
Walking Hand in Hand. How the EU¹ Facilitates Democratic Transition of Macedonia or the Fortification of its Illiberal and Authoritarian Regime

Andreja Stojkovski

Abstract. In the last century the Spanish liberal philosopher, writer and professor Jose Ortega y Gasset speaking on the problems of the Spanish Society uttered the famous phrase: "Si España es el problema, Europa es la solución". This has proved to be a rather correct view of the development of Spain in the last nearly 40 years, and from Europe's problem it transformed to be part of the solution creators.

The last twenty-five years, since Macedonia's independence, the country has proved to lack the capacity to independently resolve any major political problem, and has depended onto assistance from the International Community and in particular from the EU. This assistance however genuine and fruitful in the last few years has failed to produce the same results as before and has gradually turned from support for democratic transition to aiding and abiding the authoritarian regime.

On one hand, the EU needs to stay true with its promises to Macedonia and the WB Countries, while remaining consistent with its core values. On the other hand, Spain needs to share some of its success in Europeanization of Society with the same group of countries, in particular with Macedonia that has been for too long a

¹ The EU is used as a term representing also the individual efforts of its Member States.

blank spot on the map, thus staying proving one more time how correct Ortega y Gasset was.

Keywords: EU, Macedonia, authoritarian, Spain, NATO, Pržino Accord

1. Introduction

This article will focus on the current state of affairs in the Republic of Macedonia, and the involvement of the EU in the resolution of the political crisis. Doing so, the article will dedicate attention to the developing relationship between the EU and the Republic of Macedonia through a chronological perspective, but also through a perspective of public support and understanding of the EU role. Finally, the article will discuss the role that the Kingdom of Spain plays or could play when it comes to Macedonia.

For twenty-five years Macedonia has maintained the strategic objective to become a member of NATO and of the European Union. The path to NATO membership was going steady, but was blocked at the Bucharest Summit² in 2008, while the EU Accession experienced a romantic period from 2004 to 2009, and has been in a decline ever since.

Since the *Black Monday* on 24 December 2012 Macedonia has been living in a state of permanent political crisis. This state was extended throughout the whole of 2013 and fortified with the early parliamentary and presidential elections in April 2014. These elections resulted in a government formed by a coalition between VMRO-DPMNE and DUI, while Gjorge Ivanov was elected President of Macedonia. The opposition lead by SDSM refused to take up their mandates and boycotted the work of the parliament alleging that the elections were not legitimate due to electoral fraud, intimidation of citizens and inadequate separation of state and party

² Bucharest summit declaration.

activities. To be completely honest, the OSCE-ODIHR Electoral Monitoring Mission did conclude that the elections "were efficiently administered, including on election day",³ but failed to mention, thus credit the elections with the four key components: Free, Fair, Democratic and Credible.

Finally, Spain is an exemplary EU Member State that transformed into democracy through its EU accession process. Since the accession in 1986, Spain made a difficult U-Turn and established a democratic system, "united in its diversity". Seizing all the opportunities provided by the Structural and Cohesion Funds, and learning lessons throughout the negotiations, Spain in its peak, just prior to the last Global Economic Crisis, was the eighth, and currently the 14 economy in the World and a permanent guest of the G20. At the same time Spain is a bridge of the two stances, pro-enlargement and pro-deepening, and the biggest Member State that is openly pro-enlargement and pro-deepening.

2. Analysis

From its independence, Republic of Macedonia's accession to NATO and to the EU has been presented as a top priority of all governments elected in power. Nevertheless, for a longer period the country's accession is in standstill, which was duly reflected in the manner in which political parties communicated their messages about the EU and NATO integration and the issues/matters they have defined as party priorities.

