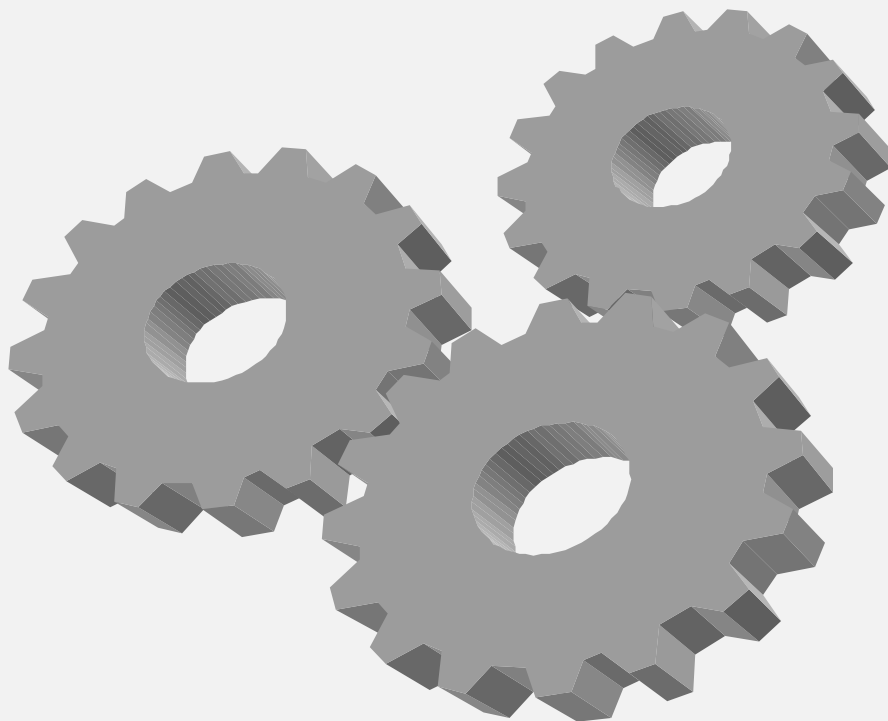


Milan Igrutinović

**BILATERAL RELATIONS AND OPEN ISSUES BETWEEN
BULGARIA AND SERBIA
IN THE CONTEXT OF SERBIA'S EU ACCESSION PROCESS**



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INTRODUCTION

A look at Serbian bilateral relations with its neighbors shows us that Bulgaria holds a position of one of three "old neighbors", a country that had a border and diplomatic relations with it before the collapse of the SFRY. Actually, diplomatic relations with Bulgaria reach further in the past than with any other country, and are a few months older than the ones with Romania, so we can say that Bulgaria is the "oldest" Serbian neighbor, if we measure it like this.

Besides a similar position towards the Ottoman Empire and common heritage of gaining independence from it, two countries waged four wars in a 60-year span (1885-1944), all while changing border, alliances and foreign policy orientations. Still, in the period that we are looking at, which is present time, we can say that relations are sufficiently stable and cordial, that they open the way for further cooperation and that certain issues are being dealt with in reasonable and satisfactory way.

In the following section we will briefly show a history of relations until 5 October 2000, that is to the end of period which, in its last phase, has been marked by the collapse of Yugoslavia and the international isolation, and then pay more attention to the relations after 2000 with a closer look at some more relevant topics of bilateral relations.

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Serbian - Bulgarian diplomatic contacts have started right after the Berlin Congress of July 1878, when Serbian Principality gained international recognition of sovereignty and independence. Bulgarian Principality was created as a result of Russo-Turkish War of 1877/1878, but had remained a vassal state of Ottoman Empire. After the establishment of diplomatic relations in January 1879, Prince Milan sent his first diplomatic agent and general consul in Sofia, while an adjutant of Prince Alexander Battenberg was sent to Nis. Two rulers' close personal connections were soon disturbed by state ambitions, so a short war broke out in November 1885 by an unsuccessful Serbian attack, with withdrawal and status quo ante peace.

A period of competition for defining cultural and political profile of Christians living in European part of the Ottoman Empire, especially in Macedonia, has marked bilateral relations until the

start of the second decade of the 20th century. Two countries, jointly with Greece and Montenegro within the Balkan alliance have attacked the Ottoman Empire on 8 October 1912, claiming victory before the end of the year that left the Empire with only a small patch of land surrounding Istanbul, with victors gaining the rest of its Balkan possessions. Lines of divisions have caused a clash among allies, a clash in which Bulgaria found itself alone against the others, and started an attack in Macedonia on June 29 1913. Romania and the Ottoman Empire have joined the war against Bulgaria in July, leading to Bulgarian defeat, marked by a peace accord in Bucharest in August. Bulgaria declared its neutrality with the start of the World War One in 1914, but, after long diplomatic activities it had joined Central powers on 14 October 1915 with an attack on Serbia. Swift Entente victories in September 1918 had caused Bulgaria to end its war effort, as a first Central powers' country to do so.

Creation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes on 1 December 1918 and peace treaty with Bulgaria that was signed in Neuilly-sur-Seine in 1919 had led to the change of border and the new basis for relations, in which Yugoslavia rather than Serbia was their subject. Unstable and generally poor relations have characterized the period leading to the World War Two, when Bulgaria, following the defeat of Yugoslavia and its arrangements with Axis powers, sent troops to Yugoslavia on 19 April 1941. Under Soviet military pressure Bulgaria changed its position on 8 September 1944, its government changed and Bulgarian Workers Party became a dominant force in its society. With the victory of partisan forces in Yugoslavia under leadership of Communist Party of Yugoslavia, both countries have started to develop communist forms of government, and on 8 May 1945 they have (re)established diplomatic relations. After short-lived ideas of Balkan federation, relations were marked by logic of bloc divisions and non-aligned position of Yugoslavia for decades. Fast pace of collapse of communist order in Bulgaria in late 1980s and similar process accompanied by dissolution and war in Yugoslavia in early 1990s created a new groundwork for relations.

Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, formally created on 27 April 1992 out of Republic of Serbia and Republic of Montenegro, had started its existence in practical and then formal international isolation, due to the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia. Bulgaria had observed the UN sanctions toward Yugoslavia and has declared that it will not take actions with regards to the war in former Yugoslavia. Bulgaria has many times put forward the issue of damages it took by the sanctions regime, putting a price on it from 6 to 10 billion dollars. It should be noted that Milan Panić, a first FRY Prime-minister made its first international visits to Romania, Bulgaria and Macedonia, in August 1992. Different paths that two countries had in early 1990s could be seen through two days in December 1995. Paris peace accord that ended wars in Bosnia and Croatia was signed on December 14, while Bulgaria officially declared its wish to become a EU member on December 16.

Bulgarian Prime-minister Zhan Videnov (from Bulgarian Socialist Party) had visited Belgrade on 12 February 1996, wishing to kick-start stronger bilateral cooperation and to initiate a conference of Balkan countries' foreign ministers. The importance of good relations was

underscored by sending Filip Ishpekov, Videnov's foreign policy advisor as an Ambassador in FRY in April 1996. Videnov's initiative resulted in Sofia declaration of Balkan countries' foreign ministers, on 7 July 1996, dedicated to stability, security and regional cooperation. A treaty on customs cooperation was signed in June 1997, followed by the visit of Bulgarian Army's delegation to FRY Army and by the adoption of Salonika declaration on good neighbors' relations and cooperation.

The escalation of political conflict between Serbian government and Kosovo Albanians led first to sporadic armed clashes and then from the start of 1998 to openly violent clashes. During her visit to FRY President Milosevic and Foreign Minister Jovanovic on 28 March, Bulgarian Foreign Minister Nadezhda Mihaylova had expressed the need for dialogue between two sides and had also offered the mediation by other Balkan countries to that effort. Jovanovic had declined such a possibility, maintaining that such an involvement would directly or indirectly aid the rebel forces. A new batch of sanctions by USA and the EU had started in summer of 1998, while Bulgaria froze the FRY and Serbian property on its soil on 8 June. During Paris talks between FRY and Kosovo Albanians' delegations the Balkan countries' presidents have appealed to Slobodan Milosevic to accept the deals at hand, and with the start of the bombing campaign on 24 March President Petar Stojanov had said that "Bulgaria has no other options than keeping Euro-Atlantic solidarity".

DEVELOPMENT OF RELATIONS AFTER 5 OCTOBER 2000

Bulgaria met the 5 October changes with relief. Minister Mihaylova came to visit Belgrade on 23 October and she marked the current changes in FRY as a new period for the Balkans. One month later she came again, meeting also with Patriarch Pavle. New FRY President Vojislav Kostunica met Bulgarian President Stojanov in Nis on 20 November 2000. Both heads of state had concurred that there was a need to advance relations across the field, and to further the relaxation in the region. The issue of possible visa restrictions by Bulgaria towards Yugoslav citizens arose at that time, due to the new Bulgarian obligations vis-a-vis Schengen visa regime. During the visit by FRY Foreign Minister Goran Svilanovic to Sofia at the end of January 2001 a new readmission treaty was signed that kept the visa-free regime for Yugoslav citizens. A treaty on cooperation on infrastructure issues, for the Nis-Sofia highway, was also signed. The importance of transportation in this early period after 5 October was further shown by the session of the Yugoslav-Bulgarian Economic Cooperation Commission on 22-24 April 2001 in Belgrade. Commissions were led by two ministers of transportation (Zoran Sami and Antoni Slavinski), and two agreements were signed - the Protocol of Cooperation and the Treaty on Air and Maritime Transport. FRY Defense Minister Slobodan Krapovic had visited his Bulgarian colleague Boyko Noyev at the beginning of March 2001.

In the middle of 2001 the National Movement for Stability and Progress came to power in Bulgaria, led by Simeon Saksoburggotski, last and under-aged Bulgarian Emperor 1943-1946. New Foreign Minister Solomon Pasi has visited Belgrade on 26 November 2001 in return visit, where he signed the Agreement on Cultural Cooperation. Pasi has met with President Kostunica, while publicly advocating the creation of new communication infrastructure on the Balkans, parallel to one aided by the Marshal Fund in Europe after World War Two. Impetus for cross-border cooperation was given on 26 October 2002 when mayors of Sofia, Skopje and Nis had signed the agreement on creation of first Euroregion in the Balkans, accompanied by university cooperation agreement. The process of relaxation of commercial activities was continued by the free trade agreement, signed on 15 January 2003, while two days later Bulgaria had lifted remaining sanctions that it had implemented alongside the EU, leaving only Slobodan Milosevic, Milan Milutinovic and connected persons as subjects of sanctions regime.

Prime-ministers Kostunica and Stanisev have met in Dragoman on 19 December 2005 to open modernized (electrified) rail line Dragoman-Dimitrovgrad. This visit was also supposed to show that Serbia (and Montenegro, at the moment) and Bulgaria are "creating this way a European border, open and transparent in full sense of the word" and that "two countries now share a common European future as well".

