

**No Stability without Accountability –
The West’s Responsibility in Macedonia**

A DPC Policy Paper

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS¹

The Republic of Macedonia (hereinafter “Macedonia”), once considered an island of relative stability in a troubled region, is now once again in the news, for the first time in almost a decade and a half, on account of internal turmoil. The hostility or opportunism of Macedonia’s neighbors has in the past decade abetted the degeneration of an already clientelistic domestic political culture into one in which neo-authoritarianism has taken strong hold.² The Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM), the political opposition to Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski and his ruling party, the nationalist Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization-Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE), has for months been releasing voice recordings which appear to record internal government deliberations – and demonstrate widespread (and widely believed) malfeasance. Public dissatisfaction with malgovernance has led to demonstrations, while an ethnic separatist narrative which had been in remission for over a decade has been revived with a bloody – and still opaque – security operation against armed ethnic Albanians in the northern town of Kumanovo in early May.

Macedonia's near quarter-century lasting “name dispute” with Greece, as well as differing historical interpretations with Bulgaria, have halted its forward movement toward EU and NATO membership. But however one dissects the origins of the country’s stall on integration, the problems facing Macedonia cannot be written off as solely externally imposed. Governance in Macedonia is characterized by a lack of political accountability and rule of law which is structural, and not merely situational, in nature. The country therefore faces a potent cocktail of internal and external impediments to its democratic development, prosperity, and Euro-Atlantic integration.

Multiethnic Macedonian civil society has responded to the challenge in the past year with increasing confidence and assertiveness. While the SDSM has fed popular mobilization calling for Gruevski to step down in favor of a transitional government, it would be a mistake to conclude that demonstrators are there for the opposition *per se*. But despite growing popular confidence, which implies potential for more durable arrangements to ensure political and legal accountability, there is no path out of the crisis without concerted Western engagement. The government is simply in too dominant a position – and able to exploit both fears of conflict and a sense of grievance at unfair treatment by its neighbors. The situation is dangerously unstable – and several actors, including the Gruevski government, Serbia and Moscow aim to profit from it.

There are ample grounds for confidence in the ability of Macedonia’s citizens – ethnic Macedonian, ethnic Albanian, and other communities – to develop a country which can serve and protect its citizens, as well as pursue common aspirations. But to enable such development, significant changes to the

¹ Recommendations are further developed in the Conclusion and Recommendations section of this policy paper.

² The author conducted roughly 20 interviews in February and March 2015, primarily in Skopje, in preparation for this policy paper, with follow-up contacts throughout May 2015. Interviewees included government officials, opposition members, civic activists, leaders of civil society organizations, media figures and international officials.

incentive structure in and around Macedonia must occur. A common, multifaceted and strategic Western policy response is required. To this end, DPC recommends the following:

To the US and NATO:

- State clearly that Macedonia's territorial integrity and sovereignty are non-negotiable, and that external and regional attempts to disrupt this order will not be tolerated.
- Reiterate that Montenegrin and Kosovo independence have completed the post-Yugoslav state formation process. All efforts toward border changes in the Western Balkans – i.e., in Macedonia, Kosovo, Serbia or BiH – will be actively resisted by NATO.
- The US and the overwhelming majority of NATO member states should press Greece and Bulgaria to accept the entire arrangement proposed by leading EU member states (below) as a path to removing objections to Macedonia's invitation for membership in the Alliance.
- The government and political establishment of Kosovo should be told in no uncertain terms that support or advocacy for separatism or territorial reallocation will not be tolerated, and that such advocacy has consequences.

To the EU:

- Larger EU member states should actively press Athens and Sofia to retract their objections to opening EU negotiations – under clear conditions proposed by the entire Union. The member states most assertive on the deterioration of Macedonia's democratic practice must also take the lead on pressing Greece's government to accept the terms below, using all available leverage:
 - 1) That a transitional government, to be composed of equal numbers of the larger parliamentary parties, vetted by respected local civic figures, be established for a set two-year window with a clear mandate to:
 - a) Investigate, with EU assistance, the veracity and background of the recordings that have been released by SDSM leader Zoran Zaev.
 - b) Provide full support to an EU-supervised independent investigation of the Kumanovo operation.
 - c) Pursue a medium-term plan to identify and remedy areas of rollback on EU standards which have occurred since the EC's 2009 recommendation to launch accession negotiations.
 - 2) Acceptance of the above conditions would allow EU accession negotiations to commence with the transitional government, with the "name dispute" addressed within the Acquis' requirement for good neighborly relations.
 - a) In the event that no agreement is reached within two years, the matter will be referred for binding arbitration.
 - 3) A newly-elected government (in 2017) would have the mandate to develop and implement a process to amend Ohrid and the relevant legislation to ensure democratically accountable government and fail-safes against future abuse of power.

To the Council of Europe:

- Establish a senior-level presence in Macedonia to monitor adherence to the country's CoE commitments, assist the authorities with implementation of these commitments along with reforms required to exit the current political and governance crisis and provide reports on the results.

To the International Financial Institutions:

- Insist that the financial review required before disbursement of the World Bank's Development Policy Loan (DPL) be completed, including assessment of the "Skopje 2014" project and government purchases of media space, from both a public procurement and a transparency perspective. Should this not be completed, and publicized, prior to the September 2015 deadline, no further funds should be disbursed by the Bank or other IFIs.

To Greece and Bulgaria:

- Accept the reasonable way forward for the EU and NATO outlined above.

To Macedonian Civic Actors:

- Forge a coordinating committee to advocate for the transitional government and program outlined above, monitoring its performance for public consumption when adopted.
- Prepare a strong non-partisan civic monitoring capacity for the post-transitional government elections, to encompass regular expert monitoring of the preparation for those elections well before they are held (voter lists, ensuring party-state separation, media environment, etc.)

Macedonia's Journey

Macedonia was, along with Bosnia and Herzegovina, somewhat reluctant to pursue independence as Yugoslavia was collapsing, engaging in efforts to try to keep the six republics together in some sort of reconfigured state. Only when this became impossible, and the prospect loomed of being subjugated within a rump Yugoslavia dominated by Serbian President Slobodan Milošević, did then-President Kiro Gligorov actively press for Macedonia to become an internationally recognized state. Following a referendum in September 1991, Macedonia declared independence and was soon widely recognized. Yet it faced problems with many of its neighbors from the beginning.

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 region³ 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 with itself. As a result, Macedonia faced strong opposition to entry into international organizations, necessitating an agreement in 1995 that Greece would allow the country into the UN and other organizations of which it was a member (the European Union and NATO, for example), as well as recognizing it, under the title “the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia,” or “FYROM.”⁴

Bulgaria, while first to recognize Macedonia’s independence, soon lodged objections to the Macedonian people and language as being distinct from Bulgaria’s.⁵ As Bulgaria joined NATO in 2004 and the EU in 2007, this has added to the hurdles that Macedonia must clear in its efforts to join both clubs. Now relatively forgotten is the border demarcation difficulties with Serbia, the description by Serbian nationalists in positions of authority of Macedonians as “south Serbs” and the still-ongoing dispute over the country’s autocephalous Orthodox Church. But these issues were salient enough to drive the (first of its kind) deployment of a UN monitoring/deterrent force in December 1992 on the country’s northern and western borders.

Finally, though Albania made no claims on Macedonia and recognized it quickly, internal tensions within Macedonia between ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians were not merely an internal issue, but a topic of regional and international concern, particularly as efforts by Kosovo Albanians to realize full rights under Milošević’s rule were stymied, ultimately leading to armed rebellion and a brutal crackdown by Serbian security forces beginning in early 1998. The resulting wave of refugees spurred resistance in Macedonia for fear of a Kosovo Albanian influx affecting the demographic composition of the state which in turn spurred deep resentment by both ethnic Albanian citizens of Macedonia and Kosovo Albanians. Macedonian Albanians had long complained of marginalization in public institutions,

³ Now split among three administrative regions – Western Macedonia, Central Macedonia, and Eastern Macedonia and Thrace.

