



N. Macedonia, EU are you blind & the Bulgarian Veto

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The relations of Bulgaria and North Macedonia have been very complicated mainly due to the Bulgarian reluctance to recognize a national identity for the citizens of North Macedonia. Bulgaria has stated clearly that considers North Macedonia part of its own cultural family.

The communist past

In 1946, the Bulgarian Communist Party recognized the Macedonian language and identity to approach Tito, the Yugoslavian communist leader. This diplomatic effort did not last long due to the increased tensions between Joseph Stalin, Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Soviet Union and General Secretary of the Communist Party, and Tito. As a result Yugoslavia was expelled from Cominform -the alliance of the communist parties – in June 1948. Bulgaria supported and the Soviet Union thereby cut all diplomatic ties with the “traitors”. Yugoslavia dissolved in 1992, and a new country under the name of North Macedonia appeared on the map. Surprisingly, Bulgaria was one of the first countries to recognize the new state, underlining at the same time that the official recognition of the state does not automatically constitute recognition of the Macedonian language or/and the Macedonian identity.

The following year (1993), Bulgarian representatives refused to sign an agreement with North Macedonia due to the footnote stating, "*this agreement is written and signed in Bulgarian and Macedonian language*". During the subsequent decades, the two countries had limited diplomatic relations.

The new era

In 2017, Zoran Zaev's victory in the elections opened the road for negotiations between

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North Macedonia and its neighbours, especially the two close ones with which the country had historically troubled relations, Bulgaria and Greece. In 2017, also Bulgaria and North Macedonia reached an agreement and signed a *Treaty of Friendship, Good-Neighbourhood, and Cooperation*. The two countries agreed on a commission of experts in charge of finding common ground in historical and cultural issues.

In the same period, the North Macedonian government negotiated with Greece in a desperate effort to solve a major political problem, the issue of the name of the country. In 1991, the Greek government declared that Greece would never recognize any state entity under the name of Macedonia. For the Greek government, the issue became of central importance. The tensions in the cabinet rose and ultimately forced the government to resign. In the following years, every Greek government adopted a hard-line policy towards the issue of the name and subsequently denied recognition to its northern neighbour.

The negotiations and the reach of an agreement (*Prespa Agreement*) were unexpected. *Prespa Agreement* provided a solution to the issue of the name and recognized the existence of Macedonian identity and language. As expected, *Prespa Agreement* ignited the Bulgarian government's immediate response, which responded by issuing a framework position. Bulgaria announced its intention to block North Macedonia's entrance into the

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(ECFR, 2020)

European Union (EU) if it does not accept and respect the Bulgarian red lines and positions. In the same context, all Member States of the EU received a Memorandum on the Republic of Bulgaria's relationship with the Republic of North Macedonia in the EU enlargement and Association Stabilization Process. Bulgaria asked in this memorandum the EU leaders not to accept "*the ethnic and linguistic engineering that has taken place under former authoritarian regimes*".



Borisov, B. and Zaev, Z., 2017.

In November, Bulgaria vetoed the initiation of negotiations for the European membership of North Macedonia. In the last month, the two countries have reached a historic low in their relations. Bulgaria uses its EU membership and the rights and powers associated with it. At the same time, North Macedonia proclaims its right to self-determination. For many, including the Bulgarian sociologist Ivaylo Dichev, the foundation of the two countries' problem lies in the fact that "*North Macedonia even exists*".

What does Bulgaria want?

Bulgaria **demands**:

1. the term "**Macedonian language**" **not be used in any EU negotiating framework document** since Bulgaria

considers the Macedonian language to be merely a dialect of the Bulgarian one.

2. that **North Macedonia "acknowledges" the historically Bulgarian origin of the Macedonian nation** since allegedly there is not a distinct Macedonian nation – it is only an "artificial" creation of the Yugoslav communists in the aftermath of the Second World War.
3. that **Skopje should give up its claim for the official recognition of a Macedonian minority in Bulgaria**. In contrast, it should not impede those Macedonian citizens who self-identify as Bulgarian from doing so.

(Dr. İdlir Lika)

Some analysts consider Bulgaria's linguistic and historical claims as illegitimate under international law, as they constitute interference in North Macedonia's internal affairs and call into question its right to self-determination. As for the inviolability of borders, the Macedonian government changed the constitution on 2 December 2018 to state that "***the Republic respects the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of neighbouring countries***" (ECFR, 2020).

Surprisingly, Bulgaria tried during its

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presidency to accelerate the integration of the Western Balkans in the EU by the creation of a specific framework. Bulgaria felt comfortable presenting itself as ready to accept North Macedonia in the EU and hide behind the increasing voices of sceptical countries towards a new enlargement, taking into account that Bulgaria did not use its veto alongside the other three EU member states two years ago. Only when the other countries

decided to open the road for North Macedonia, Bulgaria used its veto.

Why did Bulgaria use its veto?

