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Slovakia and North Macedonia: A Comparison of Experiences in Resolving Neighbourly Disputes

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Abstract: The aim of the present article is to compare the experiences of Slovakia and North Macedonia – countries with similar path of problematic nation-state formation and at the same time to identify to what extent Slovakia's experience in improving relations with its neighbors can serve as an example of "good practice" for North Macedonia. In the case of Slovakia and North Macedonia, which have been chosen as the subject of comparative research, it is possible to speak of the existence of a number of "unresolved" problems in relations with neighboring states, which they have to face as newly "nationalizing" states. In the case of Slovakia, bilateral relations with Hungary are key, in the case of North Macedonia, relations with Greece and Bulgaria. The following research question is, what role the factor of Europeanization of internal and foreign policy played in this case.

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Paper is comparing the historical genesis of the disputes with the neighboring states as well as their nature and way of solution chosen by both countries. What they have in common is the lack of respect on the part of Bulgaria, or Hungary, for the sovereignty of the neighbouring states. As the issue of the status of minorities abroad is one of the highly sensitive topics of internal politics in both states, and similarly the so-called Hungarian card in Slovakia and the Bulgarian card in North Macedonia, the escalation of the above conflicts depends on the dynamics of internal political developments in the respective countries. For these reasons, there is little chance that a change in the positions of the two states could occur in the short term.

Keywords: Slovakia, North Macedonia, Slovak-Hungarian relations, Bulgarian-Macedonian relations, reconciliations, neighbor disputes, nationalism

Introduction

The transformation of the former communist states after 1989 was characterized by different dynamics, depending on the historical traditions and political culture in each state. It was also strongly influenced by the nature of the communist regime there. In its analysis, two dimensions have usually been emphasized - the dimension of political transformation and the evolution of the character of political regimes; and the dimension of economic transformation from a planned to a market economy. However, in the case of a number of states, the building of "nation" statehood and the formation of the political nation, i.e., the completion of the transformation of the so-called cultural nations and "state nations,"[1] are also key factors. Thus, one of the main results of the changes in the Central and Eastern Europe region after 1989 is the emergence of new, so-called nationalizing states.[2] In addition to attributes such as democratic revolutions, we can also speak of "nationalist" revolutions. This does not only apply to the newly created states. One of the key slogans of the changes, especially in the Soviet bloc states, was both: "the road to Europe," i.e., joining the European integration processes, and the restoration of state independence. Therefore,

some authors refer to 1989 as the "Autumn of Nations," which is understood as an analogy of the "Spring of Nations" in Central and South-Eastern Europe in 1848.[3] In this context, Kuzio speaks of the so-called quadruple transition.[4] Although most of the states in the region share the identical strategic goal of following the Western model of modernization through internal reforms and integration into the EU and NATO, at the same time the transformation of the region has also brought about new challenges to the relations between the individual states in the region. On the one hand, European integration processes are opening new opportunities for cooperation by weakening the role of state borders, but, at the same time, the construction of nationalizing states is opening up both unresolved and new conflicts, especially in relations between neighboring states, which these states have to redefine.

Part of the self-identification processes in the formation of political communities is the process of defining oneself in relation to the "other," while one of the key attributes and legitimizing formulas of collective identities is the consciousness of a common past lived in solidarity, and of shared plans for the future.[5] According to Anthony D. Smith, it is the existence of a codified, unified history that distinguishes a nation from other traditional, politically unintegrated communities, the so-called ethnicities.[6] This "history" or historical narrative is also distinct from

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[1] See Friedrich Meinecke, *Weltbürgertum und Nationalstaat:* Studien zur Genesis des deutschen Nationalstaates, (München: R. Oldenbourg, 1908)..

[2] Rogers Brubaker, "National Minorities, Nationalizing States, and External National Homelands in the New Europe", *Daedalus*, Vol. 124, No. 2, What Future for the State? (Spring, 1995), pp. 107-132.

[3] Adam Burakowski, Alexander Gubrynowicz and Paweł Ukielski. *1989 The Autumn of Nations* (Warsaw: Natolin European Centre – ENRS, 2020).

[4] Taras Kuzio, "Transition in Post-Communist States: Triple or Quadruple?", *Politics*, vol. 21, no. 3 (2001), pp. 168–177. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9256.00148

[5] Zuzana Kusá, "Metodologické otázky výskumu premien kolektívnych a osobnostných identít", in *Teoretické prístupy k identitám a ich praktické aplikácie : zborník zo seminára,* ed. by Juraj Marušiak and Michaela Ferencová (Bratislava: Veda 2005), 10-30.

[6] Anthony D. Smith, *Nacjonalizm. Teoria, ideologia, historia,* (Warszawa: Sic!, 2007), 26-27.

the narratives of other political communities. At the same time, the Czech historian Miroslav Hroch notes that in the process of the formation of modern nations, "'to have a history" meant "to exist in historical continuity as an unquestionable whole." At the same time, however, according to him, "national history" was written in relation to the history of other nations, especially those to which "the national historical argument as a justification of the national program was related."[7] Thus, the politics of memory and debates about "national history" are not only part of the discourse within communities, but their addressees are often also elites or even the publics of other political communities. Working with collective memory thus becomes an integral part of foreign policy, as it participates in creating the boundaries of a political community, defining who is part of it, but also who does not belong to it.

At the same time, as Mario Rufer argues, the "politics of memory" interprets events from the past through a narrative that defines itself in relation to the present. It purposefully manipulates events, some of which are highlighted and recalled, others of which are left in the background, depending on the nature of the narrative and the level of political urgency. Rufer points out that in this respect the politics of memory cannot be neutral.[8] Thus, the politics of memory is a complex of purposeful activities aimed at achieving the desired perception and interpretation of events from the past in order to achieve specific political goals. Collective memory can thus be an instrument of the politics of reconciliation, but also an instrument of confrontation. Similarly, European integration can be an instrument not only of rapprochement between neighboring states, but also of power coercion by one state against another. Establishing good relations with neighbors is one of the key conditions for a candidate state to be recognized as eligible for EU membership, as part of the 1993 Copenhagen criteria.

The reformulation of legitimation narratives in nationalizing states after 1989 has increased the role of the national minority factor in the domestic and foreign policies of individual states. Minority issues are approached through the so-called triadic nexus, i.e., the relationship between minority members, their country of residence and their "kinstate," also referred to as the "external homeland."[9] In a number of Central and Eastern European states, minorities constitute a significant part of the population (e.g., North Macedonia, Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, Moldova, etc.), while others claim close relations with "their" minorities abroad (e.g., Hungary, Serbia, and to a lesser extent Poland), while Bulgaria considers the titular population of a neighboring state to be part of "its" nation. In this, its approach is similar to that of the Russian Federation towards Ukraine and Belarus.[10] The importance of the minority issue in the foreign policy of the states of the region has experienced several waves of growth and decline. The first wave took place in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the communist regimes, the break-up of the

[7] Miroslav Hroch, *Národy nejsou dílem náhody* (Praha: SLON, 2009), 168, 175.
[8] Mario Rufer, (2012) "Politics of Memory", in *Online Dictionary Social and Political Key Terms of the Americas: Politics, Inequalities, and North-South Relations*, Version 1.0 (2012). http://elearning.uni-bielefeld.de/wikifarm/fields/ges_cias/field.php/Main/Unterkapitel162

[9] Brubaker, "National Minorities, Nationalizing States, and External National Homelands…"
[10] Vladimir Putin, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians", *President of Russia* (2021, July 12), http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181

post-communist federative states (Yugoslavia, the USSR and Czechoslovakia) and the wars in former Yugoslavia. Later, minority issues were revived during the accession process of Central European states to the EU, and, finally, they gained new relevance in the context of the unilateral declaration of independence of the Serbian province of Kosovo in 2008 and the war between Russia and Ukraine after 2014. The claims made by the representatives of the kin-states are also formulated historically, drawing on narratives formed in the 19th and 20th centuries, usually before the rise of communist regimes.