⁴ See “Interim Accord between the Hellenic Republic and the FYROM,” *United Nations*, New York, September 13, 1995. Available at: <http://www.hri.org/docs/fyrom/95-27866.html>

⁵ For one take on the dispute, see Kiril Radev, “A fresh spat between Bulgaria and Macedonia,” *Dnevnik*, Sofia, December 19, 2012. Available at: <http://www.voxeurop.eu/en/content/article/3184541-fresh-spat-between-bulgaria-and-macedonia>

including education, and unequal allocation of public resources. Yet despite all these tensions and pressures, Macedonia managed to get through the 1990s – and the 1998-1999 war in neighboring Kosovo – without involvement in international conflict or eruption of internal hostilities. It is true that the political and interethnic situation was both tense and stagnant; a political culture of clientelism prevailed in Macedonia, as it had throughout the region. Yet it appeared to many at the time, including the author, that with the changed regional context and now that EU and NATO membership were on the menu, that internal reform – including ensuring ethnic Albanian inclusion – could proceed.⁶

And yet Macedonia did not completely evade the specter of conflict. Interethnic violence in northern Macedonia erupted in January 2001 and an ethnic Albanian separatist group, the National Liberation Army (NLA), emerged which included many Macedonian Albanians who had fought in the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) and in southern Serbia's Preševo Valley. International engagement ultimately brought the conflict to a negotiated settlement before it could metastasize into a wider ethnic conflict. The violence deepened ethnic polarization in the country and displaced (in most cases, temporarily) 140,000 citizens.⁷

The Ohrid Framework Agreement, signed in August 2001,⁸ was aimed at resolving the problems of inclusion (political, economic and social) and legitimacy which had fuelled the conflict. Ohrid, and the reforms which followed it, ensured that Albanian language could be employed wherever significant numbers of Albanians were resident in Macedonia, as well as reconfiguring and strengthening local self-governance. These reforms, in turn, generated some resentment among ethnic Macedonians. But in general, and over time, interethnic tensions were considerably reduced,⁹ though the communities integrated more politically than socially. In interviews conducted in February and March 2015, many interlocutors stated that Ohrid was a success in this regard; none criticized it or its goals *per se*.

The nature of post-Ohrid politics differed from that practiced prior to the agreement, but only somewhat. The dominance of the two main parties drawing ethnic Macedonian support, the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) and the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization-

⁶ Kurt Bassuener, "The Future of Macedonia: A Balkan Survivor Now Needs Reform," *US Institute of Peace*, March 30, 2001.

Available at: <http://www.usip.org/publications/the-future-of-macedonia-balkan-survivor-now-needs-reform>

⁷ Aleksandar Shumkovski, "Refugees and IDPs in Macedonia: Successful Returns," in *Researching Internal Displacement: State of the Art – Conference Report, 7-8 February, 2003*. Norwegian University of Science and Technology/Forced Migration Review, Trondheim, Norway. Page 32. Available at: <http://www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/Supplements/TrondheimConf.pdf>

⁸ Ohrid Framework Agreement, August 13, 2011.

Available at: <http://www.ucd.ie/ibis/filestore/Ohrid%20Framework%20Agreement.pdf>

⁹ A longitudinal International Republican Institute poll, with most recent data collection in December 2014, records a low of 1% and a high of 4% of respondents reporting "interethnic relations" as "the most serious problem facing Macedonia today" in the period from September 2009 to December 2014. See "Survey of Macedonian Public Opinion, December 9-15, 2014," International Republican Institute, April 2015. Page 5. Available at:

http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/2015-04-20_survey_of_macedonian_public_opinion_december_9-15_2014.pdf

Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE) remained; but now ethnic Albanian parties, including the post-NLA Democratic Union for Integration (DUI) as well as the long-standing Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA), were partners and effective adjuncts. Instead of common governing philosophies or policies, such coalitions were designed around a sharing-out of portfolios and resources – “just a sharing of the spoils,” as one long-term international observer put it.¹⁰ Another called the ruling coalition of VMRO-DPMNE and DUI “not really a partnership...it’s a division of ministries.”¹¹ While the governance system was more ethnically inclusive in that sense, a strong insider/outsider dichotomy has remained constant since independence.

The centrality of Macedonia’s aspiration to join the EU and NATO was encapsulated in the Ohrid Framework Agreement’s first sentence¹² which is repeatedly referenced throughout. It is commonly cited as a binding agent in Macedonian society. Since Macedonian independence, these aspirations have been pronounced not just across the ethnic spectrum (which is not simply binary Macedonian/Albanian, but among the most diverse in the Balkans),¹³ but across the political spectrum as well. For about a decade after Ohrid, the differentiation between the two largest communities on these membership goals remained negligible, despite administrative reforms, including strengthened local self-governance, which generated some resentment among the ethnic Macedonian majority. But despite frictions, there were results. In 2005, the European Commission recommended that Macedonia become a candidate for EU membership; the European Council confirmed its candidacy in December 2005, just two months after Croatia’s membership talks got underway.¹⁴ In recent years, however, a disturbing shift has become evident. While an International Republican Institute poll recorded that 83% of respondents supported NATO membership and 76% supported EU membership as of December 2014,¹⁵ the Macedonian Centre for European Training (MCET), which aggregated by ethnic group, recorded (also in 2014) that 91% of ethnic Albanians supported EU membership, in comparison to 54% of ethnic Macedonians (53% of VMRO-DPMNE supporters vs. 68% of SDSM supporters held this view).¹⁶

¹⁰ Interview with Western official, Skopje, March 24, 2015.

¹¹ Interview with opposition and civic activist, March 23, 2015.

¹² The preamble/first sentence of the Ohrid Framework Agreement reads: “The following points comprise an agreed framework for securing the future of Macedonia’s democracy and permitting the development of closer and more integrated relations between the Republic of Macedonia and the Euro-Atlantic community.” (emphasis added).

¹³ The most recent population census was in 2002. See Page 34 of “Census of Population, Households and Dwellings in the Republic of Macedonia, 2002 – Final Data – Book 13, According to the Territorial Organization of the Republic Macedonia, 2004,” *Republic of Macedonia State Statistical Office*, May 2005. Available at: <http://www.stat.gov.mk/Publikacii/knigaXIII.pdf>

¹⁴ “EU enlargement: the next seven,” BBC News, September 2, 2014.

Available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-11283616>

¹⁵ “Survey of Macedonian Public Opinion, December 9-15, 2014,” International Republican Institute, April 2015. Pages 49-50. Available at:

http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/2015-04-20_survey_of_macedonian_public_opinion_december_9-15_2014.pdf

¹⁶ Bojan Maričik, “The Political Culture, Europeanization, and Fears in Macedonia – 2014 Report from the Survey Research ‘Eurometer,’” Macedonian Centre for European Training, Skopje, 2014. Section IV – “Citizens’ Support for Macedonia’s EU Integration.” Available at: <http://mcet.org.mk/en/dokument.asp?cnd=98>

Several interlocutors, however, made a point of noting that the potential for interethnic frictions – or worse – remained, and expressed fear that there would be political efforts to stoke tension.¹⁷

Gruevski in Power

In July 2006, VMRO-DPMNE, led by then-35-year old Nikola Gruevski, won the most seats in parliamentary elections. The right-leaning nationalist party was able to effectively capitalize on rival SDSM's predominance in the transition period and its role presiding over Ohrid's implementation, which many ethnic Macedonians saw as too generous to ethnic Albanians. A freeze on public employment was also deeply unpopular. As LSE fellow and policy analyst Dimitar Bechev points out, the problems of Macedonia's governance culture didn't begin with Gruevski.¹⁸ Indeed, there were initial hopes in Macedonia and abroad that Prime Minister Gruevski could lead the consolidation of Macedonia's democracy and set the country on the path to – or even achieve – the country's integration with the EU and NATO. At the time, Macedonia was the regional leader, only behind Croatia in its integration efforts.¹⁹

At NATO's Bucharest Summit in April 2008, there were hopes – even expectations – that Macedonia would be invited to join the Alliance, along with Croatia and Albania. Yet, due to the persistent “name dispute,” Greece alone impeded consensus among NATO members and left Macedonia in limbo.²⁰ This event was cited by many interlocutors, from Macedonia and abroad, as the pivot point in Macedonia's shift from progress to regression in its democratic practice and development.

Similarly, in 2009, the European Commission recommended that the then-27 member states allow Macedonia to begin the membership negotiation process. One interlocutor noted that this was when George Papandreou was Greek Prime Minister, when a more constructive approach was adopted by Athens.²¹ But better atmospheric aside, the “name dispute” continued to impede formal membership negotiations – and has continued to do so. In December 2012, Bulgaria joined Greece in torpedoing Macedonia, objecting to the beginning of membership talks on the basis of Macedonia's failure to promote good neighborly relations – including accepting Bulgarian demands to jointly commemorate

¹⁷ Interviews in Skopje, March 23-25, 2015.

¹⁸ Dimitar Bechev, “Breaking Macedonia's Vicious Circle,” EU Observer, May 8, 2015. Available at: <https://euobserver.com/opinion/128635>

¹⁹ This point was made several times in interviews, most pointedly by a government official, Skopje, March 24, 2015.

²⁰ The summit, which also followed Russia's war with Georgia over the disputed region of South Ossetia, also saw hopes dashed in Tbilisi and Kyiv for Membership Action Plans.

