

ELIAMEP Briefing Notes

55 /2017

November 2017

A new Balkan rapprochement. Skopje accepts Sofia's positions allowing for bilateral relations to move forward

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On August 1st, 2017 Bulgaria and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia signed a Treaty of Friendship, Good-Neighborhood, and Cooperation, a major step forward in their bilateral relations, following years of what could be described as of "relative stagnation". The signing of the treaty became possible, almost ten years since Sofia had suggested it for the first time, after the two sides reached an understanding on a number of "thorny issues", on the basis of key Bulgarian positions. Thus the Treaty provides for the establishment of an expert's committee to examine "educational and historical issues" on the basis of "authentic and proven historical sources" (Art 8, Par 2), and for the celebration of "common historical events and personalities" (Art 8, Par 3); while the "Republic of Macedonia agrees that nothing in its Constitution can or should be interpreted as providing the basis for interference in the internal affairs of the Republic of Bulgaria, in order to protect the legal status and the rights of persons that are not citizens of the Republic of Macedonia" (Art 11, Par 5).ⁱ

All previous governments in FYROM, led by VMRO-DPMNE that was in power from 2006 until 2016, proved unwilling to accept those Bulgarian positions; on the contrary the "identity policies", that occupied much of Nikola Gruevski's policy agenda, had only succeeded in antagonizing and alienating Bulgarian public opinion.ⁱⁱ The recent government change in Skopje and the formation of the new coalition government led by SDSM, led to a new chapter in Bulgarian-FYROM relations. The new government is strongly committed on pushing forward the Euro-Atlantic integration of the country, and it understands that in order to do that it has, at first, to improve relations with FYROM's neighbors. In the case of FYROM-Bulgarian bilateral relations, Sofia had made it clear to Skopje, at least since December 2012, that it would not consent for an opening of EU accession negotiations unless Skopje would satisfy three preconditions: the signing of a friendship and cooperation agreement, joint government sessions as well as an agreement for joint celebrations of notable personalities and events "in our common

A new Balkan rapprochement. Skopje accepts Sofia's positions allowing for bilateral relations to move forward

history".ⁱⁱⁱ The new treaty commits Bulgaria on assisting FYROM in its Euro-Atlantic integration, and even more, it expressly commits Sofia in supporting FYROM's efforts to join NATO, "in accordance", however, to "relative decisions by NATO summit meetings" (Art 2, Par 2).^{iv} The treaty of friendship was accompanied by two more agreements: a memorandum on the construction of the Sofia-Skopje railway (part of the European VIII corridor), that has been a long-standing Bulgarian aim, to be completed until 2027, and on the construction of a pipeline between the two countries.^v While on 18 November Prime Minister Zoran Zaev announced that a joint session of the two governments will be held in Strumica, on 23 November, when ten new agreements will be signed, adding that "I would like for us, in Macedonia, both the government and the opposition to support such important documents, which opens, not only friendship, but also great alliance between Bulgaria and Macedonia, in order to help the citizens of Macedonia in the integration process for membership in the European Union and NATO".^{vi}

The treaty understandably has created high expectations about the prospects opening-up for the development of bilateral relations, and its assessment has been unanimously positive in Sofia. The Bulgarian Prime Minister hailed the signing of the treaty, declaring that "The agreement is important because it shows the EU that in the Balkans [...] two countries, without external intervention, have demonstrated that peace and good neighbour relations are the most important thing",^{vii} while Krasimir Karakachanov, VMRO's leader and Bulgarian Minister of Defense characteristically stated that "the treaty ends a period of silly quarrels between two countries that share a common history, language, and culture".^{viii}

The reception of the treaty was however different in Skopje. VMRO-DPMNE, now in opposition, declared on 31 July that if the text of the treaty remains "as it is" it would not support its ratification in Parliament, because "in one or in one and a half years... Macedonia will come face to face with issues that will be resolved at its expense" - although in principle the signing of the treaty was a positive development "because it strengthens the cooperation and friendship" of the two countries, and it commits Bulgaria in "supporting more actively Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration".^{ix} While on 21 July, Traiko Velianovski, the head of VMRO-DPMNE' parliamentary group, claimed that "it is deeply unpleasant... to accuse your own people of spreading nationalism and hate... VMRO-DPMNE is particularly worried by the lack of transparency and by the superficial way by which Zaev is dealing with such a serious matter, as that of the... treaty with Bulgaria. This issue is violating the identity and history of the Macedonian nation... Macedonia has its own history and is particularly dangerous to talk about a "common history", as it generates the impression that the Macedonian people did not have their own history in the past... does really Zaev understand how dangerous are these ideas?"^x Even more critical against the content

