

Zgodovinski časopis

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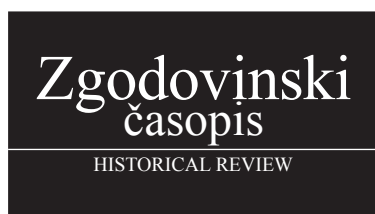
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Razprave

Biljana Vankovska

Historical Science in Chains: The Impact of the Bilateral Agreement Between Skopje and Sofia on Freedom of Academic Work

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Historical Science in Chains: The Impact of the Bilateral Agreement Between Skopje and Sofia on Freedom of Academic Work

Zgodovinski časopis (Historical Review), Ljubljana 77/2023 (168), No. 3–4, pp. 434–456, 57 notes

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The article focuses on the impact of the bilateral Treaty between Skopje and Sofia (2017) on academic freedom of history research in N. Macedonia. It starts with the elaboration of the wider problem of the marriage of convenience between politics and academia, followed by questioning if historical research is possible under the grip of geopolitics. The central part argues that the current political and legal framework curtail the freedom of research for the sake of the 'greater good'. To sum up, the Macedonian historiography is subject to unconcealed external control that challenges its existence as a genuine academic discipline.

Keywords: academic freedom, N. Macedonia, Bulgaria, historiography, historical commission.

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Zgodovinska znanost v verigah: Vpliv dvostranskega sporazuma med Skopjem in Sofijo na svobodo akademskega dela

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1.01 izvorni znanstveni članek: jezik En. (Sn., En., Sn.)

Članek se osredotoča na vpliv bilateralne pogodbe med Skopjem in Sofijo (2017) o akademski svobodi zgodovinskega raziskovanja v S. Makedoniji. Članek uvodoma obravnava širši problem navidezne zveze med politiko in akademskim svetom, čemur sledi vprašanje, ali je zgodovinsko raziskovanje možno v primežu geopolitike. Osrednja teza je, da trenutni politični in pravni okvir omejujeta svobodo raziskovanja zavoljo "večjega dobrega". Skratka, makedonsko zgodovinopisje je pod neprikritim zunanjim nadzorom, ki spodbija njegov obstoj kot pristne akademske discipline.

Ključne besede: akademska svoboda, S. Makedonija, Bolgarija, zgodovinopisje, zgodovinska komisija.

1. Introduction

The two bilateral agreements signed between the Macedonian government and those of neighbouring Bulgaria (in 2017)¹ and Greece (2018)² are considered to have put an end to decade-long regional disputes. Paradoxically, the alleged great successes of the European and national diplomacies remained a well-hidden secret for the Macedonian general and expert public until the moment they were officially signed. No wonder that they have attracted significant academic interest only *ex post facto*. In other words, the expert advice was not requested by the ruling elite, at least not in Skopje. The haste and short-sightedness of the Macedonian foreign and regional policy is now on full display because the not foreseen consequences of both agreements are now affecting a series of internal issues.³ Instead of opening the road to a brighter future in NATO and in the EU, a range of internal fractures that call for solutions have appeared.⁴ Probably the most neglected aspect is the impact of both bilateral agreements on the constitutionally guaranteed autonomy of academic teaching and research, particularly in the domain of the historical sciences.

Having been left out of the corridors of power, a part of the Macedonian academic and intellectual elite publicly issued a few warnings to the decision-making circles.⁵ However, they were not only dismissed but also blacklisted as politically motivated and even anti-European. On the contrary, the authorities in Sofia and Athens created a synergy between the state policy, the public opinion, the media and academia for the sake of promotion of their national interests. This was particularly true in the Bulgarian case, where the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (along with other academic institutions and individual scholars) directly supported the official state policy of negating the Macedonian nation, history and language.⁶ The very

¹ *Договор за пријателство, добрососедство и соработка*, 2017.

² *Конечна спогодба за решавање на разликите*, 2018.

³ Vankovska, “Geopolitics of Prespa”; Armakolas, Damjanovski and Siakas, *The Prospects of the Prespa Agreement*.

⁴ In the words of the President of the Republic Stevo Pendarovski, “the modified French proposal, which divided us unprecedentedly, caused numerous controversies, but all of them were directly or indirectly related to the fear of an identity threat for the Macedonians and the Macedonian language.” *Address by President*, 2022.

⁵ For instance: *Нова Македонија*, „Македонски интелектуалци“, *Лидер*, „Отворено писмо“; *Нова Македонија*, „Правото и светата должност“; *Денешен весник*, „62 македонски интелектуалци“.

⁶ *Communication from the Board of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences*.

few occasions when Skopje organized official public debates on the foreign policy and identity demands of the neighbouring states were set up in a non-transparent way and with a selective approach when inviting (only pro-government) scholars and intellectuals. The Macedonian universities remained mostly silent.

At a glance it seems as if both sides (the Bulgarian and Macedonian one) have applied the same methods of providing public legitimacy for their actions, i.e. by relying on the assumed scholarly esteem. However, the key difference lies in the fact that the Macedonian side in the negotiations has always been in asymmetric power relations with states that could always use the veto power in the EU (and NATO). The dependence of the academic circles on the political power centre (abroad and/or at home) is hardly a new phenomenon. It is rather a result of the decade long process of instrumentalization of science for political goals (or better, the authority and credibility that are believed to go by default with academic titles – *ipse dixit* principle). Hence one could hardly even talk about the autonomy of university and freedom of research – principles that have never been fully understood and implemented.

The institutionalization of the ‘marriage of convenience’ between the political power and academia in the above-mentioned two cases (on the relations Athens – Skopje and Sofia – Skopje) has gained momentum with the implementation of the two bilateral agreements, and particularly through the establishment of the interstate/intergovernmental expert commissions on historical and other issues.⁷ Even though both deserve equal attention and analysis, in this article we shed more light on the implications that derive from the Agreement on friendship, good neighbourly relations and cooperation. The key reason lies in the fact that the ‘creative reading’ of the rather vague and ambivalent text of the Agreement led to the so-called Bilateral protocols, which are now part of the EU negotiation framework for Macedonia’s accession process.⁸ Thus in July 2022, the provisions of the 2017 Agreement have overarched the bilateral state context and *de facto* (and *de jure*) have become part of the EU conditionality package imposed on one of the states with a candidate status for membership. The acceptance of these identity demands very much related to history understanding and teaching by the Government and the Parliament triggered stormy public reaction. A significant part of the academic community (notably, the historians) reacted again through media statements, official releases, public debates, columns etc.⁹ The critique had a wider focus, pointing out different aspects of the bilateral protocols’ content, but the history as a humanistic science was always in the centre.

