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Research Article

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# “A Patriotic Act for Macedonia”: The Mnemohistory of Commemorations of Mara Buneva in Skopje (2001-2018)

Naum Trajanovski\*

Almost every year since 2001, on 13 January, a commemorative plaque dedicated to Mara Buneva is mounted and, on several occasions, demolished in the centre of Skopje. Buneva (1902-1928), who was affiliated with the rightist interwar Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation (Vnatrešna Makedonska Revolucionerna Organizacija, VMRO), is famous for her assassination of Velimir Prelić (1883-1928), a high-ranking representative of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (Kingdom SHS) on the territory of today's North Macedonia, as well as her immediate suicide at the crime-scene. The present paper aims to trace the so-called mnemohistory of commemorations of Mara Buneva in Skopje by triangulating the historical and media discourses and political rhetoric over the commemorative events from 2001 to 2018. I argue that the discursive shift over Mara Buneva, as well as over the commemorations themselves, occurred after a set of groupist claims over a particular memory site.

**Keywords:** North Macedonia, Bulgaria, Mara Buneva, mnemohistory, commemorations

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I conducted the pilot research for the present paper for my MA thesis which was successfully defended in 2015. I owe a debt of gratitude to the participants of the panel sessions and the organisers of the “Changing memoryscapes: Social (re)construction of places of memory” workshop (Zagreb, November 2017) and “Memory and Religion: Central and Eastern Europe in a Global Perspective” conference (Warsaw, October 2018), where parts of the paper were presented. I discuss some of the findings in my monograph on the Museum of the Macedonian Struggle (full title – in Macedonian – *Operacijata Muzej: Muzejot na makedonskata borba i makedonskata politika na sekavanje*, Skopje: Templum, 2020), while I also turn to the Buneva case-study in my chapter on the Macedonian Orthodox Church as a memory agent in today's North Macedonia (to be published in the “Memory and Religion” conference proceedings in early 2022). The transliteration from Macedonian and Bulgarian to the Latin alphabet is based on the standard ISO 9 system. All the translations in the text are mine, unless otherwise indicated. The state name of North Macedonia and the corresponding ethnic and national adjectives are rendered in accordance with the 2018 Greco-Macedonian Agreement. Any eventual shortcomings are solely my responsibility.

Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation (*Vnatrešna Makedonska Revolucionerna Organizacija*, VMRO) is famous for her assassination of Velimir Prelić (1883-1928), a high-ranking representative of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (Kingdom SHS) on the territory of today's North Macedonia, as well as her immediate suicide at the crime-scene. The plaque is set in the place where Buneva committed the assassination, on the right bank of the Vardar River, as the finale of the morning's commemorative ceremonies. Despite being of a partisan character, Skopje's annual one-day event provokes reactions throughout the Macedonian public: from expert debates to physical confrontations.<sup>2</sup> However, the most recent developments led to a peculiar turnout: Buneva has arguably trod the path from the subject of a counter-mnemonic practice to a national martyr, while her commemoration has turned from informal to formal recognition within the national martyrology.

The present paper aims to trace these dynamics as a mnemohistory of commemorations of Mara Buneva in Skopje: an event which, despite having acquired “privileged visibility”<sup>3</sup> on both national and regional levels, remains under-researched.<sup>4</sup> Herein, I argue that commemorations of Buneva, which occurred as a “media event” in their initial phase in the early 2000s, gradually became a platform for formatting a specific historical revisionist discourse.<sup>5</sup> To point out these developments, I trace the set of commemorative events as a *mnemohistory*, or a diachrony of public interpretations of a particular event: focusing not on the “past

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<sup>2</sup> The paper looks at the developments within the Macedonian setting. I wrote a paper in Macedonian on some of the bilateral aspects of commemorations of Buneva in 2015 titled *Komemoracijata na Mara Buneva vo Skopje*, verzija 2015: Diskurs analiza na makedonskite i bugarskite medium. *Politička misla* 13(49), 55-67.

<sup>3</sup> Bhabha, Homi K. 1990. *Introduction: Narrating the nation*, in *Nation and Narration*, edited by Bhabha, Homi K. London and New York: Routledge, 3.

<sup>4</sup> The politics of history-writing over Buneva is discussed in the subsequent chapters. At this point, it is worth mentioning the brief discussions on Buneva's assassination in: Todorovski, Zoran. 1998. *Vnatrešnata Makedonska Revolucionerna Organizacija 1924-1934*. Skopje: IP ROBZ; Andonovski, Veroljub. 2003. *Sto godini segašnost*. Skopje: Kultura; Ačkoska, Violeta and Nikola Žežov. 2004. *Predavstvata i atentatite vo makedonskata istorija*. Skopje: Makavej, 250-86; and Cvetanovski, Viktor. 2012. *VMRO Slava i Raskol*. Struga: IRIS, 291-309. For an overview of the Bulgarian debate on Mara Buneva, see Biliyarski, Tsocho. 2010. *Podvigat na Mara Buneva*. Sofia: Aniko; Gosheva, Ekaterina. 2008. *Mara Buneva: Zhivot i Delo*. Sofia: Izdanie na VMRO-SMD; and Simeonov, Nikolay. 2008. *Opit za vnasyane na nyakoi yasnoti za zhivota i deloto na Mara Buneva*, in *VMRO i Ivan Mihailov v zashtita na balgarshтинata*, edited by Nikolov, Ivan. Sofia: Izdatelstvo Sv. Kliment Ohridski, 103-11. A detailed yet biased chronicle on the assassination and its immediate reception can be found in Mihajlov's memoir: Mihailov, Ivan. 1967. *Spomeni. Osvoboditelnata borba 1924-1934, volume 3*. Louvaine: A. Rosseels Publishing, 363-77; Christowe, Stoyan. 1935. *Heroes and Assassins*. London: McBride & Company, and Swire, Joseph. 1939. *Bulgarian Conspiracy*. London: Robert Hale are some of the earliest scholarly accounts which mention Buneva's deed in English. Buneva's assassination is also mentioned in the classic: Kedourie, Elie. 1960. *Nationalism*. London: Hutchinson University Library, referring to Swire's version of the murder as an argument for the nationalist-driven psychological mechanisms. The assassination was recently adapted into two short stories by two Macedonian authors: Nikolova, Olivera. 2015. *Kadifenata pokrivka*. Skopje: Matica Makedonska, and Kitanoski, Mišo. 2020. *Prsten i parfem*. Skopje: Ars Libris.

<sup>5</sup> An overview of memory studies' treatment of “media events” can be found in Garde-Hansen, Joanne. 2011. *Media and Memory*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

as such,” but on “the past as it is remembered.”<sup>6</sup> The argument is also built upon Robin Wagner-Pacifici’s project of the “sociology of events” – a critical discourse which focuses on the *ongoingness of events*, or “the ways they are restless and the ways they are subject to continuing oscillations between bounding and unbounding as they extend in time and space.”<sup>7</sup> In practice, the stabilisation of these “intrinsically restless”<sup>8</sup> events in a discourse often occurs as a result of a specific set of activities by various social and political actors. Thus, this links with the underlying consensus in the literature on cultural memory that the commemorative events are “social and political” by definition.<sup>9</sup> In this paper, I reconstruct the set of eighteen commemorations of Buneva by triangulating the relevant historical and media discourses and the political rhetoric over the events (from 2001 to 2018).<sup>10</sup> I argue that the discursive shift over the historical figure of Mara Buneva, as well as the discursive shift over her commemorations, resulted after a set of groupist claims over a particular memory site.

