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The relations between Macedonia and Bulgaria

Односите помеѓу Македонија и Бугарија

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Abstract

The Macedonian-Bulgarian relations are very interesting and in the same time very complicate from both historical point of view and present point of view. This paper treats this relations and the joint declaration from 1999 as key document for this relations. Having in mind that (1) Bulgaria is member of EU and NATO and (2) Macedonia has aspiration for joining them, this bilateral relations have the full capacity to become international issue. This paper is trying to present its humble contribution for the future improvement of this relations.

Key words: Macedonia, Bulgaria, Bilateral relations.

Апстракт

Македонско-Бугарските односи се многу интересни и истовремено многу комплицирани гледано од историска и сегашна перспектива. Овој труд ги третира овие релации и заедничката Декларација од 1999 год. како клучен документ за овие односи. Ако се има во предвид дека (1) Бугарија е членка на ЕУ и НАТО, и (2) Македонија има аспирација да се придружи кон овие организации, тогаш овие билатерални односи го имаат целосниот капацитет да постанат и меѓународен проблем. Овој труд има за цел да го даде својот скроман придонес кон идното подобрување на овие односи.

Клучни зборови: Македонија, Бугарија, Билатерални односи

1.INTRODUCTION

Republic of Macedonia declaration of independence reopened the questions for the Macedonian-Bulgarian relations. Despite the fact that Bulgaria was the first country that recognized Macedonia as independent state the further relations were not going so smoothly. The reasons for this were deep historical moments that had and still have implications on the relations between the two states. Furthermore, this at first glance, bilateral relations, have become obstacle for the Macedonian Euro-Atlantic integration.

2.HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Similar to other Balkan countries Bulgaria also shared the fate of long period under the Ottoman rule. In fact both, Macedonia and Bulgaria were almost five centuries under Ottoman rule. There were occasional riots and uprisings for getting autonomy or creating their own state in both countries. The matter that differentiated the liberation movements in Macedonia and Bulgaria was the role of major powers in them. Russia that entered into war with the Ottoman Empire in the period from 1877-1878 and managed to win, contributed to the establishment of the Bulgarian state directly. After these events Bulgaria managed to get a kind of

autonomy in 1878 and in 1908 got full sovereignty. On the other hand, the uprising in Macedonia from 1903 was not concretely supported by involvement of a third party and was virtually crushed by the powerful Ottoman army...

After finishing the Second World War, Bulgaria as Macedonia¹ became a communist state. After the fall of communism in the 1990s both neighboring states declared for their highest goal in the foreign policy the Euro-Atlantic integration. Although neighbors, both countries were treated differently, or were located in different groups and processes that progress with different tempos towards EU and NATO. More specifically, according to the terminology of NATO, Macedonia was part of the so-called "Adriatic Group" of countries that cooperated on the way to NATO integration, while Bulgaria was not part of the Adriatic group and managed to join it much earlier than these states. In terms of EU integration, on the other hand, Macedonia was and still is a part of the so-called group of countries "Western Balkans", which consists of the former republics of Yugoslavia with Albania without Slovenia. Again, Bulgaria was not part of this "problematic" group consisting of countries in whose territory was carried out the military conflict in the former Yugoslavia. Again, Bulgaria managed to become EU member before any of other countries in the Western Balkans.

