

BULGARIAN FOREIGN POLICY AND FYROM, 1989-2006

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Introduction

In the post-war period, Bulgaria's entry into the Soviet sphere of influence was a decisive event for her political future. It opened the way for BCP, the *Bulgarian Communist Party*, to take power. And it enabled Bulgaria to develop an official policy on the Macedonian Question. As historians are well aware, in the first years after the Second World War a key shift in Sofia's official line on the Macedonian Question was carried through. The traditional position - that the Slavs in the geographical area of Macedonia were of Bulgarian ethnic stock - was abandoned, and the Yugoslav ideology of 'Macedonism' was adopted in its place.¹ But though the policy of cultivating a Macedonian identity was abandoned by Sofia in the wake of the Moscow-Belgrade rift of 1948, all through the Cold War period Bulgaria's position on the Macedonian Question, and the level of its relations with Belgrade in general, continued to be decisively affected by the level of relations between Moscow and Belgrade. It has been well said that: 'When relations between Moscow and Belgrade deteriorated, polemics between Sofia and Belgrade over Macedonia flared up, only to cool down when Soviet-Yugoslav relations improved'.²

The present chapter will attempt to examine the changes in Bulgarian foreign policy towards Skopje that took place after the removal of Todor Zhivkov from his post as Secretary-General of the BCP in November 1989. That date, November 10, was a watershed in the recent history of Bulgaria. For it can be seen as signalling the start of a period of democratization, and a radical readjustment in Bulgaria's position internationally and at home. Simultaneously, internal developments within the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia were touched off by the end of the Cold War and by fundamental restructuring in Eastern Europe. They were to lead to Yugoslavia's violent break-up in June 1991 and the independence of FYROM, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

I. November 1989 to the end of 1991 **The 'transitional period', from traditional confrontation to attempts at a rapprochement with Skopje**

The start of the democratic process in Bulgaria, in November 1989, enabled an opposition to the ruling BCP to make its appearance. This opposition coalesced in the founding of the UDF, the *Union of Democratic Forces*. UDF was an 'umbrella' party. Within its loose political structure there was a whole cluster of political forces whose basic unifying element was their opposition to the BCP. Some of them, indeed, were notable for their extreme anti-Communism: seeking in domestic politics not just the introduction of the multi-party system and democracy; but having the BCP banned, and a 'cleansing' of Communists from political and public life. In international politics they wanted Bulgaria to immediately turn towards the West; and they condemned the BCP for its servile obedience to Moscow. They were particularly tough in their approach to the Macedonian Question; the BCP was accused of 'national betrayal' and 'criminal errors'.³

¹ See for example two recent Bulgarian books on this period: V. Angelov, *Hronika na edno predatelstvo*, Sofia, Gergana 2004, and D. Mičev, *Makedonskiat vâpros i Bâlgaro-iugoslavskite otnošenja. 9 Septemvri 1944 - 1949*, Sofia, Sofia University Press 1994. The classic study by a Greek scholar is still E. Kofos, *Nationalism and Communism in Macedonia*, New York, Caratzas 1993, 137-164.

² J.F. Brown, *Nationalism, Democracy and Security in the Balkans*, Aldershot, Dartmouth 1992, 116.

³ Personal testimony, by a Bulgarian university lecturer who took part in public debates on the Macedonian Question in early 1990.

In these conditions of ever more intense domestic political confrontation, the BCP was renamed the *Bulgarian Socialist Party*, BSP, in spring 1990. The party continued to hold the reins of power until October 1990. It now concentrated its energies on ‘shaking off the irredentism of Skopje’ and of Belgrade.⁴ It reacted angrily to a statement by the Federal Parliament of Yugoslavia on February 16, 1990 condemning the ‘forcible assimilation of Macedonians in the Pirin region’; a communiqué from Bulgaria’s foreign minister Bojko Dimitrov stated that nowhere was there a ‘Macedonian nation’ with historical roots (not even in ‘Vardarska Makedonija’ itself); that the Pirin region’s population was Bulgarian; and that for the Yugoslavs to raise the subject was tantamount to interfering (intolerably, as European politics stood at that time) in the domestic affairs of a neighbour state.⁵

On February 20 the Bulgarian government labelled as ‘open interference in [its] domestic affairs’ a public protest meeting in Skopje to demand ‘recognition of rights for the Macedonian minorities in Bulgaria, Greece and Albania’,⁶ and ‘union of all Macedonians within the bounds of a single Macedonia’.⁷ On March 6 the Bulgarian parliament moved to reject the Yugoslav criticism and the notion that a ‘Macedonian minority’ had at any time existed in Bulgaria; and it noted that ‘in the nineteenth century most Macedonians called themselves Bulgarians’. Their ‘forcible Macedonization’ (to quote the wording of the motion) was ‘the result of Yugoslav [territorial] aspirations’.⁸

In the first six months of 1991 the crisis in Yugoslavia worsened. It became increasingly obvious that the federation was about to break up. This created a whole new set of coordinates. Bulgarian politicians expressed ‘sympathy’ for the democratic movements in Slovenia and Croatia, including their demands for self-determination and independence. Milošević, by contrast, was seen as the villain of the piece; the figurehead of oppressive Serb nationalism, bent on hegemony in the area.⁹ When Skopje declared its independence in September 1991, Bulgarian policy-makers were faced with a dilemma: should they recognize this independence, or not? In discussions in parliament – or to be more exact in the parliamentary Committee for National Security & Foreign Policy – the view gained ground that Bulgaria ought to be one of the first countries to recognize the independence of the ‘Republic of Macedonia’, and that ‘it was the right thing to do’.¹⁰ This was also the view of UDF (the strongest political bloc in Bulgaria after the October 1991 elections), of the country’s president eliu elev, and of a section of the BSP.¹¹

