

Mo, 2013-04-29, 15:05

EU external relations Macedonia interview

By Veselin Jeleu, dpa =

Top Bulgarian envoy: Skopje's stance on neighbours is alarming By Veselin Jeleu, dpa

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Brussels (dpa Insight) - Macedonia has drawn repeated criticism for embarking in policies adjudged as hostile by neighbours such as EU-member states, Greece and Bulgaria. Bulgaria's EU Permanent Representative Dimiter Tzantchev in an interview with dpa Insight EU, warned that the Skopje government's discrimination of Macedonian citizens who identify themselves as Bulgarians "should ring the alarm bell," in EU capitals.

dpa: Why has Bulgaria joined Greece in opposing an immediate opening of accession negotiations between the EU and Macedonia?

Dimiter Tzantchev: "Bulgaria was the first to recognize the FYROM's (Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia's) independence under its constitutional name and to help this newly established state during the hard times of the embargo against the ex-Yugoslavia. We used our influence on the leaders of the Albanian ethnic minority in the FYROM to prevent its further destabilization when the country was on the verge of civil war in 2001. We know well our responsibilities for the stability of the region.

"Bulgaria is a staunch supporter of the European integration of the Western Balkans as it is the only way to guarantee peace, democracy and prosperity for the entire region. Regretfully, the current political leadership of FYROM has pushed our bilateral relations back to the past. Anti-Bulgarian stereotypes throughout the media, cinema, literature, history and geography textbooks in the official education system are widespread. Citizens of FYROM who openly declare their Bulgarian identity often face discrimination (dismissals from work, intimidation, police interrogations, institutional and media pressure). Provocative projects like "Skopje 2014" clearly outline potential territorial and other claims against Bulgaria. FYROM has crossed certain limits, causing wide discontent in the Bulgarian public opinion. Skopje's policies engender serious concerns already in two EU member states from the region and this should ring the alarm bell."

dpa: Should disputes about history stand in the way of EU integration in the 21st century?

Dimiter Tzantchev: We have to face the reality. Macedonia is a geographical area that nowadays lies within the boundaries of at least three states (Greece, Bulgaria, FYROM). For this reason, the use of the geographical term Macedonia as an official name for the newly established state is burdened with political sensitivity in neighbouring countries where the term 'Macedonian' is used to indicate the link to the geographical area, but not to a national identity.

"All historical facts show that by the time one part of this geographical area was included in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia after the WW I, the overwhelming majority of its Slavic population were identifying themselves as Bulgarians. The failure to eradicate the Bulgarian identity between the two World Wars by imposing a South Serbian identity, prompted Yugoslav leader Josip Broz Tito to launch in 1944 a policy aimed at forging a new Macedonian national identity in the then Socialist Republic of Macedonia. The communist leadership of former Yugoslavia would claim that every Slav inhabitant of the entire geographical area is Macedonian, belonging to the Macedonian nation. This policy included also the decreeing of the local Bulgarian dialect as a Macedonian language, as well as fabrication of historical background for the new Macedonian identity at the expense of neighboring countries' history. Any attempt of the local people to manifest its Bulgarian identity was suppressed through Stalinist methods including imprisonment and arbitrary executions in 1944-1946 of the local political and the intellectual elite who self-identified as being Bulgarian.

"But even this couldn't delete the collective memory of the people in our two countries. We share the same history, the same linguistic and cultural tradition. Therefore, we don't see any reason why our common history should divide and not unite us. The fact that so many monuments of Bulgarian historical figures have been recently erected in Skopje, no matter how they are labeled now, only confirms that we have been one ethnical entity in the past."

dpa: Can't your differences be tackled in the process of EU accession negotiations rather than before them?

Dimiter Tzantchev: "The new EU members should be committed to the European values and respect their EU neighbors. Radical nationalist ideologies belong to the past. There will be long-term repercussions and risks to regional stability if the current policies of Skopje vis à vis neighboring countries continue. That is why such issues should be solved before, and not after the start of the accession negotiations. FYROM has a much bigger interest in starting accession negotiations than to continue its intransigent claims for non-existent minorities and stealing neighboring countries' history.

"The people of FYROM should look to the future and not to the past. We in the EU should help them do that. Because if they continue to look to the past, the only true fact of history they will find is the Bulgarian identity of the Slavic population in the geographical region of Macedonia. They will also face the undisputable fact that the Slavic population has arrived in that region many centuries after Alexander the Great. These are the facts of history and they cannot be changed. As the great Danish thinker Soren Kierkegaard observed: Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.

dpa: Bulgaria insists on concluding a treaty on good-neighborly relations with Macedonia. Macedonian foreign minister Nikola Poposki has recently said he saw no need for such a treaty. At the same time four rounds of talks on it have already taken place. What should we expect?

Dimiter Tzantchev: "Indeed, Minister Poposki openly questioned the need for a Treaty the same day (April 16, 2013) the Commission's progress report on FYROM was released. We don't understand Skopje's reluctance to commit itself to a legally binding document that would ensure it will not use its Constitution to interfere in Bulgaria's affairs for the purpose of defending the status and the rights of persons who are not and who have never been FYROM's citizens, but whom Skopje sees as belonging to the Macedonian people. FYROM has already undertaken such a commitment in the 1999 Joint Declaration with Bulgaria, as well as in its 1995 Interim Accord with Greece. It is only the Constitution of FYROM that contains such a claim and this engenders concerns in neighboring states.

"We must say it very clearly: no matter what the result of the efforts to build a Macedonian nation is, it cannot be used as an argument for Skopje's minority claims vis à vis Bulgaria. No citizens of Bulgaria have taken part in such a nation-building process as it was started in 1944 and has been confined only to the territory of the then Socialist Republic of Macedonia, and after 1991, in FYROM. Therefore, any claims by Skopje for Macedonian national minority in Bulgaria are completely baseless and unacceptable.

dpa: Serbia and Kosovo have struck an agreement to normalize their relations. The Commission has consequently recommended opening accession talks with Serbia and association agreement talks with Kosovo. It has also issued a progress report on FYROM. The Member States are expected to decide in June whether to start membership negotiations with Serbia and FYROM. What are your expectations?

Dimiter Tzantchev: "The agreement reached between Serbia and Kosovo is an impressive example that if there is a political will and commitment, there are no unsolvable problems, no matter how difficult they seem to be. The compromise that FYROM has to make is much smaller: to agree with a Treaty on good-neighborly relations based on a political declaration Skopje has already signed in 1999. We are, of course, aware that FYROM faces serious challenges also in other important areas - inter-ethnic relations, economic and financial stability. Recent months have marked a setback in the functioning of the democratic institutions and the freedom of expression."

dpa: Aren't you concerned that FYROM may be destabilized if it loses its immediate EU-integration prospects?

Dimiter Tzantchev: "Let me reply with a question: If a candidate state would be destabilized by the simple fact that it does not get immediately what it thinks it deserves, then what is the real level of stability and political maturity of that country? In such a case, there should be other factors challenging its stability. And it might be worth taking a closer look at the situation on the ground.

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