

# Macedonian trap

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## Introduction

In the last eighteen months, news reports relating to the Balkans have again become prominent in the world *media*. The fact that the *mass media* are more interested in emergency situations and negative stories than day-to-day stories of success makes this very concerning. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Macedonia represent today's most complicated and potentially explosive regions of the Balkans. Europe has been faced with the failure of the Dayton concept of Bosnian statehood and revealed a complete lack of understanding of the internal situation in the country. The recent attempt to approve the UN Security Council resolution recognizing genocide in Srebrenica in 1995 once again proved this. From the perspective of national reconciliation in the Balkans, the strategy which attempts to focus on only one side (irrespective of which one; in this case Serbs) committing crimes in the civil wars of the 1990s can only lead to a new flare-up. The history of the Balkans has proved it on numerous occasions. This was demonstrated by the attack on the Serbian Prime Minister Alexander Vucic, who visited Bosnia on the twentieth anniversary of the tragedy in Srebrenica to honour the memory of the victims killed there.

The situation in Macedonia today is much more dangerous than it seems at first glance. It should be reviewed from several angles and these are the main threats for further internal Macedonian destabilization:

1. the possible spreading of the internal political crisis in Macedonia to neighboring Balkan countries;
2. worsening national issues in the region, with the Albanian issue being the most difficult;
3. the failure of the EU strategy for comprehensive stabilization of the Balkan region through integration.

Each of these threats will be taken into consideration here.

## **The internal political crisis in Macedonia and its possible extension into other Balkan countries**

The nature of the current political crisis in Macedonia is twofold. It is obvious that the internal development of all Balkan countries is influenced by

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the foreign policy goal of integration into the EU. The political *élite* of Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Macedonia are extremely loyal to the EU but Macedonia holds a special place in this list due to the dead-end it appears to have reached in its quest for European integration. This has created extremely favorable conditions for the establishment of a populist-minded, irresponsible and corrupt ruling *élite*. This is true for the current Government and any subsequent one, if it is to function with the same foreign policy conditions.

The Cabinet of Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski has functioned since July 2006<sup>1</sup>. Prior to 2015, so for more than eight years, the EU didn't express any serious criticism of him or his policies. This is shown by the annual positive conclusion of the European Commission on the Stabilization and Association of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM)<sup>2</sup>. Ironically, only opposition leader Zoran Zaev's publication of illegally recorded telephone conversations of Prime Minister Gruevski has exposed the true nature of the political leader and his Government<sup>3</sup>. It immediately sparked public discontent and mass protests. They ended in meeting opposition demands and those of the EU on holding early parliamentary elections no later than April 2016. This raises several questions.

The lack of a proactive EU response to the internal situation in Macedonia is due to the poor awareness of Europeans about the events occurring in the country, so has Nikola Gruevski now ceased to satisfy the European Union as a partner as a result of some erroneous actions? What is the fundamental difference between the opposition (the former Communist Party) that initiated Gruevski's resignation and the man himself? Finally, on what basis do Western countries define the legitimacy of the current Government?

The first question may have two answers. Firstly, the EU believes in the relative stability in the Balkans, in a viscous but certain process to achieve a common Europe and in the ability of the political *élite* to reach consensus even in the absence of alternative solutions in foreign policy. This created the illusion of predictability and the EU, fully immersed in its own problems, let the situation degenerate. Secondly, Macedonia has become a bargaining chip in the escalating confrontation between the West and Russia. As we know, Gruevski hasn't joined in with the Western sanctions against Russia, but conversely expressed a willingness to join the new Russian energy project "Turkish stream". The Russian side is inclined to consider what is happening in Macedonia in the context of the "colour" revolutions and as further

<sup>1</sup> Edward P. Joseph, *The Balkans, Interrupted*, in «Balkan Insight», 25 May 2015. <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/the-balkans-interrupted>.

<sup>2</sup> See EC Reports 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, Macedonia. <http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/>.

<sup>3</sup> Jordanovska Meri, Marusic Sinisa Jakov, *Dissenters Challenge Gruevski's Grip in Macedonia*, in «Balkan Insight», 10 March 2015. <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/dissenters-challenge-gruevski-s-grip-in-macedonia>.

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attempts to squeeze Russia out of the economic space of Europe and the world political stage. Of course, one should not disregard the Russian factor. With regard to an imminent “colour” revolution in Macedonia and EU policies, the first answer as the root cause of the change of the Macedonian government is more likely. The EU ‘missed’ the moment when the ‘responsible student’ stopped showing great promise and became corrupt failing to follow European directions. The EU responded in the traditional way: supporting the struggle for civil rights and freedom. Time will tell whether this reaction was right. There are some concerns about the main Government opponent and today’s favorite of the West, Zoran Zaev: «Zaev is to be credited with doing a service to transparency and accountability, but he and his associates lack credibility. It was not Gruevski who invented the governance model melding high-level corruption, clientelism, and the misuse of the State’s repressive apparatus. He simply perfected what the Social Democrats [who is Zaev now and his team - *the author’s comment, E. Entina*] had developed while they were at the helm in 1990s»<sup>4</sup>.

