

French blunder exacerbates crisis in the Balkans - EU and North Macedonia

Since July 2, there have been widespread protests in Skopje, threatening the stability of the Balkan region.¹ Responsibility for the crisis is largely borne by France and the EU. North Macedonia has been a candidate country since 2005, but membership negotiations were stalled in 2019 by France, and vetoed in 2020 by Bulgaria. The reason was "unsolved problems" in the understanding of "one's own past". According to Bulgaria, Macedonians deny a common history and the fact that their language is a Bulgarian dialect.²

In mid-June, France came up with a proposal for a solution. It was rejected on June 23 by Dimitar Kovačevski, the Prime Minister of North Macedonia, on the grounds that the language and identity of the Macedonian people were not respected. On 24 June, the proposal was adopted by the Bulgarian Parliament, with certain reservations – including a refusal to recognise the existence of a Macedonian language. On June 30, President Macron presented a version that would satisfy the interests of both parties. Sofia considered it as essentially the same document and expressed satisfaction that the EU now had taken over Bulgaria's view.

The differences between the proposals³ are cosmetic, and Balkan scholar Florian Bieber calls the French conduct a disaster.⁴ In Skopje, the government took a positive stance, apparently persuaded by the EU according to the principle "now or never". It was argued that the language in practice had been recognized, and that history and identity were not part of the negotiating framework, which, clearly, was contradicted by the content of the texts.

The proposal consists of three partially overlapping documents dealing with the EU's view of Macedonia's membership, the framework of negotiations, as well as procedural issues.⁵

Before negotiations may continue after a first meeting, Macedonia must amend its constitution so that the Bulgarian minority is mentioned by name. According to the 2021 census⁶, there are 3,500 Bulgarians (0.19 percent of the population) who, so far, like Croats and Montenegrins, have been designated as "others". It may be added that neither the Macedonian ethnic group nor other minorities are mentioned in the Constitution of Bulgaria.

The introductory text says the following about language: "Regarding the translations of the *acquis* into Macedonian, the EU took note of Bulgaria and North Macedonia's respective unilateral declarations on the Macedonian language". The EU thus equates Bulgaria's denial of a Macedonian language with the Constitution of North Macedonia. No country has been forced to accept anything like that.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e7BxEIC1Vd4>

² <https://www.kjellmag.se/wp-content/uploads/Aktuellt/Europa-forstar-oss-inte-.pdf>

³ <https://www.ceps.eu/et-another-failure-of-eu-leadership-in-the-western-balkans/>

⁴ <https://twitter.com/fbieber/status/1544578438404706304>

⁵ <https://vlada.mk/node/29432>

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_North_Macedonia

Particularly controversial is the interpretation of the concept of "good neighbourly relations". At first, it raises questions of language, identity, and history, which have not occurred in previous membership negotiations. Secondly, there is a lack of reciprocity. Bulgaria's demands on North Macedonia are met, but no concessions are made from the Bulgarian side.

The documents also mention a 2017 agreement between Bulgaria and Macedonia aimed at resolving conflicts over history. It concerns the development of a standard language, the content of textbooks, inscriptions on memorials, the identity of historical figures (e.g. 1878–1913), as well as what Bulgaria refers to as hate speech. The outcome of the talks will affect the entry into the EU.

It should be mentioned that a common history is limited to the early Middle Ages, as well as the two world wars, when North Macedonia was occupied by Bulgaria. Otherwise, the area was part of the Byzantine and Serbian medieval states, and from the middle of the 14th century to 1912/1913 of the Ottoman Empire.

Also, the South Slavic language area constitutes a continuum of dialects and any standard language is, usually, a consequence of political rather than linguistic boundaries. Bulgarian and Macedonian differ from other South Slavic languages by a simplified case system and a definite final article. However, they are based on very different dialects, and if you let Serbian be Swedish, Macedonian corresponds to Norwegian and Bulgarian to Danish. To claim today that Macedonian is a Bulgarian dialect is like arguing that Norwegian is actually Danish. Bulgarian was standardized in 1899 based on Eastern Bulgarian dialects. Four years later, in 1903, the book "On Macedonian Matters" was confiscated in Sofia, since it pleaded for a language different from Bulgarian, based on dialects of southwestern Macedonia. This language was codified in 1944.⁷

It is true that during certain periods there have been tendencies to look for a Macedonian identity far back in time and sometimes overstate the number of Macedonian-speakers in the Balkans. In this respect, however, Macedonians are not different from their neighbours. After centuries under the Ottomans, all Balkan peoples are faced with the task of (re)creating a historical continuity.

