

PERSPECTIVES ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE RELATIONS BETWEEN BULGARIA AND MACEDONIA

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1. INTRODUCTION

Following years of isolation and sustaining negativism between Bulgaria and Macedonia, 1999 will remain in the history of bilateral relations as laying the foundation for new bilateral cooperation and dialogue.

The development of bilateral relations was based on common interests and priorities in the field of regional development and cooperation in South Eastern Europe and the aspiration of both countries towards full membership in the European Union. Both countries will have a long way to go until they accomplish their European goals. It is possible and necessary for Bulgaria and Macedonia to establish and maintain common strategic priorities in the area of infrastructure development (energy, transportation, telecommunications); harmonization of national legislatures with European legislature, introducing institutions of European type for commercial, economic, political and cultural cooperation.

By signing the political declaration of February 22, 1999, the prime ministers of both countries set the beginning for a bilateral process of resolution of long lasting political and historic dispute, which have hampered cooperation between the Sofia and Skopje. This declaration opened the doors for a new era in developing bilateral relations in the areas of commerce, political and cultural cooperation.

The declaration presented a broad framework for future cooperation in several fields of common interest:

- cooperation within the framework of UN, OSCE, the Council of Europe, NATO's Partnership for Peace, the SEE Multinational Task Force and other international organizations;
- to maintain contacts and hold meetings between representatives of both sides' state institutions and to facilitate contacts between non-governmental organizations and individual citizens from both countries;
- to facilitate the provision of the necessary legal, economic, financial or commercial conditions for free movement of goods, services and capitals, to decrease customs and border formalities;
- to expand and develop transport connections, along the lines of regional infrastructure projects;
- to encourage cooperation in the field of culture, education, health care and others;
- to employ efforts for free dissemination of information, by encouraging cooperation between the press, radio and television;

- to give up any territorial claims , and Macedonia to declare that its constitution can not be interpreted as an incentive to meddle in Bulgaria's domestic affairs;

The Participants in the conference Perspectives for Cooperation between Bulgaria and Macedonia, held in Arbanasi in June, shared the principles and priorities for future cooperation, stated in the February Declaration. Participants agreed that bilateral relations should be built upon these pragmatic goals, which will influence anyway the development of each individual state. The latter include policies for integration into the European Union, economic reconstruction and a new security system for the Balkans.

Despite the good results accomplished in 1999, in Bulgarian-Macedonian relations there will be still unsolved problems, connected with the past and the ambiguous interpretations of history and cultural heritage.

The second bilateral conference Perspectives for the Development of Bulgarian-Macedonian Relations, held by the Institute for Regional and International Studies (IRIS), in collaboration with Forum - Center for Strategic Documentation and Research and Euro-Balkan - Skopje had the ambitious goal of extending the discussion framework, set by the first conference. Using the experience, gained at the first conference, as well as the monitoring and analyses of Bulgarian-Macedonian relations in the following months, the organizers of the project suggested to conference participants the following statements for discussion:

1. After the peak activity in bilateral relations in the first half of 1999 and the signing of a declaration, several agreements and accords, in the second half of the year the activity on foreign policy level between the two states dropped. Due to delays in exchange of ratification documents, some important bilateral agreements like the tax agreement or the consular convention are not in force yet. NGOs should mobilize public opinion and attract public attention on all state institutions which are responsible for these agreements to be enforced.
2. The definition and practical implementation of bilateral initiatives in all areas of common interest are implied in the February Declaration from 1999. The organization of such initiatives will be successful only if bilateral committees for cooperation in all areas are established. NGOs from both countries should support this process with assistance on behalf of mass media.
3. The long term perspectives to Bulgarian-Macedonian relations depend upon the conduct of positive dialogue and effective mechanisms for gradual resolution of existing problems and conflicts on all levels. One successful strategy for overcoming the negativism in bilateral relations could be developing appropriate institutions on both sides which will guarantee the sustainability of cooperation despite any political changes in the government of each state.