The principles used by Western countries, and the EU in particular, to determine the extent of the legitimacy of parliaments, governments and leaders of individual countries isn’t entirely clear. According to several sources, from 20,000 to 60,000 people gathered in a protest organized by the opposition in Skopje. Approximately a similar number gathered to support the authorities (according to official figures over 30,000 people, other sources suggest a figure in the region of 20,000 to 30,000). Sixty thousand dissatisfied people sounds significant but even in such a small country like Macedonia, it is only three percent of the population. Thus the West has satisfied the requirements of three hundredths of the country’s citizens. The resignation of Gruevski’s Government, however corrupt it might have been, as a result of the distrust of an active but small minority of the population, sounds crazy in the context of a democracy. In practice, it appears that the EU and its Member States operate double standards regarding the basic rules of democracy, applying different standards in third countries, compared with their own. In France for example, the support for the President and Government is at a historical low. According to opinion polls, they are not just supported by a minority but by a negligible minority of the population. The electorate are being deceived in an obvious way. However, no one seems to want to change the electoral process despite the fact that the Government has lost legitimacy and doesn’t have social support. In relation to its nearest neighbours it seems Brussels adheres to a rather different approach. In the UK, the Conservatives have an absolute majority of seats in Parliament, but this is not due to the

<sup>4</sup> Bechev Dimitar, *Breaking Macedonia’s vicious circle*, in «EU observer», 8 May 2015. <https://euobserver.com/opinion/128635>.

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overwhelming support of the majority of the British population. It results from the use of an antiquated electoral system that clearly fails to achieve the requirements of fairness and equality of every vote. However no one demands the abandonment of this electoral process where voters' rights are sacrificed for the necessities of handling political matters.

This approach is a policy of contradictions which inevitably does not bring any dividends to the EU. In addition, the political unpredictability in the Balkan countries and the inability of international players to build long-term strategic relationships which are dependent on political *élites* of the former Yugoslav Republics, who are considered to be Western partners, have painfully hit the economy. In these circumstances, it is virtually impossible to implement any long-term strategic business projects which are vital for Macedonia and the other Balkan countries as their industrial-economic developments have been destroyed by time and war. Besides that, «Western Balkan countries are relatively small, with a small population and weak economies, and closely linked with one another (and with Greece and Bulgaria), in a way that it is not possible to solve one crisis without tackling the others too, and that one crisis left unsolved could dangerously spill over to the rest of the region»<sup>5</sup>.

The total interdependence of the Balkans is defined by the history of the region and the specific ethnic groups of all the former Yugoslav Republics. The mixed ethnic population is unique and painfully reflects on the successes and failures of modernization in these countries. Thus, the success of one Western Balkan country progressing ahead of the rest always provokes instability in the neighbouring countries. For example, the entry of Croatia into the EU in 2013 significantly affected the prospects for a unified Bosnia and had an impact on how the political *élites* of this neighbouring country evaluated the possibility of Bosnia and Herzegovina joining the European Union. For the Bosnian Croats the issue of EU integration has ceased to be so acute due to the fact that the vast majority have passports of the Republic of Croatia. This seriously affects the prospects of creating a well-functioning and unified State of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Previously the Croats were ready to make concessions and compromises in exchange for getting closer to joining the EU, but now it has become irrelevant to give part of their sovereign rights to the common Bosnian “pot” for a phantom membership. That is why several years ago, most experts on the Balkans talked about the need to make the process of EU accession for all the Western Balkan countries in parallel. Just as the success of one country destabilizes the whole

<sup>5</sup> Costamagna Christian, Denti Davide, *The EU needs to step up its involvement in the political crisis in Macedonia*, in <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsee/2015/06/03/the-eu-needs-to-step-up-its-involvement-in-the-political-crisis-in-macedonia/>.

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region, the failures and stagnation in any of the Republics undermines peace throughout the Balkans.

Looking back at the recent past, Montenegro separated from Serbia following a *referendum* in May 2006 (where only a few hundredths of the votes were in favour of separation), but this was only due to the freezing of the integration process for the Serbs in connection with the Kosovo issue and lack of cooperation with the Hague Tribunal. This event not only led to the subsequent secession of Kosovo from Serbia, but also in the long term, it has turned Montenegro into an externally dependent country with its own latent aggravating national problem. A country that does not have an established manufacturing or agricultural industry, but reliant upon tourism as the only source of primary income, can't be completely independent. This is compounded by the fact that in Montenegro, with a population of just 600,000, there are two national minorities: Serbs and Albanians. At the same time the rights of Serbs aren't properly established giving rise to a potential time bomb. The situation in all other former Yugoslav Republics is very similar so it is no surprise that the national question in the Balkans has once again revived, and cannot be discarded as an irrelevance as this region has already influenced world events.

