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Historical Reconciliation: Hungarian Lessons

History is usually a source of fascination and ever more entertainment for individuals and societies. However, anyone watching TV-shows or even TV-channels dedicated to history might find another persistent feature of history stunning: its role in conflicts between nations and states. Since February 2022, a war is raging which was justified by its initiator, Vladimir Putin, with a series of historical arguments and theses about how and why Ukrainians should not have a proper, sovereign statehood.[1] Putin's decision to attack his neighbour – while at a closer look certainly based on more complex considerations than historical narratives – demonstrates too palpably the power of history not only as an argument, but as a way of thinking about the place of people – states, communities, groups – in the world.

While this recent aggression, which is being justified with historical arguments, is extreme in light of Europe's history since 1945, the significance of history for the Russian-Ukrainian war is not peculiar. Conversely, it is indeed just another manifestation of a more general phenomenon of modern history and modern statehood, based on the idea of popular sovereignty and the self-determination of nations. The past was and is often a source of legitimization, acting as a well of claims for these entities used both internally and externally. Conflict is possible especially when readings of a common or overlapping past were and are different. While diplomacy and mediation may hinder a war and establish a *modus vivendi* in these cases, as long as history retains its role as the foundation of the community, it has the potential to become a dangerous tool again.

Based on the experience of the European Union, especially the Franco-German historical reconciliation and the explicit goal of the community to establish a peaceful Europe, many actors of the post-1989 transition did not shy away from addressing history and historical narratives. Especially before the accession of the post-Socialist

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[1] Vladimir Putin: On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians. http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181 (accessed on October 4, 2023.)

countries, interventions into historical issues were commonplace and happened broadly. Moreover, elements of the accession criteria, like good neighbourly relations, served as an incentive for Central and Eastern European politicians to seek some form of agreement with their neighbours, including addressing historical issues. Hungary, which raised the issue of Hungarian minorities living in its neighbouring countries—on territories that were detached from Hungary just 80 years before the change of regime—to the level of official politics, was one of the champions of this process.

While it did not happen in a void, rather taking place within the context of bilateral reconciliation projects, especially around Germany, the Hungarian example is still instructive on its own. While it attempted to facilitate a transfer[2] of the Franco-German case, from a bilateral process to a case where problems of historical reconciliation were raised with all of the neighbours except Austria, and two of which (Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia) were to dissolve during the process, leaving Hungary with new "partners" for dealing with historical conflicts. Furthermore, the historical issues at the core of the discussion were different in all three cases (Romania being the third neighbour in 1990). Therefore, in this paper I offer a short overview of the historical reconciliation attempts of Hungary since 1990. I will focus on drawing from the lessons of this experience, one that was neither successful, nor – at least on the societal level – an outright failure. Hungarians and their neighbours do not actively dislike each other today, and there are even signs of sympathy.[3] However, the general growth of sympathy happened while the historical narratives that were supposed to keep them apart did not change much, and conflictual readings of history are still the mainstream. Thus, my question is: how did an unfinished reconciliation reconcile these societies?

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[2] On transfer see: Anna Veronika Wendland, "Cultural Transfer," in *Traveling Concpets for the Study of Culture* eds. Brigitt Neumann, Ansgar Nünning (Berlin-Boston: DeGruyter, 2012), 45-66.

[3] Dóra Kanyicska Belán, and Miroslav Popper, "Attitudes and relations between the Slovak majority and the Hungarian minority in Slovakia," *Intersections:East European Journal of Society and Politics* 8:3 (Nov. 2022), 192–215: DOI:https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v8i3.747.

History and Politics: historical Reconciliation

To answer the question as to 'why history wars – conflicts between states over the interpretation of history – occur,' we must go back to the question of 'why does history hold such significance for politics, including bi and multilateral relations?' The starting point could be how history is related to the community, especially to the modern nation. The idea of nation has always been situated in time, and intellectuals were eagerly looking for its roots. National languages were traced back in time, looking at topographic names, vocabulary and written texts as part of a more general, but still allegedly national, cultural production. Events from the past were integrated into and narrated through a story that postulated the uninterrupted existence of the nation way back in time. These national histories sought to define the space in which the nation was to find its home, while customs of the ordinary people – subjects of ethnography and *Volkskunde* – get revered as reservoirs of an authentic national character that was – due to the lack of sources – inaccessible for literary history and historiography. Even natural sciences joined the club of national (or better nationalized) sciences when they made an attempt to discover, and insist on, the biological foundations of national and racial difference as the source of cultural diversity.[4]

Within the national sciences, history held a special place for two reasons. First, stories related to the respective pasts of communities are a genre that resonates well with the ways in which humans are socialized through fables, stories, the social imaginary, as well as real lived experiences. Thus, identification with history comes naturally, especially when it is used to highlight values that are supposed to be held in common. Second, history is an important means of claim making, a crucial way of asserting rights for the community. However, this legal use of history is not merely legalistic , although references to old and past laws were favoured tools of argumentation

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[4] Stefan Berger: "Introduction Historical Writing and Civic Engagement: A Symbiotic Relationship," in *The Engaged Historian: Perspectives on the Intersections of Politics, Activism and the Historical Profession* ed. Stefan Berger (Berghahn, 2019), 1–33.

for the legal specialists who contended statehood for their nations.[5] The fact of the past existence of legal foundations and categorizations, in itself, was turned into a tool of claim making in the face of assertions that one or the other nation did not truly exist, or was not mature enough for statehood. Thus, historians eagerly sought traces of past cultures, civilizations and statehood, and political subjectivity to demonstrate that their nation had a right to self-determination.[6]

Not surprisingly, history became one of the tools that effectively fostered identifications with the community and mobilized people into action. The legacy of the past became present, something people felt tangibly—even the material heritage that was supposed to testify to the maturity of the nation became part of the idea of community. The notion of the Hungarian, Romanian or Serbian city or clothing seeped into the present again, providing grounds for the emergence of national styles in applied and fine arts alike.

Finally, history became a place where one could find clues to decipher national character, a dominant idea of the 19th and 20th centuries.[7] Everything was deemed helpful, regardless of how minute, in drawing such conclusions; from the form of houses to the size of windows and the way in which vineyards were cultivated all offered something about how melancholic, energetic, communitarian or individualist etc., nations and their members were.[8] The alleged persistence of such traits, that were therefore also in the present, was proof that not only history, but the result of historical inquiries that brought to light these characteristics was significant too.

Increasingly after WWII another aspect of historical identification emerged and came to the fore by the end of the 20th century: histor-

[5] Natasha Wheatly, *The Life and Death of States. Central Europe and the Transfromation of Modern Sovereignty* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023).

[6] Thomas Maissen, "National History and New Nationalism in the Twenty-First Century Introductory Remarks," in *National History and New Nationalism in the Twenty-First Century: A Global Comparison* eds. Niels F. May and Thomas Maissen (Routledge, 2021), 1–22.

[7] Balázs Trencsényi, *The Politics of "National Character": A Study in Interwar East European Thought*. (London–New York: Routledge, 2012).

[8] Gyula Szekfű: A magyar bortermelő lelki alkata. Történelmi tanulmány. [The Psychology of the Hungarian Winemaker. A Historical Study] Budapest, 1922.; Károly Kós: Erdély. Történelmi vázlat. [TRansylvania. A Sketch of its History] Kolozsvár, Erdélyi Szépmíves Céh, 1930.

ical responsibility and historical trauma/victimhood. While collective guilt was legally refuted, the wrongs (and obviously the goods) of the past, together with the sufferings, were somehow made into a common "property" of the community, something that it must face in the present. Be it the Holocaust, colonial rule and violence, as perpetrator or as sufferer, it was treated as a collective psychological issue that must be overcome before a community can face its future.[9] The most important in this regard was the process of *Vergangenhaitsbewältigung* (coming to terms) and *Aufarbeitung* in Germany. In this long process, historiography first identified racist-colonialist plans of global domination within German policy, thus refuting any claim that Germans had no, or just a shared, responsibility for the two world wars, with the society later going through a process of subsequent revelations about how much even ordinary Germans were involved with Nazism and the Holocaust. It led to a peculiar historical culture that is still the basis of rejecting nationalism as a viable political idea. After 1990, a similar process was envisaged for dealing with the Communist German state.[10]

While the German example is perceived as a specific and unique case, it is still an often-cited model and elements of it are always invoked, especially after political transitions. Very often *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* was linked to the Franco-German historical reconciliation process as they overlapped not only chronologically but also in important historical aspects too. As a part of the political process of European integration with the emergence of what is called the Franco-German axis, German-French relations were tense due to the memory of a past filled with conflicts since 1871 or maybe even since Napoleon. Even after WWII it was feared that the rivalry and an accidental war between the two countries could destroy Europe

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[9] Jan-Werner Müller, "Germany's Two Processes of "Coming to Terms with the Past" —Failures, After All?," in *Remberance, History and Justice: Coming to Terms with Traumatic Pasts in Democratic Societies* eds. Vladimir Tsmaneanu and Bogdan Iacob (CEU Press, 2015), 213–237; Máté Zombory: "The Anti-Communist Moment: Competitive Victimhood in European Politics," *Revue d'études comparatives Est-Ouest* 51 (2020), 2-3, 21–54.
[10] Jan-Werner Müller, Germany's Two Prooocesses

again. In order to avoid it, a process of entangling the two societies in order to find and bolster common ground and understanding started. German and French historians worked together on writing a history of entanglements between the two countries, instead of the container-like national narratives, history textbooks were revised, content that justified conflict and war was removed, a common one prepared, and regular youth exchanges started leading to increased interactions. Together with the political rapprochement and institutionalized close cooperation, it certainly created an atmosphere in which a war between the two was no longer imaginable .[11] In 1990, it seemed ready to offer as a template for post-Socialist countries on how to overcome their symbolic conflict over their histories.

Hungary and its Neighbours: Entangled Histories of the 20th Century

Hungary had a number of such conflicts around 1990. Although the concrete issues at stake were the situations of Hungarian minorities in the neighbouring countries, it was entangled with several questions of history. Hungarian minorities emerged after WWI, when about two thirds of the country was annexed to Czechoslovakia, Romania, the South Slav State and Austria. About 30% of the inhabitants of these provinces were Hungarian speakers, according to the 1910 census, and they constituted a sizeable minority in all of these countries, except Austria, making up between 4-8% of the population as a whole and between 20-33% regionally, on the detached territories. In some regions – along the borders and in the so-called Székelyföld, the easternmost part of Transylvania–Hungarian speakers were the majority.

Interwar Hungary wanted territorial revision – the return of most or all of the territories, regardless of ethnic composition – while its neighbours considered minority rights as a breach of their sovereignty and the Hungarian minority as a security threat (still, Czechoslova-

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[11] See: *Agonistic Memory and the Legacy of 20th Century Wars in Europe* eds. Stefan Berger and Wulf Kansteiner (Palgrave, 2021), 1-12.

kia granted relatively broad language and cultural rights, and here, at the local level, Hungarian parties had influence due to the democratic political structure). The result was a long diplomatic struggle around Hungarian minorities, permanent claims of oppression of Hungarians from the Hungarian side and the accusation of irredentist designs (or warmongering) from the other. None of these issues were unfounded, but neither brought about any solution.[12]

A curious part of these rhetorical battles was the use of historical arguments. Hungarians always insisted on two, interlinked specificities of the Hungarian nation: its unique capability of forming and leading a state in the Carpathian Basin. As such, they claimed that none of the other nationalities ever proved capable of doing it, while the 1000 years existence of Hungary demonstrated a Hungarian historical destiny – and their civilizational/cultural superiority, at least vis-á-vis Romanians and Serbians.[13] According to this line of argumentation, the historically revealed incapacity of the other nations was the reason as to why their nation states were so dysfunctional (Romania), threatened with dissolution (Yugoslavia), or simply constituted a colonizing state in its less developed areas (Czechoslovakia) that did not take into account the local specificities the way Hungary allegedly did before 1918. The other side had their own historical arguments too. They invoked the Hungarian oppression of minorities in the 19th century and how they sought to assimilate them. They even used it to justify measures restricting the rights of minorities, stating, for example, that the Romanianization of Hungarian language schools was only the reversal of assimilationist measures, a salvation of threatened Romanians, or, at the very least, they could compare the restrictive measures of these new states favourably with the discriminative acts of dualist Hungary.[14]

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[12] *Hungarian Minorities in the 20th Century* eds. Nándor Bárdi et al. (Boulder Co, 2012).

[13] Gábor Egry, "New Horizons from Prague to Bucharest: Ethnonational Stereotypes and Regionalist Self-Perceptions in Interwar Slovakia and Transylvania," *Historie-Otázky-Problémy* 8, (2016), 47-58.

[14] Miklós Zeidler, "The Leauge of Nations and Hungarian Minority Petitions. In Czech and Hungarian Minority Policy in Central Europe 1918-1938" / Eiler, Ferenc et al, Praha : Masarykův ústav AV ČR 2009, 85-115.

Between 1938 and 1941 Hungary re-annexed about one third of the lost territories from all directions, creating a new bone of historical contention. Although verbally well disposed towards its newly enlarged minorities (about a million Romanians, 100, 000 Slovaks, and 200,000 Serbs and Croats), actual policies were again restrictive and discriminative. There was an exodus from both sides of the new borders, migration amounted to hundreds of thousands, which was especially the case for educated non-Hungarians who left the country. Furthermore, Hungarian troops committed mass murders, either during the reoccupation (in 1940 in Transylvania) or afterwards (the infamous mass killings in Novi Sad in 1942), further aggravating the situation. Where the Hungarian governments faced a similarly disposed national government as its counterpart (Jozef Tiso's Slovak Republic and Ion Antonescu's Romania) a mutual propaganda war started highlighting everyday oppressive acts and broader discriminative measures, fostering and reinforcing irredentism on all sides.[15]

At the end of the war all of the territories were returned to Czechoslovakia, Romania and Yugoslavia, without granting them minority rights or autonomy, while the last phase of the war saw extensive violence from the new states. The least intense of this violence was found in Romania, whereby paramilitaries killed hundreds of Hungarians, but the Soviet army took over administration of the disputed territory for half a year, effectively stalling the evolution of a vicious cycle of atrocities and reprisals. Nevertheless, even with Soviet intervention, thousands of Hungarians were kept in internment camps among appalling conditions in the southern part of Transylvania. In Yugoslavia, Tito's troops killed Germans and Hungarians as an act of retribution; the number of Hungarian victims was around 15, 000. In Czechoslovakia, Hungarians were deprived of their citizenship, their property confiscated, and the state planned their deportation. Tens of thousands were brought to the Czech lands, the bulk were planned to be sent to Hungary. Although unilateral action was blocked by the Allies, a population exchange agreement was

[15] Bárdi-Fedinec-Szarka, *Hungarian Minorities*

signed and about 180, 000 Hungarians were sent to Hungary from where about 70, 000 Slovaks left for Czechoslovakia.

After the Communist takeover, "normalization" of the situation started, although in Czechoslovakia it only meant the restoration of their citizenship, not their property, and they could now organize a Hungarian cultural association. Minority rights mostly comprised language rights, and the sphere of the Hungarian language, especially in the educational sector, was gradually shrinking. The violent oppression and discrimination between 1944 and 1948 could not be discussed publicly. In Yugoslavia, Hungarians enjoyed the benefits of multicultural federalism too, but the historical events remained taboo here as well. In Romania, the minority policy took sudden turns. In the first years, Romania generously established a Hungarian language university with education in Hungarian at all levels, and granted broad language rights. In 1952, even an autonomous Hungarian region was established, although it signalled the start of curbing back those rights in other areas. After 1956, fearing Hungarian irredentism that was allegedly manifested in the 1956 Uprising in Budapest, which generated widespread sympathy among Romanians too, Romania reversed course and started to reduce the accessibility of Hungarian language education and the use of Hungarian in public services, although the situation became really dire only around the late 1970s.[16]

Furthermore, Nicolae Ceauşescu set on a radical nationalizing course, together with building a neo-Stalinist power structure, with a part of these measures being ethnic engineering; firstly by bringing Romanians to majority Hungarian cities through rapid industrialization, and later with the plan of so-called systematization. According to the latter, small rural settlements were to be erased and replaced by larger, semi-urban ones, centralizing the population of the previ-

[16] Stefano Bottoni, *Stalin's Legacy in Romania: The Hungarian Autonomous Region, 1952-1960* (Lexington Books, 2018); Csaba Zoltán Novák, Aranykorszak? A Ceauşescu-rendszer magyarságpolitikája: 1965-1974 [Golden Age? Minority Policy towards the Hungarians in the Ceauşescu-era 1964-1975] Csíkszereda, Pro Print 2011.

ous settlements. While the plan itself was generally devised and applied to all of Romania and not only to its areas inhabited by ethnic minorities,-Hungarians on both sides of the border saw it as thinly veiled effort to destroy the Hungarian minority (still almost 2 million people) and its cultural heritage; artificially creating majority Romanian localities where all public services were soon Romanianized.[17]

The one significant difference with the interwar period was the absence of rhetorical clashes at the level of Communist national governments. The issue of minorities did not become a major issue in bilateral relations for a very long time. Hungary's government refrained from reproducing interwar irredentism, not least because it also feared the eruption of Hungarian nationalism. It was also often powerless to do so in an international system where the countries Hungary had a dispute with belonged to the same block as Hungary did. Thus, the issue was publicly handled very carefully, although it has seeped back into historiography and public history from the 1970s onwards.[18]

The gradual reappearance of the topic in the public was done from Hungary with the effort to achieve a change of course from Romania – to no avail. The tense bilateral relations have spilled over to historiography since the late 1970s. Romanian politics looked at the production of Hungarian history on Transylvania with suspicion all the time, and, since the end of the 1970s, they interpreted the Hungarian narrative as the denial of Romanian rights over the territory. When the Hungarian Academy of Sciences announced the preparation of a History of Transylvania, Romania immediately perceived it as a dangerous act. After the publication of the three-volume work,

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[17] Csaba Zoltán Novák, Holtvágányon. A Ceauşescu-rendszer magyarságpolitikája 1975-1989. [In a Dead End? Minority Policy towards the Hungarians in the Ceauşescu-era 1975-1989] Pro Print, Csíkszereda 2015.

[18] György Földes, Magyarország, Románia és a nemzeti kérdés (1956–1989). [Hungary, Romania and the National Question (1956-1989)]. Budapest, Napvilág 2008.; Réka Krizmanics, "Trianon in Popular History in Late-Socialist and Post-Transition Hungary: A Case Study," *East European Politics and Societies* 36:3 (2022), 1036-1060. https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325421989411; Réka Krizmanics, "Addressing the Trianon Peace Treaty in Late Socialist Hungary: Societal Interest and Available Narratives," *Hungarian Historical Review* 9:1 (2020), 101–123.

the Romanian government started an international campaign leading to a veritable 'history war' in which the Hungarian Academy was accused of irredentism and the deliberate falsification of history.[19] It was, however, the last act of the drama. Systematization was never realized, leaving Hungarian inhabited territories intact when Ceausescu fell in December 1989 as the last Communist ruler in Europe. But the baggage of history remained.

Hungary and its Neighbours: Overcoming History?

Although the level of tensions eased with the simultaneous change of regime and democratization, the basic perceptions about the potential conflict between Hungary and its neighbours remained for a long time after 1990. The asynchrony between the democratization process and Euro-Atlantic integration perspectives of Hungary on the one side, and Slovakia and Romania on the other, greatly fuelled fears that Hungary would use its advantageous position after accession–the theoretical possibility of blocking Slovakia and Romania from membership – to revive irredentism. This, not least, because Hungarian foreign policy was now vocal about minority rights and set as its goal the creation of an international framework that could, in an ideal case for them, lead to territorial or cultural autonomy.[20] Thus, bilateral and international negotiations dragged on in this regard, leading to several bilateral and international agreements that defined a set of individual minority rights that fell short of national autonomy as the minimum standard for Europe. As only the bare minimum of these agreements were often implemented, Hungary continuously claimed that Hungarian minorities were exposed to assimilation and discrimination.[21]

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[19] Martin Mevius, Defending, "'Historical and Political Interest': Romanian-Hungarian Political Dipsutes and the *History of* Transylvania," in *Hungary and Romania Beyond National Narratives Comparisons and Entanglements* eds Anders Bloqmvist et al. (Peter Lang, 2013), 569–606.

[20] Balázs Vizi, "Does European Integration Support the Minority Quest for Autonomy?: Minority Claims for Self-Government and Devolution Processes in Europe, in *Autonomies in Europe: Solutions and Challenges* eds. Zoltán Kántor, Eszter Kovács (L'Harmattan-NPKI, Budapest). For cultural autonomy see: *Non-Territorial Autonomy: An Introduction* (Palgrave and Macmillan, 2023).

[21] Elisabeth Sándor-Szalay, "International Law in the Service of Minority Protection—Hard Law, Soft Law, and a Little Practice," in, *International Law From a Central European Perspective: Legal Studies on*

One of the factors facilitating a form of rapprochement was EU integration. This was because resolution of bilateral conflicts before accession – not to import them within the EU – was an explicit condition. Furthermore, an informal part of the package of conditions was a kind of European politics of memory. From the side of the EU, the focus was on the Holocaust, a sore point in the history for Central and Eastern Europe as collaborators with the Nazi regime, a not so insignificant phenomenon which was hardly talked about earlier. Moreover, in Romania anti-Communism brought about attempts of rehabilitating the radical-rightist ethnocratic Antonescu regime which had its own share in killing Jews in Transnistria. The changing politics of memory on the Holocaust was, however, less a bilateral matter than an EU led transnational effort, bringing about the transfer of EU practices: establishing museums of the Holocaust and Jewry, memorial days and – if necessary – reports of special commissions on the Holocaust. These reports uniformly established the role and responsibility for the Holocaust of the respective national administrations and condemned the antisemitism of those societies.[22]

The flipside of this *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* process was a more local initiative, dealing with the memory of Communism. The post-1989 regimes positioned themselves against the Communist dictatorships and their security states (excessive in all cases but with very different visibilities) but it was harder to establish responsibility for so-called Communist crimes than for the Holocaust.[23] Communism was easier to shed as alien, and imposed on the region from the outside, because Communist parties – unlike antisemitic ones – were minuscule in the region before 1939, except in Czechoslovakia. However, due to the violent ethnic policies that were implemented

Central Europe (Miskolc, Budapest: Central European Academic Publishing, 2022), 157-179.

[22] Timothy Snyder: "European Mass Killing and European Commemoration," in *Remberance, History and Justice: Coming to Terms with Traumatic Pasts in Democratic Societies* eds. Vladimir Tismaneanu, Bogdan Iacob (CEU Press, 2015), 23 – 43.; Pakier, Małgorzata, and Bo Stråth, "Introduction: A European Memory?," in *A European Memory: Contested Histories and Politics of Remembrance* eds. Małgorzata Pakier and Bo Stråth (Berghahn Books, 2010), 1–20. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qd3kh.6.

[23] James Mark, *The Unfinished Revolution: Making Sense of the Communist Past in Central-Eastern Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

immediately post-WWII, and which were condoned by Communists and non-Communists alike, and the later restrictive ones, facing Communism in Slovakia, Serbia or Romania meant taking stock of its minority policies as well.[24]

The thorniest, and partly still unresolved of these issues was the Czechoslovak case. The so-called Beneš decrees – the legal basis of expropriation in 1945 – were still in force, and while an otherwise fairly generous process of property restitution was started, it excluded minorities from its beneficiaries. Fear from Germans and Hungarians of property reclamation was strong enough to hinder meaningful concrete action, despite the symbolic condemnation of the decrees and tangible efforts of Czech-German historical reconciliation. In the Slovak-Hungarian case, such systematic efforts at a broader social scale were absent. The fate of Hungarians immediately after WWII is hardly a popular topic of Slovak historiography, although recently there has been some interest in it.[25]

In Romania the situation was similar in the sense that anti-Hungarian measures were exempted from the condemnation of Communism. It took more than a decade and explicit pressure from the EU to set up a presidential commission under the aegis of President Traian Basescu to study the crimes of communism. A separate section of it was dedicated to minority policies, among them of the Hungarians.[26] In this sense, at least symbolic compensation was provided, although the focus of the Romanian historiography is not one of these issues, and very often the history of Communism in Romania is a story of national victimhood. Beyond the issues of Communism, the Romanian state made some symbolic gestures regarding Hungarian his-

[24] Lavinia Stan, "Transitional justice in Central and Eastern Europe," in *Research Handbook on Transitional Justice: Research Handbooks in International Law Series* (2017) 508-530; *Post-Communist Transitional Justice: Lessons from Twenty-Five Years of Experience* eds, Lavinia Stan and Nadja Nedelsky (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). doi:10.1017/CBO9781107588516
[25] Csongor István Nagy, "Questions of Integrity: The Commission's "Founding Values" Policy and Ethnic Minorities," *VerfBlog*, (2021/12/06). https://verfassungsblog.de/questions-of-integrity/, DOI: 10.17176/20211207-022334-0 .
[26] See the thematic issue: A kommunizmus romániai öröksége. Heritage of Communism Magyar Kisebbség 13, 2008/1-2.

torical memory. Most importantly, it accepted that Hungarians could celebrate their national day, March 15th in public spaces, and it even became customary that the president send a greeting on that day. While it is seemingly just a small gesture, March 15th is a controversial issue, because Hungarians commemorate the unification of Transylvania with Hungary that day, knowing that the subsequent civil war between Romanians and Hungarians claimed tens of thousands of civilian victims too.

As regards to more salient historiographic issues, the model of Franco-German reconciliation was floated several times for both the Slovak-Hungarian and the Romanian-Hungarian relations. Interestingly, different elements of it were taken for the Slovak and the Romanian relations. For the latter, the institution of common government sessions was adopted,[27] while the idea of common textbooks remained only a desire. Hungarian and Romanian historians operated with a mixed historical commission (inherited from the Socialist era) but it rarely tackles sensitive issues, like March 15th, whose assessment in Romanian historiography has barely changed. While cooperation between Hungarian and Romanian historians is not infrequent, not least because the Romanian higher education system trains Hungarian minority historians, it is rarely elevated to the higher levels of the academic hierarchies. Quite to the contrary, an episode around the hundred year anniversary of the Trianon peace treaty showed how deeply seated the fears of the use of history for irredentist aims was.

The Hungarian centenary was preceded by the Romanian, the commemoration of the unification of Transylvania with Romania in 1918. Around this date, the Romanian Academy published some texts that tried to clarify the Romanian interpretation of the end of WWI, while accepting that this day can't be a day of celebration for Hungarians, it was silent about the nationalist aspects of interwar Romania. Around the same time, the Hungarian Academy of Sciences pro-

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[27] Közös magyar-román kormányülés [Hungarian-Romanian common government session] https://24.hu/belfold/2005/10/19/kozos_magyar_roman_kormanyules/ (accessed October 4, 2023.)

vided a research grant in a competitive selection process for a new research group that was to work on the history of the end of WWI, called Trianon100.[28] In 2017, however, the president of the Romanian Academy of Sciences, Ion Aurel Pop, attacked this research group, accusing it of being a governmental organization with the aim of falsifying history.[29] While the scandal died down in a few months, it was still proof of how sensitive historical issues could be for historians who – like the president of the Romanian Academy of Sciences – are adherents of the classic nationalist historical canon.

The Slovak-Hungarian reconciliation ran a different course that lead to the same place: nowhere. In this case, political gestures, like common government sessions, were absent, but the mixed historical commission agreed on the plan of a common textbook.[30] It was corroborated by politicians in 2007. Its structure was carefully planned, all chapters were co-authored by one Slovak and one Hungarian historian who ought to have published a text they could both agree upon. In case of irreconcilable differences, both texts were to be published parallelly. Initially, publication was planned for 2010, but work slowed down after Fidesz came to government again in 2010. After several postponements, the government finally requested a review from a historian close to Fidesz, László Tőkéczky, who was anything but a specialist of Slovak history.[31] Nevertheless, Tökéczky derided the manuscript and attacked it in a nationalist manner, using typical nationalist tropes. Most importantly, he denied that a common textbook must cover the whole span of history. Instead, he argued, in line with Hungarian nationalist perceptions, that Slovaks did not have a history until the dissolution of Hungary. Even though experts

[28] www.trianon100.hu

[29] Trianon 100: visszautasítja a Romániában megjelent vádakat az MTA Lendület-kutatócsoportjának vezetője. [Trianon100: the leader of the reserach project refutes the allegations] https://mta.hu/mta_hirei/trianon-100-visszautasitja-a-romaniaban-megjelent-vadakat-az-mta-lendulet-kutatocsoport-janak-vezetoje-107661 (accessed October 4, 2023.)

[30] Jakab György. A közös történelem széthordása. [Taking away the common history piecemeal] Történelemtanítás 2013/1. https://www.folyoirat.tortenelemtanitas.hu/2013/04/jakab-gyorgy-a-kozos-tortenelem-szethordasa-04-01-09/ (accessed October 4, 2023.)

[31] Szarka, László, A közös történelem nehéz öröksége. [The Heavy Burden of Common History] REGIO 22, 2014 (1). 156-192

from the mixed-commission tried to fight back, Tőkéczky's opinion had a decisive weight with the government and the plan was postponed *sine die*.

So far this is the last organized and politically officialized effort of historical reconciliation between Slovakia and Hungary, and Slovakia and Romania. Curiously, the nationalist Orbán government found one partner with whom it was possible to realize something that is usually part of historical reconciliation efforts elsewhere, namely mutual recognition of past crimes against the other nationality. The similarly autocratic Serbia of then-prime minister Aleksandar Vučić was a partner in an effort to recover the number and names of the victims of the massacres at the end of the WWII and to erect a monument to the victims. It was an effort of a mixed commission, based on the study of hitherto inaccessible files and documents and crowned by an event where the Hungarian and Serbian presidents, János Áder and Tomislav Nikolic apologized for the crimes committed and commemorated the victims.[32]

Historical Reconciliation: Politics of History without Politics?

While it is also true for the Hungarian-Serbian case that the broader historiography, not least because the topic of Serbians in Hungary and Hungarians in Serbia is not among the most popular ones, is not really changing with gestures like the joint commemoration of victims, these gestures signal the abating of tensions that were still important in the early 2000s. Social attitudes are more relaxed today, sometimes even positive, despite the absence of major historiographic revisions on either side. The history people learn about from textbooks, or from public history, has not changed much and Hungarians and their neighbors are most often portrayed as being on opposite sides of history. Thus, it is probably not premature to conclude that history seems to be losing its power.