A characteristic approach of post-communist states in formulating interpretations of past conflict themes is self-victimization, which is a part of nationalist discourses. At the same time, however, some of them, e.g., Poland, but also the Czech Republic and partly Slovakia, try to present themselves as constructive actors in international relations, especially in the Central European area. Likewise, in some of their documents defining relations with neighbouring states, the inspiration of the German policy of reconciliation after the Second World War can be felt.[11] In the case of Slovakia and North Macedonia, which have been chosen as the subject of comparative research, it is possible to speak of the existence of a number of "unresolved" problems in relations with neighboring states, which they have to face as newly "nationalizing" states. In the case of Slovakia, bilateral relations with Hungary are key; in the case of North Macedonia, relations with Greece and Bulgaria. In both cases, the question of their readiness for EU

membership has been questioned, this readiness includes, among other things, their national and ethnic policies. An equally important issue in both countries is the question of the inviolability of national borders. However, while Slovakia has managed to resolve these issues so that they do not pose an obstacle to its EU membership, this has not been the case for North Macedonia - on the contrary, this is the first time in the context of the EU's eastern enlargement that a Member State has used its right to block membership.

The aim of the present article is therefore to compare the experiences of both countries with similar experiences of problematic nation-state formation and, at the same time, to identify to what extent Slovakia's experience in improving relations with its neighbors can serve as an example of "good practice" for North Macedonia. Given that the historically contingent conflict with Greece has been concluded, for the time being, by the so-called Prespa Agreement, on the basis of which Greece ended its blockage of Macedonia's accession process to the EU and NATO, and Macedonian-Albanian relations were concluded by the so-called Ohrid Agreements, the primary focus will be on the Macedonian-Bulgarian relations. That is to say, the main obstacle is "Bulgaria's double veto in December 2020 and June 2021 on opening North Macedonia's accession talks with the EU."[12]

From this main research question, another question arises,

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[11] Lily. Gardner Feldman, "The principle and practice of ‚reconciliation' in German foreign policy: relations with France, Israel, Poland and the Czech Republic", *International Affairs*, Vol. 75, No. 2, (Apr. 1999), 333-356.

[12] Ognen Vangelov, "An Analysis of Bulgaria's Rejection of the Macedonian Ethno-Linguistic Identity and Its Implications", in *Macedonia's Long Transition. From Independence to the Prespa Agreement and Beyond,* ed. by Robert Hudson and Ivan Dodovski (Cham: Springer Nature, 2023), 207.

namely, 'what role did the factor of the Europeanization of internal and foreign policy play in this case.' The notion of Europeanization in this case can be approached on several levels. The first is the level of the member (or candidate) states and refers to the adaptation of "domestic politics, policies and politics to the changes dictated by the European Union."[13] This relates to institutional and legislative changes, to the adoption or imitation of procedures and institutions in the democratic states of Western Europe. However, in the accession process of both states, the relevance of the European Union level has also become apparent, with national or bilateral issues becoming part of the agenda of the EU institutions.

The nature of the research questions is also reflected in the structure of the article. In the first part, I will discuss the historical genesis of the conflicts of Slovakia and Macedonia between their respective neighboring states in a comparative perspective, identifying the key events that framed their development. In the next part, I will discuss the nature of bilateral disputes in terms of their content. We will try to identify to what extent the experiences of Slovakia and North Macedonia, in their establishment in the international environment, are compatible. Finally, in the third part, we will look at the resolution of these disputes and the role played in this process by the involvement of international institutions, and, in particular, the EU institutions. The final part of the study will provide a summary of the findings and answer the two research questions.

2. Historical Genesis of Slovak and Macedonian Neighborhood Disputes from a Comparative Perspective

In the cases of Slovakia and North Macedonia we can speak of "polity seeking"[14] nationalisms in the 19th and 20th centuries, i.e., nationalisms seeking their fulfilment in the form of their own statehood. Neither the Slovak nor the Macedonian political representation, in seeking historical legitimations of their claims, could rely on a historical "pre-figuration" of their statehood to which they could claim an immediate continuity. On the contrary, they had to revive, or reinvent a tradition of statehood from the distant past, whether it was the Slovak tradition of Great Moravia and the revival of the cult of Sts. Cyril and Methodius, or, in the case of North Macedonia, with reference to the tradition of the Macedonian Empire of Alexander the Great. While Slovak nationalism lived in a liminal phase between a "cultural" and "state" nation for most of the 20th century (1918-1939 and 1945-1992), in the case of Macedonia this liminal phase lasted from 1994 to 1991. In both cases, the state-building ambitions of the "national" representations were fulfilled only in the last decade of the 20th century.

Both countries share a delayed start to the process of modern national formation when compared with their neighbors, which, moreover, had to face competition from other nationalisms, albeit in different historical contexts and temporal phases. The process of the Slovak "national revival" started in the second half of the 18th century; the Macedonian process only started during the 20th centu-

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[13] Claudio M. Radaelli, "Whither Europeanization? Concept Stretching and Substantive Change", *European Integration online Papers (EIoP),* Vol. 4, No. 8 (2000); Vít Hloušek, "Proces europeanizace a politické strany v kandidátských zemích", *Sociální studia,* Vol. 1, No. 1, 93-108.

[14] Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism reframed. Nationhood and the national question in the New Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 79.

ry. Slovak and North Macedonian nationalisms developed within the framework of supranational state formations, defined dynastically. Slovakia developed as an integral part of the Kingdom of Hungary and the Kingdom of Austria-Hungary, respectively, and did not exist as an administrative or geographical category until 1918. Its present territory was referred to as "Upper Hungary."

From the 19th century onwards, Hungary began to transform itself into a nationalizing state.[15] After 1918, Slovakia, except for quasi-independence in 1939-1945, became part of multi-ethnic Czechoslovakia. However, it had already formed as a geographical and administrative unit after its foundation. North Macedonia developed within the Ottoman Empire until the beginning of the 20th century, later as part of Yugoslavia, with large parts of the Macedonian ethnic territory becoming part of the territory of Greece, Bulgaria and partly Albania. It did not acquire administrative status and thus political borders until after 1944.

