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## Managing Diversity or Legitimizing Historical Manipulations?

### Bulgaria using EU accession negotiations to dispute Macedonian identity and language

The Western Balkan (WB) countries that are still not members of the European Union (EU) have expressed interest in joining. Many see accession as a panacea to all problems, but the EU is trying to manage expectations and control the enlargement process. One of the increasingly important conditions since the 2004 enlargement is good neighbourly relations. In this respect, the EU has developed a position that “The EU cannot and will not import bilateral disputes and the instability they can entail. Definitive and binding solutions which contribute to regional stability must be found and implemented **before** a country accedes”.<sup>1</sup> Settling bilateral disputes has become an explicit precondition for further enlargements since the opening of accession negotiations with Serbia in 2014, whose progress is measured against sustained improvement in its relations with Kosovo. With the 2015 Berlin Process, EU prospective candidates promised not to use bilateral disputes to obstruct each other’s progress to EU integration.

As part of its accession process, Macedonia changed its name to North Macedonia with the Prespa Agreement with Greece in 2018 after having signed an Agreement for Friendship, Good Neighborliness and Cooperation with Bulgaria in 2017.<sup>2</sup> At the end of 2020, Bulgaria distributed among EU members a “Memorandum explaining the relation between the Republic of Bulgaria and the Republic of North Macedonia in the process of enlargement, accession and stabilization” requesting that the 2017 Friendship Agreement be included in the accession framework.<sup>3</sup> 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 practically vetoed the talks that were expected to start in December 2020.<sup>4</sup> Bulgaria expected the EU to accept the Bulgarian claims that the Macedonians have “Bulgarian roots”, stating that until

the end of WWII, the Slavic population of Macedonia was Bulgarian and the Macedonian nation was created by the Yugoslav Communists. They demand that Skopje acknowledge that the Macedonian language is an artificial construct, indicating that “the official language used in today’s Republic of North Macedonia can be only considered as a written regional norm of the Bulgarian language”.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, they demanded that Skopje renounces any claims on the Macedonian minority in Bulgaria.<sup>6</sup>

In December 2020, the European Commission put forward a draft document which was not adopted by the Council of the European Union as the Czech and Slovak Ministers disagreed and said they will not endorse the amended draft on EU Enlargement Conclusions, intended to appease Bulgarian demands. They stated that the proposed text “contained elements including the notion of falsifying history that in their view would be hugely detrimental to the enlargement process and could potentially bring about further complications down the road”.<sup>7</sup> Allegedly, the sentence added by the German Presidency in the hope of reaching agreement on a common Negotiating Framework,<sup>8</sup> pass Council conclusions, and pave the way to the first intergovernmental conference, was not acceptable to the two Foreign Ministers, as it suggested that “EU candidate members could in future be judged also on whether they had falsified or wrongly interpreted their history”.<sup>9</sup>

In the European Parliament (EP), during a session where it was expected to adopt the accession Progress Reports, MEPs put pressure on Bulgaria to lift its veto on the opening of the accession negotiations. However, after a feisty debate the EP failed to pass an amendment criticizing the Bulgarian position.

The EU is at point of choice: to insist on the vision from the *acquis* with its liberal prescriptions and to increase regional cooperation and solidarity, or give way to nationalist

claims which will jeopardize the enlargement process and the unification of Europe. Bulgaria's veto raises old claims stemming directly from the 1960s doctrine of their Communist leader Todor Zivkov.<sup>10</sup> Early warning turned into early EU action could prevent this destructive nationalist attempt from spilling across Europe, threaten the vision of the EU project and compound the already existing illiberal fragility evident within the Union today. The EU's choice is between nationalist revisionisms of European history and solidarity in diversity management according to liberal democratic (i.e., European) norms.

