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## **ROZHOVOR**

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## INTERVIEW ON THE REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA WITH ZHIDAS DASKALOVSKI

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Mr. Zhidas Daskalovski holds a Ph.D. from the Political Science Department, Central European University. He has published numerous scholarly articles on politics in the Southeast European region, as well as co-edited books including: *Understanding the War in Kosovo* (Frank Cass: London, 2003) and *Ten Years after the Ohrid Framework Agreement: Lessons (to be) Learned from the Macedonian Experience* (CRPM and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung: Skopje 2012). A professor and one of the most prominent political scientists in the country, Daskalovski is Director of the Council of Europe supported by the School of Public Policy “Mother Theresa”. Dr. Daskalovski was the 2008 *Young Scientist of the Year* of the Macedonian Academy of Science and one of the *Distinguished Persons of Bitola* of the University of Kliment Ohridski. He is also the recipient of a number of distinguished research fellowships including the Lord Dahrendorf Fellowship at St. Antony’s College at Oxford University, the School of Slavonic and East European Studies Macedonian Studies Fellowship, and the Social Science Research Council / Ethnobarometer Fellowship at the University of North Carolina. He has written Macedonia country reports for Freedom House / Nations in Transit, Open Budget Index, Global Integrity Report, Bertelsmann Transformation Index, UNDP People-Centred Analysis, and UN Human Development Report. His expertise is prominent in the general field general policy analysis, while he focuses particularly on decentralization, democratization, ethnicity, and multicultural issues. Dr. Daskalovski has gained thorough policy-research experience in his work for the Center for Research and Policy Making, War Torn Societies Project (WSP), Local Government Initiative, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) and the European Stability Initiative. He was the Chief Advisor to Mr. New Democracy’s leader Imer Selmani in Macedonia’s 2009 presidential and local elections and to the president of Macedonia’s Green Party (DOM) in the 2013 local elections.

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*The Republic of Macedonia is a small country in the Central Balkans which, in today’s political and economic terms, is on the periphery of Europe. Despite this fact, the country appears very often in world media coverage – relations between Macedonians and Albanians, the long lasting name dispute with Greece, the wire-tapping scandal, or the refugee crisis. Media content often fabricates the image of the country as a troublesome one. Is the media’s picture actually worse than the reality of the situation?*

What differentiates Macedonia from most European countries is that for some twenty five years its status as an independent state has been continually challenged

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by Greece; and also Albanian nationalism. Moreover, it has recently become part of the geopolitical struggle over influence in the Balkan region between Moscow and Washington D.C. Proximity to the Middle East has also influenced politics due to the current refugee crisis. Traditionally poor and with few natural resources, it faces a big challenge in developing a genuine economic model for growth. Of course the media looks for negative stories, scandals and conflicts, so it does not report on the good economic performance of Macedonia, the ability to steer away from the Yugoslav wars of succession, or to minimize and quickly end its own conflict with the ethnic Albanian guerrillas in 2001.

*Relations between the majoritarian ethnic Macedonian population and the Albanian minority have been one of the country's most serious problems since the beginning of its independence. How would you evaluate the implementation of the Framework Agreement signed in Ohrid in 2001 which helped to end up the conflict between Macedonian security forces and Albanian armed rebels and promised more rights to ethnic Albanians living in the country? Are there still some important issues between Macedonians and Albanians that are unresolved?*

The so-called Ohrid Framework Agreement envisioned a series of political and constitutional reforms aiming to accommodate the grievances of the Albanian community, while at the same time preserving the unitary character of the state, thus addressing the concerns of the Macedonian majority who feared a 'federalisation' of the country and its eventual disintegration. These reforms included meeting many of the demands raised by Macedonian Albanians throughout the 1990s and introducing features of consociational power sharing, such as a system of double majorities requiring consent from minorities (labeled 'ethnic communities' by law) represented in parliament to key decisions of the Parliament (the right of minority veto). Other reforms dealt with electing members of the Supreme Court, Judicial Council and the Public Attorney, a substantial degree of municipal decentralization, as well as confidence-building measures to overcome the immediate consequences of the 2001 conflict. The agreement and the constitutional amendments also granted official status to languages spoken by more than twenty per cent of the population. Furthermore, the agreement promoted the policy of achieving equitable and just representation in the public administration at the national and local level as the highest priority, a key reform in the public sector.

Although today Macedonian society is still split along ethnic lines, conflicts have been subdued with the implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement. All Macedonia's political parties share the view that Macedonia should become a member of the EU and NATO. There is a strong consensus among political groups and citizens that a market democracy should be the basis of the country's political system. The process of interethnic consolidation following the Ohrid Framework Agreement is supported by the European Union. Indeed, to ensure that the government fulfills its obligations from the Ohrid Framework Agreement, the EU has made the further integration of Macedonia into Europe conditional on full implementation of the agreement. Promotion of multi-ethnicity, political modera-

tion and tolerance among ethnic groups are widely understood as being important characteristics of Macedonian politics.