A stumbling block is the Macedonian revolutionaries who, between 1878 and 1913, fought for an autonomous Macedonia, separate from Bulgaria. They were born in northern Greece or present-day North Macedonia but often perceived themselves as Bulgarians. At the same time, they spoke a language close to today's Macedonian, arguing for a common or separate literary language, partly or entirely based on dialects in Macedonia.⁸

An example of EU getting it wrong is the concept of hate speech. By that, Bulgaria *inter alia* argues that the country's "administration" of Macedonia during World War II must

⁷ <https://www.scribd.com/document/53259867/Macedonian-Language-and-Nationalism-During-the-Nineteenth-and-Early-Twentieth-Centuries>

⁸ Tchavdar Marinov 2013: "In Defense of the Native Tongue: the Standardization of the Macedonian Language and the Bulgarian-Macedonian Linguistic Controversies

"https://www.academia.edu/36933300/_In_Defense_of_the_Native_Tongue_the_Standardization_of_the_Macedonian_Language_and_the_Bulgarian_Macedonian_Linguistic_Controversies_

not be described as "(fascist) occupation".⁹ Bulgaria was Hitler's ally and although the country's Jews were saved from the Holocaust, the Macedonian Jews were sent to Treblinka.¹⁰ 90 percent of the 7,000 Jews in occupied Macedonia lost their lives and the EU has no reason to conceal this.

On July 14, Ursula von der Leyen addressed the Parliament of North Macedonia.¹¹ She was met with a standing ovation when she said, "There is no doubt that the Macedonian language is your language," but also with protests. She welcomed the Macedonians to Europe, but she was not entirely honest when stating that bilateral talks on history are not a condition for negotiations. No, not to start the process, but they do constitute a prerequisite for a positive outcome. Besides, it is somewhat strange to demand that a country described as "a multi-ethnic example" should amend its constitution in an unprecedented manner. The tone of the speech was positive, but hardly neutralised the paternalistic character of the EU proposal.¹²

Even if the French proposal will be accepted after a chaotic debate, it lacks both popular and parliamentary support. The two-thirds majority required to amend the Constitution does not exist and new elections will unlikely change anything. According to opinion polls, 72 percent of the Macedonians and 56 percent of the population as a whole are against the proposal,¹³ which implies a potential conflict between Macedonians and Albanians. Having this in mind, it is difficult to understand attempts by EU to hide obvious contradictions in the document.

Scholars and politicians, such as former Foreign Minister Nikola Dimitrov, argue that bilateral issues of language and identity should not be part of the negotiating framework, which primarily concerns rule of law, democracy, and economy. The Swedish government should work for a reformulation of the proposal in this direction, while the [Swedish] Christian Democrats and Moderates should urge their partners in EPP¹⁴ to do the same. Neither nationalism nor historical revisionism belongs in the EU.

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⁹ <https://sdk.mk/index.php/makedonija/zaev-od-izbrzana-poslushnost-kon-sofija-nalozhi-da-se-otstranat-plochite-koi-potsetuvaat-na-bugarskata-fashistichka-okupatsija-pishuva-germanski-fats/>

¹⁰ <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-holocaust-in-macedonia-deportation-of-monastir-jewry>

¹¹ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_22_4523

¹² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bkoOanp1Ctc&t=841s>

¹³ <https://sitet.com.mk/anketa-na-ipis-ogromno-mnozinstvo-makedonci-ne-go-prifakja-francuskiot-predlog-za-eu>

¹⁴ <https://www.epp.eu/papers/uniting-europe-shared-responsibility-for-eu-integration-of-the-western-balkans>

Post Scriptum – Debate, Protocol, History

After Ursula von der Leyen's speech in the *Sobranie*, members of parliament debated the French proposal for three days, between 14-16 July. The discussions took place in chaotic conditions and an atmosphere of open confrontation. When members of the governing coalition spoke, their colleagues from the main opposition party VMRO-DPMNE¹⁵ tried to silence them honking on *vuvuzelas*¹⁶. The ruling Social Democrats, the SDSM,¹⁷ sometimes responded with boos and the situation was not made any better by the Speaker Talat Xhaferi, raising his voice against the members and addressing them with "ti"¹⁸..