## Prehistory

### *The assassination and its immediate reception*

In the wake of the First World War, the so-called “Macedonian Question” – a common *floskel* for approaching the contested claims over Macedonia throughout the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries – unfolded into a set of sub-questions concerning the territorial partition of Macedonia among the regional states (Greece, Bulgaria, and the Kingdom SHS) and the future of Macedonian national-activism.<sup>11</sup> “Vardar Macedonia” (*Vardarska Makedonija*), the northern Macedonian territory, became part of the post-Versailles Kingdom SHS; which in turn resulted in integrating the local population into the Serbian *ethnie*, as well as into the novel South-Slav (Yugoslav) *politie*.<sup>12</sup> The Macedonian-speaking Slavic community in Greece did not get state recognition. At the same time, the Third Bulgarian Tsardom endorsed and accepted war refugees from Northern Greece as Bulgarians and started re-instrumentalising the legacy of pre-war Macedonian national-activism as a certain

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<sup>6</sup> Assmann, Jan. 1997. *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 9. More on the theory and methodology of mnemohistory in Tamm, Marek. (ed.). 2015. *Afterlife of Events: Perspectives on Mnemohistory*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan Memory Studies.

<sup>7</sup> More in Wagner-Pacifici, Robin. 2017. *What is an Event?* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

<sup>8</sup> Wagner-Pacifici, Robin. 2010. Theorizing the Restlessness of Events. *American Journal of Sociology* 115(5), 1351-86.

<sup>9</sup> For an overview of the argument, see Gillis, John R. 2018. *Memory and Identity: The History of a Relationship*, in *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity*, edited by Gillis, John R. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 3-24; and Zerubavel, Eviatar. 2003. *Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

<sup>10</sup> The media references are provided in the relevant footnotes.

<sup>11</sup> On the tripartite “Macedonian Question” see Roudometof, Victor. (ed.). 2000. *The Macedonian Question: Culture, Historiography, Politics*. Boulder, CO: East European Monographs; Pettifer, James. (ed.). 2001. *The New Macedonian Question*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan; Livanios, Dimitris. 2008. *The Macedonian Question: Britain and the Southern Balkans 1939-1949*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 3-52.

<sup>12</sup> More on the process in Boškowska, Nada. 2017. *Yugoslavia and Macedonia before Tito: Between Repression and Integration*. London and New York: I.B. Tauris.

response to the post-Second World War constellation of power. Here, the critical agency is the Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation (*Makedonska Revolucionerna Organizacija*, MRO) established in Salonika in 1893, which had the Ottoman Empire as an initial revolutionary *raison d'être*. One of its major military operations was the 1903 Ilinden Uprising (*Ilindensko vostanie*), which culminated in the ten-day Kruševo Republic (*Kruševska Republika*).<sup>13</sup> The intra-MRO cleavages deepened after the ill-fated insurrection, contributing to the demise of the Organisation as such, while in the aftermath of WWI, a political body inaugurated in the region of Petrich/Pirin Macedonia (part of the interwar Bulgarian Tsardom and today's Republic of Bulgaria) – tagged as VMRO (*Vnatrešna Makedonska Revolucionerna Organizacija*, VMRO) – claimed the legacy of the pre-WWI MRO and managed to consolidate a strong regional core by promoting the political independence of the partitioned Macedonian territories.

The assassination committed by Mara Buneva on 13 January 1928 should be read in the aforementioned context. The Serb authorities' administrative approach in the new "South Serb" territories was *de facto* colonial: suppressing the cultural particularities and establishing a severe governing structure.<sup>14</sup> The first counter-hegemonic groups – both legal and illegal, and mostly among the Macedonian youth – emerged in the 1920s, often operating with the institutional support and the underground networks of the Bulgarian-based VMRO. The Macedonian Youth Secret Revolutionary Organisation (*Makedonska Mladinska Tajna Revolucionerna Organizacija*, MMTRO), was one of the activist groups which, despite being ephemeral, obtained wider recognition after the state purge of its members and the subsequent legal case, or the so-called "Skopje student process."<sup>15</sup> In June 1927, the authorities imprisoned Dimitar Ćuzelov, a regional coordinator of the youth organisation, which affected more than 50 other affiliates of MMTRO across Vardar Macedonia. The legal process which followed appeared to be the focal point regarding Buneva's assassination: VMRO issued a "death penalty" on Prelić, the main prosecutor in the "Skopje student process," and she was "instructed and sent by VMRO" to finalise this sentence.<sup>16</sup>

It is a scholarly commonplace that VMRO's politics of armed cross-border confrontations from the early 1920s and the terrorist attacks strategy from the late

<sup>13</sup> For a concise overview of the MRO activities and its organisational structure, see Rossos, Andrew. 2008. *Macedonian and the Macedonians: A History*. Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 99-127.

<sup>14</sup> The repression "was an important part of the Macedonian policy, at least in the 1920s [...] Around the middle of the decade, 35,000 men of the security forces (soldiers, border troops, gendarmes, Chetniks) were given the task of maintaining peace and order; 12,000 of the 17,000 gendarmes in the kingdom were stationed in Macedonia." Boškowska, further distinguishes three phases of the aforementioned decade: periods of "disturbances" (1920-1923), "relaxation of the tensions" (1924-1925) and "intensified terror and counter-terror" (1927). More in Boškowska, *Yugoslavia and Macedonia before Tito*, 23-51. See also: Jovanović, Vladan. 2002. *Jugoslovenska država i Južna Srbija 1918-1929: Makedonija, Sandžak, Kosovo i Metohija u Kraljevini SHS*. Beograd: Institut za noviju istoriju Srbije; Jovanović, Vladan. 2011. *Vardarska banovina 1929-1941*. Beograd: Institut za noviju istoriju Srbije.

<sup>15</sup> Todorovski, *Vnatrešnata Makedonska Revolucionerna Organizacija*, 123-57.

<sup>16</sup> Todorovski, as well as the other Macedonian interpretations of the assassination from the post-1991 period, openly suggests a political dimension to the murder. More in his *Vnatrešnata Makedonska Revolucionerna Organizacija*, 149-55.

1920s contributed to strengthening the repressive measures by the Serb authorities in Vardar Macedonia.<sup>17</sup> The figure of Vančo Mihajlov (Ivan Mihailov)<sup>18</sup> – the head of VMRO from 1924 to 1934 (the official ban of the Organisation after the Bulgarian *coup d'état*) – acts as the key *dramatis persona*: he succeeded in eliminating the intra-party ideological factions and consolidating his power with a “regime of terrorism.”<sup>19</sup> This strategy also led to the assassination of King Alexander of Yugoslavia in October 1934 by a VMRO affiliate. With regard to the assassination by Mara Buneva in Skopje, it is crucial to mention that Mihajlov immediately endorsed the event,<sup>20</sup> while the link between VMRO and the assassination of Prelić was also made by the daily newspaper *Stara Srbija* – published in Skopje in the interwar period. Specifically, a text published in the newspaper just one day after

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<sup>17</sup> The series of assassinations of Serb officials and public figures are illustrative: the killings of, *inter alia*, Spasoe Hadži Popović and Mihajlo Kovačević in 1927, and the assassination over Živojin Lazić in 1928. As a sign of protest against the assassinations, the Kingdom SHS shut its border with Bulgaria in 1927 – a decision which was revoked in April 1928, after the earthquake in the Plovdiv region. VMRO also sent terrorist groups across the Greek border during the 1920s, which led to a brief Greek invasion of Bulgaria in 1925 and a border crisis in 1931. More in: Frusetta, Džems. 2019. *Bugaraska Makedonija: Sozdavanje na nacijata i na državata, centralizacija i autonomija vo Pirinska Makedonija*. Skopje: Polica; Boškovska, *Yugoslavia and Macedonia before Tito*; Todorovski, *Vnatrešnata Makedonska Revolucionerna Organizacija*; Katardžiev, Ivan. 1977. *Vreme na zreenje: Makedonskoto nacionalno prašanje pomegu dvete svetski vojni, tom I & II*. Skopje: Kultura; Žežov, Nikola. 2008. *Makedonskoto prašanje vo jugoslovensko-bugarските дипломатски odnosi 1918-1941*. Skopje: Filozofski Fakultet-Skopje; Cackov, Kiril. 2010. *Atentatot na general Mihajlo Kovačević i voveduvanjeto na specijalna policiska sostojba vo Štipsko*, in *Godišen zbornik*, edited by Cackov, Kiril. Štip: Uni Goce Delčev, 5-11. For the Bulgarian debate over the political history of the interwar VMRO, see Micheva, Tsvetana. 2001. The Ideological Development of IMRO after the First World War (1919-1944). *Historical Review* 3-4, 78-91; Micheva, Tsvetana. 2001. The Ideological Development of IMRO after the First World War (1919-1944). *Historical Review* 5-6, 80-112; Micheva, Tsvetana. 2009. On the History of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (1928-1934). *Bulgarian Historical Review* 1-2, 80-97; Micheva, Tsvetana. 2013. Reconciliation Missions to Overcome the IMRO Split. *Bulgarian Historical Review* 1-2, 148-60.