After unilateral proclamation of independence by Kosovo on 17 February 2008, a string of recognitions by most neighboring countries has ensued. Croatia, Hungary and Bulgaria have practically made a simultaneous move, on 19-20 March. Serbian Government had responded according to its own action plan, by withdrawal of its ambassadors for consultation, issuing protest notes, while Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremic was publicly stating that such a move was a step backwards in bilateral relations of these countries with Serbia. Jeremic also stated that "countries that have chosen to take a hit on its neighbor cannot count on the same level of relations. There is no country in the world that would agree to maintain same relations". On the other hand, Bulgarian Prime-minister Sergey Stanisev has said that "the interest of Bulgaria is to have full guaranties for preservation of peace and stability in the region, and strongest guaranties for that is international engagement by KFOR and UNMIK and future EU mission. Foreign Minister Ivaylo Kalfin said that "Kosovo is a unique case and that a failure in finding the solution would run a risk for creation of the conflict like the one in the Middle East".

Deterioration of relations started to rectify after the electoral win of Democratic party coalition in the spring of 2008 and Boris Tadic's reelection as Serbian President. Bulgarian Prime-minister Boyko Borisov, together with his deputy Cvetan Cvetanov and Minister of Economy Traycho Traykov, has visited Belgrade on 26 April 2010. He had informed Serbian Prime-minister Cvetkovic on the development of Belene Nuclear Powerplant, a project in long-term development with Russian cooperation, while opening the topic of energy cooperation between two countries.

Looking to further its ambition to join EU and specially to show itself as a reliable security partner, Serbia had participated in two military exercises at Bulgarian Shabla proving ground, in 2010 and 2011. Anti-aircraft units of Serbian Army and Bulgarian Army and border units took participation in them. At the exercise in August 2011 President Tadic was present as Prime-minister Borisov's guest, and they have jointly concluded that the exercise "is a proof of close relations of Serbian and Bulgarian armies". Tadic congratulated Borisov on successes made by Bulgaria through NATO and EU memberships, holding that experience relevant for Serbia as well. Borisov promised Bulgarian help in Serbian process of accession to the EU, and emphasized the importance of infrastructure projects, specifically mentioning Sofia - Nis highway. Prime-minister Mirko Cvetkovic had also given recognition to the good relations between two countries in his interview to Bulgarian National Radio on 19 February 2011, when he described relations as "excellent", said that "there is a potential for growth in the future" and also that "Bulgarians in Serbia are the nexus between Belgrade and Sofia". **From current point of view, we can assess that a through a number of top-level meetings from spring 2010 to early 2011 relations have been improved and lifted from a rather low level after Bulgarian recognition of Kosovo's independence in March 2008. From this period onwards, they retain a level of relatively stable growth.**

Picture 1: Prime-ministers Oresharski and Dacic are unveiling a bust of Vasil Levski, Dimitrovgrad, 19 February 2014.



At the Sofia meeting between foreign ministers Ivan Mrkic and Kristian Vigenin on 23 January 2014 a 135th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations has been formally marked. The meeting was used for public confirmation of good neighborly relations, common dedication to democracy, rule of law and human rights, and for joint declaration to that regard. It also emphasized the wish to further improve bilateral relations, to keep the tempo on high-level meetings, dedication to the process of European integrations and fulfillment of cross-

border cooperation projects. A wish for creation of High-level Cooperation Council and for signing the friendship, cooperation and good-neighbor agreement was also present. Soon after that prime-ministers Ivica Dacic and Plamen Oresharski have met in Dimitrovgrad to prop up a Serbian-Bulgarian business forum for the development of the city, but also to unveil a bust of Vasil Levski in the city center. Oresharski has also visited the Bulgarian National Council and Dimitrovgrad Gymnasium.

In his return visit to Belgrade at the beginning of July, Vigenin spoke with Dacic, who took the post of Foreign Minister after elections in March. South Stream project was the most important topic of their conversation, and we will be paying more attention to it later in the text. Bulgarian elections were soon to follow, and BSP gave power to Boyko Borisov's GERB. Daniel Mitov, new Bulgarian Foreign Minister, visited Belgrade on 13 March 2015, to underline the high level of relations on talk once more about infrastructure projects. Touching upon the issue of Bulgarian national minority in Serbia, Dacic said that "we should deal with all of the problems in friendly manner, and to allow for better position of national minorities", with which Mitov concurred and gave appreciation to Serbian Government in that respect.

Prime-ministers of Romania, Bulgaria and Serbia (Victor Ponta, Boyko Borisov and Aleksandar Vucic) have met in Craiova on 24 April 2015, starting a trilateral cooperation platform. The inspiration for this was found in Visegrad group, and all three participants have made that comparison. Vucic remarked that the meeting was a part of joint step forward by three countries on all important political and economic questions. Ponta said that the group was open to other countries and that the meeting laid groundwork for better cooperation and promotion of three countries' economic, political and social interests. Infrastructure projects were the main practical topic of the meeting. Ponta also said that the energy was the main driver for development, that Bulgaria, Serbia and Romania should speed up the work on related projects in order to catch up European and global markets with secure access to energy under competitive prices. Borisov said that he wanted to see Bucharest-Sofia-Belgrade highway "as soon as possible", and high-speed rail links to Turkey. He also said that "Serbia was Bulgaria's best neighbor" and that it will get help in its Euro integration path. Vucic spoke of the Belgrade-Vrsac-Vatin-Timisoara highway project and of faster pace of construction of the Nis-Sofia highway. Beside these topics, reference was made to the Digital agenda, the EU Danube Region Strategy and internal affairs (growing importance of migrants coming into Balkans). The next meeting was organized in Sofia on 24 October with migrant crisis being the dominant topic, along the problems of border controls and reaction of key EU states on these issues. Three countries have pledged readiness to follow the common EU policy on the issue, including the possibility of closing the borders. Prime-minister Vucic stated Serbian position that it would like to see stronger institutionalization of **Craiova Group** as a mechanism of cooperation and top level meetings. However, in the last 18 months since this meeting there were no visible activities in this format. All three countries held parliamentary elections in the meantime, and

Bulgaria and Serbia had presidential elections and it is possible that stabilization of governing power is needed to continue the activities in this group.

