

**DRESS RIGHT TO ROMANIA!
PEER REFERENCE IN INTERNATIONAL DIFFUSION
OF NORMS**

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Abstract. *Post-communist transition is usually studied through the combination of domestic and foreign factors, structural or agency-based, with the foreign agency most often being associated with the politics of powerful international actors, such as the European Union or the United States. Notwithstanding the role of these actors, which is substantial, this study turns its attention to a missing ingredient in the international diffusion of norms, the peer country reference. In this case, a particular post-communist nation acts as preferred reference to another nation that needs peer models in its quest for economic, political and social development.*

This study presents Romania as a peer reference for Bulgaria, by analyzing Bulgarian media from the early 1990s until 2015. The Bulgarian elite and public are responding to events in the northern neighbor, in order to emulate positive models or to avoid post-communist transition traps. Both right- and left-oriented politicians are using Romania in order to move Bulgarian politics in one direction or another. Constructed ideas about Romania thus become part of Bulgarian political life.

Keywords: *Post-communism, Transition, International Diffusion, Bulgaria, Romania.*

Research Question and Methodology

In late February and early March 2015 Romania was shaken by corruption scandals involving high ranked politicians and members of their families. Among those arrested was the former minister of tourism Elena Udrea¹. The head of the anti-corruption National Integrity Agency, Horia Georgescu was forced to resign after being arrested in an alleged property scam². His arrest

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¹ *Daily Mail* (UK), <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2949136/Glamorous-former-Romanian-tourism-minister-presidential-candidate-detained-suspicion-money-laundering.html>, Accessed 1 August 2015.

² *The Telegraph* (UK), <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/romania/11478459/Romanian-anti-corruption-chief-arrested-on-corruption-charges.html>, Accessed 1 August 2015.

followed in the wake of the resignation of Darius Valcov, the Romanian finance minister, accused of accepting bribes³. Romanian anti-corruption authorities even targeted family members of Prime Minister Victor Ponta⁴. A few months later, during the summer of 2015, the Romanian prime minister himself was indicted in tax evasion and money laundering and his assets were seized⁵.

These and other similar news coming from Romania found an immediate echo in Bulgarian media. The comments in mainstream newspapers were generally positive. The liberal daily “Dnevnik”, among other media, republished a comment originally written within the Bulgarian-language department of the German broadcaster Deutsche Welle, entitled “Should Bulgaria learn from Romania?”⁶ The author, Jassen Boyadzhiev, suggested that when it comes to the fight against corruption, Bulgaria and Romania should both be given as examples, Bulgaria – for failure and Romania – for success⁷. Other Bulgarian newspapers followed suit. The left leaning “Sega” reported that Bulgarian vice-prime minister Miglena Kouneva has said that Bulgaria should follow the Romanian example in the fight against corruption⁸. The weekly “Banker”, mainly covering Bulgarian financial news, also gave Romania as an example of success in fighting corruption, comparing it to clumsy political reactions on the south side of the common border⁹.

The issue of the fight against corruption on the highest levels of political power was not the first occurrence in which Bulgarian media extensively reported on Romanian domestic affairs and suggested that Bulgaria should follow the example of its northern neighbor. Since the end of communism in 1989, on numerous occasions, Romania had indirectly become a symbol of how normal the post-communist development in Bulgaria is, of whether the steps the country was taking were appropriate or not, of whether the process of European integration was moving in the right direction or not. As if falling behind its neighbor, this symbolic point of reference would endanger not only the smooth post-communist transformation, but would also deal a fatal blow to national self-esteem.

A combination of jealousy for the neighbor’s alleged success and shame of our own inability to be in par with what has become a norm elsewhere points toward theoretical models that deal with international diffusion of norms and values. Generally, these models fall within one or more of the following large approaches: coercion, competition, learning and emulation¹⁰. The coercion

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ *Agerpres*, <http://www.agerpres.ro/english/2015/02/17/company-belonging-to-mother-and-sister-of-pm-victor-ponta-targeted-by-dna-searches-09-50-04>, Accessed 1 August 2015.

⁵ *The Guardian* (UK), <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/13/romania-prime-minister-victor-ponta-questioned-corruption-inquiry>, Accessed 1 August 2015.

⁶ *Dnevnik Daily*, http://www.dnevnik.bg/analizi/2015/03/23/2497650_da_se_uchi_li_bulgariia_ot_rumuniia/, Accessed 1 August 2015.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ *Sega Daily*, <http://www.segabg.com/article.php?id=734738>, Accessed 1 August 2015.

⁹ *Banker Weekly*, <http://www.banker.bg/komentari/read/kakva-stana-tia-nali-sasht-ni-hvaleha-za-borbata-s-korupciiata>, Accessed 1 August 2015.