About the relations between Macedonia and Bulgaria as relations between two independent states, only the period after the beginning of 1990s when Macedonia split from Yugoslavia, can be discussed. Previously, only Yugoslav-Bulgarian relations, in whose building appropriately as a federal unit of Yugoslavia Macedonia participated too, can be discussed. It can be concluded now that Bulgaria was rather burdened with Macedonia for many years before Macedonia's independence. Sufficiently illustrative was the statement of the Bulgarian President Petar Stojanov that (Are Bulgarian-Macedonian relations improving? 2002) *"Macedonia is the most romantic part of Bulgarian history."* The statement clearly reflects the positions of certain circles in Bulgaria which have been still dreaming of Great Bulgaria with the Treaty of San Stefano² conspiring return of "deceived Bulgarians from Macedonia" to their "Bulgarian" roots. In reality, the "romance", which they saw in Macedonia, was actually the subjugated Bulgarian policy towards Macedonia, which resulted in the greatest distress and suffering in the Bulgarian history. Thus, Bulgaria started to "liberate" Macedonia together with its Balkan allies Serbia and Greece in 1913, which practically drag Bulgaria into two Balkan wars, from which Bulgaria got only the Pirin part of Macedonia and had suffered from enormous human and material losses. Furthermore, the myth and the ambition about Bulgarian Macedonia was one of the main reasons and motives for inclusion of Bulgaria on the wrong side in the two world wars. After the brief occupation over Macedonia during the Second World War, Bulgaria was forced to return to its pre-war borders. The result of the participation of Bulgaria in the Second World War was again the same, big human and material damages. Finally, after the Second World War and the definitive establishment of Macedonian Republic as recognized federal unit within Yugoslavia, and with improvement of relations between Bulgaria and Yugoslavia, Bulgaria was expected to abandon finally the "romance" to Macedonia and to accept the reality. Thus, Sofia for the first time in the time of Dimitrov recognized the historical fact of existence of a Macedonian nation, language and finally the existence of Macedonian minority in Bulgaria. Such changes in Bulgaria for the first time allowed free declaration of Macedonian nationality in the census in 1956, where, as Macedonians declared nearly 200,000 citizens of Bulgaria, mainly in the region Blagoevgrad, i.e. of Pirin Macedonia³. However after disruption of Soviet - Yugoslav relations and thus the Yugoslav - Bulgarian relations, Bulgaria came back to its pre-war positions and refused to recognize Macedonians as distinct nation and the Macedonian language considered again just as dialect of Bulgarian. Such treatment of Macedonia and the Macedonians in Bulgaria is retained even after creation of independent Macedonia and was obstacle in the relations between the two neighbors.

3. THE BILATERAL RELATIONS BETWEEN INDEPENDENT MACEDONIA AND BULGARIA

After the proclamation of independence of Macedonia, Bulgaria was the first country that decided to recognize its independence⁴. This move was of paramount importance for Macedonia and a great ground for building the future Macedonian-Bulgarian relations. The recognition was not without controversies though.

¹as part of federal Yugoslavia

²according to which almost the entire Macedonia was included in the framework of Bulgaria in 1878

³for more see Bugajski,(1995) and Zang (1991)

⁴in packet with recognition of independent Slovenia, Croatia, B&H

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. According to Gligorov (2001) the Bulgarian President Zheljko Zheljov pointed out exactly that Bulgaria would not interfere in the internal affairs of Macedonia. But, exactly the denying of determination of the majority population in Macedonia was nothing else, but interfering in its internal affairs. The reactions in Macedonia about such recognition of Macedonia were divided. While President Gligorov was skeptical about the intentions of Bulgaria, the Vice President Ljupco Georgievski considered that the most important element in the whole thing was just the recognition of Macedonia. According to Gligorov (2001, p. 408), Georgievski said "(...) *it is important Bulgaria to recognize Macedonia, and about the Macedonian nation let the historians speak.*" (Translation by D.M.) In reality, in the international relations, states are recognized or not, and no one requires recognition of language or nation, because it is a fact that they exist. It's possible that the position of Bulgaria's recognition of Macedonia, but not of the Macedonian nation, has been intended for internal use in Bulgaria. It must not be forgotten that many years ago the Bulgarians were imbued with the idea of Greater Bulgaria as ethnical Bulgaria and such created opinion could not change overnight. At the same time, recognition of a distinct Macedonian nation would have meant opening the process for recognition of a Macedonian minority living in the region of Blagoevgrad but also across whole Bulgaria. In this direction particularly interesting were the talks between the presidents of Macedonia and Bulgaria where the Bulgarian President Zhelev (according to Gligorov 2001, p.411) has said: "*You are not taking in to consideration that in Bulgaria, of several generations, there are two million Macedonians, but they feel like they are Bulgarians and they seem to be greater Bulgarians than us. This influence we cannot reject.*"

The existence of policy that recognized the state but not the nation directly burdened the relations between both countries but also affected within the countries. For example, the organization of the Macedonians in Bulgaria "OMO Ilinden" was prohibited to act, and even the celebration and the laying flowers on the grave of Yane Sandanski was questioned. It took expiration of nearly a decade since the fall of communism in Bulgaria in order to allow the registration of the political party "OMO Ilinden"⁵ which finally won five local officials and several in the region of Pirin Macedonia. However, after year later the Bulgarian Constitutional Court declared the action of the party unconstitutional after which it ceased to exist. This behavior of Bulgarian institutions was a clear violation of the Convention on Human Rights⁶ which Bulgaria had ratified and which guaranteed the right of free association. The European Court of Human Rights reacted adequately to that.

