

Policy Analysis

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Side Effects of “Phantom Pains”: How Bulgarian Historical Mythology Derails North Macedonia’s EU Accession

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Abstract: What happens if historical daydreams derail the vector of European integration? The latest round in the dispute between Bulgaria and North Macedonia provides an insight. This analysis discusses Bulgaria’s veto on European Union (EU) accession talks with North Macedonia, first declared in 2019, and its manifold consequences. Bulgaria tied its consent to North Macedonia’s accession to the EU with the country first capitulating to Bulgarian demands concerning its history and identity. This revived arguments from the 1960s and 1970s. Bulgaria’s demands led to a nationalist counter-reaction in North Macedonia, while at the same time complicating the work of a joint expert commission on shared history established in 2017. The author highlights the unenviable nature of the position of the Macedonian members in the commission, caught as they are between their academic ethos and the diplomatic priorities of their country. The analysis concludes with remarks on the implications for the EU of Bulgaria’s “phantom pains” over Macedonia.

Keywords: North Macedonia, Bulgaria, EU membership, nationalism, history politics

Introduction

On 2 October 2022, Bulgarian voters went to the polls yet again, in the fourth parliamentary election since April 2021. The new elections were called after the government of reform-minded prime minister Kiril Petkov had lost a confidence vote in July. His coalition government fell apart when the “There Is Such a People” party (*Ima takŭv narod*, ITN) decided to withdraw its support. They justified their move by stating how uneasy they were about Petkov’s openness to lifting Bulgaria’s veto on starting

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accession talks between the European Union (EU) and North Macedonia, which had been in place since 2019 (Todorov 2022). The ITN party, established in 2020 by television host and comedian Slavi Trifonov, could not capitalize on its opposition to a compromise with North Macedonia. As quickly as its star had risen in 2021 (from nowhere to winning the July 2021 elections with 23.8% of the vote), it faded away into obscurity. At the last election, ITN failed to clear the 4% threshold to enter the National Assembly. Instead, another new party saw the biggest increase in votes, more than doubling its share since November 2021 when the last elections were held: “Revival” (*Vazrazhdane*), a pro-Russian, far-right outfit gained 10.2% of the vote.

Vazrazhdane is light on policy details. Its leader, Kostadin Kostadinov (who has a PhD in ethnology),¹ spouts the obscurities and conspiracies that are typical of the extreme right. Yet, there is one issue where he and his party have very specific ideas. That issue is Macedonia, which features as a separate item in their policy platform: “The question of relations with Macedonia is crucial. Macedonia is the second Bulgarian state in the Balkans and *Vazrazhdane* is working to unify the two Bulgarian state formations into one state.” To achieve this, the “broken unity of the Bulgarian ethnos must be re-established in order to make Bulgaria the largest and strongest state in Southeastern Europe”. The ultimate goal of *Vazrazhdane*’s foreign policy is “complete unification with Macedonia and the revival and strengthening of the full state independence of a united Bulgaria.”²

Now, 10% for a far-right party (with as little as 38% voter turnout) does not sound too disconcerting, especially when compared to other European countries. 10% was also more or less the threshold other extreme nationalist, far-right formations reached but failed to surpass in previous Bulgarian elections. Nevertheless, in at least one neighbouring country, *Vazrazhdane*’s success was noted with concern: North Macedonia. The media and political observers in North Macedonia feared that, should *Vazrazhdane* become part of a governing coalition led by election winner Bojko Borisov and his GERB (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria) party, a new round of Bulgarian demands of Macedonia regarding language and cultural identity and a new veto on the country’s EU integration would come into play. Their fears are rooted in precedent: Bulgaria’s veto on opening membership negotiations with North Macedonia in 2019 was the pet project of another ultranationalist politician, Krasimir Karakachanov. As head of the VMRO-BND (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization–Bulgarian National Movement) party, Karakachanov was a member of Borisov’s coalition

1 See Kostadinov’s blog at <https://kostadin.eu/about/>; and the Wikipedia entry on him at [https://bg.wikipedia.org/wiki/Костадин_Костадинов_\(политик\)](https://bg.wikipedia.org/wiki/Костадин_Костадинов_(политик)).

2 See the entry on “Macedonia” in *Vazrazhdane*’s party programme at <https://vazrazhdane.bg/programa/makedoniia>.

government until 2021 and developed an unhealthy obsession with Macedonia. Yet, this obsession resonates with large parts of Bulgaria's political class and society at large.

