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MACEDONIA AND THE EU: Plunging headlong into the past

Dr. Eran Fraenkel, Consultant on Media and Programming for Social Change.
CIDOB collaborator

Following the collapse of the Berlin Wall and of SFR Yugoslavia in 1989, the European Union was in the unprecedented position of having to decide whether it would expand to include countries that had been part of the Warsaw Pact – such as Poland or Estonia – or that had been part of the “other” Europe – such as the ex-Yugoslav successor states and Albania. Over the ensuing decades, the Union has admitted most of these countries, but has also made it increasingly clear that countries which have not yet been granted accession are in for a long wait and may be excluded indefinitely, if not permanently.

There are six countries in Southeastern Europe (Macedonia, Bosnia, Albania, Serbia, Montenegro and Kosovo) that have been labeled the “Western Balkans,” which actually is a euphemism for “Unqualified for EU Membership.” The specific rationale for denying admission to the EU differs from country to country. Despite any variations, however, the underlying objections are the same: countries of the

Western Balkans are “not ready” yet for EU membership; it is “too early” to let them in; the “cost” of having these countries as members would outweigh any benefits that might derive from their accession.

Whereas until recently most Macedonians may have considered that the country was genuinely not in sufficient compliance with EU membership criteria, many of them have become convinced that the EU’s intentions are insincere, at best.

Among its qualifications for accession to the EU, Macedonia points to its longstanding recognition of the identity and rights of its minority communities; unlike either of its neighbors to the east and south, both of which are EU members.

Rather than providing incentives for Skopje to meet whichever accession standards have been defined and agreed to, unrequited relations with the EU have become the engine of increasingly regressive political, social and economic trends.

Macedonia may not yet be a failed state – though an increasing number of Macedonians from all its communities describe it that way – but it is certainly a flailing state. Rather than steadily forging its way into a common European future, the Macedonian government has created a fictional lineage that excludes everyone but its most fervent adherents.

The government in Skopje is intentionally poking a stick in the eye of the government in Athens and successfully reinforcing Greece’s opinion that Macedonia should not be allowed to enter the European Union. And it is also aggravating its relationship with its eastern neighbor, Bulgaria.

Equally clear is the message to Macedonia’s Albanians, who comprise approximately a quarter of the country’s population: we Macedonians have inhabited this territory longer than anyone, including you Albanians who purport to be the descendents of the peninsula’s indigenous Illyrians.

As the country sinks further and more quickly into a reality of its own making, a reality that excludes numbers of its own citizens, its immediate neighbors, and ultimately Europe, the EU must ask itself seriously whether the price of keeping the Western Balkans out is worth the consequences.

This hesitation appears to have been exacerbated by the admission of Bulgaria and Romania in 2007, and to the slow pace of economic and political change taking place in these two countries since their accession. Furthermore, whereas reluctance to admit new countries to the EU was largely limited to political elites prior to the previous enlargement, there is now more vocal and widespread popular objection to expansion, as manifest in various anti-immigrant movements and support for increasingly conservative governments in some capital cities of “Old Europe.”

These trends have had a net negative impact on the Balkans. In Macedonia specifically, continuing exclusion from the European Union has had, and will continue to have the opposite effect than what

Eurocrats are intending: namely, rather than providing incentives for Skopje to meet whichever accession standards have been defined and agreed to, unrequited relations with the EU have become the engine of increasingly regressive political, social and economic trends. The longer it takes Brussels to grasp the cause-and-effect relationship between its accession policy and realities in Macedonia, the more likely it is that the EU will have to face the consequences of having created one (and most probably more) “black holes” in Europe, lacking rule of law, representative and participatory politics, free-market economies, and freedom of expression.

Macedonia may not yet be a *failed* state – though an increasing number of Macedonians from all its communities describe it that way – but it is certainly a *flailing* state. Rather than steadily forging its way into a common European future, the Macedonian government is plunging the country headlong into an ever more distorted, mythical, and divisive past. And the more Skopje invests in inventing this allegedly glorious ancient past, the less invested it becomes either in dealing with its precarious and real present or preparing for any possible future.

Though few people in Macedonia would dispute that social, economic and political conditions still need to improve, what keeps Macedonians disillusioned is the experience of ever-shifting goalposts.

