



The Place of Public Diplomacy in Bulgaria's Balkans Policy During the GERB Governments

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Abstract

Balkans has a strategic importance for Bulgaria. Bulgaria, which has historical and demographic ties with the region have tried to expand its influence area in the Balkans during the GERB governments. For this reason, Bulgaria has benefitted from the Public Diplomacy in the scopes of education and culture. Besides, the passport of Bulgaria, that gained power and prestige after the EU membership of the country has become the most important cultural instrument towards the region. In this study, the place of Public Diplomacy in the Bulgaria's Balkans Policy during the GERB governments was analyzed.

Keywords: Bulgaria, Balkans, Diplomacy, Public Diplomacy, GERB.

Öz

Balkanlar Bulgaristan için stratejik bir öneme sahiptir. Bölgeyle tarihsel ve demografik bağlara sahip olan Bulgaristan, GERB hükümetleri döneminde Balkanlar'daki nüfuz alanını genişletmeye çalışmıştır. Bu sebeple kültür ve eğitim alanlarında kamu diplomasisinden önemli ölçüde yararlanmıştır. Bunun yanı sıra 2007'deki AB üyeliğinin ardından güç ve prestij kazanan Bulgaristan pasaportu ülkenin bölgeye yönelik en önemli kültür aracı haline gelmiştir. Bu çalışmada, GERB hükümetleri döneminde Bulgaristan'ın Balkanlar politikasında Kamu Diplomasisi'nin yeri analiz edilmiştir

Anahtar Kelimeler: Bulgaristan, Balkanlar, Diplomasi, Kamu Diplomasisi, GERB

Introduction: Content and Methodology

The weakness of Classical Diplomacy's sense in foreign policy in fulfilling the requirements, triggered the emergence of new types of diplomacy. The changes that emerged in international arena have accelerated this process. Public Diplomacy, as one of the new types of diplomacy, has gained popularity due to innovations in mass media, interdependence, unbearable costs of wars and changes in the nature of power due to the phenomenon of globalization. Although Public Diplomacy gained a meaning that substitutes the concept of soft power, it has experienced an expansion of geographical area and content especially in the post-Cold War era. In this period, Public Diplomacy, which was no longer an instrument of foreign policy that applied by only large states, also has become a frequently used tool for medium and small states.

Following the dismissal of communist leader Todor Zhivkov on November 10, 1989, and especially with the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) there have occurred radical changes in Bulgarian foreign policy. Alongside the problems with the neighboring countries, the disintegration process that took place in the Balkans in the 1990's, drove the Sofia administration toward the Euro-Atlantic institutions in their foreign policy. Thus, Bulgaria became a full member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 2004 and the European Union (EU) in 2007 under the influence of conjunctural convenience. In addition to this, to create new areas of influence in the region has become inevitable for Bulgaria, as an important political force in the Balkans. The realization of this depends on the effective use of Public Diplomacy. Relatives and cognates of Bulgaria that are found in the mass population of the region has been an important component of this policy.

The aim of this study is to determine the place of Public Diplomacy in Bulgaria's policy towards the Balkans during the governmental term established by the Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) Party between 2009-2019. The main reasons for examining this period are the fact that GERB has been in continuous power except for the period of May 2013-October 2014, and it has been observed that Public Diplomacy compared to previous Bulgarian governments has been tried to be implemented more effectively. Moreover, for about 30 years after Zhivkov, there was no stable power in Bulgarian political life until 2009-2019. It is also assumed that Bulgaria, which aims to expand its regional influence in the Balkans, should benefit from Public Diplomacy. Consequently, the aim of this study was to find out the dimension and instruments of Public Diplomacy in Bulgarian foreign policy. In this context, the analytical structure of the study, in which qualitative data analysis is used, consists of three parts. In the first part, Public Diplomacy is explained conceptually and in the second part, the Balkans and Public Diplomacy in Bulgarian foreign policy are mentioned. In the third part of the study Bulgaria's Public Diplomacy practices were analyzed.

