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Southeastern Europe

“Europe Does Not Understand Us”

Why is Bulgaria trying to veto North Macedonia’s EU membership?

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Zoran Zaev, Prime Minister of North Macedonia, shakes hands with Boyko Borisov, Prime Minister of Bulgaria.

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To understand the complex political situation on the Balkan peninsula, it can sometimes be helpful to use examples in the guise of counterfactual questions. For instance, can we imagine Germany demanding that Vienna officially recognize that Mozart was German in order to join the EU? Or France producing tons of polemical literature to prove that Belgian and Swiss identities are “artificial”? Or German scholars insisting that the Netherlands and Belgian Flanders should admit that they speak a variety of Plattdeutsch and readopt the term *(Neder)Duits* as a “traditional” name for their Dutch tongue? Or Austria blocking the EU membership of Slovenia on the grounds that the latter is a “product of totalitarianism”—first established by the half-Slovene dictator Tito in the framework of his communist Yugoslavia?

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Approaches, and (Self-)Representations (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2013 and 2017), as well as *Balkan Heritages. Negotiating History and Culture* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015).

As absurd as it may sound, Bulgarian academics and politicians have been reiterating analogous claims concerning the history, language, and national identity of North Macedonia for over 50 years. Over the past couple of years, similar claims have been mobilized by the Republic of Bulgaria (an EU member state since 2007) as a means to pressure the Macedonian government as it seeks to join the EU. Bulgarian veto threats finally materialized on 17 November at a meeting of the General Affairs Council, during which European ministers discussed EU enlargement. While there appears to be a consensus within the EU that North Macedonia has fulfilled the criteria to initiate negotiations, Bulgarian Foreign Minister Ekaterina Zaharieva declared Sofia's disapproval of the EU negotiation framework and thus practically vetoed the talks that were expected to start in December.

Disputed Legacies

Centrally situated in the multi-ethnic Balkan area, Macedonia was part of the Ottoman Empire until 1913 when it was partitioned between Greece, Serbia (later Yugoslavia), and Bulgaria. Despite brief occupations of most of the region during the two World Wars, Bulgaria failed to incorporate it into its national borders, and in late 1944 a Macedonian republic was established with its own capital (Skopje) and language within the framework of socialist federative Yugoslavia. Since the 1960s, Bulgarian politicians—initially Communists, after 1989 their post- and anti-Communist heirs—rejected the characterization of that nation and language as “Macedonian”, claiming that the Slavic population of Macedonia consists of ethnic Bulgarians speaking a Western Bulgarian dialect. A decades-long historiographic feud started between scholars and public figures from Sofia and Skopje, focused on the interpretation of a long series of historical personalities and events spanning from medieval history to the mid-twentieth century.

In 2019, the former Yugoslav republic (independent since 1991) was renamed North Macedonia as a result of the **Prespa agreement**. It put an end to a 27-year-long dispute with Greece over the name “Macedonia”, aggravated by nationalist exploitation of ancient Macedonian heritage (which Athens claims as its own symbolic property) by the former government of Macedonian nationalist Nikola Gruevski. The Bulgarian-Macedonian dispute over a historical heritage claimed by both countries exploded in the same year, although it received less international media coverage. Surprisingly, this happened after the Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borisov and his Macedonian colleague Zoran Zaev signed a “Treaty of Friendship, Good-neighbourliness, and Cooperation” in August 2017. By virtue of the treaty, Sofia and Skopje set up a joint historical commission to propose formulas concerning their “common past” that both sides could find acceptable.

Yet the commission's precise task remained largely unclear due to divergent expectations between the two countries. Being in a weaker position vis-a-vis EU member Bulgaria, the Macedonian government included several relatively young researchers with an international academic background and a more or less liberal way of thinking. It avoided dispatching most leading Macedonian historians, who cultivate a more nationalist worldview. Skopje also assigned the team a minimalist mission, such as proposing recommendations for the revision of school textbooks in a spirit of good-neighbourliness. For Sofia, on the other hand, this was not enough. Bulgarian authorities formed a team of mainstream historians and diplomats—often persons with important administrative positions in national institutions—whose public statements made their understanding of their role quite clear. They seemed to imagine themselves more like army generals defending a national cause or police inspectors expected to make wrongdoers acknowledge their misdeeds. The behaviour of the Bulgarian experts diverged starkly from the politically neutral tone expected in academic debates, and demonstrated a stunning lack of scholarly knowledge concerning topics like the construction of national identities and languages.

European Leverage

Unsurprisingly, the dialogue between the two national teams in the joint commission proved difficult and soon morphed into media scandals around the question of the national belonging of one or another historical personality. The Bulgarian government unceremoniously used the commission to impose traditional Bulgarian interpretations of Macedonian history, language, and identity on North Macedonia. At the end of the day, Sofia offered a false choice first to the Macedonian experts in the joint commission, and then to the government in Skopje: either accept Bulgarian "historical truths" or face a Bulgarian veto blocking their bid for EU membership. Irritated by the Macedonian refusal, the Bulgarian government intensified its bullying. In October 2019 it passed a so-called "Framework position", and the Bulgarian parliament in Sofia issued a declaration denying the existence of the Macedonian language. The documents included a number of problematic requests addressed to North Macedonia as a precondition for initiating EU accession talks.