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[32] A szerb-magyar megbékélés napja a vajdasági Csúrogon. [The day of Serb-Hungarian reconciliation in Csúrog in Voivodina] https://ujszo.com/kulfold/a-szerb-magyar-megbekeles-napja-a-vajdasagi-csurogon (accessed on October 4, 2023.)

One reason is the fact that history is not among the primary discursive means of politicians today. A new generation, socialized during the post-1989 period, talks a very different language, uses less or at least less concrete historical references. History in rhetoric is rather general and justifications of political claims are rarely based on historical arguments in the context of EU politics. The most likely exception is when a country objects to a policy of the Community and uses its alleged historical traditions (or so-called constitutional identity) to make its case. History is not – at least for the present – a means of mobilization within countries, and it is only rarely used to raise passions against an external enemy. Moreover, the Orbán-government intended and still hopes to build a Central European alliance of support for its own politics and, out of this pragmatic reason, it is not prioritizing 'history wars' with neighbors.

Furthermore, the practical aspects of EU integration have had its positive effects too. More interactions, less interethnic tensions within, and the experience of general outmigration to the West all could have contributed to the relaxation of social level relations between Hungarians and their neighbours without revising historical narratives. In a sense, the "Hungarian question" lost its salience in these countries, or was replaced by a "question of Europe," a new vision of the EU as a besieged continent defending its historically developed traditions.

But how much is this a ray of light for North Macedonia? The history of reconciliation efforts since 1990 rather shows that while history might have lost most of its power on the people, politicians are sometimes the exception, and it is enough to reignite 'history wars,' even if societal relations are changing. Historical reconciliation is very hard if historians do not make concerted efforts, and without the support and pressure from the political sphere, the internal divisions of the profession could lead to failure. While the Hungarian-Slovak reconciliation was "ambushed" by politicians against the will of the historians involved – but with help from a historian – the Hungari-

an–Romanian led nowhere – despite the palpable disinterest of politicians to interfere with it. Historians, however, have very weak or no influence on this decision, either individually and/or collectively. Thus, if we want historical reconciliation, the process should rather be to find ahistorical argumentative strategies for politicians in conflict and leave historians to reconcile with history and each other.

Spasimir Domaradzki

EU Enlargement and Geopolitics: Is it Relevant Today?

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to explore whether, and what role, geopolitical considerations play in the process of European enlargement. Commencing from a short overview of the existence and role of geopolitical considerations in the EU's history, this paper recognizes moments when and where geopolitics mattered. The second part juxtaposes these findings with the contemporary geopolitical narrative which has been particularly emphasized since the full-scale Russian invasion on Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Carrying out critical analyses of official statements, political rhetoric and practical actions, this paper reaches the conclusion that at this point, despite the EU rhetoric, geopolitical considerations do not determine the course of the EU and its member states in the context of the EU Enlargement policy. Instead, the increased number of candidate countries does not mean that the EU has any plans for "fast-tracking" enlargement. On the contrary, the Enlargement process is becoming more and more subordinate to the EU's internal problems and its member-states' inability to overcome the deadlock on the future direction of European integration.

Geopolitics and European Integration

While geography plays a crucial role in the process of European integration, the mainstream political discourse on the integration process tends to downplay its role; both internally within the EU, and towards the candidate countries, the idealist and liberal institutionalist approaches of shared political values and benchmarks dominates. With that said, while there is a dominant narrative of considering EU enlargement as a process of accession of likeminded states sharing the same values, European integration has always been embedded in geopolitical considerations. *Art. 237* of the Rome Treaties draw, although not explicitly enough, the geographical limits of integration, acknowledging the willingness for the membership of "any European state".

Since the early days of the integration process, the European Communities have operated within the geopolitical framework of what Europe is. The Cold war division of Europe and the geopolitical challenges of the global rivalry between the East and the West had, and continues to have, an impact on the EC member states internal policies.

This is not to say that geopolitical considerations were not important in the process of European integration. The particular European Communities' interest towards Greece and Turkey, since the 1960s, was part and parcel of the US, NATO and the general Western strategic interest of containing the USSR. While these interests were not detached from the expectations for meeting basic standards of political pluralism, they constituted a careful calculation of the geographical and values-based priorities. The initiated Association Agreements approach aimed at hooking both Turkey and Greece, not only militarily, but also in the Western European economic orbit. The membership of Spain and Portugal sealed the European Communities' south-western flank, although it was possible only after the end of their authoritarian regimes.

The most significant geopolitical change, the end of the Cold war, provided completely new perspectives for the process of European integration. The end of the ideological and military East-West rivalry created favourable conditions for the unification of Europe that eventually turned into the largest EU enlargement in the history of the integration process. This fifth enlargement constitutes an interesting example of the interplay between liberal (or values based) and geopolitical considerations. The dominant, values-based, approach under the Copenhagen Criteria and conditionality overshadowed geopolitical considerations. This "desecuritization" approach, as John O'Brennan argued, dealt with geopolitical issues within the enlargement process from a "soft" security template and sought to de-link territoriality from traditional security concerns, to "normalize" a

broad range of geopolitical issues as domestic EU politics within the enlargement negotiations.[1] This was the zeitgeist.

The membership perspective was contingent upon the fulfillment of the constantly evolving interpretations of the Copenhagen criteria, which served as a point of reference for the decision to keep Romania and Bulgaria as a separate group, and to encourage further reforms at national levels. However, the NATO airstrikes over former Yugoslavia and the security considerations for the stability of the whole region, served as a catalyst for the inclusion of the two countries into the group of ultimately twelve countries that joined the EU in 2004 and 2007.[2] This move secured NATO's eastern flank, which overlapped with the EU's eastern border, providing for a coherent land connection from Tallin to Athens at the cost of unfulfilled political criteria. The concern for Bulgaria and Romania's premature membership forced the EU to introduce the pioneered solution, or mechanism, of post-enlargement conditionality (Cooperation and Verification Mechanism), which was supported by a silent political agreement that the membership of these two countries, in the next integration formats, like the Schengen and Euro zones, would be contingent upon the further improvements in their judiciaries' fight against corruption and organized crime.

The fifth enlargement not only completed the EU's eastern flank and reached the border of the former Soviet Union, but also created a *de facto* enclave of non-EU member states surrounded by the EU in the Western Balkans. The emergence of this enclave practically diminished the role of other geopolitical rivals, and the declared membership perspective secured the EU's privileged position in the region.

This favourable geopolitical turn of events in the first decade of this century was accompanied by the piling challenges of the fifth

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[1] John O'Brennan, "Bringing Geopolitics Back in: Exploring the Security Dimension of the 2004 Eastern Enlargement of the European Union," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 19: 1 (March 2006), 156.

[2] Георги Д. Димитров, Как България се промуши в Европейския съюз. Геополитика и национални специфики в отношението към българското членство в ЕС. Том 2., Университетско издателство „св. Климент Охридски", 2023 p.357-397

enlargement and the growing disenchantment between the social attitudes and political priorities of the EU's member states national political elites. The enlargement *fatigue* and the regional instability together with the reluctance of the Balkan states' political elites for reforms, paved the ground for the protracted, or more accurately, never-ending process of EU-Western Balkans rapprochement.[3] (Anastasakis, 2008) This, however, was secondary to the fact that the Western (both EU and NATO) interests were secured in the Balkans.

The shared awareness that the process is stalled, turned into an explicit policy during the Juncker commission when, in 2014, the President of the European Commission declared that there would be no enlargement during his term.[4] While the recipients of Juncker's decision were supposedly the embittered Western societies, the repercussions in the Balkans were no less important. The political elites in the Western Balkans interpreted this statement as an easing of the EU pressure for reforms and saw it as an opportunity to turn towards other, less values-oriented partners, like China, Russia, Turkey or Saudi Arabia. Although the enlargement supporters in the EU gathered around Germany's Berlin Process initiative, which aimed to sustain the pace of reforms and conditionality, the EU's position in the Balkans received a significant blow.

Juncker's decision would not have been possible without the EU's self-confidence that the Western Balkans were an enclave without alternative geopolitical options. Hence, their prospective membership is dependent not solely on their own efforts, but also on the already existing member states' willingness to accept them. The enduring cooperation between the Western Balkans' political elites and the EU institutions provided sufficient arguments for the emergence of the term "stabilitocracy," which practically answered the

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[3] Othon Anastasakis (2008) The EU's political conditionality in the Western Balkans: towards a more pragmatic approach, Southeast European and Black Sea Studies, 8:4, 365-377, DOI: 10.1080/14683850802556384

[4] "Juncker to halt enlargement as EU Commission head," *EUBusiness* (July 15, 2014). https://www.eubusiness.com/news-eu/politics-juncker.x29

question, 'what are the EU priorities in the Western Balkans?' The mediocre performance of the internal reforms in the Western Balkans were balanced by the fact that these countries provided security and control necessary for the handling of the piling challenges of the economic, migratory, Brexit and COVID-19 crises.

Even the awareness that Jucker's *faux pas* had a negative impact on the relations with the Western Balkans, and that it emboldened geopolitical rivals to strengthen their foothold in the region, were not sufficient to mobilize the EU to provide a qualitatively different form of interaction with the region. Instead, the Western Balkans remained contingent upon the domestic politics of the EU member states, exemplified by Macron's veto on the kickoff of the enlargement negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania in November 2019.[5] The enhanced enlargement methodology prioritized the French concerns about the inflexible and irreversible EU enlargement policy over the endless paralysis and growing disappointment with the EU in the Western Balkans. The new methodology acknowledged the need to "re-establish a credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans and to make it very clear that for the Commission and for the EU as a whole, it is a top priority to have stability, peace and prosperity in our region."[6] This renewed enlargement push was supposed to be established on the principles of "credibility, predictability, dynamism and stronger political steer" and continued to be "merit-based."[7] The clustering of negotiation chapters and the political mobilization of all political formats and stakeholders was to result in new dynamics, notwithstanding the highest priority for the rule of law cluster. All of these efforts were part of a "geo-strategic investment,"[8] as Varhelyi claimed.

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[5] Robin Emmott et al., "France under fire for "historic error" of blocking Balkan EU hopefuls," *Reuters* (October 18, 2019). https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-summit-balkans-idUSKBN1WX1CT

[6] "Remarks by Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi at the press conference on the revised enlargement methodology,"*European Commission* (Brussels, February 05, 2020). https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/el/statement_20_208

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

The new methodological framework was an attempt at a new opening. While it was crucially necessary for the Western Balkans in order to revive the relations with the EU, it was no less needed for the embittered EU societies, as it equipped political leaders like Macron with the argument that the political elites have strengthened their command over the relations with the "questionably democratic" Balkan leaders.

However, the new formula has promptly become the hostage of yet another bilateral conflict, this time between Bulgaria and North Macedonia over national identity. Paired with Albania on the road to the EU, North Macedonia has one again become a source of concern. While the EU is involved in the resolution of this conflict, and both sides are under pressure to move forward, the bilateral tensions and the Bulgarian veto practically revealed the vulnerability of the EU relations with the candidate States on individual interests.

A New Geopolitical Turn?

The 2014 Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine resulted in the shift from being locked within the legal framework of contemporary international relations and political confrontations between Russia and the West, into an open contestation of the existing organization of the global order. The Russian annexation of Crimea, and the Moscow led separatism in Donbass, were still considered as a deviation from the dominant roles in international relations. Despite the imposition of sanctions and the deteriorating relations, the dominant narrative silently accepted the Russian interpretation that the war in Donbass was a local conflict and that although Crimea officially belongs to Ukraine, it was never actually so. Hence, after 2014, the US and the EU still searched for the accommodation of the Russian aggression within the dominant order. The Normandy format and the Minsk Agreement aimed at appeasing Moscow while ignoring Putin's growing demands. This is why the commencement of the full-scale military aggression in February 24, 2022 came as a surprise.

Russia's war in Ukraine resulted in another push for the advancement of the enlargement process. The Russian attack required a reassessment of the European security environment, especially in the context of the Balkans, where Russia has set her foothold in Serbia and Bosnia. The EU promptly extended its sanctions policy against Russia, which aimed to cripple Russia's ability to finance the war, and thus undermine its economic base. Ukraine has become a recipient of substantial economic and military support and, importantly, has received, together with Moldova, the status of candidate country. This was an important move from a symbolic perspective, but also a confusing step from a practical perspective, for both the EU public opinion and the candidate States. The rush for unreserved support for the victim of Russia's aggression completely ignored the complexity of issues which had piled up in the decades long enlargement justifications in relation to the Western Balkans. It was not surprising that "[...] the granting of candidate status to Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia without strict conditions has undermined its [EU's-SD] credibility in the region [Western Balkans – SD]."[9] As Paul Taylor, contributing editor at *Politico,* noticed: "[...] Western Balkan elites understandably feared their countries were being pushed further back in the line for membership."[10]

The awareness in Brussels that the introduction of Ukraine and Moldova into the waiting room triggered dubious feelings, forced EU politicians to pay visits to the region. In August, German Foreign Affairs Minister Annalena Baerbock visited Sarajevo, Prishtina, and Belgrade, while Borrell visited Albania to start a tour in the region and delivered messages of hope for the quick EU integration of the Western Balkans countries in light of recent events in Europe.[11] Simultaneously, two EU-Western Balkan summits — in Brussels and

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[9] Ljiljana Kolarski, "The Impact of the War in Ukraine on the Western Balkans," *The Policy of National Security*

Ɣ3:,2 (/022),.87-107. https://www.ips.ac.rs/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/pnb2_2022-5.pdf p.93-94

[10] Paul Taylor, "EU must seize the geopolitical moment in the Balkans," *Politico* (Dec 14, 2022). https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-balkans-accession-russia-china-geopolitics/

[11] Kolarski, "The Impact of the War in Ukraine on the Western Balkans," 93.

Tirana — were held and the Berlin Process was revived in order to support regional economic integration in preparation for joining the EU's single market. The Western Balkan leaders also attended the inaugural summit of a new European Political Community in Prague in October 2022.[12] This noticeable intensification of relations, including the removal of the Bulgarian veto, created the impression that a genuine breakthrough was possible. However, the new dynamics contained consistent demands for EU reform on its decision-making system to scrap national vetoes on sanctions and taxation policy before new members are admitted.[13]

Does the EU Really Want Enlargement?

Looking beyond the political rhetoric of the European institutions, which contains all possible declinations of "geopolitics," it seems necessary to take a look at what a geopolitical approach would mean. At first, it would need to clearly define the territories (and hence countries) that constitute a geographical priority. We can generally agree that such an argument is relevant for the candidate EU member States, as their membership is already anticipated, but then it is not so clear how to treat the countries subject to the neighborhood policy. Until Feb 24, 2022, the Eastern Partnership countries were not officially considered as countries, for which the EU perspective is an option. The EU granted Ukraine and Moldova candidate status in June 2022, thus expanding the EU's "waiting room."

This extension of the EU's waiting room brought about a number of questions on the further consistency of the EU's approach. It is reasonable to wonder whether or not the merging of countries from the enlargement and neighborhood policies into one group will be harmful for the former or beneficial for the latter? This, especially considering that the post-2013 EU enlargement policy record is rather dubious, to put it bluntly.

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[12] Paul Taylor, "EU must seize the geopolitical moment in the Balkans."
[13] Ibid.

The general agreement among experts that the enlargement policy after 2007/2013 does not work, raised the logical question, 'what is the way forward?' Apart from the symbolic value of the Ukraine and Moldova candidate status, and even the potential commencement of formal negotiations, the question of 'how exactly to secure that these countries will not get stuck in the same waiting room' arises. What do the Western Balkans countries, who have been lining up for membership for decades, think about the war-motivated "fast-track" for the two former Soviet Republics? Maybe a small war in the Western Balkans can speed up the process? This has become a question that attracted the intellectual efforts of many experts on the Enlargement and Neighborhood policies from respected think tanks as well as academia.

The general diagnosis underlines the awareness that the EU's approach towards the Western Balkans does not work and must be corrected. Whether it is the Centre for European Policy Studies' (CEPS) staged accession model,[14] The Institute of Human Sciences' (IWM) access to the Single Market and the Four Freedoms,[15] or The German Institute for International and Security Affairs' (SWP) suggestion for the coordination of the future accession negotiations, current process of association, and potential new formats, such as a European Political Community or a European Political and Economic Area,[16] the dominant responses to this dilemma have all attempted to square Macron's demands for internal EU reforms and a renewed enlargement perspective. As Wolczuk pointed out, "in May 2022, French President Emmanuel Macron said it would take decades for Ukraine to join the EU. More recently, he embraced the imperative

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[14] Michael Emerson et al., "A Template for Staged Accession to the EU," *Center for European Policy Studies* (Oct 01, 2021). https://www.ceps.eu/ceps-publications/a-template-for-staged-accession-to-the-eu/

[15] Kristof Bender, "EU Enlargement and Europe's Future: How to Revive One of the EU's Most Successful Policies," *Europe's Futures* (September 14, 2023). https://www.iwm.at/europes-futures/publication/eu-enlargement-and-europes-future-how-to-revive-one-of-the-eus-most

[16] Barbara Lippert, "The EU's Next Eastward Enlargement Will Be Complicated and Expensive," *Stiftung Wissenshaf und Politik* (August 12, 2022). doi:10.18449/2022C46. https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2022C46/

of enlargement for geopolitical reasons while promoting the idea of a Europe of different speeds."[17]

Interestingly, what unites all of these proposals is not the increase of the enlargement process efficiency, which is in itself the essence of the Enlargement policy's weakness, but an effort to blur its importance, by replacing the final goal of membership with selective access to bundles of EU policies or politics. Importantly, the implementation of these ideas opens a Pandora's box, as it will not only concern the current candidates but will also provide an opportunity for the "relegation" of those current members unwilling or unable to join the EU's core, Thus further deepening the divides in the integration process.

The informal meeting of the EU leaders in Granada this October (2023), which simultaneously took place with the European Political Initiative, shed more light on the distribution of the accents in the internal EU political debate. The burning issue remains migration, where the Polish and Hungarian veto for the European Summit statement of Ursula von der Leyen is sufficiently informative. While there is awareness for the need for enlargement, there are also "no shortcuts," meaning that the countries are exposed to a merit-based approach.[18] These "no shortcuts" or "merit-based" approaches are largely shared by the experts on the topic. This, one could argue, consistent approach, seems to be indifferent to the geopolitical challenge that Europe is facing, since the membership conditions remain as they were.

Charles Michel's closing press conference also shed more light on the set of priorities in the internal EU debate and the place of the Enlargement policy in them. As he states: "The EU needs to focus on

[17] Kataryna Wolczuk, "Overcoming EU Accession Challenges in Eastern Europe: Avoiding Purgatory," *Carnegie Europe* (June 28, 2023). https://carnegieeurope.eu/2023/06/28/overcoming-eu-accession-challenges-in-eastern-europe-avoiding-purgatory-pub-90039

[18] EU summit statement adopted without migration paragraph – as it happened, *The Guardian* (Oct 6, 2023). https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2023/oct/06/viktor-orban-eu-ukraine-migration-policies-leaders-granada-armenia-azerbaijan-europe-live

three questions: what are the EU's common priorities and policies for the future, how Europe will act together in terms of decision-making, and how to make sure that Europe has the budget in line with its ambitions." An additional four corresponding topics of discussion were: Europe needs to strengthen its economic and technological basis; Russia's war in Ukraine has demonstrated the importance of developing the industrial basis for security and defence; There was a need to speed up work on sovereignty; Europe needs to engage with the rest of the world, and the EU has a special role to play in a multipolar world.[19] In that context Von der Leyen's argument that "we also have to do our own homework so that we are ready in case that […] candidate countries are ready to join, that we are also ready to welcome them to the European Union,"[20] means that regardless of all of the candidate countries' efforts, there is little chance that any enlargement can take place prior to the introduction of internal EU reforms. These reforms primarily concern the pressure exerted on the member States to accept the Quality Majority Voting (QMV) as a new voting principle replacing unanimity and member-States' veto power, securing their own budget resources and defining a clear path for the further development of the EU. All of these are topics highly contested among EU members and there is no political constellation for their prompt incorporation without overcoming a potential veto or removing a member ready to apply such veto. Hence, there is little hope that the perplexed internal situation will be resolved promptly, and the membership perspective will be solely dependent on the candidates' merit-based progress.

This tendency is even more clear, when looking at the content and recommendations of the Report of the Franco-German Working Group on EU Institutional Reform Sailing on High Seas: Reforming and Enlarging the EU for the 21st Century, that was presented on September 18, 2023 and was endorsed by representatives of the French

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[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid.

and German governments.[21] Although the "report recommends a flexible EU reform and enlargement process,"[22] it acknowledges that the EU enlargement is high on the political agenda for geopolitical reasons and that simultaneously "[...] the EU is not ready yet to welcome new members, neither institutionally nor policy wise."[23] Hence, without the imposition of a new organization of the EU institutional and decision making process containing QMV and delivering a Rule of Law tool for interference in the member states internal matters, thus securing the interests of the core (or if someone wants "the strongest" in the EU), the enlargement will not take place. Having in mind that the proposed reforms are a highly contested issue, and that there are internal divisions on every policy issue, it is not surprising that the proposal follows a path, settled already by the European Commission's White paper on the future of Europe[24] five scenarios on the future of Europe, that formally draws alternative options but practically advocates the introduction of the next reincarnations of the "two speeds" or "Europe a la carte" concepts. Any version of this will facilitate the deepened integration of the few, and exclude the rest, thus removing the burden of solidarity. The implementation of such ideas will promptly produce tensions around QMV decisions on issues of fundamental importance in national politics and will fuel anti-EU narratives concerning the so called "oppression of Brussels." Just as much as such solutions can facilitate the decisions of the "core," it will deliver new tools for interference in national politics which, notwithstanding the specific type of democratic legitimacy of the EU, will also become a source of contention. This course of action found its place in the Granada Declaration, through

[21] Mared Gwyn Jones, "Germany, France present EU reform proposal as bloc prepares for new members," *Euronews* (September 19, 2023). https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2023/09/19/germany-france-present-eu-reform-proposal-as-bloc-prepares-for-new-members
[22] "Report of the Franco-German Working Group on EU Institutional Reform Sailing on High Seas: Reforming and Enlarging the EU for the 21st Century," (September 18, 2023), 5. https://www.politico.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/19/Paper-EU-reform.pdf
[23] Idem.
[24] White paper on the future of Europe, Reflections and Scenarios for the EU27 by 2025, European Commission
COM(2017)2025 of 1 March 2017, https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2017-03/white_paper_on_the_future_of_europe_en.pdf

the acknowledgement that "in parallel, the Union needs to lay the necessary internal groundwork and reforms" to the aspiring members reforms.[25]

Finally, in the context of our deliberations, this proposal makes enlargement policy a hostage to internal reforms. This step not only deprioritizes enlargement as an EU policy, but will also continue to discourage reformers in candidate States, and fuel the arguments of EU critiques, that the EU treats them instrumentally.

Geopolitics Matters, but not in this Case

With regard the analysis above, several conclusions can be made. Rhetorically, the EU signals a clear understanding of the ongoing changes in Europe and its statements are replete with geopolitical and geo-strategic considerations. However, practically speaking, no EU enlargement related actions are practically driven by geopolitical considerations. Instead, the EU continues to rely on vague, constantly changing requirements[26] that serve more as a shield against the candidates than as a guide towards EU integration. Much more concerning however, is the fact that there is no coherent, consensus-based Enlargement policy within the EU. In other words, the EU enlargement policy is not a shared priority, or, in a sense, a *raison'd etat* of the European Union. Instead, it has become a victim of member States' short term political needs and interests, as aptly described by Bender.[27] This instrumentalization of the Enlargement policy for internal political purposes has devastating consequences for the EU and its member States' credibility, which, in the absence of hard power, is one of the strongest tools of political action, if used appropriately.

[25] "Granada Declaration," *European Council* (October 6, 2023). https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/10/06/granada-declaration/

[26] Dragan Tilev, "The New EU Enlargement Methodology: Enhancing the Accession Process," *Institute for Democracy, Societas Civilis – Skopje* (March 2020), 3 https://idscs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Final-Commentary-Dragan-Tilev.pdf

[27] Kristof Bender, "EU Enlargement and Europe's Future: How to Revive One of the EU's Most Successful Policies," *Europe's Futures* (September 14, 2023). https://www.iwm.at/europes-futures/publication/eu-enlargement-and-europes-future-how-to-revive-one-of-the-eus-most

The enlargement process is no less dependent, or probably even more dependent, on the internal EU political dynamic than on the nature of relations between the EU and the candidate States. The current EU geopolitical arguments, or rhetoric, is simply a fig leaf covering the need to adjust the talk to the war time environment, but it contains no substance when it comes to the practical actions taken by the European politicians and/or the EU institutions. Instead, what we can deduct from the political statements and practical actions during the last year and a half is that what really determines the EU activity towards the candidate States is the EU's internal considerations. The Enlargement policy has become a hostage to the federalist push for reforms aiming to weaken member States' positions vis à vis EU institutions and the Franco-German vision of further political integration.

Despite the geopolitical turbulences, the EU stubbornly holds to the rule of law principles, despite the fact that they remain one of the most politically biased enlargement criteria. This, however, should not be surprising in the context of the EU's betting on the rule of law as a mechanism for intra-EU leverage on member States; a mechanism in which the EU invested a lot in the last two European Commission terms. Hence, for the sake of consistency, the EU cannot ease the pressure on external partners, when it tries to increase it internally, regardless of the fact that it is a controversial issue, to say the least. The fact that the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism was officially closed for Bulgaria and Romania, without any tangible improvements in the field of rule of law in Bulgaria, exposes the importance of an appropriate political constellation in the EU for the adoption or removal of such rule of law related tools. Instead, and conversely, the EU introduced annual rule of law reports on each member State.

The EU also insists on internal EU reforms prior to the next enlargement, which will increase the Union's strategic autonomy, by securing new, reliable financial sources independent of the member States,

and, most importantly, the abandonment of the member-States' veto power. The trade-off of the enlargement for the right to veto exemplifies the severe frustration within the EU towards the principle of consensus and the practical limitations stemming from it. This question has the potential to capsize the EU train, and its connection with the enlargement policy will slow rather than speed up the enlargement process. Therefore, apart from the geopolitical rhetoric, the EU's practical actions are not embedded in geopolitical considerations.

The war in Ukraine brought new countries into the "waiting room," but so far the EU has not produced any alternative approach to providing a solution that would allow for a swift entrance into the Union. While Ukraine and Moldova's candidate status were a necessary act of solidarity, it cannot result in the repetition of the same political practices that led to popular disappointment with the EU in the Western Balkans. The war in Ukraine changed the geopolitical environment in Europe as no other event has for the last thirty years, and the EU should take advantage of this in order to complete the enlargement of the Western Balkans, which has seemingly become an endless process.

What if Geopolitics Really Mattered?

Geopolitically, the Western Balkans are a non-issue. The NATO membership of all Balkan states with the exception of Serbia (although Bosnia and Kosovo are not members of the alliance, NATO troops are stationed there) substantially diminishes the potential for regional and European destabilization. Instead, in the current Western Balkans enlargement discourse, the accent is placed on local or "Balkan" problems like the Bulgarian-Macedonian identity dispute, or calls for further reforms. Without questioning the need for internal reforms in the candidate States, or the difficulties caused by such formal obstacles like the veto, the question remains whether the elimination of these obstacles will open the door for member-

ship or not? The new enlargement horizon, including Ukraine and Moldova, is even more replete with endless conflicts and obstacles. Now, whereas previously the challenges embraced a NATO dominated area, which still faced crucial security challenges like the Serbia-Kosovo conflict or the situation in Bosnia, the picture is getting even more complex. The EU will have to deal with the post-war borders of Ukraine, the problem of Transnistria and numerous other tensions that will emerge together with the dropping of tensions in Ukraine.

In the search for the "geopolitical" drivers for EU enlargement activities after February 2022, one particular aspect of the geopolitically driven factor of enlargement is missing. During the 2004/2007 enlargement, the "geopolitical" argument meant that despite the fact that countries were not ready to join the Union, their membership was important for other reasons that went above normative, or perhaps more accurately, "norms driven" considerations and concerns. Hence, despite the awareness that countries like Bulgaria and Romania were not willing (or able) to reach the preparedness benchmarks to the extent that the European Commission would consider them satisfactory, other priorities of a security nature outweighed these normative shortcomings. Namely, the countries were accepted because they sealed the EU's eastern border and connected Central Europe with Greece. If this was the case in 2007, *ad analogiam*, it would be logical to expect a similar pattern of behavior, or political signals coming from Brussels after 2022. So far, however, despite the ongoing war in Ukraine, as this analysis reveals, apart from the inclusion of "geopolitics" as a buzz word, there are no such signals in important international documents that would indicate the EU's readiness to turn a blind eye on systemic shortcomings in the candidate states for the sake of faster membership. Instead, as the recent conclusions from the Granada summit and the discussed report revealed, there is an exactly opposite trend that the EU will make no concessions whatsoever when it comes to candidate States' duties

within the EU's new enlargement methodology. After 2022, no EU official even dared to say that the acceptance of the Western Balkans countries altogether would expand the sphere of peace in Europe, or that the four freedoms would make most of the regional conflicts meaningless. What continues to matter is the good old normative conditionality driven policy that turned the enlargement into a tool rather than a goal.

Michal Vit

In Search of Principles of Visegrad (Economic) Cooperation and its Inspiration for Bilateral Relations between North Macedonia and Bulgaria

This paper discusses the experience of the enlargement process in the context of the V4 region and its impact on deepening economic relations in the context of EU membership. That being said, the paper explores the compatibility of shared - and mutually created - political values with extending economic relations within the V4.[1] The guiding principle here is the fact that the EU structures its regional policies in order to create space for cross border collaboration. In other words, the EU is indirectly imposing economic incentives in order to create social conditions for deepening and extending economic cooperation among its member states.

Context of the Shared Priorities of the V4 towards the EU

The EU enlargement in 2004 and 2007 was understood as a final phase of the "triumph of the democracy transition" in the CEE region. However, this created an unclear political space for the Western Balkan countries, which hoped to fulfil the conclusions of the Thessaloniki summit in 2001. In the same period, North Macedonia was granted the status of candidate country, which opened a space for political and social expectations for the continuation of the enlargement process.

