

POLICY STUDY

# **BULGARIANS IN SERBIA**

AND SERBIAN-BULGARIAN RELATIONS IN  
THE LIGHT OF SERBIA'S EUROPEAN INTEGRATION







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**INTEGRATION**

WORKING PAPER

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PUBLISHERS

ISAC Fund  
International and Security Affairs Centre  
Kapetan Mišina 5  
11000 Belgrade  
[www.isac-fund.org](http://www.isac-fund.org)

Friedrich Ebert Stiftung  
Office in Belgrade  
Dositejeva 51  
11000 Belgrade  
[www.fes.rs](http://www.fes.rs)

EXECUTIVE PUBLISHER

Nikola Petrović

Žarko Petrović, Research Director

Igor Novaković, Chief Researcher

TRANSLATION

Ana Selić

DESIGN AND LAYOUT

Marko Zakovski

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## ABBREVIATIONS

CEFTA – Central European Free Trade Agreement

CEI – Central European Initiative

DS – Democratic Party

DSS – Democratic Party of Serbia

EU – European Union

GERB - Citizens for Bulgaria's European Development (a Bulgarian political party)

IPA – Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance, an EU program for candidate and potential candidate countries

LDP – Liberal Democratic Party

NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organization

NR Bulgaria – People's Republic of Bulgaria

PUPS – Party of United Pensioners of Serbia

SDA – Party of Democratic Action

SDP – Social Democratic Party

SDPS – Social Democratic Party of Serbia

SECI – Southeast European Cooperative Initiative

SFRJ – Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia

SELEC – Southeast European Law Enforcement Centre

SEPCA – Southeast Europe Police Chiefs Association

SNS – Serbian Progressive Party

SPC – Serbian Orthodox Church

SPO – Serbian Renewal Movement

SRJ – Federal Republic of Yugoslavia

SPS – Socialist Party of Serbia

SRS – Serbian Radical Party

SVM – Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians

URS – United Regions of Serbia

VMRO – Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (a Bulgarian political party)



## SUMMARY

This policy study offers an analysis of the conditions and perspectives of the Bulgarian national minority in Serbia and the manner in which this issue impacts relations between Serbia and Bulgaria and Serbia's European integration prospects. The study is based on publicly available documents and data gathered during ground research conducted by the authors in Dimitrovgrad, Bosilegrad and Sofia in 2013.

The authors analyze various aspects of the Bulgarian national minority's position, comparing them with the general condition of Serbian citizens in southern Serbia and the country as a whole. Also examined are the respect and fulfillment of minority rights stipulated by Serbia's legislative framework and international norms, as well as the distribution of political power among the Bulgarian minority's representatives in Serbia, and how this influences Serbian-Bulgarian relations in general.

The study strives to show that ethnic Bulgarians in Serbia are not discriminated against either individually or in comparison with other minorities, and that they enjoy the rights, the status and the political influence proportional to their numbers. Still, there are problems in practical realization of their minority rights, especially in education, information, and culture, mostly arising from a lack of funds available for the realization of these rights. There also exists "the legacy of the past," both in the treatment of the Bulgarian minority in Serbia and concerning relations between the two countries, which affects the perception of Bulgaria in Serbia and vice versa.

Although it has no territorial pretensions toward Serbia, Bulgaria will insist that the rights of ethnic Bulgarians in Serbia be respected, primarily in the municipalities of Dimitrovgrad and Bosilegrad, where the Bulgarian minority forms an absolute majority. This insistence will depend on the measure to which the rights of the Bulgarian minority in these municipalities are respected, as well as on the internal political dynamics in Sofia. It is quite possible that during negotiations on Serbia's accession to full-fledged EU membership the official Sofia will come forth with requests that certain historical – real or construed – injustices toward Bulgarians in Serbia be rectified.

The legal position of Bulgarians in Serbia allows this national minority to uphold its natural demographic boundaries. As in the case of most Western Balkans peoples, however, including the Serbs, negative trends – i.e. a decrease in numbers – is noticeable. This is caused by the poor economic situation and weak central government's support to Bulgarian-language education, culture, and information.

Bulgarians are among the best-integrated national minorities in Serbia, with a right to use their own language and script, be educated in their maternal language, keep ties with their mother country, preserve their specific culture, and be informed in their mother tongue.

In view of the fact that Bulgaria is an EU member state, Serbia will have to exert additional efforts to convince nationally-conscious politicians in Sofia that it will continue to improve the position of ethnic Bulgarians – especially if their rhetoric urging the protection of the

rights of Bulgarians in the “Western provinces”<sup>1</sup> continues to bring them political points. Historical narratives in both Serbia and Bulgaria are rife with true and alleged evidence, based upon medieval and Ottoman borders, Ottoman church-administration boundaries and the like, of this territory belonging to one or the other state. These historical narratives, however, do not play an important role in present relations between Serbia and Bulgaria, both occupied with their European integrations processes. Still, they could trigger a conflict in the future, and this is why it is important not to include them in a debate on the rights of the Bulgarian national minority, or the relations between Bulgaria and Serbia.

The issue of the position of Bulgarians in Serbia can be raised from the viewpoint of the rule of law and the prospect of EU membership, but certainly not from the standpoint of the right of nations to self-determination. **The fundamental thesis of this policy study is that the rights of Serbia’s Bulgarians, and the mechanisms for their realization, are well provided for and that it is possible, with adequate improvements, for the Bulgarians in Serbia to exercise their minority rights fully.** Nevertheless, it is necessary to establish a dialogue on several levels with the national elites in Bulgaria so they will understand the position of their compatriots in Serbia as:

- (1) An issue of minority rights, in accordance with laws of the Republic of Serbia and the Framework Convention on the Protection of National Minorities of the Council of Europe;
- (2) An issue of legitimate interest to the Republic of Bulgaria within the Framework Convention, outside the jurisdiction of the Copenhagen Criteria, as the position of Bulgarians in Serbia should not be regarded a political but a legal matter, hinging upon the resources available for ensuring minority rights;
- (3) A socio-economic issue related to the development of Serbia’s underdeveloped regions and the economic ties of two neighboring countries, between which the municipalities of Dimitrovgrad and Bosilegrad serve as a bridge.

In this way both countries could attain their declared goals – good neighborly relations and economic prosperity. Serbia should set the following goals for up-keeping minority rights in order to: (1) ensure the continued presence and prosperity of Bulgarians in Serbia, (2) create and maintain a good-neighborly atmosphere, and (3) foster conditions for economic prosperity of the whole of southern Serbia and eastern Bulgaria.

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<sup>1</sup> “Western outlands” (“Западните покрайнини” in Bulgarian) is a term used in Bulgaria for the municipalities of Dimitrovgrad and Bosilegrad in Serbia, and Strumica in Macedonia - awarded to Serbia, i.e. to the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, after World War I.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## TO THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA AND THE REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA

1. Political elites in Belgrade and Sofia should jointly admit the existence of a difficult historical legacy, and base their future relations upon a mutual, publicly declared responsibility for this legacy. This, for example, should involve mutual apologies for crimes committed in the territories which changed hands during the two world wars, for unjustified wars, and for mutual attacks. Also, both sides should insist on marking and jointly celebrating the non-controversial and positive moments of their common past.
2. New border crossings for the population of municipalities of Dimitrovgrad, Babušnica, Surdulica and Bosilegrad should be opened as soon as possible, wherever the citizens on both sides of the frontier deem a local border regime should be established.

## TO THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA

3. The authorities in the Republic of Serbia should seriously examine the recently published Platform of the Bulgarian national minority in Serbia, and formulate a road map or an action plan of comprehensive, continuous, and positive practical measures toward the Bulgarian national minority in Serbia, as well as toward the Republic of Bulgaria.
4. The Government of Serbia should set up a special scholarship fund for young Bulgarians to study in Serbian universities, and return to Dimitrovgrad and Bosilegrad as graduates integrated into Serbian society, instead of immigrating to Bulgaria.
5. Additional education of the state administrative bodies (preferably in cooperation with national ethnic minority councils) in Pirot and Pčinja districts should be effected, taking into account individual and collective national minority rights prescribed by Serbian laws, as well as by the Framework Convention on the Protection of Human Rights of the Council of Europe. Institutions not under the local administration's jurisdiction should, in accordance with Serbian laws and as soon as possible, adopt measures regulating the use of Bulgarian language as a minority language.
6. Renaming Dimitrovgrad into Caribrod should be encouraged. Caribrod is the old name of this municipality, still in use among the local population, especially since Caribrod carries no negative inter-ethnic connotations.
7. Reduce bans on members of radical political parties in Bulgaria entering Serbia to a minimum, and have them apply only to persons with violent past and a record of criminal or misdemeanor convictions.
8. Bosilegrad is situated in a geographical pocket, without links to main roads in Serbia, and improvement of its road and other infrastructure should be carried out according to a well-devised plan. Because of its specific position and ethnic composition, the opening of a duty-free zone and other economic exemptions should be considered. A similar approach should be used for some other municipalities in Serbia.
9. A customs terminal should be opened in Bosilegrad as soon as possible, to enable the Ribarci border crossing to be opened to trade as well.

10. Importation of information material and books from Bulgaria should be facilitated, especially of those available on the Internet.
11. In cooperation with the Bulgarian National Minority Council, the process of accreditation of all elementary and high school textbooks in Bulgarian for students attending Bulgarian-language classes should be accelerated.
12. The Serbian government, in cooperation with the Bulgarian National Minority Council and non-government organizations, should improve conditions for education in Bulgarian language and set up and maintain a corps of qualified teachers.
13. It is necessary to review the success of the projects aimed at the Bulgarian national minority so far financed by the Government of the Republic of Serbia. This should help prepare a long-term strategy of support to national minority projects based on their actual needs. Transparent criteria for issuing grants to organizations promoting and protecting the rights of Bulgarians in Serbia should also be formulated.
14. The Republic of Serbia should adopt a more pro-active approach to cooperation with the Republic of Bulgaria. In contrast to the attitude displayed in most neighboring countries, the public in Bulgaria favors Serbian culture, language and entertainers, a fact so far neglected by politicians in Serbia. A closer and more open cooperation with the Republic of Bulgaria is necessary, not only for the sake of resolving open issues but for overall development of Serbia's south.

#### TO DIMITROVGRAD AND BOSILEGRAD MUNICIPALITIES

15. Local authorities in these two municipalities should post on their official public-information boards announcements in Bulgarian, informing the citizens they can use Bulgarian in communicating with state bodies;
16. Bilingual signs with settlement names should be erected in these two municipalities wherever none yet exist;
17. Communal inspectors should visit all sites of religious significance and improve their condition with assistance from state bodies, instead of letting citizens do that themselves;
18. Basic economic problems should be determined and remedies for them initiated, either through construction of new border crossings or customs offices, or by creating opportunities for attracting investments or donations. Local budgets should be program-oriented to improve the investment climate and attract investors;
19. These two municipalities (perhaps along with the municipalities of Babušnica and Surdulica) should work together with the Republic of Serbia on a strategy of local tourism development and of systemic development of tourism, taking into account that the number of Bulgarian tourists is constantly rising. Many local tourist destinations are decrepit and closed (such as Zvonačka Banja [spa]), and should be revitalized and promoted.

## TO THE LEADERS OF THE BULGARIAN NATIONAL MINORITY IN SERBIA AND BULGARIAN NATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

20. It is necessary to stop using controversial terminology such as “Western provinces,” i.e. their use should be limited to historical matters and should not refer to the present political situation or the actual Serbian-Bulgarian frontier. Further, extremely problematic terms such as “genocide,” “violence” and similar should be completely avoided. Such qualifications are not compatible with a desire for harmonic coexistence of Serbs and Bulgarians in the future. It is necessary to advise politicians in Bulgaria not to use them either, especially when anniversaries of certain events in Serbia are marked;
21. Positive examples in Serbian-Bulgarian relations should be underlined and should serve to encourage cooperation between the two peoples (such as of King Milutin, Prince Mihailo, Vasil Levski, and others).
22. Politicians in Bulgaria should be discouraged from organizing events involving inflammatory rhetoric, since that can create ethnic tension, or, at least, they should refrain from attending such happenings.

## TO THE SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

23. Terms such as “Shopi” and “Shopi language” should no longer be used, since almost no ethnic Bulgarian perceives himself/herself as a “Shop” ethnically; these terms should be used only to refer to the regional culture and dialect;
24. In order to improve relations between the two nations in the long run, ways for better cooperation between the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Bulgarian Orthodox Church in the territory of Serbia should be found, based on examples of SPC’s cooperation with other Orthodox churches.
25. Ways should be found to have people originating from a locality serve as priests in it. If necessary, the Serbian Orthodox Church should cooperate with the Bulgarian Orthodox Church in having Bulgarian nationals trained as priests (through student exchange programs, or similar).

## TO THE BULGARIAN NATIONAL MINORITY COUNCIL

26. It should monitor whether local newspapers carry enough articles of interest to the Bulgarian national minority in Serbia;
27. Additional efforts should be invested to resolve the issue of approval of Bulgarian-language textbooks;
28. Spending should be made more transparent and financial reports published.



# INTRODUCTION

## THE ISSUE OF MINORITIES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

Ever since the dissolution of the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires, ethnic issues in the Balkans have been among the main sources of conflicts and clashes. They were very evident during the two world wars, but also during the wars for Yugoslav succession of the 1990s. In the latter case, they were caused by the dissatisfaction – primarily of Serb, but also other – ethnic elites with the newly-established countries' frontiers, which did not correspond to ethnic reality. Thus, Kosovo acquired independence citing the ethnic principle, whereas Macedonia underwent an ethnic clash between the dominant Macedonian population and ethnic Albanians in 2001, while in June of the same year Serbia had a similar experience in its three southern municipalities – Preševo, Medvedja and Bujanovac. As of recent, calls for the creation of a so-called “natural Albania”<sup>2</sup> coming from ethnic Albanians living in four different countries are becoming ever more frequent, loud and numerous.

The response of the International Community – except in the case of Kosovo – consisted of a specially-tailored solution for each individual case, always involving the participation of minorities in local- and central-level governments, the introduction of the rule of law and of norms regulating minority issues, while offering prospects of including the countries experiencing such problems in the EU. In other words, such solutions are based on legal-political agreements that in a foreseeable future promise sustainable economic development on the road to EU accession. All other talks on the position of minorities are being resolved by politically and legally binding decisions passed by EU institutions, whereby national political elites are discouraged from endangering the prosperity of their electorates by insisting on ethnic issues.

In recent history Bulgaria experienced no major ethnic conflicts, especially not such as its western neighbors in the former Yugoslavia. Still, national sentiments toward fellow Bulgarians living in Serbia and Greece – and especially in Macedonia – are quite strong. For, official Sofia recognizes Macedonia as a sovereign state, but not the existence of the Macedonian language.

## SERBIA, BULGARIA AND BULGARIANS IN SERBIA

Relations between Serbia and Bulgaria have been improving during the past twenty years. Until recently, the impression was that there are no misunderstandings, and that Bulgaria will be one of EU member-countries that will unreservedly support Serbia's accession with the EU. When, however, it became clear that Serbia will become a candidate for EU membership, the situation changed.

