

Dear ladies and gentlemen, Members of the European Commission,

We, Bulgarian students studying in Bulgaria and in the countries of the European Union, who feel attached to the European idea, call to you once again to critically analyse the process of expansion of the European Union to the Western Balkans.

From the very beginning, we want to emphasise that our address to you is not intended to make suggestions in the direction of blocking the expansion of the European Union, or a country in the Western Balkans being isolated from this process. We are simply trying to draw attention to the fact that the discussion on the expansion of the EU to the Western Balkans comes from the normal ground of civilised dialogue, and that debates on these issues are being used for speculative purposes that are far from European values.

We are all witnessing the vulgarist election campaign for the election of local authorities in the Republic of North Macedonia, especially in the mayor elections of the capital of Skopje. What happened during the election campaign reflects the huge need for further efforts to bring political life in the Republic of North Macedonia at least in line with European standards of democracy and tolerance.

We stress that, in principle, we welcome the possible accession of the Republic of North Macedonia to the European Union in the foreseeable future. At the same time, knowing its own defects from the Bulgarian political life, we can confidently declare that the readiness of the Republic of North Macedonia to be a member of the European Union, to comply with Community law, and to follow the written and unwritten rules of conduct of both the ruling elites and civil society is far from the minimum standards.

We strongly want to distinguish ourselves from the ongoing disputes between politicians from Bulgaria and the Republic of North Macedonia concerning the historical past of the region, the ethnogenesis of the inhabitants of present-day North Macedonia, and others. In some cases, these disputes are relevant to scientific discussions in the field of humanities, and in other cases they are frankly speculative in nature.

We want to emphasise the issue of the readiness of the Republic of North Macedonia to be an adequate member of the European Union. From our own Bulgarian experience, which will soon become 15 years old, we can state that the lack of correspondence between a country's readiness to become a member of the EU and, more generally, European standards, has adverse consequences both for the country applying for membership, and for the European Union itself.

We are also witnessing other well-known examples of open conflicts between countries with much more serious political and democratic traditions than the Republic of North Macedonia and the European Union. We will not say anything new if we list the most dramatic examples that are discussed daily by journalists and politicians in Europe.

However, we would like to draw attention to the fact that the launch of a possible procedure for the accession of the Republic of North Macedonia to the European Union must be accompanied by extremely serious monitoring — much stricter and circumstantial than those applied so far. Because if for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe that have passed the accession procedure, the emphasis was on the transposition of European legislation, on their macroeconomic indicators, on the rule of law, and on corruption, then in the case of the

Republic of North Macedonia, the focus should be on the issue of compliance with **human rights** as a whole, and only then should all other topics be considered.

There may be some historical disputes related to the Republic of North Macedonia, but we will not comment on them here. However, we will put to your attention the certainly unquestionable claim that historically the rule of today's territory of the Republic of North Macedonia has always been repressive, authoritarian and totalitarian. The beginnings of democracy, in the spirit of what is enshrined in the very foundations of the European Union, date back only to the period after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of Yugoslavia.

The period from the Balkan Wars to the Second World War has been extremely difficult for the population of present-day North Macedonia. There is a terrorist state regime and the territory is governed not by the constitution of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (the so-called Vidovdan Constitution), but according to the 'Law on the fight against outlaws'. There are enough distressing evidence of the suffering of the population of present-day North Macedonia during the regime of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. It's about true state terrorism.

The period between the end of World War II and the fall of the Berlin Wall, the population of present-day Republic of North Macedonia spent within the socialist Yugoslavia (originally the Federative People's Republic of Yugoslavia, then the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia) in its "own" quasi-state entity, originally known as the People's Republic of Macedonia, and then as the Socialist Republic of Macedonia. Despite the fact that Yugoslavia of Josip Broz Tito was further away from Moscow's orbit due to Stalin's personal conflict with Tito, and that there was some freedom of movement there, the state structure in the country was frankly totalitarian.