There was never really a discussion about the French proposal, but only a stress on one's own positions and harsh accusations against adversaries. A member of the coalition government, Pavle Trajanov, leader of the Democratic Union, tried to gather support for a joint statement on the French proposal and drafted a resolution that in his opinion might be accepted by all members. He was not listened to. Instead, a position statement by the SDSM and their main coalition partner, the Albanian party DUI, was adopted.

VMRO-DPMNE requested a one-hour break for deliberations, which was rejected by the Speaker. Then the party left parliament in protest. Out of 69 members present, 68 of 120 members of parliament voted in favour of the Government's statement. Pavle Trajanov did not vote.

The main points of the position statement¹⁹ were these:

The Government of the Republic of North Macedonia is required to adhere consistently, through the State Delegation for Negotiations with the European Union, the Secretariat for European Affairs, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Expert Group for Negotiations, to the principle of unconditional respect for the language, identity, historical and cultural characteristics of the Macedonian people, as elements on which negotiations are not conducted with the European Union. The negotiations should take place on an equal footing and in principle, respecting the norms of international law, and in unconditional respect for the dignity and characteristics of the Macedonian people, in full compliance with the resolution adopted by the Parliament of the Republic of North Macedonia on 29 July 2021.

The Government of the Republic of North Macedonia is obliged:

A. In the Negotiating Framework, references to the Macedonian language should be made without explanation, additions, or footnotes.

When concluding agreements with the European Union containing references to and naming the official languages of the European Union, such as the Agreement on Cooperation with Frontex, these shall be signed indicating the name of the Macedonian language without explanations, appendices, or footnotes.

¹⁵ Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity

¹⁶ For the sound cf: <https://sv.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vuvuzela> or reactions during the speech of premier Kovačevskis 14 July: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=di06l_XaUwo

¹⁷ Social Democratic Union of Macedonia

¹⁸ In South-Slavic languages, like in French and German there is a distinction between you in singular and plural, Vi - Ti, Sie – Du.. The plural is used as a sign of respect and distance, and the singular of intimacy.

¹⁹ <https://www.novamakedonija.com.mk/makedonija/sobranieto-gi-usvoi-zakluchocite-za-francuskiot-predlog-za-glasaa-site-prisutni-pratenici>

During the accession negotiations, until they have been concluded by an agreement on the accession of the Republic of North Macedonia to the European Union, and after the Republic of North Macedonia has become a full member of the European Union, the Government will not accept discussions on any solution regarding the Macedonian language other than that set out in the Negotiating Framework. When the Republic of North Macedonia has obtained full membership in the European Union, the Macedonian language should become one of the official languages of the European Union without further explanations, additions, or footnotes.

B. When bilateral issues concerning intergovernmental agreements on good neighbourly relations are not directly related to EU law or the Copenhagen criteria for membership, they cannot constitute a condition for the opening and closure of chapters and clusters during accession negotiations with the European Union. (Translated from Macedonian KM)

In two respects, the proposal goes beyond the French "compromise". First, it demands that there be no restrictions or further explanations when the Macedonian language is mentioned in the EU context. This in itself is a departure from the wording of the EU proposal, in particular the introductory document, which mentions that Bulgaria has a different view on the language than North Macedonia (cf. above). Even more important, however, is the comment under B. It implies a cautious rejection of the negotiating framework and an actual admission that it contains requirements that should not be found in a document of this kind. This recognises that both the Prime Minister and the Minister for Foreign Affairs – or, for that matter, Ursula von der Leyen – have not been telling the whole truth when claiming that bilateral issues concerning history and identity are not part of the negotiating framework, despite the fact that any reader has been able to notice they form part of the text and affect the process of negotiations. Now the government actually confirms what the critics have been arguing all along, that aspects that are not related to the criteria for membership should not affect the outcome of the negotiations.

