

## On nationalism, identity and the foreign policy of Macedonia



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### **Abstract<sup>1</sup>**

In the third decade of our independence, Macedonia needs a new foreign policy. This policy should be a product of the harmonization of the positions of the main political parties in the state. In accordance with the democratic principle, a state interest is not something carved in stone but is whatever the parties formulate as the state interest. By ceasing to formulate the state national interest solely by themselves, the ruling nationalists would achieve the necessary distance between their own political views and the position of the state. Such a strategy would pull the country out of the present dead-end and lead to the formulation of an alternative foreign policy. The same strategy would also pull the governing party itself out of the dead-end it has reached in foreign policy.

**Key words:** nationalism, identity, foreign policy

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This, in short, is our situation: after twenty-two years of independence we have still not achieved the strategic goals of our country as formulated in its foreign policy in 1991—the goals of membership in NATO and the EU. The main reasons for this failure? First, the blockade from Greece, and second, more recently, obstruction from Bulgaria, both countries being member-states of international alliances—NATO and the EU—formed in order to defend the interests of the alliances as a whole and not the individual interests of the member-states. As a small nation that does not have the power to affect the conduct of our neighbours, let alone that of other countries, we therefore have to identify what it is in our conduct that irritates not only our neighbours but also our friends in the world. The answer is clear: it is, above all, our nationalism—i.e., the very same thing that irritates us in the behaviour of our neighbouring states.

I am aware that many people in this country have long denied that there is such a thing as Macedonian nationalism; but I believe that today we can agree that where there is a nation there is also nationalism. It existed in the past when it was forbidden, and it also exists today in democratic conditions.

In fact, during the past two decades, living as free people, we have learned to recognize not only the nationalism of others but also our own nationalism. We are learning, I hope, that in Europe today, nationalism does not pay off as a state policy because its restrictedness and authoritarian character causes conflicts with other political options at home and conflicts with other countries abroad.

One of the practical lessons of the past two decades is that life in a state of freedom for all, life in democracy, has its price. That price is the free articulation of all political ideas, including those we may personally dislike—for it is precisely democracy which gives nationalism the right to express itself, that guarantees my right to express myself. Namely, the right to say that our nationalism is a result of the imagination that there once was a state called Macedonia in the modern sense of the word, the imagination that it was our ethnic territory which our enemies divided in the beginning of the twentieth century...

In fact, whether we like it or not, the concept is identical with that of other Balkan nationalisms, including the Greek *Megali Idea*, the idea of Bulgaria from the Treaty of San Stefano, the idea of Greater Serbia, or of Albanian Ilirida—all products of their corresponding

national romanticisms, which by definition are not concerned with reality. And reality says that such state-constructions of nationalistic minds did not exist as modern political-territorial units and were certainly not filled with homogenous, “ethnically pure” populations. Reality also shows that the attempt to replace present “political” borders with “historical” ones leads to war, as has been so clearly proved by two world wars, numerous wars in Asia and Africa, as well as the wars in former Yugoslavia.

How has our modern nationalism appeared? I shall share with you an interesting experience from the latest history of Greek-Macedonian relations. In the first five years of our independence, Greece was in a strenuous search for an enemy on our side of the border. With the ideas that President Gligorov and I advocated, they could not build a case for dispute, since it takes two sides for a dispute to be initiated. I remember that their Consul General in Skopje confirmed my suspicions that his country wanted to provoke a conflict between the two nationalisms when he did not find any other argument to answer my question as to what it was that Greece could object to in Macedonian policy, except to say that there were other people with different ideas in the Republic of Macedonia. Those others that the Greek state waited for were the political representatives of Macedonian nationalism, the rivals of Greek nationalism. They waited for the idea of a United Macedonia—an idea which had been kept under control by the previous communist regime—to reappear on the surface so that this would be proof of our irredentism. They waited, they provoked, and what they wished for transpired. Thus, Macedonian nationalism, that powerful tool for ethnic mobilization and national cohesion and, not less importantly, for election victory, has been institutionalized in conditions of democracy.

This nationalism has been institutionalized, so to speak, forever. Namely, for as long as there is democracy, there will always be nationalists, there will always be liberals, there will always be socialists, fascists and everything else. Our non-democratic political tradition does not let us adjust easily to these new facts of life. I think that one of the reasons for the strong animosity apparent in our domestic policy is due to the fact that the political parties in Macedonia have not yet learned the lesson that, in conditions of democracy, the other political option is here, so to speak, “forever”. If that is so, however, if all political options have the right to exist, then democracy in the long run has the task of teaching us to first stop fighting, and then to start being patient, then to tolerate each other, and finally to respect one another. As far as the

latter goes, it seems that, as the situation is at the moment, we will have to wait for quite a while longer. I am thinking that when, in the future, the political options, liberated from their own extremism, will truly respect each other, we will be up for another surprise. Namely, we will learn that the notorious “Macedonian syndrome of self-destruction”, or whatever that curse is called, was nothing but the absence of a “democratic state of mind” among ourselves, the Macedonians.