### The aggravation of national conflicts in Macedonia

One of the most famous contemporary Balkan historians and political scientists, Dejan Jovic, may appear very emotional, but very precisely explains the complexity of any transformation in the Balkans: «Instead of creating the image of modern, new, advanced countries, there is an insistence that we are “the ancient”, even when it sounds ridiculous. For example, in Macedonia the argument is about who they are: Slavs or “ancient Macedonians”. Apparently is not enough to appear in the Balkans in “the seventh century”, that is too late! The Albanians and Greeks had been here before. Therefore it is necessary to prove an existence before: right after the creation of the world. There is a focus on the past: the farther the better. We have never been interested in the future and today there is still no interest. In the future, the attitude is come what may, but the past, is what we prize and how we had a voice. Others may have come up with something for the future, but not for the past!»<sup>6</sup>.

Thus explaining the inherent volatility of the region; it is a philosophy of life. Permanent dissatisfaction with the present is very easily compensated for with illusions of the past and unfair decisions in history can inspire almost

<sup>6</sup> Jovic Dejan, *Neprekidno nam se vraca 1991, rat nikako da postane proslost*, in «Politicka misao», 07 December 2014. <http://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/dejan-jovic-neprekidno-nam-se-vraca-1991-rat-nikako-da-postane-proslost/788590.aspx>.

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anybody from the Balkans. The ethno-territorial structure of the region ensures that these problems always become a national issue. For Macedonia, which avoided the fierce civil wars of Bosnia and Croatia, this is the central issue today. Nobody, except the Macedonians themselves, considers the country to be a fully-fledged State.

Macedonia was established as an administrative unit with republican *status* within the Socialist Yugoslavia to create a national balance. Its modern sovereignty is the result of the break-up of Yugoslavia along its administrative borders. All Yugoslav Republics dreamed of true independence, but they didn't have the adequate experience of sovereign States to establish themselves in the modern world. That is why in foreign policy, they immediately chose to "give the rights of freedom" to a third party, the European Union, and the internal political *élites* did not hesitate to agree to become "disciples" of European bureaucrats. As a result, for such complex Republics as Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia, which had no historical experience of having their own State, the process of formation of the modern State was dependant upon how it was seen by others.

Macedonians experienced the most serious problems in relation to statehood with the Greeks: «Most visible is the so-called "name dispute" with Greece, which objects to the Republic of Macedonia's use of "Macedonia" as both an ethnic and a territorial description, arguing this implies a claim on the Greek region with the same name. Greek Governments have also argued that the country's name implies an appropriation of the heritage of Philip of Macedon and Alexander the Great, which Greece associates itself»<sup>7</sup>. This has led to the official recognition of Macedonia as the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, a rather peculiar and distinct title. It formally gives Macedonia a transitional *status*: it is sovereign, but still "the former". The historical paradox is suitably expressed in Henry Kamens' article: «After everything the West did to ensure that Yugoslavia ceased to exist, it imposed a name including the word "Yugoslavia" on a newly-independent State. One wonders whether the US would ever accept having its name forcibly changed to "The Former British Colony of the United States of America"»<sup>8</sup>.

The second complaint about the statehood of Macedonia is the conviction of Bulgarians that the Macedonian nation and language don't exist in principle. From the outset, whilst they recognized the independence of Macedonia, they claimed that the Macedonians were ethnic Bulgarians and their language was just a dialect of Bulgarian. Macedonians have a less severe

<sup>7</sup> Bassuener Kurt, *No Stability without Accountability - the West's Responsibility in Macedonia*, in DPC Policy Paper, Sarajevo, June 2015, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Kamens Henry, *Macedonia: Europe's Camel Doesn't Want To Be A Domin*, in «NEO - New Eastern Outlook», 30 May 2015. <http://journal-neo.org/2015/05/30/macedonia-europe-s-camel-doesn-t-want-to-be-a-domino/>.

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conflict with the Serbs but there is still disagreement. During the existence of Yugoslavia, a separate Macedonian Orthodox Church was established. This was initiated by Tito in order to achieve a religious balance. After the break-up of Yugoslavia, the Macedonian church declared itself independent, but this is not recognized by the Serbian side.

In part, this is why at the State level Macedonians seek to recreate and re-write their history in a creative manner. So, in 2010 Nikola Gruevski launched a project called "Skopje 2014": «Program called "Skopje 2014" includes ambitious building projects and efforts at what some analysts termed "antiquisation": attempts to recast the history of Macedonian identity around the ancient kingdom of Philip and empire of Alexander. The centerpiece of the project is a massive statue of Alexander the Great in Skopje's central square. It is hard to conceive of a project better calibrated to hit all the wrong nerves in Greece, and also in Bulgaria, for different reasons. It also represents a curious set of priorities for a country with limited resources, and coming from among the least developed units in the former Yugoslavia. The cost of the project - according to the «Financial Times» 600 million euro, or approximately 10% of Macedonia's annual GDP - is monumental»<sup>9</sup>. From the financial point of view this decision appears excessive, but from the political perspective it is logically justified. In the circumstances it was seen as the only way to legitimize the State. However, this has given rise to more difficulties because in addition to the irritation of the Bulgarians and the Greeks, this also challenges the other minority, Albanians, which is in reality much more serious.