Several statements and comments by Bulgarian politicians suggest that Serbia's accession with the EU could be tied to resolving the status of the Bulgarian national minority in Serbia. Although the rhetoric of these statements and comments is legalistic, the legacy of two world wars – when Bulgaria took advantage of its position with the Central Powers and the

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<sup>2</sup> Dušan Reljić, “Promene granica u kartama ponovo na Zapadnom Balkanu [Border Changes on the Maps Reappear in the Western Balkans]”. U Očekuj neočekivano, Deset situacija na koje bi trebalo paziti, [Expect the Unexpected, Ten Situations to Keep an Eye On], Volker Perthes and Barbara Lippert (editors), (SWP Research Paper, January 2012), p. 31.

Axis to expand its territory at the expense of Serbia – weighs upon the Serbian public to mistrust Bulgaria

On the other hand, complaints by the Bulgarian national minority concerning their position in Serbia warrant an objective analysis and an adequate response by the Serbian government. Thus, the most striking such comment came from the Bulgarian vice-president, Margarita Popova, who, while visiting Bosilegrad on Orthodox Easter 2012, told the Bulgarian national radio in the town's Cultural and Information Center that Serbia will not be able to continue its integration with the EU without resolving the issue of its ethnic Bulgarians in a satisfactory manner.<sup>3</sup> This statement was not an isolated one, and the position of ethnic Bulgarians in Serbia is occasionally raised by the Sofia political elite as an issue of primary importance in relations with Serbia, despite a very dynamic cooperation in many other fields. Similarly, Marin Raykov, the Bulgarian interim prime minister after the resignation of Bojko Borisov's government, said in May 2013 that the rights and freedoms of Bulgarians in Caribrod (Dimitrovgrad) and Bosilegrad "are playing an important role in assessing the progress of our western neighbor toward European integrations"<sup>4</sup>

Relations between Bulgaria and Serbia in the past several years have also been marred by several ethnically-motivated incidents. One of them occurred on November 28, 2010, when the Serbian Interior Ministry stopped several buses with members of the Bulgarian nationalistic party Ataka from crossing the Serbian border in order to prevent the repetition of incidents from previous years. The Ataka members were traveling to Bosilegrad to mark the 91<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Neuilly<sup>5</sup>. Volen Siderov, the party leader, and supporter of the-then minority Bulgarian government of GERB, led by Prime Minister Bojko Borisov, threatened to block the border with Serbia, demanding a response by the Bulgarian Foreign Ministry, as well as a review of its support for Serbia's accession to the EU.<sup>6</sup> Siderov previously also frequently questioned Serbia's territorial integrity by asking for the revision of the Treaty of Neuilly, according to which the "Western provinces" were given to Serbia.<sup>7</sup>

Using EU membership as a lever to influence a neighboring state is no novelty, but older member-countries are increasingly uncomfortable with such an attitude of its members which share borders with candidate countries of the Western Balkans. For instance, certain EU members have blocked or are still blocking the skipping of some stages in the EU accession process. Thus, Slovenia had been blocking Croatia's membership over a territorial dispute,<sup>8</sup>

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3 "Bugarska može da stavi veto na EU zbog bugarske manjine [Bulgaria Could Veto Serbia for EU over Bulgarian Minority]", VP Novinite, [http://www.novinite.com/view\\_news.php?id=138536](http://www.novinite.com/view_news.php?id=138536), (taken over on April 20, 2013)

4 "Progres Srbije ka EU povezan sa manjinskim pravima Bugara" [Serbia's EU Progress Linked to Bulgarian Minority Rights], Balkan Insight, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/serbia-s-eu-progress-depends-on-fate-of-bulgarian-minority>, (taken over on May 15, 2013)

5 According to the 1919 Treaty of Neuilly-sur-Seine between Bulgaria and the Entente Powers following the First World War, territories of Caribrod (Dimitrovgrad), Bosilegrad and Strumica in Macedonia, a part of land around the Timok River and a stretch of land connecting Bulgaria to the Aegean Sea were taken from Bulgaria and reparations ordered. The treaty is known in Bulgaria as the „Second National Catastrophe.“

6 "The Bulgarian minority: Life in Serbia as in a colony," Vestionline, <http://www.vesti-online.com/Vesti/Srbija/99970/Bugarska-manjina-Zivot-u-Srbiji-kao-u-koloniji>, (taken over on May 5, 2013); "Bulgarian rightist threaten to block the Serbian-Bulgarian border", Blic, <http://www.blic.rs/Vesti/Politika/220194/Bugarski-desnicari-prete-blokadom-srpskobugarske-granice> (taken over on May 5, 2013).

7 "Entry of Bulgarian rightists prevented", B92, [http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2010&mm=11&dd=27&nav\\_id=475313](http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2010&mm=11&dd=27&nav_id=475313), (taken over on May 27, 2013).

8 The most drastic such example was the dispute over the Bay of Piran between Slovenia and Croatia, because of which Slovenia significantly delayed the closing of certain chapters in Croatia's negotiations with the EU. Since then, older EU members view such practice with disapproval, which might have prompted Croatian officials to pledge shortly before the country joined the EU that once they obtain full-fledged membership they will not treat other candidate countries in the same way.

Greece is blocking Macedonia over its name, Serbia was blocked on several occasions, and the issue of minorities was raised even by Romania, which in May 2011 threatened to block candidate status for Serbia, if the position and the education of Romanians (Vlachs) in Serbia were not resolved properly.<sup>9</sup> Serbia had similar talks with Hungary, but after a bilateral agreement signed in the first half of 2013, this issue – at least for the time being – was dropped from the agenda.

The ISAC Fund, with support of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation's Belgrade office, has launched a project to shed light on the existing open issues involving the position of the Bulgarian national minority in Serbia, and the relations between the two countries. This policy study is the outcome of research whose purpose is to offer practical solutions to matters involved in resolving them. The implementation of suggestions from this study would improve the situation and help avoid potential misunderstandings. This would help Serbia's progress toward full-fledged EU membership without unnecessary delays.

## SERBIAN-BULGARIAN HISTORICAL TIES

Relations between Bulgaria and Serbia are mutually frequently viewed through the negative prism of past legacy, especially the so-called fratricidal Serbian-Bulgarian war of 1885, but of other events as well. Bulgarian perception is also influenced by the causes and the outcome of the Second Balkan War and the Question of Macedonia, as well as by the ceding of the "Western provinces", i.e. the municipalities of Dimitrovgrad and Bosilegrad, to Serbia (The Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes) in 1919. In Serbia's view, in the Second Balkan War and World War One, Bulgaria's actions amounted to "a stab in the back" of Serbia, while atrocities of the Bulgarian occupation army in Serbia during both world wars are particularly painfully remembered. The two countries, however, have a much longer history of relations and numerous examples of good cooperation, conducive to promotion of much closer ties between them.

For, Serbian-Bulgarian relations can be traced to the early Middle Ages, when the first Bulgarian and Serbian states were founded. Although from time to time they fought each other for dominance, noticeable cultural and political communication was established. Its legacy persists to this day. The greatest Serbian saint, St. Sava (Nemanjić) was much revered by Bulgarians even during his lifetime. Thus, the Bulgarian Emperor Ivan Asen II refused to allow his remains to be returned to Serbia after the saint's death in 1236, in Trnovo. The Bulgarian church and nobles supported his decision. Only when Serbian King Vladislav personally went to Trnovo did they relent, and let him take the remains back. The remains of yet another member of the Nemanjić Dynasty, the St. King Milutin, rested in Sofia since the second half of the 15th century, testifying to the neighborly closeness and mutual respect of the two peoples. At the end of the 19th century they were transferred to the Holy Sunday Church (also called the Saint King's Church, Bulgarian: църква „Света Неделя“) in the very center of the Bulgarian capital. As a saint, King Milutin means much to the Bulgarian church and nation, and his day is celebrated in Bulgaria every year on October 30.

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<sup>9</sup> Dogovor kroz zadnja vrata da da Srbiji status kandidata" [„Backdoor deals give Serbia EU candidate status“], Euractiv, <http://www.euractiv.com/enlargement/backdoor-deals-give-serbia-eu-ca-news-511245> (taken over on May 12, 2013)



The casket of King Milutin in the Church of Holy Sunday in Sofia

The last major Serbian-Bulgarian battle of the Middle Ages took place in 1330, at Velbazhd (today's Kyustendil). After the battle, some western territories that were part of the Second Bulgarian Empire were incorporated into Serbia. Following the collapse of Serb Emperor Dušan's empire, these and some other territories became part of the Principality of Velbazhd, ruled by the Serbian noble and Emperor Dušan's nephew, Prince Constantine Dejan Dragaš. During his rule, the Monastery of St. John Theologian (the so-called Poganovo Monastery) was built. Today it lies in Serbia and is of great importance to Bulgarians and their church. From 1878 to 1918, it stood on Bulgarian territory, and from 1871 until 1918 it was under the jurisdiction of the Bulgarian Exharchy.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, after the fall of Bulgaria to Turks in 1393, Bulgarian refugees in Serbia strongly influenced the development of Serbian culture in the Serbian Despotate of Stefan Lazarević. Undoubtedly the most prominent among them was Constantine the Philosopher, the biographer of Despot Stefan Lazarević, and the originator of the Resava School.

The Enlightenment, and the liberation movements against the Ottoman Empire, gave a new impetus to Serbian-Bulgarian ties. Cultural and church leaders such as Pajsije of Hilandar, Jovan Rajić, Dositej Obradović and others renewed and codified the tradition of remembrance and encouraged the nascent national elites in both Serbia and Bulgaria. But, though these tendencies helped renew the ties between the two peoples, they also created a basis for territorial aspirations, to which neither country remained immune.

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<sup>10</sup> The Bulgarian Exharchy was the autocephalous Bulgarian Christian Orthodox church, from which the current Bulgarian Christian Orthodox Church derives its continuity. It was formed in 1870 by a decree of the Turkish sultan, but without the consent of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. The Sultan's goal was to support Bulgarian Christians against the Greeks who dominated in the Ottoman Empire's Orthodox Church, as well as to aid them in their opposition to Serbia's further expansion. Until the Second Balkan War the seat of the Exharchy was in Istanbul, after which it was transferred to Sofia. Although its original territory was smaller, after a plebiscite of believers in 1874, the Exharchy was expanded to include the entire Vardar and Pirin Macedonia. Until 1878, it also held jurisdiction over the whole of present-day south Serbia.

Serbian Prince Mihailo Obrenović attempted twice (in 1862 and 1869) to organize refugees from Bulgaria into a military unit – the Bulgarian Legion – to be used against Turkey and to foment rebellion in Bulgaria that would liberate that country from the Turks. One of the most prominent Bulgarian heroes, Vasil Levski, was a Legion member. He was given training, arms, and financial assistance in Serbia, for an uprising against the Ottomans.<sup>11</sup> Prince Mihailo also advocated a united Serb-Bulgarian state, but all his aspirations came to naught with his assassination in 1868. Today, Levski has a monument in Belgrade, while Prince Mihailo recently had one erected in Sofia.



A monument to Prince Mihailo Obrenović in Southern Park in Sofia

Belgrade and Sofia's maximalist national programs led to increased misunderstandings and then to conflict, the consequences of which are still felt. Pretensions toward so-called Torlaks, i.e. Shopi (a nationally-ambivalent ethnic group dwelling roughly from the Pirot district to Sofia, and from Zaječar to Štip, speaking the so-called Torlakian-Shopi dialect) and the Slavic population of Macedonia (Vardar Macedonia primarily) resulted in a series of clashes viewed very differently by the participants:

1. The attempt to create the so-called "San Stefano Bulgaria" in 1878, by the Treaty of San Stefano, caused great resentment in Serbia, because territories liberated by the Serbian army – primarily Pirot and Vranje – and believed to be inhabited by a Serbian-majority population were supposed to be annexed to Bulgaria.
2. The Serbian-Bulgarian war of 1885, in Bulgaria called fratricidal, was started by Serbian King Milan over the union of the Principality of Bulgaria and Autonomous Eastern Rumelia. In King Milan's view, this undermined the international and regional order established by the 1878 Treaty of Berlin. Bulgarians, however, were deeply offended by the war, believing Serbia had no true reason to attack them. The war ended with Serbia's severe defeat of at the Battle of Slivnica.
3. The Second Balkan War broke out because of Bulgaria's dissatisfaction with the circumstances on the ground in the wake of the First Balkan War, and the pretensions of both countries to entire Vardar Macedonia. There is much resentment to this day in Bulgaria because Macedonia, perceived by the Bulgarians as a territory inhabited by their compatriots, was "taken away" from the mother country. On the other hand, in Serbia the consensus – to be enhanced by Bulgarian activity in both First and Second World War – was that Bulgaria stands always ready to "stab its Slavic and Orthodox brothers in the back."

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<sup>11</sup> Except for Levski, other Bulgaria's national heroes participated in these events, such as Georgi Sava Rakovski, Stefan Karadzha, Vasil Drumev, et al



The Tašmajdan Park in Belgrade. The inscription in Serbian and Bulgarian says: "In June 1862, in the engagement against the Turkish garrison at Kalemegdan, volunteers from the Bulgarian Legion, founded by Georgi Rakovski, also participated. Among them was the apostle of freedom Vasil Levski."

4. Bulgarian participation in the First World War in coalition with the Central Powers, and with the Axis Powers in the Second World War, resulted twice in its occupation of southern and eastern Serbia – and numerous atrocities against the local population which the Serbs still remember, and the Bulgarians avoid mentioning.

After the defeat of the Axis Powers and the coming of Communists to power in both countries, new relations were established. The leaders of Yugoslavia and Bulgaria – Josip Broz Tito and Georgi Dimitrov respectively – planned the creation of a Yugoslav-Bulgarian Balkan Federation. The first step toward that was made by the signing of the Bled Agreement on August 1, 1947. The initiative, however, was terminated by Joseph Stalin who saw the proposed state a threat to his authority in Eastern and Southeastern Europe. He punished Yugoslavia by issuing the 1948 Resolution of the Inform-bureau and expelling it from the Soviet bloc. A firm border between Yugoslavia and Bulgaria was established – its effects particularly felt in Dimitrovgrad and Bosilegrad, Bulgarian-majority municipalities placed under special police and army surveillance.

During the Cold War, especially at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of 1980s, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia – its Socialist Republic of Serbia most of all – served the People's Republic of Bulgaria as a window to the West through which Serbian entertainers and other cultural content (such as movies and TV series, along with those from the West) entered the country, bringing the Bulgarians and Serbs closer to each other<sup>12</sup>

This cultural and linguistic affinity came to be partly reflected in political sentiment as well. Bulgarian citizens reacted very negatively to the 1999 NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, though the Bulgarian Government allowed NATO to use that country's airspace.

With the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, however, European integrations became the goal of both countries. Since then, bilateral relations obtained a new purpose through various regional cooperation projects inspired by the EU. Bulgaria was accepted into the EU in 2007, and, since then – regardless of all its shortcomings when compared to other member countries – its macro-economic indicators are showing constant progress.

