

Bulgaria sets tough conditions on North Macedonia's EU accession path

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On 9 October 2019 the Bulgarian government adopted the so-called "Framework Position In Relation To EU Expansion And The Process Of Stabilization and Association: Republic North Macedonia And Albania". Although in the resolution it is stated that Bulgaria "welcomes and supports the recommendation of the European Commission to open accession negotiations with North Macedonia as well as with Albania"¹ and that accession to the EU "is an important step (in the direction) of guaranteeing peace, stability and the steady development and prosperity of the region", it soon becomes clear that Sofia sets a number of strict preconditions. Sofia renders its support dependent upon the whole accession process, and contingent upon Skopje addressing, what it sees as the "anti-Bulgarian ideological foundations of Macedonianism" (the national ideology of the "Macedonian people") constructed after 1944 and the establishment of the Socialist Republic of Macedonia in post Second World War Yugoslavia. Thus, in the preamble of the resolution it is made clear, in no uncertain terms, that Sofia "will not allow the integration of North Macedonia into the EU to be accompanied by the European legitimization of a state-sponsored ideology on an anti-Bulgarian basis... [as the] re-writing of the history of the Bulgarian people after 1944 is among the pillars of the anti-Bulgarian ideological structure of Yugoslav totalitarianism".²

The resolution proceeds to underline that Bulgaria's support to North Macedonia's EU accession is tied to the implementation of the Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighborliness and Cooperation, signed between the two countries in August 2017, and specifically on achieving "real progress in the implementation of the letter and spirit of the Treaty". As "real progress" Sofia expects from Skopje, during the course of the accession negotiations, to address a number of issues relating to the official narrative of "Macedonian national identity", constructed after 1944, dealing with the historical past, attaching special emphasis on the work of the Joint Multidisciplinary Expert Commission on Historical and Educational Issues. Sofia demands that North Macedonia terminates any interest and policy of support for recognizing a Macedonian minority in Bulgaria. In addition, it repeats the official Bulgarian position of not recognizing the Macedonian language, even declaring that "the language norm, declared in the constitutional language of the Republic of North Macedonia is related to the evolution of the Bulgarian language and its dialects", while it "clarifies" that the term North Macedonia "foreseen by the Prespes Agreement... refers only to the political subject of the Republic of North Macedonia, and not to the geographical region of North Macedonia, part of which belongs to the geographical boundaries of Bulgaria".³

¹ РАМКОВА ПОЗИЦИЯ ОТНОСНО РАЗШИРЯВАНЕ НА ЕС И ПРОЦЕСА НА СТАБИЛИЗИРАНЕ И АСОЦИИРАНЕ: РЕПУБЛИКА СЕВЕРНА МАКЕДОНИЈА И АЛБАНИЈА

² See Annex

³ See Annex

The Bulgarian government resolution stands out for its tone and content, setting specific, strict preconditions to North Macedonia that will certainly bring into a difficult position any government in Skopje, as their satisfaction touches upon core issues of “Macedonian nation-building and identity”. Thus, few people outside Bulgaria expected such an official document issued by Sofia. After all, the formation of Zaeв's government in May 2017, in North Macedonia, signified an important moment in bilateral relations, as the new government, although led by a party (SDSM) that was historically seen in Bulgaria as sponsoring “anti-Bulgarian attitudes in Macedonia”, had made a huge leap forward in accepting Sofia's approach on bilateral rapprochement, opening the way for the signing of the historic 2017 Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighborliness and Cooperation.⁴ Following the signing of the agreement more important steps had been taken, in the direction of bridging differences on historical issues (such as difference over the medieval period), and on advancing tourist, trade relations and infrastructural projects, like transport corridor No 8.⁵

So what went wrong? Increasingly during the last 12 months, political forces (VMRO, ATAKA) and intellectual quarters (members of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, university professors) in Sofia would accuse Skopje of “insincerity” on sensitive issues concerning their “common history” and of “prevarication” in the work of the Joint Multidisciplinary Expert Commission on Historical and Educational Issues. Already in December 2018, the Bulgarian Minister of Defense, and Deputy Prime Minister of Public Order, Krasimir Karakachanov – and leader of the VMRO that sees itself as the guardian of “Bulgarian heritage in Macedonia” – accused Skopje of continuing to “play tricks ... falsify history and... forcing a Macedonian identity and language not only within Macedonia, but also on Bulgarian territory”.⁶

