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Memory in the Halls of Power: The 1903 Ilinden Uprising and Macedonian State-Building

Abstract

The article intricately explores the nexus of politics and security enveloping the notion of the Macedonian state, with a specific focus on analyzing the narrative and collective memory tied to the 1903 Ilinden Uprising. As the country marks its 120th anniversary, the state elites and society stand at a pivotal juncture, grappling with a pervasive wave of revisionism that extends beyond historiography, permeating public discourse and collective reflections on this seminal historical milestone for the Macedonian people. Even though Ilinden takes its place as a revered national holiday, the trajectory of Macedonian state-building unfolds as a dynamic journey shaped by the intricate interplay of both external and internal influences. The analytical framework employed is rooted in the Copenhagen school of security studies principles, enriched by the foundational tenets of political science and memory studies. This multidisciplinary approach aims to present a perspective on the significant historical event of Ilinden from a non-historian vantage point, offering profound insights into its enduring impact on Macedonian politics and statehood.

Keywords: Macedonia, Ilinden, idea of the state, collective memory, state-building

Introduction: The Historical and Political Relevance of the 1903 Ilinden Uprising

Many historians and other social scientists have already concluded that the 1903 Ilinden uprising, and particularly the short-lived Krushevo Republic, represents a decisive historical event in modern Macedonian political history¹. Many foreign authors agree². For

¹ See for further detail: Г. Тодоровски (ур.), *100 години Илинден 1903–2003* (прилози од научен собир), 6–8 мај 2003, Скопје 2005; Е. Оровчанец-Спироска (ed.), *120 години од Илинденското востание* (зборник на трудови од истоимена конференција одржана на 1 август), Скопје 2023; Ј. Лазарев (ed.), *Македонската борба за самостојност и независна држава Македонија – 120 години Илинден* (зборник на трудови од истоимена конференција одржана на 8 јуни), Скопје 2023.

² This author of this text considers mostly the Macedonian perspective as well as the foreign authors' ones who agree over the pivotal role of the Ilinden Uprising for the Macedonian state- and nation-building process.



instance, in the words of Keith Brown, “for modern Macedonia, Krushevo 1903 combines something of the flavor of France’s Bastille, England’s Runnymede, and the United States’ Alamo. Yet also important is the imperial reach of the enemy in the past, the image of glorious defeat still unavenged, and the continuing vulnerability of a small country in the present. In this regard, Macedonia’s Krushevo, and especially the battle of Mečkin Kamen, can perhaps be linked more closely to Greece’s Messolonghi, Serbia’s Kosovo field, or even Israel’s Masada in its emotive power”³. This explication is hardly a surprise, as the same may apply to any state’s history, and Macedonian is not an exception. No wonder some authors refer to the (almost unavoidable) blender of myth and history (or “mythistory”). The famous writer, Salman Rushdie has said that the whole history of humanity is a bloody battle over the prevalence of the story; namely a battle about whose story is older, greater and better⁴.

The expression “mythistory” is authored by the president of the American Historical Association, McNeill who argues:

Myth and history are closely related in that both explain how things came to be as they are, by telling some kind of story. But in our everyday speech, myth is considered to be false, while history is or tends to be true. Accordingly, the historian who rejects someone else’s conclusions calls them mythical, while claiming that his own views are true. But what appears true to one historian will appear false to another, so that the truth of one historian becomes a myth to another, the moment his claim is denied⁵.

McNeill’s main contribution is the critical attitude towards history (created in a certain social context, related to a certain value system and with a mission to demarcate who are “us” versus “others”), but also to the dangerous attraction of myths on which the internal cohesion of the group and identity is built. In a similar style, another author detects the guilt of historians in the incorporation of the mythological thread in historiography: “we, historians, are necessarily guilty of creating permanent myths about peoples, myths that are both deep and dangerous, and by constructing a continuous, linear story of the European peoples”⁶.

The significance of the 1903 Ilinden Uprising transcends the epoch because it was consequently accompanied by another crucial event – the anti-fascist assembly of the

The goal of this analysis is not to enter into a polemical debate with the neighboring historiographies who claim the opposite and question the Macedonian character of this event. After all, the author is not a historian herself. However, one could find interesting and opposing analyses by some Bulgarian and Greek authors who deserve academic attention and appreciation. See, for instance, A. Heraclides, *The Macedonian Question and the Macedonians*, London and NY 2021; V. Roudometof, *Collective Memory, National Identity, and Ethnic Conflict: Greece, Bulgaria, and the Macedonian Question*, London 2002; D. Gocev, *Вечните идеали и безсмъртният български подвиг от 1903 г. (105 години от Илинденско-Преображенското въстание)*, София 2008.

³ K. Brown, *The Past in Question: Modern Macedonia and the Uncertainties of Nation*, Princeton 2018, p. 3.

⁴ Quoted by T. Aleksić (ed.), *Mythistory and Narratives of the Nation in the Balkans*, Newcastle 2007, p. 5.

⁵ W.H. McNeill, *Mythistory, or Truth, History and Historians*, “The American Historical Review” 1986, vol. 91, no. 1 (February), p. 1.