The central issue for the Macedonian State is not a dispute about its name or even the existence of the Macedonian nation *per se*; both of these whilst creating many tensions could be easily resolved with political will. A serious challenge to the existence of Macedonia however is the Albanian national question. Both pro-Western liberal-orientated experts and nationalist-conservatives agree on this. As a result of oppressions in Kosovo in the 1990s, a huge number of Kosovars fled to Macedonia, changing the ethnic and religious composition of the country (it is well-known that only some Albanians are Muslims and they mostly live in the territory of Kosovo. Albanian Catholics have always been significant proportion of the population in Macedonia and Albania). Macedonia with its Albanian population, surrounded by Albania and Kosovo, where Albanians are the titular populace, and with borders that are practically transparent, is inevitably faced with a national problem. The difficulties exist in two directions: one, is in the manifestations of Albanian nationalism, and the other, the requirements of the EU necessitating the rights of national minorities to be respected, even to the

<sup>9</sup> Bassuener Kurt, *No Stability without Accountability - the West's Responsibility in Macedonia*, cit., p. 6.

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point where they are granted greater preference than the titular population. So, «the West's insistence on implementing legislative rights for ethnic minorities in a country sharing a border with that minority's homeland, is clearly a stimulation for further ethnic segregation of the society and federalization of the State. It comes natural for a minority ethnic group to gravitate to a more macrosocial national identity where it shares institutions with a majority ethnic group (...). Giving more "human rights" is simply generating social segregation and eventually conflict and civil unrest (...)»<sup>10</sup>.

This factor is reinforced by several manifestations of Albanian nationalism. The very existence of the latter is primarily related to the relative youth of the Albanian nation (in the sense of active population growth and large number of young people). The foundation of the Albanian electorate in Albania, Macedonia, and Kosovo comprises young people aged between 30 and 40 years. Most of them are not as well educated as their Western European peers and the standard of living in these countries is significantly below the European average. The easiest route to success for all Albanian political parties is to play the nationalistic card: «Any story of Greater Albania is merely romantic nationalism for effective political campaigns and fundraising throughout the Albanian Diaspora»<sup>11</sup>. In this sense, any Albanian party in opposition can only become even more radical than the previous one, a fact that Macedonians are very apprehensive about.

Unfortunately, the events of recent months have been of great concern for the experts. Thus, in its analysis of the Macedonian events of May 2015, the liberal-oriented Balkan expert Kurt Bassuener writes: «Unfortunately, claims of agitation for Greater Albania are not completely fanciful; there are vocal adherents of such a goal, particularly in Kosovo. A public rally at a Prishtina sports hall for the eight Kosovars killed in Kumanovo operation, included members of Prime Minister Isa Mustafaj's Democratic Alliance of Kosova and opposition party Vetovendoje (...). Xhavit Jashari, Head of the Association of Veterans' Families, said of the men "They are heroes of Kosovo. They fought for the freedom of the occupied lands, and for their unification in one country, Albania". This direct endorsement by major political figures of ethnic separatism in Macedonia is a dangerous and destabilizing escalation of interethnic and interstate tension (...)»<sup>12</sup>.

A month earlier, during a joint interview on the Pristina TV channel "Klan Kosova" involving the Prime Minister of Albania, Edi Rama, and the Deputy Prime Minister Hashim Taci, Rama said that «the unification of

<sup>10</sup> Pandovski Vladimir, *The illusion of Greater Albania as a mechanism of balkanization in Macedonia*, in «Oriental Review», 22 May 2015. <http://orientalreview.org/2015/05/22/the-illusion-of-greater-albania-as-a-mechanism-of-balkanization-in-macedonia-ii/>.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>12</sup> Bassuener Kurt, *No Stability without Accountability - the West's Responsibility in Macedonia*, cit. p. 11.



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Kosovo and Albania had two alternatives, and that it was all up to the EU. The first is unification within the European Union. But if the EU continues to close its doors to Kosovo, then the two countries will be forced to unite in a classical way»<sup>13</sup>. This provoked a strong reaction among Macedonian and Serbian politicians and the public. Certainly, Hashim Taci later tried to justify this by saying that he and the Prime Minister were misunderstood. However such statements can undermine the fragile national peace in the region despite their subsequent denial.