<sup>18</sup> Mihajlov (1896-1990) is, without question, the most outspoken figure from the “Macedonian 20<sup>th</sup> century.” After gaining control over the Organisation, Mihajlov announced a “ruthless terror campaign,” which resulted in a series of assassinations of both party-members and the assigned enemies of the Organisation. Moreover, “under him, the Petrich region of southwest Bulgaria became virtually autonomous,” and “from this base, VMRO launched raids into Greece and Yugoslavia.” During WWII, Mihajlov was claimed to be an informal advisor of the Independent State of Croatia’s Ante Pavelić. In 1944, he had contacts with the German authorities with whom he negotiated the establishment of a Macedonian state. A concise summary can be found in Hall, Richard C. 2014. *War in the Balkans: An Encyclopedic History from the Fall of the Ottoman Empire to the Breakup of Yugoslavia*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 187-88. For an overview of the post-WWII historiography on Mihajlov, see in: Apostolski, Mihajlo. 1980. *Pogledi vrz jugoslovensko-bugarските odnosi vo Vtorata svetska vojna*. Skopje: NIK Naša kniga; and Katardžiev, Ivan. 2006. *Makedonija vo XX vek*. Skopje: Kultura. For Mihajlov’s ties with the Croatian *Ustasha*, see: Kisić Kolanović, Nada. 2003. *Zagreb-Sofija: Prijateljstvo po mjeri ratnog vremena 1941-1945*. Zagreb: Hrvatski Državni Arhiv, 91-122. Mihajlov-Pavelić friendship dated back to the MMTRO trial, when the latter served as an attorney of the youth group. More on Mihajlov’s role in Balkan interwar politics in Banac, Ivo. 1993. *The National Question in Yugoslavia: Origins, History, Politics*. Ithaca: Cornell Uni Press, 307-28. For the post-communist debate on Mihajlov, see: Troebst, Stefan. 2003. *Historical Politics and Historical ‘Masterpieces’ in Macedonia Before and After 1991*. *New Balkan Politics* 6.

<sup>19</sup> As described by an American diplomat from the field. More on the terror-centred *modus operandi* and its immediate diplomatic reception in: Frusetta, James. 2003. Bomb-throwers and Cookie-pushers: American Diplomats, the Macedonian Question and the Perceptions of Violence, 1919-1941. *Balkan Studies* 4, 3-17.

<sup>20</sup> Mihajlov, *Spomeni*, 363-77.

the assassination is clear in scapegoating VMRO structures as organisers of the murder, highlighting the event as a "political assassination" while further hinting that "it is very, very possible that she had an assistant, otherwise, how could she purchase a gun?"<sup>21</sup> On a different note, the locals developed a different theory for the assassination. The theory is neatly summarised by Vančo Saldžievski, a local Skopjan, in his oral history interview for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in 2012: there was an ongoing love affair between Prelić and Buneva, the assassinated and the assassin, as Buneva was already working as a seamstress at Prelić's family house before the murder.<sup>22</sup> As will be argued in the next section, these discourses and interpretations reappear again as loci of division between the "pro-" and "anti-Buneva" camps with the start of the commemorative activities in Skopje in the early 2000s.

### ***The canon and the paths beyond***

In her "Canon and Archive," Aleida Assmann identifies two forms of collective forgetting, "a more active and a more passive one." The dynamism of nation-building operates within this peculiar dialectic, which translated to an institutional level has the formation of institutions of active memory, "which preserve the past as present" (canons), and institutions of passive memory, "which preserve the past as past" (archives).<sup>23</sup> Post-WWII Macedonia is certainly an over-researched case in this regard.<sup>24</sup> In the aftermath of WWII, Vardar Macedonia obtained the status of a federal unit within the newly formed Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia. The immediate post-war decade was also a period when key institutional "transmission belts" for disseminating the Macedonian historical canon were established.<sup>25</sup> This went hand in hand with the process of "liquidating" the various forms of "anti-Macedonianism" in Macedonian history.<sup>26</sup> Impacted by the Tito-Stalin split (1948), the aftermath of the Greek Civil War (1946-1949), and the reshufflings within the Macedonian Communist Party (MCP), the "liquidation" had the confrontation with the non-leftist and anti-Yugoslav political platforms of Macedonian national activism as a particular credo. The treatment of MRO is illustrative: the "progressive" wings within the Organisation were integrated into the novel canon, occupying a central place in the national pantheon, while the rightist,

<sup>21</sup> More in: N.N. 1928. Atentat na Prav. Ref. G. Prelića. *Stara Srbija*, 14 January 1928, 2.

<sup>22</sup> The reference number of the interview is 2012.354.19, RG-50.676.0019. Saldžievski also recalls that Buneva's brother, Boris, was also part of the Bulgarian occupation government in Macedonia during WWII.

<sup>23</sup> Assmann, Aleida. 2008. *Canon and Archive*, in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, edited by Erll, Astrid and Ansgar Nünning. Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 97-109.

<sup>24</sup> For an overview, see: Troebst, Stefan. 1999. *IMRO + 100 = FYROM? The politics of Macedonian historiography*, in *The New Macedonian Question*, edited by Pettifer, James. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 60-79; and Brunnbauer, Ulf. 2014. *Historiography, Myths and the Nation in the Republic of Macedonia*, in *(Re)Writing History. Historiography in Southeast Europe after Socialism*, edited by Brunnbauer, Ulf. Münster: LIT Studies on South East Europe, 165-200.

<sup>25</sup> More in: Troebst, Stefan. 1997. *Yugoslav Macedonia, 1943-1953: Building the Party, the State, and the Nation*, in *State-Society Relations in Yugoslavia, 1945-1992*, edited by Bokovoy, Melissa K. / Irvine, Jill A. and Carol S. Lilly. New York: St. Martin's Press, 243-67.

<sup>26</sup> Troebst, *Historical Politics and Historical Masterpieces*.

anticommunist and, arguably, fascist traditions were clearly “archived” in the very Assmannian understanding of the concept.

Several takes on the Macedonian communist historiography hint at the various techniques of history-production, or what Brown describes as a process of isolation of the “symbolic pollution” from the Macedonian national narrative.<sup>27</sup> The memory of Buneva’s assassination followed a similar trajectory. As a tribute to her deed, “a street in Sofia was named after her and her portrait was carried through the streets in sober procession.”<sup>28</sup> Stoyan Christowe captured the momentum by writing that Buneva “[i]nstantly [...] captured the imagination of the Macedonians with her courageous act and is now at the top of the calendar of heroines.”<sup>29</sup> This “calendar” was further cultivated by Mihajlov’s VMRO before the formal end of the Organisation in 1934, while after that year the memory of Buneva was mostly nurtured by mihajlovist organisations in the diaspora. The Serbian authorities, in turn, sought to eliminate any link to the memory of the assassinator in the wake of the murder.