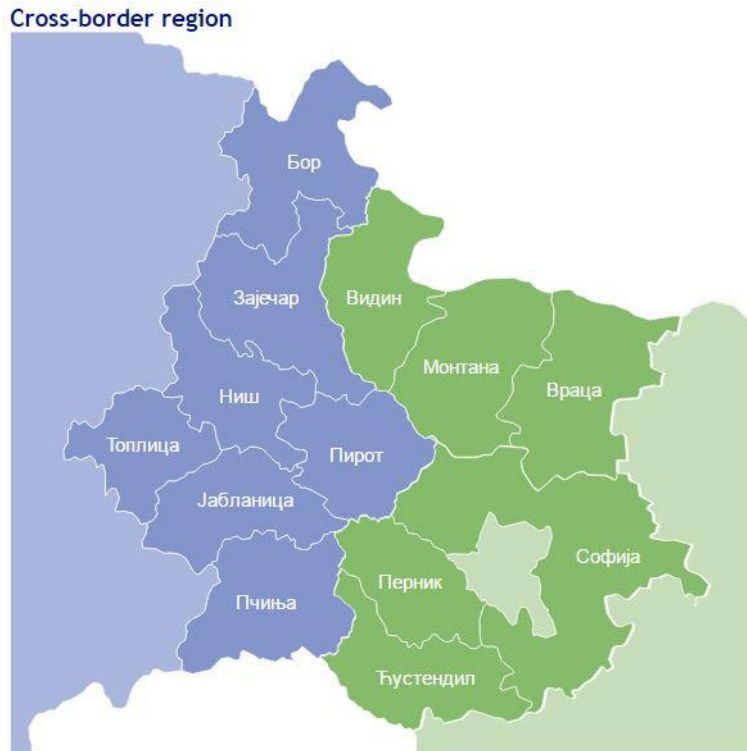
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Since the political changes in Serbia from 2000 there is a possibility to develop forms of **cross-border cooperation** between two countries at the border regions level. A key step in that direction was made in late October 2002 in Skopje, when mayors of Nis, Sofia and Skopje signed an agreement for creating the first Euroregion in the Balkans, to ease the way for cross-border cooperation. The main framework for cooperation was eventually found through **IPA (Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance) aid for cross-border cooperation (CBC)**. IPA CBC between Serbia and Bulgaria was started in March 2006 through a joint committee session in Sofia which took the task to prepare the project. First meeting of the IPA CBC program committee was held in June where the preparatory work for the 2007-2013 IPA framework began. Until October 2007 full administrative preparation, contacts and local administration training was achieved. About 21% of Serbian (in 6 counties with 36 municipalities) and 18% of Bulgarian (6 counties) territory around the common border were encompassed by the project. Main goals of fostering cross-border cooperation were the development of socio-economic activities in border areas, common responses to ecological, health and organized crime issues, strengthening of administrative cooperation and border security.

The start of this program coincided with the Bulgarian entry into the EZ in 2007, which led to a stricter visa regime towards Serbian citizens. In the context of bilateral relations, it had specifically hit the population near the border. Such a state remained until 1 January 2010 because at the European Council meeting in November 2009 it was decided that the visa regime for citizens of Serbia, Macedonia and Montenegro was to be abolished.

For the 2014-2020 IPA CBC program two more counties were added - Toplicki from Serbian side and Vraca from Bulgarian side. Focus of cooperation is now triple: strengthening of tourism and culture and national heritage; investment in education and youth training programs; environmental protection, climate change adaptation promotion, risk mitigation and risk management. Budget, funded by the EU, is set at 29 million euros.

Picture 2: Regions of Serbia and Bulgaria within the cross-border cooperation program



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According to available data, in the Autumn of 2003 the work of Joint Committee for Border Renovation, Marking and Maintenance was continued, for the first time after nine years. Final meeting was held on 25 October and on 12 November the Convention for Border Renovation, Marking and Maintenance was signed.

The border question exists only on the level of technical maintenance, renovation or opening of new crossing points. Thus, in June 2007 in Kusjak, two presidents (Boris Tadic and Georgi Prvanov) have signed two memoranda on the opening of two new border crossings - Novo Korito / Salas (Knjazevac municipality and Vidin county), and Petacinci - Bankya (Babusnica municipality). The basic project was finished only in 2009, then it was changed, so the construction started only in 2014. These memoranda were signed on the margins of triple meeting of Tadic, Prvanov and Romanian president Trayan Basescu, that was organized along the three armies' military exercise "Danubian Shield 2007", under the auspices of NATO and after Romanian-Bulgarian initiative later joined by Serbia.