Without going into too many details about Balkan history, this text would be incomplete without providing a brief historical context. Geographical Macedonia was part of the Ottoman Empire until 1913, after which it was divided among Serbia, Greece and Bulgaria. All of the attempts to absorb geographical Macedonia into Bulgaria failed, apart from short occupations during the two World Wars. The Communist International (Comintern) passed a resolution in January 1934 insisting on the creation of an independent Macedonia and recognized the Macedonian identity and language. In April 1941, the Bulgarian army, as an ally of Nazi Germany, occupied almost all of today's Macedonia. The Macedonian partisans joined the Yugoslav antifascist forces and proclaimed a Macedonian state within the Yugoslav Federation after the war in 1944. The subsequent post-war period of the 1950's and 1960's was marked both with identity engineering and a boost to national mythologies, as well as negotiations between Yugoslavia and Bulgaria for a possible federation. The current Bulgarian claims largely resemble the hardline position from the mid-1960s, long before the EU project unfolded and democratic European norms were agreed. Shared historical legacies, including when it comes to language, have become a point of contention for Bulgarian maximalist claims in a highly asymmetric dispute. Bulgaria is using the Macedonian attempt to open accession talks, to impose their own interpretation of the past on to the aspiring candidate state for the EU. The apparent strong posturing by authorities in Sofia may be directly linked to their domestic concerns, especially as the country has been shaken by numerous corruption scandals, coupled with street protests and an alarming economic decline further worsened by the ongoing pandemic.<sup>11</sup>

However, these Bulgarian claims have a deep history, have been repeated over the last century, and are unlikely to disappear after the elections and the formation of a new Bulgarian government.

If the EU allows this Pandora's box to open, Europe will soon have to face its own historical demons, something the Czech and the Slovak Ministers of Foreign affairs<sup>12</sup> recognized when they opposed Bulgaria's conditioning of the accession negotiations. Regrettably, the Bulgarian situational power was not sufficiently challenged or tempered by the EU Council. Instead, the EU still insists that issues be handled bilaterally, even though *de facto* Bulgaria enjoys the asymmetrical leverage of EU membership.

After getting rid of an authoritarian government that captured the state,<sup>13</sup> the Macedonian citizens expected the government of Zoran Zaev, (in power since 2017) to put them back on the EU accession track. A precondition was to find a solution for the name dispute with Greece,<sup>14</sup> subject to an asymmetric bilateral negotiation process which ended with the Prespa Agreement<sup>15</sup> and the new name for the country – North Macedonia.<sup>16</sup> The NATO accession<sup>17</sup> was seen as a layover to the more important EU accession, and once it was achieved the promises were that North Macedonia, in a package with Albania, was on the EU doorstep. The whole Prespa process stimulated hope on the Bulgarian side that the EU institutions would not get involved and Bulgaria would use its membership to impose "historical revisionism"<sup>18</sup> and erase some dark chapters of their history.<sup>19</sup> Such revised narratives could then shed a different light or provide a different justification for ignoring several judgments of the European Court of Human Rights that condemn Bulgaria for its treatment of the ethnic Macedonian minority.<sup>20</sup> Almost all of the claims and proposed concessions were already exchanged in Todor Zivkov's time and the current escalations sound like a *déjà vu*, setting the stage for a replay, now that Bulgaria has the advantage of being an EU member state and North Macedonia wants to join the Union.

Challenging identities and languages, rewriting national histories within the EU, is not a topic some member states are willing to revisit, as shown by the Czech and Slovak Ministers' letter<sup>21</sup> followed by another letter from nine EU Foreign Ministers addressed to the Head EU diplomat, Josep Borell, demanding the return of the accession agenda

for the Western Balkans<sup>22</sup> – a clear sign of disagreement with the Bulgarian veto. The nine Ministers demanded a strategic approach towards the Western Balkans “not only through the enlargement lenses, but also through foreign policy optics”.<sup>23</sup> These countries still vividly remember how authoritarian interpretation of history affected their societies and their reaction to the Bulgarian veto is a call to the EU decision-makers to formulate and apply a historically-informed approach.