Conceptual Perspective: Public Diplomacy

Public Diplomacy, which emerged as an important type of diplomacy within the discipline of International Relations (IR) in the post-Cold War period, is increasing its popularity day by day with the effect of developments in communication technologies. The concept of Public Diplomacy, put forward by Edmund Gillion in 1965 in response to the negative connotation evoked by the concept of "Propaganda", has been used over time to meet the United States of America (USA)'s international

publications, information and cultural activities (Özdal, 2018: s. 61). Although its entry into the IR literature corresponds to the Cold War period, it has a rich historical background in terms of finding a field of application as an instrument of foreign policy. Setting up a library in Alexandria by The Ptolemaic Dynasty, as an invitation for the children of the 'friend' kings to Rome about education during the Roman Republic, and foundation of the *Alliance Francaise* in 1883 to correct the image of France, which was defeated during the Franco-Prussian War in 1870, issues can be put forward as examples within this context (Özdal, 2018: 62).

Although it is difficult to make a clear definition of Public Diplomacy itself, it can be stated that there is a consensus on its aims and instruments. In its simplest form, Public Diplomacy can be defined as the process by which a state tries to influence the people and elite of another country within the framework of its own political and ideological ideas. In the words of Hans N. Tuch, Public Diplomacy is "*a process of communication with foreign people, which aims to express the ideas and ideals of the nation, its institutions and culture, as well as the national aims and current policies of a government*" (Tuch, 1990: 3). The aim of Public Diplomacy, which is based on the activities outside the scope of traditional diplomacy, is to create public opinion in favor of itself in foreign countries mainly for national goals and interests. The instruments used to achieve this include a wide range of international publications, foreign journalists and academics, cultural activities, student exchange programs and scholarships, systematic visits, conferences and publications (Potter, 2002: 46). Although the theoretical and application centered development of Public Diplomacy was more focused on the USA due to the unique atmosphere and ideological competition environment of the Cold War

period, it expanded geographically after the end of the Cold War period and was transformed in terms of its content. Yet in the post-1991 period, while globalization gained a dominant character, increased interdependence, actor diversity in IR, high costs of wars and developments in mass media triggered the emergence of alternative types of classical diplomacy. In other words, the fact that Public Diplomacy began to become popular in the post-Cold War period is directly related to the structure of the international system it brought along. According to Joseph S. Nye, in this period, the transformed power turned from being capital-centered to information-centered and soft power became more important (Nye, 1990: 164-167).

Within this framework, it draws attention a process where knowledge is at the center of power. Therefore, the function of the process of collecting information about the target population, which is the main stage of *listening*, emerges before the implementation of Public Diplomacy. In addition to *listening*, the function of Public Diplomacy is to become an international *advocacy* of the target public's thinking, to monitor *cultural diplomacy* using cultural resources, to follow *exchange diplomacy* through student exchange programs or cultural interaction instruments, and to target public communication with *international news broadcasting* concerning its functioning can be approached under 5 groups (Cull, 2009: 18-22). As it is a parallel activity, Cull includes *psychological warfare* in this classification (Cull, 2009: 22-23).

In addition to the function of Public Diplomacy, it is seen that its field is expanding geographically. Such that, in the post-Cold War era, Public Diplomacy was not only a matter of large states, but also became an area of interest for regional powers and even small-scale states. Furthermore, a series of innovations in

Public Diplomacy have emerged with the new conjuncture in the international arena. In terms of actors, as well as the state, non-state elements have become the subject of Public Diplomacy, a process in which new technological instruments (satellite, internet, mobile phones) are used, the concept of soft power comes into prominence and national brand creation and horizontal relationship building are essential (Özdal, 2018: 63). To sum up, the new Public Diplomacy gained popularity in the context of functionality, geographic expansion and the transformation process it underwent, and because of its breadth, it had its own types of sub-diplomacy. Educational diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, tourism diplomacy, religious diplomacy, and more issues emerged as a result of the breadth of extent.

The Balkans in Bulgarian Foreign Policy during the Post-Cold War Era and Necessity for Public Diplomacy

Following the dismissal of communist leader Todor Zhivkov on November 10, 1989, structural changes have taken place in Bulgaria. Foreign Minister Petar Mladenov, who succeeded Zhivkov, tried to improve the country's image in the international arena. As a result of the Gorbachev policies, the leader of the USSR, hints that change in the structure of the international system would take place were taken into consideration by the Bulgarian decision-makers. With the end of the Cold War period, Bulgaria faced a series of problems in the foreign policy. In addition to the country's ethnic and political problems, the Yugoslavia-based disintegration process in the Balkans posed geopolitical risks for the Sofia administration. During this period, Bulgaria, having deteriorated relations with Turkey because of Zhivkov's regime attempts to assimilate the Turkish minority, and with the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, it was deprived of a big power in international

politics. As a result of these developments, Bulgaria faced foreign policy challenges in the early 1990s.