2.1 *Striving to join the "Western World"*

The path to NATO membership was going steady from its start with the Accession to the Partnership for Peace in 1995. In 1999 the

³ International Election Observation Mission (IEOM) The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia Presidential and Early Parliamentary Elections, 27 April 2014.

country joined the Membership Action Plans that were supposed to lead it to full-fledged membership, but at the Bucharest Summit in 2008⁴ the alliance concluded that invitation for membership "will be extended as soon as a mutually acceptable solution to the name issue has been reached".⁵

The conclusion, as it reads, was due to a Greek veto and heavily impacted Macedonian society and politics. It was a boost to nationalist politics and led to early parliamentary elections and absolute majority of the conservative VMRO-DPMNE. By the end of the year, the new government decided to pursue a legal resolution to the name and filed a lawsuit with the International Court of Justice in The Hague.⁶ Though the ruling was positive, and stated that Greece was in breach of article 11 of the Interim Accord,⁷ it failed to identify an obligation for Greece or for any of the International Organizations to re/open the issue of Macedonia's accession and re/decide on it.

More than eight years since the Bucharest Summit, and five years since the ruling of the ICJ, Macedonia is still "trying" to resolve the name issue.

On the other hand, relations with the EU started with the Rome Summit in 1990⁸ and through the Lisbon Summit,⁹ which was seen as a total failure, led to the first resident envoy of Macedonia being sent to Brussels, four months later, in October 1992. However, the resident envoy did not yet mean establishment of diplomatic relations, which came later, after the signing of the Interim Accord, in December 1995. Meanwhile, most of the countries from the European Union, at that time the European Communities, established diplomatic relations with Macedonia in the period since its independence to the signing of the Interim Accord.

⁴ "Relations with the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia".

⁵ Ibid. 2.

⁶ "The Court finds that Greece, by objecting to the admission of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to NATO, has breached its obligation under Article 11, paragraph 1, of the Interim Accord of 13 September 1995".

⁷ "Greece and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia".

⁸ The European Council. Rome 14-15 December 1990.

⁹ The European Council. Lisbon 26-27 June 1992.

Contractual relations between Macedonia and the EU started with the negotiations, and later entry into force of the Cooperation Agreement in 1998, which was followed with the Stabilization and Association process and the negotiations and signing of the Stabilization and Association Agreement¹⁰ in 2000 and 2004. This romantic period of the relations between Macedonia and the EU further improved through the Application for EU Membership¹¹ being submitted in April 2004 and with the submission of the responses to the European Commission's Questionnaire in February 2005 being called the "longest love letter the EU has ever received" by Secretary General and High Representative for CFSP, Javier Solana (Vesnik, 2016). Later that year the Council awarded Macedonia the Candidate Country Status, while in October 2009 the Commission recommended the opening of accession negotiations, which the Council has acknowledged but failed to act upon ever since.

2.2 The biggest political crisis since 2001

In early 2015, after twenty-four years of independence and statehood, Macedonia found itself amidst the biggest political and institutional crisis to date. Answers to the question on what has led to this situation are very complex and result of long-term turbulences in the political arena, coupled with systemic regress of all institutions in the Republic of Macedonia.

2.3 Standing at the edge of the cliff

In January 2015, Macedonia entered new and, by far, the most difficult stage of the deepest political crisis the state has faced. At that moment, Prime Minister Gruevski announced criminal charges against four individuals, including opposition leader Zoran Zaev, on the grounds of cooperation with foreign intelligence services and

¹⁰ Council of the European Council. Brussels 26 March 2001.

¹¹ "Accession of Macedonia to EU", Wikipedia.

providing them with illegally obtained, partially edited recordings of telephone conversations led among high state and government officials. According to Prime Minister Gruevski, Zoran Zaev used these materials to blackmail him into resigning from office, establishing technical government and organizing early parliamentary elections (Kanal 5, 2015). Consequently, Ministry of Interior motioned another criminal charge against Zoran Zaev defined as "violence against high state officials". This officially marked the start of lawsuit dubbed "Coup". On the same day Prime Minister Gruevski announced his positions, three people were arrested, one of which was Zoran Verushevski, former chief of Ministry of Interior's Agency for Security and Counterintelligence.

