

**Bulgaria's Secret Empire:
An Ultimatum to North Macedonia**

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Abstract:

In the summer of 2019, 30 years after the end of communism in Europe, Bulgaria began to forward the way of Skopje numerous onerous demands as a salient precondition for opening European Union (EU) accession negotiation talks with North Macedonia. All of these demands are dictated by ethnolinguistic nationalism that underlies the Bulgarian national master narrative. On 9 October 2019, the Bulgarian government officially adopted these demands in the form of an ultimatum, bar the term. Sofia did not have to deploy this ultimatum to stop the talks, since earlier Paris temporarily blocked the pending accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia. It appears that in the face of economic and political problems at home, Bulgarian politicians tend to use nationalism (and populism) to divert citizens' attention. The Bulgarian government seems to emulate the Kremlin's policy of the "Russian World," which on the basis of ethnolinguistic nationalism claims for Russia all the territories inhabited by Russian-speakers. After the fall of communism, a similar policy of "Bulgarian World" (*Bilgarski sviat*) has been pursued by Sofia from Moldova to North Macedonia and Albania, clamouring for recognizing all the Slavic-speakers in this wide area as members of

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the Bulgarian nation. These neoimperial ambitions are not conducive to stability in the Balkans and in the European Union.

Keywords: Bulgaria, “Bulgarian World”, ethnolinguistic nationalism, European Union, hybrid neo-imperialism, North Macedonia, ultimatum

Introduction¹

This article offers a detailed overview of Bulgaria’s 2019 ultimatum to North Macedonia. In this document, which officially does not include the term “ultimatum” in its title, Sofia made the opening of the EU negotiation talks with North Macedonia conditional on Skopje’s meeting the terms of this de facto ultimatum. Off the records, Bulgarian pundits proposed that the Bulgarian government formulated this list of demands mainly for domestic consumption, that is, to placate the nationalist parties in the ruling coalition. However, the harm done to the Bulgarian-North Macedonian relations, and to the relations between North Macedonia and the European Union (EU) may be serious and long-lasting, unless a mutually satisfying solution to this debacle is found soon. Unfortunately, as of mid-2021, the stalemate continues. Sofia vocally upholds its veto on commencing accession talks with North Macedonia.² Yet, Austria, the Czech Republic and Slovenia recently spoke up in support of Skopje, insisting that a bilateral disagreement should not prevent Brussels from opening accession negotiations with a candidate state that fulfills all the criteria.³ Germany immediately sided with this position, so the hope is that a way forward may be agreed upon in the near future.⁴

¹ I thank Elena Marushiakova, Veselin Popov, Radosveta Vassileva and the two anonymous reviewers for their advice and suggestions for improvement. Obviously, I am responsible for any remaining infelicities. It was Dawid Warszawski’s (a nom de plume of Konstanty Gebert) article “Dla kogo Macedonia?” (*Gazeta Wyborcza*, 17 October 17, 2019. <https://classic.wyborcza.pl/archiwumGW/9067006/Dla-kogo-Macedonia->) that inspired me to write this essay.

² “Bulgaria Upholds Veto on North Macedonia EU Accession Talks,” *Ekathimerini*, May 22, 2021. <https://www.ekathimerini.com/news/1161604/bulgaria-upholds-veto-on-north-macedonia-eu-accession-talks/>.

³ “North Macedonia Gets EU Backing From Austria, Czech Republic, Slovenia,” *RFE/RL*, May 22, 2021. <https://www.rferl.org/a/macedonia-austria-czech-slovenia-eu-membership/31268608.html>.

⁴ S. J. Marusic. “Germany Rekindles Hope of Breakthrough on North Macedonia’s EU Bid,” *BalkanInsight*, May 27, 2021. <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/05/27/germany-rekindles-hope-of-breakthrough-on-north-macedonias-eu-bid/>.

Meanwhile, this diagnosis of a potentially destabilizing and prolonged tension is supported by a cursory look at Sofia's policy of the "Bulgarian World" (*Bulgarski sviat*), which as yet Sofia does not acknowledge or name in any explicit manner. The Bulgarian government appears to emulate the Kremlin's policy of the "Russian World" (*Russkii Mir*). The latter was formulated in the mid-2000s, and has been deployed since then for Moscow's political and military forays across the post-Soviet area, be it the annexation of Crimea, the ongoing war on Ukraine, or increasing pressure on Minsk that Belarus should become a province of the Russian Federation.⁵ The world public opinion and researchers pay growing attention to Russia's "hybrid-style" neo-imperialism.⁶ Yet, Sofia's increasingly less shy neo-imperialism of a similar kind has fallen under the EU's and Washington's radar, like many other negative political, economic and legal developments that unfolded in Bulgaria during the decade and a half after Bulgaria joined the EU in 2007.

Moscow pays on its own for pursuing the "Russian World" policy. In contrast, Sofia uses Bulgaria's status as an EU member state for extending its sphere of influence across the Balkans. The main instrument for implementing the "Bulgarian World" policy is the Bulgarian citizenship, whose holder has the right to the Bulgarian-EU passport. This document allows for unrestricted travel, settlement and employment across the entire European Union. In socio-economic terms, this possibility is literally invaluable to Slavophones from such impoverished non-EU states as North Macedonia, Moldova or Albania. Sofia's 2019 ultimatum blocked, probably temporarily, the way of North Macedonia to EU membership. In Bulgaria this fact contributes to the perceived success of the country's hybrid neo-imperialism, especially so because this does not burden Sofia's finances, yet it comes at a direct cost to the European Union. Importantly, it will be mainly Brussels, *not* Sofia alone, which will need to deal with any fallout of such a policy of the "Bulgarian World," be it political instability, social unrest, economic collapse, or -let alone-military conflict.

Due to their recent character, the developments covered and analyzed in this article, by necessity, are mainly referenced with the use

⁵ Cf R. Dutczak. "Po Krymie czas na Białoruś? Putin szykuje kolejną aneksję," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, June 15, 2021. <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75968,27197670,po-krymie-czas-na-bialorus-putin-szykuje-kolejna-aneksje.html>.

⁶ Cf A. Åslund and M. Snegovaya. "The Impact of Western Sanctions on Russia and How They Can Be Made Even More Effective," *Atlantic Council*, May 3, 2021. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/the-impact-of-western-sanctions-on-russia/>.

of online articles taken from the press and specialist publications in a variety of languages. For the sake of quick reference on historical events in the Balkans, links to Wikipedia articles are given. On the other hand, entries from the Bulgarian, Macedonian, Russian, or Ukrainian Wikipedias are employed to illustrate prevalent national sentiments and interpretations of the past and recent phenomena of significance to the subject at hand. I resigned from translating the titles of the cited non-English-language articles and publications in order not to add to the word count. At this point, the reference apparatus already accounts for almost half of this article. Last but not least, in literature the transcription (that is, romanization) of the Bulgarian Cyrillic letter [Ѣ] for denoting the vowel /ɛ/ or /e/ is quite irregular. Latin alphabet-based systems transcribe this Bulgarian letter confusingly as [ʹ], [ǎ], [a], [ü], or [u]. I decided to romanize the letter [Ѣ] with the unique Turkish grapheme [ı] that represents quite a similar vowel.

A Very Bulgarian Ultimatum

The year 2019 promised to be a long-awaited *annus mirabilis* in the Balkans. After the old nationalist guards were replaced with democratic, liberal and pro-European cabinets in Greece and Macedonia, a narrow window of opportunity opened for much needed and long-awaited rapprochement between Athens and Skopje.⁷ A bilateral agreement was signed in 2018 and implemented early the following year. The compromise saw the official change of the name of the Republic of Macedonia to the Republic of North Macedonia, though Athens consented that the Slavic language of Macedonian would continue to be known under its already established moniker.⁸ On top of that, Skopje opted for the Finnish model of ethnic relations⁹ and made Albanian into the country's co-official language.¹⁰ The domestic tension between North Macedonia's Albanian- and Macedonian-speakers finally defused, and

⁷ Cf G. Gotev. "Tsipras and Zaev reportedly in the running for Nobel Peace Prize," *Euractive.com*, October 3, 2018.

<https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/tsipras-and-zaev-reportedly-in-the-running-for-nobel-peace-prize/>; "North Macedonia Deal: Greek PM Tsipras in 'Historic' Visit," *BBC News*, April 2, 2019. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-47785258>.

⁸ "Macedonia, Greece Sign 'Brave, Historic' Agreement on Name Change," *RFE/RL*, June 17, 2018.

<https://www.rferl.org/a/greece-macedonia-sign-agreement-name-despite-protests/29293265.html>.

Cf "Mandatory Swedish," *Wikipedia*, accessed November 12, 2019,

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mandatory_Swedish.

¹⁰ "Macedonia's Albanian-Language Bill Becomes Law," *RFE/RL*, January 15, 2019. <https://www.rferl.org/a/macedonia-s-albanian-language-bill-becomes-law/29711502.html>.

Greece no longer standing in the way, the yearned-for prize of membership in NATO and the European Union for North Macedonia appeared to be tantalizingly within a hand's reach.¹¹

However, despite the oft-repeated promises that democratizing reforms would be rewarded with a swift opening of accession negotiations with the European Union, at the summit of the European Council on 18 October 2019, the French President Emmanuel Macron vetoed any such membership talks with Albania and North Macedonia.¹² Paris, as the de facto co-leader of the European Union, alongside Germany, proved to be as unreliable and mercurial as President Donald Trump's United States.¹³ In addition, this move concealed a much darker and then much less discussed development of Bulgaria's ultimatum issued to North Macedonia, four months earlier, in June 2019.¹⁴ For a while the Bulgarian government played down the issue of this ultimatum, by stressing Sofia's "unwavering support" for North Macedonia's membership in the EU.¹⁵ Yet, one week before the aforementioned meeting of the European Council, on 10 October 2019, the Bulgarian government led by Prime Minister Boiko Borisov¹⁶ made this June ultimatum into an official Bulgarian policy,¹⁷ fully endorsed and

¹¹ T. Kamusella. "North Macedonia – A Surprise," *Wachtyrz*, November 19, 20219. <https://wachtyrz.eu/tomasz-kamusella-north-macedonia-a-surprise-slonske-opisaniy-swiata-1/>.

¹² "Emmanuel Macron's EU Accession Veto is a Historic Mistake," *Financial Times*, October 21, 2019. <https://www.ft.com/content/eda39e1e-f3eb-11e9-b018-3ef8794b17c6>.

¹³ A. Brzozowski. "Skopje on Fire as MEPs Slam EU Leaders' Failure to Open Accession Talks," *Euractiv.com*, October 22, 2019. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/future-eu/news/skopje-on-fire-as-meps-slam-eu-leaders-failure-to-open-accession-talks/>;

L. Tregoures. "By Blocking Enlargement Decision, Macron Undercuts France's Balkan Goals," *Atlantic Council*, October 30, 2019. <https://atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/by-blocking-enlargement-decision-macron-undercuts-frances-balkan-goals/>.

¹⁴ "'What Did You Think is Going to Happen?' – Bitter Reactions in Macedonia After Bulgaria Presents an Ultimatum Over Goce Delcev," *Republika*, June 12, 2019. <https://english.republika.mk/news/macedonia/what-did-you-think-is-going-to-happen-bitter-reactions-in-macedonia-after-bulgaria-presents-an-ultimatum-over-goce-delcev/>.

¹⁵ E. Marinova. "Bilgariia ne dava bezuslovna podkrepa za Severna Makedoniiia v ES," *Investor.bg*, September 30, 2019. <https://www.investor.bg/ikonomika-i-politika/332/a/bylgariia-ne-dava-bezuslovna-podkrepa-za-severna-makedoniiia-v-es-290287/>; R. Encheva, "Bilgariia s usloviia km Severna Makedoniiia za chlenstvoto i v ES," *bto Novinite*, September 30, 2019. <https://btvnovinite.bg/bulgaria/balgariija-s-uslovija-kam-severna-makedonija-za-chlenstvoto-j-v-es.html>.

¹⁶ Due to various romanization systems, the prime minister's name is also rendered as "Boyko Borissov."

