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**BULGARIA'S FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS NORTH
MACEDONIA, THE AGREEMENT OF 1 AUGUST 2017**

ABSTRACT

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This dissertation contains an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion, a bibliography, and two appendices. It consists of a total of 277 pages, with 339 footnotes. The bibliography consists of 291 sources, of which 155 are in Bulgarian, 10 in Macedonian, and 126 in English.

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The materials related to the defense are available to interested parties on the website of Plovdiv University "Paisii Hilendarski" (<https://uni-plovdiv.bg>).

1. GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE DISSERTATION.

1.1. Relevance and significance of the topic of the dissertation

This dissertation analyzes the Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighborliness, and Cooperation between the Republic of Bulgaria and the Republic of Macedonia (now the Republic of North Macedonia) of August 1, 2017, tracing its negotiation process, signing, and implementation. The main objective is to establish the influence of foreign policy strategies and diplomatic approaches on good-neighborly relations in the Balkans. The significance of this work is multifaceted, covering both current political and fundamental theoretical and methodological aspects.

The topic of the dissertation is extremely relevant and of high public interest. The agreement of August 1, 2017, continues to generate policies and effects to this day, making it a constant in the Bulgarian political process. The case is important because it touches on deep cultural, historical, and political factors. The signing of the agreement was welcomed by the partners of both countries in the EU and NATO and was described as a historic breakthrough and strategic success for Bulgaria. However, the failure to implement it led to the crisis with the Bulgarian veto in 2020, which turned the bilateral dispute into a serious problem at the European level, hindering the EU's enlargement policy. This proves that the study examines a continuous process and one of the most serious foreign policy issues that need to be resolved.

The study fills an existing scientific gap in Bulgarian political science thought. Relations between the two countries at the beginning of the 21st century have been little studied from a political science perspective. As of early March 2025, there are only seven dissertations in the NACID register in Professional Field 3.3. Political Sciences related to Macedonia, and none of them focus on bilateral relations between the Republic of Bulgaria and the Republic of North Macedonia.

This unexplored topic, which is relevant in political and academic life, offers great opportunities for working with direct sources, documents, and evidence from the recent past. The proximity of the research period (2014-2017 and subsequent implementation) provides an opportunity to collect detailed and reliable information.

The dissertation addresses the lack of a systematic assessment of the effectiveness of good-neighborliness agreements in resolving identity disputes. This includes the need to analyze the role of the European Union as a mediator. The need for evaluation stems from the fact that the Treaty, although signed triumphantly, has proven ineffective in its implementation. A central element that proves this gap is the need for deeper commitment and intervention by European

institutions in 2022 (through the "French proposal") – a fact that proves the ineffectiveness of the negotiation process and the lack of balance in the implementation of the 2017 Treaty.

The dissertation has theoretical and practical value through the development and application of an innovative integrated methodological framework. The study combines qualitative methods (analysis of diplomatic documents and semi-structured interviews with experts) with elements of game theory. The use of game theory (according to John Nash's method) to assess the alternatives, costs, and benefits for both sides. This allows the object of study to be quantified. This method has established that Bulgaria chooses rapid signing (Alternative B), while Macedonia chooses Alternative A (rapid integration, postponement of deep disputes). The analysis diagnoses that this choice of alternatives is the main reason for the ineffective implementation of the agreement and the formation of unbalanced relations.

The study links macro-theories of IR (Realism, Liberalism, Constructivism) with micro-theories of negotiation (Game Theory, Hard-Nosed Bargaining - HNP) to diagnose the causes of specific political outcomes. For example, expert assessments show that negotiations shifted from a cooperative to a competitive model (from integrative to distributive) after 2018, which explains the failure in implementation. This approach allows us to answer the question "why" certain events occur and what their internal logic is.

The text has a strong political context and regional relevance. The study finds that the weaknesses in Bulgarian foreign policy and diplomacy are due to the immaturity of Bulgarian politics as a whole, characteristic of the period of democratic transition, and the inconsistency in policy towards the RSM. External factors, such as the EU and the US, exert serious political and diplomatic pressure, which creates the specific circumstances of the moment in 2016–2017. The signing of the Agreement is a strategic step, without which it is impossible to move on to the next stages of the EU enlargement policy. Subsequently, the need for EU intervention (through the "French proposal") becomes a critical assessment of the weak implementation of the Agreement.

The case has regional relevance and fits into the broader Balkan processes. It is comparable to the Prespa Agreement (2018) between Greece and Macedonia. The comparative analysis (which is also an additional contribution) shows that while the Prespa Agreement led to a clear change (name change, NATO membership, and renunciation of antiquisation), the Treaty with Bulgaria remains only with the definition of a common history and without other significant changes, being implemented only partially. The study emphasizes that the disputes with Greece were acute but relatively shallow to resolve, while the disputes with Bulgaria are much deeper (identity, historical) and require greater diplomatic efforts.

1.2. Object and subject of the study.

The object of the study is the negotiation process for the conclusion of the Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighbourliness and Cooperation between the Republic of Bulgaria and the Republic of Macedonia of 1 August 2017. **The subject** of the study is the approaches, procedures, and diplomatic steps taken by Bulgaria and Bulgaria's behavior throughout the process of signing the treaty between Bulgaria and Macedonia.

1.3. Research hypothesis

The main hypothesis of the dissertation research is that the preparation and conclusion of the Good Neighbourliness Agreement between Bulgaria and North Macedonia contain structural and procedural weaknesses that limit its full effectiveness and predetermine the difficulties in its subsequent implementation.

The main thesis should be refined with the following sub-theses:

- 1) The weaknesses in Bulgarian foreign policy and diplomacy are due to the immaturity of Bulgarian politics as a whole in view of the period of democratic transition and the inconsistency in policy towards the Republic of North Macedonia;
- 2) The preparation for the Agreement on the Bulgarian side was carried out in accordance with internationally established diplomatic practices and does not contain any conceptual errors.
- 3) The Agreement did not produce the expected results for a number of reasons beyond the Agreement itself, including changes in power in both countries, changes in the European and international situation in the period after 2017, and others.

1.4 Research objectives and tasks

The main objective of the dissertation research is to establish the influence of foreign policy strategies and diplomatic approaches that contribute to good neighborly relations in the Balkans, as reflected in international treaties.

The main tasks related to the objective, subject, and scope of the study are:

- 1) To construct the conceptual framework of foreign policy and international relations;
- 2) To outline and summarize the historical dynamics of diplomatic relations between the two countries;

3) To reveal and construct in detail the diplomatic approaches of the Bulgarian government during the period of negotiations, signing, and implementation of the Good Neighborliness Agreement with Macedonia and to outline the specific diplomatic moves, decisions, and documents;

4) To systematize the specific diplomatic work done by the Bulgarian side prior to the signing of the Treaty and to establish the degree of compliance with recognized international standards and practices;

5) Develop a questionnaire for conducting semi-structured interviews with experts (expert assessments);

6) Conducting the interviews, processing, analyzing, and systematizing the assessments received from the experts;

7) Formulating conclusions about Bulgaria's foreign policy and diplomacy in the context of the negotiations and the conclusion of the good-neighborliness agreement.

To accomplish these tasks and assist the research, we should provide answers to some **research questions** such as:

1) What are the accepted and established international principles for negotiating such agreements?