On the other hand, opposition's leader had demanded technical government, Gruevski's resignation and organization of new fair and democratic elections as early as his statement on non-recognizing the results from last year's early parliamentary elections. On several occasions in the course of 2014, Zaev publicly announced that he is in possession of so-called bombs providing evidence that governing authorities, led by Gruevski, have abused their power to wage war against those of different mind, have intercepted communications of high number of citizens (22,000), have abused public funds in multitude of ways (kickbacks, favourable prices and procedures for acquiring land tenure, etc.) and have rigged elections or have engaged in inadmissible pre-election pressure and threats. From the moment criminal charges were raised against him to present, the opposition leader and his associates published 38 instalments (Plusinfo, 2015) of wiretapped conversations that support allegations of government's wrongdoings.

2.4 Help is on its way

Pržino¹² Accord was the outcome of three months of negotiations in search of a solution to the political crisis, the signing of which took place at an interparty meeting held on 2nd June 2015 at the residence

¹² Pržino is the name of the Skopje neighbourhood where the residence of the EU Ambassador is located.

of EU Ambassador Aivo Orav.¹³ This was the seventh interparty meeting with the first having been held on 30th March 2015 in Brussels. Meanwhile, the remaining meetings were held in Skopje, Strasbourg and again Brussels. The first breakthrough in the negotiations was achieved on 2nd June 2015, when after eight hours of negotiations Commissioner Johannes Hahn announced that leaders of the four biggest political parties have agreed to hold early parliamentary elections in April 2016, preceded by a transitional period.

The final form of the Pržino Accord was reached on 15th July 2015, with two meetings taking place in the meantime. In the presence of Commissioner Hahn, and with additional support from Assistant Secretary of State for Europe and Euroasian Affairs Victoria Nuland who was visiting Macedonia, the Pržino Accord was finalized and regulates key issues related to bringing back democracy in the country, restoring the rule of law and organizing the early parliamentary elections:

Commitments assumed under the Pržino Accord include:

1. Parties to agree on exact organization of the government preparing the elections.
2. Revision and modification of the State Election Commission's composition.
3. Opposition's return to the Parliament.
4. Discontinued further disclosure of any materials arising from interception of communications.
5. SDSM to hand over all materials from intercepted communications to the competent public prosecutor.
6. Enhanced competences and authorizations for SEC to ensure free and fair elections, with level playing field for all political parties.
7. Appointment of new special public prosecutor with full autonomy, to lead investigations surrounding and arising from intercepted communications.

¹³ Aivo Orav finished his term as EU Ambassador in September 2016. The current EU Ambassador to Macedonia is Samuel Zbogar.

8. Start of work and first report of parliamentary committee (chaired by representative of SDSM) overseeing work of the Directorate for Security and Counterintelligence (UBK) and interception of communications.
9. Facilitated negotiations among stakeholders, to ensure greater media freedoms.
10. Appointment of new Minister of Interior (upon nomination by SDSM).
11. Appointment of new Minister of Labour and Social Policy (upon nomination by SDSM).
12. Appointment of new Deputy Minister of Finance with veto rights (upon nomination by SDSM).
13. Appointment of new Deputy Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Economy with veto rights (upon nomination by SDSM).
14. Appointment of new Deputy Minister of Information Society and Administration with veto rights (upon nomination by SDSM).
15. Submission of formal resignation by the incumbent government to the Parliament.
16. Appointment of new Prime Minister nominated by VMRO-DPMNE.
17. Holding fair and democratic parliamentary elections.

2.5 The turn of the tides

Several days after the Pržino Accord was signed a report announced as special report with benchmarks for the transition period and qualified by Deputy Prime Minister for European Integration Fatmir Besimi¹⁴ as one in series of reports complementing the Pržino Accord, the Priebe Report proved to be actual turning point. The report was presented on 8th June 2015 by a Group of Senior Experts on Rule of Law. The report known as Priebe Report (Telma, 2015) completely shifted pressure in the negotiations. It was drafted by a group of experts, such as the former Director General for

¹⁴ "360 stepeni 107 od 04/ 06/ 2015", Youtube.

