

FORUM

Macedonian Historiography: The Question of Identity and Politics

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Historians are playing an important role in Macedonian society. Their understanding of history and their focus of research interest revolves around the national identity of Macedonians and differentiating them from Others. In recent decades, the political debates in the Republic of (North) Macedonia and its relations with Bulgaria and Greece have had important impact on historiographic production and the new (revisionist) interpretations of the past. History has become an essential element in contemporary politics that is key for framing the national identity of the Macedonians. In this new political context historians are even more engaged in political campaigns and debates, thus making them and their historiographical work one of the sources for symbolic division in the country.

This article surveys the predominant trends in Macedonian historiography in recent decades. A central issue is the place of history in the contemporary political debate. Of particular relevance is how historians have approached the two agreements with neighbouring Bulgaria from 2017 (the Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighbourliness and Cooperation between the Republic of Macedonia and the Republic of Bulgaria) and with Greece from 2018 (the Prespa Agreement), and consequently, the change of the constitutional name of the country from Macedonia to North Macedonia in 2019. The two agreements led to the foundation of two commissions for examining historical, archaeological and educational issues between North Macedonia on the one side and Bulgaria and Greece on the other. The existence of these commissions sparked strong reactions among historians, politicians and the public, particularly once officials in Sofia openly denied Macedonian ethnic identity and language. Such developments show the role history plays in politics and identity questions in North Macedonia and Southeastern Europe (both within EU and non-EU member countries).¹ Because of linguistic constraints, this article deals only with the works from ethnic Macedonian historians and does not include the work of Albanian historians from North Macedonia.

The majority of recent scholarship on Macedonian historiography deals with works from the late socialist period (the 1970s and 1980s) and especially the first two decades of the post-socialist era. The majority of studies revolve around the question of national identity and reveal that historians are playing an important part in shaping the political discourse of the major political parties. Moreover, these historians play an important role in wider Macedonian society by promoting and creating an understanding of history that frames the question of national identity around defending Macedonians from Others, thus creating a potential for ethnic conflict between the ethnic Albanians and Macedonians living in the country.²

¹ The author of this article has been a member of the Multidisciplinary Expert Commission for Historical and Educational Issues between North Macedonia and Bulgaria since its foundation in 2018.

² Noteworthy articles are: Ulf Brunnbauer, 'Serving the Nation: Historiography in the Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) after Socialism', *Historien* 4 (2003–4): 161–82; Robert Pichler, 'Historiography and the Politics of Education in the Republic of Macedonia (1991–2008)', in *'Transition' and the Politics of History Education in Southeastern Europe*, ed. Augusta Dimou (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2009), 217–49; Irena Stefoska, 'Nation, Education and Historiographic

During the last two decades political changes in North Macedonia have affected bilateral relations with neighbouring countries. Namely, in 2006 the right-wing nationalistic and populist VMRO – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (*Vnatrešna makedonska revolucionerna organizacija – Demokratska partija za makedonsko nacionalno edinstvo*; VMRO-DPMNE)³ led by Nikola Gruevski⁴ came to power and looked to the historical profession for support during the name dispute with neighbouring Greece. The importance and the place of history for the Macedonian ethno-national project was reflected in several policies of Gruevski's coalition government with the Democratic Union for Integration (*Bashkimi Demokratik për Integrim / Demokratska unija za integracija*; BDI/DUI⁵). These included massive archaeological excavations, and most notably the implementation of the state-funded project Skopje 2014, which aimed to give a classical appearance to the capital city. Owing to the focus on ancient history, the government's policy was named 'antiquisation' (*antikvizacija*), while some intellectuals referred to other terms such as 'archaeophilia' (*arheofilija*) and/or 'anticomania' (*antikomanija*).⁶ However, the government's policies did not only affect the field of ancient history. They provoked new interpretations of nineteenth and early twentieth century history, and especially the history of the socialist period (1944–90), i.e. socialist Macedonia and Yugoslavia.

