

## BULGARIA'S EU ACCESSION: BETWEEN ECCLESIASTICAL CONCERNS AND THE STATE'S PRO-WESTERN OUTLOOK

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### ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the socio-political position and role of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church in the context of the country's accession to the European Union. The authors consider these aspects from the perspective of distinctive circumstances and attitudes within the Church, which significantly differed from those of state authorities in the context of European integration. The limitations of the Church in terms of socio-political influence were closely tied to existential challenges, such as schisms and exposure to state intervention, coupled with a low degree of religiosity. Given the extensive reach of the Europeanization process affecting political, economic, and social dimensions and the historical influence of Orthodox churches on political decision-making and public opinion, the authors seek to explore the political ramifications of isolationist tendencies, internal divisions, and public perceptions, coupled with the ambivalence between political pro-Westernism (pro-Europeanism) and religious anti-Westernism. The hypothesis posits that the Church did not have a prominent role in the course of European integration as a consequence of the isolationist tendencies derived from its recent history. To investigate this assumption, the authors rely on the rational choice perspective of religious institutions. Additionally, the authors examine the Church's recent history and challenges, its unusual position within the Orthodox world, and the geopolitical circumstances that have increasingly marginalised religious authorities in favour of state decision-makers.

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## Introduction

Prior to Bulgaria's accession to the European Union (EU) in 2007, Greece and Cyprus were the only Orthodox-majority EU member states. Considering the scope of the Europeanization process, which impacts all aspects of political, economic, and social life on the one hand, and the traditional inclination of Orthodox churches to influence political decision-making and public opinion on the other, we aim to explore the ambivalence between these two diverging phenomena in the Bulgarian case. This is important considering that the Orthodox churches, due to their histories and traditions of intertwining with state decision-making (Olteanu and De Neve 2013, 9), have the potential to influence various activities in the context of European integration. However, in the case of Bulgaria's EU accession, the role of the Church was not so prominent. This paper aims to investigate the reasons for the lower visibility and influence of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (BOC) during that period.

The role of the religious actors, including the BOC, has always been both religious and political, at least in the context of national symbolism. For instance, the decision of the BOC to abandon the World Council of Churches and ecumenical initiatives (1998) contributed to the isolation of that church within the Orthodox world. Some authors (Metodiev 2012, 12) attribute this disengagement to the inability to resolve its communist-era problems, including the lack of consensus on intellectual leadership and some important social issues, which also reflected on the fall of public support for the chief national religious institution. A schism within the Bulgarian Orthodoxy between 1992 and 2012, precisely over the post-communist heritage, further alienated the citizens from religious matters. In a European Values Study conducted in 1999/2000, almost 53% of Bulgarian respondents stated that religion "was not/not at all" important in their lives, ranking high in that regard both in the Southeastern European (SEE) and Central and Eastern European (CEE) contexts (Halman 2001, 12; cf. EVS 2011).<sup>3</sup>

Simultaneously, on the other hand, during the decoupling between Bulgaria and various Christian organisations, the country was already a candidate for EU membership, awaiting the European Commission's recommendation to officially

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<sup>3</sup> According to the 1999/2000 EVS dataset, 52.3% of Bulgarian respondents considered that religion 'was not'/'not at all' important in their lives, while 47.7% answered that religion "was quite/very" important in their lives (EVS 2011). However, the importance of religion has increased recently. According to the 2017/2018 EVS dataset, 29.6% of Bulgarians responded that religion "is not/not at all" important in their lives, while 60.3% of Bulgarian respondents stated that religion is "quite/very" important in their lives (EVS 2022). This still ranks Bulgaria among the Southeast European countries with the lowest importance of religion on a personal level.

launch membership negotiations, which occurred in 1999. This uneasy relationship between a strong pro-Western political (state) course and the actions of the Church is observed through the lenses of contemporary historical developments, including those stemming from the communist period. Namely, isolationist tendencies, internal polarisations (schisms), and leadership crises, among other things. Considering the degree of social consensus required for the successful realisation of EU accession, we examine some specificities surrounding the BOC, including its relatively low public support. We hypothesise that Bulgarian Orthodoxy had a marginal influence on public decisions and attitudes. This is due to a variety of factors, including the Church's recent history and challenges, its unique position within the Orthodox world, and the geopolitical circumstances that have increasingly marginalised religious authorities in favour of state decision-makers.

The widespread anti-Western feelings among the clergy, intellectuals, and citizens recorded during the 1990s in Southeastern Europe, according to Makrides (2009, 210), could be correlated with the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia, on the one hand, and the deterioration of religious balance between the East and West after 1989, on the other. This manifested, *inter alia*, in the rise of re-evangelising activities, especially by Protestant communities, coupled with the perception of Western support for Roman-Catholic causes in the Balkans and elsewhere at the expense of Orthodoxy. However, these aspects were further complicated by two characteristic facts in Bulgaria: Bulgarian Orthodoxy was experiencing a schism, and a large portion of the population either considered themselves non-religious or was not interested in religious matters during the time of accession to the European Union. The authors will reflect on these aspects in further segments of this paper, starting from the brief contemporary historical overview, over the conceptual and theoretical considerations, to the empirical part, focusing on political and religious developments in the context of the country's EU accession.

The authors argue that the examination of the diminished influence of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church in the political realm is academically valuable for understanding broader trends in the relationship between religion and politics in post-communist societies in Europe. This phenomenon also pertains to the Western Balkans, which has been part of the EU enlargement policy for over twenty years. On the one hand, religious authorities possess the capacity to influence political developments, as seen in some EU candidate countries, like Montenegro (Vučković and Petrović 2022, 67; Veković and Jevtić 2019). On the other hand, the Bulgarian instance indicates the weak capabilities of the Church in the political domain (and the course of the European integration process), due to its own internal challenges and the tendency of the state to intervene in its internal matters. Socio-politically, it offers insights into the intricate dynamics of national identity

and the challenges faced during the European integration process, including the dilemmas and reasons behind the isolationist and anti-Western stances of the religious stakeholders in Bulgaria. Considering that Bulgaria was among the first Balkan countries to join the European Union, its experience with secular-religious cooperation in that context might be relevant for current EU candidates and their respective institutions. Additionally, it illustrates the enduring effects of communist rule in Bulgaria on the religious domain, a phenomenon that has been evident throughout the European integration process.