The merits of recognizing Skopje’s independence ‘under the constitutional name’ (i.e. ‘Macedonia’) were founded, it would seem, on the expectations that recognition would push Skopje further still out of the Serbian orbit, and that this would open the way to a rapprochement with Bulgaria. The hope was then that via rapprochement, ‘the Bulgarian consciousness of the Slav population would awaken’.¹² Looked at in the broader context, this view reflects ‘extremely powerful currents of feeling’ that had surfaced in Bulgarian society since late 1989, and which had to do with the position of Macedonia in Bulgarian history and

⁴ St.Aleifantis, *Βουλγαρία: τα διλήμματα μίας νέας εποχής* [Bulgaria: dilemmas of a new era], Athina, Irini 1993, 63.

⁵ P.Moore, ‘The Macedonian Question resurfaces’, *Report on Eastern Europe*, 1/14 (6 April 1990) 48.

⁶ Moore 48.

⁷ M.Balakalova, ‘Bulgarian ‘Macedonian’ Nationalism in the post 1989 Decade’, *New Balkan Politics* 6, www.newbalkanpolitics.org.mk/Oldsite/issue_6, (downloaded 5/11/2004).

⁸ Moore 48. But during the OSCE Human Rights Conference at Copenhagen in June 1990, AMSB, the Association of Macedonian Studies in Bulgaria, tabled a memorandum in which the claim was made that ‘the Macedonian people is an artificial creation of Serbia, and all Slavs of Macedonia are really Bulgarians’. Having described the harassment of inhabitants of Yugoslav Macedonia of Bulgarian ethnic identity, the memorandum was severely critical of demonstrations asserting the existence of a ‘Macedonian nation’, which it said were part of a campaign by ‘Greater Serbia’ chauvinists to acquire the whole of Macedonia.

⁹ F.-L.Altmann, ‘Ex-Yugoslavia’s neighbours: who wants what?’, *The World Today* 48.8-9 (Aug.-Sept.1992) 164.

¹⁰ eliu elev, *V goliamata politika*, Sofia, Trud 1998, 152.

¹¹ elev 153.

¹² Aleifantis 66.

the identity of the Slav Macedonian population. According to these ‘currents of feeling’ the Slav Macedonians ‘are former Bulgarians who had to live separately for a long time because of turbulent historic developments and thus have forgotten their “Bulgarian-ness”. The so-called Macedonian language is simply a dialect of the Bulgarian language. Macedonian identity is ‘artificial’ and does not really exist. There is, therefore, no historical and ethnic Macedonian nation... it is the pro-Serbian and anti-Bulgarian regime which prevents Macedonians from clearly declaring their Bulgarian identity’.¹³

II. 1992-1998 Skopje is ‘recognized’; Bulgarian hopes are dashed

Bulgaria officially recognized Skopje ‘under their constitutional name’ at the start of 1992. On January 15 Filip Dimitrov, prime minister in the UDF government, announced block recognition of the four former Yugoslav republics: Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Macedonia. This made Bulgaria the first state in the world to recognize Skopje under its constitutional name.¹⁴ Speaking on television, President Jelev expressed his agreement with the government decision; adding that it was the Macedonian *state* that Bulgaria was recognizing, not the Macedonian *people*.¹⁵

Though the Dimitrov government trumpeted the rapid recognition of FYROM under the constitutional name as ‘a foreign policy triumph’,¹⁶ it was a decision taken unreflectingly.

¹³ Bakalova, *NBP* 6. These ‘extremely powerful currents of feeling’ were also evident in the debuts of organizations from November 1989 onwards. There was for instance the ‘Pan-Bulgarian Union of St Clement of Ohrid’, which announced the Bulgarian identity of the Slavs of Macedonia and denounced ‘the assimilation policy of the Yugoslav authorities to the detriment of the Bulgarian population in Vardar Macedonia from 1944 onwards’. Then there was the ‘Society for the Radical reform of the Bulgarian Socialist Party’, founded in the Blagoevgrad district, which accused BSP of ‘bearing the moral and political responsibility for the criminal and politically short-sighted underestimation of the national issue in public business’ and, as a group, strongly criticized the ‘government’s compliance in the establishing of a Macedonian nationality in Yugoslavia after World War II, which it called ‘a crazy crime’: D.M.Perry. ‘The Macedonian Question revitalized’, *Report on Eastern Europe* 1.34 (24 August 1990) 7. In December 1990 the *Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization - Union of Macedonian Societies* (or in its Bulgarian initials VMRO-SMD), was founded to ‘continue’ the work of Mihailov’s interwar VMRO. In Article 2 Para.1 of its party platform it declared that ‘VMRO-SMD is the heir to the Internal Revolutionary Organization and to the Macedonian National Committee, and is fighting to achieve their ideals and goals by constitutional means...’. Article 2 also stated that ‘The goal of VNRO-SMD is the defence...and revival of Bulgarianness in Macedonia’. The reference is from S.A.Giannakos, ‘Bulgaria’s Macedonian dilemma’, *Journal of Southeastern Europe and the Balkans* 3.2 (2001) 154. [*Author’s note*]. ‘Bulgarianness’: this translates Blg. , an imprecise but emotive term which is rendered in Constantine Stephanov’s *Complete Bulgarian-English Dictionary* (Sofia 1914) as ‘Bulgarian ways and manners (*pop.*)’. Its content is not primarily political. [*Translator’s note*].