¹⁷ "Ramkova pozitsia otnosno razshiriavane na ES i protsesa na stabilizirane i asotsiirane: Republika Severna Makedoniiia i Albaniia," Ministerski svet Republika Bilgariia, accessed October 9, 2019. <http://www.gov.bg/bg/prestsentar/novini/ramkova-pozitsia>; N. Lalov. "Kakvi sa bilgarskite usloviia km Skopje?," *mediapool.bg*, October 9, 2019.

supported by the parliament.¹⁸ It is a political gift to placate the radical nationalist wing in his cabinet. These nationalists (including Ataka) are led by Deputy PM Krasimir Karakachanov, who heads the political party, Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Bulgarian National Movement.¹⁹ Both this party and its leader infamously espouse openly racist anti-Roma and anti-LGBT rhetoric and even explicit hate speech.²⁰ A fortnight before the adoption of this ultimatum policy, on 29 September 2019, Karakachanov had directly threatened Borisov by stating that “[his party] will leave the coalition, if the government approves North Macedonia’s application for EU membership.”²¹ On 2 October 2019, the list of demands already secured, Karakachanov opined that “all Macedonian politicians [...] are good Bulgarians, but publicly they say [that the question of the Macedonian national identity] is complicated. The Macedonians think they can enter the EU and keep their anti-Bulgarian rhetoric. This cannot be allowed to happen.”²² Having observed negative reactions to the ultimatum in North Macedonia, Karakachanov

<https://www.mediapool.bg/kakvi-sa-balgarskite-usloviya-kam-skopie-news298783.html> ; “Makedoniia: Spored Bilgariia niama makedonski ezik ili maltsinstvo,” *Vesti*, October 11, 2019. <https://www.vesti.bg/sviat/makedoniia-spered-bylgariia-niama-makedonski-ezik-ili-malcinstvo-6100717>.

¹⁸ L. Iliev. “Parlamentit prekopira pravitelstvenata pozitsiia za Severna Makedoniia,” *Sega*, October 11, 2019. <https://www.segabg.com/node/98205>.

¹⁹ “IMRO – Bulgarian National Movement,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 10, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/IMRO_-_Bulgarian_National_Movement.

²⁰ “Politiko: Bilgarskata kraina desnitsa shte raztursi Briuksel,” *mediapool.bg*, September 13, 2017.

<https://www.mediapool.bg/politiko-balgarskata-kraina-desnitsa-shte-raztursi-bryuksel-news269171.html>;

“Karakachanov zastana zad khomofobska kauza i Pokhod za (traditsionnoto) semeistvo,” *Dnevnik*, June 19, 2019.

<https://www.dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2019/06/08/3922576-karakachanov-zastana-zad-hom-ofobska-kauza-i-pohod-za/>;

“Bulgarian Nationalists’ Roma ‘Integration’ Plan Dismays Rights Advocates,” *BalkanInsight*, February 8, 2019. <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/02/08/bulgarian-nationalists-issue-controversial-roma-integration-plan-02-07-2019/>;

V. Chaudhary. 2019. “Everybody Hates Us: On Sofia’s Streets, Roma Face Racism Every Day,” *The Guardian*, 20 October 20, 2019.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/20/bulgaria-sofia-racism-roma-everybody-hates-us-anti-gypsy-abuse>; S. Uber. “Calls for Bulgarian Minister Karakachanov to Resign Grow Louder,” *ERRC*, January 17, 2019. <http://www.errc.org/news/calls-for-bulgarian-minister-karakachanov-to-resign-grow-louder>.

²¹ “Karakachanov: VMRO napuska vlastta, ako podkrepim Severna Makedoniia za chlenstvo v ES,” *Nova*, September 29, 2019.

<https://nova.bg/news/view/2019/09/29/264064/karakachanov-vmro-napuska-vlastta-ako-podkrepim-severna-makedoniia-za-chlenstvo-v-es>.

²² “Karakachanov prodilzhava s provokatsiite: Makedonskite polititsi sa dobri bilgari,” *mediapool.bg*, October 2, 2019. <https://www.mediapool.bg/karakachanov-prodalzhava-s-provokatsiite-makedonskite-polititsi-sa-dobri-balgari-news298562.html>.

upped the ante, and on 17 October 2019 strove hard to offend Skopje by pronouncing that “North Macedonia is better suited for [joining] the USSR than the EU.”²³ (The irony is that it was communist Bulgaria which applied twice, in 1963 and 1973, to join the Soviet Union.²⁴)

Bulgaria's prominent intellectuals and civil society members, shocked by the ultimatum and its authoritarian ramifications, immediately, on 10 October 2019, started a petition against the government's official position on North Macedonia's efforts to accede to the EU.²⁵ Some see the Bulgarian President Rumen Radev as one of few supporters of democracy and the rule of law in today's Bulgaria.²⁶ However, even before the government officially adopted the aforementioned policy on North Macedonia, Radev had approved this ultimatum almost a month earlier, on 19 September 2019. The Bulgarian president had opined that “Bulgaria's support for North Macedonia's membership in the European Union should not be detrimental to Bulgarian history, language and identity.” Then Radev had followed with a hard demand, “If [Skopje] can guarantee that within a month the [Joint Bulgarian-Macedonian] Commission [of Historians] will resolve all the contentious issues – [that is, the nationality of historical] figures, [history] textbook corrections, explanatory texts in [North Macedonia's] museums, [Skopje's] views [on all these questions as] presented in the [North Macedonian] mass media, then the Bulgarian government will be in position to pursue a policy of unconditional support for North Macedonia's membership in the EU. But if [Skopje] cannot provide such a guarantee, the [Bulgarian] government should take concrete measures to include these aforementioned criteria [that is, demands] in the [EU's]

²³ “Karakachanov: Severna Makedonija e po-dostoina za SSSR, otkolkoto za ES,” *Nova*, October 17, 2019. <https://nova.bg/news/view/2019/10/17/265806/karakachanov-severna-makedonija-e-po-dostoina-za-sssr-otkolkoto-za-es>.

²⁴ N. Tsekov. “Nai-goliamoto predatelstvo v bilgarskata istoria,” *DW*, December 20, 2018. <https://www.dw.com/bg/най-голямото-предателство-в-българската-история/a-46815221>; D. Draganov. “Bilgariia - 16 republika na SSSR. Mit ili realnost,” *24 chasa*, November 7, 2015. <https://www.24chasa.bg/novini/article/5097382>.

²⁵ “Bilgarskata pozitsiia za Severna Makedoniia e nova razdelitelna liniia,” *mediapool.bg*, October 10, 2019. <https://www.mediapool.bg/balgarskata-pozitsiya-za-severna-makedoniya-e-nova-razdelitelna-liniya-news298837.html>;

S. Dechev. “Komisiata s Makedoniia – novata zakonomerna bilgarska katastrofa,” *Svobodna Evropa*, October 11, 2019. <https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/30212052.html>.

²⁶ “Radev: Dirzhavata se upravliava chrez nechii telefon,” *Standart News*, September 16, 2019. <https://www.standartnews.com/balgarriya-politika/radev-drzhavata-se-upravlyava-chrez-nechii-telefon-401755.html>; A. Ivanova. “Radev: Demokratiata v Bilgariia e v kritichno sistoiianie!,” *Dnes.bg*, December 7, 2018. <https://www.dnes.bg/politika/2018/12/07/radev-demokratiata-v-bilgariia-e-v-kritichno-systoiianie.395938>.

negotiating framework for North Macedonia, as mandatory conditions for [the country's] membership."²⁷ And that is exactly what happened, when Borisov's government adopted its official ultimatum policy for North Macedonia.²⁸

Democracy in Decline

For a while Paris's loud *Non* prevented the scandal of nullifying the commencement of membership talks with North Macedonia, due to this Bulgarian ultimatum. As a result, Sofia's aggressive recalcitrance fell under the radar of Europe's and international public opinion. The Bulgarian government has been "lucky" in this manner on numerous occasions in the past. Nowadays Europe's attention has zoomed squarely on the pro-authoritarian and populist regimes in Hungary or Poland,²⁹ but similar developments elsewhere in the EU escape Brussels' attention and scrutiny.³⁰ The same applies to the progressive dismantling of the rule of law in these countries. It is largely ignored when taking place in Bulgaria,³¹ though on the other hand causes much international uproar in the case of Hungary and Poland.³² Obviously, from the European Union's

²⁷ T. Grinčaroska. "Bugarskiot pretsedatel so nov ultimatum do Makedonija," *Telma*, September 19, 2019.

<https://telma.com.mk/bugarskiot-pretsedatel-so-nov-ultimatum-do-makedonija/>.

²⁸ S. J. Marusic. "Bulgaria Sets Tough Terms for North Macedonia's EU Progress," *BalkanInsight*, October 10, 2019. <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/10/10/bulgaria-sets-tough-terms-for-north-macedonias-eu-progress/>.

²⁹ "Rule of Law: European Commission Refers Poland to the Court of Justice to Protect Judges from Political Control," European Commission, accessed October 10, 2019, https://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-19-6033_en.htm;

J. Rankin. "Hungarian Minister Grilled by EU about Threats to Rule of Law," *The Guardian*, September 16, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/16/hungary-faces-eu-disciplinary-action-over-alleged-rule-of-law-violations>.

³⁰ R. Vassileva. "Bulgaria's Autocratic Model," *New Eastern Europe*, September 27, 2018. <http://neweasterneurope.eu/2018/09/27/bulgarias-autocratic-model/>;

R. Vassileva. "Bulgaria's Dangerous Flirtation with the Far-Right," *New Eastern Europe*, May 21, 2019. <http://neweasterneurope.eu/2019/05/21/bulgarias-dangerous-flirtation-with-the-far-right/>.

³¹ R. Vassileva, R. "Is Bulgaria the EU's Next Rule of Law Crisis?," *euobserver*, September 12, 2018. <https://euobserver.com/opinion/142795>; R. Vassileva. "Is Bulgaria's Rule of Law about to Die under the European Commission's Nose? The Country's Highest-Ranking Judge Fears So," *Verfassungsblog*, April 23, 2019. <https://verfassungsblog.de/is-bulgarias-rule-of-law-about-to-die-under-the-european-commissions-nose-the-countrys-highest-ranking-judge-fears-so/>.

³² R. Vassileva. "How Many Ministries of Truth Does Bulgaria Have?," *New Eastern Europe*, September 6, 2019.

perspective Hungary and Poland are of more import for the cohesion of the Union and its structures. But turning a blind eye to the rise of the far-right populist and ethnonationalist autocracy in Bulgaria with no respect for the law and human rights does not auger well.³³

Fortunately, on the strength of the 2018 petition addressed to the US Senate,³⁴ in early 2019, after the hiatus of 15 years, the Bulgarian Service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) was relaunched.³⁵ This service was originally terminated in 2004, when Bulgaria joined NATO. The freedom of speech in the country's mass media and public life improved further, when Sofia embarked on a raft of reforms that made it possible for Bulgaria to join the European Union in 2007. But afterward the democratic standards of public discourse were progressively undermined. Media freedom declined. Like in Hungary, a group of oligarchs with close links to the government took over the country's main press, radio and television outlets. Alternative and, above all, opposition views have been increasingly removed from public discourse.³⁶ The necessity of relaunching the RFE/RL Bulgarian Service puts Bulgaria next to such authoritarian states as Azerbaijan, Belarus or Russia. But maybe Bulgarian nationalist see this development as a distinction for their "hard graft" to make sure that Sofia would not "bow" to Brussels. As incredulously it may sound, they propose that the EU is the same as the

<http://neweasterneurope.eu/2019/09/06/how-many-ministries-of-truth-does-bulgaria-have/>; R. Vassileva. "On the Price of Horses and the Rule of Law in the EU," *New Eastern Europe*, July 17, 2019. <http://neweasterneurope.eu/2019/07/17/on-the-price-of-horses-and-the-rule-of-law-in-the-eu/>.

³³ Cf W. M. Bishop. "Bulgarian Vigilantes Patrol Turkey Border to Keep Migrants Out," *NBC News*, March 10, 2017.

<https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/europes-border-crisis/bulgarian-vigilantes-patrol-turkey-border-keep-migrants-out-n723481>.

³⁴ "Do Kongresa na SASht be vnesena Petitsioa za vizstanovyavane na rabotata na radio 'SVOBODNA EVROPA' sektsiia 'Bulgariia!,'" *BOETs*, May 25, 2018. <http://www.boec-bg.com/archives/551>.

³⁵ "RFE/RL Returns To Bulgaria," *RFE/RL*, January 21, 2019.