Border crossing Petacinci is now interesting because of the new challenge of migrant crisis and the need for stronger state border protection. In its vicinity lies the ex-military border post of

the same name, that the army had left in 2007 when the border control duty was taken over by the Ministry of Internal Affairs. MIA had soon concluded that this object (a few old single-level buildings) was not needed for the task and it was left abandoned until summer 2016. **It is now being used as a station for mixed patrols that monitor the border in order to stop illegal border crossings, primarily from human traffickers and various groups of migrants and refugees, all within the wider effort to close the so-called Balkan rout as one of two main gateways for massive migrant influx into the EU.** Since late 2016 there has been an increased number of migrants trying to cross Serbian-Bulgarian border, usually in the Dimitrovgrad and Negotin areas. Until September 2016 around 7500 people have been found and stopped on borders towards Bulgaria and Macedonia, while the Bulgarian police stopped some 1200 people in the first two months of 2017. **Since mid-January 2017 policemen from Austria are patrolling alongside Serbian police and military, while Bulgaria is actively cooperating with European Border and Coast Guard Agency (former Frontex), on its border toward Serbia but primarily toward Turkey, which is in this sense the first under pressure.**

ECONOMIC COOPERATION, WITH FOCUS ON ENERGY ISSUES

Classic commercial transactions are dominant in two countries' economic relations, while higher forms of cooperation are less present. The volume of trade varied in the 2008-16 period but it's around 550-620 million Euros per year, which makes Bulgaria 11-16th foreign trade partner for Serbia, depending on the year. A detailed overview can be seen on Picture 3:

Picture 3: Trade volume between Serbia and Bulgaria, 2008-2016:

Kretanje robne razmene u periodu 2008 – 2016.

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	Izvoz	Indeks	Uvoz	Indeks	Ukupno	Saldo	% pokrivenosti uvoza izvozom
2008.	168,9	106,1	626,5	144,6	795,4	-457,6	27,0
2009.	141,0	83,5	282,4	45,1	423,4	-141,4	49,9
2010.	182,6	129,5	439,1	155,5	621,7	-256,5	41,6
2011.	232,9	127,2	343,1	78,4	576,0	-110,2	67,9
2012.	223,5	97,1	389,7	113,7	613,2	-166,2	57,4
2013.	252,3	112,9	330,5	84,8	582,8	-78,2	76,3
2014.	287,8	114,0	308,9	93,4	596,7	-21,1	93,2
2015.	343,2	119,2	301,5	97,6	562,4	41,7	113,8
2016/6	177,0	106,7	148,4	103,0	283,7	28,6	119,3

Izvor: Republički zavoda za statistiku

A new impetus for stronger commercial cooperation was given in November 2013 with the start of Bulgarian-Serbian Chamber of Commerce, co- financed from IPA CBC budget. The main role within this chamber was given to local chambers from Nis, Zajecar, Leskovac, Vidin, as well as to Bulgarian Chamber of Commerce and Bulgarian Economic Forum. General improvement of relations, consultancy work for interested businesses and capacity building for joint planning and development are top priorities for the new chamber.

Closer Bulgarian-Serbian cooperation in the energy field has developed more indirectly, and tied to the South Stream project. Italian Eni and Russian Gazprom have signed a MoU in June 2007 to build a gas pipeline from Russia (Novorossiysk), under Black Sea, through Bulgaria and towards Italy, with total capacity of 63 bcm. Preliminary deal between Russia and Bulgaria was reached in January 2008 and was ratified in parliament in June of the same year. Few months before, Gazprom and Srbijagas had commissioned a study on a interconnector between Serbia and Bulgaria, and parallel to Bulgarian involvement in January a Russian-Serbia deal was reached to have northern fork of the South Stream go through Serbia, with a natural gas storage at Banatski Dvor. That fork was then supposed to enter Hungary. In Serbian case, the South Stream project was tied to a NIS privatization by selling the majority stake to Gazpromneft, along with the rights for oil and gas exploitation in Serbia, even though the South Stream part was not formally part of that agreement. The business model for construction of the pipeline was similar in Serbia and Bulgaria, in terms that a partnership was to be established with local gas companies (Srbijagas i Bulgargaz). JugoRosGas, a mixed Serbian-Russian company had built a small-diameter gas pipelines from Batocina to Nis, thus ending the existing gas infrastructure that enters the country at the Hungarian border and forks in two lines, one towards Bosnia and Hercegovina (to Sarajevo and Zenica) and the other towards Nis. Those gas pipelines are intended for the local market (for city heating plants) and have no capacity to be true interconnectors that could perform gas transit for third-party buyers in any meaningful way.

From the end of 2008 two issues have popped up for the realization of the project. First effects of the so-called world economic crisis, triggered by the collapse of the Lehman Brothers on 15 September 2008 have soon begun to spillover to Europe. In these new conditions the investment money (for the gasoline, among other things, and the costs have jumped from 1,3 to 2 billion Euros in Serbian leg) was ever more difficult to find. The second issue was the gas crisis between Russia and Ukraine, after unsuccessful negotiations on the Ukraine gas debt, with the stoppage of shipments from the Russian side in January 2009 and thus creating crisis in Eastern and Southeastern Europe. This crisis has showed the unenviable position of these European regions in terms of lacking gas market elements which should, ideally consist of multiple sources and competitive pricing. From that point of view, the South Stream project was not fully adequate, since the money would go into the connection with the one and only supplier.

Parallel to the South Stream project, **Serbia and Bulgaria have signed the MoU for the gas interconnector, on 14 December 2012 in Brussels**, and under the influence of the 2009 gas crisis. Initial expectations were that the interconnector from Nis through Dimitrovgrad to Sofia should be finished by 2015, with financing from the EBRD. Prime-minister Dacic expected that Serbia would receive 62 million Euros and that Serbian companies would participate in the project. However, not much has been done per this MoU, and gas projects had to be redrafted after conflict broke out in Ukraine in February 2014.

