Eastern Enlargement's Impact on European Identity in the Central and East European states

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1. Introduction

What does it mean to be European?

There is not a single answer to this question, as there are many aspects to consider. Being European can be based on geography, history, culture, identity, or a political alignment with the European Union. Being European becomes more confusing as these categories begin to overlap and change with time. What this study focuses on is the overlap between the political definition of being European and the building of a European identity within the EU. Looking through a constructivist lens, institutional structures shape identities, which in turn drive actors' behavior. Thus, it is worth looking at how the institutions behind European integration have affected the way European identity is perceived in Central and East European (CEE) countries before and after their accession into the EU. The CEE states include Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia, Romania, Bulgaria, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia.

In essence, we can evaluate how the feeling of common European identity has evolved along with the institutions of the EU. Deeper integration has increased the need for collective ontological security. A common European identity is seen as necessary to overcome the European Union's democratic deficit, fuelled by a legitimacy concern of whom the EU actually represents (Bruhagen, 2006). As such, the EU encourages the building of a common European identity. However, if identities are shaped by institutions, are they also affected by the interpretations attached to the institutions? EU membership had a different meaning for the founding states compared to the CEE states. Contemporary European identity is based on norms and values, created by institutions with an exclusively Western origin. The European Union is seen as an "active norm-creator", while Eastern Europe or the East is seen as a "passive receiver of norms and values" (Headley, 2012, p.436). With all this in mind, it is interesting to investigate in what ways this asymmetry has affected the perceptions of a European identity in the CEE states and more specifically in Bulgaria.

The topic of study is relevant, as the post-communist states in the East began their journey to 'return to Europe' 30 years ago. Most of them achieved membership status within the EU, but their European integration is still ongoing, as large differences in living standards, democratic freedoms, and good governance remain between older and newer members. It is due to these differences that there is still tension between the East

and the West of Europe. “The EU became so focused on expanding, that it lost its will to integrate” (Baylis et al., 2017, p.73). Therefore, the **research question** which this study asks is:

RQ: What are the effects of the Eastern Enlargement of the EU on the interpretation of European identity in the Central and East European countries?

The main argument of this study is that the Eastern enlargement of the EU has changed the interpretation attached to European identity, because of a change in the institutions of the EU. From the perspective of an Eastern accession state it represents the change from an outsider to being part of the EU club. The main hypotheses of this study are that following enlargement, people from CEE states will have a less materialist understanding of European identity and that their support will drop after their accession.

The design of this research relies on a secondary analysis of several articles. The main focus is to trace how European institutions have affected the meanings attached to European identity in Eastern Europe. This is done through process-tracing following the fall of communism and the accession of the CEE states into the EU. Furthermore, Bulgaria is selected as a most-likely case, due to the gap between its domestic institutions and the European standards at the time before accession. At face value, an assumption can be made, that accession had the greatest effect on Bulgarian institutions, assuming that they did catch up with European standards.

From here on the structure of the paper continues with an elaboration of background terms–European integration, Identity building, Europeanness, and Western Eurocentrism. All of these terms are tied into a literature review that focuses on the broad topic of Eastern Enlargement and gradually narrows down to a more detailed description of Bulgaria’s accession into the EU. Afterward, mainstream theories that explain the Eastern Enlargements are discussed, most notably Schimmelfennig’s External Incentives Model (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004). Then the paper introduces the research design and empirical data. This flows into a discussion which ties existing literature about Bulgaria and data from different Eurobarometers. The findings of this paper include are that Eastern Enlargement had a genuine effect on the values and support people attach to Europe and the EU. More specifically, Bulgarians

became less materialistic and less enthusiastic about Europe, although somewhat more supportive of the EU.

2. Background – introduction to concepts

European integration

To understand the efforts of the European Union to create a common identity for its members, one needs to trace how the need for such an identity has arisen alongside the process of European integration. In its broadest sense, European integration refers to the process of economic and political integration of European states. "Since its beginnings, European integration has been legitimated by the ideology of a pan-European community of liberal-democratic states"(Schimmelfennig, 2001, p.48). In its early days, EU integration was considered to be elite-driven, relying on a 'permissive consensus' unconstrained from public pressure (Eichenberg & Dalton, 1993) to pursue an 'ever closer union' in the spirit of the Solemn declaration of the EU. Furthermore, "the primary justification for the existence of the EU was the economic benefits of its members" (Eichenberg & Dalton, 1993, p.513). Early theorists for European integration assumed that "a deep economic integration would naturally lead to political integration and the establishment of European identity" (Fligstein, et al., 2012).

However, the treaty of Maastricht in 1992 marked a paradigm shift. As integration deepened, unprecedentedly strong Euroscepticism emerged. Euroscepticism here is defined in its broadest sense as "a political doctrine or movement motivated by hostility to European political integration" (Morgan, 2005). Public opinion had become a concern for the EU as public support had become imperative for further integration efforts. As such, public support became a central pillar of study for European integration efforts.

Early theories of public support relied on utilitarian-based models, examples being Shepherd's *Public Opinion and the European integration* (1975) and Beck's *Economics and Elections* (1988), Eichenberg and Dalton (1993). Later studies introduced non-economic factors and stressed the importance of citizens' perceptions (Gabel & Whitten, 1997), of national identity (Carey, 2002) and the need for a multilateral approach to explaining public support (Boomgaarden, 2011). To combat falling levels of public support, the EU has recognized that developing an EU citizenship and an

identity would be a major task to weaken the democratic deficit and to increase its own legitimacy (Tsaliki, 2007). Building a common identity has been found to help get over problems of legitimacy (Bruhagen, 2006).

Identity building

There are many ways in which the topic of identity can be approached, hence concrete definitions are necessary to establish a baseline. "Identity is a product of the self-society relationship" (Callero, 2014, p.3). Callero holds that identities are social constructs that give meaning to how people understand both self and others. Moreover "the construction of identity depends on the self-processes of people engaged in symbolic interaction" (Callero, 2014, p. 3). "Although not universal, but reflecting particular historical and situational circumstances, identity categories are reproduced by persons engaged in face-to-face interactions. Identities have meaning, which can be recognized, accepted, and documented." (Callero, 2014, p.3).

An explanation of why individuals become attached to a certain identity can be offered by the concept of 'ontological security'. "Ontological security refers to the need to experience oneself as a whole, a continuous person in time – as being rather than constantly changing – to realize a sense of agency" (Mitzen, 2006, p. 342). Furthermore, ontological security is in line with the core tenets of constructivism.