Enlargement - Reinhard Priebe, in capacity of team leader. The report was first presented to EU Commissioner Hahn and members of the European Commission, and then to Mr. Besimi, during his visit to Brussels. The underlying message of this report was: "Macedonian parties to find a lasting political compromise translated into an agreement signed in Skopje on 2nd June" (DW, 2015).

The Report offered detailed overview of state-of-affairs relating to the rule of law in Republic of Macedonia, especially interception of communications, and established "significant shortcomings"¹⁵ in five main areas of concern:

1. Interception of communications;
2. Judiciary and prosecution services;
3. External oversight by independent bodies;
4. Elections; and
5. Media.

Among the many remarks, one emerged as crucial for resolution of the political crisis in Macedonia and can be subsumed in one sentence: "Considerable gap between legislation and practice has to be urgently addressed and overcome",¹⁶ additionally explained later in the report: "Only a few recommendations refer to necessary changes in legislation; most of them concern actions and choices within existing constitutional and legal framework".¹⁷ In other words, main problem identified by the report is not insufficient alignment of national legislation, but rather its implementation and enforcement.

2.6 Sentiments are rising, support drops

The outbreak of the wiretapping scandal in Macedonia coincided with the strengthening of the Pro-EU and Pro-Western sentiments among

¹⁵ "Report of the Senior Experts' Group on Systemic Rule of Law Issues Relating to the Interception of Communications".

¹⁶ Ibid. 22.

¹⁷ Ibid. 22.

many of the citizen. On the one hand, many of the citizens understood better the transformative power of the EU and saw clearer the previous engagement of the Union in supporting democracy in the country. On the other hand, among the supporters of the government the Pro-Russian sentiment was growing. Macedonia does not traditionally have strong feelings about Russia; nevertheless, there are still some who sympathize with the similar language, culture and joint Slavic heritage although this is not part of official governmental policy. This whole thing started with one of the prominent pro-governmental Eurosceptic journalist, Mirka Velinovska, asking in her columns: "What have the EU and the USA ever done for us!?" and continued with the propaganda criticizing the EU's approach in all of its neighbourhood, including in Macedonia, and presenting it as yet another proof for the Union's inevitable dissolution and the birth of a new world order, and advocating the replacement of the Euro-Atlantic integration. What is the actual opinion of the citizens regarding Macedonia's EU Accession and how important is the EU to the citizens? Should the European Union be involved and stay involved in the resolution of the political crisis? To answer best, let's use the data from Eurothink's survey research #Eurometer2015 and #Eurometer2016.

When asked whether the European Union should play an important role in resolving the current political crisis in Macedonia? In #Eurometer2015 a large majority of exactly 60% of the citizens agree that the European Union must play a key role in resolving this political crisis, whilst only 24% of the citizens have a negative view. In #Eurometer2016 the position is completely different with the negative views on the involvement of the EU and the impact of the Pržino Accord taking a slight lead over the positive views. Furthermore, the positions of the citizens with regards to the credibility of the European Commission's Country Report has experienced a fall of nearly 10% when comparing years 2015 and 2016, as well as whether Macedonia should continue striving to join the EU, or look for an alternative development model.¹⁸

¹⁸ #Eurometer2016 – Perception and positions about the EU and EU Accession, as presented on the conference "Urgent Reform Fails" held on 11th November 2016.

However, in spite of the fall expressed at the various aspects of EU involvement with Macedonia, support for Macedonia's EU Accession is still high. On the question: If on Sunday a referendum is organised where the question asked is – "Do you support the Accession of Macedonia to the EU?" a rather high number of citizens answered with "yes, I would support Macedonia's EU Accession".¹⁹ Compared to the year before, when the support on this question was expressed by 67%, this year 70% answered with yes.