In reality there has been no peace and it certainly hasn't been created over the past twenty years. In some aspects the situation has actually worsened. Having supported only Albanian national aspirations, the Europeans have created a unique hindrance for a united Europe and the integration project. Today there are two States of the Albanian people, Albania and Kosovo, and two States with a substantial Albanian minority, Montenegro and Macedonia. All four countries are on track to join the EU. If Albania and Kosovo are considered outsiders, it appears that Montenegro has a good chance of being included in the next wave of integration should this occur. As for Macedonia, the decision on whether it joins the EU is a purely political question. This will be considered in more detail below. At this stage, it is worth noting that with the current state of affairs in Greece it will not be easy to solve.

If any of these countries join the EU, a flow of Albanians (perhaps with the exception of Albania itself, which stands somewhat apart in relation to the other three) who have Macedonian or Montenegrin citizenship will move to existing European countries, adding to the army of young unemployed, i.e. potentially the most socially dangerous group. Add to this that the Albanian *mafia* is considered to be the strongest and most brutal in Europe, and it becomes a bleak picture for the already precarious social peace in the EU. If we assume that all four countries integrate into the EU, it is probable that the Albanians, habitually speaking with one voice, will become a real political force. This force has the potential to consider blackmail as a mechanism to obtain desired outcomes, which is clear from statements of certain leading Albanian politicians. It will be impossible to suppress this nationalism unlike Serbia. Albanians don't have any imperial past, so they have nothing to be reproached for in the context of the modern world. During the twentieth century a significant proportion of the nation saw themselves as victims of the Yugoslav regime; they had to fight for their rights and endured insults and repressions. The growth of Albanian nationalist sentiment is dangerous not only because it increases the possibility of a new conflict in the Balkans but

<sup>13</sup> Poznatov Maja, '*Greater Albania*' statement awakens old ghosts in Balkans, in «EurActiv.com», 10 April 2015. <http://www.euractiv.com/sections/enlargement/greater-albania-statement-awakens-old-ghosts-balkans-313685>.

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also because of its potential uncontrolled nature at a European level. Thus European politicians need to consider carefully whether they should support a particular political force or focus on a nationalistic stance in the region, as it could have profound consequences for the future of the EU.

### **Shaping the future of the EU strategy for a comprehensive stabilization of the region**

The reaction of the European Union to the latest political crisis in Macedonia has exposed to view a huge number of problems both in the Union and its integration policy. These include:

1. the Europeans do not appear to keep abreast of the Balkans and hence their delayed and inadequate response to events happening there;
2. the EU has shown an inability to settle the Macedonian question without the involvement of the United States, which can't but affect its image in the West and in the world generally;
3. the integration policy of the EU doesn't encourage other international players association to act in the Balkan territory, and consequently is in danger of failure due to the complex problems outlined earlier that will impact the very idea of a united Europe extremely hard.

Macedonia started its way to membership in the EU in 2001, the Agreement on Stabilization and Association came into force in 2004 and the *status* of candidate country was assigned ten years ago, in 2005. In October 2009, the European Commission recommended the Council to start negotiations about Macedonia's membership, but they have not started: «FYROM, despite its progress in reforms, may now be seen as a laggard in the accession process. It is characteristic that up until a few years ago, apart from frontrunner Croatia, FYROM was seen as the Western Balkan country closest to beginning accession negotiations. By 2014, both Montenegro and Serbia have overtaken FYROM, while the same is also highly likely to happen soon with Albania»<sup>14</sup>. As we know, this is connected with the obstructive actions by Bulgaria and mainly Greece of any Macedonian attempts to join the EU because of their claims for its name. The fact that the European Union has not yet resolved the issue is just ludicrous, bearing in mind that the association has nothing to do with the negotiations about the name. Those matters relating to the use of the name fall under the auspices of the UN.

The European Union has at least two instruments to solve the Macedonian question: technical and political. The technical has been suggested several times, with the idea being to open membership talks with Macedonia,

<sup>14</sup> Koktsidis Pavlos, Armakolas Ioannis, Maksimovic Maja, Feta Bledar, *The Western Balkan EU Accession Process and the Greek Presidency 2014*, Hellenic Presidency of the Council of the European Union, August 2014, pp. 25-30.

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irrespective of the solution to the problem with Greece and Bulgaria, putting it before the relevant chapter of the *acquis*. In addition, Greece claiming that this would be a breach of the requirements for membership in the EU is inappropriate in this instant. The European Union, with the direct participation of Greece, has already violated them, when in 2004 part of Cyprus joined the EU, when its statehood had not been recognized by Turkey setting a precedent, even though Turkey is not an EU member. It only highlights the fact that there is always a way if there is the political will. The vulnerability of the current situation in Greece would facilitate making this move and it is essential because the situation in Macedonia and its internal political crisis have been created by the failure to achieve EU integration. Some researchers tend to compare the situation in Macedonia with the sanctions: «The UN embargo that hit Belgrade in the 1990s made the Serbs feel isolated and created the environment for a *mafia*-like economy, a nationalist political discourse and populist political practices. The levels of crime and corruption and Belgrade's shortsighted policies at the time remain a huge burden for today's Serbia. Considering that Macedonia's EU path is being stopped by a name dispute with Athens (...). The EU has a heightened responsibility towards the Macedonian citizens and should do all it can to break the stalemate (...). The persistence of a 10-year veto has discredited the European perspective of the country, seriously undermining the EU's popularity and therefore influence»<sup>15</sup>. The EU has seriously discredited itself in connection with the current political crisis, for example, by giving a very positive assessment to Nikola Gruevski's team and their performance.

