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Macedonia after Bucharest: avoiding another European failure in the Balkans

When Macedonia earned EU candidate status in 2005 – the undisputed *annus horribilis* of European integration – its success not only served to shore up the deeply troubled EU enlargement perspective, but

also produced substantial credit for the idea that a multiethnic democracy in the Western Balkans can be sustained without extensive international intervention. At this point, Macedonia was the only former Yugoslav Republic that had managed to avoid major conflict despite its extremely vulnerable position, and had built a unitary and largely self-sustainable multiethnic democracy – a model which proved far superior to the heavily superintended but wholly dysfunctional multiethnic federalism in Bosnia.¹ In

2006, this model's achievements also became a prime inspiration for the Ahtisaari plan for Kosovo.² In an ironic and perverse twist of fate typical of the Balkans, Macedonia's multiethnic 'success story' faces its most profound crisis three years later, just as the country was about to convert from being a consumer to becoming a *bona fide* provider of stability. Macedonia's invitation to NATO membership at the Bucharest Summit in April 2008, as virtually all of the Alliance's members agreed, was to help the country and its model of multiethnicity make this decisive transformation. At the Summit, however, Macedonia's membership bid was blocked by its first neighbour Greece – the sole NATO member opposing the invitation of membership to Macedonia.

Greece has long objected to Macedonia's constitutional name, claiming that its use implies irredentist territorial claims over Greece's northern province of the same appellation. Western observers and officials routinely dismiss these fears that Greek sovereignty is in mortal peril from tiny and embattled Macedonia as 'ludicrous'.³ The same sentiment is shared by more than 120 countries, including the United States and Russia, which recognise Macedonia by its constitutional name, despite Greek protests. But NATO and the European Union operate through consensus, and the name issue is still able to create enough domestic pressure for the Greek government to go out on a limb and veto Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration.

2. Clarisse Pasztor, 'The Applicability of the Ohrid Framework Agreement as Model for Kosovo', in *Forum Analytica* no. 6, August/September 2006, pp. 47-59. See: www.forum-csrd.org.mk.

3. Donald Rumsfeld, 'NATO Expansion Should Continue', *The Wall Street Journal*, 28 March 2008. See: http://online.wsj.com/public/article_print/SB120665952870370033.html; Steven Erlanger and Steven Lee Myers, 'NATO Allies Oppose Bush on Georgia and Ukraine', *The New York Times*, 3 April 2008. See: www.nytimes.com/2008/04/03/world/europe/03nato.html.



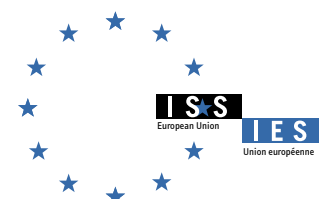
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Electoral poster of Nikola Gruevski, leader of VMRO-DPMNE and current Prime Minister, is seen fixed on a building as a worker hangs the national and the city flag.

able multiethnic democracy – a model which proved far superior to the heavily superintended but wholly dysfunctional multiethnic federalism in Bosnia.¹ In

1. Ivan Krastev, 'Dancing With Weak States', in Anders Mellbourn (ed.), *Developing a Culture of Conflict Prevention*, Anna Lindh Programme on Conflict Prevention (Stockholm: Gidlund, 2004).

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The Greek veto tactic, however, exposes Macedonia's acute internal vulnerabilities, which reached another climax during the country's exceptionally violent and irregular elections that took place on 1 June. Concessions on issues of identity from the ethnic Macedonian majority to the country's ethnic Albanians – such as the official use of the Albanian national flag and language, and increased ownership of the public administration – lie at the heart of the Ohrid peace settlement that ended Macedonia's dire inter-ethnic crisis in 2001. Seen by most in the Macedonian ethnic majority as a fundamental challenge to the ancient Yugoslav political order, which granted ethnic Macedonians a proprietary hold on the country's territory and governmental apparatus, these concessions make the peace process both highly controversial and potentially reversible. The fear of being marginalised in their own country, heightened by the Macedonians' historical fears of aggressive encroachment by neighbouring nations (Greece in particular), lies at the root of this resentment toward the Ohrid process. It is axiomatic therefore that the more external pressure mounts against the Macedonian identity, the less willing the ethnic Macedonians will be to maintain the crucial inter-ethnic compromise with their Albanian compatriots.

