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## **WHO OWNS SS. CYRIL AND METHODIUS AND THE SLAVIC HERITAGE?**

### **History as a geopolitical tool for the resolution of the Macedonian question in the 21st century Balkans**

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#### Summary

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The paper addresses the issue of how the Saints Constantine/Cyril and Methodius are projected in the geopolitical context of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Balkans and used as a tool for resolution of the “Macedonian question”. The genesis dates back to 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the growing competition for Ottoman Macedonia raised the political concern for nationalization of the famous persons from the rediscovered Middle Ages, which involved Ss. Cyril and Methodius and their Pan-Slavic work. Our analysis will focus on the continuity of this historical controversy that surrounds the relations between the Republic of Macedonia and Bulgaria, following the signing of the Treaty of friendship, good-neighbourliness and cooperation in 2017. The politization goes to such an extreme to involve the redefinition of the historical context of the origin of Glagolitic and Cyrillic alphabet and the Slavic

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literacy. As a result, the Thessalonica brothers are brought into the wider nationalistic agenda and projected into a modern geopolitical map for resolution of the Macedonian question.

Keywords: Cyril and Methodius, geopolitics, Macedonia, Bulgaria, nationalist agenda, Macedonian questioning, history

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The Saints Constantine/Cyril and Methodius are well-known personalities in the Balkan and European history, whose work on the creation of the Slavic alphabet and literature provided them with the epithet “Apostles of the Slavs”. However, their pan-Slavic accomplishments are the subject of appropriation ever since the Middle Ages. The authors of the *Life of Ss. Cyril* and of the *Life of St. Methodius* clearly reflected the Slavic perspective, using the terms *Slavs*, *Slavic language*, *our language* to describe the work of their teachers.<sup>1</sup> This shows that the disciples of Ss. Cyril and Methodius were not concerned with ethnicization of their activity and defined it within the pan-Slavic concept.<sup>2</sup> Indicatively, the contemporary Byzantine authors were completely silent about Cyril and Methodius, ignoring their missions despite initially being part of the official policy of the Byzantine’s court. The first Byzantine accounts are of much later date, coming from the *Life of St. Clement of Ohrid* written by Ohrid Archbishop Theophylactos in late 11th and early 12th century. However, Theophylactos’ interpretations were filtered through completely different ideological conception and Byzantine terminology that was constructed by Byzantine emperor Basil II in 1018, as part of the general rearrangement of the ecclesiastical and administrative borders following the elimination

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1 Marvin Kantor, *Medieval Slavic Lives of Saints and Princes* (Ann Arbor, Mich. : University of Michigan, Dept. of Slavic Languages and Literatures, 1983).

2 Митко Б. Панов, “Кирилومتодијевските традиции во идеолошката програма на Византија“, in *Зборник на трудови „Погледи за македонскиот јазик“* (Скопје: Институт за македонски јазик „Крсте Мисирков“, МАНУ, Совет за македонски јазик, Филолошки факултет „Блаже Конески“, 2020), 547-558.

of the Samuel's State.<sup>3</sup> As a result, the new administrative and ecclesiastical term "Bulgaria" became Byzantine label for the Slavs, which did not define their ethnicity, but had the meaning that they were the subjects of the Empire within its administrative borders.<sup>4</sup> Hence, the administrative-ecclesiastical terminology meant that its inhabitants belonged to Byzantium. The terminology was, however, conveniently exploited by the leaders of the Second Bulgarian Empire for invention of the traditions deriving from the Byzantine territory. The Roman Papacy responded by legitimizing the invented claim of the leaders of the Second Bulgarian Empire, to justify its equally invented involvement in the coronation of the former medieval tsars. By this fabrication, the Papacy intended to demonstrate its own political and ecclesiastical continual influence in the Balkans and its predominance over Byzantium.<sup>5</sup> The pretensions to the Byzantine territory which fell within the scope of the jurisdiction of the Ohrid Archbishopric, paved the way for conflicted claims to the political and ecclesiastical traditions. It inevitably involved the Saints Cyril and Methodius and their disciples, since they were connected with the aspired territory in question.