The document differs on one important point from Trajanov's proposal. He said in the parliamentary debate that he could only propose changes to Macedonia's constitution if Bulgaria confirmed the existence of a Macedonian minority. The governing coalition did not go that far, choosing not to mention the constitutional amendments. It is difficult to know if this was due to a wish not to offend Bulgaria and the EU, or whether there is any substance in rumors on July 16 that Bulgaria plans to withdraw the demand for constitutional change. According to one view, the Bulgarians have realized that they have made an "auto-goal" by demanding that the Bulgarian minority be mentioned in the constitution. Doing that, they have actually recognized that there is a Macedonian nation.²⁰ Incidentally, this was pointed out early on by the Bulgarian musician and politician Slavi Trifonov: "In Macedonia there is no Bulgarian minority; they're all Bulgarians".²¹

At a press conference on the afternoon of July 16, prime minister Dimitar Kovačevski, declared that North Macedonia had accepted the French proposal and that a first meeting would take place in Brussels on July 19. He also said that the Macedonian language is guaranteed and that issues of identity and culture will not be negotiated. He spoke as if the

²⁰ <https://www.novamakedonija.com.mk/pecateno-izdanie/se-povlekuva-baranjeto-bugarite-da-vlezat-vo-makedonskiot-ustav/>

²¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LLJ4rRHVJS4>

Parliament's position and the EU text were identical.²² It is not entirely clear whether the conclusions of the parliament – which do involve modifications – will be attached to the Government's official acceptance of the EU proposal:

At today's 60th session, the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia considered and adopted the conclusions of the Parliament of the Republic of North Macedonia concerning information on the content of the draft negotiating framework for the accession negotiations of the Republic of North Macedonia with the European Union proposed by the French Presidency and the Council of the European Union, obliging the Government to continue talks with the European Union to lift the blockade of the EU's integration processes.

On the basis of the conclusions, the Government endorsed the Proposal of the French Presidency of 30 June 2022 for the Republic of North Macedonia to open accession negotiations with the European Union.²³

What still remained unknown was the content of a *Protokol*, or minutes of the bilateral talks held by Bulgaria and North Macedonia under the 2017 agreement, which relate specifically to history and identity. The government had so far refused to publish details about the negotiations, which were due to end on June 10, despite the fact that they concern a crucial issue on which there are differences of opinion. At the press conference, it was announced that Foreign Minister Bujar Osmani would meet his Bulgarian colleague Teodora Genčovska in Sofia on July 17 to sign the protocol.

At noon on Sunday the minutes had been signed. It was unclear, though, when the text would be published. However, it was not long before Bulgarian and Macedonian media reported from the Bulgarian foreign minister's press conference after the meeting with her colleague from Skopje.

On Bulgarian TV, Teodora Genčovska pointed out that the *Protokol* signed has specific deadlines. It forms part of the framework of negotiation and contains explicit mechanisms for the fulfilment of individual points. In addition, answering a direct question, she confirmed that there are no real differences between the two French proposals.²⁴

According to the Macedonian newspaper Večer, Genčovska reiterated that Bulgaria has no intention to recognize the Macedonian language. She also recalled that the document contains four additional concessions demanded by Bulgaria – that historical controversies be resolved, that Bulgarians are included in Macedonia's constitution, that Macedonia stops using hate speech and publishes dossiers from the Yugoslav Security Service, UDBA. She added: "As we have repeatedly pointed out, this is part of the French package of proposals, i.e. the Negotiating Framework and the Conclusions of the European Council."²⁵

Teodora Genčovska further stressed that before the negotiations may begin, action must be taken. How long this will take depends entirely on North Macedonia. It may require three

²² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1DKHX5pHwqs&t=292s> jfr även artikel i *Nova Makedonija* <https://www.novamakedonija.com.mk/makedonija/vladata-go-odobri-francuskiot-predlog-vo-vtornik-prva-megjuvladina-konferencija-vo-brisel/>

²³ <https://www.novamakedonija.com.mk/makedonija/vladata-go-odobri-francuskiot-predlog-vo-vtornik-prva-megjuvladina-konferencija-vo-brisel/>

²⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hsNOU-SpqP8&t=4s>

²⁵ <https://vecer.mk/makedonija/genchovska-otkriva-detali-za-protokolot-2/>

months or two years.²⁶ She knows, of course, that today there are no parliamentary prerequisites for an amendment to the Constitution of North Macedonia

This must have been a cold shower for the government in Skopje. Bulgaria's foreign minister not only confirmed what critics had been saying from the beginning – the vice-president of VRMO-DPMNE, Aleksandar Nikoloski triumphantly exclaimed: "The masks have fallen, the lies have been exposed"²⁷ – but reminded, on the basis of documents, that France and the EU had actually agreed to the inclusion of issues concerning history and identity in the framework of negotiation. Which meant that the talk of "compromise" was a euphemism. It is a mystery that North Macedonia's premier and foreign minister have repeatedly claimed, since July 1, that those who pointed out these facts are wrong. Even after the parliament's Position Statement, which constituted a more or less open criticism of the French proposal.