²¹ In the words of one Macedonian official, “After Bucharest, there was nothing until Papandreou came to power. He changed the approach. For a year and a half, there were 12-15 meetings between the prime ministers. This was unprecedented... It was important that there was dialogue between them – and the frequency of it. It's hard to know what might have happened without the financial crisis and Papandreou's resignation. But with Samaras coming to power...” Interview with government official, Skopje, March 25, 2015.

certain elements of “our common history.”²² This stance “helped Greece not to be isolated” in the EU.²³

Negotiations between Macedonia and Greece on the name issue have been ongoing under UN auspices since 2005, directed by American UN Envoy Matthew Nimetz. A number of compromise solutions have been proposed, including most recently “the Northern Republic of Macedonia.” All have been rejected by Greece; the last (informal) proposal in 2013 was rejected prior to the Gruevski government having to pass judgement at all.²⁴ This came after the International Court of Justice found in a 15-1 ruling that Greece had violated its obligations under the 1995 accord which had established the “FYROM” formulation as a means to not impede Macedonia’s entry into international organizations.²⁵ Despite the advent of the international financial crisis and the difficulties of Eurozone members, most visibly Greece, which remains in dire fiscal condition, the Eurozone, most notably Germany, has demurred from pressing Athens to recalibrate policy toward Macedonia.

Backsliding on a host of democracy, rule of law and other indicators began – or in some views simply accelerated – in this period. The EC Progress Reports have recorded this regression,²⁶ but in milder terms than many independent observers. Independent INGOs like Reporters Without Borders and Freedom House have been sharply critical. In particular, media freedom as assessed by Reporters Without Borders has dropped precipitously to become the worst in the former Yugoslavia,²⁷ from among the highest, based, *inter alia*, on the 2011 closure of an independent television channel and three newspapers, physical threats to journalists and legal persecution.²⁸ Public perception of an increasingly self-serving and discriminatory VMRO-DPMNE grip on the public sphere has also become pronounced.²⁹

²² Siniša Jakov Marušić, “Bulgaria and Greece Block Macedonia’s EU Talks,” *BIRN*, December 12, 2012. Available at: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/bulgaria-joins-greece-in-blocking-macedonia-s-eu-bid>

²³ Interview with government official, Skopje, March 25, 2015.

²⁴ A useful summary of these processes was assembled by the Institute for Social Sciences and Humanities – Skopje in its 2013 policy study “Who Owns Alexander the Great? – A Question on Which EU Enlargement Relies.” Pages 3-5. Available at: <http://www.isshs.edu.mk/documents/Who-owns-Alexander-the-Great-A-Question-Upon-Which-EU-Enlargement-Relies.pdf>

²⁵ ICJ Press Release No. 2011/37, December 5, 2011. Available at: <http://www.icj-cij.org/docket/files/142/16841.pdf>

²⁶ The latest report, released in October 2014, was characterized by more than one Western official as the toughest yet, but by a number of civic and opposition figures as indulgent of the Gruevski government (Interviews, Skopje, March 23-25, 2015). See “The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia Progress Report,” European Commission DG Enlargement, October 2014. In the executive summary’s concluding paragraph, the report reads: “Overall, 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.” Given the depth of the problems observed, the author’s view leans toward the latter interpretation.

Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2014/20141008-the-former-yugoslav-republic-of-macedonia-progress-report_en.pdf

²⁷ Regionally, only Turkey ranks lower. See: <http://rsf.org/index2014/en-eu.php>

²⁸ A listing of government actions which have contributed to Macedonia’s declining ratings can be found on Reporters Without Borders’ Macedonia country page: <http://en.rsf.org/macedonia.html>

²⁹ In the IRI poll, the number of respondents who answered the question “has Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski done his job well enough to deserve re-election?” in the negative has consistently been more negative than positive since early 2014, standing at 48% “No” vs. 37% “Yes” and 15% “Don’t Know/Refused to Answer” in December

In the words of an independent economist, “it’s a captured state; that’s it.”³⁰ There is a sense that to compensate for Greece, and later Bulgaria’s obstruction of Macedonia’s European path, the Commission and member states have soft-pedalled regression across a host of governance indicators, including through the High-Level Accession Dialogue.³¹

In 2010, Prime Minister Gruevski announced an ambitious – and regionally unprecedented in modern times – program called “Skopje 2014,” which included ambitious building projects and efforts at what some analysts have 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, or approximately 10% of Macedonia’s annual GDP – is (pun intended) monumental.³² Survey research illustrates the sheer scale of the project puts its continuation at odds with a majority of ethnic Macedonian citizens (whom VMRO-DPMNE claims to represent), who do not associate their identity with antiquity.³³

In this period, the party grip on all public institutions has been assessed as having strengthened, including through public employment, which has grown markedly under VMRO-DPMNE. “40% of those employed work in administration,” according to surveys, observed one social analyst.³⁴ Many such positions are on vulnerable short-term renewable contracts – “so they can buy support and votes.”³⁵ When combined with a prevailing sense that the vote is not secret – and of a jealous party-state nexus which punishes opponents³⁶ – this gives the party which controls the government great leverage over a wide proportion of the citizenry. “The taping [note: explained below] shows it’s an asymmetric information economy... (citizens) are all acting with rational expectations... It’s like living in hyperinflation – you take what you can get *now*. There is a huge utility rate for taking the patronage

2014. The author believes that the last figure should be read in light of public perceptions of government monitoring, control, and leverage over the public sphere. See: “Survey of Macedonian Public Opinion, December 9-15, 2014,” International Republican Institute, April 2015. Page 16.

Available at: http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/2015-04-20_survey_of_macedonian_public_opinion_december_9-15_2014.pdf

³⁰ Interview with independent economic expert, Skopje, March 23, 2015.

³¹ See 2014 EC Progress Report.

³² Andrew Byrne, “Macedonia strongman stays put despite protests,” *Financial Times*, May 16-17, 2015, page 3.

³³ “Who Owns Alexander the Great?: A Question on Which EU Enlargement Relies,” ISSHS, Skopje, 2014. Executive Summary, page 1. Available at: <http://www.isshs.edu.mk/index.php?newsinfo=228>

³⁴ Interview with social researcher, Skopje, March 25, 2015.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Opponents can be former colleagues as well, as recordings appear to suggest. Officials who depart party and government service are apparently punished for leaving the fold, to serve as an example, according to one legal analyst (interview, Skopje, March 25, 2015). This interviewee recounted the recording in which Finance Minister Zoran Stavrevski allegedly calls Interior Minister Gordana Jankulovska to blackball a former colleague – “bitter his life,” in the recording – for daring to leave. “They wilfully fuck people up. They do it *a lot*... Fear works.”

now.”³⁷ Journalist and civic figure Sašo Ordanoski told the *Financial Times* that “the crucial criteria for employment are a party membership card and voting loyalty – this is part of a very sophisticated architecture of power.”³⁸ Yet still, despite these conditions, the IMF approved a new program for Macedonia immediately prior to elections in 2011 – without earmarks. The World Bank’s Development Policy Loans were also criticized by independent economists as fuelling the government’s patronage system.³⁹ “Gruevski is remarkably good at playing the foreigners. His Finance Minister, Zoran Stavrevski, worked for the World Bank. He knows the game. He’s the only one in the government with the capacities to be convincing.”⁴⁰ Some Western governments – interlocutors singled out the US, the Netherlands and Germany in particular – had resisted new loans for Macedonia, while the World Bank spoke positively of GDP growth.⁴¹

Political polarization increased, exacerbating the long-standing in-group/out-group dynamic long prevalent in Macedonian politics. On December 24, 2012, SDSM MPs were physically removed from the Parliament after physical altercations erupted over the budget.⁴² Internationally brokered mediation was employed to convince the party to return. But following presidential and early parliamentary elections in April 2014, which SDSM characterized as fraudulent, the party has boycotted parliament.⁴³ One resident Western official characterized the elections as “very smooth” because “everything was arranged” in advance.⁴⁴ A climate of fear and intimidation has taken a deepening hold in Macedonia, according to a host of civic and international interlocutors. Locally conducted polling shows that 53% of Macedonian citizens do not freely express their opinions; 81% of those who responded this way attributed this to fear of “possible consequences for them and their families.”⁴⁵

Into this environment a number of bottom-up civic actions developed in response to government policies and plans. Among these were the 2014 student and professor/teacher protests against a new exam policy which opponents characterized as an avenue to tighten political leverage over the education sector. While even some involved noted wryly “our students are not very politically engaged. The exam issue animated them – lack of democracy didn’t. But it gave serious impetus.” He added that

³⁷ Interview with independent economic expert, Skopje, March 23, 2015.

³⁸ Andrew Byrne, “Macedonia strongman stays put despite protests,” *Financial Times*, May 16-17, 2015, page 3.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Interview with opposition and civic activist, Skopje, March 23, 2015.

⁴¹ Interview with independent economic analyst, Skopje, March 23, 2015.

