

**Bulgaria's Claims  
on the Macedonian Ethno-Linguistic Identity**

Macedon etnolingvisztikai identitással  
kapcsolatos bolgár álláspont

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**Abstract:** Bulgaria's veto on opening North Macedonia's accession talks with the EU has internationalized a bilateral historical dispute that is obscure and perplexing to international observers. This article explores the genesis of this historical dispute and how it has been rationalized by the current Bulgarian political and academic elites. The dispute concerning the origin of the Macedonian ethno-linguistic identity is a legacy of both Bulgaria's nation-building processes and its politics of continued grievances about the "injustice" done to Bulgaria and Bulgarians ever since the annulment of the San Stefano Treaty in 1878. Bulgaria's current formulation of the problem was canonized in the 1960s by its communist leader, Todor Zhivkov, and continues to shape Bulgaria's foreign policy toward North Macedonia.

**Keywords:** North Macedonia, Bulgaria, EU, ethno-linguistic identity, nationalism

**Összefoglalás:** Az Észak-Macedónia EU-csatlakozásához szükséges tárgyalások megkezdését ért bolgár vétő egy a nemzetközi megfigyelők számára zavaros és zavarbaejtő történelmi vitát vitt nemzetközi szintre. A jelen tanulmány feltárja ennek a történelmi vitának a keletkezéstörténetét, és az a folyamatot, ahogy a jelenlegi bolgár politikai és tudományos elit racionalizálja ezt a vitát. A macedon etnolingvisztikai identitással kapcsolatos vita eredete egyrészt Bulgária nemzetépítési folyamatának, másrészt annak a politikának a hagyatéka, ami a Bulgáriával és a bolgárokkal szemben az 1878-as San Stefano-i szerződés annulálása óta elkövetett "igazságtalanságok" folytonos felpanaszolására épít. A problémának Bulgária általi, jelenleg is érvényes keretezését az 1960-as években kanonizálta Todor Zsivkov kommunista vezető, és továbbra is ez a koncepció formálja Bulgária külpolitikáját Észak-Macedóniával szemben.

**Kulcsszavak:** Észak-Macedónia, Bulgária, EU, etnolingvisztikai identitás, nacionalizmus

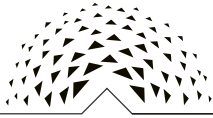
## INTRODUCTION

This article addresses the genesis of Bulgaria's claims regarding the Macedonian ethno-linguistic identity, i.e., the origin of the Macedonian people and their language. The conflict over the ethno-linguistic identity of the Macedonian people living in the wider Macedonia region (in today's North Macedonia and parts of Bulgaria and Greece) has been brought to the fore both in the EU and more generally in international affairs by Bulgaria's recent double veto in December 2020 and June 2021 on opening North Macedonia's accession talks with the EU (Gotev & Trkanjec, 2021). Although this episode appears to have

come out of the blue, in reality, the conflict over the origin of the Macedonian people and their language has been a protracted one, tainting relations among the states and peoples of the southern Balkans for the better part of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century. Also, many international observers have connected the current Bulgarian policy toward North Macedonia with the Bulgarian domestic political crisis and the turn toward increasing nationalism in domestic electoral rivalries, where the “Macedonian question” can be a useful tool for gaining votes. While domestic politics is important in setting an agenda for hot topics in foreign policy, such as the “Macedonian question” in Bulgaria, the current Bulgarian attitude toward North Macedonia’s EU membership was first announced ten years ago, when the political situation was quite different, and when Bulgaria was a new EU member. North Macedonia had been a candidate for EU accession since 2005, and discussions about opening the talks began in 2010-2011. At the time, the Bulgarian members of the European Parliament (MEPs) announced that the then Republic of Macedonia must agree to a Bulgarian reading of their “shared history”; that Macedonia “should not manipulate history in its history textbooks”; as Macedonia’s reading of history had been “provocative” toward Bulgaria regarding its medieval and modern history (Glamchevski, 2011). Indeed, although Bulgaria’s 2020 veto seemed to have surprised many in the EU, this was not, in fact, Bulgaria’s first veto. It was in 2011 when Bulgaria had lodged its first veto on opening accession talks for the Republic of Macedonia. Bulgaria then sided with Greece on vetoing North Macedonia’s start of the accession talks (despite a positive recommendation by the European Commission), and Bulgarian President Rossen Plevneliev justified the veto by stating that “Bulgaria cannot grant an EU certificate to the actions of the government in Skopje which is systematically employing an ideology of hate towards Bulgaria,” and that “... the government in Skopje be done with its anti-Bulgarian campaign, and the manipulation of historical facts” (Gotev, 2012, para. 11). Nevertheless, as Greece had been the main obstacle to Macedonia’s NATO and EU accession, having vetoed Macedonia’s NATO membership since 2008, the Bulgarian stance did not receive much attention at the time.