2) What is the behavior of Bulgarian diplomacy in the process of negotiating and concluding the agreement, and does it comply with established international principles and standards?

3) Are there any weaknesses in the conduct of Bulgarian diplomacy and, if so, are they situational or are they an expression of the essential challenges of Bulgarian foreign policy?

1.5 Methodology and limitations of the scope of the study.

From a methodological point of view, the methodological framework of the deductive approach was chosen as most relevant to the set goal and tasks. The theory of international relations and the science of conflicts (conflictology) offer the theoretical principles that must invariably be used to study the relations between Bulgaria and Macedonia.

Empirical and theoretical methods were used in the study to examine the subject matter. The methods used are entirely qualitative, including semi-structured interviews with participants in the process of preparing the Good Neighbourliness Agreement with Macedonia (diplomats, MFA officials, political advisers, politicians); analysis of the content of documents from the period of the study related to the preparation of the Agreement; analysis of previous theoretical

studies on the topic; examination of the political behavior of the leading political leaders of both countries as an important factor for the implementation of the Agreement.

Research methodology. Several scientific methods were used in order to obtain qualitative answers to the research questions and tasks. A **literature review** was conducted on the construction of the conceptual framework of foreign policy and international relations, and the dynamics of relations between the countries were traced from a historical perspective, including through the use of historical sources to detail the "Macedonian question" in Bulgarian politics. The method is used for tasks 1) and 2). The method of **document analysis and comparison** is used to trace the dynamics of relations, measured by the number, quality, and political weight of the bilateral agreements concluded. The analysis and comparison of documents is mainly used in tasks 2) and 3). The **expert assessment** method used by the specialists involved focuses on the direct actions and interactions of the parties and the relevant diplomatic units and representatives in order to assess the preparation, quality, political context, and strategies of the two negotiating parties. The assessments derived from the information and facts provided by the experts enable us to evaluate the individual elements of the negotiation process as a whole - the preparation, signing, and implementation of the Agreement of August 1, 2017. The expert assessments are important for the implementation of tasks 3), 4), 5) and 6). **Game theory** is also used as a specific scientific discipline suitable for assessing bilateral relations, and by calculating the equilibrium using the John Nash method, we seek a quantitative, quantified expression of the object of study. Game theory helps to answer the main challenges in tasks 6) and 7). The methodology and methods used are mainly qualitative methods that give us an answer to "why" certain events occur, what their internal logic and sequence is.

The combination of the four methods allows researchers from several countries to evaluate, compare, and present the most reliable answers to the research questions.

Since foreign policy and diplomatic relations are too broad a field for research, even between two countries, **restrictions** have been placed on the research in order to ensure its accuracy, focus, and reliability.

First. The period of preparation of the agreement in 2014-2016, its signing and subsequent implementation are examined, with the entire period being viewed as a never-ending negotiation process with its ups and downs. The time limit ends in 2022 with the second meeting of the Joint Intergovernmental Commission established under Article 12 of the Agreement.

The **second** limitation that needs to be made is conceptual and directly related to the subject of the study. Focusing on the relations between the two countries during the period in question, attention should be paid to international issues that have arisen between Bulgaria and

Macedonia. Important are the points of conflict from a historical and cultural perspective, which until 2014 have hindered good relations between the two countries. The study will not seek answers and developments on economic, infrastructure, or defense issues, but will examine specific approaches, methods, and strategic decisions of the diplomats who prepared the good-neighborliness agreement and whether it is possible to resolve the historical, linguistic, and cultural problems between the two countries. Relations with other countries are not the subject of the study.

Third, the theoretical limitations are related to the lack of research on the topic, which means that there are few scientific works for comparison and supplementation, but also has the potential for initial development of the topic through the use of a number of documents and witnesses to a specific set of diplomatic actions. The historical proximity to the period under study provides an opportunity for detailed and reliable information on the issue from people involved in it.

A **fourth** limitation is that the political situation in both countries during the period in question will also not be the subject of detailed study. The main focus is far from domestic politics, with the only issues related to it being clearly expressed positions by one side or the other on inter-state issues concerning the preparation, signing, and implementation of the good-neighborliness agreement.

The **fifth** limitation is related to the information about the subject of the study and the people from whom it could be obtained. Unfortunately, when working with diplomatic information and information about bilateral contacts, protocols are followed that do not allow the disclosure of information, even verbally. For this reason, many diplomats and experts working on the case at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs refused to participate. Some independent experts and active politicians also had similar restrictions and refused to participate in the expert assessment as part of the study.

2. STRUCTURE AND CONTENT OF THE DISSERTATION RESEARCH

In **terms of structure**, the doctoral dissertation consists of an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion with findings and recommendations, relevant appendices that lend credibility to the study, and a bibliography.

The first chapter presents the theoretical framework of the problem, using classical scientific definitions related to foreign policy, diplomatic work, and conflicts at the international level. The issues of conflict between Bulgaria and Macedonia are presented through this prism of the theory and history of international relations.

The second chapter presents the dynamics of relations between the Republic of Bulgaria and the Republic of North Macedonia, aiming to systematize the background to the conclusion of the agreement.

The third chapter of the study presents the methodology of the empirical research, including the results and their analysis.

The concluding part summarizes the main conclusions that can be drawn as a result of the study, provides answers to the research questions, and indicates the degree of proof of the hypothesis and sub-hypotheses.

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3. SUMMARY OF THE DISSERTATION

3.1. CHAPTER ONE. NEGOTIATIONS AS PART OF THE THEORY OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

3.1.1 Conceptual framework of international relations

The first part of Chapter One presents the theoretical basis of the dissertation, outlining the key concepts and theoretical schools in international relations (IR) and diplomacy. IR is viewed as a complex system of interactions between states, international organizations, and non-state actors that shape political and economic processes on a global scale. As an academic discipline, IR studies conflict, cooperation, and governance in an anarchic international environment through theoretical and empirical methods.

Foreign policy (FP) is a political activity aimed at protecting the international interests of the state. It has national characteristics and is the result of internal factors. FP is implemented through an institutional mechanism of bodies that coordinate international relations. Foreign policy strategy sets long-term goals, and diplomacy is the main tool for achieving them through negotiations, agreements, and peaceful means.

International treaties are legal instruments that come about after a process of negotiation, signing, and ratification. Bilateral relations are critical for building cooperation or, conversely, for escalating tensions. International conflicts arise when interests clash, and international crises represent an intermediate phase of acute tension, without necessarily escalating into military conflict.

International relations is the third main branch of political science, which developed after the First World War. It is interdisciplinary, drawing on international law, history (particularly important for countries with accumulated historical problems, such as Bulgaria and North Macedonia), economics, sociology, anthropology, and political geography.

Theories in IR provide a framework for explaining the behavior of international actors. Paradigms serve as generally accepted analytical models for understanding the international system.

Rational choice theory assumes that actors act strategically to maximize benefits. It is related to **game theory**, which analyzes decisions in situations of interdependence and uncertainty. **Behaviorism** uses quantitative methods and empirical observations to identify patterns of behavior. **New institutionalism** emphasizes the influence of institutions that limit or expand opportunities for action by imposing rules and norms.

