

The Geopolitics of North Macedonia's Accession to the EU. Pressures from Bulgaria

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*North Macedonia's EU accession talks are being halted because of Bulgaria's insistence that the neighboring country stops appropriating history and acknowledges it speaks a Bulgarian dialect. However, the issue escalated recently when Bulgarian **Defense Minister Krasimir Karakachanov** said North Macedonia can only become an EU member if it became a part of Bulgaria or an Albanian province. Effectively, Karakachanov gave decisionmakers in the North Macedonian capital of Skopje a choice - Greater Albania or Greater Bulgaria.*

In a separate incident, Karakachanov said in October last year to Skopje: “If you suddenly decided to create a new nationality, do us the favor of not stealing Bulgarian history and, moreover, by falsifying the history of Bulgaria by cultivating a sense of hatred towards Bulgaria, Bulgarians and anything Bulgarian.”

This is in reference to the complicated identity issue in North Macedonia, whose people once overwhelmingly identified as Bulgarian, with a smaller population identifying as Serbian. They were however propagated by the old Tito regime of Yugoslavia to adopt a Macedonian identity.

This served three purposes:

It was a part of a “strong Yugoslavia, weak Serbia” policy. The Serbian Orthodox Church wielded great influence in the Socialist Republic of Macedonia. Attachment to Serbia was weakened through the invention of a canonically unrecognized Macedonian Orthodox Church that declared autocephaly from the Serbian Orthodox Church in 1967.

To weaken pro-Bulgarian sentiment in the region as the people prior to the existence of Socialist Yugoslavia wanted to reunite with Bulgaria.

To lay claim to the major Greek port city of Thessaloniki that is confusingly situated in the Greek region of Macedonia, in which 90% of Ancient Macedonia is located (only 10% in North Macedonia).

As part of building a new Macedonian identity, Yugoslav scholars in 1945 began to make changes to the Bulgarian language and called it Macedonian. They also constructed a new historical timeline that claimed the people of the Socialist Republic of Macedonia had common history with ancient Greek figures like Alexander the Great and medieval Bulgarian

figures like Tsar Samuel, whose moniker was ironically “the Bulgar.”

Since today’s North Macedonia achieved independence from Yugoslavia in 1991, it prioritized consolidating a Macedonian identity. This soured relations with neighboring Greece for decades. Although Athens and Skopje came to terms with the signing of the 2018 Prespa Agreement, in which Greece accepted the country’s name as North Macedonia in exchange for their renouncement of territorial aspirations against northern Greece and acknowledged the Ancient Macedonians were Greek, the issue with Bulgaria was left unresolved.

The first Foreign Affairs Minister of the now North Macedonia, Denko Maleski, said last year “We are past the time when Macedonian history was protected by the powerful Yugoslav federation and could, without pressure, selectively choose the building blocks of the Macedonian nation, and could cross out the mentions of ‘Bulgarian’ and write ‘Macedonian’ instead.” Maleski is not alone in North Macedonia to reclaim Bulgarian identity, with several academics and politicians also shedding Yugoslav-era historical revisionism and propaganda. In fact, even an influential YouTuber went to [his channel](#) to say “We’ve been fed communist lies. We are not the Macedonians. We are the Bulgarians.”

Skopje’s obsession with maintaining Yugoslav-era propaganda contributes to the country’s internal collapse. The 2001 conflict saw Albanians from Kosovo storm areas of North Macedonia to continue their project for a Greater Albania, although it ultimately failed. The Greeks had always warned Skopje that prioritizing historical revisionism was distracting them from the real threat – the disintegration of their country from Albanian separatists concentrated in the northwestern part of the country. Albanians, accounting for over 25% of the population, now control the Ministry of Finance. In addition, the last 100 days of the Prime Ministers mandate will be given to an Albanian. According to a 2010 Gallup [Balkan Monitor report](#), 53% of Albanians in North Macedonia support a Greater Albania, up from 44% in 2008 and 52% in 2009. 11 years on from the report, although there is no official data, it can be expected this number is even higher.

It is for this reason that Karakachanov has warned North Macedonia that it will become a part of Greater Albania or Greater Bulgaria, or perhaps even both. As Skopje insists on claiming their language is not a Bulgarian dialect and that historical heroes like Tsar Samuel the Bulgar were in fact Macedonian and not Bulgarian, the Albanians are increasing their political power and have shown numerous times that they are willing to use violence to achieve a Greater Albania.

Bulgarian military leaders likely acknowledge that at some point in the future a conflict will breakout in the neighboring country if the Albanians cannot achieve separation through political means. Such a conflict could justify a Bulgarian military intervention.

This is not be implausible as three years ago the North Macedonians had territorial ambitions against Greece, but now has the Greek Air Force policing its airspace under a NATO mandate. If civil war broke out in North Macedonia, it would not be impossible to imagine that Bulgaria would intervene, despite its difficult relations with Skopje like Greece once had, and thus have de facto control over the country, just as Greece now has control over its airspace.

Choosing between a Greater Albania and a Greater Bulgaria could become a difficult choice

that Skopje may need to make if they persist in maintaining Yugoslav-era propaganda and historical revisionism against Bulgaria instead of facing the true threat to their territorial sovereignty – Albanian separatism.

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