In the past 20 years, the EU has lost its attractiveness of being a normative power for the Western Balkan countries.[2] Looking back to the period of the past 20 years for perspective, CEE countries can serve as examples of the successful adaptation and implementation of EU norms and, at the same time, as important partners and supporters for WB countries in their aims of being members of the EU. Despite the current political context of the enlargement process, the general framework of assistance should focus on the following dimensions: Firstly, enforcing the rule of law and democratic political systems in all states of WB. Secondly, pursuing an agenda of market-oriented economic reform; and lastly, developing and extending regional frameworks for cooperation with a focus on bilateral relations. In this

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[1] For purpose to this study, the author uses V4 region as an equivalent to CEE region.
[2] See more details here https://www.aspeninstitutece.org/project/visegrad-startup-report-20162017/

context, the V4 countries can serve as a good example for the WB on the use of regional cooperation in order to achieve shared political and economic commitment in the past almost 35 years. One can define the shared similarities as follows: Firstly, a proclaimed political commitment of integration into the EU; secondly, the identification of policy areas for fostering regional cooperation based on economic and social similarities; thirdly, the provision of external assistance, both from the EU and the CEE region as well.

A closer perspective on economic cooperation within the V4 shows the most significant feature of the collaboration. Economic cooperation has always lagged behind political cooperation among the V4 countries at both the regional and EU levels. Looking at the cooperation of the V4 countries in any policy area, the need for enhanced cooperation has always arisen from those countries' shared interests and goals, particularly membership in NATO and, most importantly, the EU. That said, their economy-related policies have been left without any special interests in terms of emphasising enhanced cooperation or even trying to standardize their policies in order to achieve better intra-Visegrad cooperation. The economic cooperation among the Visegrád countries is based on similar dynamics given by the historical context, as well as by the current dynamics on the Common Market. There are two interesting patterns here: the strategic role of Germany for all of the V4 countries and the shared experience of their respective economies serving as logistics and supplier hubs. This puts significant pressure on the limits of Visegrád cooperation, namely the ability to identify shared political interests and to develop and execute a coordinated strategy. Since economic issues have never been the most significant aspect of intra-V4 cooperation, such issues might have serious consequences for a coordinated policy with respect to the key political agenda of the EU. This brings us back to the very beginning. The V4 can develop a coordinated strategy when it comes to top policy priorities, while also developing deeper integration in areas

where all parties involved see mutual, direct benefits. Conversely, in policy areas where transaction costs for enhanced cooperation are higher, the level of cooperation decreases. In addition to that, the need for cooperation is driven by different aims, such as strong economic relations with Germany instead of intra-Visegrad interests. In all likelihood, Visegrád countries will continue to protect their economic interests – as other EU member countries do – with regional cooperation merely being a welcomed side effect of their national priorities. In this context, it needs to be said that the V4 countries react to EU priorities rather than actively shaping them. There are a few crucial points that make the V4 a very important region in this regard. Firstly, all of the V4 countries face similar challenges when it comes to the need of supporting policies aimed at boosting innovative businesses. Secondly, there is a strong private sector that enjoys the structural and infrastructural setting of the region when it comes to the development of the already existing background of global innovations. Thirdly, all of the countries are driven by similar externalities such as the strong economic role of Germany. In this context, cooperation at the EU level is the only possible platform for interconnection within the EU and for gaining significant know-how and financial support.

Explanatory Framework of the EU Integration

The literature on Europeanization may serve as a good tool for analysis and a deeper understanding of the impact of the EU integration of the V4 region as well as in the broader context of the Western Balkans. As Risse[3] points out, if one analyzes the EU integration process, the socialisation effects, such as collective identities and public discourse, should be considered. In a broader context, this logic leads to the identification of common interests in the integration process. Therefore, besides the rationalist approach represented by Moravcsik which,[4] for example, emphasizes the economic gains emerging

[3] T. Risse, *The Euro between national and European identity*, Journal of European Public Policy (2003), 10:4, 487-505, DOI: 10.1080/1350176032000101235

[4] A. Moravcsik, *Why the European Community Strengthens the State: Domestic Politics and International*

from regional cooperation - in the context of an enlarged EU - social effects play a crucial role in both the implementation and the functioning of policy, thus fostering regional cooperation.

As Börzel[5] argues, since 1990 the EU regional policy was mainly a matter of top-down processes that focused on institutional as well as regional policy settings. The EU regional policy, as the literature on Europeanization suggests, may be approached from the perspective of rational choice and/or sociological institutionalism. The first approach argues that the EU enabled domestic changes as a result of inducing changes in the opportunity structures for (domestic) actors (as newly-created conditions demanded domestic change). The second approach focuses on the altered behaviour of actors as a result of a change in norms, practices, and ideas (in terms of identification with the new structures). From a slightly different viewpoint, regional policy may be understood from a rationalist point of view as a new form of redistribution of power[6], and from a social constructivist perspective as an area of shared norms and rules. Likewise, the EU regional policy results in the "imagining" of regional cooperation and the creation of an institutionalized way of redistributing policies as well as interests.[7] In this context, it is important to understand both the imposed institutional structure on regional cooperation, but also what creates the *de facto* content of the process.

There is a general agreement in the scholarly literature that the 2004 EU enlargement process involved the adoption of a large amount of EU legislation on the part of the acceding members, and, that in many cases, this happened merely in a formal way. Generally, new norms were not properly translated and adapted to the national political

Cooperation (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1994).

[5] T. Börzel: The Diffusion of (Inter-)Regionalism. The EU as a Model of Regional Integration. co-authored with Thomas Risse, KFG Working Papers. Research College "The Transformative Power of Europe", (Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin, 2009).

[6] T. Börzel: The Diffusion of (Inter-)Regionalism. The EU as a Model of Regional Integration. co-authored with Thomas Risse, KFG Working Papers. Research College "The Transformative Power of Europe", (Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin, 2009).

[7] J. Olsen, The Many Faces of Europeanization, *Journal of Common Market Studies* 40(2002): 921-950.

contexts. In other words, the behaviour of actors has not changed.[8] Following this argumentation, only one "logic of Europeanization"[9] is arguably operating regarding EU regional policy in the new member states, with the sociological institutionalist logic largely missing. Therefore, further development of sustainable regional cooperation must be based on the penetration of interests geared towards a wide scope of actors, as well as socialising them in the context of the newly created (bilateral) context.

However, the Visegrad region experienced vertically developed incentives to collaborate despite often formally adopted norms aimed to support regional cooperation. Referring to the theoretical understanding of regional cooperation, one can witness two processes. Firstly, there is the identification of shared regional interests that were translated into multilayer regional cooperation. In this context, we can see a democratisation and decentralisation of interests – the involvement of various institutions, less dependent on control or political interests penetrating bilateral/regional relations. It has already been proven that relying only on infrastructure, in the sense of EU norms, means that long-term gains, such as newly-created regional cooperation based on shared interests, are absent from the implementation. The EU policy cannot bring about the envisioned goal—the emancipation of regional/bilateral cooperation. In this respect, when evaluating the EU regional policy in the context of V4, a wide scope of factors should arguably be considered that would go beyond the binary understanding of the implementation of individual programs and initiatives. With that said, the nature of (regional) cooperation within the V4 is based merely on a shared historical communist experience which was boosted by the shared political goal of the transformation period, which was integration into NATO and the EU. To continue the argument, the V4 cooperation - also in its economic terms - is based on the identification of shared inter-

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[8] T. Börzel: The Diffusion of (Inter-)Regionalism. The EU as a Model of Regional Integration. co-authored with Thomas Risse, KFG Working Papers. Research College "The Transformative Power of Europe", (Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin, 2009).

[9] ibidem

ests. This general concept allows actors to act under the umbrella of a shared identity, while also being driven by pragmatically identified interests that result in shared profits.[10]

In this context, it is interesting to observe the changing dynamics of bilateral collaboration after the adoption of the current EU financing framework for the years 2021 and 2027, in which there is a significant reduction of European Union funds dedicated to cross border collaboration. Therefore, institutional structures which are relevant among others for Euroregions were pushed – formally and by context – to come up with new goals and priorities, as mentioned by representatives of Euroregions Nisa and Těšínské Slezsko. They mentioned in private conversations that a lack of EU funds reflects operational capacity as well as a search for the purpose of operations. It reflects the danger of only interest driven institutional structures without a deeper sense of identification. Speaking about the Czech – Polish context, Euroregions typically rely on a mix of funding sources, with contributions from both national governments and the European Union. In the Czech Republic, funding for Euroregions often comes from the Ministry of Regional Development, which allocates resources to support joint projects and initiatives. In Poland, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs plays a similar role in financing cross-border cooperation initiatives. Additionally, European Union structural funds, such as the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the Cohesion Fund, are essential sources of financial support for Euroregion projects in both countries. However, current development shows that both countries have to increase their budgetary participation which, in principle, corresponds with a need for the identification of national priorities relevant for cross border collaboration. In principle, regions with well identified interests can translate their activities into budgetary matters.

However, this supporting structure was able to perform due to the overall supportive environment for collaboration. This means that

[10] R. Fawn, "'Regions' and their study: where from, what for and where to?" *Review of International Studies* N. 35 (2003)

the period around the time of the EU accession has been shaped by political representatives who enjoyed a similar political vision hand in hand with well cultivated personal relations on both the national and regional levels. Such a nature of collaboration was a foundation for the further penetration of bilateral and regional relations beyond the level of shared interests.

To assess the experience of the CEE region when it comes to identifying key aspects driving regional collaboration, the following conclusions can be drawn.

Firstly, the theoretical explanation – using the framework of Europeanization – is very dependent on the social and political context in which it is defined. This means that explaining principles of the EU integration in the context of the CEE region is very context dependent. It means that the normative environment of EU integration is a key explanatory variable.

Secondly, the incentives to deepen regional collaboration significantly depend on shared ideas and motivations. This leads to a need to find an appropriate institutional framework, such as creating a system of Euroregions used as an important institution for processing finances dedicated to regional cooperation in a cross-border manner.

Thirdly, regional cooperation in the CEE region has never been a matter of political issues or objections to pursuing a common goal — membership in the EU. The shared political vision has always been more important than often personalised short-term interests.

Fourthly, none of the CEE countries controlled or intended to control the stream of regional and bilateral collaboration in a political and economic manner. In this sense, the regional collaboration has been pushed by the interests of a wide scope of stakeholders, not primarily by one segment.

Lesson Learned and (Potential) Inspiration for Bulgarian – Macedonian Relations

The conceptualization of the regional collaboration in the CEE region, described above, sets an outline for the analysis of the bilateral relations between Bulgaria and North Macedonia. The purpose of the following section is to review some of the main drives and principles of bilateral collaboration in the context of the EU enlargement process. The review follows the main identifying elements as outlined in the context of the CEE region.

Using the Europenization framework creates significant methodological challenges. That the perspective of norm-based explanations would allow for EU enlargement and lead to more extensive acceptance of the EU norms should be a logical assumption. However, employing this framework to explain drivers of closer collaboration between both countries shows a significant limit of the process. Firstly, Bulgaria and North Macedonia do not enjoy the same dynamics of the process since Bulgaria has been an EU member since 2007. In this context, the normative aspect of the enlargement process is thus based on the EU as the formative element, but as a tool of the EU approximation it misses its transitional (normative) element. In this context, one should also consider the lack of institutionalized cooperation that shapes bilateral relations. Translated into practical implications, there is a significant lack of institutionalized bilateral relations that would be exposed to the EU practices when channelling EU funds and other means of collaboration. With that said, the impact of Europenization remains on a central level that has limited knowledge and interests regarding practicalities on a regional level. From this perspective, there is a significant lack of means for Eupenization since the tools are very limited.

To deepen – in the form institutionalization – bilateral cooperation that would be based on identifying common interests is an ongoing process due to cultural and social proximity. This is the case primarily

of economic affairs where business interests are frequently independent of political priorities. A closer look at the similarities between the CEE region and bilateral relations between Bulgaria and North Macedonia shows significant limits of comparison. From a broader perspective, the shared historical experience of both countries brought only limited elements that can be interpreted as a historical momentum for bilateral relations as it was in the CEE region. Likewise, there is also a practical element concerning the lack of deeper bilateral economic convergence, this being the strong economic presence of Germany as a strong initial push for economic collaboration within the CEE region. However, Germany has never enacted a significant regional economic policy towards the CEE states. That being said, its economic interests have been in line on a bilateral basis. This enabled the emergence of politically independent businesses interests which happened to be in collaboration on the regional level. This element is significantly less present in the context of BG-NMK relations leading to a lack of regional interests. At the same time, one can observe two diverging processes. There are strong political interests with economic implications. It drives the nature of bilateral collaboration as very personalized bilateral relations with a strong background in political affairs. As a result, there is a narrow personalized economic interest that does not allow for broader desertification when it comes to segments and members. In principle, there is a very low number of "newcomers" to the economic relations leading to the replication of similar principles that have not allowed for the generation of a strong normative convergence push in the context of EU integration. Instead of this, we can see that the limited ability of pushing economic interests against political ones of the Europenization element is not strong enough. Going further, one can observe a correlation between rising political tensions and the failure to fulfil potential economic cooperation in segments where the impact concerns interests that are driven by economic cooperation. Such a situation results in a limited diversified portfolio of actors shaping bilateral relations. As a logical consequence, the more

the political space is dominated by nationalistic tendencies, the less space there is for new-comers or even new ideas driven by common (economic) interests. As a result, the current dynamics of bilateral relations can be defined as immature by the inability to separate economic aspects from nationally driven political agendas.

According to the study published by CSD, which focused on economic relations between Bulgaria and North Macedonia, the dynamics of relations corresponds with growing distrust on the political level. This is a paradoxical situation where relations which should be a matter of growing interdependence, given by the fact that the EU membership means primarily economic gains, are significantly affected by negative politicisation.[11] As a result, the scope of relations is narrowed to economic interests and the nature of relations with demonstrated reservations to enrich the political substance of bilateral relations. In this context, it is worthwhile to underline that identifying similarities between the Visegrád region and Bulgaria and North Macedonia is very difficult in terms of having the political nature of collaboration as a supportive element for deepening regional cooperation. This results in a situation in which the bilateral relations are dominated by political leadership which also has economic power to maintain the status quo concerning the dynamics of bilateral relations.

To analyse the dynamics of bilateral relations, in the above mentioned context, the decisive elements of deepening and widening the collaboration are shared political and economic interests as well as providing incentives in the form of the provided institutional and financial structures understood as having transformative power. That said, the current momentum requires a different conceptual framework than the concept of Europenization applied in the CEE region. Limited engagement of shared historical experience created a space that is dominated by nationalising agendas that pushed the understanding of the bilateral issue as a European one aside. In this

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[11] See the full study here: https://csd.bg/events/event/promoting-constructive-capital-in-north-macedonia/

context, existing analytical frameworks from CEE regions are hardly applicable, especially without comparable institutional support. At the same time, the longer the timespan of the bilateral issue is, the more collaboration is dominated by a bilateral agenda and less by European norms. At the end, it threatens the EU enlargement process as such more than the bilateral cooperation, thus showing that the EU is unable to frame the process by ideas, but only as a rationalised mechanism of the Common Market of the EU.

Juraj Marušiak

Slovakia and North Macedonia: A Comparison of Experiences in Resolving Neighbourly Disputes

Introduction

The transformation of the former communist states after 1989 was characterized by different dynamics, depending on the historical traditions and political culture in each state. It was also strongly influenced by the nature of the communist regime there. In its analysis, two dimensions have usually been emphasized - the dimension of political transformation and the evolution of the character of political regimes; and the dimension of economic transformation from a planned to a market economy. However, in the case of a number of states, the building of "nation" statehood and the formation of the political nation, i.e., the completion of the transformation of the so-called cultural nations and "state nations,"[1] are also key factors. Thus, one of the main results of the changes in the Central and Eastern Europe region after 1989 is the emergence of new, so-called nationalizing states.[2] In addition to attributes such as democratic revolutions, we can also speak of "nationalist" revolutions. This does not only apply to the newly created states. One of the key slogans of the changes, especially in the Soviet bloc states, was both: "the road to Europe," i.e., joining the European integration processes, and the restoration of state independence. Therefore, some authors refer to 1989 as the "Autumn of Nations," which is understood as an analogy of the "Spring of Nations" in Central and South-Eastern Europe in 1848.[3] In this context, Kuzio speaks of the so-called quadruple transition.[4] Although most of the states in the region share the identical strategic goal of following the Western model of modernization through internal reforms and integration into the EU and NATO, at the same time the transformation of the region has also brought about new challenges to the relations between the individual states

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[1] See Friedrich Meinecke, *Weltbürgertum und Nationalstaat:* Studien zur Genesis des deutschen Nationalstaates, (München: R. Oldenbourg, 1908)..

[2] Rogers Brubaker, "National Minorities, Nationalizing States, and External National Homelands in the New Europe", *Daedalus*, Vol. 124, No. 2, What Future for the State? (Spring, 1995), pp. 107-132.

[3] Adam Burakowski, Alexander Gubrynowicz and Paweł Ukielski. *1989 The Autumn of Nations* (Warsaw: Natolin European Centre – ENRS, 2020).

[4] Taras Kuzio, "Transition in Post-Communist States: Triple or Quadruple?", *Politics*, vol. *21*, no. 3 (2001), pp. 168–177. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9256.00148

in the region. On the one hand, European integration processes are opening new opportunities for cooperation by weakening the role of state borders, but, at the same time, the construction of nationalizing states is opening up both unresolved and new conflicts, especially in relations between neighboring states, which these states have to redefine.

Part of the self-identification processes in the formation of political communities is the process of defining oneself in relation to the "other," while one of the key attributes and legitimizing formulas of collective identities is the consciousness of a common past lived in solidarity, and of shared plans for the future.[5] According to Anthony D. Smith, it is the existence of a codified, unified history that distinguishes a nation from other traditional, politically unintegrated communities, the so-called ethnicities.[6] This "history" or historical narrative is also distinct from the narratives of other political communities. At the same time, the Czech historian Miroslav Hroch notes that in the process of the formation of modern nations, "'to have a history" meant "to exist in historical continuity as an unquestionable whole." At the same time, however, according to him, "national history" was written in relation to the history of other nations, especially those to which "the national historical argument as a justification of the national program was related."[7] Thus, the politics of memory and debates about "national history" are not only part of the discourse within communities, but their addressees are often also elites or even the publics of other political communities. Working with collective memory thus becomes an integral part of foreign policy, as it participates in creating the boundaries of a political community, defining who is part of it, but also who does not belong to it.

At the same time, as Mario Rufer argues, the "politics of memory" interprets events from the past through a narrative that defines itself in relation to the present. It purposefully manipulates events, some

[5] Zuzana Kusá, "Metodologické otázky výskumu premien kolektívnych a osobnostných identít", in *Teoretické prístupy k identitám a ich praktické aplikácie : zborník zo seminára,* ed. by Juraj Marušiak and Michaela Ferencová (Bratislava: Veda 2005), 10-30.

[6] Anthony D. Smith, *Nacjonalizm. Teoria, ideologia, historia,* (Warszawa: Sic!, 2007), 26-27.

[7] Miroslav Hroch, *Národy nejsou dílem náhody* (Praha: SLON, 2009), 168, 175.

of which are highlighted and recalled, others of which are left in the background, depending on the nature of the narrative and the level of political urgency. Rufer points out that in this respect the politics of memory cannot be neutral.[8] Thus, the politics of memory is a complex of purposeful activities aimed at achieving the desired perception and interpretation of events from the past in order to achieve specific political goals. Collective memory can thus be an instrument of the politics of reconciliation, but also an instrument of confrontation. Similarly, European integration can be an instrument not only of rapprochement between neighboring states, but also of power coercion by one state against another. Establishing good relations with neighbors is one of the key conditions for a candidate state to be recognized as eligible for EU membership, as part of the 1993 Copenhagen criteria.

The reformulation of legitimation narratives in nationalizing states after 1989 has increased the role of the national minority factor in the domestic and foreign policies of individual states. Minority issues are approached through the so-called triadic nexus, i.e., the relationship between minority members, their country of residence and their "kin-state," also referred to as the "external homeland."[9] In a number of Central and Eastern European states, minorities constitute a significant part of the population (e.g., North Macedonia, Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, Moldova, etc.), while others claim close relations with "their" minorities abroad (e.g., Hungary, Serbia, and to a lesser extent Poland), while Bulgaria considers the titular population of a neighboring state to be part of "its" nation. In this, its approach is similar to that of the Russian Federation towards Ukraine and Belarus.[10] The importance of the minority issue in the foreign policy of the states of the region has experienced several waves of growth and

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[8] Mario Rufer, (2012) "Politics of Memory", in *Online Dictionary Social and Political Key Terms of the Americas: Politics, Inequalities, and North-South Relations*, Version 1.0 (2012). http://elearning. uni-bielefeld.de/wikifarm/fields/ges_cias/field.php/Main/Unterkapitel162

[9] Brubaker, "National Minorities, Nationalizing States, and External National Homelands…"

[10] Vladimir Putin, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians", *President of Russia* (2021, July 12), http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181

decline. The first wave took place in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the communist regimes, the break-up of the post-communist federative states (Yugoslavia, the USSR and Czechoslovakia) and the wars in former Yugoslavia. Later, minority issues were revived during the accession process of Central European states to the EU, and, finally, they gained new relevance in the context of the unilateral declaration of independence of the Serbian province of Kosovo in 2008 and the war between Russia and Ukraine after 2014. The claims made by the representatives of the kin-states are also formulated historically, drawing on narratives formed in the 19th and 20th centuries, usually before the rise of communist regimes.

A characteristic approach of post-communist states in formulating interpretations of past conflict themes is self-victimization, which is a part of nationalist discourses. At the same time, however, some of them, e.g., Poland, but also the Czech Republic and partly Slovakia, try to present themselves as constructive actors in international relations, especially in the Central European area. Likewise, in some of their documents defining relations with neighbouring states, the inspiration of the German policy of reconciliation after the Second World War can be felt.[11] In the case of Slovakia and North Macedonia, which have been chosen as the subject of comparative research, it is possible to speak of the existence of a number of "unresolved" problems in relations with neighboring states, which they have to face as newly "nationalizing" states. In the case of Slovakia, bilateral relations with Hungary are key; in the case of North Macedonia, relations with Greece and Bulgaria. In both cases, the question of their readiness for EU membership has been questioned, this readiness includes, among other things, their national and ethnic policies. An equally important issue in both countries is the question of the inviolability of national borders. However, while Slovakia has managed to resolve these issues so that they do not pose an obstacle to its EU

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[11] Lily. Gardner Feldman, "The principle and practice of ‚reconciliation' in German foreign policy: relations with France, Israel, Poland and the Czech Republic", *International Affairs*, Vol. 75, No. 2, (Apr. 1999), 333-356.

membership, this has not been the case for North Macedonia - on the contrary, this is the first time in the context of the EU's eastern enlargement that a Member State has used its right to block membership.

The aim of the present article is therefore to compare the experiences of both countries with similar experiences of problematic nation-state formation and, at the same time, to identify to what extent Slovakia's experience in improving relations with its neighbors can serve as an example of "good practice" for North Macedonia. Given that the historically contingent conflict with Greece has been concluded, for the time being, by the so-called Prespa Agreement, on the basis of which Greece ended its blockage of Macedonia's accession process to the EU and NATO, and Macedonian-Albanian relations were concluded by the so-called Ohrid Agreements, the primary focus will be on the Macedonian-Bulgarian relations. That is to say, the main obstacle is "Bulgaria's double veto in December 2020 and June 2021 on opening North Macedonia's accession talks with the EU."[12]

From this main research question, another question arises, namely, 'what role did the factor of the Europeanization of internal and foreign policy play in this case.' The notion of Europeanization in this case can be approached on several levels. The first is the level of the member (or candidate) states and refers to the adaptation of "domestic politics, policies and politics to the changes dictated by the European Union."[13] This relates to institutional and legislative changes, to the adoption or imitation of procedures and institutions in the democratic states of Western Europe. However, in the accession process of both states, the relevance of the European Union level has also become apparent, with national or bilateral issues becoming part of the agenda of the EU institutions.

[12] Ognen Vangelov, "An Analysis of Bulgaria's Rejection of the Macedonian Ethno-Linguistic Identity and Its Implications", in *Macedonia's Long Transition. From Independence to the Prespa Agreement and Beyond,* ed. by Robert Hudson and Ivan Dodovski (Cham: Springer Nature, 2023), 207.
[13] Claudio M. Radaelli, "Whither Europeanization? Concept Stretching and Substantive Change", *European Integration online Papers (EIoP),* Vol. 4, No. 8 (2000); Vít Hloušek, "Proces europeanizace a politické strany v kandidátských zemích", *Sociální studia,* Vol. 1, No. 1, 93-108.

The nature of the research questions is also reflected in the structure of the article. In the first part, I will discuss the historical genesis of the conflicts of Slovakia and Macedonia between their respective neighboring states in a comparative perspective, identifying the key events that framed their development. In the next part, I will discuss the nature of bilateral disputes in terms of their content. We will try to identify to what extent the experiences of Slovakia and North Macedonia, in their establishment in the international environment, are compatible. Finally, in the third part, we will look at the resolution of these disputes and the role played in this process by the involvement of international institutions, and, in particular, the EU institutions. The final part of the study will provide a summary of the findings and answer the two research questions.

2. Historical Genesis of Slovak and Macedonian Neighborhood Disputes from a Comparative Perspective

In the cases of Slovakia and North Macedonia we can speak of "polity seeking"[14] nationalisms in the 19th and 20th centuries, i.e., nationalisms seeking their fulfilment in the form of their own statehood. Neither the Slovak nor the Macedonian political representation, in seeking historical legitimations of their claims, could rely on a historical "prefigurement" of their statehood to which they could claim an immediate continuity. On the contrary, they had to revive, or reinvent a tradition of statehood from the distant past, whether it was the Slovak tradition of Great Moravia and the revival of the cult of Sts. Cyril and Methodius, or, in the case of North Macedonia, with reference to the tradition of the Macedonian Empire of Alexander the Great. While Slovak nationalism lived in a liminal phase between a "cultural" and "state" nation for most of the 20th century (1918-1939 and 1945-1992), in the case of Macedonia this liminal phase lasted from 1994 to 1991. In both cases, the state-building ambitions of the "national" representations were fulfilled only in the last decade of the 20th century.

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[14] Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism reframed. Nationhood and the national question in the New Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 79.

Both countries share a delayed start to the process of modern national formation when compared with their neighbors, which, moreover, had to face competition from other nationalisms, albeit in different historical contexts and temporal phases. The process of the Slovak "national revival" started in the second half of the 18th century; the Macedonian process only started during the 20th century. Slovak and North Macedonian nationalisms developed within the framework of supranational state formations, defined dynastically. Slovakia developed as an integral part of the Kingdom of Hungary and the Kingdom of Austria-Hungary, respectively, and did not exist as an administrative or geographical category until 1918. Its present territory was referred to as "Upper Hungary."

From the 19th century onwards, Hungary began to transform itself into a nationalizing state.[15] After 1918, Slovakia, except for quasi-independence in 1939-1945, became part of multi-ethnic Czechoslovakia. However, it had already formed as a geographical and administrative unit after its foundation. North Macedonia developed within the Ottoman Empire until the beginning of the 20th century, later as part of Yugoslavia, with large parts of the Macedonian ethnic territory becoming part of the territory of Greece, Bulgaria and partly Albania. It did not acquire administrative status and thus political borders until after 1944.

Slovak nationalism developed in competition with, and in opposition to, Hungarian nationalism, but also to Czech nationalism and, marginally, to the territorial and cultural ambitions of Poland. The territory of Slovakia and its population were part of these three nationalist projects, all of which perceived Slovakia as a periphery that needed to be integrated with the "center." Unlike North Macedonia, its population was referred to by the ethnonym "Slovaks" and was accepted as a specific entity, distinct from both Hungarians and Czechs. However, while Czech, Hungarian and Polish nationalisms were based on state-law traditions, Slovak nationalism was only just building

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[15] Brubaker, "National Minorities, Nationalizing States, and External National Homelands".

a similar state-law tradition. The key moments in this case were the years 1848 (the formation of the first Slovak political representation under the name of the Slovak National Council), 1861 (the Memorandum of the Slovak Nation with the demand for the creation of a Slovak territorially defined autonomous territory), and finally the establishment of Czechoslovakia in 1918, when the key demand of a significant part of the Slovak political representation became the demand for territorial autonomy as a form of statehood. This was realized in 1938-1939, after which Slovakia existed as a quasi-independent state of Nazi Germany until 1945, and after 1945 as a semi-autonomous part of the restored unitary Czechoslovakia. From 1968 until the end of 1992, Slovakia was a subject of the dualist Czechoslovak federation.

North Macedonia was in a similar situation on the periphery of the often rival nationalist projects of Bulgaria, Greece, Serbia, but also Albania. Before the 20th century, the term "Macedonians" as an ethnic category does not appear in written records; according to the Czech historian Jan Rychlík, "Macedonism" as a coherent political program designating the population of Macedonia as a separate Slavic nation does not appear until the early 20th century.[16] Since the 19th century, however, Macedonia - its territory and population - has been the subject of the political agenda of Bulgarian nationalism, which at the time can also be described as polity-seeking nationalism. Although Bulgarian statehood was shaped with reference to its historical heritage, without clearly defined borders, one can agree with the statement that Bulgaria is also a "young nationalizing state concerned with the ethnic homogenization of its own population."[17] In relation to North Macedonia, however, it is a state that was created in a relatively earlier era, claiming the role of being the fulfilment of the program of "nation statehood" also in relation to the population of North Macedonia. On this basis, it legitimizes its efforts to act paternalistically towards neighboring North Macedonia.

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[16] Jan Rychlík and Miroslav Kouba, *Dějiny Makedonie* (Praha: Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, 2017), 11.
[17] Anton Koujouharov, "Bulgarian 'Macedonian' Nationalism: A Conceptual Overview", *The Online Journal of Peace and Conflict Resolution,* Vol. 6, No. 1 (Fall 2004). 287.