The main theoretical schools outline different explanatory approaches:

Realism and neorealism: these are based on the assumption of an anarchic international environment in which states strive for security and power. Realism emphasizes national interest, while neorealism (Kenneth Waltz) shifts the focus to the structure of the international system. A distinction is made between defensive and offensive realism.

Liberalism emphasizes the role of institutions, democracy, and economic interdependence. The theory of democratic peace argues that democracies are less likely to go to war with each other.

Constructivism emphasizes socially constructed identities and ideas. According to Alexander Wendt, "anarchy is what states make of it," and international politics is shaped by norms, values, and collective understandings.

Despite their differences, these theoretical approaches provide analytical tools that can be used to interpret the dynamics, behavior, and conflicts in the international system—a basis that the dissertation uses in its analysis of Bulgarian-Macedonian relations.

3.1.2 The place and role of diplomacy in international relations

Diplomacy is the main instrument of international relations (IR) through which states communicate, coordinate interests, manage conflicts, and build alliances. It provides a legal and institutional framework for maintaining international order and peaceful interaction between sovereign actors.

The modern diplomatic system was formed after the Treaties of Westphalia (1648), which established the principles of sovereignty, equality, and non-interference. During the 17th–19th centuries, diplomatic practice was institutionalized through the creation of permanent embassies, professional diplomatic corps, and common rules, which were finally codified by the Congress of Vienna (1814–1815) and the subsequent Vienna Protocols. The Hague Conventions (1899, 1907) added legal mechanisms for arbitration, and after the First World War, the League of

Nations laid the foundations for multilateral diplomacy. After 1945, the UN further institutionalised diplomatic practices, and the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations (1961) provided the most important legal framework regulating the immunities and status of diplomatic missions.

Theoretical interpretations of diplomacy reflect the main paradigms in IR. Realism views it as a tool for protecting national security and the balance of power; diplomacy serves to maximize strategic advantages, and international law remains subordinate to the interests of states (Mearsheimer). Neoliberal institutionalism emphasizes the role of international organizations in promoting cooperation through transparency and regulation. Constructivism views diplomacy as a product of shared norms and identities, not just material interests.

In the context of globalization and new risks (terrorism, migration, transnational crises), diplomatic approaches are adapting. Joseph Nye's concepts of soft power and smart power expand the foreign policy toolkit by combining appeal, values, and traditional mechanisms of influence.

Multilateral diplomacy is playing a key role in addressing global challenges; the EU is the most successful example of institutionalized multilateral cooperation. Bilateral diplomacy remains the main form of interaction, especially between countries with historical disputes and accumulated sensitivities — as in the case of Bulgaria and the Republic of Macedonia.

The diplomatic corps functions as the operational infrastructure of foreign policy: diplomats gather information, mediate negotiations, draft agreements, and ensure their implementation.

Diplomacy continues to be a key instrument for managing international conflicts and adapting to the multipolar and interdependent environment of the 21st century.

3.1.3 International negotiations and intergovernmental agreements

This sub-section examines international negotiations and bilateral treaties as central instruments of foreign policy, determining the structure and dynamics of inter-state relations since the end of the Cold War. The new multipolar environment requires adapted strategies that combine law, diplomacy, and conflict management.

Bilateral agreements are a fundamental mechanism for regulating political, economic, and cultural cooperation. They allow for the resolution of specific historical disputes and the normalization of relations. Their legal basis is found in the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties (1969) and the UN Charter, which regulate the conclusion, validity, denunciation, and implementation of treaties. The Convention provides protections for weaker states against

coercion, and Article 33 of the Charter encourages the resolution of disputes through negotiation and mediation.

The implementation of bilateral treaties often proves problematic—it depends on the domestic political environment, geopolitical interests, and leadership strategies. An example is the Good Neighborliness Treaty between Bulgaria and North Macedonia (2017), whose implementation has been met with varying political interpretations.

In theory and practice, several approaches to international conflict management are distinguished:

1. Diplomatic negotiations – a key instrument combining a realistic focus on interests and liberal facilitation through institutions.

Mediation involves a third party that facilitates or guides the dialogue.

– *The theory of maturity* (Zartman) emphasizes that successful negotiations are possible in a "mutually painful impasse."

2. Arbitration and international legal mechanisms – effective in territorial and trade disputes, but limited in relation to great powers.

3. Multilateral mechanisms – actions through the UN, EU, etc., as in the Dayton Agreement (1995), but often hampered by bureaucracy and vetoes.

4. Transformative peacebuilding – aimed at long-term social change and civil society engagement.

The Bulgarian-Macedonian case falls mainly within the scope of diplomatic negotiations, as the dispute is not armed and involves issues outside international law (e.g., language).

Negotiations are a rational, structured process involving preparation, agenda setting, proposal development, compromise, and implementation. In theory, a distinction is made between:

- **Distributive negotiations (Model T)** – zero-sum logic, fixed mandates, limited flexibility.
- **Integrative negotiations (Model A)** – mutually beneficial solutions, flexibility, and focus on interests, not positions.

The study applies Roger Fisher and the Harvard Negotiation Project's model to assess the preparation and effectiveness of negotiations between Sofia and Skopje. Central to this is the **BATNA** (Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement) concept, which determines the negotiator's strength and point of withdrawal; its absence indicates structural weakness.

The parties' strategies range from competitive ("I win – you lose") to cooperative ("both sides win"), and their styles from analytical-aggressive to constructive. Game theory complements the analysis, allowing for the modeling of rational behavior in interdependence.

Finally, diplomatic momentum is key to the sustainability of any agreement. The signing of the Good Neighbourliness Agreement (2017) represents a diplomatic breakthrough, but raises the question of whether the momentum has been sustained and transformed into lasting policy.

3.2. CHAPTER TWO. Bulgaria, the Balkans, and Macedonia at the beginning of the 21st century.

3.2.1 The Balkans after the Cold War and the consequences for relations between the Balkan peoples.

After 1989–1990, the Balkans underwent profound transformations. The collapse of the communist regimes in Bulgaria and Romania paved the way for democracy, the EU, and NATO, and geopolitical tensions in the region eased, creating conditions for new diplomatic interaction. In contrast to these processes, in Serbia, Slobodan Milošević's nationalist course led to the breakup of the Yugoslav party, referendums on independence, and wars in Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia. In Bosnia, the conflict took on an ethno-religious character, giving rise to new state formations (Republika Srpska, Herzeg-Bosnia). The Yugoslav Wars claimed over 250,000 lives and created 2 million refugees, cementing the image of the Balkans as a conflict-ridden region. The escalation in Kosovo in 1999 prompted NATO intervention aimed at preventing ethnic cleansing.

Macedonia began its emancipation from Belgrade without bloody conflicts, but with intensified anti-Bulgarian propaganda. The September 1991 referendum was vaguely worded, and the Macedonian parliament simultaneously renounced territorial claims and declared its intention to protect "Macedonians" outside its borders—a contradictory message that showed diplomatic immaturity. On January 15, 1992, Bulgaria was the first to recognize independent Macedonia – an act that strengthened regional stability, refuted anti-Bulgarian clichés, and restored Sofia's active role on the international stage.

Nevertheless, persistent problems emerged in the 1990s: the rift between Macedonians and Albanians, which led to the 2001 conflict and the Ohrid Agreement; the fragile Macedonian identity, based on Yugoslav anti-Bulgarian nationalism; the structural weakness of the state, marked by corruption and institutional instability.

