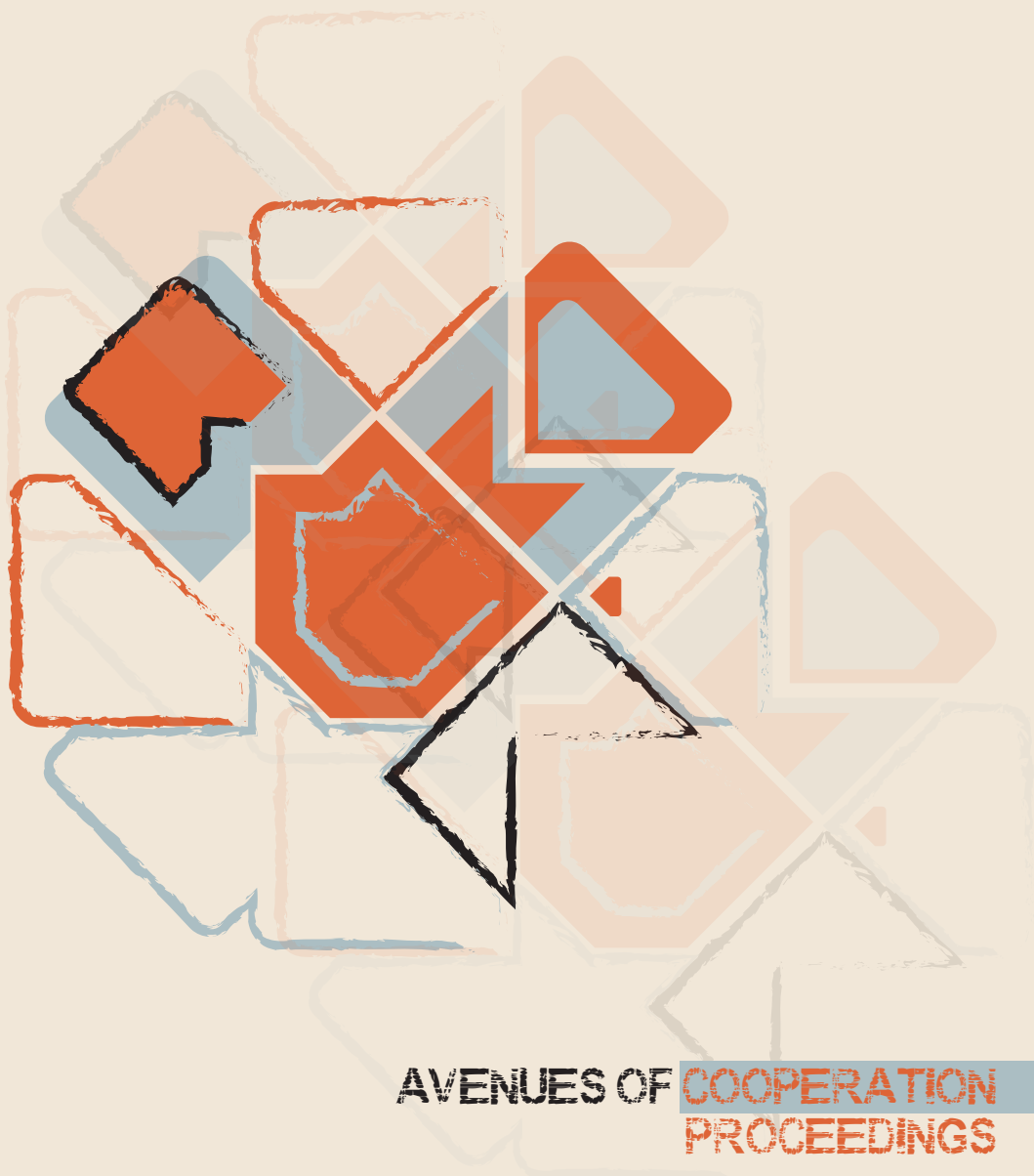




INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL SCIENCES  
AND HUMANITIES  
SKOPJE



# AVENUES OF COOPERATION PROCEEDINGS



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# Avenues of Cooperation Proceedings

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## **AVENUES OF COOPERATION PROCEEDINGS**

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Gábor  
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**Comments on the  
Bulgarian-Macedonian  
Historical Controversy – and  
the Road to Resolution**

(Based on the discussions at the Avenues of Cooperation conference, held at Skopje 3-4th December 2021.)

The intention of this text is to integrate the core of my own keynote talk (*Finding a New Place in History? The Potential Role of Historical Revisionism in Reconciling Nations*), given at the conference *Avenues of Cooperation*, into the broader discussions at the same venue, with the aim of highlighting how it could bring forward the resolution of the actual case, the controversy over the history of the historical (and not political) region of Macedonia. As the controversy is the result of political disputes, its sources lie more in politics and less in historiography or social attitudes, thus the resolution of the actual deadlock of North Macedonia's stalled EU accession process must come from politics and must be mostly political – while also offering symbolic gestures that point towards a process of a reconciliation of histories. History and historiography can mostly contribute to the latter with new framing, interpretation, and research. As for the former, historians can offer advice based on their practical experience of historical reconciliations as political processes, and these lessons dominated in the papers given at the conference. Thus, in this commentary, without being exhaustive, I will try to weave together these issues, mainly highlighting the pitfalls that are better to avoid in historical reconciliations, and offering ideas for how a new historiography can help the political become social, and, consequently, hopefully more stable.

Firstly, it is important to note that not all historical reconciliations are the same in ethical terms. A notable number of such processes emerged not because the parties wished to find a better foundation for more amicable bilateral relationships than national histories focusing on the conflict with the other. A series of reconciliations (German-Polish, German-Czech etc.) arose from the moral asymmetry of the parties in terms of crimes committed by one of them against the other. In such cases, even existing power relations were reversed, the potentially dominant party – Germany – was in a morally weaker position, and admitting its historical crimes was the precondition of the process, which in turn brought about a form of recognizing unacceptable forms of retributions

against Germans too. Furthermore, this model is most frequently applied to dealing with uncomfortable issues in a nation's own past, like complicity in the Holocaust or the operation of the Communist dictatorships.

One important feature of such reconciliations is the key role of the concept of truth and often trauma. Due to the moral stakes of the process, truth is understood more strictly than, the epistemologically much less certain, historical truth would involve. It is rather posited as something that could be revealed and told similarly to how truth is established in criminal processes, and its presumed bearings are often the same: bringing psychological reassurance to the victims. It is therefore only partly a historical issue, it is akin to psychotherapy and its effects are imagined in similar terms – although, at a social and not individual level. In the German-Polish and German-Czech case, Germany taking responsibility was assumed to bring forgiveness but not forgetting, and with the gesture of forgiveness a new start, and the ability to mutually deal with difficult issues from the past.

Asymmetry of the parties, however, can be a matter of power too, without serious moral implications. Dominant powers have the means to try to assert their superiority in symbolic terms too, with an attempt to appropriate the history of their partner if they have the means to compel the other party to make concessions in historical scholarship. One such ongoing process is the Russian-Ukrainian case. While not a historical reconciliation *per se*, this ongoing political conflict involves a debate over the shared and entangled histories of Ukraine and Russia (in terms of whether Ukraine has its own history, and, therefore, whether it is entitled to be a fully independent country) to the extent that articles about the entangled nature of this history, and how it must condition bilateral relations, were published under the name of Russian president Vladimir Putin. Thus, what we can see from this case is how the structural asymmetry can condition the logic of the process while enabling one party to demand concessions not based



on mutuality. Moreover, it is happening within a post-imperial space where the former imperial core makes historical assertion a means of restoring the space itself.

What are the bearings of these models on the case at hand? Firstly, reconciliation based on ethical issues reduces the capacity of history to make later revisions, and establishes a truth that is only partly compatible with the epistemological foundations of history as an academic discipline. While historians will never have an ultimate truth, moral responsibility cannot be established with insufficient facts and probabilities. Moreover, resolving traumas is a moral responsibility, thus, it is not even possible to avoid dealing with such pasts. These are very serious limitations for a political process too, therefore, if such an asymmetry is not present in the relationship, it is imperative to avoid reframing the symbolic conflict in such moral terms.

Secondly, the Bulgarian-Macedonian case implies an asymmetry, insofar as Bulgaria has effective veto power over the most significant political aim of North Macedonia: EU accession. Thus, it replicates, to a certain extent, the Russian-Ukrainian case. Not only in political terms, however. The basic structure of the contested past is similar, it covers not only the same space, but asserts that the two nations were once one and one of them – the Bulgarian – is somehow more mature, retaining a superiority, and this fact should somehow play out into the structure of bilateral relations.

Historiography does not have much to say of the latter, however, at least not with the acceptance of national grand narratives as its dominant form. If this nation-centered historiography is retained, the Slovak-Hungarian case could be used as an example to follow. In that case, the space of the contested history is the same, and at least significant actors among one of the parties – the Hungarians – use to raise the issue of the existence of the Slovak nation and the Slovak history before the 19th century, or even before 1918. In turn, Slovak actors invoked the idea of a millennial oppression of Slovaks by Hungarians, which would have transformed the debate

into a morally asymmetric one, countered by Hungarian demands of admitting humanitarian crimes against Hungarians after WWII. Moreover, the bilateral relationship was heavily burdened since the independence of Slovakia, with the issue of the rights of Hungarians in Slovakia. None of these historical issues are entirely resolved yet, but they are subject to a more professional and less politicized debate today, and political gestures were made from the Slovak side too.

While political will for reconciliation was often expressed, and historical mixed-commissions were used as its means, with the goal of a common history textbook defined, the calmness in Slovak-Hungarian relations is not the result of historical reconciliation. The change of social attitudes was more important, and two factors played a significant role in this change. The first factor was a more pragmatic political relationship which did not extensively use history, anymore, as a pronounced discursive or rhetorical tool in regards to the other nation. The second factor was the effective mixing of the societies, with an interface of dense interactions developing along the border – not least due to the EU accession, which, ultimately, was successful because of the external actors – the EU and the Western countries – put pressure on both countries during the accession talks not to engage in a war of history, and they forestalled Hungarian intentions to try to find leverage against Slovakia.

The idea was that Slovakia would not join the EU simultaneously and that Hungary, much like Bulgaria does today, could subsequently use her membership to get concessions from Slovakia. However, while eliminating international tensions, this solution left the minority rights unresolved. But it is an issue of human rights and not history.

The Slovak-Hungarian case exemplifies another model, reconciliation based on empathic nationalism. In this case, both parties accept that national narratives are legitimate, and the other has its right to have its own interpretation of the common history, as

long as they accept that alternative interpretations are legitimate too. Thus, history is not reconciled, only recognized, and its discussion is rendered to historians, who are sometimes tasked to come up with representations of this common history too. This is a political compromise, which is based on a less directly political use of historiography

This is certainly a way forward from Bulgaria's quasi post-imperial assertions. However, only a different paradigm of history can bring a more lasting solution, as national histories can always be revised in a less conciliatory way and filled with an ethical content that, again, would undermine bilateral relations. A paradigmatic reconciliation would, however, mean that national history is thoroughly reconsidered, complemented or even replaced by another framing of the history, establishing either a common one, or dissecting it into narratives that are, in turn, recombined in an inclusive, integrative way.

