

Bulgaria's veto strengthens nationalism and Euroscepticism in North Macedonia

Many in the Western Balkans feel that Sofia's veto creates an unprecedented policy of blackmail. It opens the possibility for every member state of the EU to forcibly require a solution for some identity issues regarding state candidates.

By Vedrana Maglajlija



During a three-day trip to the Western Balkans in September 2021, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen supported the formal opening of accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania, and made clear that this opening would be as soon as possible. “You will be part of the EU. It is not a question of if, but when”, she tweeted, showing her commitment to the region.

However, in November it will be a year since Bulgaria vetoed North Macedonia and denied it the opening of the membership negotiations, stopping for the third time the European integration of this Western Balkans country. Unfortunately, these rejections have had long-term consequences both for North Macedonia and the EU itself.

The first rejection followed the name dispute with Greece which was the first time the EU and the NATO integration processes of North Macedonia stopped. North Macedonia was deemed a regional frontrunner after its 2004 application for EU membership, but it had to find a solution to the Greek veto it was subject to since 2008. Resolving this dispute took 11 years, during which nationalism grew, before the Prespa agreement was found, with Macedonia changing its name to North Macedonia.

In 2019, a handful of member states, led by France, blocked Albania and North Macedonia from starting membership talks again. While French President Emmanuel Macron was supported by Denmark and the

Netherlands in refusing Albania, France alone rejected North Macedonia. The then President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, called that decision a "grave, historic error".

Now, Bulgaria demands other EU members to acknowledge Macedonian as "a written regional norm of the Bulgarian language." Macedonia and Bulgaria share linguistic and cultural similarities but also have different views on their history. This dates back to the 19th century when Bulgarian nationalists claimed Ottoman-ruled Macedonia as part of Bulgarian territory. However, Bulgaria came out badly from the Balkan wars at the beginning of the 20th century, after which today's North Macedonia became part of Serbia. Therefore, Bulgarian politicians often claim that there is a common North Macedonian-Bulgarian history, the history of one ethnos in the past having been separated by the big powers.

After the Second World War, Bulgaria came under the Eastern bloc led by the Soviet Union while North Macedonia was part of Tito-led socialist Yugoslavia. Yet, after Macedonia declared its independence from the former Yugoslavia in 1991, Sofia was the first to recognize its neighbor. However, their relations have been very complex since then. Bulgaria still does not recognize the Macedonian language, which Bulgarian scholars view as a dialect of Bulgarian, while both countries celebrate the same national heroes claiming they were Bulgarian or Macedonian. Each country has in the past accused the other of not respecting the rights of its national minority living across the border. In 2017, leaders of the two states signed the Friendship Treaty, agreeing on the establishment of a commission that will try to resolve their differing views of history, but this joint commission has made little progress.

In this context, despite the diplomatic and political efforts to achieve a breakthrough, at the end of June 2021 Sofia again announced it was not ready to let North Macedonia open membership talks. As for North Macedonia, Skopje has repeated that it cannot compromise over sensitive issues such as identity and North Macedonia's parliament almost unanimously passed an opposition-proposed resolution that draws so-called "red lines", defining non-negotiable identity-related topics in talks with Bulgaria.

Issues that Sofia is rising cannot be solved overnight and require a long period of time for discussion. Furthermore, this kind of move could be used for historical revisionism and lead to the 'death' of the integration process, especially in the Western Balkans due to the intensity of violence in the past and of identity issues in the region. The Bulgarian veto is maybe formally allowed, but it raises questions in terms of European values and standards. Many in the Western Balkans feel that Sofia's veto practically creates an unprecedented policy of blackmail. It opens the possibility for every member state of the EU to forcibly require a solution for some identity issues regarding state candidates, rather than for issues linked to the respect of European standards and values.

Stalling in European integration also arouses fears of stronger nationalism in North Macedonia, based on recent history, as North Macedonian Prime minister Zoran Zaev stated it: "If the nationalism returns, we'll lose decades." In the meantime, there are warnings that the EU cannot leave Balkans 'open' for non-Western powers and their interests. Russian influence cannot be disregarded and it is convenient for Moscow to have unstable Balkans. Recognizing this, North Macedonian President Stevo Pendarovski recently made clear that if the spat with Bulgaria were to persist, alternatives needed to be explored. "This does not mean giving up European integration, on the contrary. But if the dispute with Bulgaria continues, we must look for alternatives."

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