## **A SURVEY OF COMPLAINTS OF BULGARIANS IN SERBIA**

The basic problems facing Serbia's citizens of Bulgarian nationality – discounting poverty and economic backwardness of southern Serbia – are the rights to education in their own language and to the official use of their language and script, as well as the manner and the degree of automatism in the exercise of these rights. Another problem is a lack of Bulgarian-language textbooks, especially in humanities, since their contents in this contested area differ greatly. Also, though the use of Bulgarian is allowed for official purposes, citizens cite problems related to translations that cause delays and waste of time, discouraging them from the use of their mother tongue. In addition, in the past thirty years the education system favored the Serbian language, which induced most minority Bulgarians to opt for

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12 Bulgarians are still very receptive to cultural contents coming from Serbia. Folk singers from Serbia have been performing in Bulgaria almost on a daily basis since the 1980s. Serbian film production is also very popular with the Bulgarian public, and movies are regularly screened in local cinemas, a practice rare elsewhere. On the other hand, Bulgarian cultural contents are not present in Serbia and, when they are, are received with scepticism, probably because of the SFRY's onetime economic superiority over Bulgaria. But, in sports, Bulgaria is more successful, in the five previous Olympic Games – even when Serbia was competing with athletes from Montenegro – having won two to six times more medals than Serbia. Still, sports cooperation is very good, since many Serb athletes train in Bulgaria, and play in the Bulgarian Primary Soccer League.

Serbian as their native idiom. The reason they cite for this is to avoid delays and unnecessary obstacles. Also, citizens are under the impression that national issues of ethnic Bulgarians are subordinated to the interests of political parties with a dominant influence in the Bulgarian National Minority Council.

The most vocal organizations when it comes to the rights of Serbia's Bulgarians are the Helsinki Committee for the Protection of Rights and Freedoms of Bulgarians in Serbia and the Culture and Information Center of the Bulgarian National Minority in Bosilegrad. Complaints these two organizations frequently lodge concern the historic perspective of the position of Bulgarians in Serbia, claiming that the current position of this ethnic group is but a continuation of the policy of discrimination and assimilation conducted first by the Yugoslav, i.e. Serbian authorities in the "Western provinces" between the two wars, and after 1960, when the Macedonian Question was once again opened between SFRJ and the People's Republic of Bulgaria.<sup>13</sup> These two organizations frequently use the terms "genocide", "assimilation", and "Greater Serbian chauvinism" when describing the positions of Bulgarians in Serbia, stating, for example, that 63,000 ethnic Bulgarians lived in the "Western provinces" in 1960, while only 20,500 of them lived there in 2001.<sup>14</sup> They also favor historic revisionism, claiming that the entire Torlak population living in eastern and southern Serbia (which they call the "Bulgarian Morava Basin" ("Българско Поморавие," in Bulgarian) are more or less of Bulgarian origin, and that the current state of affairs is the outcome of assimilation begun in 1878.<sup>15</sup>

They demand a more active and forceful role of Bulgaria in resolving the „Bulgarian Question in Serbia“, and on several occasions directly demanded from Bulgaria to take advantage of Serbia's current position. They are against the creation of a „Shopi nation‘ out of the Bulgarian ethnic body in Serbia“, a „project“ they accused not only Serbia of carrying out, but official Bulgaria as well, when Bojko Borisov was that country's prime minister.<sup>16</sup>

## A PLATFORM FOR THE PROTECTION OF RIGHTS OF THE BULGARIAN NATIONAL MINORITY IN SERBIA, JULY 2013

According to RTV Caribrod, in July 2013 "the Bulgarians in Serbia reached consensus for the first time."<sup>17</sup> The declaration – certainly the most serious attempt to rally together all elements of the Bulgarian minority in Serbia, such as the representatives of the Bulgarian National Minority Council, of all Bulgarian minority parties in Serbia, its non-government organizations and trades associations<sup>18</sup> – contains, among others, the following requests and proposals:

1. That Serbia and Bulgaria sign an inter-state Friendship Treaty, to enable cooperation in improving the position of the Bulgarian national minority through a joint working group

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13 A Memorandum, the Culture-Information Center of the Bulgarian National Minority Bosilegrad, 2009, p. 3.

14 Ibid, p. 2

15 Ivan Nikolov, Bulgarians in Yugoslavia, the last remaining Versailles inmates (Българиите в Югославия - последните Версайски заточеници), the Culture-Information Center of the Bulgarian National Minority Bosilegrad, Bosilegrad, 2002, p. 4.

16 "Serbia has nothing in common with the Western provinces (Сърбия няма нищо общо със Западните Покрайнини!)", <http://planinitenabulgaria.blog.bg/turizam/2011/11/29/syrbia-niama-nishto-obshto-sys-zapadnite-pokrainini.858687>, (taken over on April 29, 2013).

17 The signing of a platform for the protection of rights of Bulgarians in Serbia, RTV Caribrod, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ghQ99QvAMjs>, (taken over on July 25, 2013).

18 This attempt was obviously not fully successful, because President of Bosilegrad Municipality Vladimir Zaharijev, failed to attend the gathering.

- that would formulate the concrete measures to that end (primarily through support of various projects, and the upgrading of the road infrastructure);
2. That the provisions of the Serbian Constitution, and all the laws and international legal norms pertaining to national minority rights, be fully implemented, with special stress upon mandatory preschool, elementary and high school education in Bulgarian for members of the Bulgarian national minority that would be automatic. Particularly stressed was a lack of adequate textbooks, the two countries' education ministries being urged to resolve that problem;
  3. A resolution of problems pertaining to publishing and the media. This primarily involves financing of the Niš-based Bratstvo publishing house of the Bulgarian National Minority Council, a comprehensive solution of informing the Bulgarian minority in its maternal language, a reintroduction of Bulgarian-language programs and shows on the National Radio and Television Service (RTS), and free import of printed material from Bulgaria, as well as access to Bulgarian-language TV programs.
  4. That services in Bulgarian and in accord with the canons of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church be allowed, based on the practice exercised by other "brotherly Orthodox churches in Serbia." Also, renaming the churches considered the "cultural and historic heritage" of the Bulgarian national minority should end, and priests of the Serbian Orthodox Church should stop moving into these religious buildings;
  5. It is particularly urgent to take concrete measures to preserve monuments and cultural heritage in the municipalities where the Bulgarian national minority in Serbia lives, and to support their cultural organizations;
  6. Questions pertaining to the use of written Bulgarian in administration and the judiciary, where conditions for that exist, should be resolved, in addition to preserving Bulgarian place-names, and bilingual public, traffic, and road signs;
  7. A social and economic identity card of the Bulgarian national minority should be compiled, and economic initiatives launched to prevent further economic deterioration of these municipalities, and negative demographic trends;
  8. The European Union on its part should take a more "critical approach," and take the position of Bulgarian minority in Serbia into consideration while assessing the degree to which the Copenhagen Criteria have been met. The Republic of Bulgaria is asked to request from Serbia the preservation of the ethnic Bulgarians' cultural, linguistic and religious identity.

Interestingly, this initiative was launched during the summer, when the public's attention is diminished due to the vacation season, and when hardly anything is happening on the political scene. Furthermore, a reconstruction of the Serbian government was also in progress, which helped divert the attention from this document. The only institution that responded to the Memorandum was the Bosilegrad Church Municipality of the Serbian Orthodox Church's Vranje Eparchy. Its reaction was focused on the Platform's Item 12, dealing with the confession of faith, but also pertained to some other items as well. The Church Municipality of Bosilegrad denied the Platform's accusation of a "group gathered in Niš,"<sup>19</sup> of malice and spreading untruths.

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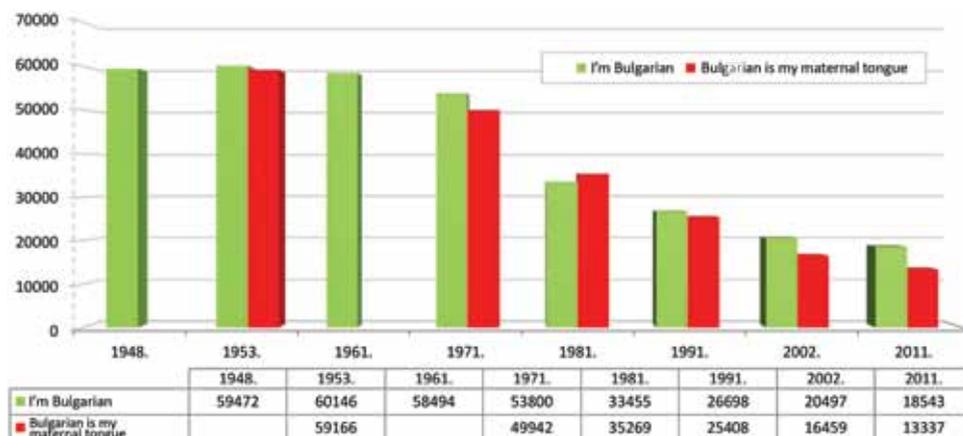
<sup>19</sup> The Church Municipality of Bosilegrad, Public Announcement, The internet portal of the Vranje Eparchy of the Serbian Orthodox Church, <http://www.crkvenaopstina.bosilegrad.com/2010-02-01-10-32-19/120-saopstenje-za-javnost2.html>, (taken over in July 2013).

# BULGARIANS IN SERBIA

## CONCEPTS AND FACTS

Since 1948, the number of ethnic Bulgarians in Serbia was diminished by two-thirds and continues to drop, both according to official and unofficial statistics.

Graph 1: Drop in the number of Bulgarians since 1945



According to official data of the Serbian Statistics Bureau, there are 18,543 Bulgarians living in Serbia. This figure is seriously contested by official Bulgaria and the Bulgarian elites in both countries, for they consider it a result of decades-long suppression of Bulgarian identity by Serbian and Yugoslav authorities. It is also partly an outcome of ethnic mimicry of Bulgarians themselves, which is a consequence of individual opportunism and a historic legacy of the 1948 Resolution of the Inform-bureau.<sup>20</sup> Geographically, Bulgarians are a majority in two municipalities in eastern and southeastern Serbia – Dimitrovgrad and Bosilegrad. Several hundred of them live in municipalities of Babušnica (Pirot district) and Surdulica (Pčinja district). A small number can be found in Pirot, Vranje and Niš. In Ivanovo, near Pančevo, and in Belo Blato, near Zrenjanin, there are several hundred Bulgarian Roman Catholics.

Population according to ethnicity

	Total	Serbian	Bulgarian	Bulgarians in %
Republic of Serbia	7186862	5988150	18543	0.258012
Pančevo	123414	97499	501	0.41
Babušnica	12307	10933	632	5.14
Dimitrovgrad	10118	2819	5413	53.50
Bosilegrad	8129	895	5839	71.82
Surdulica	20319	16233	734	3.61

<sup>20</sup> Interviews with ethnic Bulgarians in Serbia

Population according to maternal language

	Ukupno	Srpski	Bugarski	Bugarski u %
Serbia Total	7186862	6330919	13337	0.19
Pančevo	123414	111523	201	0
Babušnica	12307	11524	492	4
Dimitrovgrad	10118	5251	3437	33.97
Bosilegrad	8129	1307	6599	81.18
Surdulica	20319	17480	295	1.45

Source: Statistical office of the Republic of Serbia

When analyzing the position of Bulgarians in Dimitrovgrad and Bosilegrad it is impossible to neglect the question of why the number of those saying Bulgarian is their maternal language is 10 percent lower than the number of those considering themselves Bulgarians. It may also be interesting to find out why some 20 percent of Dimitrovgrad Bulgarians do not claim Bulgarian as their maternal tongue. The difference is too significant to be neglected and warrants a thorough explanation.

In Serbia there are 5,000 more people who consider themselves Bulgarians, than those who consider Bulgarian their maternal language.

Official data from Dimitrovgrad casts a shadow on the claims by local Bulgarian minority representatives whom our researchers spoke with, that their compatriot townsmen are “afraid” of stating their true ethnicity. According to the 2011 census, ethnic Bulgarians number more than a half of that municipality’s population (in the words of our collocutors, for the first time ever), and there is no grounds for the fear that may have existed in the socialist era. Some mimicry may be explained by habit, but not by today’s repressive state policies, even if there was some repression during the Cold War. On the other hand, the issue of the ethnic Bulgarians’ maternal language is serious, since 20 percent of Bulgarians of that municipality no longer consider Bulgarian their mother tongue. This is probably due to a combination of neglecting Bulgarian in education programs and cultural and information contents during the past thirty years, and to personal choices of individuals opting for one of the two kindred Slavic languages.

The situation in Bosilegrad is somewhat different because only 10 percent of its Bulgarians speaking Bulgarian as their maternal language do not consider themselves Bulgarian. It is difficult to provide a logical explanation of this, since Bulgarians occupy the leading positions in local administration, courts, and prosecutor’s offices. It is not officially known how many of them are on the local police force, but their presence in law enforcement is undeniable. The “fears” of Bosilegrad residents engendered by the previous times are explainable, but free choice of individuals should neither be neglected.

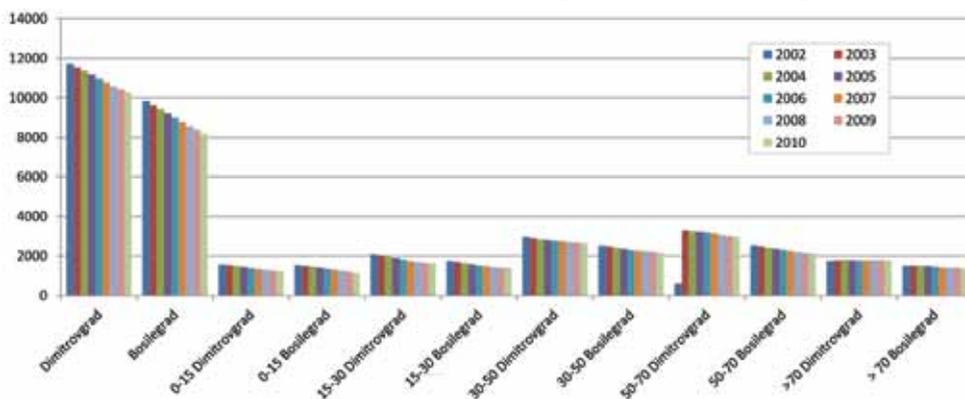
There are ideas in Bulgaria that a majority of inhabitants of Dimitrovgrad and Bosilegrad municipalities are of Bulgarian origin, but that their ethnicity was systematically suppressed by Serbia’s authorities. Simultaneously, there are claims in Serbia that all inhabitants of the area stretching from the town of Trn to almost as far as Sofia, and to Vidin to the north, are of Serb origin. These ideas are based on medieval maps of the realm of Despot Constantine

Dejanović, and 19<sup>th</sup> century ethno-linguistic theories classifying the entire Torlak and Shopi population as Serb, following a logic similar to that of the above-mentioned Bulgarian theories.

## THE DEPRESSING DEMOGRAPHY OF SOUTHERN SERBIA

Bulgarians are getting old and leaving southern Serbia. Migrations toward urban centers in Serbia, and toward Sofia and other Bulgarian university centers, where students have been receiving full scholarships since 1993, are economically-motivated, and cannot be ascribed to any direct pressure from Serbian authorities. They do not differ from the migrations of Serbs themselves, in the direction of Niš, Belgrade, and Western Europe.