One such paradigmatic shift could be – regarding the Balkans – to appropriate the recent challenge to the Ottoman backwardness paradigm in the Balkans' historiography. These works posit that the late-Ottoman reforms, which the new Balkan states carried over to their independent statehood, and certain Ottoman institutions contributed significantly to European modernity and they should be seen as part of its constituent elements. Thus, they advocate a new historical imagery of the Balkans, not built around the backwardness paradigm and that creates a more unified historical space despite political boundaries.

It is easy to see how this shift within the modernist paradigm would help with reconciling the Bulgarian-Macedonian dispute: offering a new frame that renders national history secondary, while not offering a foundation for politicized claims. Another possibility would be the abandonment of the national modernist paradigm as the basic framing of the Balkans' history (which does not necessarily imply that we abandonment it as an interpretative tool/structural feature.) As Marta Szpala pointed out, in the

Polish case, local histories challenge the unified understanding of national history. While it is rarely explicit, such a shift of the scale implicitly questions the basic premise of the nation as a homogeneous unit because history is usually adjusted to this alleged political homogeneity. Writing local or regional histories makes it easier to capture continuities and similarities of historical trajectories that historians can recombine into non-national regional histories too.

There is one danger, however. As such local histories often emerge from the social demand for local memories, they often frame history as an experience of the local community, especially if they concern sensitive issues and periods (Local experience of communism, the Holocaust etc.). Thus, they easily feed into the moral stories and create historiography instead of history, leading towards the path of morality-based reconciliation, with all of its problems around the concept of truth.

These are, however, inevitable challenges that historians must face for themselves. To be successful, they must be more conscious of their own social role, the epistemological foundations of their discipline. And they should not be left alone. Societies need projects that generate a different historical consciousness, and an awareness of the limits of history and its reflexive understanding. And they need cooperation bilaterally, internationally, and common research projects.



# **Spasimir Domaradzki**

**The (Un)Learned Lessons  
of Polish-German  
Reconciliation**

When discussing reconciliation, the Polish – German case is often considered as one of Europe’s success stories. The ages long rivalry nurtured the sense of exclusivist belonging and constituted an indispensable ingredient of national identity. The Prussian participation in the partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the unimaginable German brutality during WWII are just two of the myriad of examples of this misfortunate neighborhood. The sense of threat and the harm done were coined into a Cold War narrative and skillfully exploited by the communist authorities in Poland, nurturing the sense of threat and a clear vision of the enemy.

Against this background, the current Polish-German relations constitute a unique phenomenon that is often compared to the Elysée Treaty between France and FRG. Today, thirty years after the signing of the Polish-German Treaty of Good Neighborhood and Friendly Cooperation, the two countries are among the closest integrated within the European Union. This year Poland surpassed France as the number one exporter to Germany (16,621 billion EUR in the 1st quarter of 2021.<sup>1</sup> As the German Ambassador to Poland highlighted, there are 400 partnership agreements among cities and over 3 million youth activities (RPN),<sup>2</sup> infrastructural connectivity and yearly joint government consultations that highlight the new dynamic in mutual relations.

Even if there are still unresolved issues and the ghosts of the past still haunt national politics, the two countries have moved beyond the trap of historical claims in order to pursue a joint European future. It is true, though, that alternative narratives are still present in the Polish political discourse. On the one hand, these relations are considered as a pillar not only of bilateral cooperation but also of European security. As Jan Barcz captures it, the Polish-German Treaty of Good Neighborhood and Friendly Cooperation is resis-

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<sup>1</sup> Polska trzecim co do wielkości partnerem handlowym Niemiec. Naszą atrakcyjność zwiększyła pandemia <https://businessinsider.com.pl/finanse/polska-trzecim-co-do-wielkosci-partnerem-handlowym-niemiec-nasza-atrakcyjnosckmwzclv>

<sup>2</sup> Arndt Freytag von Loringhoven, Trzydzieści lat Traktatu Polsko-Niemieckiego, RPN 11/2021

tant to political turmoil and the temptation to use old tensions for short term political benefits.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, the usage of these old tensions is still a source of cheap political capital that can be easily mobilized when necessary.

The aim of this short paper is not to provide an account for all of the activities that paved the way for Polish – German reconciliation. Instead, considering the Bulgarian-North Macedonian dispute, the aim is to accent the existing weaknesses and silent traps that exist even in such an advanced process of political reconciliation in Europe as the one between Poland and Germany.

## **The Lengthy Road to Reconciliation**

While the common sense is that the process of Polish-German reconciliation is a post-Cold War phenomenon, it needs to be stressed that its roots are much deeper and are connected to the silent resistance against the communist authorities in Poland. After the end of the WWII, the relations of Poland's People Republic with the two German states remained uneasy. While the relations with GDR were regulated by the Treaty of Zgorzelec, Poland had no official relations with FRG. West Germany's Hallstein doctrine was based on the non-recognition of countries that recognized GDR. The lack of bilateral relations was consistently used by the communist propaganda to incite threats and boost the image of the old enemy.

In 1965, in the context of the approaching Centennial celebrations of the baptism of Poland, and against the dominant communist position, the Polish Bishops signed a letter to their German counterparts that included the famous phrase "We forgive and ask for forgiveness." Despite the negative reaction of the communist authorities and the disappointed response from the addressees, today, the letter is recognized as the turning point in the Polish-German relations. As Basil Kerski mentioned in a recent interview, the

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<sup>3</sup> Jan Barcz, Krzysztof Ruchniewicz, *Akt dobrosąsiedzki : 30 lat traktatu polsko-niemieckiego o dobrym sąsiedztwie i przyjaznej współpracy*, Elipsa, Warszawa 2021



author of this letter, Archbishop Bolesław Kominek, was aware that the Polish – German conflict is an obstacle on Poland's way towards the West.<sup>4</sup> Thus, this was not a purely Christian or ethical but also a conscious political act against the interests of the Polish communist authorities.

Since 1965, Poland and Germany walked a long road towards mutual reconciliation that was paved by substantial political turbulences and geopolitical changes that influenced the positions of both states. While FRG abandoned its non-recognition policy towards the Soviet satellites, the communist regime saw the perspective of closer cooperation as an opportunity for new loans, but also as a chance to sign the 1970 Polish-German border agreement. During his visit in Warsaw, Willy Brandt kneeled in front of the monument of the Warsaw Ghetto Heroes. Today, the gesture itself has its own monument.

While each side had its own internal challenges, the fates of the two countries were intertwined in the strong grasp of the Cold War. Importantly, the German dream for unification had to await the rise of Solidarity in Poland and the collapse of communism in Central and Eastern Europe. Once communism was over, the need for reconciliation became even more urgent, and that was understood well by the non-communist political elites. Already in November 1989 what is now known as the *Reconciliation Mass* was held in Krzyżowa, in Lower Silesia, with the participation of both the Polish Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki and the FRG Chancellor Helmut Kohl. This symbolical gesture completed the pantheon of gestures of mutual reconciliation. Within the next two years the two countries will resolve the most urgent matters of Germany's unification and the recognition of the Polish-German border on Oder river. Along with the 2+4 Treaty, the Border Treaty of 1990 and the 1991 Treaty of Amity and Good Neighborly relations paved the way for dynamic and all-embracing cooperation.

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<sup>4</sup> Dominika Rafalska, Bitwa o pamięć, Rozmowa z Basilem Kerskim, dyrektorem Europejskiego Centrum „Solidarności” w Gdańsku, RPN 11/2021

## **Investing in Reconciliation**

The second pillar of reconciliation concerns the establishment of an extensive institutional structure. The establishment of the Polish – German Reconciliation Foundation in 1991 aimed to assist the victims of the Third Reich and to encourage reconciliatory activities. The foundation managed the humanitarian payments for different groups of victims of the Nazi regime. Since the early nineties countless institutions bringing youth together, encouraging historical research, reconciliatory efforts and joint projects were established. Among the most prominent, at least the Viadrina University, the German Historical Institute in Warsaw and the Polish Academy of Science Center for Historical Research in Berlin should be mentioned. The reconciliatory efforts become a part of the Polish efforts to join the process of European integration that was unequivocally supported by Germany.

Civil society played an indispensable part in the Polish-German reconciliation. Endless NGOs were involved in activities and projects bridging the two nations together. Youth camps, historical tours, exchange programs and joint projects contributed to a shared sense of community and dismantled prejudices.

## **The Mobilization of Political Elites**

The Polish-German reconciliation would not have been possible without the shared awareness among both Polish and German political elites, that through their words and deeds they bear direct responsibility for the success of this effort. While popular memory and national martyrdom endure, the political elites recognized the need to avoid cheap popular mobilization techniques based on stereotypes and prejudices. The reconciliatory efforts concerned not only the need to replenish the immediate popular association of the German with the bad but also to challenge the emerging stereotypical perceptions towards the Poles. Today, thirty years later these efforts paid off.

## The Relations Beyond Reconciliation

After three decades, the Polish-German reconciliation is a fact. Today's youth sees the mutual relations through the prism of partnership and cooperation rather than rivalry and subservience. At the same time, the mutual relations evolved. The entangled economies bond the two countries. Simultaneously, the political relations are subject to a plethora of alternative political visions on both sides of the border and directly impact them. Today the future of the EU, the European Green Deal, the Nord Stream 2 or the relations with Russia draw divisive rather than shared positions between Warsaw and Berlin. The ruling Law and Justice party continues to explore anti-German sentiments as a tool for political mobilization, but its spicy language is mitigated by the calm reactions in Berlin and the mutually beneficial economic cooperation within the EU.

Today, the changing accents of Germany's historical memory trigger understandable suspicion among the Poles, carefully protecting the clear line between a victim and perpetrator during WWII. Uneasy questions in the mutual relations, like the newly opened Documentation Center for Displacement, Expulsion and Reconciliation in Berlin or the lack of recognition of the existence of a Polish minority in Germany will remain an integral part of the Polish – German relations. However, the close interconnection between the two countries diminishes their potential to become dominant problems in the bilateral relations.

## The (Un)learned lessons of Polish-German Reconciliation

While this brief overview aimed to sketch the main trends in Polish-German reconciliation efforts, several general lessons are worth highlighting. **Firstly**, genuine reconciliation cannot be achieved based on short term political interests. It is a lengthy and tedious process driven by the sense of righteousness and reciprocity. This is particularly important in the context of the reconciliation efforts between North Macedonia and Bulgaria. While

the short-term interest of removing the Bulgarian veto on North Macedonia's road to the EU dominates the current relations, the genuine reconciliation between the two is of crucial importance for both states if they are to share a joint future within the EU. Hence, the rapprochement between Sofia and Skopje needs to be accompanied by a credible, well secured financially, and long-term reconciliatory effort that will secure the existence of a complex set of institutions, programs and initiatives bridging the two societies.

**Secondly**, the reconciliation is not possible without the emergence of a wide consensus at the national level, that it is necessary and appropriate. Reconciliation will not be possible if the relations with the neighbor are a hostage to internal political conflicts. The national consensus on reconciliation needs to have a strong geopolitical, economic, historical, social and international rationale.

**Thirdly**, political actors must be politically responsible and refrain from the temptation to use the bilateral relations as a source of cheap political support. As the Polish experience shows, regardless of the investments and determination in reconciliation, the old narratives of mutual contest remain "ticking time bombs." If the anti-reconciliatory narrative persists within the mainstream political discourse, there is no room for reconciliation.

**Fourthly**, the reconciliation requires not only an endless process of education, but also a self-reflection about our own past. A genuine reconciliation is impossible without an honest will to see also ourselves. While there is still room for improvement in that respect in the Polish-German relations, it requires a deep reflection among the North Macedonian and Bulgarian political elites and societies.

