

Cross-Border Linguistic Nationalism in the Central and Eastern Balkans

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The Balkan Slavic language area consists of the Bulgarian and Macedonian languages and the easternmost (Torlak) dialects of Serbian. Its external boundaries can be defined in structural terms, but its internal division among different languages is a matter of social convention and an object of strife among different nationalist discourses. Linguistic arguments are routinely employed in this debate, but the choice among different structural features and the weight assigned to them is always an arbitrary decision.

The prevailing Bulgarian opinion is that all of Balkan Slavic is linguistically simply Bulgarian: there is no Macedonian language, and what Serbian dialectologists consider their easternmost dialects are at least structurally Bulgarian, too. This official view of the boundaries of the Bulgarian language and ethnicity crystallized during the 19th century when the Bulgarian national church (the Bulgarian Exarchate) was created within the borders of the Ottoman Empire, and has not essentially changed ever since. Macedonian dialectology does not lay claim to any Serbian territory, but it considers the dialects of south-western Bulgaria to be Macedonian, despite the lack of any widespread Macedonian national consciousness in that area. The use of structural linguistic arguments is for Bulgarian dialectologists and, to a lesser extent, their Macedonian counterparts, a way of ignoring the fact that the present linguistic identities of the speakers themselves in various regions do not always correspond to the nationalist discourses.

The Bulgarian authorities have banned the Macedonian organizations in Bulgaria, and the Macedonian authorities have banned the Bulgarian organizations in Macedonia. Because of this, both countries have been convicted at the European Court of Human Rights.

Several endangered or even moribund Balkan Slavic dialects are spoken in Albania, Kosovo, Greece, Serbia, and Romania. In some regions the identification of their speakers as Bulgarians or Macedonians is quite straightforward, in others the speakers face several alternatives, such as identifying themselves as either Bulgarian or Macedonian or, despite their home language, as members of the main nationality of their country (as Slavic-speaking Greeks, for instance). For Muslim Slavs there is the additional alternative to consider the local, religiously and linguistically defined ethnicity (such as Goran, Torbesh, or Pomak) to be their primary identity. The promotion of the minority rights of such groups is caught between the conflicting Bulgarian and Macedonian nationalist discourses. It is also hampered by the conflict between Macedonia and Greece about the use of the name Macedonia, as well as by the reluctance of Greece to acknowledge any linguistic minorities in the country. Bulgaria and Macedonia render support to those representatives of minorities abroad who are ready to identify themselves as Bulgarians or Macedonians, while Greece at least tolerates the attempts to create a distinct standard language for Pomaks, if written in Greek letters.

Ethnolinguistic identities are social constructs and, at geographical or cultural boundaries, matters of free choice. A linguist should show that conflicts among nationalist discourses cannot be resolved by linguistic arguments without taking into account the self-identification of the speakers themselves. The myth of the objectivity of structural and dialectological features and isoglosses should be dismantled.