On the other hand, these risks included opportunities in oneself. In the words of Zhelyu Zhelev, the first President of Bulgaria of the transition to democracy, "for the first time, Bulgaria has had the opportunity to guarantee its security and national independence in the face of regional and global developments (Özlem, 2019: 169)." Yet, even though Bulgaria is considered as a small-scale state at the level of international system, it has had the opportunity to become an active actor of the Balkans regional sub-system. In this context, it is seen that Zhelev has put forward good neighborhood relations, finding solutions to the problems in the Balkans and the integration of the country with Europe as the new period objective of Bulgaria's foreign policy (Zhelev, 2008:73).

When looked at the issue from the application point, 345.960 ethnic Turks had to migrate to Turkey in 1989 because of the assimilation policies of Zhivkov regime. Immediately after the forced migration to Turkey, Bulgaria tried to end that crisis period in their relations with Ankara. By the signing of the *Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighboring, Cooperation and Security* in 1992, bilateral relations were put into a new framework and developed rapidly during the 1990's. Bulgaria, to have the confidence of Turkey, allowed political activities of the *Movement for Rights and Freedoms*, the majority of which were constituted by the ethnic Turks, in that period. This initiative of Bulgaria also aimed to extinguish the international image that was damaged due to assimilation attempts between the years of 1984 and 1989. On the other hand, as seen in the example of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1992, the bloody disintegration process of Yugoslavia has created a regional mobility. Moreover, the issue of Yugoslavia had frightening consequences for Bulgaria, which experienced ethnic

problems a few years before due to Turkish minority. Yugoslavia crisis carried risk for all countries in Balkans because of its potential to create instability at regional level. That is why Bulgarian decision-makers tried to follow a constructive policy. In this context, Bulgaria has gained the trust of NATO and the EU as it has set out to cooperate with the Euro-Atlantic institutions in both Bosnia and Herzegovina and especially the Kosovo crisis. Therefore, Zhelev's emphasis on the integration process with Western and European institutions in particular has shown itself in the new term. The pro-Western Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) party, which came to power in 1997, has made progress in membership of Euro-Atlantic institutions, and continued by Tsar Simeon II, who came to power in 2001, a sign of a new era in Bulgarian foreign policy (Baeva, 2012: 170, 177-178). Consequently, Bulgaria became a NATO member in March 2004 and EU member in January 2007 due to under the influence of conjunctural convenience brought by NATO's and EU's enlargement strategies (Özlem, 2019: 172-178).

While Bulgaria's foreign policy, which is outlined above, was followed in the post-Cold War period in the 1990's to improve bilateral relations with neighbors and to establish regional peace, it is noteworthy that the first 10-year period of the 2000's was focused on Euro-Atlantic membership. Thus, the GERB party, that came to power in 2009, aims to maintain good neighboring relations and to become a regional power in the Balkans so the issue of gaining respectability in the Euro-Atlantic institutions has become more evident. However, it should be noted that with the effective return of the Russian Federation

(RF) to the international system under leadership of Vladimir Putin, the Sofia administration faced difficulties in implementing its objectives in the field. Russia's historical ties to Bulgaria, the Slav-Orthodox denominator, the sympathy of the Bulgarian people to Russia and Russia's influence on bureaucratic authorities in Bulgaria due to its connections from the USSR period, led to the Sofia administration being labeled as the "Trojan Horse"³ of Russia within NATO and the EU.

The practical reflections of Bulgaria's foreign policy, which is a simplified equation from the theoretical point of view, during the GERB governments, created complex image. Yet, for Bulgaria, which is a member of the EU and NATO while tries to pursue a policy of balance between the West and Russia, the sustainability of this situation is controversial. Furthermore, Bulgaria does not determine the network of relations between major powers in terms of qualitative and quantitative power elements; as can be seen in the example of the South Stream project, it is directly affected by this process. Therefore, the dysfunction in the general picture drove Bulgaria towards the Balkans and the idea of becoming a regional power became distinct. Although, Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borisov was emphasizing in his discourse (*24Chasa*, 27.08.2016) that they follow a foreign policy towards good relations with all neighbors also there has been a covert agreement in the Bulgarian public opinion that Sofia should focus on the Balkans again (www.eiri.bg).