Bulgaria has been issuing citizenships to Macedonian citizens for a few decades upon applicants declaring their identity as “Bulgarian.” The numbers circulating in the media are some 80–130.000 passports – increasingly cited by Bulgarian politicians to bolster the claim of the Bulgarian roots of modern Macedonians.<sup>24</sup>

The next stages have to correct deficiencies that exacerbated the problem. They largely stem from allowing the process to be handled by national politicians and local historians without international facilitation/mediation that would offer plausible directions within the normative EU framework. Nationalist escalation could easily intensify if not prevented while there is still a “zone of possible agreement” and the possibility to set the scene for constructive dialogue. Both the Bulgarian and Macedonian sides have demonstrated a profound lack of diplomatic sense and skill and would benefit from intensive trainings in negotiation skills, preparing for a negotiation process, strategic planning, effective communication, conflict analysis, reconciliation methodologies and other topics that should be identified in a needs-assessment analysis.

Instead of encouraging the candidate and the member state to reach a compromise on their own, unavoidably asymmetrical, it will be more helpful for the EU to develop a process and an action-plan with concrete measures to resolve this impasse and others of its type. A new negotiation framework needs to be created, with the EU at the table, not as an adjudicator, but within a supranational structure that will help the two delegations identify what can and should be negotiated, and what is already part of the EU acquis and has simply to be implemented by both states. This framework has to be negotiated with the guarantors of the international standards framework – the EU, the OSCE, the Council of Europe (CoE) and the UN (UNESCO and relevant

departments of the Secretariat). The joint multidisciplinary expert commission for historical and educational issues, created by the 2017 Friendship Agreement to contribute objective, factual interpretations of historic events, can be a sub-committee of the new design, but under no circumstances can it be the only negotiation venue, to incorporate the historical discussions within a well-crafted structure to address from various angles in the context of peacebuilding, regional cooperation, implementing jointly EU standards. This wholistic approach can avoid short-fixes for long-term problems and instead provide healthy, long-term solutions, facilitated by objective, knowledgeable experts, whose main job would be to enable constructive discussions within the international principles and commitments that both sides have signed and aspire towards fulfilling. So far, instead, the negotiation process has been unhelpfully scattered between meetings of the historical commission and some bilateral meetings of the Foreign Ministers and occasionally the Prime Ministers.

The EU can also discourage politicizing of historiography, as Europe cannot afford discussions on historical “truths” and should promote the recipe that holds the nations of the Union together, i.e., mutual respect for different historical “perspectives.” The successful outcome of this process would be to have constructive dialogue under the EU auspices and, instead of causing division in the EU institutions, to have a process that will heal the old wounds and will focus on current possibilities for fruitful cooperation. The member states can collectively remind Bulgaria that this is a time for renewing the vows for updated solidarity and generosity.

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#### ENDNOTES

- 1 *European Commission (2019), Communication on EU Enlargement Policy, [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20190529-communication-on-eu-enlargement-policy\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20190529-communication-on-eu-enlargement-policy_en.pdf).*
- 2 <https://dw3yoh98rrmk.cloudfront.net/5fdcb3054598476c8e8952f18b0b2e01.pdf>.
- 3 *IFIMES (2020), Bulgaria: Bulgarian “certification” of identity of Macedonians and Macedonian Language?, <https://www.ifimes.org/en/9924>*