The cult of St. Clement and of St. Naum and St. Cyril and St. Methodius continued to be maintained in Macedonia within the Ohrid Archbishopric during the Ottoman rule (abolished in 1767), which is attested by the oldest visual expressions of the Saints, which include the hagiography from the end of 17th century.<sup>6</sup> Towards the end the 17th century the cult of St. Cyril and Methodius was

3 Mitko B. Panov, *The Blinded State. Historiographic Debates about Samuel Cometopoulos and His State (10th-11th Century)* (Leiden/Boston, Brill, 2019).

4 Mitko B. Panov, "The Slavs and the conceptual Roman borderland in Macedonia," In *Continuation or change? Borders and Frontiers in Late Antiquity and Medieval Europe as the main title and Landscape of Power Network, Military Organisation and Commerce*, ed. Lukasz Rozycki, Piotr Pranke (London/New York: Routledge, 2022) – in print.

5 Mitko B. Panov, "Who crowned tsar Samuel? Appropriating the Byzantine ideology in the 13th century Balkans," in *Proceedings of the IX International Symposium on Byzantine and Medieval Studies "Days of Justinian I"* (Skopje: Institute of National History, 2022) - in print.

6 Цветан Грозданов, *Портретите на светителите од Македонија од IX до XVIII век* (Скопје: Републички завод за заштита на спомениците на култура, 1983). Mitko B. Panov, *The Blinded State*, 154-161; Митко Б. Панов, "Средновековните претстави во Стематографијата на Христофор Жефаровик: политичко-идеолошки мотиви и контексти", in *Зборник на трудови од научниот симпозиум „Христофор Жефарович и неговото време, Струмица, 5-6 декември, 2019* (Струмица: НУ Завод за заштита на спомениците на културата и музеј, 2020), 47-56.

rediscovered in Russia, followed with the renewed interest in the Balkans and from the 19th century across the Slavic world.<sup>7</sup> In the political environment of the second half of the 19th century Ss. Cyril and Methodius and their disciples gained dominant position within the Pan-Slavic idea. As a result, the place of origin of the Glagolitic and the Cyrillic alphabet became one of the key arguments for establishing the conceived direct connection with the traditions and heritage of Ss. Cyril and Methodius.<sup>8</sup> This was exploited in the contemporary political projects, reflecting the conflicting claims between the orthodox and catholic Slavs. Macedonia as the place of origin of Ss. Cyril and Methodius whose traditions were maintained and continued by St. Clement and St. Naum and by the Ohrid Archbishopric, were brought within the Russian geopolitical project of Greater Bulgaria. This posited the historiographical controversy related to the “Macedonian question” which persists in the present times.

Our analysis will focus on the “common history” that define political relations between the Republic of Macedonia and Bulgaria, following the signing of the Treaty of friendship, good-neighbourliness and cooperation in 2017. In this regard we will address the tendency of using/abusing the historical narrative that involves the work of St. Cyril and Methodius and their disciples and the origin of the Glagolitic and Cyrillic script and Slavic literacy, reflecting the geopolitics of the 21st century Balkans.

The Treaty between Republic of Macedonia and Bulgaria on the insistence of Sofia articulates the issue of history, whose importance is clearly highlighted in the introduction of the document, noting that “common history links our two countries and their peoples”. The Joint Multi-Disciplinary Committee on Historical and Educational Issues, established with the Treaty, was supposed to work on “objective, and based on authentic and evidence-based historical

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7 Maddalena Betti, *The Making of Christian Moravia (858–882). Papal Power and Political Reality* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2013).

8 Митко Б. Панов, “Создавањето на глаголицата во претставата на руските и балканските исторнографи (1850-1865), in *Proceedings of the 4th International Symposium “Days of Justinian I”*, ed. Mitko B. Panov (Skopje: Euro-Balkan University, 2016), 99-109; Florin Curta, *Eastern Europe in the Middle Ages (500–1300)* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2021, 180-198; Roumen Daskalov, *Master Narratives of the Middle Ages in Bulgaria* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2021).

