people. Instead of conducting numerous interviews with Bulgarian citizens to get a sense of the common feelings and contrasting beliefs, the analysis will reflect on the pre-existing data that report on these notions. This is most prominently used in connection to the collection of statistical data, as the analysis embraces previous studies and surveys from Globsec and Alpha Research to triangulate the findings of the analysis. Globsec is a global and independent think tank that annually reports on democratic trends in the CEE and Baltic region alongside other foreign and security policy reports; and Alpha Research is the biggest independent Bulgarian national research agency. Both produce useful data by conducting national surveys on different democratic, security and foreign affairs issues, which is greatly functional to provide data of second-hand observations. The pre-existing data are often utilised in this study to provide an empirical background to the analysis in connection to the loose discourse analysis at hand. Specifically, the studies and surveys are used to gain insight into the public perception of the political reality of Bulgaria and their ontological insecurity.

As the first dimension of the analysis is concerned with Bulgaria's post-CVM experience it should be noted that the CVM reports have been made inaccessible since the conclusion of its implementation in 2023. Without these original reports on the specific issues and concrete recommendations to the nations' conditional challenges, the analysis of Bulgaria's progress is to be estimated through second-hand sources and reports on the same. These include other reports and press releases from the European Commission on the subject. The six CVM benchmarks for

Bulgaria have therefore also been found through second-hand sources, from the Dutch EU Monitor website, which was published in a Q and A form in 2018.<sup>39</sup> However, the 2017 revised assessment of progress and recommendations on the basis of the benchmarks can be found in the report from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council, *SWD/2019/392/final*.<sup>40</sup>

## Limitations

The thesis focuses on the case of Bulgaria in relation to the enlargement discussions of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia as a historical and contemporary precaution to hastened pre-accession determined largely or wholly by external risk factors as a stabilising tool. However, it will not explore these individual nations and their circumstances for EU Membership in-depth, as they remain unique to their historical, geographical, ethnic, cultural and economic situation. Much thorough literature has already been composed on the candidate countries, including EU documents testifying the knowledge of the existing domestic challenges, and so, it makes sense to refer to these sources to provide future perspective to the relevance of the study at hand. Instead, the study's contribution to the enlargement discussion is derived through a case study of an existing Member State, Bulgaria, to determine the lived effects of the EU's geonormative enlargement strategy.

As previously mentioned in the data collection chapter, the analysis is utilising pre-existing literature and datasets to complement the analysis of the democratic trends of the national case. While this methodology does limit the independence of the research, it allows access to broader sources than could have been achieved independently. The validity of the research is further supported by the triangulation of the pre-existing data in connection with the discourse analysis of the democratic trends.

Furthermore, the study addresses the possible neglect of local agency in the case by incorporating analysis of the internal motivations of key political actors. In this, it is examined how local elites navigate and instrumentalise EU-leaning or pro-Russian narratives for personal/political gain.

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<sup>39</sup> EU Monitor, 'Cooperation and Verification Mechanism Reports on Bulgaria and Romania', EU Monitor.nl, 13 November 2018, <https://www.eumonitor.nl/9353000/1/j9vvik7m1c3gyxp/vktflbqbopzj?ctx=vij1dk0votxc>.

<sup>40</sup> European Commission, 'COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT BULGARIA : Technical Report Accompanying the Document REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND THE COUNCIL on Progress in Bulgaria under the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism' (European Union, 2019), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52019SC0392>.

## Theoretical framework

### Post-Accession Hooliganism

As previously mentioned, the term 'post-accession hooliganism' is defined in connection with the negative changes to the Bulgarian and Romanian political entities after their accession to the EU in 2007.<sup>41</sup> Taking a point of departure in Mungiu-Pippidi's 2007 article on the probability of an, at the time, future Eastern backsliding and a strong notion of the EU's weakening conditionality enforcement post-accession,<sup>42</sup> Ganev revisited these speculations with the contemporary knowledge of time to reassess the democratic developments within the two states. In the 2007 article, the CEE Members' newly accession and Europeanisation are discussed on the background of scepticism towards their democratic transitions' longevity. In Ganev's 2013 rendering of this discussion, he identifies patterns of elite behavioural changes and heightened leniency for corruption as grounds for transitory behaviour that disputes the longevity of the EU's conditionality. Here, Ganev differentiates between two types of corruption, *cronyism* and *competitive rent seeking*, as different ways of lobbying. Where competitive rent seeking is much like the normalised lobbying that is seen in most democratic nations now, cronyism is characterized by covert engagement of networks of power that facilitates in-group favouritism.

In Bulgaria's post-communist establishment, the privatisation process, along with the reinvention of the communist parties to capitalist, laid grounds for cronyism as assets were strategically bought by and distributed among the communist nomenclature.<sup>43</sup> Prospects of full EU Membership worked briefly as a motivator for competitive rent seeking, allowing foreign actors to bid in and thereby increase profits through mutual interests, before returning inwards to enjoy the fruits of cronyism yet again.<sup>44</sup> This brief window of competitive rent seeking and behavioural variation is imperative to Ganev's notions of post-accession hooliganism as state elites use foreign

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<sup>41</sup> Venelin Ganev. "Post-Accession Hooliganism ': Democratic Governance in Bulgaria and Romania After 2007" *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* 27 no. 1 (February 2013): 26-44. DOI: [10.1177/0888325412465086](https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325412465086)

<sup>42</sup> Alina Mungiu-Pippidi. "Is East-Central Europe Backsliding? EU Accession Is No 'End of History.'" *Journal of Democracy* 18, no. 4 (2007): 8. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2007.a223238>.

<sup>43</sup> Günther Heydemann and Karel Vodička, eds. Chapter 11 "Bulgaria" in *From Eastern Bloc to European Union: Comparative Processes of Transformation since 1990*. (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017): 289. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781785333187>.

<sup>44</sup> Ganev. "Post-Accession Hooliganism':" 31.



investments to manipulate the flow of funds into the state market as a way to funnel capital into private businesses owned by cronies.

While the measurement of corruption indexes remains imperative to the methodology of post-accession hooliganism, Ganev further argues that the qualitative properties of the different definitions of corruption affect the relative efficiency of corrupt practices that stimulate developmental effects.<sup>45</sup> With this, it is meant that competitive rent seeking facilitates open offers of bribery to articulations of mutual interests that promotes competition for the best outcome for all parts' self-interest. Opening the market of privatisation to the EU allowed for an influx of capital aimed at developing Bulgaria and Romania's state-building as new democracies. However, the lack of strict conditionality, and administration of the same, created an environment conducive to attitudinal and behavioural backsliding, ultimately stimulating measures of cronyism.

To define this pattern of elite behaviour Ganev uses sociological understandings of hooliganism in a way that reflects the identifiable behavioural patterns. Based on three central characteristics that allows the actor (here, the state or state elite) to demonstrate accepted or favourable behaviour on a daily basis to go unnoticed, and choose to perform behaviour or misbehaviour based on circumstantial contexts based on the social or personal profit of the situations, in small bursts of disruptive acts that does not actively seek to destroy the system in which it exists on a daily basis.

Considering both Mungiu-Pippidi and Ganev's previous studies of the CEE enlargement and their findings of concern pointing towards a pattern of timely behavioural shifts motivated by promises of great rewards, this study utilises the notion of post-accession hooliganism to establish an argument of concern against the unreliability of sudden illusions of democratic transition. With this, it is meant to aid in the analysis of Bulgaria's democratic transition and find ways to assess the stability of its foundations through analysis of elite behaviour. By operationalising the term, the analysis considers the (in)stability of Bulgaria's post-accession and post-CVM experience with the understanding that stability, in the EU geostrategic context, is equal to that of security. While the paper primarily relates to the stability aspect of the EU's geostrategy, Ganev's theory is further upheld by the imposition of honour that comes with the entitlement of being recognised as *European*. Therefore, the analysis likewise takes on an aspect of identity in relation to security to the further research of the EU's geostrategy. This notion of the imposition of

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid. 29.

honour as a mechanism of monitoring is fundamentally reiterated in the theory of ontological security, which further echoes the understanding of stability as a prospect of security.

Ganev's post-accession hooliganism departs from the sociological behavioural patterns of hooliganism, which is often connected to sports and the performance of community identities. This departure validates the sociopolitical background of the research in a way that connects it to identity politics. With this, it is understood that the state elite acts in representation of the state, as elected officials under some degree of social consensus. Stable behavioural patterns in IR are imperative to the cooperation between states as it guarantees a sort of security through the states' external representations of Self. Post-accession hooligan behaviour suggests unreliable patterns of conduct that disallows secure partnerships based on trust. In this study, the term is used to describe these relationships in the IR context as a factor for ontological insecurity. The theory is considered the bedrock of the study as it assesses the long-term behavioural patterns in the post-accession dynamics, accentuating specific political and social junctures in the period of 2020 to 2025 that reflect the indulgence of the political elite.

In a case study of Romania's elite post-accession hooligan behaviour, Dragoman found that, in Romania, non-ideological populists consolidated power in the name of direct democracy and the people's genuine will.<sup>46</sup> The emergence of non-ideological populist developments are also observable in Bulgaria, Ganev identifies, as a result of a severe debasement of the relations between voters and their representatives that is led by constant disappointment in the fulfilment of the representatives' guarantees, also termed *representative entropy*.<sup>47</sup> The political crisis in Bulgaria as a development of the 2020 protest cycle has strongly reflected the same tendencies of emerging populism in the interest of diminishing the power of the representative elite; a class that is no longer deemed to represent the will of the people, but self-interested cronyism. Recognising the same patterns in Bulgaria as in Romania, the present study utilises the theoretical diagnosis to analyse the case's political environment from 2020 to 2025 as it heads into the last steps of the accession process: the eurozone entry.

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<sup>46</sup> Dragoş Dragoman, 'Post-Accession Backsliding: Non-Ideological Populism and Democratic Setbacks in Romania', *South-East European Journal of Political Science*, Ideologies and Patterns of Democracy, I, no. 3 (2013): 42.

<sup>47</sup> Ganev, 'Post-Accession Hooliganism'. 40.

## Ontological Security

To delve further into the identity dimension of the EU's securitisation project, as it surely can be called based on the account of plentiful deliberations made on the Union's reiterations of geostrategy unfolded and still unfolding in the Eastern fringes, the theoretical framework takes on Steele's concept of ontological security to establish identity as an imperative element for domestic stability and security through affirmations to the state's self-identity. Steele's ontological security theory elucidates how state survival and territoriality come secondary to the affirmations of the state's self-identity as it affirms internal and external perceptions of the state, along with the physical existence and boundaries of it, through social and political expressions of self-identity.<sup>48</sup> Put shortly, ontological security is the alignment of these self-expressions, as the state conducts correspondingly to its self-perceptions and its role within the international order. Feeling secure and aligned in the state's internal perception of reality assures the correct external reflection. Ontological security, thus, serves as a factor of predictability in international relations, securing stable social bonds across and within states.

In a geopolitical context, such as the enlargement of the EU, successful accession would then become an act of affirmation of the given state, its Europeanness (cultural and social identity), its normative values (democratic alignment), and its physical integrity (affirmed by the boundaries of EU governance). In this way, the thesis distances itself from the realist view of survivalist understandings of security and presents states and international actors as internal reflective actors who can act 'morally' or honour-driven to serve their self-visions. This understanding helps comprehend social action more nuanced through honour-driven obligations to appease internal and external perceptions. It should, however, be stressed that the ontological security of a state does not determine its actions pre-emptively, nor are they politically void. Rather, they are understood through the same frames of political engagement as realist security, as Steele puts it:

“Like the realist who assumes that leaders use politics and rhetoric to satiate the masses and activate them to engage in unsavoury “security” policies, ontological security scholars assume that state agents use politics to secure self-identity

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<sup>48</sup> Brent J. Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State*, (New York: Routledge, 2008): 2.

[https://www.academia.edu/15829412/Ontological\\_Security\\_in\\_International\\_Relations\\_Self\\_Identity\\_and\\_the\\_IR\\_state](https://www.academia.edu/15829412/Ontological_Security_in_International_Relations_Self_Identity_and_the_IR_state)

commitments. Indeed, is there anything more political in social life than the struggle over identity?"<sup>49</sup>

Indeed, the political engagement of state agents can thereby be seen as a way to shape the social identity of the state. Thereby, ontological security is an approach to IR that interprets policy actions to determine motivations for the social and security implications they have. Actions, policies and their subsequent narratives are ways in which states negotiate an identity that is perceived by the internal and external audience and are therefore not merely reactionary, as they are in a realist view. Rather, the narratives spun around the actions are as essential as the actions themselves, as they account for the moral reasoning of their pursuit.

Like post-accession hooliganism, the ontological security presentation of honour and identity in connection to security supports the fundamental understanding of stability as security in the EU's geostrategic context. In consideration of the ontological paradigm of social constructivism, the interconnected concept of security and identity is, however, determined by the social meanings and contexts of which they are constructed around. It is employed in this context as a framework to understand the identity facet of security and what it means to be part of the European community. This also includes what implicit guarantees are protected under the acceptance of the given identification marker. In this regard, the thesis employs the ontological security framework to scrutinise the political vacillation between European and Russian sociopolitical identification that has influenced the Bulgarian governmental crisis and supports the perpetual cycle of voter fatigue.

