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## Bulgarian rhapsody

The democratic progress in eastern Europe should inspire us. But we seem to have barely noticed it

**Peter Preston in Sofia**  
**Monday October 16, 2006**  
[The Guardian](#)

Truth can also be calmer and quieter than fiction. So there's supposed to be a crowd of Bulgarians jostling outside the British visa office in Sofia, eager to lead a new throng of immigrants as Romania and Bulgaria join the European Union club. "Experts" tell the Daily Mail that as many as 350,000 more east Europeans are on their way here to give John Reid and assorted local councils the collywobbles.

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The advertisement features a central image of a newspaper cover from The Guardian. The cover has the masthead 'the guardian' in its signature blue and white font. Below the masthead, the main headline reads 'Honours scandal reaches door of Downing Street' with a sub-headline 'The Prime Minister's Office is accused of covering up the scandal'. There is a photograph of a man in a suit, likely a politician, on the cover. To the right of the newspaper image, the text 'Subscribe now and get 20% off' is written in a bold, blue, sans-serif font. At the bottom right of the advertisement, the logo 'the guardian digital edition' is displayed, with 'the guardian' in a larger, bold font and 'digital edition' in a smaller font below it.

Yet on the spot, strangely, you find no queue of any sort, just a tiny trickle of routine humanity coming and going. What about those crowd pictures (in the Mail) the other day, then? Ah! They were taken, rather artfully it seems, on the day after a UK bank holiday, when 48 hours' worth of custom got truncated into 24: say, 15 or 16 applicants rather than eight.

Relax, says my most plugged-in Bulgarian friend. Of course, some ordinary workers will want to roam the union in search of a better-paid job. But they have mostly gone to Spain, Portugal and France thus far (because the climate is better), and that's surely where any small second wave will follow. Well-trained, English-speaking professionals working in computers, medicine, engineering and the rest? They're different, and some of them might head for Britain, perhaps. But whoever found cats alarmed about extra cream?

And relax, too, says one of the top law enforcement officers covering this precise patch, with a sardonic grin. London won't suddenly be flooded with sinister Bulgarian Mr Bigs because "they're all in London already". Maybe the tabloids will still be able to confect an outcry or two. Sofia's journalism bars still buzz over tales of a British redtop trying to hire a local prostitute to jet into Heathrow on

[EU strikes deal with US over sharing of passenger data](#)

January 1, so that she could star in some sex-trade shocker.

But if you want the problems of immigration most absorbing Bulgarian attention at the moment, then look a touch closer to home: at the 3,000 Brits, seeking places in the cut-price sun, who have arrived to live, and often to set up property businesses that will keep more crowds coming. Have luxury villas but rather lack drains as yet. Once more, it is local-council wailing about resources that captures the headlines. Once more the truth is both quiet and calm.

Stand in the gallery of Bulgaria's parliament and look down on MPs doing their job - or rather sitting reading newspapers through various promulgations. No confrontations, no benches opposite and bawled insults. It's a relaxed morning in the shadow of an imminent presidential election.

And the issues on the table for detailed discussion are consensual ones, too. Has the anti-corruption select committee got a draft bill clamping down on corruption? Indeed: featuring such wonders as the right to run advertisements in local newspapers denouncing politicians who cross the line. Has the ethical select committee evolved a code of practice that many western countries might envy? Indeed: the far corners of sleaze are being swept. The business of shaping up for Europe is almost complete.

And - quietly, calmly - pause over something so familiar as to no longer seem remarkable. It is 17 years since Bulgaria shrugged off the dead hand of Moscow, pulled down some of the more grotesque Soviet statues, and tottered into bizarre, heady freedom as its king returned from exile to play political saviour (very badly). It has taken at least a painstaking decade of targets and reforms to meet European Union requirements. But those deeds are mostly done. Now, without many illusions or undue excitement, another stable European democracy is in the bag. Welcome to the club.

This could, glancing east, be rootless Georgia, or Ukraine, suddenly tugged and bullied by a resurgent Kremlin. This

could be a political earthquake zone. Instead, Sofia has made a considered, life-changing choice. Do we value, or even much notice, that achievement?

General Sir Richard Dannatt is storm centre when he talks about "naive hopes" for liberal democracy in Iraq, and aims for a "lower ambition". But our union, nation by nation, has marched on, without naivety, until it is 27 strong. And it will not, and cannot, stop there. Croatia waits at the gate. Bosnia, Macedonia and the rest are standing in line. Diplomats General Dannatt can meet in Whitehall any day have Kosovo on their eventual list: troops out for a higher ambition.

