

The Key Challenges for Macedonia and the Western Balkans in 2010

Last year has been a comparatively positive one for the region as a whole with a few exceptions. Croatia now stands on the threshold of the EU club having finally managed to resolve its dispute with Slovenia. As a result of this and progress in other areas, the country can realistically be expected to achieve membership in 2011 – probably with Iceland.

Serbia too has made encouraging progress with regard to its EU ambitions receiving word from the European Council on December 7th that the Interim Agreement will be implemented, indicating a major step towards the state's increased EU integration. The Interim Agreement will come into effect once the European Council concludes that Serbia is cooperating fully with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, thereby requiring an increased commitment to law and order within the state.

Albania and Montenegro also have advanced in their EU candidacy respectively receiving and returning the EC's questionnaire for assessment of their readiness for membership. While not at an advanced stage, these actions will lay the foundations for the future and mark progress toward the two states' membership of the EU. Conversely, for two of Montenegro's neighbours the forecast is not particularly good. Both Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo have taken a step back from EU integration, or at best have remained stationary. Bosnia, which has had an Interim Agreement in place with the EU for over a year, received a poor

progress report from the EC in October. The main criticism was that reform – and the will to do so – across all sectors was lacking. The inadequacy of the current constitution for providing a stable government and the refusal of the three main political entities to compromise to reach amendment was noted, as was the fact that EU-related reforms have been limited and that there have been efforts to reverse previously agreed reforms. Bosnia therefore has many matters to attend to and must attempt to reach a consensus between its conflicting political factions over how to amend their constitution so that it actually functions, and enables government. This will be the country's greatest challenge in 2010. The situation in Kosovo is also negative. Questions remain over the legality of its declaration of independence but more importantly perhaps, there has been a distinct lack of progress over inter-ethnic relations between Serbs and Albanians and the northern, predominantly ethnic-Serb portion of Kosovo remains completely opposed to what they deem an illegal government in Pristina. Corruption remains a serious problem and has even taken the sheen off November's municipal elections amid accusations (and actual proof) of electoral fraud.

Macedonia has made great strides this year, persuading the European Parliament and Commission to recommend that a starting date for accession talks be determined at the meeting of the Council in early December. As is common knowledge, and with echoes of the vetoed membership of NATO in 2008, a date

was not allocated due to the ongoing name issue with Greece, but the door has been left open and the matter will be re-tabled during the Spanish Presidency in the first half of 2010. For Macedonia then, the biggest challenge of 2010 – at least from January to July – will be to genuinely work constructively with Greece toward finding a mutually acceptable solution. Presumably this will not prove easy given that the name dispute has been a burning issue ever since Macedonia's independence almost two decades ago.

For ethnic Albanian Macedonians, there is no great attachment to the nation's name and would much prefer to gain entrance to the EU rather than haggle over what they deem an irrelevant issue. There is a risk for the Macedonian government therefore that further delay in resolving the name dispute with Greece could in fact destabilise their country as a whole, potentially breaking up the fragile ruling coalition of VMRO-DPMNE and the ethnic Albanian DUI. There is also a school of thought that suggests for deliberate political prevaricating on the name issue, in order to push through economic reform unhindered by the increased restrictions that EU membership negotiations would entail. If this is true, then it is a risky strategy gambling on the nation's unity for political objectives. Whatever the case may be, the Macedonia name dispute will be crucial in 2010 regarding the country's EU and NATO aspirations and also its stability.

By William Boyd