

The French Proposal: A Turning Point in the Balkans or a Dead End?

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Abstract: North Macedonia's long-standing bid for EU accession was hindered by a Bulgarian veto that had lasted for two years until a French proposal emerged as a last-minute solution. However, this proposal presents potential pitfalls for new vetoes and has exacerbated political polarization in North Macedonia, thereby threatening inter-ethnic relations in the country. The proposal requires North Macedonia to include ethnic Bulgarians in its constitutional preamble, a move that seems unlikely given the opposition's firm resistance to any such constitutional amendment. This raises questions about the EU's decision to comply with the Bulgarian demands and the likelihood of achieving a sustainable solution to long-standing bilateral issues.

Keywords: North Macedonia, Bulgaria, EU accession negotiations, Bulgarian veto, French proposal, constitutional amendment, inter-ethnic tensions

Introduction

In a dramatic turn of events, a French proposal emerged as a last-minute solution to the Bulgarian veto that had blocked North Macedonia's EU accession negotiations for two years. However, this veto was just one in a series of vetoes that have hindered North Macedonia's path to accession

since it became a candidate in 2005. While the proposal appeared to break the stalemate, it also introduced potential pitfalls for new vetoes, particularly from Bulgaria. Additionally, the proposal has exacerbated political polarization in North Macedonia, threatening to also impact inter-ethnic relations negatively in the country.

The French proposal hinges on a critical condition that mandates North Macedonia to include ethnic Bulgarians in its constitutional preamble and other areas, despite there being only 3,500 Bulgarians in the country according to the latest census (only less than half of whom claim Bulgarian as their native language). Unfortunately, due to the current political climate, meeting this requirement seems highly unlikely, as the opposition has staunchly opposed any constitutional amendment. As the opposition is poised to gain significant support in the 2024 elections, the fate of the responsibilities outlined in the French proposal hangs precariously in the balance.

This begs the question: why did the EU choose to comply with the Bulgarian demands and create a negotiation framework that includes historically contentious bilateral issues? Is this approach likely to lead to a sustainable solution or will it only serve to exacerbate long-term tensions?

The Proposal: A Dubious Solution for North Macedonia's EU Accession?

The French EU Presidency's negotiation framework for North Macedonia's EU accession is anything but straightforward. While it splits the process into a formal political opening with screening and a subsequent negotiation stage, it introduces a new condition for negotiations to actually begin: North Macedonia must amend its constitution to include ethnic Bulgarians. This provision, along with others that address bilateral issues between North Macedonia and Bulgaria, has been met with great opposition within the country.

Initially rejected by North Macedonia's government and President, the negotiation framework was later accepted after reportedly having been modified to remove the contentious bilateral issues (Damceska, 2022; EWB, 2022). However, experts claim that the proposal has remained largely intact, with only superficial alterations to the language (A1on,

2022). This acceptance has only fuelled the opposition's fervour, as political opponents and independent NGO experts specializing in European integration have criticized the proposal and its potential consequences. Adding insult to injury, the Bulgarian government has issued a unilateral declaration to the EU stating that it does not recognize the Macedonian language and considers it a mere variant of western Bulgarian (Republika, 2022). This move, made shortly after the Bulgarian parliament accepted the French proposal, serves as further evidence that Bulgaria's previously entrenched positions, which had led to its veto, remain unyielding. As North Macedonia attempts to navigate this precarious negotiation framework, the question remains: will this approach ultimately help or hinder the country's EU accession efforts?

The gauntlet thrown down by the French proposal thus demands a Herculean task from North Macedonia - the amendment of its constitution to include ethnic Bulgarians before negotiations on the clusters can even begin (Altiparmakova, 2023). This formidable challenge was set to take place during the year-long screening phase, which commenced in the autumn of 2022. However, the political landscape of the country quickly transformed into a minefield after the government assented to the proposal, rendering the constitutional change virtually impossible to carry out. The governing coalition's lack of a two-thirds majority vote in parliament made it imperative for the opposition to lend their support to the cause, exacerbating an already complex situation. The opposition, led by VMRO-DPMNE and its coalition with Levica, an opposition party also gaining popularity, has taken a strong stance against the constitutional change set out in the EU negotiation framework (Marusic, 2022). They have vowed to resist this change at any cost and have also promised to demand an overhaul of the negotiation framework if they emerge victorious in the 2024 elections.