The veto's decision might be associated with the increased criticism that the government faced, especially during the summer and autumn of 2020. The movement "**EU are you blind**" in the heart of the country, Sofia, put additional pressure on a government already under attack for various corruption cases.

For Boyko Borisov, Prime Minister of Bulgaria, taking a harder position in the issue of N. Macedonia is a strategic move to put foreign policy in the spotlight. Also, recent polls prove that the public opinion shifted in Bulgaria. Public opinion seems to firmly oppose to a potential EU membership of N. Macedonia. Borisov needs public support for his government. The issue of N. Macedonia is sensitive and unites the vast majority of the Bulgarian public. Borisov also has his eyes on the future and wants to secure the next elections before making any change to his foreign policy. There are also the factors of the coronavirus and the economic crisis. Borisov has been heavily criticized for the governmental response to the pandemic. This additional pressure might have also contributed to his current stance towards N. Macedonia.



Photo from the protests in Sofia, 2020.

What are the options?

Bulgaria has probably the three following options:

1. **Hard-line option:** Bulgaria does not change its position and blocks the start of EU-N. Macedonia negotiations.
2. **Intermediate option:** Bulgaria reconsiders its demands and asks for the implementation of the 2017 agreement between the two countries which will gradually open the road of EU membership for N. Macedonia
3. **Retreat option:** Bulgaria changes its policy position after giving in pressure by EU diplomats.

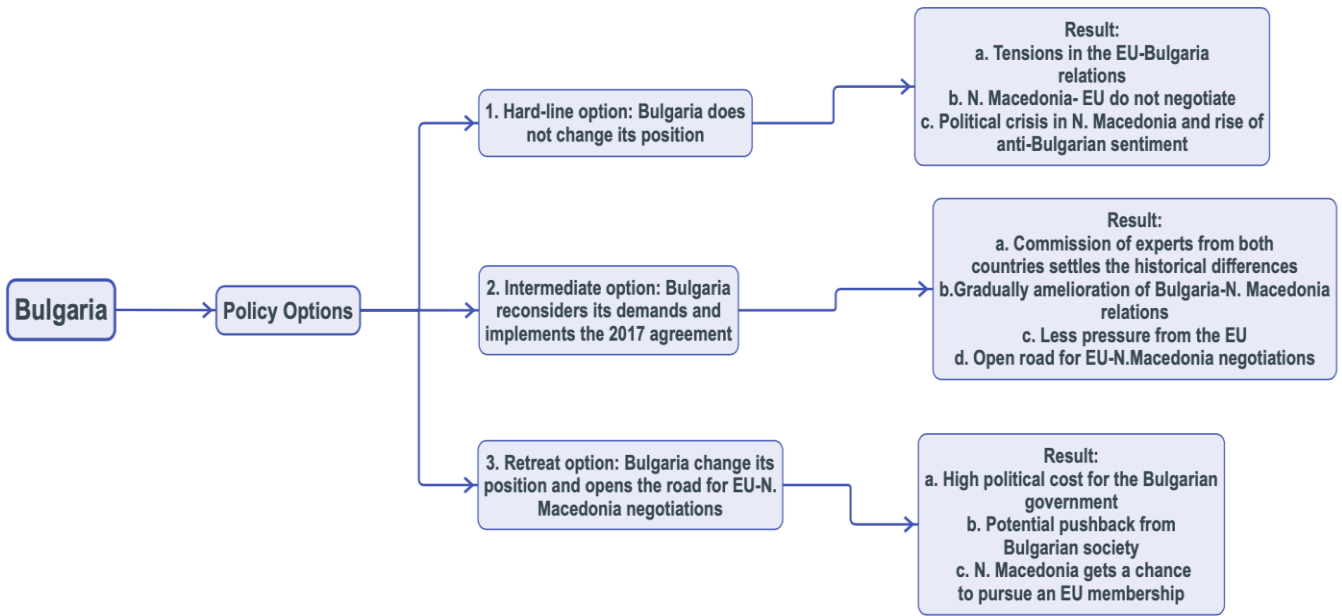
Potential **Results** of the three options:

1. **Hard-line option:**
 - a. Increased tensions in the EU-Bulgaria relations.
 - b. Deadlock in the negotiations of N. Macedonia and the EU.
 - c. Increase of political instability in N. Macedonia and of the anti-Bulgarian sentiment.
2. **Intermediate option:**
 - a. Implementation of the 2017 agreement and establishment of a commission of experts from both countries in charge of settling historical differences.
 - b. Amelioration of the relations of N. Macedonia and Bulgaria.
 - c. Amelioration of the EU-Bulgaria relations.
 - d. Finally, open road for the EU-N. Macedonia negotiations
3. **Retreat option:**
 - a. High political cost for the Bulgarian government.
 - b. Potential pushback from the Bulgarian society.
 - c. Open road for the EU-N. Macedonia negotiations.