⁶ See more in: P. Geary, *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe*, Princeton 2002. One could add that the best proof of this is the name deal between Athens and Skopje (better known as Prespa Agreement), with which the so-called “second party” (the Republic of Macedonia) confirms the myth of the continuity of Greece from the ancient Macedonian kingdom to the present day. See: B. Vankovska, *Geopolitics of the Prespa Agreement: Background and After-Effects*, “Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies” 2020, vol. 22, no. 3.

people's liberation (ASNOM) in 1944. Both are related to a same date – the 2nd of August, or St. Elijah's Day. It was more than a coincidence, bearing in mind that the Ilinden heroic legend was embraced by the partisan movement in the WWII. In short, even though the Krushevo Republic lasted just for ten days, for many generations of Macedonians, its constitution has been heralded as the greatest historical achievement. The reason is not only because of the attempt to establish a state but even more because the progressive agenda of its leaders (the republican form associated with the most progressive ideas of the time). On the other hand, the 1944 Second Ilinden is a more palpable historical proof of the people's determination and ability to establish a state of their own and thus enjoy the full right of self-determination. It's worth mentioning that in the popular culture and the political discourse, there is also a so-called Third Ilinden, associated with the independence referendum from 1991. Obviously, Ilinden (either on 2 August or on 8 September) epitomizes the dominant political narrative around which the state and society are united, at least superficially. From a constitutional point of view, Ilinden is a significant part of the spirit and the letter of the Macedonian Constitution's preamble⁷.

However, the 120th anniversary coincides with a peculiar situation in which the public and the political elites are exposed to unprecedented pressure. This assumes a precise re-assessment of Macedonian historiography (or better, its revision) to appease its eastern neighbor Bulgaria, all for the sake of EU integration⁸. In essence, Ilinden, serving as both a historic event and a linchpin in the political/state narrative, finds itself on a precarious slope, giving rise not only to regional tensions but also internal discord. Rather than arising from a sincere quest for truth in academic research and history writing, key questions about the uprising and its prominent figures are imposed by power centres. In the present (geo)political context, exploring the significance of Ilinden in the realm of international state-building becomes imperative. The Ilinden narrative reveals internal imperfections linked to the fractures in Macedonian society along ethnic lines. Consequently, it appears challenging to assert any political, ideological, and value continuity between the past and the contemporary interpretation and celebration of Ilinden.

This paper's fundamental premise is that even the mere mention of "Ilinden" today elicits diverse understanding, emotion, and collective memory across different segments of society. This includes the Macedonian ethnic community, marked by significant division and polarization. The commemoration of this historical milestone prompts an examination

⁷ Constitution of the Republic of North Macedonia, online at https://www.sobranie.mk/the-constitution-of-the-republic-of-macedonia-ns_article-constitution-of-the-republic-of-north-macedonia.nsp.x. In the context of Ilinden's significance one should take into account the following sentence: "Taking as the points of departure the historical, cultural, spiritual and statehood heritage of the Macedonian people and their struggle over centuries for national and social freedom as well as for the creation of their own state, and particularly the traditions of statehood and legality of the Krushevo Republic and the historic decisions of the Anti-Fascist Assembly of the People's Liberation of Macedonia..."

⁸ A group of esteemed historians from the Balkan region issued a joint statement against the misuse of history by Bulgaria arguing that "conflicts over history and historical symbols are once again an important political topic in Southeast Europe. In recent months, the Bulgarian government has threatened to block the start of negotiations between Brussels and Skopje, asking North Macedonia to accept the 'historical truth' that the Macedonian identity and language have Bulgarian roots and that the Macedonian nation was created by Tito and the Comintern. We condemn this case of historical revisionism and the misuse of history for political purposes". Quoted from RFE, *Protest istoričara iz regiona protiv zloupotrebe istorije oko S. Makedonije*, 18 novembar 2020, online at <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/30956756.html>.

of whether Ilinden holds distinct meanings for various groups and how this dissonance influences the concept of the state idea, aligning with the Copenhagen School of security studies⁹.

Macedonian historians have extensively documented the causes, circumstances, course, and immediate consequences of the Ilinden Uprising of 1903. However, under the pressure from Sofia, and particularly after the signing of the Treaty of Friendship, Good-neighborliness, and Cooperation between the Republic of Macedonia and the Republic of Bulgaria in 2017, the history of Ilinden, and more broadly, Macedonia and Macedonians, has been transformed into a bargaining chip within a state-formed entity, namely the Joint Multidisciplinary Expert Commission on Historical and Educational Issues between the Republic of Bulgaria and the Republic of Macedonia. Since then, Macedonian historiography has been subjected to overt external control, challenging its standing as a genuine academic discipline¹⁰.

The intricate array of historical questions continues to weigh heavily on the Macedonian political and broader public landscape on a daily basis. Rather than fostering unity around the ideals of Ilinden ancestors, the prevailing trend is one of ongoing polarization and the securitization of the event¹¹. This paper takes a unique approach to the analysis of Ilinden. Instead of delving into historical facts and their interpretation within the academic domain, it seeks to offer an alternative perspective. The central argument posited here is that Ilinden, viewed as an embodiment of the idea of the Macedonian state, can be examined through the lenses of political science and security theory. By drawing on insights from the impacts of state-building and nation-building, the aim is to retrospectively explore how Ilinden has shaped the process of constructing the Macedonian nation and what the current outcome entails. The ultimate objective is to assess the trajectory that the modern Macedonian state and nation are following as of late 2023.

Conceptual and Political Confusion: On the Idea of the State

According to Barry Buzan, one of the founders of the Copenhagen School of security studies, any state consists of three key elements¹². The essence of the state (understood as

⁹ See more: B. Buzan, L. Hansen, *The Evolution of International Security Studies*, Cambridge 2012; B. McSweeney, *Identity and security: Buzan and the Copenhagen school*, "Review of International Studies" 1996, vol. 22(1), pp. 81–93.