In this paper, we hypothesise that the BPC did not play a significant role during Bulgaria's European integration and that, due to the weak social position during Bulgaria's negotiations with the EU, the BOC maximised the benefit of non-interference in state affairs. In order to investigate this assumption, we rely on the rational choice perspective of religious institutions. Although rational choice approaches were initially created under the auspices of economic sciences, their application in political sciences has long been recognised (Павловић 2015). As religion is one of the significant social phenomena, Laurence R. Iannaccone (1997) recognised the possibility of applying the theory of rational choice in religious studies from the perspective of the social sciences. Among other things, Iannaccone (1997, 26) pointed out that the rational choice approach "forges links between religious research and a growing body of rational choice research on other 'nonmarket' institutions and activities". As non-state actors emerged as a research subject in political science, religious actors (religious institutions) got their place in political research. One possible approach is the interest-based approach, which belongs to rational choice theory. According to Jonathan Fox (2018, 84), the two main interests of religious institutions are (1) institutional survival and (2) the protection of core religious values. Therefore, "[b]ased on this, it would be rational for a religious institution to support political activities only when they do not threaten the institution's survival, unless a core non-negotiable religious value is at stake" (Fox 2018, 84). Using this logic of the argument, in the following part of the paper, we will show how the BOC from 1992 to 2012 was preoccupied with its institutional survival and why it did not influence Bulgaria's Eurointegration. Hence, after institutional stabilisation in 2012, the BOC could devote itself to the second type of interest, i.e., to protect its central values, which are neo-traditional. The type and process of protecting these values, which have become one of the primary interests of the BOC, will be presented in the following work.

### **A Brief Historical Overview**

Throughout the Ottoman era, the Constantinople understanding of church autocephaly implied its jurisdiction in all territories outside the (Eastern) Roman

Empire, i.e., among “barbarian peoples”, which included the Bulgarians at the time. The Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople was the head of the Christian Millet, whose power was more significant than before the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople (Hackel 1990). Hence, the process of the struggle for the independence of the Christian peoples in the Balkans from the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century also included the struggle for the independence of their local churches (including Bulgaria) from the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople (cf. Јовић 2023).

In order to prevent Greek-Bulgarian conflicts in the Empire, the Sultan issued the 1870 Ferman on the establishment of the Bulgarian Exarchate, an autonomous (not autocephalous) ecclesiastical jurisdiction over the territory between the Danube and Balkan Mountains, but under the supreme rule of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Nevertheless, Bulgarian political and ecclesiastical authorities sought territorial expansion in the so-called ethnic Bulgarian territories, primarily Thrace and Macedonia. Growing Bulgarian nationalism became a threat to the Ecumenical Patriarchate and Greek nationalists. The Bulgarian Exarchate even declared autocephaly in 1872. Therefore, with the consent of some Greek-speaking autocephalous Orthodox churches, the Ecumenical Patriarch condemned the Bulgarian Exarchate for the “heresy of ethnophyletism” at the 1872 Constantinople Council. On the contrary, the Moscow Patriarchate considered “that the right of Bulgarians to church autonomy, up to the preservation of church independence, is legitimate” (Јовић 2023, 157).

The conflict with Constantinople, combined with the political changes in the country at the end of World War II, pushed the BOC further towards Moscow. “With the help of other Orthodox churches (especially the Russian) and thanks to the favourable attitude of the Bulgarian People’s Government”, the schism was resolved on February 22, 1945, when the Bulgarian Exarchate was granted autocephalous status by the Ecumenical Patriarch (Johansen 1981, 2). Nevertheless, the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the BOC found themselves on opposing sides of the Iron Curtain during the Cold War, while ties with Moscow developed further.

The BOC was in a precarious position in communist Bulgaria due to the official ideology of state atheism. Along with complete internal control over church activities, “the ecumenical activity of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church has been initiated, pursued, and controlled, respectively, by the Communist State and its State Security Service” (Metodiev 2012, 3). The BOC was also weakened by internal divisions caused by state interference, first in 1968 when the reformed Orthodox calendar was introduced in the BOC<sup>4</sup>, and second in 1992 when the Alternative Synod was established. Part of the BOC hierarchy declared that the election of Patriarch Maxim in 1971 was carried out uncanonically by

the government headed by the General Secretary of the Bulgarian Communist Party, Todor Zhivkov. Stepping out of the BOC in 1992, Metropolitans Pankratiy, Kalinik, Pimen, and Stephen formed the Alternative Synod, which chose Pimen as its leader. Despite reconciliation in 1999 under the auspices of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the part of the Alternative Synod headed by uncanonical Metropolitan Inokentiy continued to function in the 21st century. In 2010, uncanonical Metropolitan Inokentiy, with the support of two other members of the Alternative Synod, asked to return to the BOC. They were readmitted in 2012, but the remaining two members of the Alternative Synod did not support this act. The BOC's credibility was further weakened after 2012, when it was confirmed that a significant part of the church hierarchy had cooperated with the State Secret Service (Kalkandjieva 2014, 125-129).