## HOW A BILATERAL ISSUE WAS INTERNATIONALIZED

The issue of the Macedonian ethno-linguistic identity rose to prominence outside Macedonia and Bulgaria when it became evident that the EU would recommend opening the accession talks for North Macedonia’s EU membership in 2019-2020. The two countries had previously signed a bilateral Friendship Treaty in August 2017, according to which both countries were to set up an interdisciplinary committee on historical and educational issues “to contribute to the objective, based on authentic and evidence-based historical sources, scientific interpretation of the historical events” (United Nations, 2017, p.



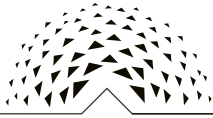
16). A committee consisting of seven experts from each side was set up thereafter, and it has been meeting four to six times a year. However, in the past three years it has been unable to find common ground on the historical interpretations of events and personalities in the history of the two nations. Bulgaria has used the stalemate in the Committee as grounds for its subsequent veto in the European Council on North Macedonia's start of EU accession negotiations. In other words, Bulgaria has justified its veto by claiming that North Macedonia has not been complying with the Friendship Treaty due to the lack of results reached by the interdisciplinary committee (Radio Free Europe, 2020).

However, it appears that Bulgaria's official stance toward North Macedonia has radicalized since 2018, after North Macedonia and Greece signed the Prespa Agreement under the auspices of the United Nations, which resolved the three decade-long dispute instigated by Greece in 1991. Greece had objected to the use of the previous constitutional name of North Macedonia, i.e., the Republic of Macedonia, claiming that the name allegedly implied territorial ambitions regarding the northern Greek province of Macedonia. The Prespa Agreement resolved the issue by adding the qualifier "North" in front of "Macedonia" for what was then Republic of Macedonia. North Macedonia was thus able to join NATO, becoming its 30<sup>th</sup> member in March 2020. At the same time, the Agreement acknowledged the existence of the Macedonian language and the right of North Macedonia's people to call themselves Macedonians, including their cultural, historical, and linguistic distinctiveness. This development seems to have irked Sofia, as it did not fit its own claims that the Macedonian people and language were in fact a derivative of the Bulgarian people and language. As it became evident that the European Commission would likely recommend the opening of accession talks for North Macedonia (and Albania) at its December summit in 2019, Bulgaria passed a parliamentary declaration about its stance on the issue of EU enlargement and Macedonian identity in October 2019. This declaration allowed North Macedonia's EU membership only if Bulgaria's conditions were met. Among other things in the declaration, Bulgaria asserted that it categorically opposes the "eventual European legitimation of a past ideology with an anti-Bulgarian character," and the "rewriting and appropriation of history of the part of the Bulgarian people after 1944, which is the pillar of the anti-Bulgarian ideological construction of Yugoslav totalitarianism" (National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria, 2019). The declaration also demands that North Macedonia renounce any idea of a Macedonian ethnic minority on the territory of Bulgaria (National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria, 2019).

Although the declaration does not explain what it means by "anti-Bulgarian ideological construction," an explanation was included in the "Framework Position for EU Enlargement and the Process of Association and Stabilization: Republic of North Macedonia and Albania", issued by the Bulgarian government the day before the adoption of the parliamentary declaration. This framework position contains a long list of demands for North Macedonia to fulfil if it wants to get

Bulgaria's approval for EU negotiations. Among the many stipulations, it demands that North Macedonia remove any plaque commemorating events from World War II that contain the phrase "Bulgarian fascist occupier"; that EU documents use the phrase "official language of the Republic of North Macedonia" instead of "Macedonian language", and if the term "Macedonian language" is used, it should be clarified that "the linguistic norm in the Republic of North Macedonia is tied to the evolution of the Bulgarian language and its dialects in the former Yugoslav republic after their codification in 1944." Furthermore, "no document during the accession process shall be understood as Bulgaria's recognition of the existence of a so-called 'Macedonian language', different from Bulgarian" (Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria, 2019). Curiously, the Framework Position also demands that before the second intergovernmental conference between North Macedonia and the EU is held, "all historical and literary sources from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century [before the codification of the Macedonian language in 1944], be presented in Macedonian school textbooks in their original norm." This means that Macedonian textbooks must contain texts in the Bulgarian language that had been used prior to the standardization of Macedonian in 1944. In short, based on this document, an "anti-Bulgarian ideological construction" means virtually anything related to the expression of a distinct Macedonian ethnic, cultural, or linguistic identity prior to 1944, i.e., prior to the establishment of Macedonia as a state within the framework of Socialist Yugoslavia.