The reason behind those 70% can be found in a different question that refers to the public trust/support in the institutions with the trust in the three branches of government, the Parliament, the Government and the Judiciary being the lowest, while trust in the EU, NATO and NGOs stands on the higher end.²⁰ Therefore, in conclusion, despite the differences there is a great amount of support for the EU and the international community in general to play an important role in resolving the political crisis as the citizens are aware that the institutions in Macedonia don't have the capacity to resolve a crisis with such intensity.

For the sake of argument, this rise in Pro-Russian and Pan-Slavic sentiment is not unfounded and unsupported. Since the beginning of the political crisis, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation has issued four different statements on Macedonia blaming the West, and describing the situation as one more coloured

¹⁹ Ibid. 26.

²⁰ The #EUROMETER2015 found out that only 32% of the citizens surveyed trust the government, whilst the trust in the Public Prosecution and the Judiciary is at only 17% i.e. 17.2%. On a different research project of MCET, asked how they assess the institutions, with 1 being the lowest, and 5 being the highest the participants in the survey assessed the work of all three branches of government at the lowest, while the Government has actually the lowest public support with the average mark of 1.55. The Government was assessed with 1, by 55% of participants. The second lowest is the Parliament with an average mark of 1.66 and 50% of the participants assessing its work with 1, and the third lowest is for the Judiciary with an average of 1.72 and 44.4% of the participants assessing its work with 1. For the three lowest there was no one to assess their work with 4 or 5. On the higher end were the EU, NATO and Civil Society, with average marks of 2.82, 2.81, and 3.18 respectively.

revolution. These are also the first four statements issued on Macedonia since its independence twenty-five years ago.

Russia has no strategic interest in Macedonia, and Macedonia has never had its strategic interest to be involved or related to Russia. However, the interest of Russia is to slow-down the expansion of NATO and Western influence in what is now considered as an interest sphere, while Macedonia's, i.e. the Macedonia's Government interest is to obtain some foreign support and at any cost to its statehood, democracy and long-term stability. Therefore, the involvement of Russia should be seen as an impediment to further democratic transition and to EU Accession.

2.7 Ticking bomb

The general support for EU Accession although at a historically lower end is still rather high and prevents the ruling party and the Government from completely dropping out of the process. Last time I checked all parties have as their priority EU and NATO Accession, while the Government has listed the same as Strategic Priority within its Working Programme 2014-2018.²¹ However, crossing from party statements and Government Programmes, one can note a big difference within public perception and support of EU Accession. Discrepancies exist between the different ethnic communities and the supporters of different political parties.

Support for EU Accession is greatest with the Albanian and the Roma, whilst the support among the Macedonian stands nearly at the average, with the Serbian having the lowest support. To explain the discrepancy, we need to go back to recent history, or education, traditions, family relations and stereotypes. Having been part of a conflict, where the International Community and the EU in particular had significant involvement, and through which Kosovo gained its independence it is only normal that support for EU Accession is highest with Albanians and lowest with Serbs. Add to this the fact

²¹ Working Programme of the Government 2014-2018, Strategic Priority N. 2: *Integration of the Republic of Macedonia with NATO and the EU*,

that Albania is already part of NATO and is about to begin accession negotiations with the EU and the conclusion is simple. Albanians living in Macedonia strive to follow unify with their fatherland. Since changing borders is out of the question, that unification could only be achieved if borders are erased or lifted, thus joining the EU is the key, which explains the high level of public support to EU Accession amongst Albanians.