Trapped by the Proposal: How it Can Escalate Tensions and Further Fuel Bulgaria's Denial of the Macedonian People and Language

The Bulgarian veto was based on Bulgaria's claim that North Macedonia had failed to comply with the 2017 Treaty of Friendship, Good-neighbourliness and Cooperation, specifically regarding the progress

of the Joint Historical Commission¹, which aims to find some common ground in terms of historical representations in the curriculum of the two countries. In documents issued by the Bulgarian government and parliament prior to lodging the veto, it was claimed that the Macedonians are a historical aberration, artificially created in 1944 from ethnic Bulgarians who had allegedly inhabited North Macedonia for a millennium, with the same being true for their language.² Bulgaria argued that this should be reflected in North Macedonia's history textbooks and educational curricula. The Macedonian side of the Commission was accused of resisting any solution that would reflect Bulgaria's "historical truth". Bulgaria's demands for North Macedonia's EU accession seem to be unrelenting and have taken a more forceful tone, as compliance is now presented as the sole path forward. This position can be seen as a form of coercion, potentially limiting North Macedonia's options for its European future.

The acceptance of the proposal was shrouded in mystery, as a key bilateral protocol at the heart of the negotiation framework debate was not immediately disclosed (BNR, 2022). However, once it was revealed several weeks later, it was immediately apparent that this bilateral protocol contained several conditions related to the Joint Historical Commission (Georgievski, 2022). These conditions included setting timelines for the Commission's work and "encouraging" a complete resolution of its work before North Macedonia can join the EU. Essentially, if the Commission fails to produce the desired results as outlined by Bulgaria, Bulgaria can again claim grounds for North Macedonia's failure to fulfil its obligations and indefinitely delay North Macedonia's accession to the EU until it finally complies with Bulgaria's demands for the revision of its history textbooks and other curricula. According to what appears to be Bulgaria's strategic position as outlined in its Framework Position and the subsequent Explanatory Memorandum, this would lead to the establishment of

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- 1 The full name of the commission is Joint Multidisciplinary Expert Commission on Historical and Education Issues Between the Republic of North Macedonia and the Republic of Bulgaria.
 - 2 More details in the Bulgarian Government's Framework Position: Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria. (9 October, 2019). *Ramkova pozitsia otnosno razshiryavane na ES i procesa na stabilizirane i asocirane: Republika Severna Makedonia*. <https://www.gov.bg/bg/prestsentar/novini/ramkova-pozitsia>

a narrative that presents modern Macedonians as being of Bulgarian ethnicity. The creators of this policy appear to believe that the new narrative will eventually “reverse-engineer” the Macedonian people back into their “true” Bulgarian origin, as they believe that ethnic Macedonians were artificially created as a nation from ethnic Bulgarians in North Macedonia.

It is abundantly clear from even a cursory analysis of the official documents issued by Bulgarian institutions, such as the Explanatory Memorandum that was sent to all EU members in 2020, that Bulgaria’s purported strategy is not merely a far-fetched interpretation of the Bulgarian positions (European Western Balkans, 2020). These claims persist in mainstream political debates and continue to be advocated in Bulgaria even today. This suggests that Bulgaria has no intention of relinquishing these outrageous demands in its bilateral negotiations with North Macedonia and will likely insist on them as a prerequisite for North Macedonia’s accession to the EU.

For instance, as recently as in 2022, Bulgaria’s popular and influential president, Rumen Radev, made the statement that “Bulgaria will not permit the legitimization of Macedonism in the EU” (Republika, 2022). The term “Macedonism” is employed in a derogatory manner in Bulgarian discourse, which claims that the expression of a unique Macedonian identity and language, not founded on Bulgarian identity and language, is intolerable. This perspective is reflected in said official documents issued by the Bulgarian government and parliament, including the Explanatory Memorandum, which characterizes the Macedonian identity as a consequence of “Yugoslav totalitarianism.”