<https://pressroom.rferl.org/a/rferl-returns-to-bulgaria/29722317.html>; "RFE/RL Formally Relaunches Bulgarian Service," US Agency for Global Media, accessed June 13, 2019, <https://www.usagm.gov/2019/06/13/rfe-rl-formally-relaunches-bulgarian-service/>.

³⁶ Stefan Antonov, *The Age of the Oligarchs: How a Group of Political and Economic Magnates Have Taken Control of Bulgaria* (Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Oxford University, 2013).

<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/our-research/age-oligarchs-how-group-political-and-economic-magnates-have-taken-control-bulgaria>.

Kremlin's oppressive Soviet bloc of yesteryear,³⁷ and that NATO is not different from the Warsaw Pact.³⁸

Bulgaria's New Course: Back to the Past

Sofia's unseemly ultimatum to North Macedonia is also a sign of the deepening malaise of democracy in Bulgaria.³⁹ The old pre-1945 nationalist program of "Greater Bulgaria" (see below the map of Greater Bulgaria of the 1878 San Stefano Treaty) is back in force. The nationalist and populist lunatic fringe has now become the mainstream of today's politics in Bulgaria.⁴⁰ Myths and ethnonationalists' warmongering projects of neo-imperial expansion do away with common sense. In 1989 Sofia expelled 360,000 of Bulgaria's Turks to Turkey, which destabilized the communist country's economy, thus precipitating the fall of communist system in the People's Republic of Bulgaria. Afterward these expellees were allowed to return, and two-thirds of them did. Bulgarian nationalists were incensed by this development and demanded that human and political rights would continue to be withheld from these "ethnically non-Bulgarian" returnees. The existential fear was that post-communist Bulgaria would break up in the course of an ethnic civil war, like neighbouring Yugoslavia. Hence, during the first two decades after the end of communism, all Bulgaria's main political forces, including the Turkish minority, treaded carefully. They strove to maintain the domestic

³⁷ Cf J. Gallon. "For Eastern Europe, Brussels Is the New Moscow," *Real Clear World*, October 12, 2019.

https://www.realclearworld.com/2019/10/12/for_eastern_europe_brussels_is_the_new_moscow_200379.html; A. Andreev. "ES = SSSR? Nekda da vidim," *DW*, May 9, 2019. <https://www.dw.com/bg/ec-ссср-нека-да-видим/a-47189642>.

³⁸ B. Egorov. "Kolko moshtna e sivetskata versiia na NATO?," *Russia Beyond*, May 11, 2019. <https://bg.rbth.com/history/330434-varshavski-dogovor-suvetskata-versiya-na-nato>.

³⁹ "Bulgaria No Longer Considered 'Consolidated Democracy'," *BulgarianPresidency.eu*, April 12, 2018.

<http://bulgarianpresidency.eu/bulgaria-no-longer-considered-consolidated-democracy/>; P. Asenov. "Bulgarians Prefer Authoritarian Rule to Democracy," *SBS Bulgarian Radio*, February 16, 2018. <https://www.sbs.com.au/language/english/audio/bulgarians-prefer-authoritarian-rule-to-democracy>.

⁴⁰ "Europe's Populists are Waltzing into the Mainstream," *The Economist*, February 3, 2018. <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2018/02/03/europes-populists-are-waltzing-into-the-mainstream>; T. Petkova. "GERB shte izliazat izkliuchitelno zamaian ot izborite neasen," *Sega*, August 15, 2019. <https://www.segabg.com/node/86802>.

ethnic status quo, alongside good relations with all the neighbouring countries.⁴¹

However, the success of Bulgaria's NATO and EU membership encouraged nationalist extremists. In the 2005 parliamentary elections the rabidly anti-Turkish, anti-Roma and xenophobic Ataka (Attack) party won almost a tenth of all the votes. The following year, in the presidential election, over 20 percent of voters cast their ballots for this party's leader, Volen Siderov.⁴² Subsequently, the mainstream parties took over many elements of Ataka's radical program,⁴³ and this party is a member of the current ruling coalition in Bulgaria, too.⁴⁴ The post-Milošević Serbia's continuing flirt with Putin's resurgent Russia⁴⁵ offered a ready-made model to Bulgarian politicians of how to curry voters' favor by mixing nationalism with religion as the basis of "true Bulgarianness," which is capable of standing up to the "corrupt West," or the European Union.⁴⁶ A clear sign of this trend is, beginning in 2001, the institutionalization of the burgeoning posthumous personality cult of the national communist dictator of three a decades and half, Todor Zhivkov.⁴⁷ Nowadays, this tyrant and ethnic cleanser is incongruously celebrated with EU flags unfurled at his monument in the dictator's hometown of Pravets.⁴⁸

⁴¹ T. Kamusella. "Words Matter: Bulgaria and the 30th Anniversary of the Largest Ethnic Cleansing in Cold War Europe," *New Eastern Europe*, February 25, 2019. <http://neweasterneurope.eu/2019/02/25/words-matter-bulgaria-and-the-30th-anniversary-of-the-largest-ethnic-cleansing-in-cold-war-europe%ef%bb%bf/>.

⁴² "Ataka (partiiia)," *Uikipediia*, accessed November 12, 2019, [https://bg.wikipedia.org/wiki/Атака_\(партия\)](https://bg.wikipedia.org/wiki/Атака_(партия)).

⁴³ N. Nikolov. "What's Left When You are (Far) Right in Bulgaria?," *OpenDemocracy*, April 29, 2014. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/whats-left-when-you-are-far-right-in-bulgaria-0/>.

⁴⁴ "Obedineni patrioti," *Uikipediia*, accessed November 12, 2019, https://bg.wikipedia.org/wiki/Обединени_патриоти.

⁴⁵ U. Hajdari and M. Colborne. "There's One Country in Europe Where Putin Is a Rock Star," *Foreign Policy*, January 25, 2019. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/01/25/theres-one-country-in-europe-where-putin-is-a-rock-star-russia-serbia-vucic-belgrade-kosovo/>.

⁴⁶ Cf. B. Daragahi. "Are Bulgaria's Strings Still Being Pulled by the Kremlin?," *Independent*, April 23, 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/independentminds/long-reads/bulgaria-russia-moscow-kremlin-influence-oligarchs-nato-us-west-cold-war-a8864136.html>;

H. Cooper. "Bulgarian Far Right Set to Shock Brussels," *Politico*, December 9, 2017. <https://www.politico.eu/article/bulgarian-far-right-set-to-shock-brussels/>; Gallon, "New Moscow."

⁴⁷ T. Kamusella. "Bulgaria: An Unlikely Personality Cult," *New Eastern Europe*, September 7, 2018. <http://neweasterneurope.eu/2018/09/07/bulgaria-unlikely-personality-cult/>.

⁴⁸ T. Kamusella. "EU Flags for Balkan Tyrant and Ethnic Cleanser," *New Eastern Europe*, September 17, 2019. <http://neweasterneurope.eu/2019/09/17/eu-flags-for-balkan-tyrant-and-ethnic-cleanser/>.

In 2014, Russia annexed Ukraine's Crimea,⁴⁹ despite the 1994 Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances, on the strength of which, Britain, Russia and the United States jointly promised to guarantee the territorial integrity of Ukraine.⁵⁰ Neither London nor Washington did react beyond imposing economic sanctions on the Russian Federation.⁵¹ What is worse, this annexation undermines the 1975 Helsinki Final Act's principles of the inviolability of international frontiers in Europe (Point III) and of the territorial integrity of the continent's extant states (Point IV).⁵² As a result, the post-communist period appears to have come to an end,⁵³ yielding the new and as yet uncharted *post-Helsinki era* in Europe.⁵⁴

If Russia can annex a European territory at will with the EU and NATO standing idly, and Serbia can choose to defy Brussels by *not* recognizing the independence of Kosovo,⁵⁵ why should Bulgaria stick by the obsolete standards of the Helsinki Accords, democracy, or rule of law? Especially, at present, when in spite of Brussels' dire warnings,

⁴⁹ "Annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation," *Wikipedia*, accessed November 12, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Annexation_of_Crimea_by_the_Russian_Federation.

⁵⁰ "Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances," *Wikipedia*, accessed November 12, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Budapest_Memorandum_on_Security_Assurances.

⁵¹ I. Gutterman and W. Grojec. "A Timeline of All Russia-Related Sanctions," *RFE/RL*, September 19, 2018. <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-sanctions-timeline/29477179.html>.

⁵² "Helsinki Accords: Articles," *Wikipedia*, accessed November 12, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helsinki_Accords#Articles.

⁵³ The Kremlin claims that it was the West, which breached the Helsinki Accords first in 2008 by recognizing the independence of Kosovo. However, it was Serbia that had originally attacked and expelled Kosovo's Albanian-speaking majority. In Crimea the Ukrainian authorities neither suppressed, let alone expelled the peninsula's Russophones (Cf M. Riekstins. "Putin's Propaganda," *Foreign Affairs*, November/December, 2014, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/putin-s-propaganda>;

V. Kuznechevskii. "Kto zhe pokhronil Khelsinskie soglasheniia?," *Stoletie*, April 6, 2015, http://www.stoletie.ru/vzglyad/kto_pohoronil_khelsinskije_soglasheniija_688.htm;

"Vopros o nezavisimosti Kosovo: Pozitsiia Rossii," *Rukspert*, 2019,

https://rukspert.ru/Вопрос_о_независимости_Косово#.D0.9F.D0.BE.D0.B7.D0.B8.D1.86.D0.B8.D1.8F.D0.A0.D0.BE.D1.81.D1.81.D0.B8.D0.B8; "Khelsinskii lohotron. O nerushimosti granits kotoroiu dolzhna sobliudat' tolko Rossiia," *Odnako*, October 13, 2014. <http://www.odnako.org/blogs/helsinskiy-lohotron-o-nerushimosti-granic-kotoruyu-dolzhna-soblyudat-tolko-rossiya/>).

⁵⁴ Cf "European Security and the Ukraine crisis: A Post-Helsinki World?," The Ditchley Foundation, February 26, 2015.

<http://secure.ditchley.co.uk/conferences/past-programme/2010-2019/2015/european-security>;

B. Whitmore. "R.I.P. Helsinki Accords," *RFE/RL*, July 30, 2019. <https://www.rferl.org/a/rip-helsinki-accords/27161370.html>.

⁵⁵ "Serbia's Vucic Says No Recognition of Kosovo Unless Belgrade Gets Something Too," *RFE/RL*, March 5, 2019. <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-s-vucic-says-no-recognition-of-kosovo-unless-belgrade-gets-something-too/29803920.html>.

Belgrade signed a free trade agreement with Russia's Eurasian Economic Union on 25 October 2019.⁵⁶ Perhaps, as Brexit shows,⁵⁷ the policy of national grandeur outside the European Union is a possibility.⁵⁸ In the case of Bulgaria, such a policy is sure to turn away the electorate's attention from the unpalatable facts that their country is the poorest⁵⁹ and most corrupt⁶⁰ state in the European Union, and that 2.5 million (56%) out of the 4.5 million job active Bulgarians work abroad.⁶¹

⁵⁶ M. Stojanovic. "Serbia Signs Trade Deal With Russia's Eurasian Union," *BalkanInsight*, October 25, 2019. <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/10/25/serbia-signs-trade-deal-with-russias-eurasian-union/>.

⁵⁷ "Brexit," *Wikipedia*, accessed November 12, 2019, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brexit>.

⁵⁸ D. Maddox and D. Williamson. "Boris vows to make Britain 'greatest place on Earth' – But needs to deliver Brexit first," *Express*, October 13, 2019. <https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/1189999/Brexit-news-Boris-Johnson-UK-EU-deal-Commons-speech-European-Union>.

⁵⁹ D. McLaughlin. "Welcome to Bulgaria, the World's Fastest Shrinking Nation," *The Irish Times*, October 13, 2018 <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/europe/welcome-to-bulgaria-the-world-s-fastest-shrinking-nation-1.3658819>.

⁶⁰ "Bulgaria Remains the Most Corrupt Country in EU," *Obserwator Finansowy.pl*, January 29, 2019. <https://finansialobserver.eu/recent-news/bulgaria-remains-the-most-corrupt-country-in-eu/>;

J. Rankin. "Cloud of Corruption Hangs Over Bulgaria as It Takes Up EU Presidency," *The Guardian*, December 28, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/28/bulgaria-corruption-eu-presidency-far-right-minority-parties-concerns>.