In constructivist views, "identities are social and thus always formed in relationship to others" (Baylis et al., 2017, p.147). More importantly, it is identities that shape interests. In the same way, constructivism tries to explain state behavior through the identities of the political actors. Steele holds that "the driving force of state behavior is the need to secure and maintain a particular and established self-identity through time" (Steele, 2008, p.2). Therefore states will "pursue social actions to serve self-identity needs, even when these actions compromise their physical existence" (Steele, 2008, p. 2). This is in line with another big tenet of constructivism – legitimacy (Baylis et al., 2017, p.149). "All actors crave legitimacy or the belief they are pursuing values of the international community and are doing so for reasons of identity and interest" (Baylis et al., 2017, p.149). Legitimacy is a valuable resource, as having more of it pushes down the political costs for a course of action (Baylis et al., p.149). In a European effort to gain

legitimacy, Ursula von der Leyen decided to create a commission that was tasked with Protecting the European way of life. But what exactly does being European mean here?

Europeanness

Broadly speaking there are two distinct definitions of Europeanness. The first one is cultural and defines Europe as built on the Hellenic philosophy, Roman law, and Christian values (Vasilopoulou, 2011). Other historical explanations link Europeanness to the ”Renaissance and the Enlightenment and how they have produced institutions like the market economy, industrial capitalism, representative liberal democracy, nation-states, and research universities” (Martinelli, 2017, p.5). Moreover, “the highest European values are the dignity, inviolability of the person, human rights, conscience, individual responsibility, all articulated through a Jewish-Christian tradition” (Martinelli, 2017, p.16).

The second definition of Europeanness has a political character and emphasizes membership in the European Union and adhering to its liberal norms and values. The founding myth of European integration emphasizes the circumstances which Europe was facing after World War II. Europe had been devastated through war, it had ceased to be the center of the international system and was threatened by Soviet communism at its gates (McCormick, 2015). Under these dire circumstances only a union of the democratic European states could create lasting peace and resist totalitarianism at its doorstep. Thus European integration began as a “pan-European, liberal, antifascist, and anticommunist ideology and identity” (Schimmelfennig, 2001, p.66).

More recently in 2019, the president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen established a department of protecting “the European Way of life”, which left many people puzzled. She explains Europeanness through a reformed political definition of Europe with the commitment of all EU member-states to article 2 of the treaty of Lisbon –

> The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the

> member states in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity, and equality between women and men will prevail.
>
> Treaty of Lisbon, 2009, Article 2

Europeanness encompasses "the construction, diffusion, and institutionalization of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, and shared beliefs and norms" (Schimmelfennig &Sedelmeier, 2017, p. 1) Initially Europeanization was shaped multilaterally by the member states, but this changed with the Eastern enlargement. The bargaining position of the CEE candidate countries left them with no choice, but to oblige in accepting the EU's policies, without question (Schimmelfennig &Sedelmeier, 2017, p. 1). This leads us to the topic of Western Eurocentrism.

Western Eurocentrism

Said (1987) shows how the oriental "Other" has been represented in a standardized and institutionalized way ever since the eighteenth century. The Western perspective represents the Orient as a poor, irrational, and primitive region (Said, 1978). Moreover a Eurocentrist view implicitly assumes the superiority of European norms and values over those of non-European societies (Pokhrel, p.321). Eurocentrism advocates for the imitation of the Western model by all others. This ingrained superiority is based on the values of "individuality, human rights, equality, democracy, free markets, secularism and social justice" (Pokhrel, p.321).

Interestingly enough, the limits of 'Europe' have never been clearly set by the EU – at least not in the East (Schimmelfennig, 2008). Thus the dividing line between Europe and the Orient has been shifting. The discourse of who belongs to Europe has changed over time. To quote Huntington (1996, p. 244) "Croatia's border is, in effect, Europe's". Huntington also holds that "the most significant dividing line in Europe is that of 1500 Christianity. This line also coincides with the lines of the historic Habsburg borders" (Huntington, 1996, as cited in Mingst & Snyder, 2017, p. 210).

The relations between the EU and Russia are an example of how the West treats an eastern outsider. "There is a tendency for Russia's Europeanness to be questioned because of behavior that is considered out of step with European Union standards" (Headley, 2012, p. 427). In the context of the CEE states, "Capital and foreign aid flow

almost entirely from West to East. Interdependence between East and West is highly asymmetrical in favor of the EU" (Schimmelfennig, 2001, p. 54). Thus Western Eurocentrism accompanies the process of Eastern enlargement as the West acts as a center of attraction for the East.

3. Literature review

Theorizing the Eastern Enlargement

"Enlargement is often claimed to be the most successful foreign policy of the European Union"(Schimmelfennig, 2008, p. 918). Through its conditionality of accession it has contributed to the "consolidation of democracy, human rights, minority protection, and conflict resolution in Eastern Europe" . Membership is referred to as the central pillar of the EU's external political integration capacity and consequentially, as the "Golden carrot" of integration (Börzel & Schimmelfennig, 2017,p. 278).

Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier conceptually defined Eastern enlargement as a "process of gradual and formal horizontal institutionalization" (2002, p. 500). They approach the topic from two different sides: that of the member-states and the side of the CEE accession states. Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier evaluate the arguments of two schools of thought – rationalist institutionalism and constructivism.

Rationalist institutionalism emphasizes the importance of material interests and cost/benefit calculations. It further holds that institutions only have secondary causal status and shape the cost/benefit calculations of actors, not their identities. Rationalists hold that "an organization expands its institutions and membership if, for both the member states and the applicant states, the marginal benefits exceed the marginal costs" (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2002, p.512). Rationalists explain several reasons for the accession countries wanting to join. One explanation concerns changes in the world economy which created incentives for joining an international economic organization. A second explanation holds that the deepening of economic integration creates negative externalities for outsiders, that trigger demand for membership. A third reason concerns the trade interdependence between members and non-members. Finally, a fourth reason stresses the relative strengths of economic sectors and factors (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2002, p.512).

Constructivism emphasizes that the identities and interests of actors are shaped by institutions. The institutions define social roles that give meaning to rights and obligations (Schimmelfennig &Sedelmeier, 2002, p. 509). In line with constructivist institutionalism, ideational and cultural factors generally shape Enlargement policies. The most relevant include 'community' and a 'cultural match', or in other words, the degree to which insiders and outsiders of the organization share a collective identity and values (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2002, p. 513). The more a non-member state associates itself with the international community, which the organization represents and the more values it shares, the stronger its pull to this organization, and the higher the willingness for horizontal institutionalization (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2002, p. 513). On the EU's part, a candidate member needs to be European in the sense that they are willing to subscribe to the European integration project of an 'ever closer union', and that it adheres to the liberal-democratic values of the EU (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2002, p. 513).