Before I continue with the presentation of the latest developments in Macedonian historiography, it is worth mentioning that Macedonian historians currently have at their disposal several options to publish their research works, although the profession is run in a highly centralised way. Financing mainly comes from the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Education and Science. Almost all professional historians are employed in either the Department of History in the Faculty of Philosophy in Skopje or the Institute of National History in Skopje.⁷ Most research appears in the two well-established scientific journals *Bulletin (Glasnik)* and *History (Istorija)*, although there was also a *Macedonian Historical Review (Makedonska istoriska revija)* which was founded fifteen years ago but only produced three issues.⁸ In addition, Macedonian historians make use of the unlimited opportunities afforded by electronic and print media to communicate with the public. They have also promoted new museums (the Museum of the Macedonian Struggle for Statehood and Independence, the Museum of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation and the Museum of the Victims of the Communist Regime) and written scripts for more than one hundred documentaries on Macedonian history from ancient times to the present day.

Since the 1990s, historians' focus has remained on political history and has primarily addressed questions concerning 'Macedonian statehood' (*makedonska državnost*) and national identity. Almost half of the articles published in the *Bulletin* cover the nineteenth and twentieth centuries while only one third concentrate on ancient and medieval history. When covering nineteenth and twentieth century history, most articles focus on the national question and the politics of neighbouring

Narratives: The Case of the Socialist Republic of Macedonia (1994–1990)', in *The Ambiguous Nation: Case Studies from Southeastern Europe in the 20th Century*, eds. Ulf Brunnbauer and Hannes Grandits (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2013), 195–229.

³ The abbreviation VMRO refers to the historical organisation (*Vnatrešna makedonska revolucionerna organizacija*) or IMRO (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation).

⁴ Nikola Gruevski is a Macedonian politician who was president of the VMRO-DPMNE from 2003 to 2017 and prime minister of the Macedonian government from 2006 to 2016. In 2016–17 he was accused of corruption, abuse of power and ordering illegal wiretapping. In 2018 Gruevski escaped to Hungary, where he asked for political asylum.

⁵ The BDI/DUI was founded in 2002 by Ali Ahmeti, the former political leader of the KLA in the Republic of Macedonia.

⁶ Irena Stefanoska, 'Greek Gifts: Archaeophilia, Ochlocracy and Monochromatism in Contemporary Macedonia.' Paper presented at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington DC, 10 Mar. 2010; Nade Proeva, 'Nacionalnite mitovi vo sovremena Evropa i negiranjeto na makedonskiot identitet', *Slavia Meridionalis* 12 (2012): 107–58.

⁷ In 2005 the government of the Republic of Macedonia recognised Tetovo University with Albanian as the language of instruction. At the Faculty of Philosophy there is a Department of History where a small community of Albanian historians exist. In 2008 the Institute of Spiritual and Cultural Heritage of Albanians was opened in Skopje. Among other things, there are an important number of historians dealing with Albanian history in the Balkans.

⁸ See: <http://periodica.fzf.ukim.edu.mk/mhr/issues.html> (last visited 1 September 2023).

countries towards Macedonians and Macedonia.⁹ There are only a few articles dealing with social and cultural history and no articles on emerging fields such as environmental history. Moreover, interdisciplinary approaches are very rare. The story looks very similar in the other two journals: *History* and *Macedonian Historical Review*.

While the topics tackled by historians have remained the same, worth mentioning and studying are some new interpretative approaches. The first concerns ancient history, more precisely the ancient Macedonians and the ancient Kingdom of Macedon: here the focus is on the origins of the ethnic Macedonians and what sort of continuous statehood can be retraced. The second is the topic of the revolutionary period, i.e. the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century. Third is the history and representations of socialist Macedonia and Yugoslavia. In each case, recent publications show how interpretations of the past have become politicised in response to the new political developments with neighbouring Greece and especially Bulgaria. Equally notable are the polemical denunciations of those with different views and understandings of the past and how the past informs contemporary societies.