Within this framework, emerges the debate that arises on how Bulgaria will become a political, economic, military and cultural center of power. From a political

³ The statement was rejected by the Bulgarian Prime Minister. For details: "Boiko Borisov: Balgariya Ne e Troyanskiyat Kon na Russiya v NATO", *Trud*, 01.03.2019. For a study on this subject see also: Raimond

Detrez, "Balgariya v ES – 'Černata Ovtsa' ili 'Troyanskiyat Kon' na ES?", *Balkanite Prez Vtoroto Desetiletie na XXI Vek*, ed. Aleksandır Kostov, Paradigma, Sofiya, 2015, pp. 144-163.

perspective, it can be asserted that Bulgaria became an important force in the Balkans and increased its prestige with the effective use of classical diplomacy during the GERB governments. During this period, Bulgaria developed its relations with its neighbors and tried to expand its political influence over the Western Balkan states by taking advantage of EU membership. The situation of the Sofia administration is very favorable for the area of political influence among the other 4 EU member states. Greece's problems with Albania and (North) Macedonia prevent it from being effective in the region whereas Romania stands out from Western Balkan issues. Croatia and Slovenia are identifying themselves as Central European countries rather than Balkan states. Those created an available area in favor of Bulgaria. Sofia administration has sought to fulfill the responsibilities of the EU for the Western Balkans. For instance, Bulgaria was actively involved in the Berlin Process, which was initiated in Germany in 2014 because the EU enlargement was stalled in the Western Balkans. Bulgaria has also been a catalyst in the Quadrilateral Meetings with Serbia, Greece and Romania.

Economically, Bulgaria is far from being a regional power in the Balkans. Since 2018, Bulgaria has a foreign trade volume of 67 billion dollars (www.mi.government.bg). Turkey, Greece and Romania are regional scale commercial partners, although Bulgaria is behind the three actors. Besides that, Bulgaria ranks last in terms of the EU's average income per capita. Although there was a relative increase in public welfare during the GERB governments, the main problems of the Bulgarian economy such as bribery, corruption and lack of infrastructure prevent it from being an economic power. For this reason, Borisov, who tries to attract foreign investments to his country, frequently uses the discourse of cooperation in the fields of energy,

tourism and transportation in the Balkans. However, it is difficult to say that it is successful in the fields of energy and tourism. Having lost a significant part of its domestic market to Greece in terms of tourism, Bulgaria has lost its position as a transit country also in terms of energy policies, as can be seen in the old-Nabucco, South Stream and TANAP projects. Hence, it can be stated that Bulgaria does not constitute an economic regional power in the Balkans.

It can be said that the situation in the military field is similar to the economy. The state became a NATO member in 2004 and has a total of 33,000 military personnel. Despite its shrinking and professionalizing army structure, it has unmodified military vehicles and inventories. The efforts of Air Force aircraft to be composed of Russian MiG-28's and to be replaced by US-made F-16 Block 70's have not been realized despite its NATO membership. Also the buying of the S-400 air defense systems by Turkey from Russia and the initiations of the negotiations in Serbia has caused concern to the Bulgarian public (Özlem, 2019: 221-222; *ClubZ*, 1.11.2019). According to Global Firepower's ranking military forces in 2019, the Balkan countries, when Turkey was ranked 9th, Greece 28th, Romania 40th, Bulgaria was able to get only at the 49th place (www.globalfirepower.com). Although other Balkan countries have lagged behind Bulgaria, the Sofia administration is currently far from being a military force in the Balkans, but as a member of NATO, it has the potential to serve as a model for other Balkan countries. As can be seen, although Bulgaria is a political regional power in the Balkans, is not the same case in economic and military fields. However, culturally, Bulgaria's status as a regional power is being determined by the effectiveness of Public Diplomacy.