Piedrafita and Torreblanca (2005) theorize about the reasons behind the EU's enlargement. In particular, they look at three logics of action. The logic of consequentiality follows rationalist assumptions that states pursue material benefits and are motivated by cost/benefit calculations (p.32). The logic of appropriateness holds that actors consider their social roles and the norms which they are expected to uphold when taking a decision (Piedrafita & Torreblanca, 2005, p. 33). The third and final logic of Enlargement is that of justification. The logic of justification emphasizes the features of institutions that encourage actors to agree and comply in the absence of coercion (Piedrafita & Torreblanca, 2005, p. 34). The authors conclude that Enlargement largely followed a logic of consequentiality when it comes to the accommodation of the interests and material calculations of each member-state. However, EU identity played a significant role in some of the most important conditions. "Member states not only defended their interests but have also obliged to justify their actions and comply with norms and principles accepted by all" (Piedrafita & Torreblanca, 2005, p. 53). Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2002, p. 520) share similar observations that the bulk of the literature on the EU's Eastern enlargement has been "underpinned by a surprisingly strong consensus that it cannot be answered in a rationalist, materialist framework".

The consensus that rationalist explanations are insufficient, links well to the constructivist lense of this paper. Schopflin holds that the communist experience of CEE is something so important that it amounts to a whole new cleavage line (1994, p.128). “The ways in which society understands itself, identities are defined, and relationships are constructed are still significantly affected by the communist experience” (Schopflin, 1994, p.129). In Western Europe the post-communist legacy of the East is largely understood in the West’s special responsibility to the East (Sedelmeier, 2005). The East, on the other hand, had to completely comply with the process of Europeanization.

The return to Europe

The long return to Europe began in the 1990s with the start of democratic and market-economic transitions of CEE states. A profound process of ‘Europeanization’ took place (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2017, p.1). Originally, the term was limited to the EU and its members, and it emphasized a two-way street of institution-building. However, at the time when accession talks began, Europeanization had become different, no longer an aspiration, but closer to a chore. “Europeanization had been narrowed to a one-way street for downloading EU policies” (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2017, p.1).

On his inauguration day, Bill Clinton held a speech – “a generation raised in the shadows of the Cold War assumes new responsibilities in a world warmed by the sunshine of freedom but threatened still by ancient hatreds” (as cited in Mingst & Snyder, 2017, p.215). “The Cold war ended with the end of the Iron Curtain” (Huntington, 1996, as cited in Mingst & Snyder, 2017, p.209). Fukuyama (1989) goes even further and proclaims the end of history:

> The triumph of the West, of the Western idea, is evident first of all in the total exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives to Western liberalism . . . What we are witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War or the passing of a particular period of postwar history, but the end of history as such: that is, the endpoint of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government
>
> Francis Fukuyama

On the other side of the wall, “communism was rejected in the language of values but was permeated by material need and intellectual atrophy” (Kolankiewicz, 1993, p. 143). The concept of democracy became idealized and utopian (Schopflin,1994, p.130). Furthermore, the CEE societies were shockingly inexperienced in democratic politics. “Democracy was a code word meaning not the complex culture of procedures and values that have evolved slowly in the West, but total freedom and immediate access to Western levels of prosperity” (Schopflin, 1994, p.131).

The Western model was seen as the gold standard for peace and prosperity (Baylis & Owens, p.154). The predominant view after the collapse of communism was that ‘rejoining Europe’ would be desirable and straightforward for the CEE countries (Schopflin, 1994, p.137). This view proved to be mistaken. By 1994 the Eastern states had realized that the West would not make a concentrated effort to help their new democracies,only offering occasional verbal support, without taking any actions (Schopflin, 1994, p. 136). However, the CEE states were quick to adopt the use of rhetorical action and to pursue entry into the EU on normative grounds (Schimmelfennig, 2001, p.63). The CEE countries were successful in mobilizing the institutionalized identity of the EU and turned the question of accession into a question of the legitimacy of the European international community (Schimmelfennig, 2001, p.68). The legitimacy of the community lied in its image of an open liberal, democratic, and multilateral society of states with a pan-European appeal.

The CEE countries used this image to put the EU countries in a rhetorical trap, by manipulating the collective European identity. They argued “that they were not only part of geographical Europe, but also of the European international community” which would be later linked to demands for formal membership (Schimmelfennig, 2001, p.68). The CEE states argued that they had traditionally shared the norms and values of European culture and civilization and “had always aspired to belong to it even during the years of division at the times of the Cold war. Thus, the “return to Europe” became their battle cry” (Schimmelfennig, 2001, p.68).

More notable examples are the Hungarian foreign minister Jeszenczky, explaining Hungary’s aspirations for EU membership as a ”return to this Community to which it

has always belonged" (as cited in Schimmelfennig, 2001, p.69). Another example is the claim of a Romanian ambassador that "Romania has always been a part of West European traditions" (as cited in Schimmelfennig, 2001, p. 69). The chief Polish negotiator stated that the EU's technocratic approach was not enough to fulfill the historic goal to "give Europe back to Poland, and Poland back to Europe" (as cited in Schimmelfennig, 2001, p. 69). Consequentially, the CEE states condemned the Western demonstration of its higher bargaining power as an economic Yalta or even as a new Iron Curtain (Schimmelfennig, 2001, p.69). Vaclav Havel (as cited in Schimmelfennig, 2001, p. 70) claimed that anything other than a concrete membership prospect "would be a return to the times when European order was not a work of consensus, but of violence". The East collectively argued that in the absence of a specific timetable for enlargement, the West risked the CEE states looking away from liberal democracy (Schimmelfennig, 2001, p.70).

The rhetorical strategies of the CEE states were largely successful, given that the Luxembourg European council opened formal accession talks with all candidates simultaneously, based on European identity. However, not all CEE states followed the path of Europeanization at the same speed. Bulgaria and Romania were considered the laggards of the group and this became evident from the postponement of their accession from 2004 to 2007. Brussels had deemed that issues related to corruption, poverty, poor economic performance, and the need for legal reform were unsatisfactory vis-a-vis European standards (Kaneva & Popescu, 2011, p. 193).

To sum this literature review up, there are conflicting theories that explain the reasons behind the Eastern Enlargement of the EU. Overall, the Eastern Enlargement is celebrated as one of the most successful efforts of the EU to bring peace and stability to a neighboring region. This has been achieved through the political conditionality of the accession process. The main schools of thought are the rationalist and constructivist ones. There is scientific consensus that material cost/benefit calculations alone cannot explain the decision to enlarge. Bargaining power was incredibly asymmetrical between the East and West. Furthermore, the road to Europe for the CEE countries was paved in the language of values, norms, and identities. However, the effect of the Enlargement can only be judged from a later point in time. Therefore, this study will further focus on

the case of Bulgaria. It will follow Bulgaria's efforts to return to Europe and demonstrate how it has reshaped its identity along the process.