On the other hand, Hungary and Bulgaria share very similar historical traumas. Hungary claims legal continuity of its statehood with the pre-1918 Kingdom of Hungary. The peace treaty signed after 1920 in Trianon, which became part of the so-called Versailles settlement and the settlement of Europe after the Second World War, is regarded in Hungary as a national tragedy, as it not only meant the loss of territory, but also a large number of ethnic Hungarians who became citizens - members of national minorities in neighboring states - found themselves outside the borders of the Hungarian "nation state." The program of overcoming the legacy of Trianon and "reuniting" Hungarians by revising the borders was a key priority of Hungarian governments in the interwar period; after 1989 Hungarian governments began to speak of "reuniting Hungarians across borders."[18] This program was already hinted at by the first Hungarian Prime Minister, József Antall, who emerged from free elections in 1990, when he described himself as the Prime Minister of 15 million Hungarians "in spirit" (Hungary itself had a population of around 10 million at the time).[19]

For Bulgaria, a similar moment was the Peace Treaty of Berlin of 1878, which was a revision of the previous Peace Treaty of San Stefano, which envisaged the existence of a "Greater Bulgaria," which was to include the territories of Thrace, Southern Dobrudja and what is now North Macedonia. Similarly to the so-called "Trianon trauma," one of the key principles of Bulgarian foreign policy until the end of the Second World War was the idea of a Greater Bulgaria, conceived of as an idea of "reunification"—with the idea of "taking back Macedonia"[20] playing a key role in it. Kouyouharov refers to the Macedonian question in Bulgarian foreign and domestic policy, understood as "the ideology that Bulgaria deserved Macedonia," as an "obsession."[21]

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[18] Peter Weiss, "Mäkký revizionizmus a iredentizmus", Pravda (2022, August 2), https://zurnal.pravda.sk/esej/clanok/635518-peter-weiss-makky-iredentizmus-a-revizionizmus/
[19] George Schöpflin, "Hungary and its neighbours", *Chaillot Paper,* no. 7 (May 1993), 12.
[20] Dimitar Rizoff, *Die Bulgaren in ihren historischen, ethnographischen und politischen Grenzen: Atlas mit 40 Landkarten,* (Berlin: Konigliche Hoflithographie, Hof-Buch- und Steindruckerei Wilhelm Greve, 1917). Citedy by Maria Todorova, *Scaling the Balkans. Essays on Eastern European Entanglements* (Leiden – Boston: Brill 2019), 319.
[21] Koujouharov, "Bulgarian 'Macedonian' Nationalism", 291, 292.

The above traumas have largely framed the foreign policy of both states even after the political changes in 1989; on the other hand, both states have refrained from raising demands for border revision or from violent actions against neighboring states. On the other hand, both Hungary and Bulgaria have pursued non-violent activities aimed at redressing alleged grievances caused by the current state-border arrangements. These activities are often formulated as unilateral actions, carried out without consultation, or even sometimes in open, albeit non-violent, confrontation with neighboring states, even though they affect them or their citizens. In Hungary, this format is referred to as "national policy," as a complex of political, cultural, educational and institutional instruments aimed at building contacts with members of Hungarian communities in neighboring states (especially in the case of Slovakia, Romania, Serbia and Ukraine, and, to a lesser extent, Slovenia and Croatia), which is shaped largely autonomously from formal foreign policy instruments.[22]

Paradoxically, in the case of the Slovak-Hungarian and Macedonian-Bulgarian disputes, these conflicts are taking place between states that claim the same geopolitical orientation, i.e. at the level of global politics they declare their relations to constitute an alliance.[23] Czechoslovakia, and after 1993 Slovakia, like Hungary, declared EU and NATO accession as a common priority; Hungary, especially after the 1998 Slovak parliamentary elections, when a broad coalition of right-wing and left-wing pro-Western parties came to power, supported Slovakia's accession to NATO. Slovakia and Hungary also cooperate closely within the Visegrad Group. This cooperation, like the CEFTA cooperation in the 1990s, was seen as a preparation for EU integration. Despite Slovakia's divergent views on Hungary's so-called national policy, and nowadays also on the different positions of the two countries on the war in Ukraine, the representatives of the two countries tend to declare a positive atmosphere in their bilateral relations. [24]

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[22] Anita Sobják, "The Implications of Hungary's National Policy for Relations with Neighbouring States", *Policy Paper* no. 32 (Warsaw: Polish Institute of International Relations, June 2012).

[23] Juraj Marušiak, "Slovensko a Maďarsko – spojenectvo s historickou záťažou", S*tudia Politica Slovaca*, vol. 8, no.2 (2015), 41-54.

[24] "Wlachovský: SR má záujem na normalnych vzťahoch s Maďarskom", Teraz.sk (TASR: July 3, 2023),

Similarly, both Bulgaria and North Macedonia see their future in NATO and the EU. Bulgaria supported the process of forming an independent Macedonia and was the first state to recognize this step. Bulgaria also supported North Macedonia militarily and advocated for its accession to NATO. While Bulgaria has been an EU member state since 2007, North Macedonia is part of the EU Stability and Association Process as well as CEFTA. The Stability Pact is, like the Visegrad Cooperation, an "antechamber" of EU membership.[25] Bulgaria and North Macedonia cooperate within the Regional Cooperation Council, which is the successor of the Stability Pact, and is the operational arm of the South East European Cooperation Process (SEECP), functioning as a focal point for guiding, monitoring and supporting cooperation in South East Europe.[26] In both cases, then, we are dealing with conflicts between neighboring states whose alliances, despite shared strategic objectives, are in both cases accompanied by "historical burdens." This not only creates an obstacle to effective cooperation and is a source of mutual distrust between neighboring states, but also creates room for political conflict.

3. Nature of Conflicts

If we try to identify to what extent Slovakia's experience in consolidating relations with its neighbors can be useful and applicable to North Macedonia, it is necessary to compare the nature of the disputes that accompanied the process of the formation of the two independent states, and which are a part of their foreign policy. North Macedonia has faced conflicts with all of its neighbors. The Greek-Macedonian dispute concerned symbolism, the heritage of ancient Macedonia, but also, and to a large extent, the borders and the North Macedonian minority in Greece. With Albania and Kosovo,

https://www.teraz.sk/slovensko/wlachovsky-v-budapesti-sr-ma-zaujem/725869-clanok.html
[25] Stefania Panebianco and Rona Rossi, "EU attempts to export norms of good governance to the Mediterranean and Western Balkan countries," *Jean Monnet Working Papers in Comparative and International Politics,* no. 53, (Catania: University of Catania, Department of Political Studies, October 2004), http://aei.pitt.edu/6109/1/jmwp53.pdf
[26] Regional Cooperation Council, *Statute of the Regional Cooperation Council,* Sarajevo, April 25, 2013. https://www.rcc.int/download/docs/RCC%20Statute_25April2013.pdf/3f50ec2e5f5f4bc88e15a2d9e-ba40f59.pdf

North Macedonia is divided by a dispute over the status of the Albanian minority, as is the case with Slovakia and Hungary. The Macedonian-Albanian dispute was concluded after the armed conflict in 2001 with the so-called Ohrid Agreements, which brought about a regulation/resolution of/to the minority issue. Unlike North Macedonia, Slovakia did not have to resolve the conflict by force. Although, unlike Bosnia and Herzegovina or Croatia, North Macedonia's independence in 1991-1992 was peaceful. Part of the Serbian political representation referred to what is now called North Macedonia, as in the period between the two world wars, as "southern Serbia." This, like the Bulgarians, questioned the very existence of the Macedonian nation and language. Reminiscences of this practice ended with the recognition by the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in the first months 1992 and the non-violent withdrawal of Yugoslav or Serbian troops from Macedonian territory.

Bulgaria's policy towards North Macedonia is framed by the statement of Bulgarian President Zhelyu Zhelyev that Bulgaria recognizes North Macedonia as a state but does not recognize the existence of the Macedonian nation and language.[27] At the same time, he underlined their "common ethnic roots and cultural-historical traditions."[28] Such partial recognition, while on the one hand, in 1992, represented a step towards stabilizing what is now North Macedonia's international position, at the same time was a demonstration of Bulgaria's self-perception as a "master" concerning its relation to North Macedonia, i.e., its superior position vis-à-vis its neighboring country.[29] The political consequences of this move were manifested in the form of mistrust between the two states, with Bulgaria accusing North Macedonia of anti-Bulgarian propaganda, while in North Macedonia, Bulgaria was accused of stealing Macedonian history.[30]

[27] Jenny Engström, "The Power of Perception: The Impact of the Macedonian Question on Inter-ethnic Relations in the Republic of Macedonia", *The Global Review of Ethnopolitics*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (March 2002), 3-17.

[28] Symeon A. Giannakos, "Bulgaria's Macedonian dilemma", *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans Online,* Vol. 3 No. 2 (2001), 153-170, 154.

[29] Danijela Čanji, "Transiting From the East to the 'Core' West of Europe: Slovakia's Ontological Liminality After the Outbreak of 2022 Russia's War on Ukraine", *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political,* online first (2023). DOI: 10.1177/03043754231185650

[30] Koujouharov, "Bulgarian 'Macedonian' Nationalism", 282.

3.1 Slovak-Czech relations

It is very difficult to find analogues, in terms of content, of a similar dispute in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989. Slovakia experienced a similar dispute in the period of the Habsburg monarchy. The dispute over the existence of an independent Slovak nation and language erupted in full after the codification of the written Slovak language in 1843. Until then, Slovak evangelical intellectuals used the Czech language in their written communication, while in the Catholic environment, a different variant of the Slovak language had been used since the end of the 18th century. The step of Slovak evangelical scholars and politicians led by Ľudovít Štúr prompted a negative reaction from the Czech side, which argued for the need to preserve the national unity of Czechs and Slovaks, but also for the cultural superiority of the Czechs over the Slovaks. Other, more pragmatically formulated, objections concerned the economic and political weakness of the Slovak national movement.[31] The consequence was a partial loss of interest in Czech politics in Slovakia when the Slovak question dropped out of the Czech national agenda for several decades. The revitalization of the idea of a Czech-Slovak unity can be spoken of only towards the end of the 19th century. Slovakia became part of T. G. Masaryk's program. The idea of the creation of a Czechoslovak state as a political pact, or an instrument of common defense against German and Hungarian expansionist nationalism, was established during the years of the First World War. The project of "Czechoslovakism" thus resembled the idea of "Yugoslavism" as a political cooperation of national political representations of the South Slavs in the same period.

After the establishment of the First Czechoslovak Republic (ČSR), this political pact was elevated to a state and ethnopolitical doctrine, as the idea of a unified Czechoslovak nation and language also became part of the first Constitution of the Czechoslovak Repub-

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[31] *Hlasowé o potřebě jednoty spisowného jazyka mezi Čechy, Morawany a Slowáky*, ed. by Ján Kollár *(*Praha: České museum 1846).

lic in 1920. At the same time, however, the first ČSR recognized the existence of two branches of this nation, or two variants of the Czechoslovak language - Czech and Slovak. However, the dominant position was retained by the Czech part of the common state, while the demands of a significant part of the Slovak representation spoke of the need for an "equal" status of Slovakia.[32] On the other hand, Ľudovít Štúr's very move in the 19th century was negatively labelled as the "Czechoslovak split" by Czechoslovak government politicians, often even by those of Slovak nationality.[33] Although the concept of ethnic Czechoslovakism had the support of a part of Slovak society, its de facto end was the creation of an autonomous Slovakia in 1938, which declared independence in March 1939 under pressure from Nazi Germany. Although the Slovak anti-fascist resistance advocated the restoration of Czechoslovak statehood, it assumed a revision of the concept of the ethnic unity of Czechs and Slovaks and the "equal" status of both constituent peoples in the restored state. This demand was confirmed by the Košice government manifesto of April 1945,[34] which recognized the Slovaks as a separate nation and the Slovak language as a language distinct from the Czech language. The year 1945 thus brought an official end to the project of ethnic Czechoslovakism. Its "substitute forms"[35] in the mode of restoring centralist practices and limiting the powers of Slovak institutions did not change this fact. The idea of the difference between Slovaks and Czechs was already widely accepted in both parts of the common state.

Although, especially in the Czech public debate, the idea of federalization in 1968 was received with great reservations, with the expediency of this step being questioned, and considering that after 1989, most Czech political parties opposed the weakening of the powers

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[32] Pavel Kosatík, *Slovenské století* (Praha: Torst 2021).

[33] Milan Hodža, "Československý rozkol", in *Polemika o československom rozkole,* ed. by Natália Rolková (Bratislava: Matica slovenská 2008), 15-277.

[34] *Košický vládní program,* (Prague: National Archive, March 1945), https://test.nacr.cz/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/labyrint-1945-Kosicky-vladni-program.pdf

[35] Dušan Kováč, *Slováci – Češi – dejiny* (Bratislava: Academic Electronic Press, 1997), 126.

of the central state authorities, and even indicated, e.g., in the case of Civic Democratic Party (ODS), a preference in favor of replacing the federation with a unitary state, the idea of ethnic Czechoslovakism had only marginal support in society. The argument against strengthening the powers of Slovak institutions referred, rather, to the practical aspects of the functioning of the Czechoslovak state. The Movement of Czechoslovak Understanding was the closest to the ideas of ethnic Czechoslovakism. However, it won less than 0.5 per cent of the vote in the 1990 parliamentary elections,[36] and political forces in then Macedonia that espoused the idea of ethnic unity between Bulgarians and Macedonians were similarly placed (VMRO-Fatherland).[37] However, while in the Czech Republic the idea of ethnic Czechoslovakism acquired a marginal status after the Second World War, at least at the level of the political elites, in Bulgaria, even after 1944, when Vardar Macedonia became part of Yugoslavia again as its federal republic, the political elites there did not abandon the idea of Bulgarian ethnicity for the Slavic population of Macedonia.

Therefore, and also because of the lack of awareness of Czech-Slovak ethnic unity, the break-up of Czecho-Slovakia in 1992 did not become a trauma that could negatively mark the relations between the two successor states, despite the fact that the division of the common state in the early 1990s did not have the support of the majority of the population neither in the Czech Republic nor in Slovakia. On the contrary, the "velvet divorce"[38] opened the preconditions for close cooperation between the two independent states, which declare themselves to be close partners. This is in contrast to Bulgarian-Macedonian relations, where the belief in the ethnic unity of the populations of the two states in Bulgaria and its rejection by the Macedonian elites remains a source of conflict and mutual distrust.

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[36] Elections to the Slovak National Council, 1990. Share of the votes for political parties, https://volby. statistics.sk/nrsr/snr1990/volby90_s/php90.htm

[37] Rychlík and Kouba, "Dějiny Makedonie", 255.

[38] Paweł Ukielski, *Aksamitny rozwód: Rola elit politycznych w procesie podziału Czechosłowacji* (Warszawa: Instytut Jagielloński, Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN 2007)-

3.2. Slovak-Hungarian relations

Historically, the key "constitutive other" in the case of Slovakia remains Hungary. The primary source of conflict has been the policy of transforming the Kingdom of Hungary into an ethnically homogeneous Hungarian nation-state, which gradually began to take shape from the first half of the 19th century and escalated after the so-called Austro-Hungarian Settlement (Compromise or Ausgleich) in 1867.[39] Only one political "state" nation, the Hungarian, speaking the Hungarian "state and national" language, was recognized by the Hungarian state, while other ethnic languages had only a secondary status as "nationalities" or "national languages" in the multi-ethnic Hungary. Semantically and symbolically, the category of nationality was placed on a lower level than the category of "nation." At the same time, however, the awareness of ethnic and linguistic differences between Slovaks and Hungarians was clearly rooted in society and at the level of political elites, which the Hungarian state sought to overcome through ideological, administrative, cultural and educational instruments.[40]

Later, after the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the dispute became territorial. Slovakia appeared in Hungarian inter-war projects as a unity with a promise of political autonomy; later, territorial revision projects concerned only the ethnically mixed Slovak-Hungarian territories along the southern side of the border.[41] According to post-World War II censuses, Hungarians in Slovakia accounted for approximately 10-12 percent of the population, with their share of the total number gradually decreasing.[42] Territorial disputes led to Hungary and Czechoslovakia perceiving each other as enemies and a potential source of threat in the interwar period. The

[39] The Austro-Hungarian Settlement meant the transformation of the Austrian Empire into a dualistic state formation, consisting of the Austrian Empire and the Kingdom of Hungary. The term settlement in this context refers to the mutual recognition of the two sides as equal partners.

[40] Alexander Maxwell, *Choosing Slovakia: Slavic Hungary, the Czechoslovak language and accidental nationalism*, (London & New York: Tauris, 2009).

[41] Ladislav Deák, *Hra o Slovensko* (Bratislava: Veda 1991).

[42] Martin Pekár, "Základné východiská menšinovej politiky na Slovensku od roku 1918 po súčasnosť", in *Národnostná politika na Slovensku po roku 1989,* ed. by Štefan Šutaj (Prešov: Universum 2005), 56.

issue of borders led to armed conflicts in 1918 (when Czechoslovak military units occupied the territory of Slovakia), in 1919 (the invasion of the Bolshevik Hungarian Republic of the Order of the South and East of Slovakia), and in 1939 to the so-called Small War between Slovakia and Hungary. At the same time, in 1938 and 1939, mutual relations were marked by the so-called Vienna Accord, i.e., the annexation of the southern and eastern regions of Slovakia, and after 1945 by the application of the principle of collective guilt against members of the Hungarian minority on the basis of the so-called "Beneš Decrees."[43] As a result, they were deprived of their civil rights until 1948, and there were unsuccessful efforts to deport them to Hungary, which eventually resulted in a partial population exchange between the two states (some members of the Hungarian minority left for Hungary, from where some members of the Slovak minority came to Slovakia). After 1948, however, the minority rights of ethnic Hungarians were gradually restored and legislatively enshrined after the adoption of the Constitutional Law on the Status of Nationalities in the Czechoslovak Republic in 1968.[44]

After 1989, the component of open territorial revisionism fell away. The asymmetrical dispute over the status of national minorities in both states became one of the key themes of mutual relations. Negative reactions in Slovak society were provoked by the demands of some representatives of the Hungarian minority for the revision or abolition of the aforementioned "Beneš Decrees," which are considered the key documents of the post-war organization of Czechoslovakia. Other conflicting issues centered around the demands for the establishment of Hungarian territorial autonomy that were raised primarily in the first half of the 1990s.[45] Later on, and

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[43] These were decrees of the President of the Czechoslovak Republic Eduard Beneš, issued during the Second World War in exile, which regulated the post-war organisation of Czechoslovakia. They were ratihibec by the Czechoslovak Provisional National Assembly in 1945 and became part of Czechoslovak legislation. They included, among other things, legislative acts which led to the collective punishment of members of the German and Hungarian minorities in Czechoslovakia. At the present time, these documents do not create any legal relations.

[44] *Ústavný zákon o postavení národností v Československej socialistickej republike*, no. 144/1968 Coll.

[45] Zoltán Pástor, *Slováci a Maďari,* (Martin: Matica slovenská 2011), 145

despite the improvement of the atmosphere in bilateral relations, in the 2020s there were also demands from the radical part of the Hungarian minority for the definition of the Hungarian community as a "distinct political nation" within Slovakia, resulting in the demand for territorial autonomy ("the creation of a Hungarian neighborhood to be administered by Hungarians through their elected representatives"), which also included the definition of Hungarian as an official language, the legalization of dual citizenship, the creation of an independent Hungarian Catholic archdiocese, etc.[46] One of the long-standing controversial topics is the preamble of the Constitution of the Slovak Republic, which refers to the Slovak nation as the "state-forming subject," while in the case of minorities, it only refers to their members as individuals. Since 1993, the radical wing of the Hungarian representation in Slovakia has been demanding that the preamble be amended to give the Hungarian community the status of a "co-ruling nation."[47] However, this topic has not been the subject of international negotiations, perhaps because after 2011, the Fundamental Law of Hungary also contains a similar preamble referring to the ethnonational character of the state.[48]

The question of the interpretation of a number of conflictual events from the past remains controversial, including, in addition to the Trianon Interstate Treaty, the issues of the so-called Vienna Arbitrations, post-war retributive legislation (the so-called Beneš Decrees), and so on. Moreover, all the above-mentioned conflicting issues are addressed not only at the level of Slovak-Hungarian interstate relations, but also in the relations of each of the above-mentioned actors with the representatives of the Hungarian community in Slovakia.

Some analogies between Slovakia and North Macedonia can be identified in the issue of citizenship policy. Both Bulgaria and Hun-

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[46] *Memorandum maďarskej komunity,* (Bratislava: Strana maďarskej komunity – Hungarian Community Party, June 2, 2020), https://www.mkp.sk/sk/2020/06/02/memorandum-madarskej-komunity

[47] Pástor, "Slováci a Maďari", 145.

[48] *The Fundamental Law of Hungary (as in force on 23 December 2020),* (Budapest: Ministry of Justice, 2021), https://www.parlament.hu/documents/125505/138409/Fundamental+law/73811993-c377-428d-9808-ee03d6fb8178

gary apply an ethnic principle in the granting of citizenship that is contrary to the interests of the neighboring states concerned, while refusing to negotiate their policies with them. Like Slovakia, North Macedonia also perceives its neighbors' policy negatively.[49] Hungary's policy of "uniting the nation across national borders" has a long tradition, including the dispute over the so-called "Law on Hungarians Living Abroad" ("Hungarian Status Law") of 2001, which the Hungarian side applies extraterritorially, i.e., in the form of direct financial transfers to ethnic Hungarians - citizens of neighboring states living abroad. A similar form of building direct institutional links between the Hungarian State and members of Hungarian communities abroad was the establishment of the Carpathian Basin Deputies' Forum, which brought together ethnic Hungarian deputies from Hungary and neighboring countries, with the status of an advisory body to the Hungarian National Assembly.

The dispute over national minorities in both states is also asymmetrical. In Slovakia, the Hungarian minority represents a significant segment of the population, while the Slovak minority in Hungary is numerically marginal. Although it is recognized by the Hungarian state, it is at an advanced stage of assimilation. On the other hand, although Bulgaria raises the issue of the Bulgarian minority in North Macedonia, it itself refuses any discussion of the existence of a Macedonian minority in its country, and the organizations that demand recognition by the state have been proclaimed illegal by Bulgarian authorities.[50]

3.3 Slovak-Polish relations

The Slovak-Polish dispute was primarily territorial in nature, with Poland arguing for the existence of an allegedly large Polish minority in the north of Slovakia, particularly among the Gorals - a linguistically and culturally transient population on the Slovak-Polish

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[49] "Macedonia Suffers from 'Bulgarian Citizenship Syndrome'", *Novinite* (December 23, 2011), https://www.novinite.com/view_news.php?id=135109

[50] Koujouharov, "Bulgarian 'Macedonian' Nationalism", Giannakos, "Bulgaria's Macedonian dilemma", 167.

border. On the other hand, however, the tendency of the population to self-identity as Slovak prevailed in these regions. In the interwar period, alongside the projects of the annexation of the northern part of Slovakia, there were also considerations of the annexation of the whole of Slovakia to Poland as an autonomous part of the latter. However, this was part of the Polish-Hungarian geopolitical projects to achieve a common border. The Slovak-Polish conflict project resulted in the annexation of a section of the territories of northern Slovakia in 1938. After the invasion of Poland by Nazi Germany, in which Slovakia also participated, Slovakia also regained the territories that had belonged to Poland in 1920. After the Second World War, the 1920-1938 borders were restored, and, in 2009, representatives of both states apologized for their mutual wrongs[51].

4. Resolving conflict issues at the bilateral and multilateral levels

In the case of both Slovakia and North Macedonia, it is evident that despite the Europeanisation of their internal and foreign policies, the ethnic factor plays a significant role in the internal and foreign policies of the CEE states. The common element in both cases is the internationalization of bilateral issues.[52] Neither Bulgaria nor Hungary is pushing the issue of border revision, but in both cases we can speak of a policy of "soft revisionism" or "irredentism."[53]

In the case of Slovakia, the Slovak-Hungarian dispute took on an international dimension, for example in 1993, when Hungary hinted at the possibility of blocking its accession to the Council of Europe. Hungary justified its position based on the status of the Hungarian minority. The primary demands, which were shared by the Hunga-

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[51] Dušan Čaplovič, „Słowacja przeprasza Polskę za 1939", (*Gazeta Wyborcza,* September 27, 2009), https://wyborcza.pl/7,75399,7083113,slowacja-przeprasza-polske-za-1939.html?fbclid=IwAR3e77LZ-VZZquN5h3fPLwJyuLQJyGdwp2H-Vb870w4-zdRVi9_wYzhOaufA; „Porównanie Katynia z epidemią tyfusu to nie droga do pojednania", (*TVN24,* September 1, 2009), http://www.tvn24.pl/wiadomosci-z-kraju,3/porownanie-katynia-z-epidemia-tyfusu-to-nie-droga-do-pojednania,107529.html
[52] Vangelov, "An Analysis of Bulgaria's Rejection", 208.
[53] See Victor Roudometoff, "*Collective Memory, National Identity, and Ethnic Conflict: Greece, Bulgaria, and the Macedonian Question,*" Westport: Praeger Publishers 2002; Myra Waterbury, *Between State and Nation: Diaspora Politics and Kin-State Nationalism in Hungary* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2010).

rian minority representation, were to allow the writing of personal names and place names in minority languages, the drafting of a new constitutional law on minority self-government. Similarly, the more radical Hungarian politicians also raised the issue of the revision of the so-called Beneš Decrees in property discrimination against the Hungarian population after 1945. Slovakia eventually became a member of the Council of Europe thanks to a compromise whereby it committed itself to allowing the writing of personal names and place names in minority languages and, in the future, to adopting the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. On the other hand, Slovakia's admission to the CoE was also a result of successful negotiations that made it virtually impossible for Hungary to block admission to the organization.[54]

Despite the tense relations between Slovakia and Hungary and the deteriorating relations between Slovakia and the EU due to the growing authoritarian tendencies during the third government of Vladimír Mečiar (1994-1998), the signing of the bilateral *Slovak-Hungarian Treaty on Good Neighborly Relations and Friendly Cooperation*[55] on March 19, 1995 in Paris was a significant step. Prior to the signing of this Treaty, the Slovak Government adopted the Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, which was ratified by the Slovak Parliament in September 1995. In view of the EU accession process, both governments were interested in adopting the treaty, with the then left-wing Hungarian government of Gyula Horn considering EU enlargement as a key condition for improving the status of Hungarian minorities abroad.[56] The treaty contained a guarantee of the inviolability of national borders, which the Slovak side hailed as a great success of its diplomacy, while at the same time, a large part of the treaty was devoted to the rights of national minorities, thus the document touched upon the solution of both Slovak and Hungarian traumatic experiences.[57] At the same

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[54] Marián Leško, *Slovenské tango z roku jeden* (Bratislava: Perex, 1993), 16-17.
[55] Act no. 115/1997 Coll.
[56] Pástor, "Slováci a Maďari", 161.
[57] "Pred 25 rokmi podpísali Maďarsko a Slovensko zmluvu o spolupráci", *Konzervatívny denník Postoj*

time, after the adoption of the treaty, the Government of the Slovak Republic issued an interpretative addendum, according to which the treaty did not contain any obligations regarding the recognition of collective rights for minorities. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Hungary rejected this interpretative supplement.[58] The presence of provisions containing obligations in the case of the protection of national minorities provoked opposition from both the SNS, the minor coalition partner, and the pro-European opposition, which feared the possibility of the creation of Hungarian territorial autonomy in the south of Slovakia. Therefore, the treaty was not ratified by the National Council of the Slovak Republic until a year later, although the Hungarian Parliament had already ratified it in June 1995.[59] At the same time, in its *Declaration no 99/1996 Coll.*, the National Council of the Slovak Republic stressed the individual nature of minority rights, while, on the other hand, describing the treaty as "an important act of historical reconciliation between our countries and peoples."[60] Moreover, the signing of the treaty took place on the eve of the approval of The Stability Pact in Europe, which included bilateral treaties between the states of Central and Eastern Europe to close disputed border and minority issues. Although the focus of the treaty is *Article 15*, regulating the status of national minorities in both states, the treaty also touches on other aspects of cooperation. However, *Article 5* also allows for the establishment "in each area of common interest, an appropriate framework for cooperation," resulting in the creation of 12 interstate commissions governing cooperation on issues relating not only to minorities but also to cross-border cooperation, health, etc.

Despite the adoption of the treaty, the Hungarian side continued its efforts to Europeanize the issues in question, for example,

(March 19, 2020), https://www.postoj.sk/52783/pred-25-rokmi-podpisali-madarsko-a-slovensko-zmluvu-o-spolupraci

[58] "Michal Kováč podpísal zmluvu s Maďarskom", *Sme* (May 7, 1996), https://www.sme.sk/c/2109635/michal-kovac-podpisal-zmluvu-s-madarskom.html

[59] "Ako sa kalila slovensko-maďarská zmluva", *Sme* (December 13, 1995), https://www.sme.sk/c/2137216/ako-sa-kalila-slovensko-madarska-zmluva.html

[60] *Declaration no. 99*, 1996 Coll., March 19, 1995.

through complaints presented not only to the EU but also to other pan-European institutions such as the Council of Europe or the OSCE. At the same time, however, it is possible to speak of an improvement in the position of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia after the parliamentary elections in 1998, when its political representation - the Hungarian Coalition Party - became part of the ruling coalition. Several demands of Hungarian political representation in Slovakia were accepted, such as the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages, and steps were taken to implement it in practice; the János Seley University was established in Komárno with teaching in the Hungarian language, etc.

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's efforts in 2002 to block the accession process of the Czech Republic and, in effect, also of Slovakia with regard to the so-called Beneš Decrees, eventually resulted in the partial paralysis of Visegrad cooperation until Orbán's government was replaced by Péter Medgyesy, a nominee of the Hungarian Socialist Party. As Hungary was on an equal footing with Slovakia in relation to the EU, i.e., in the position of a candidate state, it was not in a position to block Slovakia's accession process. Even the then-EU member states were not interested in raising the issue of the so-called Beneš Decrees as part of the post-war European order, especially Germany, despite the fact that part of its, and the Austrian, political representation advocated this step. However, the issue of relations between Slovakia and Hungary remained on the agenda of political parties in both states as an important instrument of political mobilization. The divergent positions of the two states were also reflected, for example, in the issue of recognition of the unilateral declaration of independence of the Serbian province of Kosovo in 2008. While Hungary has recognized Kosovo, Slovakia has rejected this step. This conflict was also reflected on the national level, when an "ethnic cleavage" was created when a resolution was adopted by the Slovak National Council. The majority of the Slovak political representation rejected the recognition of Kosovo, while the MPs representing the

Hungarian Coalition Party voted against such a position. At the same time, radical representatives of the Hungarian minority, e.g., Miklós Duray, described the declaration of Kosovo's independence as a step towards self-determination for Hungarians in Slovakia,[61] which only deepened the mistrust in Slovak-Hungarian relations.