Bulgarian Public Diplomacy and Its Functionality in Balkans

Bulgaria's ability to become an effective power in the Balkans regional sub-system, rather than economic and military elements, is directly proportional to its political and cultural activities. Although the military and economic power elements are possible in the medium and long term, short-term effects are possible through the political maneuvers of Sofia's administration. Under the effect of this situation, Public Diplomacy creates a wide area for Bulgarian decision-makers. However, in order to determine the importance of this area, it is necessary to state the reasons for the meaning of the region from the Bulgarian perspective. Firstly, considering the geographical location of Bulgaria, the Balkans' identity is more prominent than the Black Sea and European ones. Secondly, in the pre-Ottoman period, the Bulgarians established two great kingdoms in the region and from the historical perspective they are an inseparable part of the region. Thirdly, the Balkans is a field of political, economic, military and cultural rivalry between global and regional actors. Fourthly, Bulgaria's cognate and related community found in the Balkans forms its demographic ties in the region (Özlem, 2018: 231-232). For these reasons, the Balkans are a vital area of interest for Bulgaria.

In the light of the above-mentioned parameters, while the geographical and historical situation provides a static ground for Bulgaria, the fact that being a multidimensional competition area of the region plays a dynamic role in shaping of the current equation. In this framework, apart from the implementation of traditional diplomacy, demographic ties for the Sofia create a favorable space for Public Diplomacy. There is a dual classification of "Bulgarian Citizens" and "Historical Bulgarian communities of Bulgarian origin" in Bulgaria's "National Strategy Document for

Bulgarian National Historical Communities Abroad and Bulgarian Citizens Abroad" dated 23.07.2014 adopted by the Bulgarian Council of Ministers. It is seen that all of the historical Bulgarian communities in the second class are located in the Balkans except Russia, Moldova and Ukraine (www.strategy.bg). In other words, in the regional equation, Bulgaria is more likely to achieve effective results in the short term by benefiting from cognates and related communities with Public Diplomacy.

When looking at the population of cognates and related communities of the target group of Bulgarian Public Diplomacy on a Balkan scale, at the varying population rates there is a demographic link in all neighboring countries. In terms of numerical distribution, according to official data in the 2011 census, 18,543 people in Serbia and 7,336 people in Romania identified themselves as Bulgarians. In 2002, while 1,417 people were recorded as Bulgarian in North Macedonia, only around 450 ethnic Bulgarians were living in Turkey. However, according to the Bulgarian public opinion, around 50,000 Bulgarians live in Albania as well (*Mediapool*, 14.10.2017) in spite of their being just a few thousands in fact. In addition to this, due to cultural and linguistic ties, there are Macedonians and Torbeshes in North Macedonia and the Goranis in Kosovo.

In terms of Bulgarian Public Diplomacy institutions, the activities of the State Agency for Foreign Bulgarians (ДАБЧ-АБА), the Institute for Culture of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and BNR Radio Bulgaria, as well as the Bulgarian Ministry of Science and Education (MSE), come into prominence. The Association of Bulgarian Schools Abroad (АБУЧ-АБСА) can also be mentioned as a non-state actor. The State Agency for Bulgarians Abroad, which is primarily concerned with the issue, was established in 1992 as a unit operating under the Council of

Ministers. As a coordination unit for the implementation of the state policy towards the Bulgarians in the world, ABA has strategic duties such as to protect the Bulgarian ethno-cultural area abroad, to ensure Bulgarian unity and to establish the Bulgarian lobby abroad (www.aba.government.bg/). ABA operates in a broad geographical area, and has the authority to issue the Bulgarian descent certificate, which is the basis for citizenship applications.

On the other hand, the Institute for Culture (*Darzhaven Vestnik*, 19.06.2012) established in 2012 within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, serves to support the fulfillment of the priorities of Bulgarian foreign policy through the usage of cultural diplomacy and to become an integrated part of international cultural relations. The Institute aims to create a positive image of Bulgaria and to carry out activities in order to expand the country's cultural presence abroad (<http://www.culture-mfa.bg/>). In other words, the Institute for Culture is an important instrument of Bulgarian Public Diplomacy. The Bulgarian National Radio (BNR), contributes to the Bulgarian Public Diplomacy as an international media body, and broadcasts in nine foreign languages except Bulgarian. The radio, established in 1935, in the languages it broadcasts mostly transmits news about Bulgaria (www.bnr.bg/radiobulgaria). Apart from this, even though there are news in English in the Bulgarian news portals, it is not possible to evaluate them under the scope of Public Diplomacy. Language courses given to a limited number of foreign students by the Bulgarian Government and the abroad activities of the Bulgarian Ministry of Science and Education are noteworthy. In the meantime, ABSA is another institution in the field of education. ABSA, established in 2007, is committed to expanding the Bulgarian language and culture abroad and assisting the educational activities of Bulgarian schools abroad

