

PUBLIC GOVERNANCE

NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN: THE CASE WITH THE INVISIBLE BULGARIANS IN NORTH MACEDONIA

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Abstract

The paper examines the persistent issue of "debulgarization" and resistance to constitutional acknowledgement of Bulgarians in North Macedonia, despite the EU negotiating framework, which presupposes their inclusion in the constitution alongside other ethnic groups in the country. The authors examine the discrimination of the Bulgarian ethnic community in North Macedonia at the individual, institutional and structural levels, as a result of the historical reluctance of the state's political elite to recognize the Bulgarian cultural and historical heritage in the region or the existence of citizens with Bulgarian ethnic identity. The conclusion is that terms such as "Bulgarization" and the instillation of hostility towards Bulgarianness are weaponized to cover up the three deep challenges facing the North Macedonia's elite: the crisis of national identity, the crisis of political regime, and the crisis of the country's geopolitical orientation.

Keywords: *debulgarization, North Macedonia, lex specialis, discrimination, multiethnic social cohesion.*

THE STATE OF DEBULGARIZATION AND THE ETERNAL PROBLEM WITH BULGARIANS

In the late 1990s, the first president of the Republic of Macedonia, Kiro Gligorov, declared to the country's parliament that the *debulgarization* of Macedonia at the state level had been completed (Filipov, 2022). From a current perspective, this statement can be regarded as a report on the accomplished political mission of not just one politician, but several generations of politicians in the former Yugoslav federal unit. However, only a quarter of a century later, in the summer of 2022, the leader of the largest party, VMRO-DMPNE, Hristijan Mickoski, declared himself against the negotiating framework for the country's membership in the European Union on the pretext that it represented a *Bulgarization* of Macedonia. Mickoski stated, "Let's be clear, it's nothing but capitulation without delay. That's gradual bulgarization of Macedonia or a diplomatic knockout" (Telma TV, 2022). His stance was

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triggered by the European consensus, outlined in the so-called “French proposal,” which required that negotiations for North Macedonia’s EU membership can commence once it incorporates ethnic Bulgarians into its constitution – the same way it has already included seven other ethnic groups in the country’s legislation. The incorporation of Bulgarians in the constitution is a mandatory precondition in the negotiation framework for starting negotiations on membership of North Macedonia in the EU.

The statements made by Gligorov and Mitskoski reveal a distinctive phenomenon in the nation-building process in North Macedonia. For several decades, irrespective under what name or under what political regime - whether it be the Democratic Federal Macedonia, the People’s Republic of Macedonia, the Socialist Republic of Macedonia, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, or the present-day Republic of North Macedonia - the country’s political elite has exhibited a notable reluctance to recognize the Bulgarian character of a significant part of the cultural and historical heritage on the territory of the historical region of Macedonia. It is unwilling to acknowledge that the primary figures around whom the contemporary Macedonian national narrative was built were historically part of the Bulgarian ethno-cultural and national community. Furthermore, the elite of North Macedonia faces challenges in acknowledging that persons with a Bulgarian ethnic identity have lived and still live here. Consequently, the elite has a clear problem with the very fact that in the state there are citizens who self-identify as Bulgarians. Moreover, the elite also perceives as a threat citizens who self-identify themselves as ethnic Macedonians, while recognizing the Bulgarian roots of the contemporary Macedonian nation and language. This trend was illustrated by the demonization of the first foreign minister of the independent Republic of Macedonia, Denko Maleski, following his expression of opinion regarding the common historical roots of the two modern nations (Maleski, 2020).³

Our aim is to inquire into the reasons why politicians from various political factions in North Macedonia employ terms such as “debulgariazation” and “Bulgariazation” and why they resist formal acknowledgment of the presence of Bulgarians within the nation’s borders and their inclusion in the constitution alongside other ethnicities.

THE CURRENT SITUATION WITH BULGARIANS IN THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA

In early 2024, the then Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights Dunja Mijatović, in her letter to the Prime Minister of North Macedonia, recommended that the government work for social cohesion, justice and reconciliation. She called on the authorities to take some steps that would enhance respect for victims’ rights, dealing with past grievances and social cohesion in North Macedonia, one of which was “to condemn instances of hate speech and inter-ethnic violent incidents and promote reconciliation and social cohesion among various ethnic and religious groups” (Mijatović, 2024).