**Finally**, economy not politics builds the most durable bridges of reconciliation.



# **Costas Douzinas**

**The Greek Road to  
Prespa/es: Reconciliation,  
Recognition, Ideology**

## 1. The “Macedonian” Question

“Macedonia” has been the site of historical, political and cultural contestation over many decades. The problem started dominating Greek politics after the establishment, in 1991, of the independent state known as the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), internationally, or the Republic of Macedonia, under its constitution. In Greece, a reheated postmodern nationalism was constructed around the Macedonian question. It turned the so-called “continuity” question into a matter of domestic and international politics. Continuity is the claim, presented as historical fact, national myth or both, that modern Greeks are direct descendants from ancient Hellenes. A continuous line links Pericles and Philip to Karamanlis or Papandreou. The dispute involves conflicting positions over the existence or not of a Macedonian nation, over its history, tradition and language. Macedonia is either exclusively Greek, a feeling expressed in the slogan “Macedonia is Greek,” which was plastered all over airport terminals in the 2000s, or, it is a designation that belongs to other people too.

Let me unpack the various arguments mobilised by the opposing sides in Greece and reflected, I think, in the North. On the nationalist side, the term “Macedonia” refers to a unique spiritual legacy and the ancient history and tradition of the area which is exclusively Greek. People living in the northern part of the region have no distinct Macedonian nation or ethnicity. Their language is a dialect of Bulgarian.<sup>1</sup>

The other side accepts that Macedonia is primarily a geographical designation. Its larger part is located in Greece, 40% in North Macedonia and a small part in Bulgaria. This means that following a different historical temporality, Macedonia signifies both Greek and non-Greek people, histories and traditions. A distinct nation lives in the northern part of the region and speaks its own independent language.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Agelos Syrigos and Evanthis Hatzivassiliou, *The Prespes Agreement and the Macedonian Question* (Patakis, 2019, in Greek).

<sup>2</sup> Kostis Karpozilos and Dimitris Christopoulos, *10+1 Questions and Answers about the Macedonian*

Now, if you reverse the juxtapositions, you have broadly similar positions in North Macedonia. Greek nationalists do not want the northern neighbors to use any form of the word “Macedonia” in their name, denying their formal and cultural existence; the state was and is still called, ridiculously, after its capital Skopje. Their Macedonian opposites do not want the designation “North” next to their name. Some claim, rather extravagantly, that their nation descends directly from ancient Greece, generating fears of cultural appropriation and even irredentism.

It is a case of nationalism looking itself in the mirror and seeing its reverse evil in the other side. History vs history, nationalism vs nationalism, Greek vs Macedonian pride. Opposed nationalisms are the two sides of the same coin.

## 2. The Agreement

The agreement, signed in the Prespes lakes between Greece and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) in June 2018, brought to an end the international dispute. The agreement partly answered anxieties on both sides, using a trick unknown and rejected by diplomacy or international law: the ambiguity and polysemy of language. Linguistic ingenuity allows, first, the same signifier to be assigned to two or more signifiers and, second, the same sign to attach to different referents.

Let us have a look at the key provisions.

The name of the country changed from FYROM to North Macedonia. The crucial Article 7 states that the terms “Macedonia” and “Macedonian” have two separate meanings that refer to different historical contexts and cultural heritages. Greek Macedonia refers to the northern part of Greece, and its Hellenic civilization, history, culture, and heritage from antiquity to the present day. For the other side, the terms Macedonia and Macedonian denote the northern part of the region. Its people, with their own language,

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*Question* (Polis, 2018, in Greek); Alexis Heracleidis, *The Macedonian Issue: Nationalism and Ethnocentrism* (Sideris, 2018, in Greek).



history, culture, and heritage, are distinctly different from those of Greek Macedonia.

Citizen nationality will appear in travel documents as Macedonian/Citizen of North Macedonia. This allows the Greeks to claim that, since “nationality” is the term used in international law to mean citizenship, Macedonian nationality denotes simply a political, not ethnic, relationship between the population and the state. The Macedonians can claim, on the other hand, that the term “nationality”, with the etymological presence of the term “nation” in it, recognizes the existence of a Macedonian nation. Finally, the agreement accepts the existence of a Macedonian language, but adds that it belongs to the “group of South Slavic languages” and not related to the Hellenic civilization.

The polysemic use of the language allows, therefore, both parties to claim victory. The compound name with the assignation “North,” distinguishes the region along geographical and not national grounds, a victory for Greece. The name North Macedonia, with its own nationality and language, allows the Macedonians to claim that the kernel of their nation is retained.

These changes were carried out through a constitutional amendment, required by the agreement, and the adoption of the new name *erga omnes* (in all cases) both domestically and internationally. It was agreed that all North Macedonian state documents and signage would change to reflect the new name. History books on both sides would be examined to eliminate irredentist and inaccurate claims.

It was a quite unprecedented voluntary change of the name of a country as a result of an international agreement. Both parties experienced outside pressure to conclude the agreement. The United States and the European Union demanded that Greece withdraws its objections to the international recognition of its northern neighbor allowing it to normalize its position. In the case of FYROM, the need to join international organizations, mainly NATO and the EU, from which Greece had excluded it using a veto

power, became paramount. The Skopje government realized that the stability and prosperity of the country depended on a change in its international standing.

### 3. Politics

The Prespa agreement is a case of reconciliation between two adversaries that follows some of the characteristics of a Hegelian struggle for recognition. As Hegel argued in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*,<sup>3</sup> being in the world and our identity is shaped by the recognition of others. The thesis was developed in the part on the master-slave dialectic which starts from a clear power imbalance, something evident in the relation between the two countries.

Now the moral grammar of the struggle has been developed by philosophers such as Charles Taylor,<sup>4</sup> Axel Honneth<sup>5</sup> and Nancy Fraser.<sup>6</sup> It involves the acceptance by two parties that they are both same and different, both equal and unique. Equality leads to respect, the acknowledgment of common dignity. Difference leads to esteem, a recognition of those features that make the other valuable and unique in himself.<sup>7</sup> The sense of dignity depends on recognition of our universal status as moral and legal agents, as having the same rights and entitlements as others. Our sense of worth and pride, on the other hand, depends on the recognition of the value of our particular form of life. If social recognition is denied, or, if we are misrecognised by others, then significant harm is inflicted: "a person or group of people, [states Charles Taylor], can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves."<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup> G.W. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford University Press, 1977, tr. A.V. Miller); Alexandre Kojève (1947/1980) *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit* (Cornell University Press); Richard Williams, *Hegel's Ethics of Recognition* (1997).

<sup>4</sup> Charles Taylor, 'The Politics of Recognition', in *Multiculturalism*, A. Gutman ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994) 25.

<sup>5</sup> Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition* (Polity, 1995, tr. J. Anderson)

<sup>6</sup> Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, *Recognition or Distribution: A Political-Philosophical Debate* (Verso, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Costas Douzinas, 'Identity, Recognition, Rights: What can Hegel teach us about Human Rights', 29/3 *Journal of Law and Society* (2002), 379.

<sup>8</sup> Taylor, 25.

In Macedonia, the struggle of contested identities, common in multicultural societies, became an international dispute. Identity politics entered the hackneyed world of international politics. In this context, recognition revolves, first, around the dignity of formal state and national existence and, second, around cultural esteem, acceptance and appreciation of the culture, history and tradition of the other. International law, through the agreement, and domestic law, through the constitutional amendments, offer the recognition of equality and dignity. The two states accept that they are formally equal, that they have the dignity of unhindered international recognition. North Macedonia gains: it acquires full legal personhood with its privileges and rights. It becomes a full member of the international community, and the Greek veto to its participation in international fora ceases. North Macedonia has already joined NATO and has applied for EU membership which will allegedly help the future stability and prosperity of the state. The fate of Greece over the Eurozone crisis makes this a disputable claim.<sup>9</sup> The country lost 27% of its Gross Domestic Product, and its people up to 40% of their income over a period of five years. The Balkan states in the periphery of the EU are often treated by the metropolitan states like the colonies of old.

Greece gains too. A hundred and forty states had recognized FYROM with its constitutional name "Republic of Macedonia." The claim that "Macedonia" refers exclusively to the Greek region and to classical antiquity was daily denied in international fora and media which used the constitutional name. I recall that this incomprehensible denial of the name in academic conferences or diplomatic encounters raised eyebrows and ironic comments. Greece was losing good will and credibility by its denial to accept another country's right to decide its name, a basic component of the right to self-determination. The compound name agreed upon resolves the false claim that somehow Greece has copyright to the term Macedonia in some register in the sky. This simple statement led to prosecutions and attacks by nationalists. In this

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<sup>9</sup> Costas Douzinas, *SYRIZA in Power* (Polity, 2017), Chapter 1, 2 and 3.

aspect, the agreement is the definition of a win-win situation. It shows that respect for the dignity of others is the only way to confront the puerile effects of nationalism.

Things are different, however, if we move to cultural identity. Here, the struggle for recognition is about the uniqueness and value of the other's culture, history and tradition.<sup>10</sup> This was and still is an intensely political struggle in both places and has led to a sharp domestic divide.

In Greece, the political landscape was reshaped by the agreement. The right-wing party in the government left the coalition and voted against the agreement. The agreement was passed after a tumultuous session in Parliament, only because a small opposition party voted for the agreement. Soon after, both these parties were dissolved. But the main struggle took place in the streets. The pro-agreement side organised conferences, lectures and publications explaining the meaning, significance and gains from the agreement. We were joined by colleagues from North Macedonia, who published articles and participated in panel discussions in Greece. Katerina Kolozova and other colleagues visited Greece, spoke and had many articles translated into Greek. The Institute Nikos Poulantzas translated the ISSHS study on the "Skopje 2014 project" into Greek, which was used to explain the position of ordinary people in North Macedonia.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Greeks visited and spoke in North Macedonia explaining the Greek anti-nationalist position. I visited Skopje during and after the Prespes negotiations. This visit, the welcoming I received is one of the great memories of my political career.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Cillian McBride (2021) 'Recognition politics in Northern Ireland: from cultural recognition to recognition struggle', *Irish Political Studies* DOI: 10.1080/07907184.2021.1969549

<sup>11</sup> <https://poulantzas.gr/yliko/institouto-kinonikon-ke-anthropistikon-epistimon-ton-skopion-is-shs-to-programma-skopia-2014-ke-i-epidrasis-tou-stin-proslipsi-tis-makedonikis-taftotitas-ep-anexetasi/>

<sup>12</sup> Costas Douzinas, 'We call it Prespes, they call it Prespa', 1/4/19 *Efimerida Syntakton*, at [https://www.efsyn.gr/themata/politika-kai-filosofika-epikaira/189428\\_emeis-leme-prespes-ekeinoi-prespa](https://www.efsyn.gr/themata/politika-kai-filosofika-epikaira/189428_emeis-leme-prespes-ekeinoi-prespa); Costas Douzinas, *From the University Chair to Parliament's Benches: Life and Times of a Left Government* (Nissos, 2019, in Greek), Chapter 12.

The nationalists organised mass rallies and used threats, bullying and accusations of treason against pro-agreement MPs. Their attempt to derail the agreement failed, but it poisoned public debate and prepared the downfall of the first European radical left government, in 2019. Indeed, the agreement was used by the right-wing opposition as the main weapon for the defeat of the left, even though it was reassuring the Americans and Europeans that, if elected, they would honour it. Similarly, the Macedonian government suffered major defeats by the nationalist opposition.