Thus, the 2011 report assesses the work of Parliament and Government quite positively: «There has been progress in the conduct of elections. The elections were competitive and well-administered throughout the country (...). However, political dialogue needs to be further strengthened in order that problems can be resolved through the institutional framework (...). The Government coalition has overcome difficulties and strengthened its internal cooperation. The new Government has given fresh impetus to the EU reform process»<sup>16</sup>. Regarding the legal system: «further amendments were made to the legal framework as regards independence, efficiency and transparency of justice (...). However, considerable efforts are now needed in order to strengthen the quality of justice (...)»<sup>17</sup> as for the fight against corruption: «Corruption remains prevalent in many areas and continues to be a serious problem»<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>15</sup> Costamagna Christian, Denti Davide, *The EU needs to step up its involvement in the political crisis in Macedonia*, in <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lseec/2015/06/03/the-eu-needs-to-step-up-its-involvement-in-the-political-crisis-in-macedonia/>.

<sup>16</sup> EC Report 2011, pp. 7 -9.

<sup>17</sup> *Idem*, p.13.

<sup>18</sup> *Idem*, p. 15.

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Let's look at the EC 2012 report. Work of Parliament: «the functioning of the Parliament and political dialogue have been maintained. The Parliament has consistently supported the accession process, including the High Level Accession Dialogue. The implementation of the law on languages and of the rules of procedure has progressed (...). On-going efforts will be needed to fully address the recommendations of the OSCE/ODIHR»<sup>19</sup>. Work of Government: «cooperation within the Government coalition has continued and has been successful in putting the accession process at the centre of the political agenda. The Government has effectively coordinated the implementation of the HLAD on the basis of its own roadmap. The Government responded with maturity to inter-ethnic tensions and needs to build on this to further strengthen inter-ethnic relations and reconciliation, including on the *status* of victims of the 2001 conflict. The coalition partners should pursue their dialogue in order to find solutions and ensure stability»<sup>20</sup>. Legislative system: «as regards the judiciary, legislative and institutional safeguards are in place, but further efforts are needed to guarantee independence and impartiality in practices»<sup>21</sup>. Fight against corruption: «Corruption remains prevalent in many areas and continues to be a serious problem»<sup>22</sup>.

The conclusion of the EU for 2013 is the following: «The country continues to sufficiently meet the political criteria. The municipal elections in March/April 2013 were assessed by the OSCE/ODIHR as professionally and efficiently administered (...). Further progress has been made this year in the area of the efficiency of the judiciary. Progress has also been made with the establishment of comprehensive data on the anti-corruption enforcement track-record, which should be built on in future (...).

The country has deep and wide-ranging cooperation with the EU across all areas of the *acquis* and is at an advanced level of legislative alignment, at strategic and institutional level, with the focus now on administrative capacity and coordination mechanisms within the national administration to ensure effective implementation. The country has made further progress in improving its ability to take on the obligations of membership»<sup>23</sup>.

And even in 2014, when the political crisis in Macedonia was widespread, the report was rather positive: «given the cumulative progress the country has achieved, the Commission considers that the political criteria continue to be sufficiently met and maintains its recommendation to open accession negotiations but regrets the backward steps of the past year. The

<sup>19</sup> *Idem*, 2012, p. 7.

<sup>20</sup> *Idem*, p. 8.

<sup>21</sup> *Idem*, p. 11.

<sup>22</sup> *Idem*, p. 13.

<sup>23</sup> The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia 2013 Progress Report, p.1-2, in [http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key\\_documents/2013/package/brochures/the\\_former\\_yugoslav\\_republic\\_of\\_macedonia\\_2013.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2013/package/brochures/the_former_yugoslav_republic_of_macedonia_2013.pdf).

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Commission urges the authorities to take decisive action to address concerns about increased politicisation and growing shortcomings with regard to the independence of the judiciary and freedom of expression so that its recommendation can be sustained in future years (...). The country's level of alignment is sufficient to move to the next stage of the accession process. The focus should now be on administrative capacity and effective implementation»<sup>24</sup>.