³ Following his article on a North Macedonian website and an interview on a Bulgarian television station, Denko Maleski was the subject of criticism and attacks from politicians, scholars, intellectuals, and opinion makers (See UMD, 2020; Nova Makedonija, 2020; Sitel, 2020; Djikov, 2020; Vangelov, 2020). Following the attacks, Prof. Maleski was dismissed from his position as advisor to the President of North Macedonia, Stevo Pendarovski, under the formal pretext of lack of funds for salaries.

This call corresponded to the message in the European Parliament Resolution of 25 March 2021 on the Commission reports on North Macedonia for the period 2019-2020, which marked the need to overcome the legacy of hostile interethnic relations in the country. In paragraph 77 of the Resolution, the European Parliament stated that it “strongly encourages the authorities and civil society to take appropriate measures for historical reconciliation in order to overcome the divide between and within different ethnic and national groups, including citizens of Bulgarian identity” (European Parliament, 2021, 14). Thus, achieving strong social cohesion in the multi-ethnic society through national reconciliation, especially between the state and the Bulgarian people in North Macedonia, has acquired an important European dimension as part of the process of preparation for the country’s accession negotiations with the European Union.

As early as 2008, some representatives of the Bulgarian community in the North Macedonia expressed a desire to be included in the constitution (Mitev, Zhelyazkova, Stoykovski, 2008). In 2021, after a request from several organizations of Macedonian Bulgarians, this grew into an official position of the Bulgarian state and a condition for Bulgaria to approve the negotiating framework for North Macedonia’s membership in the European Union (President of the Republic of Bulgaria, 2021). Finally, in the summer of 2022, this became the position of the entire EU as a necessary condition for the start of membership negotiations for North Macedonia.

Why is it important for Bulgarians in the country to be included in their constitution?

The legal system of the Republic of North Macedonia is characterized by the application of the so called “lex specialis.” This legal doctrine ensures that the state, in conjunction with the protection of individual citizens’ rights, is also responsible for safeguarding the collective rights of ethnic groups residing within its borders.⁴ The Constitution of the Republic of North Macedonia formally acknowledges the presence of Macedonians, Albanians, Turks, Serbs, Vlachs, Bosniaks, and Roma within state borders, thereby enshrining their collective rights in a comprehensive array of laws and regulations, so these communities can enjoy specific privileges. The exclusion of ethnic communities from the constitutional framework, both de jure and de facto, results in their marginalization and the restriction of their collective rights as a specific ethnic group. For this reason, Bulgarians are deprived of the available legal tools for active collective presence and participation in the state.

BULGARIANS IN NORTH MACEDONIA UNDER INDIVIDUAL, INSTITUTIONAL AND STRUCTURAL DISCRIMINATION

The “invisibility” of Bulgarians in North Macedonia is a legacy of the nation-building process that took place during the Yugoslav era, in which the communist elite left no room for Bulgarians. After World War II, Yugoslav policies deliberately distanced the newly created Macedonian national identity from the centuries-old Bulgarian historical and cultural presence in the region, sometimes through repressive measures, such as the Law for the Protection of Macedonian National Honor, and through relentless antibulgarian propaganda. Thus, imposed antibulgarian sentiment still lingers in post-communist North Macedonia, making

⁴ The origins of this legal framework can be traced to the communist Yugoslavia era, and it has been adopted by several of the former Yugoslav republics.

reconciliation with Bulgarian people in the country impossible. The legal and social status of Bulgarians remains marginal and their integration blocked, which has a devastating effect on their community.

The European Parliament has repeatedly noted the existing “discrimination against citizens openly expressing their Bulgarian identity and/or ethnic background” (European Parliament, 2021, 14) in North Macedonia. Under discrimination here we refer to “actions that deny equal treatment to persons perceived to be members of some social category” (Pincus and Ehrlich, 2018, 13). In public life, it refers to certain disfavored groups with “stigmatized identities” that may be based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, mental illness, and physical disability. (Schmidt et al., 2014: 922). Pincus outlines discrimination as a phenomenon with individual, institutional, and structural dimensions (Pincus, 2018).

