
Brussels and Skopje: How the European Union Failed the Balkan Peninsula

Every week opposition Zoran Zaev releases what he calls a “bomb”, leaking evidence of Prime Minister Gruevski’s illegal wiretapping of around 20,000 Macedonian citizens; the charges accuse Gruevski’s government of covering up murders, tampering with judicial proceedings, intimidating journalists and corrupting election results.¹ Dubbed ‘soft authoritarianism’ by critics, Gruevski’s extralegal, hypernationalist politics have been condemned for nearly half a decade.² The *New York Times* in 2011 cited the prime minister’s disregard for freedom of the press and rule of law, echoing a similar report in the same year by the European Commission; whereas censorship, intimidation and targeted defamation were just a few of the Commission’s “concerns”.³ Technically in dialogue with the European Union, Macedonia has slipped into a Serbian-esque politik, leaving many perplexed as to how the Former Republic of Macedonia could have exited the European orbit so rapidly.

Meanwhile, in Brussels, the EU Enlargement Negotiations Commissioner Johannes Hahn has met with Gruevski, Zaev and two ethnic Albanian party leaders to discuss rapid reforms, interim government and April 2016 elections. And while some may view Commissioner Hahn’s involvement as an example of the successes of European soft power, the wider picture, the geostrategic failure in the Western Balkans and the very situation itself in Macedonia evinces the opposite: The European Union has been part of the problem in Macedonia. Gruevski is the product of Brussels’ failure; and, while, the past cannot be rewritten, the future of EU enlargement policy must learn from its follies in the Western Balkan nation of two million.

In 2004, Macedonia submitted its application for accession. Up to this point, Macedonia’s application seemed inevitable; while its submission came a bit later than its Balkan neighbors (Croatia in 2003, Bulgaria in 1995, etc.), Macedonia exhibited signs of willingness and enthusiasm to begin the negotiation process, having been the first non-EU Balkan nation to sign the

¹ "Macedonia, Oltre 20mila in Piazza Contro Il Governo. Le Opposizioni: "Grueski Si Dimetta"" *Repubblica.it*. 17 May 2015.

² Brunwasser, Matthew. "Concerns Grow About Authoritarianism in Macedonia." *The New York Times*. 13 Oct. 2011.

³ "The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia 2011 Progress Report." *European Commission*. 12 Oct. 2011.

Stabilisation and Association Agreement Act with the European Union in 2001.⁴ However, over the course of the next decade, Macedonia's formal application was stymied by the efforts of Greece and Bulgaria. For the latter Balkan nation bordering Macedonia to the south, the issue of the Republic's name called into question its accession to the Union; in the 2006 progress report on the application of FYROM, the European Parliament reemphasized the name-issue as a potential roadblock in Macedonia's quest for membership. For Greece, the name is and was a cultural appropriation and amounted to nothing more than theft of Greece's ancient history.⁵ And while in 2007, EU officials contended the naming dispute would not amount to any formal impasse for membership (outside Greece's veto power), in 2008, Greek officials lobbied Brussels to affix resolution of the naming issue as a precondition to EU accession.⁶ At the top of Greek concerns was a potential Macedonian claim over Greece's northern province of Macedonia. In the spirit of good, neighborly relations, a precondition across the board for entrance into the EU, Macedonia adopted (as its first amendment to its constitution) a disclaimer barring any "territorial pretensions" towards any neighboring state. Given that the government in Skopje was now barred from territorial aspirations abroad, the conflict over Macedonia's name shed the legitimacy of security concerns; the naming controversy now became historical in nature. How could the Macedonians, or rather: why should they be allowed to, claim a common history with the Greeks if the Slavs didn't arrive on the Balkan Peninsula until centuries after Alexander the Great? The ethnically and linguistically Slavic country, according to Greece, is actively robbing Greece of its unique history. Thus, in the mid-1990s, there occurred a rhetorical shift in how Greece discussed its northern neighbor: from security and territorial integrity to cultural appropriation and historical integrity.

