

The Bulgarian-Macedonian *Hala* Meets EU Hypocrisy

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In the mythology of Slavic people living in the Balkans, the *hala* is a moody vicious dragon tormenting villages with thunderstorms and depriving them of harvest. While legends diverge, in some regions, it is believed that this supernatural ruthless monster eats children and hurts adults (on the *hala*'s numerous powers, [see Ronesa Aveela, *Spirits & Creatures Series Collection: Household Spirits, Rusalki, Dragons & Dragon Tales*](#)). The *hala* could be a metaphor for the Bulgarian-Macedonian tensions over cultural identity. Once in a while, this monster makes a sudden appearance on either side of the Bulgarian-Macedonian border and demonstrates its bad temper. According to Bulgarian mainstream beliefs, the Macedonian *hala* heartlessly devours Bulgarian history and threatens the fruit of Bulgarian culture. From a Macedonian perspective, the Bulgarian *hala* cruelly engulfs the EU future of Macedonian children and threatens Macedonian identity.

In the latest chapter of Bulgarian-Macedonian relations marked by the [Bulgaria-Macedonia Friendship Treaty of 2017](#) and the subsequent notorious Bulgarian veto, the Bulgarian-Macedonian *hala* started living an EU life. However, will this EU life finally calm down the *hala*, especially after the bilateral protocol of July 17th, 2022 supplementing the treaty and paving the way to Macedonia's EU negotiations?

To answer this question, we need to delve into the dynamics of EU accession negotiations and the characteristic features of the Bulgarian-Macedonian *hala*.

In the EU, Politics Sadly Trump Principles

When it comes to the Bulgarian-Macedonian controversy, many analysts have expressed concern that the EU looks unprincipled in the eyes of countries aspiring for EU membership. The hard

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truth, however, is that in the EU politics usually trump principles – the Union often looks unprincipled even in the eyes of its own citizens.

The most obvious relatable example I can give is the appointment of Ursula von der Leyen as President of the EU Commission. She was appointed in overt violation of the [Spitzenkandidaten process](#) because she was not the lead candidate of any of the European political parties. In fact, she did not even run in the 2019 EU elections.

Source: freepik.com

Sadly, we often see heavily politicized decisions by the EU Commission which have negative repercussions for EU citizens and their fundamental rights. Despite Boyko Borissov's assaults on Bulgaria's rule of law, the EU Commission's reports on Bulgaria under the [Cooperation and Verification Mechanism \(CVM\)](#) supposed to help the country strengthen its rule of law were traditionally full of praise, legitimizing purposeful dismantling of checks and balances. The EU Commission engaged in further dual standards vis-à-vis the rule of law by [activating Article 7\(1\)](#) of the Treaty on European Union against Poland but not against Hungary, even though the rule of law backsliding in Hungary was equally dire. This year, the EU Commission has faced [burning criticism](#) for “surrendering its leverage” and giving up an opportunity to hold Poland accountable for its systemic breaches of the rule of law by approving the country's recovery plan without seeking adequate assurances for the protection of the rule of law.

Accession is a Heavily Politicized Process

The dynamics of EU accession are no different from the EU's usual *modus operandi*. Accession has always been a highly politicized process in which most key decisions take place behind a thick curtain and often through arm-twisting. With the introduction of the Copenhagen criteria (the so-called pre-accession conditionality) in view of the 2004 enlargement, the EU tried to transform the accession process from purely political to politico-legal. Surprisingly, those unacquainted with the latest EU enlargements seem to believe that the EU takes decisions based on strict criteria.

The reality is that the criteria are rather fluid. In his monograph [EU Enlargement and the Failure of Conditionality. Pre-accession Conditionality in the Fields of Democracy and the Rule of Law](#), Prof. Kochenov explains that in the fifth wave of enlargement in 2004 “the application of the principle of pre-accession conditionality was marked by resounding failure, if it was applied at all”. In her book [European Union Enlargement Conditionality](#), Eli Gateva gives examples of purely political decisions to close some chapters in the negotiations with Romania. The very fact that Bulgaria and Romania were admitted to the EU in 2007 even though [they did not fulfill the accession criteria on the rule of law](#) shows how political enthusiasm often trumps sober judgment.

In the case of Macedonia, the case is no different, albeit with a few nuances. In earlier work (see, for instance, [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)), I have argued that the Bulgaria-Macedonia Friendship Treaty is not so friendly because it purported to establish a Ministry of Historical Truth. You will see that the article published in Brussels subsequently got deleted without an explanation and is now [only available](#) via the Way Back Machine Internet Archive. Did I say anything scandalous, or

did I just strike a nerve? In all pieces, I concluded that political meddling in history is often perilous. Other examples of historical reconciliation, such as the French-German *rapprochement* post-WWII, have shown us that patience and dialogue rather than pressure seem key. Above all, the Bulgaria-Macedonia Friendship Treaty looks like an arm-twisting tool for there is no equality of bargaining power. Yet, probably many of you remember how key figures in Brussels [cheered](#) when this treaty was signed in 2017.