¹⁴ This decision lacked, it would seem, the support of a government consensus about its timing, and was taken by a close circle of the prime minister’s advisers with the support of president Jelev. UDF deputy Nikolai Slatinski was president of the Parliamentary Committee on National Security at the time; he writes: “For hours we... discussed the recognition of Macedonia, of course in a package with – for tactical reasons – Croatia and Slovenia. No one really cared for them (some of our colleagues did not even know the names of their capitals. We expected Stoyan Ganev to arrive with the last news from Western Europe. Suddenly some minutes after 19.30 several ministers headed by Philip Dimitrov ran through the corridors of the Parliament. Their eyes were shining as if the April uprising of 1876 had again broken out. A confusion followed. Their decision for recognising Macedonia was taken without Stoyan Ganev and Stefan Savov (also abroad). Stefan Tafrov, a Mr Jelev’s confidante, was arguing emphatically in favour of an immediate recognition. He insisted that ‘according to latest information’ Turkey would recognise Macedonia in one hour, and Bulgaria would be irreparably compromised if it lagged behind. Philip Dimitrov walked to the microphones as if he was entering history at this very moment...” The reference is from E.Alexandrov, ed., *Bulgarian Foreign Policy after 10 November 1989*, Sofia, Intela 1997, 72.

¹⁵ The reference is from Bakalova, *NBP* 6.

¹⁶ Alexandrov 72.

Sofia had secured no prior guarantee from Skopje about FYROM's specific positions and practices on matters that concerned Bulgaria directly. Too late, the Dimitrov government tried to repair the omission. In a press conference on February 10, foreign minister Ganev said that Bulgaria "does not recognize the existence of a Macedonian nation and the presence of a minority linked to the Republic of Macedonia". He also insisted that "the authorities of the Republic of Macedonia should give clear guarantees that the Republic had no territorial claims against Bulgaria, and that it had no intention of raising the issue of the existence of a (Macedonian) minority either in Bulgaria, or in Greece, or anywhere else".¹⁷ On a visit to FYROM at the end of the same month, Ganev emphasized that "by recognizing the independence of Macedonia, Bulgaria was declaring that she had no territorial claims on the Republic", and that at the same time "she was awaiting 'reciprocal action' from all her neighbours, Macedonia included".¹⁸ Ganev left open the question of whether or not to establish diplomatic relations, saying that this would depend on 'progress towards a peaceful solution of the Yugoslav crisis'.¹⁹ Replying to a question in the Bulgarian parliament on March 13, he said that Bulgaria would "pick the right moment, from the point of view of [her] national interests, to open diplomatic relations with Macedonia".²⁰

Significantly, although the Dimitrov government was unsuccessful in its attempt to obtain the guarantees it sought from Skopje,²¹ there were in the course of 1992 a series of initiatives to support FYROM. In August, for instance, the government gave a positive response to FYROM's plea for economic aid, after the Greek government had decided to stop oil being sent to FYROM from the port of Thessaloniki.²² Bulgaria also agreed to establish diplomatic relations at consular level.²³ Also in August, elev was able to persuade Russian president Boris Yeltsin to immediately get Russia to recognize FYROM 'under its constitutional name'.²⁴ In September the Dimitrov government faced severe criticism at home for its willingness to sell arms to FYROM; this was in flagrant breach of a UN embargo, and it caused political ructions in Sofia.²⁵

¹⁷ 'Bulgaria does not recognize 'Macedonian nation', wants Balkan charter', *BTA* (10 February 1992); BBC *SWB* EE/1302 I (12 February 1992).

¹⁸ 'Bulgarian Foreign Minister holds 'exceptionally useful' talks in Macedonia', *BTA* (27 February 1992); BBC *SWB* EE/1318 A2/4 (2 March 1992).

¹⁹ *BTA* (27 February 1992); BBC *SWB* EE/1318 A2/4 (2 March 1992).

²⁰ *BTA* (13 March 1992); BBC *SWB* EE/1330 A2/2 (15 March 1992). Two months later, on May 4, he stated, on the same subject, that this would happen 'once we see for ourselves that their joining will make a contribution to a good climate in the Balkans, even though it will produce complications'. Quoted in 'Bulgarian Foreign Minister on relations with Macedonia', *BTA* (4 May 1992); BBC *SWB* EE/1373 i (6 May 1992).

²¹ Not only were there no commitments of any kind from Skopje on the matters which concerned Sofia; in June 1992 there were reports in the Bulgarian press of 'political trials' at Titov Veles in FYROM, of persons who had declared themselves Bulgarian. The Bulgarian foreign ministry demanded information about this from his counterpart in FYROM, 'in conformity with the talks of the two countries' Foreign Ministers and with the assurances given by Mr Maleski [the FYROM foreign minister] that the Macedonian government would abide by the...OSCE agreements, including right of free choice of identity'. *BTA* (23 June 1992); BBC *SWB* EE/1422 A2/2 (2 July 1992).