The Greek veto came at a moment when such centrifugal forces between the ethnic Macedonian majority and the country's 25 percent Albanian population were at unprecedentedly high levels. After the country's 2006 parliamentary election, ethnic Macedonians' feeling that they were the major losers of the Ohrid peace process was a key contributor to the return to power and record high popularity of the right-wing Macedonian VMRO-DPMNE⁴ party.⁵ Rather than entering wholesale into the straitjacket of post-Ohrid Agreement inter-ethnic compromise, VMRO-DPMNE, under the leadership of Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski, decided to ride the prevailing sentiment of the ethnic Macedonians by excluding the majority Albanian party Democratic Union for Integration (DUI) – the political wing of the resented former Albanian guerrilla – from the governing coalition.

Although constitutionally legitimate, Gruevski's coalition gambit took advantage of a bitter intra-Albanian rivalry. To satisfy the unwritten practice of forming a multiethnic coalition, VMRO-DPMNE partnered with the Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA) – DUI's sworn political archrival – which emerged second in the Albanian portion of the ballot. Although nationalistic itself, DPA ran on a ticket of smearing the myth of the 'national liberation' uprising in 2001 and

the achievements of the Ohrid Agreement, projects championed by DUI and resented in the Macedonian ethnic community. Through this ingenious double-sided campaign, DPA made itself indispensable to the Macedonian nationalists by offering the legitimacy of a multiethnic coalition without steadfast commitment to the Ohrid Agreement. Participation in the central government, in turn, allowed DPA to leverage its newly gained control in state institutions (particularly the security apparatus), to attempt to whittle away DUI's superior influence in the Albanian community, largely secured through the Ohrid Agreement provisions – most notably, DUI's control of the special Badinter majority in Parliament,⁶ and of local government in Albanian-dominated municipalities.⁷

The result was an inter- and intra-ethnic 'catch-22', with DUI unable to fully wield its authority on ethnic issues and the VMRO-DPA coalition falling short of the legitimacy needed to overcome DUI's opposition. And this is not to mention the intra-coalition spats between DPA, trying to bolster its own record of ethnic achievements, and the VMRO-led government, unsympathetic to these demands. The paralysing tug-of-war that raged for almost two years before the Bucharest Summit encouraged all sides to adopt revisionist stances towards the Ohrid Agreement, which by then was increasingly failing to moderate these bitter rivalries.

The only political platform that offers any hope of uniting Macedonia's ethnic and political groups under these circumstances is the country's Euro-Atlantic integration. By blocking this process, Greece has effectively taken Macedonia's internal (in)stability and its regional impact hostage to the name dispute. In fact, the Greek veto would have been virtually impossible without Macedonia's domestic turmoil. In the months before the Bucharest Summit, the bitter internal political infighting mixed with the government's populist provocations against Greece,⁸ had the effect of weakening the Macedonian NATO candidacy and facilitating the Greek veto. When the Summit came, Macedonia's internal woes hardened Greece's determination to veto Macedonia's membership, knowing that this will only further turn the country's internal politics against itself, and effectively extend the paralysis in Skopje indefinitely. Macedonia's en-

6. According to the Badinter majority principle, the passage of legislation where identity issues and minority interests are concerned requires a 'qualified majority of two-thirds, within which there must be a majority of the votes of Representatives claiming to belong to the communities not in the majority in the population of Macedonia.' See Article 5, item 1, of the Framework Agreement. Having won the majority of ethnic minority seats in Parliament after the 2006 elections, DUI was able to block the passage of important legislation under these provisions.

7. DUI currently controls an overwhelming majority of 33 out of the 34 ethnic Albanian municipalities in Macedonia that have considerable autonomy under the Framework Agreement decentralisation provisions.

8. Attempting to exploit the rising nationalist sentiment, the government took several ill-conceived steps such as re-naming Skopje Airport after Alexander the Great, putting statues from the Hellenic and Roman period in front of the government building, and the like. Greek diplomacy masterfully exploited these moves and Macedonia's political instability to undermine the country's NATO candidacy and counter the Allied, especially European, objections against the veto.