It is evident that one should have followed the advice to draft a conclusion that might ideally bring together most members of parliament. One should have pointed out the weaknesses of Macron's proposal and that North Macedonia is subjected to demands that no other country has faced. Teodora Genčovska actually torpedoed the document that the government in Skopje had endorsed the day before.

The crisis has deepened. When President Stevo Pendarovski attended a celebration in his home village of Galičnik, he was met with booing.²⁸ The EU should have been aware of the delicate situation in North Macedonia and one might wonder in retrospect whether the EU's own criteria of good neighbourly relations should not have been an obstacle to Bulgaria's membership. After all, the country in reality had irredentist claims on a neighboring country, which cannot have been unknown. At the same time, everyone knows that EU's member states in the Balkans and Eastern Europe were members of NATO before they entered the Union. EU membership in the Balkans is accurately referred to as "Euro-Atlantic integration" and is highly dependent on US strategic interests.

It remains to be seen how Ursula von der Leyen and President Macron will resolve the situation. What has happened shows that current EU routines and the slightly sentimental and at the same time admonishing tone, cannot handle a complex reality that, with the media's willing assistance, is in danger of becoming a non-committal abstraction.

This is the third time Macedonians have been treated in a particular manner by the International Community. In 2001, the UCK guerrilla in Kosovo attacked Macedonia. At the time, Sweden represented the EU presidency and Foreign Minister Anna Lindh sharply criticized this violation of international law. Only a few days later, the United States intervened via the top diplomat Robert Frowick and Sweden softened its criticism. After a bitter conflict and difficult negotiations, Macedonia implemented changes to its

²⁶ <https://vecer.mk/makedonija/genčovska-otkriva-detali-za-protokolot-2/>

²⁷ <https://www.novamakedonija.com.mk/makedonija/nikoloski-albanija-slavi-bugarija-se-raduva-samo-vo-makedonija-predavstvoto-sozdava-nemir-frustracii-podelbi/>

²⁸ <https://www.novamakedonija.com.mk/makedonija/i-svirezhi-i-aplauz-za-pendarovski-vo-galichnik/>

constitution which in practice turned the country into a binational state. The status of the Albanian language was raised and functions on the same level as Macedonian.²⁹

The second time the country was treated less than fairly was the Prespa agreement in 2018.³⁰ Perhaps not so much because of the change of name – the Slavic-speaking Macedonians is not the only people living in historical Macedonia. However, the agreement was highly problematic since it concluded that there were no speakers of Macedonian in Greece, which is contrary to European conventions on minority rights. Admittedly, the Slavic population of Greek Macedonia has during the 20th century declined both in absolute and relative terms, as a result of wars, large-scale refugee immigration and population transfers, as well as assimilatory policies. But although they are fewer, they do exist, as evidenced by the fact that in recent years Macedonians gather in different parts of Greek Macedonia to dance³¹ and sing³² Macedonian folk music.

Especially distasteful about the Prespa agreement was the behaviour of the European Union. A large number of prominent politicians arrived in Skopje to convince citizens that they should vote for the agreement. Instead, a majority of Macedonians – unlike Albanians – boycotted the referendum and the turnout was well below the 50 percent stipulated by law. In Parliament, there was no majority. At that point, the EU Commissioner for Enlargement, Johannes Hahn, stressed that there was no need for new elections:

Only eight or nine members of the opposition are needed to adopt the agreement. If they, including the opposition, say they want membership of the EU and NATO, they must live up to that decision. It is a decision in the interest of the country, rather than in the interest of individual parties or politicians. How to secure the votes? I believe in a combination of Balkan methods and a rational approach.³³

Hahn's prejudiced and offensive rhetoric worked. In various ways, the members were "induced" to change their minds.

During last weekend's parliamentary debates, and also in interviews with ordinary people, distrust of the EU was very much evident. Freely reproduced, one could hear the following: "This is not the first time Ursula von der Leyen has been here. She came here in 2018 as well. Everyone promised that if we just did as they said, we would become members of the EU. Now we listen to the same words again."