²² The Dimitrov government agreed to see to the transport of 26,000 tonnes of oil products from Turkey to FYROM. *BTA* (21 September 1992); BBC *SWB* EE/1494 I (24 September 1992).

²³ *BTA* (22 August 1992); BBC *SWB* EE/1468 I (25 August 1992).

²⁴ elev 161-165.

²⁵ The balloon went up with denunciations of Secret Service chief General Brigo Asparuhov in September 18 for letting a government adviser get involved in arms sales to companies in FYROM, in breach of the UN arms sales embargo. It came to light that Dimitrov's adviser Konstantin Mišev had, with the cognizance of the prime minister, gone ahead with agreements to sell armaments to companies in FYROM. This revelation provoked reaction from the country's president, elev, and the BSP. The Bulgarian parliament in closed session, on October 21, passed a vote of censure in which it called the prime minister 'personally to blame' for the 'Mišev arms deal'. On the Mišev affair, see: 'Dimitrov denies secret arms deals with Macedonia, calls for apology from Zhelev', *BTA* (5 October 1992); BBC *SWB* EE/1506 B/4 (8 October 1992); 'President Zhelev's TV Interview on Asparuhov-Mišev 'scandal', *BTA* (10 October 1992); BBC *SWB* EE/1518 I (22 October 1992).

In December a new ‘technocrat’ government headed by Berov came to power.²⁶ At first it made a show of linking the issue of bilateral relations with the behaviour of FYROM. The new foreign minister, Dobrev, made a policy statement early in 1993, in which he said:

‘We have stated that we will recognise the country de jure if it amends certain points in its constitution, namely, Article 49, which implies that the Macedonian nation will defend all Macedonians in the neighbouring countries, regardless of their citizenship. This runs counter to international law. Legal protection can be given only by the state of which the individual is a citizen. Anything else would be interference in the state’s domestic affairs. We also insist on observance of the Helsinki principles – human rights, free information exchange, etc. We cannot close our eyes to the confiscation of Bulgarian books and newspapers and to the fact that anti-Bulgarian materials still appear in government publications. We hold information that people who identify themselves as Bulgarians are subjected to repressions. We insist that citizens of the Republic of Macedonia determine freely their national and ethnic identity as is done in Bulgaria’.²⁷

But these fine words were soon to be forgotten, as Berov and his government plunged into opening up bilateral relations without first settling the issues involved. This became all too clear during Berov’s state visit to Skopje in 1993. The visit was seen by the press as ‘a good opportunity for both sides to clarify their priorities [and] to place the accent on what unites them and push what divides them into the background’.²⁸ An initial agreement was signed on economic and trade relations in border areas.²⁹ At the same time, efforts continued from the Bulgarian side in support of Skopje. On December 22 diplomatic relations were upgraded to ambassador level;³⁰ in March 1994 the Berov government decided to place Bulgaria’s ports ‘at FYROM’s disposal’, the Greeks having imposed their embargo;³¹ and on April 15 the Bulgarian Parliament voted to give passage to US troops forming part of the UN forces stationed in FYROM by a Security Council resolution in December 1992.³²

To Bulgaria’s chagrin, however, just as she was trying to open up bilateral relations there occurred what has come to be known as ‘the language dispute’. On April 14, 1994, during a state visit to Skopje by Bulgarian education minister Marko Todorov, this dispute caused the signing of a bilateral agreement to be aborted; and the same happened during a state visit to Sofia by FYROM president Gligorov on April 25-26,³³ with some fifteen documents awaiting signature. The problem emerged in its practical shape when the Slav Macedonian delegation refused to accept the Bulgarians’ suggested form of words for signing the documents. The text (in English translation) ran: ‘This document is signed in the official languages of the Republic of Macedonia and the Republic of Bulgaria’. Gligorov insisted that it should be explicitly stated that the document was being signed ‘in Bulgarian and Macedonian’.³⁴ It was this ‘language dispute’ that was perceived by Bulgarian politicians as putting a freeze on bilateral relations, a freeze that was to last for almost five years, as the

²⁶ When the Dimitrov government resigned in October, the incoming Berov government enjoyed the support of the BSP, of the *Rights and Freedoms Movement* and of a number of deputies who had defected from UDF.

²⁷ European standards of conduct should be effective in the Balkans’, interview with Bulgarian deputy foreign minister Valentin Dobrev, *The Bulgarian Watcher* 75 (Feb.11-17), 1993, 5.

²⁸ Nikos Chios, «Σόφια-Σκόπια: θερινή ανακωχή» [Summer truce between Sofia and Skopje], *Καθημερινή*, 18 Ιουλίου 1993.

²⁹ Alexandrov 89.

³⁰ V.Katsunov, al., *Istoria na Bâlgaria po dati. Bâlgarska hronika*, Sofia, Trud 2003, 424.

³¹ Bakalova, *NBP* 6.

³² N.Avreiski, ‘Balkanskata politika na Republika Bâlgaria’, *Me dunarodni otnošenja*, kni ka 1, XXXV (2006) 85.

³³ Katsunov, al. 425.

³⁴ elev 174.