Bulgarian resentment intensified during 2019, as meeting after meeting of the Joint Multidisciplinary Expert Commission would fail to come to an agreement concerning the personality of Gotse Delchev, an important revolutionary figure in turn of the 20th century Ottoman Macedonia, claimed by both Bulgarian and North Macedonian historiography.⁷ Then, in advance of the important EU Summit on 16 October 2019, concerning the opening of the EU accession negotiations with North Macedonia, Karakachanov raised the stakes. The Bulgarian Defense Minister declared that he would not support the accession of North Macedonia, underlying that Bulgaria should not give its green light “until all falsifications of the history of the Bulgarian people in Macedonia are cleared”, accusing Skopje of “not

⁴ See Yorgos Christidis, “A new Balkan rapprochement. Skopje accepts Sofia's positions allowing for bilateral relations to move ahead”, ELIAMEP Briefing Notes 55/2017, November 2017

⁵ Надежда Неменски, “България и Македония искат бързо изграждане на Коридор № 8”, 10 June 2019, Vesti.bg, <https://www.vesti.bg/bulgaria/bylgariia-i-makedoniia-iskat-byrzo-izgrazhdane-na-koridor-8-6096343> (last access 5/8/2019)

⁶ Martin Dimitrov, Sinisa Jakov, Marusic, “Bulgarian Minister Touches Raw Nerve in Macedonia”, Balkan Insight, 10 December 2018, <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/12/10/language-and-history-remarks-upset-macedonia-bulgaria-relations-12-10-2018/> (last access 20/12/2018)

⁷ Проф. Ангел Димитров: Разочароваща е седмата среща на Съвместната мултидисциплинарна експертна комисия по историческите и образователни въпроси”, Агенция “Фокус”, 13 September 2019, <http://www.focus-news.net/news/2019/09/13/2698442/prof-angel-dimitrov-razocharovashata-e-sedmata-sreshata-na-savmestnata-multidistsiplinarna-ekspertna-komisiya-po-istoricheskite-i-obrazovatelni-vaprosi.html> (last access 1/10/2019)

implementing” the 2017 treaty, and even threatening to leave the government in case it would support North Macedonia.⁸

The next day, 30 September 2019, an extraordinary session took place, under the aegis of President Rumen Radev, with the participation of Prime Minister Boyko Borisov, Foreign Minister Ekaterina Zaharieva, Karakachanov, as well as the head of the parliamentary committee on foreign affairs and of the Joint Multidisciplinary Expert Commission on Historical and Educational Issues, to discuss bilateral relations between Bulgaria and North Macedonia on the eve of the scheduled for the mid-October EU Summit. Borisov stated that “the membership of North Macedonia to the EU is important, however it cannot take place at our expense, with a rewritten history... I always have said that we are one people... Let's accept that we are brotherly people. Let's that murderous war... by Skopje stop, because we have no other people closer to us... We have never said that we unconditionally support their entry into the EU. Let's stop playing with history and the past and concentrate upon the future...” Karakachanov once more declared that “we cannot support unconditionally North Macedonia in its path towards the EU, these people are playing with us.” President Radev announced that “the participants in the meeting had agreed in principle that immediate action on working out a national position with clear demands and criteria, defending Bulgaria's national interest is necessary”, adding that it is important “to draw red lines that will guarantee that North Macedonia's access to the EU will not take place at the expense of Bulgarian history, language and identity”.⁹

After a few days, North Macedonia's Prime Minister, Zoran Zaev, in a rather conciliatory tone stated that instructions had been given to the Joint Commission not to seek to establish the absolute historical truth, but to agree upon specific facts disputed until now, through however the prism of friendship between modern European countries and nations. “The aim of the negotiations is how to value our identity in the Balkans, this however cannot take precedence over the future of our citizens. The agreement with Bulgaria, as well as with Greece, guarantees issues of identity and gives a serious perspective to our country. We are on the eve of a historic decision...”. According to Zaev, commissions should not seek to establish a definite history as “with the passing of time, new historical facts are being established, [however] there are historical facts that are not being challenged by any country. It is true that in the past we have had a common history. It is true that we have had periods that no Macedonian state, no Bulgarian state existed. We had a history kept by our grandfathers and great-grandfathers. It is important that we confirmed that we [also] have a separate history, when we developed separately, as two nations that wish to be brothers”.¹⁰

⁸ Каракачанов: ВМРО напуска властта, ако подкрепим Северна Македония в ЕС”, Vesti.bg, 29 September 2019, <https://www.vesti.bg/bulgaria/vmro-napuska-vlastta-ako-podkrepim-severna-makedoniia-v-es-6100221> (last access 2/10/2019)

⁹ Надежда Неменски,” Борисов за Македония: Да спрат да си играят с историята”, Vesti.bg, <https://www.vesti.bg/bulgaria/borisov-za-makedoniia-da-sprat-da-si-igraiat-s-istoriata-6100241> (last access 2/10/2019)

