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Bulgaria's National Identity Policy in the Balkans

Jakub Pieńkowski

Bulgaria claims a special competence to shape relations between the EU and the Western Balkans. While holding its first presidency of the Council of the EU, Bulgaria sought to strengthen its influence on European policy towards the region. At the same time, it tried to convince the Balkan states that their integration with the EU would not be possible without Bulgarian support. This two-pronged approach allows the Bulgarian authorities to raise the status of the Bulgarian minority with respect to the Balkan partners, which may affect the stability of the Western Balkans and their integration with the EU.

National Identity. The Bulgarian government of Boyko Borisov actively raises the issue of support for Bulgarian identity, language, and culture in places of traditional Bulgarian settlements abroad. Historical and ethnic issues are an important factor to mobilise the Bulgarian electorate. This has been proven by the long-standing presence in parliament of nationalist groups hostile to the Turkish minority, which comprises 9% of citizens. The United Patriots received 9% of the votes in the elections in 2017 and entered the ruling coalition with the Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) of Prime Minister Borisov. GERB, although presenting itself as a modern pro-European party, must take into account the expectations of its coalition partners and some of its own voters. The main opposition force, the post-communist Bulgarian Socialist Party, also uses nationalist sentiment.

Demands Concerning the Bulgarian Minority. Bulgarian historiography creates in society an image that today's territory of Macedonia, part of Albania, Serbia and Kosovo is the former cultural and ethnic space of Bulgarians. The authorities in Sofia try to guarantee the status of national minorities in these areas and to shape the sense of Bulgarian identity among Balkan Slavs with no crystallised national identity, e.g., the Gorani people, Muslim inhabitants of the borderlands of Kosovo, Macedonia, and Albania. Bulgaria wants to enlarge the diaspora and its small presence in the political life of the neighbouring states. These activities intensified before the Bulgarian presidency of the Council of the EU, which was planned to be a landmark for bringing the Balkans closer to the EU.

As a result of Borisov's pressure on Albania's Prime Minister Edi Rama, the Albanian parliament granted the status of national minority to Bulgarians in October 2017. According to the Bulgarian government, this minority numbers 50,000 in Albania but their community is threatened by scattering, religious diversity (Muslim and Orthodox), and sometimes assimilation with Macedonians. Bulgaria is also seeking recognition of the Bulgarian national minority in Kosovo, consisting of 15,000 people according to the authorities in Sofia. The Gorani are also claimed by Serbia and Macedonia as their own minority. In a December 2017 meeting, Bulgarian President Rumen Radev asked the Kosovo President Hashim Taçi to recognise the Bulgarian national minority. In May 2018, about 500 Kosovan citizens, claiming Bulgarian origin, applied for this recognition to the authorities in Pristina. However, the rapid assignment of minority status is doubtful because of a need to change Kosovo's constitution first. Bulgaria also pushes Serbia to grant free access to education and media in Bulgarian. The Bulgarian government is particularly interested in changing the name of Dimitrovgrad (from the Bulgarian communist Georgi Dimitrov) to the historic Tsaribrod.

Bulgarian citizenship awarded to people claiming Bulgarian national identity is a tool for awakening identity. In 2007-2017, 110,000 people were awarded citizenship, including 59,000 from Macedonia, 5,500 from Serbia, and 2,500 from Albania. A significant number of applicants report they want a Bulgarian passport because it allows them to work legally in the EU. About 71,000 of the 1.4 million ethnic Macedonians (so, about 5%) are Bulgarian citizens. Since Bulgaria's accession to the EU in 2007, this factor has become more important in relations between the two countries.

Bulgarian-Macedonian Reconciliation. According to Bulgaria's historical policy, the Macedonian nation came about from mistreatment of local Bulgarians under "Yugoslavian national engineering". According to the Macedonians, Bulgaria seeks to denationalise and appropriate the heritage of the Macedonians. However, the loss by nationalist parties in Macedonia and the creation of a government of social-democrats in May 2017 initiated normalisation of relations. By August that year, they had signed a treaty on the border and good neighbourly relations. That sparked an intensification of economic and political cooperation, including in symbolism: Prime Ministers Boyko Borisov and Zoran Zaev in May 2018 for the first time jointly laid flowers in Rome on the grave of Saint Cyril, a patron of both states.

The Bulgarian presidency also supported the settlement of a dispute in the name of Macedonia. Borisov, in reporting the Bulgarian presidency's achievements to the European Parliament, claimed success for the Macedonia-Greece agreement to use the name the Republic of Northern Macedonia, announced in June. He considered it an outcome of the EU-Western Balkans summit held in May in Sofia, although in reality the Bulgarian presidency only then learned about the sides' willingness to compromise. Borisov, in confirming support for the Zaev government, in June, together with Foreign Minister Ekaterina Zakhariyeva, refused to meet with nationalist Macedonian President Gorge Ivanov, who was visiting Bulgaria and opposes the name change. In addition, Zakhariyeva dispelled doubts raised by President Radev about the necessity to add a border guarantee to the Macedonian-Bulgarian treaty. According to the foreign minister, the name "Northern Macedonia" cannot be the basis for territorial claims to the historic Pirin Macedonia, belonging to Bulgaria.

Church Issues. In November 2017, the Macedonian Orthodox Church (MOC), gathering ethnic Macedonians, used the improved inter-state relations to turn to the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (BOC) for help in returning to the Orthodox ecclesial community and expressed its readiness to recognise the BOC as its mother church. Patriarch Neophyte and the Synod of the BOC welcomed the request. Radev and Borisov assessed it positively, signalling at the same time that they do not want to interfere in intra-church matters. The BOC dialogue with the MOC met with fierce criticism from the Greek Orthodox Church, which remains unfriendly to Greek-Macedonian reconciliation, as well as from the Serbian Orthodox Church and Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, which consider Macedonia to be their canonical territory. As a result, in May 2018, the Synod of the BOC rejected the MOC's invitation to the 1000th anniversary of the Ohrid Archbishopric, so the rapprochement was halted.

The issue of ecclesiastical independence has particular importance because in Orthodox countries it is a crucial element of national identity and state sovereignty. So far, the Orthodox Churches have recognised only the autonomy of the Macedonian Church as part of the Serbian Orthodox Church, given in 1959. The autocephaly unilaterally announced by the MOC in 1967 is considered a schism by the others.

Conclusions. Bulgaria's support for the preservation of the national identity of compatriots abroad does not differ from the policies of other democratic states towards diasporas. Currently, the low political activity of the Bulgarian minority in Albania and Kosovo does not cause any internal or inter-state disputes. Also, the progressive normalisation of Macedonian-Bulgarian relations has significantly reduced tensions between the two countries. However, especially in their relations, attempts to use minorities to pressure the neighbour will cause ethnic tension and could lead to destabilisation of the Balkans. On the other hand, the restoration of the MOC canonical unity with the other Orthodox churches with the help of the BOC would strengthen Macedonia's international position. However, the unilateral recognition by the BOC itself as the mother church of MOC, over the Serbian Church and the Ecumenical Patriarchate, would increase religious and ethnic tension.

Bulgaria's focus on the Balkans during its presidency of the Council of the EU favoured the ambitions of the European Commission to open accession negotiations with Albania and Macedonia, which probably will happen next year. While the Balkan states signalled favour for the Bulgarian proposals before and during the presidency, they could be more assertive when it ends. This may tempt Bulgaria to persuade these countries to agree to Bulgaria's expectations by conditioning these matters on progress in European integration. The EU should critically evaluate such attempts because conditioning accession on bilateral matters slows this process and contradicts the interests of the Union and the other Member States.