Bulgaria's demands of North Macedonia concerning the history and language of the Macedonians show how long it can take to recover from "phantom pains", which started in 1878 when the new Bulgarian state was established without incorporating Macedonia, a region/country that Bulgarian nationalists have historically claimed to be theirs. This pain has consequences that go far beyond Bulgaria and therefore merits attention. Singlehandedly, for almost three years so far, Bulgaria has been blocking North Macedonia's accession process to the EU, thus adding uncertainty to the political future of a country that already has its own share of instability. Since the EU had decided to lead accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania in parallel, negotiations with the latter became collateral damage of Bulgaria's intransigence. Apart from growing regional tensions and frustration about the EU, the most immediate effect of Bulgaria's demands of the Macedonians has been a strengthening of the nationalist forces in North Macedonia, especially the largest opposition party, VMRO-DPMNE (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization—Democratic Party of Macedonian National Unity). These forces can pose as defenders of the nation against a foreign bully. Thanks to the mobilizing power of concerns about national identity, today VMRO-DPMNE stands a good chance of returning to government after the next elections, even though their last stint in power was mired in scandal. This whole episode shows how EU membership gives leverage to member states which can highjack the accession process in the name of agendas that have nothing to do with the EU at all.

The Bulgarian–Macedonian Dispute Reloaded

"To draw final conclusions at this point of the historical political controversy over Macedonia, which has been simmering for fifteen years, barely makes any sense because it is still in full swing." So begins the conclusion to Stefan Troebst's 1983 (!) book on the controversy between Bulgaria and Yugoslavia over Macedonia (Troebst 1983, 239). Then and now, the dispute about the identity of the Macedonians, the nature of their language and the interpretation of the history of Macedonia impedes bilateral relations. As Troebst pointed out, the controversy impacts domestic politics as well. Much of what was said almost 40 years ago—i.e., during communism—could be applied today, down to the concrete arguments used by those involved in the dispute (mainly historians, public intellectuals, journalists and politicians). Not much new under the sun, one could say, with one exception: the power symmetry has dramatically shifted in favour of Bulgaria as a

result of its veto powers in the European Council and of North Macedonia’s strong wish to become a member of the European Union.

The roots of the current dispute are easily located—in the city centre of Sofia, i.e., the seat of power of Bulgaria. The more difficult task is to explain the dispute. Why did Bulgaria, quite surprisingly, suddenly block the opening of membership talks with North Macedonia and demand, as a precondition for those talks, that North Macedonia change the ways in which it represents its past? For many years, Bulgaria had postured as the strongest supporter of Macedonian EU membership. Indeed, many Bulgarians think that the Macedonians are actually part of the Bulgarian ethnic nation, but in reality few of them care, except true believers such as the aforementioned Karakachanov and Kostadinov. Before the government’s veto, there was little public debate about Macedonia in Bulgaria, nor was there any mobilization from below. It seems that it all came down to the disproportionate influence in this matter of the VMRO (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization) party and its leader, Krasimir Karakachanov, then vice premier and minister of defence. The VMRO was part of the United Patriots, one of GERB’s smaller coalition partners in Borisov’s third government. Karakachanov is a trained historian who has published widely about the historical VMRO, which was formed at the end of the 19th century to fight against Ottoman rule. Today, both the Bulgarian and Macedonian parties of the same name claim to be their only legitimate heirs. During communism, Karakachanov provided information on Macedonian issues for State Security (Hristov 2011). For Karakachanov, Macedonia seems to have become a personal obsession. Apparently, he was given Macedonian identity issues as a “playground” during his otherwise inconspicuous tenure in the government (save for rants against Roma). He managed to persuade the government to take a position from which it could not easily climb down lest the public consider it unpatriotic. The head of government, Bojko Borisov, cared little, until it was too late. Eventually, the situation resulted in the whole of the EU being held hostage to the singular historical views of a Bulgarian minister.

