Bulgaria and Romania’s 10th EU Anniversary: What Has Changed?
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When ten years ago on New Year’s Eve the clock struck midnight, Bulgarians and Romanians waved European flags in the streets as big changes were expected for the New Year. Ten years ago, we believed and hoped that joining the EU would reverse the damage the communist regime had inflicted on our economies and our mindset. Both our nations looked forward to a better economy, more foreign investments, freedom of movement, work opportunities, less corruption. But hope and excitement were mixed with fear as we didn’t know exactly how our lives were about to change. ‘It was hard but we reached the end of the road. It is the road of our future. It is the road of our joy. We arrived in Europe. Welcome to Europe,’ Traian Basescu, the then Romanian President, said in a speech.

Meanwhile, the Bulgarian President Georgi Parvanov called the accession day a ‘heavenly moment’. ‘The day we are welcoming – 1 January 2007 – will undoubtedly find its place among the most important dates in our national history,’ he continued. Ten years later, what has come true of these words?

To start with, joining the European Union was certainly not ‘the end of the road’ for either of the countries, it was the beginning of it and we still have a long way to go. Ten years have proven not to be enough to build the sort of democracy that took other European countries centuries to construct. It looks like we have learned how to walk but we still need a guiding hand. Despite the slow progress, we are happier than a decade ago or so it seems. Compared to ten years ago, a larger percentage of Bulgarians and Romanians are satisfied with the lives they lead, as the Eurobarometer public opinion reports from 2007 and 2016 show.

Employment and entrepreneurship

After a decade of EU membership, Bulgaria and Romania still are the two poorest countries of the Union. In 2007, the minimum salary in Bulgaria was 180 BGN (92 euro), 1.7 BGN per hour (0.87 euro). In 2017, this has increased to 460 BGN (235 euro), 2.77 BGN per hour (1.42 euro). In Romania, the minimum wage is currently 1,250 RON (275 euro), compared to 390 RON (114 euro) in 2017. In spite of their significant rise, these salaries are still frustrating and shameful. Bulgaria is now the top outsourcing destination in Europe. Many companies are moving entire departments to Sofia where they hire qualified workers for much less money than they would have to pay in their home countries.

From one side this is good because many foreign companies come here to create jobs that are better paid than the local ones and these opportunities motivate many young people to stay in their country. In Bulgaria, the number of people who work abroad is now higher than that of those who work at home. Romania is also facing a severe demographic crisis and could lose 5 million of its citizens by 2050 through emigration. The working force is shrinking and that leaves us with an uncertain future and it is the European Union which still gives us the hope that we are not left behind to deal with this alone.

The truth is that our labour is still offensively cheap, almost as cheap as in India, a developing country. Even our higher-paid specialists can earn many times more in the west. When I travel in Europe, I always compare the prices of food in the supermarkets and I have noticed that they aren’t that much higher in the west than they are in the east. But the salaries differ significantly. While the minimum wage has to go up considerably, a process that will take a few more decades, the mentality of citizens also needs to change. For many Bulgarians I have talked to, 600 euro per month seems like a good salary. This money is enough to live from pay check to pay check in the capital. But if we want our standard to rise to that of the west, our dreams need to get bigger. Fostering self-employment and entrepreneurship is one way of setting more powerful goals for ourselves and steering our economies in a sustainable direction.
It needs to be said that the EU funds are actually hindering entrepreneurship, because they mainly focus on large businesses. Both countries receive the highest EU funding for rural development but here we have a similar problem: the funds are mainly concentrated in the hands of large-scale farmers and manufacturers. Funding opportunities for entrepreneurs and self-employed individuals or small farmers are also provided by the EU but here corruption often stands in the way. When there is a public tender in Bulgaria, the state often favours the companies with political connections instead of selecting those that are able do the best job. This way an inequality is created when it comes to accessing the funding opportunities. There is also a need for more qualified professionals who can consult owners of smaller businesses and self-employed individuals.

**Government and civil society**

In less than four years, Bulgaria experienced three changes of government. The last resignation – after the presidential election in November 2016 – came as a surprise and assigning a temporary government has proven to be quite a challenge. The two previous resignations came after two waves of mass protests, the latter lasting a whole year. Romania’s citizens brought down two governments, in 2012 and 2015. This led to a slow but steady economic progress. There were also many other protests driven by different environmental and economic issues, such as the fight to ban fracking which united both countries. It seems that the sense of belonging to a bigger European family has helped us feel stronger as citizens; we have learned that we can and must demand more from our governments. Unlike Bulgaria, Romania’s judicial system improved significantly. Several Romanian politicians were found guilty of corruption and sentenced to years in jail, including former prime ministers, ministers and mayors. Among all Member States, Bulgaria still has the highest perception of corruption, currently ranking at the bottom 69th place out of 167 countries, according to the latest Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index. But there are increased calls for reforms of the judicial system reforms. I am hopeful that in the next decade Bulgaria will follow the Romanian example and more corrupt high-profile politicians will end up in jail.

**Should we celebrate our 10th anniversary?**

I believe we have a reason to celebrate and be happy about our tenth anniversary. We are young Member States and it will take us a few more years or even decades to enter ‘adulthood’. EU membership still means hope for many Bulgarians and Romanians who can’t trust their own governments. Joining the EU and being a member for ten years has united us with other European countries but it also helped us unite within the borders of our own countries. After a decade, this is still not the end of the road. The dream of a better and freer life is the reason why we should celebrate and continue this journey. We are no longer the same nations that used to complain about their governments and do nothing about the things we don’t like about them, we have grown into active citizens but there are still many more lessons that we need to learn.