

## The EU is risking a reversal in Macedonia

Whether Macedonia will go back to the 2001 year of crisis, which saw an eruption of fighting between ethnic Albanians and the Macedonian state, is uncertain. But recent events in the country are causing a fresh escalation of inter-ethnic tension.

In an interview for Der Standard, an Austrian newspaper, the EU ambassador to Macedonia, Erwan Fouere, linked the situation with Macedonia's name dispute with Greece, saying: "If the resolution of the name dispute keeps on being delayed, it can potentially lead to inter-ethnic tensions."

Both Macedonians and Albanians overwhelmingly support EU integration as the key process for building better relations between the country's various communities. The name dispute, which has only intensified in the past two months, threatens to leave Macedonia in a permanent stalemate in EU terms.

The European Council in December 2009 as a result of the name row failed to follow up on the European Commission's recommendation to start accession talks. On top of this, foreign direct investment to Macedonia is a mere €163 million a year (the figure for 2009), combined with an unemployment rate of 32 percent.

In this context, the current government has chosen to score points through populism, by creating external enemies instead of doing internal homework.

The most recent example of this trend is the Skopje 2014 vision, which provoked vocal, but mixed reactions from the wider public.

The Albanian ethnic community opposed the project by saying that it does not represent the multi-ethnic character of the country. The leader of the Albanian opposition party, the Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA), Menduh Thaci, in an interview for the national Kanal5 TV openly threatened conflict, saying: "Politics that suppresses Albanians leads directly to war. Overnight two borders will fail. Macedonians cannot win the war."

Presented with great pomp, the vision of a revamped Skopje of 2014 will involve a grand statue of Alexander the Great, situated in the main city square, a triumphal arc and many statues of famous Macedonians from the history.

The anger comes mostly from a plan to build a church in the main city square, which has provoked negative reactions from the Muslim community, supported by several civic initiatives, who have been continuously asking for a change of the city square plan that will allow them to build a mosque or withdraw the idea of building a church.

The government as well as the municipality of Centar (responsible for the detailed urban plan) have not responded to these calls. On the contrary, heavy machinery is already digging up the city square at this very moment.

Even the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), the Albanian junior coalition partner in the government, is against the idea of Skopje 2014. DUI's Vice President, Izet Memeti, sees Skopje 2014 as a "regressive project that will deepen ethnic divisions."

With Skopje 2014, the government is sending a conflicting message to both the Greek authorities and the Albanian community in Macedonia, which constitutes a quarter of the population.

Building the grand statue of Alexander the Great on the square will fuel the flames of discord between Macedonia and Greece and further harm Macedonia's EU aspirations. At the same time, building a church in the city centre with money from the budget that all citizens, regardless of their ethnicity or religion, contribute to, puts Macedonia at risk of a new conflict - this time a religious one.

By failing to upgrade Macedonia-EU relations, the EU also risks intensifying inter-ethnic tensions in the country, which could eventually undo everything that the country has achieved since 2001.

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