The major challenge to the second Bulgarian-Macedonian conference, within the Networking Between Bulgarian-Macedonian NGOs For Political Resolution of Problems in Bilateral Relations Project, is to offer an assessment of how policy recommendations are undertaken by governments, as well as the role of NGOs in the development of bilateral relations.

2. SECURITY

The security cooperation between Bulgaria and Macedonia is based upon the common aspiration towards NATO and EU membership and the need to develop a regional security system for South Eastern Europe.

Both countries' efforts in this respect should be directed towards setting up coordinated strategies for receiving membership, as well as bilateral strategies for addressing security issues - military and soft.

2.1. Military Political Cooperation

In 1999 the Ministries of Defense of Bulgaria and Macedonia signed an agreement for cooperation in the area of national defense. In their will to maintain and enhance security, cooperation and trust in South Eastern Europe, the governments of both countries signed on April 16 an agreement for a military equipment and ammunitions donation.

The agreement envisions the following:

- Bulgaria to donate to Macedonia, including 94 T-55A tanks and 108 M-30 122 mm artillery cannons, described as military equipment;
- Bulgaria to donate to Macedonia 94 combat ammunition packages for T-55A tank and 108 combat ammunition packages for M-30 122mm artillery cannons;
- Macedonia to accept the donation of military equipment and ammunitions, by obliging not to sell it or lease it to a third party without the Bulgarian side's consent.
- Bulgaria commits to organize the transport of the donation, on its own expense, to Macedonia through a negotiated border pass.

Besides the bilateral cooperation, Bulgaria and Macedonia actively participate in various forms of multilateral cooperation initiatives in South Eastern Europe - Partnership for Peace, South Eastern European Defense Ministerial and the Multinational Rapid Forces -- which increases even more the opportunities for cooperation between the two countries.

2.2. Soft Security Cooperation

Contrary to the achievement in the military political and defense cooperation, Bulgarian-Macedonian relations in the field of soft security have not given any substantial results. The lack of bilateral initiatives and actions in this field causes a serious deficit in security cooperation throughout the region due to the threats of the Kosovo crises and the stability in Macedonia.

At the first Bulgarian-Macedonian Conference participants agreed that a bilateral strategy to address soft security issues should be developed and undertaken by Bulgaria and Macedonia. Such a strategy should be based upon several columns:

- mutual efforts for increasing control on transborder organized criminal economy, trafficking of drugs and arms, smuggling of people;
- exchange of information and policies for prevention of ethnic destabilization and provoking inter-communal conflicts;
- containment and control over the waves of destabilization - political, economic or ethnic, generated from neighboring countries or regions.

2.3. Conclusions

Cooperation between Bulgaria and Macedonia in the field of security should be enhanced through signing the appropriate agreements and protocols and then by developing practical mechanisms for implementation of different bilateral strategies.

Several recommendations, adopted by the first Bulgarian-Macedonian Conference were not taken in consideration, among which the most important is the bilateral program for cooperation between the Ministries of the Interior and the Court systems of both countries for fighting transborder crime. Such program could be developed based on a system for exchange of information and data on transborder organized crime, as well as developing a mutual task force. The program should also envision exchange visits, study trips and joint actions of policemen from both countries.

3. ECONOMIC COOPERATION

The development of economic cooperation between Bulgaria and Macedonia is determined by the deep economic changes both countries experienced in recent years, as well as aspiration towards the principle and norms of international trade and the economic institutions of the European Union. Bulgaria's and Macedonia's choice for membership in the EU and their desire to develop free trade relations turns both countries in strategic partners in establishing the priorities for regional economic cooperation in South Eastern Europe.

Some of the existing problems in developing mutual economic activities and business are due to the difference in legislature and economic regulations in both countries and the absence of appropriate institutions from both sides to encourage cooperation.