4. VMRO-DPMNE stands for 'Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity.'

5. Nadège Ragaru, 'The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia: Between Ohrid and Brussels', in Judy Batt (ed.), 'Is there an Albanian Question?', *Chaillot Paper* no. 107, January 2008, European Union Institute for Security Studies, Paris.

suing weakness and isolation – the Greek government seems to believe – will eventually compel its authorities to resolve the name dispute on Greece’s terms.

The sheer volatility of the political forces that these tactics rely upon, however, makes the failure to achieve a swift resolution of the name issue a perilously divisive scenario. In a post-Bucharest poll, 80 percent of the majority ethnic Macedonians declared that they oppose a change of the country’s name in return for the invitation to join NATO. A full 94 percent of Macedonia’s ethnic Albanian minority, on the other hand, pledged support for such a move. This represents a dramatic change in the ethnic Albanian attitudes from just a month before, when only 52 percent of Albanians agreed to a name change to secure NATO membership. If the promise of being the region’s first Albanians to enter NATO and the EU convinced Macedonia’s Albanian minority to commit to post-Ohrid Macedonia, this sudden loss of willingness to defend the Macedonian identity is a sign that their allegiances are highly conditional on the country’s ability to deliver on that promise. Failing that, their attention might begin to shift towards the other Albanian-dominated states in the region. And this tendency is supported by other inter-ethnic disagreements resulting from the uncertainty of Euro-Atlantic integration. An earlier poll revealed that while a full 95 percent of Albanians insisted that Macedonia should immediately recognise Kosovo as an independent state, 60 percent of Macedonians were against the move.⁹ Unsettled by their experience from the 2001 crisis, Macedonians are extremely reluctant to recognise Kosovo before their country’s borders are guaranteed through NATO membership. If pressed to recognise Kosovo without this assurance, the Macedonian majority will certainly react with reduced willingness to make the concessions necessary to revive the Ohrid Agreement.

Just as the Greek strategy had anticipated, the political forces underlying these divisions incited VMRO-DPMNE and DUI to call for snap elections in the wake of the Bucharest fiasco, instead of forging a united front to quickly unblock the country’s NATO integration. The ballot, which took place on 1 June, basically united the two ethnic antagonists in the same goal – to extend their majorities (VMRO’s overall and DUI’s Badinter majority) just enough to force the other side’s hand in the current deadlock. In this vein, VMRO-DPMNE formed a pre-electoral coalition notable for boasting a record number of ethnic parties of Macedonia’s smaller minorities – a full 11

in a coalition of 20 parties.¹⁰ This record number of MPs from the country’s smaller minorities would give VMRO a direct way to subvert DUI’s projected Badinter majority by helping DPA bridge DUI’s likely numerical advantage in overall minority MPs. Prime Minister Gruevski endorsed this scenario publicly, declaring that he would prefer to ally with DPA in the next government coalition. DUI, in turn, responded with threats that it will force federalisation of the country if the Albanian electoral frontrunner is not included in the next government.

The consequence of these zero-sum tactics and ethnic populism was an exceptionally violent and bitterly disputed ballot between the two Albanian parties in the northwest of the country, right along the border with Kosovo. Following a campaign marked by over two dozen party-orchestrated armed incidents, an assassination attempt against the DUI leader (after an earlier shooting at the DPA leader), and one casualty in these areas, violence exploded on election day, almost slipping out of control on several occasions. The morning vote was marked by a 40-minute skirmish between armed party members and the police in the infamous Aracinovo village near the capital Skopje, which left one person killed and ballots in the entire area broken up by blockades of the police and angry local Albanians. Several other shoot-outs involving ranking party officials resulted in more voting disruption and almost a dozen wounded, many of whom were innocent bystanders. Most disturbingly, members of the police apparently associated with the Albanian parties appear to have facilitated the vote-rigging operations, as highlighted by the US Ambassador to Macedonia and Denis McShane, a former minister in the British Government who monitored the election.¹¹ Overall, intimidation by armed groups was massive and had a decisive impact on the Albanian ballot. Voting ended with full-scale violence in over 30 polling stations, directly affecting more than 25,000 voters, while major irregularities and ballot manipulation affected almost 50 percent of the Albanian vote or 10 percent of the total electorate in the country.¹²

Conducted in this fashion, the elections gave not only an ethnic, but also a territorial, dimension to the crisis in Macedonia, by creating a ‘grey zone’ of violently contested democratic representation in Al-

9. For full details of the poll, see Center for Research and Policy Making: *Should Macedonia Recognize Kosovo as an Independent State?*, Public Opinion Poll, 19 March 2008. See: www.crpm.org.mk.