Foreign ministers Dacic and Vigenin had met on 3 July 2014 in Belgrade with South Stream project as a focal point of the talks. Beside the joint remark that bilateral relations are "very good" and "never on such a developed level as in the last few years", the two ministers discussed gas issues in the context of conflict in Ukraine, first batch of EU sanctions towards Russia and the very perspective of South Stream. Vigenin had informed Dacic that Bulgaria was in a "constructive dialogue" with the EC on the subject, hoping to get things clarified soon and to continue preparatory work on Bulgarian soil. Dacic was clear that the South Stream project was an issue of energy security, not of relations with Russia, and underlined the importance of the project for both countries. Formally, South Stream project hit the roadblock as early as April 2014 in European Parliament that has, largely under the influence of the Ukrainian crisis, voted for a non-binding resolution in opposition to the project and looking for other ways to secure gas supplies in the region. After the second batch of EU sanctions against Russia, and Russian counter-sanctions in August, the relations have fallen to a very low level. **Russia has cancelled the South Stream project in December 2014, justifying the decisions by impact of EU sanctions and legal and administrative problems that Gazprom had in the preceding months.**

De facto end of the South Stream project has increased the need to develop gas infrastructure in the region in order to complete the gas market in line with the Energy Community. Through the Energy Community, the EU took the lead in that regard. At first, **a Central and South-Eastern Gas Connectivity (CESEC) was formed in February 2015** under the auspices of European Commission, soon followed by a non-EU states such as Serbia. At the CESEC High-Level Group meeting in Dubrovnik on 10 July 2015 a **MoU was signed with action plan of six priority points in gas infrastructure development**: Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) that should eventually bring Azerbaijani gas and maybe from other Central Asian nations; Interconnector Greece-Bulgaria (IGB) that should connect Bulgaria from TAP and from the Greek LNG terminal; **Interconnector Bulgaria-Serbia (IBS), a key connection for diversification and supplying Serbia with gas**; phased development of Bulgarian gas infrastructure; phased development of Romanian gas infrastructure to allow for two-way connection with Hungary, Ukraine, Moldova and Bulgaria; TNG terminal in Croatia; connecting that LNG terminal with Hungary. There are also three secondary points: connecting Romanian off-shore rigs with mainland, interconnector Serbia-Croatia and the new LNG terminal in Northern Greece. This is a crucial framework in which Serbian-Bulgarian cooperation in this field plays out, and the basis for future talks, plans and financing. In the summer of 2016 Serbian ambassador to Bulgaria, Vladimir Curgus, stated

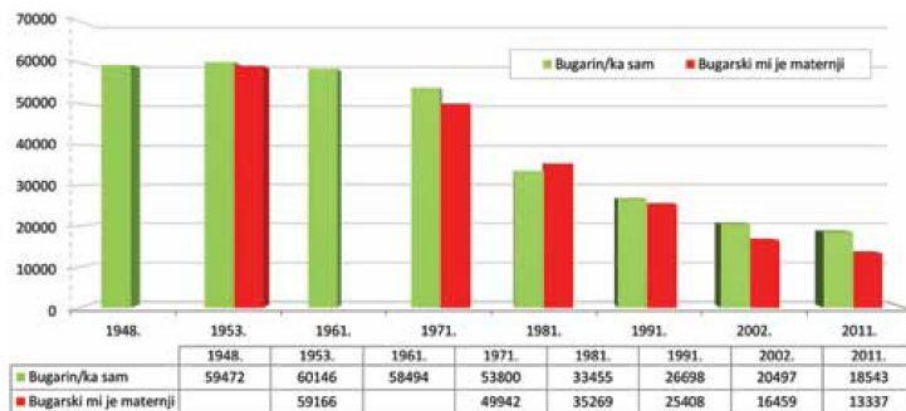
that the Ministries of Energy are in a constant contact and concurrence on the common need to build this interconnector and develop the market. Bulgaria was able to secure the financing from the EU for the project, and Serbia is in the process of closing the financial construction.

The last and most important MoU for the new interconnector was signed on 19 January 2017 during the visit to Sofia by the Serbian Minister for Energy Aleksandar Antic. The start of the interconnector is planned for 2020 (in earlier news 2019 was also mentioned). Antic relayed the expectations that the part of the funds that Serbia needed would come from the IPA funds that should be available in 2018, when the construction should also start. Bulgarian Minister of Energy Tamenushka Petkova has said that Bulgaria had already received 45 million Euros from the EU, and that the first construction phase from the Bulgarian side was already finished. The key for the dynamics of the construction is the connection to the other interconnector that links Bulgaria with Greece and LNG storage in Alexandroupoulos and with planned Southern Corridor gasoline that should connect Greece and Turkey. **The capacity of the IBS should be around 1,9 bcm**, close to a total current consumption in Serbia. The importance of the project has been once again emphasized during the meeting between Dacic and caretaker Prime-minister Ognjan Gerdzikov in Bosilegrad, since it is one of the tree main infrastructure projects - Nis-Sofia highway, Nis-Dimitrovgrad rail reconstruction and the gas connector construction.

