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## By Way of Presentation: Macedonia, 1991-2016: A Quarter Century at Issue

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On 8 September, the Republic of Macedonia celebrated its first twenty-five years as an independent state, evoking the historic day of autumn 1991 when more than 95% of its citizens voted in favor of its peaceful and democratic emancipation from the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia that had already started to break apart.

For most of the last quarter century, Macedonia has managed to live and grow, as a society and as a state, virtually apart from current news trends. This is an achievement that is no small feat if we take into account its geographic location –in the very heart of a peninsula whose name has become synonymous with division and confrontation– and the signs of the times into which it was born, alternatively dominated either by fratricidal confrontations or by the embers of authoritarianism, or by both at the same time.

That healthy departure from what was regularly seen in the media broke down temporarily in February 2001, when the prophecy that Milcho Manchevski had sketched years prior in his film *Before the Rain* transcended the screens to become a reality. The only republic that until then had escaped unscathed from the bloody process of dissolution of the former Yugoslavia, channeling in a peaceful way – though not free of tension– the ever complex relations between its two main ethnic communities and turning its political institutions into a useful forum for dialogue, was for a moment on the verge of slipping through a spiral of violence similar to that which had already truncated the hopes for the future of several of its neighbours. But fortunately, an international community that had already learned from

its mistakes in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia, and a political elite that was able to embrace pragmatism and regain the capacity for dialogue just as the abyss began to open beneath its feet allowed for a healthy return to normality and informational anonymity.

And again –although this time for a much happier reason– this distancing from the media outlets was momentarily interrupted in December 2005, when the European Council meeting in Brussels agreed to grant Macedonia the status of candidate country, expressly mentioning the progress made in the implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, which sought to avoid the danger of a new inter-ethnic conflict, and its willingness to advance in the reform of its political system and in the modernization of its economic model. Macedonia thus placed itself at the forefront of the race for European accession –Croatia aside with a notable advantage over the rest of the states of the region– and seemed to ward off the danger of international isolation that had been haunting it practically from the moment of its birth as a state.

Unfortunately, this healthy departure from the spotlight which –with the two exceptions we have mentioned, and perhaps a few more– has been enjoyed Macedonia in its recent history, is now a thing of the past. And so it is that for a time –and perhaps at the same rate with which the attention of Western European media began to forget about Bosnia and Herzegovina and its fragile inter-ethnic balance, Albania and its acute internal fractures, Montenegro and its everlasting problem with corruption, Serbia and its never-dubbed nationalism, Kosovo and its still pending international recognition, or that of Greece and its critical economic situation– media attention has been increasingly focused on a Macedonia involved in a kind of "perfect storm" that has shaken the country to the very foundation of its constitutional framework and which has made Winston Churchill's phrase about the Balkans and history famous once again.

Indeed, the last three years of Macedonian political life could be described in any way except by the adjective "quiet". First, the scandal of illegal eavesdropping revealed by the leader of the main opposition party; then, the massive demonstrations –from one side or another– that paralyzed life and tightened the political relations of the country for most of 2015 and 2016; thirdly, the forced resignation of

the prime minister and the need to prepare for –and then postpone twice– parliamentary elections; and, finally, the complex situation generated by the uncertain outcome of the 11 December 2016 elections. And this is without even mentioning the serious refugee crisis, especially acute in the summer of 2015, which tested Macedonia's capacity to cooperate effectively with its neighbors and pushed its own crisis management capabilities to the limit.

And all of this, unfortunately, without other chronic problems disappearing from the political scene of a country in which unemployment remains a structural problem, corruption an endemic evil, Euro-Atlantic integration an increasingly remote ideal, the interethnic coexistence a daily challenge, and the question of the name a frozen dispute.

Thus, the decision to dedicate a monographic issue of *Balkania* to Macedonia was both simple and complex. Simple because we were perfectly aware of the interest that the country has been arousing among both the small community of Balkan scholars and the larger one of those interested in the future of Europe, which guaranteed a good dose of attention to our project; but complex, as much as it was difficult to keep the balance between the analysis of structural and short-term problems and, above all, to keep it at the level of documented criticism which is characteristic of scientific journals, equally distant from an hagiography as from the indiscriminate attack.

The result of this ambition and these *caveats* is what the reader will be able to find in the following pages: a volume we consider to be timely, balanced, reasoned, critical, and rigorous. A volume that we wanted to serve as a meeting place –firstly– for some of the most prestigious, and several of the most promising, Macedonian political scientists such as Irina Chudoska Blazhevska, Zhidas Daskalovski, Ljubomir Frčkoski, Loreta Giorgievska, Nano Ružin, and Andreja Stojkovski; on the other hand, for some of the Spanish Balkanists who have more frequently been paying attention to Macedonia, such as Diego Checa, Jesús Nieto, and those who subscribe this introduction; and, finally, for some other European researchers who have also been moved to pay their attention to this small country in the heart of the Balkans, of which Nora Repo and Max J. Wahlström

from Finland are excellent examples. This is a volume, lastly, that has also tried to maintain the balance between the issues that always appear on the table when it comes to Macedonia –interethnic relations, the problem of identity, the Damocles' sword of violence, et al– contrasted with issues that only recently have had a genuine emergence –such as corruption, populism, immigration, and social mobilization– thus composing a reasonably complete mosaic of works capable of providing a multidimensional image of this complex country, in this complex geographical context, and in this complex historical conjuncture.

Ultimately, this presentation could not conclude without some words that should serve to specify and explain a fact that the attentive reader will no doubt have noticed: that as of this number, *Balkania* is no longer under the umbrella of the Spanish Embassy in Belgrade but rather (and hopefully for many years in the future) under that of *Casa Mediterráneo*, an initiative of the Government of Spain, along with the *Generalitat Valenciana* and the local governments of Alicante and Benidorm, which is oriented to political and economic cooperation, intercultural dialogue, mutual knowledge and the strengthening of ties between the civil societies of Spain and other Mediterranean countries. Their warm welcome will allow us to contribute to this public diplomacy effort by encouraging the knowledge of this small but important corner of the Mediterranean that are the Balkans, making more visible in them the presence and the interest of Spain, in what we are sure is called to be a mutually beneficial partnership. Of which, this volume is, of course, only the first installment.