In March 2020, the EU announced that it would start accession talks with North Macedonia by the end of the year. At the same time, the Bulgarian government issued an explanatory memorandum, a document that it sent out to all other member states. This memorandum was then attached as an annex to the European Council Conclusions issued in March 2020, but as a unilateral statement of a member state, not as the Council's position (European Policy Institute-Skopje, 2020, p. 6). The memorandum reflects much of what had been stipulated in the Framework Position of Bulgaria's government the previous year, for example, the statement that "The accession path of the Republic of North Macedonia provides a valuable opportunity for its leadership to break with the ideological legacy and practices of communist Yugoslavia. The enlargement process must not legitimize the ethnic and linguistic engineering that has taken place under former authoritarian regimes" (Kolekjevski, 2020). This statement further reinforces Bulgaria's attempt to categorize the distinct Macedonian ethno-linguistic existence as a legacy of Yugoslav authoritarianism, which must be abandoned and remedied during North Macedonia's accession process in the EU. The memorandum further attempts to offer a historical overview of the question of the Macedonian identity prior to the creation of the Macedonian republic within Yugoslavia, with dubious claims, for example that "following World War I the overwhelming majority of [today's North Macedonia's] Slavic population used to clearly self-identify as Bulgarian," and that "Belgrade tried to eradicate the Bulgarian identity of this population" (Kolekjevski, 2020). It then



continues to assert that “a Macedonian language or ethnicity did not exist until 02.08.1944” (Kolekjevski, 2020). Although Sofia had the opportunity to lodge a veto on the European Commission decision to open accession talks for North Macedonia in March 2020, the veto came after the Commission revealed its negotiation framework in June the same year. The framework did not consider Bulgaria’s demands from its explanatory memorandum and used the term “Macedonian language” when stating that EU legislation should be translated into the candidate’s language (Telma, 2020).

In summary, Bulgaria’s claims regarding the Macedonian ethno-linguistic identity became an EU (and thus international) matter once the opportunity rose for Bulgaria to assert its advantageous position as an EU member state. By threatening to continuously (ab)use its veto right in the EU, Bulgaria is attempting to impose its own interpretation of history. If this interpretation is not accepted as an indisputable fact during North Macedonia’s accession process in the EU, North Macedonia must not be allowed to join the bloc. According to Bulgaria’s interpretation, the population of North Macedonia and its language was Bulgarian prior to 1944, whereas anything that North Macedonia calls Macedonian people and language must be understood as a historical aberration, and a conspiracy by both Belgrade and the Former President of Yugoslavia, Josip Broz Tito to engineer a Macedonian identity so as to thwart the “legitimate” Bulgarian claims regarding the Macedonian people and language. It logically follows that even today’s expression of a distinct Macedonian ethnic identity and language, with its own culture, history, and independent development, is considered by Bulgaria an “anti-Bulgarian ideological construction” and propaganda, which must be remedied through the imposition of new educational plans for history and other subjects in Macedonian schools, which would reflect the “real identity” of its population. The underlying objective, it appears, is to “re-engineer” (to use the term in Bulgaria’s memorandum) North Macedonia’s population into its “true Bulgarian” self. However, this objective, at least for the time being, appears to be highly unpopular in the EU. Most member states, though reluctant to openly condemn Bulgaria’s behaviour as a member-state, have reiterated that bilateral issues related to historical disputes should not be a subject to discuss in the EU. Some states have been more vocal by issuing statements in direct opposition to Bulgaria’s demands, for example, the Czech Republic and Slovakia (Marusic, 2020).

