The dispute between North Macedonia and Bulgaria in the light of historical and political issues

DOI: 10.46932/sfdvn4n8-004

Received on: September 26th, 2023
Accepted on: October 24th, 2023

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ABSTRACT
The path towards North Macedonia’s membership in the European Union has been long and arduous. After resolving the naming dispute with Greece, North Macedonia is now facing opposition from Bulgaria, a member of the European Union, over issues related to history, culture, and language. Bulgaria has the right to veto North Macedonia’s accession to the European Union. The current situation in North Macedonia is dire. Corruption is rampant in state administration and society at large. The economy is deteriorating, and the young generation is leaving the country in droves. The international community can play a crucial role in preventing this chaotic social and political situation in North Macedonia. It can push both countries to find a reasonable solution in order for North Macedonia to be part of the European Union as soon as possible.

Keywords: North Macedonia, Bulgaria, historical, cultural and language contest, EU-integration.

1 INTRODUCTION
The saying of Napoleon Bonaparte, “The history of people is written by their geography,” is quite fitting for North Macedonia’s geopolitical position. The country’s location defines its social values, economic foundation, political framework, mentality, judgment, and way of life of its inhabitants.

The relief of North Macedonia itself reveals a lot: it combines plains and mountains, has rare natural beauty, a variable climate throughout the year, and numerous natural resources. These features have always attracted the interest of larger and more powerful countries that wanted to own this land. On the other hand, North Macedonia has always been seen by these countries as a transitional bridge between the West and the East; therefore, it has been the target of foreign invasions.
Even the different cultural influences in this country form the basis for the deep ethnic and religious division, which has constantly turned this country into a powder keg. Therefore, Macedonia is the mother of problems, a country that has never found peace and stability and is always a headache for the population itself, but also for regional and global policies.

Moreover, the constant hostilities between the ethnic groups that share this small living space have fostered stereotypes, prejudices, and hatred towards each other, as well as a hardened mentality with pronounced nationalist tendencies, which breaks away from the dark tradition of the past and moves forward towards progressive global trends.

The genesis of the problem dates to the great Slavic influx in the 6th century AD from the Carpathians, who flooded Balkan countries and gradually brought the entire Balkans under their control, this also includes present day North Macedonia. The organization and even their internal cohesion was so compact that even Byzantium, for 300 years in a row, had difficulty bringing the Balkans under its control, except for two cities, Sofia, and Thessaloniki, which remained under its administration.

However, under Slavic rule, there were dark years. The Balkans returned to prehistoric times, Christianity was undone, ancient civilization faded away, aqueducts were destroyed, and the communication network, culture, art, and literature were neglected. The fate of the local populations was terrible: most fled to countries under Byzantine rule, while others were forced to assimilate. (Weithmann 2000, p. 50-57).

This unprecedented vandalism by the Slavic tribes that invaded the Balkans in the 6th century also explains their actions throughout the centuries until today and sheds light on the historical and political background of the overall situation in the Balkans, as well as in North Macedonia.

However, this Slavic trend was finally stopped by the strengthening of the Ottoman Empire, which fought the non-Muslim religious element and exerted an unprecedented pressure on the peoples of the Balkans. Due to the continuous wars for liberation from the Ottoman yoke, they could not promote their nationalism, language, and culture for more than five centuries.

2 THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE NOTION ‘MACEDONIA’

The Macedonian nation is a new creation. During the Turkish rule, it did not exist as such, nor did the term ‘Macedonia’. However, the first attempt to create a Macedonian identity date back to the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. At that time, the notion of Macedonia was used in Europe as a geographical notion, referring to the ancient state of Macedonia, which extended to the territory of today’s Macedonia. This, of course, was done by the great powers, which, through the Christian peoples of the Balkans, opposed the Ottoman Empire (for more see Riedel 2005, 142).
Officially, the “Macedonian” territory around 1900 was divided into three vilayets (districts), as administrative units of the Ottoman Empire. Both in the Vilayet of Skopje, as well as in the Vilayet of Bitola and Thessaloniki, the different ethnic groups, in the first place, identified with their regional affiliation and mainly the Christian, Muslim peoples and a small number declared as Israelis. Whereas the term Macedonian was a summary notion for all the ethnic groups that lived in these three vilayets (ibidem, p. 93-94).

