



Weekly Briefing

**North Macedonia external relations briefing:
Bulgarian PM attends the opening of a controversial center in Bitola
named after a Nazi collaborator
Gjorgjioska Marija Adela**

China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.
Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin
Kiadásért felelős személy: Huang Ping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.
 +36 1 5858 690
 office@china-cee.eu
 china-cee.eu

Bulgarian PM attends the opening of a controversial center in Bitola named after a Nazi collaborator

Summary

A top-level delegation from Sofia, which also included Prime Minister Kiril Petkov, attended the opening of a Bulgarian cultural club in the city of Bitola that had been named after the Nazi collaborator Ivan Mihailov. The move was widely perceived as a provocation by the Bulgarian state, which has been blocking the start of Macedonia's EU accession negotiations for over 2 years. The majority of the Macedonian public condemned not only the Bulgarian delegation, but also the Macedonian Government for turning a blind eye to the rehabilitation of fascist historical personalities on its own territory.

On the 16th of April, a top-level delegation from Sofia, attended the opening of a Bulgarian cultural club in the city of Bitola that had been named after the Nazi collaborator Ivan Mihailov. The event was attended by Bulgarian Prime Minister Kiril Petkov, Vice-President Iliyana Yotova and Foreign Minister Teodora Genchovska. Bulgarian Socialist Party member and MP Dragomir Stoynev, MP Andrei Gyurov and former defense minister and leader of the right-wing VMRO-BND party, Krasimir Karakachanov, were also present, as well as former foreign minister Ekaterina Zaharieva. The event provoked an avalanche of fierce reactions by the public because of Ivan Mihajlov's historical personality and legacy. In the early 20th century, Mihajlov cooperated actively with Mussolini and Hitler's Nazi Germany. He also fought for unification of Macedonian territories and their merger with the Bulgarian state. The event was thus seen by the Macedonian public as a disrespectful and humiliating move and a clear provocation. Left-wing protesters and the association of World War 2 fighters from Bitola gathered in protest with signs calling out Bulgaria for its occupation of Macedonia during the Second World War and the Holocaust of Macedonian Jews. Many public figures and officials also condemned the move. The public rightly reacts to the name of the cultural center "Ivan Mihajlov" in Bitola, wrote on her Facebook profile the former Minister of Justice Renata Deskoska. She also pointed out that when she was a minister, in 2019, the Ministry did not approve the use of the name Ivan Mihajlov. President Stevo Pendarovski stated that the event "does not contribute to rapprochement between the two peoples". Moreover, he added:

“Unfortunately, yesterday in Bitola an attempt was made to present a proven collaborator of the Hitler Nazi regime as a bridge of rapprochement between the two countries. I am sure that neither the Macedonian nor the Bulgarian people believe that the character and legacy of Ivan Mihajlov can contribute in that direction,” said President Pendarovski. PM Dimitar Kovacevski said that Mihajlov was a controversial historical person, but since the opening of the center was a civil initiative, such projects are not subject to state supervision because of the European Convention on Human Rights, with which N. Macedonia is fully compliant.

Dragi Gjorgiev, co-chair of the joint North Macedonia-Bulgaria Commission for Historical and Educational Affairs, said it was nothing short of a “deliberate provocation”. “This is a historical figure who, due to his ideas about the non-existence of the Macedonian nation, is extremely negatively perceived by Macedonians,” Gjorgiev said. “And when the name of such a person is imposed as the name of a cultural club on the territory of N. Macedonia, and that person has nothing to do with culture, then it can be understood only as an arrogant provocation, or even as an act that leans towards the opposite of the so-called friendship [which Sofia says it wants],” he added. The historian Todor Chepreganov agreed with this view: “You can not run away from the historical facts. Bulgaria was not only a fascist, but also a Nazi state. Why didn’t Petkov and his political entourage apologize and pay homage to the monument to the 3,000 Jews who were deported from Bitola, and instead came to pay their respects at the opening of a cultural club named after Ivan Mihajlov,” he said. As an Axis ally, Bulgaria shipped all the Jews from territories it had occupied in Greece and Macedonia to the Treblinka extermination camp.

The event did not go unnoticed by the Jewish community in the country. “On Shabbat and the first day of Passover, the senior Bulgarian government officials, opened the Bulgarian Cultural Centre Vancho Mihajlov named after a proven fascist, collaborator of [Croatian fascist leader Ante] Pavelic, Mussolini and Adolf Hitler,” the Macedonian Jewish Community said in a Facebook post. The Jewish Community recalled that 7,144 Macedonian Jews or 98% of the Jewish population in Macedonia were sent to the Treblinka camp. “This act is an insult to the Jews and a threat to human rights and freedoms, a violation of the democratic values of modern Europe. This is a classic example of disrespect and distortion of history,” the Community said. The Jewish Community demanded that the Bulgarian government apologise for the atrocities and the Holocaust committed by their predecessors during World War II. It also insisted on

initiating a procedure in Macedonia regarding the legal viability of cultural and other centres as well as civic associations bearing the names of proven fascists and Nazi collaborators. Several weeks later on the 11th of May, the political party “Levica” (the Left) filed criminal charges against the President of the Association "Cultural Center Ivan Mihajlov" Bitola. According to the party, the defendant is charged with committing the crimes "Ridicule of the Macedonian people" and "Inciting hatred, discord or intolerance on national, racial, religious and other discriminatory grounds." Several days earlier, on the 9th of May, the Day of Victory over Fascism, the delegation of the Left paid tribute to the heroes who, as fighters in the People's Liberation War, liberated the Macedonian people from the threat of fascism. On the occasion, the Party announced that they had submitted a Resolution against fascism in the Parliament of the Republic of Macedonia.

The European Commission failed to condemn the opening of the center in Bitola. As reported by the Macedonian Information Agency (MIA), in response to their question on the issue they only sent a short commentary which stated: “We are closely monitoring the events. We are aware that the opening of the Bulgarian cultural club in Bitola is perceived as highly controversial in North Macedonia, and it has triggered strong reactions amongst the public”. The absence of an open condemnation comes as no surprise in view of the EU’s own contribution to the rehabilitation of fascism on the European continent. Namely, on 18th September 2019, the European Parliament voted by 535 votes to 66 to support a resolution titled “On the Importance of European remembrance for the future of Europe.” The motion attempts to wholly rewrite the history of the second world war. In the resolution, complete equivalence is drawn between communism and nazism. It completely airbrushes European fascism. Indeed, the word fascism doesn’t even appear in the text. Instead, there is only a reference to “nazism.” Moreover, the resolution expunged from history the leading role of the Soviet Union and indeed of communists in the defeat of fascism. One of the sponsors of the controversial European Parliament motion on historical memory, was the Bulgarian MEP Andrey Kovatchev. The other Bulgarian MEP who sponsored the European Parliament motion, Alexander Yordanov — a politician from the early liberal anticommunist opposition — publicly insists there was never fascism in Bulgaria.

The opening of a Bulgarian center named after a fascist historical figure is highly controversial to say the least. It is all the more problematic that the event was condoned and

attended by the Bulgarian political establishment. This act demonstrates a provocation at best and an open rehabilitation of fascism at worst. The failure on behalf of the European Commission to comment on the issue is also concerning, in the context of the ongoing Bulgarian veto on the Macedonian EU accession, but also in the context of the rehabilitation of fascism on the European continent more broadly. It goes without saying that such acts of provocation hardly help the rapprochement between the two nations and certainly contribute to the deterioration in their bilateral relations. Most worryingly, they demonstrate the resurfacing of old historical ghosts on the contemporary political scene with highly negative ramifications for the continent as a whole.