¹⁰ Николай Киров, “Заев за Македония: „Нямаме план „Б” с България”, Vesti.bg, 3 October 2019, <https://www.vesti.bg/sviat/zaev-za-makedoniia-niamame-plan-b-s-bylgariia-6100410> (last access 4/10/2019)

Zaev's conciliatory tone was not shared by everyone inside North Macedonia. Risto Nikovski, a prominent ex-diplomat, accused Bulgaria "of waging a war against Macedonia that could not be colder..." According to Nikovski, "The treaty of capitulation that we signed gives them the right to show what is not proven... They are trying with all their powers to appropriate a key part of our history, with their only aim to persuade us of our Bulgarian descent. Symbol of all that is, of course, the personality of Gotse Delchev... Is there any bigger humiliation to negotiate about your history with your neighbors? This is exactly what our Macedonia is doing, and we should not wonder what is happening. With the signing of the asymmetrical agreements with Bulgaria and Greece, Macedonia put itself into a position of dependency, with the consequences proving even fatal for the survival of the Macedonian people... Now we have no doubts that the aggression on the side of Athens, and particularly of Sofia, has never expressed itself more clearly and been more dangerous. Both have clear intentions to inflict a fatal blow on the Macedonian national identity. They think that the time has come for the final settling of the Macedonian question".¹¹

The hardening of Sofia's position vis-à-vis North Macedonia and the attempt to condition Skopje's accession process upon the previous satisfaction of a number of key Bulgarian preconditions undoubtedly constitutes a critical moment in bilateral, Bulgarian-North Macedonian relations. No Bulgarian government in the future may easily ignore or abandon these strict conditions. Sofia has "bound itself" into a tough diplomatic position, reminiscent of Greek policy vis-à-vis North Macedonia, where dominant perceptions of history-identity and a feeling of diplomatic superiority dictated a strict diplomatic position that no Greek government dared to openly question, let alone abandon. Some of the key Bulgarian demands on history, however, touch upon fundamental aspects of the North Macedonian national narrative and nation-building and it will be hard for any government in Skopje to accept. It will certainly take a lot of good will and creative thinking by both sides in order to move forward.

¹¹ Надежда Неменски, „Нова Македонија“: Няма основание 3 март да е празник на България», Vesti.bg, 2 October 2019, <https://www.vesti.bg/bulgaria/nova-makedoniia-niama-osnovanie-3-mart-da-e-praznik-na-bylgariia-6100358> (last access 3/10/2019)

ANNEX

We present here the text adopted by the Bulgarian government on 9 October 2019 ¹²
Translation by Yorgos Christidis; all emphases in original

Framework Position in Relation to EU Enlargement and the Stabilization and Association Process: Republic North Macedonia And Albania

Bulgaria has been consistent in its support in favor of the European perspective of the Western Balkan Countries, as the accession process is a key factor for reforms and the stability of the region. **Bulgaria welcomes and supports the recommendation of the European Commission to open accession negotiations with North Macedonia as well as with Albania.**

At the same time, Bulgaria will not allow the integration of North Macedonia into the EU to be accompanied by the European legitimization of a state-sponsored ideology on an anti-Bulgarian basis. The re-writing of the history of the Bulgarian people after 1944 is among the pillars of the anti-Bulgarian ideological structure of Yugoslav totalitarianism.

The beginning of negotiations should not be interpreted as a guarantee for membership, but as a positive moving power for the acceleration of reforms, strengthening the Rule of Law and maintaining good neighborly relations. Progress towards membership in the EU depends upon individual efforts on implementing the Copenhagen criteria and the preconditions of the Process of Association and Stabilization, including good neighborly relations. Good neighborly relations have a horizontal importance and follows that have to be appreciated at every level of the process of accession of the candidate states.

I. Republic of North Macedonia

The accession of the Republic of North Macedonia is an important step [in the direction] of guaranteeing peace, stability and the steady development and prosperity of the region. Bulgaria was the first to recognize the independence of the country and always has supported, as a matter of principle and with consistency, its European and Euroatlantic integration. Bulgaria's consistent support for the European perspective of the Republic of North Macedonia was reflected also in the Common Declaration from 22 February 1999, in the Memorandum for Cooperation in the Sphere of European and Euroatlantic Integration and in the Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighborliness and Cooperation of 2017, which for us is a solid,