Slovak nationalism developed in competition with, and in opposition to, Hungarian nationalism, but also to Czech nationalism and, marginally, to the territorial and cultural ambitions of Poland. The territory of Slovakia and its population were part of these three nationalist projects, all of which perceived Slovakia as a periphery that needed to be integrated with the "center." Unlike North Macedonia, its population was referred to by the ethnonym "Slovaks" and was accepted as a specific entity, distinct from both Hungarians and Czechs. However, while Czech, Hungari-

an and Polish nationalisms were based on state-law traditions, Slovak nationalism was only just building a similar state-law tradition. The key moments in this case were the years 1848 (the formation of the first Slovak political representation under the name of the Slovak National Council), 1861 (the Memorandum of the Slovak Nation with the demand for the creation of a Slovak territorially defined autonomous territory), and finally the establishment of Czechoslovakia in 1918, when the key demand of a significant part of the Slovak political representation became the demand for territorial autonomy as a form of statehood. This was realized in 1938-1939, after which Slovakia existed as a quasi-independent state of Nazi Germany until 1945, and after 1945 as a semi-autonomous part of the restored unitary Czechoslovakia. From 1968 until the end of 1992, Slovakia was a subject of the dualist Czechoslovak federation.

North Macedonia was in a similar situation on the periphery of the often rival nationalist projects of Bulgaria, Greece, Serbia, but also Albania. Before the 20th century, the term "Macedonians" as an ethnic category does not appear in written records; according to the Czech historian Jan Rychlík, "Macedonism" as a coherent political program designating the population of Macedonia as a separate Slavic nation does not appear until the early 20th century.[16] Since the 19th century, however, Macedonia - its territory and population - has been the subject of the political agenda of Bulgarian nationalism, which at the time can also be described as polity-seeking nationalism.

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[15] Brubaker, "National Minorities, Nationalizing States, and External National Homelands".

[16] Jan Rychlík and Miroslav Kouba, *Dějiny Makedonie* (Praha: Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, 2017), 11.

Although Bulgarian statehood was shaped with reference to its historical heritage, without clearly defined borders, one can agree with the statement that Bulgaria is also a "young nationalizing state concerned with the ethnic homogenization of its own population."[17] In relation to North Macedonia, however, it is a state that was created in a relatively earlier era, claiming the role of being the fulfilment of the program of "nation statehood" also in relation to the population of North Macedonia. On this basis, it legitimizes its efforts to act paternalistically towards neighboring North Macedonia.

On the other hand, Hungary and Bulgaria share very similar historical traumas. Hungary claims legal continuity of its statehood with the pre-1918 Kingdom of Hungary. The peace treaty signed after 1920 in Trianon, which became part of the so-called Versailles settlement and the settlement of Europe after the Second World War, is regarded in Hungary as a national tragedy, as it not only meant the loss of territory, but also a large number of ethnic Hungarians who became citizens - members of national minorities in neighboring states - found themselves outside the borders of the Hungarian "nation state." The program of overcoming the legacy of Trianon and "reuniting" Hungarians by revising the borders was a key priority of Hungarian governments in the interwar period; after 1989 Hungarian governments began to speak of "reuniting Hungarians across borders."[18] This program was already hinted at by the first Hungarian Prime Minister, József Antall, who

emerged from free elections in 1990, when he described himself as the Prime Minister of 15 million Hungarians "in spirit" (Hungary itself had a population of around 10 million at the time).[19]

For Bulgaria, a similar moment was the Peace Treaty of Berlin of 1878, which was a revision of the previous Peace Treaty of San Stefano, which envisaged the existence of a "Greater Bulgaria," which was to include the territories of Thrace, Southern Dobrudja and what is now North Macedonia. Similarly to the so-called "Trianon trauma," one of the key principles of Bulgarian foreign policy until the end of the Second World War was the idea of a Greater Bulgaria, conceived of as an idea of "reunification"—with the idea of "taking back Macedonia"[20] playing a key role in it. Kouyouharov refers to the Macedonian question in Bulgarian foreign and domestic policy, understood as "the ideology that Bulgaria deserved Macedonia," as an "obsession."[21]

The above traumas have largely framed the foreign policy of both states even after the political changes in 1989; on the other hand, both states have refrained from raising demands for border revision or from violent actions against neighboring states. On the other hand, both Hungary and Bulgaria have pursued non-violent activities aimed at redressing alleged grievances caused by the current state-border arrangements. These activities are often formulated as unilateral actions, carried out without consultation, or even sometimes in open, albeit non-vio-

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[17] Anton Koujouharov, "Bulgarian 'Macedonian' Nationalism: A Conceptual Overview", *The Online Journal of Peace and Conflict Resolution,* Vol. 6, No. 1 (Fall 2004). 287.
[18] Peter Weiss, "Mäkký revizionizmus a iredentizmus", Pravda (2022, August 2), https://zurnal.pravda.sk/esej/clanok/635518-peter-weiss-makky-iredentizmus-a-revizionizmus/

[19] George Schöpflin, "Hungary and its neighbours", *Chaillot Paper,* no. 7 (May 1993), 12.
[20] Dimitar Rizoff, *Die Bulgaren in ihren historischen, ethnographischen und politischen Grenzen: Atlas mit 40 Landkarten,* (Berlin: Konigliche Hoflithographie, Hof-Buch- und Steindruckerei Wilhelm Greve, 1917). Citedy by Maria Todorova, *Scaling the Balkans. Essays on Eastern European Entanglements* (Leiden – Boston: Brill 2019), 319.
[21] Koujouharov, "Bulgarian 'Macedonian' Nationalism", 291, 292.

lent, confrontation with neighboring states, even though they affect them or their citizens. In Hungary, this format is referred to as "national policy," as a complex of political, cultural, educational and institutional instruments aimed at building contacts with members of Hungarian communities in neighboring states (especially in the case of Slovakia, Romania, Serbia and Ukraine, and, to a lesser extent, Slovenia and Croatia), which is shaped largely autonomously from formal foreign policy instruments.[22]

Paradoxically, in the case of the Slovak-Hungarian and Macedonian-Bulgarian disputes, these conflicts are taking place between states that claim the same geopolitical orientation, i.e. at the level of global politics they declare their relations to constitute an alliance.[23] Czechoslovakia, and after 1993 Slovakia, like Hungary, declared EU and NATO accession as a common priority; Hungary, especially after the 1998 Slovak parliamentary elections, when a broad coalition of right-wing and left-wing pro-Western parties came to power, supported Slovakia's accession to NATO. Slovakia and Hungary also cooperate closely within the Visegrad Group. This cooperation, like the CEFTA cooperation in the 1990s, was seen as a preparation for EU integration. Despite Slovakia's divergent views on Hungary's so-called national policy, and nowadays also on the different positions of the two countries on the war in Ukraine, the representatives of the two countries tend to declare a positive atmosphere in their bilateral relations. [24]

Similarly, both Bulgaria and North Macedonia see their future in NATO and the EU. Bulgaria supported the process of forming an independent Macedonia and was the first state to recognize this step. Bulgaria also supported North Macedonia militarily and advocated for its accession to NATO. While Bulgaria has been an EU member state since 2007, North Macedonia is part of the EU Stability and Association Process as well as CEFTA. The Stability Pact is, like the Visegrad Cooperation, an "antechamber" of EU membership.[25] Bulgaria and North Macedonia cooperate within the Regional Cooperation Council, which is the successor of the Stability Pact, and is the operational arm of the South East European Cooperation Process (SEECP), functioning as a focal point for guiding, monitoring and supporting cooperation in South East Europe.[26] In both cases, then, we are dealing with conflicts between neighboring states whose alliances, despite shared strategic objectives, are in both cases accompanied by "historical burdens." This not only creates an obstacle to effective cooperation and is a source of mutual distrust between neighboring states, but also creates room for political conflict.