⁴² Kole Casule, “Macedonia opposition ejected from parliament in row,” *Reuters*, December 24, 2012. Available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/12/24/us-macedonia-protest-idUSBRE8BN0EX20121224>

⁴³ Siniša Jakov Marušić, “EU Mediation Proposed in Macedonia Political Row,” *BIRN*, June 27, 2014. Available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/12/24/us-macedonia-protest-idUSBRE8BN0EX20121224> In its final post-election report, the OSCE’s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, controversially among Macedonian civil society and opposition figures, said the elections were “efficiently administered,” while noting an “inadequate separation of party and state activities.” See the full report at:

<http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/fyrom/121306?download=true>

⁴⁴ Interview with Western official, Skopje, March 24, 2015

⁴⁵ Bojan Maričik, “The Political Culture, Europeanization, and Fears in Macedonia – 2014 Report from the Survey Research ‘Eurometer,’” Macedonian Centre for European Training, Skopje, 2014. Section V – “Atmosphere of Fear and Conspiracy.” Available at: <http://mcet.org.mk/en/dokument.asp?cnd=98>

“There is debate now, visible in the media. More freedom to write, speak, criticize. It’s spreading.”⁴⁶ The multiethnic protest drew an estimated 12,000 and achieved results, as the government eventually withdrew the proposed law.⁴⁷ Professors and teachers also protested. Yet civic activism was not confined only to public protest; plenums were organized to develop policy proposals and demands, and (unlike the plena in BiH) open to all citizens, including members of parties.⁴⁸ Nor did civic activism remain confined to only these issues. Self-employed workers also protested against what they characterized as lopsided tax liability.⁴⁹ These protests drew participants from the ethnic Macedonian majority, Albanian minority, and across the full breadth of the country’s society.

Such activism struck many of the author’s interlocutors – including several civil society participants – as a long-overdue breath of fresh air. One long-term international observer, who was broadly critical of donor-funded civil society organizations, stated “that’s *real* civil society!”⁵⁰ Several domestic analysts and civic actors were adamant that the student protests were unprecedented. “The student plenums are historic, multiethnic. They use both languages – even in their logo. The professors’ plenum is the same – and associated (with the student plenum). The high school plenum – the same. Civil society coalesces across the division. It’s organic, based on interest. It felt natural, grassroots.”⁵¹ The ambient climate of fear was beginning to be breached. “The biggest change is bringing down the wall of fear. People are not afraid to protest anymore. Student protests were decisive.”⁵² Among many interviewees, there was also a sense that the opposition was attempting to ride the growing popular wave, after earlier attempts to spark protest alone.⁵³

The economic situation is also increasingly reliant on external infusions. “The politicians are losing grip,” as one economist put it. “They want to extend the timeline as far as possible. We buy stability here... If the international community wants stability... Zaev will go to jail and people will be scared. Gruevski will do what Erdoğan does – hold elections, invite the international community as observers. They’ll accept.

⁴⁶ Interview with legal and educational expert, Skopje, March 25, 2015.

⁴⁷ Siniša Jakov Marušić, “Student Protest Blocks Macedonian Capital,” *BIRN*, December 10, 2014. Available at: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/mass-student-protest-clogs-skopje> See also Erwan Fouéré, “Macedonian Student Plenums: A Cry for Respect,” *BIRN Comment*, December 15, 2014. Available at: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/blog/macedonian-student-s-plenum-a-cry-for-respect>

⁴⁸ “Nobody was excluded – including parties.” Interview with social analysts, Skopje, March 24, 2015. Student plenum members opened the May 17 protests in Skopje calling for the Gruevski government to resign. See “Macedonia: the protest in Skopje was opened by students,” *FOCUS News Agency*, May 17, 2015. Available at: <http://www.focus-fen.net/news/2015/05/17/372541/macedonia-the-protest-in-skopje-was-opened-by-students.html>

⁴⁹ Interviews with opposition and civic activist (March 23, 2015) and Western official (March 24, 2015), Skopje.

⁵⁰ Western official, Skopje, March 24, 2015. One local analyst opined that the sort of external support frequently given to civil society, particularly by the EU, was “just projects,” and that local staff at embassies “have been too long in these jobs; they would have to be self-critical” if an honest look at performance were conducted. Interview with social researcher, Skopje, March 25, 2015.

⁵¹ Interview with Macedonian social analysts, Skopje, March 24, 2015.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.* “(The SDSM) weren’t especially happy about the (student) protests. *They* wanted to lead against VMRO.” These interlocutors agreed emphatically with the author when he posited “it sounds like SDSM wants to *be* (back in) the system, not change the system.”

It'll be like Belarus.”⁵⁴

Into this environment, the opposition SDSM, led by Strumica Mayor Zoran Zaev, began to release recordings it alleges to be of Prime Minister Gruevski and a host of government officials and figures documenting crimes and abuses of power. These “bombs,” as Zaev terms them, have been released since February 2015 in installments of conversations among officials.⁵⁵ Zaev also claims that the government has tapped the phone lines of 20,000 people. The government has not denied the veracity of the recordings, but rather claims that they were obtained illegally by the opposition, which was in collusion with an unnamed foreign intelligence service.⁵⁶ Regardless of the source, the veracity of the recordings is widely believed by a large segment of the public, and effectively all of the author’s interlocutors. The intercepts confirmed what many believed was standard practice prior to their release – nearly 64% of respondents in the MCET poll said they’d believe “secret services in Macedonia intercept communications of people they perceive as opponents.”⁵⁷ As one local civic figure put it “there were no surprises with the bombs.”⁵⁸ One international observer was also unconvinced that the opposition was just given the recordings, rather than exerting itself to obtain them. The recordings appear to demonstrate the pervasive control of VMRO-DPMNE over the entire public sphere, including the administration, courts, security services and media, as well as the use of this leverage for collective political and private gain. Yet until recently, the “bombs” failed to generate an active upwelling of mobilized public outrage. While no charges have been filed on the basis of the recording contents, Zaev has had his passport confiscated and has been charged with “violence against top state officials.”⁵⁹

That changed on May 5, when Zaev released a recording he alleged documents the attempted cover-up of police culpability in the beating death of an opposition supporter, Martin Neškovski, on election night in June 2011.⁶⁰ Popular protests, not organized by the SDSM, drew thousands to protest in downtown Skopje, epicenter of the “Skopje 2014” project, calling for Gruevski to step down. Beatings of protesters by police, as in Kyiv in early 2014, only drew more to peacefully protest. Protests remained peaceful, even generating a web image that went viral of a protester (and political analyst for the Macedonian

⁵⁴ Interview with independent economist, Skopje, March 23, 2015.

⁵⁵ Andrew MacDowall, “Fears for Macedonia’s fragile democracy amid ‘coup’ and wiretap claims,” *The Guardian*, February 27, 2014. Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/27/fears-macedonias-fragile-democracy-amid-coup-wiretap-claims>

⁵⁶ Most commentary boards for media covering the issue are loaded with postings claiming that the CIA is behind the plot. But in response to criticism by the British Ambassador in early April, one Macedonian official stated that such criticism of the government proved British services were the source.

⁵⁷ Bojan Maričik, “The Political Culture, Europeanization, and Fears in Macedonia – 2014 Report from the Survey Research ‘Eurometer,’” Macedonian Centre for European Training, Skopje, 2014. Section V – “Atmosphere of Fear and Conspiracy.” Available at: <http://mcet.org.mk/en/dokument.asp?cnd=98>

⁵⁸ Interview with social analysts, Skopje, March 24, 2015.

⁵⁹ “Macedonian opposition leader charged in wiretapping scandal,” AFP, May 1, 2015. Available at: <http://news.yahoo.com/macedonian-opposition-leader-charged-wiretapping-scandal-173036059.html>

⁶⁰ See Siniša Jakov Marušić, “Macedonians Protest Over ‘Fatal Police Beating,’” *BIRN*, June 7, 2011, available at: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/macedonians-protest-after-police-murders-youngster> and “Macedonia violence after Zaev claims ‘cover-up,’” *BBC News*, May 6, 2015. Available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-32610951>

Helsinki Committee for Human Rights) Jasmina Golubovska using a riot policeman's shield as a mirror to apply lipstick, and then kissing it when he refused to allow her to draw a heart (a symbol of these protests) on the shield.⁶¹ A theme woven throughout protesters' motives and demands was the lack of accountability of authority in Macedonia. While SDSM leader Zaev had been feeding public outrage with the series of recordings, it appeared that the opposition was attempting to generate a public wave and ride it. Zaev demands that the government resign in favor of a caretaker government, which would prepare for elections in a year's time. Gruevski adamantly refuses to do so, claiming that he has a popular democratic mandate which the opposition is attempting to unconstitutionally overturn.