Similarly, in the case of Macedonian-Bulgarian relations, institutional measures have been taken to improve relations between the two states. One of the first steps was the adoption of the so-called Joint Declaration of 1999, by which Bulgaria de facto recognized the existence of the Macedonian language, while North Macedonia renounced its support for the Macedonian minority in Bulgaria.[62] The name of the language had been an obstacle to the signing of several bilateral agreements for seven years until then. However, even the Joint Declaration did not end the "ideological, historical, linguistic and cultural battle aimed at the reaffirmation of one's history and identity at the expense of the other."[63] This is also why the bilateral treaty between the two states was only signed in 2017. Although, like the Slovak-Hungarian treaty, it contains mechanisms for resolving mutual disputes, it contains provisions that can be interpreted as a commitment to arrive at common interpretations of historical events that are commemorated in different ways in each country. The Slovak-Hungarian Treaty does not contain similar commitments, although they were the subject of negotiations at the level of prime ministers. For example, during the 2009 meeting of the Prime Ministers of Slovakia and Hungary, Robert Fico and Gordon Bajnai, an 11-point cooperation plan was adopted, which, in addition to infrastructure projects, was to include the preparation of a joint Slovak-Hungarian history textbook. Slovak-Hungarian dialogue also took place at the level of non-state actors, not only within the framework of cooperation financed by the International Visegrad Fund, but also through dialogue and a joint statement by the highest representatives of the Catholic Church in both countries.[64]

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[61] Marián Leško, "Za koho hovoril Duray", *Sme* (June 31, 2007), 24.
[62] Giannakos, "Bulgaria's Macedonian dilemma", 17.
[63] Koujouharov, "Bulgarian 'Macedonian' Nationalism", 282.
[64] https://www1.pluska.sk/spravy/z-domova/fico-stretnutie-madarskym-premierom-bolo-uspesne-fo-to-video

Tensions in Slovak-Hungarian relations escalated again after the victory of the Fidesz party in the 2010 parliamentary elections, when the Hungarian Parliament not only approved an ethnically defined model of granting Hungarian citizenship, but also declared June 4th (the anniversary of the Trianon Peace Treaty) a public holiday called the Day of National Unity. At the same time, Hungarian officials began to refer to the treaty as the "Trianon Peace Dictate," as it refers to the respective bills adopted in 2010.[65] Unlike in the past, when Hungarian government officials sought to solve problems in bilateral relations through EU institutions, after 2010 we can speak of the de-Europeanization of Hungarian "national policy" by transferring it to the bilateral level or by implementing unilateral actions. This stems from the negative attitude of EU member states and institutions towards the policy of "soft revisionism," but also from the general deterioration of relations between Hungary and most EU member states as a result of the criticism of internal political developments in Hungary.

This course continues despite the fact that the verbal confrontation between Slovakia and Hungary has gradually subsided after 2011, which is the result of the efforts of Orbán's efforts to gain the position of a regional leader. However, the Hungarian government continues to take steps that cause tensions in mutual relations, such as the purchase of land or historical monuments by the Hungarian state in southern Slovakia. The policy of "soft revisionism" thus continues, albeit in a less spectacular form than in the past, while, conversely, its mobilizing power has declined.

This is particularly true in the case of Slovakia, where there has been a deradicalization of Slovak ethno-nationalist groups playing with the so-called Hungarian card in their political rhetoric and, after 2012, the Hungarian Coalition Party, as the more radical component of the political representation of Slovak Hungarians, did not even get into parliament.

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[65] Sadecki, Andrzej, "The Long Shadow of the Treaty of Trianon: Hungary's Struggles with the Past", *OSW Point of View,* no. 80 (Warsaw: Centre for Eastern Studies 2020), 19-20.

4. Conclusions

While the Slovak-Hungarian relationship after 1918 was transformed from a dispute over the recognition of the uniqueness of Slovaks as a nation, and thus a political actor, to a dispute over the status of national minorities or state borders, the Bulgarian-Macedonian dispute concerns the recognition of the identification of the Macedonian population as a community distinct from the Bulgarians. In this respect, the disputes are of a different nature. What they have in common is the absence of respect on the part of Bulgaria, or Hungary respectively, for the sovereignty of the neighbouring states. As the issue of the status of minorities abroad is one of the highly sensitive topics of internal politics in both states, and similarly the so-called "Hungarian card", i.e. playing with the fear of Hungarian territorial revisionism in Slovakia and, in the similar way, "Bulgarian card" in North Macedonia, the escalation of the above conflicts depends on the dynamics of internal political developments in the respective countries. For these reasons, there is little chance that a change in the positions of the two states could occur in the short term.

The Bulgarian-Macedonian dispute resembles the Slovak-Czech dispute in terms of its content. It resulted in the so-called velvet divorce in 1992, which, however, was not in the nature of historical reconciliation, but rather could be described as a Czech-Slovak settlement, similar to the Austrian-Hungarian settlement of 1867, i.e,. a mutual recognition of both actors as equal partners. In the case of both the Slovak-Czech and the Bulgarian-Macedonian relationship, there can be no talk of "reconciliation," as the two sides, despite their different interests, did not consider each other enemies and there were no warring conflicts between them. The Slovak-Hungarian relationship has a different character, which also contains elements of "reconciliation," but the mutual discourse, at least in the past, also contained enmificatory elements, which are sometimes instrumentally used by the political representations of both states and the Hungarian community in Slovakia, even today. It is thus characteristic of

the Slovak-Hungarian relationship that the process of reconciliation between the two states has not been completed, if by reconciliation we mean the "closure" of several conflict issues in the form of a spectacular and binding gesture by the highest representatives of both states, enjoying moral authority on both sides of the border. On the other hand, the conflicting topics in mutual relations do not represent a topic of political mobilization in the Slovak domestic political discourse after 2010, neither among the Slovak majority nor among the Hungarian minority.

The Europeanization of bilateral conflicts was beneficial in the case of resolving disputed issues between Slovakia and Hungary in a situation where both states were in the same position (i.e. candidate states) in relation to the EU. Thus, Hungary in the 1990s, unlike Bulgaria, had only limited opportunities to Europeanize disputes with its neighbors and to exert pressure on its neighbors through European institutions, on the other hand, it had such a chance in the case of Slovakia's accession to the Council of Europe. In the case of Bulgarian-Macedonian relations, the different positions of the two countries (Bulgaria as an EU member since 2007 and North Macedonia as a candidate for membership) allows Bulgaria to act from a position of more powerful actor. Bulgaria has demonstrated its ability not only to Europeanize the resolution of the bilateral dispute with North Macedonia, which partly affects fundamental attributes of its state sovereignty, but also to "Bulgarianize," and thus nationalize, the foreign policy of the EU, which has thus had to address a topic that is primarily the subject of Bulgarian domestic political discourse. However, in the end, stirring up such conflicts undermines the positive effects of the EU enlargement process in the region, which is why Bulgaria's course of action ultimately represents a de-Europeanization factor. In the context of EU integration, and especially in the pre-accession process, it was crucial for Slovakia to communicate with relevant partners at several levels - with EU institutions, Member States, and especially with neighboring countries.

In the context of Slovak-Hungarian relations, it can be considered a success for Slovakia to have been able to integrate Hungarian minority political representation into decision-making processes in the Slovak Republic. Hungarian political parties were part of the government coalition in 1992-1990 (the Hungarian Civic Party representing the liberal-oriented minority of the Hungarian community in Slovakia), later in 1998-2006 (Hungarian Coalition Party) and finally in 2010-2012 and 2016-2020 (Most-Híd - a mixed Slovak-Hungarian party). In bilateral state-to-state relations, the two states have managed to identify common interests both at the EU level and in the Central European region. This has contributed to the fact that issues related to the "legacy of Trianon" or the consequences of the Second World War have remained on the agenda of mutual relations, even if they are not the only ones. Slovak-Hungarian relations can be used as an example to show that an incomplete process of historical reconciliation need not be an obstacle to the de-escalation of mutual confrontation and successful regional cooperation. At the same time, neither the same geopolitical orientation, nor the common membership in the EU and NATO mean that unresolved issues from the past lose their importance in bilateral relations. Relationship building at the bilateral level remains an important part, indeed a precondition, of EU accession and, in the post-accession period, of successful participation in its structures.

Katerina Kolozova

For a Geopolitical Instead of Technocratic Approach to the EU Enlargement Process: Addressing the Aftermath of the Lifted Bulgarian Veto

The aftermath of the lifting of the Bulgarian veto to North Macedonia's negotiations that took place in the summer of 2022,[1] under the French Presidency of the European Union, has caused a rather unexpected change of heart in the public. Ever since, the habitual pro-EU majority among the local expert public and journalists alike, has been opposing the EU's Common Position on Opening Negotiations, including the accompanying negotiating framework – calling upon the Prime Minister to refuse it,[2] followed by appeals to pause the negotiations which, by this Spring of 2023, have not ceased. The main reason for this is the perception that the document itself, i.e., the EU's Common Position including the Framework, and the negotiating process itself are premised on historical revisionism that will erase the Macedonian national identity. "'No'" to a Europe like this," "'No' to an undemocratic Europe" have been slogans to be heard, perhaps too often by the center-left leaning mainstream, of the civil society[3] and academia as well as by the nationalist parties VMRO-DPMNE and Levica.[4] The civil society mainstream specialized in

[1] Spanning from June, when the EU's Common Position and Negotiating Framework leaked into the Macedonian public to July 16th, when the Government accepted the so-called "French Proposal," and in its immediate aftermath.

[2] Malinka Ristevska Jordanova: It should Not Remain No, *Sloboden Pecat* (June 2022), available at https://www.slobodenpecat.mk/en/malinka-ristevska-jordanova-ne-treba-da-ostane-ne/, accesed on 13 May 2023, (Dr. Malinka Ristevska Jordanova has been engaged in the EU integration process since the end of the nineties, holding high positions as part of the public administration in the Macedonian parliament and government. As a State Counselor at the Secretariat for European Affairs, she chaired the MK-EU SAA Subcommittee on Justice and Home Affairs from 2002-2008 and the SAA Committee from 2008-2010 and was the coordinator of the national program for the adoption of EU law. She made a special contribution to her country's candidacy for joining the EU, the fulfillment of the recommendations for the beginning of the accession negotiations and the realization of the benchmarks established in the roadmap for the liberalization of the visa regime. Dr. Ristevska – Jordanova is the founder and former director (February 2011 – February 2017) of the Macedonian think-tank Institute for European Policy – Skopje, where she is now a non-executive member of the board. In her research, Dr. Jordanova focuses on the application of EU conditionality policy in the region of Southeast Europe, as well as on the transposition of EU law.); Ida Manton, Improve the Proposal to Save Europe from Itself [Подобрете го договорот за да ја спасите Европа од самата себе] Youth Educational Forum/Radio MOF (July, 2023), available at https://www.radiomof.mk/stav-podobrete-go-dogovorot-za-da-ja-spasite-evropa-od-samata-sebe/, accessed on 13 May 2023.

[3] The French Proposal: Who is for, Against and Something in Between [Француски предлог: Кој сè е за, против или нешто помеѓу], Civil Media (Skopje: 22 June, 2022), available at https://civilmedia.mk/trenchevska-zaedno-so-megunarodnite-partneri-i-graganskite-organizatsii-gradime-ednakvo-opshtestvo-za-site/, accessed on 13 May 2023.

[4] Sinisa Jakov Marusic, Opposition to 'French Proposal' Mounts in North Macedonia, *Balkan Insight* (Skopje: BIRN, July 4, 2022), accessed on 12 May 2023; Protests in front of the Government Building

EU integration such as the European Policy Center (EPI) and Institute for Democracy Societas Civilis- Skopje (IDSCS), and according to IDSCS Director Marko Trosanovski:

> If we accept, i.e. by silence, we approve of the introduction of bilateral issues and bulgarianization of the process itself, I do not believe that many member states or at all whether any will oppose this, as was previously the case with the Czech Republic and Slovakia, especially in the context of the urgency of the momentum and crisis in Ukraine, with the EU needing immediate success in the Western Balkans and its perspective from the perspective of European enlargement. In the part of the proposal itself, much of it is realistically harmful."[5]

Based on the desk-analysis (the list of analyzed sources is at the end of the document) conducted for the purposes of this study, we can infer the following premises of the discussion to follow:

- The EU is seen as "undemocratic" due to its catering to the Bulgarian nationalist bullying of North Macedonia (all of the arguments raised in favor of the thesis of EU's democratic deficiency are related to this issue purely, and sometimes also to the agreement with Greece)[6]
- Even the NGO's and scholars specialized in EU integration

Against the French Proposal [trans. of the original title in Macedonia], Kanal 5 (2 July, 2022) available at https://kanal5.com.mk/protest-pred-vladata-protiv-francuskiot-predlog/a536946, accessed on 13 May 2023; Call from EPI and IDSC: Parliament to convene today for a session on the "French proposal," the Government must not remain, Sloboden Pecat (June, 2022), available at https://www.slobodenpecat.mk/en/povik-od-epi-i-idsc-sobranieto-ushte-deneska-da-svika-sednica-za-francuskiot-predlot-vladata-ne-smee-da-ostane-nema/, accessed on 13 May 2023; Top Tema with Marko Trosanovski, Aleksandar Krzalovski and Emil Kirijaz [„Топ тема" со Марко Трошановски, Александар Кржаловски и Емил Кирјаз] Telma TV (Skopje, January 2023), available at https://tinyurl.com/5fupdx-nn, accessed on 10 May 2023;

[5] The French Proposal: Who is for, Against and Something in Between [Француски предлог: Кој сè е за, против или нешто помеѓу], Civil Media (Skopje: 22 June, 2022), available at https://civilmedia.mk/trenchevska-zaedno-so-megunarodnite-partneri-i-graganskite-organizatsii-gradime-ednakvo-opsht-estvo-za-site/, accessed on 13 May 2023.

[6] "Restoring EU's Credibility and the European Consensus in the Civil Society in N. Macedonia" [Analysis of Survey and Focus Group Results], Institute of Social Sciences and Humanities (Skopje, February 2023), available at https://www.isshs.edu.mk/restoring-eus-credibility-and-the-european-consensus-in-the-civil-society-in-n-macedonia-preliminary-research-report/, accessed on 13 May 2023.

deny, to this day, that the negotiations have truly started due to the conditionality that might lead to their halt – the recognition of the Bulgarian minority in North Macedonia.

- The elite civil society in question, the big, visible and rich, declaredly center-left and moderately center-right leaning CSOs – including the academia and the media – are against the recognition of the Bulgarian minority.[7] Let us note the fact that the same part of the society that insists on the national, ethno-linguistic distinctness between the Macedonian and the Bulgarian states and nations, as well as their separate cultural-historical backgrounds, rejects the recognition of a separate, minority group called Bulgarian. It is an odd choice considering such a recognition would vouch for the distinctness of the Macedonian majority.

Certainly, no social group is monolithic, no part of the spectrum of political debate is univocal, and we do not wish to erase the nuances among the different actors and voices. However, the situation in the country is deeply polarized across a number of political-social arrays, and, in this context, the question of EU enlargement holds the dominant status. Both the left and the right of the public debate seem to be united regarding the question of enlargements, or the reservations toward it more specifically, and in their opposition to the recognition of the Bulgarian minority. Upon the latter, the continuation of the freezing of the EU accession relies. Thus, even that question falls under the category of (opposition to) the continuation of the EU enlargement.

The discourse is in fact ambiguous: no one dares, in particular those funded by the Euro-Atlantic sources, to say explicitly that they oppose the EU integration, whereas a worrying majority of them are in favor of a) pausing the negotiations, b) looking for alternatives to the EU,[8] and against a) the implementation of the Bulgarian-Mace-

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[7] Katerina Kolozova, "North Macedonia's EU path is under threat from an unlikely actor", Al Jazeera English (18 September 2022), accessed on 1 May 2023.
[8] Katerina Kolozova and Tihomir Topuzovski, "Restoring EU's Credibility and the European Consensus

donian treaty as part of the negotiating process, b) constitutional recognition of a Bulgarian minority. While admitting the growing euro-skepticism in the country due to the fact that N. Macedonia has been a candidate (non-negotiating) country for nearly two decades, we must admit that the breaking point that marks a dramatic drop in the nation's support of EU accession is directly linked to the Bulgarian-Macedonian (un)neighborly relations.

If we proceed with the discussion on the fate of the country's further EU accession in purely technical terms, we might say that there is no veto impending – at least in the foreseeable future – from North Macedonia's neighbors. There is, however, the possibility of a paradoxical act of what one might call "self-vetoing": if the National Assembly of North Macedonia fails to vote in the Bulgarian minority in the country's Constitution by November 2023, the negotiations will be frozen, the accession process, once again, put back in a state of an indefinite halt.

Thus, one more time, we are up against the stubbornly reemerging wall of competing national romanticisms in the Balkans in the way of the process of EU enlargement. In this policy essay, we are looking at the matter from the two perspectives: not only that of accession, and thus, the Western Balkan and Macedonian viewpoint and interests, but also from the perspective of EU enlargement, which, I argue here, is becoming increasingly geopolitical instead of technocratic. The latter is a point which I would like to defend by invoking the following arguments in its favor: France's center-aligned policy discourse, in particular the expert part of the public, promulgating values and goals incapsulated in slogans such as "Pour une Europe geopolitique," but also pushing for ideas such as the European political community. The latter may be considered by some as a second tier version of the Union that actually resists further enlargement until the full membership of all EU candidates. However, I would argue the opposition – the Union gains political, and even geopolitical,

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in the Civil Society in N. Macedonia" (Skopje: Institute of Social Sciences and Humanities, 2023), 23.

groundedness by adding a political union around it, or underpinning it, or complementing it. The idea is neither fully fleshed out, nor do we know whether it will become a reality – so, it will be treated here as a marker, a symptomatic shift in European mainstream discourse on the more generic question of "Europe as some form of - even if only loose – unity."

2. Geo/Political Europe, and its Enlargement?

2.1. The thesis just presented, namely that the EU has been developing a geopolitical vision of its future, is one that needs to be corroborated and disambiguated from the argument that it is France under Macron's leadership which propagates it. In other words, we have to examine the hypothesis if the other "big players" in Europe assume a similar logic and adopt a more geopolitical and globally competitive reasoning that relies on the continent's cohesiveness. As a simple overview (see below) of the European Commission's strategic documents and investment long-term plans (including the grant-schemes) would show, the EU seems to be seeing Europe (not the EU exclusively) as a single global player that seeks to improve its competitiveness in innovation-based economy. For example, the New European Research Area (New ERA) 2030 Strategy underscores the inextricability between innovation, economic growth and global geopolitical relevance: chapter 5 of the New Era Communication released 30 September 2020 is titled "The Geopolitical Dimension of ERA."[9]

The V4 countries also seem to be supporting the idea of an enlarged, cohesive Europe, and their arguments seem to be phrased in geopolitical terms primarily.[10] Consider the following statement by Commissioner Jutta Urpilainen about the mission of the new Directorate General International Partnerships ('DG INTPA'):

[9] Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions a New Era for Research and Innovation (Brussels, 30.9.2020 COM (2020), 628.
[10] Olaf Scholz: "Wir brauchen eine geopolitische, erweiterte, reformierte und zukunftsoffene EU," Aktuellles Europaeisches Parlament, available at https://tinyurl.com/4yzvehxz, accessed on 11 May 2023.

The journey of the new 'Geopolitical Commission' started in December 2019. We want Europe to be stronger in the world. President von der Leyen entrusted me with the role of Commissioner for International Partnerships in my mission letter, and asked me to ensure that the European model of development evolves in line with new global realities [...] This means working hand in hand with partners, setting agendas, taking initiatives and ensuring effective implementation of our actions for the ultimate benefit of people across the world. It also means promoting and protecting human rights, democracy and the rule of law – the very foundations of our international cooperation.[11]

The very dubbing of the Commission as "the Geopolitical Commission" shows a commitment to a new vision of the foundations and not only goals of the Union, its immediate neighborhood and thus affects the candidates, also called "accession countries." This self-definition is so surprising to the "EU specialists," so accustomed to the post-political vision of globalization, that the idea is met with skepticism and patronizing assumption that the "Commission" is unable – or should not venture – into restituting itself as either political or geopolitical.[12]

We can take the turn of 2020 as the point of the EU redefining not only the vision of the Union itself, but that of the future of the continent and its role in the global political arena, in terms of geopolitics, or often times, put simply, in terms of politics rather than technocracy. Enlargement is seen increasingly in primarily geopolitical and political terms, mobilizing digitalization and green agenda transformation processes as the background against which Western Balkans ought to reconceive its approach to the accession process. This view

[11] "Geopolitical Commission builds on International Partnerships," available at https://international-al-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/news-and-events/stories/geopolitical-commission-builds-international-al-partnerships_en, accessed on 11 May 2023

[12] Nicole Koenig, "The 'Geopolitical' European Commission and its Pitfalls", IWM - Vienna Blog, available at https://www.iwm.at/blog/the-geopolitical-european-commission-and-its-pitfalls, accessed on 11 MAY 2023

is reflected in the EU's Strategic Investment Plan for the Western Balkans released in October 2020. [13]

However, if we want to be technical and mark the key dates and documents, it is safer to state that since 2019, the European Union has been redefining itself as a geopolitical Union, and that would not be an overstatement – the documents, press releases and statements are explicit. The European Commission's President, Ursula von der Leyen, has stated that Europe needs to become more assertive and take a more active role on the world stage. In her political guidelines for her Commission, she outlined the need for a "geopolitical Commission."[14] As part of this redefinition, the EU has produced a number of key strategic documents. These include the following (a summary overview):

1. The Strategic Agenda for 2019-2024: This document outlines the EU's main priorities for the next five years. It includes a strong focus on geopolitical issues, such as foreign policy, defense, and trade.

2. The European Green Deal: This is the EU's plan to make Europe climate-neutral by 2050. It is a major part of the EU's geopolitical agenda, as it aims to position Europe as a global leader in the fight against climate change.

3. The EU's Trade Policy Review: This document, published in 2020, sets out the EU's trade policy strategy for the coming years. It includes a focus on strengthening the EU's strategic autonomy, enhancing its competitiveness, and promoting a free and fair global trading system.

4. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee

[13] "Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: An Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans"
Brussels, 6 October 2020)
[14] Beatriz Rios, "Ursula von der Leyen vows a green, digital, geopolitical EU in Davos," *Euroactiv* (22 Jan. 2020), available at https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/von-der-leyen-vows-a-green-digital-geopolitical-eu-in-davos/, accessed on 10 May 2023.

and the Committee of the Regions a New Era for Research and Innovation (Brussels, 30.9.2020 COM(2020), 628.

5. European Commission, Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, Whittle, M., Rampton, J. (2020). Towards a 2030 vision on the future of universities in Europe – Publications Office. https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2777/510530

6. European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, The EU in 2022 – General report on the activities of the European Union, Publications Office of the European Union, 2023, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2775/0687.

7. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: An Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans (Brussels, 6 October 2020).

8. A Strengthened Enlargement Policy is the EU's Strongest Geopolitical Tool. European Parliament (Press Releases. Plenary Session) 23 November 2022.

9. European Council: Meeting of the European Political Community, 6 October 2022, available at https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2022/10/06/

10. European Council: Speech by President Charles Michel at the plenary session of the European Economic and Social Committee (18 May 2022), available at https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/05/18/discours-du-president-charles-michel-lors-de-la-session-pleniere-du-comite-economique-et-social-europeen/

11. European Council/Council of the European Union: Meeting of the European Political Community, 6 October 2022, available at https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2022/10/06/, accessed on 14 May 2023.

It is evident from the sources cited, documents list presented, and positions of the EU and the EC discussed, it would be reductionist to see the "sudden" (as some have called it) geopolitical focus on the enlargement of the EU as an issue directly linked, if not immediately caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Certainly, the invasion has accelerated the enlargement process and deepened the geopolitical argument in favor of Europe's consolidation as territory, market, and a civilizational framework, pushing for closing the gaps on its map (not only geographically but also as a sphere of interest). The documents and policy transformation processes discussed above, demonstrate that the idea of "geopolitical Europe" as well as "geopolitical Commission" predates even the Pandemic of 2020, and thus, the war in Ukraine as well.

2.2. In a plenary held in November 2022, the European Parliament adopted a Recommendation, by 502 votes in favor, 75 against and 61 abstentions, to the European Union which can be summarized in the following steps, or more specific recommendations, and I quote:

- o No alternatives should replace enlargement
- o Reform the decision-making process on accession and advance with accession negotiations by qualified majority instead of unanimity
- o Accession negotiations should be concluded by 2030.[15]

The essence of the conclusions that shape the Recommendation comes down to prioritizing "the importance for the EU of prioritising the alignment of accession countries with the EU's common foreign and security policy." This is truly a geopolitical reasoning, grounded in a sense of territory, security, against the background of the planetary competition for relevance. Europe, evidently, seeks to position itself as a global player in and of itself instead of as a mere appendage to the USA and/or other forces deemed to be suited to align with,

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[15] European Parliament: "A strengthened enlargement policy is the EU's strongest geopolitical tool," a Press Release (23 November 2022), available at https://tinyurl.com/4e9eb9sn, accessed on 19 June 2023.

considering the Euro-Atlantic definition of the EU. The fact that the main global competition revolves around technological innovation, and thus what was once called "industrial" power that is now primarily intellectual, does not exclude or heed the of prospects of war and thus the need for physical circumscription of the continent, "defining one's borders" as Emanuel Macron would put it. Quite to the contrary, both the seemingly "ethereal" battle of ideas (innovation) and the processes of digitalization are also defined as geopolitical factors, if not key geopolitical processes. The definition in case is evolving, deepening, and solidifying itself as a process in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war. The battle for technological planetary domination (seemingly) paradoxically coincides with the supposed threat of a nuclear war and the dangers of deepening the climate crisis. And it is undergirded by aspirations to counter said threats. Yet, political rhetoric, policy and politics are far from being the same thing. That is why we have put forward a few recommendations hoping to contribute to transforming words into action.

In conclusion, European geopolitics is a notion that expands beyond the conventional use of the term, beyond international relations and security policy. The "competitive planetary edge" obviously concerns technological advancement, yet the latter is presumed to be a category of geopolitical nature. If the scale is planetary, it puts forward the importance of territorial consolidation and control. Thus, the continent must become compact, not only at the borders but from within. Western Balkans is at the heart of EU, surrounded by EU states, outside the technocratic, yet inside the physical borders of the EU.

- We recommend that a more political European Commission assumes a more hands-on approach and carries out a systematic review of how its funds are being spent, esp. through IPA III, when it comes to the strengthening of the civil society in North Macedonia, Serbia and Western Balkans more generally speaking.
- The rift of the CSOs in North Macedonia and the EU has been

growing throughout the second half of 2022 and the beginning of 2023, yielding a CS that favors Open Balkans and other alternatives to the EU accession, not shying away from calling the EU undemocratic (even fascist) and "something we may need to look for an alternative of";[16] the EU, and in particular DG NEAR, must carry out thorough an examination as to whether its funds are helping build a society that shares the same values.

- A more hands on political approach must be undertaken, by supporting parts of the CSOs that share the EU values, to encourage the country to recognize the Bulgarian, Jewish, Croat and Montenegrin minorities in North Macedonia, which is the condition for further pursuing the accession process. If this issue remains unaddressed the entire enlargement process will be negatively affected.
- The Commission must work on deepening the sectoral integration approach in order to achieve a fully integrated continent in terms of standards, policies, economic and scientific production and complete freedom of movement, in short, an effective full integration, even if some of the nation States may not have the status of full member states (This is not a model to substitute the accession process but rather to accelerate and complement it).

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[16] Kolozova and Topuzovski, "Restoring EU's Credibility and the European Consensus in the Civil Society in N. Macedonia."

Dimitar Vatsov, Veronika Dimitrova, Ljubomir Donchev, Valentin Valkanov, Milena Iakimova

The Pro-Russian Propaganda Machine in Bulgaria, and the Russian Style Representations of North Macedonia

Introduction

The Bulgarian public was among the first targets and, alas, victims of the Kremlin's anti-democratic propaganda. The full-scale Russian war against Ukraine started on February 24, 2022, but its preparation in Bulgarian media can be traced back to 2013, with its narratives poisoning society's capacity for rational argumentation and ultimately targeting any forms of solidarity. This process is also outlined in "Challenging Online Propaganda and Disinformation in the 21st Century"[1] and especially after the annexation of Crimea for other countries[2]. Some authors claim that there is an intensification of the Russian political warfare against the West (including propaganda) after the onset of the war in Ukraine[3]. Although Bulgaria does not have a significant Russian minority group, in the country institutional measures to curb propaganda are weak[4] and it is expected to flourish and have influence on public opinion.

This article sets out two main tasks:

1. To outline the global Russian narratives that circulated in the Bulgarian media space online from 2013 to 2022, as well as to outline the means and ways of their dissemination in 2022 - the year of the full-scale war against Ukraine. Part 1 is dedicated to answering these questions.

2. To show how the Russian propaganda package presents the fate of small countries in the global world: how it tries to tempt them to be "sovereign," while, at the same time, not recognizing their capacity to achieve sovereignty. It also shows how Bulgarian speakers denigrate North Macedonia in the same way that Russian

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[1] Gregor and Mlejnková, *Challenging Online Propaganda and Disinformation in the 21st Century*.
[2] Pavlíková, Šenkýřová, and Drmola, "Propaganda and Disinformation Go Online"; Polyakova et al., "The Kremlin's Trojan Horses"; "The Kremlin's Trojan Horses 2.0"; "The Kremlin's Trojan Horses 3.0"; Helmus et al., "Russian Social Media Influence."Pavlíková, Šenkýřová, and Drmola, "Propaganda and Disinformation Go Online"; "The Kremlin's Trojan Horses 3.0"; Polyakova et al., "The Kremlin's Trojan Horses"; "The Kremlin's Trojan Horses 2.0"; Helmus et al., "Russian Social Media Influence."
[3] Mareš and Mlejnková, "Propaganda and Disinformation as a Security Threat."
[4] Hanzelka and Pavlíková, "Institutional Responses of European Countries"; Ognianova, "European Union Sanctions Against Kremlin Propaganda Outlets [in Bulgarian]."

propaganda denigrates Ukraine. This is explored in Part 2.

Part 1 summarizes the results of two of the large-scale collective studies of the Human and Social Studies Foundation – Sofia.[5]

The second part is a separate study carried out by means of content-analysis of a sample of articles from one of the main hubs of Russian propaganda in Bulgaria, Pogled-info.