## Securitisation & Desecuritisation

The theoretical framework has so far made a lot of mentions of securitisation and desecuritisation based on the knowledge gathered from the literature review. This section will elaborate a bit more on the way in which securitisation is to be understood in the Bulgarian context to EU enlargement. Taking a point of departure in O'Brennan's arguments of EU enlargement as an execution of 'soft' security as a way to normalise geopolitical issues as domestic EU politics through measures of 'desecuritisation'.<sup>50</sup> To understand 'desecuritisation' in relation or contrast to 'securitisation', the framework draws on Buzan, Wæver and De Wilde's judgement of the securitisation process as a rhetorical representation of existential threats that are employed to legitimise emergency policy

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<sup>49</sup> Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations*. 5.

<sup>50</sup> O'Brennan, "Bringing Geopolitics Back In".

responses.<sup>51</sup> In other words, it is a sort of politicisation of an issue that seeks to represent a threat to be eliminated through emergency measures outside the bound of political procedure. It is important to note that 'desecuritisation' is not to be understood as the complete opposition, but rather as the process in which the de-escalation of the threat is achieved. To desecuritize is to stabilise and normalise the state of existence that is shaped by the newly accepted emergency measures. Defining the EU's Eastern enlargement as a desecuritisng measure, as it has extensively been in the existing literature, it is understood that instability in the CEE region poses a threat to the harmony of the European community and therefore justifies foreign intervention through the normalisation of coerced inter-state relations. These inter-state relations have been cultivated as political methods to prevent regional fragmentation and conflict through modes of social politicisation that transform the external security factors to internal factors.

To operationalise this concept in the Bulgarian domestic context it is understood that the EU's accession of the CEE Members has allowed them to externalise their domestic issues related to the European standard, at least to a certain extent. Meaning, that through the desecuritisation process, the EU has normalised the enlargement project as a stabilising tool of conduct and with that, they have created a sort of self-obligation to maintain balance and prevent externalisation of domestic issues or conflicts that can cause inter-state dissension. It is with this notion in mind of the EU's self-obligation that drives the geopolitical dimension of this thesis. Namely, that the EU has created a (conditional) obligation to only aid in normative conflicts that has potential to externalise themselves. The conditionality of the obligation, I argue, stems from the limitations to the EU's intervention in domestic politics that are only lifted in special cases that clashes with the EU's geonormative commitments. Considering the essentialism of these geonormative commitments, the thesis builds on the notion of the EU's securitisation and desecuritisation processes to understand the limits of the Union's mediation tools to identify the weaknesses that hinders the integration of new democracies. Bulgaria works as an example of these limitations as they face a manifold political crisis that has debilitated the nation's rule of law development through the weakening of its democratic institutions.

Connecting de/securitisation to the other elements of the theoretical framework, occupied with the negotiations of identity iterated through policy action, political engagement and

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<sup>51</sup> Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde. *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. Boulder, Colo: Lynne Rienner, 1998. 25.

the narratives that drive both, the paper uses these to discern how state agents formulate security and threats relative to the external agents. Coupling ontological security understandings of the political interconnections of identity and security with the concept of de/securitisation, the analysis is structured around the representative narratives that are employed to realise policy actions or inactions that affect the state's democratic compliances. That is, the narratives that surround the implementation or blocking of policies. Like ontological security theory, which finds that these narratives employ rhetoric and politics to secure self-identity commitments, de/securitisation theory further establishes that the EU has succeeded in identifying its enlargement projects as a stabilising tool through securitising narratives and actions in the past. The thesis, therefore, considers the EU's monitoring mechanisms and their reports as the standard of EU rule of law and seeks to determine the weaknesses in the desecuritisation process that have allowed a political crisis from negative public perceptions of democratic and rule of law deficits.

## Counter-Democracy – the organisation of distrust

Lastly, the theoretical framework embraces Pierre Rosanvallon's understanding of democratic institutional structure. Centring the topic of the enlargement project's limitations around the Bulgarian political crisis as a case of internal ontological insecurity, the thesis is concerned with the negative public perceptions and surrounding discourses that have perpetuated the political spiral.

Rosanvallon famously talks about societies of distrust in his work on democratic distrust and representative entropy, *Counter-democracy: Politics in an Age of Distrust*.<sup>52</sup> His work presents two main forms of distrust, liberal and democratic, which are used to describe different views on the foundations of democracy in relation to the people's power. Liberal distrust of power is a theory of state-building that aims at constituting a weak government, in which public suspicion is institutionalised to hold elected leaders accountable. In the Bulgarian case, arguments can be made that the eruption of the 2020 protest cycle was an execution of liberal democratic acts that sought to exercise the people's institutional suspicions towards the government by acting on their distrust to overturn it. The liberal branch of institutionalised distrust is rooted in the prevention of despotism, which means that it builds on an anxious and pessimistic view of democracy that seeks to establish weak democracies through heightened suspicion and accountability of the elite.<sup>53</sup> On the

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<sup>52</sup> Pierre Rosanvallon, *Counter-Democracy: Politics in an Age of Distrust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), [https://assets.cambridge.org/97805218/86222/excerpt/9780521886222\\_excerpt.pdf](https://assets.cambridge.org/97805218/86222/excerpt/9780521886222_excerpt.pdf).

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. 6+7.

other hand there is democratic distrust of power, which is observed as the primary form of distrust in post-totalitarian states. While the Bulgarian protest cycle *can* be seen as a civil execution of liberal counter-democracy, the nation's Soviet history and post-Soviet state-building struggles does not facilitate the perception of weak governance structures.

Rather, the 2020-21 protests have arguably become an example of the power of counter-democracy, as public distrust was mobilised to organise a single body against the sitting government to hold elected officials accountable and maintain pressure on the government to serve the people. This demonstration of dissatisfaction arose from a long period of observed political negligence and corruption. It acts as a perfect example to execution of the three main mechanisms of counter-democracy: oversight, prevention and judgement. Rosanvallon presents these mechanisms as an outline of what he describes to be 'counter-democracy' as they operationalise the public distrust and the popular power that comes with the proper execution of electoral-representative democracies to create a common instrument of accountability.<sup>54</sup> In the study at hand, it is also defined as an organisation of distrust.

The mechanism of oversight is argued to constitute an invisible institution of reputation through modes of vigilance, denunciation and evaluation.<sup>55</sup> This pillar expands the populace's capacity as a legitimising entity beyond the regular vote to be a constant element in a working representative democracy. In the Bulgarian context, the 2020 protest cycle is deemed an exemplary execution of these powers, arising from observations and reports of corruption and public organisation around dissatisfaction and distrust in government, where the elected officials were forced to resign due to loss of reputation.

While the power of oversight is what sparked the protest cycle, the prevention mechanism is of particular interest for this thesis, as it formulates the importance of civil society organisations and movements to collectivise resistance to unpolitical acts from the top. Here, Rosanvallon draws on Montesquieu's distinction between the ability to act and the ability to prevent in *The Spirit of the Laws*, to explain the different capacities of bottom-up sanctioning.<sup>56</sup> The distinction is developed through a recognition of the limitations of the authority of mandates as a means to achieve political goals against the elite, also defined as 'positive democracy'. The

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid. 8.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. 13.

<sup>56</sup> Montesquieu, Charles de Secondat, Anne M Cohler, Basia Carolyn Miller, and Harold Samuel Stone. *The Spirit of the Laws*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989. in Rosanvallon, *Counter-Democracy*: 21.

observations take root in the civic inability to mobilise specific policy actions or decisions through mandated elections or referendums due to the challenges of collective desirable formulations. Instead, civil society has been compelled to take more concise measures, in the form of blocking undesired policy actions and decisions, to demonstrate their dissatisfaction. The effectiveness of blocking as a mechanism of prevention is earned through the tangibility of the action, as it is easier to organise around, for example through protests. Protesting is the core of effective prevention mechanisms as it is an exertion of power that is mobilised through organised distrust, often around specific single issues.

The organisation of distrust is often inspired by existing groups of civil society organisations that work as agents for the mechanism of oversight. These organisations play a key role in the formulation of issues and the mobilisation of people as an institution of counter-democracy. These organisations act as supporting pillars of civil society's unity and transparency on important issues. Likewise, they are important for the continuous assessment of political actions and decisions as they exist on stable engagement from multitudes of people. The stable engagement, which keep these organisations alive, are moreover vital for the third mechanism of judgement. This mechanism emphasises ongoing evaluation of the political sphere to allow civic oversight outside of formal election processes. It can be interpreted as the constant driver for the other mechanisms, as it is through the constant evaluation processes that government deficiencies are identified and brought up for public assessment. From which, the other mechanisms' functions are introduced to ensure accountability and proper democratic processes to realign the elite's representations of the state under social consensus.

The case study utilises the theoretical concepts of the counter-democratic framework as a background for the examination of the normative frames of the Bulgarian democratic institutions. Specifically, it analyses how these mechanisms are manifested in society and what effect they have, in order to determine the democratic institutional weaknesses of the national case. This is set out in hopes of determining a pattern of democratic behaviour based on the operationalisation of the theoretical framework of counter-democracy that examines how these institutions interact. The mechanism of judgement in the national context is employed to offer a useful lens for understanding how citizens respond to institutional failures and democratic deficiencies as an underlying notion to support the other mechanisms that include more tangible actions.



Again, the theoretical framework operates on the notion that the political elite, made up of elected officials, act as representatives of the people under social consensus mechanisms, such as positive democratic processes of elections. It utilises the same understanding of social consensus that operates in the establishment of ontological security, while defining civil society's tools of counter-democracy to express dissatisfaction in the elite's representations. Like post-accession hooliganism, counter-democracy is derived from sociological understandings of behaviour, which makes the theoretical framework able to support social notions of identity and behaviour in a political context.

## Analysis

### Bulgaria's tumultuous post-CVM era in an age of distrust

This dimension of the analysis is concerned with the democratic structure and normative framework of Bulgaria post the provisional closure of its CVM benchmarks. To analyse the effectiveness of the mechanism it is important to be acquainted with the framework of which it operates. The cooperation and verification mechanism (CVM) was introduced during Bulgaria and Romania's accession to the EU in 2007 as a transitional measure to ease the progress of rule of law implementations that are described in the Copenhagen criteria as conditions for EU Membership.<sup>57</sup> For Bulgaria, the monitor instrument was employed to promote areas of judicial reform (1-3), anti-corruption (4,5) and measures against organised crime (6). The CVM is made up of a series of benchmarks in the given fields addressing the shortcomings and was implemented through an annual report system that secured vigilance over the progress which "benefitted from contact with Member States, civil society and international organisations, independent experts and a variety of other sources."<sup>58</sup> In its October 2019 report, 12 years post-accession, the Commission could finally conclude Bulgaria's satisfactory fulfilment of its CVM recommendations, given the continued commitment to specific issues which were listed in the conclusions of the report and wholly completed in June 2023. This decision was partly based on the reported meetings of the required benchmarks in the fields of rule of law and partly on the satisfactory display of Bulgarian

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<sup>57</sup> European Commission, "Rule of Law: Commission Formally Closes the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism for Bulgaria and Romania," *Press release* (September 15, 2023), [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_23\\_4456](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_4456).

<sup>58</sup> European Commission, "Cooperation and Verification Mechanism Reports on Bulgaria and Romania," *Questions and Answers* (October 22, 2019), [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda\\_19\\_6137](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda_19_6137).

commitment to the Union's normative framework through observations of the steady progress. The Commission officially closed the CVM for the 2007 Members in September of 2023, and instead regards their continued cooperation and improvement under the annual Rule of Law Cycle, which examines developments across all Member States, based on four rule of law sectors.<sup>59</sup>

The realisation and implementation of the remaining three benchmarks on judicial reform and anti-corruption, however, remain at the heart of the political crisis that put the nation in a political deadlock for the past four years. In the 2024 Rule of Law report country chapter on Bulgaria's rule of law situation, it is described in more detail how Bulgaria has reformed its judicial system through a comprehensive constitutional reform that limits the powers of the Prosecutor General and divides the Supreme Judicial Council (SJC) into two separate entities.<sup>60</sup> The report states that the Bulgarian Parliament adopted these amendments to the Constitution on December 20, 2023, however, they were actually challenged in the Constitutional Court in two cases, ending in a deadlock.<sup>61</sup> While decision on the drafts is still pending, the unchecked concentration of power in Bulgaria's Prosecutor General's Office, which exists in a vertical structure to exercise authority over the entire prosecutorial hierarchy, facilitates a framework susceptible to abuse.

To put this concentration of power into perspective, the previous Prosecutor General, Ivan Geshev, effectively exposed the judicial structure's capacity for corruption by ordering a raid on the presidency in July 2020, which violates the constitutionally sanctioned immunity of the President and separation of powers.<sup>62</sup> A move which ultimately inspired the first mass protest in Sofia, forcing the resignation of the government along with the Prosecutor General, and demanded the realisation of the judicial reform that the CVM already appealed in its benchmarks. Geshev's official dismissal from the Prosecutor's Office in 2023 ended with him suing Bulgaria at the ECtHR for violations of his personal rights and briefing MEPs on the Borissov Administration's corruption and money laundering.<sup>63</sup> The intricacies of the case, Geshev's attempt at exposing the corruption of the incumbent administration and the subsequent public display of the unchecked power of the vertical system, are great examples of how the power is really concentrated. While Geshev has

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers, "2024 Rule of Law Report" *Country Chapter on the rule of law situation in Bulgaria*. (European Commission, July 24, 2024) p. 4-5.