This cheer was an obvious sign that the ideologists of this treaty were in Brussels, too – what I have consistently [argued](#) since the infamous Bulgarian veto. In 2020, Sofia just did a political favor to powerful players in Brussels who wanted to delay accession talks with Macedonia and Albania – that was the political mood at the time. Boyko Borissov’s government had an excuse in the shape of this treaty as well as some actors capable of delivering a performance, albeit mediocre, around it. The Macedonian audience probably still remembers how Borissov’s foreign minister Ekaterina Zaharieva “surprisingly” transformed from a fervent supporter of Macedonian EU membership into a spokesperson of Krassimir Karakachanov, leader of far-right (Bulgarian) VMRO, almost overnight.

In this light, the latest [protocol of July 17th](#) looks like a mere façade allowing interested parties to get out of a rather awkward situation and to succumb to new geopolitical imperatives. It is well-known that because of the war in Ukraine, the US has been encouraging the EU Commission to bring the EU family closer together. This, of course, is important to maintain peace in Europe. The protocol full of unnecessary verbiage allows Bulgaria’s government to explain the U-turn in its foreign policy to its citizens, permits Macedonians to be congratulated on their achievements (what has changed since 2020?), and provides the occasion for the EU Commission and European leaders to tap both Bulgaria and Macedonia on their shoulders. A perfect PR face-saving move in front of the masses, is it not?

Now that this protocol is part of Macedonia’s EU negotiations framework, the good and the bad news is that the decision on whether this protocol has been complied with will be entirely political, too – it will depend somewhat on the political weather in Bulgaria and Macedonia, but mainly on the clouds in the Brussels area, including the Atlantic gusts of wind.

The Bulgarian-Macedonian *Hala* is a Political Animal, Too

Bulgarian-Macedonian tensions have a long complex history which is difficult to summarize in a short article – from the Bulgarian Revival and Liberation from the Ottoman Empire, through failed Bulgarian Unification, wars (Balkan Wars, WWI, WWII), and policies of the communist Comintern, to Todor Zhivkov’s radical turn in policy vis-à-vis Macedonia in the 1960s. Anyone making generalizations can easily be accused of foolishness and disrespect for both Bulgarian and Macedonian ancestors.

While I may be blamed for falling into this trap myself, I think that some reflection on why Bulgarian-Macedonian cultural tensions are a good façade behind which political decisions on accession can be hidden is necessary. One generalization that I believe is accurate is the following: the nature of the Bulgarian-Macedonian tensions is not merely cultural. The appearances of the Bulgarian-Macedonian *hala* depend on the geopolitical winds and the

political status quo in both Bulgaria and Macedonia. In other words, the angry *hala* sleeps in its cave, but torments our villages when cold and warm political weather fronts meet.

Historically, many politicians have abused this wound and have played with the sentiments of people on both sides of the Bulgaria-Macedonian border for purely political gains. To this end, I found a [CIA report from 1971](#) dedicated to Bulgarian-Yugoslav tensions over Macedonia, which was made public in 2011, interesting. The report presents the CIA perspective on Zhivkov's motivation to reignite the "Macedonian question" in the 1960s, abandoning Georgi Dimitrov's previous stance. Here I need to clarify that in the [current Bulgarian mainstream narrative](#) Dimitrov is a national traitor who was completely subservient to Moscow. He is also accused of threatening the lives of many Bulgarians by supporting policies forcing them to "Macedonize" (become Macedonian).

According to this report, beyond a "key means of building national pride which had been stifled by the Bulgarian Communist Party's subservience to the Soviet Union" (pp. 4-5), the Macedonian question was the main means for Zhivkov to keep "Yugoslavia at arm's length" (p. 8). "Sofia has never been comfortable about having Yugoslavia, an unorthodox, successful Communist country on its border, especially because of the sharp contrast it affords with Bulgaria's economic and political stagnation" (p. 8), the report states.

Even further, according to this report: "...the Macedonian issue has always had a character of its own and has from time to time been exploited by Moscow. Certainly, Bulgaria's Macedonian policy was developed haphazardly and has moved ahead in an erratic fashion. Some of this can be ascribed to fluctuations in Soviet policy, but some of it must also be related to Sofia's political vicissitudes and ineptitudes in the pursuit of Bulgarian foreign policy goals" (p. 8).

Could any of this be relevant to the Bulgarian-Macedonian veto of 2020? It seems to me that a country known for haphazard, erratic foreign policy can easily be exploited when geopolitically convenient. Luckily for Macedonia, the geopolitical winds are different now.

Is It Not Time to Tame This *Hala* Haunting Our Bilateral Relations?

One thing on which both Macedonians and Bulgarians can agree is that it is very difficult to agree on historical issues – there is too much baggage and memories of violence, pain, and resentment going back to at least the middle of the 19th century that cannot be ignored. Many Western analysts underestimate this issue, without having sufficient background to properly judge what the stakes are.

The "Macedonian question" is here to stay and torment our common existence just like a *hala* if we allow it to. While it is important to look for answers about our common history and try to discern facts from propaganda (both Bulgaria and Macedonia seem to have work to do!), is it not also important to learn to live together despite our diverging heavily politicized points of view? We cannot change the past, but we do have some say on our future, do we not?

If we choose to be prisoners of history in perpetuity, no fickle EU negotiation framework can save the troubled relationship between the Bulgarian and the Macedonian people. It is easy to

change school textbooks but touching the hearts of people is an entirely different matter. Some food for thought – it is well-known that school history textbooks are government-approved propaganda. While textbooks may have deficiencies, they have not prevented some Macedonian citizens to feel Bulgarian and some Bulgarian citizens to feel Macedonian. Why is that?