¹⁰ This issue has been extensively discussed elsewhere; for a detailed exploration, refer to Panov et al., *Macedonian Nation Between Self-Identity and Euro-Atlantic Integration: Implications of the Agreements with Bulgaria and Greece*, in: B. Radeljić, C. González-Villa (eds.), *Researching Yugoslavia and its Aftermath. Societies and Political Orders in Transition*, Springer, Cham 2021, also: B. Vankovska, *Historical Science in Chains: The Impact of the Bilateral Agreement Between Skopje and Sofia on Freedom of Academic Work*, "Historical Review" 2023, vol. 77(168), no. 3–4, p. 434.

¹¹ For instance, the following newspaper article offers an accurate perspective of the political and public actors as well as about the polarization over the Ilinden and its interpretation: J. Павловска, *Европската иднина каква што се нуди не е алтернатива за илнденското минато*, "Нова Македонија", 1 август 2023, online at <https://novamakedonija.com.mk/pecateno-izdanie/evropskata-idnina-kakva-shto-se-nudi-ne-e-alternativa-za-ilindenskoto-minato/>.

¹² B. Buzan, *People, States and Fear: An Agenda For International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era*, Hertfordshire 1991, p. 40.

a key referent object of national security) should be sought in a triangular interconnection of elements: the idea of the state, its institutional expression/structure, and the physical foundation (territory and population). We chose this approach because, at first glance, it complicates the elaboration of our thesis, but at the same time, it enables a deeper insight into the relationships among the three angles of the triangle, with Ilinden placed at its centre as a historical event and a symbol of statehood and the struggle for national and political self-determination.

The theoretical framework underpinning this work provides the opportunity to understand that the idea of/for the state is not only a philosophical or political question but also a security one. The study of the state is a perpetual preoccupation of political science, and a definitive answer to what the state truly is still does not exist. Its definition depends on the positions of the researcher. This ambivalence is pointed out by Ralph Miliband by arguing that “the state is not an object... it does not exist as such”¹³. In other words, state exists in the minds and the will of the people that united around one key idea, i.e., the wish to live together, to represent a polity, political community. Only then does a state receive a materialized form, and the people become self-aware of their existence as citizens (of a state community). By embracing the concept of the state idea, one acknowledges that its existence is primarily rooted in the socio-political realm rather than the physical. If the essence of the state is grounded in the collective idea held by its citizens, then that idea itself emerges as a pivotal focal point for national security considerations. A state without a binding idea among its citizens might be unable to sustain its internal security. Buzan argues that discussing the idea of the state calls for attention to its two main sources: the nation and organizing ideologies.

It is clear that states are vulnerable regarding their physical foundations (territory and population), necessitating a security and defense system for their protection. However, history also provides ample examples of populations and territories existing outside the borders of the states to which they once belonged. On the other hand, due to migration, demographic changes, and other factors, the composition of the population changes over time. But does this necessarily imply an alteration in the idea of the state? In that sense, taking the premise of this analysis, we assert that the state is not purely a physical phenomenon but also a metaphysical entity; it is an idea around which a group of people is gathered. At its core lies the unification of people around the desire to live together in an organized community, and the cohesive force is found in the values and other ideals that make these people feel “belonging”, “together”, and in continuity¹⁴.

Historiography and “mythistory” are most often illustrated in constitutional preambles¹⁵. One could say that history, or awareness of one people’s past, is an emanation of the idea of the state. Hence, the idea of state may be considered an object of national/state security, under certain circumstances. This is particularly significant considering that the idea of state can take various forms and contents, and there may even be multiple contradictory

¹³ R. Miliband, *The State in Capitalist Society*, London 1969, p. 49.

¹⁴ In some Slavic languages the semiotics of the term “community” means “to be together”, or “to be united around one thing” (за-едно, заедница).

¹⁵ See for a comparative analysis of preambles’ significance in the world constitutional law in: W. Voermans, P. Cliteur, *Constitutional Preambles. A Comparative Analysis*, Leiden 2017.

ideas among groups within a country, creating conditions for instability and internal weakness of the state. The idea itself has a strong symbolic and unifying power, but it also has its institutional expression in the constitution and the form of the political system. According to Yannis Stivachtis, “external threats, on the other hand, may endanger the sovereignty of the state as well as ‘the idea of state’, particularly its national identity, organizing ideology and the institutions that express it. In other words, political threats aim at the organizational stability of the state”¹⁶.

The idea of/for state (or the state idea, to put it differently) is considered indigenous in normal circumstances, i.e., an original representation of what kind of state (political community) one desires to live in. Although it is not set in stone and unchangeable, its “anchor” is always sought in the foundational narrative of each political community. In other words, it emerges from the society and the people who constitute it, or at least, this is how most national states in Europe and beyond have been created.

In theoretical terms, the political narrative encompasses the way in which groups and societies construct their collective memory, interpreting events from the past. It speaks to how individuals and groups remember, interpret, or discuss historical events, or the significance they attribute to them in the current political moment. In this continuum, events that have left the most significant political and societal marks on the development of a given community occupy a particular place. Undoubtedly, for Macedonia and the Macedonian people, that aura belongs to Ilinden. Although multiple “Ilindens” have been distilled in everyday discourse, as well as in political and intellectual discussions, this text primarily focuses on the Ilinden of 1903.