There are of course challenges and debates, which is normal in multinational states, and Macedonia is no different than Belgium or Spain. There are new and different demands posed by ethnic Albanian politicians, consideration of which has so far been refused by Macedonian political leaders – for example, introducing a budget which would take into consideration the numerical strengths of the two communities and divide the spoils accordingly in different sectors such as education, health, culture, and so on. There are other contentious questions, but the point is that after 2001 and OFA, internal conflict has been ruled out.

*However, Albanians in Macedonia are not unified in their goals. Their political elites run several parties and apart from ad hoc achievements, they are not able to establish a grand coalition, or pre- or post-electoral coalitions. Why?*

Ethnic Albanian parties are led by politicians who need to cater to their own interests and the interests of their constituencies. The “grand questions” were solved in 2001, and the international community firmly supports the integrity of Macedonia and its territorial borders, as they are in the Balkans, so there is no need or time to have a unified front against Macedonian politicians and state.

*What about Albanian extremism or separatism? Does it really exist as a serious security threat?*

Albanian extremism or separatism is stronger in Kosovo, where it had (or still has) institutional support and legacy. The whole 2001 conflict for example was imported from there; it was not an autochthonous Macedonian affair. There were many Albanians from Macedonia who fought in the war in Kosovo; there were even some leaders, or people who founded the KLA, like Ali Ahmeti, who did not get any spoils. There were guns; the border was porous; there were also some radicals ready to fight in Macedonia. So, this combination brought the war in 2001. There were also the smugglers; you cannot rule out their involvement. It’s always better for them to have an unstable situation, where they can smuggle more guns, heroin, and women, than in a stable and peaceful situation. Today Ahmeti is part of the system and would avoid destabilization of Macedonia as this would hurt the economy and therefore his electoral prospects.

*Other minorities live in Macedonia, such as Serbs, Turks, Vlachs, Bosniaks, Roma people and others. What are the relations between ethnic Macedonians and other minorities? And did the relations improve or worsen after the Ohrid Framework Agreement was signed?*

Relations between ethnic Macedonians and Orthodox minorities, Serbs or Vlachs are very good, as there are few cultural differences between these ethnic groups and Macedonians. Muslim Bosniaks are seen as a bit more distant group, although relations are also cordial. The Roma however, regardless of whether they are Muslim, Orthodox, or non-believers, are a different category in the eyes of ordinary

Macedonians. There is a significant level of avoidance of contact with Roma, especially as they live in specific localities in the cities. Beyond ethnic distance, this is also a class issue, as most Roma are poor. Middle-class Roma might be better accepted, although some distance prevails toward them as well. Relations among communities have only marginally improved after the Ohrid Framework Agreement was signed, but there is greater awareness that minorities need to take a bigger role in public administration duties than before.

*Probably the most serious crisis since the beginning of independence erupted last year, known as the “wiretapping scandal”, and it has been a dispute between major Macedonian opposition leftist and major governmental right-wing political parties, which are traditionally large enemies. Could you summarize the issue and what was the major consequence of the wiretapping scandal?*

The opposition got hold of secretly taped conversations of government officials. Whether they were obtained through “acts of patriotism by concerned members of the secret service” (the version of the opposition) or through “treason and cooperation with a foreign secret service” (the version of the ruling party), these audio tapes were played to the public (via internet and even public broadcastings at a Concert Hall, in front of a party building, and so on) in a series of instances throughout the winter and the spring. The tapes indicate government wrongdoings, some more, some less convincingly. Some of the content related to political management techniques and/or party management, especially during campaigns. While the opposition commented as if the indications heard in the tapes were conclusive evidence of criminal activities and that therefore the government should immediately resign, the ruling party disputed the content, claiming different illegally recorded conversations very deliberately collated together to make audacious claims which have nothing to do with reality and certainly are not evidence of criminal wrongdoings. Since some of the tapes included private conversations of politicians and their spouses or between politicians of different genders, or gossiping between politicians and journalists, the whole release of the tapes had a surreal soap-opera feeling where one longed for more details about the private life of concerned politicians. Among many in Macedonia, a widespread ‘sense of impunity’ of VMRO-DPMNE and DUI officials exists, amplified by a long-standing absence of alternation in government. On the other hand, the opposition does not convey trust among the citizens, who feel that their motives for releasing the tapes are not exactly to fight for democracy but for power.