⁶¹ "More Bulgarians Working Abroad than in Bulgaria," *Novinite.com*, November 6, 2015. <https://www.novinite.com/articles/171684/More+Bulgarians+Working+Abroad+Than+in+Bulgaria>; "2,5 miliona bulgari rabotiat v chuzhbina, v Bilgariia – samo 2 miliona," 2015, *24 chasa*, November 6, 2015. <https://www.24chasa.bg/novini/article/5097621>.



Greater Bulgaria of the 1878 San Stefano Treaty⁶²

Bulgaria's bookshops and news kiosks are full of commemorative volumes, periodicals and maps of "Greater Bulgaria" as created by the Russians for the four brief months on the basis of the San Stefano (Yeşilköy) Treaty of 3 March 1878.⁶³ To this day the date is celebrated in Bulgaria with much pomp as the "National Day of Liberation."⁶⁴ However, already on 13 July 1878, in the Treaty of Berlin, the great powers "shrank" the Bulgarian territory to its present-day size, wary of Russia's growing influence in the Balkans.⁶⁵ Most Bulgarians see this development as a "national tragedy," and still dream of the national ideal of "San Stefano Bulgaria."⁶⁶

⁶² "Sanstefanska Bulgaria.png," *Wikimedia Commons*, accessed November 12, 2019, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sanstefanska_Bulgaria.png.

⁶³ "Treaty of San Stefano," *Wikipedia*, accessed November 12, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Treaty_of_San_Stefano.

⁶⁴ O. Aanmoen. "Simeon II of Bulgaria Attends National Day Celebrations in Sofia," *Royalcentral*, March 7, 2019. <https://royalcentral.co.uk/europe/simeon-ii-of-bulgaria-attends-national-day-celebrations-in-sofia-117172/>;

"Bulgaria Celebrates the Day of Liberation," 2019, *Novinite.bg*, 3 March 3, 2019. <https://www.novinite.com/articles/195546/Bulgaria+Celebrates+the+Day+of+Liberatio>.

⁶⁵ "Treaty of Berlin (1878)," *Wikipedia*, accessed November 12, 2019, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Treaty_of_Berlin_\(1878\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Treaty_of_Berlin_(1878)).

⁶⁶ "Sanstefanska Bilgariia i nesluchiliat se natsionalen ideal," *Webcafe*, March 2, 2018.



Bulgaria as redefined by the Treaty of Berlin in 1878⁶⁷

During the First Balkan War, Sofia managed to extend the nation-state's boundaries considerably for about two months.⁶⁸ Another bout of militarily enabled expansion of the Bulgarian territory lasted for three years from 1915 to 1918 during the Great War. Subsequently, the mirage of "Greater Bulgaria" was lost immediately when the Central Powers collapsed, dragging their ally, Bulgaria, down in the defeat. Obviously, the Entente would not hear about any "San Stefano Bulgaria."⁶⁹

https://www.webcafe.bg/lifecafe/istoriya/id_299080677_Sanstefanska_Bulgaria_i_nesluchilijat_se_natsionalen_ideal.

⁶⁷ "Bulgaria after Congress of Berlin in 1878.png," *Wikimedia Commons*, accessed November 12, 2019,

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bulgaria_after_Congress_of_Berlin_in_1878.png.

⁶⁸ "Treaty of London (1913)," *Wikipedia*, accessed November 12, 2019,

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Treaty_of_London_\(1913\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Treaty_of_London_(1913)).

⁶⁹ "Bulgaria During World War I," *Wikipedia*, accessed November 12, 2019,

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bulgaria_during_World_War_I.



Bulgaria's territorial gains at the end of the First Balkan War, April 1913⁷⁰

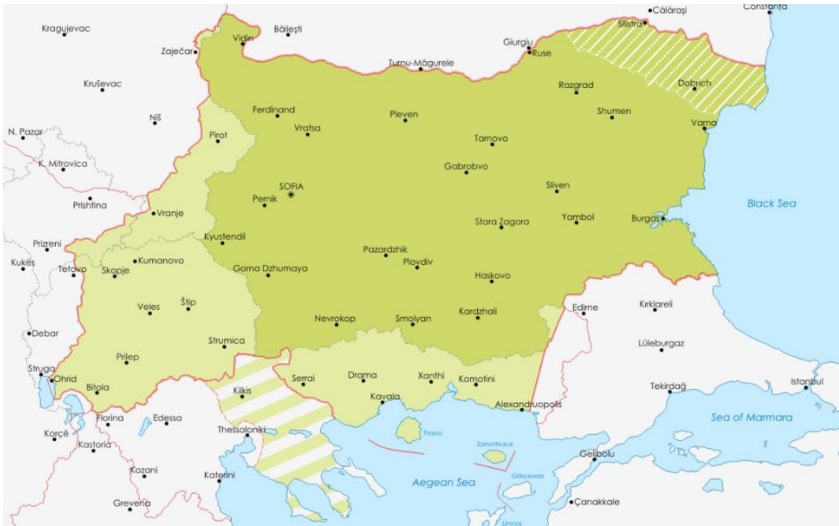
In 1941 Bulgaria joined the Axis Powers' onslaught against Yugoslavia. As a result, during World War II, Bulgaria managed to regain "its true San Stefano borders" for almost four years.⁷¹ Somehow, from the perspective of present-day Bulgaria, the millions of casualties, refugees and expellees are forgotten. And repeated multi-front warfare against all Bulgaria's neighbours does not seem to be "mad," but is lauded as "brave tactics" and "patriotism." Even worse, the fascist character of Sofia's alliance with the Third Reich and Mussolini's Italy is not perceived as a historic liability, nor is Bulgaria's (oft-denied) active participation in the

⁷⁰ "First Balkan war - liberated territories 1913.png," *Wikimedia Commons*, accessed November 12, 2019,

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:First_Balkan_war_-_liberated_territories_1913.png.

⁷¹ "Military History of Bulgaria During World War II," *Wikipedia*, accessed November 12, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Military_history_of_Bulgaria_during_World_War_II.

Holocaust.⁷² Bulgarian national ideologues change the past and its interpretations to suit their political needs, while Bulgarian leaders of all political persuasions do not think much about tactically embracing this poisonous politics of remembrance and history, if it can generate votes.⁷³ Principles do not matter any longer. Again the “pragmatism” of national myths takes over daily lives of people, complete with its well-tested promise of wreaking havoc that politicians are sure to “explain away” as “indispensable sacrifice at the altar of the nation.”⁷⁴



Bulgaria During World War II, 1941-1945⁷⁵

⁷² M. Cheresheva. “Bulgaria Holocaust Commemoration Sparks Controversy,” *BalkanInsight*, March 10, 2017. <https://balkaninsight.com/2017/03/10/controversy-sparks-over-bulgaria-holocaust-commemoration-03-09-2017/>.

⁷³ Cf J. Tsoneva. “Never Forget What the Fascists Did,” *Jacobin*, September 10, 2019. <https://jacobinmag.com/2019/10/bulgaria-fascism-nazism-anticommunism-historical-memory>.

⁷⁴ Cf P. D. Miller, P. D. “Worshipping at the Altar of the Nation,” *The American Interest*, May 1, 2017. <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2017/05/01/worshipping-at-the-altar-of-the-nation/>;

“Nationalism, War and Sacrifice: Dying for One’s Country,” *Philevents*, 2012, <https://philevents.org/event/show/2402>; I. Pajari. “Soldier’s Death and the Logic of Sacrifice” (pp 179-201), *Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies*, November 25, 2015.

<https://helda.helsinki.fi/bitstream/handle/10138/158351/Soldier%27s%20Death%20and%20the%20Logic%20of%20Sacrifice.pdf?sequence=1>.

⁷⁵ “Map of Bulgaria during WWII.png,” *Wikimedia Commons*, accessed November 12, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_Bulgaria_during_WWII.png.

Bulgaria's Demands

As in today's increasingly authoritarian Hungary or Poland, in Bulgaria the ethnolinguistically defined nation is the most revered totem of collective identity.⁷⁶ Many politicians believe that such a nation "by nature" is above the law. The incumbent government expresses the nation's "will" and thus can never err or bear being constrained by some international regulations, for instance, the EU's principles and legislation, or international law.⁷⁷ In light of these pro-authoritarian and populist changes in European, Balkan and Bulgarian politics, Sofia's ultimatum to North Macedonia does not really come as a surprise.

When, for a quarter of a century, Greece blocked Macedonia's aspirations of joining NATO and the EU on account of the latter country's "wrong" name,⁷⁸ Sofia's stance appeared to be supportive of Skopje. Somehow Bulgarian politicians could scale any ideological differences that drove the two countries apart during the Cold War period, when Macedonia was one of communist Yugoslavia's republics. Promisingly, on 15 January 1992, Bulgaria was the first country to recognize the independence of freshly post-Yugoslav Macedonia.⁷⁹ However, the Macedonian Scientific Institute, originally founded in Sofia in 1923 and dissolved in 1947, was re-established in 1990. Its main role was and still is to "prove" the primordial Bulgarianness of Macedonia, and Sofia's "natural right" to this historic region, including present-day North Macedonia.⁸⁰ In 1994 this institute issued a memorandum in which, among others, it was claimed that Macedonian is a mere literary variety of the Bulgarian language. This lightly veiled denial of the existence of Macedonian as a language in its own right generated a flurry of agitated diplomatic activity both in Skopje and Sofia. In 1999 a mutually

⁷⁶ B. Manka. "Ethnic Identities in the Making: The Case of Bulgaria," *Cultural Survival*, June, 1995,

<https://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/ethnic-identities-making-case-bulgaria>; "Grazhdanski komitet 'Zapadni pokrainini': Doly N'oi," *Desant*, September 18, 2019, <http://www.desant.net/show-news/50985>.

⁷⁷ Cf "Kornel Morawiecki w Sejmie: Nad prawem jest dobro Narodu! 'Prawo, które nie służy narodowi to bezprawie!' Reakcja? Owacja na stojąco," *wPolityce*, November 26, 2015. <https://wpolityce.pl/polityka/273101-kornel-morawiecki-w-sejmie-nad-prawem-jest-dobro-narodu-prawo-ktore-nie-sluzzy-narodowi-to-bezprawie-reakcja-owacja-na-stojaco-wideo>.

⁷⁸ "Macedonia Naming Dispute," *Wikipedia*, accessed November 12, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Macedonia_naming_dispute.

⁷⁹ Dejan Marolov, *Republic of Macedonia Foreign Policy: Diplomacy in the Middle of the Balkans* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 58.

⁸⁰ "Macedonian Scientific Institute," *Wikipedia*, accessed November 12, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Macedonian_Scientific_Institute.

acceptable solution was eventually reached.⁸¹ In essence it fell back on the 1967 Yugoslav-Bulgarian compromise to refer to Bulgarian and Macedonian as “official languages,” but without mentioning any specific glottonyms (language names). In addition, Skopje and Sofia declared that they did not have any claims to each other’s territories, be it on the basis of language or another. Recognizing Bulgaria’s good will, the Macedonian government agreed *not* to recognize any Macedonian minority in Bulgaria, though such a minority had officially existed in Bulgaria until the Tito-Stalin rift in 1948.⁸² The Bulgarian-Macedonian Friendship Treaty of 2017 seemed to be a crowning achievement in this process of scaling differences in favour of a common European future of peace, stability and prosperity for both Bulgaria and Macedonia.⁸³

However, on the side, Bulgarian linguists, with the official support of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, continued to equate the “Greater Bulgaria” of the San Stefano Treaty with the “true” territorial extent of the dialectal area of the Bulgarian language. On such a Bulgarian dialectal map one will *not* find any Macedonian language, or its dialects.⁸⁴ The prospect of EU membership for Bulgaria and its subsequent actualization were also deployed for attracting impoverished Macedonians to the Bulgarian nation. Employment and travel opportunities were seriously limited in the case of Macedonia until the breakthrough in the country’s relations with Greece was reached at the turn of 2019. Meanwhile, Sofia did not lose time and offered an easy track to the Bulgarian passport for any willing takers from Macedonia. Thus far, the document has been issued to well over 60,000 Macedonians.⁸⁵ This is another “argument” in

⁸¹ R. Synovitz. “Bulgaria: Resolution of Macedonian Language Dispute Clears NATO Hurdles,” *RFE/RL*, February 9, 1999. <https://www.rferl.org/a/1090545.html>.