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of the treaty were historians and media in FYROM. Thus, speaking to the newspaper *Вечер* historian Alexandar Stoychev argued that “the common celebration of St Ilia (i.e. of the 1903 revolution that broke out in Ottoman Macedonia against the Ottoman power and is one of the most important national days in FYROM) means that we are negating our nation... The common celebration of the biggest Macedonian national day together with Bulgaria is an act that is contrary to historical events. No Balkan state, including Bulgaria, supported Macedonian revolutionaries in their struggle for their own state”.^{xi} While newspaper *Република* accused Zaev “of inviting Borisov to celebrate together St Ilia’s day in Macedonia” and for “surrendering our history to Bulgaria”.^{xii}

The Treaty of Friendship, Good-Neighborhood, and Cooperation signed between FYROM and Bulgaria could signal the significant upgrading of relations between the two countries, “converting” Sofia into a valuable advocate of FYROM in international fora, and in particular NATO and the EU, something that could, potentially, generate tension in its relations with Athens. Still, in order for FYROM to manage to complete its Euro-Atlantic integration, Skopje has to proceed with the full normalization of its bilateral relations with all its neighbors, and in particular Athens. And for this to happen a solution to the so-called “name-dispute” has to be found.

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ⁱ ДОГОВОР ЗА ПРИЯТЕЛСТВО, ДОБРОСЪСЕДСТВО И СЪТРУДНИЧЕСТВО МЕЖДУ РЕПУБЛИКА БЪЛГАРИЯ И РЕПУБЛИКА МАКЕДОНИЯ, <http://www.mfa.bg/uploads/files/1501093350Dogovor-RM-RB.pdf> (last accessed 17/11/2017)

ⁱⁱ Y. Christidis, I. Armakolas, P. Paschalidis, “Greek-Bulgarian Relations: Present State and Future Challenges”, *ELIAMEP*, March 2017, p. 20-21

ⁱⁱⁱ Sinisa Jakov Marusic, “Bulgaria and Greece Block Macedonia's EU Talks”, *BIRN, Balkan Insight*, 12 December 2012, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/bulgaria-joins-greece-in-blocking-macedonia-s-eu-bid>, (last access 5/7/2016)

^{iv} ДОГОВОР ЗА ПРИЯТЕЛСТВО, ДОБРОСЪСЕДСТВО И СЪТРУДНИЧЕСТВО МЕЖДУ РЕПУБЛИКА БЪЛГАРИЯ И РЕПУБЛИКА МАКЕДОНИЯ

^v «Ο Διάδρομος № 8 αποτελεί τη βάση της ένταξης των Δυτικών Βαλκανίων», *БНР*, 1 August 2017, <http://bnr.bg/el/post/100858835/o-djiadromos-8-apotelei-ti-vasi-tis-entaksis-ton-djutikon-valkanion> (last accessed 2/8/2017), also

^{vi} “Joint session of the governments of Macedonia and Bulgaria to be held in Strumica”, *European Western Balkans*, 18 November 2017, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2017/11/18/joint-session-governments-macedonia-bulgaria-held-strumica/> (last accessed 19/11/2017)

A new Balkan rapprochement. Skopje accepts Sofia's positions allowing for bilateral relations to move forward

vii Francesco Martino, "Bulgaria and Macedonia, good neighbours?" *Osservatorio Balkani e Caucaso Transeuropa*, 11 August 2017, <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Bulgaria/Bulgaria-and-Macedonia-good-neighbours-181841> (last accessed 17/11/2017)

viii *Ibid*

ix Nikola Lalov, 'Makedonskata opozitsia do posledno ne priema dogovora s Balgaria', 31 Juli 2017, mediapool.bg, <http://www.mediapool.bg/makedonskata-opozitsiya-do-posledno-ne-priema-dogovora-s-bulgaria-news267332.html> (last accessed 2/8/2017)

x "Партията на Груевски твърдо против бъдещия договор с България", actualno.com, 21/7/2017 https://www.actualno.com/balkani/partijata-na-gruevski-tvyrdo-protiv-bydeshtija-dogovor-s-bylgarija-news_618247.html (last accessed 24/7/2017)

xi "В Македония бесни: Договорът с България – предателство!", dnes.bg, 1/8/2017, <http://www.dnes.bg/obshtestvo/2017/06/22/v-makedoniia-besni-dogovoryt-s-bylgariia-predatelstvo.345114> (last accessed 2/8/2017)

xii *ibid*