However, the situation changes both theoretically and practically with the introduction of the concept and practice of international state-building. In brief, for the purposes of this work, we will only mention that the new international context that emerged after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War in 1989 created conditions for international interventionism on a broad scale. Under the pretext of facilitating the transition to liberal democracy in former socialist countries or stabilizing post-conflict societies, the West became a leading force and driver of changes in the internal configuration of states that expressed a desire to become part of European and Euro-Atlantic integrations (NATO and the EU).

This approach seemingly focused only on the institutional structure of the state (building institutions, democratization, and rule of law), but it quickly became evident that its effects also reached the idea of/for the state. Initially, constitutional engineering involved modeling and intervention in the social contract of states dependent on interventions (imposing a written constitution from outside or voluntarily or under pressure changing the constitution), and then new institutions were installed within that constitutional framework.

However, what did this mean for the first element of the triangle, the state idea? Although, seemingly, transitional states were left to determine their own ideological and metaphysical visions (through celebrating holidays, political ceremonial discourse, or through memorial and other symbols, often even in the preambles of their now liberal

¹⁶ Y. Stivachtis, *The state-society/citizen relationship in security analysis*, “Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press”, April 2015, p. 8.

constitutions), the political pragmatism revealed that historical anchors became mere decorations, or alleged proof of the state-building traditions of a specific nation, while in everyday life, an entirely new postmodern narrative emerged. According to this narrative, all these countries that followed in the footsteps of Western liberalism adapted their traditional ideas and values to the new “secular religion” embodied in the values of NATO and the EU. To prevent a collision between the old (national) and the new (supranational), they practically kept them separate, like two parallel realities.

Thus, traditional narratives and state-building myths began to be treated only as incidental rituals marked by inertia, mainly under the influence of elites and Western diplomatic representatives, while what became a living narrative, reproduced daily, was the story of the “promised land” and the ultimate happiness that the nation and the people would find once they joined NATO and the EU. In practice, two parallel worlds were created, one of (backward but useful) past and one of the progressive future. Under the influence of Western postmodern influences, narratives about the historical past (especially in the Balkan states) began to be considered folklore, and even dangerous triggers for (alleged) nationalism, or they were adapted in a bizarre way to the new ideals/ideas, leading to the conclusion that the national protagonists from the historical gallery were actually always fighting not for their people and their state but for NATO and the EU.

In such a context, historiography becomes collateral damage because commemorating historical events and figures related to the state’s/people’s past poses an obstacle to progress toward EU integration-related goals. Regarding the idea of the state, one could argue that it is directly impacted both externally and internally. The redefinition of the constitution preamble in February 2019, which specifically addressed 2 August (i.e., ASNOM), serves as an illustrative example of how external pressures can alter the state’s foundational principles. Simultaneously, Bulgaria’s insistence on commemorating the Ilinden uprising (under a different name, Ilinden-Preobrazheni in the Bulgarian official vocabulary) alongside Macedonia is a minor detail. The real revision of history and negotiation over one’s national historiography and collective memory takes place within the bilateral historic commission established under the provisions of the 2017 Good Neighborly Treaty. The result is a pervasive confusion about whether the Macedonian state and society have the right to aspire to EU membership and a European identity while simultaneously honoring their national history and legacy. The initial content of the Good Neighborly Treaty has in the meantime revised through the imposed EU negotiation framework, which now insists on inclusion of the “part of the Bulgarian people” in the Constitution’s preamble but also in some of its normative parts¹⁷. It’s no wonder that the public space is highly polarized on this issue, leading political and intellectual groups to divide into two blocks of alleged patriots and supposed pro-EU forces. Macedonia stands out as the only case (*sui generis* in the history of EU enlargement) that must decide its national and collective identity and history in terms of “either – or”. On another internal level, an ongoing ethnic security dilemma persists between the ethnic Macedonian and ethnic Albanian communities, further

¹⁷ See more about the Bulgarian demands in terms of constitutional revision in: M. Ristevska Jordanova, S. Kacaraska, *EU – North Macedonia accession negotiations: the implications of the Bulgarian conditions*, Skopje 2020, available at https://epi.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/EU_MK-accession-negotiations_implications-of-BG-conditions_small-font.pdf.

contributing to the potential for conflict and insecurities that could result in another layer of inter-ethnic tension¹⁸. At the celebration of the 54th anniversary of the Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts (MANU), its president academic Ljupco Kocarev put this dilemma bluntly:

If we lose the nation, we don't need European integration. If we lose the Macedonian state again, there will be no state entity to integrate into the EU. Thus, the EU will have nothing to integrate, and we will have nothing to commemorate and celebrate¹⁹.

Ilinden as a Myth and Milestone in Macedonian Statehood

The dominant political narrative is typically viewed as the “glue” that binds together every political community or state. Its most profound manifestation is evident in the form and content of the social contract, namely, in the constitution of the state. However, it is essential to recognize that this narrative is essentially a story that encapsulates the idea of the state, an expression emanating from its essence. As already said, the political narrative of the Macedonian statehood and the Macedonian people centers on Ilinden (be that the one of 1903 or the second one of 1944). At the first glance, there is nothing dubious about this claim as Ilinden (August 2nd) has been a historical/political/symbolic constant in the modern Macedonian history and politics of state building. However, more careful insight shows that the event has had a different treatment and ways of commemoration throughout the recent political history. The organized state commemorations date back relatively recently, but the collective awareness of Ilinden's significance has a much longer (non-institutionalized) history.

During the socialist period, Ilinden was linked to the class, national, and even multi-ethnic components (due to its integration into the broader Yugoslav narrative of brotherhood and unity). However, even in that period, certain dissident and emigrant circles promoted not only its national content but also the thesis of the unfinished Ilinden, divided into the three parts of the envisioned homeland, the unique Macedonia.