The key focus of this article is somewhat different: the accent here is on a rather neglected issue of constitutionally guaranteed freedoms and rights, notably

⁷ The official name of the body envisioned by the 2017 Treaty is Joint Multidisciplinary Expert Commission on Historical and Educational Issues between the Republic of Bulgaria and the Republic of North Macedonia. The Prespa agreement uses different wording: Joint Inter-Disciplinary Committee of Experts on Historical, Archaeological and Educational matters.

⁸ *Протокол од Вториот состанок на Заедничката меѓувладина комисија.*

⁹ *МКД, „Писмо на 200 научници“.*

the freedom of scholarly work. The starting premise reads as follows: the 2017 Agreement and the bilateral protocols that institutionalized the so-called historical commission are in direct contradiction to constitutional norms, as well as to the widely accepted principles and values enshrined in the foundations of the academic community/university. These documents are just a culmination of a long-lasting process, but their effects vastly overcome the science of history and affects the general freedom of academic work. At last, we pose a rhetorical question: Is it possible to carry out free and independent research, to develop critical thinking and share scholarly findings that are not in line with the official state policy?

2. University in chains or just a marriage of convenience between academia and politics?

It may look odd to reiterate the basic definitions of the academic freedom and freedom of academic work in the era of the fourth industrial revolution and knowledge-based society. However, for the sake of illustrating the bizarre divergence of the academic freedom in the Macedonian case, it is useful to refer to *Encyclopaedia Britannica*: “academic freedom [is] the freedom of teachers and students to teach, study, and pursue knowledge and research without unreasonable interference or restriction from law, institutional regulations, or public pressure. Its basic elements include the freedom of teachers to inquire into any subject that evokes their intellectual concern; to present their findings to their students, colleagues, and others; to publish their data and conclusions without control or censorship; and to teach in the manner they consider professionally appropriate. For students, the basic elements include the freedom to study subjects that concern them and to form conclusions for themselves and express their opinions.”¹⁰ Moreover, even a quick glance at the scholarly literature that deals with the state of affairs in modern universities and academic freedom in general shows that the concerns are still accurate and vivid.¹¹ It seems that the mechanisms for curtailment of academic freedom become more sophisticated across the world. As argued by Jay Schalin, “the right to seek truth, wherever the investigation may lead, has come to be known in higher education as academic freedom. But it can mean different things to different people”.¹²

The concept of academic freedom and university autonomy came rather late, i.e. centuries after the establishment of the first universities. It took some time to figure out that with no codification of the freedom of the members of the academic community from any reprisals, the existence of the university as such is meaningless. The history of academic freedom, or better the struggle to gain freedom of the university from the church or state control precedes the history of the concept

¹⁰ See: *Encyclopedia Britannica*, “Academic freedom”. For an article that tends to be scholarly, the encyclopedias (including the esteemed Britannica) may not be worthy references, but here we cite this source with a sole intention to display the elementarity of the concept and related principles, which are blatantly violated in the researched case.

¹¹ For instance: Johansen, Silenced!; Nelson, *No University Is an Island*..

¹² Schalin, *Academic Freedom*, p. 5.

itself. Having been upgraded and redefined throughout centuries, it is now one of the key pillars of modern university.

One of the most significant international documents in this sphere is the 1997 UNESCO *Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel*.¹³ Even though with no mandatory legal force, the included definitions and principles bear huge academic and moral weight. For instance, the Recommendation expresses “concern regarding the vulnerability of the academic community to untoward political pressures which could undermine academic freedom” and considers “the right to education, teaching and research can only be fully enjoyed in an atmosphere of academic freedom and autonomy for institutions of higher education and that the open communication of findings, hypotheses and opinions lies at the very heart of higher education”, but also that “right to education, teaching and research can only be fully enjoyed in an atmosphere of academic freedom and autonomy for institutions of higher education”. Furthermore, it states that “the open communication of findings, hypotheses and opinions lies at the very heart of higher education and provides the strongest guarantee of the accuracy and objectivity of scholarship and research”.¹⁴

In a similar spirit, the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada issued Statement on Academic Freedom in 2011, which stresses the importance of academic freedom for society: “Academic freedom is essential to the role of universities in a democratic society. Universities are committed to the pursuit of truth and its communication to others, including students and the broader community. To do this, faculty must be free to take intellectual risks and tackle controversial subjects in their teaching, research and scholarship. Academic freedom is constrained by the professional standards of the relevant discipline and the responsibility of the institution to organize its academic mission. The insistence on professional standards speaks to the rigour of the enquiry and not to its outcome.”¹⁵

Aside from the legal and other declaratory principles, one should keep in mind the relationship between science (scholarly research) and politics/power. According to one of the wide-spread myths, science is genuine only when absolutely objective, i.e. intrinsically tied to facts and truth. This premise certainly has immense significance for the natural and technical sciences, but the position of social and humanistic sciences is rather specific.¹⁶ With no intention of going into further elaboration of this thesis, the main intention here is to point out the exceptionally relevant position of critical studies. Namely, the foundations of this school of thought are laid out by Robert Cox and his maxim that “theory is always for someone and for some purpose”.¹⁷ In other words, even when deeply committed

¹³ UNESCO, *Recommendation concerning the Status*.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Statement on Academic Freedom*.

¹⁶ It is not unusual in the mutual debates of scholars from social sciences and humanities with the ones from natural sciences to hear a thesis that their work is hardly scientific, they can hardly anticipate any historical event and that their research methodology is not rigorous enough, predictions are impossible, etc.