After 2000, the European perspective became a leading factor in the region. The conditionality of the EU transformed domestic policies and directed countries towards

cooperation rather than confrontation. European integration provides a mechanism for resolving bilateral disputes, but the actual issues remain within the competence of the countries themselves – it is in this context that the 2017 Good Neighbourliness Agreement between Bulgaria and North Macedonia arose.

3.2.2 The Macedonian question and its place in Bulgarian-Macedonian relations.

Understanding contemporary Bulgarian-Macedonian relations requires tracing the historical processes that have defined the parameters of the "Macedonian question." This question represents the aspiration for national, political, and cultural unification of the population in geographical Macedonia with the Bulgarian state and was a key element in Bulgaria's foreign policy from 1878 to 1989.

The historical ties between Bulgarians and the population of present-day North Macedonia date back to the Middle Ages: under Khan Presian and Tsar Simeon, these lands were integrated into Bulgaria, Ohrid became a spiritual center, and Samuel established his capital there. The Bitola inscription and inclusion in "Thema Bulgaria" testify to a lasting Bulgarian presence. During the Renaissance, figures such as the Miladinov brothers clearly asserted their Bulgarian identity. After the Congress of Berlin (1878) and the fragmentation of the Bulgarian lands, the idea of national unification became a foreign policy priority.

The Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (IMRO), founded in 1893, formulated a struggle for the autonomy of Macedonia and Adrianople with the prospect of joining Bulgaria. The Ilinden-Preobrazhenie Uprising (1903) was the peak of the organized struggle. Bulgaria supported the VMORO and VMOK until 1934. The Balkan Wars and World War I were driven by the desire for national unification, and the Treaty of Neuilly (1919) left a lasting sense of incompleteness. In the 1920s and 1930s, the VMRO functioned as a quasi-state factor with influence on political life.

After 1944, the communist government adopted the line of the Comintern and Tito, recognizing a separate Macedonian nation and language. The Treaty of Bleis (1947) even provided for the transfer of Pirin Macedonia to Yugoslavia—the most serious deviation from the traditional Bulgarian position. Yugoslavia pursued a policy of Macedonisation, accompanied by repression and the replacement of historical memory. It was not until 1963 that Todor Zhivkov rejected the federalist line, although the change remained formal.

After 1989, the issue returned with full force. On January 15, 1992, Bulgaria was the first to recognize independent Macedonia – a move with a stabilizing effect, demonstrating maturity and a peaceful policy. Nevertheless, Skopje followed an inconsistent line: the new identity was

built by denying the Bulgarian connection, and anti-Bulgarian rhetoric remained a tool for domestic political legitimacy. The main dispute was the language issue, which blocked an attempt at a bilateral agreement in 1994.

The joint declaration of February 22, 1999, marked the peak of relations in the 1990s. It introduced a diplomatic formula for the language and obliged Macedonia to prevent anti-Bulgarian propaganda. Bulgaria provided significant political and military support, including during the Albanian conflict in 2001. However, public attitudes in Macedonia did not change significantly.

The period 2002–2014 was marked by a new decline. Nikola Gruevski's administration and the transformation of the VMRO-DPMNE party reinforced nationalism. The "anti-Bulgarisation" campaign and the "Skopje 2014" project used historical figures associated with Bulgarian history as a tool for identity distancing. Bulgaria shifted from unconditional support to a policy of conditionality, and in 2012, together with Greece, blocked the start of Macedonia's negotiations with the EU due to a lack of good neighborliness.

The Macedonian question remains a constant factor in Bulgarian politics and a litmus test for national sensitivity, with the missed opportunities for rapprochement in 2002–2014 continuing to weigh on bilateral relations.

3.2.3 Political dynamics and foreign policy of the Republic of North Macedonia. The agreement with Bulgaria and the Prespa Agreement with Greece

This sub-section analyses the political dynamics in the Republic of North Macedonia between 2015 and 2018, which led to a change in the country's foreign policy course and the signing of two key agreements: the Good Neighbourliness Agreement with Bulgaria (2017) and the Prespa Agreement with Greece (2018). The focus is on Zoran Zaev's administration, the comparison between the two documents, and their impact on Euro-Atlantic integration.

Nikola Gruevski's (VMRO-DPMNE) administration formed an authoritarian model through control over institutions, the media, and the judicial system, leading to isolation from European processes and confrontation with neighbors. In 2015, revelations of mass wiretapping (Zaev's "bombs") sparked a deep political crisis and mass protests, which escalated after President Ivanov granted amnesty in 2016. The crisis reached its peak on April 27, 2017, when nationalist protesters stormed the Parliament. After a failed attempt to form a coalition with VMRO-DPMNE, the president handed the mandate to SDSM, and on June 1, 2017, Zaev heads the government, promising to fight corruption, normalize relations with neighbors, and

accelerate Euro-Atlantic integration—a course that carries significant domestic political risk due to deep-rooted nationalism.

Although the SDSM is traditionally perceived as distant from Bulgaria, Zaev declared a break with the aggressive practices of the previous administration. Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borisov welcomed the change, and in June 2017 Zaev visited Sofia and an agreement was reached to include "common history" in the treaty. It was formally signed on August 1, 2017. The treaty does not resolve historical or identity disputes, but it sets a framework for respect, dialogue, and limiting nationalist rhetoric.

At the same time, the process of resolving the dispute with Greece—the most serious obstacle to the country's international recognition and membership in NATO and the EU—is ongoing. Greece has blocked Euro-Atlantic integration since the 1990s, insisting that the name "Macedonia" contains irredentist claims. Under pressure from the EU and the US, and following the work of special envoy Matthew Nimetz, the two countries reached a "painful impasse" (Zartman), which made compromise inevitable. The Prespa Agreement (2018) provides for a change of name to "Republic of North Macedonia" (*erga omnes*), Greek recognition of nationality and language, removal of symbols such as the "Sun of Vergina," and the creation of a commission to review textbooks.

The two agreements have a common strategic goal—Euro-Atlantic integration—but differ in logic and mechanisms.

The agreement with Bulgaria (2017) is based on the idea of a shared past and contains recognition of a "common history," but does not resolve identity disputes. The historical commission (Article 8) is assigned an excessive political role, and progress remains limited, leading to a blockage of the negotiation process with the EU in 2020.

The Prespa Agreement (2018) represents a more structured and legally specific solution, requiring constitutional changes. It achieves a significant compromise on both sides – name versus language/nationality – and quickly leads to North Macedonia's membership in NATO (2020). From the perspective of negotiation theories (Fisher, Raiffe, Zartman), the Prespa Agreement is more successful because it resolves the main dispute and builds on strong international pressure ("forced multilateralism"). In contrast, the agreement with Bulgaria did not lead to sustainable social transformation and left key identity issues unresolved.

3.3. CHAPTER THREE. The Agreement of August 1, 2017.

3.3.1. General idea of the treaty – legal justification

The first part of Chapter Three provides a theoretical and legal justification for the Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighbourliness and Cooperation of 1 August 2017 as a transformative diplomatic act. The analysis uses the models of Ickle, Zartman, the Harvard Negotiation Project, and Game Theory to assess the strategic choices of Bulgaria and the Republic of Macedonia.

