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## The EU needs to step up its involvement in the political crisis in Macedonia

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*European neglect of political crises in the Western Balkans has long been lamented: many are convinced that the EU can – and should – still make a difference. The latest [statements](#) by Commissioner Hahn are arguably a step in this direction. Will it be enough? **Christian Costamagna** and **Davide Denti** propose concrete EU actions to step up the game in the region.*



*From: [www.delo.si](http://www.delo.si) // REUTERS/Ognen Teofilovski (MACEDONIA DIPLOMACY POLITICS)*

The crisis in Macedonia is linked to both domestic and international factors, and the EU should take a comprehensive approach to help its resolution.

All of the Western Balkan countries will one day, presumably, join the European Union: that's why all EU institutions, beginning with the High Representative Federica Mogherini, should work closely to find a shared solution not just for the political crisis in Macedonia, but for the whole Balkan region.

### Yugoslavia *docet*?

The failures of the EU to stop the Yugoslav wars in the nineties, when [Jacques Poo's "heure de l'Europe"](#) ticked, can give us a few insights. First, when European countries are divided, they cannot prevent or address a crisis. Second, without the support of the USA, Europe seems too weak and incapable to solve the issues of its own backyard. Third, the Western Balkan countries are relatively small, with a small population and weak economies, and closely linked with one another (and with Greece and Bulgaria), in a way that it is not possible to solve one crisis without tackling the others too, and that one crisis left unsolved could dangerously spill over to the rest of the region.

A serious effort of research and information, and of dialogue among the peoples of the region, is still badly needed – as shown by the [conspiracy theories](#) that have abounded on the popular media after the events in Kumanovo. The media war, at the end of the 1980s, has been responsible for fuelling hate and fear among the citizens of the Yugoslav republics before the actual war started. Serbian media [show](#) they did not learn the lesson very well.

The whole region is still in dire need of substantial developments in the civic society sector to help deconstruct all-too-persistent nationalist myths. At the same time, the leaders of Serbia, Albania and Kosovo should refrain from the instances of

inflammatory rhetoric that they have lately fallen prone to. The message should be clear and unequivocal: Europe's boundaries cannot be redrawn further.

### The EU can still make a difference in Skopje

The EU's contribution to help solve the Macedonian crisis has been, so far, underwhelming. For a start, the current level of EU involvement is inadequate, and the way the European People's Party (EPP) has provided outright [support](#) to governments such as Gruevski's is questionable (and [not even an isolated case](#)).

Although High Representative Federica Mogherini may already be busy with the ongoing crises in Ukraine, Libya and Syria , a full involvement of Commissioner Hahn (as showed by [his recent mission in Skopje](#)), and the attentive oversight of the EU Head of Delegation in Skopje would allow the EU not to be taken by surprise by the next events in Macedonia. For this aim, the EU Council would do well to reopen the EU Special Representative (EUSR) office it had in Skopje until few years ago, which would allow the EU Delegation to be more involved in the political developments of the country.

Concerning the substance, the EU could facilitate the government and the opposition to talk. The extent of mistrust that the two main Macedonian parties have towards each other, after the scandals highlighted by the wires, is remarkable. At the same time, the government is still legitimated by the elections and commands the support of a consistent part of the citizenry, although a significant share of the population feels now disenfranchised. It is unlikely that a snap election, as the one [agreed](#) between the parties after EU mediation for April 2016, might provide a sustainable solution to the crisis. At least, voting should be preceded by a well-organized transitional period, in which EU, CoE and OSCE observers ensure that the elections are free and fair and that the competition proceeds on a level-playing field, without misuse of administrative resources and influence by the incumbent, as it has been the case in the past. Ideally, this should be done under a caretaker government. Moreover, whichever the outcome of the polls, the EU should remain deeply involved to avoid the repetition of the delegitimation of the democratic institutions, as was in 2013, by the losing party.

To achieve this, the EU should push an ambitious agenda favouring the entrenchment of the rule of law and democracy in Macedonia, by anticipating the contents of the chapters 23/34 of the enlargement negotiations through such tool as the [High Level Accession Dialogue](#) once used by Commissioner Fuele, or through a localised version of the [Structured Dialogue on Justice](#) used in Bosnia, allowing for the inclusion of practitioners and of the civil society in the talks. This process should include an investigation into the events occurred in Kumanovo, as well as into the scandals uncovered by the wiretapping affair. This would make it evident to all Macedonian citizens that the EU does not only care about striking a deal between politicians, who are often all discredited in their eyes, but rather that it is able to listen to the civil society that took the streets in the last month, and to involve all citizens in a dialogue for the improvement of the quality of democracy in their country. Lest the citizens feel listened and involved, their frustration will soon turn against the EU representatives too.

### A bold stand to cut the Gordian knot

Finally, the EU cannot afford keeping Macedonia isolated. The UN embargo that hit Belgrade in the 1990s made the Serbs feel isolated and created the environment for a mafia-like economy, a nationalist political discourse and populist political practices. The levels of crime and corruption and Belgrade's shortsighted policies at the time remain a huge burden for today's Serbia. Considering that Macedonia's EU path is being stopped by a name dispute with Athens, and that even Greece is experiencing a deep crisis itself, the EU has a heightened responsibility towards the Macedonian citizens and should do all it can to break the stalemate.

It is thus of fundamental importance for the EU Council to remove the veto blocking the start of accession talks. This is not to say that Macedonia is today politically and economically fit to start accession negotiations, but rather that the persistence of a 10-year veto has discredited the European perspective of the country, seriously undermining the EU's popularity and therefore its influence. To achieve this, a strong effort will be needed to pressure the Greek government on the topic, recalling also the 2010 opinion of the ICJ on the illegality of the veto. It is understood that this will only be possible within a broader package deal with Greece. The EU has the capacity to help Macedonia and the Balkans, but Europeans must find a compromise among themselves first. Mogherini can't help solve the Macedonian issue without strong support from all the European capitals.

*Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of LSEE Research on SEE, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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