(www.abgschool.org). ABSA, defining its identity as a non-governmental, independent and voluntary association, is an integral component of Public Diplomacy with its activities.

Among the 5 classes categorized above in terms of the functionality of Public Diplomacy, it is observed that Bulgaria has significant potential in the Balkans. This potential is manifested in the context of cognate and related communities, while it is far from being directed to the majority population group of other neighboring countries. The fact that the institutions of Bulgarian Public Diplomacy are also focused on the Bulgarian population abroad strengthens this aspect. As a matter of fact, the Sofia administration is sensitive to the issues of its citizens in the region, but conveys their demands to the addressing states. For instance, Bulgaria (Özlem, 2018: 246; <https://www.isac-fund.org>) which transmits to the Belgrade administration the right of education in the mother tongue of the Bulgarian minority in Serbia, communicates with the cognates and related communities through its diplomats. This also means that Bulgaria does not remain reckless towards its cognates. This situation is not unique for just GERB governments, it is qualified as Bulgaria's state policy. Therefore, although the first and second stages of Public Diplomacy, *listening* and *advocacy*, are fulfilled, it can be said that this situation carries the traces of classical diplomacy.

When the educational activities are examined as *exchange diplomacy*, it is seen that two aspects come to the fore in the studies. The first one is the scholarships granted by the Bulgarian government, and the second is the Bulgarian Ministry of Science and Education's activities to teach Bulgarian for Bulgarians living abroad. In addition, Bulgarian language scholarships granted by the Bulgarian government can be stated with in this context (See at:

www.slav.uni-sofia.bg/index.php/summer-seminar). In more details, there is a scholarship program for Bulgarian cognates from North Macedonia, Serbia, Romania, Kazakhstan, Moldova and Ukraine, which has been systematically provided by the Bulgarian government since 1993 via ABA. While the scholarship process was carried out in coordination with the MSE, its scope was expanded over time. The program, which was implemented with 400 students, reached up to 2.000 students during the GERB governments and the scholarship grants was increased over the years (*Dnevnik*, 25.03.2015). For example, the monthly scholarship grant was increased from 105 Leva in 2015 to 240 Leva since 2019 (*Offnews*, 28.12.2018). Within the scope of the scholarship program, students from North Macedonia are given a quota of up to 150 people, while young people belonging to historical Bulgarian minorities abroad are expected to remain connected to their homeland.

On the other hand, draws attention the Sunday School (*Nedelni Uchilishta*) programs for the Bulgarian population living abroad, an initiative of the Ministry of Science and Education of Bulgaria launched in 2013 with a Decision of the Council of Ministers, and financed by the Bulgarian government (See at: <https://www.mon.bg/bg/174>). The geographic area of this practice, which coincided with the period of GERB party being in power, was the US, RF, China, Spain, Germany, UK, France, Morocco, etc. and Greece was the only country from the Balkans to be included in the program (https://www.mon.bg/upload/21039/zap2709_21102019_nedelni-uchilishta.pdf). The same situation is observed in ABSA activities as a non-governmental organization. The ABSA, which is complementary to the work of the MSE, includes only Greece from the Balkans. As it can be seen, both the scholarship program and the Sunday Schools, constitute the

educational dimension of Bulgaria's Public Diplomacy in the Balkans. Finally, even though the number is symbolic, the summer language courses scholarships granted by the Bulgarian Government and the usage of the EU's Erasmus program may also be included in the exchange/educational diplomacy.

