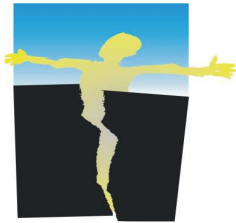


# HELSINKI Bulletin



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## **Macedonia: Under Constant Pressure from its Neighbors**

Macedonia's statehood, nation or church have been denied by its neighbors ever since its independence. Has it not been for EU, US and NATO it would have been thorn by internal conflicts and, probably, by foreign aggression. However, despite the multitude of domestic problems, Macedonia managed to survive and even obtain EU candidacy and membership of NATO. These are the guarantees of its sustainability and social consolidation.

Despite some minor disputes over the borderline, Serbia recognized Macedonia in 1996 under the name of the Republic of Macedonia. But the Serb Orthodox Church /SPC/ still denies the autocephaly of the Macedonian Orthodox Church /MPC/ proclaimed back in 1967. The issue of MPC autocephaly is closely connected with the recognition of the Macedonian statehood.

Serbia's undefined borders with all neighboring countries will seriously hinder its faster movement towards EU membership. The border issue is in the corpus of regional

cooperation expected to be a crucial political problem in the region in 2010. Anyway, this is what EU underlined in its Serbia report for 2009. Serbia still has not settled yet its borders with Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Montenegro.

Serbia has strongly responded to the border demarcation agreement between Macedonia and Kosovo. Montenegro and Kosovo will soon start negotiating an agreement as such as well. Given Serbia's denial of Kosovo's independence, demarcation with the countries that have recognized it threatens to turn into a tediously long-term problem.



Belgrade now plays on Macedonia's complex international position to blackmail it with Kosovo. Counting on knotty relations between Macedonians and Albanians in

Macedonia, Belgrade has hardly expected Kosovo to be Macedonia's priority. However, Macedonia prioritized international circumstances and the opportunities for a speedier movement towards EU, and hence recognized Kosovo's independence – an act that contributed to the stability of this part of the Balkans.

Relations between Macedonians and Albanians in Macedonia proper have been prioritized over the consent with Serbia vis-à-vis the Albanian issue. After the Ohrid Agreement (2001) Macedonia begun acknowledging the fact that ethnic Albanians were crucial for its stability.

### **Macedonia recognizes Kosovo independence**

Macedonia recognized Kosovo simultaneously with Montenegro (2008). Serbia saw both acts as hostile and promptly activated its Action Plan for Kosovo the details of which emerge only in some concrete situations. To begin with, Belgrade withdrew its ambassadors from all neighboring countries and expelled Macedonian and Croatian ambassadors.

Macedonia and Montenegro explained their decisions to recognize Kosovo by saying, "Bearing in mind the fact that Kosovo institutions are obliged to fully implement the principles and provisions of the plan of the special representative of the UN Secretary General for the settlement of the status of Kosovo, the two countries support the establishment of democratic institutions in Kosovo to serve development of a multiethnic society that would guarantee the rights of all ethnic communities to cultural, religions and linguistic identity."<sup>1</sup>

Belgrade's response to Macedonia was followed by strong

diplomatic pressure from US. American Secretary of Defense Robert Gates said, "Washington would highly appreciate Macedonia's soon recognition of independent Kosovo."<sup>2</sup>

Two major Albanian parties in Macedonia, Menhud Thachi's Democratic Party of Albanians and Ali Ahmeti's Democratic Integrative Union crucially influenced Macedonia's decision to recognize Kosovo. The recognition itself also contributed to the country's stability. A document released by the two Albanian parties quotes, "Kosovo status has been for long a key problem generating serious political problems in the region, instability and armed conflicts...Recognition of Kosovo's independence is a realistic solution to regional crises." Commenting the initiative by the Albanian parties, Menhud Thachi said, "An independent Kosovo is not an Albanian project only but an initiative coming from US, EU and NATO."<sup>3</sup>

### **Inauguration of President Ivanov**

Even the inauguration of Macedonian President Djordje Ivanov was not spared from Serbia's and Greece's blackmail. Presidents of Albania, Montenegro, Croatia and Serbia – Bamir Topi, Filip Vujanovic, Stipe Mesic and Boris Tadic – attended the inaugural ceremony. President of Kosovo Fatmir Sejdiu was not invited because of the pressure from Serbia, whereas Bulgarian President Georgi Prvanov and President of Greece Karolos Papoulias turned down the invitation.

Tadic said in his message of congratulations, "I sincerely

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<sup>1</sup> [www.b92.net](http://www.b92.net) October 9, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> [www.B92.net](http://www.B92.net), October 9, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.



congratulate you on winning presidential election. I feel confident that we would work together on strengthening neighborly and friendly relations to the benefit of citizens of Serbia and Macedonia.”<sup>4</sup> In addition to Macedonia’s recognition of Kosovo, added Tadic, the relations between the two countries are burdened by the church issue.