3.1. Aspects of Bulgarian-Macedonian Economic Cooperation

The development of bilateral economic cooperation will depend on the degree each country will be able to set up its own priorities for economic development in the aftermath of the Kosovo crises. The bilateral dialogue should focus on aspects of the process of economic reconstruction and development of the entire region, the loss of traditional markets and the insignificant volume of foreign investment.

The efforts of both countries in developing economic cooperation should lead to:

- setting up a free trade zone and facilitation of movement of people, goods, services and capitals;
- substantial increase in the import/export;
- creating better conditions for mutual investments and industrial cooperation;
- development of important infrastructure projects, involving both countries.

After the February Declaration Bulgaria and Macedonia signed specific agreements for cooperation in the field of trade, infrastructure development and investments.

3.2. Commercial Cooperation

The active commercial cooperation between Bulgaria and Macedonia was stimulated by representation of the most beneficial trade partner status. Besides this both governments envision the establishment of an Joint Intergovernmental Commission with the following functions:

- assessment of the implementation of the goals of the agreement and suggest policies for elimination of obstacles;
- to discuss additional opportunities for commercial cooperation.

Bulgaria and Macedonia have reached certain agreements in the field of customs policies and regulations, which are very important for the future development of bilateral commercial cooperation, including the following:

- to assist the easy flow of passengers and goods across the border, by harmonizing customs regulations and using the same customs forms;
- to cooperate in the investigation and prevention of customs crime, by exchanging information and experience, and training of personnel;
- upon request to provide information about individuals, suspected for committing customs violations;
- to inform their counterparts about any recent changes in their customs regulations.

3.3. Investments

In the course of the Bulgarian-Macedonian discussion in this area several suggestions for bilateral cooperation were made, aimed at improving the investment environment by:

- mutual stimulation of investors;
- providing for just and impartial treatment and protection of investments of the other contracting side;

- guarantying, in cases of reinvestment of revenues from investment, of the same protection as the primary investments;
- information-sharing for the possibilities for investments;
- application of regime of most favored nation in regard to investors from the other contracting side.

3.4. Infrastructure

The integration to the pan-European structures as a priority aim of both countries and the importance of Corridor # 8, in the framework of the Pan-European Transport Network, define the content of the cooperation between Bulgaria and Macedonia in the area of infrastructure development. The two states reached concrete agreements for constructing the railway line, connecting Bulgaria and Macedonia. The bilateral agreements stipulates the following:

- constructing the railway line with 1435 mm gauge in the direction of Kiustendil with joint border station Giueshevo-Beliakovtsi-Kumanovo; respectively on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria from the joint border station Giueshevo to the border with Macedonia; on the territory of the Republic of Macedonia - from Kumanovo to Beliakovtsi;
- reconstruction of the existing railway sections, respectively on the territory of Bulgaria from Kiustendil to the joint border station Giueshevo; on the territory of Macedonia from Kumanovo to Beliakovtsi.

It is envisioned that each of the countries should design, finance and build the railway sections on its territory and the deadlines for reconstruction should be coordinated by the ministries of transport of the two countries within three months after the date the agreement has come into effect.

The Agreement of building, until the year 2002, of two new international road border check points (BSPs) and the respective road links, connecting:

- the town of Sandanski and the village of Strumiani on the territory of Bulgaria with the town of Berovo on the territory of Macedonia;
- the town of Simitly on the territory of Bulgaria with the town of Pehcevo on the territory of Macedonia.

Each of the countries takes the building of infrastructure on its territory on, which is necessary for the functioning of the new BCPs.

In the framework of the dynamic dialogue other agreements with general character have been adopted in the areas of motor transport and aviation cooperation.

The agreement on motor transport, the arrangements and modes of transportation of goods and passengers, the conditions for issuing and exemption from licenses, taxation, responsibilities of the transport companies, the control over and sanctions against failures in duties under the agreement. The establishment of joint Bulgarian-Macedonian commission has been envisaged, which could:

- exempt particular goods from road fares;
- coordinate the types and number of licenses which will be exchanged annually between the two countries, as all the other conditions, regulating the issuing of licenses.