4. Theoretical framework

The research topic has been approached through a secondary analysis of scholarly articles in the fields of Europeanness, European integration, and European identity building. Furthermore, these concepts are put into a specific historical context from the fall of communism in Eastern Europe until after the accession of the CEE states in the EU. Particular attention has been paid to articles that describe the effects of the communist legacy with regards to democracy building. Furthermore, several theories about the Eastern Enlargement are revisited, specifically rationalist and constructivist explanations, and most importantly the External Incentives model. The EI model is important, as it holds that after the CEE states become members, the EU no longer has credible punishment and reward mechanisms to encourage democracy and good governance.

The External Incentives Model

The EIM is a rational bargaining model that makes certain assumptions about actors in negotiations. The actors are independent and exchange information, promises, and threats to achieve their preferred outcome. Their success depends on their bargaining power, which is a function of their asymmetric interdependence (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2017, p.3). The asymmetry in material bargaining power is so great, that Schimmelfennig even compares the accession talks to a "suasion game" where the best strategy for the accession countries was to cooperate with everything that was asked of them (Schimmelfennig, 2001, p, 55). Thus "the conditionality of the EU accession process makes the new member states passive recipients of EU norms" (Headley, 2012, p.436). Furthermore, according to the EIM, "the cornerstone of Europeanization is its conditionality" (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2017, p.3). In the context of the Enlargement, membership is associated with political conditions that have to do with improving the governance and the democracy of the accession states. The success of the accession's conditionality depends on the ability of the EU to reward compliance and to punish non-compliance.

However, there's a caveat with the credible enforcement of sanctions, as once the reward of membership is given, it can not be taken away. After accession, "the membership reward had been granted and it could not be matched by any credible EU sanctions for non-compliance afterward" (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2017, p.15). Therefore, the External Incentives model predicts lower compliance with the EU's standards after membership has been granted, which would result in institutional backsliding.

What this study adds to the EI model is the assumption that the institutional backsliding in CEE states after accession will result in changes to how European identity is perceived in the region. This study holds that the perception of European identity in CEE states has changed due to institutional changes, stemming from EU membership. More specifically, this study hypothesizes, that before accession, people from CEE states had overestimated the material benefits of EU membership, and as outsiders to the EU, idealized the idea of Europe.
Two hypotheses follow logically from this point of view:

H1: The percentage of people in CEE countries who have a materialistic interpretation of European identity decreases after the Eastern enlargement.

H2: The percentage of people in CEE countries who have a very positive interpretation of European identity decreases after the Eastern enlargement.

To test these hypotheses out, aggregate data showing public values would be required in at least two points in time – before and after accession. Such data is available through the interactive Eurobarometer, which will also be used here.

5. Research Design

As previously mentioned, this study sets out to answer the question: *What are the effects of the Eastern Enlargement of the EU on the interpretation of European identity in the CEE states?* The topic of study is important, as it can highlight changes in how European identity is perceived after joining the EU.

The independent variable is the effect of the Eastern Enlargement of the EU. The EU's enlargement has been conceptualized as „a gradual and formal process of horizontal institutionalization" (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2002, p.500). That is the horizontal spread of norms, values, identities, and institutions.

The dependent variable of the question is the interpretation of European identity in the CEE states. Different political interpretations of European identity are captured with questions from the Eurobarometer surveys.

This study uses a single-case research design to answer the research question and test the hypotheses, as this approach would afford greater qualitative depth. Given the abstractness of the topic and the concepts involved, a large N study would not reveal enough details. However, the increase in depth comes at the expense of generalizability. Therefore, this paper also utilizes results taken from the 2005 and 2019 Eurobarometers as an empirical back-up.

Bulgaria has been selected as a case study. The reason for this is that Bulgaria is seen as a most-likely scenario. This is due to Bulgaria being the original laggard in implementing institutional reforms following EU standards during the Eastern Enlargement. Therefore, an assumption is made that the EU had the biggest reform impact on institutions in Bulgaria. Therefore, the expectation is that interpretations of European identity also must have changed the most in Bulgaria. This also leads us to expect that the ontological insecurity about having European identity would be highest in Bulgarians, as the institutions of their state were the furthest from the European standard.

6. Case study

Bulgarian identity building and the Eastern Enlargement of the EU.

To understand how identity building has developed in Bulgaria, one must appreciate its communist past."A large literature on the comparative politics of post-communism has shown the importance of communist and even pre-communist legacies in shaping political trajectories after 1989" (Spendhzarova & Vachudova, 2012, p. 40). The communist party elites in Europe had used a rhetoric of "competition and hatred" to enforce an 'us' versus 'them' divide between East and West (Kaneva & Popescu, 2011,

p. 195). Socialism was praised as the true road to modernity vis-a-vis the morally corrupt capitalist West. The Cold War had been a bitter fight for ideological superiority between the East and the West. “Thus, national identity in communist Europe had been hijacked by an intricate web of party propaganda” (Kaneva & Popescu, 2011, p. 195).

“After the collapse of communism in 1989, former communist nations experienced significant political, economic and cultural turmoil, accompanied by a deeply felt need for national self-redefinition” (Kaneva & Popescu, 2011, p. 191). There was a strong desire for Bulgaria to become part of Europe again (Landry, 1997, as cited in Ichijo,2011, p.95). However, for the ‘new’ Europeans to rejoin, they would have to demonstrate their sincerity and seriousness to break with their communist past (Kaneva & Popescu, 2011, p. 195). This would require for Bulgaria to rebuild its image both in the international and the domestic narratives. Nation-branding programs were state-financed to articulate “a new image for external consumption and, at the same time, to revive national pride at home” (Kaneva & Popescu, 2011, p. 191). Furthermore, these nation branding narratives reflect the choices of the elite in how they wish to re-imagine the national identity (Kaneva & Popescu, 2011, p. 193). In a way, the very existence of such a campaign demonstrates a nation’s desire to dissociate itself from its communist past (Kaneva & Popescu, 2011, p. 198). Early in 1990 Bulgaria’s anthem was purged of communist references. The coat of arms that was in use from 1948 to 1989, featuring a communist pentagram, was also abandoned (Kaneva & Popescu, 2011, p. 196). Large educational reforms were also undertaken to instill a feeling of Europeanness among the pupils. Education retained its national character, however, “the Bulgarian identity was now largely presented as an inseparable part of a common European identity” (Ichijo, 2011, p. 97).