Equally importantly, the Bulgarian members of the Joint Historical Commission have consistently expressed comparable viewpoints in the media, accusing their Macedonian counterparts of obstinacy and incapacity for failing to recognize the alleged historical truth that the history of modern Macedonians until 1944 had been Bulgarian and only strayed from it due to Yugoslav oppression. One instance of such remarks comes from Angel Dimitrov, the Bulgarian co-chair of the Commission, who utilized language similar to that later used by President Radev as early as 2018, when the Commission was first established. Dimitrov contended that “Anti-Bulgarian myths and

stereotypes developed during Yugoslavia and the concept of Macedonism obstructed bilateral communication.” Furthermore, he asserted that due to this doctrine, there is a “lack of clarity regarding contemporary Macedonia’s identity because a small group of people continue to propagate an alleged independent origin of the Macedonian nation” (Express, 2018). This serves as an unequivocal sign of the strong concurrence between the official political rhetoric in Bulgaria and the language employed by purported experts in the Commission.

These comments strongly imply that there is minimal or no scope for advancement within the Commission. They provide clear evidence of the belief that Macedonians must be convinced of their “true identity” and “re-engineered” into Bulgarians by imposing the Bulgarian version of history in North Macedonia’s educational system. All of this is expected to be the outcome of North Macedonia’s EU accession process, relying on this not-so-hidden strategy. The shocking similarity between the argumentation employed by Bulgaria to deny the existence of the Macedonian nation and the Russian propaganda that fuelled the aggression towards Ukraine is both alarming and deeply troubling.³ The fact that the European Union seems to be unaware of these striking similarities is a cause for deep concern, especially as this rhetoric, even if implicitly, has found its way into the negotiation framework for North Macedonia’s EU accession. This kind of insidious and hateful vitriol threatens not only to derail North Macedonia’s progress towards EU membership, but it could also have grave consequences for both political stability and inter-ethnic relations within the country and beyond.

3 Russian President Vladimir Putin’s essay on Ukraine, which was published in July 2021, and his subsequent address to the nation on 21 February, 2022, just before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, contain a number of points that dismiss and negate the Ukrainian nation and its history. Notably, these positions bear striking similarities to those expressed in Bulgaria’s Framework Position and the subsequent Explanatory Memorandum. For instance, Putin’s essay portrays Ukrainians as an integral part of the Russian people, who were artificially separated by the communists, much like how the Bulgarian documents describe Macedonians as being part of the Bulgarian people, also artificially separated by the communists. Additionally, the essay portrays the Ukrainian language as a part of the Russian language, much like official Sofia claims Macedonian to be a Bulgarian dialect, among other similarities. The narratives in Putin’s essay and Bulgaria’s documents are strikingly similar and employ nearly identical lines of argumentation.

Unpacking the Impact: Escalating Political Tensions and Potential Inter-Ethnic Risks Triggered in North Macedonia

As previously mentioned, the disclosure of the French proposal for the EU negotiation framework had an instant impact on the nation, causing intense political divisions and sparking anti-government demonstrations that, at times, had the potential to escalate into violence (DW, 2022, July 6). Despite the protests eventually losing steam, the stark political polarization within the country has only intensified. A preliminary poll indicated that over 70 percent of respondents rejected the French proposal, underscoring the level of dissatisfaction with the negotiation framework (Spasovski, 2022). The results of a recent poll have confirmed the prevailing sentiment of opposition towards the terms outlined in the negotiation framework. Additionally, the poll has brought to light a profound inter-ethnic divide on this issue. Specifically, overall 70 percent of Macedonians expressed their rejection of the negotiation framework with the EU, while 75 percent of ethnic Albanians expressed their support for it. Furthermore, this opposition is even more pronounced at a regional level, with over 80 percent of the population in two-thirds of the country rejecting the negotiation framework. In regions with mixed populations, the level of rejection is comparatively lower, but the overall inter-ethnic division on this matter is alarming (Sitel Television, 2023). Previously, the demand for a referendum on the issue by VMRO-DPMNE was met with a resounding refusal from Parliament Speaker Talat Xhaferi, who belongs to the ethnic Albanian DUI party, a junior partner in the ruling coalition (Taylor, 2022). Following this, Levica (Left) put forth a fresh referendum proposal, only to have it rejected once again by Xhaferi for parliamentary review (Vecer, 2022). With the matter now in the hands of the Constitutional Court, the French proposal and the conditions outlined in the negotiation framework have the potential to become a highly charged topic in the upcoming 2024 elections (Levica, 2023).