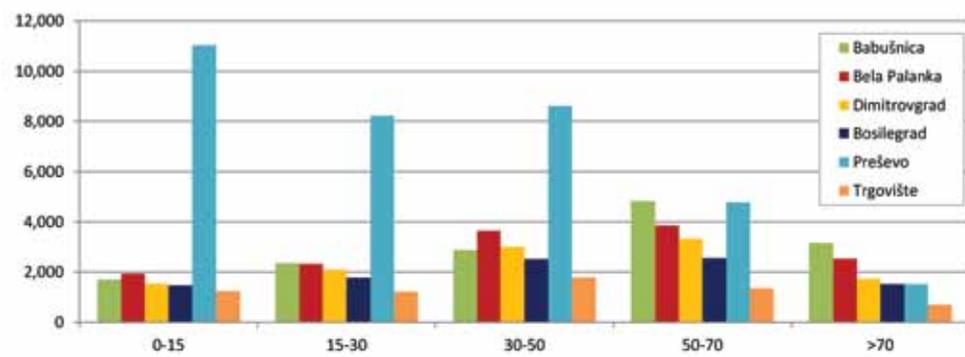
Graph 2: Estimated drop in the number of inhabitants in Bulgarian municipalities by age (2002 - 2010)



Source: Statistical office of the Republic of Serbia.<sup>21</sup>

Compared to other municipalities in southern Serbia – those with large number of national minority members (Preševo) as well as those sharing similar socio-demographic characteristics – the Dimitrovgrad and Bosilegrad municipalities have more or less the same age structure. The only exception is the majority Albanian municipality of Preševo, whose population is markedly younger.

Graph 3: Population age groups in southern Serbia (according to 2002 census)

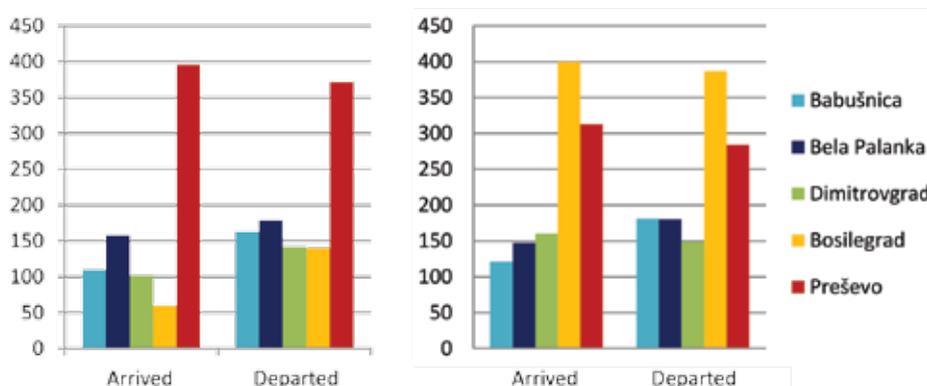


21 Population estimates are being conducted in the period between two censuses and are based on the results of the previous census and the data on the natural and mechanical population migrations.

<http://webzr.stat.gov.rs/WebSite/Public/MethodologyHelp.aspx?IndicatorID=180303IND01&Areas=false>, (taken over on May 20, 2013).

In general, Bulgarians – much like the other inhabitants of southern Serbia – are leaving this region. The following table shows internal migrations, mostly in the direction of larger cities in Serbia or regional centers, but it does not show the ever more frequent migrations to Bulgaria. Also, as of recently, more Bulgarians moved to Niš (128), Zaječar (68), Vranje (238), and Pirot (95) than before.<sup>22</sup>

Graph 4: Internal migrations in southern Serbia in 2010 and 2011



## THE FAILING ECONOMY OF SOUTHERN SERBIA

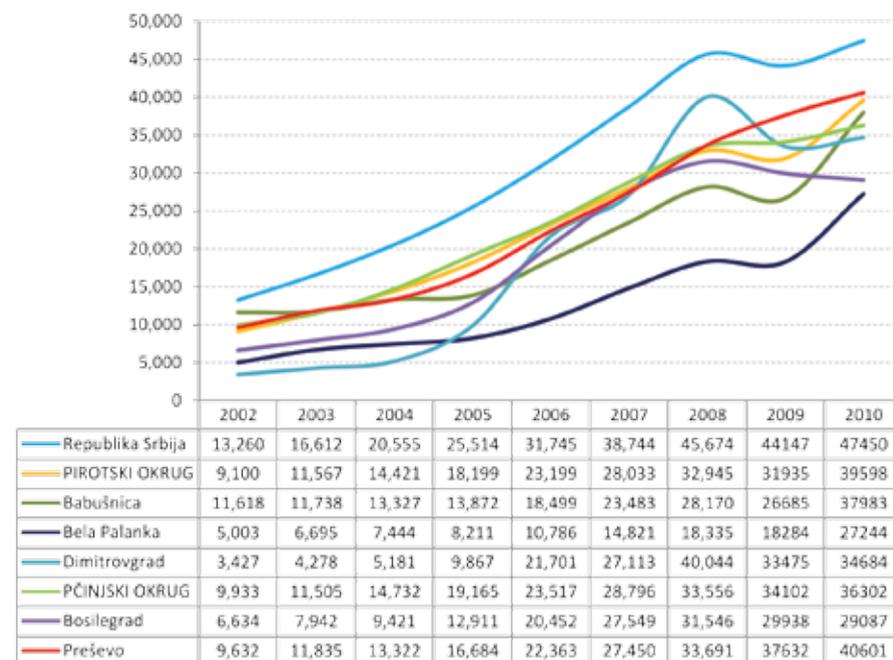
Economic conditions in all municipalities in southern Serbia are poor. Still, according to data from the graph and the table below, there is no significant difference between the position of the Bulgarian majority municipalities of Dimitrovgrad and Bosilegrad, and other southern Serbian municipalities. Although they continue to figure below the Republic of Serbia's average, until 2009 the municipalities in the south showed an upward trend in average gross salaries. Since the Serbian average includes the province of Vojvodina and the capital city of Belgrade, it is no surprise that Dimitrovgrad and Bosilegrad – and other municipalities in southern Serbia – share a similar fate. Both Bulgarian majority municipalities are generally on par with the regions they belong to. This is particularly important in the case of Bosilegrad, which, though an isolated municipality with very unfavorable starting positions, still manages to follow the average

Dimitrovgrad and Bosilegrad have a markedly different economic position. Dimitrovgrad is a frontier municipality, astride one of the most important regional corridors, and is a customs outpost, only some 70 kilometers from downtown Sofia. Bosilegrad is an isolated municipality, away from the nearest major corridor about an hour's drive. Dimitrovgrad is rather well off compared with neighboring municipalities, though it is still below Serbia's average. Bosilegrad is among Serbia's poorer municipalities. Dimitrovgrad is close to Sofia with its millions of inhabitants, and offers a great variety of good restaurants with favorable prices. In them, the ban on smoking and the EU rules on food preparation are not rigidly enforced. That, together with their popular brass bands, attracts Bulgarians from western Bulgaria, to the benefit of the local economy. Also, Dimitrovgrad profits from exporting food

<sup>22</sup> Changes in ethnic structure in Serbia between the 2002 and 2012 censuses, <http://www.makroekonomija.org/demografija/etnicke-promene-u-srbiji-između-popisa-2002-2011-13-bugari/>, (taken over on May 20, 2013)

to Bulgaria, as it does from weekend tourists from Sofia, desirous of good entertainment or of visiting local religious sites, primarily the Poganovo monastery.

Graph 5: Average gross salaries compared to those in Serbia, Pčinja and Pirot districts



This export-oriented economy, however, is not doing very well. According to the Agency for Economic Registers – covering communities, limited responsibility societies, and public companies – of enterprises registered in these municipalities in 2005, or taken over from court registries, only about a half are still active today.

Economic societies	Active	Excised from the register	Bankrupt or in liquidation	Total
Dimitrovgrad	68	28	5	101
Bosilegrad	32	17	7	56

Except in Bosilegrad, whose population believes the area would profit much from the opening of a customs outpost, similar complaints come from other places in southern Serbia. It appears, however, that a customs post will allegedly be opened in 2014, facilitating cross-border trade with Bulgaria. The local population also thinks the opening of yet another border crossing between Dimitrovgrad and Zaječar would intensify border-area contacts between the two countries, and settle some unresolved property matters.

On June 27, 2007 Bulgaria and Serbia agreed to construct and open new border crossings at the village of Novo Korito, municipality of Knjaževac in Serbia, the village of Salas, municipality of Belogradcik, in Bulgaria<sup>23</sup>, the village of Petačinci, municipality of Babušnica in Serbia, and the village of Bankja, municipality of Trn in Bulgaria<sup>24</sup>. Moreover, each side also agreed to build the infrastructure necessary for the crossings to function properly. These pledges, however, are yet to be realized.

## PRESERVING BULGARIAN NATIONAL MINORITY IN SOUTHERN SERBIA

### BULGARIAN-LANGUAGE NEWS MEDIA: BROADCASTERS

Until recently, Serbia's Bulgarians had at their disposal three newspapers, two radio stations and a TV station (RTV Caribrod) in their language. Until 2005, Radio Niš broadcast three hours of program in Bulgarian weekly, but offers only 15-minute such daily programs since.<sup>25</sup> Our interviewees, however, inform us that a RTV Bosilegrad is ready to broadcast; electronic media have programs in both languages. In both municipalities programs provided by cable TV providers from Bulgaria can also be accessed, thus contributing to the diversity of the media scene.

Still, basic objections in this regard revolve around a lack of money and of good-quality contents in the Bulgarian-language media, i.e. a lack of shows dealing with the issues of importance for the preservation of the Bulgarian minority in Serbia. Local TV Caribrod in Dimitrovgrad broadcasts about one half of its shows in Serbian and the other in Bulgarian. Also, according to our collocutors, Radio Bosilegrad broadcasts about 70 percent of its program in Bulgarian and 30 percent in Serbian. This roughly corresponds to the ethnic structure in that municipality, though the official ethnic structure – owing to ethnic mimicry – says otherwise. There are no Bulgarian-only broadcasters. Although this seems appropriate for Dimitrovgrad, the situation in Bosilegrad requires more reporting in Bulgarian. It is important to note that Bulgarian-language broadcasters mostly use the Shopi dialect of Western Balkans Bulgarian, which differs somewhat from official Bulgarian. Journalists use it because it is their maternal tongue.

A journal in Bulgarian and other shows have been broadcast by the Serbian Radio and TV for several years, but were cancelled during the 1999 bombing of Yugoslavia. Ethnic Bulgarian representatives told our researchers that a reintroduction of a Bulgarian-language journal by the National Public Service's Niš Studio would contribute to better informing in Bulgarian.

In the 2007-2011 period, the Republic of Serbia had set aside RSD5,192,525 (or close to EUR50,000) to finance various projects aimed at improving the capacities of the local electronic media, and producing Bulgarian language programs.<sup>26</sup> Funds were allocated both

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23 Law on the confirmation of the agreement between the Government of the Republic of Serbia and the Government of the Republic of Bulgaria on the opening of a border crossing Novo Korito (Republic of Serbia) and Salas (Republic of Bulgaria), (the Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, International Agreements, No. 42/2009).

24 Law on the confirmation of the agreement between the Government of the Republic of Serbia and the Government of the Republic of Bulgaria on the opening of a border crossing Petačinci (Republic of Serbia) and Bankja (Republic of Bulgaria), (the Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia – International Agreements, No. 42/2009).

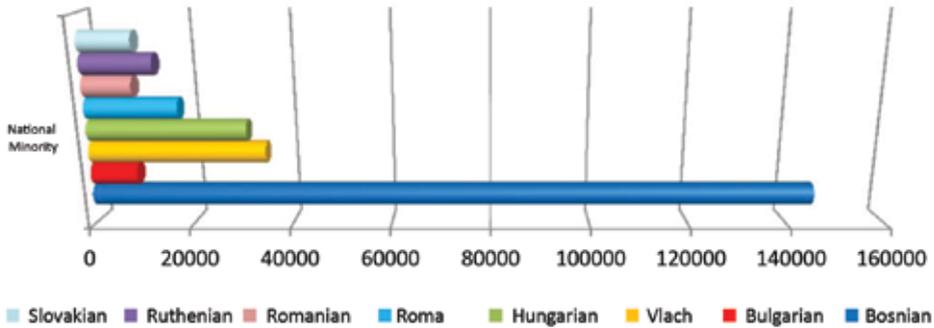
25 The second periodic report submitted to the Council of Europe's General Secretary in accordance with Article 25 of the Framework Convention on the Protection of National Minorities, MIN-LANG/PR (2010) 7, The Council of Europe, Belgrade 2010, p. 208.

26 The third periodic report submitted to the Council of Europe's General Secretary in accordance with Article 25 of the Framework Convention, ACFR/SR/III (2013) 001 Serbian version, The Council of Europe 2013, p. 169.

for equipment and concrete media contents. Still, it appears that such production did not contribute much to a promotion of any issues concerning ethnic Bulgarians and their rights; moreover, our collocutors did not mention any of these projects.

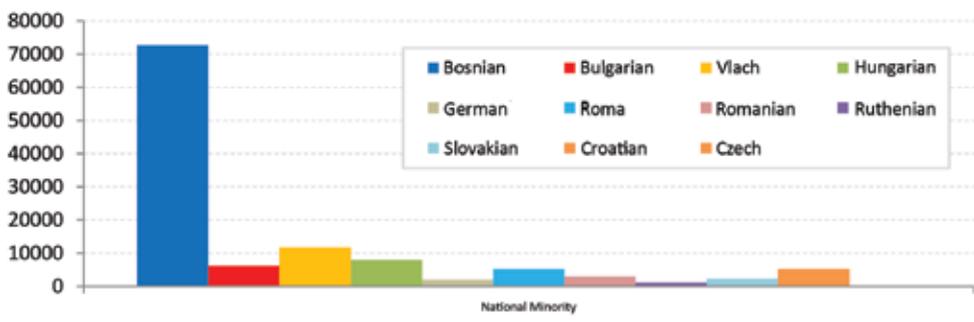
As far as the media picture is concerned, it cannot be said that the Bulgarian national minority is at a disadvantage compared to other minorities in Serbia. Serbia's Bulgarians on the average have the same number of newspapers and broadcasters per capita as other national minorities in Serbia – except the Bosniaks, who have many more

Graph 6: Number of national minority members per 1 TV broadcasting permit



Media contents from Bulgaria are accessible via cable providers, but are more difficult to obtain through ordinary antennas. They will become even less accessible once Bulgaria introduces the digital broadcasting system.<sup>27</sup>

Graph 7: Number of national minority members per 1 radio broadcasting permit



27 "Media in Bulgarian in Serbia and Bulgarians in Serbian media," JUGpress [http://www.jugpress.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=2736:mediji-na-jevicima-manjina-potreba&catid=37:jug-srbije&Itemid=58](http://www.jugpress.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2736:mediji-na-jevicima-manjina-potreba&catid=37:jug-srbije&Itemid=58), (taken over on May 16, 2013).