During the Second World War, the Bulgarian state appropriated MRO's memory to obtain symbolic legitimacy in the "newly liberated" territories; hence, a monument of Buneva was established at the assassination spot in 1941 and two commemorative ceremonies were held in Skopje. The 1942 commemorative event dedicated to Buneva in Skopje was attended by members of the Bulgarian occupation regime, as well as “mihajlovists and other collaborators,” while Mihajlov himself sent a bouquet from Croatia, where he was residing at that time.<sup>30</sup> It is also important to mention that the monument of Buneva in Skopje during WWII was also targeted by anti-fascist fighters as a symbol of the occupation regime: Mile Todorovski, in his text on the “forms of resistance” in wartime Skopje, indicated that several partisan groups vandalised the “area around Mara Buneva’s monument” in 1941 by writing anti-regime and communist slogans.<sup>31</sup>

In the wake of the war, the monument dedicated to Buneva was immediately demolished by the new authorities, and the local memory of Buneva was thus

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<sup>27</sup> See Brown, Keith. 2004. *Villains and Symbolic Pollution in the Narratives of Nations: The Case of Boris Sarafov*, in *Balkan Identities: Nation and Memory*, edited by Todorova, Maria. New York: NY University Press, 233-53; Troebst, *Historical politics*. Brown discusses the aforementioned process through the case of Boris Sarafov (1872-1907), member and, at a certain point, leader of the pre-WWI VMRO. However, the cases of Buneva and Sarafov are interesting from one peculiar point that illustrate intra-party turmoil. Namely, Todor Panica (1879-1925), the assassin of Sarafov, was killed by Menča (Melpomena) Karničeva (Karniču) in 1925 in the Vienne Burgtheater. Karničeva (1900-1964), a wife of Mihajlov, was a major inspiration for Buneva, and the two of them even met before the assassination in Skopje in 1928.

<sup>28</sup> Swire in David Sheperd. 1968. *Relations between Yugoslavia and Bulgaria, 1918-1941*. Durham: Durham University, 109.

<sup>29</sup> Christowe, *Heroes and Assassins*, 207-8.

<sup>30</sup> More in Andonovski, *Sto godini segašnost*, 186-91.

<sup>31</sup> Todorovski, Mile. 1973. *Antiokupatorskoto raspoloženie vo Skopje i vidovite na otpor*, in *Skopje vo NOV 1941*, edited by Unkovski, Vančo / Inadeski, Goce and Stojan Antovski. Skopje: Gradski odbor na SZB, 171-87.



“sentenced to oblivion.”<sup>32</sup> Likewise, Buneva and her assassination are difficult to trace in the communist historiography: she is absent from the key texts published by the Institute for National History (*Institut za nacionalna istorija*), the only institution entitled to history-knowledge production in Yugoslav Macedonia, and she is not even mentioned in the first, three-volume edition – and the peak of socialist Macedonian historiography – titled History of the Macedonian people (*Istorija na makedonskiot narod*, published in 1969).<sup>33</sup> The critical juncture in the Macedonian scholarship can be located in the mid-1980s. Provoked by a certain foreign scholar’s interest in the history of the rightist VMRO, some of the most prominent historians started to appeal for a broader research scope for Macedonian historiography.<sup>34</sup> Ivan Kataržiev’s agency is important in this context, as it was he who articulated and argued in favor of this appeal: he imagined this process as a professional, all-Yugoslav effort, conducted by domestic scholars and focused on addressing the “ballasts” of national history.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, it would take more than a decade for the ballasts to leave the archives, a development discussed below, as a process resulting in a different societal and political constellation.

In the post-WWII period, however, Buneva’s deed was again recognised by diaspora organisations, with stress on the mihajlovist Macedonian Patriotic Organisation (MPO). In the immediate post-communist decade, a political platform in Bulgaria – VMRO-Union of Macedonian Associations (SMD) – was the first to endorse Mihajlov’s and, consequently, Buneva’s legacies. VMRO-SMD, which would evolve into a political party in the late 1990s by drawing “directly on the MRO as its basis and appealed to Bulgarians of Macedonian origin,”<sup>36</sup> “virtually monopolised” the discourse over the “Macedonian affairs” in post-communist Bulgaria: in the words of Filip Lyapov, the party, alongside the Sofia-based Macedonian Scientific Institute (reopened in 1990), an “academic-cum-political” institution, were the most active social agents working for the establishment of the memory of the mihajlovist VMRO as a “positive reference for patriotism” and published extensively on the topic.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Bechev, Dimitar. 2009. *Historical Dictionary of the Republic of Macedonia*. Lanham and Toronto: The Scarecrow Press, 35.

<sup>33</sup> More on the Institute in: Stéfoska, Irena. 2009. *Why the Institute of National History? The Beginnings of the Institutionalised Form of Historiography in the Process of Building the Macedonian Nation*, in *The Echo of the Nation*, edited by Trajanovski, Žarko et al. Skopje: Templum, 76-92.

<sup>34</sup> The reference point here is Stefan Troebst’s doctoral dissertation: Troebst, Stefan. 1987. *Mussolini, Makedonien und die Mächte 1922-1930. Die "Innere Makedonische Revolutionäre Organisation" in der Südosteuropapolitik des faschistischen Italien*. Cologne and Vienna: Böhlau.

<sup>35</sup> Kataržiev mapped three historical periods which were to be subjected to a novel set of analytical interests: the origins of the anarchist movement in Macedonia, the collaboration between Ivan Mihajlov and Ante Pavelić (as well as Mihajlov’s mentoring role in the *Ustaša* movement), and the “ballasts of the historical past and their influence on the contemporary oppositional movements in the country.” More in: Kataržiev, Ivan. 1986. *Po vrvicite na makedonskata istorija*. Skopje: Kultura, 399-407.

<sup>36</sup> More on VMRO-SMD in: Frusetta, James. 2004. *Common Heroes, Divided Claims: IMRO Between Macedonia and Bulgaria*, in *Ideologies and National Identities: The Case of Twentieth-Century Southeastern Europe*, edited by Lampe, John R. and Mark Mazower. Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 119; and Nedeva, Ivanka and Naoum Kaytchev. 2001. *IMRO Groupings in Bulgaria after the Second World War*, in *The New Macedonian Question*, edited by Pettifer, James. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 167-83.

<sup>37</sup> See: Lyapov, Filip. 2021. *Female Martyrs and Assassins: Local, National and Transnational Entanglements of Memory Politics in Contemporary Bulgaria*, in *Cultures and Politics of Remembrance*

SMD’s Women Association also bore the name of “Mara Buneva” in the early 1990s, while in 1994 the party published a 16-page brochure on Buneva’s biography and her deed.<sup>38</sup>

### **Initial memory wars: The Macedonian 1990s**

The first post-Yugoslav decade was key for delineating the memory stances of the two major political parties in the ethnic Macedonian camp – the reformed socialists of the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (*Socijaldemokratski sojuz na Makedonija*, SDSM) and the rightist Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization-Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (*Vnatrešna makedonska revolucionerna organizacija – Demokratska partija za makedonsko nacionalno edinstvo*, VMRO-DPMNE) which claimed the legacy of the “historical” VMRO. The DPMNE’s ideological matrix, moulded around the anti-regime sentiments of the first two generations of post-WWII Macedonian refugees, despite being clear on challenging the “communist” historical canon, failed to translate this credo into a particular memory policy or a long-lasting project during its first period of rule (1998-2002).<sup>39</sup> On the contrary, the initial set of historical whitewashing was conducted during the first SDSM period of governance (1991-1998), targeting the MRO’s intra-party cleavages from the Ilinden period as well as the oppositional voices from MCP in the immediate post-WWII decade.<sup>40</sup> The public debate over an eventual “national reconciliation” – instigated by the erstwhile DPMNE leader Ljubčo Georgievski – is illustrative enough: Georgievski pursued an official recognition of the “murderers from both sides” of the political spectrum, hinting at the ideological divisions within the interwar VMRO, while Katardžiev – here as a proponent of the opposite camp – delegitimised the initiative as “pure political manipulation” and a “simple ideological confusion,” further highlighting the dangerous by-products of rehabilitating the rightist traditions from the recent Macedonian past.<sup>41</sup>

