

Theater of Fear: The Geopolitics Behind the Action Plan for Minorities in North Macedonia

An Analysis of the Dispute over Chapters 23 and 24, Constitutional Amendments, and the Bulgarian Veto

1. Four Actors, Four Interests

When a political process takes more than three years, while the formal solution to what appears to be a technical problem is relatively simple, it becomes obvious that the technical problem has long ceased to be the real reason.

The Action Plan for the Protection and Advancement of the Rights of Members of Communities in North Macedonia is a case in point.

The document was created to meet a condition related to the opening of negotiations with the European Union. It was supposed to be an administrative instrument. Instead, it has become part of a broader geopolitical dispute in which different actors use the same document for different purposes.

1. Skopje sees it as a condition that must be met to continue the European integration process.
2. Sofia sees it as an additional instrument in the broader dispute over Macedonian identity, history, and the treatment of Bulgarians.
3. Brussels sees it as part of a procedure that needs to be completed in order to keep the political process moving.
4. Domestic political parties see it as a resource for political mobilization.
5. Minority communities, although formally at the center of the document, are the least present political actors in the entire process.

That is why the dispute remains unresolved. The actors are not actually trying to solve the same problem. Each approaches the issue according to its own institutional constraints, sense of urgency, and political interests.

2. The Action Plan Is Not a Bulgarian Document

The most important point in this debate is also the simplest: the Action Plan is not a document for Bulgarians.

It is a cross-cutting document concerning the rights of communities in North Macedonia. According to the available information, it covers 27 communities and contains measures, deadlines, and institutional responsibilities in areas such as anti-discrimination, political and administrative representation, cultural rights, and education.

This has a direct consequence.

What is guaranteed for one community does not disappear for the others. The legal mechanism does not operate according to the principle of "more rights for some and fewer rights for others."

If the document provides for a law or institutional mechanism concerning one community, the same horizontal principle applies to the others.

That is the essence of the document.

The claim that its adoption would grant Bulgarians some form of special status does not follow from the logic of the Action Plan itself.

3. From a Technical Document to a Geopolitical Instrument

According to the sources cited in the analysis, the document was prepared with the participation of domestic and international experts and in coordination with the Council of Europe and the European Commission.

It was reportedly informally aligned with 26 of the 27 EU member states, while Bulgaria remained the only member state with outstanding observations.

This changes the nature of the problem.

If one country stands alone against a document supported by almost all the other member states, the question is no longer simply whether the document is technically sound.

The question becomes why that member state has an interest in blocking it.

In geopolitics, this is the key distinction. It is not enough to ask what someone is demanding. You also have to ask what they gain by demanding it. More importantly, what do they lose if they stop demanding it?

Recommendation: North Macedonia should insist on separating the technical issue, namely the adoption of the Action Plan, from the geopolitical issue, namely the need for structural safeguards against the abuse of the bilateral veto. This would reduce the risk of future blockades and provide greater predictability.

4. Bulgaria and the Logic of Asymmetric Power

North Macedonia does not have many instruments with which to influence Bulgaria. Bulgaria has a very powerful instrument: it is a member of the European Union.

This means Bulgaria does not have to convince the entire Union of its position. It only needs to prevent consensus.

That is an asymmetry of power.

In a system based on unanimity, a state does not have to be strong enough to impose its preferred solution. It only needs to be strong enough to block someone else's.

This creates a specific form of bargaining power. Skopje has to convince. Sofia can condition. The difference is substantial.

5. Constitutional Amendments: The Problem Is Not Just on Election Day

Constitutional amendments are a separate issue, although they have become politically merged with the Action Plan. The requirement that Bulgarians, along with other communities, be included in the Preamble is linked to the European Union's 2022 negotiating framework.

From the Macedonian perspective, the issue is not simply whether the amendment is politically acceptable. The problem is that once a constitutional change is made, it is effectively irreversible, while the European integration process can remain dependent on political decisions that are not under Skopje's full control.

This creates an asymmetric exchange.

North Macedonia is being asked to make an irreversible concession in return for something that remains conditional. In a rational negotiation model, such an exchange would normally require a guarantee.