## **WHY DOES BULGARIA REJECT THE MACEDONIAN ETHNO-LINGUISTIC IDENTITY?**

**A**s explained in the previous section, the issue of the Macedonian ethno-linguistic identity has become a subject of international discussion only recently, with Bulgaria’s veto on North Macedonia’s EU accession. However,

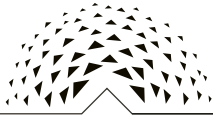
the issue has long been a bone of contention between the two countries, as well as previously between Yugoslavia and Bulgaria, following the break between Tito and Stalin in 1948 (Banac, 2018, p. 192). The modern-day claims by Bulgaria are thus at least 73 years old, and the roots of these claims go back to the very establishment of Bulgaria as a Principality under Ottoman control in 1878.

After the Russo-Turkish war, according to the Treaty of San Stefano, signed in March 1878 and dictated by the Russians, an independent state of Bulgaria was to be created, incorporating most of today's North Macedonia, as well as parts of today's Serbia, Kosovo, Greece, Romania, and Albania. However, this state entity never came into being, as a few months later the Treaty of San Stefano was replaced by the Treaty of Berlin, signed in July 1878, which allowed for the creation of a semi-independent Bulgaria under Ottoman control, with a much smaller territory, excluding the territories in the west (i.e., today's North Macedonia, and the other parts initially envisaged by the San Stefano Treaty). Nonetheless, the initial San Stefano project, which did not result in any state-building, became engrained in Bulgaria's historical narrative as a grave injustice to Bulgarians, leaving large parts of what it believes is its rightful property under the control of foreign entities. That this continues to be the case even today is attested to by Bulgaria's most important holiday, the 3 March national holiday, the day of the signing of the San Stefano Treaty. Thus, Bulgaria has been celebrating a state-project that never came into being and has never existed. However, the project has had powerful ramifications for Bulgaria's historical narrative: the project was dictated in San Stefano by Russia, which has influenced Bulgaria's internal and foreign politics in a profound way, as well as many of its decisions to enter the wars of the twentieth century.

During the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913, Ottoman Macedonia was partitioned among Greece, Serbia, and Bulgaria, with Greece acquiring around 50 percent of the whole territory. Serbia and Bulgaria received the remaining 49 percent, while a miniscule portion went to Albania (around 40 percent for Serbia, 9 percent for Bulgaria, and 1 percent for Albania). As Bulgaria was dissatisfied with its proceeds from the Balkan Wars, it joined the Central Powers in World War I to gain more Macedonian territory (which belonged to Serbia and Greece), which it believed was its rightful property. Bulgaria eventually lost and was reduced to its 9 percent acquired during the Balkan Wars. The same pattern was repeated in World War II, when Bulgaria joined Hitler's coalition to acquire Macedonian and other territories from Serbia and Greece, but it eventually lost the war and only switched sides several months before the end of the war.

Evidently, Bulgaria's foreign policy in the first half of the twentieth century focused on how to correct the "historical mistake" that had existed since the annulment of the San Stefano project for a greater Bulgaria, but any gains were only temporary, and the results were catastrophic for Bulgaria in all these wars, with vast casualties. During World War I alone, Bulgaria lost 300,000 people, 100,000 of whom were soldiers, the highest number of soldiers lost per capita





in any country involved in the war (Bell, Dimitrov, Danforth & Carter, 2021). Thus, Bulgaria's emotive stakes in the "Macedonian question" remained high throughout the twentieth century, where all of its losses in the previous century had been attributed to neighbouring states and wider conspiracies rather than to its own decisions to enter wars with an agenda of "uniting all Bulgarians in one state."

However, one major difference occurred during World War II. In all previous wars, the Macedonian population was recruited to fight the wars of the states possessing the territory of Macedonia, whereas in World War II the local population formed a resistance to the Bulgarian occupation, with the agenda of creating a Macedonian state. Toward the end of the war, the first and second Antifascist Assemblies of the National Liberation of Macedonia (ASNOM) were called, when Macedonia became one of the six republics in the new Yugoslav federation led by Josip Broz Tito, with Macedonian as the official language of the republic. Initially, Bulgaria's leadership, especially the first post-World War II Prime Minister of Bulgaria, Georgi Dimitrov, welcomed the constitution of the Macedonian republic within Yugoslavia, thereby recognizing its population and language as distinct from Bulgarian. Under Dimitrov's leadership, Bulgaria went as far as to establish an autonomous region in Pirin Macedonia (the Bulgarian part of Macedonia), recognizing and even promoting the Macedonian language in the schools of the region (Marinov, 2020, pp. 44-60). In the short period of good Yugoslav-Bulgarian neighbourly relations immediately after World War II, there was even a discussion of creating a larger Yugoslav federation, including Bulgaria (Marinov, 2020, p. 43). During this time a census was also carried out, according to which around 70% of the population in this region declared itself Macedonian. Very similar results appeared in the census ten years later, in 1956, in terms of the total number of ethnic Macedonians in Bulgaria, although the official stance in Bulgaria today is that the population was forcibly registered as Macedonian. In the later censuses nearly all of those who had claimed a Macedonian ethnicity disappeared, since a possibility to self-declare as Macedonian ceased to exist after 1956.

