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On the project

Euroscepticism and the European Parliament elections in 2014, the EU's Neighbourhood in light of the Ukraine crisis and power relations in the EU: The EU-28 Watch project is mapping out discourses on these issues in European policies all over Europe. Research institutes from all 28 member states as well as Iceland, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey give overviews on the discourses in their respective countries.

This survey was conducted on the basis of a questionnaire that has been elaborated in March 2014. Most of the 33 reports were delivered in June 2014. This issue and all previous issues are available on the EU-28 Watch website: www.EU-28Watch.org.

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Macedonia

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1. Euroscepticism and European Parliament elections

Ljupcho Petkovski

European elections in the shadow of the Macedonian elections

The electoral campaigns for European elections overlapped with the campaign for national parliamentary elections in Macedonia, and the decision of the opposition not to recognize the results of national elections describing them as rigged. Being preoccupied with the national political crisis, the elections for the European Parliament received no attention from either the Government or the opposition. More importantly, the prospect of EU membership was not discussed in the national electoral campaign, which came as no surprise but rather as a trend that commenced in 2008.

The electoral campaigns for the European Parliament elections received some attention in the media. However, the reports were superficial and did not touch upon the political programs of main candidates and political parties. The media were extensively reporting on the opinion polls that predicted a strong rise of eurosceptic and populist parties especially in France and the United Kingdom. Media commentators pointed out that national, not European issues dominated the campaign in all major member-states, which is a symptom of ambivalence of young European voters towards European politics.

Hidden euroscepticism surfaces in a time of crisis!

No overt euroscepticism exists amongst Macedonian political elites. On the contrary, and despite the fact that there is no real prospect of membership unless the bilateral naming dispute with Greece is solved, there is a strong declarative consensus around the statement “there is no alternative to EU membership”. However, the Government is often criticized by the opposition, civil society and some media for instigating anti-European and anti-western sentiment.

In most of the cases this criticism seems justified. Some media professionals, analysts and intellectuals, who are seen as messengers of official policy in Macedonia’s highly polarized and controlled media landscape, often advocate that Macedonia should reconsider its relations with the ‘ever-intruding EU’. In the context of the Ukrainian crisis, these voices became even more visible. The EU is often blamed for having double standards towards Macedonia, and for being too supportive of Greece’s position in the name dispute.

Government-sponsored or not, this discourse appears to have paid off in decreasing the otherwise consensual popular support to EU membership. According to the EUROSTAT’s Eurobarometer, in autumn 2013 only 50 percent of respondents in Macedonia reported that membership in the EU would be a good thing for the country. Although the figure seems relatively high and absolutely highest in candidate countries, back in 2007 it was much higher (80 percent) and there is a worrisome, stable diminishing trend. A survey conducted recently by the Macedonian Centre for European Training only reaffirms this trend in the political disappointment. This survey demonstrated that nearly half of the

respondents (47 percent) thought that Macedonian political elites should seek for an alternative development model outside of the EU, whereas 42 percent reported that EU is the best alternative for Macedonia. These figures are significant if one keeps in mind the strong division between ethnic Macedonians (55 percent) and ethnic Albanians (only 17 percent) in favour of alternative development model outside the EU without specifying what such an “alternative model” entails.

“Eurosceptic earthquake” and effects on enlargement

Representatives of government and opposition have not made significant comments on the outcome and turnout of European Parliament elections. The only high-level politician who reflected on the outcome of the elections is Fatmir Besimi, the Deputy Prime Minister in charge of European Integration. In a round table discussing the outcome of the elections and its impact on the Enlargement Policy, Besimi interpreted the success of eurosceptic parties as a reflection of the deep political, economic and security crisis in Europe. Acknowledging the fact that anti-enlargement forces have gained momentum in the European Parliament, he assured nevertheless that EU membership will remain the top priority of the Macedonian government.

Media reporting and comments intensified after the elections. The results of the elections and the rise of euroscepticism, i.e. the “eurosceptic earthquake” were interpreted as a punishment by the European voters imposed on the alienated politicians that have unsuccessfully dealt with the crisis. It was also accounted for as a clear sign that changes are about to happen in the way the European Union functions. On the other hand, journalists coming from the small, but increasingly vocal anti-European camp in Macedonia cynically noticed that the election results are a clear sign that Euro-enthusiasm only exists among Macedonia’s liberal elite, despite the fact that “fascists have occupied Europe”.

NGO representatives and experts commented on the results of the elections mainly with a view to possible changes in EU Enlargement policy. In general, commentators predicted an inevitable change in the way the European Union deals with candidate countries in terms of increased conditionality and a stricter focus on accession criteria.

2. The EU’s Neighbourhood

Andreja Stojkovski

Pale Slavic Sentiment for Russia but...

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.