sources, scientific interpretation of historical events”. Government’s decision for state-level organization of “joint commemorations of common historical events and personalities, aimed at strengthening good-neighborly relations” is also provisioned with the Treaty. Although without defined mandate from the Treaty, the Committee undertook the task to select personalities from the “common history” and to determine the textual formulations and historical characterizations as a justification for the further political decision of joint commemoration. The taken responsibility, without the mandate from the Treaty, resulted in Committee’s agreement on the “common” Middle Ages, that justified the political decision for joint commemoration of Ss. Cyril and Methodius, Ss. Clement and Naum of Ohrid, Tsar Samuel as part of the “common history”. Although the Committee textual formulations were not revealed, the decision met with great triumphalism in Bulgaria.<sup>10</sup> The Governments of both countries declared the Committee’s formulations as a “historical truth”, with Macedonian Government emphasizing that it should be “clearly marked” on all the official joint commemorations.<sup>11</sup>

The involvement of politics in defining the “common history”, however, showed that the dogmatized historical “truth” on the “common” Middle Ages, actually meant its “Bulgarization”, encompassing not only Ss. Cyril and Methodius, Ss. Clement and Naum of Ohrid and Tsar Samuel, but the whole history

9 Government of R.N. Macedonia, *Treaty of Friendship, Good-neighborliness and Cooperation between Republic of Macedonia and Republic of Bulgaria*, [https://vlada.mk/sites/default/files/dogovori/Dogovor\\_Za\\_Prijatelstvo\\_Dobrososedstvo\\_Sorabotka\\_Megju\\_Republika\\_Makedonija\\_I\\_Republika\\_Bugarija.pdf](https://vlada.mk/sites/default/files/dogovori/Dogovor_Za_Prijatelstvo_Dobrososedstvo_Sorabotka_Megju_Republika_Makedonija_I_Republika_Bugarija.pdf), accessed 9 January 2020.

10 Ангел Димитров, “Ще признае ли Скопие, че Самуил е български цар?” *ТВ Нова*, <https://nova.bg/news/view/2019/02/22/241463/ще-признае-ли-скопие-че-самуил-е-български-цар>, accessed 15.02.2020; Иван Илчев, “Ще се договорят ли България и Македония за общата си история?” *ТВ Европа*, <https://www.tv Европа.com/2019/02/shte-se-dogovoryat-li-balgariya-i-makedoniya-za-obshtata-si-istoriya>, accessed 27.01.2020; Наум Кайчев, “С колегите от Северна Македония успяхме да намерим общ език и постигнахме съгласие по темите за Средновековна история,” <https://www.btv.bg/shows/lice-v-lice/videos/doc-kajchev-s-kolegite-ot-severna-makedonija-uspjahme-da-namerim-obsht-ezik-i-postignahme-saglasie-po-temite-za-srednovekovna-istorija.html>, accessed 31.07.2020.

11 Government of R.N. Macedonia, “Усвоена информация за првиот состанок на меѓувладината комисија меѓу Северна Македонија и Бугарија, 09.07.2019, <https://vlada.mk/node/18512/>. Accessed 12.01. 2020.

and the identity of the Macedonian nation. It showed that the Bulgarian leadership tends to enforce its political concept of the “common history” to resolve the “Macedonian question”. This means that by “nationalizing” the famous personalities from Macedonia, Bulgarian leadership intends to “Bulgarize” the Macedonians and to de-Macedonize the Macedonian nation.<sup>12</sup> Hence, the initial joint celebrations of Ss. Cyril and Methodius between Bulgaria and Republic of Macedonia on the academic level since 2014 (11 may), as an integral part of the Program for Scientific and Cultural Cooperation between the Macedonian Academy of Science and Arts and Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, it turned out not to be long lasting with the involvement of politics. With the signing of the Treaty in 2017, the celebration was raised on the political level, with state leadership of both countries jointly paying respect to Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Rome on May 24th. The positive political climate led to the decision of both Governments for joint celebration of Ss. Cyril and Methodius and Ss. Clement and Naum of Ohrid (July 2019), legitimized by the Committee’s historical characterizations and textual definitions, by which they were declared as part of the “common history” (February 2019).