During the 1960s, the communist government aimed to promote the interests of the Eastern Bloc in the West through ecumenical dialogue. Thus, the BOC became a member of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Conference of European Churches (CEC) and, at least declaratively, approached the West. However, at the time of the country's democratisation in the 1990s, the communist legacy within the BOC led to a dampening of interest in participating in ecumenical organisations. One of the reasons for the schism in the 1990s was distrust towards the protagonists of the ecumenical dialogue in the BOC during the communist period. At a time when Bulgaria was getting closer to the West and striving for European integration, the BOC withdrew from all ecumenical organisations, isolating itself from the Orthodox world and even from Bulgarian society (Metodiev 2012). On the one hand, the Orthodox churches were generally dissatisfied with the direction of development of the WCC, ecclesiological disagreements, and the process of decision-making (cf. Зизијулас 2014, 75-92). On the other hand, as the issue was addressed in the WCC, almost all Orthodox churches, except the Bulgarian and Georgian Orthodox Churches, remained members of the WCC. The BOC's abandonment from the WCC and isolation from the rest of the Christian world were directed against the communist legacy because the ecumenical workers in the BOC were considered a "church within a church" that was politically instructed (Metodiev 2012, 12). The abandonment of the communist legacy brought with it the rise of (neo-)traditionalism. It considered ecumenism to be a heresy, which was confirmed as the official position of the BOC in 2016 (Ladouceur 2017).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The reformed Orthodox calendar largely coincides with the Gregorian calendar, as a result of which the part of the Church that kept the Julian calendar separated from the BOC and established the Old Calendar Bulgarian Orthodox Church in order to resist the reforms that they saw as the Westernization of the church.

<sup>5</sup> In a statement of the Holy Synod of the BOC, issued as a rejection of the draft document of the Holy and Great Council of Orthodox Church titled "Relations of the Orthodox Church with

By doing so, the Church declined to take part in ecumenical dialogues, including the ongoing exchange between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox churches (CNEWA 2021). Likewise, during the two papal visits (John Paul II, 2002, and Francis, 2019), the Bulgarian clergy avoided public prayers with the Roman Catholic leaders. Metropolitan Nikolai of Plovdiv dismissed the papal call for unity, stating that “it is not possible to unite the light and the darkness” (CNEWA 2021). These anti-ecumenical and also anti-Western stances, although not uncommon in the Orthodox Christian discourse, should be observed in the context of the Bulgarian Church’s tendency towards isolationism. This tendency aimed to reduce chronic meddling in its affairs by the state and other stakeholders. On the other hand, the isolationism led to a permanent lack of foreign policy (Metodiev 2012, 3). Merdjanova (2022b, 21-22,) contends that the BOC isolationism manifested in distancing from the entire Orthodox Christian community except for the Russian Church; the BOC refused to take part in the Pan-Orthodox Council in Crete in 2016 and continued to criticise liberalism, modernity, the West, the rights of women, minorities, etc. However, while the Church did manage to distance or isolate itself from other religious authorities, it did not succeed in overcoming the state interference that had been ongoing for many decades.

### **Isolationist Attitudes between Pro-Europeanism and Anti-Westernism**

Having presented the exposure of the Bulgarian state and church to Russian counterparts during significant periods of contemporary history, the authors will now move on to the conceptual considerations of Europeanism, Westernism, isolationism, and their connected terms. These concepts will be considered in the socio-political and cultural context to portray in more detail the challenges in the functioning of the Bulgarian Church. The roots of these phenomena lie in the historical evolution of the Bulgarian Church and its complex relations with the two Orthodox centres of power, namely, Constantinople and Moscow. These notions are somewhat interconnected, especially Europeanism and Westernism. On the other hand, the concept of isolationism is perhaps the most adequate for understanding the peripheral status and role of the Bulgarian Church in national politics, including the European integration process.

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the Rest of the Christian World” (2016), it is unreservedly noted: “Besides the Holy Orthodox Church, there are no other churches, but only heresies and schisms, and to call the latter ‘churches’ is theologically, dogmatically, and canonically completely erroneous” (Ladouceur 2017, 335).

According to Makrides (2009, 216), Orthodox anti-Westernism closely relates to Orthodox anti-Europeanism, the latter referring not to the European concept *per se* but to the idea of Europe promulgated by the West, which historically differed from, for instance, Byzantine considerations of the continent. On a similar note, Todorova (1999) refers to the perception of “otherness” in Southeastern Europe, explaining a sense of (self-)exclusion or detachment from (the western part of) the continent. In the context of this paper, the authors assert that the isolationist tendencies of the BOC constitute the primary characteristic influencing its functioning in the socio-political (and international religious) sphere. Furthermore, the authors highlight a stark contrast between political pro-Europeanism and religious anti-Westernism. They argue that the Church’s anti-Western tendencies were not primarily directed at countering pro-European political narratives and actions. Instead, they served to establish a religious distance from other Christian actors on the international stage. The goal was to strengthen and unify the weak and divided Bulgarian Orthodoxy by minimising ties with other actors.

Delving into the concept of “refused relation” as a political act of isolation, particularly in the anthropological context of Peruvian indigenous cultures, Bessire (2012, 467) references Peruvian law, which acknowledges isolation as “the situation of an indigenous people or part of one that occurs when this group has not developed sustained social relations with the other members of national society, or that, having done so, has opted to discontinue them”. This represents a voluntary act aimed at preserving specificity or some other personal interest. Applying the concept of “refused relation” to the Bulgarian Church and its international behaviour, one could argue that the institution sought to diminish ties with its counterparts globally to safeguard its autonomy and ability to function. The erosion of its autonomy, competences, and ability to act as a singular and distinct actor, particularly during the socialist and post-socialist periods, posed an existential threat to the Church, from which it has not fully recovered. By limiting international cooperation, the Church effectively aimed to restrict external intervention in its internal affairs. However, as the paper demonstrates, while the BOC did manage to withdraw from international cooperation with other Christian churches (Orthodox, Catholic, and others), it has not succeeded in limiting the influence of the state, especially throughout the socialist era. Considering the profound impact of the socialist period on the functioning of this church, state meddling continued to unfold even after the collapse of the Iron Curtain. The authors argue that the Church has still not fully overcome its challenging recent history. Consequently, due to this fact, isolationist tendencies, as a reaction to excessive interventions in its internal affairs, persist in Bulgarian Orthodoxy.

As per Çakır (2020, 18), isolationism in the field of international relations can be characterised as a strategy that involves refraining from intervening in the affairs of other nations, thereby keeping itself at a distance from the international arena. Its meaning is far from uniform, signifying the opposite of “interventionism” in the context of US politics (Urbatsch 2010): a more neutral international non-engagement and/or non-involvement. It has also been understood as a reaction to globalist tendencies (Šuvaković 2017, 250). According to Siskos (2012, 4), generally speaking, the fact that the orthodox churches function as national units is unfavourable for ecumenical activities and makes them vulnerable to isolationism. This isolation was noted in broader Christian circles (cooperation with other churches) as well as within the national Orthodox church itself.