The media in Macedonia criticized Ivanov’s decision against inviting Sejdiu. “Satisfying one-off whims of someone’s friends, Tadic of Djelic, whatever, must not substitute for management of interethnic relations,” said some.”<sup>5</sup>



*Djordje Ivanov*

### **Between Kosovo and Serbia**

To make amends to the President of Kosovo, official Skopje decided to invite Sejdiu as the first foreign politician in visit to Macedonia since Ivanov’s inauguration. But Sejdiu called the visit off because the Macedonian President would not have met him with adequate protocol. Belgrade was also dictating the protocol for Sejdiu’s visit. According to Kosovo analysts, Sejdiu did the right thing without negatively affecting relations between the two countries.

“Like Kosovo, Macedonia is a country with many problems. It has a problem with neighboring Greece over

<sup>4</sup> Beta, May 12, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

the country’s name. On the other hand, Macedonia has had hard time with Serbia for months because it had recognized Kosovo. Indeed, they do not need additional problems in their relations with Kosovo,” said analyst Millazim Krasniqi.<sup>6</sup>

“Macedonia and Kosovo have affirmed their dedication to regional and European integrations. In this sense, I don’t think this is an isolated case. The Macedonian President and the Macedonian government need to read this message with utmost care so as to pursue good relationship, though by some standards of mutual respect,” said Krasniqi.<sup>7</sup>

### **Macedonia and ICJ advisory opinion about Kosovo**

Under the pressure from Belgrade, Macedonia decided not to argue the legality of Kosovo’s independence before the International Court of Justice /ICJ/ or submit any relevant documentation. It decided to remain neutral after the media in Serbia criticized it for not siding up with Serbia in the case before ICJ.

### **Relations between SPC and MPC**

Though not canonically recognized yet, the Macedonian Orthodox Church /MPC/ – Ohrid Archbishopric (MPC—OA) or just MPC is an official Eastern Orthodox church in the Republic of Macedonia. MCP proclaimed autocephaly – i.e. independence from the Serb Orthodox Church /SPC/ - in 1967 in Ohrid. It has been in dispute with SPC ever since. By denying to

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,4287747,00.html>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.



recognize MPC, SPC actually denies Macedonia's statehood. The Patriarch of Constantinople refused to recognize it because of the name "Macedonian" and so did the Greek and other Eastern Orthodox churches. MPC considers itself a successor of the Ohrid Archbishopric. SPC recognizes only the newly established Orthodox Ohrid Archbishopric with Archbishop Jovan Vranisevski at its head.

In 2003, SPC suggested an autonomous status of MPC within SPC (the so-called Nis agreement). Should that be the case, believers and clergy of an autonomous Ohrid-Prilep Archbishopric would be duty-bound to invoke the name of the Serb Patriarch in all liturgies. Only Bishop Jovan Vraniskovski seconded the proposal.

For their part, Greeks negate the Macedonian nation and the name Macedonia for a state, as they take the term itself denotes their historic kingdom (Alexander the Great). Therefore, Greece (but EU as well) recognizes Macedonia under the name Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. The name for Macedonia has been negotiated for two decades already. As of lately, there is a mention of a solution supposed to satisfy both sides (*Northern Macedonia* or *Slavic Macedonia*)

New SPC Patriarch Irinej touched on the problem in his first official address. "We have a common history, we have a common culture and we understand each other's language. Things that have happened so far are not normal. We've done our best to overcome the problem, they have not taken it seriously /at first/ but they do now," he said. "Now we are faced with a new problem because there is a new official church recognized by all nations (Ohrid Archbishopric)...They will need to exert efforts to solve this problem among themselves. Our door is open to them and I wish we should find a solution. We'll do everything in our power - I, in my capacity as the Patriarch and the whole church - to

have the problem solved," added Irinej.<sup>8</sup>

As disclosed by Bishop of Backa Irinej, the two churches were negotiating in secret throughout 2009. "We had some contacts and discussions but made no tangible progress," he told the press in Skopje.<sup>9</sup> He said that both SPC and MPC were willing to engage in a dialogue to overcome the status quo. According to sources from MPC, SPC softened its stands once it realized that the project involving Jovan Vraniskovski was a failure.



*Patriarch Irinej*

The Macedonian church seeks autocephaly, whereas SPC insists on the term "autonomy," which is less than independence for MPC. The Macedonian church is fully aware that the road to a higher position within Eastern Orthodoxy goes through "clerical" Belgrade. However, it is hard to expect SPC, which has good relations with the Greek Church, to allow autocephaly for MPC while Skopje and Athens are disputing over the name for Macedonia.

MPC Synod renamed MPC the Macedonian Orthodox Church - Ohrid Archbishopric (MPC-OA). According to the professor at the Faculty of Theology in Skopje, Dimitri Belcovski (who worked on the amendment of MPC constitution), the MPC Synod decided to rename the church back in 2005.

