



## Relations between Serbia and Bulgaria, position of Bulgarian minority in Serbia and process of European integration<sup>1</sup>

*Although Bulgarians in Serbia are not exposed to discrimination, during the process of Serbia's integration to the European Union (EU), Bulgaria will insist on respecting of their rights. The intensity of the pressure will be determined by both the factual exercise of minority rights of ethnic Bulgarians in municipalities where they live, and the internal political dynamics in Bulgaria. It is possible that the official Sofia will have demands related to revision of certain historical, actual or constructed, injustices towards ethnic Bulgarians in Serbia, which will be delivered during the process of Serbia's accession into the EU. Considering the fact Bulgaria is already an EU member state, official Belgrade will have to make additional efforts to persuade nationalistic politicians in Sofia that they will do all that is possible to improve the position of ethnic Bulgarians in Serbia, especially if using of the tempting rhetoric about protection of rights of Bulgarians in "Western Outlands" could bring political benefits for those politicians in domestic political scene.*

*At the same time, according to the Serbia's legal provisions on protection of minorities, Bulgarians in Serbia have all the preconditions to preserve the natural demographic framework of their community. However, demographic trends are negative and numbers of ethnic Bulgarians in Serbia decreased around three times in the second half of the XX century. As in the case of almost all nations in the Western Balkans, overall number of people is decreasing, and with it, the numbers of minorities too. This decrease is a consequence of the bad economic situation in the state, but also of the relatively low level of state support to the education, culture and informing in Bulgarian language.*

### Historical legacy

The long history of Serbian-Bulgarian relations is mostly filled with positive experience, however, recent experiences are more negative than positive and have a stronger impact within both nations. These processes do not affect mutual relations to a great extent, but they influence the perception of those relations and cause the mutual lack of trust.

Mutual relations are often being perceived through the prism of a negative historical heritage, including the outcomes of the Serbian-Bulgarian war in 1885, Second Balkan War and the question of Macedonia, surrender of the Western Outlands (municipalities Dimitrovgrad and Bosilegrad) to Serbia in 1919 (Bulgarian perception) and "back stabbing" of Bulgaria during the Second Balkan war and First World War as well as the crimes of the Bulgarian occupation army in Serbia during both world wars (Serbian perception).

Expansionist national programs of Belgrade and Sofia that caused disputes and clashes in the past are out of place in the EU integration era. EU integration process, as a mutual goal of both states, gives a new meaning to bilateral relations through the projects of regional cooperation inspired by the EU itself. Bulgaria became a member state in

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1) This document is one of the results of the research completed during 2013 by the ISAC Fund's research team, with the support of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation. It represents a short version of analysis, conclusions and recommendations presented in a policy study "Bulgarians in Serbia and Serbian-Bulgarian relations in the light of Serbia's EU integration", which is available at the ISAC Fund's official web site.

2) "Western Outlands" ("Западните покраинни" in Bulgarian) is the term which is used in Bulgaria for municipalities in Serbia, Dimitrovgrad i Bosilegrad and in Macedonia for Strumica, which became a part of Serbia after First World War and the Treaty of Neuilly-sur-Seine signed in 1919.

2007, and from that moment, regardless of its weakness in comparison to other member states, macro-economic indicators show permanent economic improvement and transformation this country.

## **Bulgarian national minority in Serbia**

Today ethnic Bulgarians in Serbia constitute majority in the municipalities Dimitrovgrad and Bosilegrad, but they also live in smaller numbers in other municipalities, as well as in the bigger centers such as Nis and Belgrade. Bulgarian national minority is one of the best integrated minorities in Serbia, which has and exercises the following rights: right to use its own language and script, right to have education in its native language, right to maintain links with the kin state, right to preserve cultural particularities and right to be informed on mother tongue. Ethnic Bulgarians participate in all levels of governance and their influence is, at least, in proportion to their numbers. Their elected representatives mainly belong to the national level parties, in which local ethnical Bulgarians have a prominent role. Minority Bulgarian parties are becoming more and more inclined to establish coalitions with the national level parties in order to ensure the best possible position in the municipality administrations.

However, the ethnic Bulgarians are facing problems in exercising some their rights, such as the right to education and the official use of language and script. Their request is that the implementation of these rights should become automatic, without a necessary declaration, such is the case today. In addition, they face with the low funding and absence of quality content in the media in Bulgarian language. Despite all these problems, one cannot say that there is a difference in between Bulgarians and other national minorities similar in numbers in Serbia.

During summer 2013, representatives of the Bulgarian national minority have adopted the Platform Bulgarian national minority in Serbia, a joint document aimed at the improvement of the exercise of minority rights. State organs in Serbia did not express any reaction towards this, although this document itself does not represent a problem for Serbia, since it is based on questions of respecting the rights of ethnic Bulgarians and the rule of law in general.

Main argument of the ISAC Fund's Policy Study is that the framework of guaranteed rights for ethnic Bulgarians in Serbia, as well as the mechanisms for their exercise are at the satisfactory level. Therefore, it is possible, with certain improvements, to achieve the full exercise of human and minority rights for ethnic Bulgarians in Serbia. Through multilevel dialogue with national elites in Bulgaria, the question of position of ethnic Bulgarians in Serbia should be treated as a question of:

1. minority rights, in harmony with the legislative framework of the Republic of Serbia and the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of Rights and Freedoms of National Minorities;
2. a legitimate interest of Republic Bulgaria within the scope of the Framework Convention, but not as a question of "Copenhagen Criteria", due to the fact that the position of ethnic Bulgarians should not be a political, but rather a legal question and the question of available resources for the exercising minority rights; socio-economic nature, i.e. question economic development of backward regions in Serbia and economic relations of the two neighboring states, where municipalities Dimitrovgrad and Bosilegrad represent a sort of a "bridge" between them.

## **Confidence building and progress – Serbian membership in EU as the best framework for solving open questions**

Instead of continuous mutual mistrust, or revisionism attempts of the "Treaty of Neuilly-sur-Seine", which is being advocated by some nationally oriented political parties in Bulgaria, it would be much more rational to work on the improvement of the position of Bulgarian national minority in Serbia and accession of Serbia to the EU. This would contribute to the practical disappearance of the border, and therefore re-integration of "Western outlands" into the Bulgarian ethnic space, from which they have been separated since 1919. Through the EU integration of Serbia, a single market between the two states will be formed, as well as preconditions for single information and cultural spaces, and people will, as it is the case today, continue to choose the education language for themselves and for their children, as well as the language which they will use in public and private sphere. Resources which Serbia needs to invest in maintaining Bulgarian national minority in Dimitrovgrad, Bosilegrad and in other municipalities could be multiplied with EU support through bilateral and cross-border programs.

## A Way forward

Serbia's membership in the EU is the best framework for solving open questions, and the basis for it should be laid during the EU accession process.

Both sides need to acknowledge the existence of historical legacy, thus through accepting responsibility for that legacy they can make the base for the new relations in the future. They should also work on establishing the new cross-border links on both the interstate and personal levels.

Question of Bulgarian position in Serbia should be treated as a question of the rule of law and the EU membership perspective, and not as a question of self-determination.

Projected goals of both states – good neighborly relations and economic prosperity should be expressed in form of (1) maintaining and prosperity of ethnic Bulgarians in Serbia, (2) creating and maintaining neighborly atmosphere and (3) creation of conditions for economic prosperity the whole southern Serbia and the western Bulgaria.