The first attempts to recognize the Macedonian identity were made by the so-called Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (VMRO), founded in Thessaloniki in 1893, which on August 2, 1903 organized the Krushevo Uprising against the Sublime Porte, at the head of which was the Vlach Pitu Guli. The insurgents managed to take the city of Krushevo and administer it for a short time, declaring it a Republic (Brown 2003, 12).

Then the uprising died down, with great human and material losses, however, one thing was achieved, that against the great powers of the time, the “Macedonian issue” was actualized (ibidem, p. 66-67).

After World War I, the three vilayets mentioned were put under Bulgarian, Greek and Serbian rule, which in history will also be known as Pirin Macedonia (Bulgarian part), Aegean Macedonia (Greek part) and Vardar Macedonia (Serbian part). However, the Bulgarians held the smallest part of the territory at around 9.5% and complained about the injustice done to Bulgaria by the Treaty of Versailles. When the fascists gained supremacy in Europe and Bulgaria became their ally, with the outbreak of World War II, they gave about two-thirds of today’s territory of Macedonia to Bulgaria.

Only after the fall of fascism and with the rise of Tito as the leader of the FSRJ in 1944, did Macedonia gain the status of a Republic within the Socialist Yugoslav Federation and the Macedonians, for the first time, were recognized as a nation (but only the Slavic population, not the other ethnicities, who were treated as minorities). Tito, with this act, had the latent political goal of preventing Serbia, with the secession of Macedonia, from having the dominant influence in the new Yugoslav federation, which it had before the war, and, on the other hand, of stopping the Bulgarian claim to Macedonia (Weithmann 2000, 213).

With the collapse of Yugoslavia, Macedonia, based on the constitution of 1974 of FSJR, declared its independence in 1991. Although Macedonia physically separated from the Yugoslav Federation, and avoided war with Serbia, the political mentality did not change. The first government (run by the Party of Social Democrats of Macedonia, LSDM) did not take into consideration the position of other ethnicities, especially Albanians as they are the largest community in Macedonia. In the Yugoslav Constitution of 1974, article 7, The Socialist Republic of Macedonia belonged to Macedonians, Albanians, Turks, and
others. It was also a pure multi-ethnic state. Under the new Constitution of January 17, 1992, Preamble, Macedonia belonged exclusively to Macedonians and others, so the new government turned from the multi-ethnic character to a mono-ethnic state. This caused much dissatisfaction among the Albanian community in the new state of Macedonia. It was evident that the new state would have internal problems too; the external ones were present since 1945, when Tito created the Republic of Macedonia “to prevent the Serbian and Bulgarian influence in Yugoslavia” (see Weithmann 2000,230), but also to marginalize the autochthonous Albanian population in Macedonia, in order not to dominate this territory.

On the other hand, even the Albanians outside Albania, as the third numerically largest people in the former Yugoslavia, gained recognition during the time of socialism, but not to the same degree as the ‘constituent nations’, rather at a lower level (Kola 2003, p. 133-155).

With this act, the aim of the socialist government was to protect the smaller and historically weaker nations (Macedonians, Albanians, and Bosnians) from the larger and more established ones in the system such as the Serbs, Croats, and the Slovenians. The creation of the Socialist Republic of Macedonia was justified by a new state ideology, shaped by the Communist Party of Yugoslavia and its leader, Tito, while Marxism constituted the ideological core of the entire political discourse.

Tito’s goal was to create equality for all nations living in Yugoslavia, regardless of the numerical size of the population and the territorial area of the republic. After the political platform was created, the implementation process began immediately, starting with the phase of decentralization of state institutions. With the Constitution of 1974, the last of this political system, the six republics gained the status of “national states” (for more see Hayden 1999 and Dimitrijevic 2000). Thus, all republics had equal status at the federal level, being represented by an equal number of delegates, regardless of the number of inhabitants and the size of their territory. It was clear that, in this way, “the smaller Yugoslav nations were brought into a better advantage” (Adamson/Jovic 2004, 206). In this way, the Socialist Republic of Macedonia gained equal status with other republics, while the Macedonian identity was also recognized by the constitution, so the Macedonians gained the status of a nation (Slavic one) in the Yugoslav Federation. On this occasion, it should be emphasized that, to satisfy the voracious nationalist appetites, especially of the Serbs, Yugoslav communism created three spheres of national communities. The first was the sphere called nations (‘narodi’, i.e. constitutional nations), which were originally five, otherwise known as Slavic nations: Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Montenegrins and Macedonians, and from 1960 also Bosnians, known by the name Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Non-Slavic ethnic groups such as: Albanians, Hungarians and Italians were not called ‘minorities’ but ‘nationalities’ (‘narodnosti’) and finally, smaller ethnic groups such as: Roma, Austrians, Czechs and Slovaks were treated as ‘ethnic communities’ (‘etnicke zajednice’).
The notion of ‘minority’ did not exist in the political discourse of the time. However, it must be said that the Albanians in the former Yugoslavia, in Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia, constituted one of the largest groups among the constitutive people such as the Slovenes, Bosnians, Macedonians and Montenegrins, but, due to the distinctive feature of being ‘non-Slavic people’, were never recognized as a ‘nation’ within the Yugoslav Federation and even Kosovo did not gain the status of a Republic, but only an extended autonomy, which means that, compared to the other aforementioned nations, it did not have the right to self-determination.