Concerning ancient history, the narrative shaped during the last two decades is inseparable from the question of what kind of continuous statehood and nationhood Macedonia possesses. During the socialist period, ancient history was interpreted predominantly through the prism of historical and cultural heritage and was not considered part of the national history.¹⁰ With independence from the Yugoslavian federation in 1991, representations of Macedonia's ancient history such as the sun of Vergina were incorporated into national symbols such as the national flag. Following the agreement between Greece and the Republic of Macedonia in 1995, the sun of Vergina was removed from the national flag. Regarding the historians and their works in the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, narratives of Macedonia's continuous statehood and nation were mainly promoted by amateur pseudo-historians, and criticised by professional historians.¹¹ These amateur works claimed to uncover a process of 'ethnogenesis' whereby a Macedonian ethnic identity was formed out of the first substrate provided by the ancient Macedonians. However, the professional historians who criticised these views also supported the theory that ancient Macedonians were an 'ethnic' group or culture distinct from the ancient Greeks, but also from other ancient cultures, such as the Thracians or Illyrians.¹² However, very soon professional historians embraced the theory of the nation's ancient origins first propounded by those working outside of academia. What is more, this myth of an ancient and continuous Macedonia was disseminated in the reformed curricula for elementary and secondary education in 2004–5 at a time when the government was led by the Social Democratic Alliance for Macedonia (*Socijaldemokratski sojuz na Makedonija*; SDSM) and the BDI/DUI coalition. Since then, history textbooks for sixth and seventh grade in elementary schools and those for the first year in high schools have openly promoted the myth of continuity.¹³

This continuity thesis became the official state narrative after 2006, once a right-wing nationalist and populist government led by VMRO-DPMNE was formed.¹⁴ The support from professional historians for this attempt at a nationalist revision of history was signalled in 2008 with the publication

⁹ Petar Todorov, 'Istorija u Makedoniji: nauka, političko pitanje ili pitanje identiteta?', in *Ogledi o historiografiji i nacionalizmu u Jugoistočnoj Evropi*, ed. Amir Duranović (Sarajevo: UMHS, 2019), 129–40.

¹⁰ For example, see Mihailo Apostolski, ed., *Istorija na makedonskiot narod*, 3 vols. (Skopje: Institut za nacionalna istorija, 1969).

¹¹ Irena Stefoska and Darko Stojanov, 'A Tale in Stone and Bronze: Old/New Strategies for Political Mobilization in the Republic of Macedonia', *Nationalities Papers* 45, no. 3 (2017): 360.

¹² For example, see Nade Proeva, *Studii za antičkite Makedonci* (Ohrid: Bibliotheca Historia Antiqua Macedonica, 1997).

¹³ Darko Stojanov and Jovan Bliznakovski, 'Between History and Politics: Understanding Antiquitas Myths in Macedonian History Textbooks', in *Myths and Mythical Spaces: Conditions and Challenges for History Textbooks in Albania and South-Eastern Europe*, eds. Claudia Lichnofsky, Enriketa Pandelejmoni and Darko Stojanov (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2018), 77–96; Darko Stojanov, 'In Search of Autochthony: A Case Study of the Great Migrations Period as Presented in History Textbooks in Macedonia', *Der Donauraum* 50, no. 3–4 (2010): 225–34. Reprinted in: *Povijest u nastavi*, 10, n. 19/2012, 1, 33–44.

¹⁴ Stefoska and Stojanov, 'A Tale', 356–9.

of *The History of the Macedonian People* by a group of historians from the Institute of National History in Skopje. The chapters on ancient history openly promote the theory of '[the] continuity of Ancient Macedonians and the process of their symbiosis with Slavs'. Namely, according to this view, the entire 'process enabled mutual interaction, coexistence and symbiosis between ancient Macedonians and newly arrived Slavs in Macedonia'.¹⁵ Along with the promotion of the myth of continuity, other myths are also visible, such as the myth that Macedonia is the first European Christian country or that Macedonia was the centre of cultural and spiritual processes in the early medieval ages, thus promoting Macedonia as the cradle of culture and literacy in Europe.¹⁶ The incorporation of ancient history into the national canon was also supported by historians dealing with the history of the nineteenth and twentieth century – a period characterised by most Macedonian historians as the period of 'national revival' and the 'Macedonian national-liberation movement'. Historians justified the lack of pre-existing evidence for the 'ethnogenesis of the Macedonian people' in antiquity by arguing that, during the time of Yugoslav federation, research into this topic was risky and went against the policy of building Yugoslav identity.¹⁷