The political narrative surrounding Ilinden significantly influences the understanding not only of the past but also of the present and future of the Macedonian state. While numerous actors may participate in formulating (or challenging/re-examining) the dominant political narrative, the power to control and change it lies with the political elite, often supported by members of the intellectual and media communities with whom they are closely aligned. Outside this circle, there are actors attempting to impose their own narrative, especially if the dominant one is not inclusive and acceptable to the majority in the population.

¹⁸ Paul Roe argues the following: “By analogy with the (state) security dilemma, a societal security dilemma might exist when the actions of one society, in trying to increase its societal security (strengthening its own identity), causes a reaction in a second society, which in the end, decreases its (the first society's) own societal security (weakens its own identity)”. P. Roe, *The Societal Security Dilemma*, “COPRI Working Papers”, June 1996.

¹⁹ *Коцарев: Ако ја изгубиме нацијата, не ни треба европска интеграција*, “Нова Македонија”, 8.10.2021.

This article attempts to uncover, at least partially, the ways in which Ilinden has been interpreted and integrated into the dominant collective memory during a certain period. Such an approach sheds light on the dynamics of power in society, particularly the competition among narratives that play an instrumental role in shaping the current political and societal agenda. It also illuminates the politics of memory that facilitates the promotion and implementation of specific public policies, which, at first glance, may seem practical but lack a tangible connection to the understanding of national and cultural identity in the state community. The results of our analysis speak of the coexistence of multiple narratives about Ilinden, in constant tension with the ongoing remolding of the Macedonian national and political identity, especially in the last five years (2018–2023).

In theoretical terms, memory regimes refer to a complex set of social and cultural practices, institutions, and discourses that shape how individuals and groups remember, select, or forget events from the past. This concept encompasses dominant narratives, symbols, rituals, and commemorations that define the collective memory of a society regarding its history. The political narrative is closely linked to the memory regime, as political actors rely on collective memory to construct narratives that align with their political agendas and interests. By shaping the manner and content of events from the past embedded in collective memory, the memory regime directly serves the function of the political elite, which promotes current political initiatives through narratives about the past. This is particularly true for weak states without a strong and clear societal consensus on the foundations of the political community. In such cases, the political narrative about the past is like clay, moulded and adapted to the specific political moment. In consolidated democracies, such fluctuations are unprecedented.

In a general sense, and across examples from different states, one can observe memory regimes that emphasize a heroic national narrative or acknowledge the injustices and sufferings of the past that the current community respects and seeks to overcome. According to Sabrina P. Ramet, the genealogy and evolution of national myths (sustained precisely through memory regimes) are closely linked to the rise and fall of political projects they symbolize and support. She argues that myths are not neutral concepts but are historically and politically situated discursive tools. As they change, so does their interpretation. Hence, their popularity and general acceptance depend on the needs of the political project. Moreover, Ramet emphasizes that myths are not monolithic; they appear in various versions that then clash with each other or integrate different elements²⁰.

Due to the limited space and the specific focus of this work, we will only conclude here that the questions of collective memory, its significance, and its connection to the political narrative are issues of lively interest. Various schools and approaches only demonstrate that this is a multidimensional problem present in all societies. What attracts the researchers' interests not only in the context of memory studies but also in history, political science, sociology, anthropology, and other fields, is the quest for answers on how memory is constructed, provoked, contested, and/or transformed in contemporary societies.

Here, we will briefly delve into the theoretical framework developed by Kubik and Bernhard, which is interesting not only from an academic perspective but also in the con-

²⁰ S.P. Ramet, *Dead Kings and National Myths: Why Myths of Founding and Martyrdom Are Important*, in: O. Listhaug, S.P. Ramet, D. Dulic (eds.), *Civic and Uncivic Values, Serbia in the Post-Milosevic Era*, Budapest 2011.

text of the specific topic²¹. Firstly, a brief overview of the theoretical framework of this analysis. The authors define memory regimes as a set of values, practices, and institutions that regulate the production, circulation, and consumption of memory in society. They argue that each regime is shaped by the complex interplay of state power, civil society, and global influences. They analyze memory regimes through three prisms: form, content, and function. The form prism pertains to the institutional and discursive structures that shape and disseminate memory, including laws, museums, and media representations. The content prism refers to the individual events, personalities, and narratives that are remembered and the ways in which this is done. The functional aspect of memory regimes relates to the broader societal and political goals that memories serve, such as nation-building, reconciliation, or resistance to hegemonic power.

Kubik and Bernhard distinguish between different memory regimes based on their degree of openness, inclusivity, and contestation. Dominant memory regimes, for example, are characterized by a high degree of state control over production and dissemination but a relatively narrow range of acceptable memory narratives. In contrast, pluralistic memory regimes exhibit greater openness and inclusivity, as well as more space for contestation and debate. The final and enduring memory regime is influenced by various factors, including historical heritage, political interests, and global trends. According to the authors, it is particularly important to analyze how memory regimes change over time and how different actors contest and negotiate memory in the public sphere²².