⁸² Trajko Stamatovski, *Vo odbrana na makedinskiot literature jazik* (Skopje: Kultura, 2001), 141-156.

⁸³ S. J. Murasic and M. Cheresheva. “Macedonia Approves Landmark Friendship Treaty with Bulgaria,” *BalkanInsight*, January 15, 2018.

<https://balkaninsight.com/2018/01/15/macedonia-approves-landmark-friendship-treaty-with-bulgaria-01-15-2018/>.

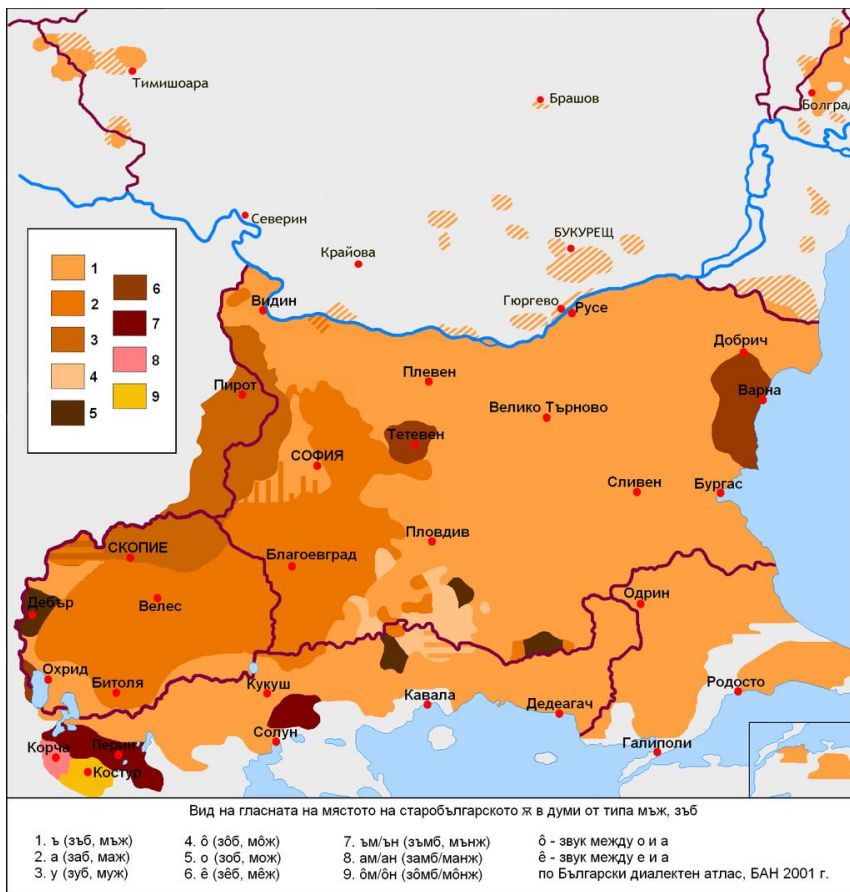
⁸⁴ *Obshhtavasht tom* (Ser: Bilgarski dialekten atlas, Vol 4), eds. S Stoikov, S B Bershtein and I Kochev. Sofia: Knigoizdatelska kishta Trud, 2001.

⁸⁵ “Thousands of Macedonians Get Bulgarian Passports,” *BalkanInsight*, December 29, 2011.

<https://balkaninsight.com/2011/12/29/7-000-macedonians-obtain-bulgarian-passports-in-one-month/>; “More and More Macedonians Are Receiving Bulgarian Passports,” *Novinite.com*, August 10, 2019.

[https://www.novinite.com/articles/199223/More+and+more+Macedonians+Are+Receiving+Bulgarian+Passports/](https://www.novinite.com/articles/199223/More+and+more+Macedonians+Are+Receiving+Bulgarian+Passports;); “Blizo 30 000 makedontsi sa vzeli bilgarski passport za 6 godini,” *Mediapool.bg*, June 26, 2018. <https://www.mediapool.bg/blizo-30-000-makedontsi-sa-vzeli-bilgarski-passport-za-6-godini-news280737.html>; M. Ilcheva. “Makedontsi: ‘Bilgarskiit

the eyes of Bulgarian nationalists that Macedonians are “Bulgarians who are suffering the identificational consequences of the denial of their true national identity, as orchestrated by the Yugoslav communists.”⁸⁶



Bulgarian Academy of Sciences' view on the “dialectal territory” of the Bulgarian language⁸⁷

pasport e unizhenie/,” *DW*, 13 March 13, 2017. <https://www.dw.com/bg/македонци-българският-паспорт-е-унижение/a-37914463>.

⁸⁶ “MKD, Makedoniia: Istinski i izkustveni natsii na Balkanite,” *Fokus*, June 23, 2014. <http://m.focus-news.net/?action=opinion&id=28893>; “Niama makedonska natsioa predi 1944 g., otseche Dzhambazki,” *News.bg*, June 17, 2019. <https://news.bg/bulgaria/nyama-makedonska-natsiya-predi-1944-g-otseche-dzhambazki.html>;

“Makedonskata natsiia e izmislена v kraia na VSV, priznakha v Skopie,” *News.bg*, November 3, 2017. <https://news.bg/int-politics/makedonskata-natsiya-e-izmislена-v-kraia-na-vsv-priznaha-v-skopie.html>.

⁸⁷ “Bulgarian dialect map-yus.png,” *Wikimedia Commons*, accessed November 12, 2019,

Now, with the 2019 ultimatum, Sofia threw out of the window the painstakingly achieved and carefully cultivated rapprochement with North Macedonia.⁸⁸ Instead of extending a helping hand, Bulgaria picks on a weaker neighbour that at present finds itself in the uneasy position of a supplicant. A braver -and “patriotically Bulgarian”- thing to do would be to stand up to Greece, from which Sofia could staunchly demand Aegean Macedonia⁸⁹ and western Thrace,⁹⁰ as “truly” Bulgarian provinces from “times immemorial.” In addition, Sofia does not appear to be shocked and appalled by the fact that for almost a century Athens has staunchly denied the existence of any Slavic-speaking (Bulgarian⁹¹ or Macedonian) minority in Greece.⁹² Should Athens dare not to comply with Sofia’s ultimatum of this kind, Bulgaria could seal off its border with Greece, thus blocking the latter country’s sole direct land access to the rest of the European Union. Who cares that Brussels and Washington would undoubtedly protest? For sure, Russia, as an “old and trusted friend” would come to Sofia’s succor. Bulgaria as an anti-European “Trojan horse” would play nicely in Putin’s larger plan of weakening the EU.⁹³ In Bulgarian nationalists’ eyes another Balkan war is but a small price to pay for re-founding the “San Stefano Bulgaria.”

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bulgarian_dialect_map-yus.png.

⁸⁸ Cf “Georgeievski: Bilgarskiiat ultimatum anulira dogovora za dobrosisedstvo,” *24 chasa*, October 11, 2019. <https://www.24chasa.bg/novini/article/7704580>.

⁸⁹ “Aegean Macedonia,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 12, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aegean_Macedonia.

⁹⁰ “Bilgari v Girtsia,” *Uikipediia*, accessed November 12, 2019, https://bg.wikipedia.org/wiki/Българи_в_Гърция.

⁹¹ “Bi Bi Si razgnevi Girtsia s material za ‘nevidimoto makedonsko maltsinstvo’,” *Dnevnik.bg*, February 26, 2019.

https://www.dnevnik.bg/sviat/2019/02/26/3396332_bi_bi_si_razgnevi_gurciia_s_materia_l_za_nevidimoto/; B. Chekov. “Pesnata na dedo mi,” *FrogNews*, December 17, 2012. <https://frognews.bg/kultura/art-jungla/pesnata-dedo.html>.

⁹² “Greece’s Invisible Minority - the Macedonian Slavs,” *BBC News*, February 24, 2019. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/stories-47258809>; “Greece: Status of Minorities,” Library of Congress, accessed November 12, 2019, <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/greece-minorities/greece.php>; *Denying Ethnic Identity: The Macedonians of Greece* (New York: Human Rights Watch / Helsinki [formerly Helsinki Watch], 1994), <https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/GREECE945.PDF>.

⁹³ Cf “Zaradi ruskoto vlianie Bilgariia e v periferiata na ES, smiata Ivan Kostov,” *Dnevnik.bg*, October 16, 2018.

https://www.dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2018/10/16/3328466_ruskoto_vlianie_v_bulgariia_e_prichinata_stranata_da/; N. Tsekov. “Putin i negovite emisari v Bilgariia,” *DW*, September 16, 2019. <https://www.dw.com/bg/путин-и-неговите-емисари-в-българия/a-50445451>.



Slavophone (Macedonian / Bulgarian) minority in northern Greece⁹⁴

But Bulgarian leaders and nationalists are careful *not* to anger any fellow EU member state. After all Brussels is the main source of funds for the development of Bulgaria,⁹⁵ and for lining the pockets of its corrupt politicians.⁹⁶ Hence, the ultimatum handed to North Macedonia is a cost-

⁹⁴ "Greece Linguistic Minorities Hatched.jpg," Wikimedia Commons, accessed November 12, 2019, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/>.

⁹⁵ "Sredstva ot ES i dugi donori," Ministerstvo na finansite, accessed November 12, 2019, <https://www.minfin.bg/bg/73>.

⁹⁶ "Misuse of EU Funds in Romania and Bulgaria," *Investigative Journalism for Europe*, November 14, 2018. <https://www.investigativejournalismforeu.net/projects/misuse-of-eu-funds-in-romania-and-bulgaria/>; I. Angelov. "Bilgariia e dirzhava s korumpirani upravniitsi," *Duma.bg*, 20 May 20, 2019. <https://duma.bg/balgarriya-e-darzhava-s-korumpirani-upravniitsi-n192112>; P. Cholakov. "Bilgarint se vizmushtava. No prodilzhava da turp," *DW*,

effective and seemingly risk-free manner in which Bulgarian leaders can “prove” their patriotism and loyalty to the nation. For the time being, North Macedonia seems to be the sole loser of the situation that is not of Skopje’s making, while the European Union chooses to look away.

The ultimatum’s list of 20 odd demands is impossible to fulfill. By doing so Skopje would have to agree to the utter humiliation of North Macedonia and its citizens. Not only does Sofia want Skopje to *refrain* from talking about any Macedonian minority in western Bulgaria. North Macedonia is also required *not* to use the term “Macedonian language” in any international context and especially in the European Union. At best, according to Sofia, it should be referred as a “dialect of Bulgarian.” The old chestnut on the non-existence of the Macedonian nation has been refreshed in Sofia’s demand that in Macedonian history textbooks fascist Bulgaria’s wartime occupation of Macedonia should *not* be labelled as “occupation.” The reasoning behind it is that the Macedonians are a regional group of the Bulgarian nation, while North Macedonia is part of the “Greater Bulgaria” of 1878. Hence, in 1941 Sofia did not annex, but “united” Macedonians and their “region” with the “mother country” of Bulgaria. To add insult to injury, Sofia wants Skopje to give up on North Macedonia’s most important modern national hero Goce Delčev, who instead is to be recognized as an “exclusively Bulgarian hero.”⁹⁷ Recently, in order to up the ante, Bulgarian nationalists, led by MEP Angel

June 11, 2019. <https://www.dw.com/bg/българинът-се-възмушава-но-продължава-да-търпи/a-49133023>.

⁹⁷ Marusic, S. J. “Intellectuals Condemn Bulgaria’s ‘Unacceptable’ Demands of North Macedonia,” *BalkanInsight*, October 11, 2019.

<https://balkaninsight.com/2019/10/11/intellectuals-condemn-bulgarias-unacceptable-demands-of-north-macedonia/>; “Petition Condemns Bulgaria’s Conditions Imposed on Macedonia,” *Republika*, October 11, 2019.

<https://english.republika.mk/news/macedonia/petition-condemns-bulgarias-conditions-laid-on-macedonia/>; M. A. Koloski. “As EU Decision on Macedonian Accession Looms Nearer, Bulgaria Shows Increased Symptoms of Their Macedonian Syndrome,” *United Macedonian Diaspora*, October 3, 2019.