Individual discrimination refers to intentional behavior by individual members of one group that is intended to affect members of another group. This category includes a wide range of behaviors: antagonistic graffiti, banners, verbal abuse, refusal of employment, landlords’ refusal to rent property, etc. In this regard, European Commission against Racism and Intolerance reports claim that in the Republic of North Macedonia:

- Bulgarians in North Macedonia are victims of hate speech (for example, pejorative terms such as *fascists* and *cheap prostitutes* are used).
- There is violence against individuals of citizens of North Macedonia who identify themselves as Bulgarians (ECRI, 2023).

The reference to women with Bulgarian identity as “cheap prostitutes” is an example of intersectional discrimination/hate speech in which individuals are targeted because of their combination of ethnic origin and gender.

In the public discourse of North Macedonia, there have been number of instances of insulting and discriminatory attitudes toward Bulgarians, including calls to expel them from the country or not to sell them goods in shops. One particularly egregious example of this kind of discrimination is the case of Hristian Pendikov, a 21-year-old youth from Ohrid. He was subjected to verbal abuse and subsequently assaulted on the basis of his Bulgarian identity (BNR, 2023).

Institutional discrimination includes legislation, government policies, institutions, and the actions of institutions, as well as the behavior of individuals who implement these policies and control these institutions. Government policies are designed to have a differential and/or detrimental impact on disadvantaged groups. The primary purpose of institutional discrimination is to maintain oppressed groups in a state of subordination. In this regard, several examples prove the state of institutionalized discrimination against Bulgarians in North Macedonia:

- The authorities, led by Prime Minister Mickoski, refuse to adopt constitutional changes including the Bulgarian ethnic community as a state-forming people in the country and thus guarantee it the collective rights that other ethnic groups listed in the constitution have (European Commission, 2024, 4).

- The authorities made changes to the legislation that gave them grounds to deregister some existing nongovernmental organizations of citizens with Bulgarian identity (ECRI, 2023).

- The educational system in place also exhibits characteristics of oppression, particularly in the context of historical representation. For instance, school textbooks omit to mention any Bulgarian ethnic presence within the country's borders. When some individuals with Bulgarian identity are mentioned in historical events and processes on the territory of the country, they are presented as the result of Bulgarian propaganda, therefore as collaborators of Bulgarian chauvinism and traitors to the Macedonian people. Moreover, in instances of involvement of the Bulgarian population in Macedonia in historic events and processes is addressed, authors frequently opt to substitute the Bulgarian ethnonym with that of Macedonian. As Benson (2004) astutely observed, the historical narrative that is taught in schools has been "systematically falsified to conceal the fact that many prominent 'Macedonians' had supposed themselves to be Bulgarian, and generations of students were taught the pseudo-history of the Macedonian nation" (Benson, 2004, 89).

- Due to the absence of legal recognition, Bulgarians are not included in census lists as a separate category. During the most recent census conducted in 2021, the official forms incorporated the seven nationalities stipulated in the constitution (State Statistical Office, 2022). Individuals identifying as Bulgarian or belonging to the remaining nationalities were designated as „Others,“ so every Bulgarian had to explicitly declare their nationality and be manually recorded by the enumerators.

- Representatives of state institutions often display double standards or show personal biases towards Bulgarians, thus entering into a conflict of interest. For example, Vesna Bendevska, a member of the Commission for the Prevention and Protection of Discrimination, which is supposed to protect the human and community rights of all citizens of North Macedonia, displayed political and ethnocentric biases incompatible with both professional ethics and the supranational nature of the Commission. Bendevska joined the protests against the inclusion of Bulgarians in the constitution or the so-called "Bulgarization" (Anket-A-na, 2022).^{5 6}

- Due to the absence of legal recognition, Bulgarians are not included as a separate category in the data about hate speech and hate crimes. In the 2019 report of the OSCE mission to Skopje, 9.1% of all respondents answered that in the last 12 months they had experienced a hate crime based on their ethnicity. However, the data refer only to representatives of the peoples or parts of peoples included in the country's constitution: Macedonians, Albanians, Serbs, Vlachs, Roma, Turks and Bosniaks (Iganski, 2019).