The relations between Bulgaria and Macedonia in the area of aerial communications are regulated by mutual provision of equal and fair opportunities for exploitation of the agreed lines and compliance with the interests of the nominated aviation companies.

3.5. Conclusions

The dynamics of the development of the economic relations between Bulgaria and Macedonia in 1999 brought to promotion of a number of concrete initiatives in the area of economy, which in practice get ahead of the public debate on these issues.

Future joint initiatives in the three spheres of economic cooperation should be directed to:

- elaboration of projects for attracting potential investors in the transport infrastructure of the two countries - the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the US Trade Development Agency, the World Bank, private investments and projects of the European Union and the United States. The cooperation can be directed to coordination of the efforts of the two countries towards successful implementation of the AMBO project, through lobbying the companies of the Caspian Oil Consortium, the U.S. federal authorities and the institutions of the E.U.
- overcoming the administrative and bureaucratic obstacles in passengers' traffic, decreasing administrative formalities; restoration of the trade routes;
- expanding the programs for protection of bilateral investments; promotion of joint economic projects; establishment of a Bulgarian-Macedonian bank; establishment of common mechanism and parallel units for analyses and risk assessment in the sphere of investment policy.

4. COOPERATION IN THE AREAS OF MEDIA, ARTS AND ACADEMIC EXCHANGE

The most sensitive and disputable question in the framework of Bulgarian-Macedonian relations is the cooperation in the areas of culture, media and academic exchange. This is a result of the suspicion on behalf of particular circles concerning the purpose of such undertakings. This is additionally complicated by the specifics of these areas, i.e., even without the existence of legal and administrative barriers, the ideologization of the problem remains the most central impediment.

One of the suggestions made at the first conference was to work towards the abolition of the administrative and legal obstacles to free exchange of publications and newspapers. Participants from Macedonia stressed that the registration regime at the

Ministry of Internal Affairs of Macedonia for foreign (Including Bulgarian) publications should be repealed. Subsequently this regulation was repealed, so there are no normative restrictions for free informational and cultural exchange.

The major problems, that new initiatives will encounter concern their motivation, mechanisms for implementation and financing. The concrete cooperation projects could be carried out in various ways, depending on their character, but in any case the proximity of the countries and the languages will facilitate the processes.

4.1. The purpose of cooperation

The “iron curtain” that was imposed for decades severed the contacts between the two countries. This has resulted in the impossibility to understand the overall cultural context of the functioning of the two societies. The isolation between the two countries brought to the invention of stereotypes and mythology, which prevent the rational acceptance and understanding of the behavior of the “other”. As a basic premise and aim of the development of cooperation is the idea, that it should overthrow the information wall between the two countries and contribute to the mutual acceptance and understanding, facilitating the promotion of any other bilateral initiatives.

The motivation can be “external”, i.e. the European Union or other international players would like to see a positive development of such processes. In this case, the financial aspect of projects in these areas could be more easily resolved. The other levels of motivation are “internal” and would achieve more sustainable results.

4.2. Motivation for promoting cooperation

The dynamic development of cooperation will be conducive to the enrichment of culture in both countries. The notion of “cultural invasion” cannot be sustained, since culture and science are not priority areas of development of countries in transition. The perspective to see “national culture” only as museum exponents is much more alarming.

An additional sound reasoning in defense of the development of cooperation is the understanding that “culture and science” are not threats by themselves. The problem ensues from their instrumentalization and politization. The free flow of information, exchange in arts and education will provide for preventing manipulation or misunderstanding of public attitudes or official positions of the two countries.