There has been one exception: cooperation with the Russian Church. The Bulgarian Church has traditionally heavily relied on its Russian Orthodox counterpart. This is a consequence, among other things, of the fact that the BOC had been reestablished in the 19th century with Russian diplomatic support (Vučković, 2014). Profound connections with Russia have also manifested in the affinity of the BOC towards accepting some ideological arguments coming from its eastern Slavic partner. Knorre and Zasyad’ko (2021, 71) note the pivotal role of the Russian Church in the Orthodox anti-ecumenical movement, which arose in response to the ecumenical initiatives of other Christian churches. Archbishop Seraphim (Sobolev), who (interestingly) managed Russian Orthodox communities in Bulgaria from 1921 to 1950, declared at the 1948 Pan-Orthodox Conference in Moscow that the ecumenical movement represented a Protestant-Masonic project aimed at building an ecumenical Church of the Antichrist with the intent to destroy the true Church of Christ on Earth (Knorre and Zasyad’ko 2021, 71.). The distaste of the BOC towards ecumenism, in some way, represented the lack of affinity towards the West and international cooperation as such, with the exception of Russian/Soviet institutions.

According to Makrides (2009, 216), opponents of Westernism are aware of “incompatibility between modern Western values (e.g., secularism, humanism, individualism, liberalism, separation of church and state, pluralism, tolerance, multiculturalism) and the ‘premodern’ values stemming from the Eastern Orthodox tradition (theocentric worldview, closeness between church and state, normative approach to religious truth, otherworldliness, communitarianism)”. However, religious actors, especially the elite, are able to take pro-European positions. Their pro-Europeanism is not based on a set of Western values but on the idea of incorporating an authentic Orthodox view of unity (conciliarism) in the process of building a united Europe. On the other hand, Aristotle Papanikolaou claims that even liberal-democratic values are not in conflict with

Orthodox theology. He claims that the Orthodox policy of theosis (deification) is the basis of the Orthodox' relationship with the Other. Papanikolaou states that the Orthodox must resist the "Judas temptation" of identifying Orthodoxy with a certain nation, culture, or politics (Papanikolaou 2023, 9), and that the attitude towards the stranger (the Other) is the same as Christian politics (Papanikolaou 2023, 277).

In general, a "liberal" view of Europeanism can be (Papanikolaou) but not necessarily (Makrides) connected with Western values. Nevertheless, it is a certain form of religious modernism. On the other hand, unlike religious actors' Europeanism, which does not have to coincide with Westernism, anti-Europeanism is almost always associated with anti-Westernism since it is based on a departure from religious modernism. Therefore, religious anti-Westernism is often intertwined with neo-traditionalism (one term encompasses another). Thus, "[t]he starting point of neo-traditionalism is typically a systematic or even strident anti-westernism, highlighting the historical, cultural, theological, and socio-political factors that distinguish 'the East' and 'the West,' and Eastern and Western Christianity" (Ladouceur 2017, 324-325). For neo-traditionalists, Western Christianity or non-Orthodox churches are unreservedly heretics. That is why the declaration of Bulgarian clergy and monastics in February 2016 noted: "[T]he apostolic and millennium-old patristic tradition unequivocally considers that heretics are outside the ship of the Church and, as a consequence, beyond salvation" (cited in Ladouceur 2017, 332). This document of the Bulgarian clergy was adopted as an objection to the declaration of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church in Crete in 2016 entitled "Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World". In other words, the neo-traditionalists in the BOC once again expressed their unwillingness for any cooperation with the rest of Christianity, considering all of them, including the ecumenical dialogue itself, as heresy. Therefore, religious anti-Westernism is only one of the manifestations of the ideology of neo-traditionalism, which also encompasses anti-ecumenism and isolationism, as is evident in the Bulgarian case.

On the one hand, Kamphausen (2006, 27) finds that Europeanization should not be equated with Westernization, despite some common traditions and origins, arguing that links between Christianity and democracy have existed and that a sense of European identity also resulted from ideas about borders, limitations, interplay between centres and peripheries, beliefs, and other aspects. Christian traditions and principles have indeed influenced the ideas of European unity, although this was not obvious from the onset of the Eurointegrations. While the Treaty establishing the European Economic Community (1957, Treaty of Rome) was initially based on liberal economic principles, it was not until the Copenhagen Council in 1993 that political criteria for membership were formally set (although they themselves did not specifically

mention Christianity) (Amato and Batt 1999, 34). These criteria include the stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, and the protection of human rights, including those of minorities. The political nature of enlargement conditions reflected the most recent development at that time—the evolution from the European Community into the European Union through the Maastricht Treaty that entered into force in November 1993.

While the Copenhagen criteria did cause some grievance in candidate countries due to a perceived lack of trust in their “Europeanness”, on the other hand, these criteria were intended to contribute to unification through rules and procedures rather than shared culture or identity (Amato and Batt 1999, 34). Apart from the fact that European law has traditionally been strongly influenced by Christian principles and teachings (Pin 2022), the fact that freedom of religion was practiced in Western Europe (in contrast to CEE throughout the Cold War) represented another favourable aspect of Church-State relations, which came to influence the eastern parts of the continent as well.

Nonetheless, even though the focus of European decision-makers indeed was (and has been) on the aspect of legal harmonisation—the adoption and implementation of the *acquis communautaire*—the extent of the changes required is such that it extends way beyond the legal system and into the economic, political, and socio-cultural spheres. While also referring to other scholars such as Panebianco and Vukčević, Petrović (2020, 175) perceives European integration in a constructivist context, not only as an “export” of norms but also of meanings, ideas, and beliefs—all of which affect self-identification. However, this ideational aspect, considering its broad scope, has come to influence all domains of socio-political and cultural life in Bulgaria as part of its Europeanization efforts.