<http://umdiaspora.org/2019/10/03/bulgariasmacedoniansyndrome/>; “Macedonian and Bulgarian Historians Fail to Find Common Ground During Their Ohrid Round of Talks,” *Republika*, October 16, 2019.

<https://english.republika.mk/news/macedonia/macedonian-and-bulgarian-historians-fail-to-find-common-ground-during-their-ohrid-round-of-talks/>; I. Dichev. “Kakvo tochno iska Bilgaria ot Severna Makedoniia?” *DW*, October 11, 2019. <https://www.dw.com/bg/какво-точно-иска-българия-от-северна-македония/a-50790983>; “Borisov otiva pri prezidenta Radev, za da bistriat chlenstvoto na Severna Makedoniia v ES,” *Lupa.bg*, September 28, 2019. https://lupa.bg/news/borisov-otiva-pri-prezidenta-radev-za-da-bistryat-chlenstvoto-na-severna-makedoniya-v-es_24774news.html.

Dzhambazki, announced that North Macedonia is none other, but a “second Bulgarian state.”⁹⁸

The rhetoric clearly reminds one of the Third Reich’s views on interwar Austria prior to the Anschluss of 1938. Berlin was denying the existence of any Austrian nation. From Germany’s perspective Austria’s inhabitants were deemed to belong to the German nation. Hence, Austria was an “unnecessary” second German state in Europe. Nowadays, any German politician voicing such anti-Austrian views would be relieved of their post in no time. In today’s Europe there is no place for any German neo-imperialism. Hence, even far-right extremists and radical nationalists enamored of the German nation would not call for another annexation of Austria. At the same time, the Austrians see no problem in sharing the German language with the Germans, Belgians, Liechtensteiners, Luxembourgers or the Swiss. However, none of the aforementioned nations with a stake in this tongue, sees it as an argument for creating a Greater Germany, where all German-speakers would have to be gathered. Hence, Sofia’s insistence that the Macedonians must relent and redefine their language as a dialect of Bulgarian is an ideological throwback from Europe’s dark 20th century. Such a “logic” does not become the democratic EU. But the Bulgarian government appears to believe that Bulgaria -as the self-styled oldest civilized country in Europe⁹⁹- must be exempted from observing such rules.

⁹⁸ “Bulgarian Nationalist MEP Declares Macedonia the ‘Second Bulgarian State in the Balkans’,” *Republika*, 26 June 26, 2019.

<https://english.republika.mk/news/macedonia/bulgarian-nationalist-mep-declares-macedonia-the-second-bulgarian-state-in-the-balkans/>.

⁹⁹ “Nai-drevnata tsivilizatsiia v Evropa e protsifiala na teritoriiata na Bulgariia i chast ot Balkanite,” *Kvantov prekhod*, March 31, 2018.

<https://www.kvantov-prehod.org/article/1106/най-древната-цивилизация-в-европа-е-процъфтяла-на-територията-на-българия-и-част-от-балканите>; B. Dimitrov. “Zashto Bulgariia e nai-starata dirzhava v Evropa,” *Trud*, January 19, 2018. <https://trud.bg/защо-българия-е-най-старата-държава-в-е/>;

P. Minkova. “Predi 8000 godini v Bulgariia se razhda pivrata tsivilizatsiia v Evropa,” *168 chasa*, September 25, 2019. <https://www.168chasa.bg/article/5661512>.



All the Bulgarias of the distant past remade into Sofia's "Bulgarian World"¹⁰⁰

A similarly imperial approach to language politics was practiced in the late Russian Empire. In 1863 the existence of the Ukrainian language was denied and its use in publishing strenuously banned until 1905.¹⁰¹ Subsequently, a theory was developed that Belarusian and Ukrainian are not languages in their own right, but mere "peasant dialects" of the single imperial (Great) Russian language. Nowadays, this theory has been revived as part of Russia's neo-imperial ideology of the *Russkii Mir* (Russian World).¹⁰² In turn, this ideology "justifies" the Kremlin's

¹⁰⁰ "Bilgarskite darzhavi predi 681 g.," Spiralata, accessed November 10, 2019, <http://www.spiralata.net/kratce/index.php/istoriya/1021-balgarskite-darzhavi-predi-681-g>.

¹⁰¹ "Valuevskii tsirkular," Vikipediia, accessed November 12, 2019, https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Валуєвський_циркуляр.

¹⁰² A. Prymiak. "Free Belarus: Coercion to 'Integration': Russia's Creeping Assault on the Sovereignty of Belarus," *Visegrad Insight*, May 30, 2019. <https://visegradinsight.eu/free-belarus/>; T. Kamusella. "After Ukraine's New Language Law, It Is High Time for Ukrainian Russian," *New Eastern Europe*, August 7, 2019.

<http://neweasterneurope.eu/2019/08/07/after-ukraines-new-language-law-it-is-high-time-for-ukrainian-russian/>;

T. Kamusella. "Russian: Between Re-ethnicisation and Pluricentrism," *New Eastern Europe*, February 9, 2018.

<http://neweasterneurope.eu/2018/02/09/russian-re-ethnicisation-pluricentrism/>.

annexations in Ukraine¹⁰³ and attempts to make Belarus into another Russian province.¹⁰⁴ Sofia appears to be a diligent student of this new-old politics *à la russe*. If the Kremlin can aspire to an ever-expanding “Russian World,” Sofia should have its right recognized to a similar *Bilgarski sviat* (Bulgarian World), which on the “historic grounds” extends at least from the Volga and the Aral Sea in the east to the Danube basin and the Apennine Peninsula in the west.¹⁰⁵



Goce Delčev¹⁰⁶

Goce Delčev -a revolutionary, nationalist, leader, politician and terrorist in one- was born in 1872 in the Ottoman town of Kilikis, which

¹⁰³ “Russian Military Intervention in Ukraine (2014–present),” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 12, 2019, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_military_intervention_in_Ukraine_\(2014–present\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_military_intervention_in_Ukraine_(2014–present)).

¹⁰⁴ “Union State,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 12, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Union_State; A. Shraibman. “A Brotherly Takeover: Could Russia Annex Belarus?,” *The Moscow Times*, January 29, 2019. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/01/29/a-brotherly-takeover-could-russia-annex-belarus-op-ed-a64326>.

¹⁰⁵ “Bilgarskite dirzhavi predi 681 g.,” 2019, *Spirala.net*. <http://www.spiralata.net/kratce/index.php/istoriya/1021-balgarskite-darzhavi-predi-681-g>.

¹⁰⁶ “G Delchev.jpg,” *Wikimedia Commons*, accessed November 12, 2019, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:G_Delchev.jpg.

today is located in northern Greece, that is, in Aegean Macedonia. At that time, neither Bulgaria nor Macedonia had been founded as nation-states yet. Delčev wanted to create a nation-state for a postulated nation of Macedonians in order to prevent the partition of Ottoman Macedonia between Bulgaria, Greece and Serbia. Initially, he had some hopes of Bulgarian support for his program, but soon he came to a realization that a “San Stefano Bulgaria” would be no solution to the “Macedonian” predicament. In 1903 Delčev died in a skirmish with Ottoman troops.¹⁰⁷ He had no way of knowing that in 1934 Comintern would recognize the Macedonians as a nation (alongside their Macedonian language) in order to thrust a thorn into the side of Belgrade’s policy of Serbianizing its share of Macedonia, then known as “southern Yugoslavia.”¹⁰⁸ Ten years later, in 1944, the victorious communist Yugoslav partisans, under Tito’s leadership, granted the Macedonians their own national republic within communist Yugoslavia.¹⁰⁹ Immediately, the Macedonian activists and leaders followed with a Soviet-style program of the accelerated development of Macedonian as a written medium of education, administration, scholarship, literature and culture.¹¹⁰

The politics of history (*Geschichtspolitik*) is a widely accepted intellectual-cum-political fashion in today’s Europe. The employment of preselected elements of the past “appropriately customized” (that is, to a degree falsified) for current needs has become a new norm of political discourse. From this inherently biased perspective, Sofia claims Delčev as a Bulgarian, while Skopje as a Macedonian. On the strength of his place of birth, Athens could claim him as a Greek, while Ankara might see him as a “disloyal Turk,” because Delčev was an Ottoman subject. When Yugoslavia thrived, his rewardingly multiethnic and polyconfessional background made Delčev into a “true Yugoslav.” But all such claims are,

¹⁰⁷ “Gotse Delchev,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 12, 2019,

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gotse_Delchev.

¹⁰⁸ “Resolution of the Comintern on the Macedonian Question,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 12, 2019,

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Resolution_of_the_Comintern_on_the_Macedonian_Question.

¹⁰⁹ “History of North Macedonia: 1944–1949,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 12, 2019,

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_North_Macedonia#1944-1949.

¹¹⁰ “Decision about Language on ASNOM (scan, 2 August 1944),” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 12, 2019,

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Macedonian_language#/media/File:Reseniie_na_asnom_z_a_jazik.jpg; “Standard Macedonian,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 12, 2019,

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Standard_Macedonian;

“Blaže Koneski: Work on Standard Macedonian,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 12, 2019,

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blaže_Koneski#Work_on_standard_Macedonian.

in essence, anachronistic, and an error of judgement to a historian. The sociopolitical reality in which Delčev lived was largely *non-national*, and only after his death it was firmly split among ethnolinguistically defined nation-states. Should they like it or not, all these Balkan national polities share their pre-national common past, which cannot be retroactively split along some then non-existent “national lines.”

The Bulgarian-Macedonian quarrel over Delčev resembles the debate over the “true nationality” of the romantic poet Adam Mickiewicz (1798-1855).¹¹¹ He was born in the Russian Empire to a petty noble family who, in 1795, had experienced the demise of their country, the Commonwealth of the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The family’s and the poet’s lingering loyalty was to this former Commonwealth, and especially to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. However, nowadays Mickiewicz is claimed to be a Polish national poet, because he wrote in Polish, though he never visited the Polish capital cities of Warsaw or Cracow. Others consider Mickiewicz a Lithuanian poet, because he gained education in Vilnius, or the present-day capital of Lithuania. The Belarusians believe that they also have a right to Mickiewicz, because his family mansion is located in today’s Belarus. Many Jews in the diaspora and Israel deem Mickiewicz to be a Jewish poet, too, because of the Jewish origin of this poet’s mother. However, when Mickiewicz died, there was no nation-state going by the name of Belarus, Israel, Lithuania or Poland yet. Hence, all the respective *national* historiographies have the same claim to their shared common *pre-national* past of Poland-Lithuania.¹¹² Obviously, Moscow could see Mickiewicz as a “disloyal Russian,” too, since he was a subject of the tsar.

Bulgaria’s Secret Empire

When the European Union looks the other way, Sofia busies itself with the underhand -or “hybrid”- reconstruction of the “San Stefano Bulgaria.” This project is implemented now at direct expense to North Macedonia and the future of its citizens, but also undermines the process

¹¹¹ “Adam Mickiewicz,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 12, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adam_Mickiewicz.

¹¹² T. Kamusella, “Mickiewicz and the Holocaust: An Alternative History,” *Wachtyrz*, November 11, 2019. <https://wachtyrz.eu/tomasz-kamusella-mickiewicz-and-the-holocaust-an-alternative-history/>; M. Urbańczyk, “Idea ULB (Ukraina-Litwa-Białoruś) w myśli Jerzego Giedroycia i Juliusza Mieroszewskiego,” in *Rodzinną Europą. Europejska myśl polityczno – prawną u progu XXI wieku*, eds. P. Fiktus, H. Malewski, M. Marszał and J. Koredczuk, (Wrocław: E-Wydawnictwo. Prawnicza i Ekonomiczna Biblioteka Cyfrowa. Wydział Prawa, Administracji i Ekonomii Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2015), 309-322, https://www.repozytorium.uni.wroc.pl/Content/66136/19_Michal_Urbanczyk.pdf.

of European integration in the Balkans, alongside the basic principles of the European Union. Curiously, the EU's poorest weakest and most corrupt member state is able to wag the entire Union, while no one appears to pay attention. In more ways than one, this Bulgarian approach copies Moscow's¹¹³ destabilizing tactics as applied to the EU and non-EU countries located along the Union's eastern frontier. Immediately after the fall of communism, the Kremlin considered this area to be the "near abroad," or Russia's exclusive sphere of influence.¹¹⁴ After 2007 the policy became rebranded under the novel moniker of the "Russian World." It is Moscow alone that defines, as it sees fit, the spatial extent of this *Russkii Mir*.¹¹⁵ For instance, nowadays, the term seems to cover both Syria and Israel.¹¹⁶



Mir.¹¹⁵ For instance, nowadays, the term seems to cover both Syria and Israel.¹¹⁶

By economic and political necessity, Sofia's tacit neo-imperial ambitions are more limited. So far, no one officially speaks openly about any program of a "Bulgarian World." Yet, it should be asked what Bulgaria's territorial aspirations may be beyond the "near abroad" of North Macedonia, or this "second Bulgarian state" in the Balkans.