3. Nature of Conflicts

If we try to identify to what extent Slovakia's experience in consolidating relations with its neighbors can be useful and applicable to North Macedonia, it is necessary to compare

[22] Anita Sobják, "The Implications of Hungary's National Policy for Relations with Neighbouring States", *Policy Paper* no. 32 (Warsaw: Polish Institute of International Relations, June 2012).
[23] Juraj Marušiak, "Slovensko a Maďarsko – spojenectvo s historickou záťažou", *Studia Politica Slovaca*, vol. 8, no.2 (2015), 41-54.
[24] "Wlachovský: SR má záujem na normalnych vzťahoch s Maďarskom", Teraz. sk (TASR: July 3, 2023), https://www.teraz.sk/slovensko/wlachovsky-v-budapes-

ti-sr-ma-zaujem/725869-clanok.html
[25] Stefania Panebianco and Rona Rossi, "EU attempts to export norms of good governance to the Mediterranean and Western Balkan countries," *Jean Monnet Working Papers in Comparative and International Politics,* no. 53, (Catania: University of Catania, Department of Political Studies, October 2004), http://aei.pitt.edu/6109/1/jmwp53.pdf
[26] Regional Cooperation Council, *Statute of the Regional Cooperation Council,* Sarajevo, April 25, 2013. https://www.rcc.int/download/docs/RCC%20Statute_25April2013.pdf/3f50ec2e5f5f4bc88e15a2d9eba40f59.pdf

the nature of the disputes that accompanied the process of the formation of the two independent states, and which are a part of their foreign policy. North Macedonia has faced conflicts with all of its neighbors. The Greek-Macedonian dispute concerned symbolism, the heritage of ancient Macedonia, but also, and to a large extent, the borders and the North Macedonian minority in Greece. With Albania and Kosovo, North Macedonia is divided by a dispute over the status of the Albanian minority, as is the case with Slovakia and Hungary. The Macedonian-Albanian dispute was concluded after the armed conflict in 2001 with the so-called Ohrid Agreements, which brought about a regulation/resolution of/to the minority issue. Unlike North Macedonia, Slovakia did not have to resolve the conflict by force. Although, unlike Bosnia and Herzegovina or Croatia, North Macedonia's independence in 1991-1992 was peaceful. Part of the Serbian political representation referred to what is now called North Macedonia, as in the period between the two world wars, as "southern Serbia." This, like the Bulgarians, questioned the very existence of the Macedonian nation and language. Reminiscences of this practice ended with the recognition by the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in the first months 1992 and the non-violent withdrawal of Yugoslav or Serbian troops from Macedonian territory.

Bulgaria's policy towards North Macedonia is framed by the statement of Bulgarian President Zhelyu Zhelyev that Bulgaria recognizes North Macedonia as a state but does not recognize the existence of the Macedonian nation and language.[27] At the same time, he underlined their "common ethnic roots and cultural-historical traditions."[28] Such partial recognition, while on the one hand, in 1992, represented a step towards stabilizing what is now North Macedonia's international position, at the same time was a demonstration of Bulgaria's self-perception as a "master" concerning its relation to North Macedonia, i.e., its superior position vis-à-vis its neighboring country.[29] The political consequences of this move were manifested in the form of mistrust between the two states, with Bulgaria accusing North Macedonia of anti-Bulgarian propaganda, while in North Macedonia, Bulgaria was accused of stealing Macedonian history.[30]

3.1 Slovak-Czech relations

It is very difficult to find analogues, in terms of content, of a similar dispute in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989. Slovakia experienced a similar dispute in the period of the Habsburg monarchy. The dispute over the existence of an independent Slovak nation and language erupted in full after the codification of the written Slovak language in 1843. Until then, Slovak evangelical intellectuals used the Czech language in their written communication, while in the Catholic environment, a different variant of the Slovak language had been used since the end of the 18th century. The step of Slovak evangelical scholars and politicians led by Ľudovít Štúr prompted a negative reaction from

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[27] Jenny Engström, "The Power of Perception: The Impact of the Macedonian Question on Inter-ethnic Relations in the Republic of Macedonia", *The Global Review of Ethnopolitics*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (March 2002), 3-17.

[28] Symeon A. Giannakos, "Bulgaria's Macedonian dilemma", *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans Online*, Vol. 3 No. 2 (2001), 153-170, 154.

[29] Danijela Čanji, "Transiting From the East to the 'Core' West of Europe: Slovakia's Ontological Liminality After the Outbreak of 2022 Russia's War on Ukraine", *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, online first (2023). DOI: 10.1177/03043754231185650

[30] Koujouharov, "Bulgarian 'Macedonian' Nationalism", 282.

the Czech side, which argued for the need to preserve the national unity of Czechs and Slovaks, but also for the cultural superiority of the Czechs over the Slovaks. Other, more pragmatically formulated, objections concerned the economic and political weakness of the Slovak national movement.[31] The consequence was a partial loss of interest in Czech politics in Slovakia when the Slovak question dropped out of the Czech national agenda for several decades. The revitalization of the idea of a Czech-Slovak unity can be spoken of only towards the end of the 19th century. Slovakia became part of T. G. Masaryk's program. The idea of the creation of a Czechoslovak state as a political pact, or an instrument of common defense against German and Hungarian expansionist nationalism, was established during the years of the First World War. The project of "Czechoslovakism" thus resembled the idea of "Yugoslavism" as a political cooperation of national political representations of the South Slavs in the same period. After the establishment of the First Czechoslovak Republic (ČSR), this political pact was elevated to a state and ethnopolitical doctrine, as the idea of a unified Czechoslovak nation and language also became part of the first Constitution of the Czechoslovak Republic in 1920. At the same time, however, the first ČSR recognized the existence of two branches of this nation, or two variants of the Czechoslovak language - Czech and Slovak. However, the dominant position was retained by the Czech part of the common state, while the demands of a significant part of the Slovak representation spoke of the need for an "equal" status of Slovakia.[32] On the other hand, Ľudovít Štúr's very

move in the 19th century was negatively labelled as the "Czechoslovak split" by Czechoslovak government politicians, often even by those of Slovak nationality.[33] Although the concept of ethnic Czechoslovakism had the support of a part of Slovak society, its de facto end was the creation of an autonomous Slovakia in 1938, which declared independence in March 1939 under pressure from Nazi Germany. Although the Slovak anti-fascist resistance advocated the restoration of Czechoslovak statehood, it assumed a revision of the concept of the ethnic unity of Czechs and Slovaks and the "equal" status of both constituent peoples in the restored state. This demand was confirmed by the Košice government manifesto of April 1945,[34] which recognized the Slovaks as a separate nation and the Slovak language as a language distinct from the Czech language. The year 1945 thus brought an official end to the project of ethnic Czechoslovakism. Its "substitute forms"[35] in the mode of restoring centralist practices and limiting the powers of Slovak institutions did not change this fact. The idea of the difference between Slovaks and Czechs was already widely accepted in both parts of the common state. Although, especially in the Czech public debate, the idea of federalization in 1968 was received with great reservations, with the expediency of this step being questioned, and considering that after 1989, most Czech political parties opposed the weakening of the powers of the central state authorities, and even indicated, e.g., in the case of Civic Democratic Party (ODS), a preference in favor of re-

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[31] *Hlasowé o potřebě jednoty spisowného jazyka mezi Čechy, Morawany a Slowáky, ed. by Ján Kollár (*Praha: České museum 1846).