<sup>61</sup> 'Bulgaria's Constitutional Court Strikes down Bulk of Constitutional Amendments', ConstitutionNet, 29 July 2024, <http://constitutionnet.org/news/bulgarias-constitutional-court-strikes-down-bulk-constitutional-amendments>.

<sup>62</sup> Bulgarian Constitution art. 103.

<sup>63</sup> Krassen Nikolov, *Dismissed Chief Prosecutor Sues Bulgaria before Strasbourg Human Rights Court*, November 22, 2024. Euractiv.com <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/dismissed-chief-prosecutor-sues-bulgaria-before-strasbourg-human-rights-court/>.

previously drawn negative attention to himself in EU's assessment of Bulgaria's deteriorating rule of law by failing to secure convictions of high-level corruption, the incident that led to his untimely dismissal emerged from the clash of powers that came from his exposure of governmental corruption.

The appointment of Borislav Sarafov as the new Prosecutor General has further provoked constitutional debates related to the legitimacy of the SJC. The Constitutional Court's ruling of the SJC's permanence as a functioning supreme body in the judiciary, rather than a body of mandates, has created legal loopholes that override the members' mandates, which makes them able to nominate Sarafov as the sole selection for the new Prosecutor General.<sup>64</sup>

Comprehending the importance of the appointment of the Prosecutor General and the technical interpretation of the Constitution, is to understand the concentration of power within the functions of the Prosecutor General; where a single person oversees the legalities of and holds authority over the entire prosecutorial hierarchy and their decisions.<sup>65</sup> With the extent of unchecked power within the judicial system and the longevity of the position, seven years, the three-part election of the SJC members is imperative to the legitimacy of their Prosecutor General appointment. Given the political deadlock and the Constitutional Court's ruling to maintain the Council's permanence as a direct result of the National Assembly's inability to form and elect new members, the extended mandates gained the ability to make another nomination that will extend past the next election of SJC members, who are appointed for five years.

The concentration of power in the Prosecutor's office has been compared to that of the Soviet model due to its vertical structure and unchecked authority.<sup>66</sup> However, some steps have recently been taken to decentralise the judicial power of the Prosecutor General. The Parliament introduced a legislative package in March 2024 as part of the rule of law commitments under the EU funded Recovery and Resilience Plan (RRP) that employs an ad hoc Prosecutor to establish

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<sup>64</sup> Конституционен съд на Република България [Bulgarian Constitutional Court], "ОПРЕДЕЛЕНИЕ № 7 [Definition No 7]," Art. 130 §4 *Constcourt.bg*, July 24, 2023: 2, [https://www.constcourt.bg/bg/act-9534?fbclid=IwY2xjawGwHDBleHRuA2FlbQIxMQABHYnIUZqO9bhirJZXIAaDL--dEfwsxInlLryNFVWNQKiM8LxCsjBhjstmVw\\_aem\\_vmkKTXvbM2Zi3LMY4NZN0Q](https://www.constcourt.bg/bg/act-9534?fbclid=IwY2xjawGwHDBleHRuA2FlbQIxMQABHYnIUZqO9bhirJZXIAaDL--dEfwsxInlLryNFVWNQKiM8LxCsjBhjstmVw_aem_vmkKTXvbM2Zi3LMY4NZN0Q).

<sup>65</sup> Bulgarian Constitution, art. 126 & 127.

<sup>66</sup> Radosveta Vassileva, "Capturing Bulgaria's Justice System: The Homestretch," *Verfassungsblog: On Matters Constitutional*, January 9, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.17176/20190109-140600-0>.

effective accountability and criminal liability at the Prosecutor General's Office.<sup>67</sup> This position will act as an independent watchdog for the Prosecutor General's decision-making in the prosecutorial decisions to open or dismiss cases, and will be able to assess cases against the acting Prosecutor General and their deputies. Introducing a separate system for the selection of judges to be appointed ad hoc prosecutors to the Judicial System Act, there are still missing references to the details of the position that effectively operationalise the office. Among these are the appointment of a clerk and premises to ensure independence of the position, as well as the special appointment of investigative police officers.

The introduction of the ad hoc Office as part of the RRP is significant in that the government have previously stood to lose EU funding due to policy shortcomings in the anti-corruption and green transition chapters under the rotations of six different caretaker governments.<sup>68</sup> Passing the package under the Recovery and Resilience Plan supports the perceived commitment to the continued efforts of the CVM, as it performs in accordance with the conditions of its lift to further rule of law progress. However, according to anonymous sources of Euractiv's network, the development and staffing of the office, which will effectively operationalise the mechanism, is being purposefully delayed by the SJC.<sup>69</sup> The political dependency of the SJC has long been reported in constitutional law circles, most commonly validated by the election of its members, where 11 of the 25 are directly elected by the National Assembly.<sup>70</sup> In this discourse, it has been argued that the primary criterion for these mandates is their political affiliation and likability within the Assembly rather than their judicial qualifications and ethics. Like the Prosecutor General, the ad hoc Prosecutor is also appointed by the SJC, further facilitating political trickle-down capture of the prosecutor institutions. Albeit the reform having temporarily appeased both domestic and international institutions with its promises, the implementation of the mechanism has left much to be desired. Investigators at Bureau for Investigative Reporting and Data (BIRD) have reported

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<sup>67</sup> Council of Europe, "Bulgaria: The Committee of Ministers Strongly Welcomes the Establishment of a Constitutional Basis for Independent Investigation of a Chief Prosecutor," Department for the Execution of Judgments of the European Court of Human Rights (Council of Europe, July 2, 2024), <https://www.coe.int/en/web/execution/-/bulgaria-the-committee-of-ministers-strongly-welcomes-the-establishment-of-a-constitutional-basis-for-independent-investigation-of-a-chief-prosecutor>.

<sup>68</sup> 'Bulgaria Must Take Necessary Steps to Receive Recovery and Resilience Plan Funds, New PM Tells VDL', *The Sofia Globe*, 22 January 2025, <https://sofiaglobe.com/2025/01/22/bulgaria-must-take-necessary-steps-to-receive-recovery-and-resilience-plan-funds-new-pm-tells-vdl/>.

<sup>69</sup> Krassen Nikolov, "Bulgarian Prosecutor Tasked with Probing Chief Prosecutor, Unable to Function," Euractiv (EURACTIV, November 3, 2023), <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/bulgarian-prosecutor-tasked-with-probing-chief-prosecutor-unable-to-function/>.

<sup>70</sup> Vassileva, "Capturing Bulgaria's Justice System:"

extensively on the systemic dismissal of cases against Sarafov with evidence that supports the speculations of political motivation of the SJC's ad hoc Prosecutor nomination.<sup>71</sup>

The appeasement of the promised reform did not last long without effective follow-through, and in March 2025, protesters in Sofia gathered to, once again, demand effective rule of law reform from the top, starting with the resignation of the Prosecutor General Sarafov and a new election for the SJC mandates, along with the political banning and sanctioning of the famous oligarch, Peevski.<sup>72</sup> The persistence of the public demonstrations of dissatisfaction and their thematic consistency demonstrates the influence of counter-democratic measures and civil society. In *Counter-democracy*, Rosanvallon draws on sociological understandings of civil society's influence over the representative institutions, focusing on political distrust as a driving force to what he calls counter-democracy.<sup>73</sup> Counter-democracy is the civil society framework that upholds a representative democracy through the organisation of distrust and suspicion. In this context, the perpetuation of the public demonstrations against the state of affairs, cycling the same problems, has moved on from the powers of oversight to demand prevention of backsliding. In this dimension, Rosanvallon distinguishes between the ability to act and the ability to prevent, deeming that there are greater limitations to compelling specific actions and decisions than influencing sanctions against undesired policies.<sup>74</sup> With this, it is understood why protests are a great civil display of dissatisfaction that hinders undesired policy implementation. Further, it explains the perpetuity of these demonstrations as the powers of positive democracy have been delayed in concurrence with the spiralling political crisis and representative entropy.

The March protests in response to the appointment of Sarafov as Prosecutor General and the passivity of the ad hoc Prosecutor Office has, in this connection, demonstrated the weakness of Bulgaria's civil society. While the negative sovereignty of civil society was strong enough to dismantle the government in 2020, the political polarisation as a result of the prolonged political crisis has effectively diffused the civic ability to organise around a common issue, leaving a weakened state of counter-democracy that simultaneously enforces the government's position. Again, the outcome of the 2020 protest was supported by the distinction of the demands:

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<sup>71</sup> Atanas Tchobanov, "How Taleva (Not) Investigates Sarafov," Bird.bg (Bureau for Investigative Reporting and Data, December 31, 2024), <https://bird.bg/en/taleva-sarafov-delo-1/>.

<sup>72</sup> Metodi Yordanov and Marin Kolev, "Protest in Sofia Demands Rule of Law, Delyan Peevski's Removal from Power," bta.bg, March 19, 2025, <https://www.bta.bg/en/news/bulgaria/855151-protest-in-sofia-demands-rule-of-law-delyan-peevski-s-removal-from-power>.

<sup>73</sup> Rosanvallon, *Counter-Democracy*.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. 14.

resignation of the ruling government and the Prosecutor General, early elections and judicial reform through constitutional amendments. The forced resignations are a form of prevention and judgement that aims to block action and restrain power, whereas the demands for judicial reform are compelling specific actions, of which the conditions are negotiable. The thematic consistency of the revived demonstrations is a testament to the limitations of civil society's ability to act and compel specific conditions.

At length, the implementation of the ad hoc Prosecutor Office can be deemed a temporary pacification of civil society that is enforced on general commitments of the decentralisation of judicial power. Secondly, the fast development of the ad hoc Office and its promises relative to the effective operationalisation of the mechanism, which is broadly speculated to be delayed on purpose by the SJC, suggests a pattern of elite behaviour that aligns with Ganey's definitions of hooliganism. As Bulgaria previously stood to lose RRP funding due to policy shortcomings in the anti-corruption and green transition chapters under the caretaker governments, it has construed motivations to temporarily restrain selfish impulses and demonstrate a readiness to comply with EU conditionality in order to secure funding. Implementing the ad hoc Office on general commitments that align with EU's demands, it works in the same way to appease institutions of oversight.

## Sub conclusion

At length, the analysis has investigated the Bulgarian rule of law implementations and limitations in its post-CVM era, which has been marked by the spiral of political obstruction and party fragmentation that, ultimately, has delayed vital processes of implementation and reform of its judiciary and democracy. The political crisis, which has resulted in six different caretaker Cabinets in the past four years, has left vital democratic institutions in a weak position, both in concern of the public trust and engagement and the authoritative power the institutions hold.

The impermanence and instability of the caretaker Cabinets has concurrently made the adoption of any major executive decisions, institutional reforms or legal amendments almost impossible with the ease of which decrees are challenged and deadlocked in an obstructive political environment. However, strategic exceptions are found in the reform of the judiciary. As previously mentioned, the reform to the Judicial System Act to appoint an ad hoc Prosecutor in an attempt to decentralise the Prosecutor General's power was passed as part of the EU funded Recovery and Resilience Plan. The reform can be observed through two strategic lenses: The first, as a calculated

attempt to pacify civil society's dissatisfaction with the lack of comprehensive judicial reform. The avid execution of counter-democratic organisation in the past four years has forced the elite to take measures in order to remain in power, however, the decorative establishment of the ad hoc Office underlines the limitations to civil society's negotiation and implementation power.

The second strategic explanation focuses on the reform's fulfilment of the Recovery and Resilience Plan's criteria to strengthen Bulgaria's rule of law relative to the effective operationalisation of the mechanism. Highlighting the political interest in RRP funding, the analysis suggests a pattern of elite behaviour that mirrors Ganev's descriptions of hooliganism in the form of limited demonstrations of conditionality compliance and performed willingness based on general commitments. The limitations of the ad hoc Office, and the suspected intentionality of its limitations of functioning independence, accentuates the pattern of pre-accession behaviour that Ganev identified among the Bulgarian elite after 2007, as a way to appease institutions of oversight through mini-spectacles.

## Security in Uniform – Narratives of Disadvantage

Returning to the significance of the political crisis that has captured the political party system and government legitimacy for the past 4 years this section of analysis dives deeper into the new political divisions born from the anti-corruption movement of the 2020 protest cycle and its shifting development to focus on EU-Russian relations as a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Having previously established the challenges of the current democratic structure of Bulgaria's authoritative and judicial powers, the analysis examines the social dimension of the political landscape in an effort to discuss how the institutional weaknesses of the Bulgarian democracy are affecting its social governance.

