

MACEDONIA IN EUROPE: AN UPDATE OF THE SEARCH FOR A RIGHTFUL PLACE

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Abstract

After Macedonia declared independence from former Yugoslavia in September 1991, the Macedonian government began negotiations for a peaceful secession. It not only stopped providing military resources to the Yugoslav National Army and withdrew its military personnel from military service but also, recognizing that it could not handle external threat alone, requested what became the United Nations' first-ever preventive peace-keeping mission into Macedonia. The internal unrest, however, would be dormant for the following 10 years, which eventually resulted in the reaching for the guns by 2001. Although Macedonia had secured itself from external aggression by what the Macedonians call "four wolves", it could not escape from the Albanian – Macedonian conflict within its borders in 2001. Although the internal conflict ceased to exist with the US- and EU-brokered Ohrid Agreement, the country faced contentions on various fronts which challenged the viability of the state, particularly from Greece. The example of Macedonia stands in contrast with other Balkan states due mostly to staying out of war in 1992 – 1995 and could turn into a success story in the Balkans provided that the EU proves successful in silencing its internal disputes regarding the pronouncement of a date on which to start accession negotiations. If it happens, it would have a two-way effect: it would affirm the tenacity of reforms carried out by Macedonia and also reinforce the viability of the EU as an influential agent of post-conflict settlement, which remains to be seen.

Keywords: Macedonia, Europe, Balkans, EU

JEL Classification: Y80, Y90, Z0, Z00

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper argues that post-independence era has proved that Macedonia's future would be decisively shaped by Western-oriented policies beginning with its invitation of outside assistance for preventive mission in the country. Thanks to EU involvement in the overall reconstruction of Macedonia, the achievements in many fronts have made the country more competent than it was back in 1991. Relations between the EU and Macedonia are enough reason to expect the former to continue to help the latter in placing itself in a rightful position in European affairs. In this framework, this paper shall unfold in subsections providing a brief historical timeline, to be followed by the country's exposure to western political environment after independence and a close-up of current state of affairs. The final analysis is that the EU process for Macedonia is not likely to be a retrogressive one. Put differently, a date for starting negotiations would be the next step for the country, although the time-span for that remains to be seen.

1.1. The Historical Backdrop

Historically, Macedonia has been a micro stage for the incoming and outgoing peoples in the macro stage of the Balkans which has come to be labeled as one the most complex sub-regions in the world with a wide range of ethnicities, languages, religions, and social attitudes (Poulton, 1995: 4). Geographically, ancient Macedonia during the rule of Alexander the Great stretched from the Adriatic to India, as well as from Egypt to the middle of Balkans. In this larger geographical environment, the present-day Macedonia had been a destination point for invaders and merchants since the times of Alexander the Great (Perry, 1997: 227). Macedonia was ruled by the Ottoman Empire from late 1300s to the end of Balkans Wars in 1913. Articulated frequently, the famous Macedonian question as to who would rule Macedonia following the end of the dwindling Ottoman Empire was settled by the 1913 Treaty of Bucharest which divided Macedonia between Bulgaria, Greece and Serbia. Each country would try to assimilate the populations it incorporated in the ensuing years (Perry, 1997: 228). Macedonia as we know it today was established in August 1944 in Vardar Macedonia and took the name “People’s Republic of Macedonia” and later “Socialist Federal Republic of Macedonia” (Tangör, 2008: 139). Tito included Macedonia as one of the constituent republics of Yugoslavia in 1946 yet what followed was far from being impressive in the newly established state: absence of national institutions, state apparatus, and official history (Perry, 1997: 230, 231).

As one of the poor republics, Macedonia received monetary assistance from Belgrade which showed some healing signs in the 1960s and 1970s. By 1980s, the resurging ethnic unrest became visible in Kosovo with the expected result: Macedonians were also alarmed by the Albanian population in Macedonia. By 1990, the first multi-party elections were held in Macedonia. In hindsight, a close reading of this election said much for the post-independence developments in Macedonia because the Albanian votes indicated a Macedonian – Albanian split, not to mention the Turks, Roma, and Serbs who mostly preferred their own political platforms. Two years later, Macedonia declared independence. This marked the beginning of an arduous nation-building process. Although it did not bring violence and bloodshed until the turn of the century, the political timeline of the country would say otherwise after 2001.