Bilateral negotiations, when they concern identity and historical memory, require not just an agreement but a reformulation of relations. Charles Ickle emphasizes that treaties serve two functions: conflict resolution and the creation of a new framework for interaction. In this sense, the 2017 Treaty is a "second-order" agreement aimed at changing the model of good neighborliness. Eckle warns that a treaty without guaranteed subsequent implementation can be more harmful than no agreement at all – an observation that is particularly relevant to the implementation of the Treaty.

Zartman accepts that successful negotiations are possible in a "mutually painful impasse." The period after 2015 can be defined as a moment of "maturation" – neither confrontation nor stagnation are beneficial, and external pressure from the EU requires a demonstration of good neighborliness. From the HNP's point of view, the Treaty represents an attempt to "separate the people from the problem" by accepting the legitimacy of both sides' interests and seeking a solution based on objective standards. The Historical Commission (Article 8) is an instrument of this very approach – expert management of sensitive issues in order to reduce political escalation.

In a European context, the Agreement demonstrates the Western Balkans' ability to resolve regional issues on their own initiative. It strengthens the EU's enlargement policy and positions Bulgaria as a key player in 2018. The agreement also acts as a geopolitical buffer, limiting the possibilities for intervention by external forces, including Russia.

Domestic political logic determines the different approaches of the countries. Zaev, governing in a crisis following the wiretapping scandals and violence in parliament in 2017, uses the agreement as a tool for Euro-Atlantic integration. But Macedonianism remains the dominant identity narrative, which provokes strong nationalist reactions. Bulgaria, after a long period of confrontation under Gruevski, sees an opportunity to restart relations and carries a significantly smaller domestic political burden on the issue.

The analysis introduces three possible alternatives for each of the countries to assess their strategic decisions before signing the Agreement:

Alternatives for Bulgaria	Alternatives for the Republic of Macedonia
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Alternative A: Refusal to negotiations, a firm position.	Alternative A: Escalation of Macedonianism and confrontation.
Alternative B: A "step-by-step" approach – demanding real changes and then signing an agreement.	Alternative B: Negotiations, compromises (with Macedonianism) in favor of European integration, but partial protection of Macedonian interests.
Alternative C: Negotiate as quickly as possible and bind Macedonia to a document for future changes.	Alternative C: Negotiate as quickly as possible and bind Macedonia to a document for future changes.

The countries' choice:

- **Bulgaria chooses Alternative C – a quick agreement, demonstrating cooperation and a friendly attitude, with the resolution of contentious issues explicitly postponed until after the agreement has been signed.**
- **The RCM chooses Alternative B – compromises with Macedonianism at the expense of European integration, with the aim of minimising costs (compromises with Macedonianism) and maximising benefits (NATO/EU membership).**

Nash equilibrium and Strategic Equilibrium Ratio (SER): The analysis uses game theory to assess the effectiveness of this choice. The most balanced equilibrium (classical Nash equilibrium) is when Bulgaria chooses B and Macedonia chooses B, with equal benefits (2, 2). Based on the alternatives chosen by Bulgaria (B) and Macedonia (B), the actual result of the Agreement is:

	Macedonia: A (confrontation)	Macedonia: B (compromise)	Macedonia: C (deep concessions)
Bulgaria: A - (firm position)	(0, 0)	(1, -1)	(2, -2)
Bulgaria: B (step by step)	(-1, 1)	(2, 2)	(3, 1)
Bulgaria: C (quick agreement)	(-2, 2)	(1, 3)	(2, 4)

Actual result (Bulgaria B, Macedonia B) = (1, 3). Calculation of the Strategic Equilibrium Ratio (SER): $SER = \frac{P_b + P_m}{P_b \max + P_m \max}$. The maximum possible benefit for Bulgaria is 3, and for Macedonia it is 4. $SER = \frac{1 + 3}{3 + 4} = \frac{4}{7} \approx 0.571$.

The result of 0.571 shows that the two countries realize only about 57% of their total potential – a moderately effective but unstable strategic equilibrium. Bulgaria gains limited international advantage but narrows its options for resolving deep disputes, while Macedonia retains significantly broader maneuvering capacity.

The 2017 agreement shows 82% textual and semantic similarity with the 1999 Joint Declaration, after removing the protocol articles. The preamble and the texts of Articles 1–7 and 9–11 practically repeat the Declaration, which means a lack of adaptation to the new problems that have accumulated over 18 years. Bulgaria prefers a ready-made framework that facilitates rapid initialing.

The significant new elements are in Articles 8 and 12. Article 8 establishes the Historical Commission, an instrument conceived as a scientific framework for an objective reading of shared history and common commemorations. Although perceived as a diplomatic achievement, this article quickly became a source of deadlock, as historical issues are inherently political. Article 12 introduces the only real binding mechanisms – annual intergovernmental meetings. Failure to comply with them reduces diplomatic momentum and facilitates the RSM's delaying tactics.

The agreement has been criticized for its lack of a pre-negotiation phase, including impartial criteria for dispute resolution. Articles 8 and 12 do not contain a risk management mechanism – there is no protocol for action in the event of failure of the commission or unilateral non-compliance. This structural advantage favors the Macedonian strategy of prolonging the process.

The first signs of deterioration appeared as early as 2018, when Zaev defined the Ilinden Uprising as "Macedonian only," contrary to the definition of "common history." Macedonian diplomacy then shifted its focus to domestic political pressure and nationalist rhetoric, moving towards positional bargaining.

Bulgaria did not use the available instruments of foreign policy pressure and did not establish mechanisms and guarantees for implementation in advance, which put it in a relatively weaker position. Thus, the Agreement, conceived as a transformative act, is implemented as an

unstable equilibrium ($CSR = 0.571$), which leaves room for the continuation of Macedonian policy of postponement and preservation of Macedonianism.

3.3.2. Implementation and weaknesses of the agreement

Understanding the dynamics of relations between the Republic of North Macedonia (RCM) and Bulgaria after the signing of the Good Neighbourliness Agreement in 2017 requires a detailed review of the functioning of the mechanisms provided for and an assessment of the diplomatic process through expert assessments and quantitative data.

A central instrument for the development of bilateral relations is the Joint Intergovernmental Commission under Article 12 of the Agreement, which is supposed to meet annually. In reality, however, it has only met twice in the period 2017-2022 – in 2019 and 2022 – which shows a discrepancy between the planned and actual activity. The first protocol covers the period until mid-2019, during which 16 high-level meetings were held. This initial stage was characterized by active dialogue between Prime Ministers Boyko Borisov and Zoran Zaev, with emphatic rhetoric about a "shared history" and political rapprochement. Both sides demonstrated a willingness to stabilize relations. Bulgaria maintained a positive attitude, which was particularly important for Skopje in the context of European integration after the Prespa Agreement. The protocol records activity in the economy, energy, and transport, but there is a lack of concrete action on education and historical disputes—critical areas.

Second Protocol (July 17, 2022): Changed context and a firm framework. The second protocol shows a decline in political dialogue—only nine high-level meetings have been held in the past three years. This document is much more in-depth and focused on the sharp contradictions, reflecting the changed balance of power after the Bulgarian veto. The second protocol (point 3) contains obligations on the part of Macedonia:

- Inclusion of Bulgarians in the constitution.
- Taking measures against hate speech.
- Rehabilitation of victims of the communist regime and access to archives.
- Development of a model lesson on Tsar Samuel.
- Harmonization of history teaching content by 2024/2025.