European integration was not only a magical instrument of civilization-building without an alternative, but the only valid source of legitimacy for the Bulgarian political elites (Dichev, 2000, as cited in Ichijo, 2011, p. 95). However, there was a significant fear in Bulgarians, that they were not European enough. This was due to a clear difference in living standards, as well as religious and cultural differences (Ichijo, 2011, p. 96). For Bulgarians there was a reputational stake as well, as for the most time, the country had been either unknown or associated with poverty or backwardness in the international realm (Ichijo, 2011, p. 97).

Besides the national and European identity, Bulgarians also have a third, Balkan, component to their identity. All three of these coexist and overlap without contradicting each other. For Bulgarians, being Balkan is a cultural specificity and does not exclude them from being European (Ichijo, 2011, p. 96). However, in the West, the Balkans are often used as "a depot of negative characteristics and stereotypes against the positive image of the 'European'" (Ichijo, 2011, p. 97). The whole peninsula was perceived as not entirely European due to the different religions, ethnicity, and lower levels of economic and political development. Ichijo (2011), cites a report from the Bulgarian Media coalition that the themes reported in foreign media were profoundly negative of Bulgaria. They would mostly depict the minorities' lifestyle, poverty, corruption, nationalism, and crime. This would also translate into negative images of Bulgarian sport and tourism quality (p.97). Kaneva and Popescu go even further and depict Eastern Europe and the Balkans in particular as "the internal Other for Western Europe" (2011, p. 202), a stark dichotomy between the 'civilized' West and the 'exotic' East. This depiction of the Balkans has important implications for an increase of the feeling of distance and heterogeneity between East and West.

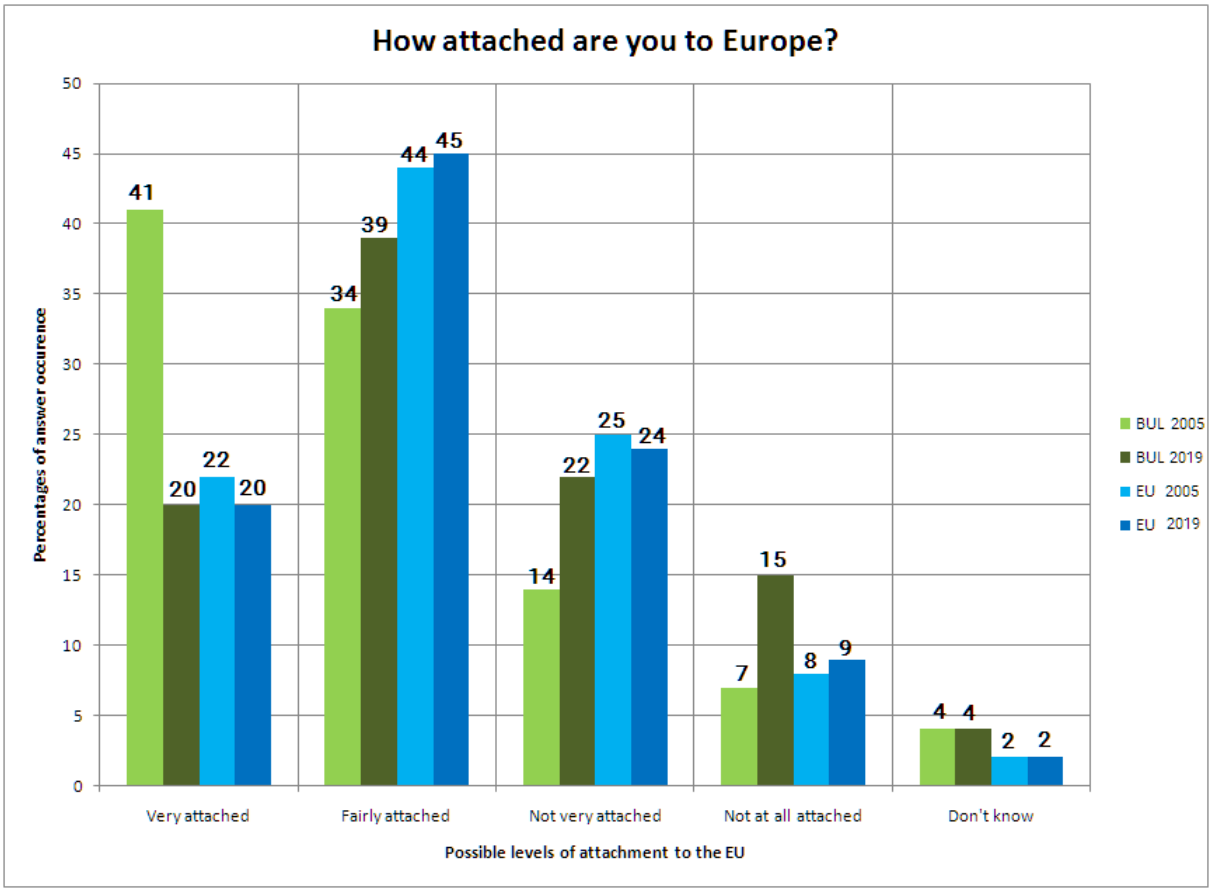
Regardless of these externally negative views, "there is a surprisingly strong yearning for European citizenship and pride of being part of the EU" (Kabakchieva, 2009, as cited in Ichijo, 2011, p. 102). "European identity is most strongly expressed in the Bulgarians with higher education, income, and social status, as well as among the young" (Topalova, 2006, as cited in Ichijo, 2011, p. 100). The youth has been able to quickly and radically change its values and social identities and as a result, "the share of people who feel 'European' has been steadily increasing through the years" (Topalova, 2006, as cited in Ichijo, 2011, p. 100).

Four years after completing its accession to the EU, Bulgaria continued to experience internal problems with corruption. The post-communist successor party had been engaged in far-reaching and systematic corruption (Spendzharova & Vachudova, 2012, p. 40). In response to the corruption, the EU implemented a new monitoring tool – the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM), to continue the EU leverage after the accession period (Spendzharova & Vachudova, 2012, p. 40). Spendzharova and Vachudova conclude that it is the CVM and the freezing of EU funds that made

corruption a salient topic for the Bulgarian public. This combined pressure forced the Bulgarian government to implement anti-corruption reforms.