## MEDIA IN BULGARIAN: NEWSPAPERS<sup>28</sup>

This publishing house, founded in 1959, issues Bulgarian-language newspapers and is fully financed from the Serbian budget. Among them are the *Bratstvo* weekly from Niš, with circulation of 2,000, the children monthly *Drugarče*, with the circulation of 1,500, and the *Most* magazine, which deals with culture, art, and social issues, and is published every other month in close to 800 copies. These newspapers and magazines, however, are no longer published regularly and do not wield the same influence they used to in the socialist era – partly because of insufficient funds, and partly because many other newspapers and magazines are now available.

For subsidies (i.e. funds granted after a public competition) for Bulgarian-language print media, the *Bratstvo* publishing house received a total of RSD79,169,651 in the 2007–2011 period for operating costs and for individual projects – such as marking its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2009. From 2008 to 2011, additional RSD 780,000 were granted as assistance for periodic publications dealing with Bulgarian art and culture.<sup>29</sup>

Year	Print media	Subsidy or competition	Extraordinary funds	Purpose
2007	Bratstvo, Niš	30000000		
2008	Bratstvo, Niš	30000000	80000	Preserving the traditions of Stara Planina settlements of Pirot, Dimitrovgrad, Knjaževac
2009	Bratstvo, Niš	7513303	980000	Bratstvo's 50 <sup>th</sup> anniversary
2010	Bratstvo, Niš	7513303	350000	Magazine <i>Drugarče</i>
2011	Bratstvo, Niš	4143045	350000	Magazine <i>Most</i>

Since 2007, therefore, about RSD81 million (close to EUR880,000) were granted to the *Bratstvo* company that publishes Bulgarian-language newspapers and magazines. This is a substantial sum requiring clear insight into how and for what the money was spent, and to what effect. According to unofficial information, most of it was used for salaries, and operating expenses

Importing printed material, according to Article 6, paragraph 2 of the *Law on importing and distribution of foreign means of mass communication and foreign information activity in Yugoslavia*,<sup>30</sup> requires, however, a permit issued by the Ministry of the Interior. Item 11 of the previously mentioned Platform obliges Serbia to allow a free exchange of information with the Republic of Bulgaria, including the distribution of Bulgarian print material, radio and TV programs. Since information space has been open for some time, it is difficult to explain any problems in this regard, especially as English, French, German and Russian printed material is freely sold in Serbia. But, taking into account that some printed material in Bulgaria openly

<sup>28</sup> The second periodic report submitted to the Council of Europe's General Secretary in accordance with Article 25 of the Framework Convention on the Protection of National Minorities, MIN-LANG/PR (2010), The Council of Europe, Belgrade 2010, p. 158.

<sup>29</sup> The third periodic report submitted to the Council of Europe's General Secretary in accordance with Article 25 of the Framework Convention, ACFR/SR/III (2013) 001 Serbian version, The Council of Europe 2013, pp. 169-170.

<sup>30</sup> The Official Gazette of SFRJ No. 39/74 and 74/87, The Official Gazette of Federal Republic of Yugoslavia No. 24/94 and 28/96, and the Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia No. 43/2003, of April 22, 2003.

questions the 1919 Treaty of Neuilly, the need to control publications openly challenging Serbia's territorial integrity seems justified.

## EDUCATION IN BULGARIAN

There are two forms of education in Bulgarian: a full pre-school, elementary and high school education in Bulgarian, and as a subject titled Bulgarian Language with Elements of National Culture, taught in schools where all other courses are in Serbian. While the latter can hardly suffice to fully preserve and foster a national culture and traditions, a complete Bulgarian-language education lacks funding, textbooks, and opens the problem of integrating the graduates into higher levels of education in Serbia. Full Bulgarian-language education depends also on the desire of the parents to enroll their children in Bulgarian-language classes only. Since Serbian laws allow minority members to attend classes in their maternal tongue, concerns of the population and official Bulgaria are not without foundation.

In the 1980s, Serbian-language courses were introduced in Bulgarian schools in Dimitrovgrad and Bosilegrad, allegedly to accommodate parents who thus thought to enhance their children's prospects of studying at some of Yugoslavia's prestigious universities.

Nowadays, however, Bulgaria offers university scholarships for students from the "Western provinces." For a decade now, high school graduates from Dimitrovgrad and Bosilegrad have been using this opportunity to study in the much-closer Sofia, where all their expenses are covered by the Bulgarian state – rather than in Niš or Belgrade, where there are no such benefits. Despite a lack of official data, it is common knowledge that only a small number of university graduates return from Bulgaria to Dimitrovgrad, Bosilegrad, and the surrounding municipalities.

The situation involving Bulgarian-language textbooks is also difficult. At issue are not only the contested subjects of geography and history, but chemistry and others as well. These textbooks should be adjusted to the Serbian education program, but there are no funds to cover that. The imported textbooks, even if paid by Bulgaria, also pose the problem of adjustment to the Serbian education program.

There are three bilingual pre-school institutions in Serbia – in Dimitrovgrad, Bosilegrad and Babušnica – with some 100–150 children attending each. From 2007 to 2012, a total of 1,493 children passed through them.<sup>31</sup>

Until 2009, Bulgarian classes were taught in two elementary schools in both municipalities. But, since 2010, only the school in Bosilegrad has a full Bulgarian-language curriculum. In both municipalities, as well as in Ivanovo (near Pančevo), Babušnica, and Surdulica, only the subject of Bulgarian Language with Elements of National Culture is taught.

In April 2013 interviews with the ISAC research team, the presidents of municipalities of Dimitrovgrad and Bosilegrad said both local administrations urged the citizens to choose Bulgarian-language education for their children. They even intervened with the ministry in charge when less than 15 students (a legal minimum) applied, asking that the classes be

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31 The third periodic report submitted to the Council of Europe's General Secretary in accordance with Article 25 of the Framework Convention, ACFR/SR/III (2013) 001 Serbian version, The Council of Europe, 2013, p. 280.

organized anyway. From the Bulgarian National Minority Council, the research team also learned that parents themselves were responsible for not enrolling their children.

But, certain Bulgarian organizations in Serbia demand that children whose parents declare themselves ethnic Bulgarians must be enrolled in Bulgarian-language classes without any special procedure. Allegedly, half of information programs on local TV and radio are in Bulgarian and half in Serbian, without a single station broadcasting only in Bulgarian. The existing practice, however, reflects the ethnic structure of Dimitrovgrad, whereas Bosilegrad needs more reporting in Bulgarian. This demand should be viewed as an exercise of the right to free choice, though parents should also be fully informed of all the possibilities at their disposal.

Bulgarian-language education in elementary schools  
(Dimitrovgrad and Bosilegrad until 2010; Bosilegrad only after 2010)

School year	Number of municipalities	Number of schools	Number of classes	Number of pupils
2007/08	2	2	4	26
2008/09	2	2	4	47
2009/10	2	2	3	46
2010/11	1	1	14	98
2011/12	1	1	14	98
<b>Total</b>				<b>315</b>

Bulgarian Language with Elements of National Culture in elementary schools  
(Babušnica, Ivanovo (Pančevo), Surdulica and Dimitrovgrad)

School year	Number of municipalities	Number of schools	Number of classes	Number of pupils
2007/08	2	2	0	672
2008/09	2	2	0	675
2009/10	2	2	0	1330
2010/11	4	5	57	736
2011/12	4	5	57	736
<b>Total</b>				<b>4149</b>

Since 2007, a primer and textbooks in Bulgarian for elementary schools have been approved, along with readers for the third and fourth grades, and materials for Serbian as a non-maternal language.<sup>32</sup> Also, with a Sofia publishing house Prosveta's assistance, textbooks partly adjusted to Serbia's curricula were approved, with a recommendation that they be supplemented by adequate textbooks in Serbian: physics and astronomy for the 10th grade, and mathematics for the 9th grade. Further, chemistry and environmental

32 The third periodic report submitted to the Council of Europe's General Secretary in accordance with Article 25 of the framework Convention, ACFR/SR/III (2013) 001 Serbian version, 2013, pp. 232-233.

studies are adjusted to Serbian curriculum for grade 1 in highschoools, as is chemistry, biology, information technologies, physics, astronomy, mathematics, psychology, logic, and philosophy for upper high school grades. Problems, however, in maternal language education for members of minorities exist in Serbia as a whole, regardless of the minority in question. In his annual report back in 2008, Serbia's Ombudsman pointed out that basic problems in minority education are a lack of quality minority-language textbooks and of good teachers. To these he added outdated and unclear criteria for the import of textbooks, some elements of course structuring, and a selective attitude of education inspectors.<sup>33</sup>

Certain collocutors, however, say that a part of the responsibility lies on the Bulgarian National Minority Council, because it should decide which Serbian textbooks should be translated into Bulgarian. In general, the issue of textbooks is serious, and the institutions in charge – the Serbian Education Ministry and the Bulgarian National Minority Council in Serbia – should take this matter with due consideration, and work together to resolve the above-mentioned problems.

## CULTURE

In 2007, the Serbian Ministry of Culture announced its first call for proposals for financing projects/programs of quality, that would contribute to the development and presentation of art and culture of various national minorities. In addition to minority and ethnic communities, individuals and organizations actively engaged in multiculturalism were also eligible to apply.

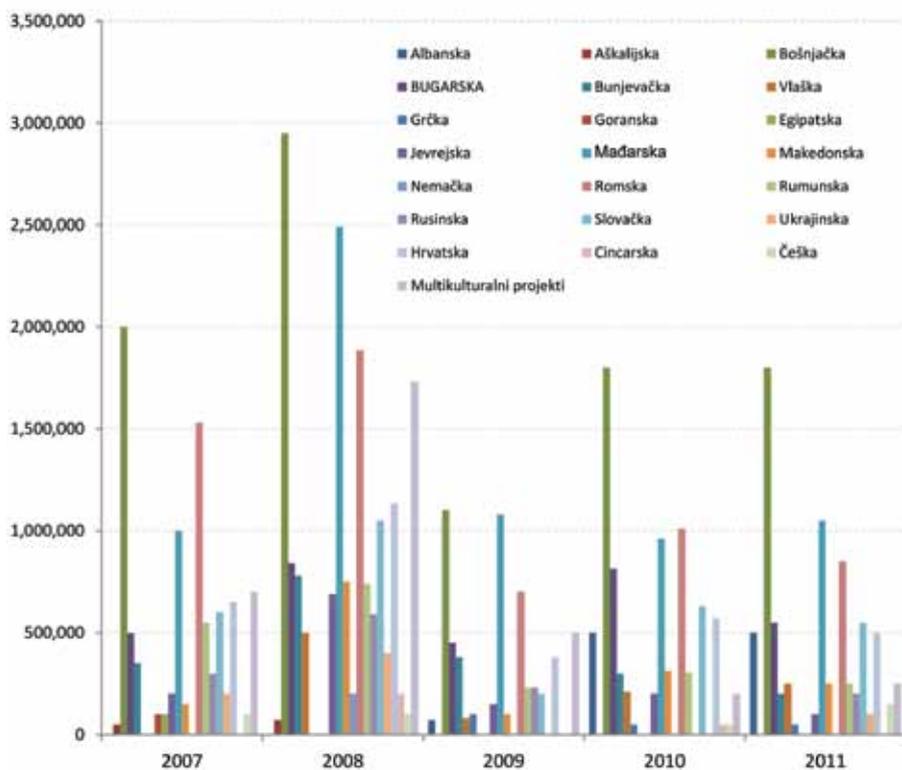
Within this framework, projects proposed by members of the Bulgarian national minority received substantial support: ethnic Bulgarians were among the top ten of the 21 national minorities in Serbia, in regard to the amounts they received. In this respect, Bulgarians in Serbia are certainly not discriminated against, especially since their National Miinority Council also has a say in which projects are to be financed. But though compared to the funds granted to other national minorities, the Bulgarians fared well, the sums – ranging from EUR5,000 to EUR8,000 – could not help them very much to develop their local culture.

National minority	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Albanian	0	0	70000	500000	500000
Ashkali	50000	70000	0	0	0
Bosniak	2000000	2950000	1100000	1800000	1800000
<b>Bulgarian</b>	<b>498200</b>	<b>840000</b>	<b>450000</b>	<b>815000</b>	<b>550000</b>
Bunjevci	350000	780000	380000	300000	200000
Vlach	0	500000	80000	210000	250000
Greek	0	0	100000	50000	50000
Goronian	100000	0	0	0	0
Egyptian	50000	0	0	0	0
Jewish	200000	690000	150000	200000	100000

33 The Ombudsman, The Regular Annual Report for 2008, The Official Gazette, Belgrade, 2009, p. 44.

Hungarian	1000000	2490000	1080000	960000	1050000
Macedonian	150000	750000	100000	315000	250000
German	0	200000	0	0	0
Roma	1530000	1885000	700000	1010000	850000
Romanian	550000	740000	230000	305000	250000
Ruthenian	300000	590000	230000	0	200000
Slovak	600000	1050000	200000	630000	550000
Ukrainian	200000	400000	0	0	100000
Croatian	650000	1135000	380000	570000	500000
Tzintzar	0	200000	0	50000	0
Czech	100000	100000	0	50000	150000
Multiculture projects	700000	1730000	500000	200000	250000

Graph 8: Financial support from the Ministry of Culture to project development and presentation of the arts and culture of national minorities (2007 - 2011)



Ideally, these competitions for funds are meant to assist projects or programs to promote national minority art and culture. Thus, ethnic Bulgarians received financial support for their book publishing, periodicals, theater shows, culture and art events. The total sum allocated to them from 2007 to 2011 was about RSD3,153,200 (about EUR34,500). If the funds to assist national minority cultures granted to them during the same period by the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina are added, i.e. RSD490,000 for Vojvodina's ethnic Bulgarian programs, the sum reaches RSD3.5 million over five years (EUR38,000.00, according to the then average exchange rate of RSD91.15 for one euro). And though the amount may be regarded as modest, it is substantial compared to what other national minorities got for the same purpose, during the same period. Further, the municipalities of Dimitrovgrad and Bosilegrad also assist their Bulgarian-language culture institutions.<sup>34</sup> Thus, *Bratstvo* publishers came out with several books in Bulgarian since 2000.<sup>35</sup>

The flow of money – and the actual effects of the projects financed by the state – are still hard to follow, there being no way to objectively assess them. In 2011, the State Auditing Institution probed the operations of the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights, but did not audit the Ministry's Fund for National Minorities, thereby making it difficult to determine the Fund's expenditure with any precision.<sup>36</sup>

## THE OFFICIAL USE OF BULGARIAN LANGUAGE AND BULGARIAN CYRILLIC

According to the *Law on the official use of language and script*,<sup>37</sup> Bulgarian language and script are in official use in the municipalities of Dimitrovgrad and Bosilegrad, as well as in Ivanovo (as stipulated by the Statute of the city of Pančevo), in the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina.

According to available data, however, citizens rarely use Bulgarian in official communication.<sup>38</sup> Also – according to ISAC research team's collocutors – in contact with judges, police, or prosecutors, the parties use the Shopi dialect of Bulgarian, while minutes are taken in Serbian. ISAC's collocutors confirm that whenever citizens ask for an interpreter during a certain procedure, one is always provided. They also said that the main reason for a more frequent use of Serbian is financial, i.e. to avoid burdening the local budget. According to them, since all parties use Serbian fluently, it is less costly to prepare all documentation in that language. In comparison, all materials for the local Assembly in Bosilegrad are prepared both in Serbian and Bulgarian.