4.3. Basic principles: rationality and mutual benefit

Cooperation in these areas should be based on the following principles:

First: Science and culture do not “earn” money, but they can be developed on the same market principles as economic cooperation is – mutual benefit and pragmatism. The exchange of information and cooperation in the areas of arts and education will expand the market of media and academic products.

One of the suggestions of the first conference was to establish free academic exchange which would include dissemination of academic publications, exchange of lecturers and students, as well as organizing open lectures of prominent public and political figures from Bulgaria and Macedonia in the other country. Education becomes more expensive and cooperation in these areas will provide for increasing the quality of education through exchange of publications, skills and knowledge of mutual interest and benefit.

Along these lines was the idea for dissemination of Bulgarian and Macedonian literature, in Macedonia and Bulgaria respectively, in the original language. It was proposed to use the bilingual model for publishing poetry, and the texts would be published in the two languages in parallel.

The broad framework of mutual acquaintance includes the suggestion for exchange of significant works of literature, which would present and introduce the readers to the contemporary culture of the countries. This suggestion was based on the conviction that the “Chinese wall”, standing for decades between the two nations, can be overcome if only there is a possibility to penetrate through it, i.e. to make the “other culture” cognizable.

Proposals for art projects were made also along these lines. There was a proposal for organizing weeks of the Bulgarian cinema in Macedonia and the Macedonian cinema in Bulgaria. The suggestion was addressed to the ministries of culture of Bulgaria and Macedonia, as well as to the national cinema centers in the two countries.

In the field of theater, two specific motions were made:

- Publication of anthology of Bulgarian dramas in Macedonian language and of Macedonian dramas in Bulgarian language;
- Project for a joint theater production with Bulgarian-Macedonian team and its presentation in both the countries.

Macedonian participants made the motion of publishing a Bulgarian-Macedonian and Macedonian-Bulgarian dictionary, which according to them was necessary for more precise translations of poetry, essays, etc.

Second: The informational and cultural exchange does not mean “invasion” and “enforcing of position”. The principles of reciprocity, goodwill, of objective and accurate attitude will provide for balancing these relations.

The cooperation in informational exchange should make use of the interest of the public to their neighboring countries, as well as the steady interest of Western media in the regional issues. The necessity of such cooperation is motivated by a number of reasons, ranging from mere curiosity to professional interest, whether in the area of trade, investments, tourism, science or culture.

The informational exchange will satisfy this interest. The exchange can be carried out in different ways – “sell and buy or swap” of news and media products, which are of mutual interest and concern the development of the two countries.

It was also emphasized that media could play an enormous role for eliminating the remnants in the way of perceiving “the other”. The electronic media was pointed out to be the most powerful instrument for exercising influence on the public opinion.

Concrete mechanisms for implementing the cooperation were put forward. Signing an agreement between the Bulgarian and Macedonian televisions was suggested, which would envision:

- Television broadcasting on the principles of exchange without translation and censorship;
- Exchange of television productions, devoted to Bulgaria and Macedonia respectfully; making joint productions on common problems;
- Making productions, which present the points of view of both the countries on controversial issues;
- Television broadcasting of Bulgarian and Macedonian films in Macedonia and Bulgaria respectfully.

These proposals were addressed to the national and private media in the two countries.

Related to the matter was the motion to organize dissemination of newspapers and magazines on the principles of exchange. Another proposition concerned the cooperation between Bulgarian and Macedonian newspapers and magazines of similar subjects, including the publication of special editions devoted to the other country's authors, poetry, publicism, etc. of the other country.

4.4 Conclusions

The basic principles, conclusions and concrete recommendation for projects' implementation should be applied for promoting bilateral cooperation. The problem who will carry out these cooperation, in other words – who will be the “agents of change, remains, but the answer is clear. The general tendency is that the states are giving up their former functions and responsibilities. This defines them as factors, which would assist the processes by establishing a favorable administrative and legal environment. Hence, the initiative is in the hands of the representatives of the civil society – nongovernmental organizations, media, writers and artists, scholars and intellectuals.

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