

MACEDONIA – LOST IN INTEGRATION

MAY 2013

As it is known Macedonia's road to the EU has been filled with many difficulties from outside and inside. The latest developments are that Macedonia is still waiting for a date to begin with the negotiations and will wait for one until June when the EU Summit will take place. After the local elections in March and April 2013, Macedonia received its Spring Report from the Commission on 16th of April officialy called: REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND THE COUNCIL - MACEDONIA: IMPLEMENTATION OF REFORMS WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE HIGH LEVEL ACCESSION DIALOGUE AND PROMOTION OF GOOD NEIGHBOURLY RELATIONS.

This Report, covering the six months period since the most recent Progress Report, is divided

into two sections. The first part assesses the implementation of reforms under the High Level Accession Dialogue (HLAD) which the Commission had established in March 2012, assessing additional progress under the different headings of the HLAD. The second part of this Report assesses the steps taken to promote good neighborly relations with all neighboring countries, with a particular emphasis on relations with neighboring EU Member States i.e. Greece and Bulgaria. This Spring report also monitors the progress after the Parliamentary crisis that began on December 24th and supposedly ended on March 1st with the 1st of March Agreement between the Macedonian political parties.¹

¹ The deadlock began on 24 December, when the Macedonian parliament approved the country's budget for 2013 with no opposition members in the chamber. The main opposition party, the So-

Separate topics within the report are:

1| Freedom of expression and the media.

Even though there has been some progress noted regarding the freedom of media and the dialogue between the government and the media organizations, it is noticeable that the Commission has used stronger language than in its previous reports regarding this issue. For instance it says that "there are continued concerns about self-censorship, poor labour rights of journalists and the public's access to objective reporting. Moreover, during the local elections in March, observers noted a lack of balance in coverage by the public



cial Democrats (SDSM), then boycotted parliament and demanded that the government call early national elections. The government rejected that call, prompting the SDSM to threaten to boycott the local elections scheduled for 24 March. This agreement ended the opposition's boycotts of parliament and of the local elections. It did not, however, accede to the opposition's demand for early national elections; instead, after the local elections, there should be talks that could lead to early national elections. In addition, an independent commission should investigate what led to the parliamentary showdown on 24 December that led to both the opposition and journalists being removed from the chamber. The inquiry should include a review of the parliament's security system and rules of procedure. A formal dialogue with the media should also be launched. <http://www.europeanvoice.com/article/2013/march/eu-ends-macedonian-deadlock/76563.aspx>

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broadcaster and private stations.” This sentence contains high concerns regarding basic media freedoms as the right to report freely or be protected under the law. The impression that this issue is extremely worrying can be supported also by the fact that Freedom House and Reporters without Borders stated in their last report that Macedonia has fallen to the 116th place when it comes to press freedom. Knowing that only in 2009 it was at the 34th place, the fall to the 116th is not only worrying but alarmingly dangerous as it shows certain trends that no democratic system should have.

2] Rule of law and fundamental rights (Inter-community dialogue; public administration reform; electoral reform; strengthening the market economy).

As in the previous theme, here as well many issues are noted, in addition to the presentation of the chronology of reforms in the abovementioned sectors. Thus, what strikes as peculiar again is the harshness of the language used by the EC, something that was not the case with the previous Progress Reports for Macedonia. The biggest criticism in this part is the following: OSCE/ODIHR reported, however, that allegations of voter intimidation and misuse of state resources persisted throughout the election campaign, and that separation between state and political party was blurred. Media covered the campaign extensively, but several broadcasters, including the public broadcaster, did not provide a balanced coverage of the campaign. While there was enhanced confidence in the accuracy of voter lists, the procedures for compiling and maintaining the lists can be further improved. After 22 years of independence voters' frauds and many irregularities in the election processes show a trend of declining rule-of-law in Macedonia which is supposed to be the pillar of every republic.

Part II:

In the second part of the Spring report regarding the steps taken by Macedonian authorities to promote good neighborly relations especially with EU member states two countries are presented: Greece and Bulgaria. When it comes to the relations with Bulgaria, the countries entered into a dialogue to improve their relations. The Report further states: “exchanges at Foreign Minister level led to a proposal from Bulgaria, on 27 November, to incorporate a number of confidence-building measures in the broader framework of an 'Agreement on good neighbourly relations and cooperation', in addition to joint thematic working groups related to key areas of concern and continuous commitment and good will in the implementation of any agreements reached.” As the bigger focus is put on the name dispute with Greece, the relations with Bulgaria are not high on the agenda in Macedonia at the moment. However, even with a plausible solution to the name dispute it remains to work on the relationship with Bulgaria as throughout the years seemed to be thoroughly neglected by Macedonia for unknown reasons.

The Spring Report regarding the relations with Greece and the name dispute stated that: “on 3 October 2012, Foreign Minister Avramopoulos sent a letter proposing the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding, to which Foreign Minister Poposki replied on 5 November. Formal talks on the name issue, under the auspices of the United Nations, led by the United Nations Secretary General's Personal Envoy Matthew Nimetz, took on new momentum during the reporting period. A visit by Mr Nimetz to both Athens and Skopje in early January was followed by talks in New York between the negotiators on 29-30 January. The latest talks took place on 8-9 April,

at which the UNSG's Personal Envoy presented a new proposal which he hoped could “pave the way for serious discussions and hopefully a solution”. There are no signs that the name issue will be solved by the June EU Summit as things stand in May 2013. The pressure is increasing on Macedonia to accept some reference that will be enacted into force once the country is a full EU member. However Macedonian authorities have stayed rather silent on this issue, mostly leaving the Albanian coalition partner to discuss it in the public.

One of the main conclusions of the Spring Report which stand out is: it is important for the political agreement of 1 March 2013, which has helped to overcome the political crisis, to be implemented without delay, particularly those provisions relating to the establishment of the Committee of Inquiry. Having in mind that, as it is May 2013 when this Commentary is published, there is no sign of a Committee been convened and knowing that the Summit of the EU will be in June it is not hard to predict the results of this Macedonian saga. Without a strong political will to deal with the domestic issues and without an agreement regarding the name, Macedonia will once more be left out of the EU family. Moreover if there is a lack of political will to deal with the abovementioned issues, the EC and other EU bodies might harden the language and the messages they send to Macedonian authorities. It might be that the time of the ‘stick’ has finally arrived in Macedonia.

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