While the first protocol is more in line with Skopje's direct political interests, the second is more in line with Sofia's. The main reason for these significant differences in content is the dynamization of relations caused by Bulgaria's veto on the start of accession negotiations. The

veto forced Macedonia to make certain compromises on Macedonianism, which led to a more productive meeting, reflecting Bulgaria's changed foreign policy strategy.

The Joint Commission on Historical and Educational Issues (Art. 8) is a key innovation compared to the 1999 declaration. Although its tasks are formally scientific (objective interpretation of history), they are deeply political in nature, as they touch upon fundamental components of Macedonian identity. Political leaders (Borisov and Zaev) have given the commission the responsibility of resolving sensitive political disputes. Experts note that the lack of a clear political mandate, especially for Macedonian representatives, who often reflect the doctrine of Macedonianism, is blocking the process. According to the experts, the delay in the commission's work is not accidental, but a deliberate move within the Macedonian strategy to preserve Macedonianism.

In 2022, the commission's performance is rated as "below expectations." This proves that the agreement fails to define the necessary social change in Macedonia, and the Historical Commission is tasked with making political decisions.

¹ 's expert assessments show that after 2017 there has been no real transformation in relations, and the main issues remain unresolved, leading to the Bulgarian veto. According to experts, the issues of minorities, hate speech, and propaganda against Bulgaria remain largely absent from the text of the 2017 agreement, being used only declaratively. Bulgaria did not raise the issue of hate speech in the 2017 negotiation process, which is a serious omission. The issue of Bulgarians in Macedonia (national minorities) is also absent from the agreement. Lyubomir Kyuchukov concludes that the agreement "was not intended to settle issues in detail."

Experts identify a number of mistakes in Bulgarian foreign policy:

- Lack of clear goals and vision: Bulgaria did not define its ultimate goals and dividends and did not openly state the contentious issues at the outset.
- Lack of consistency and momentum: Bulgaria did not maintain its diplomatic momentum long enough and aggressively enough after 2018. Foreign policy was personal, opportunistic, and chaotic, taken over by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
- It was a strategic mistake to transfer all the work and responsibility to the Historical Commission.
- The preparation of Bulgarian diplomats was assessed as poor and inconsistent, and their mandate was unclear.

¹ There are 11 expert assessments received from the experts described in Appendix 2.

The quantitative assessment of the preparation and negotiation process is average to low (3.44 and 3.55 on a scale of 1 to 7). Attitudes tend towards quick cooperation rather than in-depth problem solving.

In the initial stage, there is cooperation, which gradually gives way to competition after 2018/2019. Regarding the type of negotiation process, there is a slight predominance of assessments that the negotiations are more like bargaining than partnership. The lowest ratings are given to the elements of understanding (2.63) and trust (3.13). This creates a general atmosphere of mistrust and suspicion between the parties, resulting in unsatisfactory implementation.

Experts assess external influence as moderate to very high. External intervention is present and is driving the process forward. Encouragement from the EU and the US is motivating Sofia and Skopje to resolve the issues quickly. External influence (EU, US) is in favor of Skopje's integration. Serbia and Russia also exert influence, which intensifies the confrontation. The hypothesis is that Bulgaria would not act without external encouragement, which may mean that the main motivation of the Bulgarian side is shifting away from resolving deep-rooted disputes and toward short-term foreign policy dividends. However, external intervention is being implemented differently than Western diplomats expected due to the fundamentally different motivations of the two countries.

The experts interviewed are unanimous that there are no real mechanisms to ensure compliance, and the actions envisaged sound wishful thinking. The only direct mechanism is the meetings of the Commission under Article 12. The lack of mechanisms to monitor implementation undermines the effectiveness of the agreement. Goodwill is the main factor. The weaknesses of the agreement necessitate external intervention, expressed through the "French proposal" (EU membership conditional on the inclusion of Bulgarians in the Constitution).

The interviews make it abundantly clear that the Prespa Agreement is more successful and effective. It is drafted with greater precision and contains specific mechanisms for control and evaluation. It resolves the main dispute over the name. The Prespa Agreement aims to deny the historical connection between Greece and Macedonia, while the Bulgarian-Macedonian agreement emphasizes precisely this shared historical past.

The Good Neighbourliness Agreement is a compromise document that allows for different interpretations and does not prescribe specific ways of implementation. As a result, Bulgaria is faced with complete disregard for the agreements on the points that are most important to it. In practice, relations have not changed significantly since the signing of the agreement. The agreement does not solve any significant underlying problems, but only creates a

basis for resolution. The Bulgarian side has laid this foundation, but has not built on it. The poor overall assessment of the negotiation process and the lack of guarantees put relations at risk, with Bulgarian diplomacy failing to protect its national interests. Ultimately, the actions (and inactions) in implementing the agreement have turned the initial agreements into a heightened return and expansion of the problems. The Bulgarian veto proved that Bulgarian diplomacy was not sufficiently insistent, but it forced Skopje to accept significant changes, as seen in the second protocol of 2022 and the need for European intervention through the "French proposal."

3.3.3 Consequences for Bulgaria and the EU

This section of Chapter Three analyzes the foreign policy context in which the 2017 Agreement was concluded and the long-term consequences of its non-implementation for Bulgaria and the EU's enlargement policy. After the Cold War, the Balkans returned to latent nationalism, but the European perspective changed the dynamics and turned European integration into a key stimulus for stability and good neighborliness. The EU requires not only internal reforms but also foreign policy adaptation, including the resolution of historical disputes – a condition that often gives rise to internal political tensions.

Following the accession of Slovenia, Bulgaria, and Romania, the EU has established itself as a major stabilizing factor in the Balkans. The experience of Slovenia and Croatia shows that membership can be a catalyst for modernization, and the enlargement policy – a tool for limiting the influence of Russia, China, and Turkey. Against this backdrop, the signing of the agreement between Bulgaria and Macedonia in 2017 caused a wide international response and was perceived as a historic breakthrough. European leaders—Juncker, Mogherini, Hahn, as well as the governments of key member states—described the act as a model for regional reconciliation.

However, the positive reaction does not hide the fact that the agreement does not resolve the deep-rooted identity disputes. After 2018, relations deteriorated to levels reminiscent of the Gruevski period. The Bulgarian veto in 2020 blocked not only North Macedonia's negotiations, but also those of Albania, turning the bilateral dispute into a European problem. European institutions sharply criticised the blockade, with Borrell emphasising that historical disputes cannot paralyse enlargement.

An analysis of the European Commission's reports clearly outlines the change in tone. In 2020, relations were assessed as stable, with progress on the Treaty. In 2021, there is talk of stagnation and the need for an "extra push." In 2022, there is a brief improvement around the start of the negotiation process, but the domestic political crisis in Skopje undermines sustainability. In 2023, efforts are overshadowed by incidents and hate speech, including attacks

on Bulgarian clubs. In 2024, the EC insists on "tangible results" and good faith implementation – a sign of a lack of irreversible progress.

European intervention through the French proposal (2022) confirms the shortcomings in the implementation of the Agreement. The proposal includes key Bulgarian demands: the inclusion of Bulgarians in the constitution, protection against discrimination, mechanisms against hate speech, and a strengthened mandate for the joint commission. It recognizes the Macedonian language without affecting the Bulgarian position and transforms the commitments under the Treaty into a common European framework. The need for this intervention is an indicator of the unsuccessful implementation of the treaty and the structural weaknesses of the bilateral process.