The transition was best reflected in Greece's next grievance: the Macedonian Flag; the former flag of Macedonia included a Vergina Sun, an ancient Greek symbol associated with Alexander the Great. In response, Macedonia updated its national flag to its current status in appeasement and recognition of Greek power over Macedonia's accession to both NATO and the European Union. The former occurred in 1992; the latter in 1995. While cultural appropriation and misidentifying national history are certainly not minor grievances, rapid and almost eager appeasement of demands by Macedonia ought to have softened Greece's stance on Macedonian accession into NATO and EU.

Two decades later, however, Greece and Bulgaria, for similar ethno-historical reasons, were issuing annual vetoes to Macedonia's accession to the EU or NATO. While the rest of post-Soviet Europe

⁴ "Ten Years of the Enactment of the Stabilization and Association Agreement" *Secretariat for European Affairs*. 2011.

⁵ "Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia Progress Report 2006" *European Commission*. 12 July 2007.

⁶ Macedonia PM in Greek Outburst after EU Summit." *EurActiv*. Efficacité Et Transparence Des Acteurs Européens, 23 June 2008.

has been allowed to move past its history on the fringes and periphery of Europe, Macedonia is left in the dark; forced into the dark, rather. While Croatia and Turkey were given candidate status in concert with Macedonia (the former joining the Union in 2013), the start of any negotiations has been repeatedly vetoed by Greece. In 2012, seven years overdue, the then Czech Enlargement Commissioner circumvented Greece's retardation of the process and entered into unofficial "dialogue" with Macedonia to jumpstart reforms and keep Macedonia in Europe's "orbit."⁷ As expected, over the course of nearly a decade of stalemate, public opinion in Macedonia began to drift away from Brussels, viewing accession as a pipedream worth little of the struggling nation's resources. In 2003, ninety percent of the Macedonian public supported membership in the EU. By 2014, only fifty-one percent viewed potential membership positively.⁸ Of particular interest to this discussion is the ethnic divide on the issue of Macedonian accession with or without a name change. Only around 5% of ethnic Macedonians support EU accession contingent on changing the name to the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia; predictably, 75% of ethnic Albanians support EU accession even if it necessitated a name change.⁹ It is likely that Albanians are seeing the increasingly inevitable admittance of their homeland, Albania, to the Union, as all the more reason to hasten Macedonia's application. The rapid decline, however, in support for accession is coming mostly from ethnic Macedonians, all the more telling of the ethno-national dynamic on the peninsula.

The toll of two decades of stagnant negotiations cannot be undervalued. The European Union witnessed a warm embrace of the West after the fall of the Soviet Union for more than a decade in Macedonia; the momentum, however, has been quick to dwindle among ethnic Macedonians. A hopeful Macedonian polity, not too long ago, saw economic and political salvation to its west. But the discouraging effects of Greek and Bulgarian vetoes have all but soured Macedonian opinion on the matter; while some may view Gruevski's 2006 election to Prime Minister as a nail in the coffin of Macedonia's application, a different narrative may better explain how the distressed nation fell into a soft authoritarianism reminiscent of Putin's Russia. In order to maintain his government, Gruevski's governing coalition includes the party of Ali Ahmeti, the right-wing Democratic Union for Integration, formed out of the crises of the early-2000s and including multiple, former Albanian "terrorists". Together, Gruevski's coalition has consistently skirted attempts to liberalize or reform the government. The European Union has allowed its enlargement policies to be hijacked and in turn lost the opportunity to influence internal and domestic policy in Skopje.

⁷ Marini, Adelina. "Enlargement Policy Has Failed in Macedonia." *Euinside.eu*. 15 May 2015.

⁸ Damjanovski, Ivan. "Public Opinion and Macedonia's Accession to the European Union (2004-2014)" *Institute for Democracy Societas Civilis Skopje*. 2014.