As protests continued to build toward a planned major protest on May 17, a police operation took place in the northern city of Kumanovo that reportedly left eight police and an initially reported 14 Albanian militants dead, with many more wounded. The latter figure was later revised down to 10 Albanians killed⁶² – nine of whom were Kosovo Albanians and KLA veterans with ties to KLA leadership. Macedonian Foreign Minister Nikola Poposki stated that the Kumanovo events were “probably the most serious security situation that we faced since independence.”⁶³ Much was – and remains – unclear about this operation. The high number of police casualties calls the preparations for the operation into question, with one local analyst citing security officials as stating that police were treated as “cannon fodder.”⁶⁴ Another local analyst, Sefer Tahiri, also asks why the militants, allegedly mostly former KLA fighters (from both Kosovo and Macedonia) were not asked to give themselves up.⁶⁵ President Gjordan Ivanov has acknowledged that the group had been monitored for some time; opposition leader Zoran Zaev alleged that it was for nearly two years. Opposition party member and civic activist Ivana Jordanovska was among the first to write convincingly what many have since deduced: that the operation was timed to divert and even help repress, or at least reframe, protests against the government.⁶⁶ DUI leader Ali Ahmeti, who claims to have been called by the militants once the operation began.⁶⁷ “I did what I had to do. I persuaded them to surrender, because otherwise it was not going to be good for anyone.”⁶⁸ He claims to have information on why the armed group was in

⁶¹ Jessica Elgot, “Macedonia’s lipstick protester: ‘I saw the policeman smile very slightly,’” *The Guardian*, May 13, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/13/macedonia-lipstick-protester-jasmina-golubovska>

⁶² Kole Casule, “Macedonia says 10 militants killed, not 14, in weekend gunbattle,” *Reuters*, May 15, 2015. Available at: <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2015/05/15/uk-macedonia-police-idUKKBN0001RZ20150515>

⁶³ Konstantin Testorides, “AP Interview: Clashes Show Macedonian Border Is Vulnerable,” *Associated Press*, May 15, 2015. Available at: <http://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2015/05/15/ap-interview-clashes-show-macedonian-border-is-vulnerable>

⁶⁴ See Sefer Tahiri’s comment article: “Macedonian Police Action Leaves Host of Questions,” *BIRN*, May 12, 2015. Available at: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/macedonian-police-action-leaves-host-of-questions> (subscriber only link). The author asks numerous questions about the planning and motivation for the operation.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ivana Jordanovska, “How Low Can He Go?,” *The Balkanist*, May 10, 2015. Available at: <http://balkanist.net/op-ed-how-low-can-he-go/>

⁶⁷ Siniša Jakov Marušić, “Ahmeti Tried to Negotiate End to Macedonian Carnage,” *Balkan Insight*, May 15, 2015. Available at: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/macedonia-s-ahemti-negotiated-surrender-of-kumanovo-armed-gunmen>

⁶⁸ Ibid.

Kumanovo, but refrained to state it until he felt it was confirmed.⁶⁹

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 the Kumanovo operation, included members of Prime Minister Isa Mustafaj's Democratic Alliance of Kosova and opposition party Vetovendosje.⁷⁰ The Kosovo Defense Ministry refused requests to host the event officially.⁷¹ 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."⁷² This direct endorsement by major political figures of ethnic separatism in Macedonia is a dangerous and destabilizing escalation of interethnic and interstate tension, and is generating ample fodder for regime-oriented press in Skopje, Belgrade, Banja Luka, Moscow, and beyond. The lack of a clear and credible Western security guarantee for Macedonian territorial integrity and sovereignty – even identity – has left ample room for nationalists throughout the region to entertain grand designs, as well as giving Moscow inroads in a country in which it had few.⁷³

Little time was lost by Gruevski's supporters in the region and beyond to seize upon the operation as evidence of both radical Islamist threats and of the specter of a Greater Albania. Serbia's President Tomislav Nikolić and Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić both spoke of the same threats. Momir Stojanović, Chair of the Security Services Control Committee in the Serbian Parliament and member of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party, asserted that opposition to Russia's "Turkish Stream" project was to blame for the Macedonian unrest, voiced his fears for ethnic Albanian destabilization in southern Serbia's Preševo Valley, and asserted that the US was behind the efforts, using the region's ethnic Albanians to do their bidding.⁷⁴ Elements of the Serbian press even posited the danger of a "Third Balkan War," with Serbia, Macedonia, Greece and Bulgaria united against the looming threat of a "Greater Albania," citing supposed CIA reports.⁷⁵ Bosnia's Republika Srpska (RS) President Milorad Dodik (who has been busily exploiting an attack by a lone gunman on a police station in Zvornik as evidence of a homegrown Islamist threat in BiH and of the dysfunction of the state) lost no time in

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Una Hajdari, "Former Kosovo Fighters Salute Men Killed in Kumanovo," *BIRN*, May 26, 2015. Available at: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/former-kosovo-guerilla-honor-those-killed-in-kumanovo#.VWWnoOp-PYI.twitter> See also "Komemoracija ubijenim teroristima u Kumanovu" *N1*, May 26, 2015. Available at: <http://rs.n1info.com/a63903/Vesti/Komemoracija-Albancima-ubijenim-u-Kumanovu.html>

⁷¹ Ibid (Hajdari).

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Several interviewees remarked on Russia's growing traction among ethnic Macedonians in recent years, prior to the Kumanovo operation. Author interviews, Skopje, March 23-25, 2015.

⁷⁴ "Greater Albania is Key Security Risk," *B-92*, May 14, 2015. Available at:

http://www.b92.net/eng/comments.php?nav_id=94112

⁷⁵ "Third Balkan War in the making: Serbs, Greeks, Bulgarians, and Macedonians to unite against the 'Greater Albania?,'" *Telegraf*, May 14, 2015. Available at: <http://www.telegraf.rs/english/1566600-third-balkan-war-in-the-making-serbs-greeks-bulgarians-and-macedonians-to-unite-against-the-greater-albania>

connecting the incidents; the RS press gave Kumanovo heavy coverage.⁷⁶ The RS Police Chief Dragan Lukač, also spoke of a Greater Albania threat – hardly a threat to Serbs in Bosnia, in any case.⁷⁷

Perhaps most disturbing are the recordings released following the Kumanovo operation by the opposition. In them, senior officials, including Interior Minister Gordana Jankulovska, appear to discuss the impossibility of coexistence with Macedonia's Albanians and preference for a war option. In the recordings, Gruevski's cousin and intelligence chief, Sašo Mialkov, allegedly says "There is a solution (to ethnic disputes with Albanians), but unfortunately we do not have a national consensus." Jankulovska allegedly says she supports "that kind of solution" (presumably a war option or ethnic cleansing), stating that it would be good if "we settle things once and for all."⁷⁸ In the same recording, she allegedly tells Gruevski's Chief of Staff Martin Protugjer "there is no coexistence with them (Albanians)." When he allegedly suggests "what if we have a war?," she allegedly replies "if we were to show who is stronger, we would deal with them in an hour."⁷⁹ A lack of consequences for those who endorse renewed ethnic conflict on both sides of the Macedonia-Kosovo border will only accelerate this downward spiral.

In light of this mentality, it was heartening to see that many Macedonian Albanians and ethnic Macedonians saw the operation taking place in a charged political environment prone to manipulation. A video taken in the aftermath of the operation in Kumanovo demonstrated a widespread distrust of the entire political elite in Macedonia; its going viral spoke to its widespread appeal.⁸⁰

Jankulovska, along with Mialkov and Minister of Transport and Communications Mile Janakieski resigned in the aftermath of the operation, on May 12, prior to the release of these recordings.⁸¹ Until Kumanovo, the SDSM had refrained from releasing recordings which were feared likely to inflame interethnic tension. In the event, the May 17 protests drew thousands (Zaev planned for 100,000; observers said it drew "tens of thousands" or "20,000") from throughout Macedonia, including ethnic Albanians, and passed off peacefully.⁸² One protester was quoted by Deutsche Welle as saying that "Gruevski managed something that no other Macedonian politician did in the past 24 years of

⁷⁶ "U RS uskoro antiteroristički zakon," *SRNA*, May 13, 2015. <http://www.blic.rs/Vesti/Republika-Srpska/558836/U-RS-uskoro-antiteroristicki-zakon>

⁷⁷ Radmila Cenić, "Zašto su ušli teroristi u Kumanovo?," *B-92*, May 15, 2015. Available at: http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/tema.php?yyyy=2015&mm=05&nav_id=992381

⁷⁸ Siniša Jakov Marušić, "Macedonia Opposition Promises Non-Stop Protest Camp," *Balkan Insight*, May 15, 2015. Available at: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/macedonia-opposition-promises-non-stop-protest-camp>

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ See the video, with English subtitles, at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sOX9kJRj54I>

⁸¹ Jasmina Mironski, "Macedonia ministers, intelligence chief, resign after violence," *AFP*, May 12, 2015. Available at: <http://news.yahoo.com/macedonia-ministers-intelligence-chief-resign-shootout-official-204547873.html>

