



HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG



**WHEN CONDITIONALITY BECOMES BLACKMAIL:
European Union Member States Should not
Write the History of Candidate Countries**

Western Balkan Strategy Group
for an effective EU-enlargement policy

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It is impossible to understand the foundation of modern Europe and of the European Union as a peace project, without taking into consideration the historical experience of European citizens (colonialism, world wars, antisemitism, nationalism, totalitarian regimes), and the conflictual narratives around it. After World War 2, many European countries invested immensely in creating sustainable peace. Numerous organizations and institutions are still working together towards this noble goal; one of the recent positive examples being the foundation of the Observatory on History Teaching. The unification of Europe and the reconciliation processes were unimaginable without dealing with the complex war past. Today, Europe is a union of different nations, languages, cultures, religions, and it values the different historical experiences as well as the different historical perspectives of our entangled past. What makes Europe strong and unique is the richness of different cultures and languages, all with a common future.

However, we are presently witnessing political efforts that use history as a tool for denial of human rights and dignity in the region of Southeastern Europe, and across Europe as well. The manipulation of history and imposing “historical truths” by political forces are becoming a trend in Europe again, thus endangering the basic principles and values of the European Union. The war dissolution of Yugoslavia is an illustrative example of the destructive force of nationalism and conflictual ethno-nationalistic narratives. Historical revisionism in the `80s was one of the crucial elements of war propagandistic blueprint. In addition, the manipulation of history for political purposes, or when war crimes are denied, relativized, justified, and glorified, open windows of opportunity for an increase in tensions and in more radical cases, the danger of repeating past atrocities.

Recent developments in Southeastern Europe are diminishing the image of the European Union and its perspective of the region. The long history of the dispute over the history of the region of Macedonia, the identity of ethnic Macedonians and the question of the Macedonian minority in Bulgaria is threatening the EU integration of North Macedonia, but also the entire Western Balkan 6. The Bulgarian government, supported by extreme right-wing parties is blocking North Macedonia on its EU path demanding that the government in Skopje accepts the “historical truth” that Macedonian identity has “ethnic Bulgarian roots” forged on an anti-Bulgarian basis by the decision of Tito and the Comintern and that the Macedonian language is simply a literary norm of the Bulgarian language and can only be named as the “official language of North Macedonia” in the EU, but not as “Macedonian language”. This policy of denial of one’s language, identity, and human rights represents a threat against European values, human dignity and even to regional stability. Therefore, it should not be allowed in 21st century Europe. The EU must develop mechanisms to prevent its members from abusing their position of power and disrupting the enlargement process with absurd demands on EU candidates.

A number of former politicians and leaders of European countries as well as scholars from the region and Europe have already responded and criticized the Bulgarian position and the danger it represents for the integration of the region in the European Union and for Europe itself. Different historical perspectives should not be part of the EU enlargement process, and should be solved only by following positive examples in recent European history. The recommendations from UNESCO and resolutions of the European Council on teaching history and the positive experience from the numerous joint History commissions between European countries should represent the basic principle for solving disputes arising from



different perceptions about the past.

No nation in Europe and in the world should be able to impose or ask from other nations to accept different narratives on history by political decision. History is a scientific rather than political discipline and should not be in any case negotiated by politicians. In the end, politics should be in the function of facilitating relations between nations and countries not making them troublesome. And a good example of how recent politics played a positive role in this is the solution to the long lasting Greek and Macedonian dispute, for the sake of common good.



The Way Forward

It is important that historians and intellectuals dealing with questions of history and society in North Macedonia and Bulgaria, but also from the countries of the region, and Europe, to act responsibly. Politicians should stop relying on intellectuals who abuse historical narratives to incite nationalism and ethnic hatred. From all factors in the process, we are asking to react to abuses of history for political purposes and to stand in defense of the basic principles of the European Union, such as diversity and democracy.

Hence, the EU member states and European Commission should:

- Officially reject and condemn the revisionist approach of the Bulgarian government and to support experts to discuss the past free from ideological, political, or any other pressure;
- Unblock the opening of accession negotiations with North Macedonia;
- Be consistent in respecting basic EU principles and values and condemn any attempt to deny the basic human right of self-determination;
- Prevent and stop the abuse of power in the process of integration of WB6 by member states.

In addition, Bulgaria and North Macedonia's political leaders should:

- Respect and implement the Agreement for good neighboring relationships with mutual respect and recognition;
- Create positive and favorable conditions for experts to discuss the past, free from ideological, political, or any other pressure.
- Ask for expert assistance from UNESCO, the Council of Europe and/or other relevant organizations in the work of the Bilateral multidisciplinary expert commission on historical and educational questions.
- Specifically, the Bulgarian government should immediately abandon its policy of denial of others' identity.

Finally, the Multidisciplinary expert commission for historical and educational questions on both sides should:

- Be objective and critical towards their own national historical narratives as the only way to overcome the disputes over the past and to promote dialogue based on arguments.
- Have in mind that the only way to reconciliation is through a sincere and long-term process of dealing with the complex past.

Authors:

Lejla Gačanica

Legal, independent researcher Sarajevo
Bosnia and Herzegovina

Izabela Kisic

Executive Director, Helsinki Committee for
Human rights Belgrade
Serbia

Darko Leitner-Stojanov (guest expert)

Previous member of the Multidisciplinary
Expert Commission
North Macedonia

Dr. Fisnik Korenica

Jurist, Group for Legal and Political Studies
Pristina
Kosovo

Daliborka Uljarevic

Executive Director, Centre for Civic Education
Podgorica
Montenegro

The “Strategy Group for a political, societal and economic European integration of the Western Balkans Six” is a group of legal, historical and political researches from all WB6 countries organized by Heinrich Böll Stiftung’s Belgrade, Sarajevo and Berlin offices. Its aim is to credibly advocate for a more effective European integration of the Balkans in European as well as Balkan capitals.