As we see, the European Commission is inconsistent in its assessments. Thus, on the whole they regularly give positive assessments of the activities of the Parliament and Government, as well as the progress of their reforms, while also claiming that corruption is a major problem of the Macedonian society. However the efficiency and effectiveness of the implemented legislation is usually evaluated at the level of transparency of the system that they regulate. In addition, it is obvious from the reports that European bureaucrats reacted rather casually to the growing conflict between the Government and opposition. When the crisis moved into an openly public dispute and Zoran Zaev published a telephone recording of Nikola Gruevski, the reaction of the EU was «very slow and initially limited to expressions of “serious concern”, and called for an “independent and transparent investigation”. This statement gave the impression that the EU seemed out of touch with reality on the ground (...). The Commissioner, Johannes Hahn, paid his first long-scheduled visit to Skopje on 17 February 2015. This was more than two weeks after the Prime Minister had accused the leader of opposition with espionage. Yet the Commissioner made no reference to the wiretapping scandal during his visit, and confined his remarks to expressions of hope for the country's progress on the EU perspective»<sup>25</sup>.

The situation became obvious a year ago but the conflict was neglected and resulted in street demonstrations and clashes. In an attempt to find a compromise between the Government, represented by Gruevski and the opposition led by Zaev, the European Union failed to become an independent and effective regulator.

«Without the support of USA, Europe seems too weak and incapable to solve the issues of its own backyard»<sup>26</sup>. It seems that a particular American influence is very significant in modern Macedonia. The US have a strong influence in Macedonia on both the official authorities and the opposition. For example, in his interview Kurt Bassuener stated the following: «The popular

<sup>24</sup> The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia 2014 Progress Report, p. 1-3, in [http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key\\_documents/2014/20141008-the-former-yugoslav-republic-of-macedonia-progress-report\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2014/20141008-the-former-yugoslav-republic-of-macedonia-progress-report_en.pdf).

<sup>25</sup> Fouere Erwan, *Waiting for EU leadership: the worsening crisis in Macedonia*, in CEPS Commentary, 13 April 2015, [http://www.ceps.eu/system/files/Fouere\\_Macedonia\\_Commentary.pdf](http://www.ceps.eu/system/files/Fouere_Macedonia_Commentary.pdf).

<sup>26</sup> Costamagna Christian, Denti Davide, *Op. cit.*

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perception is that the EU has more leverage [than the others]. But they are the least helpful. They are bureaucrats. The strategy seems to be: support the powerful, press the weaker party, for their bureaucratic agenda (...). Nobody in Government fears the EU (...). The only real fear of Gruevski clique is US. He would never confront the US Ambassador (...). When the US Ambassador criticizes not too often it matters. There is much more respect and fear of them [than of the EU]»<sup>27</sup>. This is clear from the negotiations around resolving the political crisis. From mid-May until July 20, representatives of the EU had weekly rounds of talks with Gruevski, Zaev and representatives of other Albanian parties, trying to find a solution. During this period much has been achieved, including a list of urgent reforms that Macedonia has to implement during the year. The main stumbling block was how the State apparatus of Macedonia would operate until the upcoming early parliamentary elections in April 2016. It has been overcome only with the help of Americans. Prior to July 2015, although the US Ambassador to Macedonia, Jess Bailey, was present at all the meetings of the party leaders<sup>28</sup>, the negotiations were held only under the auspices of the Europeans. However «there has been no forward movement in the process for a month. The last meeting between the party leaders, on June 29, ended without agreement on transitional Government»<sup>29</sup>. Then the US took an active involvement. The day before the next round of negotiations between the Government and opposition under the auspices of the European Union, US Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs, Victoria Nuland, arrived in Skopje saying: «Now is the time to bring this crisis to an end»<sup>30</sup>. It must be admitted that she was able to reach a formal agreement; having met with both Nikola Gruevski and Zoran Zaev, the following day both parties agreed to make concessions and reached an agreement under the direction of the EU: «In brief, the agreement includes snap elections by next April, the return of the opposition to Parliament in September, the appointment of a special prosecutor with consent from all political parties to investigate illegal surveillance claims, the resignation of the current Government so that a new transition Government can be inaugurated 100 days before the elections; and the appointment of five ministers or deputy ministers by the opposition»<sup>31</sup>.

<sup>27</sup> Bassuener Kurt, *No Stability without Accountability - the West's Responsibility in Macedonia*, cit., p. 15.

<sup>28</sup> Marusic Sinisa Jakov, *EU Reforms Collide with Macedonia's Grim Reality*, in «Balkan Insight», 25 June 2015. <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/eu-reforms-collide-with-macedonia-s-grim-reality>.

<sup>29</sup> Bassuener Kurt, *It's Time the US Grabbed the Reins in Macedonia*, in «Balkan Insight», 12 July 2015. <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/it-s-time-the-us-grabbed-the-reins-in-macedonia-1>.

<sup>30</sup> Hajdari Una, Tomovic Dusan, Marusic Sinisa Jakov, *Nuland Tries to Break Deadlock in Macedonia*, in «Balkan Insight», 13 July 2015. <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/nuland-focuses-on-rule-of-law-in-kosovo-montenegro>.

<sup>31</sup> Blazevska Katerina, *Macedonia Peace Deal Arouses Hope and Doubt*, in «Balkan Insight», 16 July 2015. <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/macedonia-peace-deal-arouses-hope-and-doubt>.