But this is where the structural weakness becomes apparent. The European Union does not provide a clear mechanism that would prevent future bilateral blockades.

6. The EU and the Problem of Self-Restraint

The European Union has legal and political instruments at its disposal. But possessing an instrument does not mean being willing to use it. In the case of North Macedonia, that is precisely where the problem lies.

The Union can state that bilateral disputes should not derail the enlargement process. But if a single member state can block the process without a clear time limit, then the formal rule and the practical reality are not the same.

From a geopolitical perspective, this is not only a problem for North Macedonia. It is a question of the credibility of the European enlargement model itself.

Every candidate now has reason to ask the same question:

If one member state has the opportunity to open a bilateral dispute and turn it into a European condition, what prevents another member state from doing the same?

7. The Bulgarian Interest Does Not Have to Be Identical to the European Interest

There is another distinction that needs to be made.

Bulgaria is a member of the European Union. This does not mean that its national interest is automatically identical to that of the Union as a whole.

Each state has multiple layers of interest. European integration is one. Domestic politics is another. National identity is a third. Historical interpretation is a fourth.

In Bulgaria's case, the issue of North Macedonia has particular political potential because it touches on an identity theme that has considerable political utility for mobilizing voters.

8. The Myth of "Special Status"

Domestic politics further complicates the process. The easiest way for political actors to explain a complex European issue is to turn it into a matter of fear. An institutional document becomes a story about identity. Constitutional change becomes a story about national survival. The European procedure becomes a story about capitulation.

In such an environment, facts become secondary. And the facts are relatively simple. There are 27 communities in the country. The Action Plan is horizontal. Bulgarians are one of those communities. Their inclusion in the Constitution does not, by itself, create a hierarchy among ethnic or community groups.

But a political narrative does not have to be legally correct to be effective. It has to be simple enough for people to understand and emotional enough to provoke a reaction.

Fear is often more politically effective than procedure. That is why the myth survives.

Recommendation: North Macedonia should communicate clearly and consistently to the public that the Action Plan and the constitutional amendments do not create a hierarchy among communities. They are intended to provide a framework for equal rights and protection for all 27 communities.

9. Minorities as a Subject That Has Disappeared from Their Own Question

The greatest irony is that those whose rights are formally being discussed are hardly present at the center of the political process. The Action Plan is a document concerning 27 communities. Yet the public debate is mainly conducted by state institutions, political parties, and so-called experts. This creates a problem of legitimacy.

When the government says that minorities have no objections, that is not the same as demonstrating the politically organized and independent position of the communities themselves. In geopolitical terms, they become the object of negotiation rather than the subject of negotiation.

Recommendation: North Macedonia should encourage greater organization and participation by minority communities so that they become subjects, rather than merely objects, of negotiations. This would strengthen the legitimacy of the process.

10. Four Structural Weaknesses

10.1. Political Risk Concentration

The state concentrates too much political responsibility at the top. Instead of the institutional system producing a negotiating position, the political leadership produces the position and the institutions then follow it.

This creates vulnerability. A country should not rely on a single negotiator. It needs institutional capacity, multiple sources of expertise, and bargaining instruments that can be deployed when necessary.

Recommendation: North Macedonia should build an institutional model for negotiations in which multiple institutions and expert bodies have defined roles. This would reduce vulnerability and create continuity beyond individual governments and political leaders.

10.2. Sofia: Asymmetry Between Demands and Domestic Practice

Bulgaria makes demands on North Macedonia concerning the status and rights of a particular community, while its own constitutional model is not based on the same logic of collective ethnic rights.

Such asymmetry renders the dispute more resistant to compromise. When a politician requests a neighboring country to adhere to a principle that is not practiced within their own political system, the dispute transcends purely legal considerations. It evolves into a matter of identity and political legitimacy.

Recommendation: North Macedonia should insist on the principles of reciprocity and European standards, arguing that requirements should be consistent with EU principles and practices rather than based solely on unilateral national interests.

10.3. Brussels: Rules Without a Mechanism to Protect Them

The EU has created a procedure but has not created a sufficiently strong mechanism to prevent its abuse. This means political practice can go beyond the formal rules.