Following rumours that the *Protokol* would only be published at the inaugural meeting in Brussels on 19 July, a Macedonian text was finally released in the evening of 17 July.³⁴ The document is twenty pages long and covers a variety of areas of cooperation, from economics to the environment. The potentially controversial content is found in the last six pages and deals with language, identity, and history. Under the heading "Second item

²⁹ <https://www.aftonbladet.se/kultur/a/p6paRE/sa-knacktes-ett-foredome>

³⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prespa_agreement

³¹ Jfr *Eleno mome - Elena my dear* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tEe-ZbdUMvo>

³² *Velat ne nema – They say we do not exist*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FFVF7s03M1U1>

³³ <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2018/10/05/hahn-not-think-elections-necessary/>

³⁴ <https://mia.mk/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Protokol.pdf/>

on the agenda", some questions of principle are addressed, while the details are found under "Third item on the agenda".

Initially, it is stated that the *Protokol* involves the adoption by the governments of North Macedonia and Bulgaria of the second report of the "Joint Multidisciplinary Commission on History and Education" for the period from 10 June 2019 to 10 June 2022.

It is recalled that paragraph 8:2 of the agreement concluded between Bulgaria and Macedonia in 2017, stresses that the Commission's work should "contribute to an objective and scientific interpretation of historical events, based on evidence-based historical sources" and that the work of the Commission cannot be unilaterally suspended by one party. Subsequently, it is mentioned that the agreement applies to the content of curricula, textbooks, and relevant teaching materials, as well as inscriptions and symbols on historical monuments, information in museums and other cultural institutions, as well as public digital media. Original documents shall be available for review.

The second part of the text is divided into two sections. I): measures that must be taken before the start of membership negotiations after the opening conference, and II) measures taken during the process of negotiations.

The first section states that negotiations may begin "when the Republic of North Macedonia in its constitution mentions those citizens who live on the territory of the state and are part of other peoples, such as the Bulgarian people". Then comes a passage that seems to have been forgotten in Skopje during the debate of recent weeks. Many have argued that if Bulgaria demands that the Bulgarian minority be mentioned in North Macedonia's constitution, the same should apply to the Macedonian community in Bulgaria. However, the minutes recall the following:

The Republic of North Macedonia affirms in accordance with Paragraph 11:5 of the 2017 Agreement that nothing in its Constitution can or should be interpreted as constituting or ever will constitute a basis for interference in the internal affairs of the Republic of Bulgaria with the aim of protecting the status and rights of people who are not citizens of the Republic of Macedonia.³⁵

Thus, the agreement, signed by then Prime Minister Zoran Zaev in 2017 means that North Macedonia no longer claims that there is a Macedonian minority in Bulgaria.

After that, hate speech, rehabilitation of people oppressed during the communist period, as well as historical themes are discussed. The two states commit themselves to intervene against any form of hate speech and ensure its disappearance from textbooks, educational programs, inscriptions, symbols, and signs on memorials and public buildings. Macedonia undertakes to open all relevant archives that may provide information on the oppression of people on an ethnic basis, for example, because you were Bulgarian. Bulgaria claims that it has already taken similar measures.

³⁵ *Protokol*; Third item on the agenda, s. 17 <https://mia.mk/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Protokol.pdf> .

Furthermore, the Government of North Macedonia shall submit lesson proposals according to the curriculum in history for grade 7, on the theme "The State of Tsar Samuil".³⁶

In the part relating to measures after the continuation of negotiations once the conditions of the first part have been met, hate speech, the rehabilitation of the victims of communism and historical themes are again discussed. At the beginning of the 2023/2024 academic year, the Republic of North Macedonia shall have amended the content of textbooks in geography for grade 7 with reference to unfounded ethnic/territorial claims. Possibly this could relate to a map of the three parts of historical Macedonia: Vardar (Serbia and Yugoslavia, respectively), Aegean (Greece) and Pirin (Bulgaria) which may contain information on speakers of the Macedonian language (?).

Otherwise, what has been said earlier that hate speech must be removed is repeated. As for history, all periods should be reviewed and the content harmonised.