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Formally, the political crisis in Macedonia is considered to be resolved, although the probability that this has settled the situation and that Parliament will function normally are not high. Political analyst Professor Gordan Jovanovski in an interview with «Balkan Insight» describes the agreement: «The fact that the opposition will monitor or control the work of several ministries through deputy ministers with a right of veto signals that no one believes that the cooperation will go smoothly»<sup>32</sup>. In addition, there are also concerns about the implementation of the package of urgent reforms drawn up by the EU. The reforms are designed to overcome problems during the year in the following areas: «the interception of communications, the judicial and prosecution services, the lack of external oversight carried out by independent bodies, the conduct of elections and the lack of freedom of the media»<sup>33</sup>. Given that none of the identified issues in Macedonia have been resolved in the past 15 years, a short period of time allocated for the implementation of reforms and the complete absence of political consensus suggest the EU requirements are somewhat inadequate. They also appear to further delay the prospect of opening negotiations on EU membership for Macedonia. Their mere existence is an open acknowledgment that EU policies in the country in the past few years have been unsuccessful. The role of the USA as the final arbiter, stabilizer and the only force able to solve the problems further highlights this fact. This structure to resolve the crisis in Macedonia is a blow to the image of the EU because in the past the United States had already put the mission to stabilize the Balkan region into the hands of the EU. Negative opinions suggest that the EU is unable to cope with this task, and once again must act together with the United States. This can't but affect the image of the European Union to all the other Western Balkan countries, thus putting the European integration project at risk.

At the same time the European Union is extremely wary and even hostile to attempts by other international players to act in the Balkans. However, working together on achieving a resolution is an absolute requirement. «So, while the EU wants primacy among Western actors, including the US, NATO, the OSCE and the Council of Europe, it also hamstring itself. The EU doesn't do hard power or coercion but it doesn't want others to do it for them within a coordinated strategy, either»<sup>34</sup>. In the case of the United States or NATO, if the European Union calls for assistance at the last moment, the involvement of Russia, Turkey and China will not be welcomed in the region. However, in circumstances where the European Union is not sufficiently effective in itself, the presence of another alternative force could either be

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>33</sup> Marusic Sinisa Jakov, *Op.cit.*

<sup>34</sup> Bassuener Kurt, *It's Time the US Grabbed the Reins in Macedonia* cit.

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destabilizing or more optimistically guarantee a compromise. Everything depends only on how they approach it. Neither Russia nor Turkey or China consider the Western Balkans in isolation from the EU. For them, this is one of the potential bridges in cooperation with Europe. They are willing to invest just under guarantee of future EU membership and European market. The European Union should strategically take advantage of this situation inviting others to invest and be involved in making political decisions of consensus. If this does not happen, then the situation in the Balkans will continue to be fluid and volatile due to the fact that all these traditional actors in the region will carry out mixed, inconsistent policies in their own narrow interests.

As for the situation in Macedonia itself, it is, first of all the result of «both a crisis of Western vision and of Macedonian democracy, which has left opportunistic players - domestic, regional and foreign - ample room for malfeasance»<sup>35</sup>. Secondly it is connected with the fact that the discussion about the enlargement of the EU has proven to be temporarily closed, resulting in disinterest in all the candidate countries and their problems. There appears a conviction that all their problems should be solved by the candidates themselves because the EU is in crisis, but this is a very dangerous delusion. The crisis in Macedonia has shown everyone that nothing in the Balkans should be taken for granted. What seems a stable and prosperous State today may tomorrow fall into a deep crisis and extrication from this could then take years. «Maintaining stability at the expense of the rule of law and Government accountability is a sure recipe for failure in the long term. It is time for the EU to use all the foreign policy instruments at its disposal to address in a more decisive manner the crisis in Macedonia, not only for the sake of the country and its people, but also because of the potential impact in the broader region»<sup>36</sup>. In order to do this, it is important to strengthen the institutional presence in the country, for example, by re-opening the office of EU Special Representative in Skopje, which was closed several years ago, or through more active support of the reforms by individual EU Member States, for example, the Netherlands, which is traditionally active in Macedonia. In addition, the EU should reconsider its attitude to other international players, such as Russia, Turkey and China participating in the stabilization of the Balkans. Finally of course it should open negotiations on membership of Macedonia in the near future. Only this will help the future leadership of Macedonia to avoid the situation in which Nikola Gruevski was ensnared.

<sup>35</sup> Id., *No Stability without Accountability - the West's Responsibility in Macedonia* cit., p. 15.

<sup>36</sup> Fouere Erwan, *Waiting for EU leadership: the worsening crisis in Macedonia* cit. [http://www.ceps.eu/system/files/Fouere\\_Macedonia\\_Commentary.pdf](http://www.ceps.eu/system/files/Fouere_Macedonia_Commentary.pdf).