According to official institutions, the authorities have failed properly to inform the citizens in Dimitrovgrad and Bosilegrad of their right to communicate with state bodies in Bulgarian as well as in Serbian. Since, in principle, there are no formal linguistic barriers, the citizens

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34 The second periodic report submitted to the Council of Europe's General Secretary in accordance with Article 25 of the Framework Convention on the Protection of National Minorities, MIN/LANG/PR (2010) 7, The Council of Europe, Belgrade 2010, p. 81.

35 The *Bratstvo* publishing house, founded by the Bulgarian National Minority Council, publishes editions in the Bulgarian language. In 2002, its first book appeared. Another one was published in 2003. In 2004, two books were printed, in 2005 three, and in 2006 four. Among them were the selected works in three volumes of the well-known author Detko Petrov. The second periodic report submitted to the Council of Europe's General Secretary in accordance with Article 25 of the Framework Convention on the Protection of National Minorities, MIN-LANG/PR (2010) 7, The Council of Europe, Belgrade, 2010, p. 71.

36 The State Auditing Institution, A Report on Auditing the Annual Financial Report of the Ministry of State Administration and Local Self-Government in 2011, p. 4, [http://www.dri.rs/images/pdf/revizija2012/1\\_mduls2011.pdf](http://www.dri.rs/images/pdf/revizija2012/1_mduls2011.pdf), (taken over on May 26, 2013).

37 The Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, No. 45/91, 53/93, 67/93, 48/94, 101/2005 and 30/2010.

38 The third periodic report submitted to the Council of Europe's General Secretary in accordance with Article 25 of the Framework Convention, ACFR/SR/III (2013) 001 Serbian version, The Council of Europe 2013, p. 206.

– out of inertia, or in the hope of a more favorable resolution of their case – prefer to use Serbian over Bulgarian. It is interesting to note that in most instances ethnic Bulgarians are the ones who hold positions where decisions are being made. Thus, in a dispute between the Democratic Alliance of Bulgarians and Bosilegrad’s Electoral Commission, concerning that party’s recognition as belonging to an ethnic minority, the Commission filed its decisions in Serbian, though the party submitted its documentation in Bulgarian, officially in use in that municipality. And though there was a pressing need for alacrity, all decisions could have been announced in Bulgarian, as most members of the Commission were ethnic Bulgarians. They could have communicated in Bulgarian, and, if it court proceedings turned out to be necessary, official translations could have been provided in due time.<sup>39</sup> Another, even more telling example is that of a decision of the Ministry of the Interior, the Vranje Police Administration, and the Bosilegrad police station issued to the Democratic Alliance of Bulgarians on November 19, 2010, rejecting its request to hold a public gathering, because the application was submitted in Bulgarian. In all likelihood signed by an ethnic Bulgarian, this document is a stark example of the violation of the right to use Bulgarian in Bosilegrad, and can hardly be considered an accident, or ignorance of official regulations.<sup>40</sup>

Some of ISAC’s collocutors qualified such examples as isolated instances, saying that it is very easy to obtain almost all the documents required by citizens in Bulgarian. All of them, however, agree there are problems in obtaining birth certificates and those of a clear police record in Bulgarian without a special request. The automatic issuance of these two documents in Bulgarian is very important, because local ethnic Bulgarians need them when applying for Bulgarian citizenship.

There are still problems with implementing regulations on the use of personal names ending in “–ov” (for men) and “–ova” (for women), especially in public services (for instance, health centers) which are not under state jurisdiction, and therefore not subject to strict control. Bulgarian is generally freely used for the names of places and public institutions, but members of this ethnic community have reported changes in the names of certain churches and locations in the municipality of Bosilegrad.

## RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

Bulgarians worship in churches belonging to the Serbian Christian Orthodox Church. They are mostly Orthodox Christians, though there is a large group of ethnic Bulgarians in Ivanovo and Belo Blato, in the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, who are Roman Catholics. Orthodox Christian canons do not allow a specific Orthodox church to hold services in the territory of another Orthodox church without permission. Thus, the Russian and the Romanian Orthodox Churches have such permission: the former holds services in the whole of Serbia, and the latter in the Banat region (but not in Negotin region). Considering that, allowing the Bulgarian Orthodox Church to hold services in Dimitrovgrad and Bosilegrad should be quite acceptable. When Serbian Patriarch Irinej attended the funeral of the Bulgarian Patriarch Maksim, journalists asked him whether Bulgarians in Serbia worship in Bulgarian, and he told them that church services are in Church Slavonic, the members of the

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<sup>39</sup> For instance, the decision of the Municipal Electoral Commission in Bosilegrad No. 013-33/2012, of April 23, 2012.

<sup>40</sup> Quoted according to the bulletin of the Bosilegrad Culture and Information Center No. 68-69, of March 2012. Allegedly, based on an agreement with the prosecutor’s office, the person who passed the decision, an interior ministry official, had to pay RSD40,000 in damages to the Center.

two nations understanding each other quite well.<sup>41</sup> Further, religious classes in elementary and high schools for students of Bulgarian, Vlach, and Roma ethnicity are conducted by the Serbian Orthodox Church.

The Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) is firmly against the introduction of Bulgarian-language church services. SPC is frequently the generator of disputes between Bulgarian national minority leaders and the authorities, especially with its attempts to impose the Shopi nationality on Serbia's Bulgarians. The Church has very negatively reacted to the Platform's demands that the practice of changing the names of religious facilities claimed as the heritage of the Bulgarian national minority in the Republic of Serbia be stopped, and that church services in keeping with the Bulgarian Orthodox Church's canons be allowed, having in view that other Christian Orthodox churches in Serbia are allowed to adhere to theirs.

A response by the SPC Vranje Eparchy to the *Platform* was stern. Refusing any discussions on the churches, clergy and language of the service, the Eparchy's announcement abided by a strict interpretation of the church-canon rules, suggesting the signatories of the Platform were guided by vanity in raising the question of the rights of ethnic Bulgarians to a point precluding any compromise.<sup>42</sup>

## BULGARIANS' INTEGRATION AND TRUST IN SERBIA AND PARTICIPATION IN GOVERNMENT

There are three Bulgarian national minority parties in Serbia: (1) the Democratic Party of Bulgarians (Демократическа партия на Българите) seated in Dimitrovgrad and led by Angel Josifov; (2) the Party of Bulgarians in Serbia (Партия на Българите в Сърбия) led by Dragoljub Notev, and (3) the Democratic Alliance of Bulgarians (Демократичен съюз на Българите), seated in Bosilegrad and led by Dragoljub Ivančov.

While the first two parties were founded in 2007, the Democratic Alliance of Bulgarians has been in existence since 1990.

A simple search of the Internet in Bulgarian reveals numerous activities of this party concerning the rights of the Bulgarian national minority in Serbia. In 2010, this group protested against a statement by the Bulgarian Parliament Speaker Cecka Cačeva, that Bulgaria unconditionally supports Serbia's integration with the EU, believing that such support should be tied to the rights of ethnic Bulgarians in Serbia and prevention of "the policy of [their] forcible assimilation," especially concerning the right to education and informing.<sup>43</sup> Frequently using the designation "Western provinces" for the territory of Dimitrovgrad and Bosilegrad, thereby suggesting they belong to Bulgaria, this party is the most vocal and radical political movement of Bulgarians in Serbia. Short of openly advocating a secession of "Western provinces," it quotes numerous legal and political arguments in favor of the revision of the 1919 Treaty of Neuilly. The Democratic Alliance of Bulgarians, however,

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41 "As long as Bishop Jovan is in prison, there is nothing to talk about," RTS, <http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/125/Dru%C5%A1tvo/1208876/Dok+je+vladika+Jovan+u+zatoru,+nema+razgovora.html>, (taken over on May 10, 2013).

42 A press release by the board of the Church Municipality of Bosilegrad, from a session held on July 25, 2013 in Bosilegrad, on the occasion of the signing of A Platform on the Protection of Rights of the Bulgarian National Minority in Serbia, carried out in the office of the Bratstvo newspaper, <http://www.eparhijavranjska.org/Newsview.asp?ID=989>, (taken over on July 30, 2013).

43 Bosilegrad Bulgarians protest over support of Serbia [Българите от Босилеград протестираат срещу подкрепата за Сърбия], <http://podkrepa.net/novini/179-bosilegrad-protest>, (taken over on April 23, 2013).

holds no seats in the Bosilegrad Municipal Assembly and, according to data from the several previous elections, enjoys little support in Bosilegrad, and almost none in Dimitrovgrad.

The Dimitrovgrad-based Democratic Party of Bulgarians and the Party of Bulgarians in Serbia demonstrate a much “softer” approach than the Bosilegrad political group. They participate in the Dimitrovgrad local government and, except for publicly advocating the rights of Bulgarians in Serbia, it is difficult to point out any other controversial statements by them in the media.

## ELECTION PROCESSES IN THE PAST SEVERAL YEARS

Bulgarians are one of the best integrated national minorities in Serbia. They hold leading positions in political parties, but voters in Bulgarian-dominated regions still show more trust in the mainstream majority parties than in their minority’s political groups. From 2008 to 2012, an ethnic Bulgarian, Zoran Petrov, served as a Member of Serbia’s Parliament, but not as a representative of any of the three Bulgarian parties.

In the election of May 6, 2012<sup>44</sup>, 76.58% of voters voted in Dimitrovgrad and 64.13% in Bosilegrad, with a negligible number of invalid ballots. This was well above the average turnout for Serbia. The Bulgarian national minority – an absolute majority in these two municipalities – generally supports the majority mainstream parties. It is obvious that with over 96% of valid ballots, Bulgarians wanted to participate in the elections despite the calls of certain Belgrade intellectuals to boycott them by casting so-called “blank ballots”. In other words, that campaign failed to win a response in these two municipalities.

May 6, 2012 elections for MPs

Party	Dimitrovgrad		Bosilegrad	
	Number of votes	%	Number of votes	%
DS	2710	38.77	1026	19.01
SRS	224	3.2	153	2.83
URS	325	4.65	251	4.65
Preokret	658	9.41	293	5.43
SNS	1411	20.19	582	10.78
DSS	308	4.41	1961	36.33
SPS	763	10.92	878	16.27
Dveri	113	1.62	12	0.22
SVM	11	0.16	6	0.11
SDA	14	0.2	6	0.11
Others	187	5.3	71	1.31
<b>Total</b>	<b>6724</b>		<b>5.239</b>	

<sup>44</sup> On May 6, 2012, elections were held in Serbia in which a former nationalist politician Tomislav Nikolic (Serbian Progressive Party) defeated the pro-European presidential candidate Boris Tadic, whose Democratic Party eventually became opposition.

May 6, 2012 elections for Serbia's President, round one

Candidate	Dimitrovgrad		Bosilegrad	
	Number of votes	%	Number of votes	%
Tomislav Nikolić	1,452	20.78	573	10.62
Boris Tadić	2,538	36.31	1,043	36.31
Vojislav Koštunica	325	4.65	1,982	36.75
Ivica Dacić	785	11.23	904	16.76
Čedomir Jovanović	559	8	178	3.3

May 20, 2012 elections for Serbia's President, round two

Candidate	Dimitrovgrad		Bosilegrad	
	Number of votes	%	Number of votes	%
Tomislav Nikolić	3,274	55.14%	1,527	36.53%
Boris Tadić	2,469	41.58%	2,567	61.41%

Serbia's Bulgarians placed their trust in majority parties, and not a single minority party, logically expected to be an ally of Bulgarian ethnic parties managed to win the vote of the Bulgarian ethnic minority in these two municipalities (the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians gathered 11 votes in Dimitrovgrad and six in Bosilegrad, and the Bosniak Party of Democratic Action-Sulejman Ugljanin won 14 and six votes, respectively).

The results of the local vote are even more interesting. Namely, the local Bulgarian minority parties such as the Democratic Party of Bulgarians and the Party of Bulgarians in Serbia in Dimitrovgrad are in coalition with majority mainstream parties at the local level as well (the Liberal Democratic Party – Turnabout, and the United Regions of Serbia). Most citizens supported the Democratic Party of former Serbian president Boris Tadić. Coalitions of majority parties – the SPS and SDPS, PUPS, SNS, and of DSS and SRS – won together 1,772 votes, i.e. one-fourth of the vote, which is more than the best-faring Bulgarian party, the Democratic Party of Bulgarians, which ran in coalition with the United Regions of Serbia, and three times more than the coalition of the Liberal Democratic Party, the Party of Bulgarians in Serbia, and the Serbian Renewal Movement. Even if we assume that all Dimitrovgrad Serbs voted for mainstream parties, it is still clear that a large number of ethnic Bulgarians also backed these parties.

N°	Election list	No. of votes	% of votes
1	Demokratska stranka - Boris Tadić	2713	40.53
2	Srpska radikalna stranka - Aleksandar Martinović	145	2.17
3	Grupa građana "Pravda i solidarnost" - Zoran Čurov	425	6.35
4	Čedomir Jovanović - Preokret - LDP, Partija Bugara u Srbiji, SPO	461	6.89
5	Pokrenimo Dimitrovgrad - Tomislav Nikolić - SNS, DSS - Vojislav Koštunica	849	12.68
6	PUPS - Nikola Stojanov	239	3.57

7	Ivica Dačić - Socijalistička partija Srbije (SPS) - Socijaldemokratska partija (SDP)	539	8.05
8	Nebojša Ivanov - Demokratska partija Bugara - Ujedinjeni regioni Srbije	1323	19.76
Source: CeSID	Total	6694	100
	Invalid ballots	250	
	Valid ballots	6694	
	Number of registered voters	9128	

It is obvious that Dimitrovgrad citizens trust the majority mainstream parties more than their Bulgarian minority parties. This may be explained by the fact that Dimitrovgrad's major Serbian parties have prominent ethnic Bulgarians as members, who uphold both their parties' line and ethnic Bulgarian issues. Thus, as far back as July 2008, the Dimitrovgrad Municipal Assembly officially requested a return of the city's former name, Caribrod,<sup>45</sup> echoing the wishes of most of its citizens. The Bulgarian National Minority Council supported this request that is still pending. Unofficially, the delay is explained by a worry a precedent would be created for returning the names of other cities renamed after WWII, such as Zrenjanin – previously Petrograd/Veliki Bečkerek – etc. The recently adopted Platform for the Protection of the Rights of Ethnic Bulgarians in Serbia was also supported by local leaders from Dimitrovgrad, despite their membership in the majority parties. It seems most minority representatives feel that without a foothold in Serbia's mainstream parties, local communities have little a chance of adequate representation. While in some minority communities parties ruling at the national level are invited to participate in local government, led by minority parties (e.g., in Novi Pazar), elsewhere local leaders opt for membership in the mainstream parties.

Though almost all councilmen in Bosilegrad have Bulgarian surnames, central parties are in power – continuously dominated by the officially ever-more Eurosceptic Democratic Party of Serbia, whose charismatic local leader, Vladimir Zaharijev, enjoys support of over one-half of the electorate.