To trace how the public mood in Bulgaria has accumulatively changed through the years following the accession, we can look at Figures 1-3, representing aggregate national data from Bulgaria and the EU. The figures combine the results of the 2005 and the 2019 Eurobarometers - before the accession into the EU and after, respectively. These dates have been chosen as the first and last points in time when Bulgaria was polled on these questions in the Interactive Eurobarometer. To look at the accumulative empirical effects of these events, we proceed to examine aggregate national data of Bulgaria before and after accession.

Fig. 1. *Comparative data on attachment to Europe based on answers from Bulgaria and the EU mean for 2005 and 2019*



Source: All calculations are based on the 05/2005 and the 11/2019 Eurobarometer.

Fig. 1 combines the results from the 2005 and 2019 Eurobarometer to the question of "How attached are you to Europe?". The lighter colors represent data from 2005 and the darker ones – data from 2019. Specifically, green colors represent Bulgaria and blue colors represent the EU mean. Fig. 1 makes it easy to see the differences and trends in answer occurrence at each point of time between Bulgaria and the EU.

The results from 2005, to the question of how attached one feels to Europe, are the following:

- "Very attached" – 41% for Bulgaria versus 22% for the EU;
- "Fairly attached" – 34% for Bulgaria versus 44% of the EU;
- "Not very attached" – 14% for Bulgaria and 25% for the EU;
- "Not at all attached" – 7% for Bulgaria and 8% for the EU;
- "Don't know" – 4% for Bulgaria and 2% for the EU.

The results from 2019 to the question of how attached one feels to Europe, are the following:

- "Very attached" – 20% for Bulgaria versus 20% for the EU;
- "Fairly attached" – 39% for Bulgaria versus 45% of the EU;
- "Not very attached" – 22% for Bulgaria and 24% for the EU;
- "Not at all attached" – 14% for Bulgaria and 9% for the EU;
- "Don't know" – 4% for Bulgaria and 2% for the EU.

Fig. **2** combines the results from the 03/2006 and the 11/2019 Eurobarometers, to the question "How attached are you to the EU?". Lighter colors represent 2006, while the darker ones – 2019. The different shades of green represent Bulgaria, while the shades of blue stand for the EU. (Note, 2006 was the first available point in time when this particular question had been asked to Bulgarians).
The results from the 03/2006 Eurobarometer, to the question of "How attached are you to the EU?" are the following:

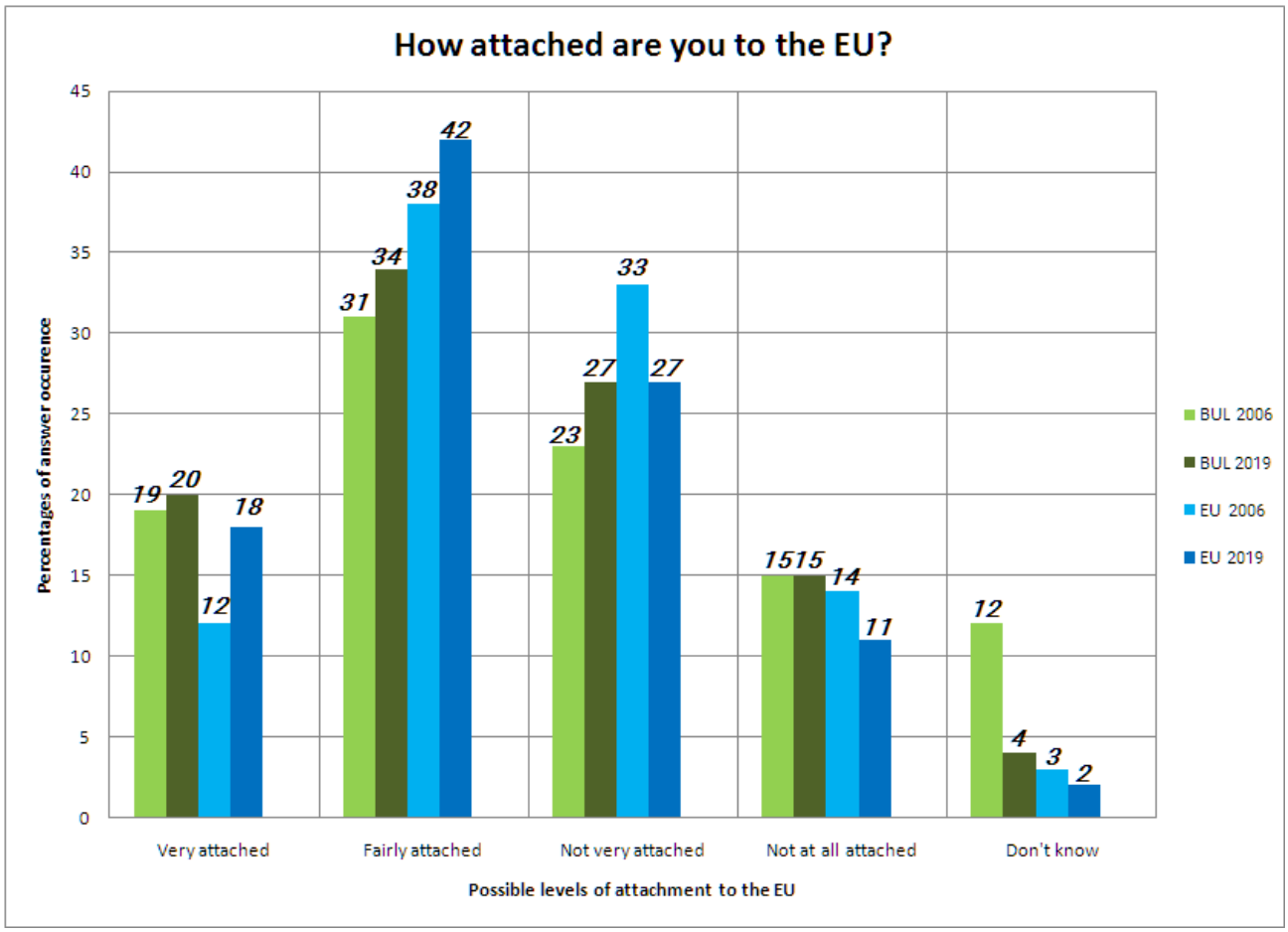
- "Very attached" – 19% for Bulgaria versus 12% for the EU;
- "Fairly attached" – 31% for Bulgaria versus 38% of the EU;
- "Not very attached" – 23% for Bulgaria and 33% for the EU;
- "Not at all attached" – 15% for Bulgaria and 14% for the EU;

- "Don't know" – 12% for Bulgaria and 3% for the EU.