Radical politics was a victim of the agreement. The left, as the contemporary heir to radical Enlightenment values, which have been abandoned by the right wing and liberals, sacrificed its domestic position in the service of its internationalism.

#### **4. History and memory**

The conflict helped construct, on both sides, an artificial and virulent type of postmodern nationalism. The French historian Pierre Nora has argued that modernity, by accelerating time, deprived old traditions of their living meaning. The relationship to the past was reconstructed through simulations of natural memory. Elites created “sites of memory” in language, monuments, museums and archives, with the nation-state as their main referent.<sup>13</sup> They tried to secure the future through the “invention of tradition”. These sites have run out. The nation-state is now supported by second order simulations of natural memory: the classical style statues in the Skopje 2014 project, the “costume” docudramas, the anti-agreement demonstrators dressed in classical robes, and the pageants during this year’s bicentenary celebrations of the Greek revolution. All these offer representations of the past with little relation to any shared tradition, life world or political institutions, except, for the pace of media consumption.

These artificial “memories,” instead of supporting collective iden-

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<sup>13</sup> Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory: Conflicts and Division* Vol.1: *The Construction of the French Past* (Columbia University Press, 1999).

tity, help deepen the political splits. The problem is apparent in the cultural part of the agreement. The national identity of the two peoples is presented as united, without internal tensions and struggles. North Macedonia, however, is a multiethnic society where the idea of a Macedonian nation is not acceptable to everyone. In Greece, the internal division around the continuity claim is also papered over, despite the fact that it was and is strongly contested. Furthermore, the claim that the “culture, and heritage, of a nation or population is distinctly different” from those next door, as the agreement claims, is futile historically, but fundamental for a nationalist conception of history. In this respect, historic evidence has been sacrificed on the altar of the political solution. It is clear that by exploiting the semantic ambiguity of language, both sides had formal claims satisfied.

The domestic operation of the linguistic ingenuity, however, allowed the conflict over culture to continue and even strengthen, as the two positions were extensively publicised. For the nationalist Greeks, and not only, there is still no Macedonian nation; for their Macedonian counterparts, there is no Northern but a single Macedonia. The nation, this kernel of individual and collective identity, remains clouded and contested. What is most unclear and doubtful to some is the greatest truth and emotion for others. This helps us explore the contemporary work of ideology.

### **5. An ideology of empty signifiers**

Ideology operates between knowledge and the unconscious, between things we are certain about, and mysterious others that we don't fully understand, even though they determine us. Let me briefly examine some of its main characteristics.

#### **i.**

Our emotions, passions and beliefs are led by desire, trauma and fear. The ideological politics of Greek right-wing nationalism is exemplary. It employs continuous references to past national

grandeur, utilizing emotions of pride. This *delusion de grandeur* is schizophrenically accompanied, however, by a fear of powerlessness and persecution by great and small powers. The small northern neighbour is scheming against our interests, its irredentism is a lethal threat. The powerful Europeans humiliate us, the powerless lust after our cultural jewels. Some want part of our land, others of our spiritual heritage, yet others of our sovereignty. The great and the small are lurking, trying to steal what we do not have. A wounded grandeur, a misfiring maleness, a glorious but also insecure, strong but also impotent existence is the ideological profile of Greece.

ii.

The most powerful right-wing desire was to get rid of the left government and return power to its “legitimate owners” who ruled the country for fifty years and brought it to its knees in 2010. The negative geopolitical and economic effects of the “failure to reach” an agreement were well understood and admitted, privately and *sotto voce*, by opposition politicians and commentators. It did not stop their rejectionism. It is a good example of the irrational logic of the unconscious: “I know that my actions will harm the interests of the country, however I still go ahead and carry them out.” Ours is an “enlightened” false consciousness: politicians built a protective *cordon sanitaire* around them. It deflects what they know but are not prepared to admit.

iii.

The claim to truth is still a powerful trope in our supposedly post-truth era. This applies equally to those who rely on their “indisputable” knowledge and reason as well as to the others who follow their emotions. How? Developing the Hegelian analysis, psychoanalysis argues that desire is the desire of the Other. Our emotions are triggered by reciprocal relations. I have strong feelings, I believe something passionately, when I know that others believe or desire it too. For example, most Greeks do not understand the

Christian liturgy because ecclesiastical language remains archaic. Yet, since a priest utters the words in a church service, we are prepared to believe their sacredness. Church sacraments (called “mysteries” in Orthodox theology) are linguistic mysteries too. The priest knows their meaning. That is enough for the churchgoers. The more our societies collect data and information, the more our personal ignorance grows, accompanied by our trust and support for those in the know. In a society of constant information flows, we authorize others to believe for us. We believe by proxy.

What matters is that some people — politicians, scientists, experts — have the answers, even though they and we do not. This combination of cynicism and claims to truth is another component of the dominant ideology in our post-ideological era. Strangely, during the pandemic, the conflicting claims of experts undermine this “belief by representative,” fueling all kind of conspiracy theories.

#### iv.

The polysemy of the term Macedonia allows the opposing sides to claim it for their own narrative. In post-ideology, signifiers like “Macedonia” or the “nation” are empty; every group attributes to them its own preferences, trying to attach a significance to the empty signifier, to make it meaningful— full of meaning. Such signifiers become an ideal bedrock for individual and collective identity-formation. And, as we do not have a common definition, allusions to Macedonia or the nation are made through imaginary entities, both fantastical and imagistic. “To understand the meaning of Macedonia, you should take part in the anti-agreement rallies,” was a common statement in Greece during the Prespes negotiations. Images were displayed: Alexander the Great’s statue, or, the Sun of Vergina (an archeological find linking the site of Vergina in Greek Macedonia to classical Greece) or, the memorial to the Unknown Soldier. None of this explains what Macedonia is. But they trigger more fantasies and images of joy, exaltation or grief: statues, days of national celebration



or mourning, the 2004 European football championship etc..<sup>14</sup> Their combination creates a constellation of affect that gives emotional meaning to Macedonia. Uninterested in detailed historical, geographical or geopolitical arguments, this imaginary Macedonia has a much stronger effect than history or facts.

## V.

The psychological architecture built around words and images is part of our individual and collective identity. We are never certain, however, about the meaning of symbols or about the solidity of our individual or collective identity; it is always under threat. This is why the others' desire is so important in constructing our identity in either recognition or misrecognition. Psychoanalysis emphasizes the role of others in this struggle and distinguishes between two ways of organizing our response, the "ideal ego" and the "ego ideal."

**Ideal ego:** the individual imaginary, with its images and imagination, projects an ideal identity and compensates for the "lack," the Freudian discontent of personal and national failures and defeats. As an anti-nationalist, I am informed, educated, and tolerant, despite the difficulties of everyday life. Commitment to knowledge, historical truth and moral values guarantee my intellectual superiority. I am right, because I know.

The nationalist relies on past glories and future hopes which confirm national greatness and superiority over others. I am right, because I feel so. This is similar with the collective imaginary. "Macedonia," Alexander the Great, and the Balkan wars are aspects of my knowledge and historic understanding – therefore I am for the agreement. Or, they are parts of my national myth, tradition and culture — and I am against it. Either way, truth, passion or both, compensate for the national humiliations, the bankruptcy of the state in the Eurozone crisis, the impoverishment of people, and the loss of sovereignty.

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<sup>14</sup> Costas Douzinas, 'A legal phenomenology of images' in Oren Ben-Dor, *Law and Art: Justice, Ethics and Aesthetics* (Routledge, 2011).

**Ego ideal:** I see myself from the other's position and try to become or to do, what I think the other expects from me. The anti-nationalist celebrates the international approval of the agreement. It confirms that civilized Europe recognizes us as rational, conciliatory, modern. The nationalists enthuse about the massive rallies against the agreement, South and North. I am the same with others, I believe what they believe. I enjoy the narcissist's desire who sees in others his own reflection and his identity as a reflection of others.

Somewhere between our imagination, images, truth and the others' desire, we move, in different paths, towards the "Macedonia of our dreams," something we never had and never will. In the meantime, the widest possible acceptance of the Prespes agreement's moral grammar is the best way to start building a Balkans of friendship and peace. It was no small achievement if you recall that less than thirty years ago deadly nationalist wars were killing and driving from their home thousands of people; there are fears currently that they might return.

A twenty-first century Balkan federation will not result from diplomatic initiatives or political agreements but from a reciprocal cultural recognition and respect. In such a case, national histories, traditions and cultures will stop being a cause for conflict and will become a bridge for people.



# **Marta Szpala, Michal Vit**

**Context for reconciliation:  
lessons learned from  
Central Europe**

The relation between Poland, Czech Republic, and Germany and the current tension between North Macedonia and Bulgaria differ in the context, time span and characteristics of conflicts preceding the efforts to reconcile. Nevertheless, some examples and best practices from the Polish – German and Polish – Czech reconciliation process can serve as inspiration on how North Macedonia and Bulgaria can move forward from the limbo and lay the foundation for a successful process of reconciliation and normalization of mutual relations.

In this context, the relations between Germany, Poland, and the Czech Republic have been shaped by a need of constituting new senses of belonging or even a new form of national identity. This process has started shortly after the 1945 as a result of unprecedented resettlement of people from Poland and Czechoslovakia towards Germany and from eastern parts of Europe to Poland and Czechoslovakia. In both cases, these processes have been framed by a need for a strong sense of national identity being in internal conflict with communist ideology. However, this democratic uprising after the 1990 brought a new substance to identity building. Instead of reclaiming historical truth, mutual relations have been shaped by a shared political goal – membership in the EU and NATO. In this context it is also worth to mention that identity building processes have not been shaped by the EU as such, but they were a result of shared political motivation.

The tensions between Poland and Germany were strong, long-lasting, and deeply rooted in history. Mutual negative stereotypes were deeply rooted in history and enhanced in the 19th century, when Prussia occupied part of Western Poland. German aggression against Poland was followed by the brutal occupation – Poland lost six million inhabitants (including three million Polish Jews), its cultural heritage was destroyed (especially the capital after the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in 1943 and the Warsaw Uprising in 1944). Many Poles were imprisoned in concentration camps and experienced forced labour and expulsions. After the war,

and under the pressure of Stalin, the Polish borders were shifted to the West. Polish Eastern provinces were incorporated into the Soviet Union and Poland received German territories to the Oder and Neisse river. It was followed by a massive resettlement of Poles and Germans.

During the period between 1945 and 1965 the governments of communist Poland and the Federal Republic of Germany, belonging to competing power blocs, cultivated mutual suspicions and antipathy towards each other. It was only in the 1960s that the first steps towards mutual reconciliation were taken. The initiative to rebuild relations between the two nations came from the milieu of Catholic and Protestant Churches. In 1965 the famous Letter of a Polish Bishop to their German counterparts, "We forgive and ask for forgiveness," paved the way for reconciliation. In the document the Polish side acknowledged the suffering of the expelled and the Poles. Further steps towards the normalisation of Polish-German relations were taken when Willy Brandt, who introduced the so called new Eastern Policy, became Chancellor in 1969. In December 1970, Willy Brandt, during his visit to Poland, knelt at the memorial of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and this gesture was seen as one of the best signs of reconciliation. Opposition to these initiatives were significant both in Poland and Germany, none of these societies were ready for reconciliation or even willing to acknowledge the other side's suffering.