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*in Southeastern Europe*, edited by Trajanovski, Naum / Todorov, Petar / Volchevska, Biljana and Ljupco S. Risteski. Skopje: forumZFD – Institute of National History – Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology-Skopje, forthcoming. Tsocho Bilyarski, one of the founders of the Macedonian Scientific Institute in the early 1990s, is one of the key authors in these regards, writing extensively on, as put by Lyapov, the “martyrology of the Macedonian Bulgarians under foreign occupations.” For SMD’s activities in Bulgaria during the 1990s, see, as well: Bakalova, Maria. 2013. Bulgarian ‘Macedonian’ Nationalism in the Post 1989 Decade. *New Balkan Politics* 6.

<sup>38</sup> More in Gosheva, *Mara Buneva*.

<sup>39</sup> See the historical manifesto of the early 1990s VMRO-DPMNE: Trajkovski, Aleksandar (ed.). 1993. *Zlatna knjiga: 100 godini VMRO*. Skopje: Glas na VMRO-DPMNE. More on the different memory politics of the first and the second DPMNE governments in: Trajanovski, Naum. 2020. *Operacijata Muzej. Muzejot na makedonskata borba i makedonskata politika na sek'avanje*. Skopje: Templum. On identity politics during the first DPMNE government, see: Voss, Christian. 2001. Sprach- und Geschichtsrevision in Makedonien: Zur Dekonstruktion von Blaže Koneski. *Osteuropa* 51(8), 953-67.

<sup>40</sup> The process was identified as a “cosmetic” change of the Macedonian national narrative: Troebst, *Historical Politics and Historical Masterpieces*.

<sup>41</sup> More in Georgievski, Ljubčo. 2001. *Ostvaruvanje na vekovniot son*. Skopje: NIP Nova Literatura; and Katardžiev, *Makedonija vo XX vek*. For a contextual background of the debate, see: Katardžiev, Ivan. 1987. Politika i istorija – istorija i politika. *Istorija* 23, 9-29.

The failed initiative paved the way for the Macedonian *Kulturkampf*, a process of establishing “an ideological hegemony by stressing the fundamental incompatibility of visions,”<sup>42</sup> which in turn found a safe place in the Macedonian media in its initial stages. The leftist interpretations, following the aforementioned research agenda from 1984, manifested as a series of critical takes on the historical “ballasts” (a set of feuilletons on the rightist interwar VMRO, by and large relegitimising the official post-war canon) and an attempt to reproach certain paradigmatic interpretations from ethnonational standpoints similarly to the “cosmetic” changes from the early 1990s (*i.a.* Katardžiev’s study on MMTRO from October 1998, published in “Nova Makedonija”). Here, Buneva and her Skopje assassination can be traced as several sporadic mentions: as an instrument of the mihajlovist politics and the Bulgarian state-agenda.<sup>43</sup> The historical revisionists also pushed their agenda through the media outlets: worth mentioning are the “public disputes” over historical figures affiliated with the rightist VMRO (such as, *inter alia*, the correspondence over Todor Aleksandrov’s commemoration from 1996 and 1997, and the reactions to the fragments of Mihajlov’s memoirs published in 1997, both in “Nova Makedonija”).<sup>44</sup> The revisionist agenda culminated with Zoran Todorovski’s monograph on the interwar VMRO, and the novel takes on the assassins and the assassinated in Macedonian history, which will be discussed below.

Without a clear political and societal consensus, it can be argued that before the first set of commemorations of Buneva in Skopje, the dominant historical paradigm on Macedonian interwar activism remained undisputed and within the formulations of the Yugoslav period: on the one hand, critical of the Serb rule in Vardar Macedonia, while not challenging the “brotherhood and unity” imperative of the Second Yugoslavia; and on the other hand, approaching the interwar period as a prolepsis of the forthcoming class-struggle, a certain “time of maturation” of the Macedonian national-program.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Trencsényi, Balázs. 2014. Beyond Liminality? The Kulturkampf of the Early 2000s in East Central Europe. *Boundary 2*, 135-52.

<sup>43</sup> Katardžiev’s appeal to approach historical ballast from a “progressive” standpoint was embodied as a series of feuilletons in the sole Macedonian media outlet from the post-Yugoslav decade – “Nova Makedonija.” The two authors publishing most feuilletons, Veroljub Andonovski and Viktor Cvetanovski, published separate books of the collected articles in 2003, *A hundred years of presence (Sto godini segašnost)*, and 2012, *VMRO: Glory and cleavage (VMRO: Slava i raskol)*.

<sup>44</sup> Todor Poporušev Aleksandrov (1881-1924), emerged as a leader of the VMRO in the wake of the Young Turk Revolution. He took part in the Balkan Wars as a Bulgarian military commander. In 1915, he “orchestrated the guerilla attacks against Serb forces at the Udovo railway station, which was instrumental for Bulgaria’s involvement in WWI on the side of the Central Powers.” He was also a signatory of the statute of MMTRO. More on Aleksandrov in Bechev, *Historical Dictionary*, 9-10, 139. See, as well, T. Marinov’s seminal study: Marinov, Tchavdar. 2009. Anticommunist, But Macedonian: Politics of Memory in Post-Yugoslav Macedonia. *Tokovi Istorije* (1-2), 65-83. Keith Brown also depicts the October 2000 commemoration of Vlado Černožemski – another affiliate of the interwar VMRO – as a means for reimagining the infamous assassinator as a “martyr for the Macedonian cause.” More in: Brown, Keith. 2003. *The Past in Question: Modern Macedonia and the Uncertainties of Nation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 244.

<sup>45</sup> For an extensive overview of Bulgarian-Macedonian relations, see Marinov, Čavdar. 2013. *Makedonskoto prašanje od 1944 do denes: Komunizmot i nacionalizmot na Balkanot*. Skopje: Fondacija Otvoreno Opštество; see also: Stamova, Marijana. 2014. Bulgarian-Yugoslav Relations and the Macedonian Question (1948-1963). *Annales* 24, 661-70.

### **The Skopje-based commemorations**

#### ***Placing Buneva on the “commemorative map” (2001–2006)***

The first commemorative ceremony of Mara Buneva in Skopje, reported in a Macedonian media text, took place in January 2001. The event was covered in “Večer” – the second newspaper to the aforementioned “Nova Makedonija” – in two separate articles from 15 and 16 January.<sup>46</sup> The 2001 event defined the features of the commemorative ritualogy that would follow a corresponding organisational pattern in the forthcoming years: being part of the institutional memory of the Bulgarian VMRO-SMD, the ceremony was attended by its members and local supporters in Skopje. Here, one can mention the agency of the “Association of Bulgarians in Macedonia” titled “Radko” – a pseudonym of Mihajlov – which was established in 2000 in Ohrid and banned the very next year (March 2001), after a scandal occurring on the inaugural event of the Association.<sup>47</sup> The ban was further considered by the European Court of Human Rights, which decided in favor of the Association in 2009.<sup>48</sup> The commemorative ritual constituted two segments, commencing with a religious service in the nearby Orthodox Christian church of St. Demetrious (*Sv. Dimitrija*) followed by an honouring of the assassin at the very spot of the assassination, placing fresh flowers and, from 2002 onwards, a memorial plaque. The pattern arguably correlates with Mihajlov’s plea from his post-war memoirs and interviews: Buneva should be annually commemorated in Skopje by the Bulgarian patriotic youth, which “are supposed to place fresh flowers at the assassination spot.”<sup>49</sup> Moreover, it also followed the partisan-driven debate from the 1990s on the commemorative model of Buneva: Ekaterina Gosheva, for instance, the former president of the Women’s Association “Mara Buneva” within the VMRO-SMD, advocated for a recreation of the “missing” religious service of Buneva in Skopje in a 1994 brochure.<sup>50</sup> Thus, drawing upon Katherine Verdery, Buneva’s