To understand the level of support amongst Macedonians one needs to correlate ethnic to political affiliation as on the two extremes of the political spectrum we note different level of support. The supporters of SDSM are above the national average, in the lower 70s, whereas amongst the supporters of VMRO-DMPNE support for EU Accession is significantly lower, and nearing the 50% mark. This has to do with government supported propaganda of the last years and the stalemate when it comes to the EU Accession Process of Macedonia. Furthermore, anti-EU and anti-Western sentiments were strengthened with the strengthening of the political crisis and the publication of the Priebe Report²² and the EC Country Report (The Economist, 2013) of 2016 stating that the country is experiencing "State Capture". Finally, the EU was the sponsor and is a strong voice of support for the work of the Special Public Prosecutor, that in the eyes of the average VMRO voter is seen as targeting the VMRO elite, thus both, its sponsors and supporters. as well as the Special Public Prosecutor itself, are totally undesirable. For the Albanian Political field, the political party affiliation does not diminish the support to EU Accession and it is the highest with both, DPA and DUI.

Should the crisis continue, with the inconsistency in the EU's approach and if we have in mind the development and the propaganda so far, it can be expected that EU Accession will be postponed indefinitely leading to the Albanian feeling disenchanting by their political representatives and disenfranchised from the Government and opening up the doors to the potential of a new explosive phase for Macedonia.

²² Report of the Senior Experts' Group on Systemic Rule of Law Issues Relating to the Interception of Communications.

2.8 *The fuse is still burning*

The early parliamentary elections of December 2016 shed some light, but did not bring the clarity that the whole country expected or better said needed. In a situation when the election results are so tight²³ disarming the barrel bomb of the Balkans is not as easy as it seems. This election result neither facilitates the easy and speedy work on the reforms and liberation of the state and institutions, nor it allows for a stable government with wide majority. However, there are, to use the words of DUI, ample opportunities to form a government or operate under this circumstances.

What could be the lesson learnt from the elections is that DUI who at the previous elections was the dominant party of the Albanian block with nearly 150.000 votes has now lost 9 MPs and nearly 70.000 votes and needs to take this into account when deciding on potential coalitions. The diversification of the Albanian block aside, the Social-Democrats were the clear winner, strengthening their election result from the previous cycle, going against all major polls that showed VMRO-DPMNE winning by wide margin, and gaining on some 40-50.000 votes by ethnic Albanians and in regions where the crisis of 2001 occurred.²⁴ This is the first time that a Civic Platform has gained such support and in particular support by the ethnic Albanian. The message is clear, ethnic Albanians dislike the ethnic divides promoted by VMRO-DPMNE and justice, responsibility and rule of law, which are direct preconditions for EU and NATO Accession, thus DUI making a coalition with VMRO-DPMNE would be fatal not just for the party, but also for the country.

²³ At the early Parliamentary Elections 2016 the distribution of mandates in the Parliament was the following: VMRO-DPMNE 51; SDSM 49; DUI 10; BESA 5; Alliance for the Albanians 3; and DPA 2.

²⁴ SDSM won or had a significant result in the villages of Tanushevtsi, Brest and Arachinovo where the crisis of 2001 started or saw the most severe clashes, and had significant results in the municipalities of Chair, Tetovo, Kichevo, Gostivar, etc.

3. Spain-Macedonia: Diplomacy without relations?

Spain is supportive to Macedonia's EU Accession, and its officials have never failed to state the formal diplomatic phrase. However, in the years since Macedonia's EU Accession started, and in particular in the last seven years as the authoritarian regime in Macedonia started fortifying, Spain has continuously failed to put itself into the position of the Pro-European citizens, and support in a significant manner the Europeanisation of Macedonian Society.

In light of the last Spanish Presidency of the EU, Spain's Ambassador-at-large for European Integration Projects, Mr. Carlos Carnero Gonzales, stated that he does not see any objective obstacle to Macedonia's accession. At the end of November 2009 in Madrid, at the Pre-Presidency conference organized by the Royal Institute Elcano,²⁵ within the framework of TEPSA,²⁶ his statement was:

"The future of Macedonia is in the EU. There is no alternative scenario, and there is no Plan B. Macedonia will open up Accession Negotiations. Macedonia will negotiate its membership, and in the end Macedonia will become an EU Member State".