It's too late for it to be too early for Macedonia to join the EU

The Republic of Macedonia gained its independence from Former Yugoslavia in 1991. Two years later the country was admitted to the United Nations, albeit under the name FYROM (Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia), as demanded by Athens due to Greece's dispute with its northern neighbor over ostensible cultural, historical and territorial claims. Although Macedonia and Greece signed an Interim Accord in 1995, and despite reaching a Stabilization and Association Agreement with the EU in 2001, Macedonia has not come any closer to accession talks with Brussels. Skopje submitted its application for EU membership in 2004, and obtained candidacy status in 2005. Since then, opening accession talks with Macedonia has been endorsed on five occasions (in 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013), but the Council of Europe has denied or postponed the recommendation each time.

The possible consequences of this approach to expansion have been pithily captured by Hedwig Morvai-Horvat, Executive Director of the European Fund for the Balkans of the King Baudouin Foundation. He describes three possible scenarios should the EU continue to deny accession to the countries of the Western Balkans.¹ The first is “Business as Usual,” in which

the possibility of accession is perpetually discussed and postponed, leading to increasing skepticism about enlargement among current EU member states. Second is the “Turkey Path,” in which countries denied EU membership are increasingly drawn to other “possible clubs.” In this scenario, EU members block the progress of candidate countries, to the point that the both elites and citizens of candidate states lose interest in EU membership. “The lack of progress is likely to halt democratization, leading to semi-authoritarian regimes that control the media, change the constitution, and checks-and-balances lose the battle vis-à-vis enhanced powers for the executive branch.”² In the third scenario, the possibility of enlargement is abandoned entirely, resulting in the growth of Euroskepticism and the loss of significance for the EU as a whole. “While in the 1990s it seemed that the EU had no alternative, recent developments mean that the US, Russia and Turkey are competitors in their struggle for influence and power in the countries on the outskirts of Europe.”³ For the preceding nine years Macedonia has put up with “business as usual.” Each successive postponement of accession talks, however, has diminished both the patience and the confidence of this small, relatively poor, and landlocked country.

Whereas until recently most Macedonians may have considered that the country was genuinely not in sufficient compliance with EU membership criteria, many of them have become convinced that the EU's inten-

tions are insincere, at best. Namely, the majority of people in Macedonia – both ethnic Macedonians and Albanians – were largely in agreement that the country had met or surpassed requirements for admission into the Union. Indeed, becoming part of “Europe” has been among the outstanding common political goals of otherwise contentious inter-ethnic politics in Macedonia. Among its qualifications for accession to the EU, Macedonia points to its longstanding recognition of the identity and rights of its minority communities; unlike either of its neighbors to the east and south, both of which are EU members. Furthermore, the country has been governed by coalitions of Albanian and Macedonian parties since its independence in 1991. Irrespective of its inelegant and at times crude behavior, Macedonia accepted and accommodated over 400,000 refugees from Kosovo during Milošević's ethnic cleansing campaign in 1998-1999; a number equal to nearly 25% of the country's total population.⁴ In the wake of the domestic Macedonian insurgency in 2001 and the signing of the Ohrid Framework Accord in 2002, Macedonia bowed to international pressures to amend the Constitution, making it a *de facto* if not an official bi-national and bi-lingual state. Irrespective of any preconditions and expectations that Skopje has addressed over the past decade, however, accession talks remain beyond the horizon.

2. Op cit.

3. Op cit.

4. Romania and Bulgaria, which bore little or no burden during this conflict, were reportedly “rewarded with EU membership for their support in the 1999 Kosovo war, even though neither was fully prepared.” See “Analyst: Bulgaria's and Romania's EU Accession was right,” at www.euroactiv.com

1. See “How to Strengthen the EU Integration Process.” Available at: www.independent.mk/articles/5791/How+to+Strengthen+EU+Integration+Process#shash.qv2X1qJ.dpuf

That this horizon is truly distant was recently reaffirmed by an announcement from the European Commission that it has allocated one billion Euros to the IPA (Pre-accession Assistance) funds for the Western Balkans for the period 2014-2020. As described by the Greek presidency of the Council of Europe in May 2014, these funds are meant to be a “consolation prize” for those countries to which the EU cannot give a specific time frame for becoming part of the union.⁵ And though few people in Macedonia would dispute that social, economic, and political conditions still need to improve, what keeps Macedonians disillusioned is the experience of ever-shifting goalposts: as previously accepted criteria for launching Macedonia’s accession talks change for seemingly arbitrary and opaque reasons, Skopje has been arriving at the inevitable conclusion that there will be no movement from “talking about talking” to arriving at a firm deadline for the country’s admittance to the EU.⁶

Plunging headlong into an imaginary past

As Macedonians see their chances of becoming EU citizens fade, the government has exploited their disappointment to launch a dramatic program of historical revisionism aiming to reorient the country from the future to the past. Rather than investing in repairing crumbling schools, or providing seed money for the development of sustainable businesses, substantial sums are being spent on “Skopje 2014”, a program that is transforming the city into a museum of a civilization and people that no one in the country recognizes.