Ilinden as a Building Block of the Macedonian Statehood and a Tool of Political Manipulation

Ilinden (August 2) is a defining moment for Macedonian statehood, serving as both a marker for the establishment of the Macedonian state and a catalyst for debates surrounding its redefinition. The moment/concept is multi-layered, requiring an analysis that involves defining the precise moment and its representation in historical, historiographical, and collective/memory-related contexts. In the Macedonian collective consciousness, the glory and heroism of the fighters in the Ilinden Uprising, the National Liberation War (NOB), and ASNOM intertwine and merge. Additionally, Ilinden is “extended” for a little over a month to include the day of the independence referendum in 1991, aiming to encompass it within the historical trajectory that should be unidirectional and progressive. The simplest narrative for the “Three Ilindens” suggests a *continuous* political development in the Macedonian political and national consciousness over almost a century until the realization of the dream of (the first) Ilinden and those that preceded it. The geopolitical and internal constellations in which the Third Ilinden took place never allowed any transcendence of

²¹ M. Kubik, J. Bernhard, *Twenty Years After Communism. Politics of Memory and Commemoration*, New York 2014.

²² In the absence of another similar theoretical elaboration on the political narrative for Ilinden, it is intriguing that one author attempts to apply the mentioned theoretical framework to ascertain the existence of three memory regimes for Ilinden in the period 2001–2018 (see more: N. Trajanovski, *The Three Memory Regimes of Ilinden Commemorations (2001–2018). A Prolegomenon to the Study of the Official Memory in North Macedonia*, “Southeastern Europe” 2020, vol. 44(1)).

Ilinden beyond the borders of the Republic of Macedonia, a state that has faced huge problems on the way to its international recognition. Even the (irresponsible and romantic) statement of the then young leader of VMRO-DPMNE about holding a party congress in Thessaloniki, will be abused for years by the regional establishments and the international factor as “proof” of alleged irredentist intentions of the small and weak Macedonian state.

But what happens over the following years is the trivialization of Ilinden (especially its celebrations), to the point of turning it into a party symbol. The famous places of the Ilinden uprising were repeatedly “occupied” by party armies, state officials and ambassadors, to prove that Ilinden belongs to “them”. Those who were in political opposition at the given moment found alternative ways to commemorate it and sent political (poisonous) arrows to each other from other places. Thus, instead of a nation-building symbol and a moment of national unification, Ilinden became an apple of discord, and every celebration of it became an occasion for scandal. According to some experts, in the Macedonian political bloc there is a differentiation between the meanings of the two Ilindens. Thus, Professor Vlado Popovski²³ argues that ASNOM is more respected, that is, it feels closer, among the members of Social-Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM)²⁴, while Ilinden 1903 is considered more important among the membership of VMRO-DPMNE²⁵.

This confrontational policy of the Macedonian political parties (i.e. the two dominant ones – VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM – occupied the stage and the discourse) has led to the complete alienation of the people. Hence, Ilinden became a kind of mixture of religious holiday, name day, public holiday and non-working day, a time for family and private socializing. The failed transition, followed by the criminalization of politics and the politicization of crime, did not leave much room for pride and national celebration.

As already indicated, Ilinden throughout the decades represented and still represents a vessel (a container) in which certain content can be added or subtracted, according to the political moment and the conjuncture of political interests. What the ordinary citizen feels towards the event does not always coincide with the political signals sent to him by the political speakers. Apart from the existence of “several Ilindens”, several places of public commemoration have also been introduced (Mečkin Kamen, Pelince and Skopje)²⁶.

Due to the internal political complexity, in recent years in each of these places official representatives rotate according to rank (President of the Republic, Prime Minister or Speaker of the Assembly) and according to ethnicity (one of the three is always a repre-

²³ Цивил – Центар за слобода и Форум Цивилен мировен сервис – Македонија, *Владо Поповски, историчар: Историографијата во Македонија е исклучива*, in: *Соочување со реалноста. сеќавање на минатото – обликување на иднината*, Скопје 2016, с. 52.

²⁴ The party’s name in Macedonian reads Социјалдемократски сојуз на Македонија, СДСМ.

²⁵ ВМРО-ДПМНЕ, Внатрешна македонска револуционерна организација – Демократска партија за македонско национално единство – is the full name of the party in Macedonian. In English it reads International Macedonian Revolutionary Organization-Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity.

²⁶ It is interesting to trace the evolution of the commemoration of Ilinden, which in the collective memory of the Macedonian people is something that is not completely illuminated. It is considered natural that the holiday has been celebrated “always” – which does not correspond to historical facts. Thus, the initiative for regular celebration of Ilinden in Krushevo (and then in other places) dates back to 1967. See more about the testimonies of the participants. See: Канал 5 ТВ, *Илинден првпат бил прославен во Крушево пред точно 100 години*, 2 August 2018.

sentative of the Albanian community). The events can be said to be state-sponsored rituals, whose performance is usually patterned, without much enthusiasm or creativity, almost by inertia. The audience is almost as a rule mobilized by the political parties that are in power, but even with organized transportation and other support, the mass is absent. Opposition centers have organized parallel demonstrations in other places, and their leaders send opposite messages. The reports about certain incidents, about the numerous presence of the police, etc., speak of the dramatic internal situation in which the state, as well as society, finds itself.

In the ethicized political space, especially after the military conflict of 2001 and the newly established political constitution of the state based on the principle of consensual democracy, Macedonia became a community of communities. This meant that, at least in the first years, Ilinden became only a Macedonian (ethnic) holiday. The presence of a political representative of the Albanian parties or an office holder was more the exception (and part of protocol) than the rule²⁷. Just ten days after Ilinden, the Albanian political factor year after year raised the signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement to the pedestal of a key historical act. The representatives of the Macedonian political parties attended those celebrations, but even though it is an unofficial holiday, its celebration is financed from the state budget. This was most explicitly shown at the moment when Macedonia marked 20 years since the declaration of independence in 2011. The leader of the leading Albanian political party DUI (Democratic Union for Integration) said that Albanians respect this Macedonian holiday, but do not celebrate it.