- 4 Tchavdar Marinov, *Europe Does Not Understand Us*, Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, <https://www.rosalux.de/en/news/id/43443/europe-does-not-understand-us?>
- 5 <https://www.politico.eu/article/bulgaria-north-macedonia-eu-accession-talks-language-dispute/>.
- 6 <https://ecfr.eu/article/how-to-advance-a-european-solution-to-bulgarias-and-north-macedonias-dispute/>.
- 7 [https://www.mzv.cz/representation\\_brussels/en/news\\_and\\_media/joint\\_statement\\_by\\_the\\_ministers\\_of.html](https://www.mzv.cz/representation_brussels/en/news_and_media/joint_statement_by_the_ministers_of.html).
- 8 The negotiating frameworks establish the guidelines and principles for the accession negotiations with each candidate country. The draft frameworks are divided into three parts: 1. principles governing the accession negotiations, 2. substance of the negotiations, and 3. negotiations procedure. The objective of the negotiations is that North Macedonia adopts the EU *acquis* in its entirety and ensure its full implementation and enforcement upon accession.
- 9 <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/12/18/czechs-slovaks-reject-bulgarias-historical-twist-to-enlargement-criteria/>.
- 10 Todor Zivkov was a Prime Minister and General Secretary of the Bulgarian Communist Party. His core theses regarding the “Macedonian issue” were: In the middle ages there was no such thing as a Macedonian nation; Tsar Samuil’s state in the 10th-11th century is Bulgarian; Macedonia is the cradle of the Bulgarian renaissance and the creation of the Bulgarian nation and they would not be proper Marxists if they gave up their history and founding figures like Cyril and Methodius, Dimitar and Konstantin Miladinov, Goce Delchev etc. Zivkov stayed in power until the fall of the Communist regime in Bulgaria in 1989 and in his time the “Macedonian question” was the topic of many negotiations between Bulgaria and Yugoslavia.
- 11 <https://www.euronews.com/2020/11/12/bulgaria-quarrel-threatens-to-put-brakes-on-north-macedonia-eu-membership-talks>.
- 12 <https://euobserver.com/opinion/150841>.
- 13 European Commission Fact Sheet: Key findings of the 2016 Report on the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.
- 14 At the time referenced to as: former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, currently North Macedonia.
- 15 More details on this negotiation process and the Agreement, can be found in PINPoints No 46.
- 16 Previously the country’s constitutional name was “Republic of Macedonia” and until the final settlement with Greece it was to be referred as “the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”, as stipulated in UNSCRs 817 and 845 (1993).
- 17 North Macedonia became a NATO member on 27 March 2020.
- 18 Historical revisionism is a concept widely discussed within the historical science. Here it is used in a sense of “denialism of history,” which rejects the foundation of historical evidence (almost a synonym for “historical negationism”) not as a constructive method by which new facts and interpretations allow for continuing the dialogue between the present and past.
- 19 During the Second World War, Bulgaria was part of the Axis powers and occupied the territory of what is today North Macedonia. Macedonian historiography considers this period “Bulgarian fascist occupation.” Bulgaria denies that and claims its forces liberated its people in the west. In a declaration adopted by the Bulgarian Parliament last year, Sofia told Skopje to stop using the term “fascist occupation” in reference to Bulgaria in its history books and to remove all such mention on World War II monuments in the country.
- 20 Just Access: <https://just-access.de/access-to-the-eu-and-justice-denied/#sdfootnote107sym>. Additionally, the US State Department in its 2020 Human Rights Report on Bulgaria, reports under “Freedom of Assembly” that Bulgaria continues “to deny registration of ethnic-Macedonian activist groups such as the United Macedonian Organization-Ilinden, the Society of Oppressed Macedonians, Victims of Communist Terror, and the Macedonian Ethnic Tolerance Club in Bulgaria, despite a May judgment and more than 10 prior decisions by the European Court of Human Rights that the denials violated the groups’ freedom of association.” <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/bulgaria/>.
- 21 [https://www.mzv.cz/representation\\_brussels/en/news\\_and\\_media/joint\\_statement\\_by\\_the\\_ministers\\_of.html](https://www.mzv.cz/representation_brussels/en/news_and_media/joint_statement_by_the_ministers_of.html).
- 22 Austria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Germany, Greece, Romania, Ireland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia wrote to Josep Borrell, the EU chief diplomat. warning about the coronavirus pandemic’s geopolitical consequences and the possibility that other actors, like China and Russia, could undermine the EU’s partnership with the region, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2021/03/15/borrell-ready-to-have-further-discussions-with-member-states-on-the-western-balkans/>.
- 23 <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/letter-to-hrvp-borrell-on-western-balkans/>.
- 24 This was obvious at the last elections, for which Bulgarians abroad were allowed to cast their vote in Embassies, and in North Macedonia there were 510 voters who used this right.

*oPINion* are comments on current conflict and global developments by members of the PIN Steering Committee. The views presented in *oPINion* reflect those of the authors of the articles and not those of the GIGA or PIN. The Processes of International Negotiation (PIN) network is a non-profit group of scholars and practitioners that encourages and organises research on a broad spectrum of topics related to international negotiation seen as a process. Since 2018 the network is hosted by the German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA).  
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