The academic celebration of Slavic brothers, however, proved to be short-lived. Immediately after the political decision for joint celebration, Sofia openly demonstrated its intention to “nationalize” Ss. Cyril and Methodius. In October 2019, the Bulgarian Government issued the “Framework position of EU Enlargement of the Republic of North Macedonia and Albania” which was complemented with the Declaration of the Bulgarian Parliament. With these political documents the Bulgaria’s version of national history within the concept of “common history”, was raised on the EU level as precondition for the Republic of Macedonia for starting the negotiations with the EU. These documents in fact openly contested the existence of the Macedonian nation and negated the

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12 Mitko B. Panov, Ruzhica Cacanovska, Maja Angelovska – Panova, “Macedonian Nation between Self-Identity and Euro-Atlantic Integration: Implications of the Agreements with Bulgaria and Greece”, in *Researching Yugoslavia and Its Aftermath: Sources, Prejudices and Alternative Solutions*, ed. Branislav Radeljić and Carlos González-Villa (Springer: Berlin/New York, 2021), 223-252.

Macedonian language, politically defined as Bulgarian dialect.<sup>13</sup> Thus history was used as a geo-political tool for imposition of the revision of the national narrative of the Republic of Macedonia, that directly affected the identity of the Macedonian nation and the historical essence of its existence.

As a response, the Assembly of the Macedonian Academy of Science and Arts issued on 3 December 2019 the “Charter of the Macedonian language” reaffirming its scientific stance of the “centuries-long continuity” of the Macedonian language, whose written development “is tied to at least two indigenous scripts - the Glagolitic alphabet and the Cyrillic alphabet”. The Charter concluded that in accordance with the dominant scientific theory, the “Macedonian language which was spoken on the territory of Macedonia inhabited by the Macedonian Slavs, especially in the region of Thessaloniki, was the language which, through the Cyril and Methodius translations of the Holy Books, was introduced by the Slavs to the Christian world.”<sup>14</sup>

The immediate response from the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences followed, where it stated that “the Bulgarian character of the Cyril and Methodius language” has been a scientifically proven fact since the 19th century and for centuries this language has been “known by the national name only as Bulgarian”. Furthermore, the Bulgarian Academy claimed that Glagolitic and Cyrillic alphabets within the medieval Bulgarian state “were in use throughout the Bulgarian-speaking territory” (encompassing Macedonia), while the scriptural tradition was “inextricably linked with the Bulgarian and is only a part of the entire Bulgarian literary tradition from the Middle Ages to the present day”.<sup>15</sup> Aspiring to present its scientific stance on the language issue, Bulgarian Academy of Science and Arts worked on the publishing of a collective book titled “On the

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13 Government of Bulgaria, “Рамкова позиция относно Разширяването на ЕС и Процеса на стабилизиране и асоцииране: Република Северна Македония и Албания“, 09.10.2019, <https://www.gov.bg/bg/prestsentar/novini/ramkova-pozitsia>, accessed 17.10.2019.

14 “Соопштение на Собранието на МАНУ”, 3.12.2019, <http://manu.edu.mk/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Повелба-за-македонскиот-јазик.pdf>, accessed 01.02.2022.

15 “Съобщение на Ръководството на Българската академия на науките,” 11.12.2019, <https://www.bas.bg/?p=28413>, accessed 31.01.2022.

official language of the Republic of North Macedonia”. This was supposed to support the Bulgarian claim that “in its origin and structural and typological characteristics the official language of the Republic of North Macedonia is a southwestern written regional norm of the Bulgarian language”.<sup>16</sup> The Publication clearly aspired to present Ss. Cyril and Methodius and their disciples as ethnic “Bulgarians”. To this end, the authors even constructed the notion that Macedonia was inhabited by the “Bulgarian Slavs” ever since the 7th century. With this “argument”, they aspired to demonstrate that Ss. Cyril and Methodius were born in pure Bulgarian ethnic surroundings, where the Slavic people in fact spoke Bulgarian language. Thus, they claim that the Slavic language and alphabet created by Ss. Cyril and Methodius, was “Bulgarian”, because it was designed for their ethnic fellows – Bulgarians. Hence, their conclusion that the “first written Slavic language based on the translations of Cyril and Methodius was Old Bulgarian” and that it was Bulgaria that saved the legacy of Cyril and Methodius and spread it among all Orthodox Slavs and also on the territory of present day Romania”.<sup>17</sup> Thus “Bulgarized”, the traditions of Ss. Cyril and Methodius and their disciples Ss. Clement and Naum of Ohrid, are projected onto the modern Republic of Macedonia.