The second interpretative strand of note regards the history of the Macedonian national liberation movement or the revolutionary period. During the socialist period, historians emphasised the so-called 'socialist' revolutionaries from the Macedonian revolutionary organisation.¹⁸ This meant that a significant number of members of the Macedonian revolutionary organisation politically defined as right wing were not included in the national canon. During the socialist period and in the early 1990s there was consensus among professional historians that these historical personalities played a negative role in the Macedonian revolutionary movement and the struggle for the creation of the Macedonian national state. The first publications aiming to revise the national narrative came out in the early 2000s.¹⁹ Following 2006 and the political changes, the publications that sought to rehabilitate historical figures who were regarded critically and left out of the national canon have increased, as has the number of historians who support these new interpretations. Most of these kind of publications were supported and financed by the state archive of the Republic of Macedonia or the Ministry of Culture.²⁰ At the same time, in Skopje, monuments of these figures were erected in important places and some streets were renamed, sparking negative reactions in the public and among political parties such as the SDSM.²¹ Throughout this period, the official state narrative was strongly supported and influenced by professional historians.²² Consequently, the new interpretations of the past were reflected in the newly opened Museum of the Macedonian Struggle for Statehood and Independence. At the same time, it is important to mention that there was no written scholarly debate about these issues.

¹⁵ Todor Čepreganov, ed., *History of Macedonian People* (Skopje: Institute of National History, 2008), 88–90.

¹⁶ Čepreganov, *History*, 91–100.

¹⁷ Violeta Ačkoska, 'Segašnosta i minatoto niz razvojt na makedonskata istoriografija', in *70 godini Institut za istorija: Conference Proceedings* (Skopje: Filozofski fakultet, 2016), 28.

¹⁸ The original name of the revolutionary organisation was the Secret Macedonian-Odrin Revolutionary Organisation, renamed the Internal Macedonian-Odrin Revolutionary Organisation in 1906 and re-established in 1918 under the name Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation. Today, two political parties in North Macedonia and Bulgaria are using the same abbreviation for their name – VMRO-DPMNE in North Macedonia and VMRO-BND in Bulgaria.

¹⁹ Zoran Todorovski, *Todor Aleksandrov: Se za Makedonija, Dokumenti 1919–1924* (Skopje: Analitiko, 2005).

²⁰ Zoran Todorovski, *Todor Aleksandrov* (Skopje: Državen Arhiv na Republika Makedonija, 2014); Vlado Popovski, *Hristo Matov* (Skopje: Državen Arhiv na Republika Makedonija, 2015), Teon Džingo *Aleksandar Protogerov dokumenti* (Skopje: Državen Arhiv na Republika Makedonija, 2018); Nikola Žežov, *Boris Sarafov* (Skopje: Državen Arhiv na Republika Makedonija, 2019).

²¹ See: <https://vecer.mk/uncategorized/%D1%81%D0%B4%D1%81%D0%BC-%D0%BD%D0%B5%D0%BC%D0%B0%D0%B0%D1%82-%D0%B8%D0%B4%D0%B5%D0%B8-%D0%B0%D0%BC%D0%B0-%D0%B3%D0%B8-%D0%B1%D0%B8%D0%B2%D0%B0-%D0%B7%D0%B0-%D1%86%D0%B8%D1%80%D0%BA%D1%83%D1%81/> (last visited 23 July 2023).

²² In the larger context of the implementation of the Project Skopje 2014, the government, supported by the local authorities in Skopje, eradicated several monuments at different locations in the capital city.

Indeed, no article or monograph was published by other historians to counterargue or to debate with the new interpretations of the revolutionary period.

The third noteworthy historiographical trend concerns interpretations of the socialist era. This part of recent history is particularly important because of the institutional development of the Macedonian nation and the foundation of the most important national institution that laid the foundation for the ethno-national historical narrative. From 1946 until the end of the 1960s Macedonian socialist leaders established what would become the most important academic institutions (Saints Cyril and Methodius University, Institute of National History, Institute of Macedonian Language, Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts). The historiography of the socialist era is also important because of the impact that socialism continues to have on present Macedonian society, given that socialist policies are still visible today – in the realms of urban and industrial development, interethnic relations, and relations with neighbouring Bulgaria and Greece. During the socialist period, research into the past stopped at the end of the Second World War. While Macedonian historiography produced an important number of publications glorifying the national liberational movement of the communist partisans, there was no interest in researching the history of socialist Macedonia after 1945. The only exceptions were the Greek civil war (1946–9) and the fate of ethnic Macedonians, as well as the question of Macedonian refugees from Greece (*Egejci* or Aegeans) in socialist Macedonia and in countries of the Eastern bloc.