This evening, by chance, comes the third lecture in memory of Hugo Young, at Chatham House. Last year Gordon Brown lectured - and did not mention Europe. This year Jose Manuel Barroso, the president of the European commission, will surely do better. "Only in mid-career, to my shame, did I begin to understand that, for Britain, Europe is the issue overshadowing all others," Hugo wrote in his final book. Come in Sofia, come in Bucharest! To our shame, we seem to have lost the ability to marvel and to cheer.

[p.preston@guardian.co.uk](mailto:p.preston@guardian.co.uk)

## Comments

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**disrealian**

October 16, 2006 02:54 AM

Yes you are right, Peter we should cheer for democracy rising in Bulgaria and we should also start looking at thinking about Ukraine and Georgia themselves and potentially one day in a distant future Russia. The thin but wide EU has proved to be a great success and long may it

continue, the thick and narrow EU has produced division but the EU strikes me as unglamorous but still useful and more useful than pyrotechnics in the Middle East.

<http://gracchii.blogspot.com>

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**volov**

October 16, 2006 03:30 AM

Peter

Thanks for reminding us of the best big picture going.

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**Teacup**

October 16, 2006 07:02 AM

Excellent and cheering article. Thank you for brightening my day

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**GrumpyMuppet**

October 16, 2006 08:38 AM

`But whoever found cats alarmed about extra cream?`

I did find Peter, quite a few of the EU countries (or their immigration departments) in fact. As a Swedish visa official in London put it, `you have just finished your studies so I can give you only a single entry visa [as opposed to a multiple entry visa] and for only for the precise duration of your trip`. She was obviously rather alarmed

that I had indeed finished my studies in Britain, so I was rootless, ready to immigrate anywhere in Europe, to open a kebab shop (we Turks are taught early on how to make a good doner) and to bring all my family along as freeriders to swamp the health and education and benefit systems.

And my studies which were obviously only a fig leaf to find the opportunity to do such evil things to the EU? PhD in orbital mechanics.

The racist, Islamophobe folk that are the Americans? They issued me a 10 year visa with a smile.

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**Dave69**

October 16, 2006 09:47 AM

Probably because you weren't Mexican...

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**Richardlith**

October 16, 2006 10:07 AM

The problem with writing about Bulgaria is that one day the journalist can write "it's a stable democracy -- look, they are passing laws in a half-filled parliament, just like Westminster. " All is wonderful, his journalism contacts all speak English (Wow), the wine is good, the people good looking and polite.

The next day you can, with equal justification and on your editor's orders, write a shocker about corruption, people trafficking, drugs, gypsy encampments.

The thing is that in Bulgaria, both these pictures are true, and are just part of a complicated country that cannot be described in 1,000

wordes. Is that not how any country is?

You should see what the Bulgarian press writes about the UK. One day, drugs, people trafficking, poor schools. The next, a Hello type piece on the Queen, good schools, etc.

Here is a headline from last week from Bulgaria. "New EU entrant asks Russians to build new nuclear reactor." Worried??

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### **PapaKarl**

October 16, 2006 10:41 AM

Bulgarians are one of the most underrated people in Europe. Despite their small size they were always a respected force in the Balkans, organized and institutional when the Greeks and Serbs were no more than bandit gangs.

Not surprisingly, Bulgarian-Turkish relations normalized almost instantly after the fall of Jivkov and the ethnically cleansed Turks of Bulgaria returned to their homes.

With Greece, normalization has taken a long time coming. With Serbia it's even worse, since we had to bomb them to stop their ethnic cleansing of Muslims in former Yugoslavia.

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### **Nerroth**

October 16, 2006 11:27 AM

I wonder how long it will take for pro-Europeans in English-sepeaking EU countries to start showing that the European Union has some benefits, after all...

In fact, it's unfortunate that when efforts arise in

other parts of the Earth to emulate the EU's successes, such as in South America with the impending development of the South American Community of Nations (the merging of the Andean Community and Mercosur, and the expansion of the blocs' role in areas of common currency and passport control and so forth) - indeed, we should be encouraging such developments.

In regions where natural resources are divided between rival states, the wider region can suffer (as witnessed in the disputes within the current iteration of Mercosur - which does not have the political infrastructure that the Union has in solving disputes between member states, or developing common policies - hopefully an impetus towards following the EU example) and when a region can speak with a larger common voice on economic issues (as the Union does in trade discussions) it can carry more weight.

Another comment today resulted in a call for joined-up thinking. In this case, it's quite relevant!

Gary

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**Deneva**

October 16, 2006 11:43 AM

Totally agree on the issue of potential Bulgarian emigrants to the EU, Peter, but I really think you are a little bit overestimating the parliament and its activities. Not a little bit, actually, a lot.