N°	Election list	No of votes	No of seats	%
1	Demokratska stranka Srbije – Vladimir Zaharijev	2808	18	52%
2	Demokratska stranka	745	5	14%
3	Ivica Dačić – Socijalistička partija Srbije (SPS)	600	4	11%
4	Ujedinjeni regioni Srbije - PUPS – Nevenka Kostadinova	433	2	8%
5	Socijaldemokratska partija Srbije – Rasim Ljajić	303	2	6%
TOTAL		4889	31	91%

Bulletin of the Bosilegrad Municipality<sup>46</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Dimitrovgrad to be renamed Caribrod again? RTS, <http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/125/Dru%C5%A1tvo/3982/Dimitrovgrad+ponovo+Caribrod%3Fhtml?email=yes>, (taken over on June 28, 2013).

<sup>46</sup> The bulletin of Bosilegrad municipality, [http://www.bosilegrad.org/sr/Informator\\_o\\_radu\\_opstine\\_Bosilegrad.pdf](http://www.bosilegrad.org/sr/Informator_o_radu_opstine_Bosilegrad.pdf), (taken over on May 29, 2013).

This is particularly interesting since ethnic Bulgarians in Serbia are pronouncedly pro-European, equating their economic and national interests with Serbia's integration with the EU, that will erase the borders between Serbia and their mother country. It seems the their support to DSS is a tribute to the personal qualities of the Bosilegrad mayor, and has nothing to do with the policies of his party. But it also appears the voters do not make any distinction between the local and national elections, since in the 2012 parliamentary vote they also supported the DSS. Obviously, the local government has an extremely pragmatic and practical approach: the EU flag hoisted on the town hall, it cooperates with all the international agencies in the region, but does the same with state institutions of both Serbia and Bulgaria.

The presence of Bulgarians in the judiciary is also proportional to their numbers. With new appointments of January 1, 2010, there are six ethnic Albanians, 34 Bosniaks, eight Bulgarians, five Bunjevci, three Vlachs, two Goranians, 42 Hungarians, five Muslims, one Roma, 10 Romanians, five Ruthenians, eight Slovaks, six Croats, and 15 Montenegrins working as judges in Serbia. Further, six ethnic Bulgarians were appointed lay judges.<sup>47</sup>

The Republic of Serbia granted no special funds to Bulgarian national organizations, except the Bulgarian National Minority Council, whereas the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, from 2007 to 2011, approved a total of RSD3,068,726 to its ethnic Bulgarians, in following instalments:<sup>48</sup>

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Bulgarians	310000	343726	240000	135000	2040000

## THE BULGARIAN NATIONAL MINORITY COUNCIL

The Bulgarian Minority National Minority Council was founded in 2009 and is located in Dimitrovgrad. Its chairman is Zoran Petrov, a former MP of the Democratic Party, currently the President of the Dimitrovgrad Municipal Assembly. At the first session of Serbia's Council for National Minorities, on October 30, 2009, the Bulgarian National Minority Council's flag, coat of arms, and national holidays were confirmed.<sup>49</sup>

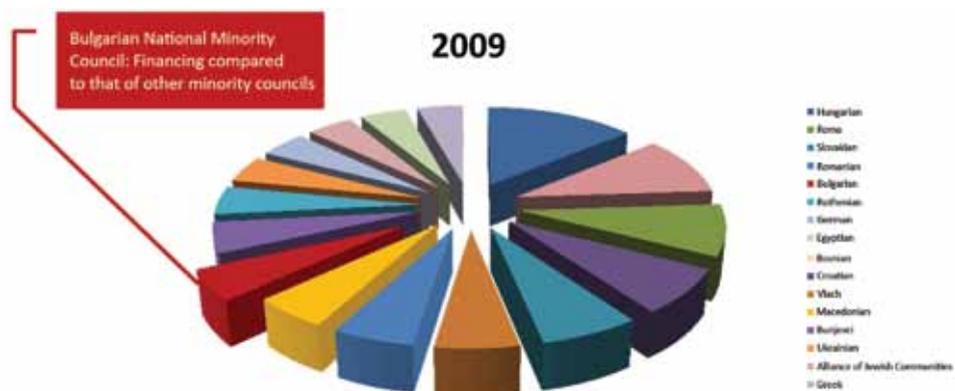
It is important to note that financially the position of the Bulgarian National Minority Council is similar to that of other national minority councils. This confirms that the funds from the state budget, allocated for national minority councils, are distributed in keeping with the government Decree regulating this matter (*The Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia*, No. 95/2010 and 33/2013).

The role of the Bulgarian National Minority Council in safeguarding the rights of Bulgarians in Serbia is not clear to ethnic Bulgarians themselves, though the Council's cooperation with the Central Government's institutions is good.

<sup>47</sup> The third periodic report submitted to the Council of Europe's General Secretary in accordance with Article 25 of the Framework Convention, ACFR/SR/III (2013) 001 Serbian version, The Council of Europe, 2013, p. 311.

<sup>48</sup> The third periodic report submitted to the Council of Europe's General Secretary in accordance with Article 25 of the Framework Convention, ACFR/SR/III (2013) 001 Serbian version, The Council of Europe, 2013, p. 135.

<sup>49</sup> The second periodic report submitted to the Council of Europe's General Secretary in accordance with Article 25 of the Framework Convention on the Protection of National Minorities, MIN/LANG/PR (2010) 7, the Council of Europe, Belgrade, 2010, p. 71.



The Council was active within the system of national councils; it gave its opinion on candidates for various positions in education institutions<sup>50</sup> and proposed the general outlines for preschool, elementary and high school curricula dealing with the questions of the minorities' national identity. It also gave its opinion during the passing of acts on preschools and elementary schools, in local self-rule units where Bulgarian is in official use, as well as during the forming of Bulgarian-language classes with less than 15 students. Finally, it provided proposals how to distribute the funds allotted from the budgets of the Republic of Serbia, the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, and local self-government units during public competitions for culture events, institutions, and national minority associations involved with culture.<sup>51</sup>

50 Two Years of National Councils' Operation – A Study by the Vojvodina Ombudsman, [www.ombudsmanapv.org/ombjo/attachments/article/741/Dve%20godine%20nac.saveta%20II%20deo\\_2012\\_.pdf](http://www.ombudsmanapv.org/ombjo/attachments/article/741/Dve%20godine%20nac.saveta%20II%20deo_2012_.pdf), (taken over on May 16, 2013).

51 Two Years of National Councils' Operations – A Study by the Province of Vojvodina Ombudsman, paragraphs 18, 24, 42, 54, [www.ombudsmanapv.org/ombjo/attachments/article/741/Dve%20godine%20nac.saveta%20II%20deo\\_2012\\_.pdf](http://www.ombudsmanapv.org/ombjo/attachments/article/741/Dve%20godine%20nac.saveta%20II%20deo_2012_.pdf), (taken over on April 25, 2013).

The National Council also passed a decision on giving traditional names in the minority language to units of local self-government, settlements, and other locations and sites, as well as institutions of special importance to the national minority, and proposed to the body in charge that these names be publicly displayed in the national minority language.<sup>52</sup>

The Council asked the Dimitrovgrad Municipal Assembly to reintroduce place names used in the past, but are yet to receive a response.

The Ombudsman of the Republic of Serbia never prepared a separate report on the position of the Bulgarian minority, nor, since 2007, did he in his annual reports mention any problem concerning this ethnic minority. His institution is graded Category A by the U.N. Supreme Commissariat for Human Rights, and is in charge of accepting complaints from national minority representatives. The Ombudsman has frequently gone public on the education in, and the use of national minority languages – primarily in the case of Bosniaks.<sup>53</sup>

## **THE BULGARIAN POLITICAL SCENE AND THE ISSUE OF BULGARIAN MINORITY IN SERBIA**

### **RELATIONS BETWEEN BULGARIA AND SERBIA**

#### **A. POLITICAL RELATIONS**

Since the dismantling of the Iron Curtain, Serbia and Bulgaria entered upon opposite paths. While Serbia, never clearly defining its goals of forming a national state with ethnic borders, sank into a vortex of wars during the last decade of the 20th century, Bulgaria, after initial hesitation, embarked on a road of European and Euro-Atlantic integrations. The national question, dominant in Serbia, did not assume such importance in Bulgaria, where social issues, modernization, and ties with the West, took precedence. When it eventually surfaced, the national question became focused mostly on Macedonia, the position toward which and the Macedonian nation was also never clearly articulated. Closely adhering to decisions of the International Community, Bulgaria officially joined the sanctions against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia initiated by the United Nations. Still, Serbian-Bulgarian border remained one of the most porous in the region, with the larger part of illegal trade taking place there, or over the Serbian-Macedonian frontier. With the forming of Ivan Kostov's government in 1997, Bulgaria took a firmer pro-Western course, and announced its wish to join NATO and the EU, as eventually happened in 2004 and 2007, respectively.

Conditions for greater rapprochement with Serbia were created with the 2000 change of Serbia's government. The two countries signed a series of bilateral agreements on closer political, economic, and security ties. Opportunities for Serbia to join numerous regional initiatives – most of them directly or indirectly inspired by the EU and supported by Bulgaria – opened as well. Among them were the Central European Initiative – CEI (1989), the Southeastern Europe Cooperative Initiative – SECI (1996), the Danube Cooperation Process (2001), the Southeastern Europe Police Chiefs Association – SEPCA (2002), the Regional

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., paragraph 53, [www.ombudsmanapv.org/ombjo/attachments/article/741/Dve%20godine%20nac.saveta%20II%20deo\\_2012\\_.pdf](http://www.ombudsmanapv.org/ombjo/attachments/article/741/Dve%20godine%20nac.saveta%20II%20deo_2012_.pdf), (taken over on April 25, 2013).

<sup>53</sup> The Ombudsman, The Annual Report for 2012, <http://www.ombudsman.rs/index.php/lang-sr/izvestaji/godisnji-izvestaji>, (taken over on June 25, 2013).

Cooperation Council – RCC (2008), the Southeastern Europe Law Enforcement Center – SELEC (2009),<sup>54</sup> and the Danube Strategy (2011).

After entering the EU, Bulgaria was forced to introduce a stricter visa regime for Serbian citizens, which greatly affected the members of the Bulgarian national minority in Serbia. The regime was lifted after Serbia was placed on the so-called “White Schengen” list.

In 2007, crossborder cooperation between Serbia and Bulgaria was reintroduced within the framework of two components of the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA), for the EU’s 2007–2013 budget period. Six Serbian and six Bulgarian districts (including Sofia) are cooperating, and the total value of the program is about EUR11.5 million.

This ascent in relations was again affected by Bulgaria’s 2008 recognition of Kosovo’s independence, but, also again, they gradually improved in the following years. Mutual visits by former prime ministers and presidents of the two countries took place from 2009 to 2012. During these visits the national minority issue was not raised, but was opened when Serbia’s prospect of becoming a candidate for EU membership became likely, more precisely, with recent statements by Bulgaria’s Vice President Margarita Popova, and Caretaker Prime Minister Marin Raykov, to be elaborated on in the further text. Since, moreover, there are not many ethnic Serbs in Bulgaria, Serbia is reluctant to sign a bilateral agreement with Bulgaria on the protection of minorities.

But, cooperation between individual cities is improving. Thus, the city of Pančevo has established cooperation in culture, youth issues, education, science, sports, economy, finances, European projects of common interest, etc. with the Bulgaria’s coastal city of Burgas.<sup>55</sup> Also, Pančevo and Ivanovo established cooperation with the municipality of Bela Slatina, and the village of Bardarski Geram in art, culture, education, media, sports, science, ecology, private business, agriculture, industry, construction, communications, transport, and various other modernization projects.<sup>56</sup> Finally, Serbia’s city of Novi Pazar and Bulgaria’s municipality of Novi Pazar established cooperation in culture, tourism, economy, etc., where common interests and possibilities for joint activity exist.<sup>57</sup>

## B. ECONOMIC RELATIONS

By the signing of several bilateral agreements, primarily the Agreement on Mutual Incentives and Protection of Investment, the Agreement on Cooperation in Tourism, and especially the Agreement on Economic Cooperation (signed in 2007, operational since 2010), the two countries undertook to improve economic relations and cooperation in industry, agriculture, forestry, construction, energy, research and development, and investment in small and medium enterprises.<sup>58</sup> The Agreement calls for founding an Inter-Governmental Commission for Economic Cooperation that would meet at least once a year to advance mutual cooperation. Energy, tourism and infrastructure figure as the three most important fields of cooperation. Featuring among the projects are the construction of the South

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54 Created by the transformation of SECI’s Regional Center for Combating Transborder Crime, founded in 1999.

55 The Official Gazette of the City of Pančevo, No. 27/2009.

56 The Official Gazette of the City of Pančevo, No. 12/2010.

57 The Official Gazette of the City of Novi Pazar, No. 2/2010.

58 The Law on the Ratification of the Agreement on Economic Cooperation between the Government of the Republic of Serbia and the Government of the Republic of Bulgaria, [http://www.podaci.net/\\_zakon/propis/Zakon\\_o\\_potvrdivanju/Z-psesiv03v0942.html](http://www.podaci.net/_zakon/propis/Zakon_o_potvrdivanju/Z-psesiv03v0942.html), (taken over on May 5, 2013).

Stream gas pipeline, the regional Niš-Dupnica gas pipeline, and the completion of Corridor 10 toward Bulgaria, and from Bulgarian border to Sofia.

### Trade between Bulgaria and Serbia

Trade between Serbia and Bulgaria had been constantly on the rise until the 2008 economic crisis – especially after 2003, when a bilateral free-trade agreement between Bulgaria, and Serbia and Montenegro was signed. Bulgaria and Romania were the first two countries which, by their temporary participation in the 2006 CEFTA agreement, enabled transition from a previous free-trade treaty that served mostly the Central East-European states, to the new one, which brings together countries of the Western Balkans and Moldova. According to the Serbian Chamber of Commerce, in 2012 Bulgaria was 11<sup>th</sup> on the list of exporters to Serbia, and 8<sup>th</sup> on the list of importers from Serbia.<sup>59</sup>

Year	Serbian data		Bulgarian data	
	Export to Bulgaria	Import from Bulg.	Export to Serbia	Import from Serbia
2004	60915300	223548600	344123250	52619400
2005	92998100	208847200	351110340	86918580
2006	154278200	434311400	580084200	209975400
2007	218024800	596715900	814428170	238464680
2008	251306100	930380500	974886880	268063840
2009	198653800	394645800	517840620	200555520
2010	241117500	579633200	729336280	267617720
2011	325326300	480109600	665844120	353309400
Total	1542620100	3848192200	4977653860	1677524540

### Bulgarian investments in Serbia and Serbian investments in Bulgaria

According to the Serbian Chamber of Commerce and the Embassy of the Republic of Serbia in Sofia, largest Bulgarian investments in Serbia occurred in 2006 – EUR62.5 million, and in 2007 – EUR29 million. In 2008, Bulgarian investments in privatization in Serbia substantially dropped, to only EUR377,000.<sup>60</sup> Until 2008, the investments total was about EUR110 million. They mostly involved privatizations of former socially-owned companies in Serbia, then numbering 28. More than one-half of the deals, however, were terminated because contract obligations were not met. The most drastic examples of such failings concerned the Kruševac *Trajal tire* factory, and the Leskovac *Nevena* chemical plant.