In his inaugural speech delivered on May 12th 2014, President Gjorge Ivanov, speaking on the International Community and its role, said: “...any violation of the international law today means undermining of the project of nations united for the good of all” (Ivanov). Later on, in the same speech, speaking on Macedonia’s relations with the international community he said: “The Republic of Macedonia will not be limited to the region and Europe only.” In spite of his diminished influence in the international positioning of the country and in the relations with other countries and organisations, these two sentences depict the current situation in the country. The country’s leadership cannot depart from its strategic objective to eventually join NATO and the European Union. However, the “Greek veto” is the perfect excuse for its firm grip on the freedom of expression, civil liberties and critically

thinking civil society organizations, so any criticism is treated as pressure over the “name issue”. These shortcomings to democracy and rule of law have recently been identified by the foreign media as “small” dictatorship. Prime Minister Gruevski has never openly backed the Pro-Russian sentiment, but that is understandable as he cannot “defect from” the strategic partnership with NATO and the special cooperation agreement with the United States.

Nevertheless, there are many who share Russia’s views on democracy. One of the prominent pro-governmental eurosceptic journalist, Mirka Velinovska, asked in her columns: “What have the EU and the USA ever done for us!?” (Nova Makedonija daily newspaper). The situation could best be described through the words of another analyst, Zoran Dimitrovski: “His [Prime Minister Gruevski’s] political habitus is that of a person suffering multiple personality disorder – he has his heart with Putin, and his reason, at least for now until they dissolve, with NATO and the EU” [FOKUS weekly political magazine].

Ukrainian crisis as a litmus test

The “war” in Ukraine became an ideological and geostrategic litmus test for Macedonia’s future position regarding its relations with Russia, but also regarding the EU’s relations with the Eastern Partnership countries. Macedonia could not evade officially positioning itself in the UN as opposing the annexation of the Crimea by Russia, but it failed to follow suit with the EU on the sanctions imposed to Moscow.

This schizophrenic situation is due to many reasons, but mostly to the fact that the people have, for a long time now, been served with news on the economic renaissance of Russia and the steady growth of its power on the international stage. While Russian business has not massively invested in Macedonia, its capital is mainly distributed in the mining, energy and oil sectors; however some of the Putin-affiliated oligarchs coming with their “Russian” understanding of democracy are getting ever closer to Prime Minister Gruevski and serve his regime. Therefore, it was to be expected that the ruling party’s propaganda would criticize the ambivalence of the European Union towards Ukraine, present it as yet another proof for the Union’s inevitable dissolution and the birth of a new world order, and advocate “the replacement of the Euro-Atlantic integration”.

Our hearts are with Prime Minister Erdogan!

Replacement of Euro-Atlantic integration is being advocated through another “success story”: Turkey of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Mainstream media and the ruling party propaganda are constantly depicting Turkey as the economic giant and the symbol of success without EU integration. In their columns and TV shows, prominent pro-governmental eurosceptic journalist have never failed to praise the economic model of Turkey and indicate that it has been achieved with the country being far from acceding to the EU.

The only problem with this narrative is that it fails to mention the clear gaps in the regional development in Turkey, and the fact that there obviously are big differences between Turkey and Macedonia. However, it will be more than difficult to get that message through to the ordinary citizen, as Turkish investments in the country are very strong and rather well promoted. In addition, according to viewers’ ratings, the Turkish-produced “soap operas” are the most popular shows and are taking up much of the time on all TV stations, thus wielding immense cultural influence.

The strength or the closeness of this relation is perhaps best explained through the words of Prime Minister Erdogan that the Turks and the Macedonians are brothers or through the sympathy that Macedonia’s President Ivanov feels for Prime Minister Erdogan in his dealings with externally

supported protesters at Istanbul's Gezi Park. Such public statements go completely in contrast with the impressions and public positions of all the democratic and liberal structures in the EU. However, in Macedonia, Erdogan's regime is quite often referred to, directly or indirectly, as a successful model of "economic development" without democracy or without EU.

Links:

- Anadolu Agency, [Macedonian President extends support to PM Erdogan](#), 4 July 2013.
- Andreas Ernst, [Nikola Gruevski: Der kleine Diktator](#), 23 April 2014.
- Kremlin.ru, [Meeting with President of Macedonia Gjorge Ivanov](#), 18 June 2010.
- Yilan, [President Ivanov at Iftar dinner with Turkish PM Erdogan](#), 3 September 2012.
- President of the Republic of Macedonia, [Inauguration speech by President Ivanov in the Assembly of the Republic of Macedonia](#), 12 May 2014.

3. Power relations in the EU

Bojan Marichikj

Germany - the leader and ruler of Europe

Ever since the personal and political role of the German Chancellor Angela Merkel has grown in European politics, the public discourse in Macedonia perceives Germany as a key player on the EU political and economic court. This could be easily recognized in the manner the pro-governmental media covered the three main events in the last several months: Merkel being elected to her third term in the German federal elections in September 2013; Germany's specific role in the Ukrainian crisis and the role of German political actors in the aftermath of the European Parliament elections.