[32] Pavel Kosatík, *Slovenské století* (Praha: Torst 2021).

[33] Milan Hodža, "Československý rozkol", in *Polemika o československom rozkole,* ed. by Natália Rolková (Bratislava: Matica slovenská 2008), 15-277.

[34] *Košický vládní program,* (Prague: National Archive, March 1945), https://test.nacr.cz/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/labyrint-1945-Kosicky-vladni-program.pdf

[35] Dušan Kováč, *Slováci – Česi – dejiny* (Bratislava: Academic Electronic Press, 1997), 126.

placing the federation with a unitary state, the idea of ethnic Czechoslovakism had only marginal support in society. The argument against strengthening the powers of Slovak institutions referred, rather, to the practical aspects of the functioning of the Czechoslovak state. The Movement of Czechoslovak Understanding was the closest to the ideas of ethnic Czechoslovakism. However, it won less than 0.5 per cent of the vote in the 1990 parliamentary elections,[36] and political forces in then Macedonia that espoused the idea of ethnic unity between Bulgarians and Macedonians were similarly placed (VMRO-Fatherland).[37] However, while in the Czech Republic the idea of ethnic Czechoslovakism acquired a marginal status after the Second World War, at least at the level of the political elites, in Bulgaria, even after 1944, when Vardar Macedonia became part of Yugoslavia again as its federal republic, the political elites there did not abandon the idea of Bulgarian ethnicity for the Slavic population of Macedonia.

Therefore, and also because of the lack of awareness of Czech-Slovak ethnic unity, the break-up of Czecho-Slovakia in 1992 did not become a trauma that could negatively mark the relations between the two successor states, despite the fact that the division of the common state in the early 1990s did not have the support of the majority of the population neither in the Czech Republic nor in Slovakia. On the contrary, the "velvet divorce"[38] opened the preconditions for close cooperation between the two independent states, which declare themselves to be close

partners. This is in contrast to Bulgarian-Macedonian relations, where the belief in the ethnic unity of the populations of the two states in Bulgaria and its rejection by the Macedonian elites remains a source of conflict and mutual distrust.

3.2. Slovak-Hungarian relations

Historically, the key "constitutive other" in the case of Slovakia remains Hungary. The primary source of conflict has been the policy of transforming the Kingdom of Hungary into an ethnically homogeneous Hungarian nation-state, which gradually began to take shape from the first half of the 19th century and escalated after the so-called Austro-Hungarian Settlement (Compromise or Ausgleich) in 1867.[39] Only one political "state" nation, the Hungarian, speaking the Hungarian "state and national" language, was recognized by the Hungarian state, while other ethnic languages had only a secondary status as "nationalities" or "national languages" in the multi-ethnic Hungary. Semantically and symbolically, the category of nationality was placed on a lower level than the category of "nation." At the same time, however, the awareness of ethnic and linguistic differences between Slovaks and Hungarians was clearly rooted in society and at the level of political elites, which the Hungarian state sought to overcome through ideological, administrative, cultural and educational instruments.[40]

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[36] Elections to the Slovak National Council, 1990. Share of the votes for political parties, https://volby.statistics.sk/nrsr/snr1990/volby90_s/php90.htm

[37] Rychlík and Kouba, "Dějiny Makedonie", 255.

[38] Paweł Ukielski, *Aksamitny rozwód: Rola elit politycznych w procesie podziału Czechosłowacji* (Warszawa: Instytut Jagielloński, Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN 2007).

[39] The Austro-Hungarian Settlement meant the transformation of the Austrian Empire into a dualistic state formation, consisting of the Austrian Empire and the Kingdom of Hungary. The term settlement in this context refers to the mutual recognition of the two sides as equal partners.

[40] Alexander Maxwell, *Choosing Slovakia: Slavic Hungary, the Czechoslovak language and accidental nationalism*, (London & New York: Tauris, 2009).

Later, after the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the dispute became territorial. Slovakia appeared in Hungarian inter-war projects as a unity with a promise of political autonomy; later, territorial revision projects concerned only the ethnically mixed Slovak-Hungarian territories along the southern side of the border.[41] According to post-World War II censuses, Hungarians in Slovakia accounted for approximately 10-12 percent of the population, with their share of the total number gradually decreasing.[42] Territorial disputes led to Hungary and Czechoslovakia perceiving each other as enemies and a potential source of threat in the interwar period. The issue of borders led to armed conflicts in 1918 (when Czechoslovak military units occupied the territory of Slovakia), in 1919 (the invasion of the Bolshevik Hungarian Republic of the Order of the South and East of Slovakia), and in 1939 to the so-called Small War between Slovakia and Hungary. At the same time, in 1938 and 1939, mutual relations were marked by the so-called Vienna Accord, i.e., the annexation of the southern and eastern regions of Slovakia, and after 1945 by the application of the principle of collective guilt against members of the Hungarian minority on the basis of the so-called "Beneš Decrees."[43] As a result, they were deprived of their civil rights until 1948, and there were unsuccessful efforts to deport them to Hungary, which eventually resulted in a partial population exchange between the two states (some members of the Hungarian minority left for Hungary, from where some members of the Slovak minority came to Slovakia). After 1948, however, the minority rights of ethnic Hungarians were gradually restored and legislatively enshrined after the adoption of the Constitutional Law on the Status of Nationalities in the Czechoslovak Republic in 1968.[44]

After 1989, the component of open territorial revisionism fell away. The asymmetrical dispute over the status of national minorities in both states became one of the key themes of mutual relations. Negative reactions in Slovak society were provoked by the demands of some representatives of the Hungarian minority for the revision or abolition of the aforementioned "Beneš Decrees," which are considered the key documents of the post-war organization of Czechoslovakia. Other conflicting issues centered around the demands for the establishment of Hungarian territorial autonomy that were raised primarily in the first half of the 1990s.[45] Later on, and despite the improvement of the atmosphere in bilateral relations, in the 2020s there were also demands from the radical part of the Hungarian minority for the definition of the Hungarian community as a "distinct political nation" within Slovakia, resulting in the demand for territorial autonomy ("the creation of a Hungarian neighborhood to be administered by Hungarians through their elected representatives"), which also included the definition of Hungarian as an official language, the legalization of dual citizenship, the creation of an in-

[41] Ladislav Deák, *Hra o Slovensko* (Bratislava: Veda 1991).

