



Veton Latifi

The Macedonian paradox

International long-term presence and the aspirations for the EU integration

Veton Latifi argues for continued international engagement in Macedonia and outlines the further prospects of EU integration and membership.

In countries with ethnically polarized societies and the existence of a fragile peace along ethnic lines, the International Community's assistance is indispensable. This has shown true in the case of the Balkans and especially in the Macedonian case. Here, the rapid diminution of the international presence in Macedonia over the last years was running the risk of opening a space for radical elements and to increase the probability for anarchy. Since September 11 primary world interests are engaged in the war on terror, whereas the Balkans (including Macedonia) has dropped from the list of priorities of the International Community (IC) as it was previously the case. However, this does not mean that the International Community has not continued to remain involved in Macedonia diplomatically, politically, and economically despite the reduced military involvement.

Easing tensions through international mediation in Macedonia

Eventually the international community's significant withdrawal of involvement and facilitation in the Macedonian post-conflict period will fuel insecurity amongst the countries population. Only if all members of the International Community and not only parts of it remain committed to working with local authorities to improve the situation for a stable and secure political environment, positive results can be expected, during the reforms, and in the process of the stabilisation and democratisation of the country.

Macedonia encountered during the 2001 crises and afterwards many incidents, which might have brought the country to its abyss at any moment, if the International Community had not intervened to calm the situation. Mediation was crucial in the Macedonian conflict, and played a vital role during the different political deadlocks after the conflict, as a result of different delays and incidents. The IC had reached a significant impact in getting things back to normality. Furthermore, no peace agreement would have been signed if the representatives and envoys of EU, USA, NATO, OSCE and other international organizations had not been all involved together. Neither could the drawbacks to the peace process have been overcome without a close co-operation of the authorities with the international representatives in Skopje.

The kidnapping of five Macedonian civilians on 30th August 2002, by Albanian armed groups on the road from Tetovo to Gostivar in Western

Macedonia, proved once again that the entire peace process may be endangered very easily, even one year after the conflict. It led to one crucial conclusion: that without the involvement of the International Community the rest of the peace process would be impossible. The case showed how much the role of IC can help, with its preventive actions and mediation processes, with so called "amortizing access" and how they would react in case the peace were to be threatened. The kidnapping took place two weeks before the elections on 15 September, 2002 in a tense atmosphere, and surrounded by fears of renewed violence, due to the political aims of any of the political parties in the run-up, may lose the elections. But the kidnapped people were released one day later, thanks to the international representatives' pressure, and its co-operation with local authorities on the case. From one side, the Albanian political subjects were urged by the IC to condemn outright the kidnapping and to facilitate the release of Macedonian civilians. At the same time, the international representatives obtained a guarantee through diplomatic efforts from Macedonian authorities that they will not respond improperly or with violence to the kidnapping before the elections.

Over a short period of time, this case has shown that the peace and prosperity of the people of this country is no sure thing if the International Community will not remain in Macedonia. Negative climate for Macedonians, whether to go out and express their will in the elections of September 15th 2002 due to resulting fears from possible incidents and use of violence, as some indications were announced. But the international representatives through their mediation and other diplomatic efforts would not allow the electoral process to fail. They managed with the political parties' leaderships, to create an environment free of intimidation and fear so that over 70 percent of the Macedonian electorate went to vote on that day.

However, as a result of the already mentioned continuity of international involvement, there will be no progress in the country, but only prolongation of the problems and challenges for the future, if any of the members of International Community (NATO, EU, USA, OSCE, etc) withdraw their attention from Macedonia completely.

Long-term international commitment in Macedonia

The Ohrid Framework Agreement demonstrates that the international community has learned important lessons from peace processes elsewhere in Europe, including Bosnia and Kosovo. But it remains to be seen if the lessons have been learned fully and can be applied in the post-conflict period, too. Taking into consideration all the above-mentioned aspects and challenges for Macedonia, the International Community in future needs to remain engaged in the peace process and not leave the country to its own devices to cope with challenges, because they would only mean a temporary shift of the international presence. The cost of remaining engaged in this region is lower than withdrawing only to return once more.