¹⁷ Cox, “Social Forces, States and World Orders”.

and convinced that their work is led by the search for objective truth, scholars often forget that they are also a product of a certain value laden educational system and societal influences from their working and living environment. Martin Luther King maintained that we are not the creators of history; we are created by history. The same applies to historians and researchers in social & humanistic sciences with respect to the institutional milieu in which they work. The relations of power in society set and determine the ambiance in which one becomes a scholar/researcher, goes up through the ranks and publishes their findings. Bearing in mind that theory immanently bears a normative dimension and serves a purpose, it is practically impossible to get to an absolutely objective theory of social life and history. Some radical thinkers such as Howard Zinn, the author of *A People's History of the US*,¹⁸ used to argue that one cannot remain neutral in a moving train (i.e. a train that runs into an abyss). Consequently, a scholar is often driven to go against the mainstream, to protest against the "objectification" of history based on a selection of historical facts and their interpretation in a way that fits an official narrative. A critical thinker deconstructs the narratives, and, by doing so, displays the power relations and hidden agendas.

Conventional thinking has it that academic freedom (teaching and research) are firmly guaranteed (only) in developed democracies: the more mature a democracy, the more developed is the science and freer the critique of political decisions. But the essential issue here is: Who has the power to determine what democracy is and what it is not, i.e. the very definition-making is a relation of power *per se*. It is usual to look at science as a corrector of politics but also as a driving force of societal development, i.e. the production force in a constantly developing society. However, reality often de-romanticizes this version of the link between democracy and academic work and freedom. For instance, there is a network for support of scholars at risk, as well as methodologies for measuring the level of academic freedom in various countries, etc. Yet the risks are seen merely in non-democracies, while risks and perils are detected only in those parts of the world that are proscribed by democratic political and security forums. The number of brave and outspoken scholars who analyse the academia and education from the position of critical pedagogy is extremely small. For instance, Henry Giroux argues that neoliberal capitalism has a disastrous effect on the education, young people and entire societies. He points out that the university is in chains made by the military-industrial complex. Under such circumstances the understanding of university as a free and democratic public sphere is practically curtailed through the repression of state power and militaristic ideology.¹⁹ He argues that higher education is one of the most important spheres in which the struggle for democracy is taking place. Long before him, the poet and professor Gerald Stern considered universities as bastions of corporate power, i.e. of power that is displaced out of the political institutions.²⁰ The Swedish scholar who voluntarily left academia in order to preserve freedom

¹⁸ Zinn, *A People's History*.

¹⁹ Giroux, *The University in Chains*.

²⁰ Quoted by Hedges, "Death of an Oracle".

of speech and thought Jan Oberg, argues that the problem is far more complex. Instead of referring to the military-industrial complex, he suggests a new concept (and acronym) – MIMAC, *Military Industrial Media Academia Complex*. When it comes to the status of professors and researchers, the growing number of those that have been stigmatized and cancelled is a worrisome indicator all over the world. Obviously, the most targeted and most vulnerable ones come from the realm of social sciences and humanities.

Academic research and teaching are closely linked to the education in general, particularly due to the fact that university produces cadres – i.e. teachers for the entire educational system, which then has huge influence on children in their formative years. These spheres are extremely important for any state power; consequently political elites insist on having control over both. In certain situations, when it is convenient, the government officials represent the scholarly legitimacy and credibility as unquestionable and call upon scholars' findings in certain areas (*argumentum ad verecundiam* or *argumentum magister dixit*). Therefore, politicians try to create their circle of reliable scholars who would offer the 'academic' explication of their politics. The migration from the academic to the political realm (and vice versa) is quite often a phenomenon of imperfect democracies.²¹ Philosophy of captive minds and ketmanism have left the narrow narrative of authoritarian 'communist' societies, as described by Czesław Miłosz, Milan Kundera, and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn.²²

The contemporary captive minds in the so-called Western Balkans, including those in academia, cherish a belief in a mantra (or maybe secular religion) that knows nothing beyond the wish to 'become a part of the West' i.e. to join NATO and EU. Such a position is in line with the existent (Western-based) geopolitics of knowledge but also with the power centres (within and outside the country). Walter Mignolo rightly points out to epistemic racism, which is "built on classifications and hierarchies carried out by actors installed in institutions they have themselves created or inherited the right to classify and rank."²³ The same applies to the Balkans, where the ones who classify and rank have become subjects that are classified and ranked as those with inferior knowledge (about history, human rights, democracy, etc. Mignolo concludes that coloniality, not just colonization, has a long history; it was not just brute force that made all of this possible. It was the control of knowledge that justified the demonization and dehumanization of people, civilizations, cultures and territories.²⁴ The democratization process has begun with the infantilization of the current academic and expert social capital, which consequently –through the education and soft power mechanisms– helped create the so-called brown sahibs.²⁵ Unlike the traditional captive intellectuals and

²¹ According to the Macedonian legislative, the holders of public/political offices are allowed to continue their work at the university during their mandateterm.

²² Tony Judt described brilliantly the contemporary 'captive minds' that exist both in the East and the West. Judt, "Captive Minds, Then and Now".

²³ Mignolo, "Foreword: Yes, we can!", p. 16.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24.

²⁵ The notion of 'brown sahibs' in the Macedonian public discourse was introduced by Igor Radev. It now serves as a metaphor for all those who are fanatically devoted to the West

professors who keep close to the national political elite because of self-interest and personal security, their modern-day counterparts are often a part of compradorial elites, i.e. have external masters to obey and worship.

The global developments of the last 30 plus years have a similar reflection on the local levels, where regional imperialisms confront each other. Kulačkova detects this phenomenon in the Balkans, and particularly with respect to Macedonia, ever since the Ottoman empire's fall gave rise to regional colonialisms.²⁶ This situation perpetuates up to date as the Republic of Macedonia seems torn between the appeasement of the West and the (not quite European) demands of its neighbours.²⁷ The aspirations of the West and regional actors are only seemingly contradictory. In fact, on the higher level the European integration is depicted as a value that calls for and is worth of self-sacrifice of one's identity, while on a regional level it gets a primitive outlook of the Balkan national-chauvinism. The same applies to knowledge production and academic research that is subdued to the higher geopolitical goals.

