

Становище за дисертацията

“Република Македония в българската политика (1989 – 1997 г.)”

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The doctoral dissertation entitled „Република Македония в българската политика (1989 – 1997 г.)” by Mrs К. М. Тодорова analyzes the development of Bulgarian foreign policy vis-à-vis the Republic of Macedonia (RM) from the end of 1989 and the beginning of the so-called democratization period until the beginning of 1997 and the fall of the Zhan Videnov’s government.

The dissertation based on a chronological period, analyzes the formation of Bulgaria’s policy towards RM under different governments during that period. An analysis that is primarily based upon (ample) material on the discussions that took place during that time by the main decision makers in Bulgaria – the President, Prime Minister, Foreign Ministers, diplomats, MPs involved in foreign policy (like members of the parliamentary commission on foreign policy) and the heads of various agencies with an institutional role in foreign and security policies. The dissertation makes excellent use of the available archival material, providing useful insight on how Bulgarian foreign policy on RM was being shaped at the time. The successful “narrative” is accompanied by background information on political changes that took place in Bulgaria during that time.

At the same time, the dissertation follows developments that took place at the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia during its dissolution (1990-1993), but most importantly dwells on internal political developments inside RM. On the latter, the dissertation introduces us into party-political formation that took place in RM during 1990-1991 and after, elections and government changes. Particularly interesting and important is the information provided on the perceptions Bulgarian diplomats and other officials had on the ideological features of the two dominant political forces among ethnic Macedonians, the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia and

VMRO-DPMNEE; and especially their stance towards Bulgaria. The gap between expectations and reality, concerning the true extension of pro-Bulgarian feelings in RM at the time of Yugoslavia's dissolution and the first two years following its independence becomes very clear. It is noticeable how extensive, and ultimately influential, were "romantic views", one would say misperceptions, on the identity of ethnic Macedonians and their willingness to re-discover their *Bulgarianess (българщина)*, until well after RM's declaration of independence. Misperceptions that, to a certain extent, help to understand the strong support provided by Sofia to RM's international recognition: not only it was the first state that recognized it, but state high officials, like President Zhelev, emerged as a major lobbyist for RM abroad. It is striking how unilateral support to RM became and remained state policy, following RM's declaration of independence, while important bilateral issues remained open and Bulgaria's national interests elsewhere, for example maintaining good bilateral relations with Greece (not to forget, a 'hard-won achievement' in post-1974 bilateral relations) were being undermined. As it is pointed out in the dissertation, Sofia *"е изправена пред същите проблеми – това са претенциите за наличие на „македонско малцинство“, фалишифицирането на историята и намеса във вътрешните работи чрез финансирането и подкрепата на македонистки организации... Българската дипломация не само че не търси контакт с Гърция по въпроса, но и отклонява всички опити на Атина да получи съдействие по определени затруднения"* (p. 364).

In relation to Greece there is also another issue that the dissertation brings into the fore. Namely, it contrasts the full-scale mobilization of Greece's diplomacy on the open issues it had with RM, with the "passivity" Bulgarian diplomacy displayed. Thus, when examining consultations between the deputy foreign ministers of the two countries (Bulgaria and RM) on 16-17 септември 1993, Mrs Тодорова remarks that *"От българска страна също е проявена въздържаност и не са изказани докрай причините, които водят до влошаване на отношенията. Липсва също така предупреждение, че може да се стигне до оттегляне на българската подкрепа за републиката пред международната общност. От документите се вижда, че този подход вече се обсъжда на различни нива в държавата. В случая прави впечатление, че не се пристъпва бързо към предприемането на конкретни мерки и инерцията във външната политика на България продължава"* (p. 307). While at different points she notes that *"Независимо че българската дипломация отчита*

възможността спорът между РМ и Гърция за името да се реши във вреда на България, продължава придържането към политиката на ненамеса по въпроса. Това лишава страната от възможността да се опита да повлияе на спорецките среди в своя полза и я обрича да бъде в позицията на пасивен наблюдател, който не може да защити интересите си по никакъв начин... (р. 311) В ролята на медиатор в спора между двете страни встъпва САЩ с предложение за ново име на републиката – „Северна Македония“. Въпросното понятие включва географски и българската област Пиринска Македония. Въпреки това официална реакция от страна на България няма” (р. 333).

The last point is poignantly relevant to the signing of the Prespes Agreement between Greece and RM, in June 2018, that settled most of outstanding issues between the two countries, with Bulgaria however being totally absent from considerations concerning the solutions that were suggested and found, most notably on the name “North Macedonia”. The reasons behind Bulgaria’s “diplomatic passivity” are not adequately addressed. Mrs Todorova does however point out at the Conclusion at the factors underlying the difficult position Bulgaria found itself in following November 1989: namely the collapse of the Eastern Bloc that generated fundamental security concerns for Bulgaria, forcing upon it a reorientation of its foreign policy and the difficult post-1989 social and economic transition that Bulgaria was going through. Ultimately, Bulgarian state weakness was a prime factor affecting policy making vis-à-vis RM. How exactly it played out in its foreign policy, not only towards RM, but generally, for example in its Balkan policy, is an issue that remains to be thoroughly examined.

The dissertation raises also other issues that are important not only during the period under examination, but continued after that, playing a significant role in shaping Bulgarian perceptions and decisions vis-à-vis North Macedonia, even today. Namely the disappointment felt with the attitude adopted and maintained by the Macedonian elite towards Bulgaria following RM’s independence: while Sofia was providing an “à la carte” diplomatic support on the issue of recognition, it was increasingly realized that the Macedonian elite not only was unwilling to work on developing economic and cultural relations but it was vocally maintaining its claims on minority issues and a hostile attitude to persons claiming a Bulgarian identity in RM. A disappointment that gradually turned into discontent and a lack of trust to the Macedonian elite concerning its real intentions towards Bulgaria. Both discontent and a lack of trust being

crucially important in understanding how we reached the point of adopting the so-called *Framework Position In Relation To EU Expansion And The Process Of Stabilization and Association: Republic North Macedonia And Albania* on 9 October 2019 and the toughening of Bulgaria's official position. What the dissertation does not look at where the motives behind the unfriendly posture of the Macedonian elite: was it old-fashioned, Yugoslav style, *Bulgarophobia*? Or was it concern with the ultimate aims of a neighboring state that did not recognize the Macedonian identity that was breeding insecurity and ultimately a reserved policy towards Bulgaria? Or both? In any case, that is a question that falls outside the framework of the present dissertation.

In sum, the dissertation “Република Македонија в българската политика (1989 – 1997 г.)” by Mrs Krasimira Todorova is well-written and up to the standards. It has a clearly defined structure, a research hypothesis that is being answered at the conclusion, and a solid methodology for a history dissertation, based on extensive archival work. Most importantly, the dissertation makes a valuable contribution in understanding more thoroughly the topic under examination, i.e., the formation of Bulgarian state policy vis-à-vis the RM during the period of 1990-1997, that is of interest not only to historians, but to a wider circuit of policy experts and analysts that follow inter-Balkan relations, both in Bulgaria and abroad. It is highly recommended that the author should look to its future publication.

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