As previously mentioned, the 2020 protest cycle sparked the mobilisation of an anti-corruption movement among the political parties, which sought to present ideological and capable alternatives to the established parties. The movement was driven largely by mass feelings of dissatisfaction and distrust in the government and their practice in the democracy. According to Globsec's national polls, 72% of Bulgarians still expressed dissatisfaction in the Bulgarian democracy in 2022, and again in 2024.<sup>75</sup> This is among the highest dissatisfaction rates in the polled

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<sup>75</sup> Patrik Szicherle, 'Public Attitudes in Bulgaria: A Severe Lack of Trust', (Bratislava: GLOBSEC, 10 November 2024): 16. <https://www.globsec.org/what-we-do/publications/public-attitudes-bulgaria-severe-lack-trust>.



CEE countries. However, this fact is not surprising given the spiral of political crisis that has caused seven snap parliamentary elections and in the past four years along with a rotation of six caretaker governments.

To discern a pattern of perceived vulnerability rooted in apparent dissatisfaction, the 2020 Globsec national report identified that 59% of the population did not believe anything would change (for the better) if the government changed.<sup>76</sup> This rate of distrust in the democratic practices can largely be attributed to the reported 77% that believe that the governing power is concentrated mainly at the hands of oligarchs and financial groups.<sup>77</sup> Arguing that the result of the October 2024 election and the long-awaited formation of a Cabinet continue to prove the masses right in their distrusting beliefs, it can be further maintained that the high rates of dissatisfaction with the current system make the population vulnerable to anti-democratic narratives. This tendency was already discernible in 2020, as almost half of the respondents (45%) thought a better alternative would be to invest in more authoritarian leadership models to square the perceived faults and hesitations of democracy. It should be noted that these numbers were recorded before the Covid-19 outbreak, and, as Globsec notes, the 2020 protest cycle called for political transparency in a stand against corruption as a response to the handling of the crisis.<sup>78</sup> The numbers have dropped significantly to just under 21% in a more recent Alpha Research study cited by BTV.<sup>79</sup>

Nevertheless, the October 2024 elections resulted in the reinstalment of a GERB-led government on the part of the 'establishment' backed by BSP and ITN, effectively reverting the governmental make-up back to the familiar structures in the hopes of changed behaviour. This exemplifies the challenge that it is to dismantle the status quo. Tendencies of stability-seeking through repeating patterns of political practice can largely be explained culturally as part of the democratic transitory experience in post-communist spaces, where expedited Europeanisation has resulted in 'shallow institutionalisation' that have not ensured democratic benefits to the same

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<sup>76</sup> Rumena Filipova & Ruslan Stefanov, "Democracy in Bulgaria: Still fragile after 30 years of transition." *Globsec.org* (Bratislava: GLOBSEC, October 20, 2020) 3, <https://www.globsec.org/what-we-do/publications/democracy-bulgaria-still-fragile-after-30-years-transition>.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid. 4.

<sup>79</sup> Novinite. 'One-Third of Bulgarians Lean Toward Authoritarianism, Communism, or Military Rule.' Novinite.com, 28 August 2024. <https://www.novinite.com/articles/228008/One-Third+of+Bulgarians+Lean+Toward+Authoritarianism%2C+Communism%2C+or+Military+Rule>.



degree they have elsewhere.<sup>80</sup> These benefits refer to e.g. effective rule of law standards, economic prosperity, and bigger say in international/European matters.

In Bulgaria, the erosion of trust in the political institutions is fuelled by democratic dissatisfaction at the root, resulting in increased measures of civic oversight. As a result of the evaluation of insufficient government action and harmful political conduct and corruption, protests are carried out to demonstrate distrust in the political elite. However, as mentioned in the introduction of the theoretical framework of the counter-democratic mechanisms, protests are tools of prevention that aim to block specific actions and decisions or demonstrate dissatisfaction in the conduct of the elected officials' representations by demanding a government reshuffle. At the centre of this mechanism are civil society organisations as agents of mobilisation that ensures and survives on constant engagement in evaluation processes.

What makes the theoretical framework of counter-democracy and the role of civil society engagement interesting to the Eastern EU enlargement is the spreading antagonisation of NGOs and civil society organisations inspired by the Russian narrative and regulation of 'foreign agents' in the NGO sector in the 2010s.<sup>81</sup> This narrative is employed to create a negative connotation to prevention mechanisms and is largely inspired by the rhetoric of the Soviet era, relating to spies and enemies of the state, seeking to perpetuate distrust in foreign interventions and facilitate trust in the government's protection. Since 2022, the far-right (ultra)nationalists, headed by the Vazrazhdane party and accompanied by prominent anti-LGBTQ+ figures, have proposed initiatives to force foreign-funded organisations and people to register as 'foreign agents', which prohibits them from participating in government-funded and political events and keeps them out of state institutions of education.<sup>82</sup> Luckily, the bill was rejected for a fifth time in Parliament in February, but it demonstrates the perseverance of which the political elite operates to undermine counter-democratic institutions in an effort to centralise the democratic powers and limit civil society's influence to formal electoral processes.

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<sup>80</sup> Bojan Bugarcic. "A Crisis of Constitutional Democracy in Post-Communist Europe: 'Lands in-between' Democracy and Authoritarianism". *International Journal of Constitutional Law* 13, nr. 1 (1. januar 2015): 219–45.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/icon/mov010>.

<sup>81</sup> Katherin Machalek, "Factsheet: Russia's NGO Laws," *Freedomhouse.org*, 2006,  
[https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/Fact%20Sheet\\_0.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/Fact%20Sheet_0.pdf).

<sup>82</sup> Chytomo, "Bulgaria Moves to Pass Law on Foreign Agents," ed. Ben Angel and Joy Tataryn, Chytomo.com, August 22, 2024, <https://chytomo.com/en/bulgaria-moves-to-pass-law-on-foreign-agents/>.

Bulgaria's vulnerability to anti-democratic narratives has been further demonstrated by the second development of the political party system during the past four years of crisis. As mentioned, the war in Ukraine has uncovered great insecurities in the Bulgarian-EU relations. While Russia's full-scale invasion initially warranted a closer European solidarity, on the basis of sudden increases in Russian threat perceptions and a regional proclivity towards welcoming Ukrainian refugees,<sup>83</sup> the longevity of the war has proved rocking relations between Bulgaria and the EU. During this second development, triggered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the political division has shifted to focus more on the East-West attitudinal axis. Bulgaria is often regarded as the CEE country with the most positive and lenient attitudes towards Russia in the EU, a notion which has since been demonstrated through numerous policies of de-Europeanisation and a maintenance of common historical and cultural bonds towards Russia.

Domestically, the Bulgarian elite have shown proclivities towards the Russian model by recently passing a bill that reformed the Pre-School and School Education Act to adopt an antagonistic rhetoric and stance against "non-traditional sexual orientations" and "gender identities outside of the biological one."<sup>84</sup> The language of the anti-LGBTQ+ bill is the same that is employed in the infamous Russian anti-gay legislation passed in 2013, and is likewise framed to serve as a protection of the innocence of minors. The propagandisation of identity that is used to legislate acts like this decree to ban LGBTQ+-positive ideologies, and the education hereof, is moreover employed to reinforce more conservative social structures. By framing an exclusionary angle through the fear of replacement, the discourse is shifted from its actual focus to instead facilitate perceptions of in-group disadvantages that work to incite fear formulated on the basis of societal transformation. The fear of replacement is a common tool in the far-right's playbook as a framing mechanism to establish an internal group of self-perceived disadvantage through emotional narratives that frame outside forces or influences as trying to infringe on (primarily conservative) social structures in efforts of social replacement.<sup>85</sup> This is especially apparent in the debates that

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<sup>83</sup> Dominika Hajdu, Jana Kazaz, Katarína Klingová, Viktoria Musilová & Patrik Szicherle, "GLOBSEC Trends 2023: United We (Still) Stand." (Bratislava: GLOBSEC, May 22, 2023): 38 + 24. <https://www.globsec.org/what-we-do/publications/globsec-trends-2023-united-we-still-stand>.

<sup>84</sup> Translated from Държавен вестник. (2024, August 16). "Law on Amendment and Supplementation of the Preschool and School Education Act." *Parliament.bg*; National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria. <https://dv.parliament.bg/DVWeb/showMaterialDV.jsp?idMat=224947>.

<sup>85</sup> Arslan Suleymanov, "Fear as a Tool in the Hands of the European Far Right," European Student Thinktank, July 10, 2023, <https://esthinktank.com/2023/07/10/fear-as-a-tool-in-the-hands-of-the-european-far-right/>.

accompany these bills, which, in this case, employ rhetoric that allude to a sort of war discourse of security and defence against a foreign invading evil.

A former GERB MP is quoted expressing: "On one side are the people who defend traditional values, and on the other – the people who destroy them."<sup>86</sup> This quote reinforces the social cultural bonds towards Russian values as the traditional and natural, something to be disrupted or invaded on. While the invader is not explicitly defined it is loosely framed to be the Western partners and the imposition of liberal values through the influencing of their membership or subscription to their association. This is done through the implicit contrasting of the discourse which is employed to create two opposites, an invader and a defender. With the explicit framing of the defender of traditional values as themselves, the favouring parties, the invader is implicitly read to be the opposition to the bill. The rhetoric is employed to securitise cultural values and, in this, the cultural ties to Russia, and effectively alienate the Western pervasion of this connection by presenting a concrete solution to reassure the protection of minors against perceived propaganda.

It also presents certain notions of power and the abuse of power. Framing themselves in defence of the Western ideological invasion, the political supporters of the decree are producing a narrative that portrays Bulgaria and its children at being at a disadvantage to the encroaching powers of Western ideological liberalism. That is, unless something is done to prevent the abuse of power, such as the implementation of a nationwide ban on the education of such ideologies. From this perspective, the discourse behind the implementation of the decree is observed to represent one narrative of the power struggle between the EU and the domestic sovereign right to define collective and personal self-realizations. Being effective in the adoption of the decree, the legitimacy of the Eurosceptic bloc is highly regarded and powerful in the way that it utilises narratives of projected disadvantageous self-perceptions.

The emergence of Euroscepticism has gradually followed Bulgaria's accession to the EU in 2007 as the benefits of their membership are continuously lagging. According to Globsec's data of 2024, 73% of Bulgarians felt that the EU dictates state affairs with little to no domestic influence.<sup>87</sup> This number has only fallen with 6%-points in the recent 2025 report, remaining

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<sup>86</sup> Boris Mitov, "“Евтин популизъм”. Депутатите забраниха ЛГБТ “пропагандата” сред деца с “текстове от Уикипедия” ["Cheap populism". MPs ban LGBT “propaganda” among children with 'Wikipedia texts'], Radio Free Europe, 7 August 2024, <https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/33068949.html>.

<sup>87</sup> Szicherle, "Public Attitudes in Bulgaria:" 8.

relatively high compared to the average of 56% of the region.<sup>88</sup> With the increased economic and sociopolitical pressure coming from the EU to sanction Russia, numbers from Globsec and Alpha research show that more Bulgarians are again expressing a positive view of Russia as a strategic partner since the drastic drop immediately after 2022. An independent study from Alpha Research conducted in February 2025 shows that, while Western allies, such as Germany, France, Italy and Britain, still have the overwhelming support of Bulgarians, Russia is perceived positively to just under half of the polled citizens; just four percentage points less than the perceived positivity of the US.<sup>89</sup> Globsec's survey on the same topic of the perception of regional allies explains these numbers more in-depth, as respondents confess that the common history and cultural and value proximity are the driving forces of the close relations.<sup>90</sup> These powerful ties of emotional memorability to Moscow makes Bulgaria extra vulnerable to Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns.

In this vein, CSD refers to the term *cognitive capture* to describe the historical and socio-cultural conditioning of (some) Bulgarians' cultural affinities that make them susceptible to pro-Kremlin information manipulation and disinformation.<sup>91</sup> Cognitive capture, also known as cognitive warfare in later stages of implementation, is a method of spreading disinformation on a cognitive plan that aims at manipulating the opponent's attitude and will.<sup>92</sup> Seen through the lenses of ontological security, the cognitive capture that Russia still holds over Bulgaria through socio-cultural acceptance and association is a breeding ground for pro-Kremlin narratives. Acknowledging that realists see the use of rhetoric and politics to engage masses in offensive security policies, for example through reversing discourses or alternative framings of identity, an ontological security view sees a connection between the cognitive capture of socio-cultural and historical connections and finds that that connection is a legitimate branch of the Bulgarian self-identity that can be equally politicised by state agents.

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<sup>88</sup> Dominika Hajdu et al., "GLOBSEC Trends 2025: Ready for a New Era?", (Bratislava: GLOBSEC, 14 May 2025): 43. <https://www.globsec.org/what-we-do/publications/globsec-trends-2025-ready-new-era>.

<sup>89</sup> Alpha Research, "59% of Bulgarians – Bulgaria to protect the common positions of the EU, to contribute to its unity and strength" [59% от българите – България да защитава общите позиции на ЕС, да допринася за единството и силата му] *Алфа Рисърч*, Alpharesearch.bg, March 2025, <https://alpharesearch.bg/post/1033-59-ot-bulgarite-bulgaria-da-zashitava-obshite-pozicii-na-es-da-doprinasia-za-edinstvoto-i-silata-mu.html?lang=bg>.

<sup>90</sup> Hajdu et al., "United We (Still) Stand." 51.