Maximalist view of the Bulgarian minority in Albania¹¹⁷

¹¹³ T. Kamusella, "A Case of the Tail Wagging the Dog? Bulgaria, the EU and North Macedonia," *New Eastern Europe*, December 10, 2020.

¹¹⁴ "Blizhnee zarubezhe," *Vikipediia*, accessed November 12, 2019,

https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ближнее_зарубежье; C. Coughlin, "Post-Brexit Britain Has a Vital Role to Play in Bringing Nato Back Together," *The Telegraph*, October 23, 2019.

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/10/23/post-brexit-britain-has-vital-role-play-bringing-nato-back-together/>.

¹¹⁵ "Russian World," *Wikipedia*, accessed November 12, 2019,

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_world; "Geographic Distribution of Russian Speakers," *Wikipedia*, accessed November 12, 2019,

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geographical_distribution_of_Russian_speakers.

¹¹⁶ "Russian Involvement in the Syrian Civil War," *Wikipedia*, accessed November 12, 2019,

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_involvement_in_the_Syrian_Civil_War; "Russian Jews in Israel," *Wikipedia*, accessed November 12, 2019,

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_Jews_in_Israel.

In return for Sofia's promise of support in Albania's efforts to join the European Union, in 2017 Tirana recognized the country's Orthodox Slavic-speakers as a Bulgarian minority.¹¹⁸ Strangely, members of this new minority reside along Albania's frontier with Macedonia. Skopje dislikes this development and considers these Orthodox Slavic-speakers to be Macedonians.¹¹⁹ But North Macedonia has hardly anything to offer to Tirana or to the minority in question.¹²⁰ On the other hand, the latter may now apply for Bulgarian citizenship and receive the much coveted Bulgarian-EU passport, which would allow them to seek gainful employment in the European Union.¹²¹ Remittances sent back home help both their families and the development of Albania. So the Bulgarian World is already growing. The Bulgarian Prime Minister Boiko Borisov did not fail to curry favour with nationalists by crediting this "historic breakthrough" to his personal diplomatic endeavors.¹²² Somehow Sofia's hybrid policy of reaffirming – through demographic and cultural means – the tacit existence of the "San Stefano Bulgaria" on the Albanian territory has escaped the Albanian government's attention.

¹¹⁷ "Ethnic Bulgarians in Albania.jpg," *Wikimedia Commons*, accessed November 12, 2019, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ethnic_Bulgarians_In_Albania.jpg.

¹¹⁸ "Kërkesat e KE, pakica bullgare në Shqipëri do të njihet si minoritet," *Exit.al*, October 11, 2017.

<https://exit.al/2017/10/kerkesat-e-ke-pakica-bullgare-ne-shqiperi-do-te-njihet-si-minoritet/>.

¹¹⁹ "Makedonets v Albanii vizmuten ot genotsid s priznavaneto na bilgarskoto maltsinstvo,"

News.bg, November 8, 2017.

<https://news.bg/int-politics/makedonets-v-albaniya-vazmuten-ot-genotsid-s-priznavaneto-na-balgarskoto-maltsinstvo.html>;

"Kovačev: Priznavaneto bugarsko malcinstvo vo Albanija ne ja zagrozuvaa Makedonija," MKD, October 9, 2019.

<https://www.mkd.mk/makedonija/politika/kovachev-priznavaneto-bugarsko-malcinstvo-vo-albanija-ne-ja-zagrozuvaa>; "Makedoncite protov pobugarčuvanje," *Infomax.mk*, October 2, 2017. <https://infomax.mk/wp/македонците-против-побугарчување-ма/>.

¹²⁰ "Priznakha bilgarskoto maltsinstvo v Albanii," *News.bg*, October 12, 2017.

<https://news.bg/int-politics/priznaha-balgarskoto-maltsinstvo-v-albaniya.html>;

"Bulgarians in Albania," *Wikipedia*, accessed November 12, 2019,

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bulgarians_in_Albania.

¹²¹ R. Domuschieva. "Rekorden broi kandidati za bilgarsko grazhdanstvo," *bto Novinite*, 12 May 12, 2018. <https://btvovinite.bg/bulgaria/rekorden-broj-kandidati-za-balgarsko-grazhdanstvo.html>;

"V Albanii zaradi bilgarski pasporti edno selo se prevrshita v prizrachno," *Darik News*, July 9, 2017. <https://dariknews.bg/novini/sviat/v-albanii-zaradi-bylgarski-pasporti-edno-selo-se-prevrshita-v-prizrachno-2035708>.

¹²² "Albania prizna bilgarskoto natsionalno maltsinstvo," *Mediapool.bg*, October 14, 2017.

<https://www.mediapool.bg/albaniya-prizna-balgarskoto-natsionalno-maltsinstvo-news270490.html>.



Paulicians, or "Banat Bulgarians"¹²³

Another diasporic group claimed and lauded by Sofia and Bulgarian scholarship are the "Banat Bulgarians," though its members prefer to be known under the self-appellation of "Paulicians." Their origin dates back to the period of prolonged intermittent warfare between the Habsburgs and the Ottomans, which ravaged and destabilized much of the northern Balkans. Between the late 17th century and the mid-18th century, a trickle of Slavophone Orthodox refugees followed from what today is the northwestern corner of Bulgaria, across the Danube, to the Habsburg lands north of the Danube. Most settled in Banat, which Vienna

¹²³ "Banat Bulgarian settlement.svg," *Wikimedia Commons*, accessed November 12, 2019, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Banat_Bulgarian_settlement.svg.

permanently seized from the Ottomans in 1718. With time these refugees adopted Catholicism and the Latin script for writing their South Slavic vernacular.¹²⁴ Books were published in this Paulician language during the 19th century, and its use was revived after the fall of communism. Sofia considers Paulician to be a “third literary standard” of the Bulgarian language, following the Bulgarian and Macedonian literary standards. However, Bulgarian scholars prefer to dub this language “Banat Bulgarian.”¹²⁵ In the wake of the breakup of Austria-Hungary, Banat was split between Yugoslavia and Romania. Unlike in the case of Albania’s “Bulgarians,” the prospect of a Bulgarian-EU passport does amount to much among Paulicians. The Romanian-EU passport -also available to Paulicians living in Serbia- offers exactly the same privileges like its Bulgarian counterpart.¹²⁶ Hence, Paulicians have no immediate need to cozy up to Sofia.



Taraclia County (marked red) in southern Moldova¹²⁷

¹²⁴ “Banat Bulgarians,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 12, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Banat_Bulgarians.

¹²⁵ “Banat Bulgarian Dialect,” *Wikipedia*, accessed November 12, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Banat_Bulgarian_dialect; M. Mladenova, “Ezikt na bilgarskite katolitsi v rumunski Banat v nachaloto na 21 vek,” *Problemi na sotsiolingvistikata: Ezikt vro vremeto i prostranstvo* (2014): 54-60, https://www.academia.edu/9202432/ЕЗИКЪТ_НА_БЪЛГАРИТЕ_КАТОЛИЦИ_ОТ_РУМЪНСКИ_БАНАТ_В_НАЧАЛОТО_НА_21_ВЕК.

¹²⁶ Cf “Povestea românilor din Serbia care vor să obțină cetățenia română,” *Radio Timișoara*, December 21, 2016, <http://www.radiotimisoara.ro/2016/12/21/povestea-romanilor-din-serbia-care-vor-sa-obtina-cetatenia-romana/>; “Apel privind acordarea cetățeniei române în Serbia,” *Jurnal Romanesc*, March 7, 2018, <http://www.jurnalromanesc.ro/jr2/index.php/component/k2/115-boljevac/1038-apel-privind-acordarea-cetateniei-romane-in-serbia.html>.

¹²⁷ “Taraclia District in Moldova.svg,” *Wikimedia Commons*, accessed November 12, 2019, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Taraclia_District_in_Moldova.svg.

However, Sofia's most interesting and least noticed foray is into Taraclia County in southern Moldova. As a result of the Russo-Ottoman War of 1806-1812, St Petersburg gained Bessarabia (or today's Moldova). Local Slavophone Orthodox ("Bulgarian") supporters of the Russians south of the Danube evacuated with the Russian troops to escape Ottoman reprisals.¹²⁸ At present, ethnic Bulgarians, numbering 28,000, add up to two-thirds of the county's population,¹²⁹ while in total, around 65,000 ethnic Bulgarians live across all of Moldova.¹³⁰ In 2004, with Sofia's support, Taraclia State University was founded with Bulgarian as its medium of instruction.¹³¹ Definitely, Moldova being Europe's second poorest state (after post-2014 Ukraine),¹³² a Bulgarian-EU passport is quite an attraction. Already four-fifths of job active Moldovans work abroad, meaning that almost half of the population de facto emigrated from the country to the EU or Russia.¹³³ Obviously, a Moldovan citizen can apply for a Romanian-EU passport (half a million already did and obtained this document¹³⁴), but if the Bulgarian authorities make it even easier for

¹²⁸ "Tarakliia," *Uikipediia*, accessed November 12, 2019, <https://bg.wikipedia.org/wiki/Тараклия>; "Besarabski bulgari," *Uikipediia*, accessed November 12, 2019, https://bg.wikipedia.org/wiki/Бесарабски_българи.

¹²⁹ "Raionul Taraclia," *Wikipedia*, accessed November 12, 2019, https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raionul_Taraclia.

¹³⁰ "Bessarabian Bulgarians: Modern Moldova," *Wikipedia*, accessed November 12, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bessarabian_Bulgarians#Modern_Moldova.

¹³¹ "Tarakliiski dirzhaven universitet," *Uikipediia*, accessed November 12, 2019, https://bg.wikipedia.org/wiki/Тараклийски_държавен_университет; "Universitatea de Stat, Grigore Țamblac' din Taraclia," accessed November 12, 2019, <https://tdu-tar.md/>; R. Marinova. "Tarakliiskiyat dirzhaven universitet chestva 15 godini," BNT 1 Novini, October 3, 2019. <https://bntnews.bg/bg/a/tarakliyskiyat-drzhaven-universitet-chestva-15-godini>.

¹³² O. Sen Nag. "The Poorest Countries in Europe," *Worldatlas*, October 22, 2019. <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/the-poorest-countries-in-europe.html>; W. H. Hill and D. J. Kramer. "The Fight for the Poorest Country in Europe," *The American Interest*, July 2, 2019. <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2019/07/02/the-fight-for-the-poorest-country-in-europe/>.

¹³³ "Emigration from Moldova," *Wikipedia*, accessed November 12, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emigration_from_Moldova; "Economic Woes Abroad Hit Moldova's Migrant Workers," *Euractiv.com*, October 28, 2016. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/economy-jobs/news/economic-woes-abroad-hit-moldovas-migrant-workers/>; M. Meloni. 2016, "The Country That Was Orphaned by Emigration," *Narratively*, August 1, 2016. <https://narratively.com/the-country-that-was-orphaned-by-emigration/>.

¹³⁴ "Numărul basarabenilor care obțin cetățenie Română este în creștere," *Romanian Global News*, July 29, 2019. http://www.rgnpress.ro/rgn_18/categorii/politic/30986-2019-07-29-08-19-02.html.