Slav Macedonian side made recognition of the Macedonian language a sine qua non for establishing bilateral relations.³⁵

BSP won the December elections of 1994 but there was no real change in Bulgarian policy towards FYROM even with a new government. As BSP clung to power through 1995-1996, Sofia made no visible move, took no visible decision. Its 'Balkan policy' was other: to seek bilateral relations with Belgrade³⁶ and, above all, Athens.³⁷ When in 1996 some of its cadres recommended recognizing 'the Macedonian language' as a way of exiting from the impasse on bilateral relations, BSP was accused by UDF of 'selling national interests down the river'.³⁸

III. 1999-2006

The 'language dispute' is got over; Sofia-Skopje relations go ahead

The 'language dispute' separating the two sides was successfully dealt with in early 1999. The basic factors here were domestic political developments within FYROM in late 1998, plus the worsening of the Kosovo crisis. In October 1998 the winner in the parliamentary elections was IMRO, acronym for a coalition whose full name is quite a mouthful (*Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization & Democratic Party for Macedonian National Union*). IMRO stood in sharp contrast to its rival the SDUM (*Socialist Democratic Union of Macedonia*), which had governed FYROM since independence in 1991. Never had SDUM been on good terms with any party in Bulgaria, and in Sofia it was viewed with suspicion as the vehicle for intense 'anti-Bulgarian' feelings.³⁹ IMRO, on the other hand, had taken care to foster good relations with UDF (thus bringing down about its ears accusations by SDUM of being a 'Bulgarian 'fifth column' within FYROM⁴⁰). From 1992 onwards, IMRO's leader Ljubco Georgevski, FYROM's new premier from October 1998, had emphasized how necessary it was for his country to cultivate good relations with Bulgaria.⁴¹ The deteriorating situation in Kosovo was also causing mounting anxiety about Balkan security not only in FYROM itself but in the region as a whole.⁴²

Under these changed conditions the incoming Bulgarian government – the UDF, led by Ivan Kostov, which had won the April 1997 elections – endeavoured to find some way out of the impasse in Bulgaria-FYROM relations ever since spring 1994, and then to bury the hatchet over the 'language dispute'. A compromise formula was found: in the two countries' official documents FYROM's official language would be referred to as 'the Macedonian

³⁵ elev 177. See also the personal testimony of Angel Dimitrov, Bulgarian ambassador to FYROM, in: 'Sâzdavane na Republika Makedonija i sâstoianie na savremenite bâlgaro-makedonski otnošenja' [The creation of Republika Makedonija and the state of Bulgarian-Macedonian relations today], *Sledvoenna Bâlgaria: me du Iztoka i Zapada*, Sofia, Kata 2005, 39.

³⁶ Alexandrov 90.

³⁷ For developments in relations between Athens and Sofia in this period, see Y.Christidis, 'Aksenti v gretsko-bâlgarskite otnošenje sled 1990 godina' [Greek-Bulgarian relations after 1990], *Me dunarodni otnošenja*, kni ki 2-3, XXXIV (2005), 155-164.

³⁸ Alexandrov 136.

³⁹ Bakalova *NBP* 6.

⁴⁰ St.Popov, *Macedonia: Conflicting Perspectives*, Sofia, Open Society Fund (Center for Liberal Strategies) 1999, 44-45, www.makedonia.org/Macedonia_conflicting_perspectives.htm (downloaded 10/11/2004).

⁴¹ Georgevski had visited Sofia in February 1992 and had contacts with all the parliamentary parties. He described Bulgaria's decision to recognise FYROM "as a stunning blow delivered on the Serbian propaganda which claims there were 'secret designs' on Macedonia's territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence behind Bulgaria's principled decision. In actual fact it is Serbia which poses a threat to Macedonia..." See 'Macedonian party leader satisfied with Bulgarian consensus on Recognition', *BTA* (14 February 1992); *BBC SWB* EE/1307 A2/2 (18 February 1992).

⁴² K.D.Kentrotis, 'H Βουλγαρία και το ζήτημα του Κοσσυφοπεδίου' [Bulgaria and the Kosovo question], in: V.Kontis & E.Manta, ed., *To Kóssovo και οι Αλβανικοί Πληθυσμοί της Βαλκανικής*, Thessaloniki, Institute for Balkan Studies 2000, 363.

language according to the Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia'. On February 22, 1999, in the course of a state visit to Sofia by Gligorov, a joint communiqué was issued based on this formula, while FYROM at the same time undertook not to interfere in the domestic affairs of Bulgaria.⁴³ Though this joint communiqué raised some hackles inside Bulgaria,⁴⁴ now that it had been signed the way lay open to an upgrade of relations between Sofia and Skopje. During Gligorov's visit no fewer than seven inter-state agreements were signed, and the Bulgarian government announced that it was making a present to FYROM of 150 tanks and 142 pieces of artillery.⁴⁵ During NATO operations against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the Kostov government showed - to borrow a phrase from the classics - noticeable 'philo-Macedonian zeal'. To justify its decision to make runways available to NATO for as long as operations lasted, to the detriment of Yugoslavia, it appealed to 'political support' for FYROM, which it accused Miloševi of trying to destabilize. In April 1999, with demonstrations going on in Sofia against this decision, Kostov said:

'I appeal for Bulgaria, on one occasion at least as this century ends, to behave responsibly towards Macedonia. I shall answer the protests with the question that people are asking in Macedonia: what's going on in Sofia, why are you all shouting for Serbia, why aren't you shouting for Macedonia...? Since Miloševi's position doesn't depend on us, and nor does NATO's position either, we have one worry and one only - Macedonia'.⁴⁶