On 9 October 2019, ahead of a European Council meeting where the opening of accession negotiations with North Macedonia was on the agenda, the Bulgarian Council of Ministers adopted a so-called “framework position” regarding EU enlargement (I draw here on my earlier analysis, Brunnbauer 2021). According to the news portal *Balkan Insight*, this document contained a “long shopping list of demands” for North Macedonia to fulfil (Marusic 2019). The framework position opened with a telling sentence: “Bulgaria cannot allow the integration of the Republic of North Macedonia into the EU to be followed by European legitimation of a government-sponsored ideology on anti-Bulgarian foundations” (Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria 2019). A day later, the Bulgarian parliament passed a similar declaration (Narodno sūbranie 2019). Throughout, the document

listed Bulgarian concerns related to issues of historiography, language and national identity—in short, Bulgaria’s ultimate demand was the adoption of its official view of Macedonia’s history and identity (Brunnbauer 2021). The national Macedonian interpretation of history, as it had emerged since the establishment of the Macedonian Republic within federal Yugoslavia in 1944, was classified as an “anti-Bulgarian ideological construction of Yugoslav totalitarianism.”

North Macedonia, according to one demand, must remove inscriptions on monuments and memorial plaques in which “hatred against Bulgaria” is openly incited, for example by referring to the “Bulgarian fascist occupation.”³ The Bulgarians also demanded that the joint expert commission, established in 2017 on the basis of a bilateral friendship treaty (see below), provide a consensus assessment of “our common history until 1944,” including on the figure of Goce Delčev, a well-known fighter against Ottoman rule revered and claimed by both sides, the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Liberation Organization and the 1903 Ilinden Uprising (Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria 2019). Since the document speaks of a “common” and not a “shared” history, these demands amounted to no less than North Macedonia being forced to consider all these events and figures as “Bulgarian.” In the immutable Bulgarian view, there was no Macedonian people before 1944, only a Bulgarian one, and since in this view of history it is the case that only a people can be a bearer of history, it follows that the history of Macedonia, at least until 1944, is part of the history of Bulgaria.

Another demand was that North Macedonia realign its teaching of history, geography and literature and its historical monuments with the findings of the joint expert commission. In “harmonizing” the teaching of history and literature, the Bulgarian government demanded that source texts from the 19th and 20th centuries reproduced in textbooks be “presented and taught according to the linguistic norms in which they were originally written” (Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria 2019). That is, in Bulgarian and according to the Bulgarian government’s view. In the future, politicians and other official actors would have to base their “official statements and comments” on the texts agreed upon by the joint expert commission. It appears that the Bulgarian government believed that the state could dictate what historians or other producers of history are allowed to write. So much for Bulgaria protecting freedom of opinion and academic freedom.

³ As a reminder, after the destruction of Yugoslavia by Nazi Germany and its allies in April 1941, Bulgaria among them, the latter occupied large parts of Macedonia and pursued a policy of forceful assimilation of the local Slavic population, including forced deportation of Serbs. With the active assistance of the Bulgarian authorities, more than 10,000 Jews living in Vardar Macedonia were deported to Nazi extermination camps in 1943.

The Bulgarian government also demanded that North Macedonia refrain from any support for the “so-called Macedonian minority” in Bulgaria, which is denied official recognition. But North Macedonia would have to commit to rehabilitate persons “who were victims of the Yugoslav communist regime because of their Bulgarian identity.” With regard to language, the Bulgarian framework position formulated the demand that in all EU documents referring to the accession of North Macedonia, the phrase “official language of the Republic of North Macedonia” should be used; where the phrase “Macedonian language” cannot be avoided in EU documents, a note with an asterisk should be added stating “according to the Constitution of the Republic of North Macedonia”. No such document could be interpreted as a recognition by Bulgaria of the existence of the “so-called Macedonian language, separate from Bulgarian” (Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria 2019).

Six months later, in mid-2020, the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (*Българска академия на науките*, BAN) provided a pseudo-scientific justification of this position in its brief (60 page) book “On the Official Language of the Republic of North Macedonia” (*За официалния език на Република Северна Македония*) (BAN 2020). This publication was a direct response to a declaration by the Macedonian Academy of Sciences (*Македонска академија на науките и уметностите*, MANU) on 3 December 2019, which summarized the “scientifically accepted facts” about the Macedonian language and reaffirmed the MANU’s importance in defending and advancing the role of the Macedonian language as a “state language and language of social integration” (MKD 2019). The book’s announcement on BAN’s website said it all about the purpose of its counter-publication: “The book is the result of a recommendation of the Assembly of Academicians and Corresponding Members of the BAS to unite the potential of Bulgarian scientists to express a unified scientific position on the official language of the Republic of North Macedonia.” The book states that “the official language of the Republic of North Macedonia is a “southwestern written-regional norm of the Bulgarian language.” The last paragraph of the booklet concludes: “The basis of the official norm [of Macedonian] and the way in which it has been codified and artificially imposed from the top down gives it the status of a variant, but not a language in its own right” (BAN 2020, 55). The authors of the text also have good advice for politicians in North Macedonia: “The young state” of North Macedonia has prospects without having to rely “on some invented history.” Rather, “in scientific relations between the two countries, one should strictly adhere to the objective scientific truth, without politicization and succumbing to old ideological clichés” (BAN 2020, 55)—of course, this call was only directed towards Skopje because for the authors, it went without saying that Bulgaria possessed the truth (see also my analysis in Brunnbauer 2020).