The bilateral relations between Spain and Macedonia are not burdened by an open issue. Both countries suffer from overstretched diplomatic services that are understaffed, underfunded and underequipped. Neither the Spaniards express any true interest for the Macedonians, nor are the Macedonians aware of how much they can benefit from the Spanish experience. More efforts should be put into promoting bilateral cooperation on all levels –culture, education, and civil society– which could improve the image of Macedonia in Spain and promote Spain as a role model society in Macedonia.

Spanish companies have hardly expressed interest for the Western Balkans. Although, there are no particular reasons why Spanish entrepreneurs should not be interested in investing in the Macedonian market,²⁷ where there is obviously an economic opportunity,

²⁵ Real Instituto Elcano.

²⁶ Tepsa.

²⁷ МакСтат база на податоци.

traditionally they focus mainly on Latin America, Morocco and Western Europe. If used wisely to include the Western Balkans region, this focus could expand and prove beneficial for all by linking the region with Latin America and Saharan Africa. Macedonian trade exchange with Spain in the past year had the scope of almost 70 tons of goods, and just above 172 million euros.²⁸

*If Macedonia is the problem, Europe is the answer*²⁹

There are not so many, similarities between Macedonia and Spain, but so many lessons learned that each country could pass to the other. In fact, if we use the famous line of Ortega y Gasset on Spain as the problem of Europe, and apply it to Macedonia we could have the first lesson learned, Macedonia can learn about the basics from the Europeanized Spanish society.³⁰

To expand the horizons, Western Balkan enlargement and the Mediterranean partnership are two parallel processes that could prove to be complementary if steered in the right direction. Macedonia might not be on the Mediterranean, but its main route leads to the Mediterranean and is strongly influenced by the things going on in the wider region. For example, the latest research in the field of

²⁸ According to the data supplied by the Macedonian State Statistical Office, the most exported product from Macedonia to Spain was hot-rolled flat products from iron or non-alloy steel, 600mm or more in width and more than 15mm thick, non-plated and non-coated (*Customs Tariff - 7208 51 20 00*) with more than 10,5 tones. On the other hand, the exported product that brought the biggest value to Macedonian GDP were sets of ignition wiring and other wiring sets for vehicles, planes and sail boats (*Customs Tariff - 8544 30 00 00*) in the total value of nearly 75 MEUROs. Ceramic tiles (*Customs Tariff - 6908 90 91 00*) are the most imported product to Macedonia with import of nearly 85 tons, while the biggest contribution to Spanish GDP comes through the export of deboned pork with approximately 8,6 MEUROs.

²⁹ The famous quotation from the liberal philosopher, writer and Spanish professor "If Spain is the problem, Europe is the solution".

³⁰ In the last century Spain was governed by a dictatorship for more than 40 years, and was a witness of a *coup de état*. It has been the exemplary of an isolated country that managed to turn around its fortunes by joining the EU.

desertification indicates that the eastern part of Macedonia might be faced with the same destiny as Southern Spain.³¹ The fact that Macedonia is a smaller country suffering from the same problem could offer Spain an opportunity to produce immediate results and to prove its leadership skills in combating climate change. The Mediterranean Union and the Southern Axis of the EU will be reinforced with Macedonia's accession, thus providing Spain with an ally for its positions inside the EU.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

This paper argues that Macedonia belongs in the European Union. Furthermore, it argues that the EU has proved as very much involved and supportive of the democratic transition of the country, although at moments due to its inconsistency it has aided and abided the illiberal and authoritarian regime in Macedonia.