<sup>91</sup> Gloria Trifonova & Svetoslav Malinov, ed. Ognian Shentov, Ruslan Stefanov & Todor Galev, "Operation 'Disinformation': Uncovering Kremlin Influences in Ex-Military Networks in Bulgaria." (CSD: Sofia, November 29, 2024). <https://csd.eu/publications/publication/operation-disinformation/>.

<sup>92</sup> Peter B.M.J Pijpers, "On Cognitive Warfare: The Anatomy of Disinformation," TDHJ.org, March 21, 2024, <https://tdhj.org/blog/post/on-cognitive-warfare-the-anatomy-of-disinformation/>.

As previously exemplified in the discourse that allowed the passing of decree 199 on the ban of LGBTQ+ education in schools, there is an element of honour and identity tied to the pro-Russian ideology that draws on the reminiscent greatness of the Soviet era. In December 2023 a decision was made to compel a symbolic separation from Russia with the dismantling of the Red Army monument in Sofia's Knyazheska garden. The monument had been a point of discussion for over three decades as a symbol of the Soviet legacy and its continued presence in Bulgaria, and its dismantling became a tension-filled point of significant symbolism in Bulgaria's redefinition of its links to Moscow.<sup>93</sup> The statue symbolised the heroism of the Red Army in Bulgaria and acted as a reminder of the forces of the Soviet brotherhood. For many it was a depiction of security in the known, the beginning of the authoritarian rule, something that many Bulgarians still reminisce zealously on – especially in times of political crisis where 45 % thought it was a good idea to invest in more authoritarian leadership models as a way out of the crisis.<sup>94</sup>

Considering the thesis' theoretical framework and understanding of security as a sense of stability, parallels can be drawn between the desire for strong leadership models and the rather positive image of President Radev. In 2023 and 2024 the President of Bulgaria scored the highest rates of trust among all political institutions, with the armed forces as the closest runner-up.<sup>95</sup> As of 2025 the Bulgarian trust rates in the armed forces have increased to 53%, demonstrating the continuing upwards trend in the political distrust and military legitimisation.<sup>96</sup> The political power struggles of the past four years has resulted in obstructionist behaviour among the political parties, which has, in turn, highlighted the perseverance of Radev's stronghold and authority on the government as he sits his second term. This is primarily manifested through public finger-wagging and nudging at the politicians and MPs to speed up negotiations and coalition processes, to end the crisis. After eight years on the job, Radev projects the sort of stability and seriousness that the parliament has lost during the spiralling crisis, and which has been perpetuated by the obstructionist behaviour of the political parties.

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<sup>93</sup> Maria Mateeva-Kazakova, "The Resurgence of the Russian Dilemma on the Bulgarian Political Scene," Robert-schuman.eu, June 4, 2024, <https://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/european-issues/751-the-resurgence-of-the-russian-dilemma-on-the-bulgarian-political-scene>.

<sup>94</sup> Filipova & Stefanov, "Democracy in Bulgaria:" 3.

<sup>95</sup> Rumena Filipova, "Bulgarian Public Opinion, 2024: Increasing Commitment to Allies and Improving Perceptions of Media Freedom amid Continuous East-West Ambivalence." (Bratislava: GLOBSEC, April 6, 2024): 13+14. <https://www.globsec.org/what-we-do/publications/globsec-trends-2024-bulgaria>.

<sup>96</sup> Hajdu et al., "GLOBSEC Trends 2025", 23.

This makes Radev a powerful figure of influence among the public. The sheer levels of trust that Radev captures compared to the rest of the governing bodies is very notable in the influence that he has over the public perception. Over time Radev has positioned himself rather aggressively against Bulgarian involvement in the war in Ukraine and has on numerous occasions echoed Kremlin narratives about the war and Ukraine's physical integrity and sovereignty, in particular concerning Crimea. In response to the National Assembly's decision to send military aid to Ukraine back in December 2022, Radev unceremoniously labelled supporters of the weapon shipment "warmongers".<sup>97</sup> As a staunch opponent to the escalation and prolonging of the war, Radev uses his military legitimacy as a former Major General in the Bulgarian air force to assert his own beliefs on security, which mirror pro-Kremlin narratives of i.a. Russian military superiority.

In line with the strong public trust in the president, armed forces and the unabashed support for Kremlin narratives that are derived from the lingering effects of the Soviet era's military integration, CSD has previously uncovered how networks of ex-military officers in prominent political roles act as a fixed part of the Russian cognitive capture model.<sup>98</sup> The study highlights how ex-military officers act as agents of disinformation in governmental institutions through their training in environments of reflexive control. Here military officers are being subjected to specific information in a conditioned environment that prime them to hold certain beliefs based on the narratives presented in their training or education. The relative high levels of trust vested in the armed forces – around 36% rather trust and 6% completely trust in 2024<sup>99</sup> – compared to other institutions, where the rate for rather and completely distrust outweighs the trust rate, is giving leveraging powers to members of the armed forces. The numbers of trust have even grown further apart in the recent publication of the Globsec 2025 report – reporting 53% of respondents trusting the armed forces as well as the President and 27% trusting the government.<sup>100</sup> This underscores how military status can be used as a legitimising driver to strategically leverage security narratives, that reinforces a sense of stability and continuity that aligns with Steele's concept of ontological security.

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<sup>97</sup> БНТ, "Radev: The warmongers in the National Assembly decided on military aid for Ukraine" [Радев: Войнолюбците в Народното събрание взеха решение за военна помощ за Украйна], bntnews.bg, December 23, 2022, <https://bntnews.bg/news/radev-voinolyubcite-v-narodnoto-sabranie-vzеха-reshenie-za-voenna-pomosht-za-ukraina-1218066news.html>.

<sup>98</sup> Gloria Trifonova & Svetoslav Malinov, ed. Ognian Shentov, Ruslan Stefanov & Todor Galev, "Operation 'Disinformation': Uncovering Kremlin Influences in Ex-Military Networks in Bulgaria." (CSD: Sofia, November 29, 2024). 11. <https://csd.eu/publications/publication/operation-disinformation/>.

<sup>99</sup> Filipova, "Bulgarian Public Opinion, 2024:" Fig. 13.

<sup>100</sup> Hajdu et al., 'GLOBSEC Trends 2025'. 23+67.

Steele argues that states – and by extension, political actors – act as internal reflections of the national self-identity driven by morality and honour to maintain an internally accepted sense of order. In Bulgaria, the election of military figures into political leadership, which are primed with pro-Russian rhetoric in environments of reflexive control, provide an alternative identity framework based on the reality they perceive that counter EU-aligned governance models. This process not only reinforces institutional trust in militarised leadership, but it also strengthens narratives that challenge Bulgaria's Europeanisation, positioning Russia as a more familiar and stable anchor for national identity that is based in military superiority and, in that, a higher degree of physical security. Among other instances, Radev did not participate in the July NATO summit in Washington to strategize NATO aid to Ukraine due to dispute over Bulgaria's official statement to the summit in support of Bulgarian military aid in Ukraine as well as a reaffirmation of the understanding that Ukraine should not give up territorial integrity in potential peace negotiations.<sup>101</sup> Such action speaks volumes to the faction of Radev supporters that place more trust in the President and armed forces than other governmental institutions as it clearly signals a stance that goes against the interest of the Euro-Atlantic partnership.

## Sub-conclusion

Russia's war in Ukraine has shed a bright light on the Russian interests in Ukraine, as well as the apparent leveraging of pro-Kremlin ideologies through reflexive control in the armed forces environment as a result of the sustained military integration of the Soviet era. This section of analysis has uncovered how President Radev's image as a stable body of governance in times of political crisis has benefitted narratives of Russian military superiority and perpetuated frames of Bulgarian disadvantage in an international context. These domestic disadvantage narratives are determined through loose discourse analysis to be employed in different contexts as tools of social preservation through fears of replacement. Such frames are most notably discerned in the passing of decree 199 on the ban of LGBTQ+-positive ideologies and the education hereof in schools and educational institutions, where LGBTQ+ persons and their advocates are framed through military rhetoric as unwelcome invaders of the traditional family and social structure. In this recreation of in- and out-groups, the in-group is representing a branch of the Bulgarian self-identity that is aligning itself implicitly with the Russian social model through reiterations of the same narrative,

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<sup>101</sup> Vidka Atanasova, "Why is Bulgaria's Pro-Kremlin President Boycotting the NATO Summit?" *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*. RFE/RL July 3, 2024. <https://www.rferl.org/a/nato-bulgaria-rumen-radev-summit/33020556.html>.



creating a point of defence in a values-based articulation. The rejection of Western codes of conduct, through channels of moral value and security definition, is used to further legitimise this branch of identity and their sociocultural ties to Russia. The denial of the implicit guarantees, which are morally obligated and protected by the shared identity markers of the EU community, has brought decisive consequences to Bulgaria's ontological security, as suggested by the erosion of trust in the EU's identity-based security commitments. This is further perpetrated by the effect of ex-military actors' influence on the security debates as legitimised leaders.

This, in large parts, is how political actors have leveraged the political crisis, especially as it has evolved into its second stage of political fragmentation, triggered by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The analysis has further highlighted the attempts at centralising the governing institutions' power by attempting to block foreign-funded civil society organisations, which are vital pillars of the counter-democratic institutions that prevents institutional power play. With this, the analysis of Bulgaria's vacillating de-Europeanisation process and reshaping of social governance aimed to emphasise the attempt at direct action to limit democratic forms of prevention as a warning sign of the growing political affiliation for the Russian model among political radicals, such as the growing Vazrazhdane party.

## The Far-Right's Strategic Reclaiming of Sovereignty

The previous sections of analysis aimed to identify how political actors have leveraged the political crisis to undermine democratic progression after the provisional closure of the CVM in Bulgaria in 2019. The analysis has until now engaged with the national institutional dimension and regional dimensions to identify a pattern of normative behavioural misconduct at the different levels of government. The above analysis of the identity discourses that have helped reshape Bulgaria's social governance identified broad patterns that link the erosion of trust in government to have facilitated the appointment of ex-military leadership as a way of seeking security in times of inflated political dissatisfaction in the representative democracy and great discord on the handling of geopolitical issues. This section considers the narratives of key political parties and actors in relation to how they legitimise identity-based social politics, through security discourses and, in that, promote a greater geopolitical alignment.

To do this, the analysis undertakes a deeper study of the national discursive constructions of security made during election campaigns, particularly during the last cycles of election campaigns, where the radicalisation of voters became most apparent as a result of the



perpetual election cycles provoking feelings of representative entropy. Representative entropy is, as recalled from Rosanvallon, a severe debasement of the relations between voters and their representatives that is led by constant disappointment in the fulfilment of the representatives' guarantees.<sup>102</sup> The electoral fatigue in Bulgaria coupled with increasing representative entropy among the centre parties and their supporters triggered a political radicalisation movement that was measurable even from the short time between the June 2024 election and the one in October 2024. During these election cycles the far-right nationalist party, Vazrazhdane, has been able to hold its 13% of votes, keeping it at a consistent third place, while other parties regularly lost support due to voter fatigue. Vazrazhdane and the other far-right parties that gained access to Parliament in the most recent election did so by successfully mobilising untapped voter demographics that the centre parties lost to voter fatigue by virtue of their radical approaches to domestic issues and uncompromising ideology.<sup>103</sup> While they are not part of the Zhelyazkov coalition-government, they have still been able to hold their parliamentary influence with 33 mandates, and amass growing support for their action against the GERB-led eurozone entry as part of the broader anti-EU movement. Other far-right parties have not been able to wield such influence in Bulgaria's political scene before, which is part of why Vazrazhdane's discursive performances of security and peace are significant to the analysis of Bulgaria's geopolitical alignment.

This relative success makes Vazrazhdane a party of great social and political influence as they have been able to frame themselves as a viable alternative to the insufficiency and compromises of the established centre parties. During the October 2024 pre-election campaign, Vazrazhdane mobilised undecided voter engagement through their 'give peace a chance' campaign, which sought to promote peaceful foreign policy in relation to Bulgaria's stance against armed conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East through political neutrality.<sup>104</sup> The campaign, which rallied in the week leading up to the October election, was presented by party leader Kostadinov to signify the importance of voting by framing the election as a choice between war and peace. The discourse performed at the Sofia rally by Kostadinov conveyed concerns about the formation of a new government influenced by the gains of war. The speech refers to the pro-EU parties that have

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<sup>102</sup> Rosanvallon, *Counter-Democracy*. 13.

<sup>103</sup> Kristina Tsabala, "The Less Turnout, the Better for Radicals: The Crisis of Bulgarian Democracy and the Rise of the Far Right," *Kolegium Europy Wschodniej*, August 19, 2024, <https://www.kew.org.pl/en/2024/08/19/the-less-turnout-the-better-for-radicals-the-crisis-of-bulgarian-democracy-and-the-rise-of-the-far-right/>.

<sup>104</sup> Kaloyan Kirilov, "Vazrazhdane Holds 'Give Peace a Chance' Rallies in Several Cities," *Www.bta.bg* (BTA, October 21, 2024), <https://www.bta.bg/en/news/bulgaria/765454-vazrazhdane-holds-give-peace-a-chance-rallies-in-several-cities>.

fostered transatlantic relations through promises of Bulgarian support for the West's perceptions of geopolitical conflicts instead of leading with Bulgaria's national interests in mind.