Now that we have our own country, the interests of other states do not directly impinge on our people living on the borders of the stronger Balkan countries, so there are no historical reasons for such bloody hostilities except those that are a product of greedy human nature to control all that can be controlled. But there is a democratic cure for that, too. Today, pluralistic democracy poses a difficult task for politicians: through disputes and a conflicting and complicated process of adjustment of the interests of various political options, to produce policies that will defend the state interests in the best way. For, in conditions of democracy, a state interest is whatever the political parties manage to formulate as a state interest through the democratic process. Thus the attempt to rule in an authoritarian way in conditions of democracy is condemned in the long run to failure, sometimes even with personal consequences to the autocrats. The times of a one-party system are over, as are the times since the beginning of the nineties when unconsolidated democracy enabled the formulation and implementation of foreign policy in accordance with the deliberations of the President and the Minister of Foreign Affairs. Today, in conditions of multi-party democratic competition, the role of the President, the Prime Minister and the Minister of Foreign Affairs is to conciliate the political diversity of opinions at home so that the state speaks in one voice in international affairs. That is an extremely challenging task even in the most advanced democracies.

Does this mean that the successful democratic process is a cure for nationalism as well? Yes, it does. For if we enable the democratic system of Macedonia to function successfully, if we have a civilized dialogue of patriots on both sides of the dispute, then the final product—the country’s foreign policy—will take into consideration all interests, arguments and political positions, and will not be identical with any single party’s views. Thus, for example, the programme of a certain party may be that Macedonia extends all the way to India, just as the programme of the Indian nationalist Janata Party states that nearly all of Asia is, in fact,

“historical” India, but the state policies of Macedonia and India will be something else. Because only with such conduct can we produce for our country what each of us wants as human beings—security and wellbeing. In today’s political terms, that means membership of NATO and the EU.

Let me repeat: until we start having a civilized dialogue between the parties in Macedonia we will not have a solution for the great problem we face, i.e., the problem with Greece concerning the name. The optimism that we need only stick tight to our constitutional name and that some external mediator will bring an acceptable proposal has no basis in reality, but only in itself, yet this is the foreign policy which has been practiced since 1993—optimism of a Balkan type. The issue demands our engagement because in the background there is a very serious identity dispute, both with Greece regarding the ancient past and with Bulgaria regarding more recent history.

Just look at the blindness of nationalism! Although the dispute itself, in which three sides participate, is the best illustration that there is no single truth about Macedonia, all Balkan nationalisms, refusing to see what is in front of their noses, claim the exact opposite: that only their truth about Macedonia exists. In this situation, one side is pushing us away from itself, and the other pulls us towards itself. But the former would do anything for the latter to fail in their intentions. Last week at a round table meeting in Skopje, pointing out the disagreements between Macedonia and Bulgaria concerning “history and identity”, the Bulgarian Ambassador asked us to dedicate ourselves to “what unites us”. The Greeks, on the other hand, as we know, ask us to do the opposite—to dedicate ourselves to what divides us. Perhaps with a wise policy we will manage, first together with our neighbours, to celebrate our uniqueness, and then to celebrate what is common to us.

Concerning the domestic public, our policy faces the most difficult task—one much more difficult than that our neighbouring countries face, although the task of the politicians from Greece and Bulgaria is not easy either. The dominant feeling among us Macedonians, and I have said this before, is that Greek conduct in the past looked like an attempt to destroy our existence (“they took our land”), while today it looks like an attempt, as Immanuel Kant would say, “to destroy our existence as a moral personality” (“now they want to take our name”). Because it is a fact, to continue with Kant’s quotation, that a state is “a society of people that no one has the

right to command or have at its disposal except the state itself... A state is a tree with its own roots.”

How, then, can we reach a solution? One of the creators of Greek policy towards Macedonia, alluding to our nationalism, says that it is not the name but the ideology hiding behind it that is the true danger to his state. Of course, he means the ideology of United Macedonia, the divided fatherland, etc. Can we then give up our nationalism in exchange for the name? The answer is that we cannot. We have already said that where there is a nation there is also nationalism, and in democracy people have the right to freely express their political views. Thus nationalism is a legitimate political option in a democracy. What we will find out sooner or, in our case obviously later, is that nationalism does not pay off as a state policy. Such awareness should lead to changes in the attitudes of the leadership of the nationalist parties, which may become more moderate. People learn, after all, from the mistakes of the past and change or at least moderate their political views. The example of Serbia with regard to Kosovo shows that it is not the people but the leaderships of nationalist parties that must turn their back on their own radical nationalist variant and lead them in another political direction.

The accusations of appeasement directed towards people with more moderate political views is not justifiable: in a hypothetical world of liberal people on both sides of the border, those on the Greek side would be ashamed to force us to change our name, and we, on the Macedonian side, would not be ashamed to say that, just as our language, our basic identity is Slavic. So it is not the attitudes of liberal people but the nationalistic political options with their irreconcilable positions in Greece and Macedonia that point to the necessity of compromise. Such a compromise would be adopted by the parliaments of both countries and, in that way, would open the process of reconciliation between the Greek and the Macedonian people.