Following Skopje’s recovery from the devastating earthquake of 1963, and thanks in large part to international aid, Macedonians took pride in the city as a symbol of resilience and renewal. This is no longer the case. Rather, in an expression of petulant nationalism, the government has created a fictional lineage that excludes everyone but its most fervent adherents. First and foremost, this newly created past rejects the Slavic ancestry of contemporary Macedonians; the ancestry that has been at the heart of Macedonian post-War historiography and at the core of the country’s identity disputes with neighboring Bulgaria and Serbia. Instead, the new identity ideology advocates nothing less than the uninterrupted descent of Macedonia’s present-day population from the peninsula’s indigenous and eponymic “ancient” Macedonian tribe. The center of Skopje is now dominated by grandiose statues of Alexander the Great, his father Phillip

of Macedon, and his mother, whose identity is hardly known to anyone. Skopje’s international airport as well as the main highway to the border with Greece have both been renamed “Alexander the Great.” By laying claims to these and other pre-Slavic historical figures (such as the Byzantine Emperor Justinian), the government in Skopje is intentionally poking a stick in the eye of the government in Athens and successfully reinforcing Greece’s opinion that Macedonia should not be allowed to enter the European Union.

Macedonia’s revisionism has also aggravated its eastern neighbor, Bulgaria, by prominently placing a statue in downtown Skopje commemorating the medieval Tsar Samuel (Samoil). Though his seat of power and citadel are located in Ohrid, in southern Macedonia on the border with Albania, both Skopje and Sofia lay exclusive claim to this historical ruler as “ours.” Neither is willing to admit to a shared past. Identity arguments with Bulgaria long pre-date the “Skopje 2014” project: Bulgaria may have been the first country to recognize Macedonia as an independent country in 1991, but it has not retreated from its long-standing position that Macedonia is inhabited by “Western Bulgarians.” Several ironies

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emerge from this dispute with Bulgaria. One is that claiming Samoil was Macedonian does not dovetail very easily with the re-identification of Macedonians as the heirs to Alexander the Great. A graver irony is that in their fixation on claiming Samoil as “ours,” proponents of Macedonia’s historical revisionism have been blind to - or possibly have ignored - the number of Macedonian citizens who have been opting to identify with the country of Bulgaria. Namely, over the past ten years, between 50-90,000 Macedonians are thought to have requested and received Bulgarian passports. Whereas Bozidar Dimitrov, head of the National History Museum in Sofia, insists that these are people who are “returning to their Bulgarian roots,” there is far more pragmatic explanation. That is, despite all the revisionist rhetoric, some Macedonians have responded more positively to Bulgaria’s offer of a future as EU citizens rather than to Skopje’s attempts to convince them of who they might have been in the past.

This historical revisionism, known as *antikvizacija*, or “antiquization”, not only excludes regional actors from the newly re-imagined past, but also precludes anyone who refuses to participate in a narrative that denies events which occurred within living memory. Thus, for example, *antikvizacija* dismisses people who fought in World War II as partisans, and who were active in the establishment of post-war Macedonian cultural, legal, and political institutions. In this new narrative, most of Macedonia’s 20th-century history is one of suffering, as illustrated by the single museum dedicated to this period: Музеј на ВМРО и Музеј на жртвите

5. See <http://www.independent.mk/articles/4794/consolation+prize+for+western+balkans+funds+instead+of+acceptance+date+in+EU>.

6. As The Economist put it in 2011, the EU has put no pressure on Greece to let Macedonia begin EU accession talks, and Greece does not expect any pressure to be applied. Rather, “the euro crisis means that enlargement is hardly a priority for Europe. Indeed, many countries are quite happy to find any excuse not to pursue it. Greek objections over Macedonia’s name will do nicely.” See: <http://www.economist.com/node/21541400>.