Despite the achievement of the Ohrid Agreement mediated by the European Union and the United States, the country remains dangerously polarized and the implementation of the agreement remains precarious since any of the parties can block the implementation of the process. Keeping in mind that the Ohrid Agreement Framework was brokered by the EU and the USA, the International Community should be committed to remaining in Macedonia during the process of the implementation of the agreement. The cessation of hostilities and the start of the implementation process of the Ohrid Framework

Agreement would not be possible if international intervention in the mediation, accompanied by a NATO peace-keeping mission would not arrive in time. The implementation process of the Ohrid Agreement has been delayed several times – since this calls for close monitoring and involvement of internationals, in the process of implementation of the reforms foreseen with the agreement.

If the international envoys from the EU and USA will not come back to Skopje to push forward the talks for the parliamentary adoption of the remaining laws of the Ohrid Agreement, its implementation will continue to be blocked. Their facilitations in the meetings with the four leaders who signed the agreement are decisive, after they usually urge all sides to overcome the disputes mainly between Macedonian and Albanian leaders.

In a special report of the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) published in August 2001 it is stated that "The international community will not be able to remove its military forces from the Balkans without first resolving issues relating to the Albanian population in the region." Yet the report also said that only a few Albanians in the country are willing to fight for a Greater Albania. Besides, an international presence is asked for in Macedonia in order to prepare the country for Euro-Atlantic integration. The current developments and experience have shown that on its own, Macedonia would take a long period of time on the road to reforms necessary for EU integration and for the implementation of the Ohrid Agreement.

The reforms as a basic condition for European integration despite international long-term presence

Macedonia is the first former Yugoslav Republic, which signed the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) with European Union on April 9, 2001. But as the last former Yugoslav republic embroiled in an armed conflict at that period, it missed the results of the internal reforms in the meantime and lost the advantage Macedonia held over other countries in the region on their path towards European structures.

Macedonia first established diplomatic relations with the EU in December 1995. In February 1999, Skopje requested associative membership in the EU. On November 24, 2000, the SAA was initialised in Zagreb. Following the authorities and political parties' rhetoric of speech, the impression is inevitable that everybody will promote the aim for the countries EU integration. Whether they are actually working towards that aim is another question – their actions very often seem to prove the opposite. In a conference of the Skopje based International Centre for Preventive Activities and Conflict Resolution (March 2002), it was concluded that besides the slow implementation of the reforms in the country, there is also not enough evidence showing dedication towards the implementation of SAA. While the agreement is currently being ratified by the national parliaments of the EU countries, the question aside from the readiness level of EU integration should be clarified, as well the question of will on Macedonia's side.

Firstly, Macedonia's population, politicians and authorities have establish whether they are seriously interested or not to being integrated into Europe, with concrete actions and long-term steps required, rather than just promises and media statements.

Secondly, the two main ethnic communities – Macedonians and Albanians – have to make it clear, that they are far away from any secret plan for any

partition of the country, leaving behind any historical dream of living separately from each other. The majority of the population prefers to live in peace and inside the actual borders. But this does not mean that radical elements do not exist, nor political circles with political marketing aims, which have not given up on the idea of changing territories or borders. From the beginning, the rise of support for such ideas and people will undermine all efforts, not only for the stability of this country, but also for Macedonia's EU integration. Both sides should commit themselves to it. The country should meanwhile bring down all market barriers. With it, the Luxemburg European act of 1987 would be fulfilled, and regional co-operation would be improved: The basic political Copenhagen criteria are still to be discussed. With regard to the status of minorities, Macedonia is improving very successfully – if the Ohrid framework agreement continues to be implemented fully. The democratisation and the rule of law – as one of the fundamental topics of the Copenhagen political criteria – remain questionable. They are very closely connected to the process, which should start the democratisation of the political parties– as one of the urgent reforms.

The third part of the Ohrid framework Agreement on the decentralization of the government addresses reforms that would have been necessary in the near future, even if there had been no conflict in the country. Macedonia has a very centralized power, which carries greater risks of corruption and discrimination. The improvement of local self-government is essential for encouraging the participation of citizens in democratic life, and for promoting respect for the identity of communities.

It is necessary for Macedonia to gain a more functional public administration before any aspiration for EU integration can be taken further. Reforms in this direction should be made with a strategy that would adjust the process of painful reductions of the overstaffed public administration. Creating a serious strategy against corruption will be more possible in an economically and socially cohesive Macedonia, which presently is not the case. Lastly, the carriers of these reforms, need to be additionally supported: new elites composed of moderate, educated and young people, should be recruited locally through different NGO programmes, and the International Community.

This is an excerpt from the Chapter 7 of Veton Latifi's book: *Macedonian Challenges in the Process of Democratization and Stabilization* published by KAS, Skopje, 2003.

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