⁸² "Tens of Thousands Gather for Antigovernment Rally in Macedonia," *RFE/RL Balkan Service*, May 17, 2015. Available at: <http://www.rferl.org/content/macedonia-rally-gruevski-/27020724.html> Perhaps not surprisingly, anticipation of the rally's multiethnic draw was presented as a liability by regime-supportive media in Macedonia and Serbia, also alleging that Western diplomats were *leading* the protest. See "Foreign Ambassadors lead Anti-Government Protest in Skopje," *InSerbia*, May 17 at <http://inserbia.info/today/2015/05/foreign-ambassadors-lead-anti-government-protest-in-skopje-report/>

Macedonia's independence: he united the people against him.”⁸³ A government counter-rally was called on May 18, which some observers claimed was similar in size to the Neškovski protests prior to the Kumanovo operation, and others counted at 30,000 – 90,000.⁸⁴ At his counter rally, Gruevski vowed there would be “no bowing down” to “dark forces” and that Zaev’s “five minutes are up.” On the same day, four-party talks, which included Gruevski, Zaev, DPA leader Menduh Thaçi, and DUI leader Ali Ahmeti, failed to reach agreement on a way forward.⁸⁵

International Factor: Perverse Symbiosis, Authoritarian Drift

The stalling of Macedonia’s progress toward EU and NATO membership has created what one interviewee termed “a perfect ecosystem” for the increasing party-state synthesis, authoritarianism, and paranoia that has come to characterize the Gruevski era in Macedonian politics.⁸⁶ The “name issue” has allowed the VMRO-DPMNE government to portray all problems and critiques – internal and external – as part of a hostile plot against Macedonia’s independence and Macedonian identity. Even otherwise critical local interlocutors slipped into the gear of accepting some of the official narrative. Greek and Bulgarian policies in the EU and NATO have effectively created a perverse symbiosis that has allowed increasing abuse of power by the Gruevski government to be justified to a considerable – almost exclusively ethnic Macedonian – constituency. Yet the problem is far broader and deeper now in terms of the accountability of Macedonia’s governance than one that could simply be resolved by getting over the “name issue” – which in any case, does not appear to be on the immediate horizon.

A commonly held view, oft-repeated not only by EU officials but also external observers, is that the Union’s (and by implication, West’s) only “leverage” is in the negotiation process, which has been stymied by the lack of consensus within the Union (and NATO) by Greece and Bulgaria. Numerous observers since the escalation of the political crisis into large protests have repeated this line of reasoning.⁸⁷ The argument that frequently follows is the need for compromise and internal consensus in

⁸³ “PM Gruevski to meet opponents as protests continue over Macedonia wiretapping,” *Deutsche Welle*, May 18, 2015. Available at: <http://www.dw.de/pm-gruevski-to-meet-opponents-as-protests-continue-over-macedonia-wiretapping/a-18456391>

⁸⁴ “Macedonia’s embattled leader rallies supporters in show of force,” *Al Jazeera America*, May 18, 2015. Available at: <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/5/18/macedonias-embattled-leader-rallies-supporters-in-show-of-force.html> A presumably pro-regime tally was reported by RT: “‘No bowing down.’ Thousands of pro-govt protesters rally for Macedonian PM,” *RT*, May, 19, 2015. Available at: <http://rt.com/news/259849-macedonia-pro-government-rally/>

⁸⁵ Konstantin Testorides, “Macedonia: 4 main political leaders fail to make progress in resolving political crisis,” *AP*, May 18, 2015. Available at: <http://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2015/05/18/macedonia-4-political-leaders-to-resume-crisis-talks>

⁸⁶ Interview with Macedonian official, March 25, 2015.

⁸⁷ Several of those who answered Carnegie Europe’s Judy Dempsey’s question “Is Europe Sleeping on the Western Balkans” expressed variations on the standing theme that the EU enlargement process is the engine of reform and that its being stalled is *the* problem. Both Kristof Bender and Alexandra Stiglmayer of the European Stability Initiative expressed this view, which is sort of an institutional mantra. See <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/?fa=60069> But they are far from alone. See also Tamara Nikičević, “Ilir Deda: Zapadnom Balkanu je kriva EU, a ne Rusija,” (interview) *Dani*, May 15, 2015, and Adelina Marini,

Macedonia – a return of the SDSM to parliament, further give on the “name issue,” and so on. This sometimes goes so far as to rationalize government malfeasance as a response to the inability to move forward on the “European path.”

Russia has leaped boldly into the fray with open support for the Gruevski government, alleging Western plots of “color revolutions”⁸⁸ and that the critiques of the government are motivated by its involvement in the Turkish Stream spinoff of the cancelled South Stream project and Macedonia’s refusal to join EU sanctions on Russia over its war in Ukraine.⁸⁹ Together with Serbian Foreign Minister Ivica Dačić, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov asserted that the Kumanovo operation – together with the attack on a police station in Zvornik in the Republika Srpska – signified a major Islamist threat in the region which the West was unwilling to contend with, asserting that officials in Brussels had “an ostrich attitude” and are “ashamed to admit” the nature of the alleged threat “because they are probably trying to justify the ineffectiveness of their efforts.”⁹⁰ Lavrov added that “the need for concrete action cannot be replaced by political correctness.”⁹¹ “As for the developments in Macedonia that reflect the volatile situation also in other parts of the Balkan region, we seriously fear that it’s manifestations of well-prepared terrorist actions that are being planned and staged. In this connection we are very much concerned over the developments in Kosovo and certain areas of Bosnia and Herzegovina.”⁹² He further echoed a line asserted in Belgrade and Banja Luka that the pursuit of a Greater Albania poses a major threat to regional stability.⁹³ He later asserted that there were plans to partition the country between Bulgaria and Albania.⁹⁴ Moscow’s policy is, however, consistent with a long-standing, but increasingly pronounced policy of support for governments and leaders who are domestically embattled and/or are criticized for their policies in the West – and insisting that Euro-Atlantic integration is not the only option for such countries. A Moscow-supported regional authoritarian synthesis seems to be forming; a *de facto* alliance of strongmen in Belgrade, Skopje and Banja Luka.

Much of this criticism of Western – primarily EU – policy is built around the knowledge that both stability and concerns about “countering violent extremism” are presently the main Western lenses for

“Enlargement Policy Has Failed in Macedonia,” *EUInside*, May 15, 2015. Available at: <http://www.euinside.eu/en/analyses/macedonia-eu-complete-failure-of-enlargement-policy> Ms. Marini asserts that the “isolation” of Macedonia from the European mainstream is the fundamental issue.

⁸⁸ Lavrov said “Western organizers” were attempting to “push the country into the abyss of a ‘colour revolution.’” See “Russia accuses West of trying to destabilise Macedonia,” *Reuters*, May 17, 2015. Available at <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2015/05/16/uk-macedonia-crisis-russia-idUKKBN0010MP20150516>

⁸⁹ “Lavrov: Turkish Stream and Macedonian Refusal to Sanction Russia reason for Destabilization,” *MINA*, May 15, 2015. Available at: <http://macedoniaonline.eu/content/view/27411/2/>

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ “Russia voices worry over Macedonia violence,” *AFP*, May 15, 2015. Available at: <http://news.yahoo.com/russia-voices-worry-over-macedonian-violence-180027235.html>

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ “Macedonian Opposition Leader Dismisses Speculation of Partitioning,” *novinite.com*, Sofia, May 22, 2015.

Available at:

<http://www.novinite.com/articles/168729/Macedonian+Opposition+Leader+Dismisses+Speculation+of+Partitioning>

viewing the region and the entire Mediterranean littoral. The effective reality of EU policy in the region (with the US in a supportive role, though with its own equities) is one of containment, with driving progress toward democratic practices and values in a secondary role – or even lower. There is a danger that events such as Kumanovo might allow the narrative on Macedonia to shift from one of governance to one of interethnic tension, which prior to Kumanovo had starkly receded in virulence, though many interlocutors (of both major communities, as well as foreign observers) feared its dormant potential – and the possibility of it being stirred deliberately by the government.⁹⁵ There was a prevailing sense among the breadth of interviewees in Macedonia that the West – and the EU in particular – had abandoned local exponents and defenders of European and democratic values. “The popular perception is that the EU has more leverage (than the others). But they’re the least helpful. They’re bureaucrats. The strategy seems to be: support the powerful, press the weaker party – for their bureaucratic agenda... Nobody in government fears the EU. As long as they tick boxes...”⁹⁶ Yet there was differentiation among EU member states in terms of their willingness to be direct, with the Netherlands frequently characterized as the straightest, since “they have no vested interest; they can speak freely.”⁹⁷ Germany also is taken seriously, but “they don’t want to be seen as activist.”⁹⁸ The US was considered by many interviewees a crucial actor with leverage. “(T)he only real fear of the Gruevski clique is the 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).”⁹⁹ American officials also acknowledge potential leverage, while noting it is difficult to get on the policy agenda in Washington in the prevailing international context so as to apply such leverage.¹⁰⁰ The policies of international financial institutions (IFIs) also were frequently cited as supporting Macedonia’s accelerating authoritarian drift in their lenience and timing.¹⁰¹

Some European observers, such as the personally committed former EU Special Representative Erwan Fouéré, have been vocal on the values front all along¹⁰² – including while resident in Skopje. And the recent joint statement by the Ambassadors of the EU, US, France, Britain, Germany and Italy made prior to the May 17 demonstrations and in the wake of the Kumanovo operation was refreshingly strong in content and tone.¹⁰³ British Ambassador Charles Edmund Garrett last month suggested that an interim

⁹⁵ Skopje interviews, March 23-25, 2015. In the author’s own experience, a similar process appeared to take hold, however briefly, during Orange Revolution Ukraine, with the then-EU foreign policy chief fixating on the trumped-up separatist narrative rather than on the prevailing reality – one of popular outrage at the government’s attempt to steal the election. Moscow’s involvement then – as now – was also clear.