[42] Martin Pekár, "Základné východiská menšinovej politiky na Slovensku od roku 1918 po súčasnosť", in *Národnostná politika na Slovensku po roku 1989*, ed. by Štefan Šutaj (Prešov: Universum 2005), 56.

[43] These were decrees of the President of the Czechoslovak Republic Eduard Beneš, issued during the Second World War in exile, which regulated the post-war organisation of Czechoslovakia. They were ratihibec by the Czechoslovak Provisional National Assembly in 1945 and became part of Czechoslovak legislation. They included, among other things, legislative acts which led to the collective punishment of members of the German and Hungarian minorities in Czechoslovakia. At the present time, these documents do not create any legal relations.

[44] *Ústavný zákon o postavení národností v Československej socialistickej republike*, no. 144/1968 Coll.

[45] Zoltán Pástor, *Slováci a Maďari*, (Martin: Matica slovenská 2011), 145

dependent Hungarian Catholic archdiocese, etc.[46] One of the long-standing controversial topics is the preamble of the Constitution of the Slovak Republic, which refers to the Slovak nation as the "state-forming subject," while in the case of minorities, it only refers to their members as individuals. Since 1993, the radical wing of the Hungarian representation in Slovakia has been demanding that the preamble be amended to give the Hungarian community the status of a "co-ruling nation."[47] However, this topic has not been the subject of international negotiations, perhaps because after 2011, the Fundamental Law of Hungary also contains a similar preamble referring to the ethnonational character of the state.[48]

The question of the interpretation of a number of conflictual events from the past remains controversial, including, in addition to the Trianon Interstate Treaty, the issues of the so-called Vienna Arbitrations, post-war retributive legislation (the so-called Beneš Decrees), and so on. Moreover, all the above-mentioned conflicting issues are addressed not only at the level of Slovak-Hungarian interstate relations, but also in the relations of each of the above-mentioned actors with the representatives of the Hungarian community in Slovakia.

Some analogies between Slovakia and North Macedonia can be identified in the issue of citizenship policy. Both Bul-

garia and Hungary apply an ethnic principle in the granting of citizenship that is contrary to the interests of the neighboring states concerned, while refusing to negotiate their policies with them. Like Slovakia, North Macedonia also perceives its neighbors' policy negatively.[49] Hungary's policy of "uniting the nation across national borders" has a long tradition, including the dispute over the so-called "Law on Hungarians Living Abroad" ("Hungarian Status Law") of 2001, which the Hungarian side applies extraterritorially, i.e., in the form of direct financial transfers to ethnic Hungarians - citizens of neighboring states living abroad. A similar form of building direct institutional links between the Hungarian State and members of Hungarian communities abroad was the establishment of the Carpathian Basin Deputies' Forum, which brought together ethnic Hungarian deputies from Hungary and neighboring countries, with the status of an advisory body to the Hungarian National Assembly.

The dispute over national minorities in both states is also asymmetrical. In Slovakia, the Hungarian minority represents a significant segment of the population, while the Slovak minority in Hungary is numerically marginal. Although it is recognized by the Hungarian state, it is at an advanced stage of assimilation. On the other hand, although Bulgaria raises the issue of the Bulgarian minority in North Macedonia, it itself refuses any discussion of the existence of a Macedonian minority in its country, and the organizations that demand recognition by the state have been proclaimed illegal by Bulgarian authorities.[50]

[46] *Memorandum maďarskej komunity,* (Bratislava: Strana maďarskej komunity – Hungarian Community Party, June 2, 2020), https://www.mkp.sk/sk/2020/06/02/memorandum-madarskej-komunity

[47] Pástor, "Slováci a Maďari", 145.

[48] *The Fundamental Law of Hungary (as in force on 23 December 2020),* (Budapest: Ministry of Justice, 2021), https://www.parlament.hu/documents/125505/138409/Fundamental+law/73811993-c377-428d-9808-ee03d6fb8178

[49] "Macedonia Suffers from 'Bulgarian Citizenship Syndrome'", *Novinite* (December 23, 2011), https://www.novinite.com/view_news.php?id=135109

[50] Koujouharov, "Bulgarian 'Macedonian' Nationalism", Giannakos, "Bulgaria's Mace-

3.3 Slovak-Polish relations

The Slovak-Polish dispute was primarily territorial in nature, with Poland arguing for the existence of an allegedly large Polish minority in the north of Slovakia, particularly among the Gorals - a linguistically and culturally transient population on the Slovak-Polish border. On the other hand, however, the tendency of the population to self-identity as Slovak prevailed in these regions. In the interwar period, alongside the projects of the annexation of the northern part of Slovakia, there were also considerations of the annexation of the whole of Slovakia to Poland as an autonomous part of the latter. However, this was part of the Polish-Hungarian geopolitical projects to achieve a common border. The Slovak-Polish conflict project resulted in the annexation of a section of the territories of northern Slovakia in 1938. After the invasion of Poland by Nazi Germany, in which Slovakia also participated, Slovakia also regained the territories that had belonged to Poland in 1920. After the Second World War, the 1920-1938 borders were restored, and, in 2009, representatives of both states apologized for their mutual wrongs[51].

4. Resolving conflict issues at the bilateral and multilateral levels

In the case of both Slovakia and North Macedonia, it is evident that despite the Europeanisation of their internal and foreign policies, the ethnic factor plays a significant role in the internal and foreign policies of the CEE states. The common element in both cases is the internationalization of bilateral issues.[52] Neither Bulgaria nor Hungary is pushing the issue of border revision, but in both cases we can speak of a policy of "soft revisionism" or "irredentism."[53]

In the case of Slovakia, the Slovak-Hungarian dispute took on an international dimension, for example in 1993, when Hungary hinted at the possibility of blocking its accession to the Council of Europe. Hungary justified its position based on the status of the Hungarian minority. The primary demands, which were shared by the Hungarian minority representation, were to allow the writing of personal names and place names in minority languages, the drafting of a new constitutional law on minority self-government. Similarly, the more radical Hungarian politicians also raised the issue of the revision of the so-called Beneš Decrees in property discrimination against the Hungarian population after 1945. Slovakia eventually became a member of the Council of Europe thanks to a compromise whereby it committed itself to allowing the writing of personal names and place names in minority languages and, in the future, to adopting the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. On the other hand, Slovakia's admission to the CoE was also a result of successful negotiations that made it virtually impossible for Hungary to block admission to the organization.[54]

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donian dilemma", 167.
[51] Dušan Čaplovič, „Słowacja przeprasza Polskę za 1939", (*Gazeta Wyborcza,* September 27, 2009), https://wyborcza.pl/7,75399,7083113,slowacja-przeprasza-polske-za-1939.html?fbclid=IwAR3e77LZVZZquN5h3fPLwJyuLQJyGdwp2H-Vb87ow4-zdR-Vi9_wYzhOaufA; „Porównanie Katynia z epidemią tyfusu to nie droga do pojednania", (*TVN24,* September 1, 2009), http://www.tvn24.pl/wiadomosci-z-kraju,3/porownanie-katynia-z-epidemia-tyfusu-to-nie-droga-do-pojednania,107529.html

[52] Vangelov, "An Analysis of Bulgaria's Rejection", 208.
[53] See Victor Roudometoff, *Collective Memory, National Identity, and Ethnic Conflict: Greece, Bulgaria, and the Macedonian Question,*"Westport: Praeger Publishers 2002; Myra Waterbury, *Between State and Nation: Diaspora Politics and Kin-State Nationalism in Hungary* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2010).
[54] Marián Leško, *Slovenské tango z roku jeden* (Bratislava: Perex, 1993), 16-17.