10. For a full list of the parties participating in the coalition ‘For Better Macedonia’, led by VMRO-DPMNE, see the official page of the party at <http://www.vmro-dpmne.org.mk/>.

11. In apparent disbelief at the situation he witnessed, McShane said that ‘nobody can form a government on the basis of an election in which police have stuffed ballot boxes and thugs are attacking polling stations.’ Dan Bilefsky. ‘Election violence deals setback to Macedonia’, *The International Herald Tribune*, 1 June 2008. See: <http://www.iht.com/articles/2008/06/01/Europe/mace.php>.

12. For a detailed overview of the irregularities that took place during the 1 June election, see the ODIHR preliminary election monitoring report at http://www.osce.org/documents/odihr/2008/06/31445_en.pdf; and the Helsinki Committee of the Republic of Macedonia Report on the 2008 Early Parliamentary Election at www.mhc.org.mk.

banian areas of the country. The electoral results, unless managed very carefully, will inevitably reinforce these trends and eventually draw in the security institutions and the Macedonian majority. Owing to the electoral pandemonium, DPA and DUI came out equal in terms of control of Albanian seats in Parliament, causing great uproar in DUI's ranks and a danger of uncontrolled protests and retributions. An explosion was avoided when under strong international pressure, a massive re-run of the ballots was scheduled to take place on 15 June in almost 200 polling stations with over 170,000 registered voters. An electoral rerun on this scale can shift as many as 15 MPs, which effectively means that the Albanian ballot will be completely up for grabs again in an even more volatile atmosphere, poisoned by the bad blood and high stakes created on 1 June.¹³

Whether the tense repeated ballots and the inevitable post-electoral recriminations further escalate the country's crisis or not will depend not just on the actions of the Albanian parties, but perhaps even more on the behaviour of the Macedonian majority and the state institutions largely under its control. A constructive stance on ethnic issues and the concessions that this would involve, however, are not a foregone conclusion for the new Macedonian majority that emerged from the 1 June election. In contrast to the Albanian ballot, the free and fair ethnic Macedonian vote conferred an unprecedented victory on the incumbent right-wing VMRO-DPMNE. Barring significant shifts during the 15 June reruns, the electoral results would give VMRO control of the absolute majority in the Macedonian Parliament and the virtually unshakeable position of a government coalition-maker for the next four years – an outstanding feat for an incumbent in a country that suffered both a substantial economic downturn and a complete dimming of its Euro-Atlantic integration prospects in the 6 months preceding the elections.¹⁴ In this sense, VMRO's landslide victory can only be attributed to the party's uncompromising stance on the two vital identity issues for ethnic Macedonians – the Albanian ethnic demands and the name negotiations with Greece. Having staked VMRO's political bottom line on this ethnic 'identity' ticket, Prime Minister (re)elect Nikola Gruevski will find it difficult to break from the hardline attitude of his constituency now, when neither Euro-Atlantic integration nor economic recovery exist as viable political rallying alternatives.

Such post-electoral 'stonewalling' of the majority on the sensitive identity issues could quickly ignite a

13. Typically, Albanian parties control 27-30 MPs in Parliament, so the 12-15 MPs that will be contested by the revote constitute more than half of the Albanian ballot, and can produce a winner with a landslide. Depending on the turnout, the revote might also impact on the distribution of parliamentary seats among the Macedonian parties, possibly with significant repercussions for the majority that will form the new government.