⁹⁶ Interview with civic and media figures, Skopje, March 24, 2015.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Western official, Skopje, March 24, 2015.

¹⁰¹ Discussions with civic actors in Macedonia, March 23-25, 2015.

¹⁰² For example, see Erwan Fouéré, “Gruevski Has Made a Nightmare Out of Macedonia,” *BIRN*, February 27, 2015.

Available at: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/gruevski-has-made-a-nightmare-out-of-macedonia>

¹⁰³ “Joint Statement by the Ambassadors of the United States, France, Italy, the United Kingdom, Germany and the European Union,” May 11, 2015. Available at:

<http://macedonia.usembassy.gov/https/macedonia2/speeches/speeches2015/joint-statement-by-the->

government and new elections might be a solution.¹⁰⁴ European Commissioner Johannes Hahn called for an independent investigation of the Kumanovo events;¹⁰⁵ US Ambassador Jess Baily and EU Head of Delegation Aivo Orav oversaw the signature of a pledge among all party leaders to refrain from violence on May 13.¹⁰⁶ Yet the issue was not on the Foreign Affairs Council agenda on May 18. So the process of playing catch-up with events appears to be accelerating. But the default setting still seems to be one of attempting to bridge the political divide between VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM through mediation, which is being undertaken by three MEPs, Ivo Vajgl (ALDE, Slovenia), Eduard Kukan (EPP, Slovakia) and Richard Howitt (PES). On May 19, Gruevski and Zaev met in Strasbourg together with Commissioner Hahn and former Macedonia Rapporteur MEP Richard Howitt for a reported 10 hours.¹⁰⁷ A recent summit of Western Balkan leaders produced statements that the crisis could undermine regional stability and many countries' integration prospects.¹⁰⁸ And a visit by SDSM leader Zoran Zaev to meet with Prime Minister Boyko Borisov in Bulgaria elicited protest from regime-associated press in Skopje at Bulgarian interference and suggested that Zaev planned to federalize Macedonia.¹⁰⁹

Conclusion and Recommendations

Macedonia's political crisis derives from a number of factors: being stymied on Euro-Atlantic integration; an unaccountable and non-democratic synthesis of party and state feeding an insider/outsider political dynamic; and a systemic lack of political and legal accountability. This is not a problem that can simply be resolved by restoring the "soft power" of the EU's purported magnetic pull, nor by way of mediation; the imbalance among the parties is simply too stark. There are now structural and institutional problems which need to be resolved, along with removal of regional impediments, to ensure that Macedonia can function and join the clubs that its citizens – of all self-descriptions – still want to join.

There are no easy, short-term fixes. Even if the opposition-fed – not solely opposition-oriented – protests fizzle, the status quo is unsustainable. Indeed, there are indications that the government will do whatever it takes, including fanning dormant and greatly ameliorated ethnic tensions, to remain in

[ambassadors-of-the-united-states-france-italy-the-united-kingdom-germany-and-the-european-union-may-11-2015.html](http://www.novinite.com/articles/167628/UK+Ambassador+to+Macedonia+Calls+for+Interim+Gov+t)

¹⁰⁴ "UK Ambassador to Macedonia Calls for Interim Government," Novinite.com, Sofia, April 1, 2015.

Available at: <http://www.novinite.com/articles/167628/UK+Ambassador+to+Macedonia+Calls+for+Interim+Gov+t>

¹⁰⁵ "EU wants Kumanovo clashes investigated before it acts," *B-92*, May 12, 2015.

Available at: http://www.b92.net/eng/comments.php?nav_id=94091

¹⁰⁶ Siniša Jakov Marušić, "Ahmeti Tried to Negotiate End to Macedonian Carnage," *Balkan Insight*, May 15, 2015.

Available at: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/macedonia-s-ahemti-negotiated-surrender-of-kumanovo-armed-gunmen>

¹⁰⁷ "Radio Free Europe: Gruevski-Zaev meeting in Strasbourg lasts for 10 hours," *Focus News Agency*, Sofia, May 19, 2015. Available at: <http://www.focus-fen.net/news/2015/05/20/372822/radio-free-europe-gruevski-zaev-meeting-in-strasbourg-lasts-for-10-hours.html>

¹⁰⁸ L Lazar Semini, "Balkan Leaders Wary of Macedonia Crisis Fallout," *Associated Press*, May 26, 2015. Available at: <http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/albanias-president-wary-macedonia-crisis-fallout-31305813>

¹⁰⁹ Reactions in Macedonian media after Zaev's visit to Bulgaria (ROUNDUP)," *Focus News Agency*, Sofia, May 31, 2015. Available at: <http://www.focus-fen.net/news/2015/05/31/373892/reactions-in-macedonian-media-after-zaevs-visit-to-bulgaria-roundup.html>

power. This would have serious regional implications. As post-Kumanovo commemorations in Prishtina have demonstrated, they would not be alone in doing so.

The decade between Macedonia's EU candidacy (alongside now-member Croatia) and today has seen the net regression of the country's regional and international standing. The lack of forward movement toward membership is by no means the *only* reason for this backsliding, but it has created an ideal ecosystem for a new brand of unchecked populist authoritarianism.

Removing the hurdles of external brakes on popular aspirations to integrate into the EU and NATO is an essential part of a durable solution in Macedonia. There is truth to the argument that the EU's leverage in Macedonia was undercut – even discredited – by Greece's hijacking the Union for the sake of its own national policy on the “name dispute.” But even if the immediate removal of external impediments were a feasible option, the *internal* brakes on Macedonia's integration – the absence of demonstrable and institutionalized alignment with democratic commitments and values – would remain. The reasoning for the Commission's recommendation to begin accession talks has since been undercut by the policies of the Gruevski government since 2009. Simply “getting on with” the negotiation process will not force resolution of these deeper problems. This must also be factored into a new approach toward the problem.

Nor is mediation under current conditions likely to achieve desirable results; the lack of democratic accountability and the prevailing power dynamic mean that mediation could likely have the perverse effect of legitimizing the policies of the current regime, and at the same time weaken political opposition and alternative civic voices. “There are no circumstances for political dialogue now – the only dialogue now is at the expense of the citizen,” said one local analyst.¹¹⁰ “Citizens need to rise,” as one interviewee stated two months ago, before the current protest wave. “Politicians need a hard landing.”¹¹¹ The centralization of power within parties, abetted by a party-list electoral system, which demands party discipline and impedes individual accountability to voters, was a regular point raised by interviewees.¹¹²

The EU's proven tendency to default toward compromise and a hope that its own transformative power will impel reform creates a strong need to ensure there are alternative nodes of official advocacy for human rights, democratic values and rule of law in Europe. European democratic values are too important to be left to the EU alone. The Council of Europe, NATO, OSCE and the US also have specific roles to play toward creating a conducive environment for durable progress and stability in Macedonia.

This is both a crisis of Western vision and of Macedonian democracy, which has left opportunistic players – domestic, regional and foreign – ample room for malfeasance. Ohrid may have made Macedonian politics more inclusive, but it did not make politics more accountable. This is the ultimate challenge.

¹¹⁰ Interview with social analysts, Skopje, March 24, 2015.

¹¹¹ Interview with civic and media figures, Skopje, March 24, 2015.

¹¹² Several interviews with civil society figures, Skopje, March 23-25, 2015.

