

## PROJECT PROPOSAL: FACING OUR PAST

### Concept Note

#### I. Background

The project "Facing Our Past" is provoked by some events from October 2011. During reports on the Skopje's television for the shooting days of the movie "Treto poluvreme" (Third Half) from Darko Mitrevski with a plot about the tragic events during the war when the Bulgarian troops and security services assisted in the deportation and extermination of the Jewish communities in Macedonia and Greece, Bulgarian MEPs – Andrey Kovatchev /GERB/, Stanimir Iltchev /NDSV/ and Evgeni Kirilov /Coalition for Bulgaria/ sent a letter of protest to the EU Enlargement Commissioner Stefan Fuhle. Signatories insist for immediate reaction by the Commission to the future release of the film, pointing out that it "roughly falsified Bulgaria's history" and spreads "hate speech". The national press and electronic media immediately reacted with hostility to the film, which no one had seen and supported MEP's views pointing out Bulgarian people's tolerance in saving the Jewish communities from the "Old Lands". The public opinion was irradiated with false messages from famous historians /prof. Georgi Markov, associated professor Plamen Pavlov/who categorically rejected the issue of responsibility of the Bulgarian state for the deportation of the Macedonian and Greek Jews during World War II. BHC established contact with the director of the "Treto poluvreme" – Darko Mitrevski. We extended also invitation for participation in a discussion in Sofia to the organizations of Jews in Bulgaria, historians and other experts. We have suggested the idea of showing the movie to the Macedonian Director and to the Chairman of the Bulgarian Union of Filmmakers Georgi Stoyanov. We have received assurances for future partnership in the project from the Cultural Center in Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski. Ongoing are enhanced contacts with representatives of Skopje's university community.

BHC is convinced that the hostile attitudes in Bulgarian society to the future Macedonian film is a result of the systematical denial of the crimes against humanity committed by the pre-war governments, which pushed into the involvement of Bulgaria into the war on the Nazi side. In spite of the anti-Semitic legislation passed and the systematic violations of the rights of the Jews, which ensued, the dominant historical narrative in Bulgarian society highlights the heroic act of 42 MPs, civil society activists and church representatives, who mobilized the public into preventing the deportation of the Jews from the "Old Lands" to the Nazi gas chambers.

The problem for BHC as a respected human rights organization is related in first place to the right to free expression which undoubtedly has every director both from Sofia and Skopje. Neighborly relations and cyclical inflammations about different events tragically bounded the two countries cannot become a ground for censorship on a movie which

was condemned for instigating “hate speech” without being ever seen! On the other hand, we know the public appearances and positions of Jewish communities in Bulgaria, and also in Macedonia. We know that these communities are concerned with the fact that the dominant Bulgarian historiography overexposes the saving of 45 thousand Jews from the “Old Lands” in 1943, and hides the complicity of governments of Bulgaria to the Holocaust in the Aegean Thrace and Vardar Macedonia. The reasons that led to the actions of some politicians and the then civil society not to allow the deportations from the “Old Lands” were sufficiently analyzed in articles and books. But we shouldn’t forget that history should be a place for shared memory. This means that it has to fit into and stories of the families who lost their relatives because of the raging ideology and actions, to which unfortunately Bulgaria has decided to join after it became an ally of the Third Reich in the period 1940 – 1944.

## II. Project aim and means for achieving it

The aim of the project is to correct the dominating historical narrative of the involvement of the then government of Bulgaria in crimes against humanity as an occupying force.

Our initiative foresees:

1. Showing the film “Treto poluvreme” in the House of the Cinema in the presence of its Director Darko Mitrevski and with the cooperation of the Union of Filmmakers in Skopje and Sofia.
2. Organize a press conference with the participation of Darko Mitrevski, film critics, directors, producers
3. Organize academic discussions with the participation of historians, cultural anthropologists and sociologists from the University of Skopje and Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski. We envisage the participation also of international scholars, such as Nadege Ragaru, Stephan Troebst and other authors of books about Bulgarian history and politics and the fate of the Jewish communities in the Balkans.

As a non-governmental organization, BHC believes that the discussion can contribute to the dialogue between Sofia and Skopje both in the context of Macedonia’s EU accession, as well as in bilateral relations. The film “Treto poluvreme” should be placed in the correct political and historical context. Hostile relations between Bulgaria and Macedonia countries, apart from other factors, are due to the silence of our historiography on the unpleasant events of the Second World War. There are more and more titles of European and English-language books related to the deportation of Jews from neighboring Macedonia and Greece, thematizing the behavior of the Bulgarian army as an occupying force. We know that nationalist circles, organizations like BNS, VMRO and “Ataka” will oppose our activities. It is possible that circles in Macedonia too might use the event for political purposes. Yet, these should not be the forces which control the historical and the political narratives in our countries as they cash on the

ignorance of the wider society. Our targets are going to be also the young historians from Bulgarian Universities, whom we will actively seek to involve in our project. As the release of the film in Macedonia and in other countries in the world will certainly attract publicity in Bulgaria, it is important to enter into the discourse with knowledge and wisdom.

### III. Results:

The immediate result of the project will include an extensive publicity. Media planning of the event, as well as the messages will be directed to academic audience; to intellectual and political elites. In the long-term perspective, a significant success for us would be the change of the educational content. We believe that our project fits into a wider European Discussion on history and memory. We cannot overlook the fact that in celebration of the International Day of the Holocaust Greece sent to the UN Human Rights Council a warning message. Greece wanted to be marked the exclusive role of Bulgaria as a savior of 45 000 Jews, but also to highlight its responsibility for its undisputed complicity in the extermination of more than 11 000 Jews from the lands it occupied during WW II. The study of the white spots, which for one reason or another exist today in the history books, especially in the Balkans, as well as in the popular discourse is essential in the process of integrating our societies into a common European perspective. BHC has a good experience with its efforts to influence the public and to achieve legislative and institutional changes in many spheres of social life.

Sincerely,

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