According to an independent study from Alpha research on the impact of domestic issues on personal concerns, the three biggest concerns for eight out of ten Bulgarians in late 2023 were inflation (89%), energy prices in winter (86%), and healthcare (83%).<sup>105</sup> These numbers reveal a widespread concern for personal and national finances as a result of the expenses that the nation experiences from the war in Ukraine as part of the EU bloc's sanctions on Russian gas and oil. Despite affirmative reports on Bulgaria's abilities to reduce energy reliance on Russian products, CSD was able to report that in 2023 roughly half the natural gas imports continued to derive indirectly from Turkstream through Greece, Turkey and Romania to keep prices down.<sup>106</sup> Given the obstructive dynamics of Bulgaria's political crisis and party fragmentation along with a consistent and disproportionate reliance on Russian energy resources,<sup>107</sup> Russian state capture mechanisms are able to gain fertile ground. Particularly in the energy sector, neutrality in terms of financial gain risks enabling another loophole for Russian influence by driving a disjunction between EU obligations and national policy conduct. In connection to Vazrazhdane's campaign, geopolitical neutrality promoted as the peaceful and pragmatic path that best benefits Bulgarian national interests frames geopolitical side-picking as an undermining of national prosperity and sovereignty – that unilaterally affects Bulgaria's EU relations.

In his speech in Sofia, Kostadinov reframes the election as a binary choice between war and peace, to strategically redirect the political discourse away from the dominating East/West attitudinal debate. As a result, foreign policy is recast in terms that resonate more personally with a broad segment of the electorate.

The party has a dexterity for presenting their opposition in a way that reiterates geopolitical neutrality through frames that emphasise social security, over that of national security. They are largely able to maintain this frame through the way in which they present Russia as a

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<sup>105</sup> Alpha Research "Electoral Attitudes at the Campaign Start – October 2022 General Elections." (September 2023): <https://alpharesearch.bg/post/1000-elektoralni-naglasni-na-starta-na-predizborna-kampania-parlamentarni-izbori-oktomvri-2022.html>. In Teodora Kaleynska, "The Political Crisis in Bulgaria /2021–2023/: Internal and External Consequences," *Perspective Politice* 16, no. Special Issue (January 1, 2023): 106, <https://doi.org/10.25019/perspol/23.16.0.10>.

<sup>106</sup> Remina Aleksieva & Kalina Tcolova, 'Energy Without Russia: The Consequences of the Ukraine War and the EU Sanctions on the Energy Sector in Europe', Center for the Study of Democracy, October 2023, <https://csd.eu/publications/publication/energy-without-russia/>.

<sup>107</sup> Emiliya Milcheva, "Russian Gas Transit through Bulgaria Hits Record High," Euractiv (EURACTIV, February 14, 2025), <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/russian-gas-transit-through-bulgaria-hits-record-high/>.

strategic partner counter to that of the EU. In response to the government's inaction after the death of Bulgarian UN employee Captain Marin Marinov in Gaza in March 2025, Kostadinov underlined the need for social security measures that prioritises the safety and wellbeing of all Bulgarian citizens.<sup>108</sup> Given the party's strong Eurosceptic stance, the response also serves as a critique of the perceived loss of sovereignty associated with the demands of the Western allies, demands that reflect the prioritisation of the collective ontological security over that of national individuals.

"This is not the policy of a sovereign state; this is a grave betrayal and abdication of responsibility to the Bulgarian citizens. Against this backdrop, it is impermissible and morally unacceptable to redirect significant funds from the state budget to Ukraine in case of necessity, while the social systems, the education system, healthcare, pension insurance remain chronically underfunded."<sup>109</sup>

With this quote, Kostadinov and his party have demanded the resignation of the Cabinet. It is significant in the way that it collectively addresses Bulgaria's sovereignty and foreign policy issues, as well as underfunded social security, to highlight the Cabinet's eagerness to extend EU inter-state relations. Vazrazhdane's discursive pursuit of neutrality is based upon an antagonisation of the Parliament's compliance with EU foreign policy. Furthermore, it uses notions of social security to politicise issues and relate them to EU directives of national concerns, promoting a securitised framing of the EU's authority that undermines national sovereignty. Among these concerns is the fear of a potential migration influx from the Middle East in the perpetuation of Israel's genocidal operations.<sup>110</sup> As mentioned in the previous analysis section, the fear of replacement is a rhetorical tool that is used to create in- and out-groups, which is especially prominent in right-wing immigration discourses. In Vazrazhdane's discursive representations of the EU as a perpetrator of war, the fear of replacement is employed to underline Bulgarians as the in-group against two out-group categorisations. One reflects traditional right-wing framing of ethnic identity of 'us' versus 'them', whereas the other adopts a broader Eurosceptic perspective, recognising EU institutions to facilitate top-down politicisation of specific issues important to the Union as a whole, often at the expense of national sovereignty and domestic concerns.

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<sup>108</sup> Nikolay Zabolov, "Vazrazhdane Leader Demands Cabinet's Resignation, Return to Foreign Policy Favouring Bulgaria," *Www.bta.bg* (BTA, April 2, 2025), <https://www.bta.bg/en/news/bulgaria/863654-vazrazhdane-leader-demands-cabinet-s-resignation-return-to-foreign-policy-favou>.

<sup>109</sup> Kostadin Kostadinov in Zabolov, "Vazrazhdane Leader Demands Cabinet's Resignation,"

<sup>110</sup> Kirilov, "Vazrazhdane Holds 'Give Peace a Chance' Rallies in Several Cities,"

At length, the reinforcement of the 'Bulgarian' in-group and the value of their issues is ultimately used in an attempt to distance Bulgaria, and its prosperity, from the EU. This distancing, in turn, eases the restoration and strengthening of economic, political and cultural ties to Russia. Vazrazhdane's unique rhetorical emphasis on sovereignty and social security serves to obscure underlying foreign policy objectives, that are more concretely described on the party website to maintain and strengthen e.g. trade relations with Russia by lifting EU sanctions.<sup>111</sup> The discourse is positioned heavily towards the engagement of the undecided or unmotivated voter, where it tries to deviate from the policies of concessions demanded by the EU by promoting reciprocal conditionality.

One of the big projects that the Zhelyazkov cabinet has outlined as part of their political promises is Bulgaria's eurozone entry. With Bulgaria having fully entered the Schengen zone on January 1<sup>st</sup> this year, GERB is aiming to finally see an end to the accession process. While PM Zhelyazkov has stated that entry to the eurozone is the top priority of the government, with aims of reaching all Maastricht criteria for entry in January 2026, including keeping budget deficits at maximum 3%, other parties have been critical of this approach. Claiming that this prioritisation curbs domestic social security issues and foreign policy development, the radical opposition has raised concerns of the government's conduct of national interests and sovereignty. In just two weeks there have been two separate no-confidence votes against the government, one of Vazrazhdane and the other of MECh – backed by Vazrazhdane and Velichie, with a third warned to happen after easter.<sup>112</sup>

This wave of no-confidence votes has revealed how the ontological clash between Eastern and Western identity-affirmations remains central to the national political discourse. While the government's foreign policy passivity acts in affirmation of the largely collective Western/European stance in relation to Israel's military operations in Palestine and Lebanon, with a slightly more defensive foreign policy acting in favour of the Europeanisation of Ukraine, the far-right seeks to secure the Bulgarian identity as a cultural manifestation of sovereignty. They aim to reiterate national sovereignty and self-identity through security discourses centred around domestic

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<sup>111</sup> Възраждане, "Foreign Policy" [Външна политика,] Възраждане (Vazrazhdane), January 8, 2023, <https://vazrazhdane.bg/%d0%b8%d0%ba%d0%be%d0%bd%d0%be%d0%bc%d0%b8%d0%ba%d0%b0-%d0%b8-%d1%80%d0%b0%d0%b1%d0%be%d1%82%d0%b0/>.

<sup>112</sup> Borislova Bibinovska & Nikolay Trifonov, "Vazrazhdane Leader Promises Third No-Confidence Motion against Government after Holidays." bta.bg (BTA, April 17, 2025) <https://www.bta.bg/en/news/bulgaria/874496-vazrazhdane-leader-promises-third-no-confidence-motion-against-government-after->.

issues that are felt at the personal level, going from geopolitical to sociopolitical by internalising the government's obligations. Further, the political right's answer to the killed UN employee acts as a defence of the Bulgarian national honour, a notion that is greatly connected to the reality of a nation's self-visions. Relating this notion to Ganev's idea that honour is the driving instrument in the monitoring mechanisms of the EU and its identity bestowment, the attack on the Cabinet's inactivity in light of captain Marinov's death in Gaza is questioning the moral obligations of the nation's self-visions in its connection to the EU. The moral obligations of self-identity in IR are honour-driven, in that, it manifests itself as a code of conduct that is reflected both internally and externally through political pursuits and policies. Here, they frame a discrepancy of Bulgaria's self-visions within their frames of peaceful obligations in geopolitics that highlights the apathy of the transatlantic allies towards Bulgarians.

By analysing the opposition's attempt at the Zhelyazkov government and the antithesis of their policies and political discourse it is revealed how the entry to the eurozone acts as a lure for pro-European parties to get their political ducks in a row to accomplish the completion of their EU accession. With Bulgaria's entry within feasible reach, the opposition is working overtime to halt the process by securitising national sovereignty and the culturality of the Bulgarian lev. The weakened position of the minority government makes it reliant on thematic majorities in Parliament and it has therefore turned to a more divisive rhetoric to drive a line between the pursuit of pro-EU developments and the far-right nationalists. An example is GERB's statement to PP-DB that "You cannot declare support for the euro area and European development while working with Vazrazhdane, MECh and Velichie."<sup>113</sup> Such a statement reinforces the geopolitical division of the political sphere, while also attempting to collectivise the pro-EU front around a common goal – the euro changeover. The statement is framed around the no-confidence votes as an extension of the euro lure to see the changeover through with temporary forms of political behavioural systems that reflect the sought-after outcome. In accordance with Ganev and his introduction to post-accession hooliganism, the euro changeover process, an extension of Bulgaria's EU-accession, and its starch opposition accentuates speculations of whether the Europeanisation process can be defined as a series of mini-spectacles performed to exhibit pragmatic eagerness to comply with EU standardisations. The Cabinet's prioritisation of eurozone entry and fulfilment of the Maastricht

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<sup>113</sup> Yoana Vodenicharova, "Zhelyazkov Cabinet Survives Second No-Confidence Vote, Political Parties React," bta.bg (BTA, April 17, 2025), <https://www.bta.bg/en/news/bulgaria/874603-zhelyazkov-cabinet-survives-second-no-confidence-vote-political-parties-react>.

criteria may be categorised as performances of mini-spectacles, depending on the consistency of the political elite's post-accession behaviour. However, the conduct that such commitment forces is further working as a stabilising tool that aims to align the fragmented party system towards a common goal.

## Sub-conclusion

Vazrazhdane's success in the recent snap elections can largely be attributed to the tools of mobilisation that they employ to drive untapped electorates. The electoral fatigue in Bulgaria as a result of the incapacities of representatives to form a government contributed greatly to the downward trend in civic partition in the two recent snap elections.<sup>114</sup> During these cycles of representative entropy, Vazrazhdane has proved successful in mobilising (far-right) radicals and keeping consistent numbers by representing vital notions of security in times of instability and conflict. Due to the historical success of Vazrazhdane and, subsequently, other far-right nationalist parties, the analysis has used the party's explicit rhetorics of security as a backdrop to analyse the broader geopolitical scope that continues to dominate the nation's domestic politics.

Vazrazhdane's representations of security are leveraged through discourses of sovereignty. The discursive representations of the choice between war and peace that drove the 'Give Peace a Chance' rallies cemented the already popular notion of the EU's encroachment of national sovereignty,<sup>115</sup> reframing the EU as a perpetuator of war and conflict through a binary register. The right-wing uses this binary framing of war and peace to establish cognitive frames among supporters that allows for recognisable categorisations that are buildable. For example, Vazrazhdane's no-confidence challenge of the Zhelyazkov government is built upon the existing notion that the pro-European bloc is undermining Bulgaria's sovereignty and national interests in pursuits of external recognition of morals, neglecting internal self-visions. The political clash works in affirmation of the notion that a working government is an insufficient standalone factor for ending the ontological crisis in Bulgaria. Simultaneously, the process of the euro changeover and its pushbacks have demonstrated the different virtues that are prioritised on the different political wings. For the Western faction, it has been argued that political actors are aiming to stabilise internal self-visions through forced performances of mini-spectacle that align more consistently with EU standardisation and moral codes of conduct, where the Eastern faction rather presents a

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<sup>114</sup> Tsabala, "The less turnout, the better for radicals:" 2024.

<sup>115</sup> Szicherle, "Public Attitudes in Bulgaria:" 8.

consistent discourse of resistance around the notion of culture, something that inherently factors in the definition of identity.