The Kostov government showed the same partisan zeal throughout the 2001 crisis, a still severer one for FYROM. It issued one statement after another to condemn the activities

⁴³ The remainder of the communiqué specifically states that 'Republika Makedonija declares that nothing in its Constitution can be taken to mean that it is now, or will ever be in the future, a base for interference in the domestic affairs of the Republic of Bulgaria in order to defend the status and rights of persons who are not citizens of Republika Makedonija'. This clause, which in essence reproduces Article 6 Para.2 of the New York Interim Accord between Greece and FYROM, envisages that Article 49 of FYROM's Constitution shall not apply to Bulgaria. The text of the joint communiqué can be found in Greek translation in G.E.Doudoumis, *I synchroni Voulgaria. Provlimata kai prooptikes* [Bulgaria at the present day: problems and prospects], Athina, Valkanikes Ekdoseis 1999, 187-190.

⁴⁴ FYROM's president Gligorov accused the Georgevski government of 'reneging on the Macedonian minority in Pirin Macedonia'. In Bulgaria itself, the Public Prosecutor stated that 'it would be charitable to call prime minister Kostov's decision to recognize the Macedonian language an error'. Doudoumis 107.

⁴⁵ Doudoumis 106. A few months later both sides signed an agreement on defence cooperation. One of its provisions was that FYROM should be given armaments by Bulgaria. See 'Perspectives on the development of relations between Macedonia and Bulgaria', Institute for Regional & International Studies, Sofia 1999, www.iris-bg.org (downloaded 12/03/2003). It is perhaps no coincidence that, again in February 1999, the Sofia City Court received a written request from the *United Macedonian Organization (Ilinden - Pirin)*, a branch of the *United Macedonian Organization (Ilinden)*, to register as a political party. The *United Macedonian Organization (Ilinden-Pirin)* may have been thought of as moderates, but that did not stop them talking about the existence of a 'Macedonian minority' in Bulgaria. The parent party, *United Macedonian Organization (Ilinden)*, had made its first appearance in April 1990, as heir to the *Independent Macedonian Organization (Ilinden)* founded in November 1989 by Georgi Angelov Solunski. In March 1990 Solunski's party held a protest meeting in the centre of Sofia to demand cultural and ethnic autonomy for 'Macedonians in Bulgaria', with slogans such as 'We're Macedonians - and that's all' or 'Macedonian United, a guarantee of peace'. On May 15 the Public Prosecutor in Sofia warned the *United Macedonian Organization (Ilinden)* that it must 'either register as a political party, or disband'. So in July it applied to the local Court at Blagoevgrad to register as a political party. The application was however turned down, the judges ruling that 'goals and the means [of the party] used to achieve them are contrary to Bulgarian unity'. For the origin and activities of *United Macedonian Organization (Ilinden)* and other Bulgarian organizations seeking the recognition of a 'Macedonian' minority, and for the reaction of the Bulgarian authorities, during the years 1990-1993, see H.Poulton, *Who are the Macedonians?*, London, Hurst 1994, 150-159.

⁴⁶ Doudoumis 108.

of 'Albanian extremist groups' and to beg the international community to lend its support to security and stability in the 'Republic of Macedonia'.⁴⁷ It even tried to act as mediator, but this provoked a sharp reaction from FYROM foreign minister Mitreva; she told it to mind its own business and 'concentrate on the forthcoming parliamentary elections in Bulgaria'.⁴⁸

From 2001 onwards bilateral relations continued to grow despite political changes in both countries, due undoubtedly to improvement in the Bulgarian economy and progress in the country's application to join the European Union, making her a more attractive prospect to FYROM as a potential partner. Meetings between top politicians of both countries became more frequent,⁴⁹ and a fair number of agreements were signed. These included, for instance, the Nevestino-Delchevo agreement (October 18, 2004) for a new border crossing; and the trilateral memorandum (December 28, 2004) signed by the prime ministers of Bulgaria, FYROM, and Albania, for an oil pipeline running from Burgas via Skopje to Vlorë.⁵⁰ Halfway through 2005 Bulgaria and FYROM each opened a culture and information centre in the other's capital. Typical of the new post-1999 thaw was an official statement issued on August 30, 2004 by FYROM's new president, Ivo Ivanov, on the eve of his visit to Sofia:

'...our relations with Bulgaria are our highest priority. Now cooperation and mutual trust are at the highest possible level compared with the preceding period. This can be seen both in our successful top-level meetings and in the results achieved in a number of different fields: cooperation on security, defence, economy, culture, education, science... I believe that relations between Macedonia and Bulgaria can set an example in the region...'⁵¹

Bulgaria evidently had its attractions for young Slav Macedonians; they hurried to acquire Bulgarian citizenship as a means to getting a university education and a passport enabling them to travel abroad more easily. The Bulgarian state provided substantial economic incentives (scholarships, reduced fees) for Slav Macedonian students to study in Bulgaria,⁵² provided they described themselves as 'Bulgarian', this also allowing them to get a Bulgarian passport with considerable ease.⁵³ By the start of 2005 there were some 3500 Slav Macedonian students taking courses at Bulgarian universities – approximately 10% of all students in FYROM – and the total number of Slav Macedonian applicants for Bulgarian citizenship (leading to a Bulgarian passport) had reached 15,500 for the period 2000-2005.⁵⁴

Despite the advance in bilateral relations from 1999 onwards, it was not roses all the way. There were still a whole host of issues causing the Bulgarians problems. The most conspicuous was perhaps Skopje's official line of a 'Macedonian minority' within Bulgaria. This was linked to legal manoeuvres by the *United Macedonian Organization (Ilinden)* party, claiming to represent Bulgaria's so-called 'Macedonian minority'. As *United Macedonian Organization (Ilinden-Pirin)*, the party had fought the Bulgarian local elections in 1999, with very modest results (winning only 3690 votes). Nevertheless an

⁴⁷ See e.g. Kostov's statements in the Bulgarian parliament on March 7, 2001, as reported verbatim in: *Stenografski Dnevnik* 173, Session XII, Sittings 487-489 (7-9 Mart 2001), 7-9.