⁹ Damjanovski, Ivan. "Public Opinion and Macedonia's Accession to the European Union (2004-2014)" *Institute for Democracy Societas Civilis Skopje*. 2014, p. 38.

In every report by the European Commission on the status of Macedonia and Europe's enlargement policy, freedom in the media, rule of law, election legitimacy and corruption have all been the sources of significant concern. For half a decade, the Commission documented little to no progress, and in some cases, regression, in regards to freedom and human rights.¹⁰ The current reckoning for the Gruevski government, evinced by the hordes of disgruntled protesters, is the result of a decade of unchecked, illegal expansion of the state; on a peninsula where ethnic tensions run historically deep, the collective manifestations of ethnic Albanians, Bulgarians and Macedonians only further proves how widespread and intense opposition to this form of governance must be.

By allowing Greece to halt all negotiations, Europe "washed its hands" of Macedonia and permitted the age-old ethnic and national strife of the Balkan peninsula to dictate its enlargement policy. Yet, the failure of Europe to exert soft power on its own members to accomplish its enlargement goals has ramifications far graver than weakened expansion. First and foremost, Macedonia hasn't received legal aid akin to that received by other Balkan nations to dampen corruption or the repression of certain freedoms; additionally, as the geopolitical arena of Eastern Europe becomes of increasing strategic and ideological concern to the West, the European Union has, thus far, forfeited the pivotal Balkan nation and, once again, pushed it to the periphery of the developed West.

As for the former point, the gradual degradation of the freedom of press in Macedonia encapsulates a broader narrative of behind-the-scene repression. Between 2012 and 2013, *Reporters Without Borders* cited a drop in Macedonian freedom of press from the rank of ninety-fourth worldwide to 116th.¹¹ Erosion of freedom of the press in Macedonia again declined to 123rd in the world in 2014.¹² In 2005, Macedonia was forty-third in the world ranking for freedom of press, thirteen ranks higher than Croatia and forty-two higher than Turkey (which together comprised the states that entered EU negotiations in 2004-2005).¹³ Other Eastern European nations ranked at forty-eighth (Bulgaria), sixty-second (Albania), sixty-fifth (Serbia) and seventieth (Romania); the point being: Macedonia, at the start of accession talks, seemed duly inline to become a member-state, even more so than its Balkan counterparts. Yet, currently, those states which in 2005 trailed Macedonia, have outpaced it; the last decade has seen remarkable strides in many of these Balkan nations (exception: Turkey), for Macedonia, however, those strides have been unequivocally in the wrong direction.

So, what happened in Macedonia? Much of the present crisis in Macedonia is the logical conclusion of nearly a decade of trampling on the constitutional rights of Macedonian citizens; the soft authoritarianism of the center-right party headed by PM Gruevski reneged on many of the gains secured after the fall of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. So the short answer is "Gruevski happened".

¹⁰ "The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia 2011 Progress Report." *European Commission*. 12 Oct. 2011.

¹¹ "World Press Freedom Index 2013" *Reporters Without Borders*. 2013.

¹² "World Press Freedom Index 2014" *Reporters Without Borders*. 2014.

¹³ "World Press Freedom Index 2005" *Reporters Without Borders*. 2005.

Certainly, the protests would dictate thusly. The Macedonian leadership, not too long ago, opted to follow a relatively un-European path in terms of respecting certain freedoms and adhering to the essentials of advanced democracy, such as the rule of law and an independent judiciary. That's the long-story-short version; in this case, however, the long-story is significantly more telling.