Despite the EU's active role, deep ideological and identity disputes remain unresolved. The successful European integration of North Macedonia, linked to genuine good neighborliness with Bulgaria, could redefine the future model of enlargement to the Western Balkans. This requires Sofia to develop a long-term institutionalized strategy and use the European framework as a sustainable mechanism for protecting treaty commitments.

3.3.4. Summary and conclusions

The Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighbourliness and Cooperation Agreement of 1 August 2017 between Bulgaria and North Macedonia, although welcomed as a diplomatic breakthrough, was signed in a context of critically low mutual trust, with the brief moment of rapprochement around the signing failing to change this fundamental dynamic. Experts emphasize that key contentious issues were left out of the text of the agreement, without providing a clear mechanism for their gradual resolution, which has led to ongoing difficulties in bilateral relations.

The Harvard Negotiation Project (HNP) study of the negotiation process shows that the Bulgarian side was unprepared, with a strategy that did not match the complexity of the issues and a lack of historical and diplomatic coordination. Under pressure from the international community, Bulgaria chose to sign the agreement quickly, rather than engage in lengthy and in-depth negotiations. This decision, although leading to short-term diplomatic success, did not result in a real resolution of the deep-rooted disputes. Bulgaria treated the agreement as a self-implementing instrument, reducing its diplomatic activity after signing it and relying on internal transformation in Macedonian society without offering an alternative or actively seeking influence.

The negotiations, which fit into the so-called T (Traditional) Model of the HNP with a limited mandate, initially shifted from a distributive to an integrative model, but after 2018 the

Macedonian side has increasingly begun to rely on distributive strategies, refusing to compromise and returning relations to pre-conflict dynamics. Bulgaria, for its part, has traditionally maintained a principled style of negotiation, whose greatest success is the signing of the Good Neighbourliness Agreement. However, experts assess that maintaining this principled style after the signing has proved ineffective. Bulgaria has overestimated the Macedonian side's commitment to continuing its principled approach, which has not happened, and finds itself at a disadvantage.

There is no clear mechanism for measuring progress and no structured institutional communication. The implementation of Article 12 of the Agreement, according to which the Intergovernmental Commission must meet annually, has been violated, with only two meetings held – in 2019 and 2022. The Historical Commission (Article 8), although a major achievement for Bulgaria, has been burdened with excessive political responsibility for resolving deep political disputes and has become a major factor in the deterioration of relations. Instead of focusing on defining a common history and changes in education, the commission has engaged in "inventorying the past."

An analysis of the strategies shows that the two countries pursued different goals. Macedonia sought rapid European integration, willing to make minimal compromises only in this context. Bulgaria sought diplomatic success and international recognition, postponing the resolution of contentious issues. This led to the realization of the Macedonian vision – preserving Macedonianism without committing to deep reforms. The main benefit for Bulgaria – the resolution of historical and educational issues – has not been achieved.

From the perspective of game theory, analysis of the Agreement using Nash equilibrium reveals a lack of stable strategic equilibrium. The realized scenario leads to an overall Strategic Equilibrium Coefficient (SEC) of 0.571, which indicates an ineffective realization of the Agreement's potential. This configuration creates a structural imbalance in which North Macedonia realizes a higher benefit without assuming an equivalent share of the responsibilities.

The inability of the two countries to implement the Agreement has become a European problem. The EU's reactions following the veto highlight the dissatisfaction that a bilateral dispute is blocking the Union's enlargement policy. The Bulgarian-Macedonian dispute has become a stumbling block for one of the EU's key policies. The "French proposal" of 2022 is an indicator of the EU's recognition that the implementation of the agreement is insufficient and has led to a critical stalemate. The re-inclusion of key clauses from the Agreement (such as the inclusion of Bulgarians in the Constitution) in the new negotiating framework is evidence of the weakness of bilateral negotiations and the need for European mediation. The EU has effectively

taken on the role of guarantor of the unfulfilled clauses, turning the bilateral dispute into a pan-European issue.

Ultimately, the Treaty did not lead to lasting change, and the absence of active Bulgarian diplomacy after 2018 hindered the possibility of sustainable progress. The case shows that good neighborliness cannot be left solely on a declarative basis, but should be institutionalized through clear, binding mechanisms that the EU monitors and coordinates. Bulgaria needs to build a long-term institutionalized strategy to defend its national interests, instead of giving in to the desire for a quick "breakthrough" that compromises the potential of the agreements.

3.4. CONCLUSION

Relations between Bulgaria and Macedonia represent a persistent foreign policy challenge, often accompanied by incomplete knowledge and political recklessness. The historical depths and specific socio-cultural environment make the bilateral dispute different from most regional conflicts. Chapters One and Two outlined the deep nature of the disputes, the weaknesses of diplomatic interaction, and the inconsistency that has accompanied relations since 1992.

During the 1990s and the first two decades of the 21st century, relations went through brief periods of warming and long phases of tension and low communication. The problems related to Bulgaria's historical heritage in Macedonia remain systematically unresolved, and Bulgaria rarely formulates a sustainable strategy for addressing them. There is antagonism and a choice between incompatible policies, which requires multi-layered diplomatic efforts – lacking in the period under review.

Expert assessments and public attitudes in both countries indicate not a convergence but a widening of differences. The inability of the two governments to implement the 2017 Agreement led to Bulgaria's veto on the start of negotiations between the Republic of Macedonia and the EU, which further worsened the perception of Bulgaria in Macedonian society.

The main shortcomings of Bulgarian diplomacy are linked to the hasty creation of a treaty that proved to be unsustainable and did not address the real underlying issues. Among the reasons are incomplete diplomatic preparation, an unclear political mandate, underestimation of identity sensitivity, placing excessive burden on the two commissions, and the subsequent weakening of diplomatic momentum. Bulgaria overestimates the possibility of a rapid change in Macedonian positions and maintains unrealistic public expectations. There is no long-term

foreign policy strategy for Skopje that combines diplomatic pressure, gradual steps, and consistent goals.

Against this backdrop, Macedonia is pursuing a strategy of minimizing "costs" (adjustments to Macedonianism) and maximizing "revenues" (European integration), relying on postponing deep-seated disputes. Analysis using negotiation and game theory shows that Bulgaria's foreign policy strategy in the period 2014–2017 and after the signing of the Agreement suffers from misguided goal setting and a lack of sustained support, which makes it unsuccessful in addressing key issues.

The role of the EU is central. The signing of the Agreement was welcomed by European leaders as a positive signal for regional stability and the enlargement process. However, after the Prespa Agreement, the Bulgarian-Macedonian disputes became an obstacle to the entire European integration of the Western Balkans, requiring a deeper commitment from the EU. This culminated in 2022 with the so-called "French proposal" – a European framework that integrates Bulgarian conditions and represents an acknowledgment that the bilateral agreement had not been effectively implemented. The EU's intervention is a clear indicator of the weaknesses in the bilateral process and the lack of consistency and balance in the implementation of the 2017 Agreement.