The publication was clearly designed to support the political stance of the Bulgarian leadership about the non-existence of the Macedonian nation and the Macedonia language, demonstrating that the people that live in Republic of Macedonia are in fact ethnic Bulgarians who speak the Bulgarian dialect, as were their “predecessors” in the Middle Ages, even before Ss. Cyril and Methodius created the “Bulgarian” alphabet. Hence, the aim of the publication was to demonstrate that the Macedonian nation is a fabricated construct of Tito’s Yugoslavia, when Bulgarians were ideologically and forcibly converted into the “invented” Macedonians. Thus presented historical “truth” should “correct” this fabrication, which would put an end to the “Macedonism” and to the “Macedonian question”.

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16 *On the official language of the Republic of North Macedonia* (Sofia: Prof. Marin Drinov Publishing House of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, 2020), p. 7.

17 *On the official language of the Republic of North Macedonia*, p. 14.



The political dimension behind the publication became clearly expressed in the official announcement of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences in November 2020, where it openly supported the Government's position in objecting the negotiating framework for the start of accession talks with Republic of Macedonia if it did not acknowledge the "common history". In this regard, the Academy reaffirmed its role in taking care of „the study of Bulgarian lands and nature, Bulgarian life, language, literature, Bulgarian history“, demonstrating that it will “steadfastly defend with scientific means the historical truth about the past of the historical-geographical region of Macedonia, that include the Bulgarian ethnic and cultural affiliation of the majority of its inhabitants”.<sup>18</sup> Hence, Bulgarian Academy promoted its “official” definition of the “common history”, with the meaning of promoting the “Bulgarian” ethnic consciousness on the Macedonians. This “historical truth” involved the “Bulgarization” of Ss. Cyril and Methodius and the Slavic script and literacy, which is projected and imposed on the contemporary ethnical and linguistic context of the Republic of Macedonia. Its acceptance, thus became an “scientifically” founded political criterion for the EU integration of the Republic of Macedonia.

Bulgarian parliament went even further in “nationalization” of Ss. Cyril and Methodius and their disciples. The Bulgarian politicians went to that extreme to change the official text and definition of the National Day of Ss. Cyril and Methodius on 24th of May. Instead “Day of Bulgarian Education, Culture and the Slavic Script“, in December 2020 the Parliament adopted new formulation that May 24 will be celebrated as “Day of the Holy Brothers Cyril and Methodius, of the Bulgarian Alphabet, Education and Culture and of Slavic Literature”. With this political redefinition, Slavic script was replaced with the Bulgarian Alphabet, by which Bulgaria signified its historical exclusivity in creation and spread of the Slavic Cyrillic alphabet, defined as “Bulgarian”. Indicatively, in the initial draft-text which was adopted by the Parliament in the first reading, Ss. Cyril and Methodius were

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18 “Съобщение на Ръководството на БАН,” 10.11.2020, <https://www.bas.bg/?p=32110>, accessed on 15.01.2022.

not mentioned at all. As was explained, the motive was that the term “Slavic script” in fact ignores the historical contribution of Bulgaria for the Slavic world and therefore needs to be replaced by the “Bulgarian alphabet”. However, this political reading actually meant that Bulgaria will detach itself from the traditions Ss. Cyril and Methodius, which was in fact suggestion from the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.<sup>19</sup> As a compromise solution, Ss. Cyril and Methodius were formally added in the revised text, which retained the key content aiming to promote the historical exclusivity of the Bulgarian nation in creation of the Bulgarian “Cyrillic” alphabet and in spread of the Slavic literacy to the Slavs across Europe and Russia.

This was supposed to strengthen Bulgaria’s position within the EU in order to force Republic of Macedonia to accept Sofia’s defined “common history” (already agreed within the Joint Committee as regards Ss. Cyril and Methodius and their disciples). Facing with the Bulgarian veto, the draft Council Conclusions on EU Enlargement in December 2020 were amended on the suggestion of Berlin, to include a clause stating that candidate countries should end the “misinterpretation of history”. However, unexpectedly for Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Austria rejected the amendment and thus the conclusions, on the ground that it contains the “notion of falsifying history” which would be “hugely detrimental to the enlargement process” and could “complicate its adoption down the road”. In a joint statement, the Czech and Slovak foreign ministers further concluded that they “will not allow that the Union be the judge of our shared history, how we identify ourselves or the language we use”.<sup>20</sup> On February 8th 2021, both ministers reaffirmed and clarified their motivation to defend the EU values by rejecting the imposed conditions to “North Macedonia” to “comply with request related to its national identity”. Hence, they prevented “to make the EU a collective judge of historical interpretations – of what is right, wrong, true and false in the past hundreds of years of

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19 <https://www.parliament.bg/bills/44/054-01-49.pdf>, accessed 10.01.2022.