Nevertheless, in 1972, diplomatic relations between the two countries were established. In the following years, a package of bilateral agreements that laid the groundwork for the reconciliation process was signed. These agreements tackled such areas as: the regulation of past issues (for example, pension insurances), the financial and economic relations, and the establishment of the institutional network for future understanding and reconciliation (i.e. recommendations for the UNESCO Commission for history and geography books and the declaration to support exchange in the fields of culture). The collapse of communism created a new

context for bilateral relations. The first Polish democratic government declared, in 1989, that one of its main goals would be reconciliation with Germany. This idea was supported by the concept of “community of interests” and was presented by the Polish Foreign Minister Krzysztof Skubiszewski which assumed that the two countries not only share common values but also that their cooperation is the key to stability and prosperity in Europe and the good neighbourly relations were in mutual interest. In 1991 the Polish-German Treaty of Good Neighborship and Friendly Cooperation was signed. It laid a foundation for future cooperation in different fields such as security, economy, environment, and youth exchange; it also set a program of cooperation and regulated many contentious issues.

Although the current German-Polish relations are not free from tensions, the achievements of the reconciliation process in the case of Poland and Germany are evident. In 1990, some 69 per cent of Poles felt personally endangered by Germans.<sup>1</sup> While according to the polls, conducted by the Polish Institute of Public Affairs, positive affection of Poles towards the Germans has visibly increased (from 41 percent in 2000 to 58 per cent in 2018).

There are thus some important lessons that North Macedonia and Bulgaria may draw from the Polish-German reconciliation:

1. The process of reconciliation is long lasting and patience is needed to fuel it for a long time. Thus, the main focus in the negotiation between Macedonia and Bulgaria should not be on short-term solutions and solving the contentious issues, but rather on the creation of the framework for future reconciliation.
2. Both countries should recognize that reconciliation and good neighborly relation are in their common interest, which strengthen the stability and security of the entire region. En-

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<sup>1</sup> Łada, Agnieszka. Polacy i Niemcy – Wzajemny Wizerunek i Ocena Kraju Sąsiada, [in:] Skonieczny Tomasz (ed.) (Nie)Symboliczne pojednanie. Rozważania o relacjach polsko – niemieckich po 1945 roku. Fundacja „Krzyżowa” dla Porozumienia Europejskiego, Wrocław 2019, p. 65

sureing a sense of security and building mutual trust is a precondition for the reconciliation process to begin. Reconciliation must not be understood as a unilateral capitulation and but rather as a process in which the interests and positions of both sides are skillfully harmonized.

3. To ensure the effectiveness and durability of reconciliation not only the political rapprochement of the governing elites is needed, but, the process also requires the broad support of the various groups of the society based on social contacts and interpersonal ties. Reconciliation cannot be imposed, but is rather the effect of a long process and the engagement of different groups of both societies. In the case of Poland and Germany, the creation of the nexus of various organizations dealing with different aspects of reconciliation and cooperation between the two countries contributed to the success of the process. This infrastructure of cooperation and reconciliation consisted of several thousand entities – governmental and non-governmental – which are active either in Polish-German pairs or separately and independently in both states.

First of all, Poland and Germany co-funded two large independent institutions: the Foundation for Polish-German Cooperation and the Youth Cooperation Foundation, which finance mutual activities. These two foundations consistently support Polish-German projects: meetings, actions aimed at creating partnerships, cooperation of local authorities and other institutions, promoting the German language and culture in Poland, and Polish language and culture in Germany. Over the period of 20 years the Foundations have supported over 10000 projects. The protection of common cultural heritage is an important aspect of the Foundations' work.

Moreover, the European University Viadrina, and the Collegium Polonicum - two universities at the border - were created. The German Historic Institute in Warsaw and The Polish Historic



Institute in Berlin were established. The Joint Textbook Commission was founded in 1972 under the auspices of the German and Polish UNESCO commissions.<sup>2</sup> The main aim of the Commission was to present various possible views and interpretations of events and processes and teach students critical thinking, which would allow them to assume a critical stance towards the history of both countries. The people to people contacts were in the center of the process of bringing two nations closer - several hundred partnerships between cities and districts and between schools and institutions of higher learning were established.

The enhancing of economic cooperation was also an important element of the process. The Poland-Germany Forum, the Polish-German chambers of commerce and industry were created.

On the state level, various bilateral government and departmental committees were created, plenipotentiaries for the development of bilateral relations were established, and parliamentary groups for supporting bilateral cooperation were created. Cooperation in such sensitive areas as security was also developed, for example, the Multinational Corps Northeast and the Polish-German military contingent in NATO were created.

Taking into account Polish – German reconciliation, the current focus of Macedonian and Bulgarian political elites should not be on solving disputed issues, but, rather, on creating a nexus of institutions, which will enhance contact between the two societies. It is also very important to see the role of the EU enlargement process as a narrative shaping element but not as a tool used for decision-making. This process is more about shaping and further development of identification instead of competing for a winning narrative. Looking three decades back, this issue shows a need of shared success story or momentum based on shared historical understanding and not competition. The example of Central Europe

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.krzyzowa.org.pl/en/projects/30th-anniversary/3299-koniec-prac-nad-podrecznikiem-polsko-niemieckim-dr-bartosz-dziewanowski-stefanczyk-3>

shows a need for political motivation, but also a consideration of historical context and need of shaping “big stories” despite the fact that the region shared a same starting point: resettlement of people and a need for new senses of identity and belonging.



# **Ljupcho Petkovski**

**Drawing Parallels:  
Can the Lessons Learned  
from the Prespa Agreement  
be Used to Solve the Current  
Bulgaro-Macedonian  
Predicaments?**

This short paper identifies several key components that any future solution to the Bulgaro-Macedonian predicament might contain. In identifying them, I will be explicitly trying to make parallels with the process of negotiating, signing and implementing the Prespa Agreement, which I have jointly analyzed with Ionannis Armakolas a few years ago in the paper: “Blueprint Prespa? Lessons Learned from the Greece-North Macedonia Agreement.” The rationale behind organizing my arguments is the following. Arguably, the nature of both the Macedonian-Greek and the Bulgaro-Macedonian predicaments are fundamentally identical, as the “elephant in the room” in both cases is related to topics of identity, historical heritage and national narratives of both sides. Therefore, the lessons learnt from the Prespa agreement might be illuminating and instructive of the current negotiating process. This has to do not only with the fact that the structure of incentives for resolving bilateral issues on the Macedonian side stems from the policy goal to start accession negotiations with the EU, but also with the shared historical and political context to which the “twin disputes,” i.e., the naming dispute with Greece and the historical dispute with Bulgaria, actually belong.

### **Component 1: The (Blind Spots of) Creative Ambiguity**

The key component of the Prespa Agreement was the attempt to tackle the “elephant in the room” of the name dispute, i.e., the identity and the heritage. The Macedonian side gave up its semi-official claim over antiquity, while *Article 7* of the agreement delimited the meaning of the of the terms “Macedonian” and “Macedonia,” making both sides aware that the only way forward was to use these adjectives in a non-exclusive manner. In so doing, the sides didn’t agree on everything, but rather used creative ambiguity as a method to bypass topics where full agreement was not possible to achieve. This demonstrated that deals are not about agreeing on everything, but rather about finding a way to coexist despite differences. The same thinking should be applied in any honest talks between Bulgaria and North Macedonia. The

precondition for this is a general agreement that no singular side holds a monopoly over the historical and political truth, and that the parties act from a position of fully-fledged modern nations.

One of the byproducts of the Prespa Agreement was the fact that the Macedonian side recommitted itself to its Slavic heritage. This heritage, in most of its aspects, is also claimed by Bulgaria, and claimed by both Bulgaria and North Macedonia. In a paradoxical matter, one of the successes of the Prespa Agreement turned out to be an impediment for the Bulgaro-Macedonian relations. This comes against the backdrop of the commitment to learning to share, and jointly commemorate, history as being one of the key ingredients of the Friendship Agreement from 2017. Yet, “sharing history,” “common history” and “entangled history” are essentially contestable concepts, which are a matter of different interpretations, divergent understandings and even political struggles, as the political dynamics in North Macedonia and Bulgaria have demonstrated since 2019.

Becoming complacent due to the success of the Prespa Agreement, North Macedonia’s policy makers didn’t anticipate that the interpretation of concepts such as “common history” is not necessarily a creative exercise. This is particularly the case if the languages are so close that juicy political details and the prejudices that underpin the domestic public debates in the neighboring country are directly accessible to the respective publics. The proximity of languages allows people to more easily understand each other, in both cooperation and hatred. It is a matter of conscious decision which pole will prevail. These decisions are made by visionary politicians, who don’t calculate about short-term political loss and gains.

## **Component 2 – Don’t Leave History Aside**

Overwhelmed by what they see as petty Balkan nationalistic games, which jeopardize the big picture (i.e., the stability of the Balkans achieved through enlargement), the well-intended, yet poli-

tically naïve, Western policy makers and observers usually advise against foregrounding topics of history and identity in any future negotiations. The argument goes that a focus on economy, cultural and youth exchange needs to be re-established in order to create conditions for more rational discussion on heated topics such as history and identity by deescalating the toxic climate. This approach seems to be reflected in the proposals of the new Bulgarian PM, who proposed an establishment of bilateral working groups that, for a period of six months, would discuss topics other than history.

The shortcoming of such an approach lies in the fact that cultural conflicts always have the potential to overshadow achievements in cooperation in other fields, if not well understood and treated properly. Vocal nationalists and sensationalist media can always, relatively easily, hijack public discourse by using heated rhetoric around the need to defend the sacred national narratives shaping rational political deliberation and policy agendas in a negative direction. Therefore, I argue, topics of identity, historical narratives and heritage should be tackled heads-up, in a way the Prespa Agreement did. Being aware that I am not going through the complexity of the problem and the plethora of possible solutions, for me there is one way forward in the discussion, i.e., there has to be agreement about the parameters of the negotiations.

These parameters should be the following. On the Bulgarian side, the official narrative of Bulgarian historiography, that there was no Macedonian nation before 1944, is not something that can be accepted by any Macedonian politician, not even the most liberal ones, to which the descending political star of Zoran Zaev belongs. This position simply does not do justice to the historical context and reality and is seen by many in North Macedonia as offensive and insulting. On the Macedonian side, there must be an understanding that the country has already committed itself to discussing common history, no matter how painful and emotional the process of breaking the taboo is. According to liberal

historians on both sides, the period of shared, or entangled history, can be traced back to the middle of the 19th century and lasted until the end of the First World War. Forgetting was one of the mechanisms of Macedonian nation building in socialism, remembering and understanding without having a feeling of being threatened should be the mechanism of the Europeanization of Macedonian national identity in the 21st century. Macedonian politicians like PM Zaev, President Pendarovski, and the special negotiator Buchkovski have already made very important steps of reconciliation by problematizing the taboos of Macedonian national historiography and reaching out to the Bulgarian public. Bulgarian politicians should follow suit.

Both sides should understand that there is nothing exceptional about the nation building processes of their respective nations. Nations are not products of nature, but byproducts of contingency, history, contexts and human agency. Some of them appear earlier, others later. The attempts to sacralize them and construct their genealogical continuity is only instructive of their weaknesses and constructed nature. Our nations were forged out of the same population, which had shared historical experience. The countless family ties on both sides of the borders speak for themselves. The sensibilities of these people, instead of the sensibilities of the majority of professional national historians and nationalist politicians, should be the basis for mutual understanding. The wisdom of little narratives should inspire a smart solution against the rigidity and conflictual nature of the meta-narratives about our nations.