The good news is that civic activism and mobilization in Macedonia has grown considerably in response to the clientelism and unresponsiveness of the country's politics. The growing civic organization and maturity, along with cross-ethnic mobilization and solidarity, is particularly noteworthy after the Kumanovo operation. There is pronounced concern among elements of this sector of these issues being reduced to a binary "government vs. opposition" dynamic. "We need to leave the cliché of 'kick out VMRO.' (The solution) needs to be institutional, legal. Parties need to accept an international proposal. It needs to be enforced. We need reform of both parties."¹¹³ The Institute of Social Sciences and Humanities-Skopje last week published a report calling for a unity government, which the authors distinguished from a technical government by noting the latter would not force political ownership of reform solutions.¹¹⁴ It remains unclear how this would be configured or function – or how political malfeasance would be prevented. Reducing latitude for abuse of office and power, whichever party(ies) are in government, is a tougher goal. But it is the ultimate challenge for Macedonian citizens of all identifications and affiliations. "There is now bottom-up pressure from citizens. But there is unused potential leverage on the part of the international community (which could be used) in support of citizens. We need a civic-international community alliance. It's not happening," as one civil society figure put it in March.¹¹⁵ Therefore, the democratic West's policies must be recalibrated to assist exponents of these goals – and its own values – in Macedonia. As one interviewee put it, "the EU is the fulcrum – it depends on them."

The democratic West – the EU, US, and NATO – must recognize and acknowledge that Macedonia's crisis is not *simply* a political dispute between the ruling VMRO-DPMNE and opposition SDSM, with ethnic Albanian political adjuncts. Rather, it is one of governance and accountability. Popular (and trans-ethnic) mobilization on a host of issues is rooted in this problem, and is itself part of the solution. But the country cannot truly stabilize and realize its potential until political and legal accountability are legally moored and seen to function. The policies of the EU, NATO, US and other Western and democratic world actors – including regional members of the Union and Alliance – need to be built around this foundation and directed toward these goals.

The lack of external security guarantees and arrangements in the Ohrid Framework Agreement may have been politically desirable at the time, but they now impede resolution of Macedonia's current crisis and durable progress toward a functioning democracy and Euro-Atlantic integration. Clear and credible guarantees: a) of Macedonia's sovereignty and territorial integrity; and b) against resumption of (domestic and externally-driven) interethnic conflict from NATO – particularly in the wake of the still murky Kumanovo operation – could help reduce the salience of the interethnic factor, which had long-since faded. Pressure should be applied toward those groups and political actors – particularly in Kosovo – who advocate ethnic separatism or trans-border ethnic consolidation (including Greater Albania and Greater Kosovo). On this issue, American leadership is absolutely essential.

¹¹³ Interview with civil society figures, Skopje, March 24, 2015.

¹¹⁴ "Solution for the Macedonian Political Crisis after the Resignation of Ministers in the Cabinet – Seen from the Perspective of the Civic Movement," *ISSHS*, Skopje, May 2015. Available at: <http://www.isshs.edu.mk/index.php?newsinfo=233>

¹¹⁵ Interview with civil society figures, Skopje, March 24, 2015.

The EU has yet to develop a serious approach to Macedonia's ongoing crisis, though several members – alone and collectively – have articulated appropriately forceful messages.¹¹⁶ Following the Kumanovo operation, confining the EU's collective policy response to attempts to mediate by Commissioner Hahn and three MEPs – is insufficient. Within the EU, a number of member states – including not only the “big four” – Germany, Britain, France and Italy – but also the Netherlands and Sweden, have been increasingly vocal about malgovernance in Macedonia. These countries should take the lead in developing and messaging the Union's common position toward Macedonia, seizing the initiative from those member states which have involved themselves in the country's internal affairs to its detriment – namely Greece and Bulgaria. The positions which should be adopted are outlined in detail below.

DPC recommends the following:

To the US and NATO:

- State clearly that Macedonia's territorial integrity and sovereignty are non-negotiable, and that external and regional attempts to disrupt this order – including indulgence of paramilitary groups by neighboring countries – will not be tolerated. In the first instance, the US should articulate this unilaterally. But it should be presented to NATO at the ministerial level in the immediate term for adoption by the Alliance.
- Reiterate that Montenegrin and Kosovo independence have completed the post-Yugoslav state formation process; all other efforts toward border changes in the Western Balkans – i.e., in Macedonia, Kosovo, Serbia or BiH¹¹⁷ – whether undertaken by state or non-state actors, will be actively resisted by NATO. Again, the US should take a lead role in articulating this position, pressing for its adoption within the Alliance as soon as possible. Effectively, this would amount to a binding guarantee of the current territorial arrangement of the region.¹¹⁸ Planning to deter such challenges, as well as react to emerging threats, should take place within existing mandates (KFOR, EUFOR), as well as at a regional strategic level.

¹¹⁶ For example, German Ambassador Christine Althaus said on April 28, 2015 that the accusations of government wrongdoing alleged in the recordings should have “political consequences, which means resignations.” See “German Ambassador to Macedonia also Calls for Gov't Resignations,” novinite.com, Sofia, April 28, 2015. Available at: <http://www.novinite.com/newsletter/print.php?id=168181>

¹¹⁷ For a refreshingly strong injunction against such adventurism, see Philip Hammond, “The Case for Change in Bosnia,” October 24, 2014. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-the-case-for-change-in-bosnia> In his article he stated that “referendums and separation” are “not going to happen;” Britain remains committed to maintaining BiH's sovereignty and territorial integrity. This is stronger than the usual mealy-mouthed statements that a referendum wouldn't be *recognized*. The article was published widely in the local press. However, such messaging has not been adopted by the EU, US, or NATO.

¹¹⁸ For BiH and Kosovo, there already are *de jure* security guarantees which bear reiteration and shoring-up. For Macedonia, making clear that NATO would defend the country against threats to its territorial integrity would reduce the perceived threat - and its political misuse.

- The US and the majority of NATO member states should press Greece to accept the entire arrangement proposed by the EU's larger member states (below) as a path to resolving the "name dispute," removing objections to Macedonia's invitation for membership. Similar pressure should be applied to Bulgaria for it to retract its objection.
- The government and political establishment of Kosovo should be told in no uncertain terms that support or advocacy for separatism or territorial reallocation will not be tolerated, and that such advocacy has consequences. KFOR's posture should be calibrated to defend against attempts to destabilize Macedonia.

To the EU:

- The majority of the EU membership should actively press Athens and Sofia to retract their objections to opening EU negotiations – under clear conditions proposed by the entire Union. The member states most assertive on the deterioration of Macedonia's democratic practice must also take the lead on pressing Greece's government to accept the terms below, using all available leverage:
 - 1) That a transitional government, to be composed of equal numbers of the larger parliamentary parties, vetted by respected local civic figures, be established for a set two-year window with a clear mandate to:
 - a) Investigate, with EU assistance, the veracity and background of the recordings that have been released in installments by SDSM leader Zoran Zaev. Further investigation and prosecution of all malfeasance cited in the recordings must follow.
 - b) Provide full support to an EU-supervised independent investigation of the Kumanovo operation.
 - c) Pursue a medium-term plan to identify and remedy areas of rollback on EU standards which have occurred since the EC's 2009 recommendation to launch accession negotiations. Key issues such as judicial independence and media freedom, for example, would need to be addressed before these respective chapters could open.
 - 2) Acceptance of the above conditions would allow EU accession negotiations to commence with the transitional government, with the "name dispute" dealt with in the appropriate place – within the Acquis' requirement for good neighborly relations.
 - a) In the event that no agreement is reached within two years, the matter will be referred for binding arbitration. Given the ICJ ruling on the matter, this should induce Greece to be less rigid than it has been.
 - 3) A newly-elected government (in 2017) would have the mandate to develop and implement a process to amend Ohrid and the relevant legislation (constitutional, electoral, and otherwise) to

develop democratic and oversight mechanisms to ensure democratically accountable government and fail-safes against future abuse of power. Civic actors must be institutionally included in this process.

To the Council of Europe:

- Establish a senior-level presence in Macedonia to monitor adherence to the country's CoE commitments, assist the authorities with implementation of these commitments along with reforms required to exit the current political and governance crisis and provide reports on the results.

To the International Financial Institutions:

- Insist that the financial review required before disbursement of the World Bank's Development Policy Loan (DPL) be completed, including assessment of the "Skopje 2014" project and government purchases of media space, from both a public procurement and a transparency perspective. Should this not be properly completed, and publicized, prior to the September 2015 deadline, no further funds should be disbursed by the Bank or other IFIs.

To Greece and Bulgaria:

- Further degeneration of the situation in Macedonia, including recriminations within the Union on "who lost Macedonia?", constitutes a threat to the political, economic and social interests of both Greece and Bulgaria and by association, the EU as well. Both should accept the reasonable way forward for the EU outlined above.

To Macedonian Civic Actors:

- Forge a coordinating committee to advocate for the transitional government and program outlined above, as well as for the monitoring of its performance. Deliver monthly reports to the "Security Principals" (the EU Head of Delegation, NATO mission, OSCE Head of Mission and US Ambassador), EU member state heads of mission, the head of the new Council of Europe office, and IFIs on performance, which would be made available to the public.
- Prepare a strong non-partisan civic monitoring capacity for the post-transitional government elections, which should encompass regular expert monitoring of the preparation for those elections well before they are held (voter lists, ensuring party-state separation, media environment, etc.). The reports of this effort should be made public.