The Macedonians reacted with indignation. Again, a neighbouring country had challenged the foundations of their national identity and used its veto powers in the EU to blackmail them. In 2018, following acrimonious debates, the government and parliament in North Macedonia had already agreed to the unprecedented change of the official name of their country, from *Republika Makedonija* to *Republika Severna Makedonija*, thus caving to long-standing demands by Greece, who had made the name change a precondition for green-lighting Macedonia's accession to NATO and the EU. The Prespa Agreement, signed by then prime ministers Zoran Zaev (Macedonia) and Alexis Tsipras (Greece), stipulated not only the name change but also prohibited Macedonia from laying claim to the historical heritage of the ancient Macedonians (Vlada 2017; cf. Rohdewald 2018). Both sides agreed that language and other characteristics of the "second side" (North Macedonia) were not related to the "ancient Hellenic civilization, history, culture and heritage of the northern region of the first side" (the province of *Makedonia* in northern Greece). Deprived of its prestigious ancient predecessors because of Greece's monopolistic claim on them, the Bulgarians now called on the Macedonians to remove from their national history everything else that had happened on their territory before 1944. Obviously, such claims of continuity in Macedonian historiography are ideological and anachronistic (Brunnbauer 2005). Yet, the same holds true for Bulgaria's (and Greece's) vision of ethnic continuity.

Macedonian Disappointment and Reaction

North Macedonia hoped that a new government in Bulgaria would take a different position, after Boyko Borisov finally resigned and a caretaker government led by Stefan Yanev took over in May 2021. However, the new government maintained the framework negotiation position of 2019, even though its initial author, the VMRO party, had failed to re-enter parliament in three consecutive elections in 2021. The government continued to repeatedly emphasize how important EU membership of North Macedonia was for Bulgaria, but that the country must first fulfil the provisions of the 2017 friendship treaty (obviously according to Sofia's interpretation). Even the Croatian president was forced to realize how serious Bulgaria was about the blockade: When Zoran Milanović criticized Bulgaria's position at a meeting between Slovenia, Croatia and the Western Balkan states in Brdo pri Kranju, Slovenia, in May 2021, the Bulgarian foreign minister summoned the Croatian ambassador—an extremely rare occurrence among EU countries. According to the Bulgarian Foreign Ministry, Milanović's remarks were "unacceptable and unjustified" (MFA 2021a).

The EU summit on 22 June 2021 failed to produce a breakthrough either, despite a meeting of the heads of government and foreign ministers of Bulgaria and North Macedonia a few days earlier. As was to be expected, the Bulgarian blockade provoked a backlash in Skopje, albeit not from the government, which was striving for de-escalation, but from the parliament. On 29 July 2021, North Macedonia’s National Assembly unanimously adopted the “Resolution for the Strengthening of the Macedonian State Position in the Context of the Blockades of European Integration”, with only one abstention. This resolution also dug deep into the bag of national historical rhetoric. According to the resolution, talks with Bulgaria must be conducted with “respect for the value of the Macedonian people” and “must recognize, without reservation, the findings of Macedonian social sciences, humanities and cultural studies in connection with the autochthony of the Macedonian people and their historical, linguistic, cultural and religious continuity” (Sobranie 2021). The Macedonian negotiators were asked to take into account not only the findings of “Macedonian” research, but also the “established facts and accepted theories as well as empirical studies of contemporary international Slavic studies, linguistics, historiography and international law,” in particular regarding the “centuries-old” continuity of the Macedonian language and identity. Quite apart from the question of the extent to which there is actually a scholarly consensus on these issues—there is none—the problem here is of a much more fundamental nature. Greater Bulgarian primordialism is challenged by North Macedonia’s own version, in which the Macedonian people have always existed and where everything that happened on the territory of today’s North Macedonia is part of a national Macedonian narrative. This is in line with popular romantic views among the Macedonians, including a number of professional historians. The only surprising thing was that the representatives of the Albanian parties in parliament agreed to this (Sobranie 2021).