Thus, after the breakup of Yugoslavia in the early 90s, the Serbs used their status quite well to justify the right to self-determination guaranteed by the 1974 Constitution, or rather, to secede from Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, while on the other hand they refused the same to Kosovo by any means.

The same thing happened in Macedonia as well, the Macedonians seceded from Yugoslavia, but they did not allow the secession of the territory dominated by Albanians, the case of the “Republic of Ilirida” in 1992. North Macedonia presents the best example, which illustrates how the national identity of an entire group of people has been suppressed, such as the Albanians with a real representation of 30-35% of the total population, even though Tito’s regime with the Constitution of 1974, but also the Communist League of Yugoslavia proclaimed, “the guarantee of full recognition of all nations and others who lived in Yugoslavia” (Adamson/Jociq 2004, 297).

After the independence of North Macedonia in 1991, the governments of the state followed the Serbian politics towards the other ethnicities like Albanians, Turks, Bulgarians, etc. by suppressing their fundamental rights.

3 THE POLITICAL SITUATION IN NORTH MACEDONIA AFTER THE FALL OF COMMUNISM IN 1990

The new state of Macedonia declared its independence in 1991. Its constitution was more than discriminatory, because it privileged only the Slavic-Macedonians and distorted politically the natural reality in the country. Macedonia is a multi-ethnic state, not a monoethnic one. So, the country started to face many external and internal problems.

The first external problem came from Greece which did not recognize the constitutional name of the country ‘The Republic of Macedonia’. Greece referred to Macedonia as Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) and this caused not only political problems, but also economic ones because of the embargo Greece imposed on Macedonia. Additionally, Bulgaria did not recognize the Macedonian history, language, and identity. Until today, Serbia does not recognize the autonomy of the Autocephalous
Macedonian Orthodox Church, although in the last year there were signs of close cooperation between the two churches.

The internal problems started when Albanians (the second largest ethnic group, officially about 30% of the whole population) were seeking their fundamental rights, denied in ex-Yugoslavia and until then. Therefore, in 2001 an armed conflict happened. Albanians succeeded to advance their fundamental rights, and Macedonians to keep the form of the monoethnic state.

In 2019, Macedonia was forced to change the constitutional name of the country to The Republic of North Macedonia in order to start the Euro integration, which was blocked several times by Greece, because Macedonians (especially after the extreme nationalist political party VMRO-DPMNE, led by Nikola Gruevski, came into power in 2008) claimed that Slav Macedonians are not a Slavic nation but direct descendants of Alexander the Great.

4 THE RELATIONS BETWEEN NORTH MACEDONIA AND BULGARIA FROM 1991 TILL PRESENT

After the proclamation of independence of Macedonia (1991), Bulgaria surprisingly was the first country that decided to recognize its independence under the constitutional name Republic of Macedonia (15th of January 1992), despite the historical fact that Tito created Macedonia in 1945 to stop (along with Serbia) the Bulgarian influence over the region (see Weithmann 2000).

This move was of great importance for Macedonia and a good basis for building the future Macedonian-Bulgarian relations, which were very fragile during the Era of Communism. The recognition was not without controversies though. Namely, the leadership of Bulgaria often explained that the recognition of Macedonia as an independent state did not mean recognition of the existence of a distinct Macedonian nation, history, culture, and language. But all this was in a stand-by position until the power came to the VMRO-DMPNE, which with its extremist political rhetoric ruined the relations with Greece and Bulgaria. The new Social-Democrat government of Republic of Macedonia in 2017 (for more see Çeliku 2019), had to repair the damages of a decade of destructive policymaking on the part of the populist regime of VMRO-DPMNE and Nikola Gruevski.