Nationalists, Orwell wrote, have “the habit of assuming that human beings can be classified like insects”. Personally I do not have such a habit, but our conflicting nationalisms impose precisely this task—to classify ourselves according to our sense of identity. Facing this task, we can still claim that all that has happened above the ground and has been buried in Macedonian soil is part of our history, but we have to be careful where in history we set the foundations of our national identity. Namely, it will not do to build where we know we will be assailed. I think that in this triangle of “love and hatred” when we, in fact, are searching to share

history with Greece, and Bulgaria demands that we share history with it, we have first of all to find our own secure historical grounds. My personal position is that our nation's and our identity's own secure historical ground is the one which is closest to the objective historical truth: that of the revivalists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century from the time of the last European province of the Ottoman Empire—Macedonia—through Misirkov all the way to ASNOM. I see the way out in uniting the political forces around this interpretation of our national history as a state policy, leaving the rest to our stories, our mythology or the programmes of various associations and parties. I think that this is how we can escape the triangle that hampers further affirmation of our nation as a member of two powerful alliances, NATO and the EU. Because, as we can see, the regional orbits of interest are not fully denied to us only because our neighbours are in the Euro-Atlantic political orbit. Reason tells us that the Republic of Macedonia should break away from the Balkan orbit created by the partnership and rivalry between Greece and Bulgaria and enter the Euro-Atlantic orbit.

These highly emotional issues—the name of the state, the nation, the language—cannot be resolved by majority votes in parliament; nor should they be used for mutual undermining amongst the parties in Macedonia. For if the party that is outvoted kidnaps the theme and takes it out onto the street, it will cause serious consequences to the stability of the state. It depends mostly on the politicians whether they will take it into this direction. However, this requires debate in circumstances of stability. It will be bad if solutions are forced upon us due to an internal or international crisis. For the Government to adopt this unpopular decision, a consensus must be reached among all significant players in the Macedonian political scene regarding the nature of the compromise.

Dialogue and democracy are synonymous. The dialogue for building internal consensus concerning a new foreign policy may be the beginning of the construction of our new nationalism, which obliges us to love Macedonia the way it is, multi-ethnic, and not the way the nationalists dream that it should be, ethnically pure. What is the relevance of this to foreign policy? It is most direct. Namely, such a domestic policy would be our best foreign policy, since it would have the unreserved support of the US and the EU. We live, after all, in the times of the American Barack Hussein Obama and the German Mesut Özil!

### **Summary**

In the third decade of our independence, Macedonia needs a new foreign policy. This policy should be a product of the harmonization of the positions of the main political parties in the state. In accordance with the democratic principle, a state interest is not something carved in stone but is whatever the parties formulate as the state interest. By ceasing to formulate the state national interest solely by themselves, the ruling nationalists would achieve the necessary distance between their own political views and the position of the state. Such a strategy would pull the country out of the present dead-end and lead to the formulation of an alternative foreign policy. The same strategy would also pull the governing party itself out of the dead-end it has reached in foreign policy.

In democratic conditions, all political options are present, so to speak, forever: nationalists, liberals, socialists, fascists... Only the absence of democratic awareness allows us to imagine we can ignore these facts of democratic life — ignorance that contributes to the fierceness of inter-party conflicts. Here there is typically an inclination to destroy rival political options. In this way, however, democracy is also destroyed.

Democracy and dialogue are synonymous. If we enable our political system to function as a dialogue of patriots on all sides of the dispute, our foreign policy will be a successful synthesis of all interests, arguments and political positions, no longer identical with the ideas of any single party.

The conflict between Macedonia and Greece is a conflict of two nationalisms. Thus it is not the position of liberal people but the position of two irreconcilable nationalisms, and this points to the necessity of a compromise that can be supported in the parliaments of both countries and that will lead to reconciliation between the two nations.

We in Macedonia need to conduct a strategic debate with ourselves. First, we should not lay the foundations of our identity on historical grounds which neighbouring countries consider to be their own, and in which they have the majority of world historiography on their side. Of course, we can still claim all that is above and below Macedonian ground as part of our history, and this is a true and fair claim. But we cannot establish the foundations of our identity where we know we will be assailed. Further, there must be a difference between state policy and the ideas

and programmes of political parties or civil associations, which, in a democracy, have the right to believe whatever they want—even if that means to love and glorify Alexander the Great.

Therefore we should find our own historical grounds on which we can establish the foundations of our identity without giving up all that is a part of the broader history of Macedonia. My position is that this is the line of revivalists from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, through Misirkov to ASNOM.

Fortunately for us, it is the present and not the past which decides on the existence of a nation. And the present shows that the foundations of the modern Macedonian state have survived the storm of the bloody disintegration of the Yugoslav federation and the two-decades-long dispute with Greece over identity. As far as history is concerned, we should not be afraid of the objective historical truth: it tells a completely different and more humane story than those told by Balkan nationalisms. Nothing in the past can deny the fact that we are a nation today.