As for the third electoral victory of the Christian-Democratic Union in September 2013, conservative circles in the country, which account for most of the public discourse, interpret this as a firm pro-right-wing affiliation in Europe. Hence, in their view, the strong position of the ruling VMRO-DPMNE only indicates that Macedonia politically aligns with the right-wing wave in Europe. On the other hand, the opposition Social-democratic Union of Macedonia and the left-wing media expressed their pleasure and hope stemming from the "Grand coalition" of Merkel's political party with the German Social Democrats. They have actually placed their hope in the new German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier – experienced Social Democrat and former leader of the German SPD. This situation caused optimism in Macedonia that the EU will not be so strict towards Macedonia regarding the name issue resolution as a pre-condition for opening the accession talks. Nonetheless, as time goes by, all the actors realize that such optimism should not be additionally fuelled.

As regards the Ukrainian crisis, the Germans' firm economic pressure towards Russia (excluding Russia of this year's G8 summit) and the efforts for peaceful resolution of the conflict makes Germany one of the most reasonable players of the game. However, the rather independent position of Germany in comparison to the other Western European countries, coupled with the ambivalent position of the EU institutions, gives the impression that the EU does not speak with one voice and that the German voice dominates the European choir.

Finally, there was a strong echo in Macedonia in the aftermath of the European elections. Namely, the conservative incumbent circles have stressed the rise of the populist right-wing parties such as *Front National* in France or *Golden Dawn* in Greece. In the same tone, the left-wing structures emphasized the success of *Syriza* in Greece but simultaneously the argument popped up that the pro-EU political groups (European People's Party, Party of European Socialists, Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for

Europe and Greens) make up the vast majority of the European Parliament. Either way, both main political, media and analytic blocs agreed that Angela Merkel is the indisputable winner of the European elections. Hence, considering her key role in the debate on the candidate for the post of European Commission President as well as her successful remedial role in the European economic crisis, she completely deserves the epithet “Queen of Europe” (Makfaks Independent Agency). Such discourse received additional tailwind when the major Macedonian media published the story that Forbes Magazine ranked Angela Merkel the most powerful woman in the World.

Austerity? What is that?

The issue of public spending in Macedonia has risen to the top of the political agenda. Since 2006, while the incumbent Government has been in power, the public budget has increased by 130 percent and most of the budget items concern institutional costs, social transactions and public investments in less productive purposes considered by the European Commission in 2011 as a “beautification of the capital.” This project, a landmark of the incumbent Government, took several years of intensive investments in new venues for public institutions, cultural institutions (museums and theatres), monuments and churches. Its total cost was never determined although the opposition political parties initiated parliamentary hearings and critical NGOs submitted numerous requests for free access to public information. In this light, the Governmental policy promoted increased public investments for stimulating growth as a preferred policy whereas the opposition proposed intensive austerity measures and redirecting public funds to social transactions for targeting poverty.

This national debate reflected the European debate on “austerity vs. growth”. The anti-EU conservative circles usually use the European Federation of Unions’ protests in Brussels and the bitter effects of the economic crisis and austerity measures in Greece as an illustration of what detrimental effects the austerity measures might have. Some of the pro-governmental eurosceptic journalists (such as Mirka Velinovska or Ivica Bocevski, “Nova Makedonija” daily magazine) suggest that the EU will never fully recover from the crisis, which means that in a multi-polar world Macedonia must not stop searching for options. On the other hand, some of the pro-European journalists (such as Erol Rizaov or Ljupco Popovski, “Utrinski vesnik” daily magazine) claim that the EU must go back to its roots of common values (democracy, rule of law, human rights etc.) in order to overcome the crisis and find a new impetus for development.

UK out, EU down!

The possibility of a UK exit from the EU is only the last piece of the mosaic called “EU in crisis”. Given the fact that Macedonia is at a dead-end regarding EU accession, mostly due to the name issue with Greece, any example that reveals the internal political and economic crisis in the EU is welcomed by the majority for several reasons. First, this proves that Macedonia is not the only “ill” partner of the EU. On the contrary, Macedonia appears to be one of the least problematic especially when compared to the UK, Greece or Hungary. Second, according to the right-wing eurosceptics this crisis indicates that the EU is not a homogeneous structure speaking with a single voice and embracing collective values. In contrast, the EU represents a myriad of cultures, socio-political and economic systems that are not necessarily unified. Therefore, eurosceptic prime ministers such as Cameron or Orban are perceived as champions of the ‘new Europe’. Moreover, the immense success of Nigel Farage’s UK Independence Party (UKIP) in the European elections was depicted as additionally undermining the EU and strengthening the eurosceptic camp.

Some intellectuals predict the end of the EU if the UK succeeds in seceding. However, some left-wing analysts make clear the relation between the UK’s threat to leave EU and the Scottish threat to leave UK. In their words, most likely none of these things will happen and the UK will be once again marked

as the “awkward partner” of the EU. In this line, some media representatives quote the analysis of European Commission Vice-President Viviane Reding for the Brussels-based European Political Newspaper “New Europe” that the “UK would lose influence outside EU” (Reding) because it would stay linked with the EU single market and continue to be bound by its rules just without influence in their drafting.

Links:

- NEOnline, [Reding: UK would lose influence outside EU](#), 17 February 2014