THE POSITION OF BULGARIAN MINORITY IN SERBIA

According to 2011 Census data 18.543 declared ethnic Bulgarians live in Serbia, which is some 2000 less than in 2002 (20.497). Bosilegrad and Dimitrovgrad municipalities have the largest proportion of Bulgarian population, followed by Babusnica and Surdulica. Some 74,4% of those who declared themselves Bulgarian have also said that Bulgarian is their native language, 23,4% said that that was Serbian language, while some 90% said that they are Orthodox.

Picture 5: Overview of the ethnic Bulgarian population in Serbia



The first **National Council of the Bulgarian Minority in Serbia** was elected in Nis in March 2003, with Angel Yosifov, a Dimitrovgrad doctor, as its president. In elections of June 2010, and under a new Law on National Minorities, Zoran Petrov of the Bulgarian Community for European Serbia (close to ruling Democratic Party) was elected President. There were four party lists in the last elections, held in October 2014, with unanimous election of **Vladimir Zahariev**, the incumbent President of the Bosilegrad municipality council, as its current President.

Bulgarian community in Serbia is a subject of special attention of some parties in Bulgaria. **Right-wing Ataka has, for example, proposed a declaration to the Bulgarian Parliament in December 2013 in which it called for the "return of the Western Provinces from Serbia and Macedonia"**, which are the territories that Bulgaria lost through the 1919 Neilly Treaty, when 2.563 km² of pre-war Bulgarian territory became a part of newly founded Yugoslavia, which includes Bosilegrad and Dimitrovgrad municipalities in Serbia and Strumica area in Macedonia. Ataka's MP Adrian Asenov has once pointed out that Serbia is not a legal successor to Yugoslavia, that Macedonia, while also not being a successor to Yugoslavia is not even recognized under its constitutional name, that Bulgaria has never ratified that treaty and that it should not have any legal effect. In that sense, the declaration proposed that "the question of the Western Provinces should be settled before Serbia's and Macedonia's accession to the European Union". Ataka's activities per these issues have sometimes been marked by incidents. On 28 November 2010 Serbian border police had stopped eight buses of Ataka's members and supporters in the attempt to cross the border and to go to Bosilegrad to stage a protest to mark 91st anniversary of the Neilly Treaty. Ataka's leader Volen Siderov has sought the reaction of Bulgarian Foreign Ministry, for recalibration of Bulgarian policy to support Serbia's EU accession, and in the protest in front of the Serbian Embassy in Sofia he threatened that Ataka will close the border crossings with Serbia. Bulgaria was not initially pleased by the official explanation it got from Belgrade, so it held further consultations with its Ambassador Angel Dimitrov at the Foreign Ministry. Zoran Petrov, then-President of the Bulgarian National Council, said that ethnic Bulgarians are "certainly not in danger", that there are "some problems in education and information but they are being solved with the help of relevant ministries". Democratic Alliance of Bulgarians (under leadership of Dragolyub Ivanchov) has organized protests few days later in Bosilegrad against the action of Serbian police, with the aim to "warn of difficult position and terrifying processes that threaten national identity and the existence of Bulgarian nationals, and to send a message and an appeal for help to Bulgarian, Serbian and European community to guarantee our rights".

While visiting Children's Easter Festival in Bosilegrad in April 2012, Bulgarian Vice-president Margarita Popova has mentioned the solving of open issues of Bulgarian national minority in the context of future Serbian membership in EU. Evgeniy Kirilov, BSP's MEP has stated in European Parliament in May 2013 that there was a need to rectify the position of all the minorities in Serbia, especially in Southeastern Serbia and "Western Provinces" where

Bulgarians are living. On the other hand, Foreign Minister Nikolay Mladenov did not articulate the issue in such manner, but had used much softer language while saying that "Bulgaria is not putting conditions to Serbian European road, but as well as other aspiring States, it must fulfill obligations that are specific for each of them". During his meeting with Foreign Minister Mrkic in December 2012 they have agreed to open talks on drafting the future bilateral friendship treaty and on improving position of Bulgarian national minority in Serbia within the Serbian legal framework and through dialogue. After the collapse of Borisov's government in early 2013, Foreign Minister of the caretaker Government Marin Raykov stated in May that the position of Bulgarians is "the central issue of bilateral relations", and that while meeting the representative of Bulgarian minority in Serbia. It was a significant step, and in practice it had as a consequence the publication of political platform of that community in July. New Bulgarian government was formed by Socialists, and through high-level meetings in the second half of the year - visits by the President of Parliament Mihail Mikov to Belgrade and President Tomislav Nikolic's visit to Bulgaria - the issue was not raised in such a manner and the Euro integration process and established forms of cooperation were confirmed as a basis for good bilateral relations.

A Platform for the Protection of Rights of Bulgarian Minority in Serbia was signed in Nis on 15 July 2013. Its signatories were Zoran Petrov, then President of the National Council, Dragolyub Ivanchov, Dragoljub Notev and Nebojsa Ivanov, leaders of three Bulgarian parties, directors of cultural-information centers in Bosilegrad and Dimitrovgrad and ten other various societies. Bulgarian Ambassador Dimitrov had said that it was "a positive and benevolent European document which will be debated at the highest state levels in Sofia, Belgrade and Brussels". *The Platform had a number of points, first of which was a request that Bulgaria and Serbia sign a Friendship Treaty that would encompass the creation of the working group to formulate specific measures to improve the socio-economic position of Bulgarians (it speaks of support for local projects and improvement of transport infrastructure). The second point speaks of full implementation of normative framework that regulates minority issues, with automatic pre-school, elementary and high-school education on native (Bulgarian) language. Third point requested increased financing of news outlets in Bulgarian language, namely National Council's Bratstvo publishing house from Nis, increased availability of print material from Bulgaria and renewal of TV shows in Bulgarian language. The platform also requested full practice of religious service to be in Bulgarian language, respect for original names of local churches that it considers a part of Bulgarian heritage. It also requests the adequate representation of Bulgarian language in administration and judicial branch, protection of Bulgarian toponyms and two-language street signs, the publication of socio-economic charter in order to stop demographic decline of the community and also more critical involvement of the EU and Bulgaria in these issues.* Bosilegrad Church Municipality (as a part of Vranje Eparchy) had answered to points of the Platform that touched upon religious issues with a long statement, mostly negating the formulations stated in the Platform.

