

Further EU integration will help to stabilise the disruptive forces of nationalism now present in Macedonia.

by Blog Admin

*Negotiations towards Macedonia's accession to the EU have been prolonged and often postponed in recent years, mostly due to an on-going dispute with Greece over the country's name. **Goran Janev** argues that these delays, combined with an 'ethnocratic' government, have allowed nationalist sentiments to develop and grow in Macedonia. If these nationalist trends are to be reversed it is vital that progress is made towards further European integration.*



The Republic of Macedonia is often assessed as being extremely weak, poor, and vulnerable – and, of course, greatly in need of external aid to maintain its independence. However, with only very limited support from the outside this small Balkan country has managed to maintain relative stability and is slowly progressing towards full EU integration. The unleashing of nationalism proved destructive for Yugoslavia and is still the greatest impediment to Macedonia's accession to the European Union—as well as being a divisive issue throughout much of the region.

The case of Macedonian accession to EU reveals the incredible vitality of the forces that first gave rise to the famous 'Macedonian Question' over a century ago. For even in 2012, Macedonia remains high on the agenda of its neighbouring countries, each of them still disgruntled by some or all aspects of Macedonian independence. Just as the Great Powers exercised the predominant influence on the region a century ago, today the EU has the most significant role to play in determining Macedonia's future by obliterating those **irredentist** reflexes. Clear and immediate accession to the EU would extinguish the destructive forces and allow Macedonia's own indigenous model of negotiating diversity to come to full bloom. Alternatively, if these irredentist forces are left undeterred and uninterrupted, in addition to the further development of the ethnocratic regime in the country will eventually tear it apart. The EU has a moral and political responsibility to recognise those disintegrative forces, both from within and from without Macedonia, and to take all necessary steps to help stabilise the country and the region as soon as possible.

The EU has been negligent towards Macedonia from the very beginning and continues to demonstrate its indifference. Contrary to the recommendations and opinions of the EU's Arbitration Committee, the EEC in Lisbon 1992 went ahead and made the recognition of Macedonia's independence conditional upon a change of its name that would be acceptable to Greece. Encouraged by this display of false European solidarity Greece unilaterally imposed an economic embargo on Macedonia that was only lifted after the US brokered an Interim Agreement under the auspices of the UN in 1995. Europe behaved as if it were a disinterested party.



President of the European Council Herman van Rompuy and President of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia Gjorge Ivanov Credit: President of the European Council (Creative Commons BY NC ND)

Two decades later, the EU made the beginning of accession negotiations conditional upon a successful resolution of the name dispute with Greece. Again ignoring the recommendations of the European Commission, the European Council has postponed the beginning of the negotiation process three times in a row. Taking into account the EU principle of solidarity which privileges Greece, this is tantamount to continued pressure on the country to give up its name and identity in order to gain access to the European political, economic, social, and security umbrella.

Hiding behind the phrase 'good neighbourly relations', Greek nationalism is given legitimacy, EU interests are damaged, and Macedonians are asked to give away their dignity. This cannot be true European solidarity. The EU as an institution and administrative mechanism cannot be larger than the European project as an idea. The EU's failures to curb deviations by hiding behind bureaucratic procedures are seriously undermining the ideals of the European Union.

The prolonged and persistent postponement of European integration has favoured the rise of chauvinistic and nationalistic sentiments in Macedonia. The new generation that has grown up in independent Macedonia are isolated and marginalised from the global and European cultural, educational and economic trends and have developed self-aggrandizement as a defence mechanism against this external denial of the country's right to self-determination.

Internally, inter-ethnic relations have become increasingly estranged and confrontational. Ever since Macedonia's independence, ethnicity has been growing into a major political force. After the controlled military conflict in 2001, power-sharing mechanisms and some variation of the [consociational](#) model has turned Macedonia into a divided country. The division is made obvious in the public space, where many symbolic struggles are fought with marble and bronze figurines, monuments, churches and mosques, gigantic flags on enormous masts – each one bigger than the last. Isolation from Europe, by narrowing the aspirational horizon of the young generations, has contributed towards a worsening of nationalist symptoms. A fragile democracy cannot sustain itself in the face of such divisive forces for long. Local and regional nationalism is the main cause of such divisions, but European marginalization has only served to deepen these divisions and draw support for nationalist parties.

Despite recent political developments and the grand schemes of populist nationalist politicians, Macedonian citizens for centuries have proven resilient to antagonistic calls and have maintained peaceful coexistence at the level of neighbourhoods. Even under the pressure of such difficult challenges as the military confrontation between Albanian radicals and state security forces in 2001, the vast majority of Macedonian citizens refrained from conflict and pushed for peace. However, the recent development of an ethnocratic regime has nurtured new generations who refuse to learn the lessons of mutual respect from the elders. Broadening their imagination beyond flag-waving would help reverse this negative tide. This is why Macedonia needs Europe now more than ever.

The EU needs to look straight into the eyes of the beast of nationalism and to expel it before it is too late. Yugoslavia collapsed after a prolonged economic crisis in the 1980s led the economic nationalism that had first appeared in the 1960s to develop into ethno-nationalist frenzy in the 1990s. The EU is faced with its greatest economic crisis so far and the signals that nationalist forces from within are growing stronger are getting clearer, from the south of Spain to the UK, where Eurosceptics are winning the day.

In the year that the EU was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, the EU needs to take a bold and wise act to prove it is worthy of this award. The EU needs the European project to succeed before atavistic forces gain another victory – before some new Golden Dawn parties appear in its midst. The EU must confirm that it stands for equality, democracy, and European principles over all other specific interests. The EU must cease using bureaucratic euphemisms as a cloak for nationalist reasoning that impedes the completion of the process of European integration.

Finally, the EU must encourage the new generation of European youth to develop greater ideals than those of petty nationalism. In this battle for the hearts and souls of Europeans, no concessions can be given to nationalists. The December Summit of the European Council will certainly miss the opportunity to stand behind the European ideal and mere politicking will win another victory. Another nail will be driven

into the coffin of the European project and Macedonia will be asked to remain outside in the draughty corridor.

How many more chances will be missed before the final victory of nationalist egotism over true European solidarity and unity?

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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