In the meantime, despite the governing coalition's inability to secure a two-thirds majority in parliament for constitutional amendments, they have forged ahead with establishing a working group within the

Ministry of Justice to draft these amendments, which the opposition has refused to join (Frontline, 2023). This move appears to be in direct contravention of the Constitution of North Macedonia, which explicitly stipulates that any proposal for constitutional amendment must originate from the national assembly. The discussion surrounding constitutional amendments has the potential to escalate quickly and also impact inter-ethnic relations, particularly as most ethnic Albanian parties have called for changes that go beyond the requirements outlined in the French proposal. The existing constitution, which was largely amended with the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA) after the inter-ethnic conflict in 2001, designates the Macedonian language as the official language of the then Republic of Macedonia, as well as any language spoken by at least 20 percent of the population, which is governed by a special law. However, several ethnic Albanian political parties are now advocating for the 20 percent provision to be replaced with the “Albanian language” (since the Albanians are the only non-majority ethnic community exceeding the 20 percent threshold nationally), a move that would notably alter the current constitutional framework as a document that defines the state as unitary, yet multicultural⁴ (DW, 2022, November 1). The proposal to name a specific second official language could significantly heighten inter-ethnic tensions and imply that North Macedonia is heading towards becoming a bi-national state. The constitutional change proposed by the Albanian ethnic parties, when coupled with Bulgaria’s vehement denial of the Macedonian language, has the potential to ignite heightened frustration and distrust among the Macedonian majority population, making it a volatile combination that poses a dangerous threat to the delicate stability of inter-ethnic relations.

Furthermore, the rejection of the French proposal by the Macedonian opposition and a large portion of the public, coupled with the unanimous support it has received from the ethnic Albanian parties, has also created a dangerous potential for inter-ethnic conflict. This is because North Macedonia’s and Albania’s accession paths to the EU were previously tied

4 While Albanians are the only ethnic community that surpasses the 20 percent threshold at the national level, other ethnic communities exceed this mark at the local level. As such, the 20 percent provision serves as a general guideline that applies not only nationally but also locally. It was originally designed to accommodate a unitary and multicultural society.

together. If North Macedonia's path remained blocked due to a potential refusal of the French proposal, it could also block Albania's path, as some EU member states were reluctant to decouple the two countries' paths (Euronews Albania, 2023). While the ethnic Albanian parties in North Macedonia may not necessarily support Bulgaria's stance on the Macedonian identity issue (and indeed some Albanian politicians have vigorously criticized the Bulgarian stance), their support for the French proposal could be perceived by many Macedonians as indirectly siding with the Bulgarians, intensifying inter-ethnic tensions, and negatively affecting the overall public support for North Macedonia's accession to the EU. In other words, this situation could be seen as a concerted effort to undermine the Macedonian identity both from outside and within the country, complicating the significant strides that have been made in stabilizing inter-ethnic relations and promoting integration and reconciliation efforts since the 2001 conflict.

Simultaneously, following the acceptance of the French proposal and the negotiation framework, Bulgaria has been asserting with greater insistence that ethnic Bulgarians residing in North Macedonia are experiencing discrimination. Therefore, Bulgaria argues that it is even more crucial to recognize them as a constitutional "founding" people of the country (Kolekeski, 2023). For this purpose, a Bulgarian mogul, likely in coordination with the Bulgarian state, has been organizing the establishment of so-called "Bulgarian clubs" in North Macedonia, with the stated aim of opening such clubs in every town (NetPress, 2022). The first two clubs have already been established in Bitola and Ohrid, respectively the second largest city and the birthplace of Slavic literacy. However, the names chosen for these clubs were drawn from the most controversial historical figures imaginable - Vancho Mihajlov, a Nazi collaborator during Bulgaria's occupation in World War II, and Tsar Boris III, who led Bulgaria during the war and oversaw the occupation of Macedonia, as well as the extermination of the entire Jewish population of Macedonia by sending them to the Treblinka concentration camp.