The resolution contradicts itself insofar as it also comes up with the modern-sounding form of words that the “shared places of memory in the Balkans and the Mediterranean make an inclusive approach necessary, instead of an exclusive appropriation of history and tradition” (Sobranie 2021). The document is quite right in upholding “intellectual freedom” and in warning against anachronistic historical stereotypes and illusions, but it is not consistent in applying these principles. Instead of just highlighting the intellectual fallacy of Bulgaria’s position, the Macedonian parliament produced its own absurdity. This shows once again that Macedonian nationalism is essentially defensive, yet no less prone than its Bulgarian counterpart to demanding interpretive sovereignty over those persons and events deemed crucial for Macedonian national identity. This is an unfortunate but understandable response to the denial of their very identity by a more powerful neighbour. With its publication in the Official Gazette (*Služben vesnik*),

the parliamentary resolution has taken on a normative character and provides the country's government with a framework for negotiations with Bulgaria. As expected, the Bulgarian Foreign Ministry expressed its disappointment (MFA 2021b).

Historians as Diplomats

One Bulgarian demand that came up again and again was for the joint expert commission to continue its work and formulate recommendations on how to interpret the “common” history of the two countries (judging from Bulgaria's framework position, the outcome of this work is not supposed to be open-ended). Bulgaria's understanding of “common” (*обща*) history is indicative: to Bulgarian ears, it indicates sameness. The Macedonian historians in the joint commission, on the other hand, interpret “common” (in Macedonian, *заедничка*) as meaning “shared” but not same, which implies that views on the “shared” past might differ. Official Bulgaria evidently cultivates a traditionalist understanding of history, in which an eternally existing, ethnically defined “people” is the bearer of history and according to which there is only one “historical truth” (Gerov 2020; Gjorgiev and Todorov 2020).

The trust of the Bulgarian government in the joint commission is likely rooted in the composition of the Bulgarian delegation. The Joint Multidisciplinary Commission of Experts on Historical and Educational Issues, as its official name reads, was established on the basis of the 2017 friendship treaty between Bulgaria and North Macedonia. The Macedonian government did not show much enthusiasm for the creation of this commission, as its agenda was driven by the Bulgarian obsession with Macedonian history. Yet, it agreed in the hope that this would help normalize relations between the two countries. Now the work of the joint commission has become a major argument in Bulgaria's accusation that North Macedonia did not fulfil its obligations according to the friendship treaty and, thus, did not qualify for EU membership. This was a strange justification, covered neither by the Copenhagen criteria, nor European law. It meant there were high expectations of and a great deal of pressure on the academics sent into the commission, who practically became judges in a bilateral dispute. This obviously impeded the task actually assigned to the commission, which Article 8 of the friendship treaty defined as being to interpret historical events “objectively” on the basis of “authentic historical sources” (Treaty 2017).

The joint expert commission was modelled on the bilateral commissions of historians formed between other countries with difficult shared pasts. The most important examples are those between the Federal Republic of Germany and the countries that were invaded and occupied by Germany during World War Two. The

main difference is that these commissions deal with German occupation and war crimes, the Holocaust and genocide, and postwar retribution such as the expulsion of the German minorities. In the case of Bulgaria and Macedonia, the commission is supposed to resolve such earth-shattering problems as whether the anti-Ottoman freedom fighter Goce Delčev was a Bulgarian or a Macedonian, the 1903 Ilinden uprising was a precursor to independent Macedonia or an attempt at unification with Bulgaria, Tsar Samuil’s short-lived empire was “Bulgarian” or not, etc. For the national audiences in Bulgaria and North Macedonia, these issues certainly matter. Yet little harm would be done if the two countries’ divergent answers to these questions were permitted to exist side by side. These national interpretations are victims of the same epistemological fallacy of national unambiguity and teleology anyway. Questions like this rarely produce innovative research, instead tending to spark anachronistic controversies about the national character of events that took place long before nations were even invented.