⁵ Before taking up this position, Bendevska was a MP from the Socialdemocratic Union of Macedonia. In 2024, she resumed her political career and became a MP from the ZNAM party, which officially does not support the inclusion of Bulgarians in the constitution and is part of the new ruling majority of Prime Minister Mickoski. This is an interesting example of the fusion of two separate spheres of public life, such as public administration and party politics.

⁶ We would like to point out that the same Commission could not "find" the famous showman and influencer Bozhidar Bozhinovski in connection with a complaint about systematic hate speech against Bulgarians, but Mrs. Bendevska "discovered" him on social networks to congratulate him on his birthday.

- Judicial authorities frequently fail to acknowledge hatred as a motivating factor in cases of hate crimes perpetrated against Bulgarians. In the aforementioned case of the beating of Bulgarian activist from Ohrid, Hristiyan Pendikov, the court imposed a sentence according to which the motive “hate” remained unproven (Velichkova, 2025).

Structural discrimination refers to policies that are seemingly neutral in intent but have negative effects on oppressed groups. In such cases, the intention behind these policies becomes secondary to their tangible results, which reinforces the subordinate position of discriminated groups. Structural discrimination is exemplified by Bulgarians' mistrust of state institutions that are supposed to protect their interests. In 2022, the Deputy Chairman of the Agency for the Rights of Smaller Ethnic Communities, Dzhelal Hodzic, stated that upon assuming his position, he noted the absence of Macedonian Bulgarian associations on the registry of ethnic community organizations in North Macedonia. Hodzic convened a meeting with representatives of Bulgarian associations within the country and was impressed that, “there was one interesting position, unlike all other ethnic communities - they have no trust in the institutions” (Slobodna TV, 2022, 5:30-5:41). Hodzic's assertion is of particular significance, as he noted that Bulgarians are the only ethnic group that does not repose trust in the state institutions. The underlying reasons for the demonstrated distrust are evident, stemming from prolonged exposure to institutional discrimination and institutionalized Bulgarophobia. Bulgarians are aware of the fact that the public sentiments and propaganda messages that incite hate speech and hate crimes against them are a consequence of a deliberate policy orchestrated by the state. The state can't protect them from what it has created: an environment of anti-Bulgarianism, which means a negative attitude towards Bulgaria and Bulgarian people. This attitude encompasses stigmatization, denial, and confrontation with everything Bulgarian. Within this legal and social context, it is comprehensible why Bulgarians traditionally refrain from reporting hate speech and hate crimes to institutions.

As demonstrated, a variety of discriminatory practices are evident in the case concerning Bulgarians in North Macedonia. Consequently, the process of assimilation of North Macedonian citizens of Bulgarian ethnic origin continues.

AN ONGOING DEBULGARIZATION

The existing “triple discrimination” is the key to understanding why several thousand Bulgarian families in North Macedonia, originating from towns of Tsaribrod and Bosilegrad (today's eastern Serbia) have changed their self-identification. During the period of communist Yugoslavia, several thousands of these Bulgarians relocated to North Macedonia from Serbia, where Bulgarians have the official status of a national minority (Janev, 2006). Counting their children and grandchildren, their community today amounts to about 20,000 people (Trud, 2022). In some areas, they are compactly settled - for example, they constitute a significant part of the population of the Skopje neighbourhood “Volkovo” in the “Gorche Petrov” municipality. They have an undeniable Bulgarian ethnic origin from places that do not belong to the geographical region of Macedonia, this is, they are not ethnic Macedonians. According to former Prime Minister Georgievski, however, their children today prefer not to

declare themselves as Bulgarians because of the existing social pressure. Georgievski made these remarks following a meeting with Bulgarians in North Macedonia, specifically those hailing from Bosilegrad, who conveyed their experiences and perspectives during the meeting: “We feel Bulgarians; our children are ashamed of us” (Televizija 24, 2022: 38:05-38:09). Georgievski’s conclusion is that identity change happens because “there is social stigma in the Republic of Macedonia towards certain people, towards identifying themselves as Bulgarians” (ibid.: 38:11-38:19). The social stigma and negative sentiments are proven by the data indicating that only 14% of citizens who identify as ethnic Macedonians agree that the country should include Bulgarians (and other ethnic groups) in the country’s constitution (Velinovska, 2023, 15).