2. FROM INDEPENDENCE TO 2000: AN UPHILL BATTLE

As Yugoslavia was about to complete its lifetime, contrary to the remainder of the constituent republics of former Yugoslavia, Macedonia had no pronounced and overt aim or discourse about independence in face of a combination of facts that stipulated such an attitude. First, the phenomenon of Macedonian consciousness was something new. Second, Macedonia virtually lacked military forces in view of a possible future assault by what it called the “Four Wolves” - Greece, Serbia, Bulgaria and Albania. Third, Macedonia’s economy was directly linked to Serbia. Fourth, almost all of Macedonia’s communicative links passed through Serbia. Finally, visiting the Albanian factor in Macedonia, the Macedonian authorities gave initial support to Milosevic, who were aware of the latter’s firm stance against the Albanians in Kosovo (Poulton, 1995: 179 and Ludlow, 2003: 761). However, when the conflict turned into violence in June 1991, the country did not have any choice other than independence. As the fighting in Croatia continued, the Serbs were not in a position to afford waging another war in Macedonia. In September the same year, Macedonia became independent (Panagiotou, 2008: 51 – 52).

It was upon such background that Kiro Gligorov requested an international force to protect Macedonia’s borders. The UN reciprocated in November 1992 with Resolution 795 which

provided the deployment of UN troops in December 1992 under the title United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR). After three years of successful presence, the UNPROFOR was replaced by United Nations Preventive Deployment Force (UNPREDEP). While it served to block possible irredentist claims by the neighboring states during a chaotic time, it prevented the spillover of the conflict to a larger geography, not to mention the overall effect of pulling Macedonia closer to its initial steps of integration with the Western institutions (Ludlow, 2003: 772).

As all this was happening, Macedonia had to wrestle with yet another development in the international platforms. The struggle was about the name of the state which Greece rejected fervently. The name issue was perhaps less pressing compared to the ones related to internal ethnic unrest in Macedonia for instance; however, it turned into an issue and still remains so today. Despite criticism in Macedonia, the country became a member of the UN with the name Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) in 1993. Although more than hundred states recognized Macedonia with the name of its choice; the UN, NATO and EU still use the FYROM version (Panagiotou, 2008: 49).

In this period, Macedonia made initial headway towards being part of Western structures. It was recognized by the UN in 1993, although under the name FYROM. This recognition gave way to the establishment of diplomatic relations with many countries. Various member states in the EU recognized Macedonia in 1994. After the Interim Accord was signed between Macedonia and Greece in 1995, Macedonia received international recognition and became a member of the OSCE and Council of Europe in the same year (Perry, 1997: 271).

Between 1992 and 1999, international organizations such as the OSCE and UN began to frequently draw attention to the internal ethnic tensions in Macedonia which were regarded as the most significant threats to the stability in the country. Central to these was the perceived marginalization of the Albanian minority in Macedonia. At the height of the conflict in Kosovo, a crucial development took place when China vetoed the continuation of UN troops in Macedonia as a response to Macedonia's recognition of Taiwan in 1999 (National Catholic Reporter, 2007: 8a). This was not good news for Macedonia at all.

While Macedonia sought to secure international acknowledgment in this period, it took serious efforts towards adjusting itself to the established European political and economic structures. When doing so, it faced the extremely unfavorable economic conditions which indicated a downward slope for the country. A combination of ill-fated economic indicators foreshadowed uneasy integration to European structures. With Yugoslavia now defunct, Macedonia as a poor constituent republic did not receive federal funds from Belgrade any more. Since the Soviet Union and Comecon had collapsed, the country also lost a crucial market. To make things even worse, the internal Yugoslav market collapsed with the disintegration and the war seriously disrupted internal trade links. Furthermore, due to the UN embargo on Serbia, Macedonia's trade with Serbia was suspended, not to mention the Greek embargo of 1994 by Greece's closure of borders with Macedonia and preventing access to the Greek port of Thessaloniki, which added onto the economic plight of the country (Panagiotou, 2008: 52, 54). This declining picture required outside assistance which came with the 1994 Stabilization and Reform Program of the IMF. The main economic indicators showed some healing signs with the implementation of this program and the lifting of the Greek embargo as of 1995, with mixed results. By 1996, Macedonia was declared eligible for being included in the Poland and Hungary: Assistance for Reconstructing their Economies (PHARE) program.

The overall political and economic struggle in this period was of a transitory nature and a test for Macedonia for its future survival. How the EU bid of Macedonia came to fore after 2000 in this context follows.