The activities of the joint commission soon came to an end after just a few initial meetings. According to the Bulgarian side, their North Macedonian counterparts lacked commitment, which was probably true. The April 2020 elections in Macedonia (ultimately held in July), the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and finally the series of election campaigns in Bulgaria in 2021 were the immediate reasons the commission interrupted its work after its seventh meeting in November 2019 (Gerov 2020). Given the highly polarized and charged political climate in Macedonia, the Macedonian members of the commission in particular feared that any compromise on their side might be seen as treason by a nationalist public and be exploited by the political opposition for their own interests. Two Macedonian members of the commission, Dragi Gjorgiev and Petar Todorov, highlighted how history was being instrumentalized for fostering divisions in Macedonian society (Gjorgiev and Todorov 2021). Bulgaria’s blockade could not but stir up national sentiment and increased the likelihood of treason charges against historians who might question national myths. These fears were to be proven justified (see below). It became clear that the Bulgarian side was politically much more invested in the commission than the Macedonian one (although the opposite was true when it came to the public’s attention). When in February 2022 the head of the Macedonian delegation, Dragi Gjorgiev, suggested suspending the commission for a year or two in order not to undermine the ongoing political rapprochement between the two governments, his suggestion was flatly rejected by the Bulgarian Foreign Ministry. In fact, the Bulgarian government went on to announce three further meetings of the commission for 2022 (Nikolov 2022).

The difficulties in the work of the commission were also rooted in conceptual disagreements (Gerov 2020). As already mentioned, each side has a different understanding of what “common” or “shared” history means—the very thing they are

supposed to explore. It appears that the majority on each side also has a different fundamental understanding of history, especially in the way the emergence of nations and the construction of memory are to be interpreted. If nations are constructed, then national narratives of continuity going back centuries or millennia are constructed as well—this seems to be the prevalent view among the Macedonian members, whereas the Bulgarian delegates subscribe to a more traditionalist view on history, in which Bulgarians and Macedonians formed one people (ethnos) before 1944. While one side talks about cultures of memory and “histories” in the plural, and questions the belief in “historical truths” (Gjorgiev and Todorov 2021), the other speaks of “facts” and “objectivity”.

The composition of the commission itself is telling. Most Macedonian members are from the younger generation and are primarily researchers, while among the Bulgarian members it is conspicuous that four out of seven served in the diplomatic service and another one was rector of the University of Sofia.⁴ The head on the Bulgarian side, Angel Dimitrov, was born in 1945 and had worked on the history of the Bulgarian “national question” at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences since the 1970s, that is, the high time of national communism. From 1994 to 2001, he served as Bulgarian ambassador to Skopje. Another Bulgarian member, Naum Kajčev, also held a diplomatic post in Macedonia, as Consul General in Bitola (2007–2010). Momčil Metodiev, a historian at the New Bulgarian University in Sofia and specialist in the history of the Orthodox Church during communism, has a ten-year stint in the Foreign Ministry behind him. Kiril Topalov (born 1943), whose family came from Macedonia to Bulgaria, is a literary scholar and writer, who served as Bulgarian ambassador to Athens from 1998 to 2002 and later also to the Vatican. Bulgarian experts on Macedonia whose views run counter to the nationalist mainstream are conspicuous in their absence.

Dragi Gjorgiev, the head of the Macedonian side, is an expert on the Ottoman period and director of the Institute of National History in Skopje as well as a member of the Macedonian Academy of Sciences.⁵ The cohort of younger historians, who received their training after communism, some of them abroad, is well represented in the Macedonian delegation currently with three members (one of these, Darko Stojanov, withdrew and was replaced by political scientist Ognen Vanelov). In Ljubica Spaskovska, lecturer at the University of Exeter, the Macedonian delegation includes an international member as well, and in Isamedin

⁴ For a list of members, see the entry in the Bulgarian Wikipedia on “Съвместна мултидисциплинарна комисия между България и Северна Македония” (Joint Multidisciplinary Commission between Bulgaria and North Macedonia), https://bg.wikipedia.org/wiki/Съвместна_мултидисциплинарна_комисия_между_България_и_Северна_Македония.

⁵ I would like to thank Petar Todorov from the Institute of National History in Skopje for providing valuable information on the Macedonian delegation.

Azizi from the Institute of Albanian Cultural Heritage (he previously also worked at the Institute of National History) has someone from the Albanian minority. Ethnologist Liupčo Risteski from Skopje University broadens the disciplinary profile. It thus appears that the Macedonian members were mainly chosen because of their academic merits, while the Bulgarian members were selected because they are heavyweights in the politics of history (not to refute their academic credentials).

