Serbia’s Bulgarian minority, a factor in bilateral tensions

Description

For several decades, Bulgaria and Serbia have maintained a formal yet less-than-cordial neighborly relationship. In 2009, however, the two countries embarked on a rapprochement as part of Serbia’s bid to join the European Union.



Although they share a common history and Slavic origins, Bulgarians and Serbs, as well as their respective states, have often followed different paths over the last few centuries and still find it difficult to identify common interests. Neighboring peoples for over a thousand years, they founded separate kingdoms before being forced to join the Ottoman Empire against their will. From the end of this period of occupation, in the mid-19th century, their relations became more distant, even unfriendly. This characteristic persists to this day, not least due to recent diplomatic tensions over the fate of Serbia’s Bulgarian minority.

A long-standing and distant relationship, and joint projects in need of concrete expression

As neighboring peoples, Bulgarians and Serbs share a common cultural heritage, including Slavic languages with the same roots, which facilitates a degree of mutual understanding. They also share a shared religious and cultural identity based on Orthodoxy, as well as very similar customs and culinary arts. However, history has contributed to driving them apart. In the 19th century, Tsarist Russia supported the emergence of two Slavic Orthodox states in the Balkans: an autonomous principality of Bulgaria was established in 1878, and the principality of Serbia gained independence before becoming a kingdom in 1882. The accession of the two countries to greater sovereignty fueled nationalist aspirations and respective plans to return to a “Greater Serbia” and a “Greater Bulgaria”, fueling rivalry between the two peoples. (1)

Following the attachment of Eastern Rumelia to the Principality of Bulgaria in September 1885, the King of Serbia, fearing the creation of a large Slavic state on his border, declared war on Bulgaria; however, he ultimately lost the conflict. The Treaty of Bucharest put an end to the war, but not to the animosity. History continued to drive the two peoples apart. During the two World Wars, the belligerents fought against each other, each choosing to side with the opposing camp. Even when Serbia (as part of Yugoslavia) and Bulgaria opted for a communist regime, while Sofia was aligned with the USSR, Belgrade preferred to remain independent. While Bulgaria opened up to the rest of the world after the fall of the socialist regimes, Serbia, more nationalistic than ever, faced a decade of war from 1991 to 2001.

With Belgrade’s desire to apply for European Union membership since December 2009, the two neighboring countries now seem set to move closer together. Two major economic projects could have already helped improve relations between the two countries: the construction of the Sofia-Niš motorway (although work on this has been frozen several times and is not expected to be completed until 2021) and the South Stream gas pipeline (abandoned by Russia in 2014). On the other hand, the gas interconnection between Serbia and Bulgaria (Novi Iskar-Niš), inaugurated in December 2023, appears to be a success. With this pipeline, Belgrade has been able to reduce its dependence on Russian gas. In any case, it is worth noting that the two states have made little use of these major projects to strengthen their ties, and official relations between Sofia and Belgrade remain very formal.

The thorny issue of Serbia’s Bulgarian minority

A Bulgarian presence has been established in Serbia for a long time, primarily centered around several towns in the southeastern part of the country. In 1948, 59,472 people claimed to belong to the Bulgarian minority, representing 0.91% of the population of Yugoslav Serbia. Their numbers have declined steadily to the present day: 12,918 inhabitants of Serbia still confirmed that they belonged to this minority in 2022 (0.19% of the population of Serbia). The two main towns where they reside are Bosilegrad (4,970 Bulgarians in 2022) and Dimitrovgrad (also known as Tsaribrod, with 4,281 individuals in 2022).

Bulgaria, whose population is shrinking, has for several decades taken an interest in Bulgarians living abroad and therefore in this minority living in Serbia, even though it is by far not the largest in numerical terms (a few thousand individuals, compared with more than 400,000 in Germany, for example). The government wants to help them preserve their linguistic and cultural specificity, and to this end, is sending Bulgarian school textbooks for the education of Bulgarian-speaking children. However, these documents do not conform to the local national educational programs, particularly regarding the treatment of specific historical issues. This led Belgrade and Sofia to organize diplomatic exchanges on this cultural accompaniment and to try to find common ground(2).