3. The Macedonian academic thought in the constraints of geopolitics. Is historical science possible?

The developmental trajectory of Macedonian historiography and historical science follows that of statehood. Henry Kissinger's thought that history is but memory of states²⁸ can be applied here, especially when the statehood traditions are not long and the neighboring states have 'longer memories' established as official histories. The criticism of the Macedonian historiography's quality, its oscillations and deviations have been discussed widely.²⁹ The decline and the challenges of academic research are equally visible and debatable in many other academic fields, but history is the focal point because of reasons that have nothing to do with science and critical thought. In short, historical science in Macedonia is situated in a *de facto* political process of nation- and state-building by external factors, particularly since 2017. It is also worth mentioning that nation-building in Europe has always involved the phenomenon of the instrumentalization of historiography, so at glance there is nothing unique in the post-communist states' (re)building, including the

and hysterically hate everything that is 'indigenous'. He argues: "The phenomenon of 'brown sahibism' here, but also elsewhere, cannot be applied to entire societies, even less so to a psychological phenomenon. In essence, it is a (quasi) religious phenomenon. To fully grasp how it works, one should first figure out how to see things through the eyes of 'brown sahibs', to embrace at least temporarily, their worldview. Hence, they see the vision of the almighty, all-perfect and all-moral West, which possesses the monopoly to define what is true, good and beautiful". See: Радев, „Кафеавите сахиби“.

²⁶ Kulačkova, "From Cultural to Political Hegemonism".

²⁷ Vankovska, "A (Not Quite) Friendly Treaty".

²⁸ Kissinger, *A World Restored*, p. 331.

²⁹ One of the most esteemed critics in the Macedonian academic community is the historian Nade Proeva. On more than one occasion she has denounced the misuse of history by political elites, but also in the academic publishing business that embraces quasi-historians and gives them an aureole of scholars. See for instance: Проева, *Триптих за македонскиот идентитет*; Проева, „За (зло)употребата на историската наука“.

Republic of Macedonia.³⁰ With no intention to go further into a qualitative analysis of the Macedonian historical science, the aim of this article is to test if history has had the same treatment as other scholarly disciplines now that the two bilateral agreements with Bulgaria and Greece are in force.

The Macedonian Constitution has established the principle of university autonomy and freedom of scientific research since 1991. The inherent link of academia and politics has already been discussed, so now it is necessary to add that legal regulative is often ineffectual to really frame the politics within its own realm. Academic freedom and research are issues that depend on ethics and academic (as well as personal) integrity. It is indicative that the Macedonian academic community has seldom reacted to political and legal reforms that were about to curtail academic freedoms.³¹ A much larger number of cases bear witness to the silence and complete submission of the academic community to politics. In the light of this phenomenon, it would probably be better to ask if scholarly work of high standards is even possible in such conditions. Only then one could embark to the question of historical science that has been overtly sacrificed on the altar of European integrations (i.e. international and regional politics).

The aforementioned bilateral agreements with Bulgaria and Greece have situated the historical science in a most unenviable position, worse than any other academic field. The crux of the problem with the Bulgarian agreement is the undefined notion of “common history” (enshrined in the Treaty’s preamble), which is differently interpreted and understood not only by the two political elites but also by the scholars involved in its implementation.³² The comparison of the wording used in the Treaty’s translation into English³³ (by the UN Secretariat) and the two languages in which the document was originally signed (Bulgarian and Macedonian) indicates a serious problem. The UN (unofficial translation) refers to the “common history” in the Treaty’s preamble, but the unofficial translation in English published by the Macedonian Foreign Ministry uses the term ‘shared’. In the original document, the Bulgarian term reads “общата история”, while in the Macedonian language it reads “заедничката историја”. In practice and in the public discourse, the mostly used term is “shared history” in a rather inconsistent manner. Even if the term “common history” is taken as valid, it does not make the understanding of both sides easier. The Bulgarian side usually refers to this notion by stressing the historical turning point (i.e. ‘until 1944’) in order to legitimize the idea that the Macedonian nation was created in 1944, i.e. that prior to that Macedonia and Bulgaria had a “common history” (meaning, Bulgarian history). The response by the Macedonian side is given by two members of the so-called historical commission, who argue that “we can speak about common history in certain historic periods, but also of shared or intertwined history – but not only

³⁰ Stefan Berger and Chris Lorenz (eds.), *The Contested Nation*.

³¹ Vankovska, “The Chimera of Colorful Revolution”.

³² Trajanovski, “Bulgarian-North Macedonia’s history-dispute”; Ristevska Jordanova and Kacarska, *EU - North Macedonia accession negotiations*.

³³ *UN Treaties*, No. 55013.

with Bulgaria”.³⁴ This shows that the treaty is based on unresolved conceptual and methodological issues, which had not been discussed by the professional historians prior to the 2017 signing ceremony. However, it also shows that professional historians accepted to get engaged by their governments to implement the Treaty consequently, i.e. to play by the politicians’ rules rather than by the academic ones.

Article 8, Paragraph 2 of the Treaty reads: “With a view to strengthening their mutual trust, within three months at the latest from the entry into force of this Treaty, the two Contracting Parties shall establish, on parity basis, a Joint Multidisciplinary Expert Commission for Historical and Education Issues, aiming to contribute to objective, scientific interpretation of historical events, founded on authentic and evidence-based historical sources. The Commission shall submit an annual report about its work to the Governments of the two Contracting Parties.”³⁵ This provision demonstrates that the two states indeed agreed to establish a body (commission) on historical and educational issues but they only agreed on the parity of the members from each side. The selection and competence of the Commission’s members is left for each contracting party to decide at will. The analysis of the academic credentials and competence of the Commission’s members gives a rather interesting comparison in terms of academic (and political) background, age, gender, etc. On one occasion the Macedonian foreign minister insisted on including a member (as a replacement for another) only because of his ethnic (Albanian) origin.³⁶

³⁴ Ѓоргиев и Тодоров, „Македонско-бугарскиот спор“.

³⁵ In this context it is interesting to make a review of the content of the rather more extensive Prespa agreement. Article 8, Paragraph para 5 reads: “Within one month of the signing of this Agreement, the Parties shall establish by exchange of diplomatic notes, on a parity basis, a Joint Inter-Disciplinary Committee of Experts on historic, archaeological and educational matters, to consider the objective, scientific interpretation of historical events based on authentic, evidence-based and scientifically sound historical sources and archaeological findings. The Committee’s work shall be supervised by the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of the Parties in cooperation with other competent national authorities. It shall consider and, if it deems appropriate, revise any school textbooks and school auxiliary material such as maps, historical atlases, teaching guides, in use in each of the Parties, in accordance with the principles and aims of UNESCO and the Council of Europe. To that effect, the Committee shall set specific timetables so as to ensure in each of the Parties that no school textbooks or school auxiliary material in use the year after the signing of this Agreement contains any irredentist/revisionist references. The Committee shall also study any new editions of school textbooks and school auxiliary material as provided for under this Article. The Committee shall convene regularly, at least twice a year, and shall submit an Annual Report on its activities and recommendations to be approved by the High-Level Cooperation Council, as to be established pursuant to Article 12.” Even though more comprehensive than the one in the Treaty with Bulgaria, this provision clearly demonstrates the political intrusion into the freedom of academic research in history. The only difference is that the Greek side insists on the distinction between the two histories (as seen by Athens), while the Bulgarian one sees symbiosis in the so-called common history.