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<sup>46</sup> The first report raised the question of Buneva’s place in Macedonian history (“it is known that there are two opposing views for the event which took place on 13 January 1928”) and the anticipative consideration on whether “pluralistic Macedonia has enough democratic capacities to incorporate the opposing historical claims.” See: N.N. 2001. Panihida i istoriski čas za Mara Buneva, *Večer*, 15 January 2001. The second article, an interview with Katardžiev himself, indicates the historian’s interpretation on the event – denouncing the legacy of Buneva as “counterproductive,” since it “intensified the terror against the Macedonian population” – as well as an unsigned editorial commentary on the interview, problematising the thesis of Katardžiev and applying his claims to the Ilinden Uprising, with a single quest for “consistency” in the historical interpretations. More in: N.N. 2001. Što da pravime so Ilindenskoto vostanie? *Večer*, 16 January 2001.

<sup>47</sup> The journalist Spase Šuplinovski was beaten by members of the Association during the inaugural meeting. More in: N.N. 2009. Makedonija go zagubi sporot so bugarofilite od Radko. *AI*, 15 January 2009.

<sup>48</sup> N.N. 2009. Radko dobi vo Strazbur. *Vreme*, 16 January 2009. Vladimir Pankov, the head of Radko, stated that the “Bulgarians can never be a minority to some so-called Macedonians” in the wake of the court decision.

<sup>49</sup> Andonovski interprets Mihajlov’s writings to the Bulgarian youth in Macedonia as an appeal for a memory war, a juxtaposition of ‘our’ versus ‘their’ memory. More in Andonovski, *Sto godini segašnost*.

<sup>50</sup> More in Gosheva, *Mara Buneva*, 15. Nikolay Simeonov, then a doctoral student at Sofia-University, in a similar manner, writes that “the time when the Bulgarians in Macedonia will establish a decent monument of her [Buneva] by the Vardar River is soon to arrive” in an article from 2008. More in Simeonov, *Opit za unashyane na nyakoi yashnoti*. On the margins, it is immensely interesting to note that the memory of Buneva is almost entirely linked with Skopje – the place of the assassination – rather than Tetovo, her native town, approximately 40 km away from Skopje. As a matter of curiosity, in November 2019, after almost two decades of public commemorations of Buneva in Skopje, it was hard for the locals

service from the first commemorative period can be read as a quest for establishing “accountability” – a process “morally essential to the new anticommunist orders” which involves the dead in the efforts to “determine the ‘historical truth,’ which many accuse socialism of having suppressed.”<sup>51</sup>

In Macedonia, the immediate public reactions to the commemorative activities in the given time period are to be identified as multi-partite: appealing both to the contemporary and to the historical event. Firstly, the commemorative event was discussed within the local-political key by questioning the presence of VMRO-DPMNE affiliates on the commemorative ceremonies in 2001 and 2002.<sup>52</sup> On a different note, the media coverage of the commemoration of Buneva was itself problematised: illustratively enough, in 2002, the editorial team of “Utrinski Vesnik” received an anonymous phone call from a person who claimed to have demolished the plaque, while Kosta Popovski, the journalist who covered the event, received “dozens of unknown calls” stressing his “imprudence to inform that on Sunday, a memorial service for Mara Buneva took place in the church of St. Demetrius.”<sup>53</sup> Thirdly, it can be highlighted that an institutional discourse prevailed in the wake of the commemorations in 2002 and 2003, both culminating with the immediate demolition of the memorial plaque.<sup>54</sup> Several media articles stressed the encirclement of legal measures necessary for the commemoration participants to put up a plaque.<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, the process was interpreted within the post-conflict

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in Tetovo to answer my questions on Mara Buneva – who she was, what she did etc. – other than to point out Buneva’s family house.

<sup>51</sup> Verdery, Katherine. 1999. *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change*. New York: Columbia University Press, 38.

<sup>52</sup> For instance, the criticism of Dosta Dimovska, a Minister from the first DPMNE government, who announced that she “considers herself a modern-day Mara Buneva.” More in: N.N. 2005. Makedonski pomen za bugarski spomen. *Večer*, 14 January 2005.

<sup>53</sup> The anonymous man from Kavadarci who claimed responsibility for breaking the memorial plaque identified himself as “a grandson of a Macedonian *gastarbeiter* in Sofia,” murdered by Vančo Mihajlov’s collaborators, among which was Mara Buneva herself. He claimed the single motive for his act was his “agitation for a free and independent Macedonia and because it rendered vain the politics orchestrated by the Bulgarianised Macedonians in Sofia.” The anonymous caller also claimed that another relative of his was shot by the “Bulgarian fascists” in Vataša, in Kavadarci’s vicinity, during WWII. More in: Popovski, Kosta. 2002. Anonimen povik do Utrinski vesnik. Kavadarčanec tvrdi deka ja skršil pločata na Mara Buneva. *Utrinski vesnik*, 17 January 2002, 1-3.

<sup>54</sup> In 2003, the daily *Večer* published a letter from “the people who respect and appreciate their city and their national history,” signed by Slobodan Ugrinovski, the leader of the political party “Union of Tito’s Left Forces” and addressed to, *inter alia*, the Major of the City of Skopje. The letter reads that the commemoration was a “disclosure of a vampirised Bulgarianess,” while Buneva is seen as a “freak of the Macedonian people and a servant to the tormentor Vančo Mihajlov.” Finally, the letter informs the recipients and the Macedonian public that, if “the authorities do not tear down the plaque themselves,” the locals will “self-organise. [O]n 20 January, at 12 am, they will remove the symbol of the deformation of the Macedonian history.” More in: Ugrinovski, Slobodan. 2003. Povampirena bugarština. *Večer*, 14 January 2003, 4. On 16 January, the same outlet published a reaction to the letter, signed by Siniša Babunski and “the citizens who adhere and respect the principles of the legal state-system,” who claimed that Ugrinovski’s letter is “an impertinent promotion of vandalism” and “a call for destroying the legal system,” without even discussing “the historical qualifications.” More in Babunski, Siniša. 2003. Povik za urivanje na pravnata država. *Večer*, 16 January 2003, 5.