In 2022, the meetings of the commission resumed, after a political rapprochement of the two governments. The new Bulgarian prime minister, Kiril Petkov, signalled that he was interested in a compromise. In late June 2022, a proposal was made by the French presidency of the European Council under which Bulgaria would lift its veto if North Macedonia agrees to include the Bulgarians as a constitutive people in the preamble of the constitution. The French proposal also included making the progress on the 2017 friendship treaty part of North Macedonia’s accession protocol, thus formally incorporating bilateral issues of history, identity and language into North Macedonia’s membership bid. Bulgarian legislators, with a majority of 170 out of 240, promptly passed a declaration that allowed the government to lift its veto on starting membership negotiations with North Macedonia (Marusic 2022a). The Macedonian reaction to the French proposal was less welcoming. The government declared that North Macedonia would need further guarantees from Bulgaria that it would not use its veto power for other identity-related issues in the future. It also pointed out that the two-thirds majority needed for a change to the constitution was unlikely (Marusic 2022b). In early July, nationalist demonstrators, led by the opposition party VMRO-DPMNE, took to the streets in Skopje for several days of protest against any “betrayal” of national history. The protests even turned violent (Bytyci 2022; Marusic 2022c).

The looming compromise on the political front, albeit far from accomplished and still severely contested in Skopje, reinvigorated the work of the expert commission. On 15 August 2022, the commission’s recommendations for a joint celebration of historical personalities as well as for a correction of history textbooks for the fifth grade in Bulgaria and the sixth grade in North Macedonia were published (MKD 2022).⁶ These recommendations had already been agreed in July 2019 and accepted by the two governments but not yet made public (MFA 2022). While the recommendations did not attract much public attention in Bulgaria, they sparked a massive backlash in North Macedonia, corroborating the fears of the North Macedonian members of the expert commission.

⁶ The Bulgarian version (Протокол от първото заседание на Съвместната междуправителствена комисия) can be found on the website of the Bulgarian Foreign Ministry at <https://www.mfa.bg/upload/83990/Protokol.pdf>.

The recommendations were modest (MKD 2022). The document states some essential facts about Saints Cyril, Method, Kliment, and Naum and recommends that their jubilees be celebrated jointly by the two countries. The recommendations stress these saints' crucial contributions to Christian and Slavic culture and propose both countries honour them. None of them is classified as either Bulgarian or Macedonian. Concerning Tsar Samuil, in somewhat opaque terms, the commission recommends the celebration of him to be a "symbol of shared values and genuine good neighbourhood and friendship." The document points out that the large medieval state ruled by Samuil is acknowledged by most historical scholarship as a Bulgarian state with its political centre on the territory of today's North Macedonia. The "dramatic" history of Samuil and his state "are a symbol of the common history shared by the two modern states, Bulgaria and North Macedonia." Regarding the aforementioned history textbooks for fifth (Bulgaria) and sixth (North Macedonia) graders, the recommendations were equally restrained. "Some shortcomings" were identified, for example in the portrayal of ancient history and the use of historical maps. In Macedonian textbooks, the suggestion of continuity between ancient Macedonia and today's country was classified as a "historical anachronism."

The modest nature of the recommendation did not prevent a fierce backlash in North Macedonia. Todor Čepreganov, a former director of the Institute of National History, described the commission and their recommendations as "incompetent." They would, he claimed, undermine "Macedonian national identity, language and culture." He saw the recommendations as an attempt to "erase the collective memory of the Macedonian people" (Plusinfo 2022). According to Čepreganov, two different peoples cannot jointly celebrate the same individuals. The medievalist Mitko Bankov, also from the Institute of National History, rejected the classification of Tsar Samuil's state as "Bulgarian." According to him, this state was formed totally independently of Bulgaria, which had ceased to exist in 971 (Panov 2022). Apparently, there is a healthy pluralism of opinions at the most important historical institute in North Macedonia! One hundred academics and intellectuals, many of them from the Macedonian Academy of Sciences, published an open letter against the recommendations. In their view, "Macedonian history constitutes the sovereign interest of the Republic of Macedonia" (Topalova 2022). The opposition leader Hristijan Mickoski from the national conservative VMRO-DPMNE party also weighed in and accused the Macedonian members of the commission of taking their orders from the government and the ruling social democrats—allegedly in exchange for honoraria of 80,000 euros (Expres 2022).