The turnaround in the attitude towards the Ilinden Uprising among the Albanian political elite (not necessarily among the population) in recent years is due to several factors. Not only did the national, regional and international position of the state change under the pressure of the policy of yielding to all identity and constitutional demands, but the inclusion of the Ohrid Agreement in the Preamble of the Constitution in 2019 is also significant. In addition, in history education, the thesis that Ilinden belongs to all citizens (which is a logical and reasonable thesis) is pushed, but the character of the struggle of the people of Ilinden is subtly equated with that of the Albanians in 2001. Thus, the theses contained in the new history and society textbook for the 4th grade (from 2022), in the section dedicated to the Ilinden Uprising, are a kind of echo of the position of this political party. They are the following: 1. In the Ilinden Uprising, the population was dissatisfied with the Ottoman government; 2. Consequently, like-minded people fought to change the government; and 3. The Krushevo Republic is very important because not only Macedonians fought in it²⁸. Ali Ahmeti's congratulation on the occasion of Ilinden should also be understood in this context, even though it was sent through the social network Facebook. His message read: "The Krushevo Manifesto of 1903 is a unifying definition of a common state as much as the Ohrid Agreement in 2001"²⁹.

²⁷ In fact, there are examples of a complete boycott of Ilinden by Albanian political representatives. See, for example, *ДУИ и ДПА молчат за Илинден – политиколозите со осуда за бојкотот на прославата*, 3 август 2016, ТВ 21.

²⁸ Министерство за образование и наука (МОН), *Учебник по историја и општество 4 одделение*, Скопје, 2022, pp. 127–128.

²⁹ *Честитка од Али Ахмети за Илинден*, 2 август 2020, Канал 5 ТВ.

In this way, the process of Macedonian nation-building and the formation of a national myth are intricately linked to an internal conflict from recent history. Interestingly, for the Albanians, this period signifies a “new beginning”, or the “establishment of a new state”, based on their interpretations and interests. When coupled with the newly established practice (following external influence) of commemorating the Ilinden Uprising alongside Bulgaria, it becomes apparent that each interested party has a stake in redefining and interpreting the uprising in its own way. The most significant contradiction in this complex situation is that both the Bulgarian and Albanian sides seek to lay claim to Ilinden from 1903, while seemingly ignoring or downplaying its counterpart from 1944.

Considering that the violent conflict (military, political, institutional, but also societal/identity) according to the Copenhagen School is an event of existential importance for the state and its national security, it becomes clear that the idea of/for the Macedonian state is fluid, unclear and unfinished. Under the pressure of the neighboring countries and with the blessing of Brussels, the Macedonian people were forced (that is, their elite accepted the ultimatum) to redefine their identity (name, culture, history), while at the same time a similar process of “marketing” takes place with the largest minority, which has a different vision for the state. The process is not finished, which means that this is the Achilles’ heel of the Macedonian state, which may face serious internal and external challenges not because of the regime/political system, or the physical base (territory and population), but because of the idea of an independent and independent Macedonian state, that is, for the existence of the Macedonian people as its constitutive agent.

The government slogans under which Ilinden is celebrated, especially after the coalition between SDSM and DUI (along with several other smaller parties) came to power in 2017, speak volumes about the changed discourse and attitude towards one’s own past. Thus, in 2019, the festive slogan read “We are all children of Ilinden”, and in 2020 “Victory for all: Ilinden”. The slogan for 2021 was the simplest “Ilinden 2021”. But it is much more important that throughout all advertising materials, as well as speeches, government representatives continuously avoid referring to Macedonia, Macedonians and/or the Macedonian language. The slogan of 2022 read “Ilinden, our strength for the future!”, and the national symbols and the name of the state were again omitted from the materials. The mantra implicitly reads: the past is important, but the future is more important. Moreover, through their messages, the state representatives insist on creating the illusion that the people of Ilinden (wherever they come from) fought for North Macedonia and for NATO and the EU (i.e. for concepts and solutions that at that time could not even be imagine). Thus, the holiday is used to transcend, to artificially connect the ideals of “then Macedonia” with those of “our country”. In 2019, then Prime Minister Zoran Zaev said that the people of Ilinden fought “for the future of civil and democratic North Macedonia”. The following year, 2020, he did not appear anywhere to officially commemorate Ilinden and sent a congratulatory message through his Facebook profile, without mentioning the name of any of the Macedonian revolutionaries.

Ilinden has been (mis)used in a variety of ways over the years. On the one hand, it has become common practice for buildings, streets, schools, etc. to be named by this name. On the other hand, the lowest political move was the proposal to rename the state to Ilinden-ska Macedonia, as an attempt to resolve the dispute with the name. The proposal was launched in the spring of 2018 during the EU-SEE summit held in Sofia (which is an in-

teresting “coincidence”). The Macedonian side, with the purpose of showing proactivity in the process, proposed this bizarre name. But the goal was different: to mobilize public opinion, to touch the emotional nerve of the nation and to manifest the patriotic intention of the authorities (who, meanwhile, had already negotiated a definitive name change that would be acceptable to Athens). Athens expressly rejected the proposal (for the same reasons that, in fact, disturbed the Second Ilinden, that is, the decisions of ASNOM in the preamble of the Constitution), calling it irredentist³⁰. As expected, through a Greek prism (but certainly also through a Bulgarian one), any reference to Ilinden would also mean a reflection of the broader understanding of Macedonia (and the Macedonians), since the uprising itself took place on a much wider territory than that of today’s country. But during that time, the government was trying to garner some sympathy for its efforts at home. The attempt was short-lived, just like the real Ilinden Republic of Krushevo. But the conclusion is that Ilinden was misused for political purposes and in an unscrupulous way. On that occasion, Zaev euphorically declared: “We need a new, fourth Ilinden, in which we will unite again. Ilinden is our bright past, but also our bright future. With the fourth Ilinden, with a possible agreement on the Republic of Ilinden Macedonia, we irreversibly open the way to membership in the EU and NATO”³¹.

