

AT THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

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Macedonia and EU Integration

Deputy Prime Minister of Macedonia Vasko Naumovski

“There is one issue that prevents the Euro-Atlantic integration of our country,” stated Vasko Naumovski, Deputy Prime Minister of Macedonia, who spoke at the Harriman Institute on Friday February 5, 2010, along with Aleksandar Spasenovski, a member of the Macedonian Parliament. “Despite all our progress and a recommendation from the European Commission that we start the negotiation process, the bilateral dispute with Greece has hindered us from Euro-Atlantic integration.”

Greece and Macedonia have been in conflict over the use of the name “Macedonia” since 1991. “Our southern neighbors don’t want us to use the name because the region of Macedonia reaches beyond our country across parts of Greece, Bulgaria, and Albania.” The Deputy Prime Minister believes that this logic is faulty. “Imagine if Canada told the United States of America to change its name because America spans beyond the U.S. There is a city called Alexandria in Virginia, and I don’t recall Greece telling the U.S. to change that name.”

The two countries have been working with Matthew Nimetz, a UN mediator, in attempts to find a compromise. Gordon Bardos, Assistant Director of the Harriman Institute, and the moderator of the panel, asked the Deputy Prime Minister whether it might make sense to bring Washington into the negotiations on a larger scale. “Looking at it from the outside it seems that over the past decade, not much progress has been made. It might take more than one or two annual visits by a retired American diplomat,” Bardos remarked.

Naumovski skirted the issue, responding that he is encouraged by U.S. support for Macedonia—“We’ve been extremely satisfied with the partnership before and after the NATO summit in Bucharest.” At the summit, the U.S. supported Macedonia’s candidacy to NATO, which Greece vetoed. “The U.S. is one of 127 countries in the world that recognizes us as Macedonia,” remarked Naumovski.

Shortly before the Bucharest Summit, Macedonian authorities renamed the Skopje airport after Alexander the Great—a move that angered Greece and was seen by many as the fuel behind Greece’s decision to veto Macedonia’s membership to the EU. “Is there a sense in Skopje that moves like these are counterproductive?” Bardos pushed Naumovski. “There is a big statue of Alexander the Great in Bulgaria and Greece has never asked them to move it,” Naumovski replied. “Macedonian culture belongs to the entire world—it is something that should unite all countries and civilizations that have been built on this heritage.”

Macedonia is ready for EU membership, stated Spasenovski. “No single political party in parliament opposes integration and more than 90% of Macedonian citizens are in favor of it.” He explained that EU integration will solidify the country’s democracy and remove it even further from its authoritarian past. Naumovski lamented that, to judge by the histories of other nations, the high percentage of citizen approval will drop if the integration process continues to stall.

Spasenovski emphasized that Macedonia gained its independence by peaceful means. “We achieved it without war, which was not the case in other Balkan countries.” While there was no serious strife during the independence process, there has been friction with the ethnic Albanian population—the largest minority in Macedonia.

Albanians, which comprise nearly 30% of Macedonia, have felt oppressed by the country’s power structures. In the 1980s, the Communist Party passed regulations that suppressed public use of the Albanian language and barred Albanian families from naming their children Albanian names. In efforts to decrease the size of the Albanian population, the Party also passed a law restricting Albanians from having more than two children.

Albanians have been frustrated with the lack of representation they have in a country where they comprise nearly one-third of the population. In February 2001, the tensions with the Macedonian

government intensified, manifesting in the form of an armed insurgency on the border with Kosovo. In August 2001, ethnic Albanian representatives and the Macedonian government signed the Ohrid Framework Agreement. The agreement ended the armed conflict and established a roadmap for improving relations and enhancing the rights of ethnic Albanians.

Bardos remarked that a number of reports have shown that the Ohrid Agreement has not been working. “Do you think that Macedonia will need to become a federal or a bi-national country?” Bardos queried. Naumovski responded that the agreement was signed by all political parties and represents all Macedonian communities. “No one has publicly questioned its legitimacy.” He affirmed that “from time to time there are voices, but these are voices of marginal political groups and individuals.”

Spasenosvski stated that as Macedonia continues to reform for the purpose of EU integration, “there is also a process of integration among the communities of the Republic of Macedonia.” He stressed that EU integration continues to be Macedonia’s number one priority and hopes that the name dispute will soon be resolved. Naumovski urged that “a bilateral dispute should not be a barrier to the common interest of integration.” He stressed that Macedonia and Greece continue to have good relations. “There are more things that unite us than divide us—our traditions, culture, and heritage. Greece is one of our largest investors and it is the primary tourist destination for Macedonians.”

Reported by Masha Udensina-Brenner