Socialist Yugoslavia was a totalitarian state with all the distinctive features of totalitarian order, and in the Socialist Republic of Macedonia human rights were further violated by laws and regulations which **equated the self-determination of citizens as Bulgarians with "an insult to the Macedonian national honor"**. The self-determination of Macedonian citizens as Bulgarians was treated as "fascism" and tens of thousands of people with Bulgarian self-conscious ended their lives in concentration camps as the notorious "Goli Otok".

But here we want to ignore the historical disputes as far as possible and we simply point out that in practice, until 1989, there was not a day of democratic rule on the territory of today's Republic of North Macedonia. It is not its citizens' fault that the Republic of North Macedonia suffers from a total deficit of any democratic heritage. Yet, this seems to be a severe problem whose consequences will be inevitably suffered by all agents involved in the process of the accession of the Republic of North Macedonia to the European Union.

The lack of any democratic tradition in the Republic of North Macedonia is a problem that requires not stigmatisation, but the best possible assistance. However, this aid goes through zero tolerance for all relapses of human rights violations in the Republic of North Macedonia. We want the Republic of North Macedonia in the European Union, but we want it without its authoritarian and totalitarian heritage. We have before our eyes our own consequences of past authoritarian and totalitarian practices and we know perfectly well that these problems do not perish in a day or two.

The first thing necessary to overcome these relapses of the dark past is the will of the citizens of the Republic of North Macedonia. There is no way to praise the "heroes" of

totalitarian Yugoslavia and expect the birth of tolerance and a working civil society. On the contrary, what will be born are only ugly imitations, as we are now witnessing in New Europe, and even at times in Old Europe.

It is impossible that hatred towards its neighbouring country Bulgaria and its citizens, an official political line of both government and opposition in the Republic of North Macedonia, and a tolerant society based on the European model to coexist. We are aware of what problems persist in the countries that joined the EU in the period 2004-2007. Yet they will seem insignificant in comparison to what is happening in today's Republic of North Macedonia.

We repeat that our criticism of the behaviour of political elites in the Republic of North Macedonia, as well as the mass moods and psychoses that are expansive there, is not aimed at sabotaging the accession process of the Republic of North Macedonia to the EU. On the contrary, we want to prevent the inevitable catastrophe that awaits this process if no timely measures are taken.

Examples of intolerance, of discrimination by ethnicity, of incitement of hatred to neighbouring countries and peoples are extremely illustrative. If the official statistics of the Republic of North Macedonia are believed, there are practically no Bulgarians there. In the questionnaires on population censuses in this country, the column "Bulgarian(m)/Bulgarian(f)" is missing, although the number of people with dual citizenship — the Republic of North Macedonia and the Republic of Bulgaria is significant.

We know that we will be immediately answered that this phenomenon is solely due to the desire of the citizens of the Republic of North Macedonia to obtain a passport of a Member State of the European Union. Only, you have to consider other facts. First of all, the procedure for obtaining a Bulgarian passport is difficult. It has been criticised repeatedly in public debates in Bulgaria, as the competent authorities are accused of not issuing passports to people of proven Bulgarian origin, almost on instructions from Brussels, where they do not like the influx of such new EU citizens.

Certainly, the Bulgarian procedure for issuing a Bulgarian passport to persons of Bulgarian origin is incomparably more strict than the Romanian one. It is much easier for a citizen of the Republic of Moldova to obtain a Romanian passport than it is for a person of Bulgarian origin from the Republic of North Macedonia to obtain a Bulgarian one. The same applies to persons of Bulgarian origin from the Republic of Serbia. Here we neither criticise nor even evaluate Romanian policy — we simply show that the Bulgarian policy for issuing passports to persons of Bulgarian origin is generally rather restrictive.

Despite restrictions, thousands of citizens of the Republic of North Macedonia claim their Bulgarian origin and take Bulgarian citizenship. Despite this obvious fact, in the Republic of North Macedonia, Bulgarians continue to be in the column "other" of the population census.