3. MACEDONIA AND EUROPE IN THE LAST DECADE

Throughout the UN presence in Macedonia, the Macedonian leadership had concerns that the UN might act like a colonial governor and intervene in its internal affairs, and particularly issues concerning the Albanian minority. When the armed uprising began in February 2001, following the Kosovo crisis, Macedonia began to be more cooperative in addressing the ethnic Albanians' demands. This was the time when EU involvement began to be seen more overtly regarding the shaping of Macedonia's place in the European political environment. In the first phases of the conflict, the US left it to the EU to take the matter into its hands. Accordingly, the EU addressed the Albanians that they should start deliberations with the Macedonian government. However, violence escalated which made Macedonia come to terms with two realities. First, the weak military structure of Macedonia did not allow it to crush the rebel movements. Second, the international community feared that Macedonia would be swayed into civil war. After a difficult negotiation process, the Ohrid Agreement was signed in August 2001. The agreement was a result of strong bargaining by EU and US special envoys François Leotard and James Pardew (Ludlow, 2003: 785 – 786). This was a European success, which placed Albanian leaders at Prime Minister Vlado Buckovski's cabinet at Skopje. The integration of Albanians in the state police, military and other institutions followed and for the first time the Macedonian and Albanian students started receiving education together at the European-sponsored university in Tetovo, which was a hot spot of contention earlier (Glenny, 2005: 32). After a collaborative process in Macedonia, NATO handed over its mission to a 350-strong EU force. The deepened EU involvement in Macedonia came with the military operation in March 2003 which was a continuation of the NATO operation until then. Named Operation Concordia, the mission lasted until 15 December 2003. Following this date, the EU police Mission Proxima was launched to be finalized on 15 December 2005.

Nevertheless, already before the 2001 conflict, Macedonia had signed the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) with the EU in Zagreb in November 2000, qualifying as the first regional state to do so. Although there was criticism that Skopje did not drive a harder bargain, the agreement has brought considerable benefit to Macedonia in various spheres, such as trade, production and foreign investment, involving other fields (International Crisis Group, 2001: 208 – 209). The key motive for the EU to devise such a policy strategy was to get involved in the civil reconstruction of the conflict-ridden region of the Balkans, particularly after the war in Kosovo. This meant casting aside the reactive approach to the region and assuming a proactive one. In this context, the components of the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP) revolved around several themes such as democracy and rule of law; human rights and protection of minorities; regional and international cooperation; liberal market economy and structural reforms; management of public finances; European internal market and trade; European sectoral policies; and cooperation in justice and home affairs (Panagiotou, 2008: 59 – 61). The SAA is accompanied by Community Assistance for Reconstruction, Development and Stabilization (CARDS) program, with a particular focus on democratization of the country.

When Macedonia applied for full membership in March 2004, the common reaction in many European states was that it was a rather premature move by Macedonia (Panagiotou, 2008: 62). The Opinion by the Commission on the application from the Former Yugoslav Republic of

Macedonia for membership of the European Union clustered Macedonia's progress until November 2005 in three general subheadings. First, it stated that although there has been satisfactory achievements concerning legislative arrangements and regional cooperation, additional efforts were needed for electoral process, judicial reforms, police reforms and fighting corruption. Second, it concluded that despite some remarkable steps towards a liberal functioning economy, Macedonia still had some way to go to be able to stand firm in the competitive economic environment of the EU. Third, it highlighted that if Macedonia took more steps to align its legislation with the *acquis communautaire*, in the medium term, it could be in a position to assume the obligations necessary for being a member. Accordingly, it recommended the Council to grant membership status to Macedonia, which materialized in December 2005 (Communication from the Commission, 2005: 4 – 7).

Whether the application by Macedonia was over-enthusiastic was a question of debates at the relevant time, yet what was not was the fact that it could face the “anti-enlargement EU juggernaut” as displayed by the Dutch and French referendums that showed an increased sentiment against enlargement by 2005. It was argued that giving Macedonia a date on which to start negotiations would be a way to show that the EU as a supranational political entity had its effective ways of encouraging peace and solidarity (Glenny, 2005: 34).

The Council adopted European Partnership for Macedonia in January 2006, which was updated with the Accession Partnership of February 2008. On the finance side, the Financial Agreement for 2007 National Program within the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) and the Framework Agreement were signed between Macedonia and the Commission for financial cooperation. As in the case of SAA, Macedonia was the first regional state to sign this agreement. By November 2009, the Council decided to give visa liberalization to the citizens of Macedonia (along with Serbia and Montenegro) which was scheduled to start as of 19 December 2009.