It is not farfetched to presume Brussels would have been able to prevent such a dramatic shift in the style of governance in Macedonia; in every report on Macedonia issued by the European Commission over the past half-decade, Macedonia has been scolded for its increasingly bad track record on a plethora of rights pivotal to accession. The nature of the improvised "dialogue" with Macedonia was such that true negotiations for accession never started; thus, the adoption of European legislation regarding these basic freedoms and essential facets of European democracy was never pushed through Macedonian parliament. Gruevski would have been legally barred from committing his abuses at the helm of the state either way; the main difference, however, would have been Brussels's say on the matter. The result: Europe resigned and observed Macedonia slip further and further into an unacceptable rut, with little institutional power to change anything. Europe, hoisted by its own petard, namely Greek stubbornness, lost its foothold in Macedonia. In leaving the future of Macedonia to Greece, Europe sealed Skopje's fate. Whether or not negotiations would have entirely avoided a deterioration of its progress is unknown; what is definitive, however, is the power European institutions have over nations in the midst of negotiations. Europe would have been able to file suit; to assist in reform; and to weed out high level corruption before it resulted in Macedonia's gravest crisis since independence.

Most likely, Europe will associate the summer of 2015 with Athens, not Skopje; but, the myriad of crises on the Balkan peninsula constitutes a wake up call for Brussels and how it conducts its expansion policy. With an increasingly aggressive Moscow, Europe is treading in black water. In Bulgaria, Russia has begun maneuvering to demonize certain media sources for their "Western spin," backing more favorable news outlets; for the Balkan nation of over seven million people, half lean ideologically and politically towards Moscow as opposed to Brussels.¹⁴ While Sofia is far from embracing Moscow, the pressure is still trenchant enough to draw attention. To the south, Western intellectuals are already pondering the possibility of Greece drifting away from the influence of Brussels and Washington; perhaps, it isn't too far off: Most Greeks sided with the Serbs and Russians over Europe in the 1999 conflict in Kosovo. Greece has always had religious ties with Moscow due to a shared Orthodox heritage.¹⁵ Macedonia, on the other hand, hasn't been as

¹⁴ Macdougall, Gary. "Putin Targets Pro-Western Bulgaria." *WSJ*. 28 June 2015.

¹⁵ Kaplan, Robert D. "The Greek Crisis Is About More Than Money." *WSJ*. 30 June 2015.

historically receptive to Russian flirtations. Yet, the Macedonians have squandered nearly a decade and failed to witness any major benefits from setting their hopes on the EU.

Macedonia, thus, seems like a relatively low hanging fruit for those fighting Europeanization. While the protesters outside the seat of government in Skopje are demanding reopening negotiations with the EU, Russia cites “manipulation” and “puppetry” by Western forces to oust a pro-Moscow government and divert Macedonian energy supplies away from Russian sources. An early June, 2015 article in the Wall Street Journal opines similarly: “Some...say Europe’s stalled effort to bring Macedonia closer into its fold has created an opening for Moscow.”¹⁶ Not only have Greek protests of Macedonia’s entrance into the European Union been allowed to control enlargement policy, they have also made vulnerable much of the Balkan peninsula to Putin’s attempts to strengthen Russia’s power politics akin to China in the South China Sea. The political winds in Macedonia are once again blowing westward due to the overwhelming opposition to Gruevski’s politics. However, Europe has failed to recognize the strategic import of stability and liberal democracy in the Balkans; or, at least, failed to implement enlargement policies which demonstrate their commitment.

Brussels ought to do more than just facilitate negotiations between Zaev and Gruevski to resolve this crisis. Surely, *this* crisis will be resolved. In this case, Macedonia is only the example. The broader and more pressing issue addresses the character of the European Union’s enlargement policy. As soon as the disaster in Macedonia is subdued, Europe ought to aggressively pursue accession negotiations, doing whatever necessary to get the Greeks onboard (if they’re still institutionally relevant by the 2016 elections). And, as Putin continues with an unambiguously aggressive foreign policy, Europe must pursue an equally aggressive policy in supporting fledgling Eastern European democracies. Learn from Macedonia and stop dropping the ball in the Balkans.

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¹⁶ Pop, Valentina. “Macedonia Becomes Latest Stage for Russian Tensions With the West.” *WSJ*. 2 July 2015.