What is important in this example is that behind the absence of the column "Bulgarian(m)/Bulgarian(f)" lies a ban on declaring Bulgarian ethnic origin in the Republic of North Macedonia. Between World War II and 1989, the "Law on the Macedonian National Honor" was implemented in Socialist Macedonia, according to which the introduction and reading of a Bulgarian newspaper in the country was punished by imprisonment for up to three years. These are not Bulgarian chauvinistic fantasies — these are facts. Today there is no such law, but the memory of it and its related normative documents is alive. Moreover, nothing is

being done to make the citizens of the Republic of North Macedonia aware that these practices have gone irretrievably in the past.

In fact, these practices have not gone to the past at all. Anyone who shows interest can get acquainted with a huge archive of repressive actions against people who have stated their Bulgarian origin or (God forbid!) their Bulgarian consciousness. The last case, which is literally days ago, is the prosecution of a citizen of the Republic of North Macedonia, who has allowed the Bulgarian “White Rose” dance to be performed at a wedding party organised by him. The musical work in question has absolutely no political connotations — it is a horo (a traditional Balkan dance) with a slightly more modern arrangement. The sin of the persecuted citizen was that he had allowed a musical work sang in literary Bulgarian to be played at the wedding.

Quite fresh are the cases of destruction of sites of the Bulgarian cultural heritage, as well as the destruction of Bulgarian military cemeteries in the Republic of North Macedonia, which is a violation of international legal norms, but is encouraged and promoted by the official authorities and media.

We refer this text to the European Commission, not to flood its members with examples of the intolerance of Bulgarians and Bulgaria in the Republic of North Macedonia. The facts of this attitude are widely known, they are publicly available throughout the European Union. Bulgaria is not being told that there are no such abundant practices — Bulgaria is persuaded to close its eyes to what is happening.

We hold nothing against treating the citizens of the Republic of North Macedonia with tolerance, and they have suffered enough due to the above-described historical context. Macedonian identity is formed in traumatic conditions of violence and enormous pressure, but this is not the topic of our appeal.

We appeal to the European Commission not to block the start of the accession procedure of the Republic of North Macedonia to the EU, but to impose monitoring which corresponds to the seriousness of the problems that both the EU countries and the Republic of North Macedonia itself will face in the accession process. It would not be fair to the Macedonians themselves to mislead them that it is possible to become members of the EU, given that the hatred of Bulgarians is in practice a state ideology.

We will not comment on the political and tactical reasons that make some political parties in the Republic of North Macedonia (the supporters of “Ancient Macedonism”) to be fiercely and openly anti-Bulgarian, while others (the supporters of Tito’s old Macedonianism) are more disguised and at first glance — more accommodating. **For us it is essential that the Republic of North Macedonia ceases the practice of treating the declaration of Bulgarian identity as a criminal offence.**

We do not want to tell the political elites of the Republic of North Macedonia what they are by ethnic origin, what is the origin of the official language norm in Skopje and so on. We simply insist that these same political elites stop violating the human rights of people who declare Bulgarian origin, Bulgarian identity and Bulgarian nationality in the Republic of North Macedonia.

Those people who have the misfortune or at least the huge discomfort of being Bulgarians in the Republic of North Macedonia and do not want to conceal their self-

identification in many cases are also Bulgarian citizens, which means that they are also citizens of the European Union. **We call on the European Commission to effectively protect the human rights of its own citizens.**

We live in the 21st century. Relapses of chauvinism, expansionism and irredentism are foreign to us; we believe that we live exactly in times of maximum respect for human rights. We address the European Commission with a call and request not to turn a blind eye to the flagrant violations of the human rights of Bulgarians in the Republic of North Macedonia, and not only to them. We ask that Bulgarian citizens in the Republic of North Macedonia are treated as citizens of the European Union, which they are de jure. Now it remains for them to become EU citizens and de facto.

This is a draft of the appeal, which will be sent to the European Commission.

Protesters have every right to accept or reject it.

If they accept it, they have the rights to edit it, as long as this does not change the essential meaning of the text or lead to internal incoherences and contradictions in it.

*Our main request to the EC is: **There is a systematic transgression of human rights in the Republic of North Macedonia, especially towards people of Bulgarian origin and identity, hence we request a monitoring of the respect for human rights in the Republic of North Macedonia during the procedure for its accession into the European Union.***