Makrides (2009, 216) notes ambiguities when it comes to the stances of the Orthodox hierarchies regarding European integration, observing that they tried to mediate between anti-Western and pro-Western currents, attempting to present a conciliatory image of the Church while refraining from undermining basic Orthodox beliefs. While referring to Nitsiakos and Perica, Brujić (2017, 34) detects these authors’ perception of Orthodoxy as a cultural boundary between the West and the East, especially considering the European Union’s eastern enlargements, which left the (largely Orthodox) Balkans unintegrated. The Bulgarian case is somewhat peculiar in that regard, considering that it was the only Orthodox-majority nation fully located in the Balkans to join the EU in the early 21st century.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Greece joined the European Communities in 1981; Cyprus is not a Balkan country, while only coastal parts of Romania could geographically be considered as located in the Balkans.

During the period of accession to the EU, the position of the BOC was relatively weak. This marked a contrast between a decisive pro-European political agenda on the one hand and a crisis mode in the religious sphere during an important period in the nation's recent history. According to Nushev (Костадин Нушев), the BOC at the time still struggled with the legacy of the past and was in the process of gradually restoring its presence in the cultural and public life of Bulgarian society. He noted that with EU membership, the BOC, located at the EU gates, stood "...between the consequences of the past as traditional, bequeathed from the past, models of social mission and public behaviour, and the new challenges and previously unknown conditions for ministry in the common European space" (Нушев 2011).

At the time when Bulgaria was becoming a fully-fledged member of the Euro-Atlantic community, the Church was oriented towards addressing its own issues of functioning. Even the Prime Minister of Bulgaria during the period of accession to the EU, Sergei Stanishev, noted that the role of the Church in promoting traditional values was more cultural than religious, given the moderate degree of religiosity in Bulgaria (Денерт и Диболд 2005, 59). According to Kalkandjieva and Schnitter, the religious rift also disappointed the believers, and some of them sought alternatives, establishing new communities in a Protestant manner or by adhering to other Orthodox churches (Kalkandjieva and Schnitter 2007, 364-365). Although the degree of (non)religiosity cannot be easily translated into the limited socio-political role of the Church in Bulgaria, given the challenging recent history of the Bulgarian Patriarchate, its capacity to influence significant political developments was doubtful.

### **The Path Towards EU Membership**

Bulgaria's "return to Europe" expressed the desire for "normality", both internally (democratic and freely elected institutions, a prosperous economy) and externally (integration with other European neighbours into the European Union, NATO, the Council of Europe, OSCE), at a time when both Central and Eastern European (CEE) and Western European countries were committed to overcoming the decades of bipolar division of the continent (Amato and Batt 1999, 9-10). The Bulgarian democratic overthrow was carried out only one day following the fall of the Berlin Wall (10 November 1989) (RFE n.d.) and was part of a broader democratisation wave in Eastern Europe. Despite numerous challenges, which ranged from widespread corruption and high levels of organised crime to inefficient institutions and a lack of ability to implement the *acquis*, accession to the EU was perceived as a strategic goal.

Important milestones in Bulgaria's EU accession included the entry into force of the Association Agreement in 1995 (focusing on economic and technical

cooperation and political dialogue) and the decision made at the Helsinki European Council Summit in 1999 to launch membership negotiations with Sofia (European Council 1999). According to Nikolova (2006, 398), the landmark decision of the Helsinki European Council was also influenced by the Kosovo crisis and was politically motivated. The aim was to give a positive signal to the Balkans, which lagged behind the Bulgarian neighbour in the European integration process, even though Bulgaria itself lagged behind Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) in terms of preparedness for membership (Nikolova 2006, 398). While Bulgaria was evaluated satisfactorily in terms of meeting the political conditions for membership since 2002 onwards, it did not comply with the economic and *acquis* criteria (especially in the domain of implementation) for years to come. This fact, coupled with the (geo)political urgency to speed up its EU path, led to the establishment of the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM), a tool tailored for post-accession conditionality (Petrović, Kovačević i Radić Milosavljević 2023, 318-323).

This period coincided with an interesting period in Bulgaria's political life. In early 2001, shortly before the parliamentary elections, a new political force was created: the National Movement Simeon II, led by Simeon of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, the last Emperor prior to the 1944 overthrow (Kolev 2015). Public affinities towards the former dynasty, coupled with promises about profound institutional changes and improved living conditions, have resulted in massive support and victory in the elections, with 42% of the overall vote (BTA 2001). The dualistic character of the former Emperor, perceived as both "Bulgarian" and "Western", reflected the nation at a crossroads between the Communist past and pro-European future and also enabled the regime to tackle some socialist-era issues, like the status of the Church (Dandolov 2012). During the Simeon II administration, the country joined NATO, completed the EU accession negotiations, and signed the Treaty of Accession, scheduling its entry for 2007. Although specific conditions for its EU entry were prescribed under the Treaty of Accession, foreseeing post-accession conditionality and monitoring, Bulgaria did manage to join the EU in 2007 (Gateva 2013).

During the Saxe-Coburg-Gotha government, relations with the BOC also improved. The 2002 Denominations Act was adopted to modernise the existing legal framework on religious entities and to provide legislative protection for the Bulgarian Patriarchate, which was weakened by internal division, and the rise of Alternative Synod enjoyed some support from the previous regime (1997–2001) (Slavov 2020, 17). The new law established the privileged role of the Bulgarian Patriarchate in various domains and strengthened the position of the canonically recognised Holy Synod (Slavov 2020, 17). According to the country's progress report in 2003, the new act was aimed at: ensuring equality before the law, regardless of religious affiliation or creed; prohibiting state

inference in the internal organisation of religious communities and institutions; and conferring on the BOC the status of a legal person (DG NEAR 2003, 22). In effect, this pro-European government of Bulgaria has supported the consolidation of the BOC in the wake of the schism that had lasted since the early 1990s (between the socialist-era authorities and the post-socialist fraction). Rather than being status-neutral, it supported one side and demonstrated its ability to affect church matters.