*Has the wiretapping scandal uncovered the problem of media freedom in Macedonia? According to the World Press Freedom Index of Reporters without Borders, Macedonia was in position 34 in 2009, but in 2014 sank to 123<sup>rd</sup> between Mali and Angola. What has happened? Is the situation so serious*

In Macedonia, we have an abundance of information and media both traditional and new. There are many different media that report from different political, societal or ethnic points of view. The main problem in the media sphere in Macedonia is the low quality of the various outlets combined with the unabated political at-

tempts for control and censorship. How to deal with the first – how to improve the quality of the media – I do not know, there are no easy fixes, but to deal with the second we need overall reforms, not only in the media sector. I will speak more about this in the next answer to the questions.

*Despite the ethnic tensions and sharp cleavage between right-wing and left-wing major Macedonian parties, the citizens usually point out that the most serious problems of the country are unemployment, corruption and poverty. Besides, international organizations often mention the absence of the rule of law. Is this true? And if so, is there any way out of these problems for future stability and prosperity?*

Unemployment, corruption and poverty are typical problems of modern European states, in some to a greater extent, in some to a lesser one. Corruption scandals and mismanagement of public funds occur everywhere in Europe, from the benefits of MPs in Great Britain to Czech, Romanian or Croatian senior politicians. Bulgaria is another example of problematic elite politics, not to mention Italy, Greece or even the Slovenian/Finnish “Patria” military case. What I am getting at is that absence of rule of law in Macedonia is neither an extreme nor isolated case. A way out of this problem is to carry out complex reform and strengthen a number of institutions (the Chief Prosecutor, State Audit Office, Anti-Corruption Commission, the Ombudsman, the Electoral Commission, the Media Supervisory Body and so on) as well as party democratization and an increased level of citizen participation in policy making on a local and, why not, national level, through forums, electronic voting, referenda and the like.

*Let us go now to the international environment. The Republic of Macedonia is still abbreviated in international use as F.Y.R.O.M. There has been a long-lasting dispute between Greece and Macedonia, shortly after Macedonia’s declaration of independence over the symbols and constitution. Until now, for over two decades, this has been an unresolved dispute called ‘the name issue’. Negotiations failed despite many offers and efforts from international mediators, who attempted to find a compromise. In return, Greece have blocked the country’s accession into NATO and the EU, which has frustrated Macedonian politicians and citizens. Can you imagine that any suggestion might be an acceptable solution for both sides?*

Greece is obviously the superior party here, being a member of the EU and NATO. However, the root of the problem is the admittance of Macedonia to the UN under the provisional reference. So, one solution of the problem would be for Macedonia to challenge the legality of the imposed UN designation of “the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” at the International Court in The Hague. Once the Court rules out that this designation was illegally imposed on the Republic of Macedonia, which it was, the country can resort to using its self-designated name within the UN system. This would turn the tables and put pressure on Greece to offer a compromise solution (which I will comment on below), which would be more acceptable to Skopje.

*In this respect, Greece is irritated by the process known in Macedonia over the last decade as “antiquization”, which started around 2006 in the country. Macedonian politicians renamed Skopje Airport to Alexander the Great Airport and began to raise statues of Alexander the Great in Skopje and other cities. A similar policy also applies to other antique symbols. How important are these symbols for Macedonia? And are Macedonians aware that it is provoking neighbouring Greece and adding constraints to any solution on the name issue?*

Macedonians believe in the right to self-determination as far as the name issue is concerned. History and especially ancient history has been used and abused by Balkan states and nations to the benefits of their state and nation building agendas for a long time. In fact, Greece, when established in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, did not take into consideration the legacy of Alexander the Great, and incorporated that part of its history only decades later. The fact that Macedonians nowadays emphasize links with Ancient Macedon cannot be taken as hostile propaganda by Greece unless Athens insists on preserving the purity of their national myth. If Greece recognizes Macedonia as such including the existence of a separate (contemporary) Macedonian nation and language, the Republic of Macedonia could easily acknowledge the Greek historical point of view on the ancient Kingdom of Macedon. This is the best solution for the dispute to be reached amicably, for the country to be called the Republic of Makedonija internationally (using the original name, not transcribed into the English form Republic of Macedonia). Thus, Macedonia would acknowledge the Greek historical legacy over Ancient Macedon, while Greece would not object if the ethno-nation is labeled Macedonian. There would be no need for a referendum in Macedonia as the new name would be according to the Constitution, while the designation of the language could be with a footnote that this is a modern form of Macedonian, as the ancient form of the language has yet to be conclusively analyzed and there is only few available/discovered evidence of it.