¹² <http://gov.bg/bg/prestsentar/novini/ramkova-pozitsia?fbclid=IwAR1qFw-10TRydlfncON5yPIbmZDnDIOUQwM2VWz7RL8FfVqnQWssqy2XCw> (last accessed 14/10/2019)

legal basis for good neighborly relations and cooperation in accordance with the highest European standards. It was expected that the Treaty would resolve the accumulated from decades problems and provide stimulus and a new perspective to the development of bilateral relations. The signing and implementation of that Treaty was a precondition for the support by Bulgaria for the membership of the Republic of North Macedonia in EU and NATO. In that context, the strict and whole implementation of the letter and spirit of the Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighborliness and Cooperation with the Republic of North Macedonia in a way that guarantees its irreversibility is of key importance and **remains a precondition for progress in the process of joining the EU.**

The Bulgarian position concerning the importance of maintaining good neighborly relations with Bulgaria and implementing the Treaty will be upheld at all levels and formats. In this relation, and maintaining its consistency, Bulgaria **will insist that in the text of the Conclusions of the Council ("Common Questions") of 15th October 2019 will be clear without any doubt, that the implementation of the Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighborliness and Cooperation will be part of the preconditions, implemented in the negotiations for membership.**

Bulgaria will (also) present **a National Declaration**, in the annex of the Conclusions of the Council that will be based upon the present Framework Position

In the course of negotiations on these conclusions, a trend should be established towards setting conditions for organizing the **first Intergovernmental Conference (IC) with the Republic of North Macedonia**. Bulgaria's agreement in holding the first IC will depend upon achieving real progress in the implementation of the letter and spirit of the Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighborliness and Cooperation, including in relation to the work of the Joint Expert Commission on Historical and Educational Issues. Under the term "real progress" it is understood:

1. In general:

- The Republic of North Macedonia is expected to terminate (discontinue) and to refrain from conducting, irrespective under what form, the policy of supporting and encouraging claims for recognizing the so-called "Macedonian minority" in Bulgaria. The Republic of North Macedonia will, without reservations and timely, align its positions and actions in international organizations and in accordance with article 11 of the Treaty of Good Neighborliness, which clearly declares that there are no historical and demographic grounds to look for a minority status for whatever group of citizens in the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria. The multilateral forms and monitoring mechanisms of the Council of Europe should not be instrumentalized by the Republic of Macedonia (in order to) exercise pressure upon the Republic of Bulgaria on issues relating to the rights of persons belonging to minority groups;

- The Republic of North Macedonia to declare with a verbal note to member-states of the UN, that compliance to the changes that have taken place in the Constitution of North Macedonia in line with the Prespes Agreement, will take place in parallel to the strict adherence to the treaty with Bulgaria in its wholeness, including and in relation to the "language clause" of the Treaty;

- In the note to be clarified that the use of the foreseen by the Prespes Agreement short name refers only to the political subject of the Republic of North Macedonia, and not to the geographical region of North Macedonia, part of which belongs to the geographical boundaries of Bulgaria;
- to begin the process of rehabilitation for the victims of the Yugoslav Communist regime, (who were) repressed because of their Bulgarian self-consciousness;
- to begin the process of disclosing the affiliates of the Security Agencies of former Yugoslavia in today's Republic of North Macedonia;
- to adopt systematic measures for the removal from labels and inscriptions at monuments, memorial plates and buildings, of texts that openly encourage hate against Bulgaria, for example those that include characterizations like "Bulgarian fascist conqueror.

2. On the work of the Joint Multidisciplinary Expert Commission on Historical and Educational Issues:

- reaching specific results in the work of the Commission, verified by the joint intergovernmental commission, in relation to the period of our common history until 1944, including reaching an understanding concerning Gotse Delchev, BMOPO-BMPO and the Ilinden Uprising;
- changing the information labels and other indicators on historical monuments and cultural memorials in pursuance of the already agreed texts;
- agreeing on specific dates on the common remembrance of events and personalities, on which we have an agreement;
- during celebration of events and personalities, on which we have reached an agreement, political figures, representatives of state institutions of the Republic of North Macedonia, as well as media financed by the state budget, to base their official declarations and comments upon the agreed by the Commission texts

As during the first IC the negotiations framework will be approved, Bulgaria clearly states that it will provide its consent only if sensitive for our country issues are reflected in it and specifically:

- [the principle of] good neighborliness should be confirmed as a horizontal criterion in the context of the whole accession process;
- maintaining good neighborly relations and in particular – the implementation of the bilateral Treaties with member states of the EU (Bulgaria and Greece) is an integral part of the applicable conditions and will be judged in the context of Chapter 35;
- Chapter 35 will be among the first to be opened and last to be closed, in order for the implementation of the resulting conditions, to be followed the longest in the context of the accession process to the EU;