The revision of the state sponsored narrative on socialist Macedonia coincided with the democratisation of society that emerged in the wake of independence from Yugoslavia. In this socio-political context the public witnessed the first debate about the historical role of some figures from the partisan movement who also took part in the foundation of socialist Macedonia.²³ As a result, some of these historical figures were rehabilitated and presented as national heroes.²⁴ During the same period the first publications dedicated to the history of socialist Macedonia were published. The focus of these studies was on the processes of colonisation and the agrarian policies of the socialist regime as well as the mass immigration from villages to towns.²⁵ While these studies offered critical analyses of the agrarian and economic policies of the socialist regime, they remained relatively small in number compared with studies of other historical periods that asked different historical questions.

Following the political changes in 2006, a new wave of publications about the history of socialist Macedonia has appeared. In general, the publications focus particularly on those topics that shape how Macedonian national identity is understood.²⁶ Numerous works tend to emphasise the histories of those who ‘opposed’ Belgrade or were victims of the political purges within the Communist Party of Macedonia/League of Communists of Macedonia (*Komunistička partija na Makedonija/Sojuz na komunistite na Makedonija*; KPM/SKM).²⁷ Publications aiming to present VMRO-DPMNE as the direct successor to the historical IMRO and as a patriotic political party that provides a strong contrast to an ‘unnational SDSM’ – the successor of the League of Communists of Macedonia – have also risen in prominence. Surveying the field, we can say that in North Macedonia a revisionist approach to the socialist period predominates, which characterises the era as one in which the Socialist Republic of Macedonia was under the control of Belgrade and Yugoslavia, and ignores the activities of the

²³ All of these personalities were active participants in the formation of the Macedonian Republic as part of the Yugoslav Federation in 1944–5.

²⁴ A noteworthy example is Metodija Andonov Čento, the president of the Presidium of ASNOM (Antifascist Assembly of the People’s Liberation of Macedonia). In 1946 he was sentenced to 11 years in prison under false charges. In 1990 the Supreme Court in Skopje re-tried him and posthumously found him innocent of the charges. Marjan Dimitrijević et al., *Metodija Andonov – Čento: dokumenti i materijali* (Skopje: Državen arhiv na Republika Makedonija, 2002).

²⁵ Violeta Ačkoska, *Zadolžitelniot otkup vo Makedonija 1945–1953* (Skopje: Institut za nacionalna istorija, 1995); Violeta Ačkoska, *Agrarno-sopstveničkite odnosi, promeni i procesi vo Makedonija 1944–1953* (Skopje: Institut za nacionalna istorija, 1998).

²⁶ Violeta Ačkoska, *Veles i Veleško 1944–1991* (Skopje: Makavej, 2013); Ljubica Jančeva and Aleksandar Litovski, ‘Makedonija i Makedonci u Jugoslaviji: Uspostavljane sopstvenog identiteta,’ in *Jugoslavija u istorijskoj perspektivi*, eds. Latinka Perović et al., (Beograd: Helsinški odbor za ljudska prava u Srbiji, 2017), 149–67.

²⁷ Vlado Popovski et al., *Sozdavanjeto na sovremenata makedonska država* (Skopje: Makedonska reč, 2014), 129–30.

Macedonian socialist leadership in the institutional development of the Socialist Republic of Macedonia and Yugoslavia. The production of several documentaries in which professional historians presented their critical and revisionist views on the history of Yugoslavia and the role it had in the development of socialist Macedonia have served to support this interpretation of the past.²⁸

The three examples or interpretative strands presented here show how the national historical narrative is being consolidated within a new socio-political context. The proclamation of independence in 1991 created a new impetus for historians to redefine the Macedonian nation by nationalising the ancient history of the region. The name dispute with Greece has only fuelled passions about ancient history and turned into more of a political than historical debate. In this context, the policies of the right-wing populist parties added the layer of anticommunism to the historical narrative, which has resulted in a rejection of socialist history and a redefinition of the period as one when Macedonia was under the 'control of Belgrade'. In addition, these historiographical trends reveal another political project to include right-wing political figures from the nineteenth and twentieth century in the national canon.