Most of the content of the *Protokol* is already known and therefore the claims by Foreign Minister Osmani that previous versions differed from the one published are less convincing. Overall, Osmani and Prime Minister Kovačevski have argued all along, that issues of history and identity do not belong in the negotiating framework. At first, Osmani said they were not part of the negotiations at all, now he argues that they are not a condition for initiating or closing a "chapter" or "cluster." However, reading relevant documents, it is difficult to come to any other conclusion than that Bulgaria has a correct view of the content of the EU proposal.

Apart from amendments to the Constitution mentioned in France's "package", the "minutes" are undoubtedly part of the negotiating framework. The *General EU Position* document³⁷ has three parts: 1) EU Opening Statement for Accession Negotiations; 2) Negotiating Framework; and 3) Procedure for and Organisation of the Negotiations. Part 2) has always been highlighted by the Government of Macedonia as being most significant. It contains 48 paragraphs. Paragraph 5 states:

The advancement of negotiations will be guided by North Macedonia's progress in preparing for accession and foster economic and social convergence. This progress will be measured in particular against the following requirements.

The Copenhagen criteria and The Stabilization and Association Process are then mentioned, and emphasized:

The fulfilment of North Macedonia's obligations under the Stabilisation and Association Agreement as well as North Macedonia's progress in addressing the key areas identified in the Commission's report and the relevant Council conclusions.

³⁶ A state which existed between 997 and 1018, with Ohrid in western Macedonia as its capital, led by Tsar Samuil. The empire which was conquered by Byzantium is known by different names: the state/empire of Samuil, the Bulgarian, Macedonian, Macedonian-Slavic, or Western Bulgarian Empire. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel_of_Bulgaria#:~:text=Samuel%20\(also%20Samuil%3B%20Bulgarian%3A,997%20to%206%20October%201014.](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel_of_Bulgaria#:~:text=Samuel%20(also%20Samuil%3B%20Bulgarian%3A,997%20to%206%20October%201014.)

³⁷ https://vlada.mk/sites/default/files/dokumenti/draft_general_eu_position.pdf

In other words, the successful conduct of negotiations depends on whether Macedonia meets certain specific measurable criteria. Following the mention of the Copenhagen criteria and the Stability Pact, there is a crucial section specifying the demands on North Macedonia regarding good neighbourly relations.

In view of the above, North Macedonia's commitment to good neighbourly relations and closer regional cooperation, including through achieving tangible results and implementing in good faith bilateral agreements, including the Prespa Agreement with Greece and the Treaty on Good Neighbourly Relations with Bulgaria of 2017 as well as the annual reviews and measures for its effective implementation under its Article 12,

This means that the implementation of the agreement concluded with Bulgaria is part of the negotiation process. Article 12 relates to the Joint Bulgarian-Macedonian Commission which investigates disagreements on history and the France/EU proposal explicitly mentions the 'implementation' and annual reporting of the work of this Commission.

All this is formulated in paragraph 5 (of the Negotiating Framework) which is described as particularly significant for the "advancement of the negotiations". Moreover, it should be noted that the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, during his visit to Skopje, stressed that "good neighbourly relations" apply to everyone, while Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, in her speech to the Parliament, described good relations between neighbours as the DNA of the EU.

In the minutes now published, North Macedonia confirms that the Constitution will be amended, that the interests of Bulgarians will be met, that it will make changes to textbooks, as well as contribute to the removal of hate speech from historical monuments. Against this background, the actions of the Macedonian government are peculiar. It seems to reason as if ordinary people are not capable of understanding the document, or alternatively they have not had time to contemplate the meaning of the documents or has a kind of literal reading which is markedly different from the opinion of Bulgaria, the Macedonian opposition, as well as independent scholars, both inside and outside Macedonia.

At the same time, the EU's stance must be questioned. It is one thing that Bulgaria does not recognise a Macedonian language, but it is odd to allow a member state to make claims in terms of history and identity. In the early Middle Ages, there were neither Bulgarians nor Macedonians in today's sense, nor Swedes, for that matter. Since the mid-14th century until 1912/1913, the Balkans belonged to the Ottoman Empire which categorized citizens by their religious affiliation. A person was Orthodox, Catholic, Muslim or Jew and the various socio-religious groups enjoyed certain autonomy. Had the Ottomans pursued a Western European policy, the population would have been assimilated both linguistically and religiously. Instead, a specific illiterate peasant culture was preserved and formed the basis of a modern nationhood in the 19th and 20th centuries. In some cases – but not all – it was possible to relate to a medieval polity. The latest example of nation building in the region is the case of Bosnian Muslims or Bosniaks, who became a nation in 1968–1974. They speak the same language as their Serbian and Croatian neighbours, but due to their own religious backgrounds and that of Serbs and Croats, they cannot identify as such. Similarly, Macedonians are neither

Bulgarians nor Serbs. This development is common in modern nation-building, which according to Ernest Gellner³⁸ is both a process of assimilation and a refusal to be assimilated. The “diacritical marks” making a group different from another may be based on e.g. religion, language, or historical experience.