The question of renaming Dimitrovgrad to Caribrod was again set in motion at the end of 2015 and the beginning of 2016. Councilmen of the Dimitrovgrad Municipal Council have voted in November 2015 to start the initiative to rename Dimitrovgrad and bring back the old name. Zoran Djurov, member of the ruling SNS party, was the leading councilman on this issue, and he stated that the initiative had no political, ethnic or ideological meaning. The Council decision was sent to Ministry of State Administration and Local Self-government, which has responded that the issue could be taken into account during drafting and discussing a new Law on Territorial Organization of Republic of Serbia, since it was the only legal way to change names of inhabited places and units of local self-government. **The issue was raised in European Parliament in early February 2016 by Andrey Kovachev, MEP from ruling GERB, by calling Serbia to change the name of the town, since the current name was given by a "decree from Tito's regime", adding that the name was "shameful, since it was perpetuating the name of communist dictator and national traitor" (Georgi Dimitrov).** Prime-minister Vucic has responded that "Serbia is an independent country" and that there was "no pressure that could take away the independence and sovereignty. We respect minority rights". By the way, two local referenda, in 1996 and 2004 have resulted in citizen's rejection of the name-change, and local authorities now believe that the trend has changed.

There was improvement in fulfillment of minority right of Bulgarian minority in Serbia in recent period. Former Ambassador Dimitrov stated in his farewell message on 7 July 2016 that he "leaves Serbia satisfied that the relations are at a high level". **For 2016/17 school year pupils in elementary and high schools in Dimitrovgrad and Bosilegrad municipalities started to receive textbooks in Bulgarian language** (for grades I-V in elementary and I in high-school, with further translation incoming in the following year). Per words of chairman of National Council, Zahariev, these were the first translated text books since 1987. In Bosilegrad municipality 19 pupils in elementary school and 44 in gymnasium had opted to use these text books. Also, Bulgaria had invested 208.000 euros in reconstruction and modernization of gymnasium, library and for the activities of *Caribrod* cultural society at the end of 2016.

The question of education was in the center of attention at the end of 2016 for one more reason. **The Chapter 26 in the negotiation process between Serbia and EU was upcoming for opening alongside Chapters 5 (public procurement) and 25 (science), on 13 December.** However, the opening of Ch25 was prolonged, primarily due to the position of Croatia. There were a lot of public speculation on the Bulgarian position on that issue. Foreign Minister Dacic stated that **"Bulgaria also had some reservations on Ch26, but it is easy to write in the constitution that there are no minorities, as Bulgaria had done, and then to speak of the rights of your minority in Serbia"**, and in one TV program on the same day he said that Bulgaria has also blocked the opening of that chapter, saying that "it was incredible, more so because himself and Prime-minister Vucic had personally gave textbooks to pupils from the Bulgarian minority in Serbia". From public statement of Prime-minister Vucic (**"Bulgaria had reservations since there is no church service in Bulgarian language in Serbia"**) it is clearer that there was no

formal blockade but "reservations" on the opening of the chapter, which is a softer formulation even though the message was clear enough. **Still, the Ch26 was opened on 27 February 2017**, after there was a confirmation in mid-January that Croatia will no longer block it. It's clear that Bulgarian reservations were also withdrawn, and that Bulgaria had no wish to transform such a reserve into only blockade to the chapter opening.

The Prime-minister of the caretaker Bulgarian Government Ognyan Gerdzhikov met the representatives of the National Council of Bulgarians in Serbia, while visiting the International Children Easter Festival in Bosilegrad on 13 April 2017. At the venue, he said that he will relay information to the new Prime-minister (that is now Boyko Borisov) **on the position of Bulgarian minority in "Western Provinces", especially on the education and economic issues**. During visit he met with Foreign Minister Dacic, and together they have laid a wreath on Vasil Levski's bust, while Gerdzhikov has confirmed the Bulgarian will to help Serbia in the Euro integration process which should also benefit bilateral relation per se.

The visit coincided with the statement of Vladimir Zahariev, Chairman of the National Council, that this was an **"ideal moment for historical reconciliation of Serbs and Bulgarians"**, since the relations are "on an upward trend" and also that he "loves mother Bulgaria but also Serbia that is giving us right to live, create, have family and posterity, education, free medical service etc". He said that on the 27 February session the National Council had adopted the proposition to have two presidents to meet in Bosilegrad on 1 June to start commemoration of 100 years of World War One, all adorned by the act of reconciliation. Further, the Council had proposed that a date in 2018 should be set during that meeting, when a new monument for victims of wars regardless of their ethnicity should be erected. The chairwoman of local branch of the ruling SNS, Nevenka Kostadinova, has said that this was an act of self-promotion, and that such initiatives should come from state authorities.

Synthetic look at the position of Bulgarian minority is telling us that practical problems are focused on the language issue - usage in formal communication and especially in education - and that long-term issues are tied to the general economic state of Serbia, and also to the Serbian-Bulgarian relations.