- in relation to [the issue of] language, the phrase should be used "official language of the Republic of Macedonia". In the case of absolute necessity to use the term "Macedonian language" in documents and positions of the EU, with an asterisk in a footnote to add "according to the Constitution of the Republic of North Macedonia". It follows to be clear that the language norm, declared in the constitutional language of the Republic of North Macedonia is related to the evolution of the Bulgarian language and its dialects in the once upon a time Yugoslav Republic following its codification after 1944. No document/declaration in the accession process can be seen as recognition from the Bulgarian side, of the existence of the so-called "Macedonian language" as separate from the Bulgarian

In addition, in the opening statement of the EU in the context of the first IC, Bulgaria will insist upon the inclusion in the text [in relation to] of the necessity the Republic of North Macedonia implementing in good faith the spirit and letter of the Treaty of Good Neighborliness with Bulgaria during the whole accession process to the EU.

Bulgaria will depend its agreement on holding a second IC upon:

- a clear engagement and a timeframe for reaching agreement on other important personalities and events on our common history until 1944;

- harmonization of the curriculums in history and literature of the two countries in accordance with what has been achieved by the Joint Multidisciplinary Expert Commission on Historical and Educational Issues. Appropriate historical and literature sources from the 19th and 20th Centuries, in parallel with adapted texts, to be presented and studied in the language form written originally. For that purpose an invitation [should] be issued to representatives of the ministries of culture of the two countries for a follow up participation in the work of the Joint Multidisciplinary Expert Commission;

- a clear engagement and framework for reflecting (materializing) the agreements already achieved in books, documentaries, films and museums financed by the state.

In the subsequent level of the negotiations for membership Bulgaria will insist for the inclusion of guarantees in the negotiating positions of the EU in separate Chapters, (i.e.) that the Treaty of Good Neighborliness will continue to be implemented by the Republic of North Macedonia. **In each one of the Chapters in the accession process a separate position will be prepared**, while for Chapters 35 and 10 the following elements will be included:

Chapter 35 ("Other Issues"):

- The Republic of North Macedonia to apply in its curriculum on history, geography and literature in the relevant school classes/university courses the agreements achieved for the whole specter of the activities of the Joint Multidisciplinary Expert on Historical and Educational Issues;

- The Republic of North Macedonia to implement in relation to relevant historical monuments (monuments, headstones, graves, and other) the agreements achieved for the whole specter of the activities of the Joint Multidisciplinary Expert on Historical and Educational Issues

Chapter 10 (“Information Society and Media”)

- Overcoming (addressing) speech hate in public space, including towards persons who identify themselves as Bulgarians (in relation to implementing professional media standards, reaching transparency on issues of financing and media ownership, regulating online media, and other);

During the concluding phase of negotiations for membership Bulgaria will be guided from the above mentioned considerations while:

- adopting the conclusions of the Council, that approve the future Treaty of Accession of the Republic of Macedonia to the EU;
- signing the same Treaty;
- ratifying the same Treaty

Bulgaria retains its right, on grounds relating to its national security, to discontinue its support to the process of enlargement, including in relation to the real implementation of the Treaty and the achieved progress in the work of the Joint Multidisciplinary Expert Commission on Historical and Educational Issues

II. Albania

The beginning of (accession) negotiations with only one of the two neighboring countries could have negative consequences not only on the other, but also upon the region. The general assessment of the Annual Report for Albania is positive and notices that the country has continued to implement important reforms with specific results that allow it to begin negotiations for membership to the EU

It doesn't follow that the process of joining will be automatic, including by mentioning a date/timeframe for adopting the negotiation framework, organizing the ΜΠΚ for its acceptance and mentioning a date for Albania's access to the EU, **as Bulgaria's consent for the organization of the first IC will depend upon real progress [achieved] in relation to the future steps [taken] guaranteeing the rights of the Bulgarian national minority. We are expecting the adoption of a second legislative [package] in relation to the implementation of the Law on Minorities, as we are [also] expecting the rights of the Bulgarian national minority to be maximally guaranteed, including the learning, without administrative obstacles, of the official Bulgarian language as a mother tongue in regions, where traditionally [ethnic Bulgarians] lived as in Golo Berdo, Gora, Prespa, Korce, Kukës, Elbasan, but also**

elsewhere in Albania's territory, where they permanently live. We are expecting the counting of the population to take place according to the highest European standards and to reflect its real ethnic orientation.

We will work for the conclusions of the Council where a decision will be prepared and included on the beginning of the accession negotiations with the Republic of North Macedonia as well with Albania. At the same time, in the case of not reaching a consensus for beginning the negotiations, Bulgaria will comply with the consensus decision of the Council.