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By Nick Thorpe - BBC News, Sofia.

Above the main road in Karabunar, a village of 1,800 inhabitants in central Bulgaria, a rain-drenched banner reads: "Happy Holiday, Winegrowers". And on the reverse side, for drivers just arriving in the village: "Stop the Tax!"

The holiday refers to the feast of St Trifun, patron saint of pruners, and therefore of vineyards.

The tax is a reference to one of the least popular consequences of EU membership this year - the addition of a tax of 4.4 leva (J1.47; 2.2 euros) to each litre of rakia, the powerful local brandy, under the Union's rules on home-distilled alcohol.

As rakia sells at the roadside here at 5-6 leva a litre, that would mean almost doubling the cost.

Heavy rain further dampened enthusiasm for the elections to the European Parliament last Sunday - the first since Bulgaria joined the EU in January.

"Only about 200 people bothered to vote," says Karabunar's mayor, Petr Dzhalev. Yet 1,300-1,400 were entitled to vote.

The governing Socialists came first, followed closely by a new centre-right party, Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria (GERB).

Then came the Movement for Rights and Freedoms, predominantly Turkish, but winning some sympathy votes from the Roma (Gypsy) population too.

The ultra-nationalist Attack party, which focuses its fury on Bulgaria's large Turkish and Roma minorities, also secured a handful of votes.

As such, the result in Karabunar mirrored that of Bulgaria almost exactly. On a national level, GERB were a fraction ahead of the Socialists. Turnout nationwide was only 28%.

Nuclear woes

Apart from the distillers, another social group with an axe to grind with Brussels is the powerful nuclear lobby.

Kiril Nikolov is the deputy executive director of the Kozloduy nuclear power plant. He has been there almost without interruption since 1973, the year before it first came on line.

A series of incidents at the plant gave its Soviet-built, pressurised water reactors a bad name and the EU always insisted that they should be closed before the country joined the Union.

Successive governments reluctantly agreed, but kept spending money on them, in the hope that the EU would change its mind. It did not, and two of the four reactors were closed on 31 December last year, just three hours before the country joined.

"I think the decision to close the reactors was not only unfair on Bulgaria but on the population of the EU as well," says Mr Nikolov. "Our fight is not with the EU but with its leaders, its management."

That fight today is to reopen the two reactors.

The government is seeking to persuade the EU that power shortages in Albania, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Serbia and Greece will be inevitable if Bulgaria can no longer export the nuclear plant's electricity. But so far the EU has refused to reconsider.

Other worries

According to a recent opinion poll, 57% of Bulgarians do not expect EU accession to affect them personally. Around 17% believe it is affecting them in a negative way and 23% believe they will benefit. In the city of Ruse, once Bulgaria's capital and the site of a famous road and rail bridge over the River Danube to Romania, journalist Teodora Kopcheva fits into the first category.

"I used to say Bulgarians don't deserve to enter the EU. They kind of imagined that everything would suddenly be perfect. They don't realise that being European is actually a state of mind," she says.

"[They don't realise] that people should try through their own skills and efforts to make something of their lives, not just wait to be helped."

Further upstream, in the town of Lom in north-west Bulgaria, local Roma activist Nikolai Kirilov shares her evaluation.

"The EU has made little impact on our lives here - except that it's harder to get funds for the Roma than it was in the pre-accession period."

Meanwhile in Sofia, Prime Minister Sergei Stanishev has other issues to consider.

How to shield his government from the fallout of an ongoing corruption scandal? How to track down the perpetrators of a string of unsolved murders that are damaging Bulgaria's image as a country serious about tackling organised crime? And how to secure the release of five Bulgarian nurses, or at least prevent their execution in Libya?

A Libyan court found them guilty of deliberately infecting more than 400 children with HIV. Many Bulgarians sport ribbons in solidarity with the nurses, with the words "You are not alone".