## Discussion

### Bulgaria's Instrumentalised Insecurity

The theoretical framework works on a collected notion that supports social understandings of elite and civil political behaviour to reflect on the current political situation in Bulgaria in light of the 2020 protest cycle followed closely by a spiralling political crisis with a sociopolitical lens. It draws on sociological understandings to describe behavioural patterns within the political and IR context. The social constructivist ontology of the thesis consolidates this approach and, with the interpretivist epistemological approach to the dominating discourses presented in pre-election campaigns and policy action, it is able to connect the particularities of Bulgaria's political polarisation to social behavioural patterns of Bulgaria's citizenry. This section of the discussion reflects on the particularities of the national case that have been identified in the analyses, where it draws on Bulgaria's post-CVM era as a time of great democratic instability and what it means for the counter-democratic institutions.

Against the backdrop of the 2020 protest cycles that sparked during the Covid-19 crisis, the added challenges and political cleavages arising from Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the continued politicisation of prosecutor institutions, the distrust in politicians has extended to the entire political class. The provisional closure of the CVM in 2019 and the outburst of the mass protests in 2020 as a reaction to the exposure of the corruptive nature of the democratic institutions could potentially reveal a pattern of elite behaviour that mirrors the hooliganism of Ganev's post-accession hooliganism. However, further research on the concrete circumstances is needed to conclude any direct links. In the meantime, this study considers the possibility of hooligan behavioural patterns to present a plausible connection to the sudden exposure of and response to institutional corruption.

Former Prosecutor General Geshev's internal exposure of the government's corruption simultaneously displayed the centralised power of the judiciary by overruling constitutional law, exhibiting the disregard of the actual implementation of the adopted laws and reforms under EU's CVM. This democratic letdown has, in turn, shifted the perception of the EU's moral obligations



among many Bulgarians. Challenged with the passivity of the EU's apparent self-realisations, the normative identity markers of the Union's 'Europeanness' no longer acts in affirmation of the democratic desires of Bulgaria. In turn, shifts in the geonormative paradigm have been observed as electorates turn towards more pro-Russian identity politics in different forms. Most prominently, these come to show in the development of the results of the snap elections and the emergence of pro-Russian and authoritative political parties, along with the introspective politicisation of geopolitical issues that dominated pre-election campaigns. The loss of European affirmation at the disappointment of EU's values-based obligations has compelled voters to seek national identity affirmations elsewhere. Here, the study argues that given the geopolitical situation, along with Bulgaria's historical and cultural ties to Russia that are reinforced through cognitive capture and the bestowment of honour, the other alternatives come in the form of far-right, pro-Russian political parties.

These parties have, however, yet to gain popularity among a clear majority of electorates, despite Vazrazhdane's success as the biggest far-right party in Bulgarian history. Though, their rapid emergence at a time of political division have afforded them acceptance as a viable alternative to the disappointment of the EU's guarantees. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has only deepened geopolitical division, prompting the EU to securitise its Eastern borders, while desecuritising domestic concerns of inflation and energy crisis in the Member States in the process. With these clear dividing lines, the pro-Russian wing has been able to represent discourses that address these concerns in a way that disguises pro-Kremlin dispositions. Vazrazhdane's pre-election campaign for peace exemplifies this discursive framework by addressing the geopolitical conflicts in Europe as exclusionary external factors that exert influence over internal factors unnecessarily. In this, they frame neutrality to be the same as peace in an effort to legitimise non-compliance with EU sanctions by putting domestic concerns over those of international concern. Again, creating a viable alternative to the status quo.

The successful passing of the anti-LGBTQ+ decree to the Education Act in August of 2024 is a testament to the process of rejection of EU and Western codes of conduct. The decree is passed under modes of social preservation by enabling fear of replacement instruments that utilises the vulnerability of ontological insecurity and political instability in the political scene and, in turn, promote Russian-style law to isolate Bulgaria from the EU. The framing of the discourse behind the decree establishes clear in- and out-groups through militarised rhetoric of defence to provoke a feeling that something is under threat, in the need of defence. Here, that thing is the conservative in-



group and their values concerning traditional social structures, put in defence from Western decadence. The theoretical framework of ontological security acknowledges the importance of narrative cohesion in the preservation of self-identity in the face of uncertainty. As identified in the discourse analysis of the dismantling of the Red Army monument in Sofia, the cognitive capture of socio-cultural and historical narratives of association and greatness contributes to an honour-driven sense of Self that is not only stabilising but also politically pliable. In other words, while the framing of the decree's issue is centred around the disadvantage of an honour-driven in-group, the framing utilises ontological insecurities to reinforce their identity and sociocultural ties to Russia through values-based identity-markers. Thereby, encouraging self-realizations of national identity-markers that resists European liberal alignment.

## Political Polarisation and the Fix for Democracy

Previous studies evaluating Bulgaria's democratic trajectory in the unfolding political crisis have also touched on the legitimisation of the pro-Russian identity class as a strategy of the pro-Russian far-right political groups.<sup>116</sup> As detailed in the above section, this study has supported the same understanding of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the role it has played in Bulgarian domestic politics as is presented in the main literature. With this understanding, it has become clear how ontological insecurity has been facilitated and, maybe even somewhat, encouraged in the persistence of the political crisis as a means to radicalise right-wing electorates through Russian narratives. The common denominator for Bulgarians is the disillusionment with the political elite and their passivity, however, the negotiation process to find a solution has been increasingly polarised due to the political discursive encouragement of ontological insecurity.

The political polarisation of the citizenry creates two different outcomes for the exertion of democratic dissatisfaction: On one side, dissatisfaction in the current democratic framework has been displayed through a general susceptibility to anti-democratic narratives. The instability of the political scene and the governmental institutions have enabled an erosion of trust that has seemingly pushed the public towards a desire for more authoritative leadership styles. While surveys from 2020 and 2024, respectively, report a decreasing trend of authoritarian reflex, going from 45%<sup>117</sup> to 20.8%,<sup>118</sup> an adherence to illiberal and authoritative leaders and leadership

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<sup>116</sup> See: Tsabala, "The less turnout, the better for radicals:" & ENCODE, "D2.3 Emotional-Related Drivers of Politics." 3.2 *Bulgaria*

<sup>117</sup> Filipova & Stefanov, "Democracy in Bulgaria:" 3.

<sup>118</sup> Novinite. 'One-Third of Bulgarians Lean Toward Authoritarianism,'

styles continue to permeate political narratives. Especially Viktor Orbán's resistance to the Western liberal values is of great inspiration for many fostering disappointments in the guarantees of EU membership.<sup>119</sup>

The persisting authoritarian reflex, most commonly seen among older Bulgarians, notes an acceptance of autocracy as a remedy for political instability. The perpetuation of the political crisis and the insecurities it leads expands public desires for stability. The political power struggles of the past four years have resulted in obstructionist behaviour among the political parties which has, in turn, highlighted the perseverance of President Radev's stronghold and authority on the government as he sits his second term. The implications of these findings suggest that Radev's popularity is founded in his capabilities to exercise authority over the Administration. In addition to his sustained popularity, Radev's military credentials position him as a credible actor in the ongoing contestation of Bulgaria's geopolitical orientation; His rejection of military aid to Ukraine in a narrative spun around Russian military superiority and public alignment with other Kremlin-derived narratives illustrate how trust in an ontological insecure environment can be influenced by perceived performances of stability. The framed military superiority of Russia is employed to weaken the perception of both the EU, reinforcing cognitive capture that relies on notions of honour to sway public self-ideations towards the perceivably stronger East, and Bulgaria itself, sustaining a notion of in-group disadvantage that weakens the nation's self-perceived capacities to mobilise against Russia's power.

At length, the reflexive control exerted by military networks primes actors to adopt legacy conceptions of military authority rooted in the Soviet era. With the obstruction of the political party system and the loss of trust in political figures, military officials have become well-positioned to fill the legitimacy gap – arguably due to the escalations of armed geopolitical conflict. Recognised as figures of stability and legitimacy, these actors are able to effectively perform acts of cognitive capture that reframes public perceptions and undermines democratic discourse through strategic mobilisation of identity-linked narratives. Following CSD's model of Russia's reflexive control in military networks with this understanding of the President's power and role in the political crisis, the study suggests that negative self-perceptions greatly affect how political dissatisfaction and distrust is exercised in public spaces. Negative self-perception frames create a disheartening political environment where bottom-up change is discouraged and made pointless,

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<sup>119</sup> Hajdu et al., 'GLOBSEC Trends 2023'. 81.

resulting in a push toward alternative forms of government. The acceptance of anti-democratic narratives has only been furthered by the lengthy struggle against institutional corruption and the continued disappointment of the EU. Military legitimacy is further suggested to be a key factor in the deliverance of these narratives, since trust rates in politicians are low, but may be turning, as they utilise their expert status in war and security to relay messages of inferiority and sustaining negative self-images and hopelessness.

On the other side of the polarised spectrum, the study finds that civic dissatisfaction is displayed through mass engagement in counter-democratic modes of prevention. The political crisis has been established to be entrenched in the 2020 protest cycle that forced the resignation of the Borissov government and the Prosecutor General in a demand for active commitment against institutional corruption. The protests have been found to be a reaction to the delayed signs of post-accession hooliganism that came after the provisional closure of the CVM monitoring tool. Due to this, the persistence of the protests is still evident as March 2025 bid a small wave of protests to demand effective implementation of the rule of law reforms and a clean slate in key judicial institutions. Although the capacity of the protests has downscaled since 2020, the continued efforts of the public validate the counter-democratic framework upheld by civil society's mobilisation force.

While the mobilisation force behind the protests is also driven by negative feelings of distrust and dissatisfaction, the identity narrative is based on rather positive self-perceptions of honour obligations among the public, which evidently do not correspond with the conduct of the representative government. The three-fold counter-democratic framework is reliant on the operationalisation of negative sovereignty to sanction undesired policy action and decisions in the extension of positive democracy, to compel harmony between the representative and the represented. This theory is grounded in sociological understandings that centre civil society rather than political elites in representative democracies, positing that the realisation of the state's self-image is shaped by the shared self-perceptions of the population and rooted in the broader construction of national collective identity. Albeit the previous sections' argumentation for a growing susceptibility to anti-democratic narratives as a disheartened reaction to the disappointment of the democratic institutions, a slight majority of Bulgarians still prefer and desire liberal democratic structure,<sup>120</sup> which has ensured stable engagement in counter-democratic mechanisms of

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<sup>120</sup> Novinite. 'One-Third of Bulgarians Lean Toward Authoritarianism,'

oversight, prevention and judgement. Especially notable in the Bulgarian context is the power of prevention; the organisation of distrust in the 2020-2021 protests was clearly addressed with three demands of non-negotiables that challenged the political elite as the responsible of the internal self-disconnect. The following crisis has, however, been marked by the difficulties of negotiating coherent social consensus of positive identity-markers, hindering effective stabilisation of the nation's vertical ontological harmonisation. It has proven significantly easier to form negative coalitions in order to prevent decisions or sanction undesired administration, as negative coalitions thrive on the intensity of emotion and tolerate contradictions. The effectiveness of this strategy of organisation is also observed in the antagonisation tactics within political discourses; for example, the far-right's representations of social preservation.

Proving great effectiveness in influencing sanctions against undesired policies and politicians, efforts have been made to weaken the powers of oversight by attempting to enforce a foreign agent registration act that mirrors the Russian regulations of foreign-funded NGOs. The aim of the bill is to damage the credibility of NGOs, the pillars of the oversight mechanism, by evoking narratives of foreign undermining of national sovereignty through NGOs as agents of espionage. Further, such a bill would most likely sever contact to government bodies under the appearance of inappropriateness in consulting sensitive domestic affairs with foreign agents. As the bill has been proposed and contented five times without successful passing, with affirmations of more attempts from Vazrazhdane in the future, the study validates concerns that Bulgaria's civic pillars of oversight are under sustained pressure, precisely due to the exhibited strength of civil society's capacity for evaluation and resistance. However, the steady contestation of the bill, along with constant resistance to undesired policy action (or inaction) demonstrates the strong integrity of the shared honour-driven Self of the counter-democratic institutions.

## Geopolitical Implications of the Study

The Vazrazhdane party has been one of the most salient contesters of the counter-democratic institutions identified in the analysis. The party's narrative framing of the issue with foreign-funded NGOs serves to contest counter-democratic institutions of oversight by positioning them as external impositions that undermine Bulgaria's sovereign decision-making and national identity by influencing the evaluation process with external perspectives. The final section of the analysis critically examined the discourses of peace propagated and widely endorsed by Vazrazhdane and its supporters in the October 2024 election campaign, where it identified an underlying agenda rooted

in the pursuit of national self-interest through claims of geopolitical neutrality. The study of the campaign 'Give Peace a Chance' held a reference to the greatest domestic concerns and the population's insecurities as expressed by the war in Ukraine, to determine the domestic security implications of geopolitical neutrality. In this, the study may offer insight into the appeal of nationalistic ideologies by interpreting how the internalisation of national self-expression is shaped by underlying ontological insecurity.

