

PUBLIC DEBATE: overcoming historical divisions
Case study: Bulgaria - North Macedonia

12 May 2021, 10:00 – 11:30 a.m. CEST

Background

Relations between North Macedonia and Bulgaria are at their lowest in decades. What will the re-arrangement of political forces in Bulgaria after the recent parliamentary elections mean for the region? The enthusiasm after signing a friendship treaty in 2017 has turned to an open dispute between the two governments over historical heritage and questions of identity of ethnic Macedonians. The Bulgarian blockade of North Macedonia's opening talks for accession to the EU has deteriorated the fragile relationship. Bulgaria's veto reflects an asymmetry of power between EU Member States and candidate countries and puts the EU integration process in danger.

Issues tied to language and history play into the hands of nationalists: during the last two years, several developments damaged the trust and cooperation between the two governments who are accusing each other of obstructing the 2017 friendship treaty. Skopje and Sofia are trying to come out of the current limbo. They adopted an action plan for 2017's never implemented friendship treaty and established a bilateral expert's commission on historical and educational matters. So far, the expert's commission has only become the scapegoat for the deteriorated relations.

- What are the current relations between North Macedonia and Bulgaria in the context of EU enlargement?
- What does this deadlock mean for the European integration of the remaining Western Balkan countries?
- What remedies does the EU have to act against EU Member States blocking neighbouring countries?

Agenda

- 10:00 – 10:05 a.m. Welcome by Walter Kaufmann, Head of East & Southeast Europe Division, Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, Berlin
- 10:05 – 10:35 a.m. Panel inputs:
 "Demystification" of the dispute
 Darko Leitner-Stojanov, Historian, Skopje/Vienna
- The problematics behind the historical disputes and the potential impact on the WB6
 Tchavdar Marinov, Historian, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Sofia
- The role of the EU in the political disputes
 Tineke Strik, MEP, The Greens/EFA, Brussels
- 10:35 – 10:45 a.m. Introduction of policy statement "[When Conditionality Becomes Blackmail: EU Member States Should Not Write the History of Candidate Countries](#)"
 Daliborka Uljarević, Political Analyst, West Balkan Strategy Group, Podgorica
- 10:45 – 11:30 a.m. Discussion and conclusions

Chaired by Tobias Flessenkemper, Council of Europe, Belgrade