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It's Time the US Grabbed the Reins in Macedonia

The US needs to be an active ingredient in attempts to resolve the crisis in Macedonia - not just play a supporting role to the EU.

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The EU-led mediation effort in Macedonia between Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski and opposition Social Democratic leader Zoran Zaev, chaired by Enlargement Commissioner Johannes Hahn, is either on indefinite hold or dead, depending on whom one believes.

There has been no forward movement in the process for a month. The last meeting between the party leaders, (including the Democratic Union for Integration leader Ali Ahmeti, in the governing coalition, and Democratic Party of Albanians leader Menduh Thaçi, who is ostensibly in the opposition), on June 29, ended without agreement on a transitional government.

Since then, Gruevski has maintained that the conditions for continued talks are not ripe, prompting Zaev to say that the June 2 deal agreed by all four parties in the mediation process is “off”.

Zaev has vowed to continue releasing recordings, which he alleges point to the government's systematic abuse of power and lawlessness. An EU-sponsored report, assembled by a team chaired by a former Commission official, Reinhard Priebe, listed many systemic problems and abuses highlighted in the recordings, which the opposition insists were collected by Macedonia's own security services.

The mediation effort is aimed in the first instance at resolving the immediate political impasse and agreeing the formation of a transitional government that will clean up the electoral roll and hold early elections. But, even if this is achieved, which now seems unlikely, there is no clear path towards resolving the root problem of an institutionalized and systemic lack of political accountability.

In a report that DPC published a month ago, I gave my take on what the way forward should look like, to get Macedonia onto a self-sustaining democratic path and allow for its Euro-Atlantic integration (LINK: <http://www.democratizationpolicy.org/no-stability-without-accountability-the-west-s-responsibility-in-macedonia>).

US Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland steps into this challenging environment when she arrives in Skopje on Monday.

Commissioner Hahn and MEPs Ivo Vajgl, Eduard Kukan, and Richard Howitt will arrive on Tuesday to attempt to jump-start the stalled mediation effort. The extent to which they plan to coordinate their efforts is unclear.

While US Ambassador Jess Baily has reportedly been engaged in on-the-ground efforts to support the mediation, the effort has been an EU-centric affair. That entails certain weaknesses and liabilities, not the least of which is EU member Greece's infamous "name issue" with Macedonia and Bulgaria's own complaints.

Functionally more relevant to the mediation is the EU's – and particularly the Commission's – process orientation. (When an event fails to deliver, the EU defines it as an open-ended "process").

So, while the EU wants primacy among Western actors, including the US, NATO, the OSCE and the Council of Europe, it also hamstringing 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.

Mediation is aimed at achieving agreement between disputants, which locks in the relative power dynamic between them. Since the aim is to achieve agreement, a frequent gravitation is toward the mediator pressing the weaker party.

In Macedonia's case, Gruevski holds the levers of power and thus the correlation of forces works in the government's favour. This explains Gruevski's stalling tactics and attempts to change the subject. Zaev's only lever is to threaten to walk away, release more recordings, and organize more demonstrations.

In this case, the mediation model has failed. But it is important to recognize that even "success" on its own terms would be of dubious credibility and limited shelf life. Implementation of the provisions of the June 2 deal would rely on the goodwill of the political parties among which there is zero trust or respect.

While Gruevski's VMRO-DPMNE has held the upper hand for nearly a decade and pushed the envelope, Macedonia's structural democratic accountability deficit predates his rule. The best hope has been manifested in civic demonstrations against government abuse of power. While these grew considerably as a result of the recordings released by the opposition, most demonstrators are not driven by support for Zaev per se.

The timeline for holding new elections in the June 2 deal meanwhile is April 2016, prior to which numerous reforms and investigations would need to occur. This timeline is far too short.

Furthermore, while sources in Brussels note that an independent investigation into May 2015 Kumanovo operation - in which numerous members of the security forces and ethnic Albanian militants from Kosovo were killed - remains part of the EU agenda, there is no reflection of it in the June 2 agreement. An unenforceable deal is a bad deal.

Secretary Nuland should propose recasting international efforts to develop a durable way forward for Macedonia, both broadening the pool of Western actors involved and toughening the posture.

She should call for international arbitration aimed at delivering a transitional government, an investigation into criminality and malfeasance (including those enumerated in the Priebe report and with respect to the Kumanovo operation), preparing for truly free and fair elections, and addressing institutional shortcomings that incentivize abuse of executive power.

The arbitration effort would need to include not just the US and EU but other multilateral actors that have equities and credibility concerning Macedonia's multifaceted problems: NATO, the OSCE, and the Council of Europe. All should be equally represented in an arbitration panel. Macedonian civic actors and experts must also have a clear role in both informing and monitoring the process.

They would be a pivotal partner and legitimizer of such a Western arbitration, and a key factor in the transitional phase. Arbitration formally gives third parties in disputes a say – and most importantly, leverage in enforcing terms. Only in this way can all the impediments to Macedonia's democratic functionality and rule of law – including the “name issue” – be systematically confronted and resolved.

There is no way the EU would accept such an arrangement (and implied rebuke) unless Secretary Nuland puts them on the spot publicly. At present, not only in Macedonia, but throughout the Balkans, the EU wants primacy without responsibility to do what the job at hand requires. To an American Atlanticist like myself who wants the EU to succeed in this region and beyond, it seems that the EU wants only cheerleaders for its agenda(s), not true partners. This is self-defeating and undercuts the EU's own credibility. That's not good for real democrats in the region – or for Americans.

Macedonia's institutional crisis is a product of insufficient foresight in design (in the Ohrid Framework Agreement), local malfeasance, and long-term international (not just EU) malign neglect.

To fix it, the US, which has local credibility and the ability to apply pressure, must be an active ingredient, not just cast in a supporting role to the EU. Nuland should seize the initiative back from Brussels with the aim of designing a strategic arbitration process that can work for the EU, the US, and most importantly, for Macedonia's citizens.