As expected, the creation of these clubs sparked an immediate public outcry, as they were viewed as an insult to the memory of World War II and further evidence of Bulgaria's hostile intentions. The backlash was so significant that it prompted the amendment of the Law on

Foundations and Associations, creating a permanent commission responsible for reviewing club names before granting approval for registration (Stojanchova, 2022). Several months after the creation of these Bulgarian clubs, the Commission reviewed their names and issued a negative opinion, requiring the clubs to change their names. However, the clubs refused to comply, leading to their eventual outlawing and removal from the Central Registry (Novinite, 2023). Moreover, it seems that this had been Bulgaria's plan all along - to help establish clubs with highly provocative names and goals, only to have them banned later and subsequently use this as evidence that North Macedonia discriminates against ethnic Bulgarians. Similarly, a highly questionable incident involving the secretary of the Ohrid club, which occurred while the club was still operating, was exploited by Bulgarian officials to incite outrage within Bulgaria by claiming that ethnic Bulgarians in North Macedonia are facing threats to their physical safety. The young secretary was involved in a physical altercation that resulted in his injury, prompting Bulgaria to dispatch a government plane to transport him to a hospital in Sofia (Vassev, 2023). This incident was widely publicized in Bulgaria as evidence that North Macedonia fosters hatred towards ethnic Bulgarians, providing further justification for the country to face an ongoing threat of veto and a demand for it fulfil all Bulgarian conditions if it wishes to join the EU. Consequently, the relationship between the two nations has plummeted to an all-time low, potentially marking the worst point in their history since North Macedonia's independence.

Conclusion and the Way Forward

The French proposal was likely intended to be a breakthrough, clearing the path for North Macedonia's EU accession while mending its rocky relationship with Bulgaria. However, it was hastily presented during the final moments of the French EU Presidency, amid the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and a desire to demonstrate progress in the Western Balkans, following the granting of accession paths to Ukraine and Moldova. While it ostensibly allowed North Macedonia to move forward in the accession process, it has also emboldened Bulgaria's hardline stance and sparked a renewed wave of hostility towards its

neighbour. The EU's credibility as an impartial mediator has been severely undermined, and prospects for a lasting resolution to this longstanding dispute seem increasingly remote. Bulgaria's demands have been acquiesced to, with conditions imposed that Bulgaria will monitor throughout the accession process.

As a result, the already complicated and deteriorating relationship between the two countries, which had been exacerbated by Bulgaria's previous veto, has become even more intricate and convoluted. Instead of engaging in constructive dialogue and building trust, Bulgarian officials have relentlessly and irresponsibly fanned the flames of animosity, further inflaming an already explosive situation and deepening the rift between the two countries. The French proposal has been celebrated in Bulgaria as a triumph of its "historic truth," and the country is determined to leverage every possible means to coerce North Macedonia into capitulating to its demands if it wishes to join the EU. This, in turn, has significantly contributed to the exacerbation of political polarization in North Macedonia and threatens to upset the delicate inter-ethnic balance that has been achieved through decades of hard work following the 2001 conflict and the implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement.

To address the escalating crisis, a potential solution is for EU member states to adopt a unified stance by unequivocally reaffirming their recognition of the Macedonian language, culture, and identity in a legal capacity, as the German Bundestag did in its resolution of 16 June 2023 (Telma, 2023). This would effectively counter and isolate Bulgaria's aggressive denialist policies and rhetoric, which mirror Russia's denialist narrative regarding Ukrainian identity and nationhood. Additionally, the EU can insist on including highly respected European experts from leading educational institutions in the Joint Historical Commission between North Macedonia and Bulgaria. These experts could provide valuable insights into the Commission's operations, help enhance its capabilities, and facilitate a path towards mutual understanding and eventual reconciliation, without necessarily acting as arbiters.

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