In the 19th century, the Bulgarians and Slavs of Macedonia fought against Greek ecclesiastical and cultural domination. In that situation there were different alternative identities and one cannot claim with reference to a Bulgaro-Macedonian area of dialects that today's Macedonians are Bulgarians or speak a Bulgarian dialect. First, geographic Macedonia did not belong to Bulgaria during the nation-formation process in the 19th century. The Macedonian revolutionaries and cultural personalities to whom the dispute between Bulgarians and Macedonians applies, were, as a rule, not Bulgarian citizens. They were born in Greece or present North Macedonia and spoke a language different from the Bulgarian standardized in 1899. In the national sense, they identified themselves in different ways.

No one can object to the principle of good neighbourly relations. But the fact that a larger nation essentially demands assimilation from a neighbour cannot be compatible with EU principles. Through its talk of DNA, the EU has indirectly supported a Bulgarian description of reality, i.e. the Macedonians are an artificial ethnic group that has seized Bulgaria's history and culture. The basic idea behind the 2017 agreement that one should establish an objective and “once and for all” valid history in which identities are clearly defined, and it is easily determined what is Bulgarian culture and nothing else, is contrary to the very foundation of historical research. Documents may be missing and we cannot retrospectively make ethnographic or sociological investigations. Incidentally, historiography is universal and one cannot take for granted that a commission appointed by political authorities in Bulgaria and North Macedonia will have the last word in international scholarship. History is never unambiguous and the only thing we can do is let people identify themselves in the way they wish. In the case of the Macedonians, Bulgaria's behaviour in the 20th century, not least during the occupation in World War II, obviously had tangible consequences³⁹ and there are those who believe that Bulgaria should rather apologize than issue ultimatums:

In the case of Bulgaria, the collective memory in Macedonia is primarily about the murder of the Macedonian Jews, about [the massacre of] the youth in Vataša, about Stiv Naumov and Kuzman Josifovski-Pitu, and many other resistance fighters and partisans. This memory is part of Macedonian identity. Whether there will ever be a true reconciliation between Bulgarians and Macedonians depends on whether the Bulgarians have the courage to confront their dark past of World War II..... The memory of Treblinka and the genocide of Macedonia's Jews should be part of Bulgarian identity, Then future Bulgarian prime ministers could, at the

³⁸ Gellner, Ernest. 1983. *Nations and Nationalism*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

³⁹ One example is the massacre at Vataša, immortalized in a well-known song: <https://www.kjellmag.se/wp-content/uploads/Mi-zaplakalo-seloto-vatasha.pdf> One of the performers, opera singer Blagoj Nacoski (Milano) suggested on July 17 that the first meeting between EU and North Macedonia be held in the village, at the monument, and offered to give a concert. <https://vecer.mk/makedonija/operskiot-pejach-natsoski-se-nadevam-deka-prvata-megjuvladina-konferentsija-na-eu-i-makedonija-kje-se-odrzhi-vo-seloto-vatasha/>

memorial in Skopje of the murdered Jews, act like Willy Brandt in what was once the Warsaw Ghetto.⁴⁰

The problems in the Balkans are aggravated by late nation-building and the fact that the geographical boundaries between ethnic groups are not as clear as in the Nordic countries. The policy of the International Community in the Balkans have often exacerbated conflicts that have arisen as a result of inconsistencies between maps and aspirations. Against this background, the institutional construction of EU appears questionable. The dependence on the United States, the long admission processes, and internal tensions, inevitably lead to the question of whether a European free trade area from the "Atlantic to the Ural", from North Cape to the Aegean Sea, would not have been preferable.

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⁴⁰ Kica Kolbe in Deutsche Welle (Macedonian edition) 5 May 2019. <https://p.dw.com/p/3NLpU>