³⁶ *360 cmenenu*, „Исамедин Азизи од ИНИ“. In a statement for the media, minister Bujar Osmani said that he “insists that the Commission includes an Albanian as its member”, because according to him “this is a joint struggle, so the common engagement over this issue will bring us closely together very much”. In other words, an assistant professor with no academic affirmation was included because of his ethnic belonging rather than academic criteria and the Commission’s mission and needs.

An analysis of the composition of the Commission shows that it is the result of political will and the application of political criteria, not scientific ones. In fact, some of the most eminent historians dealing with the periods relevant to the 'common history' between the two states publicly said that they had refused the invitation to join a body made up by politicians and which is accountable for its work to the authorities. On several occasions, there were personnel changes on the Macedonian side, which was little discussed in public. The biggest storm, however, was caused by the resignation of one member, who explained his act by pointing out the direct interference of the foreign minister in the work of the Commission, as well as direct threats addressed to him.³⁷ Another member complained that the Bulgarian side was instrumentalised the Commission as a "means of political pressure on Macedonia", because of which it will not be able to achieve any results.³⁸

Although the Macedonian public mainly focuses on the media statements of the members of the Commission, whose co-chairman is a member of the Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts and often presents contradictory theses in an attempt to reconcile historical science with political goals, the essence lies in the fact that Macedonia signed an asymmetric agreement. It has accepted a subordinate position and the existence of an undefined 'common history', with a neighbor who does not hide its hegemonic aims. Furthermore, as indicated by the content of the said provision, two states directly invade the autonomy and freedom of academic creativity – on one side, the signatory. Thus there is no place for either astonishment or indignation, especially from those who have accepted to work under state patronage and for high fees. From the onset, the Commission's members renounced their academic freedom and principles, which is also visible in the careful, reserved, even diplomatic way of communicating with the public. Through their work, historical science and knowledge have become hostage to an agreement between two states. A former member of the Commission argued that "during the work there was a different intensity of discussion, but everything fell within the framework of a normal scientific debate".³⁹ Indeed, for cosmetic reasons, the corresponding article of the Treaty refers to "objective, scientific interpretation of historical events, founded on authentic and evidence-based historical sources", but normal academic debate is hardly ever organized behind closed doors. Additionally, it is not usual to insist on consensus and on a decision-making process because divergent positions and interpretations are the essence of free academic thought. It seems that the members of the Commission (former and present) are trying to square two irreconcilable things – the scientific thought and power politics – through an Orwellian doublethink.

³⁷ Дојче Веле, „Оставка и обвинувања“.

³⁸ Слободен печат, „ИНТЕРВЈУ Огнен Вангелов“.

³⁹ Павловска, „Историската' комисија нема мандат“.

4. The bilateral protocols of July 2022 – the hydra of the Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighborliness and Cooperation

The imprecision of the short and ambivalent text of the Treaty with Bulgaria left room for various interpretations, equally by politicians and experts. But very soon it became clear that Bulgaria uses the treaty just as a starting platform for realizing its state (and nationalist) goals, as expressed by several state and scientific institutions. Even before the election of Kiril Petkov's government and his first meeting with his Macedonian counterpart in early 2022, there had already been rumors about an eventual upgrade of the treaty through an annex or in another appropriate form. While the pundits still speculated about the possible content and form of this act, a new political blackmail for the opening of the EU membership negotiations came on the agenda. This time it appeared undercover, dressed in European clothes and wording of the French presidency. In his statement from November 2022, the Macedonian Prime Minister Kovačevski publicly admitted that "historical issues are part of the work of the historical Commission and this is very clearly stated in the negotiation framework".⁴⁰ In other words, for the integration in the EU, the historical (identity) issues are at least as important as the Copenhagen criteria, if not more important. Behind the former there is an open threat of a veto from a member state. In that way the Balkan primitive nationalism and regional imperialism received de facto not only European support, but also a European form.

The bilateral protocol of the second meeting of the joint intergovernmental commission with Bulgaria from 17 July 2022 exposed the secrecy over the work of the historical Commission in the period since June 2019. After some delay and public pressure, its content was finally made public by the Macedonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.⁴¹ The huge public dissatisfaction exploded in a form of mass protests ahead of the adoption of the Government's proposal in the parliament. The government de facto accepted the so-called French package (negotiation framework), which basically incorporated all Bulgarian demands. Here, understandably, we dwell only on what concerns historical issues and academic freedom in historical sciences. After all, if one reads the protocol carefully, the conclusion is self-imposed: the essence and purpose is precisely in the identity (historical and educational) requirements of the Bulgarian side.⁴²

The most important finding of the analysis is related to the unconcealed pressure in the form of deadlines set by the state authorities. Hence the Commission is encouraged by the two Governments to "activate its activities and achieve clear results, greater effectiveness and concrete results"⁴³, which would then be immediately incorporated

⁴⁰ МИА, „Зедничката историска комисија“.

⁴¹ *Протокол од вториот состанок.*

⁴² The historian Katerina Todoroska offers a lucid and comprehensive content analysis in a series of columns. See more: „Пред и после Протоколот“, (part 1-6).

⁴³ The quoted conclusion from the Second Protocol is from the Bulgarian (unofficial) translation as posted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Macedonian ministry has published only the Macedonian version of the text, which in this particular context reads „Двете држави ја охрабруваат Комисијата да ја забрза својата работа и да се постигнат јасни резултати“.

into the textbooks and aids for the educational process. It is ironic when signatory ministers mandate “rigorously scientific debate and with the aim of presenting facts and events of the common history” on individuals in a rather ‘hermaphroditic’ position of political appointees and scholars. The very fact that the Protocol decrees that the results of the Commission’s work be continuously incorporated into the educational materials makes it clear that the authors of textbooks (will) work by order of the state instead of by the demand to incorporate scientific knowledge and methodology. Furthermore, the Protocol of July 2022 is work in progress or rather an unfinished story, since it envisages continuous tasks for the Macedonian educational and other authorities (including the constitution-making power).