Some provisions of the Denominations Law caused international concerns, as, on the basis of Article 10, around 250 churches and premises of the Alternative Synod were confiscated and transferred to the BOC, which resulted in proceedings in front of the European Court of Human Rights (Kalkandjieva and Schnitter 2007, 370). This form of state intervention was very noticeable in Bulgaria,<sup>7</sup> unlike other Orthodox churches where the state-church boundaries were more rigid, at least nominally speaking. While these steps did contribute to the gradual unification of the Church, on the other hand, they displayed the exposure of the religious institutions to the state/external meddling. Considering the recent history of the Bulgarian Church and its vulnerable position, such actions were not perceived favourably in some parts of society. Interestingly, in the context of Bulgaria's accession, the European Values Study of 2008, according to Olteanu and De Neve (2013, 15), showed that the degree of confidence of Bulgarians towards religious authorities stood at around 45%, while the degree of confidence towards EU institutions reached almost 54%, which highly contrasted with the other observed Orthodox European countries (including Romania, which joined the Union alongside Bulgaria).

## **The Bulgarian Orthodox Church's Position towards European Integration**

### ***The State's Interference and Church Instability***

Due to the resurgence of religion on a global scale and particularly the post-Cold War dynamics in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), "Orthodox Christian Churches nowadays represent one of the most important historical, cultural, and, above all, political actors in their respective countries" (Veković 2021, 2). However, it is precisely their specific position in society that can be used for state goals. On the one hand, "the more governments permit religious actors to be autonomous social actors in a system of consensual independence, the

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<sup>7</sup> The state role was not neutral. This was not only the case in the dispute within the Bulgarian Church, but also in the country's Islamic community. See (in Serbian): Trnavac 2018, 76–78.

more religion will serve as a 'force multiplier' for important social and political goods, including democratisation, peacemaking, and reconciliation" (Toft, Philpott, and Shah 2011, 216). This notion is based on what Max Weber called autonomy (in identity, religious beliefs, and the way of life) and autocephaly (in the appointment of leadership structure) (Toft, Philpott, and Shah 2011, 216). On the other hand, if there is low and conflictual differentiation between religious and state authorities, "religious bodies are dominated and suppressed, against their will, sometimes despite their resistance" (Philpott 2007, 507). An example of this "integration" of religion into the state's authority is the Orthodox churches in socialist Romania and Bulgaria, "whose choice was to consent or die" (Philpott 2007, 507).

Merdjanova (2022a, 3) argues that during the post-Communist period, Bulgarian Orthodoxy gained prominence as an identity marker but failed to significantly impact social norms, public morality, and individual behaviour among declared believers. The author also suggests that the Bulgarian Orthodox Church's (BOC) stance towards authorities was ambiguous. It sought both freedom from state control and the state's protection and support through preferential legal treatment and access to funding, resulting in a profound exposure to state decisions and control (Merdjanova 2022a, 4). The state's interference in church affairs, while not as drastic and comprehensive as during the communist era, has inhibited religious authorities from assuming greater social influence.

Unlike neighbouring Serbia, where the Serbian Orthodox Church played a leading role in democratisation from 1991 to 2000 (Veković 2021), the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (as well as the Romanian) bore the brunt of the Communist regime's involvement. Consequently, it fell out of favour with the new Bulgarian authorities, who were considered democratic and pro-European. The Directorate of Religious Affairs at the Council of Ministers decided on March 9, 1992, on the illegitimacy of Patriarch Maxim. There were at least three reasons, one of which was taken as the legal basis for such a state decision. First, the legal basis stated by the then-government of the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) was that both church statutes and state laws were violated because Maxim was not registered as a patriarch in 1971. Secondly, the church-canonical basis (referred to later by the Alternative Synod established later) was the claim that the election of Maxim as patriarch was a direct violation of the 30th canon of the Holy Apostles, which states: "If any bishop obtains possession of a church by the aid of the temporal [secular] powers, let him be deposed and excommunicated, and all who communicate with him" (cited in Kalkandjieva 2014, 116). Finally, the political reason for such a decision by the state authorities was a consequence of revealing a document that claimed that Patriarch Maxim's election was carried out by the Politburo of the Central

Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party on March 8, 1971. The new democratic government wanted to break with all communist structures in the country. For all these reasons, the Directorate of Religious Denominations established the Provisional Synodal Government, the so-called Alternative Synod, to administer the BOC and appointed Metropolitan Pimen of Nevrokop as the head of this body and later in 1996 as the Bulgarian Patriarch (Kalkandjieva 2014, 116-117).

Until 1998, the Alternative Synod and “Patriarch” Pimen were present in public and at political events, receiving support for the restitution of church property and lands, except for a brief period of power by the Bulgarian Socialist Party, which supported Patriarch Maxim. However, in 1998, information surfaced that some members of the Alternative Synod had collaborated with the Communist regime. Consequently, the UDF government withdrew its support for the Alternative Synod. After the All-Orthodox Council held in Sofia (September 30–October 1, 1998), there was reconciliation, and “Patriarch” Pimen, along with thirteen bishops of the Alternative Synod, returned to the canonical Bulgarian Church. However, due to their degraded status in the church hierarchy, the Alternative Synod was renewed a few days after the council, and in 1999, Metropolitan Inokentiy of Sofia was chosen as its leader (Kalkandjieva 2014, 116-117).

Direct state interference in the church schism continued after the rise to power of Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, the last Bulgarian emperor, in 2001. The 2002 Religious Denominations Act was adopted, recognising the civil legitimacy of Patriarch Maxim (Maksim). The right to represent the BOC was limited to “the Patriarch of Bulgaria and the Metropolitan of Sofia” (Inokentiy only held the title of metropolitan). Only the canonical BOC could represent the church in this way and have church property. This act effectively prohibited the operation of the Alternative Synod (Kalkandjieva 2014, 117-118). Through this act, the state confiscated the property of the Alternative Synod and handed it over to Patriarch Maxim’s Synod in 2004. Consequently, Metropolitan Inokentiy and the Alternative Synod filed a lawsuit against Bulgaria before the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in Strasbourg. The ECHR ruled that the Bulgarian state had violated Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights. However, it did not resolve the property problem because the ECHR focused on the legality of the state’s interference in the church schism:

“By assisting one of the disputing parties in obtaining exclusive power of representation and control over the affairs of the entire Orthodox community, sidelining the opposing party, and deploying law enforcement agencies to help expel adherents of the applicant Synod from places of worship they occupied, the Bulgarian State failed in its obligation of neutrality” (ECHR 2022, 81).