Vazrazhdane's relative parliamentary success can largely be attributed to its tools of mobilisation, such as the strategic interchangeable employment of strong and vulnerable self-perceptions. However, it also succeeds in generating a force behind the voter fatigue by representing an image of non-compromise radicalism and presenting tangible strategies of desecuritisation. It does so most ostensibly through sovereignty discourses, where spokespersons employ a binary register to facilitate cognitive categorisations in recognisable patterns. Consequently, this discourse restructures the binary of pro- and anti-EU positions into a stark choice between war and peace, framing the EU as both an encroachment of national sovereignty and a perpetuator of war and conflict. Understanding the war in Ukraine through a European perspective, the conflict is deemed an external security risk that relays destabilising components to the geopolitical identity nexus. Bulgaria's membership to the Union compels certain obligations to reciprocate and perform shared expressions of collective identity, particularly as a means of retaining ontological stability during periods of insecurity. Accordingly, Vazrazhdane is able to reiterate public recognition of the EU's encroachment of national sovereignty, reinforcing the legitimacy of the binary categorisation representations. The no-confidence votes of the Zhelyazkov government are likewise built on notions of negligence of Bulgaria's internal self-vision, which is supported by the persistence of the political polarisation and public dissatisfaction of institutional conduct.

The internalisation of Self in alleged pursuits of realigning national ontological security has kept the Parliament from properly functioning due to the frequency of the no-confidence votes since the government's formation in January. The salience of Vazrazhdane's discursive disruption of government affairs supports the study's attention to the party's oppositional discourses, particularly in how it frames critiques of government conduct through its self-ascribed representative of the opposition. In the euro changeover plans, the anti-EU pushback demonstrates the prioritisation of the different factions. Within the Western-aligned faction, it has been argued that efforts to stabilise national internal self-vision are often enacted through performative gestures

that align with EU standardisation and moral frameworks. While the Eastern-aligned faction articulates a sustained discourse of cultural resistance, framing identity through the lens of tradition and sovereignty.

On the topic of the euro changeover, the study views the eurozone entry as the final step of the accession process, in which it is revealed how the prospect of the euro changeover serves as a strategic incentive for the pro-European faction to consolidate political alignment and finalise Bulgaria's integration into the EU. Through the analysis of the opposition's rhetoric and current dominating discourses, it is indicated that the pre-accession process is nearing within feasible reach. This is suggested through the implications of the shift within the sovereignty discourse presented by Vazrazhdane, as it employs modes of honour-driven narratives to emphasise the EU's nonchalance towards Bulgarian national dignity against the greater interests in the EU's pursuit of external relations. In turn, the pro-European faction is bearing down on cementing a common political alignment by reiterating elements of the binary categorisation, thereby facilitating further polarisation within the party system in efforts to consolidate the bloc.

Some of the issues emerging from this analysis relate specifically to the behavioural patterns of the political elite, which are partially found to be imitating the behavioural performance of elites in Ganev's research on Bulgaria's accession process in the 2000s. The notion of hooliganism in the current Bulgarian political climate is interesting, as we are currently experiencing the full effect of the closure of the EU special monitoring mechanism, which has resulted in a long spiral of political crisis and institutional instability. With the final steps of accession in motion, Bulgaria once again finds itself in an accession process where the political elite needs to consolidate their policy priorities to demonstrate compliance with EU standards. Due to the previous exhibitions of post-accession hooliganism, it should be harder to conceal deeper issues of the elite's hooligan backsliding and entrenchment. Yet, the euro changeover strategy serves as a performative extension of the EU accession, which the government uses, not only to stabilise and realign the pro-European faction's identity-markers, but also to disengage the opposition from the government affairs by delegitimising their input.

The politicisation of the euro changeover has implied a pattern of behavioural abnormality that strongly reflects the notions of post-accession hooliganism. In this, securitisation of the euro changeover is found to further facilitate political polarisation through conflicting formulations of what security means to each of the blocs. The ever-rising geopolitical tensions,

particularly the developments of the war in Ukraine and the increasing war fatigue of EU members, has expanded the speculations on the EU's enlargement geostrategy and its practical sustainability as a tool of geonormative stabilisation. With Bulgaria's eurozone bid as an extension of the EU accession process, this study has indicated how existing members are able to instrumentalise EU benchmarks for strategic gain without resolving underlying democratic deficiencies. This has been highlighted most prominently in the analysis of the practical implementation and application of rule of law reform to the judiciary, where it has been suggested that a deeper overhaul of the institutions is necessary to enforce depoliticising reform of the judicial composition.

As the changeover plan advances, a point of interest for further research would be the development of the domestic security discourses, as it has become evident in this study that the fragmentation, and subsequent polarisation, of the party system remains open-ended despite obvious problematisations for the function of the government. It is most apparent in the way that Vazrazhdane and other radical parties are able to immobilise the government with successive no-confidence voting. Vazrazhdane's parliamentary success and influence is largely a virtue of its ability to instrumentalise identity politics to frame ontological security issues as a bigger threat of foreign influence that jeopardises national sovereignty and traditional cultural values. In this, identity politics remains a crucial element in the sociopolitical context of the study, because it serves to interconnect the public's collective perception of Self through honour-driven expressions with foreign policy positioning and institutional insecurity. In the national context, it is found that national identity is not only shaped by prospective ideals but also by historical and cultural ties, which in this case are particularly related to the nation's Soviet past. Vazrazhdane has been found to actively reinforce the identity narrative that contributes to the democratic disappointment that remains prevalent among citizens by advancing frames of internal disadvantage. By cause of the prolonged political crisis, ontological insecurity has intensified the politicisation of identity, in that citizens are seeking alternative forms of stability to affirm their identity-markers. This has contributed to the erosion of trust in established institutions and increased the appeal of militarised and internalised security narratives.

In the geopolitical context of the EU enlargement as a security-enhancing project, identity politics play a vital part in the practicability of geostrategic enlargement. In the EU's engagement with prospective new members, such as Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova, the Bulgarian case exemplifies how identity politics can be weaponised post-accession in resistance to profound normative reform. Compliance with values-based EU regularity through the sporadic performance

of mini-spectacles helps create an appearance of steady adherence and good will. However, in the Bulgarian case, the eurozone entry bid may mask the unresolved tensions over national identity and ontological security. Especially, as Zhelyazkov attempts to reorient the pro-European bloc towards a 2026 changeover by stifling political divergence that may enable the far-right's opposition. The study suggests addressing identity-driven discourses to gain a better perspective of the underlying narratives that facilitate the national geopolitical competition.

These findings raise questions regarding the functioning of the EU's geonormative strategy as geopolitical urgency, sprung from Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, has potential to overtake the values-based strategy that drives democratic developments in the long run. While the EU has adopted new enlargement methodology to decelerate the accession process and ensure commitment to the conditionality through modes of credibility, predictability, dynamism and stronger political steer,<sup>121</sup> it has also highlighted the mismanagement of previous CEE enlargements. In this, the EU emphasises their deliveries of the reforms as part of the problem, as numerous Member States have pointed out the ambiguity of the conditions and benchmarks. This new enlargement methodology could address some of the issues that emerged in Bulgaria post-CVM, as the ambiguity of the conditionality benchmarks encourages reciprocal unpredictability. This is especially true following the sociological notion of hooligan behavioural patterns as unstable compliance performed through mini-spectacles that negotiates better conformity with the conditions than what is actually achieved.

## Conclusions

The destabilisation of Bulgaria's democratic institutions post-CVM has previously been demonstrated through Ganey's observations in 2012, in what he has described as post-accession hooligan behaviour among the political elite.<sup>122</sup> To contribute to the existing literature in light of the reopening of enlargement negotiations with Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia; this study has aimed to examine how the geonormative paradox of the EU's contemporary enlargement strategy disturbs the long-term democratisation processes. The study has aimed to examine the sociopolitical dimensions of Bulgaria's political crisis, which has reshaped the democratic governance and security discourse

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<sup>121</sup> European Commission, 'Remarks by Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi at the Press Conference on the Revised Enlargement Methodology', *Statement*, European Commission, 5 February 2020, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement\\_20\\_208](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_20_208).

<sup>122</sup> Ganey, 'Post-Accession Hooliganism'.



in ways that challenge the EU's geonormative authority. To do this, the study has thoroughly analysed the national case of Bulgaria on account of the deep-rooted political crisis. Connecting the political crisis and mass anti-corruption protests of 2020-21 with the provisional closure of CVM monitoring in late 2019, the study has expanded on Ganev's post-accession hooliganism to cover the period of political instability in Bulgaria's post-CVM experience.

The research has aimed to address the gaps in the existing literature on the aftermath of the EU's enlargement securitisation by introducing an analytical framework that supports the assessment of the national case's democratic trajectory post-accession. To ensure a thorough review of the case study, the analysis has been structured around three sub-questions that have guided the study's scope, encompassing three dimensions: normative-national, sociopolitical-regional, and geopolitical-international.

The normative dimension highlights how caretaker governments were unable to adopt major reforms due to the political obstruction and the ease of which decrees are challenged and deadlocked. Strategic exceptions were identified to demonstrate compliance with CVM benchmarks, only really to retain RRP funding and appease counter-democratic institutions.

In the sociopolitical context, political actors are identified to have exploited the crisis through identity-based narratives that exploit the erosion of institutional trust to legitimise Kremlin-inspired views by invoking military credibility and Soviet-era cultural ties.

In the broader geopolitical context, Vazrazhdane's binary discourse of war and peace has framed EU alignment as a threat to sovereignty, reinforcing nationalist identity politics and advocating what is to be defined as pro-Russian neutrality.

Throughout the analysis, the study has investigated the destabilisation of Bulgaria's normative frames through three theories that structure the theoretical framework: ontological security, post-accession hooliganism, and counter-democracy. The ontological security lens has aided in exploring how political actors mobilise narratives of national honour, sovereignty and identity to resist Europeanisation and reframe public trust. It bridges identity politics with post-accession backsliding and de-Europeanisation as socially constructed processes that are leveraged through the political crisis' democratic obstruction, ultimately connecting it to the internal processes of post-accession hooliganism. To further operationalise the analytical framework, Rosanvallon's notions of counter-democracy are employed to examine the organisation of distrust in the Bulgarian

struggles of ontological insecurity. The analysis of national counter-democratic structures and leading identity narratives has emphasised how the erratic and self-serving conduct of the political elite has increasingly undermined traditional democratic legitimacy.

As a result of the deep disappointment in the EU and the outcome of the democratic transition, anti-democratic narratives have emerged as viable alternatives to the EU's lacking guarantees. The rise in support for far-right alternatives, fuelled by the radicalisation of the protest movement, has been argued to exacerbate ontological insecurity, which is strategically leveraged to deepen the political polarisation. The study has, in this connection, identified how positive or negative self-perception frames shape the civic stabilisation objective of the national normative framework. While both ends originate from a deep dissatisfaction with the current political systems, the framing of negative or disadvantageous self-perceptions creates a disheartening political environment where bottom-up change is discouraged and rendered pointless, strengthening anti-democratic narratives. On the other end, positive self-perceptions mobilise feelings of dissatisfaction to reestablish the moral obligations of the representative government and fix conduct discrepancies through counter-democratic regulation.

The study proposes that the 2020 protest cycle and political crisis emerged from the strong organisation of distrust rooted in positive collective self-perceptions, which did not match the moral conduct of the representative government. The spiralling of the crisis, however, has been the development that has shown the true colours of Bulgaria's normative backsliding, as it has proven increasingly difficult to organise another positive majority. In the same context, the increasing susceptibility to anti-democratic narratives has similarly leveraged support for more authoritarian leadership and illiberal governance structures. Notably, multiple attempts by the far-right have been made to limit the capacities of counter-democratic institutions as a means to restrain the institutional pillar of oversight.

This development of the political crisis has revealed not only how but also where the EU's conditionality and enforcing authority have been lacking post-accession. It further provides reasonable implications for an approach to strengthen the EU's geonormative authority as part of future enlargement negotiations; key policy priorities should plan for the long-term care and strengthening of counter-democratic institutions through NGO and civil society organisations as principal elements of institutional oversight that continuously evaluates the representative democracy.

The accentuation of the far-right movement and Vazrazhdane is not to absolve GERB and other pro-European political parties from being held accountable for the deep-rooted institutional corruption in Bulgaria. Evidently, the GERB government's (then led by Borissov) resignation was one of the initial demands formulated in the 2020 protests due to institutionalised clientelism and entrenched corruption. The paper has also touched on the hooliganism of the current Zhelyazkov government as the nation enters the final stages of EU accession, with negotiations for eurozone entry scheduled for 2026. Overall, the study has strengthened the idea that the securitised pre-accession process facilitates superficial demonstrations of conditionality compliance that obscure underlying incentives. From this perspective, the current negotiations on eurozone entry and the reorientation of the pro-European faction towards a common goal should be critically observed, with a focus on the longevity of their conditionality compliance.

The findings of this study present practical implications, in the form of EU policy-strengthening recommendations, as well as empirical contributions. These contributions combine the view of post-accession hooliganism with the conceptual framework of counter-democracy, employing a social constructivist approach that emphasises the identity-political approach of political actors. With this, the study invites future research to further examine the Bulgarian case and their endeavours for eurozone entry as the final step of the accession process. Continued analytical efforts on the 2004 and 2007 CEE enlargements are also needed to further deliberate on the appropriate pre-accession process for the current CEE Candidates. Identifying clear social patterns among both the political elite and the citizens, the study strongly suggests adopting a combination of social and normative analysis for the Candidate cases to ensure democratic commitment and counter-democratic legitimacy.

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