The Protocol provides for the supervision of the state institutions on the process of textbooks revision and submitting reports to the Bulgarian side in case of any changes. It also includes informing it about all cases of alleged hate speech used in the textbooks and public institutions. It is nothing but a euphemism for the prohibition of critical observation of the Treaty, its implementation and the conclusions of the Commission. Equally important (and very similar to the provisions of the Prespa Agreement) is the restriction of state funding of “new books, periodicals, films and other artistic production” to only those authors and artists who will work in the spirit of the 2017 Treaty.⁴⁴ It is not very skillfully hidden state censorship on all creative activities and spheres, especially if one knows how important the state budget support is for authors’ and artists’ survival in a poor country. If the Treaty was assumed to be asymmetric (i.e. to provide obligations for only one of the signatory parties), the Protocol now confirms it in a very concrete way. From the perspective of state and people’s sovereignty, the request to alter the Constitution as a condition for opening negotiations with the EU is the peak of Bulgarian hegemony and interference in the internal affairs of the Macedonian state.

The members of the Commission and their recommendations are justifiably criticized by their colleagues, scientists, and especially historians. For instance, Nataša Kotlar argues that “they are illegitimate, not even all of them are historians by profession! Hence, their actions and decisions are controversial and non-binding for scientific thought, as well as for the general public.”⁴⁵ Similarly, Mitko Panov will hit the core of the work of the historical commission: “Through the bilateral protocols, the few members of the commission turn into censors of the historical narrative and judges who will determine what ‘historical truth’ is and that will be validated by the Government rather than by the Macedonian academia. With the

It could be translated in the following way: “Both states encourage the Commission to Commission to speed up its work and to achieve clear results.”

⁴⁴ The original provision reads: “Both countries shall ensure that public funding of new books, documentaries and magazines, films and other artistic production, cultural monuments and celebrations will be carried out in the spirit of the Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighbourliness and Cooperation, and in this context any entity funded from the state, will confirm in an explicit and binding statement that it will monitor with the necessary attention the issue of not allowing any forms of hate speech and failure to comply with this obligation will constitute grounds for suspension and recovery by the subject of the granted state funding.”

⁴⁵ *Инфомакс*, „Котлар за членовите на историската комисија“.

recommendations, in essence, the Commission completely denies the achievements of Macedonian historiography, while assuming the role of creator of the historical narrative, defining what, how and in what way will be taught in primary, secondary, and I assume in higher education. It is in complete contradiction to scientific and academic principles, which reduces the commission's work to absurdity."⁴⁶

In an institutional response to the Bilateral Protocols as of 25 July 2022, the Council of the Institute for National History pointed out their perniciousness in the light of the provisions of the Law on Scientific Research. Namely, it referred to Article 3, which guarantees the principles of freedom and autonomy of research and creative work, connectedness with the educational system, ethical principles, inviolability and protection of the person and human dignity, diversity of opinions, methods, theories and doctrines".⁴⁷ It is a rather paradoxical situation in which the highest scientific body of the Institute takes a stand contrary to the one of the director of the same institution, Dragi Gjorgiev, who is a co-chair of the Commission. Bearing in mind his full membership in the Macedonian Academy, there are clear indications for one more fracture. Namely, MANU's president Ljupčo Kocarev is a vocal opponent of the Commission's work and one of the most esteemed critics of the two agreements.⁴⁸ The situation within the Institute of History (Faculty of Philosophy at Ss. Cyril and Methodius University), as well as the Association of historians in Macedonia does not differ much: the common denominator is a sharp internal rupture over the freedom of academic work and imposed narrative by Bulgaria. Obviously the historians that are closer to power circles have greater ability to dominate the public narrative (through the media), as well as to change the history textbooks and educational system.

Over a hundred scientific workers (predominantly historians) again got together in order to make their dissent heard in August 2022, on the occasion of the publication of the "Recommendations for joint commemoration of historical figures"⁴⁹. They emphasized the ongoing politicization of science through the work of the Commission. The proclamation calls upon "the ethical codes of the academic community, modern scientific methods and paradigms, the autonomy of scientific research activity, as well as the integrity of the Macedonian social, humanistic and historical sciences". According to the signatories, the recommendations not only interpret but also revise the Macedonian and regional Balkan history in a way that bears a political pretext, wherefore they deviate from the principle of scientificity and ethics; promote a method of arbitrary and biased interpretation of historical facts, persons, events and processes that are significant for many peoples, cultures, states and eras; deviate from established scientific knowledge in Macedonian studies, Slavic studies and Balkan studies".⁵⁰

⁴⁶ *Трилинг*, „Историчарот Митко Панов“.

⁴⁷ *Pressing TV*, „За Советот на ИНИ“.

⁴⁸ Коцарев, *За македонските работи*; Дојче Веле, „Коцарев ги критикува договорите со Бугарија и Грција“.

⁴⁹ *Препораки*.

⁵⁰ *Нова Македонија*, „Препораките на заедничката комисија“.

Expectedly, the alleged independence of the Commission is defended by the political establishment, i.e. those who select and appoint its members. According to Prime Minister Kovačevski, “it works independently, and that was the goal – historians should deal with history, and politicians with politics”.⁵¹

5. Conclusion

The close ties between historical science and the political “Us” is immanent and indisputable for all peoples and their political communities. As a Macedonian philosopher from the younger generation rightly puts it, “the political ‘Us’ has a natural urge for self-legitimization. History is the discipline of legitimation. It is about its ideological nature. To be legitimate, to have meaning – it means a story to be told about you, to be historicized, to be named. That is why the name and the story is the very authority of the political ‘Us’.”⁵² It is exactly the right that was taken away from the Republic of Macedonia, and particularly from the ethnic Macedonians as its key constitutive group. In other words, de-Macedonianization is in the essence of the nationalist demands of two neighbours.

