

Resolving the Historical and Cultural Heritage Conflict Between Macedonia and Bulgaria in Terms of the Relationship Between Power And History


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Disputes over the historical and cultural heritage between Macedonia and Bulgaria are related to what is known in the literature as the Macedonian Question. The Macedonian Question started in the late 19th century when nationalism was born in the Balkans and nation states were formed. At the core of the Macedonian Question lie three problems: 1) How far do the territorial borders of the geographical region known as Macedonia extend, 2) to which country does this land or territory belong, and 3) what is the ethnicity and identity of the Slavic people living in the region known as Macedonia?

Afterward, the neighboring countries of Bulgaria, Serbia, and Greece began to claim these lands as being historically part of their state and the Slavic population living in Macedonia to have the same identity as their populations. For Bulgaria, the territory known as Macedonia is a region that belongs to the Bulgarian state, and those living in the region have a Bulgarian ethnicity. For Serbia, the Macedonian region is part of Southern Serbia, and the Slavic people in the region are also Serbian. For the Greeks, the Slavic people living in the region are Slavic-speaking Greeks. However, Bulgaria was more persistent in this race to deny the existence of Macedonia as its own nation.

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When looking at the nationalist discourse that was built in Socialist Macedonia after 1944, the historical and cultural legitimacy of the contemporary Macedonian nation is seen to have been based on the Christian missions of St. Cyril and Methodius and their disciples, St. Kliment Ohrid and St. Naum, in the medieval Empire of Tsar Samuil; on the activity of Macedonian intellectuals and other patriots of the 19th and early 20th century; on the independence movement of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (VMRO); on the goals and values of the Ilinden Uprising, and on the end of the anti-fascist war during World War II. Therefore, the issues lying at the center of the conflict between Macedonia and Bulgaria involve the ethnic identity of the brothers St. Cyril and Methodius and their students, St. Clement of Ohrid and St. Naum; of Tsar Samuil; of the ethnic character of his empire; and of the many intellectuals and patriots of the 19th century whom the Macedonian state and historiography recognize as pioneers of Macedonian nationalism and national renaissance, as well as the purpose and ethnic character of the Ilinden Uprising. Also at the center of this debate is the issue of whether Macedonian is a separate language or just a dialect of the Bulgarian language. Another subject of discussion between the Macedonia and Bulgaria involves the presence of a Macedonian minority in Bulgaria and of a Bulgarian minority in Macedonia.

Disputes between Macedonia and Bulgaria as two independent states began immediately after 1945. Although the relations between the two countries had been relaxed initially from 1944-1948, during which Bulgaria had taken some steps toward recognizing the Macedonian nation and language, as well as the Macedonian minority in Bulgaria, once Yugoslavia broke off relations with the USSR after 1948, the conflict between Bulgaria and Macedonia (Yugoslavia) returned to its starting point. The entire period from 1948-1990 saw a tense, hostile atmosphere between the two countries, throughout which both countries accused the other of falsifying history. After the dissolution of Yugoslavia, Bulgaria was the first country to recognize the independence of Macedonia, but not the Macedonian nationality or language. So, although the language of political representation had softened compared to the language of the communist era, Bulgaria had not fundamentally changed its attitude. Therefore, the Macedonian Question didn't resolve until after 1991.

The Macedonian Question was opened again in 2017 when Macedonia and Bulgaria signed the Treaty of Friendship, Good-Neighbourliness, and Cooperation (United Nations, 2017) in the name of resolving the historic conflict. In 2022, Macedonia also

accepted the French Proposal, which aimed at to unlock the Bulgarian veto of 2020 that Bulgaria had put in place to prevent the start of negotiations for Macedonia's membership in the European Union.

The most problematic part of the 2017 Treaty involves Paragraphs 2 and 3 of Article 8, which deal with the issues of history and education. According to Paragraph 2 of Article 8, establishment of the Joint Multidisciplinary Committee of Experts on Historical and Educational Issues composed of experts from both sides was expected within three months of the treaty's enactment. The task of this commission is to objectively and scientifically examine the claims of both sides regarding historical events and figures and to resolve disputes between the two sides. The commission is to submit annual reports to both governments regarding its work. According to Paragraph 3 of Article 8, both parties are to also organize joint celebration ceremonies for common historical events and personalities in order to strengthen good neighborly relations within the framework of mutual reconciliation and European values and spirit.

The 2017 Treaty actually opened a Pandora's box and reignited the old conflict between the two countries. Bulgaria has accused Macedonia of not fulfilling the obligations arising from the treaty. Meanwhile, Macedonia has accused Bulgaria of having hostile intentions toward Macedonia. Therefore, when Macedonia started negotiations for membership in the European Union in 2020, Bulgaria used the right of veto against Macedonia. Bulgaria had many, though often unclear, reasons for its veto, the main one being non-implementation of 2017 Treaty. Later on, Bulgaria began accusing Macedonia of not respecting the rights of the Bulgarian minority in Macedonia and demanded the Bulgarian minority be incorporated into the Constitution of Macedonia. Bulgaria has also accused Macedonia of anti-Bulgarian propaganda and requested that Macedonia prevent its hostile propaganda toward Bulgaria.