The recent political developments, the Prespa Agreement and the change of the constitutional name, and more importantly the Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighbourliness and Cooperation between the Republic of Macedonia and Republic of Bulgaria has also had an important effect on Macedonian historiography. Both agreements foresaw the creation of a Bilateral Multidisciplinary Expert Commission for Historical and Educational Issues that was thought would create a forum for historians to discuss openly the controversies of the past and its interpretations. While there is little information on the progress of the Greco-Macedonian Commission, the one between Bulgaria and North Macedonia provoked strong nationalistic reactions from Macedonian historians, and it represents one of the most important political topics in the country during the last three years. However, the nationalistic reactions in North Macedonia cannot be understood without taking into consideration the nationalistic narratives of Bulgarian historians and the official denial of Macedonian identity and language by Sofia's political and intellectual elites. This 'debate' between the Bulgarian and Macedonian historians is interdependent and should be studied together.²⁹

Therefore, contemporary work conducted by Macedonian historians has to be seen and analysed through the prism of the latest political developments and the role in the socio-political life they have played. Historians openly expressed their political views on important national matters such as the name issue with Greece, and especially on the work of the commission on historical and educational issues between North Macedonia and Bulgaria. In this context several conferences and publications were organised by, or with the help of, the political parties and at the same time historians took part in protests organised by VMRO-DPMNE in order to, as they claim, defend Macedonian national history and heroes.³⁰

Conclusion

This review of Macedonian historiography during recent decades, and especially during the last fifteen or more years, reveals that historical writing has become an essential element in contemporary politics that is key for framing the question of national identity. This conclusion confirms previous findings about the instrumentalisation of history in the Republic of (North) Macedonia. History's primary role

²⁸ Petar Todorov, 'Socijalistička Jugoslavija u produkciji poslednjih dokumentarnih filmova u Makedoniji', in *Reprezentacija Socijalističke Jugoslavije: preispitivanja i perspective*, eds. Hannes Grandits, Vladimir Ivanovic and Branimir Jankovic (Sarajevo: UMHS/Srednja Europa, 2019), 153–62.

²⁹ For the history of the political and historiographical dispute between Macedonia and Bulgaria see Tchavdar Marinov, *La Question Macédonienne de 1944 à nos jours: Communisme et nationalisme dans les Balkans* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2010.).

³⁰ Stalin Lozanovski ed., *Goce Delčev vo kolektivnata memorija na makedonskiot narod* (Skopje: Socijalistička partija na Makedonija, 2020); see: <https://360stepeni.mk/video-pretsedatelkata-na-sovetot-na-ini-govoreshe-na-protestot-na-vmro-dpmne-nametnuvane-istoriski-vistini-e-vo-tselosna-sprotivnost-so-bazichnite-vrednosti-na-evropskite-demokratii/> (last visited 23 July 2023).

has been to serve and defend the national identity of Macedonians. Some of the historians are direct and open in defining the political role they play in society. They are equally candid about their commitment to write about identity as a 'natural response that proves' the existence of a Macedonian identity that is opposed by neighbouring national historiographies and which serves as a rallying cry against the 'new ideas promoted by the European Union and NGOs'.³¹ The latest developments in the context of relations between North Macedonia and Bulgaria clearly show the direct involvement of historians in political campaigns, thus making the historical profession in North Macedonia an important part of the political discourse and political debates. Moreover, research into other aspects of the historiography and historical narratives shows that history represents one of the sources for symbolic divisions in the country based on ethnic, political or other dividing lines.³²

³¹ Ačkoska, 'Segašnosta', 26, 35; Violeta Ačkoska, 'Istorijata kako potreba – pomegu minatoto i segašnosta', *Godišen zbornik na Filozofski fakultet* 61 (2008): 226, 229–30.

³² Jovan Bliznakovski and Petar Todorov, *Nie nasproti drugite: simbolički podelbi vo Severna Makedonija* (Skopje: CINIK, 2020).