With these empirical descriptive tasks, we aim at shedding light on the mechanisms by which Kremlin propaganda is trying to frame our sense of reality with respect to the war against Ukraine, to the institutions, practices and values of democracy and of political pluralism, to the relation between society, power and sovereignty (withdrawing power from society and bestowing it on an uncontrollable and uncontestable center of non-political power).

Part 1.

The Pro-Russian Propaganda Machine in Bulgaria

1) General Russian narratives

The Russian propaganda package, which is sold globally with small local adaptations, draws heavily on local grassroots critiques of the West. Broadly speaking, it combines leftist critiques of neoliberalism and financial capitalism with rightist critiques of cosmopolitanism and cultural liberalism.[6] A similar mix is also characteristic of other national-populist discourses that have risen in the last decade, of which Russian propaganda attempts to appear as a "flagship."

Already in the first cited study of 2017[7], we found that the general

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[5] Vatsov, "BG Logics of Propaganda. Part I.Pdf"; Vatsov, "BG Logics of Propaganda. Part II"; Vatsov et al., "Anti-Democratic Propaganda in Bulgaria. Newst Websites and Pritn Media: 2013-2016. Quantitative Research. News Websites and Print Media."; Yakimova et al., "Is the Propaganda Machine Runing out of Fuel? (Dynamics and Transformation of pro-Russian Propaganda Narratives in Bulgaria)"; Znepolski et al., "Online Media in 2017: Frequency Measurement and Content Analysis (Report)."
[6] "Partisanship, Propaganda, and Disinformation: Online Media and the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election."
[7] Znepolski et al., "Online Media in 2017: Frequency Measurement and Content Analysis (Report)."

package of Russian propaganda is built on a **geopolitical, conspiratorial logic**. In this logic, there are **four main logical positions (roles)**, which are assigned to different subjects:

1. A global hegemon/puppet-master (the collective West, the US, NATO), through **2. its puppets (the Brussels Eurocrats and the venal liberal elites in the individual countries)** is killing the sovereignty of the European peoples, therefore[8] **3. Europe is dying – it is a victim**. The same villain is surrounding and even conducting a war against Russia, which is also a victim – but Russia alone is justly resisting, it is rising from the ashes and is actually Europe's savior: **4. Russia is reviving.**

Since it was introduced in Bulgaria as a general propaganda language in 2013, this conspiratorial logic has remained unchanged. However, we have found slight contextual variations in the individual sub-narratives since 2021: as a preparation of the hot phase of the war against Ukraine.

Firstly, if ten years ago the role of **global hegemon/puppet-master** was most often assigned to the US/NATO as well as to contextually substituted specific actors (Obama, Merkel, Soros, etc.), now, the metonymic variants are condensed into a single subject: "the collective West." The EU, which in previous periods was treated as "Washington's puppet," has, since the start of the war in Ukraine and the united response against it, become the arch-villain – part of "the collective West."

Secondly, the (sub)narrative about t**he cultural decline of Europe** ("infected with liberalism"), "threatened by a migrant invasion," etc., has been visibly fading since 2017.

Thirdly, the theme for **Bulgaria's venal elites**, who are described as domestic "puppets" serving the interests of the villain/hegemon: "Sorosoids," "grant-spongers," "genders," "liberasts," "paid analy-

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[8] Helmus et al., "Russian Social Media Influence"; MacFarquhar, "A Powerful Russian Weapon."

sts, politicians, and protesters," etc., is maintained by inertia, albeit still at high levels. This propaganda tool is often used for settling scores with inconvenient domestic political and economic opponents, it was therefore the first to be widely circulated in Bulgarian media, and until 2017 its frequency of use increased the most. After February 24, the domestic uses of the Russian talking points were silenced – maybe its protagonists were shocked in the very beginning of the war - but in the end of March 2022 they were again on the rise.

Fourthly, the (sub)narrative of **Russia's rise** has growing most dramatically in the last year (see also Veebel, 2016). Innovations in the content here relate mostly to the depicting of a more detailed image of Russia itself and, above all, to a militaristic intensification of the propaganda that frames Russia's confrontation with Ukraine and the Western world. In any case, the effort of the propaganda media is aimed at creating the impression that Russia and the Russian army are invariably winning at the front even when the facts indicate otherwise[9].

We should note that although there are no serious changes in the main narratives, the vocabulary of Russian propaganda was nevertheless consolidated ideologically into a specific **Nazi-imperialist** mix shortly before the war. Instead of the somewhat chaotic attempts to think of the Russian sphere of spiritual and political influence through the lens of "Slavdom," "Orthodox Christianity," "Eurasian civilization," "Soviet internationalism," etc., primacy is now given to the so-called "Russian world" ("russkiy mir"), which has swallowed them up. This has also happened institutionally: instead of various wannabe ideologues (Alexander Dugin, Andrey Fursov, etc.) competing to define what is Russian, on 12 July 2021 the latter was nailed down by the ultimate authority – by Putin himself, in a quasi-scientific article.[10] Arguing for historical, linguistic, ethnic and cultural affinity,

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[9] Gerber and Zavisca, "Does Russian Propaganda Work?"
[10] Putin's article at: http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181; translated into Bulgarian: https://www.zemia-news.bg/
index.php/svyat-3/91782-%D0%B7%D0%B0-%D0%B8%D1%81%D1%82%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%B8

Putin insists that the Velikorussians, Belorussians and Malorussians (Ukrainians) are "one people," a "triune people," a "large Russian nation." Further stating that everything that opposes this nation – including Ukraine, which, "seduced" the West, is trying to break away from it – is "anti-Russia." Accordingly, all the other nationalities and denominations that gravitate around "the triune people" make up the "multi-confessional, multi-national, multi-faceted Russian world." The "Russian world" denotes the empire, which also has a wider periphery, a hinterland that was naturally formed in the force field of the dominant ethnic group which has been practically extended to a Russian race ("the large Russian nation," "the triune people").

Another important thing to note: if there indeed has been a drastic change in the use of Russian propaganda narratives since 2021, it is that **now the Kremlin's official spokespersons – Putin, Lavrov, Peskov, Zakharova, the Russian ambassador to Bulgaria Mitrofanova, etc. – are literally repeating propaganda talking points with their respective propaganda vocabulary**. Before that, Russian officials still spoke in a diplomatically more neutral language, leaving the conduct of propaganda to other media and spokespersons. Now the entire Russian state is a mouthpiece for propaganda clichés. Hence the Bulgarian (and world) media – even the most objective and neutral ones – are compelled to quote them. Thus, Russian propaganda has sharply increased its spread.

2) The Spread of Russian Propaganda Narratives in Bulgarian Online Media (2013 – 2022)

In order to see the spread of Russian propaganda in Bulgaria over a long period, we repeated the measurements we had conducted for the 2013–2017 period, but now for the next five years. That is to say,

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%D1%87%D0%B5%
D1%81%D0%BA%D0%BE-%D1%82%D0%BE-%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%B8%D0%B-
D%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B2%D0%BE-
%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D1%80%D1%83%D1%81%D0%B-
D%D0%B0%D1%86%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5-%D0%B8-%D1%83
%D0%BA%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%86%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5.html.

we conducted keyword searches (from previously defined semantic nests characteristic to each narrative and sub-narrative) through the SENSIKA automated media monitoring system.[11] SENSIKA archives over 8,000 Bulgarian-language websites and blogs[12] and provides direct access to online articles that contain the specified keywords. The aggregated results cover the period from 1 January 2013 to 31 December 2022. Through SENSIKA, we searched for the same narratives through the same keywords (plus new words introduced into the vocabulary of anti-democratic national-populist and (pro)Russian propaganda after 2017):

The US/NATO as global hegemon/puppet-master;

The decline of Europe;

Bulgaria's venal elites.

Not all publications identified in the measurement are propaganda – up to 20% of the publications quote Russian speakers (mostly officials) or indirectly reference Russian propaganda, but even these publications, insofar as they quote propaganda speech, are a direct indicator of the spread of Russian propaganda.

As for the fourth narrative, "The Rise of Russia," since we had divided it into five sub-narratives in 2017 for the sake of clarity, is once again measured through five separate subdivided semantic clusters:

- Russia's increased political and spiritual might – various narratives praising Russia in general;

- Russia's enemies – antagonistic discourses vilifying Russia's enemies;

- The power of Russian weapons – direct praise of the Russian army and armaments;

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[11] https://sensika.com/
[12] The number of Bulgarian-language websites is constantly increasing: whereas in 2016 SENSIKA archived approximately 3,000 websites and blogs, by the end of 2022 there were more than 8,000.

- The sanctions against Russia – narratives describing Western sanctions as useless and harmful to the countries imposing them;

- Crimea and Ukraine – narratives insisting that Crimea is Russian and that Ukraine is ruled by Nazis.

Table 1: Number of publications, by year, containing the keywords of the different propaganda (sub)narratives. Period: 1 January 2013 – 31 December 2022

Year	Russia's increased political and spiritual might	Russia's enemies	The power of Russian weapons	The sanctions against Russia	Crimea and Ukraine	The decline of Europe	Bulgaria's venal elites	The US/NATO as global hegemon/puppet-master	New keywords only
2013	44	54	22	2	56	109	494	69	-
2014	365	7,387	219	1,141	3,983	359	3,114	999	-
2015	2,448	7,814	929	2,666	5,814	1,141	8,094	2,683	-
2016	1,326	7,511	745	4,005	6,109	1,841	11,394	2,361	-
2017	1,943	6,049	1,076	4,217	3,983	887	16,703	2,778	-
2018	1,952	11,859	2,876	3,050	4,816	1,151	14,666	2,824	5,816
2019	1,481	6,424	3,382	1,976	3,782	700	10,649	2,333	5,599
2020	2,241	5,959	2,677	1,006	2,892	534	12,437	1,968	4,206

| 2021 | 1,532 | 8,579 | 3,511 | 1,223 | 4,675 | 636 | 15,000 | 3,731 | 6,616 |
| 2022 | 8,820 | 37,446 | 23,039 | 7,338 | 97,977 | 2,328 | 14,680 | 12,134 | 115,729 |

Here is a visual representation of the data.

Chart 1: Comparative (number of publications per year, 2013 – 2022)

All narratives
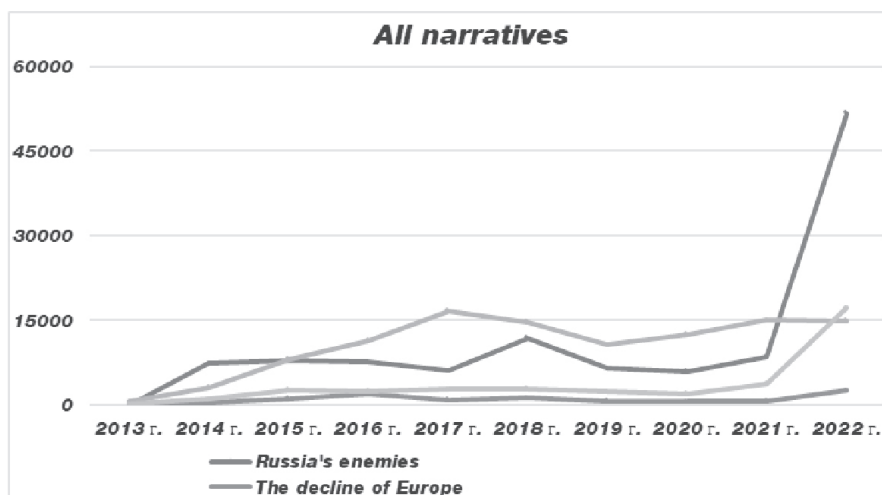
Some conclusions are clear:

In the case of all narratives about Russia and "The US/NATO as global hegemon/puppet-master," propaganda in 2022 increased significantly compared to the previous year (the increase in the number of publications is from four to 21 times for the narratives about Russia and more than three times for those about the US/NATO). The narrative about "The decline of Europe" started from a very low level and, although it increased almost four times, remains marginal in comparison to the other geopolitical narratives. Only the narrative about "Bulgaria's venal elites" has kept its level through inertia and has

even declined slightly in 2022. This is important: as the war heated up, this narrative, which is usually used by local actors to also vilify local political and economic opponents, and which was the leading narrative for many years, is now giving way to geopolitical narratives; i.e., since the start of the hot war, local uses of the Russian propaganda package have been giving way to direct Russian propaganda.

3. The Spread of Russian Propaganda Narratives During the Hot War (1 January – 31 December 2022): New Technological Solutions

The measurements for this part of the study were also conducted with the SENSIKA automated system. The queries in the Bulgarian online space were conducted through a semantic cluster (a list of keywords) characteristic of the Kremlin's propaganda vocabulary in the period under study. For example:

"anti-Russia" OR "collective West" OR "Russian world" OR "ethnic bio-weapon" OR "Ukrainian fascists" OR Banderites OR denazification OR demilitarization etc.

By searching for keywords from this list for the entire year 2022, SENSIKA found **85,397 publications** (from 1,250 sources). They are distributed over time as follows:

Chart 2: Russian propaganda in Bulgarian online space (number of publications per day, 1 January – 31 December 2022)

Vertical: Number of publications

Horizontal: Time of publication

Russian propaganda 2022

Chart 2 shows the general dynamics of the spread of Russian propaganda in Bulgaria online. Immediately obvious are two major spikes: 1) around the start of the war; and 2) at the end of November.

The year began with propaganda activity at an average of 39 publications per day, which surged sky-high on 22 February when Putin declared the independence of the so called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (1,785 publications for the day), and on 24 February when the Russians invaded Ukraine (1,262 publications). In May, propaganda activity levelled off at almost 400 publications per day, i.e., ten times more than in the pre-war period. From then on, it gradually began to decline, dropping to an average of 124 publications per day in September. That was until late November, when it surged again: from November 22nd to the end of the year, SENSI-KA identified 32,475 publications, i.e., propaganda activity increased over six times more than in the previous month, to an average of 792 publications per day.

This second surge was strategically engineered – it was the product of nearly 400 newly created anonymous, cloned (mushroom) websites which were recycling the same propaganda messages and which SENSIKA detected and began to archive at an accelerated pace from November 22nd onwards. (The spread of propaganda through aggregators is described in "Trolling for Trump: How Russia is trying to destroy our democracy". The authors made the distinction between "gray" (media publications produced by bots) and "black" (social media content which is user generated by trolls, bots, hackers and honeypots). The system of mushroom websites is a hybrid between the two of them.[13]) Presumably in Bulgaria, these websites were

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[13] "Trolling for Trump."

created gradually over the previous few months – most likely, by the platform Share4Pay, which invites users to share content from ready-made websites on social media for a fee.[14] That is, a special astroturfing machine has been created, which is subject to a separate analysis. The sharp surge in propaganda from November 2022 onwards is exclusively due to it.

Since the activation of the machine of mushroom websites, as the programmers call them, has radically changed the online environment in Bulgaria, the analysis of the content and sources of Russian propaganda is divided into two: 1) the first surge immediately before and after the Russian invasion of Ukraine; and 2) the second surge after the activation of the Machine.

4. First Surge Immediately Before and After the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on February 24th 2023

It is impossible to analyze the content of tens of thousands of articles. That is why a content analysis of publications on peak days (i.e., days with the highest number of articles) was performed. This method, developed in the previous HSSF study[15], made it possible to see not only which Russian propaganda talking points are/were the most widely circulated, but also which political and social events Russian propaganda immediately responded to.

This content analysis made it possible to see something else, too: **the surge in Russian propaganda after the beginning of the hot phase of the war, described above, is primarily machine-generated**. Startled by the war, a number of pro-Russian populist speakers – Bulgarian politicians and public figures – condemned the aggression and stopped spinning Russian talking points for at least a month, even though they had often done so before (as well as after). At the end of February and in March, only a few dozen "Bulgarian" mouthpieces of the Kremlin remained active, but they were hyperactive.

[14] The detected mushroom websites often publish ads of the platform: http://share4pay.com/.
[15] Vatsov et al., "Anti-Democratic Propaganda in Bulgaria. Newst Websites and Pritn Media: 2013-2016. Quantitative Research. News Websites and Print Media."

However, even they were not the main source of content: in the period under study, the main source of content was direct translations from Russian. The statements of Russian officials and Russian and pro-Russian western analysts are/were translated, but mostly only information that presents/presented convenient facts to create an impression of the constant "victory march" of the Russian troops i.e., the narrative of the victories of the Russian army comes to the fore and somewhat obscures the other narratives, which begin to play a secondary justifying role.

Moreover, 65% of the articles identified by SENSIKA for this period were reprints done by bots and anonymous websites. That is, a first and already powerful Machine for disseminating Russian propaganda content – albeit much smaller than the Machine of Mushroom Websites that SENSIKA would detect in November 2022 – was already in place before the start of the war

4.1 The First Dissemination Machine

February 7 was one of the pre-war mini-peaks with exactly 60 publications. Its dominant news story was fake, claiming that Polish mercenaries and Right Sector nationalists had arrived in the Donbas to prepare terrorist acts. In addition to the fact that this fake news, whose source was RIA Novosti, was typical of the anticipatory propaganda legitimation of the future war, its tracking also exposed one of the Russian propaganda dissemination machines. It works like this: Bulgarian BLITZ News Agency published the article, and eight satellites (anonymous websites identical in their design, registered at two IP-addresses) republished it within a few hours, without any change and without any reference to a source: the result was nine separate publications with identical content. Three other websites republished it with minor changes. In all likelihood, all of them uploaded it on Facebook, whereby its dissemination increased exponentially. These were the first indicators of the launching of the machine that we detected.

4.2 "Artillery Preparation" of the War (February 15 – February 24 2022)

The massive propaganda preparations for the war lasted exactly ten days. The carpet-bombing began on February 15 with a sudden 163 publications in a day (against an average of 39 per day until then):

Chart 3: Number of publications per day, 13 February – 24 February 2022

Vertical: Number of publications

Horizontal: Time of publication

The narrative logic of the "artillery preparation" of the war is simple and entirely follows the Russian media narrative: "Ukraine is attacking the Donbas and subjecting the Russian population to genocide, so the Russian population must be defended!" However, until the very beginning of hostilities, Russian media and official spokespersons were denying that there would be hostilities.

4.3 Bulgarian Topics by Date

Although the coverage of the war in the identified publications most often reproduces Russian media outlets, there are nevertheless some local Bulgarian topics.

Periodically, there were "factual" reports, coming from Russian sources, about Bulgarian weapons and ammunition found in Ukraine. These reports played a subversive role: they preemptively propagated the message that, although Bulgarian military aid to Ukraine was not publicly announced, it was nevertheless being provided secretly. In fact, Bulgarian companies were not donating but selling weapons to Ukraine all the time, but the systematic messages subverted the possibility of donation.

A systematic provoker who, through various propaganda statements reached peaks of 400–500 publications that quoted her, was the Russian Ambassador to Bulgaria, Eleonora Mitrofanova.

There was also a surge in activity around the release of the sailors from the Bulgarian merchant ship Tsarevna (peaks on 14 and 18 April), who Russian propaganda claimed were held captive by the Ukrainians and released by the Russians when the latter captured Mariupol.

4.4 Russian Talking Points "in His Own Voice": President Rumen Radev

Although most pro-Russian Bulgarian politicians and public speakers fell silent at the beginning of the war, some of them eventually ventured to start repeating Russian talking points in their own voice again.

We analyzed only the statements of President Rumen Radev who, because of his institutional position and – for a certain period – high rating, reached peaks of several hundred publications that reported anything he said.

At the beginning of the war, Radev explicitly and categorically condemned the Russian aggression. In regard to the Russian invasion, he said: "This is absolutely unacceptable. In the 21st century in Europe flying strategic bombers, missiles, air and sea landings with strikes on a sovereign state is categorically unacceptable." (February 24). And the next day, February 25, at the high-level meeting in Warsaw,

he said: "It is clear that Russia will win this war, but it will have a very difficult time winning the peace. You don't win with aggression!"

In mid-March 2022, however, he introduced and began to systematically use one of the talking points of the Russian narrative, according to which by helping Ukraine by providing weapons and supplies, the West is actually waging war against Russia. As early as March 18 (less than a month after the invasion) Radev said that if Bulgaria provided military aid to Ukraine, "this would involve Bulgaria in the war." This argument has since been systematically used by Radev to block all attempts by the government and parliament to decide on the provision of military aid to Ukraine. The fulcrum for "involving the state X [Bulgaria in our case, but the name can be arbitrarily replaced as in the quasi-local advertisements of global trading company chains] in the war" is entirely Russian, because only in the Russian propaganda narrative is Russia the victim of Western aggression, to which the "special operation" is a "preemptive response" - the aggressor, according to Russian propaganda, is "anti-Russia," i.e., Ukraine is turned into a "proxy" of the West. If this narrative was true, then support for the "aggressor-Ukraine" would actually constitute involvement in war. However, this is not true; and supporting this untruth is in Russia's direct interest: Russia's adversary – the victim-Ukraine - should not be armed.

In the studied period, this talking point swallowed up all of the other important issues on the public agenda: if Bulgaria stops paying Gazprom in rubles, it will also get involved in the war; if Mitrofanova is expelled, the situation will also be exacerbated; and so on. Even on August 2nd, appointing a caretaker government, Radev set as its main task the prevention of "involving Bulgaria in the war." These two topics – about the provision of arms to Ukraine and gas supplies from Gazprom – stabilized and remained the main focal points of the propaganda agenda in Bulgaria.

5.The Machine of 400 Mushroom Websites

5.1 What Does It Look Like?

At the end of November, the SENSIKA analytical system detected and began to archive a large number of websites that publish identical articles and that are almost identical in design:

Mushroom websites – screenshots; imagine four hundred like these two, circulated on social networks!

Compared to the other websites, they have several characteristics in common: 1. they are essentially completely anonymous, it is impossible to contact the authors, to trace the sources, to verify anything whatsoever; 2. they have the same domain (zbox7.eu, bgvest.eu, etc.); 3. they have an identical graphical user interface. Besides these

three characteristics, there are two distinctive features that distinguish them from one another: first of all, these are the subdomain names: **novini701**.dnes24.eu, **novinarbg**.dnes24.eu, **news1**.dnes24.eu; the other distinctive feature is the arrangement of the articles pretending to be "news" – this difference is very slight, but present. Programmers and researchers call such websites "mushroom websites"[16] because of their proliferation and propensity to replicate. In Bulgaria, they "sprouted" in late 2022. It cannot be ascertained exactly when they were created – probably within the previous few months – but the SENSIKA team detected and began to archive them on November 22, 2022; by December 10, the system had already covered 370 of them.

Here is a list of the domains detected so far and the corresponding number of subdomains, called clones, of each domain:

zbox7.eu – 25 clones;

bgvest.eu – 173 clones;

bg7.eu – 65 clones;

allbg.eu – 62 clones;

others – 40 clones in total.

It is likely that the Machine of Mushroom Websites is linked to the platform Share4Pay, which the websites themselves regularly promote. Share4Pay, in turn, offers any user the opportunity to acquire a ready-made website filled with publications, the user's task being to promote the publications and the platform on social media for a fee.

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[16] Detailed technical information is provided by Martin Stamenov of SENSIKA in his presentation at an event on "AI Propaganda" held by Ratio BG on 19 January 2013 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i-JnBoNZSJg0) [accessed 10 February 2023].

The platform Share4Pay – a screenshot
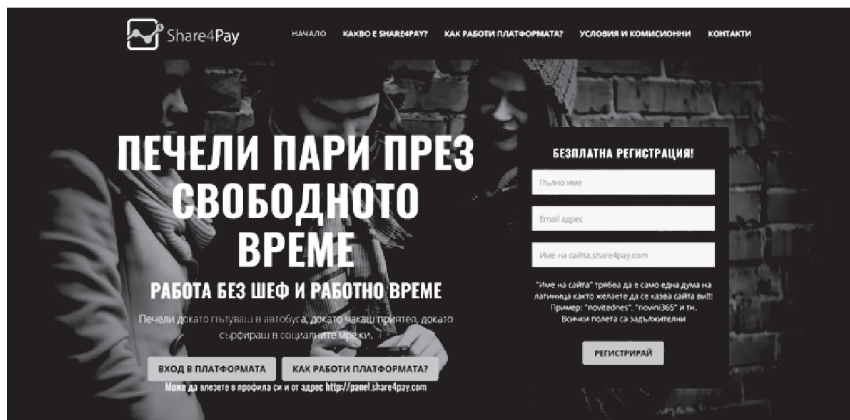
The content that is disseminated and replicated by the Machine of Mushroom Websites is varied, but when it comes to the war in Ukraine it is explicitly pro-Russian. The publications usually refer to unnamed "experts," politicians or "world media" and are structured in such a way as to seem objective. That is, the machine of mushroom websites also presents non-propaganda content (sport and gossip, as well as sensationalist news can be regularly seen), and it probably has a business model – profiting from advertising (primarily Bulgarian gambling portals). At the same time, geopolitics as part of their media content is distinctly pro-Russian: the business model is combined with a propaganda channel.

5.2 Types of Propaganda Publications on Mushroom Websites

The propaganda publications on mushroom websites covered by our study can be divided into three main types:

- The first type are publications targeted at people who do not read news but rely more on headlines and bolded passages in the text. This is the so-called impression management approach. Users of this type have to be quickly and firmly convinced of Russia's successes and of the failures of Ukraine and the "collective West" at the beginning. Headings are short and self-explanatory: "Video

of the war: DPR fighters destroy AFU stronghold at Vodiani"; in the early days of the machine, there was usually no video in the text of the articles, and the text itself was short, with many errors from the machine translation[17].

- The second type are "morning briefs," as they call themselves, which pretend to be objective, but are actually meant to build an image of Russia that is at least equal to those of Ukraine and its Western allies. Here the Machine most often cites Russian media – conventional and social.

- The third type are also "morning briefs," but they are targeted at a different group of readers – those who condemn Russia, but who may still be persuaded to change their position. Most often this is done through references to the Institute for the Study of War (IST) or various Ukrainian services. The general pro-democracy text of such publications, however, contains short and rhetorically unemphasized pro-Russia messages.

So, the Russian propaganda attempts to intervene in the Bulgarian media environment through artificially generated mechanisms and increases in content, which create an absolutely **alternative realit**y. In addition to the fact that these attempts become visible only after an analysis with a specialized tool, they operate beneath the surface of the reflexive perception of the everyday media flow. We cannot measure their real impact, at least not as it is amplified on Facebook and other social networks.

Part 2.

The Small Countries in the Mirror of Russian Propaganda

Having presented the common Russian narratives in the Bulgarian media environment, and having shown the networks and means of their dissemination online, it is now time to shift and narrow the

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[17] Half a year later the machine is less clumsy – the translations are better in linguistic quality, there are videos (often by Russian unnamed sources).

focus of our analysis. In terms of content, so far we have primarily followed the images of Russia and the West as major global actors, as "Great Powers," as well as the presentation of the war against Ukraine as a "preemptive strike," as a "defensive" aggression. Now, on the contrary, we will focus on how small countries are represented by and within the same propaganda package, and we will carry out this analysis in two steps: First, we will see how Russian propaganda promises small countries "sovereignty," which – at the same time and as if by the same token – it does not recognize: it promises them something that they cannot have anyway. Second, we will then see how various Bulgarian speakers use the Russian propaganda package to deny the sovereignty of neighboring North Macedonia - in the same way that Russian speakers deny the sovereignty of Ukraine.

Here, at first, the analysis will be qualitative, not quantitative - an analysis of the content of selected articles. For the terrain of the analysis, we chose Pogled-info - a Bulgarian news and analytical website and TV channel - which, both through its translations from Russian media and through its "author's" Bulgarian voices, is one of the main hubs of Russian propaganda in Bulgaria.

6) Sovereignty Understood "in Russian"

"Sovereignty" is the main temptation that Russian propaganda offers to local national audiences in small countries - the icing on the cake. "Don't listen to the Masters from Washington and Brussels - be sovereign!" The local national-populists seem to inevitably intercept the sovereigntist rhetoric, and yet, what is sovereignty, understood "in Russian"?

The way of present-day propaganda uses was paved by the concept of "sovereign democracy," first mentioned way back in 2006 in a speech by Vladislav Surkov, Putin's trusted ideologue and adviser. This concept, coined with the hope to be an alternative to Western liberal democracy, dominated the minds of the Kremlin elite for about a decade, but it never managed to become a consistent ideology. Today,

even the phrase "sovereign democracy" has fallen out of use - in fact, "democracy" has fallen out of it, but "sovereignty" has remained a supporting pillar in the modern Russian propaganda package.

According to Ivan Krastev, "sovereign democracy" was introduced by Surkov after the Orange Revolution in Ukraine during 2004-2005: "Sovereign democracy is Moscow's answer to the dangerous combination of populist pressure from below and international pressure from above that destroyed Leonid Kuchma's regime."[18] In 2006, the Kremlin felt that the "facade" or "directed democracy" they had been practicing since Yeltsin's time - and that was the Kuchma regime - was still not immune to an outbreak of civil discontent. Civil grievances against the corrupt governments seem to inevitably receive support and legitimization from the international democratic community.

Therefore, the Kremlin elites are trying to rebrand their power through the concept of "sovereignty." They need this term in order to confirm in the first place that the state power is and should be independent of any external influences - in the "Westphalian" sense, no one from outside has the right to interfere in their territory. In the Kremlin, with the word "sovereignty" they specifically state that they should not comply with the international democratic community, with the West. **A sovereign is one who can oppose the USA and the "collective West."** However, they further inverted the meaning of "sovereignty": and went on insisting that **sovereign is that power which is independent not only from external but also from internal oppositions.** Why? Well, because **internal resistances are presented as external**: anyone uncomfortable is presented as a conduit of foreign influence, a puppet of external forces, a foreign agent.

In the Kremlin, by "sovereignty," they do not understand freedom scattered among citizens, which, after being temporarily delegated by a social contract, becomes state sovereignty. The modern layers

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[18] Krastev, "'Sovereign Democracy', Russian-Style."

in the meaning of the concept have been erased. Sovereign is the state embodied in a single person - Putin, and not the citizens.[19] In fact, the pre-modern concept of indivisible and absolute sovereign power (with added decisionism in the line of Carl Schmitt: as a "sovereign dictatorship") is being rehabilitated, which power does not and should not tolerate opposition: neither from below, from civil protests and insurgences, nor from outside, from international norms and institutions. **Pure imperial power**.