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**DeepHeat**

October 16, 2006 12:15 PM

["London won't suddenly be flooded with sinister

Bulgarian Mr Bigs because "they're all in London already"]

The Bulgarians are no longer at the gate, they are buying up flats in W1!

Mr Preston, I can't help think that you are rather too optimistic on a number of counts:

(1) Romanians and Bulgarians more likely to go to France, Italy and Spain.

To do what? The sheer number of twenty-something French, Italians and Spanish working in Britain suggests the pull factor of service-sector jobs in Britain might be stronger.

Also, you make little mention of Romany gypsies - who persecuted and under/unemployed in Romania are looking to \*Britain\* to improve their lot.

(2) "Has the anti-corruption select committee got a draft bill clamping down on corruption? Indeed..."

Anti-corruption initiatives have not met with much success in either Romania or Bulgaria. Check out Bulgaria's lead insurer, Bullns, widely reputed to be no more than a protection racket. Look into the affairs of many larger companies, which hold politicians (or worse, mafia) on "consultancy agreements".

Phanariote Hospodar or Boyar approaches to rule in Romania overshadows the "European project" as evidenced by the "change" of rule after Ceaucescu.

Romanians and Bulgarians are lovely people, however their business and political elites are entirely repugnant and need to be kept at arm's length.

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**peekaboo**

October 16, 2006 12:29 PM

Peter Preston seems to have taken time off from his customary eulogy of Turkey's semi-military elite to now showering praise on the elite in Bulgaria. Yes they may be more democratic than they used to be but just as he ignores public opinion in Turkey and the views of persecuted minorities there, he seems not to want to notice the large segments of populations from the Baltic to the Black Sea who still see their rulers as former Communists who instead of paying homage to Marx and Lenin now pay homage to the almighty dollar (or the Euro)

But I suppose when it comes to geostrategy these uncomfortable facts must be brushed aside

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**mdr42**

October 16, 2006 12:51 PM

One of my parents' donkeys is from Bulgaria. I'm petrified the Daily Mail readers will find out and cancel our invitation to the Village Hall Christmas bingo. Actually, perhaps 'petrified' isn't the word.

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**YellowDuck**

October 16, 2006 01:14 PM

Agreed. The former communist states of Eastern Europe have made huge strides in the past 16 years.

But all is not well and to pretend it is so may come across as somewhat misleading. As this week's Economist observes politically the EU-8 are failing despite their perceived economic

advances and lists a number of problem areas:

1) not one current post-communist country has a strong reformist government.

2) bad management and populism are rife and therefore trust in government and the democratic process dwindling leading to more disaffection.

3) there is an ever more realistic risk that their strong economic performance will stall.

4) education is in the doldrums and research and development spending under 1% of GDP - below the already low level of 2% of Western Europe.

5) if living standards are not raised to western levels and public services not improved radically more people will indeed end up voting with their feet.

Not many people would want to leave their homes permanently, but there is a number of East Europeans that definitely doesn't feel at ease in their own country and is willing to take advantage of the (however still limited) opportunities available to them elsewhere in the EU.

I don't think this is a bad thing. I think it is one of the great benefits that the EU brings its citizens. But the impressionistic observations in the above article don't help the argument for open labour markets in the slightest since they appear to be based on half-truths. Even if Bulgaria (and I also agree here) is a beautiful country with a host of friendly, warm-hearted people.

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**Gombrowicz**

October 16, 2006 02:22 PM

To throw a proverbial spanner in the works, I

would contend that 'transformation' in every post-communist nation in central and eastern Europe is going too fast, with a couple of notable exceptions, such as Slovenia and the Czech Republic. In the other countries, systems, structures, concepts and ideas are being imposed on people who think they are ready for them, but they are not. That is why in the aftermath of the euphoria of joining the EU, a series of reactionary governments seem to be springing up (Poland, Slovakia). The EU, and 'western' democracy is presented (and often believed) as a panacea for all ills, but without the strong structures and regulatory systems to protect the interests of these countries, they can end up selling themselves short to western investors in their desperation to join the much-vaunted market economy.

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**bennywhale**

October 16, 2006 02:26 PM

Good article. It does show the democratising power and potential of the EU. Not flying in with a constitution in our pockets and bullets in our guns, the EU entices its neighbours into reform, democracy and civil rights for its citizens.

Even for those citizens of countries who may not, ultimately join the club, like Turkey, the affect the carrot of EU membership has had on their lives has been immense as our neighbours try to impress on us their democratic potentials.

There is a fundamental flaw at the heart of this however, which needs sorting quickly. The states in the EU are encouraged to be democratic whereas the EU itself is far from it. Reform is urgent if this most exciting of political projects in history is to remain. It needs to be revitalised with an energy to inspire Europeans, and keep expanding its democratising force.

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