The hard-line option and the retreat option are less likely to happen and are associated with higher political costs for the Bulgarian government. In Bulgaria, the government is already under tremendous pressure, which narrows its options. The EU and the other leaders of the European People's Party have stated their desire for a change in the stance of Borisov. The possibility of a change in foreign policy is associated with the domestic situation in Bulgaria. Borisov needs to reconsider his choice. Maybe he could achieve this change with low political cost by revamping the existing bilateral agreement between the two countries (intermediate option). For Borisov, his choice needs to be supported by the EU and especially by the German chancellery, which has advocated for the necessity of the accession of N. Macedonia.

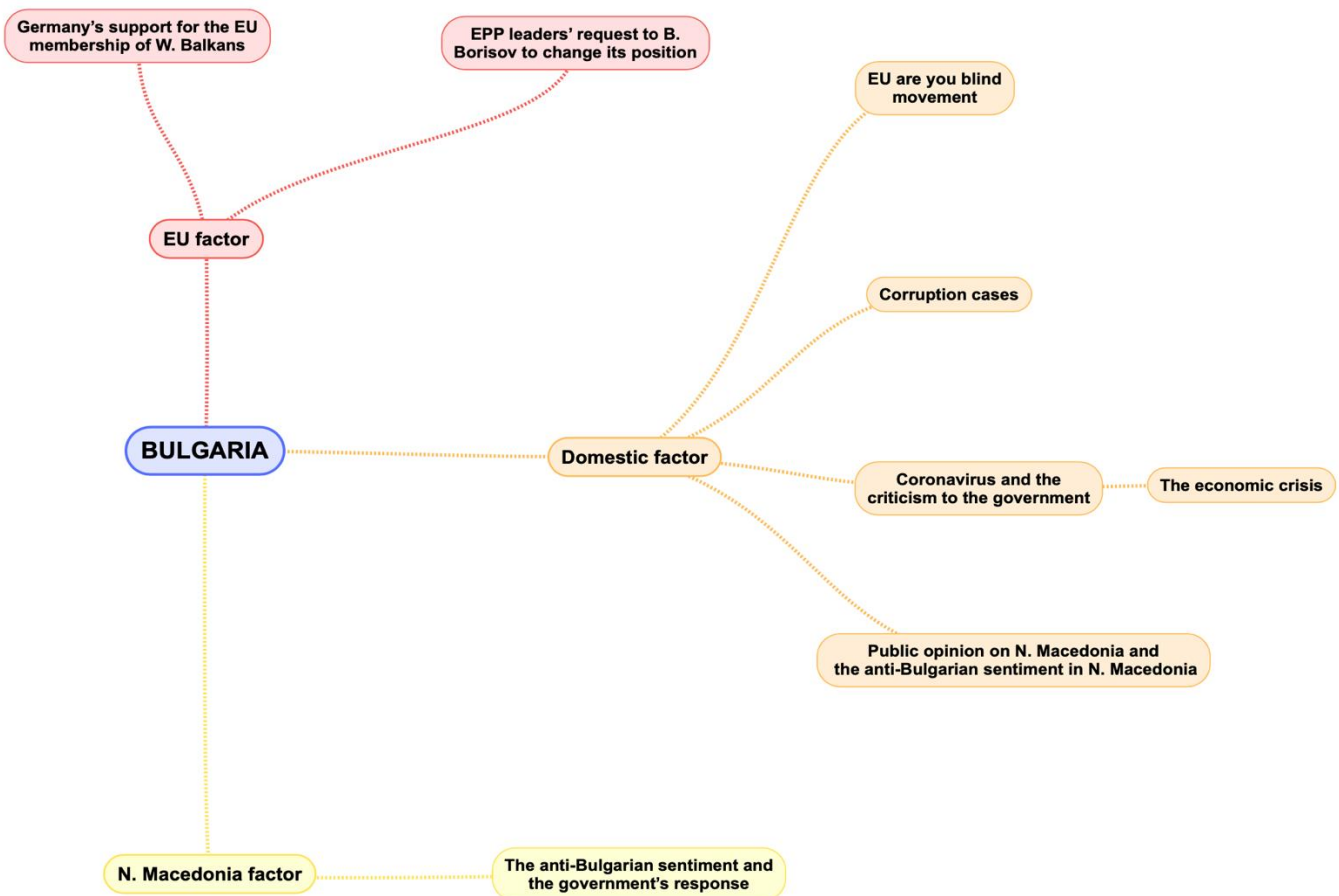
Bulgaria is a country in crisis and hiding behind the veto will not help the current government avoid the important societal pressures. Bulgaria needs to change its position and come to terms with the fact that N. Macedonia has come a long way to be denied the European prospect again. Even now, that anti-Bulgarian sentiment is on the rise in N. Macedonia, the government and specifically Zoran Zaev has put significant effort to re-open dialogue with Bulgaria and to defuse the sentiment against Bulgaria.

1. Diagram: factors that influence policy options of Bulgaria



**Own elaboration*

2. Diagram: Policy Options and Results



**Own elaboration*