Although Skopje officially decided not to interfere in the internal affairs of Bulgaria, it is indisputable that such events in Bulgaria had its negative impact on relations with Macedonia. The mutual position of both republics for non-interference in the internal affairs was not enough to keep the relations uncomplicated. The tactic of putting their heads in the sand like ostriches did not make problems disappear. The practical problems have arisen even in the early 1990s. For example, although the Prime Minister⁷ of Bulgaria visited Macedonia during the first half of the 1990s, negotiated and signed an agreement on economic cooperation between Macedonia and Bulgaria, it was not ratified in the National Assembly. What was the problem? It became apparent with the visit of Bulgarian Minister of Education Marko Todorov in Skopje⁸ when he refused to sign the previously negotiated agreement for cooperation in culture and education, because at the end of the agreement stood the usual phrase that the contract is signed in Bulgarian and Macedonian language (Gligorov 2001). Actually it comes to what would later be called "language problem" and the problem consisted in the Bulgarian position on not existence of a Macedonian language, which according to them is an ordinary Bulgarian dialect. That was the reason for stagnation of the Macedonian-Bulgarian relations because the two closest neighbors could not sign any agreements. This dispute was finally overcome in 1999.

Overcoming of the language dispute with Bulgaria deserves special attention, because it is actually about finding a mutually acceptable technical formulation as solution of a political-historical problem. The solution of the dispute came as a result of the joint declaration of 1999, signed by the Heads of Governments of the Republic of Macedonia and Republic of Bulgaria⁹. The technical solution to the political language problem

⁵ in 1999

⁶article 11

⁷ Ljuben Berov

⁸April 1994

⁹ Ivan Kostov and Ljubco Georgievski

has been found in the following formulation: The agreement was *“signed on 22 February 1999 in Sofia, in two originals, each in the official languages of the two countries -Bulgarian language, according to the Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria and in Macedonian language, according to the Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia, both texts being equally authentic.”*(see Joint Declaration 1999). Exactly this formulation allowed signing of this declaration and of all subsequent agreements between Macedonia and Bulgaria. The language problem, which meant actually denying the existence of Macedonian language by Bulgaria, was overcome through technical formulation under which the agreement was signed in the two official languages in both countries, according to their constitutions. In this way, Bulgaria only recognized the reality of existence of the Macedonian Constitution which states that its official language in R. Macedonia is the Macedonian, which does not necessarily mean that it recognizes the existence of the language.

Although separating the previous point as the most important moment of the Declaration we must not fail to observe that in the Declaration there are other moments too. So, in it the two neighbors are committing to promote mutual relations and their further cooperation, cooperation in the process of uniting Europe, holding regular meetings, improving conditions for economic cooperation, cooperation in the field of tourism, infrastructural connectivity under the regional projects cooperation in the field of culture, education, health, sport, enabling free flow of information, protection of intellectual property, cooperation in legal sphere in particular in civil, criminal and administrative matters till the two states declared that: *“neither of the two countries shall undertake, instigate or support any actions of a hostile nature directed against the other country”*(see Joint Declaration 1999). The last one is very interesting and deserves an attention. What exactly do the words not taking, not encouraging and not supporting of hostile actions by any of the two countries mean, is explained in details at the edge of the Declaration. That means four things. First, none of the states will allow its territory to be used for attack over the other. This principle later grew into a general attitude of the Republic of Macedonia, which applies to all its neighbors. Secondly, none of the neighbors will raise territorial pretensions against the other. This is also a kind of attitude of Macedonia to all its neighbors, even included in the Macedonian Constitution, where it is clearly said that Macedonia has no territorial pretensions to its neighbors¹⁰. Third and very important is the following: *“The Republic of Macedonia hereby declares that nothing in its Constitution can or should be interpreted as constituting, now or whenever in the future, a basis for interfering in the internal affairs of the Republic of Bulgaria for the purpose of defending the status and the rights of persons who are not citizens of the Republic of Macedonia.”* This formulation can be completely right, but surprises the fact and remains questionable why the Joint Declaration has no such reciprocal obligation for the Republic of Bulgaria. Fourth and finally, both sides will take measures to prevent any not benevolent propaganda that might harm the common relationships, whether it comes from institutions either from private persons.