More recently, Sofia went so far as to send the diplomats of other EU member states an openly nationalistic "explanatory memorandum" presenting the traditional Bulgarian theses: until the end of World War II, the Slavic population of Macedonia was Bulgarian—the Macedonian nation was created by the Yugoslav Communists at the cost of a merciless terror (the memorandum refers to 100,000 alleged victims of Tito's regime, presumably killed or oppressed for being Macedonian Bulgarians). As for the Macedonian language, it was again dismissed as an artificial construct based on a Bulgarian dialect. At the same time, the Bulgarian foreign minister and other state officials in Sofia began to openly insist that the Macedonian political elite should acknowledge Macedonians' "Bulgarian roots". As this absurd insistence did not bring the expected results, for the moment, the Bulgarian government seems determined to continue blocking North Macedonia's EU accession talks. Officially, Sofia insists that Skopje fails to respect the "Treaty of Friendship" from 2017. In particular, Bulgarian officials claim that the joint expert commission has not made sufficient progress in its work due to a lack of will or even hostility on the part of the Macedonian side.

Bulgaria's veto has little sympathy among European institutions and leaders, who are not enthusiastic about a new nationalist dispute around Macedonia. Bulgarian officials even complain of European (or rather, German) pressure in favour of North Macedonia, while Ivan Ilchev, a leading Bulgarian historian and member of the joint expert commission, declared that Europe failed to understand the Bulgarian reasons for the veto. Realizing that their nationalist rhetoric falls on deaf ears in EU institutions, Bulgarian representatives mobilized European politics of remembrance in relation to twentieth-century "totalitarian regimes" and now seek to defame Macedonian national identity as a product of Tito's "totalitarian" Yugoslavia.

Ironically, the Bulgarian side's arguments concerning the Slavic language and history of Macedonia were themselves to a large extent codified during the "totalitarian" regime of Bulgarian Communist ruler Todor Zhivkov. In an attempt to refine this inherited rhetoric, Bulgarian officials spice it up with liberal and technocratic clichés: for instance, they regularly complain about anti-Bulgarian "hate speech" in North Macedonia. To be sure, there are political milieus, public commentators, and media in Skopje famous for anti-Bulgarian sentiments, but these do not represent the political line of the current Macedonian government. The concept of "hate speech" is thus used by Bulgaria in a very arbitrary way: often, the very existence of a Macedonian nation is taken by Sofia as an "anti-Bulgarian" act. Meanwhile, contrary to the diplomatic behaviour of Zaev's government, Bulgarian officials such as Defence Minister Krasimir Karakachanov, the far-right leader of a "junior" partner in the current governing coalition, employ a brutal and tactless rhetoric sometimes offending not only North Macedonia but also Serbia—the country Bulgarian polemicists traditionally blamed for "engineering" the Macedonian nation. Indeed, these days it is Bulgaria, not Serbia, that fuels anti-Bulgarian public reactions in North Macedonia. Moreover, Bulgarian institutions do not exactly demonstrate European democratic decorum with their constant refusal to register political associations claiming to represent a Macedonian population in Bulgaria (small groups of people, as current data suggest). On this account, Sofia has been condemned many times by the European Court of Human Rights and criticized by the Council of Europe—including in October of this year. To derail the debate, Bulgarian authorities began condemning Skopje for allegedly making "anti-Bulgarian" claims that a Macedonian minority exists in Bulgaria—claims that official Macedonian politics have abandoned for decades.

Claims and Counter-Claims

Is there, nevertheless, something that Europe should empathically "understand" in Bulgaria's position? Is the EU being unfair to Bulgaria, and is it not too accommodating to the former Yugoslav republic? After all, the Macedonian language was only codified after 1944 within the framework of socialist Yugoslavia. Yet this does not make it any less legitimate or more "artificial" than any other standardized language norm, including Bulgarian. Languages such as modern Turkish and even contemporary Hebrew are also recent linguistic phenomena whose codifiers are well-known. Bulgarian and Macedonian are certainly closely related languages, and there is no linguistic boundary between their dialects. They form a dialectal continuum not only with each other but also with the Serbian language—a relationship quite similar to the one between the Romance and Germanic dialects and languages in Western Europe.

In 1959, **American linguist Horace Lunt**, author of the first Macedonian scholarly grammar, still believed that for Macedonians to adopt Bulgarian as a standard language "would demand far fewer concessions on their part than have been made by Bavarians and Hamburgers, by Neapolitans and Piedmontese". Nevertheless, as contemporary sociolinguists argue, a language is a "dialect with an army". In the Macedonian case, there was a process of language codification and political institutionalization of the codified norm (as an official state language) along with a solid, collective claim that it constitutes a separate language. Moreover, the distance between contemporary Bulgarian and Macedonian standard norms is not negligible: it is clearly more considerable than the one between Serbian and Croatian, for instance, or between Danish and the Norwegian Bokmål, and specialists see it as more akin to the distinction between Danish and Swedish. That makes its characterization as an "abused" Bulgarian dialect sound quite ridiculous. A standard national norm cannot be reduced to a dialect, and dialects do not have a "national identity" encoded in them—unlike the standard norms, which are eminently political phenomena.