20 “Joint Statement by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic on the Council Conclusions on Enlargement,” [https://www.mzv.cz/representation\\_brussels/en/news\\_and\\_media/joint\\_statement\\_by\\_the\\_ministers\\_of.html](https://www.mzv.cz/representation_brussels/en/news_and_media/joint_statement_by_the_ministers_of.html), accessed 20.12.2021.

history of the Balkans”. For them “the notion of North Macedonia’s obligation to rectify the alleged misinterpretation of history is not acceptable,” since EU is not “here to determine who is right or wrong on issues related to history, language or identity”.<sup>21</sup> The objection was understandable, since the Bulgarian imposition of its own nationalistic reading of history, which actually “Bulgarized” Ss. Cyril and Methodius and their Pan-Slavic work, undermined the heritage of the Catholic Slavs within the EU, being national holiday of Czechia and Slovakia.<sup>22</sup> The open objection of Czechia and Slovakia to Bulgaria’s intention to involve EU in imposition of its version of national history to the Republic of Macedonia as a criterion for membership, demonstrated that they will not allow the heritage of Ss. Cyril and Methodius to be used a geo-political bargain tool within the EU.

Bulgaria hastened to politically redefine the historical context in order to demonstrate that it was solely responsible for the creation of the Slavic alphabet and for its spread in Europe and Russia. However, Bulgarian politicians in their attempt to nationalize Ss. Cyril and Methodius, were opposing Russia as well. Especially since Ss. Cyril and Methodius and their disciples were strongly involved in the geo-political agendas intersecting in Macedonia that emerged during the second half of the 19th century and linked to the resolution of the “Macedonian question”. Sofia’s appropriation of St. Cyril and Methodius and the Slavic alphabet was clearly a reflection of its political and historical distancing from Moscow, although it actually mirrored the Russian project of Greater Bulgaria from the 19th century. This was openly demonstrated by the Bulgarian official reactions to the statement of Russian President Vladimir Putin, who at a meeting with then Macedonian President George Ivanov in 2017, stated that “today is a special day for Russia as well - the Day of Slavic writing, and the Slavic alphabet and literature came to us from the Macedonian land.”<sup>23</sup>

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21 Tomáš Petříček and Ivan Korčok, “EU should not be a judge of historical issues,” *Euobserver*, 8.02.2021, <https://euobserver.com/opinion/150841>, accessed 10.12.2021.

22 <https://cz.usembassy.gov/holiday-calendar/cyril-methodius-day>, accessed, 10.01.2022.

23 “Meeting with President of Macedonia Gjorge Ivanov,” <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/54556>, accessed 15.01.2022.

The tensions about the Slavic heritage of the Ss. Cyril and Methodius culminated in 2020 with the exhibition organized by Russian Cultural Information Center in Sofia on the occasion of the celebration of May 24. The exhibition titled “Beginnings of the Russian literacy”, described Ss. Cyril and Methodius as “born in the Greek city of Thessaloniki, reformers of the Slavic alphabet, creators of the Church Slavic language, the first spreaders of literacy and education in Russia”. The harsh critics from the Bulgarian politicians<sup>24</sup> was accompanied with the official stance of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, which accused Moscow for distorting the “historical and scientific truth” and attempting to “appropriate the Cyril and Methodius work with the strange claims that the holy brothers created the Church Slavic language and that they spread the education in Russia”. The statement further read that “Church Slavic is the Russian version of Old Bulgarian”, that the “brothers Cyril and Methodius never set foot anywhere on Russian soil” and that they were not “reformers of the Slavic alphabet” since they were the creators of the Glagolitic alphabet, which was “saved by the Bulgarian kings Boris I and Simeon”.<sup>25</sup> Although Russia through its embassy in Sofia diplomatically addressed Bulgaria’s concern, it continued its rhetoric as regards the historical contribution of the Republic of Macedonia regarding the traditions of Ss. Cyril and Methodius, reflected through the work of St. Clement of Ohrid. On the occasion of 24th of May 2021, the Russian embassy in Skopje “congratulated the fraternal Macedonian people on the Day of Saints Cyril and Methodius, which is celebrated as a national holiday”, citing the statement of Russian president Vladimir Putin from 2017, that “today in Russia is a solemn day - the Day of Slavic Literacy, and literacy came to us from the Macedonian land”.<sup>26</sup> On December 8th on the occasion of the celebration of the Day of St. Clement of Ohrid as a Macedonian national holiday, the Russian Embassy congratulated “the fraternal Macedonian people” noting that St. Clement was “