The results from the 11/2019 Eurobarometer to the question of "How attached are you to the EU?" are the following:

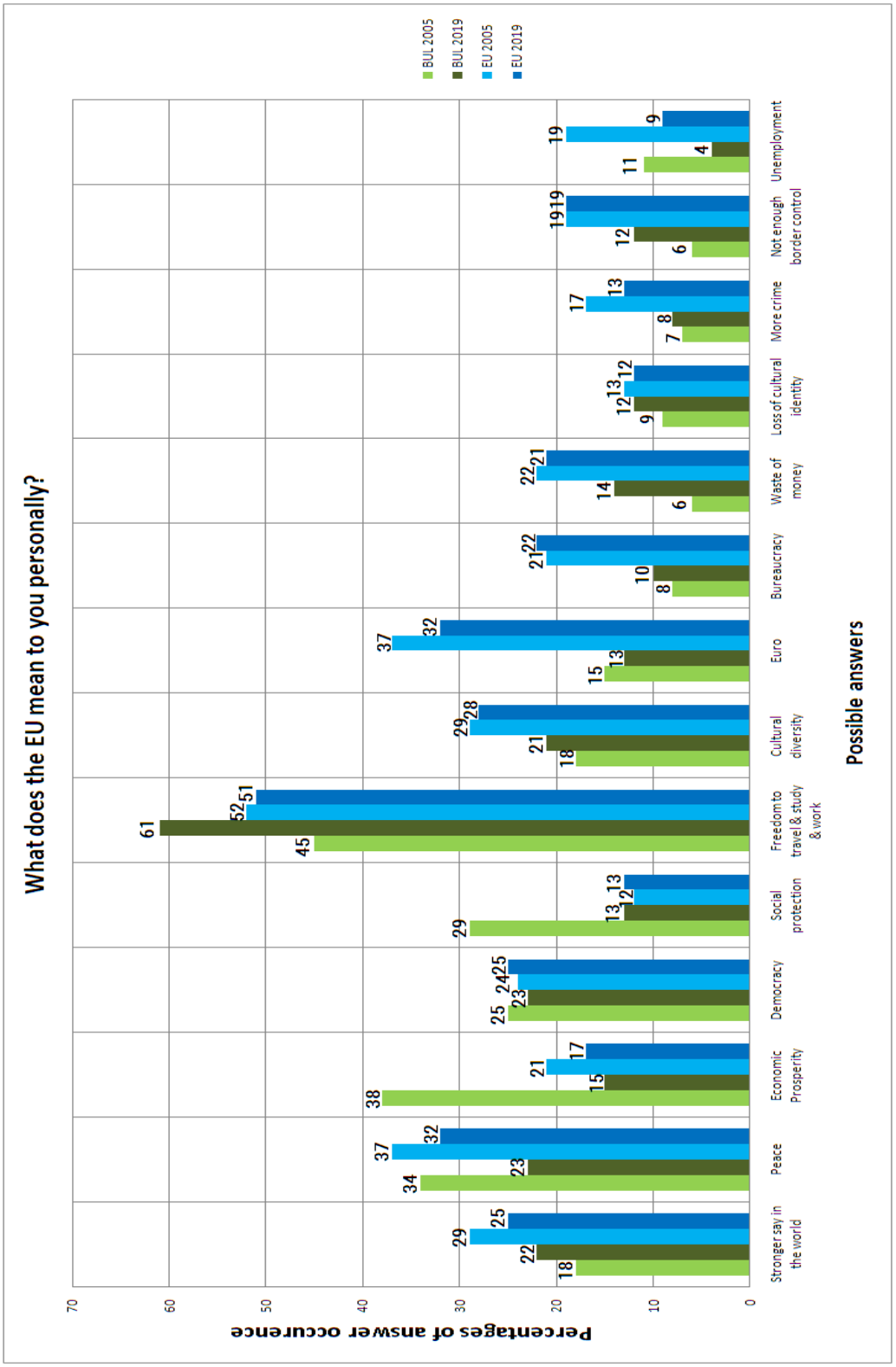
- "Very attached" – 20% for Bulgaria versus 18% for the EU;
- "Fairly attached" – 34% for Bulgaria versus 42% of the EU;
- "Not very attached" – 27% for Bulgaria and 27% for the EU;
- "Not at all attached" – 15% for Bulgaria and 11% for the EU;
- "Don't know" – 4% for Bulgaria and 2% for the EU.

Fig. 2. *Comparative data on attachment to the EU based on answers from Bulgaria and the EU mean for 2006 and 2019*



Source: All calculations are based on the 03/2006 and the 11/2019 Eurobarometer.

Fig.**3.** *Personnal understanding of EU based on answers from Bulgaria and the EU mean for 2005 and 2019*



Source: All calculations are based on the 05/2005 and the 11/2019 Eurobarometers.

Fig. **3** combines the results from the 2005 and 2019 Eurobarometer to the question of "What does the EU mean to you personally?". The lighter colors represent data from 2005 and the darker ones – data from 2019. Specifically, green colors represent Bulgaria and blue colors represent the EU mean.

The top 5 most mentioned answers of Bulgarian respondents in 2005 include:

- "Freedom to travel, study and work anywhere in the EU" - 45% for Bulgaria versus 52% for the EU;
- "Economic prosperity" - 38% for Bulgaria versus 21% for the EU;
- "Peace" - 34% for Bulgaria versus 37% for the EU;
- "Social protection – 29% for Bulgaria versus 12 % for the EU;
- "Democracy" – 25% for Bulgaria versus 24% for the EU.

The top 5 most mentioned answers of Bulgarian respondents in 2019 include:

- "Freedom to travel, study and work anywhere in the EU" - 61% for Bulgaria versus 51% for the EU
- " Peace" – 23 % for Bulgaria versus 32% for the EU;
- "Democracy – 23% for Bulgaria versus 25% for the EU;
- "Stronger say in the World – 22% for Bulgaria versus 25% for the EU;
- "Cultural diversity" – 21% for Bulgaria versus 28% for the EU;

Overall, the three figures show three distinct trends before and after Bulgaria's accession. The data from Fig. 1 and 2 is related to the 2nd hypothesis of this study, namely that the percentage of people in CEE countries who have a very positive interpretation of European identity decreases after the Eastern enlargement.

Fig. 1, shows that Bulgarians' level of attachment to Europe has starkly decreased overall, as seen by the drop of people who are 'very attached' from 41% to 20% and the increase of people who feel 'not at all attached' to Europe from 7& to 14%.

Fig. 2, however, shows that Bulgarians' level of attachment to the EU has remained somewhat stable and has even increased by 1% for 'very attached' and by 3% for 'fairly attached', although the percentage of people who are 'not very attached' has also increased by 4%.