An editorial of the (social democratic-leaning) newspaper *Nova Makedonija* came to the defence of the Macedonian members of the commission, and pointing out their uncomfortable position in the "antechamber of hell." Facing an agitated

domestic audience, they were caught in “dialogue of the deaf” with Bulgarian members who continue to consider the Macedonians Bulgarians (Botsevski 2022). Other voices, too, came to the defence of the Macedonian commission members, showcasing the plurality of historical views in North Macedonia.

Conclusion

When, three years ago, the Bulgarian government decided to link its approval of EU accession of North Macedonia with a long list of history and identity-related demands that Skopje was to fulfil, it opened a Pandora box that is proving difficult to close again. Bulgaria’s veto did not do much to advance the friendship treaty and made the work of the expert commission on historical issues even more difficult. It put the Macedonian experts in a delicate position as they had to balance their academic ethos with the overarching strategic goal of their country to join the European Union (and to overcome the Bulgarian obstruction to achieving that goal). There are three conclusions from this mess that I would like to highlight here.

First, in Bulgaria, in North Macedonia and in the Balkans in general, history continues to matter for the wrong reasons. Politicians employ a language of “objectivity”, “truth”, and “facts” in order to promote national mythologies, and they find willing historians to parrot their views. Understood in this way, history can become a matter of bilateral negotiations, in which “facts” are traded. Deconstructivist positions which are aware of the narrative nature of history and the multiperspectivity of historical interpretations are stuck between a rock and a hard place: they are steamrolled by traditionalist views as these are much more invested in debates such as whether Goce Delčev was Bulgarian or Macedonian. At the same time, a reflective view on national identity which is aware of its constructed nature is seen by an agitated domestic public as betraying national values. The denial of the Macedonians’ singularity by Bulgaria sparks a defensive reaction from Macedonian scholars who feel obliged to devote much energy to defend “their” historical truths. In such an atmosphere, there is little willingness to jointly tackle the issues that really deserve attention, such as Bulgaria’s complicity in the Holocaust against Macedonia’s Jews or the political suppression of Bulgaria-oriented Macedonians in the late 1940s.

Second, Bulgaria’s “phantom pains” for Macedonia are proving difficult to alleviate. They might recede from time to time but like a dormant inflammation can become acute at any politically convenient moment. The arguments used to justify claims on Macedonia remain the same; in the current dispute, the Bulgarian side has not produced any substantially new ideas since those analysed by Stefan Troebst 40 years ago (Troebst 1983). This is also why it is so unappealing to devote

attention to this issue: everything said has already been heard many times before. Once again, the lasting legacy of national communism for historical thinking in Bulgaria is in evidence here. Paradoxically, Macedonia does not seem to be on the minds of ordinary Bulgarians very much. The latter consider the notorious corruption and low standards of living to be Bulgaria's most pressing problems. However, politicians do care about Macedonian matters and few dare to break with the Bulgarian mainstream view. This is yet another example of the wide disconnect between popular concerns and politicians in Bulgaria.

Third, even a blatantly preposterous government position can become EU policy, if no one else cares, or other EU members are willing to hide behind the obscurantism of one of their own. Bulgaria's demands of North Macedonia were unjustified and blatantly unfair. To give an example: while Bulgaria insists on the inclusion of Bulgarians as a constitutive people in the Macedonian constitution, it persists in denying the existence of a Macedonian minority in Bulgaria, despite 30 years of efforts by the United Macedonian Organization Ilinden-Pirin, which seeks to represent the interests of the minority, to be registered and it does so against several judgements of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR 2022). For more than two years, Bulgaria paid no political costs for its obstructionist behaviour, despite undermining the stated priorities of the EU. This did little to improve the EU's reputation in North Macedonia and Albania. Some suspected that other EU countries wary of further enlargement (especially France and the Netherlands) were not entirely unhappy about Bulgaria's blockade. The compromise suggested during the French EU council presidency in June 2022 put the onus once again on North Macedonia and set a dangerous precedent: what was there to stop other countries from trying to turn their nationalist pathologies into official EU policy in the future?

At a historical moment when denial of the distinctiveness of the identity and history of a nation serves as justification for a brutal war of aggression and cultural annihilation, the EU needs an early warning system against policymakers who pursue irredentism and question the existence of other nations, however unlikely their designs are to ever turn into reality. It should definitely not reward them by forcing their victim to change its constitution.

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