First, the Treaty of Friendship, Good-Neighborliness, and Cooperation between Macedonia and Bulgaria (2017) was signed and the Prespa Agreement (2019), which solved the long name dispute with Greece. There was hope for the pro-western population of Macedonia (especially for the Albanians) that soon the path towards the EU would be open. But the Treaty of Friendship, Good-Neighborliness, and Cooperation between Macedonia and Bulgaria did not resolve the above-mentioned disputes. In autumn 2019, Bulgaria made a sharp turn in its approach to the Republic of North Macedonia by making its
support for the launch of negotiations for Albania and North Macedonia’s accession to the European Union contingent on several conditions. This in practice blocked both countries’ path to the European Union, while adding a tough new issue to existing regional problems on the way to EU membership: the lack of progress in Serbian relations with Kosovo, the continual fragility of unitary statehood in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and more general difficulties on the part of local countries to fulfil criteria, largely due to corruption and rule of law. The switch in Bulgaria’s position was in severe dissonance with the country’s hitherto unwavering support for the process of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans. The negotiations are still continuing to unblock the integration of North Macedonia towards its EU membership, but again North Macedonia has to change its constitution. The Bulgarian minority must be part of it, and the language, cultural, and historical issues will remain the biggest challenges in this contest.

5 THE ACTUAL STAND-BY POLITICAL SITUATION, CORRUPTION, AND THE EXODUS OF YOUNG GENERATION IN NORTH MACEDONIA

North Macedonia is part of the group of countries with a weak economy, with a critical external debt, minimal foreign investment, a high level of corruption at all levels, for which the European Union and the USA are constantly raising the alarm, and an incredible judiciary, where in the latest surveys of the International Republican Institute (IRI) confidence in it consists of 4% (for more see www.iri.org, August 2023), while on the other hand, while the population faces serious existential problems, politicians are among the richest in the region and Europe. The state is the only employer, which is strictly controlled by the parties in power, which in the state administration employ only their members, activists and militants, which for the last decade (2011-2019) has influenced that North Macedonia was abandoned by about 700 thousand citizens (for more see the statement of the Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs of the Republic of North Macedonia, Mr. Fatmir Bytyqi www.tv21.tv, September 2023) and this trend of mass exodus of young people continues even more intensively these last 3 years due to destructive, corrupt and stigmatizing policies in the country.

The current political stand-by situation, due to the failure to reach the 2/3 of the votes in parliament to vote on constitutional amendments, which would require the inclusion of Bulgarians in the Constitution and Bulgaria to withdraw its veto on the integration path of North Macedonia towards the EU, is increasing nationalism and the risk of Russian influence, but also increasing the fog that allows corruption to flourish at the highest state levels.

Recently, the criminal code was also amended in a hurry by the government, which amnesties all the government officials who have abused public funds, which also enables the amnesty of many former officials who are in prison or are under criminal prosecution, but also the return without any trouble of
the former Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski, who in 2018 fled the country in mysterious circumstances and received political asylum in Hungary because he was charged with many criminal acts. Thus, it turns out that the only goal of the corrupt politicians, before the country starts the reforms for the start of negotiations with the EU, is to save their own skin and not the well-being of the citizens and the strengthening of the rule of law.

It remains to be seen what these distorted political circumstances will bring: the start of negotiations with the EU or the isolation of the state, which will have irreparable consequences in the future.

6 CONCLUSIONS

The Macedonian governments after the independence of the state (1991) followed the Serbian politics in the region, trying to suppress the fundamental rights of other ethnicities like Albanians, Bulgarians, Turks, and so on. This has ruined relations with neighboring countries, especially with Bulgaria.

Moreover, the regime of Gruevski caused a big mess regarding the political and historical circumstances. He tried to fake history, and the population is still suffering from this bad politics. The country faces nowadays an institutional high level of corruption, the EU-integration is blocked, the young generation is leaving the country desperately and the state is in the hands of politicians and mafia. In this situation, the Russian influence is growing over the country, therefore the international community must act more concretely and decisively to push the dispute between North Macedonia and Bulgaria to a stable solution, otherwise the consequences could be unimaginable not only for North Macedonia but for the whole Balkan region.
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