Fig. 3 is related to the first hypothesis of this study, namely that the percentage of people in CEE countries who have a materialistic interpretation of European identity decreases after the Eastern enlargement. Figure 3 does indeed show that there has been a reshuffling of values from 2005 to 2019. The top 5 most common results for Bulgarians have changed, with 'stronger say in the world' and 'cultural diversity' shoving out 'economic prosperity' and 'social protection', while 'freedom to travel & study & work', 'peace' and 'democracy' are the top 3 answers in 2019.

7. **Discussion** – ***tying it all together***

This paper began with an elaboration of broad background concepts – European integration, Identity building, Europeanness, and Western Eurocentrism. The paper proceeded to show how interconnected the concepts are in the specific context of the EU's Eastern Enlargement.

Overall, the Bulgarian case fits well with broader constructivist explanations behind the Eastern Enlargement of the EU. These explanations place importance on the social role of European identity and the institutionalized values of the EU, which have become the standard for Europeanness. Bulgaria's return to Europe has indeed been paved in the language of values and identity. However, the Balkan aspect of Bulgarian identity, although strictly cultural for Bulgarians, had negative connotations in the West. The Balkans were generally seen as representing an internal European 'other', who had similar characteristics to Said's 'oriental other' – irrational, backward, and primitive (1987). These negative characteristics are because of the Balkan region's lower economic and political development, as well as differences in culture and religion.

On the Bulgarians' side, there was great enthusiasm to join the EU. Bulgaria quickly pledged to reform, starting with the change of its coat of arms and national anthem. Educational reforms quickly followed and Bulgarian identity began to be represented as an inseparable part of a European identity. The state financed a national-branding campaign to reinvent its image on the international stage. Political and judicial reforms were also pursued, although with mixed success due to corruption. Through all these reforms, Bulgaria hoped to be seen as 'European enough' to join, based on identity. Moreover, there was a feeling of urgency to reform, as to distance Bulgaria from its communist past and gain the trust of the West through complete compliance.

However, the bargaining power between Bulgaria and the EU was completely asymmetrical in favor of the latter during the Enlargement negotiations. Trade interdependence was hugely in the EU's favor. Thus rationalist theory can not explain the decision of the EU to let Bulgaria in, strictly through a cost/benefit calculation. Following a constructivist logic that institutions shape identities, we could assume that the identities of the candidate states will also change along with their institutions and become more 'European' after accession. The EI model predicts that after accession, the institutions of CEE states would backslide against the Euro standards. In the same fashion this study hypothesized that interpretation of European identity would become more negative. Furthermore, it hypothesized that interpretations of European identity would become less materialistic because, after the fall of communism, the EU and democracy had been misunderstood as short-cuts to prosperity for the CEE states.

The idea of 'Europe', in the face of the EU, had become a strong pulling factor for Bulgarians. Their 'attachment to Europe', as Fig. 1 shows, is 41% for 'very attached', compared to an EU mean of 21%. Furthermore, 19% of Bulgarians compared to an EU mean of 12 %, reported feeling 'very attached' to the EU as seen in Fig. 2. Combined, these results show that Bulgarians were more attached to the idea of Europeanness than the average EU- respondents before the Eastern Enlargement.

By 2019 the answers of Bulgarians have significantly changed and have become closer to EU mean answers. Bulgarians' attachment to Europe has dropped significantly from 41% to 20% for 'very attached', while people who are 'not at all attached' have increased from 7% to 14%. Meanwhile, Bulgarians' attachment levels to the EU follow a somewhat more stable trend with an increase from 19% in 2006 to 20% in 2019 for 'very attached', an increase from 31% to 34 % for 'fairly attached' and also an increase from 23% to 27% for 'not very attached'. The change in percentages follows mainly a reshuffling of people who had previously answered 'don't know', as their numbers have significantly decreased from 12% to 4%.

These trends in the data offer mixed support for the hypothesis that interpretations of a European identity will become more negative. Levels of attachment to Europe support it significantly, while levels of attachment to the EU do not.

Fig. 3 shows the top 5 Bulgarian answers to "What does the EU mean for you personally?", compared to an EU mean, including 'Freedom to travel', 'Economic prosperity', 'Peace', 'Social protection' and 'Democracy'. At the same time, figure 3 shows that in 2005 Bulgarians had significantly overestimated the 'economic prosperity' (38% Bulgaria, 21% EU) and the 'social protection' (29% Bulgaria, 21% EU) of the EU, compared to the EU mean. By 2019, Bulgarians' answers had significantly shifted with a change in their top 5 answers, now associating the EU less with 'economic prosperity' and 'social protection' and more with a 'stronger say in the world' and 'cultural diversity'.

Overall in Fig. 3, in 2019 the means of Bulgarian answers have come much closer to the EU means in almost all cases. Considering that the EU already had less materialist values than Bulgaria in 2005, one can conclude that by coming closer to the EU mean in 2019, Bulgarian interpretations of European identity have also become less materialist than they were in 2005. Therefore, Fig. 3 offers support to the hypothesis of this study, that interpretations of European identity would become less materialistic.

8. Conclusion, implications & limitations

This study set out to answer the research question "*What are the effects of the Eastern Enlargement of the EU on the interpretation of European identity in the CEE countries?".* To that, results are somewhat ambiguous. Support has been found for the hypothesis, that European identity would be less associated with material benefits by the CEE states, after their accession into the EU, based on data from the 2005 and 2019 Eurobarometers. However, the other hypothesis, concerning how positively people view European identity, is not entirely confirmed. This study predicted that support would go down, and data does show that support for 'Europe' has gone down, yet support for the EU has gone up. Both Europe and the EU are predictors for European identity, thus more research would be needed to explain this inconsistency in results. This study has found support that people from Bulgaria saw Europeanness and European identity as a short-cut to material prosperity and wealth. Consequently, after joining the EU and having 'returned to Europe', Bulgarians have become less attached to Europe, although more attached to the EU, and associate it significantly less with material benefits.

However, the study is limited in its scope and unable to explain well enough the connections between the macro-processes. The study takes for granted that it is the Enlargement itself that has caused the final results. Although all the pieces of information stick well when put together, the study has no way of controlling other external explanations that have to do with changing interpretations of European identity in Eastern Europe. However, the strenght of this study is its effort to test out an old theory in a new context. Furthermore, the events under study are very recent, which brings the novelty factor too. Therefore, further research would be advised, specifically to track the development of institutions in CEE states after their accession into the EU and to see if public values and identity shift correspondingly. Another research implication would be to study the representation of the Balkans or Eastern Europe as the internal European 'Other', and see how it affects interactions and identities in the EU.

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