The methodology exists. But its application ultimately depends on political accountability and what EU institutions often describe as the will of the member states.

Recommendation: North Macedonia should seek clear guarantees and timelines concerning blockades in order to reduce the risk of indefinite stalemate and strengthen confidence in the European integration process.

10.4. Minority Communities: Rights Without Sufficient Political Power

On the issue that directly concerns them, minority communities do not have a sufficiently strong independent political voice.

Minority parties and politicians often participate in coalitions led by major political parties, where the narrower interests of minority parties are negotiated alongside broader political priorities.

In reality, a small circle of minority politicians may have a formal or symbolic mandate to represent their communities without necessarily having a sufficiently strong mandate from those communities to defend their collective interests.

This creates a vacuum. And a political vacuum is usually filled by someone else.

Recommendation: North Macedonia should encourage greater organization and participation by minority communities so that they become subjects, rather than merely objects, of negotiations. This would strengthen the legitimacy of the process.

11. What Can Happen Next?

There are three possible scenarios.

Scenario 1: Continued Deadlock

The Action Plan remains blocked. The constitutional amendments are not adopted. Bulgaria continues to impose conditions. The EU continues to call for compromise. Domestic political parties continue to use the issue for political mobilization.

In this scenario, no one wins, but no actor pays an immediate political price high enough to change its strategy.

Scenario 2: Limited Settlement

The Action Plan is separated from the wider geopolitical dispute, and the EU creates a mechanism that reduces the possibility of future bilateral blockades.

This would allow Skopje to accept certain requirements without having to rely solely on political assurances.

Scenario 3: Erosion of the European Process

If North Macedonia remains blocked for a prolonged period, the political cost of European integration will rise. The question will then no longer be:

"How do we enter the EU?"

It will become:

"Why continue to build the entire political system around a process that has no clear endpoint?"

12. The Real Problem Is Not Bulgaria

In reality, this is not simply a dispute between Skopje and Sofia. It is a test of the broader architecture of European integration. North Macedonia is a small country with limited bargaining power.

Bulgaria is one of the EU's smaller and poorer member states, but it has the advantage of belonging to the system that North Macedonia wants to join.

The EU is the strongest actor in formal terms, but it limits itself politically because it does not want open conflict among its member states.

That is why the small aspiring state finds itself in a paradoxical position. It must meet conditions that it cannot fully control, while the final decision depends on actors whose interests are not necessarily identical to its own.

13. Conclusion: Rational Actors, Irrational System

Each of the four main actors has its own rational calculation.

- The Macedonian government wants to avoid irreversible political concessions without guarantees.
- Bulgaria wants to preserve its influence over the process while minimizing political costs at home.
- The EU wants to preserve unity among its members and avoid direct conflict.
- Domestic political parties want to turn the issue into political capital.

All four calculations can be rational. But their sum is irrational. That is the crux of the problem. The system produces deadlock because no actor has a strong enough incentive to break the deadlock on its own.

The Action Plan should be treated as what it is: a technical document concerning the rights of all 27 communities, not a substitute for the broader geopolitical dispute with Bulgaria.

Constitutional amendments should be considered separately from the question of whether an EU member state can repeatedly reopen bilateral disputes within the European integration process.

And the European Union must answer a question that is much bigger than North Macedonia:

Is enlargement a rules-based process, or is it a process in which each member state can, at any moment, bring its own bilateral disputes into the European procedure? The answer to that question will be more important than the outcome of the dispute between Skopje and Sofia.

North Macedonia is not the only country affected. If the system works this way today, another member state may use the same model tomorrow.

And then the problem will no longer be North Macedonia. The problem will be Europe.

The only way out of this cycle requires something that has so far been lacking on all sides: a clear separation between the technical issue, namely the adoption of a document already aligned with almost the entire Union, and the geopolitical issue, namely the creation of structural safeguards against the abuse of the bilateral veto.

It also requires clear and consistent public communication that neither the Action Plan nor future constitutional amendments, provided they are accompanied by legally binding guarantees, create a hierarchy among the country's 27 communities.

Until that fact becomes a central political message rather than a marginal footnote, fear will remain a cheaper and more effective political product than truth.

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