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24 «Когато една империя реши...». Руската изложба за Кирил и Методий, която провокира остри реакции», <https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/30632849.html>, accessed 10.01.2022.

25 “Становище на БАН по повод изложбата на РКИЦ,” 27.05.2020, <https://www.bas.bg/?p=30174>, accessed on 15.12.2021.

26 [https://twitter.com/Russian\\_Emb\\_MKD/status/1396654237875064840](https://twitter.com/Russian_Emb_MKD/status/1396654237875064840)

an outstanding educator, the first Slavic bishop, one of the founders of the Cyrillic script, which unites modern Russian and Macedonian languages". Towards the end of 2021, a documentary titled "One Faith, One language", of Elena Mironenko, was projected in Skopje, where the traditions of Ss. Cyril and Methodius, including Ss. Clement and Naum of Ohrid, were brought into the context of Macedonia, at the clear expense of Bulgaria.<sup>27</sup> Among other, the documentary presents that "Macedonia is the homeland of the Slavic alphabet", and that the texts written in Church Slavic, originated from Macedonia and were used in Russia, Ukraine, Serbia, Montenegro and Bulgaria. The Documentary follows the path of the holy brothers, connecting Russia as the Third Rome, with Ukraine, Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro, with Bulgaria completely excluded. Thus, the documentary demonstrated the contemporary spiritual connections of Russia with the Balkans, with Bulgaria left out from the Ss. Cyril and Methodius traditions.

Sofia understood this as a political message from Russia, by which it demonstrated its own geo-political interests in the Balkans. The documentary actually reminded Bulgaria about the history of the Balkans and Russia's role in the creation of the Bulgarian state as part of the Russian project of Greater Bulgaria. The Russian embassy's diplomatic distancing from the documentary, assessing it as a subjective and not corresponding to the position Russian historiography and the approach of the Embassy of Russia, was clearly not satisfactory for Sofia.<sup>28</sup> This was demonstrated with the sharp political reactions, that involved the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign affairs who noted that the documentary actually claim that "the holy brothers Cyril and Methodius and their disciples have nothing to do with Bulgaria", declaring it as "scientifically unsustainable" and that the whole historical periods are "incorrectly presented". In this regard, the Ministry did not fail to remind the public that within the Joint Multidisciplinary Committee on Historical and Educational Issues, the "Republic of Bulgaria and the Republic

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27 "Единая вера, единый язык," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tT-t9JiVCE8>, accessed 5.01.2022.

28 "Коментар на Посолството," 27.12.2021, <https://www.facebook.com/rusembul/posts/3123762417909072>, accessed 31.01.2022.

of Northern Macedonia have reached an agreement on historical figures and events from our common history, that include St. Cyril and St. Methodius, St. Clement, St. Naum and others, approved by the governments of both countries”. “We hope that third parties are not directly or indirectly involved in such provocations, that they do not aim at creating divisions, and that we will no longer witness such cases, which are contrary to the generally accepted ones in world historiography”.<sup>29</sup>

This was a clear political message to Russia, serving as a reminder that the Joint Macedonian-Bulgarian Committee has already defined the only “correct” historical “truth” about Ss. Cyril and Methodius and their disciples. It was also a political message to Republic of Macedonia that Ss. Cyril and Methodius and Ss. Clement and Naum of Ohrid, will be jointly celebrated in accordance with the agreed “common history”, which was politically redefined by the Bulgarian parliament. This only confirmed the Bulgarian policy of using the Medieval past to demonstrate that the Macedonians were and are no other than ethnic Bulgarians.