¹⁰ Beth Simmons, Frank Dobbin and Geoffrey Garrett, “Introduction: The International Diffusion and Liberalism”, *International Organization*, vol. 60, 2006, pp. 781-810.

mechanism clearly exists under an asymmetric power relation¹¹. The case of Bulgaria looking to Romania for inspiration, at least from time to time, is different from those models. Neither of the countries as such has been part of the other, ever in history. There was no hierarchy between the two. To the opposite, both countries have historically evolved in quite similar ways, from first achieving their independence from foreign imperial powers by the late 19th century, up to being part of communist Eastern Europe in the second half of 20th century, and later of post-communist development and EU membership. This clearly was not a jealousy that may arise from within relations between “haves” and “have nots”. This was more like envy from a peer to a peer, of a nation scared to lose status by falling behind another nation which was supposed not to go too much ahead.

The explanatory mechanism, putting emphasis on competition, stresses the different level of attractiveness of certain policies in international relations to economically-motivated¹². It is without any doubt that the element of competition exists between post-communist countries, especially as far as foreign investments or other economic considerations are concerned. These mechanisms, however, pay too much attention to rational thinking and behavior, and underestimate emotional considerations and the collective sense of self-esteem. The Bulgarian case, on the other hand, is more about “being” than about “having”. Finally, a serious setback for this mechanism is the void left regarding the possible effects of the lagging competitor on general social and political development. Any form of government between liberal democracy and benevolent authoritarianism becomes possible. For Bulgaria, the diffusion had never such ambivalent political outcomes; it aimed to reform the system, making it more alike to that of Western Europe. The diffusion, therefore, did not aim for full assimilation of foreign norms and values, but only for those with immediate economic effect.

Thirdly, the diffusion by learning acts through profound changes in existing belief systems¹³. Whether learning affects only means, or has more profound effects on the cognitive capacity of actors, individual or collective, is less relevant than the causal link between new information coming from a foreign source and its effect on domestic political choices. The Bulgarian case is again different from learning models. Romania, neither within the context of the post-communist world nor in a larger European context, provides policies that have no analogy in history. Bulgarian policy-makers and general population should not focus exclusively on Romania for inspiration, but instead look for larger models. The specific obsession with Romania cannot be explained within the learning model.

¹¹ Steven Levitsky, Lucan A. Way, “International Linkage and Democratization”, *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 16, no. 3, 2005, pp. 20-34; Steven Levitsky, Lucan A. Way, “Linkage, Leverage, and the Post-Communist Divide”, *East European Politics and Societies*, vol. 21, no.1, 2007, pp. 48-66.

¹² Nathan Jensen, “Democratic Governance and Multinational Corporations: Political Regimes and Inflows of Foreign Direct Investment”, *International Organization*, vol. 57, no. 3, 2003, pp. 587-616; William H. Meyer, *Human Rights and International Political Economy in Third World Nations: Multinational Corporations, Foreign Aid, and Repression*, 1998, Westport, Conn.: Praeger.

¹³ Jack S. Levy, “Learning and Foreign Policy: Sweeping a Conceptual Minefield”, *International Organization*, vol. 48, no. 2, 1994, pp. 279-312; Covadonga Meseguer, “Policy Learning, Policy Diffusion, and the Making of a New Order”, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 598, no.1, 2005, pp. 67-82.

Fourthly, the diffusion can sometimes be explained by the process of emulation. This approach draws on reference group theory in social psychology. At the international level, actors emulate the behavior of their self-identified models because they are conceived as psychologically close¹⁴. This model, however, is also embedded within asymmetric power relations¹⁵. This consideration alone makes it inappropriate in the case of the Bulgarian post-communist fascination with Romania.

Finally, the phenomenon of international diffusion may also be considered within the context of security dilemmas in international relations¹⁶. The key point here is that states, in search for comparative instead of absolute gains, are finally ready to engage in actions that keep a relative distance, and thus the security status of each state, vis-à-vis other key actors. Bulgarian attitudes toward Romania, however, can hardly qualify for such explanation, given that no security dilemma existed between the two neighbors during the post-communist period. Other than purely security issues were invigorating the Bulgarian goal to keep a relative distance between the two countries.

Each of these explanatory models has their shortcomings, preventing them from properly understanding the Bulgarian demand-side-driven wish to emulate Romanian good examples. There is, however, an alternative to this deductive methodological approach in trying to explain the phenomenon, the inductive approach¹⁷. Instead of starting with already established models and launching hypotheses that would prove or reject any of them, the inductive approach starts from empirical data and aims to build a carefully tailored theoretical model with tentative generalization. The charm of this inductive method is that such new theoretical explanations may be multiple. In a process of theoretical re-framing, each new piece of evidence may affect the way the issue is problematized and hence theorized.

The following section presents a few pieces of evidence witnessing how the Bulgarian political elite and population reacted to events from Romania. These events are presented as short stories and do not claim to represent all episodes in which both countries are compared, looking for advantages or disadvantages of one or another¹⁸. The method of gathering information is a semantic analysis of Bulgarian printed media, with online archives. Through a snowballing effect, the number of sources is increased by adding Bulgarian and international media that reported and commented on the same issues. The presentation is chronological,

¹⁴ Richard Rose, *Lesson-Drawing in Public Policy: A Guide to Learning across Time and Space*, 1993, Chatham, NJ: Chatham House.