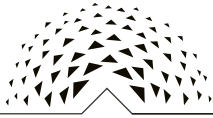
Despite Bulgaria's stance about the non-existence of any Macedonians on its territory, following the collapse of the Communist regime in Bulgaria in 1990, ethnic Macedonians attempted to form both cultural organizations and political parties. However, Bulgaria has consistently refused to officially register such organizations, considering them a threat to Bulgaria's ethnic homogeneity, and thereby rendering them illegal. As several members of the European Parliament (MEPs) have noted, the Macedonian minority in Bulgaria was declared non-existent in 1963, and Bulgaria started a persecution campaign against those who still self-identify as such. Namely, MEPs have accused Bulgaria of not respecting the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, and that "no Macedonian NGO or political party can be registered or active, and citizens who consider themselves to be Macedonians cannot officially state as much"

(European Parliament, 2018). Moreover, they note that “these policies have led to 11 European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) judgments against Bulgaria, and have been described in every major human rights report” (European Parliament, 2018).

Thus, Bulgaria’s policy of the recognition of the Macedonian ethno-linguistic identity was short-lived. This policy began to take shape as soon as Yugoslav President Tito broke from Stalin’s Soviet Union in 1948, when Bulgaria, as the Union’s closest ally, began to gradually reverse its policy of recognizing the Macedonian ethnic identity. In the immediate aftermath of the rift between Tito and Stalin, the paper of the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP), *Rabotnichesko Delo*, published an article by BCP Secretary Georgi Chankov challenging the authenticity of the Macedonian language and claiming that it was a concoction prepared by Belgrade and that the Macedonian people really spoke Bulgarian (Koneski, 1948). Curiously, the same Georgi Chankov had given entirely different statements the previous year, when Yugoslavia and Bulgaria were on good terms. He namely stated that “the Macedonian people gave enormous sacrifice and won its right to be respected as free and equal people”, adding that “the Macedonians in Pirin Macedonia should be educated as an integral part of the Macedonian people, which already has its own state; they should learn their own history as well as learn, write, and speak their own Macedonian language...” (Koneski, 1948).

The positions expressed by Chankov and the BCP in 1948, after the rift between Tito and Stalin, only became more firm and rigid in the following decades. Whereas Chankov initially only challenged the authenticity of the Macedonian language, still claiming that there was a Macedonian nation, which really spoke Bulgarian (Koneski, 1948), the following decades were marked by a complete denial of any expression of a distinct Macedonian identity, whether it was linguistic or ethnic in nature.

The return toward a resolute denial of the Macedonian ethnic identity became an explicit policy when Todor Zhivkov became Chief of the Communist Party of Bulgaria and Bulgaria’s President in the 1960s. The position formulated in this period became the cornerstone of Bulgaria’s mainstream political and academic stance up to the present day, as shown above in Bulgaria’s Framework Position and the “explanatory memorandum” in 2019 and 2020. During the meeting between Yugoslav President Josip Broz-Tito and Bulgarian President Todor Zhivkov in 1963, Zhivkov stated that “the Bulgarian Communist Party recognizes the ‘creation’ of a ‘Macedonian national consciousness’ as ‘objective reality’, but only limited to Yugoslav Macedonia” (Marinov, 2020, p. 73). This identity, according to Zhivkov, also had a starting date – after World War II, and it was built on ‘anti-Bulgarian’ fundamentals (Marinov, 2020, p. 73). Thus, the language used by Zhivkov in 1963 to explain the “history of the Macedonian identity” is clearly the stance that thereafter became the official political and academic position of Bulgaria’s elites and institutions, still used up to the present day, including the documents issued by Bulgaria’s government to its EU partners. The fact that



the 2020 veto has become Bulgaria's number one hot foreign policy topic has also consolidated the Bulgarian public opinion against North Macedonia's EU membership. Based on a poll from 2020, more than 80 per cent of Bulgarians do not support North Macedonia's EU membership if the latter does not meet Sofia's conditions, a whopping 65 per cent increase since 2019, when only 15% had a negative attitude toward North Macedonia (Buldioski & Tcherneva, 2020).