The government's instigation of the church schism and subsequent interference in its management revealed that both factions of the BOC were thoroughly dominated and suppressed by the state. The disadvantaged position of the BOC after 2004 is evident in pressing problems: poverty, the grey economy, the transfer of church property to third parties, unresolved issues of priests' salaries and health and pension insurance, a lack of interest in teaching religion in schools, isolation from the Christian world—primarily Protestant and the Roman Catholic Church (Kalkandjieva 2014), problems with other Orthodox churches regarding the Bulgarian minority in Serbia, Greece, and Macedonia (Broun 2004), and a very negative assessment (no confidence at all) of the church in Bulgaria—ranging between 26 and 30 percent in the period 2000–2008 (Mudrov 2014, 63).

### ***The Church and EU Integration: Inability to Promote “Traditional Values”***

After 1992, the BOC was no longer exposed to state atheism but to the internal schism of the communist-era establishment and their opponents. This influenced the increasing isolation from the rest of the Christian world and the orientation towards internal disputes. On the other hand, while the government strove for European integration, Bulgarian society largely returned to traditionalism. According to Maria Serafimova (2007, 21), “it is characteristic for Bulgarian society the reversion to the traditional system of religious ceremonies and holidays”. After the end of the struggle for survival, i.e., overcoming the schism, the BOC should have kept its believers, not lost them. That is why the set of values that the BOC has sought to protect since 2012 is a product of neo-traditionalism.

The inability to expand (neo-)traditional values in society during Bulgaria's accession negotiations with the EU from 2000 to 2007 speaks of the weak political position of BOC in that period. A religious actor can successfully convey the message of the relationship between religion and politics (Toft, Philpott, and Shah 2011, 23), which the BOC could not do then. Along with overcoming the schism in 2012, the BOC adopted the document *A Strategy for Spiritual Enlightenment, Catechization, and Culture*, which listed its main challenges: secularism, globalisation, family values, youth morality, etc. From them arise the positions of the BOC that are contrary to the general position of the EU: opposition to in vitro fertilisation, LGBT+ rights, immigration into the EU member states, the ratification of the Istanbul 2018 Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, a liberal understanding of children's rights and parenting (regarding the Draft Strategy for Child Defence), etc. (Kalkandjieva 2019, 69-72). Therefore, it follows that the central values that the BOC sought to protect from 2012 onwards were directed

towards the traditional family, sexuality and procreation, anti-secularism and anti-globalism, and the Christian identity of Europe (fear of Muslim immigrants).

In the previously explained disadvantageous circumstances, the BOC still received state support over the schism with the Alternative Synod. The significant property confiscated from the Alternative Synod and returned to the BOC Synod headed by Patriarch Maxim in 2004 strengthened its dependence on the state. Since 2000, Bulgaria has been conducting accession negotiations with the EU, but due to a lack of preparation, it missed the first round of eastern enlargement in 2004. Although the BOC demonstrated its anti-Westernism by leaving the World Council of Churches and the Conference of European Churches in 1998, it was not in its interest to openly oppose the foreign policy orientation of the Bulgarian government, which helped it regain its repeatedly lost legitimacy.

However, when the state was striving for integration into Europe, the BOC's isolation from Europe was not complete. Patriarch Maxim attended the Athens International Colloquium on Orthodoxy and Europe in September 1999. Bulgarian delegates attended the Turin International Conference on "Rebuilding a Common European Identity", held in February 2000. As part of the conference, a colloquium was "intended as a response to certain Western politicians who would deny the contribution of countries of the Orthodox tradition and build a new iron curtain" (Broun 2004, 218). Patriarch Maxim and Bulgarian National Assembly chairman Jordan Sokolov attended millennium jubilee celebrations in Jerusalem and Bethlehem in January 2000. The BOC's representatives met with Orthodox and Christian Democratic members of the European Parliament in Istanbul in 2000 and Crete in 2001. Additionally, the BOC's representatives attended the Conference of European Churches meeting in Skopje in 2001 to encourage reconciliation in Southeastern Europe (Broun 2004, 218-219). However, the BOC did not participate in the meeting of the Orthodox churches in Crete in 2003, where a common position on the Draft European Constitution was adopted (Mudrov 2016, 80). Moreover, although Bulgaria became a member of the EU in 2007, the BOC never opened an official representative office in dialogue with European institutions in Brussels, as the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the Church of Greece, the Russian Orthodox Church, the Romanian Orthodox Church, and the Church of Cyprus did (Leustean and Haynes 2021). This denotes another occurrence of isolationist tendencies exhibited by the Bulgarian church in international terms.

Overall, the underrepresentation of the BOC in European events had several causes. According to Spas Raikin, one of the main reasons was poverty, i.e., a lack of funds for delegates' travel. Raikin also found other reasons, such as the lack of educated theologians and laypeople, as the neighbouring Orthodox churches have (cited in Broun 2004, 219). These reasons are essentially

systemic: the church has undergone long periods of isolation since its modern foundation in 1872 onwards, and the state has been using it for its own goals throughout various periods, thus determining its full institutional, spiritual, and material development. According to Jonathan Fox (2018, 84), the two fundamental interests of religious actors are institutional survival and the protection of their core religious values. By 2012, the BOC was concerned about its institutional survival due to the schism. Only since 2012, when the schism was largely overcome (Metropolitan Inokentiy and part of the Alternative Synod were readmitted to the BOC), was the BOC able to devote itself to the protection and promotion of its core values (Kalkandjieva 2019, 68).