Bulgarian insistence on the "common past" of Bulgaria and Macedonia—clearly understood as a "Bulgarian past"—is equally dubious. That said, the Macedonian historical narrative codified during socialism is also problematic. Its claim of an enduring historical continuity of the Macedonian ethnic identity since at least the Medieval era is not exactly credible: after ancient Macedonia, no premodern polities ever claimed this label. A series of challenging questions are raised by the Bulgarian polemicists not only about this era but also regarding the modern and contemporary periods of Macedonian history from the nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries, while Macedonian historiography offers mostly simplistic answers. During the last decades of Ottoman rule in Macedonia, an advanced process of Bulgarian nation-building took place among the Slavic population of the area. This fact cannot be dismissed as the result of hostile outside "propaganda", as Macedonian historians attempt. Ironically, the contemporary Macedonian historical canon has integrated in its list of "great" Macedonian historical figures a long line of intellectuals and political activists who, despite local Macedonian patriotism, professed Bulgarian national self-identification. This was true of the famous revolutionary Gotse Delchev (1872–1903), whose legacy provoked a series of controversies that sealed the fate of the joint expert commission.

Bulgarian historiography is equally incapable of understanding the Macedonian national identity's historical trajectory, which began in the late Ottoman period. Although the explanatory memorandum of the Bulgarian government claims that "all diplomatic and historical accounts" confirm the Bulgarian identity of the Slavic Macedonian population prior to Yugoslav rule, this is simply not true. Considerable segments of the local Slavic population never embraced Bulgarian identity but instead developed a Greek and, in some cases, a Serbian identity. Moreover, a number of turn-of-the-century commentators on the Macedonian question claimed that most of the Macedonian Slavs lacked a clear sense of national identity—typical of illiterate peasant populations in Europe at the time. Even Bulgarian patriots from Macedonia admitted that, in many parts of their native region, "people still do not know the name 'Bulgarian'".^[1] Some Balkan and non-Balkan authors also believed that Macedonians were neither Serbs nor Bulgarians, but a separate Slavic ethnic group: a point of view that became increasingly popular among Macedonians after World War I.

Confronted with this counterevidence, Bulgarian historians give facile answers reducing Macedonian national identity to an outcome of hostile "propaganda" (Serbian, Yugoslav, Communist) presumably launched by infamous historical figures (Stalin, Tito, etc.). Similarly to the Macedonian historical narrative, mainstream Bulgarian historiography is dominated by the idea of an unshakable ethno-

national continuity dating back to the Middle Ages and an utter inability to grasp national identity as an eminently modern phenomenon which, like every identity, is contextual and malleable. Furthermore, although official Bulgaria insists with aplomb that North Macedonia "should acknowledge the historical truth", it demonstrates a striking incapacity to do so with regard to many "uncomfortable" topics from the recent past. For instance, Sofia depicts the occupation of Balkan territories during World War II by its pro-German regime, including North Macedonia, as "liberation", and denies a series of crimes against local population—particularly its role in the extermination of more than 11,000 Jews. In addition, even if it regularly accuses Skopje of using historical forgeries, Sofia does not hesitate to brandish fabricated "facts", such as the patently absurd figure of 100,000 Bulgarian victims of Tito's regime in Macedonia.

History is almost never black and white. If the official Bulgarian narrative is shallow and nationalist, this does not necessarily mean that mainstream Macedonian interpretations of history are correct, either. Yet it is obvious that the behaviour of Bulgarian politicians, diplomats, and mainstream scholars is scandalous. All questions of the past should be a matter of sober and well-intentioned academic debate—without arm-twisting and devoid of the political imperative to promote national ideologies and serve the interests of governments. It is disconcerting when governments claim to know the result of such debates in advance and leverage their privileged position in international politics to impose it on other countries. Nor should "historical truth" be left to the whims of state officials whose agendas have little to do with objective historical scholarship.

Bulgaria stands to gain little from hijacking the EU enlargement process for the sake of its own nationalist obsessions. Although segments of the Bulgarian political class, diplomatic, and expert milieus have been promoting the "re-Bulgarization" of Macedonia since the 1990s, Macedonian national identity proved to be much more resilient than Sofia expected. Lately, the Bulgarian state has exhibited a fanatical approach that only antagonizes the Macedonians: if Bulgaria's goal is for Macedonians to "realize" their "Bulgarian roots", the chosen strategy is clearly counterproductive. It does not contribute to the good reputation of the Bulgarian government within EU institutions, either. On the contrary, the present Bulgarian-Macedonian feud only increased international media's sensitivity to Bulgaria's endemic problems such as corruption and embezzlement of EU funds. While Bulgaria seeks to promote its ill-understood national interests by threatening a veto over North Macedonia's EU membership, it actually demonstrates the miserable level of politics, diplomacy, and—last but not least—mainstream scholarship in the country.

[1] "Nekolku dumi po vāprosa za narodnosta," Loza I (1892), 55