⁴⁸ Avreiski 86.

⁴⁹ See e.g. Kostov's statements in the Bulgarian parliament on March 7, 2001, as reported verbatim in: *Stenografski Dnevnik* 173, Session XII, Sittings 487-489 (7-9 Mart 2001), 7-9.

⁵⁰ Avreiski 88.

⁵¹ 'Otnošenata ni s Bâlgaria sa nai-viš prioritet' [Our relations with Bulgaria are our highest priority], *24 asa*, 30 Avgust 2004.

⁵² The practice of enrolling Macedonian students in Bulgarian universities started in the days of the Sofianski caretaker government (February to April 1997), which made the necessary legal changes. Avreiski 85.

⁵³ See A. Škodrova, 'Macedonia: Bulgaria's warm embrace', *Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, BCR 531 (21 January 2005), www.iwpr.net/index.pl?archive/bcr3_200501-537_1_eng.txt (downloaded 25/01/2005).

⁵⁴ Škodrova, BCR 531.

application was lodged at the Constitutional Court by sixty one deputies – some from BSP, some also from the governing UDF – to have the *United Macedonian Organization (Ilinden)* banned. The Court obligingly declared the party outlawed on February 28, 2000 on the ground that ‘its aims are contrary to good constitutional order’ and ‘that it fosters ethnic hatred and places Bulgaria’s territorial integrity in jeopardy’.⁵⁵ This decision by the highest court in the land was very unfavourably received in FYROM,⁵⁶ where officials are always careful to remind the world of the existence, in bilateral relations, of a ‘minority problem’, and to recommend that it be dealt with ‘through European machinery’. To quote Ervenovski:

‘The problems we are now discussing in public are the same problems that we were discussing in the preceding period. It is basically a question of ethnic and cultural identity, the situation of ethnic minorities, their status and their rights. All of us today – Macedonia, Bulgaria, everybody in the region – have at our disposal, much more efficient and objective machinery to resolve the issues permanently... I mean the machinery of European regulations and standards, which each country must incorporate into its own body of regulations. This machinery is far more productive than any pressure we can exert, or could have exerted in the past, through bilateral relations. If we want to become EU members, we have to play to EU rules. And that will improve the status of ethnic minorities’.⁵⁷

At the same time, and even as Skopje was speechifying about the minority problem, people in Bulgaria were observing with displeasure that the category ‘Bulgarian’ was nowhere to be found on the FYROM official census form. In the 2003 Census, ‘Macedonian citizens with Bulgarian consciousness [were] classed as ‘representative of other ethnic minority’’. The Census thus officially registered just over twenty thousand persons [20,993] ‘without it being clear how many of these described themselves as ‘Bulgarian’’.⁵⁸

Here may be mentioned Bulgarian doubts about the sincerity of the political leaders in Skopje as regards bilateral relations. To take an example: despite the cordial atmosphere during a state visit to FYROM (February 26-27, 2002) by Bulgaria’s most recent president, Georgi Parvanov, in the course of which a memorandum of cooperation was signed,⁵⁹ the Bulgarian press was rather cagey about the outcome of the visit. An article in the authoritative newspaper *Kapital* expressed grave reservations about the potential of the visit to improve relations between the two countries. ‘In actual fact’ (it wrote) ‘Greece has signed far fewer agreements with Skopje, but Greek companies have an enormous slice of the Macedonian market’. The writer also wondered how far FYROM would ‘keep its promises about improving trade relations’.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Bakalova *NBP* 6. EMO (I-P) appealed to the European Human Rights Court. In November 2001 the Court adjudged that Bulgaria had been in breach of Article 11 of the European Agreement protecting right of assembly. On the Court’s decision against Bulgaria, see ‘Ευρωπαϊκές’, *Κυριακάτικη Ελευθεροτυπία*, 4 Νοεμβρίου 2001.

⁵⁶ The decision to ban the party was condemned by FYROM’s president and government. See ‘Macedonians in Bulgaria in uncertainty’, *International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights*, 10 October 2000, www.ihf-hr.org (downloaded 14/03/2003).

⁵⁷ *Otnošeniata ni s Bǎlgaria...* 30 Avgust 2004.

⁵⁸ Avreiski 89.

⁵⁹ On fighting terrorism, organized crime, illegal drug trafficking, illegal immigration, and other criminal activities, see Avreiski 87.