Taraclia's Bulgarians to obtain a Bulgarian counterpart, then why not to take up this offer.¹³⁵

Since the turn of the 21st century, Sofia has supported Taraclia's Bulgarians in their efforts to win an autonomous status for their county.¹³⁶ In 2014 even a bill to this end was lodged with the Moldovan Parliament.¹³⁷ Chişinău already has at its plate two autonomous regions, namely, the breakaway Transnistria under de facto Russian control, and Gagauzia for the Turkic-speaking Orthodox Gagauzes. More ethnolinguistic autonomous regions of this kind could endanger the very existence of Moldova as a state. Such a development would be only in Moscow's interest. First, deepening instability would preclude NATO and EU membership for Moldova. And, second, it would be the European Union that would have to deal with any political and economic fallout at its eastern frontier. Fortunately for the Kremlin, the Russian Federation is separated by all of Ukraine from Moldova.¹³⁸

Although Sofia believes that Moldova should grant an autonomous region to Taraclia's Bulgarians,¹³⁹ the Bulgarian authorities have never

¹³⁵ T. Encheva. "Besarabski bilgari: V Moldova bilgarskoto grazhdanstvo se prodava kato kartof na pazara," *btv Novinite*, January 6, 2019. <https://btvnovinite.bg/predavanja/tazi-sabota-i-nedelia/besarabski-balgarin-v-moldova-balgarskoto-grazhdanstvo-se-prodava-kato-kartof-na-pazara.html>; "I sred besarabskite bilgari posrednitsi sibirat pari za bilgarsko grazhdanstvo," 2018, *News.bg*, December 18, 2018. <https://news.bg/world/i-sred-besarabskite-balgari-posrednitsi-sibirat-pari-za-balgarsko-grazhdanstvo.html>.

¹³⁶ "Vote in Moldova on Ethnic Bulgarian Autonomy," *BBC News*, January 24, 1999. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/261712.stm>; "Bilgarite v Moldova poiskakha avtonomiia," *News.bg*, April 13, 2013. <https://news.bg/int-politics/bilgarite-v-moldova-poiskaha-avtonomiya.html>.

¹³⁷ V. Socor. "Moldova Risks Opening Pandora's Box With 'National-Cultural' Districts," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol 12, No 69, April 14, 2015. <https://jamestown.org/program/moldova-risks-opening-pandoras-box-with-national-cultural-districts/>.

¹³⁸ P. Goble. "Moscow Puts Moldova's Bulgarian Minority into Play Against Chisinau," *refworld*, April 16, 2013. <https://www.refworld.org/docid/516fa91e4.html>.

¹³⁹ "Prezidentit Radev poluchi uverenie ot moldovskiya si kolega da se zapazi statutit na naseleniia s bilgari Tarakliiski raion," *President.bg*, September 24, 2019. <https://www.president.bg/news5135/prezidentat-radev-poluchi-uverenie-ot-moldovskiya-si-kolega-da-se-zapazi-statutat-na-naseleniia-s-balgari-tarakliiski-ayon.html?lang=bg&skipMobile=1>; "Moldova dava osoben statut na Tarakliia," *Offnews.bg*, April 3, 2015. <https://offnews.bg/politika/moldova-dava-osoben-statut-na-taraklia-485006.html>; "Moldova uveri, che shte zapazi statuta na naseleniia s bilgari Tarakliiski raion," *Trud*, September 24, 2019. <https://trud.bg/молдова-увери-че-ще-запази-статута-на-н/>.

considered a solution of this kind for Bulgaria's Turks,¹⁴⁰ who officially number 590,000, amounting close to a tenth of the country's population.¹⁴¹ After the post-communist rapprochement with the previously discriminated Bulgarian Turks, Sofia has consistently shied away from granting a Turkish-medium university to this minority.¹⁴² In Bulgaria there are not even Turkish-medium schools.¹⁴³ Any grassroots efforts to this end¹⁴⁴ are regularly and predictably torpedoed by Bulgarian nationalists.¹⁴⁵ At the same time, Taraclia's Bulgarians enjoy the full Bulgarian-medium educational system as a matter of course.¹⁴⁶ Bulgarian nationalists and politicians concur that a Turkish autonomous region in

¹⁴⁰ O. Stefanov. "Avtonomiia v smesenite raioni? Da, ima takiv serial," *Frognews.bg*, September 10, 2015. <https://frognews.bg/glasat-na-jabata/glasat/avtonomiia-smesenite-raioni-ima-takav-serial.html>;

"Manifest v neta: Bilgarskite turtzii iskat granitsi na kartata na Bilgariia, flag i khimn," *Petel.bg*, October 7, 2014. https://petel.bg/Manifest-v-neta--Bilgarskite-turtzii-iskat-granitsi-na-kartata-na-Balgariya--flag-i-himn_86358.

¹⁴¹ "Naselenie po mestozhiveene, vizrast i etnicheska grupa," in *Prebroiavane na naselenieto i zhilishtniia fond v Republika Bilgariia 2011*. Sofia, 2011.

<https://censusesults.nsi.bg/Census/Reports/2/2/R7.aspx>.

¹⁴² "Turski universitet v Bilgariia," *Patriotichen Desant*, May 11, 2012.

<http://www.desant.net/show-news/24584>; "VMRO: Ne iskame turski universitet v Bilgariia," *Novini.bg*, May 15, 2012.

<https://novini.bg/bylgariya/obrazovanie/65956?comment=new&page=1>.

¹⁴³ A. Zhelyazkova, O. Avramov, M. Kosseva and L. Petkashev. *Educational Problems of Turkish*

Children in Bulgarian Schools. Sofia: Citizens for Human Rights, International Center for Minority Studies and Intercultural Relations, 2012,

http://imir-bg.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Obrazovanie-na-malcinstvata_2.pdf;

B. Iurkov. 2013, "Faktite za turskiia ezik v uchilishta," *Blogit na Iurkov*, June 4, 2013. <https://yurukov.net/blog/2013/faktite-za-turskiq-ezik-v-uchilishata/>; "Bulgaria Summons Turkish Ambassador Over Reported Call to Encourage Study of Turkish Language," *The Sofia*

Globe, May 12, 2019. <https://sofiaglobe.com/2019/05/12/bulgaria-summons-turkish-ambassador-over-reported-call-to-encourage-study-of-turkish-language/>;

"Turskiat poslanik poiska izuchavane na turski ezik v bilgarskate uchilishta," *Fakti*, May 11, 2019. <https://fakti.bg/bulgaria/379997-turskiat-poslanik-poiska-izuchavane-na-turski-ezik-v-balgarskite-uchilishta>; "V Bilgariia niama turski uchilishta, turski avtori ne sa vklucheni..."

Novini 24/7, May 10, 2018. https://novini247.com/novini/v-balgariya-nyama-turski-uchilishta-turski-avtori-ne-sa-vklyucheni_922039.html.

¹⁴⁴ "Kmetove iskat turski ezik v uchilishte," *Actualno.com*, March 14, 2018

https://www.actualno.com/education/kmetove-iskate-turski-ezik-v-uchilishte-news_664557.html.

¹⁴⁵ "Dzhambazki: Niama da ima zadilzhtelen turski v uchilishtata ni, DPS deistva v sinkhron s Ankara," *Actualno.com*, May 14, 2019. https://www.actualno.com/politics/djambazki-nijama-da-ima-zadyljitelen-turski-v-uchilishtata-ni-dps-dejstva-v-sinhron-s-ankara-news_748737.html.

¹⁴⁶ "Bilgari v Moldova: Uchebni zavedeniia," *Ukipediia*, accessed November 12, 2019, https://bg.wikipedia.org/wiki/Българи_в_Молдова#Учебни_заведения.

Bulgaria would inescapably lead to separatism and the eventual breakup of the country.¹⁴⁷ But somehow they do not think that a Bulgarian autonomous region in Moldova could bring about a similarly negative outcome. Is it blindness, double standards or shrewd tactics on the way to a “Bulgarian World” (*Bulgarski sviat*) from the Dniester to Sofia and from Banat to Skopje?

What if this program would trigger a serious conflict, or let alone, full-fledged war?¹⁴⁸ Perhaps, Sofia trusts, that in such a case, NATO and the EU would come to Bulgaria’s succor. But why should these organizations feel any responsibility for cleaning up the Bulgarian mess? Especially when, on the one hand, Sofia abandons the principles of democracy, rule of law and the freedom of speech, while on the other, Bulgaria flirts with Russia and the *Russkii Mir*-style way of doing

¹⁴⁷ A. Popov. “Mestanpoiska priznavane na rursko maltsinstvo,” *Dnes.bg*, March 27, 2019. <https://www.dnes.bg/politika/2019/03/27/mestan-poiska-priznavane-na-tursko-malcinstvo.405760>; “Prez 1990-a Bilgariia be na praga na paguben etniceski konflikt,” *Epicenter.bg*, January 6, 2016 <http://epicenter.bg/article/-Prez-1990-a-Balgariya-be-na-praga-na-paguben-etniceski-konflikt-/89370/11/33>; “Stsenarii! Bitkata zapochova ot Rodopite - Turtsiia iskala avtonomiia na Kirdzhali,” *Blits*, December 29, 2015. https://blitz.bg/goreshтите-novini/stsenarij-bitkata-zapochva-ot-rodopite-turtsiya-iskala-avtonomiya-na-krdzhali_news383644.html.

¹⁴⁸ I took 2019 as the cut-off date for the analysis and research material presented in this article. But in May 2020, Bulgaria fired another salvo in its ideological struggle to “prove” the “non-existence” of the Macedonian language. The Bulgarian Academy of Sciences published a lavishly illustrated brochure (*Za ofitsialniia ezik na Republika Severna Makedoniia* (Sofia: Izdatelstvo na BAN “Prof. Marin Drinov”, 2020)), which proposes that the “official language of the Republic of Northern Macedonia” is a “North Macedonian dialect of the Bulgarian language” (“BAN: Oficialniat ezik v Skopie e ‘severnomakedonski bulgarski,’” *Mediapool*, May 7, 2020.

<https://www.mediapool.bg/ban-ofitsialniyat-ezik-v-skopie-e-severnomakedonski-balgarski-news307086.html>). Unhelpfully, the Bulgarian government fully supports this position as a precondition for opening North Macedonia’s accession negotiations with the EU (“Borisov to Skopje: We Have Bulgarian, You Speak Whatever You Want,” *MBS News*, April 28, 2020. <https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:zR87pdV5RyMJ:https://www.mbs.news/c/2020/04/borisov-to-skopje-we-have-bulgarian-you-speak-whatever-you-want-video.html+&cd=13&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=uk>; S. Maksimović. “Could Bulgaria Block the

EU Path of N. Macedonia over Common History Interpretation?,” *European Western Balkans*, May 18, 2020. <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/05/18/could-bulgaria-block-the-eu-path-of-n-macedonia-over-common-history-interpretation>). And in order to influence the public opinion across the EU, in late 2020, the aforementioned brochure was published in an English edition, see: *On the Official Language of the Republic of North Macedonia* (Sofia : Prof. Marin Drinov Publishing House of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, 2020). <https://bas.bg/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Za-oficialnia-ezik-na-RSM-EN-Online-Version.pdf>.

international politics?¹⁴⁹ It is high time that the Bulgarians alone would foot the bill for their *Bilgarski sviat* and the national delusion of “Greater Bulgaria.”¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁹ Cf “Ruski agenti agitirale Makedonija da se vkluci vo Sanstefanska Bugarija,” *Makedonska nacija*, January 22, 2014. <http://www.mn.mk/komentari/8650>; “Pandov: Stanuvame li Bugari, kаe pobara li Borisov od Putin obnovuvanje na sanstefanska Bugarija?,” *Daily.mk*, May

31, 2018. <https://daily.mk/vesti/mpc-ohridska-arhiepiskopija-video-3?what=7815839>.

¹⁵⁰ Cf “Turskoto robstvo, ruskite osvoboditeli i drugi legendi,” *DW*, May 29, 2019. <https://www.dw.com/bg/турското-робство-руските-освободители-и-други-легенди/a-48962900>; “Sanstefanskite mitove i bilgarskite kompleksi,” *DW*, March 3, 2012. <https://www.dw.com/bg/санстефанските-митове-и-българските-комплекси/a-15781481>; “Sanstefanska Bilgariia - mechta ili iliuziia,” *Bilgarska istoriia*, accessed November 12, 2019, <https://bulgarianhistory.org/sanstefanska-bulgaria/>; “Velika Bilgariia (politicheska kontsepsiia): Krakh na ‘Velikobilgarska doktrina,’” *Uikipedia*, accessed November 12, 2019,

[https://bg.wikipedia.org/wiki/Велика_България_\(политическа_концепция\)#Крах_на_Великобългарската_доктрина](https://bg.wikipedia.org/wiki/Велика_България_(политическа_концепция)#Крах_на_Великобългарската_доктрина).

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