Bulgaria's re-vetoed Macedonia's bid in 2021. After many negotiations among Bulgaria, Macedonia, and the European Union in 2022, the formula known as the French Proposal appeared. The main points of this document are that the Republic of North Macedonia must respect the 2017 Treaty with Bulgaria. As for the Macedonian language, which Bulgaria does not officially recognize, both countries are to publish relevant statements and define Macedonian according to their positions. The French Proposal also envisages the signing of a bilateral protocol between Sofia and Skopje on how to implement the

2017 Treaty and how to amend the Macedonian Constitution in order to include Bulgarians as a minority. Two intergovernmental conferences have been planned between Macedonia and the EU within the framework of the French Proposal. The first intergovernmental conference is to be held immediately once the Macedonian Government and Assembly accept the French proposal, after which the negotiations for Macedonia's full membership in the EU will begin. This conference has been described as a political conference. The second and main intergovernmental conference between Macedonia and the EU is to be held once Macedonia recognizes Bulgarians as a minority in its constitution. After fierce debates between the parties in power and the opposition, the Assembly approved the French Proposal on July 16, 2022 with 68 votes. According to the approved draft results, the government is to be guided on what it can negotiate with the European Union. The Assembly obliges the government to protect the national and cultural identity of Macedonians during the negotiation process. The most important point regarding these conclusions is that the Macedonian language is to be recognized as an equal language with all other official languages of the European Union.

The French proposal was offered as a solution for unblocking Macedonia's EU integration process. According to the Macedonian opposition, however, this proposal has many shortcomings. First, the Macedonian-Bulgarian dispute has now turned into a dispute between Macedonia and the EU, because the 2017 Treaty is part of Macedonia's negotiation framework with the EU. This being so and Bulgaria's apparent right of veto, the Macedonian opposition argues that Bulgaria will always have reasons to blackmail Macedonia into making concessions in its favor throughout the negotiation process. Meanwhile, the most controversial point involves how the French Proposal also foresees the signing of a protocol between Macedonia and Bulgaria that will also serve as a guide for how implement the 2017 Treaty. The Intergovernmental Meeting where this protocol was signed took place on July 17, 2022, with the signed protocol emphasizing that the government encourages the Commission to speed up its work. The protocol also states that the commission in question should work according to Article 8 of the 2017 Treaty by addressing the disputed points objectively. The protocol also has provisions for the rehabilitation of Bulgarian victims who'd been persecuted by the Yugoslav communist regime, as well as a number of other issues related to the past and historical events.

The Joint Multidisciplinary Commission of Experts on Historical and Educational Issues between Bulgaria and North Macedonia was formed in May 2018. The Commission consists of a total of 14 members (seven Bulgarians and seven Macedonians) and operates with a co-chairman system of two presidents, one representing the Bulgarian side and the other the Macedonian one. The commission votes on decisions unanimously. The commission will submit annual reports on its work to the governments of the contracting parties. According to the agreement, everything that the commission proposes to the government is required to be implemented by the government.

So far, the commission has come to an agreement regarding several historical figures, with the commission members having agreed that the medieval figures of St. Cyril and Methodius, as well as their students St. Clement and St. Naum, should be celebrated and remembered together. According to the commission, these are common figures who have made a great contribution to the development of Macedonian and Bulgarian national culture. Also, the commission has reviewed the 5th-grade history books in Bulgaria and the 6th-grade history books in Macedonia, assessed some deficiencies to be present in these books, and suggested certain corrections to be made. The works and meetings of the commission still continue, with the ethnic identity of the revolutionary Gotse Delchev and other figures of the 19th century as issues still under discussion.

The historical divisionary disputes between Macedonia and Bulgaria and the method used to resolve these disputes reveal the practical impossibility of interpreting, conveying, or writing history objectively. This impossibility has two reasons: First, it concerns the historians who interpret, transmit, and write history. Historians are not people undetached from the cultural, social, and political contestation in the writing and interpretation of history. They will inevitably reflect the world view, political views, and ideological stance of the society in which they live and act. The second reason is that historical consciousness is often distorted by certain actors, and history is interpreted and written in accordance with their ideologies. Thus, the Commission, which is composed of historians so as to resolve the conflicts between the two states, is actually a commission that negotiates history (i.e., the truth). Although the commission consists of professional historians and science has been said to have the last word in these meetings, this commission is essentially political. It was created in order to solve a political problem, and thus the solutions offered are far from the target. The commission will produce solutions that will satisfy the political and ideological goals of the states. Also,

taking into account the asymmetric ratio in terms of the political power of the states and their weight in international politics, that this commission will be able to produce solutions in favor of Bulgaria appears very unlikely.

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