Despite the tense relations between Slovakia and Hungary and the deteriorating relations between Slovakia and the EU due to the growing authoritarian tendencies during the third government of Vladimír Mečiar (1994-1998), the signing of the bilateral *Slovak-Hungarian Treaty on Good Neighborly Relations and Friendly Cooperation*[55] on March 19, 1995 in Paris was a significant step. Prior to the signing of this Treaty, the Slovak Government adopted the Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, which was ratified by the Slovak Parliament in September 1995. In view of the EU accession process, both governments were interested in adopting the treaty, with the then left-wing Hungarian government of Gyula Horn considering EU enlargement as a key condition for improving the status of Hungarian minorities abroad.[56] The treaty contained a guarantee of the inviolability of national borders, which the Slovak side hailed as a great success of its diplomacy, while at the same time, a large part of the treaty was devoted to the rights of national minorities, thus the document touched upon the solution of both Slovak and Hungarian traumatic experiences.[57] At the same time, after the adoption of the treaty, the Government of the Slovak Republic issued an interpretative addendum, according to which the treaty did not contain any obligations regarding the recognition of collective rights for minorities. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Hungary rejected this interpretative supplement.[58] The presence of provisions containing obligations in the case of the protection of national minorities provoked opposition from both the SNS, the minor coalition partner, and the pro-European opposition, which feared the possibility of the creation of Hungarian territorial autonomy in the south of Slovakia. Therefore, the treaty was not ratified by the National Council of the Slovak Republic until a year later, although the Hungarian Parliament had already ratified it in June 1995.[59] At the same time, in its *Declaration no 99/1996 Coll.*, the National Council of the Slovak Republic stressed the individual nature of minority rights, while, on the other hand, describing the treaty as "an important act of historical reconciliation between our countries and peoples."[60] Moreover, the signing of the treaty took place on the eve of the approval of The Stability Pact in Europe, which included bilateral treaties between the states of Central and Eastern Europe to close disputed border and minority issues. Although the focus of the treaty is *Article 15*, regulating the status of national minorities in both states, the treaty also touches on other aspects of cooperation. However, *Article 5* also allows for the establishment "in each area of common interest, an appropriate framework for cooperation," resulting in the creation of 12 interstate commissions governing cooperation on issues relating not only to minorities but also to cross-border cooperation, health, etc.

Despite the adoption of the treaty, the Hungarian side continued its efforts to Europeanize the issues in question, for example, through complaints presented not only to

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[55] Act no. 115/1997 Coll.

[56] Pástor, "Slováci a Maďari", 161.

[57] "Pred 25 rokmi podpísali Maďarsko a Slovensko zmluvu o spolupráci", *Konzervatívny denník Postoj* (March 19, 2020), https://www.postoj.sk/52783/pred-25-rokmi-podpisa-li-madarsko-a-slovensko-zmluvu-o-spolupraci

[58] "Michal Kováč podpísal zmluvu s Maďarskom", *Sme* (May 7, 1996), https://www.sme. sk/c/2109635/michal-kovac-podpisal-zmluvu-s-madarskom.html

[59] "Ako sa kalila slovensko-maďarská zmluva", *Sme* (December 13, 1995), https://www. sme.sk/c/2137216/ako-sa-kalila-slovensko-madarska-zmluva.html

[60] *Declaration no. 99,* 1996 Coll., March 19, 1995.

the EU but also to other pan-European institutions such as the Council of Europe or the OSCE. At the same time, however, it is possible to speak of an improvement in the position of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia after the parliamentary elections in 1998, when its political representation - the Hungarian Coalition Party - became part of the ruling coalition. Several demands of Hungarian political representation in Slovakia were accepted, such as the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages, and steps were taken to implement it in practice; the János Seley University was established in Komárno with teaching in the Hungarian language, etc.

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's efforts in 2002 to block the accession process of the Czech Republic and, in effect, also of Slovakia with regard to the so-called Beneš Decrees, eventually resulted in the partial paralysis of Visegrad cooperation until Orbán's government was replaced by Péter Medgyesy, a nominee of the Hungarian Socialist Party. As Hungary was on an equal footing with Slovakia in relation to the EU, i.e., in the position of a candidate state, it was not in a position to block Slovakia's accession process. Even the then-EU member states were not interested in raising the issue of the so-called Beneš Decrees as part of the post-war European order, especially Germany, despite the fact that part of its, and the Austrian, political representation advocated this step. However, the issue of relations between Slovakia and Hungary remained on the agenda of political parties in both states as an important instrument of political mobilization. The divergent positions of the two states were also reflected, for example, in the issue of recognition of the unilateral declaration of independence of the Serbian province of Kosovo in 2008. While Hungary has recognized Kosovo, Slovakia has rejected this step. This conflict was also reflected on the national level, when an "ethnic cleavage" was created when a resolution was adopted by the Slovak National Council. The majority of the Slovak political representation rejected the recognition of Kosovo, while the MPs representing the Hungarian Coalition Party voted against such a position. At the same time, radical representatives of the Hungarian minority, e.g., Miklós Duray, described the declaration of Kosovo's independence as a step towards self-determination for Hungarians in Slovakia,[61] which only deepened the mistrust in Slovak-Hungarian relations.

Similarly, in the case of Macedonian-Bulgarian relations, institutional measures have been taken to improve relations between the two states. One of the first steps was the adoption of the so-called Joint Declaration of 1999, by which Bulgaria de facto recognized the existence of the Macedonian language, while North Macedonia renounced its support for the Macedonian minority in Bulgaria.[62] The name of the language had been an obstacle to the signing of several bilateral agreements for seven years until then. However, even the Joint Declaration did not end the "ideological, historical, linguistic and cultural battle aimed at the reaffirmation of one's history and identity at the expense of the other."[63] This is also why the bilateral treaty between the two states was only signed in 2017. Although, like the Slovak-Hungarian treaty, it contains mechanisms

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[61] Marián Leško, "Za koho hovoril Duray", *Sme* (June 31, 2007), 24.
[62] Giannakos, "Bulgaria's Macedonian dilemma", 17.
[63] Koujouharov, "Bulgarian 'Macedonian' Nationalism", 282.