¹⁵ Heather A. Haveman, "Follow the Leader: Mimetic Isomorphism and Entry into New Markets", *Administrative Science Quarterly*, vol. 38, no. 4, 1993, pp. 593-627.

¹⁶ Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma", *World Politics*, vol. 30, no. 2, 1978, pp. 167-174; Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, 1978, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, pp. 58-113.

¹⁷ Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 2014, SAGE Publications.

¹⁸ For example, this study omits quite frequent comparisons of the living standard in both countries in terms of purchasing power parity, as well as regional, European or world statistics ranking the countries, e.g. in terms of corruption, transparency, media freedom, happiness etc.

starting with the immediate aftermath of communism and ending with the most recent events. It is not focused on particular fields of political, economic or social development. Any field is appropriate for studying, as far as it gives answer to the research question.

*Findings*¹⁹

Comparing Bulgaria to Romania in the Bulgarian media, with all possible positive or negative implications for any of these countries, started immediately after the collapse of communism, which, not surprisingly, took place there almost simultaneously, as far as the key triggering events in both countries are concerned²⁰. Among all Central and East European post-communist countries, Romania seemed to be the ideal candidate for serving the purpose of reference for Bulgarian society and political elite during transition times. Three, and soon to be four, nations from Central Europe: Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary, formed a group, the Visegrad Group, in February 1991, to foster their political, economic and military cooperation and to increase their chances for EU and NATO membership²¹. These countries wanted to clearly separate themselves from the other post-communist nations. 1991 was also the year that witnessed the beginning of a series of wars of secession on the territory of former Yugoslavia²². For this reason, Bulgarian media were very careful not to impose any possible analogy between the country and any Yugoslav successor state, for the entire period of 1990s. The last post-communist country in Eastern Europe to possibly play a reference role for Bulgaria, Albania, was largely ignored by the Bulgarian media. This left Romania as the only civilization reference for the Bulgarian public and elite throughout the entire post-communist period.

Democratic Socialism Wins Popular Vote

Romania became the model country for Bulgaria immediately after the fall of the communism. Politically, it went against the dominant trend in the post-communist world, of bringing the communist successor parties down from power in the first free elections throughout the region (1990-1991). In Romania, the first general elections, for parliament and for president, were won with landslides by Ion Iliescu and his National Salvation Front (NSF) in May 1990²³. The political opposition in Romania, mainly parties that took the names and ideologies of former formations that existed in the late 1940s, was divided and weak at that time. On the other hand, most high officials of the NSF were former communist officials and shared a democratic socialism ideology²⁴. This ideology

¹⁹ The story that narrates the fight against corruption in Romania is presented at the beginning of the study.

²⁰ Bulgarian communist leader Todor Zhivkov lost power on 10 November 1989; Romanian communist leader Nicolae Ceausescu lost power on 22 December 1989.

²¹ Libor Lukasek, *Visegrad Group: Its development in the years 1991-2004*, 2012, Verlag Dr. Kovac Publishing.

²² Alastair Finlan, *The Collapse of Yugoslavia 1991-1999*, 2014, Osprey Publishing.

²³ Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romanian_general_election,_1990, Accessed 1 August 2015.

²⁴ Steven Roper, *Romania: The Unfinished Revolution*, 2000, Routledge, p. 66.

took the socialist experience after the World War II as series of subjective aberrations, coupled with objective positive goals of pursuing social justice. In Bulgaria, the first post-communist election for the Constituent Assembly took place in June 1990, i.e. only a few weeks after the general elections in Romania. Due to the mixed electoral system, the Bulgarian socialists won the absolute majority of seats in the assembly. The victories of former communists in both Romania and Bulgaria reaffirmed the reasoning that these countries represented different groups of political transitions from their former allies in Central Europe.

The Choice between Gradual Reforms and Shock Therapy

Romania also immersed itself within Bulgarian day-to-day political and economic discussions, very early during the post-communist transition. A key debate that animated Bulgarian life in the early 1990s was that which opposed the supporters of gradual reforms, like those made in Hungary between the late 1960s and the late 1980s, and those who proposed shock therapy, like in Poland in 1989-1990²⁵. In Bulgaria, these two options were advocated by representatives of the two main political groupings; shock therapy by the anti-communist Union of Democratic Forces, and gradualism by the Bulgarian Social Party. From the Bulgarian point of view, Romania had decided to follow a more gradualist vision of economic reforms, which was associated with a lower social price. For the Bulgarian socialists, this was the better way to follow, and was at the core of Romania's relative economic and financial stability. For Bulgarian anti-communists, this decision was the proof that Romania was ruled by camouflaged communists, a sign of its growing distance from Western and European standards. This choice of the type of reform was not separated from other important economic issues during the process of post-communist transition. Among them were those dealing with the type of privatization of state-owned industry²⁶ as well as the type of agriculture that should have replaced the state-owned or quasi-collective farms²⁷.