In this context, on the fringes of the Serbian president's historic visit to Bosilegrad in March 2023, two Bulgarians from Serbia known for their activism in favor of improving living conditions in Bosilegrad were placed in detention, a measure which displeased Sofia(3). On 13 March, Slavena Guergova, Director General for European Affairs at the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, summoned the Serbian Ambassador to Sofia, Zeljko Jovic, to whom she reminded that respect for freedom of expression was one of the essential conditions for European integration. Then, on 2 August, Serbian Foreign Minister Ivica Dačić in turn called on Sofia to « recognize the existence of a Serb minority » on its territory. Belgrade estimates that several thousand Serbs live there, whereas the Bulgarian state estimates that there are no more than a few hundred, most of whom are immigrants(4).

Some members of the Bulgarian minority are said to be worried about Serbian nationalism, to the point where they are sometimes afraid to call themselves Bulgarians. To avoid attracting attention, they vote massively for Aleksandar Vučić's nationalist party, which does not prevent them from feeling neglected by the Serbian government. At the same time, the local economic situation remains precarious(5).

Sofia's evolving support for Serbia's bid for EU membership

On 23 December 2009, Serbia applied to join the European Union and was granted candidate status in March 2012. Negotiations began in January 2014. The process involves easing tensions with neighboring countries, which are set to become privileged partners. Improving relations with Sofia is therefore essential for Serbia's future. Although the two countries are hardly on friendly terms, contacts have been developing since 2009 to foster greater stability in the region, with the support of the European Union. In this context, Bulgarian Foreign Minister Nikolaï Mladenov declared on 24 February 2012 that Bulgaria supported Serbia in its quest for candidate country status.

For some years, the good relations maintained by Serbian A. Vučić (Prime Minister from 2014 to 2017, President of the Republic since 2017) with Bulgaria's Boiko Borissov (head of several governments between 2009 and 2021) fostered a rapprochement between Belgrade and Sofia, as well as a lasting tendency for Bulgaria to support Serbia's bid for EU membership, with the fall of the last B. The Borissov government (May 2021) and the advent of the Europhile government of Kiril Petkov (opposed to personal rule) led to a more formalization of relations with Belgrade, which had previously deteriorated in March 2023. On 10 June 2024, Bulgarian President Roumen Radev announced that Bulgaria might reconsider its support for Serbia's accession to the EU because of Belgrade's attitude towards the Bulgarian minority. In turn, in December 2024, Dragisa Mijačić, coordinator of Serbia's European integration body, criticized Bulgaria's opposition to the opening of Chapter 3 of the EU acquis, describing it as Sofia's response to the difficulties encountered on specific bilateral issues.

Belgrade's lack of flexibility on the issue of the Bulgarian minority has encouraged Sofia to be more demanding of Serbia's respect for European values and to ask it to comply with the EU's common foreign policy by imposing sanctions on Russia over the war in Ukraine. The Serbian government has also been criticized for not recognizing Kosovo's

independence and for its closeness to the Kremlin. In response, on 22 January 2025, A. Vučić accused Bulgaria of "powerful lobbying against Serbia and in favor of Pristina"(6).

An improvement in Bulgarian-Serbian relations is conceivable, but it will likely depend on a shift in Belgrade's perspective on its eastern neighbor, an area in which the Serbian government has shown little interest in recent decades. In March 2015, Serbia's ambassador to Sofia Z. Jovic summed up the special relationship between the two countries perfectly: *"It seems that Bulgarians and Serbs like to talk more about bad things and things that have separated them in the past, rather than good things and things that unite them."*

Sources:

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(2) Svetlana Chatritch et Krasimir Martinov, « Bulgariya i Surbiya imat obsht problem – topiyat se demografski » (Bulgaria and Serbia have a common problem – their demography is collapsing), *BNR*, 25 May 2023.

(3) « MBnR s ostra reaktsiya za zadurzhaneto na Bulgariya v Surbiya » (The MFA reacts strongly to the detention of Bulgarians in Serbia), *Darik News*, 14 March 2023.

(4) « MBnR: otnoshenieto na Surbiya kum Bulgariya naroushava osnovni printsipi na ES » (MFA: Serbia's attitude towards the Bulgarians violates the fundamental principles of the EU), *Darik News*, 4 August 2023; Institut national de statistique.

(5) « Osmoto redovno zasedanie na N. S. na bulgarskoto nationalno maltsinstvo v Surbiya » (Eighth ordinary meeting of the National Council of the Bulgarian National Minority in Serbia), *TV Info Bosilegrad*, 27 January 2025.

(6) « Vucic: groupa durzhavi, sred koito i Bulgariya, rabotiyat sreshtou Surbiya » (Vučić: a group of countries, including Bulgaria, is working against Serbia), *Nova*, 22 January 2025.

Link to the French version of the article

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