## WHAT IS THE RATIONALE BEHIND BULGARIA'S POSITION?

As discussed above, Bulgaria's central claim is that the Macedonian ethnic and linguistic identity was engineered by the Yugoslav communist regime and its leader, Josip Broz Tito. This identity came into existence, the narrative claims, on 2 August 1944, and it has no "authentic" historical evolution. In fact, as the story goes, the Macedonian ethnic and linguistic identity has been created out of the Bulgarian people inhabiting the area of today's North Macedonia for a millennium. Likewise, the standard Macedonian language is simply a regional norm of the "Bulgarian dialects" in Macedonia, and the norm itself was concocted by Belgrade to distance the language from its "authentic Bulgarian roots."

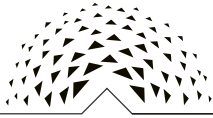
To support this narrative, Bulgaria's mainstream political and academic elites often claim that the population in today's North Macedonia self-identified as Bulgarian in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, up to World War II, when the new identity took hold based on Communist repression and intimidation. Evidence that is frequently used for this narrative is the claim that ever since the ninth-eleventh centuries AD, from the time of Cyril and Methodius, the population in today's Bulgaria and wider Macedonia has homogenized and consolidated into a single Bulgarian people and language. It follows that all the historical events and personalities from that period onward, up to World War II, were firmly tied to the history of the Bulgarian people and language in both today's Bulgaria and North Macedonia (and portions of Greece, Serbia, Romania, Kosovo and Albania).

There is indeed evidence that the term "Bulgarian" has been used to describe the Slavic-speaking population in the Ottoman Empire, often indiscriminately, covering populations that have developed separate national identities. For instance, the Ottoman explorer Evliya Çelebi wrote of "Bulgarians" in Belgrade and Sarajevo in the seventeenth century (Friedman, 1975, p. 281). Thus, the use of this term to mean much more than what later became a Bulgarian ethno-nation has had a fundamental impact in shaping the Bulgarian narrative of a "millennium-long Bulgarian ethnic and linguistic continuity". Moreover, some of the nineteenth century renaissance personalities in Macedonia have also described their vernacular language as Bulgarian, even if they wrote in their local Macedonian

dialect, for instance, Yoakim Krchovski and Kiril Pejchinovikj in the first half of the nineteenth century (Friedman, 1975, p. 282). In this period the main task of these theological educators was to combat the dangers of the Hellenization of the Slavic-speaking population, thus the distinction between what was Bulgarian and what was Macedonian was of little importance (Friedman, 1975, p. 281). Also, it is important to emphasize that a Bulgarian standard language did not exist at this time either, so most Slavic-speaking educators used a mixture of their local dialects and the traditional Church-Slavonic language. In fact, all south-Slavic standard languages began to take shape in the second half of the nineteenth century. Therefore, using the term “Bulgarian” today at face value to describe this history as a history of the Bulgarian people in Bulgaria, North Macedonia, and other neighbouring states, deprived of the complex context of the time, serves the purpose of a complete politicization of the issue with the clear agenda of appropriating the history of the region as the history of a single Bulgarian people or ethno-nation. This appropriation, on the other hand, serves as a useful tool for the contemporary pretensions of the Bulgarian political and academic elites regarding the Macedonian ethno-national history prior to 1944 and fits into the narrative of grievances that the Bulgarian nation has been suffering a grave injustice ever since the annulment of the San Stefano Treaty in 1878.

In fact, it is very problematic, to say the least, to speak of a clear Bulgarian ethno-national identity and self-identification in the nineteenth century in either today’s Bulgaria or in wider Macedonia. As mentioned above, the term “Bulgarian” was used historically (although this term was not used exclusively, only on occasion) to denote various Slavic-speaking populations during the Ottoman period. However, when it comes to the self-identification of these populations, there is little, if any, evidence to claim that these populations commonly expressed an ethnic Bulgarian identity. The process of nation-building in Bulgaria only really occurred after the creation of the Bulgarian principality in 1878 and its institutions, including universal education, military conscription, and other state-building practices. Shortly before the creation of the Principality, the Bulgarian Exarchate was created, which also provided a means for creating a Bulgarian consciousness.