14. For an overview of Macedonia's economic troubles in the first two quarters of 2008, see Sam Vaknin, 'Macedonia – 10 Things that Went Wrong Since January 2008', *The Los Angeles Chronicle*, June 2008. <http://www.losangeleschronicle.com/articles/48107>.

revolt in Albanian-dominated areas even if the ballot reruns on 15 June are perfectly free, fair and peaceful. If rejected from the government coalition for the second time after winning the Albanian ballot, DUI will find it progressively harder to resist the temptation to challenge state authority in the Albanian communities. Even if the VMRO-led government somehow manages to marginalise DUI (certainly not an outcome that could be achieved quickly), then it is axiomatic that DPA or some other ethnic contender will inherit DUI's dominant status and the reflexive disposition to act as custodian of Albanian political privileges, with practically the same result. Quite simply, faced with a revisionist Macedonian majority, any Albanian coalition alternative will be compelled to mount a subversive response to protect its turf, as witnessed by DPA's walk-outs from the previous government in protest against VMRO's disregard of its ethnic demands. Ultimately, if the Ohrid settlement cannot safeguard against encroachments from the majority, then the Albanian political spectrum can only promote its privileges by imposing greater administrative autonomy for the Albanian-dominated areas of Macedonia. Openly advocated by both DUI and DPA before,¹⁵ this strategy would result in the federalisation of Macedonia along ethnic lines, similar to Dayton Bosnia.

But Macedonia does not federalise easily. Unlike Bosnia and Kosovo, where high levels of post-conflict ethnic homogenisation naturally favour political segregation, Macedonia's sundry ethnic demographics defy such designs. Up to 49 percent of Macedonia's Albanians, or 249,036 individuals, are concentrated in and around municipalities where they are in a *minority*. Of these, 103,891 inhabit the capital Skopje, and another 110,099 live in or alongside other major urban areas. Some 112,205 ethnic Macedonians, on the other hand, also live in minority communities.¹⁶

With such high ethnic heterogeneity concentrated in large urban areas, Macedonia is potentially the most combustible reservoir of ethnic strife in the Balkans. Against this background, a change of just three municipal borders in 2004 triggered mass ethnic riots and a nationwide referendum that almost overturned the Ohrid peace process. Re-drawing administrative borders to federalise the country, in turn, would involve at least 39 municipalities of which 21 are in major urban areas, and could put up to one half of Macedonia's Albanians and a fifth of the country's total population on the wrong side of the ethnic boundary. If this scenario were in fact to materialise as part of a contested process, forced by the

15. Arben Xzaferi, the founder and leader of DPA, has advocated the federalisation of Macedonia as the only way to guarantee Albanian rights since the 1990s. See for instance, IWPR: 'An Optimist in Panic: an interview with Arben Xhaferi', *Balkan Crisis Report*, no. 236, 6 April 2001. See: www.iwpr.net.

16. Data extracted from the Municipal Database, maintained by the Ministry of Local Self-Government of Macedonia. See: <http://www.edusoft.com.mk/prasalnik/mls/>.

Albanian minority, then the federalisation of Macedonia becomes a far more explosive project than even the partition of Bosnia and Kosovo, where peacekeeping in such scenarios is largely a matter of policing the generally well-defined ethnic boundaries.

This is a danger that simply cannot be ignored. Ties of ethnic kinship and militant dedication to the cause of Kosovar independence have led Macedonian Albanians to establish a tacit linkage between their allegiance to a unitary Macedonia and the preservation of Kosovo's territorial integrity. Prior to the Bucharest veto, the concern in Macedonia was that the partition of the Serb parts of Kosovo would stir up irredentist impulses among Macedonian Albanians. Following Bucharest, the problem got reversed – the steady loss of Albanian support for unitary Macedonia, spurred by the populist revisionism in both ethnic camps, threatens to produce unrest and disintegration on a scale that will surely advance the secessionist agendas in Kosovo and even South Serbia.

For now, these dangerous scenarios are not inevitable. As the 11 May elections in Serbia demonstrated, unlocking the Euro-Atlantic perspective – even with as many caveats as in Serbia's Stabilisation and Association Agreement – can do a great deal to defuse popular support for radical forces. In Macedonia, where Euro-Atlantic integration enjoys a steady level of 96 percent support (as opposed to Serbia's 70 percent), it can do a great deal more to restore a measure of equilibrium to the troubled inter-ethnic equation.

To unlock this vital preventive mechanism, the EU, NATO and the US must abandon their sclerotic approach to Macedonia, which for the past two years has turned them into bystanders observing the escalating crisis in the country. Far more than Serbia, Macedonia's virtually consensual support for the Euro-Atlantic cause favours the 'enlightened' interventionism of the Western powers to neutralise dangerous radicalising impulses on the Macedonian political scene.