It is known that, within the Orthodox belt in the EU, “Orthodox Churches in Bulgaria, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia are less interested in EU integration issues than the Churches of Greece, Cyprus, and Romania and the Ecumenical and Moscow Patriarchates” (Mudrov 2016, 80). However, the reasons why the Bulgarian Orthodox Church did not influence public opinion or state decision-makers during the accession negotiations with the EU should be sought in its primary struggle for survival, that is, its existential concerns. The so-called traditional values are the basis of the BOC’s anti-Westernism after 2012, but “[u]ntil 2012, the Church’s efforts in this direction were badly impeded by the schism” (Kalkandjieva 2019, 68). The only serious attempt to promote religious values was the attempt to introduce religion into schools. Its 2008 *Concept for the Study of the Discipline ‘Religion’ in Public Schools* was an attempt at the mandatory introduction of religion into the education system with the direct influence of the BOC as “a mother-guardian of the Orthodox Bulgarians” but with the possibility for students to choose between learning Orthodoxy, Islam, or general religious studies (Kalkandjieva 2019, 69). However, the results are far from what the BOC expected. The Ministry of Education and Science has introduced elective classes called ‘Christianity’ and ‘Islam’ for all 12 levels of public education. However, these are only performed if sufficient students choose them. Nowadays, only 1% of students attend these classes (Kalkandjieva 2019, 69).

Nevertheless, it still cannot be said that the BOC has become a norm entrepreneur in Bulgarian society that would rival the EU as an external norm entrepreneur. Benedict E. DeDominicis (2016, 27) states, “[T]he Bulgarian Orthodox Church does not play a comparable role because it lacks the domestic social capital deriving from national symbolic institutional identity authority to do so”. Therefore, the EU lacks a national partner that would function “as a domestic norm entrepreneur to intermediate between the EU and national behavioural ideals” (DeDominicis 2016, 27). On the other hand, due to its challenging position and status, the BOC did not explicitly discourage or challenge the country’s pro-European course. It appeared to be only marginally

present in political debates concerning European integration during the first decade(s) of Bulgaria's EU path. By not actively engaging as a veto actor in European integration or participating in political debates, the BOC implicitly facilitated EU accession, or at least did not complicate it, to preserve its fragile institutional order.

## Conclusion

At the time of Bulgaria's EU accession, memories of the Cold War were still fresh, and the country was following steps similar to those of its northern neighbours and former Comecon partners. These actions began in 1989, when Todor Zhivkov was deposed, just one day after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Bulgaria continued on a trajectory similar to most other Central and Eastern European countries. Simultaneously, the violent breakup of former Yugoslavia, Bulgaria's western neighbour, further encouraged political elites to align with the European Union and distance themselves from the Balkans' instability. When considering Bulgaria's (or some other candidate's) entry into the European Union in 2007, it is important to acknowledge that the process primarily revolved around political, economic, and technical aspects. Negotiations involved government officials, institutions, and, to a lesser extent, the general public. The perspective of religious institutions was not central to these deliberations, particularly in the case of a disunited church facing many existential challenges.

Unlike its counterparts in Serbia or Russia, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church did not hold a politically influential position in the post-communist period. The relative weakness of Bulgarian nationalist symbolic association with an established institutional religious actor made Bulgarian nationalism more susceptible to influence by outside actors, such as the EU, in determining ideals for appropriate state-society relations. The fact that this church lacked autonomy during different segments of contemporary history, up until recently, is essential to understanding its role in the context of European integration. Apart from the Church's low credibility among many ordinary Bulgarians, it was experiencing a schism during EU accession preparations, further hindering its ability to effectively communicate with the public about this important strategic aim. The Holy Synod received political support from the government to secure its claims in Bulgarian Orthodoxy, raising questions about the principle of separation between the secular and religious spheres.

In conclusion, this paper aims to contribute to the theoretical debate on the ambivalence of religion and the influence of the concrete relationship between church and state on religious actors' political behaviour. Despite speaking of an "Orthodox belt" in the European Union, different historical experiences and the

protection of specific interests reveal that Orthodox churches do not share a unique attitude towards European integration, as shown in the case of the Bulgarian Church. The authors assert that delving into the waning influence of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church in the political domain is of both academic and socio-political significance. It provides a lens to comprehend overarching trends in the interplay between religion and politics within post-communist European societies and unveils the nuanced dynamics of national identity in the political context, as well as the complexities encountered throughout the European integration process.

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#### **БУГАРСКО ПРИСТУПАЊЕ ЕВРОПСКОЈ УНИЈИ: ИЗМЕЂУ ЦРКВЕНИХ БРИГА И ПРОЗАПАДНЕ ПЕРСПЕКТИВЕ ДРЖАВЕ**

*Апстракт:* У раду се анализира друштвено-политички положај и улога Бугарске православне цркве у контексту приступања земље Европској унији. Аутори разматрају ове аспекте из перспективе карактеристичних околности и ставова унутар Цркве, који су се значајно разликовали од ставова државних власти у контексту европских интеграција. Ограничења Цркве у смислу друштвено-политичког утицаја била су уско повезана са егзистенцијалним изазовима, као што су раскол и изложеност државној интервенцији, удружено са ниским степеном религиозности. С обзиром на широк домет процеса европеизације који утиче на политичке, економске и друштвене димензије, као и историјски утицај православних цркава на доношење политичких одлука и јавно мњење, аутори настоје да истраже политичке последице изолационистичких склоности, унутрашње поделе и перцепције јавности, удружено са амбиваленцијом између политичког про-западњаштва (роевропеизма) и религијског анти-западњаштва. Хипотеза је да Црква није имала значајну улогу у процесу европских интеграција, као последица изолационистичких тенденција проистеклих из њене скорије историје. Да би истражили ову претпоставку, аутори се ослањају на перспективу рационалног избора верских институција. Поред тога, аутори испитују недавну историју и изазове Цркве, њен необичан положај у православном свету и геополитичке околности које су све више маргинализовале верску власт у корист државних доносилаца одлука.

*Кључне речи:* Политика; проширење ЕУ; Бугарска; религија; сарадња; изолационизам.