Geopolitical constellation, but also the power relations in the West (i.e. the desired destination of the Macedonian state, which is also seen as a necessity by the Western powers) has led to an alleged closing down of a puzzle, i.e. the Macedonian Question. It has been done through persuasion and pressures exerted on the weaker side in the equation, with a simple goal of embracing the country (primarily) into NATO in the wake of a changing multipolar international order.⁵³ Thus, in the name of certain greater values (which are missing in this European periphery, or better the periphery of the periphery), the Western sponsors of the domestic elites have sacrificed, inter alia, the right of free historical/scientific thinking and production. As already specified, this right is increasingly derogated in Western democracies, so the Macedonian case is not only an exception. However, because of the lack of any libertarian and strong scientific traditions, it has become a field for imposing postmodernism. Anyone seeking to challenge this endeavour or to demand equal treatment from Western counterparts/power centres is considered an enemy of Western democracy and the European idea. In short, they are easily labelled as a primitive nationalist who should be cancelled.

In the imposition of the Agreement with Bulgaria, and especially the Agreement with Greece, the western academic community took an active part, in cooperation with the domestic brown sahibs. For example, encouraged by local professors close to power circles, a group of eminent foreign professors came out with the view that “the Prespa Agreement must be honoured”⁵⁴. Their open letter was published months before the Macedonian citizens expressed their will on a referendum (held in September 2018). Furthermore, the opponents of the Prespa Agreement were

⁵¹ *MIA*, *ibid.*

⁵² Карацов, „Размакедончување или за постоењето“.

⁵³ Vankovska, “Geopolitics of the Prespa Agreement”.

⁵⁴ *The Guardian*, “Historic deal”.

named “hardliners and extremists”. As soon as the public resistance was broken in 2018/2019 and sealed by changing the Constitution, it was time to implement the Treaty with Bulgaria. In the context of this dispute, which does not receive much media coverage or arouse interest among the Western academic public, individual critical positions of some Bulgarian historians or political scientists appear sporadically. More importantly, the relations between the two countries have never been in worse condition if public opinion polls are to be trusted. At the end of the day, instead of promoting cooperation and good neighbourly relations, the Treaty de facto created an irreconcilable gap between the two countries, but even more so within the Macedonian society, which is already divided along the Macedonian-Albanian ethnic lines.⁵⁵

The inherent division of society, the splits that go along the ethnic and ideological-political lines, are directly reflected on the university. What is evident is the significance of the question of the marriage of interest between politics and academia in the past periods of the country’s political history. Without much resistance, the academic community maintains close ties with the political centres of power, on which it depends both financially and on the basis of granting privileges that go to a limited number of members of that community. They de facto take the right to speak not only on behalf of their colleagues but also of the entire society, mostly through media and by giving legitimacy to the inept political elites.

Seen through the prism of the nation- and state building process, in the thirty-year period one turning point can be observed: from an attempt of internal modelling of the nation by glorifying certain periods of history (primarily in the form of *anticomania*, as Proeva calls period under Greuvski’s rule)⁵⁶ to going to the other extreme, i.e. national engineering by external (neighbouring or, more broadly, European) powers. The new nation under construction is hardly possible to be called Macedonian but rather North-Macedonian, whatever that means. The stumbling block – as observed by external state builders and their internal partners – is precisely history. The well-founded criticism of the misuse of historical science for political purposes has turned into an uncritical apologetic of the similar misuse of history for political and nationalist purposes by other international subjects. Historians also directly participate in this endeavour, which speaks of the deep split within a part of the broader scientific and academic community that deals with historical issues. In his article Dalibor Jovanovski suggests overcoming the gap by more cooperative endeavours between the historians and non-historians, especially when it comes to history textbooks for elementary education. Having agreed that the Macedonian textbooks are often of poor quality (due to the factual mistakes and ethnocentric

⁵⁵ In a recent interview, one member of the Commission testified about such a gap inside the body, which makes its work impossible. Petar Todorov says: “As for the colleagues from Sofia are concerned, one could see that their ideas and proposals for recommendations are based on an interpretation of the past through a nationalistic prism, which is dominant in Bulgaria. That, in fact, is one of the sources of the problems that exist between the two countries. That approach cannot overcome the current problems for which this Commission was established.” (*Призма*, „Интервју со членот на историската комисија“).

⁵⁶ Proeva, “Savremeni makedonski mit”, p. 199.

approach), he also warns his colleagues: “We cannot stay on the current curricula and the textbooks that are both outdated and not of very good quality, but we can’t, I am not saying we must not, be the vanguard in relation to the neighbors there is clearly no place for us in their educational programmes. It is already clear to all of us that the Franco-German concept, which has hardly given half-hearted results, or the Polish-German one, do not go well with our neighbours.”⁵⁷

The scientific, and more widely, the intellectual community, sought on several occasions to position itself as the conscience of society and the voice of reason, but unfortunately failed due to internal fragmentation and impatience. In the end, the question is whether it is even possible to talk about “science” and “community” in the Macedonian context. Furthermore, the scientific community is only a reflection of the hard social conditions, not a vanguard. The examples of co-opting members of the historical-educational Commission speak volumes about the non-existence of a moral vertical. The proximity to the political centres of power, as well as the promises of some proximity to the developed European environments, blunts the edge of critical thought, not only in historical science, but also much more widely.

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⁵⁷ Јовановски, „Погледи и размислувања“, p. 148.

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POVZETEK

Zgodovinska znanost v verigah: Vpliv dvostranskega sporazuma med Skopjem in Sofijo na svobodo akademskega dela

Biljana Vankovska

Dvostranska sporazuma, podpisana med makedonsko vlado ter sosednjima Bolgarijo (leta 2017) in Grčijo (leta 2018), naj bi zaključila desetletja trajajoče regionalne spore. Paradoksalno je, da so domnevni veliki uspehi evropske in nacionalne diplomacije vse do uradnega podpisa ostali dobro skrita skrivnost za makedonsko splošno in strokovno javnost. Nič čudnega, da so pritegnili veliko akademsko zanimanje šele *ex post facto*.