Caritas Ponzi Scheme

Caritas was a Ponzi financial scheme that was active in Romania between 1992 and 1994. It attracted millions of depositors from all over the country, who invested the equivalent of up to 5 billion USD before it finally went bankrupt, having a debt of 450 million USD. At the time of its demise the main Bulgarian Ponzi schemes were still in operation, still attracting new depositors. For this reason, the media reports in Bulgaria about the demise of Caritas may be

²⁵ Grzegorz Kolodko, *From Shock to Therapy: The Political Economy of Postsocialist Transformation*, 2000, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

²⁶ Three possible ways to privatize state-owned industry were the so-called managerial privatization, in which management and workers bought shares of their assets, the assets were distributed to all adult citizens, or were sold-out to the higher bidder.

²⁷ Possible options included returning the land to its former owners or keeping the large land cooperatives with increased participation or financial compensation for the former owners.

considered as indirect warning against naive people in the country, ready to give all their life savings to dubious and unscrupulous financial gamblers²⁸. This warning proved to be successful, given the demise of Bulgarian Ponzi schemes that began almost immediately after these publications. Some anti-communist media in Bulgaria did not miss revealing the link between the Caritas scheme and former communist circles and secret services in Romania²⁹. Some Bulgarian left-leaning media had a different approach regarding the Ponzi schemes, including those operating in Romania. For them, the phenomenon was due to popular greed, and therefore the solution was to tighten the criminal code and financial regulations³⁰.

Romanian General Elections in November 1996

Another episode worth mentioning reflects the Bulgarian reaction to the general elections held in Romania in 1996, with the first and the second round taking place on the 3rd and 17th of November, both for the president and for both houses of parliament, the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. The results were that incumbent president Ion Iliescu and incumbent government of the Social Democratic Party of Romania were defeated by Emil Constantinescu and the Romanian Democratic Convention. In Bulgaria, roughly at the same time, a presidential election took place, with the first and the second rounds held on the 27th October and 3rd of November. The oppositional (to the government) politician Petar Stoyanov, of the Union of Democratic Forces, defeated the government nominee Ivan Marazov of the Bulgarian Socialist Party. It is worth noting that the government of the BSP had taken power less than 2 years earlier, and a new parliamentary election was not expected any time soon. The Bulgarian liberal media made explicit parallels between the political situation in Romania and Bulgaria on the onset of Romanian electoral campaign³¹. The emphasis was put on the entanglement of economic and political interests in Romania, something that should have reminded the readers of the situation in their own country. Special attention was given to the post-electoral Romanian agenda, which tried to avoid financial troubles in Bulgaria in the early post-communist period³². Other important elements from Constantinescu's political agenda that found echo in Bulgaria were his plans to join Western organizations such as NATO. Last but not least, the fact that the pro-Western Romanian opposition entered the electoral campaign as a united force was taken into consideration, with the appropriate proposition for uniting the Bulgarian anti-communist forces.

²⁸ *Capital Weekly*, http://www.capital.bg/politika_i_ikonomika/1994/08/15/1766893_piramidi_ili_ponzi/, Accessed 1 August 2015.

²⁹ *Svobodata.Com*, <http://www.svobodata.com/page.php?pid=10048&rid=132>, Accessed 1 August 2015.

³⁰ *Sega Daily*, <http://www.segabg.com/article.php?id=231914>, Accessed 1 August 2015.

³¹ *Capital Weekly*, http://www.capital.bg/politika_i_ikonomika/1996/11/04/1006671_koi_shte_reshi_sudbata_na_prezidentskite_izbori_v/, Accessed 1 August 2015.

³² *Dnevnik Daily*, http://www.dnevnik.bg/print/arhiv_pari/1996/11/01/1397295_emil_konstantinesku/, Accessed 1 August 2015.

Romanian bid for NATO in 1997

Quickly following on the understanding of Bulgaria as lagging behind the fast moving westward Romania was the episode with the Romanian bid to join NATO, which was made official in early 1997. The bid called for NATO members to invite Romania, together with the first group of post-communist countries – Poland, Czech Republic and Hungary, during the meeting of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, on 9 July 1997, in Madrid. Romania would eventually be passed over and not invited to join NATO at that moment, but nevertheless, the Bulgarian media reported the bid as new proof that Romania was moving closer to Central Europe, and that the country was taking increased distance from the turbulent Balkans³³. Bulgaria, in early 1997, was amidst deep political and financial crisis. The Socialist government, elected only 2 years earlier, stepped down. Large crowds prevented the formation of a new Socialist government. Finally, the political forces agreed in February 1997 to call new election for National Assembly. Between February and May 1997, when Romania made bold moves toward NATO, Bulgaria was ruled by a caretaker cabinet appointed by the freshly elected president Stoyanov. Bulgaria finally presented its bid to join NATO on the eve of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, not because it believed it would be invited, but to show its willingness not to fall further behind other post-communist countries and especially Romania. Finally, however, despite the negative results of their bids for NATO, Romania temporarily took a slim lead over Bulgaria for being considered for membership together with Slovenia³⁴. Bulgaria at that moment was not even given such symbolic assurances.