Bulgarian National Radio (BNR) and Bulgarian News Agency (BTA) stand out in terms of international news broadcasting. Among all these, except for the Bulgarian BTA, while broadcasting only in English generally it reports the developments in Bulgaria. Therefore, apart from being an official state news agency, it does not assume any function that can be considered within the scope of Public Diplomacy. Against this background, considering the BNR's publications, other than Bulgarian, Bulgaria-based news are transmitted in 9 languages. The concerned languages include Turkish, Serbian, Albanian and Greek constitute the Balkan dimension. While only Romanian is lacking from the languages of the region, it is understood that the traditional argument of Bulgaria is that Macedonian language is not different from Bulgarian. BNR's reporting the news only about Bulgaria is a deficiency in terms of international news broadcasting. However, broadcasting by using the languages of the countries of the region is an indication of a limited effect. Otherwise, there is no international broadcasting organization in Bulgaria such as Russia Today, Al Jazeera, Deutsche Welle, BBC and etc., that broadcasts the news of the country in question in the language of the country in the form of TV or internet journalism.

Finally, when examining the functionality of Bulgaria's Public Diplomacy in the context of cultural diplomacy, it is faced with a broad spectrum. First of all, it is important to note that there are no international brands that are identified with Bulgaria such as are Coca-Cola, Sony, Mercedes, Ikea, Panda, Nestle and

so on, which can be evaluated in the context of Public Diplomacy. Instead of this, the subjects that may be identified under Bulgarian brand or cultural diplomacy are mostly handcrafted traditional products, folklore dance and traditional national clothes (Kaneva, 2011:1). Besides, Bulgaria does not have any series or films that may be used as soft power elements.

The Institute for Culture, an affiliate of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which is an important institution in Bulgaria's Public Diplomacy, carries out international scientific and cultural activities, but its geographical focus is on the Western world rather than on the Balkans. Activities include cinemas, photo exhibitions, commemoration meetings and other cultural issues. The same situation is manifested in terms of the external relations of the Ministry of Culture. In the context of its abroad activities, the Institute for Culture, operating under the Ministry, are active in 10 European capitals (<http://mc.government.bg/>) Among these capitals, the only one located in the Balkans is Skopje. This shows that North Macedonia has a more privileged place in the cultural diplomacy of Bulgaria compared to other Balkan countries. Even though cultural diplomacy was tried to be developed with these institutions during the GERB governments, it can be argued that due to the wide geography targeted, the influence power in the Balkans was kept to a minimum.

On the other hand, it is observed that the Bulgarian passport is the most effective instrument in the Balkans among the Bulgarian cultural diplomacy. The Bulgarian passport gained strength and prestige after the country's EU membership in 2007, and has been particularly attractive among Bulgarian and related communities in the Western Balkans. In addition to the blockage of the Western Balkan countries' EU membership, and the economic problems in these

countries, increased the demand for Bulgarian passports. Such that, as a result of these economic problems in the mentioned countries, the Balkan nations want to go to the EU countries without a visa and to settle there, having a Bulgarian passport. Therefore, in addition to the symbolic historical Bulgarian minorities living in North Macedonia, Serbia and Albania, the proportion of having a Bulgarian passport between Torbesh and Gorani people, which Bulgarians consider to be a cognate of Bulgarians but having little in common except linguistic similarity, has increased (*www.haberler.com*, 22.03.2012). Tens of thousands of Macedonians appear to become Bulgarian citizens by identifying themselves as Bulgarians (*DW Bulgariya*, 06.12.2012; *Mediapool*, 14.12.2017) this situation arose from time to time among Muslim Albanians as well (*France24*, 09.07.2017).

The issue of how the Balkan people get their Bulgarian passport is based on the Bulgarian Citizenship Law. According to the article 15/1 of the Citizenship Law of Bulgaria (www.lex.bg), individuals who receive the "Bulgarian descent" certificate may become citizens of Bulgaria in a privileged way. The "Bulgarian descent" certificate is given by ABA. Within this scope, ABA, which gives Bulgarian descent certificates to hundreds of thousands of people, also fulfills Bulgarian state policy. Yet, in the 1990's, the policy of issuing Bulgarian passports to Macedonians began to spread throughout the Western Balkans along with the GERB government. Considering Bulgaria's passport policy objectives, it appears that a number of reasons are effective. The first one, Bulgaria wants to gain a demographic power in the Balkans and spread Bulgarian culture in the region. The second is to seek a solution to the Bulgarian demographic crisis, albeit in the short term. The third is to ensure that the people to whom they gave citizenship acquire national

minority status (as seen in the example of Albania in 2017) in their country of residence. The fourth, its aim is to establish a close dialogue with these national minorities and to use it as a political instrument against these states. It should be emphasized that the stated aims mostly focus on the historical geography of the Greater Bulgaria Idea. The increasing political influence of Bulgaria in the Balkans, especially during the GERB governments, has led to the conviction that among the peoples of the region, the Greater Bulgaria is intended to be established.