Hence, a main ideological catchphrase of Russian propaganda today is that all velvet and color revolutions, all civil pro-European and pro-democracy protests are "a coup against the legitimate authority, orchestrated by the West." By the way, the word "Maidan" is re-connoted in this way - as a coup led by the West. Thus, any civil activist or journalist who dares to challenge the authority of the sovereign (understood as lordship) is accordingly a "foreign agent," but there is a second important feature of Kremlin usages.

Sovereignty, we said, rests with the state, but **not every state has sovereignty**. Already in 2006, Krastev noticed: "According to the Kremlin, sovereignty is not a right; its meaning is not a seat in the United Nations. For the Kremlin, sovereignty is a capacity. It presupposes economic independence, military power and cultural identity."[20] Sovereignty de iure - as a status of international law - is a fiction, a facade, if it cannot be won *de facto* by force. Small countries - those that practically fail to achieve economic and military self-sufficiency - are internationally incapacitated, they do not achieve "subjectivity." "Subjectivity" becomes an ideological-propaganda synonym for "sovereignty." **Small states in that sense are not even states - they are "quasi-states."** They are artificial and temporary entities that are doomed to decay, or, if they do not decay, they remain inca-

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[19] Even the greatest challenges - even Prigogine's rebellion - only confirmed the pure power of the sovereign: "an armed rebellion, although unsuccessful, although it ended with a full pardon of the participants by the sovereign" - https://pogled.info/svetoven/generalite-i-shoigu-kato-mishena-zapadat-se-opitva-da-zaigrava-s-putin.157908. Accessed 7 July 2023.

[20] Krastev, "'Sovereign Democracy', Russian-Style."

pable of activity of their own, rather, doomed to spin by inertia in the gravitational field of some real sovereign. Thus, Ukraine was supposed to break up as an independent state and return to the "Russian world," and the countries of Eastern Europe, according to the Russian security doctrine from 2021, were to leave NATO and, if they did not directly return to the sphere of Russian influence, at a minimum, to declare "neutrality."

Moreover, according to Russian propaganda, small states cannot compensate for their lack of self-sufficiency and strengthen their sovereignty by participating in supranational alliances such as the EU and NATO. This is precisely because by presumption these are not unions between equals, but forms of dictation of another sovereign - the unions are presented as systems of vassalage. At the same time, this other sovereign is worse - he has the claim to be a world hegemon, to dictate everything to everyone.

Here is another ideologue, Alexander Dugin, quoted by Pogled-info:

> And most importantly: the current leadership of the White House and the globalist elites of the European Union categorically do not accept even a hint of sovereignty from their vassals or from their opponents. All who are willing to submit to the West are required to completely relinquish sovereignty in favor of a supranational decision-making center. That's the law.[21]

Small countries can therefore strive for sovereignty in only one sense - by giving up liberal-democratic values and withdrawing from the West. Even bigger countries like Turkey have subjectivity i.e. sovereignty, only insofar as they partially oppose the West and balance with Russia - however, if Erdogan had fallen in the May elections and the opposition had come to power, then Turkey would "lose its subjectivity and become another anti-Russian springboard."[22]

[21] https://pogled.info/svetoven/aleksandar-dugin-erdogan-i-suverenitetat-na-turtsiya.153697 Accessed 23 July 23.
[22] https://pogled.info/svetoven/russia/elena-panina-kak-rusiya-da-razigrae-turskiya-gambit.153886

Small countries, if they imagine that they have sovereignty, look pathetic and ridiculous. This is how pathetic and funny Georgia looked in March this year, during the pro-European protests there:

> A small republic, Georgia, decided that it should live like the USA. To have sovereignty, independence in foreign policy, liberal values. Teach us, they said, America, to be like you. This address was a fatal mistake. Georgia is now on the verge of being thrown into the furnace of war with Russia, led by the West.[23]

In fact, small countries, if they imagine that their sovereignty is to defend a liberal-democratic order, inevitably become an "anti-Russian" instrument and, accordingly, are dragged by the West into a war with Russia. Lavrov directly threatens the neighbors of the Russian Federation: "[A]ll the countries located around the Russian Federation must draw conclusions from how dangerous is the course of drawing them into the area of responsibility, into the area of interests of the United States."[24]

"Getting involved in the war" is also a favorite cliché of local pro-Russian politicians in Europe (of Radev, Kostadinov, Ninova, etc. in Bulgaria, but not only). Small countries, if they wish to insist on their sovereignty, are displayed by Kremlin propaganda as victims of an illusion who are dragged into war. Thus, for the Kremlin and its propagators, fictitious sovereignty is understood as support for Ukraine and pro-Western orientation and it is equated to war, while real sovereignty is equated to a refusal of support for Ukraine and a withdrawal from democratic values – this is perversely said to be "peace and neutrality." The only real sovereignty for the little ones is to renounce active sovereignty and seek "neutrality" - to let the "Great Powers" fight each other without taking a stand. After all, the marches for peace and neutrality, organized by pro-Russian organizations

Accessed 23 July, 23.

[23] https://pogled.info/svetoven/gruziya-e-tlaskana-kam-voina-s-rusiya.153487. Accessed 7 July 2023.

[24] https://pogled.info/svetoven/maidanat-v-gruziya-nezavidnoto-badeshte-na-ukraina-i-novite-zaplahi-osnovnoto-ot-golyamoto-intervyu-sas-sergei-lavrov.153490. Accessed 7 July 2023.

throughout Europe, understand sovereignty in exactly this way: as a refusal to actively oppose imperialist aggression, as "neutrality"; and "peace" in this parlance means that Ukraine should surrender immediately.

The pro-Russian "science fiction writer" - and Pogled-info journalist - Simeon Milanov already sees "The death of liberalism as the revival of Westphalian-type sovereignty."[25] In the happy multipolar world of the future, Bulgaria - now "deprived of subjectivity within the dying unipolar world" - will "regain its international subjectivity" through "balances" and "partnerships with international giants and poles such as Russia and China, and why not a future independent [of] Germany and more" (the EU will obviously have collapsed). In this happy world, "Northern Macedonia, which is unviable as a state," will be forced to bow to Sofia, which will establish "a sort of, let's say informal protectorate over Skopje." Russia, which will have unleashed the potential of its sovereignty and in order to protect its interests in the Balkans, will have captured not only the Ukrainian, but also the Romanian Black Sea coast, in order to connect with a land corridor with brotherly Bulgaria and Serbia. Moreover, as a sign of goodwill, Russia will give Bulgaria Northern Dobrudja - in this dream "Bulgaria expands with a territory of 15,500 sq. km, receiving the most fertile lands of the Balkans, a secure geostrategic rear of the Danube Delta, expanding its aquatoria by hundreds of nautical miles, acquiring also oil and gas deposits that are now in the Romanian zone." In the "Westphalian" multipolar world of Milanov's future, borders are being redrawn, regions and populations are being assimilated ethnically and culturally, countries are dying and being born, but Bulgaria never suffers, it only flourishes in its fertile proximity to Russia.

Only one thing fails to be noticed by the Sci-Fi master Milanov in his wonderful world of the future. Namely, that the sovereignty in it is not even of the Westphalian type. This is because the Westpha-

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[25] https://pogled.info/avtorski/Simeon-Milanov/mnogopolyusniyat-svyat-shte-dade-na-balgari-ya-shansa-da-bade-velika-otnovo.144713. Accessed 7 July 2023.

lian peace treaties, which ended the religious wars in Europe, were in fact the first modern acts of limiting sovereignty. Through them, the European monarchs of the 17th century limited their sovereignty only to the territory and population of the state they already ruled - by refusing a sovereign "export of religion" abroad.[26] This marks the beginning not only of the modern international order (of mutual respect for territorial sovereignty between states), but also of the political history of modernity more generally. It is because modern political history consists of nothing else but the inventing of new and newer - already internal, democratic - restrictions over the possibility of anyone enjoying absolute sovereignty (restrictions such as the rule of law, the separation of powers, the mandates and practically all the basic values and institutional principles of liberal democracy). The history of modernity, of the emergence of liberal democracy - although this history is certainly not coherent and noncontradictory - is precisely this: it is the history not of the destruction of sovereignty, but of the search for ways to limit it by dispersing it among citizens and between states.

On the contrary, Russia's current military territorial expansion as a practice, as well as sovereignty in the speeches of Russian propagandists as a "theory," do not recognize borders and limitations. Sovereignty is understood as an actual military and economic power that expands as far as it can - until another actual power stops it. It has no moral or legal limitations. Sovereignty understood "in Russian" is pure, i.e. an ever-expanding empire. It leaves no room for free small states, nor for free citizens.

7) Bulgarian Media Representations of North Macedonia Modelled After the Russian Representations of Ukraine

The propaganda war between Bulgaria and North Macedonia - more precisely between nationalist circles and speakers in both countries - has intensified in recent years. In this war, the Russian propaganda

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[26] This is how the principle "Cuius regio, eius religio" should be read - the sovereign can impose his religion only on the territory of his kingdom.

package is being used by both sides as a weapon. Behind the uses of Russian narratives in both countries, direct Russian interference can probably also be detected – the inflaming of nationalisms and the disintegration of the EU and NATO are the real goals of Russian hybrid warfare. However, this is not the task of this analysis. Our task is to see how the Russian propaganda package is adapted to the local national soil and what the local effects of its use are, "regardless of the sponsor," so to speak.

We will now do this unilaterally, only for the Bulgarian media scene: with the particular question of how Bulgarian speakers represent Macedonia through Russian narratives. The reverse question – how Macedonians represent Bulgarians through Russian narratives – is also completely reasonable, but it will remain for another study. Some structural similarities are obvious: just as Russian propaganda today portrays Ukrainians as "Nazis," Macedonian propaganda portrays Bulgarians as "fascists" - both discursive strategies have their roots in Soviet and Jugoslav propaganda from WWII, although they use different historical realities in their implementation. We documented this process in older HSSF research on Macedonian national-populism in the media[27].

One-sidedness in this case is only a matter of methodological limitation of the field. Again, the same goal dictates the refusal to enter into the specific political and historical disputes between the two countries, as well as from the analysis of the specific political events - the requirement to accept Bulgarians in the constitution of Skopje, the closure of Bulgarian cultural clubs there, as well as language and physical manifestations of ethnic hatred - which most often motivate Bulgarian media publications. So, here we will take a formalistic – to a large extent structuralist – approach and analyze only this: Which Russian narratives are readily borrowed by Bulgarian speakers, how and to what extent are they adapted to describe the neighbors from North Macedonia? And what are their main effects?

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[27] Vatsov, Donchev, and Alexiev, "The Gun Exploded: The Rise of the Macedonian National-Populism after the Bulgarian Veto."; Vatsov, Alexiev, and Pavlov, "A Loaded Gun."

In our task, the work Ivan Spiridonov, a marginal Bulgarian writer, conspiracy theorist, critic of Satanism and transhumanism and author of the Kremlin propaganda outlet Pogled-info acts to facilitate the analysis. He has written a short manual for translating Russian propaganda into Bulgarian nationalist propaganda. A kind of instruction on what the structural analogies (common places, similarities) between Russia and Bulgaria are, on the one hand, and Ukraine and Macedonia, on the other.[28] So, let's discover the five main similarities!

1. All those who do not understand why Russia attacked Ukraine, and Bulgaria's disputes with Macedonia, are victims of "years-old propaganda, the command post of which is neither in our country, nor in Macedonia or Ukraine";

2. The task of this "Anglo-Saxon" propaganda is "to create and consolidate a non-existent nation" - Ukrainian and Macedonian respectively;

3. This non-existent - artificial and newly invented - nation must "declare itself to be something more than its neighbors" - according to Hitler, who drew "experience from the Jews, who declared themselves God's chosen people in ancient times"; the newly invented Ukrainians declare themselves superior to the Russians (the latter are represented as barbarians - "Tatar-Mongols"), and the Macedonians - to the Bulgarians (the latter are called "Turk-Tatars");

4. Furthermore, this happens when the closest neighbors are declared "the biggest enemies of Ukraine and Macedonia - respectively Russia and Bulgaria." I.e., Ukraine is turned into "anti-Russia," while Macedonianism is "anti-Bulgarianism." The new identity is forged through hatred for the Russians and, accordingly, for the Bulgarians.

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[28] https://pogled.info/svetoven/balkani/deistviyata-na-vlastite-v-rs-makedoniya-pokaz-vat-che-ukrainski-stsenarii-izobshto-ne-e-izklyuchen-i-na-balkanite.152055 Accessed 22 July 2023.

5. The feeling of ethnic and racial superiority is acquired through "the most unscrupulous theft of the history of the neighbors."

However, there are also differences, to which the author testifies in the first person, from his travels: "Unlike Ukraine, where there are still people who consider themselves Ukrainians and speak the Ukrainian language, in these lands the "Macedonian nation" and the Macedonian language were invented and imposed only after 1945. Macedonian Bulgarians, at the cost of rivers of blood and tons of ink, were reformatted into a new people - Macedonians."

There is, of course, a moral: "It also shows us something else - a fratricidal war is easily provoked today. The events in Ukraine should remind us that such a conflict may knock on our door...God forbid. They didn't decide - they didn't beat us." Ivan Spiridonov, of course, is a relatively marginal Bulgarian conspiracy theorist whose writings, despite being published in one of the hubs of Russian propaganda in Bulgaria, hardly have any serious public resonance by themselves. However, they are interesting in that they clearly show the "grammar" through which Russian narratives are translated into Bulgarian so that Macedonia is presented "as" Ukraine - as a non-existent nation, as a quasi-state, as an anti-Bulgarian project of the global hegemon.

However, the Russian narratives about Ukraine, translated as Bulgarian narratives about Macedonia are repeated by a number of Bulgarian politicians to varying degrees – more or less literally, more or less exhaustively. To the highest degree, this discourse is repeated by the politicians from the so-called "patriotic" spectrum: from Volen Siderov, Krasimir Karakachanov and Angel Dzhambazki, then through Slavi Trifonov to the current leader of the third force in the parliament (Vazrazhdane party) - the radical populist and Russophile Kostadin Kostadinov.

Kostadinov: "Ukraine is something like one big Macedonia"; "Countries like Ukraine and Belarus are artificial." When it comes to

the creation of the Macedonian nation after 1944, some Bulgarian communists timidly try to tell Stalin that there is no such thing as a Macedonian self-consciousness. Following this he says: "There is no Belarusian self-awareness in Belarus, but we started working with the people and one appeared." It's the same with Ukraine."; "Bulgaria is an occupied country, it has limited sovereignty. As we were before '89', although now it is dependent on 'the inexhaustible fantasy of American puppeteers'"[29]; "Bulgaria and North Macedonia are two countries, but they should be one country - one people, which stretches from the Black Sea to Ohrid"[30]; "Macedonia is Bulgaria"[31].

Politicians such as Kornelia Ninova (BSP) or President Rumen Radev choose the narratives they quote more carefully. A common feature for them is the use of the conspiratorial plot: on the Macedonian issue, Bulgaria must defend its sovereignty against "external" pressure from Brussels and Washington.[32] Moreover, Radev - although actually provoked in this case by a demonstrative firing of a pistol against the Bulgarian club in Ohrid, i.e., from an anti-Bulgarian manifestation - introduces the thesis: "No one can build their modern identity on an anti-Bulgarian basis."[33]

In fact, if there is a propaganda thesis that has been persistently and relatively massively circulated in the Bulgarian media in the last year - including in serious media, not only in propaganda outlets - it is the thesis that Macedonianism increasingly has anti-Bulgarian manifestations. Unfortunately, this is also an effect of actual provocations from the Macedonian side. The automated search for the keyword "anti-Bulgarian" and its derivatives in the SENSIKA system shows that the peak days of the use of this word in the Bulgarian media are also the days after incidents in the neighboring country that can ac-

[29] https://glasove.com/na-fokus/kostadin-kostadinov-pred-glasove-rusiya-shte-specheli-voynata-ne-zavisimo-na-kakva-tsena-zashtoto-nyama-drug-polezen-hod Accessed 22 July 2023.
[30] https://topnovini.bg/novini/889545-kostadinov-se-prevarna-v-persona-non-grata-v-makedoniya
[31] https://bgvoice.com/kostadin-kostadinov-makedoniia-e-bulgariia Accessed 22 July 2023.
[32] https://btvnovinite.bg/bulgaria/sled-izkazvaneto-na-radev-za-rsm-raznoposochni-politicheski-reak-cii-v-parlamenta-obzor.html Accessed 22 July 2023.
[33] https://trafficnews.bg/bulgaria/radev-nikoi-ne-mozhe-da-gradi-svoiata-savremenna-282469/ Accessed 22 July 2023.

tually be qualified as "anti-Bulgarian": the peaks for 2022 are on June 4 with 289 publications after the burning of the Bulgarian center in Bitola and on November 24 with 439 publications after the shooting at the club in Ohrid.
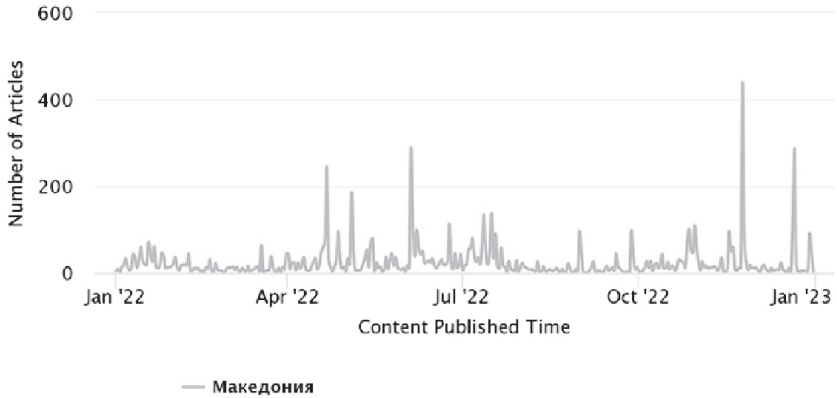
Graph 4: Number of publications per day containing "anti-Bulgarian" and deri-vatives (total 8982 publications for the period 01.01 - 31.12.2022)

However, the measurement also shows that the Bulgarian nationalist language, which uses a "translation" of the Russian narratives to present Macedonia and the Macedonians, is not at all that widespread in the Bulgarian media. The frequency of use of such language is tens of times lower than the use of direct (pro)Russian propaganda in the Bulgarian online space. The propaganda vilification of Macedonia is neither a mass practice in the Bulgarian media environment, nor a purposeful and technologically supported strategy.

Although not widespread, this language is harmful in that it portrays the citizens of the Republic of North Macedonia as people misled by malicious propaganda from the outside. However, it can be said with a high degree of certainty that the same will apply to the Macedonian nationalist discourses, which present the Bulgarians according to one or another narrative similar to the Russian ones: the Bulgarians

will also be victims of deception and conspiracy. The main function of the Russian propaganda package (but also of national-populism in general) is to show ordinary people - no matter which country they live in – as being not self-sufficient and deluded: incapable of self-determination.

To be sure, the acts of self-determination both, at the individual and group level, are always interwoven into a complex and often ambiguous social and historical fabric. And self-determination, individual and national, is often difficult and associated with traumatic experiences. But what such propaganda narratives do, is that they destroy the possibility of any citizens' self-determination. They – the citizens – are portrayed as deluded and voiceless puppets of foreign powers. Their sovereignty is annihilated in advance.

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Stefan Detchev

Deportations from Macedonia and their Place in Bulgarian-Macedonian Relationships

The subject of the deportation of the Jews from the territory of to-day's Republic of North Macedonia[1] was not always essential and important for the relations between Skopje and Sofia. For many decades these represented just one of the many numbers of Jews deported from former Yugoslavia. As Nadège Ragaru points out in her new book, in communist Yugoslavia, the Jews were mostly victims of „fascist terror." Along with this, they were also participants in the resistance. That is why a tangible presence of partisans was definitely noticeable among the surviving Jews.[2] The hard-to-hide non-solidarity of the local population in Yugoslav historiography was justified by the pace of the arrests during the so-called "lifting" done by the Bulgarian authorities in March 1943.[3]

The deportation was not mentioned by the Yugoslav delegation (in which Dimitar Vlahov was a representative from the Popular Republic of Macedonia) during the Peace Conference in Paris in 1946.[4] Even after the end of the 1960s, with the particular aggravation of the conflict between the two Balkan countries, because of the Macedonian issue, the deportation did not become a central topic in Yugoslav foreign policy. The situation was similar in Bulgaria, where the growing nationalist discourse did not affect it, and the communist regime itself continued to hide the Bulgarian complicity in the deportation in March 1943. In practice, the beginning was set only at the end of the 1990s, and here, rather, the Jewish communities around the world, as well as Jews originating from Macedonia, were the main reason for opening the topic.[5]

One has to point out immediately that the very depoertation of Jews from Macedonia in March 1943 is intertwined and strongly depends

[1] See more in Frederick B. Chary, *The Bulgarian Jews and the Final Solution: 1940-1944* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1972); Nadège Ragaru, *"Et les Juif bulgares furent sauvés …" Une histoire des saviors la Shoah en Bulgarie,"* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2020), 134-166, esp.154-158.
[2] Quoted according to Nadège Ragaru, *"I balgarskite bjaha spaseni …". Istoria na znanijata za Holocosta v Balgaria"* (Sofia: Kritika i Humanism, 2022), 408-410. All the references to Ragaru's book are done following this edition on Bulgarian language.
[3] Ibid., 411.
[4] Stefan Detchev, "Ako gi njamashe Stalin i Chervenata armija," *Svobodna Evropa* (Sept 13, 2023). https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/bulgaria-bez-stalin/32591285.html
[5] Ragaru, *"I balgarskite evrei bjaha spaseni,"* 434.

on the ideas and memory in the two neighboring countries - the Republic of Bulgaria and the Republic of North Macedonia - for the period of 1941-1944, the Holocaust itself, and the subsequent time of communist rule. In today's Republic of North Macedonia, this was strongly influenced by the understanding of the anti-fascist foundations of Macedonian statehood, which began its life in 1944 in Tito's Yugoslavia. In this sense, it is surprising how, despite its declared anti-communism, the opposition from VMRO-DPMNE almost repeats the 1941-44 period of the communist anti-fascist narrative of SDSM (the party of former communists).[6] Otherwise, in Bulgaria, from the beginning of the 1990s, a polishing of the image of tsarist Bulgaria began, as a result of which the topic of the „salvation of the Bulgarian Jews" became central. Likewise, at the same time, the former Bulgarian communist dictator Todor Zhivkov and the Bulgarian Communist Party were replaced in the role of "saviours" by Tsar Boris III, the conservative politician from the parliamentary majority Dimitar Peshev and the Bulgarian Orthodox Church.[7] The entry after 2001 of the exiled monarch Simeon of Saxe-Coburg Gotha into Bulgarian politics, as well as the creation, in 2005, of the triple coalition between the Bulgarian Socialist party (BSP, former Communist party), Simeon's NDSV and Movement for rights and freedoms (DPS), made the former Bulgarian communists in the second decade of the new century part of this sweet consensus.[8]

One can say that the Second World War for both Bulgaria and Macedonia was a time of a series of opportunisms.[9] In the end, however, the victory was on the side of the Macedonian partisans, and in the public space of the country during the last three decades, this was impossible to be avoided in a popular discourse directed against

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[6] Ibid., 437.

[7] Stefan Troebst, "Spasenie, deportirane ili Holokost? Polemikite predi i sled 1989 g." in *Istoria, mitologia i politika* (Sofia: УИ "Sw. Kl. Ohridski," 2010), 493-511.

[8] Stefan Detchev, "Kak se promeni balgarskata pamet za Holokosta prez godinite," *Svobodna Evropa* (February 04, 2022).
https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/31686441.html

[9] Stefan Detchev, "Koj babuva na makedonskata darzhava i ezik," *Svobodna Evropa* (Oct 02, 2020).
https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/30870811.html

the „Bulgarian fascist occupation." But even in the 1970s and 1980s, despite the worsening of relationships between Sofia and Skopje, anti-Jewish persecutions during the Second World War continued to be outside of the dispute between the two countries. Such a topic continued to be absent in the first half of the 1990s, as well as at the beginning of their second half. By and large, in Skopje, firstly, the participation of Jews in the struggle of the Macedonian people was praised, and secondly, the anti-Jewish persecutions were attributed specifically to the Bulgarian occupier and his fascist patrons. For Ragaru, the specificities of Jewish crimes were still silent in the historiography carried out in the newly independent state after 1991.[10]

It seems that a peculiar beginning of the entry of the problem of the deportation of the Jews into the diplomatic quarrel along the Sofia-Skopje axis appeared in 1998. Then, in Washington, a „Conference on the assets from the time of the Holocaust" was held, which was coordinated for the US Department of State by the USHMM (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum). As many as 44 governments and 13 NGOs participated. For the first time, a Macedonian delegation with the participation of Jews was also represented. At this international event, the members of the delegation from Skopje did not miss the opportunity to point out the Bulgarian responsibility for the economic expropriation of the Jews from Macedonia during the war.[11] Already here, in 1998, the future project of the Holocaust Memorial Center of the Jews of Macedonia was mentioned for the first time.[12]

The following first decade of the new 21st century was distinguished by the strong and tangible presence of various Jewish worlds and narratives about the Jews of Macedonia and the old borders of Bulgaria during the Second World War. While some celebrated the „salvation,"[13] others emphasized Bulgaria's complicity in the depor-

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[10] Ragaru, *"I balgarskite evrei bjaha spaseni,"* 410, 412, 414, 416.
[11] Ibid., 434
[12] Ibid., 435.
[13] See for example:Vladimir Mutafov, "Carjat-Obedinitel i spasjavaneto na evreite v Obedinena Balgar-

tation, which was kept silent in Sofia.[14] At the same time, American Jewish organizations, in opposition to Bulgarian cultural diplomacy, were demanding that Sofia clarify the facts.

At this time, Skopje seemed to be increasingly turning to the subject of the Holocaust and the fate of „Macedonian Jews." They were increasingly seen, not as a part of the Jews of the former Yugoslav space, but exactly as „Macedonian ones." This focused on their fate during the Bulgarian rule, which carried a powerful charge to worsen relations in view of the state of the Bulgarian narrative about World War II at the time. These developments were, to a large extent, the result of the contestation of the Macedonian identity by their neighbours, especially Greece and Bulgaria. In the Republic of Macedonia, a Holocaust Fund of the Jews of Macedonia was established, with Samuel Sadikario at the head of the organization. In September 2005, the foundation stone of the **Holocaust Memorial Center for the Jews of Macedonia** was laid in the former Jewish quarter of Skopje.[15] The implementation of the Holocaust Museum continued after 2005 for the next six years. Meanwhile, the coming to power of Nikola Gruevski's DPMNE in 2006 led to a de-Yugoslavization and a strong and significant "antiquization," which seems to have been applied in order to reject any suspicions of Bulgarism left over from the years of Lyubcho Georgievski, as well as to „throw down the gauntlet" to Greek claims and intransigence. In this way, according to Ragaru, there was a „Macedonianization of heroism," which went along with the „Macedonianization" of „historical suffering."[16] This continues to carry the potential for future tensions with Bulgaria, insofar as the impossibility at that time, to ignore the influential figure of Simeon of Saxe-Coburg Gotha, affects and continues to affect the

ia," *Media Times Review* (April 2004). And many others.

[14] Angel Vagenstain, "Spasi li Bulgaria vsichkite si evrei?," *Trud* (March 5, 2003), Reprinted in *Mediapool* (March 06, 2003). https://www.mediapool.bg/spasi-li-bulgaria-vsichkite-si-evrei-news20338.html Albena Taneva, Vanja Gazenko, *Glasove v zashtita na grazhdanskoto obshetsvo* (Sofia, GAL-IKO, 2002); Ivan Hadzhijski, *Sadbata na evrejskoto naselenie v Belomorska Trakia, Vardarska Makedonia i Jugozapadna Balgaria prez 1941-1944* (Dupnica: Devora-Bi, 2004) and some others.

[15] Ragaru, *"I balgarskite evrei bjaha spaseni,"* 434.

[16] Ibid., 416.

developments and the complete dominance of the narrative of „saving the Bulgarian Jews" in the Bulgarian public space.[17]

The actions of the international factor in the face of Jewish organizations should not be overlooked either. Already on January 26, 2010, the Speaker of the Bulgarian Parliament, Tsetska Tsacheva, donated to the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum documents, which centered on the „salvation" of the Jews from the Kingdom of Bulgaria.[18] Sofia, now a member of the EU, also began an important rapprochement with the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), an organization created to fight negationism and anti-Semitism. In 2012, Bulgaria received observer status in this organization.[19] In June 2017, it also became a corresponding member (liaison). In the end, in November 2018, Bulgaria was able to boast its status as a full member of IHRA.[20]

Already in 2012, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) publicly called on the Bulgarian authorities to reevaluate their policy towards the history related to the deportation of the Jews in March 1943 and Bulgarian responsibilities for the Holocaust.[21] Meanwhile, the action of international factors and the fact that the Bulgarian-Macedonian dispute could not, and still cannot, be completely isolated as a dispute between Sofia and Skopje lead to the partial victories of the Jews of Macedonia in the international arena. In 2009, in the permanent exhibition at the Yad Vashem memorial, at the insistence of the „Committee of Immigrants from Monastir" (Bitola) and the „Association of Macedonian Jews of the Next Ge-

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[17] Stefan Detchev, "Kak se promeni balgarskata pamet."

[18] "Tcacheva dari dokumenti na muzeja Auschwitz-Birkenau," *24 chasa*, (January 27, 2010). https://www.24chasa.bg/mezhdunarodni/article/358374

Birkenau," *24 chasa*, (Jan 27, 2010). Bojko Vasilev, "Pamet za sloto I spomeni za spasitelite," BNT (January 29, 2010). https://bntnews.bg/bg/a/22044-pamet_na_zloto_i_spomen_za_spasitelite_ae_reportaj_ot_aushvic_i_parij

[19] "Bulgaria sas statut na nabljudatel v ITF"- *Posolstvo na Izrael v Bulgaria* (Oct. 15, 2012) https://embassies.gov.il/sofia/NewsAndEvents/Pages/Bulgaria-becomes-an-ITF-observer.aspx

[20] "Bulgaria e prieta za palnopraven chlen na Mezhdunarodnia alians za vazpomenanie na Holokosta," *Republika Bulgaria, Ministerski syvet* (November 29, 2018). https://nccedi.government.bg/bg/node/234

[21] Ragaru, *"I balgarskite evrei bjaha spaseni,"* 442.

neration," against the name Bulgaria, the number of Jewish victims during the Second World War went from a glamorous 0 (zero) to being replaced by the number 11, 343.[22] In the former Yugoslav republic, analogies between the Jewish and Macedonian sufferings were already persistently drawn. The reason for this was also the commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913, which led to the fragmentation of the Macedonian people between four countries - Greece, Serbia, Bulgaria and Albania.[23]

In the first years of the second decade of the new century, it seems that the Jewish efforts met, apparently with their own and not always coincidental motivation, a response also from Macedonian governmental circles. They increasingly began to pay attention to the Bulgarian deportation of the Jews. These developments were also reflected in the academic establishment. Thus, in 2013, at a conference dedicated to the 70th anniversary of the deportation of the Jews from the „new lands," MANU chairman Vlado Kambovski explicitly pointed out how „the Macedonian people best understand the fate of the Jews, because being subjected to biological and national extermination has a similar historical experience."[24]

There were two other events that were relevant to our topic. First of all, this was the second meeting of the Macedonian and Jewish past, which was happening physically through the realization of the urban project "Skopje-2014." On March 10, 2011, opposite of the Museum of the Macedonian Struggle for Independence, the Holocaust Memorial Center of the Jews of Macedonia appeared and was opened,[25] although still incomplete. The opening ceremony was attended by

[22] Ibid., 441-442.