*What about relations with Kosovo? Macedonia was rather afraid of this new country in the western Balkans, and it was also reluctant to recognise Kosovo at the beginning. In between, the official relations between Skopje and Prishtina improved. Nevertheless, could Kosovo pose a threat to Macedonia in terms of the export of terrorism and extremism into Macedonia and could it be supportive of separatist and irredentist tendencies among Albanians in Macedonia?*

The events in Kumanovo this May, when a terrorist unit infiltrated the town and was neutralized after a bloody intervention by security forces, testifies to the fact that Kosovo is home to potentially very dangerous splinter groups with capacities in cooperation with domestic radicals to destabilize Macedonia. While the majority of Albanians in the country do not support terrorism and extremism, there are some who harbor separatist and irredentist tendencies. It is up to the domestic politicians and the so-called international community to effectively deal with such threats, emphasizing over and over and acting resolutely upon the basic premise that Macedonia is not up for grabs by nationalistic forces and that the stability of the Western Balkans is best served by preserving the territorial integrity of all the



neuralgic states, Macedonia, but also Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Geopolitical struggles between Washington and Moscow might have a negative effect here while a quick NATO and EU integration of the region will have a strongly positive and stabilizing effect.

*Relations with Bulgaria were tensed due to the dispute over historical, national and language identities and also for the official policy of Sofia toward the Macedonian minority in southwestern Bulgaria. It seems that these issues were – at least on the official level – resolved. However, Bulgaria joined Greece to block Macedonia in starting accession talks to the EU at the end of 2012. Bulgaria argued that Macedonia steals from Bulgaria’s history. What do the Macedonians think about such an argument? And have relations with Bulgaria improved?*

Unfortunately, relations with Bulgaria are improving only very slowly, both in terms of politics and in terms of business and cultural links. The main culprit is Bulgaria, which persists in its foreign and domestic policies of the attempted assimilation of Macedonians into the Bulgarian realm. Recognition of a distinct Macedonian ethnic group/nation would have helped the relations tremendously, but such recognition is not forthcoming. Meanwhile, the distance between Macedonians and Bulgarians continues to grow, so that if at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Macedonians looked at Sofia and Bulgaria as more or less as a close relative, today these relations are reduced to an uneasy friendship with a tendency of Bulgarians to be seen as unfriendly neighbors in the future.

*The dispute between Macedonian and the Serbian Orthodox Church over heritage remains unresolved since the secession of the Macedonian Orthodox Church. How relevant is this factor in mutual relations between Macedonia and Serbia?*

The relations on a state level are very good. Ordinary citizens also have cordial relations, excluding the attitudes of some ethnic Albanians from Macedonia who express hatred towards Belgrade. The relations between the Churches do not greatly affect public and private relations between Macedonia and Serbia also because both nations are not very religious; Orthodoxy is more of a traditional/historical/cultural issue rather than a purely religious one, and few in Macedonia and Serbia are practicing believers.

*During 2015, the wiretapping scandal was “beaten” by the refugees crisis. Macedonia became one of the most liberal countries in Europe when it enabled refugees to cross through the country legally and even started to organize transport northwards to the Serbian border. Nevertheless, how long can Macedonia stand two, three or even five thousand refugees a day entering the country from Greece and heading north? And what are the reactions of ordinary Macedonian citizens to the influx of refugees into the country in terms of xenophobia and islamophobia?*

There has been a mix of reactions to the refugee crisis. A part of Macedonian society is actively and passively engaged in aiding the refugees. Another portion is very worried about what could happen if the borders up north become closed, if

Germany, Austria, Hungary, and eventually Serbia decided to close their borders. Obviously a poor country, which has only recently begun recovering from economic hardships and reducing unemployment, cannot cope with such a large influx of refugees. At the moment, very few refugees have claimed asylum in Macedonia, but if circumstances as described above change we could potentially witness many refugees trapped on our northern and southern border and in localities nearby. One cannot predict what would happen, but past experiences of refugees crossing into Macedonia (from Bosnia and Herzegovina and from Kosovo) give us optimism that instances of xenophobia and islamophobia would be very limited. The dangers of illegal smuggling, petty crime and perhaps violence, however, will be real and the problem might become exorbitant very soon.

*Next year, Macedonia will celebrate 25 years of independence. Do you feel there will be reason to celebrate this event?*

Sure, Macedonia has had a turbulent past from ancient times till modernity. The existence of the independent Republic of Macedonia has been part of the dream and sustained effort of many generations of ethnic Macedonians following the breakup of the Ottoman Empire and the incorporation of the territory of Macedonia into the Serbian, Bulgarian, and Greek nation states. Other ethnic groups have slowly been incorporated into the modern Macedonian state. Following the signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement in 2001, ethnic tensions and the disputations of the character of the Macedonian Republic have been significantly reduced. Although there are still many risks, Macedonia serves as an example among many other European states on how multiethnic relations can be successfully managed and conflicts reduced.