Among the popular examples of such identity dynamic is Elena Kovachevska, the wife of former Prime Minister Dimitar Kovachevski. She is the child of Bulgarians from the town of Bosilegrad in Serbia, who moved to North Macedonia during the time of Yugoslavia. As an adult she received Bulgarian citizenship based on her ethnic origin (Trud, 2022). When this became known in North Macedonia, both Mrs. Kovachevska and her husband did not want to confirm the information. Indicative is the response of Mr. Kovachevski, who stated that he did not understand why his wife’s ancestry should arouse interest and did not give a specific answer to the question of whether she was of Bulgarian origin: “it was never a topic of conversation” (Slobodna TV / Slobodna TV, 2022: 0:30 - 0:46).

The change of identity is also visible in the case of the famous social scientist Katerina Kolozova, whose father Gorgi Kolozov was among the most beloved actors in Macedonia. According to Kolozova, her father strongly disapproved of Bulgarophobia in Macedonia and the censorship of facts in the official Macedonian historiography, had sympathy for the Bulgarian people and history, and believed that the Bulgarian and Macedonian people have an “intertwined” history. More than that, according to her father, “Macedonian identity” and even “Macedonian nationalism” (understood in the Western sense of the word as patriotism) is naturally close to Bulgarian history and Bulgarian identity. However, Kolozova herself announced that she belongs to another generation with a new identity (IRIS-BG, 2021).

In 2024, another former Prime Minister of the Republic of Macedonia, Vlado Buckovski, also stated in an interview with a Bulgarian media outlet that, in his opinion, in the 2021 census in North Macedonia, probably 20-30 000 people would have declared themselves Bulgarians, but this did not happen due to the deteriorating relations between the two countries and the negative atmosphere created in North Macedonia (BNR, 2024).

THE THREE CRISES OF NORTH MACEDONIA

Since the adoption of the negotiating framework for North Macedonia’s membership in the European Union in mid-2022, „no progress has been made in adopting constitutional amendments with a view to including in the Constitution citizens who are part of other nations, such as Bulgarians” (European Commission, 2024, 4).⁷

The predominant rhetoric of the leader of the largest party and current Prime Minister of the country, Hristijan Mickoski, asserts that his country has been coerced into making numerous

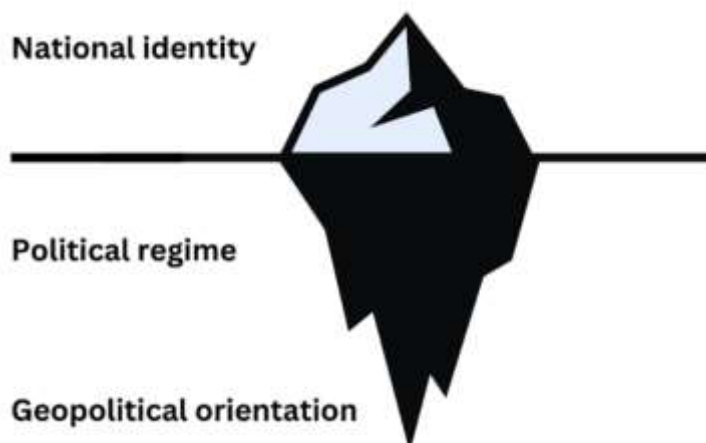
⁷ Debates were expanded with a proposal to include not only Bulgarians, but also Croats, Montenegrins, Slovenes, Jews and Egyptians (idem, 22).

compromises thus far (including alterations to the flag, currency, name, etc.) and has made considerable sacrifices, but now it is once again being asked to change its constitution. Moreover, as Mickoski repeatedly and incorrectly claims, North Macedonia is being asked to include a small group of citizens – a few hundred – into its constitution (БТА, 2024; Atlantic Council, 2025). In fact, citizens with a Bulgarian identity are not a few hundred - they are a few thousand, according to the latest census from 2021.