Signing of the Joint Declaration was a moment that positively influenced the entire region. Joint Declaration was hailed by the EU too. With it, Bulgaria was entitled to claim that it had resolved one of the major problems with its neighbors, because the non-communication that occurred due to the language dispute affected very negatively both neighboring countries. At the same time, Macedonia got normalization of relations with its eastern neighbor. As most positive moment of the Declaration would be emphasized the solving of the language problem through a technical way by which neither party had to accept the position of the other and their relations were yet normalized. In the spirit of this Declaration, Macedonia was obliged to do things, that it was, of course, ready to do practically without this Declaration, such as: no permission for using its territory to attack any neighboring country, or declaring no territorial pretensions - Macedonia has all this apply to all its neighbors. From this aspect Macedonia did not “give” too much with this Declaration. However, the question why Macedonia in the spirit of this Declaration became obliged, and did not seek or fight for a reciprocal obligation by Bulgaria for not interfering in internal affairs to protect persons, who are not its citizens remains open. Macedonia practically waived giving any possible assistance to the ethnic Macedonians in Bulgaria, who are not Macedonian citizens, and in return did not receive such reciprocal obligation by Bulgaria. This provision would be completely right if it was valid for Bulgaria too; especially taking into account that certain circles in Bulgaria tried to encourage “becoming aware” of the Macedonians that they are Bulgarians in Macedonia. Why was all this allowed, still remains open. Some believed that this was done by the “pro-Bulgarian” Premier Georgievski, but it must not be forgotten that although the Declaration was signed in his time, the draft text was

¹⁰article 3 paragraph 4

made by the previous government. However, the joint declaration was a positive moment in the Bulgarian-Macedonian relations.

Despite existence of certain problems between both countries, there were also many positive moments that contributed to building of Macedonian - Bulgarian friendship and relationships. Above all, Bulgaria was the first country to recognize Macedonia's independence. At the same time, the recognition was done under the constitutional name Republic of Macedonia and despite the fierce Greek opposition. In this direction the visit to Athens by the Bulgarian Minister¹¹ of Foreign Affairs just one day before the decision of recognition was noted, on which he said *"Athens' position is their own issue and Bulgaria do not want to interfere in it (...) we cannot impose to the population in Macedonia how it will call its country and it will call itself."*(Gligorov 2001, p.409) (Translation by D.M.) In one's opinion, this statement made in Athens at that time, can be qualified as very positive for Macedonia. Also let's not forget the fact that Bulgaria and Albania were the gate of Macedonia of entry and exit of various types of goods during the UN embargo on Serbia, which indirectly affected Macedonia from north and the direct Greek embargo which cut off all connections with the Aegean Sea to the south. Besides economic, Macedonia and Bulgaria also developed a military cooperation in 1999, which resulted in signing of a cooperation agreement in the defense sector.¹²

The support by Bulgaria as EU and NATO member will also be considered as positive thing between both neighbors, which is given in terms of future membership of the Republic of Macedonia to these organizations. Such support is certainly welcomed for Macedonia despite certain tendencies of Bulgaria to represent it as a kind of help from older brother to younger one. So, Bulgaria is trying to play the role of sponsor of the Macedonian membership in these organizations. However, we must emphasize that this Bulgaria's support is not unconditional. This was publicly announced by the Bulgarian President Parvanov and the Bulgarian Foreign Minister Kalfin in 2006. *"They warned Skopje that the unconditional support for its EU and NATO membership is past and in future, the Bulgarian support will depend on the willingness and the success of the Republic of Macedonia in adopting and maintaining the policy of good neighborly relations"*.(Ivanov 2008)(Translation by D.M.). Surely the demand for good-neighborly relations is understandable, but the potential danger that lies behind this formulation must not be ignored, especially from the experience we had with Greece, where behind the formulation of good neighborly relations the request for changing the name of Macedonia laid. This question is still opened today and is an obstacle on Macedonia's road towards membership in NATO and EU. Such situation opens the logical question about the possibility of applying "the Greek scenario" by Bulgaria or blocking Macedonia's entry into Euro-Atlantic organizations. For example, this was very clearly said by the leader of the Bulgarian VMRO party Karakachanov (Bulgarian MPs oppose Macedonia NATO, EU bid 2007) that Macedonia should be blocked, i.e. it should not be allowed its entry into NATO until it solves the problems with the neighbors. This would not be so seriously understood if this kind of threats would come only from parties that had about 10 MPs. The real seriousness of the threat gives a statement by the Bulgarian Foreign Minister in 2009 who said: *"Bulgaria will examine the access to the Macedonian side ..."* and asked *"Macedonia to make changes that will allow the European Integration of the Republic of Macedonia"*¹³. In the same statement Bulgaria's Foreign Minister speaks about existence of *"pressure on Bulgarian citizens as well as on Macedonian citizens with Bulgarian self-consciousness in the Republic of Macedonia"*. As for the question, which groups exactly had the Minister thought of when he used the terms Bulgarian citizens and Macedonian citizens with Bulgarian self-consciousness in R. Macedonia? Under the term "Bulgarian citizens" within the Republic of Macedonia mainly citizens with dual citizenship¹⁴ are involved, which besides the Bulgarian hold also Macedonian citizenship and have mainly permanent residence in the territory of RM. These are people with Macedonian ethnic origin who own Bulgarian passport out of economic reasons. Some of these people even give a written statement certified by a notary, claiming that their nationality is Macedonian, but the reason why do they take Bulgarian passports are laid in traveling visa-free or purchasing Bulgarian vehicles. In fact, for many years, RM was one of the countries whose citizens in order to be able to enter the EU, were obliged to undergo