The Accession Partnership is significant in the sense that it highlights the outstanding issues towards more progress in a detailed fashion for Macedonia in short- and medium-term. In essence, the expectations and recommendations within the document of the Accession Partnership apply to all regional states. Nevertheless, there is enough reason to forecast a relatively earlier integration of Macedonia into the EU given its relevant record so far.

4. THE STATE OF AFFAIRS

In the current conjuncture, the country's EU bid is likely to continue to be marred rather by lingering external and internal issues since independence, than new ones. To give a couple of examples, there is the name issue with Greece which has turned into a deadlock, if the term fits. Greece has blocked the membership of Macedonia in NATO and the EU accession negotiations. Given that Macedonia has no territorial claims or plans in this respect, and given the supportive attitude of the international community towards Macedonia at large, there seems to be no common-sensical motive for Greece's approach, apart from Greece's emotionally-driven arguments concerning Greek Macedonia. The problem is not bilateral anymore and risks the delay of the country's EU and NATO integration (International Crisis Group, 2009). Second, despite the well-intentioned and generally successful EU assistance to Macedonia, the current picture concerning organized cross-border crime begs more attention from the EU. Cross-border organized crimes have been cited as a significant source of internal instability in Macedonia right after the independence, which partially account for Albanians' involvement in organized crime in Macedonia upon the existence of their social, economic and political discrimination in the country.

A closer look reveals that the collapse of the USSR and the subsequent wars in Croatia and Bosnia were two touchstones for future concentration of Albanians in mafia criminal groupings. These two developments increased Albanian involvement in drug trade. Similarly, Macedonia was on the route of human trafficking with voluntary and forced migration, not to mention the flow of cheap weapons from Albania after the fall of communism (Gounev, 2003: 229, 232 – 233). It remains to be said that the only way that the EU (and NATO) can help bring and sustain stability would be by policing states like Macedonia at least in the short term (Gounev, 2003: 237).

In the presence of other problems, these two stand out in the political/security realm as the most challenging to tackle since they display a potential to adversely affect the country's road to the EU. As for the economic and governance spheres, the urgency of progress is also obvious. Foreign policy-wise, relations with neighbors remain wanting; although they are not as fraught with peril as in the 1990s (may be with the exception of Greece).

On the optimistic side, among various achievements, civil society and media as democracy indicators deserve mentioning. Civil society in Macedonia has made much progress since independence. By 2001, there were more than 1,000 non-governmental organizations (NGOs), mostly working on media freedom and ethnic issues. Furthermore, although the state broadcasting institution Macedonian Radio – Television (MRTV) dominates the sector, the number of media establishments increased considerably. On the eve of the conflict in 2001, there were more than 200 registered broadcasters in Macedonia (International Crisis Group, 2001, 203).

5. CONCLUSION

Macedonia qualifies as a unique state among the group of states that emerged from the dismantling Yugoslavia as it was born peacefully. The western support for Macedonia through UN preventive mission to avert an assault by Milosevic was no small success. The flaring inter-ethnic conflict in Macedonia by 2001 as an extension of Albanian insurgency movements gave way to a more focused and scrutinized EU involvement in the Balkans, including Macedonia as the situation in 2001 in the country still exposed internal weaknesses. Obviously, the EU established certain units with a view to preventing the spill-over effect of the events in Kosovo. In so doing, it functioned in collaboration with NATO. Recognizing that its future involvement in Macedonia should be on well-defined civil reconstruction policies, it not only extended economic assistance but also proposed a road map for Macedonia's EU route (Tangör, 2008: 153, International Crisis Group, 2001: 186).

As integration with the EU is the key priority for the country, it is more than understandable that the expectation levels are high on the part of the authorities and public. This is why for instance Skopje refused back in 2001 any regional integration before EU integration, which was originally pronounced by Carl Bildt, UN Special Envoy for the Balkans. This view, by the way, is shared not only by Macedonia but the remainder of regional states.

In these circumstances, the EU policies can be more effective provided they are formulated on several considerations. The EU should not lower the bar for further achievements; it may consider awarding examples of success; it can be more active in trying to find a genuine solution for the name issue with Greece; and extend more assistance for fighting cross-border organized crime which mars overall development. In the final analysis, the announcement of a date to start negotiations would have a two-way effect. It would confirm the tenacity of Macedonia's

achievements for more to follow in the future and bolster up the image of the EU as an indispensable reconstruction agent in the region, not as an outsider but as an insider.

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