Contrary to the claims of the majority of the political elite of North Macedonia, it seems completely frivolous that the inclusion of a small ethnic community in the constitution and granting this community the same collective rights enjoyed by other ethnic groups would lead to the "Bulgarization" of the country. The inclusion of Bulgarians in the constitution is a matter of human rights and democratization. There is a formed Macedonian national identity in North Macedonia, and a few hundred or a few thousand Bulgarians will not harm it.

The problem is that the recognition of the historical presence of the Bulgarian people in the region of Macedonia for centuries, as historical records indicate, contradicts the national narrative of North Macedonia built nearly eighty years ago. From here we propose to consider the issue of the collective rights of Bulgarians as part of a complex of crises that the political elite of North Macedonia must deal with: a crisis of identity, a crisis of the political regime, and a crisis of geopolitical orientation.⁸

Graphics 1. Three crises challenging the political elite of North Macedonia.



A crisis of national identity

The main challenge facing the North Macedonia's political elite regarding national identity is how to preserve the national myth and the state historiography, which are built on the idea not only of distinction, but also of confrontation with the Bulgarian ethnic and national community in Macedonia and through the appropriation of its cultural and historical heritage. The inclusion of Bulgarians in the constitution seems risky to the elite, so they are trying to stop this process. On the other hand, the EU demands it, realizing that this is part of the Copenhagen criteria, which presuppose equal rights, democracy and the rule of law for all.

⁸ The idea to present our thesis in this form was inspired by the lecture of Prof. Maria Popova "Ukraine is Europe: Lessons for Europe and for Political Science – ECPR General Conference Keynote" (ECPRDigital, 2023).

Moreover, the existing national narrative worsens relations with Bulgaria, and good neighborly relations are horizontal criteria in the process of European integration and without them it is not possible to achieve EU membership. Therefore, the national narrative, based on confrontation and exclusion, must be changed in an integrative and inclusive way. The new national narrative should affirm the Macedonian national identity that exists today, while respecting the centuries-old presence of Bulgarians, as well as the identification of a number of individuals from the Middle Ages, the Ottoman era and the Renaissance as Bulgarians and part of the Bulgarian community. The Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighborliness and Cooperation between Bulgaria and North Macedonia introduced the expression “common history”, which allows both countries to jointly honor certain individuals and events, instead of arguing about who they belong to.

Crisis of the political regime.

The political elite maintains the current legal and social order, which excludes Bulgarians and erases them in a historical, cultural and political sense, through systematic undemocratic practices. This approach was particularly successful during the years of communist dictatorship, but to a very large extent it has also been maintained during the last three decades of transition. Although North Macedonia has introduced a number of legal and institutional changes, as well as a number of democratic procedures, the country is not democratic in many respects. According to the Democracy Index, North Macedonia is a *flawed democracy*, ranking only 72nd in the world ranking (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2023). According to Freedom House assessments, North Macedonia is qualified as a transitional or *hybrid regime* with quite low democracy indicators: Democracy percentage 46.43 (out of 100) and Democracy score 3.79 (out of 7) (Freedom House, 2024). The elite manages to manipulate public opinion, including regarding the Bulgarian “threat” and “bulgarization”, thanks to the media, which suffer from a number of weaknesses:

- Problems with transparency of media ownership and media concentration (European Commission, 2024, 36).
- Government advertising in commercial media, which increases the risk of the potential misuse of political funds, endangers media independence and creates market disruption (idem)
- Self-censorship by journalists and media owner influence on editorial content (idem, 37).
- Highly endangered editorial autonomy “mostly due to the generally clientelistic nature of the media system” (Trpevska and Mickovski, 2023, 9).
- Information space that is very vulnerable to foreign influence and disinformation (Association of Journalists of Macedonia, 2023).