With regard to the objectives, scientific questions, and tasks of the dissertation research and the hypothesis and sub-theses presented in the introduction, we can make some interesting observations and supplement the conclusions set out in Chapter Three. The object and subject of the study were examined from almost all possible angles, with historical background information, analysis of documentary sources, and expert assessments of the relations and negotiation process between the parties. The following was done in relation to the main tasks of the study:

1) *To construct the conceptual framework of foreign policy and international relations* – this was achieved in the first chapter, which examined not only a number of theoretical issues relating to foreign policy and international relations, but also established international approaches and practices in the signing of such treaties.

2) *To outline and summarize the historical dynamics of diplomatic relations between the two countries* – the second chapter traces the historical dynamics of relations between Bulgaria and Macedonia, as well as key moments in the foreign policy and diplomacy of the two countries towards each other.

3) *To reveal and construct in detail the diplomatic approaches of the Bulgarian government during the period of negotiations, signing, and implementation of the Good*

Neighborhood Agreement with Macedonia and to outline the specific diplomatic moves, decisions, and documents—the solution to this task is multifaceted and is presented in both the second and third chapters of the dissertation;

4) *To systematize the specific diplomatic work done by the Bulgarian side prior to the signing of the Agreement and to establish the degree of compliance with recognized international standards and practices* – the task has been completed, with its solution presented mainly in the third chapter, but there are also partial references to it in the second chapter.

5) *Develop a questionnaire for conducting semi-structured interviews with experts (expert assessments)* – the questionnaire has been developed and presented as an appendix to the dissertation;

6) *Conducting interviews, processing, analyzing, and systematizing the assessments received from experts* – the research methodology described in Chapter 3 presents the approach chosen for conducting the interviews, and the participating experts are presented in an appendix to the dissertation. The process of processing and analyzing the data is also described in Chapter 3. The systematization is also presented in Chapter 3.

7) *Formulation of conclusions on Bulgaria's foreign policy and diplomacy in the context of the negotiations and conclusion of the Good Neighbourliness Agreement* – the conclusions are formulated both in Chapter 3 and in the conclusion to the dissertation.

The research questions were also answered in the dissertation:

1) *What are the accepted and established international principles for negotiating such treaties* – Chapter 1 presents various approaches, with the selected set of principles being that of the Harvard Negotiation Project.

2) *What is the behavior of Bulgarian diplomacy in the process of negotiating and concluding the agreement, and does it correspond to established international principles and standards?* The characteristics of the Bulgarian approach and the Macedonian approach are established in accordance with the Harvard Negotiation Project, and the conclusions are presented in Chapter 3.

3) *Are there weaknesses in the behavior of Bulgarian diplomacy and, if so, are they situational or are they an expression of fundamental challenges to Bulgarian foreign policy?* – this question is also answered, making it clear that Bulgarian foreign policy and diplomacy have fundamental problems, which are also reflected in the country's behavior in the negotiations with the Republic of Macedonia.

In general, **the research hypothesis** is confirmed, namely that the problems in the practical implementation of the agreement are related to its preparation and conclusion. However, the nuances that are visible in the main theses should also be taken into account

1) *The weaknesses in Bulgarian foreign policy and diplomacy are due to the immaturity of Bulgarian politics as a whole, given the relatively short period of real bilateral relations with the Republic of North Macedonia*² – Bulgarian diplomacy does indeed exhibit problems characteristic of the period of democratic transition, such as inconsistency, uncertainty, the role of external factors, poorly developed diplomatic staff, etc.

2) *The preparation for the Agreement on the part of Bulgaria was carried out in accordance with internationally established diplomatic practices and does not contain any conceptual errors* – from a formal point of view, we can say that this sub-thesis is also confirmed, but in terms of content, the approach has weaknesses related to the hastiness of the Bulgarian side.

3) *The Treaty did not produce the expected results for a number of reasons beyond the Treaty itself, including changes in power in both countries, changes in the European and international situation in the period after 2017, and others.* This sub-thesis is partially correct, but the main problems lie in the approach chosen by the Bulgarian side rather than in external factors.

² Since recognition on February 15, 1992, to date.

4. SCIENTIFIC CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE DISSERTATION

The scientific contributions of the dissertation stem from the theoretical and empirical perspective through which the negotiation process between Bulgaria and North Macedonia is analyzed. An original contribution is the application of the Nash and Harvard Negotiation Project model to prove the unbalanced strategic behavior of the countries. It is argued that Bulgaria acts in a principled manner, while after 2018, the Republic of Macedonia shifts to a distributive and confrontational model, which creates structural imbalance and compromises the agreement. The quantitative measurement of the realized integration potential (57%) is a novelty in Bulgarian political science and demonstrates why the negotiations are failing and what more sustainable alternatives would be possible.

An empirical contribution is the demonstration of weaknesses in Bulgarian foreign policy strategy through systematic analysis of documents, expert interviews, and political decisions: lack of consistency, insufficient preparation, hasty goals, and absence of sustainable guarantees for the implementation of the Treaty. This places Bulgarian policy towards the RCM in the broader context of the weaknesses of new democracies.

The dissertation develops an integrated methodological framework that combines content analysis, semi-structured interviews, and game theory, allowing for a multi-layered examination of strategies, alternatives, and outcomes in bilateral relations. An additional contribution is the comparative analysis with the Prespa Agreement, as well as the assessment of the EU's diplomatic role in regional integration processes.

The scientific novelty lies in the first comprehensive academic study of the signing and implementation of the Good Neighbourliness Agreement (2017), based on a synthesis of classical theories of international relations, conflict studies and applied negotiation theory. The combination of empirical and conceptual methods leads to a new model for evaluating the results of international treaties.

Among the scientific and applied results is the creation of a systematic framework of good practices for use in Bulgarian diplomacy. An analytical toolkit has been developed to monitor the effectiveness of international treaties, including a critical analysis of the 2017 Treaty, the Joint Declaration (1999), and the protocols under Article 12. Practical guidelines have been developed for strategic goal setting, the need for sustainable control mechanisms, and closer coordination with EU institutions. This forms an applicable model for future Balkan negotiation processes.

5. LIST OF PUBLICATIONS ON THE TOPIC AND ISSUES OF THE DISSERTATION

Slavenski, V. (2023). "Russian diplomatic influence after the start of the war in Ukraine. Is Russia in global retreat?"; *Crises, Elections, Pandemic*, 3 (Crises, Conflicts, and Diplomacy in the 21st Century), 9-25. Veliko Tarnovo: St. St. Cyril and Methodius University Press.

Slavenski, V. (2021). "Post-ideologies: populism in the pandemic and beyond. Populists in the US, Italy, and France"; *Post-democracy and post-politics. How to Think the Political in a Post/Crisis Era? Seminar_BG*, no. 22).

Slavenski, V. (2021). "Waves of risk and uncertainty – the new normal in political decision-making in Europe."; *Problems of Social and Economic Security*, 1 (The World in/after the Global Pandemic). Veliko Tarnovo: St. St. Cyril and Methodius University Press. ISSN 2738-8689.

Slavenski, V. (2022). "The political crisis in Bulgaria and relations with the Republic of North Macedonia. Prospects for a deepening of the crisis in bilateral relations."; *45 years of the Department of International Relations at the University of National and World Economy: continuity and development in the study of international relations and processes in Europe*, XX-XX. Sofia: University of National and World Economy. ISBN 978-619-232-620-3.