### **Component 3 – Let Determined Politicians, Incentivized by International and Domestic Dividends, Solve the Problem**

The Prespa Agreement was negotiated, signed, and implemented (in its core dimensions) amidst opinion polls in both countries that didn't favor the solution. In 2018, PM Zaev and his party were ascending to popularity, while then PM Tsipras was losing power. PM Zaev used his political capital to get the burdensome process



of implementation done, while Tsipras used the topic to unite the left-centre around a favorable moral topic, thus imposing his party's hegemony on the left spectrum. Both were met with street protests of the political Right, and were incentivized by foreign political dividends, though slightly different ones.

Today, politicians on both sides face public opinions that are unfavorable to a solution, as evidenced by the data of recent opinion polls. PM Zaev and his policies, this time, are in a descent, partly due to what voters saw as submissiveness toward Bulgarian demands. Bulgaria, on the other hand, has a new government led by political figures who have just started their ascent to popularity. For outgoing PM Zaev, who resigned as president of the ruling SDSM, but still holds the position of Prime Minister, solving the issue soon and formally starting accession negotiations would be an ultimate achievement for his political capital and is a matter of political honor. For PM Petkov, solving the issues would mean more international policy dividends, and more focus on the liberal political agenda that he is concentrated on by taking the lethal weapon away from the hands of nationalists. Although PM Zaev's position seems untenable, the prospect of solving the issue in a short-term perspective can strengthen his position, as benevolent international partners have put all of their eggs in the basket of him playing an instrumental role in the solution of the dispute. For a good reason – despite failures on the domestic political scene, he has demonstrated that he is one of a handful of politicians in the Western Balkans who is courageous enough to tackle bilateral issues that an ordinary politician would shy away from dealing with.

# **Stefan Detchev**

**Bulgarian-Macedonian  
Cultural Conflict and  
Historical Narrative**

## Why History can not be totally ignored

As much as one circumvents the past, different interpretations and states of Bulgarian and Macedonian identities are historical products that need a plausible explanation. This will be difficult without a direct confrontation with historical facts and a reliance on contemporary historiography, the achievements of the social sciences and humanities, the knowledge about the dynamics and multiplicity of identities and their negotiation, occurrence and variants. Currently, the Bulgarian-Macedonian dispute starts from the premise that national identity is an eternal value that has existed since time immemorial and is given once and forever. The modern Bulgarian and the modern Macedonian identities are perceived by the predominant part of the two societies as given by nature and have existed over the centuries as unchanging entities. These national identities are based on the existence of national historical narratives about the past that are considered sacred in both societies.<sup>1</sup>

## Narratives and identities in history textbooks

What is the current situation with history textbooks in both countries? They are written on the basis of a national and cultural background, which is hidden, but sets a philosophy that is valuable and ideologically charged. The content is based on scientific achievements mainly by national historiographies and in particular on their mainstreams. The local Bulgarian and Macedonian academic hierarchies are in fact mutually valued within their national institutional structures and encourage old nationalist narratives, as well as an outdated historiographical paradigm. The textbooks in both countries suggest, with their narratives, Bulgarian and Macedonian continuity through time and space, thanks to a selection of facts and their careful organization. Ultimately, students remain uninformed about the nature of the national narrative as an ideology or philosophy behind the curriculum. In this

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<sup>1</sup> Дечев, Стефан. Да се остави историята на историците. Но на кои? – Дечев, Стефан. Скрытая история. Полемики. София: Парадокс, 2019, с. 147-171.

way, the nation of today's modern nation-state is presented as existing in the past as a socio-political or ethnic group by presenting students with primordial characteristics of the collective. At the same time, the national myths embedded in the textbook stories legitimize certain territorial claims and interests of today. Particularly frightening, is the complete discrepancy between the two narratives about the period of the Middle Ages. One can definitely talk about the presence of hate speech in Macedonian textbooks and disregard for the Macedonian community in the Bulgarian. In both places there is a tendentious presentation of the other culture and prejudices towards the other nation. There are also many factual errors and obvious prejudices in the curriculum. Cases of conflict or murder from the past are purposefully presented in Macedonian textbooks in a way that incites hatred. On the other hand, the Bulgarian textbooks, with the persistent suggestion of "unliberated lands," as well as shifting the main line of interpretation to the governments of Bogdan Filov (1940-1943), and ignoring the Bulgarian anti-Nazi and anti-fascist spectrum, creates preconditions for Great Bulgarian and anti-Macedonian suggestions. By and large, the multiethnic perspective seems more visible in Macedonian textbooks, not least because of the culture of the former multinational Yugoslavia, but also as a specific Macedonian consequence of the Ohrid Framework Agreement of 2001, which governs relations and balances with the Albanian population in the country. However, the Macedonian Bulgarians, who fought in the past for an independent Macedonia, are completely absent from the story and it is suggested that all Macedonian Bulgarians were representatives of the Great Bulgarian idea and "collaborators" with the "fascist occupier." And while in the Macedonian case the textbooks emphasize the differences with the Bulgarians and their separateness over the centuries, in the Bulgarian case, salient efforts were made to ignore any differences and specificities. In this sense, the forced centuries-old peculiarity on the one hand, opposes the long-standing unity under the name "Bulgarian people" since the 9th century, on the other.

How can one come out of the narrative of cultural conflict, of sacrifice, of superiority, as well as of the contradictions and hate-inspiring historical narratives, especially through textbooks? What can the both parties of the dispute do that could recognize each other? Before that, it would have to be accepted as legitimate and normal for the history curriculum to start from the perspective of today's realities, which are present on both sides of the border of the overwhelming majorities that form a Bulgarian nation that speaks the Bulgarian language and a Macedonian nation that speaks Macedonian. The Bulgarian side, for example, could renounce the suggestion of the Macedonian nation as an artificial work of the Comintern and recognize the natural process of its formation. In this regard, its foundations can be traced in the Macedonian dialects used by the revivalists of the 19th century (and it should not be hidden that they were called "Bulgarian" at the time). Other foundations can also be found in the political separatism or the autonomist tradition of the revolutionaries (again, it is no secret that they had a Bulgarian or some dual identity, in which the Macedonian has a more political character). As difficult as this may be, the Macedonian side must come to terms with the reality of the Bulgarian identity of the revivalists and revolutionaries, despite their cultural particularism underlying today's Macedonian language and political separatism or an autonomist tradition that inspires the foundation of Macedonian statehood. Thus, the first step towards a solution is to allow each side to let the other build its story in the history textbooks, according to today's realities of state, nation and language, but without falsifying or hiding facts. Both sides must take this into account.

The second step towards a possible solution is related to the acceptance of national identity as a modern category, which came to the Balkans in the 19th and 20th centuries and then the process of formation of modern nations took place. In this sense, all national identities are in some sense constructed and invented, as they bring to the minds of the citizens of the state, through its institutions, a degree of historicity that did not exist before the

modern era and in traditional pre-modern and illiterate societies. In this sense, national histories, however, remain certain intellectual constructions that demonstrate only one possible way of telling history or describing the past. Last but not least, this identity has its own internal dynamics, which are situational and contextual.

The third step is related to a correct understanding of the concept of multiperspectivity in history textbooks and storytelling. As Hans-Georg Gadamer puts it: "Education means being able to look at things from the other's point of view." In the work of the Joint Multidisciplinary Commission on Historical and Educational Issues so far, the Macedonian side gives the impression that through the principle of multiperspectivity it seeks to legitimize some problematic and mythological descriptions of the past by Macedonian historians from the previous decades. At the same time, it is evident that the Bulgarian side demonstrates such a conviction in the rightness of the Bulgarian narrative that it completely rejects the principle of multiperspectivity. Last but not least, the reason for this is the fact that on the basis of the concrete work of the commission it sees in the multiperspectivity an attempt to completely erase the Bulgarian heritage in Macedonia. In this case, however, the Bulgarian side fails to see that the principle of multiperspectivity goes hand in hand with requirements to follow the last word of science on a given problem or topic, as well as to avoid arbitrary interpretation of facts that irritate.

Nevertheless, it is obvious that history textbooks ought to conform to certain principles and values. Democracy, human rights, international and intercultural awareness, and the education of students in critical thinking should be leading principles. The textbooks have to promote a culture of peace and the ability to live together. Therefore, the curriculum must be accurate, balanced, without prejudice and to follow the latest advances in science, promoting mutual knowledge and understanding. The textbooks themselves should present different perspectives, whilst the na-

tional and cultural background from which they are written have to be made transparent. Factual errors, obvious prejudices and hate speech must be eliminated immediately. Emphasis needs to be placed on commonalities, not on differences that still exist. Topics on which there is disagreement may be omitted or given to the best experts who could present a parallel reading. For this purpose, it is necessary to have alternative interpretations and stories. As it has already been pointed out that it is normal for the textbooks to be written from the perspective of each of both contemporary societies, in this way a new historiographical paradigm can be reached in both places. It will lead to the eradication of obvious hate speech and the elimination of stereotypes about the neighbor.

For this purpose, it is necessary to attract specialists who have not been involved in the writing of textbooks so far, and for whom it will not be a problem to revise their own curriculum. The discoveries of the best academic research in the world need to be included in the curriculum. That is why the achievements of experts should be presented to the general public and not left in closed academic circles. This includes changing the nature of the national narrative as an ideology or philosophy behind the overall curriculum. To this, we can add a suggestion of the dynamic, contextual and multi-layered nature of the identities themselves. Because the textbook should not hide, despite the perspective from which it is written, that the nation of today's modern nation-state did not exist in the past as a socio-political or ethnic group. The textbook should also show that the fundamental myths can legitimize certain dangerous territorial claims today. What should also be shown to the students is the illusory nature of continuity through time and space in the historical narrative, and how the past reality is filled with discontinuities and empty spots. The students have to feel that the author of the textbook is the one who creates a sense of continuity through the selection of facts and their organization. Therefore, the biased presentation of the other culture and the neighboring countries should be avoided, as

well as prejudices against the other nation should be suggested and deepened.

However, based on these universal values, the curriculum must be locally relevant and meet the needs of Bulgarian and Macedonian students themselves. That is why some very specific requirements should be set for future textbooks. The students have to be able to understand why nations, that are so close to each other and have certain periods of a common and hardly distinguishable past, are already two nations with two histories, languages and cultures. I would recommend the introduction of family and family histories that show the regularity, legitimacy and persuasiveness of both identities - Bulgarian and Macedonian- based on the same pre-modern population.

A consensus could be achieved if one took into account the accomplishments of contemporary historiography, as well as those of the contemporary social sciences and humanities. Then, the Bulgarian and Macedonian historians could agree on the following points: the dynamic nature of identities; the modern nature of nations; the artificial process of standardization of each language; the different medieval realities; the “common history” related to the fluid identities of Revival period elites and revolutionaries from Macedonia, who transitioned from a Bulgarian ethnic national identity into a separate, Macedonian one (which was formed later); the interaction of the right and the left of the IMRO with the Bulgarian army during the First World War; the gradual maturation of Macedonian identity during the interwar period; the complex and dynamic picture in Macedonia during the Second World War; the predominance of Macedonian identity during the war years; the forced homogenization of the Macedonian identity in Tito’s Yugoslavia at the expense of the marginalization, suppression and “cleansing” of what was Bulgarian from the past; the movement of Bulgarian historiography towards Great Bulgarianism from the end of the 1960s onwards, which hid the cultural particularism of the Revivalists, the political separatism of the revolutionaries and the early forms of ethnic Macedonianism.