[23] Desislava Ushatova, "Vazmushtenie v Makedonia ot chestvaneto na Balkanskite vojni," *Actualno* (Oct. 29, 2012).
https://www.actualno.com/balkani/vyzmushtenie-v-makedonija-ot-chestvaneto-na-balkanskite-vojni-news_405073.html

[24] "Kambovski: Makedoncite naj-dobre ja razbirat tazhnata sudbina na evreite," *A1ON.mk* (March 12, 2013).
https://a1on.mk/macedonia/kambovski-makedoncite-najdobro-ja-ra/?fbclid=IwAR37G1O61AH-SiejjxvF8khLVofFb-st8UWsBdh3idHApPhF8Kd-VRKk_QaU

[25] "Memorialen Centar na Holocousta,"
https://navicup.com/object/balkan-grand-tour/holocaust-memorial-center-226548/bg

the Prime Minister of the country, Nikola Gruevski, and guests from Israel, the USA and Germany were also present. The center was going to acquire its final form only in 2015, and for the moment the exposition was only sketched out. The story of the Bulgarian occupation was told, as well as of those 7,144 Jewish lives taken during the war. The of the Bulgarian authorities for the deportation was clearly stated in the museum exhibition responsibility. It also exhibited a special wagon with the inscription BDZ, which is said to have been left over from the deportations themselves in March 1943.[26]

The very idea of building a museum dedicated to the deportation and extermination of the Jews from Macedonia, in which the Bulgarian pro-Nazi government at the time was clearly complicit, led to visible irritation among the political and public circles in Bulgaria, as well as among nationalist-oriented Bulgarians,[27] including those who have already become accustomed to, and internalized the image and self-perception of „the only country that saved all of its Jews.“ The first headlines in the Bulgarian media at the time were particularly telling - „Near Vardar they equated the Bulgarians with Hitler,"[28] „Skopje fills its Holocaust museum with forgeries."[29] It is interesting that 12 years later, when marking the 80th anniversary of the events of March 1943, the headlines seem to sound identical - „The Skopje wagon and the lie,"[30] „BDJ blossomed on a death wagon at the Skopje Holocaust Museum."[31] As Ragaru notes in her monograph, despite the fact that the Holocaust Museum was a different initiative that had nothing to do with Gruevski's policy, in the opening of the memorial, Bulgaria saw proof that the Republic of Macedonia did not

[26] Ragaru, *I balgarskite evrei bjaha spaseni,"* 435.
[27] Spas Tashev "Skopie palni sas falshifikati muzeja si na Holkousta," *NEWS.BG* (November. 12, 2012). https://news.bg/your-voice/skopie-palni-s-falshifikati-muzeya-si-za-holokosta.html
[28] "Kraj Vardar priravniha balgarite s Hitler," *24 chasa* (October 09, 2012). https://www.24chasa.bg/mezhdunarodni/article/1580159
[29] Tashev, Skopie palni ... https://news.bg/your-voice/skopie-palni-s-falshifikati-muzeya-si-za-holokosta.html
[30] Silvia Avdala, "Vagonat v Skopie I lazhata," *Voina i mir* (February 15, 2023). https://voinaimir.info/2023/02/vagonot-skopie/
[31] Silvia Avdala "BDZ cafna varhu vagon na smartta v Muzeja na Holokosta v Skopie," *Marica* (February 28, 2023). https://www.marica.bg/svqt/bdj-cafna-varhu-vagon-na-smartta-v-muzeq-na-holokosta-v-skopie

seek knowledge about the facts related to the Holocaust.[32] The installation of a Yugoslav wagon instead of an authentic Bulgarian one, as well as the BDZ logo on it, which it was to impose only in 1964, was used by the Bulgarian media and polemicists to put under doubt the credibility of the facts presented in the museum altogether, as well as the Bulgarian complicity in the deportation itself. Along with this, other voices in the country were looking for commercial motives in the behavior of the Jews from their southwestern neighbour. According to similar voices, the Macedonian Jews were primarily looking for compensation from Bulgaria, having calculated the amount at 18 million euros.

The tension between Sofia and Skopje increased even more with the appearance of the news of the shooting of a new film entitled „The Third Half."[33] It was the work of the Macedonian director Darko Mitrevski and was mainly devoted to the deportation of the Jews from Macedonia, and the Bulgarian occupation over it during the Second World War. The film was generously financed by the state with 1 million euros, as well as by the Macedonian Film Fund with another 50,000 euros. Funding also comes from the Holocaust Fund of the Jews of Macedonia, the Jewish community in the Republic of Macedonia, as well as the Film Fund of the Czech Republic. Thus, the total budget of the film was 2.15 million euros. The Prime Minister Gruevski personally visited the shooting site in October 2011. The film was released in September 2012, and, according to Ragaru, confirmed the conviction of the authorities in Sofia that the government of Gruevski had decided to conduct an „anti-Bulgarian campaign" on the grounds of the history of the Holocaust.[34] The official premiere of the film took place at the Millennium Cinema in Skopje. In a statement on Channel 5 to the reporter Lidia Bogatinova, then

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[32] Ragaru, "*I balgarskite evrei bjaha spaseni,"*417.
[33] Viktor Kanzurov, '"Treto poluvreme"- koktejl ot futbol, Holokost I propaganda sreshtu balgarite," *E-vestnik* (October 13, 2012.)
https://e-vestnik.bg/15859/filmat-treto-poluvreme-kokteyl-ot-futbol-evrei-i-propaganda-sreshtu-balgarite/
[34] Ragaru, "*I balgarskite evrei bjaha spaseni,"*417.

Prime Minister Gruevski stated that the film was excellent and that it deserved an Oscar.[35]

The work is considered by Sofia as a kind of peak in the deliberate anti-Bulgarian campaign of the Prime Minister. Along with this, the film introduced the sensitive topic of Bulgarian complicity in the deportation, which was presented as an enthusiastic Bulgarian initiative. All throughout the film, suggestions were made about Bulgaria's exceptional responsibility. Through the old Jewish woman Rebecca and her return to Skopje, the film also sought to promote and confirm the "Skopje 2014" project. In Bulgaria, the different ways in which the nearly 20-year-old Serbian rule in Macedonia, and the several-year-old Bulgarian one were presented in the film caused irritation. While in the first part the author used parody, the second part began with gloomy black clouds and a dramatic tone that did not stop until the end. Moreover, the Bulgarians were presented as bloodthirsty. The Germans were also absent from the film, as the Nazi power was associated with the Bulgarians. At that time, a Bulgarian political observer noted that, unlike other works such as the Polish "Katyn" by Andrzej Wajda, where there was at least one good Russian, there was not a single good Bulgarian in "the third half."

It cannot be denied that both the film and the initiative surrounding the Holocaust Memorial in Skopje lead to a change in the tone and the political line of Sofia towards its Southwestern neighbour. Along with this, after its entry into the EU in 2007, Bulgaria also had 18 MPs, who could confirm membership, act in favor of and clarify the Bulgarian position. In this case, Andrey Kovachev from GERB, Evgeni Kirilov from BSP and Stanimir Ilchev from GERB referred the European Commissioner for Enlargement, Štefan Füle, to the „manipulation of history" done by Skopje.[36] The action also showed that the trip-

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[35] Kanzurov, "Treto poluvreme …"
https://e-vestnik.bg/15859/filmat-treto-poluvreme-kokteyl-ot-futbol-evrei-i-propaganda-sreshtu-balgarite/
[36] About the Bulgarian MP's position see Borjana Kamenova "Makedonski filmi sreshtu Balgaria," *BNT* (October 28, 2011).
https://bntnews.bg/bg/a/63036-makedonski_film_sreshtu_bylgarija On the reply done by D. Mitrevski

le coalition led to a change in the position of the BSP towards the past, and the regime of 1941-44. At the turn of the two first decades of our current century, in most cases, the Bulgarian representatives expressed regret for what happened to the Jews of the Aegean sea coast, Vardar Macedonia and Pirot, and, together with that, expressed their decisive rejection of any Bulgarian responsibility and complicity in March 1943 in the deportation itself.[37] At the same time, they did not miss the opportunity to point out that Skopje hid the actions of a number of factors in Bulgaria related to the survival of the entire Jewish community from the old borders of the kingdom. In this case, the developments took place at a time when the BSP was promoting its anti-fascist past less. Moreover, in post-communist Bulgaria, and among its political class, there was, rather, more interest in the issues of communism and the former secret services than the Holocaust.

After all, „the third Half" caused excitement in Bulgaria before it was seen, but it was hardly the only thing to do so. In Autumn of 2012, the annual report on Macedonia's progress towards the EU drew attention to the misunderstanding between Macedonia and Bulgaria.[38] One month later, Sofia, together with Paris and Athens, joined the countries that, in 2012, expressed reservations to the start of negotiations from Macedonia. Already an EU member, Sofia managed to include in the EU Council resolution the mention of the importance of Macedonia maintaining good neighborly relations with its neighbours.[39]

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see "Rezhisjorat na propagandistkia makedonski film "Treto poluvreme"plashi sas zatvor balgarski evrodeputat," *Dnes+* (Noem. 8, 2011).
https://dnesplus.bg/es-i-svyat/rezhisyorat-na-propagandistkiya-makedonski-film-treto-poluvreme-plashi-sas-zatvor-balgarski-evrodeput_546762 About the position of Doris Pack, chairman of the Commission on culture and education in the European Parliament see "I Doris Pak dade gol za makedonskoto "Treto poluvreme"," *Vecher*, (Nov. 28, 2011).
https://web.archive.org/web/20160305004947/http://vecer.mk/kultura/i-doris-pak-dade-gol-za-makedonskoto-treto-poluvreme
[37] Interview with Andrey Kovachev, *Fokus* (December 02, 2011).
[38] *Rapport de la Comission au Parlament européen et au Conceil, Ancienne République yougoslave de Macedoine.* Strasbourge (April 16, 2013).
[39] *Council conclusions on enlargement and stabilisation and association process* (3210th general affairs council meeting)
https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/genaff/134234.pdf

In the following years, the Holocaust, in the context of the development of Bulgarian-Macedonian relations, carried on to preoccupy the Bulgarian MPs. The European Parliament continued to be the place where the North Macedonian government, with much energy, strives to reach. On November 27, 2012, there was a hearing of the Macedonian Foreign Minister Nikola Poposki, in which he declared: „Let's leave history to the historians!" It was criticized immediately by the Bulgarian MP Kovachev, who exclaimed that the Macedonian politicians and statesmen were the ones who didn't leave it to the historians, as the whole city of Skopje, as such, was surrounded only by history.[40]

The positions of the international Jewish community, and the politics related to the memory of the Holocaust, lead to the emergence of a new challenge to the Bulgarian authorities in connection with the deportation of Jews from Macedonia, as well as from the Aegean sea and Pirot. On December 4 2011, the Organization of Jews in Bulgaria, „Shalom," came out with a declaration in which it spoke about the responsibility that the German authorities had for the deportations, but also about the complicity of the then Bulgarian government. The atmosphere and debates in Bulgaria apparently led to the appearance in the text of a wording about the „absence of resistance of the local population" in Macedonia itself, which could be seen, to some extent, as a concession to Sofia. However, the document categorically demanded that today's Bulgarian government had to take clear „moral responsibility for the actions of the pro-Nazi government towards the Jews in the period 1941-1943."[41] In the following months and years, this pressure only intensified. In October 2012, at a conference in Sofia, scientists insisted that Bulgaria should recognize its historical responsibility for the deportations, with the American researcher Michael Birenbaum speaking overtly on this sense.[42]

[40] Andrey Kovachev's speech at the European Parliament
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7XtLnJAwJQU
[41] "Pozicia na "Shalom" po povod sadbata na evreite pod balgarsko upravlenie," *Shalom.PR* (January 31, 2013).
https://shalompr.org/poziciya-na-oeb-shalom-po-vprosa-za-sdbata-na-evreite-pod-blgarsko-upravlenie
[42] "Izpravjaneto pred neliceprijatnite fakti ot minaloto e izraz na sila ...," *Balgarski Helzinski komitet,*

One must add to all of this not only the different readings that Sofia and Skopje usually gave to the period 1941-44, as either „liberation"/"administration" or „occupation" but also; the different views of the character of the regime in Sofia at the time („fascist" or just „authoritarian"); of the anti-Semitic policy in 1940-1944, as well as for the communist period in Tito's Yugoslavia and Zivkov's Bulgaria. In fact, during these years, in Macedonia, with the museum, the above mentioned film, and with the activity of the Memorial Center headed by Goran Sadikario, there were, according to Ragaru, three priorities - to recognize at the local and international level the persecution against the local Jews through the Holocaust; to assert their identity precisely as „Macedonian Jews"; to publicize the role of the Bulgarian state.[43]

During these years, the position of the Organization of Jews in Bulgaria, „Shalom," as well as the international Jewish organizations, became increasingly clear and insistent. The change in leadership in 2016,[44] as well as the accession of Bulgaria to the IHRA, and the policy of organizations such as the WJC, all created new parameters for the policy of Sofia. On August 29, 2017, Shalom issued a new statement that slightly edited the previous one from December 04, 2011. At the request of the Macedonian side, the mention of the weak solidarity of the Macedonian population with the local Jews was abandoned. Along with this, it was clearly stated at the beginning how „these territories were under Bulgarian administration."[45] Ragaru suggests that the leaders of the World Jewish Congress (WJC) played an essential role in reformulating the problem. In March 2018, around the 75th anniversary, the president of the organization R. S.

https://www.bghelsinki.org/bg/news/pressobshenie-izpravyaneto-pred-nelicepriyatnite-fakti-ot-mi-naloto-e-izraz-na-sila-ne-na-slabost-na-nasheto-demokratichno-obshestvo

[43] Ragaru, *"I balgarskite evrei bjaha spaseni,"*439. She emphasizes how it is more difficult to revise the Macedonian public discourse focused more on the collective innocence of the Macedonians in anti-Jewish persecutions and the existing solidarity between the Jews and the rest of the local population. Ibid. 439-440.

[44] D-r Aleksandar Oskar e novijat lider na "Shalom"," *24 chasa* (April 20, 2016).
https://www.24chasa.bg/bulgaria/article/5439462

[45] Ragaru, *"I balgarskite evrei bjaha spaseni,"*449.

Lauder, pointed out how the Bulgarian authorities should recognize the complicity of the Bulgarian government in the deportation of March 1943.[46]

During the commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the March events in 1943 in Sofia, the aspiration for full membership of Bulgaria in the IHRA led to the invitation of the Holocaust Memorial Center for the Jews of Macedonia, as well as the Macedonian ambassador, to Sofia. It is becoming increasingly apparent that one can no longer speak only of the „salvation" of Jews from the „old lands" without also conjuring a narrative that covers the deportation from the „new." On March 12, 2018, at a ceremony commemorating the 75th anniversary of March 1943, the director of the Center for Academic Studies of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), Paul Shapiro, pointed out to journalists how „Bulgarians" were the perpetrators of the abductions and deportations from Macedonia.[47] From here, the possibilities for a one-sided Bulgarian narrative became more and more difficult.

On the same day, the Bulgarian prime-minister Boyko Borisov was in Skopje. For the first time, a high representative of Bulgaria paid tribute to the 7,144 Jews from Macedonia. Recognition of responsibility for the „lifts" and deportations by the Bulgarian state was expected for the first time after 75 years. Silent worship with the offering of a wreath occurred in the Tobacco Monopoly in Skopje. However, the expected words were not heard at all.[48] There was an advance arrangement between Borisov, representatives of the Jewish communities in Macedonia and Bulgaria and leaders of the World Jewish Congress over what the text would contain. Nevertheless, a previously

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[46] Ibid., 449-450.

[47] Pol Shapiro quoted in Georgi Koritarov, *Televizia Evropa*, Svobodna zona (March 03, 2018). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6oz_M5ePPFQ

[48] For a response among the contemporary Jewish community in the Republic of North Macedonia see the conversation between Georgi Koritarov and Victor Mizrahi, *Televizia Evropa*, Svobodna zona (Match 03, 2018);

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ommpp_fIbDU;

See also the representative of "United Patriots" in Koritarov's program as well https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V_a5Qio-V3Q

prepared text was not read.[49] The prime minister improvised and spoke only of salvation, and how here the Nazis were at work. However, one of the reasons why Borisov was here was very well known. It was Bulgaria's desire for full membership in the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), where, as we mentioned, the country had the sole status of a candidate member. Bulgaria's full membership became a fact in November 2018. This led the country to include in its legislation, in October 2017, a definition of anti-Semitism, adopted previously by the IHRA in 2016, and to announce that Deputy Minister Georg Georgiev (who considers liberalism as a dirty word),[50] would be the Bulgarian coordinator of these activities. Ironically, Bulgaria's membership in this organization, since the end of 2018, further narrowed the possibilities for maneuvering around the deportation of 11,343 Jews from the „new lands."[51]

We can definitely say that the international mediation, mostly of Jewish organizations and institutions, left less and less room for Sofia to maneuver around the alliance with the Third Reich and its complicity in the deportation of the Jews from the „new lands." At the same time, it also limited the possibilities of the Macedonian country claiming only elementary abuse at the level of deportation, and for instilling anti-Bulgarian hatred and burdening one nation with fascist responsibility and the other one with anti-fascist righteousness. It was no coincidence that Bulgaria's path to the IHRA went together with the signing of the contract with the Republic of Macedonia on August 1, 2017, as well as with the change of the exposition in the Holocaust Museum in Skopje after March 2018. After its reconstruction and enrichment, the visitor already meets in the museum the general context of the Holocaust with the presentation of Nazism, which was before the „Bulgarian occupation of 1941-44."

[49] Ragaru, *"I balgarskite evrei bjaha spaseni,"* 32.

[50] "Georg Georgiev: Dnes si svoboden na volja da slovobludstvash, liberalni otcerugatelju," *Faktor* (January 06, 2021).

https://faktor.bg/bg/articles/georg-georgiev-s-ostar-komentar-po-debata-za-mazhkoto-horo-za-bo-goyavlenie

[51] Ragaru, *"I balgarskite evrei bjaha spaseni,"* 450-452.

The mobilization for the salvation of the Jews from the old borders of the kingdom of Bulgaria was not omitted anymore. In this way, as Ragaru pointed out: „The understanding of Bulgaria's role is close to the one accepted in international historiography."[52] Even the carriage that caused so much controversy between Sofia and Skopje after 2018 was already indicated to have been reconstructed and donated by the Macedonian Railways.

 In both countries, however, history continues to be written and changed according to the concerns of the present. The late 2020 Bulgarian veto at the beginning of the negotiations of the Republic of North Macedonia with the EU has led to a very significant hardening of the tone on both sides of the border. The presence of „United Patriots," and especially Karakachanov'sVMRO in the Bulgarian government, contributed to this. During Krasimir Karakachanov's time as Minister of Defense, the Military TV Channel produced the documentary „The Last Half" (2021),[53] which went to unheard of extremes in erasing the persecution of Jews in the Second World War and the Bulgarian complicity in their deportation from Macedonia. In the end, the aim was to completely whitewash the image of Tsar Boris III and the Bulgarian authorities at the time. The film presented today's dominant public view in Bulgaria about the former Macedonia as partitioned into „German occupation zones divided into administrative districts." It was done in order to avoid any Bulgarian responsibility in the deportation from March 1943. All of this was the result of the image suggested by the film about German-occupied territories temporarily granted to the Bulgarian administration, which consisted of local people, and was subject to the final decisions of the German authorities. To a large extent, the documentary tape was related to the recycling of the then Bulgarian propaganda from 1941 and the following years. Even after Borisov's fall from power, political forces such as "Ima takav narod" (ITN) and "Vazrazhdane" also continue to

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[52] Ibid. 437-438.
[53] "Posledno poluvreme," *Voenen televizionen kanal*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JGcFVo7bskI

stand behind a similar narrative. Such were the views shared by the co-chairman from the Bulgarian side of the mixed historical commission on April 19, 2021, Angel Dimitrov, in the program „History. BG," as well as the historiographical mainstream, which completely identified with the then line of Tsar Boris III and his prime-minister Bogdan Filov, and not with the anti-Nazi opposition from the conservative right through the center to the left.[54] It continued at the commemoration of the 80th anniversary with a letter from historians and their „general opinion" on the absence of fascism in power in Bulgaria, which completely omitted anti-Semitic legislation and Bulgarian complicity in deportations.[55] It was followed by a new letter from „independent historians" to honour, in March 2023, the memory of Tsar Boris III as a „saviour."[56] Even when a group of Bulgarian historians, in the end of February 2023, called on Bulgaria to recognize the responsibility for the deportation,[57] contemporaneously, and along with this, a new document by „independent historians" was announced against these calls. The excuse for what had happened was sought in a more general context in the Second World War.[58]

[54] "Okupacija, spasenie ili prisadeinjavane," *BNT*, Istoria.BG, (April 19, 2021)
https://bnt.bg/news/okupaciya-spasenie-ili-prisaedinyavane-balgarskoto-upravlenie-v-makedoniya-pomoravieto-i-zapadna-trakiya-1941-1944-g-294143news.html
[55] Stanovishte na balgarski istorici po vaprosa "Imalo li e fashitski rezhim v Balgaria?," *BAS* (November 23, 2022).
https://www.bas.bg/?p=41867
[56] "Iniciativna grupa za dostojno otbeljazvane na 80 godishninata ot spasjavaneto na balgarskite evrei: Otkrito pismo," *BTA* (Febr. 27, 2023).
https://www.bta.bg/bg/news/bulgaria/oficial-messages/414515-initsiativna-grupa-za-dostoyno-otbelyazvane-na-80-godishninata-ot-spasyavaneto-n
[57] "Ucheni prizovavat darzhavata da priznae otgovornostta si za presledvane I deportirane na evrei," *Mediapool* (February 28, 2023).
https://www.mediapool.bg/ucheni-prizovavat-darzhavata-da-priznae-otgovornostta-si-za-presledvane-i-deportirane-na-evrei-news345336.html
[58] "Stanovishte na istorici otnosno politikata na Balgaria po evrejskija vapros," *Institut za istoricheski izsledvanija*, BAN, (March 16, 2023).
https://ihist.bas.bg/%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B0%D0%B-D%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B8%D1%89%D0%B5-%D0%B8%D1%81%D1%82%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%B8%D1%86%D0%B8-%D0%B5%D0%B2%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%B9%D1%81%D-0%BA%D0%B8-%D0%B2%D1%8A%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%BE%D1%81/

Conclusion

One can conclude that the Bulgarian official position, especially with regard to the development of Bulgarian-Macedonian relations, not only did not change significantly between 2013 and 2023, but was even, to a certain extent, further strengthened. This is indeed a fact, despite the greater coverage of the subject of deportation and Bulgarian complicity in the media, along with some history textbooks. Until the end, the topic of the fake wagon in the Holocaust Memorial in Skopje, which was allegedly supposed to erase the deportation itself and the Bulgarian complicity, was heating up. The suggestion was that the carriage was fake because the transportation itself was done with German wagons. The titles were also not accidental, such as „One museum, one wagon and a thousand lies."[59] In March 2023, the co-chairman of the joint historical commission between the two countries from the Bulgarian side continued to deny Bulgarian responsibility for the deportation, and made efforts to generate „common opinions" in order to hide behind them. Moreover, together with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, it was the responsibility of the presidency to bar any alternative interlocutors from speaking on the topic in the Bulgarian media.

The Macedonian side realizes the strengths of its position regarding the deportation of the Jews as a convenient way to attack the Bulgarian position regarding the non-recognition of the Macedonian language and identity and to translate it into an internationally understandable and universal discourse. This happens at a time when neither Bulgarian historiography nor Bulgarian representatives from the joint commission on historical and educational issues can still present a reasonable, balanced, comprehensive and internationally acceptable account of the Second World War and the Bulgarian power in Macedonia. Along with this, however, Skopje's insistence on some original Macedonian anti-fascist righteousness, as well as the

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[59] Victoria Georgieva, "Edin muzej, edin vagon I hiljadi lazhi," *Ah, tezi medii* (July 20, 2022). https://ahtezimedii.com/2022/07/20/edin-muzej-edin-vagon-i-hilyadi-lazhi/

misuse of the deportation narrative for undisguised anti-Bulgarian purposes, could and should be questioned. It ignores the moments of opportunism in the behaviour of the Macedonian public in the first months of the Bulgarian occupation in April 1941, and the participation of leftist and communist political actors in them; the weak initial resistance compared to those in other parts of Yugoslavia;[60] the passivity of a large part of the local population during the deportation in March 1943; and the cases of saved and surviving Jews and their reluctant acceptance into the formations of partisan resistance.[61]

This is why it is not at all accidental that in recent years the international Jewish community, more often indirectly than directly, has played an important role in rounding, smoothing and refining both positions - the Bulgarian and the Macedonian one. It demands that Sofia speak about the survival of the Jews from the old borders, but also about the deportation from the "new lands," thus taking responsibility for this at the state level. On the other hand, it insists that Skopje present the general context and the entire narrative of what was happening in Bulgaria at the time without misusing the occasion in order to foment superficial, anti-Bulgarian hysteria. Hopefully in the years to come, and rather sooner than later, this will lead us to a new memory of the Holocaust in the two neighboring Balkan countries who share very common history.

[60] See more in: Stefan Detchev, "Bulgarian Historiograpfy after 1989," in *Contemporary European History* (2023), in print

[61] Ragaru, *"I balgarskite evrei bjaha spaseni,"* 440.

BIONOTES

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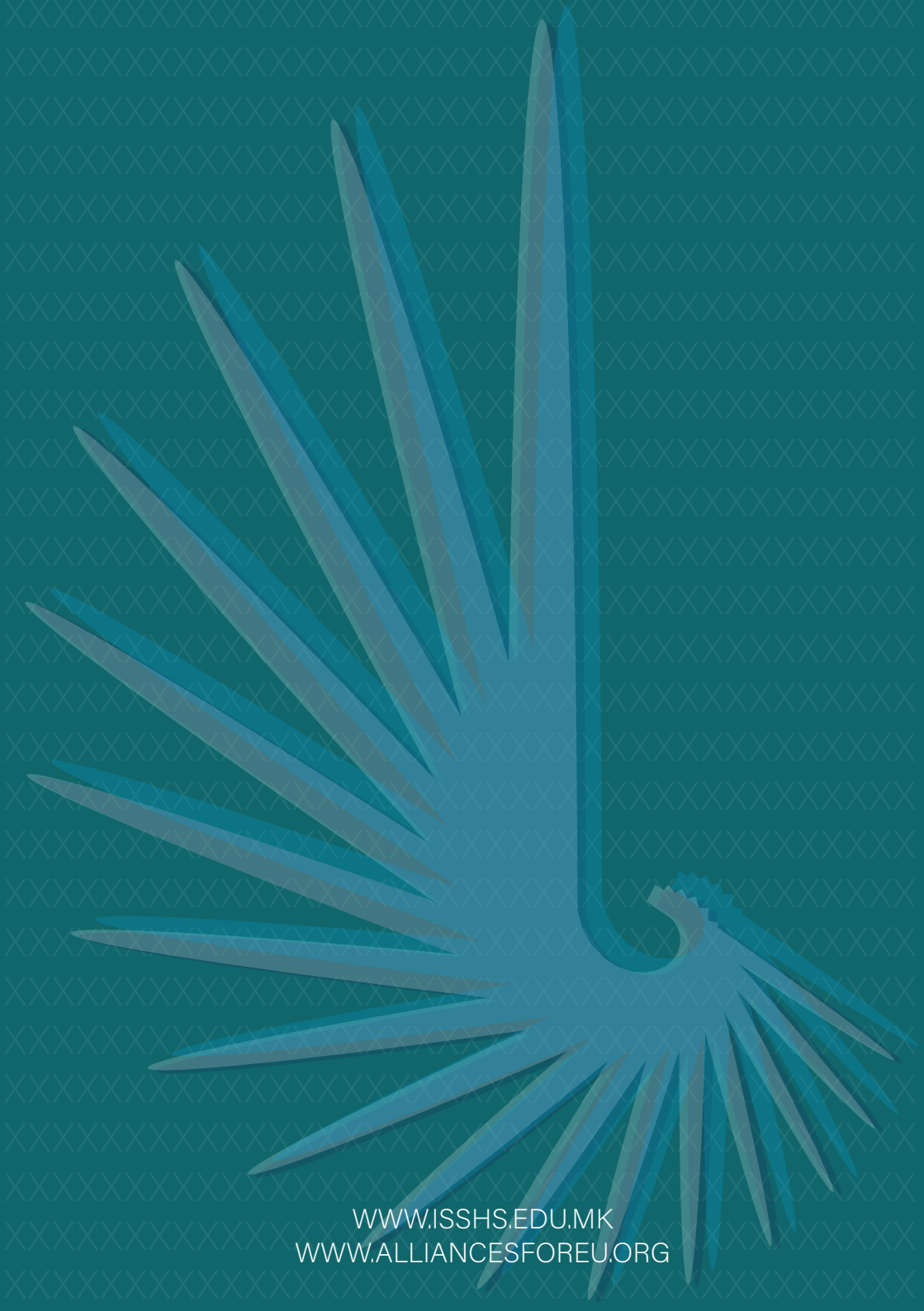**Ljubomir Donchev**, *New Bulgarian University Department of Philosophy and Sociology*

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