<sup>55</sup> Janevski, L. 2002. Bezzakonie i za spomen-obeležjata: I Mara Buneva dobi pločka, ama na crno. *Vest*, 15 January 2002, 4.

reality – it was argued that the “Buneva case” sets a precedent for future partisan and unofficial memory activities by the “other minority groups,” while the image of an assassin and a terrorist was invoked in favour of the anti-Buneva reasoning, referring to the recent armed conflict and the terrorist activities in the state.<sup>56</sup> As an underlying tone, Buneva’s activity was perceived as an “instrument” of the mihajlovist VMRO politics which allowed them to position the commemorative event within the ready-made categories of the aforementioned *Kulturkampf*. More precisely, even though her “courage” was publicly acknowledged on several occasions in the given time period, the expert discourse aimed beyond the historical person of Buneva, targeting Mihajlov’s VMRO and his terrorist strategy, while indirectly scapegoating the local “followers” of the mihajlovist cult.<sup>57</sup>

### **The two acts of patriotism (2007-2014)**

The first critical juncture in the history of Buneva’s commemorations in Skopje is undoubtedly the year 2007, when the commemorative ceremony ended up with more than 15 injured participants, an official note from the Bulgarian Embassy, and a discussion in the European Parliament, while the commemoration scheduled for the next year was canceled due to the risk of an escalation.<sup>58</sup> As a contextual background, the 2007 commemoration took place just two weeks after Bulgaria’s accession to the EU and after the governmental change in Macedonia, with the VMRO-DPMNE forming its second cabinet in late 2006. Contrary to its first term in office, this eleven-year rule placed memory politics high on the DPMNE’s agenda. However, in the course of establishing its flagship undertaking, the so-called “Skopje 2014” project – an umbrella term depicting the 137 memorial objects erected in the city’s urban core – the commemoration of Buneva – a partisan and a non-official event – arguably became the main space for memory contestation. Thus, if the discursive agenda of the first commemorative set was moulded around Buneva’s symbolic interference with the official historical canon (perceived as a derivative event conducted by outsiders and their supporters in Macedonia), then the questions of the mobilising potentials of 13 January prevailed in the course of the second commemorative period. Hereafter, two seemingly contradictory trajectories are distinguished and further discussed: the bilateral, Bulgarian-Macedonian contestations and the tendency to reimagine Buneva’s historical role within the new political mythoscape of Macedonian nationalism. The common denominator was the notion of patriotism, attributed to various set of actors and agencies as a means of political legitimisation or delegitimisation in the given context.

The 2007 event was the most covered commemoration in post-Yugoslav Macedonia, dictating the media agenda for a span of ten days. The interpretative range is also

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<sup>56</sup> The seven-month conflict between the Macedonian Forces and the armed Albanian radicals was settled by the Ohrid Framework Agreement on 13 August 2001.

<sup>57</sup> Cvetanovski, Viktor. 2002. Sorabotničkata na Vančo Mihajlov povtorno ja branuva makedonskata javnost. *Utrinski vesnik*, 16 January 2002, 5.

<sup>58</sup> The official reason was the tragic accident of a helicopter crash involving members of the Macedonian Armed Forces on 13 January 2008, yet several journalists hinted at the 2007 incident as the actual reason for the cancelation.

different from the first set of commemorations, accenting the rise of bilateral tensions (by, *inter alia*, recalling the similar incidents during Jane Sandanski's commemorations in Bulgaria in the 1990s), the references to former Macedonian Ambassador in Sofia Abdurahman Aliti's description of the event as "an isolated incident" which will "not influence the excellent bilateral relations."<sup>59</sup> On the other hand, the Bulgarian media condemned the "hooligans" by contextualising the incident within the larger framework of political and historical contestations over the recent history of MRO.<sup>60</sup> Interestingly enough, the fresh Bulgarian EU accession was also challenged in the wake of the incident, with the Macedonian media anticipating "no new attitude by the novel EU member state."<sup>61</sup>

The second set of commemorations is also delineated with a discursive shift over the very historical role of Buneva, a process that can be identified as a quest for a new historical canon, which culminated in the subsequent commemorative phase. In March 2007, "Utrinski vesnik" published an interview with Anče Gerasimovska, Buneva's niece, who claimed that "her grandma never spoke Bulgarian" – contrary to the public assumption – while the journalist announced the interview in a pretty suggestive manner: "when one hears the story of the Bunev family, told by a family member, it seems completely different to the one which is served today by certain circles."<sup>62</sup>

This invocation of Buneva's family memory was in line with a similar reproach in Macedonian historiography: the ideological division of the interwar VMRO and its terror-centred methods were denounced as "unscientific," based on a "pretentious distinction across national lines" and neglecting the terrorism "utilised by the members of the Communist Party" which was "treated as a highest moral act, a heroic deed."<sup>63</sup> Buneva's assassination was re-approached as "part of the VMRO terrorism directed towards the Serb occupational government," a certain patriotic deed in the given historical context, without a reference to the political credo of the mihajlovist Organisation. Furthermore, patriotism was also employed regarding the people who attacked the participants during the commemoration and demolished the plaque. This discourse can be traced in the course of the second set of commemorations, further normalising the violent behavior towards the 13 January commemoration.<sup>64</sup> As a particular finale, in 2014 a group of ethnic Macedonians

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<sup>59</sup> Cvetanovski, Viktor. 2007. Antimakedonska kampanja vo Bugarija poradi Mara Buneva. *Utrinski vesnik*, 16 January 2007, 1-2; and N.N. 2007. Ambasadorot Aliti za sofiskite medium: Mara Buneva ne vlijae na bilateralnite odnosi. *Nova Makedonija*, 19 January 2007, 3.

<sup>60</sup> For instance, see the article Makedonskiot komplekst na bezrodie (republished). *Nova Makedonija*, 20/21 January 2007, 9.

<sup>61</sup> Ivanovski, Hristo. 2007. Vlegoa vo EU, ne izlegoa od minatoto. *Dnevnik*, 20 January 2007, 16.

<sup>62</sup> Cvetanovski, Viktor. 2007. Vnukata na Mara Buneva: Kaj nas doma ne se zboruvaše na bugarski jazik. *Utrinski vesnik*, 11 March 2007.

<sup>63</sup> Todorovski, Zoran. 2008. *Id Ego Sum: Makedonski istoriski refleksii*. Skopje: Makedonska Reč, 198-99; 375-421. See also Ačkoska and Žežov, *Predavstvata i atentatite*.

<sup>64</sup> An official police report from 20 January 2007 reads: "the accused were provoked by these persons who shouted 'Bulgaria, Bulgaria', and thus they committed the assault." More in: N.N. 2007. Prijava protiv 15 lica učesnici vo incidentot na Mara Buneva. *Nova Makedonija*, 20/21 January 2007, 4.

gathered around the St. Demetrius church in order to stop the service by the “Bulgarian provocateurs.”<sup>65</sup>

### **A new historical canon (2015–2018)**

The cross-national confrontations of the previous commemorative phases resulted in a final endorsement of Buneva – both the historical person and the contemporary memory events – in Macedonia. The shift was informed by the new historiographic interpretations of the Macedonian interwar period, as well as the major incidents from the previous commemorative phase. These developments, in turn, paved the way for establishing a new model of commemorating Buneva in Skopje. The most illustrative case here is her placement as a wax figure, alongside Mihajlov’s one, in the permanent exhibition of the Museum of the Macedonian Struggle-Museum of VMRO-Museum of the Victims of the Communist Regime, announced in 2008 and inaugurated on 8 September 2011 – the twentieth anniversary of Macedonian independence – as part of the aforementioned “Skopje 2014” project. The newly established pantheon thus promoted the interwar period in a new light by watering down the political activists’ ideological standpoints and highlighting the combative worldviews as a hermeneutical common-ground.<sup>66</sup> A similar narrative can be found in the collected edition “The creation of the contemporary Macedonian state” (*Sozdavanjeto na sovremenata makedonska država*) from 2014<sup>67</sup> and in the 2015 state-sponsored documentary series “The Assassinations of VMRO” (*Atentatite na VMRO*).<sup>68</sup> However, although the rationale for this museal display of the interwar period was articulated as a step towards unmediated representation of the history – by showcasing both the already endorsed national heroes and events alongside the so-called ballasts of the communist historiography – the Macedonian public read the

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<sup>65</sup> N.N. 2014. *Iskršena spomen pločata za Mara Buneva*. *Deutsche Welle Macedonia*. 13 January 2014.

<sup>66</sup> More in Trajanovski, *Operacijata Muzej*.