On the Road of EU Membership

On 13 October 1999, the European Commission recommended to member states to open negotiations with Romania and Bulgaria, among other candidate countries. This simultaneous opening of negotiations was not influenced by the fact that Romania applied for EU membership 6 months earlier than Bulgaria, in 1995. Most Central European post-communist countries had already started negotiations to join the Union a year earlier³⁵. Other countries, which started negotiations together with Romania and Bulgaria, would finally join those that started negotiations in 1998, and enter the Union in 2004. The parity between the two Balkan countries on the road to EU membership in terms of schedule was kept up until they became EU members in 2007. This parity included the time of invitation, the schedule of negotiations and the signing of the treaty in April 2005. It is worth mentioning that both countries signed one only treaty for membership, not one treaty for each country. The equivalence applied even to

³³ *Capital Weekly*, http://www.capital.bg/politika_i_ikonomika/sviat/1997/04/28/853606_rumuniia_atakuya_nato_po_vsichki_frontove/, Accessed 1 August 2015.

³⁴ Zoltan Barany, *The Future of NATO expansion: Four case studies*, 2003, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 23-25.

³⁵ *European Commission*, http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/archives/enlargement_process/future_prospects/negotiations/eu10_bulgaria_romania/index_en.htm, Accessed 1 August 2015.

the special postponement clause for membership, in addition to general safeguard clauses that were agreed for the remaining post-communist countries that joined the EU on 1 May 2004³⁶. Looking for hairs to split in terms of relative advantages or disadvantages for one or another country, the Bulgarian media did not miss to report that special safeguard clauses could be activated by all EU members in the case of Bulgaria but only by a qualified majority in the case of Romania³⁷. Particular pride, for the Bulgarian public, came from the fact that Bulgaria had a larger majority than Romania in the European parliament during the process of treaty ratification.

EU Funds “Frozen” in 2008-2009

Only a year after joining the EU, Bulgaria faced serious problems in its relations with European partners. The European Commission officially took back the accreditation of two Bulgarian agencies working within the PHARE program, and stopped providing financial assistance within the ISPA structural and SAPARD agricultural funding³⁸. Under question fell almost \$1 billion EUR. The Bulgarian government, a coalition of Socialist and liberals backed by the Movement for rights and freedoms representing the Turkish minority, had to face electoral test in 2009, and found itself in a delicate situation. Regarding Romania, the Bulgarian media reported no such “freezing” of EU funds, but only EU threats of taking such extreme measures³⁹. The story repeated itself one year later, in 2009. The EU kept blocking funds for Bulgaria, which was considered as an attempt to regain European leverage over the Balkan country⁴⁰. Regarding Romania, the Bulgarian media only reported threats of blocking EU funding, but not actual blocking⁴¹. In the case of the EU funds “frozen” in the aftermath of EU accession, the role of Romania as a reference partner should not be underestimated, even if the comparison was not triggered by events in this country. In this case, it was the lack of events fully corresponding to the Bulgarian case that made Bulgaria seem in a disadvantaged position.

Opening Communist Secret Services Archives

Another sensitive and highly partisan issue for the Bulgarian political elite and population, during the entire post-communist transition, was the disclosure

³⁶ *European Union*, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-05-396_en.htm?locale=en; *Capital Weekly*, http://www.capital.bg/politika_i_ikonomika/bulgaria/2006/03/10/235363_predpazni_stupki_pred_predpaznite_klauzi_za_es/, Accessed 1 August 2015.

³⁷ *Capital Weekly*, http://www.capital.bg/politika_i_ikonomika/bulgaria/2006/03/10/235363_predpazni_stupki_pred_predpaznite_klauzi_za_es/, Accessed 1 August 2015.

³⁸ *Dnevnik Daily*, http://www.dnevnik.bg/evropa/novini_ot_es/2008/07/23/529600_zamrazenite_pari_ot_es_veche_oficialno_sa_spreni/, Accessed 1 August 2015.

³⁹ *Mediapool News*, <http://www.mediapool.bg/zaplaha-za-zamrazyavane-na-evrofondovete-i-zaradi-koruptsiyata-news139222.html>, Accessed 1 August 2015.

⁴⁰ *Sega Daily*, <http://www.segabg.com/article.php?issueid=3628§ionid=4&id=0000702>, Accessed 1 August 2015.

⁴¹ *Bulgarian News Agency*, <http://profit.bg/news/SP:-Rumuniya-riskuva-zamrazyavane-na-fondove-/nid-42175.html>, Accessed, 1 August 2015.

of the names of informants of the communist secret services, especially the names of those whose job was to inform the services about their compatriots who expressed unauthorized political views. Bulgarian anti-communist and liberal media reported about the creation in Romania of a National Council dealing with the investigation of the communist secret service Securitate and its archives⁴². They did not miss reporting that under disclosure in Romania were not only the names of politicians, but also people who held high social and administrative positions. Some particular cases of such disclosures were included within the Bulgarian news reel. On the other hand, some left-leaning media in Bulgaria, again while discussing events in Romania, warned against any precipitous disclosure of communist archives. They saw such disclosure as a form of personal vengeance of some former informants against others⁴³. Comparing both countries, the liberal media in Bulgaria reminded that Bulgaria closed the communist secret services archives in 2001 for the media investigators; quite the opposite trend was about to take place in Romania, where president Basescu proposed to open the Securitate archives for the media in 2006⁴⁴.