The EU and its Member States must not forget the commitments they made to Macedonia, and their vital interest in upholding democracy and what is commonly known as "EU values" in the region despite of the fragmented interest of some EU Member States (Austria and the Visegrad Countries would rather trade democracy for stability and achieve the closure of the Balkan Immigration Route). The "reluctant hegemon", after the Brexit vote, and with the up-coming elections in France and Holland's decision not to run, becomes the only remaining "true leader of the modern liberal-democracy" and is overburdened not only with saving the EURO, but also saving the European Union and democracy too. The power and Global Presence of Germany (The Economist, 2015) remains unquestionable, but the EU wants to become a Global Player and needs to show up as one in its own backyard. Consequently, the Western Balkan countries are gradually straying from their EU path, while the EU as a whole is losing its credibility and valuable leverage. The worst case of all is Macedonia, being in the limbo for seven years, and having lost its status of an electoral democracy.

³¹ UNFCCC, "Трет национален план за климатски промени".

4.1 *For the UE*

One of the main issues is to make irresponsible partners (political actors) to honour the agreements. EU must not refrain from applying both individual pressure and wider country pressure in order to make the partners to take their obligations seriously. On the other hand, what is crucial for the EU leverage is making a set of benefits and incentives that will open for Macedonia once the crisis is resolved.

First, the Priebe Report and the Urgent Reform Priorities must transform into Urgent Rule of Law Action Plan for Macedonia with specific tasks, duties and datelines. The implementation of this Action Plan should be treated as part of the new Approach of the European Commission for early opening of the Pre-Accession Negotiations for Chapter 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights) and Chapter 24 (Justice, Freedom and Security) for Macedonia. This would only endorse the long-standing position of the EC to open the accession talks with Macedonia in a parallel process. The "Rule of Law" Action plan should affect the programming of the IPA II financial framework for assistance of Macedonia's EU accession and direct the assistance for the priorities set-up by the Priebe Report and the Urgent Reform Priorities.

Second, the EU ought to consider establishing a parallel of the EU Rule of Law (Article 7) mechanism for the Enlargement process and the candidate countries. Namely, that system must work to pressure the candidate countries breaching the Rule of Law principle permanently and severely having arrogant political elites refusing to make any concessions on the top of it. The New Approach encompassing democracy, anti-corruption, judiciary and fundamental rights protection will increase the leverage of the EU making it a credible player wielding instruments for implementing its principles in practice.

4.2 *For Spain*

Spain, as a Member State, favours EU "voicing its opinion globally and promoting the common values of peace and security".³² Furthermore, it has always seen its involvement with the EU and EU Policies as an excellent opportunity to promote itself as an important player in external relations giving it a chance to be "visibly European, openly demonstrating an European societal sensibility".³³

Therefore, Spain should revisit its position towards the Balkans by getting more involved in the region and by putting Western Balkans higher on its own Foreign Policy Agenda. This elevation of the involvement should be made equally in all of the WB6 rather than like up until now with Serbia mostly. Speaking on Macedonia directly, Spain should evade making a blank spot on its Foreign Policy Map between Serbia and Greece and adopt a more proactive and more open approach to the country. Additional strengthening to the diplomatic representation in Skopje, both in terms of human and financial resources will be a significant step in this direction. Such a consolidated representation should work on promoting the relations between both countries including the promotion of EU values and support to the Europeanization of Macedonian society.

4.3 *For Macedonia*

Staying in the limbo for too long has proven nearly fatal for Macedonia's EU Accession, this is the moment when such state could be and should be interrupted. The Macedonian Government should explicitly express its Pro-European stance, dedicate time and efforts in transforming the Urgent Reform Priorities into what we advocated previously as Rule of Law Action Plan, and show political will to undertake the crucial reforms for democratic transition.

³² Web-page of the Spanish Government for EU Affairs; Hablemos de Europea.

³³ Índice Elcano de Presencia Global.

Furthermore, Macedonia should strengthen the diplomatic representation in Madrid, both in terms of human and financial resources. Such a consolidated representation should work on promoting the relations between both countries. The Macedonian Government should allocate funds for civil society organisations and think-tanks promoting EU Integration in both Macedonia and Spain by means of applying for joint EU funded projects under the Union Programmes but also under other financial instruments and programmes.

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