Indicatively, Greece politically did not involve itself in the historical dispute between Republic of Macedonia and Bulgaria. Athens is guided by the intention to divide the history of Macedonia with Sofia, since both share the intention to use history to delegitimize the Macedonian nation and thus to resolve the “Macedonian question”. Greece used the Prespa agreement with the Republic of Macedonia signed in 2018, to politically impose its own version of the historical “truth”. This involves “nationalization” of antiquity through the Greek historical definition of the name Macedonia and Macedonians. Politically speaking, Athens did not officially intervene in the Macedonian-Bulgarian dispute, since it is currently satisfied with the obtained political exclusivity from the Prespa agreement – the right to use the name Macedonia/Macedonians in historical terms as Hellenic heritage. Accordingly, Bulgaria has an open path from Greece to pursue its own concept of “common history” to historically “Bulgarize” the Macedonian Slavs, since for Athens Macedonia and Macedonians

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29 “Съобщение на МВНР,” 30.12.2021, <https://www.mfa.bg/bg/news/32384>, accessed on 30.12.2021.

are nothing but synonyms for the Hellenic heritage.<sup>30</sup> Accordingly, Sofia and Athens are using the political agreements to impose their national reading of the history of Macedonia, which should detach historically the name Macedonia/Macedonians as an identity label for the Slavs. Hence, they expect to resolve the “Macedonian question” by depriving the Macedonians from their national history with the imposition of their own, which at the end should historically “prove” the non-existence of the Macedonian nation. Although sharing the political agenda as regards the historical resolution of the “Macedonian question”, the use of history as a tool by Sofia to “Bulgarize” Ss. Cyril and Methodius and thus of Macedonia’s past, will certainly provoke response from Athens. Not to mention other Orthodox and Catholic countries that share the Slavic tradition of Ss. Cyril and Methodius, who does not look favorably to the “Bulgarization” of the Saints and thus of their own heritage and national holidays.

In sum. We are witnessing the evident abuse of history as a geo-political tool for resolution of the “Macedonian question”. It goes to such an extreme that Ss. Cyril and Methodius and their Slavic heritage are “nationalized” in order to justify the Bulgarian nationalistic agenda for denationalization of the history of the Macedonian nation. To this end Sofia is conditioning the lifting of its veto in the EU for the start of the negotiation of the Republic of Macedonia, with acceptance of the concept of “common history”. Thus, the correction of the history that defines the identity of the nation is turning into a criterion for the EU integration. This means that the Republic of Macedonia will enter the EU only if the Macedonians deprived themselves from their identity and became “Bulgarians”, by acknowledging that Ss. Cyril of Methodius and their disciples were part of the “common history” with Bulgaria, because they were “Bulgarians” who did not speak Slavic, but “Bulgarian” language, as they are now in 21st century.

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30 Митко Б. Панов, “За грчкото присвојување на термините Македонија и Македонци,” *Expres*, 06.06.2020, <https://www.expres.mk/za-grchkoto-prisvojuvanje-na-terminite-makedonija-i-makedonci-mitko-b-panov>, accessed, 06.06.2020.

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## **КО ЈЕ ВЛАСНИК СЛОВЕНСКОГ НАСЛЕЂА СВЕТИХ ЋИРИЛА И МЕТОДИЈА?**

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Резиме

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Рад се бави питањем како су Свети Константин/Кирило и Методије пројектовани у геополитички контекст Балкана 21. века и како су коришћени као оруђе за решавање „македонског питања”. Настанак проблема датира из 19. века, када је све већа конкуренција за Османску Македонију изазвала политичку забринутост за национализацију знаменитих личности из поново откривеног средњег века, у којој су учествовали Св. Ћирило и Методије и њихово пансловенско дело. Наша анализа ће се фокусирати на континуитет ове историјске контроверзе која прожима односе између Републике Македоније и Бугарске, након потписивања Уговора о пријатељству, добросуседству и сарадњи 2017. године. Политизација иде до те крајности да укључује редефинисање историјског контекста настанка глагољице и ћирилице и словенске писмености. Као резултат тога, солунска браћа су доведена у ширу националистичку агенду и пројектована у модерну геополитичку мапу за решавање македонског питања.

Кључне речи: Ћирило и Методије, геополитика, Македонија, Бугарска, националистичка агенда, македонско питање, историја

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