Romanian General Elections in November 2000

The Romanian elections of 2000, again, were regarded with vivid interest in Bulgaria, a country in which similar political forces disputed power, with Bulgaria lagging behind Romania in terms of electoral cycle by approximately a year. The possible return to power of Ion Iliescu in Romania, the man who held the presidential office until 1996, scared the anti-communist and liberal circles in Bulgaria. They predicted that such a victory would lead to market reforms reversal, to postponement of EU membership negotiations, and that it would bring the country back to earlier stages of post-communist transition⁴⁵. Not surprisingly, the Bulgarian left saw the triumph of Iliescu in 2000 as a victory of moderation over political extremism, as a continuation instead of a break of the policy of rapprochement with the EU and NATO⁴⁶. By extremism, the left papers meant the spectacular rise of Romanian nationalist leader and senator Corneliu Vadim Tudor, who finished second with 33% of the vote for president. In both countries, in the early 2000s, the opposition between political moderation and right-wing populism has taken precedence over earlier opposition between former communists and large anti-communist coalitions. The Bulgarian left media also did not miss noting that the European Council in Nice in December 2000 kept mentioning Romania among the candidates for EU membership, as if

⁴² *Dnevnik Daily*, http://www.dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2001/09/25/113412_komisiata_andreev_razpitva_za_tainite_na_sekuritate/, Accessed 1 August 2015.

⁴³ *Sega Daily*, <http://www.segabg.com/article.php?id=283042>, Accessed 1 August 2015.

⁴⁴ *Mediapool News*, <http://www.mediapool.bg/rumanskite-medii-s-dostap-do-arhiva-na-sekuritate-news116051.html>, Accessed 1 August 2015.

⁴⁵ *Capital Weekly*, http://www.capital.bg/politika_i_ekonomika/sviat/2000/08/04/204227_rumuniii_v_siankata_na_neokomunizma/, Accessed 1 August 2015.

⁴⁶ *Sega Daily*, <http://www.segabg.com/article.php?id=237851>, Accessed 1 August 2015.

no negative events had taken place in the country⁴⁷. For comparative purposes, barely one year after Romania, the leader of the Bulgarian socialists Georgi Parvanov will win the presidential election. Five years later, Parvanov will repeat the Iliescu performance of 2000, winning against the nationalist politician Volen Siderov with similar landslide.

EU Funds Absorption

The question of the rates of absorption of EU funds is highly sensitive in Bulgaria, given that this funding is seen as one of the key reasons for EU membership. Political elite in Bulgaria, and possibly not only there, is judged by its capacity to increase these rates. This question became sensitive even before Bulgaria officially became a EU member in 2007, given that the European structural funding began pouring earlier, with the start of the process of EU accession at the end of the 1990s. At that moment, EU funds absorption was closely related to the issue of EU integration in general. Romania, again, was considered as preferred country for reference of how well Bulgaria was doing regarding EU funds absorption. This preference came from the identical timing of the EU integration process in both countries. For the Bulgarian media, Romania usually played the role of a laggard in this absorption, lagging even behind Bulgaria. Nevertheless, the reports lacked elements of mockery regarding the northern neighbor. Instead, they were filled with warnings for Bulgaria, for the possible loss of millions, even billions of EUR, due to lack of organization or trained administrative personnel⁴⁸.

Selling Land to Foreigners

When Bulgaria and Romania joined the EU in 2007, they engaged to liberalize their land markets, including for foreign nationals as buyers, by 2014. For reasons beyond the scope of this research, this issue was and still is highly sensitive for small land-owners in Bulgaria who took the ownership over their ancestors' land in the second half of the 1990s. It suffices to say here that they fear that allowing foreigners with deep pockets to buy land may soon turn Bulgarian farmers into foreigners in their own country. Not surprisingly, as the deadline for lifting the restrictions on land sales started approaching, the issue became highly politicized in the country. Nationalist forces, that started moving from marginal positions toward the political mainstream in the early 2000s, virulently opposed the lifting of the ban of land selling. More traditional political forces, following ex-communist-anti-communist divide, found themselves in a delicate situation. So, they also had to pay attention to this nationalist discourse and to start questioning, or at least to pretend questioning, this part of the EU treaty. The news from Romania, where the issue also became politicized at the same time, therefore, were followed with close interest by Bulgarian media. Thus, the

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁸ *Portal Europe.Bg*, <http://old.europe.bg/htmls/page.php?id=6170&category=223>, Accessed 1 August 2015.

Bulgarian public learned that it would be pointless to try to change the deadline or to make the process of liberalization less abrupt than previously agreed⁴⁹. Romania, as an alter-ego, served as a vivid reminder that the signed accession treaty with the EU could not be unilaterally changed. Bulgaria was part of an asymmetric power relation with Brussels. There was a price to pay as far as it wanted to benefit from this relation for its economic and social development.