Na prvi pogled se zdi, kot da sta obe strani (bolgarska in makedonska) uporabili enake metode zagotavljanja javne legitimnosti za svoja dejanja, torej z zanašanjem na domnevno znanstveno oceno. Ključna razlika je v tem, da je bila makedonska stran v pogajanjih ves čas v asimetričnem razmerju moči z državami, ki bi v EU (in NATO) vedno lahko uporabile pravico veta. Odvisnost akademskih krogov od centrov politične moči (v tujini in/ali doma) ni nov pojav. Gre bolj za rezultat desetletja trajajočega procesa instrumentalizacije znanosti za politične cilje (ali bolje, avtoriteto in verodostojnost, ki naj bi bila privzeto povezana z akademskimi nazivi – princip ipse dixit). Zato bi o avtonomiji univerze in svobodi raziskovanja – načelih, ki nikoli nista bili povsem razumljeni in uresničeni – težko sploh govorili.

Institucionalizacija ‘poroke iz koristoljublja’ med politično oblastjo in akademskim svetom v zgoraj omenjenih dveh primerih (na relaciji Atene – Skopje in Sofija – Skopje) je dobila zagon z uveljavitvijo obeh bilateralnih sporazumov, predvsem pa z vzpostavitvijo meddržavne/medvladne strokovne komisije za zgodovinska in druga vprašanja. Čeprav si oba zaslužita enako pozornost in analizo, so v članku podrobneje osvetljene posledice, ki izhajajo iz Sporazuma o prijateljstvu, dobrososedskih odnosih in sodelovanju. Ključni razlog je v tem, da je ‘kreativno branje’ dokaj nejasnega in ambivalentnega besedila sporazuma pripeljalo do tako imenovanih bilateralnih protokolov, ki so zdaj del pogajalskega okvira EU za pristopni proces Makedonije.

Tako so julija 2022 določbe Sporazuma iz leta 2017 prerasle bilateralni državni kontekst in postale del paketa pogojev EU, naloženega eni od držav s statusom kandidatke za članstvo. Sprejemanje teh identitetnih zahtev, ki so zelo povezane z razumevanjem in poučevanjem zgodovine s strani vlade in parlamenta, je sprožilo buren odziv javnosti. Precejšen del akademske skupnosti (predvsem zgodovinarji) se je znova odzval z izjavami v medijih, uradnimi objavami, javnimi razpravami, kolumnami ipd. Kritika je imela širši fokus, saj je opozarjala na različne vidike vsebine dvostranskih protokolov, a zgodovina je bila kot humanistična znanost vedno v njenem središču.

Ključni fokus prispevka je nekoliko drugačen: poudarek v njem je na dokaj zapostavljenem vprašanju ustavno zagotovljenih svoboščin in pravic, predvsem svobode znanstvenega dela. Sporazum iz leta 2017 in bilateralni protokoli, ki so institucionalizirali tako imenovano zgodovinsko komisijo, so v neposrednem nasprotju z ustavnimi normami ter s splošno sprejetimi načeli in vrednotami, zapisanimi v temeljih akademske skupnosti/univerze. Ti dokumenti so le vrhunec dolgotrajnega procesa, vendar njihovi učinki močno presegajo zgodovinsko znanost in posegajo v splošno svobodo akademskega dela. Na koncu je zastavljeno še retorično vprašanje: ali je mogoče svobodno in neodvisno raziskovati, razvijati kritično mišljenje in deliti znanstvena dognanja, ki niso v skladu z uradno državno politiko?

Razvojna pot makedonskega zgodovinopisja in zgodovinske znanosti sledi državotvorni poti. Tukaj lahko uporabimo misel Henryja Kissingerja, da je zgodovina le spomin držav, zlasti kadar državotvorne tradicije niso dolge in imajo sosednje države ‘daljše spomine’, uveljavljene kot uradne zgodovine. Kritika kakovosti makedonskega zgodovinopisja, njegovih nihanj in stranpoti je bila široko obravnavana. Zaton in izzivi akademskega raziskovanja so enako vidni

in sporni tudi na številnih drugih akademskih področjih, vendar je zgodovina osrednja točka zaradi razlogov, ki nimajo nič opraviti z znanostjo in kritično mislijo. Skratka, zgodovinska znanost v Makedoniji je umeščena v de facto politični proces izgradnje nacije in države s strani zunanjih dejavnikov, zlasti od leta 2017. Omeniti velja tudi, da je gradnja nacije v Evropi vedno vključevala pojav instrumentalizacije zgodovinopisja, tako da na prvi pogled ni nič edinstvenega v (pre)izgradnji postkomunističnih držav, vključno z Republiko Makedonijo.

Omenjeni dvostranski sporazumi z Bolgarijo in Grčijo so zgodovinsko znanost postavili v nadvse nezavidljiv položaj, slabši od vseh drugih akademskih področij. Srž problema je nedefiniran pojem »skupne zgodovine« (zapisan v preambuli pogodbe), ki ga različno interpretirata in razumeta ne le obe politični eliti, temveč tudi strokovnjaki, ki sodelujejo pri njegovem izvajanju. Pogodba temelji na nerešenih konceptualnih in metodoloških vprašanjih, o katerih zgodovinarji pred njenim podpisom leta 2017 niso razpravljali. Vendar pa tudi kaže, da so poklicni zgodovinarji sprejeli sodelovanje svojih vlad, da bi dosledno izvajali pogodbo, torej da bi igrali po pravilih politikov in ne po akademskih. Državi sta se res dogovorili o ustanovitvi organa (komisije) za zgodovinska in izobraževalna vprašanja, vendar sta se dogovorili le o pariteti članov z obeh strani. Izbira in pristojnosti članov komisije je prepuščena vsaki pogodbeni stranki po lastni volji. Analiza sestave komisije kaže, da je ta rezultat politične volje in uporabe političnih meril, ne znanstvenih.

Skratka, makedonska stran je podpisala asimetrični sporazum. Sprejela je podrejen položaj in obstoj nedefinirane »skupne zgodovine« s sosedo, ki ne skriva svojih hegemonističnih ciljev. Poleg tega, kot navaja vsebina pogodbe, dve državi neposredno posegata v avtonomijo in svobodo akademskega raziskovanja in poučevanja. Člani komisije so se že na začetku odrekli akademski svobodi in načelnosti, kar se kaže tudi v previdnem, zadržanem, celo diplomatskem načinu komuniciranja z javnostjo. Z njihovim delom sta zgodovinska znanost in znanje postala talca dogovora med dvema državama.

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