for resolving mutual disputes, it contains provisions that can be interpreted as a commitment to arrive at common interpretations of historical events that are commemorated in different ways in each country. The Slovak-Hungarian Treaty does not contain similar commitments, although they were the subject of negotiations at the level of prime ministers. For example, during the 2009 meeting of the Prime Ministers of Slovakia and Hungary, Robert Fico and Gordon Bajnai, an 11-point cooperation plan was adopted, which, in addition to infrastructure projects, was to include the preparation of a joint Slovak-Hungarian history textbook. Slovak-Hungarian dialogue also took place at the level of non-state actors, not only within the framework of cooperation financed by the International Visegrad Fund, but also through dialogue and a joint statement by the highest representatives of the Catholic Church in both countries.[64]

Tensions in Slovak-Hungarian relations escalated again after the victory of the Fidesz party in the 2010 parliamentary elections, when the Hungarian Parliament not only approved an ethnically defined model of granting Hungarian citizenship, but also declared June 4th (the anniversary of the Trianon Peace Treaty) a public holiday called the Day of National Unity. At the same time, Hungarian officials began to refer to the treaty as the "Trianon Peace Dictate," as it refers to the respective bills adopted in 2010.[65] Unlike in the past, when Hungarian government officials sought to solve problems in bilateral relations through EU insti-

tutions, after 2010 we can speak of the de-Europeanization of Hungarian "national policy" by transferring it to the bilateral level or by implementing unilateral actions. This stems from the negative attitude of EU member states and institutions towards the policy of "soft revisionism," but also from the general deterioration of relations between Hungary and most EU member states as a result of the criticism of internal political developments in Hungary. This course continues despite the fact that the verbal confrontation between Slovakia and Hungary has gradually subsided after 2011, which is the result of the efforts of Orbán's efforts to gain the position of a regional leader. However, the Hungarian government continues to take steps that cause tensions in mutual relations, such as the purchase of land or historical monuments by the Hungarian state in southern Slovakia. The policy of "soft revisionism" thus continues, albeit in a less spectacular form than in the past, while, conversely, its mobilizing power has declined.

This is particularly true in the case of Slovakia, where there has been a deradicalization of Slovak ethno-nationalist groups playing with the so-called Hungarian card in their political rhetoric and, after 2012, the Hungarian Coalition Party, as the more radical component of the political representation of Slovak Hungarians, did not even get into parliament.

4. Conclusions

While the Slovak-Hungarian relationship after 1918 was transformed from a dispute over the recognition of the uniqueness of Slovaks as a nation, and thus a political ac-

[64] https://www1.pluska.sk/spravy/z-domova/fico-stretnutie-madarskym-premierom-bolo-uspesne-foto-video
[65] Sadecki, Andrzej, "The Long Shadow of the Treaty of Trianon: Hungary's Struggles with the Past", *OSW Point of View,* no. 80 (Warsaw: Centre for Eastern Studies 2020), 19-20.

tor, to a dispute over the status of national minorities or state borders, the Bulgarian-Macedonian dispute concerns the recognition of the identification of the Macedonian population as a community distinct from the Bulgarians. In this respect, the disputes are of a different nature. What they have in common is the absence of respect on the part of Bulgaria, or Hungary respectively, for the sovereignty of the neighbouring states. As the issue of the status of minorities abroad is one of the highly sensitive topics of internal politics in both states, and similarly the so-called "Hungarian card", i.e. playing with the fear of Hungarian territorial revisionism in Slovakia and, in the similar way, "Bulgarian card" in North Macedonia, the escalation of the above conflicts depends on the dynamics of internal political developments in the respective countries. For these reasons, there is little chance that a change in the positions of the two states could occur in the short term.

The Bulgarian-Macedonian dispute resembles the Slovak-Czech dispute in terms of its content. It resulted in the so-called velvet divorce in 1992, which, however, was not in the nature of historical reconciliation, but rather could be described as a Czech-Slovak settlement, similar to the Austrian-Hungarian settlement of 1867, i.e,. a mutual recognition of both actors as equal partners. In the case of both the Slovak-Czech and the Bulgarian-Macedonian relationship, there can be no talk of "reconciliation," as the two sides, despite their different interests, did not consider each other enemies and there were no warring conflicts between them. The Slovak-Hungarian relationship has a different character, which also contains elements of "reconciliation," but the mutual discourse, at least in the past,

also contained enmificatory elements, which are sometimes instrumentally used by the political representations of both states and the Hungarian community in Slovakia, even today. It is thus characteristic of the Slovak-Hungarian relationship that the process of reconciliation between the two states has not been completed, if by reconciliation we mean the "closure" of several conflict issues in the form of a spectacular and binding gesture by the highest representatives of both states, enjoying moral authority on both sides of the border. On the other hand, the conflicting topics in mutual relations do not represent a topic of political mobilization in the Slovak domestic political discourse after 2010, neither among the Slovak majority nor among the Hungarian minority.

The Europeanization of bilateral conflicts was beneficial in the case of resolving disputed issues between Slovakia and Hungary in a situation where both states were in the same position (i.e. candidate states) in relation to the EU. Thus, Hungary in the 1990s, unlike Bulgaria, had only limited opportunities to Europeanize disputes with its neighbors and to exert pressure on its neighbors through European institutions, on the other hand, it had such a chance in the case of Slovakia's accession to the Council of Europe. In the case of Bulgarian-Macedonian relations, the different positions of the two countries (Bulgaria as an EU member since 2007 and North Macedonia as a candidate for membership) allows Bulgaria to act from a position of more powerful actor. Bulgaria has demonstrated its ability not only to Europeanize the resolution of the bilateral dispute with North Macedonia, which partly affects fundamental attributes of its state sovereignty, but also to "Bulgarianize," and thus

nationalize, the foreign policy of the EU, which has thus had to address a topic that is primarily the subject of Bulgarian domestic political discourse. However, in the end, stirring up such conflicts undermines the positive effects of the EU enlargement process in the region, which is why Bulgaria's course of action ultimately represents a de-Europeanization factor. In the context of EU integration, and especially in the pre-accession process, it was crucial for Slovakia to communicate with relevant partners at several levels - with EU institutions, Member States, and especially with neighboring countries.

In the context of Slovak-Hungarian relations, it can be considered a success for Slovakia to have been able to integrate Hungarian minority political representation into decision-making processes in the Slovak Republic. Hungarian political parties were part of the government coalition in 1992-1990 (the Hungarian Civic Party representing the liberal-oriented minority of the Hungarian community in Slovakia), later in 1998-2006 (Hungarian Coalition Party) and finally in 2010-2012 and 2016-2020 (Most-Híd - a mixed Slovak-Hungarian party). In bilateral state-to-state relations, the two states have managed to identify common interests both at the EU level and in the Central European region. This has contributed to the fact that issues related to the "legacy of Trianon" or the consequences of the Second World War have remained on the agenda of mutual relations, even if they are not the only ones. Slovak-Hungarian relations can be used as an example to show that an incomplete process of historical reconciliation need not be an obstacle to the de-escalation of mutual confrontation and successful regional cooperation. At the same time, neither the same geopolitical orientation, nor the common membership in the EU and NATO mean that unresolved issues from the past lose their importance in bilateral relations. Relationship building at the bilateral level remains an important part, indeed a precondition, of EU accession and, in the post-accession period, of successful participation in its structures.