Standing against “Lukoil”

The final story to be presented concerns the relations between the two countries and the Russian multinational oil company “Lukoil”, which owns important assets in petrochemical industry in both Romania and Bulgaria⁵⁰. Since October 2014 the Bulgarian media have reported increased tensions between Romanian authorities and the company. First, Romanian judicial authorities have started an investigation against “Lukoil” for money laundering and false income declarations for up to 230 million EUR⁵¹. Next, they reported Romanian president Basescu saying that the country may nationalize the “Lukoil” refinery⁵². Finally, in the mid-2015 formal charges of money laundering were brought against six top managers of the refinery in Romania; at this moment, the financial frauds were said to amount to 1.77 billion EUR⁵³. In comparison, Bulgaria has investigated “Lukoil” activity only in light of the protection of the competition on the gasoline market back in 2011⁵⁴. One year later the investigation was closed without finding any wrongdoing from the part of the company⁵⁵. Although this story was still in development, Bulgarian media have already noticed the difference in the way that the two countries dealt with the Russian company⁵⁶, whether they were ready to show muscles against it or preferred to accommodate its interests without too much confrontation.

Discussion

The brief discussion will start by pointing out the general role that Romania plays within Bulgarian politics, as seen by the local media, both reformist and nostalgic, regarding presented stories.

⁴⁹ *Mediapool News*, <http://www.mediapool.bg/es-otkaza-da-otlozhi-svobodnata-pokupka-na-zemya-ot-chuzhdentsi-v-rumaniya-news212578.html>, Accessed 1 August 2015.

⁵⁰ “Lukoil” owns 97.1% of the “Petrotel” refinery in Romania, as well as 300 gas-stations that accounts for 20% of the oil market in the country; in Bulgaria, “Lukoil” possesses 94% of the “Neftohim” refinery as well as 200 gas-stations.

⁵¹ *Mediapool News*, <http://www.mediapool.bg/razsledvat-lukoil-za-ukriti-danatsi-v-rumaniya-news225514.html>, Accessed 1 August 2015.

⁵² *Investor.Bg*, <http://www.investor.bg/centralna-i-iztochna-evropa/335/a/rumyniia-moje-da-nacionalizira-rafineriata-na-lukoil-v-ploesht-181608/>, Accessed 1 August 2015.

⁵³ *Bloomberg Business*, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-08-03/romania-charges-lukoil-unit-managers-in-1-9-billion-fraud-case>, Accessed 1 August 2015.

⁵⁴ *Investor.Bg*, <http://www.investor.bg/ikonomika-i-politika/332/a/kzk-razsledva-lukoil-bylgariia-zaloupotreba-s-gospodstvashto-polojenie-121111/>, Accessed 1 August 2015.

⁵⁵ *Dir.Bg*, <http://dnes.dir.bg/news/goriva-kartel-lukoil-neftohim-comisia-zashtita-concurentziata-skokat-tzenite-11670864>, Accessed 1 August 2015.

⁵⁶ <http://e-burgas.com/archives/84810>, Accessed 1 August 2015.

Table

	The role of Romania		Becoming part of Bulgarian politics	Mentioning in western media
	Reformist media	Nostalgic media		
<i>Democratic socialism...</i>	Warning	Emulation	X	
<i>Gradual reforms vs. chock therapy</i>	Warning	Emulation	X	
<i>Caritas Ponzi scheme</i>	Warning	-		X
<i>Romanian elections in 1996</i>	Emulation	Warning	X	X
<i>Romanian bid for NATO in 1997</i>	Emulation	-		X
<i>On the road of EU membership</i>	Competition	Competition		X
<i>EU funds "frozen" in 2008-2009</i>	Emulation	-		
<i>Opening communist secret...</i>	Emulation	Warning	X	
<i>Romanian elections in 2000</i>	Warning	Emulation	X	X
<i>EU funds absorption</i>	Competition	Competition		
<i>Selling land to foreigners</i>	Reminder	Reminder		
<i>Standing against "Lukoil"</i>	Emulation	-		
<i>Fight against corruption in 2015</i>	Emulation	-		

The division reformist-nostalgic media represents two ideal-types that either look for models to advanced western nations and more precisely to West European nations, or look with sympathies if not with nostalgia to the state socialist system that went down in 1989. The examples above suggest that Romania quite frequently, and when political considerations require, changes its role from a country that should be emulated to a country whose development should be avoided at any cost. Thus, the post-communist initial good performance of the political forces ideologically close to the former Romanian communist party was seen as a model for emulation for Bulgarian socialists; they also looked, for inspiration, to the political comeback of Ion Iliescu in 2000. In contrast to this, Bulgarian anti-communist forces looked at Romania as a model for emulation in the late 1996, when Romanian anti-communist opposition took power. Once that Romania has been accepted as legitimate reference for

Bulgaria and its general post-communist development, any sudden change in this country of reference would be seen as potential trigger for similar if not identical developments at home. Chronologically, although not linearly, Romania gradually moved from being seen as a model for nostalgic Bulgarians to a country seen as a model for reformist ones. Clearly, since 2000, there is not a single event that makes Romania deviate from this general trend. When both countries are put within identical institutional frameworks by a stronger external actor, e.g. the EU, another possible relation between the two is that of competition. The EU integration process, both preceding and succeeding the EU entry date in 2007, created such an opportunity for competition, in which none of the countries seemed to have comparative advantage but Bulgaria would feel the heat of Romania ready to move forward and leave Bulgaria behind. Occasionally, this uniformity in development under asymmetric power relations with an external actor, the European Union, may turn the role of Romania into a reminder of Bulgarian obligations under the EU accession treaty.