<sup>67</sup> The contested interwar period is approached as a period when a spectrum of organisations from various ideological proveniences coexisted, with their work on the national programme as a common denominator, in the text by Todorovski, Zoran. 2014. *Borbata za sozdavanje na avtonomna, nezavisna i obedineta makedonska država 1912-41*, in *Sozdavanjeto na sovremenata makedonska država*, edited by Popovski, Vlado / Ćorgiev, Vančo / Todorovski, Zoran and Violeta Ačkoska. Skopje: Makedonska Reč - Makedonika Litera, 79-117.

<sup>68</sup> The documentary film, one of the 33 state-sponsored serials, has the following opening text: “Assassin, terrorist, komitadji... those are the synonyms which are inevitably linked with the history of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation from its establishment in 1893, throughout the years of unity, oneness, but as well in the years of internal cleavages, enmities, and physical liquidations. The assassinations as a confrontation method were not unknown to VMRO, an illegal and armed organisation that fought to create an autonomous Macedonian state within its ethnographical borders. In the Organisation’s programme-documents, some articles envisioned death penalties for various spies, enemies of VMRO, representatives of Turkish rule, and Balkan propaganda, which ought to be conducted as an individual terror.” The fifth episode, which recreates Buneva’s assassination among the other assaults from the same time-period, concludes with the paragraph: “VMRO’s assassinations of the Serb and Bulgarian governments’ representatives in the interwar period caused a certain sense of fear and respect by the Balkan states towards the Organisation.”



positioning of the figures of Buneva and Mihajlov in the museum as yet another proof of the party-centered agenda in the history and memory politics.<sup>69</sup>

In such a novel constellation, one can trace the final commemorative juncture back to 2015, when two separate commemorations took place, on 10 January and 12 January, for the first time in the history of 15 commemorations of Buneva in Skopje. The Bulgarian Cultural Club (*Bugarški Kulturen Klub-Skopje*, BKKS) organised the first commemorative event in Skopje, together with the now-renamed Bulgarian VMRO-BND. The participants mounted a plaque dedicated to Buneva at the assigned memory site. During the commemorative ceremony, Krasimir Karakachanov, BND's leader and an outspoken figure during the previous set of commemorations, announced that "Mara Buneva is one of the historical persons who can be a bridge of friendship, a support example."<sup>70</sup> The second commemoration was organised by the "Macedonian Patriotic Association – Todor Aleksandrov," a rightist non-governmental organisation which was also instrumental in the protest wave against the new governmental coalition from early 2017. The second commemoration participants claimed Buneva's ethnic Macedonian origins and her dedication to the "Macedonian cause."<sup>71</sup>

Moreover, shortly after the governmental change in 2017, the Bulgarian-Macedonian Friendship Treaty was signed, which focuses on economic partnership and aims at "enhancing the bilateral cooperation" by a joint revision of the history textbooks in both Bulgaria and Macedonia. The transnational memory agenda was also promoted with the first set of "common-state commemorations," a cross-border initiative with a clear tendency to establish political continuity. As such, the initiative instigated a set of seemingly contradictory arguments regarding Buneva's commemoration in Skopje. Besides the earlier calls for interstate commemorative activities, the BKKS affiliates have denounced the appropriation of Buneva within the novel Macedonian national narrative, claiming that she cannot be "de-Bulgarised."<sup>72</sup> Nevertheless, in 2018, the BKKS issued an open call for participation in the commemorative event, endorsing the Friendship Treaty and linking attendance at the commemoration with "a demonstration of the will for full-membership in NATO and the EU, and for a development of the good neighbourly relations with the Republic of Bulgaria and common commemorations for preserving the common cultural and historical heritage."<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> See: N.N. 2010. Mara Buneva vo fevruari vo Skopje, a po nea i Vančo Mihajlov. *Nova Makedonija*, 13 January 2010, 5; and N.N. 2010. Mihajlov, Buneva, Aleksandrov: Presudite i denes sudat. *Nova Makedonija*, 15 January 2010, 2-3.

<sup>70</sup> Trajanovski, *Komemoracijata na Mara Buneva*, 62.

<sup>71</sup> N.N. 2015. MPZ Todor Aleksandrov i oddadoa počit na Mara Buneva. *Falanga*, 12 January 2015.

<sup>72</sup> The reproach of the Macedonian appropriation of Buneva is to be traced back to 2015, while in 2017 and 2018, it was the dominant coverage pattern by the new media outlet – *Tatkovina*. More in Perv, Vladimir. 2015. Za 'čistite' Bugari, za 'valkanite' Makedonci-Bugari i za podlite Jugosloveni. *Fokus*, 13 February 2015, 42-44; Vasilev, Nikolaj. 2017. Mara Buneva – uništivačka na mitovi. *Tatkovina*, 12 January 2017; Mladenov, Lazar. 2017. Ne e li nekulturno, bezobrazno i drsko da se prigrabi tradicionalnoto ni čestvovanje na Mara Buneva. *Tatkovina*, 5 January 2017.

<sup>73</sup> N.N. 2018. BKKS od panihidata za Mara Buneva – DA za Dogovorot za dobrososedstvo! DA za zaednički proslavuvanja. *Tatkovina*, 12 January 2018.

## Conclusion

The present paper looks at the mnemohistory of Buneva’s commemorations in Skopje by mapping the memory activities in the wake of the assassination, the history-writing in the post-WWII period, and the critical developments in the two most recent decades. By recreating the set of 18 commemorative events in modern-day Macedonia, I map two junctures and present them as a tripartite model of the commemorative activities. The period from 2001 to 2006 set the ground for the upcoming commemorations, while the immediate public focus was put on the instrumental role of Buneva and the domestic detractors of the official historical narrative. The second commemorative period (2007-2014) was marked by two critical incidents in 2007 and 2014, which contributed to reshaping the commemorative model. The final commemorative period (2015-2018) put the debate over interstate commemorations at the forefront of public discourse. Moreover, two major discursive processes were identified as 1) an effort to appropriate Mara Buneva and the rightist interwar VMRO in the novel post-communist Macedonian canon and 2) disposal of the Bulgarian and Macedonian Bulgarians’ partisan memory of the assassination in Skopje.

The second point deserves a closer look: just three years after the Friendship Treaty, Bulgaria blocked North Macedonia’s opening of EU accession negotiations in November 2020. A month before, Bulgaria adopted a framework position which, in the name of “European values and principles,” calls on North Macedonia’s leadership to “break with the ideological legacy and practices of communist Yugoslavia” and accuses the state of “ethnic and linguistic engineering” after 1944, but also seeks to redefine the “Macedonian” standpoint on the Macedonian ethnic identity, language, nation.<sup>74</sup> The framework position and the Bulgarian veto were immediately interpreted as a break with the already settled agenda with the Friendship Treaty.<sup>75</sup> Here, it appears that the Buneva commemorations in Skopje are a highly valent process, involving cross-national memory actors (active, *inter alia*, in the organisation of the infamous Lukov March in Sofia), who, in turn, pushed different agendas in the realm of “joint history” – as denoted with the Friendship Treaty. This dynamic has heretofore tilted historiographic agendas, loaded the EU integration discourse with particularistic demands, and contributed to the Bulgarian veto over North Macedonia’s EU accession. Therefore, commemorations of Buneva showcase the way a partisan memory is being integrated into the official one, while it also pinpoints the divergent usages of the EU and European values in the process of achieving these memory-related goals.

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<sup>74</sup> More in: Trajanovski, Naum. 2020. Bulgarian-North Macedonia’s History-Dispute: Whose “Shared History” in the Name of which “European values”? *Heinrich Böll Stiftung Sarajevo*, 16 November 2020.

<sup>75</sup> A neat map of these developments can be found in: Ristevska-Jordanova, Malinka and Simonida Kacarska. 2020. *EU-North Macedonia Accession Negotiations: The Implications of the Bulgarian Conditions*. Skopje: European Policy Institute.

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