The short-sighted and amateurish policy of the government at the time actually capitulated on two fronts with the misuse of Ilinden (to arouse positive emotions in its electorate): first, factually informed that a certain (other constitutional) name would be acceptable for *erga omnes* use (something which until then was a kind of red line in the Macedonian negotiation policy), and secondly, the state set itself on a potential Bulgarian track, from the aspect of the open dispute on historical issues, because according to the Bulgarian reading of the Good Neighbor Agreement from 2017, Macedonia would have automatically recognized that is the second Bulgarian state.

The outcome of that Ilinden adventure is evident today: not only is Ilinden fading and all that it symbolizes in the Macedonian collective memory, but also everything that is on the letter “M” is fading. Throughout the messages about the Ilinden holiday, and even more so between two Ilinden celebrations, there is a spirit of obedience and acceptance of external blackmail.

Conclusion

The severity of the situation in which the Republic of Macedonia has been brought today can also be assessed through the divergence of public perception and feeling about Ilinden, but also all historical figures connected to the struggle for self-determination from that revolutionary period, with that of the dominant political narrative promoted by the authorities. The national symbol and myth is deeply fractured, which is compounded by the absence of a factual (and constitutional) social contract³².

³⁰ Greek Reporter, *Greece Rejects ‘Republic of Ilinden Macedonia’ Proposal*, 20 May 2018.

³¹ К. Блажевска, *Илинденска Македонија ќе ги отвори вратите на ЕУ и НАТО!*, ДВ, 19 May 2018.

³² See more: B. Vankovska, *Društveni ugovor u kontekstu međunarodne izgradnje države na Balkanu: slučaj Makedonije*, “Zbornik Pravnog fakulteta u Zagrebu” 2022, vol. 72(4).

According to the president of the esteemed Institute for Democracy *Societas Civilis*, the lamentable state of internal divisions, even concerning the ideals of Ilinden and the struggle for identity, should not be attributed to the insufficient maturity of the state and historiography³³. Instead, it is a consequence of a specific politics of remembrance, driven by external factors aiming to “close the open Balkan issues”, often at the expense of the weaker Macedonian side. Since the establishment of the independent Macedonian state to the present day, there has been a consistent imperative to appease others, whether they are Balkan neighbors or Western partners. Along this trajectory, history, the fundamental political narrative, and even “mythistory” have been manipulated to align with the interests of more powerful states and alliances. This assertion is easily substantiated by a simple analysis of the expressed positions of all political leaders regarding the significance and meaning of Ilinden, spanning from Kiro Gligorov to Branko Crvenkovski and Gjorge Ivanov. However, the most recent politics of the new leaders of the Social Democrats, such as Zoran Zaev and Dimitar Kovacevski, represents an unprecedented anticlimax³⁴.

The seemingly simple question of what is the dominant political narrative for Ilinden cannot be given a simple answer, because there is a deep polarization in relation to what should unite the nation – the question of its roots and libertarian traditions. Evidently, the political narrative about Ilinden varies depending on the ideological convictions of the political parties, their approaches to national history, and whether they are in opposition or in power. One position focuses on the Ilinden border crossing, as a first step towards the final struggle for national independence and Macedonian statehood. Ilinden 1903 can also be seen as part of a wider anti-imperialist struggle in Europe at the beginning of the 20th century, in which the Macedonian people rose up against the overpowering empire demanding freedom, but such a depiction does not fit the current geopolitical story in which the country is located. Instead, a new narrative is imposed, in which Ilinden is placed in the context of multiculturalism, that is, multi-ethnic coexistence and diversity is celebrated. In such a narrative, there is no place left for Ilinden as a symbol of Macedonian national identity; on the contrary, it is considered nationalistic, retrograde and populist.

Although some authors, identify three modes of memory in relation to Ilinden (at least for the period from 2001–2018), our conclusion is in the context of what Kubik and Bernhard elaborate as a theoretical framework for analysis, so we find that today’s mode of remembrance has a low degree of openness and inclusiveness. It is a dominant regime in which state control is decisive in relation to the official presentation of the historical past, and in function of the future as they have outlined it, regardless of how much it deviates from the dominant public opinion. The scope for accepting other narratives that would be acceptable (or at least tolerated) is very narrow, that is, it is demonized as anti-Western, anti-progressive and populist, if not hostile. The elimination and silencing of other representations of Ilinden values, that is, the imposition of new ones that are divinely related to

³³ RFE/Радио слободна Европа, *Илинден – Владина прослава и “патриотски” контрапрослави*, 1 август 2019.

³⁴ The official statements and positions of each of the Macedonian presidents of the Republic requires a more insightful analysis, and due to the lack of space and the particular focus of this article. Even a superficial overview shows a change of rhetoric depending not only on the political affiliation of each statesman but also the regional and international context in which the country had celebrated its pivotal national holiday.

the Ilinden values of 1903, speaks of a high degree of authoritarianism, much greater than anything that existed in the past in the sphere of the politics of memory.

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