In this way, the political elite is able to influence public opinion on a wide range of issues and legitimize its undemocratic practices in the society of North Macedonia. However, for objective observers it is obvious that the exclusion of Bulgarians from the constitution is an obstacle to the further democratization of the country. From a democratic point of view, the constitutional recognition of the Bulgarian people in North Macedonia is an inevitable move.

In addition to the inclusion of Bulgarians in the constitution, other challenges for the elite in North Macedonia are the rehabilitation of communism victims with a Bulgarian identity and opening the archives of Yugoslav secret services, which contain information about the persecution of prominent Bulgarians.

Charles Tilly puts it clear: “a regime is democratic to the degree that political relations between the state and its citizens feature broad, equal, protected and mutually binding consultation” (Tilly, 2007, 13-14). Democratization is characterized by an overall movement toward broader, more equal, more protected, and more binding consultations, while the reverse process of de-democratization means a movement toward more limited, more unequal, less protected, and less binding consultations. This way, nationalist anti-Bulgarian rhetoric and discrimination of Bulgarians are a vivid example of a dysfunctional democracy.

Crisis of the geopolitical orientation

The political elite of the Republic of North Macedonia has come to the understanding that within the context of a democratic system it cannot maintain a national narrative in which the historical presence of Bulgarians has either been rendered invisible or, when mentioned, has been cast in a negative light. Moreover, the elite realizes that in a democracy it cannot indefinitely deprive Bulgarians of collective rights. In this sense, the ostensibly trivial issue with the Bulgarians masks a more significant problem in North Macedonia: the elite is reluctant to relinquish some of the power it has held since the era of the communist dictatorship. That is why in recent years it has increasingly begun to reverse course in its geopolitical orientation towards partners whose level of democracy is shaky or even compromised.

First of all, in 2021, the Republic of North Macedonia joined the Open Balkan initiative, perceived as an alternative to EU integration and promoting bigger cooperation with Serbia and Albania (Mirković, 2024). The project failed, but the country lost several years in avoiding the reforms needed for greater democratization, establishing good neighborly relations with Bulgaria, and advancing in European integration.

Second, North Macedonia has attempted to sabotage the development of the Pan-European Transport Corridor 8 at the expense of Corridor 10 (360 stepeni, 2024; Velichkova, 2024; Novinite, 2024). Corridor 10 connects the Chinese-owned Aegean Greek ports of Piraeus and Thessaloniki with Serbia and Hungary, countries that are not distinguished by democratic governments and are close to the Russian Federation. China's infrastructural penetration into Southern Europe is part of its “One Belt, One Road” strategy (Vuksanovic, 2017). Despite the willingness of the North Macedonia's government to shift its foreign policy, with a marked departure from its previous pro-European stance, its attempt to stop the development of Corridor 8 failed after NATO stressed that the project has a critical role for the security of Southeast Europe (Ivanov, 2024).

Thirdly, and for now last in line, the government of North Macedonia is trying to present itself as a reliable partner of the White House in Donald Trump's ambitions to strengthen the US positions in Southeast Europe and the Middle East in the context of the complicated international situation in this part of the world. In this regard, Prime Minister Mickoski presented his country's place as part of the important Corridor 8 (the same one whose

development he tried to stop a few months earlier) and Corridor 10 (in whose southern end China has a key presence) (Right Side Broadcasting Network, 2025). In addition, at the UN General Assembly, the country decided to become a co-sponsor of the US-proposed resolution on the war in Ukraine, rather than support the resolution submitted by several EU countries (Kolekevski, 2025; Telegrafi, 2025).

CONCLUSION

The main obstacles to participation of Bulgarians in the process of multiethnic social cohesion in North Macedonia include issues of national identity inherited from Yugoslav policies, insufficient commitment to democratic principles and practices of governance that require openness, transparency and accountability from those in power, and the search for dubious and often incompatible with good governance geopolitical alliances that would guarantee the power of the elite and its national narrative. These problems create a complex environment in which Bulgarians do not have a secure and dignified place in the diverse ethnic mix of North Macedonia. Addressing them requires not only policy adjustments but also a societal shift towards an acceptance of the common history with Bulgarians – something that is easier said than done in a country that remains under the long shadow of its Yugoslav past.

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