First and foremost, NATO and the EU should approach the name dispute with far greater activism to unblock Macedonia's integration perspective. In fact, their present policy of declaring lack of jurisdiction for the dispute is one of the greatest impediments to reaching an agreement. This fully removes the pressure on Greece to compromise, whilst allowing Athens to hold the entire NATO and EU policy towards Macedonia hostage to its bargaining position.

Ironically, as one astute observer of Balkan affairs proposes,¹⁷ the solution lies in accepting – to the fullest extent – the Greek position that after the Bucharest veto the name issue has now become a multilateral matter. As the dispute effectively blocks enlargement – their most important instrument for stabilising the Balkans – NATO and the European institutions should therefore examine the problem in their *collective capacity*, to impose a multilateral debate that will push for a prompt and balanced compromise. In NATO, those member states unsettled by the risks posed by a destabilised Macedonia for Kosovo and the region would convene the North Atlantic Council to task the Secretary General to produce an urgent report investigating all aspects of the name dispute. This would serve as the basis for a North Atlantic Council (NAC) discussion on the negotiating options to unblock Macedonia's invitation on time for the country to join the Alliance with Albania and Croatia.¹⁸ Given the reluctance of the EU capitals and Commission to directly confront Athens, a comprehensive inquiry into the name issue – to include the question of the Macedonian minority in Greece – should also be initiated by the Council of Europe in cooperation with the European Parliament and a variety of organisations, such as Human Rights Watch and national Helsinki Committee branches. Seeking to recognise the root causes of the name problem, this approach would not only strip Greece of its effective monopoly over NATO and EU policies towards Macedonia, but it will also produce an objective and authoritative opinion that will bring both sides closer to a balanced compromise that minimally protects Macedonian identity. Crucially, Athens would find it very hard to block Macedonia's most immediate interim steps towards EU integration – visa liberalisation and the start of membership negotiations – against the judgment derived from such a broad and active multilateral scrutiny of the name issue.

In parallel with this multilateralisation of the dispute with Greece, the EU, NATO and the US must return to a much more engaged presence in Macedonia, befitting their role as guarantors of the country's peace process. As a first step, the international community must censure the manipulation of democratic institutions, especially elections and the use of violence and intimidation for political purposes. In this vein, the EU Commission and the US Administration should immediately set in place procedures for extending visa bans and freezing the assets of those

17. For an excellent analysis of the name dispute after the Bucharest Summit, see Edward P. Joseph: 'Averting the Next Balkan War: How to Solve the Greek Dispute over Macedonia's Name', *Internationale Politik*, vol. 10, Summer 2008, pp. 78-85. See: www.ip-global.org.

18. *Ibid.*

individuals – particularly high-ranking party officials and their families – who are identified as violators of the electoral process on 1 June and the subsequent ballot reruns. As witnessed by the recent Serbian example, being censured as a pariah by these institutions can exact a hefty political price on leaders and parties in a country where Euro-Atlantic integration has no real alternatives. In Macedonia, where EU and NATO integration is considered far more indispensable, such denunciation – if strategically employed – could be the most powerful instrument to deter future transgressions against the country's multiethnic democracy and to marginalise possible violators.

At the same time, to avert another destabilising round of intra- and inter-ethnic standoffs in the post-electoral period, the US and the EU – as guarantors of the Ohrid Agreement – should mediate the formation of a broad government coalition that will include the main political actors from both ethnic camps. This government of national unity would be formed around a mandate to rebuild consensus on the

last outstanding inter-ethnic issues,¹⁹ and to finalise the name negotiations and unblock Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration. This outcome would leave no losers in the current high-stakes political contest – particularly in the Albanian bloc – that might later act as spoilers. It is also a sensible political strategy for the majority as a way to share the burden and ownership of the difficult reforms and the strategic compromise that will be necessary to overcome the crisis in the country.

The vital issue at stake in this activist international approach towards Macedonia is not just the containment of one of the more explosive potential crises in the Balkans. It is also a strategic investment in the preservation of the most successful multiethnic reconciliation project of the EU and NATO in the Balkans.

19. This should focus on the remaining obligations from the Ohrid Agreement which caused significant friction and instability in the previous period, such as the official use of the Albanian language, the status of the former Albanian guerrilla fighters, and the enforcement of the police law in local municipalities.