од комунистичкиот режим (The Museum of VMRO and the Museum of Victims of the Communist Regime). Rather, Macedonia's history skips back to "national heroes" from the 19th and early-20th centuries, many of whom are familiar only to the most devoted academics. The Vardar River running through downtown Skopje has new bridges lined with statues of these newly re-discovered personages of consequence. And to glorify Macedonia's even earlier reinvented history, the Left bank of the Vardar is now cluttered with large and often still-unoccupied governmental buildings in styles ranging from neo-Baroque to Greco-Roman; and whose scale can only be described as "Pharaonic."

Beyond symbolizing an imaginary past, "Skopje 2104" physically and ideologically disconnects modern Skopje from its actual 500-year Turkish and Muslim legacy. Ottoman Skopje, with its 15th-century mosques, karvansarays, and hamams, is obscured by statues announcing the city's "Macedonian" identity – even if this identity currently is in the process of being (re-)invented. In addition to a 30-meter Orthodox cross already erected at the summit of Mount Vodno, overlooking the entire city, a second slightly smaller cross was consecrated

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recently in one of the city's dense residential neighborhoods. New churches are being constructed in parts of town that are intended to be common spaces; for instance along the pedestrian walkway in front of Mother Teresa's birthplace, or by the Ottoman citadel overlooking the Vardar River. The message of "Skopje 2014" to the country's various Muslim communities, representing nearly 30% of the population, is clear: Macedonia is "ours" and "we" are Christians. Equally clear is the message to Macedonia's Albanians, who comprise approximately a quarter of the country's population: We Macedonians have inhabited this territory longer than anyone, including you Albanians who purport to be the descendents of the peninsula's indigenous Illyrians.

Antikvizacija has reached heights (or depths) of absurdity that under different circumstances might be considered comical, but which in today's circumstances exemplify the mentality driving events in the region. To wit, in 2008, Nikola Gruevski (then and now the prime minister of Macedonia) and the Archbishop of the Macedonian Orthodox Church hosted a visit by Prince Ghazanfar Ali Khan and Princess Rani Atiqah of the Hunza people, who live in Pakistan's Himalaya region. Though they are Muslims, the Hunza self-identify as descendents of Alexander the Great, and were therefore welcomed in Skopje as long-lost kin. Not surprisingly, the Hunza had not been aware of their ostensible historical connection with Macedonia until a linguistics professor from Skopje proclaimed that Hunza and Indo-European languages share a common grammar. Not to be outdone, Athens also has re-discovered its own historical connections with Pakistan, but with the Kalashi tribe that lives in the Himalayas. To ensure the international legitimacy of this claim, Greek emigrants in the United States have asked Washington to accord protec-

tion to the 'Hellenic descendants of the armies of Alexander the Great' in the Himalayas.

To many outside observers, as well as to Macedonians who have not been swept up in this tide of nationalist revisionism, the country appears to have gone dreadfully astray from the path on which it started in 1991, let alone after signing the Ohrid Framework Agreement in 2002. There are those who blame Macedonia's current condition on the EU and its ambiguous, if not hypocritical policies towards countries of the Balkans and their eligibility for accession. There are those who blame Macedonia's exclusion from the EU on their own leaders' lack of vision, complicity in corruption and self-aggrandizement. But, as the country sinks further and more quickly into a reality of its own making, a reality that excludes numbers of its own citizens, its immediate neighbors, and ultimately Europe, the EU must ask itself seriously whether the price of keeping the Western Balkans out is worth the consequences. If Macedonia, and then Bosnia and Kosovo and Albania remain isolated from Europe, their eventual ally will be Turkey. Turkey is already quite influential in these countries, both as an investor and, in the case of Macedonia, as a natural counterbalance to Greece.

For Serbia and Montenegro, Russia might be a more attractive option than Turkey, though events in Ukraine could be having a chilling effect on such sentiments.⁷

The EU has its protocol for expansion, which does not bode well for the accession of any country of the Western Balkans. Macedonia is in the most vulnerable position, given the right of each EU member state to veto the application of any candidate. Would Greece and Bulgaria have been more favorably inclined to admit Macedonia had Skopje not launched its program of antiquization? This is unknowable, as it is impossible to prove a negative. What is knowable is that the only way to reverse Macedonia's slide into a fictional and self-destructive past is to guarantee it a clear and immutable future. With the necessary political will, this is something the EU could and should do – before it's too late.

7. It's worth recalling the Serbian aphorism, whose pithiness is lost in translation, coined when the army of the Soviet Union toppled the regime in Kabul in 1979: "Danas u Afganistanu; sutra u našem stanu" (Today they're in Afghanistan; tomorrow they'll be here).