A more recent investment features the renewed sale of the Paraćin *Srpska fabrika stakla* glass factory to the Bulgarian Glass Industry consortium, a member of which is the previous owner of this factory, the Pleven *Rubin* company.

The problem with further Bulgarian investment lies in a large number of 2009 and 2010 privatizations, when Bulgarian buyers failed to meet their contractual obligations.

59 Economic Cooperation: Serbia and Bulgaria, the Serbian Chamber of Commerce, <http://www.pks.rs/MSaradnja.aspx?id=37&pp=1&pp=0&>, (taken over on May 20, 2013).

60 Ibid.

As far as Serbian investments in Bulgaria are concerned, the most substantial was the takeover of over 85 percent of the Pikadili chain shares by the Serbian Delta company.

It is interesting to note that not one investment from Bulgaria was made in the two municipalities wherein ethnic Bulgarians constitute a majority. It took a series of incidents in 2010 – to be covered in more detail later on – for the Bulgarian Foreign Minister Nikolaj Mladenov to announce, in December 2012, the creation of a Business Forum for Bulgarian companies. The Forum is supposed to help boost investments in these two southern Serbian municipalities.<sup>61</sup>

### C. THE BULGARIAN POLITICAL SCENE'S KEY PROTAGONISTS OF THE "BULGARIAN QUESTION IN SERBIA"

As mentioned before, the "Bulgarian Question" in Serbia did not dominate the Bulgarian political scene until recently, when certain mainstream politicians began articulating it. According to ISAC's collocutors from Sofia, the issue of Bulgarian minority in Serbia is overshadowed by a much more significant foreign policy issue concerning neighbors – the Macedonian Question. It was, according to our collocutors, the complexity of the Macedonian issue that brought about similar attention to Serbia. For, the Bulgarian minority in other countries is much more numerous, and it would be logical for the media to pay more attention to them. Still, certain interests in Bulgarian political circles also exist concerning Serbia, as was demonstrated since 1997, during the mandate of then prime minister Ivan Kostov. It was then the Bulgarian government started financing certain non-government organizations in Dimitrograd and Bosilegrad.

In mainstream Bulgarian media, the issue of the Bulgarian minority in Serbia appears as one of general foreign policy, primarily inspired by the "Macedonian Question." It is also a part of internal political discourse, fueled and facilitated by Serbia's and Macedonia's non-EU-member status. For years, the champions of the "Bulgarian Question in Serbia" have been the nationally-oriented Bulgarian parties VMRO (the "Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization") and Ataka ("Attack," in Bulgarian), as well as *Skat* and *Alfa* TV stations. These parties and TV stations promote nationalistic topics to maintain and advance their public standing. The Skat TV is the main channel through which accusations about ethnic Bulgarians' treatment in the "Western provinces," i.e. southeastern Serbia, are voiced.

The VMRO and Ataka parties exploit the issue of "Western provinces" as crucial for their identity, and use it for political gain. Their readiness, therefore, to actively mark the anniversaries of the 1919 Treaty of Neuilly, and the death of the Bulgarian national hero Vasil Levski in Bosilegrad, comes as no surprise.

Several independent but relevant sources in Sofia told ISAC's researchers that the goal of the extremists' participation in such gatherings, for all their patriotism, is only to attract attention and score political points at home.<sup>62</sup>

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61 "Включваме" малцинството ни в Сърбия в двустранния диалог за подкрепа", News.bg, [http://news.ibox.bg/news/id\\_1495893541](http://news.ibox.bg/news/id_1495893541), (taken over on April 25, 2013).

62 For more on the Ataka party and the phenomenon of extreme nationalism in Bulgaria, see Igor Novaković, *The Rise of Political Extremism in Bulgaria – Political Party "Ataka"*, University of Bologna, 2008

Still, the participation of these Bulgarian parties at anniversaries became an inter-state issue in 2010, during the third commemoration of the Treaty of Neuilly. That is when visitors from Bulgaria, led by Ataka leader Volen Siderov, were prevented from crossing the border into Serbia. Siderov informed the media and the Bulgarian Government of this, later organizing a public gathering to protest against support for Serbia's eventual accession to EU membership. Serbian ambassador in Sofia, Aleksandar Crkvenjakov, was then summoned to the Bulgarian Foreign Ministry to explain the police action. Only three months later, a similar incident took place during the marking of the anniversary of Vasil Levsky's death in Bosilegrad. On that occasion too, Ataka activists and fans of the *Levski* soccer club were also prevented from entering Serbia. Siderov used this incident as well and threatened to block the border unless the Bulgarian government reacted to the ban. Later on, the incidents were used to organize protests during a visit of then-Prime Minister Mirko Cvetković to Bulgaria, and to demand once more that an improvement of the position of the Bulgarian minority in Serbia be a condition for Serbia's membership in the EU.

The Serbian authorities demonstrated inflexibility by banning the activists from crossing the border, thereby directly violating the Framework Convention on the Protection of National Minorities and its Article 17<sup>63</sup>, thus playing into the hands of these Bulgarian parties. But Serbian diplomatic sources hinted that the ban helped avoid likely arrests on Serbian territory, having in view previous events when the Treaty of Neuilly was openly contested and Serbia's flag burned. The explanation seems reasonable, as the Ataka's goal was fairly obvious – either to make headlines by provoking arrests of its members in Serbia, or by having their entry into Serbia banned – in which case the latter option appeared certainly less harmful.

Be it as it may, the ban marked the moment when the rights of the Bulgarian national minority in Serbia became part of mainstream public and political discourse in Bulgaria. Ataka used it in all the major national news media as one of key importance. Since then, some politicians from the largest parties consider “the Bulgarian Question in Serbia” a major issue in Serbian-Bulgarian relations.

An April 2012 statement during the Children Easter Festival in Bosilegrad by Bulgarian Vice President Margarita Popova, resounded in local and foreign media. Popova used the occasion to say Serbia should become an EU member, but not before resolving the open issues pertaining to the Bulgarian minority – thereby intimating that her country might otherwise veto Serbia's further progress. Although some of ISAC's collocutors claimed the Bulgarian Vice President later denied saying anything of the sort, researchers could not confirm the denial by examining publicly accessible records.

A similar message arrived shortly before this from a representative of another major Bulgarian party, Evgenij Kirilov, a Bulgarian Socialist Party MP in the European Parliament. He spoke in favor of improving the position of all ethnic minorities in Serbia, especially in southeastern Serbia and the “Western provinces”, where ethnic Bulgarians live.<sup>64</sup> Extremist parties continued to pressure Foreign Minister Nikolaj Mladenov to openly demand that Serbia's

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63 The sides pledge not to hinder the right of national minority members to maintain free and peaceful relations with persons legally residing in other countries, especially those with whom they share the same ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious identity and with whom have a common cultural heritage.

64 “Евгени Кирилов апелира към Сърбия да подобри ситуацията на всички етнически малцинства в страната”, [http://www.parliamentmagazine.eu/news\\_review.php?n=362](http://www.parliamentmagazine.eu/news_review.php?n=362), (taken over on May 26, 2013).

progress toward the EU hinge upon an improvement of the Bulgarian minority's position in Dimitrovgrad and Bosilegrad. On several occasions, however, especially in contacts with his European partners, he said that Bulgaria supports Serbia's bid for accession into the EU. But, in December 2012, during a meeting with his Serbian counterpart, Ivan Mrkić, Mladenov stated that "Bulgaria poses no conditions for Serbia on its European path, but Serbia, like all other countries wishing to join the EU, should meet the specific conditions pertaining to each of them individually."<sup>65</sup> On the occasion, it was agreed to open negotiations on a good neighbor treaty, the conclusion being that the "advancement of the position of Bulgarian minority in Serbia" should be sought through dialog, and within a legal framework.<sup>66</sup>

In the first half of next year, however, the Bulgarian Cabinet led by Bojko Borisov fell under pressure of a wave of protests. A caretaker cabinet was appointed, headed by Marin Raykov, a career diplomat. In mid-May 2013, during a meeting with Bulgarian national minority representatives in Serbia,<sup>67</sup> Raykov stated that the "status and rights of the Bulgarian national minority are the key issue of Bulgarian-Serbian relations"<sup>68</sup>

What followed was the gathering of representatives of the Bulgarian national minority in Serbia, who, in mid-July 2013, formulated the previously-mentioned Platform, which the Bulgarian ambassador in Serbia described as "a positive and well-intentioned European document that will be presented to, and taken into consideration by, the highest levels in Sofia, Belgrade and Brussels"<sup>69</sup>

After the forming of the new Bulgarian government led by the Socialist party, the first Bulgarian high official to visit Serbia was Parliament Speaker Mihail Mikov. He didn't mention the Platform explicitly, but reiterated Bulgaria's intention to sign an agreement on good neighborly relations with Serbia, and establish closest possible cooperation of the two parliaments. He also spoke in favor of pragmatism and concreteness in mutual relations.

During an official September 18 and 19, 2013 visit of Serbian President Tomislav Nikolić to Bulgaria, the talks dealt with Serbia's integration into Europe and the development of economic and energy-related cooperation between the two countries, with due attention to minority issues. During the visit, President Nikolić promised that the issue of Bulgarian-language textbooks will be resolved.<sup>70</sup>

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65 "България не поставя условия на Сърбия", Dariknews, [http://dariknews.bg/view\\_article.php?article\\_id=1012962](http://dariknews.bg/view_article.php?article_id=1012962), (taken over on June 3, 2013).

66 "България и Сърбия започват преговори по договор за добросъседство", [http://www.dnevnik.bg/evropa/razshiravane/2012/12/18/1972010\\_bulgariia\\_i\\_surbiiia\\_zapochvat\\_pregovori\\_po\\_dogovor\\_zafref=rss](http://www.dnevnik.bg/evropa/razshiravane/2012/12/18/1972010_bulgariia_i_surbiiia_zapochvat_pregovori_po_dogovor_zafref=rss), (taken over on June 5, 2013).

67 President of Dimitrovgrad municipality Nebojša Ivanov, a representative of the Bosilegrad Culture and Information Center, Chairman of the Bulgarian National Council in Serbia Zoran Petrov, and president of the Party of Bulgarians in Serbia Dragoljub Notev were members of the delegation.

68 "България и Сърбия започват преговори по договор за добросъседство", [http://www.dnevnik.bg/evropa/razshiravane/2012/12/18/1972010\\_bulgariia\\_i\\_surbiiia\\_zapochvat\\_pregovori\\_po\\_dogovor\\_zafref=rss](http://www.dnevnik.bg/evropa/razshiravane/2012/12/18/1972010_bulgariia_i_surbiiia_zapochvat_pregovori_po_dogovor_zafref=rss), (taken over on June 5, 2013).

69 "Български организации подписаха Платформа за защита на правата на българското малцинство в Сърбия", Агенция "Фокус", <http://www.focus-news.net/?id=n1806717>, (taken over on July 17, 2013).

70 Nikolic in Bulgaria: Economic cooperation between two countries should be enhanced, Tanjug, <http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/politika/aktuelno.289.html:454740-Nikolic-u-Bugarskoj-Ubrzati-ekonomsku-saradnju-dve-zemlje>, (taken over on September 19, 2013)

# CONCLUSION

In Serbia, there is no discrimination of ethnic Bulgarians. They participate in government on almost all levels and their influence is proportional to their numbers. They usually elect their representatives from Serbia's mainstream parties, in which ethnic Bulgarians play a prominent role, while minority Bulgarian parties increasingly enter into coalitions with such parties, to ensure for themselves the best possible position in local government. Both printed and electronic Bulgarian-language news media are operational, and their financing and local character should be maintained, to enable them to sustain the Bulgarian national minority in Serbia.

Although ethnic tensions and pressure from the days when the Iron Curtain passed through the Bulgarian-populated regions in Serbia no longer exist, some vestiges of past fears still remain, calling for a greater awareness of this ethnic group's rights. This is particularly important since the number of Serbia's Bulgarians dropped to a third of what it was in 1948, with a tendency of further decline.

Bulgarians in Serbia are a bridge toward Bulgaria, and – taking into account positive historical experiences and possibilities for cooperation – they can help eliminate negative national stereotypes still extant in both Bulgaria and Serbia. For that, full respect of the minority rights of ethnic Bulgarians in Serbia is needed, as well as assistance from them in controlling the threat to Serbia's territorial integrity coming from Bulgaria, especially in view of the fresh wounds caused by the declaration of Kosovo's independence.

It is clear, however, that the realization of guaranteed minority rights, especially those of receiving state financial aid, is linked to the global economic crisis which has cut into the resources intended for Serbia's minorities, ethnic Bulgarians included. By adopting their July 2013 Platform, the Bulgarians in Serbia clearly articulated their demands regarding their minority rights, and it is now up to the Republic of Serbia's organs to facilitate the realization of these rights – especially in education (Bulgarian-language textbooks and classes), culture, and the mandatory, parallel use of Bulgarian (place names included). Further, Dimitrovgrad's name should be changed back into Caribrod, and the issue of financing minority media resolved.

It is good that none of Serbia's official organs support the Serbian Orthodox Church's attempts to create a "Shopi identity" (ethnicity and language), for that, besides being impossible, would run directly counter to Serbia's own policies in Montenegro and Republika Srpska. Moreover, such a policy would further alienate one of the best-integrated national minorities in Serbia.

Also, it is helpful that occasional statements by senior Bulgarian officials, linking the rights of ethnic Bulgarians in Serbia with Serbia's further EU integrations, have not (yet) become Bulgaria's official policy. This provides for a participative process in advancing minority rights, with Serbia's central and regional organs working on coordinating the country's internal obligations and laws with its obligations arising from the Framework Convention. Raising minority issues to European level, based on allegations that Serbia is not honoring the first Copenhagen criterion, would probably provide faster but less sustainable results, not

founded on a true consensus that such rights ought to be guaranteed and remain so – even when Serbia joins the European Union.

In other words, the basic consensus between Serbian state organs, Bulgarian national minority representatives, and the Republic of Bulgaria should be over the question of further advancement of Bulgarian minority rights. This is a legal obligation, from the standpoint of both Serbian and international law, and Serbia should abide by it. Ethnic Bulgarian minority rights, thus, depend upon the following:

- 1) Maintaining the number of Bulgarians in Serbia;
- 2) Creating a good-neighborly climate;
- 3) Creating conditions for economic prosperity of southern Serbia and western Bulgaria.

These goals should in no way serve for augmenting anyone's political capital on the political scenes of both Serbia and Bulgaria. Respecting the wishes of its inhabitants, Dimitrovgrad's old name, Caribrod, should be returned to it, since it was renamed after World War II in honor of Communist Bulgaria's leader, Georgi Dimitrov.

The advancement of the respect for Bulgarian minority rights would thus be transferred to the legal sphere, with clear and legitimate goals for all actors involved. On the other hand, Bulgaria's support to Serbia on its path toward full-fledged EU membership would enhance Serbia's EU integrations, leading to improvement of the position of all the country's citizens – those belonging to the Bulgarian national minority included.