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<sup>8</sup> Blic, January 27, 2010.

<sup>9</sup> Politika, July 31, 2009.

## **Serbia's response to establishment of diplomatic relations with Kosovo**

Relations between Serbia and Macedonia have been tense ever since Macedonia recognized Kosovo. President Tadic says in principle, "Serbia remains committed to regional cooperation and supports Macedonia when it comes to the membership of EU. We are moving together towards EU countries' decision on visa liberation regime, which is extremely important to our citizens."<sup>10</sup> Since Serbia takes that the Western Balkans should join EU in package, such statement, as well as Serbia's overall attitude towards its neighbors testify of its strategy for obstructing Macedonia's, Montenegro's and Bosnia-Herzegovina's course to EU.

Serbia keeps reminding Macedonia that Kosovo is the main point of discord. But, as President Tadic puts it, the upcoming advisory opinion on the legality of Kosovo's independence by the International Court of Justice might bring about changes in this domain as well. Tadic said, "Serbia will never recognize the independence of Kosovo and Metohija. Once the International Court of Justice decides on the matter, Serbia will readily open a new dialogue leading to a compromise."<sup>11</sup>

At the meeting with his Greek counterpart, Foreign Minister Dimitris Drucas, Serbian Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremic said Athens could count on "Belgrade's undivided political, moral and any other support in the settlement of the problem of the name for Macedonia."<sup>12</sup> "Greece proved to be a genuine friend and a driving force of the process of integration of the entire Western Balkans into EU. In this context, we fully understand its considerations and shall continue to support the Greek government's

endeavor to have all the issues of importance for the Western Balkans solved, including the delicate question of the name for the state with Skopje as its capital."<sup>13</sup>



*Vuk Jeremic*

On March 15, 2010 Macedonia opened its embassy in Prishtina as a natural follow-up of the establishment of diplomatic relations. Antonio Milososki, foreign minister of Macedonia, said on the occasion, "Macedonia and Kosovo are committed to regional peace, friendship and economic cooperation. For us, opening of the embassy is a state occasion and a fresh impetus for bilateral relations." Macedonia supports Kosovo's territorial integrity and will help it in the process of visa liberalization, he added.<sup>14</sup>

## **Demarcation**

Border demarcation between all ex-Yugoslav republics is among prerequisites for their faster movement towards EU. This is about a bilateral problem all countries need to solve before joining EU. "It is most important for every country intent to join EU to leave behind it all bilateral problems in parallel with preparing itself for European integrations," says EU Enlargement Commissioner Stefan Fuele.<sup>15</sup>

Referring to the problem, Aleksandar Popov, director of the Center for Regionalism, says,

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<sup>10</sup> Tanjug, July 22, 2009.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Blic, November 19, 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Transcript publicized at the website of the Greek Foreign Ministry

<sup>14</sup> Tanjug, March 15, 2010.

<sup>15</sup> Danas, March 25, 2010.

“Macedonia has already defined its border with Kosovo and once Montenegro does the same we shall have a double problem. Demarcation will be a stumbling bloc in Serbia’s way to EU.”<sup>16</sup> “If forced to recognize Kosovo, Serbia will have to define its borders with it. However, when one takes into account the constitutional provision and official policy, this will surely not happen soon,” he adds.<sup>17</sup>



*Stefan Fuele*

Not long ago, the parliaments of Macedonia and Kosovo ratified an agreement on border demarcation between the two states – an act inciting strong response from Serbian officials. Martin Martinovski, Macedonian governmental spokesman, takes that “the issue of demarcation between Macedonia and Serbia was solved back in 2001” and that the agreement signed with Kosovo is not problematic. Montenegro also messages that “the alleged problem of borders can be politicized, though nothing is in fact disputable from the angle of international law.”<sup>18</sup>

Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremic called Macedonia’s decision on border demarcation with Kosovo “a heavy blow to the relations between Belgrade and Skopje,” which would “certainly leave consequences.” For him, such decision is “regrettable” and negotiating borders with Serbia with anyone else except with the Serbian government “makes no sense.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Danas, March 25, 2010.

<sup>17</sup> Isto

<sup>18</sup> Isto

<sup>19</sup> Tanjug, 18. mart 2010.

**In order to speed up its own movement towards EU Serbia needs to change its attitude towards open issues in the region. Open border issues with neighboring countries provide Belgrade room for manipulation and blackmail whenever it sees it as convenient.**

**Open border issues make it possible for influential conservative circles in Serbia to deny borders and treat them as historical temporality. This is most important in the context of the problems stemming from 1990s wars, notably the problems of interpretation of and responsibility for the wars.**

**Though it managed to avoid the war, Macedonia has been paying the cost of it for years because of the pressure from its neighbors. Putting an end to border disputes and territorial claims is the only way to establish new relations in the region.**