Not only Romania is seen as either a model for emulation or a negative example, it literally becomes part of Bulgarian politics, providing new arguments to opposing political forces, mainly on the scale between pro-Western line of development versus more nationalist and idiosyncratic way. At least five such episodes are included in this study⁵⁷. The Romanian events that provide more food for this political confrontation occurred mainly in the 1990s. This fact points out the gradual merger within discursive field of Bulgarian political forces in the 2000s. If, in the 1990s, Bulgarian socialists and anti-communist forces discursively opposed on virtually every element of reforms, both its goals and at its means, the 2000s would witness relative consensus on the eve of the EU membership and immediately afterward. To be sure, political forces radically opposing this consensus did exist in Bulgaria in the 2000s, but they gravitated around new nationalist formations⁵⁸, formations that did not make Romania part of their world of references. No matter how tempting it would be, however, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to establish any clear causality lines between the events in Romania and some corresponding events in Bulgaria during the 1990s. For example, the Bulgarian socialists' electoral victory in 1990 might have happened even without Ion Iliescu's victory, that preceded it by few weeks. Reversely, the mobilization of Bulgarian anti-communist opposition in the early 1997 might have happened even without the victory of Emil Constantinescu in Romania in 1996. The domestic causes for these events in Bulgaria, arguably, would have determined the outcomes, even without external references. The point this study makes is that such references were necessary to make Bulgarian actors feel more secure, more akin of normality, which needed some international reference.

Furthermore, it is worth mentioning an important element in making Romania a preferred country of reference during the post-communist transition in Bulgaria. This element deals with the presence of Western media as first respondents in

⁵⁷ See the Table, column 4.

⁵⁸ For example the Party ATAKA, <http://ataka.bg/>, accessed 1 August 2015.

this process of comparison, negative or positive, for one or another of the Balkan countries. This element, not at the focus of this study, is not just a decoration. In fact, it represents the input of supposedly neutral and unbiased foreign observers, giving impartial judgment on the way Bulgarian society evolves during this period. It makes the reference apparently non-arbitrary and its authors more verifiable. At least five such episodes are included in this study that account for this Western presence⁵⁹. Not surprisingly, they deal mainly with major political events in Romania, such as elections or EU integration. The Bulgarian media which use them are careful not to contradict these reports. Depending on their political colors, they selectively translate media reports from Western sources. This puts together two powerful elements, necessary for influencing the Bulgarian public, the appropriate image of Romania as preferred country of reference and the Western leverage to make this image, whatever it was, considered as a necessary course of events for Bulgaria. It would not be valid to attribute the presence of Romania as reference to the existence of Western media reports on the same events. There is no proof that Bulgarian media would have abstained from reporting on Romania, without Western reinforcement.

Reflecting on the taxonomy presented at the beginning of this study: coercion, competition, learning and emulation⁶⁰, it becomes evident that the case presented in this study deviates from any of these motivations in at least one important feature. No coercion mechanism exists between the two countries, because there is no asymmetric power relation between them during the post-communist period. Because of the lack of such asymmetric power relation, the mechanism of emulation is also theoretically problematic. The mechanism of competitiveness pays too much attention to rational thinking and behavior, and underestimates emotional considerations and the collective sense of self-esteem. The learning mechanism, as tempting as it is, does not explain why Bulgaria has exclusively focused on Romania for its post-communist development as pro-Western development, instead of looking directly to the West European models. The case presented in this study, without finding such asymmetric power relation between the two post-communist countries, but using apparently authoritative Western actors, suggests a new model – in which rational and emotional considerations become intermingled, and in which the classic picture of waterproofed national political communities cedes to a more realistic image of countries as symbolic communicating vessels that share values and norms.

Conclusion

This study made conjectures regarding Romania as an important reference for post-communist Bulgaria. Whether a reverse relation does exist, in other words, whether Bulgaria or any other post-communist country might have served as a reference for Romania, is not a subject of this article. Whether Romania made such a reference and which country played this role may become a subject

⁵⁹ See the Table, column 5.

⁶⁰ See note 10.

of another study, based on a review of Romanian media, a task which requires intimate knowledge of Romanian language. Following this research question in the context of different post-communist countries may represent the starting point of a new research program.

This research program may follow different methodological paths, some far away from those developed within this study. It was based on the semantic analysis of written discourses that found their way to the Bulgarian media in the 1990s and 2000s. It is also possible to base the analysis on politicians' retrospective narratives. With the first generation of post-communist politicians in many Central and East European countries retiring from active duty, the literary genre of political memoirs has a promising future. Completely different, however, may be a methodological approach based on statistical data. In this approach, the focus will not be on individual politician's retrospective accounts, but on the aggregated attitudes of citizens, including those regarding their neighboring countries or other important foreign actors.

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