“Are Bulgarian and Macedonian different languages?” “Is there a Macedonian language, or is it just a dialect?” “Is it closer to Serbian or to Bulgarian?” “Do you understand one another when everybody speaks his or her native tongue?” When discussing the Macedonian imbroglio with people from other countries, citizens of Bulgaria and of the former Yugoslav republic of Macedonia are often asked such questions. They may seem naive, and some of them are surely improperly formulated. But they are representative of a certain pattern of thinking. In fact, these questions presuppose a certain commonsensical idea of identity, which takes for

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1 In this text, as in other chapters of the volume, I use different systems of transliteration of Cyrillic scripts. In the case of Macedonian and Serbian, I follow the canonical Latin transliteration of these languages (in Serbian it is very strict), which is based on the usage of special characters with diacritics (such as č, š, ž). However, these principles are not typical of the Latinization of Bulgarian and Russian scripts. In their cases I use English-derived digraphs (ch, sh, zh), as well as y, which corresponds to the j in Serbian and Macedonian. This system seems to be the most popular one and, at least in Bulgaria, it is currently accepted as official. Nevertheless, as the same system does not make a distinction between the vowel a and the schwa, for the sake of clarity, I use the character ā for the latter (that is, for what is ę in the Bulgarian Cyrillic).

This solution is not perfect, particularly since this text and some of the others discuss historical matters related to both Macedonian and Bulgarian history. The problem is that many historical personalities are claimed as national heroes by both Bulgarians and Macedonians—hence all the political problems related to the transliteration of one or another name. Should we, for instance, transliterate the name of Гоце Делчев, the famous revolutionary from late Ottoman Macedonia, as Gotse Delchev in the Bulgarian way, or as Goce Delčev in the modern Macedonian way? In most cases I have tried to follow the national self-identification of the person in question, but for hotly debated and delicate cases such as Delčev or Delchev this is difficult. That is why in many instances I give both possible transliterations, separated with a slash. But the frequent repetition of the same names often obliges me to choose one of the models. And sometimes, it is simply not clear what transliteration should be adopted (for instance, in quotations of texts from the early or mid-nineteenth century). As a result, often I simply make a more or less random choice. Finally, these problems are also part of the Bulgarian-Macedonian “dis/entanglement.”
granted the direct link between linguistic classification, ethnic belonging and nationhood.

At least for most Macedonian and Bulgarian scholars, this link is absolutely legitimate. Moreover, they also ask and, even now, debate these questions. Both of the scholarly communities believe that answering them entails the affirmation, or alternately, the questioning—even the denial—of their own national identity. Thus, while Bulgarian specialists deny there are basic differences between their native tongue and Macedonian, for their Macedonian colleagues these are two clearly different languages, each with its own fundamental peculiarities and historical development. The staunch negation of a distinct Macedonian language is the reason why it is not taught in any university or other educational institution in Bulgaria. The same holds true for the Bulgarian language in former Yugoslav Macedonia: the local philologists respond with a boycott of the official idiom of Bulgaria.

The issue is also directly implicated in state politics. In 1992 Bulgaria was the first country to recognize Macedonia’s independence from Yugoslavia, proclaimed a few months earlier. However, soon afterward, President of the Republic Zhelyu Zhelev announced that Sofia recognized only the political formation named “Republic of Macedonia” and would never affirm the existence of a Macedonian nation or language. Consequently, the Bulgarian anticommunist president and government started repeating “scholarly” clichés firmly established during the nationalist-communist regime of Todor Zhivkov. According to the view that is canonical in Sofia, the Macedonian nation was “artificially created” on the basis of the Bulgarian ethnic majority in the former Yugoslav Macedonia. According to the same credo, just like the nation, the Macedonian language is “artificial” and created by political fiat: it is in fact a Bulgarian “dialect,” modified through a politically motivated “Serbification.” For the representatives of Sofia, Bulgaria and Macedonia nevertheless have a “common history,” and the inhabitants of the latter must recognize “historical realities”—in particular, the “historical fact” that the Slavs of Macedonia have always been Bulgarians and that today’s “ethnic Macedonians” are their descendants.

Given this interpretation, in April 1994, during an official visit to Skopje, the Bulgarian minister of education refused to sign a bilateral agreement composed “in the Bulgarian language and the Macedonian language.” Sofia’s representatives rejected such a formula and suggested instead the vague expression “official languages of the two countries.” The refusal of Skopje’s officials to accept this was just the beginning of a long series of scandals throughout the 1990s that became famous as the “language