In reality, prior to the creation of Bulgarian religious and state institutions in the late nineteenth century, the Slavic-speaking populations in the Ottoman regions that covered today’s Bulgaria and wider Macedonia mostly self-identified with religion rather than ethnicity. As the Belgian historian Raymond Detrez (2020) explains, the acquisition of national consciousness is not a mass phenomenon but an individual psychological development, as it results from socialization, imposed by various educational, administrative, and repressive means. Thus, he asserts that “in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Ottoman Empire... such nationalizing measures were... lacking; in addition, a multitude of national ideologies and various other (regional, vocational, social, and cultural) loyalties competed” (Detrez, 2020). Contrary to the claims of the official Bulgarian narrative that a Macedonian



identity only emerged after World War II, Detrez claims that in the second half of the nineteenth century there were “the first convincing indications of the emergence of a Macedonian national ideology, which Bulgarian historiography as a rule passes in silence” (Detrez, 2020). Detrez has also addressed the recent controversies regarding the Bulgarian claims, asserting that “Georgi Pulevski [a Macedonian national ideologue in the nineteenth century]...in 1875 [at the time of the creation of the Bulgarian Exarchate and three years before the creation of the Bulgarian Principality], a half century before Comintern’s decisions, writes... ‘a people are individuals who are from the same origin and who speak a common language, and the place where they live is called a homeland, concluding: and so the Macedonians are a people and their homeland is Macedonia’.” (Detrez, 2021).

This is echoed by other historians outside Bulgaria. For instance, Katrin Bozeva-Abazi writes that “...one cannot speak of Bulgarians and Serbs as integrated national communities in the first half of the nineteenth century. Although historians refer to ‘Serb’ and ‘Bulgarian’ to denote ethnic origin, the notion of a modern nation was an intellectual invention of the late nineteenth century...” (Bozeva-Abazi, 2003, p. 48). She adds that people in Bulgaria came to identify with a Bulgarian nation, in a process stimulated and completed by the Bulgarian state. It was the state that “accelerated the emergence of common national identity, not vice versa...”, and it was the “... Bulgarian political elites of the late nineteenth century that ‘reconstructed’ the period of national awakening” (Bozeva-Abazi, 2003, p. 80). Moreover, even after the creation of the Bulgarian state in 1878, Abazi contends, “national loyalty continued to be a vague, even a weird notion to the majority of... Bulgarian peasants” (Bozeva-Abazi, 2003, p. 123). Even a few decades after the creation of Bulgarian state institutions, in 1900 72% of Bulgarians remained illiterate (Bozeva-Abazi, 2003, p. 266). Aside from the convincing indications of Macedonian national ideology in the second half of the nineteenth century, as Detrez asserts, just four years after the codification of Bulgarian in 1899, the book “On Macedonian Matters” by Macedonian intellectual and linguist Krste Misirkov came out in 1903, where he clearly proposes a Macedonian standard language based on the Macedonian central dialects (Misirkov, 2010, pp. 351-356). These same principles of standardization were applied in 1944, when Macedonia was constituted as a state in Federal Yugoslavia. Thus, the Bulgarian central claim that the populations of both Bulgaria and North Macedonia had a clear idea of being ethnically Bulgarian is implausible and unsustainable.

## CONCLUSION

**T**he recent internationalization of the Bulgarian claims regarding the Macedonian ethno-linguistic identity through the abuse of its right to veto North Macedonia’s start of EU accession talks is based on long-standing Bulgarian policies designed to deny the existence of a separate Macedonian

ethnic identity and language. These policies have been consistent at least since the 1960s and have been embedded in Bulgaria's position when dealing with the "Macedonian question." The motives behind these policies are complex. On the one hand, they lie in the mythologized vision of a millennium-old Bulgarian ethnic identity that has been forcibly and violently separated through the intervention of Communists, as well as Yugoslav leader Josip Broz-Tito personally. On the other hand, these claims have been a component of the Bulgarian nation-building processes since the late nineteenth century and have continued both through conscious efforts, historiographic legacies, as well as inertia. The underlying objective of this denial today, it appears, is to "re-engineer" the Macedonian ethnic identification into its "true Bulgarian self" through the process of North Macedonia's EU accession and by imposing educational curricula in North Macedonia based on this mythologized Bulgarian vision of the millennium-old Bulgarian ethnic history. As explained in this article, such a historical interpretation is not only implausible but unsustainable both from a political and from a historical perspective.