However, a bribery scandal occurred in 2018 regarding the issuance of Bulgarian descendency documents by ABA. While it was seen that the members of the ABA were providing income in return for the issuance of these documents, and this development caused great damage to the image of the institution. As a result of the reactions of the Bulgarian diaspora and the public opinion even the closure of ABA came to Borisov's agenda (*DW Bulgariya*, 22.01.2019) but the decision could not be taken due to the opposition of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) and the Patriotic Union. Essentially, ABA is Bulgaria's main expertise institute in dealing with Bulgarians in foreign countries. Although this scandal overshadows other activities of the institution, it is understood that it will not be easy to close it because of other missions performed by ABA. In fact, ABA acts as a bridge between Bulgaria and the associations, schools, churches and other cultural institutions in the abroad countries where the Bulgarians are living. In this sense, ABA is in direct contact with more than 1000 associations outside Bulgaria and more than 300 Bulgarian schools located outside Bulgaria (*BNR*, 19.05.2018) and cooperates with a total of 105 associations, church foundations and schools from the Balkans (www.aba.government.bg). On the other hand, the fact

that the ABA budget consisted of only 900.000 Leva since 2018, reflects the contrast between the breadth and functionality of the field. It can be argued that this situation triggered the bribery scandal process. To sum up, apart from the student scholarships program coordinated by the MSE and ABA, the most active field is the issuance of the Bulgarian descent certificate for the achievement of the above-mentioned objectives. Yet, it can be stated that this activity has the highest impact coefficient.

Conclusion

According to the findings of the study, it is seen that Public Diplomacy is not only an area of activity specific to large-scale states but it has become also of interest for medium and small-scale states. In the post-Zhivkov period, Bulgaria started to form instruments of Public Diplomacy and established ABA as a specialist organization in addition to the activities carried out under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Culture, and the MSE.

The qualitative and quantitative power elements owned by Bulgaria, it has been an obstacle to carry out Public Diplomacy on a global scale. While developing policies aimed at Bulgarian citizens and historical Bulgarian minorities living abroad, the Balkans was the main focus into becoming a regional political force. For this reason, Bulgaria has adopted a proactive policy during the GERB governments, focusing on Public Diplomacy alongside the traditional diplomacy in the implementation of the Balkans policy. The target population for the pursuit of this policy is the symbolic number of Bulgarian minorities and communities with linguistic affinity with the Bulgarians in the Balkans.

It is seen that during the period of GERB, Bulgaria benefited from all stages of the 5 groups which were mentioned from a functional point of view in the

implementation of Public Diplomacy in the Balkans. Bulgaria, by taking advantage of the classical diplomacy in *listening* and *advocacy*, Student Scholarship Program, Sunday Schools, the activities of Institute for Culture and Radio Bulgaria's (BNR) broadcasts in regional languages focused on Bulgaria, were the other points of application. It can be stated that the impact coefficient of the student scholarship program and the Sunday Schools is more evident than the others. However, even though Bulgaria does not have a global brand in terms of *cultural diplomacy* and carries out this process with more traditional issues, the country's prestigious passport after EU membership has become the most effective cultural

instrument in the Balkans. By increasing its demographic power in the Balkans through this method, Bulgaria provides a political advantage to the countries of the region by providing legal status to its citizens. Finally, it is seen that North Macedonia has a privileged place in Bulgaria's Public Diplomacy in the Balkans. The Scholarship Programs, Sunday Schools, Institute for Culture and passport procedures show that North Macedonia is the main focus of Bulgarian Public Diplomacy in the region, and is prominent in comparison to other Balkan countries. Summarizing, it can be stated that Bulgaria tried to make the best of Public Diplomacy in its policy towards the Balkans during the GERB governments.

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