The Bulgarian historical narrative already needs a revision of the post-communist one imposed over the last three decades, which practically ignores the anti-Nazi and anti-fascist tradition of the whole Bulgarian political spectrum - from the conservative right to the left- and identifies with the government of Bogdan Filov, his actions and the government majority, excusing somehow the alliance with the Third Reich. As for the controversial topic of World War II, correctness requires the Macedonian society to present the whole complex and diverse picture - the popularity of Adolf Hitler himself near Vardar in April 1941 as executioner of royal Yugoslavia, ending the Serbian occupation regime; for the Action committees (in which there are also quite a few Macedonian communists), which greeted the Bulgarian army in April 1941 in a friendly and flowery way, not least because of the well-known Italian appetites for Macedonia; for the inclusion of many local activists in the administration during the Bulgarian occupation, including members coming from old Ilinden families close to Nikola Karev, Pitu Guli, Gotse Delchev, etc. When you are aware of all of this, you will look at the inscriptions "Bulgarian occupation" or "Bulgarian fascist occupation" in a different way. To this must be added the murders and repression by the Yugoslav communist authorities after 1944 of a number of individuals with Macedonian-Bulgarian self-consciousness, all the more so as Bulgarian police documents show that they were suspicious of the Bulgarian authorities throughout the war because of their autonomous preferences and desires for an independent Macedonia.

The whole picture for the period 1941-1944 has to be presented to the Bulgarian public as well - how the idea of an independent Macedonia already dominates, unlike during the First World War; the fears of the Bulgarian government of the traditions of Macedonian autonomy; the gradual disappointments of the local population from the Bulgarian rule; the complete failure of the Bulgarian government to win the young Macedonian generation that grew up in royal Yugoslavia; the practical inevitability of Macedonian secession after the summer of 1944. In fact, today's Macedo-

nian historical narrative is mostly the narrative of the generation that grew up in royal Yugoslavia, which represents the Revivalists and revolutionaries in some way from the perspective of 1950-1980- those years of the XX century.

Powerful symbolic gestures are also needed in the curriculum. For example, to simultaneously recognize Bulgaria's responsibility for and complicity in the Holocaust and the Vataša killings, along with Tito's communist repression in Yugoslavia after the end of 1944. It is unfair to teach the Vataša shooting without saying that Lyuben Apostolov was captured by the Bulgarian authorities, handed over to the People's Republic of Macedonia, taken to trial and sentenced. We finally need a gesture from the Macedonian side towards the Macedonian Bulgarians who fought for an independent Macedonia and were repressed for their Bulgarophilia and Bulgarian identity, or double identity. At the same time, it is clear that not only the Macedonian Bulgarians have contributed no less than anyone else to an independent Macedonia, but among them this idea was born. Moreover, even the autonomist tradition of historical IMARO gave rise to this political thinking. And as far as the perspective of this historical story will be the idea of an independent Macedonia, it cannot but be emphasized that the Great Bulgarian project was in various cases against it - in 1912, 1915 and 1941, and only in the latter case, this differs completely from the Macedonian political project, as in the beginning there is an unstable construction and swinging between the two agendas.



# **Katerina Kolozova**

**The applicability of the  
notion of “cultural conflict”  
on the Macedonian-  
Bulgarian dispute and the  
possibilities it offers for its  
resolution**

## 1. Why is the binational conflict at hand a one of purported cultural one?

If we accept the premise that nation is a purely political category, any dispute about the historical narrative embedded in the nation building would be a dispute over “ownership” of a culture, i.e., a matter of “cultural appropriation,” as these narratives are laden with ethnography, cultural and civilizational values and historical moments that tie the narrative with a thread of a temporality and a certain continuum behind it. Arriving at a precise definition of the problem at hand is key to its solution – we are aware of the continuous reactions coming from EU politicians and representatives of the public stating “they struggle understanding the nature of the problem, its very *raison d’être*.”<sup>1</sup>

Even if history proper, or rather the contemporary historical science, acknowledges the fact that there are ruptures in ethnicity formation and nation building processes, and that nation itself is a modern invention, it lends hand in the nation building narrative by providing verified data and reliable interpretation to the state institutions.<sup>2</sup> Thus, a selection of events, a particular wording around the chosen events and similar acts of “weaving the story of a nation,” is always already expected from the historians. Both political elites and historians – in any nation state – are aware that a “historical narrative” of a nation is more than history proper, and that it is rather a culture premised on a certain memory of the nation, backed by a presumably reliable historical science.<sup>3</sup> Or at least, it is expected for this awareness to be present in

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<sup>1</sup> Gorgi Gotev, “Facing pressure, Bulgaria tries to explain its North Macedonia veto,” Euractiv (May 12, 2021), available at <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/facing-pressure-bulgaria-tries-to-explain-its-north-macedonia-veto/>, accessed on 5 January 2021; Ivaylo Ditchev, “My Europe: Bulgaria vs North Macedonia — is there a way forward?,” *Deutsche Welle* (7 January, 2022), available at <https://www.dw.com/en/my-europe-bulgaria-vs-north-macedonia-is-there-a-way-forward/a-60356569>, accessed on 9 January 2022; Tchavdar Marinov, “Europe Does Not Understand Us” Why is Bulgaria trying to veto North Macedonia’s EU membership?, Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung (2 December 2020), available at <https://www.rosalux.de/en/news/id/43443/europe-does-not-understand-us>, accessed on 5 January 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Smith, Anthony D. *Nationalism and modernism: a critical survey of recent theories of nations and nationalism*. London: Routledge, 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Stefan Berger. “History and national identity: why they should remain divorced”. *History &*

any contemporary nation-state. It is certainly expected from the multi-disciplinary commission of academics to be capable of distinguishing the one from the other. Our focus groups with members of the so-called “historical commission” from the both sides of the border, conducted this fall, by both Bulgarian and Macedonian ISSHS faculty (the Bulgarian scholars being ISSHS visiting faculty), show that the commission is equipped with scholars capable of making the distinction at stake. However, it seems that there are also historians, also in both “national teams,” who believe that the national narrative upon which the sense of identity belonging is built, can be reduced to the historical science or a purely historiographical narrative. Here we note a serious impediment in a competent, reliable and up-to-date with contemporary science ability of the Commission to contribute to a resolution of the issue.

One does not need to adhere to multi-perspectivism in historiography in order to be able to acknowledge the distinction between national narrative and history proper and the role of culture at the heart of the matter at hand. As for the issue of multi-perspective study of historiography, it is a matter of educational policy rather than historical science proper but it is grounded into a scientific discipline – that of educational studies.<sup>4</sup> Thus, it should be pointed out to the Commission that history as dry, emotionless, merely factual matter can be the methodological choice of an academic, however, contemporary educational policies, require sensitivity in presentation toward different identity groups, operating with the values of diversity, inclusiveness and decolonialism. Multi-perspectivism, at least in this policy paper, is seen primarily as the unavoidable standard in history textbooks, as well as in everything related to the cultural heritage (literature, arts, ethnography), as

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*Policy.* Institute of Historical Research, Senate House, University of London, 01.12.2007, available at: <https://www.historyandpolicy.org/policy-papers/papers/history-and-national-identity-why-they-should-remain-divorced>, accessed on 26 November 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Falk Pingel, “UNESCO Guidebook on Textbook Research and Textbook Revision” 2<sup>nd</sup> Revised and Updated Edition, UNESCO and the Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research, Paris/Braunschweig, 2010, available at: <https://www.ehu.eu5/documents/3120344/3356415/Unesco+guidebook.pdf/6bdf16d1-a184-4a42-a90e-033b77fdbd42>.

aligned with the up-to-date educational studies and their reflection in the UNESCO standards. Multi-perspectivism as a matter of methodological debate in the science of history itself is not object of the discussion in the analysis at hand.

Similarly to the solution reflected in Article 7 of the *Prespa Agreement*, or to the Greek-Macedonian intellectual debate that paved the floor for it, we argue we should extrapolate the key points of cultural and identity related conflict, offer a solution to it in terms of educational policy as well as multi-issue policy analysis adhering to the standards of European international relations.

Based on our desk analysis and field research (focus groups and interviews with policy makers, intellectuals involved in the public debate on the matter, participants in the Commission), we argue there are two cultural and national identity related stakes: 1) the dispute over the Macedonian language, 2) the treatment of the shared or common history by both parties. We are not nitpicking terminological nuances as to what is meant by “shared” vs. “common” history, but looking behind the language itself, namely we examine the referent behind the terminological battles. When it comes to the issue of history, the stakes in question are the following: are we sharing a history reducible to the Bulgarian national history or are we saying that the common history allows for an organic bifurcation into a separate identity? Reducing the shared history to the Bulgarian national historiography, implies an artificiality and falsification in the creation of an identity. Granted that the Yugoslav historiography may have navigated the discourse in a way that would introduce a clear cut with the Bulgarian culture and history as well as the possible shared sense of identity between the Macedonians and Bulgarians,<sup>5</sup> we argue the sense of identity cannot be falsified, fabricated or “wrong.” Even if we embrace the constructivist argument about identity, the fact that it is a “discursive construct” does not make it less real, less true and

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<sup>5</sup> Ulf Brunnbauer, ““Pro-Serbians” vs. “Pro-Bulgarians”: Revisionism in Post-Socialist Macedonian Historiography”, *History Compass* 3 (2005) EU 130, p. 4.

a fabrication – the “construct” grows into an identity in an organic manner, it is experienced as organic as quasi-natural.

Therefore, without arguing in favor of or against the claims that the historiography of Yugoslavia thwarted and negated the links of identity nature between the Macedonians and Bulgarians, we claim that the insistence that a certain identity is unmoored from any past, instituted *ex nihilo*, imposed as a lie violates the right to self-identification or the dignity of those embodying the identity, in this case of the present day Macedonians. On the other hand, granting roots and a sense of continuity to the young Macedonian nation, even if those roots are to a considerable degree inextricable from the history of the Bulgarian nation, does not mean that the Macedonian sense of national identity is less real or reduced to the Bulgarian past but rather it ought to invent a way of integrating said past into its present. Furthermore, contemporary national history narratives should not be reduced to the past, to any past even though the collective memory we take for history is perceived as the cornerstone of identity belonging. As elaborated above, the two are distinct and history proper as well as historiography are different from any present day sense of identity and the national narrative that assigns meaning to the identity as stake.

All identity narratives have a continuity or at least a sense of continuity, and, consequently, 1944, as the year of the Yugoslav intervention in what used to be a shared/common sense of identity and national myths as per the Declaration of the Bulgarian Parliament from October 2019, should not be treated as the point of division and falsification but rather as a bridge to be crossed in order to identify commonalities and more shared history rather than less. By doing so, the discourse on the “Bulgarian fascist occupying force” in the Macedonian textbooks should be changed insofar as it nourishes a prejudice preserved to present day, but also include content of building bridges of collaboration and commonality beyond the year at issue, namely 1944: for example, the role of the Bulgarian anti-fascist forces in the liberation of North



Macedonia from the German occupation and their collaboration with the Yugoslav communist forces ought to be presented fairly and thoroughly or the poetry of Nikola Vaptsarov must be admitted to be part of Bulgarian literary history, whereas the fact that he participated in groups in Bulgaria identified as “Macedonian” in an identity sense (notwithstanding it may not be a national one) should be noted to – thus both themes become bridges of commonality and shared historical continuity instead of division and separation, without negating the separate right to national self-identification to any of the two parties. The Commission and the policy makers should be aided in revising curricula in the proposed way by UNESCO aligned educational experts.