⁶⁰ Quoted by U.Buechsenschuetz, ‘Are Macedonian-Bulgarian relations improving?’, *Balkan Report*, *RFE/RL* 6.12 (8 March 2002), www.rferl.org/balkan-report/2002/03/12-080302.html (downloaded 11/3/2002). In the period 1996-2001 Greece, unlike Bulgaria, was constantly one of FYROM’s five most important economic partners, and had at the same time become one of the major foreign investors in FYROM. See Chr.Nikas, ‘Οι Επιπτώσεις της Ενδιάμεσης Συμφωνίας Ελλάδας-ΠΓΔΜ στις Οικονομικές τους Σχέσεις’ [The effects of the Interim Accord on economic relations between Greece and FYROM], in: E.Kofos & Vl.Vlasidis, ed., *Αθήνα-Σκόπια: Η Επτάχρονη Συμβίωση* [Athens and Skopje, the 7-year symbiosis] (1995-2002), Athina, Papazisis 2003, 120-121 and 134.

All this notwithstanding, there was a recent - and rather unexpected – declaration by Bulgarian foreign minister Ivailo Kalfin in late July 2006, to the effect that Sofia would back up Skopje in her journey towards Europe, providing Skopje ceased her ‘hostility towards the Bulgarian nation and its history’ and ‘show[ed] respect for the common historical and cultural past, and good-neighbourliness towards Bulgaria’.⁶¹ This was unexpected because it was perhaps the very first time, after FYROM’s independence, that Bulgaria’s head diplomat had expressly linked Bulgaria’s political support for FYROM with matters of history and culture. There are various ways in which Kalfin’s statement can be interpreted. First of all it was a reflection of Bulgarian diplomacy’s greater self-confidence. Bulgarian diplomacy had covered much ground since 1992, what with Bulgaria now a member of NATO, a close partner of the US, and on the verge of EU membership. At the same time, the statement put into words a feeling that had been current for some time in various Bulgarian circles – historians, diplomats, journalists – and in public opinion at large. From 1992 onwards, it was felt, Bulgaria had substantially followed a policy of one-way support for FYROM, without getting much in return, especially on sensitive issues such as historical heritage and minorities.⁶²

Conclusions

Bulgarian policy towards FYROM over the last fifteen years betrays a serious inability to couple two basic requirements: how to achieve cultural rapprochement and how to develop bilateral relations without compromising Bulgaria’s fundamental positions. This inability is the result firstly of the particular conditions characteristic of Bulgarian foreign policy after the end of bipolarity, and secondly of the particular attitudes and fascination that Bulgarian society continues to have for the Macedonian Question. In spring 1997 President Stoyanov called Macedonia ‘the most romantic item in Bulgarian history’,⁶³ and in early 2005 Bo idar Dimitrov, director of the Bulgarian National History Museum, could write:

‘I wish the citizens of Macedonia all happiness, and a good life, in 2005. For their state, too... I wish in 2005 that it may forsake the doctrine of Macedonism, a doctrine that says that Macedonians are a different breed from Bulgarians. To put it in a nutshell: may Macedonia become the ‘second state’ of the Bulgarian people – as Cyprus is the second state of the Greek people, Moldova of the Romanian people, and Austria of the German people’.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Quoted by U.Buechsenschuetz, ‘Are Macedonian-Bulgarian relations improving?’, *Balkan Report*, RFE/RL 6.12 (8 March 2002), www.rferl.org/balkan-report/2002/03/12-080302.html (downloaded 11/3/2002). In the period 1996-2001 Greece, unlike Bulgaria, was constantly one of FYROM’s five most important economic partners, and had at the same time become one of the major foreign investors in FYROM. See Chr.Nikas, ‘Οι Επιπτώσεις της Ενδιάμεσης Συμφωνίας Ελλάδας-ΠΓΔΜ στις Οικονομικές τους Σχέσεις’ [The effects of the Interim Accord on economic relations between Greece and FYROM], in: E.Kofos & V.Vlasidis, edd., *Αθήνα-Σκόπια: Η Επτάχρονη Συμβίωση* [Athens and Skopje, the 7-year symbiosis] (1995-2002), Athina, Papazisis 2003, 120-121 and 134.

⁶¹ Quoted in Ch.Nikolov, ‘Na horizonta – ‘krai na istoriata’ po Bãlgarski’ [On the horizon, ‘the end of history, in Bulgarian], *Politika*, 11-17 August 2006.

⁶² See e.g. B.Dimitrov, ‘Makedonskiat gordiev vazel’ [Macedonia, the Gordian knot], *Politika*, 28 Iuli - 3 August 2006; K.Uzunov, ‘Makedonia – grobišteto na iliuzite’ [Macedonia, the graveyard of illusions], *Trud*, 2 August 2006.

⁶³ Quoted in Doudoumis 105.

⁶⁴ ‘Makedonia prez 2005 godina’, *Politika*, 8-14 Ianuari 2005. There are certainly some Bulgarian scholars who think that these views do not help to promote the development of bilateral relations. To quote one of them, Avreiski: ‘It would be a good thing if the republic of Bulgaria were to be aware of the advantages ahead for her along the road that Macedonia has set out on. But this would oblige her to turn her back for ever on paternalist tendencies that rekindle atavistic instincts and suspicions, are of no help in building modern good-neighbour relations between states in this region’. Avreiski 89.

As of 2006 Bulgarian diplomacy appears ready, with greater self-confidence, to defend fundamental Bulgarian positions on issues of history and identity. Should this frame of mind endure, it will undoubtedly affect Greece's dispute with her neighbour FYROM over its 'constitutional name'.