¹¹ Stojan Ganev

¹² according to which Bulgaria gave as gift to Macedonia nearly 100 tanks and other military equipment

¹³http://www.mfa.bg/en/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=9354&Itemid=217 website, 04 August 2009.

¹⁴except the Bulgarian citizens who stays briefly in Macedonia

the painful procedure of issuing visas. And with Bulgarian passport they could travel more easily in the EU. Bulgaria, itself, has used this position of RM and introduced a facilitated procedure for obtaining Bulgarian passport for citizens of Macedonia. Furthermore, for many years, a good proportion of students from eastern Macedonia decided to study in Bulgaria, because Bulgaria again had facilitated procedure for receiving students from Macedonia and gave even state scholarships to them. One other thing was that there was no university in the eastern part of Macedonia and this contributed directly to the students to opt to study in Bulgaria. Normally, by living and spending years and years of studying and living in Bulgaria, a good part of the Macedonian students decided to get Bulgarian citizenship in order to facilitate their stay there ...

These elements or more appropriately would be referred as weaknesses of RM, were used by the Republic of Bulgaria intentionally or not. Thus, the long-term situation of existing the rigorous visa regime for Macedonian citizens, the ability to buy Bulgarian vehicles and their registration with Bulgarian number plates for prices much lower than those in Macedonia and finally no existence of any university in Eastern Macedonia were the three main factors that directly contributed to creation of what the Bulgarian Minister called "Bulgarian citizens "in the Republic of Macedonia. Going back to his statement it can be seen that the term "Macedonian citizens with Bulgarian self-consciousness", is also used. This refers above to all the Macedonian citizens who may not have Bulgarian citizenship but feel and declare themselves as Bulgarians. In contrast, the previous category, which is assumed to vary around (Grncharoska 2011) 20, 000, the number of such citizens in accordance with all previous held censuses is marginal. Of course, regardless of their minimal figure in Macedonia, they should be allowed to express their national feeling free. The problem arises when certain organizations of this type do parallel and equal existence of Bulgarians in Macedonia with the no existence of Macedonians in Macedonia. Declaration of own identity based on the denial of existence of somebody else's identity can easily create problems and anger among ordinary citizens. That is the possible "pressure" which sees the Bulgarian minister. The irony lies in following: while the Macedonian minority is not yet recognized in Bulgaria, despite its membership in the EU and NATO, in Macedonia a kind of minority of "perceived Bulgarians" was created according to the terminology coming from Bulgaria. All of this was congested of very small number of Macedonian citizens who feel real in that way and a huge number of Macedonian citizens who reached for Bulgarian passports as of economic reasons, without actually sharing the feeling to be Bulgarian. However, the situation has drastically changed in contrast to previous years. Macedonian passport has got visa liberalization allowing relatively free movement of Macedonian citizens in the EU; a new university in Eastern Macedonia is open; there is a more liberal policy for import of vehicles from whole EU ... So the process and the interest of taking Bulgarian citizenship is significantly slowed down and reduced.

4.CONCLUSION

The shape of the future trajectory of relations between Macedonia and Bulgaria depends on several factors. There were proposals for signing a new joint declaration or agreement... Yet, good or even excellent relations might be possible between the two neighbors who share common civilization and cultural benefits such as using the Cyrillic alphabet, for instance. But it must not be forgotten that the historical past can imply in specific problems in the present very often, and such danger exists in the future trajectory of relations between both countries. It seems the only solution to be such as: the least possible- returning to the past by both parties and the most possible- concentration on the present and the collaboration. Improving the infrastructural connection is the key point for which both countries should be engaged better, which in turn will directly contribute to better economy and tourism and even cultural cooperation. Regarding the Euro-Atlantic integration of Macedonia, one must bear in mind two matters: First, Bulgaria is already a member, and secondly, our support towards membership by any of the current members is welcomed. Macedonia should maximally avoid confrontation with Bulgaria and use the Bulgarian support of Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration even for a price that Bulgaria presents itself as "bigger brother", because this cannot change the reality of the existence of Macedonia and Macedonians.

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