As far as the language is concerned, the matter has been resolved pre-emptively thanks to the *erga omnes* status of *Prespa Agreement*. Refusing to name the language by its name is a matter of disrespecting the other party’s sense of identity as standardized language of a nation is its key element. Not treating it purely legalistically, but culturally and politically – we argue that avoiding to name a language by its name is a gesture of hostility. We would advise that the two States recognize this fact – in the Declaration of the Bulgarian Parliament from October 2019 there may not be explicit negation of the standard Macedonian language, but the stance is hostile. Moreover, calling the language simply “the official language,” as the Declaration as well as the position of Bulgaria on the EU negotiation framework suggests,<sup>6 7</sup> does not resolve but rather complicates the matter and there is also an implied negation: North Macedonia does not have one official language, but two, Macedonian being one of them and also one of

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<sup>6</sup> Council of the European Union: General Secretariat Brussels (25 March 2020) CM 1946/20: *Council conclusions on Enlargement and Stabilisation and Association Process The Republic of North Macedonia and the Republic of Albania* [annexes included], available at: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/CM-1946-2020-INIT/en/pdf>, accessed on 30 November 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria, Рамкова позиция относно разширяване на ЕС и процеса на стабилизиране и асоцииране: Република Северна Македония и Албания (09 October 2019) [Framework Position regarding EU enlargement and the Stabilisation and Association Process of the Republic of North Macedonia and Albania], available at: <https://www.gov.bg/bg/prestentor/novini/ramkova-pozitsia>, accessed on 30 November 2021.

the two languages of the bilateral Agreement. We would advise the Bulgarian Parliament to revise article 1 line 5 of its Declaration from October 2019 and adjust it to the reality ensuing from *Prespa Agreement* signed in 2018, because seems to imply that Bulgaria does not accept the *erga omnes* legal validity of Prespa Agreement which has been ratified by the UN General Assembly as the document marking the conclusion and closure to the dispute between the two states.<sup>8</sup>

On July 29<sup>th</sup> 2021 the Parliament of the Republic of North Macedonia adopted a Resolution with hardly any political wording, but rather one that is unavoidably perceived, in its entirety, as a pamphlet of romantic nationalism.<sup>9</sup> It speaks of the Macedonian nation as “autochthonous” (article 2 of the Resolution), mentions “universally accepted theories” in the social sciences, humanities and cultural studies which apparently coincide with those of the Macedonian science (article 3 of the Resolution), while a patriotic prose runs throughout the document rendering each article utterly vague – bereft of clear legal and political meaning. Unlike the *Declaration of the Bulgarian Parliament*, the peculiar pseudo-political prose of the Macedonian Resolution evades proper political analysis. All that can be said of it in political and legal terms is that 1) it rebuilds the national narrative and, by doing so, it introduces a notable change – it invokes the “scientific truths of the field of Slavistics” (art. 3) unlike prior to the *Prespa Agreement* when references to Antiquity and avoidance of mention of nation’s Slavic character was part of the national narrative (let us note how easily present rhetoric and narrative has replaced the one that ruled in the era of Gruevski), 2) it charges the executive branch to execute the stipulations of the Resolution. Considering the essence of the Resolution goes against one of the key premises of the *Treaty* –

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<sup>8</sup> “Final Agreement for the Settlement of the Differences”, p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> National Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia: “Resolution on Determining the Macedonian National Positions in the Context of the European Integration Blockages,” Official Gazette of Republic of North Macedonia (08 – 3602/1) [Резолуција за утврдување на македонските државни позиции во контекст на блокадите на европските интеграции, „Службен весник на Република Северна Македонија“ (08 – 3602/1)].

“shared” or “common” history – as well as some of its articles do so very explicitly,<sup>10</sup> it violates Article 118 of the Constitution of North Macedonia, which states that ratified international treaties become part of the national legislation that cannot be contradicted or annulled by any national legal act.

## **2. Transposition of the cultural conflict and its resolution onto the plane of the political: Tackling the elusive categories of identity and national narratives in political terms**

The political means to tackle this problem of essentially inter-cultural relations is no different than from any other form of identity issues that have been raised to political issues and addressed through political means. A category of people, for the sake of comparison, let us say a specific cultural group or a sexual minority group, need to be dragged out of the pre-political discussions of academic scholasticism concerning culture or history or psychological and deontological discussions and thereby introduced into the realm of the political. By doing so they are recognized as political subjects and their political rights are negotiated with the authorities. Soon after or perhaps simultaneously, it becomes a discussion or rather negotiations and public debate over policy solutions.

In the case of our object of analysis, the transposition of the case of cultural conflict, embedded in competing nation-building narratives and dovetailing with the sense of national identity (identity still being essentially a cultural category), can be done in the following way:

- (A) By accepting that a standard and an official language of a country is as much a political as it is a linguistic category. Therefore, by way of adhering to the standards of contemporary international relations, at least those in place in the European Union, and the *Prespa Agreement* more specifically (taking

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<sup>10</sup> For example, Article 3, line 3 implying shared collective “memories” of Balkan and Mediterranean peoples rather than the stipulation of *the Treaty* about the Bulgarian-Macedonian commonalities more specifically, thereby diluting if not annihilating the nature of the Treaty at its core.

into consideration its *erga omnes* status), the official language of North Macedonia whose name should not be avoided in any bilateral communication is the Macedonian (part of the group of South-Slavic languages). (B) The intercultural concern: Bulgaria is rightly concerned that many of the authors in their national literature are represented as Macedonian in the Macedonian curricula. A multi-perspective approach would allow for the Macedonian curricula to explain as to why these authors are perceived as Macedonian, having built themselves into the national narrative, while still being part of the Bulgarian literary canon, in particular because they wrote in that language (the circumstances explaining why should not negate the facts).

- (A) By accepting that the national narrative is also about cultural and civilizational heritage and not only history, or perhaps even more so, demonstrate respect toward the two respective narratives and ethnic identifications as distinct in spite of the intersecting national histories. Thus, the good neighborly relations can be established only if the concerned ethnicities – not only nationalities – demonstrate respect toward one another by allowing them to build their own national narratives. This should be valid fully reciprocally: the Macedonian side should respect why Gotse Delchev or Dimitar Miladinov would be part of the Bulgarian “cultural intimacy,”<sup>11</sup> just as should the Bulgarian side. (B) The intercultural concern: Through the means of multi-perspectivism in curriculum building, the cultural value of a historical figure and an event for the institutions, the culture and the national narrative of the other state should be represented in good faith, without hostility and with no implicit or explicit dismissal but as an equally valid narrative that invites mutual respect and consideration. Once again, we shall reiterate, educational

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<sup>11</sup> Michael Herzfeld developed the concept of cultural intimacy as “one means of defining and understanding the sore zones of cultural sensitivity and to understand why officials so often seem to connive in perpetuating that sneaky persistence in everyday life”. Michael Herzfeld, *Cultural intimacy: social poetics and the real life of social institutions*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Routledge, 2016, p. 2.

studies expert/s specialized in the UNESCO agenda of multiperspectivity should be included in the process. In spite of the insistence of the Commission that it is academically well equipped, we once again argue that they aren't when it comes to the issue at stake – it is primarily an (educational) policy issue, not merely academic.

- Improved infrastructure that will enable to pass the distance between the two capitals in not much more than two hours by means of public transportation should be the most pressing priority as there is nothing more efficient in overcoming nationalism and bringing cultures closer together as daily interaction of the people rather than the institutions. Thus, a dramatically accelerated process of infrastructural rapprochement is to be seen as one of the most efficient means of cultural conflict resolution.
- The Declaration of the Bulgarian Parliament should be revised in all of the parts where it breaches the academic autonomy by imposing itself as the guardian of the “undeniable historical truths” as well as in the above discussed stipulation regarding the “constitutional language” of North Macedonia – as per the *erga omnes* Prespa Agreement the language is to be called “Macedonian,” and every renaming of it (or robbing it of a name) is breach of an agreement respected by the entire European Union as it should be by all of the UN nation states.
- The Resolution of the Macedonian Parliament should be replaced by one of political wording in line with the spirit of good neighborliness, and its prerequisite - good faith, entirely circumventing the atavistic and dangerous discourse of romantic nationalism.

### 3. Conclusion

The bilateral dispute and the deadlock the two nations have found themselves in cannot be solved unless the elephant in the room is

recognized and named – the ethno-national identity related intercultural conflict and the necessity of its resolution. As elaborated above, the cultural stakes that are object of concern on both sides should be extrapolated in order for them to be transposed onto the level of political discussion and addressed through such means. Ensuing policy solutions should be the following:

## Recommendations

- The first recommendation is multilayered and presented in the form of 4 sub-recommendations. *We see the first recommendation as the prerequisite of any workable Roadmap of implementation.* The two States ought to establish a clear distinction between the cultural, historical (insofar as science or academia) and political categories of discussion and respective policy solutions when it comes to the Treaty's implementation, in the following way:
  - 1) Cultural policies should be devised in order to address the cultural conflict at hand and offer resolution in terms of cultural and educational policies across disciplines (literature, arts, history);
  - 2) In order to address both political and academic concerns nested in the curricula of both countries, such as the issue of content and wording nourishing xenophobia, as well as in the political culture of both countries, educational policies, including multiperspectivism as a method, should be put in place;
  - 3) Historiography or pedagogy are not to deliver the solution to the conflict at stake but contemporary educational policies;
  - 4) Apply educational and international relations policies that could affirm the indisputable connections in history regardless of whether such history is called

shared or common – affirming them as the connection of continuity between the shared past but also hopefully shared future;

- The binational multidisciplinary Commission and the policy makers should be aided in revising curricula by UNESCO aligned educational experts; moreover, the Commission should be reformed and rendered an educational policy and cultural conflict resolution panel rather than a committee on “historical truths.”
- The Bulgarian Parliament should be made aware that article 1 line 5 of its Declaration from October 2019 is in conflict with the reality ensuing from *Prespa Agreement* signed in 2018, which is not merely a bilateral but an *erga omnes* legal act rendered such through the authority of the United Nations. Another reason for this recommendation stems from the value of good neighborliness – even if the legal *erga omnes* argument weren’t there, naming a neighbor’s language by the name it has given to it is the prerequisite of good faith instead of avoiding its use (esp. when the term “constitutional language” does not have a clear referent as explained in the analysis).
- The Resolution of the Macedonian Parliament from July 29<sup>th</sup> 2021, discussed above, should be annulled or amended by one of political wording – rather than nationalist prose – in line with the spirit of good neighborliness, a prerequisite for joining the European Union, entirely rid of the dangerous and hostile discourse of romantic nationalism.
- Both parliaments should refrain from passing declarations, resolutions, decrees and other documents that determine the “historical truth” thus directly breaching the academic freedom of both scientific communities.
- Instead, both parliaments and state institutions should focus on cultural conflict resolution policies that do not come down

to culture only but are also related to infrastructural projects that would allow an accelerated communication (travel) across the borders, while also helping the implementation of other aspects of the agreement such as improved economic collaboration.

- Strong emphasis should be put on youth cooperation as the most efficient and effective form of cultural reconciliation.





